Research Notes 83

Findings of the Action Research in
ELICOS Program 2021

CAMBRIDGE

Issue 83/July 2022

Contents

Editorial

This edition of *Research Notes* looks at action research from the 2021–2022 cohort of ELICOS action researchers. As always, the programme participants are mentored by Professor Anne Burns, who, in her introductory article, discusses the lack of opportunity for professional exchange between teachers in today's digital teaching contexts. She outlines the important role the Action Research in ELICOS program plays in providing a professional collaboration space in which participants can exchange ideas and share insights. The action research reported in this issue illustrates very well the value of this kind of community of practice.

This year's research theme was new ways to assess learner progress, which participants have addressed from various perspectives. Vahida Berberovic sets out to find if peer feedback is more useful to students than teacher feedback because it lies within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). She describes her experiences of facilitating peer feedback in an academic context. Next, Snezhana Chernova and Mukesh Abbasi investigate upper-intermediate students' experiences and perceptions of using e-portfolios to support their grammar development in an outcome-focused culture. Sue Watson explores the links between speaking and writing development and whether creative writing can foster speaking development. She suggests that bringing together creative writing and formative speaking brings vibrancy into the learning environment. Rose Harvey's higher education institution decided to switch from discrete item testing to assessment of integrated skills. She discusses the challenges presented by this switch, including rubric design and low stakeholder engagement. Next, Paola Clews addresses the subject of peer feedback, an important aspect of formative assessment which is often neglected by teachers and researchers. She describes setting up a peer feedback scaffold model to support colleagues and learning. Finally, Dale Jung and and Kate Randazzo wanted to transform student attitudes and goals beyond simple grade achievement. They used student blogging to increase student reflection and engagement with their academic pathway course.

Why collaboration matters in language teaching action research

Anne Burns, Curtin University and University of New South Wales

For many teachers, teaching is (still) experienced as an 'egg-crate' profession (Lortie 1975), where their work is carried out in isolation from other colleagues. Many teachers enter their classrooms, or increasingly their online environments, and work with their students without any scheduled opportunities to engage with other practitioners on pedagogical issues and challenges that are important and relevant to them. This is particularly so in this age of managerialism and accountability. In the English Australia/Cambridge Assessment English Action Research in ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) Program we have aimed to offset any such sense of isolation by creating a collaborative professional learning process where teachers can share their expertise and draw creatively upon the skills and knowledge of other colleagues. We argue that such collaboration is fundamental to facilitating the sustainability of the research for the teachers, their centres and the ELICOS sector more generally, and also ultimately creates a broader impact on the effectiveness of student learning (see Burns, Edwards and Ellis 2022, Edwards and Burns 2016). Here I explore the concept of collaboration in such language teacher action research programs and why it matters.

What is collaborative action research?

Put simply, collaboration involves working with others to enhance meaning and understanding in enterprises that are important to a group of individuals. Collaborative processes mean sharing knowledge, ideas and skills with others to achieve a particular goal. Collaboration can be seen from a sociocultural perspective where learning with and from others is seen as more beneficial and productive than operating alone. To achieve collaboration in the ELICOS action research Program, various strategies have been initiated, including:

- collaborative identification of a researchable topic
- collegial processes for learning about and carrying out the research
- cooperative sharing of the outcomes of the research.

In the sections below, I discuss each of these elements in turn.

Collaborative identification of a researchable topic

One of the aims of the action research Program is to identify issues and topics that are current, relevant and important to the ELICOS field. Since 2010, when the Program began, various overarching themes have been pinpointed, such as student assessment and feedback, the teaching of the four language skills, and the interaction of students with their local community. Since the advent of COVID-19, greater emphasis has, understandably, been placed on student engagement with online learning, the pedagogical uses of technology in classrooms, and assessment of learner progress in online environments.

Thematic areas are identified each year through several collaborative strategies.

- At the final workshop of the action research Program, teachers propose themes they consider likely to be relevant to the ELICOS sector, their colleges, their colleagues and their students in the coming year. The discussion is conducted as an open and interactive exchange where teachers present their ideas and these are discussed for priority among the whole group. Teachers draw on their own experiences of the pedagogical opportunities and challenges within their colleges throughout the year and consider whether these would lend themselves to further research. The themes are then recorded for future discussion with other stakeholders.

- The themes identified by the teachers are presented to the action research Program's Reference Group in a further collaborative discussion. This group consists of two senior ELICOS managers from across the national ELICOS sector, one representative each from English Australia and Cambridge Assessment English in Australia, and the author of this article. The themes are evaluated for their currency to ELICOS and the teaching of international students more generally, their relevance to the developments and challenges in the sector, and their researchability. They are then prioritised according to these three criteria.

- These themes and their order of priority are presented to the sponsors of the Program, Cambridge University Press & Assessment in the UK, for further consideration and prioritisation. Their responses are then considered again by the Reference Group who are asked for a consensus on which theme should be selected.

- Following the selection of a thematic area, potential key research topics are fleshed out and listed to provide some guidance on researchable issues for teachers wishing to apply for the Program in the following year. The overarching theme and the possible topic areas are then promoted on the English Australia website for teachers interested in joining the Program. In 2021 the overall theme was 'New ways to assess learner progress' and the articles in this issue reflect the various ways that the participating teachers identified their topics and responded to this theme.

Collaboration in this element of the Program means that the research themes emerge 'bottom-up' from teachers' concerns and interests, with reference to their wider experiences within their institutions, in combination with 'top-down' imperatives across the whole ELICOS sector. To these perspectives are added the international knowledge and considerations of an influential worldwide organisation with an interest in researching the impact of teaching and learning trends at the classroom level.

Collegial processes for learning about and carrying out research

Teachers who volunteer to participate in this Program, continuing from March to December, meet together from across Australia and do not previously know each other. Once the Program commences, they engage in a nine-month process of conducting their research. Typically, six projects are carried out in any one year, with teachers working individually or pairing with one other colleague. As mentioned above they come to this process with self-selected topics within an overarching theme. Their participation consists of three face-to-face (or more recently also online) collaborative workshops interspersed with the initiation and continuation of the research at their institutions. Various strategies for engendering collaboration characterise this process:

• Support for learning about action research is ensured through my facilitation of the Program, as an academic researcher and teacher educator, together with that of the English Australia Professional Development Manager. However, at the first workshop meeting, great emphasis is placed on the fact that the respective roles of teachers and facilitators in this Program is one of active collaboration, and not simply 'passive participation'. Discussion focuses explicitly on the fact that the group comprises different aspects of expertise, in the form of direct classroom experience, research knowledge and sector familiarity. In addition, these are not monolithically located in any one individual but dispersed across the group in different dimensions. Beginning with explicit reflections on how collaboration is intended to work in the group has been shown to relax teachers who are meeting for the first time and who may be experiencing nervousness about what is to come.

• The schedules for each workshop are loosely structured and adjusted according to the needs and responses of the group. Although input is provided along the way (e.g. on the theory, practice and procedures in action research, current theoretical and practical ideas related to the research theme, approaches to data analysis), most of the time is allocated to the teachers describing and explaining their plans for research, updating the group on their progress, and outlining their successes and challenges. These exchanges are highly interactive, conducted first as short monologues to cover the ground but then as dialectic exchanges, where numerous questions are posed, suggestions made, (positive) critiques proposed and insights reflected upon.

• Following these exchanges, teachers are given time to draw on these collaborations with their colleagues and to reflect further on their research. These reflections are carried out individually or with pairs of teachers further discussing their ideas, depending on their preferences. Facilitators and teachers

frequently circulate the room to talk through questions that come up or refinements that need to be made for particular projects. These can consist, for example, of input on technology others have used successfully, revision of research questions, decisions about data collection or analysis and so on.

- Each workshop begins and ends with time set aside for discussion by the whole group of any issues that have arisen in the wider experience or conduct of the research. Everyone is encouraged to be frank and constructive in their comments, which typically include both positive (e.g. developments in teacher practice, student achievement) and negative (e.g. uncertainties or anxieties about the research, student enrolment, future employment in a volatile sector) reflections. These opportunities seem to provide an outlet for expressing the psychological/ emotional aspects of being part of the Program but also for generating insights for its future development.

- To further collaboration between workshops, the participants make use of a Whatsapp group where updates and questions can be posted and even personal details celebrated (a new baby in 2021!). These contacts enable the teachers to maintain instant interactions with each other where new reflections and ideas can be generated and any problems quickly resolved. In addition, teachers are invited to hold individual online discussions with me if there is further input needed on any research dilemmas.

These aspects of creating collaboration are built into the processes rather than the products of the Program. They mediate the on-the-ground forward movement of the participants' experiences. They aim to provide support, interaction and reflection both at an individual and group level as the Program proceeds, and to create a strong and continuing network among the participants.

Cooperative sharing of the outcomes of the research

A further element of the Program is to ensure that the outcomes of the teachers' research are publicised for a wider audience, both within the ELICOS sector and beyond. This takes the form of professional development presentations on each project and also written reports in various formats. Again, strategies to enable this goal to become a collaborative and supported process have been attempted and refined over the years, in order to avoid placing a possibly burdensome set of expectations on individual teachers. I describe below how these strategies work:

- In the first workshop the teachers are given an overview of the expectations for how their research will be publicised in the ELICOS sector and beyond. The deadlines for producing each piece of writing are determined in line with the timetabling and teaching demands within the teachers' colleges and the expectations of the sponsors of the Program.

- The final written expectation from the teachers is the report published in this journal. This is seen as important, not only to summarise the findings from the Program but also to provide examples for other teachers and to expand

the existing literature on teacher action research. However, the process for producing this writing is broken down into various stages in order for the teachers to share their research among themselves and the facilitators along the way and, ultimately, to scaffold the development of a succession of written drafts. These stages involve:

i) a short account of up to 1,000 words written as a brief description or notes about 6–8 weeks after Workshop 1 and circulated to the group before Workshop 2 at the end of May;

ii) a 500-word description of the research and any findings for publication in an online brochure for other ELICOS teachers to read (see www.englishaustralia. com.au/documents/item/1359 for an example);

iii) an 'interim' report of up to 2,000 words submitted in August, for which teachers get detailed feedback from the facilitators in preparation for the final report;

iv) submission of the final report by early December. Feedback is then provided on this version by the end of January and the teachers revise it for submission through English Australia to this journal for publication.

• In addition to the written report, teachers present their research nationally to colleagues and other interested attendees. Before these presentations, the teachers rehearse what they have prepared at Workshop 3 and receive constructive and collaborative feedback on ways to refine the presentation. Although in previous years these presentations formed a colloquium at the annual English Australia conference, they have been offered in an online format since 2020 and the advent of COVID-19. On each of three successive days, two projects are presented in half hour sessions with additional time for discussion and questions. Staggering the presentations in this way accommodates the participants' teaching obligations and also means that other teachers across the sector can dip into the presentations during their free time. The online versions have enabled a greater number, who may not have been able to attend the conference, to be at the sessions, and have served to disseminate the research more widely. These presentations are an important way of spreading the word about action research to other teachers in the sector, particularly as the presenters typically include reflections on their experiences to uncover the processes for others who might be interested. Beyond these 'built-in' opportunities, teachers in the Program have also presented their research within their organisations and at national and international seminars and conferences.

These different cooperative strategies have concentrated on the products of the Program, ensuring that outcomes can be documented and disseminated. Nevertheless, they have also incorporated collaborative forms of sharing and support and have expanded the interactive and collegial nature of the Program. Moreover, teachers have been kept informed and updated on each other's projects and have commented positively on the connections and interrelationships among their topics, which have benefitted their own research.

Why collaboration matters and what it offers teacher action researchers

In the previous section I have outlined the various ways in which the action research in ELICOS Program has aimed to create collaboration within and across the research participant group. It is useful to draw out from this description what differences collaboration might make to the processes and products of conducting such research and why these might matter to teachers first experiencing this kind of research. In contrast to undertaking research individually, collaboration strives to create:

- equality: not everyone takes the same roles, but different forms of expertise are considered equal and important for all
- collegiality: participants work jointly with others on issues of common or related concern and have a group of 'critical friends' with whom to share research-in-progress
- reciprocity: participants aim to reciprocate access to information, provide feedback and share ideas and outcomes
- mutuality: participants create shared ownership of and investment in the research themes and connections
- affirmation: individuals within the group receive external evaluation and validation of their practices from other members
- sustainability: the impetus for the research is sustained through group interaction which encourages members to keep on task
- sociality: problem-posing and -resolving is shaped by recognition of the broader social, educational, institutional and professional contexts that might affect the individual
- regeneration: dialogue within the group is a source for the creative reconstruction of research and classroom practices.

(Adapted from: Burns and Hood 1997:4)

Conclusion

Collaboration has become something of a buzz word in many fields of work, including education and research. However, it is sometimes difficult to find accounts of what collaboration means 'on-the-ground' and how it manifests itself across the duration of a process. In this article, I have aimed to give a sense of how it is portrayed in the Action Research in ELICOS Program and what strategies are used to engender and sustain collaboration. My argument is that collaboration in action research is a potent means of support for teachers commencing a research journey. My hope is that this account may offer insights and suggestions for other practitioner researchers and professional development staff who may want to begin a similar initiative in their own organisations.

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2021 Action Research Program Participants
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Implementing peer feedback for writing tasks

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'Criticism, like rain, should be gentle enough to nourish a man's growth without destroying his roots.'

Frank A Clark

Introduction

My interest in peer feedback started after attending a seminar focused on Professor John Hattie's project 'Visible Learning' (Hattie 2012). The project was conducted over 15 years across three continents and involved synthesising over 65,000 studies and over 800 meta-analyses, across all education sectors, with the aim to establish what strategies are the most effective to improve learning. Very high on that list is feedback. After I consulted the available literature more thoroughly, I realised that, in this context, 'feedback' refers to 'peer feedback'. Surprisingly, there is ample evidence that teacher feedback is, if not harmful, not very useful to students. This reflects my own and my colleagues' frustration that our students often seem to 'ignore' the feedback we provide to them. Lundstrom and Baker (2009) explain that teacher feedback often falls outside the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – the area of development where learners are ready for new stages of learning – but peer feedback is mostly within that ZPD, and students are more inclined and capable to apply that feedback. This article presents my experiences with facilitating peer feedback for writing tasks in an academic context.

Context and participants

UTS College (formerly known as UTS Insearch) is a pathway college attached to the University of Technology Sydney. UTS College delivers Academic English (AE) courses, Foundation Studies and several Diploma courses that articulate into UTS undergraduate courses. The new AE course, developed throughout 2020, is built on four pillars: learning outcomes, proficiency, authentic assessments, and 21st century skills. The overall purpose is to prepare students primarily for the English language demands, but also for the academic skills demands, of higher education. Successful completion of the AE Level 5 course, which I teach, guarantees direct entry to all UTS courses.

The student cohort in the first cycle of my research consisted of students from China, Indonesia, South Korea and Russia, while in the second cycle almost all students were from China, with one student from Saudi Arabia. The students in the two cycles were varied: one student was a PhD candidate, 11 students had enrolled in master's degree courses, and 13 students progressed into an undergraduate course. The two main areas of study were IT and Business, with only one or two students studying degrees in Education, Design, Event Management, Medical Science and Engineering. Due to the pandemic, the majority of students were located in their home countries, and courses were held live online. The platform used for course delivery was Canvas, and lessons were conducted via Zoom and Ringcentral.

Research focus and research questions

One significant feature of the new AE syllabus course is the emphasis on developing skills that will be utilised during the students' tertiary study, including research, tutorial discussion, self-directed learning and peer-assisted learning. A number of lessons, activities and material have been produced to aid the development of these skills. It is at the teacher's discretion how those are implemented.

While students usually see the value of developing these skills, it seems that the most controversial aspect is peer feedback. Unsolicited comments revealed that students were doubtful about a peer, possibly someone with less developed skills, examining their work and commenting on it. Class observations showed that peer feedback activities were often the most difficult to engage students in.

Endeavouring to better understand the students' hesitations and provide more engaging content, I posed the following questions:

1. What are the main obstacles to student engagement in the peer feedback process?
2. What systems can be put in place to support students when applying peer feedback?
3. How effective are these approaches?

Research design and data collection

I conducted the action research project over the course of two cycles, each lasting 10 weeks, applying Kemmis and McTaggart's cyclical model (1988, as cited in Burns 2010:7), where the process of planning, action, observation and reflection is applied and adapted based on the observations and findings from the previous cycle. I developed a number of activities to introduce peer feedback to students (see Appendix 1), including model peer feedback sessions, eliciting desirable behaviour and language needed to provide constructive feedback. This was followed by activities focusing on behaviour in groups (see Appendix 2) and templates to apply peer feedback (see Appendix 3). Based on feedback from Cycle 1, I developed some additional resources focusing on language used in peer feedback sessions. The intervention was conducted from Week 3 to Week 9. Throughout most sessions we stressed the relevance and importance of feedback, often referring to quotes like the one used at the beginning of this article. Students seemed to respond well to those quotes, so, even though it was not initially planned, I continued collecting them, and the students, without being prompted, started gathering relevant quotes from their cultures and sharing them with the class.

To better understand the students' attitudes towards peer feedback, I conducted a short survey using the Likert scale, at the beginning and at the end of the cycle, supplemented by semi-structured interviews, which allowed me to further probe some of the answers supplied in the survey. In order to establish how well the support systems and processes functioned, I asked the students to video-record some of their peer feedback sessions, one or two each week. I kept a journal where I noted the students' behaviour and comments after each such session. In addition to observing the students' behaviour, I also noted down my own reflections based on their interactions immediately after the peer feedback sessions.

