"Spotlight on Re-Search: A New Beginning" : Selected Proceedings of the 2008 Michigan Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Conference

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“Spotlight on Re-Search:  
A New Beginning”

Selected Proceedings of the 2008  
Michigan Teachers of English to  
Speakers of Other Languages  
Conference

October 24-25, 2008

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The Selected Proceedings of the 2008 MITESOL Conference
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Selected Proceedings of the 2008 MITESOL Conference: Spotlight on Re-Search: A New Beginning

Preface

On October 24-25, 2008, the Michigan Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (MITESOL) met on the campus of Michigan State University, in East Lansing, Michigan, for its annual fall conference. The conference, chaired by President-Elect Karen Gelardi, offered a total of 58 talks, workshops, and poster sessions, as well as a Friday evening reception, Saturday luncheon and business meeting, Special Interest Group (SIG) meetings, and publisher exhibits.

Special guests for the conference were our plenary and featured speakers. Diane Larsen-Freeman (University of Michigan and School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont) was the plenary speaker for Friday evening, giving an inspirational talk relevant to all attendees—teachers and researchers—entitled Prediction or Retrodiction: The Coming Together of Research and Teaching. Martha Bigelow (University of Minnesota) gave Saturday morning’s plenary address on The Role of Literacy in Oral Language Processing: Implications for Research and Teaching. In the afternoon, four speakers were featured in addition to breakout sessions, making for a difficult choice for conference attendees. Martha Bigelow continued to mesmerize her audience with her talk on Somali youth titled Language, Society, and Education: What Do Immigrant Youth Have to Say? Walid Gammouh (Oak Park Schools) spoke on addressing the unique social and educational needs of refugee children in his talk Refugees: How Did They Get Here, and What Works for Them? Encouraging attendees to reflect on their accomplishments and how they might create a new direction for MITESOL’s future was the topic of Jackie Moase-Burke’s (Oakland Schools) Re-Searching Professional Identity: A Retrospective and A Fresh Direction. Finally, Mary Schleppegrell (University of Michigan) led attendees into an exploration of grammar as patterns, rather than rules, in her talk entitled Reading, Writing, and Grammar: Making Connections.

For the fourth consecutive year, MITESOL is pleased to offer a selection of papers from the conference. We teach a diverse range of learners, and, as can be seen in this volume, we have a diverse range of interests. This volume of the proceedings, as in previous years, is divided into three main areas: Research, Issues in TESOL, and Materials Development & Teaching Techniques. Within each area, papers are presented in alphabetical order by first authors’ surnames. An exception this year is that we are delighted to include the paper versions of both plenary addresses; these are presented before the other papers in the order in which they took place at the conference.

The first section of this volume is Research. We are honored to include the paper version of Larsen-Freeman’s plenary address, which she graciously wrote upon our request. In Prediction or Retrodiction?: The Coming Together of Research and Teaching, Larsen-Freeman stresses the value of both research and teaching while urging a stance of reciprocity: researchers should consider learning from teachers’ perspectives and teachers should cultivate “attitudes of inquiry.” Bigelow discusses the power of prior literacy, not only on L2 literacy, but also on oral language development in her plenary...
The Role of Literacy in Oral Language Processing: Implications for Research. In a quantitative study supplemented with case studies, she argues that those learners with low alphabet literacy in their L1 are a different population than what has more traditionally been presented in the literature. The role of phonological working memory on the L2 vocabulary acquisition of ESL children is then explored in a quantitative study by Pearson in Phonological Working Memory and Preschool ESL Children: A Study and Review of the Literature. She raises the question of whether nonword repetition tasks can predict ease/difficulty of second language acquisition and thus be a potential screening tool or differential diagnostic measure in this population. This section concludes with a paper by Thinsan entitled Constructivism in Online ELL/ENL/ESOL Teacher Education: The Learners’ Perspectives. In it, Thinsan shares a qualitative study exploring the use of pedagogical techniques, specifically those using constructivist principles, in a teacher education program.

The second section of this volume, Issues in TESOL, begins with a second paper by Bigelow entitled Texts and Contexts for Cultural and Linguistic Hybridity in the Diaspora. In this paper, Bigelow uses texts produced by Somali adolescent males to explore the power of society in shaping their perspectives and identities. The second paper in this section, The Challenges Faced by Teachers of Generation 1.5 Students at the Community College, is by Pruett-Said. In it, she discusses those students who often “fall through the cracks” and the difficulty in appropriate placement at the post-secondary level, concluding with a discussion of how teachers can help such students.

The last section of this volume includes two papers involving Materials Development & Teaching Techniques. Pearson, Roth, and King report on a teacher-training course, from both instructor and student perspectives, in their paper From Tongue-Tied to Empowered: Teacher-Training on Migrant Issues Using Project-Based Learning. Under this approach, students investigated issues that impact children of migrant families and then designed projects that would support the children’s English language development and literacy acquisition. Riggs concludes this volume with his paper An Analysis of English Tense and Aspect. Noting that this topic can be “daunting” for teachers and students alike, Riggs presents an approach that divides time into four categories with the hopes that his visuals and explanations will help to ease the all-too-common apprehension this topic generates.

As with previous volumes, the papers have been printed in the final form in which they were submitted, often following requested revisions by the editors. Only minor editing has taken place by the editors before printing of the volume. Also as before, copyright and responsibility for the contents of all papers reside with the individual authors. Therefore, all questions, requests for reprints, and permission to reproduce should be directed to the individual authors whose addresses appear at the end of each paper in the author note.

We would like to thank all who were involved in making this project a reality. The authors have given generously of their time, first, as presenters, and second, in converting their talks into paper form, often through a lengthy revision process. Each editor has played a specific and much needed role. Kay Losey generously gave up a great deal of her sabbatical time in order to mentor authors on both content and writing in this genre. With her expertise in writing, Kay provides the backbone to the mentoring
and editing process. Michael Pasquale also helped mentor authors through the writing process this year while continuing to juggle all his work responsibilities including a growing program. Pamela Bogart added much to this year’s volume with her meticulous attention to all areas of APA style, especially her detailed checking of all sources in all papers (a massive undertaking) and editing of the citations with precision. Rachel Anderson worked her tech wizardry by turning a collection of papers into a finely-tuned volume ready to be sent to the publishers. She has greatly helped ease our loss of Nigel Caplan’s expertise as he has moved on to another position in North Carolina. Christy Pearson has done her usual mentoring of authors while attending to her primary responsibility of shepherding the long process of the proceedings along. And finally, a special thank you to Carol Wilson-Duffy for her input and guidance in the publication process.

We hope you enjoy the diverse array of papers in this volume and we hope to see you at the 2009 MITESOL Conference in Grand Rapids!

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The Editors
June, 2009
Prediction or Retrodiction? The Coming Together of Research and Teaching

Diane Larsen-Freeman
University of Michigan

Abstract

Teaching and research are often thought to be different enterprises, conducted by different agents. In contrast, when arguments are made for teaching and research to be more aligned, usually it is for the purpose of encouraging teachers to make use of what researchers have to offer teachers by way of insights into language or its learning. This article argues, however, that researchers would benefit from viewing learning the way that teachers do. Indeed, newer research methodologies are now being adopted that feature teachers’ retrodictions rather than researchers’ predictions as standard practice. In a true relationship, there is reciprocity. Therefore, the article concludes with a call for teachers to cultivate researchers’ “attitudes of inquiry.”

Introduction

This article begins by surveying five differences between teaching and research. It then briefly discusses findings from a research study that I have conducted (Larsen-Freeman, 2006). The article continues with the observation that there is a need for new research methods, ones that have more in common with teaching, in particular with regard to their shared retrodictive perspective. By way of examples, I discuss four such methods. I believe that the call for teachers and researchers to share a perspective is consonant with the theme of this fall’s MTESOL conference—“Focus on Research—A New Beginning.” I conclude this paper by urging teachers to adopt “attitudes of inquiry” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) as a demonstration of a (possibly) new commitment to a relationship with researchers.

The Differences between Teaching and Research

There are at least five ways that teaching and research can be contrasted.

Teachers and researchers are different agents who are engaged in different processes.

Teachers do what they do so that others can learn. Researchers investigate how learning takes place and why sometimes it does, and sometimes it does not, occur.

Researchers generalize, teachers particularize.

Researchers seek to generalize. They often propose unified explanations for diverse phenomena. The resulting explanations can be quite abstract. For researchers, the quest is to uncover generalizable truths that endure. Teachers know that there are few generalizations that hold up across learners or across time. Teachers, therefore, particularize. They realize that students learn in different ways and that they need to

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1 This paper was a plenary address that I delivered at the MITESOL Fall Conference, October 2008. For it and for this paper, I have drawn on a number of sources: An interview of me in 2006 by Jun Liu, which appeared in Review of Applied Linguistics in China, a 2006 research article that I published in the journal Applied Linguistics, my 2008 book with Lynne Cameron, and remarks I made at the closing plenary session at TESOL 1996 in Chicago (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).
learn about their students as individuals so that they can respond to each appropriately, perhaps uniquely.

**Teachers’ and researchers’ ways of knowing differ.**

Researchers who use classical experimental designs adopt research methods that require random assignment of subjects to control and experimental groups, with each group receiving minimally different instruction. The intent of the design is to isolate one particular pedagogical procedure from other practices in order to determine its effect on research subjects’ learning.

Teachers’ ways of knowing are more nuanced. Teachers know that the effect a particular procedure has on their students varies according to the day of the week (things work differently on Friday afternoons), the week of the year (things work differently right before or after vacation), the time of the day (things work differently at 10 a.m. than at 6 p.m.), let alone with whom it is practiced, how it is practiced, and for what purpose. Teachers do not share researchers’ enthusiasm for the value of studying teaching practices apart from the normal context in which they are implemented.

**The social conditions that affect researchers and teachers differ.**

Teachers and researchers are trained differently, they work in different contexts, and their work has different rhythms. Researchers usually enjoy more autonomy over what they do and when they do it. Teachers’ schedules are frequently determined by others and by the constraints of the school day and demands of teaching.

On the other hand, researchers face pressures of a different sort—the pressure to conduct research with valid designs in order to obtain reliable results that will stand up under the scrutiny of peer review and that will contribute to the knowledge base of the field, as well as add to their own list of publications, on which much of their professional success depends.

**Researchers see teachers’ behavior as atheoretical; teachers see researchers’ writing as obtuse.**

Teachers and researchers have been known to be critical of each other. Teachers say that researchers write obtusely. Researchers say that teachers need to learn to read what they write. Teachers say that researchers demonstrate the obvious; researchers complain that teachers are merely interested in implementing, not understanding, researchers’ ideas. Teachers find researchers arrogant. Researchers counter that teachers do not care about the theoretical perspectives that are so important to researchers.

These five differences are not inconsequential. They make beginning a new relationship (what I interpret to be MITESOL’s conference theme) seem difficult to imagine.

Before going any further, it is important to point out that the way that I have approached contrasting teaching and research for rhetorical effect has the consequence of potentially reinforcing stereotypes and exaggerating differences. In actual fact, the differences are not always so stark. For one thing, some of us wear both hats, or we have worn them at some point in our careers. In fact, many of us are concurrently teachers,
and we are researchers. In addition, within our field, we are all educators. My rhetorical device also hides the fact that one can make the case for a growing similarity between the two practices—that of teaching and of research. In fact, from what I can see of developments in the field, there is the potential for congruence as never before between teaching and research. One element of this congruence is shared retrodiction. Before I elaborate on this concept, I want to suggest how traditional research paradigms are inadequate when it comes to educational research.

**Traditional Classroom-Based Research**

In traditional classroom-based research, causality has been assumed to exist between teaching and learning. Moreover, teaching has usually been seen to have an immediate, proximal effect. What I mean is that teaching has been assumed to cause learning. It also has been thought to operate unilaterally from the teacher to the students (Bolster, 1983).

It follows then that, until recently, in traditional classroom-based research teaching is viewed exclusively in terms of the influence instructors have on pupils; the reciprocal effects of students on teachers or of students on students and then on teachers are thought to be nonexistent or not of central consequence. (Bolster, 1983, p. 302)

Anyone who has ever taught, however, knows this not to be the case. Teachers teach and students do not necessarily learn, at least not what the teachers are teaching. This happens for all sorts of good reasons. A dramatic illustration of this is a research study of 5 Chinese learners of English that was conducted at the English Language Institute, University of Michigan.

**A Research Study of Five Chinese Learners of English**

A course was created for five Chinese speakers of English at the University of Michigan. All the students were women from the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), who had at least temporarily left professional positions in the PRC to accompany their partners to this country so that their partners could complete graduate degrees. All five did not want to sit idly at home during their stay in the U.S. We agreed to offer them a six-month intermediate-level English course (from June-December) at the English Language Institute, in return for which they would allow us to study their developing English.

The way we chose to do this was to ask the participants to narrate a story of their own choosing at four different time intervals, six weeks apart: the end of June, mid-August, the beginning of October, and mid-November. The women were to write the story without consulting a dictionary or a grammar book. Three days after writing their stories, they were tape-recorded telling the same story. The tapes were transcribed, and the transcripts and written stories were divided into idea units—usually, one clause in length. Each sample was then analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The quantitative measures consisted of accuracy (the percentage of error-free t-units as compared with the total number of t-units[^2]), fluency (the number of words per t-unit),

[^2]: A t-unit is an independent clause and any subordinate clauses attached to it. It differs from a sentence, which
vocabulary complexity (a sophisticated type-token ratio that takes length of production into account), and grammatical complexity (the number of clauses per t-unit). Although one could find fault with the operational definitions of these features of students’ writing and speech, each of these indices is considered among the best that have been used in other studies (Wolfe-Quintero, et al., 1998).

The scores for the five participants were averaged and then plotted on a graph over time. Figure 1 shows what this procedure yielded. In fact, we were pleased to see that collectively the students were making progress. In almost each case, performance at a later time improved over an earlier time, and this was nearly always true of all the performance features that we looked at.

Figure 1: Group averages over time on four indices using written data

However, it is well-known that averages can conceal a great deal of variability. What was interesting was when we plotted the same four indices over time for each individual student, a different picture emerged. As is clear from Figure 2, there was no smooth linear progression as there appeared to be when the students’ scores were averaged.

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3 The three figures in this article first appeared in Larsen-Freeman (2006), an article in *Applied Linguistics* 27(4), published by Oxford University Press.
In fact, what can be seen is a great deal of progress and regress from a target language-centric perspective. In some cases, the students conclude their course worse off on some of these measures than when they started! This is not to say that no learning took place nor that the picture was hopelessly chaotic. In fact, when we compared two of the indices against each other, we could begin to see a pattern. As Figure 3 demonstrates, Learner U appears to put a great deal of stock in improving her grammatical complexity. Learner L on the other hand seems to be concentrating on improving her fluency. The other learners go back and forth between the two types of proficiency.

I am not claiming that these students were consciously motivated to direct their learning to a particular feature, although they may have been. Nevertheless, they were all experiencing the same instruction, but clearly achieving differentially. Of course, there is much more to be said for these students and their language development (for a fuller
treatment, see Larsen-Freeman, 2006), but my point for displaying even these few data here is to underscore the nonlinearity of the learning process.

These findings do not bode well for an experimental approach to research that assumes causality between teaching and learning. Who can say, for example, on the basis of a pre-test/post-test design that a particular experimental treatment works or does not work? If the results are non-significant, the effects of the treatment may not yet be manifest; if the results are significant, they may have resulted from an experience that learners have had prior to the pre-test, but which are not evidenced in the pre-test.

Indeed, conventional experiments are problematic for they can only, at best, lead to claims about proximate, linear causes, while not allowing for multiple or reciprocally interacting and non-linear variables, which change over time. While I would not wish to discount experimental claims, I think that we do need to problematize them in light of the fact that any cause and effect link that is “found” might actually occlude fundamental non-linearity (Larsen-Freeman, 1997).

Instead, what is needed, as Bolster had the prescience to observe, is a teacher’s particularistic perspective; that is, this knowledge arises from the need to comprehend the complexity of a particular context with sufficient accuracy to be able to act efficaciously in it. Such knowledge derives not so much from a systematic comparison of a number of similar situations as it does from intuitive analysis of a specific context in which many important qualities are assumed to be unique. Every teacher “knows” that although there are many similarities between classes, each group has its own special characteristics, and that successful teaching requires the recognition and acknowledgement of this uniqueness. (Bolster, 1983, p. 298)

In recognition that each class or individual in a class is unique and that teachers must therefore be open to novelty with each group, what teachers adopt is a retrodictive approach rather than a predictive one. Rather than predicting that a particular teaching activity will cause learning, as is done in classic experimental research, a retrodictive approach seeks an after-the-fact explanation for learning. Retrodiction acknowledges that due to the complexity of classroom teaching and learning, the only satisfactory approach to research is to take note when someone learns something and then to look back to see how this was accomplished. Such a process is retrodiction (or retrocasting), explaining the next state by the preceding one, rather than prediction (or forecasting).

Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) adopt a complex systems approach to research. They point out that in traditional experimental research explanation produces prediction in the form of testable hypotheses. In contrast, in complex systems approaches, once a system or the behavior of agents in it has changed or evolved, the process can be explained, but new predictions are not necessarily a consequence. Of course, we humans can learn from our experience, and thus, we may have expectations of how a process will unfold, or even of its outcomes, based on prior experience; however, a complex systems approach, as Larsen-Freeman and Cameron write, brings about a separation of explanation and prediction.

As Stewart (1998, p. 17) puts it, “We can tell where the system cannot be, and we can identify the states that the system is most likely to be, but we cannot tell exactly
where the system will be.” It is highly unlikely that a single cause will give rise to a complex event. Rather, there are likely multiple and interconnected causes underlying any shift or outcome. Gaddis (2002, p. 65) adds that “We may rank their relative significance, but we’d think it irresponsible to seek to isolate—or ‘tease out’—single causes for complex events.”

Thus, it is increasingly recognized by researchers that new ways of studying phenomena are needed. As Atkinson (2002, p. 539) acknowledges, we need “…methodologies that do not denature phenomena by removing them from their natural environments and breaking them down into countable component parts.”

One further important advantage of such methodologies is that they are less likely to reproduce the researcher-teacher divide—the asymmetrical division of labor between (classroom) teachers and researchers. This is because, as I said before, teachers have long realized that teaching and learning are not simple enterprises, explicable by simple causes. Many factors may contribute to any learning that takes place or does not take place, and the best hope for explaining the results comes from after-the-fact reflection.

If we are to accept that research, like teaching, needs to be retrodictive rather than predictive, what methodological options do we have? Here I will list four—two that originated in research and two that are grounded in teaching practice.

**Formative Experiments**

In addition to what I have already pointed out, another limitation of conventional experiments occurs when researchers attempt to control context and situation, rather than investigating adaptation to the unique particularities of context. Researchers “try to ensure that an intervention is implemented uniformly despite different circumstances; and they focus on post-intervention outcomes instead of what happens while the intervention is implemented” (Reinking & Watkins, 2000, p. 384).

A different type of experiment, called a “formative experiment” (Jacob, 1992, described by Reinking & Watkins, 2000), focuses on the dynamics of implementation and might thus be capable of overcoming these limitations. Using Newman’s words, Reinking and Watkins define it as follows: “In a formative experiment, the researcher sets a pedagogical goal and finds out what it takes in terms of materials, organization, or changes in the intervention in order to reach the goal” (Newman, 1990, in Reinking & Watkins, 2000, p. 388). In other words, once the goal is reached, the researcher can reconstruct what it took to get there. This requires the researcher adopting a retrospective view.

Not only is this a retrospective approach to research, but it also sounds a lot like reflective teaching practice, to me at least.

**Design-based Research**

Another similar approach is design-based research, a method that is getting a lot of attention in educational research these days. In fact, an entire issue of the American Educational Research Association’s publication, *Educational Researcher* January/February, 2003—Volume 32(1), was devoted to it.
Design-based research seeks to counter the problem that educational research is often divorced from issues of everyday teaching. This problem points to the need for research that directly addresses the problems of classroom practice. Thus, a goal of design-based research is to advance “theory in practice.” In other words, the research is situated in natural contexts of instruction and what is observed is made sense of in terms of the local particulars. Furthermore, design-based research responds to the emergent features in the situation. It is not as though a particular research angle is adopted once and for all.

As Confrey (2006, p. 139) writes “Such studies support views of the classroom not as deterministic, but as complex and conditional. In these settings, instructional guidance is based on affecting the likelihood of certain events and outcomes by adjusting the conditions of instruction.”

By adjusting the conditions of instruction, design-based researchers concern themselves with the process of teaching and learning as much as the product. They shift their attention from being teacher-centered to being learner-centered. Rather than creating research designs that isolate a single variable, design-based researchers examine multiple dependent variables in order to develop a qualitative account that links different instructional conditions with different effects on learning, all the while acknowledging the complex social context of the classroom. Researchers adopt a retrodictive view, looking for the influence of prior activity on current activity. In fact, Shavelson et al. (2003, p. 26) quite explicitly state that any documentation during the research project “serves as the basis for a retrospective analysis of what happened during the design study.”

There are other forms of research that are retrodictive as well. The following two have originated in teaching practice. The first one, in fact, is not new.

**Action Research**

Action research is concerned with possibility rather than prediction (Wadsworth, 1998). Like complex systems research, action research considers change and facilitates an examination of the emergent nature of change. Cook (1998, p. 99), for instance, writes of “trying to describe practice without fixing it and making it static.”

The action of action research is the action that a teacher takes to disrupt the equilibrium of the teaching and learning situation. Teachers are encouraged to challenge their assumptions by acting differently from their customary way of being in the classroom. In other words, teachers who practice action research are encouraged to introduce “noise” into the system—to actively promote non-equilibrium. Then, after introducing noise, they watch what happens. They may take further actions, but notice from the perspective I am advancing here, action research is essentially retrospective. After teachers introduce noise, they watch what happens—taking a retrospective view on the effect of the introduction of the different way of operating.

**Exploratory Practice**

In Allwright’s (2003) exploratory practice, teachers identify a puzzle—something puzzling in a teaching/learning situation. (Allwright rejects the use of “problem” for its
negative connotations.) Teachers reflect on the puzzle, monitor it in a focused way, and, then, take direct action to do something about it. The doing-something-about-it generates data, which allow teachers to consider the outcomes reached so far and decide what to do next. They might move on, or take new action, or even “go public,” in which case they share their experience and observations with others.

The principles of Exploratory Practice are expected to guide specific practices that are ever-evolving. These practices are aimed at helping teachers (and potentially learners too) to investigate the areas of learning and teaching they wish to explore by using familiar classroom activities as the investigative tools (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 196).

Notice once again, that this approach is retrodictive. Teachers identify a puzzle, do something with it, and, then, watch what happens. What I think all four of these approaches are telling us is that for the sake of educational research and for educational practice, we need to adopt a retrodictive approach to teaching and research, not a predictive one. We need to “explain after by before” (as van Geert & Steenbeek, 2005, p. 408, put it).

In other words, we need to apply some sort of pressure or to make some sort of intervention to the system, and then watch what happens. This is what formative experiments, design-based research, action research, and exploratory practice have in common. Do something/take some action and watch what emerges (an approach reminiscent of Fanselow’s (1987) injunction to teachers to do things differently).

Attitude of Inquiry

It seems to me, though, that teachers, too, have to demonstrate that they are willing to participate in a new beginning with researchers. A little over a decade ago, I participated in a debate at a closing plenary session for a TESOL Convention in Chicago. We debaters were supposed to address the question “Is teaching a science or an art?” I was assigned to defend the proposition that teaching was a science. Now, I worried a great deal about this position. It seemed that it was easier to make the case for teaching being an art. Besides, I had a formidable debate opponent in the articulate Henry Widdowson, who chose to assert the proposition that teaching was an art.

One day, while driving to work, I heard a radio interview of a scientist—an entomologist from Montana State University. The entomologist specialized in the study of beetles. He said that beetles were a very common species. The interviewer asked him how they could be so common since beetles are not all that visible to the average person. The entomologist replied, “Ah, but you have to learn to look.”

It seemed to me that this was the answer to my dilemma. Good research and good teaching both involve learning to look—educating our awareness, as Caleb Gattegno, the originator of the Silent Way teaching approach, might put it.

What I said on that occasion of the debate was:

Much is mysterious about the teaching/learning process, and those who approach it as a mystery to be solved (recognizing that some things about teaching and
learning may be forever beyond explanation) will see their teaching and their research as a continuing adventure. (Larsen-Freeman 2000, p. 15)

Ultimately, therefore, if teaching and research are to have a new beginning, we each need to begin by refraining from criticizing each other. Then, researchers need to consider adopting the retrodictive views of teachers, and teachers, if they do not do so already, need to cultivate attitudes of inquiry about their teaching practice the way that researchers do. We all need to develop the habit of mind of retrospective reflectivity. And we need to be passionate enough about what we do to risk sharing with others our understandings and our retrospective explanations—for these are, in fact, the only ones that we really have. After all, “The future is made, not predicted” (Wadsworth, 1998).

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References


The Selected Proceedings of the 2008 MITESOL Conference

The Role of Literacy in Oral Language Processing:
Implications for Research

Martha Bigelow
University of Minnesota

Abstract

Prior literacy can play a powerful role in acquiring literacy in a new language, but how does prior literacy affect oral language development in a new language? This article provides an overview of three second language acquisition (SLA) studies exploring this issue with adolescents and young adults with low levels of alphabetic print literacy. The evidence comes from oral face-to-face interactions with the researcher in tasks involving recasts, narrations of a story, and elicited imitation. Results show key ways participants with low alphabetic literacy are different from the typical highly literate participants in SLA studies. For example, they are not hindered by long recasts as literate learners have been shown to be (Philp, 2003). They also differ in their use of particular morphemes from their more literate counterparts. These results speak to the need to study underrepresented learners in the SLA research, such as those with low levels of print literacy.

