

English Language Learning Magazine

CONTACT

February 2016

Conference Issue

**Portfolio-based
language assessment (PBLA)**

And lots more...

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March 2–5	Languages Canada's Annual Conference, Victoria, BC. http://languagescanada.ca/en/language-education-sector/annual-conference/
March 3	Teaching ESL to Survivors of War & Torture Trauma. Toronto, ON. http://tesltoronto.org/whats-upcoming-this-spring
April 1–2	Ontario Modern Language Teachers' Association. Toronto, ON. http://www.omlta.org/upcoming-events/spring-conference-2016/
April 5–8	Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Baltimore, MD. http://www.tesol.org/convention2016

April 9–12	American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL). Orlando, FL. http://www.aaal.org/?page=Conference2016
April 20	Starting your own business + non-traditional jobs for ESL teachers. Toronto, ON. http://tesltoronto.org/whats-upcoming-this-spring
April 28–29	Bilingual from birth: process, pedagogy and policy. Ottawa, ON. http://web5.uottawa.ca/ilob-ocs/index.php/2016/bilingual/index
April 28–30	BCTEAL. Vancouver, BC. http://www.bctéal.org/conferences/2016-annual-conference
	TESL Saskatchewan. Regina, SK. http://www.teslsask.com/tesl-sk-fall-2013-newsletter/conferences/
April 30	i3 (inform, inspire, interact), TESL Peel-Halton-Etobicoke & Sheridan College. Mississauga, ON. http://www.teslphe.org/events.html
May 7	TESL New Brunswick. Fredericton, NB. https://www.eventbrite.ca/e/teslnb-spring-conference-beyond-the-welcome-supporting-english-language-learners-in-our-schools-tickets-20848268733
May 24–27	College Association for Language and Literacy (CALL). Barrie, ON. http://www.callontario.org/#!upcoming-conference/cysp
May 27–28	TOSCON16. Toronto, ON. https://tesltoscon.wordpress.com/
May 28–30	Canadian Linguistic Association (ACL/CLA). Calgary, AB. http://cla-acl.ca/appel-2016-call/
May 30–June 1	Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics (ACLA/CAAL). Calgary, AB. http://www.aclacaal.org/call-for-papers-caal-2016/

EDITOR'S NOTE

The articles in this issue all grew from presentations at last fall's [conference](#), which was held November 12 & 13 at the Sheraton Centre in Toronto. Along with these articles, I strongly recommend reading the [panel discussions](#) to understand where English teaching in Ontario is headed. Our first article by Teresa Costa, Brenda Lohrenz, & Karen McNeil summarizes the situation nicely. If our conference is important to you, I also urge you to read the [conference report](#), make suggestions for improving it, and consider volunteering for 2016.

PBLA was a major topic at this year's conference, and this is reflected in three very helpful PBLA-related articles. Shirley Graham discusses her extensive experience in leading PBLA change, a discussion nicely complemented by Mary Anne Peters & Kim Henrie's description of their own Graham-inspired efforts. Agnes Kucharska and Jennifer Weiler round out the bases with some very specific ideas for low-level PBLA tasks. Still with portfolios, Nataliya Borkovska, Ling Hu, & Scott Jamieson describe a very interesting reading-portfolio idea to promote self-directed learning.

Doina Nugent, Yuliya Miakisheva, and Kareen Sharawy explain the innovative methods that the ELI at York has used to increase international student success; Kerstin Okubo advocates building vocabulary for spoken production; and Kristjan Seferaj presents research on the various factors influencing how we make decisions in the classroom. Finally, we have our regular feature in which Eufemia Fantetti shares the gentle wisdom of her father.

Our next issue will include articles based on the [research symposium](#). Sadly, the budget cuts mean it may be the last [research issue](#) of *Contact* for the foreseeable future.

Brett Reynolds

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CONTACT

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SETTLEMENT LANGUAGE PRIORITIES AND EMBRACING THE FUTURE

By Teresa Costa, Brenda Lohrenz, & Karen McNeil

The TESL Ontario 2015 conference theme of “Expanding Horizons – Drawing on Experience and Knowledge” captures well the essence of the settlement language sector in today’s Canada. Building on regional Integration Summits held during the fall of 2014, the TESL Canada Settlement Language National Network survey distributed the following spring, plus fall conferences held in Lake Louise and Toronto, the settlement language community has had some recent opportunities to reflect on challenges, successes, and emerging trends. Interestingly, much has evolved, even since these events. We have witnessed the Department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) boldly embracing a new future as Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) while fulfilling an ambitious call to action in response to the Syrian humanitarian crisis. We have undergone a postponement of the summer 2015 Call for Proposal (CFP) results, with augmented funding being directed to Resettlement Assistance Programs (RAP). Additionally, we have seen strong public interest in contributing to humanitarian efforts in meaningful ways, thus bringing increased visibility to the work of settling newcomers. These changes may well redefine the settlement sector moving forward, but a reflection drawing on our experience and knowledge as a strong community of practice establishes potential for expanded horizons in the settlement language field.

Settlement language efforts are broad and varied, encompassing both federal and provincial funder involvement. The IRCC (formerly CIC) Newcomer Language Advisory Body (NLAB) and the TESL Canada Settlement Language National Network (SLNN) were both launched in 2012. These mechanisms play an important role in bringing forward the voice of settlement language administrators, instructors, and assessors to funders, policy makers, and other stakeholders. The sought-after result is to ensure our student populations are the beneficiaries of dynamic, accessible and well-conceived settlement language programs and supports.

Fall 2015 statistics from IRCC-NHQ indicate that language training is the largest funding stream at 36% of settlement expenditure nationally. When all language-related costs are factored in (including support services) the allocation rises to 46%. Settlement language training federally is delivered to over 100,000 clients, with service-use numbers evenly split across Family Class, Refugees, and Economic Class. However, refugees are proportionally the biggest users of services as close to 80% of refugees to Canada access language services. According to Mourad Mardikian (2015) the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration

and International Trade's Language Training Unit oversees Canada's largest non-credit language program, with 66,450 individuals currently accessing services.

A compilation of recent sector discussions arrived at the following observations:

CIC Regional Summits (Fall 2014)

- The settlement language voice is important!
- Many key areas of focus continue to require attention such as:
 - ◊ access to assessment in rural or remote areas
 - ◊ enhanced delivery mechanisms using technology
 - ◊ dedicated language options for the workplace
 - ◊ language training for specialized populations such as literacy and learners facing trauma
 - ◊ increased access to and availability of child care and transportation
 - ◊ better linkages between all levels of government
- Recognition of instructor time over and above classroom delivery is important, particularly in this era of evolving professionalized practice.

TESL Canada SLNN Survey (Spring 2015 / Ontario responses)

- Client Profile: Focus on increasingly higher level (CLB 5 plus) learners
- Concerns: Implementation of PBLA, administrative/instructional fatigue
- Trends: Declining enrollment, need to better address vulnerable/multi-barriered populations
- Successes: PBLA, blended learning and online initiatives, sharing and resourcefulness of teachers

TESL Canada Conference Dialogue (Oct 2015)

- Taking into account how settlement and language overlap and complement each other by developing collaborative strategies that work for newcomers
- Better understanding of what services are available by province and across Canada to support development and sharing of innovative practices
- Consideration of how decision-makers can measure success by placing emphasis on less tangible but more telling qualitative outcomes such as learners' lived experience
- Keeping realities in mind, for example, an instructor working in isolation in a rural area teaching a multilevel class vs large urban classroom environment

TESL Ontario Conference Dialogue (Nov 2015)

- Many immigrants are not accessing language training in Ontario. How can we attract these potential students to programs that would support their long term goals?
- The PBLA concept is solid but the implementation and rollout has had some serious and not always positive impacts.
- Teachers don't always feel they are sufficiently listened to; often they are in the

classroom and unable to attend events. How can they be better represented at consultation tables?

- The current attendance tracking and reporting system requires modifications to take blended and online learning environments into account.

As we grow our voice, we also speak for the multitude of immigrant students that we see in our classrooms day by day, month by month. EAL educators offer a high degree of commitment towards the overarching goal of empowerment for newcomers to Canada. Diverse classrooms have led to differentiated instruction that strives not just for attainment of a desired language level but also extends to language learning goals that enhance personal and professional lives. By working collectively, we can ensure that our concerns are recognized and hopefully addressed, the trends we communicate are met with appropriate and considered action, our successes are shared and celebrated, and the stories of our students are both heard and acknowledged. Here our challenges come face to face with our resolve in drawing on experience and knowledge to expand not only our own horizons, but also those of our students’.

References

Mardikian, Mourad (2015, November). *Panel: Expanding Experience and Knowledge*. Presented at the TESL Ontario 2015 Conference, Toronto.

For other consultation documents and summaries that informed this paper, please visit the National Network Advisory Committee public group on Tutela.

Bios

Teresa Costa is the General Manager of Newcomer Settlement Programs at the YMCA of Greater Toronto, the largest IRCC funded language assessment and referral centre. Teresa has 20 years of experience in the settlement sector, is the NLAB sector co-chair and sits on the National Settlement Council.

Brenda Lohrenz is the Executive Director of BC’s provincial Language Instruction Support and Training Network (LISTN). She is the former sector co-chair of the Newcomer Language Advisory Body (NLAB) and currently sits on the National Settlement Council. Brenda is also a member and past chair of the TESL Canada Settlement Language National Network (SLNN).

Karen McNeil is Director of Language Services with the Centre for Education & Training. She is responsible for LINC Home Study, language assessment services, language assessor training (CLBA, CLBLA, ELTPA), the online self-assessment tools, and the HARTs database. Karen is a member of NLAB.

ANTICIPATING CHALLENGES AND BUILDING SOLUTIONS WITH PBLA

A retrospective on providing PD to support instructional practice

By Shirley Graham, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board

I have been presenting on portfolio-based language assessment (PBLA) every year since 2013 at different conferences, webinars and learning events. I have no vested interest in doing these presentations other than to mitigate what appears to be serious consternation and even resistance among administrators rolling out the PBLA in their programs. It seemed as though many administrators felt that they were on the sidelines watching the PBLA train barrel past them, realizing that they are actually supposed to be driving that train. So the runaway PBLA train is the best analogy I could come up with regarding the way that administrators felt about the PBLA roll-out. This article is based on a presentation that was given at the TESL Ontario Conference in November 2015 and again at the CESBA Conference in December 2015. In it, I argue that providing effective professional development for staff is not only necessary for instructors, it is the most effective tool to ensure that administrators are actually driving the PBLA train. This process allows us

- To work closely with PBLA Leads regarding the recommended stages of the roll-out
- To find out who among your staff has particular strengths to share
- To ensure that the PD events are pragmatic and meaningful
- To provide opportunities to practice of what was learned
- As administrators, to learn more about PBLA and our individual programs through a detailed planning process with the PBLA Leads
- To steer our unique programs and to take the steps necessary to ensure success for students, instructors and the program.

If the administrator is not engaged in this process, then the PBLA leads by default are in supervisory position. This presents a problem in a unionized environment where the Lead is a peer and not a supervisor. That is why administrators need to be sure that they take over driving this train. By assuming control of the PBLA professional development activities, you are in effect taking control of the train.

As indicated in Figure 1, below, there are basically two types of PD: Reactive and Proactive. Both are effective in addressing staff needs as well as program needs. The major difference is that reactive PD addresses an immediate need that arises from a challenge in the recent

past and is also effective at allaying resistance to change among staff; whereas proactive PD addresses a gap in knowledge or training or future direction that may not necessarily have been fully identified or perceived as a need by staff but is based on the forward momentum of the program. Regardless of the type of PD, in order to be effective, it must be developed based on input from staff. What administrators believe that staff need and what staff feel that they need may not necessarily be the same thing. The most effective way to plan PD is to first survey staff to assess what happened (Reactive PD) or to assess what is needed (Proactive PD). Either way, dynamic PD sessions demonstrate to staff that they are appreciated and listened to, and should ultimately result in better engagement in the PD process and ultimately in program delivery.

Reactive	Proactive
Uses surveys to assess what happened	Uses surveys to assess what is needed
Engages input from support staff	Engages input from support staff
Addresses past challenges and allays resistance	Addresses a gap that may not have been perceived by staff
Based on immediate needs	Based on forward momentum
Appreciation and better engagement	Appreciation and better engagement

Figure 1. Reactive PD vs Proactive PD.

Components of Successful PD

There are a number of components of a successful PD, which are outlined in Figure 2, below. I've already mentioned the need to survey the staff to find out what they feel they need. Next, the training goals or outcomes are defined at the outset of the PD event so everyone is on the same page. Employees need to be clear on why this event is necessary and what impact it has on expectations.

The next step would be to mine within the program to find those employees who have relevant work experiences, skills, or knowledge. Employees are the most effective resources in planning forward. By surveying staff regarding their PD needs and by also mining for expertise from among the ranks of your staff, you are in effect validating their knowledge, skills and abilities and fostering peer support. The PD session is also the perfect time to bring forward and share resources developed by staff that help make their job easier. Having staff contribute to the PD event and present resources developed in-house connect the event to past learning and work experience.

The PD session itself should allow for some level of practice of what they have learned so that they bring that experience back to their class.

This overall process promotes positive self-esteem and is respectful of the expertise that employees bring to the program. It is vitally important to validate what employees already know and what they contribute in order to have this learning opportunity resonate among the ranks. Without validating their expertise and contribution to the program, you could run the risk of alienating staff from the process that is being introduced. It is not enough to say, ‘You already know this’ or ‘many of you are already doing this’. Those comments could be perceived as disrespectful because instructors may be left to conclude, ‘If I already know this then why are we doing this PD?’ See Addendum 1 for an activity that validates those attributes that instructors bring to the classroom.

