CAMBRIDGE ENGLISH
Language Assessment
Part of the University of Cambridge

Research Notes

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The 2016 Cambridge English/English UK Action Research Scheme

A quarterly publication reporting on teaching, learning and assessment

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Research Notes

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Editorial

Cambridge English continues its involvement in action research for practising teachers with this issue of *Research Notes*, which presents five papers from the 2016 Cambridge English/English UK Action Research Scheme. The scheme supports English language teachers working in schools and institutions who are members of the national association for ELT, English UK. In his introductory article, our scheme mentor, Simon Borg, considers the relationship between teacher identity and action research, and whether the way in which teachers construct their professional identity influences how successfully they engage with action research.

Aida Sahutoglu opens the issue with her article on promoting learner autonomy in vocabulary learning: what she terms 'a teacherless approach'. She was puzzled by students' tendency to abandon rather than persist with independent vocabulary learning strategies, and found that opinion in the literature was divided on the usefulness of learner strategies. This prompted her to try to identify the missing link between vocabulary strategy training and autonomous strategy application. In her study she uses a mixture of observations, surveys, and interviews to investigate the role played by teachers, classroom activities and learner attitudes to learner autonomy. Sahutoglu concludes that explicit strategy training from the teacher, together with clear learning objectives, may be a necessary initial stage on the road to autonomous learning.

Next, Chris Edgoose and Ken Bateup take a peek behind the curtain of examination reading strategies. Noting that their own prospective International English Language Testing System (*IELTS*) students found the timed nature of the *IELTS* Reading paper challenging, the authors used think aloud protocol analysis to uncover observable strategies used by students while answering the questions to an *IELTS* Academic Reading test. In particular, the authors wanted to discover whether the strategies used by successful students differed from those used by unsuccessful students. The findings from their small sample suggested that the learners used a combination of several strategies, and that there seemed to be a complex interplay between factors such as vocabulary knowledge and test strategies which influenced the learners' final reading score.

Hayley Crawford takes us from learning and reading strategies to listening and motivation. She examines learners' attitudes towards this skill and asks whether the use of authentic materials affects their motivation. Her enquiry was also prompted by a desire to provide authentic listening texts which would be more engaging for students. This hunch was supported by findings in the literature on the critical role of listening in communication, as well as the importance of intrinsic interest in motivation and engagement. Crawford used a mixed methods approach, employing questionnaires, feedback forms, and weekly discussions to investigate which factors from a pre-selected list influenced learners' attitudes towards listening activities. Her findings suggested that for learners, the real-life relevance of texts was more important than their authenticity, and that engagement with the topic was enhanced if the task was preceded by a well-developed pre-listening stage.

Raul Pope Farguell's article on peer assessment and error correction of student writing addresses notions of feedback and learner autonomy. He wanted to use his teaching time more effectively and involve the students in the feedback process, thus developing learner independence. Pope Farguell cites the literature widely, acknowledging the academic controversy about the usefulness of error correction and feedback. For this study he focuses on proofreading, making the plausible point that the decontextualised nature of much L2 writing causes learners to focus on surface error, and that this is a valuable skill to develop for future professional and academic writing. Here he looks at whether peer assessment of written work increases students' ability to proofread their own work, and does this by tallying the number and type of errors students corrected over a 3-month period. Pope Farguell did find modest improvements in his students' error correction, and felt that the project had been a useful familiarisation with peer review.

In our last paper, Tim Leigh and Sebastian Kozbial investigate whether Exploratory Practice (EP) can be a useful tool to improve academic language and skills for lower level language learners. They wanted to address the fluctuating or waning levels of motivation in their class of A2 learners of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and in the literature had seen encouraging findings of EP used with higher level EAP students. In order to find out learners' perceptions of EP and its effectiveness in developing lower level language skills, they asked them to carry out a research project on their own language learning puzzles and present their findings to their peers. The authors found that most students perceived the project as useful for improving their learning, although this perception was not shared by their teachers, perhaps mindful of the results-driven nature of this teaching sector. They conclude that EP can enhance learner autonomy and motivation, and suggest longitudinal studies might yield more promising data on the effects of EP on language learning.

All of these examples of classroom enquiry show the value of putting the learner at the centre of assessment research. They also offer a foundation for future action research with which Cambridge English continues to support and engage, not only with English UK but also English Australia.

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Action research and teacher identity

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Introduction

To accompany this collection of papers from the 2016 Cambridge English/English UK Action Research Award Scheme, I would like to reflect on the relationship between teacher identity and action research[1]. Teacher identity has been widely discussed in English language teaching for a number of years now; an early analysis was provided by Varghese, Morgan, Johnston and Johnson (2005) while, more recently, the collection of papers in Barkhuizen (Ed) (2017b) illustrates the diverse ways in which teacher identity can be conceptualised and its relevance to many aspects of teachers' lives. Two of the chapters in this collection focus specifically on teacher research generally and action research specifically (Borg 2017, Burns 2017b) and some of the points I raise here are examined in more detail in those chapters.

Despite much recent work, defining language teacher identity remains a somewhat challenging issue. Miller (2009) lists various definitions and Barkhuizen (2017a) draws on various perspectives to construct a detailed composite definition (or conceptualisation) of the term; for my purposes here, though, I will define teacher identity in terms of the professional roles teachers and others believe they should fulfil.

Action research and teacher identity

As the articles in this issue of *Research Notes* illustrate, action researchers systematically examine their own teaching and learning contexts in an attempt to better understand, and ultimately to improve, some aspect of their work. In this sense, action research extends, beyond its conventional notion of 'teaching', the role of the language teaching professional. In other words, teachers who become action researchers are also engaged (consciously or otherwise) in the process of identity construction. This can be a harmonious process or, alternatively, it can be a source of conflict (according to Block (2015), identity construction is often more conflictive than harmonious). Let me now use two fictitious cases to illustrate harmony and conflict as teachers seek to engage in action research.

Teacher A went through a pre-service teacher education programme where the ideas of lifelong professional learning, teacher autonomy, classroom enquiry and teacher reflection were central. Throughout the programme, the teacher was required to complete assignments which acknowledge such concepts; specific attention was also dedicated to action research and the teacher was required to complete a small-scale action research project while they were doing teaching practice. Upon graduation, Teacher A was employed by a school where professional development was promoted and supported. Teachers in that school were expected to take responsibility for their own professional learning, some of their official workload was allocated to teacher development, and teachers had regular opportunities to collaborate on projects aimed at improving teaching and learning. Action research was one of the professional development activities supported by the school, and, once they had settled into the school, Teacher A was able to make professional development a regular part of their work. In their second year at the school they joined some other teachers on a collaborative action research project, and then in the following year they did an individual action research project in their own classroom. Teacher A found the experience of working in that school professionally fulfilling and motivating.

Teacher B attended a pre-service teacher education course where much emphasis was placed on subject matter knowledge and teaching skills. The teacher completed several courses in linguistics, literature, psychology, and language teaching methodology. The courses followed a similar pattern, with a focus on propositional knowledge and on showing a mastery of this through written assignments. Methodology skills were also assessed practically. There was, though, little emphasis on teacher autonomy, professional development, enquiry and reflection. After graduating, Teacher B started teaching at a school where professional development was not something that other teachers or the school leadership talked about; teachers were expected to deliver effective lessons and to ensure students did well. During their first year at this school, Teacher B attended an in-service workshop where the topic was 'action research'. They found the ideas interesting and decided to try them out in their own classroom. However, they were unable to make much progress and found the process rather lonely. They were also concerned that doing action research would reduce the time they spent teaching and that the school leadership would not be happy about that.

These two purposefully contrasting accounts illustrate the implications that action research has for teacher identity and how teachers' experience of identity construction can influence how productively they engage in the action research process. Teacher A benefited from prior teacher education which had defined the role of the teacher in a

[1] Coincidentally, Burns (2017a) also reflects on teacher identity in her introduction to *Research Notes* issue 67, which contains the 2016 reports from the Action Research in English language intensive courses for overseas students (ELICOS) Program, supported by Cambridge English and English Australia.

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manner that was conducive to action research: for example, the teacher was seen to be an autonomous lifelong learner and evidence-based reflection on experience was an important process for teacher learning. The school Teacher A worked in further emphasised such notions; additionally, the idea of collaborative professional learning was promoted. There was an expectation by the school that teachers engage in professional development and use it to become more effective practitioners. Given all these factors, identity construction for Teacher A as they engaged in action research was harmonious. That is, being an action researcher was consistent with the teacher role that had been promoted in their pre-service teacher education and was in evidence in their school.

Teacher B, in contrast, emerged from pre-service teacher education with a teacher identity grounded in the importance of disciplinary knowledge and teaching skills (both of which are fundamental) but lacking reference to key notions on which action research is premised, such as teacher autonomy, professional development, and classroom enquiry. Their workplace consolidated Teacher B's identity as a teacher and professionalism was all about preparing and delivering lessons well. And although the teacher was intrigued by the ideas about action research they learned about during the workshop, accommodating this extended sense of professionalism created insurmountable conflicts with how they saw themselves and how they felt their school expected them to be.

These cases highlight the way that teacher identity is defined through educational and professional experiences over time. How teachers respond to and engage with action research will not be defined simply by their technical understandings of what it is and how to do it, but also by the extent to which teachers can accommodate the implications action research has for their professional identity.

Addressing teacher identity conflicts in action research

One of the most central and, in my experience, common challenges for teachers when they first encounter action research (and other forms of teacher research more generally) is a conflict in which an existing identity ('my role is to teach') is challenged by an extended identity ('doing action research is also part of my role'). Teachers often dismiss action research as being irrelevant to them because their role, as they see it, is to teach and not to do research (plenty of evidence of such a position is provided in Borg 2013). In promoting action research, then, it is important, where such a conflict exists, that we give teachers opportunities to examine how they see their role, and this may involve reflection on how prior educational and professional experiences have defined how they see themselves today. It is also valuable to engage teachers in discussion of how they conceive of research, for such conceptions, too, often underpin the ways in which teachers respond to the prospect of becoming an action researcher (for example, if teachers see research as a large-scale or statistical activity, this may affect how they respond to action research). For the purposes of action research, we want to promote research as a practical, feasible, locally relevant, and enjoyable undertaking, and many teachers' ideas about what 'research' is do not reflect such notions. Some initial discussion of what research means in the context of action research is, I have found, always a useful starting point in my work with teachers.

One other piece of advice I use in supporting teachers who want to do action research but who are struggling to reconcile this with their existing teacher identity is the following: 'Don't try to become a researcher, but do action research to help you become a better teacher'.

When teachers assume the identity of an action researcher, they are doing so not to relinquish, weaken, or even betray, their identity as teachers, but actually to strengthen it. Understanding this can allow teachers to resolve the conflicts they experience when they feel that doing action research is diverting their attention away from teaching. Action research, as the papers in this collection show, does in fact, enable teachers to focus on their work with even greater clarity, allowing them to understand teaching and learning in more depth, and to generate insights which can enhance the educational experience of their students.

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Independent vocabulary learning: A 'teacherless' approach

AIDA SAHUTOGLU ST GILES LONDON CENTRAL

Introduction

Nowadays, learner autonomy (LA) seems to be widely promoted in the EFL world through offering students a variety of independent learning strategies (LS). In my teaching experience and through my involvement in study skills co-ordination at St Giles London Central, I discovered that although most learners initially seem motivated to apply these techniques, very few of them adopt new study skills permanently. One of the reasons for such rejection is that in the modern classroom setting, methodology and teacher-centred coursebooks have led to many students disregarding the 'teacherless' experience as useless and counter-productive. They may spend a fortune on a language course and expect to be spoon-fed by the teacher. Those who do try to study independently might often lack the practical knowledge of effective LS and rely on their established learning methods.

Although I was keen to explore a wide range of LS, as a complete novice in research, I felt overwhelmed by the need to help students with all their skills at once. So, I decided to narrow down the scope of this study to one particular skill, and after conducting a pre-research survey, I discovered that most students prioritised vocabulary over other skills and systems.

Thus, the primary aim of this study was to try to find the missing link between vocabulary strategy training and autonomous strategy application.

Background reading

One way of promoting learner autonomy is to equip students with the essential LS, which Scarcella and Oxford (1992:63) define as 'specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques … used by students to enhance their own learning'.

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Today, there are numerous classifications of independent LS, including the ones proposed by Rubin (1981), O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper and Russo (1985) and Oxford (1990). Some common types include memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, and interaction strategies. For the purposes of this research, only a limited number of LS were chosen from each category. The main selection criterion was that these LS should be 'teachable', tangible and easy to demonstrate and observe 'in action'.

However, Scharle and Szabo (2000) claim that although teachers may offer their learners a wide range of information and provide all the necessary circumstances and input, it is the students' participation and involvement that can make learning successful. Understandably, it may not be realistic to expect students to experiment with the unknown LS out of the class. Thus, in order to move on from 'in-class' strategy application with the teacher to 'out-of-the-class' independent application, students may undergo full strategy training.

Such training takes place in a number of stages. Griffiths (2015) suggests three stages of this process: awareness raising, explicit instruction and practice. Cohen (2011) also mentions the need for implicit instruction, i.e. incorporating strategy training into daily classroom routine. It is expected that the more aware of strategies the learners become, the less teacher-centred their classroom experience should be. Consequently, with a gradual shift towards independent application of these LS in out-of-the-class practice, the teacher may finally 'let go'.

However, there is an ongoing debate about whether there is any connection between strategy training and successful learning (Griffiths 2015), and there has not been one conclusive answer in relation to this. Thus, the link between explicit strategy training and academic success, as well as the issue of students' over-dependence on the teacher, could be explored further through this action research (AR) project.

The reason for choosing this format of enquiry is that according to Wallace (1998) AR primarily originates from specific problems that we encounter in our professional practice (in my case, it would be related to strategy acquisition) and will have clear practical outcomes. In broad terms, AR is a systematic self-reflective enquiry into one's teaching practice. It may take many forms and shapes, and may cause new issues to arise, so in order to stay focused, it is essential to ask clear research questions and to revisit them at every stage of AR.

The main stages of AR are planning (identifying the issue to investigate), action (intervention), data collection and reflections (evaluation), and due to the 'recursive' nature of AR, these stages may be repeated as often as necessary. For this particular study, the following research techniques were selected:

1. Reflective diaries, students' logs and teachers' logs (see Appendix 1) in order to gain valuable insights into the situation.
2. Classroom observations in combination with field notes.
3. Interviews; according to Campbell, McNamara and Gilroy (2004), the above-mentioned subjective methods of data collection should be supplemented by interviews or structured observations (a method called 'triangulation' which helps to increase the accuracy of findings).
4. Samples of student work.
5. Whole class surveys.
6. Questionnaires.

Techniques 1–4 provide qualitative information, while 5 and 6 give quantitative detail, thus strengthening the conducted study. To ensure validity and keep the pedagogical focus of research in mind while interpreting results, Burns' (2010) comprehensive checklists can be particularly helpful.

The study

Research questions

The primary aim of this study was to try to find the missing link between vocabulary strategy training and application by looking at the teachers' roles, classroom activities and the students' attitudes. The latter was of particular interest as although there has been a lot of research into teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy, the views of students have been analysed considerably less.

To connect strategy instruction and application, the following two research questions (RQs) were explored:

RQ1: What specific lifelong study and learning strategies do students say they currently use (and which new strategies could they benefit from) in learning vocabulary?

RQ2: What impact does regular and explicit classroom instruction have on their further independent ('teacherless') application?

Context and participants

The AR took place in two consecutive cycles at St Giles London Central. At any one time, the school accommodates up to 700 international students, who study on a variety of rolling enrolment English language courses ranging in length from one week to one year. Most classes have a maximum of 12 learners.

Most participants in this study stayed at St Giles for about 20 weeks. To see if the results would be affected by the type of course they were enrolled in, the following groups of learners were chosen (Tables 1 and 2).

The first cycle took place over eight weeks in March–May 2016. A wide range of LS were explored as there was a lot of flexibility in syllabus planning, choice of material and course outcomes. The students had just moved up from a pre-intermediate (A2) level and spent three 50-minute lessons in my class every day. The same cohort of eight

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Table 1: Participants in Cycle 1

	Experimental group	Control group
Class type	Main (Lessons 1–3)	–
Class focus	General English	General English
Class level	B1	B2
No. of students	8	5
Country of origin	Turkey (2), Japan (2), Korea (2), Italy (1), France (1)	Korea (2), France (1), Colombia (1), Brazil (1)

Table 2: Participants in Cycle 2

	Experimental group	Control group
Class type	Additional (Lesson 4)	–
Class focus	*IELTS*	*IELTS*
Class level	B2	B2
No. of students	6	8
Country of origin	Turkey (1), Colombia (1), Russia (1), Argentina (1), Poland (1), Italy (1)	Italy (3), Turkey (2), Korea (2), France (1)

students remained for the entire cycle. The ones that joined during the intervention also participated in strategy training, but their work, questionnaires and feedback were not analysed for this study. In the control group, most learners had recently moved from an intermediate (B1) class and were expected to be there for at least seven weeks, or longer.

The second cycle was shorter, lasted four weeks and took place in June–July 2016. They had one 50-minute lesson every day with me, and compared to the General English class, there was a strict International English Language Testing System (*IELTS*) examination syllabus to follow, and much less flexibility to explore and experiment with the LS. Similarly, the control group was working towards the exam and the focus of their lessons was on *IELTS* modules.

The action research involved collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. Inspired by my reading of Burns (2010) I combined classroom activities and data collection. For instance, strategy discussion was turned into a speaking activity, involving comparative structures learned the day before; and, to assess whether or not students were applying certain LS after the second cycle of intervention, *IELTS* speaking tasks which were already part of the syllabus were used.

A list of 34 LS used in the two stages of vocabulary acquisition (discovering meaning and consolidation) was compiled based on the works of Oxford (1990) and Schmitt and McCarthy (1997) (Table 3).

The intervention

Cycle 1

Step 1: A lead-in workshop

A 1-hour introductory workshop focusing on a variety of vocabulary LS (Figure 1) took place before the intervention. It was attended by both control and experimental groups.

Table 3: Vocabulary learning strategies

1.	Reading regularly.
2.	Setting goals to learn a certain number of words.
3.	Repeating, revising and recycling words.
Determination strategies	
4.	Looking for different uses of the same word – checking all the possible meanings in the dictionary.
5.	Reading: Skipping or passing new words in a text unless they prevent you from understanding the overall idea.
6.	Reading: Guessing meaning from the context.
7.	Reading: Analysing the part of speech of the unknown word.
8.	Reading: Analysing parts of the new word (affixes and roots).
9.	Reading/Speaking: Using a monolingual dictionary.
10.	Reading/Speaking: Asking my teacher for explanation.
Social strategies	
11.	Reading/Speaking: Asking my teacher for a sentence including the new word.
12.	Reading/Speaking: Asking classmates/housemates/ friends for help.
13.	Using the people around as potential tutors: asking 'How do you say …?'
14.	Finding opportunities to practise in real life what has been learned.
Memorisation strategies	
15.	Revising the word at least five times and up to 16 times, in various situations.
16.	When revising the word, doing different tasks with it (not just look at it and think about its meaning).
17.	Exploring the word's synonyms, opposites, collocation, etc. a. Checking the word's synonyms. b. Checking the word's antonyms. c. Focusing on collocation, remembering the collocation and not only the word itself.
18.	Focusing on pronunciation, saying the word aloud.
19.	Focusing on the GRAMMAR of the word, e.g. Act (verb), ActIVE (adjective), actIVATE (verb), actIVITY (noun).
20.	Grouping and regrouping the new words by topic, part of speech, collocations.
21.	Organising notes into mind-maps and diagrams.
22.	Connecting the word to personal experience by making associations.
23.	Connecting the word to unusual things – making 'crazy' but memorable associations.
24.	Selecting 'Words of the Week' which you try to use as often as possible.
25.	Creating sentences with new words.
26.	Creating stories with new words.
27.	Connecting your sentences to your personal experience.
28.	Carrying out imaginary conversations based on the topic just covered.
29.	Training your memory by memorising the sentences first, and then recording them.
30.	Creating links between unrelated words and making sentences.
31.	Creating ANAGRAMS
Cognitive strategies	
32.	Using a separate vocabulary notebook.
33.	Using flash cards (paper or electronic).
34.	Creating a weekly chart with the most challenging/ interesting/useful words.

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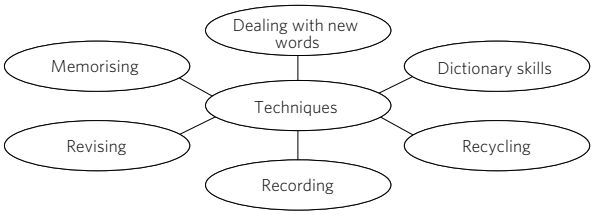
Figure 1: The workshop



For further reference, all students were given self-reference foldable pamphlets (Appendix 2).

Step 2: Consent forms

All the participants were asked to complete consent forms, highlighting key information, requirements and conditions of the study. According to Borg (2010), this is an essential pre-intervention step, as good-quality research has to be ethical and by all means respect its participants.

Following that, all the control group participants were encouraged to experiment with the vocabulary LS in their studies, and were 'left alone' until the end of the intervention.

Step 3: Week 1 questionnaires

Before the study, the participants were asked to complete Week 1 questionnaires (Appendix 3), to identify their reasons for learning English, past learning history and habits, beliefs about independent learning and teachers'/students' responsibilities, vocabulary learning and revision experiences, as well as motivational factors and areas of perceived difficulty.

Step 4: Vocabulary notebooks

Vocabulary notebooks are often suggested as useful tools for students to organise and manage their vocabulary learning (McCarthy 1990, Schmitt and Schmitt 1995).

Students were encouraged to use a separate vocabulary notebook or a folder in order to easily access new vocabulary, and move the sheets around. Schematic recording of language was also promoted, as it is much easier to learn the items that are organised somehow (Baddeley 1990). This would also allow the students to have a comprehensive reference model for further independent learning, should they decide to continue using these notebooks.

To be able to explore, record and remember more than just one aspect of a new word, there was a need for the 'all-in-one' vocabulary recording grid. After trying to adapt the Frayer Model (Frayer, Frederick and Klausmeier 1969), the vocabulary cluster table and other similar grids, I devised my own model for this purpose (Figure 2) and used the following vocabulary recording algorithm:

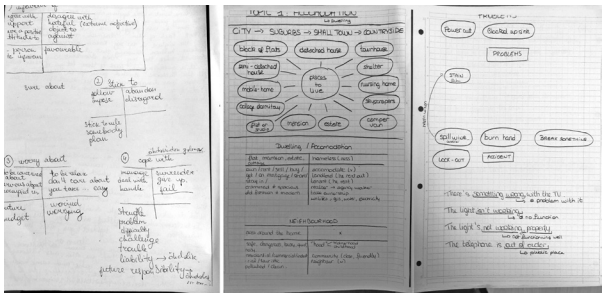
1. The word, its part of speech and transcription are written on the right side of the whiteboard (as this is where most teachers in my experience would record the new lexical items).
2. While orally eliciting possible synonyms, a small grid is drawn just below the new word.
3. The synonyms are written in the top right box of the grid.
4. The antonyms of the word, its other grammar forms, or collocation are explored. Depending on the frequency of the word, the focus of the lesson and the time available, this could either be done in class or given as homework.
5. Students are asked to make a personalised sentence with the new word (either immediately after recording it, or later, in language practice activities) and record it at the bottom of the grid.
6. Students are encouraged to write an 'association word' above the word as some lexis is best memorised through associations.

Figure 2: The vocabulary grid

It reminds me of my friend Fabian (letter F). We ate ice cream together and I liked its flavour (similar word).	
Favourable (adj.) /'feɪv(ə)rəb(ə)l/	
--- condition --- report --- impression	favourableness, noun favourably, adverb unfavorable, adjective
He made a favourable impression on his boss.	

