



# RESEARCH

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE RESEARCH SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

## Spring 2010 Issue 24

- 02 From the Co-ordinator - Anthony Bruton
- 04 Visible pedagogy in the adult ESL classroom - Anne Burns
- 08 Common sense interpretations of quantified results before applications? Anthony Bruton
- 11 Researching the influence of language embedded in the pre-task phase on task performance - Theron Muller
- 15 Exploring student engagement dynamics: Initiating model-building from a case study - Duane Kindt
- 18 Research in peril: Constraints of conducting research in the Malaysia's education context - Habsah Binti Hussin
- 23 My links - Ana d'Almeida

## From the Co-ordinator

Dear RESIG members,

I was asked to assume responsibility for ReSIG, which I did officially at the Cardiff conference, taking over from Alan Fortune and Maike Grau. On behalf of us all I would like to thank them both for their time and their commitment to ReSIG. I would also like to say to Shaida, our editor of RESEARCH, how much we appreciate her fine editorial work and to Ana d'Almeida for her much-appreciated contributions, especially her MyLinks page.

As we all know, ReSIG, like all SIGs, depends on the voluntary work of its members and I am trying to put together a committee as a team so that there is collaboration, continuity, designated responsibility, and a diversity of opinions and skills. Hopefully, we can offer the SIG a service that meets some of the expectations of the members. However, it has to be said that what we all get out of RESIG depends largely on what we put in, so I would like to encourage members to make suggestions and to offer some of their time to our common interest and interests. In particular I would like to encourage members to (continue to) submit contributions to this publication and, as I mentioned in my e-mailed letter to you all, I would suggest that RESEARCH can include a wide range of possible contributions, such as some of the following:

Research (descriptions of)

On Researching:	Definition
	Constructs
	Design
	Data    Collection
	Processing
	Analysis

[personal experience; generalisations; issues; etc.]

FOCUS on (a particular question, without it taking up a whole issue)

Critical Analysis

FORUM

Letters

News

Contributing to RESEARCH

Advertisements

In a sense, a publication such as RESEARCH has the potential for being different from either standard journals on the one hand and newsletters on the other. Among other things, and in addition to the descriptions of research that RESEARCH normally publishes, I would like to see it as a forum for a mixture or range of fairly brief, but necessary, professional experiences and viewpoints on *researching EFL*, which maybe do not or cannot receive exposure elsewhere. The point about ReSIG is that we should be concerned about issues arising from the process of researching, beyond describing actual research conducted. For example, having sifted through the last few numbers of RESEARCH, I would like to encourage contributions for the next number on (personal) questions arising from definitions and constructs in empirical research (e.g. beliefs, self-concept, incidental vocabulary learning). Maybe members can suggest other themes for FOCUS in future publications on researching. Those of us involved in postgraduate courses or thematic conferences could encourage versions of selected papers to be submitted to RESEARCH as well, perhaps with a common theme as well.

That is all I want to say for now, but I hope ReSIG continues to prosper and any suggestions for improvements will be very welcome.

Anthony Bruton  
Research SIG Co-ordinator  
ResearchSig@iatefl.org

## About this issue of Research News

The articles in this issue of the newsletter are quite mixed. The first of the contributions in this issue deals with pedagogy in the ESL classroom. Anne Burns reports that learner-centred approaches are effective instructional practices in Adult Migrant Teaching Program in Australia.

Anthony Bruton questions the use of detailed statistical analyses in some research reports, which may be too detailed for the data they are applied to and can often obscure other more significant numerical facts.

Theron Muller describes a study which investigates the influence of English language input embedded in task instructions on task production and reports contrastive results with the study he partially replicated.

In Duane Kindt's article the focus switches to student engagement dynamics. He discusses a study that employed procedures from Grounded Theory and qualitative data analysis software to examine student engagement in an oral communication course at a private Japanese university.

Habsah Hussin looks at the constraints researchers face in conducting research in Malaysia. And finally, Ana introduces some useful links in her ninth column. Her diverse collection of links shows our RESIG members the application of web technology in research.

I hope you enjoy reading this interesting and diverse collection of papers. I would like to thank 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.

