## The Conference Issue

English for Academic Purposes in Ontario: Results from an exploratory survey **PLUS** WebSafe: Tools for newcomers to counter digital disinformation **AND MORE...**

TESL Ontario

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# Calendar of Events

| April | May | June |
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| April 9 — Kids, Books, & Anti-Racism Series with Sonja Cherry-Paul | May 16 — Mental Health, Self-care, and Teacher Wellness – a Panel Discussion | June 5 — 7th International Hybrid Conference on Second Language Studies (ICSLS-2021) |
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| April 28 — Get it Write. Successfully Teaching and Assessing Writing Online – Part 2: College and University | May 27—TESOL Colombia IV "Reinventing ELT practices to meet the needs of the New Normal" | June 10-11 — NFEAP 2021: STAGES |
|  | May 28 — CEAPA - BALEAP 2021 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE | June 17-19 — CILEX 2021 |
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# Editor's Note

Hello and welcome to another issue of *Contact*. Our March issue includes articles from presenters from TESL Ontario's first fully virtual annual conference that took place in November 2020. Titled *Resilience: Renvisioning Language Education Together*, the conference brought together hundreds of educators, presenters and attendees alike, to present on, listen, and discuss a changing time in English language education. Some of those topics are presented here (and will also be presented in the summer issue). As we have adjusted to one year of virtual language teaching, I am sure we have all seen a change and maybe even a welcomed disruption to our careers and livelihoods. As we anticipate the next TESL Ontario conference in November 2021, I think we will see even more innovative techniques for surviving and thriving in an online teaching and learning environment.

*Contact* wishes to thank the 2020 presenters that have contributed to this issue. It is demonstratedly possible to turn our spoken word into writing and serve just as much punch. Similar to the 2020 conference issue, this issue too, will spread over two issues—the summer 2021 issue will boast more of the 2020 conference and its presenters.

In this issue, James Corcoran and Julia Williams explore the fascinating results of their EAP survey to better understand EAP programs and the educators within them. Justine Light and Meagan Auer discuss WebSafe—learning resources that help address the knowledge and skills gaps of newcomers to Canada (especially digital disinformation). Jill Cummings, Matthias Sturm, Geoff Lawrence, Augusta Avram, and Rob McBride, a dynamic quintet, examine the challenges and opportunities in teaching through experiences within a LINC context as a result of the pandemic. Additionally, Shayne Fogle, Alanna Carter, and Shereen Seoudi, Ryerson University instructors, explain 2 assignments that they have implemented in the classroom to help students continue learning English, engage with technology, and connect with the outside world. Tara Al-Hadithy reviews mobile assisted language learning (MALL) in relation to academic writing and EAP. Finally, Stephen Roney provides an extensive list of online tools that can be used n the classroom to help expand your students' vocabulary.

Thank you for reading. Take care.

-Nicola Carozza
editor@teslontario.org

# CONTACT

*Contact* is published three times a year (March, August, and November) by TESL Ontario. March is our conference issue. It is published for the members of TESL Ontario and is available free online to anyone.

*Contact* welcomes articles of general interest to association members, including announcements, reports, articles, and calls for papers.

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# English for Academic Purposes in Ontario: Results from an exploratory survey

**By James Corcoran, York University, & Julia Williams, Renison University College**

## Abstract

The on-going "internationalization" of Canadian post-secondary institutions has resulted in significant demographic changes in these institutions' student bodies, creating a need for more effective support of students using English as an additional language both during these students' transitions to university and during their degree programs. Currently this type of support is offered across a wide range of contexts in Canadian institutions of higher education, often embedded in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs. Given the increasing demand for EAP, investigation of the features of existing programs and the experiences of EAP practitioners is necessary for improving equity and efficacy within the field. The following article provides initial results from a recent Canada-wide survey aimed at better understanding Canadian EAP programs and the practitioners working therein, with a specific focus on the Ontario context.

Keywords/Phrases: *English for academic purposes; English as a second language; higher education; internationalization; Canadian EAP survey research*

## Introduction

Categorized as a sub-disciplinary area within English for Specific Purposes (Anthony, 2018), English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a "specialist, theory- and research-informed branch of English language and literacy education" (Ding & Bruce, 2017, p. 53). Though there is ongoing debate among scholars whether

EAP is indeed a distinct field of research rather than simply a specialized branch of English language teaching (Charles, 2013; Hyland, 2018), a growing body of empirical work implies the former (see Hyland, 2021). However, despite a global uptick in EAP research (Ding & Bruce, 2017; Hyland & Wong, 2019), and the increasing internationalization of Canadian post-secondary institutions (MacDonald, 2016; McKenzie, 2018), there is still relatively little understanding of EAP programs and practitioners across Canada. How many practitioners work in the area of EAP? Where are EAP programs located? What program models are most common? What are the professional profiles of EAP practitioners? What is the professional satisfaction of EAP practitioners working in post-secondary institutions?

Our mixed-methods, multi-phase research project explores the breadth and depth of Canadian EAP programming, responding to recent calls for greater research in this burgeoning field (Galante et al., 2020; Huang, 2018; Van Viegen & Zappa-Hollman, 2019). In this article, we present data from the first phase of this research project—a Canada-wide survey of EAP directors and instructors across three types of institutions and five geographical regions—and highlight salient findings with respect to EAP in Ontario.

## The study: Context, participants, data collection and analysis

The first phase of our mixed methods investigation surveyed EAP practitioners across Canada regarding their programs of instruction, educational backgrounds, employment status, and job satisfaction levels. In the fall of 2019, we recruited participants via official messages posted on national (TESL Canada; Languages Canada) and provincial (e.g., TESL Ontario) TESL organization listservs, and via emails sent to EAP program administrators across Canadian universities, colleges, and language institutes. We received responses from 481 EAP practitioners[1] (75% Instructors; 25% Directors), 53% of whom work in Ontario. Survey respondents were affiliated with three different types of institutions and worked across five different Canadian regions (see Table 1). Following data collection, we analyzed the survey responses, identifying similarities and differences among the programs and practitioners based on role (director vs. instructor), institutional affiliation (university vs. college vs. private English language institute), and region (B.C. vs. Prairies vs. Ontario vs. Quebec vs. Atlantic).

## Table 1: Survey respondents

|  | University | College | Private ELI | Population % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| British Columbia | 36 | 31 | 11 | 18 |
| Prairies | 36 | 27 | 15 | 18 |
| **Ontario** | **83** | **119** | **30** | **53** |
| Quebec | 6 | 3 | 5 | 3 |
| Atlantic | 23 | 7 | 8 | 9 |

1       We estimate an approximate 25% response rate based on a combination of public-facing data (e.g., EAP program websites) and survey responses, putting the total Canadian EAP practitioner population at 1,933, and the Ontario EAP population at 1,037.

# Survey results

In the following sub-sections, we outline the survey findings most salient to this Ontario readership, answering our three research questions: (1) Where, how, and by whom is EAP programming delivered across Canadian post-secondary contexts? (2) What are the profiles of practitioners working in EAP contexts? (3) What are the levels of professional satisfaction among EAP practitioners?

## Canadian EAP programs

One of the more salient findings from the survey is the diversity of Canadian EAP programs and practitioners, from the plethora of public-facing names describing these programs (e.g., English for academic purposes, English as a second language, Academic English), to where EAP programs were "housed" on post-secondary campuses (e.g., English; Applied Linguistics; Education; International Education), to the reported cultural and linguistic diversity of practitioners and students. Ontario EAP programs and practitioners were particularly diverse in their profiles. In Ontario, respondents hailed from 88 programs across 20 universities, 24 colleges, and 13 private English language institutes/schools. Ontario-based programs ranged in size from fewer than 100 students (e.g., Cambrian College; Stafford House International) to more than 1000 students (e.g., Carleton University; Renison University College, University of Waterloo; York University; Centennial College; Conestoga College). Overall, Ontario EAP programs trend large, accounting for eight of the fourteen "supersized" (over 1000 students) EAP programs in the country. Ontario-based EAP programs also diverged in terms of model, with a plurality of institutions containing multiple types (e.g., English for academic purposes "pre-sessional" certificate programs; content and language integrated "bridging" programs; "sheltered" credit-bearing EAP courses; etc.). Of the programs surveyed, 58% identified as falling under the "credit-bearing" category, with 74% of Universities, 61% of Colleges, and 7% of English language institutes suggesting that at least some sort of post-secondary credit was available to students enrolled in their EAP programs. Finally, students at Ontario EAP programs also displayed the highest levels of linguistic and cultural diversity relative to other Canadian regions, with the six most prevalent first languages being Mandarin (44%), Arabic (9%), Korean (8%), Cantonese (5%), Spanish (4%), and Punjabi (4%). These descriptive survey data are potentially useful to EAP researchers and/or administrators managing EAP program planning. However, it is clear from our results that to accurately capture and respond to EAP program nuances, additional investigation of similarities and differences at a more granular level is essential. The second phase of our research will provide this detail via more in-depth interviews and examination of specific programs. We also contend that EAP research in Canada would benefit greatly from additional comparative, institutional, and program case studies.

## Practitioner profiles

Other noteworthy findings from this survey were the median range of respondents' post-secondary teaching experience (6–10 years), and the number of respondents who claimed to have more than 16 years' experience (40%). Practitioners working at colleges and universities tended to have more experience, with those working at ELIs reporting more international language teaching experience. With respect to educational background, all practitioners had at minimum an undergraduate degree and more than two-thirds had a graduate degree, including 79% of those working at universities, 67% of those working at colleges, and 53% of those working at private English language institutes. Directors were slightly more likely to have a graduate degree (81%) than instructors (68%). Unsurprisingly, the primary disciplinary backgrounds of EAP practitioners were the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education (89%). Only a small number of respondents reported having an undergraduate degree (11%) or graduate degree (1.5%) in Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math (STEM) disciplines. With respect to language teaching certification, 47% received certification from a provincial TESL association, 34% from a national TESL association, and 19% from a private/international TESL association. Linguistic backgrounds of EAP practitioners were diverse across Canada, with certain regions skewing more native English speaker (NES)-dominant than others. NES numbers were highest in Atlantic Canada and the Prairies, while Ontario was the most linguistically-diverse region, with 66% of practitioners identifying as native English speakers, 23% as non-native English speakers, and 11% identifying as "both or neither." The most common "other" first languages among practitioners in Ontario were French, Spanish, German, and Japanese.

EAP practitioners across Canada reported only 59% full-time employment. Part-time-employed EAP practitioners reported balancing multiple jobs simultaneously, both within and outside the field. Among practitioners, EAP directors reported high levels of job security, with 89% reporting full-time employment, 80% reporting permanent contract status, and 96% reporting full-year employment. In contrast, instructors reported 50% full-time employment, 56% permanent contract status, and 57% full-year employment. In Ontario, this difference was accentuated; the province has the highest rate of part-time, temporary contract, and partial-year employment of any region in the country. Though our survey data with respect to EAP practitioner backgrounds and employment status are potentially informative for a range of EAP stakeholders, more data is needed on instructor workloads, especially with respect to those practitioners who are working in more precarious situations (i.e., those with part-time, temporary, or partial-year contracts) across institutional contexts.

### Practitioner satisfaction & legitimacy

To better understand Canadian EAP practitioners' sense of professional satisfaction and legitimacy, we created a "satisfaction" scale, based on responses to eight Likert-scale questions, accompanied by an open-ended space for qualitative responses. Salient findings include significant differences in mean satisfaction scores between i) directors and instructors; ii) those employed full-time vs. part-time; and iii) those working at colleges/universities vs. at private English language institutes. In the qualitative data, directors and instructors from across institutions highlighted various areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (see Table 2). Many practitioners highlighted their professional satisfaction with respect to the impact of their respective EAP programming on students and the institution: "English for Academic Purposes continues to be a very fulfilling area to work in. Faculty (at least in my experience) are highly engaged in student learning and collaboratively look for opportunities to improve the program (curriculum and student experience)" (Anonymous EAP Program Director). From the qualitative responses provided by practitioners—and in line with the quantitative data—much of the reported professional dissatisfaction appears to be correlated to employment precarity. As one anonymous EAP instructor explained: "I am not satisfied with the precariousness of contract teaching. After some time, it does take a toll on my mental health. With no job security, I have come to view my role as a job rather than a career. It's disappointing". EAP instructor dissatisfaction—particularly from those working part-time—is a potentially important finding with employment equity implications that requires greater elucidation through ethnographic investigation. Our survey findings support previous research in Ontario ELT (e.g., Valeo & Faez, 2013) and EAP in other Canadian locales (e.g., Breshears, 2019) with respect to the precarious working conditions of many in the sector.

