

# Second Language Assessment and Action Research

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# Second Language Assessment and Action Research

**Edited by**

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79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108436700](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108436700)

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First published 2017

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-1-108-43670-0

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# Acknowledgements

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Numerous participants have contributed over the years to the genesis and development of the Australian Action Research in ELICOS Program which gave rise to this volume and we gratefully acknowledge their contributions.

In 2008, the then English Australia Professional Support and Development Officer, Katherine Brandon, approached the first editor of this volume, Professor Anne Burns from the University of New South Wales, to explore the possibility of a national action research initiative for the English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sector, along the lines of others she had facilitated for language teachers in previous years. Katherine could see a need to strengthen and promote research for the ELICOS sector in a national context where a research-based orientation to English language teaching had not traditionally been a high priority. The concept was taken up by the then Executive Director of English Australia, Sue Blundell, together with the association's board, who supported the initial development of the Program. The current CEO of English Australia, Brett Blacker, the Professional Development Manager, Sophie O'Keefe, and the English Australia board have continued that support to the present time.

Dr Michael Milanovic, then CEO of Cambridge English Language Assessment, approved the initial funding for the Program which enabled a pilot to go ahead in 2010. Saul Nassé, the current Chief Executive, has remained enthusiastic about the Program and has continued funding support. With open minds (and perhaps initially with a bit of trepidation), Cambridge English Language Assessment staff, Dr Hanan Khalifa, Head of Research and International Education, and Dr Fiona Barker, Principal Research Manager, took on an unfamiliar research paradigm in an unknown educational context. They were joined in a reference group for the Program by members representing English Australia, Christine Bundesen, AM, then Director of the Institute of Continuing & TESOL Education at the University of Queensland, and Marian Star, Director of Studies of the University of Tasmania English Language Centre, who provided considerable enthusiasm and ongoing insights into the professional development and quality goals of the sector. More recently, Donna Cook from the Australian Catholic University English Language Centre, Brisbane, Sue Petty from the Centre for English, University of South Australia, and Dr Allen Blewitt, from Cambridge English Language Assessment in Australia, have been valued members of the reference group. Since 2010, academic managers in ELICOS

colleges throughout Australia have encouraged and supported their staff to participate in the Program. From that time also, 75 ELICOS teachers with professional curiosity and a desire to do research have been willing to ‘give it a go’. It is to the professional attitude of those teachers, and particularly those who gladly agreed to contribute their research insights to this volume, that we dedicate this book.

The production of the book would not have been possible without valuable support from a number of other individuals. From the beginning, Dr Nick Saville and Professor Cyril Weir, the SiLT series editors, have encouraged and supported the idea of a volume in this series which could highlight the contributions to insights on assessment and testing of teacher action research. Professor Donald Freeman from the University of Michigan provided insightful and invaluable comments on the first draft, while Professor Weir’s close reading and commentary on every chapter as it developed has helped immeasurably to strengthen the volume. Dr Evelina Galaczi, and later Dr Ivana Vidaković, as well as John Savage, provided exactly the right kind of continuing editorial support that has helped us as editors to bring the book to fruition.

Finally, Cambridge English and Cambridge University Press are grateful to the following publishers for their permission to use copyrighted material: Taylor & Francis for the use of Figure 1 on page 99, which first appeared in issue 44 of *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* (2007), and Bright Hub Education for the use of the photo in Appendix 2 on page 311, which first appeared on their website in 2012. We have sought permission for the use of the materials in Appendix 6 on page 241.

For further details of the Action Research in ELICOS Program, please see [www.englishaustralia.com.au/action-research-program](http://www.englishaustralia.com.au/action-research-program).



## Series Editors' note

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This volume brings together carefully selected papers from the Cambridge English and English Australia Action Research in ELICOS Program. The papers address three assessment-linked areas in action research (AR): AR for self-assessment, AR for formative assessment and AR for summative assessment. They are authored by practising classroom teachers who have used assessment results (self, formative and summative) to improve the ongoing learning of their students and their subsequent test performance. Thus a common thread throughout the book is how assessment through AR studies can contribute to language gain/improvement. Assessment literacy for teachers is not just a matter of acquiring knowledge about assessment, it is about those teachers relating such knowledge to their professional practice in their own particular context. The teachers contributing to this volume have done precisely that.

We are pleased to be publishing these papers in the Studies in Language Testing (SILT) series, partly because we are keen to expand the scope of the series to encompass classroom practices and the various kinds of learning-oriented assessment that take place at the local level. We also welcome these papers because they are the product of the highly successful Program that provided the supportive context for the AR to take place.

The two organisations have been partners in managing this AR Program since its launch in 2010 and continue to be so at the time of this publication. In 2013, the Program received an excellence award for Best Practice/Innovation in International Education, which is presented annually by the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) in recognition of outstanding contributions made by individuals or teams to international education in Australia. IEAA awards are perceived as a benchmark of excellence and best practice in the education industry in Australia ([www.ieaa.org.au/what-we-do/best-practicewinners-2013](http://www.ieaa.org.au/what-we-do/best-practicewinners-2013)). The citation for the award referred to 'a ground-breaking development in international education'.

The receipt of this prestigious award led the two partners to reexamine the underlying reasons that had led to this success and recognition in Australia and to consider how such success might be replicated elsewhere.

One of the key reasons was found to be the nature of the partnership itself. Based on interviews with the Program stakeholders, including staff members of English Australia and members of the English Australia Board, several

key features of the partnership and the indicators that led to its success were identified. They included the following:

- both partners demonstrated a culture of collaboration and had a track record of participating in collaborative arrangements
- each partner had highly qualified and dedicated persons to manage the partnership and its Program
- leadership roles, responsibilities and decision making were defined and honoured by both parties
- the goals of the Program were assessed regularly, and actions were taken to improve progress in achieving the desired outcomes.

The editors of this volume, Burns and Khalifa, have both been instrumental in the Program itself, and they have observed that its success involved ‘infectious personalities’, passionate advocates of AR with a high level of commitment leading to expansion of the partnership and its continuous improvement. Together these factors have helped sustain the necessary ‘buy in’ from key stakeholders and their commitment to the continuous improvement of the Program over time.

Anecdotal evidence shows an increasing sense of the professionalism of ELICOS through this development, and there is also empirical evidence to show increased engagement of teachers who have become actively involved in the Program (Burns 2014, Burns and Edwards 2014, Chapter 18, Burns and Brandon, this volume).

Positive impacts also include: the development of teacher peer networks across Australia; increased teacher engagement with research and academic researchers; and more teachers furthering their formal professional development through postgraduate study. The impact of the Program on the ELICOS sector in Australia is described more fully in Chapter 18, Burns and Brandon, this volume.

After seven years of the Program, 66 EFL teachers from urban and regional English language schools in almost all states and territories in Australia had undertaken 43 projects exploring aspects of ELICOS classroom practice. At the time of publication, the research theme for 2017 was ‘teaching, learning and assessing listening’. In particular, the call for proposals was looking to support researchers with an interest in identifying effective classroom interaction practices that enhance and integrate listening skills development and take into account the assessment of learner progress and achievement (assessment *for* and *of* learning).

This latest theme with its emphasis on the interaction between learning and assessment is significant. As the AR Program has evolved, it has become clear that this research paradigm is particularly appropriate for investigating learning-oriented aspects of assessment at the micro-level – in other words, to explore assessment practice in classrooms and other environments where

teaching and learning take place. This theme has already been comprehensively covered in volume 45 in the SILT series (Jones and Saville 2016) and we look forward to seeing this area of research develop in future.

In this volume, the editors and authors have all reflected on AR and its potential for helping to understand assessment practices. Their observations and commentaries in this respect are a noteworthy feature of the book. The use of AR in the validation of language testing systems is also in keeping with recent calls for the wider use of mixed methods approaches in order to gain better understandings of the impact of language assessment at both the macro and the micro level (see Moeller, Creswell and Saville 2016). Again we hope to see more research of this kind in future publications.

Nick Saville  
Cyril J Weir  
June 2017

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**Jock Boyd** is the Academic Skills Facilitator at Torrens University, Adelaide. His creative yet focused approach to his work is most apparent in his skills to design, plan and facilitate exciting learning sessions for students which stimulate creative and innovative thinking, and encourage students to take ownership of their own process and journey through their learning. Jock has a Master's of Science Communication and a Master's of Science of Learning, and participated in the first Action Research in ELICOS Program, presented at the English Australia conference in 2010, the findings of which were published in the Cambridge English journal *Research Notes*.

**Katherine Brandon**, a freelance ELT consultant and teacher, has many years' experience in teaching, teacher training and curriculum development in New Zealand, Australia, Japan and Egypt. As the first Professional Support & Development Officer at English Australia (an association of schools teaching

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**Anne Burns** is Professor of TESOL at the School of Education, University of New South Wales, Sydney, where she supervises doctoral researchers. She is an Emeritus Professor at Aston University, Birmingham, and an honorary professor at the University of Sydney, and the Education University, Hong Kong. She has extensive experience of facilitating and conducting action research, and studies on action research, with teachers in Australia, Chile, Indonesia, Japan, Turkey and the UK. Her book *Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching: A Guide for Practitioners* (Routledge, 2010) has been used by teacher researchers internationally.

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**Emily Edwards** is a Lecturer and Research Officer at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. She has also worked as an English language teacher in Australia, Asia and Europe. Her recently completed PhD research explored the impact of action research on English language teachers' professional development in the ELICOS sector, and she has published her work in journals such as *TESOL Quarterly*, *ELT Journal* and *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*.

**John Gardiner** is a teacher at the Centre for English Teaching, University of Sydney. He has extensive teaching, co-ordinating and curriculum development experience on direct entry postgraduate English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs and professional pathway programs. His standardised testing article, 'Student perceptions of four university gateway tests' (*Sydney Papers in TESOL* volume 11, August 2016) provided insights into student perceptions of the test-taking experience, and implications for test preparation courses. He has presented at The University of Hong Kong and major Australian English as a Second Language (ESL) and testing conferences. His research interests include language testing, action research, curriculum design and course development.

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# 1 Engaging action research to explore use of assessment for improving language ability

*Anne Burns*

*University of New South Wales, Sydney*

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*Cambridge English Language Assessment*

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## Introduction

The *context* for this volume is the ELICOS sector in Australia; one important *focus* in all of the chapters is the potential value of one of the various modes of assessment: self-assessment, formative assessment or summative assessment in ELICOS classrooms to promote learning; and action research (AR) is the *method* used to investigate the efficacy of classroom interventions for improving language abilities in general and exit test scores in particular.

## The context

The context within which the research reported in this volume took place is the ELICOS sector in Australia. ELICOS stands for English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students who want to study in Australia. ‘Intensive’ denotes full-time study comprising a minimum of 20 scheduled course contact hours per week of face-to-face classes of English language instruction. In the majority of the cases, students take these courses to improve their assessment score for study or work purposes. Courses are run by authorised language centres, universities, vocational colleges and high schools. Many of these providers are members of English Australia, which is the national peak body for the English language sector of international education in Australia.

Cambridge English Language Assessment has been providing masterclasses in assessment to the ELICOS sector for a number of years as part of its partnership with English Australia. In 2009, English Australia expanded the partnership to include an AR program focusing on learning and assessment matters being resolved by teachers in real time, i.e. during the ELICOS study period. Both organisations shared the belief that if teachers

were equipped with the skills to explore and address challenges posed by assessment results/scores, and share their findings at an institutional and national level, the Program would support the raising of educational, professional and ethical standards across the ELICOS sector within Australia and may lead to a ripple effect via publications and conference presentations at an international level (see Chapter 18 in this volume on the impact of the Program). In fact, in 2013, the Program received an excellence award for Best Practice/Innovation in International Education, which is presented annually by the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) in recognition of outstanding contributions made by individuals or teams to international education in Australia. IEAA awards are perceived as a benchmark of excellence and best practice in the education industry in Australia (see [www.ieaa.org.au/what-we-do](http://www.ieaa.org.au/what-we-do)). The citation for the award referred to ‘a groundbreaking development in international education’.

### The focus

This volume brings together a collection of papers authored by practising classroom teachers who have used assessment results (self, formative or summative) to improve the ongoing learning of their students and their subsequent test performance. Assessment results in the ELICOS sector, whether based on international examinations, home grown ones or classroom tests, have shown that students need to improve their speaking fluency, grammatical range and accuracy when speaking; to progress writing ability for example from a 0.5 band to a full band on *IELTS*, or up a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) level; and to increase reading proficiency. The motivation behind conducting the research reported in this volume included, among other things, exploring and developing an informed approach to raising students’ awareness to what was required in their Academic English speaking assessment; enabling students to assess their own progress in their language proficiency; developing language skills through the use of formative assessment; using digital technology to develop clear assessment criteria and provide effective feedback; and exploring the greater influence grammar may have on total assessment score.

### Method

In explaining the rationale for choosing AR as a method, we would like to draw links between various movements and concepts in the teaching and assessment domains. If we consider the concept of assessment literacy for teachers, we see that ‘not only do teachers need to understand the conceptual bases of different approaches [to language assessment], they also need to relate such knowledge to their professional practice in their particular

context’ (Scarino 2013:230). ‘Teachers should be skilled in using assessment results when making decisions about individual students, planning teaching, developing curriculum, and school improvement’ (American Federation of Teachers, National Council on Measurement in Education and National Education Association 1990).

The notion of teachers undertaking research in their own working environments on areas of immediate relevance to their practice is a trend that has been developing steadily in English language teaching (ELT) and applied linguistics literature for the past three decades. In fact, the highly complex multifaceted role of teacher, researcher and assessor had been gaining more and more attention in academic and public discourse.

The American Federation of Teachers, National Council on Measurement in Education and National Education Association (1990) developed the Standards for Teacher Competence in Educational Assessment of Students. There are seven standards:

1. Teachers should be skilled in choosing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions.
2. Teachers should be skilled in developing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions.
3. Teachers should be skilled in administering, scoring, and interpreting the results of both externally produced and teacher-produced assessment methods.
4. Teachers should be skilled in using assessment results when making decisions about individual students, planning teaching, developing curriculum, and school improvement.
5. Teachers should be skilled in developing valid pupil grading procedures that use pupil assessments.
6. Teachers should be skilled in communicating assessment results to students, parents, other lay audiences, and other educators.
7. Teachers should be skilled in recognising unethical, illegal, and otherwise inappropriate assessment methods and uses of assessment information.

The complete text of the 1990 ‘Standards’ is available online:  
[buros.org/standards-teacher-competence-educational-assessment-students](http://buros.org/standards-teacher-competence-educational-assessment-students).

## **Action research: Underpinnings and practical processes**

The genesis of AR in the field of English language teaching was to be found in the moves in the late 1970s and 1980s away from methods-based language teaching and towards the principles advocated for communicative language

teaching. In the course of this transition, the teacher came increasingly to be seen as an active agent who mediates the teaching and learning process rather than a passive deliverer of prescribed methods. Various labels can be applied to the concept of practitioners engaging in research in their own classrooms, including AR, practitioner research, collaborative enquiry, critical enquiry, classroom research and teacher research (for discussions of differentiations among some of these terms, see for example, Bailey 2001, Borg 2010, Burns 2005). The focus in this volume is on AR, as this was the approach to research selected for the ELICOS Program.

The roots of AR are located in 20th century progressive education and social psychology movements with their interests in group dynamics, group decision making and commitment to improvement of group social situations (e.g. Lewin 1946). Originating in the US and then spreading to the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia and elsewhere, AR adopts the concept that in the educational context it is practitioners in their immediate social situation who are best placed to understand, examine and innovate in curriculum-related issues and challenges.

Carr and Kemmis (1986:215) contend that neither positivist (or experimental), nor interpretivist (or naturalistic) approaches to research provide adequate accounts of the relationships between educational theory and practice. They argue that positivist research assimilates practical problems in favour of theory and interpretivist research assimilates theory in favour of descriptive accounts. Thus, both approaches result in the separation of theory and practice. They assert that to overcome such separation, educational science ‘must develop theories of educational practice that are rooted in the concrete educational experiences and situations of practitioners and which enables [sic] them to confront the educational problems to which these experiences and situations give rise’ (Carr and Kemmis 1986:215).

Cohen and Manion (1994:186) offer the following definition of AR: ‘action research is a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention.’ In so doing, they capture some of the essential elements of AR:

- the research is localised and specific
- it takes place in a naturalistic daily environment
- it creates some kind of interruption or change in the usual workings of the environment
- it uses systematic examination of what happens as a result of the intervention.

This approach to research is a way of bringing together action, in the form of intervention and experimentation, and research, in the form of continuous examination and evaluation of the changes in practices. Thus, it seeks to

unite practice with theory. AR is underpinned by the aim of increasing participants' functional, practical and theoretical knowledge of the nature of their daily social context and how they might operate within it.

In order to illustrate the processes of AR for teachers, in the Australian Program we adopted Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) 4-stage cyclical model. While there have been various criticisms of this model (see Burns (2005) for a discussion), it has the advantage of presenting the essential processes of AR in a relatively straightforward way, and thus provides a useful framework for teachers who may be unused to undertaking research. The model involves: planning (developing a plan of action or intervention); acting (putting the intervention in place); observing (documenting and recording the effects of the intervention) and reflecting (evaluating the observations and using them as the basis for further action). The fourth component evaluates the findings and discusses the insights gained by teacher-researchers as the basis for further action. The cycle is dynamic in that these four stages are interlinked and iterative, so that the research typically results in a spiral of cycles (see Burns 2010).

AR has been described as a 'family' of research approaches (Dick 1999) as it does not depend on selecting a specific methodological orientation, but is eclectic. It draws on either or both quantitative and qualitative approaches to meet particular challenges. Practitioners use a wide variety of techniques to collect data systematically, including observational tools, such as classroom video-recordings, observation notes or transcripts, and non-observational means such as surveys, test scores, interviews or classroom documents (see Burns 2010). The information obtained from these techniques is a source of reflective praxis (doing and reflecting on action), leading to deepening understanding, further action and theory construction, in the sense of developing 'personal practical knowledge' (Golombek 2009) or 'theories for practice' (Burns 1996).

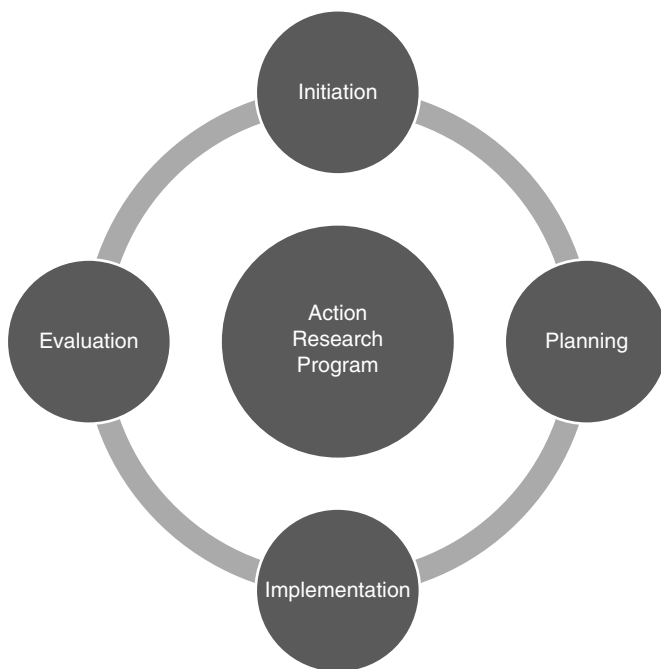
## **Approach and Program structure**

AR in educational contexts can be undertaken in various modes from a single teacher investigating his or her classroom, to a group of teachers co-operating in their own school, to teachers from a similar educational system working with a researcher or facilitator. In addition, contextually it can be located at the level of a single classroom, a school or organisation or at a larger-scale system level. The latter approach was adopted by the English Australia–Cambridge English Action Research Program (henceforward referred to as the Program) where the aim was to enable teachers to work at the classroom and/or school level, at the same time being mindful of the impact the research might have on the larger scale sectoral level.

ELICOS programs in Australia are designed for international students

who require English language development. Students may study General English or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses such as English for business, hospitality or health, or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in preparation for tertiary studies. The Program followed a cyclical and iterative process consisting of four phases, namely, initiation, planning, implementation and evaluation (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1 The Program cycle**



In the initiation phase, a reference group was set up to provide advice on planning and implementation of the Program, monitor the achievement of key milestones and evaluate the Program for the purpose of continuous improvement. The reference group was comprised of representatives from both organisations, together with an internationally recognised scholar in AR (the first author of this chapter) and an in-country project manager from English Australia. The Program now has an annual cycle during which the reference group meets three times to agree on research priorities, participant selection, award winners (one project that has achieved the most impact is selected each year), and suggestions for the Program's continuous improvement. The planning phase included:



- discussing research priorities and themes (see [www.englishaustralia.com.au/2015\\_action\\_research\\_program](http://www.englishaustralia.com.au/2015_action_research_program) for an example of 2015 research priorities)
- identifying roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders, i.e. each partner, technical expert, AR program manager and co-manager, local coordinators and participating researchers
- setting up the structure of the Program
- providing an implementation timeline, and
- developing and/or refining various tools required for implementation, e.g. call for proposals, selection criteria, guidelines for report writing and publications, report evaluation criteria, and selection criteria for award winners.

The implementation phase follows a structured timeline as shown in Figure 2.

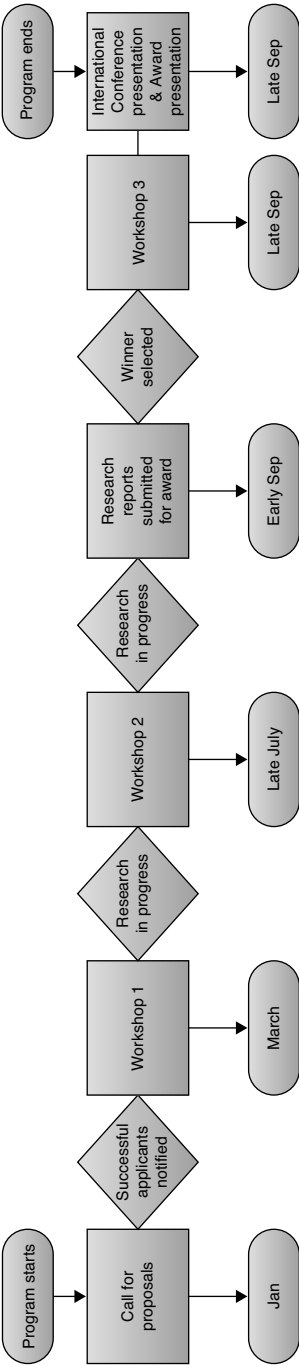
Because the concept of AR is new to many ELICOS teachers, three scaffolding workshops are provided as part of the Program. The workshops are facilitated by the first author of this chapter and the English Australia professional support and development officer (see Chapter 18). The first workshop introduces teachers to the concepts and processes of AR, explores some of the literature related to the theme for the year's Program (e.g. in 2017, teaching, learning and assessing listening), outlines AR methodologies and data collection approaches, and assists teachers to refine their plans for the next stage of their investigations. The second workshop enables participants to update each other on their research projects and to work collaboratively to provide peer feedback. During this workshop, participants identify any further steps and data sources required, refine their action plans towards completion of their projects, plan for writing up their research projects, and begin preparations for presentations of their research. The third workshop takes place a day before the annual English Australia conference. At this time, the teachers report on the final outcomes of their research, rehearse their presentations for a colloquium about the Program presented annually at the conference, and provide feedback to the facilitators on their experiences and on the professional and personal issues that arose as they conducted their research.

The evaluation phase considers the elements of success and lessons learned from the Program planning and implementation, investigates its effect and the impact on the teachers and on the ELICOS sector, and provides a platform for discussing how to make the Program sustainable (see Chapter 18 in this volume on evaluation, intended and unintended outcomes and impact).

## Overview of the volume

The volume is divided into four parts, the first three of which focus on a different aspect of classroom assessment and/or testing. Part 1 presents AR

Figure 2 The Program timeline



oriented towards self-assessment. In Part 2, the research focus is on formative assessment, while in Part 3, the authors orient their research towards summative assessment. Part 4 provides a conclusion to the volume by evaluating the impact of the Australian Action Research in ELICOS Program on the participants and on the sector.

## **Part 1: Action research for self-assessment**

The four chapters in this part explore from various perspectives how teachers worked to introduce elements of self-assessment into the courses they were teaching.

**Jennifer Wallace** (Chapter 2) explored ways of improving learners' grammatical range and accuracy when speaking while also encouraging autonomous learning. She was motivated to develop an informed approach to raising awareness of what was required in students' Academic English speaking assessment. Over two research cycles in her Academic English classes at a private ELICOS school in Sydney, she investigated the use of voice recording, transcription and peer feedback for grammar self-assessment in speaking, and data was collected via questionnaires, observation and interviews. Her research outcomes demonstrated that students gained increased confidence in noticing grammar errors and self-correcting their grammar. The chapter illustrates the profound impact AR has had on Jennifer's teaching and knowledge of assessment, and explains how the project has encouraged her to continue exploring second language speaking. Jennifer worked at the English Language Company in Sydney at the time of her project and participated in the 2013 Program.

**Diana Cossar-Burgess** and **Alla Eberstein** (Chapter 3) from the University of Tasmania English Language Centre focused on enabling their students to assess the progress of their own speaking skills. In pre-project surveys, the teacher researchers found that students considered speaking to be an important life and/or study skill and were aware of their slow progress in developing it, but felt that they lacked independent learning strategies they could use to improve. Over a period of 10 weeks Diana and Alla provided the students, who were preparing for university study, with weekly speaking activities that typically included a conversation with a 'native speaker' initiated by the student; a recording of themselves speaking about specific topics; and reflections on a designated time/length of time at home where only English was spoken. Students kept a speaking log where they recorded and reflected on the outcomes of these tasks. Diana and Alla found that most students felt they made some progress in their speaking proficiency after using the self-assessment strategies suggested in the project, and that they were intending to use these strategies in their future. Diana and Alla participated in the 2012 Program.

The goal of **Kerry Ryan** and **Jade Sleeman** (Chapter 4) was to increase students' engagement with reading and improve their critical reading skills, and hence develop a stronger sense among their students about how they could begin to assess their progress. The authors found that the use of authentic materials (such as news), students' free choice of reading material and Facebook as an alternative reading medium allowed students to better engage with reading activities. Facebook provided a collaborative online forum, and as such, it allowed students to read with a social purpose and share opinions on a topic. This, along with in-class activities, helped increase engagement with texts and improve students' critical reading skills. The authors highlight the usefulness of Facebook in developing critical reading skills, as well as students' enthusiasm for harnessing social media as a learning tool. However, they also caution about some issues they encountered with online communication, such as anxiety due to the lack of face-to-face interaction. Jade and Kerry, from La Trobe University Language Centre in Melbourne, participated in the 2014 Program and they were highly commended for the 2014 award for their project exploring the use of Facebook to develop critical reading skills.

**Jock Boyd** (Chapter 5), aware of students' increased usage of social networks, cloud computing and digital devices (DDs), set out to investigate how students use DDs for vocabulary acquisition and to show how digital devices could be used more fully and creatively to enhance learning of second language vocabulary, both general and specialised (discipline-specific). Participants in his study used the DDs as lexical tools to self-regulate their vocabulary learning, and they then reviewed their learning through self-testing. Regular vocabulary tests played a vital role in generating data on language use for the study. The tests allowed Jock and his students to observe and record what students did when they encountered an unfamiliar word and how they use their DDs for vocabulary learning. Jock believed that vocabulary development was central to students' test performance and could therefore contribute to improved scores.

The project showed that digital devices need not be discouraged in the classroom; in fact they should be absorbed into classroom learning strategies. Digital devices not only help vocabulary acquisition but they seem to enhance a student's autonomy and motivation in classroom learning. Jock, from Think: CLASS (Centre for Learning and Academic Skills Support) in Sydney, participated in the first AR Program in 2010.

## **Part 2: Action research for formative assessment**

Part 2 of this volume, which consists of five chapters, describes AR carried out to promote various forms of formative assessment in classrooms that were preparing students for future academic and vocational study.

**Elizabeth Woods** (Chapter 6) decided to adopt a learner-oriented, formative approach as part of classroom-based assessment in response to demands from advanced level graduates and university faculties for greater focus on developing speaking proficiency. Her key intervention was recording student speech and compiling audio journals which enabled evaluations by both student and teacher. Teacher feedback, course modification and goal setting completed each cycle of the intervention. The outcomes included a more dynamic learning environment, which focused on the collaborative analysis of the students' recordings and monitoring speaking development. Doing an assessment task marked the beginning of a learning cycle that motivated the students to reflect and evaluate their speaking. Journal comments suggested that this approach raised metacognitive awareness. The recordings became evidence to support student grades. The implications of this research are that this approach can focus teacher and students to collaborate on developing speaking in a sustained way as part of classroom-based assessment. Elizabeth, from the University of Newcastle Language Centre, participated in the 2012 Program.

To improve their existing class wiki, which lacked opportunities for developing speaking skills, **Jessica Cobley** and **Becky Steven** (Chapter 7) conducted AR to initiate a system for encouraging student self-awareness of speaking fluency and to assist students to develop and reach their own goals. They investigated the use of Web 2.0 technologies to set clear criteria for evaluating speaking fluency, establish learner-oriented goals and provide effective, formative feedback. As teacher researchers, their goal was to investigate how this difficulty had been addressed by others and whether their solutions could be applied to their context. To do this, they employed AR and crossed domains as diverse as drama, public speaking and forensic science. Jessica and Becky's chapter describes their journey as teacher researchers, and the changes brought about from their AR and professional development opportunities that have arisen from sharing their findings at a national and international level. Jess and Becky, from the Centre for English Language Teaching, University of Western Australia in Perth, are the winners of the 2013 award.

**Simon Cosgriff's** AR project (Chapter 8) was in response to his classroom observations that students were not applying feedback from formative classroom tasks to their performance in summative assessments. His aim was to explore the feedback process by better understanding how students felt about and responded to feedback, while at the same time providing a more interactive approach which would allow students to reflect on their own performance and respond to feedback in a more autonomous manner. His research was conducted with two groups of learners who were preparing for an academic presentation. The initial stages of this AR involved surveying student attitudes towards the feedback process and identifying their overall approach to assessment tasks. The next stage involved having students complete a series

of classroom activities aimed at raising student awareness of the grading criteria before any practice assessments. This allowed students a better opportunity to reflect on their performance and complete action plans that identified strategies for improvement. Data was collected through a series of online questionnaires, interviews, action plans and his own observations. The data showed that students appreciated a more interactive feedback process and valued the opportunity to reflect on their own personal performance. The resulting action plans combined with a better understanding of the grading criteria and assessment tasks gave students more confidence in completing the assessment task. Simon, from Curtin English at Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia, participated in the 2013 Program.

**John Gardiner** (Chapter 9) had observed that his students were demotivated by their lack of mastering grammar skills and was intrigued to find out the reasons. His chapter highlights that grammar could have a greater influence on the total assessment score than indicated by the assessment feedback and explores student attitudes in the 'productive knowledge' areas of writing and speaking in terms of intervention effectiveness. The strongly preferred grammar teaching approaches identified by students included opinions related to teacher correction, peer editing and activity type. The chapter shows how the activities he introduced contributed to positive teacher and student feedback that could potentially have an impact on their summative assessments for the course. His chapter also delivers some insights into his teaching of grammar to EAP classes post his participation in AR. It describes how he has gradually overcome the ubiquitous student attitude that 'grammar is boring' in EAP classes by modifying some of the original interventions. He also reflects on the impact of participating in the AR Program on his professional development, especially as he is an experienced EAP teacher. John, from the Centre for English Teaching at the University of Sydney, participated in the 2011 Program.

**Emily Edwards** (Chapter 10) took the opportunity of curriculum renewal in her centre to explore using assessment rubrics to develop her students' autonomous learning skills in the area of writing. Emily wanted to support her students to develop skills they would need to successfully complete their university or vocational studies. Inspired by past English Australia AR projects, she created a new set of rubrics for the college written assessment tasks then set about investigating ways of exploiting the rubrics to encourage students to make progress and be more autonomous in monitoring and maintaining their progress. She found that although students could identify learning goals they were unable to specify how they would achieve them. Emily focused on developing goal-setting skills by raising student awareness, showing students how to identify from the assessment rubrics which skills to focus on, then monitoring their progress towards achieving those goals. She found that the students who focused on only one goal had most success

in achieving it, and that the goal-setting and monitoring process was very motivating for the students. Emily, who worked for the English Language Company in Sydney at the time of the research, participated in the 2012 Program.

### **Part 3: Action research for summative assessment**

From various angles, the next set of chapters deals with classroom approaches and activities directed towards improving students' achievements in summative assessments, in order for them to be able to continue and complete their further studies.

**Martin Dutton** and **Arizio Sweeting** (Chapter 11) investigated ways of helping students prepare for the Cambridge English Knowledge About Language module of the *Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT)*, which tests a teacher's understanding of the systems of the English language for the purposes of teaching it. They had found that their students were challenged by the section of *TKT* that focuses on answering questions on connected speech. They implemented a strategy called 'auditory thinking' which involves hearing the sounds in your mind rather than just reading the phonemic transcription. Their students were very positive about the intervention and felt that engaging in auditory thinking improved their performance on the test. Martin and Arizio, from the Institute of Continuing & TESOL Education, University of Queensland in Brisbane, participated in the 2013 Program.

**Vicki Bos** and **Megan Yucel** (Chapter 12) wanted to help students improve aspects of pronunciation so they could successfully pass the tests for their English bridging program in preparation for further study at the university. They invited students identified as 'at risk' of failing the speaking component of their end-of-course assessment to participate in a special Pronunciation Assistance Program (PAP). They conducted PAP, which comprised pronunciation workshops and singing in a chorus, twice a week after class. In the pronunciation workshops students were given tasks to practise and record, with individual feedback provided by Megan on the key focus areas of that week. In the chorus sessions the students, under Vicki's instruction, rehearsed three songs that helped them with breathing and vocal projection as well as various aspects of pronunciation. The students then performed their songs at a well-received concert for friends and fellow students. The outcome of this project was extremely positive, with all of the 'at risk' students passing their spoken assessment and most demonstrating a marked improvement from their initial assessments. Vicki and Megan, from the Institute of Continuing & TESOL Education, University of Queensland in Brisbane, participated in the 2012 Program and were highly commended for their research.

**Akile Nazim's** AR (Chapter 13) focuses on preparing students for their final assessment on an academic presentation in a limited time period.

Akile identified three issues with the existing course material: lack of formative feedback, lack of student speaking practice including the assessment of their spoken presentation, and the material not being user friendly. Consequently, the course material was reworked followed by trialling a new approach. Surveys and focus groups were completed with students once the new material was trialled. The data collected showed that many students felt the course had helped them improve on their overall presentation skills. The data also highlighted that by addressing the three initial issues identified with the course material, the research question could best be resolved by (a) scaffolding course material which raises metacognitive awareness of the assessment task and language feature; (b) the implementation of feedback as feed forward; and (c) providing an emphasis on self-reflection and evaluation. The new course included increased amounts of feedback, more class time spent on speaking practice and increasing learner awareness of the assessment criteria. Akile, from the Institute of Languages at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, participated in the 2013 Program.

Given the significant numbers of native Arabic-speaking international students in their workplace, **Sara Kablaoui** and **Amal Khabbaz**'s AR project (Chapter 14) explored the development of reading skills of learners from Arabic-speaking backgrounds and ways to improve their test performance. They focused their research on developing and testing practical strategies to support these students with reading. Using observation and speak-aloud protocols of the six Arabic-speaking students in a shared Intermediate class (equivalent to B1 of the CEFR), the authors gathered information about the students' approaches to and experiences while reading. They then integrated into their language centre's 10-week course four reading activities to address the reading difficulties their participants faced, focusing on wide and regular reading, accurate grammar and spelling, skimming, scanning and reading purposefully. All Arabic-speaking students passed the final assessment for the course and reported that the strategies had been helpful. A follow-up survey also reported that the strategies were helping the students with their reading ability and confidence. Their chapter covers Sara and Amal's experience prior to, during and after the Program, and outlines how their participation in AR has helped them develop professionally. Sara and Amal, from RMIT University and Monash University English Language Centre in Melbourne respectively, participated in the 2011 Program.

**Caroline Keogh** and **John Smith** (Chapter 15), from Griffith University English Language Institute in Brisbane, had consistently noted a lack of their students' engagement with extensive reading, so they set out to encourage their students to do out-of-class reading tasks and to actively participate in the in-class activities. The aim of their AR project was thus to investigate students' existing reading habits and to incorporate them into a pedagogically



supported extensive reading program. The authors wanted to explore the extent to which an extensive reading program informed and driven by student choice would promote learner engagement and support students to prepare for their final course assessments. In each 5-week cycle of the project, they first surveyed the students' reading preferences and then introduced extensive reading materials which were carefully selected based on both the survey results and their pedagogical appropriacy for the level. Their findings indicate that providing students with a program incorporating their own reading preferences improved student engagement with extensive reading and enabled their assessment outcomes. Caroline and John were the recipients of the 2014 Program award.

**Dimitra Papadimitriou Aidinlis** (Chapter 16) set out to investigate ways of increasing her learners' motivation and explore the relationship between higher motivation and language learning. A key aspect of her research was ultimately to observe the impact of a new approach on their final course scores. She used tests at various points in the program to measure progress. What led Dimitra to participate in AR is the fact that her students were reluctant to take an active part in the learning process, which inhibited their progress and created a negative atmosphere in the classroom. The results of her investigations revealed that her students disliked reading books in English and were not avid readers even in their own language, and that the vast majority of the learners felt so inundated and intimidated by the vast amount of unfamiliar lexis in second language texts that they lost their interest in reading. Following the implementation of an extensive reading program, her students' attitude towards reading appeared to differ significantly as most respondents indicated that they started to enjoy reading in English. Dimitra also observed a notable improvement in their test results. Dimitra, who was working at Think: CLASS (Centre for Learning and Academic Skills Support) in Sydney, participated in the first Program in 2010.

**Wendy Onslow-Mato** (Chapter 17) used authentic and graded authentic texts as well as multimodal materials (e.g. videos, pictures and texts) to encourage a critical approach to reading a text that aimed to improve her students' test scores. As a result of the intervention, her students became more critical readers engaging actively in discussions and asking more critical questions. The critical reading tasks had a positive effect on their preparation for university study as they reported feeling more confident and able to take on the heavy reading load of their course. Wendy also found that graded authentic language texts were more motivating to students than non-graded authentic texts and that students' buy-in is essential. The latter was achieved by developing students' awareness of the usefulness of critical reading as well as through the use of multimodal material and scaffolded tasks. Although she felt that it could not be directly attributable to the approach she had taken, Wendy felt that the increase in student test scores was encouraging.

Wendy, from Macquarie University English Language Centre in Sydney, participated in the 2014 Program.

## Part 4: Conclusion

The volume ends with a chapter exploring the impact of the Program. In Chapter 18, **Anne Burns** and **Katherine Brandon** analyse how the Program, with its focus on language skills development and assessment, has impacted on the participating researchers, on their peers, on their workplaces and, finally, on the ELICOS sector and beyond.

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## **Part 1**

### **Action research for self-assessment**



# 2 Encouraging self-assessment of grammatical accuracy and range in speaking

*Jennifer Wallace*

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## Introduction

The action research (AR) reported in this chapter was undertaken in an Academic English class of international students. The purpose was to investigate how to raise the awareness of grammatical accuracy and range errors in speaking activities, in order to encourage a more autonomous approach to self-assessment. This article outlines the research genesis and procedures. It also discusses the outcomes of different interventions which were designed to explore the two research areas, and concludes with a discussion of the findings and impact of the research.

## Background to the research

My motivation for undertaking AR was to spend time exploring and developing an informed approach to raising awareness of what was required in students' Academic English speaking assessment, and of assisting students to develop autonomous skills for self-assessment. In the Australian context, testing through high-stakes examinations such as the International English Language Testing System (*IELTS*) is a requirement for international students hoping to attend Australian universities (Phakiti, Hirsh and Woodrow 2013). Many international tests of speaking in English place a high value on the constructs of grammatical accuracy and range (Hughes 2011). These were aspects of teaching speaking on which I had previously focused little, preferring to encourage my students to attend to meaningful communication without any special attention to the accuracy or complexity of the spoken communication. The requirements of teaching an Academic English class raised my awareness of my students' challenges in both grammatical accuracy and range in speaking. Although my students regularly cited grammar in speaking as one of their problem areas, when asked to specify their problems they seemed unaware of them, or how to work on them to improve. They also seemed overly reliant on me for feedback on their grammar. Yet this reliance

would become problematic for them in the university environment, where students would be expected to take the initiative for their own learning. The central motivation for my research was therefore to investigate these areas in order to support my students to achieve success in their speaking assessments so that they could continue to university, as well as to increase their skills of autonomous learning for current and future courses.

The notion of autonomous learning has a variety of meanings and interpretations (Cohen 2011). In this research I adopted the view that autonomy is a process whereby a learner gains greater control over their learning and thus achieves greater success in mastering a language (Benson 2011, Brown 2007). I also decided to explore the topic of raising student awareness; particularly, what the benefits are for learners, and how it is best achieved. In particular, I focused on the concept of ‘noticing’ in grammar learning, which proposes that learners are in a better position to grasp language forms if they pay conscious attention to them (Harmer 2007, Schmidt 1990). Research suggests that by helping learners to notice, teachers can provide valuable guidance for students who may not otherwise attend to grammar forms on their own (Ellis 2015, Larsen-Freeman 2015).

## Research context and participants

The research was conducted in English Language Company, a private school offering English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) in Sydney. It took place in two Academic English classes where students arrived every week on a rolling intake, which meant they could enrol at any time and then study for between two and 20 weeks. This course prepared students to achieve an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) score of 2 or 3, which is recognised by a number of education institutions in the state of New South Wales as an indication that learners have English language proficiency that would satisfy course entry requirements of *IELTS* 5.5 to 7.5.

In the first AR cycle there were 15 students of high B1 to low B2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001). The second cycle, which took place immediately after the first, involved 19 high B2 to C1 level students. Seven of the students participated in both cycles, and the total number of students varied between six and 15. Students progressed from the lower to the higher class if they achieved the required grade in assignment tasks and a final exam. There was a mix of males and females and a range of countries was represented, including Argentina, Germany, Thailand, Japan, Vietnam and Brazil, but there was no dominant nationality. Although I did not collect data on the students’ ages, most students in the school fell in the 18 to 30 age group.

## Research questions

When I began my AR I spent some time observing my students and reflecting on my teaching in order to refine my research questions. I began by writing general questions for myself, and keeping them in mind before, during and after class. My thoughts during this initial process developed from a strongly teacher-centred focus, to reflecting more on the behaviour and attitudes of my students.

My reading of the literature on noticing had led me to hypothesise that my students might need help in noticing the features of their grammar in speaking and more realistically, to notice problems in their own speaking production after they had already occurred. I concluded that my intervention would need to focus on supporting students to notice grammar issues independently. Helping my students to gain autonomy in this area would not only aid them with their speaking assessment, but would also prepare them for future study. Thus, the following question guided my research: how can students be encouraged to self-assess their grammatical accuracy and range problems in speaking?

## Research procedures

The research was conducted in two cycles, with the second cycle commencing when I started teaching the higher level EAP class. Each cycle utilised initial questionnaires, and then follow-up questionnaires and interviews to gather students' thoughts and feelings about the intervention. Students' work was also collected and analysed, and observational notes were also used to inform the data analysis.

In the first research cycle I aimed to explore my students' current levels of grammar awareness. The first intervention activity was a card-matching exercise which asked students to match grammar terms with examples. When I had ascertained that they had sufficient metalinguistic knowledge, I asked students to complete a self-assessment activity (Appendix 1) which involved students recording a spoken response to a discussion question, then transcribing their own answer, and analysing the grammar in their own transcription. I chose transcription because the usefulness of this activity in helping students to notice is supported in the literature (see for example Lynch 2007, McCormick and Vercellotti 2013). Immediately after this activity, students were given a questionnaire to gauge their reactions (Appendix 2), and to probe further into their beliefs about grammar and speaking. Sixty-four percent of the students agreed or partly agreed when asked to rate 'I know what specific problems I have in grammar when I speak', a response which did not align with my own observations of the self-assessment activity. I decided to develop three activities to help them to analyse their speaking performance.

First, students voice-recorded weekly speaking journals (Figure 1) using their mobile phones (see Goh and Burns (2012:250) for the speaking diary template on which this exercise was based).

**Figure 1 Speaking journal worksheet**

*My speaking journal*

*In speaking this week...*

- *what practice have I done in class?*
- *what practice have I done at home?*
- *what have I done well?*
- *what could I have improved?*
- *what did I like/dislike?*
- *what did I find challenging?*

*And...*

- *what can I do next week to improve?*

This activity was intended to be a consciousness-raising exercise, encouraging students to reflect on their speaking performance but also to monitor their thoughts about the intervention activities. Students were asked to complete the journal as homework and send me their recording every week, keeping a copy for themselves. Second, I designed form-focused grammar workshops where students worked independently using grammar points from the course textbook. Last, I created a bank of recorded samples and transcripts of expert speakers answering discussion questions similar to those my students would be expected to respond to in class and speaking assessments, for example: ‘What benefits has globalisation brought to your country?’ ‘How do you think travel will change in the future?’

These samples were stored on an online learning management system (LMS) called Schoology (2016). Stored alongside the recordings and transcripts were electronic worksheets which guided students to explore the range of grammar they could use to answer different questions in order to express their own meaning more effectively (Appendix 3). A benefit of using the LMS was that it could support students to take responsibility for learning independently. It allowed them to access all the worksheets outside of



class, and I sometimes set activities related to the worksheets for homework. In addition, in class during the grammar workshops and when using the LMS, students were encouraged to work in pairs to foster cooperation and peer feedback, thereby further encouraging group autonomy (Benson 2011:166). In both the analysis activity and the grammar workshops my main source of data was notes from class observations and samples of student transcriptions.

Cycle 1 ended after seven weeks when I began teaching the new higher level EAP class. The end of the first cycle provided me with an opportunity to review the intervention. To gather concluding data on the first cycle, students were given a follow-up questionnaire (Appendix 4) and I also conducted individual semi-structured interviews (following the principles set out by Burns 2010:75) to explore their responses to the AR intervention. The final questionnaire responses supported my own observations that the grammar workshops and transcript analysis activities had helped them notice aspects of their grammar when speaking (see Table 1). Therefore, these activities were adapted for Cycle 2. However, I noticed that while the speaking samples intended to increase awareness of grammatical range were helping the students' accuracy, they were not increasing range. I decided that this aspect of my intervention would need to be more targeted. In Cycle 1, the course textbook had dictated the grammar workshops; in Cycle 2, I decided to refocus the activities so that they were student rather than teacher led.

**Table 1 Did the activities we have done in class help you to notice your personal problems in your grammar in speaking? (n=7)**

Activity	Yes	A little	No	Don't know	I haven't done this activity
Transcription of your speaking recordings	86%	14%			
Grammar workshops in class	71%	29%			
Analysis of speaking samples on Schoology	43%	43%			14%
Speaking journal	43%	29%	14%	14%	

Student response to the speaking journals was mixed (see Table 1), and I found that this activity did not help to raise awareness of grammar in speaking because students often repeated the same points each week. For instance, for five consecutive weeks Student 8 repeated exactly the same account. This implied a desire to 'tick the box' and finish the activity, rather than to engage in genuine self-reflection. Moreover, in the interviews, my students' responses to their role as learners in developing their autonomy and ability to self-assess were still vague, as the following comments show:

My role is I have to concentrate in study and assessment. (Student 2)

I think first I must have purpose because I should do something to achievement, to achieve my purpose. (Student 3)

Just study as much as I can . . . Role . . .? Study! Just study. (Student 6)

I concluded that my strongly student-centred approach to autonomy clashed with the students' view of learning, and that they needed more explicit support to develop their independent learning skills. Therefore, my approach in Cycle 2 centred on encouraging autonomy within the classroom environment, rather than beyond it.

In Cycle 2, I decided to modify my activities and create various types of activity to be completed regularly in class: a general awareness-raising activity, one that focused on range and another on accuracy. For general awareness-raising, I changed the Cycle 1 speaking journal (Figure 1) to a weekly in-class 'Speaking Review' where students were asked to discuss the same questions as in the speaking journal, but in groups and without teacher intervention. I predicted that working with peers may encourage students to engage with the questions more fully. For the range activity type I used *Grammar for English Language Teachers* (Parrott 2000:331–393) to clarify my definition of range, and I also analysed the transcriptions of the expert speaker samples for frequency of four kinds of complex structure (finite adverbial clauses, noun clauses, relative clauses and non-finite clauses). This analysis was then used to create noticing activities. One activity was a text comparison and conjunction gap-fill, the purpose of which was to investigate whether students could identify the appropriate linking words that connected complex utterances. I took care to choose forms of language which could appear in speaking ('and', 'so', 'but', 'and so on'), in order to reflect natural speech. Alongside this activity, students recorded and transcribed their own answers to the same discussion questions, and then worked in pairs to analyse their use of complex structures and linking words. Students were then encouraged to edit their transcriptions to use a wider range of grammar. For accuracy, I decided to modify the grammar workshops, so I used the transcripts my students had completed in Cycle 1 and made a list of my students' five most common grammatical errors (incorrect use of articles, plural forms, verb tenses, verb forms and word forms). In pairs, students then looked for examples of the same types of errors in their own transcripts and tried to improve them.

Following the transcription stage in both the range and accuracy activities, students were asked to choose a grammar item they would like to work on and write a learning goal. They then repeated the initial recording exercise whilst bearing their learning goal in mind. Each of these range and accuracy activities was completed twice in Cycle 2, and the focus on

working with peers and its benefits for noticing autonomous learning and self-assessment were made very explicit. In the second trial of each lesson I encouraged students to choose partners of a different nationality, and work with the same partner over a number of lessons, again to strengthen group autonomy.

In terms of raising awareness, encouraging autonomy and promoting self-assessment, the accuracy activity was valuable. Students were able independently to identify and correct more errors than in Cycle 1. Although the higher level of the class in Cycle 2 could also account for this finding, my observation of the activity suggested that the redesign of the activities helped nurture noticing more effectively. In the first trial of the accuracy activity, 75% of the students found more than 20% of their own problems, and in the second trial of this activity, when students were arranged into more strategic partnerships, nearly 66% found 50% or more of their errors. The final questionnaire and interviews also established that it was mainly the accuracy issues raised in this lesson that students considered (see Table 2).

The range activity had mixed success; students were competent in noticing their own complex utterances, but seemed disheartened by the fact that their range was not as great as in their written assessments, indicating that the attempt at awareness-raising had only been partially successful. Their comments about how to improve their range, without guidance from the teacher, were also unclear and unspecific, as Figure 2 shows:

**Figure 2 Student notes from grammatical range noticing activity**

Now return to your transcript and ask yourself these questions:

- Do I use some complex sentences? *yes. a little bit. I have to use more complex sentences*
- Do I use a range of words to link them? *not really.*

If the answer is no to either question, try to improve your transcript by linking sentences or adding a greater range of linking words. Then practice it again and try to use your changes.

*if / because / that*

*I have to try more range of*  
*~~at~~ words next time.*

During this cycle observational notes were made in class and the transcripts were collected to analyse the effectiveness of the self-assessment activities. At the end of the cycle I conducted a final questionnaire which was an adapted version of the one used at the end of Cycle 1 (Appendix 4). I also conducted semi-structured interviews with students who left the class during the research, and at the end of the cycle selected two students to participate in a full interview to examine some of the issues they raised in the questionnaire.

Outcomes of the research

My data showed how the activities carried out in Cycle 2 had responded to the research question. Observation of students during the two types of activities suggested that they were engaged in the recording and transcribing, and this observation is supported by the students’ responses from the final questionnaire, which show that they found the activities valuable (Table 2).

Table 2: How useful did you find these activities? (n=12)

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

The questionnaire showed that the majority of students rated all activities as ‘very useful’ or ‘fairly useful’. As seen in Table 2, recording was one of the activities students found the most useful, which surprised me because the original intention was for the recording to be a tool which students could use to create a transcription. It could be that recording enabled students to notice not only the grammar but also other features of their speaking, such as pronunciation. The students’ open-ended questionnaire comments illustrate their views further:

- I think these activities are very useful for me. (Student 17)
- At this point, I think the activities are very dynamic which provides motivation and interest in class. I’m really enjoying. (Student 18)
- Recording myself sometimes is strange, but for me is very useful, because I can find what are my common mistakes. (Student 23)
- These records have been very useful to improve my speaking and deal with my weak points. (Student 25)

Table 2 also shows that the Speaking Review received a mixed response. Student 11, for example, noted later in the interview that this activity was

not useful because she said the same thing every week. I concluded that this activity did not support my aims to improve learner autonomy and self-assessment.

Pair work seemed to be very conducive to autonomy. In the questionnaire item asking students for their views of whether it was helpful to work with a partner, students responded positively in relation to the noticing exercises. Their responses also suggested a kind of shared ownership of their problems, taking the focus off the teacher as the main information source, as these comments show:

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

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

When we work with a partner, both can see the mistakes, and, thus, progress. (Student 25)

In the final questionnaire, 90% of the students also said that following the intervention they thought more about their grammar when they were speaking. Moreover, when I analysed the language the students used in the follow-up interviews, their vocabulary indicated that their awareness was increasing as they used expressions like 'become aware', 'realise' and 'think' as illustrated in these comments:

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

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

I feel more confident and I feel that I improving and it's in the different words, for example adjective, noun, the family . . . when I reading my transcription I can feel, it's impossible, this is a noun! (Student 10)

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

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

With more and more practice I repeat . . . correct less myself because I'm thinking in the grammar. (Student 24)

A broader outcome of my research was that immediately after it ended, the recording and transcription activities I had developed were incorporated into the syllabus for Academic English at my centre to provide students with a motivating way of ‘accessing’ their speaking. Encouragingly, other colleagues also experimented with using recording and transcription, and reported that students were highly engaged by the activity. The school now has a bank of samples of expert speakers which are utilised in many different ways to aid learning and assessment training.

## Discussion

I found that recording and transcription were the most successful methods for developing students’ self-assessment skills, particularly in the case of grammatical accuracy. It may have been that students preferred accuracy exercises because finding errors and correcting them produces a measurable achievement, boosts confidence and gives students more confidence in their ability to tackle grammar problems independently. Addressing grammatical range proved more difficult; the activities I designed allowed students to notice elements of their range, but did not seem to transfer to greater development.

Using students’ own recordings to identify the grammar focus helped to encourage student autonomy and self-assessment skills because they gave learners deeper personal investment in the activities. In addition, as mentioned, some students made their own decisions about which aspects of speaking to focus on; some used the recordings to assess their pronunciation, or focused on the transcript to study their vocabulary. My informal classroom observations during the research revealed that students corrected each other more often in speaking, and when I asked a colleague for his reflections on my speaking students’ performance, he commented that some students appeared to be noticing their own errors and correcting them more. Although these observations were impressionistic, reassuringly, they suggested that attempts to address grammar problems through self- and peer-assessment were being appropriated more widely than just in my classroom.

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

My research also raised several questions for further investigation, and one of the most salient involved the choice of accuracy errors. Rather than

focusing on a variety of features, for example, use of articles and different tenses, it may have been more pertinent to restrict students to checking only one kind of error to limit the strain on their language-processing abilities. Another issue I did not consider during the project was the possibility that some errors did not occur because students were avoiding using that grammar item. My research suggests that classroom practice should utilise a combination of textbook grammar lessons and students' own grammatical output. This would retain the student-centred focus of accuracy activities and include valuable opportunities for students to notice their own errors, whilst also ensuring that noticing is not restricted to the possibly limited grammar students generate.

One area which would have benefited from a more strongly student-centred approach was the activity design for the grammatical range noticing activities. My activities for grammatical range were taken from a grammar textbook designed for teachers. It is possible that these elements of complexity were simply too challenging for learners. Stillwell, Curabba, Alexander, Kidd, Kim, Stone and Wyle (2010) recommend that teachers collect student transcripts and identify opportunities for them to create more complex utterances, including activity repetition.

Another area of my study which begs further investigation is the nature of the speaking activities. At the conclusion of the research some students suggested that the speaking target was unnatural, which suggests elements of test *washback* in my teaching (Taylor 2005). The activities I selected did not cater for the pragmatic aspects of speaking which are interactive, requiring negotiation of meaning and turn-taking. Following Lynch (2007), I could, for example, have used an activity in which pairs of students record and transcribe a role play performed in pairs. However, my choice of speaking activity was appropriate to the types of activity students are expected to complete in speaking assessments.

## Conclusion

The benefit of hindsight and experience has enabled me to realise that my research has reached far beyond the immediate outcomes. I have gained insights into my findings and experiences which were not apparent to me at the time. My project demonstrated the gains that students can make when their awareness and self-assessment of their own language learning develops, and since my AR project I have dedicated much class time to exploring those language-learning strategies further. The insights that AR gave me into my own teaching practice and pedagogical attitudes have made me curious about the wider experience of English language teaching, and through my future research I hope to focus further on understanding how students can be assisted to develop their self-assessment skills.

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## Appendix 1

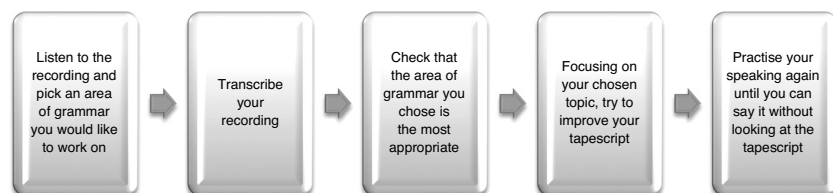
### Extract from Cycle 1 transcription self-assessment activity

7. Tanya has decided which grammar area she wants to work on and now needs a method to help her try and improve. She decides to ask her friends and fellow classmates for their advice. Which pieces of advice are most helpful?

a)	Revise the rules for this piece of grammar in a grammar book/on the internet
b)	Transcribe your speaking and try to correct the mistakes/add in extra ideas, and then practise again
c)	Translate your speaking into your first language to help you find the mistakes
d)	Show your transcription to a classmate and ask them to help you improve it
e)	Repeat a speaking exercise until you make fewer mistakes in the area you have chosen
f)	Practise the same skill but with a different question topic
g)	Listen to examples of different people speaking and analyse their language

8. We are now going to practise one of these skills using the speaking we recorded earlier.

Process:



The area of grammar I'd like to work on is:

Now transcribe your recording here:\_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix 2

## Cycle 1 initial questionnaire

1 How did you feel when you were doing the speaking task today? **Circle all that apply.**

Confident

Challenged

Frustrated

Nervous

Interested

Motivated

Confused

Shy

Something else (say what)

2 Why? Try to give as much detail as you can in your answer.

3 Tick **two things** you feel you did well in the speaking exercise today.

Area	Description	Tick?
Fluency	I can talk naturally and easily	
	I can link ideas so that I can be understood by a listener	
Vocabulary	I can use a range of vocabulary connected to the topic	
	I can use vocabulary accurately	
Grammar	I can use a range of grammar appropriate to the topic	
	I can use grammar accurately	
Pronunciation	My voice has natural rhythm and clear English sounds	
	My first language accent is not too strong	

4 Tick **one thing** you feel you could have improved in the speaking exercise today.

Area	Description	Tick?
Fluency	I can talk naturally and easily	
	I can link ideas so that I can be understood by a listener	
Vocabulary	I can use a range of vocabulary connected to the topic	
	I can use vocabulary accurately	

## Self-assessment of grammatical accuracy and range in speaking

Grammar	I can use a range of grammar appropriate to the topic	
	I can use grammar accurately	
Pronunciation	My voice has natural rhythm and clear English sounds	
	My first language accent is not too strong	

- 5 What do you feel are your biggest strengths in speaking overall? **Tick all that apply.**

Area	Description	Tick?
Fluency	I can talk naturally and easily	
	I can link ideas so that I can be understood by a listener	
Vocabulary	I can use a range of vocabulary connected to the topic	
	I can use vocabulary accurately	
Grammar	I can use a range of grammar appropriate to the topic	
	I can use grammar accurately	
Pronunciation	My voice has natural rhythm and clear English sounds	
	My first language accent is not too strong	

- 6 Tick the **one thing** you feel you need to improve most in speaking.

