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# Research Notes

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**CAMBRIDGE ENGLISH**  
**Language Assessment**  
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# Research Notes

Issue 53 / August 2013

A quarterly publication reporting on research, test development and validation

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# Research Notes

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## Editorial note

Welcome to issue 53 of *Research Notes*, our quarterly publication reporting on matters relating to research, test development and validation within Cambridge English Language Assessment.

This issue presents the research undertaken within the 2012 English Australia/Cambridge English Language Assessment Action Research in ELICOS Program, which supports teachers working in the English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sector in Australia. This issue benefits from the guest editorship of Professor Anne Burns, the academic mentor for the program, and Katherine Brandon, the key Professional Support and Development Officer for the program.

Following Professor Anne Burns and Katherine Brandon's reflection on the Action Research Program, five funded projects are presented by the teacher-researchers who participated in the 2012 Program. Each article is written in an accessible manner and the voice of the researcher comes through strongly, particularly as the authors reflect on the immediate effect their action research has had on themselves and various stakeholders.

The first two projects explore ways of improving learners' speaking skills. Vicki Bos and Megan Yucel report on the outcomes of their pronunciation program which involved learners participating in pronunciation workshops and a chorus in order to improve confidence and overcome specific pronunciation issues. Then, Damien Herlihy and Zeke Pottage, who were the winners of the 2012 English Australia/Cambridge English Language Assessment Action Research in ELICOS Award, describe using an online tool to help their learners improve their speaking proficiency.

The next three articles focus on aspects of improving learner autonomy. Diana Cossar-Burgess and Alla Eberstein report on a project that sought to encourage students to self-assess and use learning strategies independently in order to improve speaking performances. Emily Edwards describes using writing rubrics as a teaching tool with the aim of helping her students become more autonomous learners and ultimately improve their writing ability. Finally, Leesa Horn explores the effect of a learner portfolio on independent learning and language development.

This issue demonstrates how action research within English Australia has matured over the years. This is particularly evident in the reflections of the impact of action research on the inner and outer circles (for the teachers themselves, peers, institutions, ELICOS sector, etc.). We hope that this issue, along with issues 44 and 48 of *Research Notes*, inspires teachers worldwide to become involved in research.

# Reflections on the third year of a national action research program

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In this issue of *Research Notes*, reports appear for the third time of action research undertaken in Australia by teachers working in the English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sector. However, our own contribution to this issue is something of a departure from those we made in issues 44 and 48, as this time we were invited by Cambridge English Language Assessment to guest edit the journal. It proved to be a real pleasure for us to work with the contributors on their research accounts and over time to see the products of the research completed by the teachers come to fruition.

The action research program which is the focus of this issue is the 'brainchild' of English Australia, the peak professional body representing ELICOS colleges to government and regulatory bodies in Australia. It comprises more than 100 colleges teaching English to international students and works towards achieving strategic goals of representation and professional support for the benefit of its members and of ELICOS as a sector of international education.

In 2010, Cambridge English Language Assessment agreed to work in partnership with English Australia to initiate a pilot Action Research in ELICOS Program, to be facilitated by Anne Burns. The goals of the program were to equip teachers with skills to enable them to explore and address identified teaching challenges in the context of Australian ELICOS; and to share the outcomes of this research with colleagues and peers through publications and presentations. English Australia hoped to raise the professionalism of the sector by the development of teachers who were actively involved in the program; the development of teacher peer networks; increased teacher engagement with research and academic researchers; and more teachers furthering their formal professional development. In its first year, the program was so successful that it was established as an annual initiative and to date 33 teachers, from 18 ELICOS institutions in almost every Australian state and territory, have participated in and benefited from this unique opportunity to explore their own practices in a supportive and collaborative environment.

Our initial approach to suggesting areas or topics teachers might want to research was relatively *ad hoc*. Even though 'priority areas' for the sector were suggested from various sources across the country, these areas covered such a broad range that it was difficult to see them as having similar or equal priority. Moreover, they were presented as something of a 'wish list' of possibilities with no obvious connections or possible linkages. Nevertheless, certain broad issues began to suggest themselves through the teachers' own selections of topics or the discoveries that motivated their research, including: assisting learners to become more independent, increasing motivation, encouraging self-reflection and goal-setting.

Workshop discussions with teachers in the first two years of the program increasingly highlighted the importance

and necessity of integrating various forms of assessment – self/peer assessment, assessment for enhanced learning, assessment for monitoring progress, learning-oriented assessment, understanding of assessment rubrics – more systematically into teaching. These issues came to the fore not only because teachers were working with many students from traditional learning backgrounds, who tended to be unfamiliar with the notion of learner responsibility in learning, but also because many were enrolled in university preparation courses where enhanced knowledge of assessment criteria was important in their current and future courses.

Having spent considerable time discussing these issues with the first two groups, we decided to focus on how teachers integrate assessment in the ELICOS classroom in much more depth in the third year of the program. The results of these classroom investigations are laid out and explored in this issue of *Research Notes*.

The first account is by **Vicki Bos** and **Megan Yucel** from the Institute of Continuing and TESOL Education, University of Queensland. They wanted to help students improve aspects of pronunciation so they could successfully complete 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.

In their project **Damien Herlihy** and **Zeke Pottage**, teachers at Swinburne University English Language Centre in Melbourne, explored the use of a Web 2.0 tool, VoiceThread™, for contributing to students' formative assessment. Using VoiceThread, students can post audio and video comments in response to audio/visual stimuli, re-recording until they are satisfied with the outcome. In the first phase of their project Damien and Zeke worked with the students to ensure there was a shared metalanguage for talking about speaking. They posted images on VoiceThread that students accessed and commented on via a computer, laptop/tablet or mobile phone. Damien and Zeke then gave detailed feedback on these comments. Following student feedback from the first phase the researchers asked the

students to comment on each other's posts, and this activity proved to be very popular and successful. Damien and Zeke found that a key benefit of VoiceThread was that it gave shy students and students with few opportunities to speak English outside the classroom opportunities to engage and interact in English. Students made good progress in developing speaking skills and found the experience very motivating.

**Diana Cossar-Burgess** and **Alla Eberstein** from the University of Tasmania English Language Centre focused on enabling their students to assess their own speaking skills. In pre-project surveys, Diana and Alla found that students considered speaking to be an important life and/or study skill and are aware of their slow progress in developing it, but felt 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 after using the strategies suggested in the project and that they were intending to use these strategies in their future.

The curriculum renewal process at her Sydney language school, English Language Company, gave **Emily Edwards** the opportunity 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 action research 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. Emily 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.

**Leesa Horn** from Deakin University English Language Institute wanted to help her students increase their awareness of their strengths and weaknesses by keeping a learning portfolio, a collection of items of their work completed over a length of time. She observed that students who overestimated their abilities often did not put the required amount of effort into making progress, and those who underestimated their skills suffered unnecessary stress in thinking they would not be successful. Leesa hoped learning portfolios would enable students to evaluate their own progress and see their improvements in their areas of weakness. Over three 5-week action research cycles, Leesa introduced learning portfolios to her students and surveyed them on how they used them. She found evidence that the learners did indeed reflect more on their work. Although, on the whole, her students did not

like using learning portfolios, most felt that the portfolios had helped them to 'learn English'.

What has been interesting about the project conducted by the teachers in the third year is the wide range of strategies and approaches teachers use in the classroom to integrate forms of assessment into their teaching and to shape and reshape these forms according to what they discover about their students' needs and abilities. What has also emerged more strongly from the third year projects is the teachers' concern with their students' development of academic speaking skills. Given that much attention has been paid in the literature to academic writing, and the term English for Academic Purposes can sometimes be interpreted as assisting students to develop their writing skills, this emphasis on speaking on the part of teachers working in language preparation classrooms is of interest for possible future action research.

Apart from the discoveries about practice that have been made by conducting action research, the teachers involved have reported to us many ways in which the program has affected their professional lives. For some their projects have fed into masters' or PhD studies they were already enrolled in; others have gained the confidence to extend their professional development and to enrol in higher research degrees. All of them have commented that the program has given them deeper knowledge about research, insights into how to conduct it and understanding of why a research orientation is an important tool for a professionally minded teacher.

In addition, several of the teachers have been involved in giving conference presentations for the first time, as well as professional development sessions at local events or for staff at their centres. Some teachers have also had accounts of their research accepted for publication in local and international outlets. Most have influenced local curriculum development, with their teacher centres deciding to integrate the insights from their research into new or enhanced programs for enrolling students. All the teachers reported that their research had resulted in wider impact beyond their own projects, with other teachers at their centres taking an interest in their explorations or collaborating informally with them. Several of them inspired their colleagues to submit expressions of interest to be part of the program in 2014. Thus, the program appears to be fulfilling its original goals, not only of expanding teacher professionalism, but creating networks of practitioners who are being influenced by its impact at a national level.

We trust that readers will enjoy reading the accounts published in this issue as much as we enjoyed working with the teachers who wrote them, not only during the writing period but across the whole of 2012, when the action research was being carried out.

### Acknowledgement

English Australia remains delighted with the outcomes of the program and would like to thank Cambridge English Language Assessment for their continued material support, and Drs Nick Saville, Hanan Khalifa and Fiona Barker for their enthusiasm and professional support. The program would not be the success it is without the immeasurable contribution of Anne Burns whose wisdom, concern for teachers and respect for their professional knowledge and skills is unparalleled.

# The effect of action research intervention on pronunciation assessment outcomes

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## Introduction

The purpose of this project was to explore effective and innovative ways of improving the pronunciation of students in a university bridging English program at the Institute of Continuing and TESOL Education at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia (ICTE-UQ). The students involved in the project had been identified from diagnostic testing as being at risk of failing their speaking assessment, and consequently the whole course, due to poor pronunciation, which affected their intelligibility and therefore their ability to communicate successfully. Our project aimed to assist those students to improve their pronunciation in order to pass the final speaking assessment tasks. Students were invited to attend intensive pronunciation workshops and to participate in the ICTE Chorus, a student choir which is a long-standing and much-loved extra-curricular activity at ICTE-UQ.

## Educational context

The setting for this action research project is the English language centre attached to the University of Queensland. ICTE-UQ offers the English for Specific Purposes: Bridging English Program (ESP: BEP), an English language pathway for entry to University of Queensland undergraduate and postgraduate programs for eligible students. This 10-week program is offered twice a year and aims not only to teach the language knowledge and skills that students require, but also to introduce the academic culture and conventions of the institution that they are entering. Students undertake studies in English for Academic Purposes, with course components such as Academic Writing, Grammar for Academic English, and Communication in Academic Contexts. Students must achieve a pass 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 for all four skills in the first three weeks of the course. They receive feedback on their performance and are expected to use that knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses for targeted study. In the speaking test, 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, with the difference between a Pass and a Fail resting on the student's ability to communicate successfully.

## Participants

Students in the ESP: BEP program come from countries such as Chile, China, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan and Vietnam. Our research focused on students who displayed a 'jagged profile' in their diagnostic tests, with good proficiency in reading and writing, but poor performance in listening and speaking, particularly in pronunciation.

Of a total student cohort on the ESP: BEP program of approximately 200 students, 30 students were identified as being at risk of failing their final speaking test because of deficiencies in their pronunciation. These students were invited to participate in a special program to assist them in improving their pronunciation. Most students were of Vietnamese background, with the second largest group being Chinese speakers, and the remaining participants from Korea and Indonesia. 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 the program.

## Main focus of the research

The focus of our research was to investigate ways to best help students identified as at risk, based on their diagnostic test scores, of failing the speaking component of the course. Following the diagnostic speaking test we wondered how these students should best be helped. We decided that an action research approach would be a suitable way for us to design and then systematically evaluate the effectiveness of our new pronunciation intervention program. 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. We also saw an opportunity for collaboration; to pool our strengths as teachers to achieve both better student performance in the short term and an improvement in the curriculum in the long term.

## Research questions

In formulating our research questions, we initially came up with two questions:

1. Following a diagnostic speaking test, how should students who have performed poorly in the area of pronunciation be helped to improve?

## 2. What is the best form of intervention?

- intensive pronunciation workshops
- ICTE Chorus
- multimedia lab
- self-access.

After presenting these questions at our first action research workshop, we reflected on the feedback that we received from our fellow researchers, our facilitator, Katherine Brandon, and our mentor, Professor Anne Burns, and made some small but significant changes. For the first time, we were presenting our project to outsiders. We knew what we meant when we discussed our project, but we realised that we had to make all aspects of it clear to an audience without 'insider' knowledge. Therefore, 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. Finally, we discussed what we perceived 'good' pronunciation to be, and added an explanation to the question. In keeping with the iterative nature of action research, 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 looked like this: 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 consider '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.

## Theoretical perspective

The issue we wanted to explore in our project was the effectiveness of pronunciation intervention methods in improving speaking assessment results. We wanted to design a pronunciation program which would both specifically address the pronunciation criteria of the assessment rubric, and facilitate improved performance in the students' skills in the interview and discussion tasks of the final speaking test.

There are differing views as to the efficacy of teaching pronunciation in isolation from a wider discursive context (Pennington and Richards 1986). We wanted, therefore, to ensure that we took a multidimensional approach to our support program. Rather than focus exclusively on the drilling of sounds, we integrated elements of pronunciation practice into individual, pair and group speaking tasks. We aimed for a dual focus that provided the students with intensive assistance in both speech production, including phonemes, syllables, pace and vocal qualities, and speech performance, which involved aspects such as contextualised speech, fluency

and intelligibility (Morley (Ed) 1994). The choral aspect of the program added a third focus area, addressing affective factors such as confidence and motivation while combining aspects of both speech production and performance.

