



# RESEARCH

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## From the Co-ordinators

At the Cardiff conference, we will be giving up our roles as interim joint-co-ordinators and handing over to our successor, Anthony Bruton from the University of Seville. Anthony has a wealth of experience of research in our field, and will bring freshness and enthusiasm to the role. We are sure you will all join us in wishing Anthony a fruitful and enjoyable period of office.

## About this issue of Research News

As this is the final newsletter that we shall be editing, we are delighted to be able to include five contributions. There is an obvious connection between Sue Garton's study of EFL teacher's beliefs about learning and teaching in general, and Nick Andon's, based on his recently completed doctoral thesis. Given that task-based learning and teaching (TBLT) is now so widely practiced, Nick's study of teachers' actual beliefs and practices about TBLT, is to be welcomed.

The two UK-based studies mentioned above are supplemented by three from contexts as diverse as Saudia Arabia, Armenia and Bangladesh. Reima Al-jarf discusses the language needs of mainly Saudi citizens studying overseas through looking at their emails. Amalia Babayan looks at the pronunciation errors of Armenian students of Business English with reference to 'intelligibility' factors and Jennifer Jenkins' (1996) notion of an ELF pronunciation 'common core'. Finally, in Salma Ainy's article, the focus switches to secondary education, and the development of speaking skills by Bangadeshi school pupils.

We hope you enjoy this interesting and diverse collection of papers.

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## From the editor

Thank you to the members of ReSIG committee for their work in reviewing submissions, and to the contributors who submitted their work for this issue of the newsletter. Please continue to support us by

sending us your ideas and works for our publication. I do hope you enjoy reading this issue.

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# Researching teachers' knowledge, beliefs and practices in relation to TBLT

Nick Andon, King's College London

## Contextual Background

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been the subject of much discussion and research. To date, though, there has been little investigation of teachers' uptake of the public knowledge generated by this research. The research described below aimed to shed light on teachers' understanding of TBLT, their attitudes and beliefs towards TBLT as a language teaching approach, and the effect on their classroom practice of teachers' BAK (beliefs, assumptions and knowledge – Woods, 1996) in relation to tasks and TBLT.

The use of tasks within language teaching originates at least partly in practice, and the fact that TBLT has not only a strong research base but also a strong practical base helps to explain its current importance (Ellis, 2000). It is also considered to have developed out of the hugely influential CLT movement (Richards & Rogers, 2001; Bygate et al, 2001). TBLT is widely used and officially sanctioned in the language curricula of many countries, and is considered by some applied linguists to be the current orthodoxy in English language teaching (e.g. Littlewood, 2007; Nunan, 2003). Its potential importance is reflected not just in the number of publications on TBLT in the academic literature but also in its inclusion in professional teacher development literature, on teacher development courses, and in EFL coursebooks. This makes TBLT a good candidate for research into the relationship between theoretical and research-based applied linguistics knowledge and the ways in which this knowledge is understood and taken up in the beliefs, practical principles and practices of language teachers.

Most of the research on TBLT within SLA has been experimental, statistical and psycholinguistically-oriented, aimed at discovering stable effects of different task types and task treatments (e.g. the amount of negotiation of meaning, fluency, accuracy and complexity in learner output during task performance).

One of the aims of this research is to inform pedagogy. However, as Ellis points out, "the relationship between an area of research such as SLA and language pedagogy is a complex one" (2003:34), and in recent years there have been a number of calls for more research into how this type of public knowledge is understood and used by teachers. Public knowledge about language teaching, often in the form of language teaching approaches derived from research and theory and provided to teachers through training courses, workshops, conferences, books and articles, is acknowledged to be only one source of ideas that teachers draw on. Research into teacher cognition – "what teachers think, know and believe" (Borg, 2006:1) – has been seen as increasingly important to an understanding of teaching and central to what happens in classrooms (Borg, 2003; 2006). The term "teacher cognition" is used to describe a wide range of concepts including teacher's beliefs, theories, assumptions, attitudes, knowledge, understandings, and practical principles, characterized as implicit, tacit, practical, systematic, dynamic and contextually grounded (Borg, 2006; Tsui, 2003; Woods, 1996).

## TBLT

TBLT is considered to be an analytical (Wilkins, 1976) or holistic (Samuda & Bygate, 2008) approach to language teaching, in contrast to synthetic, incremental mastery approaches, such as the use of PPP within a weak version of CLT. Although there is broad agreement on how the concept of "task" can be defined (Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2003), there is less agreement on what constitutes TBLT as an approach, and as well as having strong and weak versions, TBLT is associated with a number of different research traditions and views on language teaching and learning (Ellis, 2000). The rationale for using tasks includes the following:

1. Communicative tasks are considered to trigger second language development. Investigating this is the main focus of much of the research into TBLT.
2. In addition to noticing and acquiring new language (knowledge creation), tasks may also push students to make use of language they are just starting to be aware of.
3. Tasks set up the conditions that will allow learners to acquire what they are ready to notice and understand and integrate into their developing interlanguage, rather than predetermining language content to be learned.
4. Tasks can be used to consolidate language already introduced, to promote fluent use of language already focused on.
5. Tasks relate to real-world uses of the target

- language and prepare students to transfer learning from the classroom to the world outside.
6. Tasks provide opportunities to develop confidence in interaction with peers.
  7. Tasks provide enjoyment, variety and motivation in the classroom
  8. Teachers can use tasks to assess learners in order to diagnose problems and plan subsequent language-focused input.

In order to investigate teachers' understanding and use of TBLT, key aspects of the approach were related to teachers understanding and use of tasks.

Table 1: Framework for analysing participants' use of TBLT

1.	To what extent do teachers understand and make use of tasks as meaning-focused activities which involve learners in communication in ways that reflect real-world or real-world-like processes? Are learners free to choose what to say and how to say it?
2.	Do teachers provide tasks with concrete outcomes and are these outcomes evaluated in some way? Outcomes encourage a focus on expressing and processing meanings, and put pressure on learners to pay attention to input, output and the language needed to communicate.
3.	What is the link between the task and form-focused activity in the lesson? An indirect relationship between tasks and specific language forms within the curriculum is an important issue within TBLT.
4.	What kind of input is the starting point for tasks and activities? What kinds of cognitive processing of the input are required?
5.	Modelling task performance before or after learners take part in tasks. This may help learners "notice the gap", and is one way of providing a focus on form.
6.	Planning time and repetition. Providing time to plan and opportunities for repetition are seen as having a positive effect on aspects of learners' language performance and, as a consequence, more effective learning is hypothesised to result.

## Research Methodology

An interpretive, case-study approach was used to examine the way that TBLT is understood and implemented by a small number of teachers of EFL to adults in the influential and well-resourced private language school sector in London. They are all well-

qualified and experienced, and it was assumed that they were at a stage of their careers where they would have well-articulated beliefs and principles as well as access to and opportunities to discuss current approaches and trends within applied linguistics.

Given the implicit nature of beliefs and other forms of teacher cognition, semi-structured interviews that elicit teacher's narratives about their work are seen as helpful in providing data from which researchers can draw inferences about beliefs. In addition, Breen *et al* point out the value of combining observation and interview data: "We cannot deduce language pedagogies on the basis of teachers' accounts of how they work without reflecting with them upon *actual instances* of practice" (Breen *et al* 2001: 498).