To allow me to strengthen the data, enabling adoption of a more objective approach to data collection (Burns 2010:95), I analysed student writing samples prior to the intervention and after it, and I facilitated end-of-course reflections in which students recorded their opinions on several aspects of the course, including peer feedback.

Findings

Despite adjusting some of the lessons and material, and introducing a few new strategies related to peer feedback ones, the findings over the two cycles yielded very similar results and are discussed jointly.

The survey at the beginning and end of the intervention, complemented by a semi-structured interview and end-of-course reflection, generated some interesting results. The students' attitude towards peer feedback changed significantly. At the beginning of the course, only 12 out of 15 students completed the survey. This can be interpreted as a vote of no-confidence in the activity by those three students. Seventy per cent of students who completed the survey thought peer feedback was either very useful or useful. By the end of the course, all 15 students completed the

survey; 94% of them – all bar one – thought of peer feedback as useful. When asked to further elaborate, the students expressed apprehension about peer feedback at course commencement. One student remarked, 'I prefer to cooperate with those of similar level,' while another stressed, 'I don't like it when any members are passive.' At course conclusion, students were much more positive, with one student pointing out: 'I do have more time for speaking in breakout rooms.' Another remarked that he 'had to do it to believe it is useful.'

Due to curriculum constraints, I provided only one model of peer feedback implementation in the first cycle. However, students' feedback taught me not to rush the process and, in the second cycle, I provided a second model with reading and listening activities to be completed for homework. The students completed the activities more confidently. When we checked the exercises in class, one student commented, 'So, peer feedback is basically telling others what they did wrong?' It led to an interesting discussion on how students ascertain that something was wrong and how to convey that appropriately to their partner. I felt more confident that students had understood the nature and purpose of peer feedback.

Throughout the intervention, students were asked to video-record some of their sessions, a minimum of one each week. The recordings from the first few weeks were very difficult to watch. The students spoke very little, and most interactions were focused on the technicalities of the activity to be completed, such as negotiating how much time would be spent on Task 1, how much on Task 2, asking about email addresses, etc. One such example is an excerpt from a recording where one student's camera was switched off while the other student stared at the camera with knitted brows and a pursed mouth. After a period of quiet, where only the rustling of paper and clicking of the mouse could be heard, the student whose camera was on asked, 'So, yeah, we check the sentences, right?' The student whose camera was off did not reply immediately until his peer repeated the question. He then said, 'yeah, I think.' For the rest of the recording, no one spoke. In other recordings, students interacted more, but it was still largely transactional. 'Let me check the email,' 'how do I spell your name,' and 'do we read all sentences?' are typical examples from those recordings. I have to admit that I would have probably given up on these sessions had it not been part of my action research project.

However, the tide turned in Week 6. Later sessions show more interaction, interpersonal engagement and critique of the writing. The same two students mentioned above were engaging in constructive feedback in a recording from Week 7. Both cameras were on; there was even an occasional smile. 'You have a good topic sentences,' said the first student, whose camera had been switched off previously. The second student nodded before the first student added, 'but you need evaluation also.' I felt that my resilience and insistence on continuing with the activities had paid off.

Interestingly, in the first cycle, without being pre-taught, some of the more advanced students used hedging when pointing out mistakes. One such example is a student saying, 'hey, is this maybe the wrong tense?' or another student pointing out, 'this sentence looks a bit strange to me. I would probably make it into two sentences. What do you think?' This reminded me to pre-teach hedging and polite expressions in the second cycle.

While I only rarely entered breakout rooms when students critiqued each other's work, I was diligent in taking notes on their behaviour after they finished those sessions and re-entered the main room in Zoom (Figure 1). I recorded students' ad hoc unsolicited comments as well as my own observations of their behaviour and body language. Most students avoided making negative comments as they were aware that this pertained to my research. They restricted their negative comments to 'overwhelming,' and 'I'm not an expert – how can I be confident to provide feedback?'. I noticed one student in particular who did not comment on the activities in general. Only when she was paired with a seemingly weaker student would she make remarks like 'I'm not confident when I have to assess my peer's work.' Interestingly, she never made such comments when paired with a student she perceived as being better than her. The body language reflected their opinion better than any words – many students entered the main room with cameras off or with their heads hanging low. If looking straight ahead, their demeanour was serious, and their faces lacked any expression.
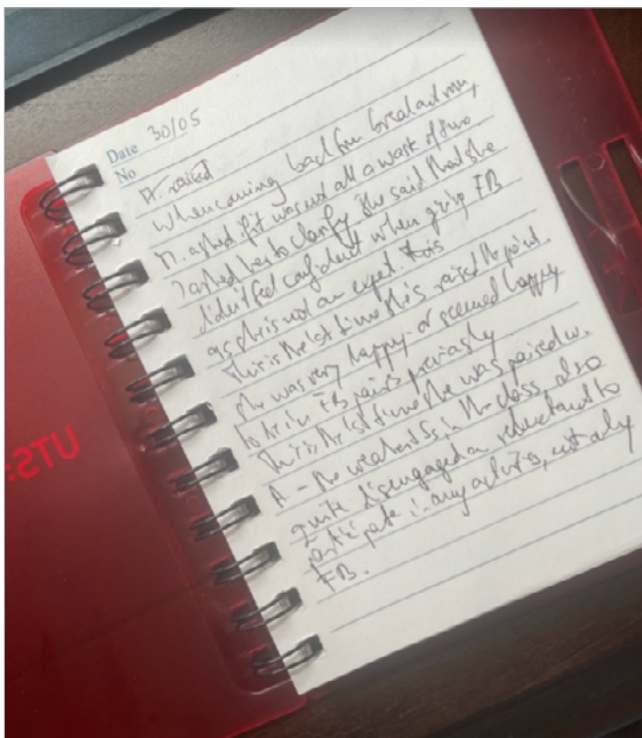

Figure 1: One journal entry after a peer feedback session

Their comments and body language changed enormously from Week 6 onwards. They became quite vocal and were happy to let me know how they realised some of their own mistakes while looking at their peer's writing. One student, for example, was so thrilled he could not contain his excitement and burst out, 'I make exactly the same mistake, exactly the same! But I never see it. Now I can see it!' This kind of reaction is confirmed in literature on peer feedback. Lundstrom and Baker (2009) found in their research that students providing feedback improved their own writing abilities more than those students receiving feedback. Similarly, Choi (2013:207) concluded in his research that 'the effects of providing peer feedback were assumed to be greater than receiving peer feedback.'

The triangulation process was somewhat impeded in the first cycle as I did not allocate enough time for collecting and analysing writing samples. I rectified this in the second cycle, and proceeded to analyse clause structure, tense, and word form, as well as referencing. There was an improvement in clause structure and word form, but it was unclear whether this was related to peer feedback. The relationship between peer feedback and improved referencing and citations is clearer. I proceeded using referencing practice activities as I had done in previous courses and the previous cycle but noticed a noticeable improvement in the students' work. The improvement could be clearly assigned to peer input.

The second triangulation exercise of collecting end-of-course reflections seemed the most insightful. The video-recorded course reflection (Figure 2) took place in Week 10, after all exams were completed and students were preparing for their graduation. I believe that students felt freer to provide more in-depth information on how they felt about this component of their course; they felt less inhibited about providing recommendations as to how those activities could be improved. The responses to the question 'what do you think about peer feedback?' could be summarised by the comment 'it is very useful.' Some chose to elaborate and gave recommendations. Those responses could be classified into three categories. The first, and largest, group mentioned how insecure they were when activities were of a general nature and recommended that all activities should be clearly structured, with a narrow definition of what was expected of the students. The second group of students explained how some students lacked the language to express their feedback and recommended more lessons spent on practising language used for feedback. The third group of students suggested having more, but shorter, peer feedback sessions, focused on one specific aspect. One such example mentioned by a student was, 'we need to practise more small tasks, for instance checking tenses in introduction of essay.'
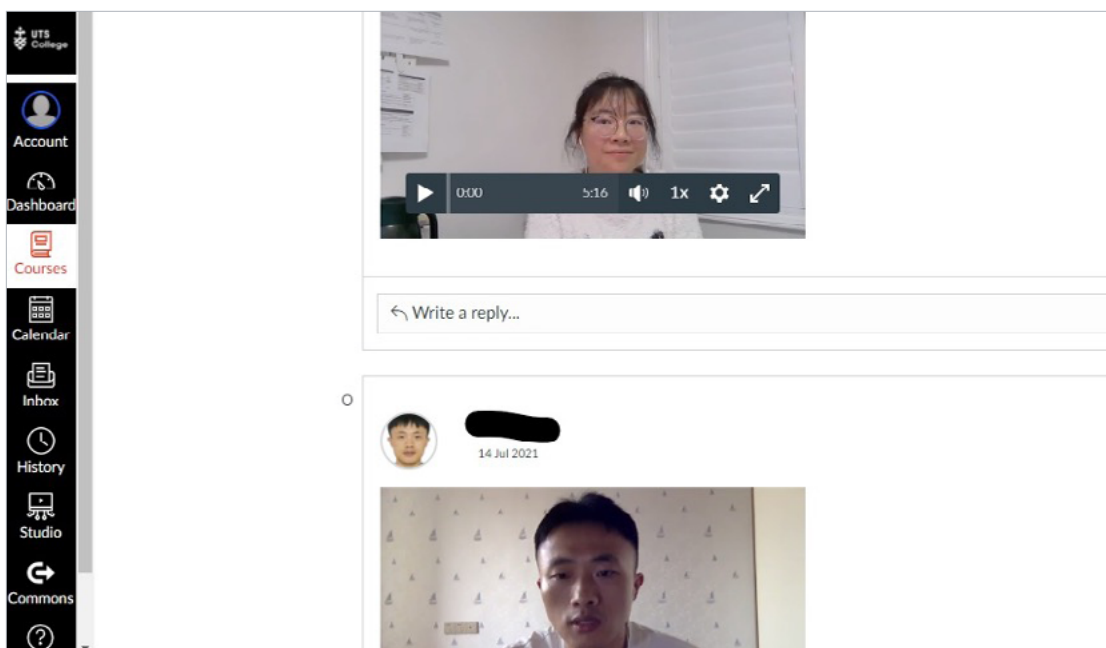
Figure 2: Screenshots of end-of-course reflection video recording

Discussion and reflections

The profile of my students in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 varied significantly, but the students' responses were quite similar. The major difference was that the students in the first cycle were more willing to provide feedback and needed less prompting. But when it came to their impressions of peer feedback, the responses were almost identical. The first theme that can be identified in their responses was focused on more scaffolding and practising before being expected to conduct peer feedback. Several stressed the need to have a checklist for each activity, pointing out, 'sometimes we forget about the criteria.'

This was interesting to me as I thought I had done a sufficient number of activities that allowed for practising the language, processes and structures needed for peer feedback. In terms of my own teaching practice, it makes me question how many times I have conducted activities under the false impression that I had done enough field building and practice/joint construction. It is a good reminder that I need to do more concept checking in my classes and ask for students' feedback more often, not just at the end of the course.

The second theme that emerged from the students' recommendations was related to requesting more specific instructions when peer feedback sessions were being organised. They particularly stressed the need for narrowing down the expected outcomes. One typical critique was 'I am in breakout room and don't know what to do' and a common recommendation was: 'tell us exactly what you want.' This is another reminder of the importance of concept checking.

However, my own observations revealed very different issues. I noticed how interaction and openness regarding critiquing a peer's work increased as the course progressed. My observation notes show how students said very little in the first sessions, regardless of how detailed the instructions were. Both the amount of feedback and quality of feedback increased over the weeks. My conclusions regarding this change are two-fold. Firstly, the need for students to feel comfortable in the classroom, to trust their teacher and their peers, cannot be stressed enough. Only with trust comes readiness to engage in activities that are not the stereotypical language classroom activities. Only when feeling comfortable with their surroundings are students prepared to open up and engage in risk-taking activities. Secondly, the more the course progressed, the more the students were confident in their own skills and abilities to provide valuable feedback. This confidence garnered a belief in the peer's feedback, increasing the value of such feedback.

Other learnings about my own practice from these two cycles were the need to be better organised, to record observations more meticulously and to structure all peer feedback activities more consistently. In addition, it is necessary to increase opportunities for students to familiarise themselves with the notion of peer feedback and give more examples of what is expected, as well as language that is desirable when providing feedback. Most importantly, though, it is vital not to skip activities and processes that build rapport, trust and belief in oneself and each other.

Conclusion

Although this research project involved a relatively small group of students, and the findings cannot be generalised, it is possible to answer the research questions posed with a certain degree of confidence:

1. What are the main obstacles to student engagement in the peer feedback process?

    The main obstacles could be divided into obstacles caused by teachers and those caused by students. Teacher-induced obstacles are related to vague instructions given to students without clearly defined outcomes, while student-generated obstacles are based on students' lack of confidence and hesitancy in taking risks.

2. What systems can be put in place to support students when applying peer feedback?

    The first obstacle can be rectified by making instructions very clear, narrowly defined with clear outcomes and expectations. The second is built over time by creating a safe environment in which students trust their teacher and peers and do not fear taking risks.

3. How effective are these approaches?

    The above findings show that such an approach – clearly defined expectations and instructions within an environment of trust – yield positive results for all. Rollinson (2005:29) concludes that 'by giving the students practice in becoming critical readers, we are at the same time helping them towards becoming more self-reliant writers, who are both self-critical and who have the skills to self-edit and revise their writing.'

It goes without saying that further research into this topic is needed before ascertaining any generalisations about peer feedback. However, I do feel confident enough to make the following general conclusions, that are not only applicable to peer feedback but, I feel, more generally in teaching practice:

1. The most important aspect for success in study is creating an environment of trust and safety.
2. When students are expected to achieve more, they will.

> ### 'Feedback is a gift. Ideas are the currency of our next success. Let people see you value both feedback and ideas.'
>
> Jim Trinka and Les Wallace

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Please click the following link to view the author's presentation at the 2021 English Australia Action Research in ELICOS Colloquium: https://youtu.be/qZRyX_dy5Ho

Appendix 1: Introducing peer feedback worksheet

A. Before reading the text

a. What are the steps to take when reading a long article?

b. Read title only:

What is this article about?

c. Read abstract:

What is this article about (more specific)?

d. Skim read:

What sections of the article should you read?

What sections should you not read?

B. While reading the text

a. Intro: first two paragraphs:

  i. Why do teachers focus on peer feedback?

  ii. What are some issues related to peer feedback?

  iii. When is peer feedback particularly effective?

b. Intro: Benefits of peer feedback for the reviewer

  i. What is usually not investigated in peer feedback research?

  ii. What is ZPD? Explain!

c. Intro: Need for L2 research

  i. What are the two main questions this research tries to answer?

d. General discussion

  i. What are the answers to above research questions?

  ii. Why?

C. What did you think of this text?

Appendix 2: Behaviour and attitudes in group/pair work

The success of a group/pair activity will depend on two factors – attitudes of the individual and attitudes of the group as a whole. Positive attitudes include helpful ways of thinking and behaving which make for a good discussion. Negative attitudes, on the other hand, are unhelpful and do not further the purpose of the discussion.

Look at the following attitudes and mark each of them as either positive or negative.

The student	Positive	Negative
1. Has previously thought about the topic		
2. Is willing to listen to others		
3. Never takes anything seriously		
4. Is willing to change her/his opinion		
5. Makes long speeches		
6. Is not afraid to say what she/he believes		
7. Will not give others a chance to speak		
8. Will talk to the teacher only		
9. Encourages other members of the group to speak		
10. Makes sarcastic remarks		
11. Is tolerant towards others' beliefs		
12. Expresses her/his opinion briefly		
13. Becomes easily angry or upset		
14. Will support good ideas from other group members		
15. Interrupts rudely		
16. Pretends to agree with the rest of the group, although she/he really does not		
17. Can relieve a tense or emotional situation with a joke		
18. Shows that her/his own comments relate to points other speakers have made		
19. Holds whispered conversations with her/his classmates		
20. Thinks that time spent on discussions is time wasted		

Appendix 3: Checking an essay – checklist

My name: _____

Partner's name whose essay I have checked:

_____

Step 1: Read the introduction.	
1. Does the introduction include background information, a preview of what follows and a thesis?	
2. Does the introduction address the instruction, topic and limiting words in the question?	
3. Does the thesis take a clear position on this topic?	
4. Has the position been defended with arguments?	
Step 2: Read the first and last sentences of each body paragraph.	
5. Does each body paragraph relate to the topic and link back to the thesis?	
6. Are the relationships between the paragraphs clearly expressed using transitions?	
Step 3: Choose one body paragraph for further analysis and carefully read the whole paragraph.	
7. Does the paragraph have a clear topic?	
8. Does the explanation clearly and completely support the topic?	
9. Has evidence been used to prove the ideas as facts?	
10. Does the paragraph present and rebut counter arguments to the writer's position?	
11. Does each sentence clearly follow on from the one before, using accurate linking expressions and pronoun referencing?	

Using ipsative assessment in teaching and learning English grammar through e-portfolios

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Research focus

Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Queensland Brisbane (TQB) is an established English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) provider that offers diverse language courses for onshore and offshore international students. This action research (AR) explored upper-intermediate students' perceptions, experiences, and evaluation of using e-portfolios for supporting grammar learning in a TQB ELICOS department. The research object was an ipsative assessment paradigm in English as a Second Language (ESL) education. The research subject was its practical implementation in the Australian TAFE context through the systematic use of Google Drive e-portfolios at the upper-intermediate level aimed at encouraging students' grammar development. We felt there was a need to explore ipsative assessment to promote grammar learning for all types of learners, in particular, those with learning differences. Grammar was perceived by many students as a boring aspect of language learning as its mastery implied dealing with memorising rules, language patterns, and multiple exceptions. Using ipsative assessment in teaching and learning English grammar aimed at shifting the focus from a burdensome grammar task to an outcome-focused culture.

