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Welcome to the latest issue of the *English Australia Journal*. Firstly, we are delighted to announce that we are now listed on the world’s largest abstract and citation database, Scopus. It is critical for many of our authors in higher education institutions to publish in Scopus-listed journals, due to the increasingly complex area of the measurement of the impact of research publications, so we were proud – after a rigorous 18-month review process – to receive the comments that the Journal ‘maintains a convincing editorial policy [and] publishes excellent content relevant to its field.’ This is testament to the high quality of articles, reviews and reports the Journal’s authors have submitted, and the quality of the work done by our anonymous peer-reviewers. We are also excited to announce that the Journal is now listed on the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) website, which together with the Scopus listing, gives the Journal a truly international profile and introduces it to scores of new readers.

On to this issue! In the lead article, Phil Benson, Mary Ann Chehade, Jose Lara, Gamze Aliriza Sayram and Lesley Speer outline how collaborative exploratory practice for language teachers can contribute to professional development. Using narrative enquiry to reflect on career turning points, the authors provide a rich account of how their collaborations resulted in professional development in varied forms. Karen McRae also provides us with a fascinating account of how using debates as interactive assessment tasks supports language students’ oral and written discussion skills. Karen’s findings have applications for many of our readers’ teaching contexts.

In Brief Reports, Truc Thanh Thi Ly presents her research into ELICOS teachers’ perceptions and applications of Task-based Language Teaching and highlights the challenges of implementing this approach in ELICOS contexts. Anh Tuy Ton Nu reports on her investigation into how a Vietnamese textbook series includes pragmatics in its content. The study can inform similar evaluations in different contexts, including ELICOS. Phil Chappell, Phil Benson and Lynda Yates close off the Brief Reports section by introducing their new research agenda into ELICOS students’ out-of-class language
learning experiences. There are several implications so far for ELICOS teachers and management to consider, with more studies to come.

In our interview this issue, Professor Thomas Farrell, a leading expert on language teacher reflective practice, answers Sophia Khan’s 10 burning questions. Also in Classroom Talk, Michelle Cowans shares her experiences using virtual reality (VR) in the classroom; Evelyn Doman outlines some principles behind flipped learning lesson design; and Marnie Wirth shares that what, how and why of ‘Journal Club’, an inspiring teacher-led PD initiative that has the potential to be implemented in any institution.

Finally, our Reviews editor, Richard Ingold, has again networked with teachers and teacher educators to offer an impressive range of reviews. These include books on pronunciation teaching, curriculum development, and learner autonomy; activity books for speaking and writing; and even a number of online resources.

So, with all the good news and excellent content surrounding this issue, we hope you enjoy reading, thinking about and discussing the myriad ideas it contains. We also hope that you will consider contributing yourself!

Many thanks to all the wonderful contributors who make the Journal possible, to the hard-working editorial team, and to our external reviewers – specialists in the content areas of the articles – for giving up their valuable time to read and comment in order to ensure the highest possible standards. And of course, as always, our thanks and appreciation go to our designer, Derek Trow, who works tirelessly behind the scenes, to the English Australia Secretariat for their ongoing support, and to the Editorial Board.

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Exploratory practice and professional development in ELT: 
The roles of collaboration and reflection

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Although professional development is a primary aim of teacher research, published studies tend to foreground research findings. This study focused on professional development outcomes of two collaborative exploratory practice projects. Using narrative inquiry as a tool for reflection, the participants identified turning points in the projects that led to professional development. In addition to learning about teaching, learners and research, developments related to working with others and the professional development process were identified as outcomes that have not previously been emphasised in the literature on teacher research. It is suggested that these professional development outcomes may be specific to exploratory practice and narrative inquiry, as flexible approaches to teacher research that are focused on understanding.

Introduction
Teacher research is often discussed as means towards professional development. However, published reports tend to emphasise research findings and what has been learned about the focus area of the project. In this paper, four teachers and one academic collaborator focus on their professional development during two collaborative exploratory practice projects. Adopting a narrative inquiry approach, they reflect individually on turning points in their professional development during the projects and conclude with a collective reflection on how exploratory practice worked as a means of professional development in the context of the collaboration.
For Richards and Farrell (2005), teacher professional development ‘seeks to facilitate growth of teachers’ understanding of teaching and themselves as teachers’ (p. 4). From a teacher’s perspective, professional development outcomes may also include improved practice, presentation and publication, and career enhancement. A study of Macedonian English teachers’ cognitions of continuing professional development found that a minority emphasised growth and lifelong learning, while the majority emphasised ‘keeping up-to-date’ with methods and new technologies (Wyatt & Ager, 2017). Wyatt and Ager observed that this reflected the ‘top-down’ approaches to professional development that the teachers had experienced and that conceptions of professional development as growth might fit better with ‘bottom-up’ approaches.

In a guide for English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) institutions, Brandon (2015) describes professional development as ‘a coherent and multi-faceted approach to an individual’s professional growth’ that involves ‘more than observations and workshops and conferences’ (p. 5). Chappell and Benson (2013) stress the importance of teacher involvement in design of self-directed and collaborative professional development activities (see also, Mann, 2005; and Smith, Connolly & Rebolledo, 2014). Maintaining that teachers can only learn in sustained and meaningful ways when they are able to do so together, Johnston (2009) argues that the crucial features of collaborative teacher development are that teachers must have or share control over the process, and, where research or curriculum development are involved, the goal of teacher development for its own sake must be clearly stated. When collaboration involves university–school partnerships, the support that teachers receive from the academic partner needs to be balanced against the risk that they will lose ownership of the professional development process (Yuan & Lee, 2015). The importance of creating space for teachers to engage in individual thinking and reflection is also stressed (Wang & Zhang, 2014).

Research-based approaches to teacher development in the field of language teaching include reflective language teaching (Farrell, 2007), action research (Burns, 2014; Edwards & Burns, 2016) and exploratory practice (Allwright, 2003; Hanks, 2017a, 2017b). Farrell (2007) explains that reflective language teaching involves collecting data but can result in ‘non-observable behaviour changes’, such as increased levels of awareness of a teacher’s assumptions, beliefs and practices (p. 95). In contrast, for Richards and Farrell (2005), the word ‘action’ in action research, ‘refers to taking practical action to resolve classroom problems’ and the primary goal is to improve teaching and learning (p. 117). Exploratory practice focuses on ‘puzzles’ rather than ‘problems’ (Allwright, 2003) and emphasises ‘practitioners working to understand their language learning/teaching issues before attempting problem-solving’ (Hanks,
Exploratory practice may also be complemented by narrative inquiry into teachers’ experiences of teaching and professional development (Johnson, 2002; Pinner, 2016).

Professional development outcomes have been discussed in a number of studies in which academic collaborators and teachers analyse data from published work or projects that they have been involved in (Burns, 2014; Crane, 2015; Edwards & Burns, 2016). Burns (2014) found that teachers who participated in action research projects in Australia experienced three types of learning: learning about teaching, learning about learners, and learning about engaging with and conducting research. Edwards and Burns (2016) found that, up to four years after participating in action research projects, teachers reported they were more confident, connected to students, research-engaged and recognised by colleagues and managers. Crane (2015) notes a number of benefits to teachers that have been cited in published studies, including awareness of learners’ experiences, renewed enthusiasm for teaching and learning, gaining space to study personal and affective issues, opportunities to develop common understanding with colleagues about curricula, and greater understanding of reflective processes. Valuable as these studies are in advancing our understanding of processes of professional development in practitioner research, we believe that there is a need for more studies in which teachers reflect on their own professional development as they experience it in the course of collaborative projects.

In this paper, four practicing teachers from the Macquarie University English Language Centre (ELC) and an academic collaborator from the Applied Linguistics department at the same university, reflect on their experiences of professional development during two exploratory practice projects. Using a narrative inquiry approach that focused on ‘turning points’, they address the following questions: How did the participants develop professionally by participating in an exploratory practice project? What were the main turning points in their development?

**Methods**

This study began when the academic collaborator, Phil, was invited to lead a lunchtime professional development session on independent learning at the ELC, in which he presented 10 pedagogical strategies to encourage independent learning. Two collaborative projects on independent learning came out of the session: Book Club Café, a project designed to encourage students to read more outside the classroom, in which Lesley and Jose were experimenting with ways of making extensive reading materials available to students and with formats for a weekly class session (Speer & Lara, 2017); and ‘Motivating Learner Independence’, in which Gamze and Mary Ann developed pedagogical processes to involve students in the ideas and practice
of independent learning, based on the principle of moving from thoughts to words and then to actions.

Teaching schedules imposed a number of constraints on the projects. ELC classes are taught in five-week blocks. Teaching allocations are made at the end of each block and teachers frequently change classes or class levels. This meant that our projects had to be completed within five weeks and, if they were to be repeated, they had to be designed for a range of different class levels. Innovations had to fit with a relatively tight curriculum and regular assessments. Project team meetings were also constrained as teachers on morning and afternoon sessions could only meet during the 45-minute lunch break. End of block meetings were difficult to arrange when one block ended on Friday afternoon and the next began on Monday morning.

The two teams opted for an exploratory practice approach for three main reasons: (i) the idea of ‘understanding a puzzle’ appealed; (ii) the teachers were attracted by the idea of embedding the project in the existing curriculum; (iii) exploratory practice supported a cyclical approach to practice and evaluation that suited scheduling and time constraints. A pattern emerged, in which each project evolved from block to block over a year. Toward the end of the year, the two teams came together to prepare a presentation on sustainability and transferability of pedagogical innovations for a local TESOL conference. This led to a second phase of the project in which our attention shifted from the projects themselves to reflection on the impact of exploratory practice on our own professional development.

The approach that we adopted in this second phase was based both on reflective practice (Richards & Farrell, 2005) and narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014). We each had a sense that we had developed professionally, but found it difficult to articulate or conceptualise exactly how we had developed. Therefore, we decided to engage in systematic retrospective reflection in an attempt to recover the processes of change that we had experienced. As an approach that is especially suited to capturing experiences of change, narrative inquiry provided the structure for this reflection as we drafted, shared and redrafted the narratives that make up the findings for this study. In order to give focus to this process of reflective narrative inquiry, we first interviewed each other on our experiences of the projects. We then met to discuss the interview transcripts in order to identify ‘turning points’ (Bruner, 2001) in the projects that were, in retrospect, pivotal to our professional development.

The writing process itself was carried out in a series of meetings over a year and, as is often the case in teacher research projects, contributed much to our understanding (Pinner, 2016). In this phase, we drafted and redrafted the narratives to elaborate on the turning points we had identified and shared feedback online and in face-to-face meetings. These narratives represent our individual responses to the questions
that guided the study and also reflect our understandings of our own professional development as it evolved through the exploratory practice and narrative inquiry phases of the project. At a final project meeting, we reviewed these narratives and, through discussion, identified the shared areas of development that are summarised under the heading of ‘shared experiences’.

_Narratives of exploratory practice_

**Lesley**

Like all language teachers, I am constantly looking for ways to improve my students’ language skills and to that end, I attend conferences and as many professional development courses as possible. However, I had always seen professional development as something theoretical, which occurred outside the classroom and was delivered by experts in the field to the teachers, who were passive recipients. It never occurred to me that what I was doing in the classroom could also be regarded as a form of professional development. It was only when Book Club Café evolved into an exploratory practice study that I came to the realisation that professional development is continuous, and that it can happen among colleagues in a horizontal manner as well as in a vertical or top-down direction. I had already been working at the ELC for seven years when we started the project and I had been teaching for several decades. However, I had never undertaken ‘research’ as such and I had certainly never seen a connection between research conducted by the teacher in the classroom and professional development.

‘Accidental’ professional development

The first step in the research process was taken when my colleague, Jose, and I decided to combine our classes for Book Club Café sessions to try to motivate our students to engage in more reading in their free time. This informal collaboration led to conversations in the staff room, which were overheard by other teachers, although we weren’t aware of it at the time. The project went well and the students began to read more, but after a few weeks, a major turning point came when I overheard a conversation in my shared office. Two teachers were discussing the Book Club Café, and I realised that one was training the other in how to run a Book Club Café, session during class, using the model we had implemented. I realised that other teachers had been listening to our informal discussions in the staffroom and they had decided to try out the project with their own students. Undoubtedly the strong sense of teamwork and collegiality in the ELC had contributed to this sharing of ideas and there followed a number of discussions about the benefits and challenges of implementing extensive reading. The positive reaction towards the project from our colleagues gave me the confidence to continue the project and to explore ways to extend it.
Exploration of our teaching leads to more opportunities for professional growth through collaboration with other teachers

After a few months of the project and as more teachers were beginning to implement our program, we began working with Phil, who introduced us to the concept of exploratory practice and mentored us in its application. With Phil and the two teachers who were involved in ‘Motivating Learner Independence’, we presented a paper at the TESOL Research Network Colloquium in Sydney in 2015. The process of preparing this presentation forced me to look more closely at Book Club Café in terms of its sustainability over time and transferability to other teaching contexts. The model of exploratory practice gave me another perspective on professional development. I realised that by examining what was happening in our classroom and sharing it with other teachers, we were all expanding our database of knowledge, and developing our skills. At the same time, I have developed better collaborative strategies and have learnt how to conduct classroom research as part of a team. Taking part in the exploratory practice study has also provided me with a structured approach to analysing my teaching, which in turn has made it easier to reflect upon, and make changes to my classroom teaching.

So what have I learnt from the exploratory practice study? Apart from attaining a greater understanding of how students learn, and being inspired to continue to develop our reading project, I have learnt that professional development can take many forms. To use Allwright’s (2003) terminology, by looking for ‘puzzles’ in our teaching contexts rather than seeing ‘problems’, teachers are empowered to use their own resources to increase their understanding of what is happening in the classroom. The critical factor lies in the sharing of this understanding as we establish our own personal learning networks. Certainly, the whole process has given me more confidence as a teacher and I have learnt to place even more value on the benefits of encouraging teachers to work together to make things better for our students.

Jose

As a full time teacher, the concept of research seemed quite distant and somewhat ‘reserved’ only for academics with PhDs. As I waited for an opportunity to do some kind of research, I started to consider different avenues of professional development as a way to maintain and update my teaching skills. It was not until I attended the professional development session conducted by Phil, that the opportunity to conduct some sort of research finally arose. This opportunity, which presented itself in the form of an exploratory practice study, would become one of the most valuable professional development experiences that I have had in my 20 years of teaching. By following the guidelines of an exploratory practice study, not only were my colleague Lesley and I able to motivate our students to do more reading for pleasure outside
class time with our extensive reading project, but I also learnt about two aspects of teaching that I had not previously explored.

More student engagement through freedom of choice
It had always been evident that most of my students did not understand the importance and value of voluntary reading. For this reason, at the beginning of Book Club Café, we decided to conduct questionnaires with our students, which indicated that the topics presented in most graded readers were limited and of little or no interest to students. Because of this, they found reading a boring and disengaging learning activity. Additionally, I learned that the lack of freedom in selecting texts contributed to the low levels of motivation towards reading. Lesley and I managed to overcome this problem by introducing a number of websites which provided a large range of texts containing a wide variety of text types and topics. With the introduction of these websites, the students had access to reading resources that they were genuinely interested in, and this resulted in higher levels of motivation and attitude towards reading. After having experienced first-hand the importance of freedom of choice, I could see how I seldom used to incorporate this factor into my lessons. As a result, I try as much as possible to let my students choose the topics not only for reading-related activities, but also for listening and speaking tasks, and in this way, I am seeing better results both in their performance and motivation.

Away from comprehension questions
Using a standard approach to teaching reading, I used to prepare follow-up activities that were primarily based on comprehension questions that I prepared beforehand. This meant that I had to invest a great amount of time reading the texts before I could write such questions. This, in addition to being time-consuming, also meant that my students felt that the focus of the reading was to be tested, thus adding to their already low motivation. After observing this, my colleague Lesley and I substituted the comprehension-based approach by completely student-centred follow-up activities, which allowed students to use the information they gathered through voluntary reading in a more entertaining and valuable manner. The first was peer teaching of vocabulary. Later, other activities, such as role-plays, creation of class glossaries, summarising stories, drawing of pictures and critical evaluation of texts, were introduced. I soon realised that the use of these kinds of follow-up activities had substantially and positively contributed to the participation and motivation of the students in regard to reading.

Beyond having assisted me in developing Book Club Café and the lessons learnt along the way, being part of this exploratory practice study gave me the chance to reduce the gap between research and pedagogy. But most importantly, given that
I was able to do so with a project that I felt passionate about and with my own students, exploratory practice provided me with a hands-on opportunity to make my professional development more meaningful, personalised and contextualised.

Gamze

At the beginning of my university studies, I developed an interest in learning about the new advances in the fields of languages and education. Having a background in TESOL as well as training and development allowed me to integrate these two fields throughout my career, focusing on knowledge networks, learning organisations, professional development and continuous education. This one-year longitudinal project contributed to my professional development in multiple dimensions: personal, motivational and intellectual.

My story evolved around three major themes. The first theme is the compass. After attending Phil’s professional development session on independent learning, I was inspired to orchestrate an exploratory practice approach and navigate my teaching focusing on specific pedagogical concepts. The second theme is the creation of a new framework, ‘Motivating Learner Independence’, which aims at promoting learner independence by stimulating students’ thoughts, words and actions. The third theme of my story is the circle of empowerment – the ripple effect of participants’ positive influences on each other.

The compass

Phil’s workshop provided us with practical tools and knowledge base to promote independent learning. Specifically, the 10 pedagogical strategies that were introduced during the session provided a clear road map, with a new scope and parameters. I was especially interested in focusing on independent inquiry, reflective practice and peer teaching. With this new direction, I started to think about how I can incorporate these three pedagogical strategies into my teaching methodology and curriculum.

A new framework

The inspiration for our project started with a motive. How can we encourage our students to become more active learners inside and outside the classroom and motivate them to take more responsibility for their learning? I wanted to understand our students’ thought processes and how I can guide them in their journey to become independent, self-reliant learners.

The second defining moment of this project came along when my colleague, Mary Ann, and I developed a new framework after our brainstorming sessions. ‘Motivating Learner Independence’ is a unique composition that involves incremental stages of developing new thoughts, word associations, reinforcing new actions and reflections,
and spiralling into deeper understandings to stimulate learner independence. This new approach allowed us to be more observant, reflective and creative in our teaching as we tailored it according to students’ needs, monitored the outcomes and added a wide range of extracurricular activities inside and outside the classroom to enrich the curriculum.

Circle of empowerment

Another significant outcome of this study was the interconnectedness, support, collegiality and encouragement among teachers, colleagues, lecturers, administrators and students as a whole. As we shared our experiences, reflected upon the outcomes, challenges and improvements, we developed a thorough understanding of the dynamics, needs and motives of our students and ourselves. This integrated network of collaborative learning became a community which empowered me personally and professionally.

The outcomes of this study can be encapsulated in three areas: pedagogical, instructional and professional. I developed a better understanding of the pedagogical outcomes, and the motivational and affective factors that facilitate or inhibit learning. Parallel to that, I started to focus more on developing needs-based strategies, tailor-made tools and techniques to maximise student learning and developing learner independence. As an overarching reflection, this project contributed to my professional development in numerous areas: observing, deeper understanding of the nature and dynamics of the learning environment and participants, analysing, reflecting, researching, finding ways to improve the curriculum, mentoring and sharing. My professional development throughout this project also contributed to my personal growth and increased my knowledge and awareness.