Each case study involved the following:

1. An initial interview to gather background data on and elicit descriptions of what each teacher considered to be their personal approach and key principles.
2. A semi-structured non-participant observation of one of the teacher's lessons, focusing mainly on the teacher rather than learner interaction.
3. A follow-up interview including stimulus recall, verbally walking the teacher through a description of the lesson to elicit comments on key issues.
4. A second semi-structured observation, with attention paid to confirming or disconfirming evidence of issues identified while remaining open to additional aspects of the teacher's practices and principles not yet noted.
5. A second follow-up interview again including stimulus recall but particularly focusing on checking principles identified and clarifying issues noticed so far.

Key themes in the data, which consisted of field notes from around 16 hours of lesson observations and 12 hours of interviews, were identified through systematic coding and comparison within and between the data sets from each case study. A profile of each teacher's key principles and practices was drawn up and checked with the teacher concerned. These profiles particularly focused on teachers BAK in relation to TBLT.

## Findings and implications

Below I present a very brief overview of the main findings reported in Andon (2008). A number of key aspects of the case study teachers' approaches can be related to TBLT.

- These teachers plan learner-centred lessons where students are active communicators in the classroom, interacting in pairs and groups, communicating

personal meanings and exchanging opinions; most of the lesson time is spent on language-using activities rather than teacher explanation and form-focused practice.

- Many of the wide variety of activities in the case study teachers' practices do match specifications and definitions of tasks in the literature. Other activities had some or most of the features of tasks and could be considered task-like to varying degrees.
- All four teachers take steps to establish connections between language use in the classroom and authentic communication in the real world.
- At least some of the time, decisions about what language the lessons focus on is derived from the linguistic requirements of the task, rather than choosing tasks in order to practice language previously presented.
- Some language is taught reactively through post-task focus on form, and not just pre-taught in preparation for the task (although this also occurs).

Tasks were used quite a lot, and used (at least some of the time) in ways that the literature suggests – with a focus on outcomes rather than the teaching of specific forms, and engaging cognitive processes involving comparing, evaluating, negotiating and making decisions jointly. However, the fact that aspects of TBLT are reflected in the principles and practices of these four teachers does not seem to be a straightforward matter of conscious decision to take up the approach. It was clear that these teachers had not had much direct contact with pedagogical principles of TBLT, and much less contact with articles on task-based research and theory.

It was also clear that they use TBLT flexibly and selectively. Tasks were used alongside other techniques and activities. The existence of frameworks for describing, analysing and comparing approaches and methods such as Richards and Rogers' (2001) scheme is related to the idea that teachers work within a unified set of theories, principles and practices. The reality is that language teachers do not adopt a single approach based on whether it can provide for the complete curriculum. Eclecticism is the norm, particularly for teachers working in contexts where they are given a great degree of autonomy.

It was also clear that teachers are not at all convinced by the concept of tasks as knowledge creating – certainly not to the extent that the use of tasks by learners could be expected to account for a reasonable amount of language development, rather than just practice of language already introduced. The teachers in this research integrate language practice with tasks in a rich

variety of ways, through choice of tasks, and through a range of formal and informal strategies to direct attention to form, both planned and unplanned. To varying degrees, all the teachers combine TBLT with lessons and activities that are compatible with a synthetic, incremental mastery approach (based on a rationale which conflicts with aspects of the rationale for TBLT).

The way teachers implement tasks also differs from descriptions in the literature. Opportunities to present outcomes from tasks were frequently missed, and complex research findings, for example on the effects of different kinds of planning on task performance, are reduced by one teacher to a simple principle: planning is a good thing. There was little evidence that teachers were drawing on (or even aware of) the research on the effects of different task types and task variables. Both interview data and observation of lessons indicated teachers' uncertainty about the rationale for using tasks. In particular, teachers are clearly not convinced about the use of tasks as knowledge creating devices.

One reason for the differences between TBLT in the literature and in teachers' practices is that teachers develop their own practical principles based on sketchy knowledge of an approach rather than extensive contact with the literature. Teachers have their own reasons for doing tasks and their own ways of implementing tasks, and do not necessarily feel the need to study an approach in order to be able to incorporate aspects of it into their teaching. This fits with the view that teachers do not find the discourse of research easy to access (e.g. Bartels, 2003); research evidence is contradictory in some aspects and not very convincing in others.

Further research, including teacher research is needed to supplement what academic researchers are discovering to account for ways in which tasks promote SLA. This has the potential to involve teachers in the development of TBLT as an approach and provide knowledge that is accessible and relevant to teachers who wish to draw on TBLT. This also suggests the need for better cooperation and communication (in both directions) between teachers and researchers, in spite of the fact that the interests of these two groups are not exactly the same. It is suggested that one way forward for TBLT is for researchers and teacher educators to do research with teachers. It is hoped that the present research may help to indicate some possible starting points for this type of research.

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# What students' E-mails tell us about their needs

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## Introduction

Technology has made it easy for students to communicate with instructors, scholars and experts from anywhere in the world. For over a decade, electronic mail (e-mail) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) have been the focus of numerous research studies. Early studies highlighted the advantages of e-mail in the teaching-learning environment. E-mail is viewed as a way to correspond easily with the instructor, and with other students sharing projects in and out of the classroom (Manrique, 1994). E-mail fosters more meaningful scholarly communication between teachers and students, and positively impacts instructional outcomes and student success (Weiss and Hanson-Baldauf, 2008). Through e-mail, instructors can send notes and materials to students and students can submit and critique assignments (Juliano, 1997; Wilkinson and Buboltz, 1998); it is used for announcements, students' questions, counseling, distribution of class assignments, quizzes, grade posting, homework hints, and attendance issues (Poling, 1994). CMC in the classroom helps develop academic discourse, collaborative and project work, build knowledge, maximize students' experience, increases participation opportunities, allows cross-cultural participation, develops reflective writing skills, and overcomes social isolation. It provides ready access to help, support, feedback, active and interactive participation, freedom from constraints of time and location, and learner control (Xu, 1996).

More recent research studies, reviewed by Luppini (2007), focus on media effects and comparisons, online courses and networks, course and program evaluations, learning processes, problem solving, writing, decision-making, argumentation, group decision-making, group dynamics, peer evaluations, gender differences, anonymity, teaching practice effects, technology integration, teacher styles and characteristics, socio-cultural factors, and professional development effects. Findings of the 170 studies reviewed by Luppini suggested partial advantages of CMC in writing, task-focused discussion, collaborative decision-making,

group work, and active involvement in knowledge construction during group interactions. Other studies showed the effects of peer interaction, group composition, group cohesion, goal commitment, group norm development, process training, mixed-sex groups, and virtual cross-functional teams. Mixed findings were found for effects of computer-mediated versus face-to-face communication on various tasks, and gender differences in computer-mediated environments.

The present study explores a new area of CMC. It aims to examine a sample of unsolicited e-mail messages received from graduate and undergraduate subjects in numerous countries, analyze their content and investigate the followings: (i) Types of requests the subjects make in their e-mails; (ii) differences in requests made by Saudi, Arab, non-Arab, male and female, and graduate and undergraduate subjects; (iii) academic needs that are revealed; (iv) communication problems; and (v) reasons for seeking the researcher's help although she was not their instructor.

Findings of the present study will help Arab and Saudi EFL college instructors, graduate students' supervisors and program coordinators understand students' academic and future needs, areas that need to be taken into consideration in curriculum design, teaching methodology, research methodology training and student advising.

