"Making Connections" : Selected Proceedings of the 2007 Michigan Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Conference

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October 19-20, 2007

Editors

Christen M. Pearson
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The Selected Proceedings of the 2007 MITESOL Conference
MAKING CONNECTIONS
Selected Proceedings of the 2007 Michigan Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Conference
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Editors:
Christen M. Pearson, Kay Losey, & Nigel A. Caplan
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# The Selected Proceedings of the 2007 MITESOL Conference

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Selected Proceedings of the 2007 MUTESOL Conference:  
Making Connections

The Michigan Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (MUTESOL), an affiliate of the international Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), celebrated its 32-year history by convening on the campus of Eastern Michigan University for its annual conference on October 19-20, 2007. The conference, chaired by President-Elect Lisa Hutchison, began late Friday afternoon with 23 evening breakout sessions. These were followed by a “light-hearted” plenary address given by Dorothy Zemach (Cambridge University Press) on materials development titled Hasn’t that Book Already Been Written? A lively reception ran late into the evening, making for a very full start to the 2007 conference.

Saturday’s events began with an early gathering of MUTESOL’s various special interest groups. Eighteen break-out sessions were then offered throughout the morning, followed by a short period of time solely devoted to perusing the exhibitors’ displays of interesting books and learning tools. By late morning the yearly business-meeting-at-large was underway, followed by a luncheon filled with more lively discussions. The afternoon began with ten more breakout sessions on a variety of topics. Attendees then had the difficult choice of which featured talk to attend: Dorothy Zemach on Whose Work Is It, Anyway? Teaching Writers How and Why to Avoid Plagiarism; Dr. Wafa Hassan (Michigan State University) on A Look at Teaching Methods in the Middle East; and Dr. Carlos Lopez (Oak Park Public Schools) on Connecting English Language Proficiency to Social Studies Content.

Late afternoon included 15 breakout sessions, followed by a listing of the final raffle winners of materials generously donated by the exhibitors. In sum, it was a very busy and productive conference which included a total of 66 talks, posters, workshops, and computer labs, in addition to the plenary and featured talks. As evidenced by the above, MUTESOL is a growing and dynamic organization!

From those 66 sessions, we are pleased to offer a special selection of 11 papers in the current conference proceedings. In this, our third year of publishing the proceedings, we follow the pattern begun at its inception, that of including three main areas: TESOL-Related Issues, Research, and Materials Development and Teaching Strategies. Within each area, papers are presented alphabetically by first authors’ surnames. Under TESOL Related Issues, Domzalski and Gaterek discuss the concept of Greenberg’s typological universals and their application to ESL instruction of grammatical structures. Pasquale, A. Pearson, and Ferwerda address the linguistic reconstruction of Chicano English from a sociolinguistic perspective, culminating in questions concerning its impact on ESL teaching. Xiping closes this section with an interesting insider’s view of changes in China’s EFL teaching practices, a timely piece in anticipation of the Olympic Games to be held in China shortly following publication of this volume.

In the research section, Hensley and Day explore adapting cooperative learning groups and Kagan structures to a new population—that of the university ESL setting—in the form of an action research project. C. Pearson then takes us on a “What done it?” exploration, attempting to unravel the mystery of language delay versus language disability in a longitudinal study of two ESL preschooleers. Concluding this section is further qualitative research by Porter-Szucs on the topic of
TESOL teacher preparation programs (for an introduction to this topic, see Porter-Szuc’s paper in the 2006 conference proceedings).

Finally, in the Materials Development and Teaching Strategies section, readers will find a diverse selection of papers by both new and returning authors. Gelardi, Haxer, and Krause explain how regular content units across the curriculum can be tiered in order to better accommodate the needs of a diverse range of ESL learners, including both instruction and assessment. Gonsior discusses how to help intermediate to advanced post-secondary students tackle linguistic binomials—those “frozen” chunks of language consisting of two elements in a fixed order connected most often by the word and—such as “rock ‘n roll,” “his and hers,” and “salt and pepper.” Gordon and C. Pearson then take readers into an example of Project-Based Learning and Service Learning through a class theater production turned community project by Gordon’s students. Next, Stokes, Caplan, and McCullough once again share useful strategies for helping students with their writing, this time using a tongue-in-cheek medical diagnosis format. Closing this section and this volume is Yoder and Letson’s interesting paper on self-assessment, with a focus on second language writing in an American ESL context.

In closing, the editors would like to note that the papers in this volume have been printed in the form in which they were submitted, often after revisions requested by the editors, and with only minor further editing having taken place. Copyright and responsibility for the contents remain with each individual author; as such, all questions and requests for reprints or permission to photocopy should be obtained directly from the authors, whose correspondence addresses appear in the author note at the end of each paper.

We would like to thank all presenters who made the conference the success it was, and especially we would like to thank those presenters who submitted papers for consideration in this year’s proceedings. The authors represented here are to be commended for their time, diligence, and cooperation throughout the often lengthy review and revision process. A special thank you goes to Carol Wilson-Duffy, who each year does the layout, formatting, cover design, and printing of the Proceedings; without her technical expertise, we would not be able to produce such a high-quality finished product. Finally, a heartfelt thank you to Nigel Caplan, whose attention to detail, writing expertise, and collegiality have made the first three years of this venture into publishing such a resounding success. Nigel will be leaving Michigan this summer to start a new path in his career, that of ESL Specialist in the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. Though very sorry to see them go, we wish him and his family much happiness and success in their new life journey.

Enjoy the offerings in this volume, and we look forward to seeing you at the 2008 MITESOL Conference in East Lansing!

Christen M. Pearson (Grand Valley State University)
Kay Losey (Grand Valley State University)
Nigel A. Caplan (Michigan State University)

The Editors;
June, 2007
Typological Universals in ESL Instruction

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Abstract

Some theories provide insights which are immediately applicable to instruction. A relatively little discussed concept of Greenberg’s typological universals is one such theory. While the jury is still out on whether the use of Greenbergian universals can speed up the learning of selected grammatical structures (e.g., relative clauses, questions), it is important to become informed about this promising approach. This paper explains the nature of typological universals, reviews seminal studies testing their applicability to instruction, and offers insights into how to use them in ESL instruction.

Introduction

Typological universals can be phonological, syntactic, or semantic. This paper focuses mainly on syntactic universals and reviews some seminal studies exploring their applicability to foreign/second language instruction. It also gives some attention to phonological universals. While the up-to-date findings remain inconclusive, it is important to remember that only few out of the original forty-five Greenbergian universals (Greenberg, 1963) have been tested in classroom settings. ESL teachers may find immediate uses for the hierarchies of grammatical structures proposed by this theory, widely discussed in the past, but drawing relatively little attention for the last few decades. Its Markedness Differential Hypothesis offers valuable insights into how easy or difficult some structures may be for English language learners, depending on their first language.

Typological universals, developed in the 1960’s by Greenberg, offer a viable option to Chomsky’s Universal Grammar. One of the main differences between the two approaches hinges upon the fact that Greenberg arrived at his universals inductively by studying the features of numerous world languages, while Chomsky’s theory is deductive in nature (Eckman, 1988). Another fundamental difference is that between a descriptive versus explanatory theory: Greenberg aims at describing language at the surface level, while Chomsky hypothesizes about its deep structure. While the latter has dominated theoretical discussions for decades and inspired numerous studies in the field of second language acquisition, the former has been tested less frequently over the years, and many questions regarding its usefulness to ESL teachers remain unanswered. Nevertheless, the concept of implicational universals, best exemplified by its Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (NPAH), still seems to hold some promise to offer shortcuts to success when it comes to learning a foreign/second language grammar.

As typological universals render themselves well for testing in classroom settings, one hopes that this paper will inspire teachers to try this concept out in their
own instruction to see whether it delivers what the theory promises, which is speeding up the learning process of selected grammatical structures (e.g., relative clauses, questions).

**Typological Approaches to Language**

*Absolute Universals versus Universal Tendencies*

World languages have many features in common. Comrie (1981) postulated two types of such features. A characteristic that is shared by all languages is called an *absolute language universal*. For example, the statement “all languages have consonants” is such a universal. If a statement refers to most, but not all languages, it is called a *universal language tendency*. “Nearly all languages have final obstruents” is such a tendency.

According to Comrie (1981), language universals and language tendencies can be either *implicational* or *non-implicational*. The above statements exemplify non-implicational universals. However, when the occurrence of one feature implies the occurrence of another feature in a given language, such universals are called implicational. One of Greenberg’s universal tendencies cited below illustrates the latter. “In prepositional languages the genitive almost always follows the governing noun, while in postpositional languages it almost always precedes the noun” (1963, p.78).

E.g.:  

*dom mojego ojca* (Polish) house my  

[GEN] father [GEN]. the house of my  

father  

(the authors’ own example)  

*kelen-u suryayuli* (Classical Mongolian)  

languages [GEN] school the school  

of languages  

(Kaluzyński, 1998, p. 56) (Prepositional languages, such as Polish, English and other Indo-European languages, have *prepositions*, meaning standing before the noun, e.g., “with students,” while postpositional languages, such as Mongolian, Turkish, Japanese, Korean, and other Altaic languages have *postpositions*, meaning standing after the noun, e.g., “students with”.)

To illustrate further the concept of implicational universals, here is an example of an implicational universal that is absolute: “the existence of clusters containing at least one glottalized member implies the existence of clusters containing exclusively non-glottalized members” (Greenberg, 1966, p.22).

Historically, the concept of implicational universals provided a framework for deriving hierarchies of grammatical structures and ultimately for developing pedagogical assumptions based on those hierarchies. However, none of this would have been possible without introducing the notion which is fundamental to typological approaches, namely, that of markedness.

**Markedness**

The term *markedness* was coined in the 1930’s by N.S. Trubetzkoy, a linguist from the Prague School (Greenberg, 1966, p.11) and given saliency in the
1950’s by the writings of Jakobson and Hjelmslev, among others (Greenberg, 1966, p.27). The concept of markedness, just like that of language universals, applies to phonology, syntax, and semantics. It was originally derived from observations that some structures are more common across world languages than others. To use the example of an implicational absolute universal from the previous section, the most common word ending across languages is that of a vowel, the least common is that of a stop-stop cluster. The former would be called least marked, the latter most marked.

Some additional criteria of markedness are often employed. The frequency of occurrence within a given language is one of them. While the frequency data for final double stop clusters in English are not available, the intrigued reader may find many frequency data sets pertaining to other unmarked versus marked phonological pairs in Greenberg (1966, pp.16-20). Another criterion is structural complexity, which may lead to difficulty in producing or learning the structure. To stay with the same example, a final double-stop cluster is indeed more challenging phonetically than a vowel; thus, it should be considered more marked. One transparent example of markedness in language involves feminine forms. Consider such words as actress or poetess. They are less frequently used than their masculine counterparts, actor and poet, which are often used generically to mean either males or females. In addition, feminine forms possess an affix, which makes them more complex morphologically.

The notion of markedness combined with that of implicational language universals provides the highly formalized, yet useful definition, cited below:

If the presence of a structure $p$ in a language implies the presence of some other structure, $q$, but the presence of $q$ in some language does not imply the presence of $p$, then structure $p$ is marked relative to structure $q$, and structure $q$ is unmarked relative to structure $p$. (as cited in Ritchie & Bhatia, 1996, p. 198).

Marked structures are less common across languages, less frequently used, and presumably more complex and difficult to learn. They also imply the existence of the corresponding less marked structures in a given language. These assumptions potentially have far-reaching consequences for the theory of second language acquisition and in turn for ESL instruction, especially when it comes to teaching selected grammatical structures.

**Typological Universals and Markedness in Second Language Acquisition**

**Markedness Differential Hypothesis**

The most direct application of markedness to second language acquisition was offered by Eckman, in 1977, in the form of the Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH). This hypothesis was formulated as a response to the growing body of research showing the limitations of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), which states that target structures similar to native structures are easier to learn than those that are dissimilar to native structures (Ritchie & Bhatia, 1996, p.196). Subsequently, many researchers investigated various aspects of the MDH’s applicability to second language acquisition (for details, see Doughty, 1991; Gass, 1978, 1979, 1980; Hyltenstam, 1984; Pavesi, 1986; as cited in Braidi, 1999, p. 92). The MDH offers a much more complex picture of the interaction between the native and target languages than the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. Below are the
predictions formulated by Eckman regarding difficulties, or lack thereof, a second language learner faces based on the MDH.

(a) Those areas of the target language (TL) that are different from the native language (NL) and are relatively more marked than in the NL will be difficult. (b) The degree of difficulty associated with those aspects of the TL that are different and more marked than in the NL corresponds to the relative degree of markedness associated with those aspects. (c) Those areas of the TL that are different than the NL but are not relatively more marked than in the NL will not be difficult. (Ritchie & Bahtia, 1996, pp. 197-198.)

One can illustrate the above predictions using the example of Greenberg’s absolute universal of word final clusters, cited here earlier. Assuming that English is the target language and there are two English learners, where one’s first language is French and the other’s is Swahili, the following scenario ensues. English allows for two stops to occur at the end of the word, e.g., leaked /likt/. French does not allow two stops, but it allows a fricative-stop cluster at the end of the word, e.g., optimiste /optimist/ (the pronunciation is given in slash brackets according to the International Phonetic Alphabet). Swahili allows only vowels at the end of the word. Two stops are more marked than a fricative-stop word ending, and a vowel word ending is least marked. According to the MDH, two-stop clusters at the end of the word will be somewhat difficult for the French speaker and even more difficult for the Swahili speaker. One limitation of the MDH is the fact that it does not make predictions about structures that are similar in the TL and NL.

**Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy and Supporting Research**

There is no doubt that the most studied typological hierarchy in the field of second language acquisition is that of relative clauses. Below is the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (NPAH) (Keenan & Comrie, 1977) with the authors’ own examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUB</th>
<th>DO</th>
<th>IO</th>
<th>OP</th>
<th>GEN</th>
<th>OCOMP</th>
<th>(&gt; less marked than)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject (SU)</td>
<td>The chimp that outsmarted the scientist…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Object (DO)</td>
<td>The chimp that the cat outsmarted…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect Object (IO)</td>
<td>The chimp that I gave money to… Object of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of a Preposition (OP)</td>
<td>The chimp that I told you about… Genitive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(GEN)</td>
<td>The chimp whose personality I like… Object of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative (OCOMP)</td>
<td>The chimp that I am duller than…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the above hierarchy, relative clauses in the position of the object of comparative are most marked, and those in the position of the subject are least marked. According to the MDH, the OCOMP relative clauses should be more difficult than GEN relative clauses, the latter should be more difficult than OP relative clauses, and so forth, assuming that they do not occur in the English learner’s first language.

As the studies reviewed here attest, the NPAH inspired much research, including the two seminal studies conducted by Gass (1979, 1980) on universals in
language transfer. The results cumulatively support the notion that the NPAH operates in the production of English relative clauses and that learners can generalize from the more marked to the less marked structures. The former finding has importance for classroom teaching, especially regarding the sequence of introducing relative clauses to students and it will be elaborated upon further below under Pedagogical Implications.

A corollary to the NPAH is the hierarchy of retentive pronouns, which exhibits the reverse levels of markedness with Subject being most marked and Object of Comparative being least marked (Keenan & Comrie, 1977). The following examples are all ungrammatical in English, as noted by using the conventional asterisk:

- OCOMP> GEN> OP> IO> DO> SU (greater than less marked than)
- Subject (SU) *The chimp that he outsmarted the scientist…
- Direct Object (DO) *The chimp that the cat outsmarted him… Indirect
- Object (IO) *The chimp that I gave money to him…
- Object of a Preposition (OP) *The chimp that I told you about him…
- Genitive (GEN) *The chimp whose his personality I like…
- Object of Comparative (OCOMP) *The chimp that I am dumber than him…

Second language learners often use retentive pronouns in their interlanguage regardless of their TL and NL, although the relationship between the extent to which they use retentive pronouns as well as their markedness and occurrence in the NL is a complex one (Hyltenstam, 1984).

**Question Formation Universals**

Another grammatical hierarchy which has met the scrutiny of second language acquisition scholars is that of question formation universals. First noted by Greenberg and restated by Eckman (Braidi, 1999, p.85), it reads as follows, with the authors’ own examples:

- Wh-fronting > Wh-inversion > Yes/No inversion (greater than less marked than) Wh-fronting: *What* can you do?
- Wh-inversion: *What can you do?*
- Yes/No inversion: *Can you do it?*

This hierarchy, according to which yes/no questions are more marked than wh-inversion, which in turn is more marked than wh-fronting has been supported by research conducted on ESL learners (Braidi, 1999, p. 90). It has important implications for teaching question formations to English language learners, as discussed below

**Pedagogical Implications**

**Teaching ESL Grammar**

Although the pedagogical implications pertaining to grammar that stem from the typological approaches are usually limited to the hierarchies of relative clauses and question formation, they are complicated by the corresponding structures of the native language of the learner. The issues of transfer further impact this already complex picture. While it is impossible for ESL teachers to know in detail the grammar of the native language of each student, some useful generalizations can be gleaned from the hierarchies. First of all, the potential level of difficulty of each relative clause or a question can be gauged from its level of markedness. Thus, one should expect overall
more errors in producing OCOMP relative clauses, such as *The chimp that I am duller than knows how to be charming* than in GEN relative clauses, such as *The chimp whose personality I like knows how to be charming*, and so forth until we reach potentially the easiest SUB relative clauses, e.g. *The chimp that outsmarted the scientists knows how to be charming*.

A more counterintuitive implication refers to the sequence in which one should introduce students to relative clauses. This refers to the idea that learning one universal triggers automatically learning another, not unlike the domino effect. According to studies cited by Gass and Selinker (2001) (see Eckman, Bell, & Nelson, 1988; Gass, 1982), one might hypothetically start with the most marked structures and then generalization onto less marked forms will follow or at least will be facilitated. Thus, while introducing relative clauses, the teacher might start with OCOMP relative clauses and proceed down the markedness ladder once the students become sufficiently familiar with OCOMP relative clauses. However, it is important to keep in mind that the above suggestion needs to be mitigated by two factors: the limited experimental support for the idea and the greater learnability of unmarked structures.

Similarly, while teaching questions, the teacher might introduce the idea of inverting the subject and the verb in yes/no questions first, before covering wh-questions with inversion. Admittedly, this sequence seems less counterintuitive than the previous one, but it is not necessarily so with the prediction that students will find the structure *Can you do it?* potentially more difficult to produce than *What can you do?*

The implications regarding the sequences of teaching relative clauses and questions are the most conspicuous application of the typological approach to teaching ESL grammar. However, the familiarity with the markedness status of many basic grammatical structures may be useful in the ESL classroom. The marked structures are less frequently used, often more complex morphologically, and thus more difficult to learn and produce. Therefore, one might suggest giving them more attention and practice time than their unmarked counterparts. Teachers usually perceive their relative difficulty, and the typological paradigm simply provides reinforcement for this practice. In table 1, the selected unmarked structures are listed on the left, their marked counterparts on the right. Since, unlike the discussed hierarchies, they are not considered implicational, the paradigm does not suggest any particular sequence in which they should be taught.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unmarked</th>
<th>Marked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>singular</td>
<td>plural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive forms</td>
<td>negative forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive adjectives</td>
<td>comparative and superlative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>present tense</td>
<td>past and future tense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>active voice</td>
<td>passive voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>declarative sentences</td>
<td>interrogative sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indicative mode</td>
<td>conditional and subjunctive modes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Pedagogically Relevant Structures, selected from Greenberg (1966, pp. 28-50).*
Teaching Pronunciation

In teaching pronunciation, the concepts of language universals and markedness provide some instructionally relevant insights, as they draw attention to potentially difficult sounds and sound clusters. These can explain learners’ rendition of target sounds and thus facilitate teaching and learning.

One phonological feature of English that is strongly marked and difficult to produce is the occurrence of voiced consonants in word-final position. Most languages that allow consonants in this position allow only voiceless consonants and automatically devoice the voiced ones. For example, the last sound in the word dog would be pronounced as /k/ rather than /g/ by some English language learners who are native speakers of Polish or Russian, just to name two. Eckman (1981) conducted a study regarding this issue in Spanish and Mandarin speakers. Spanish speakers were found to devoice English final consonants, while Mandarin speakers were reported to add a schwa sound at the end of words as Mandarin does not allow any consonants, voiced or voiceless, to be pronounced in the final position. It is an interesting example of the interplay between markedness and transfer. Extra attention given to this issue in the ESL classroom is highly recommended.

Another highly marked phonological feature of English involves the constraints on initial consonant clusters, namely the rule that prohibits the pronunciation of a stop-fricative or stop-nasal cluster at the beginning of the word. Consider the pronunciation of such words as gnaw, gnat, know, knight, psalm, and psychology, where the initial stops signified by the graphemes g, k, and p became silent to conform to the rule. These examples illustrate well the historical changes in English phonology, which have not been reflected in spelling reforms. Drawing students’ attention to this phenomenon is useful, especially since the potential for errors in this area is high, due to the lack of this constraint in many other languages and to the misleading spellings.

While suggesting incorporating the above phonological knowledge in ESL instruction, we do not advocate teaching students linguistic glosses pertaining to these phenomena, but rather explaining them in simple terms. For example: when at the beginning of the word there is a g, k, or p followed by m, n, or s, the sound represented by the first letter is silent. Alternatively, one might say that initial consonant clusters represented by gn, kn, ks, pn, and ps never begin words in English in regards to articulation.

General Implications

In addition to the specific instructional implications listed above, the knowledge of markedness and language universals may inspire teachers to take an in-depth look at the relationship between the L1 and L2 in language learning and draw their attention to various elements that factor into this complex phenomenon. This comparison may lead to a renewed interest in the students’ native languages.
Simple questions, such as How can you say... in your language? or Do you have the sound... in your language? may elicit helpful information about a particular grammatical structure or a phonological feature, respectively. Finally, markedness theory suggests that common sense assumptions may not always be accurate and that counter-intuitive claims are worth examining.

**Conclusion**

The gap between linguistic theory and ESL instruction has always been wide. The authors’ hope is that this paper contributes to narrowing the gap. The pedagogical insights offered by typological universals and markedness, while by no means a panacea for most issues pertaining to teaching grammar and pronunciation, may help teachers understand some interlanguage phenomena taking place in their classroom. In the case of relative clauses and question formation, linguistic theory may actually help teachers decide upon the sequence in which to teach these structures. We would like to encourage our fellow teachers to conduct classroom research incorporating the ideas of language universals and markedness.

**Author Note**

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**References**


Chicano English as Linguistic Reconstruction

Michael Pasquale, Amber R. Pearson & Gillian Ferwerda
Cornerstone University

Abstract
New forms of English are rising in many parts of the world due to language contact and identity struggles. This paper examines linguistic reconstruction (LR), the process of a speech community creatively negotiating and adapting the syntax, semantics, and phonology of a particular language. This adaptation invests the language with patterns and idioms that express local culture, identity, and values. LR has previously been applied to post-colonial or periphery contexts, but this study examines whether it is also occurring within the native English-speaking United States in the Chicano community. The evidence gathered points to the possibility that LR may be in process within other language groups in core English-speaking countries as well.

Introduction
The English language has been rapidly spreading throughout the world, due to its increasingly dominant role in technology, education, government, media, and many other areas of specialty (Crystal, 1997). Some linguists, such as Phillipson (1992), view the spread of the English language as linguistic imperialism, a method of indirectly dominating other countries and cultures through language. According to Phillipson, English becomes a threat to the identity of these language users because it is invested with foreign values and replaces their native languages. However, the English language has not been reproduced homogenously across cultures according to the prescribed pattern of Standard English. Rather, the language has been subject to changes by the various cultures taking ownership of it. Such changes have pointed to the connection between identity and language, as studied by Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985), Pennycook (2003), and Canagarajah (1999).

The term linguistic reconstruction (LR) was first used by Canagarajah (1999, p. 178-179) to describe a remedy for linguistic imperialism. LR allows language users to adapt English in ways that avoid the dominance of foreign ideologies. This paper defines LR as the process of a speech community creatively negotiating and adapting the syntax, semantics, and phonology of a particular language for the purpose of investing it with patterns and idioms that express local culture, identity, and values. A speech community is a group of people who share a particular pronunciation of a language and use and interpret language in the same way (Santa Ana, 1993).

Canagarajah’s (1999, 2005a) research has thus far been focused in post-colonial, “periphery” contexts rather than in core English-speaking countries. A core English-speaking country is one in which the majority speak English as a native language, whereas periphery English countries are those which have been colonized in the past by English speakers who successfully implanted the language or those which depend on English for international connections and advances (Phillipson, 1992). LR is in process in many post-colonial and periphery contexts, and such a process has
generally been acknowledged as an acceptable practice to preserve culture (Widdowson, 2003).

This paper extends the examination of LR to the core English-speaking United States, particularly in the Chicano community. Adopting Peñalosa’s (1980) definition, Chicanos are people of Mexican origin who live in the United States. Many Chicanos have been born in the United States, thus holding citizenship (Peñalosa, 1980). This paper proposes that LR is already underway among the Chicano people as they refashion their identity to connect with and make sense of the multiple cultures that define them. This study will look at the ways in which the Chicano community has adapted the English language to create an identity of their own, separate from both the dominant Anglo culture and the Mexican immigrant culture.

As a result of the data explored, this paper concludes that Chicano English (CE) is linguistic reconstruction that defines the identity of an entire speech community in a core English-speaking country. Some of the implications of this finding will be discussed as evidence for the need of further research and discussion.

**Linguistic Reconstruction Defined**

**Language and Identity**

In understanding the implications of LR, the first necessary connection to be made is the interrelation between language and identity. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) conducted an extensive study ranging over a period of thirty years on “creole” and “contact varieties” of English in the former British and French colonial empires. As they studied the various aspects of language in these communities, they saw that people tended to modify their language use based on the particular social group or role with which they wished to be identified. They claimed, therefore, that language is “a series of acts of identity in which people reveal both their personal identity and their search for social roles” (p. 14). An individual expresses his or her identity in speech.

Pennycook (2003) goes further and argues that the use of language actually creates identity, rather than merely reflecting it. People employ language to fashion their identity. He labels this process performativity (p. 528). For example, choosing to use a standard dialect in place of a local dialect would reflect the language user’s desire to adopt the identity of the mainstream. The connection between language and identity is clearly significant for the implications of the spread of the English language.

Phillipson (1992) and Widdowson (2003) argue that the core English-speaking countries have promoted the English language in the periphery English countries as a necessary commodity in order for them to function economically, academically, and in other areas. Up to this point, the sought-after teachers of English in many countries are native speakers from the core English-speaking countries. The English they speak and offer, Standard English, creates a “product” that is owned by the core countries and patented to the periphery countries (Phillipson, 1992). An unhealthy dependency on the core countries is thereby created as the very definition of Standard English (the accepted English spoken by native speakers) gives the core countries the exclusive right to administer it (Phillipson, 1992).

Widdowson (2003) explains that Standard English is monitored by a specific group of people who identify and label ungrammatical usage of English. This labeling prevents some speech communities from certain individual and
societal benefits that come from the correct usage of the English language. Because of the economic and academic benefits, the priority for many people and communities falls on learning the English language in the form specified by the core countries. In the process of learning English, several countries are beginning to lose their native languages in spite of their desire to maintain their own language, identity, and culture. Africa provides evidence of such a process. The middle class speakers and some urban speakers are discovering that the language that comes quickly and easily is English, whereas speaking their native language requires much more thought and at times shows lack of fluency (Okara, 1990). When native languages are lost, the identity of a group of people is threatened because their very means of expressing themselves is taken away from them.

