

## The ESL MAC: The Multi-Activity Classroom. Why not put it on your teaching menu?

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*ESL teachers are constantly searching for new ways of catering for the wide range of needs and interests and the varying levels of motivation of their students. The Multi-Activity Classroom (MAC) helps teachers to meet those needs by providing several different skill-based activities simultaneously. The MAC is suitable for both General English and EAP classes. This paper focuses on the rationale and implementation of the MAC, with the emphasis being on practical ideas which have proven to be effective in the classroom.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The greatest challenge for any language teacher is how to effectively cater for the language needs of all students in a class. The writer has wide experience in managing and teaching multi-proficiency, multi-ability and composite LOTE classes.

While the typical ESL class generally consists of students of similar proficiency levels, they cannot all be treated the same. Students have varying needs based on different cultural and educational backgrounds, different goals, levels of interest and motivation. It is in recognition of the need to cater for these differences that the writer decided to transfer the skills and experience gained in the LOTE environment to the ESL context and thus the *ESL MAC* was born.

### **Definition**

What does the acronym MAC mean to you? If we ask our students the question: *What is a MAC?* we will most likely get the answer 'a *MACDonalds hamburger*'. Further prompting could then elicit answers such as *MACintosh* computer, *MACintosh* raincoat, *MACK* truck, *MACH* the speed of sound. This paper adds another meaning to the acronym and places it in an ESL context: the *ESL MAC – the Multi-Activity Classroom*.

As students from most cultures associate a MAC with food which they enjoy, the term is appropriate when extended to learning and easily fits into the conference theme of "English in Australia: what's on the menu?" An *ESL MAC* becomes an enjoyable learning activity consisting of many different parts which students chose from a well-presented and ever-changing menu.

### **Rationale**

The *MAC* is a practical means of addressing the challenges of meeting the diverse needs of all students by making learning more learner-centred. It meets the criteria of the now widely accepted 'learner-centred curriculum' as defined by Nunan (1989) which regards learning as a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, where students are engaged in relevant, meaningful activities which they have chosen with the assistance of the teacher.

Students are given the opportunity to work on activities and focus on skills which are individualised and tailored to their needs. This adds variety to the learning process, gives students choice, promotes learner independence and is another way of making the learning experience more exciting and relevant to students. It is a natural extension of normal ESL class activities such as pair work and group work, with the difference being that different students are working on different topics, skills and activities at the same time.

## Implementation of the *MAC*

The stages of implementation include consideration of factors such as learning strategies and learning styles, needs analysis, learning activities and resources, group allocation, and the role of teacher and student.

### ▪ Learning Strategies and Learning Styles

The *MAC* is an integral part of the learner-centred classroom defined by Chamot et al (1999: 53) as 'an environment that creates and fosters independent students who are aware of their learning processes and who, through this awareness, are able to take control of their learning'.

Awareness of their own learning styles and understanding of inter-cultural learning styles lead to learners becoming more responsible for their own learning. Discussion and training on these should be an integral part of any course from pre-intermediate level upwards. Lessard-Clouston (1997) gives a comprehensive overview of language learning strategies and practical advice on their classroom application. Useful questionnaires for various levels of students and teacher instruction are provided by Chamot et al (1999). Ellis (2000) discusses the inter-relationship between individual learner differences, learner strategies and language learning outcomes. Class discussions of the studies of 'the good language learner' (Ellis, 2000; Nunan, 2000) are an effective way of introducing the topic to students.

### ▪ Needs Analysis

The foundation of any teaching program should be the needs of the students. A curriculum can be successful only if it meets the needs of the particular group of students for whom it is intended. As ESL teachers we need to know *why* our students are learning English; *how* they intend to use it; and *what* their proficiency level is in the four macro skills. This information is obtained by means of a *Needs Analysis* completed by students at the beginning of a course.

The *Needs Analysis* is written in language appropriate to the students' level of proficiency and type of course. A *Needs Analysis* for a lower level General English class would be quite different in both content and wording from that designed for an EAP class. Both types of analysis ask students to provide general information such as nationality, age, previous language course, length of current course, academic background, future study plans and details of proficiency tests they have taken or intend to take. More specific language learning information such as the students' perception of their strongest and weakest language skills and the skills/activities on which they would like to focus is also required (Nunan, 1988).

