Reticence in Oral English Language Classrooms: A Case Study in China

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With a growing need for spoken English among non-native English speakers, reticence research in second/foreign language learning situations has captured the attention of language theorists and educators in recent decades (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre et al., 2001; Tsui, 1996). It is assumed that when people speak in a second or foreign language, they become more apprehensive and tense and thus more unwilling to participate in conversation (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). It has been found that many SL/FL students, especially Asian learners, are passive in language classrooms and choose not to use the target language most of the time, especially when responding to teachers (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jackson, 1999, 2001, 2002; Li, 1998; Sato, 1990; Tsui, 1996; Zou, 2004). Meanwhile, multiple variables such as low English proficiency, personality, and cultural beliefs were found to contribute to student reticence in SL/FL classrooms.

Adopting a quantitative method, MacIntyre and his associates conducted a number of empirical studies and found that communicating in a second language was related to a willingness to engage in L2 communication, motivation for language learning, the opportunity for contact, and the perception of competence, language anxiety, personality, intellect, the social context, and other variables (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre et al. 2001). They also claimed that willingness to communicate was a good predictor for students' actual use of the target language in communication. All these findings were confirmed by a range of studies carried out both in second and foreign language learning situations using both quantitative and qualitative methods (Hashimoto, 2002; Jackson, 1999, 2001, 2002; Li, 1998; Tsui, 1996; Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004).

Based on six interviews of Japanese students at the University of Edinburgh, Dwyer and Heller-Murphy (1996) concluded that the students were reticent in EFL/ESL classrooms due to fear of public failure, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, low English proficiency, and inability to keep up with native speakers, incompetence in the rules and norms of English conversation, disorientation, etc. This conclusion was supported by Jones' (1999) review of research on NNS students' oral behavior in English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. On

the basis of the analysis of interviews with fifteen lecturers in a university in Hong Kong. Flowerdew et al. (2000) also found that the students were rated as passive and reticent learners in the classroom by their lecturers who attributed student reticence to such factors as low English proficiency, fear of being embarrassed in front of their peers, their inability to understand concepts, incomprehensible input, lack of preparation, and the passive learning styles acquired during their secondary schooling. The findings were in conformity with a number of other studies (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jackson, 2002; Li, 1998; Sato, 1990; Tsui, 1996; Zou, 2004), some of which also identified cultural beliefs as an important reticence-inducer in SL/FL classrooms.

All these findings reveal that reticence is a widely-observed phenomenon in SL/FL language classrooms and that various factors contribute to student reticence. However, since wide differences exist in SL/FL language learning situations, to better understand the issue of reticence and enhance the oral proficiency of the target language by promoting students' actual participation in classroom activities, more research is needed with different groups of learners in various SL/FL learning situations.

Rationale for the Study

In the past decade or so, as Chinese have come into more contact with people from other cultures, especially since China entered the WTO and won the right to host the Olympic Games in 2008, there is a growing awareness of the importance of and need for spoken English. Unfortunately, the outcome of oral English learning is not very satisfactory. Students, especially non-English majors, often complain that they are unable to speak English well. Thus, the investigation of oral English learning is of special importance to these students. Classroom participation should merit special attention because non-English majors in China often depend on formal teaching to learn spoken English as well as other aspects of English in that they usually have little contact with and few chances to use the target language in their daily life. As a result, the amount of oral practice of English in class is a key to success for many non-English majors. A better understanding of this would certainly help to promote the quality of oral English instruction.

Focusing on one case with a target on Chinese undergraduate non-English majors, this research aims to examine student reticence in oral English language classrooms by way of survey, observation, and reflective journals. To achieve this, three research questions were proposed:

(1) To what extent do the students remain reticent in oral English language classrooms, and what activity makes them the most reticent?

(2) What factors contribute to student reticence during oral English language lessons?

(3) What strategies do the students use to cope with reticence in oral English language classrooms?

Research Methodology

Participants

One intact band-3[1] class of 27 first-year non-English majors enrolled in an English listening & speaking course in a Chinese university in Beijing were invited for the study. Twenty-four (21 male and 3 female) of them, with an average age of 18.5, actually participated in the study (the other three did not fill in the questionnaire due to absence). Of these participants, 16.7% (4) of them started to learn spoken English in primary school, 41.7% (10) started in junior high school, 29.2% (7) in senior high school and 12.4% (3) in the university. Coming from different departments such as Computer Science and Civil Engineering, these students met once a week for the lesson, which lasted 90 minutes per week.

Instrument

Language Class Sociability

The original 5-item Language Class Sociability (LCS) scale, developed by Ely (1986), purports to measure to what extent learners enjoy interacting with others in the target language in class. To fit the present research, some modifications were made to the original LCS. The words “Spanish” in the original LCS items were replaced by “English” class in the present research. Designed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”, all the items were translated into Chinese before being implemented.

Background information

The background questionnaire was designed to obtain demographic data about the participants: name, gender, age, department, and length of English study.

Teacher observation

The teacher of the class was asked to keep a weekly record of students’ behavior in the classroom during the whole term. In particular, she was asked to note down whether the students were reticent, active, anxious, or confident in different classroom activities: presentation, pair work, group work, and teacher-student activity.

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1 The students are placed into different band groups ranging from 1 to 3 (band 1 is the lowest and band 3 the highest) according to their scores in the placement test upon entering the University. After a term’s learning, they are often automatically promoted to a higher band group.

Classroom Observation

In addition to teacher observation, the researcher also went to the classroom to observe and video tape students' participation in different activities.

Reflective Journals

According to Oller (1979, p. 17, cited in Bailey, 1983), questionnaires are often problematic because the respondents "tend to give answers that are associated with their perceptions of the predispositions of the researcher." Thus, reflective journals were used in the present study to provide additional data about personal and affective variables in language learning. The participants were asked to write journals (1 entry per week) for eight successive weeks to reflect and comment on their English learning experiences with a focus on their participation in classroom activities and strategies to become more active. In addition to the topics suggested, they could also write about other aspects related to their language learning experiences. In case the students might have difficulty understanding the guide in English, it was translated into Chinese before being implemented.

Procedure

The study was conducted during the second term of the academic year of 2002-2003. In the first lesson, the teacher briefly described the need to keep writing journals on English learning experiences. She also told the students that each journal entry would be commented on and returned by the end of the term. The focus for each week's writing in both Chinese and English was given to the students beforehand. The students started to write journals in the second week and 25 sets of journals were collected by the end of the eleventh week (two students didn't finish all the journals and thus theirs were not considered for later analysis). In the middle of the term, the participants completed the questionnaire in Chinese (2-3 minutes) during the normal teaching period.

Starting from the second term, the teacher kept a record of the students' behavior in different classroom activities, which lasted for a whole term except when tests were held in class. By the end of the term, 14 records of teacher observation were collected. In addition, the researcher also went to the classroom three times to observe and video tape the students' participation in different activities during the last month of the term.

Data Analysis

Because of the small number of respondents, the survey and observation were analyzed mainly in terms of frequency. The reflective journals, on the other hand, were subjected to content analysis.

Results and Discussion

Reticence Levels

Item analysis of the Language Class Sociability scale

Table 1 summarizes the students' responses to the LCS items, which are reflective of classroom sociability in the oral English language classroom. All numbers refer to the percentage of students who chose each response category.

Table 1

LCS Items with Percentages of Students Selecting Each Alternative (N = 24)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1.	I'd like more class activities where the students use English to get to know each other better.				
	0	4.2	20.8	54.2	20.8
2.	I think learning English in a group is more fun than learning on my own.				
	0	12.5	16.7	50.0	20.8
3.	I enjoy talking with the teacher and other students in English.				
	0	16.7	54.2	20.8	8.3
4.	I enjoy interacting with the other students in the English class.				
	0	8.3	29.2	50.0	12.5
5.	I think its important to have a strong group spirit in the English classroom.				
	0	0	29.2	54.2	16.7

As illustrated in Table 1, except for a modest agreement (29.1%) on item 3 (I enjoy talking with the teacher and other students in English), more than 60% of the students endorsed the other four statements. Most of them enjoyed interacting with other students in class and preferred to learn English in groups. All these implied that the students were quite willing to interact with other students in oral English language classrooms.

This tendency indicated on the survey was further supported by the students' self-reported willingness to communicate with others in oral English class in their reflective journals, as discussed below.

Students' Self-Reported Willingness to Communicate in English

When asked whether they were willing to speak English to others in class, the majority (76%) of the students, as in Zou's (2004) study, expressed a willingness to talk to others in English in class (for various reasons), as reported in Table 2. Moreover, all of them stated that they desired to speak English well because English was useful and/or because English was important for their future education and career.

Table 2

Willingness to Communicate (N = 25)

Willingness to speak English	Unwillingness to speak English	Not mentioned N(%)
19 (76%)	4 (16%)	2 (8%)

This willingness can be evidenced by their writing things such as "I'm willing to talk to others in English because it can improve our linguistic sense of English" (Mao, male), and "I am willing to talk to others in English, because I think it is the only way to improve my speaking English level" (Li, male). It is clear that improving English proficiency was a common motivation for the students to be willing to communicate with others in oral English language classrooms. This was further explained by another student, "I want to have some chances as much as possible to talk to others in English. Talking to others is a convenient way for us students to improve our oral English ability" (Zhang, male).

What the students wrote in their journals strongly showed that they were willing to talk to others mainly for the purpose of enhancing their proficiency in oral English. In addition, talking to other students in class could help them find out their own weakness and learn from others, as reported by one student:

> I become active if the teacher says "any volunteers?" It's the best chance to exchange my ideas between the teacher and the other students. At least, the teacher can correct my errors. And sometimes, the teacher can teach me some usages of the words. If I only refer to the dictionary, I wouldn't know how to use the words. So I think we should respond to the questions actively (Lin, male).

Moreover, some students were willing to communicate in oral English language class because they wanted to interact with foreigners in the future. As a student reported, "English is the most widely used language in the world. So I want to speak English well in order to communicate with the world well in the future" (Mao, female).

Furthermore, according to the self-reports in reflective journals, the students also thought highly of those who actively responded to the teacher and were actively involved in classroom activities. These active students were thought to be outgoing, smart, confident, knowledgeable, and at a high English proficiency level. "I envy them for their fluent oral English." "The students who actively respond to the teacher's questions, in my opinion, are not only knowledgeable, but also very brave and confident. Some students were not active because they are afraid of answering questions" "Their English is perfect. I admire them very much. They had enough courage and they were not afraid of losing face." All these vividly evidenced their positive attitudes towards the students who performed actively in language classrooms.

Students Participation in Oral English Language Classrooms

Although the majority of the students self-reported to be willing to speak English in class and desired to have a good command of the spoken language, their actual participation in the classroom was not so active as implied by their expressed willingness and desire to speak English. Because all the students were required to comment on their participation in class in each of their reflective journals, it can be roughly judged how active they were in different classroom activities during the first eight weeks of the term. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Students' Self-reported Participation in Classroom Activities (N = 25)

	Active during pair work N (%)	Active to respond to the teacher N (%)	Active during group work N (%)
Week 1	12(48%)	0	N/A
Week 2	14(56%)	3(12%)	0
Week 3	15(60%)	5(20%)	4(16%)
Week 4	20(80%)	3(12%)	N/A
Week 5	21(84%)	3(12%)	N/A
Week 6	23(92%	6(24%)	N/A
Week 7	21(84%)	7(28%)	N/A
Week 8	21(84%)	5(20%)	N/A

As can be seen from Table 3, in each lesson, about 3 to 7 reported to actively respond to the teacher, and about two-thirds claimed to be active during pair work. A similar trend was also observed by the teacher throughout the term, although the students who claimed to be active might not be the same as those identified by the teacher. According to her, only about 5 students actively volunteered to respond to her, but more than two-thirds of them were actively engaged in pair work. In particular, she could barely identify any silent students during pair work towards the end of the term.

The student's self-reported participating and the trend observed by the teacher were further supported by video taped observations. In all of the observed 90-minute class meetings, about 30 minutes was spent in listening and checking comprehension, about 5 minutes in giving instruction, about 45 minutes for pair work (some students formed a group of more than 2), and 10 minutes for presentations (students went to the front to report discussion results of pair/group work). Generally speaking, the students were observed to be active in answering easy questions in chorus. As for difficult or challenging questions, only a few students voluntarily stood up to volunteer to state

opinions and the others just listened and waited to be called on, similar to previous studies (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jackson, 1999, 2002; Tsui, 1996).

As for presentations, even fewer students volunteered to report their discussion results in front of the class. According to the video taped observations, only 2 students volunteered to do that and all the others remained quiet until singled out by the teacher. When it was time for pair work or group discussion, the students formed pairs or groups on their own and about two-thirds of them appeared to be active, similar to that observed by the teacher. Nevertheless, there were about 3 or 5 pairs who spent a lot of time looking up words in electronic dictionaries and thinking about what to say and how to say it.

In conclusion, the students, though having a desire to learn spoken English well and being willing to communicate with others in class, seldom actively responded to the teacher, especially when presentations at the front were expected. This evidently demonstrates that willingness and desire to participate in speech communication might not lead to actual use of the target language in class, as found in Jackson's (1999, 2002) studies as well. Certain stimuli were needed to push the students to put their desire and willingness into actual use of the target language in class.

Causes for Student Reticence in Oral English Language Classrooms

As discussed before, a considerable number of students were reluctant to respond to the teacher and remained silent until singled out. When asked to comment on what caused them to be reticent in oral English language classrooms, the students identified a multitude of variables such as low English proficiency, traditional cultural beliefs, habits, difficulty of tasks, personality, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes, similar to previous studies (Jackson, 2002; Li, 1998; Sato, 1990; Tsui, 1996).

Chinese Culture

An important source of student reticence, according to the self-reports reflected in the reflective journals, was concerned with Chinese culture, which emphasizes modesty and respect for the old and superior. As a student said:

> Because Chinese culture tells us to be modest, we often keep quiet and give the chances to others. And Chinese people always seem to be too gentle and too reserved, namely, we like and are good at hiding our emotions. As a result, we often keep quiet if we are going to be put in a different position from others' like standing up in front of many people sitting there. In Chinese opinion, the wisest thing for a person is that he shouldn't show his outstanding abilities even if he has the ability. Chinese people don't like to show their views in public. Culture is deep in everyone's mind. It is passed from generation to

> generation. So in our mind, it is all right to be reticent. It needs a lot of courage to change to be open (He, male).

This idea was agreed with by many other students. Because of the influence of Confucian ideology, "Chinese people like to be silent and listen to others" (Han, male). Chinese people, consistent with Confucian ideology, generally showed respect to elders and people in authority. This was especially so in classrooms where teachers were considered as figures of authority (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). "Because we think that the classroom is where we learn languages, and we're students, so we should sit silently and listen to teachers who are very knowledgeable" (Wang, male). One student even claimed that "there seems to have potential virtue in reticence because Chinese people believe "action speaks better than words" (Chen, male).

Personality

As claimed by Ellis (1999), that extroverted people were more willing to interact with others while the introverted and shy preferred to be quiet and listen to others, personality was also identified as a main cause for reticence in oral language class by the students in the present study. "Personality contributes more to students' reticence. Some people with an active personality are less reticent than those who are shy" (Fu, male). Some students thought that reticence was so strongly related to personality that they believed that "some people were born to be so" (Gao, female). This was further illustrated by a vivid description, "my partner kept silent unless it was a must to open his mouth. And he would be delighted if he was not chosen to answer a question during the class" (Hou, male).