Thus, one or two interesting aspects of the word were explored in class, and at the end of each lesson, students were asked to choose five words to explore further for homework, either from class work or self-study materials. The whole class feedback was done the following day. Some extracts from vocabulary notebooks are demonstrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Students' notebooks



I appreciate that a grid like this cannot be completed for every new unit of vocabulary, but I believe that once a structured approach is adopted, students could learn to see the 'whole picture' of the word, step away from simply translating it and have an easily retrievable and updatable vocabulary record.

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Step 5a: Students' logs

From the second day of the intervention onwards, the learners were asked to complete a student's log. The log, which is usually characterised by its straightforwardness (Campbell et al 2004), was supposed to help the students document and retrieve their past experiences easily.

Every Monday, in the first 10 minutes of the lesson, students recorded their weekly vocabulary objectives and speculated about how they could achieve those aims. Every Friday, in the last 10 minutes of the lesson, they were invited to reflect on the past week and honestly comment on some questions (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Student's logs

1. How do you feel about your achievement of your weekly aims? ☺😐☹
2. Which activities did you find the most useful for achieving your aims?
3. What did you do well this week?
4. What could you have done better?
5. What will you continue to do next week?
6. What will you change/do differently?

Students were encouraged to refer to the previous weeks' logs when setting new weekly goals and realistically assess their own progress.

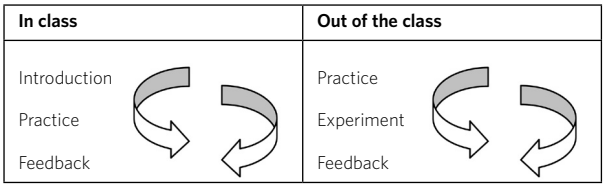
Step 5b: The teacher's journal

From the second day of the intervention I completed a daily reflections journal where I logged my reflections and students' comments about the techniques practised in class, together with some anecdotal data.

Step 6: Strategy practice

In order to explore a wide range of LS, students were exposed to a number of LS every day, and were given sufficient time to practise those in class. For example, after exploring different aspects of new vocabulary, they were asked to connect the words to their personal experience by making associations. Alternatively, towards the end of the week, when students had a wider range of new lexis, they had to organise the words into mind maps or 'spidergrams'. The essential part of strategy practice was to set the same strategy for homework. Also, students were encouraged to choose a new strategy from the list, and to explore it independently. The following day, they would share their feelings and ideas about their out-of-the-class practice. Figure 5 shows a typical daily vocabulary practice routine.

Figure 5: Strategy training cycle



Step 7: The mid-cycle whole class survey

In order to throw some light on the quantitative data that had already been collected (Wallace 1998) as well as to obtain some qualitative data from students' personal feedback about the intervention, a whole class survey was conducted (Appendix 4).

In groups, participants discussed questions related to their study routines, study methods, motivation, choice of learning strategies and the role of the teacher in their vocabulary learning. They were also asked to discuss whether their study methods (in relation to vocabulary learning) had changed since the start of the project.

Step 8: The end-of-cycle one-to-one interview

At the end of both cycles, control and experimental groups were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured, to allow some flexibility, depending on the students' answers. During the interview, students had their vocabulary notebooks and weekly logs. They were asked the same question from the mid-cycle survey. Most interviews were recorded.

Step 9: The post-cycle questionnaire

About four weeks after the end of the intervention, the students were contacted by email and asked to complete the questionnaires asking them about their learning routines, strategies and experiences.

The findings

Learning background

The overwhelming majority of students needed English for work and educational purposes, while less than half wanted to use English while travelling, and just under a quarter were learning it as a hobby. As for the students' learning experience, none were complete novices, and a vast majority of students had spent more than two years learning English, with nearly a third of the respondents studying for over 10 years. This led to an assumption that this group had had some exposure to LS before the intervention and had developed some learning routines of their own. This also becomes apparent from the list of their preferred LS shown in Table 4.

Beliefs about independent learning

Before the intervention, half of the class believed that the teacher was the reason why they were good or bad at English. After the study, over two thirds agreed that other factors, such as motivation, learning materials and personal dedication were key prerequisites of their success. Moreover, three out of four learners claimed that they knew how to practise independently, so I believe a majority of students in this class were ready for the 'teacherless' experience.

Out-of-the-class practice experience

Before the intervention, the average length of out-of-the-class practice sessions varied across the group, with students practising at least two and up to seven days a week.

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It was interesting to see that, after the intervention, the frequency of practice was within a more reasonable range of two to three or four to five days a week. When asked to explain such change in timing during the one-to-one interviews, some said that because there was more daily focus on vocabulary in class, they did not feel like they needed to study at home every day. Others admitted that they had learned to plan their practice sessions more efficiently, and instead of practising every day for less than 30 minutes, they began to have longer, more in-depth practice during the week. The fact that both interviews and questionnaires revealed the same data confirms that some students did indeed change the timing of the frequency of their independent practice.

The answer to RQ1

Students' 'own' (old) vocabulary strategies

The four most common students' 'old' strategies are demonstrated in Table 4:

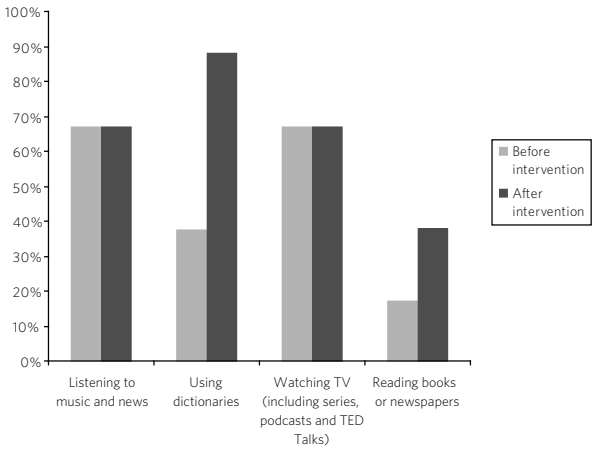
Table 4: Students' 'own' (old) LS Cycle 1

Vocabulary learning strategy	Number of students using the strategy
Listening to music and news	6
Watching TV (including series, podcasts and TED Talks)	6
Using dictionaries	4
Reading books or newspapers	2

It is clear that the students had a very limited range of techniques which may not always be seen as highly productive.

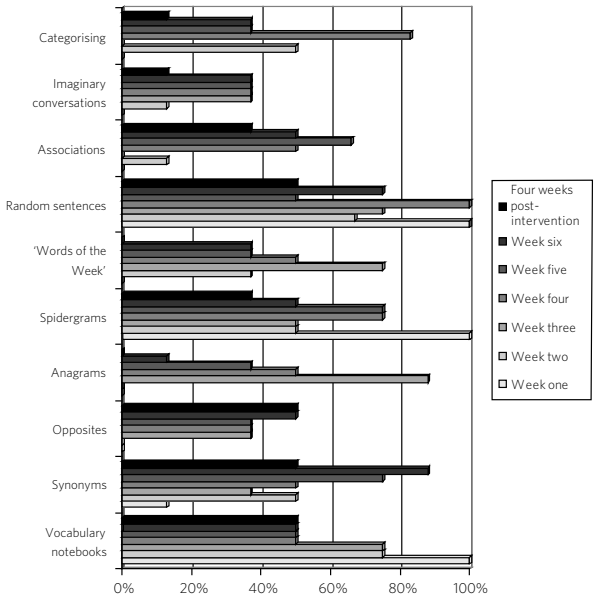
After the intervention, most students retained these LS, however the overall balance shifted towards using dictionaries, with more learners reading books and newspapers (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Students' 'own' (old) LS compared (Cycle 1)



The 10 new LS that were adopted during the intervention and eight that were still being used four weeks after the study are shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: 10 most frequently used new strategies in Cycle 1



What becomes immediately apparent is that although many LS, such as vocabulary notebooks, anagrams and spidergrams were tried out quite enthusiastically, most of them dropped in popularity over time. One possible reason for this could be that the students were willing to experiment with most things that were offered to them, but then realised that those particular strategies did not work for them. On the other hand, some LS, such as vocabulary notebooks, after the initial drop in numbers, kept their 'faithful' users.

Certain strategies, such as learning synonyms and opposites of the word and having imaginary conversations, had some impressive consistency and were used by about half of the students throughout the intervention. It is even more impressive to see that all these LS were maintained post-intervention. Creating anagrams and selecting 'Words of the Week' were the two strategies which were extensively experimented with during the cycle, but were given up in out-of the-class practice. All these strategies came from all four categories, namely determination, social, cognitive and memorisation, which confirms the balanced nature of the students' strategy application after the intervention. There was a strong correlation between the LS they applied and their weekly objectives. Table 5 shows the most popular goals that students set over a 6-week period.

Table 5: Most popular weekly goals in Cycle 1

Weekly objectives	Number of students
Learn 5–10 words daily	8
Try to use new words outside the class	7
Record new words	4
Revise new words	2

As the majority of students were overall happy or felt 'normal' about their weekly achievements, this suggests

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that as they applied the LS, they met most of their vocabulary targets.

The answer to RQ2

It is clear that regular and explicit classroom instruction allowed this group of students to experiment, gain confidence and adopt a number of LS for further independent application. Those who were only exposed once to the unknown techniques were highly unlikely to apply any of the new ones. Most students still kept their old techniques, but added the new ones to their practice. They also learned to differentiate between learning and revision techniques, and apply these depending on their tasks. Finally, although not all the techniques that were 'sold' to them were adopted, this raised their awareness about various aspects of vocabulary training and from then on, they could make informed choices and decisions about why they were adopting or rejecting a particular technique.

Cycle 2

Cycle 2 followed the same general pattern as Cycle 1 but with the changes listed in the following sections.

Week 1 questionnaire

All the questions related to motivation were discussed during the class interview, as it was quite hard for the students to write about it, and even harder for me to somehow interpret their answers. For instance, a written answer 'is good for me' could be, in my opinion, interpreted in many ways and does not constitute a comprehensive motivational factor.

Language assessment

Although in Cycle 1 there were no pre-intervention language tasks, in order to see if the experimental group would perform differently from the control group in terms of their vocabulary skills a pre-treatment Speaking test was administered before Cycle 2. Students from both groups had to record their answers to *IELTS* Speaking Part 3 questions about travelling, and email them to me. They answered the same question again at the end of Cycle 2 and their linguistic performance was compared.

Students' logs

During the interview at the end of Cycle 1, some students complained about lack of progress in vocabulary learning. When asked about the length and frequency of their vocabulary practice, many were unable to provide specific detail. So, a grid was added to the logs, with slots to record the length of their daily in-class and out-of-class vocabulary practice. This made a considerable improvement to the quality of feedback and also allowed the students to see the link between their overall vocabulary progress, weekly goal achievement and time spent working on vocabulary.

The second change was that in order to speed up strategy feedback as well as the post-cycle collation of results, a complete strategy list was added to the reverse of the log for the students to tick the ones they used at home and in class. This provided a better picture about the most common LS and helped to establish a possible correlation between strategy use and achievement of aims.

The mid-cycle whole class survey

In the second cycle, good-quality voice recorders were used in order to avoid the daunting task of going through the scribbled abbreviated notes with students' comments written in 'real time'.

Some questions were changed in order to differentiate between classroom and home practice. Other questions were turned into a ranking task, in which students were given a pile of cut-out LS and they had to individually categorise them into the ones they used regularly, were willing to try out, and used but didn't find useful. This provided a better picture about which LS to prioritise in the second half of the cycle.

The findings

Beliefs about independent learning

Initially, four out of six *IELTS* students thought that their progress depended on the teacher, although one would expect exam students to be less teacher-dependent, and be able to establish their own learning pace and routine. In contrast, after the intervention, the majority of learners accepted that it was not up to the teacher alone to help them improve.

After the intervention, five out of six students felt aware of vocabulary learning techniques, and, what is more, claimed to feel ready for autonomous learning.

Out-of-the-class practice experience

Students increased their out-of-the-class practice frequency from two to three days a week before the intervention to mainly four to five days post-intervention. Before the study, an average length of the practice session was 30 minutes (including both learning and revision), while after the intervention, students claimed to be spending 30 minutes learning new vocabulary, and at least 1 hour revising it. This suggests that they were doing a wider variety of activities not only to learn, but also to retain new words.

The answer to RQ1

Students' 'own' (old) vocabulary strategies

To support such an assumption about a variety of LS that students may have adopted during the intervention, it was important to analyse the 'before' and 'after' of strategy use. So, the students were asked to report on the two types of LS: learning and revision.

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Table 6: Students' 'own' (old) LS in Cycle 2

Vocabulary learning strategy	Number of students using the strategy
Watching TV (including series, podcasts and TED Talks)	6
Speaking with friends	4
Learning from others (strangers, teachers)	3
Reading books or newspapers	3

It is clear from Table 6 that TV was their primary source of new language, but unlike the General English group, the *IELTS* class knew that they could use their friends and other people as a valuable resource. Thus, they were already applying some social strategies. It is hard to know if this was due to the fact that they were more experienced learners (five studying English for over six years) or had had more exposure to a variety of techniques.

A range of LS used to memorise new vocabulary, again, suggests some technique awareness. There was a rough balance between:

- recording the new word
- making sentences with the new word
- revising notes
- trying to use the word outside the classroom
- using flash cards or Post-it® notes.

The 'adopted' (new) vocabulary strategies

After the intervention, they kept some of the original techniques, such as using vocabulary notebooks to record the words and finding opportunities for real-life practice. However, they added a wider variety of memorisation strategies to their arsenal, most of which they continued using four weeks after the end of Cycle 2 (Figure 8). Such 'long-lasting' strategies were connecting words to personal experiences or creating random sentences with the new word, carrying out imaginary conversations, recording words in spidergrams and exploring their opposites and synonyms. In their end-of-cycle interviews, students claimed that these LS helped them expand their vocabulary range, and besides having a spidergram to hand, allowed them to quickly revise previous weeks' language, and add new words to the spidergram as they came across some topic-related lexis later in their studies. Naturally, some LS scored highly only during the week of intervention, and then significantly dropped in popularity, such as 'Words of the Week' and exploration of synonyms and opposites.

The answer to RQ2

The interview with the control group revealed that most students left vocabulary strategy training until after the exam, as they felt overwhelmed enough about exam LS. Clearly, they did not have any extra time to explore something they were not confident would benefit their exam.

Like in the General English class, the LS they applied corresponded to their weekly objectives. It is clear from

Figure 8: 10 most frequently used new strategies in Cycle 2

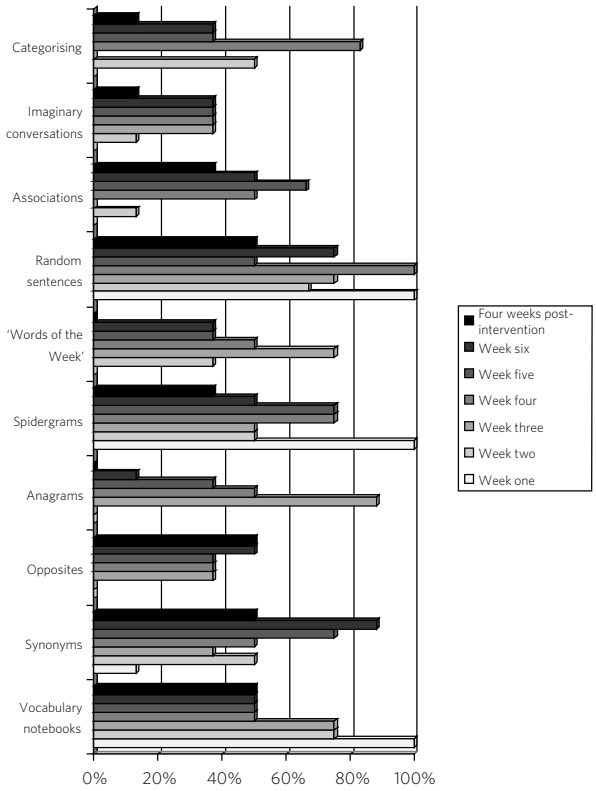


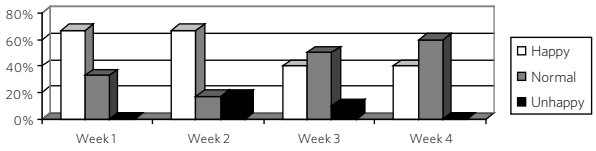
Table 7 that some common aims set over a 6-week period were also connected to the productive modules of the *IELTS* exam.

Table 7: Most popular weekly goals in Cycle 2

Weekly objectives	Number of students
Learn useful words to use in the speaking part of *IELTS*	6
Try to use new words in speaking	6
Learn 5–10 words daily	5
Learn 10 new collocations about the topic of the week	5
Learn more synonyms	4
Learn useful words for writing tasks of the exam	4

It was also interesting to see that the students were happier with their goal achievement in the first half of the cycle, while in the second half the majority felt it was just 'normal' (Figure 9). I wonder if this happened because in the second half they were setting more ambitious goals, such as learning 10 new collocations, or using new lexis in the exam tasks.

Figure 9: How did you feel about achieving your weekly aims in Cycle 2?



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The end-of-cycle one-to-one interviews: General English and IELTS

To ensure more objectivity, before the interview, the learners were advised that their comments were not going to affect the way the teacher felt about them or their progress. This was deliberately emphasised, as Campbell et al (2004) claim that some interviewees may feel under pressure to please the interviewer and provide the answers that may be expected of them.

The students' comments after both cycles were very similar and I believe that their views were open and honest. Most agreed that their study methods had changed and that their practice routine would be different after the study:

> After starting project, I could check my goal more often. So I clear where I need to arrive.

> Because of project I can understand what it means to know a word. It was important point to me.

> Now, if I see the word five to six times, I see 'the sign' and decide to learn this word.

It is clear that these students can better reflect on their own progress and make conscious choices about whether or not to learn new vocabulary. Also, they can move away from their translating habits as they are aware of various aspects of knowing a word. They can set their individual learning goals and they can be more realistic about achieving these.

Whether or not they will continue using all the LS they claimed they did four weeks after the intervention, they should be able to activate those when necessary. Finally, they will have their vocabulary notebooks for further reference, which means that they could use those as a model should they choose to continue learning vocabulary independently. However, some students still felt like they needed reminding to practise more efficiently in their free time:

> If I don't have homework, I can't practise.

> In my class we did a lot of hardworking practice. But without teacher's advice I am not sure if what I do is correct.

The ongoing in-class strategy practice might facilitate these students' adoption of some LS.

The *IELTS* students were also encouraged to do another speaking test at the end of the study. They were given the same questions they had before the intervention about an advertisement and below are some of their answers compared:

> The product was the new thing ... Thing for shoes ... it was on TV ad.

> This new ... This innovative product was ... was launched two years ago and I saw the advert on TV.

> They are trying to make us live with more comfortable stuff ... I hope the situation could change more positive way. People must understand that publicity is just a commercial way.

> Customers are mislead by advertisement. We buy things we don't need and ... pay money ... invest money in things that only luxury, not commodity.

It is clear that these students are trying to rephrase and upgrade their own language. They are using more advanced vocabulary structures after the intervention and are more adventurous with their language, although the fluency may be affected by searching for a word. The control group students also made some improvement in their speaking, using more cohesive devices and some collocations. It is hard to say if the students in the experimental group made more vocabulary progress because of the intervention. However, I tend to believe that it contributed to a wider range of language that students used in their answers.

Discussion of key findings

In the search for the answers to my two RQs I have tried to explore a variety of aspects related to students' previous experiences, their current beliefs about independent learning and the likelihood of them becoming more independent and strategically equipped.

The first RQ was about the strategies that students currently used and could benefit from. From the very beginning of both cycles, it became immediately apparent to me that in fact students needed to be shown a lot more LS than I had assumed. I was surprised to discover that even rather experienced learners were applying very basic learning strategies – using receptive skills to notice (and neither record nor memorise) new language, or bilingual dictionaries to translate a word. It was equally surprising to see them 'cling on' to their old methods after the study, although they had had so much exposure to other techniques.

On the one hand, the fact that the learners had kept some of their original techniques demonstrated that they were still confident using those and found them helpful. On the other hand, it suggests that some students were reluctant to abandon some of their old routines, although those did not help them progress in their language learning as quickly as they may have wished. Looking back at their learning experience (75% studying for over two years, 100% having had formal English instruction in some subjects in secondary and tertiary education, and 100% practising at least two to three times a week), one would expect them to have reached a level higher than A2.

So, this fact alone, in contrast with the progress they made during and immediately after this study, calls for discussion. Although there was no formal vocabulary assessment before and after the first cycle, one indicator of success would be the fact that five out of eight participants moved to a B2 class immediately after the 6-week intervention. This is unusual, as an average student would spend between eight to 14 weeks in one level. Out of the

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remaining three, two students returned to their home countries, and the third one moved up as soon as he had completed the minimum requirement of eight weeks.

As for the *IELTS* learners, although there was no evidence of this study affecting their exam scores, it is clear from their performance in the speaking test at the end of the study that they 'upgraded' their overall language level and started using far more advanced vocabulary structures.

It should also be noted that from the cohort of the control group students, two out of five B2 learners moved up to C1, and only one of those had tried out some vocabulary LS. The remaining three stayed in the B2 group for approximately four weeks longer. Their answers to the post-study questionnaires showed that the main reason why they did not persevere with applying different LS was that they were not confident of how to use the new techniques. Instead, they chose to continue with their old ones. This proves the point raised by Scharle and Szabo (2000) that input alone (no matter how detailed) does not automatically lead to successful application of new strategies.

One main difference between the input received by the experimental and control groups were explicit instruction and exposure to a wide range of alternative vocabulary LS that the experimental groups could apply in and out of the class.

Looking at all the new strategies that they acquired at least temporarily after the study, we can see that it is possible to encourage students if not to abandon, certainly to adopt new techniques. This also shows that provided they were shown how to use them, they were ready to give new strategies a go and try to experiment with them. This conclusion may lead us to an answer to RQ2: that without explicit training, further independent application of LS was highly unlikely in this group of learners.

Apart from strategies, students need clear learning aims. I believe if their teachers promote weekly or monthly goal-setting, the students will be more likely to match their aims to the right strategies. For instance, none of the *IELTS* students were interested in anagrams or creating associations, because these wouldn't necessarily bring them closer to their exam goals. However, General English students found these strategies exciting, because they allowed them to learn in a more creative and playful manner.

I understand that extra exposure would mean extra input from the teacher. This study revealed that what Cohen (2011) refers to as 'implicitness' of training, is the need for incorporation of specific strategies to explore the meaning of the word, record the word for further reference, and plenty of techniques to revisit the new word in their daily teaching practice. But if we genuinely want the students to continue functioning independently as language learners after they leave our classrooms or schools, we could try and see if strategy training could help at least some learners.

Reflections

I found this experience extremely valuable and insightful. It helped me become more aware of my teaching practice and my own attitudes and beliefs about strategy training and incorporating anything new into my classroom routine.

I realised that not only my students, but also I, the teacher, needed strategy training. Just like one would not teach a new grammar point in the middle of a listening task, similarly, I had to learn to see when and how each particular strategy would organically fit in the lesson. I also had to accept that strategy acquisition did not happen overnight, and just like my students who had to apply LS over and over, to become comfortable with them, I had to teach them again and again, in different contexts, which took me several weeks. This made me more realistic about the students' ability to adopt and apply them.

Surprisingly, staying motivated was an issue. One observation I made about myself was that in between the cycles, I was not as pro-active and kept strategy training to a minimum. In fact, there was a point where only thanks to my involvement with the Cambridge English/English UK Action Research Scheme, as well as my mentor's extra support and reassurance, that I stayed focused and motivated to continue with the intervention. Thus, if another teacher wants to incorporate strategy training as an extra skill to their classroom practice, I would strongly advise setting a time limit, having a goal to work towards and asking someone to mentor you.

It was an added bonus to end this research with some teaching aids to use in the future. For instance, I found it very useful to be able to present the new language in a more organised manner, and that is the reason why I still use the same grid I used during the study to explore new words in class. I believe some teachers might also find this approach practical. Besides, my vocabulary strategy pamphlet used in this study, which contains practical suggestions for learning, recycling and memorising the new lexis, seems to be quite popular with my colleagues and students.