**Linguistic Reconstruction: A Proposed Solution**

Some linguists (Canagarajah, 1999, 2005a, 2005b; Crystal, 1997; Okara, 1990) have attempted to find a solution to this problem that would allow the benefits of the English language to be attained while avoiding the loss of identity implications. In order to counteract language and identity loss, the ability to maintain or create identity must be restored to the linguistically dominated countries without losing the ability to communicate with other English speakers. Attempts have been made toward this end by the bilingual education movement, which seeks to develop both the native language and English equally within students. However, as will be discussed below, many times the true identity of the language users in such countries falls somewhere in between that of the local culture and the global culture. Therefore, using English or their native language somehow falls short of expressing their full identity. Canagarajah (1999) creates a practical proposal for the future of English in classrooms, a third option in between the extremist views of complete rejection or complete acceptance of English. This third option is linguistic reconstruction (LR), which provides a way to combine their local and global identity into one language (Canagarajah, 2005a). Okara (1990) develops this concept with the African community in mind. He believes the process is: a continuing quest, through experimentation, for a mode of employing the English language, which we have appropriated, to give full expression to our culture [italics added] and our point of view, our message, without our seeing ourselves, or others seeing us, as through a distorting mirror….If, therefore, an African wishes to use English as an effective medium of literary expression, he has to emulsify it with the patterns, modes and idioms of African speech until it becomes so attenuated that it bears little resemblance to the original. (pp. 16, 17) In this context, the final product will be a local literary language adopted by the Anglophone countries in Africa in those speech communities that have been affected by the spread of the English language.

LR is not solely a literary phenomenon but is found in the vernacular of speech communities as well as it provides a way to maintain cultural values. For examples, in India, the rules of polite behavior place a tight rein on spoken norms. Standard Indian English grammar, the form of English closest to British and American English, came across too harshly to maintain this politeness (Canagarajah, 2005a). Therefore, Vernacular Indian English makes use of undifferentiated tag questions and the auxiliary modal may to adapt English to fit these norms. In Standard Indian English, a tag question merely reiterates what is said in the preceding statement (Bhatt, 1995),
such as in the following example: *You said you’ll do the job, didn’t you?* However, Vernacular Indian English has adapted this version to the following: *You said you’ll do the job, isn’t it?* (Canagarajah, 2005a). In this way, the tag questions provide the context for an indirect, unimposing way to ask a question, allowing the Indian cultural values of politeness to be upheld.

Canagarajah (2005b) also provides an example of how a Chinese-Malaysian student changed a particular grammatical form in writing due to a perceived western connotation. The student created a new adaptation that allowed the insertion of his or her own beliefs and individuality. The initiative taken by this student was appreciated and adopted by other students who used the adaptation with quotation marks or with a footnote explaining its use in their writing (Canagarajah, 2005b). Another writer, Xiao Ming Li (1999), was marginalized when using either the formal Chinese or the individualistic American style. However, when she combined these two styles and created a unique third space, she found greater academic acceptance (Canagarajah, 2005b).

These examples provide evidence of the freedom opened up for language learners if they are allowed outside the constraints of Standard English. By having the choice to create their own form of language, learners are given a voice and can use it when they choose. Hall (1999) highlights the need for balance between using the standard forms and created forms of English. When learners understand the effects of their decisions to use one form or the other, they realize they have a choice. The possibilities of their language use allow them to gain ownership of the language instead of being dominated by one standard form. Ownership of language is a concept that Bakhtin (1981) explored. He posited that a language is owned only when it is populated with a speaker’s own intention and accent (p. 293). Otherwise, the language belongs to someone else. It is not a true expression of self and of the speaker’s own identity. Ownership of language allows for a dual identity, local and global, within a language.

As the above examples show, LR has been explored within post-colonial and third world countries that have lost either their own languages or aspects of their culture due to the spread of English. In some cases, they have lost both. As Widdowson (2003) notes, ideas of reconstructing language are becoming more and more accepted in the periphery countries because of the increasing concern for their loss of identity. However, this same concern and tolerance is not shown in core countries. Language creativity among immigrants and minorities in core contexts, which is occurring because of the same need for identity, is “generally dismissed as quaint regional deviation” (Widdowson, 2003, p. 41).

As minority groups struggle to find identities that allow them to maintain their own culture while embracing the new culture, is it possible that linguistic reconstruction is the avenue they choose to maintain this balance? Are they using the English language to construct their new identity? And is this acceptable in our culture today?

**Chicano English as Linguistic Reconstruction**

**Spanish Language Loss in the United States**

It is not a far stretch to compare the Spanish-speaking community within the United States to a post-colonial group facing language loss overseas. They also
increasingly use English at the expense of their native tongue. The 2002 *National Survey of Latinos* found that 72 percent of first-generation Latino immigrants are primarily Spanish speakers. This number drops to four percent by the third generation. During this time, the use of English has been increasing. Only four percent of the first generation are English-dominant, but by the third generation, 78 percent are so (Suro & Passel, 2003, p. 8). While the minority groups discussed above are placed in overseas and postcolonial contexts, Spanish speakers in the United States are situated in a core English-speaking country. This loss still potentially poses a threat to their communal identity or to the individuals within this community. However, some within the Spanish-speaking community, the Chicanos, have engaged in linguistic reconstruction (LR) to create Chicano English (CE), a dialect that reflects their unique identity.

For some people of Mexican descent, this loss of Spanish does not mean a loss of identity; rather, it leads to the creation of a new identity, Chicano. Neither Spanish nor English can fully express the Chicano culture, a mix of their Mexican or indigenous heritage and their life in the U.S. Through the creation of CE, Chicanos have negotiated and adapted the syntax, semantics, and phonology of English in order to express and define their identity. This dialect serves as a clear in-group marker, distinguishing them from the mainstream Anglo culture and from Mexican immigrants.

Past research indicates that for many Chicanos, CE is the chosen language to express Chicano identity. Through CE, the language of the U.S. becomes their own and expresses their experience and identity as Americans of Mexican or indigenous heritage. Chicano speakers “have set out to affirm pride and ethnic loyalty by maintaining their Chicano English or even by increasing the Spanish-like features of Chicano English to mark their identity even more strongly” (Penfield & Ornstein-Galicia, 1985, p. 71). Their English dialect is invested with their cultural values and contains both ethnic and acculturation markers (Santa Ana, 1993). Whereas English was once the second language of Mexican communities, they are increasingly adopting and adapting it as their first language (Martínez, 2006). For some Americans of Mexican heritage, English, rather than Spanish, is being used to express their individual and community identity. As a unique creation, CE defines the Chicano identity by distinguishing its speakers from recent Mexican immigrants. CE is most often spoken by native English speakers (Fought, 2003; Santa Ana, 1993). In fact, Fought notes that in the Los Angeles community, the division between those born in the United States and those who immigrated from Mexico is socially significant (p. 38). CE speakers use linguistic differences as a means to form clear distinctions between the two groups. Thus, Chicanos’ conscious use of language distinguishes them from Mexican immigrants, forming two distinct identity groups. CE also differentiates speakers from mainstream American culture, and, as such, is often pointed to as a form of resistance to assimilation and acculturation. Penfield & Ornstein-Galicia (1985) note that CE “serves as an in-group marker of ethnic identity and brotherhood…. This symbolic function is especially true for those sub-groups with high ethnic loyalty” (p. 17). Much of the CE dialect shows Spanish influence and is used as a medium of celebrating Mexican heritage. Thus, CE is fundamentally linked with Chicano identity.
As a dialect, CE has its own syntax and structure, lexicon and semantics, and phonology and prosody. These unique features show how Chicanos have reconstructed English, artfully blending elements of English and Spanish together and adding aspects that are uniquely Chicano to express their identity. While differences exist at all levels of the dialect, this paper will only briefly give examples of the phonology of CE. For further examples of phonological, syntactical, and lexical distinctions and identity markers, see Pasquale, Pearson, and Ferwerda (in preparation). Chicano phonology is what most clearly distinguishes CE from the mainstream Anglo culture (Fought, 2003; Penfield & Ornstein-Galicia, 1985). It most clearly demonstrates their continued link to their Mexican heritage as it shows the most influence of their Spanish substrate (Fought, 2003). Their phonological adaptation “involves the systematic reconstitution of the social meaning of linguistic variables. Whereas the pronunciation of fit as feet might signal imperfect or accented English in an Anglo speech community, this pronunciation is supplanted by different meanings in the Mexican American community” (Martínez, 2006, p. 84). For the Chicano community, this pronunciation celebrates their heritage. A feature of CE is the hyper clarity of /l/ in both word-initial and intervocalic positions (Frazer, 1996; Pick, 2007). This may result “from their contact with Spanish and therefore acts as a Mexican-American identity marker in their speech” (Pick, 2007, p. 41). Similarly, the vowel in words such as mom and caught is fronted like the Spanish [a] (Fought, 2003, p. 66). This makes daughter pronounced as [daɾa], talk as [tʰaɾ], and law as [lwa]. Moreover, there are phonological traits that cannot have arisen from Spanish. As such, they serve to distinguish CE from the speech of Mexicans, standing as unique Chicano features. Wald (1980), in a study of L1 CE speakers and Mexican English learners in East Los Angeles, found a variation of the pronunciation of [ɛ] preceding [l] between the two groups. Penfield and Ornstein-Galicia (1985) attribute these pronunciation differences to students’ “identification with different social groups within the Chicano community...In fact, it is quite possible that native-born Chicanos try hard to distinguish themselves linguistically from ‘foreign-born’ Hispanics with whom they may share the same community via Chicano English” (p. 20-21). Fought’s (2003) study also shows that CE has developed clear phonological distinctions of its own. She notes less frequent vowel reduction, frequent lack of glides, and glottalization of final voiceless stops as some of the unique distinguishing features. Chicanos have clearly created a space of their own.

Further Questions and Research

The idea of linguistic reconstruction (LR) within the United States raises a plethora of questions and thoughts. For the Chicanos, an ethnic sub-culture, Standard English (SE) is not able to express their identity. Yet can the exclusive role of SE and the monolingual norm be questioned in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom and in the U.S. society at large? How should the ESL teacher respond?

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The ESL classroom is based in a larger sociocultural context that seems to uphold an imbalance of power. Although the standard of the monolingual English native speaker has been questioned as an appropriate goal overseas, it domineeringly prevails in the United States. Many may even wonder if it needs to be questioned. Yet continuing cases of linguistic discrimination within the United States on the basis of accent

(Lippi-Green, 1997) suggest that something needs to be changed. There are those, such as Hall (1999), who see this native speaker standard as an injustice within the United States and as a form of linguistic imperialism (Hall, 1999). Thus, there is “an abstracted notion of an ideal speaker of English from which ethnic and linguistic minorities are automatically excluded” (Norton, 1997, p. 423). Immigrants, English language learners, and ESL teachers interact in a context of imbalanced power and linguistic discrimination.

Another question which needs to be addressed is: Are ESL teachers within the United States implicated in the perpetuation of unequal power systems by teaching SE? Canagarajah (2005b) argues that “continuing to use [established discourses] uncritically only serves to uphold their power. [They] colonize other communities, providing inferior status to their forms of writing and shaping their thinking” (p. 935). A critical look at ESL teaching in the U.S. will not ignore the questions that arpressing teachers overseas, but examine these questions in their own local context. In periphery English-speaking countries, these questions have placed an emphasis on respecting students’ chosen identities as they are expressed in local appropriations of English.

When asked in the American context, questions are plentiful and real. What if a student desires to learn Chicano English (CE) or African American Vernacular English instead of SE because he or she desires to identify with a particular group?

What about a CE speaker who is placed in a remedial ESL class? By teaching SE, are teachers limiting students’ expressions of identity—and does anyone have the right to do that? Is it sufficient to say that students will learn their identity dialect from their home community? Should students be allowed to choose, especially elementary and high school students who may lack the cognitive maturity to make long-term decisions? Or would teachers do their students a disservice by allowing students to choose to learn their identity dialect over SE in a society that often discriminates against those with a non-standard dialect? On the other hand, Mey (1985) raises the question of whether knowledge of SE truly helps minorities or whether the power imbalance is already too unequal (as cited in Pennycook, 2001, p. 39). Or is bi-dialectalism in ESL classes a viable option (Canagarajah, 2005b, p. 941)? These questions need to be placed in the larger sociocultural context which still demands standards, standardized tests, and SE. Perhaps teachers can help students become proficient code-switchers, and develop the ability to know when to use a dialect. Due to the existing power balance, it seems that ESL students need to know SE. Yet, can this be taught in an environment that fosters and encourages the development and expression of their own identity? Can teachers help students critically use code-switching and communicative competence to know the appropriate contexts for SE and a non-standard dialect? Would this not be truly empowering, where students are able to own the language to express their identity, and be able to use SE that allow greater economic and academic opportunities? Morgan (1997) declares that, “All local options
of language should be made available to newcomers in our society—if not for personal use, then at least for scrutiny and recognition when their interests as newcomers are at stake” (p. 446). In short, does LR affect ESL in U.S. classrooms? And if so, should it?

There are a few intriguing examples where students in the United States engaged in actively reconstructing the target language in ESL classes. Ricento (2005) conducted research in a Dominican community in New York. The Dominican students did not want to assimilate to the degree of losing their native language and desired “enriched bicultural bilingual programs” (p. 96) rather than the traditional assimilation-oriented ESL classes. Ricento states that teachers “need to understand that the identities of their L2 learners are deeply connected to their status as members of distinct, but interrelated, communities, in which bilingualism (as opposed to monolingualism) is the norm” (p. 96). In Canada, Ibrahim (1999) studied immigrant African youth in an ESL class. These students desired to learn a “marginalized linguistic norm” (p. 365) because of their desire to be identified as black. Ibrahim asks, “should we as teachers not couple [our students’] word with their world?” (p. 365). These groups of students sought a language that would allow them the freedom to express their identities.

**Conclusion**

Chicano English (CE) provides an example of linguistic reconstruction (LR) in the United States. Chicanos have created their own space in the United States; they identify neither as Mexican nor as American. To express their unique identity, Chicanos have adapted the syntax, semantics, and phonology of English with an artful blend of Spanish and unique creativity. This allows them to express their unique culture and identity. CE is a reconstructed dialect. Yet, like other “non-Standard” American dialects, CE is often seen in a negative light. It is, in short, portrayed as being sub-Standard and sub-intelligent. However, CE is not less than, but a creative appropriation of, Standard American English. It is clearly a dialect in its own right that artfully melds two worlds together. Chicanos use their language to carve out their own place and create a third space in a world that tries to paint in stark black and white.

Perhaps by viewing minority dialects within native English-speaking countries as reconstructed dialects that are as valid as World Englishes, the inequality of linguistic discrimination can begin to be corrected and American ethnic minorities’ identities can be respected. Perhaps instead of seeing CE as non-Standard, it can be appreciated for its creative adaptation of the English language. Can U.S. society be convinced of that? In other words, why should the changing attitudes toward World English dialects not also include American dialects? Pennycook (2001) urges teachers to encourage students to develop their own voice as a means of addressing the inequality and marginalization in schooling. He writes:

Voice in this context is understood as far more than just speaking; rather, it is a broader understanding of developing the possibilities to articulate alternative realities. And since it has to do with gaining the agency to express one’s life, it is less about the medium of voice (speaking, writing, etc.) and more about finding possibilities of articulation. (p. 130) Using CE, Chicanos give voice to the reality of their world and their lives as both Mexicans and Americans.
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References


Teaching English in China

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Abstract

English teaching and learning are very popular in China. Recently, English language instruction has been reformed to meet the needs of economic development in both China and the world. In this paper, the current state of English language teaching in China is introduced from an “insider’s” perspective, regarding enrollment in colleges and universities; the change from test-oriented English teaching to ability-oriented English teaching; issues concerning the teaching of English in the multimedia environment; and the use of computer and online formats to cultivate students’ English language abilities, such as speaking, reading, and writing. The information presented in this article will help meet the needs of those teachers who are interested in teaching in China or who wish to have a better understanding of their students from China.

Introduction

Since stepping into the 21st century, English language teaching in China has been faced with two challenges, one internal and the other external. The first stems simply from the educational institutions themselves, which have been impacted by the increasing use of modern educational devices, such as computers and the Internet. Almost all universities and colleges in China have established learning centers equipped with computers for use by students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). These centers have the dual functions of providing teachers with the materials needed to teach English through media or online formats and of supplying students with the materials to learn English independently outside of class. The external challenge has come from the environmental tension of the international economy after China’s entering the World Trade Organization (WTO). Many foreign businesses, run solely by foreigners themselves or by both foreign and Chinese corporations, have mushroomed in China with the result that Chinese people use English more than ever before.

To accommodate these situations, there has been a great change in all aspects of English language teaching in China, the most significant change being the one from a test-oriented approach to an ability-oriented approach. This is important for all educators to understand—not only those in China, but also educators in the U.S. who teach students from China—because English language teaching in China is no longer focused on test scores but rather on the English skills and abilities of students.

Enrollment Expansion in Colleges and Universities in China

Higher educational opportunities, along with the need for English language skills, have increased in China due to the above changes in the international scene. One of the greatest changes in higher education in China is the expansion of enrollments at
colleges and universities. This can be seen in student enrollment numbers from 1985 to 2002 (China Education and Research Network, 2005):

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<td>Number of Student Enrollments</td>
<td>170,300</td>
<td>206,300</td>
<td>290,600</td>
<td>556,100</td>
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The statistics above show that the number of student enrollments in 1985 was 170,300; in 2002 it had reached 903,400; therefore, within 17 years, it had increased 5.3 times. This expansion of enrollment, however, has kept pace with the needs of the development of the Chinese economy, because so many companies and businesses need their employees to use English to communicate with their customers both domestically and internationally. That need, in return, has impacted traditional English language teaching and caused a reform in English language teaching at all colleges and universities in China.

**English Language Teaching in China**

Since English is one of the basic courses at universities and colleges, all students are required to study English during their first two years of schooling at the post-secondary level. After this, students are free to enroll in related English electives, such as English literature, American culture, translation, and so on, in order to continue developing their English skills and abilities. English, as a basic course in the first two years, as well as English electives in the next two years, are all required to be conducted in the English language. Therefore, students have more opportunities to practice and improve their English language skills, enabling them to better meet English requirements in their work positions after they graduate from a four-year educational institution.

As has been established above, at one time, English language teaching in China was simply designed to meet the needs of the country’s requirement, but now it has been shifted to meet the needs of both domestic and global economic development. In the matter of English teaching in China, there are two situations: one is that English is taught to English majors, which occurs mostly in language universities or colleges, such as Shanghai Foreign Language Studies University, Beijing Foreign Language University, and Guangzhou Foreign Language University. The other situation is that English is taught to non-English majors, which is the case at all universities, colleges, and schools in China. Thus, all students, both English majors and non-English majors, are required to study English, to some level of proficiency, in Chinese universities and colleges, as well as in other school levels.
In addition to traditional language teaching, new elements have been added to all levels of English teaching, such as computer-assisted English instruction, multimedia classroom, online teaching and learning, and even televised English courses on TV programs, as shown in Figure 1.

As can be seen in this brief illustration of levels of English instruction in China, English as a major area of study forms a separate level for university or college students and different English courses are required in their curriculums compared to other major areas. At this level, the courses and concurrent requirements for language ability are much higher than those in the level of non-English majors, and therefore the number of students who can select English as their major is limited.

On the second level of Figure 1, it can be seen that English is one of the important courses being taught in all classes, as every student at every school receives English lessons. Because of this and the aforementioned changes in the global economy, including China’s role in said economy, and also because of China’s need for interaction with foreigners, students’ motivation for learning English has grown stronger than ever before.

Most recently, there has been considerable attention given to the fact that English teaching is quite different from other areas of teaching, such as teaching history, mathematics, or physics. In English language classes, language is taught through language (Cook, 2000, p. 121). That makes English language teaching and learning more difficult (Nunan, 2001, p. 40). The Chinese government realizes this fact clearly and, therefore, invests large sums of money into English language teaching in order to make a new environment for both teaching and learning, with the long term goal being to better serve the needs of the developing Chinese economy.

**Dual Oriented Approach of English Teaching in China**

During the time that university and college enrollments began expanding, it was also the time that the computer was being applied to teaching, especially to English language teaching, and that caused the concepts of teaching English to change. A significant change (as mentioned above) was from a test-oriented approach of English language teaching, in which students’ language abilities were measured by test scores, to an ability-oriented method of English language teaching, which focuses on more practical ways of teaching students how to apply and use the English language. This
new concept has improved and enhanced the communication and cooperation between China and the world. For instance, those students who have graduated from a test-oriented approach have found it difficult to communicate with foreigners in their workplace. Because of this, some of them have gone back to school to attend part-time classes in order to improve their oral English. This situation occurred because the test-oriented approach of teaching English was concerned more with test scores that students earned than with students’ actual language applications. In contrast, those who have graduated from an ability-oriented approach of English language teaching have experienced fewer problems in communicating with foreigners because they have received more time to improve their actual use of language in the ability-oriented classroom. In other words, the ability-oriented approach of English language teaching emphasizes students’ language use rather than how high of a test score they can achieve.

As noted above, for many years, teaching English in China followed the test-oriented approach to the teaching of English and the classroom was a “crowded human environment” in which one person, namely the teacher, was responsible for all activities that happened in class, as well as encouraging and enhancing the learning processes (Cazden, 2001, p. 136). This situation was common in English teaching ten years ago, when most schools focused on teaching English subskills as separate areas. For example, if the teacher dealt with reading comprehension in class, he/she would probably concentrate on a reading project. For a listening project, it was the business of the listening class. Therefore, each subskill area was measured by its own score unconnected to the other language subskill areas. This can be simply described as seen in Figure 2.

![Diagram](https://example.com/diagram.png)

Figure 2. The mode of Test-oriented English Teaching

Figure 2 above illustrates a model of the test-oriented approach to English language teaching. It concerns students’ specific test abilities, stressing the scores the students could achieve rather than the abilities the students could apply in their daily lives. As can be seen in Figure 2, English teaching was actually divided into two parts: ability and test score. On one hand, this model seems logical for the sake of learning a language, but on the other hand, it is not acceptable, because students actually worried more about their test scores than their abilities to use the language.

In order to address this problem, since 1999, the test-oriented approach to English language teaching has been changing into an ability-oriented approach, and this change has been accompanied by the advent of the computer being utilized in the classroom. Now, student-independent learning is advocated, including the students’ active participation in class learning, students’ self-directed online learning, and English activities incorporated both in and out of the classroom. These activities have
come to be almost as important as the students’ class work (Datesman, Crandall, & Kearney, 2005), where students are encouraged to ask and answer questions, discuss topics, and think both individually and in peer groups. Students are also encouraged to use the Internet and learn online. The purpose of this new approach is not only to teach students content area knowledge but also to teach them how to learn, how to develop their abilities to apply English, and how to solve problems they might encounter while learning English. This ability-oriented approach can be characterized as in Figure 3.

![Diagram](image)

**Fig. 3:** The Mode of Ability-oriented English Teaching

The ability-oriented approach to English language teaching, as Figure 3 shows, is supplemented by the computer, networks, and media, all of which engage students in more vivid activities of English learning, as well as the incorporating higher cognitive processes of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Brophy & Good, 1997). This approach centers on the development of the students’ ability to use English, specifically, language subskill areas such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, all taught jointly in the ability-oriented teaching environments, so that students have more opportunities to practice and internalize the English language.

Most importantly, the ability-oriented English language teaching approach advocates for student-independent learning in whichever type of classroom is encountered—traditional, multimedia, or even computer classrooms. Classroom teaching, therefore, is regarded as only a part of the whole English language teaching and learning process. To be more exact, in the ability-oriented English class, the teacher will likely demonstrate or explain for students the difficult points which students have met or will meet in their learning according to the textbook or teaching process. The teacher will then try to build in class activities in which students can practice their English in different ways: writing, listening, speaking, and even debating. In the ability-oriented English class, students are encouraged to demonstrate their abilities of using language, including fulfilling their assignments on-line or out of the classroom. Therefore, the teacher, as Figure 3 shows, has a dual-status: teacher and coach. As a teacher, he or she functions as a participant or attendant in class rather than simply as an organizer or director. The teacher helps students to deal with the teaching projects and students sustain their own abilities to inquire about and reflect on their own subjects of interest. As a coach, he or she acts as an instructor to help students carry out their learning plan and help students solve problems in their self-learning either face-to-face or through the internet. Both teachers’ and students’ achievements are evaluated by their work in and out of class.
Conclusion

English teaching in China has its own characteristics and, overall, has improved significantly in its effectiveness in recent years. The fact that English teaching in China has made such great progress is partly because of foreign teachers who have and still continue to help in the teaching of English. Hopefully, this brief introduction has served a dual purpose: first, as a useful reference for those who are planning to teach English in China; and second, for those teaching in the U.S.A., as a source for understanding Chinese students’ past teaching and learning experiences, prior to coming to the United States, in order to better support their transition.

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References


Implementing Cooperative Learning Structures in a Collaborative Situation in a Graduate-Level ESL Class

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Abstract

Cooperative learning structures are thought to be valuable methods for enhancing English language instruction in collaborative situations. However, such structures seem to be more typically aimed at younger groups of learners. In contrast, this paper reports on classroom action research using cooperative learning groups and Kagan structures in a graduate-level ESL class in a medium-sized Midwestern university. It is widely recognized that cooperative learning is an effective method of second language instruction and provides increased opportunities for learners to communicate. A series of cooperative learning lessons, as well as the modifications which were necessary for their implementation in an advanced class of adult learners, is discussed. Results indicate that, once both level-appropriate content and activities were achieved, cooperative learning structures were able to be successfully adapted and implemented. Selected students’ responses as well as performance on the assigned task of group presentations are included.

Introduction

The ultimate goal of any language instruction, regardless of age, is effective communication in the target language (TL). This may involve any number of different age- and purpose-dependent tasks, whether spoken or written, and may be described as the accomplishment of said tasks. Still, whatever the type of approach being used for whatever group of learners, most teachers today would probably agree that an essential part of understanding and retaining the TL is using it. Thus, the more time spent engaged in TL use, the better. This is probably truer for some activities than others, but by using the language, students learn. It is in this way that instruction best functions (Aebersold & Field, 1997).

One effective method of providing students with more opportunities to use the TL is the use of in-class group work (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998). Group work can be defined as the dividing up of a class into smaller bodies of students in order to achieve a specific goal which may not be attainable as a whole class. For the purpose of this paper, group work will be referred to as dividing a class into teacher- or self-selected groups of no more than five students. This kind of group work, when used effectively in class, takes the focus off the teacher and places it on the students. However, it differs from a question-answer or class discussion type format in that it divides the class into smaller clusters of students. This, in turn, allows for the elicitation of the target language (TL) from multiple students simultaneously. When class time is limited, this simultaneous elicitation can be an effective way to give more students more chances to speak than they would otherwise have. Furthermore, if group work is structured according to principles of cooperative learning—a method of
instruction employing student-centered small group work in which students work interdependently to achieve a goal—the participation and involvement of students who are members of each group can be maximized (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998). If this is the case, whenever students work in cooperative learning (CL) groups during class time, the amount of structured practice students receive increases significantly. This is due largely to two key components of cooperative learning: individual accountability and positive interdependence (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec). Cooperative learning groups, when implemented successfully, should require members of the group to perform some individual task which contributes to the group’s final product while causing members to rely on one another to complete said final product. Obviously, this requires communication between members and should serve to elicit L2 in the ESL classroom.

Interestingly, despite the above benefits of successful CL instruction, for much of its existence CL seems to have been applied to mostly younger, monolingual classes. Much of the available literature concerning CL is focused on typical primary school classes. Indeed, two well-known names in the field of CL, Johnson and Kagan, gear the majority of their respective material toward this demographic (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998; Kagan Online, 2007). As was mentioned above, however, CL would seem to be a plausible answer to the question of how an ESL instructor could maximize class time in such a way as to provide students with as much chance to use the L2 as possible. Moreover, the goals of CL would seem to be equally applicable in classes of older students, even adults. Plausibly, CL may also be an effective method of instruction with advanced language learners, although this remains to be seen. Still, these issues are both current and under much ongoing investigation, and there exist several studies dealing with these very topics.