Low English Proficiency

As found in other studies (e.g., Tsui, 1996), low English proficiency is also identified in the present research as a major factor that hindered the students from talking to others in English in class. "I hardly speak English in classes. I'm afraid of speaking for my oral English is very weak and it makes my oral English weaker and weaker" (Zhou, male). Because they perceived their English to be poor, many students chose to be quiet "because I feel that others are better than me in listening and speaking I want to withdraw" (Gong, male).

Past Educational Experiences

In addition to Chinese culture, personality and low English proficiency, past educational experiences were also considered one of the main causes for student reticence in oral English language class. "We are reticent maybe because we were taught to be so since primary school. We were hardly encouraged to speak out loud in front of others" (Huang, male).

Similar to many parts of Asia (Li, 1998; Sato, 1990; Tsui, 1996), secondary education was strongly didactic and exam-oriented in China. As a result, both teachers and learners focused on marks and written tests while neglecting oral English. Students had also formed the habit of sitting in class and listening quietly to teachers. They remained quiet until requested by teachers to speak in class. As a student described, "the teacher always chose one, so it was not necessary to be volunteers. The concept "not to put up my hand" has a long history and was deeply rooted in our mind" (Ye, male). "Some teachers used questions as a punishment, which greatly reduced our enthusiasm. Generally speaking, we were discouraged. So the students who are active are very precious" (Zhou, male).

Lack of Practice

Apart from all the factors explained above, ". . . Practice is a possible factor. If a student often speaks to foreigners, he will be active in language classrooms" (Zhou, male). Since the main task was to pass the College Entrance Examination in high school, most of the students were not given much practice in oral English, nor could they offer much time to practice it on their own before at that time. To their disappointment, only two 45-minute English lessons were offered per week at the University, which again failed to provide many chances for the students to practice speaking English in class due to the limited class time and class size. What one student wrote, "I remain reticent because I am not used to speaking English" (Lin, male), was a common thought among the peers.

Lack of Courage and/or Confidence

According to the participants, although some students might have good pronunciation and be at a high proficiency level, they still preferred to be reticent because of the lack of courage. "I'm often quiet in those activities. Maybe I'm not ready for it. Even if I made some preparation I would also give up the chance because of lack of courage" (Gao, male). "I was not active because I didn't have much confidence or enough courage though I want to answer the questions very much. But I am afraid that I can't do it well and my answer can't satisfy others" (Lum, male).

Fear of Losing Face

Like those in Cortazzi and Jin's (1996) study, the students in the present study also worried about losing face in oral English language classrooms. Thus, they kept quiet and waited until they were required to speak English. "I am not so active because I don't want to "lose face" when I make mistakes" (Li, male). "I have self respect and don't want to lose face before others. Chinese people are afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at" (Shi, male). Moreover, they were also afraid of being embarrassed, which was

virtually the fear of losing face. “I were not active this week because of my fears of embarrassing. I’m unwilling to be asked by teacher as I don’t know what to say” (Shao, male).

Lack of Interest in/Familiarity with Topics

Interest mattered a lot in students’ active participation in classroom activities. According to the students, “when something isn’t interesting, most people are not willing to talk about it, while one can talk as much as he can on his interests” (Luo, male). Similarly, whether a student was active also depended on his/her familiarity with a topic. “It depends on how much I know about the topics. If I know more I am active, but if I know little about it, I keep quiet” (Qin, female).

Poor Pronunciation

Because the students were from different parts of the country, they spoke English with different accents. As a result, pronunciation became one of the obstacles to understanding each other in communication. Some students withdrew from talking to others due to their pronunciation, as a student reported, “I am not willing to talk to others, because of my poor pronunciation” (Sha, male).

Lack of Vocabulary

As one student said, “my poor vocabulary caused a lot [of] trouble in talking [to] each other in English. So we seldom speak in English” (Tian, male). Lack of vocabulary was another source of student reticence in oral English language classrooms. “I always found my vocabulary is so small that I didn’t know how to tell others my ideas. I was very anxious and feel bad. So I have to keep quiet. And this is very common to students in the University” (Luo, male).

Pursuit of Perfection

As in Price’s (1991) study, the students in the present study also wanted to speak perfect English to others in class. This pursuit of perfection, in return, forced many students to be reluctant to respond to the teacher and remain quiet in class. This is best explained by a student’s self-report, “I seldom speak to others in English, because it is a shame to speak English not as well as Chinese” (Rao, male).

Difference Between Chinese and English

Moreover, the fact that Chinese is far different from English prevented some students from being active to speak English in class. According to one student:

> Chinese is quite different from other languages. It is composed of characters and each character can work independently and be combined with others. It is easy to make sentences in Chinese. But other languages like English are composed of something smaller than

> words, which makes it difficult for us to make sentences in English. I think Chinese are not fit to learn foreign languages (He, male).

In addition to the variables described above, other factors such as lack of familiarity with other students, anxiety, fear of being considered as "show-offs", and difficulty of tasks were also identified as reticence-inducers by the students in the present research. Generally speaking, it was quite difficult for the students to talk to others if they didn't know one another, "I was not very active because I knew nobody in the classroom and felt lonely" (Wang, male). As they knew more people in class, they became more active. Sometimes, other students' participation in the classroom also functioned as a deciding stimulus. For example, one student reported that he didn't want to speak English because "the class is in such a silence" (Huang, male).

Reticence Coping Strategies

Generally speaking, the students came to be more conscious of the reticence they experienced in oral English language classrooms by writing reflective journals. When asked to reflect on what strategies they had used to become more active in class, most of them, however, seemed to be helpless about being reticent. Mainly depending on gradual change, they believed that they would become more active as they had more exposure to spoken English and became more familiar with the classroom environment. This seemed to be true for some students according to their self-reports in reflective journals and teacher observations.

Many of the students, on the other hand, offered some suggestions for fellow students such as having more practice and overcoming the fear of speaking. As a student said, "there is only one effective way to overcome reticence. That is to speak, to think, to write, to listen with more curiosity. Only the person himself is the key to the success in learning English" (He, male). Some students also thought that it took time to reduce reticence. For example, "to reduce reticence, the students must overcome the fear of speaking. If reading more, we can speak naturally. To reduce reticence needs long-time training" (Wang, male).

Meanwhile, they also suggested that English teachers should try to create a friendly, supportive and non-threatening learning environment and prepare more interesting topics in order to make students willing and active to speak the language in class.

Conclusions and Implications

Based on the analyses and discussions in the previous section, it can be concluded that most of the students desire to learn spoken English well and were willing to interact with others in oral English language classrooms. However, due to various reasons such

as a lack of practice, low English proficiency, lack of confidence, anxiety, cultural beliefs, personality, and fear of losing face, more than two-thirds of the students remained reluctant to respond to the teacher and kept quiet until singled out to answer questions. Moreover, many of them seemed to be helpless about being reticent when the teacher asked a question and expected a response. Consequently, some measures need to be taken to help the students become more willing and active to converse with others in the target language in class.

In order to help reduce student reticence, first and foremost, English teachers themselves should be aware of the existence of reticence among EFL learners and try to give more chances and encouragement to the more quiet ones by asking them more questions. In addition, as suggested by the participants, English teachers can prepare more topics which are not only interesting but related to student life so that students have the interest in and ability to talk about them in English. In addition, English teachers should try to establish a friendly, supportive, and non-threatening classroom learning environment, as suggested by Zou (2004), as well as the participants in the present research. It is important for teachers to be friendly rather than strict and critical in class, in order to make students feel at ease to speak English, especially when responding to teachers. It is also important for English teachers to teach and train students to be supportive of one another in class. According to Zou (2004), competition often caused students to become less willing to speak the target language, while a supportive relationship among students usually made them feel free to do so in class.

EFL students should also be aware of and acknowledge the existence of reticence in oral English language classrooms. After that, they should take the initiative to seek strategies to deal with it. As pointed out by some participants, it is of extreme importance to be independent and active learners both in and outside the classrooms. Only thus will they actively seek and make use of every chance to practice speaking English to others. As a result, they may not be so reticent in class. It is also useful for them to improve their English proficiency, expand vocabulary, and be supportive of one another during oral English lessons.

In conclusion, both EFL teachers and learners should be aware that reticence is a serious obstacle for achieving fluency in spoken English and that multiple variables contribute to it in language classrooms. More importantly, they should realize the urgent need to search for strategies to help students become more active to speak the target language in oral English classes. However, because both reticence levels and reticence-inducing variables may vary from context to context, more research is called for with different groups of learners in various situations to better understand the issue and promote the learning of oral English.

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Teaching Pragmatics in the EFL Classroom? SURE You Can!

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There are a number of language competencies which English language learners must develop, in tandem, in order to communicate successfully in English. Any successful communicative event, at least one that extends beyond expressions of simple, immediate need, will require that L2 speakers have developed some mastery of the syntax, morphology, phonology and lexis of the English language. Yet, as many English teachers recognize, and as many language learners have experienced first-hand, speech acts that are grammatically and phonologically correct sometimes fail because the learner's pragmatic competence—his or her ability to express or interpret communicative functions in particular communicative contexts—is undeveloped or faulty. Pragmatic incompetence in the L2, resulting in the use of inappropriate expressions or inaccurate interpretations resulting in unsuccessful communicative events, can lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication and can even leave the native-speaking interlocutor with the perception that the L2 speaker is either ignorant or impolite.

The following simple scenario illustrates the importance of pragmatic competence. Two learners of English ask a native speaker, with whom they are unacquainted, to lend them a pen. One learner uses the phrase, "Borrow your pen," while the other asks, "Could I borrow your pen?" Both requests are easy to understand. Both result in the desired response. Yet in this context native speakers would likely respond more favorably to the request of the second learner over that of the first, simply because it is more appropriate.

Parents know that pragmatic competence or contextual appropriateness does not always develop as quickly in their children as they might wish. Some years ago the first author and his wife would often visit friends who had a 4-year-old daughter. After visiting in their home for about 30 minutes or so, their daughter would invariably ask her mother, "Mommy, when are they are going to go home." Similarly, the first author's young son once blurted out at the beginning of a meal at his grandmother's house, after tasting the main course, "I tried it. I don't like it. I don't want anymore."

In theories of language acquisition, pragmatics has often been de-emphasized and shuffled aside under the rubric of syntactic knowledge and has gone unrecognized as a significant knowledge component in language learning. That tendency has begun to change significantly, however. In recent theories of communicative competence in L2 teaching, pragmatics features prominently (Kasper, 1996). Dessalles' (1998) theory is a good example of this growing emphasis, as it highlights the importance of pragmatic competence in equipping L2 learners to use language appropriate to particular communicative events, to use the relevant utterances necessary for being considered a competent conversant, and to interpret meaning contextually.

A substantial and growing body of second language research has also focused on the importance of pragmatics. Much of that research has shown the need for specific and explicit classroom instruction in pragmatics. Tanaka (1997), for example, found that communicative effects of L2 learners' speech acts resulted from more than L2 grammatical, phonological and lexical usage and concluded that L2 learners need to acquire pragmatic competence in the social rules of speaking in order to achieve communicative competence. Similarly, in a study of adult L2 learners, Koike (1997) found that despite an excellent command of the L2 grammar and lexicon, adult learners often fail to use pragmatically appropriate expressions. If pragmatic competence is vital to successful communication, then it is also vital that English teachers help their learners acquire or at least become more aware of this important competence. Before making some modest proposals for how teachers can begin to do that in EFL classrooms, let's consider just what we mean by this term "pragmatics."

What is Pragmatic Competence?

Kasper (1997, 2000) defines pragmatics as the study of how a speaker uses language in social interaction and its effect on other participants in the communicative event. David Crystal defines it as "the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" (1985, p. 240). Elsewhere, Crystal has noted that pragmatics includes those "factors that govern our choice of language in social interaction and the effects of our choice on others" (1987, p. 120). Interlanguage pragmatics, then, is the study of non-native speakers' use and acquisition of L2 pragmatic knowledge (Kasper, 1996). Interlanguage pragmatics considers how pragmatic competence influences L2 learners' speech acts and how pragmatic competence develops in target language learning. Some skeptics have claimed that pragmatic competence cannot be taught and, as some have similarly claimed in the case of teaching language form, explicit focus on pragmatics in teaching is not necessary, as students will gradually absorb pragmatic

competence from their exposure to the target language. While we will not take the space here to give a full accounting of the research base, the conclusions one can draw from the research seem quite clear: even advanced learners of English exhibit significant gaps in L2 pragmatics, and both ESL and EFL learners appear to benefit from explicit instruction in pragmatics (Kasper, 1997; Kasper & Rose, 2001).

Pragmatic competence encompasses a variety of abilities in the use and interpretation of language in context (Bialystok, 1993). These include a speaker's ability to use language for different purposes (such as greeting, requesting, informing, demanding and so on), the speaker's ability to adapt or change language according to the needs or expectations of the listener or situation, and the speaker's ability to follow accepted rules; the maxims, if you will, for conversation and narrative.

Within our own social group, we normally find it quite easy to use language appropriate to a variety of communicative settings. This is because language is used in fairly regular ways. One source of this regularity is that members of social groups follow general patterns of behavior expected by the group. In social settings outside of our own social group, however, we are sometimes unsure whether the language we are using is appropriate and whether our interpretations of conversational events are accurate, even when we share the same first language with the outside group. When speakers from outside a social group use inappropriate utterances, even though syntax, vocabulary and pronunciation are accurate, the inside group notices that the social outsiders communicate in unexpected ways (though it would be rare, of course, for someone other than a language teacher or sociolinguist to label that deficit a problem with pragmatic competence).

Another factor contributing to the regularity of language use derives from the fact that people living in communities share certain non-linguistic knowledge and experiences which often allow interlocutors within these communities to interpret each other's utterances without the need for detailed explanation. A famous and familiar example from textual discourse is that of the children's clothing shop with the sign in the window stating, "Baby Sale—This Week Only!" Because of our pragmatic competence we know without asking that it is not babies which are on sale but rather items for babies. Another personal example is of an African student who studied at the authors' *alma mater* in the United States some 30 years ago. From the airport he took a bus to the small southern town where he would attend college. As he exited the bus, he saw across the street a supermarket with a large sign displaying the words, "WHITE STORE," and assumed that, based on his knowledge, the store was for white people only. In fact "White Store" was simply the name of a chain of supermarkets owned by a family with the surname White.

Of course, it is easy to see that pragmatic failure more readily occurs when significant differences exist in the cultural knowledge of interlocutors. Indeed, the absence of cultural knowledge (and it seems clear that pragmatic competence is a component of cultural knowledge) can cause one to appear offensive, even though accurate linguistic forms are used. Yule (1996) noticed this knowledge gap in his own language learning experience, reporting that he had "learned some linguistic forms in the language without learning pragmatics of how those forms are used in a regular pattern by social insiders" (p. 5). In the first author's developing knowledge of Cantonese, he struggles with trying to determine appropriate language to use in making refusals. In certain communicative contexts, he is never quite sure if he should use "mh sai" (not necessary), "mh oi" (don't like/love) or "mh yiu" (don't need/want) in making the refusal. In the process of learning English, the second author remembers similar difficulties in differentiating the appropriate use of the phrases, "I'm sorry" and "Excuse me."