## Table 2: Professional satisfaction and dissatisfaction

|  | Instructors | Directors |
|---|---|---|
| **Satisfaction** | • Engagement and interaction with students <br> • Autonomy <br> • Intra-program respect | • Employment stability <br> • Program impact <br> • Program growth and innovation |
| **Dissatisfaction** | • Employment precarity <br> • Poor remuneration and benefits <br> • Student lack of motivation | • Lack of respect for EAP within institution <br> • Workload <br> • Sector / program instability |

# Discussion, limitations, and future avenues

The first phase of this research project has yielded survey results that point to a diverse set of Canadian EAP programs across three major institutional post-secondary contexts. Based on survey results, Ontario is the region with the largest, most diverse set of programs and practitioners. However, our charting of the breadth and depth of EAP programs—while potentially instructional for EAP researchers, administrators, and practitioners—is far from definitive, and raises as many questions as it answers. Despite our best efforts, questions remain regarding EAP program structures, approaches, and impact, as well as EAP practitioners' lived experiences. Importantly, our survey is only the first of a two-part study, with the second phase seeking to highlight some of the more common EAP program models via qualitative interviews with purposefully selected EAP practitioners from across the three types of institutions. Ultimately, more research is necessary across regional and institutional contexts in order to paint a complete picture of this area of post-secondary language support.

With respect to better understanding EAP practitioner populations across Canada and in Ontario, our survey has outlined the extensive professional experience and the cultural and linguistic diversity of this under-researched cadre of language support professionals. In addition, survey results point to segregated levels of satisfaction between directors and instructors, and those working in private ELIs versus colleges and universities. Although Ontario, along with British Columbia, reports the highest level of overall satisfaction across regions, qualitative data pointing to employment precarity and related dissatisfaction among EAP instructors is concerning. We aim to provide greater levels of clarity as to the divide in satisfaction between those with different professional roles, as well as those working in different sectors, via interviews in Phase II of this research project.

Ultimately, despite some clear limitations (e.g., lack of elucidation on practitioner workloads; unorthodox identification of total practitioner population; lack of data on gender identification; low response rate from Quebec-based EAP practitioners), the survey phase of our project has yielded a useful baseline for subsequent data collection in our efforts to better understand the EAP sector in Ontario and across Canada. As neoliberal institutions of higher education continue to court increasing numbers of international students using English as an additional language, more research on EAP practitioners' perspectives and experiences is crucial. Better understanding of the lived experiences of EAP professionals—including how they navigate precarious professional waters—may not only add to the growing body of work in this area, but potentially lead to improved employment conditions for EAP practitioners working in Ontario and across Canada.

## Acknowledgements

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Julia Williams is an experienced EAP instructor with over 30 years of teaching in second language contexts. She is the author of *LEAP Reading and Writing*, levels 3 and 4 (published by Pearson), and the Director of English Language Studies at Renison University College, University of Waterloo. She is interested in how EAP programs are structured in academic contexts.

# WebSafe: Tools for newcomers to counter digital disinformation

**By Justine Light, NorQuest College, & Meagan Auer, NorQuest College**

## Abstract

WebSafe is a set of learning resources, organized by units and modules into a comprehensive course which aims to address the knowledge and skills gaps faced by some newcomers to Canada in dealing with digital disinformation. The development of the WebSafe course was part of a wider project which included an extensive community consultation to determine the impact of digital disinformation on newcomer ELLs in Alberta. This community consultation, along with a comprehensive literature review, focused the development of the materials. It provided a foundation for developing course content, strategies, and all of the first-hand accounts used to bring the impact of digital disinformation to life. The WebSafe course was then piloted with several hundred students and adjustments made as a result of teacher and learner feedback. In this paper, we will share how the results of the community consultation undertaken expanded our understanding of what knowledge and skills gaps may exist for newcomer ELLS who encounter digital disinformation, as well as how these findings informed the development of the WebSafe materials. Moreover, we will describe the extensive collaboration which ensured that skills and expertise from across the College combined to provide accurate and effective information for learners. Examples of the WebSafe course will also be described and information about how to access this open educational resource (OER) will be detailed.

The WebSafe course is organized into three nine-hour modules to form a comprehensive online resource which aims to equip and empower newcomers to Canada to respond to digital disinformation. Digital disinformation is defined as false information intended to harm those who receive it. It can include phishing, scams, fraud, fake news, and other threats to individual and social well-being (Lee, 2018). The course has been designed for high flex learning contexts and can be used entirely independently by learners in an online, anytime format. It can also be integrated into a synchronous/asynchronous course or blended learning context. The materials aim to develop knowledge about digital disinformation for newcomers who are adult English language learners (ELLs), and to empower them to support family, friends, and community members in dealing with online threats.

## Why is WebSafe needed?

Newcomers are uniquely targeted through the use of digital disinformation by those looking to take advantage of their desire to settle. They may experience greater difficulty protecting themselves since many may not have the English language skills, digital literacy skills, and cultural knowledge needed to recognize and respond to fraudulent information. While this issue is widely recognized, there is a notable knowledge gap at the nexus of digital disinformation and newcomer settlement. In other words, very little is known about how digital disinformation impacts the experiences of newcomer ELLs in the settlement process, and about the knowledge, skills, and strategies that newcomers need to stay safe.

In order to develop appropriate educational resources for newcomer ELLs, WebSafe conducted an extensive literature review and robust community consultation with over 500 newcomer ELLs and service provider organizations (SPOs) in the Edmonton region of Alberta. The consultation filled knowledge gaps by establishing an understanding of newcomer ELLs' information seeking and consumption habits; perceived ability to recognize digital disinformation; lived experience and impact of digital disinformation; current ways of responding to the issue of digital disinformation; and ideas about the knowledge, skills, and strategies needed to address this issue.

The results of the consultation, supported by the literature review, helped to guide the development of the WebSafe course. Results showed that knowledge needed to be developed about what digital disinformation is, about the types that newcomer ELLs most often encounter, and about Canadian culture and government processes. For instance, newcomers need to know what kind of communication can be expected from prospective employers and government agencies. Skills needed to address the issue ranged from critical thinking, to prevention and reporting. For instance, community conveyed the importance of how to evaluate the content and format of emails and ads, as well as how to put digital security measures in place. The community consultation also encouraged the development of a versatile curriculum that built confidence,

encouraged community leadership, and took seriously the mental health impacts of digital disinformation. Results from the consultation suggested that it would be vital to supplement curriculum with ongoing English language training and foundational skills development in information and communications technology (ICT), and to ensure that curriculum reflected the everyday experiences of newcomer ELLs. Having applied these learnings to curriculum development, the WebSafe course is deeply situated in the lived experiences and unique needs of newcomer ELLs.

## What knowledge and skills are needed?

### Course organization:

### Overview

WebSafe is a modular, online course for newcomer ELLs to support the development of their knowledge about digital disinformation and to empower them to support family, friends, and community members in dealing with online threats, such as scams, fraud, and misinformation. The course is made up of three modules, each made up of three units. The topics for the modules are:

**Module 1**: Email scams which addresses when scammers contact individuals via email or messenger apps.

**Module 2**: Website disinformation where the focus is on how being online can lead to encounters with digital disinformation and scams

**Module 3**: Your digital life which focuses on how to safeguard activity online and understanding how government processes in Canada work, to support learners in being able to distinguish between scams and legitimate government communications.

The course was designed to be used independently by learners at a Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) level four, so it included clear navigation and supportive how-to-videos for accessing different aspects of the online learning tools. Additional activities, at higher levels, CLB 5-6-7, were included to expand the numbers of learners for whom the materials would be relevant and interesting. Although the resources are organized in a modular way, each unit can be parsed out and used individually, should a teacher or a learner identify a particular area of interest or concern. It is expected that each unit could take 3-5 hours for a learner to complete. Of course, this depends on how the materials are used, the language levels of the learners and whether or not additional activities are integrated into a unit.

# Narrative description by module

The learning resources which make up the WebSafe course are organized into the following units:

| Module 1: Email scams | Module 2: Website disinformation | Module 3: Your digital life |
|---|---|---|
| • Email scams<br>• Phishing scams<br>• Common scams in Canada | • Social media & false news<br>• Online shopping<br>• Job website scams | • Safeguards online<br>• Digging into disinformation<br>• GC processes |

## Module One: Email scams

Module One acts as an introductory module which begins to explore the concept of digital disinformation, and more specifically, what scams are, who perpetrates them, and why. For a learner or teacher at the CLB 4 level, there are many resources included that can make these abstract concepts and vocabulary more comprehensible. The focus of module one is the range of digital disinformation and scams which target internet users through their email accounts or messaging apps. The unit focuses specifically on scams which have been reported commonly in Canada. Included in this module are first-person accounts which describe real life scams encountered by some participants in the stakeholder consultation, including Facebook messaging scams, scam communications appearing to be from the Government of Canada, and scam offers received by messaging apps or email.

## Module Two: Website disinformation

Module Two expands the notion of digital disinformation beyond scams that target users through email or messaging, to the types of digital disinformation more broadly encountered by anyone spending time online. It begins with an examination of digital disinformation encountered through social media websites, such as Facebook and Instagram. In addition to introducing the fundamentals of how these sites work and how they organize and present information to learners, the unit considers items such as filter bubbles, clickbait, bots, and influencers. Module Two, unit two looks more closely at merchandising scams online, such as Kijiji or Facebook marketplace, as well as larger merchandisers like Amazon. In the final unit, job websites are discussed as potential sources of digital disinformation. In this unit, resources support skill development in determining how to protect oneself from fraudulent job ads, while still utilizing the power of the internet in employment searches.

## Module Three: Your digital life

Module Three builds on the first two modules, by exploring concrete steps learners can take to protect themselves from digital disinformation when online. The first unit looks at the tools newcomer ELLs can

use, including bookmarks, strong password creation, and safe use of public Wi-Fi to reduce vulnerability to online scams. In unit two, the resources take a critical view of online information and strategies for determining the veracity of online information presented. Finally, the module ends with an overview of how the Government of Canada engages with citizens online and how to report digital disinformation. The mental health impacts of digital disinformation are also discussed.

## Types of learning activities

The WebSafe modules incorporate a wide range of learning activities, initially selected as representing best practices for online, anytime learning. The courses utilize a white-space design, and all written text is supported by audio which learners can opt to play as they read. Short animations, longer slide presentations, and interactive activities build motivation, engagement, and scaffold learners through the course materials. Much of the vocabulary for learning about digital disinformation is abstract and technical; however, without using this vocabulary, it is challenging to fully get to grips with the content. Each unit begins with a short vocabulary presentation, using matching activities and includes a paragraph level text for higher level learners to see words in context. Interactive audio enables learners to see each word and hear its pronunciation. Throughout the course, video and animated presentations are accompanied by flip card, categorizing, matching and true/false activities to allow learners to deepen their understanding of the concepts introduced and check their comprehension. Each unit ends with a deeper reflection activity that ties together all of the learning outcomes for the unit. An online glossary is included with the course and enables learners to click on a highlighted word to see its definition. Engaging videos use individual case study accounts of digital disinformation experiences to contextualize the information in familiar first-person language. This ensures the complex content is straightforward enough to comprehend and relatable to newcomer learners' own experiences. One critical theme which is woven throughout the modules is empowerment. The purpose of WebSafe is to spread the knowledge and skills to counter digital disinformation beyond just the ELLs who take the course. Throughout the course, there is an emphasis in the videos and activities on giving advice and explaining scams and other online threats to family, friends, and other community members. This philosophy of empowerment transcends the topics of specific units aiming to build confidence in learners that cannot only recognize digital disinformation but that can respond appropriately.

## How units can be integrated into teaching plans

WebSafe has been designed to be used as a course containing nine units, or simply as one single unit that stands alone. Having said that, the units probably work most cohesively when taught as part of a module. This is because themes and vocabulary are recycled across those three units, and in this way, they scaffold

language learning and develop understanding of the content more deeply. Because the learning resources were designed to be used independently by learners, they are easily integrated into a flexible learning context. Parts of a unit could be assigned as independent study, with certain videos or areas of content used for a longer class time consideration, whether this happens during face-to-face class time or synchronous online learning time. Moreover, it may be worth considering using individual units from different modules together, where the content makes this logical. For example, Module two, unit one considers Social Media, while Module three, unit two develops critical thinking skills and technical skills to dig into disinformation and determine the veracity of online information. Similarly, Module 1 unit 3 is about job scams, such as an email promising a mystery shopper job, and Module 2 unit 3 considers scams on job websites like Indeed and LinkedIn. The units and modules were designed for accessibility and flexibility for learners and teachers alike.