Above all, the most rewarding outcome of this project for me was to develop a deeper sense of mindfulness and insight in expanding the ability of the mind to focus more on the ‘moment of learning’ and comprehending.

Mary Ann

Exploratory practice, in the context of ‘Motivating Learner Independence’, has proved to be a catalyst in my professional journey as a teacher. Prior to identifying suitable methodologies for the implementation of this project, Gamze and I raised ideas by brainstorming and discussing observations from our own experiences as teachers in the classroom. In particular, we were interested in the lack of initiative and motivation demonstrated by our English language students in their learning environments. In early meetings, we discussed possible reasons for the lack of learner engagement and the students’ passive responses to learning. I suggested that perhaps learners were less active in their environments due to their previous learning experiences in
their home countries. With the majority of learners being from Asian backgrounds and only exposed to such cultural styles of education, I made the assumption that this explained their reluctance to be actively involved in their own language development. However, exploratory practice encouraged me to challenge these assumptions, so that I could more definitely identify the reasons for the lack of learner engagement.

Puzzles rather than problems
The first turning point in this project for me as a teacher was being inspired to look at challenging situations as ‘puzzles’ rather than ‘problems’. By simply becoming aware of the literature around the principles of exploratory practice, I was offered a new perspective or way of thinking. This was a more constructive approach that liberated me from the barriers imposed by seeing the challenge of learner motivation as a ‘problem’. This principle of exploratory practice meant that there was a need for me to delve more deeply in understanding learners' needs. In doing so, it acted as a starting point for me to be more consciously attentive and responsive to students' needs, while challenging my personal approaches to teaching in practice. It also led to the next stage of acquiring data from students, which would either challenge or affirm personal presumptions.

Away with the assumptions
Making the assumption that students were passive learners due to their previous learning experiences is one example of many assumptions that I brought to the classroom on a daily basis. The critical thinking skills fostered by methods of exploratory practice forced me to question and challenge the ideas and assumptions that I held. Such skills were necessary to the development of this project and the acquisition of authentic data from students. The first lesson in the implementation process was designed to elicit information from students about prior learning experiences. However, the results and information gathered seemed to be almost scripted and generic in nature. Students gave few examples of personal experiences, but rather produced responses that tended to be very similar to each other and lacked personal expression of ideas.

This led to the second turning point. When reflecting on data gathered, I could see that perhaps learners were giving answers to my questions, based on what they thought I wanted to hear. This turning point caused me to make changes to how I would pose questions and elicit information from students. I became more aware of the need to ensure questions were not structured in a way that led to a specific answer or implied assumptions, and began to ask more open questions and fewer closed questions. When I made changes to my questioning and discussion tactics, it seemed that it produced results, which included more personal reflections and a broader and more
diverse range of data. It also encouraged a richer, deeper response from learners, which dispelled some of my preconceptions and assumptions. It demonstrated that although there were some students whose prior educational experiences were similar to those I had envisaged, there were also individual differences in many of their previous experiences and individual interpretations of their roles as learners.

Apart from supporting the development of ‘Motivating Learner Independence’, exploratory practice has enabled me to take part in self-directed professional development. It was flexible enough to be personalised to meet my individual professional needs to gain a different perspective and understanding how my personal assumptions influenced my teaching practice. It helped me to move forward with current literature, in developing research skills to aid my investigation and led to strategies that helped to motivate and encourage learner independence.

Phil

In my contribution, I reflect on my professional development as an academic collaborator, rather than as a language teacher, and, especially, on how this development was informed by the exploratory practice framework that evolved during the project. My turning points reflect changed understandings of my role as a non-teaching collaborator in teacher research, in the context of persistent concerns over what I could contribute to teachers’ professional development without indulging in offering ‘expert’, but inappropriate, theoretically motivated advice.

Offering a different perspective

In the early stages, I observed several of Jose and Lesley’s Book Club Café sessions. They would divide their classes into groups of three or four students, introduce the task (students summarising what they had read and sharing new words they had learned) and monitor as the groups worked. I would join a group and observe, usually without intervening. A repeated concern in my observation notes was that there was little interaction in some groups, because the students were struggling with the language they needed to explain new words. I felt this was something that I could see and hear as an observer sitting in on groups, that Jose and Lesley might miss from their vantage point as roving monitors. I passed this insight on in a team meeting and Jose and Lesley made adjustments to the classroom materials and procedures. This moment stays with me a turning point, however, because it represents a point when I understood that I could advise not as an ‘expert’, but simply as a participant with a different perspective on what was happening in the classroom.

Missing the point

In the ‘Motivating Learner Independence’ classes, Mary Ann tended to work with the whole class seated in a circle, while I observed silently from the side. To
prepare for one class, she asked students to bring in pictures that represented their understanding of independence and then share their pictures and thoughts with the class. In my observation notes, I wrote, ‘This is a great lesson, can we “bottle” it?’ Noticing that some of the students’ pictures were too small for the whole class to see, I also noted the idea of building up a bank of larger laminated pictures that teachers could use for this activity. In a reflection meeting, I suggested this to Mary Ann. She responded, ‘Yes . . . but isn’t the point for the students to find the pictures?’ I still squirm a little as I remember this incident, because I instantly realised how ‘teacher trainer-y’ my comment had been. To collaborate constructively, I understood, I would have to get inside the class teacher’s perspective before opening my mouth.

Challenging questions

My third turning point came towards the end of the project in a conversation with the ELC Director of Academic Programmes, who had set up the professional development collaboration and regularly asked the participating teachers how it was going. The feedback, she told me, was that things were going well. What the teachers most appreciated, she said, was how I had asked challenging questions at each stage of the project. This surprised me, because I had not intentionally used questioning as a professional development strategy. Throughout the project, I had focused on the advice I should be giving, and not on the questions I should ask. But I recalled one conversation with Gamze in which I had repeatedly asked her how she thought a particular class involved independent learning. If my questions had been challenging, I realised, it was because they were genuine and emerged in the heat of trying to understand how her classroom practice matched her intentions. Now, I understood that the questions were more valuable than the advice that eventually followed.

Although my own professional development was not originally a goal of this collaborative project, I realise now that I have, in fact, developed a great deal. Looking back on my turning points, I see that the process of development has been very much about resolving puzzles about my role as academic collaborator. It is standard practice that the academic in this kind of collaboration should observe, listen and question, rather than advise; in this sense, I had learned something I already knew. The exploratory practice approach, however, had helped me internalise that knowledge and become more comfortable with that role. For me, exploratory practice is essentially about maintaining a sustained focus on day-to-day life in the classroom, trying things out, asking questions, and trying to answer them from different perspectives. What emerged from this, in my case, was a depth of learning that is less a matter of knowledge than of learning to inhabit a certain way of being an academic collaborator in teacher professional development.
**Shared experience**

Reviewing the five narratives collectively, we found that our professional development involved Burns’s (2014) three general areas of learning about teaching, learners and research and several of the specific areas identified by Edwards and Burns (2016) and Crane (2015). At the same time, our narratives highlighted two additional areas of development that have received less emphasis in previous studies: learning to work with others and learning about professional development itself.

The projects involved learning to work with others in several ways. Lesley and Jose were already working together on Book Club Café, but not as teacher–research partners. Gamze and Mary Ann had not worked together before. None of the ELC teachers had worked with an academic collaborator before, and this was also Phil’s first experience of such a collaboration. The collaboration between the two groups in the second phase of the project was uncharted territory for all of us. In ‘Motivating Learner Independence’, the themes of transferability and sustainability were mainly explored in the context of Gamze and Mary Ann’s collaboration with each other; in Book Club Café the spread of the project to other ELC teachers introduced a new dimension of collaboration that Lesley was keen to explore. This may explain why working with others is most strongly thematised in her narrative. The teachers in this study shared the experience of teachers in Wang and Zhang’s (2014) study, who discussed their action research projects and shared success studies and progress with colleagues. We are reminded, here, of Johnston’s (2009) observation that teachers can only learn in sustained and meaningful ways when they are able to do so together. We also identify a broader willingness and capacity to engage with colleagues other than those they collaborate with in a specific project as a major outcome of participating in exploratory practice.

Learning about the professional development process was closely linked to collaboration as it involved understanding how professional development could be a self-directed, collaborative process. It was also a matter of allowing our assumptions about learning and teaching to be challenged and to evolve inquiry-based approaches to teaching. This theme was present to some degree in all the narratives, but emerges most strongly in Mary Ann’s narrative. We are reminded, in this case, of the importance that has been attached to teachers’ involvement in the design and management of professional development activities (Chappell & Benson, 2013). As the opening of Lesley’s narrative suggests, teachers are used to cultures of top-down professional development. If conceptions of professional development can be placed along a continuum from improving teaching practice to personal and professional growth (Wyatt and Ager, 2017), we might say that the main outcomes of this project were at the growth end of the continuum. At the same time, the participants did also
improve their teaching practice, so that it would be more accurate to say that they experienced an evolution along the continuum, and that awareness of the process of professional development emerged toward the end of the project.

Arguably, these professional development outcomes emerged from teacher research, rather than exploratory practice specifically. However, there may well be a link between exploratory practice and the specific outcomes of learning to work with others and professional development. Our initial preference for exploratory practice was chiefly based on a perception that it represented a sustainable approach to teacher research. It involved identification of puzzles and a collaborative search for understanding, but also a commitment to sustained experimentation and reflection that progressively deepened understandings of these puzzles. As one of us put it in a project meeting, exploratory practice was a flexible approach that provided just enough structure for sustained and meaningful reflection on practice. Narrative inquiry, which contributed much to our understanding of the professional development process, was also a natural development of the exploratory practice approach, in which attention shifted from one puzzle to another as the project developed.

**Conclusion**

Focusing on the professional development outcomes in exploratory practice, this paper has highlighted two areas of development – working with others and awareness of professional development processes – that have not been emphasised in previous studies. Because evidence-based studies on teacher research and professional development are still relatively few in number, we hope this will be pursued in further studies in which participants explore their experiences of professional development in teacher research. We have also come to attach particular value to formal reflection on our experience of teacher research, through collaborative narrative enquiry. It was during this reflective phase that we began to move beyond conclusions that were specific to and embedded within the two projects toward more complex understandings of the processes of professional development. One limitation of this approach is that a protracted period of collaboration might not be possible in other circumstances. Nevertheless, we would argue that the study shows evidence of the value of extending teacher research projects, albeit for shorter periods, to include a follow-up phase of explicit reflection on professional development outcomes.
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The value of developing debating skills in Academic English units

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The art of debating is an ancient practice that is still frequently performed in contemporary social, business, and political interactions. It is a valuable skill that requires several techniques taught in Academic English units, including the use of critical thinking, application of formal language, and development of sound arguments. These skills are often applied and assessed in writing tasks but used less frequently as an oral assessment. Drawing upon an analysis of six sessions (over a two-year period) conducted at a tertiary institution in Sydney, this article explores how debates have been used as an interactive assessment task that empowers students from a non-English speaking background (NESB) with the ability to support positions both orally and in a written format. It examines teacher feedback as well as student reflections and academic progress once debates were incorporated into the syllabus of Academic English units. Suggestions are offered to teachers and course writers considering the use of debates in their Academic English unit.

Introduction

Developing elaborate opinions supported by reliable sources, while abiding by genre requirements and using correct grammar, is not an easy task for tertiary students. This is particularly challenging for international and domestic students from a non-English speaking background (NESB). To prepare for such demands, a large proportion of international students (28% in 2013 according to Australian Education International), started their journey at an English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) college. Supporting them during this transition period, pathway programs at tertiary institutions offer additional help for international and local NESB students not meeting direct entry requirements (Gibbs & Feith, 2015). To thrive in higher education, these students rely on institutions that recognise their needs and prior learning (Franken, 2012), break down any institutional ‘codified knowledge’ (Eraut, 2003, p. 55), and transform them to fit the new context (McKenzie & Egea, 2016).

Regulated support is available at the private higher education provider in Sydney where this study was conducted. As a pathway to second-year university, this college offers smaller classes, scaffolded learning, and compulsory Academic English units
included in all diploma programs. In order to graduate and transition to university, students enrolled in these programs must pass the Academic English unit aligned with their discipline. Ongoing modest academic results and student disinterest, amongst other factors, prompted a curriculum review. In the highly competitive market of higher education, besides ensuring quality courses, the institution is highly dependent upon its reputation within the student cohort. To provide a more positive experience, debates were introduced in the new Academic English units, giving students a chance to orally articulate their position following a prescribed structure. This study explores the effects debates had on student progress and learning experience when used as a formal assessment task in Academic English units. It highlights the value of developing debating skills and attempts to refute the misconception that debates are just for expert native speakers and are not accessible to NESB students (Snider & Schnurer, 2002). Teachers’ suggestions on running a successful debate with native-English and NESB students are also explored.

**Literature review**

Recent research explored the impact of Academic English studies on NESB / ELICOS students’ language proficiency in Australia (Dyson, 2014; Floyd, 2015; Oliver, Vanderford & Grote, 2012). An area that was noticeably neglected was the development of speaking skills as students still experienced hesitation during group discussions (Braine, 2002; Dooey, 2010; Yates & Wahid, 2013). With more than one-third of the ELICOS cohort in Australia in 2011 transitioning to higher education, and one-fifth moving to Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses (Australian Education International, 2013), refining the way speaking is taught is vital for NESB students. Furthermore, student competency is no longer exclusively assessed through a final traditional examination at the end of the term. Instead, a variety of oral, written, individual, group and interactive assessment tasks are now used, asking students ‘to perform real-world tasks that demonstrate meaningful application’ (Mueller, 2005, p. 2). In-class speaking practice should therefore prepare NESB students for these challenges, and, as supported by a number of studies, practising debating skills offers significant academic and non-academic value (Coates, 2007; McKenzie & Egea, 2016).

Though not widely used as an assessment task, debates bring together a range of skills and provide NESB students with opportunities to formally discuss perspectives orally in a ‘safe’ and small classroom environment. Unlike traditional presentations, debates encapsulate all levels of cognitive learning in Bloom’s (revised) Taxonomy. They place students in a position that requires them to think in English rather than merely regurgitate memorised phrases. Snider and Schnurer (2002) add that debating ‘transcends sheer translation’ (p. 210) as students must develop the ability to listen,
observe, interpret, analyse, evaluate and relate (Deardorff, 2006), improving mental alertness and intellectual survival skills (Ekbatani, 2011; Snider & Schnurer, 2002). Furthermore, Burton (2009) advises teachers to ‘steer away from using solely generic forms of assessment such as exams, tutorial participation and oral presentations’ (p. 97) and focus more on developing graduate capabilities such as problem solving, critical thinking, effective communication and collaborative learning – but not solely in written modes.

The advantages of public speaking in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms are highlighted by Iberri-Shea (2009), who suggests that while debates ‘require more planning and involvement than presentations, [they] are well worth the effort’ (p. 19). Students’ sense of belonging is intensified when they develop arguments collaboratively, increasing engagement levels (Iberri-Shea, 2009; Park, 2009; Radloff, 2010; Weeks & Laakso, 2016). In line with Deardorff’s (2006) Intercultural Competence Model, debates place respect, openness and curiosity as requisite attitudes. Not only must students actively generate comprehensive arguments and demonstrate a mature approach (Deardorff, 2006; Park, 2009), but they also need to predict what the opposing team will present in order to have a strong rebuttal and ultimately win the debate.

By recreating debating scenarios in the classroom and regular interaction with classmates, students are given an opportunity to gradually learn the rules and codes of the new social setting. Through social immersion NESB learners can start to adapt to the academic and professional rules of engagement in Australian professional contexts. Lee-Johnson (2015) adds that an outgoing personality is often needed by NESB learners to have the courage to interact in a social setting. Hence, besides developing academic proficiencies, within the right framework debates can be used to support NESB students and help them to overcome interpersonal communication barriers or lack of confidence in preparation for a dynamic university or work environment (Doody & Condon, 2012). While this could be a challenging task for teachers and students, these studies provide clear recognition of the value of developing debating skills. More research would help to gain a better understanding of the benefits of debating for NESB students enrolled in tertiary level Academic English units in Australia.

**The study**

**Context and rationale of the curriculum change**

Before the introduction of debates in the Academic English units reviewed, teachers regularly noted a lack of student interest in the assessment tasks, both through classroom observations and through assessment results, as learning outcomes
were not always met. Academic presentations often demand a high level of self-discipline and maturity, which Diploma/first-year level students may not have yet acquired. Despite efforts at applying ‘bridging strategies’ (MacAulay, 2016, p. 117) between topics, presentations and final tasks, students robotically read paragraphs pasted on PowerPoint slides. There remained a need to inspire students to develop in-depth arguments, resist persuasion and create new ideas (Snider & Schnurer, 2002), rather than simply realigning a number of facts. Therefore, in the first session of 2016, debates were introduced as an alternative oral assessment task to presentations. Initially, teachers were concerned that debates would be too challenging as an assessment task for NESB students as the newly implemented debates required students to defend an academic position rather than simply list advantages and disadvantages as often performed in the previous presentation tasks. Teachers played a major role in this transition, assisting students to develop a greater sense of responsibility and transform from passive to active learners. Students had approximately three weeks to prepare for their assessed debate – all groups conducted a mock debate in the preceding week as practice. The structure in Figure 1 was followed to ensure consistency in delivery.

Figure 1: Debate structure followed in Academic English units

Rationale of the study

While outcomes drawn from similar studies already support the value of developing
debating skills, this study was conducted to review student progress and learning experience, for both native-English speakers and NESB, when debates were implemented in Academic English units, replacing traditional oral presentations. In order to assess the effectiveness of debates, both teacher feedback as well as student reflections and unit results were gathered. The study explores how debates may have contributed towards promoting a fuller immersion into subject topics and assessment tasks, and attempts to highlight the benefits of challenging NESB students to articulate their arguments orally in a debate in preparation for future university studies and careers.

Participants
Based on college data, during the two-year period of the study 2,590 students (Table 1) enrolled in a Diploma Program. Seventy-seven percent of the students were international, and their linguistic backgrounds mainly included Chinese, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Malaysian, Pakistani, Saudi Arabian and South Korean. The remaining domestic cohort was a mixture of local, proficient English speakers and NESB students.

Table 1: Number of Students Enrolled in 2015–2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Number of students enrolled in 2015</th>
<th>Number of students enrolled in 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$S1^*$</td>
<td>$S2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/Commerce</td>
<td>638</td>
<td>464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts/Communication</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science/Engineering</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of students</td>
<td>871</td>
<td>597</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: In Sessions 1–3 ($S1$–$S3$) students conducted oral presentations and in Sessions 4–6 ($S4$–$S6$) they participated in debates.

The seven Academic English teachers interviewed in early 2017 already had over 10 years’ experience teaching Academic English at the time of the study. They had been employed by the college on a casual ongoing basis for a minimum of three years.

Methodology
In order to provide insight into both academic progress as well as students’ experience and teachers’ observations, both qualitative and quantitative methods were adopted in the collection of data. Approval to collect student data was obtained from the institution’s senior management team. No reference to student names, student identification numbers, gender, age or nationality was made throughout the study.
Written consent was sought from the teachers who provided audio-recorded feedback.