Four SURE Steps

A strong case can be made that pragmatic competence needs to be a focus of classroom instruction, even in contexts where English is studied primarily as a foreign language. We teachers should not view pragmatic competence as simply a bonus that can be added on if time and student interest allow. Indeed, in order to communicate successfully in the target language, some measure of pragmatic competence in the L2 is a necessity. But how do teachers in EFL settings, where there are relatively few opportunities for students to use the language in communicative contexts, begin to introduce students to pragmatics in English?

In answering that question, we suggest that teachers consider adopting the simple acronym S.U.R.E. to guide them as they help their students ***See, Use, Review,*** and ***Experience*** pragmatics in the EFL classroom.

See

> *Teachers can help their students see the language in context, raise consciousness of the role of pragmatics, and explain the function pragmatics plays in specific communicative events.*

Many students do not know how to make polite requests in English in the classroom. On more than one occasion, for example, we have heard students of English use the single word, "repeat," to request that teachers repeat something they have said. Training students in making requests (and in a whole variety of other functions needed

in the classroom) is a particularly useful way of raising student awareness of pragmatics at work.

Using a politeness continuum based on Brown and Levinson's (1978) work, we have developed a simple activity which illustrates one way of raising student awareness of pragmatics in English. In this activity, teachers first ask students what common requests they make in the classroom (of classmates and of their teacher). Eliciting the language of requests from students, the teacher then introduces the politeness continuum using a table similar to the one below:

Indirect: *I forgot my pencil. /My pencil's broken.*

Direct: *Lend me a pencil.*

Polite: *Could I borrow a pencil, please? /Would you mind lending me a pencil?*

Familiar: *It'd be terrific if I could borrow your pencil.*

After the teacher has explained and illustrated the politeness continuum, students make requests of each other using an activity sheet similar to this:

1. Polite: Ask a classmate to lend you his/her ruler. Measure this paper and write the width along with the classmate's name here.
2. Familiar: Ask a classmate to lend you 10 dollars. Write his/her name here. _____
3. Indirect: Ask a classmate to lend you his or her pencil. Write his or her name here _____.
4. Polite: Ask a classmate to sign his/her name

Discussion of appropriateness and the politeness continuum should be conducted during a review at the conclusion of this simple activity to make sure that students are indeed more aware of the role of pragmatics when making requests in English. This approach could easily be adapted and expanded on in future classroom activities to further raise student awareness of pragmatics.

Use

> *Teachers can develop activities through which students use English in contexts (simulated and real) where they choose how they interact based on their understanding of the situation suggested by the activity.*

The primary goal of language teaching is to develop the communicative ability of our students. For that to happen, of course, students must have opportunity to use the

language. One important opportunity for that, of course, is through small group and pair activities in the classroom. As Olshtain and Cohen (1991) and others have pointed out, using role plays, drama, and mini-dialogs in which students have some choice of what they say provides students with opportunities to practice and develop a wide range of pragmatic abilities. For example, in certain contexts in the United States some compliments will be met with a devaluing of the item complimented. If, for instance, someone were to comment to her friend that she liked her handbag, it would not be unusual for the friend to reply that the handbag was old or that she purchased it on sale or that it was indeed nice but a bit too small. To prepare students for the activity, brief dialogs such as the following could be introduced.

1. A: I really like your handbag.
   B: This old thing? It's about to fall apart.
2. A: Wow! What a great car!
   B: Yeah, I love it, even if I did pay too much for it.

After the dialogs have been introduced, students would be instructed to work with a partner to develop two mini-dialogs containing a compliment followed by a response that downplays the value of the item complimented.

Another way to help students use their developing pragmatic knowledge in English is through role plays that require students to adjust what they say based on their relationship with their interlocutor. An example would be to ask students to work in groups of four in which one member of the group is assigned the role of a student wishing to borrow a particular book needed to complete an important school project due that next day. The other three students are assigned the role of the student's brother, friend or teacher. Each is instructed to interact using language appropriate to their role. The role plays can be performed for larger groups or for the whole class so that students can observe how the language and communicative strategies we use are affected by the relationship we have with the person with whom we are interacting.

Review

> *Teachers should review, reinforce, and recycle the areas of pragmatic competence previously taught.*

Kasper (1997) and others have made a strong argument that even in environments characterized by teacher-fronted classroom discourse (and we think it is safe to claim that this is the case for many English language classrooms around the world) opportunities for learning and reviewing pragmatics exist. One readily available opportunity is the language of daily classroom management. Unfortunately, some

teachers see classroom management and the language used in daily classroom management as outside of the English lesson, and many choose to conduct classroom management through the L1 rather than through English. In EFL contexts, where opportunities to use English for communicative purposes are limited, teachers should avoid the temptation to use the L1 for the daily tasks and interactions that classroom management requires. Through our discussions with English teachers from a variety of countries, we have found that a significant number have not considered the value of using English for classroom management. Not doing so wastes a valuable opportunity for students to review how English is used in the context of the classroom for real communicative purposes.

Using English for classroom management takes the language out of its all-too-common role as an abstract, lifeless linguistic system to study, and places it in the role of a real-life, breathing communication system. When teachers and students use English to complete common communicative functions in the classroom, such as requests, commands, openings, closing, refusals, apologies, and explanations, students' developing pragmatic knowledge can be reinforced through the common communicative events that take place daily in every EFL classroom. For example, in opening lessons and transitioning to new activities, teachers can choose from a variety of language choices, depending on the immediate context and need. Using language from a continuum of choices, such as those in the examples below, reinforces students' knowledge of how pragmatics and communicative situations are linked.

Example Openings:

Indirect: It's time to get started.

Direct: Sit down now.

Polite: Would you sit down, please?

Familiar: Boys and girls, it would be helpful if you could take a seat.

Example Requests:

Indirect: It's cold in here./I'm freezing.

Direct: Close/Shut the window.

Polite: Could you close the window, please?/Would you mind closing the window?

Familiar: Be a dear and close the window./Would you close the window for us?

Experience

Teachers can arrange for their students to experience and observe the role of pragmatics in communication.

Video is one of the richest resources teachers have for helping their students experience and observe pragmatics at work (for a fuller discussion, see Kasper & Rose, 2001). Films, television shows, and other video programs can provide us excellent resources for experiencing and analyzing language use in specific contexts. We have found situation comedies particularly good for this purpose when used with advanced secondary school and university students. These programs are relatively short (if you omit the commercials and the opening and closing credits, most American-made situation comedies are only about 20 minutes long). They also place characters in easily defined situations and allow students to observe the characters' language use within those situations. While the situations are not authentic, observing and analyzing the use of language within these simulated situations can provide students with vicarious experiences in the ways pragmatics permeates communicative events and contexts. Appendix A presents an example of this type of activity based on an episode of the popular American situation comedy, "Friends."

Other ways teachers can help students experience and observe pragmatics at work is to invite native-speaking guests to class to interact with students. After this experience, students can reflect on the language and mannerisms they observed the guest using. Arranging for students to interact with native speakers outside class and report on what they observed is another activity that can help students experience, observe, and reflect on the role of pragmatics when communicating in English.

Conclusion

An EFL classroom can provide the context and the explicit instruction necessary for learners to begin developing pragmatic competence in English. If our goal as teachers of English is for our students to leave our classrooms with the ability, at least on some level, to communicate successfully in English, then we have to move beyond the bare bones approach to teaching language. We must put flesh and blood on those bones by using English for both classroom management and language instruction and by creating opportunities for students to see, use, review and experience the English language in communicative contexts.

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Appendix A

Observing Pragmatics With *Friends

1. Students watch *Friends* episode, *Pulling a Monica*.
2. Students watch segment containing compliment, apology, and relationship repair two more times.
3. Students discuss and answer the following questions in groups of 3 or 4:
   a. Describe the context/situation in which Monica's mother compliments, apologizes, and seeks to repair her relationship with her daughter.
   b. Describe Monica's mother's body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice.
   c. Write down words or sentences she used to:
      i. compliment
      ii. apologize
      iii. repair the relationship
4. In groups or pairs, students develop context for a role play similar to that seen in the video segment. Students perform role play.

*For use with upper secondary/university students with better language proficiency.

EFL University Students' Preferences for Error Correction and Teacher Feedback on Writing

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Responding to student writing is one of the most controversial topics in second language (L2) instruction and theory. Do students benefit from teachers' corrections and written comments on their writing? If so, are some types of feedback more effective than others? Just as importantly, what are students' preferences for feedback and error correction? Students' beliefs about what constitutes effective feedback on writing and their expectations regarding teacher paper-marking techniques may influence the effectiveness of such feedback (Schulz, 1996); therefore, it is important to investigate L2 students' preferences for teacher feedback on writing in order to ascertain whether these preferences and expectations match those of their teachers. This paper reports on a study investigating EFL university students' preferences for error correction and paper-marking techniques.

Review of the Literature

Both Huntley (1992) and Truscott (1996), based on their respective reviews of the literature, state that substantial research evidence suggests that correction of surface-level errors is futile and may not be worth the instructor's time and effort. Truscott goes even farther to conclude that this type of correction should be abandoned in L2 writing classes because it can have harmful effects. Ferris (1999), however, evaluates Truscott's case and concludes that his argument concerning grammar correction is too strong. In an ongoing debate, Truscott (1999) responds to Ferris by arguing that the criticisms she presents are unfounded and selective. Thus, the research evidence on the effects of error correction on L2 students' writing is far from conclusive (Ferris, 2004; Huntley, 1992; Ihde, 1993; Leki, 1990); nevertheless, a number of research studies in various L2 contexts investigating the effects of different types of feedback on students' writing skills have suggested that explicit error correction seems to be generally ineffective (Ihde, 1993; Kepner, 1991; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984; Sheppard, 1992).

One type of feedback that the research does advocate is feedback on content and organization. Such feedback is necessary and does result in improvement in students' writing (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Huntley, 1992; Kepner, 1991; Sheppard, 1992). Huntley maintains that feedback on content and organization should be provided to students while feedback on form should be avoided, and she recommends that L2 teachers incorporate peer reviews and student-teacher conferences in their teaching as two valuable alternative feedback methods to traditional error correction.

Nevertheless, the relatively few studies that have investigated L2 students' preferences and reactions to teacher marking techniques and their beliefs about what constitutes effective feedback to writing suggest that surface-level correction is often the kind of feedback these students want and expect from their teachers. For instance, based on a survey of 59 English as a second language (ESL) students' attitudes towards feedback on their written work, Radecki and Swales (1988) conclude that ESL teachers might lose their credibility among their students if they do not correct all surface errors, since findings revealed that students seem to need and expect correction of all errors. In a similar survey of 100 ESL students' preferences for error correction, Leki (1991) found that students equate good writing in English with error-free writing and that they expect and want all errors in their written work to be corrected.

Similarly, Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994) administered a 45-item questionnaire to 110 ESL and 137 foreign language (FL) learners in order to explore how L2 learners react when they receive teacher feedback on both first and final drafts, how these responses influence the evolution of students' perception of text quality and their composing processes, and finally, whether ESL and FL learners differ in terms of responses to feedback and self-appraisal patterns. Results revealed that although ESL and FL students revealed generally favorable attitudes towards teacher feedback, some variation in beliefs about teacher response between the two groups was also evident, indicating, according to Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, a close relationship between teachers' response behavior and students' beliefs about their effectiveness. Interview data confirmed further that instructional practice plays an important role in shaping students' expectations concerning the aims of written feedback (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996).

Moreover, Enginarlar (1993), based on a survey of 47 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' attitudes towards the feedback procedure employed in their classes, concluded that these students perceive attention to linguistic errors as effective teacher feedback. Similarly, Saito (1994) and Ferris (1995) reached the same conclusion based on their respective surveys of students' attitudes towards feedback in an ESL context. Finally, Schulz (1996) investigated FL student and teacher beliefs about

explicit grammar instruction and error correction and also found that students preferred a focus on form.

Rationale and Purpose of the Study

The above research evidence suggests that L2 writing teachers are faced with the dilemma of whether they should correct students' surface errors or not, since students seem to expect this kind of correction while research evidence generally suggests that such feedback is ineffective (Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales; 1988; Saito, 1994). Since students' beliefs about and preferences for feedback on writing may influence the degree of effectiveness of such feedback (Schulz, 1996), it is crucial to identify students' attitudes towards error correction and their expectations regarding teacher feedback on their writing. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore EFL university students' preferences for error correction and paper-marking techniques and their beliefs about what constitutes effective feedback. More specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. How concerned are EFL students with errors in their writing?
2. What features of their writing do EFL students believe are the most important for their teachers to respond to?
3. What are EFL students' preferences for paper-marking techniques?

Procedure

Participants

The participants in this study were 156 EFL university students enrolled in English language courses at the American University of Beirut (AUB). AUB offers an Intensive English course, English 100, in addition to a series of three courses in English language skills (English 102, 203, and 204), which students enroll in depending on their score on the TOEFL and an English placement exam. These courses provide training in both oral and written communication, with an emphasis on the reading, writing and research skills required of university students. The students were sampled from the four different English communication skills classes at the university: English 100 (Intensive English), English 102 (Enrichment Course in English), English 203 (Academic English), and English 204 (Advanced Academic English). Of the 156 participants, 53% were males and 47% females, and 88% stated that their native language was Arabic, while the remaining 12% specified French, English, and Armenian as their native language (7, 3, and 2%, respectively).

Instrument and Data Collection

The questionnaire consisted of two parts: First, a 12-item background questionnaire, designed by the researcher in order to obtain background information about the students; secondly, a 27-item questionnaire (see Appendix), a modified version of Leki's (1991) instrument ("Survey of ESL Students' Preferences for Error Correction"), consisting of 20 five-point Likert-type items and 7 nominal items. According to Leki (1991), the original survey would have been more effective if it had specified which draft of a piece of writing was being referred to; therefore, an effort was made in this study to include questionnaire items concerning both first and final drafts, similar to the survey administered by Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994).

Following both Leki's (1991) as well as Hedgcock and Lefkowitz's (1994) surveys, the instrument aims at exploring students' attitudes towards teacher feedback regarding various features of their writing, such as the content, organization, grammar, vocabulary choice, and writing style, as well as students' preferences for various teacher paper-marking techniques. The questionnaire was administered during the 2003-2004 Fall semester to students enrolled in the four different English communication skills classes at AUB: English 100, 102, 203, and 204.

Results

In order to clearly address the research questions set at the beginning of this study, the findings will be presented and discussed according to the three following categories: First, students' general concern with accuracy in their writing (responses to Part II, items 1 and 2); secondly, students' beliefs about the relative importance of various features in their writing (responses to Part II, items 3a-g and 4a-g, and Part III, items 5 and 6); and finally, students' preferences for paper-marking techniques (responses to Part II, 3h-i and 4h-i; Part III, items 1-4; and Part IV).