I also learned to be realistic. Although it is tempting to learn one LS a day and to end every week with five strategies perfectly acquired and used out-of-the-class, there will always be days where, despite my enthusiasm, the students would moan and refuse to even give it a chance. Or, there will be weeks marked with absolute hype about a specific LS (making the teacher think that a perfect strategy has been found!) only for it to be abandoned forever the following week.

This study also taught me not to predict much, as the students' needs, abilities and choices will always vary. What we can do is inform them, equip them with a range to choose from and step back. I tend to believe that the more strategies our students are exposed to, and the more confidently they use a particular technique in class, the more likely they are to find the ones that work for them and continue to use them at home.

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Although I was disappointed to see that the control groups were not willing to experiment with LS, I had to accept that this was the reality of our teaching and that this was why the whole project started. We do not give grammar reference books to our students expecting them to master all the verbs independently overnight. And although we encourage them to read newspapers and listen to the radio, we realise that our learners can acquire these skills only through hands-on experience. I believe that practice and reflection are key elements of strategy training, and should these take place, most learners should most certainly carry the new 'teacherless' experience beyond their classroom.

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Appendix 1: Teachers' log

Class		
Day	In class	Homework
Week 1		
Mon		
Tue		
Wed		
Thur		
Fri		

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TIPS FOR REVISION (continued):

✓ Carry out **imaginary conversations** based on the topic you have just covered. If you have a partner, try to recycle items when you are simply talking or writing to each other

✓ **Select 'Words of the Week'** which you try to use as often as possible

✓ **Real -life situations:**
Always try to find opportunities to practice what you've learnt and to identify the possible gaps you may have in your vocabulary

✓ Create **links between unrelated words** and make sentences.
This will encourage you to think about the context more. For example, can you use the words *ubiquitous* and *triceratops* in one sentence?

✓ **Use flash cards (paper or electronic).**
Include the information about the word on both sides: e.g. the word on one side and translation, pronunciation, or synonyms on the other.

PRACTISE ONLINE

Vocabulary Quizzes: **a4esl.org/a/v3.html**
Academic Vocabulary:
www.academicvocabularyexercises.com
English Media lab (games):
www.englishmedialab.com
Learn That Word (create your own word lists):
www.learnthat.org
Fun Vocabulary games (A1–B1):
www.englishactivities.net
Job specific vocabulary:
www.englishformyjob.com
Quizlet (flashcards): www.quizlet.co.uk
Vocab Sushi: **www.vocabsushi.com**
English club (word of the day):
www.englishclub.com/learn-english.htm
Vocabulary lists and games:
www.manythings.org/vocabulary
Phrasal verbs: **phrasalverbdemon.com**

EXPLORE VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE WORD AND RECORD THIS SCHEMATICALLY:

MODEL	
Association word	
The word (part of speech, formal /informal) /pronunciation/	
Synonym 1 Synonym 2	Antonym 1 Antonym 2
Collocation 1 Collocation 2 Collocation 3	Affixes (suffixes/prefixes), Derivatives
EXAMPLE SENTENCE(S)	
It reminds me of my friend Fabian (letter F). We ate ice cream together and I liked its flavour (similar word).	
Favourable (adj.) /ˈfeɪv(ə)rəb(ə)l/	
Advantageous Helpful Convenient	Harmful Disadvantageous Negative
--- condition --- report --- impression	favourableness, noun favourably, adverb unfavorable, adjective
He made a favourable impression on his boss.	
NB Of course, it is impossible to record all this information in one go, so you can add a little extra every time you revisit the new word.	

USE A RELIABLE DICTIONARY

Cambridge Online Dictionary: **dictionary.cambridge.org**
Online Thesaurus: **thesaurus.com**
Oxford Advanced Learners:
www.oup.com/oald-bin/web_getald7index1a
Pronunciation Dictionary: **forvo.com**
Reverse Dictionary (type a definition and find the word):
www.onelook.com
Oxford collocation dictionary:
oxforddictionary.so8848.com
Ozdic collocation dictionary: **www.ozdic.com**

St Giles
LONDON CENTRAL

VOCABULARY FOR INDEPENDENCE

THE SELF-STUDY REFERENCE GUIDE

Compiled by A Sahutoglu

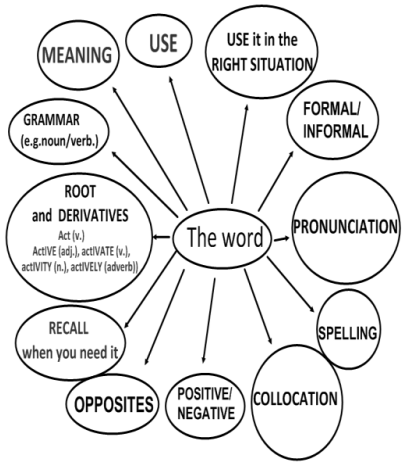
2016

Appendix 2: Introductory workshop pamphlet (continued)

VARY YOUR STUDY METHODS:

- Read regularly.
- Set goals to learn a certain number of words per day/week.
- Repeat, revise and recycle words.
- Look for different uses of the same word. When you look up a word in a dictionary, don't stop at the first definition.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO KNOW A WORD?



WHEN YOU SEE A NEW WORD IN A TEXT:

- Skip unknown words in the text unless they prevent you from understanding the overall idea
- Guess their meaning from the context.
- Analyse the part of speech (N./V./Adj.) of the unknown word.
- Analyse parts of the new word (affixes and roots) and try to guess the meaning.
- Use a monolingual dictionary
- Ask your classmate/housemate/teacher for help.

TIPS FOR LEARNING NEW WORDS:

NB Words in ISOLATION cannot be easily remembered, so always look for a context in which the word is used and try to find its collocation, too.

✓ Use a **SEPARATE VOCABULARY** notebook
You don't want the new words to get lost among your notes.

✓ Don't focus on **TRANSLATION ONLY**
Explore the word's synonyms, opposites, collocation, etc. You don't have to record everything at once- you can revisit the word and add new information every time you revise it.

✓ **Create ASSOCIATIONS.**
Imagine the 'picture' of the new word in your head:
You may make associations with a word that sounds similar, first letter shapes, things or people you know well, and keep this image in your mind! Next time you try to remember the word; you will probably remember the image first.

✓ **Create a WEEKLY CHART**
Choose the most challenging/ interesting/useful words and write them in your 'words of the week' chart.

✓ **Create ANAGRAMS (**helpful if spelling is a problem for you)
Take a list of new words (5-10), and write the words in large capital letters on a piece of paper, but mix the letters up, e.g. instead of SPELLING, write LISNPLEG.
Put the letters into the right order again to reconstruct the original list
A good follow-up is to try to make up different words using as many of the original letters as possible

✓ Anyone around you can be your **potential tutor:** just ask **'How do you say...?'**

NB A one-off 'encounter' with the new word is not enough, because we forget a lot of information immediately after the lesson.
So, try to come back to the new word…

5-10 minutes 24 hours 3 days
1 week 1 month 6 months later

TIPS FOR REVISION:

NB Revision does not mean looking at the word and trying to remember its meaning.
Revision means trying to use the word ACTIVELY and REGULARLY in different situations.

✓ **GROUP and RE-GROUP new words in your notebook**
✓ **or create WORD DIAGRAMS** (ideally, at the back of your vocabulary notebook)
Draw up the main word/theme in the centre of a blank page Arrange the other words around it. Draw up a series of arrows showing the links between the different words Use a dictionary to fill in any obvious gaps in the diagram.

NB Keep adding new words to the diagram- this may happen when you move up a level, or when you read an article or watch a film about this topic.

✓ **Create sentences/stories**.
(Funny or absurd stories are easier to remember than sensible ones)
It is important to learn the context in which the new words can be used and the grammatical rules that are related to them.

✓ Connect your sentences to your **personal experience.**
You will remember real examples better than the abstract ones.

✓ **Train your memory**
Select 10 new words. Make 1 sentence with a new word, say it aloud but don't write it down. Then make the 2nd sentence with the 2nd word. Then repeat the 1st and the 2nd sentence aloud, and move on to make the 3rd sentence. Again, repeat the 1st, 2nt and 3rd sentence aloud and move on to the 4th sentence. Once you have 10 sentences with all the new words, write them down. (To make it more fun, you may create a story instead of 10 unrelated sentences).

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Appendix 3: Week 1 questionnaire

Dear _____
Thank you for taking your time to complete this questionnaire. It should help me understand you and your study needs better. We should be able have a clearer focus for our lessons and help you achieve your learning aims.

1. Why are you learning English? (Please tick ALL the options that are true for you)

For work		For study		For travel		For fun		My parents sent me here		Don't know	
Other (Please specify)											

2. How long have you been learning English? (Tick ONE option)

Less than 2 years		2–5 years		6–10 years		10 years or more	
Other (Please specify)							

3. Where have you studied English? (Tick ALL the options that are true for you)

In secondary/high school		In university		With private tutors		In a private language school		At home, independently	
Other (Please specify)									

4. Read the following sentences and tell me what you think about them
(1= strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree)

The teacher is the reason why I'm good or bad at English.	1	2	3	4
I need to be told how to learn and practise using vocabulary at home.	1	2	3	4
If I am not told how to learn and practise using vocabulary at home, I don't know which activities to do.	1	2	3	4
I can learn and practise vocabulary independently without the teacher telling me what to do.	1	2	3	4

5. Do you learn and practise using vocabulary outside the classroom? (circle)
Yes/No

If your answer is **No**, specify why:

If your answer is **Yes**, continue answering the questions below.

6. Vocabulary **LEARNING**: How often do you try to learn new words **outside the classroom**? (Tick ONE option)

Once a week		2-3 days a week		4-5 days a week		6-7 days a week	

7. How do you **learn new vocabulary** outside the classroom? (Please, take some time to think about this and try to write EVERY activity you do.) Then, please rate each activity you do from 1 to 4 (1 = I absolutely love it, 2 = I enjoy doing this activity, 3 = I don't mind doing this activity, 4 = I don't really like it, but it's very useful)

Activity	Rating			
_____	1	2	3	4
_____	1	2	3	4
_____	1	2	3	4
_____	1	2	3	4
_____	1	2	3	4
_____	1	2	3	4
_____	1	2	3	4
_____	1	2	3	4

8. Vocabulary **REVISION**: How often do you **practise using the vocabulary** you learned in class at home? (Tick ONE option.)

Once a week		2-3 days a week		4-5 days a week		6-7 days a week	

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Appendix 3: Week 1 questionnaire (continued)

9. How do you revise the vocabulary you learn at school outside the classroom? (Please, take some time to think about this and try to write EVERY activity you do.)
   Then, please rate each activity you do from 1 to 4 (1 = I absolutely love it, 2 = I enjoy doing this activity, 3 = I don't mind doing this activity, 4 = I don't really like it, but it's very useful)

Activity	Rating
_____	1 2 3 4
_____	1 2 3 4
_____	1 2 3 4
_____	1 2 3 4
_____	1 2 3 4
_____	1 2 3 4
_____	1 2 3 4
_____	1 2 3 4
_____	1 2 3 4
_____	1 2 3 4
_____	1 2 3 4

10. How long is your average vocabulary learning session? (Tick ONE option)

Less than 30 mins		30 mins–1 hour		1 hour–1 hour 30 mins		1 hour 30 mins–2 hours		More than 2 hours	

11. How long is your average vocabulary revision session? (Tick ONE option)

Less than 30 mins		30 mins–1 hour		1 hour–1 hour 30 mins		1 hour 30 mins–2 hours		More than 2 hours	

12. Why do you learn vocabulary outside the classroom? (Tick all the true options)

Your teacher tells you to.		Your parents tell you to.		Your classmates encourage you to practise.		Classroom practice is not enough.		You have nothing else to do in London.	
Other (Please specify)									

13. Why do you revise vocabulary outside the classroom? (Tick all the true options)

Your teacher tells you to.		Your parents tell you to.		Your classmates encourage you to practise.		Classroom practice is not enough.		You have nothing else to do in London.	
Other (Please specify)									

14. Who tells you HOW to practise outside your class? (Tick all the true options)

Your teacher		Learning websites		Your classmates		Someone else. Who?		No one. You choose your activities yourself.	

15. What would you like to improve about your vocabulary?

Appendix 4: Whole class survey

Whole class survey

1. Have you started practising using vocabulary/learning new vocabulary more after the start of the project?
2. Have your study methods (in relation to vocabulary learning) changed since the start of the project – in class?
3. Have your study methods (in relation to vocabulary learning) changed since the start of the project – at home?
4. Will you practise using vocabulary/learning new vocabulary in the same way when the teacher stops telling you what to do at home?
5. What can motivate you to study vocabulary at home more?
6. To date, we have tried various techniques. Which of these do you use? Will you try using? Did you use but didn't like? You are not interested in? Will you recommend to your classmate?
7. Is there anything else you'd like to add/ask about?

What strategies are used by students doing the IELTS Academic Reading paper?

CHRIS EDGOOSE BELL CAMBRIDGE

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Introduction

The purpose of this action research project was to find out how students tackle an International English Language Testing System (*IELTS*) Academic Reading test. *IELTS* is an internationally recognised examination designed to test a non-English-speaking student's linguistic preparedness to embark on a university degree course at an English-speaking university. Many of our students take *IELTS* and the Academic Reading section of the test is something that our experience suggested is often more problematic for them than the Listening, Academic Writing, and Speaking sections. As *IELTS* teachers we had often heard from students how difficult they find it to complete the tasks in the given time and we have noticed during our time as teachers how students often get a lower band score in the Reading section than in the others. As teachers, we often talked to our students about reading (test) techniques and we wondered what it is that they actually *do* when tackling a reading test. The challenge we set ourselves was to see whether we could first identify and then pass on any successful strategies to future students (and to other teachers). The method we chose to try and achieve this was a research technique we hoped would allow us to get as close as possible to the students' thoughts as they read a text: the think aloud.

Background

There is a substantial amount of literature available on both the *IELTS* exam itself and on what student strategies are deemed to be successful and unsuccessful. We will summarise the relevant information below and then provide a summary of our reading on the think aloud technique.

IELTS

There is a wealth of online information about what *IELTS* is and what it tests, but for our purposes the most important

information comes from the *IELTS* website itself (www.IELTS.org), where we learn that the *IELTS* Academic Reading test has three reading passages, that candidates are given 60 minutes to complete the test, and that there are 40 questions to answer. The texts are taken from a variety of sources and are aimed at 'a non-specialist audience'. There are 11 question types that can be used (see the list under 'Teaching and research' on the *IELTS* website) and these questions are claimed to test a comprehensive set of text reading skills.

Our aim was not to test whether the exam did what it was claiming to do; rather, we wanted to understand what strategies our students were using that helped them to utilise these skills.

Reading strategies

According to Grabe (2009), in any reading task the reader employs many techniques depending on the reason for reading the text, particularly in academic settings. Reading is a complex combination of processes (Grabe 2009) that readers go through in order to reach the goal of comprehension: there is, for example, the processing of linguistic information (bottom-up reading); the making of evaluations about the reading text; the activation of prior knowledge (top-down reading), and a monitoring of the reader's own comprehension (Alderson 2000:3).

Students, in order to negotiate their way through the various reading processes, are given a plethora of advice by many universities that is intended to provide them with appropriate strategies; one example is Charles Darwin University in Northern Australia, who offer advice on: skimming; scanning; key word spotting and analytic reading (Walter 2015:20).

However, there is research to indicate that teaching skills such as skimming, scanning and inferring meaning from prior knowledge do not aid L2 reading. In the provocatively titled *Teaching reading skills: mostly a waste of time?*, Walter and Swan (2008) conclude that 'it is not … useful to attempt to teach reading skills unless there is certainty that (1) the learner does not already possess these skills, and (2) that s/he needs them'. These are skills, they contend, that most readers either already possess in L1, or (as in the case of guessing the meaning of a word from context) strategies that research suggests do not work (although they do not quote which research).

Kerr (2009:30), on the other hand, makes the valid point that, in the context of exams, 'it is common for the reading component to include tasks which will be best performed if candidates adopt strategies of skimming, scanning and inferring'.

It is also interesting and useful to note that there are some reading skills which have not gained the same universal acceptance as skimming and scanning, but for which there is research evidence. In an introduction to the *Navigate* coursebooks, Walter quotes Gathercole and Baddeley in research from 1993: 'Making a connection between the written words and how they sound is important because readers of alphabetic languages immediately convert what they read to silent speech in their minds, using that silent speech to build a mental representation of the text' (Walter 2015:20). This suggests, perhaps, a connection between successful L2 reading and silent speech, and Walter concludes that working on common spellings and the way they sound is useful.

What seems clear is that while there is no shortage of advice regarding how students should read, evidence of what they actually do is rather limited.

Think aloud

The think aloud research technique, sometimes called the think aloud verbal probe or the think aloud protocol, is a method of attempting to access the thought processes individuals go through *while* they are completing a task. In our case it involves asking students to verbalise what is going on in their heads as they complete an *IELTS* reading task. Charters (2003) traces the concept back to Vygotsky's 1962 concept of 'inner speech' (similar to the 'silent speech' reported in the previous section) and supports its validity, but also points out several potential pitfalls of using the protocol: tasks must be sufficiently but not too demanding, prompting of verbalisation must be done carefully, and 'triangulation' is required in the form of an exit interview, questionnaire or some other method.

Think aloud protocols receive a great deal of enthusiastic support from researchers of language use (e.g. Charters 2003, Katalin 2000), and given our context it was a practical way to approach our research, but the literature is not without notes of caution. Although enthusiastic, Katalin, for example, also points to the fact that careful consideration should be given to selecting and training participants (2000). This was a luxury of time and resources that we were unlikely to have.

Furthermore, and perhaps more worryingly, there is also research evidence to suggest that in 'concurrent think aloud protocols, the requirement to think aloud while working … (may have) … a negative effect on the task performance' (van den Haak, de Jong and Schellens 2003:339).

Other methods of uncovering reading strategies have been more recently researched, for example by Pritchard and Atkins (2016:111), who show the benefits of using eye tracking technology, suggesting that methods like think aloud 'may lack reliability'. But, be this as it may, our context and budget left think alouds as the most practical option and we felt convinced that this approach could potentially provide some rich data and with luck give us some insights into learner decision-making.

The study's overall purpose and design

We wanted to find out what strategies prospective *IELTS* candidates were using while they were answering the questions to an *IELTS* Academic Reading text;

furthermore, we wanted to find out if those employed by successful students were any different from those used by unsuccessful students (we took 'successful' to mean an equivalent of *IELTS* 5.0, as this is the score below which candidates are unlikely to be accepted by any universities without further English study). We would then try to find out if successful strategies could be taught using specific interventions.

To this end, we originally planned two cycles of think aloud: the first would be the think aloud sessions themselves and the analysis of the research, the second would be the teaching of successful strategies observed in the first, bookended by tests to see if any progress was observable (in comparison to a control group).

The scope of this project proved too ambitious, especially after feedback from the first cycle suggested that our approach to the think aloud had not been methodical enough. We had carried out five think aloud sessions but the questioning had not been consistent as we had worked independently and not structured the questions sufficiently. We had also not put sufficient thought into our choice of text.

Following advice from our research mentor, we began a new cycle of think aloud sessions with a new set of students. Our new research aim was to use our second cycle to look for observable strategies, to see if there were any that appeared to be used only by successful or only by unsuccessful candidates, then to draw conclusions and make a plan for future research and interventions on that basis.

The study's context and participants

We are both teachers at Bell Cambridge, a private language school which runs *IELTS* courses on the rolling enrolment model. Although we teach Intensive and Academic English as well as *IELTS*, we arranged with our manager that we would remain on *IELTS* classes for as long as possible during the period of our research. Rolling enrolment meant that we could not be guaranteed to keep students for long, or know beforehand what levels of *IELTS* experience and/or knowledge they would have and, equally importantly, what language level they would have. This would have adversely affected our research as we originally conceived it, but our new aims did not require students to be the same level or be in the class for an extended period of time. Table 1 has details of the participants' backgrounds and language levels.

When we got to the point in our schedules to carry out the think aloud sessions, only one of us was teaching *IELTS* and there were only six people in the class. We felt that although this was a small number, it was not so small as to render the research invalid – we had, after all, read that 'five participants will yield sufficient information' (Nielson 1994, quoted in Nalliveettil 2014:39).

As we had expected, it proved very difficult to find time in our teaching schedules to train the participants in the protocol, although we tried to explain clearly what it would involve. Unfortunately, one of the participants (Student 3) found the experience upsetting because she felt that she was underperforming, so she chose not to continue with the think aloud. It seemed clear that, although she had known in principle what would be expected, some training would have been beneficial in preparing her for the task, as the literature had indicated.

Ethics

So that the participants in our research were fully protected and had confidence that we would not misuse the recordings, we explained the research to them thoroughly, answered their questions about it and asked them to sign a consent form. We also gave them full feedback on their reading performance so that they felt they were gaining something from the experience (as we asked them to take time out from classes – study centre sessions – to help us with our research).

The study's data collection and analysis

We decided that an action research project was appropriate for our topic of interest because it would allow us to engage in a systematic cycle of classroom enquiry with support from both a mentor experienced in research techniques and like-minded, motivated peers over a 9-month period. We were also attracted by action research's reported focus on 'generating solutions to practical problems' (Koshy 2011:2).

It seemed clear to us that only an *IELTS* reading text would do in terms of the participants' reading matter during the

Table 1: Details on the participants

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6
Nationality	Swiss	Kuwaiti	Italian	Taiwanese	Italian	Taiwanese
Length in *IELTS* class	2 weeks	6 months	New	2 weeks	New	4 weeks
Listening	C1	B2+	B2+	C1	C1	B2
Reading	C1	B2+	C1	C1	C2	B2
Speaking	C1	B2+	B2+	C2	C1	B2
Writing	C1	B2+	C1	C2	C1	B2
Grammar	C1	B2+	B2+	C2	C1	B2
Vocabulary	C1	B2+	C1	C1	C2	B2
Previous exam performance	*Cambridge English: First*	*IELTS* 6.5	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

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think aloud, as we wanted to 'see' what they were thinking when they were trying to answer genuine *IELTS* questions. In terms of validity, it also seemed appropriate that we ask participants to read a full-length *IELTS* reading passage and that they read it in the 20 minutes that candidates would usually allocate for a single passage during the exam. Using a full-length passage was a difficult decision as our background reading had shown that think aloud texts were generally much shorter than the approximately 900 words of an *IELTS* passage. One example of a think aloud passage we found was just 258 words long (Nalliveettil 2014) and others were even shorter but we felt that because what we were looking for were strategies employed in a real *IELTS* context, using shorter passages with only some of the questions would affect the strategies used.

We also wanted to make the questions that we were going to ask participants as valid as possible; so, whereas in the first cycle we had chosen the questions on 'gut instinct', in the second round we decided to look into (a) which question types came up most commonly, and (b) which question types students appeared to find more challenging (i.e. those with which strategy suggestions would be most useful). To this end, we (a) noted the question types that had appeared most often in the last four Cambridge University Press *IELTS* exam books and analysed the results (see Appendix 1), and (b) we asked two available classes of *IELTS* students which question types they perceived to be the most challenging (see Appendix 2). Both of these approaches indicated that it would be worth including both 'True/False/Not Given' (TFNG) and multiple-choice questions in our think aloud (also 'Choose the correct heading for paragraphs', but we could not find a text that tested all three). We also tested a class on both these question types to try and ascertain whether students *really* appeared to find them difficult. Eight students were given online tests on the two question types which had previously been claimed to be the most difficult. They answered five questions of each type. The results are shown in Appendix 3. The results of this final research proved inconclusive with eight students getting an average of 60% of TFNG questions correct and 67.5% of multiple-choice questions correct. This perhaps suggested room for improvement but without further comparative research which was not practically possible, we did not pursue this line of enquiry any further.

We found a text which included both TFNG and multiple-choice questions and were satisfied that it represented a valid text in that it contained question types that appeared commonly in *IELTS* exams and were at least *perceived* to be difficult by students.

We also needed to ensure that we were more methodical in Cycle 2 than we had been in Cycle 1, and so we drew up a standardisation form (Appendix 4). The aim of this was to ensure that not only were we consistent with each other (as we were both going to observe the think aloud sessions) but also so that we had a template to work from within each session.