Review of Literature

Despite its being a relatively young field, as well as its being concerned mostly with pre-college level students for much of its existence, CL has been shown to be an effective method of instruction at the college level (Burke & Cummins, 2002; Dodge & Kendall, 2004; Kuech, 2004; Leon & Tai, 2004; Ocker & Yaverbaum, 2004). The study of CL in the field of ESL, which is an even more recent development, has shown CL’s effectiveness in that field as well (Ghaiith, 2002; Liang & Mohan, 2003; Storch, 2005). In their study of ESL students who were high-school-age Chinese immigrants to Canada participating in content-based courses, Liang and Mohan (2003) found that the use of CL provided learners with more chances for L2 improvement while also allowing for maintenance of their first language (L1) and the acquisition of content. The authors state that this was possible due to students’ ability to use both L1 and L2 in working out content-area problems, which enabled them to solidify knowledge in their L1 while simultaneously improving their L2 (p. 45). This was a rather specific selection of students, but CL was found to be successful for students’ language learning. Similarly, Jacobs (2000) discusses the value of CL in helping students to understand different functions of language. Because CL uses roles to ensure interdependence, students must also learn the language that goes with each role (p. 11). In his article, Jacobs promotes the use of CL, specifically in combination with
extensive reading. Although the level of student dealt with in his article is not clear, Jacobs emphasizes the importance of CL’s relationship to student motivation in the language classroom (p. 13).

The question still remains, however, of how effective CL can be in post-secondary language instruction. In a study investigating the effect of CL on a college-level ESL writing class, Storch (2005) found that small CL groups “seemed to fulfill the task more competently” than those students who worked individually (p. 168). Agreeing that CL provides more opportunities for language use than traditional classrooms (p. 154), Storch performed her study in an intermediate-level class where students’ average age was 23 (p. 157). While CL groups’ final writings were shorter, on average, than the individual students’, Storch found the quality of the CL groups’ writing to have “greater grammatical accuracy and linguistic complexity” and to be “more succinct” (p. 168). She goes on to caution against generalizing her findings but points out that CL especially aided students’ development of ideas during the prewriting stages of the task.

The effect of CL on L2 instruction can extend beyond solely academic areas as well. In a study of introductory-level college students in an EFL setting in a Middle Eastern university, Ghaith (2002) found that CL can have positive effects on students’ perceptions of class solidarity as well as personal support. Ghaith found that, because one of its key components is positive interdependence, CL can “promote cohesion and solidarity among learners” (p. 264). Ghaith also writes that CL is positively related to students’ desire to do their best schoolwork and also helps to make a class more personally and academically supportive (p. 269).

It is evident that CL can be a valuable tool in L2 instruction, even at the college- or university-level. What remains to be seen, however, is whether CL can be implemented successfully in upper-level areas of study in classes which are also at the advanced level of L2 development. The above studies show that CL can be effective for both L2 instruction and at the university level, but no study which was found dealt with university students of an advanced proficiency. In order to determine whether CL can be effective with this kind of learner, further study appears to be necessary. Hence, it may be beneficial for the CL structures, which have existed for some time now, to be applied to upper-level classes of advanced students.

**Tutorial**

There are two kinds of structures dealt with in the discussion which follows. Both employ CL to achieve a goal or goals through the assigning and fulfillment of roles by students while working together to complete a task. The first are those developed by Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec in their book *Cooperation in the Classroom* (1998). These structures are based on five aspects of group work: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing (p. 1:32). Because of its involved and complex nature, this CL method requires more than just one activity to be implemented successfully. To do so, an entire lesson, or even lessons, must be
organized according to the above five aspects of CL. For this reason, in the implementation that will be discussed below, each of the first three lessons was structured according to this method and groups remained the same for the entire lesson.

In the fourth lesson discussed below are CL structures originally developed by Dr. Spencer Kagan and adapted by High in her book *Second Language Learning Through Cooperative Learning* (1993). Kagan structures are similar to the Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1998) structures, but differ in the way in which they are implemented. Kagan structures have been developed for use in enhancing lessons, typically by means of employing them as activity structures in a lesson plan, instead of as the entire plan itself. For this reason, Kagan structures are designed to elicit what Kagan refers to as “PIES”: positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction (Kagan Online, 2007). High’s book is a collection of these Kagan structures designed specifically for use in the L2 classroom. Each structure contains the aforementioned PIES and fosters cooperative interaction through the assigning of roles to each student and the setting of such a goal as to make cooperation the only way for a group to be successful. An example of such a structure is “Numbered Heads Together” (p. 1:21), in which 1) all students in a group are assigned numbers, 2) the group is posed a question and given a time limit, 3) students discuss the answer, and 4) the teacher calls a number at random to answer as the designated spokesperson for his or her group. The fourth lesson discussed below was structured according to this method and included three separate Kagan structures as activities.

The components of CL seem to be applicable to ESL instruction; furthermore, they seem just as applicable to adult learners. It is evident from the studies discussed above, however, that CL has not received much attention in the area of advanced adult ESL learners. Thus, the question becomes whether or not CL can be both successfully adapted to and implemented in such a class. Specifically, the research question for this study was the following: Can cooperative learning structures be successfully adapted and implemented in an advanced, graduate-level ESL class?

**Method**

**Participants**

The class was a graduate-level advanced ESL seminar course in academic communication focusing on presentations, reading, and vocabulary, which met twice a week for 75 minutes each class period. Students were placed in this class based on either Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) Internet-Based Test (iBT) scores ranging from 63 to 69 or Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB) scores ranging from 63 to 75. The class consisted of 10 graduate students initially, but that number reduced to nine as one student was absent for much of the semester. Students were from a variety of language and cultural backgrounds, including Korea, China, Taiwan, India, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey. The main text used for the course was one in which two opposing viewpoints concerning a number of current issues were given (Easton, 2005). The four
implemented lessons were taught at different points during the semester; the first being taught near the beginning of the semester, and the fourth being taught near the end. The participants were available because the graduate student was the graduate assistant (GA) for the instructor of record and was observing the class once a week.

**Procedure**

In order to investigate CL’s effectiveness in an advanced ESL setting, the GA implemented four lessons which were reviewed by the instructor of record, who provided feedback before their implementation. The instructor of record served as an observer during the lessons and then provided post-implementation feedback to the GA after each lesson. Each lesson had several goals and objectives of its own. The first lesson sought to introduce the skill of giving an oral summary of a text while simultaneously acclimating students to the structure and roles of cooperative learning. The second lesson sought to produce an outline from a written text. The third lesson dealt with drawing logical inferences concerning a text by previewing an article’s abstract. The final lesson’s objectives were a series of previewing skills to be used in pre-reading. The goals of the above lessons, from the GA teacher’s perspective, were the implementation of cooperative learning structures, the reflection on the lessons by means of a journal, and the gathering of feedback from students concerning implementation, what they had observed, and what opinions they had concerning it. The first three lessons were based on Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec’s (1998) method, while the final lesson was designed using three Kagan (2007) structures selected according to appropriateness for level of students and adaptability to a graduate-level advanced setting: team word-webbing as a brainstorming activity, a modified think-pair-share structure as a prediction of content activity, and a modified jigsaw as a previewing activity.

**Lesson 1**

The first lesson, which was taught near the beginning of the semester, served as the jumping-off point for teacher-student interaction. Each teacher-assigned group was composed of five students who had read either the pro or con article from the textbook on the topic of the Internet (Easton, 2005, p. 252-270). The academic objective for this lesson was students’ being able to orally summarize their respective articles. Students orally summarized the texts they had read to the other members of their group who had read the same pro or con article, with the other members checking for accuracy. If discrepancies arose, group members were to discuss them until the disagreements were resolved with all members who read the same article in agreement. Then, group members switched so that students who read the pro article were with students who read the con article. Both sides then summarized their articles for the other in order to give one another an idea of what the opposing viewpoint’s article discussed. Once groups had completed this, an informal debate within the groups was held in order to give students a chance to express their thoughts and ideas about the topic discussed in the text.
Lesson 2
The second lesson had as its final academic objective the creation of an outline from a text. For this lesson, students had all read the same article in the textbook concerning the space exploration program (Easton, 2005, p. 230-249). Each group was teacher-assigned and given the task of creating an outline based on the text. Each group’s members were assigned specific roles in order to assure participation, including leader, scribe, representative, and moderator. Groups then discussed what to include in an outline and, when finished, sent their scribes to the board to write down their outlines. Once this was completed the class as a whole discussed similarities and differences in the groups’ outlines and worked together to synthesize them into one, final outline.

Lesson 3
The third lesson focused on making logical inferences from an academic article’s abstract and bibliographic information. Three abstracts in the students’ content areas of study had been selected by the instructor before class, and students were allowed to select one abstract from three which they found interesting. Groups were thus student-selected in that the students who chose the same abstract were together. Groups were then given a handout with questions pertaining to the abstract and bibliographic information which they were to answer. Questions on the handout focused on previewing and predicting what the article would be about. After class, groups found the full articles and read them to determine the accuracy of their previewing and predicting. The academic objective for this lesson was the prediction and its subsequent evaluation for accuracy by the students. This third lesson taught by the GA led into a unit taught by the instructor of record concerning group presentations. The content for the presentations were the articles dealt with in the third cooperative learning lesson, and the groups were the same, save one student. Because students were allowed to select which article they would read based on personal preference, once the previewing and predicting was completed during the cooperative learning lesson, one student opted to change groups in order to work with a different article he felt would be more beneficial. The outcome of the group presentations will be discussed in the Discussion section below.

Lesson 4
The fourth lesson, which was comprised of Kagan structures (High, 1993), focused on the pre-reading strategies of brainstorming to instantiate background schemata, previewing a text, and predicting its content based on brainstorming and previewing. As one student was absent, for this lesson, the class was divided into three groups of three students each, with operative roles being leader, scribe, and representative. For the purpose of this lesson, the Kagan structures had to be adapted in order to suit a graduate-level ESL class. High’s book seems to be geared more toward younger students, and the structures used were necessarily adapted to the higher level. The text used for this lesson was an article from a local newspaper dealing with the topic of population control, an issue which had just been covered in the textbook. In the first activity, brainstorming was used to instantiate background schemata. This was done by giving the students only the title of the article and then having groups brainstorm possible content in the team word-webbing format. Once groups had formulated ideas, they shared their results with the rest of the class. The second activity was a predicting exercise, in which groups were given
the title, subtitle, captions, source, and first and last paragraphs with which to predict the content of the article. This activity utilized a modified version of the think-pair-share structure. The structure, which typically consists of group of four, was modified for three groups of three students. Also, instead of thinking and discussing in pairs before reporting back to the group of four, groups thought and discussed as trios and then reported back to the class as a whole. The final activity was a modified jigsaw activity where each student received a portion of the article and was responsible for reading it and finding the main idea. Instead of contributing his or her part of the jigsaw to a group, each student shared his or her main idea on the board. This created a rudimentary outline with which students were to then, after class, read the article and see how much brainstorming, predicting, and previewing had given them about the article’s content, which was the ultimate academic objective for this lesson.

Results

Results were gathered using three methods: teacher observations made by the instructor of record, the GA’s journal, and feedback from students. The instructor of record, serving as observer during implementation of CL lessons and primary instructor for all other lessons, provided immediate feedback and reported her observations upon the conclusion of each lesson. The GA then kept a detailed teacher’s journal concerning the design, implementation, and outcome of each lesson. The journal included teacher-observed outcomes recorded by the GA. Additionally, feedback received directly from students served as a third source of data, with feedback being received in the form of post-class e-mails sent directly to the GA. This feedback was then recorded and tabulated for analysis.

Based on the data collected, the first lesson was determined to be the least successful of the four. Students were able to demonstrate some ability to orally summarize a text, to some extent, but many students were unsure or somewhat confused in their summaries. Out of the seven students who completed the post-class self-evaluation, four expressed a lack of confidence in their debating, stating that they did not feel comfortable, found it difficult to debate in English despite L1 experience, or responded that their in-class performance was merely “so-so.” Likewise, the GA recorded that, while all students participated consistently, only four were actively engaged voicing ideas and opinions, and only three students demonstrated an in-depth understanding of the content.

The second lesson was evaluated to have been more successful than the first based on the data collected. Both instructors’ observations concurred that students were more engaged and participating more actively. The GA recorded that all groups were actively cooperating and engaged in discussion. All three groups were successful in completing their group outlines and sharing them with the class. Similarly, in post-class self-evaluations, students reported more confidence in their work, with three students expressing hesitation as to the quality of their work.

The third lesson received the highest evaluations, both by teachers and students. Students appeared more comfortable with cooperative groups than in the previous two
lessons. Both instructors’ observations agreed that the groups cooperated successfully and produced a complete set of predictions concerning their abstracts. All three groups completed their task of prediction based on the abstract. Furthermore, all groups also rated their work as excellent, which corresponded with teachers’ observations. All nine students reported that their work was completed, and that they were successful in producing feasible and logical predictions.

In the fourth lesson, which used Kagan structures, groups were able to complete their tasks, and academic objectives were achieved; an in-class outline was created based on student previewing, which students used to evaluate their predictions about the reading. Five of the eight students who submitted a post-class self-evaluation wrote that their predictions had not been accurate, but this was not considered to be a failure to achieve goals, as students had actively predicted the content and then evaluated their predictions based upon their post-class reading of the article. One student wrote that she appreciated the content learned. Another wrote that his group had “more time to think about different views” and that this “led us to communicate [with] one another for discussion.” All groups were observed actively participating and discussing content.

Discussion

As evidenced in the Results section, of the first three lessons which were based on the Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1998) cooperative learning method, the third lesson seemed to be the most successful. This appears to be true for a number of reasons. At the beginning of the semester, both students and the graduate student teacher were not familiar with the class or cooperative learning, which likely functioned to limit the effectiveness the lessons may have had. Additionally, students were not entirely comfortable with one another at the time, which seemed to make group work and interaction more difficult than desired. Also, for the first lesson, students were divided into two groups of five students; this was felt to have been too large a group for CL, which corresponds with ideas discussed by Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec. Both instructors agreed in post-class discussion that the academic content of this lesson was not appropriate for the students’ level.

The second lesson was observed to have been smoother than the first, which was most likely due to its being later in the semester as well as the second CL lesson. Students were more used to one another and the instructor and able to work together more easily because of it. Groups were also made smaller for this lesson. This seems to have been more successful than larger groups, as noted in the GA’s journal, where he noted that smaller groups not only provided students with more chance to participate, but also maximized student roles and the responsibilities they were to have fulfilled by eliminating any overlap. Furthermore, the academic content of the second lesson was felt to be closer to students’ level but was still not exactly appropriate.

The third lesson based on Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec’s (1998) approach was determined to be the most successful for a number of reasons. First, students were comfortable with CL by this time and also familiar with roles and how to fill them.
This was evident in student responses received, which were both unprompted and overwhelmingly positive. Second, this being the third lesson, the appropriate level of academic content was realized—dealing with professional journal abstracts. Students were also observed to have been more enthusiastic about this lesson, as they were able to select the article with which they wanted to work. Students in post-class self-evaluations all regarded their group’s work as excellent. This corresponded with both instructors’ observations. What is more, students also responded positively to the unit which followed the third CL lesson. The unit, taught by the instructor of record, used as its subject matter the respective articles from the third CL lesson’s abstracts and concerned the delivery of group presentations. In self-reports, students themselves wrote that they had learned more by working together than they would have alone. As the GA had been adapting cooperative learning structures for use in the graduate-level ESL class, this lesson seemed to achieve the appropriate level for the students. Dealing with academic abstracts in students’ content areas of study appeared to be effective in engaging students and eliciting participation. Another reason this lesson was more successful than the previous two was that the instructor of record had been using group work in the class throughout the semester, and students now seemed comfortable with being in groups. This is not to say that all groups functioned the same, however. Different groups had different dynamics, some louder and excited, some quieter and more reserved, but all groups completed their tasks successfully.

The fourth lesson, based on Kagan structures, also seemed to be largely successful. After the third lesson, an appropriate level was reached for the fourth lesson, and a newspaper article was used as the text. The pre-reading strategies that were covered were also appropriate for the students’ level as well as their future academic endeavors. As noted in the Procedure section, however, the Kagan structures had to be adapted in order to be appropriate for the students’ level as well as class size. Many of the structures, taken as is, seem aimed at younger children and, thus, inappropriate for older, more advanced, learners. Once adapted, though, the Kagan structures seemed to be sufficiently successful. This is also likely due to both instructor and student comfort in dealing with CL and its accompanying activities. This was the final lesson, so the class was used to CL, and it also took place near the end of the semester.

**Limitations**

There are limitations to this implementation, however, which must be addressed. First, and foremost, the four lessons discussed here were taught in one class of, ultimately, nine students. This cannot be expected to approach a representative sample for ESL settings in general. Likewise, the inexperience of the GA in working with CL while adapting it to graduate-level students may have hampered the lessons’ implementation. This was determined to be unavoidable, however, as no studies concerning the adaptation of CL to this demographic of students was found. In addition, much of the evidence used to evaluate the effectiveness of implementation was highly subjective. Observations made by the instructor of record, reflections in the GA’s journal, as well as feedback and self-evaluation by students were necessarily subjective. Granted, this was an action
research study, but no quantitative data, other than achievement of academic objectives, was considered necessary, and results must be taken as such.

The first and second lessons appear to have not been at the appropriate content level for the graduate-level ESL class in which they were taught. However, by the third lesson, this was no longer true. The content of this lesson appeared to be appropriate for the students. At the same time, the article abstracts which were used were in students’ content areas of study, which probably provided additional incentive to participate. Additionally, because of this appropriateness of level, as well as students’ comfort in groups, the subsequent unit on group presentations was very successful, both from a teacher’s standpoint and according to prompted and unprompted student feedback.

Conclusion

Due to the final success of cooperative learning in this graduate-level ESL class, it would appear that cooperative learning may be an effective tool for higher-level ESL instruction. Formal research with additional supportive data is necessary before any positive claims can be made concerning cooperative learning’s effectiveness in the ESL classroom. Still, if adapted appropriately, cooperative learning structures seem to have the capacity to suit upper-level ESL students. The key would seem to be adapting structures and their content to the appropriate level. Again, though, before this can be firmly supported, further research must be conducted concerning both the effectiveness of cooperative learning in upper-level ESL classes as well as the adaptation of cooperative learning structures for higher-level students. Further study, with a larger, more representative learning sample, is necessary to determine whether the results of this study would be replicated. As CL is adapted to higher-level students, it may also become necessary to study different methods of adaptation, or perhaps whether one approach—e.g., Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec (1998) versus Kagan (2007)—is more adaptable than others.

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References


The Case of the Missing Piece: Using Language Structure to Decipher Delay v. Disorder in ESL Children

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Abstract

When working with ESL children lagging behind their peers, a question that often arises is whether a child is simply language delayed in his/her English acquisition or whether a child has an underlying language learning disability. As the first language provides the foundational cornerstone upon which a second language is built, a language learning disability can have long-ranging effects on a learner’s ESL development and literacy acquisition. Using a longitudinal case study approach of two preschoolers, this research study seeks to explore this issue by analyzing the acquisition of semantics (e.g., comprehension of quantity, negation, cause/effect), grammatical morphemes (Brown, 1973), and syntax (with a focus on wh- interrogatives) to determine whether there are any “warning flags” that not only might solve the mystery, but which could also be used as clues to help in deciphering the puzzle of language delay v. language disorder in other second language learners.

Introduction

Increasing numbers of limited English proficient (LEP) children are in the schools, often from populations that are at higher risk for language learning disabilities (LLD) due to multiple factors (e.g., lack of adequate maternal prenatal nutrition and medical care). As a guiding principle of education in general, and second language learning specifically, is to move from the known to the unknown (Ausubel, 1963; Brown, 2000; Freeman & Freeman, 1998; Tattershall, 2002), from a linguistic perspective, this would indicate building the second language (L2) upon the foundation of the first language (L1). However, if the child has problems with the L1, it is difficult to use it as a scaffold for acquiring the L2; that is, the foundational cornerstone is missing. The problem increases because diagnosis is difficult, if not impossible, due to the complexity of the situation that often includes attrition of the L1 along with developmental issues. Further exacerbating the problem is the paucity of research specifically investigating the language processing of special needs ESL children. Therefore, as a first step, this study investigates the language development of two preschool-aged, internationally adopted (IA), special needs children in order to determine what particular “piece” of language might hold a clue as to delay versus disorder. This study is unique in that information on both children, fifteen years later, will be used to determine whether the original conclusions (Pearson, 1992) reached in the study were accurate.

Review of Literature

Second language acquisition, by itself, is a complex process. When it is combined with language learning disabilities and the issues inherent in international adoptions, it becomes exponentially so. Therefore, because of the multifarious nature of the process, this review of the literature will be broken down into subcomponents where a cursory overview of pertinent issues to each area will be covered.
First language acquisition

A key issue in studies of first language acquisition has involved the rate of development versus the sequence of acquisition of key structures, especially those involved with grammatical morphemes and syntax. Similarities in sequence have been found across languages (Bowerman, 1973; Slobin, 1968), in children learning to sign (Newport & Meier, 1985), and in children with developmental delay (Leonard, 1998). In other words, the rate of acquisition may vary, but the ordering of major milestones appears invariant.

The classic study in child language morphology and syntax is that of Brown (1973). In a longitudinal study of three children, fourteen morphemes crucial for English syntax were chosen for analysis of acquisition, with the resulting order—based on correct usage in 90% of obligatory contexts—being: progressive, in, on, regular plural, irregular past, possessive, uncontractable copula, articles (a/an, the), regular past, regular 3rd person, irregular 3rd person, uncontractable auxiliary, contractable copula, and contractable auxiliary. Brown found that the sequence of acquisition approaches invariance despite variation in rate of development. Another area of syntax that a child must acquire involves interrogatives, including wh-questions and the use of auxiliaries in such structures. Brown (1973) and Ingram (1989) both found identical orders of acquisition for the first five developmental stages: rising intonation, what, when, addition of auxiliaries, and inversion. Once again, though the rate of acquisition varied, the sequence of acquisition did not (see also Berko Gleason, 2005; Radford, 1994).

Language learning disabilities

While the above studies addressed normal acquisition, they rarely addressed the child who appears normal yet experiences language delay. Tomblin (1996), in a large study of the general population, has conservatively cited prevalence figures of five percent, whereas Leonard (1998) cites a figure of seven percent language learning disabilities in the preschool population. When looking at studies on atypical language acquisition, a key issue that has evolved is delay versus disorder/disability. Early on, the term delay indicated permanence, that is, something that did not “catch up.” Yet currently, the terms delay and disorder have been differentiated, delay meaning an area where slower than typical development occurs, but which over time resolves; disorder indicating a delay or deviance that does not resolve over time (see de Villiers, 2003 and Rice, 2003 for further definitions). It is important to note that with a delay, the rate of acquisition is slower, yet the sequence of acquisition remains the same. In a disorder, though, not only is the rate different, the sequential order of structures is also different.

One type of language learning disability, termed Specific Language Impairment (SLI), exhibits a deficiency in the use of grammatical morphemes as the key defining characteristic. While other areas of delay may exist, tending to resolve over time, comprehension and production problems with morphemes continue throughout the school years, causing problems with literacy acquisition (Catts, Fey, Tomblin, & Zhang, 2002; Catts, Hu, Larrivee, & Swank, 1994; Johnson, et al., 1999). Some children with SLI also experience difficulties involving short-term memory, sequential memory, and word retrieval. (For in-depth discussions of SLI in general, see Adamson & Romska, 1997; Levy & Schaeffer, 2003; Watkins & Rice,
Adoption issues

Issues affecting second language acquisition in internationally adopted (IA) children include medical factors (e.g., prematurity/low birth weight, maternal drug/alcohol use, pre- and post-natal infections, and environmental toxins), socio-emotional issues (e.g., deprivation, abuse, and institutionalization), and first language development (Miller, 2005; Pearson, 2003, 2005a). Pearson (2004a, 2004b, 2005b) has also found a differential effect of these variables in the acquisition of basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP) in those children adopted at age three years and older (for BICS vs. CALP, see Cummins, 1980). More typical second language issues, such as the affective filter, personality types, and motivation also play significant roles in older IA children (for these variables in SLA in general, see works by Krashen, 1981, 1985; Lambert, 1972; and Skehan 1989; for these variables specifically in IA children, see Pearson 2003, 2005a). (For additional current work with IA children in language and other areas, see Federici, 1998; Gindis, n.d., 1999; Glennen, 2002, 2005; Mason & Narad, 2005; Miller, 2005; among others.)

In summary, the above cursory review of literature has addressed the issues of first language acquisition (most notably, rate vs. sequence of acquisition, especially in regards to grammatical morphemes), issues of delay vs. disorder in language learning (with a focus on SLI), and issues of particular concern with IA children across the realms of medical, socio-emotional, and language. With the above foundation in place, attention can now be turned to the specifics of this study.

Research questions

This study addresses the following questions: First, is there a delay or disorder in the language processing of each of the children in the study? And second, which component of language provides the missing piece—the clue—to unlock the puzzle of problematic second language acquisition in each child?

Method

Participants

Two special needs children constitute the main focus of this case study. Both children were adopted from overseas and exposed to English as a “second first language” (Glennen, 2002) or English as a second language (ESL). B, a female, was adopted at age seven months from a stable country with a good foster care system in place. Her development appeared normal, though slightly delayed. By the age of three years and ten months (3;10), significant delays were noted in language. At that point, she underwent a full evaluation through the special education department in a Midwestern U.S. school district and was subsequently placed in an unlabeled special education early childhood program. During the two years of this study that she was in the program, she received class instruction plus individual pull-out speech and physical therapies. L, a male, was adopted from the same country at the age of 2;6. Language, fine and gross motor, and social development were significantly delayed with major problems noted (e.g., cerebral palsy and megalencephaly). Upon arrival into his adoptive home, marked improvement was noted, though significant delays remained.
At age 3;1, a full evaluation through the same district special education department was made which resulted in placement in the same program as B. During the two years he was in the program, he received classroom instruction plus individual pull-out physical, occupational, and speech therapies. At the conclusion of this study, both children had made marked improvement, yet both also continued to exhibit delays in language and gross motor skills.

In order to more fully understand the constellation of patterns each child exhibited, it is necessary to first provide some additional background information. Following B’s birth, she was hospitalized for six weeks due to low birth weight, jaundice, and gastroenteritis. Upon discharge, she was placed in a foster home for six months where she was well-cared for and consequently physically thrived. At seven months, B was brought to the U.S. and immediately placed with her adoptive family. This was her first exposure to the English language. The first few nights she cried for her “Eoma” (mother in her L1), but otherwise adapted well. As time passed, she continued to thrive, although some skills were delayed and she exhibited no further expressive language. Finally, at age 3;0, she began to use a few isolated words. Almost a year later, she was taken for the aforementioned evaluation, at which point it was reported that she had average mental ability with significant subtest scatter and poor short-term memory; fine-motor and social skills were both in the near-normal to normal range; gross-motor and speech/language were each found to be significantly delayed.

The situation of L was different. Records indicate that he was born in a hospital, having a greater than typical weight and excellent Apgar scores. Upon discharge, he was placed in the care of an orphanage. Information on development during his first year is sketchy and does not follow what one would expect based on his healthy weight and condition at birth. At four months, he could not control his head, nor could he sit unsupported at thirteen months. He had also experienced pneumonia twice, measles, and enterocolitis. Upon examination at sixteen months, he was found to have an enlarged head, a physically weak condition, and bilateral otitis media with blood clots and perforations of both eardrums. It was at this point that he was placed in a foster home and subsequently diagnosed with cerebral palsy affecting the lower extremities and probable mental retardation. Social reports indicated a range of both normal and abnormal behaviors. In regards to gross motor development, he was significantly delayed, though making slow progress. In language, at 1;9, his comprehension was good and he was using words for mommy and daddy in his L1. He continued to understand what was said to him, could point to different body parts when verbally directed, and was now producing four words. At age 2;6, L arrived in the U.S. and was placed in his adoptive home; this marked his first exposure to English. Within a few months, he was taken to a children’s hospital in a large Midwestern city for medical evaluation, where it was determined that he had mild cerebral palsy affecting the lower extremities and behaviors indicative of maternal deprivation syndrome. Six months after his arrival, L was taken for an evaluation through the local school district, at which time he was unresponsive for all testing. He then entered the previously noted special education preschool program the following fall.
Procedure

Linguistic analyses of the two children’s language development were conducted over a two-year period using data collected from this researcher and special education personnel working with the children on a regular basis. Both standardized tests as well as elicited responses and naturalistic observation were used. Language performance tests can be problematic due to their limited content validity, i.e., only limited areas of language skills are possible to assess, and these do not represent real-world communicative situations (Bernstein Ratner, 2005). Because of these potential problems, structured tests of language comprehension and production should be supplemented by structural and pragmatic analyses of spontaneous language samples. Further, Brown (1973) suggests that the combination of both spontaneous and elicited measures, when taken together, give a better chance of accurately discovering the child’s state of linguistic knowledge. Therefore, in order to address these concerns, results of standard measures of testing were obtained on each child and then compared with the collected language samples. However, in order to provide a composite picture of each child’s linguistic knowledge, within the constraints of this paper, data will be reported in aggregate terms.