Students' General Concern with Accuracy

Response frequencies, means, and standard deviations for the two items in the questionnaire addressing the students' general concern with accuracy in their writing (Part II, items 1 and 2) appear in Table 1. The EFL students in this study overwhelmingly (90%) agreed (55% strongly agreed) that it is important to them to have as few errors as possible in their written work. In addition, 77% of the students agreed that it is important to their English teacher for them to have as few errors as possible in their written work.

Table 1

Frequencies of Response (in %), Means, and Standard Deviations: Students' General Concern with Accuracy

ITEMS	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA	M	SD
1. It is important to me to have as few errors as possible in my written work.	1	1	8	35	55	4.40	0.80
2. It is important to my *English teacher* for me to have as few errors as possible in my written work.	3	4	17	40	37	4.04	0.96

Note. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number, and thus may not add up to 100.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree.

Students' Beliefs about the Relative Importance of Various Features of Their Writing

Response frequencies, means and standard deviations for the 18 Likert-type items addressing the students' beliefs about the relative importance of various features of their writing (Part II, items 3a-g and 4a-g) appear in Table 2, and responses to the two nominal items addressing this issue (Part III, items 5 and 6) are shown in Table 3. Students seemed to equate the importance of various features of their writing such as grammar, spelling, vocabulary choice, organization, writing style, and the ideas expressed in the paper. Slightly more students agreed that the teacher should point out errors in grammar (86% for a first draft; 82% for a final draft) than they did for the other features (ranging from 65 to 80%). In addition, as revealed in Table 2, there was minimal variation in the students' responses regarding first and final drafts.

Table 2

Frequencies of Response (in %), Means, and Standard Deviations: Students' Beliefs about the Relative Importance of Various Features in their Writing

ITEMS	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA	M	SD
3. When responding to a first draft, the teacher should always:							
a. point out errors in *grammar* (verb tenses, subject/verb agreement, article use…etc.)	3	7	5	42	44	4.18	0.99
b. point out errors in spelling	1	9	10	42	38	4.06	0.98
c. point out errors in *vocabulary* choice	4	8	9	41	38	4.01	1.08
d. point out errors in *punctuation*	5	15	15	39	26	3.67	1.15
e. make comments on the *organization of the paper*	3	10	14	34	40	3.98	1.10
f. make comments on the *writing style* (the way you express your thoughts and arguments)	3	8	13	33	42	4.03	1.09
g. make comments on the ideas expressed in the paper	5	9	12	35	39	3.93	1.15
4. When responding to a final draft, the teacher should always:							
a. point out errors in *grammar* (verb tenses, subject/verb agreement, article use…etc.)	1	5	11	48	34	4.10	0.88
b. point out errors in *spelling*	1	6	12	46	5	4.09	0.88

Table 2 (Cont'd)

ITEMS	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA	M	SD
c. point out errors in *vocabulary choice*	2	6	16	44	33	3.99	0.95
d. point out errors in *punctuation*	1	11	17	44	27	3.85	0.98
e. make comments on the *organization of the paper*	3	7	14	37	40	4.04	1.03
f. make comments on the *writing style* (the way you express your thoughts and arguments) expressed in the paper	3	10	14	35	39	3.97	1.08
g. make comments on the ideas expressed in the paper	2	12	12	39	35	3.92	1.06

Note. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number, and thus may not add up to 100.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree.

Moreover, most students (63%) stated that they read every teacher mark or comment on their writing carefully, while only 19% stated that they look at some comments more carefully than others, as revealed in Table 3. Nevertheless, the students' responses to item 6 revealed some interesting discrepancies in their beliefs regarding the importance of various features in their writing. More specifically, most students chose comments on the writing style and ideas/content (74 and 72%, respectively), as the most important ones to look at, while slightly fewer students chose organization, vocabulary choice, and grammar (59, 57, and 53%, respectively). Finally, less than half the students chose marks indicating errors in spelling (39%) and even fewer chose marks indicating errors in punctuation (26%).

Table 3

Frequencies of Response (in %): Students' Beliefs Relative to the Importance of Various Features in their Writing - Nominal Items

ITEMS	Responses (in %)
5. How carefully do you look at the teacher marks/ comments on your written work?	
1. You read every one carefully.	63
2. You look at some marks/comments more carefully than at others.	19
3. You mainly pay attention to comments on the ideas expressed in the paper.	16
4. Other	2
6. If you look carefully at some of the marks/comments your English teacher makes on your written work, which one(s) do you consider most important to look at? (Please circle ALL that apply).	
1. Marks indicating errors in grammar	53
2. Marks indicating errors in vocabulary choice	57
3. Marks indicating errors in spelling	39
4. Marks indicating errors in punctuation	26
5. Comments on the ideas/content	72
6. Comments on the writing style	74
7. Comments on the organization of the paper	59
8. Other	2

Students' Preferences for Paper-marking Techniques

Response frequencies, means, and standard deviations for the four Likert-type items addressing the students' preferences for paper-marking techniques (Part II, 3h-i and 4h-i) appear in Table 4; response frequencies for the four nominal items addressing such preferences (Part III, items 1-4) are shown in Table 5.

Table 4

Frequencies of Response (in %), Means, and Standard Deviations: Students' Preferences for Paper-marking Techniques

ITEMS	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA	M	SD
3. When responding to a first draft, the teacher should always:							
h. use a set of correction or proof-reading symbols	5	12	34	34	16	3.46	1.04
i. use a red-colored pen	6	9	38	22	25	3.50	1.15
4. When responding to a final draft, the teacher should always:							
h. use a set of correction or proof-reading symbols	2	15	25	37	21	3.61	1.04
i. use a red-colored pen	4	8	35	25	29	3.67	1.09

Note. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number, and thus may not add up to 100.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree.

As shown in Table 4, students' preferences for teacher marking techniques such as using a set of correction or proofreading symbols and using a red-colored pen were fairly neutral, regarding both first and final drafts. Fifty percent of the students agreed that the teacher should always use a set of proofreading symbols when responding to a first draft and 58% agreed regarding a final draft. Similarly, regarding teachers' use of a red pen, about half of the students agreed that the teacher should always use a red pen when responding to a first and final draft (47% and 54%, respectively).

Table 5

Frequencies of Response (in %): Students' Preferences for Paper-marking Techniques - Nominal Items

ITEMS	Responses (in %)
1. On a first draft, how do you want your English teacher to indicate an error in your written work?	
1. By crossing out what is incorrect and writing the correct word or structure	35
2. By showing where the error is and giving a clue about how to correct it	49
3. By only showing where the error is	10
4. By ignoring the errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation…etc. and only paying attention to the ideas expressed	5
5. Other	2
2. On a final draft, how do you want your English teacher to indicate an error in your written work?	
1. By crossing out what is incorrect and writing the correct word or structure	57
2. By showing where the error is and giving a clue about how to correct it	20
3. By only showing where the error is	13
4. By ignoring the errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation…etc. and only paying attention to the ideas expressed	9
5. Other	1
3. How does your English teacher currently indicate errors in your written work?	
<u>On a first draft</u>:	
1. By crossing out what is incorrect and writing the correct word or structure	24
2. By showing where the error is and giving a clue about how to correct it	52

Table 5 (Cont'd)

ITEMS	Responses (in %)
3. By only showing where the error is	21
4. By ignoring the errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation… etc., and only paying attention to the ideas expressed	2
5. Other	1
4. If there are <u>many</u> errors in a paper, what do you want your English teacher to do?	
<u>On a first draft</u>:	
1. Correct all errors major and minor	33
2. Correct all errors the teacher considers major, but not the minor ones	31
3. Correct most but not necessarily all of the major errors if there are many of them	8
4. Correct only a few of the major errors no matter how many there are	1
5. Correct all *repeated* errors whether major or minor	9
6. Correct only errors that might interfere with communicating your ideas	10
7. Correct no errors and respond only to the ideas expressed	2
8. Other	6
<u>On a final draft</u>:	
1. Correct all errors, major and minor	45
2. Correct all errors the teacher considers major, but not the minor ones	21
3. Correct most but not necessarily all of the major errors if there are many of them	8
4. Correct only a few of the major errors no matter how many there are	5
5. Correct all *repeated errors* whether major or minor	6
6. Correct only errors that might interfere with communicating your ideas	10
7. Correct no errors and respond only to the ideas expressed	2
8. Other	3

Concerning students' preferences for teachers' techniques in pointing out errors, students revealed an interesting discrepancy in their responses regarding first and final drafts. As shown in Table 5, while only 35% of students chose crossing out an error and writing the correction as the best teacher feedback technique in response to a first draft, 57% of the students chose this technique in response to a final draft. Similarly, while 49% of the students chose showing where the error is and giving a clue about how to correct it as the best teacher feedback technique in response to a first draft, only 20% chose this technique in response to a final draft. In addition, very few students chose the remaining options, such as only showing where the error is, or ignoring errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation…etc., and only paying attention to the ideas expressed as the best teacher feedback technique, in response to either first or final drafts.

Moreover, students' preferences for teacher techniques in pointing out errors on first and final drafts seem to generally correspond to what students perceive as actual teacher practice, as the responses to item 3 in Table 5 reveal. Most students (52%) stated that their teacher responds to errors on a first draft by showing where the error is and giving a clue about how to correct it, while most students (40%) stated that their teacher responds to errors on a final draft by crossing out the error and writing the correct structure. In addition, few students (ranging from 2-21%) chose either of the remaining two techniques, such as only showing where the error is, or ignoring errors in form and only paying attention to the content, as what their teacher currently practices, in response to either first or final drafts.

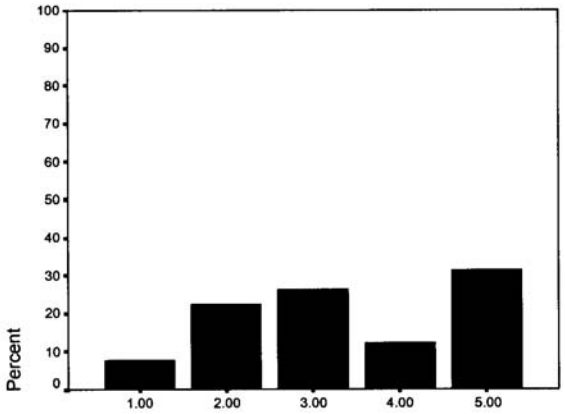
Regarding students' preferences for the amount of feedback/marks on their papers, most students stated that they would prefer their teacher to correct all errors, when responding to both first and final drafts, as shown in Table 5. Fewer students, however, indicated so for a first draft (33%) than for a final draft (45%), revealing, again, that these students want their errors on a final draft corrected.

Response frequencies for the last item in the questionnaire, consisting of various teacher marks/correction of an error and asking for students' evaluation of each mark (see Appendix), appear in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Responses to Part IV: Students' Evaluation of Various Teacher Marks

Error Underlined and General Clue for Correction Provided



Error Underlined and No Clue Provided

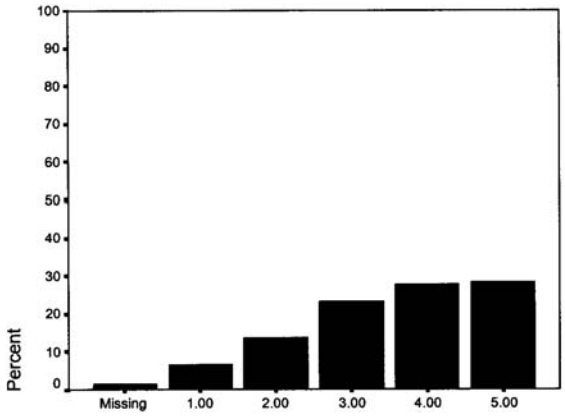
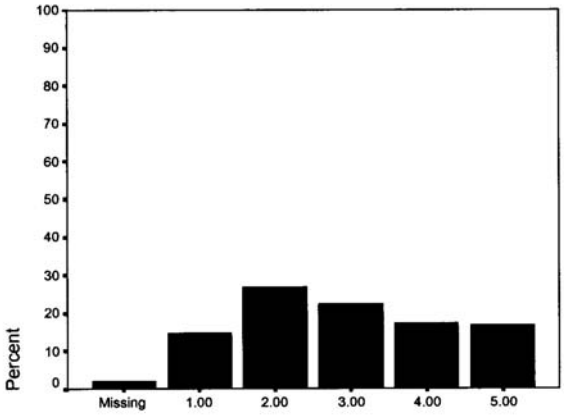


Figure 1 (Cont'd)

Error Underlined and Clue Linking the Error to the Rest of the Phrase Provided



Error Crossed-out and Correction Provided

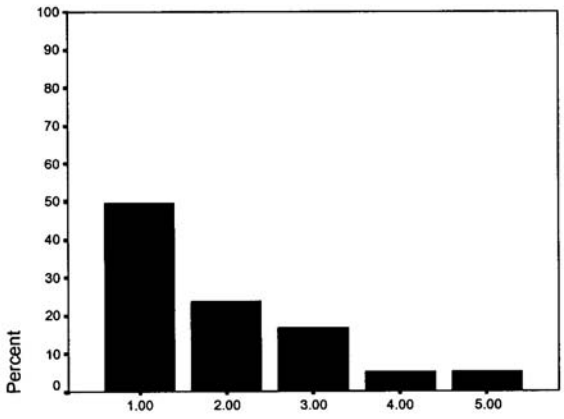
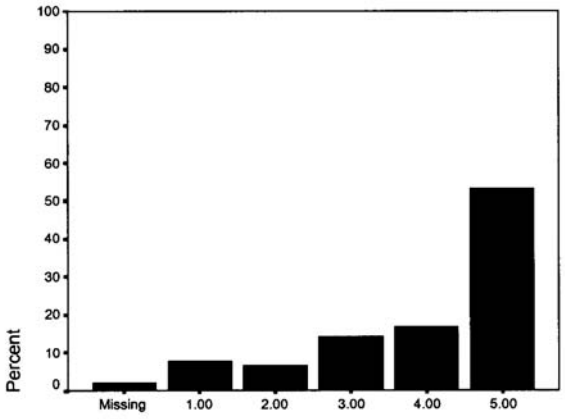


Figure 1 (Cont'd)

Error Underlined and Personal Comment Relevant to the Content Provided



Error Underlined and Specific Clue for Correction Provided

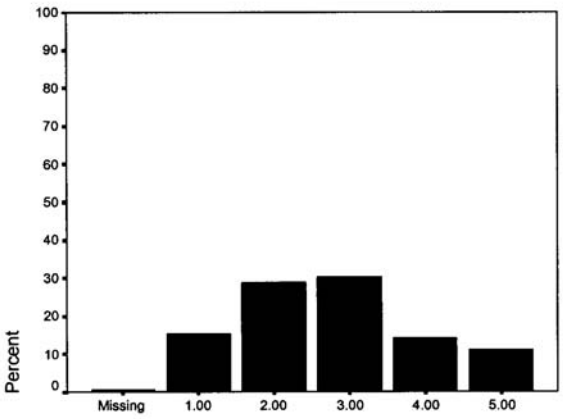
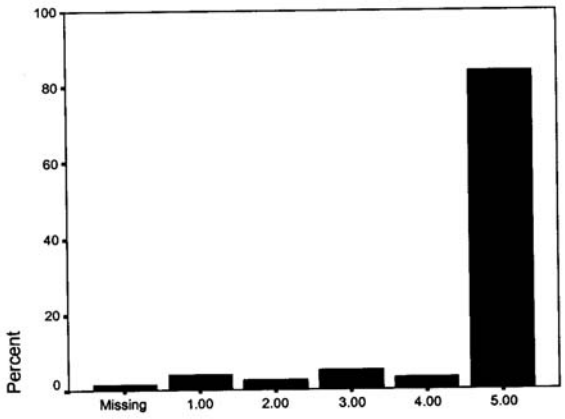


Figure 1 (Cont'd)

Error Ignored



According to the results displayed in Figure 1, "marking technique" the mark that received the most positive evaluation is correction technique (d), which consists of crossing out the error and writing the correct structure, while the one that received the most negative evaluation from the students is correction technique (g), which consists of ignoring the error. Another mark that elicited a negative evaluation from students is correction technique (e), which does not provide a correction or even a clue for a correction, but consists of underlining the error and writing a personal comment relevant to the content.

