Research Notes

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Research Notes

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Editorial notes

Welcome to issue 48 of *Research Notes*, our quarterly publication reporting on matters relating to research, test development and validation within University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations. This issue presents research undertaken within the 2011 English Australia/Cambridge ESOL Action Research in ELICOS Programme, which supports teachers working in the English language intensive courses for overseas students (ELICOS) sector in Australia.

In the first article Katherine Brandon provides the background to the 2011 Action Research (AR) Programme which sought projects to explore knowledge, skills, attitudes or practices in teaching English for specific or general purposes; monitoring student progress; and student motivation. This is followed by a summary of a recent study into the impact of the Programme for the ELICOS sector by Anne Burns who focuses on the impact on participating teachers, their institutions and more widely.

Next, six funded projects are presented by the teacher-researchers who participated in the 2011 Programme within five different institutions and several regions within Australia. The first pair of articles explore specific skills in the classroom. Sara Kablaoui and Amal Khabbaz explore the development of reading skills of Arabic English as a Second Language (ESL) learners through four specific reading strategies which helped to improve the participants' reading skills. Next, John Gardiner reports on his study in which he investigated the grammar teaching beliefs of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners in order to improve classroom instruction and student motivation.

The second pair of articles focus on aspects of learner autonomy and include the winner of the 2011 Action Research in ELICOS Award, Brendan Brown. Brendan explores ways of improving the pronunciation of higher level students, based on the students' identification of key aspects of their own pronunciation and independent practice. Adi Rotem's project sought to enable greater learner autonomy amongst EAP students, using teaching and learning strategies to observe and document learner progress along an existing independent learning continuum with students encouraged to form learner-directed study groups outside of class.

The final two articles explore assessment. Brigette Fyfe and Christine Vella report on their study into using assessment rubrics as a teaching tool in order to improve students' academic writing skills through an increase in understanding of academic conventions and building upon intrinsic features of academic texts. Finally, Megan Baker describes how she created a blog for a mixed-level class of students in order to see whether this increased their fluency and creativity in writing and whether this could be used for self-assessment.

The third round of research funded by this programme is underway and we look forward to reporting on these studies in a future issue. We finish this issue with a picture of the presentation of the 2011 Action Research in ELICOS Award.

The English Australia/Cambridge ESOL Action Research in ELICOS Programme: Background and rationale

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English Australia

English Australia is the professional association for over 100 member colleges that offer English language intensive courses for overseas students (ELICOS) in Australia. Member colleges are diverse, ranging from publicly funded as well as private institutions attached to universities, vocational colleges and high schools, to branches of international English language schools through to standalone private providers. Member colleges offer a wide range of courses, the most popular being English for Academic Purposes and preparation for proficiency exams, such as Cambridge ESOL General English examinations, and IELTS (which is jointly owned by Cambridge ESOL, the British Council and IDP). English Australia is also the peak body for ELICOS, promoting the interests of more than 270 accredited ELICOS providers in Australia.

The strategic direction of the association is guided by a 14-member Council of elected member delegates. The association's operations are implemented by a secretariat led by an Executive Director and including a full-time Professional Support and Development Officer (PSDO).

The main role of the PSDO is to further one of the association's strategic goals, that of facilitating higher levels of professional practice in member colleges. The strategic goal is achieved in a number of ways including:

- organisation and/or support of professional development at branches in Australian states

- management of a national conference, the English Australia Conference, held in September each year

- preparation of Guides to Best Practice in ELICOS, collated from member contribution (available only to members)

- twice-yearly publication of a peer-reviewed journal: the *English Australia Journal*

- promotion of the annual English Australia awards for contribution to ELICOS, contribution to professional practice, academic leadership and innovation in ELICOS.

For more information on English Australia and ELICOS, the reader is referred to www.englishaustralia.com.au

Background to the Action Research in ELICOS Programme

The English Australia/Cambridge ESOL Action Research in ELICOS Programme was set up with the following goals:

- to equip teachers with the skills to enable them to explore and address identified teaching challenges in the context of Australian ELICOS

- to share outcomes of this research in the form of presentations at local events and at the annual English Australia Conference, as well as through publication.

Through the achievement of these goals English Australia hopes to raise the professionalism of Australian ELICOS by: the development of teachers actively involved in classroom research (the programme); the development of teacher peer networks; increased teacher engagement with research and academic researchers; and more teachers furthering their formal professional development.

The Action Research in ELICOS Programme was inspired by the action research programme funded by the then Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs through its Adult Migrant English Programme in the late 1990s. With Anne Burns (now Professor of TESOL at the University of New South Wales and Professor in Language Education, School of Languages and Social Sciences, Aston University, Birmingham, UK) as key reference person a pilot programme, developed by English Australia and funded by University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (Cambridge ESOL), was implemented in 2010. The success of this programme of six projects (see *Research Notes* 44, May 2011) led to funding being offered for a similar programme in 2011 and extended to cover up to eight participants working on six projects. In both years the focus of research covered a range of topics selected by the programme Reference Group, informed by the English Australia Council. The 2012 programme has started and will comprise nine participants researching six projects relating to aspects of assessment in ELICOS.

Programme outcomes

The Council of English Australia is delighted with the outcomes of the programme to date, as outlined in a recent study into its impact (see Burns, this issue) and looks forward to further positive outcomes. English Australia would like to recognise the material and professional support provided by Cambridge ESOL, in particular by Drs Nick Saville, Hanan Khalifa and Fiona Barker and the team at the Research and Validation Group, and the invaluable contribution of Professor Anne Burns to the ongoing implementation and success of the programme.

Teacher research in a national programme: Impact and implications

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Introduction

The papers in this issue are the product of the second year of an action research (AR) programme initiated by English Australia (see Brandon, this issue) and funded by Cambridge ESOL. In *Research Notes* 44, I described some of the key concepts and practical processes of an AR approach, the main procedures used to establish the English Australia/Cambridge ESOL AR programme, and the lessons learned from the first-year pilot (Burns 2011a). In contrast, this second-year programme sought, not so much to explore the viability of teachers' interest in conducting research in their classrooms, but to embed AR as a continuing professional development opportunity for ELICOS teachers.

This article, therefore, considers how the initiative has grown and what impact it has had within the ELICOS sector. I begin by providing a short overview of the 2011 programme. I then consider briefly some of the claims made for teacher AR. The main part of the discussion, however, focuses on evaluating the impact of the programme on the participating teachers, their institutions, and the sector in which they work. The findings come from a larger study commissioned by Cambridge ESOL (Burns 2011b).

The 2011 programme

In 2011, slightly more applications were received from teachers wishing to participate in the programme than in 2010[1]. Of these applications, six projects were selected, with two projects creating a partnership of two teachers working at the same institution. In the case of each partnership, the teachers' aim was to research an area of general interest to their institutions and to gain support from each other in the process.

As in 2010, the teachers had a considerable range of experience (from 2–28 years). The majority had completed Master's-level courses, with some holding post graduate teaching diplomas and CELTA qualifications. Five were located in Sydney while two were based in Melbourne and one in Perth. They worked for a mix of university-based and private provider institutions. The teachers selected a range of research areas, drawing on their own interests and the issues they saw as the most pertinent or pressing in their teaching contexts. They included:

- using blogs for assessment
- developing learner autonomy in a university entrance course
- raising pronunciation awareness and individualising support
- using assessment rubrics as an explicit learning tool
- exploring student/teacher attitudes to and strategies for teaching EAP grammar
- investigating Arabic students' reading skills.

The programme was structured in a similar way to the 2010 pilot. Teachers met at regular intervals over a period of six months to collaborate in sharing, discussing, shaping and refining their individual projects. During this time I worked with the teachers as the academic researcher facilitating their classroom research, together with Katherine Brandon, the Professional Support & Development Officer, who administered the programme for English Australia.

Three workshops were organised during the six-month period. The first workshop, in May, consisted of one and a half days where the teachers met for the first time, were introduced to the fundamental concepts and processes of AR (see Burns 2010) and shared their initial ideas for classroom investigation. They also prepared action plans for the next phase of the research where they would go back to their classrooms and initiate the changes and strategies they wanted to introduce. The second workshop, mid-way through July, lasted one day, when the teachers focused on outlining their research activities, identifying insights, challenges and new directions and planning further steps. The final workshop, also for one day, occurred the day before the annual English Australia Conference in September. It provided an opportunity for the teachers to summarise their research to their colleagues, reflect on their findings, but also on the research experience in general, and prepare for the presentation of a colloquium about the programme at the conference. Between these workshops there were continuous opportunities to share ideas with the group and with the facilitators through email contact[2].

Claims for action research

AR, as a research-based form of professional development to enhance pedagogical practice, has gained substantial currency over the last two decades. Its influence has grown because of debates around the need to bridge the 'theory-practice

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[1] It had been anticipated that the number of applications would be larger, considering the profile gained by the pilot programme in 2010. However, the progressive downturn in Australian international education inevitably affected the ELICOS sector from 2009–11. The effects were felt in declining numbers of students leading to decreases in teacher employment and reduced availability of college funding to support additional professional development activities. There may also have been a loss of willingness, in particular, to sponsor teachers who would need to be involved in a research programme over an extended period of time.

[2] Less successful in helping the group to keep in touch was a blog set up for this purpose in one of the workshops, as the number of technical difficulties involved in accessing the site eventually discouraged us from using it. A wiki is being trialled for the 2012 project.

divide' that typically characterises the work of classroom practitioners (Clarke 1996), and to move towards more inclusive avenues of investigation that recognise practitioner research as a means for pedagogical knowledge building (Freeman 1998). Various discourses have permeated the literature which make claims for its capacity to mediate classroom innovation. These include democratising research, empowering teachers, enabling agency ownership of curriculum directives, increasing professionalism, transforming and renewing practice, and motivating change.

Advocating AR as a legitimate form of research in English Language Teaching (ELT) has increased exponentially. Edge (2001:6) asserts, 'I see the TESOL field as committed to a mode of operation for which the umbrella title, action research, is appropriate' , while Richards (2003:236) declares that 'The most powerful form of research for the beginning researcher in TESOL is action research'. Other commentators go further: 'Action research has come of age in second language scholarship' (Denos, Toohey, Neilson & Waterstone 2009:ix). While it is still the case that researchers operating from different paradigms make strong counter-arguments about the viability of AR (see especially Dörnyei 2007), it now appears to be more widely accepted, particularly as 'SLTE [second language teacher education] is being shaped by the burgeoning area of teacher inquiry' (Johnson and Golombek 2011:501). Teachers' 'theories for practice' (Burns 1996) engendered by AR are considered to have the potential to influence curriculum and pedagogical renewal in fundamental ways that are attractive to practitioners (ibid).

Evaluating impact: Methodology and findings

A mixed-methods approach, utilising both quantitative and qualitative data, was adopted to evaluate impact over the first two years of the programme. Mixed-methods approaches allow researchers 'to draw from the strengths and minimise the weaknesses of both in single research studies and across studies' (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004:14–15). By utilising data sources from both paradigms, it was considered that a more rounded picture would be obtained. Quantitative data was collected through surveys administered via SurveyMonkey. Qualitative data drew on several sources, including some that were implemented from the very beginning of the programme:

1. Data from participating teachers (workshop evaluations, discussion recordings, photographs, confirmations of invitations to present or publish, formal and informal feedback from co-teachers, colleagues, academic managers).

2. Email interviews with academic managers from participating centres.

3. Interviews with two English Australia Board members.

4. Interviews with two teachers and email communication from the other four teachers from the 2010 group.

5. Responses from delegates at the English Australia Conferences, 2010 and 2011, and from other presentation events.

The findings from the study reflect the perceptions of teachers, their teaching institutions and the sector more broadly.

The impact on the teachers

Teachers from both years of the programme strongly emphasised its positive impact professionally and personally, this comment being typical of many others:

> It's been an awesome experience . . . I honestly can't think of a negative comment – it was a really positive experience, really worthwhile. I'd recommend action research to anybody.

They placed high value on opportunities for collegial collaboration through which they felt they achieved, for example, 'inspiration – from "thinking" teachers!' and 'a wealth of great ideas from the group'. Such comments implied that they gained substantially during workshops from being able to recount the 'narratives' of their research, which helped them articulate the 'personal practical theories' that motivated their practices (Golombek 2009, Johnson and Golombek 2011).

They also stressed that they valued support at points of need – 'One of the most important points for me was method of analysing my data. Anne and the other researchers gave me some good ideas I think can help me narrow down my focus' – but at the same time sought a measure of self-reliance about personal directions for their research – 'If there's too much directive then too much to do and I felt I had to find my way.' The comments imply that support provided to teachers doing AR should be finely tuned and scaffolded. Effective support appeared to involve a combination of structure/direction and autonomy/independence, or what Fullan (2007:46) refers to as 'looseness-tightness'.

Data from more in-depth interviews with two teachers from the 2010 project summed up many of the themes expressed in the comments of all the participating teachers, suggesting that their participation had led to:

- greater consciousness-raising and curiosity about classroom practice
- deeper ability and confidence to face and resolve classroom problems
- personal satisfaction in carrying out and learning more about research
- a greater sense of credibility bestowed by doing research as a teacher
- a 'ripple-effect' from their research on other colleagues at their teaching centres.

The data pointed also to some of the challenges for teacher AR. While the teachers identified time as a problem, the comment from one teacher, that 'It's been a little bit hectic, but no big deal', also appeared to reflect a majority view that the professional benefits outweighed the additional commitments involved. Time constraints have, nevertheless, consistently been identified as one of the major difficulties facing teachers undertaking research (e.g. Borg 2010, Rainey 2000, Roberts 1998).

In addition, while the majority of teachers reported strong

support from their institutions and colleagues, organisational responses did vary. In one case, institutional sponsorship (which was required for participation in the programme) did not necessarily translate into an environment supportive towards research, and the teacher had felt isolated while carrying out her project. In two other cases, teachers reported they had experienced negative comments from colleagues who expressed surprise that anyone would want to take on the additional work of research. However, these attitudes did not seem widespread, as the data reported in the next section shows.

The impact on the institutions

From the point of view of the teachers' academic managers, the programme impacted their institutions in a number of ways. They believed there were benefits not only for the individual teachers whose participation they had sponsored, but also positive 'ripple effects' among other teachers organisationally. These included a strengthening of teachers' concepts of the links between practice and professional development, greater interest in and engagement with teacher-initiated research, and an increased sense of professionalism that related to growing awareness of a wider world within and outside the institution. The managers also reflected on the personal growth, increased confidence and motivation they had observed in the teacher researchers. One example comes from a manager involved in the 2011 programme:

> The two teachers have gained a great deal of confidence from their participation. They presented their project and described the experience . . . to the staff at [the college]. They will also make a presentation on the highlights of the project and the significance of the experience for them as teachers to the entire company in our [annual company-wide professional development day] in December.

The managers' comments also suggest that the teachers' AR fed into broader organisational curriculum and professional development plans and helped to consolidate and strengthen them, allowing in some cases for the research areas concerned to become a particular focus for programme and staff initiatives. In addition, their comments underscore their willingness to provide time for the research to be highlighted and discussed at formal and informal meetings of teachers. Their positive attitudes appear to have been significant in motivating non-participating staff and management to be influenced by the pilot programme.

The impact on the ELICOS sector

Evaluating the impact of the programme on Australian ELICOS as a whole is challenging, as it has not so far been possible to gain extensive feedback from across the sector. Nevertheless, the evidence that exists suggests that there has already been some impact nationally. In a survey of member colleges administered by English Australia in July 2011, 38% of respondents indicated that they saw the AR programme as important, and 21% as very important, while 32% responded

that they were satisfied and 21% very satisfied with the way it had been offered, although respondents also indicated they were less certain about its impact on practice. Considering that in July 2011 the programme had been in progress for less than one and a half years, was in the middle stage of only the second round, and also that member colleges had had the opportunity to access only the outcomes from the first-year pilot programme (2010), these were pleasing results. They were positive indications that the programme was making an impact at the sector level.

While a further survey designed specifically for the AR project returned a very low response rate across the sector (n=27), those who responded were from every state and territory, apart from the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Northern Territory (NT). Moreover, 77.7% of respondents were in senior positions and therefore can be said to have awareness of the ELICOS sector as a whole. In the survey, responses were sought about awareness of the programme. While 10.5% indicated they had never heard of it, 31.6% claimed to have heard of it and know what it involved, with others having heard of it, but either not knowing (31.6%) or only partially knowing (31.6%) what it involved. In relation to dissemination of the outcomes, 57.1% reported that they had attended presentations on the programme, while 50% had read the accounts published in *Research Notes* 44, 50% had attended the colloquia at the 2010 and 2011 English Australia Conferences and 42.9% had read about it on the English Australia website.