Elements of PBLA

Preparing a presentation is a challenge but it does provide the administrator with an opportunity to reflect on the process being presented. There is not often the opportunity for administrators to reflect on their process due to the demands of running a program. When I was preparing this presentation for the TESL ON 2015 conference, I had a revelation. In the previous section, I outlined the Elements of Successful PD. I wanted to round out the overall picture by also outlining the Elements of PBLA since this is the focus for administrators in supporting their instructors as they move through this process. Here is what happened when I laid the two side by side:

Components of Successful PD	Elements of PBLA
Employee training goals are clear	Learner goals are clear
Employees are involved in determining what is needed	Needs assessment ensures students involved in determining what they need
Work experiences and knowledge are resources in planning forward	Term planning based on most needs of students assessed
New materials are connected to employee’s past learning and work experience	Materials are task-based, student centred, and based on the principles of adult education
PD is followed by practicing what they learned	Regular practice and assessments ensure students are on track with their learning
The learning opportunity promotes positive self-esteem, respect	PBLA is respectful of adult learners previous learning and life experiences

Figure 2. The components of successful PD and successful PBLA.

It was obvious that what I described as the Components of Successful PD and the Elements of PBLA are virtually a mirror image of each other. Whether it was intentional or not, both sides of the chart are respectful of the principles of adult education. Both require clear goals, participant involvement in planning, use of and connection to prior learning, opportunity for practice, and a respectful environment that promotes positive self-esteem.

As administrators, we should be providing our instructors the same support, using the same principles of adult education that we expect our instructors to provide for their students in the classroom.

Getting Started

Regardless of the point you are at, it is never too late to take over driving the PBLA train. Meet with your PBLA Leads to see what they have been trained to present. And then survey your staff to find out what they already know about PBLA, assessments, using rubrics, comfort level with the CLB, etc. Then you would ask what they think they would like to start or what they need help with. With the answers in hand, ask yourself these questions:

- Where did the idea for PD come from?
- Is this a real need or a perceived need?
- What is already in place?
- What more is needed?
- How do I validate what they already know and what they already bring to the table?

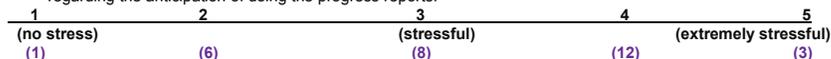
It turned out that within our own program, in the pilot project, we had many PD opportunities for staff that were strictly top-down. There were plenty of opportunities for instructors to practice what they had ‘learned’, but they were not surveyed prior to the training nor were they invited to share their expertise. Subsequent PD events were based on previous PD events but not with input from the instructors. The result was that there was a lot of push back and resistance to engaging with the PBLA.

During the PBLA Pilot, staff were under a lot of stress so the survey included questions regarding stress levels. The survey was anonymous, allowing the instructors the safety to say what they want to say without the fear of being judged or without running up against the union’s code of conduct between members. The following is taken from that very first survey that had a few questions regarding stress levels.

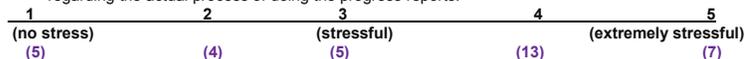
The initial survey concluded that there were very high stress levels among staff indicating serious challenges. Even with all the initial PBLA training, instructors were struggling. They were not confident in their benchmark determinations, and

Instructor survey (83% responded)

5a. On a scale of 1 – 5 with 1 being no stress and 5 being extremely stressful, please describe your level of stress regarding the anticipation of doing the progress reports.



5b. On a scale of 1 – 5 with 1 being no stress and 5 being extremely stressful, please describe your level of stress regarding the actual process of doing the progress reports.



6. Did you find the portfolio binders helpful in determining learner progress and in completing the progress reports?



7. Please describe on a scale of 1 – 5 (with 1 being not prepared and 5 being very prepared), if you feel that you are better prepared to use the portfolios in September now that you know what is needed to complete the progress reports.

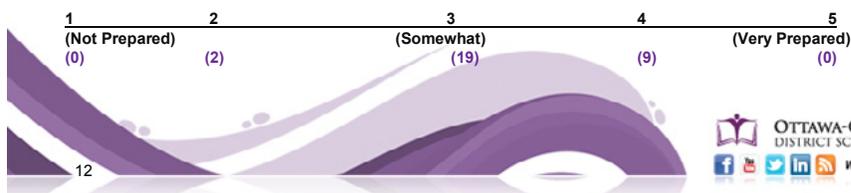


Figure 3. Survey results about stress.

they were not on the same page regarding the CLB. Overall, staff were uneasy, unhappy and stressed-out. The main areas of stress actually had to do with reviewing the portfolios to help the instructors make their determinations regarding benchmark progress. The instructors were not all on the same page and were not all using the CLB as part of their instructional practice. We felt that the time was right for a job-imbedded PD activity that was fun, reflective and confidential.

Recalibration to the CLB

Language assessors are regularly recalibrated to CLB as part of their professional practice, yet instructors are not. Instructors naturally tend to teach to the highest level in their class which can then skew their benchmarking practices. We needed all our instructors to be on the same page regarding the CLB and their benchmarking practices. The PD was called ‘Guess that Benchmark!’ and it was a quick weekly activity that took less than 5 minutes. It was a gentle, reflective, constant approach (9 weeks) that let up to a 3 hour interactive PD session where instructors were put into groups by the level they taught and they all brought a portfolio from their class to share. The PBLA Leads facilitated this PD session. Instructions for this activity are included at the end of this article (See Addendum 2).

At the end of this session, the instructors were surveyed and overwhelmingly found the process to be very useful and they felt better equipped to use the CLBs in their benchmarking process.

The challenge is that this is a one-off PD event. We needed to find a way to recalibrate instructors on an on-going basis. I’ll return to this later.

The next step in our PD pathway involved further examination of survey results regarding what instructors felt that they needed combined with what administration felt was needed. With this recalibration activity under our collective belts, the next step for us was to provide a PD session on using rubrics to capture demonstrations of student ability which would in turn support benchmarking determinations.

What the instructors said...

CLB Recalibration PD Survey Evaluation Results

Overall, I found this workshop:

very useful	useful	somewhat useful	not useful
30	5		

2 The content was:

very useful	useful	somewhat useful	not useful
31	4		

3. I feel better equipped to use the new CLBs for my benchmarking from this workshop:

strongly agree	agree	somewhat agree	don't agree
14	16	2	1

Other Questions:
 4. The best thing was:
 5. Why didn't we:
 6. What are next steps?
 7. What would you like to see in future?

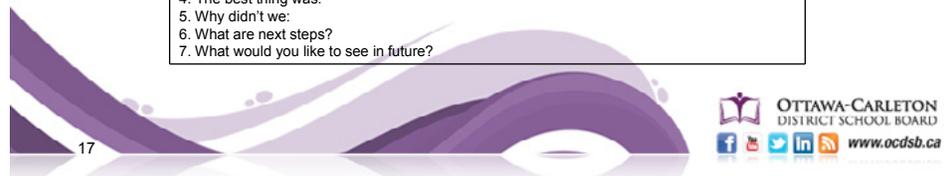


Figure 4. Survey results about CLB recalibration.

Linda and Larry

Linda was an instructor in our program who had regularly used rubrics in her instructional practice. However, she was not experienced in using PowerPoint or exceptionally confident in presenting to her peers. Larry Iveson, the PBLA Lead of our program, was able to support Linda in preparing the PowerPoint for the PD session and supporting her in delivering the workshop. We offered this workshop after hours for those instructors who wanted to attend. It was voluntary, unpaid PD. We had offered after hour PD sessions in the past and would have been lucky to attract 10 instructors. There were over 30 who attended this time, which spoke volumes about the need among instructors for a tool to capture demonstrations of learning. Instructor led PD is a respectful validation of the contributions of instructors to the program.

Betty

Betty was a new instructor teaching an ESL benchmark 2/3 class. During student conferencing a learner was very upset, feeling that her Writing benchmark was too low. I just happened to be at this site and I was confronted with how to support the instructor and listen to the student without anyone losing face. The student was asked to sit in the hall. We each had a copy of the Profiles of Ability for Stage 1 of the CLB and together we made a discovery. We put the student's writing book between us and we each highlighted what the student was able to do. We then compared notes and together came to the conclusion that the student was actually writing higher than was originally thought. We showed our results the student and were able to show her what she could do but those things that she was not able to do would continue to challenge her at the next level if she did not pay attention and improve in those areas. Both Betty and I realized that a student who is upset about their progress may not fully understand what it is that they are able to do, and what it is that they are not doing. That is what PBLA clarifies. Taking this process a step further, the PBLA Leads came up with a one page document, from the CLB for each of the productive skills (Speaking and Writing) that incorporates more than just the profiles of abilities. This tracking tool can be used by the instructor, one of each for Speaking and Writing for each student, to highlight what the student can do. This can be done throughout the term or at benchmarking time. This tool can then be used during student conferencing and then the student can add it to their portfolio. Most importantly, here is a tool that engages the instructors in an on-going recalibration to the CLB levels of each one of their students (see a sample Tracking Sheet in Addendum 3). As I said above, this kind of ongoing calibration was one thing we keenly needed. The tools for Speaking and Writing are available on the TESL Ontario website and will soon be available on Tutela as well as the OCDSB website. The tracking tools for the receptive skills (Listening and Reading) will be available in the near future.

Scheduled Proactive PD Events

Timing of PD is important for a number of reasons. Providing a PD event at the end of a term before instructors go on a break is not as effective as starting a PD event at the beginning of the term. Instructors start a term fresh after a holiday and ready to go. This is an excellent opportunity to provide PD based on input from instructors, and then allows them the opportunity to use what they learned the very next day. Expectations are clearly laid out giving the instructors the clarity of forward momentum for the program. Since 2013, we have been offering the first day back in September as a PD day for instructors and for childcare staff. The instructors are surveyed after this full day event and administrators have a great tool for moving forward with subsequent PD events that are either job imbedded or given dedicated program time.

Resources

With all the PBLA resources that are available to instructors, it is a good idea to create a central repository that all instructors have easy access to. For those who are more comfortable with paper copies, each site should have a hard copy of all the resources. As instructors create rubrics or find other resources, these should be added to the repository. Both the e-files and hard copies are valuable tools to new instructors who will not have had all the PBLA training.

Yellow Binder for Instructors

With all the material and information that instructors are expected to keep, track, and record, the team discussed the possibility of putting together a portfolio binder for the instructors to help them organize their student information, PBLA information, Term Planning, PBLA Inventory, Student CLB Tracking Sheets, and more. We provided each instructor with a canary yellow (easy to find) binder at the September PD day complete with a table of contents, blank documents and dividers. The feedback from instructors has been very positive. The table of contents is attached as Addendum 4.

Yet to Come

The next step for us is to align our PBLA process to our performance appraisal process. We envision a process that allows administrators to observe PBLA in action and to allow for meaningful interaction that supports the instructors in PD that is meaningful to their professional growth. Peer mentorship is another valuable resource for new instructors to tap into as they join the ranks.

Conclusion

PBLA is a process and not an event. It is not meant to replace what you are doing. It is meant to enhance what you are doing, take the mystery out of benchmarking, and reduce confusion and misunderstanding between instructors and their students. PBLA increases learner awareness of goal attainment and increases learner accountability as well as instructor accountability. Attendance improves when students know that assessing is happening on a regular basis. Students are enthusiastic about PBLA and when instructors are well supported in transitioning to this process, the classroom is a richer place for both instructors and students.

[Addendum 1](#) – Validation Activity

[Addendum 2](#) – Guess that Benchmark! Instructions

[Addendum 2b](#) – Game sheet

[Addendum 3](#) – Sample CLB Tracking Sheet

[Addendum 4](#) – Table of Contents for Instructor Binder

Bio



Shirley has been the Education Officer for ESL/LINC/LBS at the OCDSB since 2010. Shirley works to continuously improve the transition of students between LINC/ESL, LBS and Credit programs. She is currently on the Board of Directors of CESBA and was the Chair of the Board for the 2014/15 year. She is actively involved in the Ottawa Community Coalition for Literacy, the Algonquin College TESL/FL Advisory Board, the Ottawa Local Immigrant Partnership and the LINC Advisory Committee. Shirley has led the integration of PBLA at the OCDSB in LINC and ESL

classes since 2010. Since 2013 she has been actively engaged with Ottawa Public Health in the development and promotion of lesson plans to mitigate the decline of newcomer health.

Prior to her current role she was the project manager at World Skills Inc. where she implemented the Workplace Language Training program, developed a specific curriculum, ELT for Entrepreneurs, and engaged in community outreach. She graduated from the University of Toronto with a Bachelor of Arts. She also graduated from the Vancouver Community College TESL program. She is TESL Ontario certified and has also been trained as a language assessor.

NAVIGATING THE SHOALS OF PBLA

By Mary Anne Peters & Kim Henrie, Mohawk College

The seeds of this presentation and subsequent paper were planted during the TESOL Conference in Toronto in March 2015 where Kim attended a presentation given by Shirley Graham about the Portfolio-based language assessment (PBLA) pilot cohort in Ottawa-Carleton. She presented the unvarnished truth at the moment when we at Mohawk College were just 2 1/2 months into implementation for our classroom teachers. This presentation provided lots of ideas, which Kim took back to Mohawk along with the understanding that the resistance we were facing was quite normal and to be expected.

Hindsight has provided an enormous amount of insight into what we might have/should have done differently. In retrospect, it is clear that we should have done work around having teachers unpack their underlying assumptions about teaching. The scope and scale of resistance were surprising and led us to consult the literature around change management and teacher development.

This paper will outline our particular context, and how we made it work for us. We will also touch on some of the challenges and explore the underlying reasons behind the resistance we encountered by looking at the literature around change management, teacher cognition and teacher identity.

Each context is unique, and we do not claim to have all of the answers. In fact, after more than one year of implementation, we have a plethora of unanswered questions. We, humbly, offer our experiences as LINC Coordinator (Mary Anne) and PBLA Lead Teacher (Kim) in Cohort 1 in the hope that others may find use in some of our strategies and take comfort in our shared challenges.