The information gained on the Needs Analysis is the starting point for designing learning activities which meet the needs of the particular group of students. Completion of a form such as a *Class Analysis* (see Table 1) provides a useful overview of the whole class and can be updated as needed.

The *Class Analysis* summarises the important information which the teacher needs to consider when planning learning activities; it gives a quick 'snapshot' of each student. For example, in the excerpt shown in Table 1, it can be seen that Kaori is an undergraduate student from Japan majoring in Human Relations. She considers her strongest skill to be speaking and her weakest skills listening, reading and writing. In this course she would like to focus on improving her listening and writing skills. She has not done any formal English Proficiency tests but will do an IELTS test in November. Her self-assessment on the ISLPR (Wylie & Ingram, 2001) supports her course focus. The teacher will therefore plan *MAC* activities which will extend and improve her listening and writing skills and provide additional IELTS test preparation and practice.

Name	Origin	Weeks	UG / PG	Strongest skill/s				Weakest skill/s				Skill Focus				Test Information	ISLPR self-assessment			
				Major	L	S	R	W	L	S	R	W	L	S	R		W	S	L	R
Kaori	Japan	10	UG HR													will do IELTS end November	3	2	2+	2+
Marie	France	5	UG English													IELTS 6.5 (2004) (General module) L6/ S7/ R 6/ W 7	2+	2+	3	2+
Jimmy	China	10	PG Acc													IELTS 6.5 (2004) L7/S7/R 5.5/ W6	3	3	2+	2

Table 1. Excerpt from a *Class Analysis* for an EAP class

Marie is an under-graduate student from France majoring in English who will study ELICOS for five weeks. She has recently taken the IELTS General Training Module and obtained 6.5 overall. Her strongest skill is speaking. She has nominated listening, reading and writing as her weakest skills, but has chosen to focus on her listening and reading skills.

Jimmy from China is a post-graduate student of Accounting who has already obtained the required English score for entry into the Master of Accounting course in February 2005. His strongest language skill is speaking and his weakest is reading. While his main course focus is improving his reading, he would like some opportunities for extending social conversation skills.

#### ▪ Group Allocation

Small-group work has long been recognised and accepted as being an essential feature of any communicative language teaching program (Ellis, 2000). For each *MAC* session students are placed in groups according to a particular skill focus or activity with consideration given to factors such as nationality and gender where possible. As groups are based on language needs, students may change groups from session to session as their focus changes. For example, a student may start off in a speaking group in one session, move to a writing group in the next session, and then continue on to a reading group. Flexibility and variety are ensured as groups form and re-form. The length of each *MAC* session depends on timetabled class times, student needs and student and teacher preference; the shortest session would be one hour or one class period, and the longest two hours.

#### ▪ Learning Activities and Resources

Once groups have been established, the teacher is ready to prepare a range of learning activities/tasks suitable for each group. Tasks and resources need to be relevant and appropriate to the student level, with the focus on authenticity. As the preparation of resources is time-consuming, it is preferable for these to be multi-functional; for example, a reading text can be the basis for a group focusing on reading, a group discussion or a writing task.

As a wider range of resources needs to be accessed and more activities developed for a *MAC* workshop than for a traditional lesson, it is optimal, if possible, for teachers to work together to reduce the preparation load. Collaborative planning is ideal especially in larger institutions where there are several classes of the same level. Teachers can work together to select resources and prepare activities and students will benefit from the broader perspective gained from input by different teachers.

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The main factors to be considered in preparing appropriate learning activities and materials for the learner-centred classroom are covered in depth by Nunan (1988). A useful checklist for evaluating classroom materials with a strong focus on learner relevance and suitability is provided by Breen and Candlin (1987, cited in Nunan, 2000: 223-4).

The criteria for selecting suitable *MAC* resources are the same as those for other ESL lessons. They need to be relevant and appropriate to the student level and, wherever possible, authentic. Resources for reading/writing groups include textbooks and authentic materials with worksheets; for listening and speaking groups, video programs, radio news, radio discussions and taped lectures are the most useful.