Research theoretical framework

Ipsative assessment (Cattell 1944) is an innovative approach which refers to 'academic measurement based on intra-individual comparisons' (McLean and Chissom 1986:3), when students are encouraged to compete against themselves (Hughes 2014), monitor their ongoing academic progress (Sheridan 2015) and determine long-term perspectives of personal growth through learning (Brown and Knight 1998). This modern assessment method encouraged us as educators to refrain from comparing our students' academic performance to other people's responses, as in a norm-referenced assessment paradigm (Biggs 1999, Dunn, Morgan, O'Reilly and Parry 2004, Rust, Price and O'Donovan 2003), or assessing in accordance with pre-set standards, as in a criterion-referenced model (Le Brun and Johnstone 1994, Newble and Cannon 1989, Scarino 2005).

Grammar is a fundamental linguistic constituent which plays a pivotal role in any language teaching and assessment (Zain and Rohani 2007). According to Larsen-Freeman, grammar is a multi-dimensional construct, which comprises three important elements: 'morphosyntax, semantics, and pragmatics' (Larsen-Freeman 1997:2). Thus, while designing relevant grammar assessment tasks within a Communicative Language Teaching framework (Larsen-Freeman 1997) one must focus on the evaluation of the grammatical form, its meaning, and its actual use. We felt the need to incorporate grammar tasks that enabled learners to interact with thematic units, create hands-on artefacts and use grammar structures appropriately. According to Purpura's (2004) categorisation, grammar assessment tasks are classified into (1) 'selected response' (such as multiple-choice tests, discrimination tasks, or consciousness-raising tasks), (2) 'limited-production' (such as cloze exercises, short-answer tasks, sentence completion or dialogue-completion tasks), and (3) 'extended production tasks' (such as information gap tasks, role plays or simulation tasks). Extended production assignments are further categorised into three sets of activities: (1) 'performance-focused' (e.g., simulations, recasts, practice activities); (2) 'product-focused' (e.g., presentations, essays); and (3) 'process-focused' (e.g., observations, discussions, reflection activities).

E-portfolios allow students to demonstrate multi-dimensional grammar competence through collecting relevant digital artefacts (such as digital images, sketch notes, audio clips, video clips, cell phone recordings, web pages, etc.), and provide valuable learning experiences as they show 'the cumulative efforts and learning of a particular student over time' (McDonald 2011).

The teaching approach we took was grounded in pedagogies, educational psychology, and methodology. In terms of pedagogies and educational psychology, the research was based on Creative Pedagogy (Craft 2001) and Humanist Theory (Knowles, Holton and Swanson 1998). The Creative Pedagogy theoretical framework claims that creating innovative practices and novel classroom environments boosts learners' academic motivation and enthusiasm as well as encourages creative behaviour (Craft 2001). Humanist Theory emphasises the whole individual and their ability to learn through study, practice, and experience. It is a 'process by which behaviour is changed, shaped, or controlled' (Knowles et al 1998:13).

In terms of ESL methodology, the Critical Components theoretical framework (Staehr Fenner and Segota 2012) underpinned our research. It states that there are three critical components of the ESL pedagogical process: ESL teachers, ESL standards, and relevant assessment. The components constantly interact and significantly affect each other, creating necessary conditions for ESL academic achievements (Staehr Fenner and Segota 2012).

Organisational context

TAFE ELICOS classes are aimed at developing the skills and confidence necessary for everyday communication and travel, professional communication, and further studies at vocational or university levels, and are delivered in face-to-face, virtual synchronous, and online asynchronous delivery modes. The heterogeneous mix of ELICOS students at TAFE was predominately from the following countries: China, Japan, Brazil, Colombia, South Korea, Thailand, India, Taiwan, Spain, and Vietnam, and the typical age group was between 20 to 35 years. The participants in our research were four ELICOS upper-intermediate students studying virtually. They were a cross-cultural multi-age cohort from Japan, the Philippines, Argentina, and Indonesia. Two of the students were residing offshore, while the other two were living in Queensland. All of them had chosen a virtual method of English language learning. They were all digitally literate and their IT skills were at an average level.

Currently, the ELICOS program at TAFE relies on formative and summative assessment results for students to progress to the next-level classes. ELICOS educators at TAFE are required to use a criterion-referenced assessment model and evaluate their students' progress against a pre-determined set of standards. However, not every student can show progress through normative assessment types; thus, a new assessment approach was needed in the ELICOS department to support low achievers and students with special needs. We introduced a novel ipsative approach as a possible organisational solution that focused on intra-individual comparisons and enhanced the learning journey through building a growth mindset.

Research gap and research questions

Given that e-portfolios have been used in education for decades, it seems reasonable to expect a sizeable body of research to exist on how to apply them most efficiently and sustainably in the ESL classroom. Unfortunately, this has not proven to be the case. Firstly, although international students arrive in Australia with an array of learning and assessment experiences, receiving ipsative feedback through e-portfolios may be one way that has been least experienced by these students. Secondly, ipsative e-portfolios have the potential to develop students' multi-dimensional grammar competence, but an ESL classroom implementation plan has not been described in the research literature yet. Thirdly, a wide range of ELICOS students' assumptions about the benefits of e-portfolios is based on theoretical presuppositions of quality and potential effectiveness, rather than on empirical data drawn from a concrete ESL context.

Considering the specific context mentioned above, the following research questions arose:

1. What is the pedagogical plan for implementing a multi-phase ipsative assessment approach in the ESL classroom?
2. What are ELICOS upper-intermediate students' perceptions, experiences and evaluation of a multi-phase ipsative assessment teaching and learning approach in the ESL virtual classroom?

In our context, we hoped to initiate ground-breaking research that would continue a cycle of integrating e-portfolios as learning tools into the main ELICOS curriculum. We aimed to enhance students' learning journeys and provide professional development opportunities for colleagues.

Research design and plan

This AR project used a qualitative approach. Qualitative research methods investigate 'complex human-centered issues' (Webster and Mertova 2007) when the level of subjectivism is relatively high (Heale and Forbes 2013). This methodology enabled participants to share experiences and capture their voices (Creswell 2014). It also provided insights through student reflections on how e-portfolios supported the learning of grammar, in addition to concomitant learning of organisational, planning, and technological skills.

A single case study research analysis was chosen as an appropriate method for this project. It allowed for contextually specific and in-depth knowledge about particular academic issues by focusing on qualitative data gathered through various sources.

Data collection involved eight principal sources of qualitative data: fortnightly Testmoz[1] quizzes, fortnightly Smart Survey satisfaction questionnaires, systemic non-structured classroom observations, unstructured virtual classroom conversations, discourse analysis of verbal and written communication, reflective journals in Google Documents, weekly ipsative assessment planners, and progress checklists.

The ELICOS programme we developed was a 12-week learning process in a virtual class. We designed six blocks of 18 ipsative assessment tasks in total and linked them to the Cengage Life B2 course book (Dummett, Hughes and Stephenson 2012) and the current ELICOS curriculum. The ipsative assessment theme schedule comprised such topics as Getting to Know You, Relationships, Storytelling, Science and Technology, Art and Creativity, and Development. We created six blocks of themes with three ipsative assessment grammar tasks with gradually increasing difficulty levels: selected response, limited production, and extended production tasks. In order to facilitate instructional scaffolding, we created a Digital Weekly Planner (spark. adobe.com/page/0DdBA3yae3Ov4) with 33 Spark Pages (Spark Adobe), featuring extensive pedagogical instructions, ipsative assessment samples, and assessment

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1 Testmoz is a web tool that allows you to create auto-graded tests and quizzes.

checklists. This type of scaffolding was ideal for virtual teaching and learning, as it was practical and students followed the modelling to create their own artefacts.

Implementation, observation, and evidence of student progress

Firstly, we conducted diagnostic testing to identify students' grammar gaps, preferred learning styles, past experiences of assessment types, digital competency levels, and current technology acceptance views. Initial critical reflections helped us to design our project plan and incorporate ipsative assessment tasks into the existing ELICOS course curriculum. We also helped our students to set up their Google Drive e-portfolios and Google Docs as part of the orientation process.

We delivered the course book content in virtual synchronous and asynchronous teaching-learning modes. We designed each fortnightly thematic block as a sequence of subtasks or phases aimed at building hierarchical grammar skills. Learners' progression was followed through our observation journals, informal discussions, Testmoz quizzes, Smart Survey questionnaires, and self-reflective assessment tasks. The students were constantly encouraged to upload their digital artefacts into Google Drive e-portfolios. Our critical reflections allowed us to make some changes in getting students' feedback. As a result, we incorporated students' real voices into the project using a Vocaroo online recorder.

We reviewed the artefacts in the students' e-portfolios (An Ipsative Assessment Student's Journey, https://spark.adobe.com/video/jPx6FJuPOjfry) and collated the student feedback received through Testmoz quizzes, Smart Survey questionnaires, Vocaroo voice recordings, Google Docs reflection notes, blog posts, and social media messages during the 12-week term. We conducted a post-project Likert Scale Survey (see Table 1) to reveal overall satisfaction levels, shortlist activities the students had enjoyed most, identify technology that had enhanced the students' learning, and analyse their acceptance of the technology changes, which had taken place over time.

Table 1: Post-project Likert scale survey data

Students' perceptions, experiences and evaluation of implementing a multi-phase ipsative assessment approach in the ESL virtual classroom						
	1 - Strongly Disagree	2 - Disagree	3 - Neutral	4 - Agree	5 - Strongly Agree	Response Total
A. The assessment tasks were easy to understand.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	75.0% (3)	25.0% (1)	4
B. It was clear what the teacher expected of me.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	75.0% (3)	25.0% (1)	4
C. There were opportunities to ask the teacher questions about the assessment tasks.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (4)	4
D. I experienced a lot of technical difficulties.	0.0% (0)	50.0% (2)	50.0% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	4
E. I had enough time to complete the tasks.	0.0% (0)	50.0% (2)	0.0% (0)	50.0% (2)	0.0% (0)	4
F. I believe the ipsative assessment is good learning practice.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	50.0% (2)	50.0% (2)	4
G. I enjoyed my learning experience while completing the tasks.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (4)	0.0% (0)	4
H. The ipsative assessment tasks were useful for my language learning.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	75.0% (3)	25.0% (1)	4
I. The feedback I received on my work was sufficient.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	25.0% (1)	75.0% (3)	4
J. I would like to participate in ipsative assessment in the future.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0	25.0% (1)	75.0% (3)	0.0% (0)	4
K. My motivation has increased through the Ipsative Assessment journey.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	25.0% (1)	75.0% (3)	4
L. My engagement has increased through the Ipsative Assessment journey.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	25.0% (1)	75.0% (3)	4
M. My creativity has increased through the Ipsative Assessment journey.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (4)	4
N. I believe technology enhances language learning.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	75.0% (3)	25.0% (1)	4

We gave individual feedback on each student's ipsative assessment progress/process. Each student received our extended advice on how to improve his/her individual performance in the future. Peer feedback on Google Drive e-portfolios was encouraged.

Our findings

Our research participants found that they had reduced their fear of receiving poor assessment results. The educational focus shifted from mistakes and errors to such metrics as students' feedback responsiveness, self-reflection, autonomy, academic sustainability, cultural sensitivity, creativity, personal commitment, and accountability. They enjoyed and managed ipsative assessment tasks regardless of external (pandemic restrictions or family circumstances) or internal (different technology acceptance mindsets or diverse academic abilities) challenges. An outcome-focused culture prevailed.

In terms of students' technology acceptance mindsets, they easily adapted as their confidence in technology increased. All four participants believed that the use of technology enhanced their language learning. They familiarised themselves with an array of programs; Spark Adobe, CANVA, Toonme, Reface, Bitmoji, Testmoz, YouTube, and Power Point. They particularly enjoyed creating comic strips, photo collages, blog posts, silent movies, and YouTube videos. All four participants agreed on the fact that they had enjoyed their learning experiences while completing the ipsative assessment tasks and three participants wanted to participate in ipsative assessment in the future, as they found it useful for their language learning. Some participants' quotes are presented below (comments are unedited to maintain authenticity).

> *Ipsative assessment tasks help me learn English a lot! The first grammar task is always easy to deal with. The second task stretches me. The third task is always challenging for me. It is challenging and fun to learn this way. I prefer not to change anything about my class. (Participant 1)*

> *This is the first time I create something in English! Last week it wasn't as easy as I thought. These tasks require computer skills, English skills, and creativity. I love the feeling of accomplishment in the end. (Participant 2)*

Pedagogical reflections

Overall, our research revealed ipsative gains made by the students during the 12-week term. The initial impressions of the introduction of ipsative assessment were highly positive. Of particular note was how readily accepted this novel assessment approach was among the student cohort and how easy and reliable the weekly tasks were to set up and monitor. In addition to the anticipated benefits for the students in terms of their retention of the course material, the gradual implementation of ipsative assessment tasks gave us as ELICOS teachers a meaningful real-time indicator of students' responsiveness to pedagogical feedback and follow-up educative instructions. Besides that, all four students improved their macro skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing during the process of

drafting and submitting the 'best' final versions of ipsative assessment tasks to the e-portfolios. Furthermore, there was a noticeable increase in development of organisational, planning, and technological skills as well as the students' cumulative efforts in learning through the multi-phase grammar tasks. Learning engagement was evident from the successful submission of tasks into students' Google e-portfolios.

A number of recommendations/insights arise from our research. Firstly, ipsative assessment is not simply a replacement for forms of normative assessment; it is a supplementary instrument targeted at increasing academic performance and supporting other assessment formats by enhancing students' motivation, engagement, and personal accountability as well as facilitating the retention of key course milestones via completing alternative tasks. Ipsative assessment can only be as effective and engaging as the quality of the tasks it consists of. The implementation of ipsative assessment involved utilising weekly-planned digital Spark Pages with sample ipsative artefacts designed by us.

High levels of pedagogical commitment, involvement, and consistency are required to guarantee the project viability. The educator must invest a lot of effort into communicating academic wins for the students, retaining the initial interest in the ipsative assessment approach, stimulating students' curiosity, and forming exploratory behaviour.

Any organisational fluidity, such as that produced by the pandemic, produces a destabilizing influence on the educational process. For instance, rotating teachers or adding new students to an existing class in a virtual delivery mode might lead to academic frustration, procrastination, or procedural chaos. Organisational flux and instructional diversity shift the focus from what is originally required and interfere with the overall students' experiences. Ipsative assessment success greatly depends on teacher-student relationships and emotional bonds; this type of assessment is more effective with one main class teacher or a maximum of two co-teachers (a pedagogical partnership). Teachers and students must have similar technology acceptance mindsets (Davis 1986) which greatly impact their individual intentions to utilise technology, and anticipations about its perceived ease of use and potential usefulness.

Our experience of conducting this cycle of research has encouraged us to consider a second cycle. Since we will continue to work in this workplace, we also hope to include other teachers who can join with us to guide new students in their learning of e-portfolio use for ipsative assessment.

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Please click the following link to view the authors' presentation at the 2021 English Australia Action Research in ELICOS Colloquium: https://youtu.be/qZRyX_dy5Ho

Formative speaking assessment: Beginning with story

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Introduction

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

Context and participants

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

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

Table 1: Participant information

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

*Students participated in both cycles

Research focus

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

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

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

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

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

Research design

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

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

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

Table 2: Cycle 1 – 'My Language Journey'

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

Table 3: Cycle 2 – 'Arriving in Australia'

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

Data collection

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

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

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

Findings

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

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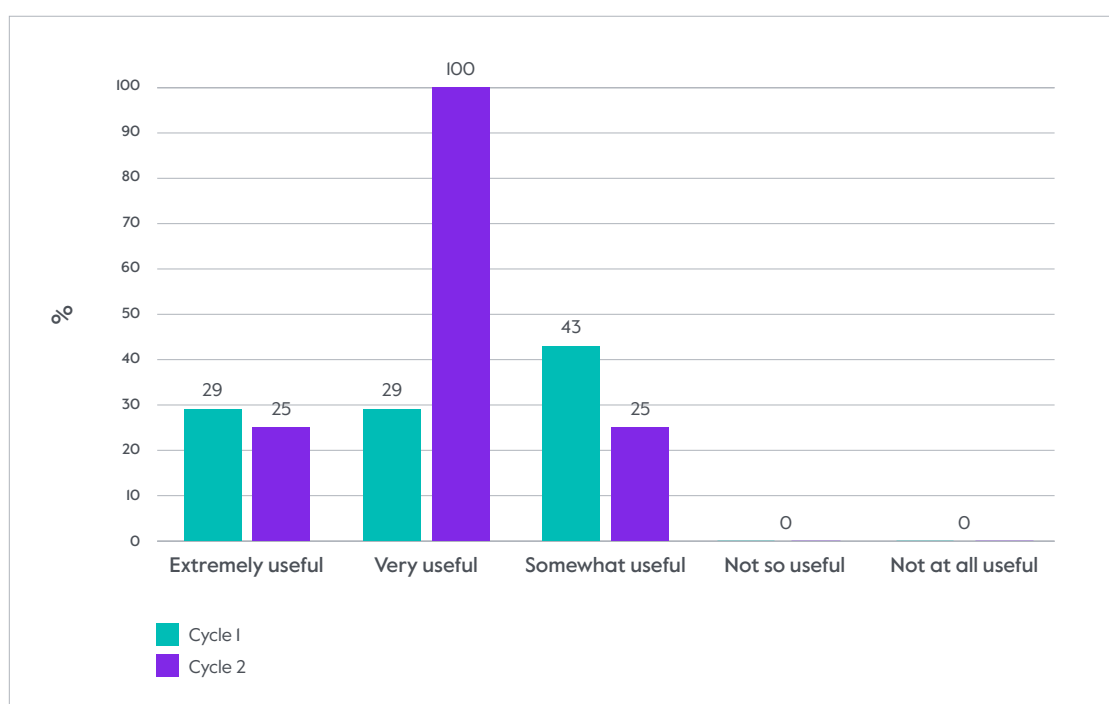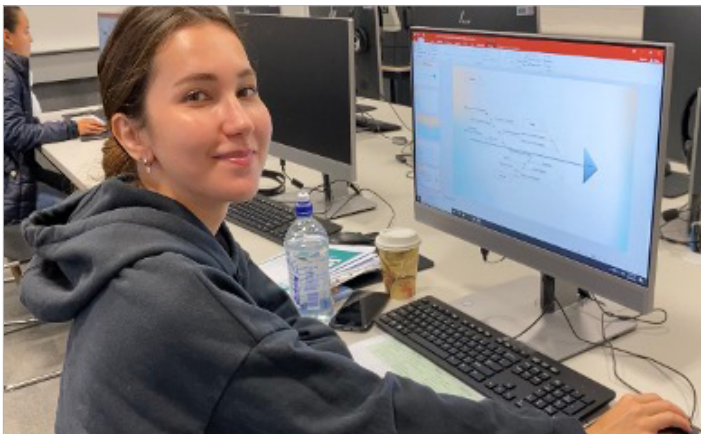