A final item sought a range of views on how respondents believed the programme was making an impact, using a four-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree), to which 15 responses were made. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect is that, while responses to impact on practice and attitudes to practice at the college and sector level tended not to denote strong agreement, there was much stronger agreement with the propositions: *It is an important option for teacher development in the ELICOS sector* (86.6% agreement or strong agreement); and *The program [sic] should continue to be a central aspect of English Australia's strategy to facilitate higher levels of professional practice* (86.6% agreement or strong agreement). No respondents indicated strong disagreement or disagreement with these items, although two indicated that they were unsure in each case. Eighty-two per cent were also in agreement or strong agreement that *It has the potential to raise the profile of ELICOS internationally.* Agreement (40.0%) or strong agreement (26.7%) was also expressed with the item: *It has increased management awareness of the positive role of research in ELICOS teaching.*

Further data was gained from interviews with two members of the English Australia Council. Key comments related to the programme's creation of new dimensions for the sector; the rejuvenation of teachers' professionalism and teaching practice; and engagement in professional development.

In relation to the sector, they referred to 'a ripple effect' and the emergence of 'new dimensions':

> It's also given us a global dimension . . . what exactly is happening in Australia . . . taking the lead again . . . it's now mentioned in every single forum I go to – Council, government meetings, state [English Australia branch] meetings. People are very, very aware of it.

In relation to rejuvenating teachers and teaching practice, one believed that:

> [AR] was always applicable for best practice but was hidden and is now bringing it out again into the open for jaded teachers. It also provides stimulation for teachers who know in most institutions there are limited career possibilities. It gives an option in their career . . . some people want something more systematic.

In addition, they referred to the stimulus to further professional development, especially that which lead to studying for higher qualifications.

> Collaborative action research is not a particularly widely used instrument in classroom teaching, but it's a precursor to going down the route of a Master's or PhD . . . gives it a global aspect.

A final data source comes from attendees' responses from the colloquia at the English Australia Conferences in 2010 and 2011. Comments on teacher presentations were overwhelmingly positive, as the examples below indicate, with delegates at both conferences listing the colloquium as a highlight of the day's programme and, in one case, of the entire conference.

> I was most pleased to attend the action research colloquium as I had considered taking part in the program [sic] when I first heard about it. . . . I now feel that I could confidently engage in some action research myself. (2010)

> Very much enjoyed the action research presentations. Please do it again! (2010)

> I think the action research colloquium is a great addition to the conference. (2011)

> [The action research colloquium] was interesting and useful for teachers. (2011)

Taken as a whole the responses in these data sets suggest that the programme has clearly made an impact in promoting the concept of research, and more specifically AR, within this sector, at least from these respondents' perspective. The programme also seems to have begun to establish itself as an important additional avenue for professional development. What is less certain is the impact it may be having on teaching practice more generally, perhaps understandably given the newness of the initiative.

Conclusion

This programme represents a substantial innovation for both English Australia and Cambridge ESOL. Fullan (2007: 46) notes that factors in innovation are constructed by a 'system of variables that interact to determine success or failure'. Kenny (2002) argues that variables include: sponsorship (clear support) by senior management; provision of adequate resources, including adequate time and staff with specialist skills as part of the project team; establishment of self-managed project teams with open communication processes; and accountability processes that emphasise documentation of learning, iterative development, periodic reporting after each cycle, and dissemination to the organisation. These are variables that are intuitively simple but socially complex in the introduction of organisational innovation and change.

The data reflected several, if not all, of these elements, which are likely to account for the positive responses revealed in the analysis. The programme secured annual funding and management sponsorship respectively from two powerful organisations, one international and the other national. The implementation of the programme was structured and planned, and its processes mediated by both academic and administrative expertise. Teachers' participation was ratified by their organisations and underpinned by enthusiastic managerial support as they conducted self-initiated projects. The learning about research that took place was systematically documented, disseminated among the team of teachers and then made publicly available through numerous presentations at different levels of the system. The reporting of the research through this journal serves to further disseminate the outcomes nationally and beyond.

Without administrative and institutional support, recourse to advice and communication with others, recognition of the initiatives being achieved, and opportunities for dissemination to interested others, AR carried out by individual teachers is unlikely to have a continuing impact, either within their own organisations or beyond. The programme reported here has been in a position to be productive from the start as it contains conditions for success which for many would-be teacher researchers are simply not routinely available.

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Developing reading skills of learners from Arabic-speaking backgrounds

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Introduction

This action research project took place at RMIT English Worldwide, a major university-affiliated language centre, which offers ELICOS courses as a pathway towards tertiary study. The project's goal was to understand some of the problems Arabic ESL learners have with reading and to develop their skills so that they enjoy reading and become more proficient. The action taken consisted of four reading strategies which were designed to address the practices we thought impeded their reading skills. We observed the students throughout the process, collected and analysed their results and received their feedback via surveys. The data suggested that a systematic reading approach facilitated by regular class-based reading activities was a valuable way to improve reading skills.

Context and participants

The research participants were all intermediate students of English for Academic Purposes, and were therefore at a B1 level of the CEFR. They were drawn from two classes, E4Q and E4C. Almost all were on a pathway to tertiary study at RMIT University. The classes included students from the People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Libya, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Brazil and South Korea. Due to the project's focus, only native Arabic-speaking students were invited to participate. When the research began, the participants from E4Q were in Week 6 of a 10-week course. As such, they participated in the research for five weeks only and were not part of the 'action taken' stage. The participants from E4C were in Week 1 of a 10-week course and thus participated in the research for ten weeks. Most of the participants already had an undergraduate degree and some had work experience in areas including engineering, education and nutrition (see participants' profile in Table 1).

The main issue of the research

The number of native Arabic-speaking students has grown quickly at the centre over the past few years, and continues to be substantial. During this time, teaching and administrative staff have observed that this cohort struggles markedly with reading, particularly in comparison with other groups of students. At higher levels, equivalent to B2 to C1 of the CEFR, the struggle with reading increases and native Arabic-speaking students fail this skill more frequently than at levels lower than B2. Many teachers have noticed that some native Arabic-speaking students have to repeat a five-week module a number of times because they do not pass their reading exam. This becomes demoralising for the student, and some teachers report that they are not sure of the best way to support the student in this case. We have also noticed that these students often struggle with reading activities in class, completing them slowly, and having difficulty understanding why some of their answers are incorrect. In addition, it seems that this group fails reading and writing to a greater extent than listening and speaking, which suggests an imbalance in the students' language learning progress.

Table 1: Participants' age, nationality and gender

| Country | E4C (Module A) Sara & Amal's class for 10 weeks | | E4Q (Module B) Sara's class for 5 weeks | | Total |
	Male (age)	Female (age)	Male (age)	Female (age)	
Saudi Arabia	2 (28*, 22)	1 (32)	3 (22, 30, 27)		6
Kuwait			2 (20, 19)		2
Libya	1 (30)	1 (25)			2
United Arab Emirates	1 (19)			1 (19)	2
Total	4	2	5	1	12

* Student withdrew from course in Week 4 to return home.

Research questions

In the early stages of the project, our research questions were informed by our own interest and ideas, as well as prior research on the topic of reading skills amongst native Arabic-speaking students of English. We were interested in the influence of Arabic students' reading processes in their first language on their reading in English. We were particularly interested in the lower level skills of letter and word recognition on which higher level skills of discourse conventions and syntax depend, an area which, in the case of Arabic, has not been the focus of much research (Hayes-Harb 2006). After attending the first Action Research in ELICOS Programme workshop and reading Burns' book *Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching: A Guide for Practitioners* (2010), our growing understanding of the methodology of action research as well as the scope of the project led us to refine our questions. We chose to focus on ways of addressing reading difficulties, as opposed to investigating the reasons behind them.

In order to understand the exact nature of the reading difficulties, we conducted two 'pre-research' activities. Firstly, we conducted small group discussions in class about students' past and current reading habits in their first language. These discussions revealed that most of the participants did and still do read regularly in Arabic. They read a variety of texts including news, sports news, religious texts, and books and articles relevant to their professions and areas of interest. The students also reported that their limited vocabulary was a main factor in their reading difficulties. Secondly, we asked each participant to individually complete a short reading diagnostic task comprising four multiple-choice and four short-answer questions. Each student was asked to say, in Arabic or English, what they were doing during the test. In addition, we video-recorded them and took notes as they worked on the task. This provided us with a very rich source of information about the students' reading habits and processes. We noticed some habits that are understood to be detrimental to reading success, such as mouthing words, running a finger along the lines, stopping at unfamiliar lexis and translating questions or words. In terms of process, we noticed a lack of a methodical approach utilising effective reading strategies. For example, the students generally did not skim the text, use prediction or cross-check their answers, relying primarily on their memory to answer the questions. We decided to focus on addressing these detrimental habits and shortfalls, and used the information gathered from the pre-research activities to guide us in refining our main question:

Will a systematic and consistent reading approach, facilitated by relevant class-based reading activities, help Arabic students become better readers, enjoy reading and improve comprehension?

Action taken

In order to investigate our research question, we decided to implement specific strategies in class aimed at overcoming the detrimental reading habits and lack of method identified in the reading diagnostic task. In Weeks 6 to 10 of the research, we regularly did four classroom-based activities with all students in E4C. We observed all students as they did these to analyse their performance and engagement. Each activity and its rationale are described below.

1. 'Drop everything and read'
   The students are required to have some kind of English reading text with them in class each day. This can be a graded reader or non-fiction book from the Independent Learning Centre, a newspaper, magazine or other text of interest. The students in our class also chose information pamphlets, science books and religious books. As often as possible, students are asked to 'drop everything and read' for 5–10 minutes of class time. After reading silently, they are asked to either write a 2–3-sentence summary of what they read, or summarise it verbally to a classmate.

   Regularly doing 'drop everything and read' could discourage students from mouthing words and pausing when faced with unfamiliar vocabulary. In addition, this strategy aims to encourage students to read more extensively which, according to Susser and Robb, enhances 'fluency and speed as well as comprehension' (1990, 2.2 Definition of extensive reading). Furthermore, the same article states that summarising what students read, in writing or verbally, increases their understanding of the text and gives the teacher an opportunity to check students' comprehension.

2. 'Read and copy'
   Using the same reading text as above, the students are asked to read for 5 minutes in 3–5-word 'chunks' and simultaneously copy this into their notebooks. They must ensure all punctuation and spelling are correct. We asked students to do this during their break between classes as well as in class.

   Regularly doing 'read and copy', both in and out of class, could help students to read in chunks and to use their eyes, rather than fingers, to follow the text. We are also aware that this strategy may help students improve their writing skills including punctuation, spelling and their ability to understand different sentence structures and collocations which are sometimes problematic for Arabic ESL learners.

3. 'Reading windows'
   Prior to the class, the teacher prepares some sheets of card with small rectangular 'windows' cut in them. Each pair of students is given a reading window card and a reading text and then a skim-reading activity is set. However, the student can only read the text through the window, which their partner moves, at a medium pace, in a downward zigzag manner. The students then swap roles and repeat. As a class, the answers for the skim-reading activity are checked.

   Regularly using 'reading windows' could help students to skim read quickly from left to right and identify key words.

4. 'Read around the room'
   For this activity, a reading text is blown up to a large size, and then cut into sections/paragraphs. The teacher sticks each section on a different wall of the classroom so they must be read in isolation. At this stage, there may be an

introduction/warm-up to the text. Otherwise, the students are asked to do some kind of skim-reading activity about the texts. They have a limited amount of time to spend at each section/paragraph, so must work quickly. Then, the answers for the skimming activity are checked, before a second activity that requires closer reading is set. The timed reading process is repeated and answers checked and discussed.

Regularly doing 'read around the room' activities could help students to skim paragraphs for the main idea and use this information to answer questions accurately and efficiently. It was apparent from the diagnostic test that the students stopped when they reached unknown words and slowly re-read the relevant section repeatedly, which is a strategy commonly used by Arabic ESL students (Alsheikh and Mokhtari 2011). Although this can be a useful strategy to understand vocabulary from context, we did not want students to do this when skimming a text as it slows the reading process and prevents them from looking at the text as a whole. As such, we thought read around the room would be beneficial as the time limit compels students to read quickly and focus on the main idea.

Analysis of data

We collected a combination of quantitative and qualitative data for the purposes of this project. We decided to compare our project participants' end-of-course reading exam results to those of native Arabic-speaking students in E4D, a non-participating intermediate class (B1 CEFR). To do this, we calculated the average exam result of the Arabic-speaking students in E4C and E4D. We found that the project participants scored almost 10% higher than the Arabic students in E4D (Tables 2 and 3). Although this is a hopeful result leading us to believe that the strategies had at least some impact on the participants achieving the required 60% score to pass the reading exam, it is still uncertain whether the strategies were the actual cause.

At the end of the 10 weeks, we asked all 15 students in E4C (n=6) to complete a survey about the reading activities. The survey was designed to find out whether students felt the aims of each activity were achieved (these were clearly stated on the survey); if they enjoyed it and whether they believed it would help them in future reading exams. We closely

Table 2: Intermediate end-of-course (EOC) reading test results for Arabic students in E4C

Name	E4C Arabic students EOC reading	
	Result /30	Result %
Samira	18	60
Anees	25	83
Musafa	27	90
Faiza	19	63
Sulaiman	18	60
	Average: 71.2%	

Table 3: Intermediate end-of-course (EOC) reading test results for Arabic students in E4D

Name	E4D Arabic students EOC reading	
	Result /30	Result %
Mohammed	15	50
Bilal	19	63
Khaled	27	90
Bader	18	60
Noha	14.5	48
	Average: 62.2%	

Table 4: Did the strategy achieve the intended aims?

Strategies	None	Some	All
Read around the room	0	2	3
Read and copy	0	4	1
Drop everything and read	0	3	2
Reading windows	0	4	1

Table 5: Did you enjoy the activity?

Strategies	Don't know	No	A little	Yes
Read around the room	1	0	2	2
Read and copy	0	0	1	4
Drop everything and read	0	0	0	5
Reading windows	0	1	1	3

Table 6: Do you think this can help you in your reading exam?

Strategies	Don't know	No	A little	Yes
Read around the room	2	0	1	2
Read and copy	1	0	1	3
Drop everything and read	0	0	1	4
Reading windows	0	1	1	4

analysed the responses of the five remaining Arabic students and found this qualitative data to be particularly enlightening (see Tables 4–6).

In summary, the survey revealed that the participants believed that some or all of the strategies' aims were met. Also, the participants mostly believed that the strategies could help them in a reading exam, though some participants were less sure about this. In addition, they also enjoyed or somewhat enjoyed the strategies, which is probably an important part of their success. With reference to our research question, this information suggests that the consistent and systematic reading approach introduced through our action did indeed assist them to become better readers with stronger comprehension and to enjoy reading.

We also asked the following open-ended questions in the survey (see example in Figure 1):

- Which of the activities did you enjoy most? Why?
- Which of the activities did you find most useful? Why?
- Which of the activities would you like to continue to use in/ outside class in future? Why?

Figure 1: Sample of student response to survey open-ended questions

Overall Opinions:

1. Which of the activities did you enjoy most? Why?

Stop everything and read because it helps to understand the meaning without knowing all the vocabulary –

2. Which of the activities did you find most useful? Why?

Read around the room because it helps to improve reading speed and skim.

3. Which of the activities would you like to continue to use in/outside class in future? Why?

Read and copy because it improves understanding while I'm writing

Firstly, most students reported they enjoyed 'read and copy' because it helped them understand writing structure, improve their spelling and increase their understanding when reading. It was also considered to be an easy and relaxing task. The majority of students thought that 'read around the room' and 'read and copy' were the most useful strategies. They found that 'read around the room' helped them to improve their reading speed and their skimming skills, while 'read and copy' assisted students to improve their writing and also trained them to use their eyes instead of their fingers. Finally, 'read and copy' and 'reading windows' were the two strategies that students believed they would continue to use in the future. The former is believed to aid students' reading and writing skills while the latter is thought to be something new, different and helpful. Overall, 'read and copy' proved to be the most popular, most useful strategy which students will keep using in class and out.

Reflection

Participating in this year's action research project has been a stimulating and rewarding experience which has not only shed light on our area of interest, but also provided us teachers with a valuable framework for exploring future challenges in our teaching practice.

In undertaking this research, our main priority was to improve students' reading skills and confidence. This issue has been quite prevalent at our centre, with both teachers and Arabic students being very aware of it. We even wondered if this perception contributed to the problem by creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. As such, we were quite pleased that our data suggested our action was successful in that the students not only passed their reading exam, but also reported that the strategies they were taught were useful and enjoyable. That said, there were almost certainly other variables which could have contributed to the students' achievement. Firstly, there was a great sense of purpose, teamwork and motivation in the class, which may have stemmed from students' awareness of our project. Secondly, a Wiki was set up where students in the class could interact with each other and us in English by chatting and responding to discussions, posting reading and listening materials and peer-correcting writing. This gave them another opportunity to refine their skills and feel part of a group. The third factor which may have added to their improvement was regular vocabulary quizzes which incorporated spelling, meaning, pronunciation and word form. These quizzes addressed the need to broaden vocabulary, identified by Arabic students in the pre-research discussion.

We have both continued to use the strategies in a systematic manner and have encouraged our colleagues to do the same, especially as a follow-up survey showed that the students continue to use some of the strategies and still feel they are useful. One wrote, 'I can read any things [sic] now without use [sic] my finger' and expressed her appreciation of the project. Another student pleasingly said that she still used reading windows 'in her mind'.