## How to access WebSafe & additional teacher resources

All of the resources which make up the WebSafe course are open-educational resources, freely available to use and adapt to any educational context in Canada. They can be accessed by teachers and learners, with no registration, at the NorQuest College website. You are welcome to use them in class with learners or to send learners directly to the website. Moreover, if you contact NorQuest College via websafe@norquest.ca, we can share Scorm packages which can be directly inserted into your LMS. In addition to the modules, the website has teacher resources, including an Implementation Guide, a needs assessment tool, language extension activities, and PBLA Sample Tasks.

### Instructor guide

The Instructor Guide is intended to support teachers who want to integrate the WebSafe resources into their classroom context. It contains all the learning objectives, and it details the course organization. It is designed to be a useful reference guide as it contains all of the language resources and activities at a glance and also has a glossary reference list. Quizlet sets have been created for each unit and are public. The link to the Quizlet sets is included in the glossary master list in this Guide. All of the videos in the course are posted on YouTube and can be accessed directly external to the course itself. Links to these videos can be found in the Instructor Guide as well as transcripts to enable closer analysis of language and preparation of scaffolding language activities. The Instructor Guide also contains links to additional resources and information about online security.

### Needs assessment tool

For instructors who may feel that analysing and selecting the content in the entire 27-hour course is overwhelming, there is also a needs assessment tool on the website. This tool can identify which particular units may be of most benefit and interest to a specific cohort of learners.

### Language extension activities & PBLA sample tasks

The learning resources and activities in the WebSafe course are intended primarily as a settlement resource, providing essential information for responding to digital disinformation. While opportunities to learn new vocabulary and practice listening skills are integral to the resources, there are no explicit language learning activities. In the Language Extension guide, sample extension activities that integrate language teaching and learning into the WebSafe resources are included. These activities are not lesson plans, and do not include a full explanation of each topic or grammatical concept, nor the necessary scaffolding learners may need to accomplish that activity. These are intended to provide examples of how the integration of language instruction can be achieved in a seamless way. There are nine language extension activities included in the Guide as samples of how the resources can be easily adapted for integration into the language classroom, whether in-person or virtual.

In order to support the integration of these materials into LINC teaching contexts, we have included a number of teacher-created PBLA assessment tasks, as examples. All of these resources can be found at the website above.

## Conclusion

We welcome feedback on your experience using WebSafe with your learners, as well as updates on any broken links or questions you may have. You can contact the WebSafe team at websafe@norquest.ca.

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# Teaching in COVID-19 Times: Challenges, innovations, solutions, and opportunities

By Jill Cummings, Yorkville University; Matthias Sturm, Simon Fraser University, Avenue - LearnIT2teach Project; Geoff Lawrence, York University; Augusta Avram, Burnaby District School Board; & Rob McBride, New Language Solutions

## Abstract

Based on the research we presented at the TESL Ontario Conference in November 2020, we examine here the challenges, innovations, solutions, and opportunities in education that have grown out of the sudden disruption and constraints due to COVID-19. We first set the background in a global context; then report on the impact, challenges, and needs in LINC programs in Canada. We then discuss an in-depth case study of a LINC educator's experiences based on her own teaching and teacher development work during this time. We conclude by discussing lessons learned from these COVID-19 experiences and recommend ways forward.

All settlement language training professionals were caught by surprise by the pandemic in mid-March 2020. Almost all Canadian classes for adult newcomers were suspended, and students already dealing with adjustment to the language and cultures of their new homes faced isolation at home and with remote learning. Most, but not all, teachers were caught unprepared. Some teachers already employed a blended learning strategy in their in-person instruction, and their learners had been oriented to applying technology in their learning. But many teachers had previously made minimal use of information technology in their practice. A subset of this second group was teachers who personally had limited skills with information technology. But all teachers were facing the challenge of pivoting teaching and learning to fully online remote delivery.

The challenges extended beyond teachers and learners to administrators and funders. The whole sector was struggling to understand better practices in online delivery, and many found themselves scrambling for the

technology applications, devices, and Internet connections to enable it. Application options ranged from language training enabled learning management system solutions like Moodle to simpler online technology like Google Classroom, Edmodo, or ESL Library.

In their homes, many newcomers had limited devices or connectivity to begin with, and many now found themselves sharing a single device and connection with other family members who were also suddenly learning online.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to present challenges and surprises. Crisis is opportunity goes the old saw, and the innovations in teaching practice required to address the suspension of in-person learning will no doubt have deep impacts on better practices for years to come. Many voices had been advocating for learning technology innovations in settlement language training (SLT) for years. As we emerge from COVID-19, no doubt educators are seeing that the crisis has fueled innovation and adoption across the entire educational sector, and no less so in the SLT field.

Based on the research that we presented at the TESL Ontario Conference in November 2020, we examine here the challenges, innovations, solutions, and opportunities that have grown out of the sudden disruption and constraints of COVID-19. To set the background in a global context, Jill Cummings, Associate Dean for Faculty Development at Yorkville University (Canada), begins by highlighting innovative responses to COVID-19 by educators worldwide as documented in the Handbook publication that she has been developing, *Teaching in the Post COVID-19 Era: World Education Dilemmas, Teaching Innovations, and Solutions in the Age of Crisis* (Fayed & Cummings, Co-Editors. Springer Publishing, 2021). Then, Matthias Sturm, Simon Fraser University and Avenue - LearnIt2teach, reports on the impact, challenges, and needs due to COVID-19 in LINC programs in Canada. Augusta Avram, LINC educator, then adds to this picture through an in-depth case study based on her own teaching and teacher development experiences during this time. Geoff Lawrence, Associate Professor at York University, concludes by discussing lessons learned from these COVID-19 experiences and recommending ways forward.

## Global perspectives

The United Nations reports that the COVID-19 pandemic has deprived 91% of students of education in almost 194 countries worldwide because of school closures and lockdowns (United Nations Educational & Organization (UNESCO), 2020). While this situation has severely challenged teachers, we have also witnessed educators' innovative solutions and resilience as they have adapted their teaching to provide education online for learners. During this time of extreme constraints, I have had conversations with
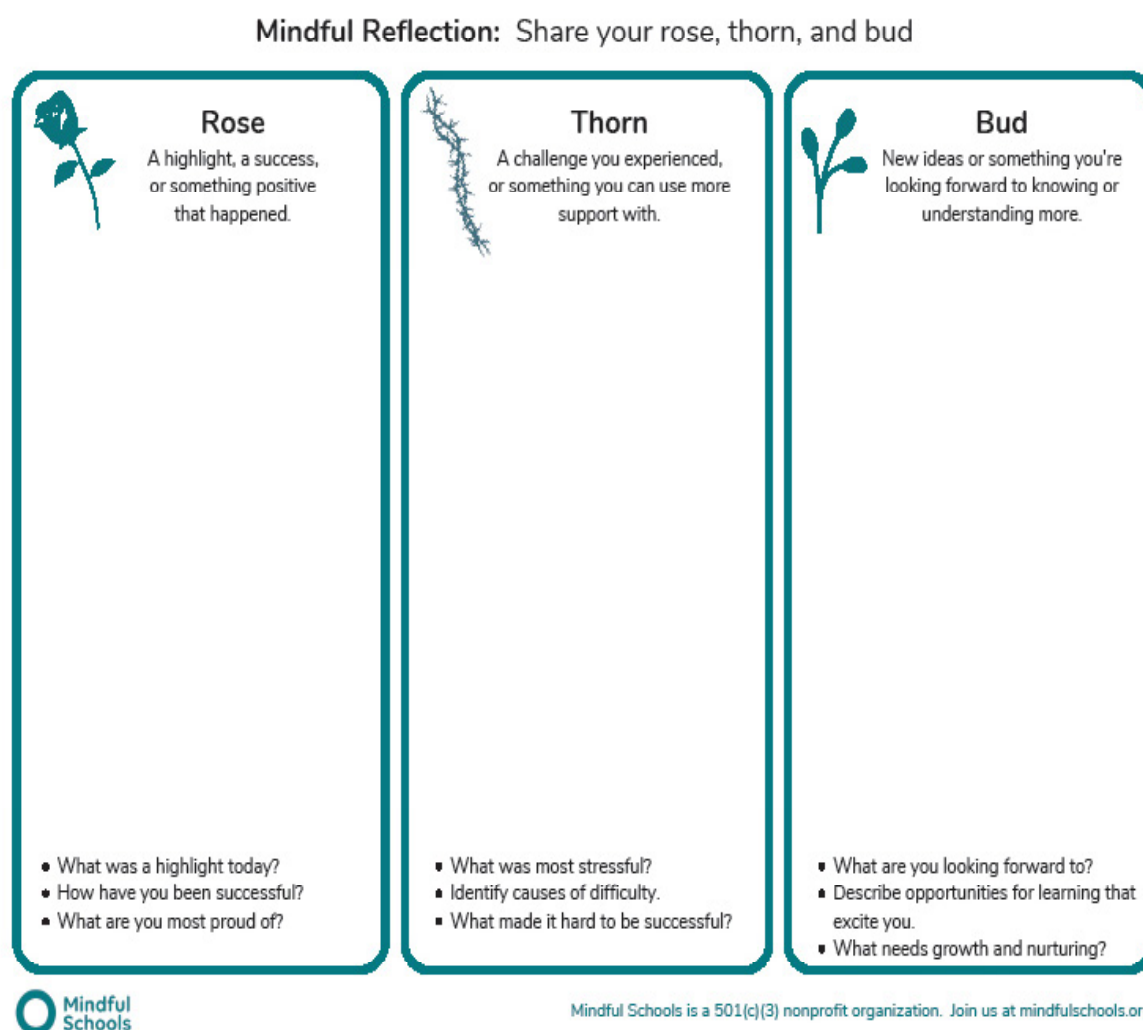
educators who have confronted these challenges in more than 30 locations worldwide. This has resulted in the Handbook, *Teaching in the Post COVID-19 Era: World Education Dilemmas, Teaching Innovations, and Solutions in the Age of Crisis* (forthcoming, 2021), developed with my colleague and co-editor, Ismail Fayed. I am going to share here a few of the innovative strategies and endeavours that educators have shared with us, focusing particularly on chapters contributed by ESL/EFL teacher educators. I believe that they represent the efforts that teachers have used to turn an extreme challenge into an opportunity during this past year. These ideas need to be shared and discussed as ways forward in technology-enhanced education.

Overall, one gets a picture of the sudden and complete shift of ESL learning/teaching to online, remote synchronous delivery via video conferencing platforms like Zoom; plus, the development of more online, asynchronous solutions, and the integration of various apps to enhance interaction in both synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning.

Gary Motteram, ESL teacher educator from Manchester University, details in chapter 9 the responses of English language teachers engaged in settlement English language training in England. Drawing on Trucano's principle that "the best technology is the one you already have, know how to use, and can afford" (Trucano, 2013), this teacher educator explains the use of multiple media by teachers to take advantage of the limited Wi-Fi time available while maintaining contact with a collaborative but widely spread network of English teachers. Use of mobile phones, SMS messaging, and Whatsapp chat and texts keep instructors in touch with each other to share strategies and concerns. Pre-recorded videos and narrated PowerPoint presentations provide asynchronous online instruction for English learners while saving limited Wi-Fi for conversation practice during valuable video conferencing time.

Our neighbours to the south also demonstrated adaptability in providing ESL classes for newcomers during COVID-19. Ally Zhou, a teacher educator working with Oklahoma City University (OKCU), reports on the collaborative solutions implemented in their ESL and Citizenship classes. To resolve the issue of a lack of dedicated study space during this time of closure of public spaces, the program arrived at a solution with the city library system to make Wi-Fi available to students in the library parking lot. Students were able to maintain social distancing procedures by remaining in their cars or at outside seating areas while using their mobile devices to attend classes and study. Student teachers in the TESOL program at OKCU assisted learners in preparing them for classes by phoning them about how to access the courses and get started online in advance. Translation was done by family members who drove with the students to class.

Teacher educators Antoinette Gagne, Shakina Rajendram, and Dania Wattar at OISE/ University of Toronto explain how they intentionally focused on equity in their online course for teacher candidates learning to

support English learners from K to 12 during the shift to virtual classrooms. They found that using digital apps and multi-modal interactions not only increased engagement, but afforded teacher candidates with experience, dialogue, and reflection on how to implement equitable practices with their own learners. As noted by Shakina, this was an opportunity for teacher candidates to develop both the technology and teaching skills they needed for work with their own students during COVID-19. "… I tried to model…checking-in with students at the start of each class. Some check-in prompts that I found helpful were sharing a rose, a thorn and a bud (Gonzalez, 2020) …Checking in with each other helped us to build authenticity and camaraderie into our online community."