Discussion

Similar to previous findings in L2 contexts (Enginarlar, 1993; Ferris, 1995; Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales; 1988; Saito, 1994; Schulz, 1996; 2001), the EFL students in this study revealed a great concern with accuracy and error-free writing, in spite of the research evidence arguing that surface-level error correction is ineffective. Nevertheless, it is essential to consider whether students who report benefiting from such correction actually need it and improve because of it (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996; Radecki & Swales, 1988). Few research studies have investigated the relationship between students' preferences to different types of feedback and the improvement and development of their writing ability; investigations

of this type are crucial before any conclusions can be made as to whether students' need or desire for the correction of surface-level errors is indicative of the effectiveness of such feedback on the development of their writing skills.

In addition, the EFL students in this study generally equated the importance of various features of their writing such as grammar, spelling, vocabulary choice, organization, writing style, and content; most students, however, chose comments on the writing style and on the ideas expressed in the paper as the most important teacher marks they look at, while few students chose comments on spelling and punctuation. Moreover, the EFL students in this study did not generally differentiate between responding to various writing features on a first draft as opposed to a final draft.

On the other hand, the students' preferences for teachers' techniques in pointing out errors did seem to differ regarding first and final drafts. More specifically, most students chose the correction technique showing where the error is and giving a clue about how to correct it as the best teacher feedback technique in response to a first draft, while concerning a final draft, most students chose crossing out an error and writing the correction as the best teacher feedback technique. Findings also revealed that students' preferences for teacher techniques in pointing out errors on first and final drafts generally correspond to what students perceive as actual teacher practice. Since an interdependent relationship exists between teachers' behaviors and students' views (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, 1996), this finding may indicate that teachers seem to be behaving according to students' preferences or, perhaps just as likely, that students' preferences for teacher feedback reflect instructional practices.

Regarding students' preferences for the amount of feedback/marks on their papers, most students stated that they would prefer their teacher to correct all errors, especially when responding to a final draft. Considering that in most cases a final draft includes a final grade for the paper, this finding is encouraging; these students seem to care about having their written errors corrected, for reasons beyond that of obtaining a good grade on the paper. Another positive finding is that most of these students would rather receive a clue about correcting errors on their first drafts rather than the correction itself, even though the latter would presumably make it "easier" to revise the draft. Such a preference for "clues" in teacher feedback was also found among the ESL students surveyed in Leki's (1991) study.

Concerning students' beliefs about the importance of various features of their writing, many of the students chose comments on the writing style and ideas/content as the most important teacher marks they look at; slightly fewer students chose organization, vocabulary choice, and grammar, while less than half chose marks indicating errors in spelling and punctuation. Thus, even though the students indicated

a preference for having every error corrected, it is encouraging that most of them also emphasized the importance of comments on the writing style and content, rather than only surface-level errors.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that findings revealed strikingly similar responses to those provided by the ESL students in Leki's (1991) survey regarding the last item in the questionnaire, which consists of various teacher marks/correction of an error and asks for students' evaluation of each mark (see Appendix). The EFL students in this study, similar to the ESL students in Leki's study, rated highly the sample corrections identifying the error and giving a clue as to what the correction is. The EFL students in this study, however, rated the sample correction technique of crossing out the error and writing the correct structure more positively than did the ESL students in Leki's study. Another similarity is that both groups of students reacted negatively to the two correction techniques which ignore the error, particularly disapproving of the notion that the teacher would make no response at all to an error. Thus, these two groups of L2 students, in very different instructional and cultural settings, seem to hold generally similar views regarding error correction and what constitutes a "good" teacher mark on an essay. Likewise, the two groups of US and Columbian FL students examined in Schulz's (2001) study held very similar beliefs regarding error correction and the role of the teacher as an expert who should correct student errors.

Conclusion

The findings of this study support the general contention that L2 students seem to expect surface-level error correction from their teachers and believe that such feedback is beneficial (Enginarlar, 1993; Ferris, 1995; Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales; 1988; Saito, 1994; Schulz, 1996; Schulz, 2001), despite the research evidence arguing otherwise. Nevertheless, L2 students' need or desire for error correction is not necessarily indicative of the effectiveness of such feedback; some students may hold unrealistic beliefs about writing, usually based on limited knowledge or experience. Such students may have simply not had their preconceptions challenged; therefore, teachers might try to modify some students' expectations about error correction (Leki, 1991). In line with Ashwell (2000) and Ferris et al. (1997), it is strongly recommended that teachers help their students understand how feedback is intended to affect their writing and why it is given the way it is. Otherwise, students may not be able to interpret the teacher's feedback or act on it in the way the teacher had intended. Teachers should make an effort to explore their students' beliefs about writing, feedback, and error correction and to try to bridge any gap between their own and their students' expectations (Schulz, 1996, 2001); it is teachers' responsibility to be aware of their students' perceptions of what helps them progress and to somehow incorporate these perceptions

in their teaching. Therefore, incorporating classroom discussions on error correction, feedback, and writing can be essential in helping L2 teachers become familiar with their students' beliefs about what constitutes effective feedback to and modifying or reinforcing these beliefs accordingly.

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Appendix

Questionnaire - Part II

II. Directions: Below are some beliefs that some students have about feedback to writing. **Read each statement and then decide if you: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree. Please write the number of your response in the space provided.**

There are no right or wrong answers. We are simply interested in your opinions.

REMEMBER:

(1) strongly AGREE (2) agree (3) neither agree nor disagree (4) disagree (5) strongly DISagree

1. It is important to *me* to have as few errors as possible in my written work. ____
2. It is important *to my English teacher* for me to have as few errors as possible in my written work. ____

3. **When responding to a first draft (that is, a paper you will rewrite at least once), the teacher should always:**
   a. point out errors in *grammar* (verb tenses, subject/verb agreement, article use…etc.) ____
   b. point out errors in *spelling* ____
   c. point out errors in *vocabulary choice* ____
   d. point out errors in *punctuation* ____
   e. make comments on the *organization of the paper* ____
   f. make comments on the *writing style* (the way you express your thoughts and arguments) ____
   g. make comments on the *ideas* expressed in the paper ____
   h. use a set of correction or proof-reading symbols ____
   i. use a red-colored pen ____

4. **When responding to a final draft (that is, a paper that will not be rewritten and will receive a grade), the teacher should always:**
   a. point out errors in *grammar* (verb tenses, subject/verb agreement, article use…etc.) ____
   b. point out errors in *spelling* ____
   c. point out errors in *vocabulary choice* ____

d. point out errors in *punctuation* ____
e. make comments on the *organization of the paper* ____
f. make comments on *the writing style* (the way you express your thoughts and arguments) ____
g. make comments on the *ideas* expressed in the paper ____
h. use a set of correction or proof-reading symbols ____
i. use a red-colored pen ____

III. Directions: Answer the following questions by circling the number of the appropriate response.

1. **On a first draft, how do you want your English teacher to indicate an error in your written work?**
   1. By crossing out what is incorrect and writing the correct word or structure
   2. By showing where the error is and giving a clue about how to correct it
   3. By only showing where the error is
   4. By ignoring the errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation…etc. and only paying attention to the ideas expressed
   5. Other (please specify): _____

2. **On a final draft, how do you *want* your English teacher to indicate an error in your written work?**
   1. By crossing out what is incorrect and writing the correct word or structure
   2. By showing where the error is and giving a clue about how to correct it
   3. By only showing where the error is
   4. By ignoring the errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation…etc. and only paying attention to the ideas expressed
   5. Other (please specify): _____

3. **How does your English teacher currently indicate errors in your written work?**
   On a first draft:
   1. By crossing out what is incorrect and writing the correct word or structure
   2. By showing where the error is and giving a clue about how to correct it
   3. By only showing where the error is

4. By ignoring the errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation…etc. and only paying attention to the ideas expressed
5. Other (please specify): _____

On a final draft:

1. By crossing out what is incorrect and writing the correct word or structure
2. By showing where the error is and giving a clue about how to correct it
3. By only showing where the error is
4. By ignoring the errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation…etc. and only paying attention to the ideas expressed
5. Other (please specify):

4. **If there are <u>many</u> errors in a paper, what do you want your English teacher to do? On a first draft:**
   1. Correct all errors, major and minor
   2. Correct all errors the teacher considers major, but not the minor ones
   3. Correct most but not necessarily all of the major errors if there are many of them
   4. Correct only a few of the major errors no matter how many there are
   5. Correct all *repeated* errors whether major or minor
   6. Correct only errors that might interfere with communicating your ideas
   7. Correct no errors and respond only to the ideas expressed
   8. Other (please specify): _____

On a final draft:

1. Correct all errors, major and minor
2. Correct all errors the teacher considers major, but not the minor ones
3. Correct most but not necessarily all of the major errors if there are many of them
4. Correct only a few of the major errors no matter how many there are
5. Correct all *repeated* errors whether major or minor
6. Correct only errors that might interfere with communicating your ideas

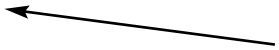
7. Correct no errors and respond only to the ideas expressed
8. Other (please specify): _____

5. **How carefully do you look at the teacher marks/comments on your written work?**
   1. You read every one carefully.
   2. You look at some marks/comments more carefully than at others.
   3. You mainly pay attention to comments on the ideas expressed in the paper.
   4. Other (please specify): _____

6. **If you look carefully at <u>some</u> of the marks/comments your English teacher makes on your written work, which ones do you consider most important to look at?**

   (Please circle <u>ALL</u> that apply).
   1. Marks indicating errors in grammar
   2. Marks indicating errors in vocabulary choice
   3. Marks indicating errors in spelling
   4. Marks indicating errors in punctuation.
   5. Comments on the ideas/content
   6. Comments on the writing style
   7. Comments on the organization of the paper
   8. Other (please specify): _____

IV. Directions: The following sentence, which has an error in English grammar, has been responded to in various ways by different teachers. **Look over the different possible responses and rate each one. If you think the mark/comment is a very good way to indicate an error on a paper, circle #1. If you think the mark/comment is a very bad way to indicate an error on a paper, circle #5.** If you think it is somewhere in between, circle the number between #1 and #5 that best represents your opinion.

		Very Good				Very Bad
	See section in grammar handbook.					
a.	Since I arrived here, I <u>am</u> very lonely.	1	2	3	4	5
	_____					
b.	Since I arrived here, I <u>am</u> very lonely.	1	2	3	4	5
	_____					
						
c.	Since I arrived here, I <u>am</u> very lonely.	1	2	3	4	5
	_____					
	have been					
d.	Since I arrived here, I ~~am~~ very lonely.	1	2	3	4	5
	_____					
	I'm sorry to hear that. Why don't you come and talk to me about it?					
e.	Since I arrived here, I <u>am</u> very lonely.	1	2	3	4	5
	_____					
	tense					
f.	Since I arrived here, I <u>am</u> very lonely.	1	2	3	4	5
	_____					
g.	Since I arrived here, I am very lonely.	1	2	3	4	5
	_____					

V. (OPTIONAL) <u>Directions</u>: Please write your response to the following question in the space provided.

Do you have any <u>other</u> ideas about teacher feedback to student writing that are not included above?

Newly Placed Versus Continuing Students: Comparing Vocabulary Size

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Students who enroll in intensive language programs are usually required to take a placement exam to determine at which institutional placement level they will begin their ESL studies. These exams typically assess reading, writing, speaking, listening, and grammar proficiency. At some institutions, students sometimes move on to the next levels without having to sit another placement test. Even though all the students are exposed to the same grammar lessons and read the same books, the language skills of these students develop at markedly different rates. New students enter the program and are placed at the appropriate level, but their language skills sometimes seem superior to their classmates who have moved up from the previous semester. Why is there this perceived English proficiency gap between newly placed and continuing students?

One possible factor contributing to this disparity is the tendency for continuing students to be "socially promoted." That is, they have completed the assignments and have had good attendance, so the natural thing is to move them to the next level so they can learn something new. However, learning a language takes time, and often more information is covered within a course than students are able to fully acquire.

Another factor that may contribute to the varying rates of English acquisiton is the students' L1. It is not atypical in some intensive programs to see, for example, speakers of Spanish in the same classroom as speakers of Mandarin. A large lexical overlap between students' native language and English is good news for students whose native languages are Spanish, Portuguese, or French, for instance. Students whose mother tongue is Korean or Mandarin, on the other hand, may require a great deal more time to acquire the words that some of their classmates may learn with less effort. After a course or two, despite high motivation to learn and diligent studying, these students, who were placed into the same proficiency level at the beginning, are still studying in the same level together, but their language abilities may vary widely. Understandably, administrators are often reluctant to make "slower" learners repeat a level once they have already covered the material, especially since they pay the same tuition as their classmates who have made greater gains in the language.

The perceived English proficiency gap between newly placed and continuing students could be widespread among ESL and EFL programs that only use a placement test at the beginning to place new students into the appropriate institutional placement levels, yet research on this topic has been sparse. A search for other studies on the topic yielded only one investigation by Brown, 1980. Brown evaluated the test scores of 319 ESL learners at UCLA and found that the placed students scored 6.71 (out of 50) points higher on a cloze test and 9.82 (out of 100) points higher on the final examination than continuing students. He argued that many students who continue studying for more than one semester would likely have to repeat their classes if they had to take the placement tests again.

A principle underlying this study is that vocabulary provides the "enabling knowledge" required to be successful in other areas of language proficiency (Laufer & Nation, 1999). The acquisition and retention of new vocabulary contributes significantly to overall success in learning a language. The size of a student's vocabulary has been found to closely correlate with reading comprehension (Beglar & Hunt, 1999; Laufer, 1992; Qian, 1999) as well as with writing ability (Astika, 1993; Beglar & Hunt, 1999; Laufer, 1998; Laufer & Nation, 1995; Linnarud, 1986). Indeed, words are the primary carriers of meaning (Vermeer, 2001), and there is growing evidence that the more extensive one's vocabulary, the higher one's general language proficiency will be.

It is beyond the scope of the current study to investigate workable methodologies in teaching vocabulary. There has recently been an explosion of textbooks from most ESL publishers dealing with vocabulary instruction. Rather, this study seeks to explain the extent of the apparent gap between the newly placed and the continuing student in terms of vocabulary size by answering the following question: Is there any difference between the English vocabulary size scores of newly placed students and continuing students within the same institutional placement level?

