



**CAMBRIDGE ENGLISH**  
Language Assessment  
Part of the University of Cambridge

# Research Notes

Issue 56

May 2014

ISSN 1756-509X



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Issue 56 / May 2014

A quarterly publication reporting on learning, teaching and assessment

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Printed in the United Kingdom by Canon Business Services

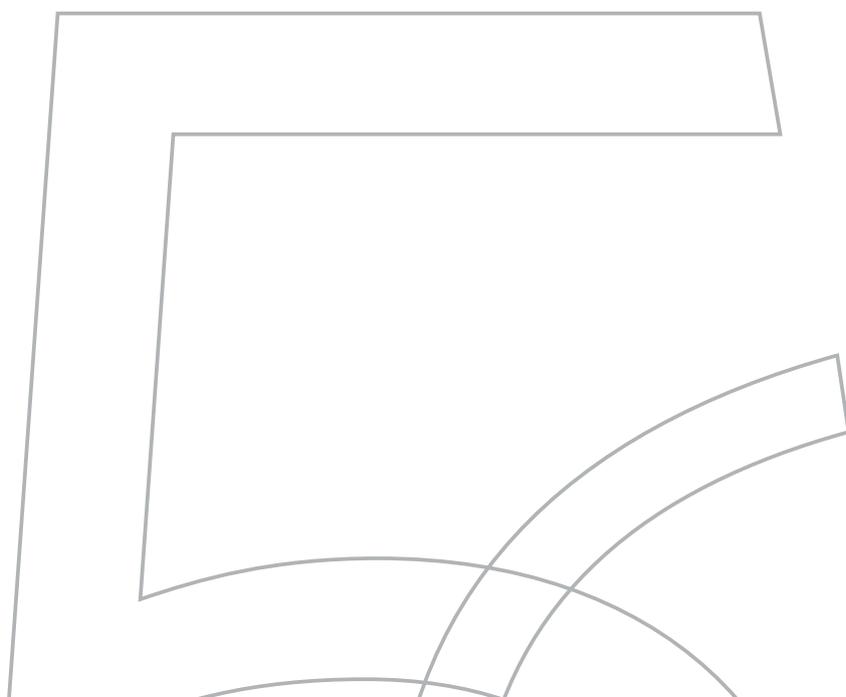
# Research Notes

## Issue 56

May 2014

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# Editorial

Welcome to issue 56 of *Research Notes*, our quarterly publication reporting on matters relating to learning, teaching and assessment within Cambridge English Language Assessment.

This issue presents the research undertaken within the 2013 English Australia/Cambridge English Action Research in ELICOS Program, which supports teachers working in English language intensive courses for overseas students (ELICOS) sector in Australia.

The issue begins with Katherine Brandon, the Professional Support and Development Officer at English Australia, describing the background and rationale of the action research program. Then Professor Anne Burns, the key academic reference person for the program, explains why disseminating the participants' action research via publication, conferences, workshops, etc. is a crucial aspect of the program.

Next, six funded projects are presented by the teacher-researchers who participated in the 2013 program. The first article investigates ways of helping students prepare for the Cambridge English *Knowledge About Language* module of the *Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT)*, which tests a teacher's understanding of the systems of the English language for the purposes of teaching it. Martin Dutton and Arizio Sweeting had found that their students were challenged by the section of the *TKT* test that focuses on answering questions on connected speech. They implemented a strategy called 'auditory thinking', which involves hearing the sounds in your mind rather than just reading the phonemic transcription. Their students were very positive about the intervention and felt that engaging in auditory thinking improved their performance on the test.

The rest of the articles in the issue explore different aspects of improving the speaking skills of learners. Emily Mason and Akile Nazim's action research focuses on preparing students for an academic presentation in a limited time period. After conducting surveys and focus groups with teachers and students, the teacher-researchers rewrote the course material, then trialled and evaluated it. Their new course included increased amounts of feedback, more class time

spent on speaking practice and increasing learner awareness of the assessment criteria. Simon Cosgriff then describes his action research, which involved the use of feedback to both improve speaking skills but also to develop autonomous learning strategies. He used a range of activities to raise students' awareness of the assessment criteria and to engage them in the feedback process.

The next three articles report on ways of improving learners' speaking skills using online tools. Jennifer Wallace explores ways of improving learners' grammatical range and accuracy when speaking while also encouraging autonomous learning. Although she tried several different interventions, she found that having students record and analyse their own speech samples for grammatical errors was most popular and effective. Her action research project helped raise students' awareness of their grammar while speaking, which resulted in more self-correction and peer correction. Then, Jessica Copley and Becky Steven, the winners of the 2013 Action Research in ELICOS Award, investigate ways of improving their students' speaking fluency. They used various online tools to measure students' speech rate and the number of non-lexical fillers used over time. Students responded positively to the intervention and the fluency program developed has been incorporated into other classes within their institution. Finally Tim Dodd and Selena Kusaka were interested in helping their learners improve their ability to both lead and engage in academic tutorials. They recorded their students' academic discussions using Audionote, which allowed them to provide oral feedback which students could review as they listened to their own speaking performance. Students had a portfolio of their speaking performances that they could review and reflect on. Dodd and Kusaka were also able to better monitor the type of feedback they were giving and student uptake.

Due to the success of this action research program, Cambridge English Language Assessment has recently launched a similar program with English UK. We hope that this issue, along with issues 44, 48 and 53, which also present action research, inspires other teachers to become involved with research.

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## The English Australia/Cambridge English Action Research in ELICOS Program: Background and rationale

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### English Australia

English Australia is the professional association for over 100 member institutions that offer English language intensive courses for overseas students (ELICOS) in Australia. Member colleges are found in major cities as well as regional centres

around the country and range from publicly funded as well as private institutions attached to universities, vocational colleges and high schools, to branches of international English language schools through to standalone private providers. Member colleges offer a wide range of courses,

including General English, English for Academic Purposes and preparation for proficiency exams, such as the Cambridge English suite and the *International English Language Testing System (IELTS)*. English Australia is also the peak representative body for ELICOS, promoting the interests of more than 270 accredited ELICOS providers in Australia.

The strategic direction of the association is guided by a 14-member board of elected member delegates and the association's operations are implemented by a secretariat led by an Executive Director and including a full-time Professional Support and Development Officer (PSDO). The PSDO works to provide professional support for staff in member colleges through managing a number of initiatives including:

- a national conference, the English Australia Conference, held in September each year
- the Action Research in ELICOS Program
- *Guides to Best Practice in ELICOS*, collated from member contributions
- twice-yearly publication of a peer-reviewed journal: the *English Australia Journal*
- professional development events at branches in Australian states
- annual English Australia awards for contribution to ELICOS, contribution to professional practice, academic leadership, innovation and action research.

For more information on English Australia and ELICOS, please go to [www.englishaustralia.com.au](http://www.englishaustralia.com.au)

## Background to the Action Research in ELICOS Program

The English Australia/Cambridge English Action Research in ELICOS Program featured in this issue has the following goals:

- to equip teachers with the skills to enable them to explore and address identified teaching challenges in the context of Australian ELICOS
- to share outcomes of this research in the form of presentations at local events and at the annual English Australia Conference, as well as through publication.

The program was inspired by action research funded by the then Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs through its Adult Migrant English Program from the early 1990s. A pilot program, developed by English Australia and funded by Cambridge English Language Assessment, was implemented in 2010 with Anne Burns, Professor of TESOL at the University of New South Wales and Professor in Language Education, School of Languages and Social Sciences, Aston University, Birmingham, as key reference person. The success of this program of six projects (see *Research Notes 44*, May 2011) led to funding being offered for similar programs in the years since.

In the first two years the focus of research within the program covered a wide range of topics selected by the program Reference Group, and informed by input from English Australia member colleges. However, in 2012 a program theme was selected, that of assessment, to provide increased focus on an area of particular concern to Australian teachers and thus to add more cohesion among projects. This proved

very successful and is the current model for implementation. The 2013 program focused on teaching, learning and assessing speaking, as illustrated by the teacher reports in this issue.

## Program outcomes

Through the program, English Australia is already seeing an increase in the professionalism of Australian ELICOS by the development of teachers actively involved in classroom research; the development of teacher peer networks; increased teacher engagement with research and academic researchers; and more teachers furthering their formal professional development. Outcomes have been published and presented widely, and national and international recognition of the success of the program is growing. The initiative is now into its fifth year and the 2014 program will support 11 teachers researching six projects relating to aspects of teaching, learning and assessing reading in ELICOS classrooms.

The board of English Australia continues to be delighted with the outcomes of the program to date. We would like to recognise the continued material and professional support provided by Cambridge English, in particular by Drs Hanan Khalifa and Fiona Barker and the team at the Research and Validation Group, and the invaluable contribution of Professor Anne Burns to the ongoing implementation and success of the Program.

## External recognition of the program

In 2013 the work of Katherine Brandon (English Australia), Professor Anne Burns (University of New South Wales) and Dr Hanan Khalifa (Cambridge English Language Assessment) in the development and implementation of the English Australia/Cambridge English Action Research in ELICOS Program was recognised nationally. They were awarded an International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) Award for Best Practice/Innovation in International Education for 'a ground-breaking development in international education' (see [www.ieaa.org.au/what-we-do/best-practice-winners-2013](http://www.ieaa.org.au/what-we-do/best-practice-winners-2013)).

English Australia was delighted to see its counterpart, English UK, join forces with Cambridge English for its Action Research Award Scheme, which builds on the model adopted for the Australian program. We hope that the UK scheme will bring as much professional development and energy to UK teachers as it has to those in Australia.



Participants from the 2013 program with Dr Hanan Khalifa, Cambridge English Language Assessment, from left: Martin Dutton, Arizio Sweeting, Hanan Khalifa, Becky Steven, Jessica Cobley, Tim Dodd, Selena Kusaka, Anne Burns, Katherine Brandon, Simon Cosgriff, Emily Mason, Jennifer Wallace.

# 'Systematic inquiry made public': Teacher reports from a national action research program

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## Introduction

The teacher research movement (e.g. Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999), of which action research is a well-recognised strand, has gained ground in general education generally, but also more recently in English language teaching. Among the many opportunities for professional development now available to language teacher educators and language teachers (e.g. Richards and Farrell 2005), action research (AR) has gained an increasingly prominent place. Research by teachers in their own classrooms refers to practitioners who are involved 'individually or collaboratively in self-motivated and self-generated systematic and informed inquiry undertaken with a view to enhancing their vocation as professional educators' (Lankshear and Knobel 2004:9). Thus, action research emphasises local and situated inquiry, on issues of direct concern to teachers themselves, initiated, carried out and managed in their own classrooms or schools. The outcomes of this research are intended to provide the basis for deeper understanding, and can lead to change and improvement in the lives of the teachers and their students.

The Action Research in ELICOS Program, offered each year in Australia through the professional association for institutions teaching English to international students<sup>1</sup>, English Australia, and funded by Cambridge English Language Assessment, has its foundations in the teacher research movement. More specifically, it draws on the concept of action research (see Burns 1999, 2010a) carried out by the practitioners who are the most closely involved in teaching and learning processes, ELICOS teachers themselves. The program offers teachers from different parts of Australia the opportunity to come together to discuss plans for investigations in their classrooms and then to undertake the research in their various teaching locations. However, while planning for their individual research is crucial, one of the most important features of this program is the dissemination of the research to other teachers, in Australia and elsewhere, who might benefit from these accounts. The publication of the teachers' accounts in this journal is an important way of reaching this goal.

In this article, I discuss why practitioner action research dissemination is seen as an integral part of the program and offer some insights on the main ways that this has been achieved.

## Why teacher research should be 'made public'

Stenhouse, a leading figure in the teacher research movement, argued for an inclusive view of research as 'systematic inquiry

made public' (1975:142). In this respect, Stenhouse saw educational research as the province, not only of academic researchers, but also of those involved in the daily practice of teaching. Systematic, in this view, means having a plan that moves actions in the classroom away from being intuitive, routine or taken for granted to being systematic and open to experimentation and discovery. Systematic investigation involves being able to demonstrate to others that the knowledge gained is credible, defensible and trustworthy. Teachers undertaking action research should be able to demonstrate how they know that a teaching activity works, or why the action they take with students is effective. In order to do so, their research needs to be made public, open to scrutiny and available for future reference.

Over the last two decades, as action research has gained in stature in the field of English language teaching, Stenhouse's call for the dissemination of the research done by teachers has been consistently echoed by others. Brumfit and Mitchell (1989:9), for example, recommend that 'if the research is to be more than personal value (and hence to justify the term 'research' at all)', it should conform to recognised investigative procedures. They argue the need for research that provides descriptive accounts of work in classrooms, noting that this is an area to which teachers can readily contribute. In addition, they stress that, as with other forms of research, investigations conducted by teachers in their classrooms must include 'a willingness to publish the research', as research is 'not another name for personal study' (1989:7).

In a similar vein, Nunan opines that '[i]t would be unfortunate if the research projects which are carried out by teachers never saw the light of day' and that 'all projects should have a reporting mechanism built in' (1989:121). Crookes (1993:137) reiterates this argument that action research 'should be disseminated'. He also makes the important point that action research reports must be communicated by teachers for teachers and other interested parties in forms they can actually use. He argues that, if they are to be accessible, accounts by teachers may therefore disrupt the usual norms of academic reporting, but in so doing may provide a pathway for teachers into more conventional forms. His position chimes with that of Nunan (1992:xi) who states: 'if teachers are to benefit from the research of others and if they are to contextualise research outcomes against the realities of their own classrooms, they need to be able to read the research reports of others in an informed and critical way'. Crookes also sees action research accounts as offering 'progressive' opportunities for disputing standard research reporting practices (1993:135).

Burton and Mickan (1993) too take up these points. They refer to the benefits to be gained through teachers'

<sup>1</sup> English language intensive courses for overseas students (ELICOS)

experiences of writing 'for a professional audience' and note that, for the teachers they worked with in Australia, this experience also led to teachers feeling 'more at ease with reading more widely' (1993:119). Moreover, they note that 92% of these teachers indicated that their writing experience led to greater interest in continuing to read professional publications. These authors also note that the research accounts produced were of great interest to other teachers, because they adopted story-telling forms that other teachers could relate to.

Teachers who have read the published reports ... have found them a rich source of ideas for their own practice. The reports are written in a narrative style which reflects the teaching context of readers and makes them comprehensible in a way which academic reports do not (1993:121).

Subsequently, Freeman (1996:105) re-emphasised the necessity for teacher research to be made public. He argues that if a 'discipline of teaching' is to be developed teacher knowledge of teaching must be a contributor to the debates and 'cannot dissipate in the recesses of private conversations, staffrooms or schools' (1996:105). He reiterates Crookes' concept of new genres of reporting, that need not conform to 'specialized forms in order to be heard or considered legitimate contributions' (1996:109). He continues:

The usual forms of telling associated with research are impoverished. They are restricted as well as restricting. Current ways of articulating research are not readily available to teachers or learners who are unprepared to alter their voices and what they have to say in order to fit within the confines of the genre (1996:109).

Freeman's position also echoes that of Crookes (1993), Nunan (1989, 1992), and Burton and Mician (1993) in seeing teacher research as an opportunity for teachers to create a larger public framework for their work by entering and engaging with 'discussions of policy and disciplinary knowledge' (1996:104).

The theme of reporting on action research by teachers continued to be taken up by others. McDonough and McDonough (1997:230) note the impact of having 'gone public' through presentations and publications among a group of teacher researchers with whom they worked, arguing that '[i]n these ways their findings can be brought to a wider audience and can be subjected to critical analysis by their peers'. A later publication by Freeman continues to reinforce this point: '[y]ou will doubtless learn from your inquiries and, if you make them public, others may learn from them as well' (1998:193).

The publications across the 1990s laid down a strong case for the public dissemination of teacher research, which continued to grow. In an edited collection of teacher action research internationally, Edge (Ed) (2001:2) views the need for teachers to make public their research in moral and philosophical terms. He argues that teachers have 'a responsibility to act as well as we can in collaboration with the other actors in our own complex environments, and then to communicate our experiences to colleagues around us and elsewhere'. He sees the emergence of a 'generation of action research' across the preceding decade as a matter of greater 'access' to research for teachers, wherein 'we want to hear firsthand accounts of personal involvement and significant outcomes for the teller of the research' (Edge (Ed) 2001:7). He ends his introduction to the volume with a plea

to teachers: 'If you are already engaged in this kind of work, please do communicate your experiences to others' (Edge (Ed) 2001:11). Further support for story-telling narratives in action research is given by Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001:149), who emphasise that '[w]e benefit from listening to other teachers' stories'. Richards and Farrell (2005:184) also support publicising the outcomes of action research, saying that 'part of the philosophy of action research is sharing the findings with other colleagues' in order to lead to better understanding.

From an Exploratory Practice perspective, Allwright and Hanks (2009:239) argue that the case for reporting practitioner research, however local and provisional it may appear, is 'compelling', as it contributes to educational decision-making and theory-building. It is also important to pass on knowledge about the research process to others, which does not imply 'slavish imitation' but instead has the potential to prevent 'unproductive dead-ends'. Finally, they argue that reporting findings may 'encourage others to join in the debate and in the search for yet deeper meanings'. Edge's theme of teacher researchers' responsibility to enhance access to the discipline of teaching is taken up again by Barkhuizen (2009:124). He argues that teacher-researchers must share their work through disclosure to 'other teachers, curriculum developers, school-policy makers, and the wider language teaching community. Not doing so would mean missing the opportunity and ignoring the responsibility to contribute to discussions and debates in the field of language education.'

## The need to make teacher action research even more public

Despite the strong endorsement for dissemination offered in these publications, there is still an urgent need for more teacher researcher contributions that are accessible to other classroom teachers. Dörnyei's (2007: 191) criticism, '[t]here is one big problem with action research: there is too little of it. Published studies of action research in applied linguistics are small in number', does indeed highlight the relative scarcity of teacher action research studies in comparison with other sources. There are various reasons for this situation. Overwhelmingly, teachers have not been trained or encouraged to do research and then to engage in reporting it, although this situation is changing as pre-service and in-service courses increasingly include opportunities for small-scale classroom investigation (Burns 2011). Also, teachers may believe the research is too localised to be of interest to others or lack confidence in presenting their research for wider consumption (Burton and Mician 1993). As Richards (2003:266) notes, going public with research is 'more daunting than any other aspect of the whole process' and 'frightens people'. He suggests that the best place for teachers to start is with colleagues, perhaps sharing findings in a staff meeting and then building up to other forms of dissemination. Teachers may also assume they cannot live up to conventional expectations about academic publishing or may not be familiar with the processes involved (Allwright and Hanks 2009). This situation may also be changing in

the light of the discussions of alternative genres for reporting touched on above.

As recently noted (Borg 2013, Burns 2011), the body of action research publications by teachers is beginning to increase, and many more examples have become available, particularly in the last decade. Among the more prominent recent examples are the *Language Teacher Research* series published by TESOL with collections from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia and New Zealand, Europe, and the Middle East, and articles from journals such as *Language Teaching Research*, *Profile* (Colombia), and the *TESOL Journal* (see also Burns (2010b) for a comparative review of other teacher research publications in the 2000s). The articles now published in *Research Notes*, issues 44 (2011), 48 (2012), 53 (2013) and this current issue, 56 (2014), offer a further collection of teacher research accounts from the Australian context, where action research by language teachers has a relatively long history of publication (see Burns 2011).

My own position on teacher research dissemination was developed from my earliest experiences of working with teacher researchers to facilitate action research (see Burns and Hood 1992). It has aligned closely with the development of the themes in the literature cited in this overview and is adopted as a central and necessary aspect of the design of the English Australia/Cambridge English Action Research Program. Dissemination in this context means not only enabling teachers in the program to publish their research through an annual newsletter (see English Australia 2013) and the accounts in this journal, but also encouraging them to present their research in their teaching centres and at other local meetings, state workshops and colloquia, the annual English Australia Conference and as far as possible internationally (see Burns and Edwards in press). In this respect, six of the teachers (Dutton and Sweeting, Mason and Nazim, Cobley and Steven), whose work is published in this issue of *Research Notes*, will shortly be presenting their work at the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) Conference, as part of the Research Special Interest Group Pre-Conference Event (SIG PCE) through poster discussions, and also through individual presentations. Underpinning these opportunities is a belief that dissemination of their work by the teachers contributes 'to build[ing] a community of practitioners aligned towards teacher research and a professional climate that is open to public scrutiny and constructive critique' (Burns 1999:183). More recently, Borg provides further support for this stance (2013:9), arguing that dissemination is a 'basic characteristic of all research' and advocating a broad view of teacher research dissemination, in 'the many varied formats, oral and written, formal and less formal, through which they can make their work available for public scrutiny' (see also Burns (1999, 2010b) for a wide range of practical suggestions for dissemination).