Area	Description	Tick?
Fluency	I can talk naturally and easily	
	I can link ideas so that I can be understood by a listener	
Vocabulary	I can use a range of vocabulary connected to the topic	
	I can use vocabulary accurately	
Grammar	I can use a range of grammar appropriate to the topic	
	I can use grammar accurately	
Pronunciation	My voice has natural rhythm and clear English sounds	
	My first language accent is not too strong	

- 7 Read the statements below and tick the box which best describes your feeling.

## Second Language Assessment and Action Research

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Partly agree	Partly disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
a) I am confident when speaking in English						
b) I think my grammar when speaking needs improvement						
c) I would be able to express myself more effectively if my grammar when speaking were better						
d) We do lots of speaking practice in class						
e) I know what specific problems I have in grammar when I speak (e.g. tenses, prepositions, plurals . . .)						
f) I want more speaking practice in class						
g) I feel that the speaking practice we do in class helps me focus on my personal problems in speaking						
h) I know how to improve my grammar when speaking on my own						

8 Are grammar for writing and grammar for speaking the same? Circle: yes/no

If no, how are they different?

9 How do you practise your speaking outside of class? Give as much detail as possible.

10 What else could we do in class to help you practise your speaking issues?

11 Is there anything else you would like to tell me about regarding speaking?

## Appendix 3

**Extract from electronic resource worksheet, used by students to self-assess their grammatical range**

### Grammar Method 1

Step	Method	Done?
1	Choose one of the topics in the question list.	
2	<p>Choose one question. Analyse it by asking yourself these questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. What tenses should I use to answer this question (e.g. present perfect, future going to . . .)?</li> <li>b. Could I use a range of modal verbs to answer this question? Which modal verbs could I use?</li> <li>c. What kind of adjectives could I use?</li> <li>d. Could I use comparative or superlative language?</li> <li>e. Could I use conditional clauses?</li> </ul> <p><b>*For part 2 you should only make very brief notes*</b></p>	
3	Record yourself answering the question. Try to say as much as you can without stopping.	
4	Transcribe your recording of yourself. Try to write down exactly what you say.	
5	<p>Compare your transcript to the transcript of the Speaking Resource recording and ask yourself these questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Do I use the same tenses as the native/expert speaker? Are there any other tenses I could use?</li> <li>b. Do I use a range of modal verbs (if appropriate)? Are my modal verb forms correct (e.g. followed by a base verb)?</li> <li>c. Do I use a range of adjectives (if appropriate)? Are my adjective forms correct (e.g. -ed/-ing)?</li> <li>d. Do I use comparative or superlative language or other special structures (like conditional clauses) if appropriate?</li> </ul>	

## Second Language Assessment and Action Research

Step	Method		Done?
6	Now choose <b>one</b> of these areas and try to check your transcript:		
	Articles	Are all the articles I use in my speaking correct?	
	Plural forms	Do I use plurals when necessary? Are my plural forms correct?	
	Verb forms	Do I use the correct forms after my verbs (e.g. -ing/ infinitive)?	
	Clauses	Do my clauses all have a subject and a verb? Do I use linking words (and, but, so)?	
7	Record your answer again. This time try to use the extra phrases/ grammar improvements you identified in your analysis of your transcript. <b>*Repeat this stage until you can answer the question using a good range of grammar and a lot of the grammar improvements*</b>		

## Appendix 4

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### Cycle 1 exit questionnaire

- 1 Did the activities we have done in class help you to notice your personal problems in your grammar in speaking? **Tick one circle for each task.**

	Yes	A little	No	Don't know	I haven't done this activity in class
Transcription of your speaking recordings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Grammar workshops in class	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Analysis of speaking samples on Schoology	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speaking journal	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

- 2 Did you enjoy the activities we have done? **Tick one circle for each task.**

	Yes	A little	No	Don't know	I haven't done this activity in class
Transcription of your speaking recordings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Grammar workshops in class	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Analysis of speaking samples from Schoology	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speaking journal	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

- 3 Which activity did you like the best from the ones in the table? Why?
- 4 Which activity did you find the most useful? Why?
- 5 Which activity would you like to continue to use outside of class in the future? Why?

# 3 Promoting self-assessment in speaking skills for EAP students

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## Introduction

Increasingly, independent learning is a primary goal in educational settings, and for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners it is a goal that can be hard to reach. The purpose of our action research (AR) project, which we conducted in 2012, was to help students monitor their speaking fluency, ability and progress through self-assessment, while investigating how reflection and self-analysis can be useful tools to encourage students to become more independent learners. The aim of the study was for students to explore the potential of working independently outside the classroom and to assess their own skills with the ultimate aim of increasing their speaking performance. Thus, our interest was in exploring relationships between autonomous learning and student progress in speaking.

## Background

Many of our students come from countries where teachers control the amount and pace of learning. Because they have experienced teacher-centred classrooms, they are sometimes seen as being ‘passive learners’ (Harris 1997:13). Tertiary study in Australia may therefore be a challenge for students because styles of teaching may be very different and they are expected to demonstrate self-direction and independence in learning (Cotterall 2000). In such a situation it is necessary for teachers to introduce students to concepts of self-assessment and self-monitoring, which are important tools for both teachers and students (Gardner 2000). If student awareness can be raised about their own progress and performance, they are on the path towards independent, or autonomous learning, which according to Holec (in Gardner 2000:50), is ‘the ability to take charge of one’s learning’. In relation to this concept, several authors (e.g. Gardner and Miller 1997, Tudor 1996) have argued that an integral part of autonomous learning is



self-assessment, as it assists learners to evaluate their success on specific learning tasks.

As Gardner (2000:50) points out, self-assessment can potentially 'serve a number of purposes, such as confidence building, demonstrating learning gain or motivation'. Moreover, Harris (1997) suggests that students are usually willing to assess their own language performance if they are taught how to do it. In this research project we aimed to give students strategies for self-assessment of their speaking skills by getting them to reflect on and monitor their performance and then provide them with opportunities to work independently to develop their skills (Burns and Joyce 1999).

## Research context and participants

The students involved in this project were enrolled in a 15-week Direct Entry Academic Program (DEAP) offered by the English Language Centre (ELC) at the University of Tasmania (UTAS). Direct Entry programs allow successful students to go on to enrol in Australian universities, without the need to re-sit other tests such as the International English Language Testing System (*IELTS*). DEAP students and teachers have high expectations and a substantial workload is to be completed in each course. Teachers are assigned to each class on a two days/three days basis so both of us were involved in a variety of activities and tasks in all language skills our students had to perform.

Entry to this program requires an overall *IELTS* score of 5.5 with no band less than 5.0, which is approximately B1 level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001). Because of time constraints, DEAP offers a strong focus on academic writing and research skills with little explicit emphasis on speaking, even though students are tested on this skill. This gap in the program was what prompted the research project. Assessment is based on both individual and group work performance and numerous skill-based tasks (UTAS 2011).

Within the DEAP program, we taught students academic language, research and study skills in preparation for entering university degree programs. Sixteen students participated in our project. There were nine males and seven females in the student group and most were in their mid-20s. All of the students from this class were aiming to enter university at the mid-year intake in July and most of them were pursuing postgraduate courses; several students were aiming for doctoral studies. Usually, DEAP classes at UTAS are predominantly comprised of Chinese students. However, in the class we taught for this research students of widely different nationalities participated, originating from Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, India, Nepal, China, Africa, Korea and Thailand, which meant that English was the common language among them. The students in our class were very motivated, hard-working and highly driven. The students showed a high level of

interest in participating in our research as they saw it as a tangible way to enhance their speaking skills. Therefore, the students all agreed to take part and were motivated participants throughout the project.

### Research questions

In the initial stage of the AR project, we planned to complement a series of formative integrated speaking assessment tasks with student self-assessment, and reflection components. We had also intended to modify the assessment tasks according to assessment of their own performance and to see if students' marks for those speaking assessment tasks would improve as a result. As the project developed, however, we noticed that students were not really concerned about improvement of their scores, which were relatively high in our English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class to begin with. Rather, most students worried about not being able to participate adequately in speaking-based activities in their future faculty studies. Thus, the main focus of our research shifted from scores improvement to increasing students' confidence in speaking and learning autonomy through self-assessment.

As a means of increasing their involvement in their learning progress, students were encouraged to identify their areas of weakness in speaking performance and revisit them by keeping weekly logs, as well as participating in peer review and teacher consultations. This approach raised a few questions, such as: What strategies would be suggested to students? Would the strategies make any difference? How motivated would students need to be to implement the strategies? While keeping these issues in mind, we decided to make our research question more specific to reflect the revised objective of our research. The questions thus became:

Is it going to make a difference to students' speaking skills if we:

- a) include elements of self-assessment (such as self-analysis and reflection) in their study tasks?
- b) provide students with strategies for autonomous learning by suggesting weekly speaking activities?

### Research procedures

We used three different teaching interventions and collected qualitative as well as quantitative data, which consisted of student surveys, self-analysis/reflection questionnaires and a semi-structured interview (Burns 2010). Ongoing reflection on the data was used to modify the focus of our research to emphasise autonomous learning, and the outcomes of the analysis formed the basis for future classroom activities.

First, as part of the 15-week DEAP course, students completed a formative assessment task in Weeks 3, 8 and 12. The tasks consisted of assessed

tutorial discussions held on topics studied in the reading components of the course, so that students had some previous knowledge of the language they needed to use. Topics, task requirements and the assessment criteria were given to students the day before actual assessments to allow preparation time. The data we collected for these three formative assessment tasks was students' self-analysis of their general speaking proficiency before the assessment (Appendix 1) as well as their reflections on their own performance in each tutorial (Appendix 2). In the second version of their self-assessment in Weeks 8 and 12, the students were asked whether the extra speaking activities they were doing at that time were helping them to improve their performance and in what way.

Second, students were asked to do an initial self-assessment of their own speaking skills, followed by setting goals, a process which was subsequently completed before and after each of the tutorial discussions. In the first self-assessment of speaking skills in Week 3, we were interested in finding out students' attitudes regarding the importance of improving their speaking skills, their degree of confidence (or lack of confidence) in their own speaking performance and identification of common problematic areas. From 16 respondents, 14 stated that speaking was a fairly important language skill for their immediate as well as future study needs. Interestingly, many students mentioned everyday life, social interactions and job-related situations as well as their study goals among the reasons for their answers, as in the following comments (using pseudonyms) about why they needed to develop good speaking proficiency.

Because I need to make conversation through my study in the Uni, speak to people in market, make friends with native and international students.  
(Abdul, Jordan)

Because good speaking can be useful in a job and do other things.  
(May, Thailand)

I want to study teaching. Speaking is very important for a teacher.  
(Jin, China)

When responding to which specific area/s of their speaking performance needed improvement, students came up with a great variety of answers, mentioning different aspects of speaking such as 'fluency', 'grammar', 'vocabulary', 'speaking speed', 'style of speaking' and 'pronunciation'. Somewhat contrary to our expectations, only three students mentioned 'confidence' as their area of weakness and all but two students named several areas of their speaking performance they thought they were good at, such as 'everyday English', '[speaking] speed' and 'pronunciation'.

Although most students did not find it difficult to assess their speaking performance, they showed much less awareness of what could be done to address their weaknesses. Eight out of 12 students mentioned ‘more practice’ and gave similarly vague responses when asked what they could do to improve their performance. To address this issue, in Week 5 of the course we introduced students to a series of weekly speaking activities to provide them with strategies they could use independently in order to achieve greater autonomy in their speaking performances. To assist students with their reflections, we asked them to keep individual logs containing weekly speaking activities as well as reflection exercises to monitor their progress (Appendix 3). In addition, they participated in weekly (approximately 20 to 30 minutes long) unstructured ‘group debriefing’ sessions where they discussed their experiences, listened to the recordings of each other’s speaking and made comments in small groups. Many students made meticulous notes about their achievements as well as frustrations, and the ‘group debriefing’ sessions quickly became very popular; some of the activities introduced in the log (for example, singing a song) were suggested by students. Students’ records of their experiences together with their responses to an interim questionnaire (Appendix 4) formed the second set of data collected in the project. From the data we collected in the logs it appears that students felt very positive about doing the activities and were prepared to critically evaluate the results.

Finally, for the last 10 weeks of the DEAP course, students completed more Speaking Logs and tasks which were used for classroom discussion and reflection. The tasks were designed with input from the students and included:

- a short conversation initiated by students with English speakers outside the classroom
- students recording themselves speaking about specific topics, starting with familiar themes and moving on to DEAP-related topics
- a designated time where only English was spoken at the student’s home.

At the beginning of each week, students reviewed the tasks from the week before, discussed and reflected on their progress and set goals for the following week.

## Outcomes of the research

The students responded very positively to the teaching interventions we devised. In the second and third rounds of the pre-tutorial self-analysis (Appendix 1), all but two of the participants answered ‘Yes’ to the question ‘Are the extra speaking activities that you are doing at the moment helping you to improve your performance?’. We received a similar response from the interim questionnaire (Appendix 4) students completed in Week 11, as well

as from the final interviews we conducted in Week 15 of the course. In the interim questionnaire, 14 students out of 16 stated that the activities were ‘Very helpful’ and two students stated they were ‘Somewhat helpful’. When interviewed at the end of the course, most students responded positively when asked whether the activities helped them to improve their speaking performance and in what way.

Yes, there were concrete [specific] tasks and so it was easy to focus on them. (Norah, Iran)

Yes – you can find [realise] your problem and then work on it. (Jin, China)

Yes, helped a lot – [I feel that I] achieve something. (Bikram, Nepal)

Two students, however, were less positive, with one stating that he would have preferred a more structured approach.

Little bit, not much. Class helps increase confidence and [students] get more feedback in class. (Kaur, India)

Yes, but more time in class should be spent on [structured] speaking [activities]. (Raoul, China)

In addition to responses to the teaching interventions, we also wanted to find out which of the activities best contributed to encouraging independent study and increasing learner autonomy. The final set of data (a questionnaire in Week 11, semi-structured interviews in Week 15 and the follow-up online survey) indicated the students’ ranking of the various speaking activities in relation to how they assisted their progress (Table 1).

As seen in Table 1, the majority of respondents indicated that they found conversation tasks the most beneficial for their progress, closely followed by self-recording. Although many students considered English-only time at home a very useful activity, many commented that it was often less practical because some living arrangements (e.g. sharing a house with people from the same country) made this a challenging task. From our perspective of focusing on self-assessment and learner autonomy, however, at the end of the course it was encouraging to see that all the respondents stated they intended to continue practising at least one activity in future. However, as only seven participants responded to the follow-up survey we cannot conclusively say whether they actually did so. Our next step in the research would have been to look at various reasons for students’ preferences for the specific activities; however, we did not have time within the project to follow up this aspect with these particular students.

Table 1 Students’ ranking of effectiveness of speaking activities

Speaking activity	Source of data						
	Interim questionnaire 16 participants			Final interview 16 participants		Follow-up survey 7 participants	
	Very useful	Somewhat useful	Not useful	Very useful	Somewhat useful		
Recording of own speaking	56%	31%	6%	31%	13%	33%	
English-only time at home	50%	38%		31%	13%	67%	
	88%	13%		19%	25%	17%	
Conversation task							

It was observed in previous DEAP courses that students' speaking skills improved very little and it was this issue that initially drove our research. In response to our research questions, after using the strategies suggested in the project for 10 weeks, most students felt they made progress in their speaking skills. The data also showed that the students intended to continue using some of the strategies independently in their university study. That was certainly an encouraging outcome for us, as the responses indicated that the project overall was useful and had a practical value for our students.

## Discussion

In undertaking this research, our main aim was to provide students with strategies to enable autonomous learning in order to improve their speaking performance for general use and future study. The data we collected confirmed our initial assumption that students consider speaking an important life and/or study skill, but lack independent learning strategies to improve.

More recent developments in the ELICOS sector show that we were correct in our assumptions about the increasing importance of speaking skills development. In 2013, less than two years after we had completed the project, the University of Tasmania (alongside other leading Australian universities) changed their entry requirements for international students. Most schools and faculties now require all four language skill scores instead of just writing and overall scores. In order to better meet these demands the outcomes of our project became a regular part of the pre-degree course at our centre. The Speaking Log activities were used as the basis for independent learning tasks and were required to be completed without teacher intervention; in addition, weekly speaking activities were used for peer and/or teacher feedback. Various modifications have been made to the activities; first, so that they can be used by other teachers, second, so that they can be integrated more closely with other skills areas and topics, and third, so that they can respond to changing student populations. There are also several other common areas for further development, such as informing students of the expectations related to their speaking performance at university, assisting them with skills necessary for successful self-analysis of speaking, and enhancing their knowledge of strategies for self-direction in speaking performance.

We also intend to focus more on group rather than individual activities for speaking development, especially in the feedback sessions run in class. We strongly believe that successful learning outcomes in confidence-building as well as linguistic development can be achieved if students share their positive as well as less positive learning experiences with each other and use the classroom as a social space. Working in multicultural groups has the additional benefit of building social networks outside students' own cultural backgrounds, which will become the reality when they start their degree courses at university.

## Conclusion

As experienced ESL teachers, it was timely in our careers to put into practice some of our ideas and be able to incorporate them into our daily teaching. Teaching outcomes and how students progress are often on teachers' minds and being able to do something positive was exciting. We found this AR project to be an interactive and a personally engaging process. We both felt that the project had positive impacts on our professional development. We were encouraged by our student responses and by how our ideas were adopted more widely in our centre, were eagerly accepted by teachers and students, and showed positive results. These outcomes were confidence boosters and empowered us to go on to further study.

We also found it professionally rewarding to be part of a national network of other ELICOS teachers. Our AR lifted us out of our specific teaching program and into a wider world of language teaching and learning. It was interesting to learn about what different teachers across Australia were doing in their classrooms and how different centres operated. We often compared notes on students, curricula, management and centres, as well as exchanging teaching ideas and giving support to each other. We made new friendships and professional alliances which have had a profound effect on the way we teach.

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# Appendix 1

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## Tutorial performance reflection and self-evaluation

### Part 1 – Goal setting and strategy development

Student name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Reflection and goal setting</b>	
<i>Setting clear, specific and achievable goals is an important part of any learning process. Think of your study as a journey. If you are not sure of your destination, which direction will you take? Start by asking yourself the questions (and take notes):</i>	
1. Why do I need to develop good speaking proficiency?	
2. What language/study goals will good speaking proficiency help me to achieve?	
<b>Speaking performance</b>	
<i>Discuss your answers in groups; reflect on similarities and differences. Continue by asking yourself more specific questions about your speaking skills and compare this reflection to planning a trip. How far will I travel each day? How will I get to the next point?</i>	
Which aspects of speaking in English do you think you are good at?	Which aspects of your speaking performance need improvement?
Can you think of any reasons why those areas are problematic for you?	What can you do to improve the aspects of your speaking you are not satisfied with?

## Appendix 2

### Tutorial discussion self-assessment form (Assessed tutorials 1, 2, 3)

Student name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Reflection points – Student copy</b>	
<b>Preparation</b>	<b>Y/N/Not sure</b>
<p>[Shows evidence of thought and ability to generate ideas] Did you feel prepared for the discussion? Did you feel that you had enough:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• background knowledge</li> <li>• interest points</li> <li>• vocabulary and language structures for the topic?</li> </ul>	
<b>Contribution</b>	<b>Y/N/Not sure</b>
<p>[Contributed equally to the discussion and included others] Did you feel confident and relaxed participating in the discussion? Were you satisfied with your ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• share ideas</li> <li>• understand and appreciate others' points</li> <li>• express yourself clearly?</li> </ul>	
<b>Content</b>	<b>Y/N/Not sure</b>
<p>[Ideas and arguments were: Relevant to the topic; Interesting and informative] Did you feel that things you said:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• were interesting and original</li> <li>• attracted attention and responses from others</li> <li>• were relevant to the discussion?</li> </ul>	
<b>Quality of voice</b>	<b>Y/N/Not sure</b>
<p>[Speed, volume and pronunciation were of a sufficient level to allow clear understanding of the individual's contributions] Did you feel that your group members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understood you easily</li> <li>• had to ask for repetition occasionally</li> <li>• had difficulty understanding you?</li> </ul>	

## Promoting self-assessment in speaking skills for EAP students

Language	Y/N/Not sure
<p>[Use of language added to the individual's contributions. Grammar was sufficiently clear, with evidence of linking devices to add coherence to contributions. Vocabulary was appropriate to the topic.]</p> <p>Did you feel that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• your language proficiency (grammar and vocabulary) helped you to make your points</li> <li>• your language proficiency (grammar and vocabulary) was not good enough to contribute fully in the discussion</li> <li>• your language proficiency (grammar and vocabulary) was insufficient for you to contribute at all?</li> </ul>	

# Appendix 3

## Sample of student entry in Speaking Log

Speaking Log

Bring this Log to class on Mondays

week 3

Task	Time/Date	Speaking experience (i.e. what happened)	Any problems	Things that worked well
1. Record (on phone/laptop) yourself speaking for 1 minute Topic – Family (how important is family in your life? Why? What is your current family situation? What are you plans for the future – to get married, to have children, to see your children getting good education, etc.)	Sunday 7pm	I used academic words from reading passage and lecture	my voice is strange. I have Problem with articulation	Speed, Vocabulary
2. Continue with an allocated time at home where you speak English only	Friday 5-6 pm	I talked about other countries cultures about family structure	no Problem	Vocabulary Pronunciation
3. Initiate a conversation with a stranger (preferably not at the ELC) (e.g. ask for directions in the street; ask for information in a shop, at the supermarket, etc.)	Friday 8 pm	I asked about different types of Champagne in (9/11)	I could not understand every word because of accent	I got the whole point of the seller

## Promoting self-assessment in speaking skills for EAP students

### Reflection:

How would you evaluate your progress this week?

Excellent \_\_\_\_\_ Very good \_\_\_\_\_ Good \_\_\_\_\_ Fair \_\_\_\_\_ Poor \_\_\_\_\_

How well do you think you achieved your general goals?

Excellent \_\_\_\_\_ Very good \_\_\_\_\_ Good \_\_\_\_\_ Fair \_\_\_\_\_ Poor \_\_\_\_\_

How well do you think you performed in your specific tasks?

Excellent \_\_\_\_\_ Very good \_\_\_\_\_ Good \_\_\_\_\_ Fair \_\_\_\_\_ Poor \_\_\_\_\_

What are the things you did well?

grammar

Pronunciation

Vocabulary

What will you do differently next time?

try to understand the accent of people by listening  
radio and watching TV

Peer comments:

Teacher comments:

# Appendix 4

## Speaking Log activities questionnaire (interim: Week 11)

This questionnaire is about the **Speaking Log** activities you completed in the past five weeks. We are going to start the second stage of the Log, so it is important that you answer the questions in as much detail as you can to help us choose the right activities for it.

You may choose to write your name below or leave it blank.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ DEAP B-10

**1. How regularly did you do the activities? Please tick one answer per activity.**

Activity	As often as possible	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not very often	Never
Recording of own speaking					
English-only time at home					
Conversation task					

Comment \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Rank the activities from 1 to 5 according to how difficult they were to complete:**

Activity	1	2	3	4	5
	Very easy	Easy	Moderate	Difficult	Very difficult
Recording of own speaking					
English-only time at home					
Conversation task					

Comment \_\_\_\_\_

- 3. Rank the activities from 1 to 4 according to how helpful you think they were for your speaking improvement:**

Activity	1	2	3	4
	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not very helpful	Unhelpful
Recording of own speaking				
English-only time at home				
Conversation task				

Comment \_\_\_\_\_

- 4. Would you use the activities in future by yourself to further improve your speaking? Please tick one answer per activity.**

Activity	Yes, definitely	Probably	Not sure	Definitely not
Recording of own speaking				
English-only time at home				
Conversation task				

Comment \_\_\_\_\_

# 4 **‘Only connect’: Foregrounding learning and assessment through Facebook engagement**

*Kerry Ryan*

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## **Introduction**

*‘Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted’ (Forster 1910).*

The quote from E M Forster raised questions for us as teachers about how we could help our students to make the link between prose and a passion for learning. Consequently, the aim of our project was to connect students with reading in a meaningful, personal way; to see texts not just as objects for language study, but also as sources ‘of factual information, simple pleasure, joy or delight’ (Day and Bamford 1998:6). We wanted to use authentic reading materials from the news to encourage students to read more extensively in a way that could garner their enthusiasm and better prepare them for assessments. To do so, we decided to use social media to facilitate an online interactive reading environment where we hoped students would develop critical thinking skills through discussion, which could also benefit practice of other assessed skills such as speaking. We believed Facebook could afford collaborative learning opportunities as it was already a familiar social platform for both our students and ourselves, and one that could engage students beyond the classroom (Willms, Friesen and Milton 2009). While the primary focus of our project was improving student engagement with reading, we soon found that improved engagement extended to other facets of learning for both our students and us as teachers.

## **Theoretical background and motivation for the research**

Reading is a skill that is often practised individually in language learning. However, we were keen to develop a strategy that would offer our students a more constructivist learning approach (DeVries 1997), by connecting their



reading of texts with their social life beyond the classroom, in this case the students' use of and familiarity with technology. Our research was also motivated by Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where a learner can enhance his or her performance with the assistance of more capable peers. In addition, as Gergen (2009) argues, meaning in learning is constructed through social engagement. From these perspectives, reading does not have to be an individual activity, but can become a collective experience, and development in reading can be supported by social interaction.

We were also interested in incorporating social media, specifically Facebook, into our teaching. The positive benefits of using applications like Facebook to engage students in English language learning are increasingly reported in current research. Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010) trialled Facebook as a learning platform to practise English at a Malaysian university with 300 undergraduate students, finding that 91% of students found it a positive experience that provided an authentic and engaging learning environment. Similarly, Omar, Embi and Yunus (2012) used Facebook with English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Malaysia for group information-sharing activities, which students rated as useful, easy and convenient, as well as interesting and enjoyable. We also wanted to acknowledge that harnessing student engagement with digital media is no longer a choice, but an imperative. As Taylor and Parsons (2011:6) note, students 'have changed over the last twenty years in response to their engagement within a technology rich society and changes in upbringing . . . How schools respond is key to student success.'

With the introduction of new technologies, learning can be facilitated in new ways and new spaces. A computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) environment may exist in a purely online form, where the computer and technology provide the medium for an interactive process of learning with others. Alternatively, face-to-face communication is also a feature of CSCL, where the technology then provides a support tool. In both situations successful collaboration depends on learners understanding and interacting with each other, as CSCL 'locates learning in meaning negotiation' (Stahl, Koschmann and Suthers 2006:416). In this project, we wanted to utilise both situations, using a Facebook page as an online space and complementing it with face-to-face discussion in class. Our interest in changing our approach to teaching reading arose from what we saw as a disparity between reading activities in beginner and intermediate General English (GE) classes, and reading activities in more advanced academic English for Further Studies (EFS) courses at our teaching centre. The teaching of reading at lower levels tended to focus on general comprehension for practical skills such as obtaining travel information, understanding communication from friends or professionals, or following instructions. Since reading

is often connected to real-world goals at these lower levels, this approach probably prompted a certain level of motivation and interaction among the students as they completed the tasks. However, as students move up towards Academic English programs, the nature of reading texts becomes more abstract and ideas oriented. Reading at higher levels can be a more solitary and cognitively demanding activity, focusing on inference, distinguishing between fact and opinion, and evaluating and synthesising information. However, this transition can be a huge gap for students to bridge, because of a possible lack of familiarity with the demands of these types of text. In our teaching, we had endeavoured to help students become more critical readers; yet we felt that our teaching strategies did not necessarily address this movement from basic comprehension to critical thinking, or encourage students' interests. A lack of engagement with academic texts seemed to be negatively impacting student comprehension and development of key reading skills. For example, students often found it difficult to discern factors such as writer's argument or inferences in a text. Focusing on activities where aspects of texts could be further discussed with classmates could therefore give students more practice in making judgements about more abstract features of a text.

We also felt that students could be better prepared for their assessments by engaging further with class activities, where they had opportunities for recycling language and consolidating learning through the integrated use of macro skills. In developing our research, we aimed to link activities with the requirements of the curriculum and the students' assessments. Following Biggs' (1996) notion of 'constructive alignment', we needed to think carefully about how we could revise our classroom activities to help students to improve their learning outcomes based on the type of skills they were required to demonstrate in assessments.

## Research context and participants

Our research took place at La Trobe Melbourne, a private college offering intensive GE and EFS language courses in association with La Trobe University. Students participating in this research were studying EFS Level 4, which is a 10-week course at upper level focusing on academic language and study skills; this level is equivalent to B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001). We completed our project of four cycles with four different classes, where we each taught two classes separately. Kerry taught Cycles 1 and 3, and Jade taught Cycles 2 and 4. The cycles overlapped by five weeks, so we were able to share experiences and alter the project where necessary. Each class had an average size of 15 students, a total of 58 students altogether, who were mostly young adults from Asia and the Middle East on academic pathways to

undergraduate or postgraduate courses at La Trobe University (see Table 1). For many students this was the first time studying in a new country, and for some the first time studying at an academic level. We conducted our research with EFS Level 4 students, because this seemed to be the point where students needed most assistance to develop their reading and critical thinking skills to prepare for their eventual assessment.

**Table 1 Composition of classes involved in the action research project**

Cycle	Gender	Ages	Languages	Study pathway
1 (14 students)	8 female 6 male	18–44	Chinese 4 Vietnamese 4 Arabic 3 Thai 1 Urdu 1 Spanish 1	Undergraduate 9 Postgraduate 2 PhD 1 None 2
2 (16 students)	6 female 10 male	19–30	Chinese 2 Vietnamese 4 Arabic 5 Hindi 3 Spanish 2	Undergraduate 9 Postgraduate 6 None 1
3 (14 students)	10 female 4 male	19–31	Chinese 5 Vietnamese 6 Hindi 2 Spanish 1	Undergraduate 8 Postgraduate 6
4 (14 students)	4 female 10 male	19–30	Chinese 7 Vietnamese 5 Arabic 2	Undergraduate 11 Postgraduate 3

EFS Level 4 is an integrated skills course that places emphasis on students becoming more independent learners. The main assessments in the first five weeks of the course are writing a research report, which leads to a tutorial discussion, and separate reading and listening comprehension exams. In the latter half of the course, students learn how to write a discursive essay. In Week 10, the students have an integrated reading and writing assessment, which they must pass to successfully complete the course. In this assessment, the students are given two academic articles containing the same problem, for example, mobile phone addiction. Using information in the articles, the students write a discursive essay outlining the issue and critically evaluating two solutions. They also have to create a group presentation based on independent research from newspapers or academic journals, again with a problem, solution and evaluation structure. We designed our action research (AR) project to provide authentic reading materials, as well as valuable experience analysing texts. It also allowed the students to exercise and improve their critical thinking skills in a collaborative and engaging way. We were able to give the students weekly formative feedback on how well they described and

presented information, how well they had critically evaluated solutions, and how they managed the discussion. All of this feedback was fed forward to improve their assessment results.

In our AR, we focused on making links between the skills needed in the course and how they could be practised and reinforced as preparation for assessment. We believed that reading the news with an online discussion in Facebook, followed by an in-class group face-to-face discussion would give students more extensive reading opportunities and also practice in using other language skills. Furthermore, critically analysing news stories each week would give the students authentic experiences of sourcing materials, identifying issues and evaluating solutions. By participating in a weekly class discussion, they would also be practising skills needed for the tutorial speaking assessment. The criteria for this assessment were: how well they present information, include all participants in the discussion, ask questions, paraphrase, and clarify if needed.

### Research focus and questions

We were interested in changing our classroom pedagogy and the students' reading environment to look afresh at 'how' and 'where' reading could take place in order to improve how our students developed critical skills. We also wanted to encourage students' ability to become critical readers, by sharing their opinions and perspectives through interactive discussion. Based on these interests, more specifically we were keen to explore the questions:

- How can we better engage Academic English students in reading?
- How can we develop a more collaborative method of reading?
- How can we help students to improve critical reading skills?
- How can we improve students' assessment preparation?

We were also interested to investigate how we could use technology and the noted advantages of CSCL (Stahl et al 2006). We felt that online social networking would engage our students to become more critical readers. This led to our main research question: How can social networking media be used to facilitate students' critical engagement with extensive reading of the news in English?

### Research procedures

We completed our research in four 10-week cycles over a period of six months. As we were both teaching separate classes, we decided to research with two classes each, which would give us a chance to refine and revise our intervention, but also learn from each other's practice and experiences. Kerry led the 10-week cycle with a newly enrolled Level 4 EFS class. Five weeks

later, at the beginning of the following term, Jade began the second cycle with her new class. As Kerry finished Cycle 1, she began the third cycle with another new class, and then as Jade finished Cycle 2, she began the fourth cycle with a further new class. In this way, all four cycles overlapped and allowed for adjustments in the new cycles. We viewed the first two cycles as our initial intervention, with major revisions implemented in Cycles 3 and 4 as our understanding and insights deepened. We collected various forms of data to investigate student engagement, following the same data collection procedures for each cycle and using this information to make improvements where possible in following cycles.

## Cycles 1–2

Although we had our own hunches about which social networking technology to use, as Sammel, Weir and Klopper (2014:105) state ‘the technology must first meet the needs of the user. Therefore, the needs and understandings of the user must be explored’. Thus, to maximise student engagement, we surveyed them at the beginning of the project about their reading habits and their use of technology (see Appendix 1). We also asked them about their reading habits in their own language and in English, which was an opportunity for them and us to become aware of any differences in reading practices.

Conducting the survey was an important beginning step for our research but we were also able to make it a learning experience for the students. First, we used it as a basis to discuss factors related to reading success and how students could replicate what and how they read in their own language to increase their reading in English. This discussion also highlighted their and our expectations about the amount and type of reading needed in their current course and at university. Second, since they were required to collect data for their own research reports, we were able to use our survey as an example of how to create such a tool and generate data. In this way, we took advantage of our AR for both student learning, which could contribute to preparing them for their assessment, and our own data collection.

As we had predicted, the survey data showed that students preferred to read on mobile devices, and predominantly accessed news through social networking sites. We also found that students read for pleasure in their first language but not in English. Primarily they read in English for study or research purposes, mainly through social media or internet websites. Although not all students agreed that reading the news was interesting, they believed it was important, and unanimously agreed it would help improve their English skills. The survey information was interesting because it also challenged some of our cultural assumptions. We were surprised to discover that being read to as children or reading for pleasure was not a part of many of our students’ reading experiences, unlike the integral role it had played in our youth.

Consequently, reading did not seem to be a priority for them as adults. We repeated this survey in the following three research cycles to examine similarities and differences between the reading habits of each group.

Using the information from Cycle 1, we set up an open education Facebook page, which the students knew how to use and could access through apps on their mobile phones. We created a reading group for sharing articles and news items, which did not display personal information to other users, for which we acted as joint administrators.

For our first Facebook discussion, we posted a news article and a question for students to comment on throughout the week. Following this online interaction, we finished the week with a Friday afternoon in-class discussion. We began by looking at useful language and phrases in the article for giving opinions, agreeing, disagreeing, and asking for clarification, and highlighted how this language was also integral to the criteria for the tutorial speaking assessment. We then practised these language structures through Facebook interaction and the in-class discussion, simultaneously reinforcing the use of vocabulary that students had learned from the article.

After modelling the activity in the first week, we then turned it over to the students, on the assumption that if they organised the activity they would become more engaged. Each week thereafter, a pair of students chose the next topic and article for discussion, and posted a question on Facebook along with the link to the reading. For the Friday afternoon discussions, the pairs concerned were given the task of devising questions and managing the interaction. This gave them an opportunity to work closely with another student, but also to practise leading a tutorial, which they would complete for their speaking assessment.

Once students began participating in the weekly Facebook discussion threads, we were able to collect data on individual student engagement. We counted the number of comments and 'likes', noted whether a student was liking a post or other students' comments, and recorded who was adding additional material, such as further web links, videos or photos. The Facebook page preserved the thread of conversations, showing us how students were expressing themselves when interacting with each other's ideas. We also audio-recorded the weekly in-class discussions that followed the Facebook threads so that we could monitor the participation of each student. Since we were teaching our classes separately, we also used an online wiki journal to record and share our observations of how students were engaging in the Facebook and classroom activities. As a website that allows multiple users to edit pages, the wiki provided a collaborative space for keeping up to date with what was happening in each other's classrooms. We further complemented these sources of data with a weekly face-to-face meeting where we would make notes on our progress.

Although students in Cycles 1 and 2 expressed their excitement in class

about using Facebook, they were a little slow initially to make comments on the actual page. However, after some weeks of practice and familiarisation, momentum built up. Most students became invested in the project and took charge of making contributions to the Facebook discussions. A few students had to be more strongly encouraged to participate because they saw the project as an extra task. We learned that reinforcing students’ participation was crucial. We did this by promoting the Facebook page, reminding the students about the activity daily in class, and encouraging them to keep posting comments and questions. At the end of each cycle, students completed an exit survey (see Appendix 2) about their experiences and participation. The survey asked students about how, when and where they accessed the Facebook reading group. It also focused on how easy they found it to use, how interested they were in the reading items, how comfortable they were in participating in the online and face-to-face discussions, and how confident they felt in their language abilities after participating in the activities. After analysing the data, we conducted focus groups to investigate their experiences further, and to clarify their responses where necessary. Another useful tool that informed us of what students were thinking and feeling was their weekly journal writing entries. We discovered that the less engaged students would have participated more if the Facebook discussion had been assessed. Some students also said that they were apprehensive about making comments on Facebook, as they were concerned about the quality of their language and grammar.

This kind of information from the first two cycles proved most useful in helping us to adjust activities for the following groups of students. It appeared that many students did not feel comfortable expressing their opinions, either on the Facebook page or in the weekly discussions, and believed they lacked the vocabulary and language structures necessary to do so. As a result, we developed a preliminary lesson focusing on the language for agreeing and disagreeing politely. Controversial statements such as ‘Mobile phones should be banned in all classrooms’ were used as a fun way to encourage students to practise expressing their opinions and to agree and disagree while supporting their stance. Following a discussion of a sensitive political issue in class, we also focused on how academic discussions and debates encourage the expression of different opinions, which should not be taken personally. In the second half of the course, we also encouraged students to prepare for their assessments by selecting articles for the Facebook reading group they had chosen for their presentations, which meant they were able to exchange ideas and opinions with other students and to practise using them.

## Cycles 3–4

In Cycles 3 and 4, we followed the same procedures for the Facebook activity, class discussion and data collection. However, because of the feedback

from the focus groups in Cycles 1 and 2, we made some tweaks to ensure more student engagement. First, we included the Facebook discussion on the students' official timetable to reinforce the importance of completing the learning activities and to encourage those who saw them as extra work. Responding to the suggestion that assessment would increase participation, the Facebook activity was also assessed as an independent learning activity, worth 5% of the overall assessment score. In addition to highlighting how the in-class discussions were related to the speaking assessment, we linked the Facebook texts more explicitly to the development of critical reading skills, such as discussing how language is used in reporting the news, and how particular opinions were expressed and supported. We highlighted that practising these skills was essential for academic success.

We also decided to use the previous groups' activity on Facebook as a way of modelling participation for the new groups. In the first class where we introduced the reading group, we asked students to find the Facebook page on their mobile devices and read through some of the posts from previous classes. We then discussed the type of language students had used for giving opinions, agreeing and disagreeing. In addition, we asked students to consider whether every post consisted of perfect grammar, which they agreed was not the case. From these responses, we stressed that the aim of the activity was to promote interaction and communication, and not grammatical accuracy. We responded further to suggestions from the first cycles by including audio-visual elements, such as a video or photograph. These elements complemented the Facebook news item, and also recognised that multimodality is an important aspect of communication (Kress 2000). These changes resulted in a noticeable surge in participation and engagement in Cycles 3 and 4.

A form of unexpected data from all four cycles was the Facebook page 'Insights', and the 'Reach' feature, which indicates how many people have received the post in their newsfeed. Once a Facebook page reaches 50 'likes', the page administrators are provided with 'Insights' about user engagement. These include the number of post clicks, people who see the page, and demographics of page users. This information informed us that other students who were not enrolled in our classes were engaging with our activities, which we had not anticipated.

## Outcomes

To outline our findings, we will consider each of our research questions in turn.



## How can we better engage Academic English students in reading?

The Facebook reading group provided the students with additional authentic reading materials outside the classroom and also enabled them to choose articles they were interested in and wanted to discuss as a group. In each 10-week program, students read at least eight extra articles, with more links to reading materials added through posts from other students (see examples in Appendices 3 and 4). In addition, the students read other students’ comments on the articles. In the exit surveys from the four cycles, 81% of students said they were now more interested in reading the news, 78% felt more confident reading the news in English, and 83% were reading more English news than before joining the reading group. 86% of students surveyed said they also continued to follow the news stories after the weekly discussions, indicating a continued engagement with reading beyond what was provided on the Facebook post each week.

Students were able to access the Facebook page easily from their mobile phones or tablets and felt it was a stimulating way of learning. As one student noted: ‘in my opinion, using mobile phone, tablets or computers in teaching is an interesting way. My teacher has had a modern method to teach us effectively through Facebook reading.’

As the comment suggests, the students appeared to appreciate the novelty and currency of using Facebook for learning. From various other comments collected from exit surveys and focus groups, it seems that it encouraged them to become more engaged with reading and it integrated their reading with a familiar social networking tool, the use of which reflected their personal practices:

I think it is really useful for improving my reading and speaking skills because it provide the platform for both me and my classmates . . . to discuss the latest most interesting news and enjoy it all the time. To comment on the article, I need to read it carefully for understanding . . . I can learn lots of new vocabulary. So I really feel thankful for this project.

Students prefer to pay attention on [sic] the internet more than books.

In my opinion, this is a creative education method and really I feel optimistic about results for this group.

Further evidence of engagement was that a few students from earlier cycles continued to ‘like’ current articles in later cycles and to comment on the Facebook page even though they had left the college. It can be said, therefore, that using technology proved to be an effective way to engage EFS students in reading in English. Their engagement was partly stimulated by their

enthusiasm for using mobile devices and connecting to social media, and partly by shifting their reading from being a solitary activity to one where there was interaction with others, which is the focus of the next research question.

### **How can we develop a more collaborative method of reading?**

Posing a question with the news article focused the students' attention on reading for a purpose in order to present their perspectives to others. As soon as a student commented on Facebook, we acknowledged their comment with a 'like', so that they received an instant notification. The students reported anecdotally in classroom discussions that this feedback boosted their confidence as they could see that their teacher was interested in their opinion. They also gained confidence in agreeing or disagreeing with each other. The students often 'liked' the comments of others that they agreed with (e.g. Appendix 3), proposed other points of view and posted reading materials or photographs to support their opinions (e.g. Appendix 4), and posed further questions, perspectives or clarifications (e.g. Appendix 5). Many students stated in class and in focus groups that they were excited to read each other's comments and that these helped them to understand the issues more fully, as this comment suggests: 'I check the reading group more than 10 times a day because I want to know anyone have same thinking like me or not.' They also reported that the Facebook page encouraged them to read more, or as one student put it: 'I like this kind [of] interaction, it gives me a push to read.' In addition, the Facebook threads seemed to help scaffold students' reading comprehension. The threads helped them to prepare for the weekly in-class discussion, as they had time to consider opinions different from their own and recycle vocabulary from the reading, as suggested by this statement: 'The Facebook reading group more like a team work.'

These comments reflect the benefits of using an interactive platform, such as Facebook, for developing reading skills. Sharing links and commenting on the posts of others helped to build a connectedness between students that seemed to increase engagement and learning.

### **How can we help students to improve critical reading skills?**

In the exit surveys, the students all reported an improvement in their reading skills, most notably in relation to vocabulary, skimming and scanning skills, reading speed and overall comprehension. They also felt their critical reading skills had developed because they had learned to systematically support their opinions and consider opposite viewpoints, as suggested by this comment: '[The] reading group is very helpful, it provides us a lot of knowledge about many problem in this life for students. Students can know the topic from other student country to understand this.'

From our observations, we noticed that students were managing the class discussions more independently and confidently, seeking clarifications and qualifications of ideas, as well as relating personal experiences. Our own observations were supported by comments from the students such as the following:

Thank you for giving us a place to express our mind and make us feel confident.

It is really excited for me to convey my opinion to the other people and at the same time I can also get their various one about the article. In my view, in this sense is extremely great because everyone takes part in it and learn more knowledge together.

For some students, this opportunity for critical discussion, where they could offer opposing or different positions, and agree or disagree with others’ points of view, seemed to stimulate their own thinking about the content of the articles and increase their awareness of needing to justify and rationalise their arguments.

### **How can we improve students’ assessment preparation?**

We realised that while the students and teachers may have enjoyed the novelty of using mobile devices and social media applications, alignment with the curriculum was an important factor in determining student engagement. As we learned from the exit surveys and focus groups in our first two AR cycles, a specific link to assessment was important for several students. When students in the second and third cycles were able to see the relevance of their learning activities to skills that could be demonstrated in their assessments, their engagement increased. For example, practising skills such as skimming and scanning in the texts they read supported their reading comprehension in examinations, while using the language needed for online and in-class discussions assisted them with the skills they would have to demonstrate in their speaking assessment. As teachers we noticed improvements in student confidence in their reading, and in preparation for speaking assessments.

### **Discussion**

Social networking media can be used to facilitate students’ critical engagement with extensive reading of the news in English in a way that can have benefits for learning and assessment. This AR project demonstrated that we could engage students to read more extensively through collaborative activities, where learning in other language skills was also highlighted. Part of the

success that we had in this project was making students aware of the links between various activities and assessment. It is important for students to see the relevance of their learning activities and how this contributes to successful learning that can be exhibited in an assessment. Furthermore, highlighting assessment links to participation in the Facebook reading group was beneficial for 'engag(ing) students in a productive learning activity' (Gibbs and Simpson 2004:14), which for some students may be the external motivation they need.

However, using a social media platform for learning highlighted some key aspects to consider. Starkey (2012:20) states that: 'The introduction of digital technologies to society is influencing ideas about knowledge and learning theory, and beliefs about teaching and learning in the digital age.' We, like other educators, had often lamented that our students seem more interested in their mobile devices than in our classes. However, this project showed us the importance of recognising that there is a genuine place for them in our classrooms. Feedback from the exit surveys and interviews indicated that students had made much quicker and stronger connections with other students than we had experienced in our previous classes, because they had been able to share personal experiences and knowledge. Many students commented that they became Facebook friends with other students immediately after joining the group, which gave them an insight into each other's lives and allowed them to initiate topics of conversation resulting in continuing friendships. One student stated that the Facebook interactions had given students a base for continuing to interact when they were outside the classroom.

The students also commented on our use of a new and modern method for learning outside the classroom, which resulted in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere inside the classroom. They enjoyed getting 'likes' which boosted their confidence, and one student wrote 'wow, someone cares about our opinion'. This kind of peer feedback encouraged them to engage in exchanging opinions with other students. Sharing their personal experiences with us in the Friday class discussion also improved communication and they began to see their teachers as a resource in the classroom rather than an authority figure.

Another noticeable benefit of using an open social media platform was that it extended learning opportunities beyond the classroom and beyond the immediate group of students. One student, who participated in our second research cycle, enrolled in one of our advanced classes 15 weeks later and commented that she was still reading articles posted on our Facebook page. We also noted that students from other classes, who were not officially in the group, were 'liking' the page and may have been reading, or viewing the reading links, as evidenced by the number of 'views' recorded. In addition, we found that students were not only sharing the page with friends in other classes, but also with family members on Facebook. The sharing of

knowledge and learning experiences in this way reminded us of the value of ‘peripheral participation’ (Lave and Wenger 1991) in assisting individuals to develop and extend themselves as part of a learning community.

However, while most of our students were enthusiastic about using Facebook, the use of social media in our teaching also highlighted some issues that need to be considered. Because social media does not involve face-to-face interaction, it can induce anxiety in relation to the representation of a user’s identity (Pangrazio 2013). Students learning a language may fear that their competence is not adequate for participation in online discussion, or that others will judge their contributions (Miyazoe and Anderson 2010). We encountered this response from our students, especially in the first two cycles. Although essentially we overcame this problem with the groups in the third and fourth cycles, by discussing their possible fears at the beginning of each cycle and reiterating that the use of Facebook was not for grammar or writing assessment, the few students who still did not fully engage may have experienced these feelings.

Another aspect of identity representation related to security issues involved in participating in a Facebook group. Two students from Arabic-speaking countries separately expressed concern about whether their participation could be monitored by government organisations. Although we allayed their fears about repercussions from voicing their opinions through social networks in an Australian educational context, it was a valid consideration for students who may return to countries where government surveillance and punishment is a reality. A possible solution for some students was to create an alias Facebook account, which we encouraged as an option.

Lotherington (2007) argues that, in addition to teaching language, teachers must incorporate the teaching of digital skills, a point which was highlighted in the final cycle of our research when a small group of students was banned by Facebook for a month for trying to add unknown people as friends. The students, who were new to using Facebook, were not automatically aware that inviting unknown people to be linked to your social media profile may compromise personal information shared online. This incident presented an important learning opportunity about maintaining privacy online, which led to a class discussion about what personal information should be shared and with whom. In relation to a heated discussion that arose on the Facebook thread between two students about a highly sensitive political issue, we also discussed appropriate online behaviour and use of language. Such instances, which came about because of our use of an interactive technological tool, presented additional opportunities for learning about technology, co-operation, mediation, negotiation and relationships, and for critical reasoning and capacity to relate to the outside world (Trentin 2010:45–47).

Notwithstanding considerations related to identity and digital literacy, we believe that overall the Facebook reading group was a beneficial learning

experience for both our students and ourselves. Our use of this technology also inspired other colleagues, and we found that the basic structure of the learning activities could easily be replicated by other teachers. We gave several professional development workshops to our colleagues and we know of at least three other teachers who began to use this social media platform for their own classroom reading clubs.

## Conclusion

The AR project was not only a positive learning experience for our students, but also for us. We learned more about our students and their reading habits through the surveys, class discussions, and even the Facebook data 'Insights'. In addition, this project helped us to grow professionally. We were able to take the practice of research out of the theoretical domain and apply it actively in our classroom. We were also able to introduce research as a realistic activity to our students, include them as participants and model our own methods and procedures for the students' future academic endeavours. We believed this was an aspect of our research that was especially pertinent to our postgraduate students, who would soon be undertaking their own forms of research at university.

In addition, we had an important opportunity to engage with each other's ideas as teachers, and improve our pedagogy collaboratively (Burns 2010). Baron and Corbin (2012:763) define a student engaged in learning as one 'who has a positive, fulfilling and work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption and who views him or herself as belonging to, and an active participant in, his or her learning communities'. We believe that most of the students in our project became such learners. We, too, have been learners in this project, participating in our learning community with our students, with each other and with our practice. 'Only connect', a concept that started just as prose, has reawakened our passion.

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Appendix 1

Survey 1: Reading habits

Action Research Survey 1

How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender? Please circle: Male/ Female

What is your nationality? \_\_\_\_\_

What will you study after you complete your English studies at LTM? Please Circle

Foundation / Diploma    UG    PG    No Pathway    Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Which social media sites are you a member of? Please circle: Facebook, Twitter, Weibo, Other: \_\_\_\_\_

How would you rate your reading ability in English? Please circle a number.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Think about the following questions in relation to your first language and English:

Why do you read? Please tick all that apply.

Your first language      English

Fun	Fun
Social media	Study/Research
Communicate with others	Communicate with others
To find out about the news	To find out about the news
Gossip	Gossip
Other: _____	Other: _____

What do you read?

Your first language      English

Newspapers	Newspapers
Social media- Facebook, twitter, Weibo, other?	Social media- Facebook, twitter, Weibo, other?
Internet sites	Internet sites
Magazines	Magazines
Journals	Journals
Textbooks	Textbooks
Books	Books
Other: _____	Other: _____

What do you read?

Your first language      English

Newspapers	Newspapers
Social media- Facebook, twitter, Weibo, other?	Social media- Facebook, twitter, Weibo, other?
Internet sites	Internet sites
Magazines	Magazines
Journals	Journals
Textbooks	Textbooks
Books	Books
Other: _____	Other: _____

How do you find about the news?

Your first language      English

Newspapers	Newspapers
Social media	Social media
News websites	News websites
television	television
radio	radio
Talking to friends	Talking to friends
Other: _____	Other: _____

How often do you read about the news?

Your first language      English

Once a day	Once a day
More than once a day	More than once a day
2-3 times a week	2-3 times a week
Once a month	Once a month
never	never
When something interests me	When something interests me
Other: _____	Other: _____

Do you think it is important to know about the news? Please circle: Yes/No

Please give a reason for your answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you think the news is interesting? Please circle: Yes/No

Please give a reason for your answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Who do you discuss news with?

Your first language      English

Friends	Friends
Family	Family
Teachers	Teachers
Work colleagues	Work colleagues
Strangers, e.g. People on the bus, in the supermarket, etc.	Strangers, e.g. People on the bus, in the supermarket, etc.
Other: _____	Other: _____

Do you think reading news would improve your English ability? Please circle: Yes/No

Please give a reason for your answer: \_\_\_\_\_








## Appendix 3


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### Student Facebook post including image



 [redacted] that right [redacted]. me too, i have not known a very huge trash (6.35 bill kgs) in the ocean. i saw many pic of animal eating trash and endangered sea turtles. i suggest that there is recycle trash in each countries, because we can not stop using glastic in our life, while everyone know the effect of glastic bag on the sea enviroment. i uasually use glastic bag when i buy food.



Unlike · Reply ·  1 · July 23 at 1:59pm

 [redacted] What an awful photo!

Like ·  1 · Commented on b [redacted] [?] · July 23 at 2:02pm

 Write a reply... 

## Appendix 4

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### Student Facebook post with suggestion for further reading

 i understand you, but your government lies everyone in your country. can you read it and think critically about this. Paracel Islands (Called Xisha in Chinese, Hoang Sa in Vietnamese) is not belong to your countries in ancient. vietnamese protected and keep it in vietnam - USA and Vietnam - france war and from 1700. why china did not protect it when France and USA occupy it??? because it is not belong to china. it is belong my countries and there are many people vietnamese people who died for it and independent of nation <http://www.smh.com.au/.../angela-merkels-historical-china...>

 **Angela Merkel's historical China map flap**  
[www.smh.com.au](http://www.smh.com.au)

Last week German Chancellor Angela Merkel hosted visiting Chinese President Xi Jinping at a dinner where they exchanged gifts.

Like · Remove Preview · 1 · May 21 at 9:22pm

## Appendix 5

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### Student Facebook conversation



The screenshot shows a Facebook thread with four messages. Each message includes a profile picture, a name (redacted), and a timestamp. The messages discuss the ethics and practicality of animal testing versus stem cell research.

**Message 1:**  
[Profile Picture] [Redacted Name] I think testing on animals within certain limits probably acceptability. Now a day people are facing many diseases as well as the origins of cosmetic products are not exactly clear. So, testing on animals helped research finding methods for diseases we had never been done before and helping customers correctly choose.  
Unlike · Reply · 1 · July 18 at 7:56pm

**Message 2:**  
[Profile Picture] [Redacted Name] I don't agree with you because nowadays we can testing on stem cell instead of animals. And what is exactly the certain limits?  
Unlike · 2 · July 19 at 9:35am

**Message 3:**  
[Profile Picture] [Redacted Name] I think, testing on stem cell is very expensive and complicated. Not many countries can't afford to pay for experiments, so testing on animals is the best method. And your question about certain limits, I can explain like that all of studies are under the supervision of a lot of organisations like ILAR ( Institute for Laboratory Animal Research ), UFAW ( Universities Federation for Animal Welfare), FELASA ( Federation of European Laboratory Animal Science Associations).  
Unlike · 2 · July 19 at 1:09pm

**Message 4:**  
[Profile Picture] [Redacted Name] But nowadays a lot of diseases like cancer, diabetes, heart... can be treated by stem cell. Moreover, stem cell is applied in skincare too. Therefore, we must use stem cell in research even if high cost.  
Unlike · 2 · July 19 at 5:39pm

**Message 5:**  
[Profile Picture] [Redacted Name] It seems to me that it would be wrong to ban testing on animals for vital medical research until equally effective alternatives have been developed.  
Unlike · 1 · July 21 at 2:36pm

# 5 **More upload, less download: Active student participation in their own vocabulary development**

*Jock Boyd*

*Think: CLASS, Sydney*

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## **Introduction**

With the advent of social networks, apps and digital devices, the environment of learning is changing rapidly. Students are using digital devices, in the form of smartphones and iPads in the classroom but, from my observations, they often use them as mere reference materials, looking up words and translating them into their own languages. These powerful devices are capable of much more; they can be used as learning tools if they are incorporated into classroom teaching practice. My action research (AR), which I completed in 2010, investigated first how students in my English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom were using their digital devices for vocabulary acquisition and second, how I could develop a teaching process that would better incorporate the use of digital devices. More specifically I aimed to deepen both my own and my students' knowledge about how digital devices could be used more fully and creatively to enhance their learning of second language (L2) vocabulary, both general and discipline specific.

## **Theoretical background and motivation for the research**

Vocabulary is essential to L2 acquisition (Laufer 2014, Webb and Sasao 2013), success in language tests and in academic performance since 'without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way' (McCarthy 1990:140). Word knowledge has multiple dimensions and involves knowledge of the spoken form, written form, grammar, collocations, register, meaning and associations with other words (Nation 2001). Nation (2001) also argues that, since there is much to understand about a word beyond its dictionary meaning, contact with a word from multiple aspects is essential for a complete understanding.

According to Lantolf and Thorne (2007) and Thorne and Tasker (2011), L2 learning is influenced by three important tools: the psychological tools (language and cognitive activities), the physical tools such as mobile technologies including Digital Devices (DDs), and personal assistance (provided by teachers, peers, or friends). These activities use various cognitive processing such as cognition (reading and checking dictionaries) and self-regulation (creating vocabulary lists and self-testing). Participants used the DDs as lexical tools to self-regulate their vocabulary learning, and they then reviewed their learning through self-testing. According to Liaw, Huang and Chen (2007) the self-testing by learners results in users of DDs actively constructing their knowledge and thus they become autonomous learners, which may increase the retention of knowledge.

In addition researchers (e.g. Knight 1994, Lieb 2006) have argued that vocabulary is best learned by a combination of implicit and explicit learning. From an implicit perspective, vocabulary learning occurs when a learner absorbs the message of a text and predicts the meaning of words from their context (Nation 2001). However, as Lieb (2006) recommends, there is a need for conscious study of new vocabulary, since there are tens of thousands of words to know. In view of the complexities of acquiring vocabulary, second language learners may have insufficient time to rely on comprehending word meaning only from context, especially when they need to learn specialised technical vocabulary. In my project I therefore took the view that conscious vocabulary learning should be taught but that there should also be room for implicit learning to assist vocabulary acquisition. This approach is supported by studies such as Parry (1991), which showed how two students, one Cypriot and one Korean, adopted either an implicit or explicit approach to learning specialised vocabulary.

Vocabulary testing can cover a wide range of elements from morphological knowledge to knowledge of word meaning (Nation 2001). Henriksen (1999) echoes this when she distinguishes vocabulary acquisition as a lexical continuum from partial to precise knowledge and receptive to productive knowledge. However, most vocabulary tests measure either the comprehension of meaning (Nation 2001), or vocabulary use (Arnaud 1992). The tests used in this study focus on the contextual meaning of the word in which the learners can demonstrate their understanding of specialised design vocabulary. Words are the fundamental units of meaning, and if a student knows that 'dither' means to be indecisive but does not understand that within the context of design dither means to add pixels to a digital image, it will result in a break in communication. It is important that the test takes this contextual meaning into account as the acquisition of specialised language is improved through the use of DDs.