For the purpose of this study, an analysis of student performance in three discipline-based Academic English units (Writing and Research for Arts/Communication; Writing and Research for Business/Commerce; Writing and Research for Science/Engineering) was made from 2015 to 2016. This quantitative research consisted of an analysis of oral assessment scores and overall results in these units. In 2015, students conducted a 20-minute group presentation as an oral assessment and topics ranged from gender pay inequality to financial services, amongst others. In 2016, a 20-minute debate replaced presentations, covering topics such as public relations, internet censorship as well as case studies. All teachers followed marking rubrics – for the oral tasks they assessed students as a group and also on their individual performance. All marks were collected from the institution’s administration database and were moderated by Unit Coordinators and the Program Convenor throughout each session.

Qualitative information included feedback from Academic English teachers employed in S6, and student reflections from the cohort enrolled in S6. These Academic English units were running for the third time in S6 and all the teachers had taught it at least twice. Besides submitting regular end-of-session unit reports, teachers participated in one-on-one 15-minute audio-recorded interviews after S6. Eight main questions (Appendix A) were addressed to the teachers, focusing on their observations of student performance in oral presentations and debates. Sub-questions indicated parameters, offered clarification and allowed for robust feedback. It was feared that amongst the student cohort, only the stronger students would participate in focus groups or one-on-one interviews. As part of their reflective learning experience, students in S6 (a total of 155 participants) were asked to complete reflective tasks in the form of blog entries and forums via the e-learning platform for a more accurate cross-sectional analysis. To improve response rates and quality, reflection questions guided students to reflect on their performance and experience (Appendix B). On completion of S6, anonymous student comments were extracted from the e-learning platform. An evaluative research approach was conducted to assess and summarise teachers’ and students’ views.

**Limitations of the study**

A limitation of this study is that when debates were introduced in S4 in 2016, other components of the curriculum were concurrently modified. Students and teachers had to adapt to more interactive methods of delivery and assessment, and this may have had a positive impact on student performance and results. Notwithstanding this limitation, this may have been counteracted by the introduction of in-class
examination to ensure academic integrity. Some may consider exams as more challenging than take-home assignments, and this change may have also affected the students’ final task and consequently their overall unit scores. Further research could be conducted in units where debates are introduced and other factors remain constant.

**Results**

**Student performance in presentations (S1–S3) and debates (S4–S6)**

As seen in Figure 2, results for Business and Science groups did not experience considerable changes and irregularities in their results. A small improvement in S4 was recorded, but further variability was still noticed in S5 and S6, lacking a steady trend. A substantial drop in Arts/Communication results in S3 was followed by consistent higher marks upon the introduction of debates in S4–S6.

![Figure 2: Average marks achieved in presentations (S1–3) and debates (S4–S6) in 2015–2016](image)

**Student overall unit performance**

As indicated in the overall unit results in Figure 3, the final task had significant impact on the students’ final score. The most striking observation to emerge from the data comparison was that Arts/Communication students showed significant and ongoing improvement from S4. A drop across both Business and Science cohorts was experienced in S4, with steadier results in S5–S6.
Teacher feedback

All seven teachers participated in this study (100% response rate). There was a general agreement that both debating and oral presentations offer valuable techniques for all students. It was highlighted that both tasks emphasise public speaking skills, but they test students on different things. One teacher explained that besides the need to develop more in-depth arguments for debates, students must also ‘listen, pay more attention, interact and collaborate with the rest of the team to provide a formal response’ just like in most work environments. These techniques are not always seen in oral presentations. With the introduction of debates some teachers focused more on ‘prompting and provoking’ students to encourage critical thinking, problem-solving, and professional conduct.

There was consensus among teachers interviewed that debates were regarded as more challenging for young NESB students. An interviewee added that debates are ‘hard and intellectual’ – students have to think on their feet, which can be difficult if English is not their first language. Oral presentations allow them to prepare, have a visual element, and feel more in control. Others confessed that the most proficient students seem to find debates ‘fun and challenging’ – they feel ‘they have a voice’ as ‘they get to express their ideas’, but ‘even the quiet ones have ideas during debates!’

Most teachers mentioned that linguistic difficulties were not the only barriers to successful participation in debates, and that ‘some students are better at some things than others; it sometimes comes down to individual ability and cultural influence.’
However, teachers agreed that the same could be said about written tasks and all standardised assessment in general.

An element of concern about the considerable reliance on student participation and collaboration for effective debates was expressed by all teachers. Their feedback was heavily linked with how hard-working and dedicated students were – ‘there is a lot that is up to the student, especially with the research and delivery aspect. If someone does not show up on the day they are letting down their team . . . an oral presentation can still go ahead, but in a debate if you have a weak link, you can lose the game,’ confessed a teacher. Despite initial scepticism, teachers were later pleased with student collaboration and performance. They provided suggestions and warnings to ensure a positive experience and their main thoughts are summarised below (Table 2).

**Table 2: Major Teacher Concerns and Benefits of Debates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major teacher concerns</th>
<th>Common benefits highlighted by teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reliance on student participation</td>
<td>Student engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of teaching materials</td>
<td>Enhanced collaboration skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging for ESL students</td>
<td>Developing student responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introvert/shy students struggle</td>
<td>Teamwork and bonding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard and intellectual</td>
<td>Fun for both students and teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All interviewees appreciated having a distinct structure and clear objectives dictated by the curriculum when preparing students for debates. Most instructions and materials were uploaded on the e-learning platform, with each teacher supplementing lessons according to each cohort’s needs. Teachers indicated that generally more materials were available online on oral presentation techniques than debating skills, while some activities, such as body language awareness tasks, overlapped. One interviewee warned that task requirements and models must be made clear for everyone as otherwise debates will rely heavily on the teacher ‘to shape them in the way they’re meant to be; mismanagement can turn them into dull and time-consuming activities.’ This is particularly vital for international students who, unlike most local students, had never participated in a debate before and needed more assistance with their preparation.

**Student reflections**

In the student cohort, there were 64 respondents (from 155 enrolled students in S6) that completed their reflection tasks, resulting in a total response rate of 41.3%. Students initially experienced a level of uneasiness when starting to prepare for a debate. However, they predominantly reported having had a positive experience overall, particularly after they completed their task.
Introverted students expressed signs of anxiety and lack of self-confidence with regards to delivering a persuasive and coherent speech facing an audience, as this was a first-time experience for several students. Some initially considered debates as more daunting and intimidating than oral presentations, and this made them feel ‘really worried’. Others added that besides overcoming the fear of public speaking, they also had to deal with the pressure of being confronted by the opposing team. Nonetheless, they seemed to appreciate having the opportunity to learn and practice the basic skills of debating. Responses in pre- and post-debate reflections were summarised into three categories: ‘uneasiness’, ‘enjoyment’ and ‘learning’ (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Samples of student comments in three main categories**

The practice of academic language skills, critical thinking, argument development and referencing during the preparation phase was highlighted in several entries. Prior to the debates, students did not realise how many academic skills they would be applying, but they later saw the relevance to upcoming assessments. Some also mentioned the importance of working ‘efficiently with other group members’ for better results in debates. Numerous participants felt exceptionally optimistic once they completed the task, and an element of surprise was a recurring feature in their remarks. Some expressed a sense of accomplishment and thanked the teacher for the ‘great experience’. Others ‘enjoyed the process’ and the fact that they were doing ‘something different’. Consequently, although challenging, most participants found debates thought-provoking, inspirational and engaging.

**Discussion and future direction**

Concurring with previous research (Park, 2009; Weeks & Laakso, 2016), data collected showed that teachers and students considered debates as a very engaging and fulfilling task. One of the most relevant findings was that throughout S4–S6, Arts/Communication students consistently achieved higher scores in debates and overall unit scores. There is always going to be variability within the cohorts, but what is
significant is that students have enjoyed the debates despite the challenges they presented. It would be interesting to conduct a longer extrapolated study to see if the statistical improvement in marks can be maintained.

These findings, although preliminary, seem to suggest that while both debates and presentations offer valuable practice, Arts/Communication cohorts may possibly benefit more from debates. Despite the positive feedback collected across the three disciplines, a possible explanation for this disparity is that Arts/Communication students wrote a persuasive essay as a final task. Students’ performance in relation to educational outcomes improved considerably as they re-applied debate argument development techniques in final essays. The debate comprised highly similar argument development and organisation of ideas and therefore served as additional practice. The Business and Science groups wrote reports instead of essays, requiring a completely different configuration for which students had less time to practice. Improvement in performance the Arts/Communication could also be linked to additional teacher feedback given to smaller cohorts enrolled from S4–S6.

Overall, teacher and student feedback suggests that debates offered all students a steep learning curve and helped them to understand the high standard of formality and depth required in academic and professional scenarios. Debating skills still offered value to Business and Science students, as they developed higher-order thinking and speaking skills in formal contexts. Nevertheless, based on the nature of their industry, other oral tasks such as presentations, sales pitches and project proposals might be more appropriate as assessment for these cohorts. Therefore, it is suggested that in cases where presentations are preferred as summative testing, debates can still be used as formative assessment.

Like with all other group tasks, student dedication was directly linked with debate performance. Teamwork that takes place outside the classroom was difficult for teachers to gauge and assess, and some distracted students impacted their team’s preparation and performance. To enhance group collaboration, efforts to instil a sense of belonging and responsibility from the beginning of the session are essential. Furthermore, practicing all necessary academic skills, as well as highlighting them in marking criteria (Park, 2009), is required to avoid having students simply stating an impromptu subjective opinion on the day. Additionally, to avoid bias when marking students on their debate performance, teacher-swap or co-marking has been proposed for an impartial assessment. The main suggestions gathered from teachers are summarised below:

- instil a sense of belonging from early in the term
- show videos of debates as examples
• provide opportunities for students to practice several discussions and guided speaking tasks
• film mock debates and allow students to work on feedback provided
• allow props (e.g., pictures/costumes) for a more dynamic performance (without wordy slides)
• co-mark (or teacher swap) to assess debates performance without bias.

Students appreciated the backing and solidarity of teammates who were supporting the same cause, and this boosted their confidence and relationship levels. A deep sense of relief replaced initial feelings of anxiety, and high levels of satisfaction were recorded upon task completion. In line with MacAulay’s suggestions (2016), it was highly encouraging to see that in retrospective reflections students recognised the relevance of debating skills for their future university studies and workplaces. They demonstrated genuine self-reflection on personal strengths and weaknesses and some even expressed regret when reflecting on their lack of preparation.

In future sessions it is suggested that students are allowed to add props that support their position and arguments, but not use PowerPoint slides to avoid the risk of reverting to passive narration. Students should conduct practice sessions, critically analysing the opposing side and brainstorming possible confutation, to aid with a deeper understanding of the topic and improve confidence levels during the rebuttal stage. Peer marking could also be explored, particularly in practice sessions, so that students can rate members of their team (or opposing team) and reflect on potential areas that may require improvement before the actual assessment task is conducted. Snippets from political debates may be shown in class and additional models could be recorded by teachers or performed live as an example. Filmed guided speaking tasks could be done in preceding weeks so that students become aware of the pitch and tone of their voice as well as their body language.

**Conclusion**

This study was undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness of using debates in Academic English units. With careful preparation debates can provide valuable practice for future university studies. The findings of this study complement those of earlier research, confirming that that debates are an effective simulation of professional scenarios and offer an enjoyable way of developing formal speaking as well as interpersonal and intercultural competencies for tertiary students. One of the more significant implications of this study is that debates have also helped Arts/Communication groups to enhance their essay writing skills and consistently receive
higher overall unit results over 3 sessions. It would be interesting to compare experiences of other students enrolled in Academic English units, where debates are implemented and are the sole element that is modified. Notwithstanding the limitation of the study, continued efforts are needed to make debates more effective for Business and Science cohorts and more accessible to NESB/ELICOS students.

**NOTE:**
Since this study was conducted, slight modifications were made to the oral assessment tasks of these Academic English units. In lieu of a debate, Business/Commerce cohorts now conduct a Sales Pitch, while Science/Engineering students complete a Project Proposal prior to the final report. Significant improvements have been noted in student performance and results.

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APPENDIX A

Teacher Interview Questions

1. From which activity do you think students benefit the most: oral presentations or debates?
2. Do you think students prefer oral presentations to debates?
3. Does your teaching approach vary when preparing students for debates in comparison to oral presentation preparation?
4. Do debates equip students with useful communication skills that they will use in the future?
5. Are there any skills practiced during oral presentations that students do not practice in debates (and vice versa)?
6. Were the debates preparation tasks in the curriculum sufficient (for you and the students)?
7. What are the main pros and cons of using debates as an assessment task with domestic and international students?
8. When debates are used as an assessment task, should presentations still be used as formative assessment (and vice versa)?

APPENDIX B

Student Reflection Questions

1. In your opinion, what is more challenging: debates or presentations?
2. How did you feel when you found out that you had to participate in a debate as part of your assessment?
3. How did you prepare yourself for the debate?
4. Was this the first time you participated in a debate?
5. Did you try your best while preparing for and participating in the debate? Do you think you performed well?
6. How did you feel once the debates were over?
7. Do you think the debate was a useful exercise?
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How EFL textbooks accommodate pragmatics: 
An investigation into a newly published textbook series for 
Vietnamese upper-secondary school students

Anh T. Ton Nu

Macquarie University

This study was conducted to see to what extent pragmatics is incorporated into a newly published EFL textbook series for Vietnamese upper-secondary school students under the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (NFLP 2020). The results show that there is a paucity of explicit information on pragmatics in this series. In addition, the presentations of different pragmatic aspects were found to be inadequate according to current theories of L2 pragmatics teaching. Accordingly, the present study supports the need to supplement this textbook series with range and depth of pragmatic input with pedagogically adequate tasks that can increase pragmatic knowledge.

Introduction
The parallel importance of pragmatic knowledge alongside organisational knowledge in the overall knowledge of language (Bachman, 1990, 2000; Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010) and the call for bringing pragmatics into the classroom (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996) has made research on pragmatics, pragmatic competence, context and culture gain momentum in English as Foreign Language (EFL) in the past two decades (for examples see Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Rose, 2005; Taguchi, 2014; Tatsuki & Houck, 2010; Vellenga, 2004). Regarding the EFL context of Vietnam, there has been a heightened interest in how pragmatic knowledge is taught and learnt (for examples see M. T. T. Nguyen, 2007, 2011; Tran, 2004; Vu, 2017), particularly since
the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach became powerful in Vietnam in the late 1990s. However, there is still a gap in the literature of both international and Vietnamese EFL contexts as to how different aspects of pragmatics are included in EFL textbooks despite their crucial role in providing input to EFL learners. Given this research gap and a newly published textbook series’ alleged aim to develop communicative competence, the pragmatic input in these textbooks needs to be evaluated.

**Methods**

In order to find out what pragmatic information is incorporated in the textbooks, the method of content analysis and both quantitative and qualitative approaches were adopted. Also, a framework for textbook analysis was adapted from Vellenga’s (2004) classification of pragmatic information and Vu’s (2017) adapted framework of Vellenga (2004) and Kachru (1992) (see Appendix for Vellenga’s and Vu’s frameworks). The data source of this study is the newly published national EFL textbook series for Vietnamese upper-secondary schools, which consists of 18 books (six students’ books, six workbooks, and six teachers’ books).

Data was collected in two stages. First, the six initial units of all students’ books were examined to check the usability of the textbook analysis framework. After it was concluded that the framework functioned well for the initial sample, further categorisation of all pragmatic data from the whole textbook series into the framework was conducted.

The data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Firstly, all data were counted to yield the total amount of pragmatic input included in the textbook series, as well as the percentage of each category and sub-category of pragmatic input in this study. Subsequently, the data in each category and its sub-categories were analysed qualitatively with regard to the findings and discussions from the similar previous studies of Vellenga (2004), M. T. T. Nguyen (2007, 2011), Ren and Han (2016), and Vu (2017) and to current L2 pragmatics theories, to shed light on the quality of the pragmatic information identified from the textbooks. In examining the pragmatic tasks collected from the students’ books and workbooks, Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy by Anderson et al. (2001) and Ishihara and Cohen’s (2010) example of pragmatic tasks were used to analyse the quality and nature of these kind of tasks in this textbook series.

**Findings**

The page-by-page analysis of the textbook series resulted in the following key findings. First of all, this English textbook series shows a paucity of explicit information on
pragmatics, which accounts for only 5.5 per cent of the students’ books pages and is totally neglected in the teachers’ books.

In terms of the quality of the pragmatic information included, it was noted that there is no information about appropriacy, register, and cultural knowledge. Even though politeness and formality receive some attention in the textbooks, they are just mentioned by their names five times in all students’ books without any explanations.

In addition, the treatment of speech acts in this textbook series lacks both contextual and metapragmatic information. For example, in the teaching of making suggestions, in *English 11, Volume 2, Student’s Book* (Hoang, Phan, Hoang, Hoang, Kieu, Vu, & Kaye, 2016), a list of different linguistic forms for making suggestions is provided, including: *I suggest* + V-ing; *I’d like to suggest* + V-ing; *Why don’t we* + V (infinitive without to)?; *Let’s* + V (infinitive without to); *What about* + V-ing?; *How about* + V-ing?; *... would be useful as it’s / because it’s / since it’s ...*; *What do you think about* + V-ing?; *Wouldn’t it be better to* + V (infinitive) (p. 36) and followed by an example conversation; however, it is not accompanied by any explanations about the differences in terms of illocutionary force of the expressions. The same method is applied to the teaching of other speech acts throughout the series. Furthermore, there is a limited range of speech acts, and they are distributed unsystematically throughout the textbooks. The linguistic presentations of speech acts was also found to be unrealistic and limited in the number of different language forms to perform a language function.

Furthermore, the pragmatic tasks identified from the students’ books and the workbooks are not oriented towards increasing pragmatic or intercultural competence. Instead, they are designed for students to practice the target language functions only.

Further, the metalanguage used in this textbook series does not include any explicit metapragmatic information; however, regarding its use of different sentence types, the analysis suggested that the metalanguage in this series could provide a pragmatically appropriate source of linguistic input for students. This is because not only imperative sentences but also declarative sentences and questions are appropriately used in all categories of metalanguage style.

**Discussion**

This study lent support to previous research findings by Vellenga (2004), Ren and Han (2016), M. T. T. Nguyen (2007, 2011) and Vu (2017), in which the dearth of pragmatic information and the problematic treatment of speech acts and general pragmatic information in EFL textbooks are noted. As pragmatic information was also found to be neglected in all teachers’ books under the scope of this study, it is highly
recommended that these teachers’ books be accompanied with a supplementary
guideline which shows teachers how to incorporate pragmatics into the teaching of
different sections in the students’ books.

Additionally, its findings that the so-called pragmatic tasks identified from this
textbook series focus on only low level of cognition in Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy
(Anderson et al., 2001) indicate the need to incorporate real pragmatic tasks which
are oriented towards enhancing learners’ pragmatic knowledge and require different
level of cognitive processes including remembering, understanding, applying,
analysing, evaluating, and creating (see Ishihara and Cohen’s [2010] examples of
pragmatic tasks, and Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy [Anderson et al., 2001]).

Conclusion

This study has identified a mismatch between the ultimate goal, both of this textbook
series and the NFLP 2020, of developing students’ communicative competence and
the paucity of explicit input about pragmatics in this textbook series. Therefore, it is
essential that stakeholders, including teachers, textbooks writers, and policy-makers,
find ways to supplement this textbook series, and others like it, with input and tasks
that can increase pragmatic knowledge. As there have not been any studies which
evaluate this new textbook series in particular nor any research which focuses on the
inclusion of different aspects of pragmatics in EFL textbooks in general, the present
study serves as a means of evaluation of this textbook series in terms of pragmatic
input and fills a gap in the literature.