Submissions for the Research SIG newsletter should be sent to [ResearchSig@iatefl.org](mailto:ResearchSig@iatefl.org) and copied to me at [Shaida.mohammadi@gmail.com](mailto:Shaida.mohammadi@gmail.com). Please visit <http://resig.iatefl.org/submit.htm> for Research News Author guidelines.

We look forward to seeing you in Harrogate at next IATEFL conference. For further information about the conference programme please refer to [www.iatefl.org](http://www.iatefl.org).

Shaida Mohammadi  
Research SIG editor  
[Shaida.mohammadi@gmail.com](mailto:Shaida.mohammadi@gmail.com)

If you enjoy reading this newsletter and would like to subscribe and/or join us at future events, don't forget to renew your membership of IATEFL or become a new member of IATEFL. You can now do both online at: [www.iatefl.org](http://www.iatefl.org) or you can contact IATEFL Head Office at:

#### **IATEFL**

Darwin College, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NY, UK.

Tel: +44 (0) 1227 824430 Fax: +44 (0) 1227 824431

Email: [generalenquiries@iatefl.org](mailto:generalenquiries@iatefl.org)

For more information about the Research:

<http://resig.iatefl.org/>

#### **Copyright Notice**

Copyright for whole issue IATEFL 2010.

Copyright for individual contributions remains vested in the authors to whom applications for rights to reproduce should be made.

Copyright for individual reports and papers for use outside IATEFL remains vested in the contributors to whom applications for rights to reproduce should be made. Research SIG newsletter should always be acknowledged as the original source of publication.

IATEFL retains the right to republish any of the contributions in this issue in future IATEFL publications or to make them available in electronic form for the benefit of its members.

# Visible pedagogy in the adult ESL classroom

Anne Burns, Macquarie University

## Introduction

The research reported in this article is located in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) a large-scale national program, funded by the Australian Department of Immigration, which was originally established as a language and settlement program, but has moved increasingly in recent years towards preparation for work. For over fifty years the AMEP has offered various kinds of ESL courses to new migrants, and since the early 1990s has used a national curriculum, *The Certificates in Spoken and Written English* (CSWE), offered at four learning levels (see Burns, 2009).

I and my co-researcher, Helen de Silva Joyce<sup>1</sup>, were motivated to undertake the research for several reasons. Over the years, there had been consistent feedback from AMEP learners that the communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches underpinning classroom practice were unfamiliar and inappropriate to their learning needs. Funding bodies were increasingly challenging the effectiveness of the program in achieving adequate learning outcomes (e.g. Robb, 2006). Theoretical debates in Australia were questioning the nature and effectiveness of 'progressive' and 'learner-centred' pedagogies, and curriculum theory and practice in the AMEP was moving towards notions of 'explicit' and 'visible' pedagogy (see, e.g. Feez, 2002). In the light of these factors, we undertook classroom-based research to investigate:

1. the characteristics and features of effective teaching for effective learning in AMEP classes
2. the role of the teacher in framing the language learning experience of their learners.
3. learners' responses to classroom teaching approaches and their views on their effectiveness.

<sup>1</sup> The content of this article is based in part on an earlier version of an unpublished paper prepared jointly with Helen. The research resulted in a professional development resource for teachers (Burns & de Silva Joyce, 2008).

## Theoretical frameworks

### Communicative language teaching

CLT has been the 'default' recommended for curriculum development in English language teaching for the best part of thirty years. It underpins most major programs in the western English-speaking world and more recently has been taken up vigorously in many non-western educational policy developments on the teaching of English (see e.g. Liu, 2004). Despite its ascendancy, it poses numerous challenges for teachers, including definitional ambiguity and inconsistency (e.g. Harmer, 2003), confusion over whether strong or weak versions are more effective (e.g. Whitely, 1993), uncertainty over what it actually means and how to implement it (Duquette, 1995), and insensitivity to local conditions and needs (Bax, 2003). Some commentators argue that its principles are insufficiently grounded in research on teaching practice and teacher knowledge (Bartels, 2005), while others contend that CLT is a "chimera" (Thornbury, 1998:110), as research over 20 or so years shows that it does not actually exist (or if it does, only as a hybrid of traditional and CLT approaches) in most language classrooms (Thornbury, 1998; Karavas-Doukas, 1996).