One of the tools most extensively utilised by second language learners is a dictionary. Most students in academic programs depend heavily on

dictionaries, using them as a primary source to find word meaning (Fan 2003). However, many teachers argue that the use of dictionaries can hamper learning and believe that learners should use them sparingly (Fraser 1999). Teachers may prefer to emphasise the positive aspects of the communication and reassure students that they can deduce a word's meaning from context while reading, and not from direct translations from a dictionary (Schmitt 2000). This practice is supported by some researchers who attach importance to implicit, naturalistic methods of vocabulary acquisition. Wakely (2010), for example, argues that deducing the meaning of a word from its context is the best method of learning new vocabulary, and consulting dictionaries interferes with the comprehension process. However, she also argues that learners use dictionaries no matter what advice is given to them by their teachers.

Despite these concerns, there is evidence that dictionaries smooth the progress of vocabulary acquisition and the comprehension of texts (Watanabe 1997). Knight (1994) found that using dictionaries enhances not only vocabulary but also comprehension. In addition, some studies have found that guessing from context does not always work well, especially for specialised vocabulary, and that dictionaries are valuable for acquiring new vocabulary (Nation 2001). Cobb (2004) recommends a combined approach, believing that students should consult dictionaries selectively while using other lexical strategies such as deducing from context or disregarding words.

In recent years, increasingly learners have been able to use a range of digital reference materials as a source for words, phrases and other lexical items that are linked through a reference system which includes the word form, meaning, origin, pronunciation and history. Some commentators (e.g. Nesi 1999) argue that these materials, which include DDs, electronic dictionaries (ED) and concordances, have the potential to improve vocabulary acquisition significantly. However, other educators and researchers are concerned about their potentially negative effects on L2 acquisition. They dislike DDs because of their poor quality and the possibility of encouraging translation rather than learning. Some educators even want them banned in classrooms (Tang 1997). However, although more learners are using DDs and EDs, there is little research on how they use them and how these devices can support vocabulary learning in general.

Whether negative or positive, the new digital technologies had impacted on my teaching of vocabulary in the classroom. Currently, there is a wide variety of print and electronic dictionaries and reference materials available. At the college where I work, DDs were very popular among Asian students. However, none of the students used traditional dictionaries. They all used smartphones instead, such as the Apple iPhone®, the Google Android® and the Apple iPad®. Through the use of these DDs I explored how they could be used in the classroom to enhance L2 vocabulary learning, and how students could be helped to use their DDs as tools for learning and not just tools to

reference materials. This required me to assist my students to develop skills for choosing the vocabulary they required to enhance their learning, specifically their learning of technical vocabulary, and enabled students to look up words online, create their own wordlists and develop their own dictionaries with their own meanings.

In summary, previous research indicated to me the importance of both conscious vocabulary learning, through explicit teaching and the use of dictionaries, as well as implicit vocabulary learning. My study aimed to explore these ideas by investigating how conscious learning could be facilitated through the use of modern technology as embodied in DDs such as smartphones.

## Research context and participants

The 12 participants in my research were studying English in Direct Entry courses at my centre, Think: CLASS. The English course consisted of 25 hours of face-to-face teaching over 15 weeks and aimed to move students from an International English Language Testing System (*IELTS*) equivalent band of 5.5 to 6.0. Their success in the assessments in this course would enable them to go on to study at the Billy Blue College of Design Bachelor degree programme, without needing to take a separate English proficiency test. The course work focus draws on content from topics that engage students by using a range of authentic language and gives them the specialised vocabulary needed to work in the design industry in an English-speaking country. There were six male Chinese students and six female Chinese students, aged between 19 and 25. They had all been studying English for four to five years in their country of origin and were assessed at an intermediate level of proficiency (*IELTS* Band 4.5–5.0).

## Research questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. Why do non-English speaking design students use DDs?
2. What are the differences between users of DDs in terms of Lexical Processing Strategies (LPSs) including inferring (deducing meaning of unknown words from text using linguistic cues and background knowledge), ignoring (disregarding unknown words) and consulting (asking others or looking words up in a dictionary available on a smartphone or iPad®)?
3. How can the students organise their DDs to enhance vocabulary learning?
4. What strategies can be used to enhance learning through DDs?



The first two questions formed part of my pre-intervention investigation and informed the intervention I subsequently carried out. The last two research questions were a part of the classroom intervention strategy I developed. The main aim was to investigate how DDs could be used to assist students to take responsibility for their own learning. This accountability could take the form of personalised assessment tasks; these tasks allowed students to test themselves and each other. Students were encouraged to acquire vocabulary through their own definition of a word attained through a personal ‘narrative’, so that they could embed it in a context that was meaningful to them. More specifically, students would save information about vocabulary to their DDs which could be in the guise of a photograph, a video, a podcast, a web link or even a personal story or anecdote. This personalisation of the word, thus, became the context in which the students learned the word(s).

Digital literacy is not taught in many English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms and many teachers are not adept at the use of technology, leaving strategies for their use up to the student. The findings from this study aimed to bring up to date my own understanding of how students use and learn with DDs. I also wanted to find strategies that could assist other teachers to improve the ways students can be helped to learn new vocabulary.

## **Research procedures**

The research was conducted in two stages. The pre-intervention stage provided background information on the students’ current use of DDs as well as their use of their devices for conscious and implicit vocabulary learning. The second stage drew on the data and findings from the first stage to develop the classroom intervention.

### **Stage 1: Pre-classroom intervention research**

In the first stage I investigated students’ use of DDs in L2 vocabulary learning both quantitatively through a questionnaire (see Appendix 1), which was administered at the beginning of the course, and qualitatively through a semi-structured interview (see Appendix 2), which followed up on their responses in more depth, since written questionnaires can result in students giving brief or simplistic answers (Frary 2003). I also undertook observations of my students’ use of DDs during class time.

During my lessons, students were engaged in personal reading activities, such as finding stories of interest in a range of design magazines, and I also introduced regular vocabulary tests which played a vital role in generating data on language use for the study. The tests I administered consisted of matching exercises and games with words and definitions. Each test was a

puzzle to be played with, rather than a test of the student's ability. Therefore, the test scores were not the main aim of the activity; instead the tests allowed me to observe and record what students did when they encountered an unfamiliar word and how they use their DDs for vocabulary learning. I conducted the interviews, which I made notes from, and classroom observations at times when the students were busy with the activities, so that I did not have to interrupt the lesson or ask them to stay after class.

I made three basic assumptions about the vocabulary tests used in this study:

1. The most important component of vocabulary acquisition is the ability to establish a link between the word meaning and the context of its use.
2. The link between meaning and context in the mental lexicon can have two components: recall and recognition, and these can be further divided into active and passive.
3. Specialised vocabulary is more important than the number of words used. Hence a good vocabulary test for design students evaluates the depth of knowledge, not the learner's overall vocabulary.

The tests used in this study did not investigate vocabulary size but focused on word meaning, as illustrated earlier using the word 'dither'.

The vocabulary test undertaken for this study, apart from measuring the student use of DDs, had two other implications: through the preparation of students for the test, new learning techniques were explored and additionally the test results allowed students to see how their learning was progressing. The student preparation for the test involved confirming that students had the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding to undertake the test, and also ensured their familiarity with the vocabulary of their profession. In addition to the learning experience of taking the test itself, there were many chances for building on this formative approach. Rather than just handing back the test answers to the students, a number of learning strategies were used:

- The test was divided up amongst different groups of students who looked at various questions from the test and then decided how many marks should be allocated to each question based on its difficulty.
- Based on the results, the difficult questions were identified and then gone over in class before they were returned.
- The most difficult questions were identified and students were asked to review those questions in pairs and to come up with the correct answers. They then confirmed their answers with another pair before the tests were returned.

This kind of formative approach to self-assessment can be effective (Boud 1995) when used in vocabulary acquisition.

The intention of the questionnaire was to ascertain what the students perceived to be the advantages and disadvantages of DDs and how they use them in language learning. All students reported owning a smartphone (e.g. Android® and iPhone®) or an iPad®. These DDs are all quite expensive, but the students felt that combining phone and internet capabilities meant that the expense was worthwhile. The majority of DD owners were either happy or fairly happy with their DDs. They considered that the best aspects of DDs were the ability to add video and audio content (100%), their convenience (91%), their ease of use and speed (86%), their ability to look up words the students could not spell (71%), and the ability to record and listen to pronunciation of difficult words (66%). The disadvantages outlined by the students included not having enough detailed grammatical information (45%), a lack of 'how to use' information (28%), and their breakability (15%). Apart from the iPad® users, students reported that the small screens hampered their ability to view the whole of the information available, and many students had the impression that the information did not exist until they scrolled further down the page.

All the students reported using their DDs to quickly look up words and to find out detailed information about a word and grammatical information, while 80% of the students reported that they used a dictionary in their DD to search for 90% of words unknown to them when reading a text. Importantly, the students felt they were more likely to consult a DD than any other type of dictionary: paper, online or CD-ROM. About 90% of students used a DD at home, 85% in class, and 30% outside of class. Less than half of the students were trained in how to use their DDs at school, but 65% of them felt confident in using them. These responses suggested that these students were comfortable using their DDs. The analysis also showed that they used their DDs in and outside the classroom much more for reading and writing than for speaking and listening (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Breakdown of usage of digital devices across language skills**

Skills	Digital device use (%)
Reading	91%
Writing	86%
Listening	17%
Speaking	12%

Overall, the findings showed that DDs were very popular among the students in my class. All of them owned a digital device and used it on a regular basis and most were very satisfied with their DDs because they provided access to a great amount of information, were portable and fun to use.

In addition to the questionnaires, after each reading session and

vocabulary test, I carried out interviews to get more information on when, how and why students consult their DDs. The students were asked a series of open questions from which it was found that they: a) used their DDs for unknown words 70% of the time, b) inferred the meaning of words 20% of the time, and c) ignored words while reading 10% of the time. To illustrate, in one interview a student who used a DD for unknown words explained what he/she did in the following way:

Teacher: When you first saw the word dither, what did you do?

Student: I didn't know the word, very difficult word.

Teacher: What happened next?

Student: I tried to look it up but couldn't find it until I searched the internet.

I wouldn't have worked out its meaning.

Another explained how he read to infer words:

Teacher: When you first saw the word pixel, what did you do?

Student: I knew the word.

Teacher: What did you do?

Student: I kept reading.

A third student stated that he did not look up unknown words during reading:

Teacher: Do you always read the text first and then look up the word?

Student: Yes, because I need to read faster.

Teacher: Does the dictionary slow you down?

Student: Sometimes, but easy words I should know.

Based on the interview data, it was possible to identify that the use of DDs was dependent on several factors. Unsurprisingly, students' ability, knowledge and experience were factors. Those students who had more vocabulary knowledge used DDs more rarely. Another factor was text features, such as length and readability; the students reported using their DDs less with longer and more complex texts; this was surprising and may be attributed to time pressures. The type of genre and register was also linked to the use of DDs. When the students were reading an academic article, they would sometimes be confused by a word, which they could otherwise understand when they encountered it in a different genre, such as a magazine article. However, DDs facilitated students' word class knowledge. Using their DDs helped the students to link new words with other known words and this allowed them to work out the meaning of a word from the context.

However, in relation to the specialist vocabulary they required for the design course, they reported that it was very difficult to work out meaning

by relying on lexical strategies such as guessing and inferencing, and most of their dictionaries did not contain the technical words they needed. As a result, the students spent considerable time looking up words on the internet and translating them into their own language. However, they indicated that these translations were never written down or kept for future reference. The students seemed to expect to remember the words or to look them up again the next time they encountered them.

The questionnaire and interview data showed that students used the DDs as translation devices, but they appeared to be looking up new words every time they encountered them. They had a formidable learning tool that they could not use appropriately. It was evident that I needed to assist the students to organise their vocabulary learning and take more ownership of the vocabulary learning process.

## **Stage 2: Intervention strategies**

Based on what I had discovered in Stage 1, I devised a series of vocabulary activities that engaged students in using their DDs more effectively. These activities were based on the approach of Morgan and Rinvulcri (2004) and included text, writing on the part of the students, and communicative activities. The vocabulary activities also relied on the use of corpora and concordances, multisensory procedures (involving the use of different senses, e.g. sight, hearing) and included the activity I intended to focus on most: word personalisation tasks. This strategy involved encouraging the students to personalise their learning through personalised narration, as recommended by Fazioli (2009). Personalised narration involves presenting (instructional) content in conversational language and in a personal context. Word personalisation tasks are driven by the narrative potential of stories to increase learners' interaction with the vocabulary to be learned. I asked my students to focus on the reception and production of the new vocabulary and on getting the meaning of the word across and into their memory. The stories that they were asked to create associated with each new word were like communicative vehicles that were transmitting the meaning of the word via a personal tale. To incorporate their use of DDs, I conceived of a personalised online database that could be created. The DDs could then become a repository of various kinds of information for the new specialised vocabulary required for the students' College of Design courses.

To develop these ideas, first I carried out extensive research on the best tools available for organising vocabulary into a useable personalised dictionary. From a wide range of applications that could be used as a learning environment (e.g. Simplenote®, Microsoft OneNote®, Evernote®, Drophr® and Zotero®), I chose to use Evernote® because of its ability to include images, video, audio and web links and also because of its capacity to personalise the

operations. Evernote® is a free online service that allows the user to operate their software to collect, sort, collate, tag and annotate notes. Learners are able to enter information onto a card system that can then be accessed whenever and wherever they wish. These notes can also be accompanied by images and annotations, videos, audios and web clippings, which can be shared for viewing and editing by other users. Evernote® can also be downloaded to a desktop and, most importantly for this study, downloaded as an application for the iPhone®, the iPad® and other smartphones. These synchronised notes can be accessed and edited when the internet is both available and unavailable.

Next I introduced the students to new vocabulary learning strategies involving the use of Evernote® on their DDs in the ways outlined above. In doing so, it was important for me to bear in mind that I should minimise my teacher involvement, so that the student could 'own' the vocabulary learning process. To investigate this change of approach, I observed the students' use of DDs in class. I also conducted brainstorming sessions with the students to get their reactions to the use of Evernote® and the personalisation vocabulary learning activities they were using. I noticed that these sessions resulted in a rounder, more student-led intervention than has usually occurred with my teaching. My observations confirmed that the new learning strategies brought about a change in the way students approached vocabulary learning. In particular, I observed three key changes of focus in the way they were learning: word meaning, how a word fits into a story, and the purpose of a text. The students seemed more aware of how to discover meaning from diverse contexts of vocabulary use and remember it through a variety of memory strategies. In addition, students were enabled to choose their own most effective way of recalling vocabulary.

For example, one student was very proud of how he had learned the specialised meaning of 'dither' (to add pixels to a digital image), by hearing a lecturer on a YouTube video using this word. He then looked it up in his dictionary and was 'flabbergasted' that the meaning provided was 'to be indecisive'. Further research on the internet led him to understand what the word meant in a design context. This student then saved the video link, wrote his own definition and posted an image of the specialised meaning of dithering in Evernote®. Because the student developed his own personalised learning strategy a very difficult word was understood and could then be easily retrieved and used in the future.

The organisation and personalisation of vocabulary through word stories on their digital devices also seemed to increase the students' autonomy and motivation. Students also seemed to be accessing the vocabulary through different access points. For example, one of the fashion students took great pride in the lexical database she had created on Evernote®. She downloaded catwalk shows from YouTube, and images of clothing patterns from web

pages. On her smartphone, she included her own photographs of clothes she liked and even scrapbooked images from magazines. Many of these forms of visual communication had personal stories attached that required her to use the new vocabulary she had learned to express her meaning or her understanding of the fashion that she was passionate about.

## Outcomes of the research

The students in this AR had the opportunity to access vocabulary through various activities and strategies rather than just by using more traditional paper-based activities. In contrast to the assertions in much of the literature referred to earlier, I found that DDs are an important resource and that students appreciated using them because they supported their learning. Incorporating the use of DDs made the task of learning specialised vocabulary easier and acknowledged current real-life developments in modern technology.

Using Evernote® to create a class dictionary allowed individual students to add, edit and comment on other students' vocabulary, to take greater advantage of their DDs as vocabulary learning tools and to use them more creatively than previously. Also, because the students were encouraged rather than discouraged from using their devices, they were able to search for a much greater variety of information, and organise it in the way they preferred. They also valued the support for accuracy the DDs provided, since many of them indicated that they became frustrated when trying to guess specialised meanings from context. This integration of the digital world and the real world also allowed the students to create personal learning environments. They were able to capture what they saw, heard or read about a new (specialised) word, phrase or technique in the database and access this database from home on their desktop computers, at school on the library computers and in many other locations on their DDs.

Through my classroom observation, I also learned that vocabulary acquisition is quite often an implicit process. A number of times the students were surprised that they could remember a new word, but they could not recall having actively spent time learning it. They seemed to learn from the processes of completing the task, and not from the outcomes of the task. My research also highlighted the importance of explicit strategies for vocabulary acquisition. Helping students to organise vocabulary and personalise their learning of required words seemed to prove effective.

There were various limitations to the research. The students were not randomly selected and the numbers involved were very small. Therefore, their responses and the strategies they used for learning cannot be generalised to other international students who attend the college. My small-scale investigation can only reflect what occurred in this class when students learned

new vocabulary using the approaches I have described. The use of a written questionnaire and interviews for data collection could also only illustrate the strategies the students were aware of; it could not reveal implicit learning strategies they used unconsciously.

Overall my research confirmed the view I held when I began the project, that DDs need not be discouraged in the classroom; in fact, they should be absorbed into vocabulary and other learning strategies. The students' use of their DDs not only seemed to enhance their acquisition of vocabulary but also their autonomy and motivation. Students were able to choose creative and interesting personal learning strategies rather than be limited to teacher-led activities that may have reduced their opportunities to improve.

In contrast to the assertions in much of the literature, I found that DDs are an important resource if used appropriately. The students appreciated the use of DDs because they supported their learning. Many felt that too much guessing led to their becoming frustrated with the vocabulary and they liked the idea that they could understand the word accurately. The DDs provided this accuracy support. Vocabulary development is a critical element in successful language performance both in formal assessment and real-life language use. This particular AR suggests one way of contributing to that development.

## Conclusion

McIntosh (2010) describes learning as the process of making and of bringing into being knowledge. This definition resonates with me because it focuses on the process not the product of learning. Conducting AR led to a major transformation in my teaching. It made me stop and reflect about how I could improve my teaching practice and my interaction with my students, and I realise I still have much to learn. Because of my experience I would offer other teachers three tips. First, experiment in your classroom by creating 'work' for yourself, and not just your students, which responds to your personal questions and curiosity. Next, collaborate with your colleagues and peers, especially those working in other faculties. Finally, contribute honestly and openly to your community of practice without discarding your personal values.

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# Appendix 1

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## The questionnaire about digital devices

This questionnaire is designed to gather information about how you use digital devices (DD). It also includes questions about other ways you deal with unknown vocabulary. It takes about 20–30 minutes to complete this questionnaire.

This is not a test; there are no right or wrong answers. It is important to answer each question as honestly as possible. Please think about what you typically do. Thank you very much for your co-operation!

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

### Part I: Digital devices (DD)

1. Do you own a DD? a. Yes b. No
2. If you don't own a DD, why not?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. If you use both a printed dictionary and a DD, which do you use more often?
  - a. I primarily use a DD.
  - b. I use a DD more often than a printed dictionary.
  - c. I use a DD and a printed dictionary with about the same frequency.
  - d. I use a printed dictionary more often than a DD.
  - e. I primarily use a printed dictionary.

### If you don't own a DD, skip the following.

4. Which type of DD do you own?
 

Brand: \_\_\_\_\_

Model: \_\_\_\_\_

Cost: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Does your DD have an English–your language dictionary/a your language–English dictionary/an English–English dictionary?
  - a. English–your language dictionary
  - b. Your language–English dictionary
  - c. English–English dictionary
  - d. Thesaurus
  - e. Other ()

6. If you use both a printed dictionary and a DD, do you use them for different reasons?      a. Yes    b. No

**If your answer is yes**, what do you use each type of dictionary for?

Please mark all the items that are true of you.

- a. I use a DD when I want to know the meaning of the word, to find examples or to know more about the usage of the word.
  - b. I use a DD when I want to know the meaning of the word, while I use a printed dictionary when I want to know detailed grammatical information.
  - c. I use a DD for speaking and listening and use a printed dictionary for reading and writing.
  - d. I use a DD at school or in the library and use a printed dictionary at home.
7. Are you satisfied with your DD?
- a. Satisfied
  - b. Somewhat satisfied
  - c. Dissatisfied

8. What are the good points and bad points of your DD?

Please mark all the items that are true of your DD.

**Good**

- a. It is easy to look up a word.
- b. It is easy to carry around.
- c. It is easy to change from one dictionary to another.
- d. You can hear the word spoken.
- e. It is easy to check spelling.
- f. It can be connected to another application.
- g. Other ( )?

**Bad**

- a. It does not provide detailed information about how to use the word.
- b. It does not contain enough examples.
- c. It does not provide enough grammatical information.
- d. The screen is small and hard to use.
- e. It is fragile and easily broken.
- f. Other ( )

**Part II: How do you deal with unknown words?**

1. How often do you use your DD?
- a. Daily
  - b. 4 or 5 times per week
  - c. Several times per week
  - d. Once per week
  - e. Less often

2. What percentage of unknown words do you look up when reading?
  - a. More than 90%
  - b. 70–90%
  - c. 50–70%
  - d. Less than 50%
3. Do you use online dictionaries?
  - a. I use it daily.
  - b. I use it 4 or 5 times per week.
  - c. I use it several times a week.
  - d. I use it once per week.
  - e. I use it less often.
  - f. I never use it.
4. Where do you use your DD?
  - a. At home
  - b. In class
  - c. At the library
  - d. Other ( )?
5. Please answer the following questions using a five-point scale:
  - 1 Never or almost never true of me
  - 2 Generally not true of me
  - 3 Somewhat true of me
  - 4 Generally true of me
  - 5 Always or almost always true of me
  - a. I use an English–English dictionary.  
1 2 3 4 5
  - b. I use an English–my language dictionary.  
1 2 3 4 5
  - c. I use a my language–English dictionary.  
1 2 3 4 5
  - d. I use a DD for speaking (e.g. face-to-face conversation).  
1 2 3 4 5
  - e. I use a DD for listening (e.g. listening to lectures).  
1 2 3 4 5
  - f. I use a DD for writing (e.g. writing academic papers).  
1 2 3 4 5
  - g. I use a DD for reading (e.g. reading magazines).  
1 2 3 4 5
  - h. I use a DD to find out the meaning of a word.  
1 2 3 4 5
  - i. I use a DD to find out the pronunciation of a word.  
1 2 3 4 5

- j. I use a DD to find out the spelling of a word.  
1 2 3 4 5
- k. I use a DD to find out all the meanings of a word.  
1 2 3 4 5
- l. I use a DD to find out how to use a word.  
1 2 3 4 5
- m. I use a DD to find out the part of speech (e.g., noun, verb) of a word.  
1 2 3 4 5
- n. I use a DD to find out the sentence patterns in which a word can be used (e.g. interested in, like to go, etc.).  
1 2 3 4 5
- o. I use a DD to find out whether a word is countable or uncountable (i.e. whether a word can be pluralised).  
1 2 3 4 5
- p. I use a DD to find out the synonyms and antonyms of a word.  
1 2 3 4 5
- q. I use a DD to find out the patterns of a word (i.e. with which words the word is frequently used).  
1 2 3 4 5
- r. I pay attention to the examples of use when I look up a word in a DD.  
1 2 3 4 5
- s. When I want to know more about a word that I already have some knowledge of, I look it up.  
1 2 3 4 5
- t. When I get interested in another new word in the definitions of the word I look up, I look up this word as well.  
1 2 3 4 5
- u. I increase my vocabulary by studying my DD.  
1 2 3 4 5
- v. I look up in my DD English words that I have seen/heard outside class time.  
1 2 3 4 5
- w. I ask a teacher for the meaning of a new word.  
1 2 3 4 5
- x. I ask a friend or a classmate for the meaning of a new word.  
1 2 3 4 5
- y. I scan nearby entries to find out related words.  
1 2 3 4 5

### **Part III: Background information**

1. Education:
-

2. Sex: a. Male b. Female
3. Field of study:

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4. How much time each week do you usually spend studying English outside of class?
  - a. Less than 30 minutes
  - b. 30 minutes–1 hour
  - c. 1–2 hours
  - d. 2–3 hours
  - e. 3–4 hours
  - f. 4–5 hours
  - g. 5–6 hours
  - h. 6–7 hours
  - i. 7–8 hours
  - j. 8–9 hours
  - k. 9–10 hours
  - l. More than 10 hours
5. How much time do you spend each week on activities related to vocabulary learning outside of class?
  - a. Less than 30 minutes
  - b. 30 minutes–1 hour
  - c. 1–2 hours
  - d. 2–3 hours
  - e. 3–4 hours
  - f. 4–5 hours
  - g. 5–6 hours
  - h. 6–7 hours
  - i. 7–8 hours
  - j. 8–9 hours
  - k. 9–10 hours
  - l. More than 10 hours
6. Where do you get most of the opportunities to learn/practise English vocabulary?
  - a. In class and homework assignments
  - b. Self-initiated learning activities outside my classes
  - c. Both
7. Have you received any formal training in your DD? a. Yes b. No
8. Are you confident about your ability to use your DD?
  - a. Confident
  - b. Neither confident nor not confident
  - c. Not confident

## Appendix 2

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### Prompts for the interviews

**These questions were asked based on the observation.**

1. Do you use a digital device to look up new words?
2. Do you usually write down the unknown words?
3. Did you read the text several times?
4. When did you use your DD, right after reading a new word, after reading the sentence, after reading the paragraph, or after reading the whole text?

**For each word**

5. What did you think when you first saw the word?
6. Then, what did you do?
7. Why did you use/not use your DD?

**When the student consulted a dictionary**

8. What is the meaning? What did you find out?
9. Did you find it easily? Why/why not?
10. Are you satisfied with the meaning?
11. Did you find out any other information?

For a few words, the student was asked to demonstrate how they looked up the word.



## **Part 2**

### **Action research for formative assessment**



# 6 **Developing speaking through formative learner-oriented assessment**

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## **Introduction**

Speaking is a foundational skill that enhances the development of the other skills and is the primary skill for people to connect with others around them and negotiate daily life. English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) classrooms in Australia are environments where English is the instructional language and speaking is a core skill. Nevertheless, teachers and students often dedicate more teaching time to academic reading, writing and listening skills than speaking skills. Even though students have many speaking opportunities during daily lessons, they sometimes feel their speaking skills are neglected when they do not receive enough individual feedback and guidance. Without explicit teaching of speaking, development can be haphazard, and without targeted intervention, students' difficulties can persist.

I believe there is a need to invest more time in teaching speaking and to teach a broad range of speaking skills for international students to become more confident and competent speakers, who can engage effectively in daily and academic life. Therefore, the purpose of my project was to investigate developing speaking through the use of formative assessment. The project explored the use of recorded student speech and a learning management system (LMS) and its journal tool to manage recordings and feedback.

## **Background to the research**

Student feedback surveys are one of the mechanisms employed to gain student feedback about teaching, learning and assessment experiences at the University of Newcastle (UoN) Language Centre, where my research took place. In the lead-up to this research project, student feedback surveys indicated that students wanted a greater focus on teaching and learning speaking. In particular, they wanted teachers to pay more attention to speaking including teaching activities for 'more useful skill in speaking' [sic] and pronunciation (University of Newcastle Language Centre 2011, 2012).

In response to this feedback I decided to focus my action research (AR) on assessing speaking. I wanted to be more effective in assisting my students to develop their speaking skills and to overcome their persistent difficulties. I felt strongly that more timely, informative and individualised feedback would improve student speaking and course satisfaction. I believed that by recording their speech, I would be able to better understand their abilities and challenges, and to monitor their progress.

Previously, students and teachers at our ELICOS centre had access to a language laboratory for students to practise listening to and speaking English each week. The laboratory featured networked audio equipment, which also enabled teachers to monitor the students' practice and progress. Computer laboratories had now replaced this valued resource. While information technology has the potential to deliver a wide range of applications to support and enhance language learning and teaching, access to computers or smartphones in itself may not meet teacher or student needs. While some language-learning software had been installed on the centre's computers, the functions of the language laboratory had not been emulated. To conduct my research I needed effective, easy-to-use applications for recording my students' speech. I intended to share these recordings between students and teachers for reflection on student performances and to archive them for later reference. Consequently, I decided to explore how I could create a digital language laboratory using the computer laboratories. I believed that would result in improved student satisfaction with the speaking component of the courses that I taught. I also hoped that such a tool would enable other teachers to improve speaking assessment, teaching and learning.

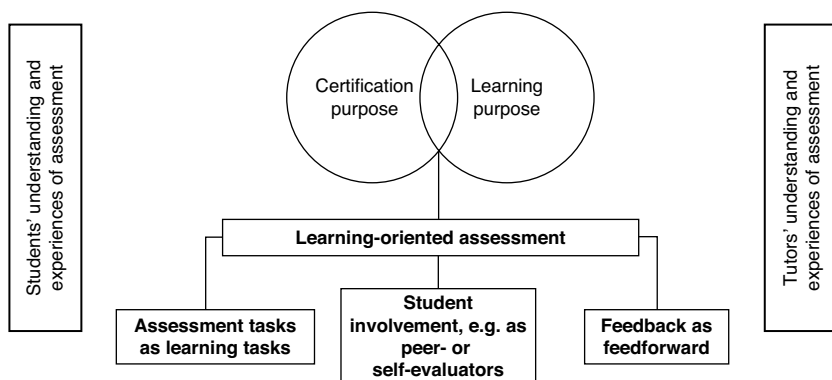
At the centre, program convenors set the examinations, which were administered late in the course. I decided to emphasise the formative dimension to assessment by responding to the assessment requirements more systematically early in the course. I sought to optimise the potential for classroom-based assessment tasks to guide student learning, in addition to formally contributing to the students' final grades. My decision to focus on classroom-based assessment was because it is integrated into all of the courses and presents teachers with some flexibility in task choice and administration.

My motivation to adopt a structured approach to formative assessment resulted from attending a workshop on collaborative learning, assessment and feedback. This workshop outlined a framework for learning-oriented assessment (LOA) (Carless 2007). This framework synthesises teaching practice with the concept of formative assessment to focus primarily on learning. It introduced me to new ways of thinking about assessment *for* learning and to a framework for connecting formative assessment theory with classroom practice.

Formative assessment aims to assess learner progress and to modify course content and instructional approaches in relation to the learner progress within the course timeframe (Goh and Burns 2012:192). It can be

both formal and informal, and is conducted recurrently in order to support learning. It is usually contrasted with end-of-course assessment, or ‘summative’ assessment, which serves to summarise the individual learners’ overall achievements at the end of the course. However, formative assessment has evolved to have diverse conceptualisations and practical approaches depending on teachers’ views and beliefs. Aiming to clarify the concept of assessment for learning, Carless and his colleagues (Carless, Joughin and Mok 2006:395–398) introduced the term learning-oriented assessment (LOA) and Carless (2007) later proposed the ‘framework for learning-oriented assessment’, which provides a practical, structured approach to assessment for learning. The framework, represented in Figure 1, specifies three principles: ‘appropriate tasks, student involvement in assessment and feedback’ (Carless 2007:60).

**Figure 1 Framework for learning-oriented assessment (Carless 2007:60)**



My aim was to assess for both learning and certification by designing an assessment approach that incorporated these three principles. Consequently, I needed to adapt classroom-based assessment tasks ‘to stimulate sound learning practices’, to engage the students in evaluating their speaking and to ensure that feedback was ‘timely and forward looking so as to support current and future learning’ (Carless 2007:59–60). I defined feedback to mean comments as opposed to marks or grades to reinforce the focus on learning based on the Gibbs and Simpson (2004:11) review of studies into the effectiveness of feedback. They noted that ‘in the absence of marks it has been reported that students read feedback much more carefully (Black and Wiliam 1998) and use it to guide their learning’. Such feedback aims to identify both learning achievements and gaps between a student’s performance and the learning objectives, in order to assist the students in establishing learning goals and generating further learning.

## Research context and participants

The UoN Language Centre offers nine 10-week courses each year. In these courses, international students develop their English language skills for general and academic purposes, with most students preparing for further study at the university. Every five weeks, new courses commence at each of four levels: elementary, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced. All students complete a suite of placement tests on the first day to establish their English language proficiency. Students who have International English Language Testing System (*IELTS*) scores of 5.0, 5.5 and 6.0 overall are placed in the intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced courses, respectively. At the end of these courses, students are expected to achieve English language proficiency equivalent to B1, B2 and C1 respectively on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001). On successful completion of the upper intermediate course, students are eligible to commence foundation studies and some undergraduate programs offered by the university, and from the advanced level, they can enter undergraduate programs with higher entry requirements, postgraduate and research programs.

Assessment at my centre is termed ‘progressive assessment’, a continuing process, which aims to comprehensively assess student achievement at multiple times and in various ways throughout each course. Teachers assess students utilising examination-style (75% of the score) and classroom-based assessment (25% of the score) tasks. The teachers collate the outcomes of these assessments to arrive at the students’ final course mark (University of Newcastle Language Centre 2013). These results are formally reported to the students in the final weeks of each course, in Week 8 and Week 10. An undefined aspect of progressive assessment is that it can take the form of either formative or summative assessment. It can be formative if the outcomes of the assessment influence choices of content and contribute to ongoing learning development. Alternatively, it can be summative if the assessment outcomes are only used to sum up the learner’s progress as part of the final grade.

While responding to assessment outcomes is part of a teacher’s responsibilities, the influence of assessment on course planning is taken for granted, and it is not always clear to either teachers or students which form of assessment has taken place. This situation is particularly noticeable when classroom-based assessment marks are formally reported to the students in the final stages of the course. The timing of this reporting leaves only a limited opportunity for students to respond to their results and for teachers to modify course content and instructional approaches according to examination outcomes.

To undertake my research, I involved my own classes as well as three other classes and their teachers working with students across the same language programs. The three teachers were colleagues teaching classes at either

the intermediate, upper intermediate or advanced courses and they joined me during the final phase of the intervention. They were all experienced teachers, who had each been teaching at the centre for more than five years. Following informal discussions about the research as it was progressing, these teachers offered to try my research intervention with their classes, and this resulted in their becoming actively involved. By the end of the project, which continued for 20 weeks, 89 students from seven different classes had participated in the research. Their nationalities included Chinese, Kuwaiti, Saudi Arabian, Libyan, Iranian, Thai, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Filipino, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Paraguayan. The majority of these students were in their early twenties, but ages ranged from 17 to 36 years.

## Research questions

In the early stages of the research, I developed six research questions to reflect the wide range of concerns I held about assessing speaking. These questions focused on my approach to assessment, assessment tools and improving pronunciation outcomes. However, addressing all six questions was well beyond the scope of the project. I decided to focus on adopting an LOA approach as part of progressive assessment and to explore the development of assessment tools to support learning. Assessment considered task achievement, grammar, vocabulary, discourse management and interactive communication. Refining my questions to reflect these aims enabled me to proceed more effectively with planning the intervention. My final research questions were:

- How can a formative LOA approach be adopted as part of progressive assessment?
- What kind of assessment tools will assist in the formative assessment of speaking?
- How can the use of speaking journals encourage students and teachers to focus on and monitor speaking development as part of formative assessment?

Assessment tools refer to instruments used by teachers and students for the purpose of assessing learning. In my project, I introduced three new assessment tools to support LOA of speaking. These were an LMS course, journals and recording software. A learning management system is a collection of online computer applications designed for educators. It co-ordinates 'learning resources, administrative functions, assessment and grading' (EDUCAUSE 2010). At the UoN Language Centre, students and staff use the LMS Blackboard Learn™ (2009). The second assessment tool introduced was the journal tool, which is one of Blackboard's course tools and is a self-reflective tool for students. Access to the journals can be restricted to only the student and their teacher or made public. The recording software

Audacity® (Oetzmann 2008) was the third assessment tool employed. I chose this software as it is free, easy to use and open source.

## Research procedures

The research project consisted of four broad stages. These were planning and development; intervention; examining outcomes; and finally, reflecting and identifying future research directions (Burns 2010). However, progressing through the stages was far from linear. AR is a recursive research approach, so there was considerable overlap and cycling back and forth between the stages. The planning and development stage was intense and multi-faceted. I explored ideas, took stock of existing resources, and consulted with colleagues and academic support staff. I undertook numerous tasks including: selecting assessment tools; arranging software installation; selecting and purchasing headsets; learning to develop a Blackboard course; designing a record-and-store procedure; and selecting appropriate assessment tasks.

A key aspect of my intervention was to record my students as a way of making 'concrete' their speaking acts, so that I could learn more about their needs and abilities. This approach, however, would generate a large number of audio recordings, presenting a challenge about how to manage them. I had also resolved to use the computer laboratory as a key space for focusing on speaking, so an early priority was to develop a procedure to record and store the recordings digitally to make them accessible to students and teachers. Before the research project, I had had no experience of using computers for recording. I had used Blackboard only to access information and had very little understanding of its applications. As a result, I consulted with the Blended and Online Learning Design (BOLD) team in my university's Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). They suggested using the software programs Audacity® for recording and LAME mp3 encoder (LAME Development Team 2012) for creating mp3 files along with a Blackboard course (see Appendices 1 and 2) for sharing and archiving recordings.

While learning to record with the Audacity® software proved very easy, learning to create a Blackboard course was complex and time-consuming. The course I created provided a virtual space to centralise information and activities. It contained project information, assessment schedules, rubrics, models and tasks (Appendix 2). In addition, it featured internet links for students to download the software tools on their own computers if they wished. For each class I set up a group and pre-enrolled the students with a journal for each student to store their speech recordings. I decided to use personal journals, which allowed only student and teacher access, as the students had expressed this preference in class. Each journal entry (Appendix 3) was created by a student, and typically consisted of an attached audio file along with a written comment. The comments included self-evaluations, task



evaluations, concerns about speaking performance and feedback from their teacher.

Finally, I focused on selecting assessment tasks. I decided to modify the classroom-based assessment tasks into learning tasks at each course level by introducing recordings. I experimented with a variety of tasks. The classroom-based tasks aimed to assess not only pronunciation but also task response, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse management. I eventually decided on student short talks of 1 to 2 minutes in length (Appendix 4), since these gave them the opportunity to produce a personal response to the weekly theme incorporating the key learning outcomes of that week. As these tasks were monologic, interactive communication was assessed during other classroom activities and not with the project assessment tools.

The second research stage, intervention, was conducted over three phases. The first and second phases involved my classes, one upper intermediate (CEFR B2) class in Phase 1 and two classes in Phase 2, one each at the intermediate (CEFR B1) and advanced (CEFR C1) levels (Council of Europe 2001). The final phase involved four classes across all of these levels. My colleagues taught three of the classes, and I taught one. Each class consisted of between 10 and 18 students.

During the first phase of the intervention, I focused on continuing to develop the Blackboard course and managing technical challenges. The computer laboratories were being upgraded, and the required software had not yet been installed. As a result, my students and I made recordings of their assessment tasks using smartphones and cassette recorders. These recordings were the first of many assessment performance recordings. A focus group of three students and I listened to their recordings together after class and exchanged face-to-face feedback. To do this, I replayed each student's recording and paused it at salient points to focus on performance. These recordings were not placed in the Blackboard journals. By the second phase the Blackboard course was ready to use, and the software had been installed on the computers. Each class had one lesson per week in the computer laboratory. In this lesson the students recorded their speaking performance on the weekly assessment task. They often listened to their recording and recorded it again several times. Next the students exported their audio files as mp3 files from Audacity® to their student home drive or USB. Finally they created a journal entry in the Blackboard course.

In the classroom, the students and I also used smartphones and a video recorder for capturing performances such as short talks and oral presentations. Recording was very convenient and easy, but uploading the recordings from smartphones to Blackboard was more complicated than from Audacity®, as some of the file types were not compatible with the Blackboard audio player. In addition, some students did not have smartphones, so Audacity® became the preferred recording tool. After each lesson I accessed

each journal via Blackboard and listened to the students' journal entries. I gave feedback in writing and logged follow-up actions for subsequent lessons in my research notes and weekly plans. Throughout the intervention stage I collected data from a variety of sources. The data included student and teacher journal comments, survey and interview responses, research notes and the recordings. The student speaking journals were a rich source of feedback from both students and teachers.

In the third intervention phase I gained individual student perspectives when I interviewed a focus group of three students. The aim of these interviews was to ascertain their impressions of the intervention. Two of the teachers provided reflective feedback in writing and face to face, and the third teacher shared her experiences and reflections in an extensive telephone interview. My research notes captured ideas, recollections and many to-do lists. Some entries described student actions and reactions while lessons were in progress. After lessons had concluded I often made evaluative comments about the lessons, and I noted ideas for adjusting course content, teaching strategies and tasks. These observations and evaluations also guided further development and fine-tuning of the Blackboard course.

During and after the intervention stage, I began to examine the outcomes. To do this I transcribed parts of the interviews, and assembled the written data from the journals and the collaborating teachers' reflections. I began to read through the data and consider the ideas and themes that would help me to respond to my research questions. The first themes that I focused on were references to the assessment tools, journals, feedback and aspects of speaking. The next step was to read through the data again and code the recurrent themes. This process involved marking similar ideas and themes across a number of different but related data sources in order to group the incidence of ideas and themes together. The number of themes and ideas that emerged as I continued to read increased, and I added new codes accordingly, moving back and forth between the data, coding and questions.

## Outcomes of the research

The first research question was concerned with exploring the possibility of orienting the Language Centre's progressive assessment approach to foreground learning: How can a formative LOA approach be adopted as part of progressive assessment? The first of Carless' three principles of LOA requires the teachers to develop 'assessment tasks as learning tasks' (2007:59–60). This was achieved through the simple intervention of recording student assessment task performances. All the students succeeded in recording speaking assessment tasks and a total of 249 journal entries were made during the second and third intervention phases. The recording intervention in itself seemed to motivate the students to focus on improving their speaking.

Teachers and students both reported that they felt that the intervention facilitated learning. The following journal entries illustrate an upper intermediate and an intermediate student's satisfaction with the LOA approach to progressive assessment tasks:

In this activity, I can learn new words and how to use these.

I enjoyed to record my voice. after the recording, I think we can improve my speaking [sic].

The second principle of LOA is 'student involvement as peer- or self-evaluators' (Carless 2007:59–60). For this project I focused on self-assessment and not peer assessments. I observed my students listening to the recording of their speech numerous times before finally submitting it, suggesting that the students were evaluating their performance repeatedly. Many students shared their self-evaluations face to face with their classmates and their teachers, who observed that recording facilitated self-assessment. Some upper intermediate and advanced students wrote their evaluations as comments in their speaking journals.

I tried to make a intoned speaking. Unfortunately, I couldn't have enough time so the fluency is not perfect, but I hope that there are some improved points [sic]. (Advanced student)

I liked this activity but I had trouble saying "co-operative" and "refund". (Upper intermediate student)

I notice about my speaking has something not very clear such as "th", "v". I think this activity is very good for us to find out our mistake. (Upper intermediate student)

The comments varied in relation to the language level of the students. Teacher C commented that many of her intermediate level students simply copied the teacher's model of how to comment. Teacher A, who was teaching an advanced (CEFR C1) class, reported: '[My students] were able to self-analyse. I didn't completely agree with their analyses but this was their first time to critically evaluate.'

The detail and themes of the advanced students' feedback reflected greater facility with language. Their main concerns included pronunciation, grammar and practising speaking. The focus group students confirmed that for them, recording assessment tasks did indeed facilitate student evaluation.

'Feedback as feedforward' (Carless 2007:59–60) is the third principle of LOA. Teachers and students gave feedback in journal comments and face to face in the classroom. The focus group students also emphasised the need for

correction feedback to ensure that they did not just repeat the same errors. They also commented that face-to-face feedback and interaction was their first preference. One example of a teacher's intention to use feedback to guide the modification of the course was: 'We will work on the "f" and "p" sounds in class tomorrow' (Teacher B).

In addition to these feedback methods, I also experimented with creating feedback recordings along with Teacher B, an idea that arose from a student request for audio models as part of the feedback. I uploaded my audio models to Blackboard for my students. This development of recording audio feedback illustrates one of the ways in which feedback from students about the process was fed forward into the course. However, both Teacher B and I found this method time-consuming.

Two main uses of feedback emerged: goal setting and course modification. Two teachers indicated that they used feedback to help their students set learning goals. They also used it to modify course content and teaching approaches to better meet the needs of their students. Teacher A wrote:

The intention is that having been made aware of their problem, they can focus on them and seek to improve . . . It makes me aware of different issues students have, and I can draw their attention to these as and when they arise and remind them to work on them. I can also create specific activities to target weak areas.

Likewise, I fine-tuned the courses and intervention in response to feedback. Some students used the feedback from their own observations as well as their teachers to set goals for improvement. The feedback from students also suggests that they learned more about their speaking by having the opportunity to listen to their recordings and read their teacher's comments.

The second research question related to exploring practical support for teachers when assessing speaking: What kind of assessment tools will assist in the formative assessment of speaking? The assessment tool most valued by the teachers was the recording and editing software Audacity®. Two colleagues who participated in the intervention reported experiencing improved confidence and greater awareness of student abilities and difficulties as a result of being able to record the students' speech. Teacher B remarked: 'It's giving me evidence, and it's giving me confidence because I can actually go back . . . and have a really good understanding about where they are going wrong . . . It's educating me.'

She also added that she loved having a tool that enabled her to listen to student recordings again and again so that she could really understand how they were speaking. This gave her 'confidence to give a professional judgment on their speaking' that was evidence based. She felt that by being able to listen to student recordings, she was better informed about their speaking and about speakers from different countries.

The final research question focused specifically on the speaking journals: How can the use of speaking journals encourage students and teachers to focus on and monitor speaking development as part of formative assessment? Blackboard and its journal tool were essential for managing the recordings and communication between the teacher and students. The speaking journals are a concrete yet digital and permanent mode for monitoring and focusing on speaking. They were key organisational tools for archiving the recordings of each student over the duration of their course enrolment, and were communication hubs that provided students as well as teachers with easy access to early evidence of what the students needed to improve.

The use of the speaking journals facilitated the monitoring of speaking development as part of formative assessment. In the focus group interviews, all the students were emphatic that the speaking journals had assisted them to focus and reflect on their speaking. The journals gave the students agency in seeking assessment and feedback from their teachers. The recordings also provided teachers and students with a means of capturing speaking performances for later review and analysis for further learning. The students all said they would like to continue using the speaking journals in their advanced course.

The journals enabled the teachers to monitor each student's speaking in a way that is not easily done in a busy classroom. My colleagues and I were able to hear each student speaking, one by one, without the pressures and distractions of the classroom. As a result our students received individualised and considered feedback on their speaking. Teacher B remarked that using the journals had increased her focus on speaking and using the assessment tools had resulted in her students becoming more confident speakers and more engaged in speaking activities: 'Everyone has to speak and they are much more eager to talk in groups, in pairs and with different people.' Teacher B described the excitement the students displayed when they knew that they were all going to get individual feedback. She found that they began to ask questions about speaking that they did not normally ask. She said it made them 'speak about speaking'. Finally, the journals also enabled the monitoring of speaking development across the duration of the course.

Another outcome of the project was that my approaches to teaching and providing feedback evolved, as learning-oriented assessment is positioned early in the teaching cycle rather than at its end. My commitment to focus on speaking and formative assessment immediately created positive washback. I began to teach more explicitly about speaking, and ensured speaking was taught and practised on a daily basis. My ability and confidence in giving feedback increased, and my feedback became more specific. I also came to see assessment as a powerful productive tool for learning. Recording students' speaking performances transformed assessment tasks into learning tasks and facilitated self-assessment as the students played the recordings back and recorded themselves again.

The project produced a range of tools for assessment that have continued to be used in my centre. Teachers and students now have access to and regularly use the recording and editing software Audacity®. Instructions for recording using Audacity® and uploading recordings to Blackboard journals are readily available in the computer laboratories to guide users. Other assessment tools created for the project were a range of speaking assignments for progressive assessment (Appendix 4), assessment schedules and rubrics, speaking journals and pronunciation models (Appendix 2). These were all uploaded to Blackboard for the students and teachers to access. Self-study language-learning software, Connected Speech (PROTEA Textware 2009) and Issues in English (PROTEA Textware 2004), were upgraded and reinstalled in the newly equipped computer laboratories. This software features pronunciation modules that my students used to learn about suprasegmental features of pronunciation and to practise pronunciation skills. The project also initiated the collection of speaking assessment performances, and teachers continue to collect recordings. This body of students' recordings is also available for assessment standardisation, moderation and training activities.

## Discussion

Positive outcomes arose from expanding my research to other classes beyond my own. These were implementing the project more widely over the curriculum and more extensively testing the assessment framework. A further pleasing outcome was that the intervention was equally successful at the intermediate level. The only adaptation that would enhance student assessments would be to provide scaffolding for self-assessment.

The most significant challenge for the teachers was time to listen to the recordings and provide feedback. One strategy to reduce the demands on teachers' time and yet provide feedback for students would be to assist students to develop self- and peer assessment skills. This alternative approach would lessen student dependence for feedback on the teacher by sharing the responsibility. Such an approach would also develop greater learner autonomy and evaluative skills. During the intervention I also had to create more time for teaching speaking skills, which caused me to reflect on the way I used time in the classroom, and to learn ways of managing classroom time more efficiently. For some reading and writing lessons I developed a flipped-classroom approach, which meant that students completed some tasks outside class time. As a result, I achieved a better balance of time spent in the classroom on different skills for speaking.

Deciding what aspects of speaking feedback to focus on was also very challenging, especially in the first stage of the intervention. I quickly found that I needed to increase my knowledge about speaking to offer useful feedback. Thus, I consulted books on speaking and pronunciation to learn more

and eventually decided to focus feedback and teaching on suprasegmental elements, grammar, vocabulary and discourse management. However, even with a more comprehensive knowledge of speaking, it was difficult to write feedback about speaking effectively and efficiently, and I also realised that students needed to be taught the meta-language used in feedback comments and to be given face-to-face feedback. I found that one of the most satisfying and time-efficient ways of providing feedback was conferencing, where feedback is one-to-one or with small groups of two to three students. This method also enabled me to model correct pronunciation immediately after mispronunciation had occurred and made it possible for the students to ask for further clarification.

A variety of assessment tasks were tried over the course of the project. The aim of the intervention was not to set specific assessment tasks but rather to establish a flexible approach. The tasks selected for recording were mostly monologues, together with pronunciation practice of vocabulary lists with sentences and 1-minute mini-talks prepared by students. Other activities included listening to an audio-visual presentation and then emulating the presenter's intonation for selected phrases, and listening to and practising pronunciation of model paragraphs.

Not all teachers and students had confidence in using computers, and consequently, it was important to develop simple processes and to assist them to learn about using technology to support LOA. I used the strategy of pairing students as technology buddies to support the development of their technology knowledge, skills and confidence, a strategy that could also be used for teachers to provide professional development and ongoing support. Finally, in some contexts, teachers and students may not have access to computers or sophisticated software. Nonetheless, it would still be possible to emulate this approach to LOA for speaking, as teachers and students could use whatever available recording devices they have. If an LMS is not available, recordings can be shared through other methods such as using email, USB, CD and cassette tape. It is the process of recording, replaying and assessing speech that is important, and not the software.

## Conclusion

This research project explored ways to focus on developing students' speaking skills to promote learning as part of an existing progressive assessment program. LOA emphasises the formative dimension of assessment and positions in-classroom assessment in the teaching-learning cycle. Assessment tasks become learning tasks when students record their speaking performances on these tasks. As recording gives students opportunities to hear themselves speaking, they can assess their performance in relation to assessment criteria and their own concerns. Furthermore, allowing students

multiple attempts when recording creates opportunities for them to act upon their evaluations and improve performance. Active involvement in assessment in this way assists students to develop evaluative skills and identify goals for further learning.

My involvement in the research project gave rise to a rich professional development experience. This resulted in broadening and deepening my knowledge of speaking and improving my assessment and computer literacy skills. My confidence and efficacy in assessing speaking increased measurably. Adopting an AR approach led to a systematic and reflective investigation that motivated me to read about speaking and its nature, teaching and assessment. Accordingly, I listened more discerningly to my students' speech and discovered how they wanted to be supported in learning to speak. AR emerges from daily classroom challenges as structured, bottom-up investigation. Engaging in AR re-positions teachers in relation to teaching, learning and assessment through critical reflection. Teachers doing AR develop knowledge about and for teaching, learning and assessing to improve practice. I learned that one of the richest sources of knowledge for teaching is talking with and listening to learners.

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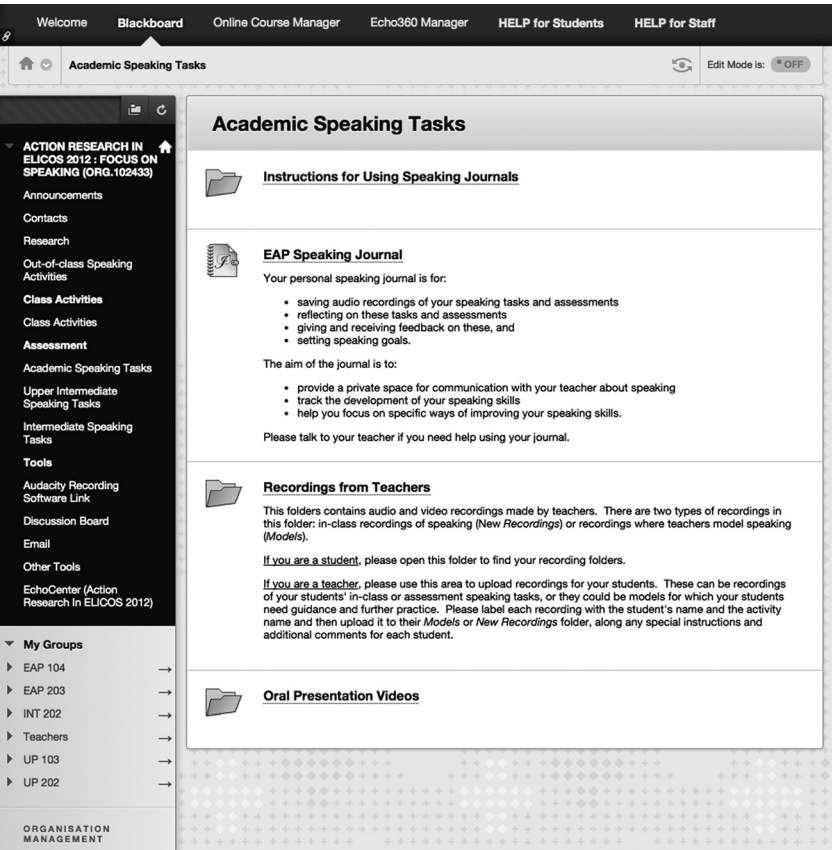
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# Appendix 1

## Academic speaking on Blackboard



## Appendix 2

### Upper intermediate speaking on Blackboard

Welcome
Blackboard
Online Course Manager
Echo360 Manager
HELP for Students
HELP for Staff

ACTION RESEARCH IN ELICOS 2012 : FOCUS ON SPEAKING (ORG.102433)

Announcements
Contacts
Research
Out-of-class Speaking Activities
Class Activities
Class Activities
Assessment
Academic Speaking Tasks
Upper Intermediate Speaking Tasks
Intermediate Speaking Tasks
Tools
Audacity Recording Software Link
Discussion Board
Email
Other Tools
EchoCenter (Action Research In ELICOS 2012)

My Groups
EAP 104
EAP 203
INT 202
Teachers
UP 103
UP 202

ORGANISATION MANAGEMENT
Control Panel
Files

Upper Intermediate Speaking Tasks

In-class Progressive Assessment Schedule

Week	Task	Assessment Focus
2	Things that make us feel good/bad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>effective pronunciation and sentence structure.</li> </ul>
5	Achievements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>fluency</li> <li>use of language introduced in Module 5</li> <li>appropriate speed, and</li> <li>appropriate volume.</li> </ul>
6	A memorable event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>accuracy of grammar</li> <li>use of language and vocabulary introduced in Module 7</li> <li>effective pronunciation (including stress and intonation)</li> </ul>
8	Solve the mysteries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>use of language &amp; vocabulary</li> <li>pronunciation (including stress and intonation)</li> <li>appropriate speed</li> <li>accuracy of grammar</li> </ul>

Week 2

Week 5

Week 6

Vocabulary List Pronunciation

This folder has recordings of the Upper Intermediate vocabulary lists for you to listen to & practice your pronunciation.

Instructions for Using Speaking Journals

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## Appendix 3

### Academic speaking journal on Blackboard

#### EAP Speaking Journal

*If a Blog or Journal can be graded, a grade assigned to an individual member is applied only to that individual. [More Help](#)*

Wednesday, 4 July 2012

noun clauses 2

Posted by Mahjabin at Wednesday, 4 July 2012 09:21:19 o'clock EST

I have found some difficulty with noun clauses, please advice me.  
Attached Files:  
mahjabin noun clauses.mp3(1544.1kb)

Comments: 1

Comment

Liz Woods said...

Thursday, 16 August 2012 02:34:31 o'clock EST

Hi Mahjabin,  
You speak very clearly and your grammar is perfect. One area to practise is your fluency. This means I would like you to try to speak a little faster.

Your word stress, sentence stress and intonation are very accurate. You also have very good pronunciation of the individual sounds. Just take care when you pronounce the words, 'works', 'artwork' & 'Adair'. For these words, your word endings need to be stronger some times. It is these letters need to be stronger:  
works > ks  
artwork > t  
Adair > air - it is a longer sound than you are currently pronouncing.

Please practise these & record then again in a new journal entry. Please let me know if you need any extra help.

Kind regards,  
Elizabeth

JournalDetails

<

Mahjabin

INDEX

July 2012 (2)  
noun clauses 2  
word stress 2

June 2012 (2)

114

## Appendix 4

### Upper intermediate speaking assessment on Blackboard

Welcome Blackboard Online Course Manager Echo360 Manager HELP for Students HELP for Staff

Upper Intermediate Speaking Tasks > Week 6 Edit Mode is: OFF

#### Week 6

##### Speaking Assessment 3: A memorable event

This task is to assess whether you can talk about a memorable event that you have attended. You should use some of the vocabulary from Module 7 and some *Useful Language* from *Describing the event* on p.75 in your textbook *New Cutting Edge*.

Prepare a 1-2 minute talk as homework. Use the model talks to help you to prepare.

The speaking skills that you will be assessed on are:

- accuracy of grammar
- use of language and vocabulary introduced in Module 7
- effective pronunciation (including stress and intonation)

You will be given a grade out of 20 marks, which will be used as part of your progressive assessment mark.

# 7 From wikis to mobile apps: Assessing fluency

*Jessica Coble*

*Becky Steven*

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Language Teaching, Perth*

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## Introduction

As teachers of General English at Level B1–B1+ of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001), part of our teaching involved using a wiki (from the Hawaiian word for ‘quick’ or ‘fast’), which is a website that allows someone to add, delete, or revise content by using a web browser. We wanted to improve our existing class wiki, which lacked opportunities for developing speaking skills. We conducted action research (AR) to encourage student self-awareness of speaking fluency and to assist students to develop and reach their own goals. Our research involved using Web 2.0 technologies to establish learner-oriented goals, develop clear criteria for speaking fluency, and provide effective, formative feedback. As teacher researchers, our goal was to investigate how fluency development had been addressed by others and whether their solutions could be applied to our context. To do this, we crossed domains as diverse as drama, public speaking and forensic science. We used qualitative and quantitative data collection tools and reflected critically on the changes brought about from our AR, and professional development opportunities that have arisen from sharing our findings on a national and international level. They reflect the growth we experienced as teacher researchers and the effect this has had on the speaking fluency of our students.