## Conclusion

In action research, teachers develop knowledge and understandings of their teaching spatially and temporally, within the localised conditions of their classrooms and across the duration of the research. It is vital that these experiences are not lost to other practitioners, confined to private

interactions that restrict the research from wider availability. Richards states that engagement with other teachers about one's research can be thought of as telling 'a story with illustrations' (2003:267). Teacher narratives are appealing to other teachers and, even when they are located in other destinations and with other learners, can speak creatively to the interests and concerns of the profession more widely.

The six accounts in this issue aim to do just that, to reveal not only the products of the teachers' research but also the processes and emotional experiences involved. In many contexts teaching is an insular and isolating undertaking and making their work public is not part of most teachers' experience. They are also not accustomed to having their practices opened to scrutiny, or at least not by those other than their students, or to commentary and evaluation by peers. However, if what we know about language teaching is to become more professionally mature, it is more important than ever that public communication of teachers' work is integrated into debates in the disciplinary community. Like their predecessors in other issues and their successors in future issues of this journal, the articles you are about to read are a further and important contribution to widening this debate.

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# Preparing students for answering connected speech questions in the Cambridge English Teaching Knowledge Test

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## Introduction

The purpose of this action research (AR) project was to aid students preparing for the Cambridge English *Knowledge About Language (KAL)* module of the *Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT)* at the Institute of Continuing and TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) Education at the University of Queensland (ICTE-UQ), Brisbane, Australia. KAL tests students' ability to recognise concepts of English language systems in the areas of lexis, phonology, grammar and discourse.

In our project, we wanted to specifically improve our students' ability to answer questions on connected speech in this test, where they needed to identify the processes of elision, intrusion, assimilation, weak forms, or consonant-vowel linking. We did this by developing and trialling a range of activities involving different interaction patterns, macro-skills work, and learner styles. We concluded that speaking and listening practice should be used as a way of strengthening knowledge of connected speech for the purposes of a KAL test. We also conceptualised that students needed to develop an ability to hear the sounds between connected words in their minds, which we called 'auditory thinking'.

## The context

The context of our AR was ICTE-UQ, a language centre at the University of Queensland which offers programs ranging from General English to customised English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for international students. The project was conducted during an intensive five-week English for Specific Purposes

program called ESP: TESOL A. The aims of this ESP program are to (a) develop students' English language skills through TESOL and other topics, and (b) prepare students to take *TKT: Knowledge About Language* and *TKT Module 1: Background to language teaching*. Students on this course are non-native English speakers considering English language teaching as a career.

In our class, we had one male and 17 female students, aged in their late teens and early twenties. Their countries of origin were Chile, Korea, Japan, and Thailand. Two-thirds of the participants were Chilean, who were mostly tertiary students of linguistics or TESOL education. This meant that they had some awareness of teaching methodology and English language systems. The proficiency level of the students from Chile ranged from B2 up to C2 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001). The other nationalities in the class also had a high level of proficiency up to C1, and many of these participants had a theoretical or practical background in TESOL. The students' primary aim was to prepare for and attain *TKT* qualifications, which offered either credit-bearing advantages in their undergraduate degrees, or recognition from prospective TESOL employers in their own countries.

## The main focus of the research

We chose to focus on connected speech processes because our experience in preparing students for KAL in previous courses had shown us that they often encountered problems and expressed frustration when completing such questions in practice tests.

There are two fundamental differences between KAL and other English Language Teaching (ELT) examinations. Firstly, it is a test of knowledge, not a language proficiency examination. Therefore, an ability to communicate in English is not assessed. Secondly, it only requires completion of paper-based questions in a matching, odd-one-out or multiple-choice format (see Appendix 1).

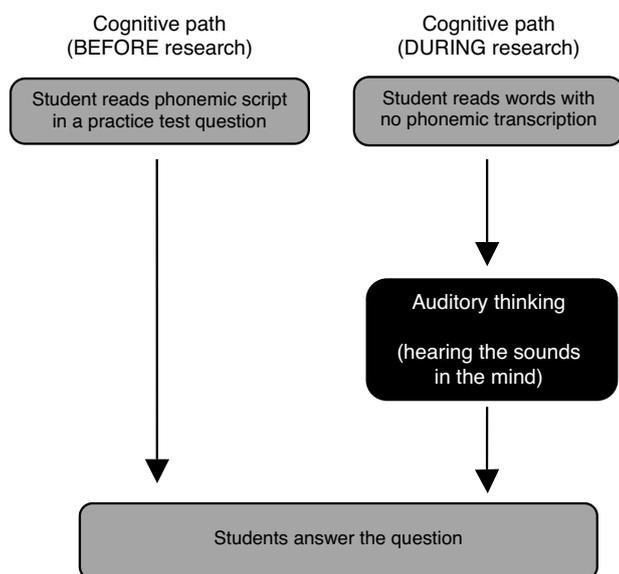
In previous courses, input sessions on connected speech tended to be centred on terminology, and interpretation of phonemic script. We believed that alternatives to this approach merited exploration, especially the employment of activities to develop deeper understanding of how speakers connect words in speech.

## Auditory thinking

An important strategy which we hoped students would develop is what we have termed 'auditory thinking'. We viewed this as the cognitive ability of a reader to call upon models of how the written word sounds from their memory. This has also been labelled as the 'intuitive knowledge' of how language samples sound, which native speakers possess (Fraser 2001:20).

With reference to Figure 1, in previous preparation courses, students answered KAL practice questions by interpreting supporting phonemic script. In our intervention, however, we wanted students to engage in the interim stage of 'auditory thinking' to imagine the language being spoken. We intended to introduce activities involving listening and speaking practice to help develop this ability.

**Figure 1: Student cognitive process before and during this research in answering a TKT connected speech question**



## Research question

Our research question was refined from an original proposal we submitted for the English Australia program, which focused on developing activities to improve the fluent *production* of connected speech and measuring any effect on

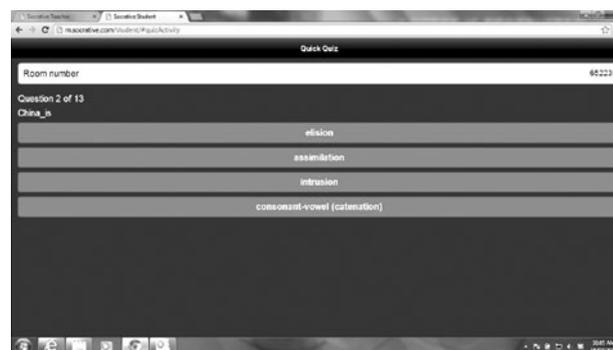
KAL question scores. However, after the first AR workshop in Sydney, we felt clearer about our core issue and recognised that our students' main objective was to do well in a knowledge test rather than improve their spoken fluency. Consequently, we revised our research question to reflect this new focus, while not denying the possibility of using speaking activities. As a result, our research question was framed as: *What tasks and strategies can we develop to prepare students for TKT: KAL items on connected speech?*

## Data collection

In this project, we felt we needed to collect data to assess two aspects of our investigation. First of all, we wanted to know if the new activities would result in better student performance than in previous years in KAL questions, and thereby demonstrate adequate preparation. Consequently, we wrote a pre-test and a post-test in similar format to typical KAL questions. Using these tests, we attempted to show overall student improvement from the start of our project to the end. We also wrote a weekly quiz, using a web-based tool called Socrative, to monitor and diagnose student progress in answering connected speech multiple-choice questions (Figure 2). This tool also acted as a guide for developing tasks. A useful feature of Socrative was that it emailed a report of results to us after each quiz.

The second purpose of our data collection was to gauge our students' response to the activities. To do this, we gave them a survey at the end of the course (Appendix 2) asking them to recall the 'most useful' and 'not so useful' activities from the course. We designed this survey with open questions to find out which activities had been most memorable to the students and to draw comments on the project as a whole. Finally, once students had taken KAL, we immediately asked them to rate how well they thought they had performed using a scale from *poorly* to *excellent* (Appendix 3).

**Figure 2: Screenshot of Socrative weekly quiz question**

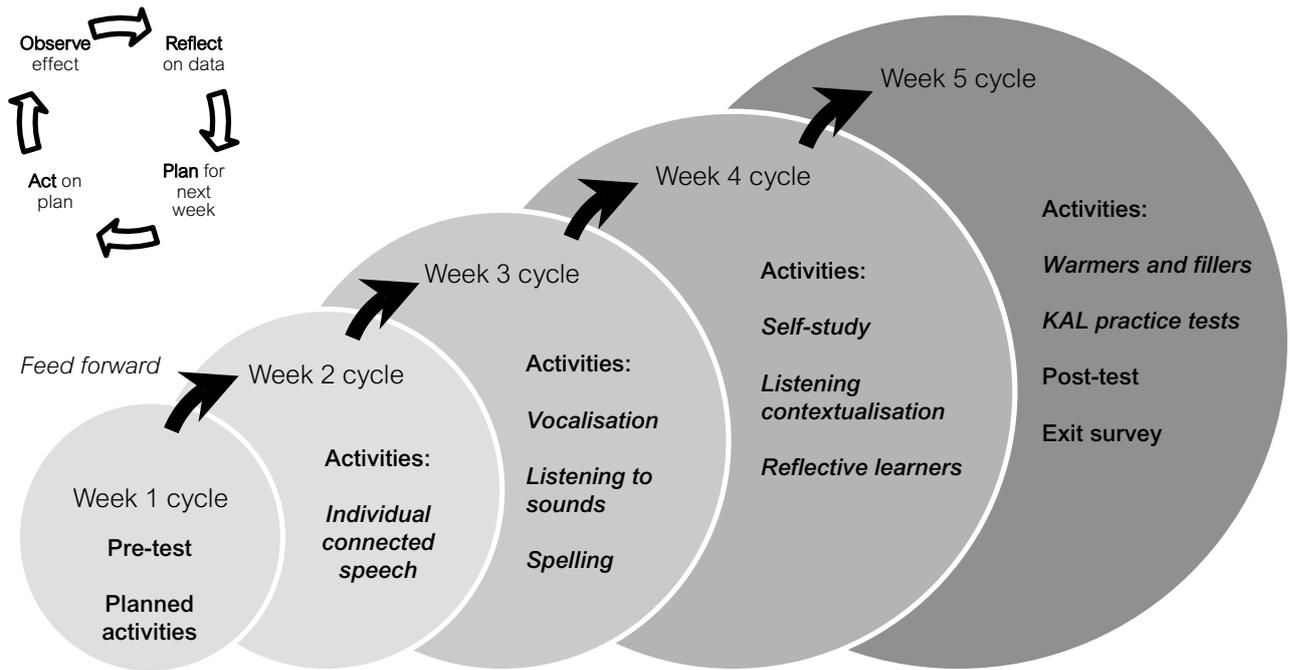


## Action taken

The steps we took to address our research question were guided by the AR cycle of Plan, Act, Observe and Reflect, conceptualised by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988:11-14, cited in Burns 2010) and inspired by our interest in activating the learners' 'auditory thinking' skills.

Our project involved five cycles, each corresponding to a

Figure 3: Weekly action research cycle and project summary



week in the KAL preparation course. During each week, we trialled new activities with the class (Act), while recording the effect that these tasks had on the participants (Observe). Then, we considered our observations (Reflect), before deciding on a course of action to address student needs for the following cycle (Plan), as shown in Figure 3. Consequently, the results of each cycle fed forward to the implementation of activities in the following week.

It is important to emphasise that, before the start of our investigation, we had carefully considered the most suitable way of scheduling our research. Firstly, we decided to integrate our activities into the existing program rather than conducting extra-curricular workshops, as we could not guarantee consistent attendance outside course times. We also decided to use the existing phonology lessons and materials. The resulting schedule of the investigations was three or four sessions per week, limited to 30 minutes each. This limitation was to ensure that connected speech did not dominate the course content.

## Planning for week 1

While planning for the first cycle, we recognised that the scope for designing needs-based activities was limited because we had not met our students at that stage. Nevertheless, we felt we should design activities with a variety of characteristics to help map out an initial avenue of development that could go on into the second cycle.

Therefore, we created three activities encompassing a range of interaction patterns (pair, individual, whole class), macro-skills (listening, speaking, reading) and learner styles (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic). We also ensured that the models of language were an even mixture of consonant-vowel linking, intrusion, elision, and assimilation. Descriptions of all of our activities can be found in Appendix 4.

## Week 1 cycle

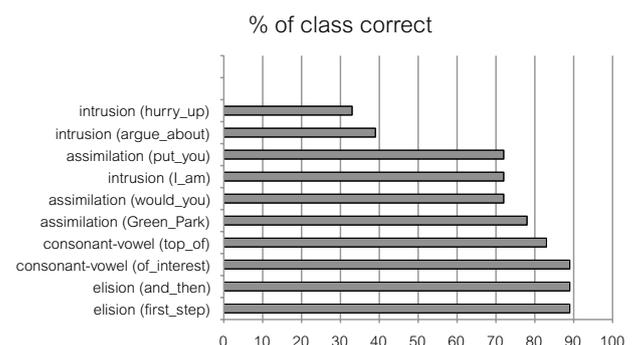
In the first cycle, we gave students the diagnostic pre-test to establish their existing level of understanding. Then, while correcting this with students, we delivered an input lesson explaining the different types of connected speech. A feedback discussion afterwards and the results of the pre-test told us that there was wider awareness and understanding of consonant-vowel linking than assimilation, intrusion and elision. One student, in particular, showed great surprise when she was introduced to intrusion. She mentioned she had never been aware that there was a /r/ sound between 'China\_and'.

Our next actions in this week consisted of introducing the class to the three planned activities, and observing how students would apply what they had learned in the first lesson.

When we reviewed our classroom observations and data from the weekly quiz, these told us that we should focus more on individual aspects of connected speech to address confusion, especially about intrusion (see Figure 4).

In addition, the student feedback concerning the three activities encouraged us to repeat it in week 2. It was obvious

Figure 4: Quiz overview for week 1 cycle



to us that listening practice of natural speech was important for developing our students' awareness. For example, some students said:

'It was useful in terms of real language . . . [it] helped me to recognise when connected speech can be used.'

'It was useful because we were exposed to . . . real sentences.'

We also considered that this awareness could extend to the fact that speakers sometimes make a choice about the form of connected speech they use. This aspect emerged after some students thought more deeply about some utterances in the 'Multiple-Choice Listening' task, such as 'Just a bit more'. In this example, an elided /t/ was recorded. However, one of our students correctly said that some speakers may use assimilation, with the /t/ approaching a /p/. This comment was a very worthwhile piece of information because it helped to show us that the students were starting to train their brains to analyse the language they heard without reliance on the written form.

## Week 2 cycle

In the second week, two of our activities were aimed at developing awareness of intrusion, and another two focused on distinguishing elision from assimilation.

Following these activities, students' difficulties with the KAL questions on these features started to become clearer to us. Predominantly, we noticed a reliance on spelling rather than sounds. A good example of this was the word pair 'ABC\_entertainment' in the weekly quiz. A third of the class identified this as consonant-vowel linking, not as an intrusive /j/. In fact, in the 'Intrusion Onion Ring' activity, some students avoided vocalising the words and simply showed their cue cards to their partner. We therefore felt that further listening practice and pronunciation work was needed.

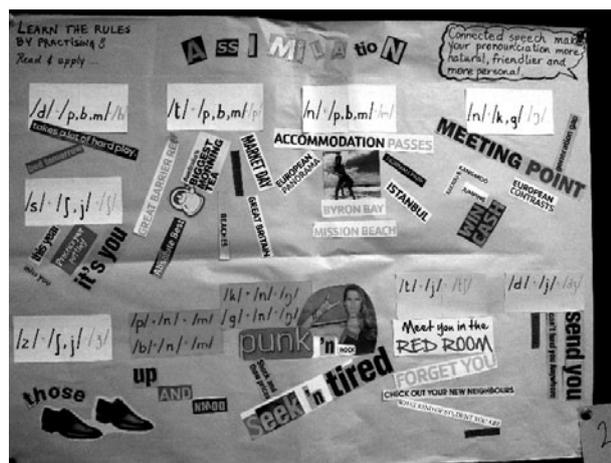
A second point referred to the 'Rules of Intrusion' activity, in which the specific phonemes of intrusion (/w/, /j/, /r/) and how they are used were built up on the board with the class. This seemed to result in an improvement in that area, as shown by the weekly quiz. Consequently, we decided to include the activity in the following cycle.

## Week 3 cycle

In this third cycle, three new activities were planned and implemented to address our concerns from Cycle 2. We also gave students a homework task to prepare a colourful poster illustrating the rules of assimilation (see Figure 5). We considered this to be an opportunity for students to activate knowledge of the rules in their own time. In addition, we thought this activity would appeal to more artistic or creative students.

Interestingly, by the end of this cycle, we had seen some students continue their development and do very well on the weekly quiz. However, others were not progressing to the same degree and we felt these students would benefit from

Figure 5: 'Rules of Assimilation' poster



extra practice. We therefore considered increasing self-study options in the following week.

Furthermore, we felt we should explore students' ability to recognise connected speech processes by listening to longer pieces of discourse, a decision motivated by students' observations of the lack of contextual cues in the 'Multiple-Choice Listening' task. As one student commented:

'The questions were just group of words without any context or written form . . . No 1 was 'old motel'.

'When I heard that first I didn't get what is it saying. Therefore I couldn't answer of which aspect of connected speech'.

## Week 4 cycle

One focus of this cycle was to introduce more self-study options, which was achieved by creating web-based flashcards using Quizlet (Appendix 5). This activity allowed students to practise matching word-pair samples to connected speech labels. After a short introduction, we saw many students using these materials in the computer room after class.

During this cycle, we felt that the students had internalised our cognitive path strategy. For that reason, we then decided to move forward and experiment with more communicative aspects of connected speech. For this, we developed a 'Listening and Role-Play' Activity. This activity was particularly interesting, as it showed us that many students were increasingly able to detect examples of connected speech from discourse both in and out of class. One student, for instance, mentioned that she had observed intrusion in the language used by her homestay family. This was a very empowering moment for her.

In planning for the next cycle, however, we sensed that class energy had dropped in the course overall, so we decided to reduce the intensity of our research actions in favour of shorter activities, which would still prepare students for the test at the end of the week.

## Week 5 cycle

A normal feature of the course timetable for the final week is that more emphasis is placed on TKT practice

tests. In the final KAL practice test, we decided to explore whether there was any difference between student ability to answer connected speech questions with and without phonemic script. This was an interesting avenue of enquiry because the majority of our activities had been conducted without the support of phonemic script, whereas KAL questions supply a phonemic transcription. Throughout the course, our position had been that we wanted to develop students' deeper understanding through listening rather than simply teaching knowledge of phonemic script and its interpretation.

In this exploration, we first separated eight connected speech items from a KAL practice test, removed the phonemic transcriptions, and asked students to complete the questions under test conditions. Following this, later in the day, students were given the same KAL practice test, but in its entirety with no modifications to the original questions. After marking and collating the results, we found that scores were unaffected in one-third of the students, whereas performance in the remaining students either improved or decreased by one point. In addition, three-quarters of the students scored greater than six out of eight questions correct in the unmodified test.

The results demonstrated that, in general, students were able to accurately recognise connected speech in practice test items with or without phonemic script. This was very rewarding for us, as it showed us that the students had developed greater awareness of how written words are spoken.

Finally, we gave students the post-test and the written survey to gather their evaluations of the activities during the five weeks.

## Analysis

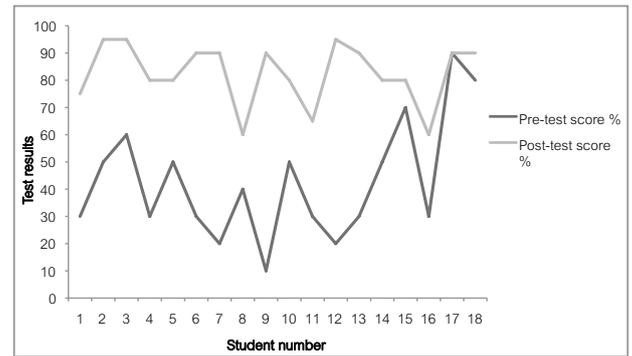
The objective of our research was to develop activities to help our students answer connected speech questions in KAL. The preparation in previous courses had not been entirely satisfactory, and we wanted to investigate alternative activities which involved a deeper level of processing by students. After the course had finished, we had generated a total of 19 activities, and data which we could use to determine (a) student improvement and (b) student evaluation of the new tasks.

## Student improvement

By comparing the pre-test and post-test results, we could see that students appeared to improve (Figure 6). In addition, student rankings of how they thought they performed after the actual KAL test were overwhelmingly positive, with 16 students rating 4 or 5 (very good - excellent), and the rest choosing 3 (average). The results of the weekly quiz had also consistently shown development throughout the project, from an average student score of 72% in week 1 to 89% in week 4.

