CAMBRIDGE ENGLISH
Language Assessment
Part of the University of Cambridge

# Research Notes

## Issue 61

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## Contents



# Editorial

Welcome to issue 61 of *Research Notes*, our quarterly publication reporting on matters relating to learning teaching and assessment within Cambridge English Language Assessment.

This issue presents the six funded research papers undertaken within the 2014 Cambridge English/English UK Action Research Scheme, which supports teachers working in courses of English as a foreign language at the centres accredited by the national association English UK. In the introductory chapter, the key academic reference person for the programme, Simon Borg, explains the considerations and challenges in setting up the new programme and reflects on the impact that action research has had on the teachers and their institutions.

The first three papers, respectively, investigate ways of improving aspects of reading, writing and listening ability in English as a foreign language. Judith Watkins, a recipient of the Cambridge English Award for Action Research in 2014, introduced an extensive reading programme to investigate its effect on students' reading speed and attitude to reading. Her ultimate goal was to help prepare them for reading demands they would encounter at their university. As part of the intervention, Judith's students had a freedom to choose their reading materials from a selection of graded readers and a range of authentic journals relating to their specialist subjects, because the ability to choose among suitable and relevant materials could help motivate students to read. Judith also actively fostered positive attitudes to reading, monitored her students' progress and set an example by reading herself alongside her students. The findings showed that even though the intervention did not have much effect on reading speed, it had a considerable effect on the students' attitude to reading and a sense of satisfaction and achievement.

Next, Tatiane Depieri investigates the effect of feedback and re-writing on improving grammatical accuracy in written texts. Her starting premise was that students should take more responsibility for their learning and increase awareness of what they need to improve, which led her to change her own and students' approach to written assignments. She found that providing feedback by highlighting errors and using correction codes so that students could analyse and correct errors themselves was not enough. The accuracy of her students' writing was only improved when the same kind of feedback was followed by students re-writing their assignments.

Synthetic phonics have been used in literacy teaching in primary schools in the UK to facilitate the learning of letter–sound correspondences. Adam Scott took a rather novel approach by teaching adults listening skills in this context. His aim was to increase his students' ability to decode natural spoken English. According to students' feedback, synthetic phonics increased their awareness of how much they did not understand, as well as increasing their level of comprehension, the latter of which was not supported by a test of listening. However, the author questions the validity of the test and highlights a need for a more appropriate assessment tool which would allow the presence of natural, connected speech.

The following three papers investigate self- and peer-assessment. The goal of Ian Chitty's intervention was to help learners make more reliable and realistic assessments of their peers' oral presentations. Having identified gaps in the current peer assessment practices in his school, Ian addressed four key areas: familiarising students with the requirements of the assessment, providing them with clearly and simply defined assessment criteria, offering opportunity for written and oral feedback in addition to the award of marks, and training students to assess before the actual assessment of coursework presentations was required. The intervention was successful in that a greater reliability in marking was achieved; students' attitude to peer assessment improved; and, students' engagement as an audience increased during presentations they assessed.

Abby Croucher noticed that students on short courses do not easily perceive their improvement. Therefore, she focused her intervention on helping students set achievable and measurable short-term goals so that they could leave with a sense of achievement. Her findings showed improvement in students' goal-setting, a high level of satisfaction with their own progress, which did not, necessarily, go hand in hand with more goals achieved. As methods for students measuring their own progress, Croucher recommends a learning journal (for some), and a numerical self-assessment scale, cautioning that there is no 'one size fits all' solution.

Another avenue for raising students' awareness of progress was explored by Rolf Tynan. As part of his intervention, students created and used an ePortfolio, an online learning record which can contain electronic files, multimedia and hyperlinks. The intervention required guiding the teachers and students through creating ePortfolios, helping learners identify their learning goals, learners keeping a learning diary, reflecting on progress, completing language tasks and evidencing their own ability in the ePortfolio. Keeping an ePortofolio allowed students to take on a more active role in their learning, become more aware of their progress and work towards achieving their pre-defined goals. It also helped improve their confidence, study skills and language ability. Tynan also cautions that teachers and students need thorough training and support, as well as enough time, to use ePortfolios as a learning tool.

In the final article Fiona Barker and Huan Japes reflect on the setting-up and running of the Cambridge English/English UK Action Research Scheme, outlining the benefits of the scheme for the participants, their learners and more widely.

We hope that this issue, along with issues 44, 48 and 53, 56, 58 and 60, which also present action research, inspire teachers to become involved with research.

# Professional development through the Cambridge English/English UK Action Research Scheme

**SIMON BORG** CONSULTANT, CAMBRIDGE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

## Introduction

Action research is not a new idea in the field of education (its origins have been traced back to Corey 1953) or indeed English language teaching (Nunan 1990) and education is certainly not the only discipline where it is an established strategy for professional development (action research is, for example, very prominent in nursing e.g. McDonnell and McNiff 2015). The basic premise in educational action research is also largely uncontroversial – that teachers can grow professionally by engaging in systematic enquiry in their own classrooms; however, in practice, the productive and sustainable implementation of action research is an issue that continues to challenge the field of English language teaching. There are various reasons why this is the case. One is a misunderstanding of what action research entails. I was recently at a conference where a speaker suggested that action research places unreasonable demands on teachers who are busy with work and life. But action research was being talked about as a substantial activity which needed to take place *outside* teachers' regular professional lives (e.g. in the evening, at weekends). Conceived in that way, action research is clearly not a feasible activity. A second obstacle to the implementation of action research relates to misunderstandings of what the 'research' element of the label implies. It very often (Borg 2013) evokes notions of large-scale, complicated and theoretical study which practitioners find off-putting. Another challenge that is associated with action research is the assumption that teachers, if they are sufficiently motivated, should be able to get on with it autonomously. And one final issue that often 'gets in the way' is that action research is 'taught', especially in universities but often too on in-service training courses, as an intensive research methods course, and sometimes by individuals whose own understandings of action research are limited. Recognising the kinds of barriers I have highlighted here is an important first step in promoting action research more effectively amongst language teachers. In other words, a productive and sustainable approach to facilitating action research will:

- see professional development as an integral part of what teachers do, rather than being an additional burden external to it
- emphasise the primarily practical and pedagogical nature of the activity, without denying a role for theoretical input or discounting the importance of rigorous enquiry
- provide the organisational and mentoring support that teachers require, rather than assuming they can engage in systematic enquiry autonomously
- embed the activity longitudinally in teachers' professional lives, allowing time for the process of enquiry to evolve.

My work on teacher research (an umbrella term for various approaches to teacher enquiry of which action research is one) has for a number of years reflected on the paradox that professional development activities such as action research present – undeniably transformative in their potential on the one hand but so limited in their adoption on the other – and it is now increasingly clearer that to resolve this paradox what is needed is much more than simply explaining what action research is – as noted above, the basic premise is fairly straightforward. What centrally influences the extent to which action research 'works' is an understanding of the conditions – such as those listed above – which facilitate it (see also Borg (2015) for a recent discussion of facilitating teacher research). The simple explanation for why action research programmes and initiatives often fail to achieve their hoped-for outcomes is that key conducive conditions are absent. And conversely, and more positively, it is clear that where such conditions do exist the experience of action research is much more likely to be a positive one for everyone involved. The reports being published in this issue of *Research Notes* support this assertion and I will now describe the scheme they arose from and the design elements which allowed it to work productively (this is not to claim, of course, that challenges did not arise and I discuss these below).

## The scheme

Cambridge English has been supporting professional development through action research for a number of years through partnership with English Australia (see, for example, Burns 2014). In 2013, Cambridge English launched a parallel scheme in the UK, in partnership with English UK, the national association of accredited English Language centres. The first year of the scheme started in February 2014 and the papers which follow report on the work conducted by the six participating teachers.

The scheme was characterised by several design features which collectively sought to make the experience a productive, feasible, and supported one for the teachers involved:

- the number of participants was kept low, to ensure each teacher was able to receive adequate individual support
- a facilitator with experience of teacher research (i.e. myself) was engaged to support the teachers
- a blended design was implemented which included face-to-face workshops, online tutorials via Skype, email support, the use of an e-learning platform (Moodle) and access to Cambridge English Teacher: www.cambridgeenglishteacher.org

- through the workshops, teachers had the chance to develop their understandings of action research, to develop their action research proposals and (in the second workshop mid-scheme) to get hands-on experience of working with the data from their schools and classrooms
- teachers were given support in accessing reading material both relevant to their chosen topic as well as to action research and research methods more generally
- schools supported teachers' applications to join in the scheme
- a timetable of key dates for the scheme was established, with several intermediate reporting points designed to give teachers a sense of direction
- teachers had opportunities to receive regular feedback on their work
- the scheme ran for nine months, giving teachers sufficient space to plan and implement at least two cycles of action research together with time to disseminate their work
- teachers were given opportunities and support to share their work, both in writing through the reports that appear here and orally through a presentation at English UK Teachers' Conference (see www.englishuk.com/en/training/awards/action-research-award-scheme).

The various design features of the scheme listed above were very intentional and reflect current understandings of the conditions which facilitate teacher research more generally. Teachers on this scheme are not given any reduction in their teaching timetable; it was therefore essential that they developed projects which could be integrated into their regular work without excessive additional burden. This is not to say the teachers were not required to dedicate additional time to the project – some time commitment is needed for any form of professional development; it was important, though, to ensure that teachers were not over-ambitious – small scale but high quality was one of our mottos.

One point to note here is that while it may seem that the scheme was very tightly structured, this should not imply that teachers lacked autonomy in deciding what to focus on through action research and how to go about it. Key decisions were, throughout, made by teachers themselves, informed by our work in the workshops and online and by the feedback they received on their work.

## Reflections

There are many ways of assessing the success of an action research scheme such as the one described above. In most basic terms, none of the teachers dropped out and all six completed an action research project. Beyond completion rates, though, there is evidence from teacher evaluations at different stages of the scheme that they found the process both challenging and rewarding. They often reflected on how doing systematic enquiry in their own classrooms forced them to question their practices and assumptions; and they also developed their understandings of how to collect, analyse and interpret classroom-based evidence. The outputs teachers produced provide further measures of success.

The written reports being published here are evidence of systematic enquiry which has contributed to teachers' own understandings of their work. In some cases their projects have been adopted more widely by their colleagues and institutions. The presentations teachers gave at the English UK Teachers' Conference in November 2014 were for me one of the highlights of the scheme; they captured in a more dynamic way than a written paper can the investment and enthusiasm that characterised teachers' action research and the positive response from the audience also made the experience a very rewarding one for the speakers. To alleviate the stress, though, that being asked to present to an audience of peers can provoke, teachers benefitted from a workshop the day before the conference at which they were able to rehearse their presentations, receive frank but friendly feedback on them and fine-tune (or revise more substantially if needed) their talks before the real thing the next day.

One further success criterion for any professional development scheme is ongoing impact. This is an issue I spoke to the six teachers about several months after the end of the scheme, my key question being 'has teachers' engagement in action research had a lasting impact on them, their students, colleagues and schools?'. All the teachers were unequivocal in their view that doing action research had had a lasting powerful impact on them personally, especially in terms of the criticality with which they view their own work and their understandings of how evidence can support informed pedagogical decision-making. The teachers also felt there were clear benefits for their students, not just for those who took part in the projects but also for those who have followed them. I also asked teachers about the impact of their projects on their colleagues and their organisations, and here the picture was more varied; in most cases colleagues were reported to have been made aware of the potential of action research without engaging in it themselves, while at the level of schools, four of the six projects had informed policy more widely. Overall, then, the teachers on the scheme reported a range of ways in which their engagement in action research had had impact beyond the formal end of the scheme itself.

Despite the positive experiences outlined so far, there were, naturally, challenges in our first year of the scheme. Teachers' timetables sometimes changed mid-year and the classes they were planning to work with (or had started working with) were no longer accessible; rolling enrolment in their schools and student progression to higher level classes meant that it was often difficult to work with the same students for an extended period of time; during particularly busy periods it was difficult for teachers to dedicate as much time as they would have liked to their projects; and while the teachers were happy that they had been required to present their work at a conference, producing the written reports that appear in this issue of *Research Notes* has been for the teachers an extended and challenging task that has lasted several months (though one they will look back on with satisfaction once their papers are published). Also, the Moodle did not work well as a forum for interaction among the teachers and this year it is being used as a repository for documents, while we experiment with Facebook and make wider use of email as a way of facilitating interaction among this year's group.

The Cambridge English/English UK Action Research

Scheme is a valuable addition to the range of professional development opportunities currently available to English language teachers in the UK. It provides teachers with the opportunity to systematically study an aspect of teaching and learning which they are motivated to understand better, which is valuable for their students, and of relevance to the priorities of their schools. The scheme provides a clear and supportive structure within which teachers can exercise empirical autonomy, and it is this combination of guidance and independence that makes the scheme appealing, together of course with the pedagogical orientation of action research. We are already half-way through the second year of the scheme and look forward to developing it further in the years to come. For now, though, I would like to congratulate the teachers whose work is being published here for their achievement.

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# The effects of an extensive reading programme

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## Introduction

'The students are always moaning that reading is difficult, yet just try and get them to borrow a book from the Learning Centre!'

This common complaint from colleagues in the staffroom led me on a journey of discovery into my learners' reading habits and into the intriguing world of action research. The goal of my project was to investigate the effects of implementing an extensive reading programme (ERP) on my students' reading fluency and speed, and on their attitude to reading.

Many of my students are aiming to enter UK universities where they will be expected to read a large number of texts in English. Research has shown that strong reading skills will be necessary at university (Day and Bamford 1998, Grabe 2009), and this can be extremely demanding if students have had no previous experience of reading extensively (Grabe 2009). Therefore, my hope was that this research would give my learners some experience of reading beyond the texts they encounter in their course books and help prepare them to read more widely at university.

## Context

My research was carried out at The Sheffield College, which offers General English courses, from Beginners to Advanced Level, to international students from all over the world. When students arrive at the college, they are given a placement test to ascertain their level and place them in an appropriate class. The majority of students are young adults who have finished high school or university and have come to improve their English proficiency. They study for 18 hours a week and most stay for a term (about 12 weeks). The minimum stay is for two weeks but some students stay for a full academic year. The classes are based on an EFL course book in the mornings and focus on improving the four skills in the afternoons. In recent years, there has been a demand from students for classes to help them prepare for the *IELTS* exam, a UK visa, and university requirements. Currently our afternoon classes concentrate on the skills needed to pass this exam.

## Extensive reading

The main principles of extensive reading, according to Hafiz and Tudor (1989:4) are 'the reading of large amounts of material in the second language over time for personal pleasure or interest, without the addition of productive tasks or follow up language work'.

Bamford and Day (2004) present 10 key points to characterise extensive reading:

1. The reading material is easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.
3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.
5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
6. Reading is its own reward.
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
8. Reading is individual and silent.
9. Teachers orient and guide their students.
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

There is a body of research that suggests there are many benefits of implementing an ERP. Indeed, in a meta-analysis of 34 studies of extensive reading, involving nearly 4,000 participants, Nakanashi (2014:1), concludes that 'extensive reading improves students' reading proficiency and should be a part of language learning curricula'. According to Day and Bamford (2002), extensive reading (ER) promotes reading fluency and increases reading speed. The results from Iwahori (2008) also indicate that ER is an effective method of both improving students' reading rate and general language proficiency.

## Research questions

I was interested to see if implementing an ERP would have any effect on my students' reading speed and fluency. I also wanted to explore my students' attitudes to reading in English. My impression, as a teacher, was that my students practised *IELTS* reading comprehension tasks but did not read in English much for pleasure. I was curious to discover if this was in fact true, and whether following an extensive reading programme would encourage them to read simply for enjoyment.

The key questions I wanted to investigate were:

1. What would be the effects of an ERP on my students' reading fluency and speed?
2. How might an ERP affect their attitude to reading in English?

## Action research intervention

My study took the form of an action research project. This type of research is designed and conducted by practitioners in order to improve teaching and learning in their own workplace. There were two cycles of research, which involved the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data, as suggested by Duff (2008). Having more than one cycle is important in action research as it allows the teacher-researcher to adapt and refine research instruments to their particular teaching context and allows enquiry to be an on-going, organic process.

Research suggests that ease of reading, interest, and pleasure are key components in a successful ERP (Grabe 2009, Waring 1997). Therefore, for these reasons, I decided to offer my learners a selection of graded readers, rather than authentic texts, which might have proved too difficult and therefore demotivating. Each of them chose their own books and if I saw that they were not engaged with the text, I encouraged them to read something different. I also offered students a range of authentic journals, relating to their specialist subjects, e.g. dentistry, engineering, sport. This gave them a wider range of interesting reading materials, replicated the way native speakers read in real life, and reflected the advice from Bamford and Day (2004) listed above.

In addition, I was aware that I might have to 'sell' the idea of ERP to the students, as there are various difficulties associated with the process. Grabe (1995) points out that, apart from finding suitable materials that would appeal to and motivate students to read on their own, the teacher may find that students are reluctant to read for entertainment rather than for exam practice. As a teacher, I realised that it would be my job to enthuse the students about the project, foster positive attitudes to reading, respond to feedback from them, monitor their progress and participate in the process actively myself. Indeed, Day and Bamford (1998:167) state: 'The most essential prerequisite for developing effective, efficient and independent second language readers through extensive reading, has always been the individual, committed teacher.'

Time-tabling the ERP into normal lessons was a further issue to consider as I was concerned students might feel that reading in class was not the most effective use of learning time. Robinson and Hulett (1991, in Day and Bamford 1998:128) consider scheduled silent reading as 'highly motivational because it encourages reading that is meaningful to the individual'. Moreover, Griffin (2013:15) found that when there was no time-tabled reading that 'a common complaint amongst the learners was the lack of time for reading beyond reading homework'. For these reasons I decided to allocate half an hour of class time twice a week to the ERP.

A final consideration was whether to assess the ERP and if so, by what method. Day and Bamford (1998) argue that although a subjective observation by the teacher may be sufficient, more formal evaluation, such as questionnaires (to measure attitude) and tests (to measure reading ability) may be necessary to validate the worth of an ERP. Schmidt (1998) asked learners to complete an 'instant' book report where they gave a brief summary of the book and a short personal response to it. However, others (Alderson 2000, Prowse 2002) believe there should be no assessment, and Nuttall (1996) considers formal testing not only pointless but possibly detrimental. For my study, I chose to assess the ERP by collecting various forms of data and these will be discussed later.

## Cycle 1: Intervention

In the first cycle of research there were seven students of mixed nationality in the experimental group. The students in Cycle 1 were already of a good intermediate standard and were working towards an upper intermediate level. There were five male students and two females, consisting of three Arabic speakers, two French speakers, one Colombian and one Greek Cypriot. Five of them were already graduates and were intending to study for a Master's in the UK. One was a graduate and hoping to improve his English sufficiently to find employment in the UK and one student was a high school leaver, on a special 'football' programme, combining football training at a Sheffield club with English at college.

The students completed a Likert scale questionnaire about their reading habits in their mother tongue and English, as recommended by Day and Bamford (1998), in order to evaluate or assess changes in their attitude to ER and behaviour at the start and at the end of the programme (see Appendix 1). There were questions about why they read, their enjoyment of reading, what they read, and how often. In addition, the students took a reading speed test. This involved the students reading a 418-word extract from a graded reader at an appropriate level for them to understand easily, and noting down how long it took according to a smartboard timer. This test allowed me to work out the students' reading speed in words per minute. Afterwards students answered a multiple-choice question so that I could check that they had understood the text.

The ERP was then implemented with two 30-minute sessions of reading a week over a 5-week period (10 sessions in total). The students had access to a small class library, which included graded readers and journals. During these sessions I participated in reading myself, as well as keeping notes of my observations of the students. After each session students gave feedback in a focus group discussion about their reading. Also, each time they completed a book, they filled in a reading record (see Appendix 3). This included a brief summary of the content, their reaction to the book and a record of any new vocabulary they had learned. In Cycle 1, all the students finished a minimum of three graded readers and some read as many as eight.

At the end of the 5-week period they completed another Likert scale questionnaire which focused on any changes to their reading habits and attitude to reading in English, and on their feelings about the ERP and any benefits they felt they had gained from participating in the programme (see Appendix 2). These questionnaires allowed me to gather some quantitative data.

The students also participated in a plenary discussion to provide feedback about their experience and to supply some qualitative data. I recorded the discussion and asked them a series of open questions to investigate in more depth what they had enjoyed or not enjoyed about the ERP, and what suggestions they had for improving the experience. This was followed up with an interview in English with individual students, as suggested by Bell (1992), to allow them to elaborate on any issues raised in either the questionnaire or the discussion.

The students also took another reading speed test, consisting of a different 418-word extract from the same graded reader, with a follow-up multiple-choice question. In order to gauge whether any changes in reading speed were due to the ERP or other factors, there was a control group of five students of mixed nationality. They were closer to a high intermediate level rather than upper intermediate. There were three male students and two female, with three Arabic speakers and two Chinese speakers. Three were graduates and two were high school leavers. All five wanted to pass the *IELTS* exam and go on to study at postgraduate or undergraduate level at university in the UK. The control group also completed the timed reading tests at the beginning and end of the 5-week period, but did not have a reading intervention or fill in any of the questionnaires.

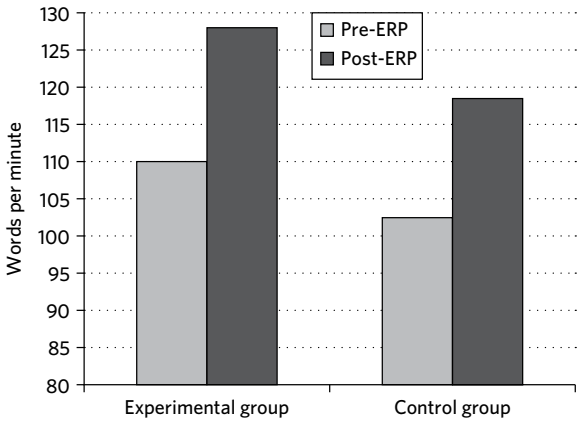
## Cycle 1: Findings

The data collected showed some changes had taken place in the students' reading speed, and their attitude towards reading in English.

### Reading speed

In the initial test, I also timed myself reading the text and scored 317 words per minute, which, unsurprisingly, was considerably higher than my learners. As can be expected, the experimental group, who were in the upper intermediate class, had a faster pre-ERP average reading speed (110 words per minute) than the control group (103 words per minute) who were in a high intermediate level (see Figure 1). After the ERP, both the experimental group and the control group improved their reading speed (experimental group: 128 words per minute, control group 118 words per minute), with the experimental group having a slightly larger increase. This would suggest that the ERP had not made a significant difference in improving the speed of the experimental group. However, in the post-ERP questionnaire (see Figure 3) and in the group plenary feedback, all the students in the experimental group agreed that the ERP had helped them improve their reading speed.

**Figure 1: Cycle 1 results – Average reading speed (words per minute)**



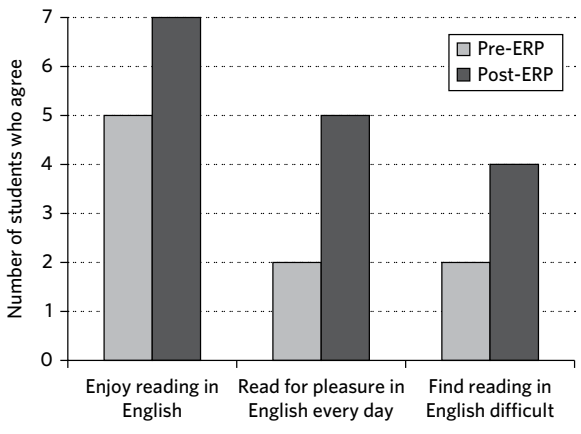

### Attitudes to reading

It was interesting to learn about the experimental group's attitudes to reading in their mother tongue and how the ERP had affected their attitude to reading in English.

In the initial questionnaires administered at the start of the ERP, six out of seven students in the experimental group reported that they enjoyed reading in their mother tongue and generally read for information rather than for pleasure. Reading the news was very popular and the majority of students generally read texts on the internet, rather than newspapers, magazines or books. As regards reading in English, over half of the students showed they were extrinsically motivated because they mainly read for their studies but interestingly, they all wanted to read more for pleasure, suggesting an intrinsic motivation too.

In the questionnaires after the ERP, there was an increase in the number of students who said they enjoyed reading for pleasure in English and now read every day. However, surprisingly, the number of students who claimed to find reading difficult had in fact increased (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Cycle 1 results – Attitudes to reading in English**



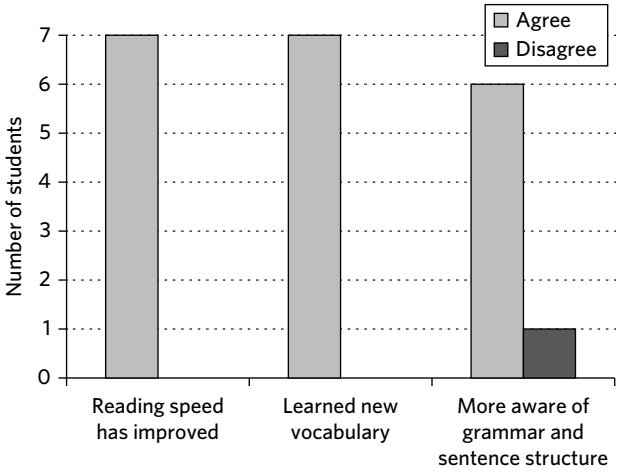
All the students agreed that the ERP had helped them learn new vocabulary and the majority also felt they had become more aware of grammar and sentence structure (see Figure 3). This was also supported by the findings derived from the reading records. Students completed a reading record after each text and noted down three or four new words they had learned each time. One student also commented on how he had learned new vocabulary from reading a dental journal.

> Wael: 'Yes it was good. I learned a lot of vocabulary. There were many updates in researches and new techniques so I found it interesting.'

A further benefit mentioned by one student in the group plenary was the positive effect of reading on other language skills:

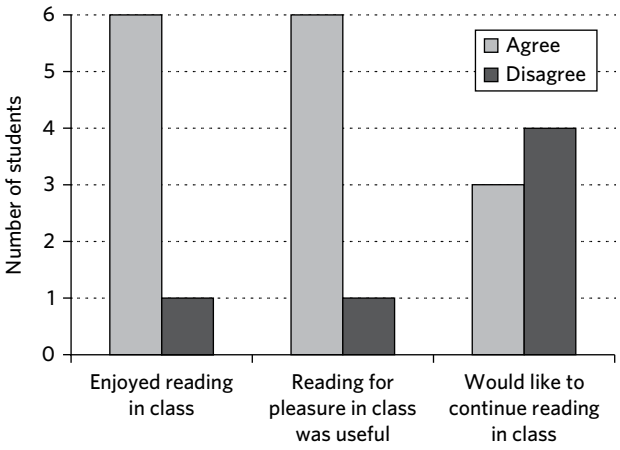
> Mouwafek: 'Yes I noticed that I improved a lot my reading and I found a way that I could improve other skills such as speaking – I could collect some phrases'.

**Figure 3: Cycle 1 results – Perceived benefits of ERP**




All the students, except one, agreed they had enjoyed reading in class and found it useful. However, interestingly, there was a mixed response to whether they should continue to read in class time (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Cycle 1 results – Students' attitude to ERP**




In the group plenary, the students' answers mirrored those from the questionnaires. They claimed to enjoy reading in English more now (see Figure 2), as they were 'allowed' to read for pleasure rather than for exam practice:

> Teacher: 'Did you like reading without having a task to do?'
> Gabriel: 'Yes, it's free, so it's less heavy to read. It's easier to read.'
> Babacar: 'Less stressful.'
> Gabriel: 'Yes if you are stressed and you say I need to read, at the end of the day you won't read and you will read slower than somebody who is reading for joy.'

Even the student who hadn't enjoyed reading in class acknowledged that the ERP had provided some benefits:

> Boris: 'I didn't enjoy it but it was helpful.'

As regards continuing to read in class, some students felt that reading extensively in class guaranteed that they would read:

> Gabriel: 'In the college it's easier maybe in the last half an hour like you are reading half an hour or 20 minutes or something but after the college you might not read, so it's like safe.'

However, others felt extensive reading should be done outside the main lessons:

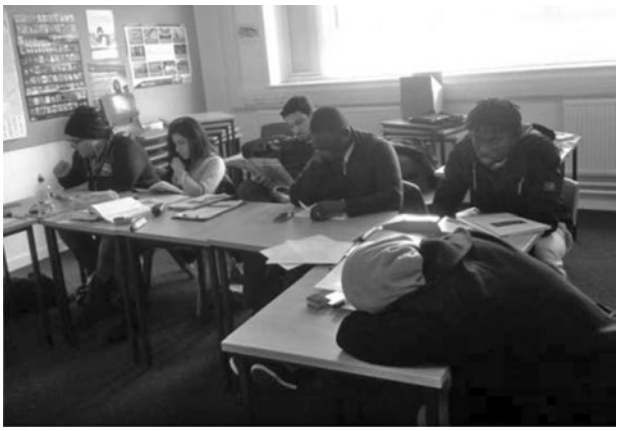
> Wael: 'I want to learn from you, as a teacher, things I can't do by myself only, such as grammars and complex subjects so I prefer to learn this at class and reading I can do after class.'

Overall, the findings from both the questionnaires and group plenary showed increased enjoyment of reading in English and more regular reading as a result of the ERP. An interesting fact was that, after the ERP, more students claimed that reading was difficult. Although the reading test had not shown a significant difference in the increase in speed of reading between the two groups, the experimental group all perceived that their speed had improved. They also all believed they had learned new vocabulary and the majority felt the ERP had made them more aware of grammar and sentence structure. However, despite these benefits, not all students wished to continue to read in class time.

## Teacher observations

Observing students reading on the ERP as opposed to them doing typical reading comprehension tasks in class was very interesting, as their body language was far more open and relaxed (see Photo 1).

**Photo 1: Cycle 1 students reading**



I also noticed that I, as a teacher, was far more active in the process than I had imagined. I was able to observe the students, answer any queries, intervene if I felt they were not

enjoying a book, and listen to their feedback. I also joined in the reading process, speed reading the books so I could direct the students to texts they might find enjoyable (see Photo 2).

**Photo 2: The teacher actively participates in the ERP**

## Cycle 2: Intervention

In the second cycle there were six students in the experimental group. They were all Arabic speakers, five males and one female and were at a mid-intermediate level. Three of them were high school leavers and three were graduates. Two hoped to go on and study for a Master's at university in the UK, whilst the others were here to accompany their spouses and had decided to improve their English at the same time.

The same procedure was followed as in Cycle 1, with minor adjustments to the questionnaires, for ease of comprehension. The sessions took place over six weeks, but because this included several holidays, I was unable to timetable myself for all the 10 sessions, so two colleagues did two sessions of reading in their lessons with my learners. In response to feedback from students in the first cycle, I also included a range of short, more academic texts, as well as the journals and graded readers. All the students in Cycle 2 read at least three books and some read six.

The control group consisted of five students of a lower intermediate level. There were two males and three females, of whom two were Arabic speakers, one was Japanese, one was Korean and one was Thai. Two were graduates, with one hoping to go on to study at a British university and the other taking a gap year to study English. Two had finished high school and were here with their spouses, and one had come to study English before finishing high school. This time, as well as taking the reading tests, the control group also completed the same Likert scale questionnaire given to the experimental group, concerning their attitude to reading in English at both the beginning and the end of the 6-week period. However, the control group did not participate in the ERP.

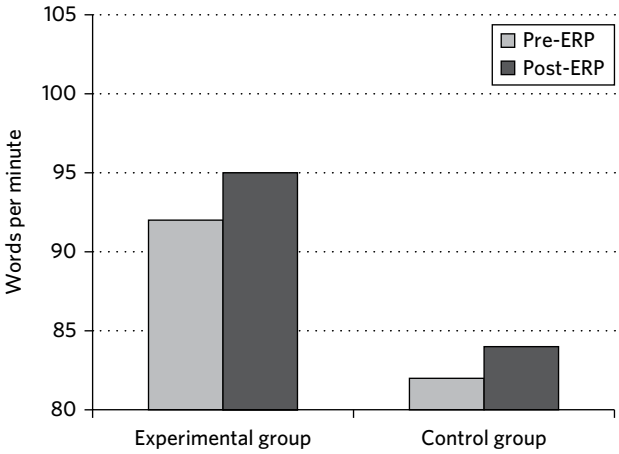
## Cycle 2: Findings

The findings showed that some interesting changes had taken place in both groups with regard to their reading speed, and their attitude towards reading in English.