Specific data bearing on the children’s comprehension and production capacities were also collected through both elicited information gathering as well as from spontaneous language samples. First, comprehension of the following semantic areas were tested: active/passive, time, amount/quantity, cause/effect, interrogatives, wh-questions, negation, and plurality. Second, production of fourteen grammatical morphemes (based on Brown’s 1973 classic work), both order of emergence and order of criterion (established at 90%) were obtained from monthly natural language samples. These morphemes, in order of normal child acquisition, include: progressive –ing, in, on, regular plural, irregular past, possessive, uncontractable copula, articles, regular past, regular 3rd person, irregular 3rd person, uncontractable auxiliary, contractable copula, and contractable auxiliary. This order can be explained by linguistic complexity, with the earlier acquired morphemes being weighted heavier in semantic content and the later occurring morphemes weighted heavier in syntactic coding (Tager-Flusberg, 2005). Finally, emergence of wh-word interrogatives in productive language were also analyzed for each child using the natural language samples which were then compared to data by Ingram (1989) and Brown (1973).

Baselines were established using data from the early childhood evaluations and initial Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Further data was then collected on a monthly basis, over a two year period, though occasional months were missed due to child illness. Additionally, monthly conferences were held with the children’s teacher and/or speech therapist in order to assess their progress in the classroom situation. All collected data and observations by the researcher were done in the familiar surroundings of the children’s home using their own toys in the following manner: spontaneous language samples were recorded for approximately one hour each month during a typical daytime activity; interactive language was tape-recorded for one-half hour, every two to three months, again during a different typical daytime activity; and an hour of specific situations designed to elicit responses to ascertain comprehension of the above semantic areas were also conducted on a monthly basis. (Details of the full
study, with specific elicitations and accompanying charts, can be found in Pearson, 1992.)

Results
Results for each child will be presented individually. The following order will be used: comprehension of semantic areas, production of Brown’s (1973) grammatical morphemes, and production of wh-questions which involve the syntactic transformation of wh-fronting.

Language development in B
Over the time of data collection, B’s age was 4;3 to 5;10, an age period during which the language structures under study here should either have been in place or well into stable development. In B, the following semantic areas were either firmly in place or showing a steady development to target levels: comprehension of quantity; cause/effect; yes/no interrogatives; wh-questions, except for the time element of when; and negation. Problematic areas where comprehension was sporadic or just beginning to emerge include: time elements; active/passive; and singular/plural.

Brown’s (1973) rules for assessing 14 grammatical morphemes were used along with his accuracy criterion of 90%. Additionally, order of emergence was also tracked using naturalistic language samples. Compared to Brown’s data, the order of emergence of B’s grammatical morphemes was widely scattered. The order of criterion, though, is more closely matched. If the rankings of the 14 morphemes are divided into a top half and a bottom half, B is acquiring the top half first, as would be expected. The later occurring, bottom half, however, are not emerging and/or reaching criterion. In fact, only four of Brown’s morphemes are in place at age 5;10 – in, on, progressive –ing, and possessive –s.

The order of acquisition for wh-interrogatives in B’s productive language shows substantial scatter effect when compared to established norms. At age 5;11, rising intonation indicative of questions remains limited and there is an almost complete lack of inversions, modals, and tag questions. Classic studies by Brown (1973) and Ingram (1989) show identical acquisition orders: rising intonation, what, where, inclusion of auxiliary verb, and inversions. B’s order to date is: what, when, which, how, and whose, an order which includes later developing interrogatives at the same time as lacking three of the earliest five interrogatives.

In sum, at nearly six years of age, B’s language is problematic in several areas. First, she lacks comprehension of earlier developing time elements and singular/plural, both of which involve the decoding of grammatical morphemes (e.g., past tense –ed, plural –s). Second, her production of grammatical morphemes is very limited, involving only four of the fourteen in Brown’s (1973) study, at an age when all should be in place. Third, she is only producing two of the five earlier developing wh-interrogatives; and notably, rising intonation, the first to develop in very young children, has not appeared in B’s production. Further, additional problems involving sequencing are noted in question formation, as evidenced by a lack of auxiliaries as well as subject-verb inversion. Finally, acquisition in each area shows scatter compared to established data on normal child language acquisition.
**Language development in L**

L was age 3;6 to 5;1 during the time of this study, and, as noted under B’s development, the language structures under investigation should be in place or well on their way to being developed during this age span. At the time the study began, L had been exposed to English on a full time basis for twelve full months; however, data was often difficult to collect due to his failure to respond. Regarding semantic development, L shows little comprehension of basic concepts, including active/passive, time, quantity, cause/effect, and negation. Comprehension of *wh*- questions and plurals appear to be emerging but are sporadic.

Emergence of grammatical morphemes in B’s language shows a similar but variant pattern when compared to Brown’s (1973) data as well as additional data from de Villiers and de Villiers (1973), especially regarding the top half/bottom half view discussed regarding B’s language. However, there is one major difference— that of the very early emergence of the contractible copula. By the end of the study, though, B is only exhibiting three of the morphemes at criterion level: articles, *on*, and *in*. In this area of language, the data show considerable delay in rate of acquisition, though exhibiting a typical sequence in order of acquisition.

Regarding the one area of syntax investigated, order for productive use of interrogatives, L’s pattern is almost identical to the classic works by Brown (1973) and Ingram (1989). Once again, the early patterns found by these researchers are: rising intonation, *what*, *where*, auxiliaries, and inversion. L’s acquisition order is: rising intonation, *what*, *where*, *do* (as an auxiliary used for inversion), and *why* (the 6th interrogative in Brown’s data). Again, though exhibiting considerable delay, L’s sequence of development is following a normal pattern.

In sum, at just over five years, L’s language is delayed, yet in areas that would be predicted. That is, earlier developing areas are in place with the later emerging structures still under development, indicating that errors are simply developmental. Productive acquisition of grammatical morphemes is fairly consistent with the cited research and productive use of *wh*- interrogatives consistently follows norms, though, again, considerable delays remain. It must be remembered, however, that in contrast to B, L had only been exposed to English for one year when this study began.

**Discussion**

**B: Delay or disorder?**

Based on the general background history of B, one would predict that her language would develop normally. Her birth-based medical problems were quickly resolved, she was carefully nurtured in her foster and adoptive families, and she was always in a language-rich environment. Learning English as a second language, used as explanation for her language difficulties, is arguably problematic as she arrived in an English-speaking environment at age seven months. Since she was producing one word in her L1 at this age, it could be taken to mean that comprehension of her L1 was definitely underway. However, even if one allows for a seven month differential in what her English skills should be—that is, at age 5;10 she would have English exposure comparative to a child age 5;3—there is considerable delay with her language skills being closer to that of a three year old.
A stronger argument would be a brain-based hypothesis for several reasons. First, it must be remembered that B was of low birth weight; therefore, she is at higher risk for brain damage and learning disabilities. As B has very limited use of grammatical markers at an age when those targeted by this study should all have been firmly in place, she fits the pattern of SLI with the key characteristic of deficits in grammatical morphology. Additionally, her concept of time has not developed, an area that is marked in English by verbal morphology. There are also B’s marked delays in syntax to consider, especially in wh- transformations and the use of auxiliaries. Multiple researchers have noted that children with SLI appear to learn language in a different way, that their verbal sequencing ability is compromised, and that difficulties are encountered in manipulating syntactical transformations along with auxiliary verb use (Dale & Ingram, 1981; Levy & Schaeffer, 2003; Slobin, 1973; Watkins & Rice, 1994). There is also information in B’s records that she has temporal sequencing problems in both the aural and visual realms, thus lending further credence to a brain-based hypothesis.

In sum, due to delays in comprehension of semantic areas, considerable delay in the acquisition of grammatical morphemes, and delays in sequencing skills needed to manipulate syntactical transformations, it is likely that B is challenged by SLI. When one adds in evidence of scatter across multiple domains of assessment, scatter being a key trait of learning disabilities in general, the argument for a language learning disability is strengthened.

The question at this point is: why has the hypothesized SLI not been considered to date? First, there has been the “wait and see” approach with an inappropriate explanation of ESL issues. Second, this study narrowly focused on linguistic structures without fully exploring non-language information. Though this study has, in fact, discovered two key areas of language difficulty—lack of morphological markers and sequencing difficulties in syntactical transformations—both of which provide important clues to language disorder, an important point was not seriously noted in B’s history, that of her low birth weight, a problem that puts children at higher risk in the language realm.

L: Delay or disorder?

Based on L’s background history, one would predict the potential for extensive language impairment due to documented brain damage along with maternal deprivation syndrome (an effect of having been institutionalized during the critical first-year period). This study found considerable delay in all aspects of language assessed: delay in comprehension of semantic concepts, delay in production of grammatical morphemes, and delay in production of syntactic transformations. Note, however, that although there are considerable delays in all areas, the same acquisition sequence is followed as that of normal children, albeit at a much slower rate. Compare this to B where not only was her language developing at a much slower rate, but structures were falling into place in a different sequence than normal. Because of L’s normal sequence of acquisition, it is hypothesized that additional issues are at play beyond brain damage to language centers.

Other possible causal explanations for the considerable delay in L’s language development include: ESL issues, personality traits, history of ear infections, maternal
deprivation syndrome, emotional issues, and interactions among all of these areas. Looking at each of these in turn, ESL issues at first might provide the most plausible explanation. However, it is well-established that BICS is in place within 6-24 months in children who speak their L1 in the home (Ellis, 1994). One would assume that this time frame would be shorter in children who are totally immersed in the L2 without any access to the L1. Since L did not start saying his first words in English for almost two years post-arrival, other variables are thought to play a role. Personality traits, as an area of individual differences, have been found to play a role in rate of second language acquisition (Pearson, 2005a; Skehan, 1989; Wong Fillmore, 1979). Family members and teachers indicate that L’s personality includes perfectionism and non-risk-taking. Both of these traits are known to detract from the ease of learning an L2.

Another area that could impact the rate of language acquisition is a history of frequent ear infections. L’s history, as noted earlier, included not only ear infections, but also perforations of the eardrums, indicating chronic infections that either were not treated or were not responsive to medication. Since chronic ear infections are notorious in the literature for affecting language acquisition (Fahey, 2000; Hall, Oyer, & Haas, 2001), it is hypothesized that L’s ear problems at least partially contributed to his weak L1 skills. This is an important point, as it has been found that L1 proficiency in internationally adopted children is the single best predictor of ease/difficulty of L2 acquisition in internationally adopted children (Pearson, 2003, 2004a, 2005a, 2005b).

Further contributing variables include the documented maternal deprivation syndrome and emotional issues. In looking at the development of comprehension of interrogatives, it is interesting to note that L frequently produces when, e.g., When we eat? and When we have lunch? In the data, however, it is thought that L’s use of when is not so much as a time element, but rather as a marker seeking reassurance that he will definitely be eating again. In other words, this use seems to be a manifestation of earlier deprivation and emotional problems, as any reassuring answer will suffice (no time element needed). Further “food for thought,” both figuratively and literally, is that L’s typically limited and sporadic production of plural morphology improves when food is an issue—quantity of food being important enough to him to force the marking of plurality grammatically. The pervasiveness of this issue can be exemplified by his response to the question When will we go? to which he replied Buy food. For L, even after two-and-a-half years, most of life still revolves around making sure there is always food to eat. If physical survival is one’s main goal, little energy remains for other development. (For those not familiar with characteristics of post-institutionalized children, a focus on food, to the extent of hoarding, is a common problem; see Miller, 2005.)

In sum, it is hypothesized that L’s chronic hearing problems, combined with institutionalization during a critical period, delayed his L1 acquisition, which in turn has provided a weaker foundation upon which his L2 could be built. Additionally, emotional issues due to maternal deprivation syndrome and institutionalization early in life have also exerted a considerable effect upon his overall development, including language.

The foremost question at this point is: what has this child gone through in his earliest years and how might it all have impacted his personality, his emotional state,
and his language acquisition? Once again, in focusing so intensely on one component of the problem, namely language, clues evident in the larger picture have been missed. Language-wise, the most important clue, perhaps, is that although the development of language structures was considerably delayed, the sequencing of their development across the realms of semantics, grammatical morphemes, and wh-interrogatives is all in a normal pattern. In looking at the larger picture, however, the effect of institutionalization during the critical period of infancy and toddlerhood, with its effect on L1 acquisition, personality formation, and emotional state, is key to the problems this child is facing.

Fifteen years later...

An interesting aspect to this study is that information on both children has been made available fifteen years post-data collection. Thus, hypotheses made at the study’s conclusion can be tested over time as to their accuracy. At the conclusion of this study, the family of the children moved to another state, where the children were deemed not to be eligible for services. B continued to struggle and at the end of her elementary school years, she was privately tested and found to have problems with both short-term and sequential memory, along with residual language issues. Significant scatter across all areas of testing continued to be evident, again indicative of learning disabilities. When non-verbal cognitive assessment measures were used, it was found that she was highly intelligent, well beyond normal; verbal measures pulled her score down to the average range. Thus, anything having to do with language involved considerable effort which resulted in motivation issues. At the time of this writing, she has graduated from high school, but is not interested in any further schooling. It appears that learning disabilities, including language, may have kept her from achieving her potential.

L also continued to struggle through the school years with emotional and motivation issues, though not with language. In areas that interested him, he excelled; in other areas, his lack of motivation resulted in a poorer performance than what he was potentially capable. There is a particular area of interest in L’s history that underscores the original hypothesis of this study. When L finally did begin talking, his first words were the unanalyzed chunks of pepperoni-pizza and chocolate-chip-cookies. Food for survival was still a focus of his life. More recently, after having graduated from high school, L has been very successful in his community college coursework—the field of culinary arts. Twenty years later, the pervasive influence of those early years of deprivation are still exerting their influence.

Conclusion

Educators often find themselves in the role of detective, sleuthing through files and conducting interviews for that elusive piece of the puzzle that will pull everything together, thus showing them the bigger picture and addressing the question of language delay or language disorder. In the two case studies reported above, detailed investigation of the development of language structures across the realms of semantics, morphology, and syntax did, indeed, provide key information for each of the children. However, in the quest for such information, other clues of a more global nature (low birth weight in the first child, emotional issues in the second) were overlooked. Thus, it is important, as educators and ESL specialists, to look both narrowly and broadly, to
investigate not only the specifics of language but also all of the medical-social-emotional variables that are known to impact second language learners. Only in so doing will the missing pieces emerge which fully address the question of language delay versus language disorder.

**Author Note**

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**References**


From the Other Side of the Desk: Recent Master’s TESOL Graduates Speak from Community College ESL Classrooms

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Abstract

This investigation focuses on recent graduates of master’s TESOL (MA TESOL) programs, exploring what influenced their successes and challenges as teachers in community college ESL classrooms and what implications this has for their graduate preparation. Based on an online survey, in-person interviews, and a variety of documents, the interaction among influencing factors is explored. These various factors from before, during, and since graduate school are depicted in a descriptive framework. All these factors have been found to contribute to the teachers’ cultural situatedness.

Introduction

In the existing scholarly literature, master’s TESOL (MA TESOL)\(^1\) programs have been studied by eliciting feedback from currently enrolled students and student teachers during their practicum experiences, as if these teachers were decontextualized, free-floating subjects, able to assess their training immediately upon its completion. It is not until after graduation, when the teachers have had an opportunity to field-test their knowledge and skills in their own classrooms, that they can truly assess the effectiveness of their preparation. In this paper, it is argued that to fully understand the effectiveness of master’s TESOL programs for preparing teachers for the community college classroom, one must first understand “the teacher” as one unit in a much broader pedagogical process and extend this vision both backwards and forwards, i.e., back to the subject formation process through which the teacher entered the program and forwards to the social process in which the teacher is continually formed and reformed in the work place (Avery & Walker, 1993; Florez, 1997; Freeman, 1991; Fugate & Amey, 2000; Jackson, 1968; Lortie, 1975; Marks, 2007; Polio & Duff, 1994). Therefore, those who examine master’s in TESOL programs cannot simply gather data by asking currently enrolled TESOL students but must elicit systematic feedback from recent graduates who are currently teaching in the community college classroom.

In attempting to resolve the tension between how well prepared recently-graduated ESL teachers feel to teach in community college classrooms and how well master’s in TESOL programs purport to prepare them for such work, this research study examines which factors appear to influence native-speaking recent graduates’ perceptions of their preparation for teaching in the community college setting and what the nature and sources of their successes and difficulties are.

\(^1\) The acronym MA TESOL will be used throughout this paper because it is perhaps the most common way master’s TESOL programs are referred to in the field. However, not all the programs that the participants in this study have graduated from use this acronym: two use MAT ESOL and one uses MA TESL.
Literature Review

In the following section, a brief review of the relevant bodies of literature is given. For a fuller discussion, see Porter-Szucs (2007). The need for English as a second language (ESL) instructors in community colleges is growing nationwide due to the increasing number of immigrants and to the vital role that community colleges play in their English language education (The American Immigration Law Foundation, 2002; Crandall & Sheppard, 2004; Kuo, 1999; Lo, 2001a; National Center for Education Statistics, 2005; Population Reference Bureau, 2003). Meanwhile, little is known about ESL teachers’ preparation for community colleges. Except for the occasional critique of the preparation of TESOL graduates for a limited number of work settings, such as for overseas institutions (Govardhan, Nayar, & Sheorey, 1999; Lo, 2001a, 2001b), for intensive English language programs (Perkins, 1997, 1998), and for the public schools (Gonzalez & Darling-Hammond, 2000; Lopes, 1997), the focus of scholarly discussions in the literature is centered less on the particular setting where graduates of teacher-training programs work and more on the actual TESOL program. Two aspects of the training of ESL teachers have received much of the attention: the curriculum and, in particular, the practicum. Many theorists, researchers, and practitioners have written about how the curriculum could be improved or where its emphasis should lie in order to provide the most useful education to TESOL students (Frad & Lee, 1997, 1998; Freeman, 1989; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Muchisky & Yates, 2004; Reagan, 1997; Sachs, 1996; Santana-Williamson, 2000; Tedick & Walker, 1995; Yates & Muchisky, 2003). A much-critiqued aspect of the curriculum is the practicum. It is often thought of as the capstone experience, in which student-teachers are expected to apply the theoretical knowledge that they gain during the TESOL program to practice. However, it often fails to live up to this expectation, according to its critics (Greis, 1984; Janopoulos, 1991; Johnson, 1992).

In an overwhelming number of these cases, TESOL programs have been examined by utilizing feedback from current students or those who were graduating at the time of the study (as opposed to former students who have completed their studies and were in charge of their own classrooms in a community college setting). This technique, albeit convenient due to ready access to study participants, is of limited value. Current students, or even those who are graduating, are not in a position to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of their training. That can only happen when the teachers have had an opportunity to apply the knowledge that they gained in the TESOL program to their own classrooms. In the literature there is, however, a dearth of information based on feedback gained from TESOL graduates. Even Gaiés (1992), the author of one notable exception, who reported on a study that was on-going at the time, failed to make any findings available. Further exceptions can only be found in K-12 teacher education, where studies of the kind advocated in this paper are more common (see, for example, Schulz & Mandzuk, 2005).

The teacher education and TESOL literatures deal with the factors influencing the formation of teachers to a greater degree. It is clear from the K-12 literature that undergraduate and graduate pre-service teachers’ pre-conceived notions (i.e., beliefs which precede the teacher training program) often prevail beyond graduate school.
This may happen despite the training program’s influences (Avery & Walker, 1993; Florez, 1997; Freeman, 1991; Jackson, 1968; Lortie, 1975; Marks, 2007; Polio & Duff, 1994). The next phase of teacher socialization extends beyond graduation, according to Paese, for at least three years on the job (as cited in Mohr, 2000). There, the graduates may be influenced by new—occupational, professional, and societal—socialization mechanisms. These often competing influences of the workplace, cautions Lawson, may be in conflict with the philosophy of the training program, causing the graduates slowly to abandon what they were taught (as cited in Mohr, 2000). This phenomenon, also known as the wash-out effect, may be temporary or permanent (Hargreaves & Goodson, as cited in Vuorikoski, 2001). Meanwhile, the so-called “teaching self,” which Olson and Einwohner (2001) define as “one’s sense of self as a teacher” (p. 403), changes depending on how teachers are socialized by their institutions. This is confirmed by the higher education and workplace literature. Fugate and Amey (2000), for instance, in their study of 22 early career community college faculty found that the institutional support, especially during the first year, was crucial to the shaping of teachers. Often these teachers are marginalized adjunct faculty (Curry, 2001; Townsend & Twombly, 2007), whose training ranges from a K-12 certificate and 18 credit hours in a relevant field to a terminal degree in TESOL (Crandall & Sheppard, 2004).

While the findings of the study presented here confirm the aforementioned findings, they also go beyond them in a number of ways. This study focused on the classroom experiences of teachers who had graduated from a master’s-level TESOL program within five years and on the role that various factors (i.e., pre-TESOL, during TESOL, and workplace-related) played in their classroom experiences. In other words, this study not only examined one isolated stage of teacher formation, but the interplay of a number of factors (see the Revised Descriptive Framework in Appendix A) and how these factors influenced the teachers’ cultural situatedness.

The Study

The purpose of the present case study was to better understand 1) the classroom successes and difficulties of recent native-English-speaking graduates of MA TESOL programs and 2) what their classroom realities can reveal about their graduate preparation and other influencing factors.

Participants

The 97 online survey respondents consisted of ESL or TESOL professionals from across the state of Michigan. Sixty-seven of the respondents held MATESOL degrees; 20 held degrees in other fields; and 10 were in the process of earning a TESOL degree. Of the 97, 12 were selected for a full interview based on the following criteria: they were native speakers of English (definition based on Boyle, 1997), they had graduated from a TESOL program in the United States, they had completed student teaching, they had graduated within the last five years, and they were, at the time of the study, teaching or tutoring ESL students at a Michigan community college (see Table 1). Of the 12 participants—11 female and 1 male—6 were graduates of Eastern Michigan University, 2 of Michigan State University, 2 of Andrews University, and 2 of out-of-state institutions. Prior to graduate school, their teaching experience (in ESL,
EFL, or another field) ranged from 0-9 years. All had studied a foreign language, and all but one had traveled or lived abroad. All interviewees chose their own pseudonyms, by which they are referred to in this study.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected by various means. The data collection instruments (an online survey and an in-person interview) were developed based on various bodies of literature, a pilot study, and personal experience. The questions were chosen to illuminate the participants’ perceptions of what factors they found to be influential in their development, successes, and challenges as teachers, and what these perceptions of their classroom realities can reveal of their MA TESOL preparation for work in community colleges. The online survey, which was administered in early 2006, served to provide descriptive statistics and access to potential interview participants. All teachers who volunteered and qualified according to the aforementioned criteria were interviewed. The twelve interviews took place in March and April of the same year. In order to assure completeness of the data, they were triangulated in the following manner: teaching settings at the community colleges were observed, paying particular attention to the physical surroundings and resources available to the teachers in the study and their students; artifacts were gathered such as lesson plans, syllabi, and catalogs; and the websites of the colleges and the teachers’ TESOL programs were also analyzed. (For further discussion of triangulation, see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In the semi-structured interview, whatever description the teachers gave of their classroom realities was followed up by further questions probing into the factors that may have shaped these events and perceptions of events. The questions were merely used as springboards for conversation. The teachers’ answers to the questions were then analyzed for examples of what factors the teachers cited (both intentionally and unintentionally) as having been drawn upon in their teaching. The interviews were then coded and analyzed for emerging themes as soon as data collection began. The descriptive statistical data were gathered on a four- rather than five-point Likert scale, where “1” meant strong disagreement with the statement and “4” meant strong agreement. The middle option of “neither agree nor disagree” was eliminated in order to reduce the potential for distortion from central tendency bias “since when using an odd number the respondent can avoid making a real choice by selecting the middle neutral category” (Dornyei, 2003, p. 37).

**Findings and Analysis**

In this retrospective perception study, the respondents in both the survey and the interview were asked to reflect on how successful they felt teaching ESL in community colleges and, as a result, how satisfied they were with their TESOL preparation for this setting. All participants in the survey felt successful as teachers: 46% agreed and 54% strongly agreed with the statement. Specific examples of teaching-related successes from the interviews included observing tangible student outcomes (such as a higher score on a post-test than a pre-test, writing a paragraph with fewer mistakes, and giving an organized oral presentation); perceiving intangible student outcomes (such as eyes “lighting up” as a sign of understanding, students talking more, or students gaining self-confidence); teachers receiving positive feedback from supervisors, colleagues, and the
students themselves; and overcoming obstacles especially with uncooperative students. On the other hand, findings also indicate perceived inadequacies in the teachers’ readiness to perform certain tasks after graduation, such as teaching grammar, designing and implementing instructional activities, evaluating and marking papers, and maintaining classroom discipline. The focus of this paper, however, is not the analysis of these successes and difficulties but rather the factors cited by the participants as having contributed to the aforementioned teaching-related outcomes. Of primary interest was the perceived influence of their MA TESOL preparation. Of secondary importance were factors before and after graduate school that were also named as influential in shaping the teachers (i.e., shaping their cultural situatedness) and eventually resulting in these teaching-related successes and challenges.

The following section, thus, presents the teachers’ satisfaction with their preparation in graduate school. This is followed by a detailed presentation of the various factors that the interviewed teachers suggested as influential in their teaching. These factors are also depicted in the Descriptive Framework in Appendix A.

**Post-Graduation Outcomes**

In the online survey, respondents were asked how satisfied they were with their preparation for the classroom (see Table 1). One question asked about preparation for teaching while another asked about preparation for non-teaching classroom duties. Participants were not provided with a definition of the latter, but the interviewed participants defined non-teaching classroom duties in the following way: classroom management, grading, record keeping, adjustment of activities and teacher talk to the students’ levels, cultural sensitivity, and curriculum design. As Table 1 depicts, the 23 survey respondents who worked at community colleges were generally satisfied with their preparation to teach; the mean of their answers was 3.1, or “Agree,” and both the mode and median answer showed agreement with the statement. However, graduates were slightly less satisfied with their preparation for non-teaching duties. The mean score dropped to 2.7 and the most frequently given answer was “Disagree.”

When only the answers of the twelve interview participants are considered, as depicted in Table 1 and Figure 1 below, the answer to both questions, or the satisfaction with preparation for both teaching and non-teaching duties in the classroom, is slightly lower. For question Q21 (preparation for teaching), the mode and median are still 3, but the mean is 2.9. For question Q22 (preparation for non-teaching duties in the classroom), the mean and median are 2.5, and the mode is 2 and 3. This suggests that the recent graduates who eventually participated in the interview tended to rate their preparation for classroom duties a little lower than those who were not interviewed. Similarly to all 23 survey respondents, the 12 interview participants rated their preparation for non-teaching activities slightly lower than for teaching. This is somewhat supported by the values for Teaching compared to Non-Teaching, respectively (mean: 2.9 vs. 2.5; median: 3 vs. 2.5;
Figure 1. Frequency of responses to questions Q21 and Q22
white = Program prepared them for teaching duties
black = Program prepared them for non-teaching classroom duties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surveyed-Teaching (Q21)</th>
<th>Surveyed-Non-Teaching (Q22)</th>
<th>Interviewed-Teaching (Q21)</th>
<th>Interviewed-Non-Teaching (Q22)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std Dev</td>
<td>0.694</td>
<td>0.782</td>
<td>0.793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min, Max</td>
<td>2, 4</td>
<td>1, 4</td>
<td>2, 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend
1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Agree
4 = Strongly Agree

Table 1: Satisfaction with MA TESOL Preparation for Teaching and Non-Teaching
mode: 3 vs. 2. However, based on such a small data set, these findings are not conclusive but rather hypothesis generating.