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APPENDIX


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ELICOS students’ out-of-class language learning experiences:  
An emerging research agenda

Phil Chappell
Phil Benson
Lynda Yates

Macquarie University

Introduction
This Brief Report presents some preliminary findings from two exploratory studies investigating the expectations that ELICOS students have about opportunities to use English in Australia in real-life out-of-class settings, and what the reality of out-of-class life is actually like for them.

Background
Recent research suggests that language use outside the classroom is vital for students who want to reach high levels of proficiency and that a balance between classroom and out-of-class learning is important (Lai, 2015). This is all the more so for students of English in Australia, where there is often a strong expectation that students will be ‘immersed’ in English language environments outside the classroom (Kashiwa & Benson, 2017). Indeed, this is stressed in the marketing promises of many Australian English language colleges. A review of some of the major college websites reveals the use of attractive images of groups of young people happily engaged in indoor and outdoor social activities. Accompanying claims set up expectations of easy access to language environments outside the classroom. For example:

‘life beyond the classroom is always comfortable and exciting’;

‘Australians are very friendly and welcoming. In shops, restaurants and on the street you’ll be surprised at how easy-going people are. They’re always happy to talk so it’s a great place to improve your English.’;

‘If you’re going to be living here for a few months (or years) get to know – and speak with – the natives!’

As ELICOS teachers know, however, out-of-class learning can be problematic for
international students, who often experience difficulty in accessing opportunities to use English. A NEAS survey of ELICOS students, for example, showed that while students were highly satisfied with classroom teaching, they were less satisfied with the support they received for their use of English beyond the classroom (NEAS, 2015). This is by no means a uniquely Australian problem. A recently published international survey of 5,000 students conducted by International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF, 2017) showed that international students were highly satisfied with their schools and teaching, but their experiences of making friends and practising the target language often failed to meet their expectations. This was also linked to concerns about accommodation and the nationality mix on their courses. ‘If the research intimated any opportunities for possible improvement’, the report stated, ‘these were largely tied to out-of-class activities’ (ICEF, 2017, p. 16).

Why do international language students find it difficult to access the opportunities for English language use and learning that study in Australia appears to offer? What can schools and teachers do to help improve students’ out-of-class language experiences?

To dig deeper into these questions, our current research program is investigating whether the key to unlocking the problem of international students’ access to English may be found in their daily lives and language learning environments.

From the ecological perspective that guides this research, language learning emerges from interaction between a learner (that is, a person with the intention to learn) and language resources in the environment (van Lier, 2004). This applies to learning in classroom environments (Tudor, 2003), but all the more so to language learning beyond the classroom, where learners must seek out and make use of language resources to support their learning (Kashiwa & Benson, 2017). In a study conducted in Australia and New Zealand, Marginson (2014) described international students as self-directed agents who are engaged in processes of ‘self-formation’, albeit under social conditions they do not control. The aim of our research is to arrive at a better understanding of ELICOS students’ language learning environments, how these environments shape their opportunities to learn, and how students, in turn, shape their learning environments.

**Methodology**

In our initial study, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 10 students from a large, private ELICOS college in Sydney’s CBD. Questions were developed and pilot-tested to achieve an interview protocol that maximised opportunities for the participants to reflect on their language learning environments. Interviews were conducted by a research assistant, herself an international student, who could empathise with the participants. Our second study involved 11 students, six from a
university language centre and five from a private provider in Sydney. These students used the Diaro app (http://diaroapp.com) on their mobile devices to track how they used languages in their daily lives over a one-week period. The data from the app were then used to promote discussion about the language participants used in different settings. Data analysis was meaning-focused and centred on cases and themes. Several layers of coding were carried out to drill down into the interviews and to achieve some consensus on our interpretations and development of themes.

**Emerging themes**

Six major areas have emerged from the two studies that will set the agenda for further research.

1. **Settings.** Settings are the building blocks of learning environments. ELICOS students mainly divide their time among three settings: college, home and work (most of the students we interviewed attended college for 4–5 hours a day and have part-time jobs). Most use public transport to travel between these settings and visit supermarkets to shop for food. In addition, they go out with friends, go shopping in the CBD, and less frequently, take excursions to tourist sites. College, home and work are, thus, the main settings in which students encounter English language resources.

2. **Location of settings.** The locations of college, home and work can be mapped as triangles of different shapes and sizes, superimposed on different areas of the map of the city. These triangles are important for two reasons. First, journeys between home, college and work map out the rhythm of students’ daily routines. Second, ELICOS students tend to live, study and work alongside other international students and recent migrants. While we might encourage students to ‘get out and meet the local English speakers’, we also need to take account of the ways in which their daily routines are embedded in the multilingual geography of the city. From the perspective of an ELICOS student’s daily life, a city such as Sydney may be more ‘multilingual’ than ‘English-speaking.’

3. **Social networks.** The settings in which students spend their time largely determine who they meet and the language resources they encounter. The students that we interviewed spend most of their time with other international students at home, in college, and at work. Encounters with local speakers of English are relatively infrequent, and often most frequent at college. College can also be an important setting for informal interaction with English speaking teachers, if there are opportunities for socialising in and out of the classroom. Interactions with local speakers outside college tend to be transactional and brief. In many cases, extensive use of English occurs among international student friends who do not share a first language.

4. **Information technology.** Students use information technology in four contexts: for English language study and homework; for entertainment and relaxation;
to maintain contact with family and friends overseas; and to navigate the city. Both English and home languages are used according to the context. Information technology use overlays the settings of college, home and work, and intersects with them at various points.

5. **Finance, time and purpose** are three interlocking factors that constrain ELICOS students’ language learning environments. Students work because they need to earn money to live and to pay college fees. Finance also conditions where and with whom students live. Most students comment that Sydney is an expensive city, and cost also constrains opportunities to engage in leisure activities. ELICOS students also lead busy lives, leaving little quality time for informal learning activities – partly because of the need to work, partly because of pressure of homework. International students who share a house may talk to each other infrequently because they spend much of their time studying in their rooms. The purpose for living and studying in Australia is also an important factor as many students prioritise formal study over informal language use due to the pressure of obtaining English language qualifications.

6. **Agency.** Students exercise agency within the constraints of time, finance and purpose in two ways. First, in the language practices that they employ in order to exploit environmental resources. For example, a student may take the initiative to create situations for interaction with housemates (e.g., by suggesting that they cook together), rather than tolerate a situation where they rarely talk to each other. Students may vary in their ability to create such opportunities for learning. Second, some students take steps to change the settings of their daily lives, for example, by moving house or changing job. One of our interviewees had taken the step of moving from Brisbane, where she found it difficult to break out of a group of co-national friends, to Sydney, where she would be more isolated from people who shared her first language.

**Implications for research and for ELICOS practice**

Further research with a larger cohort of English language learners is needed to explore these emerging themes and their relationship with the quality of English language interactions that learners experience outside the classroom. A city’s multilingual geography has emerged as an important factor in out-of-class language learning; therefore, we plan to include other multilingual cities, both in Australia and other parts of the world, in our research agenda. The nature and role of students’ social networks and how they support or hinder their language learning also deserves further attention, as does the impact the use of a particular device or app on the quality of interactions in English or other languages. Since the need for students to work to support their lives in Sydney emerged as an important theme, it would be useful to explore how far out-of-class interactions are constrained by financial considerations, the impact of their working life on the free time available to them.
and on how they construe their purposes for learning English. Finally, since students are in a process of self-formation, our preliminary findings suggest that the role of agency, how it may vary across individuals and impact their out-of-class learning opportunities would be a particularly fruitful area to pursue.

In the meantime, the main questions for ELICOS practitioners are whether they should be talking more with their students about their out-of-class lives, and what opportunities present themselves for supporting their English language proficiency. We suggest that talking about the six areas outlined above might be a useful starting point for all stakeholders to support language learning and students’ overall ELICOS experience. Practitioners might also start a dialogue with college management about representing the out-of-class situation more realistically in marketing collateral.

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Task-based Language Teaching: Teachers’ Perceptions and Implementation in the Australian ELICOS Sector

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This research applies a mixed-methods approach to explore teachers’ perceptions of task-based language pedagogy and its implementation in the ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) setting. The sources of data were gathered in two phases, comprising an online survey with 58 respondents from various ELICOS colleges across Australia, and semi-structured interviews with eight teachers who have varying teaching experience. The findings show that the majority of teachers have a high level of understanding of TBLT principles and hold positive attitudes towards incorporating TBLT in classroom practice. The research also reveals constraints that affected the successful implementation of TBLT, leading to practical suggestions for facilitating the adoption of TBLT in the Australian ELICOS sector.

Introduction

In recent decades, Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), one of the most significant trends in the second/foreign languages teaching and learning field, has been widely adopted in various contexts throughout the world (Butler, 2011; Carless, 2007; East, 2012; Ellis, 2003; Hu, 2013; Jeon & Hahn, 2006; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007; Van den Branden, 2006; Zheng & Borg, 2014). Ellis (2009) argues that TBLT has been considered to offer numerous benefits to language learning and teaching by providing opportunities for students to engage in using the target language through purposeful, meaningful tasks. However, while TBLT seems to be an ideal option for language teaching and learning, a perceived deficit associated with the approach is that it may be difficult to implement in different contexts. It is argued that TBLT implementation has not yet been sufficiently researched in both foreign language learning contexts (Shehadeh, 2012; Xiongyong & Samuel, 2011) and second language learning settings (Douglas & Kim, 2014). Another drawback of TBLT may come from the misunderstandings and misconceptions surrounding it (Ellis, 2009). In addition, there exists a relationship between what teachers believe about effective practice
(their cognitions) and what they do in classrooms (their practices) (Borg, 2015). Thus, how teachers perceive and understand TBLT will influence their classroom teaching. Teachers indeed tend to struggle with TBLT and apply what they perceive to be TBLT in ways that may be inconsistent with actual TBLT principles (Plews & Zhao, 2010).

Australia is the third most popular destination for overseas students wanting to learn English. In an educational sector that is highly regulated, the ELICOS teachers’ role and the methodology they choose to apply have a significant impact on course outcomes. Research indicates that ELICOS teachers favour a combination of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-based Language Teaching (Agosti & Bernat, 2009). However, there exists a significant gap in the literature, in terms of the paucity of research examining how language teachers perceive and implement task-based instruction in the sector. This gap inspired the current research study which focuses on ELICOS teachers’ perceptions of task-based language pedagogy and their views on how it is implemented in their classrooms.

**Methods**

The study employed a mixed-method design, comprising both quantitative and qualitative approaches, for the purpose of supplying meaningful and rich information and enhancing the validity of the overall analysis. Two interrelated data collection instruments were used in two phases. In the first stage, ELICOS teachers were invited to complete an online survey via advertisement posters, social networking sites and a web blog, all aimed at teachers who were teaching ELICOS courses at any college in Australia. Subsequent face-to-face interviews in the second stage provided the data from which in-depth understandings could be gained.

The analytical process progressed in different stages. SPSS software version 22.0 was used to analyse the quantitative data. Data analysis in forms of frequencies, percentages and means of ratings were carried out on all the responses collected through the questionnaire to explore how the participants understood the CLT/TBLT concepts, their attitudes towards TBLT and its implementation, and the prominent reasons why they chose or avoided TBLT adoption. In terms of qualitative data, a thematic analysis procedure was adopted, and the interview transcripts were analysed manually. All research procedures were approved by Macquarie University’s ethics approval process.

**Findings**

The following emergent themes were identified from the analysis of the data.

1. Participants in the study indicated they agreed with the basic tenets of CLT (e.g., student-centered learning, use of pair/group work, language skills interaction,
activity/task-oriented teachings, contextualised learning, use of authentic materials, role of teachers and learners, students’ needs, the place and importance of grammar).

2. The majority of the participants had a good understanding of TBLT principles, although there was certain diversity in their views regarding distinguishing a task from an exercise and focus on form versus focus on meaning in TBLT. However, when articulating their in-depth knowledge of the nature of a task and other TBLT concepts, a number of misconceptions were revealed, which indicates that some teachers might not have a thorough grasp of the theoretical side of TBLT.

3. Most of the teachers held a positive attitude towards TBLT and its use in their courses. All the participants appeared to have interest in applying TBLT, and viewed it as effective in delivering integrated language skills lessons in meaningful and real-world-based contexts. Further, most teachers considered TBLT a good method of teaching that encourages students to use the target language in a relaxed atmosphere while activating their needs and interests. However, when expressing their views in regard to the adoption of TBLT in their context, the teachers showed mixed perceptions, with both positive and negative opinions.

4. When teachers chose to apply TBLT in their class, this was due to its three major benefits, including creating a collaborative learning environment, promoting learners’ language development, and improving learners’ interaction skills. Conversely, the teachers who avoided practising TBLT stated barriers such as following a defined syllabus, limitations of the coursebooks, lack of time to do TBLT, and learners’ preference for learning grammar and vocabulary in a more traditional way.

5. Teachers expressed a number of hindering factors to the effective implementation of task-based teaching and learning, such as the feeling of too much onus on the teacher; self-perceived lack of imagination, creativity and organisational skills; and teachers’ ability in adapting tasks. Regarding the students, factors that teachers felt hindered the implementation of TBLT included low language proficiency, lack of motivation due to preference for learning grammar or vocabulary by traditional methods, different characteristics, use of mother tongue, and age group. Contextual hindrances included course content, lack of appropriate assessment methods, and the cultural diversity amongst groups of students from different cultural backgrounds.

**Implications**

On the basis of these findings, the following recommendations are proposed for promoting the adoption of TBLT in the Australian ELICOS sector.

First of all, the findings imply that task-based instruction for the ELICOS context is in line with the weak form of TBLT where tasks are used comparably to the production
stage in the PPP model. This could potentially lead to the suggestion that there is a need for adaptation towards “situated task-based approaches” which are featured as involving grammar instruction in the pre-stage of a task cycle; task-supported teaching on the lines of the PPP approach; tasks related to examination requirements; and alternatives to oral tasks, highlighting reading and writing (Carless, 2007, p. 604).

Secondly, teachers may need expert support via appropriate pre-service and in-service TBLT education. It is important that teachers are offered more opportunities to improve not only their knowledge of the approach, but also how to implement it in their classrooms. Suggested professional development can be performed in various modes, from teacher-sharing meetings among colleagues and ELICOS colleges, to workshops or courses conducted by official bodies, or via online seminars or practical websites with specific techniques. Meanwhile, the idea of teachers taking the initiative to explore how they could implement TBLT in their own settings should be emphasised.

Thirdly, there should be more support from the educational institutions and curriculum designers in terms of giving teachers more flexibility instead of adhering to textbooks. As for teachers, instead of considering themselves as the implementers only, they can take an active role in this teaching innovation. In the current situation, it is necessary for the teachers to use textbooks alongside various pedagogical tasks and to know how to design some content or adapt the materials in more traditional textbooks to be compatible with task-based instruction principles and procedure, and supplement their own tasks using authentic materials.

Fourthly, the difficulty in evaluating the learners’ progress in TBLT was also mentioned as one of the challenges that teachers confronted. The finding indicates that teachers may not be informed of or familiar with assessment methods in TBLT. This suggests that any training courses for TBLT include task-based assessment as well. The unit-based assessment procedures in co-teaching situations in some parts of the ELICOS sector were reported as challenging for teachers wanting to adopt the task-based approach. This implies the necessary introduction of an alternative assessment system which is more appropriate to TBLT in the sector. Formative rather than summative assessments should be encouraged. More importantly, all the co-teachers who are in charge of different units need to share the same understanding of task-based evaluation criteria and reach a consensus in their application. Learners should be prepared for task-based assessment methods by becoming informed about the evaluation criteria and performance-based assessment as well.

Finally, the international students who are taking ELICOS courses come from EFL environments and they might be used to foreign language education with more
traditional methods. So, it would be understandable that they may not immediately welcome a TBLT-inspired classroom. It is important to note that students may need explicit explanation on the benefits and reasons why they should participate in communicative activities. Teachers could possibly think about how they can assist these students to adapt to and feel willing to deal with difficulties in language use. At this point, it is also essential to emphasise the significance of the teachers’ ability in designing tasks that are suitable to learners’ language levels, with a focus not only on the output but the input as well.

References


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Virtual reality in ESL

MICHELLE COWANS

Virtual reality (VR) may seem like something from a science-fiction movie: out of reach and too fantastic to contemplate. Its use in various fields is, however, more and more ubiquitous, and its impact on memory and well-being is increasingly documented. The introduction of affordable hardware and free smartphone apps has allowed VR to become accessible in education, and the release of Google’s Expeditions app allows students to take virtual field trips to just about anywhere on the planet, while simultaneously learning about the chosen place. For ESL students, this has implications for language learning, specifically with regard to motivation, memory and retention.

What is Expeditions?

In 2016 Google released Expeditions, an app designed to bring the world to the classroom, and enhance the learning experience. Expeditions requires a smartphone with the app downloaded, a router, and cardboard VR viewers. These viewers are inexpensive and can be purchased online – the company ‘I am cardboard’ even does bespoke viewers with company, or school, logos imprinted on them (www.imcardboard.com). The router does not require the internet for the application to work, which therefore makes this tool accessible in areas where the internet is slow or not available.
Expeditions consists of virtual field trips to different places of interest around the world. Each expedition comes with a series of images, and each image has accompanying research. The teacher selects an expedition and downloads it prior to the lesson, and then ‘leads’ an expedition from a tablet or phone, and the students ‘follow’. The teacher then has access to the research, and can choose what information to use during the expedition. In addition, the teacher can select certain objects or locations on each image, which will generate an arrow on the users’ screens, directing them to follow the arrow to learn about what it is pointing to. All this is done with the use of VR viewers, allowing the learners to be in an immersive space, but still interacting with the teacher and each other.

The expeditions are not limited to places of natural beauty. There are career expeditions in which students learn about various industries, expeditions to museums to learn about history or art, architectural expeditions, expeditions into the human body to learn about science, and trips to habitats to learn about animals. There is even a trip to a refugee camp in Lebanon in which students can become immersed in the life of a Syrian family.

Setting up an expedition requires only that the students have downloaded the app. The other requirements are all from the teacher’s side, including the device to lead the expedition, the VR viewers and, if required where WiFi is not strong, an inexpensive router.

**Practical ideas**

I used Expeditions in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) classroom with students studying for the Certificate III in Spoken and Written English over a period of three terms, with five different groups of learners. Before starting, I made sure that most students in the class had a smartphone and were able to download the app. Those whose phone did not support the app (a minority) were encouraged to share with another student, or use my phone. The student cohort comprised of new migrants and refugees, the average age was late 20s to early 30s. The majority of students were adept with smartphone technologies, and enthusiastic about their use in class for learning.

Within the AMEP classroom, we used Expeditions in the following ways:

- **Information reports:** The Aurora Borealis was chosen as an example and students were led on an expedition. After each image they were encouraged to take notes on what they learned. They were then given a model report, and encouraged to choose a place to research for their own reports.
• **Listening comprehension:** Angel Falls in Venezuela was used to introduce World Heritage sites, UNESCO and its purpose, and to learn about a natural wonder. Students were required to do a listening task similar to their assessment tasks.