Introduction

Much of the adolescent and adult SLA literature has focused on literate learners – often adults in college-level language programs. This is unfortunate given the increasing numbers of language learners in high schools and adult English as a Second Language (ESL) programs who have very low levels of literacy, typically due to interrupted or limited formal schooling. Cities all over the world are welcoming refugees after long waits in refugee camps where access to education is extremely limited. Unfortunately, educators know very little about the implications of limited formal schooling and low literacy and are often overwhelmed by the learning needs of their students. Teachers’ professional preparation may not have included methods for teaching adolescent and adult learners to become literate for the first time, particularly when the learners’ first experience with literacy is in a language they are only just beginning to learn. Likewise, teaching learners who learn primarily through oral language is new to teachers. It is very difficult for many to imagine language learning that is not tied to text. While second language (L2) learning is something many ESL teachers have done, having no print

4 In academic years 04-05, 05-06, and 07-08, the adult ESL classes at the lowest level, where students have no or minimal reading or writing skills in any language, made up 17-21% of the nationwide population in Adult Basic Education Programs according to the National Reporting System (http://wdcrdbcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OVAE/NRS/tables/?CFID=6141148&CFTOKEN). With respect to adolescents, Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) cite dramatic National Assessment for Educational Progress figures that indicate that there is nothing less than a “literacy crisis for English language learners”, a literacy crisis where 96 percent of students with limited English proficiency in eighth grade score below the basic level and 31 percent fail to complete high school. They conclude: “Adolescent English language learners with limited formal schooling and below-grade-level literacy are most at risk of educational failure” (Short and Fitzsimmons 2007, p. 16).
literacy is something most ESL teachers have not experienced. Nevertheless, illiterate adults all over the world are becoming fluent in other languages. Multilingualism and illiteracy co-exist in many places in the world yet SLA research shows little recognition of this phenomenon. Prior schooling and print literacy are major ways in which learners vary and these variables have been largely ignored in SLA research. It is problematic for the field of SLA to attempt to generalize findings when a large segment of language learners are entirely left out of the inquiry (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004). The overarching concern in the studies reported in this article is if and how alphabetic print literacy in the first and/or second language(s) matters in oral second language production.

**Literature Review**

Given the void of research directly from the field of SLA related to this population, it was necessary to turn to research done with monolingual adults who were not literate (e.g., Adrian, Alegria, & Morais, 1995; Loureiro et al., 2004; Morais, Bertelson, Cary, & Alegria, 1986; Morais, Cary, Alegria, & Bertelson, 1979). This research is quite narrowly focused on phonological and phonemic awareness in relation to low/no alphabetic print literacy. What these researchers found was that normally functioning literate and illiterate adults performed the same on some oral tasks, but very differently on others.

Literate and illiterate monolingual adults performed similarly on tasks where they were asked to identify words that rhyme (e.g., *bird* and *word*). They did equally well on identifying words that began with the same sound (e.g., *pen/pig* versus *pen/Ken*). They performed similarly in oral tasks focusing on meaning, such as naming words in a semantic category (e.g., name all of the animals you can think of). Repeating real words was also equally easy for both literate and illiterate adults in these studies. These findings are useful because initial literacy instruction often focuses on these sorts of skills and it is quite likely that English language learners without print literacy will do well with games and activities that tap into these strengths.

Nevertheless, the illiterate adults in the studies with monolingual adults of different levels of literacy did significantly worse compared to their literate counterparts on tasks that require an awareness of language forms. The following tasks were harder for participants without print literacy: phoneme deletion (e.g., take the /s/ off ‘stan’ or ‘slide’ → ‘tan’ or ‘lide’); phoneme reversal (e.g., what is /los/ backward? /sol/); syllable deletion (e.g., if you take /ka/ off /kade/ what do you have? /de/); syllable reversal (e.g., what is /kade/ backwards? /deka/); list all the words that begin with a specific sound (e.g., /b/); repeat non-words (e.g., skriltch) (Adrian et al., 1995; Castro-Caldas, Petersson, Reis, Stone-Elander, & Ingvar, 1998; Reis & Castro-Caldas, 1997). In sum, illiterate adults performed significantly worse on phonological fluency tasks unrelated to meaning. Is this phenomenon related to educational level, or is there something about being able to decode an alphabetic script that produces this effect?

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5 Consider countries such as Burkina Faso where literacy rates in the population 15 and over is only 21.8% ([www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)), yet there are 68 living languages ([www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)). It is highly likely that the population is multilingual.
Charles Read and his colleagues (Read, Zhang, Nie, & Ding, 1986) replicated some aspects of the studies reported previously with monolingual adults in China with older adults who were equally well educated. The only difference was that some could read only logographic characters (semantically based), while others could read characters as well as an alphabetic script called Hanyun Pinyin. Read found the same results as the researchers who studied literate and illiterate adults: those who could read the alphabetic script significantly outperformed those who could not, on the kinds of oral form-focused tasks just described. So, the Read, et al. (1986) study suggests that it is not educational level that matters, nor is it reading per se. It is reading an alphabetic script that improves performance on these kinds of oral tasks. This was a very interesting assertion because most researchers (e.g., Sawyer & Fox, 1991) who focus on native speaking children learning to read say that success with tasks like these result in literacy, not the reverse. It seems that the ability to represent a phoneme with a visual symbol gives a person clear cognitive advantages in performing these tasks (see Tarone & Bigelow, 2005, for more details about this research).

Literacy seems to enable individuals to visualize linguistic segments and manipulate them mentally. Literate individuals have available to them a strategy where visual-graphic meaning is given to units that are smaller than words, units with no semantic meaning. These segments are introduced sequentially in a working memory system with a new content of visual experience (Baddeley, 1986). Then it is possible to play with those written symbols, each mapped to a sound. This involves conscious phonological processing, visual formal lexical representations, and their associations – all of which are strategies available to people who have alphabetic print literacy. Whether a person is hearing the endings of words in a recast or producing morphemes with little saliency (e.g., past-tense –ed) in a narrative, or repeating a sentence crafted by the researcher, this visual-graphic strategy of imagining the orthography of a word, mentally manipulating it, and then producing it, all may rest on the person’s experience with an alphabetic script.

This research does not imply anything about the intelligence, linguistic aptitude, or the humanity of adolescent or adult individuals without print literacy. But it does help develop a theoretical argument for how alphabetic print literacy may change the way a second language learner processes or hears a new language. These researchers conclude that the ability to represent a phoneme with a visual symbol gives learners clear cognitive advantages in performing phonological awareness tasks. It enables the learners to visualize linguistic segments and manipulate them in their minds. Given how basic these tasks are, educators may think that all English language learners with low print literacy need is a few months of high quality balanced literacy instruction in order to become similar to other beginners learning the language. What the research in this paper shows is that differences persist, even when learners achieve some print literacy. The research question that framed this series of studies is the following: How do low levels of alphabetic print literacy influence L2 oral language processing?

To explore this question, a partial replication and extension of Philp’s (2003) study of recasts with highly literate college students was chosen for this research design. Philp’s study fits into a robust line of SLA research in the area of recasts in second language oral interaction. She explored whether and how her participants noticed her
recasts. She analyzed the types of recasts she offered participants in terms of length and the number of changes to the participants’ utterances. Philp also did a complete analysis of the types of errors the participants made and whether their stage of acquisition (Pienemann & Johnston, 1987; Pienemann, Johnston, & Brindley, 1988) related to how well they were able to perceive and repeat the recasts they received to their initial, trigger utterances. Philp’s study was a useful choice for partial replication because it used research methods that were entirely oral. The tasks were easily explained and modeled and had no printed text. The new variable was level of literacy – something that has not been examined in terms of adolescent/adult oral SLA. Bringing low literate adolescents and adults into the SLA literature through an extension of Philp’s study allowed for the comparison, albeit broad, with her participants. Replication studies are important for the field and this research is a response to the call from many SLA researchers (Polio & Gass, 1997; Santos, 1989) to replicate research more.

Methodology

The principal and overarching methodology used in this research was quantitative; however, a close analysis of one participant’s language was supplemental and illustrative of the quantitative analyses. As a partial replication of Philp (2003), two new components were added to Philp’s research procedures in order to do additional analyses: namely, an opportunity for participants to do a story recall in narrative form and an elicited imitation task. Detailed descriptions of the methodology of these studies can be found in previously published work but will be succinctly described below (see Bigelow, delMas, Hansen, & Tarone, 2006; Tarone & Bigelow, 2007; Tarone, Bigelow, & Hansen, 2007, 2009; Tarone, Swierzbin, & Bigelow, 2006).

Participants

Table 1 shows the participants and their general characteristics. All of the participants were Somali refugees fleeing the civil war in Somalia and who had spent time in refugee camps. These events were the main cause of their low levels of alphabetic literacy. An attempt was made to balance the groups in terms of overall language proficiency by doing a SPEAK test (1982) rating and by the fact that all of the participants had reached the same stage of acquisition (Stage 5 of 6 stages) in question form development. In addition, the groups were roughly balanced in terms of formal schooling to minimize the possibility that the results related to schooling, not literacy. In using this sampling method, it was hoped that differences between the groups could be tied to literacy level.

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6 The scoring criteria for the SPEAK test were used to rate speech samples from the data by a trained SPEAK test rater. The actual SPEAK test items were not administered.
Table 1. Participant profiles for recast and narrative analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID*</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Literacy Level**</th>
<th>Yrs in USA</th>
<th>Years schooling</th>
<th>Oral proficiency SPEAK rating***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Literacy Mean</td>
<td>L1</td>
<td>L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abukar</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Najma</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ubax</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fawzia</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khalid</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faadumo</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moxammed</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufia</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pseudonyms.
**Measured using the Native Language Literacy Screening Device (n.d.).
***SPEAK test rating scale was used to rate speech samples coming from research protocol, not SPEAK test items.

Participants were recruited in community venues, not schools, after the researchers had spent considerable time in the community building trust and developing relationships with youth and those running after school activities, including homework help programs. After completing a battery of tasks with 35 individuals, four participants with the highest scores on the literacy measures and four with the lowest literacy scores were selected.

**Target forms**

Philp (2003) focused her research on question formation in English, which were also the target forms for Studies 1 and 2. This was useful because question forms have received much attention in SLA research (e.g., Ellis, 1984; Mackey, 1999; Spada & Lightbown, 1993; White, Spada, Lightbown, & Ranta, 1991). SLA researchers have widely accepted that English language learners progress through acquisition stages as they learn questions (Pienemann & Johnston, 1987; Pienemann et al., 1988). In Study 3, the interlanguage analysis focused on plural and verb tense morphemes as well as
sentence complexity. This line of SLA study also has a long tradition from which to
draw (Corder, 1981; Corder, 1967; Lantolf & Ahmed, 1989; Selinker, 1972; Tarone,

**Tasks**

The research protocol involved the same procedures for all participants. It began
with informal conversations with the participants to make sure that they were giving
informed consent and to gather background information on their prior schooling and time
in the US. Participants then did a practice spot-the-difference task where researcher and
participant each looked at pictures that were slightly different and the participant asked
the researcher questions in order to identify differences between the two pictures. When
the participant asked an ungrammatical question, the researcher recast it and then
signaled the participant to attempt to repeat it correctly. After this, the researcher
answered the question that the participant had asked. The next set of tasks, called story
completion tasks, involved the participant looking at pictures, one-by-one, of a story that
raised questions because the pictures were incomplete. Participants were asked to clarify
what was happening in the pictures and the researcher completed the story. After each of
the story completion tasks, participants were asked to retell the story as if they were
telling it to someone who did not know it. Finally, participants did an elicited imitation
task (Naiman, 1974) in which they were asked to repeat a set of researcher-generated
questions along with a number of distractor sentences. This task was designed to elicit
questions across all stages of acquisition. An example of an elicited imitation sentence is
the following: Would you ask if I could attend? (highest of 6 stages). The task involved
participants repeating sentences such as this after the researcher said them once. It is
relevant to note that in the elicited imitation task, the trigger utterance comes from the
researcher, not the participant, as in the recast task.

The following table shows the number and types of tasks done in each of the two
one-on-one sessions. In some cases, the sessions were conducted on the same day, with a
break in between; at other times, they were done a couple days apart.

Table 2: Research protocol for tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Session</th>
<th>Second Session</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informal conversation</td>
<td>Informal conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with participant</td>
<td>with participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spot the Difference #1</td>
<td>Spot the difference #3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spot the Difference #2</td>
<td>Spot the difference #4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Completion #1</td>
<td>Story Completion #4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Completion Retell</td>
<td>Retell #4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Completion #2</td>
<td>Story Completion #5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Completion Retell</td>
<td>Retell #5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Completion #3</td>
<td>Story Completion #6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Completion Retell</td>
<td>Retell #6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elicited Imitation #1</td>
<td>Elicited Imitation #2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somali Literacy Test</td>
<td>English Literacy Test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Analyses**

The types of errors participants made with regard to the target forms were analyzed and quantified according to stage of acquisition of the participants’ original or trigger utterances. Whether the participant was able to provide full, partial, or no recall of the recast from the researcher was also analyzed and quantified. Furthermore, participants’ ability to recall long recasts (6 or more morphemes) and recasts with multiple changes were analyzed and quantified. Results of the higher literate group and the lower literate group were compared for statistical significance using exact permutation analyses (Chernick, 2007; Efron & Tibshirani, 1993; Good, 2001; Marden, 2001). The learner narratives were analyzed for instances of marking plural or past as well as learner failure to use morphemes when they were needed. Complex sentences were counted and sorted into types of clauses. For these analyses, percentages were calculated, but statistical tests were not used.

**Results**

With her highly educated and literate participants, Philp (2003) found that: (a) when proficiency level (stage) matched recast, recall was higher; (b) an increased number of changes to the trigger utterance in the recast made recall more difficult; and (c) the longer the recast, the more difficult they were to recall. The participants reported here behaved somewhat differently.

**Study 1: Recasts in elicitation tasks and literacy level**

In the first study, the following question was addressed: Is accuracy of recall of a recast related to the literacy level of the learner, the length of the recast, or the number of changes made by the recast? Results show that literacy level was significantly related to the ability to recall recasts in correct or modified form (i.e., when participant recalls of the recasts were perfectly correct or partially correct). The exact permutation analysis showed that the moderately high literacy group performed better overall ($p = .043$). On the other hand, the ability to recall a recast was not related to the length of the recasts for either group. There were no statistically significant differences in recast length between the two literacy level groups or the participant group as a whole. In other words, participants in the two groups responded similarly to long and short recasts, as in the following example:

**Short recast**

**Trigger:** Why he’s so happy?

**Recast:** Why is he so happy?

**Long recast**

**Trigger:** What he doing, the man in the sitting chair?

**Recast:** What is the man sitting in the chair doing?

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7 This study was reported in Bigelow et al. (2006).
Regarding the complexity of the recasts, as in the long recast in the example above with multiple changes made to the trigger sentence produced by the participant, the more literate group recalled recasts with two or more changes significantly more accurately ($p = .014$). The more literate group was better able to recall more complex recasts.

The second portion of the analysis in Study 1 involved a close examination of one participant: Abukar. The goal was to explore how one participant with low print literacy processes recasts on questions in English. Abukar was 15 years old at the time of the study. He was very fluent, but his literacy level was very low. He had spent four years in a refugee camp during some of his school-age years. His common challenges included lack of subject/auxiliary inversion (e.g., “…what, what his is looking”) and not using do-support (e.g., “…why he come this room?”). He seemed to find it particularly difficult to repeat target-like inversion in recasts, as in the examples below:

Abukar: What he sit on, what he SIT on, or whatever?
MB: What is he sitting on?
Abukar: Mhm.
MB: What is he sitting on? Again. Repeat.
Abukar: What he sitting on?
MB: What IS he sitting on?
Abukar: Oh. What he sitting on?
MB: What IS he sitting on?
Abukar: What IS he sitting on?

He has the same challenge many turns later:

Abukar: Oh. What he try to write down?
MB: What IS he trying to write down?
Abukar: What he’s, he’s try to write down?
MB: What IS he try to
Abukar: What he is t, try to, write down?

Later in the protocol, Abukar focuses on stress on the second syllable/word, as in the following:

Abukar: Why he is mad? Why [he], he is mad?
MB: [yeah]
MB: Why IS he mad?
Abukar: Why HE is mad? Why
MB: Why IS he mad?
Abukar: Why IS he mad? Why is, [is he]…

On the other hand, Abukar uses interaction very well to learn vocabulary. (See Tarone and Bigelow, 2007, for a detailed analysis of this phenomenon.) His skill in focusing on meaning again resonates with the literature reported above where adults with little literacy are very skillful at processing language semantically.
Study 2: Recast versus elicited imitation tasks

Another analysis of the data collected in this research protocol compared how participants responded to the elicited imitation task versus the recast task, reported in Study 1 above. Specifically, the research questions were: (a) Is the ability to recall target sentences in an elicited imitation task related to the literacy level of the learner? and (b) Is there a difference in accuracy of recall of utterances in the elicited imitation task and the recast recall task?

Results show that literacy level was related to accuracy on both the elicited imitation and the recast tasks. The difference between literacy groups in elicited imitation recall accuracy approached significance at \( p = .057 \) (one-tailed test) while the difference between literacy groups in recast recall accuracy was significant at \( p = .014 \) (one-tailed test). For both literacy groups, accuracy of recast recalls was significantly better than for elicited imitation recalls at \( p = .008 \) (two-tailed test).

Study 3: Interlanguage variation and literacy level

The last analysis to report involves an examination of the nature of the variation of grammatical forms used by the two groups of learners when they did the story retell task. The exploration focuses on the following question: Does literacy level correspond to the grammatical forms participants use in retelling the same stories in narrative form? Specifically, would illiterate or low literate learners use fewer semantically redundant grammatical morphemes (e.g., plural -s, third person singular -s, past tense -ed)? Would their sentence complexity suffer from their difficulties in processing grammatical forms in the oral input? Because this third analysis focused on grammatical forms produced in meaningful communication in a comparatively small study, inferential statistical analysis were not carried out, but rather a linguistic analysis to explore patterns was used. These results will have to be tested more rigorously in future studies. The semantically redundant grammatical morphemes included bare verbs (verbs with no morphological marking) versus verbs with -ed, third person singular -s, auxiliary be and bare nouns versus noun with plural –s. Sentence complexity included an examination of relative clauses, noun clauses, and clauses with because, so, and since.

The moderate literacy group provided more morphemes for verbs than the low literacy group. The low literacy group produced more bare verbs (205/321 or 64%) in obligatory contexts versus the moderate literacy group (230/458 or 50%). The following examples show how participants from the two groups used morphemes with verbs in their story retells:

Her mom says, “Come in now, in a car.” (Faadumo, moderate literacy group)

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8 This research was reported in Tarone et al. (2009).
9 All but two of the eight participants in the elicited imitation analysis are the same as those in the Bigelow et al. (2006) study. The reason the two sets of participants were not identical was that two of the participants in Bigelow et al. were unable to complete the elicited imitation task. Therefore, two other participants who had completed the task and were matched for mean literacy level to the two they were replacing, were substituted. See Tarone et al. (2009) for details about the two different participants.
10 This research was reported in Tarone et al. (2006).
Her mother they say, “We going right now…” (Najma, low literacy group)

So, she called him (Khalid, moderate literacy group)

Somebody call him. (Fawzia, low literacy group)

Call him. (Fawzia, low literacy group)

However, this is a matter of degree: the two groups’ performances overlapped.

With regard to plural noun marking, the total number of plural nouns is much smaller than the number of verbs. Again, individual performances in the two groups overlapped, so caution in interpreting these findings is important. However, there seemed to be a tendency for the low literacy group to leave off the plural -s on plural nouns: The low literacy group produced more bare nouns in obligatory contexts (36/69 or 52%) versus the moderate literacy group (13/57 or 26%), sometimes substituting quantifiers as in the following examples:

*A lot of monkey* they take his hat. (Ubax, low literacy group)

*The monkeys* took all his hats. (Khalid, moderate literacy group)

Nevertheless, a low number of plural nouns supplied in the samples along with individual variation prevent firm conclusions.

There was also evidence of increased sentence complexity in the oral narratives of the more literate group. On average, the moderate literacy group used almost twice as many ‘so’ clauses and dependent clauses than the low literacy group. Literacy level seems related to sentence complexity. The moderate literacy group used almost twice as many ‘so’ clauses indicating causality and dependent clauses (131 v. 72). But here again, there was individual variation across the literacy groups.

**Discussion**

The results from the quantitative portion of Study 1 suggest that literacy level is significantly related to the ability to recall recasts with multiple changes. This finding is consistent with Reis and Castro-Caldas’ (1997) assertion that literacy has a positive impact on working memory. The participants in the low literacy group seem to lack phonological awareness skills that would allow them to hold information from the recast in working memory, manipulate phonemes, and produce a reformulation that indicates uptake of features in the recast.

Results from Study 2 suggest that corrective feedback that is based on learner generated language, rather than teacher or researcher generated language, may be easier to process and, therefore, promote acquisition. It is likely that learner generated language is easier to process partly because the learner has already processed the utterance for meaning and can then focus attention on the form-focused feedback in the recast.

Philp’s (2003) study, the initial inspiration for these studies, showed that highly literate adult learners did not do as well with long or complex recasts as they did with short recasts that made few changes to their original utterance. The participants in the present studies, on the other hand, differ from Philp’s participants in that they did not
struggle with length. This is an interesting and perhaps unsurprising finding from a community with many oral language traditions. It would also seem that having low literacy might encourage the development of other skills, such as easily holding long segments of oral text in working memory. Complexity (number of changes to participants’ trigger utterances) of the recasts did, however, matter for both Philp’s participants and those in the current studies. The more changes, the more difficult recall was. This may be due to the fact that the recast changed the intended meaning to the degree that it was incomprehensible to the participant. Perhaps, as with Philp’s participants, it was too difficult to hold so many changes in working memory long enough to recall the utterance grammatically. But complexity of the recasts seemed to matter more for the participants in the low literacy group. Perhaps they lacked the metalinguistic tool of being able to visualize the corrections to English question syntax and, in essence, “re-read” the “edited” sentence correctly from a mental picture in their minds.

In Study 3, the issue of whether literacy level is related to the grammatical forms and morphemes used by L2 learners in their oral narratives was explored. It appears to be so, but more information is needed. There is some evidence that the lower literacy group did not mark verbs and nouns with redundant morphemes as much as the moderate literacy group. And on average, the moderate literacy group used more dependent clauses, including more relative clauses, than the low literacy group. It seems that the findings are consistent with claims of Ravid and Tolchinsky (2002) that children do not acquire more complex syntactic forms of the native language until they are literate; literacy broadens genres of use and accompanying structures. But more and larger studies are needed to examine this phenomenon. The findings of the present study fall in the predicted direction, are consistent with studies in related fields, and set out a clear agenda for the next steps of research.

This research reported here has limitations. The analyses included a small number of participants, and even though the assumptions of the exact permutation analysis were met, future studies should include more participants and different statistical measures which have the ability to more carefully pinpoint individual variables between participants. Another limitation is the literacy measure used. This measure was not fine-tuned enough to gather data on anything more than the participants’ approximate and holistic literacy skills in Somali and English. Future studies should more carefully measure participants’ phonemic awareness, for example.

Conclusion

One of the most important findings from this research is that L2 oral language processing is likely to differ between literacy groups in some important ways in the adolescent and young adult population studied. This suggests that teachers may need to find alternative means of teaching certain grammatical forms while learners are becoming literate. Level of alphabetic print literacy may influence the way morphemes are noticed in oral input and the way L2 oral skills are acquired in interaction. Another key finding is that one cannot assume that current SLA findings apply to less literate adolescent and adult populations. The results show that participants with low literacy behaved
differently than the Somali participants with moderate literacy and also from Philp’s (2003) highly educated college students. Until more research is done, it is impossible to make assumptions about what it is like to learn to speak a new language without strong literacy skills. In this spirit, scholars must not dismiss the possibility that some aspects of L2 oral language learning may, in fact, be easier among learners with low literacy. These and many more questions remain with regard to the role of literacy in L2 oral language learning.

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References


Phonological Working Memory and Preschool ESL Children: A Study and Review of the Literature
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Abstract

Using Baddeley’s (1990) theoretical framework of phonological representation in working memory, the following questions are addressed: Does a nonword repetition task differentiate “more rapid” from “less rapid” second language learners, thus being a potential predictor of second language learning in the preschool ESL population? And, if so, could nonword repetition ability be used as a potential screening tool for at-risk ESL children? To explore these questions, twenty-three ESL preschoolers were assessed for nonword repetition ability, followed by their ability to learn new English words, using naturalistic play sessions. Comprehension and production of new vocabulary, both immediate and recall, were then assessed. Correlations, multiple regressions, and ANCOVAs were used to determine if relationships exist between nonword repetition ability and ease of English word learning. Discussion centers on the continuing research that is being done and appropriateness of this measure for the ESL population.

Introduction

A current problem in schools is whether ESL children who are developing English in an atypical manner are simply delayed in their acquisition or experiencing a language learning disability. Though children appear to acquire language with ease, language learning is actually an immense undertaking, so much so that five-year-old children have been termed “linguistic geniuses”11 because of their prowess with language in comparison to their lack of ability in other areas (e.g., to tie shoes or tell time). This is even more true for second language learners due to effects of age, personality, and motivation; influences of the first language; and the often unequal status of the languages involved. Most children learn a second language (L2) quickly and with relative ease; others, though, learn less rapidly and with more of a struggle.