Overall, we have learned the value of formalising our habits of responding to classroom challenges by planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Additionally, we have gained a deeper insight into the reading methods used by Arabic-speaking students and feel as though we have an initial plan to help them overcome their reading problems. We have also realised that it is essential for students to feel that their difficulties are of importance and that teachers are taking steps to address them. Finally, working in a team has been of great value. We have learned from each other, shared and clarified ideas, and seen things from another teacher's viewpoint.

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Student attitudes to EAP grammar instruction

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Introduction

The purpose of my action research project was to investigate the attitudes of my students towards EAP grammar instruction in a postgraduate direct entry course which prepares students for direct entry to their chosen course at the University of Sydney. The teaching intervention aimed to address grammar teaching in both EAP writing and tutorial tasks. These interventions carefully responded to the feedback from a student focus group within my class as well as from questionnaire responses and teacher journal comments. Using the feedback, a course of action for subsequent integrated grammar-input lessons was developed consultatively with the students I taught.

Context

The catalyst for this project was a 2010 survey I conducted with 44 respondents from a range of faculties at the University of Sydney. The respondents, who were student alumni of the Centre for English Teaching (CET), expressed dissatisfaction in relation to effective expression of ideas and grammar in preparation for their future studies. Furthermore, it also became apparent after conversations with my current EAP students that 'grammar' had become a de-motivating word and seemed to be perceived as a significant barrier to the clear expression of ideas.

Grammar teaching in EAP not only interests me, but also deserves much more attention and research, particularly in relation to students' attitudes. As Zhou (2009:31) states, student opinions in relation to the ongoing debate of the role of grammar teaching in EAP are often ignored because they are not considered knowledgeable enough to understand their own learning needs. Even though Borg (2003) highlights the critical role of learner expectations in L2 grammar teaching, the often marked differences between teacher and student beliefs in grammar teaching remain unresolved. Therefore, I felt it was timely to explore these overlooked grammar teaching beliefs of EAP learners in order to improve classroom instruction and student motivation in my own classroom.

Participants in this action research were in my Direct Entry Course (DEC) class at CET. Direct entry programmes are designed to prepare international students for their post-graduate university courses. This 15-week entry programme for students wishing to study at postgraduate level is divided into five weeks of intensive writing, followed by 10 weeks of discipline-specific content. For the one Vietnamese and 14 Chinese participants in my business discipline class, acceptance to DEC required IELTS Band 6 in order to achieve the university entry requirement of IELTS Band 6.5. In terms of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scale, this roughly corresponds to B2 and high B2 respectively. Since I would be teaching these students for 10 weeks, there was an opportunity to develop a rapport which would contribute to frank student responses about their attitudes towards grammar.

Research questions

As Burns (2010:30) points out, developing focused and 'answerable' research questions was a challenging task. She recommends using 'what, why and how' to form suitable qualitative questions in action research. At first, I proposed two research questions because she also recommends that often having fewer questions leads to a more focused and manageable project. These initial questions were:

1. What are the student attitudes towards grammar teaching in the DEC programme?

2. Do the students respond better to a combination of explicit and implicit grammar teaching?

After reflecting more deeply on 'what' I wanted to know from this research, I realised that my questions would not provide this information. Although Burns (2010:30) further notes that the research questions are likely to change as the project proceeds, reformulating the research direction was difficult. The first question would provide relevant DEC programme data, but this highly specific course name was applicable only to CET. Therefore, on reflection, a minor amendment was made:

1. What are the student attitudes towards grammar teaching in EAP?

This question remained the research focus as the project progressed.

After presenting the second initial research question at the first workshop I attended for the English Australia action research (AR) programme, I became concerned that this question would not illuminate the topic. Therefore, it was replaced with another one which related to grammar instruction intervention responses during the AR cycle:

2. What grammar teaching approaches and techniques receive a positive response from students?

Although satisfied with these amendments, I realised that the reflective aspect of my research was noticeably absent. This led me to supplement the two revised questions with a more reflective third question which returned the project to the core focus:

3. How do these student preferences impact on grammar instruction?

I felt that these research questions could lead to more positive consequences for all participants, both the students and me as the teacher.

Response

In order to answer these research questions, several layers of feedback were provided to strengthen the validity of the data. The two main data sources for the first research question came from a student focus group and two questionnaires. The focus group, which was a subset of my class who volunteered to participate, comprised six students who were invited to provide verbal feedback on my teaching interventions. One initial concern regarding such a focus group based on my classroom experience was that the students may feel uncomfortable discussing grammar teaching with their teacher, but this was definitely not the case because the students freely offered their comments. In fact, I was surprised by the level of openness in the group which met six times over a nine-week period. The questions I posed to the focus group mainly comprised open-ended-style questions to encourage discussion and expression of opinions. The final focus group meeting was an open class forum which gathered final attitudes towards grammar teaching. The first student attitude questionnaire that I used (Appendix 1) was adapted from a survey of learner beliefs by Loewen, Li, Fei, Thompson, Nakatsukasa, Ahn and Chen (2009) and the second one (Appendix 2) I modified to encompass EAP grammar instruction.

The second research question relates mainly to the grammar instruction intervention responses. Although I initially planned to use basic descriptive journals for both students and teacher, a joint decision was made to abandon student journals because students considered regular journal writing to be a chore. Therefore, the focus group discussions and questionnaires provided the most valuable sources of information.

Finally, writing assessment grammar scores from my class were compared with those of the three parallel classes in the DEC programme. A comparison of these scores from different classes as well as from different teachers enabled me to observe a more complete and balanced picture of the data collection. This triangulation, combined with the other data, could provide insight into desirable grammar instruction approaches and influence my future EAP grammar instruction.

Attitudes to grammar teaching

The role of grammar in L2 language teaching has been influenced by various teaching pedagogies with differing viewpoints regarding the how, when and why of teaching grammar. Burns (2011:75) notes that this conflict has become especially noticeable since more communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches appeared. Even though defining grammar is not simple and depends on a number of factors, this research paper will adopt what Ellis (2006:84) refers to as instructional techniques that draw learners' attention to some specific grammatical form that helps them use it.

The pedagogical focus of most grammar teaching

research seems to be on teacher perspectives rather than student perspectives in EAP. This research gap guided my interest in student attitudes towards grammar teaching in EAP courses because, as Borg (2003) states, these attitudes play a critical role in the success of L2 grammar teaching. The importance of attitudes is reiterated by Byrd and Reid (1998:1) who emphasise that students' wants and needs are crucial to grammar instruction planning in ESL curricula.

After studying grammar for many years, the majority of my EAP students expressed frustration with the application of their knowledge. For example, one student, Sam[1], stated that although he knows the grammar rules and can do the exercises, transferring that knowledge to his writing is difficult. This is a familiar story for most L2 teachers and students. Therefore, to illustrate the grammar teaching preferences of my EAP students, I chose to explore their attitudes in the 'productive knowledge' areas of writing and speaking in terms of intervention effectiveness.

Student attitudes to grammar in EAP writing lessons

After forming the six-member grammar focus group, we brainstormed to determine the direction of the project. These ideas and those from the first questionnaire (Appendix 1) provided the impetus for the interventions I made in my teaching. They were followed by continual student feedback and a final questionnaire (Appendix 2) which provided sample responses in Table 1. In the focus group sessions, these questionnaire responses were explored more fully.

Prior to the interventions, students expressed frustration regarding appropriate rule application. I responded to this dilemma through error type awareness-raising activities. Students then completed computer exercises based on their most frequent problems. Despite using a highly recommended website by Mohamad (2009), students rated it poorly. The comments highlighted here are summarised in Table 1 on page 13 and are drawn from Questionnaire 2.

Computer exercises are boring! (Iris)

In contrast, contextualising grammar and providing integrated opportunities for practice was strongly preferred by the students. For example, Stephanie felt that 'detailed examples, sentences in context, interesting articles' (see Table 1) would be a positive teaching approach combining correction and interaction in a relevant task. Brian's comment about 'noticing in academic reading texts' exemplifies a recurring theme in the students' responses about what they saw as a valuable and relevant task for contextualising grammar items. These 'noticing' tasks involved discussing the contextual usage of grammatical features in course texts, followed by practising the structure, and finally producing these structures in a written report. When these integrated grammar activities were included

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[1] All names used are pseudonyms.

Table 1: Students' expressed attitudes to EAP grammar instruction

Interaction preferences	Interaction dislikes
'Face to face advice on essay I wrote followed by some exercises' – Sandra	'Discussing grammar errors in group' – Lulu
'Changing groups was stimulating' – Sam	
	Correction dislikes
Correction preferences	'Correcting in groups without teacher correction 'cause classmates don't know the answer' – Stephanie
'Group error correction' and 'correct errors by teacher' – Karen	
	Activity dislikes
Activity preferences	'Teaching tedious grammar rules without examples' – Matt
'Do some fun card-game or quizzes' – Danny	'Computer exercises are boring!' – Iris
'Detailed examples, sentences in context, interesting articles' – Stephanie	
'Noticing in academic reading texts' – Brian	

in the course, far greater student interest and participation levels were evident.

In relation to correction, Karen, from Vietnam, emphasised the desire for teacher correction in addition to peer editing. Indeed, others expressed similar preferences for individual teacher correction by indicating that a sense of certainty is lacking in tasks where group editing is required.

Attitudes to grammar in EAP speaking lessons

The students in this EAP course were required to complete tutorial speaking assessment tasks. I wanted to respond to student requests for the inclusion of the instructional elements they had highlighted: 'chances to practise structures', 'fun game-like activities', 'stimulating group interaction', 'integrated with course content', 'teacher feedback' and 'recommendations for further practice'. However, with the heavy EAP course time demands, it became necessary to incorporate extra grammar input into the timetabled course lessons.

Although including all their instructional preferences was certainly challenging, the students responded positively to my attempts at addressing grammar in tutorial tasks. Leo, for instance, who usually had difficulty expressing ideas orally, exclaimed: 'My speaking was clearer today; everyone could understand my ideas'. The students appeared to be much more aware of their own mistakes than at the start of this research project, and this new awareness translated into increased confidence levels.

The desire for a 'fun' aspect of grammar learning was also mentioned numerous times as the course progressed, and indicated a possible way to overcome the overall 'grammar is boring' attitude expressed earlier. I introduced a tutorial 'game' to practice structures, so that the incentive to perform could come from fun competition rather than simply from achieving assessment outcomes. The relevance of this approach was clearly expressed in students' feedback: 'We want more of this type of lesson'. Interestingly, it was also noticeable that at the end of the course the students' tutorial assessment performance surpassed expectations, with grammatical range being the standout criterion on which they had made advances.

Outcomes

The outcomes of my research will be illustrated by returning to the three research questions.

What are the student attitudes towards grammar teaching in EAP?

Many of the attitudes expressed by my students were similar to those found in previous studies. As Loewen et al (2009: 99) observed, the general response to studying grammar was 'It's boring'. This was also the case in my class, but contextualising the grammar instruction and integrating it with examples, practice and feedback opportunities appeared to reduce the 'boredom factor'.

Comparing student responses on their attitudes towards learning grammar in the first (Figure 1) and second (Figure 2) questionnaires, an improvement can be seen from an average score of 3.6 to 4.0 respectively. This tends to indicate that students responded favourably to the interventions.
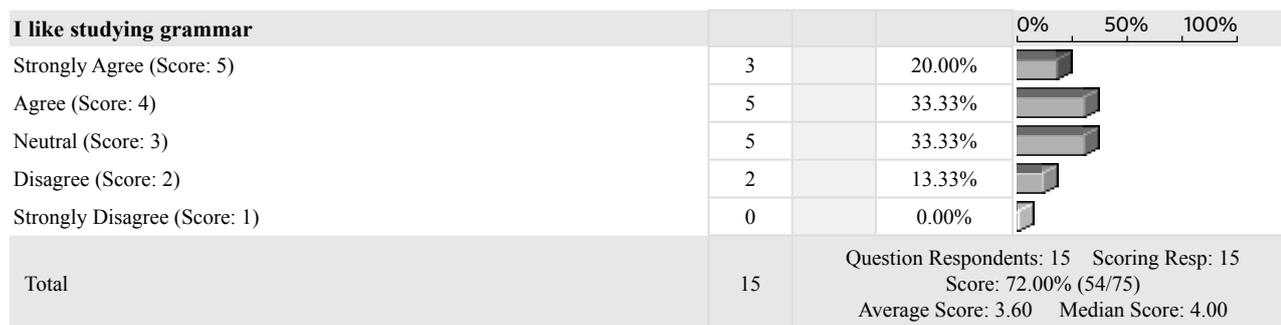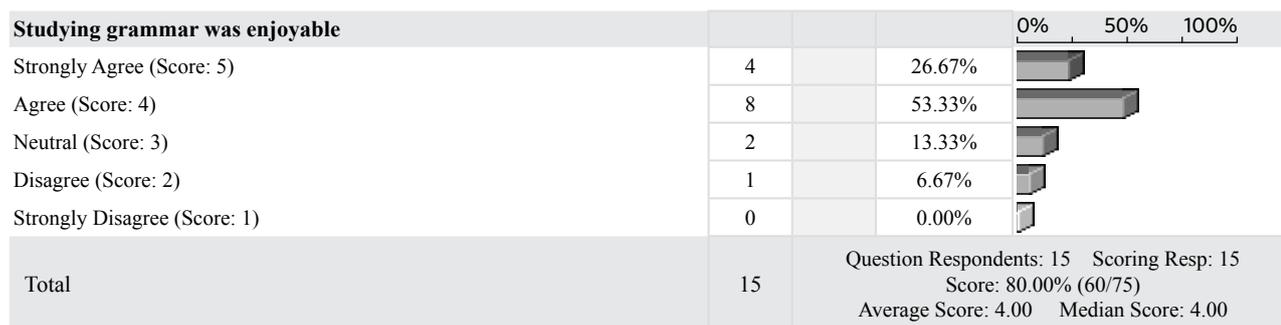
Students also expressed some notable dislikes in relation to grammar instruction. Some of these responses expressed in both questionnaires reflected a desire to avoid traditional grammar learning approaches: 'Teaching tedious grammar rules without examples' (Matt).

The student responses were remarkably similar to those reported in Loewen et al (2009:101). This common thread points to a desire by students to experience more integrative, interactive approaches.

What grammar teaching approaches and techniques receive a positive response from students?

While students voiced a desire for 'stimulating group interaction', they preferred teacher rather than peer correction alone. After probing further, they explained that their teacher was more capable and responsible for grammar correction. Following that clear feedback, my subsequent interventions had included teacher correction and group interaction.

After discussing their disappointment with the computer grammar activity, the focus group expressed a desire for more targeted (in-context) interactive activities. Loewen et al (2009:101) noted a similar negative student response to learning grammar alone. It seemed that computer activities for EAP grammar teaching would only be successful if careful consideration were given to the content and the types of interaction involved.

Figure 1: Questionnaire 1 attitude to grammar response

I like studying grammar				0% 50% 100%
Strongly Agree (Score: 5)	3		20.00%	
Agree (Score: 4)	5		33.33%	
Neutral (Score: 3)	5		33.33%	
Disagree (Score: 2)	2		13.33%	
Strongly Disagree (Score: 1)	0		0.00%	
Total	15		Question Respondents: 15 Scoring Resp: 15 Score: 72.00% (54/75) Average Score: 3.60 Median Score: 4.00	

Figure 2: Questionnaire 2 attitude to grammar response

Studying grammar was enjoyable				0% 50% 100%
Strongly Agree (Score: 5)	4		26.67%	
Agree (Score: 4)	8		53.33%	
Neutral (Score: 3)	2		13.33%	
Disagree (Score: 2)	1		6.67%	
Strongly Disagree (Score: 1)	0		0.00%	
Total	15		Question Respondents: 15 Scoring Resp: 15 Score: 80.00% (60/75) Average Score: 4.00 Median Score: 4.00	

The students' desire for examples of structure followed by practice in context was expressed repeatedly. After some discussion, it seemed that the students were asking for a combination of approaches and techniques. They responded positively to 'noticing' activities in authentic course material and enjoyed looking at structural features in texts. According to the participants, if these tasks could be followed by interactive and realistic practice opportunities with teacher correction, then the grammar teaching would be more likely to receive a favourable reaction. They put great emphasis on the words 'with teacher correction', so this point was obviously important to the students.

Games and fun activities often emerged as desirable in the students' responses. As Danny stressed, 'Do some fun card-game or quizzes'. The tutorial assessment preparation activity was mentioned as the type of activity which was both beneficial and enjoyable. It not only included noticing and grammatical structure input, but also included group interaction practice, a fun element of competition, and relevant content with detailed feedback. While I found this type of grammar teaching lesson difficult and time-consuming to design, the positive responses from students could not be ignored. The majority of participants had definite ideas about how they wanted to be taught grammar in EAP courses. While they seemed to be opposed to traditional grammar teaching approaches, a flexible combination of other more functional grammar and communicative grammar teaching approaches appeared to be desirable.

