

Formative speaking assessment: Beginning with story

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Introduction

The idea for this action research (AR) originated in the understanding that freewriting could contribute to the development of speaking fluency in an English as a Second Language (ESL) setting. Through the facilitation of storytelling workshops for international students (2018–2021), I gained insight into how creative writing (CW) could play a significant role in speaking development in the sharing of a personal story. The informal workshops I offered had been popular and provided opportunity for students to evoke personal memories through the writing and reading of their work, and in the listening, engender a communal spirit of global interest. Reflecting on this experience, I sought to incorporate the fundamentals of the CW process into a way of assessing learner progress. I believed that an alternative formative assessment had the capacity for skills development growth that could keep the interests of the learner in focus. Torres (2019) explains that success in formative assessment results from the volume of data available to the teacher to provide collaborative feedback on learner progress. In turn, this engagement would promote ongoing student learning. Bringing CW and formative speaking assessment together seemed a logical partnership, one that had the potential to create vibrancy within the learning environment (Stoller 2002) and give voice to the myriad experiences.

Context and participants

My AR took place at the University of Western Australia Centre for English Language Teaching (UWA CELT) in 2021. Here, in addition to a range of academic and general English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS), UWA CELT offers Bridging Course modules available to students on pathways to undergraduate and postgraduate study.

Over the course of the AR, I collaborated with intermediate-level learners over two separate five-week cycles. Both groups of students were small and of mixed ability, yet the intimacy of the shared live classroom created a supportive environment for AR. With international Covid border restrictions in place, the groups were among the few remaining face-to-face ELICOS classes at UWA CELT. Table 1 below outlines the more detailed participation information of the research cohort over both cycles.

Table 1: Participant information

Participant information	Cycle 1	Cycle 2
Number of students	7	5
Age range	17–44	18–34
Nationality	*Vietnamese, *Russian, Iranian, South Korean (2), Saudi Arabian, Colombia	*Vietnamese, *Russian, Chilean, Colombian (2)

*Students participated in both cycles

Research focus

The focus of my AR was to understand how CW could engage learners in formative speaking assessment. Using the term CW, I mean writing which displays imagination or invention. Maley (2015:6–13) characterises CW as a ‘playful engagement with language,’ bringing together ‘cognitive and affective modes of thinking’.

The AR plan was to replace the existing intermediate final exit speaking assessment with a CW-led formative project, culminating in an assessed speaking presentation in Week 4 worth 50% of the overall speaking score for the five-week term. The other assessments would not change, and account for the remaining 50% of the total score.

The formative nature of assessment had the potential to effectively scaffold learning throughout the five-week term with specific tasks related to the theme of the CW that would also be the assessed presentation topic. Using CW as a springboard, the personal reflections of students would identify areas of frustration, confusion, achievement, and levels of learner engagement. In addition, this project-based strategy would promote learner autonomy in the completion of student timelines and the slide preparation towards the speaking presentations in Week 4. With each of the scheduled weekly tasks, there would be considerable opportunity for speaking fluency development and evaluation of learner progress.

While the mind-mapping and CW tasks would be the cornerstone of this assessment, the actual speaking presentations would be the occasion for learners to demonstrate their acquired speaking skills with the support of presentation slides. Students would voice their personal experience and share their individual journeys. Each of the two cycles of AR would have a unique theme. The investigation would examine how CW, in its connection to personal story, progresses learning within the framework of an assessed speaking presentation.

The following research question guided the research: How can creative writing engage learners in formative speaking assessment?

Research design

Aiming for a wider perspective on the potential of CW, my AR ran over two five-week cycles. This allowed for considerable reflection and growth between the cycles, which supported Kemmis and Taggart's classic four-step model of the AR process: Plan, Action, Observe, Reflect, then in subsequent cycles beginning with *Revised Plan, Action, Observe, Reflect* (1988, as cited in Burns 2010). The participants of Cycle 1, through their varied reflective practice and survey responses, provided invaluable insight into their AR experience. This prompted a series of revised questioning in preparation for Cycle 2.

In relation to the structure and development of tasks in Cycle 2, the data analysis in Cycle 1 was influential. First, it highlighted the need to offer variation on the CW-led theme needed for continuing students, and the final peer interviews revealed that two respondents felt the Cycle 1 theme of 'My Language Journey' to be too wide. Second, the survey responses had suggested other changes in task development, prompting the introduction of an additional reflective practice, one that I hoped would not compromise the overall structure of the learning scaffold.