This difference in ease of acquisition raises the question of why individual differences exist in the ability to learn a second language (Skehan, 1989). Traditional explanations have involved different socio-emotional and environmental reasons, such as motivation, identity issues, amount and type of linguistic input, and status of the first language (L1) in relation to the target language. A different view is that of Baddeley’s (1986, 1990) theory of phonological working memory as a potential source of individual variation. Baddeley’s theory holds that when a word is perceived, a sequence of sounds (composing the word) is held in memory, first, long enough to be repeated back, and second, long enough and in stable enough representation to become part of the long-term store (i.e., the mental lexicon). This process is accomplished via a memory mechanism termed the “phonological loop”. The loop operates in the following manner: 1)

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11 Personal communication with Dr. Phil Connell, Spring 1994, based on course taught by Connell at Indiana University entitled Born to be a Genius.
incoming material is held in sound-based form, making a memory trace, which 2) starts to degrade/decay within two seconds, but which 3) can be refreshed by what is termed subvocal rehearsal. This cycle of activation, degradation, and reactivation, over time, and with enough repetitions and exposures, allows the sequence of sounds (i.e., the word) to be associated with meaning and become part of the long-term store. Finally, the word can be accessed either through semantic links or similar-sounding words.

The process of phonological working memory detailed above has been investigated in the population of monolingual English language learners regarding its potential to be used as a differential diagnostic measure with children suspected of language processing problems (Dolloghan & Campbell, 1998; Ellis Weismer, 1996; Montgomery, 1996). This raises the question of whether the same such unbiased measure might be appropriate for use with at-risk language delayed ESL children. The aims of the exploratory study that follows are: 1) to ascertain whether the framework of phonological working memory can explain individual differences in language learning in preschool ESL children, and 2) to determine whether nonword repetition ability, as a measure of phonological working memory, is a factor in the ease of second language learning, more specifically, vocabulary learning. In other words, can a memory process-dependent task such as nonword repetition act as a predictor of language learning and thus be a potential unbiased differential diagnostic tool to identify children at risk of being slower language learners in need of language-learning support? Such an unbiased diagnostic measure is needed for L2 populations due to differences between languages, cultures, and world knowledge which can negatively influence test results (Adler, 1991; Cheng, 1987; Cummins, 1985; Lidz & Pena, 1996; Mattes & Omark, 1991; Stockman, 1996), as well as potential problems involving inappropriate administration of assessments (Kayser, 1995), and/or the situation where the L1 may have stagnated or undergone attrition (Schiff-Myers, 1992).

Review of Literature

Phonological working memory has been under exploration for over thirty years, with one of the earliest and most well-established multicomponent working memory models being that of Baddeley & Hitch (1974), more recently modified and extended by Baddeley (1986, 1990). More intense investigation into its impact on language learning has occurred during the past twenty years (see, for example, Baddeley, Gathercole, & Papagno, 1998; Hitch, Halliday, Schaafstal, & Heffernan, 1991; Hulme, Thomson, Muir, & Lawrence, 1984; Hulme & Tordoff, 1989). During this time, several researchers (e.g., Dollaghan & Campbell, 1998; Ellis Weismer, 1996; Gathercole & Baddeley, 1990a, 1990b, 1993; Gaulin & Campbell, 1994; Gillam & van Kleeck, 1996; Montgomery, 1996) have investigated the use of nonword repetition ability, as a measure of phonological working memory, in normal and language impaired children, in particularly, children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI). SLI, a language learning impairment, affects approximately 7% of the preschool population (Leonard, 1998) with its key characteristic being problems with the morphological system. (For more information on this language learning disorder, see Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004; Levy & Schaeffer, 2003; and Watkins & Rice, 1994. For a fuller overview of
phonological working memory and classic studies in the area involving young children, 
see Pearson, 1999, 2000a, 2000b; and in adults, see Pearson, 2000c.)

This line of research has found that phonological working memory is involved in 
long-term vocabulary acquisition in both L1 and L2 contexts. Additionally, there appears 
to be a reciprocal relationship between phonological working memory and long-term 
memory specifically related to vocabulary acquisition (Gathercole, Willis, Emslie, & 
Baddeley, 1992). This relationship, however, appears to change over time, with initial 
heavy reliance on phonological working memory until a large store of words are built in 
long-term memory, at which time more reliance is shifted to phonologically similar 
words and semantic links (Gathercole & Baddeley, 1993). This is thought to occur by the 
age of seven years. The exception to this shift, though, is thought to be foreign language 
learning (Gathercole et al., 1992). In this situation, because of a) unfamiliar phonological 
sequences due to different phonotactic patterns and b) little support from the existing 
(L1) lexicon for sustaining memory representations, there is a decrease in the ease of 
long-term learning. Two studies have specifically investigated this issue: Service (1992) 

Service (1992) studied students ages nine to twelve years in an English-as-a-
Foreign-Language (EFL) context. The forty-four students in the study spoke Finnish as 
their L1 and were tracked over a period of three years. Students were first tested on their 
nonword repetition ability; the following three assessments, at yearly intervals, included 
teacher ratings and test scores on their second language learning. Service found that 
nonword repetition ability (as a measure of phonological working memory) and language 
learning were significantly correlated.

Cheung (1996) also explored the relationship of nonword repetition ability in an 
EFL context, working with 7th grade students in Hong Kong. Focusing on vocabulary 
acquisition, Cheung found that nonword repetition ability predicted second language 
vocabulary learning. However, these results held only for those students of limited 
English proficiency (LEP). This is interesting in that it ties into the above-cited work 
done with monolingual English-speaking children, where a shift occurs by age seven: 
first, early heavy reliance on phonological working memory, followed by less reliance 
one a store of vocabulary items are firmly in the long-term mental lexicon. It appears 
that a similar process is at work in second language learning. (For a discussion of the 
possible interaction between phonological working memory and long-term memory, see 
Gathercole, Hitch, Service, and Martin, 1997.)

Though this line of inquiry is burgeoning, several areas remain unexplored. First, 
there are no studies involving preschool-aged children learning a second language. 
Service (1992) and Cheung (1996) both investigated learners in upper elementary and 
middle school, presumably proficient in reading. Second, the existing studies on children 
learning another language involve an EFL context, not an ESL context (foreign language 
learning vs. second language acquisition). And third, the studies by Service and Cheung 
involved formal classroom learning and/or testing rather than naturalistic play sessions in 
which language would presumably be acquired in comparison to being learned (see 
Krashen (1982, 1985) for a discussion of the acquired/learned distinction). It is to these 
gaps in the literature that the following exploratory study seeks to provide insight.
Research Question

In light of the above, the following research question was addressed: In ESL preschool children, is there a relationship between nonword repetition ability and English (L2) new word learning, both production and comprehension, during naturalistic play sessions designed to simulate real-world vocabulary acquisition? That is, does nonword repetition ability differentiate faster vs. slower L2 learners?

Method

Participants

Twenty-three ESL preschoolers, aged 3;1 – 6;6 years, participated in this study. All were sequential language learners. First language backgrounds included: Korean (9), Slovak (1), Japanese (2), Uzbek (2), Farsi (1), Russian (3), Finnish (1), ‘Chinese’ (1), Arabic (2), and Icelandic (1). All children were identified through preschools and kindergarten programs in a Midwestern university town. The preschools included university-affiliated programs and HeadStart centers. The kindergarten program was associated with the elementary school that services the university community. At the time of testing, all children had spent a minimum of three months to a maximum of 24 months in an English-speaking school environment. In all aspects of the study, the children were worked with individually.

Procedure

Screening Procedures

Children were screened for nonverbal analytical reasoning ability using the matrices subtest of the Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test (Kaufman & Kaufman, 1990). All children scored above -1 sd of the mean, indicating analytical reasoning ability within the average range. A portable hearing screening unit was used to determine normal hearing acuity. Normal hearing was defined as the ability to hear the test tones at 25 dB (level set due to ambient noise) or less at 500, 1000, 2000, 3000, 4000, and 6000 Hz. For general level of English language skill, the Preschool Language Assessment Scale (Duncan & De Avila, 1986) was used in order to assess each child’s level of English language development. This test has the advantage of providing labels according to a set criteria (e.g., Limited English Proficient). Both receptive and expressive English skills were assessed, since both comprehension and production of newly learned words were involved in the learning tasks. Finally, the Goldman-Fristoe Test of Articulation (Goldman & Fristoe, 1969) was given in order to assess each child’s phonemic inventory in English, as well as to provide information needed in the task analyses regarding systematic misarticulations (Gathercole & Adams, 1993). These substitution patterns were needed for scoring each child’s productions during both the nonword repetition and experimental tasks in order to compensate for issues of normal phonological
developmental at the preschool age, as well as L2 transfer issues. However, due to many of the children’s limited English proficiency, the testing format of the Goldman-Fristoe was changed to imitation, rather than elicitation.

**Pre-test and Post-test Procedures**

Before the learning/play sessions, children were pre-tested for comprehension using a set of 40 potential English target words, all concrete nouns. All potential target words were two syllables in length, composed of five phonemes, with primary stress on the first syllable. Selection of 12 unknown words were individually selected for each child, with all efforts made to select items that a) contained a minimum of fricatives and affricates, known to be perceptually demanding for children (Miller & Nicoly, 1955), and b) involved three food items and three cooking utensil items for each play session.

Following the learning/play sessions, once the children were more comfortable with the investigator, a modified version of The Children’s Test of Nonword Repetition (CNRep) (Gathercole, Willis, Baddeley, & Emslie, 1994) was given to assess phonological repetition ability as a measure of phonological representation in working memory. As the test was designed for children speaking British English, minor modifications were made to better adapt it to children learning American English. The CNRep was presented in an audiotaped format, so that children could not rely on visual lip-reading cues. The children’s responses on screening and pre- and post-testing were recorded so that all material could be reanalyzed multiple times.

**Word Teaching Procedures**

The experimental task consisted of two 10-minute naturalistic play sessions, during which six new English vocabulary (target) words were used and assessed at each session. Materials for the learning tasks were typical play kitchen equipment, including manipulables, with the theme of cooking for and feeding toy dinosaur puppet/stuffed animals. Food items were actual foods sealed in small, clear plastic bags. Target words were presented ten times each, in a naturalistic conversational style during the ten-minute play sessions, at times of joint attention. Immediately following each play session, the children were assessed for comprehension and production knowledge of the new words using a pointing game format. The six target items were presented, along with four other items (foils) that were also played with during the session, for a total of ten items. Additionally, the children were reassessed for retention of the new words, both comprehension and production, within 24-48 hours, a time delay considered long-term for this age group (Fazio, 1997; Gathercole & Baddeley, 1990a).

**Scoring**

All answers were recorded on scoring sheets. Production data was scored on-line as well as audiotaped and rescored within 12 hours in order to recheck for intra-judge reliability (set at 95%). In contrast to existing studies which score in a binary manner (100% correct or wrong), the CNRep and scoring of target words in this study were
measured in three ways: 1) number of words/nonwords totally correct (traditional scoring method); 2) number of syllables correct; and 3) number of phonemes in appropriate sequential order correct. This system of scoring sought to more closely assess the degree of representation in phonological working memory, an issue not previously addressed. In order to address developmental and transfer issues, systematic misarticulations were scored as correct if the same substitutions were also used on the Goldman-Fristoe Test of Articulation. See Appendix A for a list of assessment areas scored for each child.

**Analyses**

An exploratory data analysis is needed in order to identify patterns during the preliminary stages of a new research area, in the following two situations: 1) when there is “not sufficient information to make precise predictions or formulate testable models” (Kirk, 1995, p. 118), and 2) when flexibility is important in “probing data and responding to patterns uncovered during successive stages of analysis” (Kirk, 1995, p. 119; see also Perry, 2005.) This was the situation encountered with this study, as no previous work has been done in this area with ESL preschool-aged children. For these reasons, several different types of statistical analyses were run, including bivariate correlations, multiple regressions, and ANCOVAs. Due to the small number of children in the study and the artificial division of scores when no naturally-occurring gaps appeared for grouping, the bivariate correlations and multiple regressions were the analysis methods of choice, with the more tenuous ANCOVAs (in this situation) used to corroborate and support obtained results.

**Bivariate Correlations**

Correlations were run between the following variables, in order to determine if any relationships existed, and, if so, in what direction: chronological age, nonverbal IQ, amount of school, degree of English proficiency, nonword repetition ability (scored three ways), immediate and recall production of new words (scored three ways), and immediate and recall comprehension of new words.

**Multiple Regressions**

Multiple regressions were run in order to better determine the interaction patterns of the variables, as well as to see if similarities existed across analyses (Kirk, 1995). Variables were the same as listed under bivariate correlations, with the dependent variables being immediate and recall production of words (each scored three ways) and immediate and recall comprehension of words.

**ANCOVAs**
Due to the above stated situation, ANCOVAs were used to support the bivariate correlations and multiple regressions. The between group (independent) variable was nonword repetition ability, as assessed by the CNRep. The within group (dependent) variables were: number of new words learned, productively, under the immediate condition, scored in three different ways; number of new words learned, productively, under the recall condition, scored in three different ways; and number of new words learned, based on comprehension, both immediate and recall. The effects of several covariates were also explored in the analyses, again to corroborate results obtained in the bivariate correlations and multiple regressions. These included: age, nonverbal IQ, and amount of school. Alpha levels were set at the .05 level; however, due to the exploratory nature of this study, trends were also noted, utilizing Tukey’s (1991) view of “leaning” towards significance.12

Results

Significant results from the bivariate correlations, multiple regressions, and ANOVAs follow, along with an overall summary of results. Summaries of relevant statistical tests can be found in Appendices B and C. For full results and complete statistical tables, see Pearson (2000a).

Bivariate Correlations

As expected, significant correlations were obtained between the three scoring methods of the nonword repetition task, notably CNRep word and phoneme levels ($r=.751^{**}$) and CNRep syllable and phoneme levels ($r=.538^{**}$). Also, as expected, all eight target conditions (production and comprehension, both immediate and recall) were significantly correlated with each other at the .01 alpha level, with correlations ranging from .548 to .995. Additionally, the following significant correlations were found: 1) immediate production of target word conditions and English language proficiency ($r=.563^{**}, .447^*, .469^*$, respectively), chronological age ($r=.463^*, .483^*, .495^*$, respectively), and amount of school experience ($r=.683^{**}, .544^{**}, .553^{**}$, respectively); 2) immediate comprehension of target words and English language proficiency ($r=.487^*$) and chronological age ($r=.476^*$); and 3) recall production of target word conditions and English proficiency levels ($r=.580^{**}, .556^{**}, .505^*$, respectively) and amount of school experience ($r=.538^{**}, .518^*, .462^*$). Recall comprehension of words did not significantly correlate with other variables.14

Multiple Regressions

12 Tukey (1991) uses the word “lean” to make the point that significance is a continuum and that the .05 alpha level is not a magical number. Alpha levels between .05 and .15 are termed “leaning” to signify that even though not traditionally significant, they are worthy of investigation and consideration, especially in exploratory research. See also Abelson (1995).

3 As customary, alpha levels at .05 are notated by one asterisk, while alpha levels at .01 are notated by two asterisks.

14 See Pearson, 2000a, for full bivariate correlation matrix.
Overall models for the three ways of scoring nonword repetition ability were all significant, though not due to any significant influence of nonword repetition ability itself. Instead, age was the most significant variable for the immediate production conditions, while nonverbal IQ exerted the most influence under the recall production conditions. Amount of school experience was also an important factor at the immediate word level. Immediate comprehension involved a complexity of interacting factors, including age, nonverbal IQ, English proficiency level, and amount of school experience. Select multiple regression results can be found in Appendix B.15

**ANCOVAs**

Due to the unequal number of subjects in the ANCOVA cells, tests of homogeneity of variance were deemed especially important. Results indicated that no problems existed with this group of subjects; that is, all tests for homogeneity of variance were nonsignificant. All ANCOVA models were run twice. The first time the covariates of age, nonverbal IQ, and amount of school were entered. Any nonsignificant covariate was then removed and the model run a second time.

Using the traditional binary scoring system, nonword repetition ability was nonsignificant. Under the immediate production conditions, age was significant, while under the recall production conditions, nonverbal IQ was significant. Using a syllable scoring system, a similar pattern was found with nonword repetition ability nonsignificant, age and nonverbal IQ significant under the immediate production conditions, and nonverbal IQ significant under the recall production conditions. Finally, under a phoneme scoring system, nonword repetition ability was significant at the word and syllable levels and also accounted for the greatest amount of variance. Nonword repetition ability also showed a trend at the immediate phoneme level and with immediate comprehension. Using this scoring system, age exerted less of an effect under the immediate production conditions and nonverbal IQ exerted less of an effect under the recall conditions. See Appendix C for relevant ANCOVA tables.16

**Overall Summary of Results**

Findings from correlations and multiple regressions, and supported by ANCOVAs, were as follows:

1) Nonword repetition ability, using traditional scoring, was nonsignificant in predicting acquisition of new English vocabulary; instead, age accounted for most of the variance under immediate production conditions while nonverbal IQ accounted for most of the variance under recall production conditions.

2) Nonword repetition ability, scored under the phoneme condition—in order to assess degree of stability of representation in working memory—was significant in predicting acquisition of new words under immediate production of words and syllables.

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15 See Pearson, 2000a, for full multiple regression tables.
16 See Pearson, 2000a, for full ANCOVA tables.
but only for the lower English proficiency children. Additionally, nonword repetition ability showed a trend towards significance for immediate production of target words at the phoneme level—again, in lower English proficiency children only—and immediate comprehension of target words.

3) Current English proficiency level was nonsignificant on ability to learn new words at the lower proficiency levels, but significant with immediate learning in the higher English proficiency children.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to determine if, in ESL preschool children, a relationship exists between nonword repetition ability and L2 new word learning, under both production and comprehension conditions, as well as immediate and recall conditions. In other words, does nonword repetition ability differentiate faster vs. slower second language learning in preschoolers, thus being a potential unbiased differential diagnostic measure in this population?

The above findings indicate that there are similarities in the use of phonological working memory in both monolingual and L2 English learners. That said, however, results of this study do not support all that is known about nonword repetition ability as a predictor of language learning in monolingual children, nor of work by Service (1992) and Cheung (1996) with L2 learning in EFL contexts. With very young children—in an ESL context—there may be too many additional factors exerting an effect on their second language acquisition, thus causing nonword repetition ability to play a less significant role. In other words, the “pie” is being cut into too many pieces for nonword repetition ability to reach statistical significance. This should not be surprising in that second language acquisition is a much more complex situation than monolingual language acquisition.

One issue that can complicate the situation is that of “wordlikeness”, that is, how similar or dissimilar nonwords are to real words. This is currently being explored in the monolingual population by researchers such as Edwards, Beckman, and Munson (2004); Munson, Swenson, and Manthei (2005); and Roy and Chiat (2004). “Wordlikeness” becomes an even more complex issue when two languages are involved; not only is there the issue of similarity/dissimilarity of the nonwords to the new vocabulary (L2), but the L1 phonemic inventory and phonotactic constraints must also be considered (Pearson, 2000a, 2002). This has serious potential consequences for type of nonword test being used. The CNRep used in this study uses the same phonemic inventory and phonotactic constraints as does English. This may bias results based on the degree of difference between the L1 and L2 being investigated. Other nonword repetition tests, such as the Nonword Repetition Test (Dollaghan & Campbell, 1998) have a more basic syllable structure (CVCV) which could be less biased depending on the L1 when such tests are used as differential diagnostic measures. (See Archibald & Gathercole (2006) and Pearson (2000a, 2002) for fuller discussions of bias in nonword repetition tests.)

Other findings also deserve discussion. First, the findings of this study (see #2 above in the overall summary of results regarding degree of representation) support the
importance of assessing nonword repetition ability and new word learning in a more controlled manner that takes into account the degree of stability in the representation held in memory. This is in contrast to the traditional all-or-nothing (binary) approach that has taken place in previous studies. Gathercole, Frankish, Pickering, and Peaker (1999) used a three prong scoring system, but gave no operational definition of how this was done, so their system remains ambiguous, making a comparison between studies impossible.

Second, findings of this study support Cheung’s (1996) findings that nonword repetition ability is only significant at less proficient stages of L2 acquisition. Note that in point #2 of the overall summary of results, significance of nonword repetition ability was shown only for those children of lower English proficiency. Further, in point # 3 of the summary of results, it was found that English proficiency level was nonsignificant at the lower levels of proficiency, but exerted an effect at higher English proficiency levels. This pattern, where nonword repetition ability has a greater influence at lower proficiency levels while current English (L2) proficiency has a greater influence on new word learning at higher proficiency levels, supports earlier studies on monolingual children where a shift takes place by approximately age seven years. That is, initially, phonological working memory plays a stronger role in language acquisition, but as language proficiency develops, long-term memory and other factors begin to exert a stronger influence and the role of phonological working memory becomes weaker.

Conclusion

Nonword repetition ability, as a measure of phonological working memory, has been a rich line of inquiry over the past forty years, with continuing research being done in many areas. Clinical populations are being studied, most notably SLI (Archibald & Gathercole, 2006; Chiat & Roy, 2007; Estes, Evans, & Else-Quest, 2007; Munson, Edwards, & Beckman, 2005; Munson, Kurtz, & Windsor, 2005; Thal, Miller, Carlson, & Vega, 2005), though other clinical areas also are being explored, such as deafness (Dillon, Burkholder, Cleary, & Pisoni, 2004; Miller, 2004) and Down syndrome (Laws, 1998). The effect of nonword repetition ability on reading ability is also being investigated with interesting results (Maridaki-Kassotaki, 2002; Masterson, Laxon, Carnegie, Wright, & Horslen, 2005; Wagner & Torgeson, 1987). Exploration into the use of nonword repetition as a nonbiased predictor also continues with multicultural populations and second dialect speakers (Ellis Weismer, Tomblin, Zhang, Buckwalter, Chynoweth, & Jones, 2000), with learners of lower socioeconomic status (Engel, Santos, & Gathercole, 2008), and with L2 learners in EFL contexts (Masoura & Gathercole, 2005; Stokes, Wong, Fletcher, & Leonard, 2006).

Can nonword repetition ability, though, differentiate faster vs. slower language learning in preschool-aged L2 learners and thus be a potential unbiased differential diagnostic measure in this population? Though promising, at this point, it is too soon to tell whether nonword repetition ability will prove fruitful as a unbiased assessment in the population of ESL preschoolers. First, there are still many unknowns and problematic areas even with the monolingual population, and second, the situation with ESL children is even more complicated due to a) the “wordlikeness” issues revolving around both the
L1 and L2, and b) the exponentially larger number of interacting variables in a second language situation making for a far more complex situation.

This study has contributed to the existing knowledge base by exploring previous gaps, specifically, a) a younger (preschool) L2 population vs. school-aged children; b) second language acquisition vs. foreign language learning (ESL vs. EFL); and c) naturalistic play sessions vs. formal classroom learning. Additionally, an argument has been made that the degree of representation in working memory needs to be accounted for by measuring nonword repetition ability and new word learning more narrowly, that is, at the phoneme level rather than the whole word level. However, more work still needs to be done in order to definitively answer the question of whether this type of assessment truly is nonbiased and can be used as a differential diagnostic measure with the very young ESL population.

**Author Note**

Christen M. Pearson, Associate Professor, English Linguistics and TESOL, Grand Valley State University. The author would like to acknowledge the children who so eagerly participated in this study; the parents, teachers, and schools for their permission to work with the children during school hours; and Drs. Rachel Anderson, Barb Fazio, and Phil Connell for their valuable input on this project. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christen M. Pearson (pearsonc@gvsu.edu).
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Appendix A
Assessment Areas Scored for Each Child

Children’s Test of Nonword Repetition (CNRep)
- # words totally correct
- # syllables correct
- # phonemes correct (in order)

Target Words (new learning)
- Immediately after task
- Production # words totally correct
  # syllables correct
  # phonemes correct
- Comprehension # correct
- Recall (24-48 hrs. later)
- Production # words totally correct
  # syllables correct
  # phonemes correct
- Comprehension # correct
### Appendix B
Summary Chart of Multiple Regressions

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<td>age</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Immediate Production of Phonemes</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>age</td>
<td>.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Immediate Comprehension</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recall Production of Words</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>nIQ</td>
<td>.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recall Production of Syllables</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>nIQ</td>
<td>.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recall Production of Phonemes</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>nIQ</td>
<td>.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recall Comprehension</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Legend:**
- **Model** = Significance level of overall model
- **Significant** = Variable(s) significant independent of overall model
- **Variance** = Significance of variance of independent variable
- **age** = chronological age
- **nIQ** = nonverbal analytical reasoning ability
- **school** = amount of time in school
- **ns** = not significant
## Appendix C
Summary Charts of ANCOVA Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CNRep ability (assessed @ word level)</th>
<th>covariate</th>
<th>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; analysis</th>
<th>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; analysis</th>
<th>model</th>
<th>sign.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immediate production – word level</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>.164</td>
<td>.144</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate production – syllable level</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.080</td>
<td>.095</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate production – phoneme level</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>.101</td>
<td>.109</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate comprehension</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.250</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall production – word level</td>
<td>nIQ</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>.074</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall production – syllable level</td>
<td>nIQ</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>.152</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall production – phoneme level</td>
<td>nIQ</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td>.127</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall comprehension</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.705</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Nonword Repetition Ability (assessed at word level) x Degree of New Vocabulary Learned
#### Immediate and Recall
#### Production and Comprehension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CNRep ability (assessed at syllable level)</th>
<th>covariate</th>
<th>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; analysis</th>
<th>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; analysis</th>
<th>model</th>
<th>sign.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immediate production – word level</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.308</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate production – syllable level</td>
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<td>.041</td>
<td>.131</td>
<td>.203</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate production – phoneme level</td>
<td>nIQ</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>.132</td>
<td>.214</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate comprehension</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall production – word level</td>
<td>nIQ</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall production – syllable level</td>
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<td>.048</td>
<td>.106</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall production – phoneme level</td>
<td>nIQ</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.034</td>
<td>.073</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall comprehension</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.709</td>
<td>ns</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Nonword Repetition Ability (assessed at syllable level) x Degree of New Vocabulary Learned
#### Immediate and Recall
#### Production and Comprehension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CNRep ability (assessed at phoneme level)</th>
<th>covariate</th>
<th>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; analysis</th>
<th>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; analysis</th>
<th>model</th>
<th>sign.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immediate production – word level</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate production – syllable level</td>
<td>age</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.128</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate production – phoneme level</td>
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<td>.048</td>
<td>.174</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate comprehension</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.085 ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall production – word level</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.152 ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall production – syllable level</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.172 ns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recall production – phoneme level</td>
<td>nIQ</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>.182</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall comprehension</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.621 ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nonword Repetition Ability (assessed at phoneme level) x Degree of New Vocabulary Learned
Immediate and Recall Production and Comprehension

Legend: ns = not significant  * = significant at the .05 alpha level
Constructivism in Online ELL/ENL/ESOL Teacher Education: The Learners’ Perspectives
Snea Thinsan
Indiana University

Abstract
As the popularity of teacher training programs via distance education increases, much remains to be studied in terms of which pedagogical techniques work, how, and how well. This action research report features K-12, ELL/ENL teachers’ perceptions of an online teacher-training course designed according to constructivist principles. Titled Bilingualism and Bilingual Education, the course adopted constructivism as framed by prominent theorists. The data were collected from synchronous and asynchronous communication records: forum discussions, submitted assignments, standard course evaluations, participants’ feedback on learning tasks, emails, and chat records. The analysis was conducted through three rounds of systematic coding. Satisfaction with the learning experiences was reported as high, and reactions to the multiple, innovative, constructivist learning tasks were also highly positive, although a few challenges were reported by participants who were unfamiliar with the open-ended, non-linear, and complex nature of the learning environments. Implications for online ELL/ENL/ESOL teacher training and further research are offered.