When we consider individual students, improvement was particularly noticeable in those who were from a non-

Figure 6: Student pre-test and post-test results



educational or non-linguistic background, such as student 9, who scored 10% in the pre-test and 90% in the post-test. Three students (8, 11 and 16), however, appeared more challenged by this area of the test, despite scoring around 60% in the post-test.

## Student evaluation

In evaluating the activities, when students were asked to cast their minds back, there were some interesting findings. From Figure 7, it can be seen that the highest number of positive comments were given to what was mainly a data collection tool, the Socrative weekly quiz.

For example, some students commented as follows:

'I did enjoy . . . Socrative quiz . . . we could check ourselves and see improvement.'

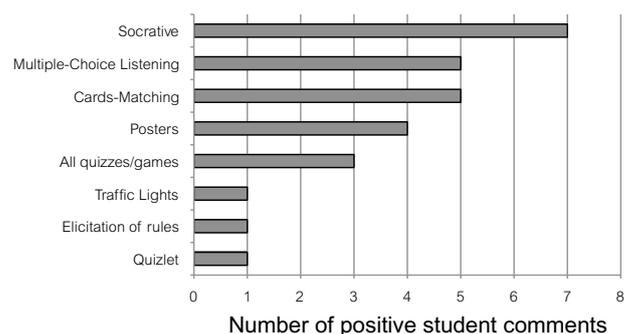
' . . . the Socrative tests were useful to think by yourself about which phenomenon could take place when saying certain words together.'

Clearly, these comments show that students felt the weekly quiz allowed for personal reflection leading to greater understanding. Another activity which received similar qualitative feedback was 'Assimilation Posters'. Although only four students commented on this, their feedback was especially insightful:

'We could learn the rules of assimilation in our own learning style.'

'While I made this poster, I had to think about what and how someone who looked at my poster understand what I want to present.'

Figure 7: Count of positive student comments regarding activities



Students also seemed to remember favourably those activities involving pair interaction, such as 'Cards-Matching' and 'Intrusion Onion Ring'. The latter of these in particular involved a high number of speaking repetitions, which was seen as a benefit by some students:

'One activity that . . . was useful for me (Cards-Matching) . . . because we did it more than once, so at the end I was able to recognise some of this features.'

'I learnt everything I know about intrusion during that lesson. The practice helped me to remember it.'

'Multiple-Choice Listening' also received positive feedback. Students saw the opportunity to listen to connected speech as helping their overall cognition.

' . . . it was good to identify connected speech features when native speakers speak . . . '

' . . . it consolidated our knowledge.'

We concluded that we would recommend the use of most activities featured in Figure 3 because students found them encouraging and supportive in various ways.

However, other activities were less well regarded. In particular, 10 students in the class commented negatively on the 'Traffic Lights' activity. One student wrote:

'The traffic lights was confusing. Too many colours with too many structures combined in one learning tool.'

We therefore decided that we would not use this activity again in its current form because of the physical difficulty in synchronising the hand movements involved.

## Reflection

During the workshops in Sydney, we sensed some difficulty in articulating our project to the other program participants due to the distinctive nature of the KAL test. On reflection, we were aware that preparing students to take a knowledge test did not seem to sit comfortably within existing ELT approaches, which tend to focus on improving communicative ability. In general, many teachers aim to develop their students' proficiency, with language knowledge often taking a supporting role. In contrast, priorities are reversed in KAL test preparation, with the attainment of knowledge rather than language production being the main consideration.

However, looking back at our research, we felt we could help students by developing their ability to 'hear' connected

speech samples in their minds (auditory thinking), and we actually achieved this through focused and varied practice, including speaking and listening. Regardless of whether students' speaking abilities improved, this approach helped to build and strengthen students' knowledge of connected speech, and was effective in preparing them for a test such as KAL. In general, this view was also supported by the students' opinions.

On a personal level, Arizio feels that this project has reinforced his passion for teaching pronunciation. As a pragmatist, he has found AR to be a new interest in his career as an English language teacher. He has particularly enjoyed the opportunity to network with other ELICOS professionals in Australia and found the workshop discussions valuable in helping to guide the direction of this research. He was pleasantly surprised by how welcoming and practical this style of research is for practitioners.

Martin has found himself more aware of the influence of his earlier engineering career on the way he conducts research. For example, he has attempted to be more mindful to use numerical data in moderation and to consider the whole journey of discovery in a more humanistic light. With respect to teaching, he has seen the importance of seeking feedback from students on their own progress. He recognises that students can provide some of the most valuable insights into how teaching is conducted and can collaborate with teachers in directing their own learning.

In conclusion, we are sure that our centre and our future students will benefit from the body of materials we have developed. We also hope that this project will influence the way our centre approaches the teaching of other areas of language knowledge in future KAL examination preparation courses.

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## Appendix 1: TKT: KAL connected speech sample question

A teacher has identified some sentences in a recording that contain certain features of connected speech.

For questions **21-28**, match the phonemic transcriptions of the sentences with the features of connected speech that they contain, listed **A, B, C** and **D**.

Mark the correct letter (**A, B, C** or **D**) on your answer sheet.

You need to use some options more than once.

### Features of connected speech

- A** intrusion (adding an extra sound)
- B** weak form of a vowel
- C** assimilation (a sound changing towards a neighbouring sound)
- D** elision (omission) within a consonant cluster

### Phonemic transcriptions

- 21** / nɒt ət ɔ:l /  
Not at all.
- 22** / dəʊm pleɪ /  
They don't play football there.
- 23** / gəʊ wɒn /  
Go on!
- 24** / reb bæɡ /  
She bought a lovely red bag.
- 25** / sɔ: rɪt /  
She saw it once.
- 26** / sænwɪtʃ /  
Have a sandwich.
- 27** / reəli jɪl /  
She's rarely ill.
- 28** / tɔ:lɪs ɡɜ:l /  
She's the tallest girl in our class.

Source: Cambridge ESOL (2008) TKT: KAL Sample Paper, internal document

## Appendix 2: Survey (Part 1)

### Action Research in ELICOS Program 2013

#### Survey (Part 1)

*Thank you for your participation in the program above. We hope it has been a useful experience for you.*

*We would be grateful if you could provide us with your opinions about the activities we used with you during the program by answering these two questions.*

1. Which activities do you remember as being the most useful in helping your understanding of connected speech?

Please indicate which one, if possible, and explain your reasons.

2. Were there any activities which you thought were **NOT** so helpful?

Please indicate which ones, if possible, and explain why.

*Once again, thank you very much for your cooperation. Without you this research project would have not been possible.*

*Regards,*

*Arizio & Martin*

## Appendix 3: Survey (Part 2)

### Action Research in ELICOS Program 2013

#### Survey (Part 2)

How well do you think you performed in the connected speech items ONLY in the KAL Module test?

Please rank your opinion on the scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = Poorly and 5 = Excellent

[CIRCLE]                      1                      2                      3                      4                      5



## Appendix 5: Quizlet flashcards

Available online: [quizlet.com/23859413/connected-speech-ar-1-flash-cards/](https://quizlet.com/23859413/connected-speech-ar-1-flash-cards/)

# Preparing students for an academic presentation: Maximising class time

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## Introduction

Our action research (AR) project was driven by a desire to find out how we, as teachers, could best equip our intermediate/upper-intermediate students for an academic spoken presentation within a limited time frame. Our research took place in an English language intensive courses for overseas students (ELICOS) college which, like many others, faces various time restrictions, administrative requirements, and classroom size parameters (maximum 18 students). Within the context of a growing language institute, our research aimed to uncover the essential elements of academic oral presentation course design.

We wanted to examine how to best incorporate effective strategies for teaching speaking, while ensuring that students were also able to achieve the outcomes for their assessment task. We also wanted to explore how students could practise speaking in front of the whole class regularly before their final assessment, without having to rely too heavily on technology or software. We deliberately chose to take this focus, as we wanted to design material that could work for other teachers in the ELICOS sector, regardless of their levels of experience or availability of technology in their institutions.

## Educational context and participants

This research was undertaken at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Institute of Languages with 57 mixed nationality students enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. The Institute of Languages EAP department has regular intakes of students who are at the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001) borderline between B1 and B2 level. These students are not quite at the English proficiency standard for a direct entry university pathway course, and are therefore placed in an intermediate academic English course for anywhere between five and 10 weeks, to raise their proficiency in all macro skill areas to a B2 level.

Seventy percent of the students in our study had conditional university offers for the following semester intake. Twenty percent of the students were on a Foundation Year<sup>1</sup> study pathway, with only 10% taking the course with no intention

of further academic study. The students were placed in class according to an *International English Language Testing System (IELTS)* score, or an internal diagnostic placement test. The focus of the EAP course involved in our research was on writing and reading skills (75% of class time), with speaking skills comprising only 10% of overall class time.

The academic spoken assessment task was conducted in the fourth week of a 5-week module, which allowed for three lessons of 2 hours per week (see Appendix 1 for the assessment task). Therefore students have 6 hours of classroom input before they are assessed. In terms of assessment weightings, the assessment task comprises 20% of their final grade, which is the second largest assessment weighting (after writing (43%)).

## The main focus of the research

With the above in mind, we wanted to explore how to prepare our students for their assessed academic spoken presentation within the existing parameters of the course and the student cohort. Although the existing course material explained what the students needed to do for the assessment task, we felt it did not comprehensively address their needs, nor was it particularly user friendly for teachers. We identified three issues, which gave rise to our research.

**1. Lack of formative feedback:** The majority of the feedback students received was from their peers in pair and group work structured activities. While this in itself was not necessarily a detriment to the presentation skills module, there was however minimal and inconsistent feedback provided by teachers. Teacher feedback was summative, given at the end of the assessed oral presentation, with formative feedback neither required nor made explicit in the course material.

**2. Lack of speaking practice for the assessment task:**

The material contained within the module was quite theoretical, with speaking practice limited to general interest topics. Even though the students' knowledge about the assessment task may have increased, they were failing to gain adequate spoken practice required to prepare them for the assessment task.

<sup>1</sup> Foundation Year pathway students have between a year and 18 months left of academic study before starting their university degree program.

**3. Lack of teaching consistency:** After holding a focus group with current and former presentation skills teachers and students, we found that, for various reasons, the utilisation of the prescribed materials varied from one class to another. Although the assessment task remained the same, teachers were either adapting the material or not using the material. Students were also unhappy with the inconsistency and discrepancy between the information they received and the activities carried out in classes.

We decided to rewrite the 5-week presentation skills module, keeping in mind the issues highlighted above. Our research question was: *How can we assist students to prepare for the assessment of an academic presentation within a restricted timeframe (6 hours)?*

## Intervention

The intervention itself can be broken down into four stages, with Stages 3 and 4 being repeated with different groups:

1. Conducting focus groups and surveys with current and former teachers and students.
2. Rewriting the course material.
3. Trialling the new course material.
4. Evaluating the new course material.

**1. Conducting focus groups and surveys with current and former teachers and students:** Past and present students completed an online survey. The survey consisted of 10 questions: both multiple-choice and open-ended questions (see Appendix 2 for survey questions). This was then followed by various focus group sessions, which explored student feedback in greater depth, and allowed students to elaborate on their responses. We also held a focus group with both past and present teachers (see Appendix 3 for focus group discussion points).

**2. Rewriting the course material:** We organised our course material into a teaching–speaking cycle which consisted of six stages. This cycle was based on the feedback provided by the surveys and focus groups, influenced by the teaching–speaking cycle as advocated by Goh and Burns (2012:151–168), and based on a genre-based cycle of language teaching and learning (Butt, Fahey, Feez, Spinks and Yallop 2000:263–265) (see Appendix 4 for diagrams of both cycles).

One of the benefits we felt could be achieved by using both Goh and Burns' (2012) and Butt et al's (2000) methodological approaches in a blended way, is the relative ease and flexibility for the teacher. For example, within the 2 hours of class time available, teachers could choose to spend longer on modelling and deconstructing the text (i.e. *Explicit Instruction*) or focus on language strategies while giving students opportunities to practise speaking and engage in feedback or reflective practices. An additional benefit of this approach is the focus on the end product that the students would ultimately have to reproduce. Given our restricted time frame, the scaffolded nature of the

approach allowed for a guided and less intimidating context for our students.

Another essential element of the course design was our desire to incorporate regular feedback into each lesson. While many factors influence performance, feedback is considered an integral component for the progression of learning (Hattie and Timperley 2007). Moreover, Wiggins (1997) states that the quality of feedback is determined by whether it is timely, specific, and understandable to the learner and allows the student to act upon the feedback. This highlights the importance of ongoing feedback which will 'feed forward', improving a student's learning and enhancing their future performance (Carless 2006). In order for feedback to function as feed forward and for the feedback itself to be beneficial to learners, three main areas need to be addressed: Where am I going? How am I getting there? Where to next? (Hattie and Timperley 2007, Sadler 2010). Through the incorporation of these three questions, we hoped that learners would have a clear concept of what their goal was, have an understanding of their level of performance and of what actions were required in order to achieve the intended goal.

**3. Trialling the new course material:** The material was trialled by each of us with different classes over a period of 10 weeks. During the trialling period no deviations were made from the newly prepared material. During each of our classes, we monitored the following using on-task behaviour as an indicator of engagement and motivation:

- student engagement with the task
- student motivation and interaction with each other (see Table 1)
- feasibility of the material for a 2-hour lesson.

At the end of each class, we met and reflected on what worked and what modifications could be made for future cohorts, making notes of our conclusions.

**4. Evaluating the new course material:** After students had completed their assessment task and prior to receiving a grade and summative feedback on their final presentation, the online survey and focus group was conducted in order to find out how students viewed the new course.

## Outcomes

By analysing the student surveys, focus groups, interviews with teachers, and our classroom observations, we noted the following outcomes.

### Student surveys and focus groups

The students' responses, both qualitative and quantitative, were positive and provided us with a good insight into how students felt about the new course material and their individual progress. When asked whether the 6 hours were used efficiently to prepare students for their final presentation, 44% of the students strongly agreed while 54% agreed. It was also encouraging to see that students felt their presentation skills had improved over this short but intensive period of time (see Table 2).

**Table 1: Outline of each 2-hour lesson (6 hours in total over three weeks) that we created and the staging involved in each leading to the final assessment in week 4.**

<b>Week 1, Lesson #1: The introduction section and the assessment task (2 hours)</b>		
<b>Goh and Burns (2012) teaching-speaking cycle stage</b>	<b>Butt et al's (2000) teaching-learning cycle stage</b>	<b>Activities</b>
Stage 1. Focus learners' attention on the task	Stage 1. Context exploration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In pairs, students discuss their experiences of doing an oral presentation in English.</li> <li>Students present a short talk on a general interest topic that they have prepared for homework.</li> <li>Students are then provided with feedback from the teacher.</li> <li><i>(The rationale behind these activities is to increase the students' confidence when presenting, and to also provide a diagnostic tool for the teacher to know what areas to focus on for each student.)</i></li> <li>Students are then introduced to the assessment task and the assessment criteria.</li> </ul>
Stage 2. Provide input and guide planning	Stage 2. Explicit instruction Stage 3. Guided practice and joint reconstruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students are shown a sample presentation for analysis.</li> <li>Students then look at the introduction section of the presentation and deconstruct in pairs - looking at language and expressions.</li> <li>Students are asked to prepare a 2-minute introduction section to present in the next class.</li> </ul>
<b>Week 2, Lesson #2: The main body section and signposting expressions (2 hours)</b>		
<b>Goh and Burns (2012) teaching-speaking cycle stage</b>	<b>Butt et al's (2000) teaching-learning cycle stage</b>	<b>Activities</b>
Stage 3. Conduct speaking tasks	Stage 4. Independent application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students individually present a 2-minute introduction.</li> </ul>
Stage 4. Facilitate feedback on learning		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students are given immediate verbal and written feedback from the teacher on the introduction section genre/content as well as body language and timing criteria.</li> </ul>
Stage 5. Focus on language skills/strategies	Stage 1. Context exploration Stage 2. Explicit instruction Stage 3. Guided practice and joint reconstruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students are shown the three stages of a presentation and the structure required.</li> <li>Signposting expressions and useful language are introduced then used through different tasks.</li> </ul>
Stage 6. Direct learners' reflection on learning		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students complete a self-evaluation checklist on what they have learned from their practice presentation to engage student reflection on the lesson and their learning.</li> </ul>
Stage 1. Focus learners' attention on the task	Stage 1. Context exploration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students' attention is now drawn to the main body and concluding stages of the presentation.</li> </ul>
Stage 2. Provide input and guide planning	Stage 2. Explicit instruction Stage 3. Guided practice and joint reconstruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students discuss and list strategies they can use to make their presentations more interesting/engaging in groups.</li> <li>For homework, students are required to prepare a 2-minute presentation on a key point within the main body of the presentation that they will be presenting.</li> </ul>
<b>Week 3, Lesson #3: The concluding and discussion sections and voice (2 hours)</b>		
<b>Goh and Burns (2012) teaching-speaking cycle stage</b>	<b>Butt et al's (2000) teaching-learning cycle stage</b>	<b>Activities</b>
Stage 3. Conduct speaking task	Stage 4. Independent application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students present a key point (2-minutes).</li> </ul>
Stage 4. Facilitate feedback on learning		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students are given immediate verbal and written feedback from the teacher on the structure of the key point, content as well as voice and pronunciation.</li> </ul>
Stage 5. Focus on language skills/strategies	Stage 1. Context exploration Stage 2. Explicit instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Voice, pace, stress on words and pitch are introduced. In pairs students look at how to incorporate these into their final presentation.</li> </ul>
Stage 6. Direct learners' reflection on learning		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students complete a self-evaluation checklist on what they have learned from their practice presentation to engage student reflection on the lesson and their learning.</li> </ul>
Stage 1. Focus learners' attention on the task	Stage 1. Context exploration Stage 2. Explicit instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students are now shown how to facilitate a discussion session after their presentations.</li> </ul>
Stage 2. Provide input and guide planning	Stage 3. Guided practice and joint reconstruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students discuss strategies for the discussion section and in pairs/small groups construct suitable discussion questions and engage in 'mock' discussion scenarios, focusing on voice and pronunciation.</li> </ul>
<b>Week 4, Lesson #4: The final assessment (4 hours)</b>		
<b>Goh and Burns (2012) teaching-speaking cycle stage</b>	<b>Butt et al's (2000) teaching-learning cycle stage</b>	<b>Activities</b>
Stage 3. Conduct speaking task	Stage 4. Independent application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students present their final assessed presentation.</li> </ul>

**Table 2: Question results****Response to 'The presentation lessons have helped me improve my presentation skills'**

Answer options	Response %	Response count
Strongly agree	35%	20
Agree	58%	33
Disagree	7%	4
Strongly disagree	0%	0
Total	100%	57

Students were also asked to explain why they thought their presentation skills had improved or not. Some of the comments we received are summarised below (see Appendix 5 for sample comments):

### More feedback from teachers

Receiving regular formative feedback was integral to the students' perception of progress. Several students commented on the benefits of feedback as they were able to observe the changes in their weekly performance.

### More speaking practice in class

A majority of the students felt that their confidence had improved, with many students expressing that they were no longer nervous while presenting in English in front of a class. Students also found that regular practice enabled them to become more confident in speaking in front of a group of people.

### Good materials

#### a) Assessment/genre

Students stated that they had a good understanding of the assessment task requirements and this was mainly due to the fact that each lesson focused on a particular stage of their presentation.

#### b) Language and other skills

Students found the language and presentation skills input to be valuable in assisting them towards their final assessment. Many also commented that this was an area of the module they had really enjoyed. Students commented that they successfully applied many of the strategies learned in class.

Therefore, from the observations above, we discovered that by addressing the three initial issues identified in relation to the course material, our response to *how to* prepare students for an assessed presentation in limited time could be addressed by:

- providing formative feedback on learning that functions as feed forward
- increasing student speaking practice in class time
- focusing students' attention on the assessment task and providing input.

It was encouraging to see the positive feedback we had received from the course, and we felt that the course materials overall were a success. However, despite the relative success of the material, there were certain limitations that had impacted on our confidence in the

material we trialled. For example, during one of our focus group sessions, we noted that all the students had 'strongly agreed' that the course had met their needs on the online survey. However, when investigated further through a smaller focus group session, a small percentage claimed that they felt that the course could be improved in various ways. Often, but not in all cases, this small percentage commented that upon further reflection, they felt that the course had not met some of their needs, in terms of grammar or language development.

Another factor we felt could have influenced our data was that some students were repeating the course and thus repeating the presentation module. These students provided negative feedback, in both the online survey and focus group, claiming that either they did not receive enough teacher feedback, or that the feedback given was not necessary.