## E-mail samples

576 unsolicited e-mail messages received from 460 graduate and undergraduate students were collected and analyzed. E-mails received from the author's current and past students were excluded. The subjects were EFL, linguistics, literature and translation majors. The distribution of e-mails was as follows:

- (i) 10% were from non-Arab students studying in the USA, New Zealand, Australia, UK, Italy, Poland, Turkey, Nigeria, Malaysia and China; 11% were from Arab students studying in Bahrain, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Iraq, Oman, Palestine and Sudan; 11% were from Saudi students studying in the UK, USA, Australia, Germany and France; 68% were from Saudi students studying in Saudi Arabia.
- (ii) 37% were undergraduate students; 37% were M.A. students and 26% were Ph.D. students.
- (iii) 48% were from female students, whereas 52% were from male students.

## Data collection and analysis

The e-mail message content was analyzed for types of requests made; academic needs and communication problems. Frequency counts and percentages of similar responses were calculated.

To find out why the subjects sought the author's help although they were not her students, a short questionnaire with an open-ended question was sent to 25% of the subjects. Results are reported quantitatively and qualitatively.

## Results

### Types of Requests

Findings showed that 47% of the undergraduate subjects sought help with assignments; 31% asked an academic question about their courses; 22% asked the author to recommend a college for graduate study, 19% asked how to improve their English, 6% requested samples of college admission test questions; and 3% needed career advice.

Unlike the undergraduate subjects, 38% of the graduate sample requested a list of references and websites for their respective theses; 27% asked questions about first and second language acquisition and how to teach EFL; 22% asked for the authors' publications; 13% asked the author to suggest a thesis topic for them; 11% asked the author to validate and edit their questionnaires; 6% requested a list of criteria, reading and speaking skills; 5% asked the author to read, edit their proposals and give suggestions for improvement; another 5% asked her to administer their questionnaires or to select the research sample for them, and requested permission to translate her articles or replicate a study of hers.

### Differences in Requests

Analysis of the message content revealed significant differences between the graduate and undergraduate subjects' requests (regardless of sex or nationality), but no significant differences were found in the types of requests made by the Saudi subjects studying in Saudi Arabia, those studying abroad, the Arab and non-Arab subjects, nor between male and female subjects.

### Communication Problems

No significant differences were found in the communication strategies of the Arab and Saudi graduate and undergraduate subjects, and male and female subjects; however, there was a significant

difference in the communication strategies utilized by the non-Arab and Arab subjects (including Saudis). The non-Arab subjects began their e-mail messages by introducing themselves, giving their full name, institution, city, country and course of study. They gave reasons for contacting the author. Messages were courteous and showed the ability to write business letters. They wrote a thank you note following the author's reply. On the contrary, 62% of the Arab and Saudi subjects, especially Saudi females studying in Saudi Arabia concealed their identity (gave no name, gave their first name only, or used a nickname). Their messages were mostly authoritative in tone, some set a time limit for reply, some lacked courtesy and many gave excuses for their requests such as having exams. Fewer than 5% sent a thank you message after receiving a reply. Many undergraduate subjects had weaknesses in English grammar and spelling, and had difficulty expressing their ideas clearly.

The author had a problem with incomplete information provided by some subjects who tended to under-specify their requests or to omit required information such as their location, college level, English proficiency level, the skill they wanted to practice and the purpose for learning English. She had to ask for clarifications several times. Another difficulty was communicating to some subjects whose requests involved plagiarism and cases in which the subjects needed to carry out the tasks and do the assignments on their own without anyone's help. In some cases, the requests required a lot of time the author could not afford, as in a student's request for answering 25 questions, each of which required a lengthy answer and the content and detailed nature which summed up the entire research paper the student was to write.

### Why Subjects' Sought Help

Students' responses to the questionnaire showed several academic, personal and social factors for seeking the author's help and not their instructors'. They felt freer to express their needs and demands via e-mail to someone who did not know them personally. The non-Arab subjects sought the author's help because they had no access to statistics about Saudi universities, needed the researcher's paper citations, or needed to study Arabic in Saudi Arabia. Many Arab and Saudi graduate subjects, in particular, indicated that they did not study research methodology, nor did they possess library and electronic searching skills. Some studied research methods theoretically and did not learn how to apply them. Others did not study thesis preparation skills, report writing, searching for information. Some thesis supervisors were not specialized in the area of their thesis, and were too busy to read, give feedback or

provide guidance. Some instructors did not welcome questions from undergraduate students. The Arab educational system encourages rote memorization and not the application and transfer of knowledge and skills, thus some undergraduate subjects asked the author to write an essay, answer homework questions or translate a text for them.

Responses to the questionnaire also revealed feelings of inadequacy, shyness, low self-image and a lack of self-esteem. Some graduate and undergraduate Arab subjects sought ready-made answers as they were used to spoon-feeding. They just wanted to pass with good grades and get a degree rather than try several times and learn. Many wanted to give their advisor a good image of themselves and their work, and wanted to pass with high grades. That is why they requested the researcher to go over their proposals, reports or research instruments and give suggestions for improvement.

## Discussion

E-mail message content in this study revealed several needs related to the academic tasks the subjects were involved in and to professional and future goals. This finding is consistent with findings of prior studies. Sheer and Fung (2007) found that academic-related task was the most frequent e-mail topic. Dzuba (1994) also reported that the purposes for communication between students and their professors were guided by their roles, needs, and goals. Hahn (1997) showed that organizations provided assistance via e-mail. Users tended to make explicit requests for instructions, explanations, brief informational answers to specific questions, or staff action on behalf of the user. E-mail respondents had difficulty completing information because some senders tended to under-specify their request or omit needed information. Users also felt freer to express negative attitudes and emotions via e-mail as opposed to face-to-face communication.

## Conclusion

Saudi and Arab graduate subjects' e-mails revealed several academic problems such as inability to search for information, locate references, select a thesis topic and construct a research instrument. The undergraduate subjects have a low English proficiency level, could not answer application questions, write a business letter in English, or handle academic tasks, and lacked study skills. To help solve students' academic problems and meet their needs, the present study

recommends that instructors and thesis supervisors be aware of graduate and undergraduate students' needs through meetings, seminars and workshops. Students should be encouraged to express their needs and practice EFL skills in an environment secure for making mistakes. Student-centered teaching methods which give the students an opportunity to practice, to apply knowledge and skills, and to synthesize information must be emphasized. Feedback must be given all the time and several revisions of the students' work should be encouraged. Research methodology courses need to focus on training students in electronic database searching, and in locating bibliographic information and electronic sources. Student evaluations of the teaching-learning process conducted frequently by instructors and departments would lead to a more positive and effective teaching and learning experience.

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# Investigating EFL teacher beliefs about learning and teaching

Sue Garton, Aston University

## Introduction

**This article reports on research into the beliefs of a group of EFL teachers. In particular, the aim of the study was to see if it was possible to identify a coherent system of beliefs about teaching and learning that may account for different approaches to teaching.**

The area of teacher beliefs is a relatively new field, which dates back more or less to the mid-seventies in mainstream education (Freeman, 2002) but is even more recent in TESOL (Borg, 2003). Although previous research has produced a rather mixed picture, Johnson (1994:439) identifies three basic assumptions underlying this growing body of research:

*Teachers' beliefs have an effect on what teachers do in the classroom insofar as beliefs affect perception and judgment.*

Teachers' beliefs are fundamental in learning to teach in that they influence how new information about learning and teaching is interpreted and how it becomes classroom practice. Understanding teachers' beliefs has an important role to play in improving teacher education. However, working with beliefs on teacher education programmes may not be straightforward, given that it would seem that these beliefs tend to be individualised and context dependent (Cumming, 1989: 46 cited in Burns, 1992:57). If it is possible to identify coherent belief systems, this could make an important contribution to teacher education.