The classroom and furniture are a further important consideration. A larger space with desks or tables and chairs that can easily be moved is ideal and allows for maximum flexibility. Chairs can be placed in a circle for conversation/discussion. Desks can be placed together to form large working spaces. Access to power points is important for listening activities.

Technical equipment such as listening posts, either fixed or portable, allow several students to listen to the same audio source. Audio and CD recorders, mini-cassette recorders for recording group discussions and individual timers further facilitate flexibility.

A fully equipped language laboratory is another ideal setting for a *MAC* focussing on listening and speaking skills (see Table 2). The number of activities which can take place simultaneously is restricted only by the capacity of the equipment and the creativity of the teacher using it.

<b>THE <i>MAC</i> IN A LANGUAGE LABORATORY</b>			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Number students</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Audio Source/ Control</b>
1	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ listen to radio news, answer worksheet questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Audio cassette</li> <li>▪ Teacher console</li> </ul>
2	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ do an IELTS Practice Listening Test</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ CD</li> <li>▪ Teacher console</li> </ul>
3	2 pairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ listen to a short talk, take notes</li> <li>▪ discuss the talk with partner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Audio cassette</li> <li>▪ Teacher console</li> <li>▪ 'Pair' mode</li> </ul>
4	Any number	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ work on individual listening tasks (students have individual cassettes and control their own station; they may use worksheets etc provided by teacher)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Individual cassettes</li> <li>▪ Student consoles 'Library mode'</li> </ul>
5	2-3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ hold a 'telephone' conversation on a specific topic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Telephone mode</li> <li>▪ Teacher console</li> </ul>
6	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ work on pronunciation activities – listen and compare each other's pronunciation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Audio cassette</li> <li>▪ 'Pair mode'</li> </ul>
7	Any number	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ complete on-line listening activities</li> <li>▪ select activities from school's own on-line multi-media library (each student can be working on a different activity or students can work in pairs or groups)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Individual student PCs with Internet access</li> <li>▪ Teacher set-up student control</li> </ul>

Table 2. The *MAC* in a language laboratory

As the teacher is able to monitor and communicate with every student at any time, the language laboratory is an ideal resource for individualising learning activities focusing on listening and speaking skills. Successful use of the language laboratory depends, of course, on teacher familiarity with and confidence in using the equipment and technical reliability of the laboratory.

Preparation and organisation are the keys to success. Setting up of systems such as colour-coded folders for different types of activities or skills, establishing particular classroom routines and keeping good records all help to make the running of the MAC smoother and more effective.

### The MAC in action: from Theory to Practice

In order for a *MAC* to be successful it must be accepted by the students. The teacher needs to discuss its rationale and give students a clear idea of what is expected of them both in terms of task performance and classroom etiquette. Some students, especially those coming from a background where the focus is on traditional teacher-centred education, may at first find it difficult to overcome their inhibitions. However, once they understand the underlying rationale they soon accept the concept enthusiastically. They come to appreciate and enjoy the 'smorgasbord' aspect of the *MAC* and the opportunity of being able to choose meaningful activities and become more actively involved in making decisions about their language learning.

The first *MAC* should be planned for a time when students are likely to be most receptive. This depends on the situation, the age and level of the students and the nature of the activities to be done. A *MAC* can be a good follow-up to several class-based lessons, especially in the afternoon when student motivation may be low. At other times a *MAC* can start the day on a positive, active and energetic note.

Just like the restaurant diner who is faced with a large menu, it is best for the teacher to start with a small appetiser or entrée, which has one main ingredient (meat, fish, chicken, etc). The best choice is the *Junior MAC*, Model 1 with the main ingredient being one resource, in this case a reading text, which is used for two different skill-based activities (see Figure 1).

This basic *MAC* starts with all students studying the same resource or stimulus material such as a reading text, video excerpt, listening segment, picture etc. The class is then divided into two sections, each divided into small groups of three to five (sections can be pre-decided by the teacher or chosen by students at the time). Each section then works on the skill-based activity chosen by the students while the teacher facilitates and monitors the groups. At the end of the session the class comes together for feedback and discussion and planning of the next workshop.