We felt we were now ready to carry out the think aloud sessions. Over a period of two days we recorded the verbalisations of the five students doing the *IELTS* task (see Appendix 5 for a scan of the task) and carried out brief interviews afterwards for triangulation and exploring a little further, using the standardised criteria.

The questions asked in the post-task interview (see Appendix 8) were based on techniques that we as teachers might expect to be employed during the Reading exam, and also on observations we made in the first cycle of think aloud sessions carried out earlier in the year.

We transcribed the recorded think aloud sessions themselves, noting also what was done physically by the participant during the session (see an example in Appendix 6) in order to look for themes, which we could then transfer to a spreadsheet to obtain some qualitative data (Appendix 7). The interviews were also summarised in our own words (Appendix 8) but not transcribed verbatim (the verbatim transcriptions of the think aloud session had proved unnecessarily detailed for our purposes). We then broke down and tabulated the results of the task (see Appendix 9) in order to analyse this in conjunction with the think aloud/interview transcriptions.

Results/Findings

The observations we made, based on the study outlined in the previous section, were as follows:

1. The only question that no students answered correctly was multiple-choice Q14. This question required the lexis 'it would be wrong to'/'we really cannot afford to', 'overlook'/'underestimate'.
2. The two questions that were only answered correctly by Student 5 (*IELTS* 7.5) were sentence completion Question 24 and Question 26. These questions required a return to the first two paragraphs and Question 24 required the lexis 'audience's response'/'desired effect' and the linking of the words 'sound', 'music' and 'voice' with the same words in the text. Question 26 required the lexis 'merge'/'are consistent with each other'. All three sentence completion questions use when- or if- clauses.
3. The only strategy that is common to all three of the *IELTS* 5.0+ students which is missing in the *IELTS* 5.0- students is the fact that they all finished all the questions, even if they guessed some.
4. Strategies that are common to all *IELTS* 5.0+ students but also employed by either one or both of the *IELTS* 5.0- students are: underlining key words; tackling all the questions, in order; using a pencil as a guide for the eye; mouthing/whispering the words either all of the time or some of the time.
5. Strategies that were employed by all of the students are: underlining key words; using the pencil as a guide; alternating between text and question.

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6. The student who guessed the questions which he did not have time for picked up 4 points this way, taking him from 2/13 (*IELTS* 2.5) to 6/13 (*IELTS* 5.0).
7. The only student to read the text in its entirety before looking at the questions was Student 5 (*IELTS* 7.5). Only Student 2 (*IELTS* 5.0) skimmed the text using the first and last sentences of each paragraph.
8. Student 5 (*IELTS* 7.5) spent almost exactly the first 10 minutes reading, and the second 10 minutes answering the questions, often without even looking back at the text.
9. The only student to refer in interview to using memory was Student 5 (*IELTS* 7.5).
10. Two students claimed not to whisper words to themselves but were seen to be doing so during the think aloud.
11. Student 5 (*IELTS* 7.5) was new to *IELTS*.
12. There did not appear to be any link between the length of time that the participants had been in the *IELTS* class and their success in the task. Student 5 (*IELTS* 7.5) for example, had never studied *IELTS* before and yet had the highest score of all.

Discussion

What the data suggests to us

Five participants is a small sample, but we feel that our findings suggest a number of questions which we are continuing to pursue with other teachers at our school. These questions are as follows (the numbers link to the numbers in the previous section):

1. The words and phrases referred to in this observation are relatively advanced lexical items. **Could this be evidence of the popular idea that the best *IELTS* readers are those with the best vocabulary?** And these items are general as opposed to purely academic.
2. Again, does the fact that only the higher level student was able to deal with the questions which required a fairly high level of lexical understanding point towards a need for vocabulary improvement? Possibly in this case a more sophisticated understanding of grammar would also help. These questions involved returning to the first paragraphs. **Could specific practice of questions that require bouncing around the text be beneficial?**
3. This looks like strong support for the teaching of **practising time management and guessing answers when the time is up**.
4. The fact that all or most of the participants used these techniques does not argue for their efficacy and underlining/question order are both covered in a lot of coursebooks. But we have never seen a coursebook that encourages mouthing or whispering the words or using the pen to guide their eyes – and yet almost all of the participants said that both of these strategies helped them. The mouthing/whispering also chimes with the 'silent' and 'inner speech' that we came across in our research. **Does mouthing/whispering and using the pen as a guide help students attain higher scores? We feel that this is a key question, which deserves further research**.
5. As 4 above.
6. As 3 above.
7. Coursebooks and teachers routinely recommend skimming the text before looking at the questions. Only Student 2 did this (*IELTS* 5.0). As the highest scoring student read the text in great detail for 10 minutes, **does this point to the possibility that spending longer looking at the text before approaching the questions might be a more successful strategy? Again, we feel more research is required**.
8. As 3 above.
9. Using memory suggests a deeper attempt to engage with the text. **Could encouraging *IELTS* students to read and remember texts be beneficial?**
10. The fact that they claimed not to whisper may suggest that sometimes students do not know they are using the technique of whispering the text to themselves.
11. The fact that Student 5 was new to *IELTS* suggests that this student was drawing on superior reading skills from his L1. His general language level was a little but not significantly higher than Student 4 and Student 1. And it is significant that Student 1, who only got 3/13 (*IELTS* 2.5) was graded as a C1 student and achieved a B in *Cambridge English: First* earlier in the year. **Does this point towards the need for more research into the effect of L1 reading on L2 reading?**
12. As 10 above.

What we have done to share results at our school

Our research has, perhaps unsurprisingly, led to more questions than answers. But we do need questions before answers are possible, so to that extent we feel we have been extremely successful.

We have fed back our results to the other teachers and management at our school through INSET sessions (one presenting our findings, another relating them to classroom practice, and a third discussing the difference between reading for an exam and reading for general information) and on our in-school Moodle. The school is very much on board with continuing the research that we have started, and teachers on *IELTS* courses are now incorporating the questions above into their planning of lessons. We are arranging regular *IELTS* research sessions and incorporating the *IELTS* reading focus into our ongoing Supported Experiment programme.

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Although the rigour of action research was not always easy and demanded commitment from both of us and the support and goodwill of our school, we feel it both motivated us and contributed to the ongoing professional development of other teachers at the school. Ultimately, we hope it will also lead to increased success for our *IELTS* students.

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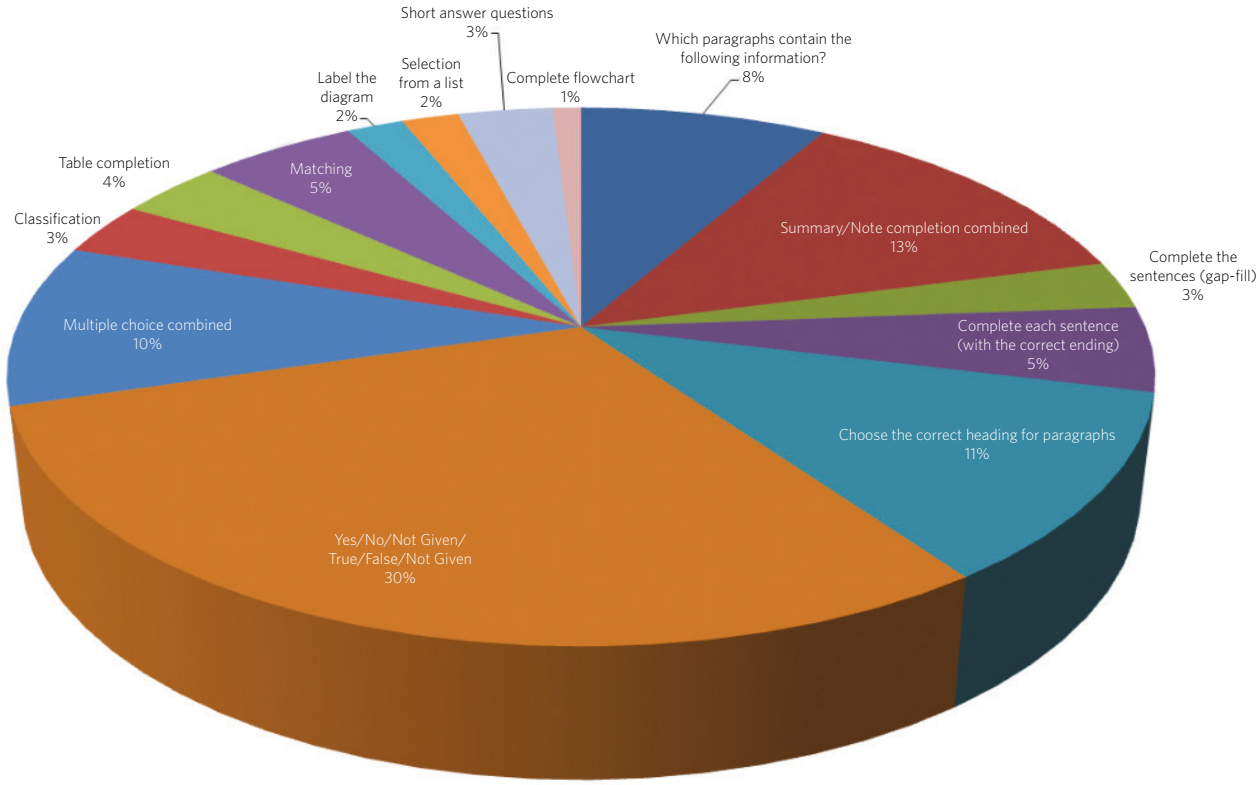
Appendix 1: IELTS question types and their frequency



Appendix 2: Survey on question types*

	I find this type of question difficult	I've never seen this type of question
True/False/Not Given (TFNG)	7	1
Yes/No/Not Given	6	2
Multiple choice (A, B, C, D)	2	
Classification		2
Complete a table	2	1
Matching		
Label the diagram	3	1
Select from a list	2	1
Short answer questions	1	
Complete a flowchart	3	3
Find information in paragraphs	2	2
Complete summary or notes on text	3	1
Gap-fill	3	
Complete each sentence (with the correct ending)	3	2
Choose the correct heading for paragraphs	5	

***12 students took part in the survey (example questionnaire is below)**

Action Research Questionnaire (15/08/16)

WHICH IELTS QUESTIONS DO YOU FIND THE MOST DIFFICULT TO ANSWER?

For each question type, put a tick ☑ in one of the boxes.

	I find this type of question difficult	I've never seen this type of question
True/False/Not Given	✓	
Yes/No/ Not Given	✓	
Multiple Choice (A, B, C, D)	✓	
Classification[1]		
Complete a table		
Matching[2]		
Label the diagram		
Select from a list		
Short answer questions		
Complete a flowchart		
Find information in paragraphs	✓	
Complete summary or notes on text	✓	
Gap-fill		
Choose the correct sentence ending		
Choose the correct heading for paragraphs	✓	

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Appendix 3: Results of online test of most difficult question types

	TFNG Score out of 5	Multiple choice Score out of 5
Student 1	4	2
Student 2	3	5
Student 3	3	3
Student 4	4	2
Student 5	1	2
Student 6	3	4
Student 7	3	5
Student 8	3	4
Total	24/40 = **60%**	27/40 = **67.5%**

Appendix 4: Standardisation form

Before task

Students told why they are being asked to participate.

1. Students told that they will be filmed but that film will only be used by the researchers and not shown to anyone else at any time.
2. Students not shown or told about the type of questions in the reading text beforehand.
3. Students complete consent form if not already completed.
4. Students told that they will have exactly 20 minutes to complete the task, just as they would have 20 minutes per task in the exam.
5. Students told the concept of think aloud. They are also told that they are not being tested and so poor performance is as useful as strong performance.
6. Students told that they should treat the paper exactly as they would in the exam. A pencil, rubber and pencil sharpener are made available to them.
7. Students told they are to constantly verbalise thoughts. They are also warned that this may disturb their thoughts a little but that as the process is more important than the result they should not worry about this.
8. Students told observer will prompt them to speak if they are silent for 1 minute.

During task

1. Students given 20 minutes exactly.
2. Students not given a warning that the 20 minutes is about to be up, but a clock is in view and is pointed out by the observer.
3. Students prompted after 1 minute of silence through task.
4. Observer can only ask: 'What are you doing now?'
5. Observer angles camera so that the whole paper and at least the lower part of the student's face is in view in order to capture hand movements across the page and silent mouthing of words during reading.
6. Observer ends task by saying 'Please put your pen down now' and stops recording.

After task

1. Observer tells student that he is now going to interview him/her for a maximum of 10 minutes.
2. Observer begins interview not more than 5 minutes after the task is completed.
3. Questions for interview:
   - **a.** Did you look at the text or the questions first? Why?
   - **b.** Did you skim the text or read it all word-for-word? Why?
   - **c.** Which questions did you answer first? Why?
   - **d.** Did you answer the multiple-choice questions?
   - **e.** How did you answer them?
   - **f.** Did you answer the TFNG questions?
   - **g.** How did you answer them?
   - **h.** Did you answer the sentence completion questions?
   - **i.** How did you answer them?
   - **j.** Did you use a finger or pencil to guide your eyes? Why?
   - **k.** Did you whisper or mouth the words to yourself? Why?

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Appendix 5: The chosen IELTS text and questions

READING PASSAGE 2

*You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 14–26**, which are based on Reading Passage 2 below.*

An Introduction to Film Sound

Though we might think of film as an essentially visual experience, we really cannot afford to underestimate the importance of film sound. A meaningful sound track is often as complicated as the image on the screen, and is ultimately just as much the responsibility of the director. The entire sound track consists of three essential ingredients: the human voice, sound effects and music. These three tracks must be mixed and balanced so as to produce the necessary emphases which in turn create desired effects. Topics which essentially refer to the three previously mentioned tracks are discussed below. They include dialogue, synchronous and asynchronous sound effects, and music.

Let us start with dialogue. As is the case with stage drama, dialogue serves to tell the story and expresses feelings and motivations of characters as well. Often with film characterization the audience perceives little or no difference between the character and the actor. Thus, for example, the actor Humphrey Bogart is the character Sam Spade; film personality and life personality seem to merge. Perhaps this is because the very texture of a performer's voice supplies an element of character.

When voice textures fit the performer's physiognomy and gestures, a whole and very realistic persona emerges. The viewer sees not an actor working at his craft, but another human being struggling with life. It is interesting to note that how dialogue is used and the very amount of dialogue used varies widely among films. For example, in the highly successful science-fiction film *2001*, little dialogue was evident, and most of it was banal and of little intrinsic interest. In this way the film-maker was able to portray what Thomas Sobochack and Vivian Sobochack call, in *An Introduction to Film*, the 'inadequacy of human responses when compared with the magnificent technology created by man and the visual beauties of the universe'.

The comedy *Bringing Up Baby*, on the other hand, presents practically non-stop dialogue delivered at breakneck speed. This use of dialogue underscores not only the dizzy quality of the character played by Katherine Hepburn, but also the absurdity of the film itself and thus its humor. The audience is bounced from gag to gag and conversation to conversation; there is no time for audience reflection. The audience is caught up in a whirlwind of activity in simply managing to follow the plot. This film presents pure escapism – largely due to its frenetic dialogue.

Synchronous sound effects are those sounds which are synchronized or matched with what is viewed. For example, if the film portrays a character playing the piano, the sounds of the piano are projected. Synchronous sounds contribute to the realism of film and also help to create a particular atmosphere. For example, the 'click' of a door being opened may simply serve to convince the audience that the image portrayed is real, and the audience may only subconsciously note the expected sound. However, if the 'click' of an opening door is part of an ominous action such as a burglary, the sound mixer may call attention to the 'click' with an increase in volume; this helps to engage the audience in a moment of suspense.

Asynchronous sound effects, on the other hand, are not matched with a visible source of the sound on screen. Such sounds are included so as to provide an appropriate emotional nuance, and they may also add to the realism of the film. For example, a film-maker might opt to include the background sound of an ambulance's siren while the foreground sound and image portrays an arguing couple. The asynchronous ambulance siren underscores the psychic injury incurred in the argument; at the same time the noise of the siren adds to the realism of the film by acknowledging the film's city setting.

We are probably all familiar with background music in films, which has become so ubiquitous as to be noticeable in its absence. We are aware that it is used to add emotion and rhythm. Usually not meant to be noticeable, it often provides a tone or an emotional attitude toward the story and/or the characters depicted. In addition, background music often foreshadows a change in mood. For example, dissonant music may be used in film to indicate an approaching (but not yet visible) menace or disaster.

Background music may aid viewer understanding by linking scenes. For example, a particular musical theme associated with an individual character or situation may be repeated at various points in a film in order to remind the audience of salient motifs or ideas.

Film sound comprises conventions and innovations. We have come to expect an acceleration of music during car chases and creaky doors in horror films. Yet, it is important to note as well that sound is often brilliantly conceived. The effects of sound are often largely subtle and often are noted by only our subconscious minds. We need to foster an awareness of film sound as well as film space so as to truly appreciate an art form that sprang to life during the twentieth century – the modern film.

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Appendix 5: The chosen IELTS text and questions (continued)

Questions 14–18

*Choose the correct letter, **A**, **B**, **C** or **D**.*

Write the correct letter in boxes 14–18 on your answer sheet.

14 In the first paragraph, the writer makes a point that

- **A** the director should plan the sound track at an early stage in filming.
- **B** it would be wrong to overlook the contribution of sound to the artistry of films.
- **C** the music industry can have a beneficial influence on sound in film.
- **D** it is important for those working on the sound in a film to have sole responsibility for it.

15 One reason that the writer refers to Humphrey Bogart is to exemplify

- **A** the importance of the actor and the character appearing to have similar personalities.
- **B** the audience's wish that actors are visually appropriate for their roles.
- **C** the value of the actor having had similar feelings to the character.
- **D** the audience's preference for dialogue to be as authentic as possible.

16 In the third paragraph, the writer suggests that

- **A** audiences are likely to be critical of film dialogue that does not reflect their own experience.
- **B** film dialogue that appears to be dull may have a specific purpose.
- **C** filmmakers vary considerably in the skill with which they handle dialogue.
- **D** the most successful films are those with dialogue of a high quality.

17 What does the writer suggest about *Bringing Up Baby*?

- **A** The plot suffers from the filmmaker's wish to focus on humorous dialogue.
- **B** The dialogue helps to make it one of the best comedy films ever produced.
- **C** There is a mismatch between the speed of the dialogue and the speed of actions.
- **D** The nature of the dialogue emphasises key elements of the film.

18 The writer refers to the 'click' of a door to make the point that realistic sounds

- **A** are often used to give the audience a false impression of events in the film.
- **B** may be interpreted in different ways by different members of the audience.
- **C** may be modified in order to manipulate the audience's response to the film.
- **D** tend to be more significant in films presenting realistic situations.

Questions 19–23

Do the following statements agree with the information given in Reading Passage 2?

In boxes 19–23 on your answer sheet, write

TRUE	*if the statement agrees with the information*
FALSE	*if the statement contradicts the information*
NOT GIVEN	*if there is no information on this*

19 Audiences are likely to be surprised if a film lacks background music.

20 Background music may anticipate a development in a film.

21 Background music has more effect on some people than on others.

22 Background music may help the audience to make certain connections within the film.

23 Audiences tend to be aware of how the background music is affecting them.

Questions 24–26

*Complete each sentence with the correct ending, **A–E**, below.*

*Write the correct letter, **A–E**, in boxes 24–26 on your answer sheet.*

24 The audience's response to different parts of a film can be controlled

25 The feelings and motivations of characters become clear

26 A character seems to be a real person rather than an actor

- **A** when the audience listens to the dialogue.
- **B** if the film reflects the audience's own concerns.
- **C** if voice, sound and music are combined appropriately.
- **D** when the director is aware of how the audience will respond.
- **E** when the actor's appearance, voice and moves are consistent with each other.

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Appendix 6: Transcription of think aloud session

Student: 5	**Date:** 6 Sept 2016	**Result:** 11/13
Time	**What participant did:**	**What participant said:**
0.00–1.00	Looks at text without turning over to the questions at all. Holds pen close to text but not following along the line of words. Does not whisper. Underlines a word at the beginning of Paragraph 1.	I am beginning reading the text trying to find something that will help me answer the questions. Now I underline this because maybe there will be a question about.
1.00–2.00	Underlines another word in Paragraph 1. Continues to underline words and hovers pen close to words, sometimes following the line of text, others not.	And this too. I am approaching the next paragraph thinking about what I have just read.
2.00–3.00	Continues same.	I'm trying to understand how much is left (laughs).
3.00–4.00	Continues same.	
4.00–5.00	Continues same.	I'm trying to understand what I've just read because I cannot really find point out what's written.
5.00–6.00	Continues same.	I'm just reading.
6.00–7.00	Continues same.	I'm reading as fast as I can now to reach the end. No I'm joking. Just reading.
7.00–8.00	Continues same.	
8.00–9.00	Continues same.	I'm underlining words that explain the main issues of the text and the words that I believe will be asked (unclear) after in the questions.
9.00-10.00	Continues same. Finishes reading at 9.28. Turns to Question 1.	Finally, I can begin with the questions. I am reading all the possibilities to this question that I can find maybe fastly in the text.
10.00–11.00	Checks the time. Hovers pen along the line of words for Question 1. Moves pen back to Paragraph 1 of text. Points towards it but does not hover directly along the lines. Returns to Question 1.	
11.00–12.00	Circles D. Focuses on Question 2. Returns to Paragraph 2. Returns to Question 2 moving pen along each line. Circles A. Focuses on Question 3.	I'm trying to understand if this one is the right answer, but I'm not sure so I guess it's that one. I am approaching the third question.
12.00–13.00	Switches between Question 3 and Paragraph 3.	
13.00–14.00	Focuses on Question 4. Circles Option B.	I am trying to understand what the question is about. Because compared to the other three options I think it could be the best one.
14.00–15.00	Switches between Question 4 and Paragraph 4. Circles Option B. Reads Question 5. Circles answer without referring to text.	Because I am pretty sure it is the right one. I choose C for the same motives of the one before I think it's the best one.
15.00–16.00	Turns to TFNG. Reads and writes 'True' next to Question 6 without referring back to text.	The part that I hate. There is a change of questions and I have to decide if the information is given or not or if it is true or false. I answered true because I can remember that I read in the text that it was true. Hopefully I'm not to reread every one every time.
16.00–17.00	Writes 'True' next to Question 7 without referring to text. Reads Question 8 and returns to text – focuses on Paragraph 8.	 I'm trying to understand if this sentence is the one that gives answer to this question.
17.00–18.00	Writes answer to Question 8. Reads Question 9, answers it immediately. Reads and answers Question 10 immediately. Turns to sentence completion questions. Reads sentence completion questions. Writes answer to Question 11. No reference to text.	 Now I have to read carefully what's the main purpose of the exercise because most of the time I believe that I know what it wants but I don't …
18.00–19.00	Answers Question 12. No reference to text.	Maybe the first one is wrong.
19.00–20.00	Alters answer to Question 12. Answers Question 13. No reference to text.	

