English Language Learning Magazine

# CONTACT

November 2017


## Fluency

**What it means to be fluent, and how to get there**

**What can we learn from Belgium when it comes to TBLT?**

**What's wrong with Broca and Wernicke?**

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# IN THIS ISSUE



## Articles



## Viva la lingua franca



## Calendar

| | |
|---|---|
| January 4–7 | Modern Language Association (MLA). New York, NY. http://www.mla.org/convention |
| January 20 | Technology for Teachers (T4T) Conference. http://tesltoronto.org/t4t-conferences-2 |
| Feb 19–22 | Languages Canada's Annual Conference, Toronto, ON. http://languagescanada.ca/en/language-education-sector/annual-conference/ |
| March 24–27 | AAAL, Chicago, Il. http://www.aaal.org/page/2018CFP |
| March 27–30 | Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Chicago, Il. http://www.tesol.org/convention2017 |

# EDITOR'S NOTE

In this issue, we focus on fluency. This is not just another word for competency but one aspect of it, an aspect that gets short shrift when classrooms emphasize accuracy, neglect the necessary repetition, and lack appropriate materials for extensive reading and listening. Philip Shigeo Brown provides a general overview of fluency in his lead article, suggesting a number of relevant activities and materials. This is followed by articles by Anna C-S. Chang on listening fluency, Richard Roberts & Roger Kreuz on pragmatics and fluency, and Kenneth Keng Wee Ong on vocabulary fluency.

If you're interested in the neuroscience of language learning, be sure to read the article by Pascale Tremblay and Anthony Steven Dick arguing why Broca's and Wernicke's areas should be history. For lessons that we can learn about task-based language teaching, Yuliya Desyatova looks to Belgium. Next, Annemarie Sullivan Palincsar explains reciprocal teaching and lays out the evidence for its effectiveness. And Debbie Broad and Brian Kennedy describe in very practical and pragmatic terms how to stage a yearly play at Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization. We also have a discussion of the new OCELT designation, a new TESL certificate program at Sheridan, and how to teach teachers to use technology. Finally, the issue includes an interview with Suma Balagopal and our regular Viva La Lingua Franca column. I extend my thanks to all contributing authors.

I'd like to close by acknowledging the difficulties that our members who teach in colleges face this fall with the province-wide strike. I hope that the attention that was brought to the issue of precarious work will have positive outcomes for all our members who find themselves working contract to contract.

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# CONTACT


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# WHAT IS FLUENCY AND HOW DO WE DEVELOP IT?

By Philip Shigeo Brown, International Teacher Development Institute

> "I want to speak English fluently."
>
> "I have to write reports in English."
>
> "I want to read English magazines, books and websites."
>
> "I'd like to understand movies in English."

Whether expressed directly or indirectly, the need for fluency inherently exists within all of these commonly expressed goals and motivations for learning English. And, as teachers, we know that learners often have a number of obstacles to overcome to achieve them, whether they are learning in ESL contexts, such as Canada, or EFL contexts like Japan. Firstly, goals that students initially make may be unrealistic and are typically too vague, too big or long-term; and many students lack confidence in their English abilities, often compounded by a sense of "relative failure" (Skehan, 1996, p.16) to develop communicative skills, and perhaps a "fixed" as opposed to a "growth mindset" (Dweck, 2006, 2016). This can be reflected in negative beliefs, attitudes, and statements such as:

> "I can't speak English."
>
> "English is difficult."
>
> "I don't understand grammar."
>
> "I'm not good at learning new words."

Even where this is not the case, students (and teachers) may have limited (or evolving) knowledge and understanding of fluency development beyond the often said "practice makes perfect." So, even where students are encouraged and enthusiastic about using another language both in and out of class, what kind of practice leads to real fluency gains? Notably, syllabus and materials design tend to introduce new topics, grammar, and vocabulary each week while the recycling of language that is needed not only to develop fluency but also to aid retention is limited (Sweller, 2017). So what is fluency and how do we develop it?

Following a brief review of how fluency is defined and measured, we examine the conditions for fluency, four key characteristics of fluency activities, and how tasks can be better sequenced to foster fluency development across the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

# What is Fluency and How Do We Measure It?

## Defining Fluency

In layman's terms, fluency is most often associated with speaking naturally or smoothly, or like a native. Although people also talk about reading or writing fluently, it is arguably less common, and listening fluency may get little or no mention. Similarly, researchers have mostly focused on spoken language, followed by reading and writing fluency, and to a lesser degree, listening (Muller, Adamson, Brown & Herder, 2014). Most researchers have sought to define and measure fluency with narrow, measurable, construct definitions despite the understanding that it is multidimensional with important considerations for complexity and accuracy (Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Palloti, 2009; Skehan, 2009), as well as "other key factors [that] may influence fluency development, including learner variables (e.g. anxiety, attitude, and motivation) and learning variables (e.g. instruction and task complexity)" (Brown & Muller, 2014, p. 4). For most classroom teachers, however, a simple and concise definition that we can also use with learners tends to be more pragmatic:

> "fluency can be described as the ability to process language receptively and productively at a reasonable speed." (Nation, 2014, p. 11)

Echoing this in his extensive blog post *F is for Fluency*, Thornbury concurs that "fluency in fact applies across all four skills, especially if defined as 'capacity to process language in real time', where 'process' means both to produce and to understand" (2017, July 28). Taking this a stage further, Herder negotiated definitions of fluency for each of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) with his students:

Table 1. Definitions of fluency based on student input.
(Reproduced from Herder & Sholdt, 2014, p. 34)

| *Output* |
|---|
| **Speaking** – thinking and speaking at the same time in a relatively natural speed with not so many errors, so that meaning is understood by the listener.<br>**Writing** – thinking and writing at the same time in a relatively natural speed, with a focus on expressing meaning with a relatively average number of revisions. |
| *Input* |
| **Reading** – Reading and understanding English at a speed closer to L1 readers - about 250 words per minute and understanding 75% is a good target, according to Nation (n.d.).<br>**Listening** – Listening to and understanding spoken English, to the degree necessary, in different situations. This implies that listening to friends, a university lecturer, the police, or a YouTube video all have unique needs. |

As well as ensuring students developed a shared understanding of fluency specific to their needs and goals, negotiating definitions of fluency formed an important part of the process to promote a fluency-based approach (Herder & Sholdt, p. 33), giving learners agency whilst building rapport and establishing a positive learning community.

### Measuring Fluency

Although language learners may be able to notice learning new vocabulary and grammar, which are more typically and easily reflected in regular test scores, they often have greater difficulty in noticing their progress with regards to fluency, especially from week to week. Thus offering even basic ways for learners to measure their fluency development can help them see their progress and feel motivated. Whilst appreciating the need for intelligibility and comprehension (and recognising the roles of complexity and accuracy), counting words per minute (wpm) is perhaps the easiest approach for measuring speaking, reading and writing fluency. For listening, learners often have to gauge for themselves how much they understand, although comprehension questions can help facilitate this. Where data is available, wpm of spoken text and or the vocabulary or reading level may also be recorded (e.g. for CDs accompanying graded readers).

Now that we have established a basic definition of fluency and means to measure it, we consider the factors that facilitate fluency development.

## How Do We Develop Fluency?

### Conditions for Fluency

Motivation and beliefs about language learning invariably shape student attitudes and behaviours, which in turn affect outcomes. Therefore, Finch (2014) emphasizes the importance of considering attitude change, “particularly when the approach is not consonant with the learners’ experience” (Cotterall, 1995, p. 203, in Finch, p. 62). So, in addition to employing a task-based framework to facilitate active involvement, Finch (pp. 62–4) recognises the value of attending to learner variables (including, but not limited to, experiences, beliefs, self-perceptions, culture, and expectations). In addition, Finch seeks to address “harmful preconceived notions of language learning” (p. 63; see also, Dweck 2006, 2016), whilst raising awareness of the language learning process.

Citing Bateson (1994, p. 41), Murphey (2014), further emphasizes that “participation precedes learning, which probably precedes fluency and accuracy” (p. 44). Therefore, socialization into a learning community, and “being involved in an activity and engaged and interacting … [are] … the first requirement[s] for learning” (p. 44). Accordingly, effective teachers understand the need to build rapport with and amongst learners; nurture a non-threatening, positive learning environment; and develop a supportive learning community, especially for learning another language where anxiety levels may be high. Recognising the important role teachers play, Brown (2003) reiterates that fluency can be promoted if they:

> (a) encourage students to go ahead and make constructive errors, (b) create many opportunities for students to practice, (c) create activities that force students to get a message across, (d) assess students' fluency not their accuracy, and (e) talk openly to the students about fluency. (p. 8)

Assessing fluency, not accuracy, is essential to ensure that students feel allowed to make mistakes as a natural part of the learning process and fluency development. Thus encouraging "intelligent fast failure" (Matson, 1991 in Murphey, 2014, p.46) and promoting the concept of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006, 2016), whilst supported by a supportive learning environment and community, can also help learners to overcome affective factors and facilitate positive attitude change (Finch 2014), increase interaction and, therefore, develop fluency.

Furthermore, Nation (2014, pp. 20-1) identifies five ways to enhance the effectiveness of fluency development activities:

1. Teachers should ensure learners understand the importance and nature of fluency development, and know when they are doing fluency activities;
2. Learners should be given opportunities to reflect on fluency development activities and their value;
3. Fluency development activities should have clear indictors to track learners' progress;
4. Teachers can monitor and counsel learners who are not making progress in fluency development activities; and
5. Fluency development activities should be conducted regularly and properly.

Nation (2007) also makes well-reasoned arguments for a balanced curriculum (in both ESL and EFL contexts), that includes fluency development across the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing with activities conducted in class: "it is important that [a fluency activity] is not just used as a throwaway activity (for example, for homework write …), but is given the time and attention that it deserves" (Nation, 2014, p. 19). Next, we therefore examine a range of skills-based fluency activities and consider their underlining characteristics.

## Fluency Activities

Nation (2014, pp. 12-14) helpfully outlines nine of the most useful fluency activities, summarised in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Nine of the most useful fluency activities (Adapted from Nation, 2014, pp. 12-14)

| Listening fluency | Speaking fluency | Reading fluency | Writing fluency |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Listening to easy stories* Teacher reads a few pages aloud from an easy graded reader, gradually getting faster each day. | *4/3/2* In pairs, learners take turns to talk for 4 minutes on a familiar topic. They then change partners and repeat the same talk in 3 minutes, then change again and talk in 2 minutes. (Adjust the timings to suit the learners, e.g. 120/90/60 seconds.) | *A speed reading course* Learners read very easy passages (all the same length) then answer multiple-choice questions, tracking speed and comprehension scores. Nation recommends twenty 10-minute sessions for 7-10 weeks. | *10-minute writing* Learners write for exactly 10 minutes on a very familiar topic and then record the number of words per minute. Teachers respond positively to the content and quantity and do not correct errors. |
| *Repeated listening to CDs* Learners listen to the same recording (e.g. accompanying graded readers) repeatedly until it is easier to listen to. Playback speed might also be adjusted to make it easier/harder. | *The best recording* Learners makes a recording of a short text, listen to it then re-records it (again and again) until they are satisfied that it is 'the best recording'. | *Easy extensive reading* Learners read lots of easy material (e.g. graded readers) comfortably below their level in order to process and access very common and useful words and phrases more readily. | |
| *Focused repeated listening* The teacher writes new words on the board then reads them aloud randomly while learners listen and point. They continue in pairs, gradually getting faster. | | *Repeated reading* Learners each read the same short text three times in a row, silently or aloud. | |

Examining the most useful fluency activities, Nation (2014) critically identifies four key characteristics that underpin them:

1. The learners' focus is on receiving or conveying meaning.
2. All of what the learners are listening to, reading, speaking or writing is largely familiar to them. That is, there is no unfamiliar language, and there are largely familiar content and discourse features.
3. There is some pressure or encouragement to perform at a faster than usual speed.
4. There is a large amount of input or output. (Nation, 2014, p. 15).

Moreover, "by seeing how well an activity involves these four conditions", teachers and learners "can decide if an activity is a fluency development activity" (p.15). However, it should be remembered that, "Not all fluency activities meet all of these conditions, but at the very least they should meet the easy material condition…no unfamiliar language, and largely familiar content and discourse features" (p.15). So consider, for example, the following four fluency activities listed in Table 3 below. How well do they meet the four conditions for fluency? (Feel free to complete the table for yourself before reading on.)

Table 3. Four of the most useful fluency activities and Nation's (2014) conditions for fluency

| **Fluency activities** | **1. Focus on meaning** | **2. Familiar/ Easy materials** | **3. Pressure to perform faster** | **4. Large amount of input/output** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Listening to easy stories* | Yes. Learners often want to find out what happens next. | Yes, with careful material selection or adaptation. | Yes, but teachers needs to monitor their own speed. | Perhaps - 5 minutes each class (plus related tasks)? |
| *4/3/2* | | | | |
| *Easy extensive reading* | | | | |
| *10-minute writing* | | | | |

For listening to easy stories, prize-winning graded readers can offer interesting and accessible materials. Split stories can also be used and harness students' curiosity, promote joyful learning, engagement and motivation, as well as building rapport and community (Deacon, 2017). Next, in the 4/3/2 activity, all the criteria are fulfilled: learners repeat a talk on a familiar topic three times in an increasingly shorter timeframe; meaning must be conveyed to each new partner; and each learner has at least 9 minutes speaking and 9 minutes listening time. Thirdly, despite the notable absence of any pressure to perform faster, extensive reading is undoubtedly a fluency activity, and its benefits have been widely published. (See, for example, Waring (2014) for a review of extensive reading and fluency.) Lastly, 10-minute writing also fulfils all the criteria; it focuses on conveying meaningful content about a familiar topic, and writing as much as possible within a limited time.

By analysing and understanding the conditions for fluency activities, we can not only evaluate their potential effectiveness, but also find ways to create new fluency activities, often by adapting existing ones (Nation, 2014). Hence, many of the most ideal fluency activities draw on learners' experiences, use previously taught (and learned!) language, and offer multiple opportunities for increasingly faster input and/or output.

Opportunities for recurring language use can also be created with related tasks, for example, as students consider, share, and discuss what happens next after each split in a story. As such, Deacon and Murphey (2001) concluded:

> Tools such as shadowing, summarizing, retelling, action logging, and newslettering increase student comprehension, negotiation of meaning, and feelings of community. These intensifying activities allow learners multiple opportunities to respond deeply to stories and experience shifts in their beliefs and attitudes. This then leads to more lively participation in and out of class.

Many teachers plan and set tasks with the intention of getting students to participate and build fluency, and some are invariably more successful than others. Having now established the key conditions for fluency and what makes an effective fluency activity, we next explore how tasks and activities can be better linked together to promote fluency development.

## Linked Activities

Nation (2014, pp. 16–20) offers insights into how we might link three activities together to address a variety of language skills, with the first two activities generally laying the groundwork for the third, a fluency activity. Three sets of three activities for a short text on doing a homestay are illustrated in Table 4, below, which should be read horizontally:

Table 4. These sets of linked skills activities

| | **First activity →** | **Second activity →** | **Third activity** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Set 1 | Read the questions without seeing or listening to the text. Guess and write down your answers. (Read/Write) | Listen to the text. Check and correct your answers. (Listen/Write) | In pairs, talk about the differences between your guesses and the answers. (Speak/Listen) |
| Set 2 | Talk to your partner about homestays. (Speak/Listen) | Read the text and write answers to the questions. (Read/Write) | Do a 10-minute writing activity on homestaying. (Write) |
| Set 3 | Listen to an easy story from your teacher's homestay experience. Guess which part is not true. (Listen) | In small groups of 3 or 4, recall and write about your teacher's experience. (Speak/ Listen/Write) | Do a 4/3/2 activity to recall the story and share which part you think was not true. (Speak/Listen) |

In set 1, the first activity prepares the learner for the listening task, helping to predict what they will listen to whilst focusing on reading and writing skills. The second task allows students to make and correct mistakes in private before sharing answers with classmates. In set 2, the first activity draws on learners' experiences and helps to activate schema knowledge prior to reading. The first two activities then prepare the learner for the 10-minute writing fluency activity. Set 3 does not utilise the text but relates to the topic. The first two activities prepare learners for the third fluency activity and including something that is not true in the story helps to add engagement and interest, as well as fun and humour.