Our Context

The LINC program at Mohawk College consists of 16 part-time teachers. Mohawk also has an ELT class with two teachers. All LINC class are shared between two teachers who focus on particular skills spanning CLB 4–8. There are two classes for youth aged 18–25, the Youth Photography Project (CLB 2–3) and the Youth Video Project (CLB 4–5). Part-time discrete skills courses are also offered in listening and writing (CLB 5) and speaking (CLB 6). Finally, there is a 13-week intensive academic preparation course (CLB 6).

Challenges

From the beginning, the training modules required significant tweaking for our context where classes are split between two teachers who teach different skills. All of our teachers are part-time working on different days with many having other obligations on their non-Mohawk teaching days. This made it impossible to offer training on one day only, because we would only get half of the teaching staff. We also started off with a deficit in the training hours allotted as our teaching days are only five hours where the CCLB and IRCC (formerly CIC) had designated five full-day training sessions in six-hour blocks, which resulted in a shortfall of five hours. In addition, the fact that our LINC program is a combination of full-time classes, part-time discrete skill classes, and a semestered intensive program designed to prepare students to enter post-secondary studies at the college means that implementation of PBLA has to be adapted to a range of contexts.

Strategies we Employed

In order to make the most of the training time, we utilized a number of strategies. These included: the designated face-to-face sessions, a PBLA news section in our daily teachers' bulletin, lunchroom tasks, classroom signs, asynchronous activities using eLearn (our Mohawk Learning Management System or LMS), and instructor surveys.

- In the lead-up to the training of our classroom teachers, we began including a “PBLA News” section in our daily bulletin. This was sometimes informational and at other times directed teachers to their weekly PBLA tasks. We completed each of the face-to-face training sessions twice to reach all of our teachers. As we were unable to complete all of the required materials within a single training session, we uploaded much of the PBLA training materials to our LMS and set weekly tasks for our teachers for the majority of weeks in our term. We typically tried to keep the tasks to a maximum of one hour.
- To fill in gaps that appeared during our training, we engaged in lunchroom activities. One such activity involved module development where teachers were given a topic and benchmark level and asked to unpack the various aspects related to that module. The results of this task were shared and discussed at a follow-up face-to-face training session. We also engaged in some calibration exercises to make sure that all teachers were familiar with the CLB (2012) document and assigning appropriate benchmarks. This idea was drawn directly from the presentation by Shirley Graham (2015).
- We also created signs which were posted in each of our classrooms, alerting students to the role of the PBLA binders in their learning and how teachers would use them to assess their learning.
- In the fall of 2015, we conducted a survey of our classroom teachers to determine how we were doing and what needed to be addressed in upcoming training. The survey results showed us that many gaps remained in terms of CLB alignment, matching assessments with all competencies, incorporating needs assessment and goals effectively, and incorporating reflection. Many of our teachers were also still

seeing PBLA as an event rather than a process, meaning that assessments were out of context for content taught.

Sources of Resistance

Bridges (2009) distinguished between change and transition, the former he described as situational and the latter psychological. He then divided transition into three distinct phases. The first phase involves letting go of previous identities and realities. This is followed by the neutral phase where people will feel that they are in a state of limbo and also confusion. This may even lead people to return to the old and familiar way of doing things. Finally, people will transition into the final phase, also known as the new beginning. In this phase, change has been fully embraced. Bridges believed that in order for this to take place, people must understand the four Ps:

1. purpose: the reason driving the change
2. picture: the outcomes of the change process
3. plan: the outline for change
4. part: the roles each person will play within the change process

Partially through our second term of PBLA implementation we would have hoped to have many of our teachers in the third phase; however, in reality, most of our teachers were still in second phase, and some were still firmly in the first phase.

What can cause resistance?

There are a number of factors that may have stalled the progress of our teachers and prevented them from reaching the final phases. Tam (2005) and Cronin-Jones (1991) found that teachers will not embrace change that is incompatible with their core beliefs about teaching. Thus, establishing and exploring core beliefs about teaching before embarking on change is a useful exercise. Teachers may also feel that they lack the motivation, knowledge, or expertise to make changes to existing curricula (Hunzicker, 2004; Beck, Czerniak, & Lumpe, 2000; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). This was certainly true of some teachers who were not prepared to begin modifying their existing texts and resources and felt intimidated at the idea of creating new resources and assessments with few existing models. Finally, teachers may feel that change involves taking risks in their teaching practice which may or may not bring them into conflict with their colleagues, and as a result, avoid both the risk and conflict (Grossman et al., 2001; Little, 2003). There were certainly elements of all of these factors which, unfortunately, would have been better addressed from the beginning rather than in hindsight, particular teacher change.

If we knew then, what we know now...

If we could travel back in time and do things differently, there are a few key changes we would make to prepare the ground better. Most importantly, perhaps, we would work to develop a shared understanding of the motivation and need for PBLA beyond “required by the funder.” Some change management gurus, such as Kotter in his 1996 book *Leading Change*, might see this as selling the problem to create a sense of urgency for the change. If instead we think of it as selling the solution, from the perspective we bring from the Mohawk context, there are two key selling points for PBLA. The first is how PBLA can help build student responsibility for their own learning. As teachers, we all want our students to be active participants in their learning and we feel frustrated by students who don’t see the connection between their own efforts (attendance, punctuality, doing the work) and that mystical benchmark number that the teachers bestow on them at the end of a term. If students are responsible for creating a portfolio of their work, assessing how it compares to the benchmark standard and reflecting on the strategies they have used to improve, then they will be much more active participants. The other selling point is transparency, being able to see the evidence for the benchmark. This is valuable for students because it will allow them to be more responsible, and it is also valuable for teachers when a student arrives in the class. Has the benchmark number been mystically pulled from the air or is there solid evidence for it? What does the evidence show about the student’s strengths and weaknesses and what they need to work on? Teachers can certainly appreciate the value of transparency and accountability for themselves and their students and could probably be stimulated to see it from a larger perspective, such as the funder’s. Perhaps, if we had begun by asking teachers to articulate these challenges (beyond informally sharing frustrations at lunch time and at the end of term) and inviting them to come up with possible solutions, they might have seen PBLA as a valid solution to real challenges in their teaching, and not as an imposed system. And, perhaps, an investment in the principles of PBLA would encourage them to work with and around the flaws and limitations of PBLA as it stands.

Secondly, a program-wide needs assessment might have helped us to explore our core beliefs about teaching and built a more positive attitude. PBLA has challenged our assumptions about Mohawk’s LINC program. We generally thought of our program as a more “academic” program than community-based programs and tended to teach skills such as academic writing and presentations. We assumed that students chose LINC at Mohawk because they wanted this academic focus. Thus, modules built around “real world tasks” seemed inappropriate (even though there are many real world tasks from an academic environment that can be planned). However, a survey conducted at the end of the first semester of implementation clearly showed that our students choose Mohawk because they like the intensity and high expectations of the program, but they want more “real life” English, not just academic English. If we had done this survey at the beginning of the PBLA process, we might have been able to get teachers more on board with depending less on the academic textbooks and planning modules to meet the students’ holistic English needs.

While the two strategies mentioned above address the issue of motivation and attitudes, we would also tackle the question of skills and knowledge better if we could do it all over again. Deep familiarity with the benchmarks is necessary to effectively implement PBLA. When the revised benchmarks came out in 2012, we did a PD session at Mohawk. However, in the intervening years, new teachers and teachers who did not use them constantly for their planning and assessment were less familiar than they needed to be. We need to know the benchmarks intimately in order to effectively implement PBLA.

Collaboration is Key

A great deal of time was dedicated to learning about changes in instructional and assessment methods; however, not enough time or space was given to the concept of teacher change (i.e. cognition and behaviour). Borg (2003) defined teacher cognition as “beliefs, knowledge, theories, attitudes, images, assumptions, metaphors, conceptions, and perspectives” (Tam, 2015, p. 23). All of these need to be unpacked and reflected upon if change is to take place. Teachers will not embrace change that is at odds with their cognition. In order to create a place where teachers can feel supported to explore their own beliefs while embracing change, Tam (2015) called collaboration and support from both peers and administration “pivot factors” for teacher change. So often, teaching is an isolating experience where teachers carry out their work simultaneously behind closed doors with no knowledge of what their colleagues are doing. In other words, they become individual islands. Tam (2015) points to professional learning communities as a means of moving from “individual to collective professionalism,” (p. 24) and this was born out in the experiences of the PBLA pilot group in Ottawa (CCLB, 2014; Graham, 2015) who recommended collaboration and “mining the existing talent” from within your organization.

Michael Fullan, former dean of OISE and author of *The Six Secrets of Change*, also promotes the value of collaboration and the “deprivatization” of practice, to use Tam’s term (2015). Fullan (2008) says that for an organization to enable change, it must connect peers with purpose, promote continuous learning, and invest in the capacity of individuals and the organization. He also talks about the value of transparency so that everyone can see the results and what is being done to achieve these results. Also key to change, according to Fullan, is to “love your employees” so they feel motivated and are able to achieve their own goals and the organization’s goals. Fullan states that employee motivation comes from three factors: fair treatment, enabling achievement, and camaraderie. These ideas line up nicely with the role of professional learning communities (PLCs) in a process of changing teachers’ practices as described by Tam (2015). Among the characteristics of PLCs are reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, including feedback on teaching and peer observation, collaborative activity and a shared sense of purpose (Tam, 2015). In the PLC Tam observed, teachers’ workloads were reduced from four to three classes to create time for this collective and collaborative work and reflection. In this way, the administration of the school invested in capacity-building by giving teachers time to learn, develop, observe

each other, reflect and achieve the desired change. This kind of fair and respectful treatment would also serve to motivate the teachers.

We have tried to put into practice as much of this advice as possible at Mohawk, but we are constrained by the limits of the funding. We try to make the work environment positive and respectful. We have encouraged collaboration and sharing by creating an electronic and hard-copy repository of materials that teachers have made and shared for re-use or adaptation. We take advantage of any opportunities for meeting, sharing, and reflecting. However, time remains the biggest constraint. Collaboration and investment in capacity require time. Teachers need more time for planning and preparation as they get used to PBLA and the related paperwork will continue to take more time. Even more importantly, teachers need time to engage in reflective dialogue to address the challenges they are facing and to be challenged in their assumptions and practices. They need time to observe each other and reflect on what they have seen. They need time to plan and strategize together for their individual teaching and the collective teaching of the program. This is where the implementation of PBLA is falling short: very little time has been allowed for even the initial training and none for this kind of reflective and collaborative follow-up work.

Conclusion

Our experiences in Cohort 1 has been a process of trial and error. We have learned a great deal and still have much to learn. What we have learned points to the need for professional development training that gives teachers clearly prioritized goals that drive change forward and create a space for peer collaboration. The need for collaboration cannot be stressed enough. Before any of this takes place, teachers need to explore their own belief systems and identify how they relate to the proposed changes. This is essential if they are to let go of an old way of teaching in favour of embracing a new method. Finally, what teachers really need is more time, “success hinges on how much time we can devote to ensuring mastery and successful implementation of any new practice, especially during the early stages. When will we learn that even one new initiative requires far more time for training, practicing, and monitoring than leaders typically allot?” (Schmoker, 2016, p. 17). This includes time for: training, planning, designing tasks and assessments, reflection, and collaboration.

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Bios

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DESIGNING AND ASSESSING PBLA TASKS IN LITERACY AND CLB 1–2

By Agnes Kucharska and Jennifer Weiler

Throughout the portfolio-based language assessment (PBLA) instructional cycle, learners communicate to us in several ways their learning goals and needs. They may share their learning preferences through a needs assessment, a class discussion, or a learner-instructor conference. Learners' needs can also be identified through classroom observations as learners demonstrate skills, strategies, and concepts that they have mastered, partially mastered, or are unable to do independently yet. As instructors, it is our job to design modules and lessons that teach the required skills, strategies, and concepts that are described in the *Canadian Language Benchmarks: English as a Second Language for Adults* (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2012) and the *Canadian Language Benchmarks: ESL for Adult Literacy Learners* (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks [CCLB], 2014). Terms, modules, and lessons can be planned in a variety of ways, and this article provides an overview of some key elements of the backward design planning process (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006) and action-oriented feedback.

Backward Design Process

In the backward design process, instructors begin planning with the end in mind (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). Within this process, you first begin planning by considering where you would like your learners to end up. Then, you determine how you will measure their achievements. Finally, you plan the learning activities and tasks that will build learners' competencies so they can successfully achieve the desired outcomes. Let's take a closer look at these three stages in the context of planning a module on how to register at a doctor's office for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) Foundation, CLB 1/1L, and CLB 2/2L learners.

Stage 1: Identify the Desired Results

Imagine you have completed a topic needs assessment with your learners. They have indicated an interest in learning how to register at a doctor's office. How do you proceed? In this stage, you need to decide what learners should know, understand, and be able to do by the end of the module (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). Instructors set learning goals that are topic-based, real-life task oriented, and grounded in the literacy and language benchmarks (CCLB, 2014; CIC, 2012). When learners have expressed interest in a topic, instructors can brainstorm a list of skills, strategies, and concepts that are integral to it. In

the context of registering at a doctor's office, an instructor's brainstorm may look something like that in Figure 1.

Depending on the topic or task, there may be many associated skills, strategies, and concepts. At this planning stage, instructors clarify priorities and decide which ones are the most relevant and appropriate for the learners (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006).