Appendix 7: Qualitative data from think aloud sessions

Finishes all the questions	1	1	1	0	0	3
Guesses at the end if out of time	x	1	1	0	0	2
Alternates between text and question	1	1	1	1	1	5
Mouths the words while reading almost all the time	0	1	0	0	0	1
Mouths words while reading sometimes	1	0	1	1	1	4
Uses pencil as guide for eye	1	1	1	1	1	5
Tackles all the questions in order	1	1	1	1	0	4
Overtly uses signpost language to guide expectations of text	0	0	1	0	0	1
Expresses doubt as to what some underlined words mean	0	1	0	1	0	2
Underlines key words	1	1	1	1	1	5
Reads whole text thoroughly first	1	0	0	0	0	1
Skims whole text first	0	0	1	0	0	1
Begins to work through the questions in order from the beginning	0	1	0	1	1	3
Skims all questions first	0	0	0	0	0	0
Reads questions first	0	1	0	1	1	3
Reads text first	1	0	1	0	0	2
	(11/13) IELTS 7.5	**(9/13) IELTS 6.5**	**(6/13) IELTS 5.0**	**(3/13) IELTS 2.5**	**(2/13) IELTS 2.0**	
	Student 5	**Student 4**	**Student 2**	**Student 1**	**Student 6**	**Score out of 5**

Appendix 8: Interview samples from think aloud sessions (IELTS conversion: ielts.calculator.free.fr)

(Colour-coded to show how themes emerged)

Question	**Student 5 (11/13)** *IELTS* **7.5**	**Student 4 (9/13)** *IELTS* **6.5**	**Student 2 (6/13)** *IELTS* **5.0**	**Student 1 (3/13)** *IELTS* **2.5**	**Student 6 (2/13)** *IELTS* **2.0**
a. Did you look at the text or the questions first? Why?	Text – because sometimes I'm slow so I thought it would be a good idea to start from the beginning.	I first look at the questions so that I can find any of the key words that are necessary because just one hour is provided it's a short time for so long text so basically what a lot of people recommended me was look at text underline key words and then go search for them.	I prefer to check the question (because when I read the q first and there is this word with capital letters so I should focus more on the text) but many teacher recommend me to read the text and then start the questions.	It depends on the type of questions. I think that I firstly look at the questions before because then I can really look at certain aspects in the text.	Yes because if I look the question first I can notice some key words in the text and then I look for some article so I find key words.
b. Did you skim the text or read it all word-for-word? Why?	Depends on the paragraph – in some paras I just understood the main meaning but I wasn't checking for every word because I'm not so clever.	I skimmed the text – if I looked word for word I would never finish because I'm a really slow reader.	Depends, if I have time I read every sentence but in general just I read the first sentence and the last sentence of the paragraph. It's not always successful. I do it to save time and get general idea about the topic.	It also depends on the question sometimes we have to screen (?) the text and sometimes I have to read really specific sentences in order to understand all the content of the paragraph and sometimes when I was looking at a specific word I had to screen (?)	I skim all the text and circle a name or the time. It's what I do. When question ask more detail I look another more detail in the text.
c. Which questions did you answer first? Why?	First answered first questions because my personality is very logic and I like to follow the timetable.	I go question by question.	In order.	The first question was the first one because – then we have an order of the different questions along the text and its helpful to begin with q14 (first q).	The first question about first paragraph and I can read first paragraph first. If the question tells me which paragraph I can focus on the text. I don't always start with the first question – it depends on which words impress me. I started at the beginning because I saw the words 'first Paragraph'.
d. Did you answer the multiple-choice questions?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
e. How did you answer them?	By looking to each answer and by trying to understand from the text which was the one that can answer better.	I underlined the key words and then I start searching for them in the text and the tricky thing is that they are often really similar but mostly they are easier to answer because you do find the answer in the text. For me MC is easier than the others to answer.	First I check what they need – if there is date or numbers or name of any person, I should go directly to this person or date. Usually I use a highlighter but in the exam you can only use pencil. Sometimes I underline, make rectangles, zigzags. For example I make circle for the date. And for important info I underline name I use rectangle so same colour so I can recognise.	Firstly I read the first sentence and the different possibilities in order to catch the different ideas and then I looked in the para to see if it was the case or not and sometimes I had to read the whole paragraph to understand the main meaning of the paragraph. It was difficult at the beginning because I was not really concentrating. I also highlighted key words in order to get the concept.	I sometimes follow the words in the question this word 'click'. Jumping to the words I've underlined.

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f. Did you answer the TFNG questions?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
g. How did you answer them?	By remembering what was written in the text because maybe I've not looked to that – I've written what I thought. I just used my memory but I'm not sure – it was another person.	My strategy in every question is the same. Here we have 'background music' so I go immediately to the paragraph and search for answers for this key word and then I read the whole sentence and mostly underline the whole sentence and then I look at the question and compare them. Then I assume true false not given. And the same I do with sentence completion.	Guess	By reading the first sentence and then looking for the key words in the test in order to notice if it was true or false.	I just looked this first and I try to know what's the paragraph going to talk about. Sometimes synonyms.
h. Did you answer the sentence completion questions?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
i. How did you answer them?	By checking the text something but not everything half used my memory and half checked text.	Sentence completion is really difficult for me because in MC and TFNG you have like only one question but here you have various answers and they are all not related to each other and you need to scan the whole text again to find them. In MC and TFNG it's like paragraph by paragraph. These are the most difficult.	Guess	-	-
j. Did you use a finger or pencil to guide your eyes? Why?	Maybe sometimes but I'm not sure. I underlined some words that could help me in answering the questions. Key words – I thought they were key because it was just a feeling – when you read the text there are some concepts that comes out often.	I guide with the pencil. I circle the most important key words the underlining is additional information to these key words – I find the key words and afterwards I look at what I have underlined.	I use pencil because I have a big index finger. I don't know why – because more accurate because you can lose focus so I use pencil to be sure at which point I'm reading.	Sometimes yes because I had to look at specific words in order to notice yeah when they were talking about a specific subject that I had to look for.	Yes, I think it makes me more clearlier to read in the text because if not I will jump to another line.
k. Did you whisper or mouth the words to yourself? Why?	Yeah, maybe when I don't understand a lot of the text maybe when I whisper to myself I can understand what it can mean.	I know that it actually helps me but it depends on my current situation on my emotions because sometimes it helps me to focus because sometimes your brain focusses more because your auditory sense and your visual sense is working at the same time. But sometimes my mind starts to focus on my pronunciation so I lose concentration on what I have just read so I tend to be just silent because I don't want to risk it.	I try to avoid that because it takes time I read silently in my mind. It's a technique for speed reading. It's easier in Arabic but I don't use my mouth. But if I want to remember something I say it out loud. I don't know if I'm fast in Arabic – in the middle. I know one girl who went to speed reading course she finish all reading for exam in 30 minutes and she got 33 from 40.	Subconsciously maybe but I don't think so, maybe for you but I don't normally do that.	Yes, maybe it can make me think about more clearly because sometimes when I read and I just read a word and speak for that, maybe I just read and I can't think about it.

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Appendix 9: Student results

Question	Student 5 (11/13) *IELTS* 7.5	Student 4 (9/13) *IELTS* 6.5	Student 2 (6/13) *IELTS* 5.0	Student 1 (3/13) *IELTS* 2.5	Student 6 (2/13) *IELTS* 2.0	Total
Multiple choice						
14	0	0	0	0	0	**0**
15	1	1	0	1	0	**3**
16	1	1	0	0	0	**2**
17	0	1	1	0	0	**2**
18	1	1	1	1	1	**5**
TFNG						
19	1	0	1	0	0	**2**
20	1	1	1	0	0	**3**
21	1	1	0	0	0	**2**
22	1	1	1	0	1	**4**
23	1	1	0	1	0	**3**
Sentence completion						
24	1	0	0	0	0	**1**
25	1	1	1	0	0	**3**
26	1	0	0	0	0	**1**
Total	**11**	**9**	**6**	**3**	**2**	

Examining learners' attitudes towards pre-selected factors in listening texts

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Introduction

Several years ago, I started creating my own bank of audio to use in class by recording fellow teachers and friends having conversations about various topics. It was a time of exploration for me, fuelled by a desire to give students more authentic-sounding texts and to be able to tailor listening topics and tasks to the individuals I was teaching at any given time.

Recently, I have started to engage in the world of professional materials writing. Keeping both my initial tender feelings towards authenticity and this new career path in mind, I aimed to understand more about which factors, if any, influence learners to want to listen, and thus, to motivate them to continue improving their English.

The idea of providing learners with listenings tailored specifically to their needs and interests is very appealing. What is more, the role the teacher could have in facilitating this and motivation linked to it is very interesting to me. If a teacher knows what factors learners notice and focus on in a text, it stands to reason that she could facilitate greater motivation through offering her students texts precisely aimed towards their preferences.

Literature review

The importance of the role of listening in the classroom has been written about extensively over the course of ELT history (Field 2008, Underwood 1989, Ur 1984). Traditionally, listening has been grouped together with reading, seen to use the same bottom-up or top-down processing skills. While the way learners process a text, both oral and written, is still quite similar, listening today is recognised as a receptive skill which requires a great deal more attention than simply being passive (Saville-Troike 2006). Field argues that between reading and listening, listening is more crucial to L2 learners because it 'enriches the learner's spoken competence with new syntactic, lexical, phonological and pragmatic information' (2008:5). In addition to this, Mendelsohn (1994) has shown that listening comprises the largest portion of our communication time, while others have argued for the importance of listening due to it being half the equation when it comes to 'communicative competence' (Gilakjani and Ahmadi 2011).

A main tenet of this study is that identifying learners' preferences with respect to listening will provide them with further motivation to keep learning English. Some literature

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highlights a relationship between materials and a sense of achievement. Vandergrift links both higher degrees of achievement and language success to being able to understand listenings, and associates this with a higher drive to keep learning (1999:169–170). Field (2008:276) describes that a 'can-do' attitude, which in terms of willingness to approach a task, necessitates materials and tasks 'within [students'] competence'. In short, learners need to feel that they can achieve the task given to them. These references highlight that the possibility of achievement is directly tied to motivation.

Further to this, Dörnyei's research into motivation considers the notion of interest that students must associate with instruction (1994, 1998). He asserts that there must be 'intrinsic interest' attached to what is taught, meaning that each text must be relevant to an individual student's needs, values or goals in order to sustain their motivation (1998:125). Furthermore, his research suggests that interest and relevance are ultimately the key methods to create motivation through instruction (1994:280).

As listening has been discussed by many important ELT writers in the past, let us look briefly at some of the discussion surrounding several listening-related notions which are relevant to this study:

1. First of all, the listening path is generally accepted as commencing with a pre-listening phase to activate schemata and encourage motivation in the topic, then moving on to while-listening tasks, and finally some kind of post-listening activity (Underwood 1989, Vandergrift 1999). This three-step process is generally seen to scaffold and assist listening comprehension in learners (Vandergrift 1999).

2. One of the most topical factors in recent years, authenticity, has gained much popularity as a means of sustaining motivation in the classroom (Guariento and Morley 2001). For the purpose of this project, I used John Field's definition whereby '"authentic recordings" – [are] recordings of people speaking naturally and without the purposes of language learning in mind' (2008:269). While many authors support using such materials (Field 2008, Guariento and Morley 2001, Ur 1991), it is also held that authentic materials should be used appropriately to the level, either in terms of content or task (Field 2008).

3. Text length can be crucial to comprehension. Field (2008:34) established that a 'recorded passage of about three minutes' is the optimal length for students, while Ur (1984) confirmed that text length can play a role in making learners uninterested in a listening. A study by Hamouda (2013) also found that a longer text could interfere with listening comprehension.

4. There is also a high degree of importance placed on visual and contextual clues. Ur (1991) in particular is a proponent of ensuring that listeners are not 'blind' as this is not usually the type of listening they would encounter in real life. In the Hamouda study (2013), it was also shown that a lack of visual clues, both facial and body language related, creates difficulty in comprehension on the part of the learner.

5. Finally, linked to point 4 and Ur's 'blind' comment, there is a consensus in the literature that listening is taught to prepare learners for the real world (Field 2008, Ur 1991). Both the content of the listenings themselves and the tasks associated with them should aim to carry students beyond the classroom and reflect reality.

Context and participants

This study took place at a Kaplan International English school in London, where students from around the world come to learn for primarily professional and future education reasons. The school operates on a continuous enrolment basis, which means that there are new students arriving constantly, some staying for as little as two weeks, and others staying on to complete an entire academic year with us. In addition to this, our school is classified as a 25+ institution, meaning that we get few young adults, with the average age of students in each class being close to 30 years old.

This action research project was carried out in a multi-level class focused specifically on listening and speaking, which met four times a week for one and a half hours on each occasion. The level was lower intermediate and intermediate, however, a number of higher intermediate students were also present in the class throughout the study. The students were from a range of backgrounds, including Japan, China, Korea, France, Spain, Chile, Turkey, Russia, Brazil and more, and their ages varied weekly from early 20s to late 40s.

In the first cycle, there were 18 participants, while in the second cycle there were 11 participants. Three of the students included in Cycle 1 were also present in Cycle 2, as they were long-stay students. Due to the continuous enrolment system, the project has focused on collective feedback from the class so as to avoid the consequences of losing participants each week.

Methodology

This was both a quantitative and qualitative study carried out over two cycles of data collection over a total of six weeks.

Cycle 1

Before undertaking any planning, it was important to know what action research was. Through the English UK/Cambridge English Action Research Scheme and my reading, I learned that it is a way in which teachers can develop professionally by examining questions they have about teaching or learning, often in their own contexts (Wallace 1998). Rather than being a linear process, as Burns suggests, action research is a cyclical process through which a practical problem is examined,

data is collected and analysed, change is made, and then a minimum of one further similar cycle is conducted over time (2015:99–103). Finally, all the data is analysed as a whole.

After my initial reading, I came up with the following research question: From a list of pre-selected factors, which ones influence learners' attitudes towards listening activities?

From further reading I decided which factors I would focus on, and then created definitions for each of the factors that would be simple enough for A2–B1 learners to understand (see Table 1).

Table 1: Definitions of the pre-selected factors

Factor	Definition
Topic	The theme of the listening (e.g. shopping, holidays)
Content	The specific vocabulary, grammar or ideas in a listening
Task	The exercises or work you do during the listening
Length of the listening	The amount of time a listening takes
Type of listening	Monologue: Only one person is talking and no one else is involved Dialogue: A conversation between two or more people Interview: One person asks questions to one or more people to get information Multiple speakers: Three or more people speaking
Relationship between speakers	The way that the speakers are connected (e.g. friends, colleagues)
Accent	The way a speaker pronounces English, either from a country, region or social background (e.g. Canadian, British)
Authentic listening	A listening that is not made for people learning English, but for native speakers of English (e.g. the news, films)
Visuals	Images or a video that go with a listening
Live listening	A listening that is not recorded, but that is spoken in real time (e.g. your teacher speaking in class)

The aim of the study was to expose learners to a variety of listening types comprised of different combinations of the pre-selected factors from Table 1. I chose these listenings and tasks both from coursebooks, real-life and self-made materials to offer a range of authentic, live and pre-recorded texts. Across each of the two cycles, these three text types were used at least once and each included a combination of the other pre-selected factors within them.

Once exposed to a listening, the goal was to collect specific feedback about learners' feelings towards each piece of audio that was chosen, as well as to get insight into which factors influenced how they felt about the listenings and/or tasks associated with them.

Before commencing the cycle, the participants completed an initial pre-listening questionnaire (see Appendix 1) to assess their attitudes towards listening. The questionnaire, designed predominantly using a Likert scale, enquired mainly about views towards class listening, but it also sought to comprehend how the learners participated in English listening outside of the classroom. Once this had been completed, the above-mentioned pre-selected factors were pre-taught and the participants were given a copy of the definitions for their reference.

As suggested in the literature (Gilakjani and Ahmadi 2011, Underwood 1989, Ur 1984) each class listening was preceded by a pre-listening phase to generate interest and motivation in the topic and to raise awareness of the context. This was followed by the listening and any tasks involved in the while-listening phase, and finally some sort of communicative follow-up.

All listenings acted as stand-alone lessons, which considered a variety of the pre-selected factors in no pattern so as to both present a range of listening types and factors and also reflect a typical week the students may have in a class at Kaplan International English.

At the end of each class, the students completed a listening feedback form consisting of a continuum scale, which assessed their feelings with respect to the audio, and two open questions, where participants were asked to write a paragraph for each one explaining their views (see Appendix 2). The objective here was to allow the possibility for 'richness of responses' (Gray 2009:348) and to give learners the possibility to comment on whatever factors they noticed.

At the end of each week, a group discussion was held. I started by asking the students 'which listening did you like this week?', and proceeded to ask further questions based on the responses given.

Following the first week of this cycle, it became apparent that the feedback form was proving challenging for many of the students; they were unable to articulate their opinions outside of 'like' or 'dislike' and thus, were not providing (much) useful data as to why they held such beliefs. Therefore, the listening feedback form was revised to include the same continuum scale, but contained only scaffolded sentences to structure student comments (see Appendix 3). Learners were also provided with various possible examples as to how to complete the sentences and were given the list of pre-selected factors on the same page.

Cycle 2

There were some methodological changes in the second cycle. First of all, it was run differently due to both time constraints and prior feedback from participants in Cycle 1. Doing three separate listenings and feedback sessions each week proved to be too overwhelming for the learners, and so I reduced this to twice per week.

Secondly, the removal of the end-of-week discussion was also a major change. This was due in part to time constraints, but also because of the lack of usable data provided by students from the first cycle. Furthermore, it failed to be inclusive enough since many participants did not contribute.

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Thirdly, feedback forms were not done at the end of class, but after the while-listening phase of the lesson. Waiting until the end confused learners in terms of what they needed to reflect on, so implementing the reflection task directly after listening task completion was a way to keep the participants focused on the most recent tasks.

Lastly, after my experience with Cycle 1, it became clear that open-ended questions on the listening feedback forms were not only too time consuming for the A2 level students, but also were not yielding valuable insight. The feedback forms were changed for ease of access and to ensure that participants could reflect on a number of the pre-selected factors involved in the listening text (see Appendix 4). The form still maintained one open question and two scaffolded statements to retain space for students' voices.

Findings

Data was collected through several methods throughout the study. As mentioned previously, initial questionnaires were completed, written comments on feedback forms were collected, a plenary discussion was recorded each week in Cycle 1, and scores students got on the listening tasks were recorded after each listening section. The next section will highlight the key findings of each cycle of the study and then will look across both cycles at a number of factors and trends.

Cycle 1 findings

Pre-listening questionnaire

In this first section I will outline the main findings of the initial listening questionnaire (ILQ). The ILQ was designed for a number of reasons. The first was to get some brief feedback on the kinds of audio that learners listen to in English outside of class. While this did not directly impact my selection of listening texts for the study, it was informative to have a starting point of their interests for comparison later on. In addition to listening interests, the questionnaire asked a range of questions pertaining to motivation for listening, contentedness with in-class listening, both topic and task related, and also about students' desire to continue improving their listening skills (see Appendix 1). In both cycles, all of the participants agreed that they wanted to improve their listening skills. Therefore, the justification for using the class for this study was present.

The statements on the questionnaire were as follows:

a) I feel very motivated to keep learning English.

b) I like doing listening exercises in class.

c) The content of the listenings we hear in class is difficult.

d) I am happy with the content of the listenings we hear in class.

e) The tasks we do in class motivate me to keep learning English.

f) I want to improve my listening skills.

g) I am happy with the listening tasks that we do in class.

h) The topics in the listening we do in class are not very interesting.

Looking at Figure 1a and 1b, it can be seen that all but one of the respondents agreed that they already feel quite motivated to keep learning English. Similarly, 14 of the 17 participants indicated that they felt the tasks we do in class motivate them to keep learning the language. These were the two most uniform responses from the class.

On the other hand, there were more varied responses across several of the questions. While students mainly agreed that they like doing listening exercises in class, there is also a central tendency shown in the data since the 10-point scale also allowed respondents to choose a neutral response. The same can be said for whether the students are happy with the listenings they already hear in class, although the main sentiment was agreement. The most diverse responses came from the statement 'the content of the listenings we hear in class is difficult', where answers were spread quite evenly across four of the groups, but with eight participants still maintaining they neither agreed nor disagreed.

Listening feedback forms

Each listening was composed of multiple factors from the pre-selected ones detailed in Table 1. Every comment made by the participants was classed into one of the following categories: similarity to real life; content – language-related or other; ease of understanding; topic; accent and pronunciation; task; length; noise or sound; other. If there were two factors present in one comment, it was placed into both categories. This section will now go on to present the key findings from the Cycle 1 feedback forms.

Across the nine listenings in this first cycle, which was rated on a scale of 1–10, there was a range of only 1.92 points in terms of learners' feelings towards them. The

Figure 1a: Cycle 1 – initial questionnaire responses a–d

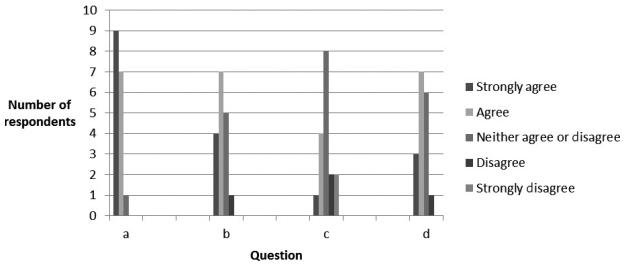
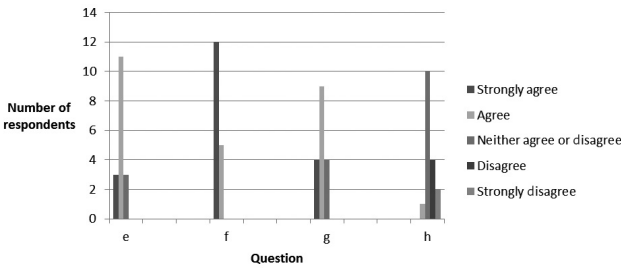


Figure 1b: Cycle 1 – initial questionnaire responses e–h



day which ranked the highest of the Cycle 1 audio was Day 6, with a mean score of 8.42. The highest number of comments made about this listening, of which all but one were positive, were associated with being similar to a real-life situation (please note these are authentic responses and may contain errors). These included:

> I would like to hear another listening like this because I'm facing the same situations.
>
> (Salma)

> The listening was fun because I usually ask something that how to get somewhere.
>
> (Haruki)

> One thing I liked about the listening was real life because I can use everywhere.
>
> (Yumi)

Another commonly mentioned factor was content, in one form or another. While learners rarely explicitly used the word 'content', their remarks fell in line with the taught definition (Table 2). These statements were still positive on the whole, but were tempered with several negative comments, for example:

> I would not like to hear another listening like this because I think it's easy the vocabulary of direction, but the vocabulary it's important to know.
>
> (Carlos)

The lowest listening score in Cycle 1 was recorded on Day 5, which took a score of 6.5 out of 10. While the Day 6 comments were largely related to their relationship to reality and the content of the listening, one third of the Day 5 remarks, and the largest single category, was connected with ease of understanding:

> The listening was a little difficult because I can understand part of listening but I don't know the means.
>
> (Zhuo)

> I thought the listening was easy for the first two stories while for the last story I couldn't follow it.
>
> (Li)

> It's also already difficult to me to understand so I would prefer to wait for that. The 3th listening it was difficult, I didn't catch almost nothing.
>
> (Sebastian)

These examples show trends within the highest and lowest ranked listenings in Cycle 1. The following table, however, shows the number of comments made about the different factors across all Cycle 1 audio (see Table 2). Ease of understanding leads the table with 51 responses under the category, while background noise and text length were the groups least represented by learners' written feedback.

In addition to this, Table 3 presents the number of occurrences of certain prevalent words present within the respondents' comments. It can be seen that 'topic' and 'understand' maintained a high ranking when organised in this manner, while the word 'content' has been used considerably fewer times than before.

Table 2: Cycle 1 – Number of comments made about the pre-selected factors

Category	Number of comments
Ease of understanding	51
Topic	40
Content	35
Real life	24
Accent and pronunciation	14
Task	13
Other	3
Background noise	2
Text length	2

Table 3: Cycle 1 – Most to least mentioned words related to the pre-selected factors

Word	Number of occurrences
Topic	39
Understand	31
Real	16
Accent	11
Speaker	7
Content	5
Task	1

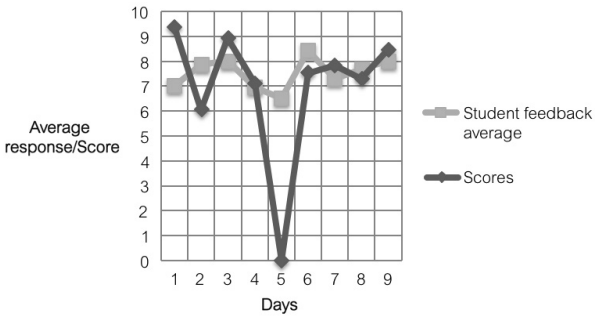
Lastly, observing Figure 2, it is clear that there is no direct correlation between feedback and task scores in Cycle 1. While some scores were quite similarly matched to the feedback responses, others were inversely correlated. In other words, student performance on listening tasks was not associated with how much they said they enjoyed the listening itself.