In addition, the data collected from Cycle 1 offered directions for the management of Cycle 2. In particular, the first reflective processes generated ideas for improvement in the formatting of the timeline template for the second cycle (see Appendix 1). I made further modifications to the presentation preparation and assessment stages in relation to Weeks 3 and 4. Half of the students had reported they would prefer, in a future cycle, to prepare slides and present individually instead of as a paired activity. I wanted to take this on board, and to counteract any loss in the sharing of ideas I scheduled more peer discussion time. To vary the channels of reflective expression in Cycle 2, I added journal writing reflection to the selection of tasks. My journal entries of ideas during the first cycle also lent significant weight to the decision process for the second cycle. This evaluation and reflection of the process, along with the collecting and analysing of data from Cycle 1 served to instruct the revised planning stage. Tables 2 and 3 below detail the changes made between Cycles 1 and 2.

Table 2: Cycle 1 – ‘My Language Journey’

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Mind-mapping	Timeline	Presentation slides preparation	Presentation practice	Peer interviews
Creative writing	Written paragraph reflection	Teacher interview	Assessed presentation	Group discussion
Recorded speaking reflection (RSR)	RSR		Survey completion	

Table 3: Cycle 2 – ‘Arriving in Australia’

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Mind-mapping	Group discussion	Presentation slides preparation	Presentation practice	Peer interviews
Creative writing	Timeline	Peer discussion	Assessed presentation	Recorded group discussion
RSR Survey	Journal writing reflection (JWR)	JWR	JWR	

Data collection

The AR participants completed three surveys in total: one 14-question survey at the conclusion of the first cycle in Week 4, one 10-question survey at the beginning of the second cycle, and one 14-question survey at the end. The additional survey in Cycle 2 was to establish how new students felt about the prospect of completing journal entry reflections. In all three surveys, the students recorded their preferences in the form of statements which they believed to be true and gave their opinions on aspects of the creative writing activities.

In addition to the surveys, the students in Cycle 1 recorded two individual speaking reflections and a written paragraph in response to structured questions about the CW and timeline activities. In Week 5, they conducted recorded peer interviews and participated in a group discussion. In Cycle 2, the students recorded one speaking reflection and three journal entry reflections; the peer interview and group discussion remained as with Cycle 1.

From both cycles, the mind-mapping, CW, thematic timelines, PowerPoint slides and presentation video recordings all provided insightful data into the research process and detailed evidence in support of learner engagement.

Findings

Working with a small research cohort, much of the data collected was qualitative. Nevertheless, the three surveys used were also instrumental in providing detailed insights into the students' experiences. I adapted the survey questions in Cycle 2 to respond to the change in theme and reflective task type, and to provide another dimension to the scope of CW on learner engagement. This modification is demonstrated in Figures 1 and 2 below.

In both surveys across cycles, students reported the usefulness of the CW activities; no students indicated that the activities were 'not so useful' or 'not at all useful.' In Cycle 2, I used statement responses as an additional question to indicate a wider range of experience possibility and to determine levels of learner engagement.