Introduction: The Practical Problem and Rationale
More and more teacher training institutions, especially in the U.S., Europe, Australia, and some Asian countries, are offering their programs online, as Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) technologies have become increasingly useful components of online educational environments (Marra, 2006; Romiszowski & Mason, 2004). Meanwhile, research during the late 1990s and early 2000s has indicated the promising potential of CMC (see Estrada, 2004; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001; Oh, 2004; Suthers & Hundhausen, 2001) and explored how to make CMC work better in higher education. (See, for instance, Bonk & Dennen, 1999; Bonk & Dennen, 2002; Campbell & Norton, 2007; Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Gordon, 2008; Kirschner, Strijbos, Krejns, & Beers, 2004; Larochele, Bednarz, & Garrison, 1998; and Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003.) Nonetheless, much is still left to be further studied in specific terms (Gordon, 2008), especially in terms of how knowledge can be best constructed personally and socially as part of virtual classrooms. At the same time, research findings have also suggested the increased necessity for reflective teaching and action research that inform and lead to more effective practices in virtual environments. (See, for example, Estrada, 2004; Norton, 2008; and Pawan, et al., 2003.)

This paper reports only part of the findings from an action research study that examined the quality and quantity of online construction of knowledge among ELL/ENL/ESOL pre-service and in-service teachers and their reactions to and attitudes toward their learning experiences in an online teacher training course designed based on
constructivism. Specifically, it reports the qualitative findings based on the views of the participants in a constructivist online course.

Conceptual Frameworks

This exploratory qualitative study was guided by the literature related to CMC in distance teacher education and learning from sociocultural perspectives, or constructivism. Constructivist principles were synthesized from the works of different sociocultural constructivist theorists and translated into the learning tasks on which the participants commented at the end of the course studied.

CMC in distance teacher education

CMC was claimed at an earlier stage in the 1990s as potentially useful in making online education better than the traditional face-to-face mode in several ways. McCreary (1990) claimed that CMC users were more oriented toward exactness, organization of thought, and clear expression, as later supported by Condon & Cech (1996). In higher education, CMC was also found to promote critical skills for academic endeavors. Garrison et al. (2001), for instance, claimed that CMC allowed learners to construct experiences and knowledge through analyzing the subject matter, questioning, and challenging assumptions. Thus, they maintained that CMC could be used to promote critical thinking if employed properly. Similarly, Kirschner et al. (2004) argued that CMC could be used to promote critical thinking, as well as meaningful problem solving and knowledge construction. Marra (2006), having extensively reviewed related literature, concluded that CMC had the ability to promote knowledge construction and meaningful learning.

Despite such positive claims, however, more research is still needed to provide insights into whether, how much, and how CMC tools work as claimed in teacher education. On the instructor’s side, much is left to be researched in terms of what pedagogical approaches work and how they do. On the learner’s side, much more needs to be understood about whether, how, and how much different learners learn in the online environments under the popularized constructivist paradigm in which learners are held more accountable. Reflecting such research needs, the literature during the past decade has featured studies that intend to analyze and understand what is encrypted in the discourses generated by the learners in terms of how CMC and implemented pedagogy work. Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson (1997), for example, found that the construction of knowledge in the studied community had five phases of development: sharing & comparing information, exploration of inconsistency, negotiation of meaning or knowledge construction, testing/modification of proposed synthesis, and applications of newly constructed meaning. Jeong (2003) also looked at the data generated by learners and found that interactions involving opposing ideas promoted more discussion and critical thinking, and that evaluation of arguments was more likely to occur as participants were reaching conclusions, but not as arguments were being shared. These studies suggest that learners’ interactions and views are important for greater understanding of learning in the virtual world.
Learning and constructivism

Pedagogical void, or the lack of rigorous pedagogical principles, in online courses has been addressed since the 1990s. Bonk and Dennen (1999) found that most online courseware was pedagogically negligent. Three years later, they still found that, despite some progress in CMC tools, “assistance in developing rich situations for collaborative knowledge construction, information seeking and sharing, reflection, debate, and problem-based learning is generally overlooked in the design of standard courseware tools” (Bonk & Dennen, 2002, p. 330). Pedagogical issues have continued to dominate the literature on distance education research up to the present, especially in terms of the need for both teachers and learners to adopt new ways of teaching and learning (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004), the capacity for connectedness of teaching constructivist lessons (Gordon, 2008), interactive communication strategies (Mackinnon, 2004), and how to scaffold for more effective discussions (Oh, 2004).

Pedagogy should necessarily be based on learning theories when responsibility in education has been shifted from the teachers to the learners. Nieto (1999) looks at learning from the sociocultural and political perspective and defines learning based on the works of prominent educators during the past 50 years as the following:

- Learning is actively constructed (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970)
- Learning is influenced by cultural differences (Gardner, 1983)
- Learning is influenced by the context in which it occurs (Bruner, 1996; Piaget, 1951)
- Learning is socially mediated and develops within culture and community (Freire, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978)

These characteristics of constructivist learning have become the prevailing foci in online teacher training and research in distance education. Tobin (1993) contends that knowledge can be constructed both socially and personally as a dialectical relationship existing between the individual's contribution and the social contribution to knowledge in distance education. Bonk and Cunningham (1998) regard a learner as an active constructor of knowledge within a socially interactive environment in which negotiation of meaning and co-creation of knowledge occur. In addition, Gordon (2008) argues that “constructivism has helped to shift the way in which knowledge is understood and assessed” (p. 324). He adds that Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the “zone of proximal development” allows us “to realize that human learning, development, and knowledge are all embedded in a particular social and cultural context in which people exist and grow” (p. 324). Also recently, Ogan-Bekiroglu and Sengul-Turgut (2008), who interviewed 15 students before and after using constructivist lessons, found that teaching methods and strategies based on a constructivist approach helped the students move their epistemological beliefs in physics through upper levels.

Research questions

Along with the reviewed positive claims above, questions concerning whether and how learning takes place have been ones still requiring more research-based answers.
Despite the increased body of literature on constructivist pedagogy in distance teacher education during the past decade, Pan and Bonk (2007) have argued that one of the most troubling concerns about constructivism in more recent years remains its lack of empirical findings. This article contributes to this literature by reporting the voices of pre-service and in-service ESL/ENL/ELL teachers as learners in an intensive, six-week, constructivist online class. This study was designed to focus on the experiences of the participants in a course that the author taught for the third time in 2008 with an effort to redesign the course according to constructivist principles. The entire study was designed to address four major questions, but this article only reports and discusses the exploratory findings of questions 1-3 below:

What were the challenges faced by teachers as learners going through an online constructivist learning environment?  
What features of the constructivist course were favorably reported?  
What features of the constructivist course were least favorably reported?  
What were the quantitative and qualitative differences of learning when the course became more constructivist?

Method

This exploratory action research, again, was part of a larger study. It only focused on the learners’ perspectives from the 2008 course. Future analyses will aim at the comparative quantity and quality of participation and products by learners from all three years.

Participants

The participants included 16 teachers with different backgrounds, diverse experiences, and teaching levels that were enrolled in the course titled “L524 Bilingualism and Bilingual Education” offered in summer, 2008. They all participated fully in the course and provided various types of data required for this study, except that only 14 of them filled out the online course evaluation. The 2008 course was offered to ELL/ENL/ESOL K-12 teachers in Indiana and, for the first time, to teachers and graduate students across the U.S. who were working, or were interested in working, with ENL, ELL or ESOL students in the U.S., Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. All of them had taken at least one online course previously.

Procedures: Syllabi and constructivist learning tasks

The constructivist learning tasks were planned deliberately for the course taught in 2008. The 3-credit graduate course, offered at a large public university in the Midwest, was conducted entirely online. The author had been teaching the course for

For more information about the entire study, see http://thinsan.org/MITESOL08/.

The 2008 syllabus is downloadable via http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/examples/syllabus08.doc, and the 2007 syllabus, which was also used in 2006 at http://thinsan.net/forums/assignments/syllabus.htm as a reference.
three consecutive years, and this study was focused on the third year of his teaching, in which he consciously made changes to reflect more constructivist principles in the design of the course. Below is a brief summary of the 2008 course.

**The 2008 course**

The course remained an intensive one lasting only six weeks and was conducted entirely online this time. The required text remained Baker (2006). The major changes from previous years were in the assignments deliberately designed to reinforce constructivist principles and to respond to the lessons learned from the previous years.

**Constructivism in action**

In order to ensure that the course became saliently constructivist, the author revisited his teaching philosophy that was informed partly by his two earlier years of teaching the course and over five years of teaching teacher-training courses online. Then, he designed the learning tasks based on the constructivist principles mentioned earlier and as illustrated in Appendix A. In sum, the constructivist principles emphasized in the design of the course include the following synthesized concepts:

- **Collaboration:** in pairs and groups among learners
- **Interaction:** extended, meaningful, constructive interactions
- **Intense cognitive engagement:** increased level of participation and tasks requiring higher order of thinking
- **Scaffolding:** both from peers and the instructor with diverse experiences, as well as rich resources from various sources
- **Modeling:** by the instructor, peers, and products of students from previous years
- **Personalization of learning experiences:** more individual tasks
- **Socializing:** more pair and group assignments
- **Reflections:** deep reflections encouraged
- **Applications:** application clearly emphasized
- **Connection with the real world:** relevance
- **Prior knowledge & experiences:** both stimulated and valued
- **Actions:** practical tasks promoting actions

**Data collection and analysis**

The data were taken from both synchronous and asynchronous communication records: forum discussion portal, submitted assignments, standard course evaluations, learners’ feedback on all learning tasks, emails, and chat records. For a general sense of the richer data in the third year, as compared with those in the previous two years, please see Table 1, which does not include the course evaluations and learning assignments because they were not suitable for quantification.

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19 The same course taught in the previous two years was offered mainly online, but face-to-face workshops were conducted at the beginning and the end of the semester.

20 See http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/teachingphil.doc

21 For full descriptions of all constructivist learning tasks and rubrics for evaluation, please visit http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/examples/syllabus08.doc.
Table 1 Overview of data collected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Participants (N)</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Email exchanges</th>
<th>Total forum postings</th>
<th>Total # of topics</th>
<th># of words in chat data file</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8 weeks/S2</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2214 (social)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6 weeks/S1</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>643</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>955 (social)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6 weeks/S2</td>
<td>Sent 212; Rec’d 252</td>
<td>1668</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>50,946 (required)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As evident in the table above, the data generated by the participants in 2008 stood out as greater across the board because of more required tasks and stronger encouragement from the author for learners to be accountable for constructing their own knowledge.

The data analysis involved three rounds of systematic coding. The author had read the forum postings and emails several times informally during and right after the course before the actual coding. The first analysis effort was to select and sort the potentially relevant data from different sources into a document file that was divided into sections according to the research questions, as well as to identify tentative emerging themes, which were guided by the constructivist principles mentioned at the end of the “Constructivism in action” section above, and generate a coding scheme according to the three focused questions. The second effort was to look at the sorted data for more emerging themes and to organize the direct quotes and notes under each identified theme. The third round was to review and refine the coded data and themes, as well as to any omitted parts to the second round analysis log. Interpretation was made by going through the analysis logs and weaving narratives according to the research questions.

**Reliability & validity**

In absence of a co-rater that would have made the study more rigorous, repeated coding was adopted as described above to improve reliability and validity. In addition, thick descriptions of both the actions and the findings are offered to provide the reader with adequate insights into reliability and validity issues. Triangulation was also employed by using different sources of data elicited at different times over the course. As an instructor working hard and closely with the participants, the author regards himself as a useful research instrument (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1995), especially when it comes to interpreting what the participants reported. However, a risk involved could have been the tendency of imposing the author’s own views on the outcomes. To avoid such a risk, he tried to use the “participants’ exact wording” (Creswell, 2008, p. 257) in weaving the narratives of the report.

**Results**

Please note that the quantitative terms used in this section are meant to provide a clear sense about how many people are represented under each theme below that
describes three main larger sections: challenges, the most favored elements, and the least favored elements. However, it must be noted that the participants were not forced to provide their comments on every constructivist feature or element of the course. Moreover, the participants were able to choose to do different assignments among the given options. Hence, the quantitative phrases should be considered accordingly.

What were the challenges faced by in-service teachers as learners going through a strong form of constructivism?

Time and intensity
While satisfaction with the learning experiences was reported as very high (see in next section below and Appendix B), five participants reported the pressure to participate in the multiple tasks of different natures as intimidating. One participant said, “There were too many tasks. Simplifying would be preferable.” One of them summed up, “Interesting things were being discussed in many different places, but I couldn’t join all because of the time.”

Complexity and non-linearity
Another reported challenge concerns the confusion caused by complexity and ambiguity in the constructivist environment in which learning was virtually non-linear and multiple learning opportunities and responsibilities were competing for their attention, as also reflected in the above quote. Like three other participants, one participant advised the author to “make [the] syllabus more clear, more linear.” However, they rated the course design positively—4.57 out of 5—as positively as one student put it, “The course was very well-designed and sequenced.”

Difficulty in collaborating
The other notable challenge involves the difficulty in collaborating with more than two people. The course required both pair and group assignments, so collaboration was compulsory. While twelve of them clearly reported benefiting from collaboration, three others expressed challenges associated with collaboration, agreeing with this voice:

Different work schedules and working styles left me feeling like I had to do all the work. I don’t know how to remedy this and the instructor did give us the option of working with a partner instead of a group of three. Next time, I will stick with one partner!

In sum, reports on challenges appeared fewer in number of participants mentioning each challenge than the number of voices in favor of the constructivist features. To be specific, only six participants mentioned challenges, but 14 reported about their favorite learning activities. Most other responses were positive, as one of them concluded, “all in all, a very intense but useful course,” and the other one corroborated: “This is a crazy time of year, trying to close school and take a class at the same time. But I’m glad I did it. It was a great experience.”
What features of constructivism were favorably reported?

In general, the participants viewed their experiences quite positively, again as reflected in the course evaluation (see Appendix B). More specific comments are elaborated under the captured themes, which can be linked to the salient principles listed in Appendix A. Note that some of the themes below are interconnected and sometimes overlapping.

Collaboration, interaction, and role assignments

Eight out of 14 participants reported that they loved collaboration and meaningful interactions among themselves in pairs, in groups, and/or as a whole class, as well as with people outside the course and with the instructor. One wrote: “The collaboration with fellow students. The forum, message and chat options were very helpful.” Another one listed, as favorite tasks, the assignments that reinforce collaboration and interactions such as “discussion forums and the readings along with the chapter expert assignment. The bilingual teacher/school profile, too.” Another one explained the above voices further, indicating: “I learned a lot from peers and instructor through discussion of questions and assignments.” Finally, related to the favored collaboration and interaction, role assignment was reported by eight participants as helpful for their construction of knowledge, as one wrote:

The weekly discussions were well-organized by chapter, and again I think it is good practice to assign roles to students, as you did with the chapter expert/questioner [forum starter] and the provocateur. The good experiences were sharing each others' backgrounds and experiences.

Relevance, application, real world connection and human touch

Constructivist learning tasks that promote relevance, practical application, real world connection, and human touch were reported as favorable. The following voice illustrates it well as a representative of ten other voices:

This assignment [Bilingual program profile] gave me a chance to critically look at a program based on the learning I was absorbing from the class and the text. I think it helped me to put the text to practical use. I was able to see strengths and weaknesses in the program/teacher so that growth can occur within the school.

Essentially, the learning tasks associated with “[t]aking course material and making connections with real life experiences and situations” were reported as very useful and much appreciated. Ten participants reported having wonderful opportunities to learn from people around them, including colleagues, friends, and students, as well as bilingual programs, and to learn more beyond the texts from such people or programs. The below voice illustrates such a view further:

I loved this assignment [Bilingual learner profile] because I was able to interview two international quadrilinguals. It was great listening to their experiences of learning languages other than their L1’s. It also underscored how language is a very political issue in countries that were former colonies of major countries such as France.
Rich resources and scaffolding

Multiple resources and experiences that serve as scaffolding in the construction of knowledge were reported as highly helpful elements. The following quote represents the views of six other participant voices:

The forums were a great place to extend the learning of concepts covered in the text, or clear up any confusion. I gained so much knowledge for reading others' posts and personal experiences. It was a very unique class as we had people from all backgrounds, situations and grade levels. I not only learned about state-wide policies, but also national and global as well. I really do enjoy working with such a broad learning community.

Options, freedom, autonomy and personalized learning

Six participants expressed in the course evaluation high satisfaction with the options and freedom granted, as well as autonomy in learning, that they developed through the course. One commented: “Great course. I loved the freedom you gave us and how the learning was autonomous rather than teacher driven. Thanks for helping us to create our learning.” Another one linked the options with creativity, reporting: “I liked the creativity we were allowed with each assignment without having the limitations of an example.” One wrote, emphasizing autonomy, “I loved that the instructor allowed the students to create conversation and autonomous learning, rather than instructor-led learning,” and the other one corroborated:

I liked how we each had different roles for each week's assignments and discussions. I loved the questions being posed by the other students instead of the teacher. I thought the roles would add stress but really they caused less stress.

[Forum]

Reflections, cognitive engagement and knowledge construction

The participants mentioned the reflectively deep engagement in constructing knowledge personally and socially as favorable. At the individual level, constructivist learning tasks that fostered reflections and cognitive engagement were reported favorably by eight participants. One wrote, “the chapter expert assignment helped me deepen my understanding of my chapter,” as another one expressed her appreciation for individual reflections along with her desire to further personalize her learning diary:

The learning diary was a great idea because it is always something teachers say they need to do but never have time. I wish I would have been more free to talk about my own teaching situation instead of the book chapters so it was more like a reflective professional journal that just a list of notes from the book. [Course evaluation]

At the social level of knowledge construction, one said as a representative of nine other similar voices: “The discussions were the meat of the course for me. That's where a lot of my learning took place. I appreciate being able to bounce ideas around and was always interested in how others would view an issue.” To help emphasize that knowledge construction occurred both individually and socially, the other participant explained how she benefited from deep individual reflections and from reading others’ notes:
I enjoyed maintaining the learning diaries as it required me to reflect upon the readings. Not only was I able to add my thoughts but my doubts or questions as well. As I read other diaries, I saw similar questions and gained answerers as well. [Forum]

*Instructor: teaching presence, feedback, support, modeling, scaffolding*

Although constructivism suggests putting learners at the center of learning and knowledge construction, all the participants regarded the instructor as a crucial element. (Please see Appendix B for satisfaction with the roles of the instructor.) To begin with, prompt and ample feedback from the instructor was reported as one of the most appreciated elements. “The instructor offered feedback and suggestions on assignments even before they were turned in. I loved the amount of time and effort [he] put into this,” wrote one of them. Another one stressed how important it was for the instructor to offer the felt presence, reporting: “The instructor was extremely present and available should we need help. I am amazed how detailed the feedback from the assignments was.” Among those who were at the verge of being flattering, the following voice shows their understanding of how constructivism worked with a role of the instructor in it:

He promptly answers all questions and as a pre-service teacher, I had many. What I really enjoyed was his scaffolding of the topics to bring a deeper understanding of the varied issues (social, cultural, and political) concerning bilingualism. As he saw us struggle with some of the issues, he provided links, videos, and articles to help us take the next step in our ZPD. He has a wealth of sources and experiences that he was willing to share. He encouraged us to construct our own knowledge to look outside the box. He was an exemplary instructor! [Course evaluation]

Clearly, the instructor was regarded as an important contributor to their learning success as a source of academic and psychological support and encouragement.

*What features of the course were least favorably reported?*

**Similar or repetitious tasks**

Participants also reported a number of features that they did not see as very useful. One of the participants mentioned the *Chapter expert* assignment as her least favorite one, but without specifying the exact dislikes, except that she already learned enough from other venues. Four other participants suggested removing either the *Chapter expert* or the *Learning diary* assignments because they are very similar. For example, one wrote she regarded *Learning diaries* as the least useful, reasoning that: “The assignments and forum discussions should be enough to show what students are learning. The diary seems to be added work that regurgitates what was already posted somewhere else.” The other one reported, “I kept most of my notes in a less public way and saw the Learning diary as a task, not a help.” [Forum]

**Low applicability or relevance**

In addition, one participant did not like the *Lesson plan* assignment because she could not apply parts of it well: “Not real fond of the way the lesson plan assignment was done--parts of it were not applicable to teaching, maybe it could be in two parts (a
one page paper and the actual lessons).” Another participant thought that the textbook was geared too much toward children. She had hoped “it would be balanced between adults and kids.”

Discussion

The findings related to challenges faced by the learners in an online constructivist course, though few in number, deserve close attention. Constructivism puts huge responsibilities on the learners’ shoulders. Having to read over 400 pages of Baker (2006) within six weeks, participate intensively in the daily forum discussions, keep learning diaries, and carry out other pair and group tasks required of them was reported as a challenge. Plus, all of the K-12 teachers were still teaching their classes during the first few weeks of the 6-week course. Collaboration, in addition, requires the learners to spend more time planning and doing things with other peers, and, for busy participants with tight schedules and those who prefer less social learning, collaboration can become a cause for frustration. In addition, even a small issue about the interface of the discussion forum should be heeded as the learners under such a challenging learning environment could benefit from all sorts of facilitation in the reported non-linear complexity of this online world of learning.

The reportedly favorable constructivist features are in agreement with what the key theorists have proposed as sound. Tobin’s (1993) suggestion that knowledge construction occurs at both the personal and social levels and Bonk and Cunningham’s (1998) emphasis on the latter appeared to be perceived by participants as agreeable. Furthermore, the participants cited enhanced reflections, collaboration, interactions, and active engagement in knowledge construction as helpful elements, as Bruner (1996), Dewey (1916), and Freire (1970) would agree. Essentially, the participants suggest that knowledge construction takes place because of thoughtful reflections and active deep cognitive engagement that occurred both individually as an extension to prior experiences (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1916) and socially (Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978) under well-planned role assignment as Pawan, et al. (2003) advised. What is more, such efforts, meanwhile, were viewed by the participants as positively contributing to their learning because of the practicality of learning tasks that allowed the participants to relate the content with the real world and to connect with real people outside the class (Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). Essentially, learning constructively needs the richness of the knowledge, ideas, and information in a given sociocultural context (Gordon, 2008) and from diverse texts and sources, as well as multiple real-world experiences of the participants (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1916), as the necessary and useful scaffolding that yields more fruitful knowledge construction. In addition, the participants thought that knowledge construction should take place because of the options that allow the learners to be creative and autonomous in personalizing their learning to the fullest, as Ogan-Bekiroglu and Sengul-Turgut (2008) also found. Finally, yet importantly, the successful constructivist learning experience was reported as best enhanced by the teacher and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2001) that serves as a source of knowledge, feedback provider, facilitator, and motivator. Instructors’ roles appear to be viewed as very important. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the least favorable features reported in
In this study, repetition of the tasks, the excessive demand of work within a short period of time, and the irrelevant examples in the core text.

In conclusion, it seems that the pedagogical voids that Bonk & Dennen (2002) listed, namely collaborative knowledge construction, information seeking, reflection, debate, and problem-based (or real-world) learning, as others (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004; Gordon, 2008; Oh, 2004) have also mentioned, were filled by the promise of constructivist tasks in the studied course.

Limitations

This study did have some limitations, however. In addition to the absence of a co-rater, the author also did not manage to interview the participants for more in-depth accounts because of their unavailability. Another limitation is that the course was very intensive, and the time allowed may have been too short for constructivism to have a fuller impact on learning to the level that participants could realize it well enough, either positively or negatively. The other thing that could have been done was to elicit feedback on all constructivist elements from all willing participants so that quantification would be more proper and the results would become more proportionally insightful.