Figure 1: Survey Cycles 1 and 2 – usefulness of CW activities
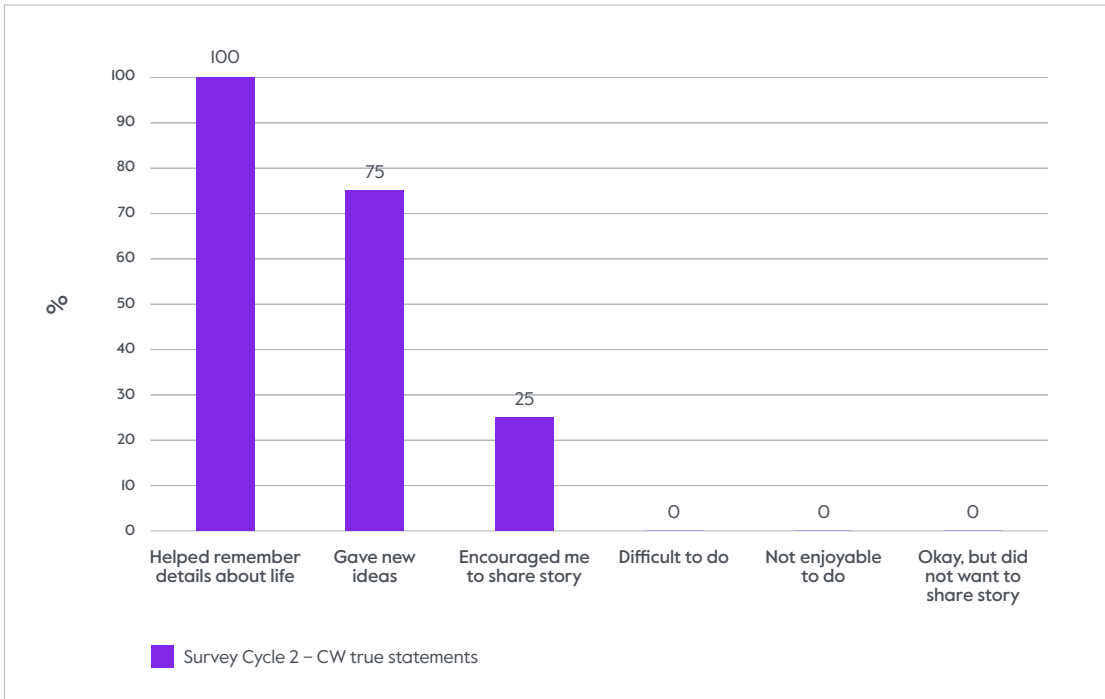
Figure 2: Survey 2 – CW statement responses

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


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

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

As seen in Figure 4, survey responses from both cycles reported that students viewed the timeline activities positively.
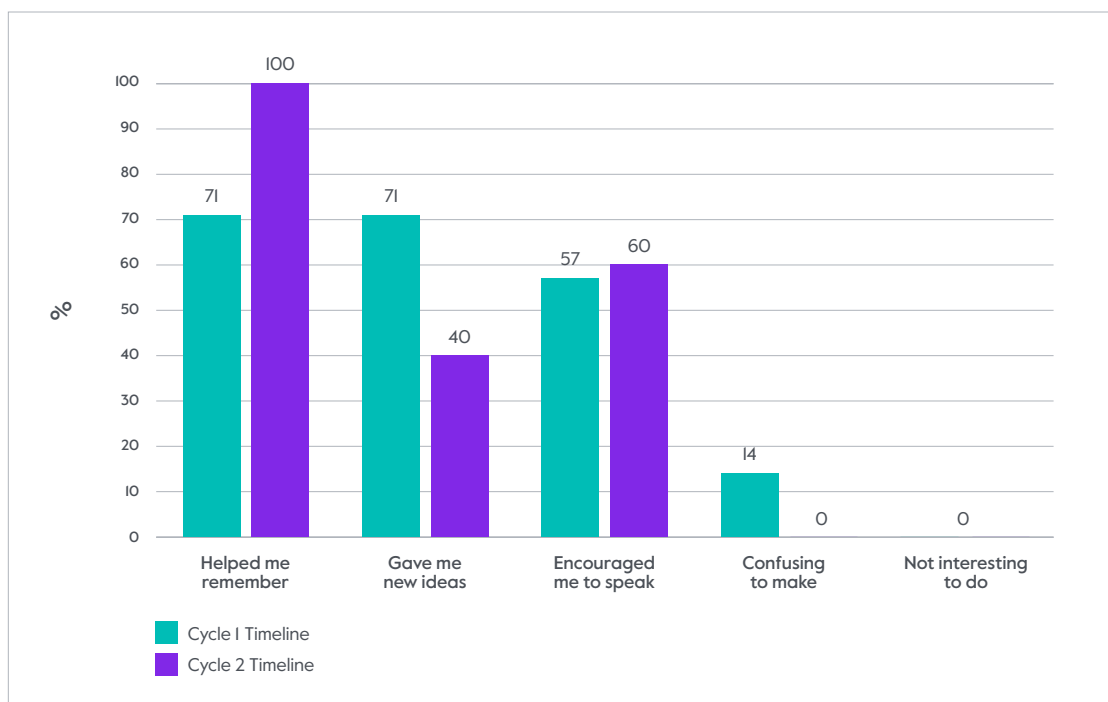
Figure 4: Survey Cycles 1 and 2 – Timelines

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

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

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

Table 4: Student 2 (S2) assessment scores

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

Table 5: Student 6 (S6) assessment scores

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusions and reflections

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

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Appendix I: Timeline samples

MY LANGUAGE JOURNEY

Year	Which Language?	Event
2001	Vietnamese	I was born in VietNam
2012	Vietnamese	Went to Karate school in VietNam
2016	Vietnamese	Became a karate teacher
2018 (2-3)	English VietNamese	Travelled to Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore
2018 (7-12)	English	Moved to Australia for studying
2019	English Chinese	Went to high school
2021	English VietNamese Chinese	Moved to Perth for studying Uni
2013	VietNamese	First time had a gold medal and had a small injury

Arriving in Australia – Timeline

Before	Arrival	Now	Future
• How did you feel about leaving home? • How did you plan your journey? What did you have to do?	• How did you feel? • What do you remember about the day? • What did you see/hear/smell/taste that was different?	• How do you feel? • Are you enjoying life in Australia? • What are you not enjoying about living in Australia?	• Do you have plans for the future? • Will you be living in Australia? If no, where will you be living?
I felt confidence. I had a plan for future	I had a mixed emotions. It was absolutely new life. I've changed my family, my home, my language and my future	Now my confidence a little bit come back to me, not completed, but better then when I come to Aus.	Australia taught me don't build any plans. Just doing anything that are you own and after see how is working.
Job, master, make a career. Maybe studied in Cath republic	When I arrived I was really quite. I didn't knew what I must exist. If honestly I come not to A.	I started feeling myself confidence, when O my husband leave me alone for 7 month. I understood that all of depends for me. Now I feeling what	I not sure where I will be living, but now I'm here and it's okay.
I have had a promising job. But after mating with my	I come in first reaction to my husband, and I warning about Hierforeal for me. He design our new flat. But only after 3 weeks started understood what happened	I can exsist everywhere. This 7 month self life was defenately important for me. I thankful to Aus. for experience.	
future husband I became change my behave	I was really frustrated, I constant at at home, because I really afraided went outside.		

Sue Watson May, 2021

Appendix 2: *Indicators of engagement

Indicators	Task evidence Cycle 1	Task evidence Cycle 2
Conducive learning atmosphere	MM, CW, RSR1, RSR2, WPR, SPA, TI, SU1, PI	MM, CW, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU2, GD
Group cohesiveness	SU1, SPA, PI, GD	JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Expectation of success	SPA, TI, SU1, PI	SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Attractiveness of tasks	MM, CW, SR1, SR2, WPR, PI, SU1	MM, CW, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, GD
Active task participants	MM, CW, SR1, SR2, WPR, SPA, TI, SU1, PI	MM, CW, SU2, JWR1, JRW2, SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Tasks performed in a motivating way	MM, CW, SR1, SR2, WPR, SPA, TI, SU1, PI	MM, CW, SU2, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Regular experiences of success	MM, CW, SR1, SR2, WPR, SPA, TI, SU1, PI, GD	MM, CW, SU2, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Regular encouragement	MM, CW, SR1, SR2, WPR, SPA, TI, SU1, PI	MM, CW, SU2, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Cooperation among participants	SPA, TI, SU1, PI, GD	MM, CW, SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Promotion of learner autonomy	MM, CW, SR1, SR2, WPR, SPA, SU1, PI, GD	MM, CW, SU2, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU3, GD
Increase learner satisfaction	SR2, WPR, SPA, TI, SU1, PI, GD	JW2, SPA, PI, SU3, PI, GD
Offer rewards in a motivational manner	MM CW, SR1, SR2, WPR, SPA, TI, SU1, PI	MM, CW, SU2, JWR1, JWR2, SPA, PI, SU3, GD

*Adapted from Dörnyei (2001)

Key

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

Implementing an integrated skills test in a Direct Entry project

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Introduction

Testing for language proficiency in Direct Entry (DE) pathway programs at the English Language Programs (ELP) at Macquarie University College (MQC) has long included discrete writing, reading and listening tests. Despite their longstanding presence, the assessment team recently considered whether discrete item tests provide the most effective method to assess students' language proficiency. Reasons for this include the need to assess the specific skills taught in the course and for assessments to reflect how language is used in real-world contexts. Therefore, they began to analyse other methods of assessment. As a result of this examination, the assessment team decided that discrete item tests would no longer be used as the final assessment in Direct Entry and an integrated skills test would be implemented. This test would require students to use reading, listening, and writing skills together. One reason for the implementation of integrated skills testing is that, in comparison to testing skills in isolation integrated skills testing can provide opportunities for more authentic assessment and provide more developed insights into student performance, which are transferable to the real world (Plakans 2012:249). A further possible benefit is that washback from integrated skills testing can also allow for the development of more relevant linguistic skills than those developed by traditional test items, such as multiple-choice and gap fill questions (Cheng, Watanabe and Curtis (Eds) 2004). In addition, Read (2015:186) argues that discrete assessment does not consider the fact that 'actual academic language use tasks routinely involve combinations of skills'. Despite these benefits, there are potential challenges in relation to the design, introduction and teaching of integrated skills testing, such as resistance from stakeholders accustomed to discrete test types, rubric design, and standardisation of scores.

Research focus

In 2020, I had been part of the team that redeveloped Direct Entry and in 2021 was part of the team implementing the new assessment. I saw this change in assessment as an interesting opportunity to understand the perceptions of integrated skills testing of stakeholders, the assessment team, teachers, and students. I was also interested in analysing the process of implementing a new assessment task. Such a significant change in assessment provided a unique opportunity to examine and understand how teachers and students can be supported through the process.

My research addressed the following questions:

- How do key stakeholders view integrated skills testing to assess English language proficiency?
- How can the ELP best support teachers and students during the implementation of a new assessment task?
- What impact does the test have on the classroom and students' preparation for tertiary study?

Participants and context

Direct Entry is a 10-week course which runs twice a year. It is an alternate pathway for entry to tertiary study and prepares students for university by developing academic language and literacy skills. In the first five weeks of Direct Entry, students work on building listening and reading skills relevant to the integrated skills test. The integrated skills test is introduced in Week 6 of the course. There is a formative feedback task in Week 7 and students receive a marked rubric and detailed comments. They complete the final summative assessment in Week 9.

Previously, the final assessments were a discussion essay and discrete item listening and reading tests with questions and texts on topics taught in the course. The new test requires students to read a short text, listen twice to a short lecture and then write a discussion essay using Harvard referencing. The question format is similar to the following:

> **Task instructions**
> You will read a passage on the topic of X and then listen to a short lecture on the same theme.
> Use your notes from the reading and the lecture to answer the following question.
> Discuss the benefits and limitations of X and provide your own opinion in the conclusion.

In the course delivery in which the research took place, there were four classes each with 18 students. This was lower than usual due to COVID-19 border closures. This smaller number of classes meant that a change in assessment was more manageable. All classes were taught online. Most students studied for the entire 10 weeks; however, a small number of students joined the classes for the last five weeks as they had higher entry scores. The majority of students were on pathway to Master's degrees at MQC and had a required entry score of IELTS 6.5 with a minimum band score of 6.0.

Data collection

I used focus groups, interviews, surveys and content analysis. Before the course began, I conducted a focus group with five ELP teachers. At the time of the focus group, it had not been confirmed if these teachers would be teaching on the Direct Entry course. I aimed to find out about teachers' awareness of and views on integrated skills tests. In this focus group, I did not ask questions about the exact assessment task to be used and focused on integrated skills testing in general. Shortly before the test was first introduced to the students, I conducted a second focus group with the five teachers who were teaching on the course, one of whom had attended the previous group. I again asked about awareness of integrated skills testing but also focused on the format of the specific test that would be used in Direct Entry. At different points in the course, I interviewed the three members of the assessment team to understand the reasons why the test was implemented and the process of development. I was especially interested in the development of the rubric and the format of the test. For reasons explained below, I surveyed 46 students using Qualtrics after the final grades were released. I asked about their views on the test and how they felt taking the test. After the course ended, I interviewed four of the teachers who taught on the course and the course coordinator.

Course content changes

With the change to an integrated skills test, the following changes needed to be made to the course content:

• removal of most discrete item listening and reading activities (especially gap fills)

• increased emphasis on note-taking techniques for both listening and reading

• increased emphasis on paraphrasing and summarising.

I made relevant changes to the content for Weeks 1 to 5 prior to the commencement of Direct Entry. The changes to Weeks 6 to 9 were completed by the assessment team based on the design of the test. The desired outcome of the changes was that students be well placed to identify the main ideas and distinguish the key ideas of listening and reading texts, to enable them to use those ideas in the integrated skills test.

The existing course content already had a reasonable emphasis on note-taking, summarising and paraphrasing, so the changes to Weeks 1 to 4 were less onerous than expected. The approach I took was to simplify some of the early listening gap fills but leave them in place, as they now represented basic scaffolds of good note-taking practice. As the weeks passed, and the students built up their note-taking abilities, the gap fills were stripped right back and eventually eliminated, replaced with decreasingly scaffolded note taking activities.

I also added more paraphrasing activities and summary writing activities as the course proceeded. The paraphrasing encouraged students to use their own words to convey ideas, while the summary writing enabled students to think explicitly about writers' and speakers' ideas and how to convey them. I had initially expected that I might need to add some listening or reading texts to the course content, but close examination of the existing texts revealed that they were suitable – in terms of number, level of complexity, and topics – without any additions.

Findings

Assessment team views

The assessment team gave three clear reasons for the change to an integrated skills test. Firstly, it is a more valid and practical way of assessing English proficiency. One member of the assessment team stated that 'integrated skills testing [offers] more cognitive validity because of those mental processes that people have to go through'. Secondly, there were also concerns around academic integrity breaches in the existing tests especially since the move to online teaching. This was due to a variety of features of the tests, including the ability to share answers more easily to discrete item questions and the lack of ability to see when answers had been shared. A member of the team stated 'they can use tools to transcribe … so it ends up being probably a reading test rather than listening test … the test is not valid anymore, they can easily share answers'. Finally, practical concerns around the time needed to develop test versions were also a key driver to the move to integrated skills testing as discussed here: 'I've been involved in test development, and I know how long it takes to develop those tests [discrete item tests] and it's you know it can be up to 100 hours per test if you're doing it properly.'

Teachers' views

Initial focus groups showed that none of the teachers had ever taught on a course with an integrated skills test. This lack of exposure possibly influenced the views around integrated skills testing and the support needed throughout the course. Teachers reported strong concerns about the integrated skills test. Whilst any new assessment and course change can cause challenges for teachers, the level of anxiety that presented itself in the focus group was unexpected. It may have been influenced by the number of other changes that had occurred over the year in international education and the long period of online teaching.

The main concern before the test delivery related to students failing the task, and thus the course, due to a weakness in one area (writing, reading or listening). The primary concern was around students with weak listening skills who would miss the content of the lecture and not be able to write the essay. Comments included (comments are unedited to maintain authenticity):

I think the students who have poor listening skills will be disadvantaged.