Primarily from the interviews, three sets of themes emerged as shaping the teachers’ classroom realities and subsequent opinions of their preparation for such work: influences prior to entry into the graduate program, those encountered during the MATESOL programs, and those relating to the institutional setting post-graduation. All three stages affected the two post-graduation outcomes under investigation (i.e. successes and challenges in the classroom as well as satisfaction with graduate school). A visually descriptive framework can be found in Appendix A, which depicts the interaction among these various themes. It displays the various factors which emerged mainly from the interview as having shaped the teachers to become the professionals that they are today. These factors were influential in the teachers’ cultural situatedness.

Pre-Entry Influences

Among the most important pre-admission factors that seemed to have shaped the teachers’ situatedness, or where they were coming from, were individual factors, prior education, and teaching experience. The first category contains multicultural and foreign-language experiences, family, and faith.

Multicultural & Foreign-Language Experiences

All twelve interview participants had some experience studying a foreign language and/or traveling overseas. When interacting with students, they frequently drew a parallel between their own difficulties and those of their students. Here is Suzy’s story (Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees).

Because I took [foreign language]…classes and that was my major, I think to a certain degree I can really foresee some of the issues when teaching another language to the students. It helps me figure it out when I was learning [the foreign language], I had these issues. And when I lived in [two foreign countries] I had these issues. And I know that this was tough for me, so it’s possible that it’s tough for them when they’re learning English.

These experiences frequently increased the teachers’ empathy for their students. The teachers were able to connect with their students on a personal level in two ways: foresee their difficulties and offer personally tested strategies for overcoming these challenges. Palmer’s (1997) famous aphorism that we “teach who we are” (p.15) is highly relevant here. A frustrating and humiliating experience of not being understood and possibly even looked down upon leaves its mark on one’s identity, and it later manifests itself in how one teaches. Another teacher’s example not only underscores this sentiment but also demonstrates her desire to spare the students the pain that she had experienced. In the following excerpt, Aniko demonstrated how her personal experience informed her teaching.

When I’m in the classroom, I can tell them I know what it feels like to go into a grocery store and they don’t understand what I’m saying. They’re asking me to repeat it and repeat it. And I know some of [the students’] hurt because what I
found is when you need to repeat, people look at it as a form of ignorance; they don’t think you’re smart enough.

Both positive and negative multicultural and foreign-language-learning experiences left a deep mark on these teachers. These experiences shaped them to become the teachers that they are today. Understanding the teachers’ realities—how they viewed themselves in relation to their jobs, how they viewed their students, and how they viewed their roles in the classroom—was an essential first step in being able to answer the research questions.

Family

Family also influenced the teachers in a variety of ways. In some cases because the teachers came from families of teachers, this impacted their career choice. Later, their families served as mentors with whom teaching-related issues could be discussed. Most commonly, however, family-related experiences allowed the teachers to understand their own students’ situations more deeply than they would have otherwise. This was the most common way in which family influenced the teachers in the study. In the excerpt below, Sophia explained that one set of grandparents emigrated from Europe in the 1930s, and because of political and historical reasons, the family’s native language was lost.

[My mother] really grew up with [the language of the old country], [but] she wasn’t allowed to speak it because it was a stigma and because my grandmother was raised during World War II. And then nobody wanted to be [that nationality]. And how as an adult, [my mother] is going through like, “I can’t believe you didn’t teach us [the language].”…Her and my aunts really get mad at my grandmother sometimes, you know, because she didn’t teach them [the native language]. But for her it was a safety issue, better that they not have an accent.

Because her mother did not learn the native language, neither did Sophia and her siblings. Sophia, therefore, drew a parallel between the process by which subsequent generations lost the native language in her family and in those of her students.

So that’s what I see in my students’ future as you do get away from your culture to a certain extent, no matter what good intentions you have. You’re not in Mexico, so you can only hold on to it for so long. And then a lot of people are lucky to have a community. I wasn’t raised in a community.

Sophia’s example demonstrates an interaction of two factors: those of family and foreign language. In other cases in the study, this interaction occurred among other factors. For instance, if a missionary family spent years overseas, the influences of the family, faith, and foreign culture were intertwined. It was beyond the scope of this study, however, to investigate the weighting of each factor.
Faith

Another source of influence was the combination of family and faith. The teaching of three participants was directly influenced by their faith. All three, at some point in their postsecondary schooling, attended religiously affiliated institutions. Leah’s influence was the most clearly articulated.

My students all have purpose and they all have value. And they’re individual, distinct human beings that are just awesome. And for me as a Christian, I know how much God loves me, and he’s met me where I’m at, and he’s changing me, and that’s what he did with my students. That’s what I’m called to do, to meet them where they’re at. [In addition to faith,] probably family [was a source of influence on my teaching] as well, you know. The two usually are related in some way. I know…when I was in college [I] didn’t do well in all my classes and my parents always said, “You know we love you and you just do the best you can and that’s all we ask for.” That’s what I do with all my students, “Just do the best you can; that’s all I ask for.”

Leah stated that her purpose in teaching ESL was not missionary in the sense that she did not want to convert her students to her faith. However, her teaching philosophy was mostly influenced by both her faith and her family.

Prior Education

In response to a question about who or what has influenced the teaching of recent graduates, the majority of the responses named former teachers. Sophia’s response was a typical one: “Both positive and negative models: things that I absolutely avoid doing and things that I consciously…do, like that teacher that I had.” Among the models that the teachers strove to avoid perpetuating was the following experience in a foreign language class. Diana recalled having a teacher who would cover her ears accompanied by a pained expression on her face whenever Diana’s pronunciation was incorrect. Diana vowed never to humiliate her own students in such a way. On the other hand, these recently graduated teachers were also—to invoke Lortie (1975)—apprenticed by observing positive models. Dontaku (the only man in the study) mentioned several teachers who shaped him in his formative years; but this example best demonstrates the direct impact one particular teacher had on his teaching.

I had a math teacher in high school. If only one thing I remember about him…the guy was so patient. If you asked, he’d explain it on the board long form. Everybody would get it but a couple of us, [so the teacher would say] “OK, let’s do it again.” [He] erased the board and [would] do another topic. I just remember him catering to learning styles. I didn’t know what was going on when I was 16-17. I was thinking if I were to teach (because I didn’t think I’d go into teaching at that time), if I were to teach, I’d want to be like that.

At that time Dontaku was not considering education as a career and did not consciously model his teaching after his math teacher. It happened nevertheless.
Prior Teaching Experience

Last, but not least, among the pre-entry influences were teaching or tutoring experiences. As reported in Porter-Szucs (2007), before entering the master’s TESOL program, three of the pre-service teachers had no experience in the classroom. One, on the other hand, was a veteran teacher in another field. This had a direct impact on their graduate school experiences and an indirect one on their post-graduation outcomes. Diana, for instance had less than 1 year of combined experience teaching or tutoring students prior to starting an MA TESOL. During the first semester of her program, when she was required to study theory, she failed to see its relevance to her goal of becoming a classroom instructor. Halfway through this first semester, she took a leave of absence and taught overseas. She shares the following: “It started to make a little more sense to me then. As far as the little bit of, six weeks of, graduate school that I had attended, it kind of made things a little bit more clear to me that I recall.” When prompted further as to whether she meant in terms of teaching, she continued: “Ah-hum. And knowing what my students were going through and I think I had a lot of questions about teaching after that.” Only while struggling in the trenches did she realize the importance of the theory that she had failed to appreciate prior to her trip. Upon return, she had a different perspective of the utility of theory classes and she approached graduate school with a new attitude and enthusiasm.

Whether the amount of instruction and practical training they received in the graduate program was too little or too much, or whether classes were relevant or irrelevant, seemed to have been influenced by each teacher’s pre-entry teaching background, as also demonstrated in the following example. Joan was the most experienced of the interviewed teachers, with nearly 10 years of teaching another subject prior to enrolling in the TESOL program. I wish the practicum would have been a little longer. Not for me. Really. But for my partners…who were…from another country…and probably needed more time in the classroom. I have a state teaching certificate…and I’ve been in front of a classroom. And there is a huge difference between being a student and being in front of a classroom as a teacher. And six weeks was fine. I got a feel for the practicum and knew what I was doing in terms of teaching English, but my partners…could’ve used more time. And for anybody who has not had teaching experience, that practicum, that six weeks, is probably not enough. Joan’s comment referred to the different needs that she and her co-teachers had during the practicum. She started out by only focusing on the nonnative-English-speaking TESOL students but closed by generalizing her comment to everyone without a teaching background. Her observation was echoed by other recent graduates in the study. For another example, Kathy, who had less than two years of private tutoring, faulted the inadequate amount of practical training during TESOL for her struggles after graduation. She struggled not only with theory but also the application of theory to practice: “Oh my gosh, I don’t know this, and I don’t know how to present this in a way that will be good for them.” When further prompted to explain how these challenges could have been avoided, she said, “I think for me having more experience in the classroom.”

To summarize the findings thus far, as depicted in the Descriptive Framework (Appendix A), several factors that existed prior to entry into the master’s TESOL program influenced the teachers’ successes and difficulties post-graduation as well as
their satisfaction with their master’s training for the community college setting. Some of these factors, such as the influence of former teachers and of foreign-language study, appeared to have a direct influence, as cited by the teachers. Others, such as teaching experience, were mentioned to have both a direct and an indirect effect: they influenced not only the decision that the teachers made in class but also how the teachers understood their graduate education, which in turn shaped their experiences in the classroom after graduation. Having explored various influencing factors prior to MA TESOL study, the focus now turns to those encountered during graduate school.

**MA TESOL Influences**

When the teachers were asked to reflect on their experiences *during* the TESOL program, the strongest theme that emerged was related to theory versus practice. Within this theme, the clearest subset was related to the practicum.

**Theory vs. Practice**

Several teachers mentioned how important it was that theory and practice be in balance, although they disagreed on what that meant and whether their TESOL program met this expectation. Some wanted more content and more pedagogy; others would have preferred less theory overall and more practice. Some wanted more theoretical preparation in specific areas; still others initially did not appreciate theory and felt it was overemphasized in the program—yet in hindsight, they wished they had paid more attention to it. As Barbara put it:

> Back then I was probably like a typical student and a lot of times thought, “Why do I have to do this? Why do I have to read all this? Why do I have to study all this? Why are you putting me through all this torture?” Now, when I think about [it], I wish I had done more. I look at my transcripts, and I say that is not nearly enough to know everything I need to know coming into a class when teaching. It just isn’t enough.

The interviewed teachers struggled to determine not only the appropriate balance between theory and practice but also the appropriate sequencing of the two. In the following excerpt, Sophia was contemplating whether taking a practically-oriented class at the beginning of her studies was the right approach or whether she should have studied theory first.

> And then the observation class was helpful too. I liked that. And to me it was connected to the research…I almost wish that we did [it] in reverse, where I had learned more of like the research, like the different types of research before I took the observation class. But then maybe I just would have been too crowded with focusing on an approach or stuff like that, instead of just relaxing and listening to what a teacher is doing.

What the teachers seemed to be struggling to conceptualize and verbalize was their observation that theory and practice should be integrated throughout the program. In every class, as much as possible, the two should be connected. Although the teachers
differed in specifics, they were unanimous in their concern with the theme of theory and practice. They viewed the practicum as the capstone experience, in which all that had been learned in theory and practiced in isolation would come together. This, however, did not always happen.

*The Practicum*

The clearest theme surrounding the practicum was the teachers’ dissatisfaction with practicum supervision. There was some variation among the five programs as to how, when, and what kind of feedback the student teachers would receive. Even within the same program, there were widely divergent practices. Teachers whose classes were off campus received the least amount of supervision due to their professors’ schedules. One teacher, Kathy, for instance, was observed only once and even then toward the end of the semester. At the other end of the continuum, one teacher was observed every time and had regular pre- and post-class conferences with the supervising professor. The teacher in the following example was dissatisfied because of, what she perceived as, largely negative feedback from her supervising professor.

And the experience that I had with Professor [name of professor in the program] was not, I don’t want to say it was a negative experience, but I don’t feel that it was a positive, reinforcing kind of experience. I didn’t feel a lot of positive reinforcement. I heard a lot of negative stuff, like “Well, you know, could have done this, da-da-da-dah,” not “Oh, you did a really good job doing this, did a really good job doing that.” So coming out of that whole practicum experience I didn’t feel like I knew very much. Like I wasn’t a very good teacher [her voice trails off].

As this was the last class in Kathy’s master’s program, the unpleasant memory of it still lingers. She felt as if she had failed to integrate the various elements of her training and that she was not ready to be in charge of her own class.

In summary, as the Descriptive Framework depicts (see Appendix A), of all the experiences during the master’s TESOL program, the most influential ones were the practicum and other aspects of theory and practice. The programs’ instructional processes and philosophy as well as the student-teachers’ effort and interactions with their professors all contributed to the teachers’ experiences during graduate school. This, in turn, influenced their challenges and successes with their own classes after graduation and their perceptions of their TESOL programs. As Barbara’s example demonstrates, it was only after graduation, when she was teaching in her own classroom, that she realized that her preparation in teaching various skills was inadequate. In light of this, she and many other teachers in the interviews reassessed their perception of their graduate preparation.

**Post-Graduation Influences**

The last stage of the teachers’ formation that was found to influence their classroom experiences and their retrospective satisfaction with their training were various post-graduation influences. In this area, two closely related themes emerged:
employment and institutional situations. The former refers to part-time or full-time employment; the latter includes institutional resources and support from key personnel.

**Employment Situation**

Eleven of the twelve interview participants were employed part-time at their community colleges. Although they all seemed to be committed to teaching and to their students, nearly all of them mentioned the various difficulties they experienced as adjunct instructors. Kathy elaborated on one reason why being a part-time instructor was challenging.

[Y]ou feel like you’re not a real member of the college. You got faculty, you got administration, you’ve got, you know, the paraprofs, the classified staff, or whatever you call that. They’re in. And then you’ve got adjuncts, you got the part-time, you get bumped out of your classes, you never know what you’re teaching from one semester to the next. It’s really sort of, you feel disposable because there’s always somebody willing to come up behind you. If you don’t want it and you’re not happy with that situation, “Oh, well, too bad; somebody else will teach it for you.”

Every one of the adjunct instructors that was interviewed had the necessary qualifications needed to obtain a full-time ESL teaching position at a community college. They were as well-educated as their full-time colleagues. Still, they felt inferior to the full-time faculty and marginalized by the college. The practice of being offered “leftover” classes (the ones that no full-timer wanted) and of being “bumped” (having to surrender a class if a full-timer’s class did not fill but the part-timer’s did) were perceived as demeaning practices by these professionals.

**Institutional Context**

Due to the fact that the majority of the participants were part-time teachers, they experienced additional difficulties. For example, their physical needs were often unmet. Barbara summarized the office situation in the following way.

We have this little office over here for the part-timers and our division is huge and I think there are 4 or 5 computers in there and just as many places to sit and…on a Monday afternoon you’ll never get on a computer in there, and you’ll never even get a place to sit down and work on your, you know, if you wanted to work on something. And so we complain about that regularly. We want to meet with students but we’ve no way we can meet with students because if we bring students in there, other instructors complain.

Only two of the twelve interviewed teachers were fortunate enough to have space of their own. For the others, the lack of an office was only the most obvious manifestation of their unmet needs. They often did not have a place to leave their books, their coats, and their purses; they did not have phones; and they did not have a quiet place in which to reflect on their teaching. These recent graduates were also frequently early-career teachers—only one had more than 5 years of teaching
experience—and, as such, were in need of support from relevant colleagues and supervisors. However, they rarely were able to interact with their full-time colleagues. Often, the reason given was that their schedules were incompatible. Part-time faculty tend to teach classes that full-timers choose not to—usually in the evening. Adjuncts often do not schedule office hours because they might be teaching another class at another school immediately before and/or after their classes at the community college, so they are simply not in one place for extended hours. Other times, even if they spend some time in the adjunct office, the location of the full- and part-time offices might be quite distant from each other. Further, they might not meet at staff meetings, either, due to scheduling conflicts or because adjuncts are forced to teach at multiple sites in order to earn an equivalent full-time salary. For all these reasons, part-time and full-time teachers rarely cross paths socially or professionally. This means that adjuncts are on their own and left to feel unsupported.

Concluding Remarks

Teaching English as a Second Language, more so than teaching another subject, requires that the teacher be able to communicate across multiple cultures as exemplified by the various well-known manifestations of “culture”: national, ethnic, linguistic, class, socio-economic, racial, power, age, gender, educational, role, and so forth (see Fuery & Mansfield, 1997; Hall, 1953; Hunt, 1989; Rosaldo, 1989; Turner, 1990). It is necessary for teachers to shift perspectives or cultural boundaries. In order to do so, teachers must be able to see themselves as culturally situated individuals and view their own boundaries from a distance. It has been argued that, in addition to the aforementioned cultural influences, the definition of cultural frame must be broadened to include one’s personal cross-cultural, foreign-language-learning, classroom observation, and actual teaching experiences (Porter-Szucs, 2007). Those future teachers, for instance, who have no teaching experience prior to entering graduate school, in contrast to those who do, are situated in different ways, culturally. Their experiences seem to influence their approach and attitude toward theory and practice specifically and graduate school in general. This difference, in turn, determines their approach to teaching later on. The earlier example of Diana’s attitudinal transformation demonstrates this. Prior to TESOL, she had no teaching experience. When she started taking graduate classes, from her vantage point, classes on the theory of second language acquisition and linguistics bore no relevance to her goal of becoming a classroom instructor of English as a Second Language. After a several-month-long leave of absence to teach English overseas, where she struggled to answer student questions, she returned to graduate school with a different attitude. The actual teaching experience changed her cultural situatedness, as it did with her approach and attitude toward theory and practice.

A broadened definition of culture, however, goes beyond teaching experience. It must include the experience of observing teaching as well. The findings of this study corroborate those of others (Lortie, 1975; Jackson, 1968; Marks, 2007; Polio and Duff, 1994) that the process of teacher formation starts years before the teacher training program and continues for years past it. All teachers-in-training arrive in their TESOL program with assumptions about the nature of teaching and the role of the teacher which have been shaped by their “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie,
1975, p. 61). In other words, by having observed their own teachers, they have formed opinions regarding what constitutes “good” or “bad” teaching or a “good” or “bad” teacher. One participant, for instance, realized that she was trying to avoid becoming her French teacher while another was trying to imitate her Italian teacher. Many of these assumptions, or experiences, or (in this broader sense) cultural markers are unstated and shape teachers’ behaviors subconsciously, continuing to do so for years after graduation. However, if these preconceived notions that are based on their cultural backgrounds are not addressed specifically during graduate school, and are not replaced by theory-driven concepts, they are likely to be perpetuated and remain strong influences beyond graduation.

The above issue has considerable implications for teacher trainers in MA TESOL programs. Given that among the factors that influenced the teachers’ classroom successes and difficulties were several that were experienced prior to enrollment in the graduate programs, it is evident that these influences have long-lasting effects, even years beyond teacher preparation in TESOL. Therefore, if TESOL programs hope to pass down their philosophies to their graduate students, they should consider building ways for reflective practice to take place in every course in order to encourage students to question and possibly override undesired pre-graduate school influences which are highly resistant to change.

This study has further implications for researchers. Given that the process of teacher formation is ongoing before, during, and after the teacher-training program, focusing on one stage of this process without due attention to the totality of the students’ experiences will result in an incomplete and rather skewed picture. Many of the insights from this study could not have been gained if the participants had not had some distance from graduate school and some experience with teaching. Thus, above all, researchers must continue to listen to the voices of recent graduates. Those researchers who do should disseminate their findings, so that others may build on their scholarship.

Author Note
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Appendix A

Revised Descriptive Framework
Using Tiered Lesson Design to Differentiate Instruction for English Language Learners in Content Classes

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**Abstract**

Differentiated instruction is a way of thinking about teaching and learning. It requires teachers to use a variety of instructional strategies to address diverse student learning needs. One goal of a differentiated classroom is to provide equal access for all students to the curriculum. This paper discusses the differentiated strategy of tiered lesson planning as a way of reaching all learners within the classroom, with an emphasis on English Language Learners (ELLs). By providing real life examples from elementary and middle school classrooms, the authors will demonstrate how to apply the strategy of tiered lesson design in a practical manner.

**Introduction**

There are many challenges facing English Language Learners (ELLs), and educators struggle to help these learners be successful in academic content area classes. ELLs have the challenge of learning not only academic content but also the language in which the content is being taught. The teacher’s task is to make the material comprehensible, while maintaining the objectives of the lessons, including addressing the content area benchmarks and standards. One way teachers can make content accessible to ELLs, while maintaining grade level expectations, is by using the strategy of tiered lesson design. Tiered lesson design is a differentiated instructional method using academic standards and/or key concepts with a focus on allowing students to meet the standards through increasingly difficult levels.

**Background**

Research indicates student achievement is a direct result of effective teaching (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2004, p. 3). There is a need for teachers to provide different pathways for all students to meet standardized academic benchmarks. Hall (2002) suggests that the intent of differentiated instruction is to maximize student growth and success by meeting individual student learning needs. The California Department of Education (2001) released findings which concluded that the “three principles of cognitive research (the need for emotional safety, for appropriate challenges, and for self-constructed meaning) suggest that a one-size- fits-all approach to classroom teaching is ineffective for most students and even harmful for some” (p. 140). With the increased focus on standardized test performance, teachers are under intense pressure to teach to the test. While differentiated instruction is a broad term encompassing many strategies that teachers can use to teach to a diverse population of students, tiered lesson design is a comprehensive strategy allowing teachers to use just one model to plan specifically for students of varying abilities across the areas of instruction, delivery, and assessment. Gardner, one of the original researchers of the theory of multiple intelligences, has contributed greatly to the awareness that students vary in intelligence, preferences, and strengths. His research supports the need to attend
To these differences (Hatch & Gardner, 1989, p. 5). Tomlinson (2004) posits that
teachers use tiered activities so all students focus on essential understandings and skills
but at different levels of complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness. By keeping the
focus of the activity the same, but providing routes of access at varying degrees of
difficulty, the teacher maximizes the likelihood that (1) each student comes away with
pivotal skills and understandings and (2) each student is appropriately challenged. (p. 83)

While research provides a theoretical justification for differentiated instruction,
federal education law mandates it. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of
2004, the federal special education act, requires that all special education students be
instructed in their least restrictive environment (LRE). By educating in the least
restrictive environment, many special education students are taking mainstream classes,
but are not able to access the curriculum in the same way as their peers, thus requiring
differentiation of the content (United States Department of Education, 2004). In other
words, the LRE may not actually be best practice in all situations. Furthermore, even
though English-as-a-second-language learners do not fall under special education, Lau
v. Nichols, a United States Supreme Court ruling, also requires school districts to
provide equal access to the curriculum for these learners. In providing equal access to
English Language Learners, teachers must differentiate in order to make curriculum

A tiered lesson should include differentiation in content, process, and product.
Tiering lessons in the content areas can be challenging because it requires locating
materials related to the topic at various reading levels without losing the content and
concepts of the lesson. To accomplish this goal, teachers can simplify or enhance the
text using the grade-level content student book or by finding published trade books on
the subject.

In order to tier a lesson for process, the teacher plans for students to interact
with the instructional materials. Questions often arise during this phase, for example:
Will the students be expected to read and comprehend the information on their own,
participate in small group instruction, or perhaps listen to the material through the use
of technology? For example, in a tiered science experiment which has been
differentiated for the area of process, the teacher would provide opportunities for
students to interact with a variety of appropriately leveled content materials. Such a
lesson plan might contain the following variations: the requirement that students
demonstrate understanding through the use of concrete materials and simplified
language or picture match or, alternatively, use hands-on materials as well as graphs
and scientific language. Further, a tiered assignment would include completion of an
experiment with result analysis along with an experiment comparison and class
discussion or demonstration. Teachers traditionally focus on delivery of the content
when planning lessons. However, backward lesson design emphasizes the assessment,
or product, as the starting point for planning lessons (Diaz-Rico, 2007). Based on their
research, McTighe and Tomlinson (2006) have also concluded that the “deliberate use
of backward design for planning courses, units, and individual lessons results in more
clearly defined goals, more appropriate assessment, and more purposeful teaching”
(p.78). When teachers use tiered lesson design, they should focus on the product as the
point at which to begin designing lessons. For this reason, the “essential knowledge,”
or benchmark, is listed first in the tiered lesson template. This focus is important because teachers are leading students through content in order to meet grade-level expectations or benchmarks. When teachers reference the grade-level expectations before tiering individual lessons, students experience a deeper understanding of the content. Once the desired end result is known, the teacher can then work backwards to determine how students will demonstrate mastery of the content. For example, if the end goal was to focus on developing vocabulary and writing skills within a social studies lesson, the three tiers of a poster presentation assignment might look like the following: the Tier 1 assignments might include artwork with limited content vocabulary. Students working at the Tier 2 level could include artwork, charts, and a written summary. Tier 3 assignments could include the previous assignments; however, the student would use an advanced writing template to complete an in-depth summary of the material. When teachers tier the delivery of the content, all students have equal access to the curriculum and should be adequately prepared to meet the benchmarks or grade-level expectations.

**Implementation**

When using tiered planning strategies, students need to have an understanding that their assignments may look different than their peers’ assignments; however, all assignments are thoughtfully designed and are evaluated for comprehension of the content. The lesson designer or teacher must keep the goal of meeting or exceeding grade-level benchmark expectations in mind when implementing the lesson. In addition to the content objectives, Michigan teachers also incorporate English Language Proficiency Standards into their tiered lesson plans. The English Language Proficiency Standards cover four domains of language: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. These standards are used by general education and ESL K-12 teachers throughout the State of Michigan to ensure that English Language Learners are being appropriately instructed and assessed by content area and English language benchmarks. In this section, examples of tiered lesson plans for three grade levels are presented.

**Third-Grade Social Studies**

The first example of a tiered planning strategy is from a third-grade social studies lesson, tiered by content and product for Level I and II ELLs, and by product for Level III-V ELLs. In order to identify English Language Learners by level, the State of Michigan has determined five levels of language proficiency. Level V indicates advanced proficiency; Level IV indicates proficient; Level III describes high intermediate fluency; Level II describes intermediate fluency; Level IA describes students who demonstrate minimal English proficiency and interrupted schooling; finally, Level IB indicates students demonstrating minimal English skills (Michigan Department of Education, 2004, p.8). The standard this lesson addresses is “2.1.1 People, Places, and Cultures,” which involves comparing the similarities and differences between men’s and women’s roles in the Native American culture (Michigan Department of Education, 2007, pg. 6). The *Our Michigan Adventure* (McConnel, 2002) textbook states the lesson goal as: students will understand the different roles Native Americans had in their daily lives.
In this scenario, teachers would provide a modified version of the text for their Level I and Level II students. The teacher would make the decision as to whether or not the students should read the text in small groups or on their own. The modified version would have simplified language and the support of visuals to help illustrate the vocabulary and make the content more comprehensible. After reading the text, students would draw the different jobs Native American men and women had and label them with the help of supplied vocabulary words.

A tiered assignment for ELLs at Levels III or IV would include students reading the text individually or with a partner and then writing a paragraph describing the different roles men and women had in the Native American tribes. Finally, a tiered assignment which might be appropriate for Levels IV and V ELLs would require students to read the text on their own and write a brief essay in first person describing their daily lives as a Native American man or woman (see Appendix A).

Sixth-Grade Science

The following example of a sixth-grade science lesson demonstrates how the process and product of a lesson could be tiered with three levels of students: Levels I & II, Level III, and Levels IV & V (Horton, Werwa, & Zike, 2002). The title of the unit is “Elements and Atoms,” and the lesson title is “Classification of Elements.” This lesson spans several 45-minute class periods. The benchmark matched to this lesson is to “classify substances as elements, compounds, or mixtures and justify classifications in terms of atoms and molecules” (Michigan Department of Education, 2000, p. 68).

When teaching this lesson in a traditional manner, the teacher provides the students with the class text and several fill-in-the-blank and short essay question worksheets. However, the worksheets and the cloze passage assessment, provided without scaffolding, are inappropriate for English Language Learners. Suggestions for tiering this lesson for process include: Level I & II, have students read and interpret a graphic organizer containing information about classification of elements and complete a vocabulary chart for unfamiliar vocabulary, in which students use a bilingual dictionary and partner with native speaker who has the text version. For Level III, have students read a glossed version of the text and complete a cloze graphic organizer, working with a partner. Finally, for Levels IV & V, have students read the text, highlighting main ideas and underlining supporting details, while working with a partner.