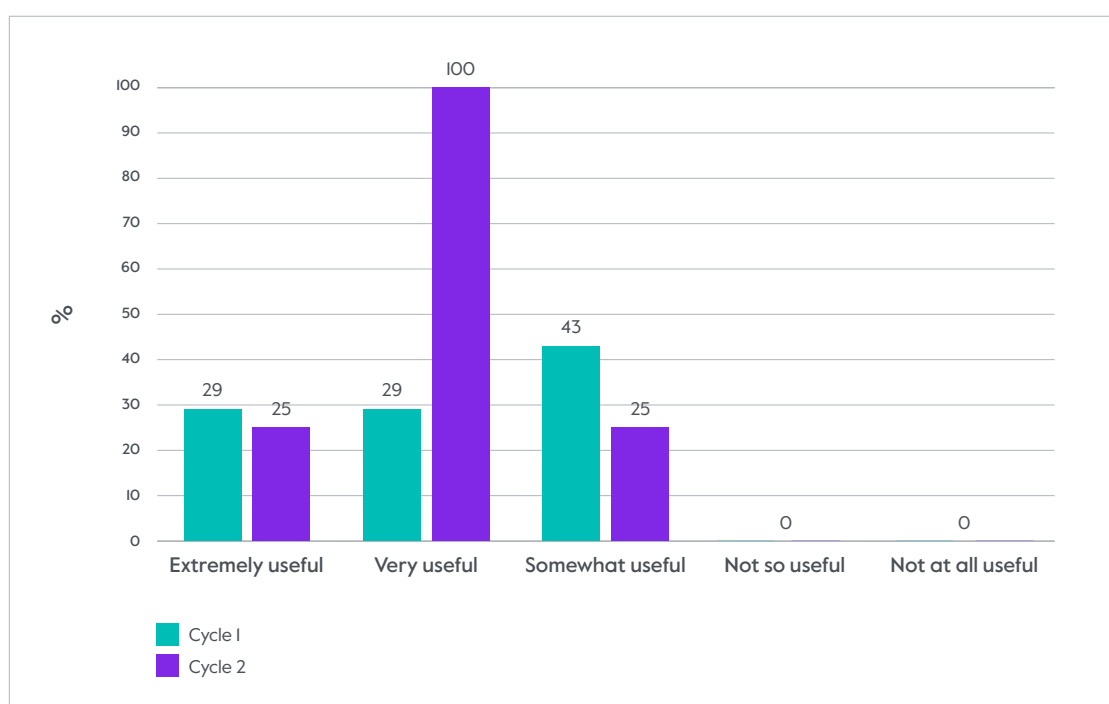


Figure 1: Survey Cycles 1 and 2 – usefulness of CW activities

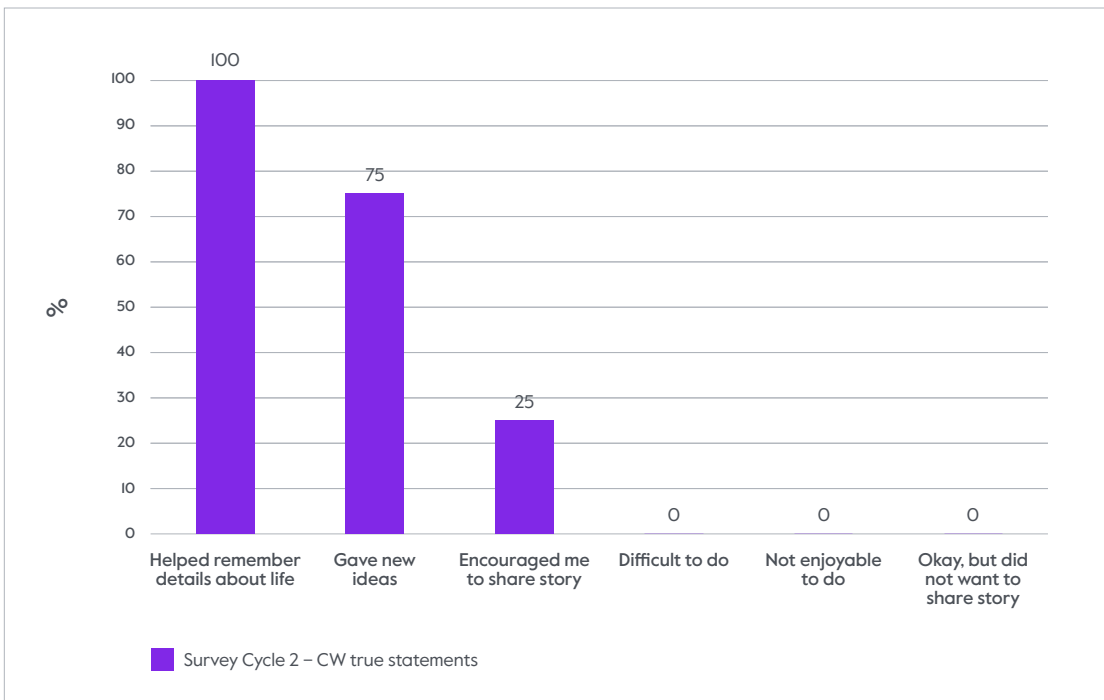


Figure 2: Survey 2 – CW statement responses

The CW tasks were constructive in engaging learners to use timelines and other material to produce effective slides for presentation in Week 3 of the cycles. Figure 3 shows a student using her timeline to prepare presentation slides (permission given).

