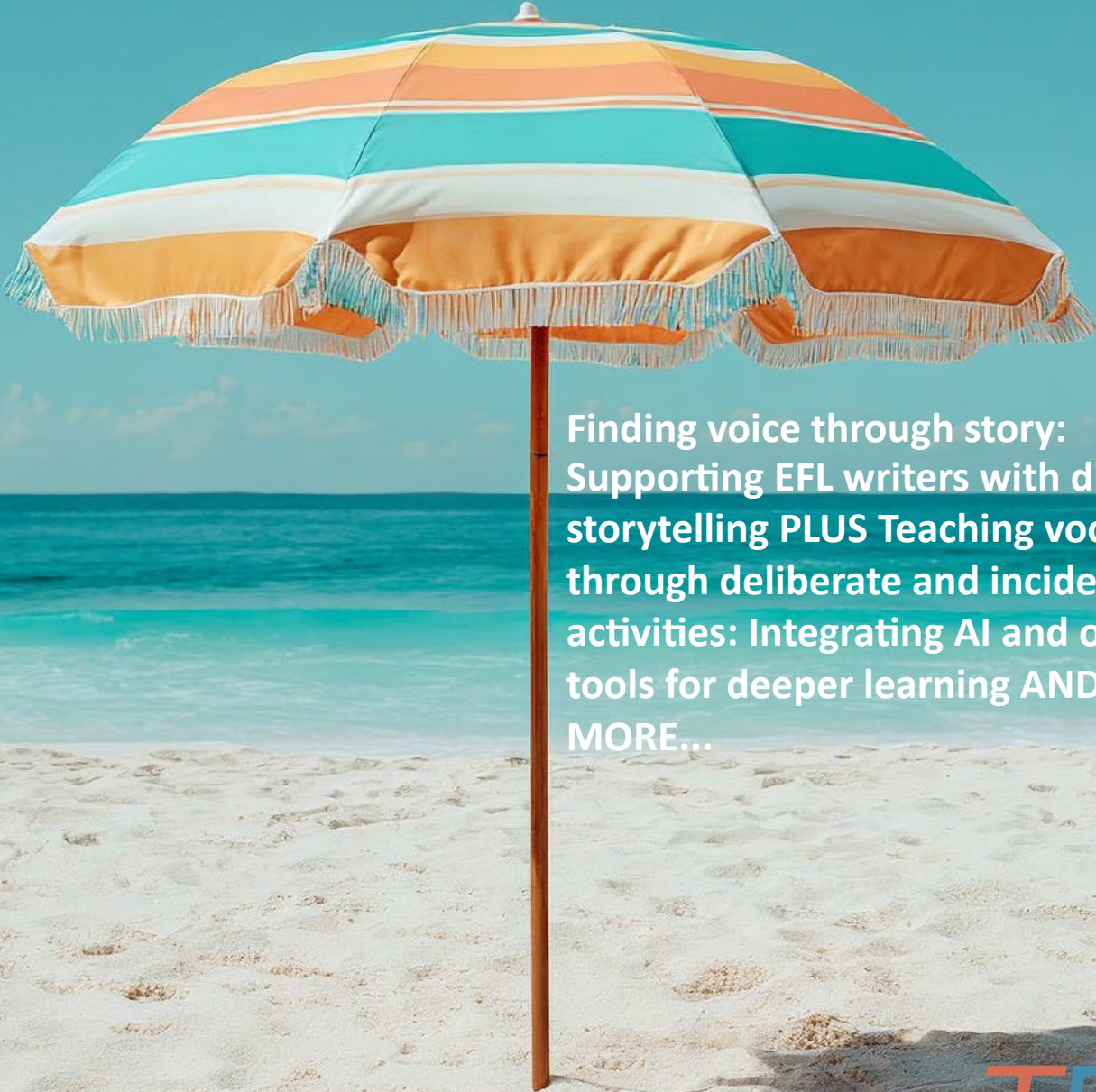


English Language Learning Magazine

CONTACT

August 2026



**Finding voice through story:
Supporting EFL writers with digital
storytelling PLUS Teaching vocabulary
through deliberate and incidental
activities: Integrating AI and online
tools for deeper learning AND
MORE...**

VOLUME 52 NUMBER 2, August, 2026

ISSN # 0227-293

Teachers of English as a Second Language Association of Ontario

<https://www.teslontario.org/write-us>

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Photostockeditor. [Photo]. Beach umbrella. Retrieved from <https://pixabay.com/photos/umbrella-beach-summer-sand-teal-9710962/>

Calendar of Events

September	October	November
September 16 — Social-Emotional Learning: A Three-Phase Approach	October 8 — Creating Dynamic Genially Games	November 4–6 — TESL Ontario Annual Conference
September 19 — TESL Durham September Game Day Social	Ocotber 16–17 — ATEAL	November 19 — TESOL 2026 Graduate Student Forum
September 22 — TESL Ottawa Fall Webinar #1	October 21 — TESL North York/York Region Fall PD Event	
September 24 — TESL Ontario Mentorship Event		
September 27 — Teaching Well, Living Well!		

Editor's Note

Another summer has pretty much come and gone, and I hope you had a wonderful one filled with sunshine, good memories, and time to enjoy the things that matter most. As we welcome a new season, I am also excited to welcome another issue and the stories, ideas, and perspectives that make our publication special.

This issue starts with Irene Kosmas, the Spotlight. She is a Program Coordinator for the EAP and TESL programs at Humber Polytechnic's English Language Centre. With over 20 years in English language education, she is a TESL Ontario Accredited OCELT and former Board of Directors member. She takes on a humanistic approach to language teaching and mentorship ... something the world could use more of nowadays. Thank you, Irene, for contributing—your piece is a great addition to the summer issue.

A heartfelt thank you goes to all of the writers and contributors who took the time to share their work with us: Anthony Daynes; Elif Once-Buyukerol and Mohammad Reza Montazeri; Driss Ait El Haj; Andrés Chinchín Talavera; Mercedes Veselka and Natalia Balyasnikova; Hamid Ashraf, Parisa Nafissi Rad, Sima Kamel Sharbaf, and Mahnaz Nafissirad; and Staci-Anne Nogami. Your words, experiences, research, creativity, and insights are what bring each issue to life. I truly appreciate the time and thought you put into contributing.

I also want to remind our readers that everyone has something to offer. You don't have to consider yourself a professional writer to have a story worth sharing. Your experiences, knowledge, talents, opinions, and unique perspective may

be exactly what another reader needs to hear. So, as we begin another season, I encourage you to consider contributing. Whether you have an idea for an article, a personal story, a helpful tip, or something completely different, I would love to hear from you.

Thank you for being part of our community, and I hope you enjoy this issue! Thank you for reading. Take care.



-Nicola Carozza
editor@teslontario.org





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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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Design	Nicola Carozza

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ISSN # 0227-2938

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Spotlight — Irene Kosmas



Irene Kosmas is Program Coordinator for the EAP and TESL programs at Humber Polytechnic's English Language Centre, where she provides academic leadership and supervises practicum placements for teacher candidates. She has taught courses in TESOL Methodology, Linguistics, and Culture and Society across initial teacher education programs at York University, Seneca Polytechnic, and Humber Polytechnic. A PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics at York University, Irene's doctoral research examines mentor teacher experiences in TESOL practicums. With over 20 years in English language education, she is a TESL Ontario Accredited OCELTA and former Board of Directors member, driven by a deeply humanistic approach to language teaching and mentorship.

Thank you for taking the time for this interview, Irene! You were nominated for the Spotlight by Farnaz Karimian for the impact you have on the TESL world – so tell us a little about your current work.

Thank you so much, and thank you to Farnaz for the kind nomination. It means a great deal coming from a colleague and friend in this field.

I currently serve as Program Coordinator at Humber Polytechnic's English Language Centre, providing academic leadership for our English for Academic Purposes (EAP) certificate and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) graduate certificate programs, where I also supervise practicum placements, working closely with teacher candidates as they move from theory into practice. I teach the Practicum course, focusing on preparing new teachers to apply TESL theory in real-world adult ESL classrooms, as well as courses such as Methodology, Linguistics, and Culture and Society across initial teacher education programs at York University, Seneca Polytechnic, and Humber Polytechnic.

I'm also a PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics at York University, where my doctoral research looks at mentor teacher experiences in TESOL practicums—examining the mentorship relationship and professional development from the perspective of the mentor, an area I think doesn't get nearly enough attention. That research grows directly out of more than 20+ years of working alongside TESL learners and thinking about how we support the mentor teachers who support TESL candidates during the practicum.

If you could use 3 adjectives to describe the work you have done, what would they be and why?

I'd choose *collaborative*, *relational*, and *evolving*.

Collaborative, because nothing I've done—coordinating programs, developing curriculum, launching new initiatives—has ever been a solo effort. It's always meant working closely with faculty, mentor teachers, and colleagues across departments and institutions to get things done well.

Relational, because at the core of teaching, mentoring, and academic leadership is people. Whether I'm supporting a teacher candidate through their practicum or mentoring a colleague, the work only succeeds when it's built on trust and genuine connection.

Evolving, because over 20+ years the field—and my role in it—has never stood still. From the English courses I have taught to the research questions I'm now asking as a PhD candidate, I've had to keep growing and adapting, and I think that's exactly what this work demands.

You are a PhD Candidate in Applied Linguistics. Tell us more about your passion for TESOL and mentorship.

My passion for mentorship really comes from having lived on both sides of it. Early in my career, I benefited from mentors who took the time to guide me through the practicum experience and beyond, and for the past two decades, I've had the privilege of being on the other side of that relationship—mentoring teacher candidates, host teachers, and faculty as they find their footing in the field.

Over the years, I've supported so many new teachers and mentors, and my greatest joy has always been the same: watching someone step into their role and gradually gain confidence—that shift from uncertainty to *I can actually do this*. I learn just as much from being part of that process as they do. Every language learner, every mentee, and every mentor teacher I've worked with, has taught me something about teaching, about patience, or about myself, and that exchange is really what keeps me so invested in this work.

That's also what drew me to my doctoral research. In TESOL practicums, so much attention understandably goes to the teacher candidate's experience—but the mentor teacher's experience is often overlooked. Mentors are doing

significant, often invisible, professional and emotional labour: opening up their classrooms, sharing their practice, and guiding someone else's growth, often without much formal recognition or support. My research looks at mentor teacher experiences in TESOL practicums because I wanted to understand what mentors need, what challenges them, and how we can support them more intentionally for their professional development.

At its core, my passion for TESOL is really a passion for the people who make it come alive—not only the teachers and mentors who devote themselves to this profession, but the English language learners themselves, whose determination and growth remind me why this work matters in the first place.

If you could redesign English education from scratch, what would you change?

My strong conviction is that people remember far more about how you made them feel than what you actually taught them, and if I could redesign English education from scratch, I'd want that humanistic perspective built into the foundation of the system—not treated as a nice-to-have, but as a core principle.