To invite more learner participation in the planning process, instructors could seek additional input from learners about what smaller tasks, skills, strategies, and concepts are most relevant to them. While it may be too overwhelming or difficult for low-level learners to generate independently their own list, learners can be guided in this process. Instructors can share some of their own brainstormed ideas to provide a starting point for learners to participate in a whole-class brainstorming activity. For example, instructors could write on the board, "doctor's office" and elicit more ideas from learners by asking questions such as, "What happens when you go to the doctor? Who do you see first? What do you say? What do you hear? What do you read? What do you write?" Instructors can add learners' ideas to the list, and the class can decide on what they prefer to learn. For module planning, instructors can use these specific ideas to determine end goals. For example, an instructor may determine that being able to greet and understand the receptionist, ask for help, read and understand form words, and fill out a medical registration form are of the highest priority. Once the desired results are established, instructors move to the second stage: determine acceptable evidence of learning.

Stage 2: Determine Acceptable Evidence of Learning

At this step, instructors design assessment tasks that will provide the opportunity for students to demonstrate their learning. Instructors need to consider three questions: What types of performance or product can provide evidence? What criteria can show the achievement of the performance or product? And how reliable and valid is the assessment task? (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). At this point, instructors need to think as assessors and consider what assessment methods can be incorporated both at the end of and throughout the module (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). In the context of registering at a new doctor's office, Stage 1 revealed that the most relevant tasks are talking to the receptionist, asking for help, and reading and filling out a registration form. In this example, end-of-module assessment tasks could include a roleplay of speaking to a receptionist and completing a form. Once these tasks have been selected, instructors must align the assessment criteria with

- the benchmarks
- profiles of ability for both mainstream and literacy learners

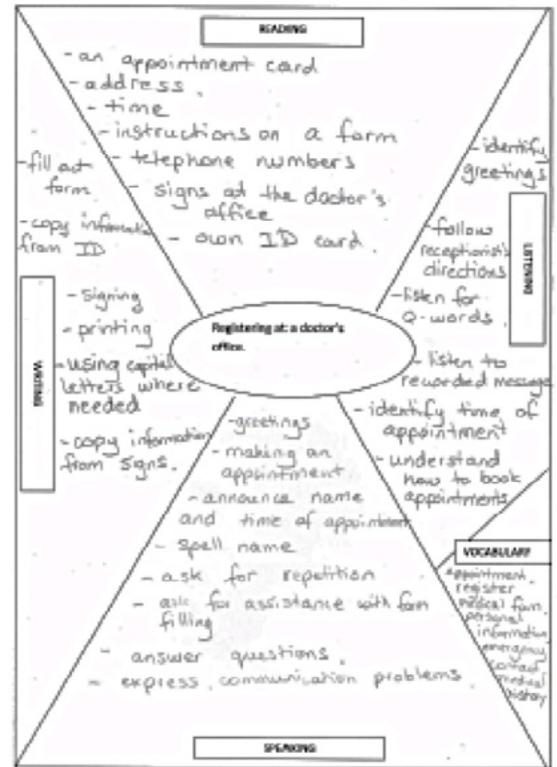


Figure 1. An illustration of an instructor's brainstorm of student needs for registering with a doctor (adapted from Holmes, Kingwell, Pettis, & Pidlaski, 2001, p. 199).

- the features of communication for CLB 1 and up (CIC, 2012)
- and conditions for learning for CLB literacy Foundation and up (CCLB, 2014).
- For example, a sample writing assessment task and assessment table is shown in Figure 2.

Writing-CLB 2- Getting Things Done
Date: _____ Name: _____
Medical Form
Fill out this form. Please use a pen. Please print.

MEDICAL INFORMATION

First Name: _____ Last Name: _____
Date of Birth: _____ day/month/year Sex: Male Female
Address: _____
Apartment Number _____ Street Number _____ Street Name _____
City: _____ Province: _____ Postal Code: _____
Telephone Number: _____
Ontario Health Card Number: _____
Check "Yes" or "No"?
Do you smoke? Yes No
Do you get exercise? Yes No
Do you sleep well? Yes No
Do you eat healthy food? Yes No
Check where you have problems:
 Eyes Ears Back Shoulders
 Heart Stomach Knees Headaches
 Frequent Coughs and Colds Allergies
Date: _____ day/month/year Signature: _____
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Writing-CLB 2- Getting Things Done
Task: Medical Form Name: _____
Date: _____

	☹	☺	☺
Holistic: Completed the form.			
Holistic: Included the required basic information.			
Wrote personal information in appropriate sections.			
Followed some conventions for addresses, telephone numbers, etc.			
Used a pen.			
Used capital letters where needed.			
Wrote legibly. (Printing)			
Signed the form.			
Comments:			
Next Steps:			
	Score: _____		

1	2	3	4
0-49%	50-69%	70-79%	80-100%
Not able to achieve	Developing	Satisfactory	More than satisfactory

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Figure 2. A sample writing assessment task and assessment table (adapted from Watson, 2009, p. 410).

Additionally, various assessments can be used throughout the module. Assessments can measure proficiency in the developing skills through such elements as skill-building quizzes, informal checks for understanding, daily debriefing about the skills and content of each class, learner self-assessments or reflections, instructor observations, and skill-using performance tasks with action-oriented feedback (to be addressed later in this article) (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). Equipped now with the desired end-results and assessment tasks, instructors move into planning how to teach the skills, strategies, and concepts through the selected topic.

Stage 3: Plan Learning Experiences and Instruction

At this step, instructors plan learning experiences by considering what approaches, resources, and experiences are required to obtain the desired results (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006).

Instructors consider how to equip learners with the skills, conceptual knowledge, and strategies required to meet the end goals and assessment task criteria. Instructors can use the continua within the *Canadian Language Benchmarks: ESL for Adult Literacy Learners* (CCLB, 2014) to gain insights into what skills, concepts, and strategies could be built sequentially into the lessons. These continua are valuable to identify learners' levels of readiness and what they realistically can be expected to accomplish next (Vygotsky, 1978). In this step, instructors also think about how to provide opportunities for learners to make connections between the content and their lives through self-reflections and how to provide opportunities for learner self-assessments (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006; e.g., see Kilner & Drew, 2012; Lupasco, 2014). Finally, instructors can plan ways to adapt the module and lessons to match learners' interests, styles, and needs (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006).

Returning to the registering at a doctor's office example, if a desired outcome is the completion of a registration form, instructors may brainstorm a list of skills, concepts, and strategies that their specific learners may need to develop. For example, they may need to learn the following:

Skills

- How to print
- How to copy information (e.g., from a health card)
- How to write inside the boxes
- How to make a selection by checking off the correct box (e.g., gender, medical history)
- Know where to sign
- How to write dates in a variety of formats (e.g., DD/MM/YY, YYYY/MM/DD)

Concepts

- Understand what letters must be copied as upper-case versus lower-case letters from ID cards that use all-caps for names
- Comprehend the importance of accuracy when completing forms
- When to use capital letters (e.g., names, addresses)
- Understand the importance of using a pen when filling out a form
- Understand that a signature is different from printing one's name
- Understand the purpose of the form

Strategies

- How to check copying of personal information against a model (e.g., ID card) for accuracy (i.e., spelling, capitalization, spacing, counting the number of letters)
- How to check that everything is filled in correctly

Once we have listed these and selected what to focus on, we can plan how to teach them in engaging and effective ways.

While the backward design model does not promote any specific instructional processes, some processes may be more effective for your group of learners. In the registration form example, instructors could provide scaffolding by adapting the social supports or the task complexity (Almasi & Fullerton, 2012; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Social supports can be adapted by working as a whole class while the instructor models how to fill in the form and points out key concepts or strategies (e.g., when to use capital letters, how to write inside boxes). Next, the instructor could provide guided practice with immediate feedback and various collaborative practice opportunities with fewer instructor supports before requiring learners to work independently (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Additionally, instructors could provide scaffolding by gradually increasing the task complexity throughout the module. Learners may be exposed first to forms that require only names, then move on to forms that also require an address, then a phone number, and finally a signature. By the end of the module, learners will have worked up to completing independently a full form which can be used as an authentic skill-using activity that could be placed in their PBLA portfolio.

Action-Oriented Feedback

Action-oriented feedback is explicit feedback provided from the instructor to the learner that identifies key points or areas for improvement and offers specific steps for learners to take that can improve their learning. Action-oriented feedback provides learners with steps they need to take to accomplish their goals (i.e., filling out a medical form), and as such, this feedback “provides students with a way forward to close the gap between current and desired performance” (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 212). During skill-building and skill-using tasks, instructors can give feedback orally or in writing on the concepts, skills and strategies required for completing the task to individual learners, small groups, or the whole class. For example, if there is a gap in how the whole class performs, instructors could review or provide explicit instruction again to the whole class. If only a small group of learners are struggling, instructors could speak specifically to that group and provide additional instruction as needed.

Before completing any assessment task, learners should be aware of the criteria and desired results. Instructors can communicate this to learners orally or in writing, and should provide many models and exemplars for the tasks throughout the module. By beginning with the end in mind, instructors guide learners in completing a series of skill-building and skill-using practice activities that mirror the format that is required at the end (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). At low CLB levels, it is important to be consistent with the format because some learners may have difficulty transferring their skills when presented with the same task but in a new format.

Throughout the module, all feedback should move learners forward. Vague comments like “Good Job!” and “Well done!” may be used occasionally; however, these kinds of comments are not effective in informing learners what they are capable of doing and what steps they need to take to improve. Feedback should be linked directly to the criteria, and instructors need to prioritize their feedback by offering comments on one or two specific areas rather than attempting to correct everything (Pettis, 2014). Good feedback includes specific action items, things that learners must actually do. For example, after completing a form, a learner who misspelled their name could be asked to fill in a new form with the correct spelling. In addition, feedback should be provided in learner-friendly language. For low-level learners, instructors can use symbols, pictures, or colour-coding to help students understand feedback, making sure that they are aware of what those symbols stand for prior to seeing them on the feedback form. In Figure 3, an arrow was used to point the learner in the right direction.

Writing-CLB 2- Getting Things Done
Date: Feb 23 2015 Name: Asia

Medical Form

Fill out this form. Please use a pen. Please print.

MEDICAL INFORMATION

First Name: Asia Last Name: StrONG

Date of Birth: Sep 14 1969 Sex: Male Female

Address: 415 250 Queen St N.

City: Hamilton Province: ontario Postal Code: L8V2S6

Telephone Number: 789 555 4932

Ontario Health Card Number: 2888 222 344

Check "Yes" or "No"?

Do you smoke? Yes No

Do you get exercise? Yes No

Do you sleep well? Yes No

Do you eat healthy food? Yes No

Check where you have problems:

Eyes Ears Back Shoulders

Heart Stomach Knees Headaches

Frequent Coughs and Colds Allergies

Date: February 23 2015 Signature: [Signature]

Writing-CLB 2- Getting Things Done
Task: Medical Form Name: Asia
Date: Feb 23, 2015

	☹	😊	☺
Holistic: Completed the form.			✓
Holistic: Included the required basic information.			✓
Wrote personal information in appropriate sections.			✓
Followed some conventions for addresses, telephone numbers, etc.			✓
Used a pen.			✓
Used capital letters where needed.		✓	
Wrote legibly. (Printing)			✓
Signed the form.			✓

Comments:

- You filled out the form.
- You used a pen.
- You signed the form.

Next Steps:

- Watch your capital letters.
Hamilton → Hamilton
ontario → Ontario
StrONG → Strong
- Use numbers for dates.
Sep 14 1969 → 14/09/69
February 23, 2015 → 23/02/15

Score: _____

1	2	3	4
0-49%	50-69%	70-79%	80-100%
Not able to achieve	Developing	Satisfactory	More than satisfactory

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Figure 3. An example of feedback. (adapted from Watson, 2009)

As evident in Figure 3, the instructor, Agnes, provided action-oriented feedback in learner-friendly language. In the Comments area, Agnes named what was completed correctly and should be continued in the future. The Next Steps section included comments on what the learner should start (i.e., use numbers for dates) and stop (i.e., incorrect use of capital

letters; Pettis, 2014). This student was shown how to correct her errors through the use of arrows that indicate the problem and the correction. This learner was asked to make the corrections in class on a new form.

Learners at the CLB Foundation, CLB 1/1L, and CLB 2/2L often need to be taught and supported in learning how to understand oral and written feedback and use it to move forward. All learners should be provided with the opportunity to discuss their feedback with the instructor. A dialogue with the teacher helps students understand where they are, what the expectations of the task are, and how they can use the feedback to reach their goals (Black & William, 1998). This dialogue should be constructive and allow learners to be part of the conversation. Learners should be actively engaged in this dialogue with the instructor posing questions that require learners to think about their progress and find a way to close the gap between their goals and present performance (Black & William, 1998). For example, instructors could model how to correct errors by showing examples of mistakes that were done during a recent task. Learners could discuss the errors and find solutions as a whole class or in groups. Once learners identify the errors, they can apply these corrections to their own work during class time with instructor support as needed. This type of feedback, with in-class opportunities to use the feedback immediately, is valuable for learners because it is done in a timely manner within the module and learners may retain the new learning better (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Furthermore, continual dialogue about and provision of action-oriented feedback throughout the term can prepare learners for completing self-assessments or peer assessments. As constructive feedback is modelled throughout the term, learners can begin to understand the importance of providing honest and productive feedback to self and peers. This is an important concept to learn as some learners may initially rate their peers too high to avoid hurt feelings. Self-assessment and peer-assessment at the low levels can be challenging, but learners can improve their skills throughout the term. An example of a self-assessment form can be seen in Figure 4. Using this form, learners go through the list and identify whether they completed the criteria of the task.

Peer and self-assessments benefit both the giver and receiver of the feedback. The receiver has additional feedback to learn from. The giver may also be able to identify possible errors in their own work (William, n.d.).

Name: _____ Date: _____				
I filled out the form.	First Name: <u>Ka</u> Last Name: _____	☹	☺	☺
I copied my information accurately.	Ontario Health Card Name: Kathy Brown First Name: <u>Kathy</u> First Name: Kathy	☹	☺	☺
I used a pen.		☹	☺	☺
I used capital letters where needed.	First Name: <u>Kathy</u>	☹	☺	☺
I printed my words.	Kathy Kathy	☹	☺	☺
I signed my form.	Signature: <u>Kathy Brown</u>	☹	☺	☺
© Agnes Kucharska, 2014				

Figure 4. An example of a self-assessment form.