How do these student preferences impact on grammar instruction?

I found that the strongly held opinions of my students towards grammar teaching in EAP courses could not be overlooked and were important in terms of increasing their motivation and shaping my pedagogical decisions. Ferris (2004:55) maintains that student beliefs may impact on writing class success and that is a convincing reason to listen to student voices when making curriculum design decisions. In other words, students' needs and wants should be the starting point for planning instruction.

Peer-correction is an area in which teachers may hold different views from EAP students. Despite peer-editing generally being seen by students in Questionnaire 2 as a positive activity, teacher correction was considered by 73.33% of participants to be highly desirable (see Figure 3). This student perception needed serious consideration when correcting errors in my EAP grammar lessons.

The students clearly supported the inclusion of grammar in their EAP course, with a high average score of 4.40 (see Figure 4). However, as already mentioned, they desired contextualised rather than decontextualised grammar instruction with activities such as 'noticing' in authentic texts as well as practice opportunities. Kanda and Beglar (2004:108) affirm that students need to engage in 'meaningful' activities with practice opportunities.

Adopting the grammar teaching perceptions of my students seems to have contributed to positive grammar outcomes in their tutorial and essay assessments. The comparative grammar scores shown in Table 2 indicate that the participants in my action research had slightly better grammar results than those in the three other parallel classes. Although this difference is relatively minor, it seems that the students did gain increased confidence and ability to use grammar.

Figure 3: Attitude to teacher correction

When I made grammar errors, I liked my teacher correcting them				0% 50% 100%
Strongly Agree (Score: 5)	11	N/A	73.33%	
Agree (Score: 4)	3	N/A	20.00%	
Neutral (Score: 3)	0	N/A	0.00%	
Disagree (Score: 2)	0	N/A	0.00%	
Strongly Disagree (Score: 1)	1	N/A	6.67%	
Total	15	Question Respondents: 15 Scoring Resp: 15 Score: 90.67% (68/75) Average Score: 4.53 Median Score: 5.00		

Figure 4: Attitude to grammar for EAP course inclusion

The study of grammar should be part of this EAP course (DEC)				0% 50% 100%
Strongly Agree (Score: 5)	11	N/A	73.33%	
Agree (Score: 4)	2	N/A	13.33%	
Neutral (Score: 3)	0	N/A	0.00%	
Disagree (Score: 2)	1	N/A	6.67%	
Strongly Disagree (Score: 1)	1	N/A	6.67%	
Total	15	Question Respondents: 15 Scoring Resp: 15 Score: 88.00% (66/75) Average Score: 4.40 Median Score: 5.00		

Table 2: Comparison of essay grammar mark averages (out of 10)

Class	Action research participants	Parallel class 1	Parallel class 2	Parallel class 3
Average mark	6.7	6.32	6.36	6.45

Reflections

This action research process has been an enlightening experience. Through this process, I have learned to listen more carefully to student 'voices' and consider both their motivational and learning outcomes. I also became aware of how rarely students have a chance to express their views, even though it seems obvious that doing so can impact on their motivation and performance level. One student, Leo, stated: 'The study group has improved my grammar a lot'. He transformed over the two months of my research from a student who lacked grammar accuracy and confidence to someone who was able to express his ideas clearly without systemic grammar errors. This dramatic transformation has motivated and encouraged me to continue exploring EAP students' grammar teaching responses. In future classes, I plan to implement a similar focus group forum to encourage feedback. However, I also realise that gaining student trust and rapport is important, otherwise their responses might be guarded.

As an EAP teacher, the 'EAP grammar teaching problem' of the how, what and when to teach has been a constant dilemma. Although I was aware of various pedagogical approaches, the focus of thinking had been centred on debates about explicit versus implicit grammar teaching. I have since learned that students are unconcerned about these arguments, but they have strong views regarding error correction, interaction and activity type which need

to be heard. After all, student needs and wants should be the starting point for making decisions about instruction. By continuing to speak to students openly about their preferences and listening to their responses, I hope that my future EAP courses can continue to address the 'grammar problem'.

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Appendix 1: Initial attitude questionnaire (Questionnaire 1)

Student attitudes to EAP grammar instruction

Attitude to Grammar	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
* I keep grammar rules in mind when I write	○	○	○	○	○
* Studying grammar helps me improve quickly	○	○	○	○	○
* I like studying grammar	○	○	○	○	○

Attitude to Error Correction	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
* I like it when I am corrected in class	○	○	○	○	○
* I like to be corrected in small group work	○	○	○	○	○
* When I make grammar errors, I like my teacher to correct them	○	○	○	○	○

Importance of Grammar	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
* Good learners know a lot of grammar rules	○	○	○	○	○
* It is more important to practise English in real-life situations than to study grammar	○	○	○	○	○

Attitude to Grammar Instruction	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
* I like it when my teacher explains grammar rules	○	○	○	○	○
* There should be more formal study of grammar in my EAP course (DEC)	○	○	○	○	○

Complete the following:

1. I like studying grammar because

2. I don't like studying grammar because

3. I like to be taught grammar in the following ways:

4. I don't like to be taught grammar in the following ways:

Appendix 2: Revised attitude questionnaire (Questionnaire 2)

Student attitudes to EAP grammar instruction

Attitude to Grammar	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I thought about grammar rules when I wrote	O	O	O	O	O
2. Studying grammar helped me improve quickly	O	O	O	O	O
3. Studying grammar was enjoyable	O	O	O	O	O

Attitude to Error Correction	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4. I liked it when I was corrected in class	O	O	O	O	O
5. I liked checking my grammar in small groups	O	O	O	O	O
6. When I made grammar errors, I liked my teacher correcting them	O	O	O	O	O

Importance of Grammar	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
7. The best learners knew a lot of grammar rules	O	O	O	O	O
8. Practising English in real-life situations is more important than grammar practice in EAP courses	O	O	O	O	O

Attitude to Grammar Instruction	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
9. I liked it when my teacher explained grammar rules	O	O	O	O	O
10. The study of grammar should be part of this EAP course (DEC)	O	O	O	O	O

Answer the following and add an explanation:

11. I liked being taught grammar in the following ways:

12. I didn't like to be taught grammar in the following ways:

13. Rank the following grammar activities from Favourite (1) to Least Favourite (6):

Noticing in reading texts [ ]   Individual error correction [ ]   Error code writing analysis [ ]

Computer exercises [ ]   Group error correction [ ]   Tutorial grammar pattern activity [ ]

14. Do you feel that your grammar has improved in the last two months?

15. Any other comments?

Raising student awareness of pronunciation and exploring out-of-class approaches to pronunciation practice

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Introduction

The purpose of this project was to explore more effective ways of improving the pronunciation of higher level students in a private language college in Perth, Western Australia. Pronunciation, in this context, refers to the way a student verbalises a word, with effective communication being the measure of success. This project aimed firstly to raise the awareness of students regarding the factors that hinder intelligibility in their own speech, then to allow students to address in their own time one or two of the key points they regarded as most hindering their ability to communicate effectively. In this way students were encouraged to critically examine their own accent, and then take steps towards adjusting it to bring it more into line with their individual pronunciation goals.

The educational context

This research was undertaken in mixed nationality General English classes. The classes involved were studying from an upper-intermediate to pre-advanced level. On the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), this would represent a level of between B2 and C1.

The students enter the school on a rolling intake, and as such the amount of time students spend in the class is governed entirely by their own agenda and how much time they have allocated themselves in which to study. The students who took part in this study attended classes five days a week, during which I taught them for a 3-hour period in the morning.

The participants

As all the classes were General English classes, and also not of a predetermined number of weeks, the learning goals of the students themselves were quite diverse. They had all enrolled in the course with the aim of improving their English, and recognised that one aspect of this was their pronunciation. The students taking part in this project were invited to volunteer after being briefed on what their involvement would require and as such were aware that they would be expected to use their own time to complete the activities given to them. The nationalities represented were Brazilian, Chinese, Columbian, Czech, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Swiss French, Taiwanese and Thai. The first cycle was conducted with a group of three students, the second with a group of five, and the third with 11 students. The number of participants in total was 19.

Theoretical perspective

The issue of 'correct' English pronunciation has always been a contentious one. With the number of native English speakers today outnumbered by non-native English speakers by as many as three to one (Crystal 1997:60–1), the nature of the English-speaking world, and indeed the idea of what a student is seeking to achieve in improving their pronunciation, has necessarily had to change. The idea of the English language student seeking to achieve a form of pronunciation that simply replicates that of a native speaker is no longer desirable nor useful to the student themselves (Jenkins 2000:6).

The shift of the English language from a means for non-native speakers to communicate with native speakers to a tool as a shared language in international communication has necessitated a change in views of what constitutes 'good' English pronunciation. Furthermore, there are those who would argue (e.g. Seidlhofer 2011) that the link between accent and identity is such that the acquisition of an accent completely removed from the first language or cultural identity of the individual speaker is neither desirable, necessary, nor advantageous in many situations. The goal in terms of pronunciation has now become 'to achieve an English pronunciation which is usually understandable in international communication, but retains unobtrusive features of the non-English accent' (Hewings 2004:14). Essentially, the goal for student learning is to reach a level of maximum intelligibility so as to be able to communicate effectively in English. This could be said to be the driving force behind any aspect of language acquisition, but it becomes particularly pertinent in relation to pronunciation, with 'pronunciation as a – probably *the* – critical factor in unintelligibility in ILT [Interlanguage Talk]' (Jenkins 2000:20).

Pronunciation is crucial to intelligibility, but traditional concepts of teaching pronunciation are proving to be out of touch with the shifts the English language is taking as a means of international communication. Therefore, new directions in teaching pronunciation need to be considered in the classroom. In this situation, the classroom provides an opportunity for students to provide feedback to each other about what is, and is not, acceptable for intelligible pronunciation. Combined with this idea of student feedback is the necessary development of a 'critical ear' to their own pronunciation weaknesses. Analysing their own pronunciation challenges allows them to take the initiative in working on those aspects of their accent that they feel require development.

The main focus of the research

I chose to focus on pronunciation for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is something that I have become increasingly interested in over the course of my career, and also something I find myself spending more and more time on as a teacher. It strikes me as an area of teaching that is often neglected, yet it makes a huge difference in the confidence, communicative ability and motivation of students. This is particularly true of how students most commonly perceive themselves to be progressing – through their increased ability to communicate in spoken English. There are few things more demotivating for a student than repeating words over and over again to a classmate who simply cannot make the connection from sound to meaning.

Secondly, I have consistently noticed that experienced and conscientious colleagues tend to either rush over or skip pronunciation sections of course books completely. Often, the reason is justifiable – in a mixed nationality class, the pronunciation activities in a course book will usually be applicable to some of the students, but not immediately relevant to other members of the class. Colleagues I have discussed this with say that pronunciation is not something that many teachers enjoy teaching, and students can find it similarly frustrating when it is addressed in a general way.

Students encounter individual pronunciation problems virtually from the first stages of learning. However, the way pronunciation problems are addressed, and how much time is spent on them, relies on the discretion of the teacher and is also influenced by the textbook the class happens to be using. Problems often persist as students' grammar knowledge and other skills improve, resulting in high-level students with significant issues in pronunciation which have not been dealt with sufficiently. While teaching higher level classes, particularly advanced classes, I have often noticed that there can be enormous variation in the students' awareness of their pronunciation.

These issues led me to the question of how a teacher can encourage students not only to become more aware of specific aspects of their pronunciation difficulties, but also to work on their pronunciation on a more individual level. As a result, the specific questions which I sought to answer through this project were:

- How can students be encouraged to become more aware of specific aspects of their pronunciation difficulties (such as particular sounds that are hindering their intelligibility, or an inability to link words effectively)?
- Is it effective to have students practise their pronunciation outside of the classroom?

The action research intervention

The intervention itself can be broken into two distinct stages – initially an awareness-building phase centring on classroom work; then a subsequent individual phase, involving activities for the students to do in their own time. Throughout both of these stages questionnaires were used to ascertain student attitudes to the project and their evaluation of how useful it was to them. In addition, recordings were made of the

students speaking in order to objectively evaluate any changes in their pronunciation.

The first step was to determine how students perceived their accents, and whether they were aware of any particular problems they had. I was also interested in whether these problems had been addressed in classes previously. My motivation was to establish whether my suspicions were correct regarding the lack of focus on pronunciation during their studies, and also to provide a base on which to judge whether the awareness-building phase of the project was successful. To explore their previous experiences and current awareness of their pronunciation, I gave the students an initial questionnaire consisting of three questions (Appendix 1):

- What problems, issues, or difficulties do you have with your pronunciation?
- Have these problems been addressed in class at any point in your studies? If so, please describe how.
- Have you tried to work on improving your pronunciation at home? If so, how?

The students were then given a copy of a pronunciation needs analysis checklist (Appendix 2 and 3) taken from Burns and Claire (2003:29). The checklist allows students to rate accents on a number of different criteria divided into suprasegmental (speech rate, volume, intonation patterns, word linking, word stress and overall effect) and segmental areas (short and long vowel sounds, diphthongs, consonants, syllable stress and word endings). Each of these different pronunciation features is graded by placing an 'x' on a continuum relating to the particular aspect that is being evaluated.

I guided the students through the needs analysis checklist to ensure they were aware of any new terms, and knew what they were specifically listening for. The first series of accents they evaluated were those of native speakers from different backgrounds and locations. The students listened to the recordings a number of times, concentrating on a particular section of the checklist before comparing their results with a partner, and then as a class. This part of the project involved discussion about which speakers were the easiest to understand, the reasons why some were more difficult than others, features of the particular accents, and comparisons of the features. The motivation for beginning with native-speaker accents was to establish the idea that improving pronunciation was not a question of conforming to a particular standardised accent, but of aiding understanding and comprehension.

The checklist contains quite a lot of information, and includes concepts and metalanguage that the students had not come across before. In the initial activities, I felt that students became overwhelmed by the number of new terms and the multiple features they were trying to listen for. This was particularly true of aspects to do with the phonemic chart, as many of the students were either not familiar with it, or not competent in using it. Another limitation was that evaluating suprasegmental features was not applicable to native speaker accents. As these speakers were highly competent, there was very little variation in volume, word

linking, word stress and so on, as these are not usually features of differences between native accents. I overcame these problems by dividing the checklist in half, providing the students with separate lists for segmental features such as diphthongs (Appendix 2) and suprasegmental features such as intonation patterns (Appendix 3). This allowed for the linguistic terms to be introduced more gradually, and also for students to focus on only the segmental aspects to evaluate the differences between native accents.

For the first cycle of this phase of the project, the initial recordings of accents were taken from Hewings (2007), including variations of British English and examples from Australia and the United States. Other accents featured included Polish, Spanish, and Jamaican. I found, however, that the speakers featured all sounded quite similar – to the point where it was difficult for me as a native speaker to discern and differentiate their accents. All had excellent intonation, word stress, and were highly comprehensible. For the purposes of students evaluating intelligibility, there was simply not enough variation for students to evaluate.

Having found the initial recordings of native speakers difficult to use effectively to illustrate differences in pronunciation, in the second cycle I decided to use recordings from the database, 'The Speech Accent Archive' (http://accent.gmu.edu/). There were advantages in using these recordings over the ones I had previously used. Apart from offering a far greater range of accents, there was also a variety of strengths of accents and levels of English-speaking competence, allowing me to choose recordings that better illustrated how accents can affect understanding. Another benefit was that I could choose examples of accents specific to the nationalities represented in the class, giving students a better idea of some of the issues that may arise when evaluating their own accents. In this archive the same piece of text is read in each of the examples, allowing students to compare both native and non-native accents reading the same text. The script (Appendix 4) features a well-balanced mix of challenging sounds designed to cover as large a variety of English sounds as possible.

As with the first cycle, the awareness-building phase of the lesson began by looking at a range of native English speaker accents, comparing the differences between accents of speakers from Australia, Scotland, England, the United States and Ireland. After listening to each recording, students discussed their evaluations in pairs and as a class. My focus, as the teacher, was on which were easiest to understand, which were more difficult and why that might be.

From this point we again listened to a series of recordings, this time of non-native speakers. In the first cycle the accents were governed by those available in the Hewings study (2007); in the second and third cycles the speakers were selected from the Accent Archive to specifically represent the nationalities of the students taking part in the study. The accents were evaluated using the segmental evaluation checklist previously used to evaluate the native speakers, as well as the suprasegmental checklist which I introduced and explained to the students at this point. The students listened as many times as was needed in order to complete their evaluations, compared their answers with partners and in groups, and then discussed similarities and differences as a class.

Next, students were recorded reading the same text that they had listened to when evaluating the example accents. I also recorded myself reading the text to give the students a point of comparison. It is important to make the distinction here between providing a model of pronunciation as a target and providing it as a reference point. Hewings (2004: 13) states 'A target is a standard of pronunciation to which students aspire . . . as a point of reference; a model is presented as a guide . . . with the understanding that variation from this model is acceptable provided it does not get in the way of effective communication'. The aim in providing a recording of both the student and of me, therefore, was to provide a reference with which students could compare and evaluate key features and their effect on intelligibility. Students were asked to listen to the recordings in their own time, evaluate their own accent, and then indicate to me one particular aspect of their pronunciation that they would like to focus on. In all three cycles of the research the process was the same, apart from the text they were recorded reading.