## Participants and setting

Five teachers participated in the study. All the teachers, three women and two men, were British and their first language was English. They ranged in age from late twenties to mid-forties. Two teachers, (Pam and Simon<sup>i</sup>) taught academic English at British universities; three

teachers (Charlotte, Linda and Tony), taught general English to adults in a university language centre in Italy. Charlotte and Linda also taught English to undergraduates in an Italian university.

The teachers differed not only in the contexts in which they were teaching, but also in their qualifications and experience. They ranged from no qualifications and very limited experience to a Master's degree and over 20 years of experience.

## Data collection and analysis

In common with most recent studies in this field, a qualitative, interpretivist approach was taken (Richards, 2003) because the aim was to investigate teachers' own accounts of teaching and learning by giving individual teachers a voice and focusing on their perceptions, language, actions, thoughts and feelings (Johnson, 1994:441).

Data collection methods used were semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, all of which were audio-recorded and transcribed. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as it was thought that they would allow the teachers space to express their beliefs, both explicitly and implicitly, while at the same time ensuring a focus on the research agenda was maintained.

Classroom observation had two main functions. Firstly, it allowed the researcher to observe the teachers' classroom practice first hand and to see if what the teachers said or thought they did in the classroom corresponded to what they actually did. Secondly, observation allowed the identification of classroom episodes which then formed the basis for discussion with the teachers in the interviews about what they did and why. Thus the teachers talked about their beliefs both about teaching and learning in general and with reference to specific activities and learners.

Two initial semi-structured interviews and two observations were carried out with all five teachers. The questions were based on those in Richards and Lockhart (1994) and were chosen in order to focus on the areas that have been identified in previous studies as key in teachers' professional lives and about which 'teachers have complex, interacting beliefs' (Borg, 1998:28). See appendix A for a list of the questions used.

From these interviews it became apparent that, when asked about their beliefs about language teaching and learning, there was a surprisingly focused range of answers the teachers gave to most questions. Moreover, the teachers appeared to be consistent in the focus of their answers across a whole range of questions. More

specifically, these answers could be seen to fall into two groups: those concerned with what might be called the more personal side of teaching and those concerning the more professional side of teaching. The following example should clarify this emerging pattern.

When asked what they believe the qualities of a good teacher are, the teachers in the study divide quite clearly into two groups. Charlotte, Pam and Tony all emphasise the contact with learners and the ability to get on with them, for example:

*Well, I suppose being somebody who's got a good relationship with the students and sensitive to students. I mean thinking back to sort of school, negative teachers sort of sarcastic, sort of humiliating, not being interested in the students. (Charlotte)*

Linda and Simon, on the other hand, both place more emphasis on the professional aspects of teaching and the teacher's competence, for example:

*The qualities of a good teacher is the teacher has to be credible to the students. [...] She has to seem to know what she's talking about. She has to be fairly well-organised in that she has to, you know, have the right material, get there in time. (Linda)*

On the basis of a rough coding and analysis of the interviews it seemed that the way that the teachers express their beliefs about teaching and learning cohere around two basic orientations. On the one hand, there are Pam, Charlotte and Tony who place a definite emphasis on people. They underline relationships and contact; teaching focuses on learner enjoyment and interest, which are equated with motivation and, consequently, learning. In other words, they are person-oriented. Linda and Simon on the other hand, emphasise the learning process and the teacher's professional role in ensuring that learning takes place. They focus on using the teacher's knowledge and competence in order to help the learners to achieve. They are procedure-oriented.

On the basis of this initial data analysis, Charlotte and Linda were subsequently chosen as the main case studies as they appeared to best represent the patterns that were emerging from the data. Moreover, they worked in similar contexts and had similar experiences of teacher education, thus keeping constant two variables that have been identified as potentially important influences on teacher beliefs (Cumming,

1989:46-47 cited in Burns, 1992:57-58)

A further six interviews and observations were carried out with both Charlotte and Linda. A final interview was carried out with both teachers together in order present the findings and to discuss them. Thus the final database for the two main case study teachers consisted of nine interviews and eight observations for each teacher carried out over a period of just over two years. All the interviews were transcribed and then coded and categorised one at a time. The process of coding and categorising continued until no further modifications were made and the categories could be considered saturated (Strauss and Corbin, 1997).

## Person and procedure orientations to TEFL

Although there is no space here to give examples from the data, from this analysis, it was clear that, when talking about teaching and learning, Linda's and Charlotte's beliefs could clearly be seen to cohere into a procedure orientation and a person orientation respectively. What follows is a description of the key features of each orientation.

### Person orientation

The main feature of a person orientation is an emphasis on relationships, on the personal and affective side of teaching. This can be seen in the way the teachers in the study talk about both learners and colleagues. It is important for teachers to be genuinely friendly and have an ability to establish rapport with learners.

Person-oriented teachers show a strong empathy with their learners and their classroom decisions are based on their perception of learners' wants and interests. The teacher makes a conscious attempt to involve the learners directly in their own learning by seeking out their preferences and being sensitive to what are felt as learner needs, adapting if necessary, to these needs.

In the classroom, teachers and learners have clear roles, but these are not underlined in the talk of person-oriented teachers. The teacher takes a secondary role, as a guide and support, with learners placed on centre stage.

Person-oriented teachers are focused on what they do, and on what they can do in order to ensure the best learning conditions possible for their learners. The route to learning in a person-orientation is the creation of a positive affective environment in the classroom, where learners are interested, engaged and enjoying themselves. This is the key to motivation and hence

learning. In other words, the teacher creates the right conditions and the learner learns.

## Procedure orientation

A procedure orientation is characterised by a focus on learning outcomes. For this reason, the emphasis is on the knowledge and professionalism of teachers and on their ability to give the learners the input they need in order to achieve those outcomes.

For procedure-oriented teachers, a good relationship with learners is part of the learning process because this relationship is based on clearly defined roles, where each classroom participant has expectations of the other. Learners expect their teachers to know their subject, be able to transmit it and be friendly. Teachers expect learners to be interested, motivated and to want to learn.

The role of the teacher is central in this orientation; procedure-oriented teachers place an emphasis on the active contribution that teachers make to learners' achievements. For this reason, they are focused on being the best teacher they can be in whatever working conditions they find themselves, as the teacher holds the key to learning.

In the classroom, decisions are based on what is perceived as useful and interesting to the learners. The teacher is in charge insofar as it is she who must take responsibility for the learning process and has the authority to do so.

The route to learning in a process-orientation is via a well-prepared, competent and professional teacher who understands her learners' needs and is able to address them, thereby striving to ensure that the learning process is constantly moving forward.

## Limitations

There are clearly limitations to the study reported here. The number of teachers involved is small and a wider study with a greater number of teachers in different contexts is needed to confirm the usefulness of these orientations. However, anecdotally, a brief questionnaire given to over 100 teachers from different parts of the world produced similar results, and feedback from a number of smaller workshops has also demonstrated that teachers themselves tend to identify strongly with the orientations.

As with any research of this kind, the researcher must question the effect that the research methodology may have on the results. I had no pre-conceptions at the start of the research process and the questions used in the

interviews were mainly those used in other studies. The orientations emerged from the data itself and were not imposed on it.

## Implications

The study reported here offers evidence that it may be possible to identify coherent systems of beliefs, shared amongst EFL teachers, which account for different approaches to teaching. It must be underlined that I am not suggesting that EFL teachers can be neatly pigeon-holed into two clear categories of teacher beliefs. However, the orientations, as presented here, can offer a useful tool in teacher education.