When designing our program we included tasks which focused on physiological aspects of pronunciation, such as tongue placement and lip movement (Dalton and Seidlhofer 1994). We selected particular activities which targeted the different language backgrounds of the students and the individual sounds that learners from those backgrounds typically have difficulty with (Power 2011). The speech production element of the course was covered by recorded production tasks which ranged from imitative (listen and repeat) at the beginning of the course, through to rehearsed speech (a short prepared talk), and finally extemporaneous speech (a conversation) (Morley (Ed) 1994). The final crucial component of our design was the explicit inclusion of individualised feedback from us, as teachers of the program. Our primary goal was for clarity of pronunciation in order to achieve intelligibility.

The choral aspect of our course was also composed in terms of the aforementioned physiological, phonemic and prosodic features. The songs were selected with specific pronunciation goals in mind, and these features were highlighted and drilled in rehearsals. The main benefit of the chorus, however, was on the affective component of learning. We theorised that if the participants felt more confident in speaking, and more motivated to do so, their ability to communicate would improve, along with their speaking test results. Rehearsing and performing songs also tied the different aspects of our entire program together; speech production and performance, physiological awareness-raising, imitative and rehearsed speech, and self-awareness and self-confidence were all brought into play in our chorus time.

## Action research intervention

We agreed that our intervention would have two main strands: the pronunciation workshop and the ICTE Chorus. 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. Participation in the Pronunciation Assistance Program – or PAP, as we called it – would entail attending two extra sessions after class each week: a pronunciation workshop and a chorus rehearsal. These sessions were not mandatory, but students were strongly advised to attend. The sessions would be taught by us, the two researchers, with Vicki, who has a background in both performing and teaching singing, having primary responsibility for the chorus and Megan's main responsibility being the pronunciation workshop. We decided to hold the workshops in ICTE's multimedia labs so that we could make use of the computers for recordings, listening practice and modelling. The workshop, we agreed, would be needs-based, with an overt focus on segmental features such as individual phonemes and consonant clusters, as well as suprasegmental aspects of connected speech, stress and intonation. As for the chorus, we agreed that it would be open to all ICTE

students as it would provide a good opportunity for the PAP students to mix with students from other courses. Vicki selected three popular songs for the chorus to learn, 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight', 'Hallelujah' and 'Keep Holding On', and detailed the pronunciation features which would be focused on while learning them. In the chorus rehearsals, we worked on breathing, vocal projection, expression, sounds, connected speech, enunciation, stress and rhythm.

Just a few weeks after the first action research workshop, the ESP: BEP course began. We used those weeks for background research, 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 PAP can be seen in Appendix 1.

In week three 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 students who had not achieved a pass in this area. We also consulted class teachers and added to the list any other students whose pronunciation they were concerned about. 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: the pronunciation workshop and chorus rehearsal, which added approximately 4 hours of pronunciation-focused practice every week to the 20 hours of regular classroom teaching that comprised the ESP: BEP course.

We set homework tasks each week so that the students were encouraged to think about their pronunciation and work on it independently outside of class. For example, students had to prepare a dialogue with a partner and record themselves delivering it, or record themselves speaking and then singing the words of one of their chorus songs. This gave us a chance to give our students individualised written feedback on their pronunciation, which they greatly appreciated (see Appendix 2 for an example of the feedback). To facilitate improvement, Vicki also provided recorded models of the songs for students to download and practise at home. In the final week of the course, Vicki organised a performance in the ICTE auditorium so that the chorus could perform for the whole school, which meant that PAP literally 'ended on a high note'.

## Data and analysis

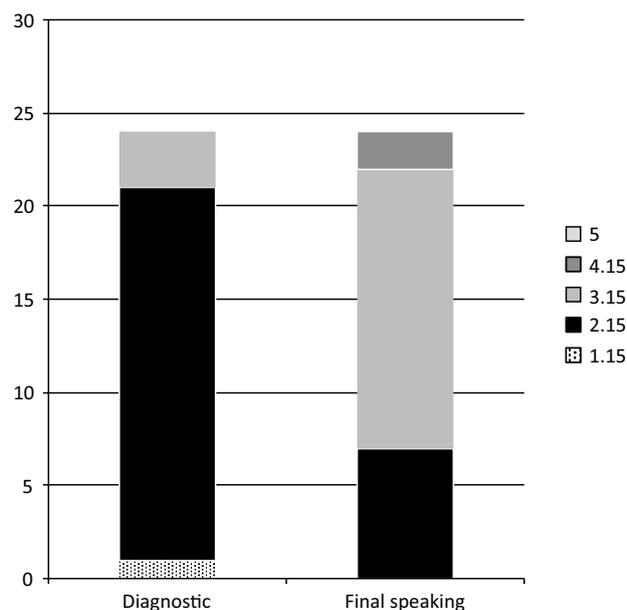
Over the course of the project, we collected a diverse range of data, in a variety of formats. At the first workshop and chorus rehearsal, we distributed short surveys to our students to find out what their needs and wants were relating to pronunciation and their feelings about being in a choir. In the 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 those sessions, which provided

a valuable learning opportunity. We also kept a journal where we were able to reflect upon sessions after teaching them. We accumulated a collection of photographs from the workshops, chorus rehearsals, and final performance. We also 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.

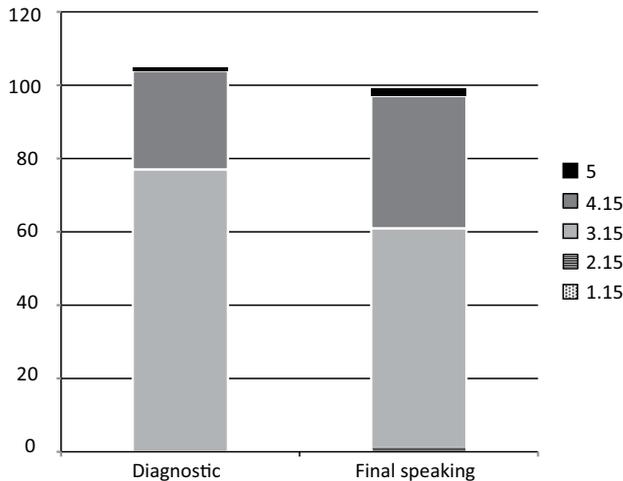
It was essential for us to be able to ascertain whether our intervention had had a positive impact or not, through accessing students' test scores. With their permission, we also recorded our teaching colleagues on the ESP: BEP course during a standardisation meeting for the diagnostic speaking test in order to see how teachers used the assessment criteria to evaluate a student's oral performance.

From our analysis of the data, we believe that the impact of our program has been very positive. A comparison of the outcomes from the initial diagnostic assessment and the final speaking test bears this out. Of the 24 students who were regular attendees, the majority achieved a higher pronunciation mark in the final speaking test, as Figure 1 shows. (Scores of 3.15 and higher are a passing grade.)

**Figure 1: PAP students' pronunciation scores pre- and post-course**



Of course, although some improvement can be attributed to skills development which occurred over a 10-week period in which students were doing the ESP: BEP course, the score gains are striking, when compared to those achieved by students who were not participating in the program (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Non-PAP students' pronunciation scores pre-and post-course**

These gains, coupled with the very positive feedback on PAP that we received from the participants, appear to indicate that the intervention made a positive difference. The students felt that the program provided them with greater confidence in their speaking, and a very real feeling of having improved.

'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)

They 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 B)

'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 C)

It is our belief that this growth in confidence contributed positively to the students' results.

An unforeseen but welcome outcome of our research, and a further sign of the success of the program, can be found in its acceptance by the ICTE management team. We have been 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.

## Reflections

On a final note, although this was very much a joint project, we would like to present our individual thoughts on the impact that our action research journey had on each of us.

Megan:

'Personally, I found my involvement in the ICTE Chorus to be a rewarding experience and I rediscovered my own 'voice' through my attendance at rehearsals. I was also reminded of the value of collaboration with and observation of colleagues as I observed Vicki's inspiring leadership of the chorus. Finally, I feel that this project has taken me out of my comfort zone and allowed me to grow as a teacher and as a researcher.'

Vicki:

'I have found this action research experience a professionally and personally valuable experience for a number of reasons. The first of these has been working closely on this project with a teaching partner. It has been (and continues to be) an extremely rewarding experience working with a co-operative, positive and conscientious colleague like Megan. In terms of the ICTE Chorus, I feel motivated to devote more time to the pre-rehearsal analysis of the songs which I will be teaching in chorus, ensuring a clear pronunciation and vocal focus for each song. Finally, I have learned a great deal about the relationship between musicality and pronunciation, and am eager to pursue research in this area in the future.'

We have both felt a sense of achievement in making a difference to the participants in PAP. As a high-stakes course, ESP: BEP is stressful for both teachers and students. As teachers on the course we develop close bonds with our students, and we want to help them to succeed, knowing that success will open the door to university studies. The feedback from the participants was overwhelmingly positive both with regard to the perceived and measurable improvement in their pronunciation, and also the affective outcomes of their learning. We hope that PAP can continue so that future students can receive the same opportunity to improve their pronunciation. We also feel professionally rewarded to discover that our proposed intervention techniques have been as effective as we had hoped in helping the students to pass their final speaking assessment. At the same time, we have also helped to raise the profile of action research in our institute. Our teaching colleagues, and our managers, have provided a great deal of encouragement, motivation and logistical support. As a result of this collaborative environment we will be able to see our hard work turned into a fixture on the ESP: BEP course and potentially gain greater recognition for the ICTE Chorus.

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## Appendix 1: 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:
  - 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:
  - 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: Example of individualised teacher feedback

**PAP WORKSHOP 4**    08/05/12

**PAIRWORK TASK**

**FEEDBACK**

Students' names: XXX

### 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

/θ/ something, with; /ð/ other, there

# Formative assessment in a Web 2.0 environment: Impact on motivation and outcomes

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## Introduction

The purpose of this action research project was to investigate the use of a Web 2.0 tool as a means of formative speaking assessment of students studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at Swinburne University English Language Centre in Melbourne. The particular tool we chose, VoiceThread™, is an online space where students can listen to audio and video posts and respond via voice or text. A secondary aim was to develop a system of feedback that enhanced the learner experience in terms of developing learner motivation and improving learner engagement in the course. By using VoiceThread we attempted to create a space for authentic communication where both teachers and students could have access to recordings of students' voices. We used these recordings to inform our practice in the classroom and students used them to direct their self-study efforts.

## Context

The research was undertaken at Swinburne University English Language Centre, part of Swinburne College, which is a medium-sized higher education provider located in an inner-suburb of Melbourne. It caters primarily to overseas students, who have not met the English language entry requirements for their Swinburne University course. There are intakes every five weeks into six course levels from elementary to advanced, and if completed successfully students achieve direct entry into their course. The students we investigated were studying English for Academic Purposes Level 5 (EAP5), a 10-week advanced course where students are expected to exit at approximately C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001). Students are streamed according to their future area of study and whether they are planning to undertake undergraduate or postgraduate study.

The research covered the 10-week course in two 5-week action research cycles. Our participants were enrolled in two classes, focused on EAP for IT/Design, each of which comprised 12 students. Damien's class was aimed at undergraduate study and Zeke's at postgraduate study. Overall, there were slightly more males than females and the nationalities represented were Chinese, Cambodian, Indian, Indonesian, Pakistani, Saudi Arabian, South Korean, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, Thai, and Vietnamese. Students' ages ranged from 21 to 30 years old.

## Main focus of the research

The speaking score in EAP5 is determined by the outcomes of various assessment events:

- two seminars (weeks 4 and 9)
- mid-course interview on student's research topic (week 5)
- final presentation on research findings (Week 10).

Murray and Christison (2010) argue that formative assessment helps teachers to determine students' problems at an early stage and provides ongoing feedback which in turn empowers them to become better learners. We felt that in our program there was a heavy reliance on summative assessment and relatively little formative assessment. In addition, we thought that this late assessment of students' progress was detrimental to their overall speaking outcomes and that feedback needed to come earlier and be more systematic.

We had found that compared with writing, providing feedback on speaking can be difficult for teachers, especially as speaking is ephemeral and there is little time to reflect on students' 'real time' performance in the classroom. We had both noticed the prevalence of electronic devices amongst our students and thought that using technology would be likely to appeal to students and might provide a solution to our problems. We decided to experiment with a more systematic approach to formative speaking assessment than we had previously been using. We were encouraged by Olofsson, Lindberg and Stödberg (2011:41) who state that e-assessment is suited to formative assessment as it can offer teachers options 'to assess aspects of learning that have proved difficult using more conventional means.'

From the options available to us, it seemed that VoiceThread potentially met our criteria of accessibility, user-friendly interface and the ability to upload interesting and relevant stimuli. VoiceThread is a part of the Web 2.0 movement that provides collaborative online platforms. The software is effectively an online discussion board where students and teachers can post audio and video comments responding to a variety of stimuli, listen to each other's responses and edit the content. It also has connectivity to smart phones, which are prevalent in language classrooms in our setting. We decided that VoiceThread would offer a good basis for developing formative assessment speaking activities. Action research provided an opportunity to test this assumption in a comprehensive and systematic way.