It is worth noting that the third activity need not be a fluency activity in its own right since the first two activities can help to create the conditions for fluency, (e.g. recycling familiar language and discourse). As pointed out recently by Sweller (2017), "All instructional procedures need to account for the fact that students are constantly under a high cognitive load" (p. 7). Thus, to determine the effectiveness of any given series, Nation (pp. 18–19) duly considers vocabulary learning and relative ease/difficulty of the activities, identifying a number of key points:

1. All three activities should be based on the same content material to promote recycling of vocabulary and grammar, which then makes subsequent activities easier;
2. Activities that make use of the same language items also provide greater opportunities for repeated retrieval and creative vocabulary use;
3. The activities need not have a different skill focus and may be repeated, especially if aiming for high performance in the same skill, as per Sets 2 and 3; and
4. If the third activity focuses on a productive skill (writing or speaking), one of the preceding skills should also be productive since productive skills are relatively more difficult than receptive ones. Hence in Set 1, the third speaking activity is more likely to be successful than if activity one and two had not included writing.

These points can further be used to form our assessment of the linked activities and, based on Nation (2014, p. 19), we can ask the following questions:

1. How easy are the activities 2 and 3 for the learners?
2. What language items recur in activities 2 and 3 (within being read from any text)?
3. How fluently and confidently are learners managing the content in activities 2 and 3?

Moreover, with a little rewording, these questions can also be transformed into a guided self-evaluation and reflection task (for example, see Table 5) to facilitate positive attitude change (Finch, 2014), and promote learner autonomy:

Table 5. A sample guided self-evaluation and reflection task

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (1) *How easy or difficult was **activity 2**?* (Please circle the answer that best describes you.) | | | | | |
| Too easy | Easy | A little easy | A little difficult | Difficult | Too difficult |
| (2) *What words and phrases did you use freely (e.g. without reading/checking) in **activity 2**?* | | | | | |
| (3) *How easy or difficult was **activity 3**?* (Please circle the answer that best describes you.) | | | | | |
| Too easy | Easy | A little easy | A little difficult | Difficult | Too difficult |
| (4) *What words and phrases did you use freely (e.g. without reading/checking) in **activity 3**?* | | | | | |
| (5) *How fluent were you in **activity 3**?* (e.g. Speaking/Writing = ______ wpm) (Comprehension = _____%) | | | | | |
| (6) *How confident did you feel in **activity 3**?* (Please circle the answer that best describes you.) | | | | | |
| Very nervous | Nervous | A little nervous | A little confident | Confident | Very confident |
| (7) *What will help you or what will you do to improve next time?* | | | | | |

# Conclusion

Recognising the need for a greater understanding of fluency and some of the main issues that learners and teachers commonly face, this article has briefly considered pedagogical definitions and simple measures of fluency that are both useful and accessible to all. With further appreciation for the holistic conditions for fluency development, we can not only employ the most useful fluency activities in our classes, but also draw on Nation's (2014) four key characteristics to evaluate and create our own. In addition, we can more effectively link tasks together to ensure greater fluency development opportunities are created across the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Last but not least, linked activities can be evaluated and reflected on by both teachers and learners in pursuit of promoting fluency as well as autonomy.

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## Additional Resources

Extensive Reading Central: https://www.er-central.com/

Paul Nation's website: https://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/paul-nation (speed reading course, Vocabulary Size Test, *Vocabulary Resource Booklet*, publications)

Sonia Millett's website: https://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/sonia-millett (Free 1000, 2000, and 2000 plus Academic Word List reading courses).

The Extensive Reading Foundation: http://erfoundation.org/wordpress/


### Author Bio

Philip Shigeo Brown is a co-editor of Exploring EFL Fluency in Asia (2014, Palgrave MacMillan) and taught in Japan from 2001-2014. Currently, Phil tutors on the University of Birmingham's MA TESOL and Applied Linguistics (distance learning) programmes, Mentors for the International Teacher Development Institute (iTDi), and is a course director for the forthcoming iTDi TESOL Certificate.

# WHAT CAN L2 TEACHERS DO TO ASSIST L2 LEARNERS TO DEVELOP LISTENING FLUENCY?

By Anna C-S. Chang, Hsing Wu University, Taipei

In my experience at many Asian conferences, some people in the audience laugh particularly loudly when they hear a native speaker of English saying something that might be funny. Strangely, they don't laugh so loudly if a non-native speaker of English says the same thing. There may be multiple reasons but this one is for sure. They want to let other people know that they can understand what the native speaker is saying, and they are proud of themselves for being able to listen fluently.

Listening, unlike speaking, is usually an individual process. That is the reason why teachers give students a speaking or writing comprehension check after listening to a passage. Otherwise it is difficult to know to what extent their students comprehend. This comprehension check leads to a misconception that teaching listening equates to testing listening. In interactive listening contexts, such the one mentioned above, laughing is a way for people to demonstrate that they are fluent listeners. Having good listening skills is the first step to using a language. As an L2 teacher for more than 20 years, I have often heard students say, "I like to learn English through speaking with English speakers not just leaning something from a book." Students normally think speaking the language is superior to understanding it, without knowing that understanding must precede speaking. Having good input skills in both reading and listening has been found to be more effective to acquire a target language than having only one input skill. Given the importance of listening skills, how can we help our students to develop listening fluency?

## What is listening fluency?

Fluency across all skills involves two fundamental components: speed and ease. Nation and Newton (2009) described some characteristics of fluency in comprehending oral utterances: doing meaning-focused activities without holding up the flow, with little attention and effort while processing the language; and being able to use prior knowledge to restructure what they know to reach a reasonable degree of performance. Simply put, listening fluency refers to listeners' ability to process aural input delivered at a normal speed with ease without paying too much attention to decoding word meaning and to reconstruct what is heard with what is already known.

Developing listening fluency requires a great deal of input over a long period of time. Therefore, relying on formal instruction is not sufficient; L2 learners must spend much more time listening outside the class. There are many ways that teachers can assist their L2 students to develop fluency more efficiently, such as repeated listening. In this article, however, we will focus on extensive listening and provide some techniques for implementing it.

# Extensive Listening

Extensive listening involves listening to a large quantity of aural input. This can be live or through all sorts of media, such as radio, television, internet, and audio books. One of the benefits of extensive listening in learning an L2 is developing aural vocabulary because listening to a large quantity of easy texts allows learners to repeatedly hear the same patterns of phonemes, words, and collocations, and learners then become more rapid and more accurate at decoding the words they hear. Extensive listening can also increase world knowledge. As in reading, efficient word recognition seems to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for good comprehension. Another essential component for developing good listening skills is background or topical knowledge. As learners listen to a large quantity of varying texts, their world knowledge improves. With increased aural vocabulary and background knowledge, it is easier for a learner to comprehend a language.

L2 teachers may wonder how to implement extensive listening in their courses. Because extensive listening is a very broad term, listeners can listen to anything in their independent study time and daily life. However, for beginners or lower level learners, some assistance in the beginning stage is essential otherwise they may quit before they see the effect. Narrow listening and narrow viewing are effective ways of increasing listening input and developing listening skills.

# Techniques for implementing extensive listening

## Narrow listening

In this article, a subset of extensive listening—narrow listening, will be brought in; the concept of narrow listening was first introduced by Krashen (1996). Narrow listening simply means that learners focus on one topic (e.g., weather or sports, or one author) and systematically do a great deal of listening in the area they choose rather than listening randomly. This approach is suitable for learners across all proficiencies and is often interesting for L2 learners because they choose their own topic. Nowadays, there are many sources that L2 learners can use, for example:

1. Audio graded readers: Many original classics have been adapted and graded to help L2 learners expose themselves to literature in the target language as early as possible. Most graded readers, in particular those at the lower levels, have audio versions. They are often highly interesting and listeners can get hooked easily. Teachers can help students to select their own materials by the same authors, the

same theme, or the same title. For example, Tim Vicary adapted or wrote several human-interest stories: *The Elephant Man*, *Grace Darling*, and *The Mysterious Death of Charles Bravo*. Cambridge publishes a series of readers related to crime. Some classic fiction, such as *The Secret Garden* and *A Christmas Carol*, is published by different publishers at different levels. Some of the empirical evidence of using audio graded readers to improve listening fluency can be seen in the studies by Chang (2011; with Millett, 2014, 2016).

2. TV programs: Recent research on learning vocabulary from viewing related TV episodes found that related television programs contain fewer word families than unrelated ones (Rogers & Webb, 2011). This implies that narrow viewing may reduce learners' vocabulary load over time. In addition, characters generally don't change from episode to episode; after a few viewings, learners are familiar with the background and the characters so it will be easier for them to keep on viewing. Television programs are a great resource for learning spoken language usage, which does not commonly appear in formal textbooks. L2 teachers may recommend programs for students to watch, and then ask them to complete a listening journal, which may include the scenarios they watch and the language they hear. In class, the teacher may survey what programs their students watch and allow time for those students who watch the same TV program to discuss the program and share their feelings and the language they have picked up.

## Simultaneous reading and listening

Due to the spontaneous and fleeting nature of spoken language, it is normally more difficult for L2 learners to control speech. Using written language to assist spoken language for comprehension has been found to facilitate comprehension (Chang, 2009, 2011; Chang & Millett, 2014, 2016). Doing simultaneous reading and listening may help L2 learners to confirm what is heard, to link the spoken with the written forms, and to understand how speakers segment the texts. Reading and listening skills can supplement each other, and it is particularly helpful for lower-level learners, who have little confidence of what is heard. This type of input is possible with audio graded readers for lower-level listeners and TED talks where written transcripts of the talks are supplied.

## Going beyond listening only: Extended listening-focused activities

In addition to helping L2 students to select related rather than random texts to do listening practice with or without written text support, another step may be added in to improve the effectiveness, which is doing extended listening-focused activities. Recent research shows that students who did post-listening activities after listening and reading graded readers improved their TOEIC listening scores much more than those who did not (Chang & Millett, 2016). The extended listening-focus activities are based on graded readers. While listening to recordings of popular graded readers, students answer questions which focus their attention on the text. The technique is outlined in Millett (2014) and an example is included in the Appendix of this article. A library of these materials is available for use at http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/sonia-millett . For students who want to improve their listening quickly, doing extended listening-focused activities does work well;

however, it is time-consuming to develop these activities unless a few teachers collaborate doing it.

Regular extended listening-focused activities and simultaneous reading and listening are effective steps on the path to listening fluency. Do them every day if you can. L2 teachers need to remember that doing extended listening-focused activities or simultaneous reading and listening are the means or process leading to fluency. It is hoped that our students can eventually listen without any of these supports. Fluency depends very much on constant practice. All activities are best to be done at least a few times a week if not daily.

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# Appendix

***The Phantom of the Opera/CD Pack by Jennifer Bassett (Series Editor),***

***Oxford Bookworms, Stage 1… (2008)***

Introduction The Opera House in Paris

1. Listen for numbers and fill in the table.

| | |
|---|---|
| Building started | |
| Building completed | |
| Cost | |
| Number of floors above ground | |
| Number of floors below ground | |
| Number of doors | |

2. What does the Opera House have?
3. Is this a true story?
4. When did the story begin?

**The Phantom of the Opera** Chapter One The dancers

1. "Quick! Quick! Close the door! It's _____!"
2. What colour was Annie's face?
3. What did she see?
4. All the girls were afraid. True False
5. Did the tall girl look into the passage?
6. Joseph said he was _________ and wore a ______________ evening coat.
7. Did he have a nose?
8. What did he have instead of eyes?
9. According to Meg Giry, what didn't he like?
10. Who told her this?
11. ". . . and one day Joseph Buquet is going to be __________, very ___________."
12. What box did the ghost go to?
13. What did he sometimes leave for Meg's mother?

14. Did the girls believe Meg?
15. Did anyone buy tickets for the ghost's box?
16. Did her mother see the ghost?
17. Did she hear him?
18. Could the girls stop talking about the Opera ghost?
19. Did they talk loudly or quietly?
20. Who ran into the dressing room?
21. What colour was her face?

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# PRAGMATICS IN THE CLASSROOM

## Don't take it literally

By Richard Roberts & Roger Kreuz

Among the first phrases that English-speaking students of Japanese learn are the equivalents of "hello" (こんにちは*konnichi-wa*) and "how are you?" (お元気ですか*o-genki desu-ka*). With these two phrases under their belts, students may fearlessly run around Japan greeting everyone they meet with "hello, how are you?" in the same way they would greet people back home. However, if they do, they would be making a mistake. Although Japanese speakers will certainly understand what is meant by *konnichi-wa, o-genki desu ka*, the second phrase is not generally asked of people one meets every day—unless they really don't look well. *O-genki-desu-ka* is also not used to greet strangers like cab drivers or the baristas at Starbucks. In Japan, aside from those who appear to be ailing, this form of "how are you?" is reserved for people one hasn't seen in a long time. Its use is more akin to "how have you been?" in English.

Subtleties such as these in the social use of language fall under the linguistic category known as pragmatics. Due to its complexity, the teaching of pragmatics is often postponed until after the sounds and basic words and grammar of a language have been mastered. As such, pragmatics, and its attendant rhetorical devices such as irony and metaphor, are often treated like the icing on a cake; the cherry on a parfait.

But can a speaker really be considered fluent in a given language if she is unaware of the social rules of that language? We believe that pragmatically competent speakers who make grammatical, lexical, or even phonological errors are more fluent than those with perfect grammar, a large vocabulary, and a near-native accent, but who speak their second language in the same way they speak their native language.

To return to our example of how to greet someone, many English speakers would be taken aback if the first thing a person said to them was, "have you eaten?" This might seem like an invitation to a meal in Toronto or Cleveland, but it is, in fact, a formulaic greeting used by speakers of Mandarin and Korean (Li, 2009). Although a perfectly appropriate thing to say in the right setting, *have you eaten?* fails as a greeting in a culture that doesn't recognize it as such. Once again, this is an example of getting the words right, but failing to take the social use of a language into account (Kreuz & Roberts, 2017).

It is easy to see how the pragmatics of greetings, farewells, apologies, compliments, and many more such speech acts should be taught along with the basic mechanics of a language. But think about so-called "advanced" rhetorical flourishes that are also a part of pragmatics: idiomatic expressions, metaphor, simile, irony, exaggeration, understatement, indirect requests, and rhetorical questions (Roberts & Kreuz, 1994). When is it appropriate to introduce these topics to a class of second language learners?

The answer to this question will depend on the age and intellectual development of the learner, but as a general rule, if the concept has been mastered in one's native language, then there's no reason not to include it in second language instruction. For example, until children are about eight or nine years of age they often have trouble understanding the concept of irony (Capelli, Nakagawa, & Madden, 1990). But teenagers and adults are certainly intellectually prepared for learning about it, and since the use of irony differs cross-culturally (e.g., Barbe, 1995), they would benefit from direct instruction in its use in English.

Teaching second-language students about irony may be easier than it seems because there is plenty of research that shows that ironic utterances follow a recipe. Consider how, on a dreary, rainy day, a person could declare either "what awful weather we are having" or "what lovely weather we are having" and be correct in both cases if the first statement is meant literally, and the second is intended ironically. Ironic statements often involve a particular tone of voice, in which people speak more slowly, more loudly, and at a lower pitch than normal (Rockwell, 2000), perhaps accompanied with an eye roll for even more emphasis (Attardo et al., 2003). And to make sure that the nonliteral nature of an utterance is not missed, native speakers of English frequently sprinkle in extreme adjectives and adverbs as well (as in *what absolutely lovely weather we are having!;* Kreuz & Roberts, 1995).

ESL students who have been made aware of these conventions and encouraged them to craft ironic statements in this way are more likely to be successful in communicating and understanding nonliteral intentions. Better yet, their speech will be more interesting and more native-like (Roberts & Kreuz, 2015). And even better still, they will become acculturated to the fact that English may not work like their native language. This last point is important because this kind of practice will alert students to the need to look for alternative explanations when they encounter seemingly unusual turns of phrase, such as being told to "break a leg" or when asked, "just who do you think you are?"

In other words, what holds true for irony is true for all figures of speech, so there's no reason not to start teaching them as early as possible. Take proverbs and idioms, for example. Teachers often wait to teach these expressions until students are at the intermediate or advanced level. And, when the time comes, students may just be given a list of proverbs and idioms to consider *en masse*. A more natural way to teach such expressions, however, would be to incorporate them into even the most basic lessons in vocabulary and grammar. For example, "cat," "bag," "let," and "out" are all words that are learned relatively early in English language study. How easy, then, to reinforce the pronunciation and meaning of these words by teaching the expression "Let the cat out of the bag" as in divulging a secret. There are many such expressions in English where the vocabulary and grammatical structures are elementary, but the underlying concepts are more complex.

Because figurative language is culturally dependent, folding in these rhetorical devices from the earliest stages of ESL learning allows students to develop cultural competence in tandem with linguistic fluency. Proverbs and idiomatic expressions facilitate this process naturally. For example, the equivalent of *a piece of cake* in Korean is “eating a rice cake while lying down.” Likewise, *pie in the sky* is “a picture of a rice cake.” And *the grass is greener on the other side of the fence* is “rice cakes are bigger on other people’s plates.” Korean students studying English, therefore, will be able to draw useful parallels between Korean and English when they learn these sayings. Imagine the self-confidence and sense of accomplishment a Korean ESL student would feel the first time they use an expression like *we’re all in the same boat* with a native speaker of English. The native speaker would likely be impressed because such an expression is not typically expected from those who are not yet completely fluent.