**Mindful Reflection:** Share your rose, thorn, and bud

**Rose**
A highlight, a success, or something positive that happened.

**Thorn**
A challenge you experienced, or something you can use more support with.

**Bud**
New ideas or something you're looking forward to knowing or understanding more.

- What was a highlight today?
- How have you been successful?
- What are you most proud of?

- What was most stressful?
- Identify causes of difficulty.
- What made it hard to be successful?

- What are you looking forward to?
- Describe opportunities for learning that excite you.
- What needs growth and nurturing?

Mindful Schools

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**Figure 1**: Gonzalez, A. (2020). *Mindful reflection: Share your rose, thorn, and bud*. Mindful Schools. https://www.mindfulschools.org/inspiration/mindful-reflection/

Although not an exhaustive view of the many solutions and skills that educators have developed worldwide in response to the needs for teaching and learning online during COVID-19 times, it does, however, reflect experiences that demonstrate how second language educators have turned a bad situation into an opportunity for innovation as well as ongoing learning. This shows promise for enhanced technology integration in the future. We next turn our attention to how this has played out in Canada. Matthias Sturm reports specifically on the response of LINC educators in Canada.

# LearnIT2teach: Teacher training and online learning for newcomers in times of crises

Resilience during the COVID-19 outbreak is at the heart of the stories about teachers of English Second Language (ESL) and the Avenue-LearnIT2teach project. Together, we enabled rapid responses by programs in Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) to site closures, resulting in an unprecedented uptake of Online Learning (OL). We rapidly changed course to support LINC teachers to use existing Blended Learning (BL) courseware by adapting existing teacher training and course materials for OL. This timely teacher training was evaluated for its impact from March to June 2020, using the professional development (PD) evaluation model by Guskey (2000), further informed by Grebow (2002).

This project has supported BL since 2010, hosting CLB and PBLA-aligned courseware in a Moodle LMS (Learning Management System), first called EduLINC and now Avenue. A four-stage training is provided for LINC professionals on how to use and adapt the courseware, beginning with an in-person orientation that has been offered online since the start of the pandemic. Pre-Stage 1 training (a computer skills diagnostic test) was added, and pre-Stage 2 gives teachers quick access to the courseware. A partnership with TESL Ontario makes PTCT accreditation for Ontario TESL teachers who have completed Stages 3 and 4 possible. The Learning Technology Innovation Leadership course is available to administrators and teachers to lead innovation in their LINC programs.

Between March 15–June 30, 2020, the shift to OL resulted in a flood of LINC providers requesting access to the learner courseware and the training for their teachers. Numerous teachers, who had previously taken the training but had not continued, recognized the value of OL for LINC program delivery. In a BL context, there had been limited demand for a synchronous virtual classroom, but it proved very popular as an alternative to meeting with students in person. The project provided 20 webinars with a focus on leveraging the virtual classroom and other teaching tools in the learner courseware. A teacher-only discussion forum was created for support and sharing ideas, supplemented by links to other relevant teaching and assessment resources. Figure 2 below shows the training uptake and its impact.

## LearnIT2Teach PD March 15-June 30

- 512 teachers (8 teachers January-March)
- 263 Stage 1 (4.6 times more than last year), 359 Pre-Stage 2 (5.4 times more), 96 Stage 2 (6.8 times more)
- 5,251 teacher course enrolments in the last two weeks of March (1,085 on average two months before)
- 75-350 connections on weekdays (3-10 times more) and around 50-100 on weekends (10 times more)
- 3 times more visits and 2.6 times more bandwidth
- 538 new courses in EduLINC (338 by new teachers) - highly significant result re. impact

**Figure 2:** LINC teacher training and EduLINC courses by LearnIT2teach  March - June, 2020

Guskey (2000) would agree that the development of 538 new courses is a highly significant result in terms of impact. The formal training and informal supports provided by the project were a means to the end of adopting the learner courseware and adapting teaching practices for OL. Grebow (2002) explains according to the 25/75 Rule of Learning that PD activities at a ratio of 1:3 between formal and informal learning yields most significant impacts on teachers' capacity to use their training experience in their practice and affect program delivery. The evaluation findings to date indicate that the surge in demand in teacher training (formal PD) resulted in mentoring and course development support (informal PD) at a ratio greater than 1:3.

Furthermore, teacher presence is a hallmark of the project's vision of BL and OL. The project's previous research by Cummings et al. (2019) had also demonstrated and substantiated Lawrence's findings (2014) of the potential of BL to extend learning and participation in connection with effective teaching practices and presence in OL (Anderson, 2018; Lowenthal, 2009; Scollins-Mantha, 2017; Swan, 2002). Interaction and connectedness with teachers are central to effective practices for developing student engagement online (Cummings et al., 2019, p. 6). Online learning program delivery can be inspired by the project's mantra that BL and OL puts well-trained and supported teachers at the center of instruction.

Online learning in times of crisis results in increased demand of PD and supports for ESL teachers. Findings show that PD impact on teaching practice and program delivery yield good results when mentoring and supports are available to adopt and adapt to OL. However, PD also needs to be prophylactic to build program capacity to respond quickly and adequately to changing circumstances. There needs to be a recognition of increased teacher time for evolving professionalized practice (Costa et al., 2016, p. 6). Programs need to develop contingency plans with crisis management strategies that include scalable BL and OL approaches for teaching and learning, with well-trained and supported teachers at the center of instruction.

## Teaching during a pandemic: An educator's personal response

In mid-March 2020 and the following months, teachers were forced to make quick decisions about the use of technology in the delivery of remote instruction, while administrators and funders had to decide about direction and support. The responses were extremely varied, and so were the debates over tech tools, online course design, choice of instructional and assessment strategies, and level of support, both for teachers and learners. The conversations and debates often took place online, and they were extremely informative but also revealing of both strengths and weaknesses and future needs of different sectors.

As far as my own response was concerned, the responsibility of dealing with the complex task of going fully online under such exceptional circumstances initially felt overwhelming, even though I had experience with the use of technology in education. At the time of the transition, as a LINC instructor teaching a blended class, I was already using Moodle, more specifically EduLINC (later to become Avenue), to which I added the use of Zoom, and I also had access to tech support through LearnIT2teach. To meet the challenges of the sudden shift, I did what many other educators started doing—I immersed myself in information and resource curating and sharing, and I increased my participation in various online teaching practice communities, both the ones I was already a member of, in particular the #CdnELTchat community and LearnIT2teach, and new ones. The benefits were many and included: an exposure to multiple perspectives; an opportunity to reflect critically on my own practice; access to resources and to ongoing support from educators sharing similar interests and concerns; and a chance to support advocacy for an equitable and principled use of technology and resources.

I came out of this immersive and self-reflective experience with the realization that my students' immediate and future needs and goals, my beliefs (especially the ones about the role of educators in a democratic society), and the program vision needed to guide my decisions as always. LINC students are immigrants and refugees, who, in addition to language skills, often lack the information and social networks that can help create a sense of belonging and facilitate participatory inclusion in Canadian society. With all this in

mind, creating a safe and supportive online community, choosing course content and strategies that were context-sensitive and relevant both to students' immediate and envisioned lives, building flexibility and choice into as many activities as possible, increasing the level of teacher support, and offering personalized accommodations took precedence. In the process of turning these priorities into reality, the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework (Garrison et al., 2001) was my main point of reference. The COI framework explains how three presences—teaching, social, and cognitive presence—need to be strategically developed to enhance student engagement in online and blended learning.

While all three COI presences are important, in view of the exceptional circumstances we were in, I decided to focus on enhancing social and teacher presence—more specifically, emotional expression through instructional design and organization. The online class needed to be a space where students could connect with each other and with the teacher on multiple levels in order to learn, share, acknowledge, and support each other. Communication was open and frequent; in April 2020, there were 2,722 teacher posts, 1,027 student posts, and almost 9000 student views for a group of 16 people. The Social Forum attracted a lot of interest and allowed people to connect informally. When it came to developing teacher presence, designing for clarity and consistency (Richardson et al., 2009, as cited in Fiock, 2020) was one of my main concerns—I wanted the students to know what to expect each week and to be able to easily navigate the course, so organization followed a predictable pattern. Instructor presence and availability increased, and feedback was frequent and supportive (Messages/Comments Block/Chats/Email/Video conferencing/Phone/Office Hours). As for cognitive presence, modelling activities and participation, providing "multiple representations of the knowledge" (Richardson et al., 2009; Stephens & Roberts, 2017, as cited in Fiock, 2020), and providing opportunities for learning reflections were at the forefront. The students responded to all this by coming together as a true community of learners, and the levels of engagement and expressed satisfaction were high, which was extremely rewarding.

This crisis has made all of us consider how "language, social practices and technologies are converging in dynamic and innovative ways" (Lawrence, 2018), and has sped up learning technology innovations in SLT and beyond, but to make this progress sustainable, I believe a concerted effort is necessary. Suggestions and recommendations are provided below in Figure 3.

**Suggestions and Recommendations**

**Settlement Language Sector:**

- Make technology integration and the development of digital citizenship skills a priority for the settlement sector - with a national strategy in place
- Ensure equity in allocation of federal funding towards tech integration among SPOs (infrastructure, training, & ongoing support)
- Encourage organizations to make use of local support systems when developing a tech integration strategy
- Fund research-based development of core teaching and training resources for tech integration and the teaching of digital citizenship
- Support online communities of practice

**Instructors:**

- Commit to tech integration and the development/enhancement of online course design skills and teaching strategies
- Explore digital citizenship issues through dialogue and self-reflective practice; support newcomers' participatory inclusion in Canadian society
- Take part in training and PD opportunities on the issue
- Advocate for ongoing support - both for instructors and students

Augusta Avram, 2020

**Figure 3:** Recommendations for future support of technology integration and instructor training in English language settlement training and instruction

## Teaching in post COVID-19 times and beyond

As illustrated in the discussions above, English language teachers and learners have been forced to adapt en masse to remote online language teaching approaches, often without sufficient training. This has reinforced the oft-cited challenges of remote distance language learning: the need to adapt teaching practices to these fully online contexts without adequate training, technological resources, Internet connections, technical support, and digital literacies (Karamifar et al., 2019); the need for educators to enhance their own techno-pedagogical competence (Guichon & Hauck, 2011) while simultaneously supporting learners' digital literacies, and having to fully manage language teaching responsibilities with inherently limited and often uncompensated time. Our dive into remote teaching has also dramatically highlighted the challenge of building community and connection among the learners in our classes. Online remote learning has expanded a sense of distance between learners and learners and teachers, exacerbating the isolation that learners (and teachers) feel and the psychosocial dimensions that teachers end up having to support, again

with limited training. Our rushed remote COVID-19 'onlining' has amplified the call for maintaining the human feel in online language teaching and learning (Lawrence, 2014).

At the same time, this global remote online teaching venture has revealed a number of potential benefits and affordances. Getting to 'class' has been exceptionally time-efficient, avoiding hours of weekly commuting and scheduling disruptions, and expanding access to language learning programs. Online teaching can offer individualized, self-paced, and multimodal opportunities to personalize the learning process and enhance language acquisition. This can help educators meet the needs of a range of learners in inherently multi-level classrooms. Online pedagogy, and today's videoconferencing tools, can offer the chance to connect learners and teachers from varied different geographical regions in rich, collaborative learning networks. In addition, Web 2.0 technologies can be used in inherently interactive and intensely collaborative approaches that can deepen social practices, skills, and strategies to meet the needs of today's ever-present technology-mediated communicative practices (Coiro et al., 2008; Johnston & Lawrence, 2018; Kessler, 2018).

In order to leverage these benefits, there are a number of factors to consider. One is the crucially important role of online language teacher education, and the benefits achieved when teachers learn about technology-mediated language pedagogy as 'students' in online learning environments. By learning as students in online professional development (PD), educators can more easily relate to student needs, emotional reactions, and challenges within these same environments. Such experiential learning can help educators work with the affective and cognitive dimensions of learning, allowing teachers to see how learning 'feels' while appreciating the cognitive benefits. Such learning can help educators develop the skills to identify the affordances of specific tools and approaches, and to be able to see how these may be suitable (or not) for their specific language learning context (Haines, 2015). This type of PD can help orient teachers to notions of teacher, social and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2001), as highlighted in the community of inquiry and teaching practice explained above, and to appreciate that these need to be explicitly developed in online teaching.