## Classroom observations

Through our classroom observations, mainly analysed by on-task behaviour, we noted the following:

**1. Student engagement with the task:** Students seemed engaged and willing to participate in tasks during class, and often would approach us at the end of each lesson to comment on how much they enjoyed the lessons. However, approximately 60% of students did not complete the self-evaluation checklist administered at the end of the class for homework, or completed them incorrectly, or commented that they felt that they had not improved. We thought this indicated that our students were either unwilling to self-reflect or to self-regulate their performance, were unable to do so, or perhaps had a tendency to be negative about their own performance. We also believed that, as the benefits of the self-reflective checklist were not perceived by our students as connected to their overall assessment success, they might have felt that it was unnecessary to engage in self-reflection. However, at the end of the three weeks, when asked if they felt that their performance throughout these weeks had improved, 93% responded positively (as can be seen in Table 2).

#### 2. Student motivation and interaction with each other:

While the majority of the class was interested in the lessons and seemed motivated throughout the 2 hours, we found that the level of motivation among the student group related quite strongly to the students' academic pathway plans. Students seemed to be more engaged in a task if they had a direct offer for university for the next semester. These students also interacted well with other students evidenced by their willingness to provide and receive feedback from their peers. We also discovered that if the students were on a Foundation Year pathway, or had missed the next university intake, they were often disengaged and unmotivated to participate in class.

**3. Feasibility of the material for a 2-hour lesson:** There was enough material for a 2-hour lesson with a maximum of 18 students in the class. One observable benefit was that, if there were fewer than 18 students, the teacher spent more time on feedback, or allowed the students to complete the

self-reflection checklist in class rather than for homework. The material and activities were flexible and accommodating in that sense. However, as each lesson dealt with a distinct stage of the assessment task, if a student happened to be absent, they would miss out on vital material, as the previous lesson's input was unlikely to be repeated or reviewed in the following lesson.

Finally, although student perceptions of their own improvement may be unreliable for a variety of reasons, the data suggests that the best approach to preparing students for an assessed academic oral presentation in just 6 hours should include the following:

- scaffolding of course material which raises metacognitive awareness of the assessment task and language feature
- the implementation of feedback as feed forward through short in-class presentations
- an emphasis on self-reflection and evaluation.

## Reflections

It has been interesting to reflect on the process of this AR project. Overall, it has been very encouraging for us to see that the question we set out to explore was answered to some extent. This research has enabled us to further recognise the importance of identifying a learner's subjective as well as objective needs in the creation of course material. The research has also brought to our attention the need for ESL

teachers to emphasise the benefits of self-reflection and evaluation in class, and to encourage students to engage in independent reflection at home. We will definitely continue to teach presentation skills as outlined in our AR project and hope that other teachers will give it a try as well. Finally, working together as a team with the support we had has been an invaluable experience.

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## Appendix 1: The assessment task

<b>Type of presentation:</b>	Explanation or Argument
<b>Length:</b>	15 minutes (10-minute presentation and 5-minute discussion)
<b>Presentation date:</b>	Week 4 (class teacher will determine schedule)
<b>Objective:</b>	To gain practice in oral presentation skills and leading an inclusive group discussion

### Task overview

- Each student will have 12-15 minutes to conduct a presentation. Approximately 8-10 minutes should be used for the presentation and 2-5 minutes for conducting a group discussion.
- You will choose a topic of your choice. You must email the topic to your presentation teacher for approval by the end of Week 1.
- Support your presentation by appropriate visual aids (e.g. PowerPoint).
- At the end of the presentation be prepared to respond to questions from the audience.
- The presentation assessment will be weighted at 20% of the final grade.

### Appendix 2: Online survey questions

1.	The three weeks were used well to help me prepare for my final presentation.	Likert Scale (Strongly agree – strongly disagree)
2.	What aspect of the presentation skills lessons did you find most useful?	Short answer
3.	What aspect of the presentation skills lessons did you find least useful?	Short answer
4.	I received enough feedback before my presentation in week 4.	Likert Scale (Strongly agree – strongly disagree)
5.	What type of feedback did you mostly receive?	Short answer
6.	Who gave you the feedback?	Short answer
7.	My presentation skills have improved.	Likert Scale (Strongly agree – strongly disagree)
8.	Refer to question 7, please explain why your skills have/have not improved.	Short answer
9.	The assessment task was suitable for my level.	Likert Scale (Strongly agree – strongly disagree)
10.	How would you change the current presentation skills lessons?	Short answer

### Appendix 3: Focus group discussion points

- Were the three weeks used well to help prepare your students for their final presentation?
- Did you feel that your students’ skills improved over the three weeks?
- Do you feel that the assessment task was suitable for their level?
- How would you change the current presentation skills lessons?

### Appendix 4: Methodological cycles

Figure 1: The teaching–speaking cycle (Goh and Burns 2012:153)

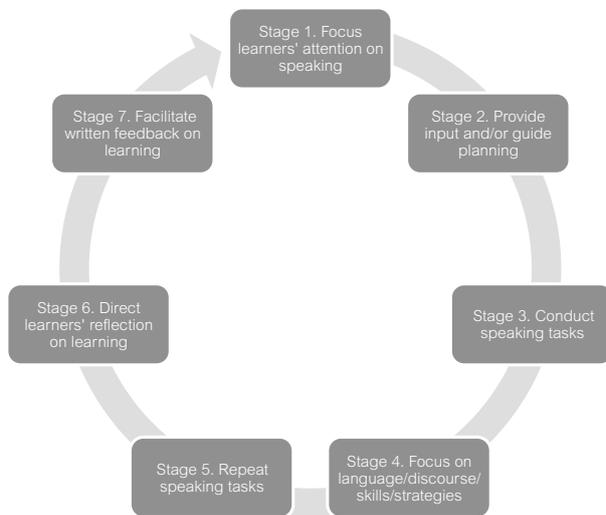
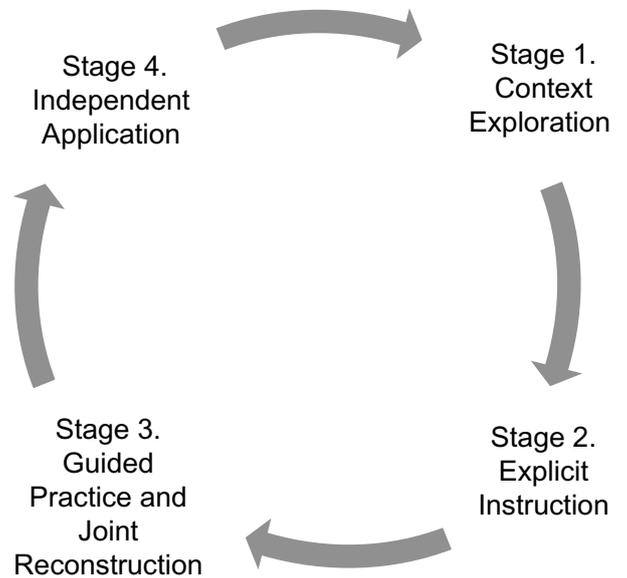


Figure 2: Language teaching–learning cycle (Butt et al 2000:263–265)



## Appendix 5: Sample comments from students

### ▪ Confidence

- I have improved every skill especially I feel comfortable to speak in front of the class.
- Have more confident to speak in front of class.
- Having more confidence and feel comfortable when speaking.
- When I stand in front of the class, I am not nervous anymore.
- The practices help me to create my confidence.
- I can speak in front of classmate without feeling so much nervous.
- I have improved every skills especially I feel comfortable to speak in front of the class.

### ▪ Feedback

- Improved myself according to the feedback.
- Doing presentation in front of auditorium and receiving teachers feedback.
- Because the teacher gave me useful advice on how to give an academic presentation with good structure.
- I feel more confidence because there are many things I had mistake in week 1 and 2. But finally I hope no mistakes on the final presentation, all this because of the real feedback, it was for my benefit now and for future.
- I improved it through the teachers teaching and feedback. The teacher told me the advantages and disadvantages of my presentation.
- I benefited greatly from the feedback given by the teacher and my classmates.
- We practised a lot and told me what I should improve in my presentation.

### ▪ Input

#### ▪ Assessment/genre

- Lessons were focused and I can apply it to my presentation.
- It was very useful to focus on different parts of the presentation.
- Practice a lot and told me what I should improve in my presentation.
- I can make clear topic and content.
- How to connect any part of the presentation together.
- Presentation structure.
- Stages of a presentation.
- Studying of the words of a presentation.
- To making outline for the presentation.
- I can understand how to build a presentation.

#### ▪ Language and other skills

- It was useful to learn specific vocabulary for the presentation like transition signals, the lesson about the use of the voice was especially interesting for me.
- Give some skills, for example, how to reduce anxiety, how to prepare, how to contact with audience was useful.
- I learn how to use link language make my presentation fluency.
- Have more technics in presentation from this class such as language body and voice.
- Getting many academic words was useful.
- Eye contact, voice stress was useful.
- Signposting expressions were useful.
- Because now I know how to prepare a presentation to face the challenges of university.

# Harnessing formative feedback for oral skills improvement

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## Introduction

This action research (AR) project explored the role of formative feedback in preparing students for oral assessments in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program. The primary aim was to create an interactive learning cycle which would engage students in the feedback process and lead to more autonomous learning. This research also explored ways to provide a better basis for students to understand and respond to feedback. I hoped that through this process I would

help to equip students with the necessary skills to study independently at university.

## Context

This AR project took place at Curtin English, which is the English language centre of Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia. As it is aligned to the university, it offers both

academic pathways and General English programs. With approximately 90% of all enrolled students on academic pathways, EAP courses are a key feature of the pathway program. After EAP, pathway students will enter either Curtin College, which offers diploma-level courses, or mainstream studies at Curtin University via the English Language Bridging program.

## Focus of research

The main focus of this research was to explore how the role of formative feedback given throughout a course could positively affect student performance in oral assessments. I chose feedback because it has a critical role in language learning, and if learners are to progress, it is important that value is placed on this process (Jones 2011). The basis for this research stems from my observation that students do not always apply feedback from course-related tasks to final assessments. While the reasons for this were unclear, my classroom observations indicated that a lack of interest in improving or a lack of awareness of how to respond to feedback were potential factors. Another observation was that from a teacher perspective, there was a strong emphasis on the quality and quantity of feedback that teachers provide to students, but not enough emphasis on promoting ways in which learners can respond to formative feedback. These observations led me to adopt the view that the principal focus of my AR project should be on helping my learners manage their own learning (Crabbe 2007). In doing so, I consciously moved my focus away from predominately language-based lessons to lessons which placed more emphasis on individualising the feedback process in order to encourage learner autonomy. I felt this to be important as a large portion of my learners come from learning environments where learning is directed rather than explored. The approach was also consistent with elements of learning-oriented assessment (Carless 2007), which gives learners a greater role in the feedback process.

## Research questions

Prior to the first English Australia AR workshop, most of my interest was on developing methods for providing a more structured approach in which learners could respond to formative feedback. In my current teaching context, one of the challenges of providing feedback on spoken tasks was providing students with a sample of their language to refer to. Not having this sample of oral language made it difficult for students to act, which limited the effectiveness of teacher feedback. With this in mind, I wanted to explore the use of audio and video technologies in supporting formative feedback and to give students the opportunity to react, which would make the feedback process more effective (Jones 2011). It would also make the approach of providing feedback on speaking tasks consistent with the feedback given on writing tasks. However, discussions during the first workshop led me to focus more on identifying awareness of the assessment task and assessment criteria as these were elements that students would need to understand in order to better respond to formative feedback. These elements provided the basis

for the research questions which would shape my research project:

1. *What happens to student oral performance if I increase their understanding of the assessment task and assessment criteria?*
2. *What can I as a teacher do to actively engage my students in the feedback process?*

## Participants

The AR presented here involved two groups of students enrolled in EAP courses and preparing for academic-style presentations as part of their final assessment. The students in each course were introduced to my research during the first week of the course. I explained the purpose of the research and each stage of the research project. Participation was entirely voluntary and no reasons were collected as to why students did not wish to participate. Students who chose not to participate were required to complete the same classroom-based activities as those who had agreed to be part of the research, although no data was collected.

### Group 1

The participants in this group belonged to English for Academic Purposes 1 (EAP 1), a 10-week course which involved study at an intermediate level (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001) B1-B1+ level). In total, the class comprised 13 students, 11 of whom agreed to take part in my research. These participants came from China (3), Colombia (1), Hong Kong (2), Indonesia (1), Taiwan (1) and Vietnam (3). Of these, eight participants were on pathways to Curtin College with only one participant planning to take mainstream studies at Curtin University. The other two students were not intending to follow an academic pathway.

### Group 2

The participants in this group belonged to English for Academic Purposes 2b (EAP 2b), a 5-week course which involved study at an upper-intermediate (CEFR B2) level. In total, the class comprised 18 students, 17 of whom agreed to take part in my research. These participants came from Brazil (1), China (3), India (1), Indonesia (1), Iraq (2), Japan (2), Libya (2), Nepal (1), Saudi Arabia (2), South Korea (1) and Venezuela (1). Of these, five participants were on pathways to Curtin College while 11 were aiming to join the English Language Bridging course before mainstream studies. Only one student was not on an academic pathway.

## Data collection

Data for this research project was collected in the form of online questionnaires, student-generated action plans, and teacher-student interviews.

## Questionnaires

The students in both research groups were asked to complete questionnaires at three stages during the research period:

- Questionnaire 1: Student perspectives on feedback (conducted during the first week of the course)
- Questionnaire 2: Pre-practice presentation (conducted prior to practice presentation)
- Questionnaire 3: Pre-presentation (conducted prior to assessed presentation).

Because the aim of the questionnaires was to understand how students responded to the process, the questions focused on obtaining attitudinal data which reflected the students' feeling, initially towards feedback in general (Questionnaire 1) and later towards the approach I was taking (Questionnaires 2 and 3) (Burns 2010). In most instances, rating scales were used as these provided for more scope in sampling the level of agreement or disagreement of the student to the approach (Burns 2010).

As I wanted responses which related to the approach I had taken in engaging students in the feedback process, students completed questionnaires prior to the practice and final assessment. I did not want the actual performance to influence their responses to this learning approach.

The levels of the students' motivation and their approaches to completing the questionnaires may have provided some limitations on the data that I collected. Not all questionnaires were completed and I had little control over how thoroughly students completed the questionnaires. Some students may have thought more deeply about the questions than others. From my observation, some of them displayed considerably high levels of motivation, while others found the process of self-reflection and engagement time-consuming and difficult. These attitudes may have influenced the overall impressions of the approach.

## Student-generated action plans

In both periods of research students were given the opportunity to consider and respond to any feedback given throughout the research period. This was presented in the form of an action plan which highlighted any weaknesses the student had as well as identifying strategies for improvement in the final assessment. I wanted these to provide evidence that students were responding to the feedback they had received.

## Teacher-student interviews

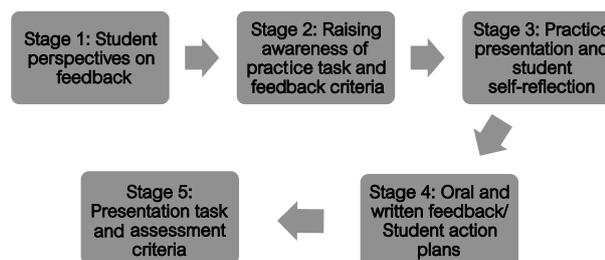
Regular tutorial sessions were timetabled into the syllabus, which allowed for the opportunity to discuss the feedback received throughout the course with each student. While the initial interviews were structured, I tried to develop an open interview approach which allowed the students to have a greater role in controlling the direction the interview took (Burns 2010). Initially, when discussing the assessment task and criteria, I met students in small groups which allowed for a more in-depth discussion. However, when meeting with

students to discuss feedback and action plans, I met with students individually.

## Action taken

This study of formative feedback on the learning process was completed with two groups over 15 weeks. While the same procedure was followed with both groups of learners, the first period of research (with EAP 1) was conducted over 10 weeks with the second period (with EAP 2b) conducted over a more condensed period of five weeks. Within each course, students were required to give an academic presentation as the speaking assessment. Prior to this assessment, students were given the opportunity to give a practice presentation on which they received feedback on their performance in the areas of fluency and coherence, presentation skills, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Each period of research consisted of five stages which centred on the different stages of the assessment (Figure 1). Some adjustments needed to be made to the current syllabus for each course in order to give me sufficient time to complete the different stages of my research.

Figure 1: Feedback cycle



**Stage 1: Student perspectives on feedback:** Before I began my classroom-based research, I felt it was necessary to gain an understanding of the students' perspectives on feedback. As one of my aims was to develop a more interactive learning experience, I also wanted student input into how different stages of the feedback process could be implemented. I hoped that it would provide learner support for how I was intending to introduce feedback regarding the presentation assessment task. The students' views were collected in the first questionnaire.

The responses showed that the majority of the students understood the purpose of feedback and felt that it was an important part of the learning process. The students also had their own distinct views on the content and delivery of feedback (Appendix 1). Key points from the questionnaire which would serve as a basis for the feedback I would give later in the course included:

- feedback should be encouraging with reference to positive aspects of language use and suggestions for improvement
- feedback should be provided in both oral and written forms
- feedback should be received in the form of teacher feedback, peer feedback, and self-evaluation.

With regard to the approach which I had planned in order to help students better prepare for presentations and respond to

feedback, students' initial responses were mixed (Appendix 1), but I felt that there was enough support for the approach that I intended to take.

### Stage 2: Raising awareness of practice task and feedback criteria:

The first classroom-based activity involved students exploring the different stages of an academic presentation and presentation-related language. These structural elements and language would form the basis for feedback on the practice presentation. The intended purpose was to get students thinking actively about the different elements of a presentation and associated language use. Following this, students were given the task for the practice presentation. Class time was provided for the students to discuss the task and feedback criteria (Appendix 2) in groups before discussing potential topics.

In the next available tutorial session, I interviewed the students regarding the practice tasks and feedback criteria. I wanted to ensure that the students understood the task and that they were aware of the criteria on which their presentations would be evaluated. I had students explain the topic and identify the areas in which they felt they had weaknesses. They also had the opportunity to introduce their topic and initial plans for the task. These interviews were regarded as information-gathering sessions in which I could check students' understanding of the task and the students could clarify any aspects of the task they found unclear.

For many of the students, this was their first opportunity to discuss an assessment task with their teacher. The response from the students was positive with students becoming more favourable towards the approach I was taking throughout the course (Table 1). They also felt that an increased knowledge of the feedback criteria better prepared them for the practice presentation (Table 2).

### Stage 3: Practice presentation and student self-reflection:

In the next stage students gave a practice presentation. As one of my aims was to provide a better basis for responding to feedback, these presentations were video recorded. This would help them understand the feedback that I would

**Table 1: Student attitudes to discussing task and criteria**

**Questionnaire 1: Before completing a speaking task, I want the opportunity to discuss the task and grading criteria with the teacher.**

	SA	A	N	D	SD
EAP 1	36.4%	45.4%	18.2%	0.0%	0.0%
EAP 2b	0.0%	60.0%	0.0%	40.0%	0.0%

**Questionnaire 2: I believe that the opportunity to discuss the task with the teacher was helpful.**

	SA	A	N	D	SD
EAP 1	50.0%	40.0%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%
EAP 2b	58.8%	35.3%	5.9%	0.0%	0.0%

**Questionnaire 3: I believe that discussing the presentation task and assessment criteria with my teacher was helpful.**

	SA	A	N	D	SD
EAP 1	44.5%	55.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
EAP 2b	42.9%	42.9%	7.1%	7.1%	0.0%

SA= Strongly agree, A= Agree, N= Neutral, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly disagree

**Table 2: Student attitudes to understanding criteria**

**Questionnaire 2: I believe that understanding the criteria will allow me to give a better presentation.**

	SA	A	N	D	SD
EAP 1	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
EAP 2b	68.75%	25.0%	6.25%	0.0%	0.0%

**Questionnaire 3: I believe that understanding the grading criteria was helpful.\***

	SA	A	N	D	SD
EAP 1	11.1%	77.8%	11.1%	0.0%	0.0%
EAP 2b	35.7%	57.1%	7.1%	0.0%	0.0%

\*Percentages do not sum due to rounding.

SA= Strongly agree, A= Agree, N= Neutral, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly disagree

provide during the next stage. At the conclusion of the session, the videos were uploaded to a website where the students could view their presentation via a private link which was emailed to each of them.

Based on their responses in the initial questionnaire, students were also given the opportunity to provide feedback to each other. However, this was limited to questions focusing on what was observed during the presentation rather than an evaluation of the students' language ability.

The survey taken by students prior to the practice presentation revealed that students felt better prepared for the presentation as a result of the increased awareness of the task and feedback criteria. In an attempt to develop more learner autonomy, students were asked to view their presentation and evaluate their own performance based on the assessment task and feedback criteria. The points raised during Stage 2 provided a focus for the students during the viewing. For many of the students, this was their first experience of watching themselves give a presentation. Viewing it was seen as a valuable exercise by most of the students (Table 3).