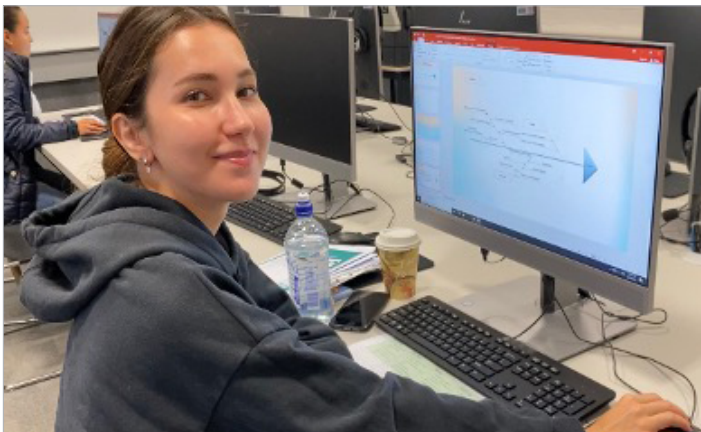


Figure 3: ‘Arriving in Australia’ student using timeline to create presentation slides (Cycle 2)

The second timeline theme, ‘Arriving in Australia’, involved learners in a more comprehensive timeline task. Building on the experience of Cycle 1, I designed the second template with wider columns for the sequencing of events under question headings. This served to guide learners in a detailed response which was conducive to presentation slide preparation.

As seen in Figure 4, survey responses from both cycles reported that students viewed the timeline activities positively.

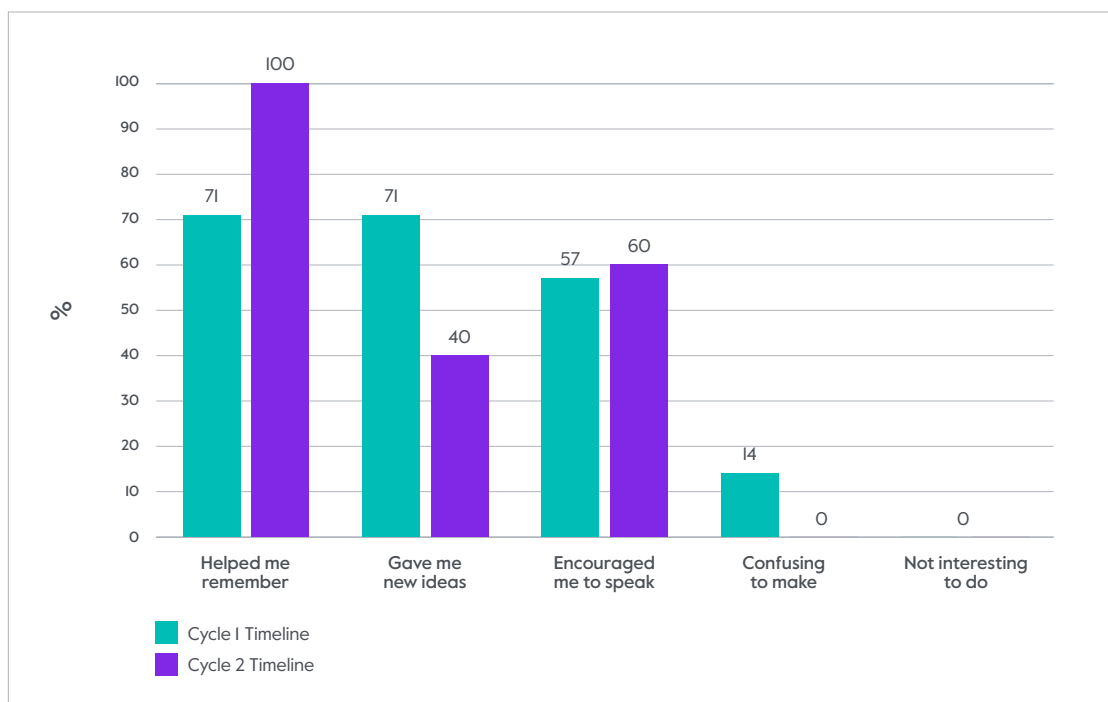


Figure 4: Survey Cycles I and 2 – Timelines

Throughout the course of my AR, all the participants recorded reflections orally or in journals, and responded to the survey questions. The reflections proved invaluable, both via voice memo and in the journals of Cycle 2. Furthermore, the mind-mapping and CW tasks of Week 1, the recordings, and journal writing were each instrumental in acknowledging prior learning, learning through frustration, confusion, or challenge, and in planning for the future. Such insightful voices demonstrated words of action, emotion, and cognitive development. These patterns were also evident in the responses from the peer interviews in Week 5.