Such experiential online PD can help teachers tune into the role of teaching presence in fostering social presence, an essential element of community formation in remote learning. Social presence can facilitate spirit (a feeling of connection), trust (the need to rely on other members), interaction (sharing personal information and building empathy) and common expectations (a commitment to shared goals) (Lomicka, 2020); social presence creates the 'we' feeling in a group (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 721). Ways to do this include integrating synchronous video/audio communication with self-paced asynchronous modalities, prioritizing dialogue over structure, and actively working with learner identities, their linguistic and cultural resources

in action-oriented, project-based approaches (Piccardo & North, 2019) to build strong connections within an online learning environment (Lomicka, 2020). A strong social presence can help reduce isolation, increase online engagement, interaction, and satisfaction which can lead to enhanced performance and learning success.

Although our forced rush into pandemic online teaching has been extremely challenging, these efforts may have helped forge a path into the future. Technology-mediated approaches offer unprecedented opportunities for our students to communicate and collaborate with others in linguistically and culturally rich communicative contexts. They can also help students further develop the critical digital literacies needed to communicate effectively in today's technology-mediated societies (Kessler, 2018). As highlighted here, effective technology-mediated language teacher education is at the core of forging this path ahead.

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# Creative assignments to help students connect English to the outside world and build confidence

**By Shayne Fogle, Ryerson University; Alanna Carter, Ryerson University; & Shereen Seoudi, Ryerson University**

## Abstract

Instructors at the Real Institute's ESL Foundation Program are continuously working on designing assignments that allow their students to practice the language skills taught in class while at the same time engaging with technology and connecting with life outside of the classroom. Through careful consideration and research, two assignments were designed and successfully achieved these outcomes. The assignments were adapted to a virtual teaching context and were equally successful. This article includes a detailed explanation of the projects that were created, the steps taken for students to accomplish all tasks, and the outcomes that resulted from their completion. Further to this is a description of the success achieved from their adaptation to an online learning environment.

## Introduction

The Real Institute is home to the ESL Foundation Program at Ryerson University in Toronto, Ontario. The ESL Foundation Program is a bridging program and is designed for students who have been given acceptance to an undergraduate program at the university conditional on completion of English studies at the Real Institute. Depending on students' linguistic proficiency, they are placed into levels for varying amounts of instruction.

Regardless of the level students are placed in, they participate in lessons to increase skills and proficiency in each of the four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). Students complete a range of quizzes, exams, and assignments that are reflective of the learning outcomes for each level. These learning activities are designed so that students practice the language structures and skills that they learn in class and will use in their undergraduate degree programs.

Designing the assignments for each level requires careful consideration and a good deal of creativity. This paper will describe our experiences as instructors and curriculum developers with two successful assignments from different levels in the ESL Foundation Program. Considerations for the particular group of students in the ESL Foundation Program, the incorporation of technology, constraints, and outcomes will be discussed. Suggestions for how to adapt these assignments for the virtual learning environment in response to Covid-19 will be offered.

## Considerations for creating new assignments

When designing the two assignments described in this article for students in the ESL Foundation Program, we started by considering what the main goals are for our students to accomplish by the end of each level. A number of important elements needed to be considered including the curriculum needs and constraints, student demographics, group dynamics, appropriate tools, and pedagogical justification.

Most students in the ESL Foundation Program are 17-21 years old, and the large majority of students come from mainland China. Many students enroll in the ESL Foundation Program out of parental expectations and have limited interest in studying English or living in Toronto. Although a large percentage of students have attended high school in the GTA, they have little knowledge or understanding of the city. While they are usually friends with each other, they are reliant on and drawn to their phones and social media apps. Further to this, they tend to communicate largely in their first language and have trouble connecting the importance of English language to their daily lives.

For the reasons mentioned above, we felt that inclusion of technology, and more specifically smartphones, was important for gaining enthusiasm from students. We also wanted to ensure that they started to make connections between what they were learning in class and how that would help them going forward. It was also integral that students not only take notice of the English structures they were learning, but that they truly understand their uses and importance.

## Engaging students with technology

As noted, to gain true interest from our students, inclusion of technology was key. In choosing the appropriate technology, it was necessary to consider accessibility, flexibility, device choice, popularity, real life issues, and creativity. To make assignments easy and accessible, it was important to choose technology that was readily available to all. This meant we needed to choose hardware and apps that students and instructors alike were familiar with, able to use with ease, and had easy access to. We agreed on the use of smartphones and personal computers, particularly (1) Word or Google Docs to write and compile pictures and (2) video software to edit and compile recordings.

Flexibility was necessary and students were allowed and encouraged to use alternate devices and tools if they saw fit. We had noticed that many students were avid users of Instagram and TikTok, which inspired the idea that taking photos and videos would capture student interest. This also gave them the opportunity to show their creativity while not precluding the less artistic students.

## Constraints

As the ESL Foundation Program consists of three-week modules, we needed to be mindful of time constraints. In our particular context, the students are digital natives, meaning they are highly capable of utilizing phones and computers. Had this not been the case, we would have needed to include tutorials on the technology. That said, it was important to keep in mind the fact that our students generally have low motivation to complete work outside of class, so the assignment needed to be simple to complete while engaging students. We also needed to work within the confines of the class that the assignment was being created for.

The first assignment that will be described below was for the reading and writing course and served as the summative assessment for the first module of the first semester of programming. The theme of the module is 'Life and Language.' The assignment needed to focus on parts of speech, writing structures, grammatical accuracy, and vocabulary.

The second assignment described below was for the listening and speaking class and served as the assignment for the third module of the second semester of programming. The theme of 'New Media' needed to connect to the theme of the subsequent module, 'Health and Wellness.' The assignment needed to focus on speaking fluency and accuracy as well as grammatical structures and vocabulary.

## Assignment 1: Connecting the classroom to the world through pictures

After careful consideration of all of the above ideas, we designed a project to encourage students to explore the city of Toronto, notice the language structures taught in class, and also practice writing skills. Students compiled a portfolio of pictures and sentences showcasing the language they encountered in their daily lives. They took pictures of the language structures while they were out enjoying their day, and then they wrote about the findings and experiences. The assignment consisted of two parts: (1) pictures and (2) writing.

For the first part of the assignment, students used their phones to photograph examples of the language structures they encountered that matched what they learned in class. As students had learned the four major parts of speech, they were required to take a picture of a noun, a verb, an adjective, and an adverb.

Additionally, they were required to take pictures of simple sentences and imperative statements. Students were advised to look in places such as the subway, restaurants, parks, billboards, shopping malls, and newspapers. Examples of this included pictures of words like "stop" from a stop sign, "hamburger" from a McDonald's menu, or "Park here" from a local parking lot sign.

In the second section of the assignment, students were required to reflect on the pictures they found and what they had learned from them. They needed to write ten simple sentences explaining how the project had affected their thoughts and feelings about the language they were learning in the classroom. They were then asked to write ten imperative sentences instructing other students and giving advice on how to improve their English skills. This included sentences such as "Subway ads were a useful way to practice my reading" and "Make sure to read the items on a menu for new vocabulary words."

## Assignment 2: Using awareness campaign videos to improve language and confidence

The second assignment that we created to build interest and engagement with students involved creating awareness campaign videos on health issues that are connected to the overuse of new media. This both directly connected to the themes of the corresponding modules and to the lives of our students. Unlike the first assignment where students were asked to work alone while going about their daily routines, in this assignment, students were required to work in groups of three or four. Because this assignment was for a speaking and listening class, collaboration was important.

It was necessary to explain to students that an awareness campaign is a marketing effort to help people recognize particular issues, raise awareness about the issue, educate about the effects of the problem, and inspire and encourage action. As videos can convey powerful emotions and can be easily spread and shared, they are useful to convey important messages. Students were shown multiple examples of awareness campaign videos.

Next, students were asked to choose from a list of topics including: cyberbullying, gaming addiction, phone addiction, health issues related to overuse of technology, and isolation as a result of social media. They then needed to brainstorm specific ideas and conduct research about the topic. Students were provided with a list of questions to guide their conversations such as:

- Why is this an issue?
- Who does it affect?
- What are the negative effects associated with the problem?
- What should people know about the issue?
- What actions should people take to resolve the issue?

Upon review of the above information, each group needed to determine exactly what message they wanted to convey with their videos and determine which format would be the most effective for doing this. This could take the form of an interview, news report, dramatic representation, or music video with voice overs. It was also stressed that each member of the group needed to appear in the video and speak for approximately equal amounts of time. The video needed to be three to four minutes long and could include printed captions. Still pictures were not accepted as this was meant to be an actual video recording.

On the date that the assignment was due, students shared a link to their videos on the learning management system so that the instructor could easily access it. All videos were shown during class time, and then the class voted on the best video based on content and creativity. Later that week, all students from the same level were brought together to watch the top videos from each class and vote on the best awareness campaign. The winning group received a small prize and had their video shown at the end of term celebration.

## Outcomes

In order to justify the pedagogy behind this assignment, we researched the benefits of using personal devices, inviting creativity, making real life connections, collaboration, and competitive experience.

### Personal Device Use

As mentioned above, our students are attached to their phones and personal devices, and for this reason, integrating the use of these devices in assignments was important. While many instructors consider such device use in the classroom disruptive, they can in fact have a positive effect on language acquisition.

Godwin-Jones (2018) explains the many benefits of using mobile devices in the language classroom. He describes how they offer unique opportunities for language learning that are very difficult to achieve without their use. One of these opportunities is the facilitated integration of multimedia in the classroom. This was a clear and successful outcome in the assignments we created. Personal devices allowed students to take pictures in one of their assignments and co-create and share videos in another. Another benefit of personal device use is facilitating collaboration between students (Godwin-Jones, 2018). In the Awareness Campaign assignment, students collaborated on different aspects of the assignment using their personal devices; they also used them to record and edit their video. A final benefit that is relevant to our assignments is facilitating and encouraging learning outside of school (Godwin-Jones, 2018). Students were required to notice language in their daily life outside of school and use their phones to capture it. They were also required to communicate with others in English and collaborate on recording a video using a personal device.

## Creativity

Many instructors consider creativity as an element that has only aesthetic value to assignments. However, for language learning, creativity plays a much bigger role. The act of selecting and using words of a second language to express feelings, thoughts, and ideas requires creative thinking skills, and by allowing students room for creativity in assignments, instructors help them practice these skills (Fehér, n.d.). Creativity also provides room for self expression, which leads to more motivation and increased self-esteem. In addition, requiring students to creatively complete a task, pushes them to communicate and discuss, leading to more authentic language exchange and greater engagement and interest (Fehér, n.d).

In the first assignment, students were very creative in the places they looked for language. In the second assignment, students were given the opportunity to be creative in choosing the style of campaign video, script, setting, props, music, and costumes. The winning assignment indeed reflected substantial creativity in all of these areas.

## Connection to real life

Designing tasks that are connected to real life makes the language classroom more relevant, useful, and interesting to students. Burk (2006) mentions that one of the roles of an instructor is to balance curricular requirements with students' interests. In designing assignments that require students to think about a topic that is relevant to their lives, they become more invested in class and see a bigger purpose for language beyond the assignment at hand. Burk (2006) also mentions that task-based activities force students to communicate to accomplish the assigned task, and this engages them with language that they can then use in real-life situations.

Both assignments were connected to real life—that is, life beyond the classroom—in different ways. The first assignment showed students that language is a part of their daily life and is useful and relevant in many contexts, and the second assignment allowed students to use authentic language to communicate and accomplish a task on a topic that is relevant to them.

## Collaboration and peer interaction

The Awareness Campaign Video assignment required collaboration between group members on the different assignment parts. Students had to work together to agree on the various aspects of their video. This helps strengthen students' language learning because they can teach each other through peer collaboration "by addressing misunderstandings and clarifying misconceptions" ("Collaborative Learning: Center for Teaching Innovation," n.d.) with one another.

The assignment also required students to heavily interact with one another, and this was a goal in itself as creating opportunities for meaningful social interaction between students is essential for language acquisition (Swain, 2000).

### Competitive experience

Chen (2019) explains the benefits of designing activities that have an element of competition; He concludes that having students work in groups and compete against each other increases interest levels and lowers tension, and it also leads to increased problem solving and better retention of ideas.

The Awareness Campaign Video assignment was a group assignment with an added element of competition as described above. Although students were somewhat anxious about having their video evaluated by their peers and possibly played to the whole cohort, it made them more accountable for their work. In addition, it added an element of fun and anticipation.

## Adapting assignments for the virtual environment

Both of the described assignments were successful in the traditional classroom setting of the ESL Foundation Program. However, discussion of these assignments would be incomplete without explanation of how they were adapted for the virtual learning environment brought on by Covid-19. Once programming switched to virtual formats, we were required to re-examine and change assignments.