Implications

Practical implications

Challenges faced by the learners in this online constructivist class deserve close attention. The reported challenges associated with the intensive nature of the course that was coupled with the multiple, non-linear, concurrent learning tasks cannot be ignored. Some learners may be less tolerant of ambiguity, the lack of linearity, and the open-ended nature of tasks. Hence, they would benefit more from a constructivist class if they were assisted by an instructor’s proper facilitation and support. In addition, interactions were embraced as helpful, but collaborative tasks in light of the participants’ busy schedules and different working styles could pose discomfort on some participants. Clear examples of anticipated products and clear directions, as a few suggested, seem necessary. Furthermore, the discussion forum and the course portal interfaces may be a factor hindering the quality of knowledge construction. Therefore, selection of an online portal should consider the available software that facilitates interactions and collaboration, and learner feedback should be sought. If necessary, technical support should be provided to less technologically savvy learners.

Meanwhile, much can be learned from the positive comments by the participants in this study. It appears that the following features were perceived by the participants as positive elements contributing to their satisfactory learning experiences: options; learner-centered atmosphere with adequate and helpful teacher presence with prompt and helpful feedback; enough venues for both personalized and social construction of knowledge; meaningful interactions with and scaffolding from multiple resources, peers, people in the real world, and the instructor; and structured class management, i.e., via role
assignment. These features should thus be further reinforced or experimented with in various contexts.

Implications for future research

Several implications for future research are offered. First, since this study only relied on the participants’ written reports, further research should incorporate in-depth interviews as part of a case study approach to seek deeper insights into whether, how, and how much constructivism works. Second, research on the quality of learning or knowledge construction still needs refined pedagogical frameworks. More research along the same line as this study will be necessary. Third, the question of what exactly a workable constructivist action is like remains to be explored in various contexts to either confirm or problematize the results from this single study. Finally, a longitudinal study on how a constructivist teacher training course like this has an impact on the participants’ practices after they have returned to their classrooms will be worth an effort. Future efforts could try to intentionally reinforce these elements and learn more from the participants more closely via follow-up interviews.

Conclusion

As a participant immersed in the six weeks of intense actions, the author has personally acquired or developed some beliefs and thoughts that may be beyond the reported results. First, knowledge construction requires intense interactions among the original text, other texts, resourceful people in the community, peers, and instructor through both personalized and social tasks. Hard work by all participants, thus, seems unavoidable. Second, some students may not be automatically adjusted to the constructivist approach to learning, so modeling, clear directions, feedback, clarifications, support, and thoughtful plans by the instructor are critical. Teacher and teaching presence, thus, should be felt adequately and positively under the learner-centered atmosphere. Third, the instructor can be overwhelmed by the volume of participation once the participants are inspired to engage deeply in their knowledge construction and must, hence, be willing to work hard in catching up with the flow and in providing timely feedback and scaffolding where necessary. Fourth, constructivism does not work automatically; the instructor should plan to communicate clearly his or her pedagogical expectations, rationale for doing things, and the purposes of each task. Finally, action research is empowering, and reflective teaching and research should be promoted more in programs that train ELL/ENL/ESOL K-12 classroom teachers. Especially for those teachers who have limited exposure to bilingual issues and ELL/ENL/ESOL experiences, constructivism seems to offer the needed element of scaffolding offered by the instructor, other participants, texts, and learners or teachers in bilingual programs that some learning tasks target. Constructivism, in sum, serves as a kitchen full of ingredients that can allow for more cooking possibilities.
Author Note

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Estrada, V. (2004). Promoting reflective teaching practices through action research and electronic learning communities with Latino/a students. In C. Crawford, et al. (Eds.), *Proceedings of Society for Information Technology and Teacher*


### Appendix A

**Constructivist plans for enhanced learning experiences**

For the best view of the matrix, please see the Constructivist Plans for Enhanced Learning Experiences at [http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/appendix_1.htm](http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/appendix_1.htm). Please also see descriptions and evaluation rubrics of the learning tasks above at [http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/examples/syllabus08.doc](http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/examples/syllabus08.doc)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Concepts</th>
<th>1. Individual &amp; whole class (15%)</th>
<th>II. Pair work (15%)</th>
<th>III. Pair work (20%)</th>
<th>IV. Group work (no more than 3 members)</th>
<th>V. Individual (10%)</th>
<th>VI. Individual (10%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Collaboration</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Interaction: extended, meaningful, constructive</td>
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<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Intense cognitive engagement</td>
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<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Scaffolding</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
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<td>•</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. Modeling</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>•</td>
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<tr>
<td>F. Personalization</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Socializing</td>
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<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Reflection</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
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<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
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<tr>
<td>I. Application</td>
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<td>?</td>
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<td>•</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Connection with the real world; Relevance</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K. Prior knowledge &amp; experiences</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Action</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sara Thinsan, October 22, 2008
MITESOL 2008, MSU*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation aspects</th>
<th>Average points out of 5 (N = 14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall, I would rate the quality of this course as outstanding.</td>
<td>4.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor listens attentively to what students have to say.</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor makes me feel free to ask questions in class.</td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, I would rate this instructor as outstanding.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The objectives of this course are clearly stated.</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announced course objectives agree with what is taught.</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know what is expected of me in this course.</td>
<td>4.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor is well prepared for class meetings.</td>
<td>4.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor treats students with respect.</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor answers questions carefully and completely.</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progression of the course is logical from beginning to end.</td>
<td>4.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor illustrates relationships among topics.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor uses teaching methods well suited to the course.</td>
<td>4.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics covered in the course are well integrated.</td>
<td>4.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor clears up points of confusion for me and other class members.</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor is enthusiastic about teaching this course.</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course assignments help in learning the subject matter.</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I developed skill in critical thinking in this course.</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor emphasizes a conceptual grasp of the material.</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity and length of course assignments are reasonable.</td>
<td>4.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor stimulates my thinking.</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor is knowledgeable on course topics.</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor promotes an atmosphere conducive to learning.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor suggests references for added reading/research</td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor shows genuine interest in students.</td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The course improved my understanding of concepts in this field.</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor is regularly available for consultation.</td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I developed the ability to solve actual problems in this field.</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The 5-scale responses were weighted as follows: Strongly agree = 5; Agree = 4; Undecided = 3; Disagree = 2; Strongly disagree = 1. For course evaluation of previous years, see http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/06-7eva.pdf. Note that the 2006-7 version used a different 5-scale weighting system: Strongly agree = 4; Agree = 3; and Strong disagree = 0.
The perspectives of immigrant youth are important to be aware of because they can reveal the powerful role society has in framing and forming the range of possibilities available to them. Culturally speaking, immigrant youth often face mismatches between home and school values, but they sometimes encounter intra-cultural struggles as well. This article reviews literature about immigrant cultural adaptation and then illustrates concepts of cultural third space (Bhabha, 1994) using three texts produced by Somali adolescent boys. The texts offer examples of Somali adolescent perspectives and a window into their perspectives, language use, and identities which take shape at school, at home, and in other public spaces. A discussion of each text is given which connects to questions and implications for educators.

Introduction

Immigration has produced countless cultural contact zones throughout the world between people who sometimes know very little about each other. Movement across political and geographic borders creates opportunities to explore the meaning of culture, difference, and identity – all brought into relief by means of comparison as well as conflict. Large diaspora communities become established but are continually infused by relatives who follow family members already settled. This worldwide movement creates intimate as well as public zones of cultural and linguistic contact within and between immigrant communities as well as with the dominant culture. Within this web of cultures and languages, identities or affiliations are imposed and chosen. For example, a boy who claims a Somali ethnic and Muslim identity may have the experience of being stereotyped or mistaken for some other ethnicity at school or in his neighborhood. Perhaps he experiences being lumped with other East Africans or with African Americans. On the other hand, in his home life, the importance of his ethnic identity may fluctuate in his day-to-day life. For instance, his choices about whether and how to “be Somali,” “be Muslim,” or use his linguistic resources are often very personal and situated. Unfortunately, the ways a person can enact minoritized identities at school may be limited by culturally biased curricula or pedagogies which narrow rather than widen modes of expression or contestation (Lee, 2005; Ngo, in press; Olsen, 1998; Traoré & Lukens, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999).

A common assumption is that to be successful in a new country, immigrant groups must quickly relinquish the old ways and make lifestyle, linguistic, and attitudinal changes in the direction of the dominant society. Adjusting to a new culture is obviously more complex than this, involving a process that may last years if not decades and which is not necessarily inevitable. Assumptions of unidirectional adaptation processes have been challenged in previous research involving Somalis (e.g., Berms McGown, 1999; McMichael, 2002). It is useful for educators, as well as all members of society, to understand that adaptation to a new society and outward behaviors may fluctuate toward or away from the dominant society and that they may have meanings that are not apparent to casual observers. It is also important to work with youth to make spaces in
school for youth to represent new identities shaped by various cultural influences. Youth often create new ways of being through great acts of agency, as well as development feelings of ambivalence in their efforts to adapt to their worlds in and out of school. In other words, it is important to see the process of adaptation as both individual and collective as well as mediated by society’s institutions, prior migratory trends, and dominant culture and sub-cultures, including youth culture (Hall & Jefferson, 1998 [1975]). It is timely and relevant to explore youth perspectives within Somali communities in the diaspora and in the U.S., given the rise of new Americans who are from African and Muslim nations. And while the discussion in this article centers on three texts produced by Somali male adolescents, the texts offer insights into the complexity and mutability of their culture. In addition, the texts and their analysis serve as an example of interpreting or understanding culture and cultural adaptation which may be useful in understanding youth from other ethnicities. The perspectives across cultures surely change, but educators can transfer new ways of understanding culture to their experiences with youth of many different cultures.

**Review of Literature**

The field of sociology is helpful in understanding and questioning immigrant adaptation. One explanation of the variety of tensions and ultimate outcomes of immigration and adaptation processes comes from Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou’s (1993) *Modes of Incorporation Typology*. These researchers argue that it matters whether immigrants come to the United States under a governmental policy (e.g., asylum seekers versus unauthorized migrants), whether they are welcomed by the dominant society (e.g., “race” of immigrant is the same as those in the dominant society), and whether their co-ethnic community can offer resources to newcomers. To exemplify the application of this typology to the Somali community, the focus in this article, one can argue that Somalis are advantaged in Minnesota by the fact that they have largely come to the United States as refugees or asylum seekers under government policies and are, now, part of a large co-ethnic community. However, they experience prejudiced societal reception in U.S. society because they are phenotypically black and much of U.S. society is fundamentally racist (Ladson-Billings & Tate, IV, 2006). Although Portes and Zhou’s typology does not account for visible religious minorities such as Muslim women who wear a hijab (veil), the hijab would presumably trigger another type of negative societal reception in some contexts (Bigelow, 2006, 2007).

Fortunately, the effects of the many systems of oppression that immigrants face may be mitigated by what Portes and Zhou (1993) call “segmented assimilation” (p. 82). Segmented assimilation is the selective and partial adoption of the norms of the dominant society. Segmented assimilation is a concept which contests the assumption that there are only two choices in becoming “American”: integrate into the white middle class or opt for permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass. Segmented assimilation balances deliberate preservation of aspects of the home culture with rapid economic advancement due to embracing aspects of the new society. Portes and Zhou cite Gibson’s (1988) seminal research with Punjabi immigrant families to illustrate the rewards of segmented assimilation. In Gibson’s research, Punjabi parents embraced full proficiency in English, urged children to abide by school rules, ignored racist remarks, and avoided fights, while at the same time disparaging traits of the majority such as
dating and leaving home at the age of 18. The community was cohesive, retaining pride in their ethnic heritage, and this served to insulate youth from outside discrimination. Using Portes and Zhou’s typology, the Punjabi immigrants were poor upon arrival, faced widespread discrimination, and had no governmental assistance, nor a well-established co-ethnic community. These facts would suggest the potential failure of the group to achieve economic stability, but, theoretically, Portes and Zhou would argue that segmented assimilation was a mechanism for them to overcome societal barriers to education and wealth.

This example of Punjabi segmented assimilation counters the call many youth hear to become “American” as quickly as possible. Immigrant youth are likely to receive this message from many sources - peers, teachers, and the media. However, as Portes and Zhou (1993) and others (e.g., Nagasawa, Qian & Wong, 2001; White & Glick, 2000; White & Kaufman, 1997) show, immediate and wholesale embrace of the dominant culture may have damaging results, particularly in terms of academic achievement. This claim may seem counter-intuitive to some readers because one might reason that the more quickly immigrant adolescents become “American,” the more able they will be to speak English, relate to other English speakers, and obtain access to mainstream institutions. However, if immigrant youth attempt to leave behind all of the home culture as quickly as possible, they may experience a widening gap between themselves and the adults in their lives, resulting in less access to family and community-wide social networks. Immigrant youth rely on adults from their own co-ethnic communities to be the primary sources of important information and support (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Portes, 1998; Wong Fillmore, 1991). For adolescents to leverage support from parents and other adults in the community, native language proficiency and investment in the co-ethnic community are usually beneficial, if not essential. This is not to say that immigrant adults are not adapting to the new society, but adolescents typically do so very quickly when immersed in the powerful social forces of mainstream schooling, which is so often a vehicle for promoting the status quo in a society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1973, 1977). Noticing the way youth trade, blend, and contest identities can tell as much about cultural adaptation as about the power systems in our own society.

Language use is a powerful enactment of this identity development. Researchers in immigrant and language education have known for decades that strong native language (L1) skills facilitate second language (L2) acquisition (e.g., Plante, 1977), foster academic success (e.g., Vorih & Rosier, 1978), and strengthen family ties (e.g., Collier, 1989; Wong Fillmore, 1991). The social benefits of L1 maintenance also include the potential for adolescents to keep close links to the adults in their lives. However, the L1-L2 dichotomy may not apply in many contexts of language use for immigrant adolescents. Rather, code-switching is used among multilinguals for many reasons, including fronting a particular identity.

Bhabha (1994) uses the terms hybridity and third space to describe the cultural space that is created by an individual. Rejecting the definition of cultural identity based on an understanding of a singular self or a self belonging simply to a people of a common

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22 Social networks are synonymous to social capital which can be defined as “intangible social resources based on social relationships that one can draw upon to facilitate action and to achieve goals” (Coleman, 1990).
history and ancestry, Hall particularly argues for a concept of identity based on the constant process of differentiation and the recognition of difference (Hall, 1989, 1990, 1996). Hall contends that identity is constructed through discourse and representation and involves the play of power. He conceives identity as constituted through alterity - "the relation to the Other, the relation to what is not, to precisely what it lacks" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Any notion of identity, therefore, depends on its difference from or negation of some other term. And because identity is constructed through social and discursive practices (e.g., De Fina, 2003; Gee, 1990; Lin, Wang, Akamatsu, & Riazi, 2002; McKay & Wong, 1996), identity is a positioning—unstable, incomplete, and always changing (Hall 1989, 1990, 1996). According to Bhabha, the moment(s) of instability that allows for the re-positioning of identity is the “in-between” or “third space”. Bhabha explains:

For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges; rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (p. 211)

This understanding of multiple identities (or subjectivities) within the self that emerge through discourse and representation allows for sites to continuously open for reidentification and resignification—for the construction and re-construction of identities (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1990).

The three texts presented below were chosen purposefully for their potential to illustrate cultural contact zones, cultural hybridity, and their potential to foster dialogue with educators and researchers about immigrant teens. They remind us that adolescents have lives outside of school and that perhaps mainstream English is not always their target. The texts expose and elucidate reasons for maintaining ties to the home language and culture. Staying connected with their Somali community, culturally and linguistically, does not preclude the fact that youth are developing new, multicultural, or hybrid identities nor does this process imply that the Somali community is culturally unchanging. The texts that follow will facilitate one possible understanding of the symbolic choices youth make as they embrace and reject aspects of the cultures and languages around them.

These carefully selected texts are not meant to be representative but rather instructive in illuminating the theoretical notions from the literature reviewed. The individuals who produced the texts were not interviewed in order to inform or confirm the interpretation offered. The meaning of the texts is open for speculation, and the readers’ scrutiny and debate.

Text #1: Religion, Language, and Life in the Diaspora

The Somali community in Minnesota boasts a large number of Somali intellectuals and politicians. Some say it is the largest such group in the world (Dirie, 2007). At a recent literary event, an award-winning Somali writer, Nuruddin Farah, came to town to do a reading to promote his latest novel, Knots, a book written in English, set in Somalia, about a Somali woman who lives in Toronto. The reading was held at a literary center over a chic, urban bookstore and there were hundreds of Somalis in
attendance. After the reading, Farah fielded questions ranging from who his favorite character in his book was, to his views on current politics, to advice about how to overcome the trauma from the Somali civil war. (He recommended journaling.) It was evident that the community admired and respected him a great deal. But one topic provoked the audience. Farah does not believe Somali women should veil in ways similar to Arab women (e.g., wearing the hijab), and his position caused great indignation among many in his audience, male and female, young and old. An on-line review of the Farah’s reading by Abdirahaman Aynte (2007) captured some of this discord and debate within the Somali community, and 45 readers posted on-line comments between February 9, 2007 and March 15, 2007. These comments were written in English and Somali and mixes of both languages. The posts are interesting to read because they are written within and for other Somalis, not members of the dominant society. The texts appear naturalistically on a public website and not in an educational setting. They do, therefore, offer a genuine and uncommon glimpse of some of the views within the Somali community in Minnesota.

Many people write in defense of Farah, but the most recent post, presumably by a young man, is critical of the author. Muhammad wrote the following comment:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Text</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
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| **Salaamz** 2 all my broz and sis in Islam, Quite disappointing and sadly missing da whole point of Being creative and writer. Nuura Diin brotha, instead of using ur gift for 4 da **Deen** R u actually preaching our pride, beauty and power in our our Muslim women 2 be thrown away? Shame on you, probably u need 2 b doing da reading but from da right bookz. **Eebaa mahadleh maadaamaa aan sixun niyad jab iigu riday, waxaan admire-gareeya, wiilasha, iyo gabdaha sida wada jirka ah diintooda u stick up gareeyeen WELLDONE AND MAY ALLAH REWARD UZ ALL 4 IT.........AAMIIN. Muhammad Hassan Umar** | **Salaamz - Hello**
| **Deen** – faith | **Praise Be to Allah, and even though you have badly broken my heart, I admire the way the boys and the girls have to stick up for their religion.** |

Muhammad begins with a typical Somali greeting “Salaam,” clipped from the full Arabic “Salaam-Alaikum”. He continues in text messaging vernacular (e.g., “u need 2 b”), flavored with an urban vernacular (e.g., “da right bookz”) common in the oral language among many urban youth, particularly African-American youth. It is also
notable that the writer switches at the end to Somali, with two words code-switched back into standard spellings of mainstream English – *admire* and *stick up*. Code switching is a common phenomenon among bi- and multilinguals and is often touted as a particular, non-random, linguistic skill necessary for being a member of a certain speech community (Heller, 1995; Rampton, 1995). However, while the language used is edgy and urban, the message of Muhammad’s response seems fairly conservative. He ties the hijab to Somali women’s pride, beauty, and power and questions whether Farah is truly wise or “reading…from da right bookz,” presumably referring to the Quran. The switch to Somali at the end seems to be a direct encouragement to multilingual young Somalis (“boys and girls”) who are striving to maintain their religion in a very Judeo-Christian society.

Muhammad’s comments are suggestive of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994). Muhammad’s language suggests hybridity due to his use of multiple varieties of English (vernacular and mainstream), Somali, and text-messaging vernacular. But this short text also reveals some of the intra-ethnic tensions that often frame the lives of Somali young people. Farah, the most famous Somali author, makes statements that may conflict with the values of other Somali Muslims, as Muhammad’s response suggests. The text urges Somali youth to “stick up for their religion,” presumably within and beyond their own ethnic community. Muhammad has chosen for his comment a register and code to signal a youthful urban identity which, due to the code-switching, did not include monolingual English speakers. This phenomenon speaks to literature in the field showing that not all English language learners have learned or chosen mainstream English as their target language (e.g., Bashir-Ali, 2006). Whether or not Muhammad can shift registers/dialects is unknown, but he is clearly skilled in using his linguistic resources to communicate a message to his audience – other young, religious Somalis in the diaspora.

Given the cultural hybridity represented in Muhammad’s comment, it would be interesting to know how Muhammad is “read” by others in the wider Minnesota society. Is he read as a young man who is “becoming Black” (Ibrahim, 1999), or adopting an identity in which he aligns himself to what he imagines is the Black or African American community? If so, Muhammad’s likely complex racial, religious, and ethnic identity may be masked by “quick reads” or assumptions about who he is and what his affiliations are. Peers and teachers from other ethnic groups may assume that some Somali youth are African American, not Somali, due to stereotypes of their fashion tastes or language use. Bigelow (2008) quotes from Somali elders in this community who are concerned if youth seem to be acting “Black” (African American). They see any appearance of what they have come to understand as “Black” (e.g., language, dress, taste in music, choice of friends) as evidence that their youth may be at risk for getting into trouble, not doing well in school, leaving Islam behind, forgetting their culture, etc. This concern reflects the elders’ awareness of potential risks to their youth, but may also reflect a lack of understanding of the process of adapting to social norms in U.S. high schools, the diversity that exists within the African American population, and the mainstream popularity of hip-hop culture.

Judging from his writing style, Muhammad’s posting may look like evidence of his assimilation to U.S. youth culture. Given his opinions, and the fact that he took the time to post a thoughtful response, it does not seem that Muhammad is leaving Islam or
“his culture” as some may worry. At the moment he composed his post, he seems to see himself as both Somali and Muslim. He is reading Somali internet sites, attending Somali events, and displaying an opinion that would be aligned with the more conservative members of the community, even as he uses American teen vernacular and text-messaging vernacular. He is using the languages he possesses, within his community. Consequently, Muhammad offers an example of a cultural space where he is able to “wear” and articulate his multiple identities for what he presumes to be a similarly linguistically talented audience.

Muhammad’s posting raises many interesting questions for ESOL and language arts teachers to contemplate, such as: How can classroom learning include opportunities for multilinguals to use their multiple language skills to write for the multilingual audiences that they actually address in real life? How can language arts topics such as voice, register, and audience include the types of writing done outside of school among multilinguals and skilled code-switchers? How can texts such as Muhammad’s and the others be used in classrooms to develop students’ awareness of rhetorical devices in making an argument?

Text #2: Being and Becoming Somali

The next text came from a panel discussion of high school students organized by a group of language teachers at the University of Minnesota. The focus of the panel was multicultural education, and the purpose was to understand multicultural education from the perspective of the students. The audience was a class of pre-service teachers. The panel discussion was video recorded and later made into a digital video case on the topic of multicultural education. The on-line tool offers video clips from four students on a range of topics and questions for teachers to discuss or reflect upon.23 A Somali high school student (Moxammed24) on the panel, a senior already accepted to a state college, introduced himself this way:

I’m from Somalia, but I never grew up in Somalia. I don’t have no idea how it looks like. But I was told by my mom always never to forget where I’m from. She always keeps reminding that at home while we are at home always know how to speak in Somali even though my Somali is not as perfect as like the rest of the people who come from Somalia. But I do feel – um I do have like a strong culture identity. Because everywhere I go today my culture is being represented no matter where. In every country I’ve been I’ve seen like a lot of people know where my country is - in Africa and stuff like that. So basically, by the way I learn my culture was just you know to learn from people who come from my country, my homeland, where I’m from. So I just take my- I see what they do and then try to follow it and try to you know learn from it. And at the same time if I do something wrong of course they are there for me and they will tell me that’s not how things are done up here and I kind of accept it cause I don’t know how things were dealt with back there so. And I’m still learning today, everyday. Every day that goes by I see a new person I learn something. So, so that’s how it is for me basically.

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23 The digital video case can been viewed at this URL: http://cehd.umn.edu/CI/faculty/projects/bigelow/multic.html
24 This is a Somali language spelling because it uses an “x” not an “h”.
Moxammed shares a number of personal facts in his introduction. He is from Somalia, but does not know what it looks like. He speaks Somali, but not as perfectly as others who come from Somalia. Moxammed is guided by others who “know how things were dealt with back there”. He is still in the process of learning about being Somali. His words touch on his Somali identity and his investment in being Somali and learning to speak and act Somali. The idea that he is part of something bigger than himself and his family is obvious. He may feel a part of an imagined community that comes from “back there” and extends to “here.” Anderson (1983) and Hall (1990) have framed imagined community as the creation of new practices and self-representation discursively created and thus imagined. Blackledge (2004) and others have extended this construct within the idea of nation, and Norton (2001) has used its basic tenets to consider belonging and engagement in imagined communities of linguistic practice, which include race, gender, and social class, but not necessarily with a focus on national identity. This construct seems to be useful in understanding Moxammed’s experience. He imagines himself as a member of a community that transcends place and nationality. Culture and language have a powerful and symbolic value for him, and all seem to be facets of being Somali in his family and being Somali in his community in Minnesota.

Moxammed is engaged in a process emblematic of hybridity which is constantly shifting. Moxammed instructs listeners, too. Being “Somali” does not necessarily require first person experiences of life in Somalia. Someone else’s memories about Somalia may suffice. Furthermore, a person can learn how to speak and be Somali from others who are doing it, and this is possible to do in Minnesota. He reminds us that there are many narratives among immigrant communities about their identity – some based on nationality, some ethnicity, and perhaps some drawn upon idealized or nostalgic identities that encompass specific ways of acting and speaking. Surely, these nuances depend on many factors, including length of time in the United States, age of arrival, and connection to other members of the Somali Diaspora.