## Research questions

Initially our research question aimed to explore diagnosis, engagement and outcomes in formative assessment: in what ways may the use of VoiceThread as a formative assessment impact on the diagnosis, engagement and outcomes for students in spoken English for Specific Purposes (ESP) tasks?

In the first action research workshop, we were asked to reflect on our questions. We realised that this three-pronged question was too broad and needed refining. As our main emphasis was on formative assessment, our question was changed to: how will the use of formative speaking assessments through VoiceThread impact on outcomes and engagement for students in ESP courses?

We interpreted engagement as relating to their motivation and involvement in the project as evidenced by their use of the technology both in and out of class. We understood outcomes as improvement in speaking including pronunciation, fluency and use of grammar and vocabulary. This question guided our investigation and the approaches we took to developing assessment activities and to documenting what occurred during the research.

## Action taken

Our explorations progressed through two action research cycles with the same two classes over the 10-week course. The main steps in the process of our research are represented in Figure 1.

Prior to both research cycles we collected background information from the students in the form of a questionnaire (see Appendix 1). Questions related to personal information, views about their level of spoken English and attitudes to technology. We also planned the content for the first two VoiceThread posts (see below).

In the first research cycle, VoiceThread was introduced to the two classes we taught and a trial VoiceThread account was set up. During the first class students were guided through the registration process. They then practised making an audio post to help familiarise themselves with the program. Over the next 10 weeks the students posted on one thread (or VoiceThread page) every two weeks, as follows:

### Cycle 1

Week 2: About you

Week 4: Your studies/integration into Australia

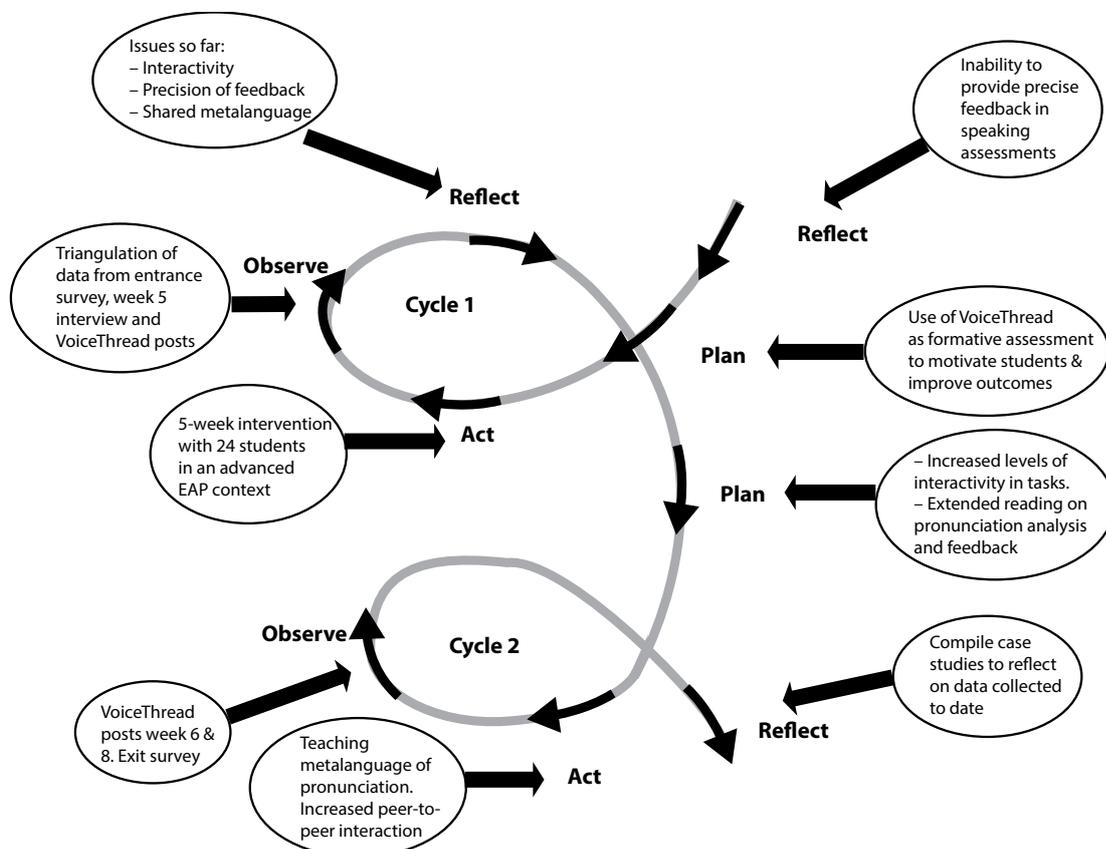
### Cycle 2

Week 6: Student to student interview (students upload information about other students)

Week 8: Practice presentation (students practise for the summative speaking test in the final week of the course)

Students were required to complete each of the above tasks as homework. They were encouraged to speak for at least 2 minutes, to react to our feedback as best they could and record as many times as they liked, before uploading the 'final' version. Students had the options of posting their responses

Figure 1: Action research cycle



via their computer at home or with a mobile device that supported the VoiceThread application. In addition we set up two VoiceThread hubs in the Individual Learning Centre (ILC) which meant that no students would be adversely affected by lack of accessibility to technology outside of Swinburne College. The feedback given to students after every post was based on pronunciation, fluency, language and content. We provided feedback using the text, audio and video options on VoiceThread and in-class face-to-face feedback.

In the first cycle we found weaknesses in our own ability to give effective feedback for two main reasons. The first challenge was that we lacked the ability to give detailed corrective feedback on the students' specific problems. In an attempt to overcome some of the weaknesses in our own pronunciation teaching we borrowed ideas from the earlier action research work of Brown (2012). We drew heavily on his work with the Accent Archive (<http://accent.gmu.edu>) and also used exercises from Burns and Claire (2003). The second challenge was that the students were not aware of the metalanguage of pronunciation. In class we planned activities to highlight various items and features of pronunciation and were careful to identify the metalanguage. At the end of the second cycle our feedback to our students had increased significantly. We found the students were able to better react to the feedback than they had initially and made significant efforts to take on board the comments.

At the end of Cycle 1 we conducted a short interview of up to 10 minutes with each student (see Appendix 2). While most students were positive about the feedback they had been receiving, students from both classes suggested that the tasks should become more collaborative and interactive. The original tasks involved students commenting on an issue in their area of study individually, such as how to apply the principles of interior design to a badly designed room. However, students wanted to include a social element to our VoiceThread project so that they could share more about themselves. They made useful suggestions about providing more peer-to-peer feedback and developing collaborative tasks. They also commented on the medium of feedback. In general, in the postgraduate class they indicated that written feedback was the preferred form and in the undergraduate class video feedback was preferred so that students could read speakers' non-verbal cues.

In week 10 we conducted an exit interview (see Appendix 3) with the students in order to gauge their overall response to the project. At the end of the two cycles we compiled the data from VoiceThread, the entrance questionnaire, the first cycle interview and the exit questionnaire in order to get a clearer picture of what had occurred in our research.

## Findings

Our aim in the research was to explore the extent to which VoiceThread would have an impact on student speaking outcomes and their engagement in improving their speaking skills. We now present our findings for each of these aims.

## Outcomes

One key advantage of using VoiceThread was that we were able to compile a large selection of student speaking samples. This was beneficial in helping us revise and modify our class activities and individual feedback. Looking back through the stored recordings in VoiceThread, we concluded that a large number of the students showed incremental developments in their spoken English. To illustrate, samples of in- and out-of-class interventions and resulting student outcomes are detailed in Appendix 4.

We also relied on students' self-assessment of their progress. In addressing the questions in the exit questionnaire (see Appendix 3) 'How would you rate your speaking improvement after the 10-week course?' and 'How much impact did VoiceThread have in this response?', nearly all of the students believed their English speaking ability had improved and the majority reported some connection between their improvement and the use of VoiceThread. Student responses suggested improvements in overall speaking, flow of ideas, word stress, intonation, pronunciation of individual words and word endings.

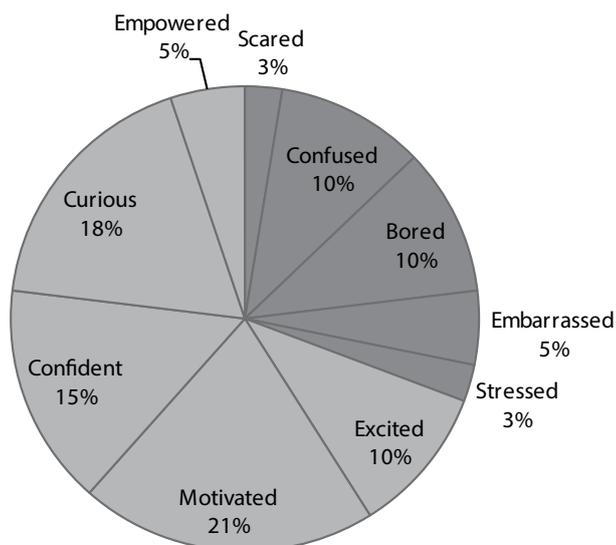
Further evidence of the impact VoiceThread had on outcomes was shown in the summative assessments, where all the students successfully passed the speaking component of the course.

## Engagement

The second aim of our project was to engage students in the formative learning process. We designed the tasks to be intrinsically motivating and to this end put no constraints on how many times students could submit posts. Students did, in fact, seem to be motivated by the tasks as they posted an average of three VoiceThreads out of a total of four. We also decided to attribute no formal grade to the assessment as our reading showed that this often decreased both motivation and outcomes (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006).

We believe that formative assessment through technology needs to motivate students in order to be an effective tool. This is supported by McCarthy (2011:63) who claims that in order to support students' aspirations blended learning technology needs to provide 'good feedback, interesting stimuli and individual attention.'

For our exit questionnaire (see Appendix 3) we chose a collection of adjectives describing students' emotional feelings about using VoiceThread that had emerged during the interviews in Week 5 (see Appendix 2). We asked the students to choose two of these adjectives to represent their main feelings during the project (see Figure 2). The three main adjectives selected were motivated (21%), curious (18%) and confident (15%), all of which indicated positive attitudes towards using this technology.

**Figure 2: Students' feelings about using VoiceThread**

While it is clear that not all the students preferred engaging with this medium, most seemed to have had a positive experience. In regard to the negative feelings expressed above these often reduced over time once students became more familiar with the procedure and use of VoiceThread. Overall, it can be said that VoiceThread as used in this project helped to foster motivation and confidence.

## Themes from the research

There were various themes arising from the project that increased our understanding of using VoiceThread in our classrooms. These were based on the comments we received from our students. We highlight two of these in the following sections together with illustrations from our data, including short 'cases studies' of individual students.

### Students' reactions to formative assessment

Throughout the project, students commented extensively on the use of VoiceThread as a means of formative assessment. The examples below illustrate the kinds of comments made by students (names have been changed) at both postgraduate (PG) and undergraduate (UG) levels.

'When you give some pronunciation feedback I can follow you to read that word again and come back to my voice to find the problem.' (Amy, China UG)

'Listen to feedback, review what I said and practise again.' (Jill, China PG)

'I want to improve my speaking I have to talk. Before I record my voice again then I listen again then if I hear any mistakes I delete them.' (Harvinder, Sri Lanka UG)

'I think it's good because I can repeat the voice and listen again, and I don't need the people show me what is wrong.' (Stan, Cambodia PG)

### Case 1: Jimmy, Vietnam UG

From our initial survey Jimmy stood out as a 'digital native', who was quite comfortable using technology for pleasure and study. Jimmy's VoiceThread posts made it clear that he had problems with connected speech. He was made aware of his staccato speech pattern through feedback via VoiceThread. Importantly, as with many other students, the VoiceThread tasks gave Jimmy, who lived with other students from Vietnam, the opportunities to speak English outside class. Like many of the other students cited above, Jimmy would listen to his feedback then revisit his original recording in VoiceThread to improve on it. Over the 10 weeks Jimmy showed significant progress. His own self-assessment in the Week 10 survey showed that he himself felt he sounded softer and more natural and he strongly attributed this improvement to the use of VoiceThread as a formative assessment tool. Similarly, his assessment results showed an upward trend progressing from 70% in Week 5 to 78% in Week 8 and 80% in Week 10. Jimmy's progress reflects the value of a cycle of formative assessment where students are in a 'process of continual reflection and review about progress' (Leung 2004:22).

#### Student's comments on interactivity and motivation

We have already noted that after Cycle 1 of our research, we realised that our students valued the opportunity for interactivity. Their comments also suggested that this increased their motivation:

'I enjoy listening to the voice of my classmates and sharing with classmates.' (Stan, Cambodia PG)

'We can do an activity and everyone has to do at least one or two feedback on anyone. So everyone at least gets some feedback.' (Sahanda, Pakistan PG)

'I can hear what other students talk about ... and see how I am improving and compare. It is motivating because of online community.' (Tendulkar, Sri Lanka UG)

'We should have more personal topics so we can know more our classmates.' (Tan, Vietnam UG)

### Case 2: Annie, Taiwan PG

Annie is a female Taiwanese student from the postgraduate class. According to the entrance survey, Annie used technology in a limited way, but seemed open to using e-resources in her learning. At the end of Cycle 1 Annie's response to VoiceThread was only moderately positive. In the Week 5 interview, Annie, like some of the other students quoted above, suggested that we should make the activities more interactive. She reported that the tasks did not help her to interact with other class members and suggested that we should expand the online community to the other class participating in this research. When, in Cycle 2, we introduced more interactive tasks, Annie's motivation increased significantly and she became very interested in listening to the VoiceThreads. Annie enjoyed the interview task the most and reported she found it more interesting because she had a chance to talk with students from the other class. According to McLoughlin and Lee (2007) the benefits of connecting with others in a collaborative online environment may produce a catalyst for motivation and peer-peer learning. This appeared to be the case in our project as students clearly felt that the

collaborative nature of this tool was a strength that should be exploited.