Freeman (2002:11) maintains that, given the importance of teachers' beliefs in influencing their classroom behaviours, reflective practice should become the norm in teacher education. Thus, such concepts as 'best method' are abandoned in favour of supporting teachers by accepting the idea that 'best teaching' is 'the individually best-next-step for each teacher' (Edge and Richards, 1998:571)

The role of teacher education thus becomes that of helping teachers to articulate their experience and to make sense of their work. The two orientations identified in this study can play a useful role in this by offering simple but powerful constructs that provide not just conceptual clarity but a practical tool to enable better understanding of the roots of teachers' work, their representation of it, and the ways in which they interpret it. By working with an awareness of their own beliefs through the two orientations, teachers have an effective means to help them gain insights into their own teaching, into how they give meaning to what they do and the reasons that underlie their practice.

Although the research presented here identifies two broad personal belief systems, this does not mean there is not scope for individuality. What the two orientations offer is a better way of understanding the nature of that individuality in pedagogic terms.

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## Appendix A

Below are the questions which were used as a guide in the first two interviews with the five teachers.

### First initial interview

Past language learning experiences

- What do you remember, good and bad, about your experiences of learning a foreign language?  
 What kinds of methods were used?  
 Do you recall if you enjoyed learning the language?  
 What do remember about your teachers?  
 What are the best ways to learn a foreign language, in your opinion?  
 Do you feel that your own education as a student has had any influence your teaching?

*On past career*

- Could you tell me something about how and why you became an EFL teacher?  
 Tell me something about your career to date.  
 Where have you taught? (country, type of institution, how long etc.)  
 Do you have any preferences for the types of institutions where you teach? If yes, why?

*On teacher training experiences*

- Tell me something about your formal teacher training experiences.

- Did they promote a particular view of teaching?  
 What aspect(s) of the course(s) did you find most memorable?

*On being a teacher*

- What or who would you say have been the greatest influences on your development as a teacher?  
 What do you feel your strengths are as an EFL teacher and your weaknesses?  
 Would you say that your teaching has changed in any way over the years? If so, how?  
 What is the most rewarding aspect of teaching for you? And the hardest?  
 Can you describe one particularly good experience you've had as an EFL teacher, and one particularly bad one?

### Second initial interview

*On lesson planning and preparation*

- How do you decide what you will teach?  
 How do you prepare lessons?  
 What about materials?  
 What role does the textbook play in your lessons?  
 What do you look for in a textbook?  
 What other teaching resources do you use?  
 Are there any particular activity types you tend to favour? or try to avoid?  
 Would you say that there are any particular teaching methods you try to follow?  
 How do you see your role in the classroom?

*On attitudes to teaching and learning*

- How would you define 'effective teaching'?  
 What is your idea of a 'successful' lesson?  
 In your opinion, what are the qualities of a 'good' teacher? And a 'good' learner? And a 'good' group?

*On learners and learning*

- Do you prefer to teach a particular level? Or type of learner?  
 What kinds of learning styles and strategies do you try to encourage and discourage in your learners?  
 What are the most important things for learners to learn in your opinion?  
 What roles are learners expected to take on in your classes?

<sup>i</sup>Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

# Action research on pronunciation errors and feedback

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## Background to the study

**The aim of the present research was to gain insight into the reasons and sources of the persistence and plethora of pronunciation errors, as well as the nature and types of the feedback on them in a Business English classroom.**

At the beginning, it is essential to identify whether we are dealing with a problem worthwhile to consider. After all, business people are generally confident, fluent communicators, and actual business would never suffer if one of the partners pronounced /βΙζ∇νεσ/, for example. The reality is that 'the driving force for the non-native speakers is getting information across efficiently' (Jenkins, 1996:10). But what is the role of correct pronunciation in securing this efficiency? A brief literature review on the matter would help us see the picture.

There have been different approaches to the 'general neglect of teaching pronunciation in contemporary language pedagogy' (Wong, 1999:115). Bobda notes that 'among the innumerable deviations from native forms pronunciation exhibits the highest number of such deviations' (Bobda, 1991:31). Some scholars 'argue persuasively for the tolerance' of this state of things, justifying it with the scarcity of books dedicated to pronunciation or the limited help and guidance to find (Todd and Hancock, 1986; Pride, 1982). Nevertheless, J. Jenkins puts forward the teaching theory of the 'Common core', which limits the 'Common core' to the areas where pronunciation errors, mainly from L1 transfer should be eliminated, because 'they threaten intelligibility', all other deviations being regarded not as "errors" but as acceptable regional differences on a par with features of L1 English regional accents (Jenkins, 1996:10). Today scholars are unanimous on the issue of 'having intelligible speakers' (Wong, 1999:116), because 'listening comprehension breaks down not only when learners hear unfamiliar words but when they simply fail to recognize familiar words embedded in the stream of speech' (Vaughan-Rees, 2006:27). G. Eustace is

explicitly clear in his message: 'For many non-native speakers, accuracy may not be vitally important, but clarity of speech, to facilitate ease of understanding, certainly is'. So, 'there is a respectable argument for saying that teachers could be serving their business students best by adopting that approach' (Eustace, 2005:38).

Ellis and Johnson, while presenting the list of eight priorities of 'what the majority of business learners need to acquire,' include the entry of 'clear pronunciation and delivery' (Ellis & Johnson, 1996:35).

The demand to 'treat language learning holistically' equally refers to the inclusion of teaching pronunciation, as 'focusing on meaning does not require ignoring forms' (Borg, 2004:12). Paul Emmerson's theory of 'mutual intelligibility' specifies best the criteria to adhere to. He draws distinct boundaries of what is represented by 'fully intelligible international English'. It is identified as 'RP/GA Minus' with 'High-Frequency Lexis Plus' where 'RP/GA Minus' is any of individual's pronunciation where:

- words are spoken approximately as they are written in phonetic script in ELT dictionaries (RP or GA), but there is a slight accent according to the country of origin;
- there is use of tone units to create chunks of meaning and nuclear stress to make key words prominent;
- but there is not much use of assimilation/elision/weak forms' (Emmerson, 2006:3).

Thus, it is evident that the question of pronunciation errors and related feedback is one of the many facets of language teaching to tend to. Unfortunately, in the case of Armenian learners of English there are no records of related research. This is why several years ago I started to collect data for further examination.

## Data collection

The presented action research had been conducted over a period of six semesters. The data was collected from the speech of university students studying Business English, as well as students preparing for BEC examinations with the age span of 17 to 50, and language proficiency levels ranging from lower intermediate to advanced. The research had been carried out in Yerevan State University and the International Accounting and Business Centre in Yerevan.

The data to study was recorded/transcribed mostly in class, with no intrusions on or interruptions to the free flow of students' speech, though, certainly with their consent.

Our initial attempts to ask the students to make their reports standing nearer to the tape-recorder, or to speak up to be recorded well, proved to be non-productive, as even the best students get frustrated from the awareness of being recorded openly and end up with unnatural, distinctly erroneous performance.

## Research and findings

The data analysis has proved that it is sound and stress errors that often create significant barriers in the process of delivering intelligible speech. Accordingly, I have clustered these errors into several groups and subgroups.

The largest is the L1 influence group, with its special niche for the subgroup of international words, which the student knows through L1. The L1 influence or transfer is exposed in different ways.