Even beyond these figures of speech, cultural differences become more obvious when students are asked to exaggerate or create metaphors or similes to describe emotions, experiences, or situations (Kövecses, 2003). Once again, the pronunciation, lexical choices, and grammatical constructions need not be any more complex or intricate than those used to create literal language at that student’s particular level. But since figurative language is everywhere in English, it’s a good idea to start getting used to it early on.

In sum, a pragmatically knowledgeable language student will be a more fluent language student. Just as important, practice in pragmatics will reinforce essential vocabulary and grammar. Our discussion is in no way meant to negate or take away from the pedagogical techniques that teachers are already using. Rather, we would like to emphasize that seemingly complex rhetorical devices can be incorporated into even the most elementary language learning lessons. And even if students make pragmatic errors, for example, by telling someone to break their legs before giving a speech (instead of breaking a leg), or suggesting they play something with their ears (instead of by ear), they will still be well on their way to making pragmatic competence part of their overall fluency.

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# RAISING AND ASSESSING SECOND LANGUAGE VOCABULARY FLUENCY

By Kenneth Keng Wee Ong, Nanyang Technological University

The centrality of vocabulary knowledge cannot be overstated; it underlies the acquisition success of not only reading and listening skills, but also writing, speaking, and grammar learning (Alderson, 2005; Segalowitz, 2005). Linguists have proposed various definitions of vocabulary knowledge. Qian's (2002) definition has generally been a cited gold standard. According to Qian, vocabulary knowledge consists of four facets:

1. vocabulary size or breadth knowledge that refers to recognition of words,
2. depth knowledge of all features of a word including its semantic, syntactic, phonemic, graphemic, morphemic, collocational and phraseological traits,
3. lexical network of words that are stored, connected and represented in the lexicon, and
4. fluency or speed of retrieval of word forms and their meanings.

Vocabulary fluency is the speed or ease with which we can retrieve the meaning of a word that we encounter or with which we can retrieve the form of a word when we have a meaning in mind. Researchers often speak about this in terms of automaticity (Segalowitz & Segalowitz, 1993). Sometimes we find disfluent learners: they may know a lot of words but take a relatively long time to recall their meanings or come up with the word. It's also possible to have a small vocabulary but be very fluent with it. Obviously, for any given speaker, fluency for common words will not be the same as fluency for rare words, so when we think about vocabulary fluency, we typically mean some kind of average fluency for that person, but sometimes fluency for individual words or groups of words is what is meant.

For the focus of this article, I will delve into vocabulary fluency in the context of adult second language acquisition. In what follows, I highlight strategies that have been shown to effectively enhance vocabulary fluency development in the second language classroom. I will also discuss the importance of assessing vocabulary fluency in combination with breadth and depth tests to produce a complete assessment of learners' vocabulary development and growth.

# Extensive Reading and Form-Focused Instruction

As we've seen, vocabulary knowledge has a number of dimensions, including breadth and fluency. In most language learners, vocabulary fluency development trails vocabulary breadth knowledge (e.g., Zhang & Lu, 2014). In other words, learners tend to be more successful in learning many words with low average fluency than they are in building fluency. This raises the importance of vocabulary fluency development in the second language classroom. Two major approaches to increase second language vocabulary knowledge, including vocabulary fluency, are extensive reading and form-focused instruction (FFI).

# Extensive Reading

Extensive reading involves reading a massive amount of text, many times more than the amount covered in most language classes. To achieve this significant increase in volume, the text should be very easy for the reader. This is typically achieved with graded readers. Learners should choose a graded reader that interests them. To see if it's the right level, they can try the free extensive reading placement test from the Extensive Reading Foundation, or they can read a few pages and make sure they know all or all but one word per page. When they're reading, they should have the experience of seeing a "movie in their head" rather than always being conscious of decoding the words on the page. Once they've found their level, Nation (2015) recommends reading one book at their level each week.

The reason that extensive reading is effective at increasing fluency is that learners are working mostly with familiar vocabulary instead of dealing with a lot of new words, and they're seeing the same words repeated many times because of the massive volume of reading they do. According to Nation (2015), extensive reading offers more repetitive exposure to words that are applied in various contexts than FFI. Nevertheless, FFI can still be useful.

# Form-focused Instruction

FFI refers to explicit instruction in teaching word forms and meanings, either before or when meeting them in a text. There is some empirical support for pre-teaching a word and its features before reading the same word in context (File & Adams, 2010). This appears to lead to slightly better fluency gains than its converse, reading a target word in context before an instructed focus on the word form and its features. However, FFI can be time-consuming and impractical if it is the only strategy used to increase vocabulary fluency.

Teachers and students often focus on explaining and learning the "hard words" in a text for FFI. But these rarely provide the best fluency gains. Vocabulary lists based on corpus data can help teachers in selecting and prioritizing words for vocabulary fluency exercises. One such list is Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL) which consists of words most frequently used in academic settings. At the end of a two-year longitudinal study of 300 first-year university students in China, recognition of the most frequent 2,000 words and the AWL was faster than that for less frequent words. (Zhang & Lu, 2014). While general word frequency is a key factor in vocabulary fluency development, words frequently used in academic settings can also an important fluency determinant in an academic setting.

## Repetition is a Key Vocabulary Fluency Development Strategy

Repeated word exposure is needed for both vocabulary depth and vocabulary fluency. To get the more than ten repetitions per word recommended (Webb, 2007), a combination of extensive reading, FFI, and flash cards is useful. These practice activities facilitate repetitive word exposures across word contexts and meanings. As vocabulary fluency typically lags behind vocabulary breadth development, the implication is that fluency exercises of repetitive word instruction and exposures in different contexts beyond ten repetitions per word are lacking and badly needed in the second language classroom to reduce the gap between vocabulary breadth knowledge and fluency.

## Building Vocabulary Fluency in Form and Meaning Recognition

When we increase vocabulary fluency, the retrieval of a word form and its meanings becomes more automatic and uses less attention. When we increase vocabulary fluency, we free up attentional capacity for higher order processes such as reading comprehension (Segalowitz & Hulstijn, 2005). That said, developing fluency in both form and meaning recognition of target words by extensive reading can be difficult as reading comprehension and processing surrounding word contexts can use up all the available attention, leaving none to develop fluency in target words.

A strategy that can reduce attentional demands for aspects other than the target vocabulary may speed the growth of vocabulary fluency. A recent study has shown that a code-switched reading method does just that for Chinese-English learners (Ong & Zhang, 2018). Under this method, graded readers are translated into the L1 save the target words that remain in the L2. The story and word contexts presented in the L1 are easily comprehensible and require little attention, allowing the reader to focus on recognizing target word forms and meanings. Furthermore, the sharp relief between target words left in English and the rest of the text in Chinese increases attention to target word forms, which may lead to fluency in form recognition. This cognitive-relief effect of codeswitched texts increases retention and retrieval of target words, potentially facilitating fluency in recognizing target word forms and meanings.

## Importance of Testing Vocabulary Fluency

While measuring vocabulary breadth and depth knowledge is the central focus of vocabulary testing, assessing vocabulary fluency has been largely neglected by second language teachers and learners. A combination of vocabulary fluency tests with vocabulary breadth and depth tests would afford a holistic evaluation of learners' vocabulary development and help teachers identify learners weak in vocabulary fluency for remedial practice. Unfortunately, computer-assisted language testing is instrumental in measuring vocabulary fluency effectively. Computer-mediated tests enables accurate and real-time measurements for assessing vocabulary retrieval speed, and facilitates large-scale and automatic testing and scoring (Cheng, Matthews, & O'Toole, 2015). Nevertheless, a simpler fill-in-the-blank dictation can be used to assess recognition fluency. A sentence is printed with the target word replaced by an underline. In this test, the whole sentence is read aloud, including the target word, and test takers write the word that they hear in the blanks. If teachers assess vocabulary fluency more often, students will likely pay more attention to it.

## Concluding Remarks

Second language vocabulary fluency is largely neglected by teachers in the classroom, both in learner development and evaluation. Teachers should not neglect vocabulary fluency development of their students in their focus on vocabulary size growth. Rich and repeated input in FFI and extensive reading should aid in raising and accelerating second language learners' vocabulary learning. Code-switched reading raises learners' lexical retention-retrieval that may increase the speed of accessing or retrieving target word forms and meanings. Importantly, evaluation of vocabulary fluency should be combined with the evaluation of vocabulary breadth and depth for teachers to assess learners' vocabulary knowledge holistically.

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# LANGUAGE AND THE BRAIN

## What we have learned from 30 years of brain imaging

By Pascale Tremblay,[1] Université Laval & Anthony Steven Dick, Florida International University

With the advancement of cognitive neuroscience and the development of modern brain imaging methods in the 1990s, the field of language neurobiology—the study of the relationship between the brain and language functions—has grown immensely and rapidly over the past thirty years, and finds itself at a crossroad with respect to its theoretical underpinning. The main message of our recent article "Broca and Wernicke are Dead, or Moving Past the Classic Model of Language Neurobiology" (Tremblay & Dick, 2016) is that the most historically important model in the field, the Classic "Wernicke-Geschwind" Model, and associated terminology, is no longer useful to guide research and clinical intervention in the field.

## A Brief History of the Classic Model

The Classic Model was the first major model of language neurobiology. It has dominated the field of language neurobiology for over 150 years now, guiding both research and clinical interventions and influencing many generations of scientists. The Model was first introduced in Europe in 1861 and in 1874 as a response to an argument about how the brain works that was prevalent in the nineteenth century. At that time, several scientists were opposed to the notion that specific areas of the brain had distinct functions, arguing instead that the brain-as-a-whole worked as one functional unit. This meant that a lesion to one part of the brain could be accommodated by the rest of the brain. Other scientists, often referred to as the LOCALIZATIONISTS, were convinced that that brain was organized into several functional units and that lesion to one unit would lead to the loss of the specific function served by that unit. This was referred to as the CORTICAL LOCALIZATION OF FUNCTIONS.

Though several scientists have contributed to the elaboration of the Classic Model, the contribution of two pioneer physicians is particularly important: the French Pierre Paul Broca (1824–1880), and the German Carl Wernicke (1848–1905). In the 1860s, Broca presented the results of a series of autopsies of patients with difficulties producing language. His analysis revealed localized damage to the left frontal lobes in the perisylvian area, that is, close to the Sylvian fissure (Figure 1). These findings were interpreted as evidence in favour of the cortical localization of function. They were also interpreted as some of the

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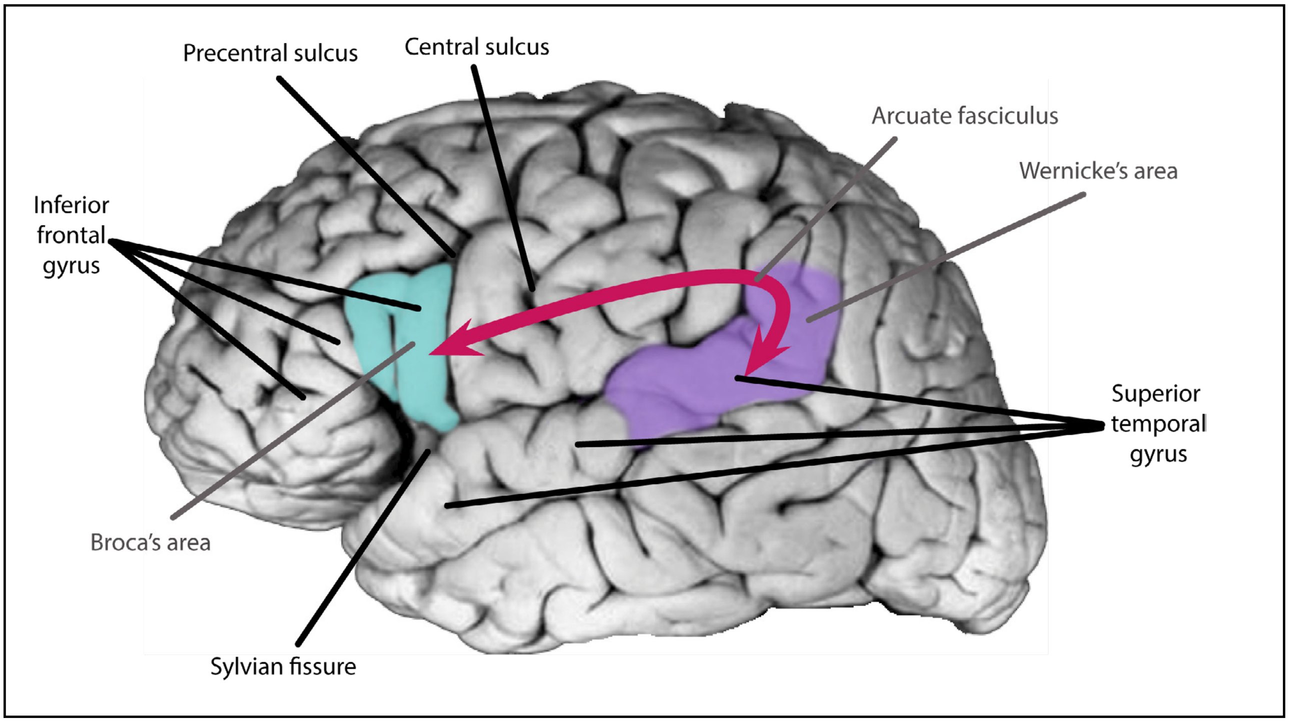


**Figure 1.** Representation of the Classic Model as popularized by Normand Geschwind.

first scientific evidences that language is lateralized to the left hemisphere, a phenomenon that is often referred to as CEREBRAL DOMINANCE. A few years later, Wernicke presented evidence that damage to the posterior part of the left superior temporal lobe (the so-called "Wernicke's area") is associated with difficulty understanding language, further supporting the notions of cortical localization and cortical dominance. Wernicke, and later Ludwig Lichtheim (1845–1928), also a German physician, elaborated the firsts neurobiological account of human language, laying the foundations of the Classic Model, often referred to as the Wernicke-Lichtheim Model, or sometimes as the Broca-Wernicke Model given the important discoveries made by the two physicians. The model continued to evolve to explain different clinical symptoms. Over one hundred years later, the model was updated and popularized by the American neurologist Norman Geschwind (Geschwind, 1970) to the model presented in Figure 1. This version of the Classic Model is the one that most students are taught in their introductory psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, or medical school textbooks.

## Overview of the Criticisms of the Classic Model

The work of pioneer scientists such as Broca, Wernicke and Lichtheim has had a major impact on our understanding of brain/behaviour relationships, and it has influenced the work of several generations of scientists. Yet, 150 years later, and with our modern knowledge of brain anatomy, we argue that the Classic Model suffers from two main issues: (1) it is centred on two "language regions" and one fibre pathway (the arcuate fasciculus; see Figure 3), and (2) the precision of the model is too limited to test specific hypotheses about brain/language relationships. Our main take-home message is that keeping alive a model so outdated has a detrimental impact on research in the field of the neurobiology of language and has presented an oversimplified model of language neurobiology to the public. This is why we argue in favour of abandoning the model and associated terminology. In the next section, we will lay the foundations for these claims.

# Criticism 1: Simplicity of the Model

The field of language neurobiology originates from the study of brain lesions in patients with language disorders. Lesion studies have had a major impact in shaping the field. But the advent of modern brain imaging techniques in the 21st century (See Box 1) has revolutionized the way that we approach the human brain and what we know about brain/language relationships.

**Box 1. A history of modern imaging techniques in 6 important dates**

**1973.** Invention of the X-ray CT scan.
**1975.** Invention of positron emission tomography (PET).
**1979.** Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is introduced.
**1982.** Imaging of brain function with PET is introduced.
**1991.** Imaging of brain function with MRI (fMRI) is introduced in humans.
**1992.** Blood-oxygen-level-dependent (BOLD) fMRI is discovered. It is the main imaging techniques to this day.
**2017.** A quick search on PubMed, the US National Library of Medicine (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed), indicated that over 230,000 articles have the word MRI or Magnetic resonance imaging in their title or abstract and include human subjects.