### Reading speed

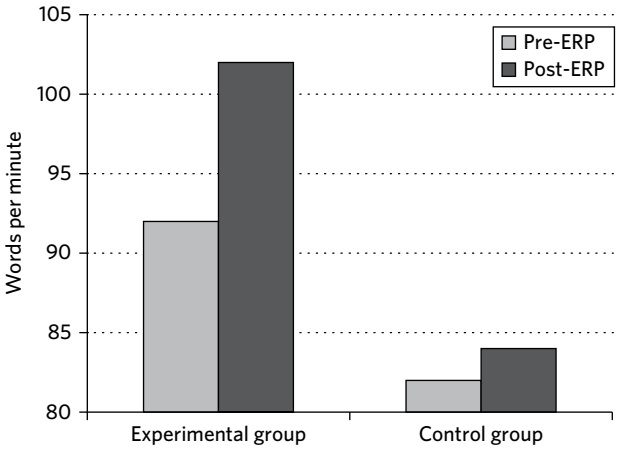
As would be expected, the initial reading speed of both groups was lower than in Cycle 1 as the students' general level of English was also lower. The experimental group had a higher initial average reading speed (92 words per minute) than the control group (82 words per minute), as they were in a higher level class. After the 6-week period, the average reading speed of the experimental group increased to 95 words per minute and the average reading speed of the control group increased to 84 words per minute (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Cycle 2 – Average reading speed (words per minute)**




However, one of the students in the experimental group took much longer to read the text in the post ERP test than he had in the pre-ERP test. Without his data, the average reading speed of the experimental group showed a much bigger increase to 102 words per minute (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Cycle 2 – Average reading speed without outlier (words per minute)**




In both the final questionnaire and in the group discussion, students in the experimental group also reported their reading speed had improved and some of them were able to give evidence of this fact:

> Mazen: 'Sometimes I timed it by my phone. For example one day I timed – the first time I read 3 pages and the next time I read 4 pages and then 5'.

This would imply that, in Cycle 2, the ERP had made a noticeable difference in improving the speed of the experimental group (or at least their perceptions of how fast they were reading).

### Attitudes to reading

I compared both experimental and control groups' attitudes to reading in English to see how those attitudes changed over the 6-week period (see Figure 7 and Figure 8).

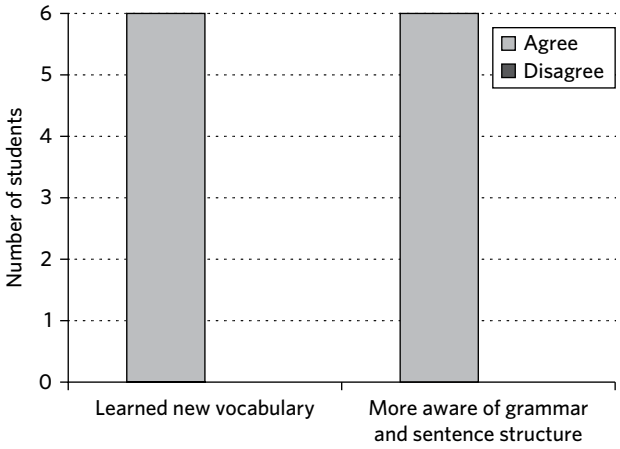
In the initial questionnaire, the majority of the control group reported reading in English mainly for their studies and only two wanted to read more for pleasure. At the end of the 6-week period they still claimed to read mostly for their studies but now more of them expressed an interest in wanting to read more for pleasure. Despite this, fewer of them said they read in English for pleasure every day. Interestingly, by the end of the period, more students in the control group stated that they enjoyed reading in English than at the beginning of the period, despite not having done the ERP. However, compared to the beginning of the period, more of them found that reading in English was difficult (see Figure 8).

Concerning the experimental group, in the initial questionnaire, most students disagreed that they read in English only for their studies. They reported that they enjoyed reading in English and that they would like to read more in English for pleasure. After the ERP, they continued to say they enjoyed reading in English and some students commented on how reading in English was no longer as difficult.

The results of the final questionnaire confirmed this (see Figure 7). The questionnaire findings also revealed that after the ERP more students in the experimental group claimed to read for pleasure every day (see Figure 7). Therefore, from the difference in results from both groups, it could be concluded that the ERP played a part in encouraging more students from the experimental group to read daily and in fewer of them perceiving that reading in English was difficult.

In the final questionnaire all the students in Cycle 2 experimental group were very positive about the effects of the ERP on their vocabulary and awareness of grammar (see Figture 9).

**Figure 9: Cycle 2 results – Perceived benefits of ERP**




In addition, all the students stated that they enjoyed reading in class, found it useful, and wanted to continue to read (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Cycle 2 results – Students' feelings about ERP**

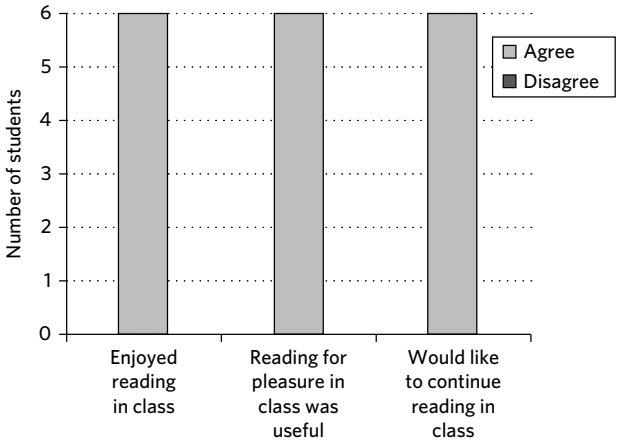



**Figure 7: Cycle 2 experimental group results – Attitudes to reading in English**

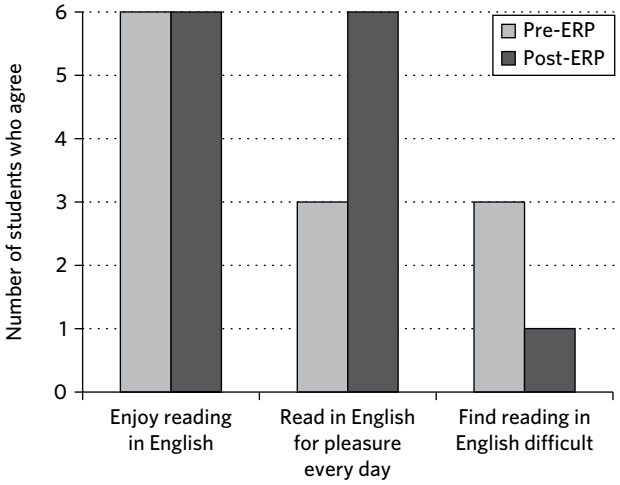
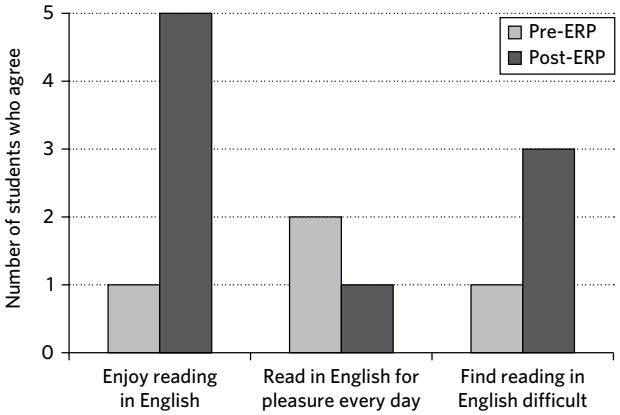



**Figure 8: Cycle 2 control group results – Attitudes to reading in English**




In the group plenary, students reported many perceived benefits, such as finding reading easier:

> Salah: 'For me I read lots of long books and now I find it very easy.'

Some also mentioned the impact of reading on their grammatical awareness.

> Dafer: 'The good thing, the other thing is when you read more you have an idea how to build a sentence and structure.'

Apart from the benefits illustrated in the graph (see Figure 9), several students also noted that ER had a positive influence on their overall knowledge:

> Dafer: 'Just widened our knowledge. We find another subject, another knowledge we don't know for a topic.'

Mazen: 'We learnt a lot of things about British life. We didn't know about British life before we coming here.'

One student felt it gave her the opportunity to read, when family commitments prevented her from reading outside the classroom (see Photo 3):

**Photo 3: Samira gives her opinion on the ERP**


Samira: 'That's what makes us continue reading actually! And although sometimes we take the books at home, we don't find time to read!'

In general, the findings from both the questionnaires and group plenary showed a very positive reaction to the ERP and its perceived benefits. Fewer members in the experimental group also reported finding reading in English difficult after the 6-week period, compared to those in the control group. Furthermore, at the end of the period, more students in the experimental group than in the control group claimed to read in English every day. The reading speed test also showed that more improvement was made by the experimental group than by the control group, indicating that the ERP had produced beneficial effects on average reading speed.

### Teacher observations

In Cycle 2, I was able to record at first hand that the ERP was impacting on the students' grammatical knowledge (there were questions about possessive 's', and use of the past tense), vocabulary development (one student was surprised to find we 'eat' not 'drink' soup) or cultural awareness (I was asked about the origin of the surname O'Neill). I could also observe that the students' body language showed the same relaxed and engaged manner as in the previous cycle.

Students themselves commented on the fact they found the ERP a relaxing activity:

Mazen: 'Here we are relaxed. We reading very well. We don't have any more stresses on our head.'

However, I observed that some students seemed to struggle with the higher level graded readers so I encouraged them to change to an easier level. In the discussion session they remarked on this:

Ameen: 'If you read something difficult it make you . . .'

All: 'Boring!'

During the ERP I felt I had played an active role in guiding the students to find suitable texts they would enjoy, and participating as a reader myself, yet being available to answer any queries they had. However, I had worried that the students might feel I was 'not doing my job'. Interestingly they perceived my role as a positive one:

Ameen: 'It's not wasted time. When we read together and you . . .'

Mazen: 'Correct us . . .'

Ameen: 'Correct us, you see us, that's make us go on reading.'

Yasser: 'It's exciting and help us to complete reading.'

The students in Cycle 2 were all Arabic speakers, and it was interesting to note that at the start of the sessions, one or two actually read out the text aloud, but by the end of the sessions they were all reading silently. I also noticed that one student who arrived early to class and used to spend time on his mobile phone was now spending time reading his book instead.

Two of my colleagues also covered some sessions and reported back positively:

Tina: 'All were glued to their books.'

Frances: 'Samira was very positive about the project.'

Additionally, I could see the impact the ERP was having on the wider community in my workplace. My teaching colleagues were interested in my research and the Learning Centre staff were also supportive. They encouraged the students to enter into the Learning Centre's Reading Challenge (see Photo 4).

**Photo 4: Students claiming their prizes in the Learning Centre's Reading Challenge**

## Discussion of key findings

I will now comment on some of the key findings from the research.

One of my initial points of interest was to discover whether my assumptions about my students not reading much for pleasure in English were correct. It appeared that in Cycle 1, the students' motivation for reading in English was indeed mainly instrumental and extrinsic, that is, connected with their plans for future study. However, in Cycle 2, the majority of students in the experimental group disagreed that they read

in English only for their studies. This could well be explained by the fact that the students in Cycle 1 were a more advanced group with a primary focus on entering a British university for postgraduate studies, whereas in Cycle 2 not all the students were planning to study in the UK. Interestingly, after the ERP, there was an increase in the number of students in Cycle 1 who reported enjoying reading in English.

As regards the reading speed test, there were no big differences between the pre- and post-tests, but some interesting observations can be made. In Cycle 1 the difference in proficiency level of both the experimental and control groups was not so noticeable, so the initial difference in their average reading speeds was only seven words a minute. Both groups increased their speed of reading – the control group by 15 words a minute and the experimental group by 18 words a minute. A smaller increase in speed might have been expected in the control group but their improvement could be explained by the fact that the students in this group were also very interested in the ERP and wanted to take part themselves. One of them was actually the wife of a student in the experimental group and read many of the books he did. Also some of the students in the control group were regularly borrowing graded readers and others were preparing for their *IELTS* exam, which involved doing a lot of reading.

In Cycle 2 the control group was of a lower level proficiency than the experimental group, which would explain the difference in initial reading speed. The average reading speed increased by just two words per minute for the control group and three words per minute for the experimental group. However there was one student in the experimental group who was over 3 minutes slower in the final test than he had been in the initial test, before the ERP intervention. Without this 'outlier', the experimental group shows a much bigger average increase of 10 words a minute. A possible reason for his slow reading speed is that the instructions I gave were not sufficiently clear. However, my belief is that this student had become so relaxed in his reading style that he felt under no pressure to read and simply took his time enjoying the text. Moreover, in the feedback, he reported that he knew his speed had improved because he timed himself reading over the course of the ERP.

Comparing the results of the two cycles, one reason why both groups in Cycle 1 increased their reading speed by more words per minute than the groups in Cycle 2 could simply be explained by the fact that they were of a higher overall language proficiency and arguably also more effective language learners. As regards the difference in speed increase between the experimental and control groups in both cycles, the difference was greater in Cycle 2 (if the 'outlier' is discounted). This could be because in the control group in Cycle 1 many of the students were also reading extensively out of class. Without exception, all the students in the experimental groups in both cycles reported that their reading speed had improved after the ERP, which gave them a sense of satisfaction and achievement.

A more significant effect of the ERP appears to be the impact on the students' attitude to reading. Taking both cycles into consideration, after the ERP there was an overall increase in the number of students who claimed to enjoy reading in English. Moreover, all the students in the experimental groups in both cycles, with the exception of one, reported that they had enjoyed reading in class and found it useful. This one student was atypical of the class in that his motivation for learning English was somewhat different. He was on a football programme at the college and said he did not enjoy reading in general, even in his mother tongue. However, he acknowledged that even though the experience had not been enjoyable it had been helpful. This enjoyment of reading was evident in the students' relaxed body language. Csikszentmihalyi (1990 in Williams and Burden 1997) describes this sense of total engagement as 'flow experience', a feeling characterised by a state of intrinsic motivation, complete absorption and fulfilment. Surprisingly, students in the control group in Cycle 2 reported an increase in enjoyment in reading, even though they had not taken part in the ERP. This could be explained by the fact that they were of a lower level and perhaps had not understood the questionnaire or instructions correctly. Again, students were also aware that other classes were taking part in the ERP and this may have raised their own interest in reading.

A further surprise was that after the ERP in Cycle 1, more students in the experimental group claimed to find reading difficult than before the ERP. This contrasts with the results from Cycle 2, where there was a decrease in the number of students who reported finding reading difficult. One explanation is that they were being challenged to read much longer texts than they were used to and for a much longer period of time. Also, as happens with any new skill, once you start to become aware of it and try and develop it, you step outside your 'comfort zone', which can appear initially difficult. In contrast, the students in Cycle 2 may have been more aware that reading was becoming 'less difficult' because I observed several of them timing their own reading in class, which made their progress more self-evident.

All students in the experimental groups in both cycles felt that, after the ERP, they had learned new vocabulary, and the majority also felt that they were more aware of grammar and sentence structure. This supports Nation's view (2009 in Nakanishi 2014) that ER has a positive effect on vocabulary acquisition and Davis' opinion (1995 in Nakanishi 2014) that it promotes language development.

Using class time for the ERP had been advocated by Robinson and Hulett (in Day and Bamford 1998) and Griffin (2013) and was greeted with enthusiasm by all the students in Cycle 2. However, some of the students in Cycle 1 felt they would prefer the ERP to be an optional after-class activity. This is perhaps because the students were of a higher level and therefore 'the gain' from their ERP experience was less evident than for the lower level students. Also, many of them were already graduates, had good study skills and so were motivated to read in their own time.

## The next steps

As a teacher, I was always nervous about using class time for 'reading for pleasure' but I am now armed with the knowledge from my own research and from the analysis of previous research (Nakanishi 2014) that incorporating ER into language learning programmes is a good idea and I would encourage other practitioners to do so.

I am currently continuing to implement an ERP with my advanced class and would like to extend my research to include our lower level classes, building on previous research into ER with beginner students (Cher 2011). I hope to foster closer links with the Learning Centre staff and set up a working group with students, which may include a 'discussion club' with Learning Centre staff about books they have read, and a 'book recommendation corner' in the Learning Centre. I would also like to involve the students in helping the Learning Centre choose new and relevant reading materials. I am also keen to discover if this new generation of 'digital natives' might engage more in reading if they had regular access to texts online and a forum on which to post their views. This could be done by comparing an online ERP and a paper/book-based ERP.

## Personal reflections

Participating in the action research project has given me the possibility of stepping outside my usual role as a teacher and allowed me to explore an area of interest, which I feel has had a positive impact on myself, my students and my colleagues.

According to Day and Bamford (1998), the teacher plays a key role in the success of an ERP and I found this to be very true, as I was constantly monitoring the students. I was aware that according to Grabe (2009) and Waring (1997) that the reading experience had to be interesting, pleasurable and easy so I searched for articles on topics I thought would engage my students.

At times there were challenges, such as not being able to control all the variables (as in the husband and wife combination in the experimental and control groups in Cycle 1: see the section on 'Discussion of key findings'), and not being able to complete the entire project on my own. However, the latter has also brought unexpected benefits. The research has led me to have closer involvement with my colleagues, as well as forge new and stronger links with the Learning Centre staff.

The process of action research is organic and creative and involves the researcher adapting to changing situations. It allows you to accept that even if your research tools have flaws, then you have the possibility to amend them in your next cycle. Action research is compelling because it has no time limits, only the ones that you set yourself.

**Photo 5: Cycle 1 students pass their verdict on the ERP**


On a personal level, taking up the role of researcher was a novel experience that impacted on my daily teaching not just when I was participating in the ERP. I found myself more discerning and critical of everything I did in the classroom, seeing my teaching through the fresh eyes of 'the observer.' I have also continued to timetable an ERP into my current classes. In addition, I have presented my findings to my colleagues and several have initiated an ERP with their lower level classes.

In undertaking the research and implementing an ERP, I gave my students the chance to read texts outside the narrow confines of a course book or exam syllabus, and prepared them for the more extensive reading they will face at university. More importantly, the process allowed them to see reading in English, not just as a means to an end but as a pleasurable and valid activity in itself.

I will allow my students to have the final say in Photo 5.

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## Appendix 1: Pre-programme questionnaire

| **Reading in my first language** | **Strongly disagree 1** | **Disagree 2** | **Agree 3** | **Strongly agree 4** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I enjoy reading for pleasure in my first language. | | | | |
| 2. I read for pleasure in my first language every day. | | | | |
| 3. I read for pleasure in my first language once a week. | | | | |
| 4. I read for pleasure in my first language when I am on holiday. | | | | |
| 5. I generally read for information rather than pleasure in my first language. | | | | |
| 6. When I read in my first language, I read books. | | | | |
| 7. When I read in my first language, I read newspapers. | | | | |
| 8. When I read in my first language, I read magazines. | | | | |
| 9. When I read in my first language, I read on the Internet. | | | | |
| 10. What is your favourite type of text to read in your first language, e.g. fiction, biography, crime? | | | | |

| **Reading in English** | **Strongly disagree 1** | **Disagree 2** | **Agree 3** | **Strongly agree 4** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I enjoy reading in English. | | | | |
| 2. I find reading in English difficult. | | | | |
| 3. I read for pleasure in English every day. | | | | |
| 4. I read for pleasure in English once a week. | | | | |
| 5. I rarely read for pleasure in English. | | | | |
| 6. I only read in English for my studies. | | | | |
| 7. I would like to read more in English for pleasure. | | | | |
| 8. It is more important to concentrate on reading in English for my studies than reading for pleasure. | | | | |
| 9. It is important for me to be a good reader in English. | | | | |
| 10. What is your favourite type of text to read in English, e.g. fiction, biography, crime? | | | | |

**General information about you:**

**Name** _____

Male ☐ Female ☐ Nationality: _____

IELTS reading score if known: _____

## Appendix 2: Post-programme questionnaire

**Name** _____

| **How I feel about the 5-week reading project** | **Strongly disagree 1** | **Disagree 2** | **Agree 3** | **Strongly agree 4** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I enjoyed reading in class. | | | | |
| 2. Reading for pleasure in class was useful. | | | | |
| 3. My reading speed has improved. | | | | |
| 4. I have learnt some new vocabulary. | | | | |
| 5. I am more aware of grammar and sentence structure now. | | | | |
| 6. Reading for pleasure in class made me read more for pleasure outside class. | | | | |
| 7. I will continue to read for pleasure outside class. | | | | |
| 8. Reading for pleasure in class was a waste of lesson time. | | | | |
| 9. I would like to continue to read for pleasure in class. | | | | |

| **How I feel about reading in English now** | **Strongly disagree 1** | **Disagree 2** | **Agree 3** | **Strongly agree 4** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10. I enjoy reading in English. | | | | |
| 11. I find reading in English difficult. | | | | |
| 12. I read for pleasure in English every day. | | | | |
| 13. I would like to read more in English for pleasure. | | | | |
| 14. It is important for me to be a good reader in English. | | | | |

## Appendix 3: Students' reading record

**Name**_____

**Reading Record**

*Please tick the boxes or fill in the information about the text you have read.*

What have you read?

Graded reader Journal

Magazine article Other

Title:_____

What was the text about?

_____

_____

What did you like/dislike about this text?

_____

_____

Write down 2 or 3 new words or expressions you learned from the text.

_____

_____

Overall, how do you rate the text?

Excellent Good OK Not very good Poor

# The effects of using correction codes and redrafting on intermediate students' writing

**TATIANE DEPIERI** KAPLAN INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH, LONDON

## Introduction

This action research project took place at Kaplan International English language school. The school is attended by students from all over the world who need to learn English for study and work purposes. Improving their writing skills is often a priority for these students.

In order to help students improve their writing, I started using correction codes to enable them to become more autonomous and aware of their own errors and areas for improvement. However, I noticed that when they got their assignments back, they would put them in their bags and leave the class thinking they had done a great job just by doing their homework. Furthermore, their writing did not show as much progress as the other skills (grammar, speaking, listening, and reading) when it came to their performance on the level test which students are required to do every five weeks in order to move up levels.

After looking for ways of making students take more responsibility for their progress in writing, I started to encourage them to rewrite their texts after correction. Because the process of redrafting can be time-consuming for students and teachers, and demand a lot of effort from them, I decided to do action research in order to learn more about how students develop their writing through the use of correction codes and redrafting.

## Context and participants

Kaplan International English language school in London, the site for this study, is an international school where students study English for general and academic purposes. The school runs a continuous enrolment system, which means that some students stay in our school for as long as a year and others for only two weeks. Most students stay for at least six weeks. For this reason, students' profiles can be quite diverse. While some of them need to improve their writing to do well in proficiency tests and have better career prospects, others prefer to focus on speaking only so they can travel and communicate in English. However, the school highly encourages a focus on all skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking as well as grammar) with the in-house books providing students with a curriculum based on the communicative approach and a focus on at least three skills for each 3-hour lesson. In order to move up levels they do a level test every five weeks. The test includes writing, which contributes 20% to the final mark.

Two classes of 15 intermediate level students each agreed to be part of the study and allowed me to have their writing samples, questionnaires, names and nationalities published. Because the school works on a continuous enrolment system, not all of the students were included in the project since the data was collected over a 4-week period.

In the first cycle, nine (six female and three male) students' data was included in this study. The criteria for selection were the following: students had to be enrolled for at least six weeks and they had to do at least five writing tasks out of six, including the first and the last ones. There were four participants from Venezuela, and one each from South Korea, Libya, Angola, Turkey and Brazil. Their ages ranged from 21 to 39.

In the second cycle of the research the data from five students (four male and one female) was collected for analysis. The criteria for selection were the same as in Cycle 1. There were three participants from Venezuela, and one each from Japan and Thailand. Their ages ranged from 24 to 35.

## Literature review

A lot has been written about feedback and most language teaching authors would agree that written corrective feedback can help students improve their writing accuracy. In a study that targeted selective correction, Bitchener and Knoch (2009) found that students who received written feedback on their use of articles outperformed the control group who received no feedback on their writing. Ferris, Liu, Sinha and Senna (2013) carried out a study where students were given *focused* feedback (where correction is provided for selected error types), *indirect* written correction feedback (where the researcher highlighted errors but did not correct them) and *explicit* correction feedback (where labels, codes or metalinguistic explanation were provided by the teacher or researcher). In this study, it was suggested that 'focused feedback, paired with discussion activities contextualised to the exact problems students are having at the moment, has strong potential to be helpful' because it is 'relevant, clear and motivating' (Ferris et al 2013:323). In this action research study, the nature of feedback is eclectic, combining focused, indirect and explicit feedback, which will be followed or not by rewriting.

Correction codes as a form of focused *indirect and explicit* feedback on writing are often mentioned in the ELT literature and are referred to as being effective and conducive to learner independence. They are symbols used by the teacher to indicate errors that students have made. For instance, when there is an error on use of articles, the teacher can use the code ART below the sentence to help students identify and correct what is wrong. One of the main advantages of using them is that 'if students can identify their mistakes, they are in a position to correct them' (Harmer 2007:151) and therefore will be able to use self-correction when doing writing tasks. Ferdouse (2012)

carried out a study with two groups of students where one of them received feedback through correction codes and the other had their errors underlined by their teacher. The study showed that students who had received correction codes as feedback were able to correct an average of 31% more mistakes than the group of learners who did not receive any clues about their mistakes.

Rewriting gives students a chance to review their work and think autonomously about the errors they usually make. It is believed that enabling learners to correct their inaccuracies will make them less prone to making the same mistakes again. According to Ur (1996:171) 'rewriting is very important not only because it reinforces learning, but also because rewriting is an integral part of the writing process as a whole'. In a recent study, Shintani, Ellis and Suzuki (2013:107) suggest that opportunities for revision enhance the effect of the feedback given by the teacher and 'increases the chance of learning taking place as evidenced in new writing'. They also say that there is a possibility that time allocated for students to process the feedback given in order to understand the corrections provided (without the need for redrafting) can also be beneficial. Ferris et al (2013) also remind teachers that students bring with them beliefs about themselves as writers and about their courses and that such beliefs may influence their response to feedback.

In order to help students improve their usage of the English language, this project focused on accuracy as a way to help students become aware of what areas of their writing need to be improved specifically in terms of grammar, spelling and punctuation. Intermediate students in particular are unlikely to leave a good impression on a potential employer or university admissions team if their writing is presented with major and frequent errors. Bitchener and Knoch (2009) also suggest that a focus on accuracy is important so that learners are not stigmatised when communicating with speakers of English and to avoid frequent errors that may impede the overall coherence and cohesion of a text. Besides, Ferris (2004) argues that students may rebel, complain and lose confidence in their teacher if they are not given feedback on their errors.

According to the literature, correcting students' writing is encouraged by most authors. Furthermore, there is a significant emphasis on autonomy in the literature and making sure that students 'do something' with the corrections given by the teacher, which inspired me to try redrafting as an extension of the feedback given to students. The present study, therefore, focused on writing feedback using correction that is focused (on grammatical accuracy), indirect (errors are highlighted but not corrected) and explicit (through the use of correction codes and metalinguistic explanation). The combination of these three forms of feedback meant that students would be more actively involved in the process of correction and would have the opportunity to analyse their own errors. Furthermore, there was also a focus in this study on the expansion of the teacher's feedback through redrafting and on the length of students' writing, as it is important that students improve their accuracy without losing fluency in their writing at the same time.

## Research focus

The study had two focuses: feedback on written work through correction codes and feedback on written work through correction codes followed by rewriting. I addressed the following research questions:

1. To what extent does grammar correction through the use of correction codes reduce the number of grammatical errors in students' writing?
2. To what extent does grammar correction through the use of correction codes followed by redrafting reduce the number of grammatical errors in students' writing?
3. Is there a notable distinction in the average length of students' writing comparing the first and the last writing tasks in both groups of students?

In this study, grammar correction accounted for errors in verb forms, parts of speech, word order etc. (see Table 1) but errors in punctuation and spelling were also accounted for as I noticed they were major areas in need of improvement in both intermediate groups. In research question c, the average length of students' writing corresponds to the number of words they wrote in their texts – including correct and incorrect ones – since I wanted to analyse the extent to which fluency was lost when students paid more attention to accuracy.

## Methodology

This was a quantitative study consisting of two 4-week cycles with two different groups of students (see 'Context and participants'). Cycle 1 focused on correction codes as a form of feedback in writing whereas Cycle 2 focused on correction codes as feedback followed by redrafting. In both stages the data was collected in the following ways: a questionnaire which served as a needs analysis and five written tasks done by the participants. Both groups were given a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) about their attitudes and feelings towards writing and correction as well as their expectations when getting feedback. I used the information that students provided in these forms to make sure this research would benefit them and reflect what they wanted as language learners. The questionnaires were designed using a Likert Scale with a total of 11 questions.

After the questionnaires, students in both cycles did five writing tasks of different genres. The choice of genres was based on the types of texts students usually write in class (descriptions of certain aspects of their countries and communicative tasks such as emails and letters), in proficiency tests (essays) and in their level tests (emails and letters). All the tasks were preceded by contextualisation of the topic (by using videos, reading tasks, listening tasks or discussion) and were done in the classroom.

Because writing is one of the components of the level test that students do every five weeks, our school encourages the use of writing tasks in the classroom at least once a week. The participants had 20 minutes to write their texts without the help of dictionaries or the teacher. The choice of using such test conditions while learners did their writing tasks was to provide them with timed written practice – and therefore

help them prepare for the test – and in order to find out what their difficulties were.

All texts were corrected with correction codes taken from the ELT book *Writing Extra* (see Appendix 2 for a sample students received). Students were trained to understand what the correction codes meant since according to Harmer (2004:117), 'Unless students know what the symbols mean, the symbols will not be much use'. Table 1 below shows the codes which were used in students' writing tasks.

When their work was returned to them with correction codes, students were given some time in the classroom to review it (i.e. analyse their errors and understand why they had made them) and ask questions they had. Techniques listed in Harmer (2004) were used before (finding errors) or after (remedial teaching and peer correction) students analysed the correction codes in their texts. Such techniques are listed below:

- remedial teaching: the teacher focuses on the main issues present in their writing and bases the content of the lesson on them
- peer correction/review: students work in pairs and help one another to understand the correction codes and recommend appropriate changes
- finding errors: students analyse sentences given by the teacher, try to find the errors in them and recommend appropriate changes.

In order to compare the participants' performance across tasks, the words in all of the texts were counted as well as the grammatical errors encountered in them (see Table 1). All words were counted as single units before the texts were corrected. The percentage of errors in each text and an overall percentage per group (Cycle 1 and Cycle 2) for all texts were calculated.

### Cycle 1

In Cycle 1, students were given one writing task in the first and second weeks, respectively, and two in the third and fourth weeks, respectively. The written tasks were of three different genres so students could use a range of different grammatical structures and verb tenses. Table 2 below lists the writing tasks that the participants did (See Appendix 3 for an example task).

**Table 2: Writing tasks done by the participants**

| Week (task) | Writing tasks in Cycle 1 |
|---|---|
| Week 1 (Task 1) | Write an email to a friend describing your experience in the worst hotel in the world. |
| Week 2 (Task 2) | Write an opinion essay about home exchange as a type of holiday accommodation. Introduce the topic, state advantages and disadvantages and summarise what you said in a conclusion. |
| Week 3 (Task 3) | Describe a family celebration or a festival in your country. |
| Week 3 (Task 4) | Write a letter for the school magazine sharing memories from your childhood. You can talk about holidays you had, your first day at school or a school trip you enjoyed. |
| Week 4 (Task 5) | Write an opinion essay about e-books. Do you think e-books should replace traditional books? |
| Week 4 (Task 6) | Describe people's eating habits in your country. |

After teaching students what the correction codes meant, I gave their texts back with the symbols for correction on grammar, spelling and punctuation and used the techniques mentioned above (remedial teaching, peer correction and finding errors) in order to help them identify their errors.

In the first cycle, the participants did not have to rewrite their compositions, but they received comments from me on organisation, cohesion and coherence when necessary as well as comments on content. As this study focuses on accuracy and grammatical correction, content-related comments will not be used in the data analysis.

### Cycle 2

In Cycle 2, five assignments were done. Students were given one writing task in the first, second and third week, respectively, and two in the fourth week. The written tasks were the same as the ones used in the first cycle, with the exception of one which had to be slightly changed to fit the theme of the lesson (see Table 3).

After getting back their written work, students were given some time in the classroom to revise their work and ask questions they had. I also used the techniques listed in Harmer (2004) mentioned above. The learners also received comments on organisation, cohesion and coherence on their texts in addition to comments on content. Unlike the first group, Cycle 2 students also had some time in the classroom

**Table 1: Correction codes and their meanings**

| Correction code | Meaning |
|---|---|
| V | Verb form (tense, passivity, aspect, form and conjugation were taken into account). For multiple word verb forms the errors were counted as one |
| Sub/obj | Subject/object (subject missing, wrong subject, wrong use of pronouns) |
| WO | Word order. Errors regarding word order were also counted as one per sentence. |
| Prep | Preposition (wrong preposition, no preposition, unnecessary preposition) |
| N | Noun (plural, singular) |
| Art | Article (wrong article, article missing, unnecessary article) |
| Gr | Grammar structure (comparatives and superlatives, adjectives and adverbs, modal verbs). Grammar structures consisting of more than one word such as incorrect comparative forms (e.g. more easier) were also counted as one error. |
| ^ | Missing word. Where a missing word was one of the word classes included in the criteria for correction (e.g. preposition, article, subject) the symbol ^ was used to signal a missing word and the symbol for the word class was also used. However, the error was counted as one. |
| / | Unnecessary word |
| P | Punctuation (no punctuation, unnecessary punctuation) |
| Sp | Spelling |

(about 15 minutes) to rewrite their texts and were able to ask me questions while rewriting as well.