Biesta (2006) contests the current trend in pedagogy towards privileging *learning* (as for example in the learner-centred curriculum). He argues that it obscures the focus on *education* and the educational responsibilities of the teacher, and that inducting learners into processes of education is not about "self-expression" (p. 28). Bourne (2003) too argues that developmental learning approaches 'biologise' learning, by placing responsibility for 'success' or 'failure' on the learner (as in learner responsibility/autonomy) and throwing them back on their 'innate ability'. Gibbons (2002) contends that pedagogy in most language classrooms is "fractured" because of "the inadequacy of the most common modes of learning within which teachers are expected to work" (p. 7).

### Classification and framing in the classroom

We selected as our theoretical framework Bernstein's notions of classification and framing. In doing so, we were building on the concept of *authoritative practice* expressed by Widdowson (1990):

...the teacher...exercises authority in transaction by virtue of the achieved role of expert. His or her authority is based on professional qualification. (p. 188)

This notion stands in contrast to that of the teacher as a ‘facilitator’ of learning and the learner as holding the major responsibility for learning.

Bernstein (1996) defines *classification* as the boundaries between one category and another (for example, reading activities in contrast with writing activities) and cautions that “classification strong or weak, always carry power relations” (p. 21). Strong classification implies “things being kept apart”, whereas in weak classification “things are brought together” (p. 26). To operationalise this concept in classroom terms, one would need to ask such questions as:

- How is the authority of the teacher represented to learners?
- How are teacher roles and relationships with students defined and demarcated?
- How are the macro-skills of language (S/L/R/W) presented?
- How are learning activities differentiated for learners?
- How are the goals and purposes of activities signalled to learners?
- How are changes in learner and teacher positioning, classrooms behaviours and changes in lesson pace mediated by the teacher?
- How are the resources of the classroom deployed and explained?

*Framing*, (Bernstein, 1996) relates to the role taken up by participants in the transmission of knowledge through pedagogic practice. Strong framing means that the teacher takes control of the selection, sequence, pacing, assessment criteria and social interaction of the classroom. Weak framing means that the learner has “apparent control” (p.21). In Bernstein’s words, “strong framing develops a visible pedagogy where rules of instructional and regulative discourse are explicit and weak framing develops invisible pedagogy where the rules... are implicit and largely unknown to the acquirer” (p. 21). Operationalising such concepts leads to these questions:

- How are expectations about conduct and manner expressed?
- How are expectations about teacher and learner engagement expressed?
- How is content selected, sequenced and paced?

- How are criteria for knowledge and achievement identified and applied?
- How are the goals and expectations of the classroom made clear to learners?
- Who has control over what is taught and learned?
- How is the time available for learning deployed?

To sum up, Bernstein holds that visible pedagogy operates with strong classification and framing, a concept echoed by Bourne (2004:65) who states it “is explicit in acknowledging responsibility for taking up a position of authority”.

## The research study

The research was carried out in 11 classrooms containing 180 students across three levels of the CSWE (beginner, low intermediate, high intermediate) in five Australian states over six months. Classes ranged from pre-literate refugees to intermediate students with secondary/tertiary education. We conducted classroom observations of up to an hour and a half, interviews with each teacher, and focus groups of 4-8 students from each class using recorded bilingual prompts where necessary. All data were audio-recorded with permission. A major aim of analysis was to identify indicators of effective and visible pedagogy as played out in the classroom and as reflected in the comments of learners who were the recipients.

Most learners indicated that on entry into the AMEP they were surprised and sometimes unnerved by the teachers’ pedagogical approaches:

- Yes... surprised, not used to critical thinking!
- Bad at first... but got confidence...we could do it by ourselves.
- Shocked when I came to Australia and could not understand people
- Very different in Australia...in China only listen and note what teacher writes on board.

However, learners also indicated that they were not averse to learning in new ways as long as they understood the purpose of undertaking particular classroom tasks and how these would help them learn.

- Teacher tells other students to explain, encourages students to help each other.

- Not difficult to understand because the teacher helps to explain it.
- Teacher has ways she indicate if you don't understand...signals.
- At the beginning teacher spoke about modules that students can learn...
- Happy students! If we not happy, not stay here!

Following Bernstein's definition of visible pedagogy, we found that in the most effective classrooms there were several observed indicators of visible pedagogy.