Likewise, the traditional assessment for the end of the lesson series on classifying substances is a cloze passage, completed by the students, without use of a word bank, notes, or textbooks. Suggestions for tiering this lesson for product include: Level I & II, completing a cloze graphic organizer, using notes; Level III, completing the traditional cloze passage with the assistance of a word bank and use of a graphic organizer; and Levels IV & V, completing the traditional cloze passage with the assistance of class notes and graphic organizer, but without a word bank (Appendix B).

Fifth-Grade Social Studies

A third example of tiering an elementary school unit could be illustrated by designing a fifth-grade Social Studies unit on “The Thirteen Colonies.” As previously illustrated, this unit could be tiered in three levels: Levels I & II, Level III, and Levels
IV & V (Duran, Gusman, & Shefelbine, 2005). The title of the unit is “America’s Beginnings” and the lesson title is “The Thirteen Colonies.” The lesson spans several 45-minute class periods. According to the Michigan Department of Education (2007), the benchmark matched to this lesson is “USHG 2.1 European Struggle for Control of North America” (p. 16).

During the traditional instruction of this unit, the teacher provides the students with the class text and several fill in the blank and short essay question worksheets. However, the worksheets and the cloze passage assessment, provided without scaffolding, are inappropriate for English Language Learners. Suggestions for tiering this lesson for process include: Levels I & II, have students read a graphic version of the text with vocabulary support and complete a vocabulary chart for unfamiliar vocabulary using a bilingual dictionary and partnering with a native speaker who has the text version; Level III, read a glossed version of the text and complete a cloze outline of the reading while working with a partner; Levels IV & V, read the traditional text, highlighting main ideas and underlining supporting details, while working with a partner.

The traditional assessment for the end of the lesson on “The Thirteen Colonies” is a matching test, completed by the students without a word bank or use of notes or textbooks. Suggestions for tiering this lesson for product include: Levels I & II, drawing a picture of a colonist; Level III, making a diorama of a colony; Levels IV & V, writing a letter to the King explaining why the colonists want and deserve their freedom. As a culminating activity, students of all levels could participate in a Colonist vs. King role-play activity (see Appendix C). This activity would activate speaking and listening skills and allow all students to learn from one another. The teacher then would have the opportunity to observe students’ comprehension of the unit and correct any common misunderstandings or misconceptions. While all the examples mentioned above cover Social Studies and Science content, the strategy is useful when planning for all grades and all content areas. The use of the tiered lesson template is helpful as a manner of organizing content, process, and product of any unit.

**Assessment**

In a differentiated environment, assessment is ongoing and diagnostic, and teachers use a pre-test before the study of each unit (Tomlinson, 2004, p. 10). Pre-tests are often referred to as “diagnostic assessments … used to check students’ prior knowledge and skill levels and identify misconceptions, interests, or learning style preferences” (McThighe & Tomlinson, 2006, p. 71). Pre-assessing students helps the teacher to plan appropriately differentiated content and assessments because each student’s level of readiness has been identified. Furthermore, each student will demonstrate weaknesses and strengths in the pre-tests, which will be addressed by using a tiered lesson design. When planning a unit using tiered lessons, teachers can use the results of the pre-test to group students into ability or interest groups. Teachers can then use a tiered lesson template to plan for instruction and assessment across three or more sub-groups of students.

Tiered lesson design is a meaningful tool when planning for assessments, both summative and formative. A summative assessment is generally used to summarize what has been learned over the course of a unit (McThighe & Tomlinson, 2006, p. 71).
Examples of summative assessments include final exams containing multiple-choice items, fill-in-the-blank and short essay questions, performance assessments, culminating projects, and student portfolios (Horton, Werwa, & Zike, 2002). When tiering for a summative assessment, the teacher could design several versions of the final exam, provide different performance assessments or culminating projects, or have differing requirements for portfolio submission. For example, in a summative assessment for a sixth-grade science unit about matter, the teacher could reduce the number of questions, provide a word bank for the fill-in-the-blank questions, allow students to use notes, provide an alternative test, or allow students to do a performance assessment (e.g., a science lab or experiment) or another differentiated assessment task.

While a summative assessment is quite formal, a formative assessment tends to “occur concurrently with instruction” (McThighe & Tomlinson, 2006, p. 71). Formative assessments are used to gauge students’ progression throughout a unit of study. Examples of formative assessments include observing, questioning, student-teacher conferencing, cooperative grouping, informal quizzing, and reviewing work in student portfolios. Teachers may use results of formative assessments to alter the method of content delivery or for re-teaching key concepts. Formative assessments lend themselves to tiering naturally, as they are used to assess students’ performance on an ongoing basis. An example of a formative assessment in a sixth-grade science unit on matter, taken from The Nature of Matter (Horton, Werma, & Zike, 2002), is to build a model of a cell using a variety of materials to represent the different parts. This assessment could be tiered by having Level I & II. Students simply create the model of a cell. Level III students could create the cell model and label all the parts. Meanwhile, Level IV and V students could make the cell model, label all parts, and write a short essay about the structure of a cell.

Benefits of Using Tiered Lessons

There are many benefits of tiered lesson design for both students and teachers. First, as a teacher designs tiered lessons, he or she guarantees “all students focus on essential understandings and skills” (Tomlinson, 2004, p. 83). A focus on essential understandings, or essential knowledge, provides the teacher a basis from which to differentiate levels. On the tiered lesson template (see Appendix A), there is a place for writing the “Big Idea,” which is the essential knowledge. The “Big Idea” is generally garnered from wording in the content area benchmark. For example, if the benchmark reads “classify substances as elements, compounds, or mixtures and justify classifications in terms of atoms and molecules” (Michigan Department of Education, 2000, p. 68), the “Big Idea” may be written “Elements are classified according to their properties.” With a focus on essential understandings, teachers are differentiating in order to suitably challenge students with language-appropriate expectations.

Additionally, teachers who use a tiered lesson design ensure that they are adjusting their curriculum, instruction, and assessment to meet the needs of their diverse student population. To illustrate, Tomlinson (2004) offers this example: a student who struggles with reading or has a difficult time with abstract thinking needs to make sense of the pivotal concepts and principles in a given chapter or story, while an advanced student in that same subject needs to find challenge when working with the same concepts and principles (p. 83). When using a tiered lesson design, teachers are able to differentiate content for students from the low end to the high end, as well
as for all those in the middle. Students benefit most by being appropriately challenged when facing new content and when working on assessment tasks that match their ability level.

Another benefit of tiered instruction is that it frees up time for teachers. If students are actively engaged in learning an appropriate task, then they will be able to successfully work independently without constant, direct monitoring by the teacher. Actively engaging students in small group instruction allows the teacher to spend time working with other groups of students or with students individually. By working with students individually or in small groups, the teacher can continue to tailor instruction to meet the needs of all students.

Working in small groups or one-on-one with the teacher is a great benefit of tiered lessons for the student as well. Research shows that structured cooperative learning has positive effects on student performance. Selection of students for small group differentiated instruction is based on specific learning needs. The Florida Center for Reading Research (2008), based on work by Hall (2002), asserts that “based on the content, project, and on-going evaluations, grouping and regrouping must be a dynamic process as one of the foundations of differentiated instruction”. During small group instruction, positive changes in students’ performance may be attributed to “the power that children have to make decisions which affect their own work, and to the way in which teachers facilitate the … learning by offering guidance and assistance rather than by directing learning” (Gillies, 1996, p. 4).

Limitations

The differentiated strategy of tiered lesson planning is not simply a teaching strategy. A teaching strategy is generally considered a tool for delivery of instruction. While tiered lesson planning is a tool for delivery of instruction, it is also a method for planning a comprehensive differentiated unit. Consideration must be given to lesson delivery as well as student assignments and assessments. If the explanation of the content material is not comprehensible, then students will continue to struggle with the content. To use tiered lesson planning successfully, the teacher must understand grade-level expectations and have a strong foundation in the content areas. As Pierce and Adams (2005) note, “a common mistake for those just beginning to tier is to develop three great activities and then try to force them into a lesson” (p. 89).

In order for teachers to move beyond this limitation, they must fully engage in study of the content material and grade-level expectations. While this is time consuming, it has great benefits for teachers in the long run. Teachers may consider using successful activities that they have previously developed for general education students and tier these activities to meet the needs of their students.

Tiered lesson planning also becomes easier as one practices it. Once a teacher has developed a tiered design model, it can be used as a guide to tier additional lessons in a variety of content areas. By using the tiered lesson design template, the teacher will save time when planning. Likewise, many tiered activities can be repeated across themes and content areas.

Teachers may be concerned that students will have adverse reactions when they discover that different students have different assignments and assessments. However, the master teacher can explain that this process benefits all students. In time,
students adjust to this type of teaching model, as they do whenever teachers change content delivery.

Although there are many limitations to using tiered lesson design, the authors strongly encourage this model to be used by teachers interested in differentiating their curriculum. Research supports tiered lesson design as a solid teaching model with numerous benefits McTighe and Tomlinson (2006), Gusman (2005), and Hatch and Gardner (1989) are just a few of the prominent educational researchers in the United States who support the use of differentiated instruction as a way to meet the needs of all students in the classroom, including English Language Learners.

**Conclusion**

When used in conjunction with effective teaching strategies, tiered lesson planning provides opportunities for student success at all academic levels within the classroom. Reading levels can span six years or more within a content area classroom, and it is necessary to look beyond the textbook in order for students to have equal access to the subject matter. Tiered lesson planning addresses both content and English language skills, which is a challenge for teachers in the classroom. Using this planning strategy allows extra time for the teacher to spend with small groups or individuals once class time is given for written assignments. Thus, tiered planning is one way to reach all students at their current academic level while maintaining the integrity of the content material.

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References


## Appendix A

**PLANNING A TIERED ACTIVITY**

**GRADE ____ UNIT ______________ LESSON ____**

**STANDARD/BENCHMARK:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE BIG IDEA: WHAT IS THE ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEVELS 1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEVEL 4/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEVEL 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Appendix B

**LESSON:** Classification of Elements

**STANDARD/BENCHMARK:** Classify substances as elements, compounds, or mixtures and justify classifications in terms of atoms and molecules.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE BIG IDEA: WHAT IS THE ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE? Elements are classified according to their properties.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEVELS 1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEVEL 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEVELS 4/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Read and interpret a graphic organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Complete vocabulary chart for unfamiliar vocabulary:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use bilingual dictionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Partner with native speaker who has text version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Read glossed text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Complete a cloze graphic organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work with a partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Read the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Highlight the main ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Underline supporting details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work with a partner (optional)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C
GRADE 3 UNIT: Native Americans
Standard/Benchmark: Locate and describe cultures and compare the similarities and differences among the roles of women, men, and families.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE BIG IDEA: WHAT IS THE ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People had different roles in the tribe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVELS 1-2</th>
<th>LEVEL 3</th>
<th>LEVELS 4/5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Read and interpret a graphic organizer</td>
<td>• Read text either as a class or with a partner</td>
<td>• Read the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Partner with native speaker who has text version</td>
<td>• Complete a paragraph frame</td>
<td>• Work with a partner (optional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Complete a drawing of the jobs they had</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Write a paragraph describing the jobs they would be responsible for</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix D
GRADE 5 UNIT: America’s Beginnings
Lesson: The Thirteen Colonies
Standard/Benchmark: USHG 2.1 European Struggle for Control of North America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE BIG IDEA: WHAT IS THE ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English people came to the colonies for wealth, religious freedom, and a better life. Many parts of American life today began in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVELS 1-2</th>
<th>LEVEL 3</th>
<th>LEVELS 4/5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Students will read the graphic organizer version of the text (context)</td>
<td>• Student will read the glossed version of the text (content)</td>
<td>• Students will read the standard textbook version of the reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The teacher will “read” the graphic organizer with a small group of students. (process)</td>
<td>• They will partner with a native English speaker or read in small group with teacher group with teacher support (process)</td>
<td>• Students will partner with a native English speaker. (process)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Complete vocabulary chart. Draw a picture of a colonist. (product) Culminating Activity: the whole class will contribute by participating in a Colonists vs. King role play activity</td>
<td>• Complete a cloze passage outline of the chapter and make a diorama of a colony (product)</td>
<td>• Make a poster illustrating why freedom is important to the Colonists. OR write a letter to the King stating why they want freedom. (product)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culminating Activity: the whole class will contribute by participating in a Colonists vs. King role play activity</td>
<td>• Culminating Activity: the whole class will contribute by participating in a Colonists vs. King role play activity</td>
<td>• Culminating Activity: the whole class will contribute by participating in a Colonists vs. King role play activity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Binomials: Frozen Chunks of English that Your Students will Think are Really Cool

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Madonna University

Abstract

Binomials, two words in the same form class connected by the word and or or in a fixed order, are a fruitful area for language learning, with hundreds available to work with in the classroom. Helping intermediate to advanced listening/speaking students of all ages notice these frozen chunks of language is a fun and useful way to introduce and work on acquisition of communicative competence. From “rock and roll” to “bricks and mortar,” there is plenty to be learned from discussing and learning about these colorful expressions.

Introduction

English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors are always looking for new ways to increase oral fluency in their students. One area that promises to improve students’ fluent use of language is the study of formulaic language. Formulaic language—also known as prefabricated language, multi-word expressions, lexical chunks, and other terms—has been defined as “multi-word collocations which are stored and retrieved holistically rather than being generated de novo with each use” (UWM Linguistics Symposium on Formulaic Language, 2007). Everyday greetings or leave takings are perhaps the most common examples of formulaic language. We say, “Hello! How are you?” and respond to similar queries without much thought. Without the ability to use formulaic language in these situations and others, students’ language use will lack the automaticity necessary for true fluency. Of course, instructors can introduce their students to many types of formulaic language, but one area that can be useful in speaking/listening classes is the use of binomials. While definitions vary, in general, binomials are groups of two words always said in the same order and joined together by a conjunction. They offer an easy and fun way to liven up ESL speaking/listening classes and enrich students’ language use in several important ways (see Figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Binomials can be used to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Improve students’ knowledge of formulaic expressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Improve students’ knowledge of idioms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Improve students’ knowledge of the English sound system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Improve students’ knowledge of the differences between written and spoken English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Using binomials in the classroom
Background

Just as formulaic language itself is referred to in a variety of ways, binomials have been referred to using different terms. An early mention of these forms is found in Abraham’s (1950) Modern Language Journal article in which he refers to them as “fixed coordinates” (p. 276). He notes the fixedness of the order of the structures and that language users ignorant of the correct order of the words in the coordinate will sound “very strange to native speakers” (p. 276). Among the examples given are fixed groups containing both two (binomials) and three (trinomials) elements: first and foremost; dead or alive; man and wife; red, white, and blue; wine, women, and song; and win, place, and show (p. 276). Malkiel (1959) called these structures binomials, and gave some similar examples, including odds and ends, husband and wife, knife and fork, hammer and tongs, and cash and carry.

He proposed what has become the classic definition of a binomial, “a sequence of two words pertaining to the same form-class, placed on an identical level of syntactic hierarchy, and ordinarily connected by some kind of lexical link” (p. 113). Pinker and Birdsong (1979) studied similar expressions, but called the forms “freezes.” They called binomials “irreversible conjoined phrases” and gave such examples as wear and tear and first and foremost (p. 497). As can be seen, binomials are a well-documented linguistic phenomenon with hundreds of easily-accessible examples available for teachers to use.

Reasons for using binomials in the ESL classroom

Communicative competence, according to Widdowson (1989), comes from “knowing a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns, formulaic frameworks, and a kit of rules and being able to apply the rules to make whatever adjustments are necessary according to contextual demands” (p. 135). Therefore, while it would be quite a stretch to say knowing binomials will make students more communicatively competent, in the long run, the more “pre-assembled patterns” they know, the easier they will find communicating with native speakers to be. Using a group of words—even the three words that make up a typical binomial—in an order not usually heard, will deem the language used by the learner “unidiomatic, odd or [full of] foreignisms” (Pawley & Syder, 1983, p. 193). Binomials can help students to see language as chunks and to understand that learning chunks of language lowers the cognitive load when they try to remember grammar, pronunciation, intonation, and everything else that goes into speaking, while carrying on a real-time conversation with a native speaker (Schmitt, 2000). They might see the beauty in learning a chunk of language that allows them to pull out a string of words for “instant retrieval” (Hill, 2000, p. 55) when necessary. Not only can binomials and other lexical chunks, be retrieved instantly for use, but they operate as a kind of linguistic shorthand, lightening not only the speaking load, but also the effort needed to put into listening.

This happens because our familiarity with the language allows us already to know the end of the binomial when the first element is said, so we are free to start composing our response before the speaker stops talking.

Improve students’ knowledge of formulaic expressions

Being short, binomials are easy for even beginning students to understand and use. In addition, they represent an introduction to the formulaic language so common
in the language use of native speakers. According to Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999), their corpora studies of large samples of language show that formulaic language makes up 30 – 45% of spoken language and 21% of written language (p. 995). Other researchers, including Hill (2000), place the estimate even higher. Hill estimates that “up to 70% of everything we say, hear, read, or write is to be found in some form of fixed expression” (p. 53). These estimates make it imperative for ESL educators to focus on these types of expressions during their class sessions. As Nattinger (1980) has noted, students need to be encouraged to see language use “as the piecing together of ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation” (p. 341), not as the stringing together of individual words.

**Improve students’ knowledge of idioms**

Teaching formulaic expressions leads students to focus on how language is organized beyond discrete vocabulary choices. Highlighting what has been called “the principle of idiom,” students can learn about the “large number of semi- preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analyzable into segments” (Sinclair, 1991, p. 110). Of course, not all binomials are idioms. If idioms are defined as “fixed expressions that are semantically opaque” (Everaert, van der Linden, Schenk, & Schreuder, 1995, p. 4), then binomials such as *husband and wife* or *knife and fork* are not idiomatic expressions. However, many binomials are, and because of this fact, they are often introduced to students in books, chapters, or lessons which focus on idioms. The enormous supply of binomials appearing in these reference sources in itself proves their usefulness. For instance, *NTC’s American Idioms Dictionary* (Spears, 2000) includes an appendix of 500 “irreversible binomials and trinomials” (p. 621). In addition, the author of the recently published *Thesaurus of English Idioms* claims that it includes 900 binomials (Nagy, 2006).

**Improve students’ knowledge of the English sound system**

ESL instructors can also use binomials to help students notice the sounds of the English language. For instance, binomials can be used to illustrate the use of reduced speech forms. Starting with a binomial that nearly all students have heard, such as *rock and roll*, teachers can show students the difference between the fully enunciated /ænd/ and the syllabic consonant [n] (Martínez, 1999). Working from this example, other instances of reduced speech can be introduced. Instructors can also point out that binomials are formed, much like other types of figurative or poetic language, with sound in mind. Nagy (2006) highlights a number of “effect-enhancing tools” (p. XII) which serve to explain the format of individual binomials. Some of these “tools,” along with the examples Nagy uses, include: alliteration (*do or die*), repetition (*neck and neck*), and rhyme (*make or break*) (p. XII). Learning these little chunks of language can also help students gain an understanding of how pronunciation, stress, and intonation work together to improve the ability of others to understand them. When students learn the pronunciation, stress, and intonation pattern of a binomial or trinomial, they end up sounding less like walking dictionaries, spewing out strings of individual words, and more like advanced speakers. As Hill (2000) has stated, when “learners learn the stress pattern of a phrase *as a whole*, their stress and intonation will be better” (p. 56).
Students will be also interested in the phonological and semantic rules that are thought to have a role in the ordering of the elements in binomials across languages (see Pinker & Birdsong, 1979, p. 499, for exceptions). The rule that seems to trump all other phonological constraints in the ordering of elements is called Panini’s Law, referring to the 4th century linguist who devised it based on his study of ancient Sanskrit texts (Pinker & Birdsong, 1979). This rule states that the first element in a binomial will have fewer syllables than the second (Osgood & Bock, 1977, p. 99). Cooper and Ross (as cited in Pinker & Birdsong, 1979, p. 498) list other phonological constraints, with examples: lax vowels typically come before tense vowels (stress and strain), words with fewer initial consonants come before those with more (fair and square), and words with more front vowels precede words with vowels which are more back (leaps and bounds). Students might also be curious to learn about Cooper and Ross’s (1975) list of semantic constraints on the ordering of elements in binomials, saying that, in general, items that can be construed as living, adult, male, here, now, or agentive will come before other elements. Some binomials that follow these rules include: life or death, women and children, brother and sister, this and that, sooner or later, and cat and mouse.

**Improve students’ knowledge of the differences between written and spoken English**

Now that the Internet has blurred the lines between written and spoken English, it is important for ESL instructors to re-establish the distinction between these two modes of communication. Since many of our students come from backgrounds in which translation of written text is the focus of instruction or from areas in which the lack of English speakers makes conversational competence hard to achieve, analyzing the difference between writing and speaking can be an eye-opening experience. As already noted, there is a difference between the amounts of formulaic language in general in spoken versus written language (Biber et al., 1999, p. 995). As Biber et al. point out, “Conversation is often regarded as extremely formulaic, and some scholars have suggested that most conversational utterances are composed of relatively fixed lexical bundles” (p. 996). Binomials, like other idiomatic expressions, are found more in informal settings than in formal ones. They are characteristic of everyday speech, rather than formal academic discourse. Listening or looking for binomials in various communicative settings can reinforce an understanding of the ways written and spoken English differ.

**Some classroom activities**

Outlined below are some activities designed for using binomials in the classroom.

- Students can be given groups of four to five binomials. Their task is to then determine which of the groups contains binomials that can actually be classified as idioms and which cannot be. Examples: Group 1—salt and pepper, black and white, man and wife, ladies and gentlemen and Group 2—nuts and bolts, hem and haw, meat and potatoes, ins and outs.

- A dialogue using binomials can be taped and played back for students. They can circle the binomials they hear, choosing from a wider group of examples
listed on a worksheet. Based on the context, they can attempt to determine the meaning of each binomial.

• Scripts of the same dialogue can be analyzed, so students can see how expressions such as nuts and bolts or life and death are used in context. For example, nuts and bolts often occurs as “the nuts and bolts of something,” while life and death usually occurs as “a matter of life and death.”

• Students can work in native-language groups to list binomials from their first language. What differences can they notice? For example, while in the U.S. we say, red, white, and blue, in France, the colors are said in the opposite order.

• Students can do their own mini research studies, examining a set collection of binomials to see which of the phonological and semantic rules suggested by Cooper and Ross (1975) are verified or disproved. Students can also check binomials in their own native languages against the rules.

• Students can hypothesize about the origins of binomials such as hammer and tongs (meaning “to do something energetically”) or hem and haw (meaning “to speak timidly”). After presenting their ideas, an Internet search to discover the historical origins of specific binomials can be made.

• Groups of students can each be given a card with a binomial on it. After discussing the meaning of the various binomials, students can be asked to write a short description of a business suggested by the binomial. They can also draw an appropriate logo for the business, for example: “Spick and Span Cleaning Service” or “Bright and Early Wake-up Service.”

• Students can be encouraged to scan reading materials (newspapers, magazines, textbooks, etc.) for examples of binomials. Examples can be brought in and discussed by the group.

Limitations

Just as native speakers of English who learn about commas tend to use them everywhere, students who learn about binomials might use them to an extent that their language sounds more comical than fluent. Correct and incorrect use of binomials should be modeled by the instructor. Like many idiomatic expressions, some binomials can be considered clichés, worn-out and trite. Students need to be cautioned that “overuse of clichés … may create the impression that the speaker is lazy, insincere, or poorly educated” (Nagy, 2006, p. XII). However, students might be able to relate to the difference between free-flowing language (symbolized by a cool drink of water), entire conversations taken over by frozen language (symbolized by a drink that has been frozen solid), and competent fluent usage (a tall cool drink, refreshingly served with a few ice cubes). Ideally, students should aim for what Lennon (2000) calls, “an optimal mix” combining “highly automaticized chunks of language and phrases where the speaker is composing more fluently” (p. 32).
Conclusion
ESL instructors will find that there are many uses for binomials in the listening/speaking classroom. In fact, once students are helped to notice binomials, they seem to be “a gift that keeps on giving” (Martínez, 1999, 5), providing teachers and students with a steady supply of examples and new ideas for classroom applications.

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References


Once Upon an Arabian Night

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Abstract

The writing process is not often a task that the average high-school student relishes. Yet, there are ways to interweave creativity into certain projects so that high-school students become immersed in an activity and lose themselves in the ensuing excitement. The following paper will show how a variety of writing activities, incorporating concepts of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Service-Based Learning (SBL), resulted in a puppet show that was written and produced by students, then taken on the road to two very different venues, where the performances were met with great success.

Once upon a time…

Schoolwork for the average high-school student has often been perceived as lacking in relevance for real life (Diaz-Rico, 2004; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). According to Diaz-Rico, “In school, problems are simplified, and there are usually right and wrong answers. Activities are neatly structured to fit within class periods. Teachers evaluate students’ products and effort” (p. 378); yet, other than grades, there are no real long-term consequences. “In contrast to the delimited world of the classroom, the real world is relatively complex and unstructured, and the stakes are enormous” (Diaz-Rico, p. 378). Because of this, there is often a distinct disconnect between what is learned in school and what is needed in real life.

Project-based learning (PBL) seeks to address this problem by encouraging students “to take initiative, seek learning on their own, and take responsibility for the results of their inquiry” (Diaz-Rico, 2004, p. 379). As such, in the words of Moss (1998), PBL is “an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop” (p. 1). This, then, results in work that is motivating (Roth-Vinson, 2001), culminating in work that goes beyond the minimum needed for a course grade (Katz & Chard, 1989) and increases students’ feelings of connectedness to the community (Diaz-Rico).

Not only does PBL provide the needed relevancy for today’s youth, it also supports interconnections between various content areas. For example, Giromini (2001) has discussed a program at an urban high school that incorporated history, science, technology, visual arts, communication skills, and English language standards into a major history project presented to faculty, parents, and guests. Diaz-Rico (2004) writes about a similar project in another high school that was carried one step further when it was recorded and transferred to video for all to keep. Another history project, described by Balderas (2001), incorporated aspects of art, writing, history, and technology to create albums which were shared not only with other classes, but also with community groups.
Service-based learning (SBL) is somewhat related to PBL, though the foci are different. In PBL, the students/participants are the primary beneficiaries in that their knowledge and skills have increased, whereas in SBL, the primary beneficiaries are perceived to be those who were served. Furco (1996) defines SBL as “a form of experiential education in which learning flows from service activities” (as cited in Diaz-Rico, 2004, p. 402). As such, learning would be seen as secondary to the service provided. Components of SBL include preparation, followed by performance of the service, and concluding with reflection. These three areas and what they involve will become more evident with the service project described later in this paper.

One type of project that can support students in meaningful, long-term learning is dramatizing literature. Drama has often been used in language teaching as a way of lowering the “affective filter” (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) and teaching culturally-appropriate interaction (Stern, 1980). It can be even more beneficial when students themselves write their scripts with help from a teacher (see, for example, Burke & O’Sullivan, 2002), or when students completely by themselves, in the words of Carkin et al. (in press), “work together to create meaning as they interpret and react to literature.” Beniston (1996) details how to use written text, video, and role-playing to teach West Side Story. Other exemplars of incorporating literature and drama can be found in New Ways of Using Drama and Literature in Language Teaching (Whiteson, 1996) and The Magic of Drama (Finger, 2000). In all of these sources, a common thread runs through: that of encouraging students to use language in a practical manner by negotiating meaning through various speech acts (e.g., suggestions, refusals, hypothesis-making).

A specific type of dramatization, informed by the theoretical framework of Vygotsky (1934/1986), is that of Reader’s Theater. Carkin et al. (in press) summarize different techniques for developing this form of drama using literature, textbooks, and existing plays. In Reader’s Theater, actors typically read from scripts, minimizing preparation time and focusing attention on the delivery rather than the memorization of the dialogue. Carkin et al. conclude that even the simplest theatrical performance “introduces a sense of authenticity in the classroom because it communicates true emotion, meaning, and realistic language use to a larger audience, [...] allowing language learners to build and then test their communicative ability in front of a real audience. Drama can make language learning relevant and engaging at any age.”