Method

The study was conducted at Brigham Young University's English Language Center (ELC) in Provo, Utah. The ELC is an intensive English language program that draws international students from all over the world, but mostly from South America, Korea, Japan, and China. Incoming students at the ELC take tests that were developed by the ELC and which assess their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and grammar skills. Based on their scores, they are placed into one of five proficiency levels.

The primary method for exposing ELC students to new vocabulary is through extensive reading. Much research indicates that extensive reading is a primary source

of acquiring new vocabulary (breadth) and deepening understanding of existing vocabulary (depth). This is the general opinion of administrators at the ELC as well. ELC students are required to read approximately twenty to thirty pages per day, and most of the reading is narrative in nature.

Participants

Participants included 159 adult non-native speakers of English. Among the participants, 58 were new arrivals to the program, another 58 had been studying at the program for 4 months, and 43 had been studying at the program for 8 months. Only students in levels three through five were considered in this study, since there were very few continuing students in levels one and two. The ELC uses its own placement tests. However, according to the ACTFL scale, the level-three students are considered to be at the low intermediate level, the level-four students are at a mid intermediate level, and the level-five student are at a high intermediate level of English proficiency.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was the Productive Vocabulary Level Test (PVLT). The PVLT is a diagnostic test developed by Laufer and Nation (1995). The PVLT was chosen because it is a test of vocabulary size that is easy to administer and score.

The PVLT uses the following format:

I'm glad we had this opp_____ to talk.

Words are tested from each of four different frequency groups: 1 to 2,000, 2,000 to 3,000, 3,000 to 5,000, and 5,000 to 10,000. Each of the four frequency groups of the PVLT is represented by 18 items on the test, making 72 total items. Another section of PVLT assesses words from the University World List (UWL), but was not used in the present study since the frequency of the words from the UWL overlap with the other frequency groups. Because the words on the test are a sample of a large group of words, scores on the test provide a rough estimate of the students' vocabulary size. For instance, if a student testing at the 1-2,000-word level gets 9 out of the 18 items correct, it can be assumed that he or she knows roughly 500 out of the 1,000 word families from that level. (A word family includes a headword, its inflected forms, and closely derived forms of the word). Furthermore, since higher frequency words are generally acquired first, the rest of the words in each sentence are always more frequent than the word being tested.

There are several pieces of construct-related evidence for the validity of the PVLT scores. First, the PVLT appears to have a high level of authenticity. The three most

widely-used vocabulary breadth tests, the Eurocentres Vocabulary Size Test (EVST; Meara & Jones, 1990), the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT; Nation, 1990), and the PVLT, were considered when selecting the instrument for the current study. Of the three, only the PVLT measures productive vocabulary size, requiring the student to produce the word as they would if they were speaking or writing, and thus seems to more realistically mirror natural language use, whereas the EVST contains nonsense words and the VLT is multiple-choice. More authentic ways of measuring productive vocabulary, such as analyzing student-produced papers and recording their speech, would dramatically lower the practicality of the test. Another point of evidence for the validity of the PVLT scores is related to the content. The words elicited in the test were found using a corpus, and therefore represent an accurate profile of the words and their frequencies in natural use.

Items are considered correct if students write the correct word and part of speech, even if there are mistakes in spelling or grammar. For example, in the item, "In order to be accepted into the university, he had to impr_____ his grades," the ideal answer is *improve*. The words *improves*, *improved*, *or improving*, even with spelling mistakes, would be considered correct, since vocabulary is what is being tested. The words *improvement*, *improvise*, etc. would be marked as incorrect, since they belong to different parts of speech or to a separate headword. Whether a student has satisfactorily mastered a level or not is determined by the administrator of the test, but Laufer and Nation (1995) recommend that a score of 85% to 90% at the 2,000-word level would indicate that the student can use the most frequent words of English.

Procedures

Before administering the vocabulary test, the researcher met with the writing teachers of the program to distribute copies of the test and to explain the purpose of the study. Each teacher also received instructions for giving the test. The test was administered to all institutional placement levels of the program at the beginning of the winter semester, January 2003, during the students' writing classes. Since the test is rather long, containing 90 fill-in-the-blank type questions, the test was divided into two parts and administered over two days to minimize fatigue. Students received instructions before taking Section 2 of the test on the second day.

A one-way ANOVA was performed for each of the three ELC proficiency levels. The independent variable was the number of months studied at the ELC and the dependent variable was the raw scores of the vocabulary test. A Tukey-adjusted pairwise *t* test was also performed to compare the vocabulary size of the newly placed and the continuing students.

Results

The current study investigated the English vocabulary size of 159 non-native English speakers. Of the 159 participants, 58 were new to the program, 58 had been studying at the program for four months, and 43 had been studying at the program for 8 months. Vocabulary size scores of each of the three groups were used to measure a perceived difference between newly placed and continuing students.

It was first necessary to obtain reliability scores for the instrument used in this study in order to know that the data obtained for the research questions could be trusted. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal reliability of the scores obtained on the PVLT. The reliability of the PVLT, containing 72 questions, was .94. This indicates that the scores obtained from the PVLT were highly reliable, justifying investigation into the research hypotheses.

The null hypothesis was used, stating that there would be no difference between the English vocabulary size scores of newly placed and continuing students within the same institutional placement level, as measured by the PVLT. As shown in Table 1, however, there is a substantial difference in productive vocabulary size between newly placed students and continuing students. In this cross-sectional analysis, newly placed students generally have larger vocabularies than continuing students. In terms of actual numbers of words, the average newly placed student knows approximately 377 word families more than the student placed 4 months earlier, and 950 word families more than the students placed 8 months earlier.

Table 1

Mean Productive Vocabulary Size Scores of Newly Placed and Continuing Students by Level

Source	Level 3			Level 4			Level 5		
ELC mo.	0	4	8	0	4	8	0	4	8
Means	15.26	11.75	11.00	23.65	22.29	12.50	36.80	30.35	23.71
n	31	20	7	26	24	8	10	26	7

Note. ELC mo. indicates how many months participants had been studying at the ELC at the time of the vocabulary tests. Scores may be interpreted as numbers of words by moving the decimal two places to the right.

N = 159

One may use these numbers to roughly estimate the average vocabulary growth per semester. Although this is a cross-sectional rather than a longitudinal analysis, one may subtract the vocabulary size from, for example, the level 4 students at 0 months (the newly placed students), from the level 5 students at 4 months (students returning after one semester), and so on across the table, and find that the students are learning an average of approximately 398 word families per semester (though increases vary widely).

Table 2

Cross-Sectional Analysis of
Average Vocabulary Growth Per Semester

Subtraction of total vocabulary size*			Addition and average of the sums	
Level	ELC mo.			
5	8			
		2,371		
4	4	-2,229		
		= 142	→ 142	
5	4	3,035		
4	0	-2,365		
		= 670	→ 670	
4	8	1,250		
3	4	-1,175		
		= 75	→ 75	
4	4	2,229		
3	0	-1,526		
		= 703	→ +703	
			= 1,590	→ 1,590
				/4
				= 397.5

*As found in Table 1

A one-way ANOVA was performed to see if there is a statistical difference between the vocabulary size of 0-month, 4-month, and 8-month students. The results in Table 3 show that the three groups of students are statistically different from each other at the .05 level. The null-hypothesis must therefore be rejected, and an alternate hypothesis is accepted that there is a statistically significant difference between the vocabulary size scores of newly placed and continuing students within the same institutional placement level, as measured by the PVLT.

Table 3

Analysis of Variance for Months Enrolled

Source	df	*f**	*P*
Months at ELC	2	3.65	0.0281

*Adjusted F test.

p = <.05.

A post-hoc Tukey-adjusted *t* test was performed on the overall scores to find which groups of students were significantly different from the others at the p = .05 level (Table 4). Results showed that the vocabulary size of 0- and 4-month students is significantly higher than the vocabulary size of the 8-month students at the *p* = .05 level. However, there was no statistical difference between the 0- and 4-month students.

Table 4

Test of Differences Between Newly Placed and Continuing Students

Months of ELC	0	4	8
0	---	9.7616	0.0174
4		---	0.0094
8			

*Significant at the *p* = .05 level

Conclusion

In the current study, vocabulary assessment was applied in a novel way to measure the perceived English proficiency gap between newly placed and continuing students.

This study found that newly placed students at any given level indeed have larger vocabularies than continuing students at the same levels. On average, newly placed students know about 377 word families more than students placed 4 months ago, and 950 more word families than students placed 8 months ago. These findings are similar to those of Brown (1980). Given that vocabulary provides the enabling knowledge to perform other language skills, this finding may go far to explain the English proficiency gap between newly placed and continuing students that teachers may have intuitively observed.

Implications

Based on the findings here, continuing students are not learning enough vocabulary during the course to match the vocabulary size of their newly placed classmates. It is recommended, therefore, that teachers and administrators at intensive English programs explore ways of teaching vocabulary in a more systematic and focused way than they perhaps are teaching currently. In addition, if extensive reading is the primary method of increasing students' vocabulary size, it is recommended that the readings be supplemented by more explicit vocabulary instruction. Furthermore, if narrative texts make up the bulk of the reading, more expository texts may be required in the reading classes since they contain more academic and low frequency words. Reading more expository texts would also seem more appropriate preparation for many students whose primary objective is to pass the IELTS, TOEIC, or TOEFL and enter an English-medium university or to be promoted in their business.

Secondly, this study found that a one-time placement exam upon entering a language program sooner or later results in classes filled with students with widely varying vocabulary sizes, which most likely influences their general proficiency. It would be appropriate, therefore, to require students to pass an end-of-term exam to correctly place continuing students. The disadvantage of doing this is that students may find it unfair that they all pay the same tuition, yet some may advance in the program while others are held back. A possible solution to this dilemma is to divide the levels into subgroups, for example, 1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, or to label them in some other way, so that smaller levels of achievement can be recognized. Students whose end-of-term exam scores do not merit a full level advancement can feel like they are progressing (and in fact they are) although perhaps more slowly than others, while reviewing and mastering the same materials with a different textbook.

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Tackling Issues Among Remedial Class Students: A Problem-based Approach

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Many schools have a streaming system; students are assigned to classes where the stronger ones learn at a faster pace, while the weaker ones are busy trying to catch up. More often than not, students in the remedial classes have to take the same internal and external examinations. This is the most puzzling part: How can the weaker students meet an approved standard within a period of time equal to that of the more able students? The answer perhaps lies in the training of remedial class teachers who apply different teaching approaches. With different approaches, students may be able to learn in more diverse ways. Teachers need to explore learning opportunities in both textbooks and authentic materials, so as to link up the classroom and the real world use of the language.

Not only do weaker students have problems in academic work, but they may also have motivational and disciplinary issues. Some students are assigned to a language remedial class because of their overall discipline problems. In their cases, they are weak in almost all subjects. They lack learning motivation and some have low self-esteem. In such cases, language teachers play an important role as both mentors and guardian angels. There teachers often have students voice their frustrations through activities that allow students to practice the use of English language in authentic situations.

The aim of this paper is to review how effective small class remedial teaching has been through a letter-writing activity. The activity, incorporating different learning styles and strategies, allows students to solve real-life problems on their own. They posed problems, provided solutions, and balanced resolutions through discussion, research on the Internet, and writing to the newspaper. Remedial students come to see that their voices were heard, that their worries were acknowledged, and that their language proficiency was improved. But added to this, these students have shown a marked improvement in their self-esteem. It is hoped that this paper will provide insights for language education on how classroom technologies and daily issues can be combined to promote effective learning in remedial classes.

Review

It is evident that people learn differently and at different paces because of their biological and psychological differences (Reiff, 1992). Clearly, learning styles include not only the cognitive domain, but also the affective and physiological domains (Oxford, Hollaway, & Horton-Murillo, 1992). But even one learning style is multidimensional (Kinsella, 1996), and a particular learning style may be founded on assumption. Assumption research on learning styles is based on the premise that learners receive information through their senses and prefer some senses to others in specific situations (O'Brien, 1989; Oxford & Ehrman, 1993; Kroonenberg, 1995).

Students learn more effectively when they learn through their own initiatives. When their learning styles are matched with appropriate approaches in teaching, then their motivation, performances, and achievements will increase and be enhanced (Brown, 1994). In various situations, teachers employ different strategies and instruments in class. Although these strategies and instruments differ, they share the goal of identifying the nature of human differences in learning and of improving the effectiveness of teaching/learning by providing criteria for individualizing instruction (Ketchum, 1987).

Research has shown that matching learning styles have a positive impact on students' achievements, interests, and motivation (Smith & Renzulli, 1984). Dunn, Dunn, and Price (1979), Wesche (1981), and Sein and Robey (1991) found that the potential interaction between learning styles and teaching approaches indicates that students' performances can be enhanced by adapting the instructional methods to individual differences in learning styles.

Kinsella (1996) argued that students who have stronger verbal/analytical faculties may have access to the traditional teaching model—listening to lectures, reading textbooks, and completing writing assignments. But they are not necessarily developing the right-brain strengths that are crucial for problem solving and creativity. Therefore, it has been pointed out that lessons should be presented both visually and verbally and reinforced through various motivating language activities such as reflective reading and writing. In this way, students can learn in ways that best suit their styles and develop their modality strengths (Kroonenberg, 1995).

Oxford (1990) posited that while presenting materials, teachers should provide colorful and motivating activities, personalized self-reflection tasks, some form of cooperative learning, and powerful learning strategies to encourage self-direction in learning. However, it is generally agreed that it is difficult for teachers to keep all the learners' activity tasks focused on the learning process while they learn at the same pace (Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

Method

This paper presents an activity carried out in a well-respected middle school in Hong Kong. The school celebrated its 115th anniversary in 2004. With such a long and distinguished history, the school is of course, interested in how to promote effective learning among students. Teachers have been commissioned to research different approaches, one of which is a "problem-based" approach, a derivation of the project-based learning approach. The school has been promoting small class teaching since 2000. During English classes, 260 students at each of the five levels are divided into eight or nine groups. The elite and remedial classes have no more than 20 students each.

The project was conducted in September and October 2004 among 20 Form 3 (grade 9) English remedial students whose mother tongue is Cantonese, a Chinese dialect commonly used in Hong Kong. The school is considered one of the best Chinese medium of instruction middle schools, (all subjects are taught in students' mother tongue, except the English lessons). Students receive eight 40-minute lessons per cycle, that is to say, approximately 270 minutes of classroom contact time every week. Students whose English grades were near the bottom in the final examination in the previous academic year were assigned to the remedial class.

There were five stages in this project: (1) Students were asked about problems they faced in daily life or at school. These problems were mainly about growing pains, academic results, friendships, relationships with family, etc. Students were asked to surf the Internet for teen magazines, and check if their problems were shared by others, or unique to themselves. Discussion sessions were held. Through snail mail and e-mail, students then wrote to *Young Post* of the *South China Morning Post*, a local English newspaper, to ask for assistance regarding their problems; the same letters also appeared in the student forum, an electronic communication platform of the school. (2) The letters were further discussed in class in two areas: How students could help the writer, and, the strengths of the published letter. Responses would be written regarding the problem posted. (3) When the response letters were printed, the class discussed further comments for the two batches of letters, and another round of written response was made. (4) The activity ended with a comparison session when the students had all three batches of letters, making a complete set: problem-response-resolution. (5) Students reflected on the series of letter-writing activities and how the writing and the discussion helped solve teenage problems.