#### 1. *Publication of the classroom program*

At the general level of the course, teachers displayed the whole of the program in terms of topics/tasks to be covered, also providing students with copies and instructing them to file them in their folders. These were referred to during the lesson. The curriculum outcomes for the CSWE as well as those to be covered in the particular course were displayed and usually translated for beginner students.

#### 2. *Clarification of teaching philosophy*

Explicit explanation was provided to learners about personal teaching philosophies. For example one teacher we observed outlined ways in which she intended to conduct the course from the point of view of her role, the learners' role, teacher responsibilities and learner responsibilities. She discussed with learners how they had learned previously and how effective that had been, the way she would teach them (at times learner- and at times teacher-centred) and the ways she expected them to interact in class. She trained them explicitly in ways to participate, such as asking each other questions rather than the teacher during group work, or taking responsibility for collecting and storing class materials.

#### 3. *Display of daily lesson plan*

Visible pedagogy involved overviewing the plan for that day's lesson at the start. An example was a teacher who listed her planned activities on the board, referred to them as each came up, and ticked them off on their conclusion. Thus learners were clearly apprised of what the activities for the lesson entailed and which point in the plan they had reached. At the conclusion of lessons where not all activities were covered, teachers made statements such as:

We'll do this task tomorrow. We've not had time to do it in class so you must finish it tonight and I'll check it first thing in the morning.

#### 4. *Signalling of movement across lesson phases*

Movement from one segment of the lesson to another was clearly signalled. For example, when introducing a new activity, one teacher moved to the front of the class, indicated the listed activities on the board, and stated the change of focus explicitly: "Now all look to the front and I will read this text". Teachers were also observed instructing students what to do with completed material: "Now write the date on the page and put the page in your folder"; preparing resources: "Open your books at page.."; and outlining a classroom procedure and expectations: "I'm going to play the tape twice. Put your pens down and listen." Thus, teachers practised strong classification and framing in their classrooms, signalled lesson segments explicitly, and were prepared to wait until all learners were attentive and ready to proceed.

#### 5. *Clarification of purpose and focus of activities*

The macro skill that was the pedagogical focus was visibly signalled and the purpose of an activity was outlined before learners began: "We are going to read a text about... This activity will help you develop more vocabulary". Teachers gave clear instructions and did not proceed before all learners demonstrated their understanding (e.g. learners explained to each other, teacher and learner modelled activities). Learners' confidence in what the activity required them to do was observable.

#### 6. *Display of classroom materials*

Learners' products were displayed in the classroom as recognition of achievements and also as reference points. Classrooms contained resources, such as phonetic alphabets or posters outlining the structures and features of the genres they were writing. Thus, they were systematically supplied with and referred to learning sources to support their activities.

### **Discussion**

Classrooms which demonstrated visible pedagogy were not places where 'communication' for its own sake drove teaching. Rather teachers articulated their teaching and learning philosophies at length. They viewed their classrooms as structured and scaffolded environments where the roles of teacher and learners were clearly defined and classroom interaction was deliberately paced. The teachers spent considerable time focused on individual texts or activities, and did not seem anxious about silence or extended wait periods in classroom interaction. They gave learners time to learn by using routinised pedagogical frameworks which moved from familiar to new language and activities and generated a sense of security. They introduced new ways of learning

only when learners demonstrated they had mastered previous activities or materials.

We would argue that these classrooms reflected an educationally driven, rather than a learner/learning centred approach to pedagogy. Teachers were not facilitators of learner-centredness in the sense of assuming that “doing” would “lead naturally to knowing” (Widdowson, 1990: 161) but authorities who managed and fine-tuned learning processes and practices for their learners. While CLT still seems set to hold sway in many corners of the English language teaching world, our research leads us to contend that it may be time to look at alternative criteria for classroom pedagogy that engage with local learning and teaching in local contexts (cf. Bax, 2003) and not with generalised and unsubstantiated precepts.