**Table 3: Writing tasks done by the participants**

| Week | Writing tasks in Cycle 2 |
|---|---|
| Week 1 (Task 1) | Write an email to a friend describing your experience in the worst hotel in the world. |
| Week 2 (Task 2) | Describe a family celebration or a festival in your country. |
| Week 3 (Task 3) | Write a letter for the school magazine about the most embarrassing/stressful/exciting moment/day you have ever had in your life. |
| Week 4 (Task 4) | Write an opinion essay about e-books. Do you think e-books should replace traditional books? |
| Week 4 (Task 5) | Describe people's eating habits in your country. |

## Findings

The questionnaires provided me with important information about students' motivation regarding writing in English. Based on the information I gathered with the questionnaires, I decided to carry out the study since all students either strongly agreed or agreed that learning to write was important for them. Because the study would have a significant focus on writing, it was essential to ensure that students would need to write in English in their jobs or studies after their English language course. In this section, I will outline the main findings for the most relevant questions.

### Cycle 1 questionnaire findings

The key findings derived from students' questionnaire responses in Cycle 1 are discussed next.

As shown in Figure 1, all students who participated in the study strongly agreed that writing is key in English language learning. Similarly, the vast majority of students stated that they needed to write in English as well. However, the responses were not as uniform when the participants were asked whether writing was enjoyable or whether they felt demotivated by their teachers' corrections. For this reason, during all stages of the study, students were constantly monitored and encouraged to continue trying even if they did not do very well on their first tasks.

According to Ferris (2004), students want to receive grammatical corrections from their teachers. My students were no different and, almost unanimously, agreed that they wanted to be corrected, with the majority saying that they expected the teacher to correct all errors in their writing (see Figure 1).

### Cycle 1 findings: Group performance

In this section, I will present the findings concerning the research questions related to the reduction on grammar errors after using correction codes (research question 1) and the average length of students' texts throughout the study (research question 2) (see the section on 'Research focus').

After the correction codes were used for the selected grammar, punctuation and spelling inaccuracies (see 'Methodology'), the overall percentage of errors was calculated across all students in each of their five texts (see Figure 2). Cycle 1 students had attendance issues; therefore some of them did only four out of the five tasks I had planned initially. For this reason, a writing task was added and six tasks were done in total – instead of five – to ensure all students would do five tasks including the first and last ones. The average number of words was calculated by dividing the sum of all words across all students in each task by the number of students who did them.

**Figure 2: The average percentage of errors across all students (Cycle 1)**

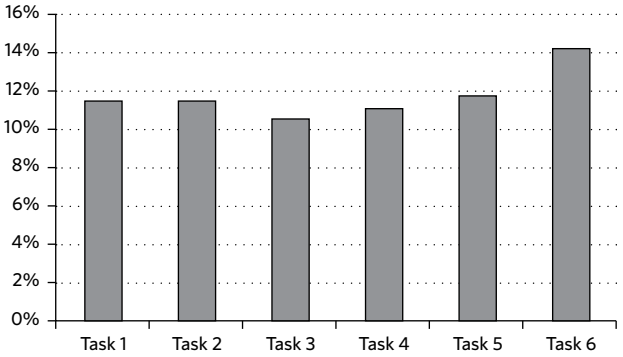
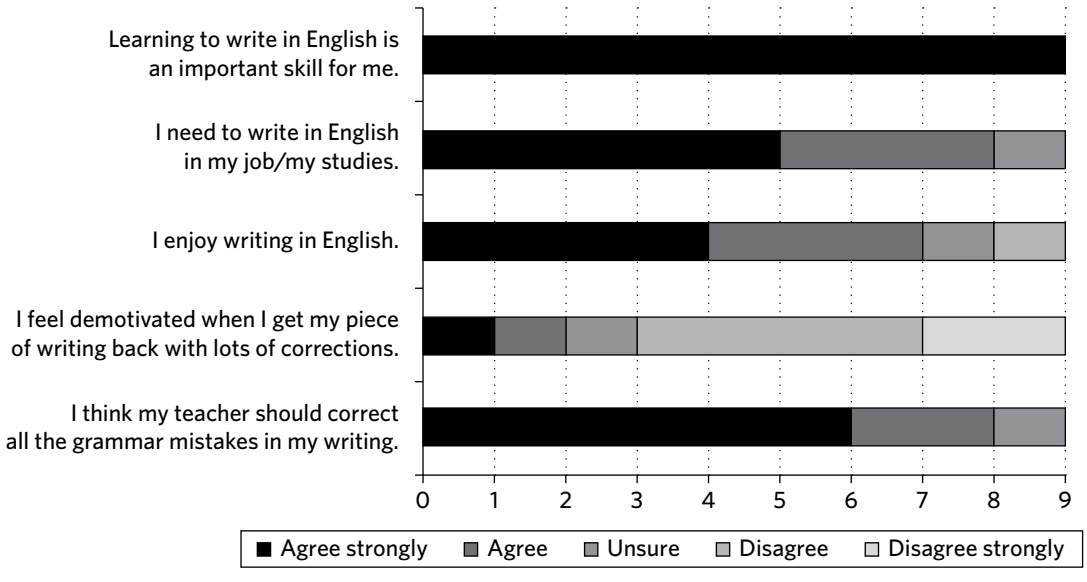
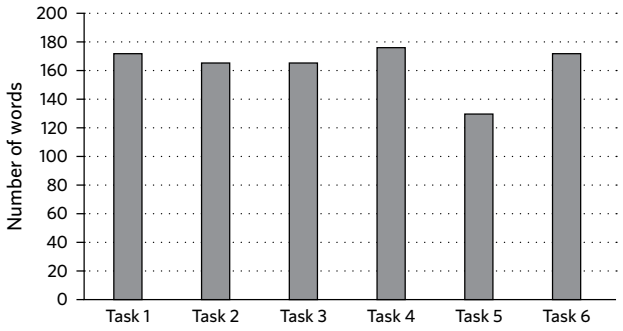



**Figure 1: Responses to Cycle 1 questionnaire**



As shown in Figure 2, there were no major changes in the percentage of errors across tasks. The number of errors is practically the same across most tasks, which indicates that there was no effect of the intervention on accuracy. Moreover, the percentage of errors increased in Task 6 compared to Task 1. This may have been due to a lack of motivation from students in Cycle 1, since the task was cognitively no more challenging than the ones they had done before. Interestingly, assignments three and six were of the same genre (a description) and while students had the least number of errors in Task 3, their performance was slightly worse in the last writing task.

**Figure 3: Average length of texts across all students (Cycle 1)**




There was no significant change in students' text lengths (as seen in Figure 3) as the average number of words remained between 166 and 177. However, there was a slight drop to 130 words in Task 5, which may have happened as a result of the level of difficulty. In this assignment, students had to write an essay giving opinions about e-books and traditional books and it was clear that the learners did not have as much knowledge and arguments regarding this topic as they did in Task 2, for example, where they wrote about house exchange as a form of holiday accommodation. In addition, in the case of the fifth task, there was a complication with contextualisation since there was not enough time allocated for pre-writing tasks. Consequently, students may not have felt as prepared as they were when writing Task 2, which was an essay before which there were plenty of introductory tasks to help students activate and build relevant background knowledge.

### Cycle 1 findings: Individual performance

The analysis of the whole group of participants did not show an effect of the intervention on students' writing accuracy, but we shall now look into individual data to see if there were any differences or particular findings in the participants' work. As mentioned previously, all participants did Tasks 1and 6 and 3 tasks in between. However, not everyone did the exact same task due to attendance issues.

No particular pattern was found, but four students had a higher percentage of errors in their last task compared to the first (see Figures 4–7). One of them (Figure 4) showed a slight increase in the number of errors in each task and a remarkable increase in the last one. Paula (Figure 5) showed a jump from 6% of errors in the first task to 14% in the last one.

**Figure 4: Ozlem's percentage of errors**

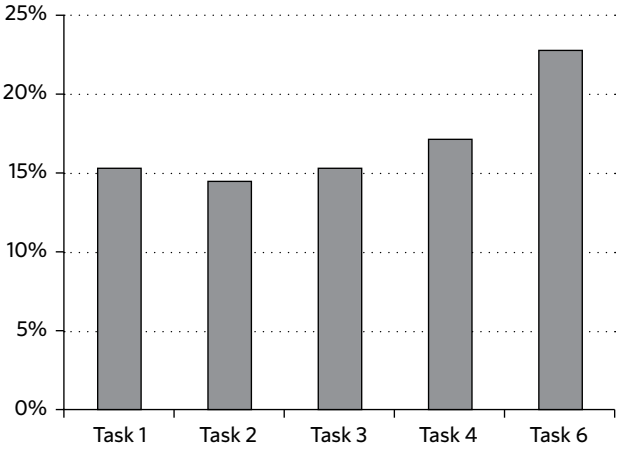



**Figure 5: Paula's percentage of errors**

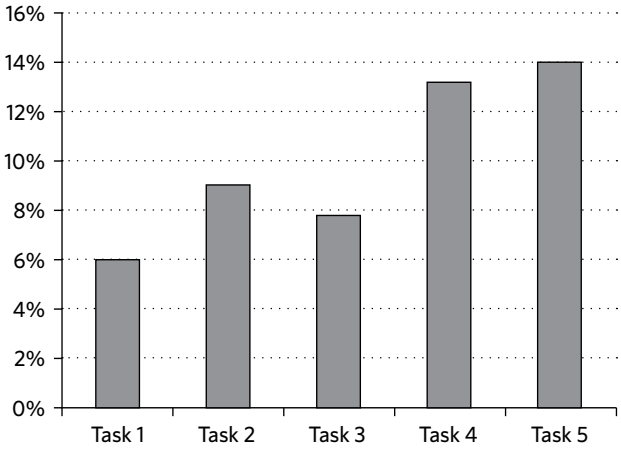



**Figure 6: Ernesto's percentage of errors**

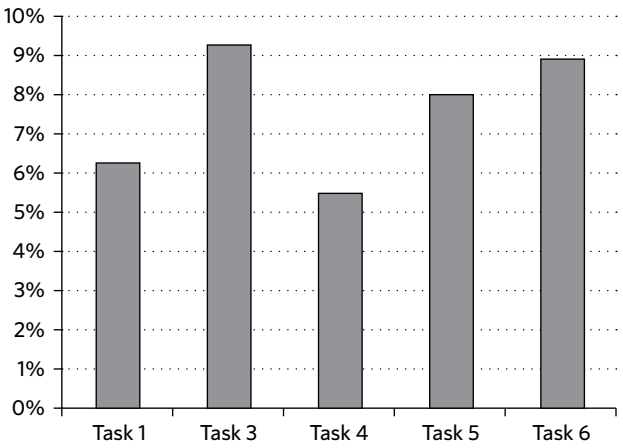
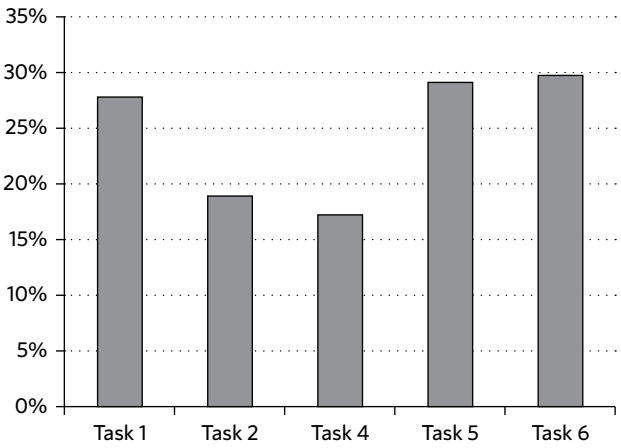



**Figure 7: Ashref's percentage of errors**



However, there is no pattern in decline either, probably because participants in Cycle 1 may have done different tasks for Tasks 2, 3 and 4. Task 5, on the other hand, was done by all students so I believe that a possible reason for the increase in the number of errors may have been lack of motivation, as I explain below.

All four students were less motivated than the others in class because they thought they were not making any progress, not only in writing but in all skills in general. Ashref in particular, showed a clear dislike of writing and had major issues with spelling. He strongly agreed with statement 4 in the questionnaire: 'I feel demotivated when I get my piece of writing back with lots of corrections'. These results probably demonstrate that motivation to write and an openness to be corrected (or not) is also important when teaching writing in the English class and especially when giving feedback.

Table 4 shows the four students' average text lengths and even though there is no pattern in the decrease of the average number of words, there are some unanticipated results. Paula's average length was notably lower and Ashref's was higher in last task compared to the first. I would attribute this fact to the topic students had to write about. While Ashref felt extremely confident writing about eating habits in his country, Paula did not have as many ideas. This indicates that knowledge about the topic or willingness to write about it can make an impact on how much students write.

**Table 4: Breakdown of the four students' average number of words per text**

| Student | Task 1 | Task 2 | Task 3 | Task 4 | Task 5 | Average |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ozlem | 118 | 110 | 112 | 174 | 128 | 109 |
| Paula | 184 | 187 | 128 | 144 | 93 | 147 |
| Ernesto | 221 | 194 | 201 | 125 | 179 | 184 |
| Ashref | 141 | 132 | 155 | 92 | 260 | 156 |

The five other participants showed either a decrease in the percentage of errors in the last task compared to the first one (see Figure 9 for example) or a similar rate (see Figure 8 for example), but again, there was no pattern in such reduction. The individual data in Cycle 1 confirms the overall results and shows that the intervention (i.e. feedback using error correction codes) had no effect on students' writing accuracy in this study.

As shown in Table 5, there was no pattern in the average length of the five other participants' texts as the number of words fluctuated from one task to another. Overall, in Cycle 1 there did not seem to be a loss in writing fluency due to the focus on accuracy, but the results indicate that the length of students' texts depends mostly on familiarity with the topic.

**Figure 8: Seoyoon's percentage of errors**

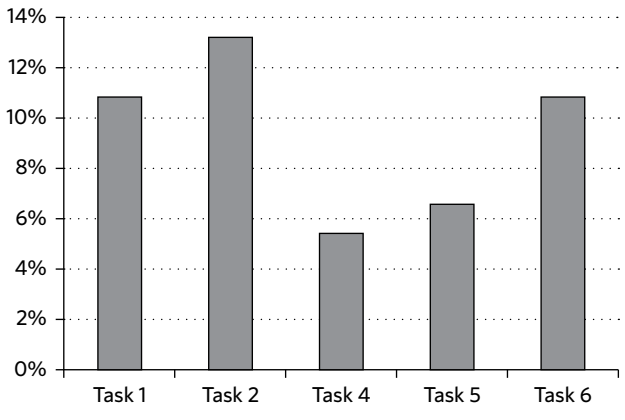



**Figure 9: Fatima's percentage of errors**

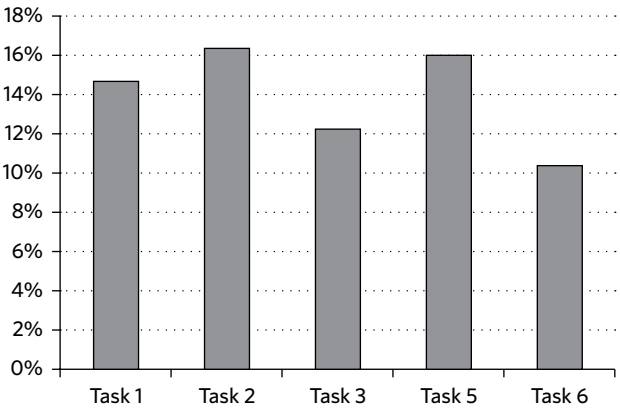



**Table 5: Breakdown of the four students' average number of words per text**

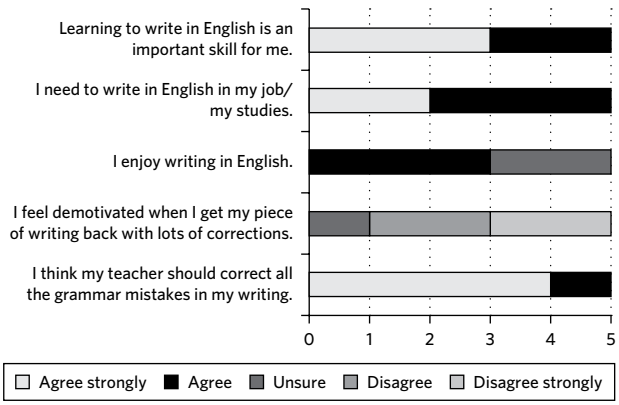
| Student | Task 1 | Task 2 | Task 3 | Task 4 | Task 5 | Average |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Seoyoon | 194 | 174 | 185 | 121 | 167 | 169 |
| Maria Teresa | 202 | 197 | 204 | 196 | 200 | 200 |
| Vitor | 200 | 196 | 185 | 115 | 139 | 167 |
| Rosairene | 150 | 214 | 182 | 181 | 173 | 180 |
| Fatima | 151 | 153 | 162 | 118 | 155 | 149 |

## Cycle 2 questionnaire findings

Here I will highlight the key findings after analysing the questionnaire completed by the participants in Cycle 2.

The five students in Cycle 2 were slightly more consistent in their answers than the nine participants in Cycle 1 since they generally agreed with the questionnaire statements (see Figure 10). Like the first group, they said it was important for them to write in English and that such a skill would help them in their jobs or academic studies, which reassured me about the relevance of this action research for this second group of students. However, they were, to a slight extent, less keen writers than the group in Cycle 1, but claimed not to feel demotivated when they receive corrections from the teacher (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Responses to Cycle 2 questionnaire**




## Cycle 2 findings: Group performance

As stated in 'Methodology', students in Cycle 2 had an extra stage in their process of writing: the rewriting stage. However, the data analysis was similar to Cycle 1 since errors were counted and analysed in their first drafts only. Unlike Cycle 1, there were no attendance issues in the second cycle,

so all students did all five tasks at the same time. The overall percentage of errors was also calculated across all students in each text and the average length of their texts was calculated by dividing the sum of all words across all students in each text by five, which was the number of participants in Cycle 2.

As can be seen in Figure 11, there was a consistent pattern of decline overall. In contrast to Cycle 1, where the number of errors fluctuated across tasks, the second group shows a decrease in the percentage of errors in each task bar the last one. This may suggest that rewriting after each task is beneficial to accuracy in future tasks. In addition to this, Cycle 2 students showed more motivation and took feedback more seriously since they would have to use the feedback to improve their texts. What may have contributed to student motivation was that Cycle 2 students received the second draft of their texts with encouraging comments from the teacher and hardly any corrections. Cycle 1 students, on the other hand, analysed their errors and discussed them with classmates and their teacher but never had a chance to improve what they had done wrong.

Similarly to the first group, these students also made slightly more errors in the last task than the previous one, which may indicate that both groups needed more work on writing descriptions and using verbs tenses common to this genre (present tenses and present perfect, for instance).

**Figure 11: The average percentage of errors across all students (Cycle 2)**

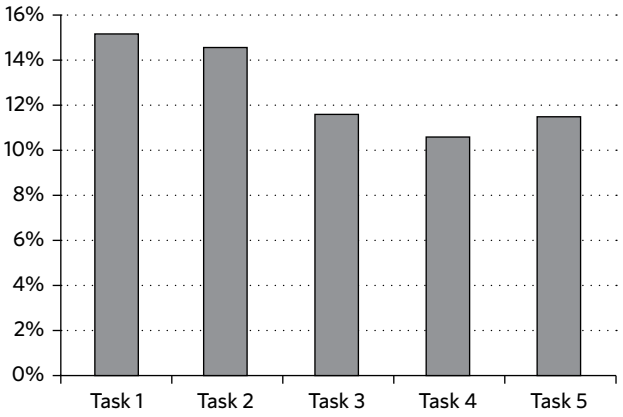
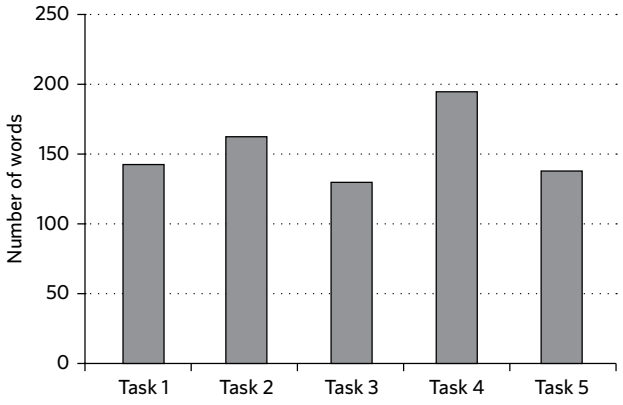



Figure 12 shows the average of words for each task across all learners. While there was an increase in the number of words in Task 4, the average number or words fell by 4% in Task 5 in comparison to Task 1 and there was no pattern of increase or decrease in the average number of words, similarly to

**Figure 12: Average length of texts across all students (Cycle 2)**




Cycle 1. This may suggest that the focus on accuracy adopted for this research did not have a negative effect on students' written fluency.

Differently to Cycle 1, the highest number of words in Cycle 2 was in Task 4, where students had to write an essay about e-books and traditional books. Indeed, students in Cycle 2 enjoyed expressing their opinions, but I believe that the better designed pre-writing tasks that I did also contributed to a more engaging generation of ideas. There was a clear change in the way I introduced the task Cycle 2 as I gave students a model text and we had more time to discuss ideas than in Cycle 1.

*Percentage of errors in each text by individual*

In Cycle 2, all participants did five tasks and there were no attendance issues. Four out of the five participants showed a decrease in the percentage of errors in the last task compared to the first. As demonstrated in the graphs (Figures 13 and 14) Cycle 2 results were slightly more uniform than Cycle 1 and may indicate the benefit of redrafting after getting feedback on writing.

**Figure 13: Jorge's percentage of errors**

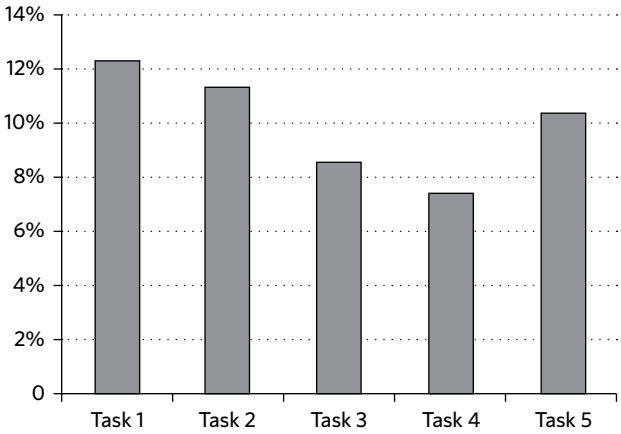
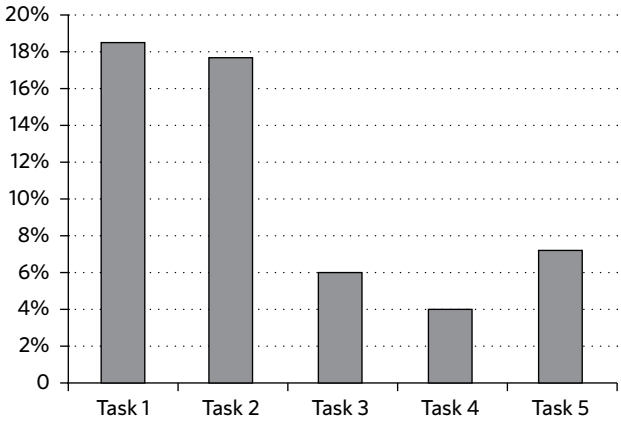



**Figure 14: Yu's percentage of errors**




Yu (Figure 14) was one of the participants in Cycle 2 who showed the most improvement in her grammatical accuracy, with a noteworthy reduction of 12% in the percentage of errors from Task 1 to Task 5. This probably happened because this particular student took the feedback into account very seriously and focused on the recurrent errors in her texts – spelling and punctuation. Jorge (Figure 13) also showed a gradual decrease from Tasks 1 to 4 and a slight increase in

Task 5, similarly to most participants in this study. Jorge's results were fairly similar to the other two participants, who also improved their accuracy even though they made more errors in Task 5 than in Task 4. As shown in Figure 15, Chayapat did not show a reduction in the error rate, except for Task 3. He was one of the students who struggled the most with writing and had the highest percentage of errors overall (19%) in Cycle 2. Text length in Cycle 2 is displayed in Table 6.

**Figure 15: Chayapat's percentage of errors**

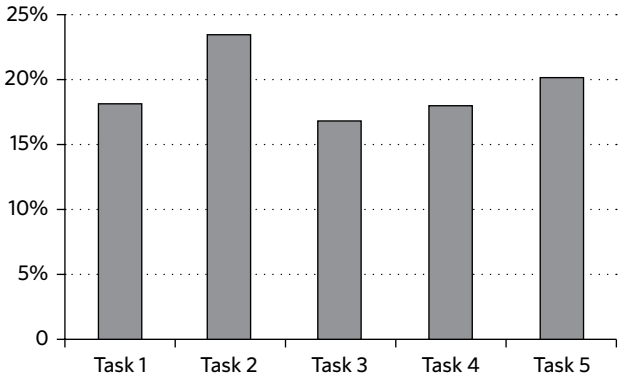



**Table 6: Breakdown of Cycle 2 students' average number of words per text**

| Student | Task 1 | Task 2 | Task 3 | Task 4 | Task 5 | Average |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jean Franco | 109 | 124 | 91 | 114 | 139 | 115 |
| Jorge | 243 | 197 | 190 | 297 | 191 | 224 |
| Nicolas | 150 | 202 | 153 | 286 | 151 | 188 |
| Chayapat | 143 | 149 | 83 | 156 | 110 | 128 |
| Yu | 86 | 142 | 131 | 122 | 97 | 116 |

No pattern was found, which means there was no considerable loss in writing fluency due to a focus on accuracy. As the numbers vary considerably, the differences do not seem to be influenced by the feedback given but mostly by the topic or genre.

## Discussion

The first question that guided this study was *To what extent does grammar correction through the use of correction codes reduce the number of grammatical errors in students' writing?* (see the Research focus section). The fact that Cycle 1 showed no reduction in the number of grammatical errors overall indicates that the intervention did not have an effect on accuracy. On the contrary, there was an increase of 3% in the number of errors in the last task, where students had to describe eating habits in their countries. This may be due to the fact that the group in Cycle 1 was more heterogeneous in their motivation to write as the needs analysis questionnaire showed (see Figure 1). Therefore, they may have found it demotivating to receive their writing with so many corrections.

To sum up, there was no pattern of decline in errors across the tasks in Cycle 1 and all the time I spent correcting their work and making comments on their writing did not have an impact on their writing accuracy. Furthermore, both groups had metalinguistic explanation following the correction and were given time in class to analyse their errors and ask questions about my correction. Differently to what Shintani et al (2013) suggest, the present study shows that allocating time in class for the revision of mistakes did not have an effect on the accuracy of students' writing. This could be explained by the fact that Shintani et al's study was more selective on grammar structures it addressed. While this study focused on 11 different areas, Shintani et al's focus on two main areas only – use of articles and conditionals.

The second research question was investigated in Cycle 2 to determine if rewriting texts after analysing correction codes resulted in a reduced error rate in future tasks. There was a reduction of 4% in their last task compared to the first one and a mostly consistent decrease in the rate of mistakes across tasks. Participants in Cycle 2 continued showing motivation until the last task and what might have contributed to this was the fact that their second drafts were mostly accurate and did not need many amendments to be made. This suggests that getting back a piece of work with hardly any corrections at all and positive comments made by the teacher may increase learners' confidence and willingness to continue trying hard. Chandler (2003) found a statistically significant improvement in students' accuracy in the experimental group (the one who rewrote their texts) and fewer students had a higher error rate in the last assignment in his study as well. Shintani et al (2013) also consider rewriting as helpful for students' accuracy in future writing tasks. The results shown in Cycle 2 suggest that, similarly to Chandler (2003) and Shintani et al (2013), rewriting following feedback may be more effective than written feedback without rewriting.

The last research question examined the average length of the participants' texts. While both groups wrote less in the last task compared to the first, the difference is very small and no consistent pattern was found. Therefore, it is possible to say that the focus on accuracy did not influence students' lengths of texts dramatically, which suggests that grammar correction in writing is not detrimental to students' written flow and creativity. What I would consider key for students' lengths of texts after this study is motivation, knowledge about the topic and pre-writing. Such elements will probably determine whether students write more or less and for this reason teachers should consider them carefully.

More research is needed to find out whether redrafting is a more effective way of improving accuracy than correction codes alone and this study needs to be expanded further into a longer course to find out whether there are significant differences in students' writing accuracy over a longer period of time. In any case, what I perceived as a teacher when comparing both types of feedback was that redrafting motivated students to get things right and amend their texts while the group in Cycle 1 was less motivated and autonomous. This reinforces the point made by Harris and McCann (1994) that students need to use the feedback we give them otherwise they do not seem to try to improve as hard as they could (or should). Ferris et al (2013) suggest that feedback should be followed up with discussion and clarification of questions that students may have. I would add that providing students with the opportunity to rewrite their

texts after working hard to understand the corrections could be even more beneficial to increase accuracy.

## Reflections

This project has been extremely valuable in making me aware of how important it is to give students not only feedback, but feedback that is effective. It is time-consuming to provide students with correction codes as well as to check their second draft and write comments for each one of them. Therefore, ensuring that the time we spend doing so does not go to waste is essential. It was especially satisfactory to follow students' progress and guide them towards their objectives.

With regard to the action research itself, there could not be a better opportunity for continuous professional development. It was very valuable to learn more about my own students and about the feedback I give them. Having worked as a teacher for almost 10 years and used correction codes for a long time in my career, I am now able to look at this type of feedback in a more critical way.

Although the project seemed too ambitious to me at first, it is gratifying to be able to look back now and see how much I have learned throughout the process. I have also inspired other teachers in my workplace to take part in action research schemes and hope to investigate other issues in the classroom through action research.

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## Appendix 1: Questionnaire given to students for needs analysis

Feedback on written work
Name:_____
Mother tongue: _____
1) Please give your answer to the questions below by ticking ONE answer for each.
How much time do you dedicate to studying English outside of the class:
Less than 1 hour a week

1 to 2 hours a week

3 to 4 hours a week

More than 4 hours a week

| | | Agree strongly | Agree | Unsure | Disagree | Disagree strongly |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Learning to write in English is an important skill for me. | | | | | |
| 2 | I need to write in English in my job/my studies. | | | | | |
| 3 | I enjoy writing in English. | | | | | |
| 4 | I feel demotivated when I get my piece of writing back with lots of corrections. | | | | | |
| 5 | I never correct my homework before handing it in to the teacher. | | | | | |
| 6 | I want my teacher to correct grammar mistakes in my writing. | | | | | |
| 7 | I read the teacher's corrections to avoid making the same grammar mistakes. | | | | | |
| 8 | I don't pay much attention to the teacher's corrections. | | | | | |
| 9 | I think my teacher should correct all the grammar mistakes in my writing. | | | | | |
| 10 | I think rewriting is important to improve my grammar. | | | | | |
| 11 | I correct my piece of homework before handing it in to the teacher for the first time. | | | | | |

## Appendix 2: Checklist and explanation of correction codes – handout given to students

**Second draft checklist / correction code**

Students: use this to help you check and correct your second draft.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Grammar** | **Code** |
| Have you used the right verb forms? | **V** |
| Do the subject and verb agree in each sentence? Is the subject missing? | **Sub** |
| Are the words in the right order? | **WO** |
| Have you used the right prepositions? | **Prep** |
| Have you checked the nouns? Are they uncountable? Are they plural? | **N** |
| Have you used the right article? | **Art** |
| Have you used the right structure? | **Gr** |
| Have you only split a word at the end of a syllable? | **Syll** |
| Have you missed out any words? | **^** |
| Have you used too many words? | **/** |
| **Vocabulary** | |
| Have you used the right word? Is it positive, negative or neutral? | **Voc** |
| Can you use a specific word not a general one? Is it too weak or strong? | **Gen** |
| **Punctuation** | |
| Does the punctuation make the writing easy to understand? | **P** |
| Have you used capital letters in the right place? | **Cap** |
| **Spelling** | |
| Have you checked difficult words are spelt correctly? | **Sp** |

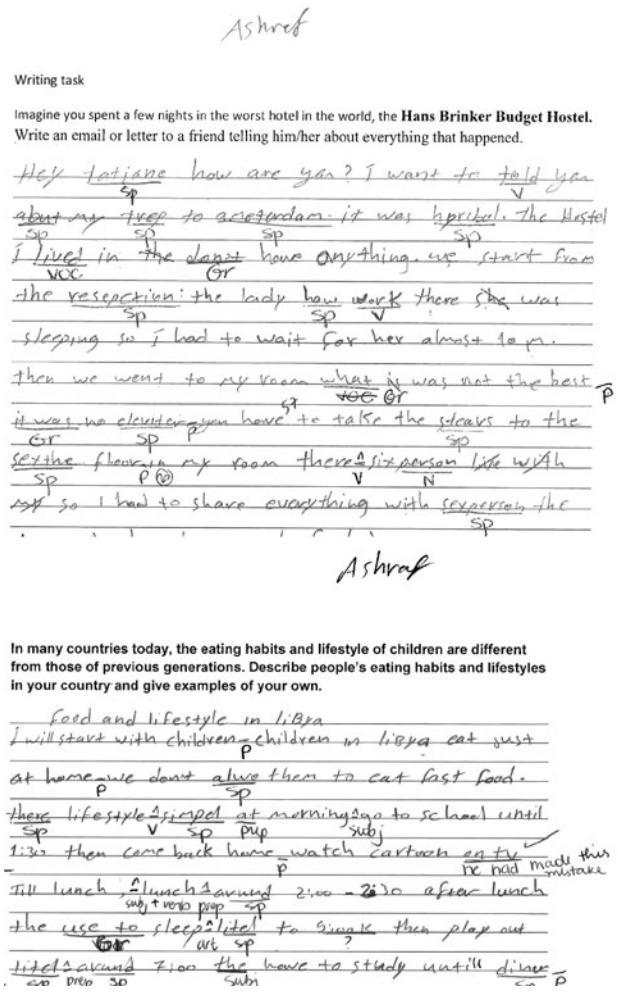
120 From *Writing Extra* by Graham Palmer © Cambridge University Press 2004 **PHOTOCOPIABLE**

## Appendix 3: Example question for the first writing task

Writing task

Imagine you spent a few nights in the worst hotel in the world, the Hans Brinker Budget Hostel. Write an email or letter to a friend telling him/her about everything that happened.