## Reflections

As an action research team what we have learned from this project has differed somewhat. For Damien it has highlighted improvement areas when dealing with pronunciation problems and he is focusing on learning more about pronunciation teaching. Using VoiceThread as a formative assessment tool for speaking has also changed his habits of giving on-the-spot corrections and increased his desire to become a more methodical and proactive teacher. This project highlighted to him the importance of keeping the lines of communication open with students at all times to better inform his teaching and improve outcomes for students. Zeke has become even more interested in how Web 2.0 tools can be integrated into today's classroom and specifically how they can be used to foster learner motivation. He is particularly interested in creating an environment that caters to a diverse range of learning styles and believes that Web 2.0 has something to offer most groups of learners.

As a team we gained from each other and shared our learning, resources and professional development. Having another person as a sounding board allowed us to reach our conclusions more confidently, reflect on our own learning and support each other. Our research has helped us to create a challenging yet collaborative learning space where we have been able to push each other further than we would have felt comfortable going by ourselves.

One of the advantages of being a part of this action research programme is that it has given us an opportunity to share our research with the wider English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) teaching community. By coming into this project we wanted to offer colleagues something tangible which could be integrated into other English language classrooms. At our college we have held two professional development sessions, which received very positive feedback, where we presented our findings to other staff and also taught teachers how they could use the software in their own classes. As a result, VoiceThread was trialled at the college as a tool for formative assessment with the intention of introducing it into the 2013 curriculum. In

addition we have set up a VoiceThread (see Appendix 5) which explains our research and offers tips on how to use it in the classroom, which is accessible to readers of this report to comment on.

The shift in recent years from a focus on summative to formative assessment has the potential to improve learner outcomes (Black and Wiliam 1998). We feel that through our exploration of Web 2.0 technology to increase formative assessment in our classrooms our learners have benefited from more careful monitoring of their progress, not only by us as teachers, but also by their peers and themselves.

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## Section D: Your experience with internet-based recording software

Have you heard of the technology Skype? (please circle) Yes No

What does Skype do? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you heard of the technology VoiceThread? (please circle) Yes No

What does VoiceThread do? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you heard of the technology Voxopok? (please circle) Yes No

What does Voxopok do? \_\_\_\_\_

Please note any other technology that can help you speak in English.

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**Thank you very much for your time.**

**Researchers: Zeke Pottage & Damien Herlihy**

## Appendix 2: Week 5 interview

Student Name:

Could you describe your experience of using VoiceThread in the first five weeks of the course?

What do you enjoy most about VoiceThread?

Is there anything you don't enjoy about VoiceThread?

How useful has the feedback been?

How do you prefer to receive feedback (video, audio or written)?

Is VoiceThread motivating you to practise English outside the classroom?

Do you feel that VoiceThread is improving your spoken English?

Do you have any suggestions for how VoiceThread could be used in the class over the next five weeks?

Is there anything else you would like to add about VoiceThread?

## Appendix 3: Week 10 Exit interview

### VoiceThread™ Student Exit Interview

**Research Question:** How will the use of VoiceThread, as a formative speaking assessment, impact on engagement and outcomes for students in English for Specific Purposes courses?

**Name:**

#### Section A (Engagement):

On a scale of 1 to 5 how would you rate your involvement with VoiceThread?

Completely inactive ←————→ Very active  
1 2 3 4 5

Why?

On a scale of 1 to 5 how motivated would you be to do more activities like this in the future?

Completely unmotivated ←————→ Very motivated  
1 2 3 4 5

Why?

Did you think you used spoken English more outside of class due to VoiceThread?

Yes No

Out of the five different activities you participated in in VoiceThread which did you find most engaging and why?

Choose two of the following words to describe how you felt when using VoiceThread?

Confused Confident Embarrassed Bored Empowered  
Curious Motivated Stressed Excited Scared

#### Section B (Outcomes):

How would you rate your speaking in English after the 10-week course?

Worse ←————→ Better  
1 2 3 4 5

Why?

How much of an impact did VoiceThread have in the above response?

Not at all ←————→ A lot  
1 2 3 4 5

Which form of feedback did you find most useful?

Written feedback Face to face Sound file Video file

Why?

Can you give an example of some feedback your teacher gave you through VoiceThread and what action you took on it?

Do you think using technology, like VoiceThread, outside of class is a good way to improve your English?

Agree ←————→ Disagree  
1 2 3 4 5

Why?

Are there any other things you liked or disliked about VoiceThread?

**Thank you very much for your time.**

**Researchers: Zeke Pottage & Damien Herlihy**

## Appendix 4: Sample of speaking outcomes

Student (pseudonyms)	Diagnosed problem	Intervention: In class	Intervention: Out of class	Outcomes
<b>Kit, Thailand PG</b>	Remove long pauses to increase fluency	True/false stories. Students retell their stories three times, each time trying to halve the time they told it in the first time.	When re-listening, make sure there are no long pauses in VoiceThread recordings. Rerecord where necessary.	<b>Week 2:</b> 172 words in 2:50 1.01 words per sec <b>Week 4:</b> 215 words in 2:54 1.23 words per sec <b>Week 6:</b> 144 words in 1:46 1.35 words per sec <b>Week 8:</b> 608 words in 7:29 1.35 words per sec
<b>Stan, Cambodia PG</b>	Consonant clusters	No 'whole class' intervention.	Listen and repeat activity. Listening and repeating consonant clusters. <a href="http://www.manythings.org/b/e/3690/">http://www.manythings.org/b/e/3690/</a>	Cluster problems <b>Week 2:</b> /kst/ /ft/ /kt/ <b>Week 4:</b> /kt/ /st/ /ŋz/ /ft/ <b>Week 6:</b> /nz/ /kt/ <b>Week 8:</b> /kt/
<b>Mohammed, Saudi Arabia UG</b>	Lack of idea development	Taught different brainstorming techniques.	Before posts student researched ideas and wrote down key ideas they would talk about.	More details <b>Week 2:</b> 45 secs <b>Week 4:</b> 2:45 <b>Week 6:</b> 2:01 <b>Week 8:</b> 2:50
<b>Jimmy, Vietnam UG</b>	Connected speech/ Sounds staccato	Taught features of connected speech (intrusion, linking & elision).	Listen to recordings again, transcribe and try to find where connected speech could be used.	<b>Week 2-Week 8</b> Sounded more natural with some linking present in speech samples: 'She told me' (/d/ is elided).
<b>Chu, China PG</b>	Realization of /ð/ & /θ/ ('th' sound)	Shown muscle buttons for those sounds.	'th' tongue twisters to practise at home.	<b>Week 2:</b> 2 correct 2 errors <b>Week 4:</b> 4 correct 0 errors <b>Week 6:</b> 4 correct 0 errors <b>Week 8:</b> 12 correct 1 error
<b>Amy, China UG</b>	Mispronunciation of /l/ & /n/	Shown muscle buttons for those sounds.	Self-study with 'Ship or Sheep' minimal pairs.	<b>Week 2-Week 8</b> Awareness raised with student but still working on producing the sounds of /l/ & /n/ particularly when encountered in the same word together.

## Appendix 5: VoiceThread presentation on research with comments from teachers and students

<https://voicethread.com/share/3331106/>

Follow the link above to see our presentation on our research. If you want to join the conversation follow the easy steps to set up an account and leave a comment. In addition there are some tips on how to set up a VoiceThread in your classroom.

# Encouraging students to become independent learners through self-assessment and reflection

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## Introduction

The purpose of this action research (AR) project was to help students monitor their speaking fluency, ability and progress through self-assessment, while investigating how reflection and evaluation can be useful tools to encourage students to become 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.

## Context

The students involved in this project were enrolled in a 15-week Direct Entry Academic Program (DEAP)<sup>1</sup> offered by the English Language Centre (ELC) at the University of Tasmania (UTAS). Entry to this program requires an *International English Language Testing System (IELTS)* score of 5.5 overall with no band less than 5.0 (approximately Level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001)). The DEAP program focuses on the academic language and research and study skills that students will need to succeed in their university degree programs. They are assessed on both individual and group performance as well as on numerous skill-based tasks. However, due to time constraints, there is more emphasis placed on academic writing and research skills than speaking skills. It has been observed that students' speaking skills improve very little as a result of this lack of emphasis, which is what prompted this research project.

## Participants

DEAP classes at UTAS are predominantly comprised of Chinese students. However, in the project class 16 students of widely different nationalities participated, originating from Africa, China, India, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Korea, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand. We felt that the variety of cultures enhanced class outcomes. There were nine males and seven females in the student group and most were in their mid-twenties.

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. The students in our class were very motivated, hard working and highly driven.

Students showed a high level of interest in participating in this project as they saw the AR project as a tangible way to enhance their speaking skills. Therefore, the students all agreed to take part in the project and were motivated participants throughout the project.

## Research focus

Our project aimed to facilitate student self-assessment of their speaking skills. We wanted to encourage them to become more independent learners and we provided them with practical tasks where they could participate in a range of activities as well as contribute ideas for their involvement, and thus reflect on and evaluate their own performance.

Our research focus evolved as our AR unfolded. In the initial stage, we planned to complement a series of formative integrated speaking assessment tasks with student self-assessment, evaluation and reflection components. We had also intended to modify the assessment tasks according to students' own evaluation of their performance and 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 their grade improvement and their grades were relatively high in our 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 grade improvement to increasing students' confidence in speaking and enhancing learning autonomy through self-assessment.

As a means of increasing their involvement in their learning progress, students were encouraged to identify their strengths and weaknesses 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 should be suggested to students? Would the strategies make any difference? How motivated would students need to be to implement strategies? While keeping these questions in mind, we decided to make our research question more specific to reflect the revised objective of our research. The question thus became: Is it going to make a difference to students' speaking skills if we:

- a) include elements of self-assessment (such as self-evaluation and reflection) in their study tasks; and

<sup>1</sup> Successful completion of 'direct entry' programs in Australia enables students to articulate to their further education course of choice, providing they meet academic course requirements, without having to undertake standardised proficiency examinations.

- b) provide students with strategies for autonomous learning by suggesting weekly speaking activities?

## Theoretical perspective

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 many students because styles of teaching may be very different and students 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 toward independent, or autonomous, learning.

Autonomous learning, 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 evaluate their performance and then provide them with opportunities to work independently to develop their skills (Burns and Joyce 1999).

## Intervention

The teaching intervention in this project included three different 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 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.

Second, students were asked to do an initial self-assessment of their own speaking skills, followed by setting goals. This was subsequently completed before and after each of the tutorial discussions.

Finally, for the last 10 weeks of the DEAP course, students completed 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.

## Data collection and analysis

We collected qualitative as well as quantitative data for our research, which consisted of student surveys, self-evaluation/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.

The first set of data collected was directly related to the three formative assessment tasks the students had to complete during the 15-week course. In this set of data, we looked at students' self-evaluation of their general speaking proficiency before the assessment (see Appendix 1) as well as their reflections on their own performance in each tutorial (see Appendix 2). In the second version (Weeks 8 and 12) of the self-assessment 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.

In the initial self-assessment 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) in their own speaking performance and identification of common problematic areas. From 16 respondents, 14 students 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 (names have been changed):

Why do I need 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.'  
- Ala'Abdal, 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.' - Jie, China

When responding to which specific areas 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 based on our teaching experience, 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 similar 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 (see Appendix 3). In addition, they participated in weekly unstructured ‘group debriefing’ sessions, approximately 20 to 30 minutes long, 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 (e.g. singing a song) were suggested by students. Students’ records of their experiences together with their responses to the interim questionnaire 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.

Those findings were supported by the third set of data gathered in this project, which consisted of a questionnaire conducted in Week 11, semi-structured one-to-one interviews conducted in Week 15 and a follow-up online survey that students were asked to complete during the first few weeks of their faculty studies. The purpose of all three of these data collection tools was to establish whether the speaking log activities helped students to feel more confident about their speaking performance as well as to develop their independent learning skills in this area.

In the second and third rounds of the pre-tutorial self-evaluation, 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 (see 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; two students stated that they would prefer a more structured approach.

Do you feel that doing the activities helped you to improve your speaking performance? If yes, in what way? If no, can you think of any reasons why not?

‘Yes, there were concrete [specific] tasks and so it was easy to focus on them.’ - Nazli, Iran

‘Yes - you can find [realise] your problem and then work on it.’ - Jie, China

‘Yes, helped a lot - [I feel that I] achieve something.’ - Bikash, Nepal

‘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 our research we also wanted to find out which of the activities best contributed to encouraging independent study and increasing learner autonomy. We used all three sources of data from this final set to rank how useful from the students’ point of view the various activities were for their speaking skills progress (see Table 1).