### Considerations

Adaptation of all assignments required significant creativity and consideration as the barriers were multiple and diverse. Of utmost importance was the fact that once classes switched to virtual formats, many students in the ESL Foundation Program returned to their home countries. This meant that students were living and learning in various cities, countries, and time zones, and this made group work challenging. Connected to this is the fact that, if students had returned to their home countries, access to everyday English was limited, and this challenged the foundational principles of the assignments.

Additionally, it was important to ensure that students could access all technology, tools, and platforms required to complete these assignments regardless of where they were in the world. Although we had always been flexible with respect to the tech tools that students used to complete assignments, this became even more important, and we made efforts to encourage students to use whatever technology was easily accessible. We provided students with lists of alternate tools they could use.

Despite the intricacies involved with adapting these particular assignments, we adhered to best practices for designing online assignments by ensuring that our assignments reflected student learning objectives

and course outcomes, remaining flexible, and encouraging creativity ("Adapting to Online Teaching," n.d.). With respect to our particular students, from experience, we knew that it was necessary to give clear and repeated instructions, show examples, and use technology wherever possible.

## Adapting and extending Assignment #1: Connecting the classroom to the world through pictures

As described, the intention of this assignment was for students to explore Toronto and to take pictures of the structures and language taught in class. As many students had returned to non-English speaking countries, it was difficult for students to find examples of English in their everyday lives. This was further complicated by restrictions related to Covid-19, and the fact that people across the world were encouraged to stay home as much as possible. To respond to these problems, we decided to allow students to submit photos, pictures, and examples of language that they found online. Students needed to complete these searches in English, and they could also complete this from the safety of their homes.

To manage issues of access, we expanded submission options for students. Wherever possible, students were encouraged to submit work through Ryerson University's learning management system; however, if students experienced difficulties doing so, we were open to allowing students to submit work through other avenues such as Padlet or Google Jamboard.

Further, to create a sense of community among students, the assignment was also extended, and students were required to view and comment in writing on a classmates' work. This task reduced the distances that existed between students, and it contributed to an environment where students got to know each other and care about each other's work.

## Adapting and extending Assignment #2: Using awareness campaign videos to improve language and confidence

As noted, this original assignment required students to work in small groups to produce an awareness campaign video. Once classes shifted to virtual environments, collaboration and group work became challenging, particularly if students were living in different time zones or did not want to spend extra time online beyond class.

In response to these challenges, we decided to allow students the option to work individually or with a partner to complete the assignment. Fortunately, and perhaps surprisingly, most students did indeed choose to work with a partner, which demonstrates that students did genuinely want to connect and work together. Students were still required to appear and speak in their videos. We provided students with a list

of free film-making tools that they could use to complete this assignment.

This assignment was also extended in an attempt to create community and relationships among students. Students were required to post their videos and then watch three other videos. After watching the videos, they needed to create an audio recording reflecting on a prompt provided by the instructor. In their response, they needed to consider their classmates' work and make connections to their own ideas and thoughts.

## Conclusion

Overall, these were successful assignments with our student population in both face-to-face and virtual contexts. Through these assignments, students engaged with the world around them and practiced the English taught in class. Students were motivated through the use of technology and were able to express their ideas and learning in creative and meaningful ways. These assignments are examples of how to make what is taught inside the classroom relevant to students' lives outside of the classroom.

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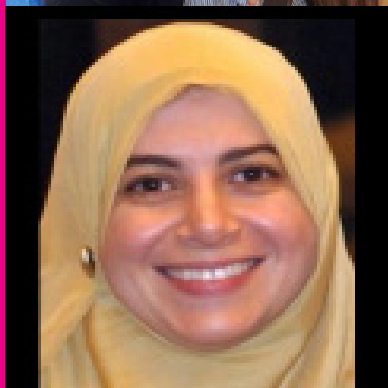
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# Exploring the potential of MALL in teaching ELLs academic writing

**By Tara Al-Hadithy, York University**

## Abstract

As a consequence of the growing interest in digital technologies, a recent field of research has emerged, which investigates the use of recent technologies in language learning: Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). Although research studies have demonstrated that mobile technology is an effective tool for improving different English language skills, the majority of MALL studies focus on vocabulary acquisition and speaking skills, whereas grammar learning and writing skills are underrepresented. As an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructor who seeks to engage her learners with the aid of MALL activities, especially given the current pandemic context, I was driven by the question: *What is the potential of MALL in teaching English Language Learners (ELLs) academic writing?* In light of the theoretical foundations of MALL (e.g., Ecological Constructivism) and the key issues with academic writing for ELLs, this paper reviews selected contemporary and empirical literature to explore the pedagogical issues and prospects of using MALL in teaching EAP writing to post-secondary level L2 learners.

## Introduction

In today's highly digital world, technologies have become firmly embedded in our life to the point of normalization. Hence, 21st Century learners who have been called *digital natives* by Prensky (2001) are "technically proficient at using computers and mobile devices for many functions, including internet searches" (Gilbert, 2013, p. 129). With the widespread ownership of mobile devices, there is "an increasing interest for these devices to be used in an educational context" (Puga et al., 2015). The growing interest in

digital technologies led to the emergence of a recent field, which investigates the use of recent technologies in language learning: Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). Although research studies have demonstrated that mobile technology is an effective tool for improving different English language skills, the majority of MALL studies focus on vocabulary acquisition and speaking skills, whereas grammar learning and writing skills are underrepresented (Viberg & Grönlund, 2012). In fact, in Burston's (2013) bibliography of MALL studies (1994–2012), only a small number of studies investigated the use of MALL to enhance writing.

Personally, I have had a positive experience with MALL for teaching academic vocabulary using a flipped approach and gamification via *Kahoot* or *Quizlet*. I used such MALL activities almost always in formal/informal settings to prep students for the unpacking of an academic reading that was subsequently used as a writing prompt. Hence, I wondered what research says about the potential of using MALL for academic writing. From that fundamental question, other related questions stemmed, including: How can MALL be incorporated in the EAP writing Classroom? What impact would MALL have on students' academic writing quality? How can MALL be used to facilitate students' learning rather than be implemented for its novel aspect? Can MALL help ELLs be more resilient when learning EAP writing?

Hence, this paper attempts to review selected contemporary, relevant, and empirical literature to explore the pedagogical issues and prospects of using MALL in teaching (EAP) writing to post-secondary level L2 learners and recognize the MALL technologies that are used to help ELLs with academic writing. The paper is divided into two parts: part one gives an overview of MALL and its theoretical foundations, while part two highlights key issues in teaching academic writing to ELLs and through a mini literature review of contemporary studies and peer-reviewed articles, it sheds light on the pedagogical issues and prospects related to teaching ELLs academic writing with MALL. Final remarks are made to conclude the paper.

## Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL): A brief overview

MALL is a new learning approach using handheld and portable devices (e.g., smartphones, tablets, MP3/MP4 players, and personal digital assistants) to improve language learning (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). The combination of Mobile learning (or M-learning) and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) resulted in the emergence of MALL (Niño, 2015). According to Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008), M-learning is mediated via handheld devices; it is learning that is potentially available anytime, anywhere. The authors clarified that MALL is different from CALL due to "its use of personal, portable devices that enable new ways of learning, emphasizing continuity or spontaneity of access and interaction across different contexts of use" (p. 273). Mobile hand-held devices make language learning personal and

more convenient for language learners as digital technology is integrated in the language learning process, which according to Miangah and Nezart (2012) is possible due to the connectivity function of mobile devices. With MALL, language learners access learning material using wireless networks to connect and communicate with learning websites via short message service (SMS), mobile email, and learning apps.

According to Stockwell and Hubbard (2013), "MALL has so much in common with CALL and ML that it is best understood as mostly belonging to both disciplines rather than being set apart from them" (p. 5). However, the authors note that MALL incorporates a "MALL-specific" region as well (p. 5). In an effort to characterize MALL coherently, Stockwell and Hubbard (2013) viewed MALL based on a framework which divides the relevant issues across three domains: physical, pedagogical, and psycho-social (p. 3). These three categories are overlapping and interrelated (p. 3). More importantly, the authors recommend 10 principles as advice for implementing MALL technology applications, which are helpful when designing curriculum with MALL or reviewing studies on language learning that implement MALL.

## MALL: Theoretical foundations

According to Palalas (2015), MALL draws on the theory and practice of CALL. Palalas noted that MALL refers to "studies that incorporate the use of handheld mobile devices for language learning (p. 30). In order to emphasize the role of mobile technology as an enabler, the term MALL has been modified to MELL–Mobile-Enabled Language Learning since it "brings into play the affordances and tools of mobile technologies thus enhancing the mobility and flexibility of teaching and learning" (p. 30).

The learning theory of MALL integrates the principles of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and technology-assisted learning models as well as some aspects of the distance education theory (Palalas, 2015, p. 31). According to Palalas, MALL followed the same trajectory as CALL as the design of most of its learning applications adopted a behaviorist approach. However, MALL is constantly evolving; as "the MALL research and understanding of the affordances of mobile technologies progress, more communicative and integrative design can be observed that incorporate the practice of four language skills and the use of technology in real-world contexts" (Warschauer & Healey, 1998, as cited in Palalas, 2015, p. 31). When MALL adopted constructivist approaches, its technologies consisted of interactive student-centred, individualized, collaborative activities (Palalas, 2015).

An emerging theoretical framework, Ecological Constructivism, melds together the various principles of Social Constructivism, Sociocultural Theory, Ecological Linguistics, and Contextual and Situated Learning (Palalas, 2014). "This paradigm emphasizes active learning embedded in a real-life setting, the role of mobile devices in such context-embedded communicative practice, and the importance of contextual affordances"

(Palalas, 2015, p. 33). Palalas (2014) emphasized that when MALL practice is viewed through the Ecological Constructivism lens, it is based on:

- Learning mediated by communication and interactivity in social contexts
- Learning mediated by the tool
- Learning mediated by the context
- Learning mediated by the affordance in the context

## Key issues with academic writing for ELLs

Due to the worldwide rapid advances in technology, the ability to write a second or foreign language has become an important skill more than ever. In fact, in many global contexts, in order for international applicants to be academically eligible for admission into college or university, they must prove that they have successfully achieved an English language proficiency requirement (e.g., TOFEL or IELTS); a major part of which is the academic writing skill assessment. EAP plays a significant role in advancing international students' academic success through English language and academic skills instruction. Many universities have established intensive EAP programs to support ELL international students.

In fact, Fox et al. (2014) stated that what typically characterizes EAP programs is that they include activities that simulate academic work to prepare students for disciplinary courses by means of a transfer of learning. In what relates to academic writing, such activities would include notetaking, research report writing or essay writing, and evaluating academic texts (p. 58). Hence, learning to write well is a need for all students in academic and second/foreign language programs, for through writing, learners not only generate new information but also transfer their knowledge (Weigle et al., 2003, p. 345).

Barkaoui (2007) noted that writing in a second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) appears to be the most challenging language skill for language learners to acquire (p. 35). Kruse (2003) researched the experience of writing a first-year university assignment and underscored that it is a complex process because student writers are expected to exhibit thorough understanding of the subject matter, to present their ideas logically, and to communicate efficiently using appropriate academic tone and language. In terms of teaching and learning writing, the construct can be considered from three main perspectives: the perspective of the text (surface features of writing), the writer (cognitive dimensions), or the reader (socio-cultural perspectives) (Cumming, 2001, p. 1).

The question is where does MALL fit into the demands of teaching and learning EAP writing? In fact, the portability and accessibility of mobile devices in this digital era have attracted many scholars to apply them in the educational settings. Applying portable technologies have been demanded by most of the modern learners who oftentimes are forced to study anywhere and anytime (e.g., at work, on the bus) (Evans, 2008,

p. 492). Students observed writing tasks in MALL as the most necessary.; "this emphasized their need to communicate with professors or friends through diverse media such as SMS, e-mail, learning management systems (LMS) such as their course website, social networking sites (SNS), and online chatting" (Park & Slater, 2014, p. 109).

## Literature review

Kulkulska-Hulme (2020) mentioned that the technical limitation of mobile devices such as the small keypad and small screens can present a barrier to extensive writing, which seems to be a recurring finding/ constraint with MALL (p. 3). Nevertheless, the more mobile technology advances, the more ESL/EFL researchers and practitioners explore new realms with MALL. Prompted by the question, *What is the potential of MALL in teaching ELLs academic writing?* this section reviews selected studies and research articles that investigated and experimented with the use of MALL to help ELLs improve their academic writing. Criteria for the selection method used includes the following:

- The reviewed articles are on research conducted in the area of MALL and teaching ESL/EFL academic writing skills in the post-secondary context. Other educational settings were excluded.
- All the articles reviewed are contemporary empirical studies (Nothing before 2010 was included.).
- They were electronically searched on the York University library database, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, or peer-reviewed online journals.
- The 7 chosen articles fall into 4 categories based on the four means of using MALL to teach or enhance ELLs' academic writing skills.