We have six students [in a class of 18] that will probably fail because of the weighting.

There were also concerns that students did not have sufficient paraphrasing and referencing skills. Teachers were particularly worried as they were now being asked to use these skills in a test environment as described here:

In terms of paraphrasing it does take a lot of time for our students who are quite low in using synonyms or academic language to be able to paraphrase.

Finally, in contrast to the assessment team view, teachers stated that the integrated skills test would make it easier for students to copy, use transcription or cheat in other ways, as in this comment:

Because if you're asking our students at this level, to paraphrase in your time limit this is like tempting them to open something to help themselves.

As a result of this concern, we implemented a number of features. These included:

- a short video for teachers and students explaining the reasons for the implementation of the test
- an extra meeting to discuss the rubric with teachers
- extra support around marking time to discuss how to best approach scoring this style of assessment.

Teachers' views at the end of Direct Entry were radically different to those at course commencement. Despite initial concern about a weakness in one skill area significantly impacting on the whole task, in the post-course interviews teachers reported that this was not the case, as this quote illustrates:

I was very concerned about you know, three or four students who are really, really weak in listening... the rubric allowed for this not to fail them for the whole task.

Teachers also stated that there was a lower number of academic integrity breaches in this test compared to the previous style of test used. A Direct Entry teacher reported that:

It limits instances of external plagiarism. Students don't ... google, the topic and find sentences that are not their own and use them in a test.

In the post-course interviews, teachers reported that after the experience of teaching and marking the integrated skills test, they believed that the test was useful to prepare students for their tertiary study. Comments from teachers included:

Identifying the main ideas. I think that's very, very helpful for them. That's what they're actually going to do later on when they go to uni.

We are allowing the students to focus on the skills that they really need for uni so skills like paraphrasing …

A number of factors contributed to this change in opinion for the integrated skills test. Firstly, the implementation of extra support mechanisms provided essential information and assistance to build teacher knowledge of and confidence in integrated skills testing. In addition, the process of marking and scoring the feedback task lowered teacher anxiety as they saw that students had the skills to complete the task successfully. Finally, the process of teaching the content provided and seeing the assessment task showed teachers that the course content appropriately supported students to complete the integrated skills task.

Teachers also reported that they greatly appreciated the opportunity to contribute to the development of the assessment and course content. They provided feedback on a criterion of the rubric that they found difficult to score as it required teachers to quantify main ideas. The assessment team made changes based on this feedback. This helped build teacher confidence in the task and in the rationale behind the task.

Student views

Initially, I planned to survey students at the beginning of the course and at the end of the course to ascertain their views of this form of testing and to see how they changed over the delivery. However, due to the views of the teachers and the level of anxiety expressed in the focus group, I decided not to survey the students at the beginning of the course as I did not wish to contribute to this anxiety. Therefore, a clear comparison and contrast of how the views changed is not possible.

To attempt to understand how students felt when they were first told about the integrated skills test, I asked the teachers in the final interviews. Comments from teachers show that they felt that students were worried when the integrated skills test was introduced.

There were many questions, so I can sense that they were concerned. I don't think they understood the concept really well at the beginning.

I think my main concern was that the students at the very beginning were stressed.

The students' views of integrated skills testing also evolved over the delivery of the course. Surveys at the end of the course (Figure 1) showed that students believed the integrated skills test was a suitable way to test all three skill areas, as shown by these quotes:

I was so excited to write what I understand from listening and reading. Also, I was not struggling to find ideas, it provided my content from listening and reading. Therefore, it makes writing easier to explain and support ideas.

*It was testing my all-round learning ability.*
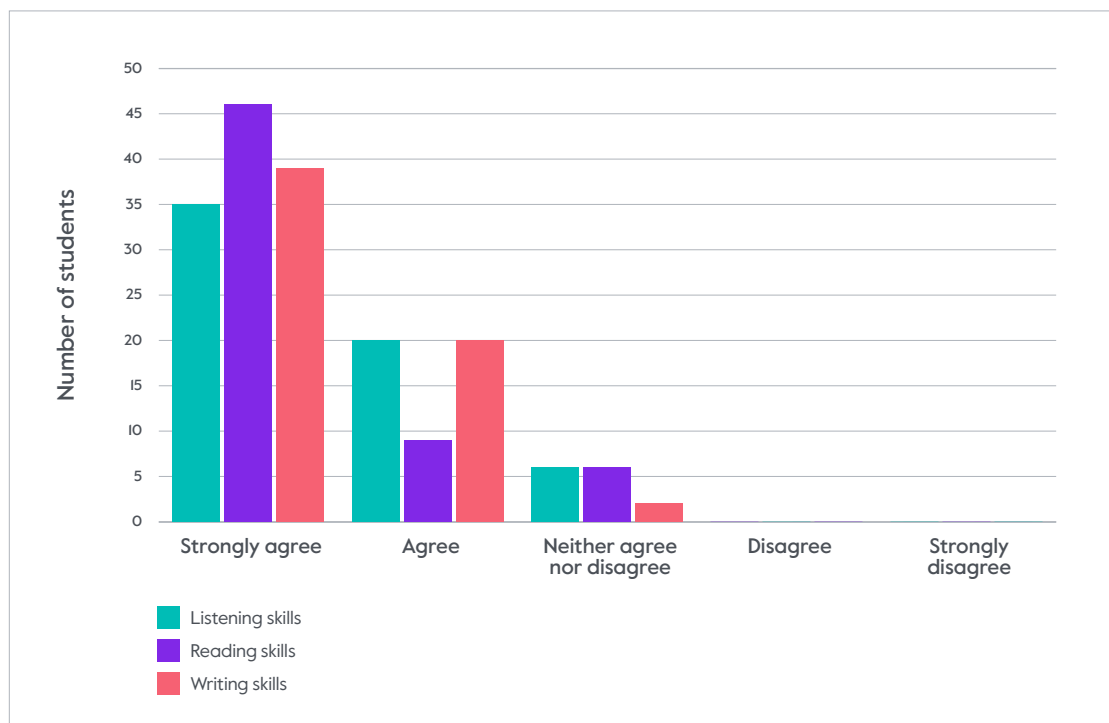
Figure I: The integrated skills test is suitable to assess my reading/ writing/listening skills

Students also believed that the integrated skills test was helpful in preparing them for university as evidenced by these quotes:

It will be useful for me, because I notice that I need to use those skills in the university in the future.

The integrated skills test is an excellent way to help students improve their English skills that are necessary for future studies in university.

The majority of students agreed that the test was helpful for preparing them for university as seen in Figure 2.
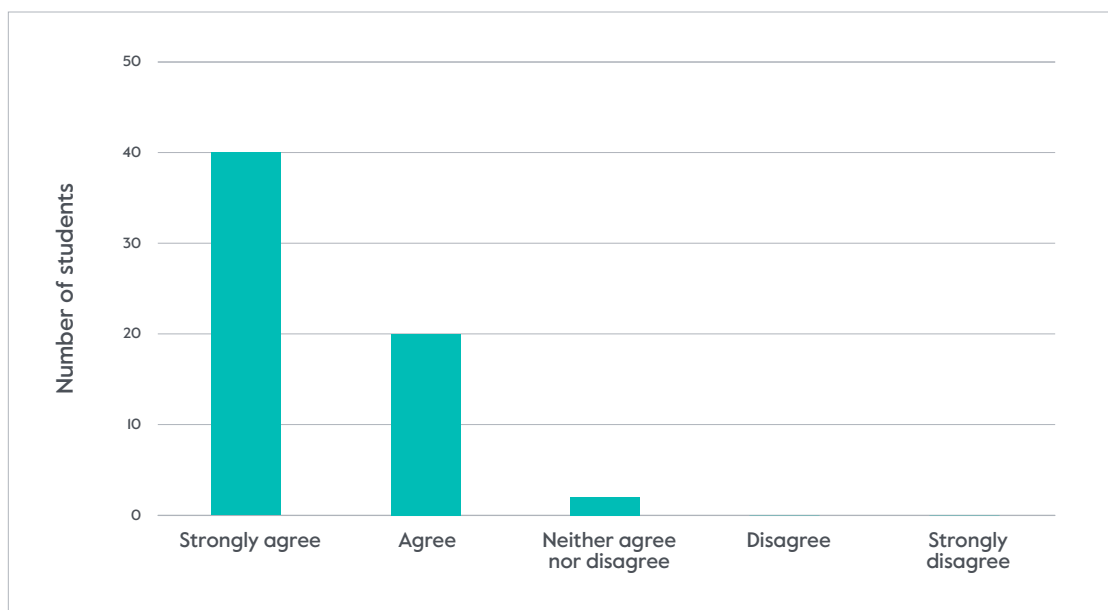
Figure 2: The integrated skills test is useful for helping me prepare for university

Marks analysis

I completed an analysis of the marks for the feedback and final tasks. The highest number of fails in both the feedback and final tasks were in the Language Accuracy criterion. Whilst there was some improvement, this was slight. Other areas of concern in the feedback task were in relation to Academic Style. There were a comparatively high number of fails in Formal Style, Attribution and In-text Referencing. All these three criteria showed a lower number of fails in the final task; however, they were still relatively high. Another area that students struggled with was the Introduction and Conclusion.

Areas which are most strongly linked to the content of the lecture and reading, such as Addressing the Task and Development, showed a lower number of fails. This is interesting due to the initial concerns that a low level of listening skills would negatively impact on students' grades. If students did not understand the listening text, then it would most likely show in these two areas with a lack of ability to address the task and a lack of development.

The initial fear of a higher level of plagiarism also did not eventuate. There was a lower number of academic integrity breaches than in previous deliveries with discrete item testing.

An analysis of the marks shows a need for a continued and extended focus on paragraph structure, in-text referencing and academic skills. These are not areas that I focused on when I added content before the delivery as I focused more on listening and paraphrasing skills. The need for more content and student support in these areas was also highlighted by teachers in interviews after the completion of the course.

Conclusions and moving forward

Overall, teachers and students came to view the integrated skills test positively and stated that it helped prepare for tertiary study. However, there were opportunities for improvement in a number of areas of its implementation. Earlier and clearer communication on why the test was being implemented and its benefits could have lowered teachers', and subsequently students', anxiety.

The research project clearly reinforced the need to support teachers consistently and practically throughout the implementation of a new assessment task. Proactively developing support materials to educate and support teachers is key to a smooth introduction of a new test.

Teachers stated that further practice opportunities were required as these were the main support mechanism to allow for success in the test. A second feedback task would be difficult to incorporate due to timing and marking load; however, other forms of practice related to specific skills required to complete the task, such as shorter listening tasks, paraphrasing, referencing, or synthesising, could be employed.

A key theme raised throughout the research process was that teachers greatly appreciated having input into the assessment development process. An example is that during an analysis of the rubric, teachers commented that it was difficult to grade how many main ideas the students included. Therefore, this area of the rubric was altered. This ability to contribute to the development of the rubric fostered confidence in the assessment task amongst teachers.

Teachers reported that they found the integrated skills test more time consuming to grade accurately than the previously used discrete tests. This was to be expected due to the need to check paraphrasing and use of sources. In future, professional development and guidance on the marking process could help alleviate any marking burden on teachers.

Professionally, the action research project showed me how changes in a course can impact teachers in unexpected ways. As a curriculum developer, it is important to factor this into the roll out of courses and assessments. Timing and communication are also key to the successful implementation of new courses and assessment.

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Towards a peer feedback scaffold

Paola Clews, Centre for English Teaching (CET) + The Learning Hub, The University of Sydney

Introduction

Peer feedback has become an important part of formative assessment in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses aiming at developing the writing, speaking and collaboration skills of students (Hislop and Stracke 2017). As such, language teachers are aware of its benefits for students and learning. However, when it comes to practical recommendations as to how to set up peer feedback activities most effectively, it is generally up to individual teachers' discretion.

This project was born from the need to find a way to make the most out of peer feedback as a learning opportunity. Since peer feedback is about student autonomy, what can teachers do to empower students to provide better feedback and hence support each other's learning? What tools can we provide our students with to undertake this task effectively? My aim in this research project was to lay the foundations for a peer feedback scaffold model to support my teacher colleagues in setting up peer feedback activities to better support learning. I wanted this scaffold to also help improve students' understanding of peer feedback and develop student-friendly peer feedback tools.

Context and participants

This research was carried out at Centre for English Teaching (CET) + The Learning Hub with students from the Direct Entry course (DEC 10). DEC 10 is a 10-week university pathway course that prepares international students for their university studies by developing their language and critical thinking skills. At the end of the course, passing students are recommended to continue their university studies at

the University of Sydney. The curriculum has been written in-house based on real-life problems (such as climate change) as well as authentic materials. Skills are highly integrated (reading/listening to write and reading/listening to speak). At Weeks 4 and 8, students take in-class writing assessments based on real university tasks. Scores for these tasks are very important towards overall assessment. Before both assessment instances, students provide and receive peer feedback on practice writing pieces using a rubric based on the one teachers use to mark the assessments. As preparation, students are provided with the rubric and a past writing sample to practise on before they provide feedback on their classmates' work.

The research was carried out in two cycles. The first cycle had 18 participants. Sixteen were receiving online instruction in their home countries, and two were receiving their course online while based in Sydney. Sixteen were Chinese, one was Thai and one was Saudi. Their ages ranged between 20 to 28 years old. There were seven female and nine male students. The second cycle included 14 participants, one of whom was based in Melbourne; the rest were receiving online instruction from their home countries. All of the participants were from mainland China and their ages ranged between 20 to 29 years old. There were eight female students and six male students.

Research focus

This project aimed at researching these questions:

1. Can a checklist support students as a tool to provide peer feedback?
2. To what extent are students able to provide each other with practical feedback?
3. To what extent is peer feedback used for revision?

Intervention

The intervention (scaffold) was based on training activities recommended by Berg (1999) as cited by Hislop and Stracke (2017) with some modifications relevant to the CET curriculum. The proposed peer feedback scaffold model included the following stages:

1. Creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere and trust among students through ice-breaking activities, warmers, regular check-ins and debriefs.
2. Providing specific training on the role of peer feedback in the writing process through an online peer feedback self-discovery module followed up by an in-class discussion (see Appendix 1).
3. Introducing the peer feedback checklist (Appendix 2) and modelling its use on students' practice essays (Appendix 3). Before students answered the questions in the checklist, they were asked to highlight certain writing features studied in class (topic sentences, link back sentences and voices from the experts, as well as grammar and vocabulary mistakes). Students were also requested to make comments in each instance, such as suggestions for improvement, if needed.

The modeling was done three times before students had to use the checklist themselves.

4. Undertaking the peer review of a past student writing sample using the checklist independently for the first time. This was followed up with an in-class discussion about how students approached the process, challenges and suggestions for future use of the checklist.

5. Setting up the student-guided peer feedback activity. Students were organised in pairs and assigned two anonymous essays to provide feedback on using the checklist. (It was suggested by colleagues that anonymity would encourage honesty). Students were asked to actively discuss the writing features and agree on their position before making any comments on the checklist. They were also encouraged to act on the feedback they received and to discuss with me any concerns about it.

The intervention was used with the participants in Cycle 1. Participants in Cycle 2 did not experience the whole intervention except for Stages 4 and 5, for which a rubric was used instead of the checklist. This rubric was an adapted version of that which teachers used to mark the task, and required students to choose a descriptor for five language features and provide comments at the end if they wanted to. In order to become familiar with the rubric, students had to read through it and raise any questions they might have about it in class. No modelling was done before Stage 5. Data collected in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 was subsequently compared to establish if the intervention had any effect.

Data collection

During the peer feedback sessions in both Cycle 1 and 2 data was collected through a Google document containing:

1. A student writing sample.

2. The peer feedback checklist (Cycle 1), the peer feedback rubric (Cycle 2).

3. An 'acting on feedback' section/box.

In order to determine if the peer feedback tool (checklist in Cycle 1 or rubric in Cycle 2) engaged students and was useful to approach the task, I observed whether students used the tool as well as their level of engagement with it (just ticking boxes or highlighting descriptors as opposed to also providing comprehensive comments to justify their choices). As for determining the extent to which students could provide each other with practical feedback, I went through all the forms categorising the comments students made. Comments were categorised in two ways: Did the comment provide a practical suggestion for improvement? Was the comment just an appraisal comment? The comments were also categorised considering the writing feature they addressed such as clarity of ideas, referencing, grammar etc.

To determine the extent to which feedback was used for revision, I analysed the students' 'acting on feedback' box in the Google docs. This space was allocated for

students to rewrite part of/the whole essay based on the feedback they received. Furthermore, an unstructured interview was done with students in Cycle 1 to get their views on whether or not the scaffold used as intervention maximised students' engagement with peer feedback.