Using the concepts of PBL and SBL, along with ideas from the increasing literature available on the use of drama to teach English language learners (ELLs) (see Carkin et al., in press, for an extensive bibliography), the following project evolved. The goals of the project included contextualizing language and literature into real-world use and then extending the resulting dramatization out into the community to serve those in need. This added another layer of learning for the students who found themselves completely immersed in an activity that had positive repercussions for both the performers and their audiences. In the following pages, the first author recounts her experience as teacher, creator, inspirer, project manager, set designer, and director, illustrating an example of PBL and SBL in action.
The Project

Conceiving the Idea

I (Gordon) teach English Language Learners (ELLs) between the ages of 15 and 17 at the high-school level. The participants in this project were all members of my Advanced ESL class, representing eight countries: Afghanistan, Albania, China, El Salvador, Iraq, Mexico, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. The project itself was the result of a simple request from one of my Level 4 high-school students during the Fall of 2006. She was a young girl from Afghanistan who had read the story One Thousand and One Arabian Nights in the original Persian, and had then proceeded to watch the Hallmark edition of Arabian Nights (Barron, 1999) starring Mili Avital as Scheherazade and Dougray Scott as her husband Schahriar.

My student said the movie was wonderful and wanted to know if our Advanced ESL English 11 class could watch it together as a class activity. I told her that I would need to preview the film in order to see if it was appropriate for our curriculum. To myself, I thought, “I don’t have time to show lightweight movies that students could easily view at home for their own pleasure.” But I took the film home and decided to see what it was all about. To my delight, a number of clever classroom activities started racing through my head within the first half hour of the film. I was amazed to discover a storyline begging to be turned into a whole unit of study that would revolve around viewing, listening, speaking, writing, and reading.

Before showing the movie to the class, I told them that I had decided to take them on a field trip in the near future. Everyone became excited and called out possible destinations like the zoo, Cedar Point, or Chicago. I told them I was thinking more along the lines of a theater. They started suggesting movies, but I rein ed them in and said I was thinking more specifically about live theater. The students were intrigued by the idea and agreed. At this, I replied “Great, we’ll be watching the movie Arabian Nights. Afterwards, we will write a script for a puppet show. You’ll create the puppets, and we’ll build a puppet theater. Then, we’ll take

1 Although I had a small class, this activity could obviously be done with a larger group of students, as well. We had to double up on parts; a larger class would not need to. The time frame ended up being five weeks in total. The first week was spent watching the movie and figuring out how to sketch out a summary of the stories within the larger tale. The second week was spent working on dialogue and reported speech. Lessons were taught and students applied the information to their summaries. The third week saw the change in writing style to the script format. Also, a few days were spent in the art room making puppets and designing backdrops. Concurrently, the puppet theater was being built outside of school time at a student’s home. Rehearsals took up the fourth week and a half of the fifth week, with the final few days of the 5th week spent in dress rehearsals. After that, we waited to go on our “field trips” to Hiller Elementary School and Children’s Hospital of Michigan. Since there were several weeks in between these two performances, we were able to continue with other lessons.
However, we built in some occasional dress rehearsals so that we would not forget how to keep our performances running smoothly. our show on the road.” I have to admit, they were stunned. They wanted the field trip, but they were not clear about the part they had just agreed to do. That was OK. I started up the movie, and they quickly became engaged. I was thrilled; I had them hooked. The film took three days to watch (175 minutes total running time), and then the work began. (For those interested in a detailed plan for carrying out such a project beyond what is offered here, see Edwards, 2000.)

**Story Summary**

For anyone unfamiliar with the basic storyline of this movie, it is based on the classic story of *A Thousand and One Nights*. The story is about a king, Schahriar, whose wife has betrayed him. The king discovers that his wife is having a clandestine affair with his brother. In a fit of rage, the king aims a dagger at his brother’s heart, but the queen throws herself in front of her lover and is killed on the spot. Schahriar is devastated. Sadly, he has little time to grieve. According to the laws of his land, he must find a new queen or risk losing his kingdom to his brother. Of course, he no longer trusts women. He plans a ruse: he will marry but kill the bride the morning after the ceremony. Then he will marry again, and repeat his plan. The girls in the harem hear about this and fear for their lives. Scheherazade – daughter of the king’s adviser – learns what is going on and tells her father that she will marry the king. After all, they were childhood friends, and she knows in her heart that Schahriar is a good man and a good king. She believes she can turn him around and bring him back from the edge of despair and grief. Her father is worried sick but finds he can not change her mind. Scheherazade assures him that she will use wonderful stories to help Schahriar find the good in others. And so the wedding takes place, and the tales begin.

The four stories that Scheherazade tells in the movie are “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” “Bak Bak the Hunchback,” “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp,” and “The Three Brothers” (which includes tales about a magic carpet, the apple of life, and a magic telescope). In our puppet theater version of the movie, students acted out the outer story line between Scheherazade and Schahriar, while puppets were used to tell the four inner tales. Four students were chosen to take on the roles of Scheherazade, Schahriar, the king’s adviser, and the king’s doctor. These four students were given the task of writing the script for the outer story. The entire class, along with these four students, was then divided into four groups. Each group was assigned one of Scheherazade’s four tales and required to summarize their story. The scripts came later after lessons were given on dialogue, reported speech, and specific punctuation (names, quotation marks, and end punctuation).

**How to Write a Puppet Show**

The grammar and writing activities built into this puppet project included teaching dialogue, reported speech, and parenthetical notations; reviewing verb tenses as they fit into the above three writing activities; and demonstrating how to use various types of punctuation, especially quotation marks, commas, colons, semi-colons, and
end punctuation (the period, exclamation point, and question mark). There were many re-writes and opportunities for peer editing. Initially, the students were asked to write a summary of their designated storyline. Next, they were taught how to write dialogue. The students were then challenged with their first rewrite assignment: turning a summary into a conversation. After that, they were shown how to write reported speech, which resulted in a second adaptation. Finally, the students learned about the format needed to write a script for the ensuing play. This became the third and final adaptation of each student’s written work. The format now resembled a script with all character names typed along the left-hand margin followed by a colon. Dialogue replaced summaries, and quotation marks were removed. Parenthetical notes were written in to indicate what the puppets would be doing. The characters began to interact, and the stories came alive.

Students were graded individually on worksheets as they initially learned each step of the writing process for dialogue, reported speech, and script writing. They also practiced verb tense, sentence structure, and punctuation. They were graded as a group whenever they handed in a draft of their story (summaries, storyline with dialogue, storyline with reported speech, and storyline written in play format). At one point, each group sat across the hall in the English office for one class hour to watch their particular Arabian Tale one more time. This gave them an opportunity to correct errors in their storyline due to misconceptions or inaccurate memories. The other groups continued to work in the classroom on their storylines.

Changing Between Media

One of the interesting experiences that the students had was learning to change from one medium to another. What they saw on the “silver” screen was not necessarily easy to portray on a small puppet theater stage. There was quite a bit of negotiating involved as students learned to adapt a story to fit the given parameters. After all, there was no way we were going to be able to portray forty thieves riding across the puppet theater stage. However, it was reasonable to use a smaller number of thieves to represent all forty. So, one student found a picture of a thief on a horse and duplicated it multiple times. He then printed out his collage and attached it to a piece of cardboard for stability. In order to make it easier to manipulate the prop, a large Popsicle stick was attached to the base of the cardboard. This was one of several adaptations needed to portray the stories in puppet theater format.

An Old-Fashioned Sewing Bee

While we were all busy working on the outer storyline and the four inside tales, we also discussed the performances. Of great concern was making the puppet shows entertaining. That brought us to a discussion of how to make puppets that would be believable. I arranged for my class to spend a few days in the art room. To our great delight, not only was the art teacher agreeable, she even set aside a work area for us and handed over two large boxes of material that someone had donated. There were yards and yards of fabric and more than a dozen different colors. We had our choice of the entire bundle: linens, stretch fabrics, crepes, gabardines, corduroys, and velours. My
paraprofessional and I stitched a basic puppet that looked like a mitten with two thumbs. Using that as our template, we made several dozen puppets out of five of the fabrics so that there would be a variety from which the students could select. The students used these for the puppets’ basic bodies. I supplied several dozen spools of thread in a rainbow of colors. I also brought in needles, pins, buttons, colorful rickrack, lace, cording, etc. The students were encouraged to use all of these supplies and let their imaginations run free. Some students made the puppet heads out of papier-mâché. Others used tennis balls for heads or white socks for the entire puppet. Trims, miniature ties, and aprons were stitched on. I brought in more than 20 skeins of yarn in a variety of colors so that the puppets would have hair and mustaches where needed. The students had fun.

My paraprofessional had each group tell her what type of backdrop they wanted for their 15-minute puppet sketch. With a lot of input from the students, four different backdrops were designed from our cache of fabrics. My parapro pinned the designs in place (a full moon, a mountain, a tree, a sun, a palace, etc.), took the material home, and using her talents on the sewing machine, stitched up four wonderful backdrops on four different pieces of material (36” x 48” size). She also made a solid black backdrop that was hung six inches from the opening of the puppet theater window stage. We used this black backdrop to hide the students and their puppets while one person reached in and changed the colorful backdrops from one storyline to the next. These colorful backdrops were hung four inches from the window/stage.

**Building a Puppet Theater**

The puppet theater was built by my parapro’s son, who is handy with wood. Using the following dimensions, he built a three-sided puppet theater: 4’x10’ for the front of the theater and two side walls (2’x10’), fastened with long hinges so that the theater could fold down flat or stand up on its own. The window of the theater was cut out in the upper third of the large board. We needed a ledge across the bottom of the window where we could place props or rest puppets. A beautiful deep red velvet curtain, complete with gold fringe and gold braid tie backs, was the perfect finishing touch after painting the puppet theater black and attaching the curtain with a staple gun.

**Rehearsals**

The students decided it would be better to audiotape their storylines because it would be too hard to read a script, turn the pages, and manage all the puppets and props. This is similar to the method of producing Reader’s Theater (Carkin et al., in press). We practiced the scripts again and again until they sounded good. Then we taped, and re-taped, and taped again. What an experience! The classroom phone rang. Someone sneezed. A chair scraped. We finally found a quiet room in the building, and held our breath while each person read his/her part. The scripts sounded good. Phew! After that, it was a matter of listening to the scripts and practicing the motion of the puppets. Meanwhile, the four students who were working on the outside script continued to practice their lines. We had to coordinate their performance with the start-up of each puppet show, since these
four students were also puppeteers. My parapro was in charge of the tape recorder, and pushed the button that would begin each tale just as the students scrambled into place behind the puppet theater. As each puppet show ended, the tape recorder was stopped, the four actors would assemble to the right of the puppet theater, and their tale would continue. One student was responsible for changing the backdrop in preparation for the next storyline, and the next group of puppeteers would gather quietly behind the puppet theater with their array of puppets and props. Within a week, we were ready for show time.

Taking the Show on the Road: Part One

I arranged for my students to perform at a nearby elementary school in our district that has 55% ELLs. My principal was so thrilled with our production that he paid for the school bus that took us to and from the elementary school. Three of our boys were responsible for hauling the puppet theater up onto the bus through the back door. The other students were responsible for bringing their individual backdrops, puppets, props, and the tape recorder.

Two hundred elementary students filed into the multi-purpose room to watch our performance. It was a very exciting day. For the first half hour before our audience arrived, my students organized all their puppets and props and positioned and repositioned the puppet theater three times. By the time the children walked in, we were really ready to perform. I gave a brief introduction, explaining what we had done to prepare for the day, then the storyline began, and the performance was underway.

The children loved it. And my students were high as a kite. What a success!!

Taking the Show on the Road: Part Two

My students were so thrilled with this experience that they began to beg to go to another elementary school to perform again. I told them I had a different idea in mind. I said I wanted to write to Children’s Hospital of Michigan to see if we might be able to perform there for some sick children who did not get much outside entertainment. My students liked the idea, so I made the phone call.

I learned that there were specific restrictions in place: no stories about death and dying, no mutilations, no performers who might be coming down with a head cold, no loud noises, nothing scary in the storyline, nothing that would upset the children. And…we had to be approved by the hospital committee. I sent in a summary of the project and the stories we would perform. Meanwhile, I told my students we would have to write a “gentle” version of the entire performance. This turned out to be a lot of work. Again, we began to negotiate how to portray different parts of the stories since characters had been strung up (“Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves”), killed (“Bak Bak the Hunchback”), or found to be in very poor health and on the edge of death (“The Three Brothers”). But the effort was worth it. We changed the storylines enough to fall within the guidelines and still not lose the essence of the tales. Our performance was approved and we prepared to take our show on the road again.
This time our superintendent paid for the bus. She and our Board of Education had been treated to a shortened performance during one of the spring Board meetings. I told them we were hoping to take our production down to Children’s Hospital near Wayne State University’s medical center. Our plan was to give something back to the community since all of my students had come to this country with very little in the way of personal possessions. The community had stepped in to help each of their families get on their feet. This would be our opportunity to give back. Right on the spot, our superintendent said she would cover the cost of the bus. We were on our way.

*Children’s Hospital of Michigan*

Our experience at the hospital was very different than the one at the elementary school. We only had 12 little guests. They were all in hospital gowns or pajamas. Three of them were on IVs. Two of them wore masks over their mouth and nose to protect them from outside germs. One little boy was laying in a red wagon because he was too sick to sit up. My students were stunned but composed.

I had tried to prepare them in advance. To my great joy, my students showed compassion and love beyond what I could have imagined. They made 12-page coloring books to take to these patients with pictures from the four *Arabian Tales*. They also bought new boxes of crayons to give to each of the children. At the end of their performance, each of my students took a box of crayons and a coloring book and handed it to a child. It was all I could do to keep from crying. I was so proud of them.

*Reflections*

When we returned from the experience at the hospital, I asked my students to reflect on the difference between their two performances. The essays I received from them were very touching. One student wrote:

> *When the children first entered the gym at Hiller Elementary, they were loud and happy. They laughed during certain parts of our show. But when the children came into the Activity Room at the hospital, they were really quiet. Most of them did not have the energy to talk, laugh, or participate in the show. Even though these kids did not show emotions during the show, I think deep inside they enjoyed it more than the kids at Hiller. I think when a kid is sick and in the hospital, he doesn’t have the energy for anything. I really learned a lot from this experience.*

In their essays, several of my students noted the difference in the physical structure where they performed their shows. Another student wrote:

> *At Hiller, we got to use the gym. It was a really big room with a lot of space. We had a lot of room to move around and perform for a big crowd of kids. But at Children’s Hospital, we had to use the kids’ play room which was pretty small. Most of the students in my class thought it was too small because some of us had to wait in the hallway for our turn behind the*
puppet theater. There just wasn’t enough room for all of us to stay in the Activity Room during the performance. So as I stood outside the doorway looking in, I watched these sick kids. I thought about how sad these children were at the hospital and how sick they were. I could smell all the medicines. That’s when I knew you have to learn to be happy with what you have. That’s what I learned while performing at the hospital.

Another student also found the two experiences to be extremely different from each other. She wrote:

The day I went to Hiller Elementary School, I was so nervous I had butterflies in my stomach. But then I saw the kids and they were so happy to come and see our play, and even happier after the play. This made me really glad because I made others smile. But when I went to Children’s Hospital, I saw that the children were wearing hospital gowns and some of them had IV’s and masks. This made me feel so sorry for them. I felt so bad because they saw a lot in their lives and they are so young. At the school, we were in a very big gym, but at the hospital we put our theater in a playroom that was small as a can for bees. When I saw the kids I did not know if I should cry or be happy. But at the end, we gave them our love and some simple gifts. They liked it but they could not smile because of what they were going through. When I left Hiller Elementary School, I felt like I was done with my job. But when I left Children’s Hospital, I felt like I had been in a different world. I was glad that I made someone else enjoy this day. Even if I did something so simple that made the children be thankful for something. I was amazed. I changed a lot from the time I left Children’s Hospital. I stopped thinking of small things. I started thinking of other people more than I think of myself.

Still another student provided some insight as she reflected on her experience with her classmates at Hiller and at Children’s Hospital:

At first when my English class started to watch “Arabian Nights,” I thought it was like any other time that we watched movies. But from the movies and the stories we wrote, I gained a lot of experiences...Although the trip to Hiller was to tell the stories that we had learned, in my opinion, the trip to Children’s Hospital was for a better cause. At Hiller, the children were hyper, loud, excited, and happy. The room where we performed was very big. There was a lot of room for us to move around and do the stories....The experience at Children’s Hospital was very touching. The kids didn’t have as much energy as the kids at Hiller, but we understood why. These kids were tired, quiet, depressed. And the room where we performed was very small, but we had to adjust to our environment as Mrs. Gordon said....I felt really happy to perform for the kids at the hospital, but I also felt really sad for what they were going through. It was an experience that I will always keep in my heart.

It is clear that my students took stock of their emotions. They wrote about the impact of performing for children with terminal illnesses versus entertaining healthy students who could walk into their school gym on their own power. Their essays
reflected their initial shock followed by a newfound sense of compassion. They also realized how lucky they were to be healthy.

**Conclusion**

As can be seen from the above narrative, the combination of PBL and SBL along with concepts from Reader’s Theater, provides an authentic project that enriches learning in many ways. Students practice speaking and listening skills across a range of speech acts as they negotiate meaning not only on a functional language level, but also at an academic level that will stand them in good stead in the real world. Reading and writing skills develop out of the need to produce a real script for actual use, in multiple formats, which again promotes academic language development in a way that transfers to real life use, not only in the short-term, but for long-term value as well. Because of the degree of negotiation required by such a project and the contextualized, authentic nature of the task, students learn at a much higher level than what is usually encountered in the school situation, developing critical thinking skills such as evaluation, analysis, synthesis, and application of knowledge. Perhaps most importantly, the students in this project took their knowledge outside of the school walls, to the community of which they are a part, and shared their newfound knowledge and excitement with others. Not only did they expand their own knowledge of language and literature, they also shared a piece of themselves with a vulnerable population, giving of themselves and becoming emotionally invested in others—hallmarks of true education.

**Author Note**

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References


Beyond “Help!” – Diagnosing the L2 Writer’s Essay: A Strategies-Based Approach

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Abstract

Sometimes, even an experienced second-language (L2) writing teacher can feel frustrated at the multitude of problems in their students’ writing. In response, this article describes five common diagnoses and presents treatment strategies to help students and teachers overcome their frustration and make progress. The maladies are dubbed by the authors as graphophobia (writer’s block), extreme myopia (inability to focus), hypocognition (lack of critical thinking), alexia (unwillingness to read one’s own writing), and chronic lockjaw (persistent inexpressiveness).

Introduction

Among all the discussion of feedback in second language (L2) academic writing, the question of teacher response is rarely mentioned. When faced with a particularly thorny pile of essays, even the most experienced teacher occasionally reacts with an impassioned “Help!” After all, the quantity and quality of problems in an L2 writer’s text at any level can be overwhelming and the task of fixing them daunting. It is perhaps for this reason that the five-paragraph essay is so attractive as a fallback position: it represents a safe, if stultifying, alternative to the chaos of a developing paper (Caplan, in press; Caplan, McCullough, & Stokes, 2006).

However, if the only strategy available to academically-oriented L2 students is an inadequate formula (Rorschach, 2004), they will be ill-prepared for their college-level classes. In the metaphor of one university writing center: “Writing a five-paragraph theme is like riding a bicycle with training wheels […]. Once you can write well without it, you can cast it off and never look back” (“College Writing,” n.d.). In other words, both the teacher and student need strategies which go beyond “Help!” and move towards academic writing.

In order to do this, it is first necessary to diagnose the nature of the writer’s problems. Symptoms exist at two levels: “surface features” and “deep features” (Elbow, 1991). The surface features of writing are those most commonly addressed in ESL textbooks, namely thesis statements, topic sentences, adverbial sentence connectors, paragraph unity, introductions, and conclusions (Caplan, McCullough, & Stokes, 2006). To do that list might be added mechanics, spelling, and one-inch margins. Notwithstanding the value of all of these surface features in a good academic paper, it is the deep features which deserve more attention and which require a toolbox of strategies from which to draw:

I suspect students can learn the surface features of academic style better if they have first made good progress with the underlying intellectual practices. When students are really succeeding in doing a meaty academic task, then the surface stylistic features are more likely to be integral and organic rather than merely an empty game or mimicry. (Elbow, 1991, p. 150).
The following five maladies all interfere with the “underlying intellectual practices” of academic writing. After a presentation of the symptoms and a discussion of the seriousness of each ailment, strategies for treatment will be offered. The medical metaphor, of course, is simply a metaphor: L2 writers are not sick, and these are common conditions for many writers. Nonetheless, by recognizing the “deep” problems in an essay and breaking down the “meaty” tasks of both teaching and learning writing into manageable micro-skills, each with its own strategies, it is possible to move far beyond “Help!”

**Diagnosis 1: Graphophobia, or “writer’s block”**

**Symptoms**

*Graphophobia* refers to the fear and avoidance of writing, that is, to conditions that interfere with the act of writing itself. For a variety of reasons, writers of all skill levels may “get stuck” even before they begin to write. Because this malady is marked by an absence of writing, it may easily be misidentified as laziness, rebellion, cheating, or psychological neurosis.

In general, graphophobia applies to a range of difficulties or obstacles and may appear as any of the following behaviors: difficulty articulating concepts and getting them down on paper; minimalistic writing with a lack of expressiveness; plagiarism; failure to meet deadlines; missing class or coming in late; disruptive behavior; and looking uncomfortable, bored, or unhappy.

**Causes**

Writing is an intellectually intimidating task because there is a common human tendency to associate the quality of writing with the writer’s intelligence (Bruce, 2004, quotes an ESL student who was worried that writing center tutors would find her writing so bad that they would “laugh at it or get angry at me,” p. 32). Furthermore, writing involves grappling with the unknown, with awareness and feelings that we have not yet put into words, in short, for dealing with parts of our experience that we barely understand. When we begin, we do not know what we will write, and for many, that lack of knowledge is uncomfortable and disorienting. Caught between hoping to excel and not yet knowing what we want to say, it is easy to freeze, for the mind to go silent, for apprehension and discomfort to gain center stage. We stop — and get stuck. Some of the many ways in which students may experience difficulty include the following: basic performance fear inhibiting the ability to think and write, inability to bridge the gap between mind and paper, difficulty negotiating levels of cognitive and syntactic complexity between the L1 and L2, lack of sufficient knowledge or experience with the topic, lack of a clear communicative goal, uncertainty about where to start, and not spending enough time on task.

**Treatments**

#1—*Helping students overcome “performance fear”*

To help students gain fluency in their writing, students and their teachers need to de-emphasize “doing it right,” that is, grades and the necessity to excel, so that the writing class can be a place where students feel free to experiment with, learn from, and use their mistakes. It is helpful to regularly use ungraded, in-class writing
activities that appeal to students’ imaginations and real interests. Such low-stakes, informal, or “private” writing (Elbow & Belanoff, 1995) can include freewriting (focused and unfocused), free-association narratives, and a variety of writing games and activities (see, for example, Peterson, 1996).

Students with writing blocks also respond well to writing activities which use a clear model and a specific writing strategy. The following model uses a contrast strategy to help students write an introduction to an essay about the challenging nature of Michigan winters:

**Summers in Michigan are delightful.** Blue skies and lush, green fields make our world colorful and bright. Long, sunny days offer plenty of time to enjoy outdoor activities like swimming, boating, horse-back riding, and picnicking — or just a simple day in the park. Best of all, summertime is the season for outdoor festivals. There are innumerable county fairs, music festivals, and art festivals, enough to satisfy every taste. However, when the bright days of summer are over, winter comes to Michigan, and our days of warmth and leisure are at an end.

After studying the model, students use the contrast strategy to write an introduction for the opposite thesis, that despite the challenges of winter, summers in Michigan offer many delights.

Perhaps the best remedy for graphophobia is for teachers to increase the amount of class time spent on both low-stakes and high-stakes writing. According to Elbow (1997), low-stakes writing improves the quality of high-stakes writing. Moreover, Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde in *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America’s Schools* (1998), assert that teachers should “increase class time spent on writing whole, original pieces through every stage of the writing process” (p. 82). In their experience, abundant in-class writing has proved helpful in significantly increasing the quantity of writing by students who previously wrote little on first-drafts and who self-identified themselves as “hating writing”

To work with students with extreme forms of graphophobia, an individual approach is recommended. Often a sympathetic teacher who takes the time to ask the student questions and make suggestions can help the student move forward. Talking though the difficulties can help students identify the “missing steps” in the process.

#2—**Help students negotiate the gap between mind and paper**

Some students think too fast to be able to get their words down onto paper. These students must understand the need to slow down their thinking in order to write. If this does not work, students can record their ideas at a faster rate (for example, audio recording, typing directly onto a computer, or dictating to a listener). In some cases, teachers can “jump start” the process by asking the student questions and then writing down his/her spoken answers.
#3—Help students negotiate the gap between the L1 and L2

Some L2 students compose their thoughts with a high degree of intellectual complexity in the L1 and try to translate it directly into the L2. As a result, their writing may exhibit strange and convoluted syntax and a complex but incomprehensible vocabulary. Teachers need to help these students adapt the complexity of their thoughts and vocabulary in the L1 to the limitations of their grammar & vocabulary in the L2. The students need to learn to simplify their complex thoughts to match the level of grammar and vocabulary that they can control in the L2.

Teachers can ask students to take a complex idea—for example, the greenhouse effect—and explain it very, very simply in writing, as if they were explaining it to a 10-year-old child. Then students can compare their examples, and the teacher can elicit a collaborative model on the overhead projector.

#4—Use experiential learning techniques

Poor writing inevitably results when students do not understand or care about what they are writing. Thus, it is essential that the teacher select activities and topics that tap students’ own experiences and motivation (Silva, 1997). When teachers are ready to move into academic writing projects on topics with which the students do not have considerable familiarity, teachers can use a variety of in-class activities to increase students’ experiential base (such as literature, movies, expert visitors, interactive lessons, and field trips).

Diagnosis 2: Extreme Myopia, or inability to focus

Symptoms

Extreme myopia describes the failure to focus on a central, unifying idea or theme. At the sentence level, the writing might be clear but the ideas so general and vague that the paper lacks concrete substance, rather like an unfocused photograph. Or the paper may contain many ideas with little indication of their relationship or relative significance, not unlike a “cluttered” image in which many elements are jumbled together with no unifying design. Often the reader feels tired after reading such a paper and experiences a strong urge to call for “Help!”

Common symptoms of lack of focus may include: introductions that begin with “the creation of the universe” (i.e., a topic so broad that there is no way to discuss it accurately within the paper); thesis statements that have no relevance to either introduction or essay; inadequate topic development, or several possibly related topics somewhat developed; or a purpose for writing which is unclear to the reader, the writer, or both.

Writers who have not found a purpose for writing cannot find a focus, resulting in trivial discussions or, worse, semi-coherent ramblings, possibly padded with many lines of quoted material. Like pouring water into a narrow-necked glass while blindfolded, the writer splashes around a great deal, but the reader goes thirsty.
**Treatments**

Myopic writing can be treated at two levels: at the pre-writing stage and through revision. During prewriting, the teacher can use a question-based activity to help the students focus their thinking. In this activity, students write a series of questions about their topic and then select the two best questions, writing each one at the top of an empty sheet of paper. Next, students use focused freewriting (Elbow & Belanoff, 1995, p. 12) to answer each question. The answer to Question #1 might form the basis for an introduction to the essay and the thesis. The answer to Question #2—especially if it is a “why” or “how” question—could form the basis for the body of the essay.

For example, a common essay topic is to write about a person who was influential in one’s life. For this essay, the first question is: “Who was the person who most greatly influenced your life?” The second is: “How did this person influence you?”