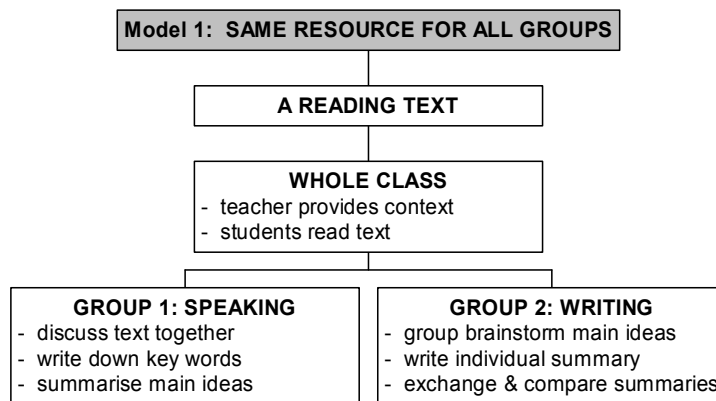


Figure 1. The Junior *MAC*, Model 1

As students and teacher become more confident with the *MAC* context, another group can be added, as shown in the lesson based on a video segment (Figure 2). Here the class is divided into three groups (or six groups with two groups doing the same activity). Each group is clearly told its focus, e.g. listening and note-taking, speaking, writing before the video is shown. After viewing the video each group works on its particular task. This type of *MAC* enables the teacher to cater for more specific student needs while reducing the amount of resource preparation.

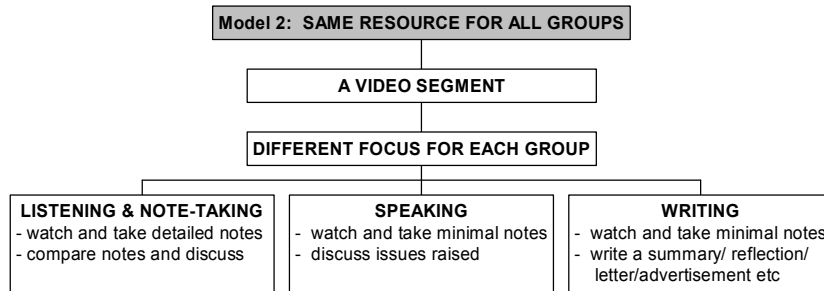


Figure 2. The *JUNIOR MAC*, Model 2

After successfully working with the two basic *MAC* models the teacher may wish to extend the tasks by providing more resources to some groups, e.g. teacher-made worksheets. Figure 3 shows a *MIDDLE MAC* workshop based on the whole class listening to a radio news item, taking notes and then dividing into four skill-based groups. The speaking and writing groups use their notes to complete a specific task, while the listening and reading groups are given comprehension questions and the print version of a news article (downloaded from the Internet or photocopied from the actual paper). While teacher preparation for this workshop is increased, so are the learning opportunities for the students.