• **Women in the workplace:** Expeditions also has career expeditions, in which students can learn about the lives of people in their workplaces. One such career – that of one of the first female firefighters in the Fire Department of New York City – was chosen to teach about discrimination and harassment in the workplace, which linked to the settlement theme of work and anti-discrimination laws in Australia.

• **Risk-taking:** Students were taken up El Capitan in Yosemite National Park to experience rock-climbing and how VR might be used to overcome phobias. This also led to a discussion on risk, and scenarios in which risks should be taken, with direct reference to their own lives and experience.

• **Refugee Week:** For Refugee Week, some of the students visited the aforementioned refugee camp and experienced life from the perspective of a refugee. The aim was to raise awareness and assist in understanding the plight of many of these people. Out of sensitivity to the refugees in the centre, this expedition was not run if there were any students in the class who may have had an experience like this, in order to protect their health and well-being.

• **Australia:** Students were taken on a virtual field trip to Sydney, the Great Ocean Road, and the Great Barrier Reef. They were then encouraged to research a place in Australia and share this information with a partner. Paraphrasing and summarising skills were utilised.

• **Flipping:** Students were encouraged to choose their own expedition, research it, use paraphrasing and summarising skills to select the pertinent information, and then lead their own expedition. This enabled the lesson to be more student-centred rather than teacher-centred, and allowed students to practice presentation skills.

In every instance of VR mentioned above, the students were engaged and motivated. They reported never having learned in this way before, believed that it aided their retention and interest, and came away from the experience enthused and eager to learn more. It has been observed that VR promotes learning in the sense that students understand the subject matter much better than if they were seeing two-dimensional images (Sala, 2016), and that due to its experiential nature it is a multi-sensory experience, enriching learning by fostering curiosity (Connolly, 2005).
Barriers
The issues, or barriers, observed during the use of VR come from both the teaching and learning perspective. Considering the latter, students may have physical reactions to the experience, such as dizziness, which may put them off. In addition, there is potential to walk into objects so occupational health and safety precautions need to be considered. Additionally, older phones do not support the app – iOS8 and Android KitKat are the earliest operating systems required, and the app cannot be used on Windows phones. From the teaching perspective, teachers are restricted to the content chosen by Google – and although there is abundant choice, it would be beneficial to students to have access to content which is more localised.

Beyond Expeditions
Expeditions is by no means stand-alone in the field of emerging VR apps, however. There are now quite a few different, inexpensive and user-friendly ways VR can be used in the second language classroom. Apps such as Within have 360-degree videos with accompanying spoken information, similar to short documentaries. Virtual Speech is an app which allows users to put themselves in business meetings, seminars or interviews, and practise what they would say. Cardboard Camera allows users to take 360-degree photos with audio which can then be viewed with a VR viewer; and VeeR is the social media of virtual reality, allowing members to upload content for viewing and sharing.

Conclusion
Although virtual reality is a growing field in primary and secondary education, its entrance into adult ESL has been fairly limited. This is due to a variety of factors, the first and foremost being a lack of awareness accompanied with an understandable level of incredulity or fear around this new technology. VR is either largely unknown, or seen as lacking in educational value due to preconceptions about it being a lone experience, or a game. It is seen as too expensive or too difficult to set up, and there is the ever-present fear that technology will fail and disrupt the lesson. While VR is not without its hurdles – mostly due to connectivity issues or older model phones not supporting the apps – these hurdles can be overcome with careful preparation, asking learners to share devices where necessary, and trusting that students of the digital age want and need content like this. These learners represent a new cohort who are not just tech-savvy, but tech-dependent. VR has the power to transform and enrich the second-language classroom, redefine content delivery, and inspire, engage and empower learners.
References


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If you would like to write an article in Classroom Talk for the *English Australia Journal*, please contact:
classroomtalk@englishaustralia.com.au
By now, I am sure that you have all heard about the flipped classroom. As a type of blended learning, the flipped classroom is an instructional strategy in which students are first exposed to new material, usually in the form of videos, screencasts, or readings prior to a lesson, and then come to class ready to discuss or use the material in a meaningful way. Despite the flipped classroom being a common buzzword in educational circles today, how do we know if it can actually help students improve? Although most adult English language classes involve more practice and less ‘lecture time’ than other content-based courses, and research is limited, results do suggest that the flipped classroom can promote student achievement (Doman, 2016; Doman & Webb, 2017).

The flipped classroom allows teachers to be available when it matters the most – as students engage in higher-order thinking skills such as synthesising, analysing, and evaluating material through hands-on projects, group work, problem-solving, discussions, debates, or any student-centred activities. Class time no longer has to be spent explaining terms, assignments, readings, or rubrics, as these can simply be put online for students to preview prior to coming to class.

So, if you believe that flipped learning could have some benefits in your classroom, why not get started yourself? In this article, I offer practical advice to teachers who are interested in flipping their own language classrooms. The following four-step program can be used by teachers of all levels with learners from all age groups.

**Step 1: Decide what to flip**

As the saying goes, ‘Well begun is half done’, and this could never be truer than in the flipped classroom. Most of the work that the teacher has to put into flipping the classroom is done in advance of the class even beginning. This includes, most importantly, creating and uploading videos of material that students can view online. Keep in mind that the materials that students can preview at home need not only consist of lectures. It could also include instructions for an assignment, descriptions of the requirements of a rubric, or guidelines for undertaking group work, just to name a few. And teachers need not feel that they have to flip every part of their courses; they might just decide to flip those lessons that tend to be more lecture-dominant.
Although the internet is filled with materials that teachers can borrow, students tend to appreciate videos, screencasts, and slides that are made by their own teachers, and which are more personalised to them. However, creating these is a time-consuming process which could take up to 1–2 hours per lesson – or more – and that is why advanced planning is critical. On the other hand, the advantage is that the materials can be used multiple times, so such front-ended planning can end up saving time in the future.

**Step 2: Create flipped materials**

So, how to create these materials? PowerPoint is part of most teachers’ toolkit, but it occupies a more important position in the flipped classroom. However, while traditional Powerpoint can and should be used, there are also alternatives which help avoid boredom and repetitiveness for both teachers and learners, including Prezi, Emaze, Slidedog, Keynote, and Projeqt, which all come with a wide range of templates and create more visual stimulation for the learners than traditional Powerpoint does. One of my personal favorites is Nearpod, which allows you to create an interactive slideshow presentation that students can view on their own devices either in class during your ‘presentation’ or outside of class on their own, and you can integrate quizzes, polls, virtual trips and drawing exercises throughout the presentation to make sure that students are on track and focused.

Once the visual presentation is made, a good way to add voiceovers is by using a screencast tool. The one I recommend is Screencast-O-Matic (http://screencast-o-matic.com) which is a free tool that allows you to record up to 15 minutes. This should be plenty, as the recommended time for a flipped ‘lecture’ is probably 5–10 minutes (Doman, 2016). Once you have made your screencast, you can give students the link directly, upload to your learning management system, or put on a public video site like YouTube.

**Step 3: Create classroom activities to complement the videos**

As the goal of the flipped classroom is to reduce the amount of time that the teacher needs to talk, time can be freed up for more pair and group work which help students to learn from each other. Therefore, the teacher then needs to create a wide variety of outlets for students to do so, such as graded discussions, jigsaw reading, projects, role plays, debates, running dictations, and so on. For example, in the flipped lesson plan discussing persuasion and the use of rhetorical appeals which accompanies this article (see Appendix), students are required to watch a teacher-created screencast on fact vs. opinion and to read about how to do a debate prior to coming to class, so class time can be more effectively spent on enriching activities on the topic, such as picture drawing, group discussion, debate, and walk-around-the-room activities.
Step 4: Elicit feedback from students and refine the process

Although the flipped approach has advantages in helping students to perform better in a new language, it does require time for students to adapt to a new learning style. Studies have shown that this normally takes anywhere from 5–7 weeks (Webb, Doman, & Pusey, 2014). It is therefore a good idea to survey your students to see how they like the flipped classroom and to see how beneficial they think it is to them. Monitor their progress, for example, by keeping a journal of the students’ amount of preparation before class, level of interaction during class, and performance on assignments. Compare this information with your traditional non-flipped classes to note any differences, and adjust your lessons/materials accordingly.

Conclusion

As a way to address the higher-order thinking skills, the flipped classroom is a great pedagogical technique to get students more actively involved in classroom activities after they have previewed materials or lectures at home. Although the nature of the flipped classroom requires heavy front-ended preparation on the part of the teacher, the benefits for students are that they have access to classroom information anytime, anywhere and can review all online materials as often as they need before coming to class. With technology becoming ever more important (and expected) in educational circles, the future of the flipped classroom seems to be secure. Why not get started with flipping your classes today using the four strategies listed above?

References


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# APPENDIX

## Example Of A Flipped Classroom Lesson Plan

### LESSON TITLE: INTRODUCTION TO PERSUASION AND RHETORICAL APPEALS

Prior to class, students will watch a screencast on the differences between fact and opinion and how opinions use rhetorical appeals. They will also read the ‘rules for debate’ handout which the teacher gave them.

### GOALS

- Goal 1: Review fact versus opinion.
- Goal 2: Introduce Ethos, Pathos, and Logos and the differences between each.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
<th>MATERIALS</th>
<th>PROCEDURES</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 mins</td>
<td>ACTIVITY 1: WARM-UP/REVIEW</td>
<td>Copies of fact vs opinion strips that are taped on the walls around the classroom. Have at least 5-6 examples of each. A set of Post-it Notes for each group.</td>
<td>Students will get placed into a group of 4 randomly. They will go to each section of the wall, read the strips, and determine if the statement is a fact or an opinion by sticking their answer on a Post-it Note. Once students have completed the activity, have them present their answers in front of the class and explain why they chose “fact” or “opinion” for each.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FACT VS OPINION WALL MATCHING ACTIVITY</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reasoning: To assess what students learned from the video.</td>
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<td>25 mins</td>
<td>ACTIVITY 2: ETHOS, PATHOS, AND LOGOS THROUGH SYMBOLISM</td>
<td>Paper and colored pencils/pens</td>
<td>To lead into the next hands-on activity, have students talk to a partner for two minutes about the definitions of ethos, pathos, and logos. Then ask for explanations from volunteers during a whole-group discussion. In this activity, students will draw a picture of symbols that will help them to remember ethos, pathos, and logos and their meanings. Show a teacher-created example first, and then have students create their own symbols and share with a partner.</td>
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<tr>
<td>TIME</td>
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<td>30 mins</td>
<td>ACTIVITY 3: ETHOS, PATHOS, AND LOGOS GROUP ACTIVITY</td>
<td>Prepare controversial topics according to students’ age appropriateness.</td>
<td>Put students into groups of 3-4. Distribute one slip of paper with a controversial topic written on it, and have groups write sentences for each rhetorical appeal - ethos, pathos, and logos - on a slip of paper. Have groups come to the front of the classroom to share their answers at the end of the activity. Encourage non-group members to question if the sentences were real examples of ethos, pathos, and logos.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The topics I chose for my adult learners included: Medicinal marijuana, gay marriage, international adoption, plastic surgery, and gambling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 mins</td>
<td>ACTIVITY 4: DEBATE</td>
<td>Rules for debate were distributed for homework so that students are aware of how a debate is run prior to coming to class.</td>
<td>As an extension, students could use the appeals as a basis for a debate on the topic. Using the same groups as activity 3, have one group support the controversial topic while another group opposes it.</td>
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Much can be learnt about each other from the seemingly simple act of sitting around the table and talking. It was through these conversations at our centre that it became clear teachers felt a gap in the professional development (PD) that was on offer at that time. They desired something more personal and nuanced towards their own teaching practices. Although management-driven PD is valuable, our teachers felt there was room for teacher-led PD that addressed their specific learning needs, while nurturing connectedness and creativity.

This article discusses ‘Journal Club’: a grassroots initiative that is context-embedded and sustainable, which nurtures reflection through conversations that inquire and build on peer knowledge, i.e., dialogic exploratory talk, and which allows teachers to act on their professional interests and think deeper with their colleagues. In the article, I will explain what Journal Club is, how it is facilitated, and what the benefits are, incorporating data from an anonymous survey conducted at our centre.

**What is Journal Club?**

Journal Club is a grassroots PD initiative, where a teacher volunteers to select a peer-reviewed article to present and discuss with colleagues over lunch. It gives teachers the freedom to reflect on their own personal learning journey, taking time to consider what is relevant to them and their classroom. Looking into their own inner worlds is the starting point for selecting an article to share and explore with their colleagues.

The theoretical framework that supports Journal Club is based on:

1. group discussion as a tool for inquiry and reflection
2. the idea that humans learn and think together in social groups (sociocultural understandings of human cognition)
3. exploratory practice.

Using the chosen article as impetus, the teachers discuss the challenges and successes that are current in their classroom practice, thereby igniting meaningful pedagogical
discussion that provides a basis to explore practice, assumptions and beliefs, and to problem-solve.

Although it is a space where teachers are free to explore, these discussions are semi-guided. The Journal Club facilitator and participants are encouraged to use a two-way dialogic exploratory approach in conversation in order to encourage reflection on practice, in light of the article. This aims to help teachers get at their values, experiences and beliefs in order to make them visible for reflection and comment, and build on each other’s knowledge. Chick (2015, p. 9) highlights three broad ‘exploratory moves’ which help facilitate this conversation for learning. The exploratory moves assist in:

1. exploring actions
2. uncovering beliefs and feelings
3. probing for deeper understanding or reflection.

For example, a facilitator or participant might ask:

‘You said that “the students seemed to be more motivated”. What were they doing that gave you that impression?’

or

‘How do you think this might influence what you do next with your students?’

The crux of Journal Club is that teachers feel free to express their learning needs, and are respected for their understanding of their context-embedded environment. They can also draw on the knowledge and experience of their colleagues, who cross the breadth of career stages (from early-, mid- to late-career). This type of PD demonstrates self-determination, which may also avoid a phenomenon Hobbs (2007) calls ‘the problem of faking it’, which can be seen in institutionally led PD where teachers experience forced reflection.

It must also be remembered that eating together is a key feature of Journal Club and one reason for its success. A characteristic of our evolution is eating together to connect and build relationships. The underlying principles of Journal Club draw on this understanding, and acknowledge that our socially evolved ways of interacting influences teaching and learning (Becher, 2011). Consequently, by reading the chosen article and reflecting on their practice with peers over lunch, teachers consolidate knowledge, support each other and experience positive realisations that can lead to exciting shifts in practice.

**How is it facilitated?**

Journal Club is voluntary. There is no expectation to attend nor is there a formal schedule for presenters or participants. Largely self-organising, it runs four to five
times a year, during quieter times on the schedule. It is worth noting that while many participants are on casual contracts, some choose to make a special trip into work to take part, even though they are not timetabled to teach that day.

It begins with an email invitation sent to all casual and full-time teachers approximately 1–2 weeks in advance of the ‘lunch date’. The email is both an invitation to attend and for a volunteer to choose and present a peer-reviewed article. Once accepted, the agenda for a Journal Club session is set by the presenting teacher based on their interest or something that is rising up in their practice.

At the lunch, the presenter briefly summarises the core ideas of the article and links it to their practice in some way, stating why they chose it, and how it might benefit their colleagues and the centre, thereby setting in motion an act of inquiry, reflection and collaboration. The presenter then loosely facilitates\(^1\) conversation, setting a respectful, non-judgemental tone – they do not dominate or heavily steer discussion. In addition, all member contributions to the discussion should be validated and respected, given it is a sharing, supportive space where teachers are valued for their experiences, beliefs and ideas.

After a Journal Club session, teachers may choose to trial some ideas from the article discussion, or simply continue to think more deeply about the issues raised. At following sessions later in the year, teachers are welcomed to share developments in their learning journey. In this way, Journal Club is a grassroots approach that motivates self-determined teacher development.

\(^1\) Facilitation is not necessarily be done by a particular person. The group itself, depending on its size, may naturally guide discussion with exploratory talk that draws on their own personal discourse principles.

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**Fig. 1: Journal Club: from planning and exploration to feedback**
**What are the benefits?**

To explore the benefits of Journal Club, an anonymous online survey was conducted that asked structured and semi-structured questions using Qualtrics. There were 20 respondents to the survey out of a possible 35 teachers who had attended Journal Club at the time. The survey results illustrated that participants felt that Journal Club fosters a collegial workplace, and engenders robust pedagogical discussion which can positively influence thought and practice.

**A tool for inquiry and reflection**

Journal Club uses group discussion as a tool for inquiry and reflection. It is a place where teachers can explore and challenge their assumptions about teaching and learning in a supportive peer environment. A demonstration of self-reflection can be seen in the following comments from the Qualtrics survey:

‘It makes you focus and reflect on certain aspects of your teaching.’

‘It gives me an opportunity to delve into my own ideas on theory and practice. Not only [do] the articles keep me in stride with the latest research and what other teacher are doing, but it also gives me an opportunity to discuss/share/critique my ideas and what I do. My colleagues are supportive and caring – Journal Club allows this nurturing/supportive collegial atmosphere.’

‘It helped to deepen my feedback responses to students – to be more explicit and supportive/kind. So yes I had realised a change. J[ournal] C[lub] has also helped to validate my practice as well . . . ’

**Teacher-led professional development**

Ninety-five percent of survey respondents said that it was either extremely or very important ‘to have a PD activity where the agenda is set and run by teachers for teachers.’ Teacher-led professional development can assist management in the planning and organising of their centre’s yearly PD activities with little to no strain on administration. Moreover, teacher-led PD helps to develop autonomous learning and self-determined teachers.

**Conclusion**

The way an organisation runs its PD is often a reflection of its culture (Butler & Schnellert, 2012), and studies have shown that top-down, management-driven PD can adversely impact staff morale, creativity, and connectedness in an educational institution (Farrell, 2015). Professional development initiatives like Journal Club present opportunities for management to nurture ‘workplace cultural competence’ (Craig & Deretchin, 2009), and to foster a context-embedded approach to PD that
honours both teachers and managers as leaders in PD. As Burns (2016) notes, ‘a culture of context-embedded PD is vital to any healthy and successful teaching institution.’

Journal Club acknowledges both management constraints and teacher PD needs, in a sustainable way. It also offers an opportunity for teachers to enliven their learning journeys and bond with colleagues in a fun and dynamic way. It is hoped that this article may be useful for educators and education managers aiming to establish their own ongoing teacher-led PD along similar lines.

**References**


**Marnie-Lee Wirth** is passionate about grassroots teacher development and has worked within this capacity in Australia and overseas.

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In this issue’s 10 Questions we are delighted to welcome Professor Thomas Farrell, whose name has become synonymous with reflective practice (RP) in the TESOL field. Author of numerous articles and books, including Research on Reflective Practice in TESOL (Routledge, 2018), Reflecting on Critical Incidents in Language Education (with Laura Baecher, Bloomsbury, 2017) and From Trainee to Teacher: Reflective Practice for Novice Teachers (Equinox, 2016), and an ESL teacher himself for many years, Farrell is well known for championing the perspective of practising teachers, and encouraging both teachers and teacher educators to explore and challenge their beliefs and approaches. In this interview, he discusses what RP is, how systemic beliefs in institutions and teacher training programs can stifle development, and ways forward for teacher education. There’s lots of food for thought here – we hope you enjoy it!
1. You started your career as a TESOL teacher – can you tell us what drew you to this field?