In practice, that starts with how we support teachers. So much of language teacher education depends on the quality of practicum mentorship, yet mentors are rarely given the training, time, or recognition the role deserves. I'd build in structured, ongoing professional development for mentors—not a one-off orientation, but real, sustained support—because how a new teacher is made to feel during that formative experience shapes the kind of teacher, and mentor, they go on to become.



I'd also close the gap between theory and practice earlier and more often, immersing teacher candidates in real classrooms — with guidance — much sooner, so they learn early on that connection and confidence matter just as much as methodology.

And above all, I'd want the system to treat English language learners as whole people navigating a major life transition, not just students working through a curriculum. Learners may forget a grammar rule, but they won't forget whether they felt respected, capable, and welcomed in the process of learning it. That, to me, is what English education should be redesigned around.

What's something you've learned from your students that surprised you?

Because I teach two very different groups—English language learners and TESL teacher candidates—I've actually learned something surprising from each.

From my English language learners, I've learned just how resilient, courageous, and capable they truly are. Many are navigating incredible challenges and trauma, yet they're building strong lives here in Canada for themselves and their families, often while learning a new language at the same time. It's humbling to witness that strength up close, and it constantly recalibrates my sense of what real perseverance looks like.

From my TESL candidates, what has surprised and moved me is how deeply they believe in this work. They genuinely want to make a difference in their students' lives, and I've seen candidates light up with pride over helping just one student make progress. That's not something you can teach; it's something they bring with them, and it reminds me that the future of this field is in good hands.

Between the two, I've come to see that this work is really sustained by the same quality on both sides—a quiet, determined belief that things can get better, whether you're the one learning the language or the one teaching it.

What's the biggest challenge facing English language education today?

Honestly, my strongest opinion here is about funding and priorities. I don't think money is being directed at the right things. We need policies that put learners and small class sizes first—real investment in the conditions that let learning actually happen—rather than funding that treats learners like numbers to move through the system.

There's a real push from government to move learners in and out quickly, but language education doesn't work that way. There's no magic formula for learning a new language—it takes time, support, and community. One-size-fits-all programs that focus on moving learners through quickly do a disservice to people who are trying to build real lives here, not just check a box.

At the same time, teachers need meaningful time—ideally alongside their professional learning networks—to genuinely explore and experiment with AI and other emerging tools, rather than being handed a one-off workshop and expected to adapt. Right now, professional development in this area tends to be rushed and surface-level, when what's actually needed is sustained, well-resourced time to build real competence and confidence with these technologies.

So for me, the biggest challenge is a mismatch in priorities: We need funding and policy that reflect what language learning actually requires: time, smaller classes, community, and well-supported teachers instead of systems built around speed and standardization.



What's one piece of advice you wish every English learner knew?

I wish every English learner knew that mistakes are not a sign of failure; they're proof that you're actually learning. So many learners hold themselves back out of fear of getting it wrong, but the students I've seen grow the most are the ones who are willing to speak up, stumble, and try again anyway. Fluency isn't built by waiting until you feel ready; it's built by using the language, imperfectly, over and over.

And beyond the language itself, I wish every learner knew that they bring real strength and courage to this process. Learning a new language as an adult, often while rebuilding a life in a new country, is one of the hardest things a person can do—and that effort deserves to be recognized, including by the learners themselves.

Thank you once again for your contribution, Irene!

You can connect with Irene at irene.kosmas@humber.ca or irene25@yorku.ca and on her [LinkedIn](#).



Finding voice through story: Supporting EFL writers with digital storytelling

By Anthony Daynes, Canada

Storytelling has long been a powerful tool for teaching and learning. Across cultures and disciplines, it allows educators and students to connect personal experience with academic content. In language classrooms, storytelling can take many forms, like written narratives, digital stories, reflective journals, or oral accounts. Yet many teachers hesitate to incorporate storytelling into writing instruction. Time constraints, curriculum demands, assessment pressures, and large class sizes can make narrative work seem impractical, as traditional academic writing goals typically conflict with personal expression.

However, when implemented meticulously, storytelling can become more than an engaging activity; it can serve as a powerful catalyst for writing development. By grounding language practice in lived experience, storytelling can increase fluency, deepen engagement, and help learners build both confidence and writing skills (Pomerantz & Kearney, 2012). This article explores how personal storytelling can support writing development in ESL classrooms and offers practical strategies for integrating narrative tasks into academic writing instruction.

Background

Writing is one of the four core language skills and plays a critical role in developing English proficiency (Brown & Lee, 2015). It is also an essential part of everyday communication, ranging from informal messages to formal academic texts or reports. Due to its importance, learners must gradually develop writing proficiency to participate effectively in academic and social contexts. However, teaching and learning writing in a second or foreign language can be challenging for both instructors and students.

Research shows that many learners struggle with writing in English due to difficulties with content development, organization, and vocabulary. For example, Rizal (2021) notes that students in foreign language (FL) contexts often rely heavily on teacher translation or textbook models when producing written texts. Instead of developing their own ideas, learners may wait for explicit guidance from the instructor before even attempting to write independently. This can limit students' opportunities to experiment with language and to develop confidence as writers.

Motivation also plays an important role in writing development. Both Rizal (2021) and Castillo-Cuesta et al. (2021) suggest that students' lack of engagement with writing tasks may stem from limited motivation

or interest in traditional writing activities. When writing tasks feel disconnected from learners' personal experiences or interests, students may view them as mechanical exercises rather than meaningful communicative activities, which can make it difficult to produce longer, more comprehensive texts. In my own language learning, tasks grounded in personal experience led to greater risk-taking and visible development over time, suggesting that relevance plays a key role in engagement.

Exposure to language outside the classroom can also influence learners' motivation and writing development. Fegher and Wandera-Simwa (2025) argue that linguistic landscapes (such as road signs, advertisements or product packaging) can encourage learners to engage more with English in their daily life. This exposure helps students see language as a living system used in real-world contexts rather than as a classroom subject.

Despite the importance of writing instruction, effective writing pedagogy is not always prioritized in FL classrooms. Teaching writing often requires careful planning, extensive feedback, and significant instructional time, which can be difficult to manage in FL contexts with multiple large classes and demanding curricula (Rizal, 2021). Thus, instructors may rely on more controlled writing tasks that prioritize grammatical accuracy over creativity or personal expression (Marshall, 2010).

Storytelling offers one possible way to address such challenges. By allowing students to write about meaningful experiences or imagined narratives, storytelling can create opportunities for learners to engage with language in more authentic and motivating ways. Narrative writing tasks may also reduce the pressure associated with standard writing tasks, allowing students to experiment with vocabulary and sentence structure as they become more confident writers (Rizal, 2021).

Storytelling may also help make writing tasks more meaningful for learners. Rizal (2021) suggests that storytelling allows students to draw on vocabulary and sentence structures they have previously learned while experimenting creatively with language. As learners organize their ideas into narratives, they begin to develop a clearer sense of linguistic structure and how different language forms work together within a text. Over time, these experiences can help students build the foundation needed to engage with more complex forms of writing.

Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling (DS) extends traditional narrative work by integrating images, audio, music, and video with written text. These multimodal affordances can scaffold creativity, enrich organization, and broaden lexical choices, particularly for EFL learners who benefit from visual and auditory cues (Castillo-Cuesta et al., 2021). When students draft scripts, select or create visuals, record voice-overs, and edit sequences,

they cycle through planning, composing, revising, and publishing, which are key phases of process writing (Brown & Lee, 2015; Castillo-Cuesta et al., 2021).

DS can also lower affective barriers. Images help anchor memories; audio narration invites rehearsal and attention to pronunciation and rhythm; and timelines support coherence. These features can increase engagement and support the “noticing” of form-meaning connections, such as tense consistency or cohesive devices (Lightbown & Spada, 2021). Importantly, DS does not replace writing; rather, it complements it by strengthening fluency, audience awareness, and rhetorical control that can transfer to analytical genres (Castillo-Cuesta et al., 2021; Pomerantz & Kearney, 2012). When learners revisit and reshape their experiences into narrative form, they must also reprocess language more deeply through reflection and revision. This kind of engagement, which I have observed both in my own learning and in classroom contexts, supports more durable language development.

Classroom applications

Storytelling can be incorporated into language classrooms through a range of activities that encourage students to experiment with language while connecting writing to personal experience. The following examples illustrate how narrative-based tasks can support writing development in both traditional and digital learning environments. Students should also be encouraged to give one another feedback on their stories so that they can learn from each other.

Personal narrative journals

One way to introduce storytelling in a classroom context is to ask students to write short entries about meaningful experiences related to class topics. For example, discussing travel stories with family or difficulties at work. Students should be encouraged to write as much as they can, listing problems, solutions, funny moments, times they enjoy, etc. This kind of task will help encourage students to engage with the language through their own personal reflective lens, which may help reduce anxiety. As the students’ proficiency increases, they can include more content and advanced sentence structures (i.e., simple past to past perfect tenses, dependent/independent clauses).

An example of a prompt could be: *Write a story about a time you went on a trip with your friends or family. Where did you go? For how long were you gone? Your story should include something funny, a problem, and a solution.*

By level:

- Beginner learners may need sentence starters (e.g., “Last summer, I...,” “We felt... because...”), word banks, and targeted grammar focus.
- Intermediate learners can emphasize paragraphing, transitions (however, meanwhile, finally), and varied sentence structures.
- Advanced learners should be encouraged to add personal reflections on the story.

Language learning stories

Language Learning Stories (LLS) invite students to narrate their own development as English learners by documenting moments of confusion, discovery, and progress. Instead of writing only about external topics, students reflect on their evolving relationship with the language itself. This practice supports metacognitive awareness, encourages meaningful noticing, and provides a motivating record of growth over time.

LLS are especially valuable because many learners rarely pause to reflect on how they are learning. They may complete exercises or memorize vocabulary, but they do not always track the *process* of improvement. Writing about these experiences helps students identify recurring patterns in their mistakes, recognize successful strategies, and take ownership of their progress. This directly aligns with the Noticing Hypothesis, which suggests that learners must consciously attend to linguistic features to acquire them (Lightbown & Spada, 2021). By articulating what changed and why, learners strengthen the mental connections needed for long-term retention.

An example prompt could be: *Choose one grammar or vocabulary area you improved this week. Show your before/after examples and explain the change.*

By level:

- Beginner learners may benefit from sentence prompts such as “*At first, I thought... but then I learned...*” or “*My mistake was... The correct form is...*” Visual aids or teacher-provided examples can also help guide their writing.
- Intermediate learners can write more detailed accounts of the learning, including who they were speaking or working with, and can begin connecting their experiences to grammar.
- Advanced learners can reflect on broader themes such as identity, confidence, and strategy. They may also analyze patterns across multiple weeks of entries, discussing what their mistakes reveal about their interlanguage development.

LLS also integrate naturally with digital storytelling. After several weeks of written reflections, students can select two or three important moments to transform into a short digital narrative. This requires learners to revisit past writing, revising it for clarity, and condensing it into a script. Choosing images to represent their experiences promotes clarity of meaning, while recording narration encourages rehearsal and improved autonomy.