**Table 3: Student attitudes to watching practice presentations**

**Questionnaire 3: I believe that watching myself give a practice presentation was helpful.**

	SA	A	N	D	SD
EAP 1	22.2%	77.8%	0%	0%	0%
EAP 2b	57.1%	28.6%	14.3%	0%	0%

SA= Strongly agree, A= Agree, N= Neutral, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly disagree

### Stage 4: Oral and written feedback/Student action plans:

Once students had had the opportunity to evaluate their own performance, I met with each student to discuss their performance in the practice presentation. I purposely delayed my feedback so that it would not influence the student's own self-evaluation, which I wanted to be as honest as possible. Once each student had given their personal response, I provided my own feedback on the student's performance. Based on the initial questionnaire findings, this was given in both written and oral forms.

The next step for students was to use the content from my feedback and their own self-reflection to create their own action plan (Appendix 3). This involved identifying areas of

weakness and developing strategies for improving these in the final assessment. I saw an action plan as one way in which students could respond to feedback and identify strategies for improvement which would better prepare them for the final presentation later in the course. Students who completed an action plan found it a useful addition to the feedback process (Table 4).

**Table 4: Student attitudes to creating an action plan**

**Questionnaire 3: I believe that creating and discussing an action plan which identified my weaknesses and ways of improving them was helpful.**

	SA	A	N	D	SD
EAP 1	33.3%	66.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
EAP 2b	14.3%	57.1%	28.6%	0.0%	0.0%

SA= Strongly agree, A= Agree, N= Neutral, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly disagree

**Stage 5: Presentation task and assessment criteria:** The last stage of the AR was to provide students with the task for the final assessment and the criteria that would be used. Students were given time to review these and create an outline for their final presentation. Once these were completed, I met with each student again to discuss their action plan and outline for the presentation. I took a similar approach to that in Stage 2 in which I tried to encourage the students to think independently by asking me questions rather than directly commenting on their proposals. Support for this activity remained strong, especially among the group of intermediate learners (Tables 1 and 2).

## Response to research questions

At the beginning of my research I had two research-based questions which were there to guide me through the whole process. I was expecting these to change as my research progressed, but by the end of the project they still encompassed my aims and the direction I wanted to take in my research.

1. *What happens with student oral performance if I increase their understanding of the assessment task and assessment criteria?*

While it was difficult to gauge exactly what impact my AR had on my students' actual oral performance, I definitely feel that they were better prepared for assessments. My classroom observations and the student responses to questionnaires revealed the following:

- allowing students to explore feedback/grading criteria enhances understanding
- discussing the task and criteria with students allows the teacher to check understanding
- discussing the task and criteria with students allows students to clarify points
- raising awareness of the assessment task/criteria leads students to be more focused

- learners require teacher guidance before more autonomous learning can take place
- understanding the task and criteria provides the focus students need to reflect and self-evaluate.

2. *What can I do as a teacher to actively engage my students in the feedback process?*

I feel that the approach I took in engaging my students in the feedback process was successful. However, I found that the group of upper-intermediate learners had more knowledge of language, which allowed them to reflect on and respond to their weaknesses more effectively. The group of intermediate learners required more structure to help them in this process. My classroom observations and the student responses to questionnaires identified the following:

- students require input before they can produce
- students need a sample of their language if they are to respond to feedback
- delaying teacher feedback can be a motivating factor to get students to self-reflect
- students are more willing to engage if they understand the task and grading criteria.

## Reflection

Participating in this AR has been a rewarding experience. As a teacher, I have tended to approach feedback predominantly from a teaching point of view. However, after engaging in the feedback process, I am now more aware of students' needs, in particular what students need in order to respond effectively to feedback. The time I spent interacting with students over the period of research allowed me to identify in more detail the issues that students have in preparing for assessments. Being more involved with the students' views also had its challenges. Motivating students to complete activities or questionnaires was challenging at times, but on the whole, the students in my two research groups approached all the activities I presented with a high level of motivation.

As this was my first experience of doing research over an extended period of time, I was unsure how it would progress, especially as I was doing the research alone. These doubts were quickly erased at the first workshop where the support from the other participants was invaluable. Despite the fact that we were all working on different projects, there always seemed to be some overlap among our investigations, which meant that sharing ideas at the workshop was of benefit to all participants.

My final thoughts are that I have learned a lot about my students, the role of feedback, and my own teaching. I feel that my research has been a success and that my students have benefited from it. I appreciated the small scale and practical nature of AR and the opportunity to let my research flow and not be forced in a particular direction. All of these factors made this AR an achievable and enjoyable project.

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## Appendix 1: Selected responses from Questionnaire 1

### Question 1: Feedback is an important part of the learning process.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
EAP 1	72.7%	27.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
EAP 2b	80.0%	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%

### Question 2: My English has improved as a result of feedback.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
EAP 1	18.2%	72.7%	9.1%	0.0%	0.0%
EAP 2b	20.0%	60.0%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%

### Question 3: I understand the purpose of feedback.

	Yes	No	Not Sure
EAP 1	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
EAP 2b	60.0%	0.0%	40.0%

### Question 6: When receiving feedback, it is important to have a sample of my spoken language to refer to.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
EAP 1	36.4%	18.2%	45.4%	0.0%	0.0%
EAP 2b	20.0%	40.0%	40.0%	0.0%	0.0%

### Question 7: Before completing a speaking task, it is important to know/understand the grading criteria.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
EAP 1	27.3%	45.4%	18.2%	9.1%	0.0%
EAP 2b	20.0%	80.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

### Question 9: I always refer to the grading criteria when preparing for a speaking assessment.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
EAP 1	18.2%	54.5%	18.2%	9.1%	0.0%
EAP 2b	0.0%	40.0%	60.0%	0.0%	0.0%

### Question 17: It is important to discuss any feedback with the teacher if you do not understand it.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
EAP 1	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
EAP 2b	80.0%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

## Appendix 2: Practice presentation feedback sheet (Blank)

Feedback criteria*	I-N	G	E	N/A
<b>Organisation</b>				
Presenter clearly introduced the topic and content of presentation				
Presentation had a clear structure - Introduction, Body, Conclusion				
Presentation had a conclusion				
Presentation used appropriate language for describing a process				
<b>Content</b>				
Content was informative and interesting				
Content of the presentation was relevant, with any new concepts clearly explained				
Presenter effectively handled Q&A session at end of presentation				
<b>Presentation skills</b>				
Presenter made good use of visual aids				
Presenter effectively made eye contact with audience				
Presenter used appropriate forms of non-verbal communication				
<b>Language</b>				
Presenter used appropriate presentation language				
Range and accuracy of grammatical language was appropriate				
Range and accuracy of vocabulary was appropriate				
<b>Voice quality</b>				
Speed, volume and pitch of voice were appropriate				
Pronunciation was intelligible and did not make listening difficult				
<b>Time limit was adhered to:</b> Yes No				
<b>Comments:</b>				
<b>Teacher:</b>				

\* I-N (Improvement Needed), G (Good), E (Excellent), N/A (Not Applicable)

## Appendix 3: Student action plan (Blank)

Area for improvement	Action
<b>Fluency and coherence</b>	
<b>Presentation skills</b>	
<b>Grammar range and accuracy</b>	
<b>Vocabulary range and accuracy</b>	
<b>Pronunciation</b>	
<b>Teacher comment</b>	

# Grammar in speaking: Raising student awareness and encouraging autonomous learning

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## Introduction

My action research (AR) project aimed to explore methods of raising student awareness of their use of grammar in speaking, as well as foster independent learning to prepare students more effectively for further education. From teaching my Academic English class I had identified that, despite overall improvement in students' speaking ability, there was often little development in terms of accuracy and range of grammatical forms used. My teaching experience suggested that these issues sometimes had a profoundly negative impact on their confidence, but students seemed unaware of their specific problems and how to address them. The majority of my students expected to go on to further education, but were dependent on frequent grammar correction from their teacher.

I therefore wished to investigate ways of both helping students to become more aware of their grammatical problems and also of helping them to develop skills to be able to address their specific problems independently. The teaching intervention trialled the use of voice recording and transcription as a way of guiding students to notice their problems in grammar, and speaking journals to give students an opportunity to become more self-reflective in their study habits. Self-study and pair work were also utilised to support students in becoming more able to work independently on their speaking problems.

## Context

The research was conducted in English Language Company, a private school offering English language intensive courses for overseas students (ELICOS) in Sydney. The focus was on two Academic English classes where students arrive every week on a rolling intake, studying for between two and 20 weeks. This course prepares students to achieve an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) score of 2 or 3, which is recognised by a number of education institutions in New South Wales as an indication that learners have English language proficiency that would satisfy course entry requirements of *International English Language Testing System (IELTS)* 5.5 to 7.5. The first AR cycle concerned 15 students of high B1 to low B2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001), and the second cycle involved 19 high B2 to C1 level students. Seven of the students appeared in both cycles, and the total number of students varied between six and 15. Countries represented included Argentina, Germany and Thailand, among others. The students varied in age and background and there was a mix of males and females.

## Research focus

Grammatical range and accuracy are considered essential components of speaking in the English language teaching literature, and this is evidenced by its inclusion on rating scales by most testing organisations. *Range* refers to the variety of grammatical structures used, while *accuracy* denotes the number of errors made. There is considerable support for the notion that grammar instruction has a positive impact on learning (Borg and Burns 2008, Norris and Ortega 2000), but encouraging students to try to rote learn and 'master' decontextualised grammar items seems to be unreasonable as it may induce feelings of defeatism. However, helping students to *notice* grammar issues supports their learning at a pace appropriate to each individual (Long and Robinson 1998, Williams 2005, cited in Brown 2007:348). These observations generated my initial research question: *How can students be made more aware of their grammatical accuracy and range problems in speaking?*

I believe encouraging autonomy in learners helps to empower them to take control of their own learning. Scharle and Szabó (2000:4) argue that 'some degree of autonomy is [...] essential to successful language learning' as a class of students, or a single student over a period of time, can have varying needs which cannot all be met by the teacher; this notion is supported by the work of other researchers (Brown 2007:70, Harmer 2007:103). I wished to encourage students to reflect on their own speaking performance and thereby gain a feeling of autonomy. This aim formed my second research question: *How can students be encouraged to try to resolve their grammatical accuracy and range problems in speaking autonomously?*

## Action research intervention: Cycle 1

Initially I wanted to explore how far my assumptions about my students were reflected in their thinking. The first intervention task gauged students' knowledge of the meta-language of grammar, and I then asked students to complete a self-assessment activity. Immediately afterwards, students were given a questionnaire to explore their feelings about the previous exercise, and their beliefs concerning grammar and speaking. Nearly two-thirds of students agreed or partly agreed when asked to rate 'I know what specific problems I have in grammar when I speak', but the initial task suggested that students were unaware of their own problems. I surmised that my research questions were appropriate and approached them with three tasks.

Firstly, students made weekly speaking 'journals' using an application on their mobile phones. This enabled them to reflect orally on their speaking experiences but also to monitor

their thoughts about the intervention tasks. Students were asked to complete the journal as homework and send me their recording every week. Secondly, I designed grammar workshops which enabled students to work on the grammar points from the course textbook explicitly in their speaking. Lastly, I recorded samples of native and expert speakers answering discussion questions similar to those my students answer in class, for example: *What benefits has globalisation brought to your country? How do you think travel will change in the future?*

These samples were stored on an online learning management platform called Schoology (2013), to enable students to access the files in their own time. This third section was initially to provide a grammatical model for students to analyse, thus enabling them to explore the range of grammar they could use to answer different questions in order to express their own meaning more effectively.

Part of my definition of autonomy was that I expected students to complete work outside school, so tasks were set as homework and students were able to access the speaking samples at home to encourage autonomous study. In addition, students worked in pairs to foster co-operation and peer feedback, and guide the focus away from the teacher, thereby encouraging group autonomy (Scharle and Szabó 2000:8).

In both the analysis task and the grammar workshops my main source of data was notes from class observations and samples of student transcriptions. Students were given a follow-up questionnaire and individual interviews to explore attitudes towards learning (see Appendix 1 for a list of the resources used in Cycle 1). After seven weeks I changed class and ended Cycle 1, which provided an opportunity to revise the intervention.

## Analysis: Cycle 1

Final questionnaire responses indicated that the intervention tasks helped students notice aspects of their grammar when they were speaking (see Table 1). In the grammar workshops I observed students' awareness of the accurate grammatical forms increasing as they correctly identified and amended their peers' mistakes more confidently and without the help of the teacher.

As shown in Table 1, students indicated that they favoured transcription and grammar workshops, and therefore these tasks were adapted for Cycle 2. As the course textbook had dictated the grammar workshops, I decided to change the Cycle 2 grammar focus to make it more appropriate for students' needs, to ensure the tasks were student- rather than teacher-led.

Disappointingly, student response to the speaking journals was mixed (see Table 1), and I found that this task did not help to raise awareness of grammar in speaking because students often repeated the same thoughts each week. This implied a desire to 'tick the box' and finish the exercise, rather than to engage in genuine self-reflection.

Addressing the second research question was more challenging. At this point my class consisted of a small group of East Asian students, including learners from Japan and Thailand, for whom 'teacher-dominated lessons' (Thompson 2001:309) and 'receiving knowledge passively'

**Table 1: Did the activities we have done in class help you to notice your personal problems in your grammar in speaking? (Total numbers of students)**

	Yes	A little	No	Don't know	I haven't done this activity
Transcription of your speaking recordings	6	1			
Grammar workshops in class	5	2			
Analysis of speaking samples on Schoology	3	3			1
Speaking journal	3	2	1	1	

(Smyth 2001:354) are often the norm. These attitudes were evidenced by students' reluctance to work in pairs and their failure to complete the homework tasks, both activities which I had planned to help students to work autonomously. Moreover, in the interviews students seemed unclear about the role of a learner, as the following responses show:

*What do you think your role is as a student?*

Student 2: 'My role is I have to concentrate in study and assessment.'

Student 6: 'Just study as much as I can [. . .] Role . . .? Study! Just study.'

I concluded that my student-centred approach to autonomy clashed with students' attitude to learning, and that students may need more explicit help to develop their independent learning skills. Therefore, my approach to my second research question in Cycle 2 would centre around encouraging autonomy *within* the classroom environment.

## Action research intervention: Cycle 2

After considering the Cycle 1 data, I decided to modify my activities and create two types of tasks to be completed regularly in class. The first was to change the speaking journal to a weekly in-class 'Speaking Review' where students were asked to discuss the same questions as in the speaking journal, but in groups and without teacher intervention.

I also decided to focus on grammatical accuracy and range separately. I used the speaking journal recordings from Cycle 1 and made a list of my students' five most common grammatical mistakes (incorrect use of articles, plural forms, verb tenses, verb forms and word forms) and, using *Grammar for English Language Teachers* (Parrott 2000:331–393) to set my definition of range, I analysed my transcripts of the native and expert speaking samples for frequency of four kinds of complex structure (finite adverbial clauses, noun clauses, relative clauses and non-finite clauses).

This analysis was then used to create 'noticing' exercises. For range, I created a conjunction gap-fill task using extracts from the transcripts of the native speaker recordings of discussion questions I had made, the purpose being to investigate whether students could identify the appropriate linking words to connect the complex utterances. Alongside this, students recorded and transcribed answers to the same discussion questions, and then worked in pairs to analyse their use of complex structures and linking words.

Similarly, for accuracy students corrected examples of the five most common mistakes and, with their partners, looked for examples of the same mistakes in their own transcripts. Students then wrote targets for issues they wished to keep in mind during the next class. Observational notes were made in class and the transcripts were collected to analyse the success of the awareness-raising exercises. For example, in the accuracy task I counted the mistakes students had correctly identified and compared them with the total number of mistakes students made altogether, to gauge awareness levels (see Appendix 2).

Each of these lessons was completed twice before ending the cycle with a final questionnaire. I conducted semi-structured interviews (following the principles set out by Burns 2010:75) with students who left the class during the intervention, and at the end of the cycle selected two students to participate in a full interview to examine some of the issues they raised in the questionnaire. See Appendix 3 for a list of the resources used in Cycle 2.

## Analysis: Cycle 2

My data shows that the activities carried out in Cycle 2 appear to have addressed the research questions effectively. Observation of students during the noticing tasks showed that they were on task during the recording and transcribing, suggesting they were engaged in the activity, and this observation is evidenced by the attitudes the students expressed in the final questionnaire, which show that they found the tasks valuable (see Appendix 4 for examples of students' comments). Ninety percent of students said that, following the intervention, they thought more about their grammar when they were speaking, and when I analysed the language they used in the follow-up interviews, their vocabulary indicated that their awareness was increasing as they used words like *aware*, *realise* and *think* (see Appendix 5). In addition, in the questionnaire, the majority of students rated all activities except one 'Very useful' or 'Fairly useful' (see Appendix 6).

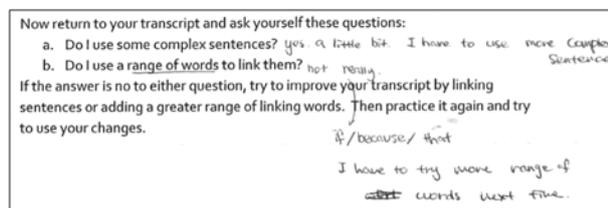
As seen in the table in Appendix 6, the Speaking Review received a mixed response, and in her interview Student 11 indicated that this task was not useful because she said the same thing every week. I concluded that this activity did not support the aims of my research questions as it did not help to improve learner autonomy.

In terms of raising awareness and encouraging autonomy, the accuracy task was the most fruitful. Students could independently identify and correct more errors than in the previous cycle. In the second trial of this task, when students were arranged into more strategic partnerships than in the initial Cycle 2 trial, nearly two-thirds of the students found 50% or more of their mistakes (see Appendix 2 for data). The final questionnaire and interviews also established that it was mainly the accuracy issues raised in this lesson that students considered.

The range task had mixed success however; students were competent in noticing their own complex utterances, but seemed disheartened by the fact that their range was not as wide as in their written ability, indicating that the attempt

at awareness-raising had only been partially successful. Their comments about how to improve their range, without guidance from the teacher, were also unclear and unspecific, as Figure 1 shows:

Figure 1: Student notes from grammatical range noticing task



Pair work seemed to be very conducive to autonomy. In the questionnaire, students demonstrated that they understood how working in pairs was helpful in the noticing exercises, and their answers also suggested a kind of shared ownership of the problems, taking focus off the teacher as the main information source.

*Did you find it helpful to work with a partner for these activities? Why/not?*

Student 6: 'It is better to do this activity with a partner. Perhaps for most of us, finding mistakes by ourselves is hard.'

Student 17: 'Yes, because a partner can help me improve the grammatical problems and also give some advice to me.'

Gaining this feeling of control over their own improvement and this acknowledgement of a successful method of study without the teacher shows a level of autonomy which may have been a result of students' raised awareness levels.

## Outcomes

As Cycle 2 drew to a close I reflected on my research questions. Recording and transcription were the most successful methods to raise student awareness of aspects of grammar, particularly in the case of grammatical accuracy. Perhaps students preferred the accuracy exercise because finding mistakes and correcting them produces a measurable achievement, boosting confidence and giving students more faith in their ability to address grammar problems independently. Further investigation could centre on my choice of accuracy errors; the five most common are possibly the most difficult to correct, so analysing the errors most amenable to correction may yield different research outcomes.

I am certain, however, that using students' own work to prescribe the grammar focus encouraged autonomy to a greater extent than prescribed textbook grammar, because it made the classroom a space of teacher-student negotiation. Notably, some students made their own decisions about which aspects of speaking to focus on; some used the recordings to assess their pronunciation, or the transcription to study their vocabulary. My informal classroom observation following the research revealed that students corrected each

other more often in speaking, and when I asked a colleague for his reflections on my students' awareness, he commented that some students appeared to be noticing more of their own mistakes and correcting them. Reassuringly, this suggested that attempts to address grammar problems through self- and peer-correction were being appropriated more widely than just in my classroom.

Working in pairs certainly encouraged students to find grammar problems together, without the teacher. This development was more the case for Cycle 2, whereas in Cycle 1 there was the difficulty that students were reluctant to work together. It would be interesting to investigate whether the students in Cycle 2 achieved a more proficient level of English *because* their study habits were more conducive to autonomous learning. However, my confidence in pair work as a sound method of boosting autonomy for students in higher-level classes has been augmented and I will continue to encourage students to work with a partner both in and outside class.

The recording and transcription exercises created during the research have been incorporated into my syllabus for Academic English; they provide most students with a motivating way of 'accessing' their speaking in the same way that they approach their writing. Encouragingly, colleagues have also experimented with using recording and transcription and reported that students are highly engaged by the task. Our school now has a bank of samples of native and expert speakers, and I plan to hold a workshop with my colleagues to explore ways in which this resource could be exploited further.