Finding

One hundred per cent of participants in Cycle 1 actively engaged in the student-guided peer feedback session using the checklist to assess their classmates' writing samples, to identify areas for improvement and to provide suggestions. They also highlighted writing features in their classmates' essays (Figure 1). As for Cycle 2, only 50% of students actively engaged with peer feedback. Half of the participants did not use the rubric or any other strategy to provide peer feedback. They read the sample and resorted to politely praising each other (Figure 2).


engaged with
peer feedback

100% (18)
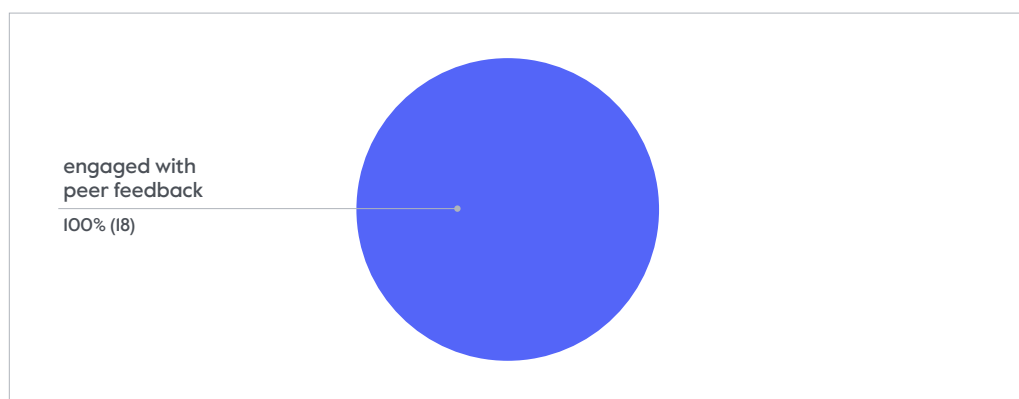
Figure 1: Cycle 1 engagement with peer feedback activity (checklist)

did not engage
with peer feedback

50.0%

engaged with
peer feedback

50.0%
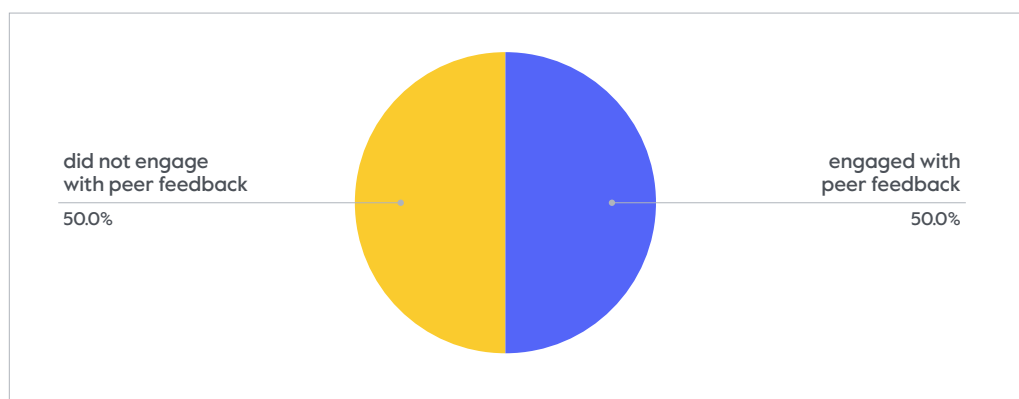
Figure 2: Cycle 2 engagement with peer feedback activity (rubric)

The data also revealed that 75% of students in Cycle 1 were able to provide practical feedback to their peers, that is, practical suggestions of how to improve the quality of their essays (Figure 3). These suggestions covered aspects such as improving clarity and relevance of ideas, paraphrasing sources, improving topic sentences, and correcting grammar and vocabulary mistakes. In contrast, 64.3 % of students in Cycle 2 provided feedback that was not practical, such as appraisal and polite comments about the nature of their classmates' work (Figure 4).
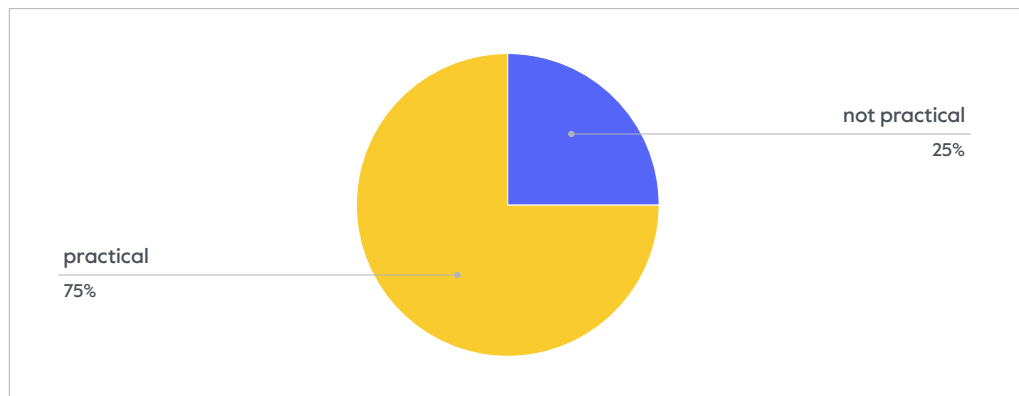

**Figure 3**: Cycle I type of feedback provided by students
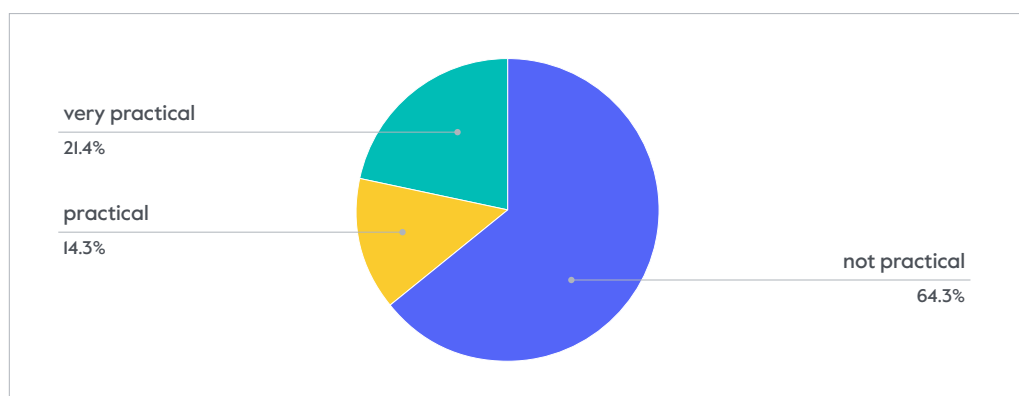
Figure 4: Cycle 2 type of feedback provided by students

Fifty per cent of participants in Cycle 1 acted on feedback as compared to only 21.4% of participants in Cycle 2. Out of the 50% of participants who acted on feedback on Cycle 1 (Figure 5) most participants rewrote a section/the whole essay incorporating the feedback they received. The points they acted on the most were organisation of ideas, paragraph development and referencing. As for students who acted on feedback on Cycle 2 (Figure 6), they rewrote part/whole essays and corrected grammar and vocabulary mistakes.
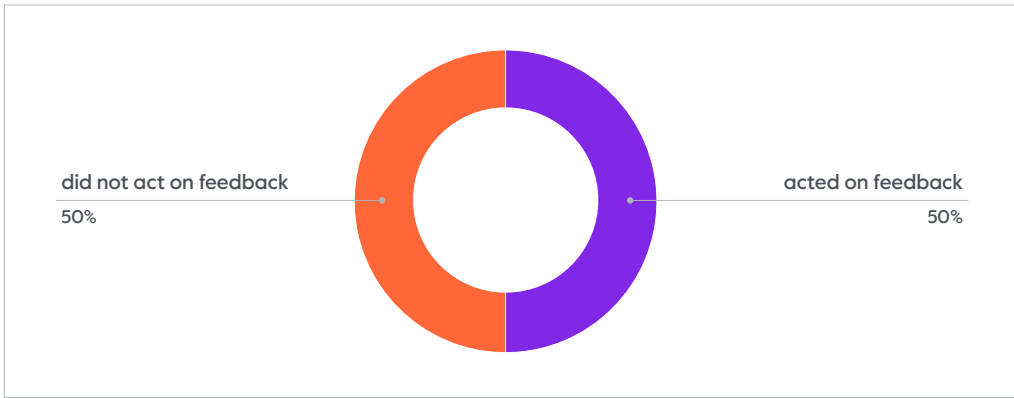
Figure 5: Acting on feedback Cycle 1
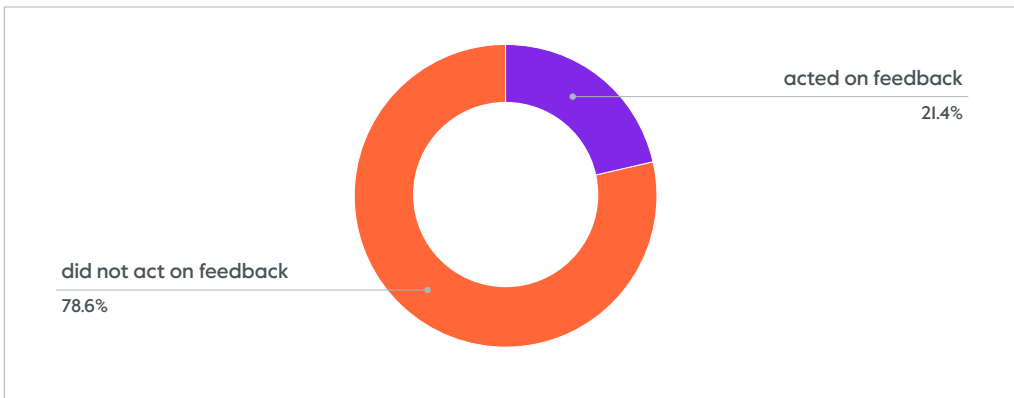
Figure 6: Acting on feedback Cycle 2

I also conducted interviews with participants in Cycle 1 to gauge their perceptions on the effectiveness of the intervention. These are some of the comments they made (comments are unedited to maintain authenticity):

> *I like my classmates make good suggestions, good ideas for my paper. Things I did not see before or I did not think about. It's very useful. (Charlie)*

> *My classmates are very respectful, I did not feel ashamed to show my paper and to read their comments. They help me write better. (Chloe)*

> *The checklist is very easy to complete. The questions are clear and we can say what we want. We can also highlight things in the paper, this helps a lot. (Aaron)*

> *My classmates are good writers and their comments are very useful. I think we also need some teacher comments because some classmates are not so good writers, like me. Teacher comments would help a lot. (Jenny)*

Students reported feeling comfortable openly discussing their classmates' anonymous work and knowing what to do when requested to provide peer feedback. They pointed out that having seen me use the checklist on their papers in class helped them identify writing features in both their own and classmates' writing. In contrast, some students pointed out they did not feel as confident providing feedback although they were happy to receive as many comments as possible from their classmates. This is because they perceived their writing skills were not equal to

some of their classmates. Most students commented on how peer feedback should be supported by teacher feedback or how it is useful to have the opportunity to further discuss feedback with their teacher (privately) when they do not agree with a comment or suggestion.

Conclusion and reflections

In order for peer feedback to be effective, students need to learn how to provide it and how to participate in it. To this purpose, it is important for teachers to re-adjust their expectations of the peer feedback skills students might have and train them in three key areas:

1. To effectively read and respond to someone else's writing.

2. To constructively react to a response to their own writing from a peer.

3. To revise their texts based on the peer response activity (Berg, as cited in Hislop and Stracke 2017).

Students also benefit from learning about etiquette as well as basic procedures and language for commenting on each other's work. The intervention applied in Cycle 1 addressed all these aspects with the online self-discovery module, the modelling exercises and the in-class discussion about feedback. However, I feel that more could be done to provide students with more varied language tools to provide feedback. In future, the self-discovery module will be redesigned to incorporate more on feedback etiquette, do's and don'ts, and appropriate, practical language.

A comfortable classroom atmosphere is another key to guarantee an effective peer feedback session. It is important to invest time building trust with the class. One of the biggest challenges I met was opening space in the busy curriculum to allow for trust building and exploring the importance of peer feedback. An integrated curriculum can be very prescriptive and not allow for flexibility to find opportunities to explicitly teach about peer feedback. The high levels of interconnection between activities make it hard to allocate time to 'unscripted' activities.

Through this research, I have also reaffirmed my belief that peer feedback tools should be clear and accessible to students. The tool should use language that is not open to subjective interpretations but most importantly, language that is within students' grasp. Peer-feedback tools should be designed considering what students can do and not what we think they should be able to do. Not only should the purpose of peer feedback be clearly taught and stated in class but students should also be given ample chances to observe how the tool is used before they use it themselves.

I was pleasantly surprised by the amount and quality of 'acting on feedback' entries from Cycle 1. Students were more inclined to use the feedback for improvement in this cycle and I believe that was connected to the quality of feedback they received. It can also be attributed to the modelling part of the intervention effectively providing students with the tools they needed to provide quality feedback. Conversely, as for the low rates of 'acting on feedback' in Cycle 2,

it could be that students lacked the skills needed to provide effective feedback and struggled to find errors in their classmates' work, explain them properly and make suggestions for improvement. This further supports the view that students need to be trained in peer feedback skills.

References

Hislop, J and Stracke, E (2017) ESL students in peer review: An action research study in a university English for Academic Purposes course, *University of Sydney Papers in TESOL* 12, 9–44.

Please click the following link to view the author's presentation at the 2021 English Australia Action Research in ELICOS Colloquium: https://youtu.be/YFRymDUBESA

Appendix I: Online peer feedback discovery module

Initial thoughts and feelings

To complete this discovery module, you will need a pen and notebook/ notepad to take notes.

Peer-feedback

What is it?

Peer feedback involves students giving and receiving constructive comments about their written or spoken performance in an activity in order to improve it.

Students can feel nervous about participating in peer-feedback activities. They can also feel insecure or afraid of being rude to their classmates. Nobody wants to disrespect other people's work.

All those feelings are normal. Whether you have participated in peer-feedback activities or not before, let's take a closer look at how we feel about giving and providing peer-feedback.

Look at the sentences below. How would you complete them?

Type your answer in the field. Then click the blue arrow to export the document. Save the export in your device We will revisit it at the end of this module.

Initial thoughts and feelings	Initial thoughts and feelings
○ Initial thoughts and feelings	I think peer feedback is (say why)
◉ Document Export	When the teacher asks me to give my classmates feedback on their work

Understanding 'peer-feedback'

Use your notes to answer the following questions.

1. Why is peer-feedback important?
2. When is peer feedback particularly effective?
3. What are the Benefits of peer feedback for the reviewer?
4. What does the research by De Guerrero and Villamil (2000) illustrate?
5. What is the author's purpose for writing the text?

Appendix 2: Checklist (Cycle I)

Synthesis task			
Content/Relevance	**Yes**	**No**	**Comments**
1. Does the text answer the question/fully effectively?			
2. Are all ideas included relevant/connected to the question?			
3. Are ideas well explained and easy to understand?			
4. Are ideas from all the relevant sources synthesised?			
Use of sources			
5. Are the sources referenced well? (Surname and year)			
6. Has all the information from the sources been paraphrased?			
Connection of ideas			
7. Are the topic sentences in both paragraphs clear?			
8. Are the sentences within the paragraphs connected to each other?			
9. Are both paragraphs connected to each other?			
10. Are the link back sentences in both paragraphs connected to the question?			
Grammar and vocabulary			
11. Is vocabulary formal?			

Appendix 3: Modelling the use of the checklist

The upward cycle: Learner progress through critical reflection and strategic response

Dale Jung, UNSW Global, Sydney
Kate Randazzo, UNSW Global, Sydney

Our context

The central theme of our action research (AR) project in 2021 was learner progress, so the context of our research is essential in explaining the specific needs of our learners, the decisions that shaped our questions and methods, and the subsequent analysis of our findings. All such factors were closely linked to supporting, sustaining and measuring the progress of our students.

Our workplace is UNSW Global, which provides multiple course options for achieving entry to undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). One such option for entry into UNSW undergraduate degrees is provided by a range of Foundation Studies programs in which students acquire and demonstrate academic skills in a number of subject areas, including Academic English. Entry to undergraduate degrees at UNSW is achieved by the successful completion of these Foundation Studies programs.

The course in which we conducted this project is called the Foundation English Entry Course (FEEC). This is a 10-week Academic English course which provides an opportunity for entry into the various UNSW Foundation Studies programs. As such, FEEC is described 'an academic pathway course', as it presents an early and crucial step in this pathway of successive courses leading to university entry. Successful completion of FEEC is essential in ensuring progression at the beginning of that pathway. Originally classroom-based, the course moved to online delivery in early

2020, using a learning management system called OpenLearning (www.openlearning.com), which includes a student profile with a designated blog space and offers features for administrators and teachers to track progress, such as completion of activities and commenting. It was after the transition to online delivery of FEEC that we identified the specific issues relating to student progress that form the basis of our project.

In order to justify the aims, interventions and implementation processes on which the project was based, it is worth noting that we have both taught on FEEC classes for many years while it was a classroom-based course and have been closely connected to the transition to online delivery and subsequent cohorts since that point. We have both been involved in developing course content and assessment processes, so we felt that we had a level of understanding to make assumptions regarding the needs of our learners and the types of interventions that could have positive impacts on their progress.

Research focus

Ensuring and measuring learner progress is a current challenge facing the online delivery of Academic English pathway courses that prepare learners for university entry. This is especially crucial in the context of these short pathway courses for young learners, who may exhibit characteristics and behaviours that negatively affect their learning progress.

Prior to our AR project, successive cohorts were overwhelmingly *focused on the destination rather than the journey*, with a strong emphasis on grade achievement rather than learning processes. A large proportion of our students lacked the levels of engagement, motivation, self-awareness and agency needed to achieve their course outcomes. There was also a tendency among these learners to be highly dependent on teachers and competitive, rather than supportive, of their classmates. As a result, we observed limited interaction among students, low rates of completion of online activities, and even cases of cheating and plagiarism. These young learners had consistently demonstrated such characteristics in both the classroom and online, which was the initial motivation for our research.

Research questions

The over-arching aim of our AR was to improve outcomes for our students by increasing engagement with the course. To ensure student progress, we aimed to transform their attitudes, moving beyond simple grade achievement to engagement with learning processes and self-awareness through a personalised and reflective approach to course content and outcomes. We also planned to build a learning community with shared goals and intersecting experiences, founded on a strong sense of learner agency and accountability.