An important take-home message is that all available scientific evidence suggests that language is not controlled by a network as simple as the one portrayed by the Classic Model. Language is a remarkable, human-specific faculty that allows us to express the most complex ideas and the deepest thoughts using long complicated strings of co-articulated speech sounds in just few seconds! The adult human is capable of producing six to nine speech sounds per seconds! The human brain is also capable of processing these sounds very quickly, and is able to access to the meaning that is carried by the sounds and the order in which the sounds are presented. Language can therefore be seen as one of the most complex cognitive and sensorimotor acts that the human brain can accomplish. That level of complexity requires a heavy machinery behind it to secure it, and multiple systems are involved including the auditory and visual systems, to the motor system and several cognitive networks including some that are language-specialized and others that are domain-general such as the attention networks.

Thanks to the advent of powerful brain imaging techniques, evidence now abounds that regions far beyond the Classic language centres are involved at all levels: from sound perception, to comprehension, to the elaboration of complex messages and finally the production of speech sounds. As you can see from Figure 2, which is taken from a recent study from our group (Tremblay, Deschamps, Baroni, & Hasson, 2016), large sections of the brain, shown in yellow, are active even for a very simple task. These regions extend far beyond classical language regions which are represented using dotted lines in the figure. Importantly, as can be seen in the figure, language is supported by brain regions outside the frontal and temporal lobes—language is distributed across the cortex and it includes subcortical regions such as the basal ganglia, thalamus (Figure 2C), and cerebellum (Figure 2D). Another important take-home message is that the activity that is seen spans across both hemispheres and not just the left one. This does not mean that the left hemisphere is not involved, but it means that the right hemisphere participates as well, in many different ways. This and hundreds of studies like this one are very powerful demonstrations that the Classic Model is no longer an adequate model for explaining brain-language relationships and to guide research in the field.

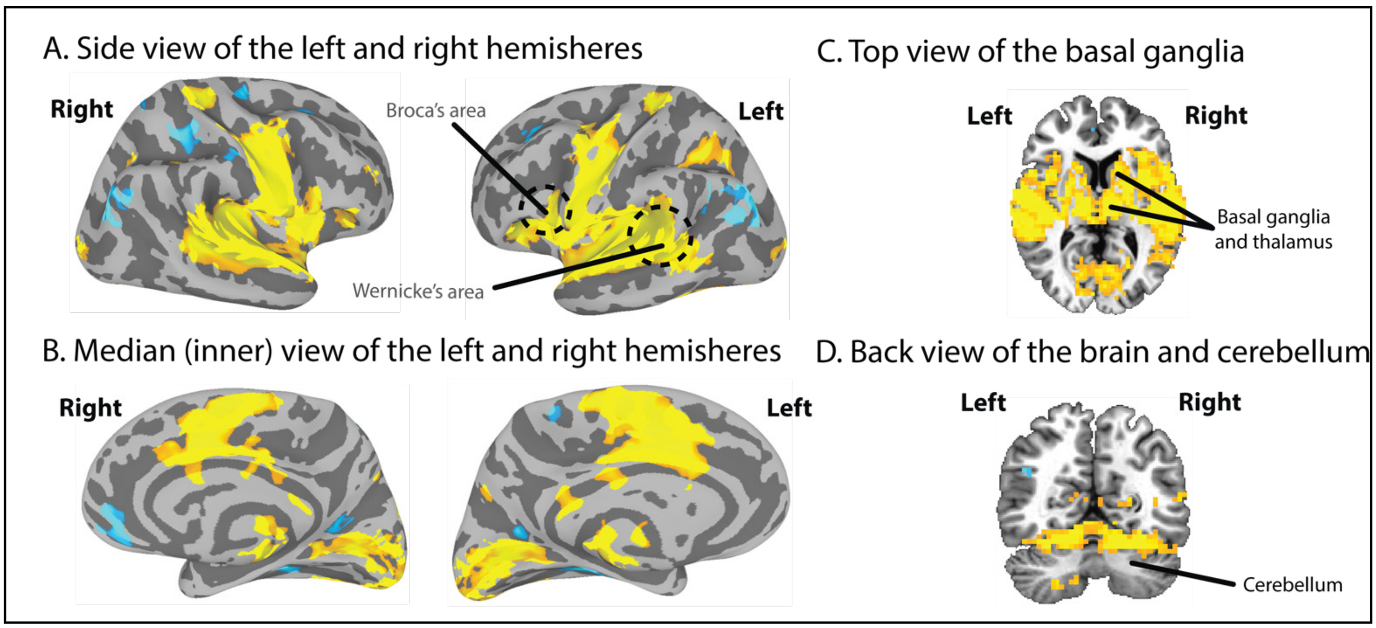


**Figure 2.** Illustration of the different brain regions that are active (in yellow) during a very simple speech production task, using functional magnetic resonance imaging.

Furthermore, contrary to the Classical Model, evidence suggests that there is not just one white matter tract—the *arcuate fasciculus*—that supports the language system. There are in fact many tracts, including the *arcuate fasciculus*, that support these functions (both production and comprehension; (for a review, see Dick, Bernal, & Tremblay, 2014; Dick & Tremblay, 2012). Recent advances in neuroimaging methods have led to the identification of many fibre pathways, and studies have found that the size or integrity of many of these tracts is correlated with speech and language performance, including the *uncinate fasciculus*, the *inferior fronto-occipital fasciculus*, the *inferior longitudinal fasciculus*, and the *middle longitudinal fasciculus* (Figure 3) This stands in direct contrast to almost every textbook presentation of how the brain processes language, as these typically focus on the two-region, one connection framework of the Classic Model. But this is what we have learned from over 30 years of brain imaging, and it is very well established in the scientific literature.

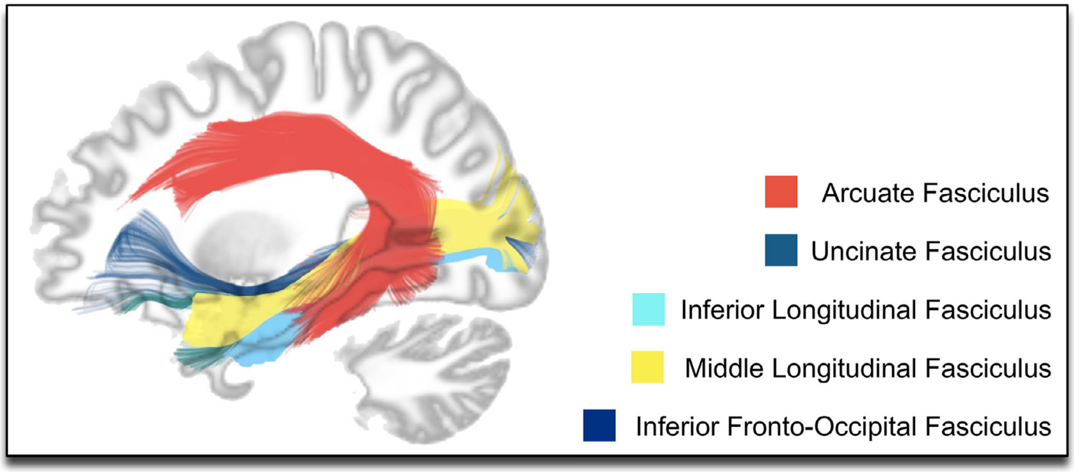


**Figure 3.** Representation of the main white matter pathways involved in speech and language functions.

## Criticism 2: Lack of Precision

Another important argument in our previous article is that there is also an important problem with the precision of the terminology associated with the Classic Model. The issue is that neither Wernicke's nor Broca's area are regions of the brain that are clearly defined. In our original article, we conducted a survey to demonstrate this point. We asked 159 people working in the field to identify which of a series of visual representations of Broca's and Wernicke's areas they think was correct. The majority of the respondents (87%) reported working in an academic setting, and 11% reported working in a clinical or hospital settings. 73% held a PhD; 13% a master's degree; 9% a medical degree and 4% a baccalaureate. Respondents worked in a variety of disciplines (speech and language pathology, psychology, neurology, & linguistics), with an average of nine years of experience. This shows that our respondents were qualified to undertake this survey. Essentially supporting our argument, none of our representations of Wernicke's areas garnered more than 30% of the votes. For Broca's, none of our definitions garnered more than 50%. What these findings demonstrate is that experts in the field use the same words to refer to different things. This is a problem because to understand the precise functional organization of the brain, we need to be very precise. We need to have clear definitions that are agreed upon. This is why we recommend using an anatomical terminology. The words *Broca's area* and *Wernicke's area* are not anatomical labels, but functional ones. For example, Broca's area refers to part of a region that is called the inferior frontal gyrus or IFG. As we already mentioned, the issue is that different scientists use the same word to refer to different locations within this general area. The IFG contains three divisions (opercular, triangular, & orbital). The definition of the IFG and each of its divisions are clear and agreed upon. Thus, when scientists report activation in the IFG in a scientific article or during an oral presentation, we recommend that they use the label IFG, PARS OPERCULARIS or IFG, PARS TRIANGULARIS, for example, because this is more specific than BROCA'S AREA.

Anatomically, the regions of the brain typically referred to as Broca's and Wernicke's areas are large enough that they do not have architectural homogeneity (Box 2). This means that, at the microscopic level, the cellular organization of the neurons in these areas is not homogeneous. Importantly, anatomical heterogeneity is usually coupled with functional heterogeneity. What this means is that within the boundaries of both Broca's and Wernicke's area lies a web of regions with distinct organization and presumably different functions. For example, Wernicke's area contains at least three different regions (named BA 39, 40 and 22, and often 21, 22 and 37 as well, see Box 2). Each of these regions is believed to play specific roles given its different cellular organization and connectivity. For instance, the regions labelled BA 41 and 42, which are referred to as PRIMARY AUDITORY REGIONS, are the first to receive the sounds, including speech sounds, in the cortex (the outer covering of the brain which contains the body of the neurons). This is why their functional name is PRIMARY AUDITORY CORTEX. In contrast, surrounding BA 22 only receives speech inputs after they have been processed in BA 41 and 42. It often referred to as ASSOCIATION AUDITORY CORTEX.

**Box 2. Brain architecture**

The study of the architecture of the cerebral cortex, which contains the bodies of the neurons (the gray matter), is called *cytoarchitectonics*. It focuses on parsing the brain to reveal how neurons are organized into layers. There are six main layers (numbered I to VI from the outermost to the inner most). Each layer contains a specific distribution of neuron types as well as specific connections with other cortical and subcortical regions. The organization of the layers varies significantly across the cortex. It is usually considered that a piece of cortex with a uniform organization serves a specific set of functions. For example, the organization of the auditory cortex is different from the organization of the motor and visual cortices. Different scientists have proposed classification methods for the different parts of the cortex. The German neurologist Korbinian Brodmann (1868 –1918) proposed one of the classification methods that is most commonly used to refer to different parts of the cortex (Brodmann, 1909, 2006). Brodmann identified 52 distinct regions in each hemisphere, known as the Brodmann areas or sometimes BA. For example, the motor cortex corresponds to BA 4 and the auditory cortex corresponds to BA 41 and 42.

In order to guide research, it is important to employ a specific terminology, one that allows us to distinguish between all the sub regions. This is crucial to further current understanding of brain organization and brain/language relationships.

## Conclusions

Language neurobiology is a field of intense research and one that is evolving very rapidly, away from the classical and simplistic explanations of the last century. Here we argue that the Classic Model is now too simplistic and too imprecise to be useful in guiding both research and clinical practice. Importantly, we believe that the continuous use of the Classic Model and associated terminology has hindered our progress towards understanding the complexity of brain/language relationship. The development of modern brain imaging tools has really helped scientists make important strides towards developing better models of language neurobiology. This opens the door to finally solving the many mysteries about language and language disorders with which the modern science has been struggling. These advances will undoubtedly lead to the development of new and more effective interventions to treat language disorders resulting from brain disease.

We also think that language research is extremely important. Language is the means through which we communicate our ideas, thoughts and feelings, teach, learn, and make contact with other people. This is a function that is central to social communication and learning and, as such, it deserves more attention from the scientific community, the public, and the media. As much as we have learned tremendously over the past 30 years, so much more learning is yet to come!

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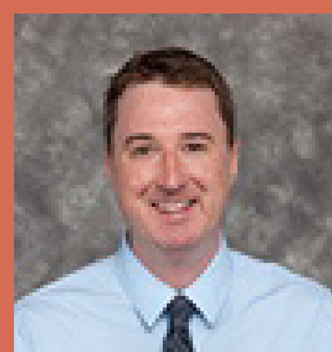

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# IMPLEMENTING TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING IN BELGIUM

## Lessons for Canada?[1]

Yuliya Desyatova, University of Toronto

## Abstract

Implementing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been central to numerous policy initiatives around the world in the last few decades. The Belgian experience of TBLT implementation has been the focus of intensive empirical research, which makes it of particular interest to policy-makers and practitioners in other countries. Implementation of Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) in adult language learning programs in Canada assumes TBLT to be the dominant teaching approach, even though empirical research on TBLT manifestation in the context is limited. Considering the paucity of accounts on TBLT presence in adult language classrooms in Canada, and the increased demand for TBLT spearheaded by PBLA, this summary of Belgian studies can aid in identifying both promising and challenging aspects of TBLT implementation at various levels: individual teachers and learners, classrooms, schools, and programs. The following features of a scaffolded TBLT implementation model emerged from the analysis: ongoing research (implementation is research-based, research-driven, and research-responsive); availability of quality resources for teachers; and open feedback channels between implementation agents.

Compared to the geographical vastness of Canada, the relatively local Belgian educational context may seem distant, both literally and figuratively. At the same time, the Belgian[1] experience with implementation of task-based language teaching (TBLT) can be of particular interest to teachers, administrators, and policy makers due to its longitudinal research-intense nature. Even though adult language learning programs in Canada have not undergone a nation-wide introduction of TBLT, this approach to teaching and learning has been mandated by the recent implementation of Portfolio-based Language Assessment (PBLA). It is assumed that PBLA implementation should result in TBLT in adult language learning programs in Canada (Ripley, 2012). While TBLT is a cornerstone of PBLA, little is known about how teachers in LINC or adult ESL programs in Canada implement TBLT in their classrooms. Until such accounts are available, some guidance on potential challenges

1 This article is based on the presentation delivered at TESL Canada conference on June 10, 2017 in Niagara Falls, Ontario.

2 In this article, "Belgian experience of TBLT implementation" refers to the introduction of TBLT in Dutch language teaching in Flanders, the northern part of the country.

and successes of TBLT implementation can be derived from literature reviews on similar contexts in other countries.

This analysis of TBLT implementation in Belgium will focus on the following aspects: 1) implementation goals and supports; 2) research evidence behind the implementation steps and structures; and 3) elements of a successful (scaffolded) implementation model. This paper analyses the Belgian TBLT implementation experience as presented by various authors in Van den Branden (2006), as well as insights from other available sources. In writing this review, I aim to inspire Canadian teachers, researchers, and policy-makers to continue searching for promising avenues of supporting effective TBLT implementation in adult language education.

## Why TBLT?

Task-based language teaching can be defined as instruction focusing on functional tasks with an emphasis on meaning exchange. The central feature of a task is its connection to a real-world rather than a linguistic goal (e.g., speaking about last weekend versus making sentences with irregular verbs). Similarly to other contexts, TBLT introduction in Belgium was envisioned as a progressive change from language-centred, teacher-dominated classrooms to a more learner-centred, real-life communication-oriented environment. In addition to reforming classroom-based language learning, more lofty goals were in sight: increased quality of language education would presumably result in better social and cultural integration of newcomers, thus mitigating educational under-achievement, high unemployment, and social inequality (Van den Branden, 2006). While these latter goals may go beyond commonly agreed upon scope of L2 instruction and its impact, they can be powerful landmarks directing meaningful educational innovation. Since the 1990s, TBLT in Flanders, Belgium, has been introduced across age and achievement levels from kindergarten to adult education, both in first and second language (L1 & L2) education programs in the Dutch language. While my focus here is on adult language education, some significant features of TBLT implementation from K-12 education may be relevant to this discussion. For all language levels and age groups, including adult language education programs, the main vehicle of TBLT implementation was ready-to-use classroom tasks designed by teams of professional task and syllabus designers. These task-based syllabuses were accompanied by detailed suggestions for teachers, as well as extensive school-based one-on-one teacher coaching programs. These implementation scaffolds—ready-to-use tasks and school-based in-class coaching for individual teachers—were selected as the most promising implementation supports based on the extensive classroom-based research that was inclusive of, and responsive to teachers' voices and feedback. After and during the introduction of these syllabuses, a number of longitudinal research projects investigated teacher response to the suggested materials and the coaching programs, as well as resulting classroom representations of TBLT. Findings of the school-based research were continuously revisited in order to adjust implementation strategies whenever and wherever necessary (Van den Branden, 2006). Below, I will summarize the research that led to the creation of the task-based syllabuses, as well as supports provided for their successful implementation.