Categorized by the type of MALL technology, the studies included here highlight the pedagogical issues and prospects of using MALL to teach ELLs academic writing. Based on this brief literature review, concluding remarks are made and certain takeaways are highlighted.

## Mobile Web 2.0 technologies

Alsaleem (2013) investigated whether WhatsApp electronic journaling as a new application in smart phones has a significant effect on writing, vocabulary, word choice, and voice of undergraduate Saudi students. This quantitative quasi-experimental study used a sample of 30 EFL undergraduate female students enrolled in Languages and Translation at a Saudi university. Based on the results of the experiment that adopted a pretest and posttest design, it was found that students' scores improved with the journaling as their choice of vocabulary and voice in writing improved. One important significance of this study is that it adopts connectivism theory for its theoretical base and recognizes the affordance of WhatsApp in connecting students via tasks like journaling. Hence, it sheds light on how this use impacts the writing skill development of ELLs in a tertiary-level educational context. According to the author, the unequal level of

difficulty in the writing prompt topics, the sample size, as well as the lack of a control group were the main limitations of the study. Still, an important missing piece of information is the English proficiency level of the students in the sample. Moreover, there is no mention of what type of English course the students in the sample were enrolled in.

Robles (2016) investigated the type of texts and text features produced by a freshman student after using mobile technology via podcasts to enhance the learner's development of second language writing skills. The Functional Systemic Linguistic (FSL), Genre Pedagogical Approach (GPA), and mobile learning concepts were employed as theoretical framework. The participant is a freshman student enrolled in an eight-week English narrative course in a private university of the Caribbean region. In order to extend learning outside the classroom, podcasts were designed by the teacher of the course, which were aimed at giving guidelines on the types of narrative texts supplemented by graphic organizers. The study implied that "the use of mobile technology could be incorporated into a traditional English class, specifically the use of genre approach to work with writing skills. The analysis of the texts produced by the student showed an improved use of the language as well as some progress in the organization of the stages of the genre structure" (p. 199). Hence, the construct of writing was evaluated from the perspective of surface features as well as the process of writing. According to Robles, the podcasts contributed to making the student a more independent learner as it motivated her to regulate her learning pace and identify her weaknesses. However, one significant limitation of this study is that it involved one participant, which makes its findings difficult to generalize.

## Social networking services

In an empirical study by Lee and Kim (2016), the authors explored the positive learning effect of formulating English sentences via Social Network Service (SNS; *KaKaoTalk*) on less proficient L2 university students' (LPSs') writing. The application was utilized as a tool to create a less threatening environment for learners by linking in and out of class activities in a multimodal learning environment to teach writing to less proficient Korean university students. The authors concluded that "it is not surprising that a mobile-based social media platform can influence the way people communicate with each other and construct their learning process to meet their objectives" (p. 74). In this case of MALL application, learning was mediated by communication and interactivity in social contexts (Palalas, 2014). In fact, the researchers concluded that KaKaoTalk-based writing activities not only increased the learners' level of motivation and involvement, but they also fostered the learners' writing performance through collaborative writing, revising sentences, adding words, and monitoring their own or peers' writing.

## Mobile apps

Engin and Donanci (2014) described how they leveraged students' interest and enthusiasm towards the use of mobile technology such as smart phones, iPads, and other tablets to create a flipped classroom in an academic writing course by using an iPad application called Educreations (www.educreations.com). The authors chose a flipped approach due to its several affordances, but they also mentioned that "flipping the classroom builds on the already existing mobile technological tools which students use outside the classroom" (p. 94). Using a flipped approach via mobile technologies makes it convenient for the students to watch and listen to the teacher as many times as they need, which helps to reinforce their learning and support those of them who are more challenged by the writing tasks (p. 95). The result showed positive feedback from the 40 students who participated in the survey. Most of the comments were related to the convenience of the flipped approach and how the iPad application catered for different learning styles. The flipped environment was a motivating factor for the students, yet the authors did not show how exactly Educreations helped improve the students' academic writing skill.

Abd Karim and Abu (2018) investigated whether the use of the Mobile-Assisted Mind Mapping Technique (MAMMAT) can be an indicator of pre-writing ability and writing proficiency level. A sample of 23 undergraduate students enrolled in a writing course at a selected university was given a pre-test primarily to determine their pre-writing ability and writing proficiency. The study was conducted using a quantitative research design to measure the effects of using MAMMAT on students' argumentative writing skills. Quantitative data were collected using the pre-test post-test with the experimental research design. Before the application, the purpose of the study and expectations from the students during the experiment process was explained to the students. The students were trained on the use of *MindMup*, online mind mapping by using their mobile phone to generate, develop, and organize essay outlines in the writing class. Hence, learning was mediated by the tool (Palalas, 2014). Findings of the study suggested that *MindMup* helped increase students' confidence and boosted their critical and reflective thinking as it assisted them in generating complex ideas for their essay. The construct of writing in this study was seen from the perspective of the text as well as the writer and reader (Cumming, 2011). The findings also indicated that the potential of mobile learning and mind mapping in teaching ESL writing is promising.

## Combination of MALL technologies

Osman and Chung (2011) described a 38-day pilot test of a combination of mobile phones, SMS, and a wiki to support the collaborative learning of L2 English by 26 university students compared to a control group of 35. The study showed that the writing of the experimental group was better than that of the control, although

the study does not clearly specify how. The findings also suggested that students in the experimental group did not like to use a wiki for collaborative learning, and they much preferred working from home on desktop PCs to using mobile phones anywhere. The authors explained that Malaysians are not well acquainted with wiki technologies; hence, its use had a negative effect on the participants' learning experience. However, the authors did conclude that the use of mobile phones with suitable learning activities is recommended as it helps improve the participants' learning experience. This is in line with one of Stockwell and Hubbard's (2013) principles for implementing technology applications, namely, principle 6: "Be aware of language learners' existing uses and cultures of use" (p. 9).

## Conclusion

The studies and articles reviewed suggest that regardless of the MALL technology, teaching with MALL has been more effective than teaching with traditional approaches alone. Many of MALL's affordances (Palalas, 2014) have materialized in the above small number of reviewed studies. When used to teach EAP to ELLs, MALL exhibited many of those features (e.g., personalized learning, multimedia, and engagement) that are useful in the classroom in addition to giving immediacy for learners to write anytime anywhere. Based on the reviewed studies and articles, MALL also offered learners the opportunity to be autonomous and engaged in collaborative environments to interact with peers and educators via written text messages on different social applications. Although the MALL technologies mentioned in the review were designed to impact the teaching and learning of the construct of writing, it was not always clear from which perspective (i.e., text, writer, reader) the construct was being evaluated to measure its impact, nor was there always clear criteria for measuring the writing improvement. More importantly, details on pedagogy are often missing in most of the studies reviewed, which limits the validity of their findings. The studies reviewed did not focus on the constraints involved in implementing MALL in an EAP course to teach ELLs academic writing. Stockwell and Hubbard's (2013) principles were not all adopted; also, it cannot be ascertained that they were implemented.

Despite their limitations, the reviewed studies and articles indicate that MALL technologies showed promising results when integrated in the process of teaching ELLs academic writing. Thus, there seems to be a good potential for using MALL to develop ELLs academic writing. The more mobile technology advances, the more ESL/EFL researchers and practitioners explore new realms within MALL.

## Key takeaways and the way forward

- The use of MALL in the instruction of academic writing (EAP) is an underrepresented and under researched area.
- Empirical studies lack the use of mixed method research approaches.

- When designing student-centred MALL activities to develop ELLs' academic writing skills, approaches fostering active learning in student-centred environments, (e.g., Constructivism and Ecological Constructivism) as well as MALL design principles, should be taken into consideration especially with the current changes in today's classroom.

- This brief literature review could be extended to shape research proposals or a curriculum design study that adopts MALL for academic writing.

- Research into MALL in the Canadian post-secondary context have been limited by school policies, teachers' lack of training and time restraints, and class management challenges (See Grimshaw et al., 2017). Post-pandemic research should be able shed light on the potential of using MALL for EAP purposes in general and for academic writing more specifically.

- Further empirical studies need to be reviewed in terms of MALL's more current design principles and emerging theoretical framework since the medium and/or use of MALL has been changing rapidly.

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# The incredible vocabulary machine

**By Stephen Roney, Canada**

## Abstract

Vocabulary is the heavy lifting in learning a language. With grammar, little meaning can be conveyed. With vocabulary, anything can, in a pinch, be conveyed. Yet vocabulary has traditionally been neglected: In part for theoretical reasons; in greater part because the obvious process to learn it, item-based memorization, has seemed so tiresome and time-consuming. The process can be automated with free tools available on the web. It can be handled outside of class time, efficiently and with a minimum of dull repetition. Learning vocabulary can be easy and fun.

## Introduction

Vocabulary is the heavy lifting in language learning. It is most of what must be learned, and it is what must most be learned. "You can say very little with grammar, but you can say almost anything with words" (Dellar & Hocking, 2003, p. 3). Yet we spend little time in the classroom teaching vocabulary. The communicative method discourages teaching it explicitly. Learners are for the most part expected to pick it up on the fly, the same way they learned their first language. However, this is not realistic: Thornbury (2017) estimates it takes 18 years in the classroom to get the language exposure of one year of natural immersion. Trying to teach vocabulary in context, the communicative approach, is simply not efficient. Numerous studies show this is more difficult for L2 learners than in our L1 (Nassaji, 2003). Learning by osmosis is not ideal.

Probably the true reason that we do little explicit vocabulary work in the classroom, in relation to its actual importance in language, is that learning vocabulary means item memorization. There is an intense

bias currently against memory work. "In a meaningful process like second language learning, mindless repetition, imitation, and other rote practices in the language classroom have no place" (Brown, 2007, p. 96). Everyone hates memory work, *drill and kill*. Few of us earned our academic qualifications in hopes of mechanically holding up flash cards for much of our career. However, this distaste for memorization is not shared by our students. Studies show that students actually prefer having lists of words to memorize (Thornbury, 2017, p. 33). The efficiency of this seems obvious to them. The solution is automation of what is properly a mechanical task: to take advantage of technology to set up an *incredible vocabulary machine*, which students can use at spare moments in or outside class. In so doing, we can also take advantage of mnemonic principles to make the experience less mechanical and boring for them—not rote at all.

All web resources cited in this article are free and freely available wherever an internet connection can be found.

## Step 1: Generate a word list

You may have a vocabulary list assigned by your text or your syllabus. If not, you may make use of the various lists of essential vocabulary already produced, such as the Academic Word List (AWL) or the General Service List (GSL). However, it is also simple to generate your own vocabulary list because of corpus linguistics tools available online, for a specific field or even for a specific text.

- The *LexTutor Frequency List Builder* (see the list of resources) will pull out all words from a text or chosen corpus in order of frequency. However, the most frequent words are not the most useful words. More valuable is the *LexTutor KeyWord List Builder*. "The keyword list...contains all the words in your text that are at least 25 times more numerous in your text than in the reference corpus (the 'keyness factor')"; this reliably extracts a list of words both important to the text and relatively unlikely to be already known. You can run this search on your text, a representative text in the field of study, or "random wiki entries by subject," (See LexTutor) to get representative vocabulary for a given ESP field.

- A faster and more user-friendly option is *Vocabulary.com*'s *VocabGrabber*: "We'll instantly analyze the text and grab all the relevant vocabulary words from the text. These are words that we determine are necessary to fully understand the meaning of the text" (See Vocabulary.com VocabGrabber). It automatically generates definitions. You can also extract a word list separated by commas for input into other programs.

- *WordSmyth* can extract AWL or "challenge" words from a text—defined as the most unusual, least common words. It too automatically generates definitions, as well as examples.

- The *Spaceless Concordancer* produces a word list ranked by frequency after eliminating the 1000 most common English words in the passage. Like *LexTutor*, it can pull a word list from a URL as well as an entered text.

- *WebCorp* pulls a word list from an entered text or a URL, by frequency, omitting function words ('stop words').

## Step 2: Sort for batch entry

Once you have a word list, you can batch-enter it into a variety of web resources. However, as their formatting requirements differ slightly, a few web sites that automatically reformat word lists are useful.

- *SortMyList* seems both the simplest to use and the most versatile. You can change the separator character between words, or between words and definitions; alphabetize; reverse word order; or order by length.

- *The Alphabetizer* can also change the separator character (for example, tab, asterisk, space, new line), reverse word order, randomize, alphabetize, and remove duplicates.

- *Text Fixer* can do the aforementioned and can also remove punctuation if needed.