Some of the questions that arise from Moxammed’s text are the following: How is a person’s potential for imagining shaped by contrary or more powerful imaginations? Is one’s own imagining powerful enough? It must matter whether identity is legitimized by others or whether it is coming from an in between place where it is in the process of being transformed. It is compelling to consider what it means to be misunderstood, misrepresented by more powerful others, and, if so, how are immigrant students in schools “imagined” by others? Moxammed’s introduction of himself affirms for educators the relevance of speaking the home language and the importance of educational best practices that include native language maintenance and development. One purpose of native language use in the classroom for a student with strong English language skills such as Moxammed is to affirm his multilingualism, his home language(s), and to allow him to engage all of his linguistic skill to create expressive, meaningful texts, perhaps for audiences which are also multilingual. Many language arts standards can be learned and expressed through multiple languages (e.g., produce texts across multiple genres, for multiple audiences).

Text #3: “You bring out the Somali in me” and Connecting Home with School
The final text was composed and given to the author by a 7th grade Somali student. It is a poem entitled “You bring out the Somali in me.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>You bring out the Somali in me.</th>
<th>Fayr/fajr – Arabic word, first prayer of the day for Muslims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The prayers of fayr. The awaiting school.</td>
<td>Duhr – second prayer of the day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The puzzled teachers when they see my work.</td>
<td>Sidee tahay – A greeting in Somali. How are you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The angry teachers that know only one language.</td>
<td>Madrassa – Religious school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “whup that ass” maintenance they call it.</td>
<td>Asr – third prayer of the day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You bring out the prayer of “Duhr” in me the whole yummy food of my Mom.</td>
<td>Kitabs – Quran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pat on the Hedd, and the kiss on the cheek. The “Sidee Tahay” word that never fades between her smiles.</td>
<td>Maghrib – fourth prayer of the day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You bring out the soccer in me.</td>
<td>Isha – last prayer of the day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My crazy friends and neighborhood. The daily arguments of world-class teams. You bring out the “madrassa” in me. My dear Qur’an and The prayer of “asr” in me. The loud voices of children reading “kitabs” in me. You bring out the tasty dinners of my sisters. The “maghrib” prayers which I love. The family meeting every night. The free time with my brother. You bring out my brother in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

25 The poem is reprinted here with the student and his guardian’s permission. The student produced this text as part of a poetry unit focused on identity. The class had read poems such as Pat Mora’s Legal Alien and You bring out the Mexican in me by Sandra Cisneros. They watched a video clip of a high school girl’s interpretation of I’m Nobody” by Emily Dickinson from a website (http://www/favoritepoem.org/videos.html). They had also discussed culture and identity with questions such as “If you could choose three aspects of your culture and put them in a time box for the future, what would you save?”
His muscles and strength which he says is for “my protection”. The crazy girls chasing him around All waiting for attention from him. He looks at me and says “Heck no” “I ain’t leaving you alone”: You bring out the prayer of isha in me, the freshly bought milk afterward. My comfortable bed as I sleep. You bring out the dreams in me.

By Ahmed Suleiman

This poem shows much linguistic skill. Ahmed uses the structure of the models he was shown which includes this formula: “You bring out the _____ in me.” He aptly uses this structure numerous times, as in the following lines:

1. You bring out the prayers of “Duhr” in me.
2. You bring out the soccer in me.
3. You bring out the “madrassa” in me.
4. You bring out my brother in me.
5. You bring out the dreams in me.

Ahmed then adds the five prayers of the day, as an additional structure, possibly signifying the presence of his faith in his life and throughout the day. The poem reveals his views about his day as including school, friends, family, soccer, and religious school. Ahmed’s poem is multi-vocalic, incorporating voices of his teachers (“whup as ass” maintenance), his mother (“Sidee Tahay”), and, most of all, his brother (“my protection,” “Heck no,” “I ain’t leaving you alone”). Ahmed offers just a couple comments on school and his teachers:
1. The puzzled teachers when they see my work.
2. The angry teachers that know only one language.
3. The “whup that ass” maintenance they call it.

The feelings Ahmed’s teachers have for his work and the fact that they speak only one language are not lost on Ahmed. His teacher surmised that Ahmed’s line containing “whup that ass maintenance” is likely in reference to the fact that he was in an advanced ESL class and could have thought he no longer needed to be in ESL.

The poem reverberates with adolescent life in the United States, but also includes an ethnic Somali and religious perspective. As such, Ahmed has created a sense of his life which is suggestive of cultural hybridity. Ahmed’s poem reminds readers how important out-of-school, family, and religious lives are to students. Muslim students still report struggles at school related to following the mandatory religious observances (e.g., prayer times, fasting) and coping with classmates’ and teachers’ fears or stereotypes about Islam (Bigelow, 2006, 2008).

This text opens up possibilities to educators because it was the outcome of a class activity. It shows that displays of multilingualism, albeit moderate, and expressions of ethnic identity were welcomed by the teacher. Ahmed even spoke back to authority – his school and teachers. Ahmed’s poem is a powerful example of how a classroom learning context can open up spaces of expression where religious diversity is welcome.

Conclusion

The texts analyzed in this paper show great diversity in terms of how language is used and how cultural hybridity is expressed. The texts are at once very personal, yet also tap into a collective and somehow unified Somali culture, or “Somali-ness.” In the first text, the writer seems to be addressing an audience like himself: multilingual and religious. He calls out to them in support for “keeping their religion.” In the second text, the speaker claims a Somali identity, but tells of how he is still “becoming” Somali because those who are somehow “more Somali” are showing him how to act and speak. The third text names the things that the writer sees in his everyday life that symbolize the Somali culture, but also shares a sense of family warmth and youthful enjoyment that seem culturally universal. All three texts offer examples of immigrant youth expressing themselves in hybrid or third space ways. The texts do, however, offer somewhat different visions of what it means to be Somali in U.S. society, but none expresses the vision of cultural adjustment being a process of wholesale assimilation. Rather, they are suggestive of segmented assimilation (Portes & Zhou, 1993). The texts affirm the fact that cultural incongruities can occur within individuals and between members of the same ethnic groups.

As educators, a plethora of questions arise: How can the existence and creation of hybrid identities occur in the classroom? As immigrant youth grow up, finding themselves academically and professionally within the fabric of American cities and towns, whom do they choose to be culturally? What forces in society help or hinder their adaptation? How can learning climates and cultures make it possible to contest other-imposed identities in hallways, in lunchrooms, on the bus, and in class? How can
educators and youth resist dichotomous perspectives or activities that essentialize identity or culture in ways that do not honor the way students’ lived reality is represented? What local knowledge can and should educators include in curricula that have been opened up to revision or critique? And what borders do educators need to cross to begin to understand local knowledge? It is important to explore these questions, even if there are misunderstandings and missteps. When educators notice the social and cultural issues immigrant youth face, as well as how these issues are part of school life, they can facilitate more and better learning environments where diverse and changing perspectives are welcomed and perhaps examined.

The previous texts suggest that native language use exists outside the classroom and, in the case of Ahmed, perhaps inside the classroom, too. This is likely to have positive consequences for the academic, the emotional, and, eventually, the economic well-being of these young people. Joining the everyday literacies of home and community life with school includes many pedagogical practices which have the potential to support native language use and thus support bilingualism. Maintaining native language use is beneficial to youth because of the potential of keeping ties to parents and elders in the community strong. Besides the benefits of close ties to co-ethnic adults (e.g., emotional, financial) youth may also leverage the native language as a symbol (among many) of ethnic or national identity which, when strong, may help them cope with the dynamic school/peer contexts.

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References


The Challenges Faced by Teachers of Generation 1.5 Students at the Community College

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**Abstract**

Community colleges have a great diversity of students including many students defined as Generation 1.5 students. These students sometimes “fall through the cracks” because they have not been served adequately in K-12 schooling, nor do they fit neatly into a category when they are at community college. Further, these students are often not placed appropriately when they begin community college. If placed into developmental writing for native speakers, they may not receive the type or extent of instruction they need. Yet if placed into ESL classes, they may be resentful at being considered ESL students, and also may not receive the type of instruction that will benefit them the most. This paper explores the challenges faced by teachers of Generation 1.5 students at community colleges and their students, and how community college instructors can help students in this situation.

**Introduction**

Community college teachers in the U.S. serve a wide variety of students. More and more, these students are second language students (Batalova, Fix, & Murray, 2007; Berger, Short, & Menken, 2008; Gawienowski & Holper, 2006). Some of these students are international students, some are first-generation adult immigrants, and some are Generation 1.5 students. At many community colleges, these different groups are frequently served by different course structures. For example, there may be non-credit continuing education classes for immigrant adults, for-credit developmental English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes for second-language students enrolled in the college, and an intensive program for international students. However, there is no common paradigm shared by community colleges, so some community colleges will have only one or two of these programs, or even none of them. Also, which students participate in which program may vary from one community college to another. One of the groups that has presented an even further challenge to community colleges and community college teachers is what is frequently referred to as Generation 1.5 students (Blumenthal, Carmona, Machado, & Spaventa, 2008).

In the past, immigrants may not have attended college, but as the global economy has changed, students must pursue post-secondary education to meet the socio-economic demands of an economic system that requires knowledge-based workers instead of manufacturing-based workers (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Roberge, 2009). Thus, many people, including immigrants and their children who may not have considered college in the past, now enroll in college. Many of these students enroll in community college because it is near to home, less expensive, and perhaps less intimidating. In addition, no doubt, many second language learners enroll in community college because they may not...
have been accepted by other colleges and universities in part because of their lack of academic language skills (Patthey, Thomas-Spiegal, & Dillon, 2009).

Today, as the number of immigrants grows, community colleges are often in the forefront of discussions regarding how to meet the needs of this population, including those students referred to as Generation 1.5. In the following article, the varied definitions of Generation 1.5 will be presented, followed by a discussion of a typical profile of Generation 1.5 students. Discussion will then turn to challenges regarding placement in classes. Information regarding accommodations one teacher has made in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes to meet the needs of Generation 1.5 students at a large suburban community college will conclude the discussion.

Definition of Generation 1.5 Students

Which students are defined as Generation 1.5 varies. In the late 1980’s, this term was coined by sociologists to refer to children who were either born in the U.S. of immigrant parents or who had come at a very early age (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). Interest in this topic and the use of the term in ESL and second-language writing circles began to appear in the late 1990’s (Roberge, 2009). Some researchers define Generation 1.5 students as students who were born in the U.S., or came at a very young age, but still present with second-language errors in their English. Others have expanded the definition to include any student who has attended some K-12 schooling in the United States (Gawienowski & Holper, 2006; Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999; Roberge, 2002; Singhal, 2004). In other cases, native non-English speakers, such as Puerto Ricans and Native Americans, are included within the definition. Even students for whom English is a major second language, such as some students from the Caribbean, Africa, and India, can be considered Generation 1.5 students (Roberge, 2002). Finally, the use of the term altogether has also been questioned (Moore & Wald, 2008). While the definition of Generation 1.5 students may vary, there are enough common characteristics that educators find the term useful as a starting point for discussions regarding these students. For the purposes of this paper, the author’s definition of Generation 1.5 students is students who came to the United States as children or adolescents and have had some of their schooling in K-12 in the U.S. school systems.

A General Profile of Generation 1.5 Students

For many years, the typcal students which most ESL teachers taught were international students. These students were new to the United States and had usually been well-educated in their own countries. Generation 1.5 students often have the opposite profile (Reid, 2006). Many of them have lived in the United States for many years, and in some cases for their whole lives. Therefore, they often act just like their native-speaking English peers. In addition, they often have the same conversational abilities as their peers. However, their reading and writing skills may lag far behind their native-speaking peers. In addition, it is not uncommon for many of these students to have had limited or interrupted schooling (Berger et al., 2008; Roberge, 2002). Some of these students may not have literacy in their first language (Berger et al.; Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). Even
students who come into the educational system well educated are coming into a system that is new to them and their parents (Curry, 2004; Preto-Bay, 2004). The curriculum they studied in their home countries may not be the same as in the United States. Large numbers of schools in the United States do not have adequate ESL and bilingual programs to serve these students’ needs. Thus, these students find themselves dropped into a new academic environment, language, and curriculum with limited or even no support. Like most children, these students are able to pick up listening and speaking English with their peers fairly quickly, but may continue to struggle to read and write academic English (Roessingh, Cove, & Watt, 2005). At the K-12 level, teachers may support these students by not grading them based on their English skills. Therefore, Generation 1.5 students may not be truly aware that their English skills are still weak. However, once they begin college, they will be expected to function at the same level as their native-English speaking peers (Harklau, 2000; Roberge, 2002).

Although Generation 1.5 students are not monolithic, there are a number of characteristics that many of them have in common. First, their academic reading and writing skills are frequently much weaker than their speaking and listening skills. Nevertheless, some students who live in ethnic enclaves may still have difficulty with speaking and listening in English, especially within the college classroom where they are expected to be able to follow longer lectures and give formal speeches. In addition, their writing and reading skills are weaker than their native-English speaking peers. This seems to be especially true of vocabulary usage (Nuttall, 2003). A number of these students have learned to write what could be referred to as “safe” essays which they know will be acceptable, but they do not have enough understanding of the structure of English and enough vocabulary to manipulate the language in another way.

One of the major challenges that these students present is that they do not see themselves as English language learners. Thus, they are often reluctant to take coursework in ESL/EAPP, or simply do not identify themselves as non-native speakers of English. In cases where students have managed to gain adequate control of English, this may not present a difficulty. However, some Generation 1.5 students still have significant enough difficulties that college coursework becomes almost impossible for them without more English study (California Pathways, 2000; Connerty, 2008; Singhal, 2004). Initially, these students may be able to cope satisfactorily at the community college, and even pass their first composition class. However, as they proceed and are expected to do more with their language skills, they may find they do not have the academic language base they need to succeed academically. As Glowski (2008) stated, “They succeed in the short-run, but fail in the long-term.” Because these students do not fit neatly into a category, how to help these students succeed continues to be a challenge at the community college level.
Placement Challenges with Generation 1.5 Students

One of the major concerns regarding Generation 1.5 students at the community college is placement. Without appropriate placement, community college students are at risk of failure in meeting their educational goals. Furthermore, if such students are placed in classes with requirements they cannot meet, teachers are frustrated because they do not know how to meet their needs. In the opinion of this author, accurate placement of Generation 1.5 is even more crucial because if they can receive the second language help they need, they can realize what their actual weaknesses are, and these weaknesses can actually be improved more quickly than in native speaking students who still have developmental needs. If Generation 1.5 students are not placed appropriately, they will continue to struggle with limited knowledge of why they are not succeeding.

Nearly all community colleges require all entering students, regardless of their language background, to take placement tests to place them into writing, math, and sometimes reading classes. Most community colleges require students to take a standardized exam such as the COMPASS (ACT, 2003). COMPASS offers an ESL test, but a student must first be identified as a second language speaker before the student is given the ESL test. This initial identification is one of the biggest frustrations concerning Generation 1.5 students that community colleges face. Because community colleges are open-admission, many of them do not require resident students to indicate their previous educational attainment. Therefore, unlike four-year colleges and universities, community colleges have no verifiable way of knowing when a student actually started attending school in the United States, or what classes they took while in school, or how well they did in them. Therefore, the only way that most community colleges can identify second-language speakers is to ask students to self-identify as native or non-native speakers on their testing intake form. Some colleges may ask questions such as “Which language did you first speak?” and/or “Which language do you speak at home?” in order to identify English language learners who may not view themselves as non-native speakers (M. Spelleri, personal communication, November 7, 2008.).

Many Generation 1.5 students who have gone to school for several years in the U.S. may, indeed, be fluent speakers of English, and thus not view themselves as non-native speakers of English. This is especially true because many of these students have limited literacy in the language they speak at home. If students take the ESL test, they can pass into the test given to native speakers. But if they do not, they are then placed into ESL classes based on their scores. Even Generation 1.5 students who believe they are not native speakers of English will identify as native speakers because they want to avoid the perceived stigma of ESL. They may know they need more ESL support, but do not want to identify as being weak in English because they want to save face in front of friends and family. Another reason students may misidentify is because in most community colleges there are only one or two levels of developmental writing, but perhaps several levels of ESL courses. Students want to quickly get through their program of study and see ESL classes as slowing them down. This is true even though at many community colleges students can be enrolled in other classes while taking their ESL classes. But ultimately, many of these students are simply unaware of what they do not know, and their expectations of what they will have to do in college are uninformed (Goldschmidt & Ousey, 2006). This may be all the more true at the community college level because
community colleges as open-admissions institutions accept all students regardless of their readiness for college study. Yet, if students are not placed accurately initially, their chances for success diminish (California Pathways, 2000; Roessingh et al., 2005).

Second-language students who do not take the ESL version of the placement tests will place into developmental (remedial) writing and reading classes regardless of their level of English. Since community colleges accept all students, it is possible for a student with very little English, and extremely limited literacy, to place into developmental English and reading. For many second-language students, one semester of developmental English will not be enough to bring their English writing and reading up to college level. But even for students whose English skills may be at a higher level, developmental classes focusing on native-speaker weaknesses may not meet the needs of Generation 1.5 students who may have different needs and require more time than just one developmental writing class to overcome those weaknesses. In addition, these classes are frequently taught by instructors who have little or no second language acquisition background (Matsuda, 2008).

Some students may feel they are being discriminated against because they are not native speakers and/or because of their ethnicity. Because of this tension, a number of community colleges only require international students to take ESL classes, but this is not mandatory. A recent on-line discussion on three professional discussion lists (esllcc-l@hcc.hawaii.edu; slwis-l@lists.tesol.org; slw_cccc@lists.ncsu.edu ) indicated that most community colleges are not satisfied with their initial placement procedure, especially as it concerns Generation 1.5 students. Those colleges that seem the most satisfied with their placement procedure base at least some of their placement decisions on a direct writing assessment. However, community colleges that do not use a direct writing assessment view it as too expensive and complicated to implement.

Furthermore, since counselors and advisers will often be the first persons students meet with at the college, it is important for counselors to understand the needs and background of Generation 1.5 students. Teachers can help initiate this process. For example, the author started the process of building bridges with counselors by creating a FAQ sheet regarding the EAP program and the students served in the program, including Generation 1.5 students. This was followed by more formal presentations where counselors could ask more questions. This has created a more comfortable interaction between counseling and EAP than was the case previously.

Yet the problem of initial placement remains unsolved. Meetings with the testing department, the English department, and the administration have produced few changes, and many Generation 1.5 students still “fall through the cracks.” In the author’s opinion, the inclusion of a writing sample, along with standardized placement testing, would significantly improve accurate placement of Generation 1.5 students since students’ writing samples could be evaluated for second-language errors. Thus, students who misidentify as native speakers and who still have many errors in their writing could be correctly placed and helped at the beginning of their college careers instead of when they find themselves in academic trouble.
Creating Support for Generation 1.5

One of the challenges of teaching Generation 1.5 is that even though their speaking and listening skills in English may be on par with their native English-speaking peers, in the realm of reading and writing they are frequently still English language learners. If put into a regular section of composition, these students will not receive the type of or the extent of instruction they need to improve. However, when they are in an ESL classroom with recently arrived immigrants and international students, they will be annoyed by and bored with activities that focus on improving listening and speaking skills as well as activities that focus on cross-cultural comparisons. Some Generation 1.5 students may have little knowledge of a culture other than the U.S. However, this does depend greatly on the amount of time the student has been in the U.S., how often they visit “back home”, how much their parents share of their culture, and whether they are connected to their ethnic community (Gawienowski & Holper, 2006; Roberge, 2002; Singhal, 2004).

Some colleges have tried to offer special classes for Generation 1.5 including special sections of composition for multicultural students. While these classes have been described in the literature, they still present some problems (Gawienowski & Holper, 2006; Holten, 2002). Some colleges that have offered special Generation 1.5 sections have found that there is not high enough enrollment to fill the classes, and at the same time it takes enrollment away from ESL/EAP classes so that there is the potential for neither class to run.

Other colleges offer special multicultural composition sections, but who will actually register in them remains a challenge. Recent discussions show that enrollment in these special sections depend heavily on counselors advising students to take them. In addition, Generation 1.5 students may still be reluctant to take them, or the few sections that can be offered do not fit into the students’ schedules. Other colleges have added a tutorial run out of the writing center to help Generation 1.5 students (Destandau & Wald, 2002). In order to meet non-language needs, one college has added a special orientation for Generation 1.5 students to help them realize the demands in both time and language that college will present (Goldschmidt & Ousey, 2006). Others feel that Generation 1.5 students do benefit from ESL/EAP classes if those classes are modified to meet their needs. Matsuda, in Writing Myths (2008), makes the case that Generation 1.5 students can be taught in EAP classes, along with other international students and immigrants, as long as instructors recognize that the student profile of their class is not that of the typical international student.
Teaching Generation 1.5 at the Community College

This author, who works at a large suburban community college, has made changes within and outside the classroom to accommodate the Generation 1.5 students who now make up a substantial proportion of the students in EAP classes along with other long-term immigrants. However, readers will also note that these are not large changes in her curriculum, further emphasizing that Generation 1.5 students can be integrated into ESL classes. First of all, it has been necessary to add questions to the initial student introduction form in order to identify Generation 1.5 students. Questions now include not only how many years students have lived in the United States, but also if they graduated from an American high school. Interestingly, at the community college level, some students mark they attended an American high school, but did not graduate. Later on in the semester, students are given the opportunity to share language history stories, but this must be done carefully because Generation 1.5 students are often initially reluctant to do so. However, as the semester progresses, they tend to become more comfortable doing so and find they have much in common with other immigrant students in the classroom. This also allows the teacher to gain more insight into the challenges and frustrations, as well as the successes, these students experience.

As mentioned previously, Generation 1.5 students are often over-confident because they are unaware of the different expectations between high school and college (Goldschmidt & Ousey, 2006). Because of this, it is recommended to give a first-week “placement” test that makes students aware of the level and type of language skills expected without discouraging them (M. Spelleri, personal communication, March 3, 2009.). The author of this article includes multiple choice grammar questions which also appear on the final exam, a reading comprehension passage that includes inference questions, vocabulary exercises that use the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000), and a spelling exercise that asks students to identify the correct spelling of a choice of words. Within the classroom setting, it is also helpful to point out to students what other professors will expect. This can even include sharing syllabi from other classes. This is not only helpful to Generation 1.5 students, but to other ESL students as well.

Another change that the author has made in classes with Generation 1.5 students is to have writing topics that do not solely depend on comparing cultural differences as some Generation 1.5 students have little knowledge of a culture other than that of the United States. Even if they do have some knowledge, they may not be able to distinguish between cultural differences and generational differences. This may be one of the more difficult changes for ESL teachers to make as they often enjoy learning about the cultures of their students. Initially, this requires evaluating textbooks to determine if the textbooks focus too heavily on cultural topics as well as topics that assume the student is unfamiliar with U.S. culture. Such textbooks should not be used for classes with Generation 1.5 students. It is also necessary to offer a choice of topics in assignments. For example, a typical writing prompt is to compare two cultures. An alternative to this topic is to ask students to write or speak about how their lives are different from their grandparents’ lives. In this case, students can write about cultural or generational differences. Instead of just asking students to compare educational systems between two cultures, the option can be given to compare high school with college. This can have the added benefit of making Generation 1.5 students think about these differences as they are often not
completely aware of what the differences are. Nevertheless, because Generation 1.5 students’ experiences are varied, there will be Generation 1.5 students who can and will want to discuss cultural differences. Therefore, giving students options in their assignments is important in classes with Generation 1.5 students.

Helping students to understand the register of college discourse is also important as Generation 1.5 students frequently have no idea that the English they speak and write is informal or even includes slang. In fact, they may not even realize that there are different registers of language, whereas international students are often aware of register (even if they do not know the term) and will ask overly-concerned questions about whether their language use is appropriate. Native speakers of English, while perhaps not being aware of the term register or how to exactly function in some registers, are at least aware that different people use language differently in various situations. In writing assignments, the author spotlights words and expressions that may be too informal for college writing. In order to expose students to academic register in speaking, the author requires students in the more advanced ESL classes to attend academic presentations of guest speakers on campus and then write a summary and response to what they heard. This also encourages them to become more involved in campus activities, which is a continuing challenge with community college students.

Finally, there are language issues. While Generation 1.5 students may have similar difficulties, the range of those difficulties can vary significantly even within the same level. Some students’ writing may be barely comprehensible, or even legible, whereas other students appear to have fluency and reasonable accuracy in their writing. Generation 1.5 students will often continue to repeat the same mistakes so that it seems their English has become “fossilized” with errors. One reason for this is they do not notice their mistakes. Therefore, it is necessary to create activities that will make students notice. One way to do this is to ask students to find particular grammatical, lexical, and sentence structures within reading passages. These readings can come from their EAP textbooks, or from other books, newspapers, or periodicals. For example, students are given homework in which they are required to find examples of transitions with their meanings, or students may be asked to find examples of indirect speech in a reading. This is frequently done when students are studying these structures so that they notice how these structures are used in context. But just as important as helping them learn the structures, it also teaches them how to slow down and notice what they are doing. The author also gives spelling tests based on students’ spelling errors in their own writing since some of the Generation 1.5 students tend to have significant enough spelling difficulties to make their writing difficult to understand. But, in many cases, this is again a matter of students not noticing, as well as not knowing, what is important. Students sometimes feel their mistakes are not important because many of their mistakes may have never been brought to their attention (Fan, 2009).