Well, not really as I was a qualified high school teacher in Ireland but left after training to travel the world. When I was travelling I discovered teaching English in Korea but there was no TESOL at that time. In fact, I was a founding member of Korea TESOL in 1979 because I was in the same room as 4 people who were organising it and they asked me. I loved teaching English at that time because the students were so interesting and I was fascinated with how to teach English. I had no idea really so I went back to my teacher training and developed my own approaches given the books were really bad and I realised quickly that this was a new field that was emerging. So I like to think as a young Irish lad, I grew up with the field!

2. How did you move from teacher to researcher? Do you have any advice for teachers who are interested in an academic career path?

This is a big jump from the previous question as I spent 10 solid years teaching and as you can see, I was learning on the job before I completed my MA to get a more solid grounding in this emerging field. That was my first foray into academics and it gave me an idea on what research was all about as I completed a full thesis (which nearly broke my heart!) and all that entails. I still was not ready for the academic path so I did both – teacher and teacher of teachers in some MA programs at night to get my own feel. Then I completed a PhD, which was the real entry. I loved the research aspect because I am a teacher-scholar still as one leads to the other and vice versa. I did not do any of these degrees to get the letter, however, as I was only interested in the process. I think a classroom is a centre of inquiry and not only a place for students to learn, but also a place for teachers to learn. Thus teachers are all researchers regardless and it depends how much and how far you want to formalise it.

3. Your name is tied to the idea of reflective practice for language teachers – can you define it, and why you feel it is such a significant area?

I defined reflective practice in a recent book as ‘a cognitive process accompanied by a set of attitudes in which teachers systematically collect data about their practice, and while engaging in dialogue with others, use the data to make informed decisions about their practice both inside and outside the classroom’ (Farrell, 2015). This means that teachers systematically collect information about their practice and use that information to make informed decisions. The main idea is that teachers take back the classroom and become generators of their own knowledge (much like I had to do in the early years as we had no internet or library, etc.) rather than consumers of the knowledge of so-called experts. Surely this is significant as teachers can learn from their reflections and discontinue practices not in the best interests of their students.
4. You mentioned above the importance of ‘engaging in dialogue with others’ as part of the reflective process. Does this mean that activities like journaling, on their own, will not be sufficient?

Yes, I did say that dialogue is very important and one reason I said this is that my most recent research (Farrell, 2018) – a review and appraisal of 168 articles in peer-academic journals on the practices that encourage TESOL teachers to reflect – clearly showed that the majority of the studies used some form of discussion as a tool for reflection. But teachers can also use journal writing for self-reflection or collaborative reflection as well. The main idea I would suggest is that reflection can be tailored to individual or group specifications but it is always good to use different tools as different lenses to explore issues in our teaching. I prefer writing myself but that is the nature of my job – I journal a lot as my reflections on my practice and much of this ends up in journals or books. The great American educator John Dewey pointed out a long time ago that reflection is best carried out with others, so it is a social activity as well, and dialogue can best promote this activity. Also, a group can engage in journaling together to augment such ‘discussions’. Teachers can try out different tools and decide for themselves what tools best further their own reflections.

5. In some pre-service courses, perhaps due to time constraints or the prioritisation of other areas, the opportunity for reflection on teaching practice often seems under-exploited by both teachers and their teacher educators. Do you have any advice for successfully planting the seed of reflective practice?

One of the problems with institutionally required reflection in these programs is that nobody defines what they mean by reflection. So many pre-service teachers just want to know what the instructor wants and give that as reflection to get grades. This is often compounded by the fact that many teacher educators do not engage in reflection themselves, yet they make their students reflect. When they say reflect, what does this mean? Often it means giving teachers prescribed checklists of what to look for rather than allowing them, or teaching them, to look at and for what they see. In other words, teacher educators must avoid reducing reflection practice to recipe-following checklists that reflect their biases and consider their pre-service teachers’ personal histories, their beliefs and theories, as well as their expectations – and that all these may differ from those of the teacher educator. In addition, teacher educators should set the example and engage in reflection themselves so that their students can learn from them and their experiences.
6. Some experienced teachers and teacher educators may not see reflective practice as something that applies to them. What argument would you make here?

I think I introduced some of my ideas about this question above but I would say that reflective practice is even more important for so-called experienced teachers because experience means nothing unless it is reflected upon – this is the essence of engaging in reflective practice. If they don’t reflect then they may be considered ‘experienced non-experts’. Reflection is the hallmark of the expert teacher as my own research has discovered and because experienced teachers who have followed routine (relatively unaware of this) can plateau easily and lose heart as a teacher but all the time not knowing why this is occurring. Again my own work with experienced and wonderful teachers has shown that teachers can burnout or as one said to me, ‘I have gone a little stale.’ Engaging in reflective practice can re-energise their whole world, if they consider their classroom to be a centre of inquiry where they can continue their own lifelong learning.

7. Teacher trainers or managers are often in the awkward position of observing teachers and then needing to provide feedback that is both developmental and evaluative. Do you have any advice for dealing with this?

Well, I am not a big fan of these as you call them ‘awkward’ observations of teachers – I call them a ‘walk through’ or worse ‘drive-by shootings’ – because it only gives an outsider a snapshot of what they think is happening in the class/lesson. This type of assessment rarely produces lasting effects and even leads to resentment because they are so judgmental: teachers resent supervisors evaluating their teaching usually armed with a checklist of predetermined aspects of what they consider good teaching. On the other hand, I know that some supervisors feel a burden with evaluating teaching because of the need to provide feedback as you correctly point out in your question. However, I believe that if both teachers and supervisors adopt a collaborative approach to teacher evaluation through reflective practice the burden is shared by both. As I alluded to above, reflective practice generally means that language teachers subject their philosophy, beliefs, theories and practices to a critical analysis so that they can take more responsibility for their actions. Recently I developed a Framework for Reflecting on Practice that has 5 stages: philosophy, principles, theory, practice and beyond practice. I believe that if teacher assessment includes teachers reflecting on all five stages particularly practice (video of the teacher teaching with the teacher analysis of what he/she was trying to teach and how it went), they can put the contents in a teacher portfolio so that both supervisor and teacher can discuss these for the purposes of teacher evaluation and professional development. This type of teacher assessment through reflective practice empowers teachers with autonomy and opportunity to
look what they think is important in teaching. It also motivates teachers to self-assess their performances while providing more opportunity for professional development. In addition it not only enhances supervisor/administration and teacher collaborations and discussions, it also creates a school culture of reflection.

8. Teachers will often teach the way they themselves were taught at school, in spite of being aware of other techniques or approaches that they may prefer on an intellectual level. How do you explain this and how can it be addressed?

Yes, we all have experiences as students at all grade levels and university. This ‘apprenticeship of observation’ is a very powerful filter all teachers tend to use while they are in training – but they don’t realise they are unless they articulate these prior experiences. If they don’t articulate these tacitly held beliefs, developed while observing their teachers and building up images of what they think is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teaching, they will filter whatever new ideas, activities, theories they are presented with through these, confirming what they already hold to be true, and denying any that go against their prior beliefs. Teacher education and development programs must first engage their participants and see where they are at and where they have developed their beliefs before they attempt to give them new ideas. Thus teachers must become reflective practitioners so they can articulate their philosophy, their principles, their theories and practice as well as reflect beyond practice as to their morals and values with the context they are teaching in. When we know what we do now and why, then we can consider if these beliefs and practices are still relevant for us in light of any new information we are presented with.

9. Sometimes teachers are resistant to unfamiliar teaching approaches and insist they won’t work in their context/classroom. When they do try them, and it doesn’t work due to poor design/understanding, this then acts as confirmation bias. How can we encourage a mindset of experimentation whilst also recognising the complex sociocultural backdrop we all work within?

I think I addressed this question above but I will add that I don’t believe in ‘dog-and-pony’ shows where so-called experts come in to teach teachers ‘new’ ways of teaching reading, writing or whatever because the teachers will not implement most of this or forget it the next day. One reason for this is that you cannot change something if you
don’t know what that something is in the first place. Hence reflective practice is very important.

10. Do you think current teacher training needs to evolve, and in what way(s)?

Yes I do, because there is still a gap between the theory-informed programs learner teachers must take as part of their training, and the reality of what actually happens in real classrooms in the school they find themselves teaching, where they must conform to existing practices if they want to survive. What is really required is a balanced integration of theory and practice in teacher education courses because teachers are more than just reactive practitioners to the immediacy of the classroom (practice) without sufficient rationale of what lies behind such reactions and methods (theory). However, before we as a profession can move to programs that have such a balanced integration of theory and practice, teacher educators must be aware that a gap exists in their teacher education programs. In order to ‘notice’ that such a gap exists teacher educators much become reflective practitioners themselves because such noticing means they recognise that the content of their teacher education programs are not really convergent with their own beliefs and that they need to do something about it. See, I am back again to the importance of reflective practice for teachers and teacher educators.

References


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As language educators, it can often be difficult to know whether the texts we use with our learners are at the appropriate level. This can be particularly problematic when creating language assessments, where a text that is too difficult will damage students’ motivation and inevitably cause them to fail. So, how can we ensure that the language features within a text are suitable for our learners?

Text Inspector is a web tool which provides the answer. It allows users to analyse writing by providing, within seconds, data on many aspects of a text’s lexis. The tool was created by Professor Stephen Bax and is based on his extensive research in the field of linguistics. After reviewing this system, it is not difficult to see why it won the 2017 ELTons Award for Digital Innovation.

To get started, all users need to do is input their text into a box on the homepage and, instantaneously, a comprehensive analysis is produced. Firstly, users are provided with statistics on their text. These include a sentence, token and syllable count, as well as a calculation of the average sentence length. Readability scores, including a Flesch Reading Ease score (Flesch, 1948), are also produced, providing users with a simple means of determining the difficulty level of their texts.

The system also generates an array of other useful metrics. One which I found particularly interesting was the analysis of lexical diversity. The system produces a score based on the range of vocabulary used and then rates a text as ‘academic’, ‘adult ESL’ or the level of a child (measured in sixteen-month blocks from 18 months to 5
years). This could be helpful for comparing texts to one another but may be somewhat confusing in an ELT context, where rankings from ‘elementary’ to ‘advanced’ are probably more appropriate.

Another useful tool is the ‘Tagger’, which identifies parts of speech. A total of 63 different tags are available, providing great detail to the analysis. For example, the system can distinguish between a ‘determiner’, ‘determiner, article’ and ‘wh-determiner’, as well as a ‘pronoun neutral’, ‘personal pronoun’, ‘possessive pronoun’, ‘wh-pronoun’ and ‘possessive wh-pronoun’. This tool could be useful when creating tests or teaching parts of speech. However, no description of the grammar used to assign these tags is provided, which may result in possible disagreements between users as to the accuracy of the categorisations.

Text Inspector can also analyse a text’s lexis with reference to four different corpora: the English Vocabulary Profile (EVP), the British National Corpus (BNC), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the Academic Word List (AWL). For example, the AWL tool identifies words that are on the AWL and the sublist they belong to. In addition, the system can classify all the metadiscourse markers (Hyland, 2005) used within the text (e.g., ‘frame markers’, such as in this section and finally). Both of these tools enable users to gain an in-depth analysis of the language used within a text.

The highlight of the system for me is the ‘Scorecard’. This provides a summary of all the analyses in the system and produces a score for the text according to the Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR). Scores range from the standard A1–C2, but they also include the grades of D1 and D2 to identify undergraduate and advanced academic usage, respectively. As well as providing an overall score, the ‘Scorecard’ gives a detailed breakdown of all the metrics used and their corresponding CEFR score. For example, a text may receive a score of C2 for the percentage of AWL words used but only B2 for its lexical diversity. This is particularly useful for teachers and test designers who want to identify which areas of a text are more challenging for
their learners. However, to access the ‘Scorecard’, you need to be a paying subscriber.

In addition to the main Text Inspector site, there are numerous ‘help’ pages. These provide supporting information based on Bax’s extensive research. A detailed explanation is given for each analysis tool, with examples and helpful tips. Quotes and links to external research are also provided. While this section is necessary to support users, it is fairly wordy, there is the odd proofreading error and the layout and variations in font are somewhat distracting. You must spend significant time wading through data to truly understand each tool. Compared to the main website, which is user-friendly, clear, and easy to navigate, the help pages can be somewhat cumbersome.

To ensure greater accuracy and reliability, a range of analyses are often used. For instance, the lexical diversity tool utilises two well-respected measures, namely the measure of textual lexical diversity (MTLD) and the software tool vocd-D, with detailed descriptions of how these are used provided in the help pages. Length can also be a factor in accuracy and reliability, and the site admits that some tools, particularly those for lexis and metadiscourse, ‘can over- or under-estimate aspects of a text’. In an attempt to overcome this, the system breaks down and analyses longer texts in small chunks, which supposedly improves the accuracy of the data. Further, the fact that the system gives users the ability to amend some of the statistics suggests that it is not perfect. However, I found the accuracy level to be very high in my analysis.

In regards to cost, there are a range of subscriptions available to suit all budgets and users. Occasional users can utilise the tools for free with texts of up to 400 words. However, those who want to analyse longer texts and use the tools more frequently will need to pay for access. Subscriptions range from £2.99 to £5.99 per month for individuals wanting to analyse texts up to 10,000 words, and £19.99 to £29.99 for organisations. The latter allows for the analysis of texts of up to 13,000 words and provides access for up to 10 users.

This system is ideal for language professionals, academics and students conducting linguistic research. In particular, I can see it being of value to test writers, curriculum designers and language teachers as it enables users to gain detailed information regarding the lexical composition of a text. However, a user who does not have a linguistics or language teaching background may have difficulty comprehending the intricacies of the data and the accompanying explanations due to their highly technical nature and specialised vocabulary.

Overall, I found Text Inspector to be a fascinating tool to explore. It is fast and comprehensive, taking a matter of seconds to produce pages of data, and it allows users to analyse reading, writing and listening texts with great accuracy and reliability.
I recommend all English language institutions and teaching professionals wishing to ensure that their materials are pitched at the right level utilise Text Inspector.

**References**


**Sarah Williams** has 14 years’ experience in the industry and has worked as an ESL Teacher, Coordinator, Examiner and Assistant Academic Manager. Her interests include language assessments, professional development and people management.

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In an increasingly interconnected world, the teaching of English must constantly adapt to new and frequently unpredictable circumstances. Globalisation, migration, devastating conflicts and the ongoing effects of colonialism and imperialism call for new perspectives on the teaching and learning of the English language. In response to these challenging conditions, *The Routledge Handbook of English Language Teaching*, edited by Graham Hall, provides nuanced, critical examinations of the future of ELT, contextualising debates within current social and political concerns.

The role of this collection of articles in facilitating dialogue is highlighted by Hall in his editorial introduction, where he states that ‘the Handbook is not intended to be a guide to ELT practice in which “experts” inform practitioners about “best practice”’ (p. 1). Instead, it aims to ‘stimulate professional and academic reflection on key issues facing ELT practitioners’ (p. 1). Doing away with authoritative and prescriptive approaches, the contributions to this collection promote critical thinking by informing pedagogical practice, enhancing knowledge and enabling personal and professional growth.

The book’s 39 chapters are divided into six thematic sections which examine ELT’s place in the world, ELT curricula, methodologies, second language learners, pedagogy, and the language classroom. Each chapter emphasises an area of interest or debate, with the range of themes covered in the collection embodying the diversity of the field and thus enabling ELT practitioners to select particular readings based on their interests and needs. While most chapters are theoretical and research-based, the informed arguments provided allow readers to expand their knowledge, consider complex and nuanced perspectives and then apply insights to actual classroom contexts. Chapters end with discussion questions, which will be useful for professional
development sessions and classroom discussions or to inspire future research, and with suggestions for further reading.

Alastair Pennycook’s chapter, ‘Politics, Power Relationships and ELT’, found in the first thematic section, ‘ELT in the World: Contexts and Goals’, provides an important contextualisation of the global spread of English and its ‘connection to colonial exploitation and the contemporary inequalities fostered by globalisation and neoliberal ideologies’ (p. 26). Providing insights into the framework and effects of linguistic imperialism, Pennycook explicitly links English teaching to power and politics. This focus on the social and political context of the ELT field allows practitioners to reflect on their practice, become more accountable and recognise their own relationship with global social inequalities. Also found in the first thematic section is Enric Llurda’s chapter, ““Native Speakers”, English and ELT: Changing Perspectives’, where he suggests that our interconnected and globalised world has removed numerous barriers and created diverse communities of English language users yet has also perpetuated the idealised concept of the ‘native speaker’, often resulting in stereotyping and discrimination against those who do not represent the normative English language teacher.

In the second thematic section, ‘Planning and Organising ELT: Curriculum, Resources and Settings’, Sue Starfield further challenges these preconceptions of ‘ideal’ teachers, as well as learners, in her chapter, ‘English for Specific Purposes’. Starfield suggests that ‘learners are often mobile, diverse, multilingual populations with rapidly evolving needs, and our understanding of content and contexts are becoming more nuanced through the use of diverse methodologies and theories not only of language but of the relationship of individuals to society’ (p. 153). This consideration of ELT through sociocultural contexts can inform teaching practice and help practitioners to become more critical by examining the attitudes and biases they may bring into the classroom. Asking critical questions, such as ‘Do I hold certain assumptions on the
type of “ideal” English learner?’ and ‘Does my understanding of students’ cultures rely predominantly on cultural stereotypes?’, and contextualising pedagogy within current social and cultural realities, can make teaching practice more responsive to the changing conditions of a multicultural, 21st century classroom.

Continuing the engagement with contemporary issues, James Simpson’s chapter, ‘English for Speakers of Other Languages: Language Education and Migration’, offers insights into curriculum and resources aimed at migrants to English-dominant countries and the challenges these people face when learning English. Simpson highlights the ‘distinctiveness of ESOL’, which emerges from its ‘interplay of life, learning and migration trajectories, of history and government policies, and the way they come together in practice’ (p. 178). This chapter is relevant for current discussions on migration and the specific motivations and challenges faced by migrants when acclimatising to a new culture and confronting everyday challenges, such as cultural codes, education and employment. Crucially, Simpson makes a compelling argument for the importance of recognising how adult students engage with English in broader sociolinguistic settings. Many of us in ELT frequently encourage students to take their learning outside the classroom, join societies, develop diverse social circles and use English on a daily basis. Considering our students’ sociolinguistic contexts can help enhance our understanding of the challenges they may face when engaging with English-speaking culture. Moreover, it can help us frame their learning as a process of ongoing improvement occurring within and beyond the classroom. For ELT practitioners working with migrants and international students, these concerns are vital for developing effective teaching methodologies.

Addressing the internationalisation of English in the fifth section of the book, ‘Teaching Language: Knowledge, Skills and Pedagogy’, Amos Paran and Catherine Wallace’s chapter on ‘Teaching Literacy’ discusses the pedagogical challenges of digital literacy, critical literacy and access to literacy through extensive reading. Their exploration of different types of literacy is beneficial for ELT practitioners considering how to utilise students’ existing knowledge and link it to new ideas, concepts and linguistic structures in order to enable effective language learning. In the same section, Geoff Hall’s chapter on ‘Using Literature in ELT’ offers compelling arguments for expanding learners’ vocabulary, awareness of register and genre, and linguistic knowledge through literature. Hall’s discussion of the scholarly approaches to ‘tolerance of ambiguity’ (p. 459) and emotional investment within ELT and literature is useful for encouraging critical thinking, promoting an active engagement with texts and motivating learners. This chapter also considers how the inclusion of literature in ELT can raise cultural awareness and enable cross-cultural learning. What these chapters capture is the necessity for ELT practitioners to engage with the multiple
forms of learner literacy that have emerged from a changing global landscape and to share knowledge across cultures.