## Background to the research

Our research journey started with a need to further develop our already established class wiki, which had sufficient activities for listening, vocabulary, reading and writing skills, but lacked a speaking component. We felt that speaking had become a by-product rather than a feature of our wiki, and we wanted to focus our attention on teaching, assessing and learning speaking skills. Our primary purpose was to investigate ways to analyse our students’

speaking fluency and build on what we found to give feedback to students on their progress. Our second aim was to measure our students' fluency using mobile applications, which we explain in more detail below, for evaluating speech rate, non-lexical fillers and interjections, and to use this information to create learner-orientated targets for improving and assessing their fluency. We believed these mobile applications would give a snapshot of our students' real-time speaking. The main reason we chose to focus on fluency was that we felt our designated coursebooks for General English tended to lack structured activities to develop fluency for learners at the intermediate level of B1–B1+ on the CEFR. Although many General English books and teaching programs contain interesting and engaging activities for developing speaking skills, including repeating unrehearsed talks (Nation 1989), board games, role plays and discussions, in our experience there is a lack of explicit instruction about the development of fluency. Rossiter, Derwing, Manimtim and Thomson (2010:583) conclude in their study that 'learner texts were sorely lacking in consciousness-raising activities and did not have a focus on fillers'.

The neglect of fluency and the lack of explicit instruction in textbooks may be accounted for by the fact that there is 'an implicit belief that fluency cannot be taught and that it will emerge naturally, for example, as a result of a stay abroad' (Chambers 1997), that it will develop 'outside the classroom' (Rossiter et al 2010), and that it takes a long time to develop (Luoma 2004). Therefore, incorporating more effective ways of teaching, learning and assessing fluency in our programs was a challenge that we wanted to address in our AR. Having identified fluency as our focus, we discovered that there is a lack of a precise and consistent definition of fluency (Prefontaine 2010). Speech rate (word count) is a common means of measuring fluency, as is the use of non-lexical fillers (um, er, ah) and interjections (so, and, like) in a sample of speech (Rossiter et al 2010). A speech pathologist we talked with in preparation for our research advised us that for classroom purposes, measuring speech rates by counting words per minute rather than syllables per minute would be more convenient. We determined that using word counts and counts of non-lexical fillers and interjections would be manageable measures for us, as busy teachers, to track students' fluency development. Furthermore, we recognised, as Boers (2014) argues, that it would be constructive to design our activities to include some aspect of time pressure in order to push our students to deliver the content of their talks faster, and with fewer hesitations.

We realised that we also needed to establish clear criteria for 'fluency' and discuss them with our students in order to guide our investigation. We decided to use the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA), an accent archive ([www.dialectsarchive.com](http://www.dialectsarchive.com), Meier 1997), because it contained clear examples of scripted and unscripted speech with a range of comprehensibility and speech continuity. We selected unscripted speech samples from

several countries to demonstrate natural features of native speaker fluency, such as hesitations and fillers. We recognised from the literature that fluency took time to develop particularly for lower level learners, and that focusing too much on accuracy in speaking rather than fluency tended to affect students' confidence and create anxiety (Zhu 2008). We also turned to Shepherd (2009) who stresses the importance of maintaining a speaker's 'unique cultural identity' through their accent and speaking in a way that is the most comfortable. This idea guided the way we supported our students in communicating comfortably and effectively using their own accent over the two 5-week cycles of our AR.

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

## Research context and participants

Our research was conducted at the University of Western Australia's Centre for English Language Teaching (UWA CELT), which provides General English and English for Special Purposes (ESP) classes for international students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. The ESP classes may include courses in Business English and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Students may also enrol in examination preparation classes for TOEIC®, Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and *Cambridge English: Preliminary (PET)*, *Cambridge English: First (FCE)* and *Cambridge English: Advanced (CAE)*. With the exception of *Cambridge English: Preliminary*, the majority of the ESP classes tend to be at upper intermediate level and above (CEFR B2 and above). In our positions at UWA CELT, we had both been working as class co-ordinators involved with a team of teachers in the planning, delivery and assessment of the General English intermediate level classes for a



number of years. Therefore, the participants in our research were all enrolled in a 20-hour-week General English course at UWA CELT at an intermediate level, equivalent to a B1–B1+ level on the CEFR (see Appendix 1 for an explanation of how we used technology to help students work towards specific CEFR descriptors). At intermediate level, students' aims and study pathways vary greatly as they work towards the upper intermediate level classes and study pathways, and indeed our students were studying English for many reasons, including work, travel and tertiary studies purposes; some were studying English simply for global communication.

Over the whole duration of the research we taught two General English classes separately, one of which had 12 students and one of which had eight students. The 20 participants comprised seven males and 13 females aged between 18 and the early 60s, with an average age of 23. Their nationalities included Brazilian, Chinese, Colombian, East Timorese, French, Indonesian, Iraqi, Japanese, Saudi, South Korean, Taiwanese and Thai. To establish our students' needs, we gave them a needs analysis form at the start of the first AR cycle. Some of the students noted that they had problems with their speaking fluency, as well as with using English outside the classroom. For example, two participants who lived with people of the same nationality expressed their concern about using English at home, as this seemed unnatural to them for everyday communication. One participant wanted to understand Australian accents better, and another expressed an interest in recording his speech as a way of practising his English (see Appendix 2 for the response from this student). We considered this information as valuable input for our initial planning stages.

## Research questions

Before our first 5-week cycle of research, we developed the following research questions (RQs):

1. How can a weekly speaking journal improve students' speaking fluency?
2. How can a wiki be used as a motivational tool to improve students' speaking fluency?

However, one of the aspects of AR is that it 'centres squarely on change over time' (Burns 2010:30). During our first cycle, we realised that our students' problems of lack of confidence and linguistic resources were much more deeply enmeshed with their struggle to develop spoken fluency, and that the real issue was that our students were not aware of how to best improve their speaking fluency. These initial research questions did not encompass our students' individual needs and learning styles. We experienced setbacks because of our students' lack of understanding of how to complete the speaking journals and wiki activities, and their inability to optimise their own fluency

practice. We realised that we had to act upon our observations and reflections by targeting fluency more effectively. Rather than limiting our focus to speaking journals and a wiki, we needed to explore other ways to use Web 2.0 technologies to analyse, evaluate, reflect on, and help our students feed forward their fluency development into further learning. These reflections during our first research cycle led us to reformulate our two initial RQs into one overall question: How can we set achievable targets for students' fluency development using Web 2.0 technologies while providing them with effective formative assessment of their fluency?

### Research procedures

In our first research cycle we involved our students in trialling mobile phone apps, recording speaking samples, accessing a class wiki and using a pronunciation bank website to enhance their speaking fluency. Starting with the needs analysis form to elicit their speaking goals and their own preferred ways of practising their speaking, we then set up an LMS to store our students' speaking journal entries and class wiki. Our students trialled the Audacity® software to record their weekly self-reflections on their speaking development and wiki practice activities. Initially in our trial, we designed a worksheet to prompt students' self-reflections on their recordings, but we found it contained too much detail and became very time-consuming. In the following weeks we improved it by using fewer prompting questions which involved our students comparing their first and last recordings (see Appendix 3 for the question worksheets). We incorporated practice exercises targeting connected speech, pronunciation and intonation into our wiki using YouTube clips and pronunciation websites. These were set up to enable our students to take more control of their own fluency development practice at home.

We sought simple yet effective ways to measure our students' pre- and post-intervention fluency and turned to the field of applied linguistics by incorporating the Oral Language Analysis and Feedback (OLAF) system (Ferguson 1998) which involved using a handheld counter to record speech rates. We adapted the OLAF system for our purposes by using a tap, tilt and shake counter app called 'Hit Counter' (Costa Centena 2013) and a smart-phone timer to count speech rates during a 1-minute 'impromptu speaking' activity every week. The activity involved brainstorming topics such as the neighbourhood, family and self-introductions, and having students speak about these topics for 1 minute. During this activity, we sat next to individual students and took a word count (wpm), counting every word they spoke in a minute (not including pauses, repetitions and fillers) to gauge their speech rate. We modified the 'impromptu speaking' activity from the field of forensic science, in which some trainers challenge their forensic science students' ability to 'communicate intelligently on the spur of the moment beyond the

classroom into society' (Williams, Carver and Hart 1993:29–40) by making them give impromptu reports on their findings, which would better prepare them for real-life scenarios such as reporting in court cases. Having taken our students' word counts using our modified OLAF system, we got our students to graph their own speech rate results weekly on a record sheet to monitor their fluency development over the cycle. Some students flourished during this activity, and found it motivating to try to increase their own word counts, whereas, in line with Boers' (2014) observations that 'learners' approaches to one and the same activity can vary considerably', other students appeared nervous and disappointed if their speech rate fluctuated.

The next step in our intervention was to target and reduce the number of non-lexical fillers and interjections that our students used in their speaking, and we employed the 'Ah Counter' (Tascovics 2011), an app which was originally designed as a tool for Toastmasters International for public speaking activities. In order to raise students' consciousness of what non-lexical fillers and interjections were, and how often they used them when they spoke English, the 'Ah Counter' app was trialled to count manually the frequency of 'um, er, ah, so' in real-time speech. We used this app in a peer assessment activity, where our students counted each other's non-lexical fillers and interjections during the 1-minute impromptu speeches. Our final stage in Cycle 1 involved students exploring a website, with a view to setting clear criteria for assessing speaking. We investigated using the Speech Accent Archive ([accent.gmu.edu](http://accent.gmu.edu)); Brown (2012) also used this technology in AR. However, because this website focuses primarily on pronunciation, it lacked the features of fluency that we were hoping to highlight in order to elicit the criteria for 'fluency' from our students. Therefore we decided it was not appropriate for our purposes.

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

Because of what we had discovered in the first cycle, in our second research cycle we were concerned that fluctuations in our students' speech rates may be demotivating. Therefore, we took speech rates only at the start and end of the second cycle as a means of formative assessment, and redesigned the record sheets with 'target' icons to enable more explicit goal setting by the students (see Appendix 4 for a sample of the goal-setting record sheet used). We had also found that taking weekly speech rates was time consuming for us as teachers. In addition, we trialled IDEA (Meier 1997), which had a good range of unscripted speech samples originally devised as a resource bank for training actors. From the IDEA archive we chose specific speakers from a variety of countries, with different accents and speech texture (Luoma 2004)

showcasing speech rate (too fast, too slow, just right), non-lexical fillers (ah, um, er) and other interjections (you know, like). Our classes established the following criteria collectively to reflect on their speaking fluency: speaking at an appropriate rate; pronouncing your words clearly; and not overusing fillers in your speech. We also continued with the successful strategies we had discovered from our first cycle, using the 'Ah Counter' for counts of non-lexical fillers and interjections, wiki speaking exercises, student recordings, and talking more explicitly with our students about how to reflect on their speaking fluency using their own targets, Web 2.0 technologies, and criteria.

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

## Outcomes of the research

We set out to investigate an effective system, which we refer to as the 'fluency smorgasbord', for our students to develop speaking fluency and set their own targets, and in doing so found that the use of speech rate and counts of non-lexical fillers and interjections were successful. We also found that our students considered our system to be useful and practical, and that it could be used at home to practise their speaking fluency. Our findings are discussed further in this section.

### Measuring speech rate

We encouraged students to set their own targets, by using word counts to increase their speech rate. We found that the majority of our students' speech rates had increased from the beginning to the end of the cycle, with a few that had only slightly decreased (Table 1). The measures in the table were all recorded five weeks apart. Table 1 presents data collected from fewer students than the original 20 participants because during the course of our AR cycles, some students were absent on the days that these word counts were taken, and also in the second cycle, some students were no longer in our classes, either being allocated different teachers for that term, or being promoted to the upper intermediate level (CEFR B2). One of us was also rather tentative about using mobile phone apps and needed time to train herself in using the system to count words, with the result that she started to take word counts only in the second cycle.

Student F, whose speech rate improved markedly, said in their focus group interview: 'I don't have a lot of chance to speak English. I live with Korean so too hard. I want choose just few subjects and talk during one minute – a mix of topics, and record and speak one minute.' This indicated that they

**Table 1** Speech rate (wpm) Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 participants

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

wanted to continue using our exercises at home to practise their speaking. We observed that repeating impromptu speaking activities regularly throughout the cycle helped students to organise their ideas. In a speaking journal entry, one student in particular reflected on how this activity helped them prepare for their 1-minute impromptu speech, and impending *IELTS* speaking interview: ‘for these two topics I know how to talk about houses. It’s good for my thinking and when we talk about the news we talk about many interesting information. Next week I also want some topics to improve my thinking for the *IELTS*.’

Some of our students also reported feeling nervous about having their speech rates counted or of lacking confidence, which may explain some lower word counts. The data led us to believe that speech rate measurement resulted in effective formative feedback for our students to monitor their speaking fluency and set their own targets for improvement.

### Counting um, er and ah

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

We also found that our students’ awareness of non-lexical fillers and interjections in their speech had greatly increased. There was an important shift in their peer interaction, resulting in effective and honest feedback to each other. For example, we heard students spontaneously evaluating each other: ‘You said “so” too many times’, ‘You use “basically” all the time’.

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

<b>First trial</b>		
<b>Student</b>	<b>First attempt</b>	<b>Fourth attempt</b>
Student A	6	4
Student B	5	Was too anxious
Student C	8	2
Student D	4	7
Student E	17	12
Student F	5	3
Student G	7	2
Student H	6	4
Student I	5	4
Student J	4	2
Student K	6	3
<b>Second trial: One week later</b>		
<b>Student</b>	<b>First attempt</b>	<b>Final attempt</b>
Student A	7	2
Student B	3	0
Student C	2	0
Student D	7	0
Student E	8	7
Student F	5	2
Student G	6	4
Student H	6	4
Student I	6	4
Student J	5	3
Student K	5	2

The data also revealed that running this activity over two weeks may have helped students to set and achieve targets for refining their use of non-lexical fillers. One student noted in a focus group interview that they had learned from their peers, by noticing their speech rates, fillers and pauses: ‘She speaking not too fast’; ‘she’s not stop her speaking, but also silence not too long’; ‘some students thinking is too long . . . they use many time um, ah. . . silence is too long’. This student also liked the way the mobile apps we used helped them to set targets, rather than just using them for standard practice exercises. During the ‘Ah Counter’ activity, students frequently enquired about effective discourse management strategies. They started questioning what they should say instead of using silent pauses in their speech, and asking how often they should use interjections. These strategies fed forward into their

final summative assessments, where we noticed students were applying techniques learned during our classes, such as saying ‘Let me see . . .’ when they were thinking of answers.

As an extension to this activity, we also used the ‘Ah Counter’ activity for students who tended to overuse their own L1 fillers when speaking English. We placed students of the same nationality in pairs to act as ‘expert assistants’ (Boers 2014) in noticing when their partner used their L1 fillers, and providing them with feedback. We observed that students took on the feedback, which helped them to gain better control of their use of L1 fillers.

## **Using recordings for self-assessment**

The weekly self-reflection recordings made during the cycle were used for students to compare their first and last speaking entries and to monitor their own speaking fluency development. Most students commented on how much they had noticed about their speaking from analysing their weekly recordings. In their first speaking journal entry, one student noticed: ‘I say “er” every five seconds . . . it is difficult to understand my French accent . . . I mix the nouns and verbs . . . the tempo is irregular . . .’; while in their final recording the same student observed ‘it is much better . . . I say shorter “ers” but only when I’m thinking . . . my grammar is better . . . I understand myself . . . but I need to improve my pronunciation.’ This student could clearly hear their L1 accent and fillers in their first speaking journal entry; however in their last journal entry they reported that they felt they were much more fluent with less L1 interference, but also realised that they needed further development.

Another student noted that ‘I was very scary but now I’m comfortable’ [sic] when comparing their first and last recordings. These observations led us to believe that it would be worthwhile to further develop our activities using recordings for self-assessment with other students.

## **Conducting exit surveys**

Our students’ comments in our exit survey at the end of the two cycles varied considerably. We discovered that the use of voice recordings and the wiki had been the most popular activities with the students for practising and developing their speaking fluency. The majority commented on the usefulness of the technology for enhancing their fluency development. One student indicated that they wanted to continue using the wiki and LMS beyond the course: ‘I have a good system to learn although the course is finished for me . . . the facilities to learn with computers and smart phones helped me to understand my ability’. Another student noted that ‘the information and tools support my progress’. In their feedback, our students also reflected on how engaging the activities were compared with those experienced in their own education

system: ‘In my country the teacher just stands up at a whiteboard!’; ‘It was a good way to learn’. Some of the strongest support for our project was reflected in two of our most fluent students’ remarks: ‘In my opinion the technology in this course helped us and is fundamental for learning English’; ‘I feel comfortable with this activity because it helps me in my fluency and I don’t make a lot of silent pauses in the last speaking journal entry. I agree with this practice and I love it’. These comments led us to believe that there is further scope for AR to be conducted on how to support and engage our students with Web 2.0 technologies after they graduate, as a tool for lifelong learning.

## Discussion

This AR project has had a significant impact in many areas of our work. First, we noticed that our relationships with our students evolved because of our interventions in the classroom. The greatest outcome of this project was to hand over control to the students, to involve them in trying out the technologies, drive their own goals and give formative feedback. The research had an impact on our classroom roles, which went through an important shift, and became much more student centred. In particular, we realised just how pivotal the IDEA archive became in enabling our students to set their own criteria, take control of their own learning, become more self-reflective and self-regulatory, and give effective feedback on their peers’ performance. The peer- and self-evaluation activities led us to believe that our students were thinking more critically about their speaking development.

Our students also surprised us with their use of metalanguage when defining the criteria and analysing their own recordings, as in comments such as: ‘After I listened to my own recording, I tried to speak again more fluently and with better intonation and pronunciation.’ Recognising students’ ability to learn and use metalanguage could be useful to those new to teaching and this idea could be highlighted in future curriculum development, particularly for teachers who feel uncomfortable with the teaching of pronunciation, or who simply may be unaware of how to incorporate pronunciation activities into their classes (Rossiter et al 2010).

Our AR has already touched teaching communities beyond that of our own classrooms. In our immediate community, UWA CELT management has invested heavily in technological resources, and is keen to explore avenues to enable students to have ‘free and easy access’ to online platforms, while other staff members are seeking ways to adapt the new resources in their classes. For instance, the teacher of elementary level (CEFR A1–A1+) students is now using Audacity® recordings in her class. The pre-intermediate (CEFR A2–B1+) teachers have started exploring the use of an LMS and



wiki. The academic course co-ordinator has invited us to integrate speaking activities using Web 2.0 technologies into the Bridging Course curriculum to support students in their fluency development. Furthermore, echoing what Prefontaine (2010) suggested, the Director of UWA CELT has commented that the ‘kind of “impromptu speaking” activities we used may have a future place in the examination preparation courses, such as *IELTS* and *TOEFL*’. Further to the usefulness of the impromptu speaking activities in *IELTS* classes, since our AR project we have also informally trialled the ‘Ah Counter’ activity with advanced *IELTS* level (CEFR B2+) students and observed that their self-reflections on their own fluency performances went even deeper than those of our intermediate level (B1+ students). They picked up on their own heavy reliance on using simple linking words such as ‘and’, ‘but’ and ‘so’ as fillers, and on expressions such as ‘you know’ and ‘like’ as interjections, rather than depending on a partner to give them feedback. Some even tried to self-correct these habits in their other attempts. With a view to an extension of our research, we feel that sentence stress is a missing component that is worthy of exploration, and we would also like to find apps which give formative feedback on intonation and sentence stress that students can use for self-access at home.

## Conclusion

To summarise, our study has reaffirmed our view that using Web 2.0 technologies to supplement coursebooks in developing fluency can be effective and engaging for students, and that setting goals and giving effective formative feedback enable students to make appropriate adjustments to suit their own needs. We recognise the importance of AR and have benefited by observing vast improvements in the efficacy of our class wiki, which was the starting point of our research. We hope our discoveries and findings encourage other teachers to embrace technology in the classroom, particularly in targeting areas such as speaking, and especially fluency.

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# Appendix 1

## The CEFR and our action research

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

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

## Appendix 2

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### A student's needs analysis responses

#### Thinking about your speaking skills.



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

## Appendix 3

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### Prompt question sheets for self-reflections

#### Thinking about your learning

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

Think about these questions for a few minutes.



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

e.g.	pronunciation	knowledge of vocabulary
	forming sentences	grammar
	fluency	intonation
	word stress	knowing how to pronounce new words

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

e.g.

- focus on my pronunciation
- learn more vocabulary to talk about this topic
- focus on my fluency
- spend my break times speaking in English only
- have conversation with my homestay family for half an hour after dinner
- use the wiki

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

#### Speaking journal Week 1

Think about these questions for a few minutes.

Now record yourself speaking about the questions.



1. What did you enjoy about today's speaking activities?
2. What did you learn about the topic?

3. What problems did you have with your speaking activities today?
4. What have you done to improve your speaking this week?
5. How did it help you to improve your speaking?
6. What can you do to improve your speaking in the next week?

## Speaking journal Week 2

Think about these questions for a few minutes.  
Now record yourself speaking about the questions.

1. What did you enjoy about today's speaking activities?
2. What did you learn about the topic?
3. What problems did you have with your speaking activities today?



## Speaking journal Week 3

Think about these questions for a few minutes.  
Now record yourself speaking about the questions.

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



## Speaking journal Week 4

Think about these questions for a few minutes.  
Now record yourself speaking about your improvement in your speaking.

Some ideas to get you started:

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

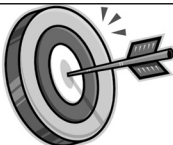


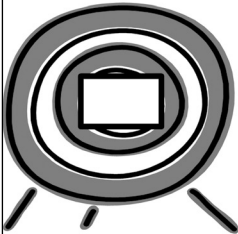
# Appendix 4

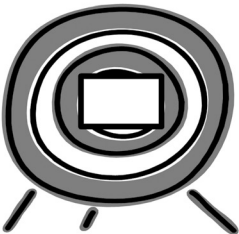
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## Speech rate recording sheet

Student's speech rate: Words per minute



  
Week 1

  
Week 5

# 8

## Harnessing formative feedback for oral skills improvement

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### Introduction

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

### Background to the research

Every year, large numbers of students come to Australia and enrol in courses to improve their English language skills. For many, this language study is the first stage in their pursuit of tertiary studies at an Australian university. In order to succeed, learners need not only to develop knowledge and language skills, but also the skills required to succeed in a tertiary environment. When contemplating the AR presented here, I wanted to explore the learning process in more detail, to go beyond language learning and explore how I could help learners develop the autonomous skills necessary to succeed at university. I felt this aspect of learning was important as many of my learners come from environments where learning is teacher-directed rather than self-directed. In other words, they are accustomed to high levels of teacher support which cannot be guaranteed in mainstream studies at an Australian university, where independence is an important characteristic of learning.

By providing students with practical learning opportunities and studying the impact of these strategies, through my research, I hoped to help them learn more about managing their own learning. From a personal perspective, I wanted to engage in this research to explore my own teaching and knowledge of the learning process in more depth. At the time of beginning the research, I had been teaching for less than a year after an extended period



in non-teaching roles in the English language teaching field. I felt it was an opportune time to explore my own teaching and to have a better understanding of learners and the overall learning process.

The main basis for my research stemmed from my observation that students did not always apply feedback from course-related tasks to final assessments. While the reasons were unclear, my classroom observations indicated that a lack of interest in improving or a lack of awareness of how to respond to feedback were potential factors. Another observation was that, although, at my centre, there seemed to be a strong emphasis on the quality and quantity of feedback that teachers provided to students, not enough emphasis was placed on promoting ways in which learners can respond to formative feedback. These observations complemented my views on helping my learners manage their own learning (Crabbe 2007). I wanted to move my teaching focus away from predominantly language-based instruction to lessons with more emphasis on individualising the feedback process in order to encourage more learner autonomy. This approach was consistent with the concept of learner-oriented assessment (Carless 2007), which gives learners a major role in the feedback process. Carless (2007) also notes that feedback is often ineffective because it is provided too late in a syllabus and may lack meaningful opportunities for students to understand and respond to it in time. With these concepts in mind, I wanted to ensure that different stages in the feedback process were organised in a way that allowed my learners to reflect on and act upon it.

In my current teaching context, one of the challenges of providing feedback on spoken tasks was providing students with a sample of speaking performance. Not having samples of their oral language made it difficult for students to act, and also limited the effectiveness of teacher feedback. I wanted to utilise learning technologies more in the classroom for this purpose, which was also in line with the direction that my teaching centre was taking. I decided to explore the use of audio and video technologies in supporting formative feedback on speaking and to give students the opportunity to respond, which would make the feedback process more effective (Jones 2011). This approach to providing feedback on speaking tasks would also be more consistent with the feedback given on writing tasks.

## **Research context and participants**

My research took place at Curtin English, which is the English language centre of Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia. As it is aligned to the university, the centre offers both academic pathways and General English programs. English language pathways are offered to international students who have met university entrance requirements except for the English proficiency requirements. Curtin English provides English language

courses for these students from elementary, or A1 level, to upper intermediate or approximately B1+ level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001) to help students meet the necessary English language requirements. With approximately 90% of all enrolled students on academic pathways, EAP courses are a key feature of the program. After completing their studies, pathway students enter either Curtin College, which offers diploma level courses, or mainstream studies at Curtin University via the English Language Bridging Course, which develops tertiary learning skills.

Each level of study is 10 weeks and students must successfully pass a series of assessments before progressing to the next level. The course length and starting level for students on academic pathways are dependent on their initial entrance score, which is determined by an internationally recognised English language test such as the International English Language Testing System (*IELTS*) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Requirements for entry to either Curtin College or the English Language Bridging Course also have a role in determining the length of the student's pathway.

The participants in this AR comprised two separate groups of learners enrolled in EAP courses, who were preparing for academic-style presentations as part of their final assessment. The students in each group were introduced to my research during the first week of the course. I explained the purpose of the research and each stage of the project, and provided an opportunity for students to ask any questions that they had. Participation was entirely voluntary and any students who declined to participate were not asked for reasons. Students who chose not to participate were still required to complete the same classroom-based activities as those who had agreed to be part of the research, but no data was collected from them.

The participants in Group 1 were enrolled in English for Academic Purposes 1 (EAP 1), a 10-week course which involved study at intermediate, or B1 level. In total, the class comprised 13 students, 11 of whom agreed to take part in my research. These participants came from China (3), Vietnam (3), Hong Kong (2), Colombia (1), Indonesia (1) and Taiwan (1). Of these, eight participants were on pathways to Curtin College with only one participant planning to take the English Language Bridging Course before mainstream studies at Curtin University. The other two students were not intending to follow an academic pathway.

The Group 2 participants were enrolled in English for Academic Purposes 2b (EAP 2b), a 5-week course which involved study at an upper intermediate (CEFR B2) level. In total, the class comprised 18 students, 17 of whom agreed to take part in my research. These participants came from China (3), Iraq (2), Japan (2), Libya (2), Saudi Arabia (2), Brazil (1), India (1), Indonesia (1), Nepal (1), South Korea (1) and Venezuela (1). Of these, five participants

were on pathways to Curtin College while 11 were aiming to join the English Language Bridging Course before mainstream studies. Only one student was not on an academic pathway. All students in both groups were full-time students living in Australia on student visas.

## Research questions

As explained, the main focus of this research was to explore the impact of formative feedback, provided consistently throughout a course, on student performance in oral assessments. I chose feedback because I believed it had a critical role in developing language-learning autonomy, and had an important value in learner progress (Jones 2011).

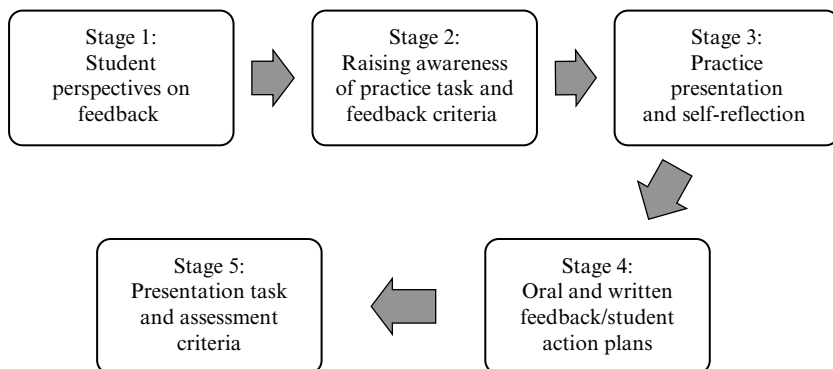
As I began my research I realised that I would need to help my learners to raise their awareness of the assessment task and the assessment criteria, as these were elements that they would need to understand in order to respond actively to formative feedback. These considerations provided the focus for the research questions that would shape my research project.

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

## Research procedures

My investigation of formative feedback in the learning process was completed with two groups over 15 weeks. While the same procedure was followed with both groups of learners, the first period of research (with EAP 1) was conducted over 10 weeks with the second period (with EAP 2b) conducted over a more condensed period of five weeks. Within each course, students were required to give an academic presentation as the speaking assessment. Prior to this assessment, students were given the opportunity to give a practice presentation on which they received feedback on their performance in the areas of fluency and coherence, presentation skills, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Each period of research consisted of five stages which centred on the different stages of the assessment (Figure 1). Some adjustments needed to be made to the current syllabus for each course in order to give me sufficient time to complete the different stages of my research. During these stages various forms of data were collected in the form of online questionnaires, teacher–student interviews, and student-generated action plans, each of which I discuss in turn in this chapter.

The students in both research groups were asked to complete questionnaires at three stages during the research period. Questionnaire 1 was conducted at Stage 1 during the first week of the course to gain students'

**Figure 1 Stages in the research**

perspectives on feedback (see Appendix 1 for sample questionnaire items). This questionnaire asked students about their views on the importance of feedback in the learning process; the way in which feedback can be given; the content of feedback; as well as how they approached responding to feedback and preparing for assessment tasks. Questionnaire 2 was completed before the students' practice session for their oral presentation (Stage 3), while Questionnaire 3 was conducted before their assessed presentation (Stage 5). These last two questionnaires asked students about their views of the feedback process and how they believed it was contributing to their overall learning and preparation for both the practice presentation and final assessments.

Because the aim of the questionnaires was for me to understand how students responded to the process, the questions focused on obtaining attitudinal data which reflected the students' feelings, initially towards feedback in general (Questionnaire 1) and later towards the approach I was taking (Questionnaires 2 and 3). In most instances, rating scales were used as these provided more scope in sampling the level of agreement or disagreement of the student to the approach (Burns 2010). As I wanted to obtain responses which related to the approach I had taken in engaging students in the feedback process, students completed questionnaires prior to the practice and final assessment. I did not want their actual performance to influence their responses. The levels of the students' motivation and their approaches to completing the questionnaires may have placed limitations on the data that I collected. Not all questionnaires were completed and I had little control over how thoroughly students completed them. Some students may have thought more deeply about the questions than others. From my observation, however, some of them displayed high levels of motivation, while others seemed to find the process of self-reflection and engagement time-consuming and difficult. These attitudes may have influenced their responses.

Teacher–student interviews provided further data. I timetabled regular

tutorial sessions into the syllabus which allowed me an opportunity to discuss the feedback throughout the course with each student. While the initial interviews were structured, over time I tried to develop an open interview approach which would allow the students to have a greater role in controlling the direction the interview took (Burns 2010). Initially, when discussing the assessment task and criteria (see Appendix 2), I met students in small groups which allowed for a more in-depth discussion. However, when meeting with students to discuss feedback and action plans, I met with students individually.

The third source of data was student-generated action plans. In both research groups students were given the opportunity to consider and respond to any feedback given, in the form of an action plan (see Appendix 3). They could highlight any weaknesses they felt they had and identify strategies for improvement in the final assessment. I used these action plans to inform myself about how the students were responding to the feedback they had received. While I actively encouraged all students to complete the action plan, some remained incomplete.

## Outcomes of the research

Before I began my AR, I felt it was necessary to gain an understanding of the students' perspectives on feedback. The students' views were collected in the first questionnaire (Appendix 1). The responses showed that the majority of the students in both groups understood the purpose of feedback and felt that it was an important part of the learning process. The students also had their own distinct views on the content and delivery of feedback. Key points from the questionnaire which would serve as a basis for the feedback I would give later in the course included:

- feedback should be encouraging with reference to positive aspects of language use and suggestions for improvement
- feedback should be provided in both oral and written forms
- feedback should be received in the form of teacher feedback, peer-feedback, and self-evaluation
- feedback should be accompanied by a sample of the language produced
- feedback should be followed by an opportunity for students to discuss any points that are not clear.

Although students' initial responses were mixed with regard to the approach I had planned to help students better prepare for presentations and respond to feedback, I felt that there was enough support for the approach that I intended to take.

The first activity in the second stage mentioned previously involved students in exploring the different steps in an academic presentation as well

as language related to these steps. These structural elements and language formed the basis for the feedback on the practice presentation. Following this activity, students were given the task for the practice presentation. For many of the students, the tutorial session interviews I conducted were the first opportunity they had ever had to discuss an assessment task with their teacher. The aims of the interview were to ensure that the students understood the task and were aware of the criteria on which their presentations would be evaluated (Appendix 2). They also had the opportunity to introduce their topic and initial plans for the task and identify the areas in which they felt they had weaknesses. The responses were positive with students becoming more supportive towards the approach I was taking (Table 1).

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

<b>Questionnaire 1: ‘Before completing a speaking task, I want the opportunity to discuss the task and grading criteria with the teacher.’</b>					
	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
<b>EAP 1</b>	36%	45%	18%	0%	0%
<b>EAP 2b</b>	0%	60%	0%	40%	0%
<b>Questionnaire 2: ‘I believe that the opportunity to discuss the task with the teacher was helpful.’</b>					
	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
<b>EAP 1</b>	50%	40%	10%	0%	0%
<b>EAP 2b</b>	59%	35%	6%	0%	0%
<b>Questionnaire 3: ‘I believe that discussing the presentation task and assessment criteria with my teacher was helpful.’</b>					
	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
<b>EAP 1</b>	45%	56%	0%	0%	0%
<b>EAP 2b</b>	43%	43%	7%	7%	0%

The students also felt that an increased knowledge of the feedback criteria better prepared them for the practice presentation (Table 2). I felt that students were more confident after discussing the task and assessment criteria.

In the third stage, students gave a practice presentation. As one of my aims was to provide a stronger basis for responding to feedback, these presentations were video recorded. The videos were uploaded to a website where the students could view their presentation via a private link which was emailed to each of them. The students viewed their presentations and evaluated their own performance based on the assessment task and feedback criteria. The areas of weakness raised during Stage 2 also provided a focus for the students’ viewing. The students’ responses in the first questionnaire indicated

that they agreed to receive peer feedback. Each student, therefore, developed a list of questions that other students could respond to after the practice presentation. Peer feedback was limited to questions focusing on what was observed during the presentation rather than an evaluation of the students' language ability. Three members of each class were assigned to each learner to complete the peer evaluation. For many of the students, it was their first experience of watching themselves give a presentation and it was seen as a valuable exercise by most of the students (Table 3).

**Table 2 Student attitudes to understanding criteria**

<b>Questionnaire 2: 'I believe that understanding the criteria will allow me to give a better presentation.'</b>					
	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
<b>EAP 1</b>	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%
<b>EAP 2b</b>	69%	25%	6.25%	0%	0%
<b>Questionnaire 3: 'I believe that understanding the grading criteria was helpful.'</b>					
	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
<b>EAP 1</b>	11%	78%	11%	0%	0%
<b>EAP 2b</b>	36%	58%	7%	0%	0%

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

<b>Questionnaire 3: 'I believe that watching myself give a practice presentation was helpful.'</b>					
	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
<b>EAP 1</b>	22%	78%	0%	0%	0%
<b>EAP 2b</b>	57%	29%	14%	0%	0%

In the second cycle with EAP 2b, I revised the topic of the practice presentation so that it aligned more closely with the assessed presentation. This decision came from discussions with EAP 1 students who felt that feedback from the practice presentation would be more relevant if it was more closely aligned to the assessed presentation.

At Stage 4, once students had had the opportunity to assess themselves, I met with each one to discuss their practice presentation performance. I purposely delayed my feedback so that it would not influence the students' self-assessments. Based on the initial questionnaire findings, my own feedback was given in both written and oral forms.

The next step for the learners was to use my feedback and their own self-assessment to create their action plans (Appendix 3), in order to identify

areas of weakness and develop strategies for improvement in the final assessment. Students who completed an action plan found it a useful addition to the feedback process (Table 4).

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

<b>Questionnaire 3: ‘I believe that creating and discussing an action plan which identified my weaknesses and ways of improving them was helpful.’</b>					
	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
<b>EAP 1</b>	33%	67%	0%	0%	0%
<b>EAP 2b</b>	14%	57%	29%	0%	0%

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

**Discussion**

The two research questions I developed at the beginning of the research guided me throughout the whole process. In relation to the first research question, while it was difficult to gauge exactly what impact my AR had on my students’ oral performance, there was enough evidence to show that increasing their understanding of the assessment task and assessment criteria meant that they were better prepared for assessments.

My classroom observations and the students’ questionnaire responses revealed that discussing the tasks and assessment criteria with the students improved their understanding, and also allowed me to check that they were clear to them. The students’ preparation became more focused and they were able to clarify points that were unclear. As a result they became more able to reflect and self-assess. I also learned that students need explicit guidance from the teacher before they can be expected to become more autonomous learners.

One challenge in raising my students’ awareness of the grading criteria was that some of the wording for the assessed presentation was unclear to them. Since they were written from a teacher, and not a student perspective, there were many subjective forms of wording which students found difficult



to understand, such as 'attempt', 'limited', 'frequent' and 'may'. I found that the students favoured more direct and specific criteria similar to those used for the practice presentation (Appendix 2).

As far as the second question about increasing student engagement was concerned, I felt that the approach I took was successful. However, the higher initial language proficiency of the upper intermediate group of learners equipped them with the necessary language to reflect on and respond to their weaknesses more effectively. Unsurprisingly, they were better able to focus on strategies for improvement, rather than understanding of the language required to complete this task, than the lower level group. Also, the upper intermediate learners had already received feedback on their speaking skills in previous course levels. For students in the intermediate class, it was the first time they had reflected on and self-assessed their performance. Because of this, these learners required more structure and guidance to help them in this process. My classroom observations and the student responses to questionnaires showed that students benefit from structure and guidance in self-assessment. More specifically, to respond to feedback they need samples of their own language that they can analyse against criteria. Delaying my teacher feedback also led them to reflect more autonomously, and I found they were willing to engage more with self-assessment when they understood the task and grading criteria.

Providing the opportunity for students to respond to formative and summative feedback has often been lacking in language courses at my centre. Poor performance in assessment tasks may be attributed to weak language skills, but after conducting this AR, I now believe that an increased awareness of the task requirement and grading criteria can greatly assist students to be more successful. Although they still require the necessary language skills to succeed, a raised awareness can contribute to improved performance, especially for learners from backgrounds with very different approaches to assessment, who may only be used to summative assessment through tests or examinations.

In the classroom, it is valuable for teachers to dedicate time to helping students understand both the task and grading criteria. Giving students knowledge of what is expected may in fact help them to focus more on the language needed for the assessment. Teachers should also be aware of the different learning backgrounds that exist in their classrooms and provide necessary support to encourage students to become more autonomous learners. Students from some backgrounds may never have experienced the types of reflection required for self-assessment in a learner-centred approach. When preparing students for assessments, therefore, there needs to be sufficient time for reflection between the practice and final assessments so that students can address their self-assessed weaknesses in language production. In this research I found that encouraging students to develop action plans handed

them more responsibility for their own learning and improvement and had an impact on their performance.

### Conclusion

As a result of this research I am now more aware of students' needs, and strategies that can be used to help them respond to assessment tasks more effectively through formative feedback. The majority of the students who participated in the research indicated that they benefited from engaging in the interactive feedback process I was promoting. This was especially true for learners from learning environments that had limited their opportunities for reflection on performance. As a result of my research, other teachers at my centre now adopt the same procedures that I developed, and awareness of the importance of formative feedback in preparing learners for assessments is significantly higher than before. Thus, the research had benefits not only for me as an individual teacher, but also more broadly for my teaching centre.

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# Appendix 1

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## Selected responses from Questionnaire 1

Question 1: 'Feedback is an important part of the learning process.'					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
EAP 1	73%	27%	0%	0%	0%
EAP 2b	80%	0%	20%	0%	0%

Question 2: 'My English has improved as a result of feedback.'					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
EAP 1	18%	73%	9%	0%	0%
EAP 2b	20%	60%	20%	0%	0%

Question 3: 'I understand the purpose of feedback.'				
	Yes	No	Not sure	
EAP 1	100%	0%	0%	
EAP 2b	60%	0%	40%	

Question 6: 'When receiving feedback, it is important to have a sample of my spoken language to refer to.'					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
EAP 1	36%	18%	45%	0%	0%
EAP 2b	20%	40%	40%	0%	0%

Question 7: ‘Before completing a speaking task, it is important to know/understand the grading criteria.’					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
EAP 1	27%	45%	18%	9%	0%
EAP 2b	20%	80%	0%	0%	0%

Question 9: ‘I always refer to the grading criteria when preparing for a speaking assessment.’					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
EAP 1	18%	54%	18%	9%	0%
EAP 2b	0%	40%	60%	0%	0%

Question 17: ‘It is important to discuss any feedback with the teacher if you do not understand it.’					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
EAP 1	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
EAP 2b	80%	20%	0%	0%	0%

## Appendix 2

### Practice presentation feedback sheet (Completed – EAP 1)

Assessment Criteria*	I-N	G	E	N/A
<b>Organisation</b>				
Presenter clearly introduced the topic and content of presentation (1)		✓		
Presentation had a clear structure- Introduction, Body, Conclusion (2)		✓		
Presentation had a conclusion	✓			
Presentation used appropriate language for describing a process (3)	✓			
<b>Content</b>				
Content was informative and interesting		✓		
Content of the presentation was relevant, with any new concepts clearly explained		✓		
Presenter effectively handled Q&A session at end of presentation				✓
<b>Presentation Skills</b>				
Presenter made good use of visual aids				✓
Presenter effectively made eye contact with audience		✓		
Presenter used appropriate forms of non-verbal communication		✓		
<b>Language</b>				
Presenter used appropriate presentation language		✓		
Range and accuracy of grammatical language was appropriate	✓			
Range and accuracy of vocabulary was appropriate		✓		
<b>Voice Quality</b>				
Speed, volume and pitch of voice were appropriate		✓		
Pronunciation was intelligible and did not make listening difficult (4)	✓			
Time limit was adhered to: Yes No				
Comments:	<p>(1) the outline of your presentation needed to be more specific</p> <p>(2) Your presentation was lacking a clear conclusion</p> <p>(3) while you tried to use some presentation language, you needed better use of language for processes</p> <p>(4) You appeared nervous which might have affected your pronunciation</p>			
Teacher:	James C			

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

## Appendix 3

### Student action plan (Completed – EAP 1)

Area for Improvement	Action
<b>Fluency and Coherence</b>	
probably feel nervous, I forget some words. Cannot focus on what I want to say	trying to practice as much as possible practice at least 10- 15 times Speaking in front of the mirror
<b>Presentation Skills</b>	
cannot use make good use of visual aids not good at using appropriate form of non-verbal communication. not good at body language	- try to use presentation - skills such as eye contact, body language when I practice
<b>Grammar range and Accuracy</b>	
<del>cannot</del> <sup>forget to</sup> use a different form of grammar. bad of remember of using grammar. I just focus on present tense and future tense	- <del>do</del> Revision grammar tenses Such as: present, past and future tenses. - reading newspaper to review grammar

## Harnessing formative feedback for oral skills improvement

Area for Improvement	Action
<b>Vocabulary Range and Accuracy</b>	
<p>not using much academic vocabulary I definitely haven't enough vocabulary <del>academic</del> academic.</p> <p>- at sometime repeat an old words vocabulary.</p>	<p>Using vocabulary at the back of the book, learn and try to use vocabulary in academic life.</p>
<b>Pronunciation</b>	
<p>- not fluency - cannot <del>is</del> control volume and pitch of voice -</p>	<p>using dictionary electronic and try to speak along with dictionary.</p> <p>or Asking teacher How to pronounce their words.</p>
<b>Teacher Comment</b>	
<p>These are all good points. You have identified your main weaknesses</p> <p>Here are some other points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Don't forget to structure your presentation appropriately</li> <li>- Practising grammar is important, but try to think of what grammar is going to be relevant to your topic and aims (describing a process)</li> <li>- Relax - I know that it's not easy, but try to have fun.</li> <li>- Practising your presentation, especially key words will give you more confidence and will help improve your pronunciation.</li> </ul>	

# 9

## The impact of student attitudes on EAP grammar feedback

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### Introduction

The purpose of my action research (AR) project was to investigate students' attitudes towards English for Academic Purposes (EAP) grammar instruction and to build on their responses as feedback for course activities. My research related to a postgraduate course which provided successful students with direct entry to the University of Sydney. I had conducted a survey with 44 respondents from a range of faculties across the university, who were alumni of the Centre for English Teaching (CET), where I work. The respondents expressed considerable dissatisfaction in relation to their ability to use effective expression of ideas and grammar. It also became apparent after conversations with my current EAP students that 'grammar' was a demotivating word and it seemed to be perceived as a significant barrier to the clear expression of ideas. Inaccurate grammar was further seen by these international students as a major impediment to educational success and they believed that their job prospects would be impacted by their inability to effectively communicate in the workplace. These issues became the catalyst for my research.

### Background to the research

The international students I had consulted considered that students whose work had a high density of grammar errors were 'stigmatised', which as Hyland and Hyland (2006:84) point out, is a consistent learner belief identified in several studies. Considering that EAP students must use English in their university courses and may intend to do so later in their careers, their concerns about the possible impact of grammar on future study and work prospects are understandable. However, this strongly held student belief that grammar should be considered a priority in EAP courses is often overlooked by teachers and educational institutions.

Grammar teaching in EAP not only interested me, but I believed it also deserved much more attention and research. As Zhou (2009:31) states, student opinions in relation to the ongoing debate on 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. Seker and Dincer (2014:74) note that students are eager to voice their needs; they suggest that 'dynamic interaction' between teachers and students is needed to increase the chances of resolving these sometimes divergent expectations.

It was therefore timely in my view to explore these overlooked grammar teaching beliefs of EAP learners in order to improve classroom instruction and student motivation at my centre. Even though defining grammar is not simple and depends on a number of factors, I decided to focus my research on what Ellis (2006:84) refers to as 'instructional techniques' that draw learners' attention to some specific grammatical form that helps them use it.

## Research context and participants

Participants in this action research were in my Direct Entry Course (DEC) class at CET. This 15-week full-time postgraduate entry program is divided into five weeks of intensive academic writing, followed by 10 weeks of discipline-specific content. My class was at the start of the 10-week discipline-specific content course when I began the AR project. The entire DEC course syllabus uses material which was written by CET teachers rather than drawn from a coursebook. That means there is considerable flexibility within the course to change the teaching materials. The intensive nature and defined goals of the course mean that the time available to spend on each language skill is limited, often resulting in grammar being given less attention than other areas. In the marking criteria for writing and speaking assessment, for instance, grammar accounts for only 10% of the total score, even though it may impact greatly on comprehensibility of ideas for the reader or listener. Another 30% of the total writing assessment score criteria, namely 'coherence', 'relevance' and 'appropriate vocabulary', may be impacted by grammar because of its role in the clear expression of ideas. This means that grammar could have a greater influence on the total assessment score than is indicated by the assessment feedback.

My class was a business discipline class which was one of three parallel classes. It consisted of 14 Chinese students and one Vietnamese, nine of whom were female and six were male. They required an overall International English Language Testing System (*IELTS*) score of 6 to enter the DEC and were expected to achieve *IELTS* 6.5 for university entrance. However if they successfully completed the DEC course they would not be required to take another *IELTS* test. Since I would be teaching these students for 20 hours per week for 10 weeks, I had an opportunity to develop a rapport with them

which could contribute to frank student responses and help guide lesson changes.

## Research focus and questions

Based on my earlier survey mentioned above, I wanted to explore in more depth what my students felt about the role of grammar in developing their language skills. Therefore I began with the question: What are the student attitudes towards grammar teaching in EAP? This first question remained my main research focus as the project progressed. Then, in order to build on my students' responses and to explore the idea of instructional techniques (Ellis 2006), my second question was: What grammar teaching approaches and techniques receive a positive response from students? I also wanted to explore what influence the students' responses would have on my teaching. Therefore I added a third question that would allow for my own further reflection: How do these student preferences impact on grammar instruction?

I believed that these research questions could lead to more positive consequences for all participants, including myself as a teacher.

## Research procedures

My first two questions relied on feedback from my students so that I could formulate appropriate teaching responses. Using this data, I could then develop a course of action for subsequent grammar-input lessons in consultation with the students, which would respond to the third question.

For the first research question, the two main data sources came from a student focus group and two questionnaires. I chose to use a focus group because the interaction from others in the group could trigger new thoughts and ideas. All 15 enrolled students expressed interest in participating in the focus group, but only six students were selected to provide verbal feedback on my teaching interventions. These focus group members were randomly selected using a standard generation process function ("=RAND()") on an Excel spreadsheet. The focus group meetings were held weekly during the 10 weeks they were enrolled in the course. In the meetings, detailed discussions ensued about their attitudes and responses to the grammar input they received in each EAP lesson and the changes they suggested were made for the following lesson. One of my initial concerns regarding such a focus group was that the students may feel uncomfortable discussing grammar teaching with their teacher. However, this was definitely not the case. In fact, I was surprised by the level of openness in the group. The last focus group meeting was conducted as an open class forum which gathered final attitudes towards my grammar teaching.

The first student questionnaire, conducted to establish initial attitudes

at the start of the research, was adapted from a survey of learner beliefs by Loewen, Li, Fei, Thompson, Nakatsukasa, Ahn and Chen (2009). The second one (Appendix 1), given at the end of the research to evaluate the interventions, was modified to encompass the EAP grammar instruction. Both of these questionnaires were delivered anonymously online to all 15 students using the 'People Pulse' software program and contained similar groups of questions:

1. Attitude to grammar.
2. Attitude to error correction.
3. Importance of grammar.
4. Attitude to grammar instruction.

However, the final set of open questions in the first questionnaire (below) was amended in the second questionnaire to a grammar activity ranking question (see Appendix 1).

**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:

The second research question related mainly to the students' responses to the grammar instruction interventions I introduced. Although I planned to use short descriptive journals for both the students and myself, a joint decision was made to abandon student journals. However, I maintained a descriptive teacher journal with carefully recorded student responses and my own reactions throughout my AR. Even though the focus group and questionnaires provided the most valuable source of information, the teacher journal was also useful in helping me reflect on the process.

Ferris (2004:55) emphasises that if teachers can hear student voices in relation to grammar instruction and respond to them, it may positively influence their success in the L2 writing class. Therefore, finally, I compared my students' essay writing grammar assessment scores with those of three parallel classes, which provided me with insights about whether my new grammar instruction approaches were influencing my students' scores.

## **Outcomes of the research**

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?

The students' attitudes towards grammar teaching in EAP started to emerge through analysis of the questionnaires and focus group responses. Overall their attitudes were similar to those found in previous research, for example Loewen et al (2009:99), who observed that in their study, the general response to studying grammar was 'It's boring'. This response was also the case in my class.

However, a comparison of students' initial views on grammar learning enjoyment before the interventions (Figure 1) and their final responses (Figure 2) at the end of the research, showed a marked improvement, from an average score of 3.6 to 4.0 respectively, which appeared to indicate that students had responded favourably to the interventions.

**Figure 1 Questionnaire 1 responses to 'I like studying grammar'\***

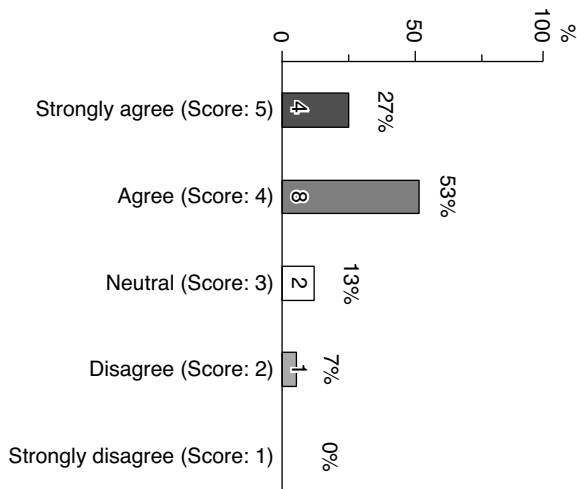


\*Question respondents: 15; Scoring respondent: 15; Score: 72% (54/75); Average score: 3.60; Median score: 4

Students also expressed some notable dislikes in relation to grammar instruction. Some of these responses reflected a desire to avoid traditional grammar learning approaches as this quote exemplifies: 'Teaching tedious grammar rules without examples' (Matt).

The responses the students expressed about grammar teaching preferences were grouped into three categories: interaction preferences, correction preferences and activity preferences. Some of the most insightful comments about the students' preferences and dislikes about each of these categories are included in Table 1.

**Figure 2** Questionnaire 2 responses to ‘studying grammar was enjoyable’\*



\*Question respondents: 15 Scoring respondents: 15; Score: 80% (60/75); Average score: 4.00; Median score: 4

**Table 1** Students’ attitudes to EAP grammar instruction

Preferences	Dislikes
<b>Interaction</b> ‘Face to face advice on essay I wrote followed by some exercises’ (Sandra) ‘Changing groups was stimulating’ (Sam)	<b>Interaction</b> ‘Discussing grammar errors in group’ (Lulu)
<b>Correction</b> ‘Group error correction’ and ‘correct errors by teacher’ (Karen) ‘Do the test and teachers correct’ (Lulu)	<b>Correction</b> ‘Correcting in groups without teacher correction ‘cause classmates don’t know the answer’ (Stephanie)
<b>Activity</b> ‘Do some fun card-game or quizzes’ (Danny) ‘Detailed examples, sentences in context, interesting articles’ (Stephanie) ‘Noticing in academic reading texts’ (Brian)	<b>Activity</b> ‘I don’t know what to do because there are too many computer exercises to choose from’ (Matt) ‘Computer exercises (It’s boring!)’ (Iris)

Overwhelmingly the students indicated that they preferred grammar learning that involved contextualised examples and explanations in addition to interactive activities, a response that was again remarkably similar to that reported in Loewen et al (2009:101). This common thread pointed to a desire by the students to move towards more integrative, interactive approaches. However, while students voiced a desire for ‘stimulating group interaction’,

they also preferred teacher rather than peer correction alone. After I probed further during the course, they explained that they believed their teacher was more capable and responsible for grammar correction and provided more reliable feedback.

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

The students' desire for examples of grammatical structure and practice in context, especially in using their own sentences, was expressed repeatedly. From our focus group discussions, it seemed that the students were asking for a combination of approaches and techniques. I found that they responded positively to 'noticing' activities in authentic course material and enjoyed looking at structural features in texts. Hyland and Hyland (2006:87) confirm the same positive student response to activities that include indirect feedback, such as giving clues to encourage grammar self-discovery. According to the participants in my study, if these kinds of tasks could be followed by interactive and realistic practice opportunities with correction from the teacher, then the grammar teaching would be more likely to receive a favourable reaction.

Following my students' clear expressions of beliefs about feedback, as well as other studies concluding that teacher correction is more highly valued than peer correction (Hyland and Hyland 2006), my interventions included a combination of teacher correction and group interaction (Appendices 2 to 4). My decision to use both types of feedback was because students did not seem to indicate that peer and teacher feedback were mutually exclusive. In fact, when I questioned the focus group about whether they would like me to use only peer feedback or teacher feedback, they expressed a strong desire for a combination of both feedback sources. However, they also asserted that the final source of feedback should be from the teacher. Their emphasis on 'with teacher correction' showed that this point was clearly important to them. The two strongest responses in the second questionnaire are shown in (Table 2).

**Table 2 Strongest student grammar teaching preferences**

<b>Strong preference</b>	<b>Relative strength of statement</b>
I liked it when my teacher explained grammar rules	92% (4.60/5)
<b>Strong dislike</b>	<b>Relative strength of statement</b>
I liked it when I was corrected in class	32% (1.60/5)

Although these responses may at first seem to contradict some of the other views expressed by the students, they can be explained by the previously

mentioned ‘stigma’ attached to grammar errors. The students clearly wanted to understand and become competent in using English grammar, but preferred explanation and correction by the teacher which they felt were reliable. In fact, according to the focus group, a lack of teacher explanation or feedback could lead to frustration and disengagement. Similarly, the concept of ‘loss of face’ when students are corrected in front of peers was an issue of concern to the students. Seker and Dincer (2014:80) assert that this problem relates to a negative affective disposition, or generates an aversion that could lead to student reluctance to take action on teacher feedback.

In the Questionnaire 2 responses, games and fun activities often emerged as desirable activities. The students referred in these responses to a tutorial assessment preparation lesson where I introduced the types of activities they found both beneficial and enjoyable. It not only included teacher input and noticing of grammatical structure on the part of the students, but also involved group interaction practice, fun competition, and relevant content with detailed feedback. Students stated that this lesson gave them an opportunity to notice and practise useful sentence structures for a familiar and relevant topic taken from the DEC reading texts. While I found this type of grammar teaching lesson difficult and time-consuming to design, the positive responses from my students could not be ignored, as Danny’s comment in Table 1 suggested: ‘Do some fun card-game or quizzes’.

Prior to the intervention, in Questionnaire 1, students also expressed frustration about applying grammatical rules appropriately. I responded to this dilemma through awareness-raising activities about error types. Students then completed computer exercises based on their most frequent problems. However, although I used a website that was highly recommended (Mohamad 2009), students rated it poorly, as Iris’s comment in Table 1 shows: ‘Computer exercises (It’s boring!)’ When I discussed the disappointing response to the computer activity with the focus group, they expressed a desire for more targeted (in-context) interactive activities. Loewen et al (2009:101) noted a similar negative response to learning grammar alone as a kind of self-study; it seems that computer activities for EAP grammar teaching are only likely to be successful if careful consideration is given to the content and types of interaction they produce. However, after two weeks of introducing new grammar interventions, other clear ideas about grammar instruction such as the following began to emerge from the focus group: ‘Identify typical mistakes because some mistakes are repeated.’

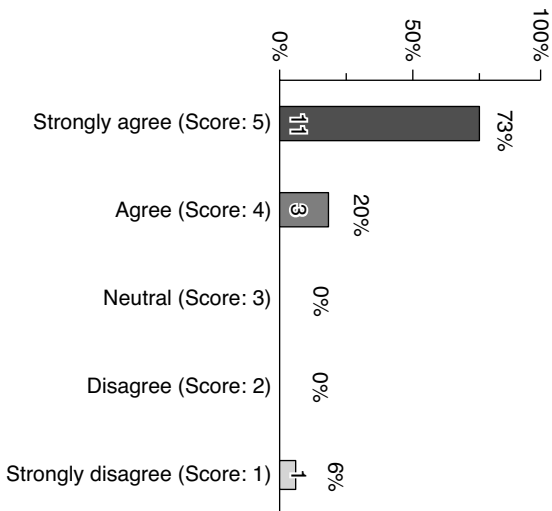
Overall, I found that the majority of participants had very definite ideas about how they wanted to be taught grammar in EAP courses. While they seemed to be opposed to traditional grammar teaching approaches, a flexible combination of structural, functional and communicative grammar teaching approaches appeared to be desirable.