Student 9 said at the end of Cycle 2 that ‘this project was a challenge, when I build the presentation, select the information and finally when I presented ... a good experience, I learned a lot and enjoyed the presentation.’

In terms of Cycle 2, in relation to the research findings, it is necessary to elaborate further on the student suggestions at the end of Cycle 1 to undertake single presentations. From my perspective, the single presentations proved easier to facilitate and provided an opportunity to gain reflective insight. The two students who participated in both cycles served as case studies to demonstrate quantifiable learner progress in the assessed presentations across both cycles. Tables 4 and 5 show their assessment scores over the two cycles.

Table 4: Student 2 (S2) assessment scores

	Presentation and organisation skills	Research and information content	Grammatical range and accuracy	Vocabulary	Pronunciation and fluency	Total score /50
Cycle 1	6.5	7	6.5	7	6.5	33.5
Cycle 2	8	7	8	8	8.5	39.5

Table 5: Student 6 (S6) assessment scores

	Presentation and organisation skills	Research and information content	Grammatical range and accuracy	Vocabulary	Pronunciation and fluency	Total score /50
Cycle 1	6.5	8.5	6.5	7	6.5	35
Cycle 2	8.5	8.5	8	8.5	8.5	42

Both students reflected that the assessed presentation was less stressful in the second cycle when they delivered the presentations alone. S6 said: 'For me the presentation was better than in the last term, I can manage myself and more speaking how I felling (sic) at the moment.' The case studies' assessment scores rose considerably: S2 by 12% and S6 by 14%, demonstrating significant growth in four out of five areas. The progress made in pronunciation and fluency was most noticeable and the growth in their presentational and organisational skills was also remarkable. Such learner progress could be indicative of the students' continued reflective practice through journal writing and the increased incidence of spontaneous sharing of experience. When watching the assessed presentation videos in Week 5, both continuing students had expressed surprise at their fluency and the content of their talks, commenting on further enhancement of skills.

Considering the assessed presentations for all the participants, in Cycle 1, 57% stated they had enjoyed the speaking presentation 'A lot' and 43% 'A little'. In Cycle 2, 100% of the students claimed that they had enjoyed the assessment 'A great deal'. I had introduced a wider band of responses for the second cycle only to see that students just used the most positive one. S2's appraisal of the process focuses again on the power of its engagement: *The mind map was really helpful before the writing. It helped me make memories, I can take the idea from the map ... my writing skill ... is better than before ... When I look at the video for the presentation, I feel so much better.*

Employing Dörnyei's (2001) 'conditions for promoting motivation', I analysed the data collected from the CW-led activities against 12 adapted indicators of engagement (see Appendix 2 for the cross-reference with weekly task and reflection), and observed evidence of engagement in all the weekly tasks: students had been

active in promoting group cohesiveness and therefore contributed to the conducive learning atmosphere. Despite the stress associated with performance, the actual assessed speaking presentations had been motivating. The learners voiced personal experiences throughout the term, sharing firsthand experiences which ignited informed discussion. Students were conscientious, encouraged by the completion of each weekly task and subsequent reflection, scaffolding their learning towards speaking assessment. This level of commitment engendered not only an expectation of success but also the promotion of learner autonomy.

The data demonstrates that through the application of tools to trigger memory, enhance recall, and actively record reflections, CW was engaging. The use of timelines to create personal experience slides for presentation was also constructive. The surveys from both cycles demonstrated that the timelines provided opportunities for voiced experience and cognitive development. The weekly tasks gave students a framework to evaluate their own progress. Through reflective practice, learners described surprise, frustration, and accomplishment. Moreover, the students' motivational energy generated global interest in the assessed speaking presentations. The final surveys revealed that all students found this type of project-based speaking assessment to be positive. Finally, the group discussions in both cycles had been open and insightful.

Conclusions and reflections

Transforming perplexity into potentiality, this AR project has refined my ELT practice. In the pursuit of evidence-based reflection, I have gained insight into how, by using CW in speaking assessment, language learning is actively focused. The presentation assessment scores provide evidence of learner progress as seen over the two cycles, and the connection of learners to prior experience has been motivational. Most surprising is the students' critical analysis of their learning process and of my teaching methods, ensuring a rich, unexpected AR collaboration. Students who have gone through the transformational states of being confused and frustrated to gain sufficient language and confidence to question the process have become autonomous (see Burns 2019). The alternative formative speaking assessment is therefore meaningful beyond assessment results, specifically working in the students' interests by encouraging learners to build upon personal story. A similar assessment process could be adapted well for online provision. Whatever the platform, reflective practices open the door for CW to build a scaffold in raising speaking skills and assessing learner progress.