The most numerous errors derive from the students' approach to read every single letter of the word, which, in fact, is an application of the Armenian or Russian (common language in Armenia) alphabetic reading mode. Words like 'debt', 'liable' or 'legal' are read as /∇δεβτ/, /λι∇αβλ/ or /λε∇γαλλ/.

The transfer of the end-of-word Armenian fixed stress onto the English words is quite common: e.g. /πρ≡∇δυκτ/, /βαρ∇τερ/, /βιζ∇νεσ/, /%διωε∇λοπσ/, /κ≡ρπ ≡∇ρετ/, /π≡ρ∇τΣεΙσ/.

The latter also affects the pronunciation of prefixes, with the effect of neglecting or minimizing their morphological meaning. For example, in the mispronounced word /ρεΙν∇ωεστΙδ/ the sound /ε/ in the prefix instead of /ι:/ along with one stress only deprive the prefix 're-' of its full meaning.

The L1 type reading mode particularly persists in the pronunciation of borrowed or international words, which have come into Armenian mainly via Russian: e.g. /∇ιζΟλετιδ/ - 'isolated', /∇κλιεντ/ - 'client', /∇φΙν≡λ/ - 'final', /∇φΙρμ/ - 'firm', /φΙ∇ανσιζ/ - 'finances'.

Examples of L1 dialect stress transfer are detectable as well: e.g. /με∇μΟρ≡νδ≡μ/ for 'memorandum' reflects the stress of the north-western dialect of the Armenian language.

Another subgroup of L1-related errors involves the host of those borrowed words that have the sounds /kh/ and /τσ/. Owing to the lack of these sounds in the English language, such words use /κ/ and /σ/ respectively. However, students tend to rely on their mother tongue variation of the borrowed words, which had successfully incorporated the original sounds of /κη/ and /τσ/. Thus, they are quite at ease with /∇φρακητ/ or /τεκη∇νΙκσ/ or /∇σΟτσιαλ/ or /∇πρΟτσεσ/.

In a similar, though reverse way, students ignore the sounds which are absent in the Armenian language. This particularly refers to the pronunciation of diphthongs and the sounds /{/, /ω/, /T/ and /Δ/, which are read /α, ε/, /ω/, /δ, τ/ and /ζ/ respectively (/≡∇ωεΙρ/ - for /≡∇ωε≡/ - a 'w-v' and 'Eε - εI' shift, /∇οω≡ν≡/ for /∇≡Υν≡/, /∇αδζ/ - for /∇{δζ/, /∇ζδ≡/ for /∇ζΔ≡/, ετχ. The tendency is towards simplification of the pronunciation, which often results in one sound only.

The second large group covers the errors which are rooted in the students' prior knowledge of English. Having learnt some of the reading rules they assume that these rules should be applied consistently. Hence, if 'ea' is /i:/ in the word 'teacher,' then - 'greater' is /∇γρι:τ≡/, 'threat' is /∇Τρι:τ/, or 'assume' is /≡∇Συμ/ φορ on the analogy of 'assure', /β≡ρ∇γεΙνΙνN/ for 'bargaining' ('gain'), /∇σερωαΙσ/ for 'service', etc..

The next set of pronunciation errors reflects the overlapping of the pronunciation of derivatives. Students often relay the pronunciation of a certain word on to its derivative. For example 'significant' is pronounced /σαΙ∇νΙφΙκ≡ντ/ ('sign') or /πρΙ∇φ≡ρ≡βλ/ for 'preferable' ('prefer').

The words 'economy', 'economic' and 'economist' are the most 'unlucky' group of the derivatives with Business English students. They are exceptionally rich in wrong pronunciation variants: e. g. /εκ≡∇νΟμ/, /ε∇κΟν≡μικ/, /∇εκΟνΟμικ/, /Ικ≡∇νΟμιστ/, /Ι∇κΟνΟμικσ/.

Students also tend to stress that part of the word which is already familiar to them: e.g. /σ≡ρ∇πλζσιζ/ 'surpluses' ('plus').

Some errors are related to the noun-verb stress shift. Mostly verb-stress is relayed on to the corresponding noun: for example, the nouns 'transfers' and 'project' are read as /τρ≡νσ∇φ≡ρζ/ and /πρ≡∇Δζεκτ/, ετχ.

There are minor cases as well, that deserve attention: for example, wrong pronunciation of voiceless and voiced consonants (/T-Δ/ pair, when /T/ ισ προνουνχεδ instead of /Δ/ - /Ολ∇ΤοY/ for 'although'); the pronunciation of 'qu', if not taught beforehand, is mostly read as /κφυ/ (τηε λεττερ 'u' is

treated separately), resulting in /I∇κφυ≐λι/ - 'equally'; an interesting example is /κ≐∇μΟν/ for 'common', which reflects the subliminal influence of everyday words from songs and films.

A decent number of errors is born from the students' urge to stylize words, make them 'user-friendly'. For example, 'transfers' is pronounced /τρανσ∇φΙερσ/, 'executive' - /εκσ∇κφυτιω/, 'organization' as /αργε∇I∇ζεΙΣν/ (the distorted perception of the glottal stop /O/) ετχ.

Eventually, there are many other examples of pronunciation errors that do not fall under any of the groupings. They are mostly expressions of students' free, non-specified attitude towards the phenomenon of correct pronunciation itself.

The above-discussed list of pronunciation errors gives ample ground to assume that further research could

make it possible to, at least, outline the 'permissible borders' of pronunciation errors and specify the types that need greater attention during feedback activities. Meanwhile, let us look at the results of the action research on *the feedback* on pronunciation errors conducted in four groups at intermediate level, because feedback *is* the most consistent and efficient media to deal with them. In a Business English course correct pronunciation is mostly introduced in the general context and is followed up in the feedback along with other issues.

We consider the feedback on pronunciation errors a complex process of integration of supra-segmental factors and feedback techniques. However, for the sake of analysis, we have discussed them separately.

On a 1-10 scale (1- the lowest) the supra-segmental factors present/applied in the four groups observed line up in the following breakdown:

Table 1: Supra-segmental factors in the feedback

	activity description	group 1	group 2	group 3	group 4
1.	Developing awareness of the importance of having correct pronunciation	2	1	5	4
2.	Cultivating learners' motivation	0	0	4	2
3.	Timely feedback to prevent error fossilization	4	2	7	7
4.	Regularity and persistence of corrections	3	2	6	8
5.	Contextualized corrections	3	3	8	7
6.	Class atmosphere (general)	6	8	4	6
7.	Preventing negative or hostile reactions by constructive attitudes (politeness, encouragement, etc.)	4	3	4	7
8.	Teacher-student relationship built-up on a horizontal axis rather than dominant-vertical one	7	7	3	8
9.	Teacher's tension-free body language and voice projection	5	4	3	8
10.	Skillful conversion of personal feedback into a general one	2	1	2	6
11.	The silence factor: allowing the correction to sink in	0	1	2	4

Observations have also revealed that error corrections predominantly refer to stress amendments, as they pose greater impediment to the correct perception of speech (Vinarskaya, Michurina 1977:335). Little attention is paid

to faulty intonation, while the rhythm factor is completely disregarded. During the research the following feedback techniques were applied with different efficiency ratings:

Table 2: Feedback techniques in use

	activity description	score
1	pronunciation drills; repetition of the correct variant to enhance its acoustic acquisition and acoustic memory	6
2	extensive use of cards	4
3	frequent references to phonetic scripts	3
4	the use of capitals or bigger signs on the whiteboard to emphasize the vulnerable points	7
5	in case of error resistance, inviting students to concentrate on it:	6
	a. giving the student a while to draw in their minds the phonetic picture of the utterance by comparing the right and wrong variants, making associations, pinpointing the dissimilarities;  b. 'Stop and think' technique: the flow of speech is interrupted the error - pointed out and the student is invited to fix the problem, suggest the correct variant	
6	drawing comparisons with L1	8
7	writing the phonetic sounding in L1, often explaining the differences in the two languages	9

Though most of the above-listed techniques work successfully with different students, as students' visual, acoustic, analytical, associative, memorizing abilities vary from person to person, points 6 and 7 of the feedback, where the L1 inclusion into the process is greater, have registered significantly greater positive results.