## Appendix 4: Excerpts from Tasks 1 and 2 done by Ashref (Cycle 1) and Yu (Cycle 2)



Ashref

Writing task

Imagine you spent a few nights in the worst hotel in the world, the **Hans Brinker Budget Hostel.** Write an email or letter to a friend telling him/her about everything that happened.

Hey Tatjana how are you? I want to told you about my trep to acsterdam it was hpritel. The Hostel I lived in the dapst have anything. we start from the resepction the lady how work there she was sleeping so I had to wait for her almost 10 p. then we went to my room what it was not the best it was no elevator you have to take the stears to the sey the flower in my room there six person like with so I had to share everything with sexperson the

Ashref

**In many countries today, the eating habits and lifestyle of children are different from those of previous generations. Describe people's eating habits and lifestyles in your country and give examples of your own.**

Food and lifestyle in Libya

I will start with children children in libya eat just at home we dont alwe them to eat fast food. there lifestyle simpel at morning go to school until 1:30 then came back home watch cartoon eg tv he had made this mistake Till lunch, lunch around 2:00 - 2:30 after lunch the use to sleep lite! to study then play out litel around 7:00 the have to study untill dinner

Writing task

Imagine you spent a few nights in the worst hotel in the world, the **Hans Brinker Budget Hostel.** Write an email or letter to a friend telling him/her about everything that happened.

Hi Nadeka

How are you? I'm in Amsterdam, I tell to you about my hotel. This is the worst hotel that I've ever stayed until now. It is very economical hotel. I cant turn on the lights. There arent any lights. Toilet is very darty. There arent any toiletarese. Shawarroom too. Shaner isnt strong presser. The towels arent washed and we have only two towels. I cant stand to stay here!

linking word

**In many countries today, the eating habits and lifestyle of children are different from those of previous generations. Describe people's eating habits and lifestyles in your country and give examples of your own.**

Are the eating habits and lifestyle of children different from those of previous generation? I think it desent have big change because they still have eaten school lunch. In my country, children who are from 6 years old to 15 years old have school lunch everyday. Its menu is made by a nutritionist and it changes different menu everyday. Its taste is very sensitive. However, they like it. The menu is always rice or bread sometimes

# Using synthetic phonics to improve listening awareness and accuracy in pre-intermediate learners

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## Introduction

'English people, they speak too fast. They need speak more clearly to understand.'

My action research (AR) project integrated a synthetic phonics (SP) teaching approach into listening and vocabulary lessons to investigate its effects on students' listening accuracy in decoding natural speech, awareness of features of spoken English and engagement with listening. SP teaches the relationship between sounds of speech and the letters or letter groups by introducing the letter (s) sound correspondences of the phonics alphabetic code (see Appendix 1) and teaches that the code is reversible: print-to-sound for decoding (reading) and sound-to-print for encoding (spelling) (Hepplewhite 2013).

It is difficult for learners and teachers to address the challenges of listening to natural speech in classroom-based learning as top-down tasks in published listening comprehension materials do not guide learners through the multiple difficulties of listening and decoding spoken English. In contrast to other language skills and systems, we expect the learner to develop by 'exposure' through extensive personal practice. I feel listening is an ignored area of language development where teachers could actively help learners develop, and where SP could offer a productive tool to guide learners' understanding in class and support their personal study.

## Synthetic phonics and listening skills

As teaching professionals, we continuously refine our classroom practice, developing learners' skills in all aspects of language study. However, except for teaching listening paper exam techniques, which partially depend on reading written question content (Field 2014), listening materials generally provide only contextualised practice tasks for learners to test their listening comprehension, hopefully in a supportive classroom environment. This prevailing, 'top-down' approach proved practical compared to older, word-by-word decoding: so-called 'bottom-up' listening approaches (Richards and Rodgers 2001). However, in the last 20 years the top-down approach has been challenged as not adequately supporting learners' listening development (Field 1998, Goh 1997), treating listening skill like a 'black-box' within the learner's mind which teaching cannot affect (Rost 2001:13). The last 10 years have seen authors begin to address this issue, promoting a metacognitive, process approach to teaching listening skills and enabling learners to consciously apply language learning/study skills to address individual specific weaknesses in their listening when they notice them (Wilson 2003). This study takes a process approach using SP, as it raises learners' conscious awareness of how phonemic features relate to spelling and seems a useful tool that lends itself to classroom and independent study.

Recognising sounds in natural, connected speech is more challenging to L2 learners than producing them. This is because the sounds in natural speech are much more varied and unpredictable than those which they are able to produce (Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin 2010). An additional difficulty is that the available materials where a process approach is taken either create potential problems, because words are spelled as they sound (e.g. *frum* (from) and *bin* (been)) or include the phonemic script, derived from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) used in linguistics. Unfortunately, the phonemic script does not help learners to address the following three key problems that they have with decoding:

1. Variations in letter-sound correspondences
English sounds (phonemes) and spellings (graphemes) only correlate 50% of the time (Hanna, Hanna, Hodges and Rudorf 1966). The phonemic script developed from the IPA (Underhill 2005:viii), which is designed for use with all languages. Because of this, these phonemic symbols often do not relate to the English spellings of a word, or the individual letters which commonly make each sounds in English. As a result, they do not readily highlight the alphabetic code which in SP demonstrates when and how English sounds, especially vowels and diphthongs, match or differ from English spelling. This leaves the phonemic script without an important element which explicitly helps learners construct and develop systemic understanding directly from these correlations.

2. Additional burden
The phonemic script gives many learners an additional code to become familiar with beyond the Latin alphabet. It is not recommended for use with low-level ESL learners (Scott 2015) and its absence from primary education phonics programmes should tell us that the complication of an extra code system unnecessarily raises the level of challenge facing learners. It prevents many learners from understanding more about the sounds they are listening for by placing the focus on understanding the script rather than the alphabet's sound code.

3. Connected, natural speech
The speed, plasticity and messiness of natural spoken English relates very weakly to the careful speech model of classroom teaching, which presents words in citation form, standardised reduced forms, and, frequently, an erroneous focus on stress-timing (Cauldwell 2013). These changing sound-shapes of words in natural spontaneous speech and in different accents, and the reality of lack of stress-timed rhythm in natural speech, make the classroom careful speech model a barrier to understanding natural spoken language. Learners applying top-down listening for keywords in these situations are often frustrated by the lack of careful speech, yet the phonemic script does not give learners a system to understand how these sounds correlate to words, or how they are created by connected speech, speed and prominence.

Clearly, spelling words as they sound and using a phonemic script in teaching foreign language learners pronunciation in English have their disadvantages. This is why I turned to SP, which is a single approach to literacy teaching used in primary school to unlock the alphabetic code of English. According to the Department for Education and Skills (2007:2–3):

> SP aims to develop children's phonic knowledge and skills through exploring and explicitly teaching the sounds of English and accompanying spellings, and uses common spellings of sounds for phonic notation. Blending the component sounds of a word together to read, and segmenting words into their component sounds to spell is a central objective of the approach. Children should explore and apply the phonic knowledge and skills as opportunities arise, as well as in planned, teacher-led sessions.

I wanted to investigate whether SP could be recycled to provide EFL learners with a toolkit that would help them develop metacognitive awareness of how learners listen and what happens to words in natural speech, and start to train their listening in light of this new awareness. If SP usefully helped learners to identify the phonemes in written words and connected students' internal models of spoken words with the reality of spontaneous speech, it might improve learners' awareness of messy native speaker pronunciation and their ability to decode it.

## Context

My interest in listening comprehension began when I was working as my school's Level Assessment Test speaking examiner. For two years, I listened to high-level students producing grammatically laboured and lexically unnatural utterances. Through repeated conversations with learners and their teachers, I concluded that, despite having a high level of grammar and vocabulary, learners were missing out on the input of the English-speaking environment and media surrounding them, as they found this listening challenge uncompromisingly difficult, and were relying instead on much

more accessible classroom and self-generated learner English and printed (coursebook) texts to learn and practise their English. Three questions emerged:

1. If learners were able to decode and notice more of the natural speech all around them, would this become input and help learners' language align with natural English they will hear?
2. Was the inability to decode spoken English a factor in learners plateauing at intermediate level?
3. Could the SP that I use effectively with ESL beginner literacy (Scott 2015) also have uses beyond beginner level?

The research took place at St Giles International language school in Brighton. At any one time, the school has between 300 and 650 learners studying English on rolling-enrolment courses in mixed-nationality, level-based classes. The average age of students at the school is 26, and all are 16 or over, primarily studying for future education or employment opportunities. Students choose the length of time they enrol at the school, with learners staying for anywhere between one week and 11 months. Students also choose whether to study only a main course, or to take eight additional skills-focused afternoon lessons each week. These seemed the most appropriate context for my action research project, to avoid affecting learners' core courses.

## Participants

Cycle 1 began with 11 students, 10 women and one man aged between 18 and 48 with an average age of 25, of whom six completed the study. Their first languages were French, Swiss German, Korean, Chinese, and Arabic. Cycle 2 began with eight students, five men and three women, aged between 17 and 34; the average age was 22 and first languages were Arabic, Spanish, Korean, Swiss German and Japanese. Five remained for the whole research cycle. The control group was taken from another class of pre-intermediate learners (A2 on the Common European Framework of Reference, CEFR (Council of Europe 2001), who were also studying supplementary classes in the afternoons. Due to falling numbers of pre-intermediate students, it was only possible to have one control group without including some learners from Cycle 1.

## Methodology

The aim of the study was to introduce SP as a tool to help learners discover more about spoken English and to better align each student's internal models of what words and phonemes sound like with the variety of different pronunciations in natural, connected, spoken English. Pairwork tasks were central throughout the project, based on the understanding that learners needed to voice and hear sounds in order for them to interact with their own internally held models. Teaching techniques and activity types, detailed below, varied as the project progressed and were adapted in response to data gathered during the project.

My action research project involved two planned 4-week cycles of intervention, conducted with different pre-intermediate (A2 level) classes. Due to rolling-enrolment, only half of the students in each class remained for the whole of each 4-week study, and new students joined the classes during the study; however, new students were excluded from my analyses.

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected through learners' questionnaires (see Appendix 2) and quantitative data only was obtained through a listening test. At the beginning and end of each cycle, learners completed two, 6-point Likert scale questionnaires. The first questionnaire (adapted from Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal and Tafaghodtari 2006) required learners to report on their internal cognitive processes when listening, and reflect on their own perceptions of their ability to listen in English. The second questionnaire required them to report on their listening habits and their perceptions of their success at listening in different environments and with different speakers they have encountered in Brighton. The learners saw and discussed the questionnaires in pairs before providing individual written responses. I judged this necessary because learners were not reflective enough to begin with, and a prior discussion with a partner would give them room for thinking about and discussing their own listening actions, perceptions and habits.

Students' ability to recognise individual words, pronounced as if they were part of natural speech, was also tested at the start of the action research cycle through a discrete-item listening test of 50 individual words selected at random from the first 1,000 most frequent words (K1 list) in the British National Corpus (BNC). Although the test only contained isolated words, I voiced and recorded these words as they are often pronounced in natural, connected speech, e.g. *family* /f- a-m-l-i/ (/fæmlɪ/). I chose an individual item test to avoid giving learners co-text which might help identify the words, and to avoid gap-fills which may allow them to draw on reading skills and grammatical knowledge in producing an answer.

After the first week of Cycle 1, I gave students an open questionnaire to identify learner opinions on their experience of the intervention, which would help me adapt my teaching approach, if necessary.

At the end of the cycle, learners took another 50-word listening test using different words from the same K1 list. Learners also completed a questionnaire which repeated questions from the diagnostic questionnaires. This was done to gauge changes in learners' perceptions of their listening ability and the challenges they identified between the start and end of the cycle, and also included questions about their experience of the intervention and using SP. Learners also participated in an end-of-cycle group feedback discussion, and answered questions about the course here and in the questionnaire already mentioned. There was a control group of students from another pre-intermediate class, which also took the listening tests but were not part of the intervention.

## Cycle 1

Cycle 1 began with 11 students, with six completing the study. The students agreed to take part in the study and were interested in the problems they have with understanding natural spoken English.

Each week consisted of four 100-minute afternoon listening and vocabulary lessons, using listening recordings sourced from listening practice resource books (see Teaching Resources reference list) and BBC *Words in the News* recordings. However, the teaching approach in Cycle 1 evolved into three distinct stages, described below, as I adapted my method in response to learners' feedback and time constraints. I monitored learners and the effectiveness of teaching materials during the lessons, and completed a weekly self-reflection on the process.

**Week 1**

Learners completed conventional gist and detail listening comprehension tasks. In addition, I taught between four and six new SP symbols, introducing them largely in the order prescribed for introducing letters of the alphabet in the UK national curriculum's *Letters and Sounds* syllabus (Department for Education and Skills 2007). My selected listening recordings were rich in these sounds, and I asked learners to look at the recording transcript and find words and phrases containing these sounds. The purpose was to identify the many spellings that could represent these sounds, and contrast these with the SP symbol which correlated with one spelling, and then review these features of letter-sound correspondence in practice activities. It became clear that this approach was not effective: identification and practice tasks were repetitive and lacked scaffolding to make them achievable, as well as a confidence-building element for pre-intermediate learners. I realised that the drip-feed approach used in children's literacy teaching required further adaptation for adult ESL listening lessons. The open questionnaire students completed after week 1 of the cycle reported that students found the sounds work boring. Learners also commented that they were finding sounds extremely hard to identify in written words. Informed by this feedback, I re-evaluated my approach to presenting and using SP in the classroom.

**Weeks 2 and 3**

In weeks 2 and 3, we moved from simply identifying a fixed set of phonemes to a more varied task set. As SP is based on the existing alphabet and the most common spelling of a sound is used as a phonics symbol to represent each sound, I decided that learners would be able to cope with the characters as sounds. Therefore, I set learners more specific tasks which used any of the SP symbols. I designed targeted post-listening tasks using SP to help learners: 1) address features of sound-spelling (mis-)correlation in vocabulary; 2) decode chunks of natural speech in recordings; and 3) highlight features of connected speech found in texts, e.g. weak forms, linking, and final consonant omission. Tasks required learners to identify words and phrases, their natural pronunciation written in SP, to identify specific natural speech features within typed transcripts or extracts from the recordings, or to label words and chunks with specific sounds.

**Week 4**

The time and effort taken producing new materials for four 100-minute classes a week meant I was unable to keep up the pace, and students were finding tasks repetitive. Learners continued to practise listening to recordings, study new vocabulary, and use phrases and vocabulary in communicative tasks, but without directly using it in tasks. To retain a phonics focus, I decided to use SP only as a teacher tool, rather like the phonemic script and see how learners responded. I wrote my teacher input – tasks, questions, vocabulary and feedback – in SP rather than normal text to keep SP present and accessible to learners, but in a passive, awareness-raising role.

## Key findings for Cycle 1

**Learners' listening habits**

At the beginning and the end of the cycle, I asked learners a set of the same questions about their listening habits to identify any potential change in habits (see Table 1). Before the intervention, learners frequently practised listening outside class. A majority of learners in Cycle 1 said they engaged with listening both with other students and host families or other local people every day, and some even dedicated time to pronunciation practice. The intervention encouraged learners a little to do more listening outside school, with the largest change in reported behaviours around the use of recorded listening materials. However, the number of students reportedly participating in conversations with local people, e.g. host families, fell.

**Table 1: Learners' listening habits: percentage agreement with behaviour statements**

| Behaviour | Before AR* | After AR |
|---|---|---|
| I listen to English a lot outside class | 77% | 81% |
| I listen and speak English with other students after school every day | 74% | 75% |
| I listen and speak English with local people after school every day | 76% | 67% |
| I listen to recorded speaking every day | 47% | 60% |
| I do pronunciation practice hearing the different sounds of English | 65% | 60% |

**Students' attitudes to listening**

*Questionnaires*

I wrote and adapted questionnaires to collect data from learners. As I was unsure of the learners' abilities to reflect on their listening I chose to use a 6-point Likert scale to challenge learners to think about their listening and avoid the potential for neutral answers. Data from the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires is presented below.

At the start of the research cycle, all learners but one felt listening comprehension was a challenge for them, although as many as six thought that they understood a lot when they listened. About a half thought listening in English is more difficult than other language skills (see Figure 1).

Further questionnaire responses indicated that the intervention raised learners' awareness of how much of the fabric of natural speech they were not comprehending. When comparing the opinions of learners before and after the action research cycle (see Figure 2), a majority of learners felt they did not understand a lot, even after the intervention, although learners' listening ability had not regressed.

**Figure 1: Cycle 1 students' difficulties with listening**

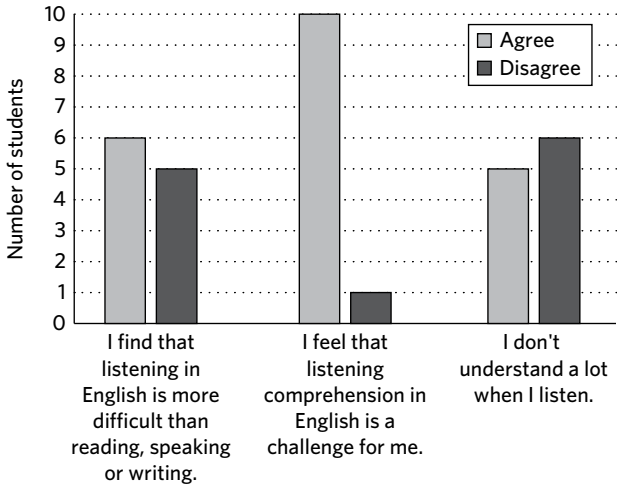



**Figure 2: Cycle 1 students' self-assessment of listening ability before and after intervention**

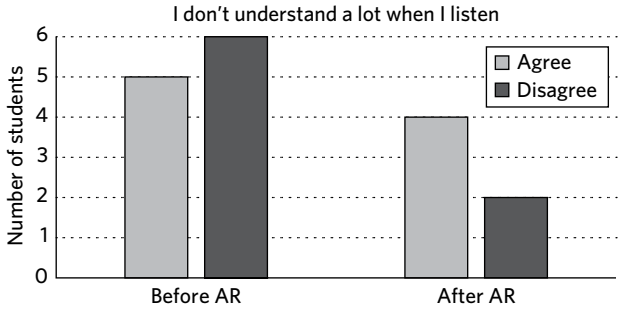



Figure 3 shows that learners reported a desire to understand every word when listening, and that no learners disagreed with this statement at the end of the intervention. Although this is seen as an unachievable learning aim, the intervention had made learners aware of letter-sound correspondence, and also of the amount of content that they were missing while listening. This result suggests that the intervention made learners keener to understand, and correlates with the increase in the frequency with which they listened to recorded speaking after this intervention (see Table 1).

**Figure 3: How much Cycle 1 students want to understand**

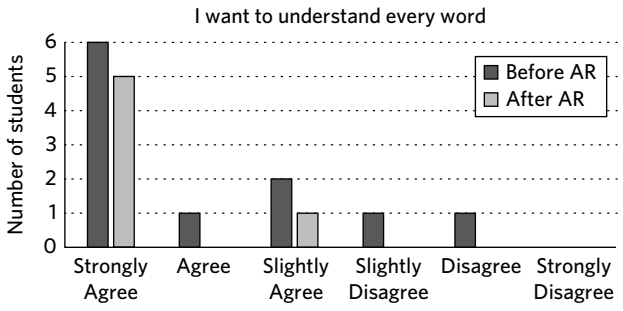
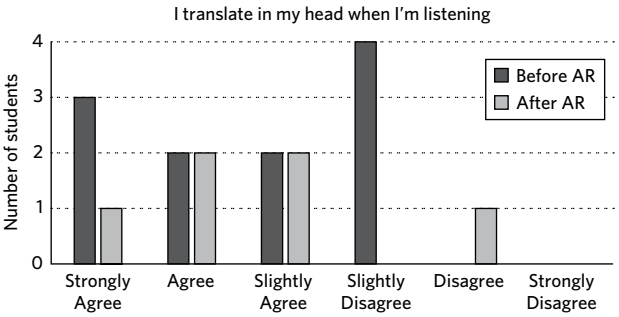



Figure 4 shows that whether learners translate while listening was unaffected by the intervention. Low-proficiency language users have not achieved automaticity in language processing, and therefore translation is expected as a mechanism for understanding (Cook and Liddicoat 2002). Therefore, increased reported bottom-up translation would indicate some improved ability to decode the sounds of speech into words. No increase indicated that learners are still waiting to catch content words from the stream of speech, which they can use to construct a working understanding of the situation.

**Figure 4: Level of translation when listening among Cycle 1 students**




Overall, the data indicate that the intervention made learners aware of the letter-sound correspondences and we see an increased desire to understand every word. However, the reported lack of change in translation levels and increased feeling of not understanding a lot while listening display a move towards conscious incompetence, but no improvement in actual listening abilities.

*Student focus group feedback*

At the end of the cycle, learners participated in a focus group discussion of the intervention for around 20 minutes. All learners expressed some insecurities over their listening abilities in general. Learners generally said: 'I like listen, but sometimes is speaking too fast'.

Learners reported that the intervention was boring, repetitive, and sometimes unnecessary:

> Asma: 'The teacher give us the listening more time, the first week or the second week it's okay but after that boring, yes [laughs] but after two weeks or three weeks different listening than before I think better than when the listening a long time.'
>
> Sandro: 'I can listening all the day outside. When I in the class I want more study vocabulary for things for working, the activities and other. It's not so important the listening.'

Two learners thought the intervention benefitted their vocabulary rather than their listening, as many (spoken) texts were used to introduce and recycle lexis: 'You can improve your vocabulary when you listen more and more.'

Similarly, one student enjoyed the listening focus but identified inconsistency in her ability to understand the recordings of natural speech used during the intervention: 'I like listen because sometimes you don't understand nothing but sometimes you can understand some word.' These comments related to the listening tasks, rather than the focus on sounds.

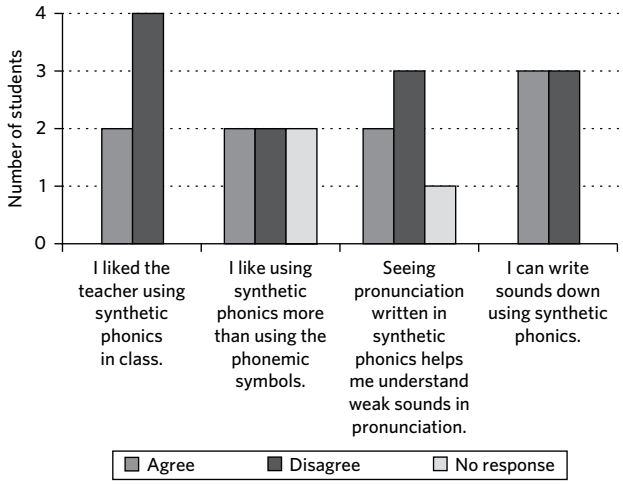
**Students' attitudes towards synthetic phonics**

*Questionnaires*

At the end of the intervention, the questionnaire required learners to comment on the use of SP. There were six respondents who had completed Cycle 1. Figure 5 shows the majority of learners did not like them being used, and thought they did not help to understand weak forms, a vital part of natural pronunciation. The number of learners able and unable to actually transcribe sounds into SP is equal, as is the number

who preferred using SP over the phonemic script, although two learners did not respond to the question.

**Figure 5: Cycle 1 students' perceptions of synthetic phonics**




This data shows that the intervention was not successful in engaging learners with SP as a useful tool, and therefore I questioned the validity of my assumptions. This was also in agreement with the negative feedback learners gave of SP after the first week of the intervention.

*Student focus group feedback*

Students had clear opinions of the SP focus of the lessons, and these varied in Cycle 1. Note that respondents used the word 'sounds' rather than synthetic phonics, as this is the term that learners had preferred in the class. Half of the learners said SP was boring, e.g. 'Some students, they feel very bored in class, very boring'. One learner had a strong resistance to being taught 'sounds': 'This don't helping me when for speaking – I need more vocabulary no sounds.' There was also a consensus that 'sounds' were challenging to study: 'Of course the spelling is different with sounds; it's difficult for me.'

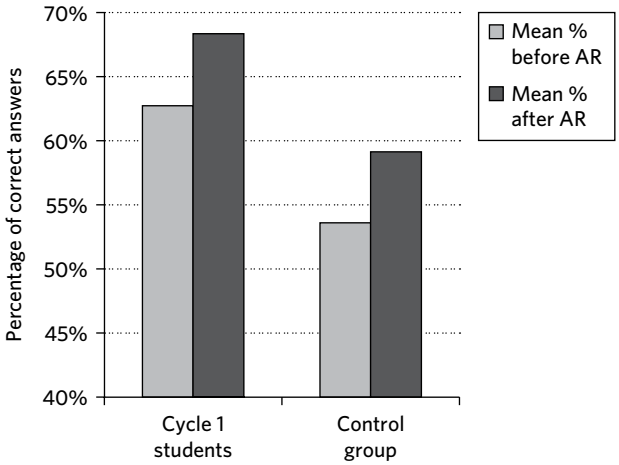
However, two students were clear that learning 'sounds' met one of their learning needs, although their focus was on speaking rather than listening: 'Sometime is help me pronunciation is very important that sounds when you try say something.'

Students clearly did not enjoy using synthetic phonics very much, and this was likely due to task design and the lack of scaffolding for activities. This caused me to reconsider my approach to using SP in class, which informed my action research Cycle 2.

**Listening tests**

The results of the pre- and post-intervention listening tests corroborated the lack of impact of SP teaching that the other data show. The results of the discrete item listening test (Figure 6) show that learners in both Cycle 1 and the control group improved their ability to decode individual words uttered in a natural, non-citation/dictionary form, between the beginning and the end of the course period. Both groups achieved about 5.5 per cent increase. This identical improvement indicates that the intervention had no effect on the listening abilities the test measured.

**Figure 6: Listening test scores – Cycle 1 students and a control group**




## Cycle 2

Similarly to Cycle 1, Cycle 2 also consisted of four weeks of four 100-minute afternoon listening and vocabulary lessons. I also used listening recordings sourced from listening practice resource books (see Teaching Resources reference list) and BBC *Words in the News* recordings. However, in response to the mixed successes of Cycle 1, I introduced the new group of learners to the idea of SP and the entire SP code in the first lesson of Cycle 2. I gave each student a colour copy of the teacher's alphabetic code reference table, containing example words for each spelling of each sound (see Appendix 1). Students used these throughout the course to develop their intuitions about pronunciation and for support when approaching new, more challenging tasks involving SP. I continued developing materials and adapting resources from Cycle 1 to improve the quality and range of input learners received.

Throughout Cycle 2, learners continued to listen to and answer questions on listening passages, and in addition each lesson had a theme which helped to support personalisation through speaking tasks around the topic, using target vocabulary and sounds from SP tasks. Students completed SP tasks from, and similar to those used in weeks 2 and 3 of Cycle 1. The intention was to help learners notice the connections and differences between the spellings and the sounds of the words. A further addition was that I asked learners to transcribe the individual sounds from phrases in recordings into words, and in reverse. This helped learners to identify sounds from written words and phrases, and transcribe them into SP characters. Learners used these words or chunks in more familiar, controlled practice activities. Lessons themes included friendship, work, etc., which helped learners relate lesson content to their own experience in pair-work discussions and group feedback. As in Cycle 1, lessons involved addressing sound-spelling (mis-)correlation in new vocabulary, decoding chunks of speech, and unpacking the connected speech in texts.

## Key findings – Cycle 2

**Learners' listening habits**

As shown in Table 2, learners in Cycle 2 did not practise listening much outside class before the action research

cycle, with few reporting speaking with host families or other local people, or practising pronunciation as part of their private studies. However, post-intervention, Cycle 2 learners' reported listening habits changed a lot. After the intervention, a majority of students practised listening outside class, with all three initial statements seeing a change in attitude and practice, denoting a reported change in students' level of listening awareness. The largest increases were in learners listening to English outside class and listening to other students after class. Time for dedicated pronunciation practice rose, although fewer listened to recorded texts.

**Table 2: Cycle 2 learner habits: percentage agreement with behaviour statements**

| Behaviour | Before AR* | After AR |
|---|---|---|
| I listen to English a lot outside class | 65% | 88% |
| I listen and speak English with other students after school every day | 63% | 77% |
| I listen and speak English with local people after school every day | 44% | 50% |
| I listen to recorded speaking every day | 50% | 43% |
| I do pronunciation practice hearing the different sounds of English | 44% | 40% |

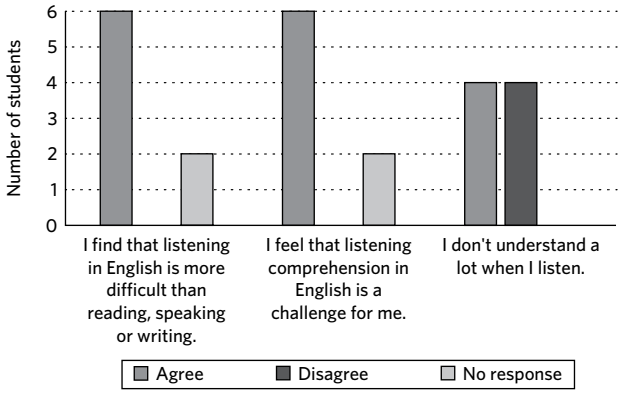
## Students' attitudes to listening

*Questionnaires*

Learners completed the same questionnaires at the start and the end of Cycle 2, as in Cycle 1.

Figure 7 shows that most learners in Cycle 2 felt that listening comprehension was a challenge for them, with half stating they did not understand a lot when they listened and that they thought listening was more difficult for them than other English language skills.

**Figure 7: Cycle 2 students' difficulties with listening**




It is clear from Figure 8 that more Cycle 2 learners reported after the intervention that they did not understand a lot when they listened. However, it is unlikely that their listening abilities declined. It is more likely that their awareness had been raised, resulting in a realigned judgement of how much they understand.

However, learners still wanted to understand every word after the intervention (see Figure 9), which was also the case

**Figure 8: Cycle 2 students' self-assessment of listening ability before and after intervention**

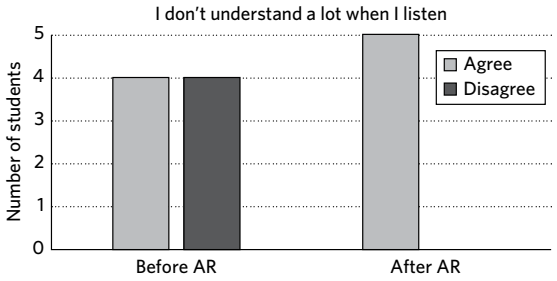
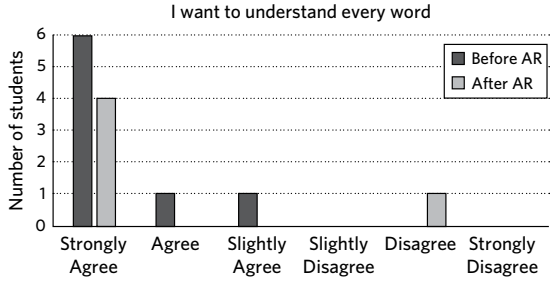


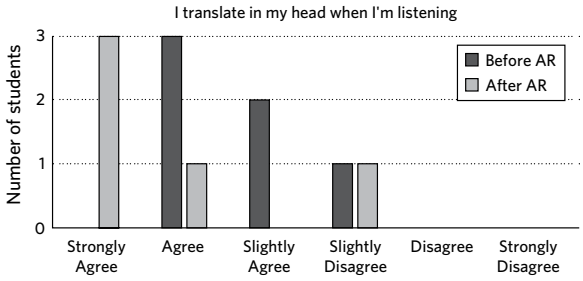

**Figure 9: How much Cycle 2 students want to understand**




in Cycle 1. This indicates that although awareness about the scale of the challenge of understanding every word had been raised, it had not stopped students from having this as a goal.

Figure 10 shows that by the end of the intervention, the degree to which learners reported translating when they listened had become stronger. This finding potentially indicates an improved ability to decode natural speech, and translate it to understand, as discussed above. As pre-intermediate learners are still unable to understand a lot of the content words used, but are very familiar with the high-frequency function words which account for so much spoken language and are usually reduced in natural, connected speech, this indicates that some improvement in understanding had been achieved through SP teaching.

**Figure 10: Level of translation when listening among Cycle 2 students**




Data indicates that Cycle 2 had more impact as pre-and post-intervention questionnaire results varied more than in Cycle 1, including students engaging in more spoken interaction. As in Cycle 1, students became more aware of the challenges of listening, reporting increased inability to understand, however it also appeared that the impact was positive as translation of known content increased, meaning more was being decoded.