Conclusion

The backward design process and action-oriented feedback recommended as part of PBLA is a cyclical and dialogic process between instructors and learners and has the potential to empower learners over time. Instructors plan terms, modules, and lessons by first determining what tasks learners want to do by the end of that time. Then, instructors plan appropriate assessment tasks that incorporate the skills, strategies, and concepts that are associated with each task. Finally, instructors consider learners' needs and levels and plan experiences that allow learners to develop the required language and literacy skills. Throughout the teaching process, instructors continually observe learners' performance, provide action-oriented feedback, adapt teaching as necessary, and make notes to inform future teaching. What learners struggle with in one module could be returned to in future modules. For example, if the student in the above example (see Figure 3) struggled with writing dates, a future module could incorporate writing dates on application forms or time sheets. As Black and William (2001) suggest, this cycle can increase learners' motivation because they know that their voice is being heard and they are making progress because instruction is tailored to meet their needs.

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Bios



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ACTUALIZING POTENTIAL

Fostering Student Development as Self-Directed Learners through Reading Portfolios

By Nataliya Borkovska, Ling Hu, & Scott Jamieson, University of Guelph

We developed a reading portfolio assignment for an intermediate, university preparatory academic reading class of 10–15 students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The class met five hours per week. The reading portfolio project is a major assignment worth fifteen percent (15%) of the course grade. We devoted one hour per week of class time to the portfolio, and the students spent up to two hours outside class working on the portfolio. The assessment of the reading portfolio consisted of three separate components: student self-assessment (30%), teacher assessment (30%), and student reflection on the process and their progress (40%).

This assignment came about as a result of a perceived need for more individualized, and scaffolded, reading skills practice. Rather than simply providing students with a list of independent learning resources, we undertook to design and deliver a self-directed reading portfolio project over a fourteen-week semester. This project fosters self-direction in learning (SDL) because it offers students choice, creates opportunities for students to collaborate in the co-construction of knowledge, and promotes self-reflection. (You can learn more about the theory underlying SDL in Appendix A).

Based on our understanding of, and experiences working with, this group of students, we have determined that most students have had little experience of self-directed learning. The reading portfolio is, therefore, designed to provide the structure of a possible self-directed process to help students plan, implement and evaluate their learning.

The Process

The Reading Portfolio (in online or paper-based format) is comprised of eight components: self-assessment checklist, goal and objective setting, weekly actions, online learning resources, student reflection, self-assessment, and teacher assessment. The students are also given in-class time to discuss different aspects of the portfolio process with their classmates, which promotes collaborative learning. Figure 1 below represents the process of self-directed learning as outlined by Knowles (1975) and Garrison (1997) and the support provided by the instructors during portfolio process.

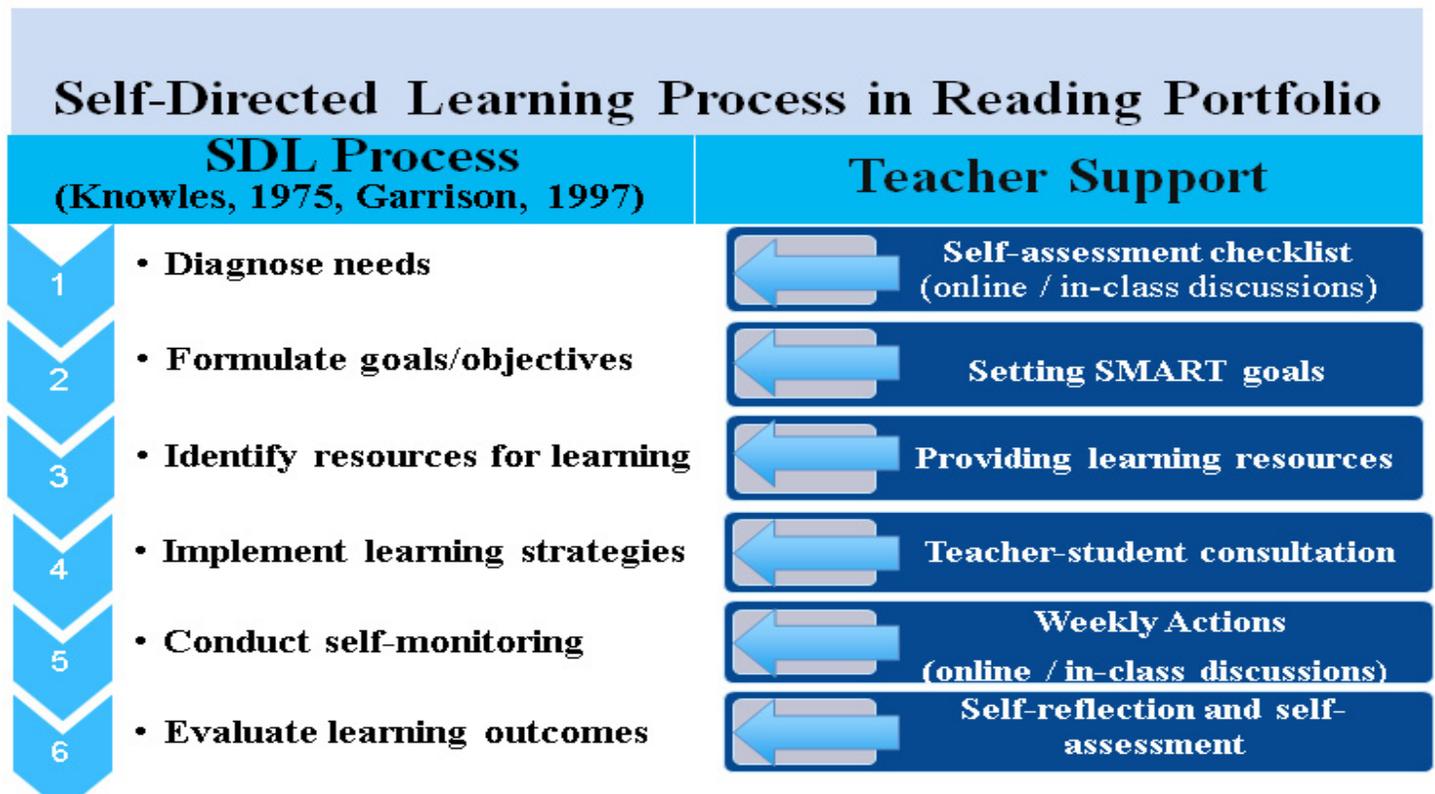


Figure 1: Self-Directed Learning Process in Reading Portfolio (adapted from Garrison, 1997; Knowles, 1975)

Step 1. Diagnose Needs

We conduct a SDL Readiness Survey, adapted from Cotterall (1999), to learn more about student beliefs, attitudes, and expectations around the roles of the students and teacher in learning. The first component of reading portfolio, self-assessment checklist is provided to help students identify their needs. The self-assessment checklist outlines reading and vocabulary related learning outcomes for the semester. The students self-assess their ability on the five-point scale, which helps them identify learning challenges and areas for improvement. We also ask students to identify and to discuss their reading related challenges in small groups in class.

Step 2. Formulate Goals & Objectives

Based on the identified needs, students set goals (long-term) and objectives (short-term), and make plans for the whole semester. We introduce SMART goal setting rules to help student make their goals more **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic/**R**elevant and **T**imely. Students discuss their goals with their peers and provide feedback using a SMART rule to help them revise the goals and objectives.

Steps 3–5. Conduct Self-monitoring (Learning Strategy and Learning Resources)

Once students set their goals and objectives and make plans for the whole semester, they translate these goals into weekly actions. Students record and reflect upon their weekly actions in logs to help them establish the habit of self-monitoring. As the students carry out their weekly action plans, the instructors provide ongoing support in class and online. For example, the instructors encourage the students to choose appropriate learning activities to maximize their learning (e.g. using concept maps and Venn diagrams for text organization, highlighting, annotating, and outlining reading texts).

Class time is also allocated for students to share what they have read, the learning strategies they have used and the challenges encountered. Every week, we provide feedback on weekly actions online or in class and support the students by providing reading and vocabulary learning resources. Individual teacher-student consultations are arranged mid-semester to review their goals and weekly activities. The individual consultation allows the student to ask questions and receive feedback on solving reading challenges, on using preferred learning strategies, and on selecting goal-related learning resources.

Step 6. Evaluate Learning Outcomes

At the end of semester, students reflect on their learning process and assess their efforts and achievements, which helps them develop critical thinking skills. In particular, the students look back at their goals and objectives and reflect on whether they have been met or not and why. They highlight their greatest improvement and challenges and analyze their progress and ways of dealing with challenges. The reflections are evaluated based on students' analysis of learning experience, organization and development of answers, accuracy and word choice.

Benefits to students

The completion of the reading portfolio project can bring many benefits to students because they identify and problem-solve their challenges, set manageable semester goals, use appropriate learning materials, and keep track of their own progress. It provides them with a project in which they have greater freedom of choice. They can take charge and become involved in prioritizing their own learning goals. Through this process, we believe, students have an increased awareness of themselves as learners because they adopt greater responsibility in monitoring their learning. We also see that the students are able to identify the ways that they learn best and to adapt to the expectations of a new academic environment, which is beneficial for future learning.

Ways forward

From the instructor's perspective, we now understand that setting up an online platform and providing feedback on students' weekly activities may lead to increased teacher workload. We suggest creating a re-usable online template, providing exemplars of successful student portfolios, and assigning more class time to complete and share some portfolio components with peers.

The assignment weight in our course grade was 15%, yet considering the intensity and time dedications required for this assignment, we might increase the weight of the grade for this assignment. In their feedback, the majority of students have ranked teacher-student consultations and completion of multiple intelligence survey as the most useful activities in the preparation of the portfolio. We would recommend conducting three teacher-student consultations during the semester (beginning, mid, end).

Final thoughts

As teachers, we may provide opportunities for students to discuss and analyse the effectiveness of certain learning strategies. While this has merits in terms of promoting collaborative reflection upon learning strategies, it is essential to note that we cannot direct the learners to be self-directed. At best, we can simply seek to provide opportunities for reflection and self-directed feedback on the success of the students' own learning strategies. With this in mind, we understand that we may never directly witness the results of the learning that goes on in any course or class we teach, but we might hope that the skills and awareness that the students have gained through exercising more self-direction in learning in our classes extend beyond the classroom. SDL will continue to be a subject of ongoing area of interest for teachers, not only because of its potential value for facilitating adult development and adult learning, but also because of the challenges it presents to us in terms of determining the relative effectiveness of particular teaching methods and approaches.

The QR code refers you to the [online template](#) used in the Academic Reading course at the University of Guelph. The template includes all the components of the Reading Portfolio.



Appendix A: Background

Self-direction in learning (SDL) has increasingly become an integral part of adult education given the ever changing world of information in which we live. Studying effectively requires students to take the lead in using effective learning strategies to access the learning resources available to them. Educators should strive towards exploiting the potential of SDL for facilitating second language development and towards adopting teaching beliefs and approaches that more holistically consider the developmental needs of students. “It is no longer plausible for educational institutions to imagine that their most essential task is to pass along accumulated knowledge to succeeding generations” (Taylor, 2006, p. 196). In other words, educators should promote and support the development of self-directed learning as part of lifelong learning skills. Moreover, learning outcomes guidelines for elementary/secondary students (Coelho, 2001), for post-secondary students (“Guidelines for University Learning Outcomes”, 2005), and for students in second language programs (Leaver, Ehrman, & Shekhtman, 2005), all identify autonomy in learning and the capacity to be self-directed as being key to future academic and professional success beyond the classroom.

Based on our experiences teaching English for Academic purposes in university language preparation programs, we have learned that post-secondary international students may be accustomed to a different set of social and cultural assumptions about what constitutes effective teaching and learning. Students seem to be able to identify what they need to improve, but they may not be sure how to best practise to improve. As well, students may consistently have the idea that the role of the teacher is to tell the students what to do to learn. It seems that students’ understanding of how to be more self-directed in learning may differ from teacher understanding of how students might take increasing responsibility for their own learning.

SDL means that learners exercise intellectual direction in their learning. In theory, learners are assumed to have a degree of autonomy which enables them to play an active role in their own learning and to accept responsibility for “planning, implementing, and evaluating a learning experience” (Taylor, 2006, p. 197). Garrison (1997) proposes that any explanation of SDL needs to consider self-direction in two dimensions: the internal cognitive-motivational factors which affect changes within individuals as they develop and learn as well as the external social contextually contingent factors, which influence how SDL is exercised. Taylor (2006) puts forward the idea that educators should explore the dimensions of SDL at the “intersection of adult development and adult learning” (p. 216). By this, the author implies that educators should consider SDL in terms of how to help move the development processes of maturation along as well as in terms of how to create conditions propitious for self-directed learning.

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Bios

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BUILDING RESILIENCE

Leveraging Socialization for International Student Success

By Doina Nugent, Yuliya Miakishева, & Kareen Sharawy, York University

Abstract

The York University English Language Institute's initiatives in promoting and encouraging graduate students' resilience are extremely promising. This article describes how the York University Pre-graduate Preparation Program is implementing socialization and volunteering components within an ESL program to promote greater graduate student success in the classroom, and beyond, and to encourage greater student resilience and a sense of control over academic and professional progress through social networking and volunteering.

In 2009, the York University English Language Institute (YUELI) launched the York Pre-graduate Preparation Program (YP3), designed for international students wishing to pursue graduate studies in the English language. The program is eight months long and is divided into two terms, each offering classrooms instruction and a variety of extracurricular activities (e.g. academic workshops and seminars, campus trips to other Ontario universities, guest speaker presentations, and so on) to help students prepare for the challenges of graduate school. In YP3, students focus on improving the English language skills needed to not only succeed academically, but also to effectively communicate with professors, program administrators, or other graduate students in the programs of their choice. Moreover, YP3 offers a variety of activities to help students adjust more rapidly to life in Canada, and to become active members of Canadian academic and social environments. This article will describe the challenges YP3 students face upon arriving in Canada, and discuss the program initiatives introduced to help the students to both define and attain their academic, personal, and professional goals.