# Needs Assessment

## The complexity of needs assessment

Needs assessment is a starting point for TBLT; in order to provide learners with real-life tasks relevant to a particular group of individuals, their teacher needs to have a profound knowledge of language use situations that the learners are facing daily beyond the classroom. While adult language learners are often expected to be key informants on their own linguistic needs, multiple complexities are associated with such an approach. The mere necessity of articulating one's own learning needs may be a culturally novel experience for many adult learners, either educated in teacher-centred environment, or deprived of uninterrupted age-appropriate educational opportunities. Even when individual learning needs may be clear to a learner, language is another barrier in effective communication of those needs to the teacher. While visuals can be helpful in identifying general thematic domains of language use, they might not adequately reflect the variety of specific language-use situations within the domains. According to Van Avermaet & Gysen (2006), learners' subjective learning needs often fail to reflect their objective language learning needs for a variety of reasons including, but not limited to, lack of meta-linguistic and meta-cognitive awareness, which results in limited ability to formulate concrete and relevant language learning goals. Finally, learners often confuse learning needs with individual preferences for a teaching style or skill focus (Van Avermaet & Gysen, 2006). When LINC/ESL students are confronted with the question of what they would like to learn in class, replies such as "to improve speaking and listening", or "learn English" are common. All these challenges do not question the value of continuous assessment of learners' needs throughout the course, but they do raise serious doubts about the weight and validity of student-centred needs assessment as a starting point for curriculum or syllabus design.

## A research-based approach to needs assessment

In Flanders, Belgium, this complexity of needs assessment in adult language education led to a comprehensive research project aiming to identify common domains and situations of language use, as well as to isolate their vocabulary and functional components. Selection of informants for this study reflects the complexity of real-life language functions and newcomers' limited knowledge of these situations: the 453 participants included 56 non-native speakers of Dutch currently taking a language course, 50 non-native speakers not taking a language course, 17 teaching experts, 30 native speakers of Dutch in frequent contact with non-native speakers, and 300 other native speakers of Dutch (Van Avermaet & Gysen, 2006). While teaching experts' responses carried more weight in the follow-up stages of this project, the original phase invited input from a variety of fluent speakers, without limiting the informants to language learners, in order to determine the range of authentic language use situations. These situations of language use were separated into five needs domains for adult language learners (in the order of increasing linguistic complexity): informal social contacts, education of children, formal social contacts, work/business, and education. In order to facilitate development of teaching and learning materials reflective of real-life use situations across the domains, a vocabulary frequency analysis of the language corpus was conducted, which distilled 2.5 millions language tokens into 1,372 words that are highly frequent across the domains and situations of language use. Similar corpus analysis was undertaken for every K-12 grade level in Flanders, Belgium. This meticulous documentation of lexical frequency in the target language is a crucial step to efficient teaching towards basic proficiency in the target language. Without such a research-based approach to evaluating the basic vocabulary needs of beginning learners, task-based instruction can fail to produce adequate progress. The significance of corpus-based frequency vocabulary lists for development of effective teaching and learning materials for beginners has been noted by Canadian researchers (e.g., Uchihara & Yanagisawa, 2017), but settlement-oriented corpus analysis for lexical frequency remains to be conducted.

# From Needs to Tasks

Other inevitable complexities stemming from needs assessment through identification of real-life tasks in a newcomer setting include three common problems: 1) the problem of specification, which results in an endless list of tasks newcomers may be facing in their daily interactions; 2) the problem of task complexity, which entails numerous daily decisions on task structure and task sequencing; and 3) the problem of performance extrapolation, which questions the validity of the assumption that successful performance on one task means a successful performance on an apparently similar task at a different time and place (Van Avermaet & Gysen, 2006). While the third problem remains open for empirical investigations, the first two were addressed prior to TBLT implementation in Belgium by teams of professional task, syllabus, and curriculum designers. Solutions offered—task-based syllabuses consisting of ready-to-use tasks for K-12 and adult language programs—were not mandatory but optional suggestions on TBLT implementation. TBLT was envisioned as a promising approach to improving the quality of language instruction, and teachers were encouraged to try it in their classrooms by the incentive of extra funding available to schools committed to implementation. By offering teachers optional ready-to-use classroom materials, an opportunity to reflect on the details, outcomes, and rational for TBLT implementation was provided for teachers.

## Interaction as the key to learning

The key element of TBLT effectiveness is acknowledged to be not in the task itself, but the amount and quality of interaction that arises from it (Van Gorp & Bogaert, 2007). The teacher's role in stimulating this interaction, guiding it, and increasing its quality is paramount. Even after the task is designed, its success in advancing learners' language competence depends on multiple decisions to be made by the teacher: how much support should be offered before and during task completion to the group(s) and individual learners, and in what form; how to stimulate active engagement of every single learner; what kind of focus on grammatical form would be appropriate for the task and the group; how to elicit negotiation of meaning and content; how to maximize opportunities for language output, etc. (Van Avermaet, Colpin, Van Gorp, Bogaert & Van den Branden, 2006, p. 175). This understanding of the crucial importance of classroom interaction and support of individual learners to ensure the emergence of quality learning is observed by numerous researchers (e.g., Woods, 1996; Kubanyiova, 2012). Teachers in Belgium were supported to focus precisely on enhancing the classroom interaction as a prerequisite to enhanced language learning.

The TBLT implementation model demonstrated numerous scaffolding structures, from research-based needs assessments and ready-to-use tasks and syllabuses, to individual one-on-one in-class coaching offered to teachers by professional consultants. The teacher is the key actor in selecting, adapting or designing a task, as well as ensuring that the task's learning potential is realized during the in-class interaction. This interaction is also dependent on all the diverse learners interacting with the teacher, within the group, with the task, with materials and resources, and with the meaning-making language learning process orchestrated by the teacher. According to Van den Branden (2006), it is the quality of this complex interaction that will determine the effect of a task on language proficiency of the group and individual learners. Attention to classroom interaction is seen as the central, rather than additional or taken-for-granted task of teaching. Therefore, the focus in the national TBLT implementation process in Belgium was on addressing other multiple teaching challenges such as needs assessment, material and assessment design, in order to allow teachers to turn their full attention to facilitating learning in the classroom.

It is worth noting that in the Belgian TBLT implementation model described in 2006, assessment is not presented as a key factor impacting growth in language proficiency, as it is in PBLA. Language assessment and evaluation appears to be documenting learning outcomes after the learning took place, rather than being the central part of the learning process itself. This apparent lack of emphasis on assessment does not mean absence of feedback, but rather acknowledges critical differences between assessment and action-oriented feedback. Such two conceptually different approaches to assessment in PBLA implementation in Canada and TBLT implementation in Belgium in apparently similar settlement contexts indicate the need for empirical evidence to support either one of the two assumptions. Further comparative analysis of various TBLT implementation models, which is beyond the scope of this paper, may produce additional examples of the dependence of certain educational innovations on then-current political climate, rather than on research-based evidence.

## Elements of a scaffolded implementation model

In the Belgian TBLT implementation model, the three critical elements of scaffolded implementation can be observed: research, resources, and productive communication. More specifically, these three factors were manifested in the following: 1) the implementation model was built on a local classroom-based research tradition that provided rich accounts of what teachers and learners do, think, feel, and need; 2) a comprehensive database of quality, ready-to-use resources was developed prior to TBLT implementation; 3) channels for ongoing communication between the actors were provided from the onset, with the goal of effective response and adjustment of the implementation process; and 4) longitudinal research-based monitoring of the implementation process and its outcomes was conducted. It is symbolic that research both starts and closes the proposed list of the key factors for successful implementation. Research-based needs assessment is a foundation of TBLT itself, and if this foundation is extrapolated to the task of TBLT implementation, it would entail careful assessment of what teachers and learners need in order to teach and learn the task-based way. The real-world task for teachers, administrators, and policy makers is improving the quality of both the process and the product of language learning, and extensive classroom-based research is a critical information source for policy development and implementation, as well as for assessing its impact. Such classroom-based research on LINC/Adult ESL programs in Canada is extremely limited and is in urgent need of exponential growth in order to support research-based policy development and implementation.

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# USING RECIPROCAL TEACHING TO SUPPORT STRATEGY INSTRUCTION AND LANGUAGE USE AMONG SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Annemarie Sullivan Palincsar, University of Michigan

Recently, a group of researchers (Ardasheva, Wang, Adesope & Valentine, 2017) conducted an analysis to determine whether, and under what conditions, strategy instruction was effective in supporting the learning of second language learners. The purpose of strategy instruction is to equip learners with the means to engage in the self-regulation of their own learning. When learners are self-regulated, they have control over their learning and are directing their cognitive activity and motivation toward their own learning goals. Self-regulated learners: (a) actively engage in learning tasks, (b) set goals for learning, (c) monitor their activity, thoughts, and feelings, and (d) make the adjustments necessary to achieve their goals (Loyens, Magda, & Rikers, 2008).

Ardasheva and colleagues determined that, in fact, there was evidence that: (a) second language learners benefited from strategy instruction when their achievement was compared with learners who did not have access to strategy instruction, (b) "less is more"; in other words, focusing on a small repertoire of strategies was more powerful than teaching many strategies, and (c) ideal instruction focused on a balance of attention to language and strategies. All of this is relevant to this article on Reciprocal Teaching because Reciprocal Teaching is a form of strategy instruction designed to promote self-regulation while reading and learning with text; it addresses the teaching of four strategies, and it engages the teacher and learners in lots of use of language as the group co-constructs the meaning of the text they are reading and discussing.

## What is Reciprocal Teaching?

Reciprocal Teaching is an instructional procedure designed to enhance students' comprehension of text. It is a dialogue between teacher and students. The term "reciprocal" describes the nature of the interactions since one person acts in response to the other. This dialogue is structured by the use of four strategies: questioning, summarizing, clarifying, and predicting. The teacher and students take turns assuming the role of dialogue leader. The brief excerpt below is illustrative of a Reciprocal Teaching exchange. In this excerpt, Clare is the discussion leader, and launches the discussion with her question.

TEXT: The pipefish change their color and movements to blend with their surroundings. For example, pipefish that live among green plants change their color to a shade of green to match the plants.

| | |
|---|---|
| Clare: | [Question] One question that I had about this paragraph is: What is special about the way that the pipefish looks? |
| Keith: | [Clarification] Do you mean the way that it is green? |
| Andy: | It's not just that it's green; it's that it's the same color as the plants around it, all around it. |
| Clare: | [Summary] Yes. That's it. My summary is this part tells how the pipefish looks and that it looks like what is around it. [Prediction] My prediction is that this is about its enemies and how it protects itself and who the enemies are. |
| Monty: | [Addition to summary] They also talked about how the pipefish moves... |
| Keith: | It sways back and forth. |
| Andy: | Along with the other plants. |
| Teacher: | What do we call it when something looks like and acts like something else? The way that the walkingstick was yesterday? We clarified this word when we talked about the walkingstick. |
| Angel: | Mimic. |
| Teacher: | That's right? We said...we would say...that the pipefish mimics the... |
| Students: | Plants. |
| Teacher: | Okay! Let's see if Clare's predictions come true. |

## What is the purpose of Reciprocal Teaching?

The purpose of Reciprocal Teaching is to facilitate a group effort between teacher and students, as well as among students in the activity of bringing meaning to a shared text. These strategies were selected because they not only promote comprehension but they also provide opportunities for the students to monitor their own comprehension. Instruction that is conducted for the purpose of increasing students' awareness and regulation of their own activity is referred to as metacognitive instruction.

## How were the four strategies selected?

The four strategies: summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting are all strategies known to be used by proficient learners (see Hattie, 2008). *Summarizing* provides the opportunity to identify, paraphrase, and integrate important information in the text. Text can be summarized across sentences, across paragraphs, and across the passage as a whole. When the students first begin the Reciprocal Teaching procedure, their efforts are generally focused at the paragraph level. As they become more proficient, they are able to integrate larger portions of text.

*Questioning* reinforces the summarizing strategy and carries the learner one more step along the comprehension activity. When students generate questions, they first identify the kind of information that is significant enough that it could provide the substance for a question. Then they pose this information in a question form and self-test to ascertain that they can indeed answer their own question. Question generating is a flexible strategy to the extent that students can be taught and encouraged to generate questions at many levels. For example, some school situations require students to master supporting detail information; others require students to infer from text or apply information from text to new problems or situations.

*Clarifying* is an activity that is particularly important when working with students who may believe that the purpose of reading is saying the words correctly; they may not be particularly uncomfortable that the words, and in fact the passage, are not making sense. When teaching students to clarify, we call their attention to the many reasons why text is difficult to understand; for example new vocabulary, unclear referent words, and unfamiliar or difficult concepts. They are taught to be alert to the effects of such impediments to understanding and to take the necessary steps to restore meaning (e.g., reread, read ahead, ask for help).

*Predicting* requires students to hypothesize about what the author might discuss next in the text. In order to do this successfully, the reader must activate the relevant background knowledge that they already possess regarding the topic. The readers then have a purpose for reading; to confirm or disprove their hypotheses. Furthermore, the opportunity has been created for students to link the new knowledge they will encounter in the text with the knowledge they already possess. The predicting strategy also facilitates use of text structure as students learn that headings, subheadings, and questions imbedded in the text are useful means of anticipating what might occur next. In summary, each of these strategies was selected as a means of aiding students to construct meaning from text and monitor their reading to ensure that they are in fact understanding what they read.

## How are the four strategies implemented in a typical Reciprocal Teaching dialogue?

While the eventual goal is flexible use of the strategies, they are typically used in the following manner. The discussion leader generates questions to which the group responds. Additional questions are raised by other members of the group. The leader then summarizes the text and asks other members if they would like to elaborate upon or revise the summary. Any clarifications are discussed. Finally, in preparation for moving on to the next portion of text, the group generates predictions.

## What is the theoretical basis for Reciprocal Teaching?

The development of the Reciprocal Teaching procedure has been informed by several lines of research that include: progressive reconceptualizations of reading and effective teaching and learning; cognitive development; as well as metacognitive strategy instruction for self-regulated learning. In the past several decades, there has been a great deal of interest in examining the characteristics of traditional reading instruction and its impact upon students' reading abilities and conceptions of reading. One feature of traditional reading instruction is that the strategies are typically presented as a set of isolated skills. For example, in teaching summarization students might be asked to underline a topic sentence in a series of disconnected passages; this type of task does not reflect the nature of summarization, which involves analyzing and synthesizing information. A second characteristic is that strategies are seldom practiced in the actual context in which they will be useful, specifically while reading extended text. As a result, students, as well as teachers, are likely to lose sight of the purpose of strategy instruction as a means to better comprehension. Finally, the isolated practice of individual strategies does not reinforce their flexible and opportunistic use. Hence, traditional reading instruction has typically provided inadequate opportunities for learners to acquire the conditional as well as the procedural knowledge regarding the use of strategies.

Examinations of traditional reading instruction have led to progressive redefinitions of reading. Reading has been redefined as an interactive process of constructing meaning from written texts. It involves the interaction of the reader, task, context, and materials. The reader interprets the text on the basis of background knowledge, the purpose of reading and the context in which reading occurs (RAND, 2001).

Reciprocal Teaching was developed on the basis of these newer conceptions of reading. First, instruction focuses on helping students to understand the factors that interact and influence their comprehension of text. Second, students are taught to apply the strategies in meaningful contexts, that is while reading extended text rather than in isolation using artificial tasks. Third, students are encouraged to use the strategies flexibly and opportunistically; in other words, students learn to use the strategies as opportunities arise in which they will assist comprehension rather than routinely applying the strategies. The strategies are taught as a means for enhancing comprehension rather than as an end in themselves.

The four strategies of Reciprocal Teaching are not novel to most educators. What is unique about Reciprocal Teaching for some teachers is the nature of the instruction. Reciprocal Teaching encompasses many aspects of effective teaching. From the students' perspective, Reciprocal Teaching is effective since students are actively engaged in learning, with frequent opportunities for immediate and specific feedback regarding their performance. This kind of guided learning is essential for helping students to improve their performance. From the teacher's perspective, Reciprocal Teaching provides frequent opportunities for diagnostic teaching. The dialogic nature of the instruction enables teachers to access students thought processes as they discuss their understanding of the text. This valuable diagnostic information enables the teacher to individualize instruction by providing the kind of support needed by the student.

Underlying the model of Reciprocal Teaching is the notion that expert-led social interactions play an important role in learning and can provide a major impetus to cognitive development. This idea can be found in the writings of Vygotsky (1978), Dewey (1910/1933), and Piaget (1967), who emphasized the role of guided learning in social contexts as a key to developmental change. Dialogue is a critical element of socially mediated instruction since it is the means by which experts provide and adjust support to novice learners. Reciprocal Teaching is an example of socially mediated instruction in which the teacher and students engage in dialogue for the purpose of constructing meaning from text.