Digital storytelling formative assessment

The bulk of what makes DS so appealing as a pedagogy is the final formative assessment. In this assessment, the student is tasked with revisiting all the other reflections and stories made throughout the semester, compiling them, editing them (with provided feedback), and developing a narrative of everything they have learned throughout the course. This can be written or orally recorded. This final reflective culmination acts as a catalyst for reflection and learning.

An example prompt could be: Create a two to three-minute digital story titled ‘My English Learning Journey This Semester.’ The story should combine written text, images, and recorded narration to present key moments from their language learning experience.

Select three important moments from your earlier writing, such as:

- a challenge you faced when writing in English
- a grammar or vocabulary concept you improved on
- a meaningful classroom activity
- a moment when you felt more confident using English

Teaching implications

Alignment with SLA principles

Storytelling supports process writing (planning, drafting, revising) and encourages meaningful output, feedback, and reflection (Brown & Lee, 2015). Metacognitive components in Language Learning Stories and DS final formative assessments exemplify the Noticing Hypothesis by explicitly attending to form–meaning relationships (Lightbown & Spada, 2021), thereby enabling students to see their mistakes and revise them. Beyond noticing, these activities also promote what Leow (2023) describes as deep processing, as learners engage with language meaningfully through reflection, revision, and personal connection, which supports stronger retention and learning. Peer interactions further this by emphasizing feedback to help with comprehensible input and provide opportunities for pushed output.

Feedback & affordances

A two-phase feedback model is effective: respond first to the message and organization, then target a small set of high-impact language features (e.g., tense control, article use). This preserves fluency gains while supporting accuracy (Brown & Lee, 2015). There should also be a balance between DS and traditional storytelling, possibly by assigning the former one week and the latter another. Use minimalist rubrics and selective marking and encourage students to give feedback on each other's work. Allow students a choice between low-tech DS (photo slides + voice-over) and a traditional essay, or an audio essay, for the same learning goals (Castillo-Cuesta et al., 2021). Provide institutionally available tools or no-cost options to limit the students' needs. Encourage the use of multilingual resources for planning (L1 brainstorming) while keeping final products in the target language, as appropriate to course outcomes (Brown & Lee, 2015). Incorporate local linguistic landscapes (photos of signs, menus, ads) as prompts for stories and vocabulary building, helping students connect English to daily life and community (Fegher & Wandera-Simwa, 2025).

Conclusion

Personal and digital storytelling are not distractions from writing; they are powerful pathways toward it. By centring lived experience, narrative tasks lower affective barriers, increase engagement, and scaffold key dimensions of writing development, creativity, organization, and controlled experimentation with language. Digital storytelling adds multimodal supports that make noticing and revision more concrete and motivating. Over time, as students see themselves as authors with something to say, they gain the confidence and control necessary for more formal genres.

I saw this trajectory in my own learning and later in the classroom, stories made risk-taking feel safe, and practice felt purposeful. For EFL writers, storytelling (both traditional and digital) helps transform *correct sentences* into meaningful communication, and *language practice* into voice. When we design writing instruction that invites students to speak from experience and shape narratives for real audiences, we give them more than assignments; we give them authorship.

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Teaching vocabulary through deliberate and incidental activities: Integrating AI and online tools for deeper learning

By Elif Once-Buyukerol & Mohammad Reza Montazeri, Canada

Introduction

Vocabulary learning can occur deliberately or incidentally, but these approaches may differ in purpose, process, and effectiveness. Deliberate learning of second language (L2) vocabulary refers to intentional learning of words, in which learners focus on memorizing or practicing words through activities like flashcards, dictionaries, or word exercises (e.g., Nakata, 2020). On the other hand, incidental learning pertains to the learning of vocabulary as a by-product of meaning-focused tasks rather than through explicit memorization (Boers, 2020). For example, learners may be reading or listening and picking up new words without the deliberate intention to study them.

Research has shown that deliberate learning is particularly important for beginning-level learners, which leads to faster short-term gains (Webb et al., 2022). On the other hand, incidental learning tends to be slower and less direct than studying word lists or flashcards, since new words do not appear often enough for beginners to notice and remember them easily. However, for more advanced learners, repeated exposure to words in meaningful contexts can be especially fruitful, as they are better able to notice, infer, and retain new vocabulary over time (Webb, 2020).

Both deliberate and incidental vocabulary learning play essential roles in L2 development. Deliberate learning allows learners to focus on specific words and meanings, building a foundation of essential vocabulary through activities such as flashcards, dictionaries, or targeted exercises. Incidental learning, in contrast, occurs naturally through exposure to meaningful language in context, helping learners acquire the vast number of words needed to use English effectively. Research has shown that to read independently in English, L2 learners need to know approximately 8,000–9,000 word families (Nation, 2006). Given the sheer size of this vocabulary, combining deliberate study with rich, contextual exposure ensures both a robust foundation and ongoing, deeper learning of words.

L2 teachers are, therefore, encouraged to integrate the affordances of both teaching methods to maximize the learning gains. Current technology could facilitate this process. Particularly, the advent of Artificial

Intelligence (AI) has revolutionized vocabulary learning, allowing teachers to harness AI tools judiciously to teach vocabulary items either deliberately (through various exercise types) or incidentally (through reading, listening, reading-while-listening, and viewing). In what follows, we will expound on the affordances of each method through the lens of technology and AI. Due to its widespread use in textbooks and classroom practices, the first section will focus on gap-filling exercises as a key component of deliberate vocabulary learning. The second section will delve into various modes through which vocabulary is presented incidentally. We will finally culminate with some practical Do's and Don'ts for utilizing technology in vocabulary learning.

Deliberate learning of vocabulary through technology and AI

Deliberate learning plays a key role in vocabulary instruction (Pellicer-Sanchez, 2020). Research has consistently shown the benefits of explicit instruction and intentional learning activities for vocabulary development (Gardner & Davies, 2007; Webb & Kagimoto, 2009). This is especially true for multiword items such as idioms (*e.g., kick the bucket*) and phrasal verbs (*e.g., let down*) which are often more difficult to learn and recall since the overall meaning of them is often different than their individual parts.

This emphasis on deliberate vocabulary learning is also reflected in instructional materials. Many widely used vocabulary textbooks include a range of explicit practice activities (Strong & Boers, 2019). Among these, gap-filling exercises stand out for their relevance to real-life communication. In these tasks, learners must infer or predict missing words based on context—a process that mirrors how meaning is often constructed during spontaneous conversation.

When examining common textbooks, two main types of gap-filling activities emerge:

- Free guessing, where no clue is provided (*e.g., She's got straight _____*) (*correct answer: hair*)
- Constraint guessing, where a partial clue is given (*e.g., She's got straight h_____ or she's got straight _____*). (*correct answer: hair*)

While research highlights the advantages of free guessing for long-term retention (Grimaldi & Karpicke, 2012), it also cautions teachers about the potential cognitive load it can impose on learners. Therefore, it is important for teachers to understand the benefits of free guessing exercise types and how to use them effectively in and beyond the classroom to reduce the cognitive load.

Integrating online tools for gap-filling exercises

As language teaching increasingly moves to digital environments, incorporating technology can make traditional exercises like gap-filling more engaging and effective. Several online tools can enhance learning experience. We highlight two user-friendly and lesser-known options: Edpuzzle (<https://edpuzzle.com>)

and Wooclap (<https://www.wooclap.com>).

Edpuzzle allows teachers to embed interactive questions directly into videos. Questions can range from multiple-choice to open-ended formats. While the tool can be used to teach any language skill, the open-ended question option is particularly useful for creating free guessing tasks. Teachers can upload videos from platforms like YouTube or use Edpuzzle's open library to edit materials shared by others. Embedding a gap-filling task at a specific moment in the video provides learners with meaningful context for vocabulary use. This not only makes learning more enjoyable but also transforms a traditional textbook activity into an engaging, multimodal experience.

Wooclap is another free platform that turns lessons into interactive experiences. It offers a variety of task types, from presenting information to assessing learners and gathering feedback. For vocabulary instruction, features such as “*Label an image*,” “*Drag and drop*,” and “*Find on image*” are particularly valuable for teaching new words alongside visuals. The “Fill in the blanks” activity also works well for assessing vocabulary in context. Moreover, Wooclap's automatic grading system can ignore minor spelling errors, and its built-in timer adds an element of fun and challenge. These features make Wooclap both teacher-friendly and highly effective for vocabulary learning and review.

Using AI to enhance vocabulary teaching for gap-filling exercises

The use of AI in language teaching is rapidly expanding, offering new opportunities for both teachers and learners. When preparing gap-filling activities, AI tools such as ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com>) can serve as powerful assistants helping to generate, edit, or adapt content quickly. However, effective use depends on crafting clear prompts. Teachers should be trained to communicate their instructional goals and learner profiles clearly to AI tools to get useful results. For example, teachers can prompt AI to “act as an English language teacher” or even “as an intermediate-level learner” to generate exercises from different perspectives. The content produced will vary significantly depending on the role and purpose provided.

AI tools are especially valuable for gap-filling tasks because they can:

- prevent repetition and boredom by generating diverse, contextualized, and even localized versions of the same exercise.
- support multiple modalities, making materials adaptable for in-class and online environments such as Zoom, Google Slides, or Jamboard.

- allow easy customization, letting teachers edit, add, or remove elements to match learners' proficiency levels.
- enable multimodal learning through the integration of videos, images, and audio files, making vocabulary learning more engaging.

By incorporating pre-, while-, and post-activity stages into AI-generated materials, teachers can create richer and more dynamic vocabulary learning experiences while maintaining pedagogical depth.

Incidental learning of vocabulary through technology and AI

Repeated exposure in meaningful contexts (i.e., through reading, listening, reading-while-listening, and viewing) can help learners develop a deeper understanding of how words are used in context and build fluent, automatic access to vocabulary (Ballance & Cobb, 2020). In essence, technology offers valuable tools for enhancing these input modes by providing rich, multimodal exposure to language in authentic contexts.

Vocabulary learning through reading with digital tools

Digital reading platforms have transformed how learners engage with texts, offering interactive and multimodal ways to build vocabulary beyond traditional print reading. Online tools such as graded e-books, and browser-based readers can also allow learners to click on words for instant, interactive, or sometimes pictorial glosses (i.e., definitions), translations, and pronunciation.

These digital reading environments now offer adaptive features that help learners notice and understand unfamiliar words without interrupting the flow of reading. For example, the ReadLang platform allows learners to click on unfamiliar words in online texts and immediately view their meaning in their first language; the system then records these items for spaced review later (Ridout, 2024).

Recent advances in AI-assisted language learning demonstrate how intelligent tools can personalize and support vocabulary development. For example, custom GPT scaffolding can provide explanations and step-by-step guidance, helping learners notice and practice new words in meaningful contexts (Liu & Ma, 2025). GPT also can make learning more engaging and manageable by offering individualized feedback and highlighting usage patterns.

For ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers, these findings suggest that GPT can act as an effective scaffold for noticing and practicing real word usage while teachers guide, monitor progress, and gradually reduce support. The following example classroom procedure, based on Liu and Ma's (2025) study, illustrates how teachers can implement GPT scaffolding in practice:

- **Warm-up:** The teacher introduces three new words (one noun, one verb, one adjective).