Our project aimed to address two questions:

1. What impact do weekly blogging and critical self-reflection and strategic response have on student engagement?

2. What impact do these series of activities have on student progress against established course outcomes?

Our project interventions

Central to our aim was promoting students' engagement with their own progress throughout the 10-week course using 'the upward cycle', which consists of two weekly series of activities embedded within the course in the OpenLearning platform. Very early in our planning, we determined that our interventions must result in the empowering of students through the development of strong study habits and learning processes which reinforce course principles. We hoped that students would absorb the idea that they are capable of developing and improving their own abilities. In other words, what if students believed that they could do better? We were further encouraged to pursue this aim after consulting studies on:

- normalising failure (Robinson 2017) by responding with strategic goal-setting
- active learning methods (Brown, Roediger and McDaniel 2014)
- critical reflection and self-analysis (Yang 2009)
- growth mindset (Bai and Wang 2020, Dweck 2006).

We decided that one of the weekly series of activities within 'the upward cycle' would be blogging. We assumed there was a link between learner progress and regular productive activities in which the theme-based lexis of each weekly unit could be recycled. Therefore, we felt a series of weekly embedded blogging tasks would provide for this reinforcement of vocabulary, but from a personalised perspective (see Appendix 1). In addition, we hoped that further writing practice and language production, unconstrained by academic conventions, would increase learner engagement with course content, as well as promote valuable connections with other learners through sharing experiences and opinions.

After considering our assumptions, we developed and implemented a weekly blogging series of 10 guided entries. Learners completed a series of scaffolded activities leading to the production of blog posts in their OpenLearning profile. They blogged about themselves and their lives, reinforcing language features from the course. They shared posts, pictures, videos and voice recordings in the blog section of their online course profile and interacted with each other by commenting on each other's posts.

Our other weekly series of activities would be one of critical reflection and strategic response (see Figure 1). This intervention was based on the assumption that our students needed to consider how they learn and make connections between their own progress and the strategies introduced throughout the course. Therefore, it would encourage students to reassess their experience of challenges and failure and to see them as opportunities to learn.

As a result, each week, students were required to critically reflect on their previous performance and experiences in course activities and assessments (see Appendix 2). They used this reflection to respond by identifying and applying appropriate strategies and setting learning goals for similar learning and assessment tasks in the near future.
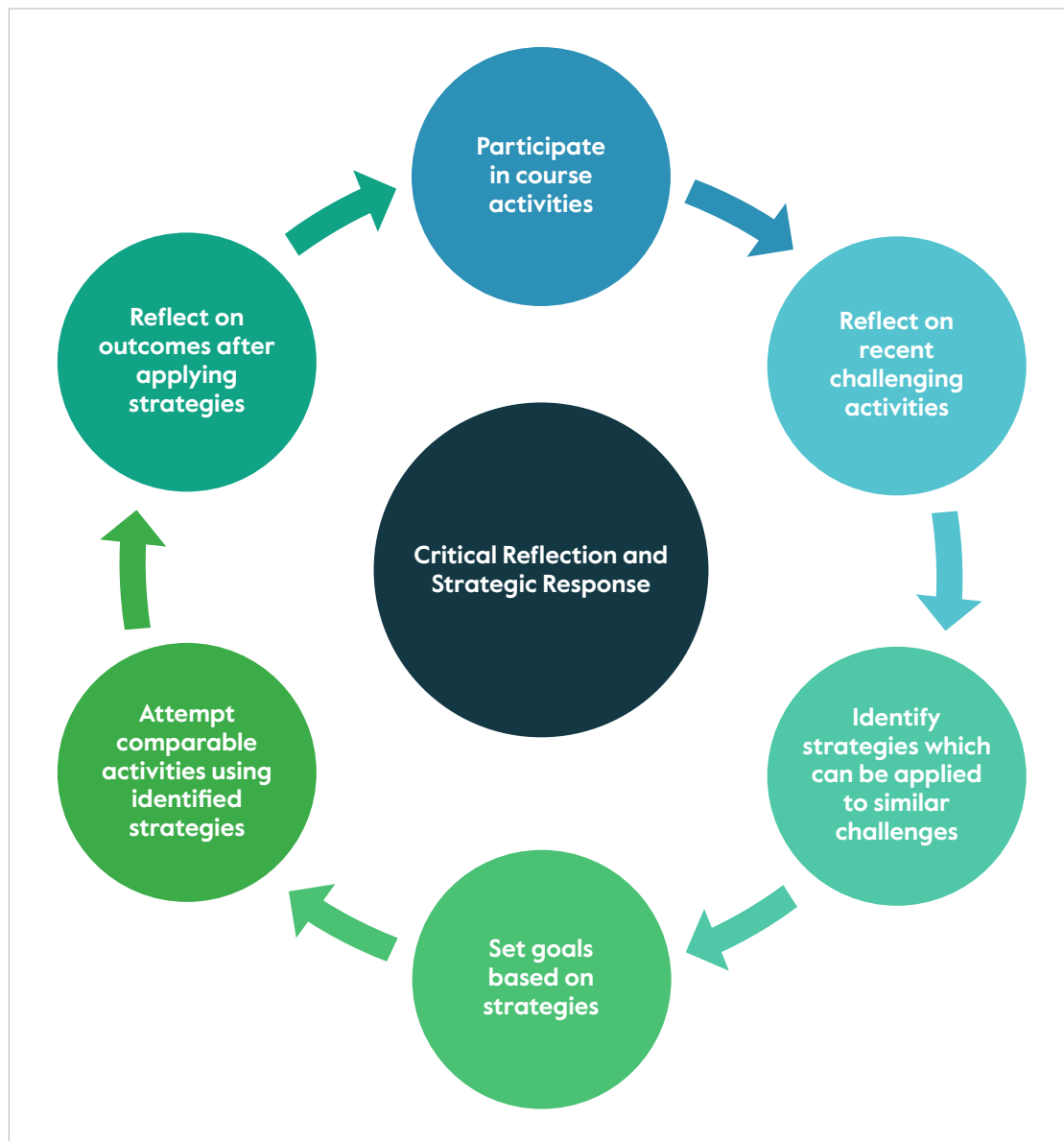
Figure 1: Tasks completed by students in the weekly 'Critical Reflection and Strategic Response'

Participants

The focus of our research was two successive FEEC cohorts, whose characteristics were a typical representation of FEEC learners in terms of age range, nationality and level of English. There were 16 students from China in the first cohort, and there were 11 students from China and one from Turkey in the second cohort. Their ages ranged between 17 and 21 years.

Data collection

For each cohort, we collected data throughout the 10 weeks of the course. All tasks and tools were created in OpenLearning, where the data can be stored.

Data for Research Question 1 was based on the following tasks:

- the percentage of course activity completion compared with previous equivalent cohorts
- average number of comments per student compared with previous equivalent cohorts
- textual analysis of final exam essay (topic: blogging)
- textual analysis of Unit 9 'My Learning' reflection (blogging and reflecting on progress)
- student engagement survey in Week 10 (see Appendix 3).

Data for Research Question 2 was based on the following tasks:

- assessment results
- meeting their entry requirements for Foundation Studies.

Impact of the action research project on students

Two notable findings were in relation to learner engagement and the impact on students' results.

Learner engagement

Having taught the five previous online cohorts, we had observed a lack of engagement evidenced by a limited average number of online comments made by students throughout their course, as well as a low average percentage of course completion.

Over the period of our AR, we saw an increase in student engagement in terms of the average number of online student comments on course activities over 10 weeks. These rose from an average of 139 comments for previous equivalent cohorts to 268 in Cycle 1 and 409 in Cycle 2.

The average percentage of course completion rose from 87.27% to 94.41% in Cycle 1 (including eight students with 100%) to 98.23% in Cycle 2 (including six students with 100%). In both research cycles, half of each class achieved 100% completion, demonstrating an unprecedented level of course engagement.

The significance of learner engagement is highlighted in students' own responses in the final essay and course reflection activities (see Figures 2 and 3). Regarding blogging and critical reflection and strategic response, students consistently placed value on improving language and communication skills, as well as learning, self-expression, and building relationships. This indicates that students valued the 'experience' as more than tasks to complete.
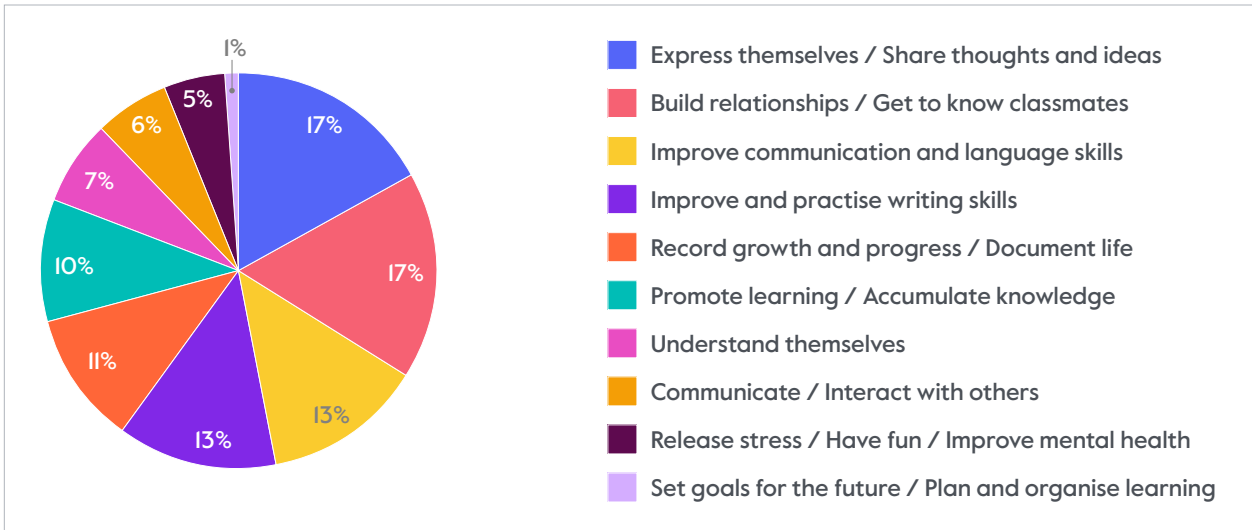
Figure 2: The importance of blogging

These comments from the students illustrate their views about blogging and the impact it had on their learning (comments are unedited to maintain authenticity):

I learned to express myself by giving some information about myself. At the same time, I did research on some topics and shared them with my classmates and teacher and read their comments. (Ella)

International students can improve their writing and logical thinking skills through the process of posting blogs. (Diana)
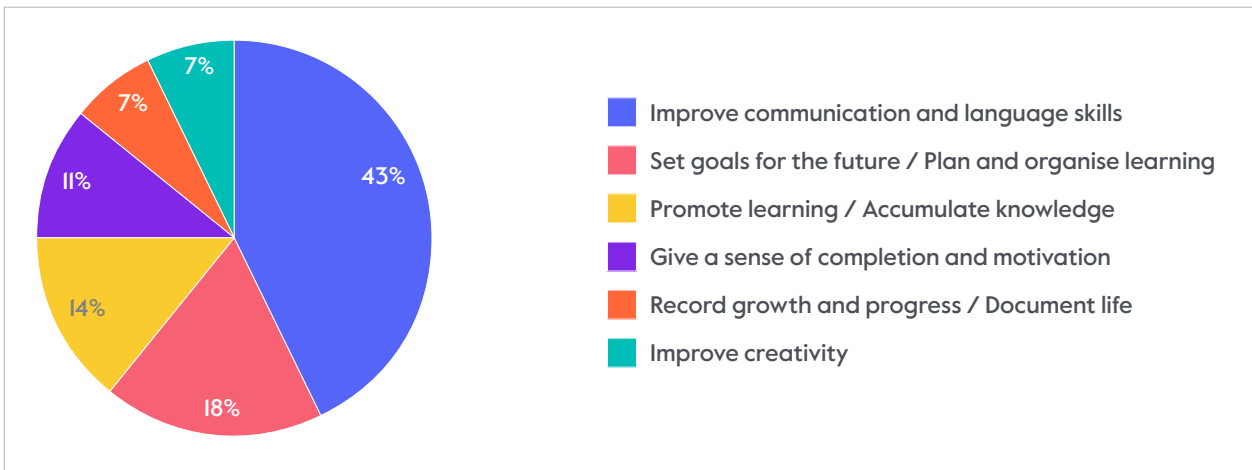
Figure 3: The importance of reflecting

These comments illustrate students' views about the processes involved in reflecting and responding strategically:

Thinking about my progress is important because I need to know where I've improved. And how I've improved. (LaVine)

I set personal learning goals because if there is no goal, there is no motivation to learn. It is the belief that supports me to study hard. (Aiden)

Appendix 4 consists of a variety of responses regarding learner progress, engagement, attitudes, blogging, and reflection-response processes from the student engagement survey (Appendix 3), in which students were prompted to comment on their rankings, along with responses from the final reflection task about the students' learning journeys. The survey was conducted on the final day of the course and confirmed our other findings, in that students themselves saw their own progress in terms of academic performance as well as their attitudes towards learning and building a community.

Positive impact on students' academic results

The average course results were demonstrably higher than previous cohorts. Most students achieved well above the minimum requirement to an extent that had not previously occurred. The percentage of students from both Cycle 1 and 2 who achieved the results required for entry into Foundation Studies was very high, at 100%, compared with previous cohorts, ranging between 86% and 95%.

Project findings and applications

Our motivation for our AR project was to increase the engagement of our young, online learners in course activities, and to provide a series of activities for them to monitor and enhance their own progress focusing on personal and academic development. The outcomes of our research demonstrate that the amount and quality of engagement increased along with improvements in course assessment results. After conducting our AR project with two separate cohorts, we have observed a number of positive outcomes.

Our major project findings are listed below:

Blogging topics – Topics that are personal, familiar and simple, and shared are immediately accessible to young learners. These also allow for comparison and commenting.

Our young learners, regardless of language level or maturity, wrote in a style similar to social media, a familiar and safe context. The topics, for example, hobbies, travel, friendships and dreams, were clearly less daunting compared to more demanding, academic writing tasks. In contrast to essay writing, our students needed little encouragement to write about what was familiar and personal. Writing became a tool for communicating ideas, sometimes pleasant and undemanding, and sometimes challenging, but not intimidating.

Core activities – Starting the blogs and reflection processes early in the course meant that these learning experiences felt integral to the course, as important as assessments, and deserving of attention.

Early in the implementation of the blogging and reflection-response processes, we observed that students were moving away from simply completing tasks with little consideration. Students very quickly responded creatively with their organisation of information and the integration of visual materials, in ways that clearly attempted to engage the attention of both teachers and classmates. Additionally, learners' reflections on assessments and other tasks showed greater insight and critical thinking than we had previously encountered.

Expect more, get more – The blogging and reflection-response activities increased the 'size' of the course by 15% in terms of the total number of online activities and the time required to complete them. This addition may seem counter-intuitive as a solution to engagement for a previously under-engaged learner cohort. However, our findings showed a greater response to course content in terms of completion rates as well as the quality of responses in terms of depth and personal commitment (cf Gibbons 2009). In demanding more of our young students, we actually received much more in response, and this specific observation deserves further analysis. We discovered that young learners can be surprisingly prolific if given the right combination of targeted tasks, scaffolding, and challenge. In doing so, we raised expectations and the learners' motivation to meet them. The combination of blogging and reflection-response activities gave the necessary support, but also the freedom and opportunity to be productive and personally responsible.

Blog entries by stealth – We scaffolded the production of blog entries with target language revision exercises, such as simple vocabulary and grammar revision exercises. Topic-based survey questions, organised from general to increasingly specific and personalised, also integrated opportunities to illustrate meaning or show examples through photos or diagrams. Eventually, without explicit instruction, learners generated the content of the blog entry in their various answers. All that was required was a process of compiling, editing, and inserting transition and cohesion signals to produce a blog entry, as the example below illustrates.

An example: The blog entry on hobbies
1. An activity differentiating the meaning of various adverbs of frequency.
2. A personalisation exercise in which students express how often they engage in a number of common hobbies and leisure activities.
3. Greater personalisation as students describe how often they engage in their own hobbies using targeted adverbs.
4. Further information elicited; for example, reasons for interest in these activities.
5. Compilation of all information generated so far, edited using cohesive devices.
6. Publication of the completed blog, with pictures to add interest. Await responses and comments from teachers and classmates.

Blog writing to academic writing – Blog entry production provided students with the experience of producing a cohesive text involving a number of steps: creating content by compiling facts and information relevant to the topic; organising these into a logical sequence with examples; and then linking them appropriately with cohesive devices. This systematic approach to text creation is also applied to the production and development of more academic texts such as body paragraphs in academic essays.

Exploit technology – Incorporating both a blogging series and a reflection-response series was partly a desire to take full advantage of existing functions within the OpenLearning platform. Moving to online delivery offered a tremendous opportunity to use these tools in this exciting new environment. The OpenLearning student profile already included a blog section, and the capacity to post information as text, pictures, and audio or video files further enhanced these activities. In addition, by providing a repository of all posts, blog entries, comments, and communication threads throughout the course, the platform was well-suited for reflecting on previous experiences and planning ahead with strategies for new challenges. This growing bank of blog entries and reflections was also useful to boost the confidence of learners by acknowledging the amount of English text they produced, particularly encouraging at this point in their academic pathways.

Comment early and comment often – We, as teachers, were committed to commenting quickly on blog entries and reflection posts. Our contributions provided the equivalent of teacher feedback to learners, albeit more personalised. As such, our quick response time gave these comments a level of significance that students generally give to teacher feedback. The teacher comments also served as a model for peer-to-peer interaction.