The majority of respondents indicated that they found conversation tasks 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, at the end of the course it was encouraging to see that all of the respondents stated that 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				Final interview				Follow-up survey			
	16 participants				16 participants				7 participants			
	Very useful	Somewhat useful	Not useful	No comment	Very useful	Somewhat useful	Not useful	No comment	Very useful	Somewhat useful	Not useful	No comment
Recording of own speaking	56%	31%	6%	7%	31%	13%		56%	43%	29%	28%	0%
English only time at home	50%	38%		12%	31%	13%		56%	29%	57%	0%	14%
Conversation task	87%	13%			19%	25%		56%	86%	14%	0%	0%

## Outcomes and reflections

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.

In answer 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.

This project has been a rewarding and stimulating experience for us as well as our students. Most of the time students were willing to participate in the project and responded positively to the reflection questions which, in turn, created a rich and supportive teaching environment.

We also hope to make the outcomes of this project a regular part of the 15-week DEAP courses in future, with the research findings used as a foundation for further development of the speaking component of the program.

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## Appendix 1: Tutorial performance reflection and self-evaluation

Goal-setting and strategy development

**Student Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Reflection and goal-setting</b>	
<p><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></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Why do I need to develop good speaking proficiency?</li> <li>What language/study goals will good speaking proficiency help me to achieve?</li> </ol>	
<b>Speaking performance</b>	
<p><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></p>	
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]</p> <p>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]</p> <p>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]</p> <p>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]</p> <p>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>	
<b>Language</b>	<b>Y/N/Not sure</b>
<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 your 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 intonation	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 Champign in (9/11)	I could not understand every word because of accent	I got the whole point of the seller

**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 in choosing the right activities.

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 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# Using writing assessment rubrics to develop learner autonomy

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## Introduction

The purpose of this research project was to use newly created assessment rubrics to develop learner autonomy in pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP)/ *International English Language Testing System (IELTS)* classes at an English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) school in Sydney. When my students start university or college, they will have to take responsibility for improving their writing independently, so I felt that more focus on self-directed study skills was required, along with more transparent assessment procedures. A new syllabus reform provided the opportunity to investigate a new approach to developing learner autonomy. Initially, I used the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001) descriptors and *IELTS* Writing band descriptors to design detailed rubrics to use in the scoring of formative written assignments. Having created new rubrics, I then wanted to investigate ways of exploiting them to encourage students to make progress and be more autonomous in monitoring and maintaining their progress.

## Context

Like many ELICOS schools, English Language Company operates with a rolling intake system, allowing students enormous flexibility with start dates and course length. There are two academic classes at the school: EAP combined with *IELTS* preparation at two levels (see Table 1), in which students are focused on improving their academic English skills, mainly to progress to a university or college course in Australia.

## Participants

Participation in the study was entirely optional, but most class members were keen to take part. The project consisted of two stages and involved a total of 18 students:

**Table 1: Participant details**

Stage	Proficiency level	Nationalities	Gender
Stage 1	CEFR B1-B2 <i>IELTS</i> 5.0-5.5	Chilean, Chinese, New Caledonian, Saudi Arabian, Thai (X3)	3 males, 4 females
Stage 2	CEFR B2-C1 <i>IELTS</i> 6.0-7.0	Argentinian, Brazilian (X3), Iranian, Mexican, Mongolian, Portuguese, Saudi Arabian, Spanish, Thai	7 males, 4 females

## Research focus

My research was grounded firstly in Assessment for Learning (AfL) theory, which highlights the importance of developing students' awareness of assessment criteria and methods of making further progress, rather than merely providing them with a score (Brown 2004-5, Pooler 2012). Brown (2004-5) emphasises the vital role of feedback in this process, which may include the use of explicit criteria to inform learners accurately of their performance and areas for improvement, while part of the process also includes assisting students in setting realistic goals (Pooler 2012). Additionally, Fyfe and Vella's (2012) action research report on using assessment rubrics as a learning tool provided inspiration at the start of my project, since their findings showed that analysis of rubrics in class greatly enhanced students' understanding of how to improve their writing. In conjunction with AfL, I focused on the concept of learner autonomy, defined as a student's capacity for self-directed learning, the ability to act independently and also to cooperate in a group with others (Smith 2008). This links to my overall aim of encouraging learner self-reflection on performance and more active attempts at improving writing autonomously. The final theoretical construct related to this project is learner motivation, widely accepted as a key factor affecting second language acquisition, and previous action research reports (Koromilas 2011, McCrossan 2011) suggested strong links between motivation, goal-setting and progress at higher levels. Both studies found that although learners may have difficulty setting clear and realistic progress goals, discussing and setting these goals in class can positively impact student motivation. When the goals correspond to assessment tasks or criteria, this relates back to AfL as described above, so I decided to link these theories together and use the newly created assessment rubrics (see Appendix 1) in a variety of ways in order to increase student motivation, progress, and learner autonomy. As a result of initial reading and reflection, the project commenced with the following research question:

- How can a class of EAP/*IELTS* learners autonomously assess and monitor their own progress in relation to their formative written assignments, and how can I assist them in this process?

This question shaped the overall project, initiating Stage 1, which lasted four weeks.

### Stage 1: Interventions

A more specific research question was then developed during Stage 1:

- How can explicit use of assessment rubrics in my EAP/*IELTS* class most effectively enable students to assess and monitor their own formative written assignments?

This stage comprised one action research cycle, which involved the implementation of three self-reflection activities (evaluating; editing; goal-setting) based very closely on the assessment rubrics. The aim was to integrate the rubrics fully into lessons, and to discover which of the activities might be the most effective in my context.

**Activity 1: Students evaluating classmates' essays**

**Activity 2: Students editing their own writing using a checklist (see Appendix 2)**

**Activity 3: Students setting goals after receiving feedback (see Appendix 3)**

One activity was introduced per week. Activity 1, a feedback task, involved students using sections of the assessment rubrics to evaluate and score different aspects of their classmates' essays, thereby encouraging learners to become familiar with marking standards. Activity 2 occurred before submission of written assignments, as a final editing check in class. Activity 3 was another feedback task, whereby students had to choose one criterion from the rubrics (their weakest) to set a goal for making progress in the next written assignment, and to identify possible methods of achieving this goal. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected so as to triangulate the results and ensure higher validity. In the first week, a questionnaire was used to ask students about the assessment rubrics and independent learning behaviour, followed by a focus group in order to gain greater insight into these issues. At the end of the cycle, another questionnaire was used to collect student opinions about the intervention activities, and I kept a teacher's journal throughout the cycle to record my reflections. Scores for students' individual written assignments were also recorded for the duration of the cycle.

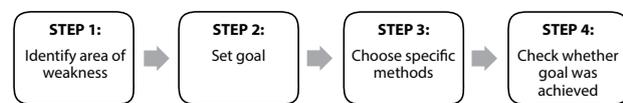
### Stage 1: Analysis

Interestingly, when the assessment rubrics were first used as a score sheet, most students achieved a slightly lower mark than in their previous written assignments: this may have been a result of the score sheet providing greater objectivity for assessment decisions. After this initial downturn, all of the students' scores increased for the second assignment, by between 3% and 5%. Scores do not, however, tell the whole story, so questionnaire and focus group data provided more insight. Results of the first questionnaire showed that the students found the assessment rubrics difficult to understand. The questionnaire also asked about independent learning behaviour, and it was pleasantly surprising to discover that my learners possessed certain autonomous habits (or so they claimed). For instance, 85% described referring to their assignment feedback rubrics to choose a subsequent criterion for focus. However, a major issue that emerged in the focus group was that the students all mentioned different individual areas of weakness: a natural problem, compounded in my context by 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.'

These results made me consider learner autonomy more deeply, and it seemed that my students required more guidance in knowing how to address their weaknesses, which supports the findings of Fyfe and Vella's (2012) study. Stage 1 was concluded with a questionnaire, asking learners to reflect on the usefulness of the three intervention activities (analysing; editing; goal-setting). They responded that all three were beneficial in helping them to assess and monitor their own written assignments, and I will certainly continue to use all of them in the EAP/IELTS course. However, due to the rolling intake and my students' need for more concrete examples of methods to improve their writing, I considered that goal-setting might be the most useful of the three in my context. As Stage 1 ended, I reflected on goal-setting as being a four-step process (see Figure 1), with Step 3, choosing specific methods, being the most difficult and important, and this shaped the second stage of the project.

**Figure 1: Steps in goal-setting**



### Stage 2: Interventions

Stage 2 involved three action research cycles and consisted of eight weeks. The research question, which again developed during the research process, was: How can goal-setting using assessment rubrics in my EAP/IELTS class most effectively enable students to assess and monitor their own formative written assignments?

The first cycle comprised only observation and reflection, while Cycles 2 and 3 included all four of the action research steps: planning, action, observation and reflection. The key details of each cycle are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Details of Stage 2 cycles**

Cycle	Action	Observation
1	N/A	Questionnaire about goal-setting (see Appendix 4)
2	Activity: matching goals to methods of achieving them on cards (see Appendix 5)	Focus group
3	Activity: using a record sheet to monitor assignment goals and progress (see Appendix 6)	Semi-structured interviews and tracking of assignment scores

Firstly, the questionnaire in Cycle 1 was used to discover students' attitudes to goal-setting, and analyse their ability to set goals and methods (see Appendix 4). Then, after reflecting on the questionnaire responses, for the activity in Cycle 2, I produced a reference sheet for students that included for each criterion of the assessment rubric, two possible methods that could be used to achieve it, and then cut up the squares to make cards (see Appendix 5). My students had to identify which specific criterion (out of 15) each method belonged to by matching the cards, and this made them think very carefully about what the criteria meant, and how they could improve each one.

For the 'observation' stage of action research Cycle 2, a focus group was held to get feedback. Finally, after reflection on Cycle 2, the intervention for the third cycle was developed as a means of the students recording their goals and progress, and they were free to choose the methods offered by the teacher, or create their own (see Appendix 6). Semi-structured interviews concluded Cycle 3, delving deeper into the concepts of learner autonomy and goal-setting. Assignment scores were also recorded, and my notes were kept in a research journal.

### Stage 2: Analysis

In the first cycle, all participants agreed on the importance of setting goals to improve their English, citing reasons such as: 'It's fundamental to set goals because it allows me to be aware of my progress and my difficulties'. In fact, articulation of goals for improving written assignments was quite good, probably as a result of explicit focus on the assessment rubrics in class feedback. However, when asked about how these goals would actually be achieved, the learners were rather vague. Table 3 shows examples of the goals and corresponding methods specified by four students.

Method 2b appears to be the most useful, because the student has a specific tense they need to master through further grammar revision, while 1b, 3b and 4b are not specific or achievable in the short term. I hypothesised that setting precise and attainable goals, matched to appropriate methods, and then checking achievement of the goals, would increase learner progress and motivation, and this led me to design the activities for the second and third cycles.

During the focus group in Cycle 2, the students reported that matching methods together with goals based on the criteria was particularly useful in aiding their understanding of how to make progress. Secondly, they commented on the teacher's guiding role in goal-setting: '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 ...'. Additionally, we agreed that the learners needed an extra set of self-study worksheets to be placed in the school's library, based directly on the writing assessment rubrics, in order to help them find specific rules or tips independently but quickly, so I have now started creating these resources.

During the third cycle, my students recorded and self-monitored their essay scores, goals, methods and progress using the record sheet, and it was encouraging to quantify these results. In total there were 23 instances of goal focus, and in 83% of instances the score for that criterion improved,

while only two students experienced a decrease. Of these positive occurrences, the average increase in score was 2.6%. The implication is that monitoring goals and progress benefits achievement; however, deeper analysis was necessary, so to conclude the project, the four learners (Students A, B, C and D) who had been in the class for the duration of Stage 2 were interviewed. The interview transcripts were then coded according to common themes.

### Theme 1: Progress and motivation

Student D experienced the highest increase in score in the class (5% overall) and she was encouraged by this result, saying 'it helps me to be proud of me [sic]'. Furthermore, Students B and C felt that tracking their goals and progress pushed them to work harder, because they wanted to improve even more. Student A was one of the two students to experience a decrease in score during Cycle 3, but he claimed that marks were unimportant to him, because overall he felt more confident in his writing. Throughout this project, I have noted that the majority of learners are motivated by recording and monitoring their goals and progress, although of course some students need encouraging in different ways.

### Theme 2: Usefulness of self-study and self-monitoring materials

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. However, Student A mentioned that he did not enjoy writing down goals and consistently checking them; instead he seemed to have a more auditory learning style, preferring to improve his language through listening and speaking. This activity was therefore perhaps not compatible with Student A's learning preferences, which reminded me that analysis of individual learner styles is important in developing study techniques. The idea of having self-study worksheets provided in the school's library was particularly appealing to my learners, since they said they would feel 'free' to use them anytime.

### Theme 3: Learner autonomy and the role of the teacher

The students accepted that learner autonomy is really important for their studies, but reported that it is difficult to achieve. Student A mentioned that this is because he is struggling with the language and rules, and so 'in the beginning we need a tutor that show [sic] us the way how [sic] to do it'. This highlights the importance of the teacher's role in guiding and motivating students and offering them a range of learning strategies to choose from.