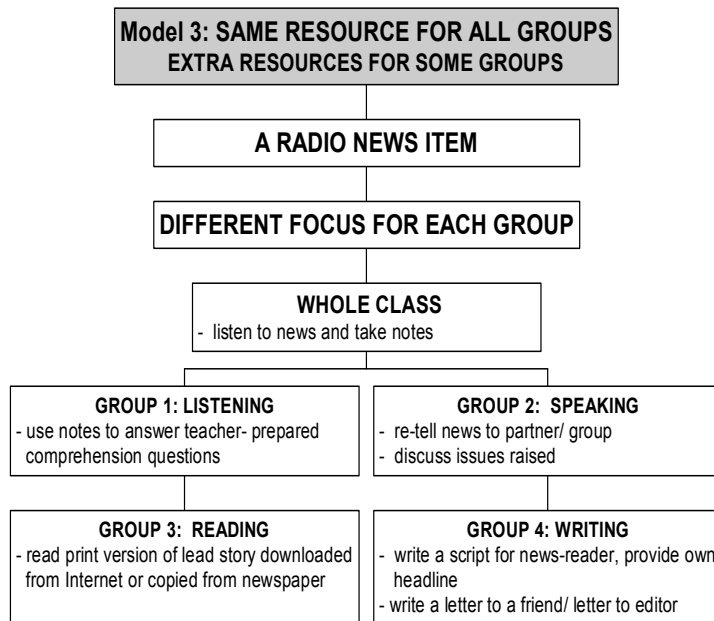


Figure 3. The *MIDDLE MAC*

When the three basic models of the workshop are firmly established, it is time to try the top model, the *SUPER MAC* (see Figure 4) where each group uses different resources and has a different focus. The scope for this workshop is unlimited and is restricted only by available resources and teacher planning and preparation time. At the higher levels of EAP classes this model can easily become the norm.

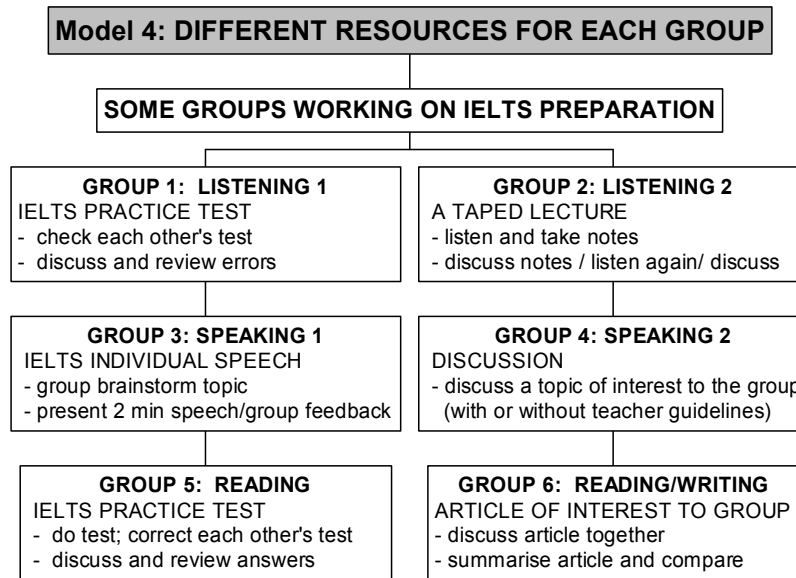


Figure 4. The *SUPER MAC*.

- **The role of teacher and students**

Once the teacher has discussed the requirements of a particular *MAC* session with the whole class, the focus changes from teacher to student and the teacher takes on the role of facilitator. Students are totally in control of their own learning and call on the teacher only when they need assistance.

They organise their work stations, elect group leaders, collect resources, and negotiate how to tackle their particular learning activities. They become totally involved in what they are doing. Students know what is expected of them and are aware of the need to be tolerant of one another, especially the need to keep noise levels down so that all groups can focus on their task. The teacher is free to monitor all groups and spend quality time with a particular group or groups as needed.

Enthusiasm, preparation and organisation are the essential qualities of the *MAC* teacher. While it is acknowledged that the demands placed on the teacher to plan and facilitate a *MAC* are greater than those required for a traditional teacher-centred lesson, the professional and personal rewards for students and teachers make the effort worthwhile. The buzz of activity and the positive atmosphere created by students who enjoy what they are doing reflect a classroom energy which is both stimulating and rewarding for all.

A successful *MAC* session leaves both teacher and students happy and fulfilled (and perhaps in need of a caffeine fix) knowing that they have worked together to achieve worthwhile outcomes. It greatly enriches the student-teacher relationship and helps to foster learner autonomy. Success is self-generating and students are generally eager to have more and more *MACs*.

## CONCLUSION

The *MAC* is a challenging addition to the teaching repertoire of an ESL teacher. It is a practical and effective way of meeting a wide range of student needs, levels of motivation and proficiency. Its strong focus on the learner helps students to set realistic goals, use appropriate learning strategies, regularly reflect on their progress and become independent learners. The *MAC* creates a learning environment that provides optimal challenge to each student, and enriches and strengthens the student-teacher relationship. **The ESL MAC: why not put it on your teaching menu?**

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