Weekly discussions

Weekly discussions were held only in Cycle 1 due to the minimal content they yielded over a longer time, as well as time constraints in Cycle 2. Here I will examine the results of the three weekly discussions from this first cycle.

In terms of the categories mentioned in the discussions, 'real life' was that most commonly referred to in Week 1, whereas in Weeks 2 and 3, the majority of comments were about the topic. That being said, each discussion was between 6 and 10 minutes and yielded on average only seven comments per occasion.

Figure 2: Cycle 1 – Feedback vs task scores



Apart from the oral feedback they gave on each week's audio, the students tended to be distracted by the speaking components of each class, and rather than commenting solely on the listenings, they focused instead on the communicative aims of the lessons. An example of this is the following excerpt from the Week 1 transcription:

> T (Teacher): What do you think? S8?
>
> S (Student) 8: … on Tuesday we talk about experience? Ok, for me was very good experience because I can improve my English talking in short time. … In one minute I have to think and not translate to speak in English….
>
> T: Ok. Guys, do you have anything else you want to say about the week? About the listenings specifically?
>
> S8: This week was very … completely different to the other weeks. I don't know but for me was very interesting because we talk – everyone talk about the experience about the food, that is simple topics to talk.
>
> T: And did you prefer it being different? Yeah?
>
> S9: On Tuesday we repeated three tenses. That is very useful for us.
>
> T: Ok, so in terms of the speaking it was useful. Good. Alright everybody!

In this case, the learners cannot separate the listening tasks in their memories from the speaking tasks they performed afterwards. This is why in Cycle 2 I collected feedback from the students immediately after they had completed the listening tasks.

Cycle 2 findings

Pre-listening questionnaire

The responses to the ILQ in Cycle 2 tended to be slightly more positive in general, but there were fewer 'strongly agree' responses reported on the whole (see Figure 3a and 3b). Similar to Cycle 1, the most positive questions were a and e, with 10 of the 11 respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing in each case. Further to this, the response to 'I am happy with the listening tasks that we do in class' saw all but one participant register a positive response.

In terms of the more widely distributed responses, there is only one of note. As in Cycle 1, the degree of difficulty of the listenings displayed varying responses, and in this cycle Question c proved to be the only one that elicited any kind of negative response.

Figure 3a: Cycle 2 – initial questionnaire responses a–d

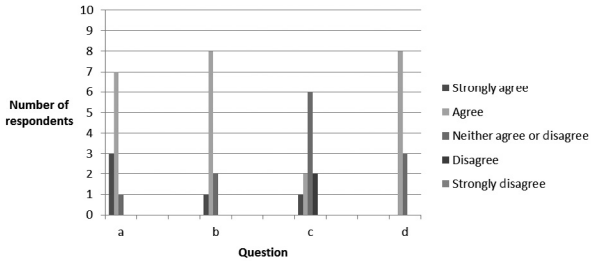
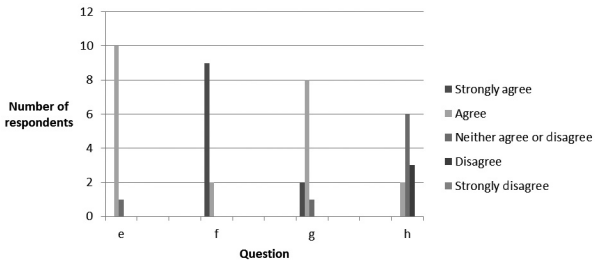


Figure 3b: Cycle 2 – initial questionnaire responses e–h



Listening feedback forms

Compared to the Cycle 1 reflections, the Cycle 2 feedback forms were redesigned to include Question 3, a Likert scale questionnaire, in order to yield more substantial data (refer to Appendix 4). The statements involved were as follows:

a) I enjoyed the topic of this listening.

b) The content of the listening was interesting.

c) The content of the listening was useful for me.

d) The tasks I did were enjoyable.

e) The tasks I did were challenging.

f) The listening was too long.

g) The speakers were easy to understand.

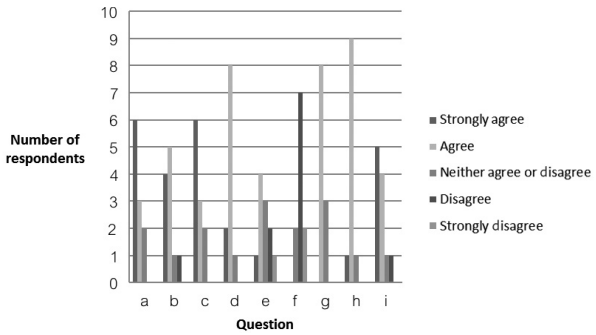
h) I liked the speaker's accent.

i) I want to hear another listening like this in class in the future.

These questions were added so that I could ensure that I would get data on the pre-selected factors and as I also questioned whether students were aware of these factors. Now we shall consider the key findings from the Cycle 2 feedback forms.

In general, Cycle 2 revealed a narrower range of feedback on the continuum scale – only 1.14 points – when compared with Cycle 1. Day 3, which scored an average of 8.64 out of 10, was the most enjoyed listening of the second cycle. In terms of the specific factors reported on the Likert scale on Question 3 of the feedback form, nine out of 11 participants on Day 3 agreed that the tasks they did were enjoyable and 10 out of the 11 respondents agreed that they liked the speakers' accents (see Figure 4). The most wide-ranging responses came from Question e, where five respondents

Figure 4: Cycle 2 – Day 3 feedback form results



agreed that the accompanying tasks were challenging, three neither agreed nor disagreed, and three disagreed. On the other hand, two out of 10 of the students reported not wanting to hear another listening like this in the future. This was one of only two negative responses to this question across all the Cycle 2 listenings.

Similar to the highest ranked listening in Cycle 1, the majority of comments made by the learners on Day 3 were about its similarity to real life. Some examples are:

> I like it because is a typical situation I can live in London everyday.
>
> (Nadia)

> My favourite thing about this listening was daily conversation because it can let me communicate with people.
>
> (Ting)

> I think it was really convenient for our life ... we can use these sentense every day.
>
> (Haruki)

On the lower side of the spectrum was Day 2, which received an overall score of 7.5 out of 10. While this was the least liked audio of the second cycle, just two of the statements in the questionnaire contained 'disagree' responses, so the responses were still quite positive. The feedback to Question e (the tasks I did were challenging) was comparable to that of Day 3 as there was a wide range of responses (see Figure 5), whereas Question c showed that two students disagreed that the content of the listening was useful. An equal number of comments were made by learners about the content, ease of understanding and the topic of the Day 2 listening. For instance:

> My favourite thing about this listening was the story because it's totally new way to live for me. There aren't too many words or grammer usefull to us for studying.
>
> (Fan)

> It's interesting story to know, but easy enough to understand.
>
> (Tatyana)

> The topic was very interesting. I am interested in people who lives in alone. I wonder what they do all day, how was their life? So I liked very much.
>
> (Ezgi)

Figure 5: Cycle 2 – Day 2 feedback form results

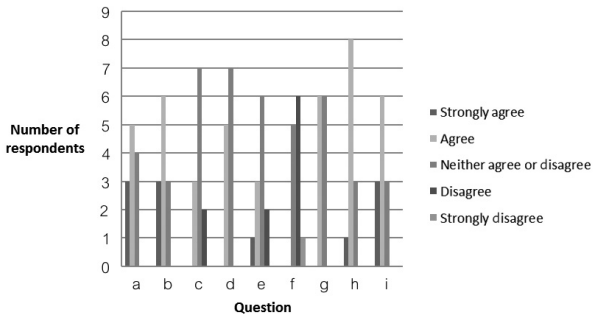
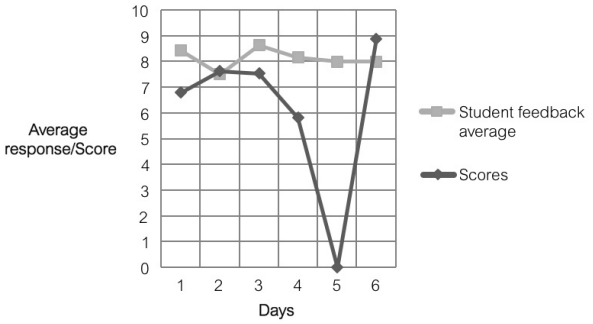


Figure 6: Cycle 2 – Feedback vs task scores



Across all the listenings in Cycle 2, 'content' had the highest number of comments at 27, followed by 'real life' with 20 comments. The least mentioned factor was length, about which there was only one comment made. With respect to the specific words used by learners, there is a similarity to Cycle 1: 'topic', 'understand', and 'real' were ranked first, second and third, respectively, and were used in the same order as in Cycle 1. The two factors that were mentioned the least were 'task' and 'content', which were also in the bottom two spots in Cycle 1.

As with the first cycle, in Figure 6 we can see that there was no correlation found between performance on while-listening tasks and how learners reacted to a listening.

Cycles 1 and 2 – comparing all listenings

Finally, although each listening was a stand-alone lesson, and each comprised a different combination of the pre-selected factors, it is possible to compare these factors across all listenings – both Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 – in order to highlight any overall trends. Using the three highest and three lowest feedback scores, let us now examine those trends.

Comparing the top three listenings, we can observe several similarities between them. The first is the length insofar as each was between 48 seconds and 1 minute 20 seconds. This does not show definitively that audio length was a factor influencing listening preferences, however, as there were listenings of a similar length which ranked closer to the bottom. The second factor noted was related to listening type. Each of the top three listenings was a dialogue. Once again, however, there were other dialogues that did not receive a high ranking. Finally, background noise was present in all of the top three listenings in the form of either café noises or traffic. While these three factors were included in the three most well-received texts, their occurrence is not limited to the three highest; they are also present in listenings that had lower rankings. This is to say that there was nothing consistently distinctive in the three most highly rated texts.

Looking at the bottom three listenings, there are no consistencies across them. This being said, all but one of the bottom five listenings was a monologue.

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There was very little regularity across the pre-selected factors in the listenings. However, as demonstrated in the Cycle 1 tables above and the comments across both cycles, ease of understanding contributed to learners' attitudes towards listenings. The lowest feedback score in each cycle reflected poorer comprehension of the text on the part of the learners. Apart from this, dialogues seem to have been slightly more preferred to other types of listening and background noise also tended to contribute to higher rankings. Overall, the highest ranked listenings may indicate a preference for listenings that are more similar to real life.

Discussion of the findings

I started this study with the following research question: From a list of pre-selected factors, which ones influence learners' attitudes towards listening activities? Here I will comment on some of the findings that have been presented above.

In the first cycle, while the ILQ indicated that learners wanted to improve their listening skills, when it came time to do the listenings, there was an air of drudgery in the classroom. I experienced resistance from certain students about why we were focusing on listening over speaking in the classroom. Paired with the fact that we did three listenings a week in order to get the cycle done under time constraints, this negativity may have influenced the feedback scores in Cycle 1. In the second cycle, however, the class atmosphere was much more positive, so the higher ratings and smaller range between all six listenings could have been encouraged by it.

The findings from the weekly discussions in Cycle 1 proved to be inconclusive and such discussions were most likely too challenging for the A2 and B1 level students involved. Similar to the open questions on the feedback forms, the participants found it difficult to articulate their thoughts on which factors had influenced their choices. The discussions resulted in dominance from certain more confident or higher level students, and a lack of involvement on the part of others. At the same time, there were issues with students separating the communicative follow-up tasks from the while-listening tasks, which is what I wanted their reflections to focus on. The discussion would likely have been done better as smaller interviews to allow others a chance to be involved, but unfortunately there were time constraints which simply did not allow for it.

In order to see if any factors did have an effect on the participants' preferences, it was necessary to pre-teach the terminology and give examples of this. The fact that so few of the pre-taught factors surfaced in the comments directly may indicate that the learners did not sufficiently understand each of them. Apart from the word 'topic', the most prevalent words that could be tied to an influential factor, as such, were 'understand' and 'real'. The use of these words and the categories tied to them denotes that the students were able to give some of their own input as to why they liked or disliked a particular listening in addition to the pre-selected factors. However, the number of categories that emerged from the students' comments across both Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 shows that the learners likely had a limited ability to express why they felt a certain way; often, they were unable to attribute their preferences to any specific factors. In Goh's study on factors affecting student listening comprehension, she cites that 'what appeared to be absent from the low-ability group's metacognitive knowledge was an understanding of the role of other factors' (1998:34). I feel that there may have been a similar issue at play during this project. In addition, continuous enrolment may have contributed to the lack of diversity of expression. Given that our school employs a continuous enrolment system, it was difficult to ensure that each new student had an adequate induction to the study and a full understanding of the terminology involved in the feedback forms.

On the other hand, the number of comments made about particular aspects of listening suggests that there may be elements that students recognise more in a listening text. Throughout the two cycles, topic and content, in terms of language, were both referred to over many other factors, which may allude to the fact that learners more easily notice these.

There were indications that arose from the ranking of all the audio that the type of listening (e.g. monologue, dialogue), text length and the inclusion of background noise might have had some influence on how learners reacted to them. While none of these is conclusive enough to call them a definite factor responsible for motivating learners to listen, dialogues and background noise do have a strong link to the real-world listening that was referenced by many students in the comments. Field asserts: 'there has been a wish to relate the nature of listening practised in the classroom to the kind of listening that takes place in real life' (2008:25). Similarly, as mentioned in the literature review, real-life listening often entails visuals – facial expressions, body language, lip movement. The desire to listen to real-life situations is associated with the choices that the majority of learners made in the ILQ. They cited films, music, and the news as what they listen to outside of class, each of which could be linked to visuals. Initially, I had thought that the authentic texts would be better received by learners, eliciting higher scores; however, texts seen as simply relating to real life as opposed to actually being authentic were preferred. This may suggest that suitably graded material to ensure ease of understanding is indeed of more value to learners than authenticity overall.

In addition to the points above, I suspect that students' attitudes to the listenings were influenced slightly more by their motivation to engage with the topic, which would have been created in the pre-listening phase, than by any other pre-selected factors. My justification for this is that during Cycle 1 it took some time for me to run the lesson smoothly with the addition of the feedback forms. I felt quite overwhelmed through much of it as I sensed negativity from my students in response to the forms. This meant that I could not dedicate as much time or confidence to the pre-

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listening stage, and so motivation levels were not always high beforehand. In contrast, I felt rather confident during Cycle 2, and by then I had discovered how to structure the lesson in order to fit in the correct amount of time for the forms and still have a well-developed pre-listening phase. This is supported by the fact that the majority of the top-ranked listenings were in Cycle 2. Therefore, I would conclude that in my context, the teacher's attitude and participation towards generating interest in the topic may have had more influence on learners' attitudes than other factors. It would be interesting going forwards to experiment with how the teacher delivers the lesson to see if this might show more or less interest towards specific listenings on the part of the students.

Reflections on action research

This experience has been very enlightening and I have learned so much about action research and myself as a teacher and an individual. There have been moments, however, when I have also felt overwhelmed by the process.

On a professional level, I feel as though I learned so much about the action research process: how to select an area of focus, choosing an appropriate question, collecting data, analysing data and reflecting on it all as you go. I have a much better understanding of the elements involved than I had before starting this scheme. On top of this, I have gained valuable insight into my own teaching, particularly when it comes to classroom management and dealing with differing opinions in the classroom. Being positive in the classroom and not treating your research like a burden on your students goes a long way in keeping the participants happily involved.

Furthermore, I have taken a lot from it on a personal level. Most important was that I need to work on my time management. With the Action Research Scheme, we attended two 2-day workshops to learn more about data collection, data analysis and other relevant tools, where we also developed our projects with the help of our peers and mentors. After each workshop, I felt highly motivated. But life would get in the way and I became distracted by some personal issues I was dealing with. Doing this research was like having another part-time job, so balancing that with my other work and personal obligations was difficult at times. I know now that I need to just make a schedule and keep to it. In addition to this, I have discovered that anything is achievable if broken down into smaller steps. You do not have to do everything in one day, so having small, achievable tasks will keep your morale higher and will ensure that you stay to schedule.

In the future, I do not think I would undertake another project similar to this in a continuous enrolment environment. I felt it was too difficult to create enough rapport with many of the students for the study to feel personal to them and therefore, for them to make personal reflections. I would like to continue exploring the listening process going forward with respect to self-made audio, and I will take with me the knowledge that I have learned on this journey. Overall, this has been a rewarding experience that I am grateful to have had the opportunity to be a part of.

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Appendix 1: Pre-listening questionnaire

1. How many weeks are you studying at Kaplan International for in total? _____

2. Why are you studying English? *Tick one box that describes your reason the most.*

☐ For work ☐ To study at a university ☐ To speak to people when I travel

Other _____ (please write)

3. Which of the things below do you listen to in English outside of class? (Circle as many as you like)

Films Music Radio programmes Lectures/talks

The news Podcasts Audiobooks

4. For the statements below, tick the box that best describes how you feel.

	Strongly agree	**Agree**	**Neither agree nor disagree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
a. I feel very motivated to keep learning English.					
b. I like doing listening exercises in class.					
Why? (Please explain your choice in 4b)					
c. The content of the listenings we hear in class is difficult.					
d. I am happy with the content of the listenings we hear in class.					
e. The tasks we do in class motivate me to keep learning English.					
f. I want to improve my listening skills.					
g. I am happy with the listening tasks that we do in class.					
h. The topics in the listening we do in class are not very interesting.					

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Appendix 2: Cycle 1 feedback form

1. Using the numbers below, how did you feel about this listening?

   1 = strongly disliked it
   5 = neither liked nor disliked it
   10 = strongly liked it

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

2. Please write a paragraph explaining your feelings in Question 1, giving reasons. (e.g. why did you like it or dislike it?)

3. Would you like to hear more listenings in the future like the one you just did? Write a paragraph explaining why or why not.

Appendix 3: Cycle 1 revised feedback form

1. Using the numbers below, how did you feel about this listening?

   1 = strongly disliked it
   5 = neither liked nor disliked it
   10 = strongly liked it

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

2. Complete the sentences below with your own ideas. You can use the words in the box below to help you, if you wish.

   a) One thing I *liked/disliked* about this listening was _____ because _____

   _____

   _____.

   b) Another thing I *liked/disliked* about this listening was _____ because _____

   _____

   _____.

   c) I thought that the listening was *difficult/just right/easy* because _____

   _____.

   d) The _____ was _____ because _____

   _____.

Content	**Gender of the speakers**	**Accent**
Task(s)	**Relationship between the speakers**	**Background noise**
Topic	**Authentic speech**	**Visuals**
Number of speakers	**Length**	**Live listening**

3. Finish the sentences below so that they are true for you.

   a) I *would like/would not like* to hear another listening similar to this one because _____

   _____.

   b) If I were to change something about what we listened to today, I would change _____ because

   _____.

Appendix 4: Cycle 2 feedback form

1. How much did you like this listening? Tick one box below.

   1 = I didn't like it at all.
   5 = I neither liked nor disliked it.
   10 = I really liked it.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

2. Why? Please explain your choice in Question 1.

_____

_____

_____

3. Say how you feel about the statements below. Tick one choice for each statement.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
a) I enjoyed the topic of this listening.					
b) The content of the listening was interesting.					
c) The content of the listening was useful for me.					
d) The tasks I did were enjoyable.					
e) The tasks I did were challenging.					
f) The listening was too long.					
g) The speakers were easy to understand.					
h) I liked the speaker's accent.					
i) I want to hear another listening like this in class in the future.					

4. Complete these sentences so that they are true for you.

   My favourite thing about this listening was _____ because _____

   _____.

   My least favourite thing about this listening was _____ because _____

   _____.

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To what extent can peer assessment of written work increase a student's ability to proofread his or her own work?

RAUL POPE FARGUELL EUROCENTRES BOURNEMOUTH

Introduction

In late 2014 an observer commented that I could improve my teaching by encouraging learners to rely less on the teacher for feedback, and I should think of ways to push students to work harder during this phase of a lesson. It was through this process that I was introduced to the Cambridge English/English UK Action Research Scheme and subsequently peer assessment. Writing was chosen for two reasons. First, I felt it was the skill that was most neglected in my classroom and, despite lots of writing being done in the form of notes or practising grammatical structures, teaching writing and analysing it were not common practice. Second, writing offered a concrete opportunity for students to assess each other's work at A2/pre-intermediate level, whereas an assessment of oral performance would be both too subjective and too difficult. My hope was that through regular consultation with each other about their written work, students would move from a position of needing someone to point out their own errors to being able to see them for themselves. I was keen to use peer assessment as a way of fostering the students' future autonomy. My interest was further piqued to learn about the relative scarcity of application of peer assessment in EFL.

My study took place at Eurocentres Bournemouth, a private language school offering General English courses to students from 16 years of age. Over a 12-week period, 28 students, aged from 17 to 65, participated from 11 countries in an A2 class. Students stayed from between a week to 12 weeks.

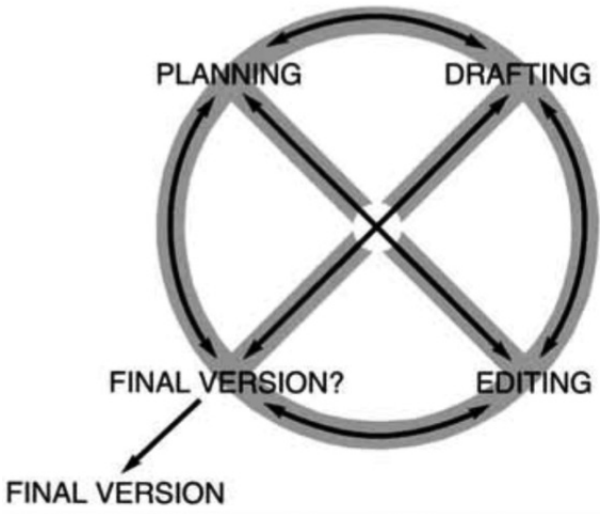
This article will review the literature surrounding writing, providing feedback, and peer assessment, before detailing the participants in the study and its context. This will be followed by the research question, then a delineation of the three research cycles and the results of each phase. Finally, conclusions will be drawn about the implications of the study, and suggestions for further research based on the findings will be made.

Literature review

The writing process

Before being able to assess their peers' work, students first have to complete a writing task and proofread, which can be challenging and time-consuming since writing is not a linear process. It involves planning, composition, revising then editing, and writers move backwards and forwards between drafting and revising with stages of re-planning in between (Hedge 1988). This process is represented in The Process Wheel (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Process Wheel (Harmer 2004:6)



Experienced writers plan what they are going to write, which is decided by the purpose and in particular the type of text they will produce, the language they will use and the information to be included in the text (Harmer 2004). The writer considers the audience they are writing for, the language they will use, and how best to structure the essay – the facts, ideas and arguments (Harmer 2004). In contrast, it is my impression that EFL students, perhaps lacking a specific context, audience or purpose, tend to focus on grammatical accuracy over the explicit context since that is how writing practice is often presented.

Proofreading

The first stage of peer assessment is proofreading a peer's writing, i.e. looking for grammatical, lexical, and spelling errors, as well as the order of arguments and paragraphs. Arguably, from practising grammatical structures to writing WhatsApp messages, 'proofreading light' is something students are likely to do on a daily basis (in their L1(s) and L2(s)), yet with writing specifically, there isn't a culture in EFL whereby students proofread their work, seek advice and then rewrite what they have written on a regular

basis. Instead preference for class time is given over to the practice of other skills such as speaking, listening and reading. My own experience of writing in EFL eliminates proofreading altogether and class time is more often spent creating ideas and completing the task without revisiting it. This denies students the chance to see writing as a dynamic process which would include the practice of proofreading on a scale that would benefit them later in life at university and/or work. It also eliminates the chance for students to provide feedback on their peer's work and assess its impact on grammatical accuracy. As far as I am aware, there has not been a study involving peer assessment as a vehicle for improving a student's own ability to proofread their own written work in EFL.