Students guess meanings or recall any known forms.

- **Context exploration:** Students read real sentences (concordance lines) showing these words in context. For example, the word *dynamic* appears in sentences like “She is a *dynamic* leader” or “The market is *dynamic* and changing.” Students notice patterns and try to infer meanings.
- **GPT scaffolding:** Students use prepared prompts to ask the GPT tutor questions, such as:
 - “Give me two more sentences using *dynamic* in business.”
 - “Which words usually go with *dynamic*?”
 GPT provides examples, explanations, or hints.
- **Practice/output:** Students write their own sentences using the new words and check with GPT or the teacher for feedback.
- **Assessment:** Teachers can give a short test on word use, form, and meaning, and later discuss results with students to reflect on learning.

Vocabulary Learning through Listening with Digital Tools

Extensive listening (listening for overall meaning rather than individual words, often in an enjoyable way) provides an enjoyable and effective way to learn vocabulary incidentally, especially multiword expressions. Interestingly, unlike previous preconceptions, recent research shows listening can be as effective, or even more so, than reading for learning these expressions because spoken language presents them in smooth, natural speech (i.e., meaningful units rather than as separate words) (Webb & Chang, 2020). This helps learners hear phrases like *give up* in “He didn’t *give up* after failing the first time” as a single, meaningful unit.

Extensive listening can also happen through listening to music. One particular study evinced that English song lyrics can be an enjoyable and powerful tool for teaching phrasal verbs, offering repeated, natural exposure, especially in Pop and Hip-hop music genres (Akbari et al., 2018). Based on the findings, Pop songs worked better for lower-level learners due to their repetition and clear language, while Hip-hop suited advanced learners with its wider range of expressions.

This type of listening can be enhanced with technology tools like LyricsTraining, which displays synchronized lyrics and highlights target words. Learners can interact with the lyrics by completing exercises and playing games, combining incidental vocabulary learning with active engagement (<https://lyricstraining.com>). Not only can this approach make learning enjoyable and memorable, but it can also reinforce word recognition and usage in context.

Both listening and reading help vocabulary learning, but research shows that combining them (i.e., hearing and reading a word at the same time) works even better. This kind of “dual input” aids the brain in remembering words more easily and using them later (Jung & Lee, 2023). It can also make learners more motivated and confident in using English (Vu & Peters, 2020).

To support bimodal input, digital platforms can combine listening and reading in engaging ways. To illustrate, the ReadLang platform allows learners to read texts while simultaneously listening to audio generated by the site, reinforcing word recognition and meaning through dual exposure. Likewise, listening materials can be created with NaturalReaders AI, a text-to-speech tool that produces clear, natural-sounding recordings with adjustable speeds, ensuring lower-proficiency learners can follow along without oversimplification (<https://www.naturalreaders.com>).

Vocabulary learning through viewing with digital tools

While reading and listening provide important exposure, viewing L2 content adds a layer of contextual richness that can make vocabulary more memorable. The benefits of this multimodal and adaptive input are supported by research, which shows that viewing, especially with captions, often outperforms reading or listening alone for incidental vocabulary learning (e.g., Teng, 2024). This is because watching L2 programs exposes learners to words in meaningful, multimodal contexts (through combining sound, text, and visuals) which helps them notice, understand, and remember new vocabulary.

Video-assisted platforms like YouGlish allow learners to hear words used in authentic speech across thousands of online videos. This platform furnishes L2 learners with multiple natural examples and native usage patterns that support incidental noticing and reinforce correct pronunciation (<https://youglish.com>). Learners can also adjust video speed to notice stress and rhythm in words and multiword expressions. Unlike traditional dictionaries, this platform also offers instant glossing to show word meanings in context.

Video-based learning can be optimized through using captions or subtitles. Subtitles, be it in English or in the first language, has proved to be conducive for vocabulary learning. Using bilingual subtitles (for example, showing both English and the first language) can be especially helpful (Chen, 2025). Learners can connect meaning and form more easily, follow the story without getting lost, and reinforce new vocabulary through repeated exposure. This approach supports both younger learners, who need more guidance, and more advanced learners, who benefit from seeing subtle differences in word use (Chen, 2025).

For ESL learners, this means that making use of AI tools such as YouTube’s automatic caption generation or bilingual subtitle plug-ins can replicate this advantage. Another powerful online platform for creating

subtitles for any video is Kapwing, which automatically generates captions, allows easy editing for accuracy, and supports multiple languages (<https://www.kapwing.com>).

Do's and don'ts of deliberate and incidental learning of vocabulary

Do's:

- **Encourage contextual guessing.** Integrate gap-filling exercises that encourage learners to predict missing words from context, as this mirrors real-life language use and strengthens inference skills.
- **Blend technology with pedagogy.** Experiment with digital tools and AI platforms such as Edpuzzle, Wooclap, or ChatGPT to make vocabulary practice interactive, multimodal, and adaptable to different proficiency levels.
- **Use meaning-focused, level-appropriate materials.** Select engaging texts, videos, or audio (e.g., graded readers, captioned videos) that let learners focus on meaning without being overwhelmed by unknown words.
- **Promote repeated, multimodal exposure.** Combine reading, listening, and viewing (using tools like ReadLang, YouGlish, or LyricsTraining) to recycle target words across varied contexts.
- **Integrate light reflection and AI support.** After tasks, briefly discuss or notice new words, and use AI tools as scaffolds (not substitutes) to explain usage, personalize input, and guide noticing while maintaining teacher oversight.

Don'ts:

- **Avoid repetition and overload.** Don't rely only on textbook-based or repetitive gap-filling exercises. Vary the content, difficulty, and context to sustain learner engagement and prevent cognitive fatigue.
- **Don't let AI lead without guidance.** Avoid using AI tools without clear instructional goals or well-structured prompts. Ambiguous directions can result in irrelevant or unproductive materials rather than meaningful learning opportunities.
- **Don't depend solely on AI glosses.** Overreliance on instant translations weakens contextual guessing and independent noticing.

- **Don't let technology be passive.** Encourage active interaction (such as clicking, replaying, or discussing) and include occasional follow-up to reinforce retention.

Conclusion

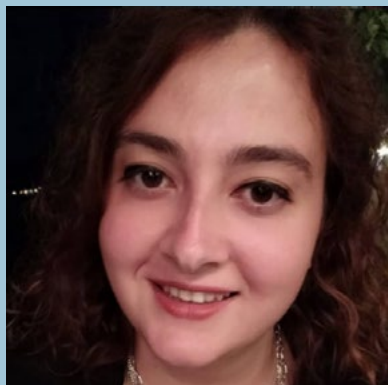
Both deliberate learning (particularly free gap-filling exercises) and incidental learning play essential roles in vocabulary teaching and learning. To make these approaches more effective, enjoyable for students, and time-efficient for teachers, the thoughtful and informed use of online tools and AI is key. By integrating these activities and strategies, ESL teachers can better support learners in expanding and strengthening their vocabulary knowledge.

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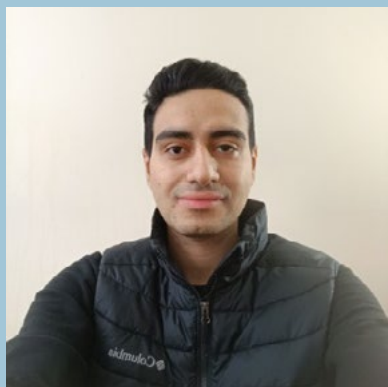
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Prioritizing deliberate reading to maximize SL learners' vocabulary gain: An example of teaching

By Driss Ait El Haj, Canada

In the context of second language (SL) acquisition, studies on the benefits of teaching vocabulary through reading have yielded significant outcomes, sparking debates over the most effective methods for vocabulary acquisition. Some studies argue that incidental learning helps SL learners acquire the form-meaning connection, as they are exposed to substantial input through reading and listening (Nation & Webb, 2017). Still, we should prioritize deliberate reading within the purview of instructed second-language acquisition (ISLA) if the aim is to teach form, especially formulaic language.

Incidental versus deliberate vocabulary learning

Given the ongoing debate over the efficiency of deliberate and incidental learning and their contributions to SL learning, it is crucial to compare the two before delving into teaching and learning vocabulary. First, let us give some brief definitions. Webb and Nation (2017) argue that incidental learning occurs when we mainly focus on the content of the text, whether oral or written, by encountering the words in the text repeatedly. This way, learning is not intentional since the primary focus is on understanding the input. Conversely, deliberate learning occurs when learners intentionally focus on the linguistic packaging to commit new words to memory or solidify the previously learned lexical items.

If both methods of acquiring vocabulary are efficient, we should, at this stage, examine which one performs better. Incidental learning, on the one hand, needs much input and time. In the case of teaching and learning an SL—or another additional language—learners need sustained exposure to authentic texts, which can be challenging. On the other hand, Nation (2016) contended that graded readers are potentially suitable for incidental language learning; however, it is well known that graded readers do not contain low-frequency words. Therefore, incidental learning cannot consistently aid in learning low-frequency words. As such, deliberate learning is better suited to accompany SL learners throughout their journey, from acquiring

high-frequency words to building a substantial vocabulary of low-frequency words. This stance aligns with Webb and Nation (2017) and Laufer (2003), who argue that deliberate learning may account for most vocabulary growth. To put it briefly, deliberate vocabulary learning may be more efficient than incidental learning, especially in an ISLA context.

What is ISLA?

It is crucial to define what ISLA is before attempting to explore its role in maximizing SL learners' uptake. ISLA, as determined by Loewen & Sato (2024), is a subfield that aims to understand how teaching and learning L2 occur in formal contexts; i.e., it examines how the systematic manipulation of learning mechanisms can work together to help learners acquire a second language in such contexts. It is also worth noting that formal contexts include any instruction that occurs in any classroom, whether four-walled, online, or otherwise.

It is paramount to highlight the crucial role of ISLA in promoting focus on form or meaning, as suggested by Michael H. Long's (1996) three-way distinction about L2 instruction, and we cannot talk about meaning without referring to vocabulary. As mentioned before, instructions occur in formal contexts, where, as we all know, there must be a teacher with their students. The fact that instructions occur within that context does not mean students cannot acquire vocabulary incidentally. However, deliberate vocabulary takes up more space in our L2 vocabulary instruction through reading. Here, the question is: How can teachers make reading activities a primary source to maximize learners' uptake?

Strategies for deliberate reading

Connecting students to texts

As an ESL instructor, I used to rely on my intuition to gauge students' vocabulary when designing the reading materials—namely, the texts—I brought into the classroom. Studies, conversely, have shown that creating a link between students and texts is one of the most effective strategies teachers should implement to promote reading and offer opportunities for vocabulary acquisition. Researchers, such as Mesmer (2007), argue that pairing students with texts has a positive impact on children, including boosting their self-confidence. In other words, we mean by pairing learners with texts combining the ensemble of information about readers with information about texts, without neglecting the salient role of factors such as motivation, attention span, and the importance of attention and focus proposed by Nation (2022). In essence, teachers should select texts that best match L2 interests and proficiency level. Some texts can perfectly serve as mirrors of students' culture, beliefs, and ideology. Other texts, on the other hand, can be good opportunities to explore

different cultures and ideologies, which ultimately lead, in both cases, to L2 vocabulary growth, as texts can be drawn from various sources.