## References

- Bartels, N. (2005). Applied linguistics and language teacher education: What we know. In N. Bartels (Ed.), *Applied linguistics and language teacher education* (pp. 405-425). Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Bax, S. (2003). The end of CLT: A context approach to language teaching. *ELT Journal*, 57, 278-287.
- Bernstein, B. (1996). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Biesta, G. (2006). *Beyond learning: Democratic learning for a human future*. Boulder, Col.: Paradigm Publishers.
- Bourne, J. (2003). Vertical discourse: The role of the teacher in the transmission and acquisition of decontextualised language. *European Educational Research Journal*, 2 (4), 496-521.
- Bourne, J. (2004). Towards a ‘radical visible pedagogy’. In J. Muller, B. Davies and A. Morais (Eds.), *Reading Bernstein. Reading Bernstein. researching Bernstein* (pp. 61-74). London: Routledge Falmer.
- Burns, A. & de Silva Joyce, H. (2008). *Clearly teaching: Teaching in action for teachers*. Sydney: AMEP Research Centre, Macquarie University.
- Burns, A. (2009). Adult ESL in Australia: Policies, programs and practices. *Language Issues*, 20(1), 31-39.
- Duquette, G. (Ed.) (1995). *Second language practice. Classroom strategies for developing communicative competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Feez, S. (2002). Heritage and innovation in second language education. In A. Johns (ed.), *Genre in the classroom* (pp. 43-69). Mahwah, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gibbons, P. (2002). *Scaffolding language, scaffolding learning. Teaching second language learners in the mainstream classroom*. London: Heinemann.
- Harmer, J. (2003). Popular culture, methods and context. *ELT Journal*, 57(3), 288-294.
- Karavas-Doukas, E. (1996). Using attitude scales to investigate teachers’ attitudes to the communicative approach. *ELT Journal* 50(3), 187-198.
- Liu, J. (2004). Methods in the post-methods era: Report on an international survey on language teaching methods. *International Journal of English Studies*, 4(1), 137-152.
- Robb, A. (2006). Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. Opening Keynote Address. AMEP National Conference, 5 October, Perth, Western Australia.
- Thornbury, S. (1998). Comments on Marianne Celce-Murcia, Zoltán Dörnyei, and Sarah Thurrell’s direct approaches in L2 Instruction: A turning point? *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(1), 109-115.
- Whitley, M. S. (1993). Communicative language teaching: An incomplete revolution. *Foreign Language Annals*, 26(2), 137-154.
- Widdowson, H. (1990). *Aspects of language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

# Common sense interpretations of quantified results before applications?

Anthony Bruton, Seville University

## Introduction

To be honest, I had not looked at Kim's (2006) article on lexical development from reading modified texts that closely until I read the other articles by Han (2007) and Chapelle (2007), which debated the issue of the generalizability of results and their pedagogical applicability. I suppose Han had a point on the generalizability of the results, and certainly on the question of whether results are necessarily applicable to pedagogical practice for which they have not been tested. As part of his argument Han does make some very important points that should be recognized by supposedly respected journals: the actual exposure to text in the study was only 20 minutes, and there was no control of prior lexical knowledge, or a delayed posttest. However, on the second re-reading a number of other research questions arose, but more on the quantification of the lexical knowledge and the interpretation of the results than on the possible applications. On closer inspection, there are actually other much more polemical aspects of the study.

To give Kim credit, the purpose and overall design of the research seemed valid: the comparison of various textual conditions on the acquisition of targeted lexical items. The number of participants is very respectable, 297, especially given the number of conditions studied, six, which is also commendable. The nature of the six conditions seem valid, and the examples for the conditions are clear, but we are not given either the nature of the text, the genre, or the length, which is normally considered necessary in studies of incidental vocabulary learning. I will let that pass and I will also not dwell on the lack of any raw scores, so we do not actually know how many words each student did not know before starting.

I will say one or two things about the tests, since they have a bearing on the interpretation of the results. There was no pretest as Han points out, but there is a

'retrospective vocabulary pretest', a term the author generously attributes to Dick Schmidt, but which to most people would suggest a contradiction in terms. This pretest asked students to try to remember the words they think they knew the meaning of before they read the text – not a very reliable measure, for obvious reasons, and which the author had to try to authenticate by inserting nonsense word distracters as a check. The scores on the 'form-recognition vocabulary posttest', which required the participants to mark the words they "thought they had seen while reading the text" (p.352), and the "meaning-recognition vocabulary posttest", which required them to "select the correct meaning for each target word from a list of 52 meanings in Korean" (p.352), were calculated as the total correct scores minus the items indicated in the retrospective vocabulary pretest and verified as known in the two posttests, then calculated as a percentage. Each individual score depends on the pretest score and the posttest scores, but as a percentage they could represent very different raw scores: for example 20% of 10 previously unknown words is 2 new words, and of 20 is 4 new words, but we are not given the raw scores. Apart from the obvious fact that the retrospective vocabulary pretest focused only on prior knowledge of meaning not form only, it is immediately apparent that there is already a huge amount of conjecture here about prior and text-induced lexical knowledge, especially cases where lack of knowledge is indicated in the retrospective vocabulary test.