Providing feedback on written work

The issue whether error correction of L2 written work is effective or not is far from settled and has been called 'the most contentious issue in second language (L2) writing research' (Liu and Brown 2015:66). In 1996, Truscott wrote that correcting L2 writing had failed to facilitate improvement (Ferris 2004) which led to a revival of the discussion, centring around teachers deciding 'whether, how, and when' to address students' errors (Ferris 1999 in Chandler 2003:268). Ferris (2004:50) concluded that the 'burden of proof' is on those who favour error correction'.

There are studies that found that error correction failed to make a significant difference to student accuracy. Chandler (2003:268) lists examples such as Kepner (1991), who investigated error correction in students' journal entries when surface-level errors (spelling, grammar, punctuation and word choice) were highlighted, and Semke (1984), whose study looked into the effect of error correction on written accuracy and fluency. However, it was noted that there were inconsistencies with what students were asked to do with the corrections in Kepner's research, and the difference in quantity between what the test and control group were expected to write in Semke's study. Conversely, Chandler (2003:269) goes on to say that even the studies where the efficiency of error correction has been demonstrated (Ashwell 2000, Cardelle and Corno 1981, Ferris 1997, Ferris and Roberts 2001) measured the accuracy of rewrites only or on tests, which didn't take into account the accuracy of future assignments. Such inconsistencies in existing written corrective feedback research have in turn led to 'stagnation' in current research practices (Liu and Brown 2015:66).

Despite the lack of clarity resulting from research, what can be said to be more conclusive is the way students feel about error correction. L2 students are generally positive about receiving written teacher feedback on their work (Hyland and Hyland 2006). The debate, however, is what type(s) of feedback work best for students. In a summary of research on the effectiveness of corrective feedback, there were 11 types identified in the 44 studies synthesised by Liu and Brown (2015:74). The most popular was direct correction, used in 66% of the research, and error coding (41%) and error locating (23%) were the second and third most favoured methods. They also found that studies varied in how much correction was given to students with the decisive factor being the length of the writings involved. Correcting all the errors in a text was the most common treatment type, referred to as 'comprehensive' or 'traditional' feedback, while for pieces longer than 300 words, 'mid-focused' feedback was preferred given the time-consuming nature of comprehensive feedback. Lastly, Liu and Brown (2015) report that 36% of the studies fed back on grammar alone, while 18% focused on grammatical and lexical errors, and 27% covered grammatical, lexical, and mechanical errors. It is worth noting that despite 27% of studies not stating the turn-around time of corrective feedback, most studies provided it within three to seven days (45%), with one to two days being less common (23%). Whatever the method of correction chosen, the length of writing is a key indicator in determining the L2 learners' writing proficiency under timed conditions and the possible efficacy of correction (Liu and Brown 2015:74).

Peer assessment

Education has seen a shift in classroom dynamics in the last 20 years, from a teacher-centred approach to student-centred learning, which 'emphasises authenticity, interaction, task-based activities, and communication for real world, meaningful purposes' (Brown 2007:378). Peer assessment similarly puts students at the centre, involving them in judging each other's work (Falchikov 1994) which has been found to enhance learning (O'Malley and Valdez Pierce 1996, Sluijsmans 2002). Peer assessment is thus a way of giving more control and autonomy to students as it actively involves them in the feedback process and moves them away from a passive reliance on teachers' feedback in order to improve their written work (Hyland and Hyland 2006:90). Finally, peer assessment does not only encourage students to cast a more critical eye over each other's work; O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996) report that students evaluating the written work of their peers are also extending their own opportunities to learn how to write, such as learning to reflect on how to increase their control as a writer, which has implications for future learning autonomy and lifelong learning.

Peer assessment research

Studies have questioned L2 students' ability to offer useful feedback to each other and queried the extent to which students are prepared to use their peers' comments in their revisions (Hyland and Hyland 2006:91). An additional lack of communicative and pragmatic skills, particularly at lower levels, may cause difficulty when relaying feedback to peers (Hyland and Hyland 2006:92). Indeed, Hyland and Hyland (2006) report that Connor and Asenvage (1994) found feedback made only a marginal difference to student writing. Only 5% of revisions could be directly linked to peer comments compared with 35% related to teacher comments. They also document the importance of learner training, after which students felt more positive and confident when performing peer assessment.

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A recent action research project initially highlighted that students felt 'less engaged' during the process of peer assessment owing to the inability to see the benefits in their immediate context (Chitty 2015:38). Notwithstanding, Chitty (2015) did find that while individual peer assessments of oral presentations on an undergraduate degree preparation programme varied substantially, when their assessments were taken on average they matched those of an expert assessor.

Formative peer assessment, though not in EFL, was used successfully by Nortcliffe (2012) over a 5-year period on a Web Programming Module at Sheffield Hallam University. The research found that not only did students value peer feedback more than that of the tutor, but the more the research went on, the more responsive students were to peer and self-assessment.

Conclusions from literature review

Nortcliffe's conclusions highlight a central issue in the debate about the potential successes of peer assessing in pursuit of individual grammatical accuracy. Chandler (2003:293) found evidence of 'more correct' work after just 10 weeks of student errors being underlined. Feedback alone though is not enough to make progress. Key to learning from error correction seems to come from the revision of errors (Chandler 2003) and one way of doing this is through keeping error charts or a record (Ferris 2004). Ferris (2004:58) also asks another important question: Are certain types of errors (lexical, morphological, syntactic) more amenable to treatment than others? The discussion has led researchers to suggest the need for longitudinal research into these issues (Liu and Brown 2015).

Context and participants

The participants in this project were 28 students enrolled at Eurocentres Bournemouth in an A2 class on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001), working towards B1 level. Eurocentres Bournemouth runs a rolling enrolment policy and students can stay for as little as a week. In this study there were 15 males and 13 females from varying L1 backgrounds: 14 Arabic speakers, three Swiss-German, two Turkish, two Spanish/Catalan, two French, one Mandarin, one Portuguese, one German, one Japanese and one French/Italian. Only one participant was enrolled throughout the 12-week course, another two were present for 10 weeks and most ranged from between two to eight weeks. The participants were aged between 17 and 65.

Students at Eurocentres are required to do a piece of writing each week and writing is formally assessed every four weeks. The assessment is not only in writing, but also in speaking, vocabulary and grammar. This is on a formative assessment basis and student objectives are set for the subsequent four weeks based on their marks and areas of weakness. Listening and reading is assessed over the 4-week period.

It is important to note that the study took place between July and September when a number of students used the summer break in their education systems to improve their English. Two of the participants in the study are long-term students, i.e. staying over six months with a view of attending university in the UK. Most of the participants believe learning English will increase their job opportunities.

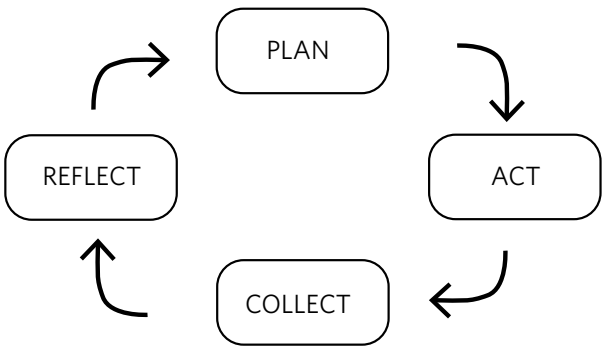
Research question

If it is true that the majority of students believe they will need English for their future careers or while at university, the ability to read their work and be more reflective and critical writers becomes an important skill to develop within the classroom. Coupled with my goal of making students more autonomous, I decided that my research question would be: To what extent can peer assessment of written work increase a student's ability to proofread their own work?

Action research

Given the nature of the research question and the lack of previous research into peer assessment's relationship with individual accuracy in writing, I believe that action research and its very *raison d'être* lends itself to this type of exploratory research. As shown by Figure 2, action research is a constant cycle, where once a general problem is identified, how to solve it, which then informs the research, is tested. After the results are collected, they are analysed and reflected upon before the process is started again as new light is shone on the problem. The stages are much less clear cut in reality because, as Lewin (1946:42) put best, 'planning is seldom perfect, action reveals the need for further planning, backtracking occurs, and so on.'

Figure 2: The action research cycle



Source: www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/ldc/resource/evaluation/tools/action

Therefore, going into the study, I was ready to be as flexible as possible and open-minded as to how the research might develop, what techniques might be used and what the students might need.

The study

The study took place over 12 weeks and was split into three cycles to allow for time for reflection and to make any changes necessary. One student wrote and reviewed 10 pieces of work, which was the maximum for the study, while 10 of the participants completed one piece of work. The majority of the students completed at least three pieces of work. The only source of data collected was the written work assessed by the student. The participants were using *New English File Pre-Intermediate* (NEF Pre-Int) (Oxenden, Latham-Koenig and Seligson 2005) and the writing tasks were either taken from the textbook or narrative-based pieces around the students' own experiences. More detail about the task types will be given as each cycle is elaborated on. The theme of the writing task was introduced on a Monday and the content needed for that genre was discussed. Students then wrote the piece during class time. Peer assessment and proofreading took place on a Friday for an hour. Before each session, the reasons why the students were reading each other's work were explained; this was particularly useful as there were often new students in the classroom unaccustomed to the practice. Thus the focus was always that through helping one another the students were helping themselves and reflecting on their own errors. The peer assessment component of the lesson was always conducted in pairs, as shown in Figure 3, while the subsequent stage, proofreading, was done individually (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Students working together to proofread a peer's work

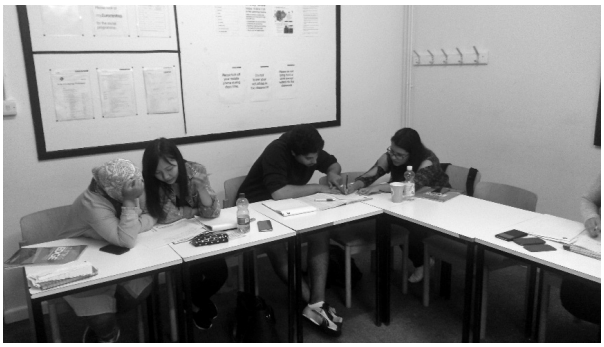
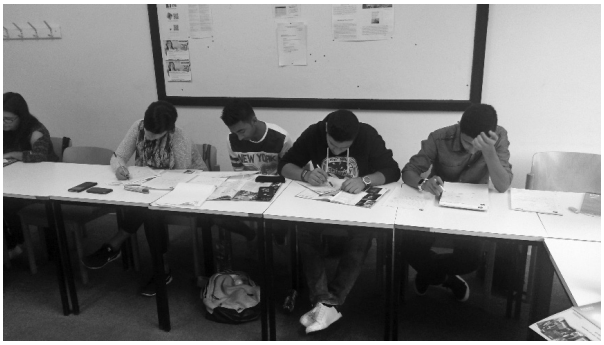


Figure 4: Participants proofreading their own work



Ethics

On the first day of the study, and to each new student thereafter, I explained the reasons for doing the writing and proofreading in class and explained that their work might be used anonymously. All students were given an opt-out option of the research if they felt its objectives were not relevant to them and what they wanted to achieve while in class. No student opted out. All students agreed I could contact them by email if I wanted to use their work, which they had provided to the school. I have received permission from those photographed to use these in anything related to the research.

Cycle 1

Monday morning was spent explaining the action research to the students. I detailed what I wanted to do with their writing and how it would benefit them. I invited questions and got written consent from them.

My first decision was to consider the first task type. I used the task from NEF Pre-Int, 'The story behind the photo', which asked students to create a story based on the photo given. They had to decide what happened before, during and after the image in the book. We spent 50 minutes discussing what grammar and vocabulary they could use, and they brainstormed different ideas. The next 50 minutes the students spent writing together. Due to the difficulty of the task, they collaborated and brainstormed in pairs and wrote the story together. I ensured each person in the pair was contributing to what was written, not only the student holding the pen. After each group had stopped writing I encouraged them to read and check for errors.

They wrote the text on Monday and I made photocopies of each piece of work. On Friday the task was to proofread another group's work before the errors the proofreaders found were discussed with the group that had written the text.

The first cycle's method of correction was via a discussion, and students did not indicate any errors they found on the text they were reviewing. I wanted to encourage discussion and interaction and have students talk about the types of surface-level errors and the mechanics of writing.

The errors the students found were typical of A2 level students: missing past simple –ed, present simple instead of past simple, preposition for time and place errors and spelling errors (e.g. *pus* instead of *bus*, *wich* – *which*, *familie* – *family*) and students were asked to decide in their groups:

1. Which of these mistakes are typical of A2 level?
2. Which of these mistakes do you make?
3. What other mistakes do you make?

The students were told to think of the errors they had seen and talked about, and then asked to look at their own work to see if they found similar or the same errors.

In the following three weeks, the students read two pieces of one another's work in pairs before discussing with the people whose work they had reviewed and telling them the general problems they had found with it. They were then given a new copy of their own work to review. In the first four interventions, the students wrote:

1. 04/07 The story behind the photo (NEF Pre-Int).
2. 11/07 The best holiday I've ever had.
3. 18/07 An informal email.
4. 25/07 An invitation to a party (NEF Pre-Int).

Cycle 2

The format remained the same in Cycle 2, with the exception of changing the way students gave feedback. Instead of a face-to-face conversation this time, in which I noticed they relied on memorising what they had been told, I got each pair to write a list of errors they had found, but limiting it to a general area and giving no details about the quantity of these types of errors or where they could be found (e.g. spelling, articles, word order). Sometimes the error was hard to be too general about (e.g. no 'goodbye' at the end). I also decided that it might be easier to focus on a narrower set of genres dictated by the students' immediate context, i.e. being on holiday and meeting a new friend. Accordingly, I decided that the writing should focus on holidays and replying to messages/emails. The types of writing were:

1. 01/08 The best holiday ever.
2. 03/08 A postcard to Mum and Dad.
3. 08/08 Reply to a Facebook message.
4. 19/08 Reply to an email.

Cycle 3

Once again, I decided to see what effect changing the way feedback was given had on the number of errors found. The students now had to underline the errors when they located them. However, Cycle 3 was also cut short due to class changes and I began teaching a different class. The participants wrote:

1. 26/08 Something I will never forget.
2. 03/09 Giving advice to a friend.

Findings

The research question this study aimed to answer was: To what extent can peer assessment of written work increase a student's ability to proofread their own work?

To answer this, I collected samples of student writing and totalled the number of errors in the piece of work, how many were correctly corrected, how many were incorrectly corrected, and how many errors weren't spotted. I included any spelling, punctuation, grammar and lexical errors and totalled all the errors on the page, irrespective of whether they had been made already.

The 28 students over the three months of the study produced 91 pieces of written work and 1,322 errors. Due to the nature of the question, the results are going to look at the following:

1. What difference was there between the first attempt a student made at proofreading and the last?
2. Did students correct more errors consistently over time?

These will be broken down further by looking at how many errors the students made and how well they fared when first trying to correct their work. In the interests of the research, only students that did at least two pieces of work will be taken into consideration, which is thus 18 students, 81 pieces of work and 1,124 errors.

Question 1: What difference was there between the first attempt a student made at proofreading and the last?

Table 1: First versus last intervention

	First intervention		Last intervention		
Students	**Errors made**	**Errors corrected**	**Errors made**	**Errors corrected**	**Percentage**
18	289	72	170	95	+30.97%

Table 1 shows how many errors the 18 students made when writing their first piece of work and their last. The errors corrected column was counted after peer assessment had taken place and the percentage is how many more errors students were able to locate in their last piece of writing compared to their first. The results seem to show that students did get better from their first to their last intervention, with students locating 30.97% more errors at the end of their time at Eurocentres than at the start. Interestingly, more errors were present in the first intervention by 10 of the 11 students than in any other task.

Table 2 tells us what that figure looks like if we take the second piece of proofreading done by those same 11 students.

Table 2: Revised 'first' versus last intervention

	Revised 'first' intervention		Last intervention		
Students	**Errors made**	**Errors corrected**	**Errors made**	**Errors corrected**	**Percentage**
18	196	72	170	95	+19.15%

The revised table (Table 2) shows a noticeable reduction in the difference between how students first proofread their pieces of written work compared to how they fared with their last piece of work. Similarly, the table shows that students were making 19.15% more corrections to their final piece of work than their first or their revised first attempt at proofreading.

For the sake of clarity, all results from hereon do not use the first attempt the students made in Cycle 1.

Table 3: Average number of errors versus last intervention

Average intervention		Last intervention	
Errors made	**Errors corrected**	**Errors made**	**Errors corrected**
10.88	4	9.44	5.27

Table 3 shows the average number of errors and corrections per piece of written work made both at a student's first attempt at proofreading and their last, of which the average was six pieces of work. The results when compared demonstrate that students did improve in both reducing the errors they made, from 10.88 on average to 9.44, and also in the errors they were able to correct, increasing from 4 to 5.27.

Question 2: Did students correct more errors consistently over time?

To answer Question 2, at first glance it would appear that students did correct more errors over time. Tables 2 and 3 above show a reduction in the number of errors when comparing the first and the fifth pieces of work. However, looking closely at all the pieces of writing from one to five, there is some variation from some students in pieces two, three and four. If we take the pieces of work of the five longest serving students from the class and show the number of errors they were able to correct during all of Cycle 2 and the first part of Cycle 3, we can start to discern a pattern (see Table 4).

Table 4: Number of corrections in five consecutive pieces of work by five students

	Number of corrections from work item 1 to 5				
Student A	4	5	3	8	3
Student B	2	3	6	1	3
Student C	3	4	3	1	3
Student D	3	3	4	3	5
Student E	1	3	3	3	2

In Table 4 we can see that across five consecutive pieces of work during the middle of the research, there were some students that were fairly consistent throughout and others who were less predictable, often showing little or no variation between the start of Cycle 2 and at the start of Cycle 3, which amounted to five weeks of lessons at 20 hours a week. Another reading might be that the students were in fact making fewer errors, and therefore there were fewer errors to correct. Table 5 shows the same data but in percentage terms.

In Table 5 the percentage of successful corrections ranged from 46.2% to 6.6%, with all of the students making more successful corrections when comparing the first piece of writing and the fifth. Looking at writings two, three and four, however, there is some substantial variation and ther are some very consistent students, but only in one case is work item 5 the highest number of successful corrections made during that period.

Table 5: Number of corrections in percentages in five consecutive pieces of work by five students

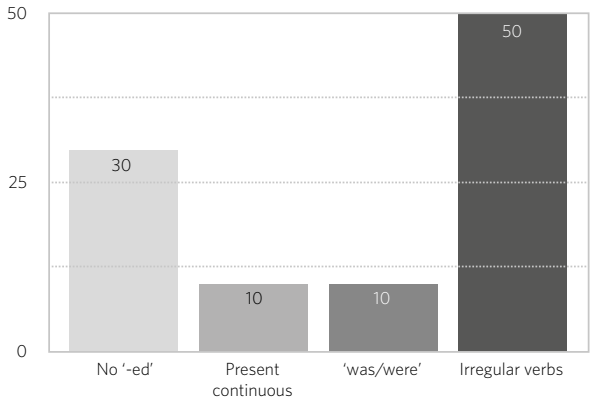
	Number of corrections made in percentages from work item 1 to 5				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Student A	30.7%	38.4%	37.5%	32%	37.5%
Student B	22.2%	27.3%	46.2%	7.1%	23.1%
Student C	20%	20%	21.4%	6.6%	21.4%
Student D	27.3%	15.8%	23.5%	18.8%	31.2%
Student E	12.5%	30%	25%	33.3%	22.2%

Figure 5 illustrates the problems the students had with the past simple, which was the most consistent problem overall. Curiously, despite errors with the past simple being discussed, listed and underlined, the error persisted throughout the study and showed no significant improvement over time. Exactly half the problems were with irregular verbs, either spelling or not knowing their irregular form. There was also a problem with *go*, *come* and *drink* in particular being left as infinitives while *put*, *take* and *make* often became *putted*, *tooked* and *maked*.

Likewise, prepositions were just as likely to be incorrect, particularly with time and place; *in* instead of *at*, for example, as they were to be missing. There didn't seem to be a distinction between dependent and independent prepositions in this, and there was little difference between the number of preposition errors at the beginning of the study and at the end.

Using the data, I will discuss their significance and possible implications of the results.

Figure 5: Problems with the past simple



Discussion

The most important finding of this research study is directly related to the research question: To what extent can peer assessment of written work increase a student's ability to proofread their own work?

The results were positive but not overwhelming. Students did indeed find errors they had made and corrected them, and some students did so at a rate of 50%, while others struggled to correct two or three basic errors, such as the past simple. This does corroborate Chandler's finding

(2003) where improvement was possible after 10 weeks of feedback. It is worth questioning, however, whether this was as a direct result of peer assessment or whether incorporating a period for drafting and editing into class time would have had the same effect, and, consequently, whether this time would be well spent. Of the latter, I am convinced it is, particularly with reference to future exams, university courses, and careers, where proofreading is essential to gain marks and avoid looking unprofessional. This point can be followed by Harmer's (2004) idea that experienced writers plan extensively and edit as they go, changing language, wording and even the order of paragraphs.

Furthermore, it could be argued that a student's grammatical accuracy might even be improved if they were given 2 hours plus a computer to work on instead of a pen, paper and classroom silence, which would be closer to a real-world activity, echoing Falchikov (1995), and give writing the importance that other skills enjoy, reflecting its importance to the students' futures.

Students mostly struggled when they were asked to look for the errors in their own texts the first time around and were vociferous in their complaints about how difficult they found it. 'How can I see my mistakes?' wasn't an uncommon phrase despite being informed that the process may take some time. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that the enthusiasm with which the students worked together, and the seriousness with which they assessed their own work were commendable, which Chitty (2015) also found eventually in his study.

The work of O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996) stated that students need to go beyond the mechanics of a text and my research showed that my students, perhaps because of their level, maybe because of their focus, were unable to look beyond the grammar and lexis of a text. This may be because at A2 level students are only capable of analysing surface errors, or because the training and guidance I provided needed to go further.

There was no qualitative difference between the method of peer assessment used, whether it was spoken, written or underlined. This may be due to several reasons. First, Cycle 3, in which I asked students to underline any errors they located, was cut short due to operational issues in the school, and the length of the intervention was shorter than the others. Since underlining has been shown in other research to be the most common method of correction, testing whether it would have yielded better results in comparison to the other two methods would have been interesting. This is especially true since underlining had been found to help students correct more of their errors after 10 weeks (Chandler 2003:293).

The limitations of this research study were faults in timing, I feel, and the unpredictable nature of action research. Lewin's (1946) observation that an action researcher has to be aware that their first round of planning may be flawed certainly rings true. Before starting the research I didn't have a clear idea about what I would find out, which worked well in terms of being reactive and trying to go where I thought I saw the problems. This also means I may well have made the wrong decision about which direction to take the research study.

To compound that, I failed to leave enough time between cycles, which might have helped me to reflect more deeply, as I only gave myself only a few days to review the data before beginning a new cycle, which left me short of time. I do also believe that any future action research will benefit as a result of having this chance to make mistakes.

In terms of the classroom, there was definite evidence that suggested more attention be paid to the past simple, which was found to be an error the whole class made irrespective of how long they had been in the class and had the error drawn to their attention. Prepositions and learner problems with them were equally highlighted by the research as being something to focus on. Both Chandler (2003) and Ferris (2004) state the importance of systematising and integrating errors into revision, and although there were instances of some students recognising common mistakes, such as mistakes with articles with a Turkish L1 student, this wasn't commonplace. There may be a need for longitudinal research, as suggested by Liu and Brown (2015), which would allow for the possibility of testing mixed forms of peer assessment against other treatment types, and teacher-based feedback.