Socially mediated instruction is sometimes referred to as scaffolded instruction. A scaffold represents a structure that can provide support, but that support is temporary and can be adjusted to meet one's needs. The metaphor of a scaffold appropriately characterizes the nature of this kind of instruction since the teacher and group provide support for individual learning that is temporary and adjusted over time (Bruner, 1978; Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). In the initial phase of instruction, teachers provide a great deal of support to students as they learn about the strategies and how to use the Reciprocal Teaching procedure. The teachers scaffold student learning by providing considerable explanation regarding the four strategies and how the strategies can be applied. Teachers further support students by modelling the application of the strategies thereby making their own problem-solving public. During the dialogues, there is a conscious effort on the part of the teachers to gradually decrease the amount of support provided to the students over time. Eventually, the teachers provide minimal support or scaffolding and act more in the role of a coach providing feedback and prompting as necessary.

## Metacognitive Strategy Instruction for Self-regulated Learning

Metacognitive strategy instruction for self-regulated learning is another line of research that has informed the development of the Reciprocal Teaching procedure. Metacognition refers to (1) the knowledge that we have about ourselves as learners, the demands of learning tasks, and the strategies we employ; and (2) the ability to monitor and regulate learning. As learners, we may know the following about ourselves: we perform better on essay tests than on multiple-choice exams and we have difficulty understanding science concepts. We may know the following about task demands: studying for multiple choice exams usually requires less time than studying for essay exams since one need only recognize rather than recall and elaborate upon key concepts. We may also possess knowledge of specific strategies that can be employed when reading text including picturing ideas, previewing the text, and illustrations and asking questions prior to reading. These three factors are not independent, instead they are highly interactive; as learners, we must consider the relationships that exist among ourselves, the task, and the strategies to effectively monitor and regulate our learning.

## How effective is the Reciprocal Teaching Procedure?

Ann L. Brown and I conducted an extensive research program investigating the effectiveness of the Reciprocal Teaching procedure. The majority of the research on Reciprocal Teaching was conducted in reading and listening comprehension instruction by general, remedial, and special education teachers. Since the beginning of the research program, approximately 300 middle-school students and 400 elementary students (1st to 3rd grade) participated in this research. This instructional procedure was principally designed for students who were at-risk for academic difficulty or had already been identified as remedial or special education students. Prior to instruction, the students who participated in the research were generally scoring below the 40$^{th}$ percentile on nationally normed measures of reading achievement. To evaluate the success of the intervention, criterion-referenced measures of text comprehension were administered as one of several measures of student performance. These assessments were designed to evaluate students' ability to recall information, draw inferences, identify the gist of the passage, and apply information presented in the text to a novel situation. The criterion level of performance established for this measure was defined as the ability to score 75-80% correct on four out of five consecutive assessments. Prior to instruction, students typically scored approximately 30% on these criterion-referenced measures of text comprehension (averaging 3 of 10 questions correct). However, at the end of instruction approximately 80% of both the elementary and middle school students achieved the criterion level of performance. Furthermore, students demonstrated maintenance of their gains for up to six months to a year following instruction (Brown & Palincsar, 1982, 1989; Palincsar & Brown, 1984, 1989).

### What are the essential components of Reciprocal Teaching? Specifically, how important are the dialogues and are all four strategies needed?

Comparative studies were conducted to determine the essential features of the Reciprocal Teaching method. Specifically, the studies were designed to evaluate the role of dialogue in teaching students to become self-regulated learners and to determine whether all four strategies were needed to improve students' comprehension of text. First, the Reciprocal Teaching method was compared to other kinds of instruction that focused on teaching students the same four reading strategies, but were not conducted in a dialogic manner. Reciprocal Teaching was compared with: (a) modeling in which the teacher demonstrated how to use the strategies while reading text, and the students observed and responded to the teacher's questions; (b) isolated skills practice, in which students were taught the strategies using worksheet activities with extensive teacher feedback regarding their performance; and c) Reciprocal Teaching/independent practice, in which students were taught Reciprocal Teaching for only four days followed by eight days of independently applying the strategies in writing while reading text. Only the traditional Reciprocal

Teaching procedure that incorporated dialogic instruction was effective in bringing about large and reliable changes in student performance (Brown & Palincsar, 1987).

The second comparative study was conducted to determine if all four strategies were needed to improve students' comprehension abilities or whether a subset of these strategies would be sufficient. The performance of students who were taught ten days of reciprocal questioning alone were compared to those taught ten days of reciprocal summarizing alone. Neither intervention was as effective as the ten days of traditional Reciprocal Teaching procedure in which students were taught all four strategies (Brown & Palincsar, 1987).

### Is the Reciprocal Teaching procedure effective in improving the listening comprehension of non-readers?

Additional studies were conducted at the primary level to determine whether Reciprocal Teaching would be an effective means of improving nonreaders listening comprehension. First grade students were taught Reciprocal Teaching by their classroom teacher in small heterogeneous groups within the regular classroom setting. Each group was composed of five at-risk students, who were identified on the basis of special education/remedial reading referrals or teacher nominations, as well as one normally achieving student. Instruction was conducted for twenty-five consecutive days, which included five days of worksheet activities to introduce the strategies followed by twenty days of dialogic instruction. Each day's session lasted approximately twenty to thirty minutes. Reciprocal Teaching was compared to traditional basal reading instruction in which both groups of students read identical text from basal readers. Prior to instruction both groups performed comparably on criterion referenced measures of listening comprehension, the Reciprocal Teaching group averaging 51% correct compared to 49% for the basal reading group. At the end of instruction, the Reciprocal Teaching groups achieved 72% on average as compared to only 55% for the basal reading instruction groups.

## Implementation

### What are some important instructional issues to consider before beginning instruction?

Before implementing Reciprocal Teaching, it is important to identify the instructional objectives you hope to accomplish. Reciprocal Teaching was designed to teach less proficient students to employ the kinds of strategic behaviors used by more skillful readers Thus, the primary instructional objective is to teach students reading processes, and content coverage is a secondary objective. Initially, the additional time spent discussing reading processes means that less content is covered than would be the case if students merely read the text. Eventually, however, as students become more proficient in their use of the strategies, it is possible to cover increasingly more content. Not only do the students develop automaticity using the strategies, but they also learn to use the strategies in a more flexible manner based on need rather than applying them in a rote fashion. Although content coverage is sacrificed initially, the long-term payoff for focusing on process objectives with the Reciprocal Teaching procedure is providing students the strategies or tools for self-regulated learning.

### How should students be grouped for instruction?

An important component of effective Reciprocal Teaching is providing students with frequent opportunities to practice applying the strategies with the guidance of others who are more capable. For this reason, it is recommended that students be taught in small heterogeneous groups to ensure that each student has ample opportunities to practice using the strategies while receiving evaluative feedback about his/her performance. Generally, the optimal group size is between six to eight students. In groups larger than eight, it becomes difficult to provide the opportunity for each student to take a turn applying the strategies on a frequent basis. This kind of frequent guided practice is essential in helping students to become more proficient in their use of the strategies. Some teachers have modified the procedure for whole-class instruction by incorporating more writing activities to provide students opportunities to practice applying the strategies and to receive teacher feedback regarding their performance.

### What criteria should be used to select appropriate instructional materials for teaching students to use the Reciprocal Teaching procedure?

When selecting instructional materials there are a number of issues to consider that include selecting materials on the basis of the students' reading/listening comprehension level, identifying materials that are sufficiently challenging as well as, incorporating text that is representative of the kinds of materials students are expected to read in school. When implementing Reciprocal Teaching as a reading comprehension intervention, reading materials should be selected at the students' instructional reading level. If there is concern that decoding itself poses a significant problem, the text can be read aloud.

*"The content of primary-level text is often so simplistic that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to carry on a sustained discussion about the content."*

The second issue to consider when selecting instructional materials is trying to identify materials that are sufficiently challenging to the students. This is important since materials that are difficult to understand provide a reason for the students to employ the strategies to assist their comprehension. This issue is particularly important for students who are reading at lower reading levels, since the content of primary-level text is often so simplistic that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to carry on a sustained discussion about the content. For that reason, it might be necessary to implement Reciprocal Teaching as a read-along activity especially for older students with low reading levels. This provides them the opportunity to use the strategies to improve their comprehension while working with more difficult text.

The third issue to consider involves incorporating texts that are representative of the kinds of materials students are expected to read in their classes at school or in contexts out of school. Generally, the passages that were used in the Reciprocal Teaching interventions were selected from the students' basal readers or content area texts (e.g., science and social studies). Providing students with opportunities to apply the strategies using materials that are comparable to the kind of texts they are expected to read independently will enhance their ability to transfer the strategies to other situations.

## Conclusion

Reciprocal Teaching offers teachers of second language learners a way to support them in becoming strategic and self-regulating as they learn how to interpret and learn from text. It has the advantage of providing a context in which there is rich use of language as the teacher and other members of the group build upon one another's ideas and the ideas in the text. While it is a demanding form of instruction, requiring thoughtfulness and guidance on the part of the teacher, it comes with a significant benefit for learners who come to a better understanding of the active nature of text comprehension and of themselves as constructors of meaning.

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### Author Bio


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# STAGE RIGHT AT OCISO

By Debbie Broad and Brian Kennedy, Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization

Can theatre help newcomers to learn English as a second language?

As volunteers with the weekly conversation groups for students attending the LINC program at the Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO), we decided to put this question to the test. For the past two years, students have had the opportunity to join a weekly drama group, rehearse an original play and perform that play in front of an audience.

In theory, drama teaches speaking skills, such as articulation, volume, tone, and pronunciation together with some basic theatre knowledge such as staging, characterization, and direction. In reality, participants learn teamwork, gain self-confidence, and see how to bring creative ideas to life. While terms such as DOWNSTAGE or SCENE are hardly essential words for newcomers, we believed these real-life skills might serve them well and reinforce classroom ESL lessons. By building speaking confidence, encouraging teamwork among people from different cultures, employing focus by memorizing and performing in front of their teachers and peers, we hoped the students could be inspired (and *inspire*!) by taking on and overcoming this huge challenge.

The big question remained: can a cast from several different countries, some of whom had never experienced live theatre, come together to produce and perform an original play? After two student productions, the answer is a resounding YES!

The overwhelming reaction to the plays has been positive. Teachers commented how they noticed certain actors speaking up much more in class. One teacher said that when she asked her class what they like most about school, cast members immediately said, “drama group!”. Many students told us that the experience had improved their confidence speaking English, some that they never imagined they could do what they had just accomplished. Others said they had liked meeting and working with students from other nationalities. One remarked that now, “Everyone here knows me and my story.” Another has promised to return in September and help recruit our next cast because she said the students should all know what a great opportunity and experience this is.

The following points may help others thinking they’d like to produce a similar ESL piece of theatre.

**1. Get buy-in for the project.** Rehearsal space will be required, cast members will inevitably miss some class time, and there may be interruptions to the school's regular daily schedule. Having the support of managers, all teachers, and other staff is essential. Our experience was that everyone got caught up in the excitement and reacted very positively to having a drama group each week.

**2. Find several courageous actors.** We all know that speaking in front of an audience is a scary prospect for most people. Acting a role on stage is even more daunting. So, imagine the courage it takes to agree to perform in a foreign language!

We asked for class time to speak to students in CLB levels 3 to 6 and got across the idea of what we planned to do. Whether it required acting out a small demo scene or asking who wanted to be the next Angelina Jolie or Brad Pitt (yes, those names seem to have global resonance!), the pitch resulted in several brave students stepping forward.

Over time, a number of cast members withdrew, usually because they were leaving the school for a job or other demands. Some worried they might be missing too much class time. Miraculously, we always found replacements and began again with the new recruits. This, along with only having one morning a week to rehearse, meant it took a whole school year to produce our half hour play.

**3. Decide what to perform.** We considered trying to find a simple play that we could adapt to the abilities of our students. But, in talking with the aspiring actors and based on things we'd already learned about them from our ongoing volunteer experience, the decision was made to take several of their stories and turn them into simple dialogue scenes. A couple of students wrote incredibly evocative poems which became readings with actions, story theatre style. By varying the dramatic style of the scenes, some memorized, some read chorally, or a combination of the two, we hoped to keep both audience and actors interested.

As mentioned, many students came and went but we kept the stories even if their authors were no longer part of the cast. The stories may have been personal but the sentiments they brought to mind were universal. Our first year, the title of the play was "Lean on me" and the theme was the importance of human relationships in our lives. This year, our title was "What's in your suitcase?" and the theme was fond memories of one's homeland and how we bring them with us—like clothes in a suitcase—when we travel to a new land.

**4. Arrange rehearsals.** Thursday mornings at OCISO are conversation periods for some classes so we already had this block of time that could be allocated to rehearsals. We took over the community room/teachers' lunchroom, so we always had the same space in which to practise. Rehearsals started with a voice and physical warm-up. There are plenty of these on-line (e.g., [http://wgdramaclass.blogspot.ca/p/vocal-warm-ups.html](http://wgdramaclass.blogspot.ca/p/vocal-warm-ups.html)).

Because of our somewhat rotating cast, characters were numbered in each script, so new actors could be assigned roles without a script revision. To help with memorization, individual lines were kept to short, simple sentences; long speeches were avoided, action was encouraged as was humour, and each scene was kept to two pages maximum. Each actor was assigned a major role in only one scene and they were paired up in different scenes. This made absences during rehearsals easier to work around.

Pronunciation was an ongoing task for us, as was editing in process; words were simplified, sentences re-cast, imagery explained. This all contributed to the students acquiring new vocabulary and to learning appropriate intonation.

Giving non-actors a basic sense of the stage, such as facing downstage (i.e., the audience) or blocking a scene, often required gentle reminders, sometimes re-positioning an actor as rehearsal progressed. We kept a prompt book, recording stage movement scene by scene using diagrams which we could refer to each week without having to try to remember where each actor should be placed at that point in the action. For stage volume, one of us would position ourselves at the back of the room and ask the actors to speak loudly enough for us to hear them.

**5. Put on the final touches.** Both plays have had a musical component. One of the OCISO teachers had organized a student choir and so, the first year, we invited them to be part of our production. They enthusiastically agreed and we selected a song, “Lean on me” by Bill Withers (which became the title). This year, we used “We are all running” by Andrew Dale from the Newfoundland group, The Once. Instead of the choir, we had the actors sing and employed the chorus as the intro and finale of the play, with the audience encouraged to join in.

Both songs conveyed and expanded our themes clearly; the melodies are memorable and the lyrics are simple and catchy (can easily become earworms!). Repetition meant the words were quickly retrievable. We added guitar accompaniment to the singing and to help convey action on stage such as climbing a tree and transitions of time and place and scene changes.

We found costumes and sets just got in the way of short scenes and quick changes, so these were kept to a minimum. The actors had input to what did get used, and several brought in items they thought would add to the production. Reflecting the title, “What’s in your suitcase?”, our main prop this year was an old suitcase that was carried on at first entrance and was used from scene to scene to underscore the central metaphor.

Each year we have produced a programme so that the actors can see their names and photos in print and the other students can read a short synopsis of each scene. We also used it to print song lyrics to enable the sing-along. We added some visuals with a PowerPoint show this year to accompany the choral readings of the poems, thinking that this would aid the lower level audience members in the absence of any action onstage. These pictures were displayed on a large TV already present in the rehearsal room.

**6. Prepare for performance Day.** Given that we needed the entire school year to be ready for "prime time", we planned for early June performances. We consulted with the teachers and staff to come up with a day that would not interfere with end-of-year testing, interviews, outings or class parties. Each play has run about thirty minutes and we did each one twice on the chosen day, in order to accommodate the whole school. Actors were, of course, nervous to begin with but, because of all the practice, soon relaxed on stage, especially once one of their lines provoked laughter from the audience. That's when some of them discovered they really are "hams" at heart! And we are confident we will find more of them come September.

We believe producing a theatre piece with ESL students is a rich and rewarding endeavour, especially for volunteers. Teachers could take this on themselves but, if time is at a premium and you are fortunate enough to have volunteers, you could survey the group and see who might be interested in taking up the challenge. We guarantee it will be interesting, educational, emotional, and fun—in a word, priceless.

## Author Bio

Debbie Broad and Brian Kennedy are graduates of the TESL program at Carleton University and long-time volunteers at OCISO.

# OCELT ADVANCES ESL TEACHING STANDARDS IN ONTARIO

## By Samantha Serles and Arielle Townsend

If you are a TESL Ontario member, you have a new designation to add to your name. The Ontario Certified English Language Teacher (OCELT) designation has been awarded to all TESL Ontario members in good standing. It is intended to be a symbol of professionalism in adult language education. But what exactly does this mean for ESL teachers and their careers?