## Reflections

AR has evoked a wide range of emotions, from satisfaction when observing students successfully working in pairs to solve problems, to disappointment when students did not complete homework. One of my most significant reflections so far is what I have learned about my own teaching; general assumptions about what is 'correct' should always be challenged. The lack of student uptake of the speaking journal, for example, showed me that an idea can be theoretically sound and yet fail to be realised in the classroom. This has been an important lesson and has made me a more critical and analytical teacher.

My research has raised many questions for further investigation. For example, at the conclusion of the research some students expressed their appreciation of the academic nature of the speaking tasks, but suggested that the target speaking was unnatural. The tasks I selected did not cater to the aspects of speaking which are interactive, requiring negotiation of meaning and turn-taking, and further inquiry demands investigation of tasks such as debates, and a focus on speech-specific grammar.

In addition, students' motivation to participate in the tasks was affected by their circumstances and backgrounds; some of my students had jobs outside school, and others had pressure from family. These variables had some impact on students' attitudes to learning and consequently their autonomy, and it would be illuminating to explore this

relationship. A continuation of this research could involve monitoring changes in student awareness and autonomy through a longitudinal study.

My research also highlighted that awareness-raising does not always encourage a feeling of empowerment. One student indicated in the Cycle 2 questionnaire that, following the intervention, he did not think more about grammar and that he felt disappointed and demotivated. Moreover, some students were cautious about the value of the noticing exercises, as in their interviews they admitted that before coming to Australia they were advised to 'speak speak speak!' and not worry about grammar (Student 7). All of these students indicated in the questionnaire that the intervention had raised their awareness of grammar in speaking, but for them awareness-raising had a negative effect on their confidence. These students often did not enjoy recording themselves, and this reaction again suggests a need to find alternative tasks that students find more engaging or motivating. To shift scrutiny away from students themselves, it may be valuable to continue trialling other 'noticing' activities using native and expert speaking texts, as those originally included in Cycle 1 of my research.

Finally, my project has helped to sustain the interest in teacher-focused research in my workplace, and I hope that my involvement in research will encourage other teachers to participate.

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## Appendix 1: Tasks carried out in Cycle 1

1. Card-matching activity to raise awareness of grammatical metalanguage.
2. Recording and transcription student self-assessment activity.
3. Initial questionnaire.
  - Students answered questions relating to the self-assessment activity and their general attitudes towards speaking.
4. Speaking journals.
  - Students were given a list of 'spring board' questions they could use to initiate their reflections on the week's speaking.

The journals were recorded on mobile phones on a weekly basis, and then sent to the teacher.
5. Grammar workshops.

- Worksheets and lesson plans guiding students to study a grammar point specifically in relation to speaking, providing them with examples from native and expert speaker recordings.

Students were expected to record themselves on their mobile phone and transcribe the recording.

6. Speaking samples analysis.
  - Recordings of native and expert speakers answering discussion questions.
  - These recordings, along with the transcripts, are stored on the school's Learning Management System (LMS) Schoology.
  - Students were given worksheets guiding them through the process of making a recording and then comparing it to the sample on the LMS.
7. End-of-cycle questionnaire and interviews.

## Appendix 2: Results from grammatical accuracy noticing task

Students were asked to record themselves answering a discussion question, and then transcribe 1 minute of the recording. They then analysed their transcripts for accuracy problems, and the results are shown below.

### Trial 1: Students work with the person sitting next to them

Grammar type	Articles		Plurals		Verb tense		Verb form		Word form		Total percentage found (by student)
	Made	Found	Made	Found	Made	Found	Made	Found	Made	Found	
Student 07	6		6		1		4				0
Student 09	6								4		0
Student 10	2	1			1		5	2	1		33
Student 11	7		1	1			8	5	1	1	41
Student 12			3	3			2	1	2		57
Student 14	2						2	1			25
Student 19	1	1	1	1							100
Student 20			1	1			4	1	1		33
Student 21			1								0
Student 22	1						5	5	1	1	86
Student 23			1				5	2			33
Student 24	2	2	1		3	2					67
<b>Total mistakes made:</b>			<b>92</b>							<b>Total percentage mistakes found</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Total mistakes found:</b>			<b>31</b>								

## Trial 2: Students arranged into strategic pairs

Grammar type	Articles		Plurals		Verb tense		Verb form		Word form		Total percentage found (by student)
	Made	Found	Made	Found	Made	Found	Made	Found	Made	Found	
Student 06	2	1	2	1			1				40
Student 11	2	1	1	1			3	2	1	1	71
Student 12	4						1				0
Student 13	1		2	2							67
Student 15					2		2				0
Student 16	9	4	1	1	1	1	1				50
Student 17	1	1									100
Student 18	2	1			1	1					67
Student 25	1										0
Student 26	1	1									100
<b>Total mistakes made:</b>			<b>42</b>						<b>Total percentage mistakes found</b>		<b>45</b>
<b>Total mistakes found:</b>			<b>19</b>								

## Appendix 3: Tasks carried out in Cycle 2

- Weekly 'Speaking Review'.
  - The basis of this task was the questions originally designed for the speaking journal.
  - Students discussed the questions in pairs in class on Fridays.
- Grammatical accuracy noticing exercise.
  - Students studied examples of the five most common areas for student mistakes (verb tense, verb form, word form, plurals and articles).
  - Students then recorded themselves answering a discussion question and transcribed 1 minute of the recording.
  - They then analysed the transcript for the five most common mistakes, and chose their most common error to think about when next studying grammatical accuracy in speaking.
- Grammatical range noticing exercise.
  - Students studied a transcript of a native speaker recording and noticing the linking words and complex sentences used.
  - Students were then asked to fill in the linking words in sentences taken from transcriptions of native speaker recordings.
  - Students then recorded themselves answering a discussion question and transcribed 1 minute of the recording.
  - In pairs, they then analysed their own linking words and complex sentences, and if necessary tried to improve their transcript and practised again.
- End-of-cycle questionnaire and interviews.

## Appendix 4: Student comments from final questionnaire

Student 17: 'I think these activities are very useful for me.'

Student 18: 'At this point, I think the activities are very dynamic which provides motivation and interest in class. I'm really enjoying.'

Student 23: 'Recording myself sometimes is strange, but for me is very useful, because I can find what are my common mistakes.'

Student 25: '[. . .] these records have been very useful to improve my speaking and deal with my weak points.'

## Appendix 5: Extracts from student interviews demonstrating language to express raised awareness

Student 7: 'Sometimes it [studying grammar] make me **think** more about the way, erm, what I'm going to say.'

Student 10: 'When I listen to me I **realise** I make a lot of mistakes, mistakes I never **thinking** I am doing [. . .] I think is really good idea to do the record and do the transcription.'

'I feel more confident and I **feel** that I improving and it's in the different words, for example adjective, noun, the family [. . .] when I reading my transcription I can **feel**, it's impossible, this is a noun!'

Student 19: 'Yes I **notice** it [grammar mistakes] [. . .] you told us how to improve and what we should focus when we speak and to correct our grammar on the record for example, it was really helpful so I'm, I'm more **aware** now.'

Student 24: 'Since I start to record myself I'm starting **thinking** in my grammar, so, and now with transcript it's more more easy to **find** my mistakes when I talk, so I think it's useful.'

'With more and more practice I repeat . . . correct less myself because I'm **thinking** in the grammar.'

## Appendix 6: Results from the final questionnaire

How useful did you find these activities?	Very useful	Fairly useful	Not very useful	Not useful at all	Don't know	I haven't done this activity
Recording myself	75%	25%				
Transcribing my recording	67%	33%				
Finding accuracy problems in my transcript and improving them	75%	17%	8%			
Finding range problems in my transcript and improving them	58%	8%	17%			17%
Discussing my speaking during the Friday Speaking Review	17%	42%	8%	25%		8%

# Using Web 2.0 technologies to enhance speaking fluency: A journey beyond textbooks

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## Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore ways to analyse our students' speaking fluency and use this information to give feedback to students on their speaking fluency development. Our project aimed firstly at finding ways to help our students to develop their speaking fluency. Our second aim was to measure our students' fluency using mobile applications for evaluating speech rate, non-lexical fillers and interjections, and to use this information to create learner-orientated targets for improving their fluency. These mobile applications gave a snapshot of our students' real-time speaking. The main reason we chose to focus on fluency was that we felt our designated course books for General English tend to lack structured activities to develop fluency for learners at intermediate level Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001) B1-B1+ which led to our action research (AR) over two cycles of five weeks.

*Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE)*, respectively). With the exception of *Cambridge English: Preliminary*, the majority of the ESP classes tend to be at upper-intermediate level and above (CEFR B2 and above). In our positions at UWA CELT, we had both been working as class co-ordinators involved with a team of teachers in the planning, delivery and assessment of the General English intermediate level classes for a number of years. Therefore, the participants in our research were all enrolled in a 20-hour week General English course at UWA CELT at an intermediate level, equivalent to a B1-B1+ level on the CEFR (see Appendix 1 for an explanation of how we used technology to help students work towards specific CEFR descriptors). At the intermediate level, students' aims and study pathways vary greatly as they work towards the upper-intermediate level classes and study pathways, and indeed our students were studying English for many reasons, including work, travel and tertiary studies purposes; some were simply studying English for global communication.

## Context

This AR was conducted at the University of Western Australia Centre for English Language Teaching (UWA CELT), which provides General English and English for Special Purposes (ESP) classes for international students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. The ESP classes may include courses in Business English and English for Academic Purposes. Students may also enrol in examination preparation classes for the *Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC)*, the *Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)*, the *International English Language Testing System (IELTS)*, and *Cambridge English: Preliminary*, *Cambridge English: First*, *Cambridge English: Advanced* and *Cambridge English: Proficiency* (also known as *Preliminary English Test (PET)*, *First Certificate in English (FCE)*, *Certificate in Advanced English (CAE)* and

## Participants

The 20 participants comprised of seven males and 13 females aged between 18 and early 60s, with an average age of 23 in two General English classes, one of which had 12 students and one of which had eight students. Their nationalities included Brazilian, Chinese, Colombian, East Timorese, French, Indonesian, Iraqi, Japanese, Saudi Arabian, South Korean, Taiwanese, and Thai. To establish our students' needs prior to our intervention, we gave them a needs analysis form at the start of the first AR cycle. Some of the students noted that they had problems with their speaking fluency, as well as with using English outside of the classroom. For example, two participants who lived with people of the same nationality indicated their concern about using English at home, as this

seemed unnatural to them for everyday communication. One participant wanted to understand Australian accents better, and another expressed an interest in recording his speech as a way of practising his English (see Appendix 2 for the response from this student). We considered this information as valuable input for our initial planning stages.

## Theoretical perspective

### Addressing fluency

Having identified fluency as our focus, we discovered from the literature that there is a lack of a precise and consistent definition of fluency (Prefontaine 2010). Speech rate (word count) is a common means of measuring fluency, as is the use of non-lexical fillers ('um', 'er', 'ah') and interjections ('so' and 'like') in a sample of speech (Rossiter, Derwing, Manimtim and Thomson 2010). A speech pathologist advised us that for classroom purposes, measuring speech rates by counting words per minute rather than syllables per minute would be more convenient. Following discussions at the first English Australia AR in *English language intensive courses for overseas students* (ELICOS) program workshop, we determined that using word counts and counts of non-lexical fillers and interjections would be manageable measures for us, as busy teachers, to track students' fluency development.

We felt that addressing fluency as a specific performance phenomenon of speech within our classes had been neglected. Although many General English books and teaching programs contain interesting and engaging activities for developing speaking skills, including repeating unrehearsed talks (Nation 1989), board-games, role-plays and discussions, in our experience there is a lack of explicit instruction about the development of fluency. Rossiter et al (2010:583) conclude in their study that 'learner texts were sorely lacking in consciousness-raising activities and did not have a focus on fillers'.

These issues with fluency being neglected and the lack of explicit instruction in textbooks may be accounted for by the fact that there is 'an implicit belief that fluency cannot be taught and that it will emerge naturally, for example, as a result of a stay abroad' (Chambers 1997), that it will develop 'outside the classroom' (Rossiter et al 2010), and that it takes a long time to develop (Luoma 2004). Therefore incorporating more effective ways of teaching, learning and assessing fluency in our programs was a challenge that we wanted to address in our AR project.

Our workshop facilitator, Professor Anne Burns, also emphasised the importance of establishing clear criteria for 'fluency' and discussing them with our students in order to guide our investigation. In the second AR cycle, we did this by using the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA), available at: [www.dialectsarchive.com](http://www.dialectsarchive.com) (Meier 1997) because it contained clear examples of scripted and unscripted speech with a range of comprehensibility and speech continuity. Unscripted speech samples from several countries were selected to demonstrate natural features of native speaker fluency, such as hesitations and fillers.

Shepherd (2009) stresses the importance of maintaining a speaker's 'unique cultural identity' through their accent and

speaking in a way that is the most comfortable. This idea guided the way we supported our students in communicating comfortably and effectively using their own accent.

As teachers we also felt that fluency took time to develop, particularly for lower level learners. We had also observed that focusing too much on accuracy in speaking rather than fluency tended to affect students' confidence and create anxiety (Zhu 2008).

### Integrating technology

Our AR project also integrated Web 2.0 technologies. In recent years, although there has been an increase in using technology as a tool for enhancing learning in the classroom, it seems that traditional forms of assessment still prevail (Stannard and Basiel 2013). However, Hattie and Timperley (2007:84) argue that 'the most effective forms of feedback provide cues or reinforcement to learners; are in the form of video-, audio-, or computer-assisted instructional feedback; and/or relate to goals'. These findings encouraged us to investigate more ways to use Web 2.0 technologies to analyse, evaluate and support our students' fluency development. The Web 2.0 technologies that we integrated included: audio recording software (Audacity®), a learning management system (LMS) a class wiki, and mobile phone applications ('apps'). These technologies were chosen to assist students by providing them with opportunities to practise their own fluency, evaluating their partners' speech samples, and using different technologies to give and receive feedback, which would then feed forward into their final summative assessment.

### Research questions

We were encouraged to join the English Australia AR program because we had already established a class wiki to develop our students' listening, vocabulary, reading and writing skills further. However, we felt that speaking had become a by-product, rather than a feature of our wiki. We believed that through AR we could explore ways of adding other dimensions to our wiki.

In the first workshop, we were asked to clarify our focus. Based on our experience with previous classes and our realisation that our students' confidence and resources to speak English at home were lacking, we developed our first research questions to address these issues: *How can a weekly speaking journal improve students' speaking fluency? How can a wiki be used as a motivational tool to improve students' speaking fluency?*

An aspect of AR is that it 'centres squarely on change over time' (Burns 2010:30). During our first cycle, we realised that our students' problems of lack of confidence and linguistic resources were much more deeply enmeshed with their struggle to develop spoken fluency, and that the real issue was that our students were not aware of how to best improve their speaking fluency. The initial research questions did not encompass our students' individual needs and learning styles. Instead of limiting our focus just to speaking journals and a

wiki, we also wanted to explore other ways to use Web 2.0 technologies to analyse, evaluate, reflect on and feed forward our students' fluency development into further learning. These reflections during and following our first cycle led us to reformulate the research questions as: *How can we set achievable targets for students' fluency development using Web 2.0 technologies while providing them with effective formative assessment of their fluency?*

## The action research intervention

In our first research cycle we involved our students in trialling mobile phone apps, recording speaking samples, accessing a class wiki and using a pronunciation bank website to enhance their speaking fluency.

Starting with a needs analysis form to elicit their speaking goals and their own preferred ways of practising their speaking, we then set up a learning management system to store our students' speaking journal entries and class wiki. Our students trialled Audacity software to record their weekly self-reflections on their speaking development and wiki practice activities. Initially, a worksheet was designed to prompt students' self-reflections, but we found it had too much detail and became very time-consuming. In the following weeks we improved it by using fewer questions (see Appendix 3 for the question worksheets that we used). At the end of the cycle, we used these recordings for self-assessment with students comparing their first and last recordings.

We also incorporated practice exercises targeting connected speech, pronunciation and intonation into our wiki using YouTube clips and pronunciation websites. These were set up to enable our students to take more control of their own fluency development practice at home.

We sought simple yet effective ways to measure our students' pre- and post-intervention fluency. The Oral Language Analysis and Feedback (OLAF) system (Ferguson 1998) involved using a handheld counter to record speech rates. We adapted it for our purposes by using a tap, tilt and shake counter app called 'Hitcounter' (Costa Centena 2013) and a smart phone timer to count speech rates during a 1-minute 'impromptu speaking' activity every week. The activity involved brainstorming topics such as neighbourhood, family, self-introductions, and having students speak about these topics for 1 minute. During this activity, we sat next to individual students and took a word count (wpm), counting every word they spoke in a minute (not including pauses, repetitions, and fillers) to gauge their speech rate. Students graphed their own speech rate results on a record sheet weekly to monitor their fluency development over the cycle. Some students flourished during this activity, and found it motivating to try to increase their own word counts, whereas other students appeared nervous and disappointed if their speech rate fluctuated.

The next step in our intervention was to target and reduce the number of non-lexical fillers and interjections that our students used in their speaking. In order to raise students' consciousness of what non-lexical fillers and interjections were, and how often they used them when they spoke English, the 'AhCounter' app (Tackovics 2011) was trialled to count

manually the frequency of 'um's, 'er's, 'ah's, and 'so's in real-time speech. We used this app in a peer evaluation activity, where our students counted each other's non-lexical fillers and interjections during the 1-minute impromptu speeches.

Our final stage in cycle one involved students exploring a website, with a view to setting clear criteria for assessing speaking. We investigated using the Speech Accent Archive (accent.gmu.edu) as used by a participant in a previous AR in ELICOS Program (Brown 2012). However, because this website focuses primarily on pronunciation, it lacked the aspects of fluency that we were hoping to highlight in order to elicit the criteria for 'fluency' from our students. Therefore we decided it was not appropriate for our purposes.

During the first cycle, we reflected continually on our research, particularly on its strengths and weaknesses. In planning our next stage, we decided to redefine our focus and AR questions, reduce the frequency of recording students' speech rates, search for another source of speech samples for the setting of clearer criteria, and rearrange the sequencing of formative assessments.

Because of what we had discovered in the first cycle, in our second research cycle, we were concerned that fluctuations in some of our students' speech rates may be demotivating. Therefore, we took speech rates only at the start and end of the second cycle as a means of formative assessment, and redesigned the record sheets with 'target' icons to enable more explicit goal-setting by the students (see Appendix 4 for a sample of the goal-setting record sheet used). We had also found that taking weekly speech rates was time-consuming for teachers.

In addition, we trialled a different source of accent archive called the IDEA (Meier 1997), which had a good range of unscripted speech samples. We chose specific speakers from a variety of countries, with different accents and speech texture (Luoma 2004) showcasing speech rate (too fast, too slow, just right), non-lexical fillers ('ah's, 'um's, 'er's) and other interjections ('you know', 'like'). The classes established the following criteria collectively to reflect on their speaking fluency: speaking at an appropriate rate; pronouncing your words clearly; and not overusing fillers in your speech.

We also continued with the successful strategies we had discovered from our first cycle, using the AhCounter for counts of non-lexical fillers and interjections, wiki speaking exercises, and student recordings, and talking more explicitly with our students about how to reflect on their speaking fluency using their own targets, Web 2.0 technologies, and criteria.

In the final stage of our second cycle we collated our data from students' speech rates, counts of non-lexical fillers, speaking journals, exit surveys, our own teachers' logs, and some focus group interviews in order to identify our overall findings further.

## Findings

In our project, we set out to investigate an effective system, which we refer to as the 'fluency smorgasbord', for our students to develop speaking fluency and set their own

targets, and in doing so found that the use of speech rate and counts of non-lexical fillers and interjections were successful. We also found that our students considered our system to be useful and practical, and that it could be used at home to practise their speaking fluency. Our findings are discussed further below.

## Measuring speech rate

We encouraged students to set their own targets, by using word counts to increase their speech rate. We observed that the majority of our students' speech rates had increased from the beginning to the end of the cycle, with a few that had only slightly decreased (Table 1). The measures in the table were all recorded five weeks apart. Table 1 presents data collected from fewer than the original 20 participants because during the course of our AR cycles, some students were absent on the days that these word counts were taken, and also in the second cycle, some students were no longer in our classes, either being allocated different teachers for that term, or being promoted to upper-intermediate. One of us was also rather tentative about using mobile phone apps and needed time for training in using the system to count words, resulting in her starting to take word counts only in the second cycle.

**Table 1: Speech rate in words per minute (WPM) Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 participants**

Student	Week 1	Week 5
A	71 WPM	66 WPM
B	69 WPM	71 WPM
C	56 WPM	61 WPM
D	77 WPM	86 WPM
E	57 WPM	86 WPM
F	84 WPM	103 WPM
G	92 WPM	116 WPM
H	105 WPM	125 WPM
I	49 WPM	78 WPM

Student F in Table 1, whose speech rate improved markedly, said in her focus group interview, 'I don't have a lot of chance to speak English. I live with Korean so too hard. I want choose just few subjects and talk during 1 minute - a mix of topics, and record and speak one minute', indicating that she wanted to continue using our exercises at home to practise her speaking.