**Table 3: Examples of goals and methods**

What goals do you have to improve your essay?	How are you going to achieve these goals?
(1a) I have to improve my academic vocabulary and grammar such as prepositions.	(1b) I'm going to write more essays and try to learn new vocabulary as much as I can.
(2a) Improve grammar, I think sometimes when I write essay I confuse some tenses.	(2b) Ask teacher and try to find the information how to use that tense from books or the Internet.
(3a) I need to answer the question correctly.	(3b) Practise more. Learn from the mistakes. Use the topic we learn from the class. Pay attention.
(4a) Structure and organization, it is really difficult for me make the correct structure.	(4b) Reading and writing.

## Issues and limitations

A wide range of factors, apart from the activities and methods used in this project, may have affected the learners' progress and writing, from prior knowledge or abilities to work commitments. It was also difficult to track student participation in various tasks, and the fact that I had to change class unexpectedly during Stage 1 meant cutting this part of the project short. However, learning to deal with the inevitable challenges of classroom research was a valuable experience for me.

## Conclusions

In concluding this study, Cotterall's (2000:116) assessment of the importance of goal-setting is particularly relevant to my and many other ELICOS contexts:

... courses designed to promote learner autonomy must encourage learners to set personal goals, monitor and reflect on their performance, and modify their learning behaviour accordingly.

Goal-setting is therefore a vital part of any course which prepares students for further academic study in contexts where learner autonomy is valued and expected. It has also been interesting to reflect on the notion of autonomous learning and the teacher's role within this. From my analysis, it seems that the teacher can be viewed as a guide whose role it is to provide students with the strategies that will enable them to become more independent when they leave the English language classroom. In addition, and as shown in previous research (Koromilas 2011, McCrossan 2011), language learners often find it difficult to specify and measure their own progress goals, methods, and improvement, so using assessment rubrics and following AfL principles can provide a focused method of guiding students in this process. It is also important to note that different strategies and tasks suit different learners, and part of developing independent thinking on university preparation courses is to encourage students to identify their own personal learning styles and self-study methods.

## Research implications

In terms of my immediate teaching context, the results of this action research project are:

- an explicit focus on goal-setting to lead to progress and achievement in writing on the EAP/*IELTS* course, benefiting the majority of students
- sharing of knowledge amongst colleagues, with several teachers now working on further sets of assessment rubrics for both writing and speaking
- increased availability of self-directed learning activities and self-study materials for the EAP/*IELTS* course.

As regards my professional development:

- my teaching methods have improved, now involving much more teacher-student negotiation; and
- I have had an invaluable induction into classroom-based research methods, equipping me with useful skills to continue my postgraduate studies.

Finally, it is important to reflect on the implications for the wider ELICOS industry. My project emphasises the necessity of transparent marking procedures in helping students make progress, in motivating them, and also in ruling out some elements of subjectivity in scoring. Additionally, it is clear that the teacher's role is vital in helping learners set goals and in providing sufficient scaffolding in the classroom that will allow autonomous learning skills to be developed.

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## Appendix 1: Formative written assessment rubrics

These were used as a feedback sheet for written assignments: the teacher circles the criterion that best applies in each of the 15 rows. They were created using *IELTS* band descriptors and the CEFR, which is why the score to obtain 'EAP 3' for each section is 15/20. However, if a student performs above this level, extra points are added, so that a student may obtain 16 or 17/20 as a very high score.

Criteria	To achieve EAP 1 (CEFR low B2)	To achieve EAP 2 (CEFR mid B2)	To achieve EAP 3 (CEFR high B2/low C1)
<b>Response to question</b>  /20	• Responds to most parts of the task [3]	• Responds to all parts of the task [4]	• Responds to all parts of the task fully [5]
	• Includes a position/thesis/purpose/outline, but this may not be clear [3]	• Includes a position/thesis/purpose/outline [4]	• Includes a clear position/thesis/purpose/outline [5]
	• Presents some relevant information, but this may not be well developed or supported [3]	• Presents relevant information, which is mostly developed and supported [4]	• Presents relevant information which is well developed and supported [5]
<b>Structure &amp; organisation</b>  /20	• There is an introduction, body and conclusion, and most of the information and ideas are organized into different paragraphs [3]	• There is a clear introduction, body and conclusion, and the information and ideas are mostly organized well into different paragraphs [4]	• There is a clear introduction, body and conclusion and all ideas and information are very well organized into different paragraphs [5]
	• Paragraphs show some structure, but maybe no topic sentences [3]	• Paragraphs are structured, with attempts at topic and supporting sentences [4]	• Paragraphs are well structured, with topic and supporting sentences, and examples [5]
	• Linking words and signposting are sometimes used, but with some mistakes [3]	• Linking words and signposting are frequently used, but with some mistakes [4]	• Linking words and signposting are used often and accurately [5]
<b>Vocabulary</b>  /20	• Mostly simple lexis is used, with some repetition [3]	• More advanced lexis is used, e.g. words learnt in class and synonyms to avoid repetition [4]	• Advanced lexis, words learnt in class and synonyms are used to avoid repetition well [5]
	• Words and phrases are only sometimes formal and academic [3]	• Some formal and academic words and phrases are used, but with a few mistakes [4]	• Words and phrases are formal and academic [5]
	• Some of the errors in spelling and word formation make it difficult to understand the text [3]	• Some errors in spelling and word formation, but they do not make it difficult to understand the text [4]	• Very few errors in spelling and word formation, so it is easy to understand the text [5]
<b>Grammar</b>  /20	• A mix of sentence forms are used, with frequent mistakes [3]	• A mix of simple, compound and complex sentence forms are used, with some mistakes [4]	• A range of sentence forms are used accurately [5]
	• Grammar errors make it difficult to understand the text [3]	• There are some grammar errors, but they do not make it difficult to understand the text [4]	• There are a few grammar errors, but they do not make it difficult to understand the text [5]
	• Several mistakes are made in punctuation [3]	• Punctuation is mainly correct [4]	• Punctuation is correct [5]
<b>Research &amp; referencing</b>  /20	• End-of-text referencing is used, but with mistakes, and in-text referencing is not always used [3]	• End-of-text referencing and in-text referencing are used, with a few mistakes [4]	• End-of-text referencing and in-text referencing are mainly accurate [5]
	• Ideas from sources have not been paraphrased: words and structure are too close to the original source [3]	• Ideas from sources have been paraphrased well in some parts but not in others (some parts are too close to the original) [4]	• Ideas from sources have been paraphrased well: using different sentence structure and words to the original source [5]
	• At least one source is used [3]	• A selection of sources is used (2-3 sources) [4]	• A selection of sources is used (3-4 sources, some academic) [5]

## Appendix 2: Editing checklist used in Stage 1 (Based explicitly on the assessment rubrics)

Criteria	Questions	My essay (answer yes or no)	My partner's essay (answer yes or no)
<b>Response to question</b>	1) Did the answer respond to <u>all</u> parts of the task? 2) Does the introduction state what the essay will include (thesis/outline)? 3) Is all the information presented and developed in lots of detail?		
<b>Structure &amp; organisation</b>	1) Is there a clear introduction, body and conclusion? 2) Are the paragraphs clearly divided? 3) Does each paragraph include a topic sentence, supporting sentences and examples? 4) Are linking words used well (in the right places, and enough)?		
<b>Vocabulary</b>	1) Is there a wide range of vocabulary, and not much repetition? 2) Are new words used which were learnt in class on this topic? 3) Is the language formal/academic? 4) Are all word forms (v/n/adj) correct and are words spelled correctly?		
<b>Grammar</b>	1) Is there a range of simple and longer, more complicated sentences? 2) Can the reader understand the text, despite the grammar errors? 3) Is all punctuation correct?		
<b>Research &amp; referencing</b>	1) Is end-of-text referencing accurate? 2) Is in-text referencing accurate? 3) Has paraphrasing been done well - can you tell that these are the writer's own words and not copied? 4) Have a selection of sources been used?		

## Appendix 3: Goal-setting task used in Stage 1 (For students to use after looking at their rubric feedback sheet)

How can I improve my writing next time?

Criteria that I need to work on (goal)	What should I do to improve? (method)
<b>e.g. Grammatical accuracy: punctuation mistakes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think carefully about full stops (.) commas (,) and capital letters (A, B) while writing</li> <li>• Check my work carefully, or get a friend to check it, and correct the punctuation before submitting it</li> </ul>

## Appendix 4: Questionnaire about goal setting used in Stage 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
  - Research & referencing (for EAP students)
- 4) What goals (if any) do you currently have to improve your essays? Please explain them here:
- 5) How are you going to achieve this goal/these goals (i.e. what are you going to do exactly)?

## Appendix 5: Goal matching activity used in Stage 2

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	Responds to all parts of the task fully	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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</li> </ul>
	Includes a clear position/thesis statement/purpose/outline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When I've finished my essay, I will highlight/underline the position and outline statements in my introduction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I will check in my notebook/textbook or with another student for ideas on how to write clear position statements and outlines</li> </ul>
	Presents relevant information which is well developed and supported	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I will ask myself: does each point I make relate <u>directly</u> to the question?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I will ask myself: have I explained each point I make clearly, and have I supported each point with an example?</li> </ul>

## Example output from Activity 2

<p>I should present relevant information which is well developed and supported</p>	<p>29</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I will ask myself: have I explained each point I make clearly, and have I supported each point with an example?</li> </ul>
	<p>6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I will ask myself: does each point I make relate <u>directly to the question?</u></li> </ul>

## Appendix 6: Goal setting record sheet used in Stage 2

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

# Introducing learning portfolios

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## Introduction

Traditionally, portfolios have been used by professionals such as artists or architects to keep samples of their work to demonstrate ability in their fields (Sharifi and Hassaskhah 2011). For over a decade, portfolios have also been used in education as an alternative assessment tool, particularly in the assessment of writing, encouraging students to engage in the writing process. In language learning, portfolios came about in response to the use of the communicative curriculum (Sharifi and Hassaskhah 2011). Ideally, students take ownership of their portfolio and select items that they want to include. By the time the portfolio is submitted for assessment, they have reviewed the chosen items against criteria and so go through the process of reflection. As students share the responsibility for their assessment, learner autonomy is increased (Sharifi and Hassaskhah 2011).

For the purpose of this study, the portfolio referred to is a learning portfolio in which students keep completed writing, reading, speaking and listening tasks along with a self-assessment of each task and written teacher feedback. I used the portfolio as a formative rather than a summative tool.

According to Strudler and Wetzel (2011:163), as part of the process of keeping learning portfolios, learners 'may be expected to take responsibility for selecting artefacts, making connections to standards and interpreting their own learning'. I hoped that my learners would increase their awareness of their strengths and weaknesses by keeping the learning portfolio and the process would allow them to see their improvements in these areas.

## Context and participants

My research took place in an English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) centre attached to a Melbourne university. Courses at the centre run for 5-week blocks with tests beginning at the end of the fourth week. Each day consists of 4 teacher-led hours and 1 hour of independent learning. All classes are shared between two and sometimes three teachers across five days.

Students from three General English (Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001) Level B1) classes were chosen as participants for this research, which took place across three blocks (cycles) of five weeks each for which I was the main teacher. Overall, 33 students, aged between 18 and 34, from China, Columbia, Japan, Korea, Kuwait, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam took part. Only nine of these students were female. Many of the students involved in the project had plans to continue their studies at the university. Other students were study tour participants.

## Research focus

In the classroom I had observed that students' overestimation of their language ability, at times, prevented them from passing the course, whereas students who underestimated their abilities suffered unnecessary stress. I also noticed students continuing to make the same errors after receiving consistent feedback from the teacher and wondered if self-assessment would raise students' awareness of their language abilities and progress. Therefore, the questions guiding my research were:

1. Can keeping a learning portfolio assist students identified by the teacher as being 'at risk' of failing the 5-week course to pass?
2. How does the use of learning portfolios contribute to teaching and learning in the classroom?
3. What are students' attitudes towards keeping learning portfolios?

Marzano (2006) suggests that student self-assessments can be used as the basis for communication between the teacher and the student where both parties give and receive feedback which may lead to a common understanding of student language production. This communication also allows students to become aware of expectations and gives them something to monitor their progress against (Butler and Lee 2010). Moreover, one of the Good Practice Principles published by Australian Universities Quality Agency (2009:4) is that: 'Students' English language development needs are diagnosed early in their studies and addressed, with ongoing opportunities for self-assessment.' In their study, Tamjid and Birjandi (2011) found that self- and peer-assessment improved learner autonomy.

Impressed by my niece's school portfolio, I chose to introduce portfolios as my intervention. Portfolios are synonymous with self-assessment and for the purpose of learning, require reflection on the part of the student (Chau 2009, Sharifi and Hassaskhah 2011, Strudler and Wetzel 2011). They help students to see their strengths and weaknesses and are useful to teachers in obtaining information about students' knowledge, understandings and abilities (Barootchi and Keshavarz 2002, Erice 2009, Leung 2005).

## Intervention

My exploration involved three cycles of action research, in three consecutive classes of five weeks each at General English pre-intermediate 1 level, which I taught as the main teacher on either three or four days per week.