Professional licensure and any accompanying professional designations have two main purposes: first, those within the profession may be able to use them to extract economic rents (payment in excess of the minimum required to bring provide the service) by limiting the competition and increasing their perceived quality,[1] and second, employers and consumers may be able to reduce search costs and risk.

"Everyone is familiar with OCT, RN, CA, and PEng as professional designations for certified teachers, nurses, chartered accountants and engineers," says Reza Mazloom-Farzaghy, Accreditation Services Manager for TESL Ontario. "These abbreviations have become common fixtures in everyday language, symbolic of the professions and respected titles for their practitioners."

Like all designations, OCELT is a marketing tool designed to signal to employers and consumers that TESL Ontario members have specialized knowledge, skills, and experience in teaching English as a second language to adults. Furthermore, as Mazloom-Farzaghy explains, "OCELT distinguishes the holders from non-adult ESL teachers, and adult ESL teachers who do not qualify for TESL Ontario accreditation." Another possible outcome of the use of a designation is a deeper identification of designation holders with the "brand" of the designation. "This identification with the brand is reflected, for example, in the hours of volunteer work that individuals will do for their association" (Richardson & Jones, 2007, p. 141). And in a field with high levels of attrition (Valeo & Faez, 2013), it may also go some small way to reducing that attrition.

Outside of the organization, a designation will only be as useful as it is familiar. In the case of OCELT, the nature of the English-language teaching field, which is often funded by the government either directly or indirectly, means that potential employers in Ontario will most likely be aware of TESL-Ontario certification and its newly attached designation.

1 Note, however, that "low pay contributes to low professional status and that accreditation alone has not sufficed to change this" (Valeo & Faez, 2013, p. 4).

Language learners attending schools or hiring teachers privately, however, are far less likely to be familiar with it and therefore far less likely to seek out teachers holding the designation.

For these reasons, it is useful for the organization to promote it, and consequently, TESL Ontario's *Guide to OCELT: The Professional Designation of TESL Ontario Accredited Members*, encourages members to use the OCELT designation on their business cards, email signature, writing bylines, and whenever they are introduced professionally. As more members adopt this professional title and use it regularly, the guide explains, it will become a common term in the TESL industry, both in Canada and around the world. "When employers see OCELT on a job seeker's application, they immediately know that the applicant has met rigorous standards and is ready to do the job," says Mazloom-Farzaghy.

Beth-Anne Chansavang, a TESL Ontario member since 2010, sees how the designation will have a positive for both ESL teachers and students. "Having the OCELT designation informs the greater public that a member in good standing is accountable, not only to the professional body itself, but also to English language learners," says Chansavang. "I believe that the designation will also promote and ensure consistency in terms of professionalism and competence across the entire OCELT community."

Today, TESL Ontario's Certificate of Accreditation is highly regarded by teachers and learners alike, but the standards of ESL teaching in Ontario have not always been so clear. Some TESL members may not be aware that OCELT is the result over two decades of advocacy for excellence in ESL teaching.

In *A Short History About TESL Ontario Certification*, Executive Director Renate Tilson describes of the process of establishing a certification process. The topic was raised in September 1994, at meeting between TESL Ontario and representatives from the Ministry of Education and Training, Citizenship and Immigration of Canada. At the time, there was a wide variety of ESL training courses in the province but no standardization. "The question of 'What Is a Qualified ESL Instructor' could not be readily answered, and teacher training courses within Ontario at that time ranged from 5 weeks to 2–3 year credit courses, some included a practicum, others did not" (Tilson, 2005).

The Standards and Certification Project was established and an initial survey was conducted to gather data about "the qualifications of instructors teaching non-credit adult ESL courses in Ontario as well as…survey data on teacher training programs issuing ESL teaching certificates throughout the Province" (Tilson, 2005). A second survey looked at "admission requirements, number of hours of instruction, course content, length and nature of teaching practica, and types of certificates issued upon completion of programs including admission requirements, course content, hours of instruction and teaching practicums, and types of certificates issued upon completion of programs" (Tilson, 2005).

This comprehensive survey data was used to inform focus groups that further explored issues in standardization. ESL training programs outside of Ontario and models of certifications in other professions were also considered. “The findings were then validated through a pilot study, with a sample of ESL instructors identified in the initial survey being selected for participation (Tilson, 2005).

In February, 1998 the first draft of a proposal was circulated to teachers, service providers, stakeholders and the ministries, and discussed at affiliate meetings and conferences. “Based on the feedback received, the Steering Committee met again on two separate occasions to revise the document to include a number of the very constructive suggestions that were sent in. The approved (by TESL Ontario’s Board) text appeared in the 1998 fall issue of *Contact* and on [TESL Ontario’s] website” (Tilson, 2005).

By 2001, over one thousand instructors were certified by TESL Ontario and 13 institutions were recognized as meeting TESL Ontario’s standards. Although the Standards and Certification Project was completed, TESL Ontario continued pushing for more professionalism in the ESL industry, and ways for the professionalism to be recognized, thus providing value for their membership. OCELT is the result of that ongoing work.

“OCELT [is] considered one more step towards getting the adult ESL teaching regulated in Ontario,” explains Mazloom-Farzahgy. “We know that we still have a long way to go and many more steps to take to achieve that goal. OCELT [will] help us go forward more smoothly and efficiently and bring together the adult ESL teachers in Ontario under one umbrella, give them a united voice, and put TESL Ontario in a more solid position in its advocacy efforts.”

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# OVERCOMING THE THEORY AND PRACTICE DIVIDE

## A perspective from the TESOL Plus program

By Danielle Freitas, Sheridan College

Certificate programs such as Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) have burgeoned in our globalized world. They are usually offered and/or accredited by reputable educational institutions, such as University of Cambridge, University College London, Michigan University, as well as sanctioned by government bodies (e.g., TESL Ontario and TESL Canada in Canada, National ELT Accreditation Scheme (NEAS) in Australia, New Zealand Qualification Authorities (NZQA) in New Zealand, & Accreditation UK in the United Kingdom). These accredited programs vary enormously in their design, ranging from short certificate courses to higher education degrees. The former have historically been known as *teacher training* courses, with the British ELT industry as a pioneer in the field, qualifying English language teachers for more than 50 years (Freitas, 2013). They generally seek to provide their student-teachers with essential knowledge and practical skills for the teaching of the English language. The latter have been typically offered by higher education institutions in the format of bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees focusing on academic disciplines. However, what the ELT field has considered to be *the content* (knowledge base) of these programs as well as *how this content* should be taught has significantly changed through the years.

## The Origins of ELT and the Theory and Practice Divide

The roots of the ELT field can be traced back to the field of general education in the 1960s, when teaching was described as a set of behaviours and activities that could be assessed by learning outcomes (Freeman, 1996). The assumption was that students would learn if a set of quantifiable behaviours and activities were carried out effectively (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). It was thought that "teachers needed discrete amounts of knowledge, usually in the form of general theories and methods that were assumed to be applicable to any teaching context" (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 399). In this context, the field of ELT saw the emergence of English language teaching methods such as Audiolingualism, The Silent Way, and Suggestopedia and the creation of teacher training programs to train teachers how to deliver instruction using such methods (Burns & Richards, 2009). These programs aimed at giving student-teachers the practical teaching skills to deliver their methods. Concurrently, the ELT field also began to build its foundation on disciplines such as linguistics, applied linguistics, and psychology. Higher education courses and degrees were created and they focused on the delivery of these disciplines as well as others such as language acquisition and classroom methodology (Freeman, 2009). This academic focus helped to legitimise the ELT profession and give English language teachers a professional identity (Freeman, 2009; Freeman & Richards, 1996).

However, as a result of these concurrent educational focuses, the divide between theory and practice began to generate a long-lasting debate in the field, and the distinction between practical teaching skills and academic knowledge became even more prominent (Burns & Richards, 2009). Attempts to resolve such a debate drew a differentiation between teacher training and teacher development, with "the former being identified with entry-level teaching skills linked to a specific teaching context, and the latter to the longer-term development of the individual teacher over time" (Burns & Richards, 2009, p. 2). As a result, teacher training qualifications have become synonyms to certificate programs such as the Cambridge Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA), usually offered by colleges and other organizations, for example, the British Council, where practical teaching skills are emphasized and depth of theory is devalued, while teacher development has become equivalent to master's degree programs, typically offered by universities, where theory or the mastery of applied linguistics disciplines are emphasised and practical teaching skills are devalued (Burns & Richards, 2009).

Developments in 80s, 90s and 00s have set a new agenda in the ELT field, replacing the debate between training and development by the reconceptualization of the knowledge base and the nature of teacher learning (Burns & Richards, 2009; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Wright, 2010). This new research and professional practice agenda gave rise to a body of research called *teacher cognition,* which emerged in the 80s and saw its consolidation through the 90s and 00s. It initially focused "on teacher decision making, on teachers' theories of teaching, teachers' representations of subject matter, and the problem solving and improvisational skills employed by teachers with different levels of teaching experience during teaching" (Burns & Richards, 2009, p. 5), but then expanded to include the importance of context and the situated and social nature of teacher learning (Freeman, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991), a focus on reflective practice (Farrell 2008; 2009; 2012), teacher identity (Mantero, 2004; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & A. Johnson, 2009; Kanno & Stuart 2011) and action research (Burns, 2010; Borg, 2015; Wallace, 1998).

However, despite the emergence and consolidation of this exciting and flourishing body of research and professional practice, Wright (2010) points out that more research is needed to shed light on how this new agenda has guided practice in the ELT field. This means that the question of to what extent TESOL / TESL / TEFL programs have adapted their curricula to include these new developments merits significant attention. One example of such an attempt is the TESOL Plus Graduate Certificate program from Sheridan College. Below, I describe how it has proposed to deal with the issues raised and adapted its curriculum to deliver innovative and state-of-the-art pedagogy.

## A Perspective from the TESOL Plus Program

The TESOL Plus is a new graduate certificate program from Sheridan College, which will be launched in January 2018 and offered at the Hazel McCallion Campus in Mississauga, Ontario. It is unique in its context as it is accredited by TESL Canada, TESL Ontario, and the University of Cambridge[1], accreditations which allow its graduates the opportunity to obtain three different qualifications, i.e., TESL Canada, TESL Ontario, and CELTA. Its two-semester curriculum includes eleven courses, with focus on educational technology, social and cultural perspectives of language learning, reflective practice, teacher identity, and professionalism, as well as focus on both depth of theory and practical teaching skills using student-centred, communicative, and action-oriented methodologies, which were all designed to reflect the new developments of the ELT field. Its goal, therefore, is to deliver innovative and state-of-the-art pedagogy as well as address the shortcomings encountered in short teacher training courses and in college- and university-based TESOL / TESL certificate programs.

As mentioned in the previous section, the issue of how the theory vs practice / training vs development debate has been dealt with in TESOL / TESL / TEFL certificate programs still merits attention. In particular, how these programs have addressed the shortcomings found in short teacher training courses, which emphasise practical teaching skills to the detriment of depth of theory, and in college- and university-based programs, which do the opposite, is of great relevance for the ELT field. In the TESOL Plus program, these concerns have been addressed with the synthesis of the CELTA curriculum, which places a greater focus on practical teaching skills, and the TESL Ontario and Canada curricula, which emphasise theory and methodology. By providing its student-teachers with a practical teaching focus, present in the CELTA, and depth of theoretical knowledge, present in the TESL Ontario and Canada, the TESOL Plus program attempts to overcome the aforesaid debate.

It is crucial to mention, however, that the focus on its practical teaching skills has been understood in light of a reconceptualized knowledge base where student-teachers are seen as learners of teaching and where the situated nature of teacher learning is emphasised. This means that the idea of "good teaching", espoused by "competency models" where the mastery of strategies and techniques is the end goal teaching, is *not* how the TESOL Plus has conceptualized its curriculum as it understands that "learning to teach is a long-term, complex developmental process that operates through participation in the social practices and contexts associated with learning and teaching" (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 402). Moreover, because, in the TESOL Plus, the situated nature of teacher learning is key, context plays a vital role. Student-teachers are exposed to a wide variety of contexts,

1 Accreditation initiated and currently in process.

not only in observing more experienced instructors, but also teaching in General English, English for Academic Purposes, and English for Specific Purposes classrooms. As Richards and Burns (2009) highlight, “Teacher learning is situated, that is, takes place in specific settings or contexts that shape how learning takes place” (p. 4). Such a variety of contexts is also observed in the hands-on, practical learning that takes place in the classroom. Through a student-centred, communicative, action-oriented approach to language teacher education, student-teachers put into practice the theory learned in the classroom by engaging in micro-teaching, case studies, project work, online tasks and other activities. As a result, greater learning takes place as student-teachers engage in a wider range of contexts to learn how to teach.

Additionally, it is also essential to highlight that the depth of theoretical knowledge the TESOL Plus has proposed to deliver to its student-teachers was conceptualized to reflect the new agenda in the ELT field. As a consequence, a concerted effort was made to develop courses through the lens of a reconceptualized knowledge base, courses which encompass critical issues dealt with in the ELT literature. Exploring the topic of technology, for instance, the course Methodology and Educational Technology in ELT approaches how technology can be used to effectively design, deliver and evaluate language teaching and learning. It was developed to not only provide student-teachers with knowledge of how to teach with technology, but also to equip them with the skills to integrate technology into methodology such that they are able to apply technology meaningfully in their future classrooms. As Reinders (2009) observes, “the success of new technologies in the classroom depends in large part on the teacher’s ability to apply them meaningfully” (p. 233). By engaging, for example, with a case study of how an English language teacher tasked with the job of implementing extra online homework activities in her classes, student-teachers will have the opportunity to meaningfully apply the knowledge learned in class to a real-life scenario, one which they might face once they start teaching.

Another example of how the TESOL Plus program has attempted to incorporate the new developments in ELT is through its Assessment and Professional Practice course. Although the relevance of assessment for teaching and learning is widely recognized in the field, more often than not, TESOL / TESL / TEFL certificate programs only approach it as an afterthought. In the TESOL Plus, however, it is dealt with thoroughly, aiming to provide student-teachers with the ability to critically integrate the theoretical and practical knowledge of the different assessment types, tools, concepts, frameworks and principles in order to monitor, evaluate and facilitate language learning. Moreover, this course also intends to equip student-teachers with knowledge of professional support systems so that they can investigate further professional development, employment resources, relevant associations, and journals and publications for new language teachers. Its focus on action research as a form of professional development is an innovative feature, one which is greatly supported by the ELT literature (Burns, 2010; Borg, 2015; Wallace, 1998). In their classes, as an example, student-teachers will put their knowledge of professional support systems into use by creating a professional practice development plan to be used in their future careers. Therefore, the course's intention is to enable these student-teachers to use such knowledge of professional practice as a vehicle for improving their classroom practice. In the ELT literature, the importance of professionalism is underscored by Burns and Richards (2009), and Leung (2009) claims that professionalism "is a particularly important issue for second language teachers working in the diverse field of English language teaching (ELT) in different world contexts" (p. 49).

In addition, the TESOL Plus has included in its curriculum instruction on Portfolio-based Language Assessment (PBLA), "a teaching and assessment model designed to enhance nationwide consistency and standards of quality in English as a Second Language (ESL) training for adult newcomers to Canada" ("On PBLA", 2017). Learning about PBLA is of great relevance for any language teacher in Canada, particularly teachers who will be teaching in Adult Non-Credit Language Training Programs, as PBLA is the model currently used in such programs. In this regard, the TESOL Plus has innovated in its pedagogy as it offers a course where PBLA instruction is integrated with the practicum, allowing student-teachers to not only learn the PBLA theory, but also immediately put such theory into practice during the practicum.

## Conclusion

This paper, therefore, provided a quick overview of the ELT origins, shedding light on the long-lasting debate of theory vs practice / training vs development, and discussed the recent advancements which have taken place in the ELT field in order to bring to the fore the issue of how TESOL /TESL / TEFL certificate programs have dealt with this debate and adapted their curricula to reflect this new ELT agenda. Attempting to contribute with a practical example, the paper displayed how the TESOL Plus graduate certificate program from Sheridan College has integrated theory and practice and incorporated the new ELT agenda into its curriculum in order to provide its student-teachers with innovative and state-of-the-art pedagogy.

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# SMART PHONES, SMART BOARDS, AND THE STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH

## How and why we should incorporate technology in the l2 classroom

By Olga Taratuta, Humber College

Technology is at the heart of everything we do on a daily basis. At the click of a button, we can have an encyclopedia, map, clock, calculator, or mailbox. Technology has in fact rewired our brains; we are no longer as capable of deeply engaging with long pieces of prose (Carr 2008). It is astounding that with the literal rewiring of the way we read, think, and learn, schools have still not caught up to the technological age. This has negative consequences for L2 learners, as many do not have much experience with computers, and they are barred from learning authentic, technology-based communication used in workplace settings. However, we can easily change outdated teaching methods to suit the technological era with adequate teacher training, as well as a shift in pedagogical approach. We must realize that we can learn from our students, too!