Even Generation 1.5 students, however, whose writing appears reasonably fluent and accurate on first look may have more difficulties in writing than what may be initially apparent. This is because students have learned to write a “safe” essay, but if required to write outside of their comfort level, they will often have considerable
problems. Forming and using verb tenses correctly, making a variety of complex sentences, and choosing precise, academic words may continue to be challenges. In order to encourage students to write beyond their comfort level and to use structures that may be new to them, this author requires students to use particular sentence types and other structures as well as new vocabulary in their formal writing assignments. Requiring students to make revisions not only of content and organization, but also of more micro errors such as spelling and grammar, is essential for Generation 1.5 students because they often believe that as long as they have good ideas it does not matter how they communicate these ideas. Unfortunately, well-intentioned teachers can also reinforce this belief by telling students “you have good ideas” without pointing out aspects of their writing that they need to improve. In sum, activities that require Generation 1.5 students to notice, understand, and correct their language mistakes will help them accomplish their goals of obtaining a college education.

Conclusion

Community colleges and community college teachers are familiar with diversity issues and with working with under-prepared students. As such, they will continue to be on the front lines of working with Generation 1.5 students and other immigrant students to help them make the transition to academia. While a few colleges and teachers have created special classes and services for Generation 1.5, most teachers will find that they have to meet the needs of Generation 1.5 students within the configurations already present in their own colleges and in their own classes. This can be done by making modifications within their classes that include identifying students who may be Generation 1.5 and creating a safe, yet realistic, writing community within the classroom. In that context, curriculum modifications can be made to accommodate Generation 1.5 students. These modifications may include giving students topic options that do not require them to compare cultural differences with which they may be unfamiliar, teaching them the discourse and register of academia, creating activities that help them notice their mistakes, and increasing their academic vocabulary acquisition.

Furthermore, community college EAP teachers need to take the initiative in making connections with other support systems in the community college to inform them of the presence and needs of Generation 1.5 students. It is important that counselors and advisors be aware that the oral fluency of Generation 1.5 students can often mask significant weaknesses in reading and writing that can put these students at risk unless appropriate interventions are taken. Support personnel, such as tutors in the learning and writing centers, can be given training that helps them understand the problems that Generation 1.5 students may come to them with as well as how to help them overcome these problems. Faculty and administrators also need to be made aware of this demographic and their characteristics and challenges. Finally, EAP teachers will need to continue the push to create initial placement procedures that are both fair and accurate for Generation 1.5 students.

Community college teachers and administrators will continue to struggle with how to help Generation 1.5 students gain the language and academic skills they need to be successful, while the students themselves are reluctant, and even surprised, to discover
that they, indeed, are having academic difficulty because of language weaknesses that are neither, yet both, ESL and developmental English concerns. In addition, these students may also be unfamiliar with the requirements and expectations of college and need extra support to help them acclimate to the college environment. The community college as a whole needs to recognize that this demographic must be served as it is a growing, yet at-risk, group. EAP programs and teachers, whether they want to or not, are often the ones that must take the initiative to help their college support Generation 1.5 students. With timely and appropriate support, these students can be successful in their educational goals.

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From Tongue-Tied to Empowered:  
Teacher-Training on Migrant Issues Using Project-Based Learning

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Abstract

This paper discusses a project-based learning assignment used in an undergraduate level Teaching ESL course. Students with little to no background in ESL or migrant issues formed learning groups with the goal to address the over-arching question of: How can ESL learners from migrant families be better served educationally? First, students researched the issue at both national and local (West Michigan) levels and then collaborated to develop programs to address local problems. Following this, students designed websites for their projects and wrote up hypothetical grant proposals to seek funding for their projects. In this paper, the theoretical background for project-based learning is presented, followed by a description of the project. The paper then progresses to a discussion of the benefits, challenges, and limitations of this type of project from both the teacher’s and students’ perspectives.

Introduction

One megastrategy\textsuperscript{26} for teaching English Language Learners (ELLs) is to “involve the learner in projects that offer long-term, meaningful learning” (Diaz-Rico, 2004, p. 378). This strategy can also be used in teacher-training programs, specifically within the format of Project-Based Learning (PBL) and its relative, service learning\textsuperscript{27}. In PBL, students develop the skills to take the initiative in their own learning as well as the responsibility for seeing a project through to completion. When done in a way that involves authentic issues in the real world, students become emotionally invested in their work, take ownership of their project, and become more integrated within their own communities. (For further discussion on this approach, see Katz & Chard, 1989; Moss, 1998; and Roth-Vinson, 2001.)

According to Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial, & Palinscar (1991), the four main characteristics of PBL include: 1) contextualizing involvement with a \textit{driving question} that reflects an authentic real-world issue; 2) \textit{conducting active research} that immerses learners into the authentic situation and encourages higher level critical thinking skills, such as in Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956); 3) \textit{collaborating with

\textsuperscript{26} Diaz-Rico (2004) defines \textit{megastrategy} as “a large idea that guides practice” (p. 105). In comparison, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) use the terms \textit{macrostrategies} and \textit{microstrategies}, while Brown (2000) uses the term \textit{principle}.  
\textsuperscript{27} For more information on service learning with ELLs, see O’Grady & Chappell (2000). For a discussion of service learning in general, see Furco (1996). Examples of service learning in the traditional university classroom include Becnel, McLeod, Pope, & Shaw (2003), Jerman, Friend, McLeod, Taylor, & Coul (2006), and McLeod (in press).
others to such an extent that a learning community evolves; and 4) using cognitive tools (e.g., computer graphics or web design) in a final presentation on the issue.

When PBL is combined with actual community problems that need solving (sometimes referred to as problem-based learning) and/or with service learning, both content knowledge and community integration are further strengthened. An example of a combination of problem-based and service learning in an ESL situation is that of Gordon’s work with high-school aged ELLs and the learning of literature (Gordon & Pearson, 2008). In her class, Gordon taught *Arabian Nights* in a multi-layered format, incorporating video, text, and writing. Students faced the challenge of converting the piece of literature into a play that could be understood by younger ELLs at an elementary school and then took their play on the road. Encountering success, Gordon’s students then decided to present their play to seriously ill children at an area children’s hospital. However, because of the children’s fragile emotional and physical states, Gordon’s learners faced another challenge – that of revising the play to delete all story events involving death, dying, mutilations, loud noises, or anything scary while still retaining the underlying integrity of the story. These high school ELLs then took their play on the road once again, providing a service to a new population of children in the community.

Another example of PBL, this time at the university level, involves the progression of events leading to the writing and publication of the well-received and highly recommended text *Tongue-Tied: The Lives of Multilingual Children in Public Education* (Santa Ana, 2004). This volume of first-person accounts, revolving around the struggle for acceptance of multilingualism in U.S. public school systems, sought to “unsilence” (Zepeda, 2004, p. xi) the authors’ voices and encourage those still silent to find their voice. The project began in reaction to the highly controversial passing of California’s Proposition 227 in 1998, which, in part, mandated that all public school education in the state of California be conducted in English. Rather than the students simply protesting the passage of this proposition, the instructor of the course sought to address the problem by having his multilingual students write of their own experiences growing up multilingual in a predominantly monolingual country. The students then combined their essays and poetry into a single volume and sought publication of the project in order to reach a wider audience, thereby increasing the chances of having their voices be heard and effecting a change in the educational system.

Thus, Santa Ana’s students were challenged by a project that took a problem, sought a solution, and implemented a plan to serve others by the sharing of their childhood educational and language experiences in a published text. It is against this backdrop of PBL and service learning that the university-level project reported here is set.

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28 See http://primary98.sos.ca.gov/VoterGuide/Propositions/227.htm for a description of Proposition 227, along with a legislative analysis, arguments in favor of the proposition, and a rebuttal to the arguments.
The Project

Context

This project took place in an undergraduate course at a mid-sized state university during the winter term of 2008. The focus of the course was pedagogical methods for use with ELLs. Students in the course were English majors with either an emphasis in Language Arts or Secondary Education. All of the students (N=23) had taken an introductory linguistics course as a prerequisite, but they had little to no background knowledge or experience with ELLs and/or migrant issues. Because of this lack of background to use as a frame of reference, the instructor sought to contextualize the material by using a PBL approach.

A problem, from the instructor’s perspective, is that ELLs on the west side of the state of Michigan—where most of the students hoped to teach in the future—can be very different than those on the east side of the state. On the east side, being that Michigan is a port-of-entry state, there is a greater proportion of ELLs from immigrant and refugee families compared to the west side of the state, more heavily agricultural, where there are large numbers of children from migrant families, especially during the time period running from March through October. The question presented itself of how to best address this difference in pre-service teacher education.

Inspired by the work of Santa Ana with college-aged students, as well as the known benefits of PBL and the university’s strong emphasis on community service, the instructor sought out a basic text on migrant issues. Such a text, focused specifically on children of migrant workers in the university’s own “backyard,” is that of Western Michigan University’s Karen Vocke. Her 2007 text, entitled “Where Do I Go from Here?": Meeting the Unique Educational Needs of Migrant Students, includes discussion and photos of areas that many students in the course drove by, unknowingly, on their way to classes each day. As such, it provided an eye-opening reality to the immediacy of the situation. In the introductory material to her work, Vocke (2007) underscores what the students came to realize on those drives to school:

Migrant farm laborers are often called America’s “invisible people” – a term that, tragically, is just as applicable to their children. Because their lives are transitory and their English skills often limited, our opportunities to have a lasting impact on their literacy education are far too brief. But that makes these children no less deserving of our full commitment. (p. 3)

Goals

Motivated by the works of Santa Ana (2004) and Vocke (2007), the instructor (first author) then asked herself: How can I move my tongue-tied29 pre-service teachers

29The use of the term tongue-tied in reference to the pre-service teachers is to draw a common thread between the title of the book used for inspiration for this project, the university students in the course, and the ESL children of migrant families that might be their future students. The term tongue-tied for the pre-service teachers is meant to reflect their lack of knowledge of migrant issues and ESL learners, as well as lack of teaching experience. Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language (1964) defines tongue as meaning “ideas expressed by speaking” and “power of speaking,” while defining tongue-tied as meaning “speechless from
to a sense of empowerment in working with their future students in order for them to, in turn, move their tongue-tied migrant ELLs to a sense of empowerment about learning and their future? Thus, the overall goal for the instructor was to challenge students to become informed professionals ready to step forward and make a positive difference in their communities. For the students, the overall goal was, first, to develop an awareness of an “invisible” problem in their communities and the schools where they would soon teach, and, second, to prepare, as teachers, to make a significant positive difference in these children’s lives.

**Objectives**

The specific objectives the instructor had for the students were as follows: 1) to become informed professionals with a high degree of knowledge concerning both the issues surrounding migrant workers and appropriate methods for teaching children of migrant families; 2) to become proactive community members, empowered by knowledge, to solve authentic problems; 3) to learn how to conduct high quality library research on a specific topic; 4) to learn how to write a formal grant proposal in order to secure project funds in the future, as well as increase their marketability during their upcoming job searches; and 5) to increase their professional interpersonal communication and work skills.

**Procedure**

Students were first divided into two large groups of twelve students each for two reasons: 1) the project was large with only 14 weeks available for completion; and 2) typically, several students will drop the course during the first half of the semester, with the potential result being a group too small for the workload. Then, in order to address the previously stated goals and objectives, students were given the following question and tasks. The question was simple and open-ended in order to encourage students to be creative, to think outside-of-the-box, to tap into their individual interests and strengths, and to take ownership of their own learning and projects. (The full project guidelines can be found in Appendix A.)

**Question:** How can ESL learners from migrant families be better served educationally?

First, students formed two large learning groups (N=11, N=12) in order to address the above question. They then worked through the following steps:

**Step 1: Understand the Problem**

Students conducted various types of research in order to equip themselves with as much knowledge as possible on migrant issues, both across the U.S. and in West Michigan. The traditional library research was used, along with meetings with area service agencies.

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amazement, embarrassment, etc.” (p. 1534). The pre-service teachers, because of their lack of knowledge and experience, were in effect tongue-tied – they did not yet know enough to be able to express their ideas, and they were embarrassed because of this. It was through this project that they developed the power to speak out on these issues with confidence.

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and interviews with individuals personally affected by the migrant experience. Issues explored included economics, health care, identity, language, and education.

Step 2: Determine What Can Be Done Realistically in this Community
Using the general knowledge about migrant issues that had been obtained, along with the specific knowledge of the situation in West Michigan, students brainstormed ideas for potential projects that would address an existing need within the West Michigan area. Using their developing professional communication skills, students then came to a consensus on a specific project that would address educational needs in some way. Once a consensus was reached, students planned out their proposed project in detail.

Step 3: Write a Formal Grant Proposal
In order to complete this step, students first needed to research and identify appropriate grant organizations and then needed to write up a formal grant proposal for their project. Proposals needed to include a strong rationale for why their project was important and feasible in addressing a specific need in the community that was currently unmet. Students also needed to include background information that set the stage and supported their proposed project and rationale, including references. Additionally, the proposals needed full details on how their proposed projects would be carried out, including short-term (one year) and long-term (five year) timelines; goals and methods of assessing outcomes; and a detailed budget for the funds requested.

Step 4: Submit all Research, Project Details, and Grant Proposal
Students submitted large binders that contained all library research that had been done, including transcripts of interviews with agency representatives and individuals. Full details of their proposed plans needed to be included, along with the entire formal grant proposal.

Step 5: Formal Presentation of Project
Students gave a formal oral presentation of their projects that included the following areas: identification of an actual education-related problem, a formal proposal for how to address the problem, and a summary of their grant proposal.

Finally, projects were assessed by the professor and a grade assigned. Criteria included depth and breadth of background research, both at national and local levels; creativity and feasibility of proposed projects; likelihood of grant being funded based on how well it was written and supported; and professionalism of formal oral presentation.

Description and Assessment of this PBL Course Component

Project Descriptions

From the instructor’s perspective, this macro-project under a PBL approach went quite well, though not entirely without challenges. Students were creative in designing very different culminating projects. One group focused on ELLs directly, creating the

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30 Due to time constraints, project grant proposals remained hypothetical and were not actually submitted to granting organizations at the end of the semester. Students, however, were encouraged to further refine and then submit their proposals at a later date when they were in a better professional position to carry out their proposed projects.
Learning Tree: The Coalition for the Education of Migrant Children of West Michigan.
The goal of this project was to promote additive bilingualism and biliteracy through biculturalism. This group proposed to use “traveling suitcases,” each with a different theme, and each containing a carefully selected assortment of books and manipulables that would encourage cultural pride. These suitcases would remain in each migrant camp for a period of two weeks before rotating to another camp. The second aspect of this project involved providing bilingual instructor-volunteers for after-school type programs, located at the migrant camps, in order to work with both students and parents using the materials in the “traveling suitcases.” By using culturally-supportive materials and encouraging ethnic pride, it was hoped that children of migrant families would be encouraged to become productive members of both the macroculture and microculture—becoming not only bilingual, but also biliterate and bicultural.

The other group, rather than focusing on the ELLs themselves, designed a project that sought to support K-12 teachers of ELLs. Under the name of the Michigan Organization for the Advancement of Migrant Students (MOAMS), their goal was to bridge the gap between teachers and students of migrant families by providing effective resources and materials for the classroom. They proposed to do this in two ways: 1) by holding in-service days in West Michigan in order to create an awareness in teachers regarding the unique educational needs of their migrant students; and 2) by providing a $150 stipend to each attending teacher for his/her use in purchasing ESL supplies for their classroom from a list of carefully chosen items. It was hoped that by having appropriate resources readily available in classrooms that students’ needs would be more easily met. Further, it was hoped that these materials would be loaned out within schools by the various teachers, thus developing an intra-school “lending library” system. This project was presented by two representatives of the group at the 2008 MITESOL conference where it was very well received (Pearson, Roth, & King, 2008). Attendees fully supported and encouraged the students to make their proposal a reality, not just as it was originally conceived, but with the following additions: First, it was suggested that the group develop itself as a non-profit organization; and second, for the group to continue the idea of a lending system beyond the individual schools’ borders, instead creating a non-profit storefront operation that would act as a clearinghouse to facilitate the lending of books and materials across school districts and beyond.

Benefits from the Instructor’s Perspective

As noted previously, students designed very different, creative projects. In addition to the creativity the students exhibited, they also become invested in their projects, going beyond the specified requirements. Both groups developed themselves as organizations with functioning websites highlighting their projects. Further, some of the students showed serious interest in further sharing their ideas and pursuing their projects, even after the culmination of the course. Two students presented their specific project in detail at the 2008 MITESOL conference (King & Roth, 2008). All students left the course feeling that they were not only better prepared to teach ELLs, but also that they could make a positive difference in the educational system and in the community. The
following comments are representative of feedback the instructor received on anonymous project evaluation forms.

I’m really Proud of what our group has done, and I think some of us, including myself, will actually try to implement our ideas in the community.

I thought that [project] really motivated me as a teacher. I am now considering getting a masters in teaching ESL. This project sparked a feeling that I didn’t know was so deep.

I loved the real-world application of this project. It addressed the real problems that exist for the migrant children today. I liked how it was centered around the needs of the children. It made what we were learning in class come alive.

Challenges & Possible Solutions from the Instructor’s Perspective

Though considered from the instructor’s perspective to be successful overall, several areas of the project posed problems. Initially, students were overwhelmed and frustrated by a large group project that, although having specific guidelines and steps, was also open-ended. As a result of this, students took too long to get started on the actual projects. A possible solution to overcoming this problem would be to break up the project into several segments. This would increase the structure of the project in order to decrease feelings of being overwhelmed, while at the same time keeping the project open-ended to encourage creativity and thinking outside-of-the-box. Segmentation would also incorporate on-going accountability, thereby decreasing procrastination. A segmented system would also enable the instructor to provide periodic feedback of a written nature in order to increase student feelings of security and a sense of making positive progress. If PBL was used throughout an entire academic year, this scaffolding could be gradually removed once students were more comfortable with a PBL approach.

A second problematic area involved students not being able to agree on which project to pursue after the initial data gathering and brainstorming, along with the difficulty encountered by some due to their lack of interpersonal communication skills. A possible solution would be to divide the class into smaller groups of approximately five students in order to decrease the potential for conflict while at the same time encouraging development of much-needed communication skills. Smaller groups would also potentially decrease time management problems as there would be fewer school/work schedules to coordinate.\[31\]

\[31\] The suggested modifications have been put into effect for the winter 2009 semester and appear to be solving the aforementioned problems. Students are working in groups of 5-6; there are now three due dates throughout the semester with various sections due (background search, decision on project with rationale, and final project) which not only allows for on-going accountability, but also instructor feedback; and students are being given 10-15 minutes at the end of each class period to consult as a group on their projects, reducing the number of out-of-class meeting times with the difficulty of coordinating school/work schedules.
Benefits from the Students’ Perspectives

As with the instructor’s perspective, the students also felt there were both benefits and challenges using a PBL approach. According to two of the students (the 2nd and 3rd authors of this paper), students felt that although the size of the groups was large, there was still equal contribution by all members. They also felt that there was genuine interest in the project, with the sense that all group members were invested in the project and working as a team. In one of the groups, there was a decision to break the project into sections, with pairs/small groups assigned to each. This increased the work efficiency, as the smaller groups brought their compiled contributions to large group meetings where more could then be accomplished. Breaking up into smaller sections within the larger group also played to individual group member’s strengths; for example, those who had strong technology skills worked on developing a website, those with strong writing skills worked on the grant proposal, and those with artistic skills worked on the graphic design of a pamphlet promoting the group’s project. Additionally, the assignment was open-ended, thus allowing the groups to implement their own ideas, thoughts, and creativity into addressing the project’s goals.

Challenges from the Students’ Perspectives

From the students’ perspectives, for each element of the project that held a positive, there was also a concurrent negative that provided a challenge. According to the student coauthors of this paper, for example, since the assignment was open-ended, allowing for the encouragement and implementation of creativity (a positive), this initially presented the problem/challenge of finding a focus for the project as all the students had ideas from various points of view that they wished to see addressed. Also, although the smaller groups working within a larger group increased efficiency, it was difficult to coordinate and set small group deadlines as there were no intermediate deadlines for the project as a whole, only the final due date. A related challenge involving size of the large group was that it was difficult to find common meeting times to share ideas, to collaborate on progress of the project as a whole, and to move forward on new work due to conflicting class, work, and extra-curricular schedules. Finally, for both groups, in their genuine enthusiasm for this PBL approach, students got ahead of themselves in trying to create final projects without having first done the needed research and development to support their ideas. This necessitated some backing up and reconfiguring of the projects.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The question that must now be asked is: were the goals and objectives set forth at the beginning of this assignment able to be met through a PBL approach? In short, the answer must be in the affirmative. The objectives, as stated earlier in this paper, were: 1) to become informed professionals with a high degree of knowledge concerning both the issues surrounding migrant workers and appropriate methods for teaching children of migrant families; 2) to become proactive community members, empowered by knowledge, to solve authentic problems; 3) to learn how to conduct high quality library
research on a specific topic; 4) to learn how to write up a formal grant proposal in order to secure project funds in the future, as well as increase their marketability during their upcoming job searches; and 5) to increase their professional interpersonal communication and work skills. Though students met challenges along the way, these actually contributed to the last three objectives being met, in that students further refined their research skills, learned how to locate and write a grant proposal, and, perhaps most importantly, developed the interpersonal communication skills so necessary in today’s world. Students also met the first objective, as evidenced by their ability to coalesce their acquired knowledge into a project that was not only feasible, but also creative. Though the second objective will not be able to be fully ascertained for another year or two, once all the students have graduated and are teaching on their own, by all indications it will also have been met.\textsuperscript{32}

The earlier stated overall goal was, for the instructor, to challenge students to become informed professionals ready to step forward and make a positive difference in their communities. For students, the overall goals were to develop an awareness of an “invisible” problem in their communities and the schools where they would soon teach and to prepare, as future teachers, to make a positive difference in these children’s lives. And to reiterate the overarching question, which drove the instructor to develop this PBL task: How can I move my tongue-tied pre-service teachers to a sense of empowerment in working with their future students in order for them to, in turn, move their tongue-tied migrant ELLs to a sense of empowerment about learning and their future? As with the specific objectives, the overall goals were met, voiced best by the students themselves in their previous comments as well as below\textsuperscript{33}. Their comments also shed light on not only the viability, but the appropriateness and advantages of a PBL task for this type of learning in a teacher-training program at the university level.

\textit{I thought overall this was a very rewarding & meaningful project. It has made me excited to (hopefully) work with migrant students in the future, especially now that I am aware of the common struggles they face. I like how this project made us aware of not only common global problems that exist for children of migrant workers, but specific problems in our community.}

\textit{The process of creating a solution to a meaningful problem was…liberating.}

\textit{I liked this project because we were able to research a problem significant to our society & create a solution as a group. I refined (and developed) skills such as working as a team, maintaining responsibility, & being flexible.}

\textit{Feeling like we can actually do something and make a difference when we see a problem.}

\textit{I really enjoyed doing the research for this project. It was really neat to see the whole process from thinking of ideas to actually writing the grant. I feel that I am}

\textsuperscript{32}A basic grading rubric can be found in Appendix B. Students also filled out peer evaluations based on work habits, significance of contributions, and interpersonal communication skills.

\textsuperscript{33}All comments were in anonymous written form. Students, however, could opt to sign their form giving permission for their comments to be used, anonymously, in oral or written reports on this project.
so much more aware of issues going on in my community and have now seen that there are things I can actually do to help.

As can be seen in the quotes throughout this paper, students speak of their experiences, their gain in knowledge, their hope of making a difference in their communities. Some speak of emotions they did not know they had and of continuing their studies to focus specifically on ESL students. Most importantly, students are no longer tongue-tied but rather speak from a perspective of being empowered. By gaining their own voice and sense of empowerment, it is hoped that they, in turn, will instill in their own migrant students a sense of self, a voice, and a feeling of empowerment.
Author Note

Christen M. Pearson, Associate Professor, English Linguistics and TESOL, Grand Valley State University; Anne Roth, Grand Valley State University; Rebecca King, Grand Valley State University. The first author would like to acknowledge and thank all the students in this class who willingly shared their perceptions and comments on this project. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christen M. Pearson (pearsonc@gvsu.edu).
References


Appendix A
Migrant Project Guidelines

Under the surface, GVSU has several significant on-going projects of which many students/faculty/staff may not be aware. One of these involves the broad issue of sustainability, specifically as it relates to the environment, economy, and society. There are also “think tanks” being held on campus involving the issue of poverty and social justice. Your overall task is 1) to research these areas (sustainability of the environment, sustainability of the economy, sustainability of society, issues of poverty, and issues of social justice) and consider how they relate to ESL migrant children and their families; and 2) write a proposal for a major feasible project that will address these issues in a way that involves education. This is a HUGE project.

Step 1: Understanding the Problems
In order to get started, you will want to consider the following:

- What do each of these terms mean?
- What is the situation across the U.S.? In west Michigan?
- How do these issues impact specifically on the migrant population here?
- What is currently being done nationally and locally to address these problems?
- What grants are available to communities to address these problems?
- How does one go about writing up a proposal for a grant?
- What issues most immediately impact the students I will be teaching? Their families?
- What areas are most in need of being addressed?
- What can I do individually, as an educator, locally, at the state level, and nationally?
- What can we do as a group, collectively, to address these problems?

Each question will most likely lead to another group of questions to explore. Using all resources available to you – the internet, interviews with community members, public radio/public television documentaries, academic texts, etc. – saturate yourself with knowledge on these problems.