How do these student preferences impact on grammar instruction?

My research gave rise to three key areas which had an impact on my classroom instruction: providing corrective feedback with practice opportunities, contextualising grammar instruction, and offering integrated grammar activities.

It was clear from my students’ responses they wanted the teacher to provide systematic feedback and correction, which was not a practice I had adopted extensively in previous courses. Although in general they saw peer editing as a positive activity, teacher correction was considered by 73% of participants to be more desirable (see Figure 3). This attitude made me realise that I needed to pay serious attention to correcting errors in EAP grammar lessons.

Figure 3 Responses to statement ‘when I made grammar errors, I liked my teacher correcting them’\*

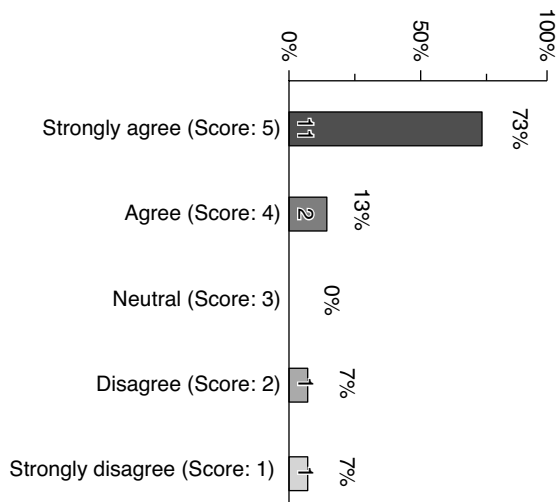


\*Question respondents: 15; Scoring respondents: 15; Score: 90.67% (68/75); Average score: 4.53; Median score: 5

Students clearly supported the inclusion of grammar in their EAP course, with a high average score of 4.40 (Figure 4). However, they wanted 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. Students want teachers to provide grammar practice which is *integrated* with the course content and is communicative and fun.



**Figure 4** Response to statement ‘the study of grammar should be part of this EAP course (DEC)’\*



\*Question respondents: 15; Scoring respondents: 15; Score: 88% (66/75); Average score: 4.40; Median score: 5

Adopting the grammar teaching perceptions of the participants, especially their desire for interactive and fun practice activities, resulted in positive outcomes across the whole class in the grammar scores for their tutorial and essay assessments. The focus group believed that their grammar improvement may also have had positive benefits for improved scores in assessment criteria other than grammar. The comparative grammar scores in Table 3 indicate that the students in my class achieved higher average grammar results in essay writing assessments than those in the three parallel classes.

**Table 3** Comparison of essay grammar mark averages (out of 10)

Class	AR participants	Parallel class 1	Parallel class 2	Parallel class 3
Average mark	6.70	6.32	6.36	6.45

Although the difference in average scores was minor, the students’ increased grammar confidence and positive reactions also indicated that these outcomes cannot be overlooked by teachers.

## Discussion

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 the introduction of communicative language teaching. The pedagogical focus of most grammar teaching research seems to be on teacher perspectives rather than student perspectives in EAP. This gap in the literature 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 this point is reiterated by Byrd and Reid (1998:1) who emphasise that students' wants and needs are crucial to grammar instruction planning in English as a Second Language (ESL) curricula. In terms of motivation and pedagogical decisions, the strongly held opinions of students towards grammar teaching in EAP courses should not be overlooked. Ferris (2004:55) maintains that student beliefs may impact on writing class success and that is a convincing reason to listen to students' voices when making curriculum design decisions. In other words, students' needs and wants should be our starting point for planning our instruction.

After studying grammar for many years, the majority of my EAP students expressed frustration about the application of their knowledge. As one student, Sam, stated, although he knew the grammar rules and could do the exercises, transferring that knowledge to his writing was difficult. This is a familiar story for many language teachers and students. In the focus group meetings, students recognised that it was difficult in EAP courses to cover all areas of grammar because of time and curriculum content constraints, which led to several group members recommending that we should focus on typical errors made by most of the students. Targeting the most common grammar errors also corresponds to the research of Ellis, Sheen, Murakami and Takashima (2008), which recommends only identifying a limited number of error types in teacher feedback. This idea formed the basis for my lessons, which attempted to address the most common grammar errors identified in student writing (see Appendix 5).

It was clear that contextualising grammar, offering integrated opportunities for practice and providing corrective feedback were strongly preferred by my students. Tasks that focused on 'noticing' were also perceived as valuable and relevant. They included discussing the contextual usage of grammatical features in course texts, followed by practising the structures, and finally producing these structures in a written report. When integrated grammar activities were included in the course, far greater student interest and participation levels were evident. In relation to correction, students expressed their strong desire for teacher correction in addition to peer editing since they felt that a sense of certainty was lacking in group-edited tasks.

As discussed earlier, students were not positive about computer-based activities. If teachers plan to include computer-based grammar instruction into their EAP curriculum, it may be necessary to evaluate the exercises to ensure they offer a combination of implicit and explicit input, and include group tasks. Otherwise, students could view computer or web-based tasks as individually oriented and disconnected activities.

## Conclusion

As an EAP teacher, the ‘EAP grammar teaching problem’ of the how, what and when to teach was a constant dilemma for me. Although I was aware of various pedagogical approaches, my focus before the research was centred on the explicit versus implicit grammar teaching debate. I have since learned that students are unconcerned about this argument, but they have strong views about error correction, interaction and activity type which need to be heard. My action research process was an enlightening experience. Through this process, I learned to listen more carefully to student ‘voices’ and to consider both their motivational and learning outcomes. I also became aware of how rarely students have a chance to express their views, even though they impact on their motivation and performance. I have learned how to adopt an approach that gains student trust and rapport, encourages student feedback, and then uses that feedback as a basis for planning my grammar teaching.

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# Appendix 1

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## Student reflection on EAP grammar instruction

### Attitude to grammar

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I thought about grammar rules when I wrote	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Studying grammar helped me improve quickly	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Studying grammar was enjoyable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### Attitude to error correction

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
4. I liked it when I was corrected in class	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. I liked checking my grammar in small groups	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. When I made grammar errors, I liked my teacher correcting them	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### Importance of grammar

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
7. The best learners knew a lot of grammar rules	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. Practising English in real-life situations is more important than grammar practice in EAP courses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Second Language Assessment and Action Research

Attitude to grammar instruction

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
9. I liked it when my teacher explained grammar rules	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. The study of grammar should be part of this EAP course (DEC)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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

Computer exercises

Individual error correction

Group error correction

Error code writing analysis

Tutorial grammar pattern activity

- 14. Do you feel that your grammar has improved in the last two months?
- 15. Any other comments?

## Appendix 2

### The error code

Code	Meaning	Example problem
Wf.	A word-form error	There are both economic and environmental problems connect to air pollution.
Wo.	A word order error	It arise several problems such as . . .
Sp.	A spelling error	By both goverment and the media of China.
Gr.	A serious grammar error	Because of most families preferring boys to girls, they . . .
O	A punctuation or capitalisation error	For example, financial assistance, this aims to . . .
Ww.	The wrong word	In some extent, this phenomenon . . . ; In another words,
S/V	A subject/verb disagreement	Chinese economy and there are massive pressure . . .
^	A word or words are missing	When it comes to the rural, . . .
?	The message is unclear	. . .to let citizen trade law and lawyer right.
Style	Not an academic style	They even do some bad things. . .

## Appendix 3

### Error code activity sample

Wf.	Wo.	Sp.	Gr.	O	Ww.	S/V	^	?	Style

1. Look at your corrected writing. Add the total number for each error code, and write the number in the boxes.
2. Highlight the two biggest numbers in the chart.
3. Complete the quizzes on the following website which relate to your two highlighted error types: [grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/quiz\\_list.htm](http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/quiz_list.htm)
4. Reflect on the essay again and rewrite the problem sentences.
5. Check your solutions in groups of three.

## Appendix 4

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### Individualised grammar lesson sample

(Name: \_\_\_\_\_)

Problem area analysis: article usage and omission/clarity of expression/  
prepositions

Error 1: As a result of government involvement in addressing urbanisation problem,

Solution 1: in addressing urbanisation, . . . OR in addressing the urbanisation  
problem, . . .

Practice 1: As a result of \_\_\_\_\_ in addressing \_\_\_\_\_,

Error 2: in terms of price supporting for

Solution 2: in terms of price support for

Practice 2: in terms of \_\_\_\_\_ for

Error 3: selling agricultural products with high prices

Solution 3: selling agricultural products at/for high prices

Practice 3: selling \_\_\_\_\_

Error 4: (Sentence development issues)

There are some limitations this solution for urbanisation due to the limitation of budget.

Solution 4 a): Due to budget restrictions, this urbanisation solution may have  
limitations.

Solution 4b): This solution to the problems of urbanisation may face limitations due to  
budget restrictions.

Practice 4: Due to \_\_\_\_\_,

Practice 4: \_\_\_\_\_ due to \_\_\_\_\_

Error 5: (Mixed problems)

However, this would be the viable solution which benefit economically.



## The impact of student attitudes on EAP grammar feedback

Solution 5: Nevertheless, this would still be a viable solution to partially address the economic needs of rural citizens.

Practice 5: Nevertheless, \_\_\_\_\_ still \_\_\_\_\_

Suggested computer exercises: articles with ‘the’ and zero articles; linker usage; preposition practice

## Appendix 5

### Current EAP course material sample

#### Explanation essay: Error correction

Error type	Original	Revised
1. Word form	The situation seems <u>unbenefit</u> .	The situation seems <b>unbeneficial</b> .
2. Word form	This might boost the <u>economic</u> and promote employment.	This might boost <b>the economy</b> and promote employment.
3. 'Such as'/lack of parallelism	Overusing the land is harmful to the ecosystem <u>such as infertile soil, air pollution and climate change.</u>	Overusing the land can have <b>harmful consequences</b> for the ecosystem such as <b>infertile soil, polluted air and a changing climate.</b>
4. Subject/verb agreement	A large amount of cheap labour <u>are</u> required.	A large amount of cheap labour <b>is</b> required.
5. Sentence fragment (incomplete sentence)	A series of areas will be listed. <u>First of all, social stability.</u>	A series of areas will be listed. <b>The first is social stability, which . . .</b>
6. Confusion of verb and verb phrase	As a result, Ethiopia was still lack of food . . .	Either: Ethiopia <b>still had a lack of food . . .</b> Or: Ethiopia <b>still lacked food.</b> Or: <b>There was still a lack of food</b> in Ethiopia.
7. Can/able to – future tense	(in the future), more people can participate in agribusiness.	(in the future), more people <b>will be able to</b> participate in agribusiness.

Here are some for you to try:

8. It cannot be deny that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages.
9. A huge unemployment problem has been arisen.
10. Ethiopians might be taught to operate modern tools, which means the local farmers can drive tractors . . .
11. The percentage of skilled farmers might rise steadily, resulting from the techniques teaching from the developed countries.

12. The quality of the harvest might increase stably in the coming years.
13. There is no care from the companies nor from the government who is not caring about the consequences.
14. Although they work hard, low wages, unequal to their input, will pay them.

(Used with permission from Asher Skowronek)

# 10 Putting assessment for learning into practice to support academic writing

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## Introduction

The action research (AR) described in this chapter was conducted in order to support Academic English students' writing development, especially their ability to monitor, assess and take action to improve their writing independently. I describe ways that I integrated student input as well as assessment for learning and learner autonomy theories into an Academic English course and developed new assessment materials to support students' academic writing. I conclude with a summary of evidence collected from this project about how assessment for learning principles can be applied to English language teaching, as well as reflections on the impact of this research.

## Background to the research

Just before the research began, I was made responsible for redesigning the Academic English syllabus and assessments at my school and I was struggling with this process. I saw AR as a tool that would enable me to explore how student input, feedback and teaching theories could be integrated into the courses. I wanted to focus my research on how writing assessment rubrics could be used to develop learner autonomy, for two key reasons. First, at that time the Academic English courses at my centre used quite limited writing assessment rubrics which were not integrated into lesson materials. As a result, students were often unsure both about the expectations for their writing performance and how to improve their writing skills. In response, I had designed detailed assessment rubrics to use in the scoring of written assignments, using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001) descriptors and International English Language Testing System (*IELTS*) Writing band descriptors as guides. The rubrics consisted of five overall criteria (Response to question, Structure and organisation, Vocabulary, Grammar, and Referencing) and within each criterion there were three sub-criteria. Having created these new

rubrics, I wanted to investigate ways of integrating them into the Academic English courses at the centre. Second, in the context of Academic English courses preparing students for university in Australia, encouraging the development of learner autonomy is an important concern in designing lesson materials. After completing their courses, my students would have to take responsibility for monitoring and improving their writing, and I felt the Academic English courses were not preparing them sufficiently for this challenge.

Initially I focused on exploring learner autonomy, and started reading articles by Cotterall (2000) and Smith (2008) to find out about theoretical principles that could guide my project. Smith (2008) defined the concept of learner autonomy as a student's capacity for self-directed learning, the ability to act independently and also to co-operate in a group with others. As the project unfolded, it became clear that assessment for learning principles were useful in informing and framing the AR. Assessment for learning theory refers to: 'the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there' (Assessment Reform Group 2002a:2). In contrast to the traditional notion of assessment of learning, in which the purpose of assessment is to measure ability and provide students with a score, assessment for learning highlights the importance of developing students' awareness of assessment criteria and methods of making further progress (Brown 2004/2005, Pooler 2012). Brown (2004/2005) emphasises the vital role of feedback in this process, which may include the use of explicit criteria to inform learners accurately about their performance and areas for improvement. In this way, the teacher is able to help their students to answer three questions: 1) Where am I now?, 2) Where am I going?, 3) How can I close the gap? Fyfe and Vella's (2012) report of their AR was also helpful because their findings showed that using assessment rubrics as a learning tool greatly enhanced their students' understanding of how to improve their writing, helping them to succeed in passing their Academic English program.

Another aspect of assessment for learning theory relevant to my research was the use of goal setting as a way of addressing the question 'How can I close the gap?' (Pooler 2012). The Assessment Reform Group (2002b:8) also provides recommendations in relation to goal setting:

- [teachers should] help pupils to understand where they are in relation to learning goals and how to make further progress
- [teachers should] give feedback that enables pupils to know the next steps and how to succeed in taking them.

These ideas informed the second stage of my AR project, when goal setting became the focus. I also built on two other teacher AR reports: both Koromilas (2011) and McCrossan (2011) identified strong links between

goal setting, motivation and progress at higher student proficiency levels. Both studies found that although students may have difficulty identifying clear and realistic progress goals, discussing and setting goals in class can positively impact student motivation. According to assessment for learning theory, goals can correspond directly to assessment tasks or criteria, so I created tasks that helped my students to set goals in this way.

## Research context and participants

My research was undertaken in 2012 at a private English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) school in Sydney, where I worked as a teacher and Academic English Coordinator. This particular ELICOS school is independent of any university or other institution, and offers mainly General English classes (from beginner to advanced levels), as well as Cambridge English exam preparation and Academic English courses. At the time of the research project, there were two Academic English courses running at the school at two different levels, Level 1 and Level 2, and I was in charge of redesigning both syllabuses. The focus of the Academic English courses was twofold: to prepare students for entry to a university program in Australia, and for taking the Academic *IELTS* test. The courses offered students a high level of flexibility in terms of their future plans, since many had yet to decide on their specific degree program. Another flexible aspect of the courses was that they operated on a rolling intake system, allowing students to start any Monday and finish any Friday. While this system is relatively common in the Australian ELICOS context, it is mostly used for General English courses, and Academic English courses in other ELICOS institutions usually run in 5- or 10-week blocks. Although the rolling intake system was understandably popular with students, it presented difficulties in designing and managing the syllabuses and assessments.

In terms of the writing assessment element of these courses, students completed one summative written task (either an essay or a report of between 200–300 words for Level 1 or 300–400 words for Level 2) every two weeks. Although the scores for these assessments counted towards the students' final grade for the course and were therefore 'summative' (see Hughes 2003), I planned to start using them 'formatively' (see Davison and Leung 2009) in terms of giving substantial feedback on the written assessments and then using that feedback to encourage students to improve.

The project consisted of two stages and involved a total of 18 students comprising 10 males and eight females, with a wide variety of nationalities including Argentinian, Brazilian, Chinese, Iranian, Mexican, Mongolian, Portuguese, Saudi Arabian, Spanish and Thai. Stage 1 was conducted with the Level 1 Academic English class who were at proficiency levels of B1–B2 on the CEFR (*IELTS* 5.0–5.5), and Stage 2 was conducted with the Level 2

Academic English class at Levels B2–C1 (*IELTS* 6.0–7.0). Student participation in the study was entirely optional, but most class members were keen to take part.

## Research questions

As my project progressed, and I learned more about assessment for learning theory, I realised it could be useful in helping me integrate reflection on writing and assessment rubrics into lesson tasks. Thus, the research question for the first stage of my project was: How can explicit use of assessment rubrics in my Academic English class most effectively enable students to assess and monitor their own written assignments?

The findings from this first stage encouraged me to focus more on goal setting in the second stage of the project, and the research question that developed for the second stage was: How can goal setting using assessment rubrics in my Academic English class most effectively enable students to assess and monitor their own written assignments?

## Research procedures

Across the two main stages of the project there were four AR cycles, as shown in Table 1. Stage 1 was conducted with the Level 1 class, but after four weeks my manager required me to teach at the other level, so Stage 2 was undertaken with the Level 2 class over the next eight weeks. Although Table 1 presents the project as linear and structured, this was certainly not the case as I experienced it. I followed the four AR steps of ‘planning’, ‘acting’, ‘observing’ and ‘reflecting’ but with some variations. Reading up on relevant theory was integrated at various stages, depending on when I had enough time. One cycle comprised a range of activities (Cycle 1), and one cycle did not involve any action (Cycle 2), whereas other cycles focused more specifically on only one activity (Cycles 3 and 4). In terms of the ‘observing’ step, I collected quantitative data through questionnaires and tracking of assignment scores, as well as qualitative data through focus groups, interviews, open-ended questions in the questionnaires and a teacher’s reflective journal. Using a range of data collection methods was practical and helped to ensure more valid results through triangulation.

## Outcomes of the research

The findings from the four AR cycles are described chronologically (Cycle 1, Cycle 2, etc.) in order to trace the ‘narrative’ of the project: how reflection on the outcomes of one cycle led to the design of the next cycle and so on.

Interestingly, when the new assessment rubrics were first used as a score

**Table 1** Details of the four AR cycles

	Cycle	Action	Observation	
Stage 1: Level 1 Academic English class	1	Three self-reflection activities: 1) students evaluating classmates' essays 2) students editing their writing using a checklist 3) students setting goals after receiving feedback	Initial questionnaire, focus group and final questionnaire	Tracking of students' assignment scores, and writing reflections in a teacher's journal (throughout all four cycles)
	2	No action: just reflecting and reading about goal setting	Questionnaire about goal setting (see Appendix 1)	
	3	One goal-setting activity: Matching goals to methods of achieving them on cards (see Appendix 2)	focus group	
Stage 2: Level 2 Academic English class	4	One goal-setting activity: Using a record sheet to monitor assignment goals and progress (see Appendix 3)	Semi-structured interviews	

sheet at the beginning of Cycle 1, most students achieved a slightly lower mark than in their previous round of written assignments. This may have been because the score sheet provided greater objectivity, or possibly because of the topic of that specific assignment task. After this initial downturn, all of the students' scores increased for the second assignment in Cycle 1, by between 3% and 5%. Scores do not, however, tell the whole story, and questionnaire and focus group data provided more insight into what was happening. A questionnaire was administered at the start of Cycle 1 asking students about their independent learning behaviour, and they reported finding the assessment rubrics difficult to understand, but it was encouraging that my learners claimed to use various strategies. For instance, 85% described referring to the feedback rubrics to choose a subsequent criterion to focus on. However, a major issue from the focus group was that the students all identified different areas of weakness in their writing, which was probably a natural outcome of the rolling intake. In addition, the students' main problem was specifying methods to overcome their weaknesses, for example: 'The problem is . . . we know that using academic vocabulary will increase the score, but we don't know how we can put [sic] the vocabulary, yes, how to do it.'

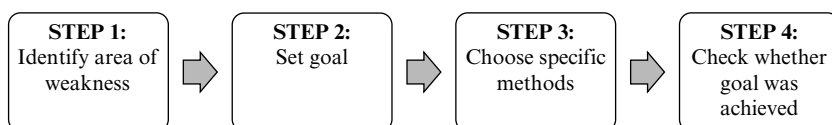
While this problem probably related to the students' overall language ability and indicated that they were still developing knowledge about use of academic vocabulary in writing, I still wanted to be able to provide some practical strategies or guidance to help my students address their weaknesses in relation to the assessment rubrics. The findings from Cycle 1 made me consider learner autonomy more deeply, and I noted that in Fyfe and Vella's



(2012) study, their students also had difficulty knowing how to address their problem areas.

Cycle 1 concluded with a questionnaire asking students to reflect on the usefulness of the three intervention activities outlined in Table 1. They responded that all three were beneficial in helping them to assess and monitor their written assignments, and so I continued to use these activities throughout the research. However, the rolling intake meant that my students needed more concrete examples of methods to improve their writing, so I decided that goal setting might be the most useful of the three activities. As Cycle 1 ended, I reflected on goal setting as being a 4-step process (see Figure 1), with Step 3 being the most difficult and important, and this reflection shaped the next cycle of the project.

**Figure 1 Goal-setting steps**



Thus in Cycle 2, the research changed in focus and in addition I moved to teach the Level 2 class. While this class had very similar needs as well as backgrounds to Level 1, because of their higher proficiency they were able to explain their needs and goals more precisely, so I administered a questionnaire about goal setting (see Appendix 1) to explore the students' perspectives in more detail. Analysis of the questionnaire data showed that all participants agreed on the importance of setting goals, which was consistent with McCrossan's (2011) AR findings. In the open-ended questions, students expanded on their responses, and their comments are shown in Table 2, coded according to the themes that emerged. It was clear that the students viewed goal setting as a vital part of their language learning and general success, which is not surprising considering they had chosen to join an Academic English course either to take the *IELTS* test or enter university.

**Table 2 Student comments about the importance of goal setting (Edwards 2013:26)**

Theme	Student comments
1) Goals develop awareness	It's fundamental to set goals because it allows me to be aware of my progress and my difficulties.
2) Goals provide a focus to improve	It helps me to focus on my needs and to do the activities that really will improve my knowledge. If you don't know where do you want to go you will not go anywhere.
3) Goals provide motivation	Setting goals provide you the motivation to reach a target, in that case improving English.

When asked about how their goals would actually be achieved, however, the students were rather vague. Table 3 shows examples of goals and corresponding methods specified by four students (labelled a, b, c and d). While Student (b) suggested a useful method for achieving the goal of improving use of tense (see 5b) the goals of students (a), (b) and (c) did not seem to be specific or achievable in the short term.

**Table 3 Examples of goals and methods specified in the questionnaire (Edwards 2013:26)\***

Responses to Question 4: What goals do you currently have to improve your essays?	Responses to Question 5: How are you going to achieve these goals?
(4a) I have to improve my academic vocabulary and grammar such as prepositions.	(5a) I'm going to write more essays and try to learn new vocabulary as much as I can.
(4b) Improve grammar, I think sometimes when I write essay I confuse some tenses.	(5b) Ask teacher and try to find the information how to use that tense from books or the Internet.
(4c) I need to answer the question correctly.	(5c) Practise more. Learn from the mistakes. Use the topic we learn from the class. Pay attention.
(4d) Structure and organization, it is really difficult for me make the correct structure.	(5d) Reading and writing.

*\*Numbers 4 and 5 refer to the two questions asked, and letters (a) to (d) refer to the answers from four different students.*

Koromilas' (2011:17) AR findings helped me at this stage. Her students also needed significant guidance in setting short-term achievable goals and she concluded that 'work on motivation . . . must begin with teaching students how to break down long-term goals into short, clear and achievable daily and weekly goals'. I hypothesised that setting precise and attainable goals matched to appropriate methods, followed by checking students' achievement of these goals, would increase progress and motivation, which led me to design the activities for Cycles 3 (a goal to method matching activity – see Appendix 2) and 4 (a goal-monitoring worksheet – see Appendix 3).

A 30-minute focus group discussion was conducted at the end of Cycle 3 with five students to ask them for feedback on the goal-setting activity implemented and to further explore their goal-setting needs. The focus group was transcribed and then coded for recurrent themes. Two key themes emerged: the need for teacher guidance, and the need for self-study materials to be created. The students reported that matching methods with goals based on the assessment criteria was particularly useful in aiding their understanding of how to make progress in writing. For example, one student said: 'It makes us think about exactly which are the points that we have to make.'

However, some of the students also commented on the difficulty of setting specific goals and identifying methods of achieving them, and stated that they needed teacher guidance: 'I think that when you have to write your own goals to improve, it's not easy at all and you need some help or you need some extra information.'

During the focus group, it also emerged that the learners needed additional self-study material, based directly on the writing assessment rubrics. The student who introduced this idea said: 'But I also wish there were more like uh exercise sheets or something, to show how to do it, because I don't know why or not it's wrong the sentence I wrote, so I need some more examples and I tried to search in the Internet or a book and it takes too long and by the time, you know . . .'

The students needed access to specific rules or tips independently but quickly, so in the following months I created 15 self-study worksheets (see example in Appendix 4), each based on one criterion from the writing assessment rubrics. My research focus at this point was a combination of goal setting and learner autonomy, and I was trying to find ways of linking the two. The importance of encouraging these skills in Academic English courses is supported by Cotterall (2000:116), who suggests that one way of promoting self-directed learning is to 'encourage learners to set personal goals, monitor and reflect on their performance, and modify their learning behaviour accordingly'. The new self-study worksheets gave the students concrete methods to modify their behaviour. However, I still wanted to help them to monitor and reflect further on their progress, which led me to design a goal-monitoring worksheet in Cycle 4.

During the fourth cycle, my students recorded and self-monitored their essay scores, goals, methods and progress using the monitoring worksheet I had designed (see Appendix 3). Over the period of the next six weeks it was encouraging to analyse the changes in essay scores. In total there were 23 instances of goal setting (in each case one student setting one criterion-based goal after receiving feedback on a written assignment), and in 83% of instances the score for that criterion improved. Of these positive occurrences, the average increase in score for the focus criterion was 2.6%, which is a noteworthy improvement, especially considering that this development was for only one criterion and each student may have also improved their score for the other criteria as well. Table 4 shows the changes in scores for the 11 students over the cycle. In Weeks 1, 3 and 5, the students each chose one criterion to focus on. In Weeks 2, 4 and 6, they received feedback on their essays and noted whether they had improved for that criterion and by how many marks (1 mark was 1%).

The findings presented in Table 4 show that setting a goal for one writing criterion for each essay over two weeks was highly effective for over half of the students (Students 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 9), and sometimes effective for others

**Table 4 Score % change for students' focus areas (over six weeks) (Edwards 2013:29)\***

Student	Week 2 (goal-setting instance 1)	Week 4 (goal-setting instance 2)	Week 6 (goal-setting instance 3)	Total change over period
1	No change	+1%	N/A	+1%
2	-1%	+6.5%	N/A	+5.5%
3	+2%	-1%	N/A	+1%
4	+1%	+3%	+3%	+7%
5	+2%	+2.5%	+4.5%	+9%
6	N/A	+5%	+2%	+7%
7	+5.5%	N/A	N/A	+5.5%
8	+1%	No change	+2%	+3%
9	+4%	N/A	N/A	+4%
10	+1%	+2%	N/A	+3%
11	+1%	+1%	N/A	+2%

\* *Light grey = above average increase in score; Dark grey = decrease in score; N/A = not applicable because the student was not in the class at this point*

(Students 1, 8, 10 and 11). Although improvement over a 6-week course was to be expected, in this case the increases seemed more significant than usual. Although two students (Students 2 and 3) experienced a slight decrease in score for their focus criterion on one occasion each, over the whole 6-week period they both saw an overall increase, especially Student 2. It was difficult to interpret these decreases through numerical data alone, as various factors could explain the scores, so Student 3 was one of four learners invited to take part in an interview at the end of Cycle 4 (Student 2 had left the school, whereas Student 3 had just changed courses).

The semi-structured interviews with Students 1, 3, 5 and 8 aimed to gain deeper insights into their responses to the goal-setting and monitoring worksheet. In addition to Student 3, Student 5 was chosen because she had experienced the highest increase in score over the six weeks (+9%); and Students 1 and 8 both achieved slight increases but also one week each of 'no change'. After transcription and coding of the interviews, three recurring themes emerged: progress and motivation; self-directed learning; and learner autonomy and teacher guidance.

First, the intervention in Cycle 4 seemed to be motivating for three of the four students interviewed. Student 5 was encouraged by her results, saying: 'I feel very very good . . . and it helps me to be proud of me.' Also, Students 1 and 8 felt that tracking their goals and progress pushed them to work harder, because they wanted to improve even more. As Student 1 said: 'I think my potential is not improved very much, because just one mark, I think I have to

improve more than this. So that's why I have to see about the feedback what is the point I have to fix and how to find a method to get a higher mark than before.'

In contrast, Student 3, who experienced a decrease in score on one occasion, claimed that marks were unimportant to him, because overall he felt more confident in his writing. He explained that writing goals and keeping track of his progress did not really appeal to him, and that he preferred measuring his progress by the quality of his interactions with English speakers outside the classroom. This comment reminded me that my students had different learning styles and finding a variety of ways of motivating them would always be important.

In addition, all four students agreed on the value of self-directed activities such as the goal-monitoring task, and that they would like to continue using these strategies at university. They all considered this kind of 'training' to be an important part of becoming an expert language learner; as Student 1 explained: 'I think they [students] have to practise by themselves to be like a professional, how to correct it.'

The idea of having self-study worksheets available in the school's library was particularly appealing to my learners, because of the flexibility it would give them. Student 8 pointed out that: 'We can feel free to use it, and also we can do it anytime, in the break, after school or whenever.'

Finally, although the students had clearly accepted that learner autonomy was important, they reported that it was difficult to achieve. Student 3 mentioned that since he was struggling with language expression and rules, teacher guidance was needed: 'In the beginning we need a tutor that show us the way how to do it.'

This comment highlights the importance of the teacher's role in guiding and motivating students and offering them a range of learning strategies to choose from, so that they can gradually develop greater autonomy. Finally, three of the four students mentioned that they were comfortable being autonomous in their L1 environments, but that in the context of studying English they found it more difficult to be independent. Student 1 summarised this issue well: 'I like to be autonomous, but sometimes it's difficult because it's not my language . . . and it's difficult to do it by myself.'

It may be that some students are not aware of autonomous learning strategies specific to language learning, such as monitoring and adjusting their language development, and therefore these strategies need to be explicitly taught and practised with teacher guidance.

## Discussion

The outcomes of this AR project highlight the value of assessment for learning principles for teaching and course design in English for Academic

Purposes (EAP) courses. My findings add to a growing body of knowledge that hopefully could be of interest and use for other teachers and syllabus writers working in similar programs. Rather than just dropping Academic English students in ‘at the deep end’ and requiring them to become autonomous for themselves, I became more aware that it is important for teachers to provide substantial support and guidance. While students may have strategies for autonomous learning in their first language it cannot be automatically assumed that they are readily transferred to second language learning.

My AR experience led me to adopt an assessment for learning approach. I learned that autonomous learning for assessment can involve engagement with assessment rubrics, guidance in goal setting, support in developing autonomous learning skills and full use of feedback on formative and summative assessment tasks to enhance future learning. Learning about assessment for learning principles through AR gave me the confidence to apply them as a regular part of my practice and I have since used these principles in other courses I have developed at other teaching institutions. In addition, from this research I realised the value of communicating more openly with my students to inform some of my decisions about teaching and about designing activities. I found questionnaires to be a very practical method of collecting student feedback and I continue to use them on a regular basis. Focus groups and interviews also allowed me to gain deeper insight into the reasons for students’ preferences and to generally understand my students better.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have highlighted the benefits for teachers of exploring assessment for learning principles through AR in an Academic English context. The discussion shows that while the students needed structure and assistance to become more autonomous in the learning, they were able to show improvements in their performance through the use of formative feedback through an assessment for learning approach. In future research it would be very valuable to explore what types of corrective formative feedback are effective for different international learner levels in Academic and General English courses, and also how mobile learning technology can enhance the integration of assessment for learning principles.

## Acknowledgements

Tables 2, 3 and 4 are reproduced with permission from *English Australia Journal* issue 29 volume 1 (2013).

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# Appendix 1

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## Questionnaire about goal setting used in Cycle 2

### How do you feel about goal setting for your essays?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) Do you think it is important to set goals to improve your English? Why?
- 2) On your essay feedback sheet, the final section asks you to set goals to improve your next essay based on that first essay feedback. Do you like doing this?  
  
Do you think it helps you to improve your writing in your next essay?
- 3) Which of the 5 criteria areas for your essays do you think you need to improve most? Please tick ✓ ONE area only:
  - Response to question
  - Structure & organisation
  - Vocabulary
  - Grammar
  - Referencing
- 4) What goals (if any) do you currently have to improve your essays? Please explain.
- 5) How are you going to achieve this goal/these goals (i.e. what are you going to do exactly)?



## Appendix 2

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### Goal-matching activity used in Cycle 3

This framework was used to develop methods ‘How to achieve my goal A and B’ relating to each of the specific writing assessment criteria. The boxes were then cut up to use as cards in an activity where students had to match the methods with the specific goals.

Overall criteria	Specific criteria (my goal is to improve this)	How to achieve my goal A	How to achieve my goal B
Response to question	<b>Responds to all parts of the task fully</b>	I will highlight/underline the parts of the task/question in different colours and then highlight my answer to each part in my final essay	I will highlight/underline the parts of the task/question in different colours and then make an essay plan which covers all aspects of the question
	<b>Includes a clear position/thesis statement/purpose/outline</b>	When I’ve finished my essay, I will highlight/underline the position and outline statements in my introduction	I will check in my notebook/textbook or with another student for ideas on how to write clear position statements and outlines
	<b>Presents relevant information which is well developed and supported</b>	I will ask myself: does each point I make relate <u>directly</u> to the question?	I will ask myself: have I explained each point I make clearly, and have I supported each point with an example?

## Appendix 3

### Goal-setting record sheet used in Cycle 4

Use this sheet to record your goals, methods and progress, so that you can improve your writing.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**1) Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

Goal (based on essay criteria)	Method	Result – did this help me get a higher score?

**2) Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

Goal (based on essay criteria)	Method	Result – did this help me get a higher score?

**Example (from one of the students):**

Goal (based on essay criteria)	Method	Result – did this help me get a higher score?
I need to make sure my paragraphs are well structured	I will highlight the topic, supporting sentences and examples, and check the handbook to revise how to structure my essay	Yes – 13/20 for structure & cohesion = +2 points

## Appendix 4

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### Self-study worksheet example

Fifteen worksheets such as the one included here were created to relate to goals students could formulate based on the writing assessment criteria.

#### Academic English worksheet for writing goals: Punctuation

<b>Problem</b> = A low score for 'punctuation' in the grammar section of your feedback sheet	<b>Goal</b> = I need to improve my punctuation —————→	<b>Method</b> = Review and practise the rules of punctuation using this worksheet —————→	If anything is not clear after this, please ask your teacher! —————→
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#### **Step 1: Review the key rules for capitalisation (this page), commas (next page), and apostrophes (the page after)**

*[Activities omitted: taken from Academic Writing and IELTS textbooks]*

#### **Step 2: Practise using punctuation accurately – look at the rules at the same time if you need to.**

- a) Add commas in the sentences below where needed.
- 1) What happens if for example you forget your password?
  - 2) To sum up I'd like to recap the main advantages and disadvantages.
  - 3) Statistics can however be misleading.
  - 4) Low-lying countries such as Bangladesh are particularly at risk.
  - 5) Furthermore not everyone will be able to afford to install new telephones.
  - 6) Contact sports like rugby will inevitably involve more injuries.
  - 7) A similarly priced house in the city centre would only have one bedroom.
  - 8) We will of course reimburse any travel expenses.
- b) The extracts below from a student essay have a number of commas and apostrophes missing. Add punctuation where necessary.

- |  |
|--|
| 1) The world is facing an energy crisis and undoubtedly one of the keys to tackling this problem is for everyone to use less energy. This solution sounds simple. It isnt however as straightforward as it first seems . . . |
|--|

2) Firstly we need to consider the costs for the individual involved in trying to save energy. We could look for example at ways of insulating homes. Many measures such as roof insulation and double-glazing are often expensive to install. Moreover many poor people live in old houses which aren't as easy to keep warm as newer buildings . . .

3) Secondly it's much easier for governments of rich countries to introduce regulations for industry without their economies suffering. However for a developing country which is trying to expand its economy, there are much greater risks . . .

**Step 3: Check your answers (see separate answer sheet)**

**Step 4: Now think about your own writing**

- 1) Go back to your last essay – did you make any mistakes with punctuation? If you did, write out those sentences again with corrections (as suggested by your teacher), and then show your teacher to check.
- 2) When writing your next essay, think about these things to help you with punctuation:
  - a) Check your punctuation carefully before submitting it.
    - Check your capital letters: do all words have capitals that should do? Have you used any unnecessary capitals?
    - Check your commas: have you put commas after discourse markers (and sometimes before too), in lists, and before co-ordinating conjunctions in compound sentences?
    - Check your apostrophes: you shouldn't have any apostrophes in your essay except for when used for possession.
  - b) Are you unsure whether the punctuation is correct? Ask one of your classmates to check it for you and discuss your ideas together.

## **Part 3**

### **Action research for summative assessment**



# 11

## Exploring tasks for summative assessment of teachers' connected speech knowledge

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### Introduction

With English entering the teaching curriculum in many countries, Cambridge English Language Assessment has diversified its qualifications to cater for practising or prospective teachers who are unable to attend intensive courses such as *CELTA* (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and *Delta* (Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Specifically, *Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT)* offers a suite of assessments, one of which is dedicated to knowledge about language (*TKT: KAL*<sup>1</sup>). The *TKT: KAL* covers concepts of the English language systems of lexis, phonology, grammar and discourse. In our teaching context, we aimed to prepare students for this module of *TKT*, but in this action research (AR) project we particularly focused on improving students' ability to answer questions on connected speech processes such as elision, intrusion, assimilation, weak forms, or consonant–vowel linking. In this chapter, we discuss our project, its findings and the activities we developed and trialled involving different interaction patterns, macro-skills work and learner styles.

### Research context and participants

The setting for the research was the Institute of Continuing & TESOL Education (ICTE-UQ), a language centre at the University of Queensland (UQ), which offers programs ranging from General English to customised English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The project was conducted in 2013 during an intensive 5-week ESP program called ESP: TESOL. The aims of this course were to (a) develop students' English language skills, and (b)

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<sup>1</sup>This chapter was written prior to the discontinuation of *TKT: KAL* in December 2016.

prepare students to take *TKT: KAL* and *TKT* Module 1. Students on this course were from a non-English-speaking background, who were considering English language teaching as a career.

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

## Background to the research

We chose to focus on connected speech processes because our experience in preparing students for *TKT: KAL* in previous courses had shown us that completing such questions was problematic and frustrating for our learners. There are two fundamental differences between *TKT: KAL* and other English Language Teaching (ELT) examinations. First, it is a test of knowledge, not a language proficiency examination. Therefore, an ability to communicate in English is not assessed. Second, it only requires completion of paper-based questions in a matching, odd-one-out or multiple-choice format (see Appendix 1). In previous courses, input sessions on connected speech had tended to be centred on terminology, and interpretation of phonemic script. We believed that alternatives to this approach merited exploration, especially the employment of activities to develop deeper understanding of how speakers connect words.

Arguably, L2 students require articulatory training of English sounds to acquire adequate intelligibility. However, there is an increasing awareness in the teaching literature that the acquisition of second language (L2) pronunciation may, as Moyer (2013) states, not only depend on 'articulatory precision' but also on 'auditory-perceptual processing and higher-order analysis'. L2 students need awareness of sound processes, especially an ability to comparatively analyse differences and similarities between their first language (L1) and English (Szpyra-Kozłowska 2014). As such, an important strategy which we hoped our students would develop is what we have termed *auditory thinking* (Dutton and Sweeting 2014:8). We viewed this as the cognitive ability of a reader to call upon models of how the written word sounds from



their memory or, in Fraser's (2001:20) words, the 'intuitive knowledge' of how language samples sound, which native speakers possess.

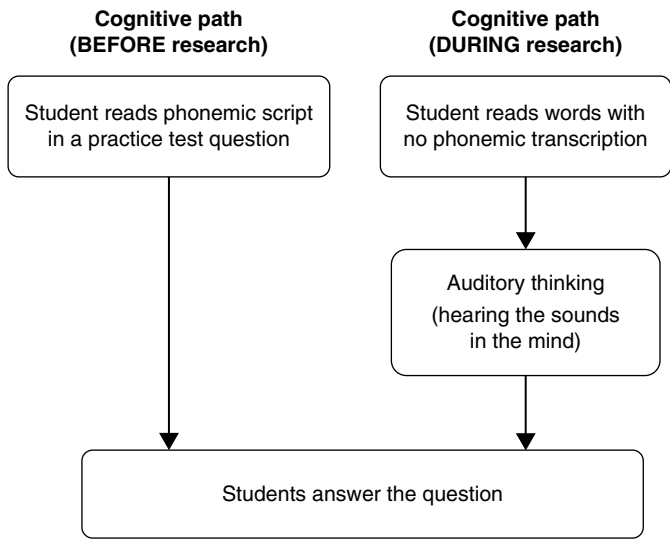
In the literature, the idea of auditory thinking is not entirely new. For instance, it is De Guerrero (2006) who offers the most pertinent insight into the type of *inner speech* that is important both for remembering language and improving language proficiency. Through two studies involving English as a Second Language (ESL) students, De Guerrero revealed a positive relationship between the occurrence of inner speech and language proficiency. That is, the frequency of mental rehearsal in the L2 increased as the proficiency level of the students became more advanced.

Research on the impact of inner speech on language learning shows that learners benefit from cognitive strategies such as engaging in tasks which involve repetition and silent rehearsal (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo and Küpper 1985). Such a benefit is also stated by Vygotsky (1986), who theorises that inner speech is a significant stage in a child's cognitive and language development, and that it can especially affect later ability in reading and writing, an assertion evidenced in the literature by Liva, Fijalkow and Fijalkow (1994).

In a wider sense, there has also been experimental research by respected psychologists such as Rod Nicolson, which establishes a link between lack of inner speech and dyslexia (Cross 2010). Other psychologists have also shown a link between language-learning ability and the ability to use inner speech. For example, Papagno and Vallar (1995) performed a study which indicated a link between language proficiency and phonological memory, conceptually a temporary store of phonological form proposed by Baddeley (1986) as part of his working-memory model. This appeared to validate the assertion by Baddeley, Gathercole and Papagno (1998) that gifted language learners had 'superior' phonological memory skills.

This literature supported our assumptions that the development of our students' ability to use auditory thinking was an appropriate direction for our research. Through our intervention, students would be prepared to engage in an auditory thinking stage, as shown in Figure 1, when answering *TKT: KAL* questions on connected speech. This would encourage students to use imagined speech to assist in answering the test questions. We saw this as an improvement on previous preparation courses, where students answered *TKT: KAL* practice questions by interpreting phonemic transcriptions. We intended to employ listening and speaking practice activities in our intervention. The rationale for choosing to use listening activities came from our belief that in order for our learners to successfully understand how connected speech works, it was important for them to be able to differentiate heard speech from speech in citation form (Cauldwell 2014). As for integrating speaking activities, we supported the long-standing 'idea that social interaction is integral to language learning' (Kuhl 2007:117).

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



**Research question**

We had started our project by wanting to measure the effect on *TKT: KAL* question scores from improving the fluent *production* of connected speech. However, after some thought, we recognised that our students’ main objective was to do well in a knowledge test rather than improve their spoken fluency. Consequently, we fine-tuned our research question to reflect this new focus, while not denying the possibility of using communicative activities. As a result, our research question was written as: What tasks and strategies can we develop to prepare students for *TKT: KAL* items on connected speech?

**Research procedures**

In this project, we needed to collect data to assess two aspects of our investigation. First, we wanted to know if the new activities would result in better student performance than in previous years, and thereby demonstrate adequate preparation. Consequently, we wrote a pre-test and a post-test in a similar format to typical *TKT: KAL* questions. The pre-test contained 10 questions, which were then randomised and reused in the post-test. We also added 10 new questions of similar format to the post-test to check if students were able to identify connected speech features in different language samples.

Using these tests, we attempted to show overall student improvement from the start of our project to its completion. We also wrote a weekly quiz, using a web-based tool called Socrative™, a free app which allows bidirectional communication between teacher and student during lessons, collects students' responses in real time, and displays them in a visual form. This quiz was used to monitor and diagnose student progress in answering connected speech multiple-choice questions. This tool also acted as a guide to inform the development of future tasks as Socrative™ was able to email us a report of results after each quiz.

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

The steps we took to address our research question were guided by our interest in activating the learners' auditory thinking skills. Our project involved five cycles, each corresponding to a week in the course. In each week, we trialled new activities with the class while recording the effect that these tasks had on the participants. Then, we considered our observations, before deciding on a course of action to address student needs for the following cycle. Consequently, the results of each cycle fed forward to the implementation of activities in the following week. Before the start of our investigation, we carefully considered the most suitable way of scheduling our research. We decided to integrate our activities into the existing program rather than conducting extra-curricular workshops, as we could not guarantee consistent attendance outside course times. We also decided to use the existing phonology lessons and materials. The resulting schedule during the investigation was three or four sessions per week, limited to 30 minutes each. This limitation was to ensure that connected speech did not dominate the course content.

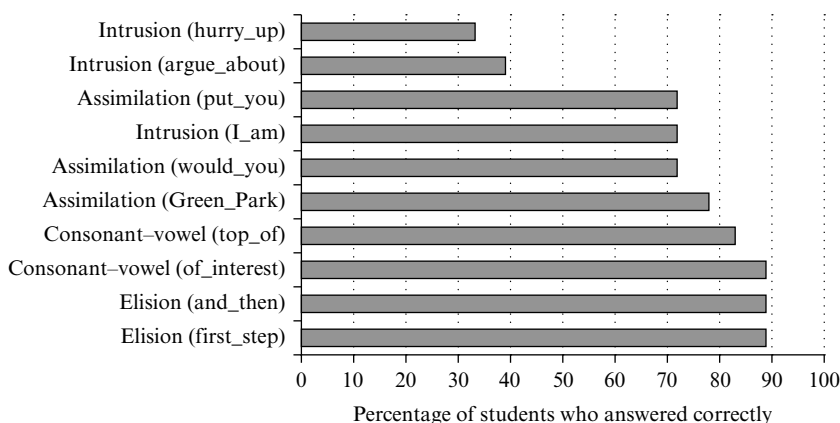
While planning for the first week, we recognised that the scope for designing needs-based activities was limited because we had not met our students at that stage. Nevertheless, we felt we should adopt a variety of activity characteristics to help map out an initial avenue of development that could go on into the second week. Therefore, we created three activities encompassing a range of interaction patterns (pair, individual, whole class), macro-skills (listening, speaking, reading) and learner styles (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic). We also ensured that the models of language contained an even mixture of consonant–vowel linking, intrusion, elision and assimilation. Descriptions of all the activities described in this chapter can be found in Appendix 4.

## Week 1

In the first week, we gave students the diagnostic pre-test to establish their existing level of understanding. Then, while giving feedback on the test, we delivered an input lesson to clarify the different types of connected speech. A class discussion afterwards, and the results of the pre-test, told us that students were generally familiar with consonant–vowel linking but unfamiliar with assimilation, intrusion and elision. One student, in particular, showed great surprise when she was introduced to intrusion. She mentioned she had never been aware before that there was a /r/ sound between, for example, ‘China\_and’.

Our next actions consisted of introducing the class to the three planned activities, and observing how students would apply what they had learned in the first lesson. When we reviewed our classroom observations and data from the weekly quiz, we realised that we should focus more on individual aspects of connected speech to address students’ confusion, especially about intrusion (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2 Quiz overview for Week 1**



In addition, the student feedback concerning the three activities encouraged us to repeat it in Week 2. It was obvious to us that listening practice of natural speech was important for developing our students’ awareness. For example, some students said: ‘It was useful in terms of real language . . . [it] helped me to recognise when connected speech can be used’; ‘It was useful because we were exposed to . . . real sentences’.

We also considered that this awareness could extend to the fact that speakers sometimes make a choice about the form of connected speech they use. This aspect emerged after some students thought more deeply about

some utterances, such as ‘Just a bit\_more’, in the multiple-choice listening task. In this example, an elided /t/ was recorded. However, one of our students correctly said that some speakers may use assimilation, with the /t/ approaching a /p/. This comment was a very worthwhile piece of information because it helped to show us that the students were starting to train their brains to analyse the language they heard without reliance on the written form.

## Week 2

In the second week, two of our activities were aimed at developing awareness of intrusion, and another two focused on distinguishing elision from assimilation. Following these activities, some of the students’ difficulties with these features started to become clearer. Predominantly, we noticed a reliance on spelling rather than sounds. A good example was the word pair ‘ABC\_entertainment’ in the weekly quiz. A third of the class identified this as consonant–vowel linking, not as an intrusive /j/. In fact, in the activity ‘Onion Ring Intrusion’, which used cue cards, some students avoided vocalising the words and simply showed their cards to their partner. We, therefore, felt that further listening practice and pronunciation work was needed. Our second observation was made regarding the ‘Rules of Intrusion’ activity, in which the specific phonemes of intrusion (/w/, /j/, /r/), and how they are used, were built up on the board with the class. This seemed to result in an improvement in that area, as shown by the weekly quiz. Consequently, we decided to include the activity in the following week.

## Week 3

In this third week, three new activities were planned and implemented to address our concerns from Week 2. We also gave students a homework task to prepare a colourful poster illustrating the ‘Rules of Assimilation’ (see Figure 3). We considered this task to be an opportunity for students to activate knowledge of the rules in their own time. Besides, we thought it would appeal to more artistic or creative students.

Interestingly, by the end of this week, we noticed that some students were continuing to develop and do well on the weekly quiz. However, others were not progressing to the same degree and we felt these students would benefit from extra practice. We, therefore, considered increasing self-study options in the following week. Furthermore, we felt we should explore students’ ability to recognise connected speech processes by listening to longer pieces of discourse, a decision motivated by students’ comments about the lack of context in the multiple-choice listening task. As one student stated: ‘The questions were just group [sic] of words without any context or written

Figure 3 Rules of Assimilation poster



form . . . No I was “old motel”. When I heard that first I didn’t get what is it [sic] saying. Therefore I couldn’t answer of which [sic] aspect of connected speech.’

## Week 4

One focus of this week was to introduce more self-study options, which was achieved by creating flashcards using the Quizlet™ online learning tool and app. This activity allowed students to practise matching word-pair samples to connected speech labels. After a short introduction, we saw many students using these materials in the computer room after class. During this week, we felt that most students had begun to employ our cognitive strategy of auditory thinking. We then decided to move forward and experiment with more communicative aspects of connected speech. We developed a listening and role-play activity, which was particularly interesting, as it showed us that many students were increasingly able to detect examples of connected speech from discourse both in and out of class. One student, for instance, mentioned that she had observed intrusion in the language used by her homestay family. This was a very empowering moment for

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

## Week 5

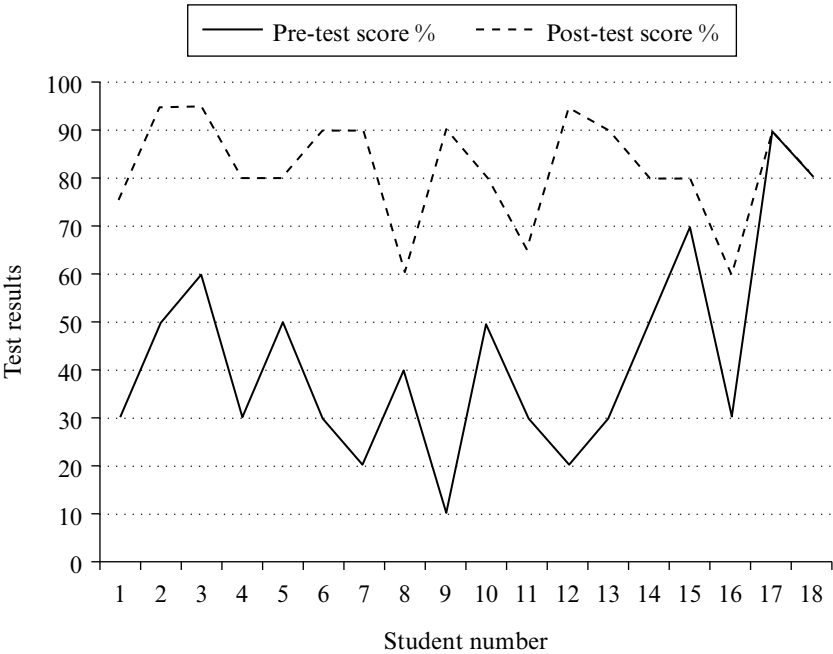
A normal feature of the course timetable for the final week is a higher focus on *TKT* exam practice. In the final *TKT: KAL* practice test, we decided to explore whether there was any difference between student ability to answer connected speech questions with and without phonemic script. This was an interesting avenue of enquiry because the majority of our activities had been conducted without the support of phonemic script, whereas *TKT: KAL* questions supply phonemic transcription. Throughout the course, our position had been that we wanted to develop students' deeper understanding through listening rather than simply teaching knowledge of phonemic script and its interpretation. In this exploration, we first isolated eight connected speech test items, deleted the phonemic transcriptions, and asked students to complete the questions under test conditions. Following this activity, later in the day, students were given the same test items, but with no modifications. After marking and collating the results, we found that scores were unaffected for one third of the students, whereas the performance of the remaining students either improved or decreased by one point. Furthermore, three quarters of the students scored more than six out of eight questions correct in the unmodified questions.

The results demonstrated that, in general, students were able to accurately recognise connected speech in test items irrespective of phonemic script. This outcome was very rewarding, as it showed that the students had developed greater awareness of how written words are spoken. Finally, we gave students the post-test and the written survey to gather their evaluations of the activities during the five weeks.

## Outcomes of the research

By the end of the course, we had generated a total of 19 activities, and data which we could use to determine (a) student improvement and (b) student evaluation of the new tasks. When comparing the pre-test with the post-test results, we could see that all students improved substantially (Figure 4). In addition, student rankings of how they thought they performed after the actual *TKT: KAL* test were overwhelmingly positive, with 16 students rating 4 or 5 (very good or excellent, respectively), and the rest choosing 3 (average). The results of the weekly quiz had also consistently shown development

Figure 4 Student pre-test and post-test results



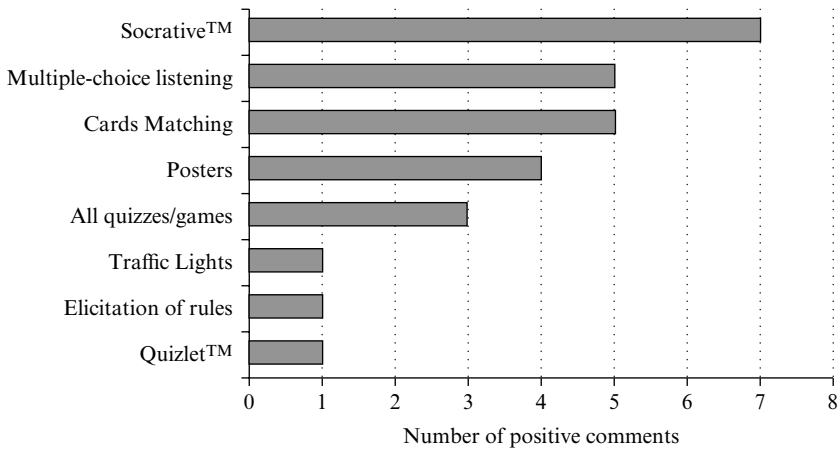
throughout the project, from an average student score of 72% in Week 1 to 89% in Week 4.

When we consider individual students, improvement was particularly noticeable in those who were from a non-educational or non-linguistic background, such as Student 9, who scored 10% in the pre-test and 90% in the post-test. Three students (8, 11 and 16), however, appeared more challenged by this area of the test, despite scoring around 60% in the post-test. Students were then asked to cast their minds back over the activities and to evaluate them, and there were some interesting findings. From Figure 5, it can be seen that the highest number of positive comments were given to what was mainly a data collection tool, the Socrative™ weekly quiz.

For example, some students commented as follows: ‘I did enjoy . . . Socrative™ quiz . . . we could check ourselves [sic] and see improvement’; the Socrative™ tests were useful to think by yourself [sic] about which phenomenon [sic] could take place when saying certain words together’.

Clearly, these comments show that students felt the weekly quiz allowed for personal reflection leading to greater understanding. Another activity which received similar qualitative feedback was assimilation posters (see Figure 3). Although only four students commented on this activity, their



**Figure 5 Count of student positive comments regarding activities**

feedback was especially insightful: ‘We could learn the Rules of Assimilation in our own learning style’, ‘While I made this poster, I had to think about what and how someone who looked at my poster understand [sic] what I want to present’.

Students also seemed to remember favourably those activities involving pair interaction, such as ‘Cards Matching’: ‘One activity that . . . was useful for me [Cards Matching] . . . because we did it more than once, so at the end I was able to recognise some of this [sic] features’; ‘I learnt everything I know about intrusion during that lesson. The practice helped me to remember it’.

Multiple-choice listening also received positive feedback. Students saw the opportunity to listen to connected speech as helping their overall cognition: ‘it was good to identify connected speech features when native speakers speak’; ‘it consolidated our knowledge’.

We concluded that we would recommend the use of most activities featured in Figure 5 because students found them encouraging and supportive in various ways.

However, other activities were less well regarded. In particular, 10 students in the class commented negatively on the ‘Traffic Lights’ activity. One student wrote: ‘The Traffic Lights was confusing. Too many colours with too many structures combined in one learning tool’. We, therefore, decided that we would not use this activity again in its current form because of the physical difficulty in synchronising the hand movements involved.

## Discussion

While conducting this research, we were aware that preparing students to take a knowledge test did not seem to sit comfortably within communicative language teaching approaches, which tend to focus on the outcome of improving communicative ability. In general, many teachers aim to develop their students' proficiency, with language knowledge often taking a supporting role. In contrast, our priorities appeared to be reversed in *TKT: KAL* test preparation, with the attainment of knowledge rather than language production being the main consideration.

In this project, we observed students' enthusiasm as their consciousness of language patterns unfolded during our classroom activities. Their growing awareness seemed to be the beginning of a chain reaction of self-confidence and professional pride. For many of our students, being more aware of connected speech led them to relinquish the assumption that connected speech is just too hard to perceive and produce. One example of this increased confidence was observed in peer teaching practice in a subsequent course when some of the students confidently integrated word linking into lessons plans.

## Conclusion

This AR with student teachers who were preparing for a knowledge about language exam has highlighted the value of explicit input in raising students' awareness of how sounds differ from their written representations in natural speech. It also reinforced to us the importance of seeking feedback from students on their own progress. We recognised that students can provide some of the most valuable insights into how teaching is conducted and can collaborate with teachers in directing their own learning.

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# Appendix 1

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## TKT: KAL connected speech sample question

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

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

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

You need to use some options more than once.