*Student focus group feedback*

At the end of Cycle 2 feedback discussion, learners reported general difficulty with, and poor confidence in

listening: 'It is quite difficult try to listen.' 'I don't have confidence to listen English.'

One student wanted to get very involved with individual texts: 'maybe we make our lesson so we upload this listening recording we can connect yes again listen so we repeat again.'

However, when asked about the heavy listening focus in classes, learners spoke about how much they had learned about listening and letter-sound correspondences: 'Although I am a little bit tired [in] the afternoon class, for me I like listen because this is the [inaudible] for me, I feel my listening is better than the weeks before.'

I asked for more details on how learners had improved, and four were sure that listening had helped learn new vocabulary: 'Yes obviously my listening it is improved, improved everyday, obviously I catch more words.'

> Jose: 'You play the listening a lot of words I believe alright yes I heard this I had this word and I sure but when you see all when you study the sounds yeah no is not true.'

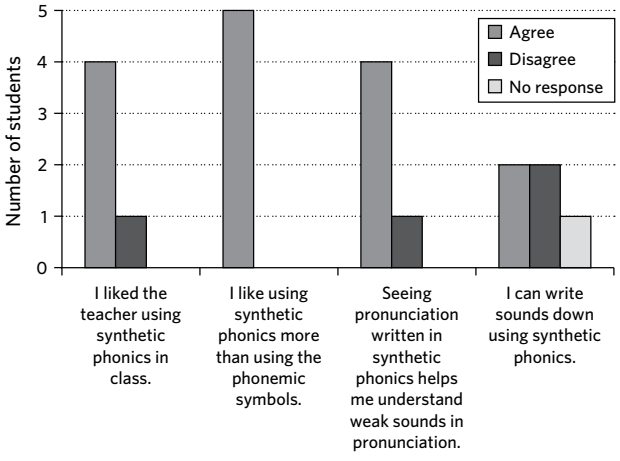
Jose also summarised the feelings of many in the group that the process of listening is an ongoing practice: 'it's a beginning it is not the finish of the course yes now I feel a bit confused and not total confused when I start listening class listening practice.'

### Students' attitudes towards synthetic phonics

*Questionnaires*

In the final questionnaire, learners were asked several questions about the experience with SP. Cycle 2 responses (see Figure 11) showed a strong level of positive engagement: all students preferred them to the phonemic script and most liked the teacher using them. Students found that SP helped them to understand weak sounds in pronunciation, which corresponds with their reported increased ability to translate in their heads when listening. However, still only half the learners felt able to transcribe sounds into SP, as with Cycle 1. This indicates that although materials had a much better impact on learning than in Cycle 1, they still lacked a productive element that was adequate for all learners to begin to use SP independently.

**Figure 11: Cycle 2 students' perceptions of synthetic phonics**




*Student focus group feedback*

Students had clear opinions of the SP focus of the lessons. Note that students used the word 'sounds' rather than SP, as this is the term that they had preferred in the class.

Learners had not always found the SP activities an interesting way of studying English, but nevertheless emphasised they perceived them as important:

> Jose: 'but it is boring but obviously it is necessary'
>
> Jason: 'I think it can be boring to us and we can't imagine and match the shape of mouth and the pronunciation, so sometimes we confused but your method is necessary to improve our listening but sometimes we should watch it [mouths speaking]'

All learners reported positively on SP as a teaching tool: 'Afternoon class, it's very good for me about difficult special sounds' and found it useful in meeting the difficulties posed by the features of natural spoken English: 'The best thing for me is I know I can learn the connection sound.'

One student specifically mentioned the alphabetic code chart that learners were given: 'The sounds table helped us to understand more easy, easier than before' and another felt that phonics were not taught enough and wanted more practice: 'I want to repeat more same listening same sounds because I forgot.'

Students also held a common perception that they could hear more because of the SP work: 'I can listen the words because I know some sounds in my mind.' Some work focused on the sound of individual words with weak orthography, which learners needed help with: 'Some words I can't believe the sounds but it's okay this is the English language.'

Learners also discussed the difficulties with understanding connected speech. Students felt that the intervention had helped with making this connection: 'I listened just sounds I can make it words; I can hear more words than before yes.'

One student thought the SP had a strong impact on listening and beyond: 'I feel my listening is better than the weeks before and especially the pronunciation and it is good for me the sounds.'

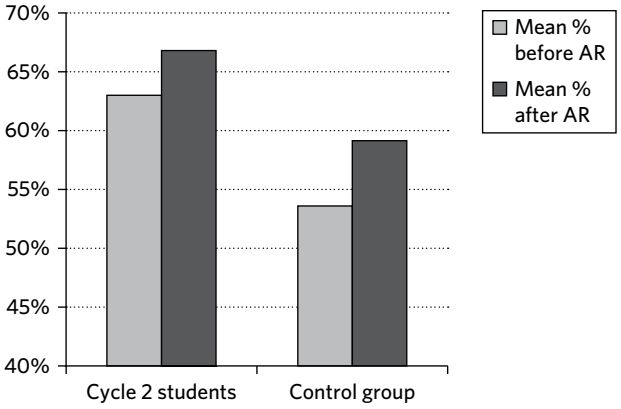
This data indicates that the study was successful in integrating SP teaching with this group of learners, although limits are recognised as learners sometimes felt bored, as in Cycle 1. The difference was that although more communicative tasks were needed, learners still judged that their listening had improved in a noticeable way.

### Listening tests

The students took pre- and post-intervention 50-word listening tests with words chosen from the BNC 1K list.

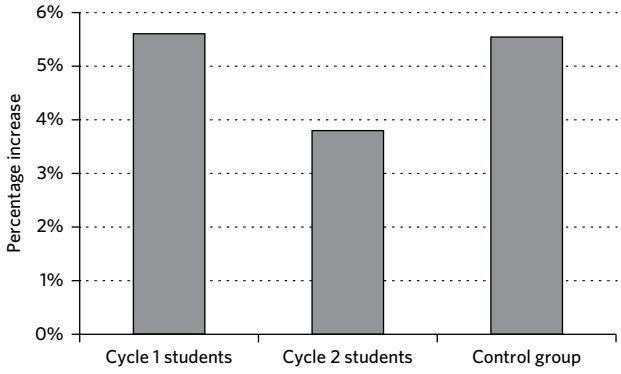
The discrete item listening test results for Cycle 2 showed learners improved by 4% while the project control group achieved a 6% increase (see Figure 12). However, this finding contradicts the feedback from learners, who stated that their listening had improved during the intervention. This leads me to question whether learners' listening abilities had been affected in a way that the discrete item listening test did not measure. I realised that, in an effort to test only listening ability and no other language knowledge, I created a listening test that contained isolated words. Through decontextualising the words effectively, every word had become a stressed word, not hidden in a challenging stream of natural speech. Therefore, the listening test did not test learners' ability to comprehend words in a stream of natural, connected speech, or decode runs of function words within it, as originally intended.

**Figure 12: Listening test scores – Cycle 2 students and a control group**




The test produced similar scores in the control group and in both intervention cycles (see Figure 13). However, this does not reflect the feeling of improvement reported by Cycle 2 respondents in questionnaire and interviews. In sum, the listening test did not identify any improvement due to the intervention and the group with more positive self-assessment (Cycle 2 group) performed worse on the test than the control group and Cycle 1. However, learners' feedback obtained both from a questionnaire and a focus group indicated that Cycle 2

**Figure 13: Listening test score increases**




had a more positive impact than Cycle 1. It is possible that the test may have been unable to measure the improvements that had been made, or that they were still negligible and that one month is too short a time period to see measurable results.

## Discussion of the findings

Difficulties in week 1 of Cycle 1 revealed a lot about learners' level of awareness of the sounds of English and how they related to the written forms of vocabulary and grammar that had been the focus of their learning. Problems demonstrated that some of my assumptions about what learners hear when listening are rather tenuous, and underline the need for better teaching of listening to natural speech. These difficulties raised an affective barrier to SP, sometimes making learners visibly bored. This ultimately limited the impact that SP teaching had on the learning which took place, discussed below.

Boredom with materials was a factor in both research cycles, although the initial student-led task-based approach taken in Cycle 1 had a greater negative impact, raising negative learner affect. The revised approach in Cycle 2 left learners accepting some boredom as a necessary part of this type of studying. Task design certainly reduced the overall potential for learning to take place compared to more communicative activities. However, I was keen not to make this a speaking pronunciation course, so caution was a necessary part of an experiment with methodology, especially after the problems encountered in the first cycle.

While in qualitative feedback on Cycle 2 learners said their listening had improved, the results of the discrete item listening tests contradicted this, indicating SP's failure to support listening. Both cycles and the control group saw similar levels of improvement. Should we question the validity of a discrete-item test for testing this manner of listening? I chose this test type to avoid learners being helped by written questions which might enable them to identify the word being tested (Field 2014). However, I became concerned that the listening sub-skill it would test was exactly the keyword-catching, top-down listening skill that learners are already practising in listening classes, and may reflect study which has little connection with the research.

The discrete-item test did not allow for the presence of any features of natural, connected or spontaneous speech that learners struggle with. Neither did it test the multi-word chunks of reduced words that squash between the stressed keyword syllables. These were the original object of my thoughts on how SP might help learners. It was an oversight (but also an importance source of learning) not to realise that the test may be an entirely inaccurate measure of the ability under scrutiny, however focusing on the need for a test of listening it is quite possible I overlooked the content it needed to test. Clearly, it is necessary for a better formal assessment to be developed for any future cycle of research.

SP seemed to both increase learner awareness of how much they did not understand, according to questionnaires, but learners also commented that they did understand more than before the intervention, stating: 'very nice for me it [listening] is I, I feel, better', 'for me I feel my listening is better' and 'yes obviously my listening it is improved'. Their emphatic tone points towards SP's potential as a developmental tool for listening abilities. Comments about the difficulties they had in associating sounds with spellings point to the unmanaged challenges of English orthography for ESL learners, while the impact SP had in both raising these issues and guiding learners through some of them, highlights its potential.

The intervention raised learners' awareness of listening as a developmental tool, and increased its practice, albeit in different ways. Unfortunately, this research is unable to give any definitive answers to the research questions. Possibly, the limited success with SP teaching in Cycle 1 made learners more comfortable studying listening using recorded speech, and more successful teaching in Cycle 2 encouraged learners to engage with difficult, natural speech more. Alternatively, the mere focus on listening perhaps gave learners the confidence to give more time to listening. Certainly, both cycles raised learners' awareness of the amount of content that they do not understand when they are listening.

The approach in Cycle 2 benefitted significantly from what I learned during in Cycle 1, which asked learners to do too much with too little scaffolding, and revealed that the Department

for Education and Skills approach for literacy could not transfer unadapted to the adult English language teaching setting, as reflected on as part of the action research process.

Giving learners an SP code reference sheet benefitted them, scaffolding their development through classroom activities which were more focused. While these received better responses from learners, they were still somewhat transcription-based and comments made by learners in Cycle 2 about forgetting sounds highlight the need for tasks to include more interactive games and communicative activities, in order to help recycle and personalise learners' understanding of sounds. However, it is reflections on the action research process that have revealed this; I was unable to develop these tasks during Cycle 2 itself, although I knew something was lacking.

Cycle 2 learners' clear preference for SP over the phonemic script showed it can be used successfully to help learners decode more natural speech. However, students' limited achievement writing SP, possibly due to a lack of communicative activities, leaves its power as an independent study tool in question.

The questionnaire data raise two further questions. First, whether the degree of successful teaching in each cycle affected changes in learners' reported desire to understand every word when listening, and second, whether any success with using SP caused the increase in learners translating every word when listening. Did more words in chunks of natural speech become comprehensible, whereas before learners were mostly catching keywords? Has SP teaching made natural speech more accessible to learners? Certainly, Cycle 2 students fed back that the intervention had helped them understand more.

## Reflections

Pursuing this research project has felt overwhelming at times. Nevertheless it has been an invaluable learning experience, engaging me in a remarkably interesting process which has informed my classroom practice, changing my approach to oral skills, asking students for more feedback, and encouraging learners to take ownership of their studies. It has also challenged my intuitions, and helped me to question them more freely.

Teaching listening certainly requires more development, as learners receive little guidance on how to listen, and what to listen for in the sounds they will hear. My action research project enabled learners to involve themselves more deeply in listening to natural speech, and revealed a commitment and concern for listening practice that I had not appreciated was there. Although particular texts were a little beyond learners' reach in work with SP and the sounds of English, this highlighted the limits of learners' listening abilities at pre-intermediate level.

Learners in Cycle 1 were studying with the approach evolving in front of them, which led to many learners dismissing SP. This made the results gained from Cycle 1 quite different from Cycle 2, and almost made it a control group of teaching pronunciation without a very effective tool, as is current practice with the phonemic script. It made me realise that in research, failure brings as many rewards as success, and reminded me that mistakes are the best teacher, as I often tell my students.

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## Teaching resources


BBC Learning English, *Words in the News*, available online: www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/language/wordsinthenews/

Flint, C and Flockhart, J (2013) *English for Life Listening*, London: Collins.

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## Appendix 1: Synthetic Phonics English Alphabetic Code Reference Chart

**Synthetic Phonics**
/s-i-n-th-e-t-i k-f-o-n-i-k-s/

**English Alphabetic Code Reference Chart**
/i-n-g-l-i sh-a-l-f-uh-b-e-t-i k-oh r-e-f-r-uh-n-s-ch-ah/

Consonant sounds are in **blue** and vowel sounds are in **red**. Spellings for each sound are in **green**.

| units of sound | example words with different spellings (graphemes) | units of sound | example words with different spellings (graphemes) |
|---|---|---|---|
| /s/ | snake glass palace house scissors cents city cycle castle psychology | /oh/ | soap know go toes hope although plateau |
| /a/ | apple | /igh/ | night tie behind fly bike either eye height |
| /t/ | toy letter watched debt receipt | /ee/ | see eat equal concrete key thief police sunny monkey movie |
| /i/ | insect exam/houses/wanted orange cylinder | /or/ | fork door snore roar four dawn sauce chalk wardrobe water caught thought |
| [schwa] /uh/ | never humour theatre again/local/an nervous activity/ordinary of/from/nation problem | /z/ | zebra jazz fries cheese sneeze |
| /p/ | pen happen | /ng/ | song longer |
| /n/ | net connect know sign engine | /ngk/ | think uncle |
| /k/ | kite cat duck school bouquet unique biscuit | /v/ | very love |
| /e/ | egg head said leisure | /oo/ | book should push |
| /h/ | hat who | /ue/ | moon blue use news fruit soup move through |

| units of sound | example words with different spellings (graphemes) | units of sound | example words with different spellings (graphemes) |
|---|---|---|---|
| /r/ | rat arrow write rhythm | /ks/ | fox books ducks cakes |
| /m/ | map summer thumb welcome autumn | /gz/ | pegs eggs exam |
| /d/ | dog middle rained | /ch/ | chair picture watch /ch-r/ train tree |
| /g/ | girl bigger guitar ghost colleague | /sh/ | sheep chef station special professional tissue |
| /o/ | orange watch quality salt | /th/ | [UNVOICED ⇝] three [VOICED ⇝] there |
| /u/ | umbrella son touch borough | /kw/ | queen liquid |
| /l/ | ladder well | /aw/ | out town plough towel |
| /ul/ | kettle pencil hospital level | /oy/ | point toy |
| /f/ | feathers cliff photograph laugh | /y-ue/ | university continue tube new neutral |
| /b/ | bat rabbit buy | /er/ | her birthday turn early work |
| /j/ | job change general original fridge | /ah/ | party father palm half halves grass laugh |
| /y/ | yes | /air/ | hair share wear where area their aero |
| /ey/ | main day table sundae cake they great eight straight | /ee-y-uh/ | career years here happier serious |
| /w/ | web wheel penguin | /zh/ | decision measure seizure courgette collage |

Sounds are "written" in slash marks **/s/** and separated by dashes /d-a-sh-i-z/.

Some sounds change in different accents, so no chart is for every accent, but this can be adapted for local pronunciation. Additional sound code (extra letter-sound matches) can be added with example words.

# Appendix 2: Data collection instruments

**Research Questionnaire 1**

Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ)

Compare your answers to these questions with your partner.

Write your personal answers on the page.

| | **Questions about what you do when you listen to English.** | **strongly agree** | **agree** | **slightly agree** | **slightly disagree** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Before I start to listen, I have a plan in my head for how I am going to listen. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 2. | I focus harder on listening when understanding is difficult. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 3. | I find that listening in English is more difficult than reading, speaking, or writing in English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 4. | I translate in my head as I listen. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 5. | I use the words I understand to guess the meaning of the words I don't understand. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 6. | When my mind wanders, I recover my concentration right away. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 7. | As I listen, I compare what I understand with what I know about the topic. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 8. | I feel that listening in English is difficult for me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 9. | I use my experience and knowledge to help me understand. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 10. | Before listening, I think of similar texts that I may have listened to. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 11. | I translate key words as I listen. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 12. | I try to refocus on listening when I stop concentrating. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 13. | As I listen, I quickly change my ideas if I realize that they are not correct. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 14. | After listening, I think back to how I listened, and about what I might do differently next time. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 15. | I don't feel nervous when I listen to English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 16. | When I have difficulty understanding what I hear, I give up and stop listening. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 17. | I use the general idea of the text to help me guess the meaning of the words that I don't understand. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 18. | I translate word by word, as I listen. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 19. | When I guess the meaning of a word, I think about everything else that I have heard, to see if my guess makes sense. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 20. | As I listen, I think about whether I am satisfied with my level of comprehension. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 21. | I have a goal in mind as I listen. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

Adapted from Vandergrift, L, Goh, C M, Mareschal, C J and Tafaghodtari, M H (2006)

**Research Questionnaire 2**

| **Questions about you and listening to English** | **strongly agree** | **agree** | **slightly agree** | **slightly disagree** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **How much do you listen in English?** | | | | |
| I listen to English a lot outside class | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I listen and speak English with other students after school every day | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I listen and speak English with local people after school every day | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I listen to recorded speaking every day. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I do pronunciation practise hearing the different sounds of English | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| **How much do you understand when you listen?** | | | | |
| I understand what my teacher says. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I understand what my classmates from other languages say in English. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I understand what my classmates from my language say in English. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I understand what my host family say. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I understand TV programmes and films in English. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I understand people in Brighton. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| | | | | |
| **How difficult do you think listening is?** | | | | |
| I don't understand a lot when I listen | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I understand other students more than local English people | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I understand other students more than teachers | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I understand teachers more than local English people | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

**Research Questionnaire 2 (continued)**

| **Questions about you and listening to English** | **strongly agree** | **agree** | **slightly agree** | **slightly disagree** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **How difficult do you think listening is?** | | | | |
| I know the sounds but I can't understand the words | O | O | O | O |
| I hear some words but they don't help me understand the meaning | O | O | O | O |
| I can't hear the grammar so I can't understand the information | O | O | O | O |
| **What do you want to do when you listen?** | | | | |
| I want to understand enough to get the information 1 need | O | O | O | O |
| I want to understand every word | O | O | O | O |
| I want people to speak more clearly to help me understand | O | O | O | O |

| **About you:** | |
|---|---|
| Where are you from and what language do you speak? | |
| How old are you? | |
| How long have you studied English in total? | |
| How long have you studied in English-speaking countries in total? | |

**End of cycle questionnaire**

| **Questions about you, this course, and listening to English** | **strongly agree** | **agree** | **slightly agree** | **slightly disagree** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| I don't understand a lot when I listen | O | O | O | O |
| I understand other students more than local English people | O | O | O | O |
| I understand other students more than teachers | O | O | O | O |
| I want to understand everything when I listen | O | O | O | O |
| I translate in my head when I'm listening | O | O | O | O |
| When I have difficulty understanding what I hear, I give up and stop listening | O | O | O | O |
| As I listen, I periodically ask myself if I am satisfied with my level of comprehension | O | O | O | O |
| | | | | |
| I enjoyed the listening classes in this course | O | O | O | O |
| The listening classes helped to improve my listening | O | O | O | O |
| I liked the teacher using synthetic phonics in class | O | O | O | O |
| Understanding is difficult when they don't say grammar words clearly | O | O | O | O |
| Learning how speakers stress some words is helpful | O | O | O | O |
| Seeing pronunciation written in synthetic phonics helps me understand weak sounds in pronunciation | O | O | O | O |
| I like using synthetic phonics more than using the phonemic symbols | O | O | O | O |
| I can write sounds down using synthetic phonics | O | O | O | O |
| | | | | |
| I listen to English a lot outside class | O | O | O | O |
| I listen to and speak English with other students after school every day | O | O | O | O |
| I listen to and speak English with local people after school every day | O | O | O | O |
| I listen to recorded speaking every day | O | O | O | O |
| I do pronunciation practice hearing the different sounds of English | O | O | O | O |
| | | | | |

| | |
|---|---|
| Where are you from | |
| What language do you speak? | |
| How old are you? | |
| How long have you studied English in total? | |
| How long have you studied in an English-speaking countries in total? | |

# Can learners make realistic peer assessments of oral presentations?

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## Introduction

The purpose of this action research project was to explore ways of helping my students to make realistic peer assessments of oral presentation skills. Oral presentations form part of the formal assessment of their coursework and in recent years these presentations have been assessed by peers. My previous experience of peer assessment on the course was not positive, although I was aware that it is widely used in higher education and is seen as an effective way to give students opportunities for learning through assessment.

## Context and participants

The participants in this project were 18 students at Bell Cambridge on a foundation year, a course which prepares overseas students for undergraduate degree programmes taught in English. There were 10 male and 8 female students aged between 17 and 23. They were taught in two groups (A and B), each with nine students. Students in Group A were assessed as having a higher language proficiency on entry at B2+ level while students in Group B were assessed at B1 and B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001).

Students on the course are required to give two oral presentations: a group presentation and an individual presentation. Presentation skills are assessed through peer assessment while a separate assessment of speaking skills is made by the course tutor.

On previous courses peer assessment involved organising peer assessors into groups of three or four and asking them to agree a mark for each presentation. The assessment criteria were few in number and rather generalised and the assessors were not asked to provide written or oral comments on the presentations. I experienced a degree of dissatisfaction with this mode of assessment for several reasons. Firstly, the marks awarded by peers rarely differentiated between one presentation and another and the marks were often higher than I thought justified. Also, my students sometimes appeared to be less than fully engaged in the assessment process, even to the extent of sometimes paying little attention to the presentations of other students. I thought that this might be due to several reasons: because my students lacked familiarity with the requirements of the assessment, because the assessment criteria were unhelpful, and because the assessment was limited to the award of marks and offered no opportunities for other types of feedback, written or oral.

## Research focus

Action research offered me an opportunity to test my assumption that peer assessment could be a valuable and effective approach to learning and that it could offer reliable and valid information about learners' presentation skills. I decided the focus of the peer assessment should be on presentation skills rather than speaking skills in general because I thought my students would benefit from having to assess a more familiar and narrower range of skills.

I formulated two research questions:

1. Could the peer assessment of presentation skills be made more reliable through a sequence of classroom interventions?
2. Would my students have a more positive perception of peer assessment as a result of these interventions?

## Theoretical perspectives

Peer assessment can be defined as the process by which students grade the work or performance of other students. Considerable attention has been given to the potential of peer assessment in higher education, although there is considerably less written about it in the specific context of language learning. Topping (1998:269) states that peer assessment can be applied to nearly every area of the university curriculum. He also argues that it offers potential gains for students in the cognitive, affective, social and transferable skill and systemic domains that are 'at least as good as those from staff assessment'. This is not to say that potential problems have not been identified in using peer assessment. Falchikov (2001) argues that while students might value being involved in assessment, they might also be uncomfortable about awarding marks, particularly to friends, and they may not always accept peer assessments as accurate.

Issues of reliability or validity frequently come up in discussions of peer assessment. Most studies suggest that peer assessment is of adequate reliability and validity in a wide variety of applications (Topping 1998). Some studies specifically focus on the effectiveness of the peer assessment of oral presentation skills and De Grez, Valcke and Roozen (2012) suggest it can be reliably used for such a purpose.

Falchikov (2001) stresses the need for previously identified criteria – which may be provided by the teacher or by the students themselves. To implement peer assessment successfully students need a careful induction, including an explanation of its rationale and time to learn the necessary skills (Freeman and Lewis 1998). A study by Tsivitanidou, Zacharia, Hovardas and Nicolaou (2012) argues that explaining the assessment criteria to students or relying

on their prior experience of peer assessment is not an adequate preparation but that students should be provided with the training and scaffolding they need to produce high-quality feedback.

A number of studies, for example Falchikov (2001), argue that peer assessment should be more than just the awarding of a mark and requires critical feedback and the sharing of information and that there should be opportunities for written and oral feedback in a well-designed peer assessment scheme.

## Interventions

I used two instruments to collect data for this project. To answer my first research question (Could the peer assessment of presentation skills be made more reliable through a sequence of classroom interventions?), I designed an assessment form (see Appendix 1) with 15 assessment criteria expressed in simple language and divided into four sections:

1. Delivery – voice
2. Delivery – body language
3. Using visual aids
4. Responding to the audience

There were up to four marks for each of the criteria, so that at total of 60 marks were available. A separate section on the form contained two prompts for written comments:

1. The most positive features(s) of your presentation was/were:
2. I'd make the following suggestions to improve your presentation:

There was also space on the form was for the name of the peer assessor. This would be detached before the form was given to the assessee in order to preserve an assessor's anonymity.

To answer my second research question (Would my students have a more positive perception of peer assessment as a result of these interventions?), I designed two questionnaires. The first questionnaire (Appendix 2) was intended to collect the students' perceptions of peer assessment before they had experienced it on this project. The second (Appendix 3) was used at the end of the project when the students could reflect on their experience of peer assessment. Both questionnaires used a Likert scale. After the second questionnaire, I interviewed a sample of six students using more open questions.

This project took place over six months of the course in two cycles. Cycle 1 involved three 1.5-hour lessons in February and March and was based on the peer assessment of group presentations. Cycle 2 involved two sessions in June and July and focused on the peer assessment of individual presentations. I included 14 students from groups A and B in the first cycle (data was missing for four students) and all 18 students in the second cycle.

### Cycle 1

In the first lesson in Cycle 1 I set up a discussion with each group in which the students shared their ideas about peer assessment and how they perceived its usefulness in the assessment of their coursework presentations. The discussion was based on two questions:

1. What are the benefits of peer assessment?
2. What are the potential problems of peer assessment?

Discussion was in groups of three to four students and was followed by feedback to the whole class. The students then completed the first (pre-assessment) questionnaire individually. They next watched a video recording of an oral presentation given by two international students on a university preparation course (English Language Centre of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University 2012) and individually assessed the presentation skills of one of the students in the video using the peer assessment form. These assessments were compared and discussed in class.

In the second lesson each student gave a 5-minute presentation on a personal topic. Each presentation was assessed by one other student, again using the peer assessment form. Each assessor gave oral feedback based on the form to their partner.

The peer assessment of coursework presentations took place in the third lesson. There were six group presentations, each given by three students and limited to 25 minutes. The presentations were based on collaborative research into the question 'should animal testing be banned?' Each member of a group had to speak for approximately the same amount of time and at the end of a presentation they were asked questions on the topic by the course tutor. Each presenter in a group was assessed by two students – chosen at random – from another group. The assessors used the peer assessment form and these were collected at the end of each presentation.

The students had individual feedback on their presentations in the following lesson. As part of this feedback, the two completed peer assessment forms – which had now been anonymised – were given to them, along with a final score for the peer assessment, arrived at by calculating the mean of the scores awarded by the two peer assessors.

The presentations were recorded on video and I used this recording to independently rate each student's presentation skills using the same assessment form as the peer assessors. This expert assessment was solely for the purpose of evaluating the peer assessments and was not shared with the students.

### Cycle 2

I hoped to gather more data from a second cycle of action research with the same students. This time they would give individual presentations based on written assignments they had recently completed. Each presentation was limited to 15 minutes with questions at the end from the course tutor and other students. As in Cycle 1, the presentations were assessed by two peers and they used the same assessment form. The students' presentations were again recorded on video, which I used to independently assess their presentation skills, again with the same assessment form.

After they had been given individual feedback on these presentations, the students completed a second (post-assessment) questionnaire about their perceptions of the peer assessment on the project (see Appendix 3). This consisted of five questions in two sections. In the first

section the participants were asked to choose on a Likert scale to what extent they agreed with each of the following statements about the peer assessment:

1. It provided me with useful information about my presentation skills.
2. It was an accurate assessment of my presentation skills.
3. It was easy to do an accurate assessment of another student.

In the second section of the questionnaire the participants were asked to indicate the usefulness of the two types of feedback offered on the peer assessment form, the scores and written comments:

4. How useful was the marks section of the peer assessment?
5. How useful was the comment section of the peer assessment?

Once the students had completed the questionnaire, I interviewed a random sample of six of them individually to collect more detailed responses to the same questions.

## Findings

I collected a range of data over the two cycles in a variety of formats. This data includes: peer and expert assessment scores, written comments on the peer assessment form, and student perceptions of peer assessment before and after they had experienced peer assessment, collected through group discussion and individual questionnaires and interviews. The findings arising from this data will be discussed next.

### Peer and expert assessment scores

I will first compare peer and expert assessment scores and then compare scores between peer assessors in order to determine inter-rater reliability. Peer and expert scores for all the students involved in Cycle 2 are set out in Appendices 4a and 4b.

I calculated total mean scores for each group in each cycle from the total scores awarded by all the peer assessors and from the total scores awarded by the expert. The findings are set out in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Total mean scores (out of 60)**

| | | Mean score: Cycle 1 | Mean score: Cycle 2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Group A | Peer N = 7 pairs | 49.7 | 53.5 |
| | Expert N = 1 | 50.8 | 52.7 |
| Group B | Peer N = 9 pairs | 44.2 | 51.2 |
| | Expert N = 1 | 43.9 | 50.8 |

Comparing the total mean scores of peers and expert in Cycle 1, we can see that the difference in both groups was small (<1% of the total marks available). This is also true of Cycle 2.

However, if we compare the total scores awarded by individual students for each presentation with those awarded by the expert for the same presentations, we can see more marked differences. In Cycle 1, the differences were between +5 marks (12% of the total marks available) and −10 marks (17%). In 11 cases out of 28, the total peer scores exceeded those of the expert, while in 14 cases the total peer scores were lower. In Cycle 2, the differences were between +10 marks (17%) and −5 marks (12%). In 17 cases out of 36 the total peer scores exceeded those of the expert, while peers under-marked in 14 cases.

While there are significant differences between peer and expert scores, these differences are usually much smaller when the expert score is compared to an average of the two peer scores. This finding seems to support the decision to have more than one peer assessor and to average their scores. The figures also indicate that there is no consistent over-marking or under-marking by peers.

I also compared the total scores awarded for each presentation by each pair of peer assessors (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). In Cycle 1, three out of the 14 pairs of assessors awarded the same total scores. The other pairs of assessors differed by between one mark (<2% of the total marks available) and 8 marks (13%). In Cycle 2 we can see a similar disparity between the total scores given by pairs of assessors.

**Figure 1: Differences between total peer scores in Cycle 1 (N = 14 respondents)**

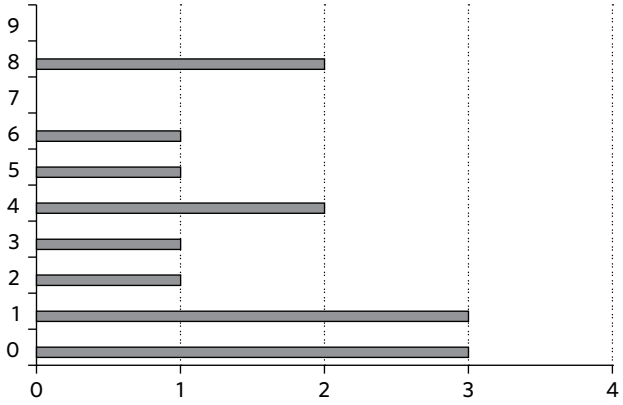
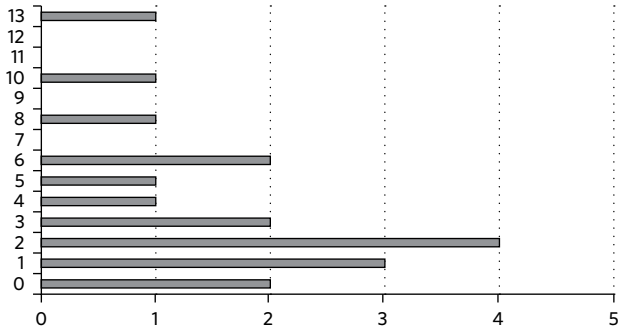



**Figure 2: Differences between total peer scores in Cycle 2 (N = 18 respondents)**




Finally, I looked at the number of instances in which there was a difference of at least 1 mark between each pair of peer assessors when they rated each of the assessment criteria. As there were 14 students who were assessed in Cycle 1 and each one was marked against 15 criteria, there were 210 pairs of assessments to be compared in this cycle. There was a difference of at least 1 mark in 123 pairs out of a possible 210 (59%).

In Cycle 2 there were 18 students who were assessed against 15 criteria, which meant there were 270 assessments to be compared (see Appendices 4a and 4b for the marks recorded for the students in Cycle 2). In the second cycle there was a difference of at least 1 mark in 136 instances out of a possible 270 (50%). This would seem to indicate that the differences between individual peer assessments became less pronounced from the first to the second cycles, suggesting that these assessments became more reliable over time and with more practice.