We observed that repeating impromptu speaking activities regularly throughout the cycle helped students to organise their ideas. In a speaking journal entry, one student particularly reflected on how this activity helped him in preparing for his 1 minute impromptu speech, and impending IELTS speaking interview: 'For these two topics I know how to talk about houses. It's good for my thinking and when we talk about the news we talk about many interesting information. Next week I also want some topics to improve my thinking for the IELTS.'

Some of our students also reported feeling nervous about having their speech rates counted or of lacking confidence, which may explain some lower word counts.

This data leads us to believe that speech rate measurement was effective formative feedback for our students to monitor their speaking fluency and set their own targets for improvement.

## Counting 'um's, 'er's and 'ah's

The peer evaluation activity involving counts of non-lexical fillers and interjections with the AhCounter app also revealed some interesting results. Firstly, although some students' use of fillers had decreased and others were affected by anxiety during the activity, overall their performance had improved by the second attempt, which occurred again after a week (Table 2). We realised that this activity may have supported our students in building their confidence by setting goals to adjust their use of fillers and interjections, and we would like to explore this further with other students.

We also observed that our students' awareness of non-lexical fillers and interjections in their speech had greatly increased. There was an important shift in their peer interaction, resulting in effective and honest feedback for each other. For example, we heard students spontaneously evaluating each other: 'You said "so" too many times', 'You use "basically" all the time'. The data also revealed that running this activity over two weeks may have helped students to set and achieve targets for refining their use of non-lexical fillers. One student noted in his focus group interview that he liked the way the mobile apps we used helped him to set targets, rather than just using them for standard practice exercises. During this activity, students frequently inquired about effective discourse management strategies. They

**Table 2: Counts of non-lexical fillers and interjections**

Trial 1		
Student	First attempt	Fourth attempt
Student A	6	4
Student B	5	Was too anxious
Student C	8	2
Student D	4	7
Student E	17	12
Student F	5	3
Student G	7	2
Student H	6	4
Student I	5	4
Student J	4	2
Student K	6	3
Trial 2		
Student A	7	2
Student B	3	0
Student C	2	0
Student D	7	0
Student E	8	7
Student F	5	2
Student G	6	4
Student H	6	4
Student I	6	4
Student J	5	3
Student K	5	2

started questioning what they should say instead of using silent pauses in their speech, and how often they should use interjections. These strategies fed forward into their final summative assessments, where we noticed students were applying techniques learned during our classes, such as saying 'Let me see . . .' when they were thinking of answers.

## Using recordings for self-assessment

The weekly self-reflection recordings made during the cycle enabled students to compare their first and last speaking entries and to monitor their own speaking fluency development. Most students commented on how much they had noticed about their speaking performance from analysing their weekly recordings.

In her first speaking journal entry, one student noticed, 'I say "er" every five seconds . . . it is difficult to understand my French accent . . . I mix the nouns and verbs . . . the tempo is irregular . . .' while in her final recording she observed, 'it is much better . . . I say shorter "ers" but only when I'm thinking . . . my grammar is better . . . I understand myself . . . but I need to improve my pronunciation.' Another student noted, 'I was very scary but now I'm comfortable' when comparing her first and last recordings. These observations led us to believe that it would be worthwhile to further develop our activities using recordings for self-assessment with other students.

## Conducting exit surveys

Our students' comments in our final exit survey at the end of the two cycles varied considerably. We discovered that the use of voice recordings and the wiki had been the most popular activities with the students for practising and developing their speaking fluency. The majority commented on the usefulness of the technology for enhancing their fluency development.

One student indicated that she wanted to continue using the wiki and LMS beyond the course. 'I have a good system to learn although the course is finished for me . . . the facilities to learn with computers and smart phones helped me to understand my ability.' Another student commented that 'the information and tools support my progress'.

In their feedback, our students also commented on how engaging the activities were compared with those experienced in their own education system: 'In my country the teacher just stands up at a whiteboard!'; 'It was a good way to learn'. These comments led us to believe that there is further scope for AR to be conducted on how to support and engage our students with Web 2.0 technologies after they graduate, as a tool for lifelong learning.

Some of the strongest support for our project were reflected in two of our most fluent students' remarks: 'In my opinion the technology in this course helped us and is fundamental for learning English'; 'I feel comfortable with this activity because it helps me in my fluency and I don't make a lot of silent pauses in the last speaking journal entry. I agree with this practice and I love it.'

## Reflections

This AR project has had a significant impact in many areas of our work.

Firstly, it has given us the opportunity to explore individual areas of interest. Jessica wanted to explore real-time speaking activities, while Becky developed an interest in using student recordings. Our different interests complemented each other during this project, and provided us with more strategies to address our research aims. We both acknowledged each other's experience as the key to successfully implementing our AR plan.

Embracing the changes we needed to make during our research cycles and reflecting on our actions has greatly enhanced our knowledge and professionalism. Initially, Becky was a novice in using technology, and felt that the research really challenged her to strive to incorporate the technologies into her teaching pedagogy. She has had a shift in perception and now thinks that using technology feels 'more like stepping through a portal than stepping off a precipice'. Jessica's reflections on her teaching and professional readings have led her down a path to seek more innovative ways of ascertaining progress in her students' speaking fluency development. She also feels that the speaking activities and findings that emerged in the AR really highlighted the importance of developing speaking fluency before speaking accuracy (Zhu 2008) in her classroom practice. Together, we have also learned different ways to gather good sources of information regarding evidence of learning and feedback from our students on class activities, including composing explicit survey questions, designing Likert scale items, conducting interviews and collating and interpreting data.

Secondly, we have noticed how our relationships with our students evolved because of our AR. The greatest outcome of this project was to hand over control to the students, to involve them in trying out the technologies, drive their own goals and give formative feedback. The impact on classroom roles was to go through an important shift, which became more student-centred. In particular, the IDEA accent archive was pivotal in enabling our students to set their own criteria, take control of their own learning, become more self-reflective and self-regulatory, and give effective feedback on their peers' performance. The peer and self-evaluation activities led us to believe that our students were thinking more critically about their speaking development.

Our students also surprised us with their use of metalanguage when defining the criteria and analysing their recordings: 'After I listened to my own recording, I tried to speak again more fluently and with better intonation and pronunciation.' Recognising students' ability to learn and use metalanguage could be useful to those new to teaching and this idea could be highlighted in future.

Thirdly, our AR has already touched teaching communities beyond our own. In our immediate community, the teacher of elementary level (CEFR A1-A1+) students is now using Audacity recordings in her class. The academic course co-ordinator has invited us to integrate speaking activities using Web 2.0 technologies into the Bridging Course curriculum to support students in their fluency development. Furthermore, echoing what Prefontaine (2010) suggested, the Director of UWA CELT has commented that the 'kind of "improptu

speaking" activities we used may have a future place in the examination preparation courses, such as IELTS and TOEFL'. As a result of our AR project, UWA CELT management has invested heavily in technological resources, and is keen to explore avenues to enable students to have 'free and easy access' to online platforms.

Beyond our community, we plan to run two workshops in Perth for the local ELICOS community in the near future to share our findings and encourage others to engage in AR. We would also like to organise an applications fair for the wider ELICOS community to explore and share their favourite language-learning apps. Finally, we are looking forward to sharing our findings with the international community by presenting at conferences.

## Conclusion

To summarise, our study has reaffirmed our view that using Web 2.0 technologies to supplement course books in developing fluency can be effective and engaging for students, and that setting goals and giving effective formative feedback enable students to make appropriate adjustments to suit their own needs. We recognise the importance of AR and are extremely pleased with the vast improvements in the efficacy of our class wiki. We hope our discoveries and findings encourage more ELICOS teachers to embrace technology in the classroom, particularly in targeting areas such as speaking.

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## Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Professor Anne Burns and Katherine Brandon for their guidance and to English Australia and Cambridge English Language Assessment for their sponsorship and for creating support.

Special thanks to IDEA created by Professor Paul Meier.

## Appendix 1: The CEFR and our action research

The chart below indicates how all of the technology used in our AR helped our students to work towards specific descriptors on the CEFR and our course framework over a 5-week cycle.

CEFR B1-B1+	Web 2.0 technology used	Purpose of speaking task
Generally follow the main points of extended discussion around him/her, provided speech is clearly articulated in standard dialect.	The International Dialects of English Archive website	Setting the criteria of fluent speech.
Explain why something is a problem; summarise and give his or her opinion about an article or film clip and answer further questions of detail; exchange accumulated factual information on familiar and unfamiliar routine and non-routine matters within his/her field with some confidence.	Wiki	Scaffolding for speaking practice and production – news reporting, mini-presentations, picture analysis, speculating on the future, discussing pros and cons, exchanging information on research, practising connected speech and intonation.
Language awareness – a conscious way of monitoring speech and considering the effect on the recipient/s. (shifting towards B2)	LMS	Centrally storing students' weekly speaking journals, enabling students to analyse and compare their first entry with their last entry.
Explaining problems; express the main point he/she wants to make expressively.	Audacity software	Recording students' reflections Self-evaluation on one's own speech and speaking tasks performed in class.
Keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is evident, especially in longer stretches of free production.	Mobile (Smartphone) applications	Teacher monitoring learner's progress on speech rate using the 'Hitcounter'. Students recording the amount of non-lexical fillers and interjections used in their peers' speech samples using the 'AhCounter' app.

## Appendix 2: A student's needs analysis responses

### Thinking about your speaking skills.



- How do you practise speaking English outside of the classroom? → I sometimes watch TV after that I try to repeat some conversations.
- How often do you speak English outside of the classroom? → I hardly speak English outside of the classroom.
- What difficulties do you have with speaking English? → I have difficulty expressing my ideas.
- What speaking activities do you enjoy doing? → recording my speech.
- How would you like to practise speaking English in class? → recording my speech.
- Have you ever recorded yourself speaking? → no
- Write three things you could do to speak English outside of the class more often.
  - speaking with native speaker.
  - calling advertising companies.
  - working in job which provide contacting with people.

## Appendix 3: Prompt question sheets for self-reflections

### Thinking about your learning

You are going to keep a speaking journal about your learning each week. You are going to think about your speaking and how you can improve your speaking skills yourself.



Think about these questions for a few minutes.

1. What did you enjoy about today's speaking activities?
2. What did you learn about the topic?
3. Which speaking activities were the most useful for you this week?
4. What problems did you have with your speaking activities today?

E.g.	Pronunciation	Knowledge of vocabulary	Forming sentences	Grammar
	Fluency	Intonation	Word stress	Knowing how to pronounce new words

5. What would you like to do to improve your speaking next week?

E.g.	Focus on my pronunciation	Learn more vocabulary to talk about this topic
	Focus on my fluency	Spend my break times speaking in English only
	Have conversation with my homestay family for half an hour after dinner	Use the wiki

Now record yourself speaking about the questions. Use Audacity to record your voice.

#### Speaking journal project week two

Think about these questions for a few minutes.

Now record yourself speaking about the questions.

1. What did you enjoy about today's speaking activities?
2. What did you learn about the topic?
3. What problems did you have with your speaking activities today?
4. What have you done to improve your speaking this week?
5. How did it help you to improve your speaking?
6. What can you do to improve your speaking in the next week?

#### Speaking journal week three

Think about these questions for a few minutes.

Now record yourself speaking about the questions.

1. How do you feel about this week's speaking activities?
2. How did you improve your own speaking this week?
3. What can you do to improve your speaking in the next week?

#### Speaking journal week four

Think about these questions for a few minutes.

Now record yourself speaking about the questions.

1. How do you feel about this week's speaking activities?
2. How did you improve your own speaking this week?
3. What can you do to improve your speaking in the next week?

#### Speaking journal week five

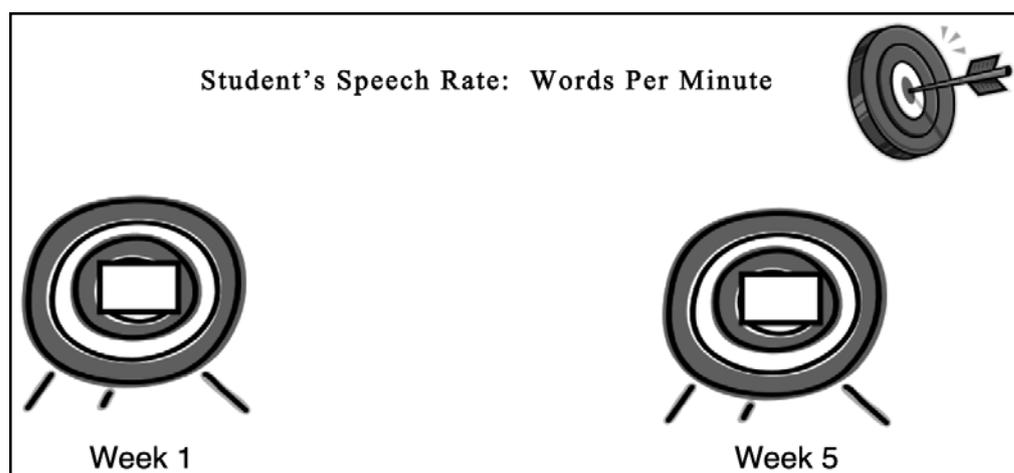
Think about these questions for a few minutes.

Now record yourself speaking about your improvement in your speaking.

Some ideas to get you started:

1. This week's speaking activities.
2. Your speaking skills this week.
3. What you can do next.

## Appendix 4: Speech rate recording sheet



## Using Web 2.0: Synchronising technology to improve feedback on spoken academic texts

**TIM DODD** LA TROBE MELBOURNE, MELBOURNE

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### Introduction

The aim of our action research (AR) was to improve feedback and student preparation for tutorial discussions with the assistance of mobile learning technology. A recent advance in mobile learning, the Audionote™ application (app) can simultaneously capture and synchronise spoken and written 'texts' into a digital file, deployable on computers and smart devices such as phones and tablets. Through this technology, teachers can record students' speaking activities along with any feedback notes, and later send these files onto them. The students can replay them and see their teacher's feedback comments highlighted on their device at the corresponding moments in the speaking activity, helping them to locate the context in which the feedback applies. This visual and auditory inter-textuality is likely to appeal to students of varying learning styles, and to teachers who want their feedback to be retained in its original context.

Our interest in this technology was piqued by its potential to help us resolve our own teaching challenge: how to equip our students to participate more effectively in academic tutorials, and also how to improve our feedback in order for it to 'feed forward' (Carless 2007) into our students' learning.

### Context and participants

La Trobe Melbourne (LTM), the institution where our AR took place, is a private English language college offering students General and Academic English language intensive

courses for overseas students (ELICOS) courses with direct pathways into undergraduate and postgraduate courses at La Trobe University. The participants in our AR study were studying in an English for Further Study class (EFS) at upper-intermediate level (entry at B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001)), or *International English Language Testing System (IELTS) 5.0*. The main speaking objective for this level is for students to facilitate a tutorial discussion, defined as 'a student-led tutorial on a topical news issue'. The student facilitates the discussion by initiating three or four questions and effectively managing the ensuing discourse which was recorded for the group. A signed statement of permission was sought from each student through the University of New South Wales to both participate in the English Australia AR program and to have their recorded speaking shared with group participants. While recordings of tutorial leaders and general feedback comments were emailed to all the participants, specific summative evaluation and personal feedback comments were not shared. Interestingly, two students chose not to participate for different reasons: one did not like the idea of her voice being recorded - either for herself or others - and the other student was concerned that the project was part of a larger government initiative to measure his English progress. This latter student eventually offered his consent voluntarily after he was given an option to observe but not participate in the first cycle of research and more time to reconcile his indifference to the research motive. Our AR spanned two consecutive cycles of 10 weeks with a total of 23 participants (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participants

	Nationalities	Future pathway	Age (Average)
Cycle 1	Vietnamese (5); Chinese (3); Saudi Arabian, Colombian, Turkish, Indian	Foundation or Diploma Studies Program (12)	22 years
Cycle 2	Vietnamese (4), Chinese (3), Saudi Arabian, Indian, Cambodian, Colombian	La Trobe University (9) Foundation or Diploma Studies Program (2)	21 years

## Research focus

As already mentioned, we decided to focus our research on the use of a mobile learning application to improve teacher feedback and to promote better student engagement. Although our teaching program provided a reasonable student guide for preparing tutorial discussions, it lacked a standard exemplar of tutorial facilitation for students to review. Moreover, we had found that evaluating speaking in real time was stressful; we were not satisfied that our rushed, hand-written feedback notes provided students with a thorough account of their performances that they could use for improvement. We wanted to change this situation and give students a more formative account of their speaking with which they could engage, such as that offered in a learning-oriented assessment (LOA) pedagogy (Carless 2007). When we chanced upon Audionote's synchronising technology, we saw the potential for both teacher-modelled and student-led tutorials and associated feedback to be preserved for review on students' portable devices, and for students to maintain these digital sequences of speaking development over time as digital speaking portfolios. We were also interested in whether the app's multi-modality would affect how we wrote our feedback notes. These enquiries led us to our research questions: *Over time how does the use of audio and note-taking technology (Audionote) impact, if at all, on teachers' feedback and students' speaking development?*

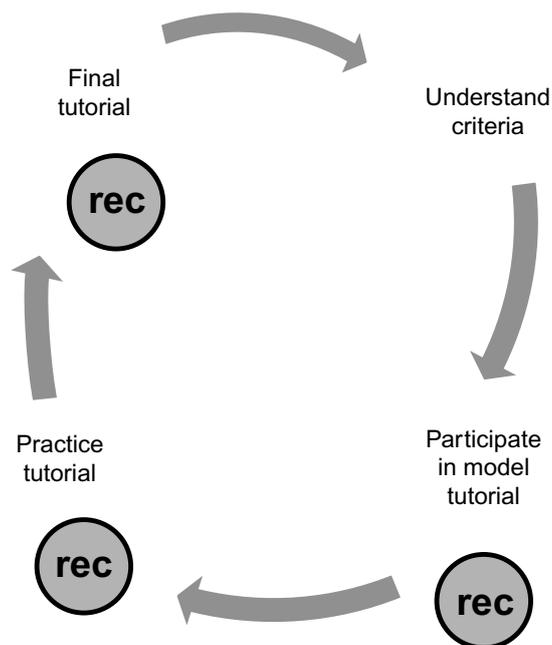
## Action taken

### Cycle 1

We undertook the research in two cycles: the first was a 4-part cycle (Figure 1), in which students focused on the assessment criteria for tutorial discussions, participated in a recorded model tutorial, practised facilitating a tutorial, and finally led a tutorial discussion for assessment. We recorded all speaking tasks in the cycle and focused on improving the way we provided and explained feedback to students via the app. We attempted this by individually customising templates in the app to suit our learning activities, and agreeing to analyse the effect of these template differences as part of our research into improved teacher feedback.

We began Cycle 1 with an initial survey (Appendix 1) which suggested that 60% of students rated their former teachers' feedback on their speaking as poor or very bad; we hoped to improve this. Along with this survey, we introduced and

Figure 1: Cycle 1



explained a requirement that the students keep a journal, with one entry expected each week. The journals were semi-structured with some question prompts provided by us, but they also allowed for student-initiated responses.

In Cycle 1, we wanted students to experience and personalise the key assessment criteria rather than slavishly analyse it. Thus, we facilitated a model tutorial in which all students participated, and we simultaneously recorded this with added written commentary into Audionote (Appendix 3). We intended for this authentic model to 'capture' with Audionote sufficient features of the assessment criteria for facilitating tutorials such as *how*, *when* and *where* to ask questions, seek clarification and paraphrase ideas, so that students could understand how to lead their own tutorials. We hoped students' participation in this recorded model tutorial would motivate them to later review it, and that our written commentary would focus their attention on key skills and strategies of the assessment criteria. We added language tasks to our feedback in the app (Appendix 3) to engage students in developing knowledge of tutorial discourse. Thus in Audionote, we were attempting to integrate language and discourse tasks on the main features of competence in speaking: core speaking skills, communication strategies and knowledge of language and discourse (Goh and Burns 2012). We emailed all recorded tutorials and feedback to students in the freely downloadable Audionote app (the main intervention which we had introduced), with instructions on downloading to either Apple (IOS) or Android-compliant smart devices (e.g. smartphones and tablets), or Macintosh and Windows personal computer systems.

At the mid-point of this first cycle, we reviewed these recorded discussions and set up a feedback session where we played excerpts of them to the class, and then asked students to comment on the effectiveness of the samples of discourse. The recordings also helped us confirm the need for a review and extra pronunciation support for a group of Vietnamese

speakers with core pronunciation problems. We began this review process by retracing all pronunciation-related feedback for these students in Audionote. At this stage, Selena and I also reviewed our approaches to writing feedback within the app. We agreed that our feedback needed to be sufficiently descriptive and evaluative if it was to be effective. Moreover, we agreed to use symbols to represent participants and common language functions to improve the frequency and efficiency of our descriptive feedback.