Once the students had decided what they would like to work on, I prepared a package of activities for them from a variety of pronunciation text books. This package consisted of exercises, recordings and activities that practised their chosen area of weakness. Although this initially required some effort in tracking down useful activities, copies of those activities could then be filed for use with other students who wished to focus on the same area for improvement. In this way, I established a file which could be used by other teachers at the school, or on a self-directed basis by students in the future. After the completion of the activities the students were rerecorded reading the text they had first used to evaluate their own speaking. The two recordings were compared by me and another independent teacher who was not familiar with the students to see whether there were any noticeable differences in the features the student had been working on.

A final questionnaire was issued asking students to indicate whether they saw an improvement in their own pronunciation, whether they were more aware of the areas which needed work, and whether they considered there to be value in this approach to improving pronunciation.

Analysis

The students' response to the initial questionnaire suggested that they were aware of particular sounds they had trouble with, or particular pronunciation issues that were common in their first language on a segmental level. As such, a common response from Japanese students to the question 'What problems do you have with pronunciation?' would be 'The letters "r" and "l''. Students had generally done little specialised pronunciation work in class, apart from the occasional teacher correction. This was, as I suspected from what I have heard in staff rooms where I have worked, and from teachers' generally negative attitudes to teaching pronunciation, due to it being perceived as a 'soft' skill and

the difficulties of addressing individual pronunciation issues in a multilingual class. In terms of practising pronunciation independently, the students' most common approach was to listen and repeat examples of spoken English in the media, sing popular English songs, or speak along with the subtitles in films. Although these approaches would definitely help students, they lack the focused nature of activities specific to an individual's problems.

The initial phase of the awareness-building stage of the intervention, in which students listened to and evaluated native speakers' accents, produced interesting discussion in class. I directed the class towards some features of the particular accents, after asking them to guess which accent was which and to tell me why they had matched that particular accent to that particular language background or location. Unsurprisingly, students found it difficult to differentiate between the different native accents, although they did have definite ideas about which were easier to understand. The usefulness of students being able to tell apart native speakers is mainly a social one, but to be able to recognise why one accent is more difficult to understand than another has implications for when they begin to evaluate how easy their own accent is to understand. Usually, a student's ability to recognise an accent related directly to whether they had any experience with that accent at any point in their lives.

What I found after the initial awareness-raising session was that the students' focus generally shifted more towards suprasegmental aspects, with word stress, chunking, and linking sounds being the areas most requested for further practice (Appendix 6). This would suggest that raising awareness of the pronunciation features that are less commonly addressed in classrooms can help students understand that suprasegmental aspects are as important as individual sounds when it comes to comprehension. It would also seem that comparing differences in native accents (which usually vary quite a lot on the segmental level, but far less on the suprasegmental level) can focus attention on those aspects which native speakers tend to share. Students can then work on improving intonation, word stress, linking sounds and other suprasegmental features.

An interesting insight that came up at this point in the research was the role of other students in determining intelligibility in the accents of their classmates. Kenworthy (1987) discusses the unsuitability of teachers in determining intelligibility in students' speaking. Language teachers, by the very nature of their work, have developed specialised skills in adapting their listening to a variety of different accents and features that affect pronunciation. Kenworthy states 'these skills make them atypical listeners and therefore unsuitable as judges of intelligibility' (1987:20). Thus, the role of 'pronunciation expert' shifts to the student concerned and also to the other students in the class. During the initial stage, when students listened to examples of accents representing the language backgrounds of different class members, the other students were able to evaluate these accents without having to critique their classmates individually. While giving their opinions of the anonymous person in the recording, they offered valuable insights, which were probably applicable to their classmates, without

confronting fellow students and commenting on how difficult they were to understand.

Comparing the two recordings made by each student, it was noticeable that during the second recording a conscious effort was being made by each student to focus on the areas of their pronunciation which they had singled out as problematic, and in which they had chosen to do extra practice. Furthermore, in my judgement, these efforts were successful in increasing the intelligibility of their pronunciation. Recognising, however, that my opinion as their teacher and instigator of the research may inadvertently affect my judgement, I gave the recordings to another teacher from a different language school in the local area. This teacher was unfamiliar with the students and was asked to give their opinion on whether they heard any improvement. After listening to the recordings, we discussed our findings and agreed that there was recognisable improvement in the pronunciation of the students involved. This view was also corroborated by other teachers involved in the Action Research in ELICOS Programme when I presented my findings to them. A specific example of two students' improvement is provided in Appendix 5.

The final questionnaire revealed that students did find activities that allowed them to work on their pronunciation at home worthwhile, and considered pronunciation an area where they appreciated having extra practice. A common response was the request for further specialised pronunciation exercises so that the student could continue to work on their pronunciation at home.

At the beginning of this research I posed the question 'How can students become more aware of their own pronunciation problems?' I feel that this project has shown that a combination of critical exposure to a variety of accents combined with criteria on which to evaluate these accents results in raised awareness of an individual's pronunciation difficulties. The second question I sought to address was whether it is effective to have students practise pronunciation at home. Through the improvement in pronunciation demonstrated through the comparison of the two recordings (by myself, other teachers and the students themselves), before and after independent practice, I feel confident in saying that an informed independent practice is an effective way of improving pronunciation.

Reflections

It is interesting to reflect on the process of completing this action research. Some of the major difficulties were related to the structure and nature of the classes that took part in the study. Motivating the students and creating a culture of self-reflection proved a challenge, as did keeping track of students who often began and completed their studies at times inconvenient to the research. These factors were simply the reality of my classes and had to be dealt with as I saw fit at the time. An example of ways of dealing with these factors included continuing to keep in contact with a student via email if they left before the research finished, or accepting that students often had other important things they were dealing with in their lives, and as a result may not have the level of

interest in reflecting on their pronunciation that I, as the teacher, would have liked.

The developments and changes over the course of the research have been interesting, particularly in relation to refining the types of questions to ask students in questionnaires so as not to lead them towards a particular response. Once I had recognised this problem, it became necessary to restructure most of the questionnaires I had created. The evidence prompting the changes was the tendency of the students to simply agree with the examples given as answers to the questions I posed, rather than to formulate answers that were relevant to their own situation.

Another factor which may have affected the differences in the students' pronunciation between the two recordings is an increased familiarity with the text. Using the same text may have resulted in the second recording being naturally more fluent irrespective of any work on pronunciation that was done between the recordings. Although the second time a student reads something pronunciation may improve through familiarity, in this research, however, the improvement did tend to focus on the aspects they had chosen to work on. This outcome shows the effectiveness of independent pronunciation practice regardless of familiarity with the text.

Finally, one advantage this research project has had for

the school at which I work is the establishment of a self-directed pronunciation folder which is available both to teachers and students. Containing lessons and resources that I compiled for use in the project, it is a useful resource if a student requests help for a particular pronunciation issue, or a teacher decides a student needs extra practice in a particular area.

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Appendix 1: A sample of students' replies to questions (prior to awareness-raising activities)

What problems, issues, or difficulties do you have with your pronunciation?	Have these problems been addressed in class at any point in your studies? If so, please describe how.	Have you tried to work on improving your pronunciation at home? If so, how?
/l/, /r/ and 'th' sounds	No	Listening to the radio, singing in English, watching TV.
Words that sound similar	No	Speaking to my housemates
People don't understand me because my accent works wrong	Some teacher helped me about my wrong pronunciation	No
My mother tongue is Japanese, which doesn't have 'r'. It is difficult for me.	My problem is grammar	Singing a song
d, l, v, w, th, wh, ch, sh, s, c, p, ph, gl, ef, pr, ap, ab, ac, ach.	At any other place. My problems that made listener can't understand that I am say.	Yes, I have. I have English lesson pronunciation in computer. However sometime it doesn't work.
'a', 'e', 'I', 'ed' like wor<u>ked</u> beach + bitch (ea + i)	Yes I had classes in Brazil when I was a child to improve pronunciation. At Milner I had exercises to correct 'ed' and 'ea' + 'I'	Listen music and trying to sing
I couldn't make sound 'r' & 'l'. It is difficult to me. I think I have problem with 'p' & 'v' & 'f' and 'th'	Sometimes my supervisor at work said to me he didn't understand my language (words)	Sometimes I follow some movies subscribe (subtitles?). But I don't know how can I improve my pronunciation?
'l' and 'r' it is difficult to pronounce differently for me. Strong and weak sounds when I speak in long sentences.	No	Yes I have, but it didn't work anytime. I tried to pick up some words from radio.
I can't use tongue well e.g. 'lip', 'rip'.	No	I watch movie when I say follow it.
Sound of my mother language mix with the English Language (example 's'). Intonation.	No, it's a general problem.	In karaoke or following subtitles or trying to repeat what someone has said.

Appendix 2: Pronunciation needs analysis checklist (segmentals) (Burns & Claire 2003:29)

Segmentals

Problems noted with:

- vowels
  - short   _____
  - long   _____
- diphthongs _____
- consonants _____

Syllables are stressed correctly:

_____

| rarely | sometimes | often | always |

Word endings are pronounced clearly:

_____

| rarely | sometimes | often | always |

Comment: _____
_____
_____

Appendix 3: Pronunciation needs analysis checklist (suprasegmentals) (Burns & Claire 2003:29)

Suprasegmentals

Speech rate is:

_____

| very slow | average | very fast |

Volume is:

_____

| very low | average | very loud |

Intonation is:

_____

| very slow | average | very loud |

Word linking and flow is:

_____

| too flat | average | too marked |

Content word stress is used effectively:

_____

| not present | sometimes present | always present |

Overall effect on the listener is:

_____

| rarely | often | always |

Comment: _____
_____
_____

Appendix 4: Script for the recordings in the Accent Archive (http://accent.gmu.edu/)

Please call Stella. Ask her to bring these things with her from the store: Six spoons of fresh snow peas, five thick slabs of blue cheese, and maybe a snack for her brother Bob. We also need a small plastic snake and a big toy frog for the kids. She can scoop these things into three red bags, and we will go meet her Wednesday at the train station.

Appendix 5: Comparison of individual pronunciation weaknesses before and after intervention

	Weakness and evidence (recording 1)	Correction and evidence (recording 2)
Student A (Japanese)	Lack of linking sounds between words resulting in stilted and unnatural sounding speech.	Evidence of word linking apparent through use of techniques such as eliding the consonant /h/ between 'ask' and 'her'
Student B (Brazilian)	Mispronunciation of consonant sounds: /θ/>/d/, /ð/>/t/	Evidence of a shift towards differentiating and correctly using /θ/ and /ð/ particularly in the words 'these things'

Appendix 6: Comparison of perceived problems and features chosen for individual practice

Student number	Perceived problems before intervention	Problems recognised as significant after intervention
1	/l/, /r/ and 'th' sounds	Intonation patterns, word linking, sentence stress
2	Words that sound similar	Word linking and flow
3	d, l, v, w, th, wh, ch, sh, s, c, p, ph, gl, ef, pr, ap, ab, ac, ach.	Consonant clusters
4	I couldn't make sound 'r' & 'l'. It is difficult to me. I think I have problem with "p" & "v" & "f" and "th"	Intonation, word linking, stress
5	'a', 'e', 'I'. 'ed' like work<u>ed</u> beach + bitch (ea + i)	Short and long vowel sounds, 'th'
6	Sound of my mother language mix with the English language (example 's'). Intonation.	Word linking
7	I can't use tongue well e.g. 'lip', 'rip'.	l/r pair, word linking and flow
8	My mother tongue is Japanese, which doesn't have 'r'. It is difficult for me.	Intonation patterns

Developing greater learner autonomy

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Introduction

The purpose of this action research project was to explore the nature of learner autonomy among my students. The project was conducted at the University of New South Wales Institute of Languages (UNSWIL) involving students engaged in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme. All students completed the University English Entrance Course (UEEC15), an advanced 15-week intensive course providing a pathway for those seeking to gain admission to tertiary programmes at UNSW. The demanding nature of the UEEC15 means that students are required to demonstrate autonomy in the consolidation of their learning. The teaching and learning strategies associated with my action research project were therefore based on a desire to assist students in building confidence in themselves as successful self-directed learners. They involved creating the optimal space for students to explore, question, reflect, apply, practise and rehearse. Within this environment learners were required to complete set tasks without teacher intervention for increasing periods of time. This was done within the context of well-defined boundaries, with clear direction and strategic support.

Issues giving rise to the research

A philosophy underpinning my approach to teaching and learning is the popular belief that independent learners are much more likely to succeed in their studies than those students who are heavily dependent on the teacher (Cotterall 2000, Oxford 1989, Sinclair 1999, Teaching Expertise 2004, Yang 1998). The notion of independence or learner autonomy in this context can be defined by a 'capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action' (Bhattacharya and Chauhan 2010:376). These attributes are not typically well represented among UEEC students, who often maintain attitudes towards their role in the learning process which are not always compatible with the culture of learning they experience in Australia. The focus of this action research project was to examine this belief by observing and documenting the progress that UNSWIL-UEEC15 students made along the independent learning continuum. I began to experiment with the idea of supportive frameworks which are non-stifling, empowering, awareness raising and confidence building. I hoped to find that within this environment students would feel freer to take risks, make mistakes and reflect openly. This project was therefore done with a view to developing better independent learning skills and strategies as a means of ultimately fostering greater learner autonomy.

Research participants

During the course of this action research project I was one of a number of EAP teachers working with four separate UEEC15 classes. I taught students in the areas of academic writing, presentation skills and research skills. I spent approximately 40 contact hours in total with each group. Table 1 provides a basic profile of the ELICOS students participating in the study.

Table 1: Action research participant profile

Course of study	University English Entrance Course (UEEC15)
Number of participants	67 ELICOS students
Level on entry	IELTS equivalent: 6.0 overall grade; 5.5 writing/CEFR equivalent: B2
Required level at exit	IELTS equivalent: 6.5 overall grade; 6.0 writing/CEFR equivalent: a high B2 (see www.CambridgeESOL.org/about/standards/cefr.html)
Nationalities	Approximately 70% Chinese; 30% other nationalities including Iranian, Thai, Brazilian, Vietnamese, Turkish, Colombian, Indonesian and Mexican

Data collection and classroom interventions

Data collection was approached using both qualitative and quantitative tools. I gathered data for analysis using classroom observations, semi-structured interviews and student surveys (Burns 2010). This data informed my research and served as the basis for ongoing reflection, planning and classroom action.

Observations and classroom video recordings

Gathering data was initially approached by conducting classroom observations and video recordings. I monitored my students as they engaged in a range of self-directed learning activities embedded in the UEEC syllabus. I hoped that determining the level of student engagement with the independent learning activities they encountered would raise awareness of the abilities that they needed to target to further enhance their skills in this area. It was also hoped that this process would highlight areas for potential revision and improvement within the design of the independent

learning activities themselves. In this way, the objective of the first phase of my action research was to gather data in response to my initial research question: 'Which independent learning activities do students find most engaging?' Table 2 outlines the independent learning activities used as a basis for my observations.

Table 3: Student comments regarding their attitudes to independent learning

Student	Comment
A	*Independent learning is not similar with my old habits in my country . . . we have an education directly dependent.*
B	*Independent learner is very difficult for me because I don't want to learn by myself.*
C	*I think the most difficult is finding what I need to learn.*
D	*I want to do my independent study . . . I don't know how.*
E	*When you have some questions it's very difficult to solve those problems by yourself.*
F	*Independent learning means students learning by their own without the help from teachers, thus, students couldn't get feedback, in this way I really doubt the learning efficiency.*
G	*Maybe the teacher will give us the clues . . . at the beginning of the UEEC class . . . let us know how the step to do the independent study.*

Initial analysis of my observation notes and classroom video recordings revealed that my students appeared well engaged with the variety of independent learning activities they encountered in the UEEC course. I found that learners seemed willing and able to apply themselves to given tasks and to demonstrate persistence when a task appeared challenging. My students appeared poorly equipped, however, to:

- make decisions about their own learning goals and manage their time effectively in order to achieve them

- learn individually or collaboratively without frequent correction from a teacher

- predict likely learning outcomes of a task or activity and transfer learning to other areas of the curriculum

- engage effectively in self-assessment and peer-assessment activities

- see mistakes as an essential part of the learning process and accurately reflect on their own learning progress.

What emerged as the most significant obstacle for students seemed to be a perceived lack of self confidence in terms of their ability to capitalise on the meaningful learning outcomes derived from engaging in self-directed learning activities.

Table 2: Independent learning activities used as a basis for student observations

Learning activity	Rationale	Classroom example
1. Decision-making activities	Encourage students to identify their own learning needs; make choices about learning goals and appropriate learning strategies.	Personal goal-setting exercises (i.e. what, when, how?).
2. Collaborative learning activities	Create opportunities for learners to mentor and actively learn from each other; redirect control from teacher to learner.	Group work activities and think–pair–share tasks.
3. Critical thinking activities	Expose ideas to challenge and debate; link theory to practice.	Simulations, debates and analytical discussions.
4. Reflective learning activities	Assess past learning and plan for future action.	Formative assessment activities (e.g. self and peer assessment using the UEEC writing and speaking rubrics).