Varying resources

If SL teachers can select texts from various sources, deliberate reading can outperform other sources in terms of input. Resources include corpora, L2 materials, glossaries, guided readers, and computer programs. As mentioned earlier, practitioners should not rely solely on their intuitions to select reading material; thus, using a range of resources effectively not only helps teachers find suitable reading materials but also helps students acquire vocabulary when encountering exact words in different texts. It is also worth noting that the list of resources provided here is not exclusive; SL teachers can use other resources if they promote reading and maximize students' vocabulary gains.

First, corpora, for instance, stand out as a crucial resource of authentic language. Pellicer-Sánchez & Schmitt (2010) claimed that reading authentic materials is one way for learners to acquire mid-frequency vocabulary. Many studies consider corpora a significantly valuable source for authentic vocabulary. Corpora provide learners with a range of language from academia, news, and novels, among others. Corpora also provide clear insights into what learners know and what they should know. Pinchbeck et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of word lists they derived from frequency data in large corpora. In their study, they found that these lists serve two main functions: they represent learning targets (RLT) and learner knowledge (RLK). Understanding the roles of these two lists will certainly assist teachers and reading material designers in providing suitable texts, helping learners recognize what they know and what they need to acquire, as argued by Pinchbeck et al. (2022). I can back up the results of that study because the vocabulary learning outcomes exceeded my expectations when I used corpora on various occasions to prepare reading materials for my students last year.

Second, a resource that can help students grow their vocabulary through deliberate reading is their L1. Teachers should unquestionably encourage and take advantage of any opportunity when students use their L1 to negotiate meanings. Blommaert (2010) and Canagarajah (2013) view words as mobile resources rather than as immobile languages. This view highlights the importance of students' linguistic repertoire as a resource for learning L2 vocabulary. When they shuttle between L1 and L2 to understand the form-meaning connection, they are more likely to guess meanings, retrieve vocabulary from prior reading, and ultimately expand their vocabulary with new words. As such, SL instructors should give their students some freedom to use translation tools, including their L2 or bilingual dictionaries. In this regard, some calls for the use of multilingualism to promote biliteracy have recently arisen, such as those of Gentil and Séror (2020), who question the importance of L1 or any other additional language in developing biliteracy.

Drawing on this study, it is no wonder that some teaching practices should have no place in the classroom when it comes to reading. One example of these practices is when ESL and French teachers at my school do not recommend novels that students have read in either language. Suppose SL teachers allow students to read the same texts in different languages. In that case, it will be easier for them to learn new vocabulary, as they no longer need to focus on understanding the content of the texts. They will therefore spend more time negotiating meanings and perhaps other linguistic features of words, drawing on their linguistic repertoire. Nevertheless, teachers should continually raise students' awareness of the misuse of L1, especially when they use loanwords or false friends.

Third, glossing, which focuses on defining words in the same target language, is another essential source of vocabulary. Glosses are usually found in the margins of texts, but sometimes students can find a glossary at the beginning or end of the text, which provides definitions for all unknown words, or they may need to click on a link if they are reading online. SL teachers should guide students and assist them when definitions in glosses exceed their proficiency levels, helping them acquire new vocabulary by providing more straightforward explanations.

Fourth, guided readers unquestionably stand out as an excellent source for SL vocabulary development. The importance of guided readers as a source of vocabulary resides in their alignment with the lexical coverage recommended by studies. They are designed to align with studies on learners' vocabulary size. When students are exposed to texts, as suggested by studies such as Nation (2006), they should be familiar with between 95% and 98% of the words in a text to understand it. The words that are beyond their knowledge offer them an opportunity to guess their meanings. Another core tenet of guided readers is that students have opportunities to encounter high-frequency words repeatedly, which strengthens understanding, retention and retrieval.

Finally, another hallmark of developing students' vocabulary through reading is the use of computer programs. Teachers or course designers, as suggested by Nation (2016), should use computer programs such as *AntWordProfiler* to analyze a text and estimate the number of unknown words it contains. By doing so, teachers will help students avoid reading burdens, enabling them to focus more on learning new vocabulary rather than struggling with the text's meaning. Another advantage of using computer programs is that they help teachers identify mid- or low-frequency words that need attention, and one way to do so is to have students notice them.

Having students notice new vocabulary

Another quintessential strategy that SL teachers should use to help learners expand their vocabulary size is noticing. According to Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (2010), learners should consciously notice the input so that intake can occur. This means that vocabulary acquisition may not happen if learners do not recognize words and notice them. Accordingly, SL teachers should find various ways to make that happen. For instance, they can write unknown words on the board, ask students to look them up in a dictionary, explain the words, and then ask students to put them into sentences. Alternatively, they can repeat those words along with their definitions for some time. As mentioned before, word repetition is one of the key features that help students notice and, hence, learn. Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt (2010) conducted a study showing that after more than 10 exposures, L2 readers could recognize the meanings and spellings of words at rates of 84% and 76%, respectively. Also, Nation and Gu (2019) argue that encountering a word multiple times helps retention, emphasizing spacing as a key factor in reading. Their claim also aligns with Nakata's (2015) research, which stresses the importance of spaced repetition. According to this research, spaced repetition leads to better long-term retention than massed repetition. In a similar vein, SL should know that the quality of meeting words is also paramount. According to Nation and Gu (2019, p. 27), retrieval occurs only when the mental processing involved during learning is deep and thoughtful. By knowing that, SL should expose learners to meaningful reading contexts that help them notice, ask for clarification, understand, and use the unknown words in follow-up activities. Webb and Nation (2017) consider time a key factor. They claim that when words are not re-encountered for an extended period, knowing the previously encountered words will potentially decay. In essence, promoting noticing is crucial and may be more effective in teaching and learning formulaic language.

How to teach formulaic language to expand learners' vocabulary

Before we offer humble practical guidance, it is now legitimate to start with the view that deliberate learning has an advantage over incidental learning. When SL instructors intend to teach formulaic language, such as collocations, chunks, or lexical bundles, deliberate reading may be the most effective approach. Some researchers, such as Frank Boers, Murielle Demecheleer, Averil Coxhead, and Stuart Webb (2014), argue that deliberate attention should be given to collocations because they are challenging to learn incidentally, as most collocations are low-frequency multiword units. Again, intentional vocabulary acquisition cannot be achieved without providing explicit instructions or a warning of a test. Therefore, teachers should make the vocabulary learning objectives, in this case, learning formulaic language, clear to students. In this regard, we should ask: Why should students learn formulaic language? The answers will revolve around

two reasons, as argued by Schmitt (2010): They are essential for functional use, such as apologizing or complaining, and they can help start a new conversation or sustain the flow of a conversation, as with *nice weather today*. A third reason is that teachers should teach multi-word units to help students achieve high levels of proficiency in a second language.

Teaching formulaic language through deliberate reading activities is not significantly different from teaching individual words. However, laudable efforts should be made to teach formulaic language; SL teachers should tailor their vocabulary-teaching strategies to ensure high exposure to these multi-word units, thereby increasing the likelihood of their uptake. One of the most appealing strategies is giving explicit instructions to students. Siyanova-Chanturia and Pellicer-Sánchez (2019) aligned with a study by Peters (2009), in which two groups of students were provided with lexical units typographically enhanced and glossed. One group was explicitly instructed to focus on new vocabulary, while the other was instructed to focus on collocations. The result was that both groups could potentially learn collocations. It is also worth noting that the text enhancement helped those groups learn collocations.

Furthermore, Siyanova-Chanturia and Pellicer-Sánchez (2019) argue that Szudarski (2012) demonstrated that incorporating exercises into reading materials enhances the acquisition of collocations. Teachers can design exercises such as linking words, filling in gaps, or matching word units to their meanings. Similarly, SL teachers should encourage students to incorporate word units into their output and recommend effective memorization strategies. One memorization strategy is to connect the abstract meanings of word units to their literal meanings. Siyanova-Chanturia & Pellicer-Sánchez (2019) give an example of the idiom *take a back seat*. They argue that helping students understand the connection between the abstract meaning of idiom and its literal meaning aids in their memorization of the idiom. Students should know that allowing someone else to decide is like allowing someone else to drive. Here, a question arises: Should the SL teacher introduce the abstract or the literal meaning first? The answer may depend on two factors: the difficulty students have in understanding the literal meaning of the idiom, and how those words are individually familiar to them. Another example of fostering memorization, or retrieval, is highlighting the sound patterns of word units. When introducing word units such as *fast and furious*, *lifelong learning*, and *time will tell*, SL teachers should highlight the sound pattern, which, in this case, is alliteration.

Teaching word units to beginners

Students should be exposed to a range of texts to maximize their encounter with lexical chunks. Examples may include dialogues and short texts on different themes, to name but a few. In the Pre-reading phase, teachers should activate learners' prior knowledge, without explicitly targeting the formulaic language, and they can also pre-teach two or three chunks. This way, teachers can smoothly guide their students to the

next step. In the While-reading phase, teachers should incorporate activities to spark the hunt for chunks. The activities may include working in pairs or small groups to find and highlight word units for polite requests, such as *Can I get...?*, to describe the weather, like *heavy rain*, or to hand something, like *Here you are*. Other activities may include providing students with a version of the exact text with some word units missing and then asking students to write or recite the missing words. In the post-reading phase, students receive explicit instructions to aid in memorization. Teachers may ask students to match word units to their contextual uses, filling in the gaps and labelling them. In a follow-up activity, students may be asked to apply retained chunks in various contexts to maximize their understanding.

Conclusion

The debates over incidental and deliberate vocabulary learning continue to capture attention, as do studies on their effectiveness. Some researchers, such as Laufer (2003) and Lin and Hirsh (2012), argue that intentional approaches lead to greater vocabulary gains than incidental learning. In contrast, Nation and Webb (2011) suggest that incidental learning through extensive reading helps develop skills such as reading comprehension and fluency. To briefly explain the difference, learners may unintentionally acquire new vocabulary when their focus is on understanding the input. Deliberate learning occurs when learners are instructed to focus primarily on a language target. It is worth noting that clear instructions and deliberate learning cannot occur beyond the context of instructed second-language acquisition. This accords with our view of developing learners' vocabulary through deliberate reading, and, more precisely, through teaching and learning formulaic language.

Teaching lexical chunks depends not only on the SL teacher's expertise but also on the learner's level of proficiency. To help learners expand their understanding of lexical bundles, teachers should employ a range of strategies and create high-quality reading materials. To successfully do so, teachers should pair students with interesting texts that provide frequent exposure to the target word units, varied reading resources, and opportunities to notice. Again, teaching which word units depends on students' proficiency levels. When beginners are exposed to authentic texts, they not only encounter high-frequency words but also learn chunks and their contextual uses. Teachers may incorporate a variety of activities throughout the reading session to solidify learners' understanding of formulaic language.