At the end of Cycle 1, students had their final tutorials, and we later analysed our assessment records and student surveys (Appendix 2) which indicated that most students (86%) rated Audionote as 'average' for improving their speaking. Although both we and the students perceived improvement in their speaking skills, and were keen to continue the intervention, the students were reluctant to attribute their improvement to the technological intervention we were using.

Between our two AR cycles, we had time to reflect on what had occurred in Cycle 1. We analysed our data further and took advice received during an English Australia workshop where the idea of *planning for learning* was introduced to us. In this concept, students are expected to engage in and reflect upon teacher feedback. Students can then act upon these reflections by creating learning goals for subsequent learning activities. We realised that due to our overt focus on improving feedback in Audionote, we had overlooked the importance of students 'acting' upon it. We coupled this realisation with Edwards' (2013) impressive AR account of the importance to students of setting goals in respect to learner autonomy, motivation and language development. We hoped that by having ready access to all sequences of their tutorial feedback in Audionote, students were in a perfect position to review their performances, set attainable learning goals according to the teacher's feedback commentary and monitor their own goals and language progress.

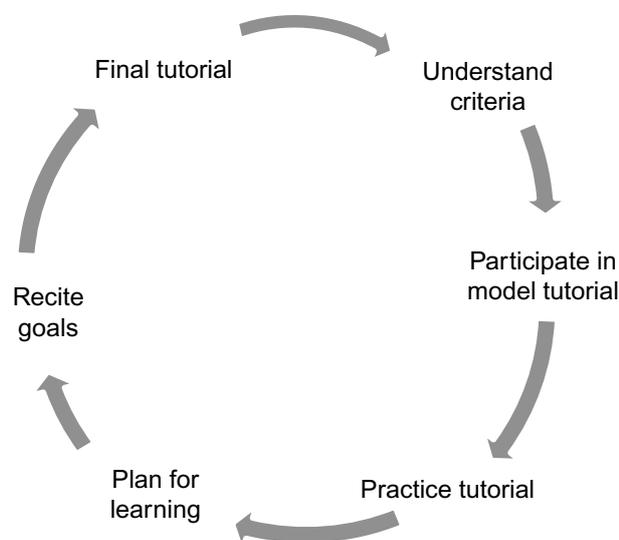
### Cycle 2: Engaging students in the 'preserved' feedback

In an attempt to better engage the students in their Audionote feedback, we decided to add two more processes to Cycle 2 (Figure 2). Specifically, students were asked to respond to their recorded tutorial feedback in Audionote, and subsequently make 'Response to Feedback Plans' for submission to us before their final tutorials. We asked them to consider two questions: *What did you learn from your first tutorial and the teacher's feedback? What can you do to improve in your next discussion?*

Our reflection on Cycle 1 also led us to believe that students required a better understanding of communication strategies and knowledge of discourse. We sourced another discourse and communication strategies worksheet, and worked alongside students to highlight and define those strategies which we both agreed required more attention. Students began to articulate these strategies in their 'Response to Feedback Plans' as methods of reaching their goals (Appendix 5). These written plans moved the focus away from our feedback as the sole determinant of change, and towards the students themselves as agents engaging in 'feed forward' with a clearer purpose for speaking. At the beginning of each tutorial, they restated their main goals and then commenced

the facilitation. By the end of Cycle 2, we had accumulated another 10-week digital sequence of feedback and speaking for each student.

Figure 2: Cycle 2



## Findings

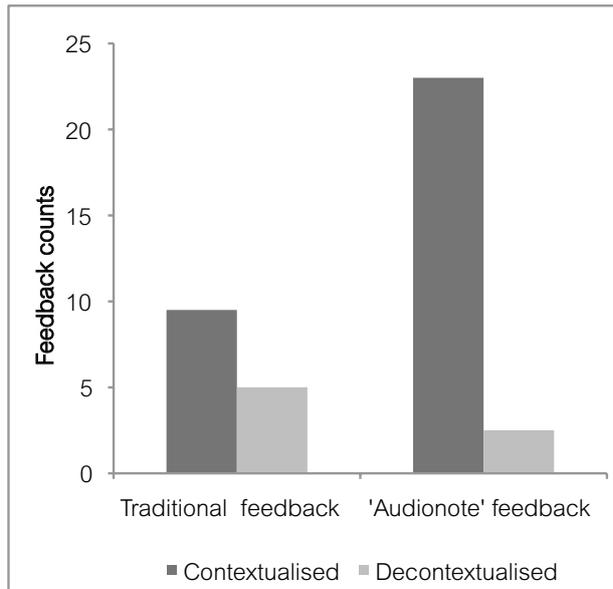
### The impact of synchronising technology on our feedback

The first cycle of research data shows how, for both of us, our feedback became *running commentaries* on talk; we took advantage of the technology's ability to contextualise our comments via the audio talk produced by the students. The feedback had a new multi-modality (sound and text) and it was liberating. Our comments became more frequent and contextualised, with more than two-fold increases in instances of feedback (Figure 3). This was possible because we were able to rely on the recorded talk to set the contexts for our written feedback.

We also compared our Audionote feedback with the feedback of an experienced teacher on a concurrent class at the same level. This teacher's traditional hand-written feedback notes were thoroughly commendable, but they were less evaluative and more decontextualised, and it is difficult to envisage how students could further act upon some of this feedback. For example, feedback advice based on negative evidence such as 'missing verbs', 'review question forms', 'problems with word order and word class' are difficult for students to act upon without direct access to the respective verbs, question forms, and word order requiring review. In truth, we also found some instances of decontextualised feedback in our Audionote recordings, but these occurrences were far less frequent (Figure 3).

Our Audionote feedback comments were as much concerned with providing students with positive evidence, such as an illustration of and evaluation of good academic language use. Selena focused her attention on illustrating the function of the discourse strategy and then appending an evaluation of its effectiveness. While her evaluation may include negative evidence, such as explicit feedback on a pronunciation error, Selena made sure to highlight just as

Figure 3: Comparing feedback counts



frequently what the students were doing well. An instance of her feedback is below:

Feedback: Student A rephrases question – you got better responses here, well done!

**(Illustrate function) + (Evaluation)**

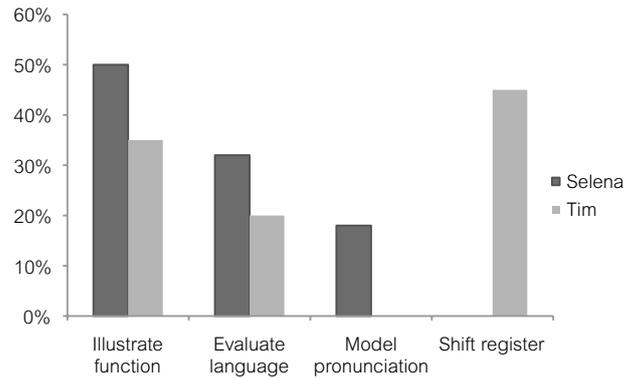
Selena also recorded her own corrections of her students' mispronunciations in the app, effectively commencing a 'feedback conversation'. Tim's feedback focused on paraphrasing the students' ideas in a more academic form, known as 'register shifting' (Gibbons 2006). Thus, Tim's feedback took the general form of shifting the register, illustrating the function or skill and appending an evaluation. For example, when one tutorial leader stated, 'We work too hard for the boss in China', his feedback was as follows:

Feedback: Employees are overworked in Chinese companies; Student B clarifies idea – Well done!

**(Academic register shift) + (Illustrate function) + (Evaluation)**

The app allowed us to not only store feedback, but also to categorise and monitor its type. Not only were we expressing feedback with a higher frequency (Figure 3), but we also found more purposes in its composition (Figure 4). While over one third of Selena's feedback occurred in the form of evaluation of language use, Tim was able to provide almost half of his feedback in a register-shifted form. Generally, we felt that these variations in our feedback were constructive for students because they distributed more attention towards both what students were doing well and what could be done better, and towards what is socially expected of their language use in academic settings.

Figure 4: Composition of feedback for Selena and Tim

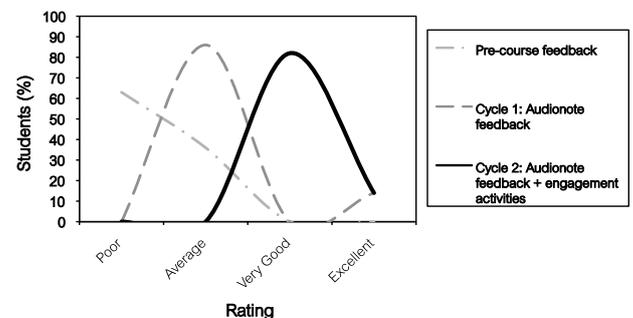


We kept logs of our feedback activities and despite an initial spike in time devoted to feedback we managed to reduce this time over the two cycles as we became more adept with the technology. We felt this was worthwhile after reading student journals which showed the students' positive responses to and perceptions of the intervention (Appendix 6).

## Impact on speaking development

The students' 'Average' rating of the Audionote feedback in Cycle 1 improved dramatically in Cycle 2 to 'Very good' (82%) for most students (Figure 5), and far beyond their 'Poor' rating for pre-course feedback. We feel that this can be strongly attributed to the additional planning for learning and feed forward pedagogy that we employed to augment the technology in the second cycle.

Figure 5: Rating feedback for improving speaking



In addition to their improved rating for feedback, almost all the students (86%) perceived an improvement in their speaking by the end of the course and recommended the continued use of the technology. However, measuring the speaking gains of students was outside the scope of this research approach although both students and teachers perceived general improvements in speaking performance over the two cycles. What was more convincing and measurable in this research was how students 'uniquely' described the benefits of the intervention in their journals and surveys (Appendices 4 and 6).

## Sample responses to using Audionote

The software is useful. It should be introduced more commonly for everyone. Thank you!

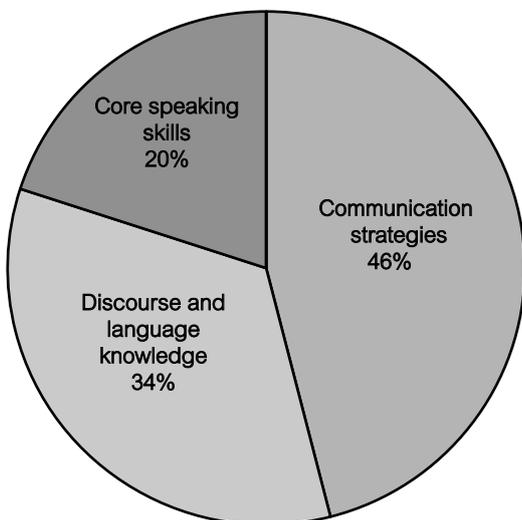
I get more confidence with speaking. Thank you very much.

It's helpful to improve my speaking because I can use it to know the discussion process and what I need to progress.

The journal entries suggested that students' self-evaluation strategies were enhanced via the intervention. As one student put it, '[the technology] can allow me a view as spectator to listen' (Appendix 4). In the first cycle, 10 of the 12 students used expressions that referred to greater noticing and awareness of language features that were not apparent to them prior to the intervention (Appendix 4). However, students also generally agreed that retrospectively 'listening to talk' became more empowering when accompanied by our descriptive feedback (Appendix 2). They valued the combined textual feature offered by the Audionote app and, in essence, used the audio and written texts as one unified piece of feedback.

Having reflected on 'how' the app was enabling students' noticing behaviours, we also turned our attention to 'what' was being noticed. Students noticed several features of speaking at the micro level, such as incorrect pronunciation and grammar errors, and also became aware of discourse-level features, such as turn-taking strategies, clarifying strategies, questioning forms, and articulating ideas (grammar/vocabulary). In fact, in focus interviews, students rated these communication strategies as providing them with the most valuable improvement (Figure 6), although the pie chart shows how evenly balanced the strategies were.

**Figure 6: What most improved in your speaking after using Audionote?**



By the end of both AR cycles, we had accumulated digital sequences of speaking and feedback spanning 20 weeks. While Cycle 1 had shown the intervention's positive effects on the frequency and multiple purposes in our feedback, Cycle 2 confirmed the need for students to be better engaged in the connections between speaking task, feedback and goal-directed learning plans. When we began to use the app to augment learning by framing it in effective student engagement activities, students then began to accept its merit in their language learning with more optimism.

## Reflections

We began this AR in order to find ways of improving our feedback on students' spoken academic texts. We now believe that the use of synchronising technology fits well within a learning-oriented assessment framework. Recently we have begun to present outcomes of our AR at other language institutions, and teachers to whom we have presented have been forthcoming in their responses to our research, and keen to discuss how they would use synchronising technology in their classes. At La Trobe Melbourne, some teachers are beginning to explore the use of synchronising technology in other speaking tasks by customising their own templates in the app. For this, initial feedback has been very promising.

For us as researchers, a valuable aspect of AR was that it highlighted the values students bring to the classroom which are not necessarily shared by their teachers. Firstly, we did not anticipate that one student would prefer not being in the research and hearing her own voice, or that another student would suspect government surveillance as a motive for our research. Moreover, we expected our students to accept, *prima facie*, the educational value of improved teacher feedback in a cutting-edge app. Surprisingly, early data suggested that students were not automatically predisposed to the benefits of this technology for their language learning. Thus, part of the challenge for us was to design and engage students in learning activities which augmented the app, rather than expecting the technology to replace and resolve such learning. When we better understood the importance of student agency in relation to feedback in the app, and the key role this played in the language learning sequence, we were able to articulate a clearer process for speaking development, benefitting both the students and ourselves.

Finally, we have also learned to be more optimistic about our classroom frustrations. We had to push beyond our initial confusion and disappointment of Cycle 1 and reflect more deeply about the direction to take for Cycle 2. This period, between 'observation' and 'replanning' in the AR cycle, allowed us time to understand that some of our 'negative' results were, in fact, helpful cues for further exploration. The AR cycle provided us with a system to manage and explore our uncertainties and frustrations, and we intend to take this forward into future teaching practice.

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## Appendix 1: Your experiences of teacher feedback

1. In the past, how did your English teachers usually give you advice about your speaking?

The teacher(s) usually spoke to me with advice on my speaking in class.

The teacher(s) usually wrote comments on paper and/or gave me a score.

The teacher(s) usually only gave me a score but no other comments.

The teacher(s) usually didn't give me any advice about my speaking.

Other? (Please describe)

2. When did your teachers usually give you advice about your speaking? (Tick)

Before and after (tests)     Only before  
 Only after     Not before and not after

3. Generally, how would you rate your teacher's advice for improving your speaking? (Tick)

Excellent     Very good     OK/Average  
 Bad/Poor     Very bad

4. Generally, how do you feel about your English speaking ability? (Tick)

Excellent     Very good     OK/Average  
 Bad/Poor     Very bad

3. If the discussion leader was someone else, how did you usually use the Audionote app?

I usually listened to the full discussions and read all the teacher's comments.

I usually listened to and read only some parts of their discussions.

I didn't usually listen to or read other students' Audionote discussions.

Other (please describe)

4. How would you rate (score) the Audionote app for improving your speaking?

Excellent     Very good     OK/Average  
 Bad/Poor     Very bad

5. In general, would you prefer your teachers to assess your speaking by:

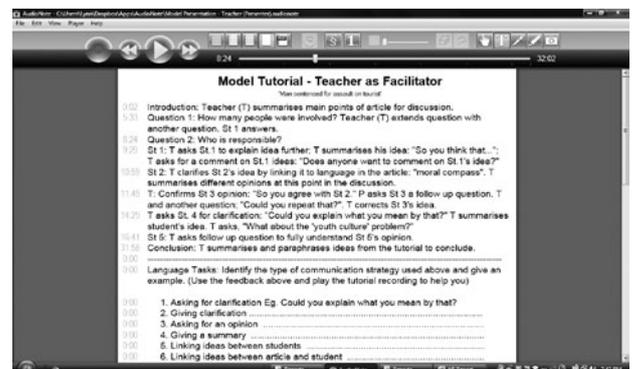
A. Writing speaking scores and comments on paper only (not using Audionote).

B. Recording speaking and comments in an app and sending by email (using Audionote).

C. Another way?

6. Do you have a final opinion or comment about using smartphone apps for improving speaking?

## Appendix 3: Screen shot of discussion feedback notes in Audionote



## Appendix 2: Using Audionote

1. How often did you use the Audionote app in level 4B compared with level 4A

More often     As often (same)  
 Less often     Not at all

2. If the discussion leader was you, how did you usually use the Audionote app?

I usually listened to the full discussions and read all the teacher's comments.

I usually listened and read only some parts of the discussions.

I didn't usually listen to or read my Audionote discussions.

Other (please describe)

## Appendix 4: Analysing students' journal ideas

Data ref	Thoughts on language use		Thoughts on technology use	
	Awareness and noticing	Speaking improvement	Reviewing speaking	Using technology
1/2	(1) Noticed/realise (2) Found/can know/different from what I thought/		(2) First time to listen to myself	
3	Surprised (to find out)/	After Audionote . . . my speaking improved . . . huge benefit to me	I can listen to my mistakes/can listen again to the speaking and read teacher comments	Access it anytime without using paper
4	Found out/aware		I really wanted to hear my voice/ excited when I heard my voice/I could hear my voice again and again so I can aware of what I was bad at/I like to listening it again/	Recording played very well/makes everything in the presentation more clear/helped me to keep up with the presentation because of the teachers notes (feedback)/I like to see pronunciation comments and the idea feedback as well/
5	Know/find out/	I think I will have a better speaking skill/my presentation got better and better/	Played 1st recording many times/I like to listen . . . and find out my weaknesses sometimes I don't want to listen to the records	By using Audionote, I recorded all my demo presentations and I'm very confident now because my presentation got better and better after each recording/easy to use/ no problems with app/makes everything easier/
7	Helps to notice/helps to find/ realised	Useful to improve speaking skills/ find pronunciation mistakes/ develop communication strategies		Also helped with listening
8	Know/	Pronunciation improved by Audionote	Students can hear their voice . . . and they will know what was wrong/sometimes I feel fear when I heard my voice/help me (be) good at listening	A good way for students/helpful for study/teachers and students should use more technology/I can depend on app to improve my speaking better than the days before
9				Really very helpful but some phones are unable to open the app
10/11	(10) Observe clearly (11) Learned that/	(11) I need more confidence and more pronunciation clear, unbelievable!/	(10) Can allow me a view as spectator to listen/	
12	Help me hear/easier for me to understand mistakes and areas for improvement/	I can learn ideas from friends/		Easy to access/can record my own speaking and practice before class . . . it make me more confident

## Appendix 5: Mapping feedback responses onto learning plans (example)

Question 1: **What** did you learn from your first discussion and the teacher's feedback?

Making people get involved in the discussion by asking them, "What do you think about his/her idea? Good idea? Better solution?" Paraphrase ideas

Question 2: **How** do you think you can improve in your next discussion?

**Goal 1:** Pronunciation: more practice, pay attention on final sounds.

**Goal 2:** Grammar: (Be) careful.

**Goal 3:** Vocabulary: Finding useful vocabulary for the article.

**Goal 4:** Ideas: More contributions required to get other ideas.

**Goal 5:** Practise, practise and practise.

**Goal 6:** Be confident.

## Appendix 6: Sample comments from student journals

<b>Student A</b>	The software is useful. It should be introduced more commonly for everyone. Thank you!
<b>Student B</b>	Using Audionote should be applied widely
<b>Student C</b>	I strongly believe that Audionote app is very helpful. I can listen my discussion, read the feedback, and I can well practice (sic) by recording my discussion at home
<b>Student D</b>	I get more confidence with speaking. Thank you very much.
<b>Student E</b>	It's helpful to improve my speaking because I can use it to know the discussion process and what I need to progress.
<b>Student F</b>	It's my first time to listen myself's English speaking. It's quite different with what I thought. From the record, I found speaking skill is really bad. The teacher's comment can help me adjusting the vocabulary, pronounce. I think the app is useful.
<b>Student G</b>	I think the Audionote app is easy to access. I feel a little nervous when I did my presentation. I already forgot what's the shortcoming in my speaking. But working the teacher's comment and listening the record, I can know where should improve in my English speaking.
<b>Student H</b>	After use the app for half a month, I think it can improve my grammar and vocabulary pronounce for the English speaking. The teachers comments is useful. But I want teacher to give me more details in the common. I find its very hard to speak standard English.
<b>Student I</b>	<p>1) I do not have any problems when I access the Audionote app in order to listen to my discussion. It was very easy to access because I have to download Audionote program easier by App Store then</p> <p>2) This app help me learn something new about my own speaking. It help me learn ideas from my friends (zone of proximal development.) I can record my own speaking and I can practise my presentation before I do in class. It make me more confident.</p>



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