**Peer assessment written feedback**

Marks awarded through peer assessment were supported by written comments on the assessment form. Of the 32 peer assessments completed in the first and second cycles, only three assessment forms contained no written comments by peers. Most of the comments on the other forms were at least 40 words in length and most of them balanced praise for what was identified as positive aspects of the presentation with aspects identified as needing improvement.

There were frequent instances of a comment explaining a relatively low score for one of the assessment criteria. For example, one assessor awarded only 2 marks for criterion 11 (showing text that can easily be read by the audience) and wrote: 'we can't see the text (too small)'. One assessor awarded only 1 mark for Item 8 (looking directly and frequently at the audience) and supported this with the comment: 'you need to look at everyone'.

There were a few examples of a pair of peer assessors making similar comments. In one case, both assessors having awarded 2 marks for the same criterion (speaking from notes, not from memory or reading a script or the screen), one assessor wrote: 'You should try not reading from the paper', and the other commented: 'You shouldn't read too much from notes.'

In only two cases, pairs of assessors wrote comments that appear to be contradictory. For example, under the heading 'the most positive feature(s) of the presentation' one assessor wrote: 'Varying the voice in volume and using emphasis', while under the different heading 'I'd make the following suggestion(s)' the other assessor wrote: 'I'd suggest you to apply a different voice in volume and pitch.'

Overall, the examples of written feedback from peers show that these students were able to support their ratings with relevant and balanced comments. The comments written in Cycle 2 were fuller and generally more accurate than those written in Cycle 1.

**Student perceptions of peer assessment**

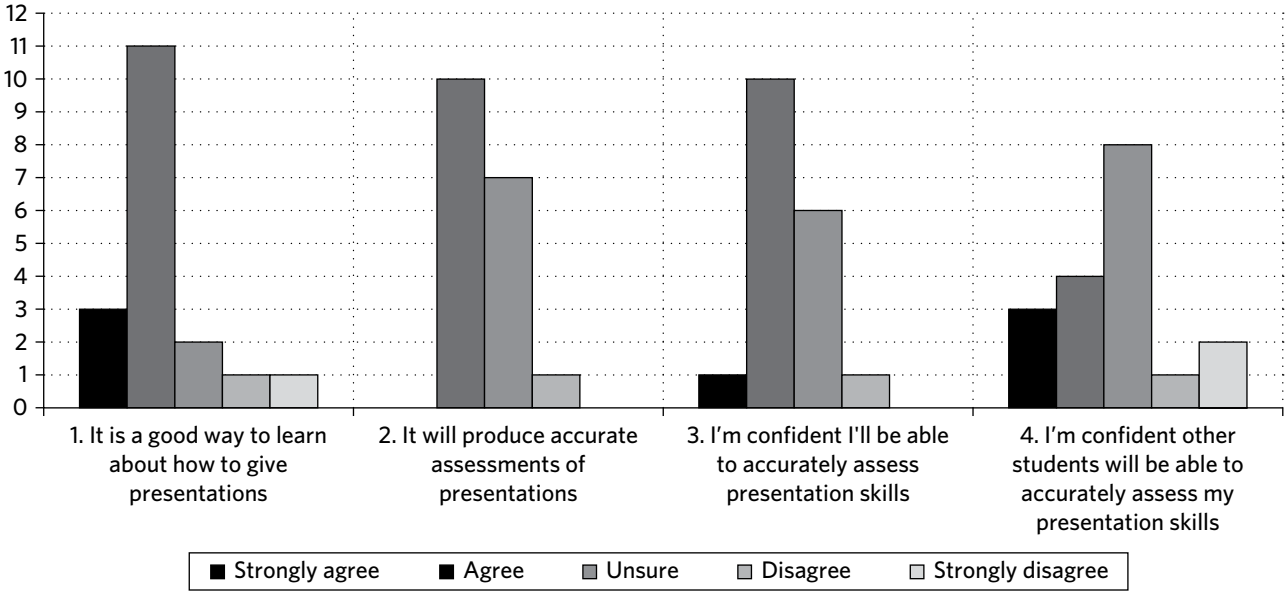
One of the main aims of this action research was to capture the students' perceptions of peer assessment both at the start of the project and at the end.

At the start of the project, I collected comments made by the students during a class discussion. The responses to the first question (What are the benefits of peer assessment?) can be divided into three categories. Firstly, the students recognised that they might be more engaged by others' presentations (e.g. you will be more engaged when listening to others' presentations; you listen to other presentations with more purpose). Secondly, they perceived benefits to being assessed by someone other than the teacher (e.g. you are more relaxed when assessed by peers; peers understand you better; you get an opinion that is different from the teacher's). Thirdly, there was a recognition that they might learn through this type of assessment (e.g. you learn presentation skills through assessing others; you learn to understand the requirements of the assignment better).

The responses to the second question (What are the potential problems of peer assessment?) were more limited, but can still be divided into two categories. There was, firstly, a concern that peers would not have the expertise of the teacher in assessing each other (peers lack knowledge/expertise; you may not be able to listen well because you are focused on assessment). Secondly, they felt that there might be some bias inherent in peer assessment (peers may not be objective; peers may favour friends).

Figure 3 shows results from the individual questionnaire, given to the students before they had experienced the peer assessment on this project (see also the section on 'Interventions' and Appendix 2). The results from this

**Figure 3: Pre-assessment questionnaire (N = 18 respondents)**



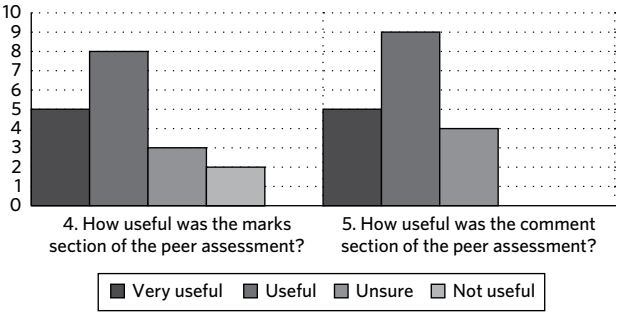
questionnaire indicate a positive initial perception of peer assessment. A majority of respondents (14 out of 18) agreed that peer assessment is a good way to learn how to give presentations. A majority (11 out of 18) also anticipated that they would be able to accurately assess others' presentation skills. The respondents were less confident about being assessed accurately by others – only seven out of 18 agreed with the statement in question 4 and eight of them were unsure.

Once the students had experienced peer assessment over the two cycles and had been given peer feedback on their presentations in the form of marks and written comments, I collected their perceptions of peer assessment on this project through a second individual questionnaire (see 'Interventions' and Appendix 3).

The first part of this questionnaire (see Figure 4) focused on the students' perceptions of the usefulness and accuracy of the peer assessments as well as their evaluation of how easy it was to do. The results from this part of the questionnaire indicate a generally positive perception of peer assessment. A majority of respondents (13 out of 18) felt that peer assessment offered useful information about their presentation skills. A majority (14 out of 18) also agreed that the peer assessments were accurate. There was less agreement about how easy the peer assessment was to do – seven students were unsure and four others disagreed that it was easy.

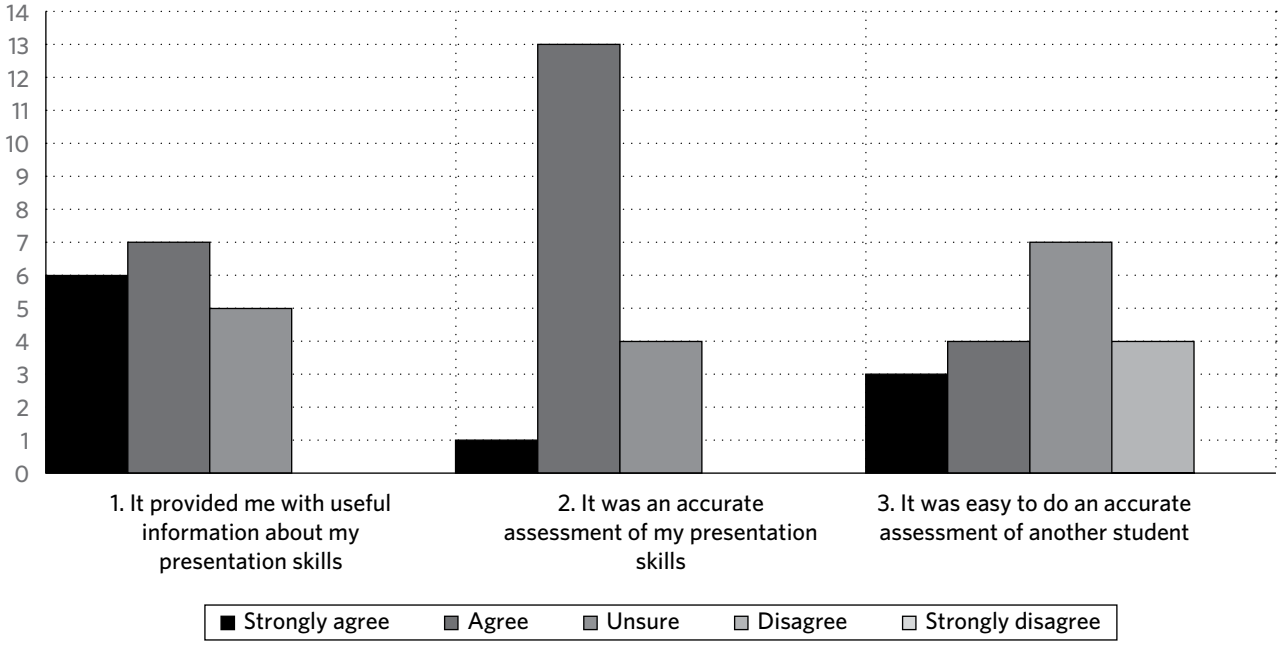
The second part of the questionnaire (see Figure 5) focused on how the students felt about the usefulness of the two types of feedback on the peer assessment form: the scores and the written comments. The results from this part of the questionnaire show a generally positive opinion of both, with the majority of the students indicating that they found both the marks and comments very useful or useful. The only negative responses were regarding the marks section of the peer assessment: two out of the 18 respondents indicated that the marks section was not useful.

**Figure 5: Post-assessment questionnaire – Part 2 (N = 18 respondents)**




Once this questionnaire had been completed, I conducted individual interviews with a random sample of six students, who were invited to elaborate on their answers. Their comments support the ratings given on the questionnaire and are generally positive. Question 1 asked the students to evaluate the usefulness of peer assessment and all of them indicated that they found the assessment form useful, one student offering the reason: 'We were able to use the assessment criteria in advance of the assessment'. There were also positive comments regarding question 3 ('It was easy to do an accurate peer assessment of another student') and these included: 'We were a small group so it was easy' and 'The rubrics were helpful'. Their responses to questions 4 and 5 about the usefulness of the marks and comments on the peer assessment form were less positive. While some students said that both the marks and comments offered useful feedback ('It was good to have both marks and comments' and 'The comments made the marks more understandable'), one student expressed a preference for the comments ('The comments were more useful') and two students commented on a perceived a lack of consistency between marks and comments ('Some comments did not support the marks' and 'Some comments were contradictory'). Furthermore, comparing their responses in the initial questionnaire with those in the final questionnaire and interview, it is clear that the students' perception of the peer

**Figure 4: Post-assessment questionnaire – Part 1 (N = 18 respondents)**



assessment of presentation skills has, on the whole, become more positive.

## Conclusions

My findings have generally confirmed the reliability of peer assessment of oral presentation skills. The differences between the mean total scores given by peers and those of the expert assessor were relatively small, although this overall similarity sometimes masked considerable variations between individual peer assessors and between individual peer assessors and the expert assessor. This would seem to confirm that there is a value in conducting peer assessment with more than one peer assessor and awarding an average of their marks, as in this project. The differences between the overall marks from peers were less marked in Cycle 2 than in Cycle 1 and this could be seen as evidence that the accuracy of peer assessments improved with practice.

The quality of the written feedback from many peer assessors and the positive perceptions that most of the students had of the feedback, point to the value of supporting the awarding of marks with written feedback. There may be benefits in building on written feedback by adding oral feedback from peers.

This project involved a series of interventions in the classroom, including a series of activities to practise peer assessment and the use of a peer assessment form with specific criteria, each criterion expressed in a clear and easily understood rubric. These interventions allowed the students to become more familiar with the peer assessment process and, I feel, more confident and accurate in assessing the presentation skills of peers.

I also noticed that the level of engagement of students in the audience during presentations was greater on this project than I had witnessed previously in peer assessment. The students' comments, collected from discussion, questionnaires and interviews, would suggest that they had become more positive about peer assessment over the six months of the project.

I also feel that students might be offered more training in assessment skills than was possible on this project. This additional training might involve a standardisation process in which a panel of experts independently rate one or more presentations, an average of their marks then being used as a standard in peer assessment practice tasks.

One positive outcome of this project has been that peer assessment of oral presentation skills has been adopted as a part of the scheme of assessment on all foundation year courses at the institution where I teach. I now hope that peer assessment can be extended to other areas of these courses, including the assessment of written assignments and assignments with an element of collaborative work.

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## Appendix 1: Peer assessment form

| **Presentation Skills: Peer Assessment Form** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Presentation title:** | | | | |
| **Presenter name:** | | | | |
| Evaluate the presenter's achievement according to the criteria 1–15 below. Tick (√) one box for each of the criteria. The marks available are between **4** for *full* achievement and **1** for *minimal* achievement.<br>Write a brief **comment:** identify the most positive feature or features of the presentation and suggest how the presenter might improve it.<br>Write the **presenter name**, the **date** and **your name** at the bottom of the form. Note: this information will be detached from the form before it is shown to the presenter. | | | | |
| **Delivery – voice** | | | | |
| 1. speaking at an appropriate pace & volume | | | | |
| 2. varying the voice in volume & pitch | | | | |
| 3. using pause & emphasis appropriately | | | | |
| 4. speaking from notes, not from memory or reading a script or from the screen | | | | |
| **Delivery – body language** | | | | |
| 5. appearing confident & enthusiastic | | | | |
| 6. avoiding too much movement | | | | |
| 7. using gestures appropriately | | | | |
| 8. looking directly & frequently at the audience | | | | |

| **Using visual aids** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9. using presentation technology efficiently | | | | |
| 10. using features of the presentation software appropriately | | | | |
| 11. showing text that can be easily read by the audience | | | | |
| 12. showing text that is free of language errors | | | | |
| 13. drawing the audience's attention to specific information on the screen | | | | |
| **Responding to the audience** | | | | |
| 14. engaging the interest of all the audience | | | | |
| 15. responding appropriately to questions from the audience | | | | |
| **Comment – The most positive feature(s) of your presentation was:** | **4. full** | **3.** | **2.** | **1. minimal** |
| **Comment – I'd make the following suggestion(s) to improve your presentation:** | | | | |

✂. . . . . ✂

| **Presenter name:** | **Your name:** |
|---|---|
| **Date:** | **Total mark** (max. 60): |

## Appendix 2: Pre-assessment questionnaire

| **Seminar presentation skills and peer assessment** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Your name:** | | | | | |
| **Peer Assessment:** | **A. strongly agree** | **B. agree** | **C. unsure** | **D. disagree** | **E. strongly disagree** |
| **1. It is a good way to learn about how to give presentations** | | | | | |
| **2. It will produce accurate assessments of presentations** | | | | | |
| **3. I'm confident I'll be able to accurately assess other presentations** | | | | | |
| **4. I'm confident other students will be able to accurately assess my presentation skills** | | | | | |

## Appendix 3: Post-assessment questionnaire

| **Seminar presentation skills and peer assessment** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Your name:** | | | | | |
| **Peer Assessment:** | **A. strongly agree** | **B. agree** | **C. unsure** | **D. disagree** | **E. strongly disagree** |
| **1. It provided me with useful information about my presentation skills** | | | | | |
| **2. It was an accurate assessment of my presentation skills** | | | | | |
| **3. It was easy to do an accurate assessment of another student** | | | | | |

| | **A. very useful** | **B. useful** | **C. unsure** | **D. not useful** | **E. not useful at all** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **4. How useful was the marks section of the peer assessment?** | | | | | |
| **5. How useful was the comment section of the peer assessment?** | | | | | |

## Appendix 4a: Table of peer and expert assessment scores – Cycle 2, Group A

| | | Assessment criteria | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **presenter** | **assessor** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **9** | **10** | **11** | **12** | **13** | **14** | **15** | **total** |
| **A** | **peer** | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | **57** |
| | **peer** | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | **55** |
| | **expert** | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | **58** |
| **B** | **peer** | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | **52** |
| | **peer** | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | **54** |
| | **expert** | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | **49** |
| **C** | **peer** | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | **57** |
| | **peer** | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | **57** |
| | **expert** | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | **56** |
| **D** | **peer** | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | **55** |
| | **peer** | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | **54** |
| | **expert** | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | **58** |
| **E** | **peer** | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | **51** |
| | **peer** | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | **56** |
| | **expert** | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | **49** |
| **F** | **peer** | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | **50** |
| | **peer** | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 4 | **48** |
| | **expert** | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | **53** |
| **G** | **peer** | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | **51** |
| | **peer** | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | **57** |
| | **expert** | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | **51** |
| **H** | **peer** | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | **54** |
| | **peer** | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | **53** |
| | **expert** | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | **53** |
| **I** | **peer** | 4 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | **52** |
| | **peer** | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | **50** |
| | **expert** | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 4 | **47** |

## Appendix 4b: Table of peer and expert assessment scores – Cycle 2, Group B

| | | Assessment criteria | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **presenter** | **assessor** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **9** | **10** | **11** | **12** | **13** | **14** | **15** | **total** |
| **J** | **peer** | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 4 | **43** |
| | **peer** | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | **53** |
| | **expert** | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | **45** |
| **K** | **peer** | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | **56** |
| | **peer** | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | **55** |
| | **expert** | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | **56** |
| **L** | **peer** | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | **57** |
| | **peer** | 3 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | **51** |
| | **expert** | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | **56** |
| **M** | **peer** | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | **54** |
| | **peer** | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | **57** |
| | **expert** | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | **59** |
| **N** | **peer** | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | **52** |
| | **peer** | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | **56** |
| | **expert** | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 2 | **55** |
| **O** | **peer** | 3 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | **44** |
| | **peer** | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 2 | **44** |
| | **expert** | 3 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | **44** |
| **P** | **peer** | 4 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 4 | **48** |
| | **peer** | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | **56** |
| | **expert** | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | **52** |
| **Q** | **peer** | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | **54** |
| | **peer** | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 4 | **41** |
| | **expert** | 3 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | **44** |
| **R** | **peer** | 4 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | **52** |
| | **peer** | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | **49** |
| | **expert** | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | **46** |

# Self-assessment of progress for short-stay students

**ABBY CROUCHER** LEWIS SCHOOL OF ENGLISH, SOUTHAMPTON

## Introduction

In a school with rolling enrolment, the length of a student's course can be anything from one week to a year. For those enrolled on longer courses, monitoring their progress is relatively straightforward; in theory, they will be classed according to their level on arrival and will progress to higher levels as progress is made. However, for those on shorter courses of one to four weeks, the amount of progress they make may be considerably less obvious.

With the aim of allowing all students to leave with a sense of achievement, regardless of length of course, I decided to carry out research which focused on short-stay students only. My hope was that by encouraging these students to set themselves achievable and measurable goals, they would leave feeling they had made tangible progress. I was keen to understand how easily they were able to do this, and whether it had the desired outcome.

## Background

### Previous setup

Prior to this study we asked all students on arrival what their language aims were and, on departure, whether they felt these aims had been met, which seems a very simplistic way of assessing progress. Students' comments on their departure forms were in fact typically quite superficial. According to Burns (2010:2), 'problematising' is 'taking an area you feel could be done better, subjecting it to questioning, and then developing new ideas and alternatives'. I thus wanted to use action research to problematise this approach to assessing student progress – to assess the effectiveness of existing procedures, and, subsequently make decisions about whether alternatives were needed.

### Goal-setting

In order to understand whether or not students felt they could make progress and achieve their aims on short courses, it was essential to focus on the process of goal-setting itself. One key aspect of my research was trying to understand whether students were able to identify specific linguistic goals, rather than highlighting broad areas they wanted to improve in. On reading other research papers, it became clear that this is something students frequently have difficulty with, stating goals such as '. . . to speak like a native speaker' (McCrossan 2011:9). Locke (1996) suggests that successful goal-setting involves creating a short time frame for completion, as well as ensuring goals are challenging and clearly defined. This led me to think that the brevity of a short-stay student's course gives them no disadvantage in terms of their potential to make progress.

Scrivener (1994) makes the point that those attending a language course out of obligation to their employer or sponsor may feel they have little control over the circumstances of their learning. However, by setting their own goals, they are able to take responsibility for the process, which can have a positive impact on their progress. This is backed up by Slavin (2003) who claims that allowing students the opportunity to select their own goals not only leads to increased levels of motivation, but also an increase in self-efficacy. One possibility that I needed to consider, however, was that not all students might want to take responsibility for their own learning. Harmer (1983:403) suggests that in the case of some students, '. . . the teacher is the one who is responsible for their learning, and they expect the teacher to do their job'. This view could have a negative impact not only on the goal-setting process, but also the participants' willingness to self-assess their progress, and so I knew I needed to play a supportive role.

### Course design

Having decided to encourage students to set their own language goals, I was conscious that this would need to impact on the content of their course. Encouraging student autonomy presents certain challenges, as once individual goals have been determined the teacher then needs to provide opportunities for them to be achieved. With a possible 12 students in each class, the teacher must take into account all students' aims, whilst considering the varying lengths of enrolment and following the syllabus. On balancing course plans and needs, Scrivener (1994:73) talks about degrees to which the students' established needs can be incorporated into existing course plans. I felt it would be appropriate to 'continue with the course as before but add in a limited number of extra activities, lessons or variations to satisfy some stated needs, or for certain individuals to do for homework.'

McCrossan (2011:11) states that 'not only were they (the students' goals) found to be important for student learning, they also proved to be an important part of course planning. Without knowing students' individual progress goals I would not have been able to tailor the course to help them achieve their goals'. Therefore, communication of aims was key, and I needed to consider ways to pass on this information to all teachers involved on that individual's course.

### Self-assessment

With goals identified and course content determined, assessment was the next consideration. In another research project which took place in a school with a similar business model to ours, Yates (2008) highlighted the difficulties associated with assessment and rolling enrolment, and I could relate to the challenge of selecting an appropriate testing system which suited all course lengths and goals. I concluded that if goals were to be determined by the individual student based on their perceived needs, the students should also be responsible for assessing their progress against these

individual learning goals. This was to avoid prescribed tests which may not be relevant to student aims, and the creation of personalised tests which would significantly increase teachers' work load.

McCrossan (2011) wanted to see if self-assessment enabled students to take responsibility for their learning, rather than rely only on teachers to provide them with a measure of their progress. I was interested to see if this would be the case in my own context, although I was aware of the importance of providing guidance and support whilst promoting student autonomy.

## The study

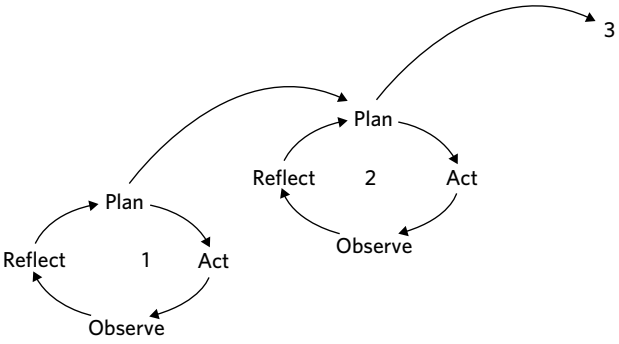
### Research focus

Once I was clear about what I wanted to achieve from the project, I decided to focus on finding the answers to the two following questions:

1. To what extent are students able to set themselves achievable and measurable short-term goals, and what impact might this have on their satisfaction?
2. What methods can we use to ensure that short-stay students are provided with a measure of their progress?

As this was an action research project, I followed the model illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Adapted from Pinchen and Passfield (1995:13)**




The first cycle involved designing instruments to assess our previous systems, before gathering and analysing data and reflecting on the results. This then led into the second cycle, where an element of change was introduced, before assessing the effectiveness of the implemented changes.

### Participants

For the purpose of the study, I defined 'short-stay students' as those with courses ranging between one and four weeks, and planned to carry out the research with students who fell into this category over a 4-month period. I contacted potential participants prior to their arrival to gauge their interest, and the response was generally very positive. Table 1 shows the breakdown of students involved.

There were also eight teachers involved in the project, all of whom were teaching the participating students in General English group classes.

**Table 1: The participating students**

| | Cycle 1 | Cycle 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | 6 male, 2 female | 4 male, 4 female |
| Ages | 17–42 | 17–54 |
| Nationalities | French, Russian, Czech | French, Thai, Brazilian, Georgian, Italian |
| Levels (on the Common European Framework of Reference, CEFR) | 2 x A2, 5 x B1, 1 x C1 | 1 x A2, 5 x B1, 2 x B2 |
| Motivations for studying English (multiple answers sometimes given) | 1 x studies<br>2 x travel<br>7 x work<br>1 x living in the UK | 2 x studies<br>2 x travel<br>3 x work<br>1 x pleasure |

### My role

It was appropriate for me in my capacity as Assistant Director of Studies to oversee the project and collect and analyse the data, as I was often already involved in the participants' induction on arrival, and was well placed to communicate with teachers, passing on necessary information and ensuring that procedures were followed.

## Cycle 1: Method

The first cycle was carried out with eight participants in March and April 2014. The aim was to use a number of instruments which would give some insight into short-stay students' abilities to assess their own progress. These were all designed specifically for the study, and Table 2 shows which instruments were used and for what purpose.

Prior to this study, the procedure on students' arrival was to interview them in order to gauge levels of comprehension and spoken English. The interview involved asking them their motivations for learning English and broad areas they would like to improve in (Appendix 4). However, the arrival questionnaire designed for this project sought to focus students on more specific goals and to encourage them to assess their own ability on arrival. The participants were asked to identify and prioritise a maximum of three areas of improvement, goal number one being their highest priority, and number three their lowest. They were also asked to rate themselves on a numerical scale based on their perceived ability in each of their chosen areas for improvement. They were told that the numbers one to 10 represented a student of their language level, with one being very bad at their chosen area and 10 being excellent. Once they had rated themselves based on their arrival level, they were asked to say what number they would hope to reach in each area on completing their course, thus setting a target.

The decision to interview and video participants while they were completing this questionnaire was made to ensure they had understood the focus of the project, as well as the questions themselves. Hopkins (2008:120) states that when involving children in classroom research, the effectiveness of a questionnaire 'depends very much on reading ability and comprehension'. This is also the case for EFL students, and so I did not want to compromise the validity of the data

**Table 2: Instruments used in Cycle 1**

| | Instrument | Completed by whom and when | Purpose | Tools |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Arrival questionnaire (Appendix 1) | By the interviewer during a video-recorded interview with the student on day one of their course. Answers were written on the questionnaire for later reference. | To ask the students to:<br>• identify broad areas they wanted to improve<br>• identify more specific aims within those areas<br>• assess their ability on arrival for each of these aims<br>• state their desired ability on departure. | • Fixed-choice questions<br>• Open-ended questions<br>• A scale<br>• A scale |
| 2 | End-of-course questionnaire (Appendix 2) | By the student on the final day of their course. | To ask the students:<br>• whether they felt they had underachieved, achieved or overachieved their aims<br>• whether their aims had changed<br>• how happy they were with their progress<br>• if their aims were realistic. | • A scale<br>• Open-ended questions<br>• Fixed-choice questions<br>• Fixed-choice questions |
| 3 | Teachers' questionnaire (Appendix 3) | By the student's teachers on completion of the course. | To ask the teachers:<br>• if they had a clear impression of how much progress the student had made<br>• if they felt the student had achieved their aims<br>• how happy they thought the student was with their progress. | • Fixed-choice questions<br>• Fixed-choice questions<br>• Fixed-choice questions |

due to a lack of understanding on the participants' part. Furthermore, part of my focus was to see how easily they were able to set language goals and whether they struggled to assess their own level. This would not be possible to gauge had they completed the questionnaire independently, and the video provided a visual account of their reactions, showing body language and any significant pauses. Participants agreed to be videoed, and I do not believe it affected their answers or behaviour.

Prior to this study, on departure, students completed an evaluation form, and the question 'Have you achieved your goals?' often directed students to simple 'yes' or 'no' answers. The answer 'no' was previously indirectly interpreted by the school as dissatisfaction, due to a lack of information to suggest otherwise. Therefore, the end-of-course questionnaire for this project was designed to obtain more specific information on achievement of goals, whilst making a distinction between this and satisfaction. Students were shown their arrival questionnaire as a reference, reminding them of their aims and targets, before being asked to score their level on departure, to see if they felt they had met these targets. They were then asked how satisfied they felt with their progress.

As the students had multiple teachers (a minimum of two), each teacher was also asked to complete a questionnaire individually. At this stage there was no clear communication of the students' aims, but I wanted to see if teachers were able to draw conclusions about students' progress regardless, and I made it clear that it was the school procedure I was assessing, not the teachers.

## Cycle 1: Key findings

### Goal-setting

In order to determine how easily students were able to set themselves goals and assess their level, I examined qualitative data from the recorded arrival interviews. It became apparent that when the participants had difficulty, it was either as a result of a lack of language, when circumlocution or gesturing was used, or because they were struggling with the goal-setting task itself, often evident through long pauses and utterances to suggest as much.

Six of the eight students were fairly quick and confident identifying their goals and assessing their level on arrival, while two needed prompting and found the task challenging. Despite the majority being quick to select broad areas for their aims, when asked which aspect of speaking, pronunciation, grammar etc. they particularly wanted to focus on, almost none were able to give specific answers, regardless of their level of English. Only one student managed to be more specific regarding his grammar aims, highlighting 'especially past perfect and past perfect continuous'. When considering my first research question, it would therefore seem that the majority were challenged in terms of setting achievable and measurable short-term goals. Some illustrative responses are provided in Table 3.

**Table 3: Cycle 1 responses to goal-setting**

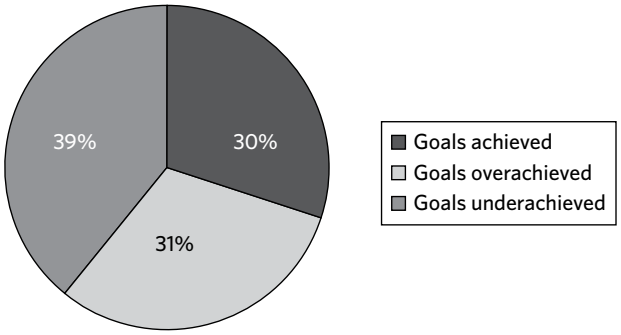
| Student | Area of focus | Response when asked in what way they wanted to improve in this area |
|---|---|---|
| Cycle 1 Student 2 (C1 S2) | Speaking | 'In general' |
| C1 S3 | Listening | 'To understand the conversation' |
| C1 S5 | Vocabulary | 'Just more vocabulary' |
| C1 S7 | Pronunciation | 'To listen (to sound like) more native speaker people' |

Having looked at the participants' ability to set goals, I was then interested to see how much progress they felt they had made.

### Achievement of goals

Following the procedure mentioned in 'Cycle 1: Method', achievement of goals was assessed by comparing students' targets on arrival with perceived ability on departure. Figure 2 below shows that the eight participants set a total of 23 goals between them. About 40% of these were not met, while about 60% were achieved and overachieved. In relation to my first research question, this would suggest that the students felt they were able to measure their progress using the instruments provided, and that the majority of goals in this case were achieved. Two participants stated that they felt their aims had changed during their course.

**Figure 2: Goals underachieved, achieved and overachieved in Cycle 1 (total of 23 goals set by 8 students)**




### Ease of aims

Six out of eight students in Cycle 1 claimed that they felt their aims were either 'quite easy' or 'very easy' to achieve, with two selecting 'not very easy' as their response.

### Student satisfaction

In the end-of-course questionnaire, students were also asked to choose the statement best describing their feelings towards their progress, and all participants selected either 'quite happy' or 'very happy' in Cycle 1. In fact, two students who felt they did not reach their targets stated '2 weeks were not enough time to make big progress, but I think I achieve the maximum' (C1 S8) and 'Now I useing English grammar constructions better than before' (C1 S4). This would imply that underachievement of goals did not impact negatively on satisfaction.

### Teachers' questionnaires

When teachers were asked whether they thought the students had achieved their aims, six out of nine said they did not know. This response was typical under previous conditions due to the lack of information teachers received about students' aims. However, when asked how happy they thought the student was with their progress a large number of responses tallied with the students' own answers, indicating that general satisfaction is easier to gauge.

## Cycle 2: Method

The second cycle took place in May and June 2014 with a further eight participants. This time I introduced some additional instruments to enable students' aims to be communicated to teachers (Table 4). In response to the difficulties students had had in specifying their aims, in Cycle 2 I prompted them more at the interview stage, offering examples if necessary.

The aims and action document was introduced to encourage better communication of students' aims to teachers. The idea was to inform teachers of the students' linguistic goals and ask teachers to document ways in which they could help with attainment. This was to enable them to incorporate targeted language work at the lesson planning stage to make the learning process 'as effective for each individual as possible' (Scrivener 1994:69).