An alternative treatment is to wait until students have completed a draft and then help them to locate and improve its focus. To do this, the teacher presents students with a model essay (on computer or OHP) in which the following are highlighted in different colors: the analytical framework of the essay, i.e., the thesis and supporting ideas (yellow); evidence such as facts, statistics, examples, or expert opinion (orange); and the writer’s commentary upon or analysis of the evidence (green). Then, the teacher provides students with colored highlighters and asks them to highlight these elements in their own papers. It is helpful for the teacher to circulate and ask pertinent questions, i.e., “How is that idea related to this one?” Highlighting is an excellent way to make the connections between ideas (or lack thereof) visible (D. Hinrichsen, personal communication, April 30, 2008).

With sufficient prewriting and analysis of the architecture of the essay, myopic L2 writers can learn to find and maintain focus in their writing. In addition, the self- and peer-review techniques described for Diagnosis 4, below, can also assist writers with focus problems. The prognosis for such students should, therefore, be positive.

**Diagnosis 3: Hypocognition, or a lack of critical thinking**

**Symptoms**

*Hypocognition*, literally the underuse of thought, is the appropriate diagnosis for the writer who uses many words but says nothing. What is lacking is the mode of inquiry of particular importance to academic writing, that of critical thinking (Ballenger, 2007). This is a notoriously difficult term to define, but Sullivan (2006) provides a useful “starting place for discussion” (p. 16) in his introductory essay titled *What is “College-Level” Writing?* Sullivan proposes that academic essays should be written “in response to an article, essay, or reading selection that contains at least some abstract content …[and] require[s] extended engagement and concentration” (pp. 16-17), and that writers should minimally show “some skill at analysis and higher-order thinking” (p. 17). It is this higher-order thinking which the hypocognitive student lacks or fails to demonstrate.
As a result, L2 writing, even at relatively high levels of linguistic competence, is often an unanalyzed list of facts, observations, and quotations, or, at worst, would be called plagiarism in academic classes. Another common symptom is the lack of development such as exemplification, explanation, justification, or evaluation. In sum, the essay fails to engage with the topic and enter into an academic dialogue. The cause of this problem is generally an incomplete understanding of the nature of academic writing in U.S. universities, in which writers are expected not only to show comprehension of texts and facts, but to use them in the service of their own argumentation (“College Writing”, n.d.). As all university students can be expected to encounter “text-responsible” (Leki & Carson, 1997) expository writing assignments during their studies in the U.S. (Hale et al., 1996), untreated hypocognition has a grim prognosis.

**Treatments**

Since hypocognition often stems from a lack of awareness of the critical thinking skills needed in analytical writing, it is essential to provide writers with contexts in which critical thinking is essential and to draw their attention to the difference between observation and analysis. Similarly to the treatment for graphophobia, breaking the task down and modeling the thinking process can provide a remedy. Students can learn and use strategies to engage in critical thinking.

The following activity leads writers through the process of analyzing a quotation, fact, example, or statistic. It begins with a “minilecture” on the difference between observation and analysis, which presents the following schematic (adapted from Elbow & Belanoff, 1995, p.140 and Peterson, 1996, p. 49):

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OBSERVATION</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>EVENT/QUOTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GENERALIZATION</td>
<td>INTERPRETATION</td>
<td>EXPLANATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANALYSIS</td>
<td>RESPONSE</td>
<td>REFLECTION</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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**WHAT DOES IT MEAN? WHY IS IT INTERESTING?**

As an example of the use of this system, students are asked to consider this observation: “Most U.S. universities require students to take writing classes.” A possible interpretation or explanation would be that universities must believe that incoming freshmen need to improve their writing before continuing with their academic
studies. There are many ways to respond to or analyze this; for instance, it could mean that high-school seniors graduate with insufficient writing ability, or that universities recognize a difference between high-school and college-level writing, or that colleges view expository writing as the foundation of academic success.

In groups, students then work through the analytical process with a variety of observations, events, and quotations which might be found in an academic essay. A favorite example is the following extract from the non-fiction book, Bird by Bird:

Thirty years ago, my older brother, who was 10 years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he’d had three months to write. (It) was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin …. and he was sitting at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task. Then, my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother’s shoulder, and said, “Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.” (Lamott, 1994, p. 19)

Working through the schematic, students describe the situation (for instance, by a summary or paraphrase); next, they interpret Lamott’s father’s cryptic advice; and finally, they analyze what the anecdote means for writing and life in general. This strategy also works well in a sustained content-based course (see Murphy & Stoller, 2001; Pally, 2000) where the teacher can draw important quotations from a novel or other text which the class is studying.

This treatment, when used in conjunction with feedback on multi-draft essays, can have positive effects. As evidence, what follows is an extract from a high-intermediate student’s essay on The Outsiders (Hinton, 1967), a young adult novel about two rival gangs of teenagers, the Socs and the Greasers: 2nd draft: [Dally] decides to suicide because he feels that life is without meaning if Johnny is not alive. He chooses to suicide by police because he thinks he should die as a hero. 3rd draft: [Dally] decides to commit suicide because he feels that life is without meaning if Johnny is not alive. The fact that he chooses to commit suicide by police because he thinks that he should die in a heroic situation. In fact, this idea is a reflection from the way that Johnny deals with Dally because Johnny considers Dally as a hero.

In the early draft, the writer makes an observation about the death of one of the characters, and he begins to interpret it in terms of Dally’s friend, Johnny. However, in the next draft, he analyzes the connection between Dally’s suicide and Johnny’s opinion of him as a hero. There is still work to do on this section of the essay, but the evidence of critical thinking is clearer.

Hypocognition is a long-term condition which requires frequent, persistent treatment. However, inasmuch as critical thinking is a culturally-constructed mode of writing, students can learn different ways to develop and express ideas and opinions.
Diagnosis 4: Alexia, or the unwillingness to read one’s own writing

Symptoms

Writing by those who suffer from alexia (as it is defined in this paper) is characterized either by a lack of improvement over successive drafts or by problems in logic, development, organization, or language which the student could have remedied without teacher intervention. Part of the frustration in teaching such writers is suspecting that feedback is being ignored and that words are pouring from the student’s keyboard directly to the teacher’s desk, hence the “Help!” reflex.

This lack of engagement with one’s own writing suggests a lack of concern for the reader and a lack of responsibility for clarity of language. It is important for writers to be their own first readers so that they can write with more awareness of their audience.

Treatments

Judicious application of peer and self review can help overcome alexia. However, writers must also be held accountable for their use of these critiques. Although there may be resistance to giving and receiving critical comments (see Hinkel, 2004, p. 45-47 for a review of the literature), peer review is valuable not only for the feedback offered by readers, but also for focusing writers’ attention on their own texts. Additionally, student writing is reprinted verbatim and with permission. The following sequence of strategies can be used over the course of a multi-draft essay:

1. Self review of the first draft (see, e.g., Williams & Evans, 2000). Students re-read and critique their own writing, answering questions about their focus, development, organization, and language. This could, in fact, be done after any or all drafts as it draws students’ attention to aspects of their own writing which they might not have read carefully before.

2. The self-review prompts peer review because now writers have specific questions to ask their peers in addition to any questions the teacher asks. Questions which elicit thoughtful answers are more useful than yes/no checklists; for example, “What is the main idea of the essay? Is this idea clear?” rather than “Does the essay have a thesis statement?”

3. Students then complete a response to the peer review, in which they identify their peers’ advice, decide whether to use it, and justify their actions. This holds writers accountable for their choices and gives them a plan for revision. Peer review can be repeated after successive drafts; this makes the writers further accountable for their revisions.

4. After the teacher has commented on a draft (for example, the second draft), students complete a response to teacher feedback, in which they explain the teacher’s suggestions and say how they will revise the paper.

5. Once the essay is approaching its final form, students produce a grammar draft. They use “self-editing skills” (Hinkel, 2004, p. 49) to check for common errors.
One method is to have students find all the verbs and verify the tense and agreement, followed by nouns (articles, number), conjunctions, and so forth.

6. It is not obvious that the skills learned in one essay will be transferred to the next assignment, let alone to another course. However, one way to help students reflect on their process and progress is to have them write a “cover letter” (Elbow & Belanoff, 1995, p. 16-17) or other form of self-evaluation. In this letter, the writer discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the paper and evaluates the usefulness of the feedback they received throughout the process. They can also reflect on what they have learned from the experience and what they will do differently next time.

Critical feedback can be a difficult pill to swallow, but the goal of these strategies is to make alexic students aware of their writing from a reader’s perspective and, ultimately, to help them become successful and independent academic writers.

**Diagnosis 5: Chronic Lockjaw, or persistent inexpressiveness**

*Symptoms*

The final diagnosis is probably ubiquitous for L2 writers: despite other qualities of the writing, ideas are obscured, confused, or rendered incomprehensible due to errors of grammar and lexis. Although it is certainly true that “without clear, reasonably accurate, and coherent text, there can be no academic writing in a second language” (Hinkel, 2004, p. x), other diagnoses should be treated first since accurate prose without ideas, content, focus, and revision can also not be considered academic writing.

*Treatment*

Students need explicit instruction in the linguistic tools with which to do the kinds of critical thinking and development which college-level writing demands (see, e.g., Hinkel, 2004). One such tool is the Academic Word List, or AWL (Coxhead, 2000), the 570 word families which a corpus analysis has identified as common across many academic disciplines. Care needs to be taken with this list because it was developed to aid students’ receptive skills (especially reading comprehension), so its relevance to production remains questionable. Still, the AWL is a good starting point, and textbooks such as Huntley (2006) and Zwier (2002) demonstrate ways to teach and use the words. It is important to introduce words at the point at which they can be used by the writer. For example, when an essay encourages students to make connections between ideas and texts (what a traditional rhetoric might call a compare/contrast paper), words such as link, be associated with, accompany, and be characteristic of can allow writers to express their ideas clearly. This strategic approach to teaching vocabulary at the point of need bypasses the frustration that most L2 learners have with never knowing enough words.

It is easier to define a grammar curriculum for academic writing than a vocabulary list. Thanks to large-scale corpus analyses (e.g., Biber et al., 1999; Carter
& McCarthy, 2006; Hinkel, 2004), common and useful structures can be identified, including passive voice, nominalization, demonstrative pronouns, modals of certainty, impersonal constructions, noun clauses, subordination, certain linking verbs, adverbial clauses, and selected (mostly real) conditional structures.

A good treatment plan for chronic lockjaw, however, needs to target the intersection between vocabulary and grammar known as “lexicogrammar” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 13). For instance, certain verbs are very common in perfect tenses in writing; others occur frequently in the passive, while many transitive verbs which theoretically have a passive form are rarely seen in this voice in academic writing. Strategic teaching accepts that it is impossible to cover all aspects of the lexicogrammar system and instead focuses students’ attention on the ways that academic writers make meaning in their texts.

**Conclusion**

It is probably impossible to make writing and the teaching of writing easy, but they can be made more manageable through the techniques described above. Once the underlying “deep” problems with the essay or writing process have been correctly diagnosed, the teacher and writer can draw on appropriate strategies and begin to see progress.

**Author Note**

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References


Implementing Self-assessment in the Second Language Classroom

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Abstract

The increased popularity of learner-centered second language classrooms has generated an interest in methods of assessment appropriate to such classrooms. Self-assessment, an assessment technique that allows learners to take responsibility for their own learner outcomes (Geeslin, 2003), is one type of assessment that meets the goals of learner-centered classrooms. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), for example, has been applied to a comprehensive self-assessment tool, the European Language Portfolio (ELP), which promotes and recognizes the importance of learner-directed assessment (Little, 2005), and engenders learner autonomy. The United States, however, has yet to fully embrace this type of nontraditional assessment (Van Houten, 2004).

This paper will provide a brief introduction of CEFR-based self-assessment (including the ELP), discuss the rationale for using self-assessment in the classroom, and offer advice to teachers on creating and implementing self-assessment tools that are specific to the needs and goals of their classes.

Introduction

By the time students enter a post-secondary ESL classroom in the United States, they are likely to have spent many years developing their own language learning styles and expectations of what will occur inside a language classroom. A traditional and still common pattern of teacher-student interaction, one in which teachers are responsible not only for decisions regarding what students should learn and when they should learn it, but also for assessing how well students are learning, is likely to have been long established as the norm in students’ minds. This traditional conception of the relationship between teacher and student is quite persistent and its implications are far reaching. Teachers often find that students are over-reliant on constant feedback and are unsure of how to take active control of their learning processes. The perception of the teacher as the sole guide through the language learning process also means that teachers hoping to promote learner autonomy and motivation in innovative ways may encounter some resistance from their students.

If one of the preeminent goals of education is to prepare students for a lifetime of self-guided and self-reflective learning, students need to be provided with opportunities to develop the skills required of autonomous learners. This paper will describe ways in which self-assessment in the language classroom can promote learner autonomy as well as offer a description of how self-assessment activities have been utilized by the authors.


**Background**

During the 1970s, the Council of Europe embarked on a project, the goals of which included the development of common language proficiency benchmarks that could be used by language teaching professionals and language learners throughout Europe. The project’s participants also hoped to encourage public conversation about the language learning and assessment process (Little, 2005, p. 324). The project culminated in the development of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which outlines benchmarks of language proficiency, and its companion and supplement, the European Language Portfolio (ELP). The ELP is of particular interest to language teachers wishing to implement some element of self-assessment in their classrooms as it provides a practical way for language learners to be included in the process of assessing their own proficiency.

Many incarnations of the ELP, a language assessment tool now widely used in Europe, have been developed. Those versions designed for use by adolescent and adult language learners consist of three required components: 1) a collection of work the language learner believes best represents his or her second language (L2) achievements, 2) a language biography, in which learning goals are set and progress is recorded, and 3) a language passport, in which the language learner describes his or her own L2 experiences and qualifications and assesses his/her proficiency using a self-assessment grid containing can-do statements representative of each proficiency level described in the CEFR (Little, 2005).

Little (2005) also describes the “complementary pedagogical and reporting functions” of the ELP (p. 325). Learner autonomy is fostered and developed through the repeated examination of goals and progress that proper upkeep of the ELP necessitates. When the portfolio owners/users continually update the ELP, they are also maintaining a current report of their language experiences, achievements, and proficiency. The benchmark descriptors (in the form of learner outcome statements) supplied by the CEFR support both of these functions and serve as a common foundation on which learners can base concrete statements regarding their proficiency and accomplishments.

Within the context of the CEFR and the ELP, self-assessment is used to evaluate language proficiency and report learning progress, but how can teachers implement self-assessment techniques on a smaller scale, within their individual classrooms? Many teachers and other stakeholders express concern about learner objectivity and ability to accurately assess their own performance on language-related tasks. These concerns, and the degree to which they appear to be founded on the results of empirical investigation, are discussed in more detail in the Limitations section of this paper.

Traditional forms of assessment alone cannot be expected to provide a complete picture of what students are learning and how well they are learning it. Falchikov (2005) points out that “over reliance on a single [assessment] technique can have adverse effects, as many aspects of learning are not measured by any one
assessment method” (p. 31). Alternative methods of assessment enable teachers to focus on aspects of the learning process, such as student involvement, usually ignored by more traditional approaches. Self-assessment tools may therefore be particularly attractive to teachers hoping to broaden their students’ conception of the learning process to include self-direction and shared responsibility.

The domain of language assessment, however, even within the classroom, is broad enough to require teachers to make some principled decisions regarding inclusion of self-assessment components. Questions regarding the appropriate time and place for self-assessment must be addressed. For example, according to Dickinson (as cited in Ekvatani, 2000), self-assessment may not be an appropriate technique when used in high-stakes situations, such as when assessing achievement or determining placement within a language program. Ekvatani characterizes self-assessment tools as appropriate additions to formative (rather than summative) assessment in the language classroom. Once the appropriate time and place for self-assessment has been determined, the teacher can begin to think about the design of specific assessment instruments.

**Assessment Design**

Brown (2004) outlines a number of possibilities for both informal and formal self- and peer-assessment tasks, which he delineates by language skill. Because different skills require different methods of psychometric elicitation of a learned skill, it is important that the language skill being assessed is defined first and used as a foundation for the assessment design. Additionally, self-assessment design must take into consideration time. Ideally, the assessment task should be executed relatively close to the time in which the language task occurs, so that learners are able to evaluate themselves while the language task is still fresh in their minds (Butler & Lee, 2006).

In the same way that materials for classroom use are tailored to the specific needs of a class and lesson, it is important to tailor self-assessments so that the assessment is specific to the task being assessed (Butler & Lee, 2006). The “Presentation Self-Evaluation” self-assessment worksheet (see Appendix A) is a demonstration of how to construct a task-specific self-assessment. For an advanced academic-based speaking and listening class, the instructor of the course (a colleague of the authors of this paper) took student-defined characteristics of what makes a successful and unsuccessful oral presentation and created a checklist for students to use as a means for students to critically evaluate their skills as an orator in English. At the end of the class period in which students gave their oral presentations, she asked students to evaluate both their speaking performance and the steps they took to prepare for said oral presentations. In designing this assessment, she considered two design aspects worth consideration: item content and item ordering.

With respect to content, the instructor is asking students essentially two questions: *What did you do well?* and *What could you improve?* If these questions were to stand alone, their vague nature would not elicit focused or accurate self-assessment responses. To help guide students’ responses towards the original purpose of the self-evaluation (getting students to evaluate the ways in which they
present and prepare for an oral presentation), she presented students with twelve specific statements to check, which specifically addressed what they had done well and what they could improve upon with respect to their presentation. To help students produce inwardly-focused responses to the assessment statements, she incorporated “I” language to encourage the language learner to internalize the statements more readily when evaluating themselves than if the statements were nondescript third-person statements (e.g., The student spoke loudly and clearly). Unlike open-ended self-critique questions, a checklist format does not offer much qualitative language production on the part of the self-evaluator. To probe for a deeper self-evaluation, the instructor’s checklist provided students with an “other” section for students to rationalize freely why they had checked statements or what they had done specifically that could not be answered by the statements given by the instructor.

With regard to the ordering of the items, it is important to recognize that in the first half of a self-evaluation, positive statements are presented first, while negative statements are presented second. By asking students to evaluate their strengths first, their confidence is inflated, so that when they are asked to reflect on their weaknesses, students do not become overly critical or become overwhelmed by their shortcomings. Fortunately, or unfortunately, a formal grade still carries a hefty weight of performance measurement that students can understand. To help synthesize the self-knowledge gained by the language learner, the instructor could ask the students to assign a grade they think most deserving based on their self-evaluation. The instructor could also present students with a grading rubric and scaffold how to rate assignments as one way in which to foster student understanding of how grades are assigned for the course.

Implementation

While self-assessment can be used in second language testing situations, the focus of this paper is to demonstrate how self-assessment can be implemented in a classroom setting, enriching the classroom environment and strengthening learner autonomy. However, the way in which to accurately assess one’s language skills or performance is not necessarily self-evident. Students who have experienced an educational system that is deeply rooted in a testing culture where the teacher predominantly assigns the grade may not necessarily find it easy or manageable to assess themselves. These learners cannot be expected to assess themselves accurately without some guidance. As suggested by Little (2005), it is the role of the instructor to mediate the learning of self-assessment through attainable steps of preparation and practice that allow learners to critically look at their own language skills and offer accurate opinions as to their strengths and weaknesses. Rea-Dickens (2001) outlines a model for classroom assessment which advocates an initial planning stage that identifies the purpose of the assessment, choice of assessment activity, and preparation of learners for the assessment.

When creating a self-assessment task, the first thing an instructor must do is to determine the purpose of the assessment. In order to elicit a better quality self-assessment from students, it is key to have the self-assessment situated and specific
to a task. Self-assessment that is directly related to a task warrants more accurate self-assessment than unrelated self-assessment (Butler & Lee, 2006). For example, if the language performance on which students are to assess themselves is writing, but a self-assessment task asks them to evaluate their oral classroom presentation skills, then the self-assessment is meaningless because the target of assessment is not being reached.

To illustrate how to determine assessment purpose, consider a self-assessment that the first author of this paper used with an ESL intermediate reading and writing class. The task was an in-class, 45-minute, timed midterm essay that was formally assessed by the aforementioned instructor and informally assessed by the students themselves. Essay evaluation criterion included content, organization, and grammar. The instructor’s purpose of doing a self-assessment in conjunction with the writing task was twofold: 1) to involve students in the writing evaluation process by giving students a better understanding of how timed-writing, a genre that academically-bound language learners need to master, is formally evaluated, and 2) to show students what to expect from instructors outside of their current reading and writing class.

In the case of the mid-term self-assessment used by the first author, the day after students took the in-class midterm, the self-assessment preparation phase of assessment was begun (Rea-Dickens, 2001). The class was presented with a mock student essay that answered the same prompt as their own mid-term exam. Students read the essay and were given an assessment worksheet (see Appendix B) to complete with guided questions that focused on content, organization, and grammar—the three areas of writing which the instructor wanted students to critically evaluate. Through a scaffolding process (Rea-Dickens, 2001), the instructor introduced questions one-by-one from the self-assessment and asked students, as an entire class, to comment on whether the essay met the characteristics of a good timed written essay, characteristics which the class had brainstormed the day before the mid-term examination. On an overhead projector (OHP), the instructor then showed students how to articulate these thoughts on the assessment worksheets in a written format, taking care to note that complete sentences that offered clear reasoning were better responses than simply a yes or no answer. The more specific learners can be about their self-assessment responses, the better, since students will need specific details for follow-up activities based on their responses. In the excerpt below, the student communicated one specific feature of language which she wanted to specifically address:

English is different from Chinese. Sometimes I don’t know the “word Location” is right or not. For example, “We need to face it and find some ways which negative side to replace.” Or “We need to face it and find more ways to replease its negative side. I don’t either know about “English is different from Chinese.” or “English is different to Chinese”.

After this scaffolded evaluation, the instructor returned the students’ original midterm exams and students completed the self-assessment worksheet on their own. For some students, the self-assessment task may still be troublesome in its novelty. In this case, instructors are encouraged to offer one-on-one assistance with the student either during an in-class self-assessment workshop or during outside-of-class student-instructor conferences.
As a follow up to the self-assessment task, it is important for learners to use the self-awareness knowledge they have gained from the self-assessment and apply this knowledge to language development. For example, on the mid-term writing self-assessment, the revision section of the assessment worksheet provided students an opportunity to hypothetically describe what they would do if they had more time to write their mid-term exams. In the case of the above student, she chose to improve the content of her essay, stating “I would like to add more examples to complete my paper because that can make reader more understand.”

By taking the time to write down these self-discovered ways to improve her essay, the student was able to then rewrite and revise her midterm examinations, which offered her a chance to focus her writing according to the areas intentionally assessed by both the formal and informal assessments: content, organization, and grammar. The revised version of her essay resulted in a half-letter grade improvement from her original essay.

**Limitations**

The benefits of learner-directed assessment may be gaining recognition by teachers, yet there are still some common stumbling blocks to implementing this type of assessment in the classroom. Teachers wishing to include a self-assessment component in their language curriculum often express reservations about doing so on the basis of reliability and validity of these measures. If each student is rating his or her own performance, what is the common standard to which they are to be held? Is inter-rater reliability not important? If the main goals of using self-assessment in the classroom are to encourage self-reflection and learner autonomy, then this problematic aspect of self-assessment may assume secondary importance. These concerns may also be addressed by gaining a better understanding of the factors that affect accuracy of self-assessment.

As mentioned above, there is evidence for the necessity of providing training and experience in order to develop the learner’s capacity for self-assessment. Ekbatani (2000) reports on a 1990 study by Heilenman suggesting that less proficient students tend to over-estimate their own language abilities while higher proficiency learners are more likely to be overly severe in judging their own performance on language-related tasks. AlFallay (2004) also reports on the likelihood that learner traits such as motivation, self-esteem, classroom anxiety, and achievement play a role in the accuracy of self-assessment. It may be the case that more experienced and higher proficiency students are able to compare their own L2 performance to some external standard and are therefore more aware of their own limitations.

Ekbatani (2000) also describes the possible role that language domain or sub-skill may play in the reliability of self-assessment tools: productive skills appear to submit to self-assessment more reliably and accurately than do receptive skills. More specifically, within the productive domain, students are more accurate when assessing their own speaking skills than when asked to rate their writing abilities.
The nature of the self-rating task with which students are presented may also affect the accuracy of the ratings produced. Pierce, Swain, and Hart (1993) point out that the more concrete, specific, and contextualized the particular self-rating task is, the more highly its results are to correlate with ratings on more objective assessment measures. Questions such as *Are you able to understand someone giving you directions to the store?* yield more accurate self-assessment than questions such as *How well are you able to understand spoken English?*

Though the opportunity for self-assessment and the attendant perceived increase in student power and autonomy may be welcomed by many language learners, teachers utilizing self-assessment tools may also encounter reluctance and confusion from some students. Bone (1999) describes the main purpose of self-assessment as being that of improving student performance and reducing the reliance on continual teacher-supplied feedback. She points out, however, that many students actually resist the opportunity to assess their own learning, believing that assessment is the domain of the instructor alone. Such reluctance on the part of students might provide an excellent opportunity to clarify the goals of self-assessment with the student individually or with the class as a whole. It can also lead to a useful discussion of the purposes served by classroom assessment, and formative assessment in particular.

Ultimately, the purpose of self-assessment is not to take the burden of assessment off instructors, but to allow for the internal reflection of the language learner. Using self-assessment in the classroom requires time and practice on the parts of both the student and instructor in order to foster accurate and useful reflections and self-evaluations. Establishing concrete purposes for assessment and preparing students to evaluate their own language skills are cornerstones of good self-assessment practice and should not be ignored by instructors when implementing self-assessment as part of a classroom assessment regimen.

**Conclusion**

The objective of this paper has been to suggest ways in which some of the goals that motivated the ambitious CEFR ELP, namely the self-assessment aspect, can be embraced on a small scale in individual language classrooms. As the authors of this paper have attempted to demonstrate, careful scaffolding and training can enable students to adopt a more self-evaluative attitude towards second language learning. This shift in assessment practice can facilitate the type of active learning that is a primary goal of student-centered pedagogy. Although implementation is limited at this time, it is hoped that the ability of self-assessment to encourage learner autonomy will lead to its greater implementation in the second language classroom in the future.
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References


Appendix A: Sample Presentation Self-Evaluation

1. What do you think you did well in your presentation?

x__I understood the whole article.
I looked up and defined for the class all important terms I did not know.
I asked a good quiz question that forced my classmates to pay attention.
__x__I chose the main relevant points.
I organized my presentation clearly.
I coordinated well with my group members and connected my part with the overall
idea of the article.
I asked my teacher questions about things I didn’t understand.
__x__The notes I used did not take many sentences straight from the article.
I was ready to respond to questions about the article.
I spoke loudly and clearly.
I used transition words to signal main ideas and details.
__x__I did not rely on notes too much and did not read straight from my note cards.

Other:

2. What do you think could have been improved?

I did not understand the whole article.
__x__I didn’t look up or define for the class all important terms I did not know.
__x__I didn’t ask a good quiz question that forced my classmates to pay attention.
I didn’t choose the main relevant points.
__x__I didn’t organize my presentation clearly.
I didn’t coordinate well with my group members and didn’t connect my part with the overall
idea of the article.
__x__I didn’t ask my teacher questions about things I didn’t understand.
The notes I used took too many sentences straight from the article.
I wasn’t ready to respond to questions about the article.
__x__I didn’t speak loudly or clearly.
__x__I didn’t use transition words to signal main ideas and details.
I relied on notes too much and read straight from my note cards. Other:

3. What grade do you think you deserve (percent %)?
Appendix B: Evaluating Your Own Work

Directions: Carefully read through your midterm essay and answer the following questions as honestly and critically as you can. Write in complete sentences only.

**Content**
Have you answered the test question? How so?

Have you supported the solutions you’ve suggested (e.g., used examples to strengthen your point)? Write the support in the space below.

If you have not supported the solutions you’ve suggested, write in the space below what kind of support you would give if you had more time.

**Organization**
Are your ideas organized and separated into paragraphs? If not, how could you change your writing so that your ideas are more organized?

**Grammar**
What do you think are your grammar strengths in this essay? Write them in the space below.

What do you think are your grammar weaknesses in this essay? How could you change these parts to make them stronger? Explain.

**Revision**
If you had more time to write this essay, what would you add, change, or delete? Explain.

On a grading scale of 1-5, what grade would you assign your essay? Please circle the grade number below.

1 = very poor

2 = below average

3 = average

4 = above average

5 = excellent