Students were first taught the letter-writing format, and the presentation of the envelope. All letters, about 100 words each, were proofread by the English teacher for grammar mistakes, but not content. This measure ensured an agreeable level of language standard and preserved objective and independent authorship. Class

discussion sessions were mostly done in small groups after the teacher's initial instructions and lectures. Sessions were well-spread out over two months in order to accommodate other areas of the regular English curriculum, and to allow time for students' writing.

Evaluations were done through four instruments. Upon completion, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire (Appendix 1) with 20 items on a modified Likert-scale (1= strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree) on the activity, what they had learnt and the change of their learning attitudes. Students were also asked to respond freely on other aspects absent from the questionnaire. They were invited randomly to attend comment sessions where open-ended questions were asked regarding the activity and their language attitudes. The teacher's observations contributed to the qualitative input of the writing up of this paper.

Results and Discussion

Students sent their letters to the newspaper and the electronic forum of the school at the end of September 2004. Five topics were found on the forum (Table 1), with a total of 51 responses (including the primary messages, suggestions, consolations, and appreciation messages), and a total of 562 hits were accumulated as of 4 November 2004. The hits include the 51 responses above, writers' checking in for responses, casual browsers' visits, teachers' monitoring, etc.

Table 1

Numeric Data of the Questions Posted

Topic	Last updated	Responses	Hits
Our problem (Appendix 2)	25 October 2004	6	59
My problem with study (Appendix 3)	23 October 2004	10	95
My problem with study (Appendix 4)	21 October 2004	26	233
My problem with study (Appendix 5)	15 October 2004	3	64
My problem with study (Appendix 6)	4 November 2004	6	111

The students who participated in this activity were all from a remedial English class; naturally they worried about their studies. In Hong Kong, grade 9 is a critical year, because it is the end of the nine-year compulsory free education. About 25 students, out of 260, will have to leave the school to work or to study in another school. Being in a remedial class, these students worried that they might not make the cut. Therefore, they were all concerned about their studies.

Since the English teacher of the class conducted the activity with the students, the students tended to focus more of their concerns on English. In some cases, students also voiced their frustration on other subjects, for example, physics and chemistry. Their main worry was that the teachers talked too fast, and they did not have time to absorb. Responses from other students were comforting, but not always practical. For example, in one case, a reply suggested that the worried student should watch English TV programs at home to sharpen up her English skills. But another response pointed out the difficulty that there was only one TV set at home, and family members wanted to watch Chinese programs. Teachers also encouraged students to have conversations with native speakers of English, but a respondent said that he did not know any native English speakers.

The results of the questionnaire are located in Table 2. The questionnaire results represent the 18 students who filled out the questionnaires (N=18). Most of the means are in the 2-point area, the spread is great. Only items 16 and 17 fall in the 3-point area, and items 7 and 14 in the 1-point area. Although it may reflect students' confidence in the activity, it may also reveal partial truth of their worry regarding study; after all, these students are in a remedial class. But it is encouraging to see that they voted confidence for the teacher for guiding them carefully through all activities and that she allowed more freedom in voicing their opinions (items 16, 17, ranked 1, 2). Socially, students gained more confidence: the questionnaire results indicated that they were more ready to discuss problems with peers, at the same time, offer objective comments to peers' problems (items 19, 20, ranked 3.5).

Table 2

Questionnaire Responses (ranked by mean)

Item	Mean	Rank
16. The teacher carefully guided us through all activities.	3.83	1
17. The teacher allowed us more freedom in voicing our opinions.	3.33	2
19. I am ready to discuss my problems openly with my peers in future.	2.83	3.5
20. I will try my best to offer objective comments to my peers' problems.	2.83	3.5
15. Reading newspapers helps me improve my language proficiency.	2.67	5
5. I like this series of activities better than the textbook lessons.	2.61	6.5
10. I feel that people really care about the problem posed.	2.61	6.5
3. The problem posed really concerns members in my class.	2.56	8.5
13. The activities allowed more time for English discussion.	2.56	8.5
1. I have learnt more about letter-writing in this activity.	2.50	10.5
11. I have learnt some new language items in this series of activities.	2.50	10.5
8. I will continue to read English newspaper on a regular basis.	2.44	13
9. In these activities, I learnt to provide comments objectively.	2.44	13
18. I learnt to cooperate with my peers in these activities.	2.44	13
12. I hope there will be more activities of this kind in English lessons.	2.22	15
6. In these activities, I found that reading forum messages is educational	2.17	16
4. The series of activities is an authentic learning experience	2.11	17
2. I am happy to see letters of my classmates published on student forum	2.00	18
7. I will continue to write to the newspaper for issues I care about	1.72	19.5
14. I have always enjoyed reading English newspapers	1.72	19.5

Interestingly, there is one contradictory comment: students agreed that reading newspapers helps them improve language proficiency (item 15, ranked 5), but they will not write to it (item 7, ranked 19.5). There are perhaps two reasons in explaining such a contradictory result. First of all, students understand the importance of learning English through the newspaper, but they do not have the habit of writing to the newspaper, and they may prefer other ways to improve their English. After all, these students who are in a remedial English class may not be as ambitious as students in other classes. Secondly, newspaper reading is not a common activity in this school, although the culture of reading is growing. This explains the low ranking of item 14, "I have always enjoyed reading English newspapers." Students often think that issues in the newspaper concern adults more than teenagers. As they grow older, there seems to be a shift in this opinion.

Items 6 and 4 (ranked 16 and 17) reflected similar findings. Students did not think that the activity was educational and it was not an authentic learning experience. To many young students, even parents, textbooks are the only means to education. Any activities outside of a textbook may not be relevant to examinations. The English teacher introduced the letter-writing activity. It may have been seen as coercing students into finishing the tasks; hence, not authentic, whether writing to the newspaper or on the forum.

The other three instruments, free responses, interviews, and teacher's observations reaped similar results. Some of the free responses are listed below:

* *The activity is interesting.*
* *I like sharing and answering others' problems.*
* *I am happy to see my problems answered.*
* *Sharing problems in English is difficult.*
* *I don't know how to answer some questions.*

At the post-activity interview, the English teacher of this remedial class confirmed some of the findings. She said that a few students found the discussion on teenage problems useful. The writing helped students focus, and that they knew through collaborative learning, lessons could make sense; through problem-solving, they realized that their problems were actually shared by peers and they were not alone. By understanding that a problem was not unique to any one individual, they were able to lighten up and face academic challenges. The teacher also indicated that students were grateful for some of the responses. They had not believed that there would be other people interested in their problems. Although the problems had not been solved right away, they appreciated the respondents' effort, and were glad that their voices were heard. Finally, the teacher believed that teenagers should learn to open up and discuss

academic, social, and spiritual concerns with peers, teachers, and guardians. During the vulnerable teenage years, helping students consider their problems, however trivial they may be, will definitely boost students' confidence.

Conclusions

There are two limitations in this project. First of all, the small number of remedial class students may not present reality in its most objective fashion. The training of the teacher as a remedial class teacher directly affected the knowledge students might gain. However, the primary aim of this activity was to see if a letter-writing activity on their problems could stir the learning interest of weaker students. The training of the teacher may not be highly relevant in this case, either, because although the students are in a remedial class, and did score low in English in the previous year, the overall language standard of the school is well above level. The teacher just aimed at pushing these students harder, so that they would be at level with the norm: the above average group.

This also explains why some students swim in and out of the remedial class; once their grades fall behind the rest, they will inevitably end up in the class, but that does not mean they have poor English language proficiency. The public examination results of Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examinations speak for themselves. Eighty percent of remedial class students traditionally pass the English language papers.

Another constraint hinged on how frequently the letters got published. This worked to the class advantage in that when the letters did get printed, students could see that their language standard had been accepted at a desirable level. In addition, students knew that the problems they posed were acknowledged by other teenagers, and that they were not alone. Students also had a chance to compare the edited version and the one they submitted and to learn how journalism works on editing and readership. The forum version had a similar educational function: viewers learnt from each other their strengths and weaknesses.

Nevertheless, this research provided findings on how authentic problems and materials could promote language learning for weaker students. Not only did students see their problems acknowledged and solved by other readers, but they also learnt to cooperate, communicate, empathize, and interact with each other. The implications here are twofold. First of all, language teachers should not underestimate the non-classroom time; students can work on their own after guidance and instruction given in class. When the issues at hand suit the level and students' interest, students will be willing to work on their own and at their own pace. Secondly, while students are reaching out for assistance, they are also allowing people from outside of the school to offer their help. This mechanism lets students learn from the world outside the classroom, and it prepares

students for future work and study, at which time they will need to be able to compromise, negotiate, make offers, and so forth.

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About the Authors

Dr. Anson Yang is Head of the Department of English and Chair of the Language Development Committee at Pui Ching Middle School, Hong Kong. He has taught literature and TESL courses at universities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States. His research interests also lie in classroom cultures and student learning profiles. Joei Cheung, Carol Chung, Josephine Mak, and Vivien Tam are all trained English teachers; they hold advanced linguistics qualifications and are experienced in teaching weaker students in the secondary school setting in Hong Kong.

Appendix 1

Questionnaire

This questionnaire aims at collecting your opinions on the letter-writing activity. It intends to find out how you feel about the learning process, particularly how you have helped solve the problem posed. Please respond to the following items by putting a tick in the appropriate boxes (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree) representing your comments. Your comments are very valuable to the future activities conducted by teachers of the Department of English in this school. Thank you for filling out this questionnaire.

Item	1	2	3	4
1. I have learnt more about letter-writing in this acitivity				
2. I am happy to see letters of my classmates published on the student forum.				
3. The problem posed really concerns members in my class				
4. The series of activities is an authentic learning experience.				
5. I like this series of activities better than the textbook lessons.				
6. In these activities, I found that reading forum messages is educational.				
7. I will continue to write to the newspaper for issues I care about.				
8. I will continue to read English newspapers on a regular basis.				
9. In these activities, I learnt to provide comments objectively.				
10. I feel that people really care about the problem posed.				

Appendix 1 (Cont'd)

Item	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
11. I have learnt some new language items in this series of activities.				
12. I hope there will be more activities of this kind in English lessons.				
13. The activities allowed more time for English discussion.				
14. I have always enjoyed reading English newspapers.				
15. Reading newspapers helps me improve my language proficiency.				
16. The teacher carefully guided us through all activities.				
17. The teacher allowed us more freedom in voicing our opinions.				
18. I learnt to cooperate with my peers in these activities.				
19. I am ready to disuss my problems openly with my peers in future.				
20 . I will try my best to offer objective comments to my peers' problems.				

Reflections and comments:

Appendix 2

A lot of people told us to ask the teachers, but when should I go to ask them? In the lesson? During lunch time or after school? During lunch time, I don't have enough time to have my lunch (we have only one hour). After school, I have to go home quickly to finish my homework and study my test and dictations. I am also afraid that the teachers may think that I am not a good student because I do not listen to her.

Please tell me! What should we do?

By Eddy*

Appendix 3

5th October 2004.

Dear Editor,

When I had problem with English in Form 1, I was asked to enter the remedial class.

Teachers think that it is the only method to help me to solve the problem. However, they do not realize that there are other problems existing in the remedial class.

We are afraid of being labeled as poor students. Sometimes too shy to enter the classroom of the remedial class. We feel that we are not well-treated by the teachers we also feel that we are looked down by the teachers and the other fellow students.

Luckily I learn in this class because the teachers are nice. However, I still hate to be labeled.

Sindy Yick (F.3C)

Pui Ching Middle School

Appendix 4

27th September 2004

Dear Editor,

I am a F.3 student. I have a lot of problem with my study. For example, I do not understand what my teachers are talking about, especially in English lessons, because my teacher is talking very fast. She never stops for a minute. We have a lot English homework and we have many dictation. If I have anything that I do not understand, I will never ask my teacher, because I am scared that she will be angry. I really need help.

Rainbow Leung (F.3)

Pui Ching Middle School

Appendix 5

I always have many problems with my study.

I have to take extra lessons after school or in the holidays, because I can't understand what the teachers are talking about.

I sometimes need to learn badminton and so I go to bed late. I am quite tired so I can't pay attention in the lessons.

However, I can not give up because my parents insist that I should continue I am exhausted.

Appendix 6

5th October 2004

Dear Editor,

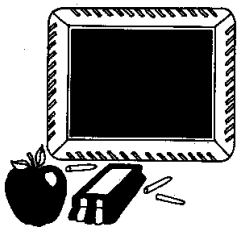
I am a F.3 student. My biggest problem with my study is that I am not good at English and I am afraid that I cannot promote F.4.

We are studying Chemistry and Physics in English. I find it difficult to understand.

In the future, I have to decide which stream I am going to enter—Art or Science. In my school, science subjects are instructed in English. I am so scared.

I always want to improve my English, but I always give up as life is busy. I feel tired and bored with my study.

Helen Leung (F.3)
Pui Ching



Tips for Teachers

Tips for New Nonnative English-speaking Teachers

Tomoko Asao, Brigham Young University-Hawaii, USA

Teaching for the first time is a nerve-racking experience for anyone, but it can be especially difficult for nonnative English speaking (NNS) language teachers in a second language setting. These teachers worry that language or cultural mistakes could have a negative effect on their careers. Some suffer from insomnia or other stress related problems. I speak from experience as a nonnative ESL teacher who taught in an academic English program in Hawaii soon after graduating with my B.A. in TESOL. As a new NNS teacher, I had many interesting experiences both positive and negative. Below I share what I learned by making mistakes in my first year, hoping that other NNS teachers might avoid some of the difficulties that I had and might be better prepared for some of the dilemmas that they will probably face.

What should I do if I find out that I have accidentally given inaccurate information?

Several times I realized that I had taught something wrong. My mistakes ranged from minor misspellings, to misunderstanding grammatical points or word meanings, to misreading articles. Fortunately, I was able to confer with experienced teachers after class, and it was during this time that I found most of my mistakes. At first, I was afraid that students would find my mistakes and conclude that they could not believe in me. Saying nothing, hoping that they would not catch my mistakes might have been the easiest way out, but I could not assume it would work. Instead, I tried to apologize and correct my mistakes as soon as possible, via e-mail or at the beginning of the next class. This usually worked; however, I gradually learned that the manner in which I reacted to my mistakes was also important. When I over-reacted or panicked, students also panicked, thinking that they were paying dearly for someone who was under-qualified. When I simply apologized, corrected my mistakes (sometimes with humor), and moved on, students reacted well. Some even thanked me for being honest and sincere. I learned

that I can earn their respect as long as I show that I am committed to teaching them as well as I can, no matter what.

What should I do if I do not know the answers to my students' questions?

During my first week of my teaching, I realized that my English was far from what it should be. No matter how careful I was in previewing the lesson, students somehow found my weaknesses by asking questions that I did not know how to answer. I felt caught between being a liar if I guessed, and losing their trust and confidence if I answered, "I don't know." I thought about not taking questions, but I had had teachers like that, and I did not want to be that kind of teacher. What finally worked for me was similar to the solution described above for when I made accidental mistakes. I simply apologized, made a promise to find the answer by the next class, and kept that promise. An alternative solution was to give students extra credit for finding the answers on their own. I believe both strategies worked well because my students saw me as honest and sincere and felt that I had treated their questions with respect.