An English learning questionnaire was created for students to complete at the beginning of each cycle. For simplicity, it included mostly multiple-choice and rating questions accompanied by pictures. I wanted to discover how students

felt about the four macro skills and their usual behaviour after completing English tasks in these areas (see Appendix 1). Particularly, I wanted to see if students reflected on what they had done. Reflection is a major component of portfolios (Erice 2009) and essential to constructivist and transformative theories of education (Sharifi and Hassaskhah 2011). Unless learners have the ability to reflect, they are limited in their ability to create new knowledge structures (Anderson 2008).

Students were introduced to the portfolio via a short smart board presentation. Within the presentation I provided three statements for students to rank in order of importance. These were:

'We can think about our work and how to improve.'

'We can take responsibility for what we do.'

'We can remember what we have done.'

I wanted to see how important reflection or learning autonomy were to students. Students' questions about the portfolio were answered and folders, where students could keep a record of their tasks, were distributed. I also showed students a model portfolio.

Throughout each cycle, I recorded my observations of my implementation of the intervention as well as the students' and my own responses to it. In response to these notes, the design of the portfolio and the timing of the intervention altered slightly after Cycle 1. Appendices 2 and 3 illustrate the style of self-assessment sheets provided for speaking (in the form of oral presentations) and reading for the first cycle and the following cycles respectively. In Cycles 2 and 3, I also developed a checklist to accompany these sheets. The reading checklist is also shown in Appendix 3. Students added evidence of tasks and self-assessments to their portfolios throughout their courses, which were collected on a regular basis, for checking and providing feedback.

Small group discussion questions were developed (see Appendix 4) for use towards the end of each cycle. The portfolio and self-assessment questionnaire (see Appendix 5), designed to collect students' attitudes towards keeping the portfolio, was distributed at the end of each cycle. I anticipated that by discussing the portfolio experience first, students would have already considered their responses for this questionnaire.

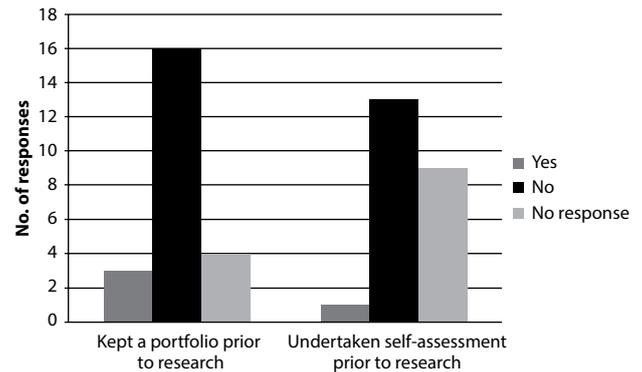
The English learning questionnaire was re-distributed at the end of Cycles 2 and 3 to see if there were any changes to students' initial responses.

## Outcomes

The English learning questionnaire I used at the beginning of each cycle showed that most students had had no prior experience with portfolios or self-assessment (see Figure 1).

The majority of students who reported that they had kept a portfolio before were from the students in Cycle 1. From discussions with these students, I understood their idea of the portfolio to be a collection of their work that they could look back on. It is relevant to take into account students' prior experiences when considering the outcomes of this study.

Figure 1: Students' prior experience with portfolios



### 1. Can keeping a learning portfolio assist students identified by the teacher as being 'at risk' of failing the 5-week course to pass?

I found that the students I was most concerned about in the class were the ones least likely to engage with the portfolio.

In a 5-week ELICOS class, students identified as being 'at risk' of failing are those who are repeaters, find tasks difficult, do not participate in class or who have poor attendance. The following brief descriptions of students who did fail the 5-week course show how these factors operated in their learning experiences.

Student F was absent much of the time due to illness. He told me that he had already passed the course but on inquiry, I found that he was in a composite class in the previous intake and had completed tests at the relevant level. He continued to argue that he should not have to complete the course again, did not complete homework and participation in class was limited to speaking tasks.

Student M took six months to complete the previous 5-week course with a borderline pass. He participated in two of the intervention cycles as he was unable to pass the first time. In class, student M spent a significant amount of time playing games on his mobile phone and speaking out of turn in his L1. During an after-class conversation with student M, he explained that he talked so much in class because he wanted to distract himself from his feelings about his family. He also said that his tutors in his home country got angry with him because he could not complete work for them. It was noticed that student M was writing self-assessments that did not make sense. When approached, he admitted to pre-writing his self-assessments as he said it was difficult for him.

Student A was absent much of the time due to a lack of childcare support. He was on a spousal visa and his wife was sponsored to study. They could not afford childcare. He had failed more than once before and was found writing on a piece of paper after class 'I feel despondent'.

Student J had been in Australia for eight years. I considered he had the aptitude to pass if he attended class and completed the set work. He told me that his absences were due to settling his divorce. He also failed to complete the set work and subsequently failed the course.

I realised that it was important to remember that factors beyond the realm of the language centre may divert students' attention away from their studies. It was clear to me that the success of this portfolio approach depended on students' language ability, outside influences affecting students'

inclination to complete tasks and genuine self-evaluations of these tasks. Therefore, students identified as being 'at risk' of failing may not benefit from using learning portfolios the way in which I incorporated them into my classes.

## 2. How does the use of learning portfolios contribute to teaching and learning in the classroom?

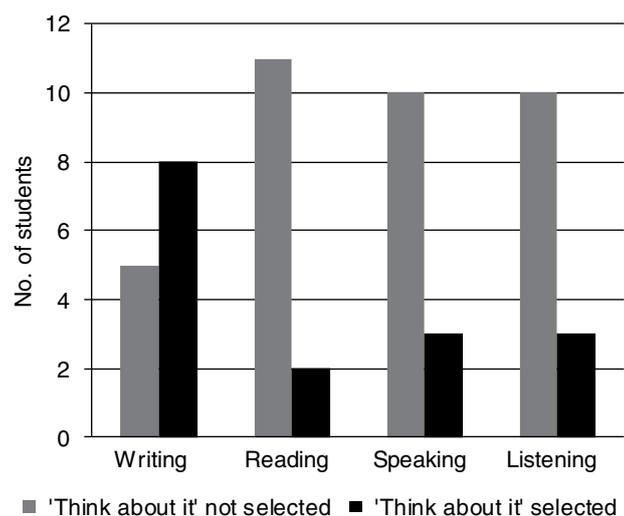
The use of portfolios did seem to contribute to learner reflection. As mentioned previously, questions 5–8 of the English learning questionnaire asked students what they usually did after completion of writing, reading, speaking and listening tasks in English. These were multiple-choice items, with the last possible response for each skill being 'Think about it'. The selection of this option at the end of the cycle showed the most noticeable change in the students' responses.

**Table 1: Students' responses to the 'Think about it' response**

Time of response	Number of students who responded	Number of times 'Think about it' was selected	Average no. of times each student selected 'Think about it'
At the beginning of a cycle	32	45	1.4
At the end of a cycle	13	29	2.2

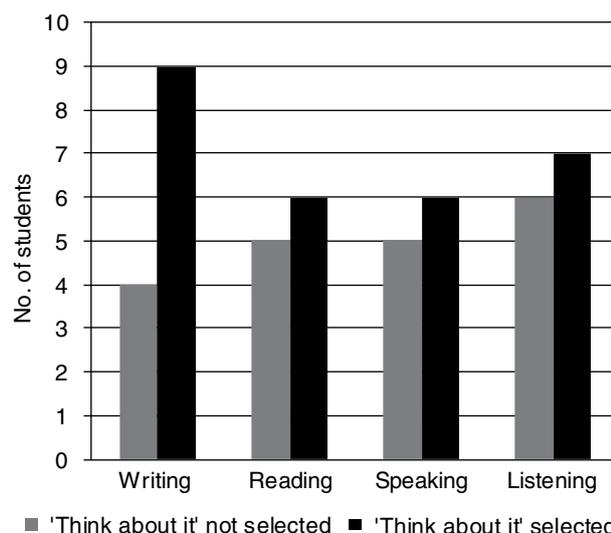
As Table 1 shows, the 'Think about it' response almost doubled after the experience of using portfolios. Collated pre- and post-portfolio responses for each skill area from the 13 students who completed the questionnaire, both at the beginning and at the end of a cycle, are shown in Figures 2 and 3 respectively.

**Figure 2: Response to task before experience with portfolios**



Students responded that they thought about writing tasks more than any of the other tasks. This could be because it is easier to see what has been produced for writing than for the other three skills. However, using the portfolio seemed to have provided students with a model reflecting on tasks from other skill areas.

**Figure 3: Response to task after experience with portfolios**



Four students (three male and one female) did not select 'Think about it' at any stage. Two males were repeating students and their language proficiency was lower than the rest of the cohort. Another male student told me he did not care if he failed because he wanted to go home. The female student was on a study tour and reportedly loved learning English but her ability was at the lower level of the proficiency range. One student responded with 'Think about it' for each skill both times she completed the questionnaire. The first time, for each skill, she had also selected 'Ask the teacher to check it', whereas the second time, this option was not chosen at all. This may be a sign of increased learner autonomy for this student.

In each class, the students who added the most reflections in their portfolios achieved the highest final assessment results in their courses. In each of Cycles 2 and 3, there were two students who contributed the same number of reflections achieving the highest and second highest final assessment results. I had also identified these students as being the most reflective. For instance, in Cycle 1, I commented in my notes that student N, 'is doing everything as asked with her portfolio. She is reading and commenting on my feedback and re-assessing her original assessment as well.' In Cycle 2, I commented on student A: 'Her self-evaluation reflects the feedback I gave her. She also included the reading we did in class and used the checklist to do so. She completed the self-assessment appropriately.' This seemed to me to support the point made by Strudler and Wetzel (2011) that reflection contributes to learning.

In respect to my teaching, I felt that the portfolios provided me with more information about the students than I would normally have gained. I was often surprised to find out how reflective students were or what high expectations they imposed on themselves. For example, one student wrote what I thought was a remarkably well-written essay for her level but included it in her *worst writing* section of the portfolio. As far as I was concerned, her sentences were near perfect and the introduction and conclusion structures required no more than minimal correction. Her reflections are included below:

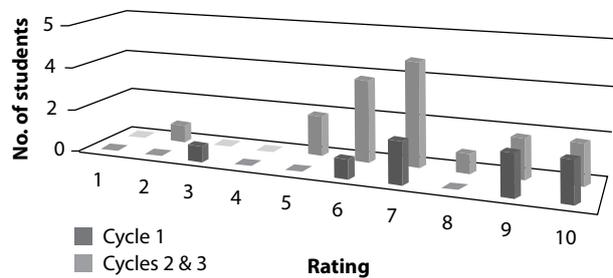
This is worse than my other writing because I still repeat my mistake again.

Having a clearer understanding of what students thought assisted me in building rapport and provided opportunities to give more feedback that was relevant to individual students. For instance, in response to the self-evaluation above I was able to give some positive reinforcement. One student told me: 'I like your comments. They give me power.'

### 3. What are students' attitudes towards keeping learning portfolios?

Twenty-five students over the three cycles completed the portfolio and self-assessment questionnaire. Question 2 asked them to rate how they felt about keeping a portfolio between 1 and 10 (where 1 was extremely sad and 10 was extremely happy) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Students' feelings about keeping a portfolio



Despite the difference in portfolio styles between the first and the second two cycles, the range of responses remained consistent, suggesting that the change in style did not alter the way students felt about keeping the portfolio. Although few students rated their feelings as a 9 or 10, overall the responses about the portfolio were more positive than negative.

From the portfolio and self-assessment questionnaire, the student discussions and the interviews, I ascertained that students did not necessarily like completing the portfolio but they did agree that it was a good strategy for learning. Comments from each of these different sources, which took place at various times within the last two weeks of each cycle, were collated, grouped and are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

These comments indicate that the students thought that the portfolios could help them to improve their language skills. Comments 6 and 9-12 were of particular interest to me as they suggested that the inclusion of the checklist helped students pinpoint what they were and were not able to do. Comment 9 also indicates that the portfolio assisted students to be autonomous in their study decisions.

From the comments above, it seems the main reason students did not like the portfolio was that it required them to do extra work or homework. I reflected that this problem could have been overcome if some class time was dedicated to portfolio entries. This would also have catered for the students who were present but found the portfolio difficult as they would have had the support of their peers and teacher while completing it.

Overall, the student attitudes towards my use of portfolios

Table 2: What students said they liked about using a portfolio

What students liked about the portfolio	No. of occurrences from 33 students
It's helpful	6
It's interesting	5
It's easy	3
It can improve my English	28
I can review what I have done	21
It helps us to be clear	2
It helps me learn	5
We get feedback from the teacher	12
I can know how/what to study by myself	13
I can know what I need to improve	27
I can know my good and bad points	7
The checklist helps me know exactly what I need to improve	2
<b>Total comments</b>	<b>131</b>

Table 3: What students said they did not like about using the portfolio

What students did not like about the portfolio	No. of occurrences from 33 students
I didn't know how to use it	7
It's difficult	7
It's boring	6
I'm not interested in it	2
It's not useful	6
I dislike writing more English words	1
I don't like having to do homework	13
It's tiring	1
No time to do it	6
<b>Total comments</b>	<b>49</b>

in my teaching were in line with the findings of research presented by Chau (2009) and Sharifi and Hassaskhah (2011), who introduced portfolios as alternative assessment. They found that in general the students commented that they did not like the process, time and stress of keeping the portfolio but did agree that it was beneficial to their learning.