I set out to investigate this concern further by conducting interviews with consenting research participants. The process of carrying out observations was continued with my four classes throughout the 15-week period of my action research as a means of monitoring student progress and guiding amendments to my approaches.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted from Weeks 3 to 6 of the course in order to further explore the outcomes of my observations and to gain a deeper understanding of the attitudes held by my students towards:

- the role of teachers and learners
- the value of independent learning skills and strategies as a means of achieving desired learning outcomes
- perceived challenges faced by students in developing themselves as autonomous learners.

In total I interviewed 19 students drawn from across my four classes; audio-visual recordings were made of many of the sessions so that the content could be analysed in detail. I asked them to describe their attitudes to self-directed learning and make suggestions about how I could assist them to meet challenges they were having in adapting to their new learning environment.

My first research question was modified after initial observations and analysis of the data produced during the interview process. It became clear that barriers to engagement in self-directed learning were not necessarily rooted in the nature of the independent learning activity but rather in the student's own perceptions of themselves as capable autonomous learners. I found that students perceived independent learning as a process of working alone without the support of teachers or fellow students. I discovered that they lacked the confidence to trust their own abilities to succeed as autonomous learners and that this attitude seemed to be undermining their capacity to effectively engage with independent learning activities, particularly outside the classroom. Table 3 on page 25 highlights some comments made by my students during the interview process.

After analysing the interviews and reflecting on my observations, it occurred to me that even when self-directed learning activities were embedded in a curriculum and delivered within the context of a sound pedagogy, learners may fail to fully benefit from them due to a perceived lack of self-efficacy. The next cycle of action research was to be based on a revised version of my initial research question. My new focus was now a question of: '*How can I assist my students to build greater learner autonomy through the process of developing confidence in their own self-directed learning abilities?*' Guided by a new perspective, I set out to develop learner autonomy within the context of a more supportive, collaborative learning environment. I began experimenting with the means of developing the attributes of the *expert learner*, through 'confidence, motivation and persistence' (Quality Improvement Agency 2008:14) by focusing first and foremost on the learning environment itself. I considered which kinds of environments were suboptimal and what goals could be set to improve these environments. The actions implemented in the classroom to achieve these goals are outlined in Table 4.

Student survey questionnaire

Finally, a comprehensive questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was conducted in Week 11 of the course, designed to

Table 4: Research interventions creating the optimal environment to foster learner autonomy

| Suboptimal learning environment	Goal: optimal learning environment	Action: interventions and classroom strategies
Failure to adequately set the agenda and provide necessary information	Provide clear instructions regarding task, timeframe and expectation	• Engage learners in setting objectives and negotiating learning goals • Highlight connections between learning strategies and learning goals • Outline required preparation for future lessons
Intervening too often or for too long	Trust learner capacity and foster learner independence	• Allow students to complete set tasks without teacher intervention for increasing lengths of time • Replace instructions and explanations with questions and elicitations • Encourage students to self access learning resources
Not intervening when necessary to overcome obstructions to learning	Offer appropriate guidance and support based on learner needs	• Use questions to redirect or refocus discussion if required • Include regular formative feedback • Help to foster effective learning routines and strategies
Demonstrating a lack of sensitivity to cues suggesting problematic group dynamics	Promote collaborative learning and facilitate functional group dynamics	• Establish independent study groups • Monitor group dynamics and assist negotiation of group work ground rules (e.g. roles, responsibilities, outcomes) • Promote culture of social support
Failure to promote self awareness or to accommodate different learning styles	Encourage self-reflection and promote awareness of individual learning styles (e.g. visual, auditory, active, theoretical etc.)	• Extend choice of strategic behaviours available to learners • Expand conceptual understanding of the contribution appropriate learning strategies can make to independent learning success • Facilitate experience and practice in problem solving
Failure to adequately recognise and reward learner autonomy	Acknowledge autonomous learning efforts and give formative feedback within an appropriate timeframe	• Recognise students for contributing ideas, exercising freedom of choice, making decisions and taking risks • Follow up on independent learning tasks – make them a focus for reflection and analytical discussion in class

capture both qualitative and quantitative data; I received 59 responses. By this time many of the participants in my action research project had become collaborators in the research process, openly reflecting on their own progress. I found this development heartening because, as noted by Dam and Legenhausen (1999:90, cited in Cotterall 2000:112), 'learners' ability to reflect critically on their learning is a measure of the effectiveness of the learning environment'. This insight suggested to me that I was making a degree of progress towards my research objectives.

Analysis of the survey results confirmed my ongoing observations; students' perceptions of their abilities to take charge of their own learning process had greatly improved. This was particularly evident in the domain of collaborative learning as well as participant engagement with the Self-access Learning Facilities hosted on UNSWIL's Learning Management System, MOODLE (see http://moodle.org/). Figure 1 outlines the details of these findings; it shows the percentage of participants who described themselves as feeling confident in their ability to engage with specific independent learning activities. While confidence is not necessarily synonymous with competence, throughout my research it proved to be a foundation on which the development of skills and abilities could grow unimpeded by feelings of self doubt and fear of risk taking.

Outcomes

In response to these findings I set about placing what students saw as the more intimidating tasks within the context of a learning environment that they had identified in the survey as less threatening. Figure 1 demonstrates 80% of participants felt confident in their ability to learn collaboratively and self access learning resources using MOODLE. I therefore began to conduct activities, such as peer assessment, within the well-established collaborative study groups that had been operating successfully since earlier in the course. This approach produced a positive result as participants demonstrated greater confidence in evaluating fellow study group members; this was due perhaps to the pre-established social support network they provided. I capitalised on students' enthusiasm for self-access facilities (see Figure 1), enabling them to more confidently explore the strengths and weaknesses of their work outside the classroom. I believe MOODLE was effective in this role because of its capacity to help students feel supported and somewhat guided during the process of learning

Figure 1: Student perceptions of confidence in specific independent learning abilities
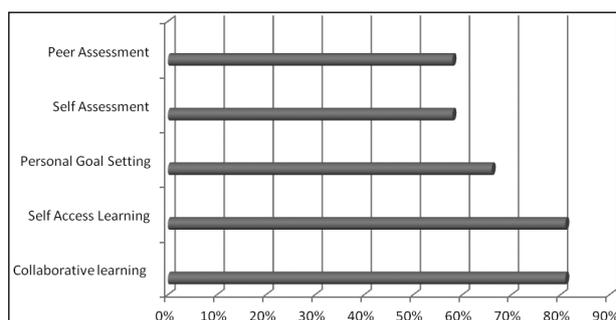
independently. This encouraged students to link theory to practice and resulted in deeper student engagement with self-directed learning resources.

By the end of the 15-week UEEC course my observations revealed students to be confidently engaged in purposeful learning activities, based on a plan of action, with an improved understanding of the direction and scope of their learning tasks. They acknowledged these strategic learning behaviours as beneficial, becoming more actively involved by exploring, clarifying and practising. Table 5 illustrates the progress that my students made along the independent learning continuum by the end of the course.

Table 5: Action research student outcomes

Early observations ➜	Final observations (post-intervention)
• Learners were lost; continuously sought guidance and confirmation	• Learners appeared better able to complete set tasks without intervention from the teacher for extended periods of time • Learners could self access learning resources • Learners demonstrated a sense of responsibility for the attainment of goals
• Learners struggled to identify learning outcomes or to transfer learning to other domains	• Learners contextualised information and could generally transfer learning to other areas of the curriculum
• Learners did not think laterally	• Learners felt more confident initiating and modifying strategies and goals to promote their own learning
• Learners felt isolated and did not value collaborative learning	• Learners demonstrated a sense of trust and offered support to each other
• Learners valued only formal and summative assessment tasks	• Learners gave more attention to the process of learning itself

During this project my students and I found that at the centre of our enquiry into the nature of learner autonomy, there exists the important notion of choice. Self-directed learners must make choices about their strategic learning behaviours. Creating an open, transparent and supportive learning environment is an important step in the direction of fostering the type of confidence and self-efficacy required to make these decisions. I implemented a series of classroom strategies (outlined in Table 4) and saw evidence that doing so helped to achieve my research objectives. In the light of this process, I found that in order to develop greater learner autonomy among my students, my role is one of a *learning facilitator*. This is a teaching role that involves fostering an active culture of learning based on a foundation of strategic support and liberating, or non-stifling, structure (see Table 4).

Reflections

Since completing this project, I would begin any discussion about the development of effective language skills with a discussion about the development of effective learning skills. My project began as an examination of how learners engage with different independent learning activities and became an

experiment in scaffolding autonomous learning by explicitly focusing on confidence-building strategies and the learning environment. I discovered that students need strategic support in order to build their capacity to develop by fostering an optimal learning space for meaningful autonomy to take root and flourish.

Meaningful autonomy requires a sense of empowerment on behalf of the learners in order that they may influence the way they approach and complete their learning. This understanding made me conscious of how important it is to act early and deliberately to equip learners with the appropriate meta-language necessary to communicate ideas and reflections about their learning needs. Once this increased understanding was achieved I found it much easier to engage my students as partners in the process of building greater learner autonomy. Another significant implication that emerged for my students and for me was the importance of building trust based on a shared identification of targets that are negotiated and agreed. A genuine understanding on the part of the student about what is expected and how learning will be assessed is an essential element in this process.

Participants involved in my study emerged with a strong commitment to the value of collaborative learning. My students and I came to recognise that 'learner autonomy is synonymous with autonomous interdependence' (Ryan 1991:227 cited in Bhattacharya and Chauhan 2010); this suggests that teachers and students are both stakeholders in a process with a common purpose. It also demonstrates the positive learning opportunities that can be associated with well-designed and supported group work activities. This insight has implications for teachers and students in respect of the value of establishing learner-directed study groups conducted outside of class. Such study groups, based on functional group dynamics with clear learning objectives, help to promote a network of social support as well as a strong culture of independent learning. I found these networks to be very important in achieving my goal of building learner confidence and dispelling the myth that independent learning is a solitary process.

I decided to undertake action research in order to throw light on my teaching practices and, indeed, really valued the contextualised focus of the examination. I cannot say with certainty that the actions I have taken are responsible for improving the learning outcomes of my students as there are clearly many variables involved in this process. I can say, however, that involvement in this process has inspired me to continue to develop and experiment with my approaches to teaching and learning with a view to fostering good learning habits and greater self-efficacy among my students.

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Appendix 1: Student survey questionnaire

UEEC Independent Learning Survey

Answer the following survey questions by circling a response. Choose either agree, disagree or undecided. Add additional comments where possible in the space provided.

1. I enjoy group-work activities (collaborative learning).	**Agree Disagree Undecided**
2. I believe group-work activities offer important learning opportunities and help to promote learning success.	**Agree Disagree Undecided**
3. I feel confident in my ability to participate effectively within a group learning environment.	**Agree Disagree Undecided**
Comments regarding group work / collaborative learning activities in the UEEC:	

4. I like being asked to assess and evaluate my own work.	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
5. I believe self-assessment activities offer important learning opportunities and help to promote learning success.	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
6. I feel confident in my ability to assess / evaluate my own performance.	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
Comments regarding self-assessment activities in the UEEC:			
7. I enjoy having the opportunity to assess and evaluate the work of my classmates (peer-assessment).	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
8. I believe peer-assessment activities offer important learning opportunities and help to promote learning success.	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
9. I feel confident in my ability to assess / evaluate the performance of my classmates.	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
Comments regarding peer-assessment activities in the UEEC:			
10. I enjoy using Self-access Learning Facilities as part of a self-study plan (e.g. MOODLE, learning resources in the L.S.U, online educational programs etc).	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
11. I believe that using Self-access Learning Facilities outside of the classroom offer important learning opportunities and help to promote learning success.	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
12. I feel confident in my ability to use Self-access Learning Facilities effectively.	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
Comments regarding Self-access Learning Facilities in the UEEC:			
13. I like keeping a reflective learning journal to record thoughts and experiences regarding my own learning progress.	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
14. I believe that the process of self-reflection will assist me to create my own learning plan and may help to promote learning success.	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
15. I am confident in my ability to create my own learning plan and set my own learning goals.	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
Comments regarding reflective learning activities in the UEEC:			
16. I am having difficulty adjusting to the independent style of learning encountered in my UEEC class.	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
17. I am having difficulty handling the work load in my UEEC class.	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
18. Overall, I am confident in my abilities as an independent learner.	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
Challenges that I face as an independent learner include:		*(give details)*	
My teachers could assist my development as an independent learner by:		*(give details)*	

Assessment rubric as teaching tool: Learning how to 'tick all the boxes'

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Introduction

We teach academic English students in university direct entry courses. These preparatory courses enable students to meet English entry requirements for degree courses at the University of New South Wales. Our decision to undertake action research was underpinned by our students' perceived inability to improve upon their academic writing skills. Our research project was an attempt to help our students develop their understanding of academic conventions in writing and build upon their ability to use the features that are intrinsic to academic texts. To this end, new courseware intended to unpack the writing assessment rubric was piloted and students' progress monitored. At the core of both the new courseware and our intervention was a commitment to *assessment for learning* approaches. This approach involves teachers and learners using assessment to enhance learning. This guided our decision to implement self and peer feedback in a more rigorous and systematic way. We used think-aloud protocol methods, interviews and a questionnaire to monitor student progress, and recorded students' grades.

Context

The University of New South Wales Institute of Languages offers a University English Entry Course (UEEC); a high-stakes direct entry path to the University of New South Wales (UNSW). Academic English students taking part in the UEEC have received offers to undertake postgraduate studies at UNSW conditional upon successful completion of the programme. The course is designed to prepare students for all the rigours of postgraduate studies, including academic writing.

It is, however, in the area of academic writing that our students most often have difficulty meeting expectations and some fail to fulfil assessment criteria to a satisfactory standard. As the students are about to embark upon studies that rely heavily on academic writing skills as a means of evaluation, it is imperative that they reconcile their current performance with the standards that will be requisite to their postgraduate studies.

We teach in the tertiary sector where a growing awareness of the role of explicit goals and standards in student learning (Smith and Gorard 2005) has led to greater transparency, and provision of course learning outcomes and assessment criteria is gradually becoming the norm. The UNSW Institute of Languages curriculum specifies use of a standard writing assessment rubric for all written assessment tasks, the full version of which is provided for students as a standard component of their course notes. However, as Rust, Price and O'Donovan (2003) note, merely supplying a copy of an assessment rubric is unlikely to result in full understanding by students. In order to gain both tacit and explicit understanding of a rubric, and to improve learning outcomes, students need to understand what the rubric means and use it as a core element of the syllabus (Carless 2011, Sadler 2010). Thus, the UNSW Institute of Languages English for Academic Purposes curriculum documentation specifies a systematic approach to 'unpacking' the often complex language included in the criteria.

The aim of our action research project was to develop a series of reflective lessons to take the assessment rubric beyond its principal function as an instrument of measurement and utilise it as a teaching tool. Further, by designing and delivering workshops that asked the students to refer to the assessment criteria and evaluate their own and their peers' writing, we hoped the formative elements of summative assessment tasks could be improved upon, and that students would comprehend and ultimately address each of the criteria in the rubric.

Literature review

Our approach was directed by current *assessment for learning* (AfL) theory and practice. AfL approaches to teaching and learning advocate a clear understanding of learning goals and standards by both teachers and students (Davison and Leung 2009:397 citing Assessment Reform Group 1999; Wiliam, Lee, Harrison and Black 2004:1). AfL has the 'overriding aim of improving student learning' (Davison and Leung 2009:399) and involvement of students in the feedback process, and in self and peer assessment in particular, is recognised as integral (Carless 2011; Wiliam et al 2004). Evaluating peer samples enables students to develop improvement strategies that can be applied to their own work (Sadler 1989:121). Through this process students develop the skills to monitor their own work independently (Carless 2011).

It was therefore our contention that if we took a four-pronged approach to teaching academic writing skills it could result in deeper understanding by our students of the features intrinsic to academic texts and ultimately lead to improvement in their assessment outcomes. This approach had at its core analysis of model texts. This was coupled with the use of the rubric as a teaching tool. Student writing was 'workshopped' with a focus on self and peer assessment in order to develop greater self-confidence and self-reliance.

Research focus

Our aim was to test new teaching approaches for academic writing and to explore implications for best teaching practice and the new UNSW Institute of Languages curriculum design. Our research questions were:

- Will use of the assessment rubric as an explicit teaching tool in the classroom lead to improved understanding of each criterion?
- Will this improved understanding lead to better outcomes in academic writing tasks?

Participants

The participants in the research were Academic English students taking part in a 10-week University English Entry Course (UEEC) at the University of New South Wales Institute of Languages. All participants were international students, from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds and had achieved a minimum IELTS score of 5.5 in writing and an overall score of 6.0 (CEFR B2 level). Thirty-two students from two UEEC classes agreed to take part in the research. Their average age was 24 years. We conducted the research with two separate classes we taught.