The social media-style of the blogs and the reflection-response activities also allowed for immediate commenting by classmates. They provided opportunities for comments, suggestions, and requests for clarification or examples. These responses from peers often generated online 'discussions' in the form of replies and further personalisation. Students clearly appreciated the immediate reaction to their posts by their learning community and this provided a dynamic aspect to the ongoing process.

Reflect on blogging – By the end of the course, we linked the two seemingly separate series of blogging and reflection-response. Students were able to consider their own recent experiences and reflect on the significance to their personal growth and achievement as well as possible future academic and professional applications.

Conclusion and broader application of project findings

Since the shift to online delivery in March 2020, student engagement and progress while studying online have rightly been an area of focus for all Australian providers, particularly when students are still immersed in their own contexts and not onshore. Teaching a range of domestic and international students online, both postgraduate and undergraduate, remains a challenge. The online delivery of English courses is set to continue well after Australian borders open. Ensuring high levels of engagement and progress is crucial in addressing the needs of international students as they achieve their learning outcomes.

The success of this AR project was largely due to the nature of the tasks and processes within the parallel weekly series of blogging, and critical reflection and strategic response. They engaged the learners in particular ways because they were personalised, scaffolded, familiar, immediate, specific and, of course, meaningful.

The key findings from this project can easily be transferred to a range of other online contexts in which international students are learning English. The principles of reflection and critical thinking can be adapted and embedded within the curriculum, as exemplified by this project, allowing for systematic implementation. These principles can also be scaled up regardless of the number of learners and the type of learning management system or platform used for delivery. In successfully achieving our research aims, we can recommend applying the principles and processes of 'the upward cycle' in order to develop learner agency, promote supportive peer-to-peer interaction, build a learning community, and meaningfully engage students in taking responsibility for their own progress.

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Please click the following link to view the authors' presentation at the 2021 English Australia Action Research in ELICOS Colloquium: https://youtu.be/YFRymDUBESA

Appendix I: Blogging tasks incorporated into the course

Course location and title	General topic	Vocabulary and grammar revision	Visual and audio component/s	Link to course content and structure
Unit 1 Blogging – About me	Personal introductions Introduction to blogging	Personal details		Course beginning Essay introductions
Unit 1 Blogging – Looking to the future	Personal goals – this course, future studies, careers Reasons for blogging	Blog vocabulary Verbs/nouns used with 'the future'	Vision board – 'illustrate your future'	Course introduction – goal setting Reasons for choosing the course Outcome of the course – studying abroad
Unit 2 Blogging – My hobbies	Personal interests, hobbies, free-time activities	Common free time activities Adverbs of frequency	Pictures of hobby	Unit themes: Life challenges, ways of life, motivation - intrinsic/ extrinsic
Unit 3 Blogging – Travel	Travel, tourism, transport and holidays	Verb/noun collocations, travel and transport lexis, place names/ proper nouns Past tense verbs for a recount Cause and effect	Illustrating a travel experience	Unit themes: Tourism and transport issues Cause and effect
Unit 4 Blogging – My family	Family, relationships, personal descriptions, informal learning	Family members and relationships Possessive pronouns Plurals	Family tree diagram, family photo	Unit themes: Sources of learning Parenting styles
Unit 5 Blogging – My hometown	Issues related to urban living	Describing places, giving directions, recommending places Adverbs of place	Hometown photos	Linked to first presentation assignment – Introducing a town or city to your study group
Unit 6 Blogging – My routine	Routines, habits, leisure, time management	Daily activities Present tenses for repeated actions	Diagram – Illustrating daily routines Video – the effects of daily routines on physical and mental health	Unit themes: Work-life balance Destructive habits and addiction
Unit 7 Blogging – Animals	Environmental issues, animal conservation, extinction	Environmental terminology Making suggestions, cause and effect, predictions	Conservation plan for a threatened species – in diagrammatical/ visual form	Unit themes: Treatment of animals Conservation and extinction of species Natural wonders
Unit 8 Blogging – friends	Friendship	Describing people: character, personality Word forms – adjective/ nouns	Photos of friends and socialising Audio – Interviewing classmates on friend	Unit themes: The human world, social issues
Unit 9 Blogging – My Classmates	Learning about and learning from classmates	Revisiting all blog entries Comparisons Personal pronouns	Course closure	Approaching course completion, revisiting blog entries prior to final reflection on blogging

Appendix 2: Critical reflection and strategic response tasks incorporated into the course

Course location	Skill focus (Secondary focus)	Specific course experience/s	Critical reflection	Additional purpose	Strategic response	Future course application
Unit 1	Reading and speaking (Vocabulary to talk about goals)	Past learning experiences	Reflecting on the purpose of learning English and priorities in this course	Introducing goal-setting and study groups	Identifying priorities and setting SMART goals	(Dependent on individual responses)
Unit 2 Reflection 1	Reading skills (Vocabulary of success and achievement)	Unit 1 Reading test	Identifying correct and incorrect answers, reflecting on successful and unsuccessful processes	Introducing learning process – critical reflection and strategic response	Choosing reading strategies for future exams	Academic reading tasks in subsequent units; mid-course and final reading exams
Unit 3 Reflection 2	Topical discussions (Vocabulary related to studying abroad)	Units 1 and 2 Topical discussion practice	Reasons for discussion practice, significance of preparation and research, uses of functional language, importance of collaboration	Reflecting on and responding to teacher feedback, building confidence	Individual responsibilities in topic research and revising target language, strategic planning and practicing in groups	Subsequent group discussion preparation and practice; Unit 5 group discussion assessment
Unit 4 Reflection 3	Essay writing (Essay structure terminology)	Units 1, 2 and 3 Essay writing lessons, including production tasks and teacher feedback	Self-assessment on aspects of essay-writing conventions – structure, academic style, vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and argument	Focusing on using teacher feedback from previous writing tasks – identifying areas of improvement	Identifying actions in response to areas of improvement, recognising strengths and weaknesses in essay writing, and committing to specific responses for improvement	Applying actions to subsequent writing tasks, building greater awareness of the significance of teacher consultations and feedback in ongoing improvement
Unit 5 Reflection 4.1	Exam reading strategies (Terminology for learning strategies)	Units 1, 2, 3 and 4 Reading skills lessons	Focusing on experiences with exam-based reading tasks from previous units, revising question types and appropriate strategies	Revision of reading exam format, building confidence, goal-setting	Reflection immediately prior to mid-course reading exam for immediate opportunity to apply strategies in an assessed context	Reflection and response to mid-course experience can then be applied to final exams in Week 10

Unit 5 Reflection 4.2	Exam listening strategies (Terminology for learning strategies)	Units 2, 3 and 4 Listening skills lessons	Focusing on experiences with exam-based listening tasks from previous units, revise exam structure, different text types, question types and appropriate strategies for each	Revision of listening exam format, building confidence, goal-setting	Highlighting previous experiences to focus on the range of strategies appropriate for various text types and questions types; reflection immediately prior to mid-course listening exam for immediate opportunity to apply strategies in an assessed context	Reflection and response to mid-course experience can then be applied to final exams in Week 10
Unit 5 Reflection 4.3	Exam essay writing (Terminology for writing assessment criteria)	Units 1, 2, 3 and 4 Essay writing lessons	Revision of academic essay conventions and previous experiences with these; focus on previous teacher feedback and student responses to this	Significance of planning in essay exams; revision of strategies for organising essay content	Highlight previous experiences to provide confidence immediately prior to mid-course writing exam; immediate opportunity to apply revised knowledge of conventions in an assessed context	Reflection and response to mid-course experience can then be applied to subsequent assessed writing tasks in Weeks 6 and 8, and the final exams in Week 10
Unit 5 Reflection 4.4	Topical discussions (Functional language for discussions)	Units 1, 2, 3 and 4 Topical discussion lessons – preparation and practice	Focusing on the significance of topical discussions as part of academic development, revision of functional language for discussions and appropriate patterns of interaction	Revisiting previous discussion practice lessons to build confidence by focusing on prior achievements, reminder of class discussion format	Immediate opportunity to apply previous experiences and revised knowledge of topical discussions in an assessed context	Providing opinions incidentally throughout the remaining units, subsequent group presentation assessment building on confidence developed in discussion lessons, appreciation of group dynamics and individual responsibilities
Unit 6 Reflection 5	Mid-course exams (Revisiting learning strategies)	Unit 5 Mid-course exams	An opportunity to consider exam performance and the impact of the strategies identified and applied in the reflections throughout Unit 5 prior to the mid-course exams	A reminder of the need to revisit and re-set goals as part of ongoing learning	Looking ahead to the final exams and evaluating and revising their choices of strategies in the various assessments of the previous week	Unit 10 final exams follow the same formats and question types as the mid-course exams – providing another opportunity to consider the range of strategies available to them, practising them in subsequent skills-based lessons as they prepare to apply these in the final exams

Unit / Reflection						
Unit 7 Reflection 6	Essay writing (Essay writing criteria and maximising feedback)	Unit 5 Mid-course writing essay; Unit 6 in-class writing assessment	After two assessed essay writing tasks – focusing on teacher feedback, linking errors (or areas for improvement) to specific items of feedback, considering what responses would be required to improve or avoid repeated errors	Highlighting the significance of teacher feedback as a source of critical reflection and strategic response in all learning and assessment contexts	Planning responses to their errors or area of weakness prior to the second in-class assessed writing task scheduled for Unit 8	Students will receive further feedback after the Unit 8 writing task (and subsequent practice tasks) – further opportunities to apply strategic responses to this feedback in the final writing exam in Unit 10
Unit 8 Reflection 7	Speaking (Group discussions and group presentation)	Units 1 to 5 – Discussions, Unit 6 onwards group presentation assessment	An opportunity to reflect on improvements in speaking skills in the context of the two main speaking assessments (discussion tasks and group presentation), reflection on the application of skills developed in this course to future academic contexts	Highlighting the significance of individual responsibilities in group-based tasks, further reinforce the importance of critically reflecting on teacher feedback	Looking ahead to the Unit 9 group presentation assessment, focusing on individual responsibilities and accountability within group-based tasks	Providing opportunities for students to recognise that the skills they have developed have greater application to both future academic contexts and beyond, a valuable opportunity to highlight the often significant improvements in both skills and confidence
Unit 9 Reflection 8	Learning process – reflection and response (Future applications of the process to future learning contexts)	Units 2 to 8 – All the previous reflection and response processes	Revisiting initial goals set in Unit 1, reflecting on their 'learning journey' in the course, their achievements and overall development, reflecting on the role of blogging in this 'journey'	Highlighting the significance of goal-setting, an opportunity to recognise and celebrate personal achievements	Looking back to initial beliefs about personal abilities and reflecting on achievements, looking forward to the immediate course assessments with greater confidence and beyond to future academic contexts	Reinforcing the central principle of the critical reflection and strategic response process; by following this process, students have tremendous agency in their own learning journeys to achieve and excel in their academic endeavours
Unit 10 Survey reflection and feedback	Course reflection – All skills – course completion and focus on applying skills to future studies	All units and course assessments	A final opportunity for students to reflect on the depth and breadth of their achievements in the previous 10 weeks	An opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate their classmates and teachers	Looking ahead to the future academic pathways with a sense of empowerment and agency	Student reflections and feedback at this point provide valuable insights and form the basis of future course development

Learning tasks

In this Foundation English course, how often have you done each of the following?	Never			Very often
a. Thought about your own learning progress	1	2	3	4
b. Set personal learning goals	1	2	3	4
c. Used feedback to improve	1	2	3	4
d. Kept up to date with your studies	1	2	3	4
e. Worked your hardest to achieve goals	1	2	3	4
Comments:				

Focus of the course

In your view, how often has this Foundation English course emphasised the activities below?	Never			Very often
a. Using skills and strategies to improve your understanding of reading and listening texts	1	2	3	4
b. Thinking about and sharing ideas or experiences	1	2	3	4
c. Making decisions about the value of information, ideas or strategies	1	2	3	4
d. Reflecting on your own progress to develop skills and ability	1	2	3	4
Comments:				

Preparing for the future

How often have you done each of the following during this Foundation English course?	Never			Very often
a. Thought carefully about the strengths and weaknesses of your own opinions and ideas	1	2	3	4
b. Learned knowledge and skills that will contribute to your future studies	1	2	3	4
c. Developed communication skills	1	2	3	4
d. Set study goals and made plans	1	2	3	4
Comments:				

Learning community

Think about the other people in your course. How often did you experience the following?	Never		Very often	
a. My classmates were friendly	1	2	3	4
b. My classmates supported me	1	2	3	4
Comments:				

Academic development

How much has your experience in this English course improved your knowledge, skills and development in these areas?	Never		Very often	
a. Gaining useful knowledge and skills	1	2	3	4
b. Writing clearly and effectively	1	2	3	4
c. Speaking clearly and effectively	1	2	3	4
d. Working effectively with classmates	1	2	3	4
e. Learning independently	1	2	3	4
f. Understanding yourself better	1	2	3	4
g. Solving problems	1	2	3	4
h. Setting goals and making plans	1	2	3	4
Comments:				

Appendix 4: Responses from the student engagement survey and final reflection (learning journeys)

Engagement survey: Progress, engagement and changing attitudes	*My learning goal has changed from passing this course to improving my language ability. (Gina)* *I think it is the most important to find interest in study. I think we should not just do one thing for the purpose of achieving a goal, but follow my own idea. I like it, so I want to do it well. (Heath)* *I learnt how to express my opinion and how to work with my classmate.* *I learnt cooperation is the most and valuable thing from my classmate. I got so much improvement form my teacher's feedback, especially on my writing and speaking. (Shane)* *From 0% in the beginning to 99% now, I have commented on many students and completed many assignments and tasks. At the beginning, I thought it was very far away and difficult, but I found that it was worth it until today, because it helped me grow up. (Aiden)* *I look back on my essays written in ten weeks and have made significant progress, and I'm not afraid of speaking in front of people. (Suzy)*
Engagement survey: Blogging	*I learned to express myself by giving some information about myself. At the same time, I did research on some topics and shared them with my classmates and teacher and read their comments. (Ella)* *I have learnt a lot from blogging about how to learn and what to have fun with. Everyone shared where they were from. And it was all very interesting. (Lisa)* *International students can improve their writing and logical thinking skills through the process of posting blogs. (Diana)* *Blogs can exercise writing, and thinking about progress to learn more knowledge. (Wang)* *Other benefit for university students of writing a blog is that students can express themselves freely. (Morgan)* *I can know everyone's opinion and I also can learn from other's tasks. (Shane)*
Engagement survey: Critical Reflection and Strategic Response	*I completed Reflection Activities. What I learnt from this is that its more effective to stop and think than just keep going. (Heath)* *Thinking about my progress is important to reflect on my own shortcomings and improvements. (LaVine)* *I set personal learning goals because if there is no goal, there is no motivation to learn. It is the belief that supports me to study hard. (Aiden)* *I did reflect on my own progress to develop skills and ability a lot, because I need to reflect my improvement and think about my learn methods. (Frank)* *Thinking about my progress is important because I need to know where I've improved. And how I've improved. (Lisa)* *Understanding my mistakes, I tried to correct them and improved myself over time. I worked hard to reach my goal and I improved myself in the subjects that I was not good at before. (Ella)* *What I learned from this is self-examination which helps me improve myself. (Jerry)*

Unit 9 reflective task: Learning journeys	*After studying in the language class at the University of New South Wales for nine weeks, I feel very fulfilled. I have learned a lot of new knowledge, which is very helpful to my English. I have mastered English better than before. This photo shows a person running in the sunshine, which means that I have been studying hard in the language class, encouraging myself and keeping a positive attitude to learn new knowledge. (Claire)*
	Meeting a new classmate is like just entering the sea, full of curiosity about everything. Halfway through the class, I thought everyone was tired and happy. In the end, when we all went through the course together, it was like finding beautiful coral at the bottom of the sea. (LaVine)
	My learning journey is very challenging. I want to improve myself through continuous learning. Just like upgrading in the game, refresh myself through continuous accumulation. In this process, there will be many difficulties, such as health problems or learning disabilities. But I will reach the peak step by step like climbing a mountain. Overcome difficulties. (Vincent)
	Climbing up step by step, although the road is not difficult to climb and also it is not easy. Even if you are tired, as long as you continue to support each other with your companions, you will definitely reach the end. So, the point is not to give up and help each other with the companions along the way. (Shane)
	It will be very difficult at first because you are not familiar with the journey. The road ahead is full of obstacles and challenges, but as you gradually master the skills, you can solve most of the challenges. There are partners on the journey, and cooperation can make progress easier. Although the journey was very difficult, it was very fulfilling to reach the summit in the end. (Chris)
	My learning journey is like sowing seeds. Although it has not yet grown completely, it will eventually grow into a towering tree through my efforts. (Jacob)
	Learning is like a travel, give me some excited things and some challenges. It is not a boring thing in my life, because i am not a only one traveller, so friend is the important part in studying. Just look forward, maybe i will saw some new scenic in this journey. (Jin)
	At the beginning of the course, I felt nervous, because it was a challenge, not only in study, but also in how to get along with my classmates. But in the two months together, I became more confident and I believe I will make progress. At last! (Tilly)
	This learning process is very hard, but I insist on it. With the help of teachers and classmates, I learned a lot and improved my English. Let me know, insist to the end, the result can make oneself satisfied. (Jason)
	My learning journey is full of unknown. I will have a lot of dangers and opportunities. I need through this experience, maybe I will defeat by some problems, but I will pass these challenges. I will clear the fog and go for what I really want and make my future bright. (Allen)

We believe that English can unlock a lifetime of experiences and, together with teachers and our partners, we help people to learn and confidently prove their skills to the world.

Where your world grows