References

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Please click the following link to view the author's presentation at the 2021 English Australia Action Research in ELICOS Colloquium: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yusRZiYuotM>

Appendix I: Timeline samples

MY LANGUAGE JOURNEY

Year	Which Language?	Event
2001	Vietnamese	I was born in Vietnam
2012	Vietnamese	Went to Kanatoko school in Vietnam
2016	Vietnamese	Became a kanatoko teacher
2018 (2-3)	English Vietnamese	Traveled to Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore
2018 (7-10)	English	Moved to Australia for studying
2019	English Chinese	Went to high school
2021	English Vietnamese Chinese	Moved to Perth for studying Uni
2013	Vietnamese	First time had a gold medal and had a small injury

Arriving in Australia – Timeline

Before	Arrival	Now	Future
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did you feel about leaving home? How did you plan your journey? What did you have to do? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did you feel? What do you remember about the day? What did you see/hear/smell/taste that was different? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you feel? Are you enjoying life in Australia? What are you not enjoying about living in Australia? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you have plans for the future? Will you be living in Australia? If no, where will you be living?
I felt confidence. I had a plan for future	I had a mixed emotions. It was absolutely new life. I've changed my family, my home, my language and my culture.	Now my confidence a little bit come back to me, not completely, but better than when I come to AU.	Australia taught me don't build any plans. Just doing anything that are good. I will see and after see (how is working).
Job, master, make a career. Maybe studied in Latin republic	When I arrived, I was really quite. I didn't know what must expect. It honestly I come not to this.	I started feeling myself confidence, when my husband leave me alone for 4 months. I understand that all of depends for me. Now I feeling what I can exist everywhere.	I not sure where I will be living, but now I'm here and it's okay.
I have had a promising job. Put after meeting with my future husband I began change my behavior	I come in first reason to my husband, and I warn in another. He tried to me. He design our new flat. Put only after 3 weeks started, understand what happened.	This 4 month still life was definitely important for me. I thank God to Aus. for experience.	
Sue Watson May, 2021	I was really frustrated, I constant sit at home, because I really afraided went outside.		

Appendix 2: *Indicators of engagement

Indicators	Task evidence Cycle 1	Task evidence Cycle 2
Conducive learning atmosphere	MM, CW, RSR1, RSR2, WPR, SPA, TI, SU1, PI	MM, CW, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU2, GD
Group cohesiveness	SU1, SPA, PI, GD	JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Expectation of success	SPA, TI, SU1, PI	SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Attractiveness of tasks	MM, CW, SR1, SR2, WPR, PI, SU1	MM, CW, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, GD
Active task participants	MM, CW, SR1, SR2, WPR, SPA, TI, SU1, PI	MM, CW, SU2, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Tasks performed in a motivating way	MM, CW, SR1, SR2, WPR, SPA, TI, SU1, PI	MM, CW, SU2, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Regular experiences of success	MM, CW, SR1, SR2, WPR, SPA, TI, SU1, PI, GD	MM, CW, SU2, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Regular encouragement	MM, CW, SR1, SR2, WPR, SPA, TI, SU1, PI	MM, CW, SU2, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Cooperation among participants	SPA, TI, SU1, PI, GD	MM, CW, SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Promotion of learner autonomy	MM, CW, SR1, SR2, WPR, SPA, SU1, PI, GD	MM, CW, SU2, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Increase learner satisfaction	SR2, WPR, SPA, TI, SU1, PI, GD	JW2, SPA, PI, SU3, PI, GD
Offer rewards in a motivational manner	MM, CW, SR1, SR2, WPR, SPA, TI, SU1, PI	MM, CW, SU2, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU3, GD

*Adapted from Dörnyei (2001)

Key

MM	Mind mapping
CW	Creative writing
RSR1	Recorded speaking reflection 1
RSR2	Recorded speaking reflection 2
WPR	Written paragraph reflection
SPA	Speaking presentation assessment
TI	Teacher interview
SU1	Survey 1
PI	Peer interview
GD	Group discussion
SR1	Student reflection 1
SR2	Student reflection 2
JWR1	Journal writing reflection 1
JWR2	Journal writing reflection 2
SU2	Survey 2
SU3	Survey 3