Some of the major changes our students need to confront occur in their academic and social environments. Our students, mainly graduates from mainland China, generally considered to be culturally quite distinct from North America (Zhang & Zhu, 2007), struggled to adjust to the demands of the more informal, interactive and student-centered classroom environment in our program. In addition, for many of our cohort, this was the first time they were living away from home, not only in a different country and culture, but also independent of their family and relatives. Those who had previously lived away from home while at university had often stayed within the relatively stricter, more sheltered confines of a university dormitory setting. As a result, they frequently struggled with the

daily tasks of shopping, preparing food, laundry, personal hygiene, maintaining a healthy life style, including exercise and nutrition, getting sufficient sleep, commuting, obtaining healthcare, and many other seemingly mundane and ordinary tasks. Moreover, for a great number of our graduates, this was one of the first times they were confronted with making their own decisions regarding their personal and career objectives, as distinct from merely accepting “parent-prescribed” goals. It was not uncommon that their major and university had been decided either by their parents or by a university system wherein students might be assigned courses on the basis of where most space was available, rather than based on any real interest or aptitude.

It was probably the latter point that proved to be particularly problematic. Frequently, our students had never received any type of what could be even remotely construed as career counseling or career guidance while in high school. As a result, when confronted with the question of what their strengths were, or what they might enjoy doing professionally in the future, the standard response was often an attempt to deflect with an answer such as “Accounting is a good career.” They appeared to lack any real self-awareness and understanding of what their own motivations and desires might be. Hence, when YP3 instructors were asking them to consider various possibilities regarding choice of program (graduate school vs. college vs. certificate programs), choice of university, or even where they might see themselves living and working in several years, our students were quite simply overwhelmed.

Added to that were the stressors created by, according to student responses, the lack of any North American network to which they could turn for help or advice. The familiar and trusted strategies of asking their friends (either in China or in their current class) or family for advice turned out to be much less effective in this new context as these sources were frequently as, or even more, clueless about the academic and career prospects in their new country than the students themselves were. According to Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure (1975, 1993), it is precisely this absence of a support network which results in poor social integration and a negative impact on educational commitment and, hence, higher dropout rates for international students.

In common with many students from countries where English is not the primary language, or at least the primary medium of instruction, our students lacked confidence in their English competence. As studies have confirmed (Zhang & Zhou, 2010), this lack of communication confidence impacted not only their academic success, but also led to feelings of social isolation, and delayed psychological and sociocultural adjustment. This in turn served only to amplify their language deficiencies as our students lacked the cultural background to be able to understand even relatively simple dialogue or classroom language (Yan & Berliner, 2013, as cited in Zhou, Zhang, 2010).

When confronted with these challenges, the majority of our student cohort exhibited the following types of behavior: self-segregation/cocooning; extreme anxiety and passivity; fixation on the factors they felt helpless to change (such as their IELTS scores); and feelings

of being overwhelmed, despondency, and hopelessness. Lacking any effective strategies to manage their changing environment, they invariably relapsed into older coping strategies, such as long hours spent memorizing materials, or asking parents for advice, none of which served them well any longer.

It became increasingly obvious that many of our students did not feel in control of their lives but rather saw themselves as ‘victims of circumstance’, blaming others for their predicaments, such as the inevitable delays in receiving a university offer. Increasingly, recent research has indicated that students from more collectivist cultures, such as China, tend to exhibit a much more external locus of control than many western students (Hamid, 1994, as cited in Stocks et al, 2012). External Locus of Control is the belief that “chance, fate, or outside forces determine life events”, while Internal Locus of Control is the belief that you are “in charge of the events that occur in (your) life” (Northouse, 2013, p. 141). In addition, Internal Locus of Control has been found to correlate positively with any number of success factors and our response to stressors. That was when we started to have what we called our little ‘worry’ sessions. We would talk with our students about what they were frightened of, and then we would attempt to quantify and qualify their fears. Students would create two lists: factors they could affect and those they could not, ‘stuff to forget’. Based on those lists, we would go on to develop an action plan for each student, with clearly defined steps and timelines. In this way, students would be focusing on what they could change, and would be sufficiently occupied to be able to at least temporarily forget about the other factors. In addition, they could feel empowered by taking concrete steps that were bringing them palpably closer to their objectives.

The first concerted attempts at such interventions for our students started in the 2011/12 fall/winter term. Strategies included prising them away from their preferred ethno-centric social networks, such as ‘we chat’, and encouraging them to gradually transfer over to Facebook (FB) and LinkedIn. Initially, instructors met with considerable resistance as students simply could not understand why they should do this, so social media activities were often set as assignments. Sometime later, when instructors found themselves increasingly juggling moodle, wiki, email and social media as means of communication with and among their classes, it was decided to switch completely to FB. Class groups became the main means of communication regarding assignments, projects, sharing of news and activities, etc. These FB groups quickly became a resource for newer students, enabling them to meet more senior students, and rapidly evolved into an alumni network. Fortunately, the benefits of networking manifested themselves very quickly, further encouraging new recruits. Such benefits included supportive alumni networks at a number of prominent Canadian universities, providing immediate assistance with diverse matters such as contact details of sympathetic professors, advice on travel and accommodation, friendly tour guides on new campuses, or even the questions being asked at specific graduate interviews.

Various forms of experiential learning (both interpersonal and vocational) increasingly became part of the weekly curriculum, depending on what opportunities presented

themselves in the surrounding community. As these opportunities frequently materialized at relatively short notice, a certain amount of flexibility was required from our faculty. Initially, until the students came to realize the benefits, course assignments incorporated such experiential components as joining clubs, volunteering with York University organizations, attending graduate, job, volunteer and career fairs on and off campus, and visits to various university campuses. The immediate benefits included enhanced spoken English and communication confidence, new inter-cultural friendships and closer ties to the York University community, and opportunities to use some of the assignments (producing resumes; preparing interview skills) in real-life contexts when applying for volunteering positions, all the while gaining valuable Canadian experience.

To help students overcome initial reservations, Term I socialization generally involved what were termed 'low threat' activities, such as group volunteering on campus for Multicultural Week or YU birthday celebrations, organized by the instructors. Rapidly, students progressed to organizing their own opportunities off campus, such as volunteering at sporting events, or even group volunteer days at homeless shelters and soup kitchens.

Invariably, there were a number of early adopters who became valuable allies in motivating their peers. These were then, unsurprisingly, the individuals who were able to take our socialization initiatives to the next level. February 28, 2015, was quite a watershed moment for the YP3 program: the very first YP3 Alumni Reunion to mark the 5-year anniversary of the program. Many YP3 alumni returned to help in the planning and organization, working together with current students to create an opportunity for students past and present to network and (re)connect in a real, rather than virtual, social setting. One of these reconnections with a small group of alumni working for a non-profit Sino-Canadian educational company, led them to return to YUELI in May 2015 to recruit 80 YUELI students as volunteers for the Sino-Canadian Cultural Festival in Toronto. They ran training workshops at YUELI, interviewed and recruited volunteers and team leaders, and organized shifts, transportation, etc. All the volunteers received certificates and references for their portfolios. In addition, YUELI instructors and directors were invited to present at the conference, and the English Language Institute was presented with award for Contributions to Sino-Canadian Cross-cultural Exchange.

As our socialization initiatives in YP3 had already begun to spread to other programs at YUELI, in 2015 it was decided to extend these opportunities to all YUELI students in a more integrated and formalized manner. YUELI launched the Volunteering Online Resource Centre (VORC), a program offering a wide range of volunteering opportunities to international students within our network of community-based partner organizations. The program components include an online platform, dedicated Facebook group, weekly workshops on related topics, such as interview skills and resume writing, and periodic Volunteer Fairs. Once again, the YP3 alumni returned to work with current students to organize the program launch and fairs. There they were able to connect with various non-profit organizations, resulting not only in further opportunities for volunteering, but in some cases also internships and other forms of Canadian experience

Discussion & Conclusion

When we first began to implement various strategies within the YP3 Program, it was in an attempt to address the most immediate concerns of our students, as they arose. Within a relatively short period of time, certain patterns emerged, both in terms of the problems we saw our cohort struggling with, and in the strategies which most rapidly effected an improvement. At this stage, a more coherent and consistent approach emerged, and it became necessary for us to define our goals more clearly. What was our desired outcome for our students? What would constitute success for us at this point? Instructors were unanimous on the outcomes: to help students overcome their challenges; for them to learn how to deal with failure as ‘deferred success’ and become more resilient; to encourage students to take concrete steps towards becoming independent, active decision makers; and for our students to become fully engaged participants in their personal, academic and professional lives, and in shaping their own futures.

At this interim stage of the project, based on the observation of our students’ increased engagement, and their success in attaining their professional and personal goals, and from tracking the progress of many of our alumni, we feel confident that the experiential components (networking, socialization, volunteering, etc.) introduced into YP3 were able to effect beneficial and lasting changes.

To date, most of our evidence has been qualitative in nature but, moving forward, we intend to also compile quantitative data to be able to more fully explore and document the relationship between experiential learning, resilience and retention for international students.

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Bios



With lengthy careers in international elite athletics and adult language education, Doina Nugent (MA, Grad. Dip. Ed, TESL) has always been fascinated by human performance optimization, whether as a competitor/coach in endurance sports, or in her work as an educator with international (under)graduate students at the York University English Language Institute.



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THE FORGOTTEN SKILL

Targeted Vocabulary Building for Spoken Production

By Kerstin Okubo, University of Toronto

In the myriad of our ESL contexts, vocabulary teaching rarely gets the spotlight, and most of us do little justice to it in our courses. With the vast majority of courses built around the four skills, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, any in-depth study of vocabulary tends to focus primarily on building vocabulary for comprehension in reading and listening. In fact, I call vocabulary “the Forgotten Skill” for this reason; vocabulary building tends to be relegated to a supporting role in building receptive vocabulary, and is particularly underemphasized, or even absent, for spoken production.

This issue presents itself in an interesting way. Over the years, my students have expressed a persistent lack of vocabulary for speaking even though they rave about how much they improve in other areas. Having circumlocution strategies to express themselves in an alternative way is important to them, but they still feel “they don’t have the words to fully express themselves” or “they have trouble finding the right words or the right way to say something.” These sorts of comments were fairly persistent, and ranged across several different EAP courses. In other words, students seem to want to speak using more accurate or specific vocabulary. However, without explicit instruction, our students tend to stay in a comfortable “simple vocabulary” zone, and most won’t reach for—or be able to reach for—a higher level of vocabulary use on their own.

After corroborating with peers across different programs, I confirmed that this phenomenon reaches beyond my own classroom walls as a common theme in many other EAP classrooms. The general anecdotal evidence was that vocabulary teaching has been insufficient in EAP programs. Now this is only a problem insofar as I wished to fulfill my students’ desire to achieve a certain level of vocabulary use in their speaking. This concern for my students’ perceived lack of skills propelled me to examine my own practice.

Current Vocabulary Practice

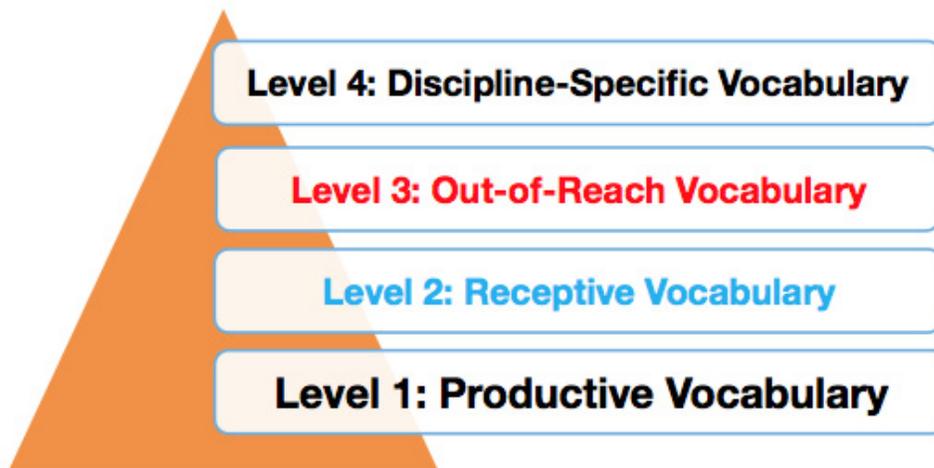
Currently we seem to be doing a couple things right with our vocabulary practice. To begin with, we have moved away from “incidental vocabulary learning” and are teaching vocabulary deliberately. We have heard from industry leaders that “incidental learning of vocabulary is insufficient”, and therefore it is the teacher’s responsibility to deliberately teach vocabulary in the classroom (Ur, 2010). We have also recognized the need to provide our students with words, commonly in the form of word lists, comprised of the words

appearing in the reading or listening content. “Students believe all unknown words to be equally important and have difficulty judging word frequency, and they have also expressed a belief in the need for teacher provided word lists” (McCrostie, 2015, p. 31). By removing the burden of discerning the usefulness of an item, we are directly equipping our students with high-frequency vocabulary. This practice commonly presents itself as the “vocabulary preparation list” which we give our students prior to a reading or listening activity, and is designed to scaffold their reading or listening.

Nevertheless, despite these sound practices, our students are often unable to transfer new vocabulary to their spoken production. This is largely due to the fact that our deliberate use of teacher-provided vocabulary preparation lists focuses on building our students’ receptive vocabularies; we are focused on making them better readers and listeners. While this is a necessary goal, it does not automatically transfer receptive vocabulary to speaking.