Step 2: Determining What Can Be Done Realistically in this Community
This step is basically identifying some specific areas of concern that can be realistically and feasibly addressed. It will become your Plan of Action (POA). At this point in the project, you will be discussing the issues in depth, sharing knowledge you have gained, and determining further areas that will need to be researched. Your focus will be migrant families in West Michigan, specifically, the ESL children of migrant families in the local schools. You will want to consider language issues, learning and academic literacy, the influence of socio-cultural issues and poverty, etc. Find your passion within this broad topic and decide what you can do to make a difference, to be a force for positive change.
Step 3: The Formal Proposal

Write a formal proposal for how your plan will be implemented. Check out grant applications to see what type of information is requested. You will minimally need to identify the problems you want to deal with (minimally, two global problems along with several smaller problems under each of the larger problems); give a rationale for why these issues need to be immediately addressed; provide background on the problems; identify current programs in the area, including their strengths and weaknesses; propose a well-thought-out plan (including how each area will be implemented), worthy of being funded, for how to address these problems in a better way, with key one year and five year goals. Depending upon how your project evolves, you may have other sections within your proposal. All proposals, though, must include a full list of all sources of information written in APA style. Each individual should keep extensive notes on all sources they consult and what information they obtained from each source. These will need to be pooled for the references; the easiest way to do this is to keep a running log of all information and sources on a weekly basis. Make sure that more than one person is doing this at all times, due to computer problems and such.

Notes: As noted already, this project is huge. It is meant to challenge you as students, as individuals, and as a class. It is meant to motivate you to see how what you are learning in school can prepare you for your future and the future of all with whom you come in contact.

There are no further guidelines for this project. It is open-ended in order for you to have free reign to deal with the problems you find yourselves to be most passionate about, in creative ways, and that use your collective strengths. Make sure, though, that with each step, you consider all the implications and potential repercussions that could result. The only way to determine these is to become as knowledgeable as possible about each area. For example, a group in Grand Rapids decided that community gardens would meet the needs of area residents for wholesome fresh foods. Their plan was to put in the gardens, provide the seeds and tools, and be available for sharing knowledge on how to garden. They did not anticipate that residents had no knowledge of most fruits and vegetables, due to not having previous access to them; that residents did not know how to cook the fresh vegetables given to them; and that residents were not interested in growing their own food, as their first priority/concern were jobs. A problem had been identified, a solution formally proposed, the grant obtained, and the project undertaken – yet the people who were in need had never been consulted. Keep this in mind.

It is my hope – my vision – that you will take this project beyond this class and actually pursue it in some way to make a difference in your community. Good luck!
# Appendix B

## Migrant Project Grading Rubric

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<td>Writing, including punctuation</td>
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An Analysis of English Tense and Aspect

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Abstract

English tense and aspect can be a daunting subject not only for English language learners but also for their teachers. In order for educators to offer satisfying and comprehensible explanations, they must first have a firm grasp of the subject matter themselves. A fourfold division of time can lead to fairly precise definitions of the various tenses/aspects found in English. This categorization of time and the resulting analysis will hopefully shed some light on several predicaments that can ensnare educators.

Introduction

Invariably, English language learners in higher education institutions are adept at developing questions about tense and aspect that have confounded many an educator throughout the ages. They want to know the difference between the present perfect and the simple past. They ask about the meaning of perfect progressive verbs, and they wonder why the McDonalds’ commercial can say, “I’m loving it,” after they were taught that non-action verbs cannot use the progressive. These are only a sampling of the kinds of quandaries that arise. To resolve these issues, a theoretical framework concerning English tense and aspect must be established. Huddleston and Pullum (2001) suggest four categories of time that will be helpful to this end. The relationships between these categories will then be analyzed, and definitions for the various tenses and aspects of English will be given.

Discussion

Background

A multitude of systems have been developed to describe the tense/aspect of English. Binnick (1991) attributes the first truly scientific analysis of tense to Otto Jespersen (pp. 53-54). Jespersen presents a seven-way division of time using a straight time line. This division consists mainly of past, present, and future, but past and future are further subdivided into before-past/future, past/future, and after-past/future (Jespersen, 1924, pp. 256-257). Reichenbach (1947) reanalyzed Jespersen’s system by defining tenses in relation to three points of time: point of speech (S), point of the event (E), and point of reference (R) (p. 288). Later, Bull (1968) proposed a theory that describes four temporal axes of orientation: retrospective, anticipated, retrospective anticipated, and an axis from which a person can retrospect or anticipate (p. 23). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) write, “…most other accounts of English tense and aspect assume one timeline…. Bull forces us to make a conceptual shift and to think in terms of viewing the tense-aspect system as a resource for taking different temporal perspectives on actions, events, and states of affairs” (p. 162). All of the above systems lay a foundation for the theory of tense presented here.

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With regards to aspect, linguists have had a difficult time agreeing on theoretical bases or even proper terminology. Some common divisions of aspect found in the literature are that of perfective (i.e., simple) and imperfective (i.e., progressive or continuous). Also, authors typically point to a distinction between aspect and *aktionsarten* (a German word that denotes the inherent aspeutal content of a verb) (e.g., cf. Binnick, 1991, pp. 139-149).

The perfect has been treated both as a tense and aspect. Comrie (1976), who treats the perfect as an aspect, gives a list of four “types of perfect”: perfect of result, experiential perfect, perfect or persistent situation, and perfect of recent past (pp. 52-65). This classification provides a helpful list on some of the main ways in which the perfect is used.

**Four Categories of Time**

Huddleston and Pullum (2001) describe four categories that are needed to discuss time’s relationship to grammar: deictic time, time of situation, time referred to, and time of orientation. For the current discussion, deictic time will be called *time of speaking*. Although this is a less accurate description, it should help simplify the presentation of the theory. The first category, time of speaking (*T_s*), is the time that it takes to make a statement. For example, if one says, “I like chocolate,” the time of speaking is the two or three seconds it takes to make this statement. Time of speaking starts when the speaker begins uttering the sentence and ends when the speaker has completed the statement.

The second category is time of situation (*T_{sit})*. This is the actual progression of time that an event occupies. The word *event* is being used loosely here to describe verbal actions and states. Therefore, the *T_{sit}* of the verb *walked* in “I walked to the store” began when the speaker started walking and finished when the speaker stopped walking and arrived at the store.

The third category, time referred to (*T_r*), is not so straightforward. *T_r* is the time that a verb is specifically describing. This may sound very much like *T_{sit}*, but there is an important distinction which does not become entirely clear until the progressive aspect is used. Consider the following example, “Charlie was watching a movie when Vanessa came home.” The *T_{sit}* of the verb *was watching* is the time that Charlie pressed play on the DVD player up to either the end of the movie or until the time that Charlie stops watching the movie. The *T_r* of this verb is a much shorter period of time. The speaker is simply talking about what Charlie was doing just before and also including the time of Vanessa’s arrival (i.e., watching a movie). Again, the actual situation of *was watching* includes the entire watching event, but the speaker apparently is not talking about this whole event.

The final category is time of orientation (*T_o*). This is a time to which another time is relating. This category is most visible when the past/future perfect or a nonstandard tense use is employed. For example, the past perfect refers to a time before another past time. In “Wayne had lost his scholarship before the end of 1997,” the losing of the scholarship happens before some time in the past (i.e., the closing of the year). Therefore, the end of 1997 is being used as a *T_o* for the past perfect verb, *had lost*. Further examples of this category will be given at a later time.
Internal Time Differentiation of Verbs

Not only does time need to be categorized, but verbs (or more accurately, lexical contents) do as well (Klein, 1994, pp. 72-98). One way to categorize verbs is based on their internal time distinction or the lack thereof. Many verbs can be internally divided into two different time stages (pp. 85-94). This includes verbs such as arrive, exit, land, leave, start, etc. When a bus arrives, a change of state takes place: the bus is not at the station and then it is. This internal temporal distinction leads to labeling these verbs as two-state verbs, and the actual duration of the action is quite ambiguous. Another category includes normal action verbs; these are often called activities. This group includes verbs such as run, eat, wash, sing, etc. There is no internal time contrast in these verbs. The beginning of a run is basically the same as the end of a running action. These verbs also have a beginning time and an end time. Finally, there are also non-action verbs (i.e., stative verbs) such as hate, like, own, be, hear, etc.

Diagramming

To help explain the framework, it will be helpful to diagram sentences. The following conventions (modified from Klein, 1994) will be used.

Time:

- T of a non-action verb: . . . . . .
- T of a two-state verb: . . . - - -
- T of an action verb: + + + + +
- T of a negative non-action verb: x x x x x
- T of a negative action verb: X X X X X
- T has no boundary ...
- T
- T_r
- T_o

Tense

With the above categories in place, one is now able to define tense. Tense appears to be a morpho-syntactic verb form that has a relationally temporal meaning. Specifically, tense shows the relationship between T_r and T_o. First, tense in English is represented by morphology (i.e., the –ed ending for the past tense, the –s ending for third person singular simple present tense verbs, and irregular past tense forms such as ate (the perfect forms are not being discussed here as they will be studied later). English also employs syntactical methods to indicate various tense forms. For example, will and be going to are helping verbs used to show future time (and arguably future tense).

Morphologically, English has two basic forms, past and not-past (the future tense and the present tense both use the base form of the verb while the past uses a distinct form). Semantically, however, English has three basic tenses: past, present, and future. The three tense system seems to have intuitive appeal, and it makes pedagogical sense since most students readily accept this model. For these reasons, a three-tense system will be employed in the current discussion.
Formal definitions of the tenses can be given at this time. The past tense indicates that $T_r$ is before (or less than) $T_o$. A simple way to represent tense relationships is through the use of mathematical/logic symbols. Therefore, the past tense means $T_r < T_o$. The sentence, “Andy went to Ford Field,” is an example of this.

![Diagram of past tense]

In this example, $T_r$ is less than $T_o$, therefore, the past tense is used.

For the present tense, $T_r$ intersects $T_o$ at some point in time. Symbolically, the logic symbol for intersection can be used to represent this relationship: $T_r \cap T_o$. “I have four cats,” is an example of a non-action verb in the simple present.

![Diagram of present tense]

Here, $T_r$ intersects with $T_o$. In other words, the time the speaker is talking about overlaps with the time the utterance is/was made. Scientific rules also use the simple present. For example, “Water freezes at 32° F.”

![Diagram of scientific present tense]

Notice that here the speaker is talking about all of time, which of course overlaps with the moment of speaking. Another typical use of the simple present is for generalizations or habits. The statement, “Mary drives to work,” means that basically each time Mary goes to work, she drives. This is a bit more difficult to diagram since the time of the situation is segmental (i.e., she is not in a constant state of driving to work, so there are pauses in the action). For the sake of simplicity, only a few of the driving events will be illustrated below.

![Diagram of habitual present tense]

In this example, the time referred to is quite broad and includes time periods even when the situation of driving is not actually happening. In other words, even at moments when Mary is not driving, it is still true that Mary drives to work. However, the point is that in these uses of the present tense, $T_r$ still intersects $T_o$.

The future tense follows the same pattern as the past and present tenses and can be defined as follows: $T_r > T_o$ (i.e., the time referred to happens after [or is greater than] the time of orientation). For simplicity’s sake, both will and be going to are here considered to constitute the future tense (although technically be going to is probably better categorized as prospective aspect [see Klein, 1994, pp. 114-117]). A standard example of the future tense could be, “I think that Jaime will ride with Cara to the party.”

![Diagram of future tense]
RIDE
This diagram shows how the time referred to of ride comes after the time of orientation (which, in this example, is equivalent to the moment of speaking).

Aspect

Aspect, like tense, can be a very confusing topic, but it does convey underlying meaning.

Aspect presents (or views) a verbal event from various perspectives. Technically, aspect shows the relationship between $T_r$ and $T_{sit}$ (see Huddleston & Pullum, 2001, pp. 125-126). English has two aspects: simple and progressive. One way to understand aspect is through an analogy with a parade (J. Laansma, personal communication, 2000). There is a large parade making its way through the center of town. High above the parade, there is a blimp. The people in the blimp can look down over the entire parade route and see the assembly from start to end. However, down on the street level, the parade is far too long to see the entire line of participants. On the street, a reporter is describing what is in front of her to a camera. The simple aspect views verbal events in a manner similar to the observer in the blimp. The verbal event is seen as a complete whole (i.e., $T_r = T_{sit}$), so the time to which one is referring is equal to the actual time of the situation (i.e., one is talking about a whole situation). For example, “I ran the race” uses the simple aspect to show that the speaker is referring to the whole running event.

Here, the diagram is attempting to indicate that $T_r$ and $T_{sit}$ cover the same time duration.

The progressive aspect (also called the continuous) views verbal events in a manner similar to a reporter on the street. The whole verbal event cannot be seen; only a small piece of the event is in focus. For example, in “I am running,” only a small piece of the running event is being viewed (i.e., the portion of the running that is/was happening at the moment of speaking).

In this example, $T_r$ is inside $T_{sit}$ and is smaller than $T_{sit}$. Using logic terminology, one could say that $T_r$ is a proper subset of $T_{sit}$ (i.e., $T_r \subset T_{sit}$). Consider an example that uses the past progressive: “I was skiing down the mountain when I fell and broke my leg.”

This example illustrates how $T_r$ is inside $T_{sit}$ and smaller than $T_{sit}$. The speaker is not talking about the entire skiing event. Only the relevant portion is being discussed (i.e., the time just before and including the falling event). Since only a small portion of the skiing event is of interest, the progressive aspect is used.
A peculiar feature of the progressive aspect is that it is only used with action verbs. For example, the non-action verb *to be* sounds strange in the progressive: *“I am being happy”* (the asterisk is used to indicate that this sentence is ungrammatical). However, a sentence such as “You are being a jerk” sounds much more natural. How is this possible? A probable explanation is that when verbs which typically have a stative meaning are used in the progressive, they are being used to describe an action with a meaning related to that of the state. In the example above, the speaker being in a state of happiness implies no action. However, when one is being a jerk, this actually means they are currently acting like a jerk, and therefore this implies an action.

**The Perfect**

With tense and aspect in place, the more difficult matter of the perfect can be discussed. The clarification of two points will help in this matter. First, the features that a verb acquires (e.g., the perfect, the progressive, etc.) have a basically unchanging nature (i.e., progressive aspect is the same thing whether it is joined with the present, the future perfect, the past, etc.). Second, the conventional labels for the twelve different tense/aspect combinations are slightly misleading. More specifically, three labels, present perfect, past perfect, and future perfect, are missing the important concept that all three of these forms also have the simple aspect and its meaning. Better labels would be simple present perfect, simple past perfect, and simple future perfect.

In order to make this second point clear in diagramming, another dichotomy must be made: \( T_r \) must now be divided into \( T_{r[aspect]} \) and \( T_{r[perfect]} \). Up until now, each mention of \( T_r \) has been a reference to \( T_{r[aspect]} \). This distinction can be seen in the sentence, “I have graduated from college.” The diagram below shows only \( T_{r[aspect]} \) since this feature has already been discussed. \( T_{r[perfect]} \) will be added in the example following the one below.

![Diagram of simple present perfect verb](image)

Since this is a diagram of a simple present perfect verb, the verb is using the simple aspect. The simple aspect means that \( T_r \) (now \( T_{r[aspect]} \)) = \( T_{sit} \). This has been shown in the picture above. Now think about the time to which the example sentence is actually referring. The time that this verb is actually referring to starts just after the graduation event and continues up to the moment of speaking and then ceases. The state of being out of college continues indefinitely into the future (assuming that this student does not return to college for further studies), but the time of *have graduated* does not continue. Therefore, \( T_{r[perfect]} \) trumps \( T_{r[aspect]} \) as representing the actual time to which a perfect verb refers. With perfect verbs, \( T_r \) aspect plays more of a background role, helping determine the placement of \( T_{r[aspect]} \). Therefore, \( T_{r[aspect]} \) will be shown using standard print while \( T_{r[perfect]} \) will be displayed in bold to indicate its primary importance.

![Diagram of perfect verb with aspect and perfect](image)
GRADUATED HAVE GRADUATED

This illustration shows $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$ starting just after the act of graduation (and hence, just after $T_{r[\text{aspect}]}$), continuing up until $T_o$ and then stopping. The ellipses at the end of the dashes, indicating the state of being out of college, show that this state continues forever.

Finally, a technical definition for the perfect can be given. $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$ starts at the right bracket of $T_{r[\text{aspect}]}$ and continues until it fully includes $T_o$ and then stops. One might wonder why this definition has $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$ starting after $T_{r[\text{aspect}]}$ when it looks as if $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$ is simply coming after $T_{s[t]}$. Perfect progressive verbs help show why the above definition appears to be correct. However, before attention is given to perfect progressive verbs, it will be helpful to first look at some examples of the simple past perfect and simple future perfect.

With the past perfect, two times of orientation become necessary (the second $T_o$ will be labeled $T_{o2}$). The following example will be diagrammed and then explained: “Lucy had already left the hotel before the fire started” (both leave and start are two-state verbs, but only the actions will be shown to simplify the illustration).

$$aspect[+++++]| \text{HAD LEFT } \{|*\} \text{ LEAVE } \{|*\} \text{ STARTED}$$

First, the past perfect uses the past tense to show that $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$ is less than $T_o$ (here, $T_s$). That $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$, not $T_{r[\text{aspect}]}$, is the relevant $T_r$ for the tense of perfect verbs should become clear in the discussion on the simple future perfect. $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$, following the basic definition for the perfect, starts at the right bracket of $T_{r[\text{aspect}]}$ and continues until it fully includes a time of orientation (i.e., $T_{o2}$) and then stops. What does all of this really mean? For starters, the past tense tells the listener that the time being referred to (i.e., $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$) is less than the time of orientation (i.e., the moment of speaking). Also, one can see that the effects of leaving (i.e., $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$) coincide and interrelate with the starting of the fire. In other words, Lucy’s leaving of the hotel was relevant because she was not there when the fire began. After the time of the fire, Lucy’s leaving is no longer a matter of importance; therefore, $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$ comes to an end.

The future perfect uses two times of orientation as well. For example, “Rie will have written her thesis by 2010.” An interesting characteristic of this sentence, and many future perfect sentences, is its ambiguous nature as to the exact time of the situation. As with many perfects, precise timing is not of importance; it is the relationship of the perfect verb to a time of orientation that is often relevant. It is clear in the above example that the time of writing begins before 2010. However, assuming that the moment of speaking takes place in January, 2009, the writing event could have begun prior to the time of speaking (e.g., in 2008), at the time of speaking, or after the time of speaking (e.g., in December, 2009). To make this example more interesting, $T_{s[t]}$ will start before the moment of speaking.

$$aspect[+++++]| \{*\} \{2010\}_2 \text{perfect}$$
This example reveals the probable importance of $T_{\text{perf}}$ for the tense of perfect verbs. The verb is in the future tense. According to the definition of the future tense, $T_r$ should be greater than $T_o$. If $T_{\text{aspect}}$ were the relevant factor for the tense of perfect verbs, one might expect the present tense to be used in this example since $T_r$ would intersect $T_o$. However, it seems much more likely that $T_{\text{perf}}$ is what is relevant to tense since, in the above diagram, $T_{\text{perf}}$ is greater than $T_o$ and the future tense is used. Once again, $T_{\text{aspect}}$ seems to play more of a background role as it helps show where $T_{\text{perf}}$ begins but does not itself relate to $T_o$ to show a tense relationship. As previously mentioned, future perfects have two times of orientation. $T_o$ is the relevant time of orientation for the perfect. $T_{\text{perf}}$ starts at the right bracket of $T_{\text{aspect}}$ and continues until it includes a time of orientation and then stops.

Having examined the simple past perfect and simple future perfect, one can now return to the question of why the definition given for the perfect has $T_{\text{perf}}$ relating to $T_{\text{aspect}}$ instead of $T_{\text{sit}}$. Again, this is best explained by looking at perfect progressive verbs. Consider the following two sentences: “They had listened to the Beatles before recording their first album.” and “They had been listening to the Beatles before recording their first album.” The first sentence uses the simple past perfect, and the second sentence uses the past perfect progressive. Below is a diagram of the simple past perfect sentence.

![Diagram of simple past perfect sentence]

There are no real surprises in this illustration. But in the diagram of the past perfect progressive, a new picture is seen.

![Diagram of past perfect progressive sentence]

Since this is a progressive verb, $T_{\text{aspect}}$ is smaller than and inside $T_{\text{sit}}$. This is a perfect where $T_{\text{sit}}$ does not include a time of orientation, so $T_{\text{perf}}$ starts at the right bracket of $T_{\text{aspect}}$ and continues until it reaches a $T_o$ (i.e., $T_{o2}$ [the time of recording]) and then stops. This verb is referring to a time after a small snapshot (or internal view) of the listening event. If this diagram is correct, then $T_{\text{perf}}$ is clearly relating to $T_{\text{aspect}}$, not $T_{\text{sit}}$. The rest of this diagram is basically the same as the simple past perfect.

The present and past perfect progressive act in a similar way to the past perfect progressive. For brevity’s sake, only the present perfect progressive will be diagrammed. A perfect that, at first glance, appears to be different from the other perfects will be looked at since this type of perfect is common. There is a group of perfects where $T_{\text{sit}}$ appears to include $T_o$. For example, “Reem has studied English here for nine months.”

![Diagram of present perfect progressive sentence]

In this example, it sounds like the $T_{\text{sit}}$ of study includes the present moment. While the actual studying event may or may not include the present moment, the event that is
relevant for grammar is the studying that lasted nine months. This $T_{sit}$ has finished and the speaker is now in the post-state of these nine months of studying. Now consider the following example, “Reem has been studying English for nine months.”

9 MONTHS \{\ast\} \\
\text{aspect}[+++++][+++]+++

Since this is a progressive verb, $T_{[aspect]}$ is smaller than and inside $T_{sit}$. And since this is a present verb, $T_{[perfect]}$ intersects $T_o$. Here, due to the progressive aspect, the situation of studying continues after the nine month studying time (and most likely past $T_o$). At this point, one might ask, “What exactly is the perfect? Is it a tense or an aspect?” Not surprisingly, this is not a simple question to answer. With regards to meaning, it seems reasonable to call the perfect a tense. The reason for this is because the perfect, like tense, seems to deal with the relationship between $T_r$ and $T_o$. However, with regards to form, it is quite awkward to consider the perfect a tense. By definition, an infinitive is not bound by tense, person, or number. For example, it is impossible to know if to go is talking about the past, present, future, first person singular, third person plural, etc. without a context. Although infinitives do not have different forms for the various tenses, they do have perfect forms (e.g., “I want to have left before Mary calls”). Therefore, it appears that the perfect is not a tense form. What kind of form is it then? Since this matter is still highly debated and detailed arguments are needed to support any view, definitively answering this question seems to go beyond the scope of the current discussion. However, the following two points do seem pertinent: concerning meaning, the perfect is similar to a tense; concerning form, it is not a tense.

**Benefits and Limitations**

The proposed theory of tense and aspect seems to be a fairly accurate representation of tense and aspect in English since it can readily explain most, and possibly all (although this is certainly hard to test due to the myriads of tense uses), tense uses that are temporally related. This descriptive adequacy makes the theory both powerful and useful and is by far its greatest asset. It can help clarify the confusing nature of the perfect and distinctions between various tense/aspect combinations. Also, the theory is fairly simple to represent graphically in the form of diagrams.

Many limitations, however, also exist. The primary shortcoming of the theory is its technical nature that is neither easily nor quickly understood. This means that, in its technical form, it is of limited value in teaching English tense and aspect to speakers of other languages. Also, its technical nature renders it practical only with advanced leveled students probably in higher education institutions. Another issue is that the theory does possibly seem to struggle with a small portion of the data. For example, one difficult issue to handle is the use of progressive verbs for habitual actions. Consider the following: “He is always teasing me.” This has the idea of a repeated action. What the progressive most likely indicates is best represented pictorially. A slightly more technical representation of habitual verbs will have to be offered here to accommodate for habitual progressives.
This is probably different from the simple aspect sentence, “He always teases me,” in the following way.

Two reference times are found in these examples. The first $T_r$ is very broad and relates to the whole time about which a person is actually talking. In other words, even at moments when the speaker is not being teased or is not teased, both sentences above can still be viewed as being true. Therefore, this broad time referred to is the primary $T_r$. Within this broad frame of reference, however, even more specific verbal pictures are being created. When the progressive is used, the verbal picture of the teasing event is not a complete picture. Only a small snapshot of the inside of the event is given, so the listener might perceive a frozen picture of a boy sticking out his tongue at a girl. However, the sentence using the simple aspect views the teasing event completely, from start to end. Therefore, instead of still-frame pictures, one might perceive video renderings of the event. While this seems like a possible solution, it is a bit more elaborate than one might like. More research is necessary to show if these diagrams are accurate portrayals of habitual verbs. The point of this example is to illustrate that the theory might still have some minor (or major, depending on your point-of-view) areas of concern.

**Other Theories on Tense and Time**

Numerous other categorizations of tense/aspect exist outside of the one presented here. The Reichenbachian system and Bull framework have already been discussed and have undergone reanalysis many times. De Saussure (2007) writes, “...there is an abundant literature trying to solve the poverty, or, as Vet puts it, the ‘descriptive inadequacy’ of Reichenbach’s formalism…” (p. 1). For example, Vet (2007) offers a neo-reichenbachian system that views time from two perspective points (versus three assumed perspective points in Reichenbach’s system) (pp. 13-15). Several textbooks for English language learners present tense/aspect in English as having twelve different groupings (i.e., simple past, past perfect, past progressive, past perfect progressive, and so on for the present and future tenses). While various theories might provide adequate explanations of tense/aspect, the one presented herein seems to allow for a high degree of technical accuracy in English and is, therefore, well suited for the task of deeply understanding the role of tense/aspect.

**Conclusion**

The study of English tense and aspect is a complex field, so comprehending such matters can be a problematic endeavor. Hopefully, the framework presented will be helpful in understanding the meaning of English’s tenses and aspects. This deeper knowledge can lead to more thorough, thoughtful, and concise explanations for students once the basic ideas are repackaged in a way that is easy to understand.
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References