Interventions and data collection

The UEEC course commenced mid-April 2011. We delivered the curriculum without any intervention for approximately four weeks. During this period, the students received 20 hours of classroom instruction in academic writing skills covering all the overarching areas stipulated in the assessment rubric, such as task response and grammatical accuracy. Our decision to allow a considerable period of time prior to intervening was based on the need to establish what gains in academic writing were being made as a result of an overall improvement in students' language skills.

The first data collection event, an in-class essay-writing assessment task, took place in the fourth week and was followed by a whole-class think-aloud protocol (TAP), which we recorded and transcribed (see TAP question prompts in Appendix 1). The TAP approach is retrospective – participants are asked to 'think aloud' recalling their thoughts and actions immediately after having completed a task. The second data collection event, a mid-term essay-writing exam, took place one week later. We used the essays from both assessment events, together with the analysis of the TAP, to inform our intervention and future data collection procedures. We recorded the grades for the in-class writing assessment task and mid-term writing exam and selected 12 students across our two classes for cross-case analysis. We chose four students with high scores, four with mid-range scores and four with low scores. We interviewed these students throughout the research period.

We next delivered a series of four reflective lessons; one per week over four weeks. These lessons were designed to target each of the four over-arching descriptors and corresponding criteria of the assessment rubric (see the reflective lesson excerpt in Appendix 2). In each lesson we addressed an assessment criterion explicitly and taught relevant lexical, grammatical and structural items using a 'text as model' approach to illustrate good examples of each. Students engaged in individual and peer review workshops and redrafted their own writing as part of this process. We delivered these lessons as part of the regular UEEC *Writing Workshop* classes. Following the delivery of the reflective lessons we interviewed the 12 selected students to gather feedback on the effectiveness of the intervention, to establish their perceptions regarding its value and to ascertain their understanding of the assessment process (see Student interview questions in Appendix 1). All the students then completed three further summative writing tasks and we collected and recorded the grades. Once again we used TAP methods to gather data pertaining to the thought processes of the students when completing writing assessment tasks and we recorded individual student interviews for analysis.

All participants completed a summative questionnaire in the final week of the UEEC (see Appendix 1). This was to measure to what extent the students were able to comprehend what the rubric required of them in their writing, and to ascertain whether they perceived their ability to achieve these standards had changed.

Outcomes

We collected both qualitative and quantitative data to gauge the effects of our research intervention on the students. Student interviews, think-aloud protocol question prompts, a summative questionnaire and student grades were used to gather data.

Analysis of individual student interviews

There was a clear relationship between what was taught in class and students' responses to the interview questions. In the early weeks of the course, for example, we focused on genre and structure in written text. Subsequently, the students were able to talk about these aspects of the assessment criteria quite confidently in the first round of interviews. The second round of interviews yielded additional information, and showed that the students were aware of how to approach writing implications and recommendations for conclusions, which were the focus of the latter part of the course. The students pointed out '. . . according to the tendency [sic] you can make assumptions and implications . . . like a critical thinking for you'. This was further confirmed in the second TAP event. When asked to identify the features of academic writing they had considered, a unanimous response was '. . . implications, recommendations, suggestions and advice'.

Although we had worked with the students to analyse the assessment rubric in class, and used it as part of the peer review process, the aspects highlighted verbally by the teacher during these sessions appeared to have made the greatest impression, as evidenced in the interview transcripts. For example, after a lesson focused on written transition signals, some students mistakenly identified the rubric as indicating

they should '. . . use all the transition signals . . .'; others responded with comments such as 'actually I don't know, but I follow the structure you taught me'.

In the first interview, the students seemed to hold the view that teacher evaluation of student writing was principally based on one or two key aspects of the rubric – although the four criterion sets are, in fact, weighted equally. In the second interview, the students were more at ease discussing the rubric and their comments pointed towards a better understanding of its components. Students referred to more aspects of the rubric as significant to assessment, which indicated their increased awareness of how it is used. Student responses included 'I think [teachers] want to see if the student knows how to express the ideas', '. . . how to answer the question . . . in terms of academic language and in terms of answering the question', '. . . it's meaningful, it's logical, it's cohesion . . . things like that'.

Analysis of students' comments indicated that they placed great importance upon the assessment rubric and that they used their knowledge of the criteria to guide their writing. Statements such as the following '. . . I could follow that [sic] steps in order to do well my structure for my essay' and 'So when I know what you expect to see in my writing exactly, I feel more confident to write' strengthen the argument put forward by Carless (2011) that it is imperative for criteria to have meaning beyond the assessment tasks. Students can, and indeed should, be encouraged to apply criteria in their own independent learning.

The final questions in both rounds of interviews focused on how the students would use the rubric to prepare for future assessment tasks. Responses such as 'I know some things in your course . . . but I can't, I don't know how to apply and maybe I apply in the wrong way' indicated they still lacked the skills to apply knowledge of the rubric in their independent learning with confidence. We have judged this finding to signify that while our action research yielded some excellent data on best teaching practices, a second round of intervention would have enhanced the gains this project can claim. This intervention would be designed to embellish our approach to include additional scaffolding in the process of 'writing to an assessment rubric'.

Analysis of trends from whole-class think-aloud protocols

The initial TAP that immediately followed the first assessment event included the prompt: 'What features of academic writing did you think about during the test?' The responses mostly identified the 'genre' of the essay, not any features of academic texts per se. However, after the second and third assessment events, the students identified discrete features, such as transition signals, vocabulary, implications and linking words as well as structures, such as cause and effect, problem–solution, comparisons and contrasts, summaries and the 'correct' structures.

Very few students drew up a plan prior to writing in the first assessment event. However, this number increased markedly in the second assessment event with almost all respondents claiming to have drawn up a plan. When prompted to recall the elements the students had planned for, the response was largely concerned with 'ideas', 'structure' and 'logical development', all explicitly referred to in the rubric.

Editing was carried out by very few students in the first and second assessment events. Those who did edit their work predominantly identified grammar as the aspect they attended to. However, for the third event, many claimed to have left sufficient time for editing and singled out a variety of areas they addressed, such as vocabulary; correct words, use of 'about' and 'approximately' for numbers, academic language; hedging; grammar; and correct word forms, verbs and prepositions. These are areas of focus in the peer-editing workshop prior to the assessment event.

Following the first assessment event, which was carried out prior to the research intervention, the students were asked if they had considered the assessment rubric or how their work would be assessed. Although they indicated that they had given thought to both, their responses generally nominated all the elements or features of academic writing that the students had long believed formed the basis of any assessment; that is, grammar, vocabulary, word count and handwriting. As word count is not referred to in their achievement goal band and handwriting is not mentioned at all in the rubric, this is strong evidence that most students, although having access to the rubric, had not given it close consideration and were operating under sometimes false assumptions.

Analysis of summative questionnaire trends

Thirty research participants completed the summative questionnaire (see Appendix 1). Examination of the questionnaire responses indicated that the majority of the participants (85% and higher) felt that analysing the assessment criteria aided their writing performance across all four criterion sets of the rubric. The second section of the summative questionnaire asked students to recollect the criteria listed in each of the four criterion sets in the assessment rubric. Tables 1 and 2 show the students' responses to the question: 'What details do you remember about each of the four criterion sets?' The results show a somewhat confused understanding of the organisation of the rubric. With the exception of 'addresses all parts of the task' (82%) and 'organisation as appropriate to genre' (79%) all other criteria cited were placed with less than 50% accuracy. The data this section yielded therefore needed to be studied more holistically.

When responses are analysed irrespective of their correct placement according to the criterion sets, the results are far more promising. Justification for our further analysis in this way lies in the belief that it is more important for the students to understand and recall features intrinsic to academic texts than to understand their relationship with the criterion sets.

Viewed in this way, more than half of the students were able to nominate at least one important feature in each of the criterion sets: 'addresses all parts of the task' (82%) in the first; 'organisation as appropriate to genre' (79%) and 'use of cohesive devices' (82%) in the second; 'attempts to use less common vocabulary' (70%) in the third and 'uses a mix of simple and complex sentences' (57%) in the fourth set.

Further, the students remembered examples of the features such as transition signals, linking words, referencing and theme – rheme relationships, which were not mentioned in the rubric. Similarly, students recalled synonyms, avoiding

Table 1: Percentages of criteria correctly identified and placed in the appropriate section

Task Response	Organisation & Cohesion	Lexical Range & Accuracy	Grammatical Range & Accuracy
• Addresses all parts of the task (82%) • Coherent and logical development (22%) • Evidence of analysis (19%)	• Response well organised and appropriate to genre (79%) • Use of cohesive devices (39%) • Transition signals (48%) • Linking words (35%) • Cohesion between sentences and paragraphs (20%)	• Attempts to use less common vocabulary (38%) • Synonyms (29%) • Academic register (30%) • Word choice and collocation (10%)	• Uses a mix of simple and complex structures (38%) • More complex structures attempted but not always correct (22%)

Table 2: Percentages of criteria recalled by students, regardless of accuracy of placement

Task Response	Organisation & Cohesion	Lexical Range & Accuracy	Grammatical Range & Accuracy
• Addresses all parts of the task (82%) • Coherent and logical development (36%) • Evidence of analysis (19%)	• Response well organised and appropriate to genre (79%) • Purpose of sections clear – central topic within each paragraph (13%) • Ideas within sections developed logically (20%) • Cohesion between sentences and paragraphs (20%) • Links could be unclear but does not impede meaning (7%) • Use of cohesive devices (82%)	• Attempts to use less common vocabulary (70%) • Word choice and collocation (32%) • Academic register (39%) • Hedging (27%) • Avoiding ambiguity (12%)	• Uses a mix of simple and complex sentences (57%) • More complex structures attempted but not always correct (32%) • Errors that do not interfere with meaning (29%)

ambiguity, hedging and complex academic vocabularies although these were not specified in the rubric. These, along with other features, were covered during the reflective lessons. Such responses further confirm that the teachers' instruction or lesson focus seem to hold more weight, i.e. are more easily retained, than the written rubric itself.

The final section of the summative questionnaire asked the 30 participants to respond to four open-ended questions (see Table 3 on the next page). This section yielded a variety of remarks and opinions. With reference to question 1: 'How useful do you feel analysis of the assessment criteria was?' 81% of the respondents responded positively, 15% found it somewhat or partially useful, while the remaining 4% did not see any value in the approach. Responses to the second question, 'Did it help you improve your academic writing skills?' indicated that 95% felt that it was linked to improvements in their academic writing. Asking the students to identify in what ways their writing had improved generated a range of responses; the four recurring comments can be characterised as follows:

1. A better understanding of the structure of essays.
2. A guide to allow for the achievement of better marks for their writing.
3. A better understanding of the features of academic texts.
4. The rubric highlighting the mistakes students were making previously.

As can be seen in Table 3, the first three questions produced overwhelmingly positive responses. In contrast, the final item, which invited students to provide any comments (they) would like to share, highlighted some of the limitations of the intervention. It was generally felt that more time, more analysis and more 'specific examples' were needed in order to maximise the effectiveness of using the rubric, both as a teaching tool and as an assessment tool. In many ways, this was the most useful data to be gleaned from the summative questionnaire as it will shape the second round of intervention, in our continuing endeavour to improve learning outcomes in academic writing skills.

Analysis of student grades

It is heartening to report that all the students who took part in the action research project passed the UEEC course. In addition, six of the 12 tracked students achieved a B− overall, which is comfortably above the course requirement of a C overall, and a further five of these students gained a C+[1].

Reflections

As Academic English teachers, we were well versed in using 'text as model' approaches together with self and peer analysis in writing classes. However, in previous classes our students typically expressed the opinion that they did not find peer and self assessment valuable as most did not trust their ability to analyse their own work, preferring the teacher to be the sole appraiser of their writing. The intervention changed this view for most of the participants in this research project.

Teaching the features of academic texts has always been the cornerstone of our approach to academic writing. However, student input from our research indicated that

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[1] An overall grade of 'C' over five UEEC writing assessment tasks is the UNSW writing requirement for entry into university courses.

Table 3: Responses to open-ended questions

How useful do you feel analysis of the assessment criteria (AC) was?	Did it help you improve your academic writing skills?	In what ways?	Please provide any comments you would like to share.
• Useful (13) • Very useful (8) • Partly (4) • Not useful (1)	• Yes (22) • Not really (1)	• To understand the structure of essays (6) • To get a good mark (6) • To answer questions, to improve, to avoid mistakes (6) • To understand the features of academic texts (3) and their components (2) • To be used as a guide (2) • To improve cohesion (2), improve task response (2) use of transition signals (1) critical thinking (1) analysis (1) • To improve my focus on writing (1) • To understand my teacher's expectations (1)	• Helped me use academic language (4) • The AC is too general, we need specific examples, both of academic and non-academic texts (4) • The AC is hard to follow (2) hard to apply to my writing (2) hard to understand the difference between the bands (2) • More time and repetition analysing the AC (3) • Peer analysis followed by consultation with teacher really useful (1) • AC difficult theory but because we have time to analyse it, understand it, apply it, practise, get feedback and see improvement, it's interesting (1)

this instruction is more meaningful when it is delivered in conjunction with analysis of the rubric. More importantly, this technique provides the students with knowledge of the standard of writing expected of them and on what they will be judged in their writing.

Our research showed that the language used by the teacher when unpacking the assessment rubric appears to be more easily retained by the students than just the written criteria themselves. This is evidenced in the think-aloud protocols, the interviews with the students we tracked and the summative questionnaire. Our awareness of this trend will inform our future instruction, which will incorporate opportunities to 'verbalise' elements of each criterion.

An absolute measure of the effectiveness of the assessment rubric as a teaching tool was limited by the difficulty of controlling for other factors that may have had a direct effect on the students' performance in academic writing tasks. These may include, but are not limited to, students' learning styles; pre-existing strengths and weaknesses in academic writing; the 20 hours of instruction per week in all academic skills areas provided by the University English Entry Course; and the amount of self-directed learning the students undertook amongst other variables. Attempts to clarify to what degree the use of the rubric as a teaching tool had an impact on the quality of their writing therefore rest heavily on the interviews and the questionnaire.

It appears that the participants found use of the assessment rubric as a teaching tool valuable in many ways and believed that the reflective lessons helped to guide and inform their writing, ultimately resulting in the achievement of better scores. Many expressed relief at finally understanding '. . . where I have been going wrong'.

As evidenced in the summative questionnaire, the students were very clear regarding the limitations of the intervention. Their need for 'more time' can be addressed by commencing analysis of the rubric earlier in the course, giving students

more opportunities for analysis, more time for self and peer assessment and the inclusion of more 'specific examples' of the features addressed in the assessment criteria. In addition, we need to address the students' request to compare the three achievement bands: the one they must achieve success in so as to commence postgraduate studies, and the bands above and below it.

The opportunity to undertake action research was valuable in a great many ways. It has made us more thorough and systematic in our teaching practice. Perhaps one of the strongest benefits of the project was going through the process of exploring the theory in a more rigorous, formal way. We were confident that assessment for learning approaches to unpacking the rubric coupled with peer evaluation tasks would be effective. We were committed to acting on these approaches in scheduled lessons, and we worked to overcome student reticence in evaluating each other's work. We have now personally seen the benefits of this methodology in action, which will give us the confidence to build upon this approach in the future.

For the University of New South Wales Institute of Languages, this project was an opportunity to evaluate some of the newer curriculum elements in a systematic way, and to build upon the formative aspects of the assessment process. Our participation in the project has also raised awareness amongst staff about the potential value of action research.

On a final note, it has been extremely satisfying to see our students make sufficient gains in their writing to confidently take up their offers of postgraduate studies at University of New South Wales. In addition, it is heartening that the students were able to discern the methods and the rationale at the core of the intervention. As one astute participant pointed out . . . '[the] assessment criteria [is] difficult theory but because we have time to analyse it, understand it, apply it, practise it, get feedback and see improvement, it's interesting'.

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Appendix 1: Data collection tools

Think aloud protocol question prompts

1. What did you think when you first saw the questions?

2. What features of academic writing did you think about during the test?

3. Did you plan or draw up an outline?

4. Did you edit your work? If you did, what were you looking for?

5. Did you think at all about how it would be assessed? Did you think about what the marker might be thinking about when they were looking at it?

Student interview questions

1. Teacher interviewing 'tracked' students regarding their approach to assessment writing.

2. What's the first thing you do when you begin an assessment task?

3. What do you think is important to get a good grade?

4. What qualities do you think the teacher marking your essay is looking for when s/he decides your mark?

5. What do you remember about the Task Response section of the academic writing assessment criteria that we analysed in class last week?

6. What insight did this analysis give you with regard to completing assessment tasks for academic writing?

7. How will this change your approach for this week's academic writing assessment event?

Summative questionnaire

1. I feel analysing the assessment criteria helped me . . .

    a. understand how to answer academic writing task questions

    b. understand how different academic texts and essay genres are structured

    c. understand the difference between academic and non-academic vocabulary

    d. understand what grammar structures are appropriate in academic writing

    e. understand the features teachers use to decide my mark

    (Strongly Agree / Agree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree / No Opinion)

2. What details do you remember about each of the four criterion sets?

    (Task Response / Organisation and Cohesion / Lexical Range & Accuracy / Grammatical Range & Accuracy)

3. How useful do you feel analysis of the assessment criteria was? Did it help you improve your academic writing skills? In what ways? Please provide any comments you would like to share.