## Reflections

I began my research thinking that the introduction of portfolios would assist students identified as being at risk of failing the 5-week course to pass. While I no longer think that the portfolios, as I introduced them, were helpful to these students, I am convinced of the benefits associated with learning portfolios in general. The students were not enthusiastic about using portfolios but the practice of self-assessment through the portfolios was found to be useful to students and myself as a means of formative assessment. It was enlightening to me to find out what students believed about their learning and abilities. I found that when students wrote about what they thought their weaknesses were, I was able to give personalised feedback and suggestions for improvement.

While the version of the portfolio I used in Cycles 2 and

3 was more developed than in the first cycle, students still did not like contributing to the portfolio. As the portfolio is undoubtedly a useful learning tool, I intend to make further attempts to develop a self-assessment model that is suitable for students at this level.

Breen and Candlin (2000) describe the teachers' role as one of being a learner about teaching. Through the course of this project I have felt frustrated, exhausted, interested and rewarded. I have improved my confidence and ability to carry out research and enjoyed getting to know my students better through their self-assessments. Having completed this project, I can see the value of action research for investigating one's own classroom as well as for initiating change.

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# Appendix 1: English learning questionnaire

English learning Questionnaire

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

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

### Part 1 - How good is your English?

Circle the picture that best describes how you feel and rate yourself out of 10.

- How well can you write in English? /10
- How well can you read in English? /10
- How well can you speak in English? /10
- How well can you listen in English? /10

### Part 2 - What do you usually do?

Circle all of the things that you do

#### 5. What do you usually do when you have completed a writing task in English?

Relax	Ask the teacher to check it
Check grammar, punctuation and/or spelling	Read what you have written
Count the number of words	Write it again more neatly
Ask a friend to read it	Think about it
Other (please draw or write here)	

#### 6. What do you usually do when you have completed a reading task in English?

Relax	Ask the teacher to check it
Check your answers <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False	Read it again
Look up new words	Write out new word and their meanings
Draw pictures to help remember vocabulary	Think about it
Other (please draw or write here)	

#### 7. What do you usually do when you have completed a speaking task in English?

Relax	Ask the teacher for feedback
Practice speaking again	Read the transcript to check your understanding
listen to the recording you made	Ask your friends for feedback
Ask questions about what you heard	Think about it
Other (please draw or write here)	

#### 8. What do you usually do when you have completed a listening task in English?

Relax	Ask the teacher to check it
Check your answers <input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False	Read the transcript to check your understanding
Listen again	Talk with a friend to check your understanding
Ask questions about what you heard	Think about it
Other (please draw or write here)	

#### 9. What do you usually do when a teacher gives you feedback?

Relax	Ask the teacher questions about it to try to understand
Talk about the feedback with your friends to try to understand	Listen to or read the feedback
Agree with the feedback	Disagree with the feedback
Complain about the teacher	Think about it
Other (please draw or write here)	

### Part 3 - What can you do?

Write your response to the questions below

#### 10. What do you do to try to improve your English skills?

---



---



---

#### 11. What could you do to try to improve your English skills in the future? (Try to think of 3 things)

---



---



---

### Part 4

Use the dictionary and write the meaning of the following words in your own language.

Self-assessment \_\_\_\_\_

Portfolio \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for completing this questionnaire

## Appendix 2: Speaking self-assessment form



Self-Evaluation for practice oral presentation Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Presentation Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle on a scale from 1 to 5:

1 - needs improvement 2 - satisfactory 3 - good 4 - very good 5 - excellent

1. Clear introduction.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I spoke at a good volume.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I spoke at a good pace.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I spoke clearly.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I made eye contact with the audience.	1	2	3	4	5
6. The introduction caught my audience's attention.	1	2	3	4	5
7. My visual aids helped my audience.	1	2	3	4	5
8. My content was appropriate.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I was confident and relaxed.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I used my notes well.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I ended my presentation appropriately.	1	2	3	4	5
12. My presentation was interesting.	1	2	3	4	5

Things I liked about this presentation:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Things to improve:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Teacher feedback:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What do I think about the peer feedback?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What do I think about the teacher feedback?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What do I think about my self- assessment?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 3: Reading self-reflection form and checklist

Date: August 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Reading topic: *Tales of Ten Worlds*

What I liked about this reading.  
(You can use the checklist to help you)

1.	<i>I could remember what I read.</i>
2.	<i>I could understand the main idea.</i>
3.	<i>I could guess the meaning of new words without using the dictionary</i>
4.	
5.	

This is better than my other reading because *I could remember what I read and know what are writers want us to know.*

*That's great! It is really helpful if you can guess the meaning of words without using the dictionary.*

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Reading Checklist

#### Focus:

- I was interested in reading
- I could concentrate while I was reading
- I didn't stop reading to look at the dictionary
- I could remember what I read

#### Comprehension:

- I could understand the main idea
- I could understand the details
- I could understand the instructions and questions
- I could answer the questions correctly
- I was comfortable with the vocabulary

#### Skills:

- I thought about the pictures before I started reading
- I read the text quickly without stopping to get the main idea
- I could quickly find the answers to questions without reading everything again
- I knew which part of speech new words were
- I could guess the meaning of new words without using the dictionary

## Appendix 3 continued

Date: 29/07/2012

Reading topic: Gladiator

What I need to improve:

(You can use the checklist to help you)

1.	I couldn't understand many things in the book
2.	It was many hard words for me
3.	It was boring because I couldn't understand
4.	I stop all time when I was reading
5.	I couldn't answer the questions

This is worse than my other reading because I couldn't understand well the book, there was many difficult words for me, and the book was boring all time

Do you use the dictionary when you're reading?  
See if you can understand better when you are not worried about every word.

let me know.

Ybb. 30/7.

## Appendix 4: Group discussion instructions

### Portfolio Discussion

Date:

### Group members:

### Group tasks:

Select one person in your group to lead the discussion

Select one person in your group to make notes

Select one person in your group to report back anything interesting to the class

Who does most of the talking in your group?

### Discussion questions

1. How do you feel about the portfolio?
2. How many times did you use it?  
Why?
3. What did you think about doing self-evaluations?
4. What did you like about the portfolio?
5. What did you dislike about the portfolio?
6. Did you show your portfolio to anyone else?
7. Do you think that keeping a portfolio is a good or a bad idea?  
Why?
8. Do you think that doing self-evaluations is a good or a bad idea?  
Why?

## Appendix 5: Portfolio and self-assessment questionnaire

### Portfolio & self-assessment questionnaire

1. Did you decorate your portfolio cover? Y / N  
If no, why not?

---

2. How did you feel about keeping a portfolio?



Why?

---

3. Circle the numbers that show how many times you did a self assessment for the following tasks in your portfolio.

Best Writing 1 2 3 4	Best Reading 1 2 3 4	Best Listening 1 2 3 4	Best Speaking 1 2 3 4
Worst Writing 1 2 3 4	Worst Reading 1 2 3 4	Worst Speaking 1 2 3 4	Worst Listening 1 2 3 4

4. Did you do a self-evaluation on all of the above tasks?  
If no, why not?

---

5. How did you feel about doing a self-assessment?



Why?

6. Did you look at each activity again? Yes /No  
Please explain the reasons for your answer.

---

7. Did you read the teacher feedback? Y / N  
Please explain the reasons for your answer.

---

8. The teacher feedback was:

Not helpful      a little helpful      quite helpful      very helpful

Why?

---

9. Do you think doing self-evaluations helped you with your learning? Y / N  
Please explain the reasons for your answer.

---



---

10. The self-assessments were:

Not helpful      a little helpful      quite helpful      very helpful

Why?

---

11. Do you think you will keep a portfolio next intake? Y / N  
Please explain the reasons for your answer.

---

12. Do you think you will continue to do self-assessments of your work? Yes /No  
Please explain the reasons for your answer.

---



---

13. Have you kept a portfolio before this intake? Yes / No

If yes,  
where?  
When?

14. Have you done self-assessments before this intake?

If yes,  
where?  
When?

15. Please share any other thoughts or comments here.

---



---



---

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

## Gala event for the 2012 English Australia/Cambridge English Language Assessment Action Research in ELICOS Program



Participants of the 2012 program with Dr Hanan Khalifa (Cambridge English Language Assessment), from left: Emily Edwards, Megan Yucel, Leesa Horn, Anne Burns, Diana Cossar-Burgess, Alla Eberstein, Hanan Khalifa, Katherine Brandon, Zeke Pottage, Damien Herlihy, Elizabeth Woods, Vicki Bos

The 2012 English Australia/Cambridge English Language Assessment Action Research in ELICOS Award was presented at this gala event to Damien Herlihy (third right) and Zeke Pottage (fourth right) by Dr Hanan Khalifa (Cambridge English Language Assessment) for their project on using the Web 2.0 tool VoiceThread™ for formative assessment of their students' pronunciation. Damien and Zeke created speaking tasks in which their students could use VoiceThread to record their voices and then subsequently receive feedback on their performance. Damien and Zeke are both enthusiastic users of technology for teaching and both hope to further develop their knowledge and skills in this area.

# ALTE report

## **ALTE 43rd Meeting and Conference, Salamanca, April 2013**

Over 100 delegates attended ALTE's 43rd bi-annual Meeting and Conference held in Salamanca, 17-19 April 2013, and hosted by the University of Salamanca.

The first two days of Workshops and Special Interest Group Meetings were attended by ALTE Members and Institutional Affiliates, and the final day was an Open Conference Day for all those with an interest in language testing. The theme of the conference day was Language Assessment for Adults in the Context of Lifelong Learning and in a world of increasing globalisation, competence in one or more foreign languages is a key dimension in facilitating employability and mobility; the conference reflected the importance of encouraging lifelong language learning.

Dr Neil Jones, Cambridge English Language Assessment and Dr Miranda Hamilton, Consultant to Cambridge English Language Assessment, ran workshops on Validating Examinations with Fewer Candidates and Learning-oriented Assessment, respectively, and Dr Ardeshir Geranpayeh from Cambridge English Language Assessment gave a plenary presentation on Benchmarking Language Proficiency in the Workplace. The presenters also included Aneta Quraishy from British Council, Berlin, who spoke about the Language Rich Europe Project; Professor Gerardo Prieto from the University of Salamanca, who spoke (in Spanish) about DIF (differential item functioning) Analysis in a Reading Comprehension Task of a Spanish as a Foreign Language Exam; Professor Clara de Vega (University of Salamanca) and Professor Francisco Martinez Lopez (University of Huelva) who talked about CertiUni - Accreditation of Language Levels in the Spanish University Sector; Dr Richard Bueno Hudson from Instituto Cervantes who talked about the Language Varieties Used in the DELE (Diplomas in Spanish as a Foreign Language) Examinations; and Professor Helen Spencer-Oatey (University of Warwick) whose presentation was entitled Taking Account of Intercultural Competence.

Prior to the conference, ALTE ran a 1-day Foundation Course in Language Testing: Getting Started which was run by Annie Broadhead, Consultant to Cambridge English Language Assessment.

## **Forthcoming events**

### **ALTE 44th Meeting and Conference, Barcelona, November 2013**

ALTE will hold its 44th bi-annual Meeting and Conference in Barcelona, 13-15 November 2013. The conference will be hosted by the General Directorate for Language Policy of the Generalitat de Catalunya. The theme of the conference is 'Language Assessment in Support of Migration and Integration: Different Approaches to a Common Issue' and speakers will include Dr Piet Van Avermaet (University of Ghent) and Philia Thalgot (Council of Europe, Language Policy Division).

### **ALTE 5th International Conference, Paris, April 2014**

The ALTE 5th International Conference will take place in Paris, 10-11 April 2014, and will be co-organised by ALTE and Centre international d'études pédagogiques (CIEP). The conference will provide not only an opportunity for delegates to hear influential voices, discuss key issues and meet colleagues from around the world, but it will also be an important showcase for telling others about the important work that ALTE members are doing.

The theme of the conference is: Language Assessment for Multilingualism: Promoting Linguistic Diversity and Intercultural Communication, and the five plenary speakers will be: Anne Gallagher (National University of Ireland, Maynooth), Dr David Graddol (The English Company), Dr Lid King (The Language Company), Bruno Mègre (CIEP) and Dr Jessica Wu (Language Training and Testing Centre, Taiwan). The Call for Papers was launched in April and we encourage you to submit a proposal. The Call will run until the end of September 2013.

For further information about all ALTE activities, please visit the ALTE website - [www.alte.org](http://www.alte.org). To become an Individual Affiliate of ALTE, please download an application form from the ALTE website or contact the Secretariat - [info@alte.org](mailto:info@alte.org). Individual affiliation to ALTE is free of charge and means you will receive advance information of ALTE events and activities and an invitation to join the ALTE electronic discussion forum.

# ALTE PARIS 2014

## **ALTE 5th International Conference**

**10-11 April 2014, Paris, France**

**Language Assessment for Multilingualism:  
promoting linguistic diversity and intercultural communication**

### **Call for Papers open**

ALTE (the Association of Language Testers in Europe) invites you to submit a paper for the ALTE 5th International Conference to be held in Paris from 10-11 April 2014.

Papers are welcomed in English, French, German, Italian and Spanish, and all proposals must relate to the conference theme: *Language Assessment for Multilingualism: promoting linguistic diversity and intercultural communication*.

The deadline for the submission of papers is **30 September 2013**

Visit [www.alte.org/2014](http://www.alte.org/2014) for more information.



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