The 4 levels of Vocabulary

In order to better understand the connection between receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary, I have arranged vocabulary into 4 levels, or categories. These levels are organized by where words fall on the productive-receptive continuum. It is also a fairly fluid list; words can move between levels, predominantly entering from higher levels and transferring to lower levels.



I will not focus very much on Levels 1 or 4, except to say that Level 1 Productive Vocabulary is what the students are able to use for their own production, or their “Mental Lexicon” (McCarthy, O’Keefe and Walsh, 2010, p. 101). Level 4 words are those we ask students to guess from context, or we simply gloss. Typically, students will delve into this specific vocabulary level more once they enter their fields of study or work.

As I discuss Levels 2 and 3, I will return to those teacher-generated vocabulary preparation lists used to scaffold reading or listening. It is apparent that, in general, the vocabulary on

these lists tends to fall into Level 3: Out-of-Reach Vocabulary. This refers to vocabulary we assume our students have not encountered before, nor know much about; they are just out of their reach. Some examples might include: *mismatch*, *consumption*, *outlays*.

This leaves Level 2 Vocabulary, which I have called the “Receptive Vocabulary”. Unlike Level 3, students have had some exposure to, and may know a few things about these words, (e.g. word form or definition), but they are not yet able to produce. This is because “learners need to know more in order to produce a word than they do in order to recognize it. So, for speaking, learners require greater lexical knowledge than they do for reading” (McCarthy et al, 2010, p. 96). In other words, they can encounter these words in a receptive manner, in reading or listening, and have few problems with them. However, students are not able to readily access them when speaking. Some examples of Level 2 Vocabulary might include: *available*, *potential*, *damage*, *avoid*.

The Problem

Perhaps by now you are already confident of where I am going, but before I make it plain and clear, I would like to go back to my title: vocabulary as the “Forgotten Skill”. I would like to note that, since many of us are aware of the dearth of vocabulary learning happening in our courses, we commonly pay some lip service to vocabulary building by using these vocabulary preparation lists in speaking activities. Who among us has never created discussion questions based on the vocabulary preparation list, usually post-listening or post-reading? We tend to include questions related to the topic, or content, and ultimately end up with such questions as *Do you think the **consumption** of fossil fuels will end within your lifetime?* We think these questions will help expose the students to the vocabulary in authentic use, and ultimately help them to expand their vocabularies. However, the problem here is that we assume new Level 3 words will automatically transfer to Level 1 Productive Vocabulary simply by way of a discussion activity.

The Solution

In essence, our current “lip service” of encouraging students to practice Level 3 Out-of-Reach Vocabulary in speaking exercises is ineffective and counterproductive. Instead we need to shift our focus to the Level 2 Receptive Vocabulary. The focus for developing our students’ spoken vocabulary should be on salient Level 2 words in the same texts we are using in class.

There are two key reasons why we should be focusing on Level 2 words for speaking. Firstly, Level 2 words tend to be higher frequency. These words cross contexts more easily, and students will more readily learn vocabulary when they encounter it more frequently (Webb and Chang, 2015). This leads to the second key reason: because students will likely already have an awareness of some aspects of Level 2 vocabulary, it is much easier for them to make these words productive. This range of words is already somewhat accessible to them as it is part of their receptive vocabulary.

If we shift our focus from the unknown Out-of-Reach Vocabulary for speaking to the familiar words in our students' receptive vocabularies, we can expect to see transfer to their productive vocabularies happen much more readily. This can result in targeted vocabulary building rather than wasted time on hollow vocabulary work with out-of-reach words.

Targeted Vocabulary Building

So what does focusing on Level 2 vocabulary look like in a real classroom context? First, we do not need to do away with the vocabulary preparation list. I suggest keeping it for scaffolding purposes, but after the listening or reading work is done, *we need to focus on an entirely different set of words for speaking practice.*

Consider the following sentence taken from a listening transcript:

These ... collapses are especially likely where there's a **mismatch** between **available** resources and resource **consumption**, or a mismatch between economic **outlays** and economic **potential**. (taken from "Why Societies Collapse": Diamond, 2013)

Firstly, this is quite a complex sentence with even more complex vocabulary, so which words might we include on a preparation list in order to scaffold our students' listening? I have bolded mismatch, consumption, and outlays in red above as likely contenders. Once the listening work is completed, then we typically move to speaking activities with the vocabulary from our list. However, I argue that it is inauthentic to have the students use words such as mismatch, consumption, and outlays in speaking activities since I cannot remember the last time I uttered these words myself.

If we are actively trying to expose students to authentic vocabulary in order to build their spoken vocabularies, then I argue we need to focus on much more frequent words within a given text: words such as available and potential (bolded in blue) in the above text seem much more valuable for production. Since we expect our students to know enough about these words to continue with their listening or reading, we would likely not include them on a vocabulary preparation list; we feel assured that these words do not fall into the Level 3 Out-of-reach category. I can also note that my students are generally not yet able to produce these words; they are in students' Level 2 Receptive Vocabularies. And since I can recall uttering these words myself at some point, then it would stand to reason that these words are more useful for my students, too.

Once you have identified the Level 2 words in a text, I suggest listing them separately from the vocabulary preparation list as follows:

Vocabulary Preparation List
<i>mismatch</i>
<i>consumption</i>
<i>outlays</i>

Targeted Vocabulary List
<i>available</i>
<i>potential</i>

The question then is: how can we incorporate these words into classroom speaking practice that leads students to transfer them to their productive vocabularies?

First, students need to do some exploration of these words to discover what aspects of the words they already know. Then teachers need to create a variety of speaking activities to practice them. These activities can range from individual work to pair work to group work, and from controlled to semi-controlled to free. These Targeted Vocabulary Lists can be—and should be—recycled and reused in different contexts, and added to as new source texts are introduced.

So how long can we expect it to take before students can begin using these words in their own speaking? According to Webb (2007), “learners usually need at least ten meaningful encounters in order to acquire a new item.” This can be daunting, but we can take heart in the fact that vocabulary recycling exercises can span the course of a few weeks, and need not take more than 5–10 minutes of class time.

Conclusion

Any teacher able to control the curriculum or play a role in choosing materials to use for their lessons, is able to re-evaluate their practices around building vocabulary for speaking. Targeted Vocabulary Building can be done in nearly any context. Since teachers are the most familiar with the lexical abilities and needs of their own students, we are the most equipped to discern the nuances between Level 3 and Level 2 vocabulary and determine which words are the best candidates for Targeted Vocabulary Practice.

After implementing Targeted Vocabulary Building in my classes, I noticed that my students not only began to actually use a broader range of vocabulary in their speaking, but they also began to show pride and confidence in their ability to use vocabulary. In fact, some even sought opportunities to use new vocabulary during discussion activities. In essence, they were experiencing improved “classroom interactional competence,” or CIC, and, according to McCarthy, “students who manage to develop CIC have a greater chance of achieving the goal of general interactional competence outside the classroom” (2015).

I believe that, by incorporating Targeted Vocabulary Building in to our curricula, those complaints from students about lack of vocabulary for speaking will all but disappear. The majority of students have a desire to use more words in their speaking, and would prefer not to continue with a limited vocabulary. We can—and should—push them to build their vocabulary at an appropriate level instead of feeding them out-of-reach words for speaking practice.

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Bio



Kerstin Okubo has been an ESL professional for more than 18 years. She began her focus on EAP in 2008, and has been teaching at the University of Toronto for the last five years. Kerstin currently teaches Academic Listening and Speaking with the University of Toronto’s IFP program.

TEACHERS AS DECISION MAKERS

A Theoretical Framework for Future Research

By Kristjan Seferaj, British Council IELTS Canada

Teachers make countless decisions during the planning stage, as the lesson unfolds, and while reflecting on their practices. The role individual teachers' thoughts, beliefs, and decisions play in their practices was a primary focus of research in ELT during the 1990s. A number of studies (see Burns, 1992; Johnson, 1992; Woods, 1996) investigated the decisions teachers make during the interactive phase and identified a number of patterns in teacher decisions. It was, however, soon realized that creating typologies of teacher decision-making processes "can in no way provide a comprehensive characterization of the complex conceptual process of second language teaching" (Johnson, 1992, p. 510). The focus of research, consequently, broadened to better capture the various dimensions of language teacher cognition, including the study of the sociocultural context in which teaching take place.

In this article, I revisit the concept of teachers as decision makers and propose a theoretical framework that can be used to investigate how teachers make pedagogical decisions in their classes. To help readers understand the framework, I first define and examine the nature of individual decision making. Following that, I show how the body of research on individual decision making can be used to develop a theoretical framework to investigate qualitatively the process of teacher decision making. I also use evidence from a classroom-based research study to show that the teacher decision making theoretical framework is a worthwhile framework to use in empirical studies. I conclude with a recommendation for future research in teacher cognition.

The process of Individual Decision Making

From a normative perspective, individual decision making is the process of making a choice from among a set of alternatives based on given criteria or strategies (Wilson & Keil, 2001; Wang et al., 2004; Eisenfuhr, 2011). Drawing on Archer's normative guide (1980) of how to be rational in thinking and deciding, normative theories provide a methodology for assessing decision making by using a list of rationalistic components. The rational model features six phases. Firstly, people are faced with opportunities to make decisions (such as the need to solve a problem). Secondly, decision makers develop alternatives during the processing stage. Once the alternatives are generated, the advantages and disadvantages of each choice are evaluated during phase three. In the next step, a decision

is made after objectively and rationally choosing the best alternative, and comparing the outcome of alternatives with each other. Two other post-decision steps, the output and the review phase, consolidate and evaluate the decision. During the output phase, a number of issues (such as enhancing the understanding of the decision, encouraging acceptance of the decision, providing enough resources, and assigning responsibilities) are taken into consideration to make the alternative succeed. The review phase involves evaluating the outcome of the decision to see whether the desired results have been obtained. If this is not the case, a reassessment of each step involved in the process is conducted to see what went wrong and, if necessary, new decisions are made.

The rational decision-making model does not always describe how people make decisions in real life. Decision makers, in most real life situations, neither possess complete information of the problem with which they are dealing (Simon, 1955; Kahneman & Tversky, 2000), nor have the ability to configure all the relevant alternatives in an unbiased manner (Kahneman & Tversky, 1986; Kahneman, 2011). Nor do they have unlimited time to search for the most appropriate alternative (Simon, 1955; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Kahneman, 2000). In addition, the rational model fails to explain why people do not always exhibit rational behaviours (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982).

To account for these limitations, a number of other models and theories have been developed. The two most known ones are Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) and Bounded Rationality Theory (Simon, 1955). Prospect Theory was developed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979) who studied the real-life behaviour patterns and investigated the relationship among the frames through which decision makers observe the situation and decision outcomes. Framing is a central concept of this theory. It is the phase during which individuals try to figure out what the problem is and what the available choices are. Acceptance and segregation are the two main mental mechanisms used during this process (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). The former refers to people's tendency to accept whatever options are presented to them as viable without second-guessing them. The latter drives people to consider options that seem relevant to the given problem and deprives the consideration of other options that are likely to affect the outcome but are irrelevant to the specific problem at hand. To illustrate this point, Kahneman and Tversky (1982) offer the following example: when people decide how much money to spend to prevent a flu outbreak, the likelihood that the flu might not reach this group of the population at all is not taken into consideration because it is irrelevant to the problem at hand.

Emphasising the impossibility of processing all the information available, rather than the quality of the information available, Bounded Rationality Theory (Simon, 1955) recognises the cognitive limitations present in decision making. The theory claims that people have finite mental abilities to comprehend and analyse all the complete information available when selecting choices. Rationality of individuals can also be influenced by the complexity of the world in which they operate. To cope with the high cognitive demands of the process, the theory assumes that decision makers develop different non-optimising procedures.

Firstly, they limit the number of goals, alternatives, and consequences considered to reduce information-searching and information-processing demands. Secondly, decision makers tend to evaluate alternatives sequentially rather than simultaneously. Constrained by the limited capacity of short-term memory, they operate on a pair-comparison model (i.e., people compare two choices first and select one of them, which, in turn, is compared to another one and so on). Theoretically, this pair-wise comparison process can continue until decision makers find the best alternative. However, in real life, people do not have the unlimited time to wait for the most suitable choice. As a result, decision makers are more concerned with “finding a choice mechanism that will lead them to pursue a ‘satisfying path’” (Simon 1955, p. 115) rather than discovering an optimal path. Lastly, to save mental energy, people often approach decision making heuristically by using rule-of-thumb strategies to find a satisfying decision. These simplified strategies can be used either individually or in conjunction with other techniques. The two most common heuristics used in individual decision making are:

- **Availability.** This is a mental phenomenon, which involves basing judgments on the information that is readily available rather than examining the alternatives. Frequently occurring events are easy to recall and decision makers tend to think of situations or occurrences easily brought to mind as more important than instances of less frequent classes. This heuristic is likely to turn into a cognitive bias when “the ease of recall is influenced by factors unrelated to the actual frequency of an event’s occurrence” (Stroh et al., 2008, p. 95). Kahneman and Tversky (2000) illustrate the concept of availability by giving the following example: if the news has recently reported on several government initiatives to crack down on tax fraud, people are more likely to falsely believe that tax evasion is on the rise due to the availability heuristic.
- **Representativeness.** This refers to decision makers’ tendency to judge the probability of an event by comparing it with previous experiences or beliefs about the event, assuming that the probabilities will be similar. Representativeness can be misleading because it decides how likely something is by evaluating the degree to which an event or object is similar to its parent population. For instance, after reading the sentence “my spouse does not work, but takes care of our two young children at home”, most people would think that the writer is a man because this situation (i.e. the man working and the woman taking care of children at home) reflects their beliefs. The representativeness heuristic can be misleading because people tend to see patterns in truly random sequences (Kahneman & Tversky, 1986), and might ignore important information or alternatives.