As we mentioned earlier, the blurry boundaries between the effectiveness of incidental and deliberate vocabulary learning make the novice SL teachers' job more challenging. Some experienced teachers use incidental learning, while others use deliberate learning, despite a lack of studies showing that one approach outperforms the other. Other instructors use both methods. The primary concern here is that little is known about the effectiveness of combining the two learning approaches; hence, we need more future studies

to address how formulaic language can be learned and understood in the context of incidental versus deliberate learning.

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Virtual exchange as a curriculum tool in EFL higher education for the development of intercultural competences, social awareness and global citizenship

By Andrés Chinchín Talavera, Canada

Abstract

In an increasingly globalized world, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education cannot limit itself to the competent use of grammatical rules, phonology, and lexical accuracy, but it must offer students the opportunity for real encounters that aid their development of intercultural communicative competences, social awareness, and global citizenship—connecting the Global-North and the Global-South. This paper provides a qualitative study for the achievement of this result through the incorporation of a virtual exchange curriculum in the EFL higher education curriculum. The research was conducted at Universidad de Las Americas in Quito, Ecuador, in partnership with Columbia University in New York City. 26 Ecuadorian students, ages 19 to 25, were examined to determine their development. The study found that through intercultural online interactions and collaborative work, the Ecuadorian students developed intercultural communicative competence, social awareness, and a sense of global citizenship. These findings advocate for the adaptation of virtual exchange in EFL higher education curricula to optimally prepare students for a globalized and multicultural world.

Keywords: Virtual Exchange, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Global Citizenship, EFL, Global-North and Global-South

Introduction

Social systems across the globe are becoming rapidly interconnected due to the ever-increasing internationalization of environments through the use of the internet and the adoption of transnational standards for work, education and daily life activities (EAIE, 2020). This highlights the importance of fostering global citizenship within the classroom, in order to help students develop Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)—understood as the ability to engage with cultural diversity, human rights, and intercultural dialogue (UNESCO, 2013).

Universities across the world must provide a foreground for this interconnectedness between Global-North and Global-South—developed western countries, and developing countries—through the incorporation of ICC in their curriculum; thus, fostering a global citizenship that does not only instill awareness, but transforms the learners into entities of change for their society based on collaboration with members of other cultures, addressing problems that are common for both societies (Byram, 2008).

It is here where the incorporation of virtual exchange (VE) plays an important role in joining students from different cultures and geographical locations for academic purposes. According to O'Dowd et al. (2019), this exchange cannot be successful by simply engaging students in virtual exchange. There must be a structural development through stages, monitored and moderated by the instructor; otherwise, the development of intercultural awareness can become superficial. Additionally, there needs to be a credit-bearing component within the process to elicit full engagement from students.

This study seeks to answer the following question: How does the integration of virtual exchange into the EFL higher education curriculum contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence, social awareness and global citizenship in students from the Global-South?

Literature review

Virtual Exchange is a tool that allows students to interact appropriately with each other without having to leave their home (Dolcini & Phelps, 2022). For VE to work effectively, it must rely on four axes described by Neuner (1994): the first is to develop awareness of one's cultural identity, the second is the ability to understand that everyone has their unique cultural background that shapes their worldview, the third refers to empathy to understand different perspectives, and the fourth is the embrace of tolerance for ambiguity in order to surmount difficult situations, especially when there could be emotional reactions—the last one is particularly important in the practice of VE.

To meet these standards, O'Dowd and Ware (2009) divided the application of VE for higher education into three stages: (1) information exchange, (2) cultural comparison and analysis, and (3) collaborative work for a final product. When these stages are properly executed, students can be expected to develop abilities for agreement on outcomes in transnational teams, negotiation of meaning, and critical analysis to collaborate in diverse groups.

These abilities are referred to as Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). ICC is a skill that relies on intercultural attitudes, knowledge and dexterities to critically evaluate one's own culture as well as others' (Byram, 2020; Gustine et al., 2025). ICC involves empathy, curiosity, openness, skill of interpretation and

critical thinking (Romero-Archila, 2025), and it is imperative for the development of global citizenship and the dialogical connection between the Global South and the Global North.

A VE framework that helps illuminate this dialogic connection is COIL, Collaborative Online International Learning (Beelen et al., 2021; Montgomery, 2019; Rubin, 2017). COIL has been bringing about what Montgomery (2019) calls the new “Southern” knowledge—a new opportunity to break away from traditional hegemonies and open up a space for new ways of learning, knowing, being and relating—known as the Third Space (Jørgensen et al., 2020).

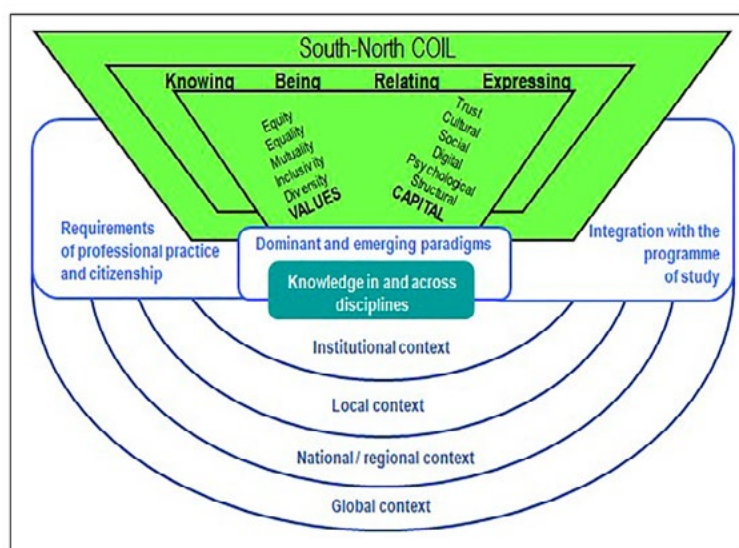


Figure 1: A Conceptual Framework of Third Space COIL Exchange (Note: Taken from Wimpenny, K., Finardi, K., Orsini-Jones, M., & Jacobs, L. Knowing, being, relating and expressing through third space global south-north COIL: Digital inclusion and equity in international higher education (2022). *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 26(2), 285.)

The graphic in Figure 1 shows that for a Third Space to exist, the hybrid experience needs to balance the academic requirements with values such as equality, mutuality, inclusivity and diversity, while acknowledging the global, local and institutional contexts of all participants. Within this framework, VE becomes a space where global citizenship is enacted through interaction, shared meaning-making and collaborations that impact society.

Methodology

This study adopted a small-scale qualitative design to examine how virtual exchange contributes to the development of intercultural competences, social awareness and global citizenship in an EFL higher education context for undergraduate students from the Global South in Ecuador. The virtual exchange was

conducted between Universidad de las Américas (UDLA) in Ecuador and Columbia University in the United States, during the fall semester of 2025.

In the present context, UDLA is a private university located in Quito, Ecuador, where English is primarily taught as a foreign language (EFL), and all students must pass six classes, from A1 to B2, as a graduation pre-requisite.

A B2 English class of twenty-six students from UDLA was paired with a B2 Spanish class of thirteen students from Columbia. The participants were from different academic majors, ages 19 to 25. Thirteen groups were formed, each consisting of two students from the Global South (UDLA) and one from the Global North (Columbia). The virtual exchange program was embedded within the course through a non-official curriculum adaptation, in which selected course assignments were replaced by credit-bearing VE tasks.

The virtual exchange lasted six weeks and was conducted through the institution's online platform, Microsoft Teams. Participants from both universities were responsible for agreeing on meeting times and documenting their sessions in a shared Microsoft Excel logbook. Students were expected to meet one hour per week to fulfill the credit requirements. After every session, participants produced a reflective response based on their interaction. In addition, they collaboratively developed a final project aligned with the COIL principles of virtual collaboration, technology integration, and interdisciplinary learning.

Following the standards of VE presented by O'Dowd and Ware (2009), the participants' interactions were divided into three different stages:

Stage 1: information exchange and trust-building (Week 1)

Stage 2: comparison and analysis of cultural practices and social issues (Weeks 2–5)

Stage 3: collaborative production through a joint podcast (Week 6)

The topics discussed each week progressed from personal, to intercultural, to social and global:

Week 1: Introduction, personal and academic life

Week 2: Digital life and cultural identity

Week 3: Education and learning styles

Week 4: Art and colonial heritage

Week 5: Customs and traditions

Week 6: Gender, inequality and social justice—Collaborative podcast

In accordance with the VE principle of faculty collaboration, instructors from both institutions regularly monitored the weekly meetings, analyzed the students' reflections, and provided feedback to guide subsequent interactions, offering cultural and linguistic insights that supported respectful and effective discourse.

Data sources were gathered through three main tools: (1) video and audio recordings of student reflections, natural conversations, and the collaborative podcast; (2) a pre-and-post questionnaire using a Likert scale; and (3) short open-ended reflective questions. Four groups were randomly selected for an in-depth analysis of their development throughout the three VE stages.

The data sources were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach that combined deductive and inductive coding procedures. Deductive coding was informed by the theoretical framework of VE and ICC (Byram, 2008; O'Dowd & Ware, 2009), while inductive coding was conducted without predetermined categories, allowing patterns and meaning to emerge from the students' data.

The exchange was conducted under a mutual commitment to data protection and participant anonymity. Both universities operated according to a coordinated understanding of informed consent, ensuring that data use for research and non-commercial purposes adhered to the internal policies and legislative standards of both institutions.

Findings

The findings of this research were organized around four interrelated themes that showed how intercultural communicative competence, social awareness and global citizenship were enacted through interaction, reflection and collaboration during the three stages of virtual exchange.

Theme 1: Intercultural self-awareness and identity construction

The Pre-and-Post-questionnaire results (Q1–Q3) showed that students' awareness of how culture shaped opinions and identities went from 78% to 91%. Interest in other cultures, which was already high (82%), rose to 87%, going from passive curiosity to active engagement. Also, their confidence to share their own culture showed a substantial increase from 69% to 95%.

During the video analysis, students consistently positioned themselves culturally in comparison (Ecuador vs. U.S.), recognizing how context (education, technology, traditions, geography) shapes identities and worldviews. For example, one participant noticed, "In Ecuador classes are more traditional, while in the U.S. students learn through discussions" (Group 2, Stage 2), demonstrating awareness of how institutional culture influences practices.

In the reflective questions, most students indicated strong intercultural self-awareness and pride in their local culture. For example, one student wrote, “I learned that I should love my culture more.”

Theme 2: Pragmatic development and intercultural politeness

The Pre-and-Post-questionnaire results (Q5) showed the development of IC, from a limited awareness of how language use needs adjustment in intercultural contexts (69%) to a strong recognition of the need to adapt language, tone, and politeness across cultures (87%).

The video analysis showed students frequently negotiating meaning through clarification, paraphrasing, questioning and collaborative reasoning, constructing knowledge together. For example, students sought confirmation and shared understanding by asking, “It’s like capitalism? Or no?” (Group 4, Stage 2 art discussion) and “What exactly is the holiday?” (Group 4, Stage 2 Día de los Difuntos).