During my TESL program, I took a compulsory course called The Adult ESL Learner. I learned different online resources to be used with ESL students, how to incorporate technology in the classroom, and how to use the popular interface used at many colleges and universities: Blackboard. However, a lot of the things I learned week to week were already familiar. I knew how to create a Google doc and share it. I didn't require an in depth tutorial on the use of Blackboard, it being very similar to any regular blog. I knew how to do a screencast without a YouTube explanation video. The teachers-in-training were treated as if they were devoid of any basic technological knowledge. I noticed that younger students like myself found the over-explanations to be boring and repetitive, while some older students appreciated the extra help. However, the manner in which we received technological training was also flawed: our class focused on the mechanics of different web applications and programs, but we were not taught how we could realistically use them to aid instruction in an ESL classroom. The assumption seemed to be that the faculty members are general experts and the students ignorant, regardless of the material.

In a study researching why many L2 teachers don't use technology in the classroom, most of the teachers answered that it was due to lack of professional development (Lam 2000, p. 3). In many schools, and even ones I have visited, the administration budgets for an expensive gadget, such as the Smart Board, and plops it into the classroom, hoping it will increase the look and value of the school. Lam calls this the "technological power game," which is true of our society: everyone wants to have the newest and most expensive gadget, and those with the better technology are perceived as "better" (Lam 2000, p. 2). There usually is a class or workshop on how to use the device/program (e.g. Smart Board, Blackboard) but teachers are not always taught the real use of the device, and why it may be beneficial over the standard chalk and board.

There are two main factors that hinder teachers from being more tech savvy in the classroom: most of the teachers interviewed in the study saw technology as a means to an end, and lacked confidence using the technology on a daily basis (Lam 2000, p. 12). In other words, teachers used technological sources such as Word to write their lesson plans or create worksheets, but technology was a minor consideration in the lesson plan itself: Word simply helps us write things more quickly than on paper. The teachers also lacked confidence and were threatened by the students' ample technological knowledge. They wanted to maintain their authority over the students by being seen as the "experts." Those teachers also reported that they would be more confident with adequate teacher training.

There are simple solutions to both of these problems. Instead of seeing technology as a mere "means to an end," teachers need to see justifications for using technology in the classroom as opposed to more traditional methods. Computers, the Internet, and smartphones have become more accessible, and as a result many immigrants are comfortable with technology (McClanahan 2014, p. 22). Incorporating a gaming aspect to the lessons, such as Kahoot quizzes and online surveys, may motivate the modern student more so than a passive activity. Also, using genuine materials in the classroom contributes to student success.

Students will be exposed to technology in all aspects of their lives, from emailing the boss, to handling a self check-out station at the grocery store. Technology is not a means to an end, but, rather, a vital aspect of "genuine, meaningful communication" (McClanahan 2014, p. 24). We not only use various technologies as a conduit for communication, such as Whatsapp or SMS, but we also learn the culture of communication through technology. In order for ESL students to fit into Canadian society, and to find jobs, they must understand how technology works, and when and how to use it. For example, when writing an email as a response to an interview invitation, the potential employee must know what to write in the headline, what the acronyms such as CC stand for, how to begin the salutation, and so on. It would be unjust for teachers to omit this entire aspect of online communication during their lessons, as it would make it harder for the students to fit in, to get a job, and to continue their education in a post-secondary institution.

These are the ways teacher trainers can solve the L2 teacher's "technophobia:" adequate teacher training to show how technology can be used as more than a means to an end, and the encouragement of genuine material in the classroom, rather than worksheets from a textbook published in the 1970s. Above all, teachers should not be afraid of seeming less experienced or technologically inferior to their students. A minor change in pedagogical attitude will go a long way—from teacher as unquestionable authority, to teacher as guide, as equal with student. The teacher is not a knower of all, especially the teachers who are from a different generation, those that didn't grow up with touch screens at their fingertips.

The phenomena of a teacher and student exchanging ideas as partners is known as "communicative learning" and is taught at post-secondary institutions for ESL teachers-in-training. The staple of communicative learning, and what separates it from other teaching methodologies, is that it is learner-centred, and has a few central components: teachers use learning techniques that allow students to be autonomous, such as group work; the curriculum is flexible and can incorporate unique student needs; teachers use techniques that stimulate student creativity; and the teacher's goal is to increase student confidence in the language by treating students as people with worth (Brown 2010, pp. 46-47).

Simply the act of incorporating the learner-centred approach in the classroom will increase the use of authentic technological materials. When students are autonomous and can make their own choice of what they want to learn, undoubtedly a lot of them will want to learn practical English skills in the cyber world—how to write a resume, how to search for an apartment online, how to type faster, academic research skills, and the list goes on. Shifting to a student-centred approach will also allow the teacher to lift all the pressure off of her shoulders: she will no longer carry the burden of knowing all the answers. Through group work, students can learn from each other, and through observation, the teacher will, in turn, learn from the students. This model is, perhaps, the most effective "teacher training," when it is not isolated from the classroom and the students.

From my observations of the TESL certificate program, we were taught to teach the students the basics: how to fill out an application form for a job, how to use a bank machine, and how to call the fire department. While all these are vital survival skills, it is presumptuous of us to assume that students need careful and over-guided instruction doing everyday adult activities. The "pre-task/activation" stage of the lesson plan, I was taught, should work on what the students already know by asking questions like, "have you ever used a bank machine in *your* country?" Then, after hearing the students' answers, the teacher should say, "wonderful answers. However, this is how we use a bank machine in Canada…" This struck me as unrepresentative of a "student-centred" approach to teaching. The teacher still positions herself as the source of knowledge.

In the example above, many if not most students would likely familiar with using a bank machine, and the differences from country to country would generally be small. Given that, the lesson might have students teach each other the basic technological skills. Or, if the topic is too simple, the teacher can move on to online banking, which truly might differ in North America compared to other countries, and which has a lot more specialized jargon. Even there, though, it is unsafe to assume that students are less familiar with the technology than the teacher.

When the teacher places the students' world knowledge on par with her own, the entire layout of the lesson plan is potentially altered as well. That is, the plan can become less of a rigid plot of events and more of a series of starting points, with large information gaps that are then filled by the students. For example, the teacher can start the lesson off talking about a new app created by CIBC, even if she doesn't own this app herself. Other students will inevitably use a banking app on their phone, and can explain the technology to their peers. When the teacher gives the students the reins, students often have more genuine conversations with one another about things they are interested in, including technology. They may also feel more respected and confident.

As a student in my TESL certificate program, I would have definitely felt more confident and less patronized if the Adult ESL Learner teacher had asked me for my input, via a survey, for example, before the start of an online, technologically-heavy course. Do I know email? Check. YouTube? Check. Blogging? Check. Can I teach this to my peers? Clearly, the professor had more experience teaching and more knowledge of pedagogical theories than we did, but there's no reason to believe that she should therefore know more about making videos, or dealing with YouTube.

There is still a lot more work to be done to incorporate technology in the L2 classroom, and it starts from a shift in attitude, a shift towards acknowledging the knowledge of students, be it in a TESL certificate program or an ESL lesson. We cannot escape from technology. The classroom should not be disconnected from reality, as it so often is.

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# SUMA BALAGOPAL

## The spark that keeps on shining

By Monique Melbourne, Humber College

(If you would like to publish a profile of or interview with a teacher, please contact the editor.)

A lot of the good things that have happened in Suma Balagopal's life happened by chance. Becoming an ESL teacher was no exception. The marketing professional was working in the corporate world for many years but found that she missed meeting and interacting with people without a financial agenda. So when she immigrated to Canada, she wanted a career that married her love of working with people with her interest in English (she completed her Bachelor's in English Language and Literature). She tried ESL "for fun" and found that it was a natural fit for her. More than a decade later, she's an established, well-respected and liked educator in her profession.

## Sparks of Excellence Award

In 2014, Suma was honoured with the Sparks of Excellence Award by TESL Ontario, the professional association in Ontario for teachers of English as a Second Language. Each year, two Sparks of Excellence Awards (n.d.) are presented by TESL Ontario to members who provide an exceptional educational experience for their students or who take on a leadership/mentoring role for their colleagues and student teachers. Suma was nominated because she embodies the qualities of an awardee and met the requirements of being a TESL Ontario member in good standing, being involved in the ESL profession for a minimum of three years, and showing extraordinary commitment that exceeded the expectations of her employment. "I felt grateful, honored, and fortunate to receive the award," recounts Suma on being one of the 2014 recipients of the Award. "It is a great feeling to have my work acknowledged and celebrated." But she was quick to add that success comes in different forms. "However, I do believe that one teacher's excellence would look very different from another teacher's excellence."

A graduate of the TESL program at Humber College, Suma started teaching a multi-level LINC classroom at Caledon Community Services in 2007. Less than a year later, she was promoted to teaching full-time, a position she still holds. Suma was praised by TESL Ontario for her collaborative and practical teaching style that motivates each learner to excel and helps in the transition to their new country. "She has managed to take teaching and learning to a whole new level, using all available teaching technologies and methods to her advantage. To her, nothing sounds sweeter than listening to the success stories of the learners in her class.... She opens her bag of tricks to get her learners to view English as a fun filled journey to the achievement of their goals" ("Suma-Balagopal", n.d.).

This drive to help her students succeed is one of the most rewarding aspects of being an ESL teacher. Suma's dedication has resulted in her students excelling and even winning grand prizes at the ESL Week Contest, an annual creativity contest organised by TESL Ontario, at one point being grand prize winners three years in a row. These students have consistently highlighted Suma's passion and positivity and have even given her the nickname "horse whisperer". She got this name after a particular group of students watched the movie *The Horse Whisperer* and compared the success of her students at ESL Week Contest with the success of the horses trained by the horse whisperer. Suma credits these ESL activities for helping to build the confidence of her learners and their integration into Canadian society.

However, the success stories are not without challenges. Some of the challenges Suma face are common to many LINC centres: meeting funder's requirements of numbers quota, and vastly different proficiency levels and age groups in one class. For Suma, keeping her class entertaining is her biggest challenge. "One of the things that teachers have to do in free language classes is to entertain, so that the students are motivated enough to return to classes and try harder at achieving their goals while having a great time. I have spoken to many successful students, and most of them point to the fact that they remember the laughter the most in the language class. Creating those opportunities to laugh and reduce the 'affective filter' is not a cakewalk."

Since winning the Sparks of Excellence Award three years ago, Suma continues to meet the needs of her students at Caledon Community Services through her exceptional track record. As an immigrant to Canada, her personal experiences help her to connect with her students because she understands what they are going through. She is also the lead teacher for the implementation of portfolio-based language assessment (PBLA) at her centre and she has mentored a number of students while preparing others for the citizenship test on a voluntary basis. She helps her former students to make connections in the community to receive support, look for employment or even start their own business. In addition, Suma is an active member of TESL Ontario, presenting at several of their annual conferences and she has been the Facebook Manager of the Social Media Content Committee since 2013. In that role, she plans and executes the social media strategy for TESL Ontario as well as designing and facilitating presentations and technology labs to increase members' knowledge of social media. "I have learnt so much in that role. I have also had a great time testing out teaching material developed by colleagues. One of them that really worked for me is the 'Dictation Triptychs'." Dictation Triptychs, as described by creator Joseph Ng, an ESL teacher, are "three parallel conversations appropriately composed and gapped to Canadian Language Benchmark descriptors to help learners improve through four-skill dictation jigsaw activities" (Palmer, 2016). This teaching technique incorporates pragmatics of speech, cultural practices, pronunciation of words and numbers, punctuation marks, and other features in written and spoken English. Suma, along with Joseph and Hala Bastawros, presented on the topic *PBLA and formulaic chunks through Dictation Triptychs* in 2016 at the annual TESL Ontario Conference.

## OCELT Designation

Recently, TESL Ontario introduced their professional designation for accredited members in good standing. Ontario Certified English Language Teacher, or OCELT aims to improve the reputation and respect of the TESL profession and recognises the knowledge, skills, integrity, high quality and ongoing professional development of certified ESL teachers who are members (for more, see Serles & Townsend, this issue).

Suma believes that OCELT could help the ESL profession gain consistency. “I do hope the designation helps with bringing about some degree of consistency in the conditions and opportunities for employment for ESL professionals. I do not think it has any effect on the career of my colleagues or myself. But I hope there will be positive effects in the future.”

She is thankful for the support she has received at Caledon Community Services, noting in a previous interview that they have played a large part in her success. “Their focus on newcomers, the support that I receive and the trust that they have shown in me has all worked together to make this happen.”

Suma has warm words of welcome for teachers new to the ESL profession. “The field of ESL is a mixed bag of memorable experiences, learning and meaning. Welcome aboard!”

## References

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### Author Bio

Monique Melbourne is a recent graduate of Humber College with a postgraduate certificate in Teaching English as a Second Language. She has worked as a copywriter, copyeditor and proofreader for various publications before entering the field of ESL teaching. She is currently a language assistant at the Writing Centre at Humber College.

# QUI DOCET DISCIT

By Eufemia Fantetti, Humber College

Years ago, when I was a young university student living far from home, I signed up for a beginner's Latin class. I remember my stomach knotting itself into a bag of pretzels while I waited for the course to start. At the time, I had certain beliefs about my learning abilities, (by "beliefs", I mean "fears").

A quick glance at my old report cards would show I was an average student in every subject save one: English. Combine that singular skill with an aptitude for daydreaming, a tendency to angst out over assignments, and a mild case of generalized anxiety—et voilà: a scholar-in-training is born.

Flashback sequence: I grew up in a home with a mother who thought it was unhealthy to read too much. If my mom had been completely in charge of my life's trajectory, I would have kept up with the crochet and embroidery lessons but lost science and geography. She wasn't fond of education and hadn't particularly enjoyed school in post-WWII Italy. This ambivalence led to odd behaviour where she would frequently invite me to skip school and stay home. I caved to her suggestions even though the only class I really disliked was gym due to the purgatory of ParticipACTION. Fortunately, teachers in my formative years changed everything. A world of possibilities flashed and forever cracked open that shell of limited options my mom insisted was our lot. My grade 8 guidance counsellor encouraged me to pursue higher education. She was adamant, especially after I argued (at fourteen) that it was unlikely I was smart enough to gain entrance to university.

My first year was a bleak experience. As the first girl with the opportunity to study past grade five, I compounded the pressure. I struggled to achieve decent marks, felt intensely isolated, and worried I would let down my entire family. I barely passed creative writing—the program I was in school for, the one my folks thought of as basket-weaving. Italian class undermined my fluency in Neapolitan and caused a flair-up of peasant-ancestry pride. My history prof informed our class that half performed dismally on a test by asking us to look first to the person seated to our right, then to the person on our left.

"Congratulations," he said. "One of you has failed."

This reinforcement of my feelings of ignorance was chipping away at my shaky self-esteem and doing serious damage to my small ego. Getting up and getting to class grew harder and harder. And like the old saying goes, absence makes the grades sink lower.

The days blurred into a long series of disappointments.

I went home. I spent the summer between first and second year working down at Harbourfront scooping up cigarette butts and witnessing a massive Shriner convention descend on Toronto. Little known fact but watching elderly men in fezzes attempt to drive tiny cars past the reflective pool gives one the perspective to try again.

I registered for the Latin class as an act of hope. The first week was overwhelming. The first month—also not promising.

Frustrated, I persisted. Confused, I continued. Haggard, I held on.

There came a day when I really should have dropped the class to lose it from my official transcript, but I stayed the course like a Pompeiian ignoring the rumblings of Vesuvius. A week later, the instructor—avoiding all the raised hands—called on me to conjugate a verb and I could not.

I wish the story ended there at the moment of my imperfect failure.

His voice oozed sarcasm as he taunted my inability to answer his simple request. "You don't know?"

Of course, I took the high road, cursed him with malocchio—yes, it's a thing—and responded, "No, I don't."

I left class and never went back, putting in an appearance only at the final exam. For a long time after, I'd dream I was wandering the hallways and searching for the examination room, ready to fight back the only way I knew how, by showing up and trying again.

Tempus fugit: The first time I sat down to plan a syllabus, surrounded by textbooks and outcomes, I kept a mental list of favourite teachers and their strategies of engagement. I thought about my best learning experiences and my worst: The horribili! The horribili! I wrote out the saying, "who teaches, learns" and tacked it above my desk. That instructor taught me a lesson I never forgot. Nescience was my starting place. Continuous learning is the finish line. In between the two points, there are countless opportunities to be kind. Each of those fleeting, fortuitous moments will make the journey worthwhile.