The chapters described above represent only a selection of the truly diverse range of contributions to *The Routledge Handbook of English Language Teaching*. Suitable for all readers looking to enhance their academic, professional and practical skills, this eclectic collection will provide much-needed material and inspiration. Ultimately, what the authors show in their thoughtful and informed chapters is that English language teaching is never neutral and so must always be open to critique and change.

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Creative Output
Activities for teaching speaking and writing
Gerhard Erasmus & Hall Houston

CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017

Reviewed by David Curtin

One of the greatest challenges that teachers confront in the language classroom is getting students to produce meaningful chunks of language. Creative Output is a book of very practical ideas on how to do just that.

Most English language teachers will already be familiar with the 'canon' of titles providing ideas for classroom activities, including 700 Classroom Activities (Seymour & Popova, 2003), Teaching English Grammar (Scrivener, 2010), and Games for Language Learners (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2006). They may, therefore, wonder why yet another volume of productive language activities is necessary. They should not fear as Erasmus and Houston have produced a work that ought to sit comfortably with the best of these tried-and-tested resources.

The book is in two parts. Part A, ‘Introduction’, provides a fascinating theoretical account of the role of input and output in second language acquisition, with the work of writers such as Krashen, Swain and Vygotsky being neatly summarised. The authors state the view that teachers cannot expect that output ‘will just happen’ (p. 5) and then provide a useful examination of the benefits of an output-focused classroom, as well as several sections on what makes speaking and writing activities successful.

Part A concludes with useful checklists of procedures that help ensure productive skills activities produce favourable outcomes. For example, the checklist for successful writing activities is as follows: topic orientation, a focus on task language, planning the task, doing the task, peer checking and review, and language feedback. Of particular note here is the suggestion that students should be encouraged to read and peer correct their classmates’ work. I have found this to be an incredibly useful and powerful technique, but one that requires an ingrained classroom culture of safety, confidence and respect.
Part B, ‘The Activities’, is the guts of the work. Listed under six headings – ‘Speaking’, ‘Writing’, ‘Speaking and Writing’, ‘From Input to Output’, ‘Book Based Activities’ and ‘Young Learner Activities’ – some 88 output-oriented classroom activities are described. The instructions for each activity consist of a ‘Preparation’ section and a ‘Procedure’ section. Most of the activities require very little physical preparation on the part of the teacher (and in many cases, no preparation at all other than some brief deliberation). The instructions are detailed and easy to follow; more experienced teachers could readily adapt and extend them.

I tried (and usually adapted) several of the activities from the ‘Writing’ and ‘Speaking’ sections. Activity 3.5, ‘Adding Dialogue to a Film Clip’, for example, is simple enough. A short film or clip is played with the sound off. Students then write the dialogue and perform it. This works at all levels of proficiency and, assuming the clip is selected appropriately, can be set up to encourage students to use a particular grammatical structure or lexical set.

Section 4, ‘From Input to Output’ acknowledges that ‘one of the best ways to get a class to produce output is first to give them some input’ (p. 85). As such, the activities described in this section start from a receptive listening or reading activity and then progress smoothly to a related, productive activity involving speaking or writing. This section also contains one of those little nuggets of information that teachers are always looking for: its introduction has a list of useful websites which have free listening and reading texts. I was unaware of several of these and have found them to be excellent for creating quick classroom activities.

Section 6, ‘Young Learners Activities’, is aimed at students of CEFR A1–A2 level, with themes that primary or early secondary year students might enjoy, including monsters, superheroes and photobombing. With their focus on drawing (families, animals, posters, etc.) and on describing drawings, these activities appear to be useful for teaching classes with students up to early adolescence.
Many of the activities in *Creative Output* will probably seem familiar to teachers who have been in service for even a modest amount of time. For example, Activity 2.9, ‘Make a Crossword’, is a very helpful activity, which may already be well known to any teacher who has ever taught a lexical set or how to use defining relative clauses. Similarly, Activity 5.8, ‘Writing a Review’, could have come from just about any Academic English, General English, or Cambridge Preparation course. Some of the activities are even adapted from other sources – though where this occurs, there is always acknowledgement of the original authors. However, this does not detract from the book. As teachers, we often need to be reminded of activities that work well, but that we have forgotten about.

In their closing comments, Erasmus and Houston say they hope that readers will find ‘one or two activities or ideas that would be useful or productive’ (p. 135). I most certainly did. And so too will you. *Creative Output* is highly recommended, but don’t leave it on the shelf next to your other activities and ideas books. Open it up, dip into it and use it.

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In the introduction to his excellent book on how to prepare for the IELTS writing test, Bob Burr explains the metaphor in his title. He likens success in the test to winning a game – a game with ‘Rules’ (the assessment criteria), ‘Umpires’ (the examiners), ‘Penalties’ (for breaking the rules), and so on. In other words, it’s a device to get students motivated, organised and ‘winning’, by which the author means attaining Band 7 in the exam’s Writing component. The book is divided into six sections. The first three take the reader through the two versions of the test, Academic and General Training, with separate sections for Task 1 of each version. The sections are structured in the same way, adopting the title’s sport-oriented approach: ‘Rules of the Game’, ‘Chart (or Letter/Essay) Types and Tactics’, ‘Game Plan’ and ‘Penalty Box’.

In Section One, Burr systematically takes students through the different task types in Academic Writing Task 1. All six types of input material – bar charts, line graphs, pie charts, process diagrams, map diagrams and tables – are illustrated, making this one of the most convenient reference books available for this task type; the Official IELTS Practice Materials (Cambridge, 2007; 2010) omit tables. Further, since there are very few high-level responses in the official practice materials, it is a relief to find clearly annotated model answers in this book as teachers can vary widely in
their familiarity with the content of the test (Chappell, Bodis, & Jackson, 2015). In fact, Burr’s thorough treatment of all aspects of the Writing Test would go a long way towards filling teachers’ knowledge gaps.

Consideration is given to each of the Task 1 assessment criteria as readers are shown how to cover all the requirements of the task. The section on coherence and cohesion, for example, gives useful suggestions for how to organise a response, with advice on writing an introduction, organising information and using cohesive devices to achieve a clear progression. At the close of this first section, there are some practical tips on time management in the ‘Game Plan’ and warnings about ‘offences’ which will reduce a test-taker’s score (e.g., failing to present all the key features) in the ‘Penalty Box’.

In Section Two, ‘Writing Task 2’, the focus is on the types of essay that test-takers are likely to encounter. Burr clearly sets out what he classifies as the four essay types: opinion essays, ‘double-question’ essays, discussion essays and ‘hybrid’ essays, which combine features of the double question and opinion essay. His analysis of each essay type includes a detailed structure guide and high-level sample essay with annotations. He also identifies the most common task instructions for each essay type, helping students to decide which structure they should follow in their response. My students have responded very favourably to his approach.

In this section, the thorny issue of style in IELTS writing is also discussed. Burr warns test-takers against using language which is ‘pretentious and aiming to impress rather than clearly address the issue’ (p. 55) and to ‘avoid over-reliance on formulaic language . . . from a template designed to be suitable for any essay, regardless of topic’ (p. 56) (e.g., intensely debated, hot topic, controversial issue). Although it may be an over-simplification for the book to recommend the same style and register for both versions of the writing test, it provides more clarity than the official IELTS website, which states, for example, that the General Training essay ‘can be fairly personal in style’ (IELTS, 2017a) but also that a ‘semi-formal/neutral discursive essay’ (IELTS, 2017b) should be written.

Section Three has a focus on General Training Task 1 letter types. Once again, there is plenty of sound advice, with the sub-section on content being particularly helpful. However, more information about the style of letters would have been useful. While the IELTS website states that an informal, semi-formal or formal letter may be required (IELTS, 2017b), only two styles are illustrated by Burr, informal and formal (though there is a caveat that variations in the degree of formality may be found within these two categories). Readers can find five example letters in the final section of the book,
'Practice Tests’, but three of these clearly require an informal style and the tone of the other two is formal, leaving semi-formal unrepresented.

The fourth section of the book deals with grammar. It is hard in fewer than 10 pages to give a comprehensive account of an area that has entire books devoted to it. Burr has evidently included the grammar points that his own students have found most problematic, and I think that most IELTS preparation teachers would agree with his selection, which includes sentence fragments, subject-verb agreement and comma splices.

Section Five is entitled ‘Readiness Assurance Program’. Under headings such as ‘Performance Testing’, ‘Performance Review’ and ‘Skills Training’, Burr elaborates on his ‘game plan’ for IELTS test-takers. He refers students to the practice tests in the last section of the book and then urges them to review their performance, in a process that he ominously warns will be ‘boring, exhausting and time-consuming’!

Despite all the metaphors and, at times, didactic tone, this section and the final one, ‘Tips and Tools’, have a lot to recommend them. Considerable thought has gone into compiling checklists for students to complete when reviewing their responses to the practice test tasks. These checklists, with their systematic analysis of the IELTS band descriptors, will also be very handy for IELTS preparation teachers since the more they know about the test, the more effective they will be in the classroom.

Gone are the days when teachers could complain about the paucity of IELTS materials. However, I have not seen a single volume on the writing test that I could recommend to both teachers and students as enthusiastically as this one. The great strength of the book is that it is the work of a teacher who is very familiar with the test specifications, the assessment criteria and how best to prepare students. Some of the sporting analogies may jar on you but for systematic coverage of all aspects of the IELTS Writing test, this book is a winner!

References


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VoiceThread
https://voicethread.com
VoiceThread LLC
Reviewed by Thushara Ari Gamage

VoiceThread is a web tool that promotes online collaboration through multimedia presentations. By using VoiceThread, teachers and students can communicate and connect in a safe and interactive online environment.

A free VoiceThread account has many limitations. Therefore, it would be more beneficial for higher education institutions and language schools to purchase a licence. A Single Instructor License costs US$99 a year and can be used by one instructor and up to 50 students; more students can be added for US$2 each. A Site License is the more flexible option as the fees and features can be customised by the VoiceThread team to suit the requirements of a school.

Creating a VoiceThread is a user-friendly, three-step process that can be carried out using any computer or mobile device. The process commences with uploading media, such as picture files, documents or videos, to one or more slides. Picture or document slides can be replaced and rotated, and their sequence can be changed after the presentation has been created. Next, comments can be added by the VoiceThread’s original creator as well by teachers and students who have approved access. Voice comments can be added using a microphone, telephone, webcam or pre-recorded audio file. Written comments can be typed in or text can be copied and pasted. Doodle comments can be drawn directly onto the slides in a variety of colours.

The playback feature gives users the ability to delete and re-record their own comments as many times as they wish before saving them. This is useful as it can encourage students enrolled in language programs to think about their spoken production of English before sharing their comments with others in their group. In the case of written comments, these can be edited multiple times by their author. As VoiceThread does not detect errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation, teachers can encourage students to focus on accuracy in these areas and to carefully edit their written comments before posting them.

The final step in creating a VoiceThread involves sharing it by emailing a link or
embedding it in an online learning platform, such as Blackboard or Moodle. The completed multimedia presentation can also be exported, downloaded and saved for viewing. An advantage of this feature is that in situations where there is limited access to technology, for example during conferences and workshops, VoiceThreads can be downloaded in advance, saved and presented on the day.

One of the major benefits of using VoiceThread is that more than one person can collaborate on a single presentation using the comments feature. There is potential for student-teacher interaction as students can view lecture or tutorial VoiceThreads from their teacher and then upload voice or written comments, questions or responses. Teachers then have the ability to respond to their students’ comments and to cater to different student requirements by creating separate VoiceThreads for different groups.

Student-student interaction can be promoted by creating different VoiceThreads within one account for students to work on. For example, students could be encouraged to add comments to and ask questions about their peers’ VoiceThreads and also to respond to other students’ feedback on their work and learn from it. This would be very beneficial in tutorial settings as it could promote active participation and collaboration among students.

Class-to-class or institution-to-institution interactive learning can also be facilitated where two or more teachers or schools can access one account. For example, telecollaborative projects (Dooley & O’Dowd, 2012) can be designed using VoiceThread to promote English language learning. This is possible by pairing one ESL classroom with another or even with a school where English is spoken as a first language. Also, in classrooms where online intercultural projects (O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006) or CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) are used, VoiceThread-embedded audio clips, video clips or images can be used as stimuli for students’ spoken or written comments.

In addition to promoting student communication, using VoiceThread, teachers from different institutions can share their ideas and support each other in designing material that promotes the targeted communicative outcomes in their individual classrooms. Also, if the intention of creating a voicethread is to invite feedback from a
wider audience, public access can be enabled. This feature could benefit educational institutions that design free online courses for students in other parts of the world. There remains the option to adjust the privacy settings to restrict public access for courses that are specific to individual institutions.

VoiceThread offers many different types of online support. There is, for example, a detailed video clip that demonstrates the three step process of creating a VoiceThread. Further, a digital library offers a list of tasks and examples of programs that have been implemented using VoiceThread. These are conveniently categorised by subject area. A useful list of published research projects that might interest teachers and researchers, including action research projects in English language classrooms, is available to help teachers understand how VoiceThread has been used to promote language learning in higher education. VoiceThread also offers free online tutorials and regular workshops in addition to fee-paying ones.

Overall, VoiceThread is a very useful tool for teachers and students as it offers a wide range of collaborative online features. In addition to facilitating online learning, the flexibility in licences and embedding and sharing options make it valuable for those who wish to use the tool as a resource to promote interactive online or classroom language learning.

References


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Developing Learner Autonomy Through Tasks
Theory, research, practice

Andrzej Cirocki

LinguaBooks, 2016

Reviewed by Dat Bao

Learner autonomy allows students to make their own choices and decisions during the learning process. When a teacher builds autonomy into tasks, they are negotiating with students’ need to be engaged and challenged. With this in mind, Developing Learner Autonomy Through Tasks offers both theoretical background and practical ideas which teachers can use to develop lesson plans and create materials that encourage independent learning. Founded upon empirical research, classroom experience and expertise in materials development, Andrzej Cirocki unpacks the ways in which autonomy can improve the impact of task design on student learning. He also demonstrates how research-led theory can drive everyday teaching practice.

Chapter 1 highlights the reason why learner autonomy matters. It does so by arguing that autonomy allows students to control three aspects of their learning: study management; social, cognitive and affective processing; and active engagement with subject matter. Here the reader might feel a minor weakness in the discussion since although the author points out that the theorisation of learner autonomy has evolved over the past 25 years, this chapter mainly captures what the concept has meant since 2003 rather than showing its whole development.

Having defined autonomy, the book presents effective classroom practice and underlying principles developed from the author’s research. Chapter 2, for example, advises teachers to promote learner reflection. Through the use of worksheets, learners are asked questions such as ‘What strategies do you use when reading in English?’ They can provide answers based on a given list of skills, including preview, critique and summarising. The teacher then looks at responses and can see which skills their students rarely use. With this knowledge, teachers can raise students’
awareness of any neglected skills and, if students wish, stretch their reading-skill repertoire. This is a helpful exercise as it encourages learner autonomy through reflection and additional practice.

Chapter 3 provides teachers with ideas for selecting resources that promote learner autonomy. This task is made easy thanks to a set of text-selection criteria, which include factors such as suitable language level, relevant content and connection to learners’ knowledge. The chapter also presents three task types that nurture independent learning: authentic tasks that stimulate social interaction, complex tasks that challenge the learner, and purposeful tasks that engage learners deeply.

In a systematic manner, Chapters 2 and 3 show teachers how autonomy activities are founded upon a process of negotiation, collaboration and problem-solving. One example of such a task is ‘What’s bothering you?’, which invites students to respond to this question: ‘Do you have any moans and groans about anything that has happened recently in your country or in the world?’ (pp. 122–124). In this activity, students work together to produce either an online blog, a dialogue, a poster or a diary entry. Some suggested areas for complaint include music, movies, education and reality shows. With these prompts, and with internet access, students have 30 minutes to complete the task. Students’ work is shared with other groups for comments and then goes back to the authors for reflection and improvement. This is a good task because it not only encourages a high degree of independent learning but also makes use of peer feedback in the writing process.

While Chapter 2 explains teaching practice in some detail, Chapter 3 focuses more on the principles of task design. This chapter tends to be more theoretical than practical, with the exception of an illustrating example towards the end to demonstrate what a good task looks like. In fact, readers will need to go on to Chapter 7 to see additional concrete examples of autonomy tasks.

Chapters 4–6 present a case study based on the author’s research into the creation of tasks which promote learner autonomy. The author’s findings indicate that the development of autonomous learning can only be meaningful and successful if it is
based on a cycle of concrete experience, individual reflection, regular practice and constant improvement. Cirocki emphasises that learner-autonomy tasks should make up a meaningful part of student learning since they foster students’ decision-making skills and their in-depth, active participation in the learning process, yet have been seriously neglected in many coursebooks.

Chapter 7 proposes a model to help teachers develop tasks that stimulate learner autonomy. The procedure requires teachers to reflect on tasks, look into learner needs and design tasks in a collaborative way. The chapter ends with a series of handouts representing inspiring tasks that nurture learner autonomy. In one task, called ‘Horror Films’, for example, learners are invited to listen to excerpts from movie soundtracks, study several images and then to match the two together. This is followed by a discussion of the language and structure of a horror film. In the end, students make use of what they have learned to create a plot with illustrations either from the internet or from their own drawings. The final chapter of the book, Chapter 8, recommends more research be undertaken so as to improve current practice and build a deeper understanding of ways to support autonomous learning.

Overall, the book balances theory and practice well. For teachers who are interested in research, it provides a chance to see how data collection and analysis can reveal insights into teaching and learning. Further, practitioners with more concern about practical teaching ideas can collect strategies to boost students’ autonomous learning. For example, in Chapter 6, teachers are encouraged to design group projects and organise presentations in order to involve students more often in cooperative learning.

For me, the major strength of Developing Learner Autonomy Through Tasks is that it draws on classroom-based research. Backed up by well-justified principles, it demonstrates how teachers can promote autonomy through classroom tasks which foster active participation and team work, and avoid spoon-feeding. The book is not an up-front instructional manual where teachers can simply go to a chapter on a specific teaching strategy and apply it. However, for teachers with an interest in praxis, Cirocki’s work offers the vigour of a connection between theory, research and practice that can be uncommon in many ELT books.

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If you are looking for an easy-to-read and practical guide to teaching pronunciation, *Beyond Repeat After Me: Teaching Pronunciation to English Learners*, by Maria Tritch Yoshida, might be of interest to you. Overall, the book is 188 pages in length and has 15 main chapters and five supplementary ones. The book looks at the theory and classroom practice of teaching segmental (individual sounds) and suprasegmental (affecting more than one sound segment) features of English. It focuses primarily on the pronunciation of American English (AE) but does not exclude other varieties.