The reflective questions exposed that learners recognized that politeness, tone, and cultural norms differ across cultures and may lead to misunderstanding—showing an awareness beyond grammatical understanding. One student wrote, “Differences in politeness and tone can cause misunderstandings,” and another expressed, “They may also offend in some way, even if it’s not their intention.”

Theme 3: Negotiation of meaning and dialogic interactions

Students indicated clear progress in dialogic skills and intercultural ethics, as evidenced in Pre-and-Post-questionnaire results (Q6), moving from uncertainty about disagreeing with people from other cultures (65%) to a substantially greater confidence in expressing respectful disagreement (86%).

This development was evident during the video analysis, where students felt free to express disagreement as part of collaborative meaning-making. For instance, during an art discussion, a student from Ecuador stated, “I don’t think that is art,” to which another participant responded, “Really? It depends on the person” (Group 4, Stage 2 art debate).

Theme 4: Global citizenship, and social awareness

The Pre-and-Post-questionnaire (Q7, Q8, Q9, Q11) showed an increase in global and social responsibility, from 78% to 87%, reflecting a strong sense of obligation towards global and social issues. Participants’ self-identification as global citizens also increased from 47% to 91%. Additionally, students’ valuing of diverse voices and pluralistic thinking went from 69% to 87%, demonstrating openness to multiple perspectives.

During the video analysis of the final outcome, participants exhibited openness toward diverse thinking and the promotion of inclusivity. One group stated, “we all want to reassure somebody that it’s fine to be the way they are, to think what they want to think” (Group 1, Stage 3).

The reflective questions revealed reductions in preconceived stereotypes and increased recognition of diversity within and across cultures. As some students expressed, “I realized that many stereotypes are not true,” “My way of doing things isn’t the only correct way,” and “They are different, but also very similar to us.”

Students also displayed heightened awareness of global issues, linking these concerns to empathy and global responsibility, as reflected in statements such as, “Global problems require empathy and cooperation,” and “Hearing real experiences made global issues feel more real.”

Additional finding

During a final survey, students expressed that the credit-bearing component motivated them to take the activities more seriously and helped them reflect more deeply. Importantly, the survey showed that the grading component was not perceived as a source of anxiety or pressure.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that when VE is embedded into the EFL higher education curriculum, and is guided and moderated by instructors, it aids the development of intercultural self-awareness, pragmatics and ICC (O’Dowd et al., 2019; Romero-Archila, 2025). Throughout the study, the participants were able to break some preconceived stereotypes, develop empathy and understanding of other cultures, and learn to see themselves as responsible members of a global community, to which they are accountable.

Pedagogical implications

For EFL educators, this study evidenced that there is no need for an entire curriculum reform in order to incorporate VE in a study program. However, it is necessary that the virtual exchange rely on a credit-bearing component in order to elicit greater engagement and motivation from students. It was also evident that global citizenship was not something taught, but a byproduct that emerged from the application of the three VE stages. Additionally, when assessing VE assignments, instructors must take into account communicative intent, collaboration, and intercultural engagement, as well as linguistic accuracy (Dolcini & Phelps, 2022).

Conclusion & limitations

This paper demonstrated the development of intercultural communicative competence, social awareness, and global citizenship in EFL higher education through the incorporation of a virtual exchange curriculum, intentionally guided by an instructor. The research evidenced the progression of four dimensions: self-awareness, pragmatics, meaning negotiation, and the emergence of global citizenship as an organic outcome

of VE interactions. The curriculum followed the three stages proposed by O'Dowd and Ware (2009) for the use of virtual exchange, and the collaborative online international learning (COIL) framework. Finally, further research needs to be carried out on the efficacy of VE curriculum adaptation with lower proficiency levels, as well as a closer examination of the development of students from the Global-North at Columbia University.

Acknowledgments

The credits of this paper go to Magister Paola Romero Camacho (Universidad de las Américas) and Doctor Ximena González (Columbia University) for the design of the curriculum adaptation program.

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Generative derailments: Collaborative curriculum design with older adult language and literacy learners

By Mercedes Veselka & Natalia Balyasnikova, Canada

Tension is central to teaching. All the same, I somehow always feel surprised when my lesson plans come off the rails, failure haunting me as I try to understand what went wrong. As an adult literacy and language teacher, my curriculum development process has often felt similar to the halting, meandering progress of the Toronto subway: hopeful, but never certain I'll arrive where I intended. When I was invited by my supervisor, Natalia, to collaborate with her on a research project designing a ten-week creative and arts-based language and literacy program for older adult learners, I was excited to practice what I had been learning in graduate school. This project's premise was deceptively straightforward. We wanted to explore how older adult language and literacy learners made sense of their experiences through creative and arts-based approaches to language and literacy learning. However, we both quickly found that our well-laid plans were often derailed by the realities of working collaboratively with learners to design the program. In this article, Natalia and I turn to the nature of tensions to imagine how derailments can be understood as both places of uncertainty and a generative force central to collaborative processes of inquiry and teaching. Natalia and I wrestled with questions about literacy and the purpose of education. These unanticipated questions became generative spaces for rethinking our pedagogical assumptions. Uncertainty about where we were headed was no longer a failure, but an opportunity to wonder together about where we all (as teachers and learners) really wanted to go.

Research as derailment

"I like this idea of derailment. As a trained educator that to me is loss of control. So that's a lot of unlearning that has to be done here, because it is not losing control. It's actually learners being agents of their own process." (Natalia)

When Natalia and I began a research project with older adult language and literacy learners, our curriculum plans were neat and ordered. We met and discussed the logistics, what we wanted to focus on and dreamed pedagogy into practice. However, as we taught, these dreams were complicated by the tensions of real people negotiating their learning together. This process was far from orderly, requiring attunement to one another and the learners. Co-designing curriculum (Deketelaere & Kelchtermans, 1996; Voogt et al., 2015;

Voogt et al., 2019) with our learners was a way to challenge our own assumptions about when learning was happening and what learners wanted. In this process, one question kept coming back to us: How can tensions be embraced as part of curriculum design processes, rather than felt as failures? In this paper, Natalia and I share with you two pedagogical derailments: places where our own visions for learning were interrupted in the process of co-design. We share these derailments to support other instructors doing curriculum co-design with their learners and to help all of us find new tracks to travel together. Additionally, we focus on two activities we used in the project and suggest ways to expand them. We hope that modeling how moments of failure can be a generative space, can guide us to more deeply understand how to learn from those we teach.

Designing curriculum together

For Natalia and me, co-designing curriculum for this research project was born out of necessity and intention. Working with twelve older adults with varied language backgrounds and literacy experiences, we wanted to explore how the participants' experiences of age and language learning intersected. As community-based researchers, we had a firm commitment to conduct participant-centered project that would be meaningful to the learners as well as our research goals. In addition, there was no pre-existing language program in the community space, so Natalia and I decided on the following structure. First, we loosely planned the themes for the ten-week language learning class. The structure of the lessons followed the three phases of Creative Collaborative Inquiry (Artem Research Collective, 2024), a research methodology but also a pedagogical invitation. In the first phase, we explored a creative activity together (including storytelling, collaging, singing, and creating advertisements). In the second phase, we guided a group discussion about the personal and collective significance of the activities. What had we learned through these creative approaches? What meaning were our learners making through the creative activities? Finally, we sought feedback about the session. What was working, what wasn't working? We used this information to design upcoming lessons. Table 1 is an example of how two activities: collaging and creating advertisements, were planned for the three phases described.



Table 1: Collaging and Advertisements with Creative Collaborative Inquiry

CCI	Collages	Advertisements
Phase 1: Exploration	We provided pictures for learners to choose from. We asked learners “What do you want to learn in English class?”	We introduced the concept of ageism and gave learners different copies of advertisements. We then looked at the advertisements together and discussed whether these ads were ageist or not. After viewing the ads, we gave them the slogans and the photos and had them create their own advertisements.
Phase 2: Discussion	After finishing the collages, learners presented their collages and explained the pictures.	We asked questions about their advertisements and asked them to share why they chose the photos and slogans. Then we asked the question: What do you think other people would find surprising about aging?
Phase 3: Feedback	We posted the collages in the classroom for them to look at and collected feedback forms about the activity.	We gave a multimodal feedback sheet to the learners to tell us whether they enjoyed the activity or not.

After each class, we discussed our impressions and reshaped the curriculum for the next week. At this time, we returned to our original plan and removed activities that did not receive enthusiastic endorsement from the learners. In what follows, we share with you how collaging and creating advertisements with our learners were moments of derailment which challenged us to expand and suggest new ways to adapt these activities for future educators.

Collaging as derailment: Doing school or having fun?

In the first class, Natalia and I laid out dozens of images on the table in front of the twelve learners, offered them colourful paper, and asked them “What do you want to learn in this English class?”

The results (Figure 1 below) were brightly coloured images scattered across the paper, sometimes carefully placed, other times glued haphazardly. We laughed and chatted as people glued and designed their collage, sometimes speaking in English and sometimes Italian. This activity was fun, and learners told us in their feedback and through their body language, that they enjoyed collaging. In the classes, Natalia and I heard important language learning happen through their requests, questions, explanations, and joy. As researchers, we believed in the value of other ways to express themselves beyond reading and writing (García & Kleifgen, 2020; New London Group, 1996). How could this be a derailment? On paper this activity was a success.

But the learners were not satisfied with fun as a learning outcome; they felt collaging was not really *doing school*.



Figure 1: Collages about Language Learning

Switching tracks: Collaging

Doing school or having fun? Research on using multimodality with English language learners suggests it benefits their language learning and identity formation (Burgess & Rowsell, 2020; Sharmin, 2022). However, it also highlighted the expectations learners bring to the classroom about what school is and what counts as doing school. Reflecting on another experience using multimodal activities with literacy learners (Veselka, 2025), I was reminded that bringing art and multimodal activities into the classroom does not always feel like success and requires scaffolding to ensure the learning is meaningfully connected to students' lives. Co-designing curriculum meant negotiating between very different sets of expectations about how to learn and teach English. In re-imagining this activity post-derailment, Natalia and I wanted to imagine the connections between *doing school* and *having fun*, building pathways to remind ourselves and our students that these are not opposite ends of a spectrum. *Having fun is part of doing school. Doing school is part of having fun.* The following ideas listed below are offerings to other educators, to experiment with in their own use of collages.

- Teach about famous collage artists and have students make a collage in one of their styles
- Write a journal with vocabulary from the collage, have students create collages in each new unit and add new vocabulary to the journal
- Use collages as a self-created picture dictionary. Have students create collages in each new unit and write phrases, vocabulary, and other important information on their collages

- Use a book/reading text and have students create collages using photos from a book, then have them re-tell the story to a classmate

Advertisements as derailment: Literacy assumptions

Creating advertisements was intended to serve two purposes. First, it allowed us to introduce the concept of ageism in a creative way. Second, it offered a way to reflect on aging through images, rather than through reading and writing which would have been challenging for some learners in our class. Natalia printed images from the [Age-positive Image Library](#) and a variety of age-positive slogans, ready to create age-positive advertisements with our learners (see Figure 2).