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**Features of connected speech**

- A** intrusion (adding an extra sound)

**B** weak form of a vowel

**C** assimilation (a sound changing towards a neighbouring sound)

**D** elision (omission) within a consonant cluster

**Phonemic transcriptions**

- 21

/ nɒt ət ɔ:l /  
Not at all.
- 22

/ dəʊm plɪ /  
They don't play football there.
- 23

/ ɡəʊ wɒn /  
Go on!
- 24

/ reb bæɡ /  
She bought a lovely red bag.
- 25

/ sɔ: rɪt /  
She saw it once.
- 26

/ sænwɪtʃ /  
Have a sandwich.
- 27

/ rɪəli jɪl /  
She's rarely ill.
- 28

/ tɔ:lɪs ɡɜ:l /  
She's the tallest girl in our class.

Source: Cambridge ESOL (2008)

## Appendix 2

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### Survey (Part 1)

#### Action Research in ELICOS Program 2013

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Regards,*

*Arizio & Martin*

## Appendix 3

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### Survey (Part 2)

#### Action Research in ELICOS Program 2013

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

Please rank your opinion on the scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = POORLY and 5 = EXCELLENT

[CIRCLE]

1

2

3

4

5

# Appendix 4

## Weekly activities

	Traffic Lights	Cards Matching	Multiple-choice listening
Week 1	<p><b>Description:</b> Students (SS) introduced to marking connected speech with colours within written sentences, and then encouraged to signal the linking features with different hand gestures while saying each sentence. Modelling provided by teacher.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> This was an activity to appeal to certain learner styles (kinaesthetic and visual), and also allow users to see/hear/repeat models of all connected speech types within sentences.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> SS given one half of a pair in phonic-style, have to repeat the sound to find a matching partner. For example, 'hau' + 'wiz' is a match, equal to 'how is'. SS then decide what the written English is and which type of connected speech was used in each pair.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> Attempt to encourage SS to listen to final sound of first word and first sound of linking word. Phonics were chosen because some SS did not know the phonemic chart. This also was to demonstrate that there are differences between pronunciation of unlinked words and connected words. Favours visual, auditory and kinaesthetic styles.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> In the language laboratory, SS work individually to listen to 10 pre-recorded utterances and answer a multiple-choice question for each to identify the connected speech type they have heard. Self-paced and repetition possible.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> Attempt to help students relate written form to longer authentic speech. This is intensive listening of all connected speech forms. Suited to auditory/visual/independent styles.</p>

	Rules of Intrusion	Song lyrics	Rats and Rabbits	Intrusion Onion Ring
Week 2	<p><b>Description:</b> SS given examples of intrusion, rules of production elicited and presented on whiteboard in class in terms of three intrusive sounds /w/, /j/, /r/.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> Decision to focus on individual connected speech types. Socratic™ and multiple-choice listening indicated intrusion to be most problematic area. Also, SS commented during 'Cards Matching' that they had learned the rules as part of their university studies in their own country. It occurred to us that we had never presented rules to guide student production of connected speech in this centre before. We had only previously taught interpretation from written phonemic samples.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Using the lyrics of a song from the course's Receptive Skills lesson, SS identified elision or assimilation in the words of the song. Then SS listened to check their answers. Learners then practised the connected speech features using the 'Traffic Lights' system.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> Giving the learners another opportunity to use the 'Traffic Lights' system, but this time approaching it differently from the previous practice. Also an attempt to raise learners' awareness that areas such as elision and assimilation are dependent on speaker's choice. This was also used as a review of connected speech for the class.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Adaptation of filler by J J Wilson. SS worked in pairs and were each assigned one feature to focus on e.g. elision for student A and assimilation for student B. The tutor would then utter some language samples at random. If the utterance contained elision A would try to hit B's hand for a point, if the utterance contained assimilation B would try to hit A's hand.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> An attempt to integrate short and fun burst of practice of areas which seemed more problematic such as elision, assimilation and intrusion.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> A multiple-pair interaction in which one S says words (in turn from a cue list) which end in vowel sounds, and the partner links this by saying intrusive sound plus their given word which starts with a vowel, For example, S1 says 'how' and S2 makes a pair using 'is' by saying /w/+/iz/.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> Consolidation of 'Rules of Intrusion'. This repeats 'Cards Matching' interaction but with many more speaking repetitions.</p>

	<b>Connected Speech Running Game</b>	<b>Rules of Assimilation</b>	<b>Connected Speech Blockbuster</b>	<b>Assimilation posters (set-up)</b>
<b>Week 3</b>	<p><b>Description:</b> A warmer team game where PowerPoint slides display word pairs and team runners identify and run to put tag into a box marked with correct connected speech type (points assigned).</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> Need for a warmer but also activities in Week 2 identified tricky word pairs where spelling interferes with cognition of connected speech type. e.g. 'really are' = intrusion – /j/ has to be inserted.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Presentation/ elicitation of rules of different types of assimilation on whiteboard.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> Following on from 'Rules of Intrusion' and seeing benefits of using that strategy from Socrative™ data.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Adaptation of blockbuster activity into a group competition to give extra practice of recognising connected speech processes in short utterances.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> Attempting to recycle and extend the learners' samples of language for recognising connected speech processes in utterances while giving them short and fun practice as fillers during course input.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> A self-directed homework task requiring SS to present rules of assimilation in a visually engaging poster format for display. Class prize for the best.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> From concern that no tasks to date had engaged reflective, self-study strategies.</p>



	<b>Assimilation Battleships</b>	<b>Listening and role-play</b>	<b>Connected Speech Stations</b>	<b>Quizlet™ flashcards</b>
<b>Week 4</b>	<p><b>Description:</b> Adaptation of task from a book of pronunciation games to enable use of assimilated word pairs using the language laboratory. Extended with self-recording of assimilated word pairs.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> Wanting to repeat the pair work interaction like 'Intrusion Onion Ring'. Used the language lab to prevent SS looking at each other's written cues.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Adaptation of two episodes of the BBC Learning English soap – <i>The Flatmates</i>. Practise listening for or reading intensively for connected speech processes, especially elision and assimilation, in the context of the conversations between the soap characters. This then led to rehearsal, reading aloud practice and role-play.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> From comments from learners about the multiple-choice listening not providing enough practice of recognising connected speech in longer texts.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Different practice tasks, including <i>TKT: KAL</i>-type questions were designed and used as a carousel activity in which learners moved from one station to another completing and correcting each other's answers. Tutor then wrapped-up session with whole-class feedback to confirm achievement and deal with problematic areas.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> Wanting to give the learners more practice of specific connected speech processes such as elision, assimilation, catenation and intrusion. To widen the focus to other phonology features, e.g. contractions and weak forms of a vowel.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Use of a web-based flashcard tool to create multiple examples of connected speech with connected speech type on reverse. Introduced in class but available for extra practice.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> Seeing that some SS didn't need much help but others did – this provided a self-access dimension. This was also the introduction of phonemic script to support items.</p>

## Second Language Assessment and Action Research

Week 5	Tricky word quizzes	<i>TKT</i> samples (with/ without phonemic script)	Bombing Connected Speech
	<p><b>Description:</b> Two variations of this activity were used: 1) difficult words were dictated – SS needed to spell them; 2) words were shown on the whiteboard and SS had to say them or write the phonemic script.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> Some SS had demonstrated difficulty with awareness of pronunciation of some words e.g. ‘debris’, ‘recipe’, ‘queue’, ‘law’, etc. This could affect their ability to answer connected speech questions correctly in the test.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Supplementation of exam practice work. <i>TKT</i> question items on connected speech were done separately from the rest of the practice <i>TKT: KAL</i> tests with and without phonemic transcriptions to check if there would be any difference in their responses.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> An experiment to see the effect of having phonemic script on student responses. To determine how SS were thinking about the questions.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Adapted kindergarten competition used as a warmer. Learners threw a small sticky ball with little rubber suction cups onto shapes on the board and then gave the connected speech processes they recognised in the utterances for points.</p> <p><b>Reason:</b> Wanting to give learners short and fun practice activities to accompany exam practice in the final week of the course.</p>

# 12 **It's a musical language: The effect of intervention on pronunciation assessment outcomes**

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## **Introduction**

In this chapter, we report on an action research (AR) project we conducted in an English language centre attached to an Australian university. The purpose of this project was to explore effective and innovative ways of improving the pronunciation of students in a university bridging English program. Specifically, the focus was on improving the learners' speaking assessment results. The chapter will describe how we honed the students' speaking skills through our exploration of the effects of a teaching intervention on pronunciation outcomes combining remedial pronunciation work and choral singing. Students were invited to participate in an extra-curricular program consisting of two strands: pronunciation workshops and a choir. The results of the research were overwhelmingly positive, both in terms of the students' performance in their final assessments, and in improving their oral confidence.

This chapter will provide an overview of our research project, highlighting key elements such as the use of formative assessment in determining learner needs, the purpose and design of a pronunciation intervention program, and the unconventional approach of using choral singing as an effective tool for improving pronunciation. We describe both the theoretical underpinnings and the practicalities of designing and conducting this intervention program.

## **Background to the research**

The initial idea for our project arose from some of the challenges that we as colleagues faced in our teaching context. We agreed that pronunciation teaching was an area that we both wanted to investigate. It can sometimes seem that teaching pronunciation is an uphill battle. Learners who have great

difficulty making themselves understood due to issues with their pronunciation often appear not to improve, despite explicit instruction. This lack of intelligibility can be both highly demotivating for the student, and detrimental to their results in speaking assessment tasks. As Stevick (1978:146) observes, ‘consciousness leads to tension, tension leads to poor performance, poor performance leads to added tension, and so on around a downward spiral’. When such students display ‘jagged profiles’, demonstrating reasonable levels of communicative competence in other skill areas, yet being unable to successfully communicate orally due to deficiencies in their pronunciation, some form of direct pronunciation intervention program can be an effective way of addressing their needs.

Teaching pronunciation in isolation from a wider discursive context is a concept which has gone in and out of favour over the years, and there are a number of differing views as to its efficacy (Pennington and Richards 1986). Consequently, we considered how we could take a multidimensional approach to intervention. We were motivated to pursue the idea of focusing not simply on drilling of sounds, but also on *integrated* pronunciation and fluency, through recorded individual, pair and group speaking tasks. Further to this, we theorised that choral singing, an element otherwise little explored in direct pronunciation instruction, would prove effective at connecting pronunciation focus to speech performance. Music therapy theories therefore also played a role in our research. As Schwantes (2009) points out, there is considerable evidence that the use of music in language therapy is an effective means of facilitating language production. This effectiveness is due in part to the vocal mechanism (place and manner of articulation), in part to the connection between the musical ear and an ear for language, and in part to the affective factors associated with the use and production of music. A desire to test out these theories in a reasonably controlled environment was a major part of our motivation for conducting this research.

## Research context and participants

The setting for this AR was the Institute of Continuing & TESOL Education (ICTE-UQ), an English language centre attached to the University of Queensland (UQ). The ICTE-UQ English for Specific Purposes: Bridging English Program (ESP:BEP) course is an English language pathway for entry to UQ undergraduate and postgraduate programs for eligible international students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Bridging English programs are an increasingly popular alternative pathway for entry to university degree programs. The ESP:BEP course aims to teach not only the linguistic knowledge and skills that the student requires, but also the academic culture and conventions of the institution that they are entering. Students undertake studies in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), with course

components such as Academic Writing, Grammar for Academic English, and Communication in Academic Contexts. Students must pass standardised assessment in all four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) in order to pass the ESP:BEP course and go on to their university studies.

In the ESP:BEP course, students take diagnostic tests in the first three weeks of the course for all four skills. The tests have a formative purpose in that learners receive feedback on their performance and are expected to use that knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses for targeted study. Teachers also use the test data to identify at-risk students and tailor their teaching accordingly. Students take the diagnostic speaking test in pairs, which are randomly assigned. The test consists of an interview with the examiner followed by a discussion between the students. Students are assessed in the areas of pronunciation, accuracy and range of grammar and vocabulary, fluency, and interaction. In the area of pronunciation, there is a focus on both sounds and prosodic features. Following the diagnostic test, the examiner gives oral feedback to each student on their performance and suggests areas to work on. Each test is recorded digitally so that students can download the file and listen to the test and the feedback again in their own time.

The project participants were all taking the ESP:BEP course. Students in this course come from a variety of countries, but the 30 learners who were identified in this cohort as being of particular risk in terms of their speaking performance came from Vietnam, China, Korea and Indonesia. There was a danger that they could fail their speaking assessment, and consequently the whole course, due to poor pronunciation, which affected their intelligibility and therefore their ability to communicate successfully. These students were invited by us to participate in a special Pronunciation Assistance Program (PAP). The students were drawn from different classes separately taught by a variety of teachers. However as a group in the PAP they were taught jointly by us. This program was conducted twice a week after class and consisted of two strands: intensive pronunciation workshops and a choir, the ICTE Chorus, a long-standing and much-loved extra-curricular activity at ICTE-UQ. Of the 30 students who began the program, a highly motivated core group of 24 students with varied pronunciation needs, in terms of the type and severity of the problems they were working to address, attended regularly for the entire seven weeks of our program.

## **Research focus and questions**

Following the diagnostic speaking test, we wondered how at-risk students should best be helped. By conducting our research, we hoped to analyse and reflect upon our intended innovations in teaching practice so that any future reforms to the ESP:BEP course were evidence based (Burns 2009) rather than relying solely on teachers' intuition.

In formulating our research, we initially came up with two questions:

- Following a diagnostic speaking test, how should students who have performed poorly in the area of pronunciation be helped to improve?
- What is the best form of intervention?
  - o Intensive pronunciation workshops?
  - o ICTE Chorus?
  - o Multimedia lab?
  - o Self-access?

As the research developed, we decided to define ‘performed poorly’ more explicitly, changing it to ‘scored below the pass mark’. We also revised the second research question, acknowledging that as we intended to use all of the forms of intervention listed in our pronunciation program, we would have no way of measuring accurately which form of intervention was the ‘best’, nor did we actually want to. One of the points of our program was, in fact, to integrate the interventions we used such that we were addressing pronunciation in use, rather than in isolation. Finally, we discussed what we perceived ‘good’ pronunciation to be, and added an explanation to the question. In keeping with the iterative nature of AR, it was useful for us to revisit and refine our questions before we began working with the students on our project. The refined research question that we eventually devised was:

- Following a diagnostic speaking test, how should students who have scored below the pass mark in the area of pronunciation be helped to improve and pass the final speaking test?

We considered ‘improving’ pronunciation to include:

- intelligibility according to test criteria: focus on sounds, stress and intonation
- the extent to which the student’s pronunciation causes strain to the listener and impedes communication
- mutual intelligibility for the purposes of interaction and communication.

## Research procedures

Before the ESP:BEP course began we conducted the following: background reading, project planning, program preparation, selection and adaptation of materials, making logistical arrangements, and liaising with colleagues and management. The tasks that we completed prior to the commencement of the PAP can be seen in Appendix 1.

In Week 3 of the ESP:BEP course, the diagnostic speaking tests referred to earlier were conducted, and we were able to access student results. We

identified the 'at-risk' students by noting their pronunciation grades and selecting those who had not achieved a pass. We also consulted class teachers and added any other students whose pronunciation they were concerned about to the list. Our final list featured 30 students, which we felt was a manageable number for the two of us.

For the next seven weeks, we offered the at-risk students two extra activities per week: a pronunciation workshop and chorus rehearsal, which added approximately four hours of pronunciation-focused practice every week to the 20 hours of regular classroom teaching that comprised the ESP:BEP course. The sessions were taught by us, as the two researchers, with Megan leading the pronunciation workshop, and Vicki, who has a background in both performing and teaching singing, having primary responsibility for the chorus. Our ultimate aim, in accordance with our finalised research question, was to improve the students' pronunciation in order to assist them in passing their final speaking assessment at the end of the ESP:BEP course. We hypothesised that the combination of these two approaches would lead to an improvement in the participants' pronunciation, with gains in intelligibility and interactive ability leading to more successful communication.

## **Pronunciation workshops**

The workshop syllabus (see Appendix 3) was designed for six weekly one-and-a-half-hour workshops, to be conducted in the Multimedia Labs where we could make use of the computers for recordings, listening practice and modelling. Alternatively, smartphones could be utilised by students for recording, downloading and uploading purposes. The workshops were largely needs based, with an overt focus on segmental features such as individual phonemes and consonant clusters, as well as sounds in connected speech, stress and intonation. Each workshop followed roughly the same format:

- vocal warmer using a YouTube video of the Dr Seuss children's book, *Fox in Socks* (1965)
- feedback on the previous week's recording task
- instruction session on that week's specific pronunciation focus (e.g. consonant clusters or connected speech)
- textbook exercises from various pronunciation texts (Baker and Goldstein 2008, Hewings 2007, Smith and Margolis 2007), concentrating on that week's focus features, with imitative recordings made periodically throughout these exercises
- a recording task.

We set homework in the form of a recording task each week so that the students were encouraged to think about their pronunciation and work on it

independently outside class. In accordance with our reading on the most effective ways to improve pronunciation, the focus of the weekly recording tasks was not only on the formation of sounds (speech production), but also prosodic features (speech performance). The tasks were graded in order for the students to progress from imitation to fluent production (Morley (Ed) 1994).

At the beginning of the course, recording tasks were purely *imitative speech*, allowing students to listen to natural models from native speakers and attempt to reproduce them accurately. As the course went on, the recording tasks began to include *rehearsed speech*, such as song lyrics (both spoken and sung), and talks lasting 1 to 2 minutes, ensuring that the students had ample opportunity to practise longer utterances. Finally, towards the end of the course, the students graduated to recording *extemporaneous speech* exercises, including dialogues and group conversations. They made brief notes planning their conversations prior to recording, and were then able to record themselves speaking in a more natural, impromptu fashion, with the support of the notes.

The graduation from imitative to rehearsed to extemporaneous speech was a key element of the construction of the program, providing a movement from accuracy- to fluency-based speech production. After submitting their recordings each week, the students were given individualised feedback by us, on fluency/connected speech, intonation, vowel sounds and consonant sounds. This feedback aimed to give them specific focus points for further practice, and was often tailored to suit the needs of learners from their specific language background (see Appendix 2 for an example of the feedback).

Interestingly, when given the task to record themselves speaking and singing the same set of song lyrics, the participants were able to hear for themselves how much more fluent, natural and emotive their sung expression was compared with that of their spoken English. This task, of all the recording tasks, impressed upon them the value of singing as a tool for improving their pronunciation and fluency.

## **Chorus rehearsal**

The choral singing component of PAP involved inviting the students to join the ICTE Chorus, a longstanding extra-curricular choir run at ICTE-UQ by Vicki. The choir rehearses once a week for an hour after class, and is open to all students at the institute. We agreed that it would remain open to all ICTE-UQ students as it would provide a good opportunity for the PAP students to mix with students from other courses. Vicki detailed the pronunciation features which would be focused on while learning the songs, which included breathing, vocal projection, expression, sounds, connected speech, enunciation, stress and rhythm. The choir rehearsed and performed three songs: *The Lion Sleeps Tonight*, *Hallelujah* and *Keep Holding On*. All three



were chosen in order to focus on particular pronunciation features and specific sounds, and areas of connected speech were highlighted in the sets of lyrics given to the students.

The main reason for selecting *The Lion Sleeps Tonight* was the focus on its rhythm, which is fast paced and regular. Keeping the beat is crucial in maintaining unity while singing, as different parts of the group sing different words concurrently. Impressing upon the students the importance of continuing to sing, without hesitation – to keep the beat moving regularly – was a key element of attempting to improve their fluency. *Hallelujah*'s slow, romantic rhythm lends itself to a focus on the clear enunciation of long vowel and diphthong sounds, and clean consonant endings. In terms of connected speech, there is also an opportunity to highlight the linking of final consonant sounds to beginning vowels, in lines such as: *It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah*. As with the other songs, in the lyrics given to the students, the beat was **bolded**, in order to ensure that they could follow the rhythm while singing. *Keep Holding On* was chosen predominantly for its extensive use of the features of connected speech. Elision, assimilation, intrusion and linking were all highlighted, modelled and drilled repeatedly. The song contains both slow, languorous sections in which to open up the vocal chords, and rapid-fire sections requiring crisp, clear diction, giving the students a range of practice. An added benefit of this song is the lyrical message, which is one of perseverance and eventual triumph over adversity. Students' identification with the song contributed to the positive feedback outlined below.

Rehearsals were highly physical, and full of laughter, energy and enthusiasm. The format varied each week, depending on how much practice was needed and for which songs (see Appendix 4). Typically, rehearsals began with physical stretches, breathing exercises, vocal warm-up exercises, and vocal projection and enunciation drills which focused on the physiological places of articulation (Dalton and Seidlhofer 1994). Students heard new songs through a YouTube video, before concentrating on the pronunciation and meaning of the lyrics. They gradually learned the melodies and harmonies, then rehearsed them, adding performance features such as appropriate facial expressions, emotion and variation in volume. At the end of the program, the participants performed their songs in the auditorium, for a large audience of their classmates, teachers and other ICTE-UQ students. The performance gave them a goal to work towards, and the sense of pride and achievement they felt before, during and after it was palpable. This meant that the PAP literally 'ended on a high note'.

Over the course of the project, we collected a diverse range of data, both observational and non-observational, in a variety of formats. At the first workshop and chorus rehearsal, we distributed short surveys to our students to find out what their needs and wants were relating to pronunciation and their feelings about being in a choir. In the final week of the program, we

asked our students to record paired discussions reflecting on what they had learned. As Megan was not directly involved in the chorus rehearsals, she was able to observe Vicki leading these sessions, which provided a valuable opportunity to evaluate student reactions. We also kept journals where we were able to record our responses to, feelings about and ideas for sessions after teaching them. We accumulated a collection of photographs from the workshops, chorus rehearsals and final performance, and kept a variety of audio and video files, including MP3s of all diagnostic speaking tests and examiner feedback, classwork and homework tasks, and videos of chorus rehearsals and the final performance. With their permission, we also recorded our teaching colleagues on the ESP:BEP course during a standardisation meeting for the diagnostic speaking test in order to see how teachers used the assessment criteria to evaluate a student's oral performance. Finally, we kept a record of students' test scores.

### Outcomes of the research

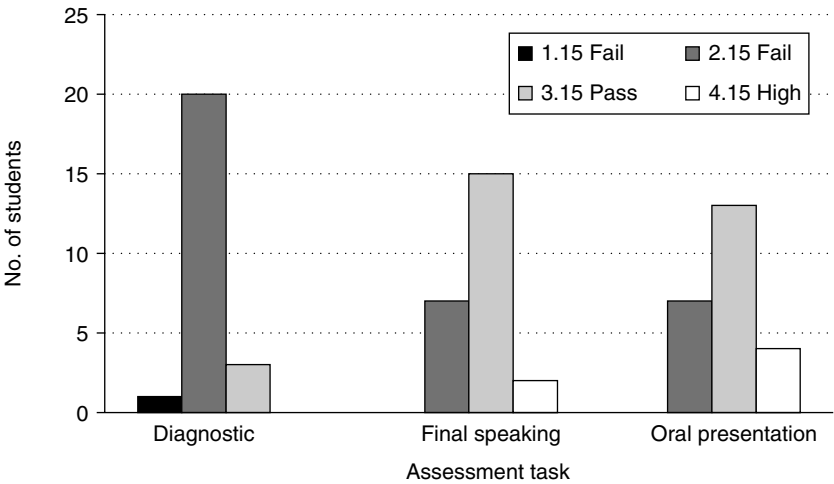
From our analysis of the data, we believe that the impact of our program was very positive. A comparison of the outcomes from the initial diagnostic assessment and the final speaking test bears out this conclusion. We took care to ensure that the assessment process was as rigorous and unbiased as possible. As the researchers, we were not involved in the final speaking assessment of the PAP students, and these students were not identified to the assessors. The key indicators for pronunciation in the final speaking assessment were:

- sounds/phonemes
- sentence stress/rhythm
- intonation
- first language influence, accuracy and appropriacy of pronunciation, density of error/ease of understanding for the listener
- language chunking to aid listener comprehension.

Of the 24 students who were regular PAP attendees, as Figure 1 shows, the majority achieved a higher pronunciation score in both the final speaking test and the individual oral presentation, in which pronunciation is also assessed. It is worth noting that scores of 3.15 and higher are a passing grade. Of particular interest to us were the students who received *high achievement* scores in pronunciation after the seven weeks of intensive work on this skill. As their teachers, we felt that we had achieved our goal of not only helping students to avoid failure in the speaking assessment, but also to enable some of them to excel.

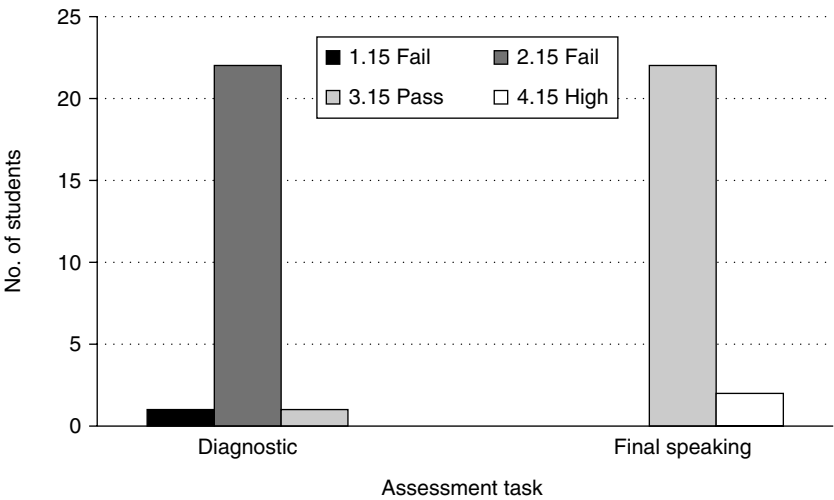
Interestingly, however, not all PAP attendees passed the pronunciation assessment criterion, as assessed by the trained assessors. Some of these students, despite their best efforts, still found themselves with intelligibility problems strong enough to impede communication at times.

**Figure 1** PAP students' pronunciation scores



From examination of the PAP students' *overall* speaking assessment results, a pattern emerged which was very positive, and tallied with the feedback that we had received from the participants themselves. Figure 2 shows that even though some PAP students had not attained a passing grade in the pronunciation criterion, they all passed their speaking assessment.

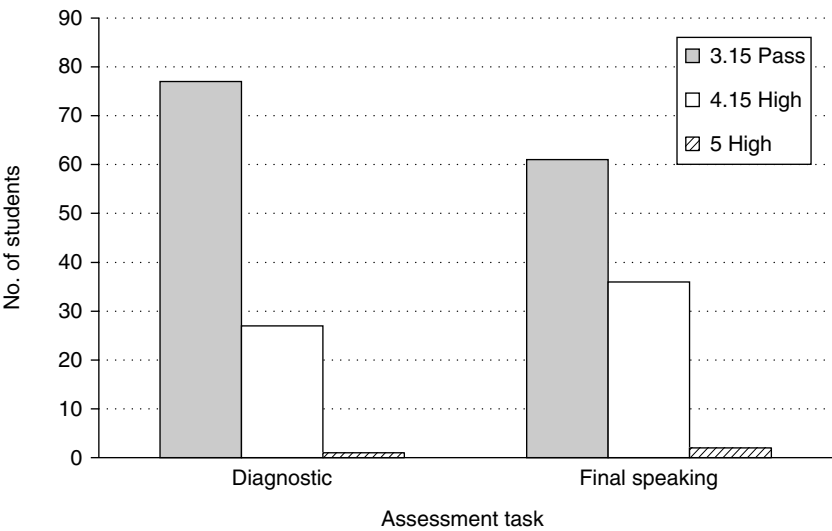
**Figure 2** PAP students' overall speaking scores



Closer inspection of the assessment results showed that a large percentage of the PAP students had greatly improved both their fluency and interaction scores in their speaking assessment, bringing their overall results over the pass mark. Many students anecdotally attributed this result to a greater feeling of confidence and fluidity in their speech performance.

Although some improvement can be attributed to skills development which occurred while PAP students were doing the ESP:BEP course, the score gains were striking, especially when compared with non-PAP students. Of the approximately 100 students in the ESP:BEP program, just under 30% participated in the PAP, while the remaining two thirds received no direct extra pronunciation assistance. Figure 3 shows the scores achieved in both the diagnostic and the final speaking assessment by those students who had not participated in the PAP. These students had received a passing grade in the diagnostic speaking assessment, and were therefore deliberately not targeted for pronunciation intervention.

**Figure 3 Non-PAP students’ overall speaking scores**



These results also demonstrated improvement, as was to be expected from a 10-week intensive English language course. The significant point from our perspective, however, was that this improvement was not as dramatic as that displayed by the PAP students. These gains appeared to indicate that the intervention had made a positive difference. This view was confirmed by the very positive feedback that we received from the PAP participants, which showed that they felt that the program had provided them with greater knowledge about English pronunciation, confidence in their speaking, and

a very real feeling of having improved. Notably, awareness-raising featured prominently in their feedback, as these comments show:

I have a chance to identify what is my weakness, and what is my strength. It also gives us a chance to improve self-confidence . . . I feel more self-confident than before I attend this class. (Student A)

I think English is quite like the rhythm of a song, like, they have a different kind of intonation, up and down – it's like a song . . . It's a musical language. (Student B)

Something which surprised and delighted us was that the participants also found the chorus a great source of fun and camaraderie in what was a stressful, high-stakes course.

At first after finishing class, at 3:45 I have to join another class, it made me so tired. But after that, I recognised I'm wrong, I'm totally wrong. I can make friends, I can practise, I can sing. It's the most important for me. Because my voice, terrible. I cannot sing well. But [in] this class I feel more confident because I can sing in a group of people and no-one can recognise my voice. (Student C)

I think the chorus is very exciting, because you know . . . we often have a difficult day, we get more stressed after studying hard, and when we come to the chorus, we feel relaxed – the chorus helps us to reduce stress. (Student D)

It is our belief that this growth in confidence, as well as the dual sense of improvement and achievement, contributed positively to the students' results.

## Discussion

Teachers may only have the opportunity to deal with pronunciation issues as part of an integrated program, as most English as a Second Language (ESL) courses lack a dedicated class for teaching pronunciation. Our course, for example, had a speaking component, but this focused on many different aspects of speaking, including presentation skills, thus allowing little actual time for pronunciation work. Therefore, a consideration for language teachers is which aspect of pronunciation should be focused on in the limited time that is available, in order to achieve the best results. Traditionally, ESL pronunciation textbooks focus on segmentals, such as minimal pairs. However, intelligibility is enhanced if suprasegmentals are also covered. As Brazil (1994) observes, the relationship between segmentals and suprasegmentals

seems to be symbiotic, with the work that learners do on one aspect helping their performance in the other. Jenkins' (2007) English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) framework reflects this stance by recommending a focus on consonants and consonant clusters, vowel length, and sentence stress in order to maximise intelligibility.

Our own backgrounds in drama and singing prompted us also to consider vocal quality and expression, including breath control, resonance, how the voice is projected, emotion and intonation. Further, when devising pronunciation assistance classes, our experience showed that it was helpful to plan a progressive series of imitative, rehearsed and extemporaneous speaking tasks, requiring students to be aware of and demonstrate pronunciation in use, in order to incorporate accuracy and fluency of output. The importance of recording and feedback in such a course cannot be overstated, as they give students the opportunity to both monitor their own progress and raise their awareness of areas in which they still need to practise. Our research indicates that a well-designed pronunciation intervention program is effective in improving students' communicative abilities by not only assisting them in pronouncing English more clearly, but also by increasing their confidence and sense of purpose. The use of music in the classroom is often relegated to the receptive skills basket, to assist students with their listening skills. However, when used productively it can be a key tool in achieving clarity of pronunciation and confidence in speech.

High-stakes pathways courses like the ESP:BEP course, in which passing or failing determines students' entry to university degree programs, are stressful for both teachers and students. As teachers, we developed close bonds with our students, and we wanted to help them to succeed, knowing that success would open the door to university studies. The inclusion of choral singing in the pronunciation program served to defuse some of the stress that students were experiencing. The feedback from the participants was overwhelmingly positive both with regard to the affective factors in their learning, and the perceived and measurable improvement in their pronunciation.

An unforeseen outcome of our research, but a further sign of the success of the PAP, can be found in its acceptance by the school's management team. We were asked to help facilitate the incorporation of PAP into the main ESP:BEP syllabus for future courses, which will open up the program to even more students. With regard to the ICTE Chorus, the AR project which was conducted had a dramatic effect on its popularity, success, professionalism and scope for both language improvement and community building. The support from ICTE-UQ and the wider university played a very important role and, without the research we undertook, it is unlikely that the benefits of the choir would have come to the attention of the institution as rapidly as they did.

In the years following our AR project, the choir has swollen in numbers. One of the reasons is the effect of having real data with which to demonstrate

to students the positive effects that choral singing can have on their language and their assessment results. The choir now performs for the general public at formal functions, community music festivals, on the public stage in the city, and for major UQ international occasions, motivating the students to participate, rehearse and achieve a high performance standard. Even more importantly, the choir has also become something of a family-away-from-family for its members, organising social events, weekend rehearsals, charity fundraisers and musical jam sessions. Further research into the benefits of group singing revealed that it is this social, emotional and community development which is just as crucial as linguistic development when it comes to students' ability to fully improve their communicative competence.

Upon reflection, an extremely important part of our participation in this research project was the way in which we as teacher-researchers developed our professional identities. This reflective, collaborative and empowering journey imbued us as teacher-researchers with a great sense of accomplishment, and altered the ways in which we now perceive our roles and practices both in and out of the classroom. The project has led to the creation of materials and courses based on our findings, has given us data and evidence upon which to draw when recommending learning strategies for students with pronunciation difficulties, has prompted a more research-oriented atmosphere within our institution, and has provided an impetus for us as professionals to conduct further innovation-based research in the English language teaching field. The material rewards of conducting research, however, have been only half the story. Conducting AR is a transformative experience. Investigating systematically, working closely with colleagues, reflecting on practice, coping with setbacks, achieving results, and ultimately finding yourself as a teacher-researcher attempting things you had never attempted before are all key elements of the evolution of teacher identity through this process.

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined an AR project conducted with students in an academic pathway program in a university English language centre. Through diagnostic testing, a group of students were identified who would benefit from a direct pronunciation intervention program, consisting of remedial workshops and choral singing. We have described the syllabus, materials and resources used in the remedial workshops and examined the effect of choral singing on spoken discourse in an assessment context. Our research shows that teacher intervention of the kind we have described contributes to improved results for students at risk of failing speaking assessment due to pronunciation difficulties. In terms of our own professional development, the process of AR has been both rewarding and a useful tool for contributing further to innovative teaching practice.

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# Appendix 1

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## Tasks carried out prior to commencement of the Pronunciation Assistance Program

1. **Workshop syllabus design for seven pronunciation workshops**  
Selection/production of materials.  
Organisation (e.g. room booking, predicting number of classes/class size).
2. **ICTE Chorus**  
Choice of songs.  
Organisation (e.g. advertising, room booking, enlisting colleagues' help in promotion).  
Choral rehearsal schedule and structure.
3. **Selection of participants**  
Check course enrolments.  
Check results and notify students – draft a letter of invitation.  
Design 'learner contract' – students to sign this, and ethics document.
4. **Consultation with management team**  
Discuss timing of diagnostic speaking test.  
Standardisation – request time to be allocated to inform teachers about the project.  
Logistics – timetabling, room booking.
5. **Consultation with teachers**  
Discuss collection of informal feedback on students' performance in diagnostic speaking assessment.  
Student performance in class – informal early feedback on students 'at risk' due to pronunciation.

## Appendix 2

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### Example of individualised teacher feedback

#### PAP WORKSHOP PAIRWORK TASK FEEDBACK

Names: .....

##### **Dialogue general comments**

Relax! ☺ Try to speak a little more naturally. You're both speaking very fast, and it sounds flat.

##### **Student 1:**

##### **Fluency/Connected speech**

Be careful not to speak too fast – you lose syllables when you do this (e.g. o'clock, activity).

##### **Intonation**

Flat and unnatural. More variety needed – don't forget emotion and sentence stress.

##### **Vowel sounds**

/aɪ/ – fine; /e/ – essay

##### **Consonant sounds**

Consonant clusters – plan, submit, o'clock

/l/ – will

/v/ – inviting

##### **Student 2:**

##### **Fluency/Connected speech**

Focus on connecting ending consonants with beginning vowels.

##### **Intonation**

Some effort at intonation – still a little flat.

##### **Vowel sounds**

/eɪ/ – train, station; /ʌ/ – other

##### **Consonant sounds**

Ends of words – coast, good

/ʊ/ – something, withi; /ð/ – other, there

## Appendix 3

### Workshop weekly schedule

Week	Pronunciation focus	Materials
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Needs analysis and awareness-raising</li> <li>The phonemic chart</li> </ul> <p><b>Recording task:</b> Diagnostic test (shopping list)</p>	Booklets containing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Original ICTE-UQ materials</li> <li><i>English for Academic Study</i> (Smith and Margolis 2007)</li> <li><i>Pronunciation Pairs</i> (Baker and Goldstein 2008)</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocal warmer</li> <li>Feedback on pronunciation</li> <li>Consonant sounds 1</li> <li>Consonant endings</li> </ul> <p><b>Recording task:</b> Short talk (1 minute) on one of three topics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Fox in Socks</i> (YouTube and/or book)</li> <li>Feedback sheets on last week's recording task</li> </ul> <p>Booklets containing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Original ICTE-UQ materials</li> <li><i>English for Academic Study</i> (Smith and Margolis 2007)</li> <li><i>English Pronunciation in Use: Advanced</i> (Hewings 2007)</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocal warmer</li> <li>Feedback on pronunciation</li> <li>Vowel sounds</li> <li>Word stress and weak forms</li> </ul> <p><b>Recording task</b> Sung versus spoken song lyrics (Self-analysis)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Fox in Socks</i> (YouTube and/or book)</li> <li>Feedback sheets on last week's recording task</li> <li>Self-analysis forms</li> </ul> <p>Booklets containing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Original ICTE-UQ materials</li> <li>Song lyrics</li> <li><i>Pronunciation Pairs</i> (Baker and Goldstein 2008)</li> <li><i>English for Academic Study</i> (Smith and Margolis 2007)</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocal warmer</li> <li>Feedback on pronunciation</li> <li>Consonant sounds 2</li> <li>Long and short vowel sounds</li> <li>Intonation and prominence</li> </ul> <p><b>Recording task</b> Pairwork – making plans for the weekend</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Fox in Socks</i> (YouTube and/or book)</li> <li>Feedback sheets on last week's recording task</li> </ul> <p>Booklets containing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Original ICTE-UQ materials</li> <li>Minimal Pairs Mayhem (ICTE-UQ)</li> <li><i>English for Academic Study</i> (Smith and Margolis 2007)</li> <li>English speech practice</li> </ul>

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5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vocal warmer</li> <li>• Feedback on pronunciation</li> <li>• Consonant clusters</li> <li>• Intonation</li> <li>• Intonation in conversations</li> </ul> <p><b>Recording task</b> Group discussion (2 to 3 minutes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Fox in Socks</i> (YouTube and/or book)</li> <li>• Feedback sheets on last week's recording task</li> </ul> <p>Booklets containing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Original ICTE-UQ materials</li> <li>• <i>English for Academic Study</i> (Smith and Margolis 2007)</li> <li>• <i>English Pronunciation in Use: Advanced</i> (Hewings 2007)</li> </ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vocal warmer</li> <li>• Feedback on pronunciation</li> <li>• Speaking test practice</li> <li>• Course summary and review</li> </ul> <p><b>Recording task</b> Pair/group discussion about the PAP (Peer assessed)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Fox in Socks</i> (YouTube and/or book)</li> <li>• Feedback sheets on last week's recording task</li> <li>• Speaking test pronunciation criteria</li> <li>• Peer assessment forms</li> </ul>

## Appendix 4

### Chorus rehearsal schedule

Week	Song	Music and lyrics focus	Pronunciation and voice focus
2	<i>The Lion Sleeps Tonight</i>	Whole song melody and harmony	<u>Voice focus</u> Inhaling and exhaling + Vocal warm-up Breathing in the song (where to take breaths) Jumps in vocal range <u>Pronunciation focus</u> Difficult phonemes Balancing enunciation and connected speech at a fast pace
3	<i>The Lion Sleeps Tonight</i>	Whole song melody and harmony	<u>Voice focus</u> Powering high notes <u>Pronunciation focus</u> Word endings and consonant clusters Connected speech
4	<i>Keep Holding On</i>	Verses 1 and 2 melody Chorus and bridge Melody and harmony	<u>Voice focus</u> Inhaling and exhaling; filling and emptying lungs Location of diaphragm; using air from diaphragm to power voice Vocal warm-up; explore vocal range <u>Pronunciation focus</u> Word endings and consonant clusters
5	<i>Keep Holding On</i>	Whole song melody and harmony	<u>Voice focus</u> Inhaling and exhaling + Vocal warm-up Breathing in the song (where to take breaths) Powering high notes using diaphragm <u>Pronunciation focus</u> Word endings and consonant clusters Difficult phonemes – pair/groupwork Elements of connected speech
6	<i>Keep Holding On</i>	Whole song revision	<u>Voice focus</u> Inhaling and exhaling Vocal warm-up Volume, expression and intonation <u>Pronunciation focus</u> Fluency through connected speech
	<i>Hallelujah</i>	Verse 1 and chorus melody	<u>Voice focus</u> Breathing in the song <u>Pronunciation focus</u> Rhythm and stress Vowel phonemes

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7	<i>Hallelujah</i>	Verses 2 and 3 melody and harmony	<u>Voice focus</u> Inhaling and exhaling + Vocal warm-up Powering high notes using diaphragm Expression and intonation <u>Pronunciation focus</u> Rhythm and stress Word endings and consonant clusters; Vowels
8	<i>Hallelujah</i>	Whole song revision	<u>Voice focus</u> Inhaling and exhaling + Vocal warm-up Volume, expression and intonation <u>Pronunciation focus</u> Balancing enunciation and connected speech
	<i>The Lion Sleeps Tonight</i>	Whole song revision	<u>Voice focus</u> Powering high notes <u>Pronunciation focus</u> Word endings and consonant clusters Connected speech
9	Three songs	Revision  Reflection and data collection	<u>Voice focus</u> Inhaling and exhaling + Vocal warm-up Singing from the diaphragm <u>Pronunciation focus</u> Balancing enunciation and connected speech at a fast pace
10	Performance		

# 13 Preparing students for an academic presentation assessment

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## Introduction

For many students in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses, managing an oral presentation is a fundamental component for success in future university courses. An important part of their preparation involves the teacher in guiding students towards improving their skills and assessing the presentations they make. The action research (AR) project I discuss in this chapter was conducted with a colleague (see Mason and Nazim 2014) and driven by the desire to find out how we, as teachers, could best equip our intermediate/upper intermediate students for an academic spoken presentation within a limited time frame allowed in the course. We wanted to examine how best to incorporate effective strategies for teaching speaking, while ensuring that students were also able to achieve the outcomes of their assessment task. Within the context of a growing language institute which, like those in other English-medium countries, receives international students from a range of language backgrounds, our research aimed to uncover how we could design a course which would assist students to prepare for an academic oral presentation assessment.

## Research context and participants

This research was undertaken in 2013 at the Institute of Languages based at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, with 57 mixed nationality EAP students. The EAP program has regular intakes of students who are at B1 or borderline B2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001), which means that students are not quite at the English proficiency standard for courses that provide direct entry to university. They are therefore placed in an intermediate course for between five and 10 weeks, to raise their proficiency in all skill areas to a B2 level.

Seventy percent of the students in our study had conditional university offers for the following semester intake. Twenty percent of the students were in a Foundation Year program, which meant that they had between 12 to 18 months of academic study before starting their degrees. The students were placed in class according to an International English Language Testing System (*IELTS*) score, or an internal diagnostic placement test.

The focus of the EAP course in our research was on writing and reading skills, to which 75% of the time was allocated, with speaking skills comprising only 10%. The EAP program was organised into modules of five weeks, and during the fifth week students were assessed on writing, reading, listening and presentation skills. In terms of assessment weightings (see Appendix 1) the academic spoken task comprised 20% of the final grade, the second highest component after writing and grammar. However, a class focusing explicitly on developing presentation skills was only a 2-hour session per week. Hence, students had a limited amount of classroom input before they were assessed on an academic presentation.

## Research focus and questions

The aim of our research was to explore how to prepare our students for their academic spoken presentation assessment (Appendix 2) given the main limitation being restricted time allocation. Having taught this course for several years, we knew what worked and what needed further improvement. Prior to redesigning our very compact presentation skills sessions, we collected data through online surveys (Appendix 3) and focus groups (Appendix 4) from both past and present students and teachers.

The preliminary outcomes concurred with our views that the existing course material did not comprehensively address the students' needs. These findings led us to identify three areas that would need to be addressed in the new course material we were to design.

### 1. Lack of formative feedback

Most of the feedback students received was from their peers in structured pair and group work activities. While this in itself was not necessarily detrimental, there was little in the course materials that allowed teachers to provide formative feedback. Teacher feedback was therefore minimal and inconsistent. The only apparent form of teacher feedback was summative, provided at the end of the assessed oral presentation in the form of a score with comments.



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

Speaking practice was limited to general interest topics, allowing for good discussions. However, the students were failing to gain adequate practice in preparation for the assessment task.

## **3. Lack of teaching consistency**

The use of the prescribed materials varied considerably from one class to another. Although the assessment task remained the same, teachers were either adapting the material or not using it at all. Students were dissatisfied with the discrepancies between activities they undertook.

In the light of these issues, we decided to rewrite the 5-week presentation skills module. The research question that guided this process was: How can we assist students to prepare for the assessment of an academic presentation within a restricted timeframe?

## **Research procedures**

The research process we followed can be broken down into four stages, with Stages 3 and 4 being repeated with different groups.

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

### **Stage 1: Conducting focus groups and surveys with current and former teachers and students prior to redesigning course material**

Data was collected through an online survey (Appendix 3) and focus groups (Appendix 4) to gather the views of both past and present students about the current speaking presentation course before any changes to the materials were made. We also administered the same survey to past and present teachers. The survey consisted of 10 questions including both Likert scale and open-ended questions. Thirty-six current and eight past students along with five past and three current teachers responded to the surveys. Three focus group sessions were conducted, one each for current and past students and one for both past and current teachers.

## Stage 2: Rewriting the course material

Based on the feedback provided by the surveys and focus groups, and influenced by the teaching-speaking cycle (Appendix 5) advocated by Goh and Burns (2012:151–168), and a genre-based cycle (Appendix 6) of language teaching and learning (Butt, Fahey, Feez, Spinks and Yallop 2000:263–265), we organised our course material into a teaching cycle which consisted of six stages.

The main benefit of combining both the above approaches was the focus on the end product ('Focus learners' attention on task') allowing context exploration which provided our students with a model presentation also exploring the genres required, which were explanation (cause/effect and problem/solution) and argument. This was then followed by examining the assessment criteria (Appendix 7). Using both Goh and Burns' (2012) and Butt et al's (2000) methodological approaches allowed us to offer explicit instruction ('Provide input and guide planning') focusing on modelling and deconstructing the text which would then be followed by a focus on language strategies ('Guided practice and joint reconstruction') while giving students opportunities to practise speaking ('Conduct speaking task') and engage in feedback or reflective practices ('Facilitate written feedback on learning'). The final stage would then encourage learners to reflect on their learning.

The first hour of Lessons 1 to 3 included students presenting for a maximum of 2 minutes and receiving immediate feedback. In Week 1, they selected any non-academic topic of their choice (e.g. a holiday, favourite movie), while in Weeks 2 and 3 they presented an extract from an academic topic on which they would be assessed. The second hour of each week consisted of theoretical input followed by practice. The formative assessment task set for each week determined what kind of instruction and practice would help students prepare for their 2-minute presentations. For example, Week 1 explored the structure and content of an introduction. The students were then expected to prepare their introduction and present it in class the following week (see Appendix 8 for details on how each stage was implemented over the 6 hours of classroom input).

Another essential element of the course design was the need to incorporate regular and, most importantly, immediate oral and written feedback into each lesson using the same assessment criteria. While many factors influence performance, feedback is an integral component for the progression of learning (Hattie and Timperley 2007). As Wiggins (1997) states, the quality of feedback is determined by whether it is timely, specific and understandable, and allows the student to act upon it. This highlights the importance of providing ongoing feedback which will function to 'feed forward' into future learning in order to improve a student's future performance (Carless 2006). For the feedback itself to be beneficial to learners, three main questions need to be addressed: Where am I going? How am I going? Where to next? (Hattie

and Timperley 2007, Sadler 2010). We aimed to design these three questions into our course, so that students would gain a clear concept of their goal, have an understanding of their level of performance and recognise what actions were required to achieve the intended goal through the provided feedback.

### **Stage 3: Trialling new course material**

Following its development, the material was trialled over a period of 10 weeks by four teachers (including both researchers) on different classes. During each class, we observed the following:

- student engagement in the activities
- student interaction with each other
- feasibility of the material for a 2-hour lesson.

### **Stage 4: Evaluating the new course**

At the end of each class, all four teachers met and reflected on what worked and what modifications could be made for future cohorts, making notes of our conclusions. Once students had completed the final assessment task in Week 4 and before they received a grade and summative feedback on their performance, the same online survey and focus group (Appendices 3 and 4) were conducted in order to find out how students viewed the new course.

## **Outcomes of the research**

By analysing the student surveys, focus group interviews with students and teachers, and our classroom observations, we noted the following outcomes:

### **Student surveys and focus groups**

The students' responses, both qualitative and quantitative, were positive and provided us with insights into how students had responded to the new course and what progress they felt they had made (see Table 1). When asked whether the three weeks (6 hours) had been used efficiently to prepare them for their final presentation, 44% of the students strongly agreed, 54% agreed and 2% disagreed. It was also encouraging to see that students felt their presentation skills had improved over this short but intensive period of time.

Students were also asked to elaborate on why they thought their presentation skills had or had not improved. Regarding feedback, students generally perceived that receiving regular formative feedback was integral to their progress. Several students commented on the benefits of immediate feedback as they were able to observe the changes in their weekly performance. With the additional opportunity to practise speaking each week, a majority

Table 1: Online survey question data

Question 1: The three weeks were used well to help me prepare for my final presentation		
Response options	Response %	Students (n=57)
Strongly agree	44%	25
Agree	54%	31
Disagree	2%	1
Strongly disagree	0%	0

of the students felt that their confidence had improved, with many students indicating that they were no longer as nervous when presenting in English in front of a class, or a group of people. Students also stated that they had a good understanding of the assessment task requirements, which was mainly due to the fact that each lesson focused on a particular stage of their presentation and the criteria were made explicit. They found the language and presentation skills input to be valuable as it assisted them in understanding what was required in their final assessment. Many students commented that they had enjoyed this component of the EAP module and felt they had successfully applied strategies learned in class. For further comments see Appendix 9.

## Classroom observations

The following comments are based on on-task behaviour during each session.

### Student engagement with tasks and task feedback

Students seemed engaged during classroom tasks, and often approached us at the end of the lesson to comment on their satisfaction. They also became more familiar and comfortable with receiving feedback verbally in front of their peers. Although several students commented that they were initially nervous about receiving oral feedback in front of their peers, as they had never experienced it before, later they acknowledged the benefits of noting that they were able to learn from their own feedback and by observing others'. Teachers also encouraged students to provide feedback to their peers. While it was difficult at first, it became evident that students began to appreciate peer feedback as much as teacher feedback, recognising that this was contributing to their learning process.

## **Student engagement with self-assessment**

Although teacher and peer feedback were appreciated, self-assessment seemed more problematic. Approximately 60% of the students failed to complete the self-assessment checklists administered at the end of each class for homework. It seemed that our students were either unwilling to self-reflect or did not see the purpose of self-regulating their own performance. It may have been that the students did not perceive self-assessment as connected to success in their summative assessment scores and therefore that it was unnecessary to engage in self-reflection. The reflections that were completed tended to show students' negativity towards their own performance. However, 98% responded positively when asked if they felt that their performance had improved.

## **Student interaction with each other**

Once the students had an understanding of what was expected for the summative assessment task and that each week helped them prepare for it, there was a greater sense of collaboration. We noticed that interaction with each other when providing peer feedback improved and we also observed an appreciation of other students' input in working towards the same goal. We found however, that the level of motivation among the student group tended to relate quite strongly to the students' academic pathways. Students who had a direct offer of university entry for the next semester seemed more engaged, while Foundation Year students or those who had missed the next university intake did not show the same level of engagement or motivation.

## **Feasibility of the material for a 2-hour lesson**

There were several factors which determined whether or not the material could be feasibly covered in a 2-hour lesson:

- Student numbers: if there were fewer than 18 students, the teacher spent more time on feedback, or allowed the students to complete the self-assessment checklist in class rather than for homework.
- Language proficiency: although students had achieved an *IELTS* score of 5.5, as in every classroom the level of proficiency in each skill varied, and time limitations restricted the amount of practice that could be made available to improve oral proficiency. The two teachers trialling the material also commented that they would have liked more time to present key information, such as the concept of a presentation genre, which students sometimes found challenging.
- Absent students: as each lesson dealt with a distinct stage of the final assessment task, students who were absent missed out on vital material.

However, since the lessons were structured according to the information provided the previous week, our observations showed that if a student was absent they often received input indirectly by observing their peers present the following week.

Overall, the students' reactions during class suggested that the material and activities were valuable and could also be used flexibly for study outside class. Our data analysis seemed to confirm that the approach we had taken to preparing students for an assessed oral presentation in limited time had been effective in:

- focusing students' attention on the assessment task and providing explicit input
- providing formative feedback on learning that functioned as 'feed forward'
- increasing student speaking practice and keeping it focused on the task at hand.

## Discussion and further developments

It was encouraging to see the positive feedback we had received, and we felt that the course materials overall were a success. Finding a balance of instruction that combined theoretical input and practice, allowing our students to practise towards their assessment goal, and providing them with sufficient feedback within the time constraints was challenging, but seemed to improve our students' skills as presenters.

Despite the relative success of the course, there were certain limitations. The assigned time for the course – 6 hours over a 3-week period – could not be changed, which meant that content had to be prioritised in relation only to completing the assessed presentation. This meant there was no room for general discussion skills. The students' level of proficiency was intermediate (*IELTS* 5.5) and there was little time to provide instruction for more general language improvement.

Furthermore, although research (e.g. Murtagh and Baker 2009) suggests that the kind of 'feed-forward' approach few took should assist students in developing autonomy, and self-regulating their learning, there was limited evidence that this occurred in our project. While these areas were not the primary focus of our study, it would be interesting to explore further why students were reluctant to self-assess, and how they could be assisted to develop greater autonomy in monitoring their own progress.

Despite these limitations, our research has influenced our teaching organisation and we have had the opportunity to work further with colleagues to build on our project. Firstly, the course we designed and the activities and materials have become a formal part of the EAP program at our institute.

For two years since the completion of our AR, the course has been successfully offered, with various staff members having an opportunity to teach and provide feedback. Staff members have noted that a benefit of the course is that students can present and receive feedback immediately. By presenting for short periods each week, students have become more confident and have been able to demonstrate their understanding of what is required from an academic oral presentation. In addition, our colleagues agree that observing their peers present and receive feedback provides opportunities for further learning, not only for the presenter but also for the observers. Students have been demonstrating awareness on how to provide more specific and valid feedback to their peers, using the assessment criteria. Both students and teachers agree that the role of immediate formative feedback in skill development is fundamental to improving student learning. Hence it appears that what we set out to achieve – feeding back in order to feed forward – is being accomplished.

In order to address the time constraints of the course, over the last two years we have continued to review the material and make changes to reduce the pressure on teachers and students. Our observations and the suggestions of our colleagues have led to:

- reducing the number of genres, explicitly analysing each genre
- reducing Week 1 student practice time in class
- introducing more technology
- providing take-home reading about the oral presentation.

In our initial project students had the option of three presentation formats: problem/solution, cause/effect or an argument. We decided that if we reduced these options to two, not only would we be able to explore each genre more effectively but our students would gain deeper understanding. Another change, which was the most difficult to decide, was to reduce the time for students to present. Removing the short presentation on a topic of their choice in the first week gave us more time to explore each genre in detail, to explain key components, like the body and conclusion of the presentation, and also to explain the assessment task. The 2-minute practice presentations, however, remained as part of the lessons in the second and third weeks.

Another change was to use more technology and to record student presentations. We now ask students to record themselves on their smartphones while presenting in class. Some students also choose to record the feedback they are given immediately afterwards. Students have commented on the usefulness of being able to listen to themselves presenting and reflecting on the feedback. We are also in the process of using our learning management system to provide students with a platform for discussions, such as their choice of topic and genre for the presentation, with their peers. The feedback they provide to each other is likely to reduce the email traffic teachers receive from students when they are coming to a decision about their topic.

## Concluding remarks

As teachers we are aware that professional development is important for maintaining good understanding of current teaching trends and methods and improving our knowledge and confidence when teaching. However, many professional development sessions are rather general and may not meet our real practical needs as teachers. Having completed this project, we are now motivated by the desire to explore what we ourselves need to know, want to know, or think we should know. Professional development has transformed itself into something more personally attainable through our own classroom explorations. Our AR was not professional development we completed for the sake of it, but rather an investigation which was and continues to be a work in progress.

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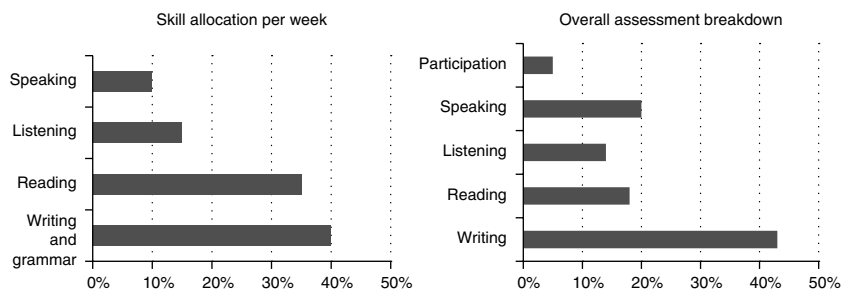
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## Appendix 1

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### Skill and assessment allocation



## Appendix 2

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### The assessment task

**Type of presentation:** Explanation or argument

**Length:** 15 minutes (10-minute presentation and 5-minute discussion)

**Presentation date:** Week 4 (class teacher will determine schedule)

**Objective:** To gain practice in oral presentation skills and leading an inclusive group discussion

#### Task overview

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

# Appendix 3

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## Online survey questions

4-point Likert scale: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree

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

# Appendix 4

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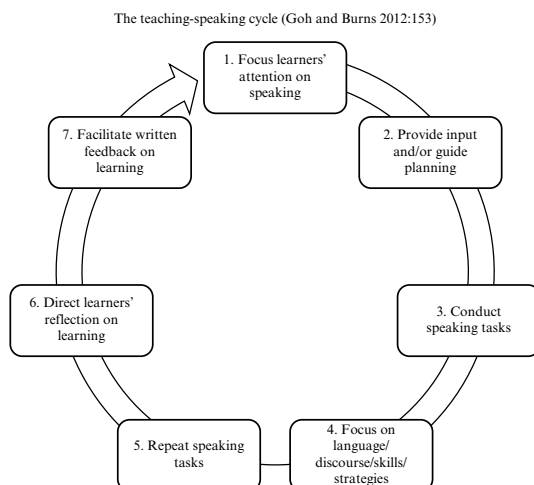
## Focus group discussion points

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

## Appendix 5

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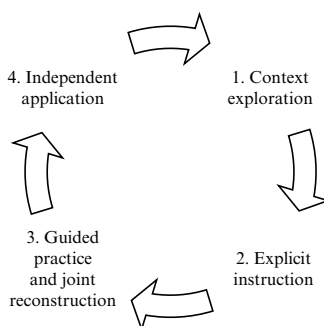
### The teaching-speaking cycle (Goh and Burns 2012:153)



## Appendix 6

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### Language teaching and learning cycle (Butt et al 2000:263–265)



# Appendix 7

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## Assessment criteria

Feature assessed
<b>Clear topic and content</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Facts/evidence/research used to support content</li><li>• Information organised and in logical order</li><li>• Clear link between this section and other parts of presentation</li><li>• Visuals were clear</li><li>• Visuals were relevant</li><li>• Visuals were used appropriately in presentation</li><li>• Presentation fulfilled the explanation or argument genre</li></ul>
<b>Timing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The presentation wasn't too long or short</li></ul>
<b>Voice and pronunciation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Speaker used appropriate volume</li><li>• Speaker varied tone of voice</li><li>• Pronunciation of key words clear</li><li>• Speaker was easily understood</li></ul>
<b>Language</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Speaker used language appropriate to academic presentation</li><li>• Speaker explained difficult vocabulary</li><li>• Speaker successfully used grammatical structures appropriate to level</li></ul>
<b>Body language</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Speaker appeared confident</li><li>• Eye contact made with whole of audience</li><li>• Appropriate body language used</li></ul>
<b>Discussion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Speaker addressed questions well</li><li>• Question provided for group discussion was appropriate</li><li>• Good discussion was generated</li></ul>

## Appendix 8

### Outline of activities we designed for each 2-hour lesson based on Goh and Burns' (2012) teaching-speaking cycle stage and Butt et al's (2000) teaching-learning cycle stage

Lesson 1: Assessment task and introduction section (2 hours)		
Goh and Burns' (2012) teaching-speaking cycle stage	Butt et al's (2000) teaching-learning cycle stage	Activities
1. Focus learners' attention on the task	1. Context exploration	(a) In pairs, students discuss their experiences of doing an oral presentation in English. (b) Students present a short talk on a general interest topic that they have prepared for homework. (c) Students are provided with feedback from the teacher and peer feedback is encouraged. (d) Students are introduced to the assessment task and the assessment criteria
2. Provide input and/or guide planning	2. Explicit instruction 3. Guided practice and joint reconstruction	(a) Students are shown a video of a sample presentation for analysis. (b) Students view the introduction section of the presentation and deconstruct it in pairs, focusing on language and expressions. Students are asked to prepare a 2-minute introduction to present in the next class.