The student journal was implemented in Cycle 2 for students to document examples of work they covered which was linked to their aims. In their research paper, Balçikanli (2008) states that a journal can encourage students to engage in critical thinking about the learning process, as well as allowing them to monitor progress. This is backed up by Harmer (1983:400) who claims that 'from the point of view of learner autonomy, journals provide an opportunity for students to think both about how they are learning . . . and also about what they are learning'. The journal encouraged students to document when the work was covered and with which teacher, as well as what they did and how it helped them. However, students were able to write as little or as much as they wanted, and they were not reminded to complete the journal, as I wanted to see if they would do so of their own accord. They were told that it was primarily for their own reference, although I would be analysing how the journals were used, and so it would not be a private document as such. Another motivation for this journal was to gain some insight into students' perspectives of the learning process, as in combination with their teachers' feedback it would allow for triangulation of data.

**Table 4: Instruments used in Cycle 2**

| | Instrument | Completed by whom and when | Purpose | Tools |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Arrival questionnaire (Appendix 1) | As per Cycle 1 | As per Cycle 1 | As per Cycle 1 |
| 2 | Aims and action document | By the student's teachers on day one of their course. | To ensure the teachers:<br>• knew the student's aims<br>• considered ways in which they could help the student achieve their aims. | Open-ended questions |
| 3 | Student journal (Appendix 5) | By the student when something was covered in class that helped them towards their aims. | To provide the students with:<br>• a record of the work they had done that helped achieve personal aims<br>• a reference to help them complete the end-of-course questionnaire. | Open-ended questions |
| 4 | End-of-course questionnaire (Appendix 2) | As per Cycle 1 | As per Cycle 1 | As per Cycle 1 |
| 5 | Teachers' questionnaire (Appendix 3) | As per Cycle 1 | As per Cycle 1 | As per Cycle 1 |

## Cycle 2: Key findings

### Goal-setting

The video again showed signs of all eight students in Cycle 2 having difficulty setting goals, with four pausing for extended periods of time whilst considering their answers. However, with prompting and examples, all Cycle 2 students were able to provide much more specific goals than Cycle 1 students (Table 5).

**Table 5: Cycle 2 – Some illustrative responses on goal-setting**

| Student | Area of focus | Response when asked in what way they wanted to improve in this area |
|---|---|---|
| Cycle 2 Student 2 (C2 S2) | Pronunciation | 'I think is difficult "thought".' (emphasises 'th' sound) |
| C2 S4 | Vocabulary | 'I like er . . . say what I think, er . . . specifically.' (clarified as phrases for giving opinions) |
| C2 S5 | Vocabulary | 'Er . . . work, school and er . . . sports (vocabulary)' |
| C2 S6 | Listening | 'Listening . . . um, the news. I listen to the radio and I try to understand the news . . . I like this. I want to learn.' |

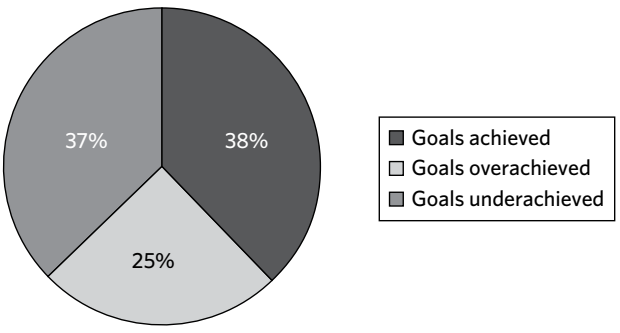
Despite identifying more specific goals, the majority in Cycle 2 experienced difficulty when it came to self-assessment of level. In addition, five participants were particularly hesitant when asked if they felt their goals were achievable. For example, student 5 in Cycle 2 (C2 S5) replied 'Not possible?', looking for reassurance. Interestingly, some students acknowledged that their targets were overambitious, but decided not to change them. One student said 'I think it's difficult . . . in two weeks . . . can . . . have here . . . 5 . . . No! 6. I want to' (C2 S4). Others responded similarly, implying a willingness to be challenged, and wanted to make as much progress as possible.

### Achievement of goals

The percentage of goals achieved based on students' self-assessment was similar in both cycles, with Cycle 2 showing that of a total of 24 goals from eight participants, a combined total of 63% were either achieved or overachieved (Figure 3). As in Cycle 1, two participants said their language aims had changed since the arrival interview.

Of all 16 students across both cycles, only one in Cycle 2 said that she did not feel she had progressed at all in one of her areas. However, she chose 'very happy' for progress, saying 'because I had try my best to do it' (C2 S7). Again, this would imply that challenge was as satisfying as achievement for some students.

**Figure 3: Goals underachieved, achieved and overachieved in Cycle 2 (total of 24 goals set by 8 students)**




### Ease of aims

Unlike the students in Cycle 1, seven out of eight students in Cycle 2 considered their aims to either be 'not very easy' or 'very difficult' to achieve, yet they still felt very positive about their progress. This may or may not be a consequence of their aims being more specific than those in Cycle 1, but as mentioned earlier, these students seemed to enjoy setting challenging targets.

### Student satisfaction

Once more, all students expressed satisfaction with their progress in Cycle 2, stating they were either 'very happy' or 'quite happy'.

### Journals

The student journals were introduced in Cycle 2 as a means of providing students with a tangible record of their progress. Of the eight participants, only five completed the journal and in varying degrees of detail. A consideration is whether students felt restricted by having to complete the journal in English, as some had written in their L1 before translating. It is also possible that had the potential usefulness of the journal been reinforced and had the students been reminded to complete it, more of them may have done so. C2 S6, whose aim was to focus on listening, wrote 'I listened a story about . . . education systems. It helped me to understand and realise key words from the text – I think that was the way to understand more when I listened other narratives'. This seemed to indicate that the student was thinking about the wider context of their language development.

### Teachers' questionnaires

In Cycle 2, when asked whether the participants' goals had been achieved, fewer teachers as a percentage claimed they did not know, with nine out of 15 teachers able to comment on the students' progress with regard to their aims. This would suggest that the better communication of aims was effective. However, one teacher said 'One week is only enough to define her current level, so if this changes during that time, it is almost impossible to detect'. This again highlighted the importance of enhancing students' own sense of progress through means such as self-assessment instruments and journals, as the teachers are not necessarily able to notice meaningful improvement within such a short time frame. Student satisfaction was again accurately gauged when comparing teacher and student responses in Cycle 2.

## Conclusions

The purpose of the intervention was to see if students were able to set themselves realistic language goals, and complete their course with a more tangible record of progress.

1. To what extent are students able to set themselves achievable and measurable short-term goals, and what impact might this have on their satisfaction?

The findings indicate that while Cycle 1 students were generally only able to specify broad areas for improvement, Cycle 2 students, with more guidance, could identify more

specific learning goals. Better goal-setting in Cycle 2 did not necessarily result in goals being more achievable, although use of a numerical scale as a self-assessment tool seemed to allow students in both cycles to measure the amount of progress they felt they had made, and this is something we will continue to use in future. Some students liked to aim high, and although this carried the risk of goals not being achieved, it did not impact negatively on students' satisfaction in this study; students were generally very satisfied with their progress, regardless of achievement of goals.

2. What methods can we use to ensure that short-stay students are provided with a measure of their progress?

The fact that some students chose not to complete the journal has made me appreciate that there is not likely to be a 'one-size-fits-all' solution in terms of providing students with a measure of their progress, leading me to believe this should be optional in future. However, for some students it provided a personalised record of their learning and an opportunity for reflection. Improved communication with teachers in Cycle 2 showed that they were better able to comment on whether they felt the students had achieved their aims. However, the data would suggest that the students themselves are perhaps best placed to measure their progress, as teachers may not have enough information to meaningfully recognise and measure progress during a short course.

Harmer (1983:396) states that 'Learner training . . . is a first step on the road to self-directed learning', and therefore by giving students help and support in setting goals, we can also provide them with a framework to assess their own progress, giving them more autonomy. This increased responsibility in the learning process could potentially increase students' motivation, and can focus them on what is achievable within the time constraints of their course, leading to a more focused approach to studying. Furthermore, using instruments that allow the student to measure their progress can provide a more tangible sense of achievement, and can make assessment a shared responsibility between teacher and student.

It is important to consider the limitations of this study, perhaps the most significant being the small sample of students involved. With a larger sample the results may have varied, although the reason for focusing on short-stay students was the fact they are so few, thus making a larger sample impossible. An added complication was that students' classes and teachers often changed through necessity, making the chain of communication challenging.

In terms of the implications of the project, the school is currently developing an online platform for staff and students. Its functionality includes various self-assessment tools, and it therefore seems likely that we will adapt the instruments designed for this research to be used online. This will not be limited to short-stay students, although the procedures will necessarily vary for long-stay enrolments.

## Reflections

In the search for the answers to my questions, I have gained an important insight into students' attitudes towards their learning outcomes. The process has also raised further questions in terms of providing students with a record of their progress. As Altrichter, Feldman, Posch and Somekh (2008:8) point out, 'there is never one clear, right answer to matters relating to human behaviour', and although informed steps have been taken in the right direction, I feel we should now explore students' attitudes towards autonomy in language learning. Journals may only aid the more autonomous student, highlighting a need to offer a variety of methods for recording progress and appealing to a range of students.

The staging of the project was largely out of my control, as it had to be guided by the enrolment dates of those participants kind enough to take part. This meant other members of staff being involved in communication with the students when I was unavailable, and for this help I am very grateful.

Although time-consuming, I do feel the project has been an invaluable investment of time, not only in aiming to improve the quality of service we offer our short-stay students, but also in learning about the research process itself. I feel confident this will aid future projects at the school, adopting a systematic approach that is beneficial to both staff and students.

Finally, rolling enrolment is a constant reminder of the need for change; nothing stays the same for very long, and neither should it, as we continually look to learn, grow and develop. This project has made me realise that there are many parallels to be drawn with the cyclical nature of action research in this respect, which is why this does not feel like 'the end' of this journey, but rather the beginning of the next.

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## Appendix 1: Arrival Questionnaire (Cycles 1 and 2)

Name: _____ Date: _____

Length of course: _____ weeks Level: _____

| | Choose up to 3 things you want to improve during your course, and write them in the boxes below:<br>- My English generally<br>- Listening<br>- Speaking<br>- Pronunciation<br>- Reading<br>- Writing<br>- Vocabulary<br>- Grammar | What in particular do you want to improve in these areas?<br>For example:<br>Speaking – fluency<br>Vocabulary – phrasal verbs | How good do you think you are in this area now for your level?<br>(1 = very bad, 10 = excellent) | Where would you like to be at the end of your course in this area?<br>(1 = very bad, 10 = excellent) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | | | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 2 | | | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 3 | | | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |

## Appendix 2: End-of-course questionnaire (Cycle 1)

Name: _____

Date: _____

Length of course: ___ weeks

Level: _____

**Part 1**

Please look at your interview sheet from day one of your course and answer the following questions about your aims:

| Aims | Where did you want to be at the end of your course?<br>(1 = very bad, 10 = excellent) | Where do you feel you are at the end of your course?<br>(1 = very bad, 10 = excellent) | How happy are you with your progress?<br>1 very unhappy<br>2 unhappy<br>3 not happy or unhappy<br>4 happy<br>5 very happy | Briefly explain why you feel this way. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 | 1 2 3 4 5 | |
| 2 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 | 1 2 3 4 5 | |
| 3 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 | 1 2 3 4 5 | |

**Part 2**

Did you find that during your course your aims changed, or that you had new aims?

Yes/No

If yes, please comment

**Part 3**

Please tick ONE sentence for each question that best describes how you feel.

1 I feel:

very happy with my progress overall
quite happy with my progress overall
quite unhappy with my progress overall
very unhappy with my progress overall

2 My aims were:

very easy to achieve
quite easy to achieve
not very easy to achieve
very difficult to achieve

3 My aims were:

very realistic for this course
quite realistic for this course
quite unrealistic for this course
very unrealistic for this course

## Appendix 3: Teachers' questionnaire (Cycles 1 and 2)

Name of teacher: _____
Name of student: _____
Date: _____
Length of course: ___ weeks
Level: _____

Please try to answer the following questions in as much detail as you can. It is important that you answer as accurately as possible, as the questions are designed to see how effective our systems of checking student progress are:

1 Tick the sentence which best describes how you feel about the progress of the student named above:

The amount of progress they made was very clear to me
The amount of progress they made was quite clear to me
It wasn't very clear to me how much progress they made
I have no idea how much progress they made

Comments:

2 In what ways do you think the student named above has made progress during their course?
(Please do not comment on their strengths and weaknesses, just on their progress since being at Lewis School)

3 In your opinion, has the student achieved their language aims? (Tick ONE)

Yes
No
Yes and no
Don't know

Comments:

4 In your opinion, how happy do you think the student is with the amount of progress they have made? (Tick ONE)

Very happy
Quite happy
Quite unhappy
Very unhappy
I don't know

Comments:

## Appendix 4: Existing arrival questionnaire

**Lewis School of English Student Profile**

Name:
Age:
D. O. B:
Sex:
Country:
Occupation:
Agent:
*Heard about us?

Arrival: Departure:
Weeks:
Type of course:

Homestay or Southampton address:

Home address:

Student contact:
Email:
Tel:

Name of Emergency contact:
Relationship:
Emergency contact:

Medical condition/learning difficulties:

English experience:

Reasons for study/Aims:

Areas of focus during course:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Speaking | Listening | Writing |
| Reading | Grammar | Pronunciation |
| Vocab | | |

Test score: Oral assess: Interviewed by:

## Appendix 5: Student journal (Cycle 2)

Here is some information about your journal:

- Write in this journal when you have done something in class or for homework that you think has helped you with your language aims.
- Do not write about anything you have done in class that is *not* connected to your aims.
- You do not have to write lots of information, just things that will help you to remember what you did at the end of your course.
- You can write in this at home, but it is important that you bring it with you to school every day.
- Write in English if you can, but if this is too difficult, you can write in your own language.
- I will need to take a copy of this journal on your last day and will use it as part of my project.
- **Ask Abby or Simon if you are not sure what you need to do.**

In your interview, you said that your language aims are:

1

2

3

# Creating ePortfolios to facilitate and evidence progress using learning technologies

**ROLF TYNAN** EMBASSY ENGLISH, CAMBRIDGE

## Introduction

Throughout my teaching career I have noticed that many students who are at intermediate or upper intermediate level believe that they leave with the same level of language ability they arrived with. When I check their perceptions and compare these with their classwork, homework and comments from their teachers, it is clear that their self-assessment does not generally reflect expert judgement and when questioned on this aspect they seem unaware of how to evaluate their progress except from test marks and an innate feeling. This is why I decided to investigate the impact that an ePortfolio procedure could have on the perception of progress of upper intermediate mixed-nationality students on a rolling intake course.

In the context of this research, the ePortfolio is a learning portfolio created by students in the form of a website. It contains digital artefacts and links to artefacts that the students have created. The ePortfolio evidences students' speaking, writing and reading skills both from tasks set in class and activities that the students have identified as useful for their own progress in specific areas of language learning. I chose an ePortfolio as I had already used the system with individual students with great success. However, I have only had anecdotal evidence of its effectiveness in raising awareness of progress through evidencing their language use. This study provided the opportunity to evaluate the usefulness of the ePortfolio procedure more systematically and thoroughly and, hopefully, to enhance the procedure.

## Literature review

Learning portfolios have been part of school educational systems for over 10 years as an alternative to conventional assessment practices. As technology has become part of the educational process, many kinds of ePortfolios are now being used at higher education establishments and in professional practices across the globe in a variety of forms. They hold a high degree of promise for accomplishing the following two purposes of assessment: '. . . providing feedback about student performance to improve curricula and pedagogy as well as determining individual students' mastery of learning and providing feedback for improvement' (Ewell 2002). Additionally, they provide students with a planning and goal-setting tool that assists them in making connections between learning experiences and they also provide faculty with a vehicle for more authentic discussions about teaching and learning. Finally, ePortolios provide institutions with a tool to establish a more permanent role in the lives of learners (Siemens 2004).

In addition to the features associated with paper and pencil portfolios, web-based portfolios offer several advantages, such as the facilitation of faculty/advisor assessments and the constant editability of students' reflections because the content is digital and therefore malleable and shareable. They also offer easy access, through any mobile device or computer, to a wide range of multimedia materials: artefact formats such as video and sound recordings that are difficult to include in traditional portfolios are easily included in ePortfolios. Over the past six years, I have observed the level of motivation and engagement increase in the groups in which I have used digital tools. As Gatyan and McEwan (2007) stated 'students enjoyed using ePortfolios because they diversified instruction and increased student motivation'. Brandes and Boskic (2008) stated that the use of formative peer and instructor feedback showed enhanced reflection, and ultimately deeper learning outcomes.

Students should be provided with guidance on what an ePortfolio could include, but according to Sterudler and Wetzel (2011:163): 'learners may be expected to take responsibility for selecting artefacts, making connections to standards and interpreting their own learning'. I hoped that the process of keeping an ePortfolio would provide learners with insight into their own progress and thus allow them to be better informed as to what their improvements are in real terms rather than purely through a summative test. Therefore, it is the whole process of the ePortfolio intervention that is considered in this research rather than just the end product, which is in line with current thinking on language portfolios. As stated by JISC (2008:6):

> . . . an ePortfolio is the product, created by the learner, a collection of digital artefacts articulating experiences, achievements and learning. Behind any product, or presentation, lie rich and complex processes of planning, synthesising, sharing, discussing, reflecting, giving, receiving and responding to feedback. These processes – referred to here as "portfolio learning" – are the focus of increasing attention, since the process of learning can be as important as the end product.

For the approach to the procedure that the students would follow I decided to adopt the clearly defined processes as presented by Hilzensauer and Buchberger (2009:4):

> Process 1: Clarification of the overall objectives, the learning goals and the respective competence development methods.
> Process 2: Collection, selection and connection of the learning artefacts with learning goals as well as linking parallel processes and/or artefacts to each other.
> Process 3: Reflection of the competence development process and documentation of these reflections. Based on these reflections, the learning process shall be managed and adapted according to the learning goals.
> Process 4: Presentation of the ePortfolio artefacts to a broader audience (peers/tutors).

> Process 5: Assessment and evaluation of the learning processes/ competence development. For this process, the guidelines and criteria must be clearly negotiated with the participants.

These five processes provided me with distinct areas to apply to the intervention that I intended. The significance of these guidelines only became apparent as I assessed my own plans for the ePortfolio procedure and discovered that, until the research, my procedure had been outcome based with less focus on the processes involved.

One of the goals of my procedure was to highlight to the learners that they could accept the responsibility of assessing their own work in terms of what they produced, using criteria agreed between the learner and teacher at the start of the activity. The ePortfolio would allow them to evidence various aspects of their learning and the weekly institutional test would cease to be the only indication of their progress. In the procedure I introduced, learners are also able to compare items they produce at the beginning of their stay and ones throughout their stay. In addition, the digital items allow them to redraft, re-record and to offer self- and peer-evaluation of items within their ePortfolio. Given that ePortfolio makes self-assessment easier, my intention was to allow students to work towards becoming more aware of their own weaknesses and strengths and improve themselves with the support of their teacher. This, I believe, would help them become more independent learners.

In addition to e-assessment offering the learners more options to notice their progress and re-evaluate their language production, e-assessment is also beneficial for teachers. For example, Olofsson, Lindberg and Stodberg (2011:41) state that e-assessment is suited to formative assessment as it can offer teachers options 'to assess aspects of learning that have proved difficult using more conventional means'.

## Research focus and methodology

My key research question was: does the use of an ePortfolio procedure contribute to a better awareness of progress for intermediate/upper intermediate English language learners? The context was within a language school with multinational students with a rolling intake procedure, which involved students potentially arriving and leaving on a weekly basis. The question then arises of what length of stay for students an ePortfolio procedure becomes valid, and this constraint informs part of the study as it further defines the context.

This study involved two 6-week cycles of action research carried out at the Embassy English centre in Cambridge. Both cycles included both qualitative and quantitative approaches to validate findings as suggested by Chapelle and Duff (2003). Being an action research study, this study involved practice-embedded cycles of intervention and evaluation. It was vital that the questions of local validity (problems emerging from a particular context and solutions appropriate to it) and process validity (to what extent problems are framed and solved in a manner that permits ongoing learning of the individual or system) were addressed so it was concluded that two cycles with classes of 12 or more students of a non-probability sampling (not involving a random selection) were needed to conduct the research; non-probability sampling was required as the intervention had to utilise a class as offered by the institution. Data collection instruments were: questionnaires (with some Likert scale questions) for students and teachers, and semi-structured audio recorded interviews with students and with teachers (to follow up on their questionnaire responses).

To address the ethical aspect of the project, students' consent to participate in the study was obtained. They were satisfied that their anonymity and the confidentiality of their participation would be maintained and the majority were interested to see how this research may help their learning.

The intervention was carried out by two teachers who volunteered to take part in the study because, I, as the Learning Technologies specialist, have no classroom time in my position. However, I planned and co-ordinated the implementation of the study, analysed the data, and communicated with teachers and students throughout to ensure that they were kept informed about the project at all times.

## Cycle 1

### Method

*Induction to the process*

The first cycle involved teacher 'A' and a class of 11 multinational students at upper intermediate level. The students were studying in Cambridge for varying lengths of time from seven weeks to nine months. This teacher was given an overview of the ePortfolio and the action research project. After that, I explained the parameters of the intervention and what it would entail for them and for the students: the teacher would have to establish clear goals for the students based on the data we had from institutional documents (see 'Starting the Process' below) and through a discussion with the students themselves; the teacher would then need to assign projects that utilise digital tools and agree criteria as well as provide feedback time; the teacher would also have to supervise the students creating an ePortfolio and allocate time to monitoring it; the students would have to create an ePortfolio (the structure of which is explained later) and complete tasks with a digital tool; both parties would have to complete a survey, and semi-structured oral interviews. I presented the concept of an ePortfolio to the class with an example from a previous student. All of the class were informed that this was part of an action research study and they all agreed to participate. They then completed a short questionnaire about their learning with reference to ePortfolios and their previous schooling (Appendix 1).

*Starting the process*

I collated relevant information from the institutional documents, which were each student's independent learning plan, the students' initial presentation of their needs in the form of a letter written on their induction day and their individual tracker forms, which contain weekly comments from their teachers on their motivation, approach and one

aspect of their learning. This provided me with enough data to create an informed guide for their development of an ePortfolio which could be targeted to their own learning objectives. The teacher set about adapting traditional tasks into outcome-driven tasks which would provide a digital artefact that the student could place in the ePortfolio. In addition to this, items identified from the institutional documents, such as the individual learning plan and the written task that is part of the level placement test on the day of enrolment, were selected and they provided the key goals and objectives to discuss with the learners and help establish individual learning goals that could be achieved within their length of study. The teacher and I reviewed the items and then I met with the learners individually discuss them and then agree exactly what the goals were: 'Improve my speaking' was refined through discussion into – 'presenting information in a presentation', 'using phrases to introduce ideas or change subject', 'explain graphs', 'speak more confidently' (Appendices 2a and 2b). The learners also agreed deadlines for each of the tasks provided to help achieve their goals. They then needed to keep a record of what they did to achieve their goals and uploaded a link to the item they produced with a description of what it was. It was made clear to the students that there were individual tasks as well as ones that were identified that the entire group would undertake as set by the teacher and would also include peer- and self-evaluation in the forms of discussions on what they had created and the experience they had gone through.

*Constructing the ePortfolio*

The group were provided with instructions on how to create an ePortfolio using an open source Web 2.0 tool – Weebly (www.weebly.com). In my role as a technologist, I had already evaluated the benefits and drawbacks of various systems, both open source and proprietary. The factors that made Weebly the best choice for the context of the present study were its ease of construction, sharing potential, individualisation as well as portability.

The students created their ePortfolios out of class and sent their links to their teacher and myself, so we could monitor what was being uploaded. Within each ePortfolio, there were four previously agreed sections: About Me; My Goals; My Progress and My English (see Appendix 3). The students completed tasks starting with the 'About Me' section, which either included a university personal statement, a discussion of a job experience or a more general statement of learning depending on their focus for the ePortfolio. The 'My Progress' was a learning diary which had reflections on what they had learned that week, what they needed to focus on and what they had achieved. The evidence of what they achieved in terms of language production was situated in the 'My English' section; the evidence was in the form of links to digital items, or the items themselves with a description of what the task was and what the created item evidenced.

*Cycle 1 end*

Students' 5-week tutorial is part of the institutional process of monitoring the student's progress and supporting learning aims through recommendations. During this tutorial, the participating students were asked what impact the ePortfolio had had on their progress and learning in general. They also completed an online Likert scale survey (Appendix 4) to provide feedback on their experience and the impact that the ePortfolio had had on their learning. The teacher was not able to see their feedback, but I could, in order to identify those who provided more detailed comments. I then selected those students for semi-structured interviews so that they could follow up on their questionnaire responses. The teacher also participated in a semi-structured oral interview that was recorded.

**Key findings in Cycle 1**

*Cycle 1 introduction questionnaire*

In Cycle 1, the questionnaire revealed attitudes to learning that may have an impact on how students view certain aspects of the process of creating work in English. This was in relation to what responsibilities the students accept as their own and what they do to support their own progress so as to promote the concept of the ePortfolio as a method of addressing those issues.

A summary of the responses to the first questionnaire are provided in Table 1. For Question 1, a Portfolio was used only by two out of 11 Cycle 1 students prior to this study. The use of the portfolio was fairly limited as it was only included in their final years at secondary school as a paper wallet folder with their best project work in.

**Table 1: Cycle 1 Introduction questionnaire results (n = 11 respondents)**

| Question | Response option | Count (%) |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Have you had a learning portfolio before? | Yes | 2 (18%) |
| | No | 9 (82%) |
| 2. When you create something using English, do you . . . | . . . review it? | 6 (60%) |
| | . . . store it in a folder or notebook? | 5 (50%) |
| | . . . throw it away? | 0 (0%) |
| | . . . show it to someone? | 2 (20%) |
| | . . . evaluate? | 3 (30%) |
| 3. How often do you look at your writing again after you finish it? | Daily | 1 (9%) |
| | Once | 3 (27%) |
| | A couple of times | 6 (55%) |
| | Weekly | 0 (0%) |
| | Hardly ever | 2 (18%) |
| | Never | 0 (0%) |
| 4. Who do you show and discuss your work with? | Teacher | 7 (64%) |
| | Classmates | 2 (18%) |
| | Friends | 3 (27%) |
| | Family | 3 (27%) |
| | Colleagues | 0 (0%) |
| | Nobody | 2 (18%) |
| 5. How do you reflect on what you have learned? | Make notes to improve | 6 (55%) |
| | Identify weaker areas | 6 (55%) |
| | Review exercises | 5 (46%) |
| | Organise practice to work on the weaker areas | 5 (46%) |
| | I don't reflect | 0 (0%) |
| 6. Do you set yourself goals and check you are doing something to reach them? | Yes, always | 2 (18%) |
| | Yes, sometimes | 6 (55%) |
| | No, not usually | 2 (18%) |
| | No, never | 1 (9%) |

The results from Question 2 showed that about half of the students review their work and half put their work in a folder. Three students evaluate their work and only two respondents show it to someone. However, responses to Question 4 reveal a discrepancy: although only two had previously said they showed their work to someone (in response to Question 2), eight said, in response to Question 4, that they showed their work to someone. The majority selected the option of the teacher, with three respondents each showing their work to friends and family. This indicates a potential misunderstanding of the questions, so the process of getting the students to complete the questionnaire would need to be revised to be more effective for the second cycle. Only two students showed their work to no-one. In a follow-up oral interview, they both identified that in their previous schooling they had to complete exercises and then move on until all exercises had been completed, with little or no time for reviewing or reflecting as the mark awarded by the teacher was the only indication of their success or failure.

Question 6 provided interesting data. Six respondents said they sometimes set goals and, when questioned further on this by their teacher they stated that the goals depended on extrinsic motivation such as an exam or tests which would spur them to set deadlines for goals and attempt to achieve them. Only two always set goals and, in fact, they always consulted their teachers as to whether the goals were realistic. Two students did not usually set goals but, again after further questions from their teacher, they said that it depended on their motivation levels for the particular goal. This was echoed by the respondent who said they had no motivation and they never set goals as they believed that they had to come to class and did not have any responsibility outside of this. In addition, it was this student who said to their teacher: 'I am just lazy, I hate working, I hate studying and just want to sleep all day or play computer games. There is nothing you can do to change me'. With this wide range of motivations and the variety of students that we could expect in a typical language class in our institution, the challenge was not just to engage all of them in ePortfolios and establishing goals, but also to engage them in their own learning.

*Cycle 1 online Likert survey*

The students completed an online Likert scale survey (Appendix 4) after the cycle had ended, providing feedback on ePortfolios. Their responses were analysed and the findings are presented in this section (see Table 2).

Responses to the questions addressing the effect of the ePortfolio on students' reflection showed that the majority of students agreed that the ePortfolio made them think about what they were learning and also think about their objectives realistically (see Questions 1 and 2 in Table 2). One student commented that it had made them think about their learning and they perceived that as beneficial, and that it should be implemented in their home country:

> I like I can see my progress because I can think about what I learn after I do homework like writing or speaking I can check again and improve. [The teacher] was very helpful and the other teacher I don't know his name. I can think about what is important for my study and make more things to help me with this. I want students to do this in my country because I think it helps me to understand my progress especially in speaking and in my country we only study grammar and writing so this can help us ☺.

The findings also revealed that the ePortfolio provided evidence of learning progress to the students. Most students agreed that the ePortfolio gave them evidence of their progress (see Question 11 in Table 2) and in their open-ended responses many reported that now they have more awareness of what they had learned.

In addition, all students in Cycle 1 agreed or agreed strongly that the ePortfolios showed them that they could use the language they had learned (see Question 10 in Table 2). This is illustrated in a student's comment below:

> I like because eportfolio can help me understand my progress and sometimes I think I am the same but when I look at my work I can understand that I improve. I make lots of extra work to make the eportfolio very good and i want to show my friends and my old teacher when I come back my country. I think we have more time to use in class is a good idea and we can show new students so they can make a good eportfolio and we learn together better.

One of the issues that I was aware of was extra work in addition to the learning that takes place in class: producing their own ePortfolio, and taking responsibility for their own learning. The results confirmed that they perceived the workload as significant as opposed to their traditional classes (see Question 4 in Table 2).

However, the perceived benefits outweighed the drawbacks in terms of students' learning although the amount of work required would always be something students with less motivation would find a stumbling block to full engagement. If this issue is something that has not been addressed in the previous schooling of a student, the driving force to provide motivation rests with the teacher, and with the inclusive experience of the rest of the group being more fully involved in the process.

*Cycle interview with a teacher*

In order to establish that using the ePortfolio procedure was something that could be integrated into our establishment's teaching strategy, it was essential that teachers were consulted on what they noticed in relation to the use of the ePortfolio and how it impacted on the teacher. If the teacher was not adequately prepared for the ePortfolio procedure then this could jeopardise the ePortfolio procedure as they are the driving force to support the students in this change of learning. The interviews were semi-structured (Appendix 5), recorded and then transcribed.

In the first cycle the teacher reported difficulties in explaining the process to the class, indicating that the teacher could have had more time to experience the process themselves so they were fully grounded in the ePortfolio process before using it with the students. The other main difficulty noted was the issue surrounding choosing goals and objectives; the teacher commented: 'I think there were some problems about what to write in "my goals"', so I asked, 'What would have made it easier for them? . . . to have access to this sample (of goals and objectives)'. The teacher

**Table 2: Cycle 1 Likert survey data (n = 9 respondents)***

| | Agree strongly | Agree | Disagree | Disagree strongly |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. The ePortfolio made me think about what I was learning. | 4 (44%) | 4 (44%) | 1 (11%) | 0 (0%) |
| 2. The ePortfolio helped me reflect on my objectives realistically. | 1 (11%) | 6 (67%) | 2 (22%) | 0 (0%) |
| 3. The ePortfolio made me more engaged in my work. | 2 (22%) | 4 (44%) | 3 (33%) | 0 (0%) |
| 4. The ePortfolio created a lot of extra work for me. | 4 (44%) | 5 (57%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| 5. The ePortfolio didn't help me improve the quality of my work. | 0 (0%) | 3 (33%) | 5 (57%) | 1 (11%) |
| 6. The ePortfolio improved my study skills. | 0 (0%) | 7 (78%) | 2 (22%) | 0 (0%) |
| 7. The ePortfolio had a positive effect on my progress in learning English. | 3 (33%) | 5 (57%) | 1 (11%) | 0 (0%) |
| 8. The ePortfolio tasks made me more confident with my English. | 4 (44%) | 4 (44%) | 1 (11%) | 0 (0%) |
| 9. The ePortfolio made me take more pride in my work. | 0 (0%) | 5 (57%) | 4 (44%) | 0 (0%) |
| 10. The ePortfolio showed me I could use the language I had learnt. | 4 (44%) | 5 (57%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| 11. The ePortfolio gave me evidence of my progress. | 3 (33%) | 4 (44%) | 2 (22%) | 0 (0%) |
| 12. I did not really understand why I was keeping an ePortfolio. | 0 (0%) | 2 (22%) | 3 (33%) | 4 (44%) |
| 13. I will not continue to use an ePortfolio after this course. | 3 (33%) | 2 (22%) | 3 (33%) | 1 (11%) |

*Note: Percentages may not sum due to rounding.

did qualify that the students found creating an ePortfolio, evaluating their own work and producing digital evidence as independent learners 'a lot of work.' The teacher stated that there had been more reflection on their work: 'they did tell each other what was good, what was bad about their work and that went really well, they were really engaged in evaluating each other's work. Most of them were excited about it and they saw it was a good idea, because they asked me about the benefits for them, but as time went on they saw it as effort'.