It was only when we started discussing the advertisements and asking learners to explain their choices when designing their own ads that we noticed a key assumption embedded in our curriculum design. We had assumed advertisements, as a multimodal text, would be more accessible for learners with limited formal education. Advertisements are not just images, but text and audience. Advertisements are meant to convey a message, to raise awareness, or to generate action. This activity generated wonderful discussion but failed to meaningfully connect oral to visual or written literacies. This should not have been surprising, as Altherr Flores (2017, 2021) discusses the literacy assumptions that are embedded in multimodal texts, and how difficult they can be for literacy learners. But this derailment was a needed reminder for me about the assumptions I bring to my curriculum design (multimodal texts are easier; less writing is more accessible). The reality was that our learners needed more time and scaffolding to support their multimodal literacies, in the same way they needed time to develop reading and writing literacies.

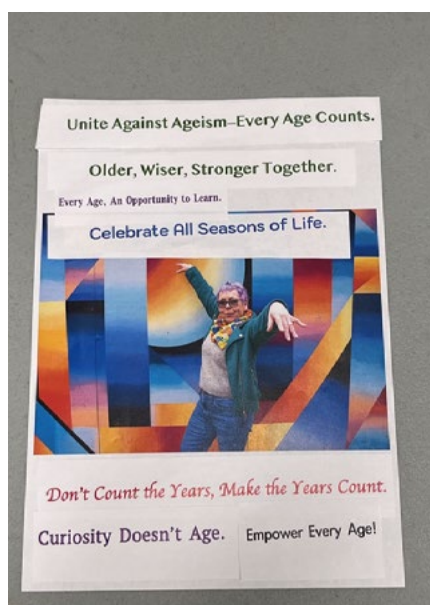
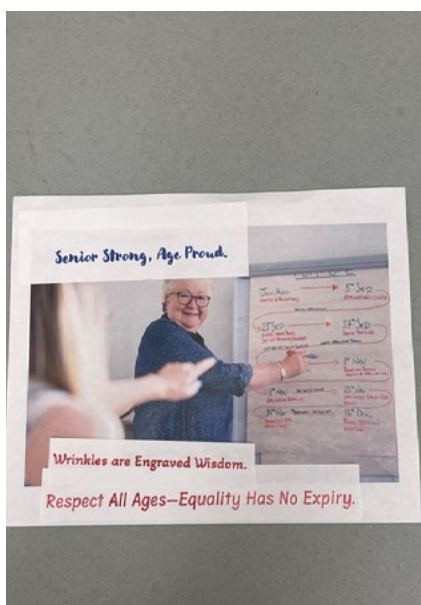


Figure 2: Advertisements about Ageism

Switching tracks: Advertisements

While the learners loved discussing their perspectives as they looked at ageist advertisements, more scaffolding was needed for learning through a multimodal text. This derailment suggested to Natalia and me that more time and support was needed to deeply engage with advertising as a genre. We would not give a developing reader a dense book and expect them to read it fluently. Similarly, we had to check our own assumptions about the accessibility of advertisements and other creative activities. Sometimes the reason a creative activity did not go well was because we assumed literacy skills our learners were still developing. For example, in rethinking how to create advertisements with literacy learners, we found more time is needed to build up learners' background knowledge and critical and reflective skills. Focusing on doing one creative activity (such as advertisements) over many weeks might have been more supportive for the learners in our class. Below are further suggestions about how this activity might be more meaningfully scaffolded.

- Have students bring in ads from their own countries, cultures or communities; compare different regions, types of advertisements, colour choices, or purposes of advertising
- Teach colour theory and design an advertisement that draws out the connections between colour theory and feelings they want to convey through the advertisement
- Have students go out into their communities and take pictures of advertisements around them; ask them to bring these back to class; analyze the words, vocabulary, phrases and types of advertising they see
- Have students design together an advertisement for a product or service important to them (could be a new business or their favourite snack); do classroom presentations once they have worked on it together

Conclusion

How can derailments be embraced as part of curriculum design processes, rather than felt as failures? This question remains with us as we continue to uncover how creative and collaborative approaches to curriculum design can be used with older adult language and literacy learners. What our study revealed

is that collaborative approaches to curriculum development often reveal tensions, rather than eliminating them. In our moments of derailment, we hope to illustrate the value of multimodal curriculum while also acknowledging the layered complexities of introducing this type of learning in English language and literacy classrooms. We would encourage educators to embrace these tensions, to pay close attention to the learners in front of them, and to scaffold multimodal activities. Rather than believing we are fully in charge of what goes on in the classroom (Waterhouse, 2020), collaborative curriculum development provided Natalia and me with a space to acknowledge the unpredictability of classroom life. The expansions suggested in the *Switching Tracks* section of this paper are evidence that when we embrace tensions in our practice, new (and perhaps better) pedagogical possibilities await us.

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Artificial intelligence in education: A practitioner-informed perspective on opportunities, challenges, and human-centered integration

By Staci-Anne Nogami, Canada

Abstract

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in education is transforming teaching and learning across global contexts. While existing literature highlights the potential of AI to support personalized learning, improve efficiency, and expand access, less attention has been given to practitioner-informed perspectives grounded in sustained classroom experience. This paper draws on 19 years of international teaching and curriculum development experience across Japan, the United Arab Emirates, and Canada to critically examine the role of AI in education. It argues that AI's effectiveness depends not only on technological advancement but on its alignment with pedagogical practice, ethical considerations, and human-centered learning design. By synthesizing research with classroom-based insights, this paper explores the benefits, limitations, and future implications of AI, emphasizing the need for balanced integration that enhances—rather than replaces—the role of educators.

Keywords: *artificial intelligence, education, personalized learning, pedagogy, teacher experience, AI literacy*

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly positioned as a transformative force in education, with applications ranging from intelligent tutoring systems to generative AI tools capable of producing human-like text. These technologies have introduced new possibilities for personalized learning, real-time feedback, and scalable educational solutions. However, the rapid adoption of AI has also raised critical questions about pedagogy, ethics, and the evolving role of educators.

While much of the discourse surrounding AI in education is driven by technological innovation, there remains a need to ground these discussions in classroom realities and practitioner expertise. Over the past

19 years, I have taught and developed English language programs in diverse international contexts, working with learners of varying linguistic, cultural, and academic backgrounds. This experience has consistently reinforced a central principle: effective education is not defined by tools alone, but by the relationships, adaptability, and intentional design that underpin learning environments.

This paper argues that AI should be understood not as a replacement for traditional teaching, but as a tool that must be carefully integrated within human-centered pedagogical frameworks. By combining academic research with practitioner insight, it examines the opportunities, challenges, and future implications of AI in education.

AI and personalized learning: Promise and practical realities

One of the most widely cited benefits of AI in education is its capacity to facilitate personalized learning. AI systems can analyze student data and adapt instructional content to meet individual needs, allowing learners to progress at their own pace (Holmes et al., 2019). In theory, this aligns closely with best practices in language education, where differentiation and scaffolding are essential.

However, from a practitioner's perspective, personalization is not solely a function of data—it is also deeply relational. In my experience teaching intensive English programs, effective differentiation often depends on subtle, real-time judgments: recognizing when a student is disengaged, identifying cultural factors influencing participation, or adapting explanations based on learner response. While AI can support these processes, it cannot fully replicate the nuanced decision-making of an experienced educator.

That said, AI tools can meaningfully enhance personalization when used strategically. For example, students can use AI for additional language practice, idea generation, or feedback outside of class time. This extends learning beyond the classroom and allows teachers to focus on higher-order skills such as critical thinking, discussion, and applied communication. In this sense, AI serves as a supplementary layer of support, rather than the primary driver of instruction.

Efficiency, automation, and the changing role of educators

AI's ability to automate administrative tasks is often presented as a major advantage. Tools that assist with grading, lesson planning, and content generation can reduce workload and increase efficiency (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). For educators managing multiple courses or large student cohorts, this has clear practical benefits.

In my own work as a curriculum developer and content creator, AI has proven useful in streamlining repetitive tasks, generating draft materials, and supporting micro-learning design. However, the value of

these tools lies in how they are used, not simply in their availability. Poorly designed or over-reliant use of AI-generated content can lead to generic, decontextualized materials that fail to meet learners' needs.

This highlights a critical shift in the role of educators—from content creators to learning experience designers. As AI takes on more routine tasks, educators are increasingly responsible for curating, adapting, and contextualizing content. This requires not less expertise, but more: pedagogical knowledge, cultural awareness, and the ability to critically evaluate AI-generated outputs.

Academic integrity and cognitive engagement

The rise of generative AI has introduced significant challenges related to academic integrity. Students can now produce essays, summaries, and responses with minimal effort, raising concerns about authenticity and assessment validity (Cotton et al., 2023).

However, framing this solely as a problem of cheating risks overlooking a deeper issue: the need to rethink assessment design. Traditional assignments that prioritize information recall or surface-level analysis are particularly vulnerable to AI misuse. In contrast, tasks that emphasize personal reflection, process-based learning, and in-class performance are more resistant to automation.

In my teaching practice, I have found that incorporating discussion-based activities, scaffolded writing processes, and real-time feedback encourages genuine engagement and reduces reliance on external tools. Rather than attempting to eliminate AI, educators should focus on designing learning experiences that require human input, creativity, and critical thinking.

Ethical considerations: Data, bias, and equity

The ethical implications of AI in education are substantial. Issues related to data privacy, algorithmic bias, and equitable access must be carefully addressed to ensure responsible implementation (UNESCO, 2021).

From an international teaching perspective, the issue of equity is particularly significant. Access to technology varies widely across contexts, and the benefits of AI are not distributed equally. In some settings, students may have limited access to devices or reliable internet, while in others, AI tools are readily integrated into daily learning. Without deliberate intervention, AI risks widening existing educational inequalities.

Algorithmic bias is another concern. AI systems trained on limited or biased data may produce outputs that disadvantage certain groups of learners. Educators must therefore play an active role in evaluating AI tools and ensuring that they are used in ways that are inclusive and equitable.



AI literacy and the future of education

As AI becomes increasingly embedded in society, the development of AI literacy is essential. Students must not only learn how to use AI tools, but also how to evaluate their outputs, understand their limitations, and engage with them ethically.

Based on my experience in curriculum development, integrating AI literacy into existing programs can be achieved through task-based learning approaches. For example, students can analyze AI-generated responses, compare them with human-produced work, and reflect on issues such as accuracy, bias, and authorship. These activities promote critical engagement and prepare students for real-world applications of AI.

Looking ahead, the most effective educational models will likely be those that combine technological innovation with strong pedagogical foundations. The concept of human-centered AI—which prioritizes human learning, agency, and well-being—provides a useful framework for this integration.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence has the potential to significantly enhance education by supporting personalized learning, improving efficiency, and expanding access. However, its successful integration depends on more than technological capability. It requires thoughtful implementation, ethical awareness, and a commitment to preserving the human elements of teaching and learning.

Drawing on 19 years of international teaching experience, this paper emphasizes that AI is most effective when it is used to augment, rather than replace, the role of educators. The future of education lies not in automation alone, but in the intentional design of learning experiences that combine the strengths of both human and artificial intelligence.



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