Lesson 2: Main body section and signposting expressions (2 hours)		
Goh and Burns' (2012) teaching-speaking cycle stage	Butt et al's (2000) teaching-learning cycle stage	Activities
5. Conduct speaking task	4. Independent application	Students individually present an introduction (2 minutes).
6. Facilitate feedback on learning		Students are given immediate verbal and written feedback from the teacher on the introduction section genre/content, body language and timing using the assessment criteria.

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7. Focus on language skills/ strategies	1. Context exploration 2. Explicit instruction 3. Guided practice and joint reconstruction	(a) Teacher examines the three stages of a presentation and the structure required. (b) Signposting expressions are introduced and practised through different tasks.
8. Direct learners' reflection on learning		Students complete a self-assessment of their practice presentation to encourage reflection on their performance and learning.
1. Focus learners' attention on the task	1. Context exploration	Students' attention is drawn to the main body and concluding stages of the presentation.
2. Provide input and guide planning	2. Explicit instruction 3. Guided practice and joint reconstruction	Students discuss and list strategies to make their presentations more interesting/engaging in groups. For homework, students prepare a 2-minute presentation on a key point within the main body for the next lesson.

<b>Lesson 3: Concluding and discussion sections and voice (2 hours)</b>		
<b>Goh and Burns teaching-speaking cycle (2012) stage</b>	<b>Butt et al's (2000) teaching-learning cycle stage</b>	<b>Activities</b>
3. Conduct speaking task	4. Independent application	Students present a key point (2 minutes).
4. Facilitate feedback on learning		Students are given immediate verbal and written feedback from the teacher on the structure and content of the key point, voice and pronunciation.
5. Focus on language skills/ strategies	1. Context exploration 2. Explicit instruction	Voice, pace, stress on words and pitch are introduced. In pairs students discuss how to incorporate these into their final presentation.
6. Direct learners' reflection on learning		Students complete a self-assessment checklist on what they have learned from their practice presentation to engage student reflection on the lesson and their learning.
9. Focus learners' attention on the assessment task	1. Context exploration 2. Explicit instruction	Students are guided on how to facilitate a post-presentation discussion.
10. Give input and guide planning	3. Guided practice and joint reconstruction	Students discuss strategies for handling the discussion. In pairs /small groups they construct discussion questions and engage in 'mock' discussions, focusing on voice and pronunciation.

Preparing students for an academic presentation assessment

Lesson 4: The final assessment (4 hours)		
Goh and Burns teaching-speaking cycle (2012) stage	Butt et al's (2000) teaching-learning cycle stage	Activities
3. Conduct speaking task	4. Independent application	Students present their final presentation for summative assessment against the prescribed criteria.

## Appendix 9

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### Sample comments from students

- **Confidence**
  - I have improved every skill especially I feel comfortable to speak in front of the class.
  - Have more confident to speak in front of class.
  - Having more confidence and feel comfortable when speaking.
  - When I stand in front of the class, I am not nervous anymore.
  - The practices help me to create my confidence.
  - I can speak in front of classmate without feeling so much nervous.
  - I have improved every skills especially I feel comfortable to speak in front of the class.
- **Feedback**
  - Improved myself according to the feedback.
  - Doing presentation in front of auditorium and receiving teachers feedback.
  - Because the teacher gave me useful advice on how to give an academic presentation with good structure.
  - I feel more confidence because there are many things I had mistake in Week 1 and 2. But finally I hope no mistakes on the final presentation, all this because of the real feedback, it was for my benefit now and for future.
  - I improved it through the teachers teaching and feedback. The teacher told me the advantages and disadvantages of my presentation.
  - I benefited greatly from the feedback given by the teacher and my classmates.
  - We practised a lot and told me what I should improve in my presentation.
- **Input**
- ***Assessment/genre***
  - Lessons were focused and I can apply it to my presentation.
  - It was very useful to focus on different parts of the presentation.
  - Practise a lot and told me what I should improve in my presentation.
  - I can make clear topic and content.
  - How to connect any part of the presentation together.



## Preparing students for an academic presentation assessment

- o Presentation structure.
- o Stages of a presentation.
- o Studying of the words of a presentation.
- o To making outline for the presentation.
- o I can understand how to build a presentation.
- ***Language and other skills***
  - o It was useful to learn specific vocabulary for the presentation like transition signals, the lesson about the use of the voice was especially interesting for me.
  - o Give some skills, for example, how to reduce anxiety, how to prepare, how to contact with audience was useful.
  - o I learn how to use link language make my presentation fluency.
  - o Have more technics in presentation from this class such as language body and voice.
  - o Getting many academic words was useful.
  - o Eye contact, voice stress was useful.
  - o Because now I know how to prepare a presentation to face the challenges of university.

# 14

## Improving reading skills and test results of learners from Arabic-speaking backgrounds

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### Introduction

Students of English from an Arabic-speaking background can face particular challenges in reading that we as teachers of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) need to address. According to our observations, these include natural differences in script and language and discourse conventions, difficulty with sound–symbol correspondence and in reading effectively for the range of purposes, such as gist, detail, opinion and evidence, required in an EAP course. In Australia, students from Arabic-speaking countries are a significant part of the community of international students. While many international students gain direct university entry based on achieving a certain result in a language proficiency test, others undertake intensive courses in Academic English as an alternative means. It is in this teaching context that our action research (AR) took place. As teachers with Arabic-speaking backgrounds, we both had a particular interest in working with this group to address the challenges we had observed.

The AR we describe in this chapter aimed to help us understand some of these issues and to find teaching approaches that would help our students become more proficient and confident readers and to be more likely to pass their assessments. In the process of completing our project, we developed four reading strategies which aimed to overcome our students' reading problems. We found that a systematic reading approach using these strategies was a valuable way to improve reading skills, and that improvements in students' reading were reflected through their test results and through comparisons with the results of a class in the same program.

## Research context and participants

Our AR project took place at RMIT (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University) English Worldwide in Melbourne, a major university-affiliated language centre, which offers English language courses to international students as a pathway towards tertiary study. The number of Arabic-speaking students had grown quickly a few years prior to our project, and continues to be substantial. During this time, staff had observed that this cohort struggled markedly with reading more than with any other skill, particularly in comparison with other groups of students. We noticed that these students often struggled with reading activities in class, completing them slowly, and having difficulty understanding why some of their responses were incorrect. At higher levels, equivalent to B2 to C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001), the struggle with reading increased and Arabic-speaking students failed in tests for this skill more frequently than at lower levels. As a result, some Arabic-speaking students had to repeat a 5-week module a number of times, which was demoralising and prevented them from progressing. Teachers also reported that they were not sure how to support students so that they could improve their test results.

At the time of the study, we were both engaged as EAP teachers. Sara was a senior teacher, while Amal also taught in the Independent Learning Centre, often working closely with Arabic-speaking students on their reading. In order to undertake the project, we requested to co-teach our classes so that Sara taught on Monday to Wednesday and Amal taught on Thursday and Friday. The classes we taught at the time of the study included students from the People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Libya, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Brazil and South Korea. Students in this EAP program were at an intermediate level (B1 of the CEFR) and mostly on a pathway to tertiary study at RMIT. The program involved 4 hours of class each weekday, plus homework and independent learning, and all skills were taught via an integrated, communicative curriculum written in-house by the institution. Assessment was conducted via 5-weekly discrete summative tests in listening, speaking, reading and writing, with a cut-score of 60%. As the class teachers, we worked together to plan each lesson and to integrate our research interventions, with a view to also prepare for the assessments.

The research participants were drawn from two classes, E4Q and E4C (where E denotes English, 4 denotes the intermediate level and the letter distinguishes between classes). Due to the focus of our project, only Arabic-speaking students were invited to participate. When the research began, the participants from E4Q were in Week 6 of a 10-week course. Therefore, they participated in the research for five weeks only. The participants from E4C

were in Week 1 of a 10-week course and thus participated in the research for 10 weeks. Most of the participants already had an undergraduate degree and some had work experience in areas including engineering, education, business and nutrition. Table 1 provides a profile of the students involved in the research.

**Table 1** Profile of participants

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

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

## Research questions

Our research questions were informed by our own interest and ideas. 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 understanding the meaning at the sentence and text level depend; an area which, in the case of Arabic, has not been the focus of much research (Hayes-Harb 2006). As our research proceeded, we decided to investigate ways to address the students' reading difficulties, rather than researching the reasons behind them.

In order to understand the nature of our students' reading difficulties, we conducted two 'pre-research' activities before we began to plan our teaching intervention strategies. First, we conducted small group discussions in class about students' past and current reading habits in their first language and in English. These discussions revealed that most of the participants did not read regularly in Arabic. However, when they did read, what they read covered a variety of texts including news, sports news, religious texts, and books and articles relevant to their areas of professional interest. In relation to their reading habits in English, the students reported that their limited vocabulary in English was a main factor in their reading difficulties

and a contributing factor to their lack of engagement with English texts. Second, we asked each participant to complete a short reading diagnostic task comprised of a short text with four multiple-choice and four short-answer questions. Each student was also asked to say, in Arabic or English, what they were doing as they completed the task, and we video-recorded them and took notes as they worked. When we analysed this data, we noticed some habits that we understood to be detrimental to reading success, such as mouthing words, running a finger along the lines, noticeably pausing at unfamiliar lexis, and translating phrases. In terms of process, we noticed the students' lack of effective reading strategies. For example, the students generally did not skim the text, use prediction or cross-check their answers, but relied primarily on their memory to answer the questions in the assessment task. These two activities provided us with a very rich source of information and verbal protocols about the students' reading habits and processes. We also began to understand some of the reasons students were not passing their reading assessments. We used the information gathered from these pre-research activities to guide us towards our main questions: Will a systematic and consistent reading approach, facilitated by relevant class-based reading activities, help Arabic-speaking students become better readers, enjoy reading and improve comprehension? Will this approach help to improve students' test results?

## **Research procedures**

In order to investigate our research questions, we decided to implement specific strategies in class aimed at overcoming the detrimental reading habits and lack of effective reading processes we had identified in the diagnostic assessment task. In Weeks 6 to 10 of the research, we regularly carried out four classroom-based activities with all students in E4C. We observed the students as they completed them to analyse their performance and engagement. Each activity and its rationale are described in the next four sections. This constituted the 'action' stage of our research (Burns 2010).

### **Drop everything and read**

The students were required to have an English reading text with them in class each day. This could be a graded reader or non-fiction book, a newspaper, magazine or any other text of interest. The students in our class also chose information pamphlets, science books and religious texts. As often as possible, students were asked to 'drop everything and read' for 5–10 minutes of class time. After reading silently, they were asked either to write a summary of two to three sentences regarding what they read, or summarise it verbally to a classmate.

Regularly doing this strategy aimed to discourage students from mouthing words and pausing when faced with unfamiliar vocabulary. In addition, this strategy was used to encourage students to read more extensively which, according to Robb and Susser (1990), enhances fluency, speed and comprehension. Furthermore, these authors state 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.

### **Read and copy**

Using the same reading text as the above activity, the students were asked to read for 5 minutes in three to five word 'chunks' and then copy these chunks into their notebooks, ensuring punctuation and spelling were correct. We asked students to do this during their break between classes as well as in class.

Regularly doing this strategy, both in and out of class, aimed to help students read for units of meaning and to use their eyes, rather than their fingers, to follow the text. We also intended this strategy to 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 English as a Second Language (ESL) learners.

### **Reading windows**

Prior to the classes, we prepared some sheets of card with small rectangular 'windows' cut in them. Each pair of students was given a reading window card and a reading text in order to carry out a skim-reading activity. In this activity, the student could only read the text through the window, which their partner moved, at a medium pace, in a downward zigzag manner. The students then swapped roles and repeated the activity, and then responded to the skim-reading activity. Their responses to this activity were then checked by the teacher as whole-class feedback.

This strategy was intended to discourage students from reading word by word and to learn to run their eyes over the text to search for the general meaning. It was also intended to help them to skim-read quickly from left to right and to identify key words.

### **Read around the room**

For this activity, a reading text was enlarged, and then cut into sections or paragraphs. Each section was stuck on a different wall of the classroom so that it could be read in isolation. We sometimes did a warm-up activity based

on the topic, graphic or title, to introduce the text. Otherwise, the students were asked to do a skim-reading activity about the texts. Since they had a limited amount of time to spend at each section/paragraph, they needed to work quickly. Then, their responses to the skimming activity were checked, before they completed a second activity that required closer reading of the text. The timed reading process was repeated and their responses further checked and discussed.

This activity's aim was to help students to skim paragraphs for the main idea and use this information to answer questions about the text. It was apparent from the diagnostic assessment task that the students stopped reading when they reached unknown words and reread the relevant section slowly and repeatedly, which is a strategy commonly used by Arabic ESL students (Alsheikh and Mokhtari 2011). Although this can be useful in order to understand vocabulary from context, we did not want students using this strategy when skimming a text as it slowed their reading process and prevented them from reading the text as a whole. 'Read around the room' appeared to be beneficial as the time limit compelled the students to read quickly and focus on the main idea.

## **Outcomes of the research**

We collected a combination of quantitative and qualitative data for the purposes of this project. Quantitative data consisted of the students' end-of-course (EOC) test scores and closed survey item responses, while qualitative data comprised open-ended responses to survey items and our own informal classroom observations.

The quantitative analysis compared our project participants' EOC reading test results with those of Arabic-speaking students in E4D, an intermediate class that had not participated in the research. The EOC reading test is a summative achievement test taken in the penultimate week of the course. It is one of four macro-skill tests that students must pass (60% cut-score) to achieve the level. It includes three distinct text types, each with 10 related items, and is designed to closely reflect and assess the reading outcomes of the course. We calculated the average results of the Arabic-speaking students in E4C and E4D and found that the project participants scored almost 10% higher than the non-project students (Tables 2 and 3).

At the end of the 10-week course, we asked all 15 students in E4C to complete a survey about the reading activities. We asked six questions in total, three of which were closed-item and three open-ended. The first set of questions in 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 tests. We closely analysed the responses of the five remaining Arabic students

(one had left the class) and found this qualitative data to be particularly enlightening (Tables 4–6).

**Table 2 EOC reading test results for Arabic students in E4C**

Name*	Result /30	Result %
Samira	18	60
Anees	25	83
Musafa	27	90
Faiza	19	63
Sulaiman	18	60
		Average: 71%

*\*All names are pseudonyms.*

**Table 3 EOC reading test results for Arabic students in E4D**

Name*	Result /30	Result %
Mohammed	15	50
Bilal	19	63
Khaled	27	90
Bader	18	60
Noha	14.5	48
		Average: 62%

*\*All names are pseudonyms.*

**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	0	1	4



In summary, the survey revealed that the participants believed that some or all of the strategies' aims were met. Also, they mostly believed that to varying degrees the strategies could help them in a reading test, though some participants were less sure. In addition, they also enjoyed or somewhat enjoyed the strategies. We also asked the following open-ended questions in the survey:

- 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?

Most students reported that 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. Students believed the former aided their language development and would continue to improve their reading and writing skills while the latter was thought to be an activity that was new, different and helpful. Overall, 'read and copy' was considered the most popular and most useful strategy which students indicated they would keep using both in and outside class. Figure 1 illustrates a sample of the students' responses to the open-ended survey questions.

This follow-up survey also showed that some of the students were continuing to use the strategies they had learned through the activities we had introduced and felt they were useful. One participant wrote, 'I can read any things [sic] now without use [sic] my finger' and expressed her appreciation of the reading strategies she had learned. Pleasingly, another student said that she still used the reading windows strategy 'in her mind'.

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

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

## Discussion

The main purpose of this AR project was to investigate whether Arabic-speaking ESL students would become more proficient and engaged readers through our use of a systematic and consistent reading approach and whether this approach would help improve their reading test results. Analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data suggests that the classroom activities we used did indeed assist the participants to improve their reading skills.

The fact that E4C performed better on average than E4D in the EOC reading test was an encouraging result which led us to believe that the strategies had at least some impact on the participants achieving the required 60% score to pass the reading test. However, it is not possible to claim that the use of these strategies was the true cause of the students' success. While in some cases teaching students to use specific strategies shows that overall comprehension of texts can be improved (Brantmeier 2002), this is not always the case. As Brantmeier (2002:2) highlights, 'making generalizations concerning the role of strategies in the L2 reading process is not straightforward'.

Given that the EOC test results are the only quantitative data available for both participating and non-participating students, further research would need to be undertaken with larger numbers of participants before it is possible to draw conclusions that the strategies taught are effective for Arabic-speaking students. Other factors could have contributed to these results, such as students' attitudes towards reading. Logan and Johnston (2009:200) explain that 'students with high positive attitudes to reading have substantially higher average reading achievement than those with lower attitudes to reading'. A positive attitude in this case is considered to be students enjoying their reading and seeking out further reading opportunities. In addition, students in both classes were not tested before the research and the lowest scoring students in E4D could have been weaker in reading initially compared to the students in E4C. Administering an assessment similar to the end-of-course test at the start of the research, or analysing students' reading results from their previous course level, could have added valuable information to the study. Following up on students' reading progress after they have left the language centre to find out whether they are still using some of the strategies would also be of interest. The research suggested that the students enjoyed or somewhat enjoyed all four strategies, which may also have played a role in the students' success. However, it is difficult to determine to what extent enjoying the strategies aided students in achieving the required results needed to pass the reading test.

Interestingly, despite our perception that 'drop everything and read' would be the strategy they would benefit from most, the participating students did

not feel that way. They all agreed that it met some or all of its aims, answered ‘yes’ to the question ‘Did you enjoy the strategy?’, and thought it could help or could somewhat help them in their reading test. However, this strategy was not thought of as the most enjoyable or most useful, nor was it selected as the strategy that students would continue to use in the future or outside of class.

## Conclusion

Undertaking this AR was a stimulating and rewarding experience which not only shed light on an area of interest to our teaching, but also provided us with a practical and valuable framework for exploring future challenges in our teaching practice. We gained a deeper insight into the reading methods used by Arabic-speaking students and developed a teaching approach that seemed to help them overcome their challenges.

In undertaking this research, our main priority was to improve students’ reading skills and confidence. It was encouraging that the data we collected suggested that we were successful in this aim, in that the students not only passed their reading test, but also reported that the strategies they were taught were useful and enjoyable. In the time following the research, we have both continued to use the strategies in a systematic manner and have also encouraged our colleagues to do the same. Overall, we have also learned the value of formalising our approach to responding to classroom challenges by following the AR process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. AR continues to play an important role in our careers as teachers and in our professional development, enabling us to identify opportunities for planned change, experimentation and, ultimately, for improvement in our teaching contexts.

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# 15

## **Incorporating student reading habits into an extensive reading program to support language development and test preparation**

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### **Introduction**

In our classroom, we consistently noted a lack of student engagement – defined as participation in set activities and a willingness to complete out-of-class reading tasks – with extensive reading (ER). The students were not completing the out-of-class reading tasks and consequently were unable to participate in the in-class activities. However, there was not a lack of interest in improving reading skills *per se*, and we believed that our students deemed reading as essential to improving their English language proficiency. Furthermore, many of our students were most likely reading extensively on their own, albeit in their first language (L1). In this chapter, we describe an action research (AR) project that investigated students' existing reading habits in order to better incorporate these habits into a sustainable, pedagogically supported ER program with the goal of increasing student engagement. A further implication of our project was the potential impact of ER programs on students' English reading proficiency and test achievement.

### **Background and theoretical ideas motivating the research**

The benefits of ER for students' second language (L2) development are well established in the research literature. They include improvements in reading comprehension and fluency; development of vocabulary and spelling; positive impacts on motivation; and subsequent improvements in writing, speaking and listening skills (Bamford and Day 2004, Day and Bamford 1998,

Grabe 2009). ER also provides students undertaking tertiary, foundation, or pre-sessional study with essential practice in reading long texts, thereby developing the skills and strategies to cope with the reading demands of their disciplines. Regular ER also exposes these students to the information and knowledge that informs their ideas and opinions, enabling them to better contribute to academic discussions. To be successful in academic life the student needs to be able to read vast amounts of text quickly and selectively, and extract main ideas in an efficient manner for use in their university assignments. In the words of Green (1997:231), readers need to ascertain the 'complex conjoining of "word" and "world", "text" and "context"'. Slow, careful reading of short, prescribed texts will not adequately prepare students for these expectations.

Moreover, participation in ER programs has also been linked to better reading comprehension and increased reading speeds. With the increasing attention paid to testing expeditious reading (quick, selective, effective reading of longer texts) in high-stakes international tests, and the more successful we are in encouraging ER, the greater the potential improvement in student test scores that could result (Bell 2001, Day and Bamford 1998, Iwahori 2008, Yamashita 2007).

In order to be successful, previous research suggests an ER program should allow students to choose material that is at a level just below their current proficiency, and from a range of genres and topics (Bamford and Day 2004, Renandya 2007). Students should approach ER materials in the same way that they would in their L1, with a focus on the overall message of the text as opposed to focusing on particular linguistic features (Waring 2012). Within this context, the role of the teacher becomes that of a facilitator who helps to establish a community of readers within the classroom, whose focus is on reading materials for interest and pleasure (Day and Bamford 1998, Renandya 2007).

Students, however, are not a homogenous group of 'passive receivers of input' (Ros i Sole 2008:205), but rather complex individuals with their own life experiences, identities and practices. These identities and practices are not discarded when students enter the classroom and are in fact interconnected and inseparable from the language-learning process. Thus, it is important to recognise not only that some affordances are meaningful for some students and not for others, but also it is not just a matter of merely presenting learning opportunities to the students. Rather, it is an essential part of teaching practice to relate these learning opportunities in a meaningful way to the student and their identity (Menezes 2011). Within the context of ER, this means that the success of any ER program depends on its ability to make reading meaningful for the students. For students in high-stakes or tertiary pathway programs, this may also take the form of impressing on students the connection between ER and test achievement.

Additionally, students have developed reading habits and skills in their L1, and these habits aid or constrain the development of reading habits and attitudes in their L2 (Day and Bamford 1998, Yamashita 2004, 2007). These L1 reading habits also include the use of technology, so it is equally important to integrate these everyday technologies horizontally into the language-learning sphere (Levy and Stockwell 2006). Providing access to online material – when it is preferred – can also provide a greater degree of autonomy by allowing the students to choose a mode of learning that is most significant to them (Godwin-Jones 2011).

### Research context and participants

Our research was carried out at the Griffith English Language Institute (GELI) in Brisbane, Queensland, which is an English language teaching centre attached to Griffith University. GELI offers courses in 5-week blocks in General English (GE), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and English Test Preparation (ETP). It also offers a Direct Entry Pathway (DEP) course whereby students can gain direct entry into the university if they successfully pass the course.

GE, the course in which we conducted our research, is divided into six different levels, with GE level 4 (GE 4) corresponding to the B1/B2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001). Upon completion of GE 4, students who are on an academic pathway are able to enter an EAP course. We decided to conduct our AR at the GE 4 level with the hope of instilling conscientious ER practices into our students' repertoires for learning before they started their Academic English classes.

All students in the GE 4 classes that we team taught were involved in the AR project. In the three cycles of AR we conducted, the 50 participants were the students from our rostered GE 4 classes. In each cycle between 15 and 18 students took part, of which only seven were not going on to academic study. They were aged between 17 and 39 years and were mainly from Asian countries (China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam), with some students also from Spain, Russia and Saudi Arabia. In the first two cycles, nearly all of the students were on an academic pathway, with 43 students planning further study in Australia. However, Cycle 3 included five students on an integrated study tour program, who returned to their home country after three weeks of study. Across the three cycles, two students participated in both Cycle 1 and 2, and two students participated in both Cycle 2 and 3, as these were students who repeated the course.



## Research focus and questions

At our institution, the ideas about ER outlined earlier are applied by encouraging students to read extensively, through the inclusion of a graded reader into the GE curriculum, a book club for EAP students, and a range of reading materials that are made available to learners in all programs through an Independent Learning Centre (ILC). However, this encouragement is often met with little or haphazard action on the part of the students, and subsequent frustration from teachers at the missed opportunity for language development. Teachers often lament the lack of L2 extensive reading being completed outside the classroom, and specifically having to ‘pull’ their students through the graded reader lessons rather than seeing the students being sufficiently engaged to ‘push’ the lesson for themselves. In order to improve student engagement we felt that we needed to investigate and resolve this disconnection between the curricula goals and the realities of the classroom.

We realised that our current ER program – which consisted of one prescribed, graded reader for each 5-week course – needed to incorporate a much greater degree of student choice. While the readers had been specifically chosen to scaffold learning outcomes and assist learners to succeed in end-of-course reading tests, these outcomes cannot be achieved if students are not inspired to do the work. Initially, we considered ways to better integrate digital materials into the ER program, on the assumption that this would provide our so-called ‘digital native’ (Prensky 2001) students with the most options. In other words, our aim was to integrate the technologies we assumed that the students were using in their personal lives into the classroom and institution. However, we soon realised that our approach required greater refinement, as we did not actually know students wanted to access reading materials, or even *what kind* of reading materials they wanted to access.

Thus, we decided we needed to first gain a better understanding of what students were already reading extensively in their L1 and L2, and how they were accessing that material. This led us to our research question: To what extent can an extensive reading program that is informed by extracurricular student reading practices promote student engagement?

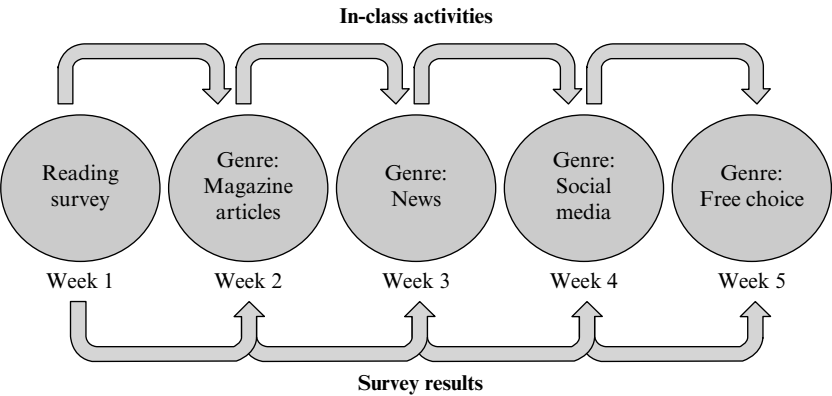
## Research procedures

Student engagement with the ER program was measured through student surveys, teacher observation journals, reading journals, digital tracking of student access to GELI’s learning management system (LMS) called Blackboard, exit surveys, in-class focus groups, follow-up interviews, and the number of ‘likes’ or ‘comments’ left by students on both the teachers’ Facebook profiles and the ‘Extensive Reading’ Facebook page. We describe below how these tools were integrated into the three AR cycles we followed.

Each of the three cycles was patterned in a similar way, though modified

slightly at each iteration in response to our reflections on the data, which included student feedback. Figure 1 details the activities we focused on in our first and subsequent AR cycles.

**Figure 1** Action research cycle

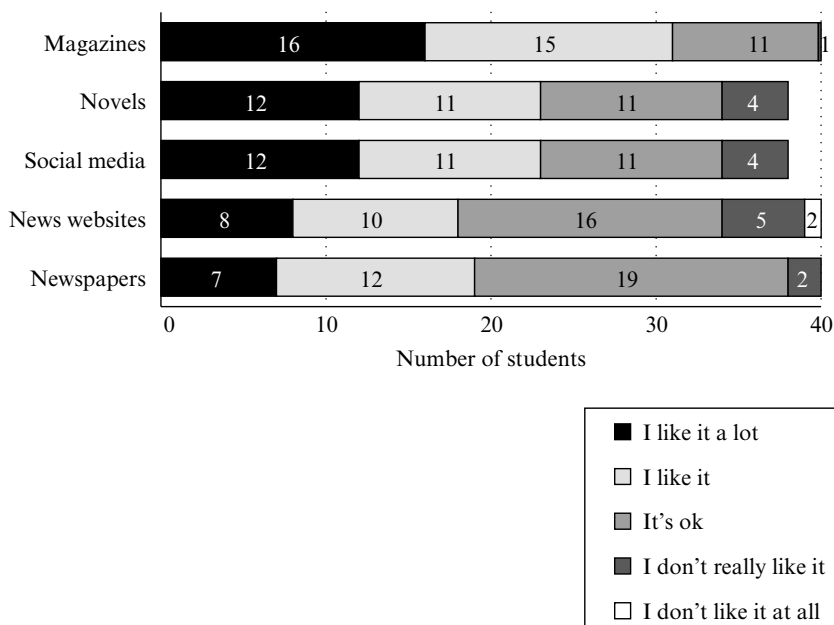


**Cycle 1**

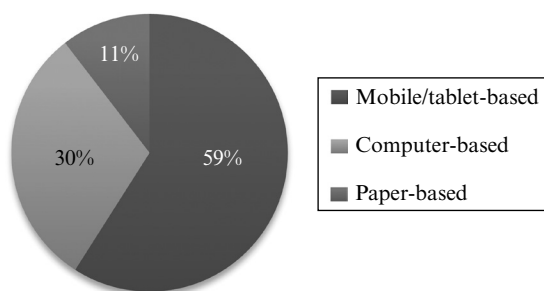
In the first week of this and the following two cycles, we surveyed (Appendix 1) the students about their preferences regarding genres and topics for reading in either their L1 or L2. The survey had a two-fold purpose. First, it was designed to gain a snapshot of out-of-class reading practices in terms of what genres the students read, which we then used as the basis for selecting the genres that would be included in our ER program. The students were asked to tick and then to rank their preferences on a Likert scale. The genres included were magazines/journals, social media (such as Facebook or Weibo), novels, news websites, sports news websites, Twitter, newspapers, text messages, advertising material and others. Second, the reading survey was intended to highlight to the students that ER was not restricted to traditional paper-based novels or graded readers, but rather included a range of text types and genres. Figure 2 details that the most popular genres identified by the students in all three cycles were magazine articles, novels, social media genres (such as Facebook or Twitter), and the news respectively.

In Week 1, we also asked the students to complete a reading journal (Appendix 2) in order to take a snapshot of their reading habits. The students were asked to identify a text they had read within the previous week and where they had accessed the material, online or paper-based. Figure 3 shows that a majority of the students (89%) preferred online reading over paper-based materials.

**Figure 2 Reading journal – genre preferences in Cycles 1–3**



**Figure 3 Reading journal – modes of reading preferences (n=50)**



The reading mode preference result has interesting implications for reading comprehension and the testing of reading comprehension, as some studies have shown that reading comprehension may suffer in screen-based presentation of texts (Mangen, Walgermo and Brønnick 2013, Wästlund, Reinikka, Norlander and Archer 2005). However, in terms of improving engagement with reading materials, it would probably be more effective to cater towards students' reading mode preferences. This divergence should be taken into account when considering the learning outcomes and goals for an ER program.

Using the data as a guide, we then selected the ER materials. The most popular choices were social media genres, magazine articles, news articles and novels. As the majority of the students expressed a preference for reading online, GELI's LMS, Blackboard (Appendix 3), was chosen as the platform through which the selected reading materials could be accessed via hyperlinks. The ER materials were introduced in class weekly, and the students were asked to read at least one article per week from the websites. As graded readers were prescribed by the GELI curriculum, the students were still also required to complete the assigned reading and activities in each week of the cycle.

Through the LMS, it was possible to track student access to the websites. However, the system did have two limitations. First, it only measured a 'hit' if the student accessed the website via the LMS, and therefore was unable to record direct access to the websites. Second, it only records access to the websites and not time spent on the websites, and was therefore not a definitive record of a student actually having read the material. Nevertheless, it did give us an idea of the number of students accessing the websites and how often they were doing so.

In-class activities were also completed each week, both to support the previous week's reading material and introduce the next week's. Our first in-class activity in each cycle aimed to raise student awareness of ER. This activity included the identification of different genres, description of the features of ER, and discussion of how ER differs from intensive reading (IR). We stressed that, in contrast, ER is primarily for enjoyment rather than to complete assigned tasks with a specific language goal, such as learning a particular set of vocabulary items. The subsequent activities were not simply comprehension checks, but rather whole-class and small-group activities that encouraged the students to share what they had read with their classmates, both in terms of content and opinion, thus stressing reading as a social practice. One example is the 4-3-2 speaking activity. In this activity the students were paired and given 4 minutes each to discuss something they had read in the previous week. The students then changed partners and discussed the same reading material for 3 minutes. The third time they changed partners again and were given only 2 minutes for a further discussion. One hour each week was designated for these activities, which are summarised for all three cycles in Table 1.

Throughout all three cycles we used observation journals, which were both descriptive and reflective (Burns 2010), to record our perceptions of student engagement in the ER program and their completion of in-class and out-of-class tasks. We also conducted an exit survey (Appendix 4) at the end of the course, in which the students were asked various questions designed to gauge what they had liked and disliked about the ER program and whether they felt their reading had increased.

**Table 1 In-class activities**

Cycle	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
<b>Cycle 1</b>	Genre-matching activity Reading survey Rules for ER	Discussion: What have you been reading?	Discussion: What have you been reading?	Discussion: What have you been reading?	Discussion: What have you been reading? Exit survey
<b>Cycle 2</b>	Reading survey Rules for ER Discussion: What have you been reading?	The news: Ask four 'wh' questions	Reading journal 4-3-2 speaking activity	Reading journal Find someone who read ...	Reading journal Focus group Exit survey
<b>Cycle 3</b>	Reading survey Rules for ER Reading and discussion: 'Street Food'	Dealing with new words The news: Ask four 'wh' questions Reading journal	Understanding collocations Reading journal	Find someone who read ... Reading journal	Discussion: Questions on article topic Reading journal Exit survey

## Cycle 2

Having reviewed the data we had collected from our observations and exit surveys in Cycle 1, we could see there had certainly been an overall positive student response to the ER program, and therefore we decided Cycle 2 should be conducted in much the same way as Cycle 1. However, we did make the following modifications in Cycle 2.

Most of the students did not complete the online reading journals in Cycle 1, although many of them had completed the readings. As a result, in Cycle 2 students were provided with a paper-based version of the reading journals that they filled in at the beginning of each ER lesson by interviewing each other about what they had been reading. This activity became quite useful as an interactive warm-up activity that helped to reinforce the notion of reading as social practice.

In Cycle 1 the students were asked to join Tumblr, a blogging platform and social networking site as a means to interact with a range of ER materials. However, there was a limited student response, with only three of the 15 students joining the site. We decided that Facebook could be a better option, as most of the students already had an account and were actively using Facebook daily. We both set up a teacher profile on Facebook in order to share reading materials with the students, which proved to be much more successful, with 12 students becoming involved, and with the selected materials garnering 35 likes and three

comments. It also provided us with a record of active student interest in our postings.

We added two open-ended questions to the exit survey we had used in Cycle 1 in order to gain more insight into the students' perceptions of, and engagement in the ER program: What did you like about reading online in this course? What did you not like about reading online in this course? We also decided to run focus groups in the final week of Cycle 2 to further gauge student attitudes towards and experiences with reading in their L1 and L2.

As our research proceeded, we realised that there were factors outside the classroom that could potentially impact on the level of student engagement with the ER program. Therefore, in the final week of Cycle 2 we also conducted two focus group interviews to explore these factors further. The eight students involved were divided into two groups of four and were asked to discuss five questions about reading as a skill, their reading preferences, and their experience with reading for pleasure (Appendix 5). These focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed.

### Cycle 3

Despite the students' greater uptake on Facebook in Cycle 2, we still felt that we had not yet discovered how best to incorporate social media genres into the program. We decided to make more use of Facebook, not just as a means of providing reading materials, but rather as the platform through which students could share and discuss with each other what they had read. We created the Facebook page 'Extensive Reading for GELI Students' for this purpose. From the focus group discussions at the end of Cycle 2, we discovered that the students viewed vocabulary as the biggest hurdle in their L2 reading. In response, we incorporated vocabulary activities and strategies for dealing with new vocabulary into the in-class activities (see also Aidinlis, this volume). These activities are included in Table 1.

In Cycle 3, we also decided to follow up with previous students who had participated in the ER program in Cycles 1 and 2 (Appendix 6). We wanted to explore how the students felt the ER program had helped them with their reading and language development now that they had finished the program. We invited all 10 students who were still enrolled at GELI at that time, but only two of the students, one from Cycle 1 (Student A) and one from Cycle 2 (Student B), accepted the invitation. The interviews were semi-structured in format and the audio was recorded. The students were asked their views of the ER program in general and whether they preferred to read a printed graded reader only, to read online, or to have a mixture of both. They were also asked whether they had read any of the websites after the course and how they thought the program had helped them in their future EAP study.

Having outlined the processes in each of the three cycles, in the next section we describe the outcomes of our research.

## Outcomes of the research

The goal of our AR was to discover to what extent a digitally based extensive reading program that was developed from and responded to students' existing reading practices was able to promote student engagement with ER in our classrooms. From the data, we noted a marked increase in interest and enthusiasm during the in-class activities, which contrasted sharply to the lack of student engagement with the prescribed reader. Further analysis of the data revealed three dominant themes that seemed to account for this change: interest in reading online, enthusiasm for choosing texts of personal interest, and recognition of the benefits of ER to language development.

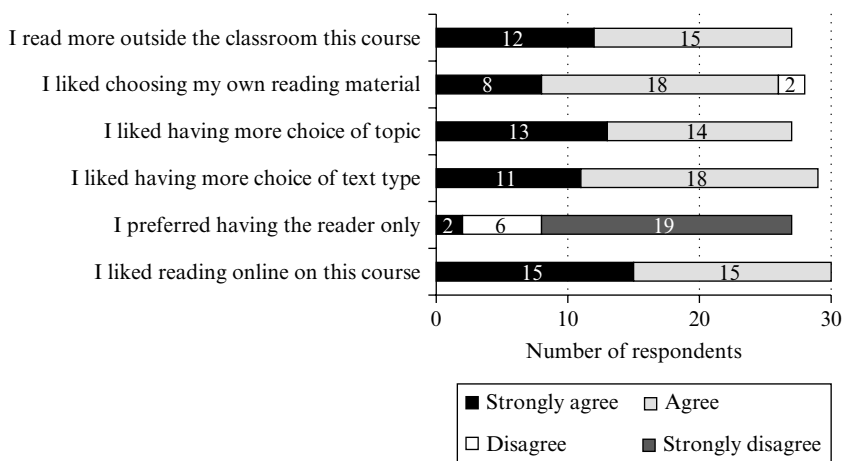
In relation to the first theme, our teacher observation notes repeatedly referred to student interest and participation in the online reading program while simultaneously noting a lack of engagement with the prescribed graded reader. Over 10 weeks of the three cycles, teacher observational notes repeatedly revealed that the majority of the students were either not completing the reading from the prescribed reader or not engaging with the accompanying in-class activities. In-class activities were often a struggle and lesson plans had to anticipate and account for most of the students not having read the material. On one occasion, Caroline heard an audible moan from the students when asked to get out their prescribed readers. One student in the Cycle 2 focus group exemplified this contrast in their engagement by commenting: 'Before I thought reading was boring, but now . . . I'm interested in reading.' In the follow-up interviews involving the two students from previous cycles, the students referred eight times to their level of interest in the online reading material, with one student noting 'now when I read more in website and sometimes news – sometimes I read a story – when interesting thing I can read, so that is help me to understand'.

The results from the exit survey (Figure 4) provided some further insight into the students' enthusiasm for the new ER program.

Of the 30 students from Cycles 1, 2 and 3 who completed the survey, 15 agreed and 15 strongly agreed they preferred reading online. Three of the students commented specifically on the online aspect of the program in the open-ended questions saying that texts and topics from the online reading program were more relevant and interesting to them. In the focus groups, conducted in Cycle 3, five of the eight students commented on their preference for reading online. One student summarised the appeal of online reading compared with the reader:

I think if I'm reading online it's not boring. Because when I read one book oh [that's] boring! Because when you . . . read one book just [there's] only the one topic, [but] if you read online, [there are] many, many topic and [if] I want [I can] change it [them].

**Figure 4 Exit survey – Cycles 1–3 (n=30)**



The availability of choice to read on topics of personal interest was another major theme to emerge from the data. In the exit surveys for all three cycles, all but two students reported liking the greater choice of texts and topics made available to them, and five students made specific positive reference to the greater degree of choice. One student illustrated this response by saying they liked the course ‘because it has a lot of topic that we can choose’. In the follow-up interview a student also commented that: ‘I don’t feel compulsory to find the words. I want to find the meaning the words because I interested in the text.’

In the exit survey for Cycles 2 and 3, however, one student in each cycle complained that some of the topics were not of interest to them. We believe this response can be partly attributed to the difficulty in finding a variety of quality material that was also appropriate for the students’ English proficiency level. However, over time, it should be possible to build a stronger bank of resources in our centre that can cater to a variety of interests. It will also be important to provide alternatives for students who do not share the majority interest.

The final dominant theme from the data was the perception that the program had benefited their language and reading development, which was referred to in the exit survey by nearly one third of the students. In the Cycle 3 follow-up interviews with Students A and B, there were 11 comments



from both participants referring to their improved language, vocabulary and reading skills. One of the students commented on the benefit to her reading skills, saying that 'I don't feel the pressure to find unknown vocabulary'. The second student also recognised the benefits of increased reading, noting: 'When I read more, I feel my language gets improved and I understand any topic now, I can understand.' As many of these students were on pathways to further educational opportunities, such as diplomas and other tertiary degrees, the added value for improving their language proficiency cannot be overstated. Most of these students had no guaranteed entry into their programs without first providing evidence of satisfactory achievement in English, and in many cases this meant a high-stakes language test. As one student from the focus group observed: 'if you are student you have to read because you have to get exam.'

Most encouragingly, our journals noted a much greater uptake of out-of-class reading. Whereas ER activities in class had often been a struggle, as most students did not complete the assigned readings from the graded reader, now the majority had read at least one article from the ER program each week. Our observations were supported by the data. In the exit survey, 27 of the 30 respondents reported that they had read more outside class during the course.

Digital tracking of student access to the ER websites through the LMS also revealed that students were accessing the online reading materials. Table 2 details the numbers of times each student accessed the ER websites via the LMS.

**Table 2 Number of accesses to online materials 24 April–5 September 2014**

Student 1 37	Student 9 19	Student 17 12	Student 25 5	Student 33 1
Student 2 35	Student 10 17	Student 18 11	Student 26 4	Student 34 1
Student 3 34	Student 11 17	Student 19 10	Student 27 3	Student 35 1
Student 4 32	Student 12 16	Student 20 10	Student 28 3	Student 36 1
Student 5 27	Student 13 15	Student 21 8	Student 29 2	Student 37 1
Student 6 26	Student 14 15	Student 22 9	Student 30 1	Student 38 1
Student 7 26	Student 15 14	Student 23 7	Student 31 1	Student 39 1
Student 8 21	Student 16 12	Student 24 6	Student 32 1	Student 40 1

The table shows that at least 25 students accessed the websites at least five times or more between 24 April and 5 September, and there was an average of 9.28 accesses per student across all three cycles. Furthermore, a number of students continued to access the websites through the LMS even after their course had finished. This finding was confirmed in the follow-up interviews by the two participating students, who both reported that 10 weeks after their GE 4 course had ended, they were still regularly reading some of the material

introduced by the ER program. It also needs to be noted that students who accessed the materials directly on the web rather than via the LMS would not be captured by the tracking software. So the number of accesses recorded in Table 2 reveal only the minimum number, and the actual number of hits could have been higher.

Interestingly, compared with the data from the interviews, focus groups, teacher observation journals and LMS tracking, the online self-reporting from the reading journals seemed to demonstrate a less widespread uptake of out-of-class reading. However, this may have been related to difficulty in using reading journals as a reporting tool. In general, our students seemed to view the reading journal as a burdensome administrative task that they were uninterested in completing. It may have been that the inconvenience of accessing this tool through the LMS as well as the time needed to report on their reading habits demotivated the students. In Cycles 2 and 3, the switch to a paper-based journal meant that all of the students completed them in class under our direction. However, this approach required the students to recall what they had read over the past seven days, which may have limited the validity of the data.

Despite their eagerness to utilise internet-based materials, an additional underlying theme to emerge from the data was student frustration with technological issues, such as the inordinate amount of time it took to log in to the wireless network and LMS. This issue was repeatedly commented on both in class and in the exit survey. One student vented their frustration in the exit survey by saying, 'I like to read in this course but I have to sign in before I can read. So it [is] very complicating and waste of time.' This point perhaps highlights again the importance of utilising student practices outside the classroom within the ER program. Frustrations with accessing the online materials could be alleviated by incorporating existing student preferences into ways of accessing the internet. Another student also noted some limitations of reading online, commenting that: 'When I read online I can't remember and I easy forget it,' an observation that has been supported in the literature (Mangen et al 2013).

Overall, however, our findings indicate that our ER program improved student engagement. The data illustrates an overwhelmingly positive response from many of the students, particularly in relation to their interest in reading online, and also in their being able to make choices with regard to genres and topics.

## Conclusion

The value of self-directed reading practice for English students cannot be overstated, and our findings indicate an ER program that more readily dovetails with students' own interests is more likely to be successful than

a program that prescribes students set reading materials. Our AR program also showed that extra training and specialised skills were not required for a teacher to incorporate an engaging ER program into their own repertoire. This approach is thus easily adoptable and adaptable to a variety of different contexts, and is not limited to the General English classroom. In fact, research connecting ER to better test and academic performance makes an engaging ER program such as this one an ideal extension to EAP and English test preparation classes. Though our program may seem to incorporate a variety of educational technologies, the real success of the program comes from discovering our students' reading practices, preferences and interests, and tailoring the ER program accordingly. Thus as teachers, we were transformed from comprehension checkers into learning facilitators.

It cannot be denied however that both we, as the teachers, and the students involved expressed a real preference for web-based materials, or as our students enthusiastically expressed it: 'online, yeah, online!'. While some teachers may despair at this resounding rejection of the 'book', our AR was not about supplanting paper with digital materials, but rather about developing a student-driven ER program. Our research was about finding a way to connect who our students were outside the classroom with their learning inside the classroom, thus fostering a more student-centred approach to ER as a means to improve student engagement.

The words of one of our students perhaps best captures the essence of our ER program and its goal to improve reading engagement: 'Some words nobody knows, and I know because I read.' We hope that, because of the demonstrated success of our intervention and the ease of its integration into the curriculum, our ER program will become a regular fixture in GELI's curriculum, and we believe it has real potential for instilling in our students a lifelong love of reading in English.

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# Appendix 1

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## Reading survey

**Do you like to read?**

Do you read (in any language) ...

☐ Magazines/Journals

☐ Social Media (Weibo/Facebook/Hi5/Mixi/Orkut/Tumblr)

☐ Novels

☐ News websites

☐ Sports news websites

☐ Twitter

☐ Newspapers

☐ Text messages (SMS, Viber, Lime, Skype)

☐ Advertising materials

☐ Other:

Do you like to read ...

	I like it a lot.	I like it.	It's ok.	Not really.	I don't like it at all.
Magazines	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social media	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Novels	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
News websites	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sport news websites	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Twitter	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Newspapers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Text messages	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Advertising materials	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Think about everything you read over the last 3 days. Make a list of everything that you read here.

## Appendix 2

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### Out-of-class reading journal

<b>Reading Journal</b>
<b>Name</b> <input type="text"/>
<b>What did you read?</b> (eg, a magazine article, a book, a website, etc) <input type="text"/>
<b>What was the title/topic?</b> <input type="text"/>
<b>Where did you read it?</b> <input type="radio"/> On my phone/tablet <input type="radio"/> On my computer <input type="radio"/> On paper <input type="radio"/> In the world
<b>What language was it in?</b> <input type="text"/>
<b>Why did you read it?</b> <div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 100px; width: 100%;"></div>
<b>How many minutes did you spend reading?</b> <input type="text"/>

## Appendix 3

### Blackboard learning management system

The screenshot displays the Blackboard LMS interface for a course titled 'Extensive Reading'. On the left is a navigation menu with a tree structure. The main content area on the right lists several course items, each with a title and a status indicating whether statistics tracking is enabled.

**Navigation Menu (Left):**

- GEI/Independent Learning (GELI, IL)
- GE 1
- GE 2
- GE 3
- GE 4
- GE 5
- GE 6
- EAP 1
- EAP 2
- EAP 3
- ETP 1
- ETP 2
- MEAP
- Surveys
- Pronunciation
- Staff Meeting Place
- Science Without Borders
- DEP Prep
- High School Prep
- Extensive Reading
- ORGANISATION MANAGEMENT
- Control Panel

**Course Content (Right):**

**Extensive Reading**

Build Content ▾ Assessments ▾ Tools ▾ Publisher Content ▾

- Reading Survey**  
Availability: Item is not available.
- Reading Journal**  
Enabled: Statistics Tracking
- The English Magazine**  
Enabled: Statistics Tracking  
*The English Magazine website has reading and listening material for students. There are comprehension questions to test understanding and to recycle important vocabulary from the text. The Language Notes and Vocabulary Notes for each level provide a useful focus for follow-up language work. In addition, in the Language Practice Zone, there are grammar and vocabulary exercises.*
- TOPICS Online Magazine for Learners of English**  
Enabled: Statistics Tracking  
This publication offers learners of English the opportunity to express and publish their ideas in English to an online audience.
- Breaking News English**  
Enabled: Statistics Tracking
- News in Levels: News for Students of English**  
Enabled: Statistics Tracking

## Appendix 4

### Exit survey

To what extent do you agree or disagree?

	Really agree	Agree	Disagree	Really disagree	Have no opinion
I liked reading online this course.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I preferred having the reader only.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I liked having more choice of text type (for example, magazine, news article, etc)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I liked having more choice of topic.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I liked choosing my own reading material.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I read more outside the classroom this course.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What did you like about reading online in this course?

What did you not like about reading online in this course?



## Appendix 5

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### Focus group questions

In a small group, discuss the following questions together:

1. Why do we read?
2. Of the four skills, how important is reading in improving your English?
3. Did you read much when you were a child or did your parents read to you?
4. What are some of the reasons for including online reading in a course?
5. Is there anything that makes it difficult for you to read in English outside the classroom?

## Appendix 6

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### Semi-structured interviews

1. What did you think of the reading program?
2. What kind of program do you prefer: a reader only, online reading only, or a mixture of both?
3. After the course, did you read any of the websites?
4. Do you think the program helped for your study in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) *now*?

# 16

## Assessing the impact of an extensive reading program on vocabulary development

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### Introduction

As a language teacher I have always tried to provide the best opportunities for my students to participate fully in the experience of learning English. However, for a number of reasons many of my English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students seemed more interested in moving quickly into their disciplinary course of study. First, they were demotivated by having to learn more English and second, they felt they had already studied English for many years without much noticeable progression. I decided to investigate whether an extensive reading program would help to build my students' motivation and confidence as well as their vocabulary knowledge. In doing so, I also wanted to explore the impact on their assessment scores at the end of the course. This chapter reports on the action research (AR) study I conducted in 2010. It discusses the procedures and outcomes of the research, including student and teacher feedback, and the knowledge gained from reflecting on the outcomes.

### Background

Extensive reading has achieved considerable support over the last two decades for its ability to promote interest and fluency in reading and to expand students' vocabulary (Day and Bamford 1998). Leung (2002:79) argues that extensive reading can give 'learners more control over and confidence in their own learning', which can facilitate their future studies as they learn to become more independent learners and become actively involved in the learning process. The use of extensive reading in my English language program was based on the following key principles, which were adopted from Bamford and Day (2004:2):

1. The reading material should be easy to encourage the students to keep reading.
2. A wide range of reading material should be available so that learners can select topics that they are interested in.
3. Learners should be given the opportunity to choose what they want to read. This empowers them as they make decisions for their own learning instead of relying solely on the teacher.
4. Learners benefit from the quantity of reading and reading speed. Students should read a book a week and infer the meaning of unknown words instead of using a dictionary.
5. Reading should be for pleasure, general understanding and information in order to achieve its purpose, which is to motivate students to read.
6. Learners should read in their own time and at their own pace. This can motivate weaker students to read as they can organise their reading time and are not under pressure to complete a text at a specified time.
7. Extensive reading is a pleasurable activity and should not be followed by comprehension questions but can be supplemented by follow-up activities so that the teacher can monitor the students' progress. This can also encourage students to persevere with their reading.
8. The role of the teacher in an extensive reading program is to explain the aim of the program and to maintain a record of the students' reading progress and their reflections on the reading material so as to help them enjoy and benefit from their reading experience. The teacher should also act as a role model for the learners by reading, discussing and recommending interesting reading material.

In terms of vocabulary development, Nation (2001) identifies the form, meaning, use and constraints involved in knowing a word, and presents a framework outlining the key questions that need to be posed in relation to these categories. Nation's (2001) framework (see Appendix 1) was used in this study as a reference point to build up the students' vocabulary and to focus my investigation on vocabulary development. Since extensive reading should entail pleasurable and interesting activities and readings, I also aimed to give students the opportunity to select readings that they found interesting and pertinent to their needs. Since 'after the 2,000 word level, learners need to start specialising in their vocabulary learning to suit their language use goals' (Nation and Wang Ming-tzu 1999:371), the participants were asked to select a number of authentic reading materials relevant to their interests and future study.

## Research context and participants

This study took place at the William Blue College of Hospitality Management, a college that prepares students for entry into vocational and higher

education programs. Within the College, the Think: Centre for Learning and Academic Skills Support (CLASS) delivers the Hospitality Management Direct Entry Programme, which is a fixed 15-week course used as a pathway to the college's vocational education and training programs. My students were enrolled in the Hospitality Management Direct Entry Programme, which equips the students with the language skills that they need to study and work in the hospitality industry. Success in passing this course enables students to move directly into the accredited hospitality course. The Direct Entry Programme is a 15-week full-time content-based course for students at lower intermediate or intermediate Level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001) with 25 hours per week of face-to-face delivery.

The aims of the course are to develop learners' listening, reading, writing and speaking skills, expand their communication strategies, and develop not only their academic skills but also their content-specific lexical knowledge. The syllabus is organised in themes (e.g. Hospitality Industry, Housekeeping, Front Office, Human Resources, Business Communicating and Legal Studies) based on pre-packaged course materials, supplemented with materials that are often authentic and related to the discipline.

My class consisted of 10 students, aged between 20 and 25 years, who were mostly from Asian countries, and who had been in Australia for between eight weeks and almost four years. Five were from Korea, two from China, and the other three were from Indonesia, Vietnam and Russia. The students' level of English at entry (up to *IELTS* Band 5 or approximately B1 on the CEFR) was also measured internally by a placement test to assess their writing skills prior to the commencement of the course. Although most of them had been studying in Australia for more than a month, they were having difficulty in developing their vocabulary, particularly the technical terminology needed for their content area and the academic vocabulary important to tertiary study. When interviewed for placement, the students responded that outside the classroom they mostly used their first language and did not read extensively. For example, one student stated that 'I'm worried and scared to speak English with other people because I think if I speak English with other people they wouldn't understand with wrong grammar'. Moreover, the majority of the students in this program had not attained tertiary level studies either in their home country or in Australia.

## Research focus and procedures

The aims of my study were to investigate ways of increasing my learners' motivation and developing their academic vocabulary through extensive reading. I also wanted to identify whether introducing this approach would help to improve the students' vocabulary development, as measured by a

pre- and post-writing test. I believed that extensive reading, which entails reading across a wide range of contexts, lexis and grammatical constructions, would not only assist generally in their successful language acquisition (Renandya 2007:134), but also raise their awareness about the often heavy amount of reading required within their new academic community.

My AR across the 15-week program was divided into three stages. All 10 students participated in all three stages. I collected quantitative data through pre- and post-writing tests to assess students' progress. Qualitative data was collected from a needs analysis, interviews with students, and comments posted on a weekly blog.

### **Stage 1 (Weeks 1–5)**

In this stage I focused on evaluating the students' needs, assessing their written vocabulary use, introducing them to the concept of extensive reading, and setting up a student blog.

On the first day of the program, an interview was conducted (see Appendix 2) and a needs analysis questionnaire was given to the students to gather information about their background, their interests and reading habits (see Table 1 in the section 'Outcomes of the research'). The aim of the interview was to find out more about the participants' cultural and educational background, and the purpose of the needs analysis questionnaire was to identify their reading habits as well as their preconceptions about reading for pleasure. This information helped me organise activities relevant to the needs of the students. A slightly adapted questionnaire was given to the students 15 weeks after the commencement of the extensive reading program to evaluate its impact on the students' motivation and reading habits (see Table 2 in the section 'Outcomes of the research').

Next a writing pre-test (see Appendix 3) was administered to assess the students' level of English. Particular emphasis was given to their use of vocabulary, specifically lexical density (LD) and lexical variation (LV), as this information was useful for the design of the extensive reading program. The assessment criteria used in the writing test were: task response, cohesion/coherence, vocabulary range, vocabulary use, and grammatical accuracy. Each criterion carried a maximum of 5 marks, the total available mark being 25. Vocabulary development and use in writing were measured by comparing the learners' pre-test, monthly test and post-test scores and analysing the LD and the LV of their writing.

Read (2000:203) defines LD as 'the proportion of lexical (or content) words – nouns, full verbs, adjectives and adverbs derived from adjectives – in the text'. The lexical density of my students' texts was calculated as follows:  $LD = \text{total number of lexical words} \times 100\% \text{ divided by the total number of words in the composition}$ . To measure lexical variation, which is the number

of word forms in the text, the following calculation was used:  $LV = \frac{\text{the number of different lexemes in the text} \times 100\%}{\text{the total number of lexemes in the text}}$ . This calculation is based on Laufer's study (1991, cited in Read 2000) which used the lexeme as the main unit of analysis of all lexical items in a text. A lexeme corresponds to a set of forms taken by a single word (e.g. the forms of the lexeme sing are singing, sang, sings, etc.). The same test was then used in Weeks 5, 10 and 15 of the course to assess the impact of the course on the students' performance.