One of the concerns that the teacher raised concerned integrating the procedure into the teaching schedule in a more structured manner. They concluded that more direction was needed for the students in the initial stages and that the reflection she noted in an earlier comment could in fact be extended, 'and . . . err . . . maybe a little bit more about what should be in each section, the language, guidance on appropriate language and what to put in each section. I would encourage them to share their sites with each other, just so they can look and comment on each other's so they can get a more of a group mentality'. Therefore the induction documentation for the teachers was revised and clarified to provide a more complete description of every element of the procedure: the goals grid was revised (Appendices 2a and 2b) and evaluated by teachers before being implemented.

## Cycle 2

### Method

*Induction to process*

In order to validate the findings from the first cycle and to adopt the changes needed that were identified from data analysis and from feedback in the first cycle, a second cycle was run. The second cycle involved another teacher and a new class of 14 multinational students at upper intermediate level including two English for Academic Purposes students. The students were studying in Cambridge at our school for varying lengths of time, from eight weeks to nine months. The students were in contact with this teacher for 100 minutes each day in a classroom, as in our school the students have three different teachers throughout the day. In this cycle, the teacher was given an overview of the ePortfolio and the action research project two weeks before the cycle started to allow them enough time to develop their own notes and specific tasks to engage the learners, and then we established the parameters of the intervention and what it would entail for them and for the students. They were then taken through the process of creating an ePortfolio for themselves so that they experienced the procedure as a student and were therefore better informed on how to explain it to their students.

*Process*

The changes to the procedure as informed by the first cycle were to:

- Introduce the topic of ePortfolios as a discussion and to review the questionnaire in class as there had been some confusion with the questions before individuals completed the questionnaire post class.
- Utilise an example ePortfolio to explain the concept of an ePortfolio to the class to clarify what they were expected to produce.
- Re-organise and present goals and objectives as a fixed list of options (Appendix 2) so as to facilitate ease of choice as this had been perceived as too complicated for the students by the teacher and by the students in follow-up interviews.
- Simplify the ePortfolio in terms of sections and amount of independent work to be agreed. In this cycle the students could identify one or two objectives and would be allowed a longer deadline to lessen the feeling of a sudden increase in workload.
- Integrate a specific time slot in the weekly schedule for reflection and review as suggested by the teacher in interview. The academic manager and the teacher suggested that the best time for feedback was after the weekly test.
- Create the ePortfolio in class time so there could be more technical support in the initial start-up phase. This was

arranged as the computer suite has to be booked in our institution.

- Aside from these changes, the procedures remained the same as in Cycle 1.

### Key findings in Cycle 2

*Cycle 2 induction questionnaire*

In Cycle 2 to address the disparity of answer selection and possible misunderstanding of the question rubrics identified in the follow up interviews mentioned previously, the teacher introduced the questions as part of an open class discussion, which looked at the possible answers and asked students the reasons for their choices. The students then completed the questionnaires independently out of class. The results this time were not considerably different from the first cycle but the validity of their selection was better ensured through the discussion (see Table 3). The biggest difference was that 79% of the class showed their work to someone as opposed to 20% in the first cycle. In Question 4, 79% of the respondents showed their work to their teacher compared with 64% in the first cycle. In Question 5 all the options had lower percentages than in the first cycle at nearly half in most cases. In the final question on setting goals the notable difference was that the percentage of respondents setting goals (either always or sometimes) was 85% in the second cycle whereas in the first cycle it was 73%.

**Table 3: Cycle 2 induction questionnaire results (n = 14 respondents)**

| Question | Response option | Count |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Have you had a learning portfolio before? | Yes | 2 (14%) |
| | No | 12 (79%) |
| 2. When you create something using English, do you . . .? | . . .review it? | 9 (64%) |
| | . . .store it in a folder or notebook? | 7 (50%) |
| | . . . throw it away? | 0 (0%) |
| | . . .show it to someone? | 11 (79%) |
| | . . .evaluate? | 6 (43%) |
| 3. How often do you look at your writing again after you finish it? | Daily | 1 (7%) |
| | Once | 5 (36%) |
| | A couple of times | 6 (43%) |
| | Weekly | 0 (0%) |
| | Hardly ever | 2 (14%) |
| | Never | 0 (0%) |
| 4. Who do you show and discuss your work with? | Teacher | 12 (79%) |
| | Classmates | 5 (36%) |
| | Friends | 1 (7%) |
| | Family | 6 (43%) |
| | Colleagues | 0 (0%) |
| | Nobody | 2 (14%) |
| 5. How do you reflect on what you have learned? | Make notes to improve | 4 (29%) |
| | Identify weaker areas | 6 (43%) |
| | Review exercises | 3 (21%) |
| | Organise practice to work on the weaker areas | 3 (21%) |
| | I don't reflect | 3 (21%) |
| 6. Do you set yourself goals and check you are doing something to reach them? | Yes, always | 3 (21%) |
| | Yes, sometimes | 9 (64%) |
| | No, not usually | 1 (7%) |
| | No, never | 1 (7%) |

*Cycle 2 online Likert survey*

The students completed an online Likert scale survey (Appendix 4) after the cycle had ended in the same way as in Cycle 1. The following section will describe the findings arising from the questionnaire data.

In Cycle 2, all students except one believed that the ePortfolio made them think about what they were learning (see Question 1 in Table 4). All students agreed that it also helped them reflect realistically on their objectives (see Question 2 in Table 4), which indicates that the revised procedure for identifying goals had been successful. This was echoed in the following comment: 'The ePortfolio has the biggest advantage for me in terms of having evidence about my English which I can show my universities. The exercises which were given matched perfectly to my setted goals.' These findings confirm the fact that learners are aware of the relevance of the ePortfolio process for their own learning.

Most students also perceived that the value of the ePortfolio was in providing evidence of their learning progress (see Question 11 in Table 4). All students also agreed that the ePortfolio showed them that they could use the language they had learnt (see Question 10 in Table 4). These findings are also confirmed by students' open-ended responses which show that they understood the procedure of reflection and implemented it into their learning process. One of the illustrative comments is provided below:

> Firstly I thought I will not make a difference but I understand it help me to organise my work and to do my work again until it is better. I can listen to myself and I can notice that I can speak and write with better grammar and more vocabulary than when I came. I think is extra work but maybe I will get easier and I can show what I understand to my new professor at university and when I find a job. I want to try to make more for my ePortfolio because I see it is a good thing and can help me see evidence of my progress.

The above findings show that the ePortfolio could have a positive impact on students' perception of their learning and progress.

The data from the question on workload showed again that the work related to ePortfolio was perceived as a lot of extra work (see Question 4 in Table 4). This confirmed that many students were unprepared from previous schooling to accept ownership for doing extra work not driven by the teacher to support their progress.

*Cycle 2 interview with a teacher*

The teacher in Cycle 2 said they would have liked more structured guidelines on the order in which aspects of the ePortfolio were to be introduced, as they felt the procedure should have a more prescribed approach rather than allowing teacher interpretation. This could mean a completely integrated design for the framework with set times, deadlines and non-adaptable activities from the teachers' perspective, with further training to establish routines and processes.

The teacher had found the project well received: 'initially they were really excited and when I assigned the tasks they didn't have any technical issues'. However, she found that although time had been allocated for the procedure each week, the reality had been different in terms of how feedback sessions were integrated into the weekly schedule. This meant that there was no regular time that ePortfolios were looked

**Table 4: Cycle 2 Likert survey data***

| | Agree strongly | Agree | Disagree | Disagree strongly |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. The ePortfolio made me think about what I was learning. | 4 (36%) | 6 (55%) | 1 (9%) | 0 (0%) |
| 2. The ePortfolio helped me reflect on my objectives realistically. | 1 (9%) | 7 (64%) | 3 (27%) | 0 (0%) |
| 3. The ePortfolio made me more engaged in my work. | 2 (18%) | 4 (36%) | 5 (45%) | 0 (0%) |
| 4. The ePortfolio created a lot of extra work for me. | 4 (36%) | 6 (55%) | 1 (9%) | 0 (0%) |
| 5. The ePortfolio didn't help me improve the quality of my work. | 0 (0%) | 3 (33%) | 7 (64%) | 1 (9%) |
| 6. The ePortfolio improved my study skills. | 0 (0%) | 9 (82%) | 2 (18%) | 0 (0%) |
| 7. The ePortfolio had a positive effect on my progress in learning English. | 5 (45%) | 5 (45%) | 1 (9%) | 0 (0%) |
| 8. The ePortfolio tasks made me more confident with my English. | 4 (36%) | 6 (55%) | 1 (9%) | 0 (0%) |
| 9. The ePortfolio made me take more pride in my work. | 0 (0%) | 6 (55%) | 5 (45%) | 0 (0%) |
| 10. The ePortfolio showed me I could use the language I had learnt. | 4 (36%) | 7 (64%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| 11. The ePortfolio gave me evidence of my progress. | 5 (45%) | 5 (45%) | 1 (9%) | 0 (0%) |
| 12. I did not really understand why I was keeping an ePortfolio. | 0 (0%) | 2 (18%) | 5 (45%) | 4 (44%) |
| 13. I will not continue to use an ePortfolio after this course. | 3 (27%) | 2 (18%) | 5 (45%) | 1 (9%) |

*Percentages may not sum due to rounding.

at in class as a group and as such there was no expectation of a weekly time to review their ePortfolios which, therefore, did not become part of the culture of study each week. The implication for further development of the process was to have the institution integrate the ePortfolio establishment and population process as part of the syllabus when training teachers on the approach of our institution.

The amount of work for the students and teacher was considered greater than the usual workload associated with teaching, and would need to be addressed by management of the institution to establish workload limits. It was mentioned that setting the goals was still problematic for the students and more guidance on this would be necessary. This would mean reviewing the ePortfolio process again and piloting it to establish the best practice through repeated monitoring, feedback and adaptation.

*Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 interviews with students*

In order to gather more detailed information on the responses from the Likert survey, five students from both cycles who had provided more information in the comments section of the online survey were selected to participate in recorded semi-structured oral interviews (Appendix 5). They agreed to participate if their anonymity was maintained as described in the participation agreement at the beginning of the action research project.

On their expectations of having the ePortfolio, the students reported that it would provide evidence of their work, ability and skills which they were able to show to parents, universities and prospective employers: 'I can show my family that I am not here for making party or whatever but I am studying; I always send them the links so they can see the new things . . . in future it is really useful that I can send to universities because if I wrote that I studied English and I have a certificate they don't know if I can really speak English but if I send them the link they can see my proves of what I can do.'

When asked, 'What were the benefits of having an ePortfolio?' the comments from the students again highlighted the perceived advantages of being able to show evidence of their abilities to parents and universities, which would not have been possible without the ePortfolio: 'there is really the evidence so the universities can see she can speak in English . . . she can write in English she has the right kind of level.' They also mentioned that they were able to notice their progress through the reflection process: 'I wanted to have like an evidence to prove my university and future employers that I can speak English that I have evidence to show them and I also wanted to improve my English because I make the portfolio, and yeah it was kind of an impulse to work more like make interviews, listen again to my recordings and think what I can do to improve.'

The following statement is one of four that confirmed the perception that an ePortfolio is a lot of extra work, especially for those students who are not academically focused during their stay in an Anglophone destination: 'If I study for longer time in Cambridge maybe I will make more things but I am here for six weeks and I want to spend free time with my friends. Maybe for hardworking student it is a good idea. Definitely it can help some students to understand they are learning more than they think but (louder) not every student.' It may also indicate that a minimum length of stay of six weeks may need to be defined for the procedure to be applicable and effective. It takes the students one week to set up the ePortfolio, and create the personal statement; it then takes one week for each task to be completed and uploaded to the ePortfolio; leading to the indication of six weeks being the minimum stay for an effective ePortfolio to be produced so there can be evaluation of the change in language ability over the period through the evidence produced.

On the question which asked, 'Do you think there was an increase in motivation to do the tasks? Why/why not?' four of the respondents indicated that there was an increased level of engagement and a perception of the importance of having an ePortfolio to evidence their language production. This is expressed clearly in the comment: 'the text which I write for the portfolio are going to be published in the website . . . and just knowing that it is published was like I really need to be good with this.'

When asked what support they would have liked, the students commented that they would like to have started the process on their first day when they arrived at the school so they were engaged in the procedure from their arrival. They also mentioned that they would like to have seen an example

from a previous student to provide them with the initial motivation to start the process.

In the follow-up question: 'Would it have been easier to have a ready-made portfolio for you to add things to?', students provided mixed responses with the potential to personalise seen as a benefit, e.g. 'it is a great opportunity that the portfolio gives you the chance to make your individual thing and you can select your own website (design), order the things as you want so it is better you can make it completely by yourself.' However, the amount of work to create it was seen as a drawback, as described in the comments: 'I think I needed the support because I have never done something like this before and it is always good to have some help', 'the main problem was making the ePortfolio'. This confirmed that more support and direction was needed in the actual use of the Web 2.0 tools, as this also required time and effort from the student.

The results showed that there was a balance to be maintained between the amount of extra work that a student needed to complete in the creation and upkeep of an ePortfolio versus the perceived benefits of being able to show evidence of their abilities and progress to others. The motivation for the latter could temper the lack of motivation arising from the increased workload.

## Discussion

The goal of this action research project was to create ePortfolios in order to facilitate and evidence progress using learning technologies. The whole process of the intervention consisted of many steps which helped arrive at the goal: the creation of the ePortfolio, the setting of goals and the realisation by students of the work they produce having value, the reflection on the learning they did, the selection of work and the explanation and evaluation by peers, self and teacher that provided the change in how the students perceived their progress and how their role in their own learning had changed.

In fact, portfolios achieve a goal that many other assessment tools cannot; they change the student role in assessment from passive subject to active participant as students are called upon to select samples of their classroom and co-curricular work products for the portfolio and to reflect upon why these artefacts were selected and how they demonstrate learning (Palomba 2002). The responsibility for assessing the quality of their own work is something that learners, for the most part, have not been doing in their previous educational situations and do not, therefore, expect to do so on arrival in an English Language school. This is something that students may need to be made aware of before they come so their expectations are in line with the approach.

For an ePortfolio procedure to be implemented within an institution the amount of direction that the students need should be clearly defined. It cannot be left open for the learners to identify and set realistic language goals independently as most have never done that before, so structured choices have shown themselves to be the best options. The teacher also needs to clearly explain the structure, potential benefits and the amount of work needed so that the students are fully aware of the procedure, and so they understand the purpose of creating and maintaining an ePortfolio.

The issue of rolling intake in EFL schools and the constant arrival and departure of students means that the students need to be inducted into the procedure on arrival so they understand that the ePortfolio is part of the learning schedule. It is also necessary to monitor the institutional exit questionnaires to compare those undertaking the ePortfolio procedure against those who are not, so as to obtain statistical data on how the ePortfolio process may raise awareness of progress. Of the 14 students in the study who have left the institutions since the start of this research project, nine have a higher score in the section of our institutional exit survey where they assess their progress than those on the standard programme. This indicates a positive result in terms of perception, but needs to await further data from the entire group of participants to provide a wider validity.

The students' perception of their own progress and learning changed in terms of raised awareness of their own learning and setting and achieving realistic goals according to the findings but with the limitation that the study only ran for two 6-week cycles with classes of around 12 students the results can indicate the potential issues and benefits as described in this study, but further studies are needed for a wider validity. The key findings reveal that one of the benefits of the ePortfolio lies in providing clear evidence of learning, and that the ePortfolio enables students to show their work and progress to interested parties. The main disadvantage is the amount of extra work required for setting up and maintaining the ePortfolio. The teachers' interviews identified that the induction process needed more clarity and prescription and that the setting of goals was an area for further adaptation to provide the learners with clarity of purpose. The length of the cycle also demonstrated that six weeks is the minimum time needed for students to engage with the project and have enough time to produce an ePortfolio with enough evidence to satisfy the amount of investment that the learner needs to have.

## Conclusion

The project was always being refined throughout the process of data collection, analysis and then adaptation. I cannot see this action research project ending because each cycle provides data for informed adaptations as the ePortfolio procedure evolves in our context. Although this study consisted of two cycles, institutionally we are going through another three cycles, continuing the action research project and using the data to refine the process and implementation procedure and widening the cycles across our centres in Australia, the United States and the UK.

The adoption of the ePortfolio procedure is something that can only be achieved with full training of the teachers who also experience the procedure themselves, a framework for the activities within the teaching schedule and sufficient time for the students to be studying long enough to utilise it. The use of the ePortfolio needs to be announced by the institution before the learner arrives. This way, students can be prepared for a different learning experience which they can continue to have after they depart since they accept the responsibility to update and maintain evidence of their own learning.

The fact that I was not the teacher involved, but the organiser, meant that I was afforded an objectivity to the project. This also meant that the contact with the learners was through teachers who sometimes needed to make changes 'on the ground' without having had the background research that I had, which caused some complications.

On a personal level, I have found the whole experience extremely compelling. I would like to carry out action research on every project I undertake with learners. Indeed, I would suggest that action research needs to be happening in all schools to enhance teacher understanding and to provide more effective and deeper learning for our students.

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## Appendix 1: Introduction questionnaire

Name: . . . . . .

1. Have you had a learning portfolio before?
2. When you create something using English, do you . . .
   . . . review it?
   . . . keep it in a folder or notebook?
   . . . throw it away?
   . . . show it to someone?
   . . . evaluate it?
3. How often do you look at your writing again after you finish it?
   Daily
   Once
   A couple of times
   Weekly
   Hardly ever
   Never
4. Who do you show & discuss your work with?
   Your teacher
   Your classmates
   Your friends
   Your family
   Your colleagues
   Nobody
5. How do you reflect on what you have learned?
   Make notes on what to improve
   Think about my weaker areas
   Look at the exercises/questions again
   Organise more practice on that area
   I don't reflect on what I have done

6. Do you set yourself goals and check you are doing something to reach them?
   Yes, always
   Yes, sometimes
   No, not usually
   No, never
7. If you have any other comments please put in this box.

## Appendix 2a: Cycle 1 goals grid student pre-discussion

| **Reason I am learning English** | 1. To study abroad at university<br>2. For travelling<br>3. For enjoyment | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Goals and objectives** | **Actions** | **By when?** | **Outcome/Evidence** |
| **1. Improve reading speed** | • Timed reading with questions<br>• Timed reading with summary<br>• Reading strategies training<br>• Practice exams | | I can . . .. . .. . .. . .. . . (+evidence in portfolio) |
| **2. Widen vocabulary** | • Diary – academic – use 20 new words every week<br>• Use thesaurus as well as dictionary<br>• Use find and replace in MS Word<br>• Writing tasks on different subjects | | |
| **3. Improve grammar** | • Increase accuracy with checklist and resources<br>• Introduce range of structures into speaking/writing<br>• Identify structures in other texts | | |
| **4. Improve writing skills** | • Writing tasks on academic subjects<br>• Organisational skills work<br>• Formal style training<br>• Drafting strategy<br>• Personal statements | | |
| | **Circle the most important below** | **For your level where are you?** | **Where would you like to be?** |
| | **Focus area** | **Level now** | **Improvement** |
| | | | |
| **Speaking** | Fluency/pronunciation/presentation/conversation | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| **Writing** | Formal/business/academic/punctuation/spelling | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| **Listening** | Academic/speed/note-taking/gist | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| **Reading** | Academic/speed/summary/gist | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| **Vocabulary** | Understanding/using/range/formality | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |

## Appendix 2b: Cycle 2 revised goals and objectives grid and options (2 tables)

| **Reason I am learning English** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Goals and objectives** | **Actions** | **By when?** | **Outcome/Evidence** |
| **1.** | | | I can . . .. . .. . .. . .. (+evidence in portfolio) |
| **2.** | | | |
| **3.** | | | |

| | **Circle the most important below – you can choose more than 1** | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Focus subsections** | **Which is the most important subsection to work on first?** |
| **Speaking** | Conversations/interviews/narratives/debating/research presentations/survey & data presentations | |
| **Writing** | Articles/letters/emails/reports/brochures/posters/narratives/essays/notetaking from listening/comic strips/animations | |
| **Listening** | Note-taking/summarising/paraphrasing/comprehension | |
| **Reading** | Summary skills/research skills/vocabulary | |

| **Skill** | **Task type** | **Tools/resources** | | | | **Example** | **Example** | **Example** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Writing** | Articles | emaze | Word | Google doc | | | | |
| | Letters/emails/reports/brochures | emaze | Word | Google doc | | | | |
| | Posters | Canva | ThingLink | | | Interactive poster | Poster | |
| | Narratives | Storybird | | | | Story 1 | Story 2 | |
| | Essays | emaze | Word | Google doc | | Essay 1 | Essay 2 | |
| | Learning Diary | Within Weebly ePortfolio | | | | | | |
| | Comic strip/animation | Make Belief Comix | Dvolver | | | | Animation 1 | |
| | Note taking from listening e.g. TED Talks | | | | | | | |
| **Speaking** | Conversations | Audiobook | | | | Conversation | | |
| | Interviews audio | Audiobook | Spreaker | | | Audio interview | Audio interview | Audio interview |
| | Interviews video | Phone and Vimeo | emaze | | | Video interview 1 | Video interview | |
| | Narratives | Audiobook | | | | Audio narrative | Audio narrative 2 | Audio narrative 3 |
| | Debating | Audiobook | Spreaker | | | | | |
| | Research presentations | emaze | Haiku Deck | Prezi | PowToon | Research present | Research present | Funny presentation |
| | Research presentations with video of speaker | Movenote | | | | Group presentation | Single presentation | |
| | Survey presentations | emaze | Haiku Deck | Prezi | Google slides | | | |
| | Survey presentations with video of speaker | Movenote | | | | Single presentation | | |
| **Reading** | Summary skills, research skills, vocabulary | Scrible | | | | | | |

# Appendix 3: ePortfolio contents (the screenshots of the portfolios are from a selection of the students' ePortfolios)

**About me**

MY ENGLISH

HOME ABOUT ME MY PROGRESS MY GOALS MY PORTFOLIO MY CEFR LEVEL CONTACT ME

I am a person who needs challenges and has a strict plan to achieve the goals I set myself. But I also wanted to go through an adventure and explore new cities and places. So I decided living abroad for half a year would be the perfect start.
Having the focus on my future career, I chose Cambridge as one of the most famous cities for studying.

At the moment I am studying English for Academic purposes and preparing myself for the IELTS exam and the Cambridge CAE (Certificate of Advanced English).

One of my aims is to study Business Psychology. I have always been very interested in how ads and spots can influence the behavior of people.
How people react in their working life and how a company should be structured to work most effectively, that is exactly what I want to learn.
For the future, I see myself as a successful business woman, who helps companies to work more efficiently and be more successful.
Experts claim that the right structure and the right staff are even more important for a company than the perfect product, and therefore I think that there are lot of business opportunities in this field for me.

However, I see my stay in Cambridge as one of many steps for a successful future and this portfolio shows sufficient information about my learning process.

I hope you enjoy this portfolio and you can get an overview of my English. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to ask me.

**My goals**

My Embassy English

Home / About me / My Goals / My Progress / My English

| Goals | Actions | By when | Evidence |
|---|---|---|---|
| Improve writing skills for academic essays for university course– focus on formality and organisation | I researched nationalities opinions on behaviour differences as applied by stereotype. After interviewing a number of students I drafted an academic essay on how culture affects the behaviour. It included referencing. | By Sept 01 | Essay 1 |
| Improve survey and presenting information skills orally. Focusing on presenting data and sounding more fluent. | I carried out research into transport in Cambridge and carried out a survey with students to discover their transport issues. I then compiled a presentation and delivered it to my class. I also practised telling anecdotes to improve my fluency. | By Sept 8 | Presentation 1<br>Anecdote 1 |

**My progress**

Home / About me / My Goals / My Progress / My English

Week 1

This week I have been studying passives and I now understand why I need to use them when I am writing academic essays. I read many example essays on business and then I found when they use passive so I could see why it was not a normal sentence. I also know that I need to write something a few times to look at organisation and add more information so it is clear. I have also been practising speaking more formally by learning my writing sentences and recording my voice. I think I need some help to make the stress in the correct way.

Week 2

My teacher recorded her voice saying my sentences so I could have an example to listen and copy. I think my English speaking is better but I need to record myself every night a little and try to listen when I stress the wrong word.we studied about personalities and we had to write a story with a message.
I have made another essay question and I will research and write the first draft this weekend. I make a plan now and I think when passive is good and I will use more synonyms if a word is used more than 3 times. I made the survey questions for my research and I asked my host father but he said the questions are too long so I will make them clearer.

Week 3

I have listened to my first recordings again as my teacher recommended and I can hear my voice is now clearer and I sound more like English speakers. I listened to a TED talk and I can hear the presenter made pauses so we could understand the more crucial things. In my presentation this week I made pauses so the class can think about my important research. My classmates said I sound like a teacher so I feel proud. I didn't record my presentation in class because I was shy but I practised again and recorded it. For my class homework we had to tell an anecdote so I recorded a true story so I could talk more quickly and fluently because I know the story and have the way to say the story effectively. I recorded it 3 times and emailed my teacher the best one.

**My English**

Essay 1

***Task:*** *To research a topic and interview the public to provide an academic essay with clear organisation, formal vocabulary and grammar.*
I researched and wrote an essay on nationalities' opinions on behaviour differences as applied by stereotype. After interviewing a number of students I drafted an academic essay on how culture affects the behaviour. It included referencing.If I did it again I would collect more responses and make more drafts. I would like to have more phrases so I do not repeat many words so I will find more synonyms for my next essay

Story 1 homework


***Task:*** *to write a story about people with different personalities and it should have the message about how people can respect each other.*
I chose to write about a house where everyone is different but they get along with each other. I tried to choose good pictures and make the story for younger people. I read my story to my host family daughter who is 8 and she asked me to read it again. My speaking was soft and clear and I could make pauses so Emily could ask more questions. She said it is a good story and I am a good storyteller. I felt proud and more confident about my speaking. This was a good activity and I sent my family the story. I would like to tell more stories to Emily as it helps my speaking stress and pronunciation.

Presentation 1 Homework


***Task:*** *To research the different types of transport in Cambridge and carry out a survey with the students to find out what their preferences are.*
I researched the different types of transport and then organised the presentation. I wrote a survey and with my partner asked 20 of the students during break times and lunchtime to discover what their preferences were. We then organised the data into graphs and practised the presentation. If I did it again I would collect more responses and maybe ask for more reasons why they made their answers. I think I am nervous in my presentation and I sometimes made mistakes but my stress is better.

My anecdote


***Task:*** *to retell a true story and think about pauses and stress.*
I recorded the story 3 times on my phone and listened each time so I could think about my pronunciation. In the first one I was very nervous and I made many mistakes with my grammar and pronunciation. In the second one I was more relaxed but I forgot some words and used many simple ones. It was easier to tell a story to Emily than to record myself talking alone so maybe I will record the next story I tell to her.

## Appendix 4: Online Likert survey at the end of the cycle

***1. Please select an answer for each question and for the last question write a comment to say why you made your choice.**

| | Agree strongly | Agree | Disagree | Disagree strongly |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The ePortfolio made me think about what I was learning. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| The ePortfolio helped me reflect on my objectives realistically. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I did not really understand why I was keeping an ePortfolio. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| The ePortfolio made me more engaged in my work. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| The ePortfolio created a lot of extra work for me. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| The ePortfolio didn't help me improve the quality of my work. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| The ePortfolio improved my study skills. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| The ePortfolio gave me evidence of my progress. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| The ePortfolio made me take more pride in my work. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| The ePortfolio showed me I could use the language I had learnt. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I will not continue to use an ePortfolio after this course. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| The ePortfolio tasks made me more confident with my English. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Overall, I think that the ePortfolio had a positive effect on my progress in learning English. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

Explain how it had/didn't have a positive effect.

## Appendix 5: Interview questions

**Instrument 2: Questions from an interview with teachers**

1. What was your expectation of students doing the tasks like setting up the ePortfolio?
2. Do you think you were prepared enough to deliver the pilot?
3. What support would you have liked?
4. How did the students react when they were introduced to it?
5. Was there a lot of extra work preparing for digital homework tasks/projects?
6. How did you integrate the digital aspect of homework/classwork?
7. Did you provide time for feedback on what was created? and what happened in the feedback sessions?
8. How often did you and your students look at your ePortfolio together?

9. Were you aware of students discussing the ePortfolios in class time?
10. Do you think there was an increase in motivation to do the tasks? Why/why not?
11. What aspects of the pilot have been more useful than traditional teaching?
12. What would you do differently if you started it again? Introduction/monitoring etc.

**Instrument 4: Questions from an interview with students**

1. What was your expectation of having the ePortfolio?
2. Was there a lot of extra work preparing for digital homework tasks/projects?
3. What were the benefits of having an ePortfolio?
4. What were the drawbacks of having an ePortfolio?
5. Were you given feedback on what was created? & what happened in the feedback sessions?
6. How often did you and your teacher look at their ePortfolios together?
7. Do you think there was an increase in motivation to do the tasks? Why/why not?
8. What aspects of the ePortfolio have been more useful than traditional learning?
9. What would you do differently if you started it again?

# Reflections on the first year of the Cambridge English/ English UK Action Research Scheme

**FIONA BARKER** CAMBRIDGE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT
**HUAN JAPES** ENGLISH UK

## Background

The Cambridge English/English UK Action Research Scheme arose from discussions in early 2013 about a professional development programme of action research (AR) for teachers working in English UK's 470 member schools. We noted that whilst many teachers are interested in action research they often lacked the knowledge, support and resources needed to become teacher-researchers. Our scheme therefore aimed to provide opportunities for action research and publication and presentation of research outcomes for UK-based English language teachers, differing from other schemes that fund academics and universities rather than teachers and language schools. To help set up the scheme we drew on our experiences of action research including the English Australia/ Cambridge English Action Research in ELICOS Award Scheme begun in 2010 – under the guidance of an expert in action research, Simon Borg. The scheme aimed to provide a focus for teachers to investigate an aspect of their own classroom practice where the focus is generated and sustained by the teachers themselves, so each project provides a unique professional development experience.

## Snapshots of the first year

Following the scheme's launch in November 2013 at the English UK Teachers' Conference in London six teachers were selected to take part, based on their submitted proposals under four main themes: Assessment, Feedback and Correction Techniques, Focus on Form and Meaning, and Study and Learning Strategies. The six selected proposals explored teaching and learning challenges that we felt would resonate with other teachers and generate positive outcomes, for example Abby Croucher's research into making a difference to the sense of progress of short-stay students; Tatiane Depieri's study on error correction in writing and Ian Chitty's work on peer assessment of speaking. The other three funded projects explored the use of technology (Rolf Tynan's study on ePortfolios); the application of mainstream teaching techniques to EFL (Adam Scott's work on synthetic phonics) and enhancing specific skills (Judith Watkins' research on an extensive reading programme).

Our first group of teachers left their classrooms (and comfort zones) in order to participate in three workshops over nine months to discuss the principles of action research, to work on research designs, analyse data, discuss challenges and ultimately to deliver (for some their first) conference presentations. These activities were interspersed with online support from Simon Borg and interactions on Moodle together with professional development support from Cambridge English Teacher (www.cambridgeenglishteacher.org). The mix of experience and interests in the group was intended to promote the discussion of ideas and a support network of fellow teacher-researchers as their research projects progressed, although we faced some difficulties making online interaction work as well as the face-to-face workshops.

After research reports were submitted in October 2014, we selected the winner of the inaugural Cambridge English/ English UK Action Research Award which is given to the researcher(s) who best embodies the scheme through a clear, focused and effective project and who is able to reflect critically on the application of their findings locally and more widely. Judith Watkins, an EFL teacher from Sheffield College, was our inaugural award winner and she and the other five participants received certificates at the English UK Teachers' Conference in November, pictured below. Following this event, the final stage of the scheme saw the six teachers revise their research reports into articles for this issue of *Research Notes* which was another challenging first for some of the group.

## Benefits of action research

Ultimately, action research helps teachers explore aspects of their classroom practice and respond to everyday challenges in a critically effective way. Our scheme enables teachers to try out their interventions in a safe and supported environment, helped by experienced tutors, peers and their institutions. Their learners benefit by being taught by teachers who are re-engaging with their own learning and development, enhancing their teaching skills and knowledge by becoming teacher-researchers. The teachers' institutions are publicly demonstrating a commitment to professional development and to using research to inform practice; teacher-researchers are also well placed to support their peers and to inspire research-informed practice within their schools and beyond.

After a successful first year, we look forward to seeing the second-round projects through to completion and to exploring further impacts on teacher-researchers such as positive changes to their teaching careers and other aspects of their professional lives. We believe that our first group of teacher-researchers gained a thorough grounding in action research principles and practice through our Scheme and hope that they continue their involvement in action research and encourage others to join them, seizing every opportunity to support others, present and publish in this area.

**Our 2014 action researchers at the English UK Teachers Conference (L–R) Ian Chitty, Abby Croucher, Tatiane Depieri, Adam Scott, Rolf Tynan and Judith Watkins, with Simon Borg, Fiona Barker and Huan Japes behind.**

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