Feelings also seem to be related to the process of individual decision making. Schwartz (2000) sees individual decision making as “a close interplay of feeling and thinking”. He argues that feelings influence the type of information people recall from their own memory. Consequently, decision makers in a happy emotional state are more likely to employ prior experiences and thoughts that reflect their current mood as decision parameters, and underestimate the likelihood of negative outcomes. Those in a sad state experience the opposite effect.

The application of individual decision making theories in the field of English language teaching raises a key issue that needs to be taken into consideration when teachers' thoughts, beliefs, and practices are researched. More precisely, current research in teacher cognition aims to gain insights into how a teacher's mind works by uncovering the impact of internal and external social influences on teacher thinking and practices. However, teachers' tacit thinking has generally been ignored within this body of research. As seen above, individuals use a number of heuristics when they make decision. Likewise, teachers' decisions are not always rational. When making pedagogical decisions, teachers select one alternative among many choices. The selection of one alternative can be seen as a conscious process, but the degree of consciousness varies from clearly motivated selections (i.e., decisions based on teachers' beliefs and knowledge, their previous learning and teaching experience, contextual factors, etc.) to unconscious decisions. The concept of using heuristics when making instructional decisions is largely ignored in teacher cognition research, since this discipline mainly emphasises "the active role which teachers play in shaping classroom events" (Borg, 2006:40), rather than teachers' passive thinking and acting.

Teachers' passive thinking, along with the influence of a number internal and external factors on teachers' decisions, is captured within the theoretical framework described below.

A Teacher-Decision-Making Theoretical Framework

This teachers-as-decision-makers framework is based on Prospect Theory and Bounded Rationality Theory. As seen above, Prospect Theory addresses how decisions are framed by decision makers' judgments about the external state of the world. By applying this framework in English language teaching, teachers are viewed as individuals who bring their own understanding of teaching and learning into their classrooms. Teachers' own perspective, situated within the context, culture and domain in which they develop, can shape teachers' thinking (Richards, 2011). Said in other words, the many judgements teachers make about finding the most effective means to support particular learning aims, and/or about the appropriateness of the approaches in which those aims can be achieved, are likely to lead teachers to see classroom routines and problems from a particular angle. Kahneman and Tversky (1982) argue that seeing the same problem through a different lens can result in different decisions.

The three constraints (i.e. limited time, limited capacity, & limited cognitive resources) that bound the rationality of individuals during the process of decision making are central concepts in Bounded Rationality Theory. Teachers, like any other human being, cannot process an unlimited amount of information and have a limited amount of time to make decisions while delivering lessons. To simplify the process, they either consider a limited number of choices or "favour information that confirms their preconceptions or hypotheses regardless of whether the information is true" (Plous, 1993, p. 233).

By integrating the two theories, a framework that can investigate how and why teachers make decisions in their classes can be obtained. This framework views teaching as a mental process of making individual decisions closely related to the collective experience of classroom and school learning in a particular context, at a given time (Kansanen, 1993; Huber, 2003; Kohler et al., 2008; Parmigiani, 2012). It also acknowledges that teacher decision making is a complicated process, not necessarily always rational. Teachers might well use heuristic cues during the process, and their decision making can also be affected by the judgments teachers make.

This teacher-as-decision-maker framework can be used to investigate qualitatively how and why teachers make certain decisions in their classes. A discussion of the findings of an empirical research that used this theoretical framework follows in the next section.

Classroom-based research findings that support the use of tacit knowledge

Seferaj (2014) used a teacher-as-decision-maker theoretical framework to explore how and why EFL teachers make pedagogical decisions in their classes. Four teachers participated in this qualitative research project, namely: Landa, a very experienced teacher with more than twenty years of ELT teaching; Elona, a novice/early career teacher; Ada, a more experienced teacher with hands-on CLT teaching experience; and Evis, a mid-career teacher and teacher-trainer with strong CLT knowledge. All four teachers taught EFL classes in different educational institutions in Albania, and they were each observed teaching four 45-minute classes over a two-year period. Post-lesson interviews, informal discussions, questionnaire on teachers' beliefs, lesson plans, and teachers' reflection on the classes observed were employed to explore the factors that informed the process of decision making.

The findings of the study show that the participating teachers worked, to some extent, within their tacit knowledge. For example, Elona, on a number of occasions, asked her students to individually complete practice and fluency-based textbook activities. By the rationale Elona provided (see Table 1), it is clear that her decision is not based on explicit thinking. (Elona was aware that her students were not interested in learning grammar rules. She also observed that the students were engaged in other things, such as chatting with each other in Albanian, instead of completing the exercise). Rather, this decision seems to have been particularly influenced by Elona's previous learning experiences, which were based on rote learning, memorisation, and drilling practice.

Post observation interview/Informal interview summary formName of Teacher: **Elona**Post-observation interview associate with observation **No. 3**Date/Place/Time: **October, 3rd 2012.**

Other notes to describe the context of informal discussion: **Interview taking place in teachers' room. The observation session took place four hours ago. This is an after school hour interview, so there are only three other teachers in the room.**

Summarise (and, if possible, code) the main issues or themes that struck you during this post-observation interview/informal discussion:

Note 1: *The teacher asked her students to complete several accuracy-based exercises on their own during the class and collected their work afterward (she had done the same thing during the other two classes observed). Instead of completing the exercise(s), the students were chatting in Albanian with each other (the same thing had happened in her previous classes). When asked why she followed this approach (target question prompted from Observation Session 2, dated September 27th), the teacher claimed that she wanted to reinforce her students' grammar knowledge. She added that her students do not really care about grammar rules (this was noticed during the observation session). The teacher continued and said that by correcting the mistakes students were likely to learn the rules. Nevertheless, the teacher never gave any oral feedback during the classes observed. She simply handed out the copybooks to her students who barely opened their copybooks to see the teacher's corrections. How can students learn the rules if they barely pay attention to the feedback/teacher's corrections?*

Analytic memo 1: *Is the teacher trying to justify her decision because she does not know the rationale behind it?*

Table 1: Manifestation of Elona's tacit thinking

Similarly, on many occasions, after being prompted to talk about different approaches to the same activity, Ada offered several ideas she had not considered beforehand. She used a number of phrases (e.g. "I will do this activity like this next time to see how it works; I guess I could have asked them to complete the exercise in their pairs as well; I am not sure why I didn't think of it before.") to indicate that her teaching decisions, rather than being based on a rational multi-step process that involves generating many alternatives

and objectively and rationally choosing the best one (Robbins et al., 2009, p. 124), were guided by her tacit thinking. In the example given in Table 2, it seems as if pair work was the only interaction mode Ada had thought of when planning the lesson. During the post observation interview, when prompted to think about other approaches to do the same activity (a free practice speaking activity), Ada mentioned another approach that was also based on the communicative concept of jigsaw. This might indicate that Ada's tacit thinking (she originally chose the pair interaction, one of the main interaction patterns she was exposed to as a learner, as the only alternative for this speaking activity), as well as her explicit thinking (when asked to think of other approaches, she mentioned another communicative teaching approach based on the jigsaw process), are strongly influenced by her previous learning experiences at a private English language school where she had been exposed to a great number of pair activities.

Post observation interview/Informal interview summary form

Name of Teacher: **Ada**

Post-observation interview associate with observation **No. 4**

Date/Place/Time: **November, 6th 2013.**

Other notes to describe the context of informal discussion: **Interview taking place in the classroom, during the lunch recess, following the observation session.**

Summarise (and, if possible, code) the main issues or themes that struck you during this post-observation interview/informal discussion:

Note 1: *The teacher says "I could have also asked my students to do this activity as a jigsaw puzzle".*

Analytic memo 1: *It does not seem as if the teacher has carefully considered all options of how to ask her students to complete this activity. Now that the teacher is thinking about the options, it strikes me that she is mentioning only communicative approaches, based on the jig-saw principle. Why? Can it be that the teacher consciously or subconsciously thinks that all speaking activities need to be approached communicatively? What's the role of the textbook here? How do her own learning experiences influence her thinking?*

Table 2: Manifestation of Ada's tacit thinking

Landa explained a number of her classroom decisions by linking her actions to her feelings, rather than to her rational thoughts. On a number of occasions, she claimed that she knows

when she is doing good teaching, and this has very little to do with the textbook. When asked directly to describe how or what she knows, she replied, “difficult to explain. Good teaching is something I feel, and makes me happy.” Likewise, Evis often used her personal practical knowledge when she made decisions about teaching in her classrooms.

The data from the present project also suggest that there might be a relationship between the avoidance of certain teaching behaviours and teachers’ negative experiences related to those teaching behaviours. Elona and Evis both believed that it was “fairly important” or “extremely important” to engage students in activities conducted in pairs or groups. Yet, they offered few opportunities to their students to work in pairs or groups in their classes. Both teachers revealed that they had had past negative teaching experiences with pair or group work. Landa made the same assertion. Teachers’ past negative teaching experiences may thus explain why the three teachers avoided this kind of interaction in their classes. It can be that teachers form judgements about the teaching behaviour associated with their negative past teaching experiences. According to Pijl and Foster (2005), heuristics play an important role in selecting and integrating information into a judgement. Likewise, heuristics might play an important role in removing alternatives that are judged as “negative” outcomes during the selection process.

Therefore, this study’s findings support the view that teachers do much more than act rationally in their classes.

Conclusion and Recommendation for future research

Traditionally, teacher cognition has acknowledged and explored teachers’ active thinking and acting. However, there are a number of empirical studies that have found that teachers’ tacit thinking also influences what teachers do in their classes. (Brown & McIntyre, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Putnam & Borke, 2000; Hodgen, 2011; Seferaj, 2014). This finding lends support for a continual exploration of teachers’ tacit knowledge in the field of teacher cognition.

Future research in teacher cognition should broaden the way teacher thinking is conceptualised to include both rational and tacit thinking. To explicate knowledge about what teachers do in their classes, future researchers need to develop a clear operational definition for the category of tacit knowledge, and conduct numerous formal and informal discussions with the participating teachers to uncover the cognitive processes they use.

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Bio



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VIVA LA LINGUA FRANCA

Teach Them to Learn and They Will Think For a Lifetime

By Eufemia Fantetti

My father had a teacher who rode a motorcycle and carried a gun. This was in post-war southern Italy. The man was effortlessly cool; he came from San Giuliano di Puglia to instruct the village kids in Bonefro. The value of the lira was destroyed, so the pistol was necessary protection.

“Holy” I exhaled the first time I heard about this guy.

“You met him once,” my father said. “The teacher we met when I took you to my old school, the old man we saw walking with a cane.” The decrepit school space was an empty outdoor corridor, and the elderly fellow had been out for a stroll when he and my father greeted each other like old friends. I was eleven, and I stood quietly beside my father during the surprise reunion—trying not to speak with my vulgar dialect accent, hoping I didn’t bring shame on my entire family. (This may sound heavy-handed, but when I showed up in the village it was like living under a magnifying glass, everyone watching every single thing I said and did because “*L’Americana*” walking through the Piazza Municipio is what counts as entertainment when people are deprived of television sets.) My father was a bright student and good kid, adored by all his instructors. I was just beginning to feel the weight of his truncated education against my endless opportunities.

In contrast, I had a teacher who rode a motorcycle and wore his hair long but he wasn’t cool. He had been, in a different decade, but he was having trouble letting go of the Hippie Heyday. In one memorable class, he sat down and said the world was flat and we had to prove him wrong. We argued it was round, and he asked what proof we had. Perhaps we’d seen an image of earth taken from a satellite but how could we trust it was true if we hadn’t seen the planet from space, with our own eyes? We were fifteen, and some students started debating on the same side as our instructor. They thought the class was awesome. I did not. I found it to be frustrating and a waste of time. At the end when he told us to “question everything we knew and how we had come to know it, my opinion didn’t change. I was thankful I didn’t live in a home where parents asked, “What did you learn today?” like they did in some sitcom families because arguing against conventional wisdom wasn’t going to fly over at Casa Fantetti. I would have been enrolled in a Catholic school faster than my father could cleave poultry into parts.

Perhaps Mr. Trapped-in-Woodstock was simply doing what Einstein said he did, not teaching but providing students the conditions in which they could attempt to learn.

Recently, at the end of a lacklustre day in front of a class, I asked my dad what he thought made a great teacher. He brought up his teacher, Aurelio di Pietro, a man who wasn't afraid to grab the ring-leader in a group of troublemakers and smack him around a bit.

"Oh for the love of God," I said. "People don't walk around hitting each other in a civilized society – either to make a point or to keep order and discipline."

"I know," said my father, miffed. "Let me be finish...What's question?"

"What qualities do you think make an excellent teacher?"

"How should I know? I never do what you do for work."

"But you trained people, on the job, in two countries."

I could hear my father smiling over the phone. He could have been a teacher, a philosopher, or his dream-goal, an engineer, but he became a wise butcher instead, putting filet mignon on the table for his entire extended family. No small feat for a man who grew up hungry and malnourished.

"You should be treats everybody with respect. Be humbles. Do the job and let them see you do the trick."

"What trick? We're still talking about teaching, not being a magician."

"Every job has a trick. Show the peoples how they can be do. Tell them, 'I do like this because easier, little bit faster and maybe better too but you can choose for you what you likes'. And then help them when they make a mistake."

I wrote it down as I chewed on my lower lip.

"Be patience. You just starting and takes time to be good at something, before you cans be great or having excellence."

"I would listen except I'm sure I inherited my perfection-is-attainable, excellence—before-rest attitude from you. Plus the nose. I'm not happy about either, by the way."

My dad laughed.

After I hung up, I thought about his teacher back in Bonefro and how happy they were to see each other after 20 plus years. I thought about the ESL student I ran into on the subway months after I'd taught her class, (we both jumped up to say hello when we spotted each other) and the students I run into in the hallways and elevators these days (more smiles than blank stares). If they're still happy to see me in twenty years, I'll be thrilled. And they might be too, once I figure out that tricky part.