The preface is enthusiastic about what makes this book different from other pronunciation titles. In the author’s own words, ‘existing books are simply *books*’ (italics in the original) (p. v), meaning that even if a CD with recordings is available, sounds tend to be mainly represented through symbols and descriptions. This book, however, makes sounds an integral part of its content on the accompanying website, www.tesol.org/beyondrepeatafterme, which is a useful audio-visual resource for teachers wishing to improve their own knowledge of pronunciation. Another important note in the preface is about the book’s audience as ‘[it] has been written with special consideration of the needs and interests of nonnative speakers of English’ (p. v), and is thus relevant to both English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers.

Chapter 1 gives an overview of important concepts that teachers need to know about effective pronunciation teaching, with Chapter 2 following up by looking at basic concepts from phonology. A positive feature of the latter is its focus on the phonemic alphabet, which is a problem area for many teachers. Chapter 3 is about the articulatory approach to pronunciation teaching. It deals with the articulatory
system and ideally should be the first chapter teachers read as it elucidates what happens inside our mouth when we talk, using both descriptions and drawings. This chapter also includes ideas about how to teach articulation. For instance, alluding to children’s experience, teachers are shown how to produce the /θ/ sound by positioning the tongue as if licking a lollipop.

Consonants and vowels appear in Chapters 4 and 5. Although these chapters contain a lot of terminology which may discourage readers, the terms are presented in bold to indicate their inclusion in the book’s glossary. Chapter 4 presents tips on how to demonstrate manner of articulation using mental images, such as a stop /p/ or /b/ working like a toy pop gun and a fricative /s/ like pushing air out of a balloon pump. In Chapter 5, a useful table of lip positions for AmE vowels is found. Chapter 6 is short and deals with the pronunciation of word endings, which may interest teachers working with learners whose first language omits or changes such sounds. It would also be beneficial to trainees on courses like CELTA, where knowledge of learners’ pronunciation difficulties is required.

Chapter 7 presents activities informed by a communicative framework for teaching pronunciation, which suggests that new sounds or sound contrasts be taught in different ways, such as using description and analysis, listening discrimination, controlled practice, guided practice and communicative practice. This chapter is packed with valuable ideas for classroom activities, including the use of gestures and movements, such as mimicking the tongue position for the /r/ sound by holding up one’s hand with the fingers curled up. Another highlight is the attention to students’ needs and the call for an eclectic (auditory, visual and kinaesthetic) teaching approach, using what the author calls ‘the pronunciation toolbox’ of mirrors or mobile phones, dental models, listening tubes made from folded paper, rubber bands, drinking straws and feathers or thin tissue paper (for working with individual sounds).

The subsequent chapters (8–12) are dedicated to aspects of pronunciation that create the musicality of English: stress, rhythm, thought groups and prominence, intonation, and connected speech. My recommendation is to approach these chapters in sequence to gain a solid understanding of syllables and stress before entering the complex realms of prominence and intonation. From a practical perspective, Chapter
13 suggests techniques for teaching these suprasegmental features, such as focusing students on stress using Cuisenaire rods. One good idea is the placing of the rods horizontally on the desk to show syllable lengthening. Other great ideas include the use of red and yellow cards for practising thought groups (meaningful chunks of language) during reading aloud activities, where a red card means a complete stop and a yellow card, a partial one, and the use of pipe cleaners for marking intonation patterns.

The two remaining chapters are dedicated to topics which are often absent in pronunciation resources: learner experience and the relationship between spelling and sound. Chapter 14 reminds teachers of the importance of planning pronunciation lessons by being mindful of learners’ age, level, language background and goals; while Chapter 15 discusses the sometimes neglected area of phonics (the study of the relationship between written letters and spoken sounds). The author warns teachers about the danger of overwhelming students with too much information on spelling patterns and reminds them of the challenges caused by the spelling of students’ first languages.

As for drawbacks, I have only very small quibbles with the book. One of them is perhaps due to my misunderstanding of the title. I was expecting a critical stance against ‘listen and repeat’. However, the idea behind the book is that of supplementation. Another minor criticism is a logistic one. It would possibly have been more advantageous for teachers if the resource templates (e.g., the listening tube shapes) had been printed on a single page for easy photocopying.

In conclusion, this book really has something for everyone, from novice teachers to teacher trainers, although academics would probably find it less useful. I strongly recommend it to trainees on CELTA or DELTA courses as its balance of theory and practice would be of great help for their practicum. Finally, I truly encourage you to acquire Beyond Repeat After Me and make pronunciation a regular feature of your language lessons.

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The CELTA Teaching Compendium

Rachael Roberts

the round, 2017

Reviewed by Sophia Khan

The CELTA Teaching Compendium is a slim 26-page e-book, designed primarily – and it’s not like you weren’t forewarned – for trainees on the pre-service CELTA course. However, it is also highly relevant to anyone on any pre-service course (such as the Trinity Cert TESOL), or anyone participating in the practicum component of a TESOL-related degree course. It would also be useful to new teachers looking for a refresher on key ideas, or teacher trainers looking for accessible, bite-size tips for their trainees.

In essence, the book works as an alphabetised ‘micropedia’ of the most immediate issues, terms and techniques relating to basic language-classroom needs. When trainee teachers first start, there is a bewildering range of teaching-related terminology to process (for example, concept questions, teacher talking time, wait time, and so on) and Roberts’ book gets straight into tackling them. These might be ‘old chestnuts’ from the other side of the teacher-training fence, but it’s easy to forget how these critical ideas can get overwhelmed by the general landslide of new information on a training course.

These ‘old chestnuts’ are also interspersed with other broader and more complex ideas, such as differentiation and use of mother tongue, and traditional key focus areas such as board work and instructions. Also included are strategies for some of the ‘small’ but important everyday struggles that teachers face, among them fast finishers, late arrivals and remembering names. To me, these areas are particularly important as they are often ignored in methodology texts or in input sessions.

In total there are 33 ‘chapters’ on offer, each ranging from half a page to two pages in length. And while this means the book is perfect for time-poor trainee teachers looking for immediately applicable strategies, it inevitably also means that it won’t help those looking for more in-depth background knowledge on how language and
skills are taught. For instance, while there’s a chapter on whether or not to pre-teach vocabulary, there is no information on how to actually teach lexis; there is a chapter on drilling but not on what pronunciation involves; a chapter on board work but nothing on form analysis, and so on. This is not a deficiency or omission; it’s just beyond the scope of a book that’s about techniques rather than theory. In the introduction, Roberts quotes from Rick Smith’s *Conscious Classroom Management* (2004, p. 44): ‘Being a new teacher is like trying to fly an airplane while building it’. The point of this e-book is to help new teachers with ‘flying skills’ rather than building language awareness.

There are a few things that make this text accessible, especially for the newer teacher. As discussed above, the brevity of the contents is one. The other feature is the style, which is personal and relatable. To give an example, under homework, Roberts writes: ‘All too often teachers give out homework which is just finishing off what they’ve done in class, and then they forget to take it in, or having taken it in, they forget to mark it. And yes, I’ve been guilty of doing all those things.’ It’s this kind of writing, along with the fact that she addresses her writing to ‘you’ throughout, that really gives the sense that this e-book is ‘like having your CELTA teaching practice tutor available for questions any time of the day or night’ (as Roberts puts it in the introduction). In true CELTA-tutor fashion, she is also careful to offer clear rationales for the approaches she suggests, so readers aren’t being told to ‘just do it like this’ – they are helped to understand the thinking behind classroom approaches and given the space to find their own ‘right’ way.

In terms of layout, it’s worth mentioning that each chapter ends with a useful little grey box that distils the already-distilled area into a few bullet points (the author obviously knows how tight time can get on some pre-service courses). As it’s an e-book, the contents page has hyperlinks to the body text, and when there is a cross-reference in the text, the keyword is hyperlinked back to the relevant chapter. While hyperlinks are useful features for an online reference source, my only quibble is with the lack of page numbers since, when such a short book is easy to print out, they would be very handy in the hard copy.
All in all, *the CELTA Teaching Compendium* is an accessible little book with a clear focus on the language learning classroom and its processes. It would be useful to trainees or new teachers who need more support in understanding and acting on unfamiliar classroom-focused ideas. And for just US$4.99, a sleep-deprived CELTA candidate can’t go wrong.

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With a shift towards offering more specialised English courses, such as direct entry EAP courses and Vocational English, many institutes are creating in-house materials to meet their learners’ needs rather than relying on a commercial coursebook syllabus. As a result, there is a corresponding need for teams of teachers who understand the underlying principles of best practice in curriculum development. This second edition of *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching* could certainly help meet this need. Within its 338 pages and 11 chapters, this up-to-date, research-based book provides interested readers with everything they should know about this area.

Reading like a coursebook, each chapter of *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching* builds on the next. Chapter 1, ‘The Nature of Curriculum,’ introduces the reader to different conceptions of curriculum including the traditional product approach, ‘a framework developed to monitor teaching’ (p. 3) as well as the process approach, reflecting recent research into the ‘emergence’ of curriculum through the process of teaching and learning. The next two chapters look at the history of course design (Chapter 2) and bring us forward to ‘New Directions in Syllabus and Curriculum Design’ (Chapter 3). These chapters examine the shift from using vocabulary and grammar as the driving force of a course towards a more communicative and purpose-based approach, taking into consideration the language aims of learners and their target contexts. The remaining chapters examine key stages and considerations in the curriculum development process, including needs analysis, formulating aims and outcomes, course planning, implementation of the curriculum, and approaches to evaluation.

Each chapter is subdivided with headings, allowing the reader to digest manageable chunks of information, and there are discussion questions throughout to encourage
reflection. There is also a page of discussion questions and suggested activities at the end of each chapter, which would enable the book to be used in a teacher training course or workshop, or with a discussion group. Each chapter also includes an appendix with one or two (and sometimes three) examples of documents linked to the chapter’s theme, such as needs analysis tools, proficiency descriptors like the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, and examples of syllabi for the course planning section. While some of these documents could be useful as models, perhaps some of them could have been omitted or at least condensed. There did not seem to be a clear purpose, for example, for having three different vocabulary frequency lists, including the entire Academic Word List.

More useful than the appendices is the inclusion of real case studies of curricula developed by teachers around the world. These case studies, which are new to this second edition of the book, illustrate how practitioners have used principles of curriculum design to create unique courses. Via discussion questions, readers are asked to analyse each case (sometimes comparing two cases) with respect to a particular concept, such as a using a text-based approach or addressing learner needs, and to evaluate how challenges were overcome. A wide range of courses are represented, including an English course for baristas, a course on discussion skills and several different Academic English courses. Curriculum teams could use these case studies to evaluate some of their own course-design decisions and also to gain ideas.

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of this new edition is its currency, with every chapter having been revised to reflect contemporary issues. Two such issues centre around the use of textbooks and technology, and both are addressed in Chapter 9. This chapter evaluates textbooks as teaching resources and offers teachers who are required to use textbooks useful guidelines for adapting material to their own contexts, such as by modifying, adding or deleting content, addressing omissions or extending tasks. In addition, Richards provides clear and current research-based arguments for augmenting a curriculum with technology. He outlines how technology can support the learner, the teacher and the institution and gives examples of how certain tools and applications (e.g., mobile devices, social media and learning management systems) have been integrated into a syllabus with specific learning
Richards stresses, however, that certain issues must be considered with any technology integration, such as infrastructure requirements, the skill level of teachers and students, and the need for professional development.

I personally found Chapter 5, ‘Context and the Curriculum,’ to be insightful, relevant and grounded in the most current research. It emphasises the importance of considering the sociocultural environment of a curriculum that comprises the learners, teachers and institution. This chapter presents some real examples of curriculum projects (in Japan and Malaysia, among others) which did not succeed because the context of the learners or teachers was not well considered. The chapter concludes by proposing ‘curriculum adoption factors’ (e.g., perceived advantages and alignment with current practices) and by highlighting the importance of piloting or implementing curriculum changes on a small scale at first to detect problems and find solutions. This is advice which should be considered carefully by all curriculum teams and administrators.

This second edition of Curriculum Development in Language Teaching is a must for all language institutes and educators who are involved with, or simply interested in, curriculum development. It contains something for everyone, even the most experienced. There is an excellent table of contents and index, which will help readers navigate the book’s plethora of information – particularly if they know what they are looking for. Because of its textbook style and depth of information, the book could also be well exploited in a postgraduate TESOL course. Novice course writers or teachers would benefit from reading the chapters in sequence, discussing the principles in groups and putting what they have learnt into practice, perhaps by doing practical project work with others. A highly recommended resource.

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Many learners race through the beginner levels of a new language, only to slow down as they reach intermediate. They can start to feel as if they’re trekking across a vast plain with little visible progress, no matter how hard they try. Energy and motivation drop off. After all, why bother trying when effort doesn’t seem to get you anywhere? Enter Practical Writing, an online writing course for intermediate-level students. Developed by ClarityEnglish, the course is available to schools and institutions which purchase a licence either to install it on their networked computers (AU$1,905 for up to 40 computers) or to make the program available online or through a learning management system (prices dependent upon the number of users and whether learner activity can be tracked). Practical Writing was shortlisted for the 2017 ELTons (the British Council’s Innovation Awards) and should help spark learners’ interest in mastering new text types.

The focus of Practical Writing is real-life written genres relevant for living, working and studying in English-speaking contexts. Delivered digitally (cloud-based or on a standalone computer), the course focuses on the skills and structures needed to write academic texts, as well as texts related to professional and personal life. Of the course’s 10 modules, nine present a different text type, including argumentative essays, online profiles, text messages and job applications. Plagiarism, while not a text type, is also addressed in a module of its own. Within each module, there is a broad focus on a topic (e.g., the module ‘A Short Report’ focuses on reviewing hotels and restaurants; the module ‘Emails’ focuses on asking for information). However, the emphasis of each module, and of the program overall, is on genre – the structure of different text types and their essential grammar and functional language – and writing skills (e.g., planning and proof reading).

In Practical Writing, learning takes place mostly through doing, with the bulk of each module presented via series of activities. Thus, rather than reading long explanations
about a writing skill or the structure of a genre, users learn through activities, such as ‘drag and drop’, ‘find the error’, and short answer and multiple-choice questions. These activities also offer learners hints and immediate feedback. Even pages presenting model texts include highlighted text with pop-ups for further explanation, allowing learners to choose if and when they want more information. Each of these learning design choices requires learners to stay focused on the content so that at every step, they’re consolidating the skills targeted in the module. Also included in each module is a short video introducing the text type and a ‘Resource Bank’, where transcripts of the introductory videos, sample answers based on real student texts and PDF worksheets for long-form writing practice are housed. At any time, learners can go to the ‘Progress Centre’ to check which activities they have completed and see their scores. Depending on their institution’s licence, teachers may also be able to access this data for students in their class.

The Practical Writing course is accessible via different platforms with each one housing different types of learning content. This is because during user testing ClarityEnglish discovered, for example, that users preferred not to watch videos on mobile devices as they use up too much data. The digital design thus takes into account where learners are and how much time they have: a few minutes on the bus for practicing vocab using the mobile app, half an hour at a desk for trying out activities on a PC, or a longer session of focused thinking for planning, writing and editing longer texts on the worksheets.

The website is uncluttered with clear, consistent navigation through modules and plenty of white space on each page. Within modules, photographs are used sparingly to set context (e.g., a hotel) or to represent the student writers (from a range of ethnicities) of model texts. While the mobile app was not reviewed, images of the app in Google Play show screens with cute (but thematically unrelated) drawings of robots in similar colourways to the website.

Several choices made in the course design are worth mentioning. Most important is the text types presented. Many of the genres, such as writing a job application,
creating an online profile or writing a review of a hotel, for example, are in themselves cultural constructs, which may challenge learners’ cultural expectations. For example, in their own culture, would learners ever review a hotel or any other business in a public forum such as a website? And do cover letters showcase and praise a job applicant’s skills? The program might therefore be more or less useful in different teaching and study situations. At the same time, Practical Writing could spark some rich class discussions, leading students to a deeper understanding and appreciation of differing cultural norms and values.

A second design choice worth mentioning is the coverage of grammar. Rather than comprehensively covering a grammatical point such as tenses in the module ‘Writing a Short Report’, the course encourages learners to consult a specialist grammar resource. This means that the program is not totally stand alone. However, perhaps it is more efficient and effective to send learners to a more complete resource. I suspect that teachers will have different opinions about this.

So, how might Practical Writing fit into the course you teach? Because of the step-by-step, work-at-your-own-pace design of the course and the feedback given on activities, it’s perfect for learners to work through independently. It would function well as homework on a General English course (allowing teachers to focus on speaking and listening in class) and also on an Academic English or Business English course (allowing learners to develop knowledge of a wide range of genres). Just note that while most of the activities are self-corrected and model answers are supplied, learners would really benefit from peer and teacher feedback for free response activities. Overall, with a focus on activity and real-life text types and with an intuitive, clean design, Practical Writing should not only foster writing skills but also help students stay motivated.

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The English Australia Journal is published by English Australia Ltd.
English Australia Member Colleges

March 2018

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University of Newcastle Language Centre - Newcastle
University of Newcastle Language Centre - Sydney
UNSW Global Pty Ltd T/A Institute of Languages
UOW College
UTS:INSEARCH
Western Sydney University, The College
Wollongong English Language & Cultural Centre, TAFE Illawarra Institute

**Northern Territory (NT)**
Navitas English - Darwin

**Queensland (QLD)**
ACU English Language Centre - Brisbane
Bond University English Language Institute
Cairns Language Centre / Eurocentres Cairns
CQUUniversity English Language Centre - Brisbane
CQUUniversity English Language Centre - Rockhampton
Embassy English - Brisbane
Embassy English - Surfers Paradise
English Unlimited
Griffith English Language Institute - Brisbane
Griffith English Language Institute - Gold Coast
ILSC Australia – Brisbane
Impact English Brisbane
Institute of Continuing & TESOL Education, The University of Queensland (ICTE-UQ)
Kaplan International College - Brisbane
Kaplan International College - Cairns
Lexis English - Brisbane
Lexis English - Noosa
Lexis English - Sunshine Coast
Navitas English - Brisbane
QUT International College
Sarina Russo Institute
Shafston International College - Brisbane
Shafston International College - Gold Coast
Southbank Institute Language Centre
Whitsundays College of English SACE

**South Australia (SA)**
Bradford College
Centre for English Language in the University of South Australia (CELUSA)
Eynesbury College Academy of English
Intensive English Language Institute
Kaplan International College - Adelaide
South Australian College of English
TAFE SA Adelaide English Language Centre
University of Adelaide

**Tasmania (TAS)**
University of Tasmania English Language Centre - Launceston
University of Tasmania English Language Centre - Hobart

**Victoria (VIC)**
Ability English - Melbourne
Academia International
ACU English Language Centre - Melbourne
Australian National College of English
Chambers Institute
CQU University English Language Centre - Melbourne
Deakin University English Language Institute
Discover English
ELYSIS Melbourne
Embassy English - Melbourne
Hawthorn-Melbourne
Holmes English Language Centre
Impact English College
INUS Australia – Education & Training
Kangan Institute
Kaplan International College - Melbourne
La Trobe Melbourne
Lyceum English Language Australia
Monash College Pty Ltd
Ozford English Language Centre
Performance Education - Melbourne
RMIT English Worldwide
Swinburne University English Language Centre
VU English

**Western Australia (WA)**
Australian English Language Centre
Centre for English Language Teaching, The University of Western Australia
Curtin English
Kaplan International College - Perth
Lexis English - Perth
Milner International College of English
Murdoch Language Centre, Murdoch Institute of Technology
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