In Week 1, the students were initiated into the notion of extensive reading by listening to me presenting my favourite book in class. Then, I elicited from the students the meaning of 'extensive reading' and asked them to brainstorm its possible benefits for them. A tour of the college's library was organised in Week 2 to familiarise the students with the available reading material. They were encouraged to select any material that they deemed interesting and pertinent to their needs and to read it in their spare time. They were advised to start reading low-level readers first so as to increase their confidence in reading a book each week. A lesson on speed reading followed this tour to show the students ways of reading for gist without the use of a dictionary.

In Week 3, the students and I created a class blog so that they could post comments weekly about the books they had read, raise interesting topics for discussion, exchange ideas, and communicate with one another. The blog resulted in a positive atmosphere of co-operation and solidarity in class as the creation of the blog became a joint effort, which motivated even the most reluctant students to participate. The students also created an extensive 'reading corner' in the classroom where they placed cards with new words and definitions in a box which could be used when completing activities and doing revision. A poster was also hung on the wall indicating their names, the number of books read each week, and those they recommended to other students. In Week 5, I conducted an interview with the students to gather information about their progress, needs and attitudes towards reading and the program, and used the notes that I took during the interview to organise the next stage of the extensive reading program. The students provided valuable feedback on their experiences with speed reading and other reading strategies, understanding unknown words from the context, and participating in class vocabulary activities and discussions.

## **Stage 2 (Weeks 6–10)**

In this stage, the learners were encouraged to start reading higher level readers. Every week a different reading strategy was taught, drawing on Nation's (2001) framework (Appendix 1). In particular, I focused on word use and constraints on word use. I organised reading sessions in class once a week for an hour, introducing various vocabulary activities taken from

Bamford and Day (2004), such as ‘back to the board’. In this activity, a student from one team stands with their back to the whiteboard and the teacher then writes up the word. The student has to guess it by utilising clues such as synonyms, antonyms and examples provided by members of their team.

The students also presented and discussed the books they had read and I took this strategy further by organising vocabulary discussion groups where they discussed the meaning and uses of new words that they had encountered while reading. I endeavoured to involve the students in the design of all these activities as it gave them the opportunity to use the language in their own contexts, and discover the different uses of lexical items. I then gauged their use of new words by evaluating their presentations of book summaries and reports and other class activities, and by collecting and analysing data from their blog. In Week 10, another interview was held to continue evaluating the impact of the program on the students’ motivation and reading habits.

### **Stage 3 (Weeks 11–15)**

In the last five weeks of the course, the students had the opportunity to read authentic reading material. They could choose any article they were interested in but they were advised to select books and/or journals from the hospitality industry field to become more familiar with the specialised vocabulary of the subjects they were going to study. The students, divided into groups, chose a chapter or an article that they wanted to read, and presented the main points to their group.

In Week 13, I interviewed the students to find out whether or not they could engage with the authentic texts. They indicated that they knew how to identify the salient points of texts and read without relying on their dictionaries. This achievement increased their confidence in their reading ability when handling authentic texts. One student commented: ‘In my experience, when I read a book as I did the first time to study in English, I used to find all of words what I didn’t know. But I couldn’t understand that book at all. Now I know the skills such as skimming that can help me read quickly. I thought it is really working.’ Another one pointed out: ‘I can guess the words I don’t know and I don’t need to use my dictionary all times. Just skip that word and keep going while you reading.’

In Week 15, a writing post-test similar to the pre-test was used to assess the impact of the extensive reading program on the students’ lexical development.

## Outcomes of the research

As I conducted my AR, the findings from the data collection procedures I described above helped to shape the direction of both my teaching and my further research.

The first needs analysis questionnaire data (see Table 1) revealed that eight of the 10 participants disliked reading books in English and were not avid readers even in their own language. One of them stated, for example, 'reading is important, but reading a book takes time because I can't understand a new word'. I followed up these findings in the interviews and discovered that text difficulty was the main reason behind most students' reluctance to read. The majority (nine) of the students reported that they felt inundated and intimidated by the vast amount of unfamiliar lexis in English.

In Week 15, I gave the students a similar needs analysis questionnaire. Their attitude towards reading appeared to have changed substantially as nine out of 10 respondents indicated that they had started to enjoy reading in English, as the findings from the second questionnaire demonstrate (see Table 2). In addition, most of the students mentioned that they now read at least once a week, with three of them even reading every day. These responses were in marked contrast to those from the first questionnaire and provided further support for the positive influence of the extensive reading program on the students' approach to reading.

The students' views on what makes reading an enjoyable experience and whether it could improve their vocabulary are also worth noting. The results of both questionnaires showed that they considered that reading for fun is important. However, in the second questionnaire some students' additional comments on the value of enjoyable reading material strongly indicated the central role that the extensive reading sessions had played in shaping their attitudes:

I now love reading because I have fun when I read.

I now know that easy and interesting books can teach me a lot of words.

Only if you are interested in reading, you will not do it as a job, and you will like doing it every day.

I can better understand what I've read about.

Furthermore, the majority of the students stated that interesting content and Hospitality Management-related reading material made the reading experience more enjoyable. It seemed that not only reading for pleasure but also for information related to their content areas motivated them to engage actively in reading. Clearly, reading development can be helped when the teacher becomes familiar with the interests and the needs of the students at the beginning of the program.



**Table 1 Results from needs analysis questionnaire (conducted in Stage 1)**

Q1. Did you enjoy reading at school?	Q2. How often did you borrow books from your school or local library?	Q3. Do you like reading books in English?	Q4. How many times do you read a week?	Q5. How many books have you read in the last six months?	Q6. Do you prefer reading online content or hard copies?	Q7. Do you read in order to learn new things?	Q8. Do you think that reading for fun is important?	Q9. What would make reading more enjoyable?	Q10. Do you think your vocabulary improves as you read?
Yes (2)	Sometimes (1)	Yes (2)	Once a week (4)	1 (6)	Online (6)	Yes (8)	Yes (9)	Pictures (2)	Yes (9)
No (8)	Once a month (3)	No (8)	Sometimes (2)	2 (2)	Hard copy (4)	No (0)	No (0)	Interesting content (6)	No (1)
	Never (3)		Rarely (2) Never (2)	3-4 (2)		Sometimes (2)	Sometimes (1)	Funny story (2)	

Table 2 Results from needs analysis questionnaire (conducted in Stage 3)

Q1. Do you like reading books in English?	Q2. How many times do you read a week?	Q3. How many books have you read in the last six months?	Q4. Do you prefer reading online content or hard copies?	Q5. Do you read in order to learn new things?	Q6. Do you think that reading for fun is important?	Q7. What would make reading more enjoyable?	Q8. Do you think your vocabulary improves as you read?	Q9. Did you use a dictionary when you read a new word?
Yes (9)	Once a week (7)	15 (6)	Online content (4)	Yes (9)	Yes (9)	Pictures (2)	Yes (9)	Yes (2)
No (0)	Sometimes (0)	20 (2)	Hard copies (6)	No (0)	No (0)	Interesting content (2)	No (0)	No (4)
Sometimes (1)	Every day (3)	30 (2)		Sometimes (1)	Sometimes (1)	Hospitality-related content (6)	Sometimes (1)	Sometimes (4)
	Never (0)							

The results from the pre-test, the monthly tests (administered in Weeks 5 and 10), and the post-test (see Appendices 3–5), as indicated in Table 3, show that there is a notable improvement in the learners' productive skills, which might have been a result of the extensive reading program. As noted earlier, the assessment criteria used in the writing test were: task response, cohesion/coherence, vocabulary range, vocabulary use, and grammatical accuracy. Each criterion carried a maximum of 5 marks, the total available mark being 25. The three test tasks were quite similar as they required the students to describe a good language learner (the pre-test and the post-test) and a successful hospitality industry professional (monthly tests) and identify main skills and characteristics.

**Table 3 Writing test results**

Students*	Writing pre-test Week 1	Writing monthly test Week 5	Writing monthly test Week 10	Writing post-test Week 15
Michael	10/25	12/25	14/25	16/25
Sarah	12/25	13/25	15/25	16/25
Catherine	10/25	12/25	15/25	17/25
Danny	8/25	9/25	13/25	15/25
Daniel	8/25	9/25	12/25	14/25
Anne	13/25	14/25	16/25	17/25
Vivian	14/25	15/25	16/25	18/25
Ken	12/25	13/25	15/25	16/25
David	15/25	16/25	17/25	18/25
Brandon	16/25	17/25	19/25	21/25

\*pseudonyms

In order to show the impact of the program on some of the students in more detail, I now describe the cases of two of the students. I focus on these two students, Catherine and Danny, because they faced not only tremendous difficulties in developing their lexical repertoire, but also seemed very demotivated to learn English and to improve their reading before the commencement of the extensive reading program.

### **Case 1: Catherine**

Catherine was a timid student who had been in Australia for about 10 months and lived with her relatives in a south-western suburb of Sydney. She had studied in a General English program, which aimed to improve general language proficiency, for about nine months prior to enrolling in the Direct Entry Programme. In the first interview I conducted with her, Catherine

stated that she was more concerned about her family and some personal problems than her level of English, and therefore, had neglected her studies. She hardly used English at home or at work and she said she had difficulty communicating with native speakers as her vocabulary was fairly limited. From the beginning of the extensive reading program, Catherine made a concerted effort to participate fully. It was exceedingly motivating for her to realise that she could contribute constructively to the reading and speaking tasks, as she mentioned in one of her blog postings. She stated that 'I can understand, remember the story and discuss with the teacher when she asked about the story'. After a class session on speed reading, Catherine noted: 'This skill can help me to read more books and newspapers later. When I read a book before, I usually worried a lot about new vocabulary I didn't know. But now, I can concentrate on the main words in the story and remember. I think this skill makes me more confident.'

As noted earlier, Catherine and most of the other students in the course hardly read any texts in English due to the overwhelming amount of unknown lexis. However, developing skills such as skimming, scanning and guessing unknown words from the context increased their confidence and their willingness to read English texts. With regard to skimming, Catherine maintained that 'this skill can improve my reading as well. I can read more quickly and catch the main ideas'. During the course, her written texts also began to show an increase in lexical density and variation, which suggested that the extensive reading program was having an impact on her progress. Catherine stated in her blog that she now read newspapers, magazines or articles on the internet and she had the confidence to recommend interesting articles and books to her friends. These findings indicate that for Catherine there was a positive relationship between her active involvement in the learning process and her confidence to immerse herself more in English. After 15 weeks, Catherine reached the required level for entry into the Hospitality Management course as her writing skills increased substantially (see Table 3).

## **Case 2: Danny**

Danny had also studied General English for more than four months without making any notable progress before he joined this Direct Entry Programme. He was under pressure from his parents to finish his English studies and commence his course in Hospitality. Danny considered the Direct Entry Programme as just another English course which was going to waste his time, and was very reluctant to participate in any class tasks and activities. After the first week of the program, Danny's attitude seemed to change and he explained in his first interview that he realised that he had the opportunity to improve his level of English and gain knowledge of discipline-specific terms.

He also stated that he had never read English books or articles in the past as he consumed an inordinate amount of time searching for unfamiliar lexis.

In the first two weeks of the extensive reading program, Danny was still reluctant to participate in the reading activities and was lagging behind the other students. However, his regular interviews with me, the selection of readers at pre-intermediate level which were of interest to him, and the vocabulary and writing tasks he completed brought about a significant change in Danny's attitude. As he mentioned in his blog, he now spent two to three days reading a book in English. He also created a vocabulary notebook which he organised under headings and handed in every week for correction and feedback. These activities empowered Danny as indicated by his postings on his blog, where he stated: 'I learned that I don't need to use dictionary when I read a book. I can understand while I am reading the book without dictionary. If I don't use a dictionary while I am studying English, I can understand all about the word from a sentence and explain it without dictionary.'

It was encouraging to notice Danny's progress and the impact that the sessions had on his motivation to learn. As he asserts in another posting: 'I felt more confident than before about my English skills but I'm not still that good enough. If I keep reading a book like this, I can read a newspaper without any grammar and vocabulary problems.' Although he still expressed his limitations, Danny appeared more confident to become immersed in English through reading.

The analysis of Danny's written texts in the tests indicated that despite the fact that he was weaker than the other students he managed to advance his vocabulary, as shown in particular by the lexical variation in his texts. It was interesting to notice that he started to use collocations more accurately, both in his texts on the blog and in the tests he wrote. The use of blogs can provide students with a tension-free environment where they can voice their opinions and communicate with the teacher or others without any restrictions. Danny utilised this facility to post his book reports, reflect on insights into his own learning, and recommend books and articles to his classmates and friends, which also facilitated his lexical advancement as he practised using new lexis in new contexts.

The analysis in Table 4 of Catherine and Danny's development of lexical density over the various tasks they completed shows that both made progress during the course. The slight increase in lexical items used in their written texts may also reflect their increased awareness of the features of written language, which can be attributed to their widening exposure to print during the extensive reading program. Similar improvements can be noticed in Table 5 through analysis of the lexical variation shown in their texts.

Interestingly, the increase in the use of different vocabulary items was at a slower pace between the pre-test and the monthly test in Week 5 than in

**Table 4 Lexical density**

Test	Catherine	Danny
Pre-test Week 1	52.41	43.08
Task 1	52.68	44.44
Monthly test Week 5	53.73	45.38
Task 2	54.92	52.68
Task 3	60.53	54.63
Monthly test Week 10	60.63	54.75
Task 4	60.91	56.86
Task 5	62.28	61.8
Post-test Week 15	62.55	62.12

**Table 5 Lexical variation**

Test	Catherine	Danny
Pre-test Week 1	51.42	43.16
Task 1	51.5	43.18
Monthly test Week 5	52.5	44.7
Task 2	53.61	52.33
Task 3	59.53	53.12
Monthly test Week 10	59.64	54.15
Task 4	59.74	55.24
Task 5	61.12	60.56
Post-test Week 15	61.24	60.75

the following 10 weeks. This improvement was most evident towards the last five weeks of the course. The same trend can be seen in Table 4, which might indicate the impact, not only of daily exposure to reading but also of authentic texts, on students' knowledge of vocabulary, since the students started to read more books after Week 5 and the authentic readers were introduced after Week 10. While it is not possible to claim any causal links between the extensive reading program, student test scores, and the analyses of lexical density and variation, the findings illustrate the noticeable improvements the students made while they participated in the research.

## Conclusion

Overall, the findings from my first steps into AR have highlighted a number of issues. First, conducting research gave me a deeper understanding of my students and of my teaching. My classroom investigation increased my understanding of the challenges my students faced in reading English as well as the way that they approached this important skill. It also increased my

knowledge of the nature of reading and ways to facilitate the implementation of an extensive reading program. Second, the research heightened my awareness of the importance of engaging students in the learning process and incorporating meaningful activities that address their needs. Through my discussions with the students and the interviews I held with them I was able to learn about and discuss skills that could be improved, suggest activities or reading material that could support them in their extensive reading, and relate more to the personal and emotional factors in their learning. I became more aware that I needed to encourage the students' participation in decisions made about the kinds of texts and tasks they wanted to read, which would give them greater opportunity to understand the value of reading for their language development, which in turn increased their motivation to participate. The use of blogs also provided me with significant information about the students and the nature of their motivation to read and improve their vocabulary.

Finally, I also gained relevant knowledge and skills to investigate new ways to intervene successfully in a challenging teaching situation. My involvement in research enabled me to reflect on my teaching practice in a more focused and systematic way, which resulted in my experimentation with new pedagogical approaches. Even more importantly, I have been able to encourage other teachers at my college to join me in exploring new ideas for a more widespread extensive reading program. Therefore, AR has continued to shape the professional culture of my college as teacher collaboration and joint enquiry have now become integral parts of our programs.

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# Appendix 1

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## Nation’s framework

What is involved in knowing a word? (adapted from Nation 2001:27)

Form	Spoken
	Written
	Word parts
Meaning	Form and meaning
	Concept and references
	Associations
Use	Grammatical functions
	Collocations

# Appendix 2

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## Interview questions

- Name:
- Date of birth:
- Place of birth:
- Nationality:
- Occupation:
- How long have you been in Australia?
- How long have you studied English?
- Educational background**
- Age left school:
- Year/Grade reached:
- Was education/schooling interrupted?
- Subjects you enjoyed at school:
- Check the highest level of education attained:
- Secondary
- Vocational



Enrolled in undergraduate  
Completed undergraduate  
Enrolled in postgraduate  
Completed postgraduate  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 3

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### Writing pre-test (Week 1)

What are the characteristics of a good language learner? Select three of the most important characteristics from the following list and support them with information and examples from your own experience.

A good language learner:

- is independent; can work without the teacher's help
- is organised
- likes doing things in English outside the classroom
- practises new language and does not worry too much about making mistakes
- is aware of the close relationship between language and culture
- reads a lot.

Write about 150 words and use appropriate paragraphing.

## Appendix 4

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### Writing monthly test (Weeks 5, 10)

What are the main skills and attributes needed to be a successful hospitality industry professional?

Write about 150 words and use appropriate paragraphing.

## Appendix 5

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### Writing post-test (Week 15)

Which of the following characteristics of a good language learner did you try to develop during the 15 weeks of your course and why?

A good language learner:

- is independent; can work without the teacher's help
- is organised
- likes doing things in English outside the classroom
- practices new language and does not worry too much about making mistakes
- is aware of the close relationship between language and culture
- reads a lot.

# 17 **Developing and assessing tasks for critical reading for the EAP classroom**

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## **Introduction**

English language students are travelling internationally more frequently in order to further their education, and are often required to undertake additional language study before admission to their chosen university course. To this end, universities now offer specialised English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses that focus on providing the skills needed for success at university. One such set of skills is critical reading. Critical reading skills are considered essential for student success in the Australian academic context, as well as elsewhere. However, it is common for international students to need to acquire and expand such reading skills to support their university study. These skills are not only essential to further academic studies at university but also for non-academic situations where students need to evaluate information. Observations of students in my own EAP classes showed that critical reading was an area in the EAP program which would benefit from further attention. In this chapter I describe the action research (AR) I conducted to enhance my students' learning in this area.

## **Context and participants**

My AR project, which I conducted with a colleague, was located at Macquarie University English Language Centre (MQELC) and three different classes were involved across three teaching blocks of five weeks each. International students at MQELC are offered two main program streams: General English and EAP. For those students who do not meet the required English levels for entry into EAP, completion of the General English stream is usually expected. Students can then go on into the EAP stream, particularly if they are intending to undertake further study at Macquarie University. There are four non-discipline-specific EAP courses from the lowest to the most advanced, Academic 1–4, (A1–4). Each EAP course consists of five weeks of study. Following completion of the non-discipline academic stream, students

are then placed into the discipline-specific University Entrance Preparation Program (UEPP) courses according to their future studies. Successful completion of their nominated UEPP course allows them direct entry into Macquarie University. These direct entry courses run for a 10-week period and are broadly categorised into the discipline-related areas of Business, Economics and Accounting (BAE), Humanities, Arts and Sciences (HAS), and Education, Translating and Interpreting (ED/TIPP).

The research was conducted in classes at the two highest EAP levels: A4 and the UEPP class of BAE. The language levels of the students in both classes were at B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001). The A4 students were at the lower end of the B2 band whilst the BAE students were at the mid to high range of B2. The majority of these students were intending to continue into Macquarie University Master's degrees with one or two students intending to enrol in Bachelor degrees. In total, 49 students, of which 20 were male and 29 were female, with ages ranging between 18 years and 38 years, across two A4 classes and one BAE class, participated in the research. For ease of identification the A4 classes will be referred to as A4a and A4b.

Class A4a consisted of eight male and eight female students, of whom 11 were Chinese and the rest from Brazil, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, who participated in the AR for approximately two days per week. Class A4b contained four male and 11 female students, 10 of whom were Chinese, and the others Brazilian and Italian; these students only participated one day per week. In the BAE class eight male and 10 female students were enrolled, mostly from China but also one each from India, Italy and Vietnam, and these students participated in the research three days per week. In sum, all the classes consisted of a mixture of students from various countries, with the majority being from China.

## Background and theoretical ideas

In relation to concepts of reading, Widdowson (1984) refers to the 'submissive' reader versus the 'assertive' reader and defines an assertive reading style as one where the reader is able to freely interpret the text and question what they are reading; in contrast, a submissive reader does not question the authority of the text. These concepts fit well with Banks' (2012) notion of 'literal' and 'inferential' reading. She suggests that students who are educated in a system where classroom interaction is primarily one-way, from teacher to student, are more likely to possess underdeveloped skills. They tend to read for literal meaning without moving beyond what is in the text, which means that their use of critical skills is likely to be limited. In comparison, a critical reading approach requires students to be inferential readers and question what they are reading, often requiring them to have more highly developed

critical skills. From my experience and observation, many of the students who came to MQELC seemed to possess an overly submissive reading style which lacked an inferential approach. Consequently, I decided to focus on helping students to develop a more questioning stance during reading and to be able to link this approach not only to academic studies but also the more general social context as a whole.

There was a need to look at what was recommended about teaching approaches to make the development of critical reading skills pedagogically interesting and to encourage more student participation both inside the classroom as well as in their independent study periods outside class. Therefore, work on multimodal approaches, such as Johnson and Rosario-Ramos' (2012) study on the use of multimodal texts (e.g. texts combined with photos or videos) to motivate underperforming English as a Second Language (ESL) students, was also an influence. It was also important to design reading activities and select materials with the needs of the students in mind (Tabari and Mohaddes 2013) and to fine tune them so that they would not only challenge students but also be reasonably achievable (Tomlinson 2003). In doing so, appropriate assessment tasks also needed to be built in to evaluate the students' progress.

## Research focus and questions

Initially my focus was on the creation of tasks for critical reading from my own perspective; however, as the research proceeded, this focus shifted to the learners and their motivations for reading. This meant placing more interest in what motivated students to read critically and how to encourage them to do so. I also wanted to explore whether these approaches would assist in improving the students' achievements in this course. This focus was reflected in the development of the research questions, which became:

1. How can I encourage students to engage more critically with a text?
2. How can I design tasks to encourage students to read critically?
3. To what extent can students' assessment scores be improved through these approaches?

I decided to extend the use of multimodal texts, as in the course the students were required to critically read a variety of materials, such as websites, and audio-visual material. I also felt that students needed to develop an understanding of the importance of critical reading skills in both academic and non-academic contexts of use, as well as to encourage the transfer of those skills from their L1 (Wilson 2016).

## Research procedures

My AR extended over two cycles which covered different lengths of time. The first cycle was conducted over five weeks with two classes: A4a (two days per week) and A4b (one day per week). The duration of the second cycle was 10 weeks: BAE for three days per week for the first five weeks and two days per week for the second five weeks. A group of students often only remained together in the same class for the duration of one cycle because of the institution's continuous enrolment policy. Therefore, class participants, with the exception of one or two participants, changed in Cycle 2 because of the division of student classes into disciplinary specialisations at the UEPP level or because new students arrived and needed to be placed into classes. As a result, some flexibility in my approach was needed and activities I used in Cycle 2 were based on the skills that students were expected to have at that level, rather than the skill outcomes required in their previous lower level courses. In addition to in-class and independent activities, while Cycle 1 provided scaffolded tasks to introduce students to concepts and strategies of critical reading, Cycle 2 was intended to challenge the students by focusing on the transfer of their L1 critical reading skills and their further development of those skills in English. I also intended to raise students' awareness of the use of critical reading skills in both academic and non-academic situations.

The cycles of research were intended to build upon each other. In each cycle, I conducted an initial survey to ascertain which elements of critical reading were most important to the students (see Appendix 1). After considering both the survey results and my own teaching experience, other factors also needed to be taken into account in the creation of the tasks, such as course content, aims and materials. Depending on the class, a combination of approaches was used whenever possible in each class. These included:

- graded authentic texts (authentic texts with language graded to an appropriate level for the students) selected to match each appropriate level by the curriculum team and included in the course syllabus
- multimodal material which tied into the readings to provide stimulation and variety
- integration of the material into the existing curriculum requirements to ensure time efficiency for teacher and students
- integration of tests that would assess the progress students were making.

Throughout the research I mainly used a qualitative approach to collecting data, based on observations and open-ended questions, with some quantitative data in the form of percentages derived from students' survey answers and test scores. First, my own observations of the class throughout the cycles aimed to monitor the level of student understanding, engagement and interest in the activities. I also wanted to ascertain whether these aspects would

lead to improved results gained in the tests. In both courses, reading tests were conducted to assess students. Other forms of data collection included audio and video recordings of students completing the tasks (taken during in-class activities) and student materials from tasks. I collected data throughout all the cycles whenever a relevant activity was used in class. In addition, after Cycle 2, follow-up focus groups of a few students who had participated in the BAE class were organised to obtain feedback on whether students felt the approach had assisted in their subsequent tertiary studies at Macquarie University.

## Cycle 1

The first cycle ran for five weeks and involved the two A4 level classes: A4a and A4b. The classes used graded texts from the course syllabus and multimodal material such as photos and film clips. The initial survey results from A4a and A4b were mixed and did not show a common pattern, so I used my discretion to decide which aspects of critical reading should be focused on. Based on Coffey's (2011) guidelines for critical reading, I designed activities to incorporate a variety of texts, which were chosen in an attempt to challenge students and also take broader social aspects into consideration when evaluating topics. Following Coffey, I used a combination of approaches whenever possible: using graded authentic texts appropriate for the A4 level, and importantly, using the already existing course materials and extending them to include multimodal material and activities which were presented through scaffolded tasks. The use of the current course material had advantages for me as the teacher and also for the students, as the texts used were already graded as being appropriate for the A4 level, and the already content-heavy course load was not further extended.

The multimodal material I used, which included YouTube clips for example, incorporated academic and non-academic contexts and genres. Wherever possible, lessons were linked not only to academic reading purposes but also non-academic ones, with students being encouraged to provide examples drawn from their own personal lives and their L1 use of texts whenever possible. My aim was to encourage students to recognise how the critical reading skills they learned were relevant in many contexts, academic and non-academic, as well as to their use of both L1 and L2. To support this aim, the material and activities I included were intended to help students transfer the critical reading skills they had in their L1 to English.

One example of a classroom task was a YouTube video of an advertisement for Evian water, entitled *The Amazing Spider-Man Evian "Baby & Me 2"* (2014). The cult-hero, Spider-Man, was used in this advertisement to promote the product. The clip was chosen because for the majority of the film clip only images and music are provided and students were likely already

to have knowledge of Spider-Man from their L1. It is not evident for most of the clip that it is an advertisement. In the lesson, I stopped the clip before the Evian brand was revealed. Students were asked to discuss the purpose of the clip and they suggested ideas, such as a movie trailer for a Spider-Man movie. The remainder of the film clip was then played to reveal the Evian branding and the slogan 'Drink pure and natural' and 'Live young'. I asked the students to discuss the link between the advertisement and the slogan. This process took advantage of the students' knowledge of Spider-Man and the Evian water brand, and introduced them to the kinds of critical reading perspectives they could bring to understanding the meanings and messages in advertisements.

This approach was extended in later classes through the use of images to prompt students' understanding and speculation about texts and to encourage them to talk about their interpretations of the texts. To elaborate on the task, students were prepared by being divided into groups of four or five and were given a handout with two different photographs (Appendix 2). They were asked to discuss them and instructed to note down anything they understood about them as a group. The groups then provided feedback to the class based on their discussions. Depending on their feedback, I then asked open-ended questions, such as 'What are the children in the pictures doing?' or 'Why do you think that?' to get them to think further about their responses. It was clear that students began to realise that different groups interpreted the photos differently and they also began to change their opinions in response to my questions and comments. The students were then shown the original article accompanying each photograph and then further similar discussion was encouraged. Once this process was completed, the students read the article in their course notes which covered a similar topic (Turnbull 2010). Students were then placed into new groups to discuss the article.

My observation notes recorded that there was a heightened engagement and more complex understanding of the text compared with reading that proceeded without extended lead-in activities. In later lessons, on completion of group activities, students worked individually and were asked to write down any questions relating to the topic or text. Over the duration of the research, in most cases, the questions they asked became more critical and reflective, indicating an improvement in their critical skills. Whereas at first the questions were sometimes unrelated to the reading, over time they developed and also began to be related to issues which may have been not addressed directly in the text. Through activities such as these, A4 students were introduced to the basic concepts of critical reading and were encouraged to become more questioning about all aspects of the texts.

In the final week of the course all students underwent a final summative assessment. The test (which is still currently being used so the topic cannot be included here) consists of a question paper and an answer sheet. The question



paper contains one reading passage of 879 words on a generic topic, divided into seven paragraphs with three of the paragraphs each missing the topic sentence. Students are given a time limit of 40 minutes to complete 15 questions, which are divided into four types. Questions 1–3 relate to identifying and matching the correct topic sentences to those paragraphs with the topic sentences missing. Only three sentences are needed but students are given five to choose from. In Questions 4–7 students are required to match opinions given in the reading to the appropriate person or organisation name – again more names than needed are provided. Questions 8–12 consist of gap-fill activities which require exact words from the reading text. In these activities students must use no more than four words to answer each question. In addition, the answers provided for gap-fill questions must be grammatically correct and free of spelling errors. The final three questions, 13–15, are multiple choice and students have a choice of four answers. During the test students may write their answers on the question paper but these answers must be transferred to the answer sheet before the end of the test time limit. Students are not allowed any resources such as dictionaries, and all mobile phones are collected before the test to avoid any student access. The tests are conducted across the A4 classes simultaneously while class teachers act as invigilators.

## Cycle 2

The second cycle was conducted with one BAE class over a 10-week period. I decided that BAE would follow the same approach as that taken in the A4 classes, as students seemed to respond well to the approach. As this second AR cycle related to a direct entry university course, I decided to focus more closely on critical reading skills needed for academic study, such as critically evaluating sources. At the commencement of the course, as in the previous cycle, all BAE students completed the survey to ascertain what they believed to be their strengths, weaknesses and needs in the critical reading skills area.

The BAE student responses to the survey indicated that they were interested in improving most aspects of critical reading without any specific area appearing to be of particular concern. In view of these responses, and because of the success I had experienced with the A4 classes, I decided to adopt a similar approach in BAE. I again scaffolded tasks by introducing the various topics through multimodal resources and the use of the authentic texts included in the syllabus for this course. I also extended and adapted the existing course material to include multimodal activities. As with the A4 students before them, BAE students were encouraged continually to question the texts they read. In addition, extra independent reading activities aimed at developing reading fluency, skimming, scanning and intensive critical reading skills, were included. Since the course already included a heavier

content load than the A4 level, many of the tasks were provided to the students as extra-curricular activities. The advantage was that students could complete these activities at their own pace and then report back to me with any questions, or request further activities. As the extra-curricular reading activities were undertaken on a voluntary basis, there was variation in the degree to which the students completed all the activities.

As the 10-week BAE course was longer than the A4 course, the assessment process included two reading tests: one mid-course assessment and one final assessment. As for the A4 classes, these tests are still currently being used so the topic cannot be included. The mid-course test consists of a question paper and an answer sheet. The question paper contains one reading passage of 1,000 words on a generic topic, divided into eight paragraphs. Students are given a time limit of 35 minutes to complete 15 questions, which are divided into four types. Questions 1–4 relate to identifying and matching the correct information statement to each paragraph. Only four statements are given. In Questions 5–9 students are required to match comments provided in the reading to the appropriate person – eight names are given but there are only five comments; therefore, more names than needed are provided. Questions 10–12 consist of gap-fill activities which require exact words from the reading text. In these activities students must use no more than three words to answer each question. In addition, the answers provided for gap-fill questions must be grammatically correct and free of spelling errors. The final three questions, 13–15, are multiple choice with a selection of four answers. During the test students may write their answers on the question paper but these answers must be transferred to the answer sheet before the end of the test time limit. Students are not allowed any resources such as dictionaries, and again all mobile phones are collected before the test to avoid any student access, and the tests are conducted across the BAE classes simultaneously while class teachers act as invigilators.

The final test also consists of a question paper and an answer sheet. The question paper contains two reading passages on generic topics. The first reading passage of 1,028 words is divided into eight paragraphs, whilst the second passage of 739 words is divided into seven paragraphs. Students are given a time limit of 50 minutes to complete 20 questions. Questions 1–13 relate to reading passage one and Questions 14–20 relate to reading passage two. Overall, there are five different types of questions. Questions 1–4 involve choosing the correct headings for four of the paragraphs from eight headings provided. Questions 5–10 require the student to identify the person making the comment in the reading. There are seven names to choose from for the six comments. Questions 11–13 and Questions 19–20 consist of gap-fill activities which require exact words from the reading text. In these activities students must use no more than two words to answer each question. In addition, the answers provided for the gap-fill questions must be grammatically correct

and free of spelling errors. Questions 14–16 are multiple choice with a choice of four answers, and in Questions 17–18 students must identify which are the two true statements from a list of five statements. During the test students may write their answers on the question paper but these answers must be transferred to the answer sheet before the end of the test time limit. The procedures regarding use of dictionaries, mobile phones and invigilation are the same as for the mid-course assessment.

## Findings

The main aim of this AR was to learn more about how to encourage intermediate level EAP students to engage more critically with texts and to develop resources and tasks that would meet that aim. To do so, I believed it was necessary to utilise the critical reading abilities the students already possessed in their L1 and to convert them into transferable skills for the ESL classroom and for other contexts in their wider social lives. I discovered that it is essential to ensure the activities and materials used at each level are appropriate and to offer the students enough variety and stimulation to challenge and engage them in the classroom and beyond. Overall, the main findings were: 1) students were often not aware of their own needs; 2) students became more critical readers; 3) there appeared to be a slight increase in students' reading scores; and 4) student 'buy-in' and integration of critical reading into the existing syllabus were important factors. These main findings are now discussed in detail.

### **1) Students were often not aware of their own needs**

It emerged that students did not always have a realistic understanding of their actual needs. When the survey results for the A4 classes were examined, students noted a wide variety of areas as being of importance and needing to be developed. However, when questioned further about their responses, students seemed to express different needs, despite having discussed the meanings of the items in the survey (Appendix 1) extensively before completing it.

There could be several reasons to account for this finding. Students may not have been familiar with the idea of completing a self-assessment needs analysis. In addition, they may not have fully understood the descriptions of the different critical reading sub-skills in the survey, or their understanding and my understanding of these needs analysis items may have differed. I may have overestimated students' familiarity with the concepts, which means that in any future research, definitions of the skills should be made more specific and also written in simpler English to avoid misinterpretation. Moreover, many of the students may not have been familiar with the concept of critical literacy skills from their previous educational backgrounds, and therefore

were not well equipped to accurately self-assess their abilities in critical reading in English.

As a result I found it necessary to develop tasks in accordance with the class performance of the students rather than their survey responses. Through further observation of the students during the project I found that students' self-needs analyses continued to be only partly accurate. In sum, when deciding what critical reading tasks to focus on in the classroom, self-identified student needs should only be considered as part of the teacher's decision-making process.

## **2) Students became more critical readers**

In the A4 classes involved in Cycle 1, the use of texts which were already part of the prescribed syllabus proved to work well, and together with the supplementary material I introduced, such as photographs and short film clips, they not only enhanced the students' understanding but also provided variety in the material used for critical reading. The scaffolded tasks, which were intended to support students to move beyond their current skills in critical reading (see Appendix 2) also led to more student engagement. Through my observations I noticed that students began to participate more in discussion about the topic and started to voice opinions related to, but not specifically addressed in, the text. Students also asked questions about the reading and topic area, and over the period of the course started to ask more critical questions. For example, in relation to the use of child labour, students questioned why companies do not research thoroughly before buying resources from other countries to ensure they are obtained ethically.

In addition, students seemed to gain greater understanding of how critical skills from their L1 were still relevant in learning English in both academic and non-academic environments. Feedback was obtained via small focus groups (of four to five students) to ascertain how the activities and tasks assisted with the development and improvement in critical reading skills. The feedback received was positive overall, and some students indicated in the focus group sessions that they were interested in learning more about how to read critically. To ensure my research was continuing to meet their needs, once a week the class would have a short meeting where the students would raise issues and give me feedback. During this time, students regularly requested additional critical reading activities in class activities as well as work they could complete at home, which testified to their motivation to improve their reading skills.

A similar outcome was noticeable in Cycle 2 with the BAE class. The students reported that they were able to relate the critical reading skills they were learning to the texts they read in class as well as to their independent reading activities outside class, and provided feedback to support this. Students

regularly commented on how they found they started to consider more issues related to the topics they were reading about that were not actually touched on in the reading. A regular comment during the short weekly feedback meetings I held was that they wanted more independent reading activities as they found them very useful to develop their skills. Students reported that the more they read, and the more they read diverse topics, their reading speed, vocabulary building and understanding improved, which was advantageous in the reading assessments. An end-of-course feedback discussion revealed that the majority of students believed they had improved their ability to critically assess a variety of texts and situations, and to do so at a faster speed. As one student noted: 'Before, I could not finish the test and could not find the answers so did not do well in reading but after doing the reading activities I was able to read faster and find the right answers and understand quickly and my test result was higher.' Overall it seems reasonable to claim that the project was successful in raising the students' awareness of the importance of critical literacy and increasing their ability to read more critically in both academic and non-academic situations.

Feedback obtained from focus group interviews, conducted with five BAE students approximately one month after they had completed the course, revealed that developing their critical reading skills had made them feel more confident in undertaking their university studies. The students reported that they had developed ways to handle the heavy reading load of their university courses. One student commented: 'There's so much reading in accounting but I can read it and understand better.' In addition, the students reported an increase in their questioning of texts during and after reading, which improved their ability to understand and link the contents to related topics outside the text. Moreover, students who had completed all of the independent activities in my course appeared to have experienced increased benefits, as compared to those who only completed some of the readings.

### **3) There appeared to be a slight increase in students' reading scores**

Test scores recorded for the students in this AR showed a slight increase. However, the amount of time spent in each class that related to the processes of the AR may also be linked to this improvement. For example, class A4a were involved in the research for two days a week and obtained an average reading test score of 59.4, while the average reading test score for the A4b class, which only participated for one day per week, was 47.5. Although this marked difference of 11.9 between the two classes is not conclusive, and cannot be attributed solely to the critical reading focus since other factors may have intervened, it is certainly interesting to note. Furthermore, scores from the BAE class over the 10-week period also showed an increase. At the

Week 5 mid-course reading test the average score was 46.2; however, in the final reading test in Week 9 the average was 52.5, an increase of 6.3. This difference is a more consistent measure of what students achieved as a result of the course, because the final test was more difficult than the mid-course test and the group used for this comparison remained constant for the whole 10-week period.

#### **4) Student ‘buy-in’ and integration of critical reading into the existing syllabus were important factors**

In this research I found it was very important to encourage student investment in the classroom activities and tasks. Gaining students’ understanding of the importance of critical reading was essential, particularly when they had little experience or awareness of critical reading from their previous education. I found that the way in which a task was presented could affect students’ investment in it. So, including a variety of interesting texts and resources, which would also integrate into the prescribed syllabus and assessment and did not place an unnecessary extra workload on the students, was also vital. This was particularly evident at the UEPP level of BAE, as the students were heading for university study in different disciplines.

The A4 (Cycle 1) and BAE (Cycle 2) responses to the tasks and the way they were introduced were based on qualitative student feedback and observations in the classroom. In each class, the graded authentic texts from the course material were used and presented in a variety of ways. I also found that scaffolding the tasks to align with the students’ current skills and knowledge, and the use of multimodality were important. I noticed through my regular classroom observations that when a scaffolded approach was used (by introducing the topic through videos or photographs) and the students were encouraged to question and discuss the texts before the introduction of the reading material, they appeared to experience a better understanding of the text. They also tended to formulate more critical questions in the final discussion after the reading. In addition, students commented that they found that both the approach to critical reading in class and the extra-curricular reading activities useful. They not only assisted in the development of their critical reading, but also increased their confidence in reading and applying the skills to their personal life.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this AR project was a rewarding, stimulating and informative learning experience. The process of AR itself provided an opportunity to examine my teaching practices in relation to particular skills areas, adjusting and improving where necessary to benefit the students. Developing the critical

reading tasks and observing student reactions to them allowed me to focus on an area of student reading ability that is not always prioritised in EAP courses, and presented an opportunity to listen closely to the students and integrate their needs and interests into the tasks and resources that were developed. Although it may not be possible for the findings of my research to be replicated in other classrooms, my account of my experiences may allow for teachers working on similar courses and in other contexts to follow up on some of my ideas about enhancing students' reading. Moreover, they may be useful to teachers working in EAP courses not only locally but also nationally and internationally.

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# Appendix 1

## Sample survey sheet

Please answer the following questions about your experience with critical reading.

	Agree	Partly agree	Partly disagree	Disagree	Don't know
a. Can you understand why and how a writer chooses to write about some things and not others?					
b. Do you understand who the writer wants to read the text?					
c. Do you know why a writer chooses certain vocabulary for a text, to persuade a reader?					
d. Is it easy to know why a writer chooses certain grammar forms, to persuade a reader?					
e. Can you see how a text is related to other texts?					
f. Do you understand why certain people and places are included in a text, but others are not?					
g. Can you understand the background of the text if it is not explained?					
h. Do you understand how who the author is, and where the text is published can tell us more about the text itself?					
i. Do you know how the structure and meaning of the text is influenced by the type of text it is (e.g. advertisement, academic journal article)?					

What critical reading skills are important to you? Put them in order: 1= very important and/or I want to learn this, 9= not important and/or I'm not interested in learning this.

1.      2.      3.      4.      5.      6.      7.      8.      9.

Do you have any comments about your critical reading?



## Appendix 2

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### Example of in-class activity

Look at these two photographs and discuss them with your group members. Note down any ideas you have.



*(Source: Richina 2011)*



*(Source: Walstad 2012)*



## Part 4

### Conclusion



# 18

## **Action research in ELICOS: Impact and insights from a national teacher development program**

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### **Introduction**

As outlined at the beginning of this volume, the Action Research in ELICOS Program was initiated by Australian peak body and professional association, English Australia, to further its strategic goal to strengthen professional practice in teaching, assessment and testing in English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) nationally. The Program is currently guided and facilitated by the first author of this chapter, together with a project officer from English Australia (the second author, from 2009–14), and funded largely by Cambridge English Language Assessment with support from participating colleges. In this final chapter, we evaluate the effectiveness of the Action Research in ELICOS Program. We then discuss the impact that the Program has had at the individual, institutional and sectoral levels, and also consider the impact it has had outside the ELICOS sector.

### **Effectiveness of the Program**

The previous chapters in this publication exemplify achievement of the overall Program goal of equipping teachers with the skills to enable them to explore and address identified teaching challenges in the context of Australian ELICOS, and of sharing outcomes of this research. Over the years, the Program has aimed to take into account practical areas that are of interest and concern to teachers as they go about their daily teaching. These areas typically focus on enhancing students' competence in oral and written skills that prepare them for further study and general language learning. A

crucial aspect of teaching and learning these skills in the ELICOS context is also the assessment and testing processes that accompany the students' participation in these courses. As the chapters in this volume highlight, although the teachers who participate in the Program may focus on investigating particular language skills or core areas of language, such as grammar or pronunciation, they are equally cognisant of the need to prepare their students for various assessments and tests, both internal to the courses in which students are enrolled or external to university entry requirements. Assessment and testing are regarded as routine requirements and outcomes in the development of the various skills; much of the teachers' focus in undertaking their research in this Program is thus directed towards achieving effective learning outcomes for their students, and to this end, enhancing their own professional competence in teaching, assessment and testing.

The Program, with its primary goal of strengthening quality teaching, assessment and testing in ELICOS, now has wide recognition and support from the association's membership (see the 'Impact on the ELICOS sector' section later in this chapter). In the following three sections we outline how we believe this goal has been achieved by: the development of teachers actively involved in classroom research (via the Program); the development of teacher peer networks; increased teacher engagement with research and academic researchers; and the increased number of teachers furthering their formal professional development.

### **Teachers actively involved in classroom research**

Although there are no official figures on the number of ELICOS teachers in Australia, when the Program was first set up it was estimated that there were over 2,000 in more than 270 colleges around the country. As of January 2017, a total of 66 teachers from 26 ELICOS institutions in most states and territories across Australia had participated directly in the Program. The level of experience of the participants ranges widely from 2 to 28 years, with 12 years being the average. Generally speaking, participants in each Program have all learned from each other, strengthening their theoretical and practical knowledge about teaching, testing and assessment, in the atmosphere of mutual exchange and collaboration encouraged within the Program.

Interest in and uptake of the Program have been gradual but increasing. Although the typical number of projects in each year's Program is six, the number of participating teachers has grown steadily each year, as teachers often opt to work in pairs to complete a project. The number of expressions of interest received by English Australia has also increased each year from a base of 12 in 2010, reaching 19 in 2016. It will be interesting to monitor the growth of interest in future Programs to discern whether it will attract increasing applications as the impact of the Program spreads further.

## **Increased teacher engagement with research and academic researchers**

This aspect of the Program was an area of particular interest for English Australia as the ELICOS in Australia tended to be perceived as a delivery-based ‘service’ industry that does not engage substantially with academic research on language teaching and learning (Burns and Edwards 2014). From English Australia’s perspective, however, it was seen as essential that teachers maintain professional curiosity and a willingness to examine their own teaching and assessment practices throughout their careers. The chapters in this publication show the many ways in which Program participants have investigated their classrooms, using the research of others to inform or support their actions, and working collaboratively with their peers. The connections that have been made between Program participants during and between workshops have enhanced individual outcomes considerably. Participants report high levels of satisfaction and motivation as a result of working with like-minded professionals (see the section ‘Impact on the teachers’). For many of the teachers, the Program has served to demystify research, increase their theoretical knowledge of teaching and assessment, and provide a flexible and sustainable framework for enhancing their classroom practices and their own professional development (Edwards and Burns 2016a).

## **Teachers furthering formal professional development**

For many of the teachers participating in the Program, conducting their research has been a catalyst for further studies. When they joined the Program, just under 60% of the participants held, or were completing, a Master’s degree. However, motivated by their experiences in the Program, several participants have gone on to undertake or complete Master’s degrees or Cambridge English *Delta* (Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), and four participants have started doctoral studies researching an aspect of teaching or assessment within ELICOS. As several of the chapters in this book show, other teacher development outcomes, in addition to enrolment for formal qualifications, are that several participants have become champions of action research (AR), taking on mentoring or leadership roles in their institutions. The ‘Impact on the teacher’ section outlines further details of how participants view their ongoing professional development.

## **Impact of the Program**

The chapters in this volume include many comments from the teachers on the impact of the Program on their professional lives and personal development,

and how it has enhanced their competence in teaching and assessment. In this section, we consider further from data collected throughout the Program, what impact there has been at the individual teacher level, the institutional level, the sectoral level, and beyond.

## Impact on the teachers

Teachers who have participated have constantly emphasised that AR is a very positive professional development experience, as in these comments.

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. (2012)

The whole project has been really inspiring and motivating. (2015)

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

From feedback received from teachers over the duration of the Program, it appears that they gain from conducting AR in at least three major ways: enhancement of teaching and assessment skills, improved understanding of learners and their needs, and deeper research engagement (see also Burns, 2013, Edwards and Burns 2016a).

Numerous comments refer to teachers' increased professionalism of their teaching and assessment skills:

I've improved my teaching skills, and I have more knowledge of learner autonomy and goal setting theories. (2011)

We have now personally seen the benefits of [assessment for learning] in action, which will give the confidence to build upon this approach in future. (2012)

One of my most significant reflections is how much I've learned about my own teaching; general assumptions about what is 'correct' should always be interrogated. (2013)

I've looked closely at how I teach speaking as well as at existing courses and curriculum at my centre. (2014)



The project has truly invigorated my teaching practice and I'm very happy with all the work I put into it (2015).

Many of the teachers have also commented on how their AR has intensified their understanding of their students' learning preferences and needs.

Action research allowed me to make deep observations that some of my strategies and philosophies [about self-assessment] were not helpful for my students. (2011)

It was enlightening for me to find out what students believed about their learning and abilities. (2012)

We continually asked questions from a learner's perspective in order to proceed. [Action research] allowed us to re-examine learning and reveal the importance of a student-centred pedagogy. (2013)

We believed that our students felt it was unnecessary to engage in self-assessment; however when asked if they felt their performance had improved, 93% responded positively. (2014)

Increased interest in learning about and engaging in research is also evident in teachers' responses:

I have been very interested in doing a PhD for some time. Perhaps this project could be the basis of that. (2010)

I've gained practical skills relating to how to set up and run a research study and I'm more familiar with AR as a research methodology. (2010)

My research has raised many questions for further investigation . . . A continuation of this research could monitor changes in student awareness and autonomy through a longitudinal study. (2012)

We have learned about different ways to gather good sources of information and feedback from our students . . . including composing explicit survey questions, conducting interviews, designing Likert scales and collating and interpreting data. (2013)

I still use focus groups. [ . . . ] just every couple of weeks talking to students informally, finding out which lessons they liked, what aspects of the lesson they liked, what they want more of, less of, I think that's very useful. (2014)

While responses from teachers about the impact of their AR experiences is overwhelmingly positive, we can also summarise some of the main challenges

they have experienced. Many of the teachers identified time as a major problem, as this comment encapsulates:

I think the main problem is working through AR at the same time as teaching and administrative tasks, so you don't have the continuity to focus on and achieve the results you want to in the given time frame and given syllabus. (2013)

However, overall teachers also seem to consider the time pressures to be worth the benefits; as one participant put it, 'It's been a little bit hectic, but no big deal'. Time constraints have, nevertheless, consistently been identified as one of the major difficulties facing teachers undertaking research (e.g. Borg 2010, Burns 2000, Rainey 2000, Roberts 1998).

In addition, while the majority of teachers receive strong support from their institutions (as discussed in the next section) organisational responses do vary. In some cases, institutional sponsorship (which was required for participation in the Program) did not necessarily translate into an environment that was supportive towards research, and a few teachers have felt isolated while carrying out their research (see Edwards and Burns 2016a). In some cases, teachers have also reported experiencing negative comments from colleagues who express surprise that anyone would want to take on the additional work of research. However, these attitudes do not seem widespread or to deter participants, and as the data reported in the next section Show, there appears to be substantial support for the Program from most institutions that have participated.

### **Impact on the participating institutions**

From the point of view of the teachers' academic managers, the Program appears to have influenced their institutions in a number of ways. They state there are benefits not only for the individual teachers whose participation they sponsor, but also that there are positive professional 'ripple effects' for other teachers. Comments also relate to the way the teachers' research has a broader impact on curriculum and professional development.

In relation to the individual teachers' participation, the managers have noticed their personal and professional growth and increased confidence, and motivation, and the benefits of being in contact with other teachers nationally.

Both the teachers excelled as group leaders during the process, gaining greater confidence and developing stronger leadership skills. It was rewarding PD [professional development] for them as well! They're keen to continue further studies and pursue new research ideas. [One of the teachers] continues to deliver new ideas on an almost daily basis! Excellent result! (2010)

[The two teachers] have gained a great deal of confidence from their participation. (2011)

[The two teachers] are thoroughly enjoying the experience of being involved in the Action Research in ELICOS Program 2013 and very appreciative of the opportunity. (2013)

[The two teachers from the 2014 Program] are certainly getting a lot out of the programme. (2014)

[The two teachers] have gained professionally by being part of the research and have found it very rewarding though at times challenging. Participation does demand a high degree of commitment from the researchers. They have been stimulated by meeting other participants and hearing about their projects. (2015)

The managers also refer to the way the teachers' research has stimulated and engaged other teachers in their institutions professionally, particularly in a sector where teacher employment tends to be highly unstable (Stanley 2016).

The program fitted neatly into our own professional development schedule for the year. As well as enlivening the staff room with AR discussions, most teachers [at the institution] also became involved with the project, allowing their classes to be included in the research. (2010)

[The teacher] is a casual employee – one of unfortunately (too) many casual employees, but this project is open to all and so has given a strong message to the teaching staff here at the [centre], that all teachers of English as a Second or Another language are not measured by the type of contract they might be on, but by their expertise and experience and willingness to be involved in the further development of theirs and therefore teaching practice in general for all across the profession. (2014)

The project has also helped stimulate discussion in the [institution's] staffroom. (2015)

In addition, their comments underscore their willingness to provide time for the research to be disseminated and discussed at formal and informal meetings of teachers.

They presented their project and described the experience . . . to the staff at [the college]. [The two teachers] 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. (2011)

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They'll also be presenting at a session for the staff here. We're hoping that their colleagues will be inspired to have a go at AR! (2012)

We've arranged for [the two teachers] to present to the staff at the next meeting. From our last experience with [two teachers from the 2012 project], we know that sharing the process and the results gets teachers' attention. (2013)

[The two teachers] are certainly getting a lot out of the programme and they recently ran an internal PD session based on their research. Unfortunately, I couldn't attend, but it went down very well. (2014)

Even more significantly from the point of view of organisational innovation and change, and the sustainability of the Program, some managers comment that the teachers' involvement has fed into curriculum development and assessment processes within the institution.

[The teacher from the 2013 Program] is also excited that the publication of last year's research has come out. The outcomes of his research are feeding into our current curriculum review process. So many thanks to EA and Cambridge for a great programme. (2014)

We have greatly benefitted from having [the teacher] research her reading interest and the result is that we will be using what she discovered to improve our programs. (2014)

[The project] has impacted positively on the EAP 2 classes directly involved in the research with potential for broader application in the [institution's] program. (2015)

Finally, the managers' comments also reflect their appreciation that the program is available to their staff.

Great thanks for the opportunity of being included in this project. It was most beneficial for all involved and highly recommended as a PD supplement for our staff. Those that were chosen have now gained important research skills while developing their leadership potential. (2011)

[The two teachers] are thoroughly enjoying the experience of being involved in the Action Research in ELICOS Program 2013 and very appreciative of the opportunity. A big thank you to both and everyone there for this opportunity. One of the teachers was just commenting to me the other day how supportive you both are in facilitating the sessions. (2013)

Thank you for providing a great workshop. (2013)

[One of the two teachers] has told me how inspiring [the workshop] was and how useful in defining their project more clearly. (2013)

So many thanks to EA and Cambridge for a great program. (2014)

[The teacher] is still feeling the full effects of being in the program and thoroughly enjoyed her big night in Melbourne [the participation in the colloquium at the English Australia Conference and the award event]! (2014)

Both the teachers have commented on the excellent support from English Australia. (2015)

On receiving the news that one of the teachers at his institution had been accepted into the Program, one academic manager wrote: 'We are ecstatic at this news!!!! [The teacher] was in class when I received the email and just had to tell her! We will be celebrating this with all the staff.'

These comments suggest that the existence of the Program is increasingly recognised and valued, and that participation is even seen as an institutional gain by academic managers within the ELICOS sector.

## **Impact on the ELICOS sector**

Data obtained throughout the Program suggests that it is also having an increasing impact on the ELICOS sector nationally. In a survey of member colleges administered nationally by English Australia in July 2011, 59% of respondents indicated that they saw the Program as important or very important, while 53% responded that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the way it had been offered. A further survey (n=92) in 2015 indicates that the Program is now considered important or very important by 78.2% of respondents, with 65.2% indicating they are satisfied or very satisfied. One of the 2015 respondents commented that 'the action research program has created many opportunities for members of staff'. Another stated, 'It is very pleasing that the program continues to attract such motivated and enthusiastic teachers'.

Data from interviews with two members of the English Australia Board collected two years after the commencement of the Program highlights the opportunities it was felt to have provided for professional development, particularly the impetus for further study, and the increased reputational dimension of the Program for the ELICOS sector in its promotion of research-based teaching.

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.

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 [i.e. English Australia board], government meetings, state [English Australia branch] meetings. People are very, very aware of it.

More recent responses by English Australia Board members collected in 2015 attest to the 'ripple effect' of generating a research base for ELICOS teaching and assessment practices.

This ripple effect has resulted in a trend for curriculum improvements [in teaching and assessment] to be led more and more by an evidence-based approach to finding effective outcomes for students and their teachers. Both teachers and students are at the centre of solutions and improvements.

It is also felt that awareness of the Program has increased considerably and that it is recognised both inside and outside the ELICOS sector for the way it has enhanced a sense of quality in the Australian international student industry.

The AR project is now at a stage where it's well known and recognised as a signature initiative by English Australia and Cambridge English for professional development. Teachers, ELICOS providers and government accreditation bodies are all aware of the AR initiative and recognise the benefits it contributes to increasing quality outcomes and recognition for Australian export education.

A final data source comes from attendee responses from the teachers' colloquia at the English Australia Conferences. Attendance has increased annually; it is notable that one or two participants joining the Program each year inevitably report that their attendance at a colloquium inspired them to consider participating, as these comments reveal.

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

I joined this Program because I attended the colloquium at the conference last year and thought, "I could do that!" (2014)

Delegates from the conferences have also commented positively over the years, as the following statements illustrate.

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. (2014)

Taken as a whole the responses in these data sets suggest that the Program has made an impact in ELICOS in promoting the concept of research, and more specifically AR. The Program also seems to have established itself as an important avenue for professional development in the ELICOS sector.

## **Impact outside the ELICOS sector**

Other impacts of the Program which were not foreseen when it was first initiated have come from outside the sector in various ways. The most notable development is that, in 2013, English Australia learned that its counterpart, English UK, would implement an Action Research Award Scheme, also funded by Cambridge English, modelled on the Action Research in ELICOS Program. A further sign of the impact of the Program, as already mentioned in Chapter 1, is the IEAA recognition of the Program with an Award for Best Practice/Innovation in International Education in 2013.

## **Unexpected outcomes of the Program**

One outcome in particular that was not anticipated at the outset was the extent to which Program participants have gained the confidence to publish additional articles and book chapters, other than those in *Research Notes*, and to present at national and international professional development events. The *English Australia Journal* has been a popular choice (see Bos and Yucel 2013, Edwards 2013, Pottage and Herlihy 2013, Sleeman 2015) for publication by participants, and a number of other publications have also disseminated insights from the Program (e.g. Burns 2013, 2014, 2015; Burns and Edwards 2014, Edwards and Burns 2016a, 2016b) and have promoted its recognition.

Presenting their research as part of the English Australia Conference colloquium has motivated participants to seek further possibilities to present their research, including at their own institutionally based professional development conferences, such as those at Billy Blue College of Design | Think Education, Curtin University, Deakin University, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) English Worldwide, the University of New South Wales, the University of Sydney and the University of Queensland. Some participants from university English centres have been invited to present to other departments within the university, and in one case their

presentation has led to AR being taken up by another faculty unrelated to English language teaching. New South Wales-based teachers have presented annually at the TESOL Research Network Symposium at the University of Sydney since 2010, while others have spoken at the National ELT Accreditation Scheme (NEAS) Management Conference. Internationally, presentations have been made, for example, at the British Council in Mexico, the Intensive Reading Conference in Thailand, the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) Research SIG, and the IATEFL Conference in the UK, Cambodia TESOL, the GlobELT Conference in Turkey, and the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA) Conference. These publications and presentations have enhanced the professional reputation of Australian ELICOS and provided significant professional development opportunities for participants.

## Conclusion

The chapters in this book show how, from a tentative beginning in 2010, the Action Research in ELICOS Program has become a mainstay of a national education association's professional support for teachers through an innovative partnership between the association, a university-based academic experienced in AR, and an examinations body, all of whom shared the view that AR could become a central aspect of high-quality teacher professional development. The Program has proved to be an exciting, dynamic and engaging initiative that has had an impact beyond what was originally envisaged, within ELICOS in Australia and also internationally. Importantly, the winners from this Program are international students learning English in Australian ELICOS colleges. As the chapters in this book show, they have benefited from the research insights gained by their teachers, which have led to curriculum change as well as innovations in classroom practice. As the two authors of this chapter, we have gained a great deal of personal and professional satisfaction and pleasure from our involvement in the Action Research in ELICOS Program, and look forward with great anticipation to further developments of this Program.

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