What should I do if my students do not trust my knowledge of English?

As a NNS teacher from Asia, I faced this problem several times, most often with speakers of European languages, which are more closely related to English than Asian languages are. Initially, some students had the impression that I might not know English well enough to teach them. Although I was not a confident teacher, I was confident about my knowledge of English, and this helped me. Generally, when students challenged me about English, I stopped class and took a little time to discuss the issue with them. Other students who knew that I was right usually jumped in to support. When this happened, the outcome was a frank and interesting classroom discussion. Sometimes, however, students were too impatient to listen to my explanations. When it seemed that taking class time would not solve the problem, I suggested that they do an extra credit task of talking to another teacher or someone they trusted more than they did me. Generally this worked in my favor. These students ended up trusting me by the end of the semester.

What should I do if I don't know words or expressions that my students use?

I was amazed by how many English words and phrases some of my students knew. Sometimes they were mistaken about their use of words, but more often they were correct. I wanted to recognize their knowledge and learn from them as well without drawing attention to my lack of vocabulary. I complimented them for their rich vocabulary and, when I could verify that they had used words or expressions correctly, I gave them extra credit. Doing this took the focus away from my weaknesses and put

in on their strengths. It encouraged students to remain positively engaged in their course work and helped establish a positive relationship between them and me.

What should I do if some students try to talk to me in my native language?

Even though my classes consist of students from many countries, some low-level Japanese students tried to talk to me in Japanese as a way to avoid using English. I immediately answered them in English and, addressing the entire class, explained that I would speak only English in class and expected them to do the same. They understood the rationale behind it, and supported my decision. However, there were times when they and other students just slipped into their native language in class. To encourage all students, regardless of nationality, to consciously try to speak English at all times, I established a rule saying that they would have to share a secret or tell about an embarrassing moment in their lives if they were caught speaking their native language three times. No one wanted to talk about such experiences, so everyone tried to speak English during my class, including the lower-level Japanese students. These students still speak to me in English even though I am not their teacher any more. I am sure there are other better rules than the one that I chose; however, I believe setting up a course goal, a class rule, or even a class game, can help NNS teachers establish a comfortable target language environment.

Conclusion

I have acquired some more experience now, and I realize that first-year mistakes are not unique to NNS teachers. All novice teachers face similar rites of passage. I benefited greatly from the wise advice I received from my fellow teachers and would advise all novice teachers to learn as much as possible from their colleagues, too. It is also helpful to realize that we are not alone. In many places of the world, most language teachers are nonnative speakers of the languages they are teaching. We nonnative speakers can exploit the advantages that we have and increase our professionalism. For example, we can see the target language from the point of view of our students and can serve as powerful role models for them. Thus, I would encourage all nonnative speakers who are perhaps questioning their choice of career as ESL or EFL teachers to continue to improve their English and teaching skills and to not be afraid to follow their dreams.

About the Author

Tomoko Asao received her B.A. in TESOL from Brigham Young University-Hawaii. This article was written in response to a request from many NNS teachers who heard her speak about her first year experiences at the annual Hawaii TESOL Conference in 2004.

Enhancing Student Writing Through Tree Methodology

Robert Raymer, Science University of Malaysia

"A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees," William Blake once wrote. My creative writing students are not fools, but they do need to learn to see trees in a new way if they are going to write well about them. After marking ESL student papers for nearly a decade, I have concluded that my students need fewer discussions about how to write and more opportunities to see the possibilities in what they might write. Put another way, I give a great deal of attention to the first stage in the writing process—preparing my students to write. The payoff is immense. To illustrate what I mean, I will draw on a series of lessons that I use with my students. While the examples below relate to the general topic of trees, the strategies that I use can be effectively applied to any number of other topics.

Early in the semester, I introduce my topic by asking my students to write a sentence about a tree. They scratch their heads and look at me funny, but they do come up with a sentence. Then I read their sentences aloud to share them with the class, anonymously, of course. I could also copy them onto a sheet of paper that could be studied by everyone. Immediately they see the wide variety of ways in which their classmates approached this task. They also see, for example, that some "sentences" are not sentences at all, but rather fragments and that other sentences feel more or less interesting than their own. Even with a one-sentence assignment, I can create mini lessons on word choice, general and specific ideas, or sentence structure.

Some time later, preferably after they have had time to forget about the tree sentences, I tell my students to write a descriptive paragraph about a tree. They groan and complain that the topic is boring, and in a way, it is true. If I insisted that they write at this point, their writing would lack focus because they are thinking about trees in general. I have to help them see trees in a new way. This is when I take my students outside for a little "tree methodology" to help them realize that getting ready to write involves making choices about their subject, their purpose, and their approach.

First we examine a vine-covered tree. When I ask what they see, they simply say, "a tree." I point out that the tree has decayed and that the leaves they see actually belong to the intruding vine. We examine hollow spots in the tree and find both life and decay there. They also notice the unpleasant presence of mosquitoes. Then, we examine a healthy specimen of the same tree, noting how it is similar to and different from the dying one. Sometimes students share stories. For example, a student from Sarawak explained that the Bidayuh people consider strangled trees to be haunted.

Gradually, students begin to realize that they might have something interesting to write about a tree although I'm not quite ready to let them begin yet. We think of various ways in which a tree might be described, from an accurate photographic description to an impressionistic one. We explore the possibilities for describing the whole tree or a particular part of it, like the branches, leaves, trunk, or roots. We imagine how the tree can be used to play games, to hang a swing, and to support a tree house. We consider the ambiance around the tree noticing the shade, the breeze, and the view.

Back in the classroom, I give my students still more options. One is to write a narrative about a tree experience they have had. They might have fallen out of a tree or seen a tree fall during a storm. They can also write a report about the history of an unusual tree or an essay about the significance for a particular tree or species of tree. They can even write poetry, and some of them have been moved to do so.

In a later lesson, we go back outside for a lesson on using sensory details to make writing come more alive for a reader. I ask my students to close their eyes and concentrate on sounds, odors, taste, and feelings, both what they feel and how they feel. I ask them to quickly list their observations, close their eyes again, and continue this pattern for about 15 minutes. Then we talk. If someone mentions traffic, I say, "Traffic is vague. Can you be more specific?" They learn to notice whether the traffic is steady or intermittent, near or far, and what types of vehicles they can distinguish. They smell perspiration, perfume, dirt, dried grass, and leaves. They notice the leftover taste of lunch and feel the breeze on their faces and in their hair. They notice ants crawling on their arms, mosquitoes biting their legs, and leaves falling on their heads. I conclude by saying that we cannot always go outside to the actual location of what we are writing about, but we can learn to use our minds' eye and other senses to concentrate and bring sensory details to life.

By now, the topic of writing about a tree is no longer boring. Students' personal interest in a topic improves their writing dramatically. When they explore a topic from many angles, they are better able to see, understand, and appreciate not just trees, but all of life and the world in which they live. They can see a tree as Blake's wise man does. What I do with a topic like trees, any teacher can do with any topic.

About the Author

Robert Raymer graduated from Miami (Ohio) University in 1978 and teaches creative writing at the Science University of Malaysia. He has published a collection of short stories, Lovers and Strangers *(Heinemann Asia, 1993), and is editor of* Silverfish New Writings 4 *(Silverfishbooks, 2004).*

Rules, Patterns and Words: Grammar and Lexis in English Language Teaching

Review by Chau Meng Huat
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

RULES, PATTERNS AND WORDS: GRAMMAR AND LEXIS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING. Dave Willis, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2003), viii + 238 pp. $25.00 (pbk), ISBN 0-52-153619-7.

Like the other titles in the *Cambridge Language Teaching Library* series, Willis' *Rules, Patterns and Words* is written for an audience of graduate students and experienced teachers. It is a much needed volume that addresses teaching both the grammar and lexis of English.

This ten-chapter text begins with the firm statement that "What is taught may not be what is learnt." Willis then provides an overview of his views on grammar and lexis, ranging from the grammar of structure, the grammar of orientation, and pattern grammar, to class, lexical phrases, collocations, and words. These notions are further discussed in Chapters 4-8. Chapter 9 discusses the grammar of spoken English while Chapter 10 summarizes the discussion and makes recommendations for language teaching and syllabus and materials design.

A number of points in the text are worth noting. First, throughout the book, readers are constantly reminded about how to situate the teaching of grammar and lexis within the framework of recognition, system building, and exploration, or what Willis postulates as the three language learning processes, to address different classroom treatments of different aspects of the language. He also emphasizes the need for learners to have opportunities for language use in the classroom through improvisation and consolidation activities. Willis' central argument throughout the book is that classroom language learning should focus on acquiring lexis after which learners can be exposed to an increasing variety of texts. Willis acknowledges that one problem of learning lexical phrases is that there are so many of them. Admirably, he introduces the idea of a "pedagogic corpus" (Chapter 7) to address the problem. This refers to a set of texts which learners have processed for meaning and which the teacher can use to help learners familiarize themselves with valuable phrases.

The only quibble about this book is that it requires more careful editing. Minor editing errors include missing information in the reference list, incorrect page numbers

listed in the indexes, and typographical errors in the main text. On the whole, however, readers will find the book professionally stimulating and a number of the exercises and tasks of immediate practical use.

About the Reviewer

Chau Meng Huat is Research Officer at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. He recently gave a presentation entitled "Towards Realizing a Lexical Approach: Principles and Challenges" to teachers in the MEd. TESL program at the Universiti, drawing heavily from the discussion of this book.

Conference Announcements

South African Association for Language Teaching (SAALT). July 4-5, 2005. 33rd SAALT Conference: Bridging the Gaps. Contact: SAALT 2005, c/o Department of Applied Languages, Tshwane University of Technology (Pretoria), Private Bag X680, Pretoria 0001 South Africa. Tel. +27 (0)12 318-5410 or 318-5268. Fax: +27 (0)12 318 5881 or 318-5269. E-mail:saalt2005@tut.ac.za. Http://www.saalt.org.za/.

5th Foreign Language and Technology Conference. August 5-10, 1005. "Uniting the World," jointly sponsored by the International Association for Language Learning Technology (IALLT) and the Japan Association for Language Education and Technology, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, USA. E-mail: harold_ hendricks @byu.edu. Http://ce.byu.edu/cw/fleat5/.

First Costa Rican Convention of Teachers of English, Elsa Oroco, Cartago, Costa Rica. October 5-7, 2005. Hosted by Costa Rica TESOL: Proactive ESP, IEP, and Higher Education, and Escuela de Ciencias del Lenguaje, Instituto Tecnologico de Costa Rica. E-mail:tmolina@itcr.ac.cr.

IATEFL Hungary. October 7-9, 2005. 15th annual conference, "Teaching and Educating through ELT," Budapest, Hungary. E-mail:conference@iatefl hu. Http://www.iatefl hu.

Japan Association for Language Teaching. October 7-10, 2005. 31st Annual International JALT Conference, "Sharing Our Stories," Shizuoka, Japan. Contact Andrew Zitzmann. Fax: 093-471-0748. E-mail:programs@jalt.org. Http:// www. conferences.jalt.org/2005/.

New Editor for the TESL Reporter

As of this issue, Mark James is stepping down as the editor of the *TESL Reporter* after "12 wonderful years." Taking over the helm from Lynn Henrichsen in 1992, on the eve of the journal's silver anniversary, James led the *TESL Reporter* through a number of changes which helped to secure a solid future for the journal and a continued commitment on the part of Brigham Young University-Hawaii to underwrite the journal as a service to our profession. Prior to serving as this journal's editor, James was the review editor from 1981-1991.

"If there is anything which I hope to see continue, it is the internationalization of our editorial review board. The creation of this board in 1992 was a milestone for the journal and recent additions to the board have been very helpful," James said. "I have many good memories during the past 12 years, meeting people, working with authors, and receiving many thoughtful emails, letters, postcards, Christmas and New Year's cards, and a number of kind gifts from readers the world over."

James went on to say that although he enjoyed his work as editor, he realized it was time for a change and for the fresh ideas that a new editor would bring. "I look forward to Maureen taking over. As our Review Editor for some years now, she has demonstrated a fine editorial eye."

Dr. Maureen Andrade, currently the Director of the English as an International Language program at BYU-Hawaii, is excited about the opportunity of continuing the tradition of the *TESL Reporter*, particularly its key role as a journal for classroom teachers in international contexts. "The *TESL Reporter* emphasizes solid research focused on practical application to the classroom, especially the EFL classroom. As such, it fulfills a need in the profession. I look forward to strengthening the vision of Dr. James in mentoring authors whose work is relevant to EFL contexts as most of our readers are outside the United States." Maureen continued, "Dr. James' effort to internationalize the editorial board is a wonderful contribution in this regard. The board members see the needs in their respective areas and can ably judge the relevance of the studies to classroom teachers in their parts of the world."

Beginning with the October, 2005 issue, Amanda Peeni will replace Andrade as Review Editor. Amanda brings with her considerable editorial experience as a free-lance, newspaper, and magazine editor and writer. She worked for several years as the New Zealand editor for *The Ensign Magazine*, an international publication published and distributed worldwide by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She previously taught at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and in New Zealand public schools and adult community education programs. Peeni is presently teaching in the English as an International Language program at BYU-Hawaii.

Conference Announcements

13th Korea TESOL International Conference. October 15-16, 2005. "From Concept to Context: Trends and Challenges," Sookmyung Women's University, Seoul, South Korea. Program questions to kotesol_conf@yahoo.com. E-mail:kotesol2005@ yahoo groups.com. Http://kotesol.org/2005.

The 14th International Symposium and Book Fair on English Teaching. November 11-13, 2005. Hosted by English Teachers' Association Taiwan (ETA-ROC), "Bridging the Gap: Teaching and Learning," Chien Tan Overseas youth Activity Center, Taipei, Taiwan. Contact Andy Leung. E-mail:etaroc2002@yahoo.com.tw. Http: //www. eta.org.tw/.

"On the Road to Sustainable Excellence: Communicating Across the Curriculum." November 11-12, 2005. An international symposium hosted by The American University in Cairo, Egypt. E-mail:cacprop@aucegypt.edu. Http://www.aucegypt.edu/academic/wpconference/.

Faculty of Communication and Modern Languages. November 14-16, 2005. Universiti Utara Malaysia, Inaugural International Conference on the Teaching and Learning of English in Asia: Towards an Asia Perspective, Contact Chairperson, TLEiA 1, FKBM, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah Darul Aman, Malaysia. E-mail:syaharom@uum.edu.my. Http://www.uum.edu.my/fkbm/tleia1.

St. Petersburg English Language Teachers Association (SPELTA) Conference. November 26-27, 2005. "The Open World of English," St. Petersburg, Russia. Contact Tatiana Ivanova. E-mail:tivanova@ti2705.spb.edu. Http://www.expolingua.com/.

Egypt TESOL Conference. December 2-4, 2005. "Best Practice in TEFL," Cairo, Egypt. Contact Nagwa Kassabgy, 1 Halim Abouseif Street, Heliopolis, Cairo, Egypt. Tel. 2012-314-2179. Fax: 202-2675699. E-mail:nagwa@aucegypt.edu. Http://www.egypttesol.org.