Lastly, Ferris (2004:58) asked whether there were certain types of errors (lexical, morphological, syntactic) more amenable to treatment than others, and far from providing an answer, the results, I believe, bring this question to the fore. This author wonders whether certain errors are more amenable to be treated at different stages of L2 acquisition. This perhaps further highlights the need for longitudinal research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the resulting 10-week cycle is something that I believe worked well, not least because it gave students time to become familiar with the fundamentals of peer assessment and, more importantly, proofreading. For future research, the role that rolling enrolment plays in the process is key, and how this may affect whether a teacher decides students would benefit from peer assessment depends on how long they are going to spend on the course, or in the class. An important question to settle is whether it was peer assessment that was responsible for the progress the students made, or if the same progress could have been made by setting aside time in class for them to proofread their own work.

This study certainly seems to concur with the conclusion of O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996): that students should be encouraged to go beyond texts at a lexis level and comment on whether a text fulfils its communicative task. It may, like peer assessment, proofreading and writing itself, take time to create a classroom or school culture where this is the norm. It is clear from the research that some

students needed more guidance, but it was also clear that students failed to take in all of the information given to them by their peers. A possible remedy could be a written document supplied by the teacher for each stage which is kept for records and revision purposes, instead of entrusting the students to take their own notes and to then revise from them.

I would definitely consider not only engaging in action research again, but exploring this very topic further, perhaps with different tasks or with different levels of students to compare the results. I believe action research has shown me that even a small-scale piece of research can provide a focus for teaching, or prompt reflection on the time spent in the classroom. More than ever before, I am aware of the context students are operating in and the problems they have, which may not have been noticed ordinarily.

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The long road to UK higher education: Using Exploratory Practice as a tool to improve academic language and skills for lower level language learners

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Introduction

For our action research project, we decided to focus on the integration of Exploratory Practice (EP) into a low level (CEFR A2), English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. Defined as 'a form of practitioner research that aims to integrate research, learning and teaching' (Hanks 2015:612), EP has received positive feedback within a range of contexts (e.g. Hiratsuka 2016, Slimani-Rolls and Kiely 2014) and, in its original form, was devised as an approach for teachers to conduct classroom research. More recently however, EP has been recognised as a potential tool for learners (e.g. Chu 2012, Hanks 2014), and it is within this form that our study is focused on.

To conduct our action research, we concentrated on a course entitled English for University Studies (EfUS). Synonymous with many EFL programmes delivered in the UK, this full-time course provides a combination of General English and basic academic skills for at least one academic term. The shared goal for students during this course is to reach the entry requirements of a university pre-sessional programme (CEFR B2/B2+). To do this, the majority of the 21-hour study week focuses on General English, with the remaining time allocated for low level EAP study. It was during this EAP time when the integration of EP for this research was implemented.

Motivation for this action research initially stemmed from our own classroom observations. Due to the length and intensity of the course (21 hours of study per week over three 10-week terms), we noted that the motivation of several students appeared to wane in the second half of the first term. We also noticed an issue with the classroom's atmosphere. At times, students appeared frustrated with the course, claiming that they wanted academic language and skills rather than General English, despite their relatively low level. From the literature, our motivation also came from positive findings highlighted in earlier EP studies amongst higher level pre-sessional EAP programmes (e.g. Dawson 2014, Hanks 2015), suggesting EP could play a role in developing language learning and academic skills.

Literature review

Developed in the 1990s, EP has been refined in recent years to promote both teachers and students 'using normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools' (Allwright 2003:127). To do this, EP focuses on the creation and research of puzzles. These puzzles can be created by teachers and, in the case of this research, by students, and should be connected with a 'puzzling' aspect of classroom life. Examples of student-created puzzles could be 'Why do I feel nervous when the teacher asks me a question?' or 'Why do some of the students in my class prefer to work alone, whilst others prefer group work?'. Such puzzles, in theory, aim to align EP with its seven key principles, all of which encompass the notion of improving the quality of life in the classroom and working collaboratively in a spirit of mutual development (Allwright and Hanks 2009). Thus, aside from its goal of harmonising the classroom, EP could be perceived as language learning through the belief that learners will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources. This, in turn, can enhance their cultural capital, their conception of themselves and their classmates and their desires for the future (Ushioda 2009).

A study which draws parallels to the current research focused on the integration of EP into a summer pre-sessional EAP programme (Hanks 2014). These programmes are often cited as high-stakes, product-focused, and assessment-driven (e.g. Alexander, Argent and Spencer 2008, Hyland 2006). In recognition of this, the study aimed to identify whether EP could enhance language learning. Findings suggested that EP provided students with opportunities to 'practise the key language and academic skills that they needed' (Hanks 2015:630) as well as empower learners with a renewed sense of enthusiasm in the classroom. Such positive findings suggest similar outcomes for the current study. It should be noted, however, that only six students participated in the study, possessing a higher language level and studying for a shorter period of time than our context.

The study

Research question 1 (RQ1): What are the learners' perceptions of EP as an effective tool for learning?

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Research question 2 (RQ2): How effective is EP as a tool for EFL teachers to develop lower level learners' academic language and/or skills?

Action research was conducted over a 10-week period to evaluate both the students' (RQ1) and teachers' experiences (RQ2). Our research focused on an EfUS class with a cohort of 17 language learners. The class was multilingual and multicultural with 11 Arab learners (seven from Saudi Arabia and four from Kuwait), two Korean learners, three Chinese, and one Taiwanese. The shared goal of all 17 students was to enrol onto a university pre-sessional programme. To do this, they had to pass in-house, summative assessments, taken at the end of a 3-term, 30-week course. Students studied 21 hours per week, with the majority of the schedule devoted to a General English coursebook (*Language Leader Pre-Intermediate*, Lebeau and Rees 2008). EP was timetabled for two classes per week (1 hour per class) for 10 weeks in the second term.

Appendix 1 shows the syllabus design and lesson content for the 10-week course. It can be seen that many of the classes aimed to integrate academic language and skills. In Week 1, for instance, EP and the notion of a 'puzzle' was introduced via a lecture. In the subsequent two weeks, the students were asked to think of their own puzzles to research; with the only requirement that it had to relate to language learning. Appendix 2 illustrates the puzzles chosen by the 17 students. By Weeks 4, 5 and 6, students were refining research questions for their puzzles and collating data via questionnaires and/or interviews. After analysing their data in Weeks 7 through 9, the final week saw students exhibit their work to their peers and teachers via academic posters.

Data collection

Teaching journals

Teaching journals were kept by the course tutors throughout the 10-week course for three reasons. Firstly, to record the content of the lessons and to ensure classes reflected the principles of EP. Secondly, for the journal to act as a tool to 'collect evidence about teaching and students' learning in order to make more informed decisions about teaching' (Farrell 2007:466). This would provide a source of self-reflection for the teachers and a means of evaluating the level of emergent academic language and/or skills in the lessons. The third reason was to record any noticeable interaction and/or behaviour in class. The term 'noticeable' was defined as something different from the interaction or behaviour normally seen in the class by the two teachers during the non-EP classes.

Student questionnaire

A widely cited constraint for teachers conducting action research is time (e.g. Borg 2009). For this reason, student questionnaires were seen as a time-efficient way of collecting data on the students' perceptions and opinions on EP. To ensure students completed the questionnaires, two classes were allocated for feedback: one in Week 5 (mid-course) and one in Week 10 (end-of-course). This allowed a comparative analysis of the learners' opinions as the course progressed. As many of the participants worked in pairs or groups, the questionnaires were also placed online, allowing students to complete them collaboratively (see Appendix 3 for the template).

Student interviews

To gain an insight into the learners' perceptions of EP (RQ1), five students were interviewed. All interviews took place upon completion of the EfUS programme and once the students were enrolled onto their pre-sessional EAP programme at the university. The rationale for this delay was to allow time for the students to reflect on their experiences of EP now they were on a higher level EAP programme. Did they feel, for instance, EP had provided them with academic language and/or skills which their peers on the pre-sessional did not possess? Interviews were semi-structured in that a set of questions was prepared for each interviewee but deviation was allowed. Interviews, with the authorised consent of the participants, were recorded and transcribed. Coding the results of the interviews involved categorising responses. This was done by reviewing the transcripts and identifying the 'keywords-in-context' (Ryan and Bernard 2003).

Findings

RQ1: What are the learners' perceptions of EP as an effective tool for learning?

According to the questionnaires, 15 of the 17 students viewed EP as a useful tool for improving their language ability. The questionnaire asked participants to explain their reasons, and Table 1 summarises their responses. The two most common reasons for the participants to recognise EP as beneficial for their language was the introduction of new vocabulary and speaking practice. During the follow-up interviews, the participants who cited these reasons were asked to explain further. In terms of vocabulary, one student said their puzzle had led them to different sources outside the classroom, such as library books, which had provided new vocabulary. With regard to speaking practice, students cited the Week 10 poster presentation as useful practice for their speaking and something different from the more familiar student–teacher interaction.

Table 1: Student responses from Question 3 on the questionnaire: Do you think Exploratory Practice has improved your English language? (Why/why not?)

Reasons why	Reasons why not
1. New vocabulary (7)	1. New vocabulary was too difficult (2)
2. More speaking practice (6)	
3. Improve confidence when speaking (2)	

Although the majority viewed EP as positive for their language learning, two participants viewed it negatively.

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Their rationale was the level and challenge of the vocabulary. This, it was discovered via the interviews, was partly due to the choice of puzzle (the importance of grammar). Given the nature of the puzzle, and students' independent research which followed, much of the new vocabulary was too difficult. It was also identified in the teaching journals that these two learners frequently asked about the relevance of EP to passing the course. As EP was an unassessed element of the programme, and these two participants were relatively weak learners in the class, their motivation evidently waned.

Participants perceived EP as an effective tool for academic skills

End-of-course student feedback indicated that 12 of the 17 students believed EP improved their academic skills. In a similar fashion to the question on language improvement, the participants were asked to provide a reason for their answer. Table 2 shows the most common responses. In terms of reasons why students thought EP improved their academic skills, most believed their research skills had improved. This related to input sessions on making questionnaires, collating data, and interpreting results. During this part of the course, the teachers' journals noted a high level of engagement amongst the students, with many citing the need to do similar research (albeit on a larger scale) on their future university courses.

> 28.04 – Students are engaged and eager to take notes; Group 3 more motivated than usual; the input part turned into a discussion about issues with data collection and how this could be tackled. 02.05 – Using specific examples from students, today's session was very lively and discursive. Groups 1, 4, 5 and 7 seemed very eager to share their experience and what they could do next time to improve their data collection.

Table 2: End-of-term feedback: Was EP an effective tool for developing academic skills?

Reasons why	Reasons why not
1. Research skills (7)	1. Just focus on making a poster (3)
2. Using the library (3)	2. Not enough time (2)
3. Finding sources (1)	
4. Making an academic poster (1)	

The table also highlights the reasons why five of the participants did not view EP as beneficial for improving their academic skills. The first reason can be interpreted as a focus on the product (the poster) rather than the process (solving the puzzle). The second reason is time, which relates to the relatively short number of hours given to EP (2 hours per week). In summary, although some students viewed EP negatively with regard to language/skills development, the majority believed it improved their language, and developed their academic skills.

EP can help to improve learner autonomy

Table 3: Positive comments from end-of-term feedback – summary

Positive comments	Number of occurrences
Research skills/practice	9
Speaking practice/confidence	8
Independent study	8
Group work	6
Learning something new	5
Other	4

A prominent finding to emerge from this project was the student-led identification that EP has helped to improve learner autonomy. Table 3 summarises the students' comments written in the end-of-course questionnaire. Aside from the language/academic skills comments, there were eight instances of learners recognising the development of learner independence without an explicit question mentioning this phenomenon. Comments such as 'I know how to look for books by myself now' and 'I am confident working without teacher' were indicative of the feedback received.

In addition to the end-of-course feedback, the student interviews supported the development, amongst some of the participants, of learner autonomy during EP. Of the five interviewees, four mentioned the importance of learner independence during their pre-sessional EAP programme, with three citing EP as a useful tool for helping them prepare for this. One student, for instance, said:

> I mean [EP] was good – teachers explaining and helping was enough – now I know we need to be more independent before our courses start or [before] pre-sessional.

Unlike the early weeks of EP, when tasks and activities were teacher-led, the later weeks allowed students much more independence. This was partly due to the nature of having different puzzles in the classroom, as well as witnessing the students' motivation to solve their puzzles. This, of course, might be challenged by assuming that a project-based activity could produce similar outcomes. We, however, believe that EP is heavily embedded within social constructionism, which implies that knowledge is constructed through discourse or conversation in a social context like a classroom (Crotty 1998). Moreover, the idea of class collaboration when working on 'solving' learners' individual puzzles related to the class environment is a unique approach that, from looking at the feedback, we believe strengthens motivation. In other words, each project was, at least implicitly, relevant for every group, whereas project-based activities might not have as much focus on social co-operation, hence these could be limited in terms of mutual interest and collaboration.

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RQ2: How effective is EP as a tool for EFL teachers to develop lower level learners' academic language and/or skills?

EP possesses limitations for EFL teachers and language learning

Qualitative data from the student questionnaires and interviews shows that the vast majority of the participants enjoyed EP. Feedback in the end-of-course questionnaire for the question 'What did you enjoy/not enjoy about studying EP?' highlights the positive contribution EP can make to lower level learners (see Table 4), with the two negative comments citing the need for more time on EP rather than a dislike for the practice.

Table 4: What did you enjoy/not enjoy about studying Exploratory Practice?*

☺	☹
Working with groups and share our ideas. Enjoy a lot. We have now good experience with this skills, especially in term three. We enjoy the new idea because we gain new experience. Yes a lot. It motivate me. It was a new topic, that I have not done it before. I enjoyed the EP Practice, I've never seen this kind of learning style before. And also I learnt how to create a poster that is the most exciting part I got.	Short time sharing. Researching range is quite limited. Hopefully, the EP practice in next term can be more.

*Please note the comments are authentic and thus may contain errors.

Nonetheless, in their teaching journals the two teachers cited a number of occasions when some of the students evidently struggled with the lesson content, for example:

> 07.04 – Some students were unsure what the purpose is of all the new lexis e.g. EP, puzzle, data collection or research. Today's class seemed, at times, too difficult and as it is not linked with assessment, some students were struggling with paying attention.

Some occurrences of this were in Weeks 2 and 3 when research skills were first discussed. One of the problems cited in the journals was the mixed ability of the group. Whilst some students knew terms such as 'quantitative', others did not. And, as the group were lower level, large amounts of time were spent clarifying meaning and checking understanding.

> 18.04 – Some students wanted clearer instructions about "what" they need to do and "how" to do it when thinking about data collections. They are not used to experimenting and making own decisions in case these are "incorrect".

In later weeks it was evident that, although the majority of students seemed to be enjoying the practice, students were working at very different paces, and developing their language accordingly. Some students, for instance, had managed to understand an abstract taken from an academic journal and used it in their poster, whereas other groups had little idea about which journal they should read or the meaning of an abstract.

> 09.05 – Group 2 indicated that their topic turned out to be very heavy on jargon and that they don't have enough time to translate these words. Similarly, they struggled with new lexis introduced in today's class in relation to describing and interpreting data. They suggested more teacher input and less independent work.

As EP did not carry any grades, the language development of the learners was considered low stakes by the institution and, arguably by the participants. It was noted by the teachers, however, that language progression was inconsistent amongst the cohort and, through the nature of exploring different puzzles, the opportunities for structured, teacher-led activities decreased as the course progressed.

Discussion

This AR project has thrown up a number of findings. The first relates to the students' perceptions of language and academic skills improvement. In this study, it is evident that most of the participants viewed EP as a useful tool for their language/skills progression. This aligns with positive findings from earlier research with higher level students (Hanks 2015). In light of the intensive nature of the course, a possible reason for such high levels of engagement may be the different nature of EP from the normal study timetable and, as previously mentioned, social co-operation. Comments from students also indicated their interest in learning academic vocabulary and conducting small-scale academic research. This also implies that, even with lower level learners, students perceive EP as being beneficial for their language and/or academic skills. On the issue of lower level learners, findings also implied that more scaffolding is required for some students to remain motivated throughout the practice. This may involve more teacher-led instruction or the narrowing of research, for instance the inclusion of a set number of secondary sources, or graded resources.

Another key implication from the findings relates to EP and learner autonomy. It was evident that EP brought in elements of academic study; namely, research methods, data collection, secondary sources, and academic posters. Given the nature of exploring individual/group puzzles, students appeared to mirror the continuum of learner dependence to independence as noted in earlier research (e.g. Greenbank and Penketh 2009), particularly towards the second part of the project. In other words, students were presented with various opportunities to become more autonomous, and although these chances were included in every class, the vast majority of students used these more in Weeks 6–10. This suggests EP, for lower level learners, can provide opportunities for independent, academic study. In this context, as the practice was unassessed, it

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could be argued to be a useful dress rehearsal for higher stakes research, i.e. during pre-sessional and/or higher education study.

Although this research suggests many positive elements of the integration of EP into a lower level course, the findings also suggest some limitations. Stemming from the second research question, it was found that language progress, from the teachers' perspective, was both inconsistent and opaque. Advocates of EP (Allwright 2003, Hanks 2014, Hiratsuka 2016) may argue that the successful outcome of the practice should not be solely based on language development. Sceptics however, would argue that, within a student fee-paying, results-driven EFL industry, institutions, and perhaps even more so students, are more interested in the learners' language progression than solving puzzles. The findings from this action research suggest a middle ground might be best suited to ensure the development of language while 'solving' puzzles. By allocating 2 hours per week to EP, the majority of the students' week was still devoted to the assessed element of their programme. It was evident however that some of the participants recognised the connection between EP and their future studies and decided to exploit the opportunity for learning academic language and/or skills; both in class, in groups, and independently. Therefore, motivation should be highlighted here as another principal outcome of EP when working with lower level learners.

Before moving to the conclusion of the study, it should be noted that the primary limitation of this research concerns the method of data collection regarding the participants' language progress. In this study, students were asked qualitative questions about their perceived progress and teachers were asked to record journals of any linguistic improvements. A more reliable method of data collection would be quantitative testing. This could be done by testing the group at the start and end of the course, and/or with a control group which does not study EP. The latter might possibly be the most significant limitation as this could be paramount in demonstrating if EP has a tangible effect on learners' development and performance, hence informing us of its efficacy when compared with other project-based activities.

Conclusion

This report has focused on the integration of EP into a lower level EAP course. Findings firstly suggest EP can be used as a means of enhancing language learning. Although the teachers in this study were not convinced of its effectiveness, the majority of the participants believed it to be useful in enhancing their language. Findings also suggest EP can develop learner autonomy and motivation. Both have been cited as useful for both higher level EAP courses and higher education study. A longitudinal study on these participants as they study within higher education could help to identify if any of the language/skills to emerge during EP are of benefit in their studies. To conclude, this research has provided further insight into the potential benefits and limitations of using EP as a tool for lower level language learners.

Reflection

When discussing our personal reflections on this action research, we both noticed that we had gradually become more interested in the outcome of our project, and that each step would bring more questions than answers. Nonetheless, with support from the action research mentors, we were able to focus on our research and reflect after each small step/experience. Our ability to reflect upon our own practice, which can be linked with 'Kant's idea of self-reflective examination of the limits and validity of our own knowledge and understandings' (McLean 2006:9), which led to constant questioning of our methods and findings, can be highlighted as the main skill that we gained during this project. At the same time, bearing in mind that EP can be treated as an alternative to action research (hence the lack of a second cycle within our project), we realised that our teaching journals, student feedback and informal conversations acted as tools to constantly improve proceeding steps and future re-runs of this project. This inventiveness, of course, was often quite frustrating, when we realised our project will never be perfect or fully finished, but this, in our opinion, encourages creativity even further – another aspect that is worth pointing out when reflecting on this action research. Dant (2003:19) illustrates this aspect using the term *an argument parallel*, something that can never be finalised or definitively resolved: 'an argument against the possibility of a final solution.' We also noticed that the students became more responsible for their own work and started to treat us more like mentors than figures of authority. This was particularly refreshing bearing in mind their level and their previous educational experience.

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Appendix 1: Syllabus and lesson content

Lesson	Lesson overview	Student tasks
1.1 (Tim) 07.04	**Introducing Exploratory Practice (1 of 2).** The teacher makes an interactive presentation about the practice.	Note taking. Understanding EP.
1.2 (Seb) 11.04	**Introducing Exploratory Practice (2 of 2).** The teacher reviews the 7 principles of EP and outlines the course aims – ***to explore a puzzle and produce/present an academic poster.***	Review task (summary writing – what is EP?). Brainstorm: What puzzles them? (Homework: think of a puzzle).
1.3 (Tim) 14.04	**Choosing a puzzle to explore and how to explore (1 of 3).** Students present their puzzle topics to peers. The teacher helps students define their puzzles. Also shows some example 'puzzles'.	Writing their puzzle as a research question (RQ). Grouping questions/forming groups (where appropriate).
1.4 (Seb) 18.04	**Exploring the puzzle (2 of 3).** The teacher gives details on key issues when creating questionnaires/interviews/observations.	Students draft their instrument for data collection.
1.5 (Tim) 21.04	**Exploring the puzzle (3 of 3).** Students are given time to review their method of data collection and to proofread/improve.	Students create data collection tools (e.g. creating a questionnaire/ interview questions).
1.6 (Seb) 25.04	**Collecting data (1 of 2).** Students collate data using their chosen method of data collection.	Students collate data via their data collection methods.
1.7 (Tim) 28.04	**Collecting data (2 of 2).** Students collate data using their chosen method of data collection.	Students collect data via their data collection methods.
1.8 (Seb) 02.05	**Analysing the data (1 of 2).** The teacher shows the students how to analyse the data to make key findings.	Students analyse their data to make key findings for their research question.
1.9 (Tim) 05.05	**Analysing the data (2 of 2).** The teacher looks at how to transfer their data into visual aids (e.g. table/chart/graph).	Students transfer their data to visual aids.
1.10 (Seb) 09.05	**Writing up findings (1 of 2).** The teacher looks at useful language for describing/interpreting data/visual aids.	Students write up their first key finding.
1.11 (Tim) 12.05	**Library tour and Induction (for secondary evidence).**	Students find a relevant source.
1.12 (Seb) 16.05	**Analysing data (1 of 2).** Students use the online library search to find one relevant source.	Students write up more of their findings.
1.13 (Tim) 19.05	**Analysing data (2 of 2).** Students analyse their questionnaires and their relevant source. Check if search completed – found relevant sources?	Students write up findings and read/ analyse their relevant source.
1.14 (Seb) 23.05	**Academic posters (1 of 2).** The teacher shows a range of academic posters done by previous classes.	Students critique posters from previous courses.
1.15 (Tim) 26.05	**Academic posters (2 of 2).** The teacher shows useful language when writing an academic poster and how to deal with questions.	Students practise using the useful language when presenting posters.
1.16 (Seb) 30.05	**Final review and proofreading.** The teacher and students review the final draft posters.	Students peer review final drafts of posters.
1.17 (Tim) 02.06	**Poster presentation.** The teacher asks students to exhibit their posters.	Students exhibit their posters to classmates and teachers.
1.18 (Tim) 03.06	**Feedback and reflection.** The teacher asks students to complete a reflection task and collates students' feedback on EP as a practice.	Students receive feedback on their poster exhibition and write a reflection task on their experiences with EP.

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Appendix 2: The participants' puzzles

Group 1: (Two female students) – Do students prefer working in groups or individually?

Group 2: (Three male students) – Why are Asian students better at spelling than Arabic students?

Group 3: (Two male students) – Why is grammar important in learning English?

Group 4: (One female student) – Why do some students use English slang?

Group 5: (Three female students) – How important is speaking English?

Group 6: (Two female and one male student) – What are the differences in writing between Arab and Asian students?

Group 7: (One female student) – Why do different nationalities view speaking differently?

Group 8: (Two male students) – How important is reading outside of class?

Appendix 3: Questions asked on the questionnaire

1. What have you enjoyed/not enjoyed about studying Exploratory Practice so far?
2. What are the positives and negatives for EfUS students of studying Exploratory Practice?
3. Do you think Exploratory Practice has improved your English language? (Why/why not?)
4. Do you think Exploratory Practice has improved your academic skills? (Why/why not?)
5. Would you recommend Exploratory Practice for next year's EfUS course (2016–2017)?
6. Would you like to write anything else about Exploratory Practice?

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