Appendix 2: Reflective lesson excerpt

Writing assessment criteria

Task 1: Discussion

Turn to the *UNSW Institute of Languages EAP writing assessment criteria* in the *Assessment Details* section of your student notes.

1. Have you seen or used similar criteria before? If yes, for what types of task?
2. Read the headings and sub-headings in each of the four columns. Check any unfamiliar vocabulary.
3. Locate the row for a mark of 7. In the Writing Workshop lessons you will review each of the descriptors in this section in detail.

Task Response criteria

Read the overarching statement that describes a mark of 7 as it relates to *Task Response*. Today you will analyse each of the descriptors in this section.

Task 2: Pair work

Read the *case study analysis* question as it relates to the first criterion.

Addresses *all parts* of the task

1. What is the purpose of the task?
2. What does the question ask you to do in your writing?
3. In order to achieve this, what components / parts does the answer require?

(*Section removed*)

Peer review

Task 5: Group work

Use the *Task Response* writing assessment criteria to evaluate the writing samples provided by your teacher.

1. Carefully read the criteria for each mark.
2. Match each writing sample to the mark that best describes it.
3. Be prepared to explain *why* the mark you have chosen is the most appropriate choice for each of the samples.

Creating a blog for self-assessment

MEGAN BAKER GENERAL ENGLISH TEACHER, NAVITAS SYDNEY

Introduction

According to a survey I completed, 'Technophobe or technogeek? Or somewhere in between?' (Dudeney and Hockly 2008:160), I am a 'technogeek'. I love using technology in my classroom to help engage students and make their language learning enjoyable. It was in this spirit that I applied for the English Australia Action Research Programme with the question I wanted to investigate, 'Does blogging help students develop creativity and fluency in writing?'.

I was teaching a mixed-level class of Pre-Intermediate students from various countries. Prior to starting the project, I noticed that many students in General English classes do not respond well to classroom activities that involve producing writing. In response to this problem, my research intervention was to set up a class blog. I was interested to discover if the blog helped with fluency and creativity in writing tasks. *Creativity* here is defined as the ability to express ideas in writing despite limited language proficiency, and *fluency* as the ability to use learned language. Over the course of the programme the project evolved as I responded to the needs of this class and found ideas that my assumptions could not have allowed me to see before engaging in the cycles of action

research. I collected data for the project by taking notes during class discussions about the project and one-on-one feedback sessions with each student. I held these feedback sessions after we completed three tasks. At the end of the research I also gave the students a survey about the tasks[1].

Students at Navitas can enrol for a period of one week to a year. In this Pre-Intermediate class (approximately A2 on the CEFR) I taught students who were enrolled from 8–40 weeks. The average age of the students was 25 years old. I taught this class for two days per week for two lessons each day, each of which was 2 hours long. During the research three new students joined this class and three students finished their course before the research was completed. Two students were absent during the blogging classes. To describe the research, I have included results only from the students who were able to participate in the whole project (eight students). The learning goals of the students ranged from basic communication in English to future academic study plans, which included preparing for IELTS, and Academic English.

Introducing students to blogging

To begin my investigation, I wanted to determine what students thought about blogging and I used the following class discussion questions to get their views:

- Do you know what blogging means?
- Do you read any blogs? If so, which ones?
- Are you interested in creating your own blog?
- Do you have access to the internet at home?
- Do you have a personal plan to improve your English writing skills?

In response to these questions, all the students said that they understood blogging and had read a blog in their own language. One student had used blogs for her research about Australia prior to arriving as a student. With the exception of one Japanese student, the whole class answered 'yes' to being interested in creating their own blog.

There are hundreds of free sites offering student-based blogs. We used the most simple and clean-looking blog site (blogger.com) which has no advertisements and which requires users to have a free Gmail email account. I set up individual blog pages for each student and then sent them an email inviting them to join the blog page as an author of the blog. When the students accepted the invitation they were able to edit their individual page of the blog.

In order to allow students time to get familiar with the blog and learn some of the features, I set them Task One, which involved writing some information about themselves: *Write about yourself (your name, age, what you like doing, your favourite food etc.) and upload a photo.* Most of the students had already posted comments on the internet before (for example comments on Facebook), therefore the actual posting of information was easy enough for them, with the exception of Student C who was posting for the first time. Once set up on the blog students wrote freely about themselves. The students

produced natural and spontaneous language without checking with me before posting, which indicated to me at this stage that they seemed enthusiastic about the idea of blogging. That two Japanese students needed assistance to set up a Gmail account surprised me in the light of my assumption that all Japanese students would be technologically aware. After students had read each other's blogs they added comments and opinions. For example, Student T wrote: '*I sometimes go to the cinema at the weekend and my favourite film is Twilight*', to which Student M responded, '*I also love the twilight saga. ☺*'. The following examples show students' uninhibited creative personal expression (Note: these examples have been copied directly from student blogs and contain grammar and spelling errors):

> *I have one brother, Leonardo. He is four year older that me and have a dog is my life, Natasha. My ambitions are learn english very well, finishing my university, working and travel.* (Student M)

> *When i 18,i was very fat about 106kg .So i want want keep fit,than i contact dance. From at that time,I fell in love dance. My favourite food is ice crem.* (Student B)

> *Im married and my hasbands name is Wu.We havent a kids.I like playing computer games and I like cooking.* (Student T)

The students demonstrated an ability to learn about the new interface of blogs within minutes. The immediacy of the blog encouraged the students not to 'think' too much before writing. The anticipation of posting a live blog and photo seemed to wipe away any fears of writing on paper in English. The students enjoyed reading each other's profile and finding out personal information such as the age of their classmates. I felt positive about the project after Task One despite encountering some technical challenges to start with and realising the low digital literacy of my Japanese students. I provided verbal and online error correction by highlighting their spelling and grammatical errors on the blog. This technique was unsuccessful as the students did not respond to the error correction even though it was explained. They did not seem willing to go back and look over the posts they had already made to correct them. I decided that in Task Two I would print out the work to be corrected on paper.

Task Two

Task Two was set as homework. Students were asked to write in a diary style about their weekend or to choose any topic of interest to them. We brainstormed a few examples: *My friend, My holiday, My country*. Only two students actually managed to complete this homework. These entries are set out below as the students wrote them:

> *And Colombia everything is contrary, it draves and walks by the right and the person driving is on the left. Are the good things of meet other countries that always there is something new to learn.* (Student M)

> *Today I got up at 6.50 a.m. and I went to school at 8.10a.m. because I will exam today. Ive got a bad mood.I tested the writing and grammar in the morning, than the reading and listening in the afternoon. I felt very difficult because I didnt study a lot of.* (Student T)

In both examples the students show attempts at describing complex ideas despite their pre-intermediate skill level. They also show their understanding of use of the present perfect and past tenses. In our class discussion, when asked why Task Two was not completed two students shared their feelings of anxiety about the blog, and three students were clearly unwilling to do homework – online or off. Another two students were having problems accessing the internet at their homestay accommodation or their apartment and felt disadvantaged by this. I noted the following comments in our class discussion about Task Two:

> *I do not like it and I do not want to do it! I do not know how to use it, I do not have a PC* (Student C)
>
> *Maybe facebook is better than a blog* (Student B)
>
> *I cannot use gmail, I do not understand – I do not want to do it in class* (Student A)

Task Three

Task Three was set as a pairwork activity where students were required to find an interesting picture on the internet and describe what they thought happened before the picture was taken and what happened after. The aim was for the students to practise writing using appropriate tenses. The task was completed in the computer lab and not on the blog; instead students were required to send an email to me with their description and photograph. When they finished the task I printed their descriptions and in the following lesson I asked the students to try to edit and correct another pair's writing. In a class discussion about Task Three, the majority of the students said they felt pairwork was more fun and the writing they produced in pairs reflected creativity.

The following example was written by Student C and Student B who chose a picture of a man with no hands writing on a footpath with his foot. *'His went to schools and speech to talk to kids anything impossible if you want do it'*. This sentence, though full of errors, still manages to communicate a substantial idea, demonstrating an innovative approach to describe what the man achieved. It continues: *'When he six years ago had accident than hand was break'*. Showing awareness of tense, students M and T made this correction: *'When he was 6 years old so broke hands'*. This task allowed students to collaborate to produce a piece of writing that required fluency in story-telling. Based on the results of this email task and a class discussion after the task, students felt less inhibited working in pairs.

Another example was Student M and Student T describing a picture of the actors from the TV show *Friends*. Their writing showed an understanding of how to use past and future tenses. They described how the actors looked excited because they were planning a wedding for the friend in the future.

At the end of the three tasks, I gave the class a survey (Appendix 2) to find out what the students thought of the tasks. Five students said they thought writing a blog was too difficult and they did not know enough grammar. From the responses to the questions I think that the task of producing writing from experiences was too challenging for this particular class, with the exception of two students, and that for students at a pre-intermediate level blogging was difficult. The enthusiasm from the first task was not as high for Task Three although two students showed progress and enthusiasm for the blogging and continued with their blog after the rest of the class stopped. *'The blog is good idea because I can practise my English'* (Student M). I continued to check the blogs of these two students and below is consideration of their progress.

Case studies

Despite the fact that the enthusiasm of the class for writing blogs seemed to be waning, the two students who had completed Task Two did continue to write three entries on the blog, which they completed as homework. The other students lost interest when they were required to do more writing that was 'freer practice' – this was due to a combination of factors including lack of confidence and technological fears. Creativity in their expression despite their limited range of vocabulary is evident in these Task Two blog postings. Student M's blogging highlights how a blog provides a platform for self-directed fluency and creativity. This student's blog is like a stream of consciousness. She wrote the most out of all the students and continued to blog when the other students stopped. Her topics expanded along with her range of vocabulary and the complexity of her sentences. Below are some examples from her blog.

> *June 4 – I study English in navitas, I like reading, painting, rollerblanding and walk and my favourite food is rice with chiken. June 9 – Sydney is different from Colombia. Here people walk and drive on the left and the driver goes to the right of the car. People drive very fast and in the neighborhood it didnt see anyone on the streets. June 18 – It is a country passionate by the music, the literature, the sports and the art.*

Student T wrote:

> *June 8 – I tested the writing and grammar in the morning, than the reading and listening in the afternoon. I felt very difficult because I didnt study a lot of. I went to the supermarket when I finished class. I bought some fruit and vegetable and I helped a people take train because he doesnt look anything. I like help people and I will very happy!!!*

Her confidence and writing fluency improved, even over this short period, and she was able to use longer sentences, more complex phrases and a range of vocabulary. Student T enrolled for an IELTS examination during the project and required an IELTS Band 5 (CEFR B1 level). She achieved this score partly because of her consistent writing practice on a variety of subjects. While the blogging activities alone cannot take all the credit for her improvement, the focus on writing and regular practice seemed to help Student T's writing fluency. Some of the topics covered in her practice writing included Chinese folk stories and Chinese cuisine – topics commonly found in IELTS questions. Throughout the research this student made progress in her ability to self-correct and took on the challenge of self-assessment for her IELTS exam. She expressed her attitude towards the blog as, *'I think class blog was very good'*.

Enhancing writing and self-assessment

I decided to introduce the idea of self-assessment after the three tasks. Students were highly critical of their skill level and had little awareness about self-assessment as a tool to motivate, learn and take responsibility for their learning aims. In order to raise their awareness, we discussed the question 'How do you know if your English is improving?' as a class activity. Those students who had written regularly (on the blog or paper diary) said that they could look at their entries and '*see their improvements*'. A majority said they could '*feel their improvement*'. There was a tendency to say '*My English is very bad*' (Student C) even when improvement was evident from writing test results. For example, Student C, who wrote a paper diary daily, showed improved understanding of the use of the past tense and the difference between singular and plural forms. Her written test results increased by 12% over four weeks, as did her confidence to express thoughts and feelings and describe experiences in writing. This student did not want to blog but was very keen to present me with a paper diary at the start of each lesson for correction.

Does blogging help with fluency and creativity?

According to research studies undertaken on blogging and second language learning, the results for higher level students undertaking this activity are generally positive (Matthew 2011, Mompean 2010). Blogs can lead to increased amounts of writing, networking, exposure to ideas in an international context and increased confidence in writing. Within my class, students who continued to write (whether using paper, blogs or email) achieved higher results in their end-of-month writing tests. The experience of blogging together as a class led to increased cultural understanding and networking (all the students became friends via Facebook as a result of the project). Towards the end of the research, although I heard sighs of disappointment when I told the class we would be heading to the computer lab for part of the lesson, this group of students learned useful skills for a workforce where one may be expected to know how to use Gmail. It would be interesting to continue the research, as it could produce more revealing data if undertaken with higher level students and across a number of classes where students are able to express their attitudes with more precision. My research has raised many questions about the role of blogs and technology in English language classrooms and more exploration is needed to see how blogs can be used most effectively in my classroom.

Reflections

Burns describes how, in action research, we engage in 'opening ourselves up honestly, and sometimes courageously, to the problems, dilemmas, possibilities and opportunities in our teaching contexts' (Burns 2010:144). I realised that at the start of the project I was expecting an 'ideal' group of students who would collaborate, share and use blogs for writing, while all the time improving their fluency and creative expression. Action research allowed me to make deep observations that some of my teaching strategies and philosophies were not helpful for my students. Whether the outcomes were positive or negative there were always insights to be made as I reflected on what I was finding.

Having one-on-one discussions with students leads to a depth of understanding that a teacher cannot gain in general class discussions. For example Student A struggled with cultural misunderstandings within the class and felt isolated by classmates, leading to anger and resentment. This student did not like my style of teaching or doing any kind of computer-based activity. Eventually we were able to resolve the classroom dynamic. I may not previously have been able to find out the level of her frustration or monitor this had it not been for focused one-on-one time. What I discovered was that if student attitudes towards learning language are more traditional, or 'paper based', then teaching writing using online tools will take time, patience and have limited outcomes to begin with. By listening carefully to my students I was better able to respond to their needs and make informed decisions about the best way to encourage fluency and creativity in writing. Learning to communicate and express oneself in another language is confronting, challenging and frustrating – adding technology into that mix is not always appropriate or helpful.

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Appendix 1: Class list

Country	Enrolment	Age	F/M	Name
Brazil	8 weeks	26	F	Student L
Korea	8 weeks	26	M	Student P
China	10 weeks	27	F	Student T
Japan	12 weeks	21	F	Student C
Taiwan	12 weeks	25	M	Student B
Colombia	24 weeks	21	F	Student M
Japan	38 weeks	30	F	Student A
China	40 weeks	20	F	Student R

Appendix 2: Survey 1

SURVEY

Yesterday we discussed computer based writing tasks. 11 people in the class said they did not like doing computer-based activities. I am interested to know why you liked/didn't like the activities.

These are the activities we have done in the past four weeks. Please tick your answer.

Blog – Introducing yourself	☐ I liked it	☐ I didn't like it
Writing about your weekend	☐ I liked it	☐ I didn't like it
Describing a photograph	☐ I liked it	☐ I didn't like it

I didn't like the writing activities because (please tick your reason)
☐ The activity was too difficult
☐ I don't like typing
☐ I don't like the computer rooms
☐ I felt rushed
☐ I didn't get enough feedback from my teacher
☐ I prefer paper
Other reason _____

If it was difficult please circle why:
☐ The activity was too hard, I don't know enough English vocabulary
☐ The activity was too hard, I don't know enough English grammar
☐ The activity was too confusing
☐ The links were too complicated
Other reason _____

If you liked some things about the computer based activities (please tick the box)
☐ It helps me to learn how to type
☐ I can change what I write
☐ I like the teacher emailing me
Other reason why you like using computers to learn English
I like it because _____

What activities do you think you might like on the computer?

☐ Homework
☐ Puzzles
☐ Games
☐ Research
☐ Presentations

Presentation of the 2011 English Australia/Cambridge ESOL Action Research in ELICOS Award

The 2011 English Australia/Cambridge ESOL Action Research in ELICOS Award was given to Brendan Brown, following the submission of final reports from the teacher participants to the Programme's Reference Group on completion of the studies. Brendan was selected because he met all the award criteria fully with strong project focus, clear analysis of outcomes and insightful reflection on his development. He addressed an area of teaching that is in high demand for support and which most teachers find extremely challenging. The Reference Group were very impressed with the tangible outcomes of his project in the form of the materials he developed and made available for use by other teachers at his college.

The group picture shows Brendan with English Australia and Cambridge ESOL representatives, together with Professor Anne Burns from the Reference Group. From left to right: David Matthews (Chair of English Australia), Sue Blundell (Executive Director, English Australia), Anne Burns (University of New South Wales), Brendan Brown, Katherine Brandon (Professional Support & Development Officer, English Australia), Nick Saville (Director of Research & Validation Group, Cambridge ESOL).

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