## Conclusion

To conclude we may state that a substantial portion of pronunciation errors are L1 related. The second large group of errors indicates how differently the already acquired knowledge of English can influence the acquisition of the new language material in respect of pronunciation. And only a relatively small number of pronunciation errors bear the character of individual interpretations.

On the other hand, the feedback data analysis places the L1 factor as one of the best remedies for error correction and prevention.

All this could mean that while devising various pronunciation-teaching approaches, the factor of L1 cannot be neglected, but, on the contrary, should be put to the best use to create shortcuts and achieve better results.

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# Speaking Skills in Secondary Level Education in Bangladesh EFL Context: A Case Study

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## Introduction

In the changing global scenario, the study of English plays a vital role in education and it is accepted that English has a far-reaching effect on all areas of everyday life. It has thus become an important vehicle for technical collaboration, industrial development and the formation of international relationships, as Graddol and Meinhof argue:

*The increasing use of English arises from complex economic, technological and social processes. It is seen by some as an inevitable consequence of economic globalisation, by others as a legacy of colonialism and imperialism – both at an individual level as well as that of nation-states (Graddol and Meinhof, 1999:1).*

English, also a major language of the international labour market and business, has an occupational and professional purpose in helping people find employment in other countries. It is often found that potential workers, even with requisite knowledge and experience cannot succeed in the competitive job market because they lack proper communication skills in English. Norton (2000) therefore, introduces the concept of *investment* instead of the term *motivation* to describe the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their desire to learn and practice it, with the expectation or hope to have a good return on that investment.

Under the present circumstances, in Bangladesh, more opportunities for business, travel, studies, jobs, etc., within the country and abroad have made it necessary to

shift the emphasis towards teaching communicative abilities, especially conversational skills.

## Problem in speaking: A case study

As observed by Bygate (1987: vii), 'Speaking is in many ways an undervalued skill... which deserves attention.' In the present circumstances, the students are able to read works in the original English version, but unfortunately are hesitant to ask for a glass of water in the language. A few years ago, I dealt with a group of learners from a secondary school. During the first lesson, when they were asked a simple question like 'What's your name?' most of them hesitated to answer because they suffered from doubt, anxiety and shyness, mainly a result of the lack of environment for practicing the language. Whenever they were asked to produce something in English, they were immediately engulfed by social anxiety which as pointed out by Leary (1983) included, speech anxiety, shyness, stage fright, embarrassment, social evaluative anxiety and communicative apprehension. As a result, in most cases, as Aida (1994) points out, students tend to fail to take the initiative or participate only minimally in conversations.

Under the present circumstance, the learner's attitude towards English in Bangladesh is a paradox. Students are eager to learn the language but find certain aspects or skills very difficult. As a result, there is both eagerness and fear.

In order to elicit information regarding issues of English teaching between curriculum and reality, and teaching and learning speaking in particular, a small questionnaire survey was conducted among students in a government school.

## Setting of the institution and the subjects

In order to gather data on the issues indicated above, several government schools in Dhaka were contacted and eventually one of the leading government schools in the capital city agreed to cooperate. The academic ranking of the school is average, a fact that has also been very convenient for the purpose of the current study, because neither a very good nor a very poor sample can be considered as a good sample. The study aimed at learners from average backgrounds who have minimum resources available to them. The data is likely to represent the views of the majority of students coming from an average background and facilities.

The learners, young girls aged between 14 and 16, were all very enthusiastic about the questionnaire. They were preparing for their Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination a year later. They had already been learning English as one of the core subjects for 10 years. The questionnaire was administered among forty students. The following section presents the data and the analysis.

## Data display and data analysis

The present study involves empirical research on a small scale and is based on a particular classroom context. A successful study is likely to provide the reader with a three-dimensional picture to illustrate relationships and patterns of influences in a particular context. In the case of the present study, dealing with one government school enhances the chances of providing suggestions and recommendations that may be equally workable in any other government institution in Bangladesh.

## Questionnaire survey

A questionnaire, consisting of structured questions, was administered among forty participants. The questionnaire consisted of 5 questions that tried to elicit information regarding the frequency of use of English in their social context; the students' observation regarding the non-teaching, and non-practice of speaking at present; their interest in developing speaking skills and the activities they think were effective in developing this particular skill. The following section presents and discusses the data.

Q.1 aimed at eliciting information about the frequency of English language usage in the social context. Table 1.1 below presents the data from Q.1:

Table 1.1 Q.1 What is the frequency of your using English in different social interaction:

Frequency	People				
	Family	Friends	Teachers	Strangers	Others
All the time					
Often	5 (12.5%)	33 (82.5%)	7 (17.5%)		1 (2.5%)
Rarely	31 (77.5%)	17(42.5%)	33 (82.5%)	15(37.5%)	22(55%)
Never	5 (12.5%)			24 (60%)	6 (15%)

Data gathered from Q.1 show that only 5 out of 40 students thought that they often used the language with friends, family and teachers; otherwise, the language was not so regularly used with others. A majority of 82.5% (33 out of 40) observed that they used English more among themselves. Knowing English was a genuine prestige issue to them. Using English with teachers was evidently placed towards the non-use line, as can be seen from the table that a majority, 82.5% (33 out of 40) mentioned they rarely interacted with their teachers in English. Data also reveal that English was not used much with strangers and talking to 'others' was a rare phenomenon altogether.

Q.2 aimed at eliciting information about the standard of English speaking according to them. The following table presents the data:

Table 1.2 Q.2 What is your opinion about the standard of spoken English, in general?

Good	Poor
1 (2.5%)	39 (97.5%)

The data reveals that the majority of the students opined that the standard of spoken English in Bangladesh, in general was poor and not upto the mark at all. Q.3 attempted to discover the reasons behind the present non-practice, and the non-assessment of speaking skills, from the students' point of view. The following table presents the data:

Table 1.3 Q.3 Why do you think that no speaking skills are being taught /practiced/examined at present?

Not required in daily life	5 (25%)
Not tested in examination	17 (42.5%)
Lack of trained teachers	12 (30%)
Negligence of authority and teachers	14 (35%)
Speaking is easier than writing	8 (20%)
No time allotted for speaking	8(20%)
Teachers are inefficient in English themselves	5(25%)
Become scared of the language	3 (7.5%)
Not easy to test speaking?	2 (5%)

From the data it can be seen that 42.5% (17 out of 40) students stated that no arrangements for testing speaking in examinations left teachers reluctant about practising this specific skill during class hours, although some activities on speaking were included in the textbook. Another 35% (14 out of 40) noted that teachers seemed neither interested nor motivated to teach this skill, and the authorities seemed to ignore it with full knowledge that developing speaking skills was a pressing need at the present time and absolutely essential for their future. 30% (12 out of 40) students mentioned the lack of untrained teachers who were responsible for non-practise of the language. A few students, 20% (8 out of 40) thought that no time allocation for developing speaking skills was a further reason for not practising the skill. This re-confirmed a mentality which adhered solely to syllabus content and focused only on examinations.