Keep your chosen resource open in a browser tab and reformat as necessary.

## Step 3: Get definitions

To know a word properly involves several elements: pronunciation, part of speech, register, collocations, connotations; but most essential is the definition. Fortunately, these can be added automatically.

- If you have used *Vocabulary.com* to generate the word list, you will already have definitions. However, the site has a limited built-in dictionary, only 12,000 words, so gaps are possible, and *Vocabulary.com* is not designed for ESL learners; definitions may be challenging.

- *Quizlet* is a more flexible option. If you enter your word list, it will offer a choice of crowd-sourced definitions. If all seem unsuitable, you can enter your own. Unlike *Vocabulary.com*, *Quizlet* allows you to export the word list with the definitions; both can then be batch-entered into other programs. *Quizlet* also offers some automatic reformatting of your word list if necessary.

- *WordSmyth* also supplies definitions for a batch-entered word list, and it, unlike *Vocabulary.com*, is designed with ESL in mind. It allows you to choose either a Beginner, Intermediate, or Advanced dictionary. Only twelve terms are permitted in a list, but this is not a serious limitation: Studies suggest that word lists should not be much longer than this for efficient memorization (e.g., Miller, 1956).

It is wise to batch-enter your word list into all three of these programs. Learners need to encounter each new term seven times, on average, in different contexts, in order to retain it (Thornbury, 2017, p. 24). By simply using each once, with their different definitions, your learner will have already encountered the term in three ways.

*Quizlet* and *Vocabulary.com* both offer mobile apps, so that students can commandeer any idle moment to drill using their smartphones. Learning could hardly be more convenient.

## Step 4: Get the pronunciation

Thanks to the Internet, and voice technology, you no longer need to model the correct pronunciation of each new term for your students. Nor is there any longer a need to teach the International Phonetic

Alphabet so that students can study pronunciation. A variety of web sites use automated speech to model the pronunciation of any words you enter. These voices do not sound artificial.

- Perhaps the clearest modelling available is at *Vocabulary and Spelling City*. It features American Standard Pronunciation in an enthusiastic female voice, saying the word aloud, spelling it aloud, and saying a sample sentence containing the word. It accepts batch entry of your word list and gives access as well to several visually-appealing activities. It offers a downloadable app. A paid premium version offers more options.

- *Quizlet* is a good complement to this; it offers Received Pronunciation (RP), also known as British pronunciation, in a male voice. This, useful added information also counts as an an additional encounter with the word in a different context. Each such variation aids memorization—and is the opposite of rote learning.

- *Vocabulary.com* will also sound the words in American Standard Pronunciation.

- Another option is *Cram*, which also offers a downloadable mobile app.

## Step 5: Add images

The popular concept of different learning styles is, at best, dubious (see, for example, Khazan, 2018). Unless we are dogs, we are all primarily visual learners. Evolution has made it our chief sense, through which we take in 83% of our knowledge of the world around us (Rosenblum, 2010). As a result, associating a new word with an image vastly increases the speed at which we learn it.

Rediscovered by TESL recently (Thornbury, 2017), this is a mnemonic device known for at least two thousand years. Aristotle knew it. Mark Twain knew it. "Dates are hard to remember because they consist of figures", he writes, and "figures are monotonously unstriking in appearance, and they don't take hold, they form no pictures, and so they give the eye no chance to help. Pictures are the thing. Pictures can make dates stick. They can make nearly anything stick…." (Twain, 1914, pp. 3–4).

Perhaps the first breakthrough in modern language learning was Francois Goin's discovery of the "Series Method": Essentially, that one learned a new word best by seeing the thing, rather than by translation. This not only aids the memory, but produces instant recognition, and so fluency.

With multimedia now so readily available, we can easily harness this power of images to improve our students' learning of new words.

- *Quizlet.com* offers its own bank of images. Often this is sufficient.

- *Flash Card Machine*, on the other hand, allows you to upload your own images, and you can batch enter your terms and definitions from *Quizlet*. Uploading your own images is more work, but it allows you to tailor images to be more memorable, based on mnemotechnic principles[1]. Finding images can be labour-intensive, but the elegant solution is to challenge a class to hunt for suitable images online. The search itself should be mnemonically effective: Thornbury (2017) and Twain

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1  Mnemotechnics is the art or science of memorization.

(1914) suggest that the most memorable images are images you have found yourself. The search for the best image can be a class competition. *Flash Card Machine* also allows you to add visual interest to text: bolding, underlining, varying text size. Although this seems unlikely ever to be needed, you can add your own audio files, as well.

- *Cram* also includes the ability to upload images.

- *GoConqr* is another option: it is a simple flash card program, but image upload is easy.

*Flash Card Machine* and *Cram*, like *Quizlet*, offer mobile apps. *GoConqr* has a "mobile version".

Now memorizing becomes exponentially easier.

# Step 6: Add context

While not an efficient way to learn a new term, recognizing the word in context is a vital aspect of knowing it. The growth of corpus linguistics has further made us more aware of collocation issues.

Several online resources will automatically generate contextual examples from your word list.

- *WordSmyth* usually has an example sentence available, and it can also produce a handsome gap-fill exercise automatically.

- *Vocabulary and Spelling City* also does this, and it will read out the example sentence as well as displaying it.

- *Vocabulary.com* can automatically extract example sentences from the text from which you drew the word list, or you can find an example sentence on the Internet. These can sometimes be shockingly current, adding the interest of realia plus newsworthiness. It also generates an automatic quiz based largely on context, quizzing randomly by definition, synonym, or example.

- It is also possible to create your own gap-fill exercises, extracting sample sentences with a concordancing tool like Lextutor's *Text Tool Sentence Extractor*. Once you have the sentences, online gap-fill exercises can be generated relatively effortlessly with *ClickSchool Cloze Maker*, *ClassTools*, or *Hot Potatoes jCloze*. See the list of resources following this article.

- Another useful way to add context is semantic mapping: Learners can create a visual chart of related words using a mind-mapping tool like *MindMapMaker,* or they can create semantic maps of new terms automatically using *Visuwords* or *Visual Thesaurus*. These can be cut and pasted to use as images in other programs. This is especially valuable for abstract terms.

The importance to memory of creating associations has, again, been known to the science of mnemotechnics for thousands of years. It was known to William James (1890):

> In mental terms, the more other facts a fact is associated with in the mind, the better possession of it our memory retains. Each of its associates becomes a hook to which it hangs, a means to fish it up by when sunk beneath the surface. Together, they form a network of attachments by which it is woven into the entire issue of our thought. The "secret of good memory" is thus the secret of forming diverse and multiple associations with every fact we care to retain. (p. 662)

# Step 7: Make a game

The real secret to memorization is attention. What we do not notice we will not remember, and what we do not remember, we have not learned. This is the fatal flaw in *drill and kill*, traditional memorization by rote: With each repetition, attention declines, and so one gets a death spiral of diminishing returns.

An ideal way to overcome this is through gamification. A game is naturally repetitive, but with variations and intrinsic motivation. With each iteration, the word is encountered in a slightly different way. Games, moreover, add the element of motion, of narrative flow. Just as evolution has made us visual animals, it has programmed us to be attracted to all that moves and changes.

Scott Thornbury writes: "Putting words to use, preferably in an interesting way, is the best way of ensuring they are added to long-term memory. ... Even unmotivated learners will learn vocabulary if set a task requiring them to make decisions about them" (Thornbury, 2017, p. 25).

Contemporary students are also well-primed to understand and to appreciate the video-game format.

- *Quizlet* offers two game-like presentations of entered word lists, called 'Match' and 'Gravity'. You can easily generate more games from a variety of other platforms by batch-entering the words and definitions from *Quizlet*.

- *Classtools*'s 'Arcade Game Generator' offers seven arcade-style games once you batch-enter. 'Word-Shoot' seems especially popular with learners.

- *WordSmyth* creates eight activities of varying sophistication. 'Guess What?' is especially good for teaching part of speech and context.

- *StudyStack* offers 13 primitive-looking activities, seven of them games.

- *Vocabulary and Spelling City* features nine free activities, including an attractive variant on 'Hangman' called 'Hangmouse'.

- *Cram* offers two activities, both highly appealing visually, looking like commercial video games.

The web offers further options with a bit more work. For these, however, you must include several distractors along with the correct answer.

- *ClassTools*'s 'Fling the Teacher' is a crowd-pleaser especially suitable for use in-class.

- *Wisc* produces 20 games once you have uploaded your content as an Excel file.

- *Factile*, *Jeopardy Labs*, and *Baamboozle* offer 'Jeopardy'-like games. *Factile* and *Baamboozle* let you upload images.

These multiple-choice games work best as competitions in class, as opposed to independent study. Having students compete for the high score is a painless and seamless sort of formative assessment.

## Step 8: Put it all together

If you have access to a Learning Management System (LMS), it is simple to host links to these resources for your students there, making them available inside and outside of class. But this is not necessary. You can host your educational content on the fly with almost no effort as a note in *OneNote*, available as part of *Microsoft Office* suite or online, or *EverNote*, and make it available by sharing the link with your class. You can also create and host your own web site for free with, among other options, *WordPress*, *Weebly*, *Blogger*, or *Wix*—all allow simple drag-and-drop design. Additionally, a document with hypertext links in Word or any other word processor can be created and distributed through email.

A more interesting option is to use *Google Maps' 'MyMaps'* feature to place words, definitions, images, and weblinks on a map of some location either exotic or familiar. This makes use again of our biologically-based attraction to motion and to narrative. Location was a key to many traditional mnemonic systems, to the classical "memory palace" and to the legendary banquet of Simonides[2]. By associating our lesson with an imaginary journey, we make the terms more immediately memorable.

This is especially useful for associated terms with this caveat: If presenting a series of associated terms, make sure they are associated by context, as lexical chains, not by being of the same class, a lexical set. That is, do not present a list of words describing similar things, like a list of fruits, but items that might come up in the same conversation, like terms used to order in a restaurant, including different parts of speech. If the former, studies show memorization will be hindered by the similarity in meaning; as a general principle, difference is more interesting, and so more memorable than sameness. If the latter, a lexical chain, the natural associations developed by this method will make them easier to retrieve as needed (Thornbury, 2017, p. 37). Memory, as William James reminds us, works in large part by chains of associations.

## Conclusion

Once you have your incredible vocabulary machine built and in working order, your job in terms of presenting vocabulary is almost done. No flash cards and no assembly-line work: You have automated this essential task. Once the system is up and running, it becomes easy to enter new vocabulary terms as desired, and you will find your students enjoying themselves as they learn English and achieve fluency faster than ever before. Moreover, once you have the system worked out, the same techniques and tools can be used with little modification to learn almost anything else you might want to teach or learn—painlessly, quickly, and enjoyably.

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2       For this and more on mnemotechics see, for example: Yates, F. (1966). *The art of memory*. University of Chicago Press; Carruthers, M., & Ziolkowski, J. (2003). *The medieval craft of memory*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

# Resources

### Building a word list
- LexTutor: http://www.lextutor.ca
- Vocabulary.com: https://www.vocabulary.com
- WordSmyth: https://www.wordsmyth.net
- Spaceless Concordancer: http://www.spaceless.com
- WebCorp: http://www.webcorp.org.uk/live/

### Sorting for batch entry
- SortMyList: http://sortmylist.com
- The Alphabetizer: http://alphabetizer.flap.tv/
- Text Fixer: https://www.textfixer.com/tools/alphabetical-order.php

### Getting Definitions
- Quizlet: http://quizlet.com/

### Getting the pronunciation
- Vocabulary and Spelling City: https://www.spellingcity.com/
- Cram: https://www.cram.com/

### Adding images
- Flash Card Machine: https://www.flashcardmachine.com/
- GoConqr: https://www.goconqr.com/

### Adding context
- ClickSchool Cloze Maker: https://www.clickschool.co.uk/pages/cloze/
- ClassTools: https://www.classtools.net/cloze/
- Hot Potatoes jCloze for gapfills: https://hotpot.uvic.ca/
- MindMapMaker: https://mindmapmaker.org/
- Visuwords: https://visuwords.com/
- Visual Thesaurus: https://www.visualthesaurus.com/

### Making a game
- StudyStack: https://www.studystack.com
- Wisc: https://www.wisc-online.com/
- Factile: https://www.playfactile.com/mygames
- Jeopardy Labs: https://jeopardylabs.com/
- Baamboozle: https://www.baamboozle.com/

### Putting it all together
- WordPress: https://wordpress.com
- Weebly: https://weebly.com
- Wix: https://wix.com
- Blogger: https://www.blogger.com
- OneNote: https://onenote.com
- Evernote: https://evernote.com

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