25% (5 out of 40) students added that the lack of interest in developing speaking skills might also be a result of the fact that English was not required in day-to-day affairs. A few students, 20% (8 out of 40) thought that perhaps speaking was easier than writing and, therefore, teachers did not feel that this area required especial attention. Another 7.5% (3 out of 40) students thought that their own scariness about the language prevented them from the practise of it. Only 5% (2 out of 40) observed that perhaps it was not easy to test speaking and so there was no inclusion of speaking in the examination.

Q.4 asked the students whether they would be interested in developing their spoken language and why.

Table 1.4 Q.4 Would you be interested to develop your spoken language, why?

Yes	No
39 (97.5%)	1 (2.5%)

Reasons	
An international language	10 (25%)
To take part in competitions	12 (30%)
To secure a better future	27 (67.5%)
To accomplish higher education	20 (50%)
To achieve higher self-esteem	22 (55%)

Data from Table 1.4 reveal that the majority, 97.5% (39 out of 40) students strongly agreed that they would like to develop their spoken English. Therefore, the great majority of students strongly agreed that it was important for them to develop their spoken English.

A majority, 67.5% (27 out of 40) stated that they were interested in developing their spoken language because they thought that English was necessary in securing a better future. 50% (20 out of 40) students realised that they would be required to communicate in English in higher education. 55% (22 out of 40) students decided that speaking in English was important for higher self-esteem that initiated a feeling of independence. They did not want to feel abandoned: 'nobody will be able to tease saying: she doesn't speak English'. Therefore, the ability to communicate in English, they thought, would make them confident in facing the future. 25% (10 out of 40) thought they were interested to develop their spoken English because it was an international language; and 30% (12 out of 40) mentioned spoken English was necessary to take part in competitions. Only 2.5% (1 out of 40) appeared not to be concerned about speaking in English. This particular student, however, belonged to the weakest category of students in the class, who, perhaps because of her own lack of self-confidence, did not want to admit the necessity of learning English. She may be ready to change her mind as soon as she obtains necessary support.

Q.5 asked about activities which could be considered the most effective in developing conversational skills.

Table 1.5 Q.5 What activities do you consider to be most effective in developing your own conversational skills?

Discussion	39 (97.5%)
Re-telling	16 (40%)
Prediction	22 (55%)
Story making	11 (27.5%)
Role-playing	11 (27.5%)
Open-ended	9 (22.5%)
Vocabulary games	2 (5%)
Dialogue making	4 (10%)
Problem-solving	3 (7.5%)
Fill in the blanks	1 (2.5%)
Summarising	1 (2.5%)

Data from the above table reveal that activities, which promoted discussion, were thought to be the most effective ones in developing conversational skills. A majority, 97.5% (39 out of 40) claimed that discussion activity was the best for mastering conversational skills. Another 55% (22 out of 40) suggested prediction activity, and 40% (16 out of 40) supported re-telling activity to be the most effective in developing conversational skills.

## Summary and discussion of the findings

The preceding sections presented and analysed the data gathered from the questionnaire in order to present the status of speaking skills development in English in the Bangladeshi context. Results show that students confirmed that learning English was essential because of its status as an international language, ensuring a better future as the key to the door of all feasible opportunities throughout their practical life.

They recognised the importance of bringing in considerable changes to the teaching/learning atmosphere, for example, by converting the class into a student-centred one, thus giving the students opportunities to think, predict, discuss, interpret and express verbally in order to ensure improvement in this particular area. The respondents also felt that the standard of spoken English was very poor in general, and that it was necessary to be able to speak in English in Bangladesh. They concluded that a change in methodology and the teachers' attitude would enhance the learning process, especially in the area of developing speaking skills.

The respondents of this study thought that activities which promoted discussion created an improved learning atmosphere and should be introduced because students would be able to learn from each other. The data also reflect that the majority of students thought that it was the fault of the teachers and the authorities who should take proper measures to teach speaking skills, as this is perceived to be very important for the future. Finally, a lack of trained teachers, an inadequate number of teaching staff, over-crowded classes and limited time made it difficult for the teachers to complete the syllabus.

## Conclusion

This essay has identified and discussed some areas of concern, including those of spoken skills being neglected, together with problems concerning teachers, the examination system and teaching methodology. Among other things, the data from this small-scale study raise doubts about the prevailing teacher-centred approach, in which students' personal opinions are often neglected and correct answers are supplied instead. As a result, students tend to become dependent on 'note books' written by so-called experts of the subject, books on literary criticism and 'exam guides' in order to memorise the answers for 'narrow instrumental purposes' (Carter and Walker, 1989: 4). Therefore, in reality, the majority of students are unable to acquire

even a minimum competence in the speaking and writing needed for effective communication.

The researcher, however, believes that a proper exploration of the materials and resources available, in a students-centred classroom and implementation of the objectives set in the national curriculum could help achieve the objectives. It would be possible to deal with speaking even in the present situation if the institution and teachers decided to allot time to speaking, taking tests and marking these on paper as the learners proceeded.

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Research is our business, and we want to publish your article. We are looking for articles that describe research results in language teaching. Innovative lines of ELT research are particularly welcome. We are also interested in articles that focus on research methodology, the research process, or problems in research.

You could also propose and edit themed special issues, for example on topics such as classroom action research, problems in teaching and learning speaking or even a geographically organised issue on topics locally relevant. We will be happy to support you with editorial advice and comment.

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Please send articles as an email attachment to Shaida Mohammadi, Newsletter Editor: [resigeditor@smpedu.com](mailto:resigeditor@smpedu.com). You can contact her or the SIG co-ordinators ([ResearchSig@iatefl.org](mailto:ResearchSig@iatefl.org)) for any further questions concerning your contribution to the newsletter.

We look forward to your contributions!

Alan Fortune and Maike Grau,  
Research SIG co-ordinators.

# MyLinks

In this eighth column of MyLinks, you'll find again a few more websites on research and supporting resources. We hope you find them useful!

» *Mission: Critical* is a 'virtual lab' capable of familiarizing users with the basic concepts of critical thinking in a self-paced, interactive environment.'

<http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/itl/graphics/main.html>

» *FQS, the Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 'is a [free] peer-reviewed multilingual online journal for qualitative research.'

<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/index>

» *Creative Commons* 'is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to making it easier for people to share and build upon the work of others, consistent with the rules of copyright.'

<http://creativecommons.org/about/>

» *Resources in Language Testing Page* is a large database of articles, links, videos, and reviews on the topic of language testing.

<http://www.languagetesting.info/>

» *Twitter* 'is a social networking and micro-blogging service that allows its users to send and read other users' updates (known as **tweets**), which are text-based posts of up to 140 characters in length.' (Wikipedia:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter>) A possible online tool for researchers.

<http://twitter.com/home>

» *Eldis Resource Guides: Education* offers quick access to key documents, organisations, research themes, discussions and other key resources in development policy, practice and research.

<http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/resource-guides/education>

» *Free English Learning Online Tools* offers online software tools for English language learners, teachers, journalists, writers, students. It could be used in teaching, learning, linguistics research and more!

<http://www.online-utility.org/english/index.jsp>

» *Dictionary of Symbolism* 'endeavours to provide some possible cultural 'significances' of various symbols and suggest ways in which those symbols may have been used in context.'

<http://www.umich.edu/~umfandsf/symbolismproject/symbolism.html/index.html>

If you have comments, a request or a link to suggest, please do get in touch!

*Anaf.*

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