But what I want to dwell more on is the nature of the analysis of the Meaning-Recognition Vocabulary Post-test scores in Table 4 (p.357) of Kim's article, and make an appeal to common sense about numerical results – see Carver (1993). The author offers a proliferation of statistical analyses, which come to various conclusions in terms of statistical significances. Apart from the fact that the average reader would be daunted by such figures, as I almost was despite being reasonably statistically literate, they miss many commonsensical points about the figures, which I will now give my opinion on.

TABLE 4

**Descriptive Statistics for the Meaning-Recognition Vocabulary Posttest**

Group	N	M	SD
EXP, +EN	(A') 48	8.997	6.802
IMP, +EN	(B') 53	7.285	6.154
-EL, +EN	(C') 47	3.489	3.624
EXP, -EN	(D') 52	8.152	6.952
IMP, -EN	(E') 48	4.406	3.613
-EL, -EN	(F') 49	2.488	3.023

*Note.* Percentage scores were used. For the form-recognition vocabulary posttest, participants' scores on only the 26 target words, not the 17 nonwords included on the test, were used in the analysis.

First, the overall results are very low, the best average score being 8.997% of the unknown target words. This score is additionally surprising since the test was a receptive, matching (select) test, where the L1 distracters were "semantically, though distantly, related to the meanings of the target words" (p.353). Waring and Takaki (2003) showed that, for example, multiple-choice select tests can produce inflated scores at least double supply tests or more, and this test is a select test. However, as mentioned above, the exposure was very limited, perhaps too limited, which results in the author having to admit that any alternative to the immediate receptive posttest would not have been sensitive enough for potentially minimal lexical knowledge increments – little mention is made of the limitations of the matching test (see Bruton, 2007, on the issue).

Second, the results between the highest scoring (explicit elaboration and enhancement) and the lowest (no elaboration and no enhancement) conditions of six conditions is actually only 6.509%, of a maximum of 26 target words (i.e. around one and a half recognized words on an immediate test) – the words recognized could be the same ones across the participants, as well. Some of the other between-condition differences are of course much less. Why the author uses three decimal places for such percentage results and in social research is a minor irritation. Whatever the statistical significances, the author should not have lost sight of the fact that the differences are actually very minor, especially given that there are probably numerous

possible extraneous variables at work, including the very subjective assessment of prior knowledge, so exactness or precision in the raw data is unlikely, and certainly not to one let alone three decimal places!

Third, for the conditions with the three highest average scores (A': explicit elaboration and enhancement; D': explicit elaboration and no enhancement, and B': implicit elaboration and enhancement, in that order) the standard deviations are approximately double those with the three lowest scores (E': implicit elaboration and no enhancement; C': no elaboration and enhancement; F': and no elaboration or enhancement, again in that order). So the conditions that are potentially conducive to greater vocabulary learning gains are also the ones where there is greatest variation between the participants. This should suggest that within these conditions there are numerous participants who are using the available resources much less fruitfully than the others.

Fourth, and in some ways most crucially for me, is the most interesting result, which actually gets lost in the statistics. This result is the fact that when the students are given an explicit elaboration, it does not make much difference whether the words are enhanced or not (the comparison between groups A' and D' was not great and not statistically significant). However, if they are given an implicit elaboration, it does make some difference whether the words are enhanced or not (groups B' versus E'), which apparently was not statistically significant. This point is actually made on page 336, but no reference is made to comparing groups B' and E', but rather to B' and F'. To these comparisons, we can add that all the groups with enhancement outscored the corresponding groups without enhancement, an important result the author does not state clearly at any point.

I have to admit I believe that inferential statistics in social research should be used economically with extreme caution and that common sense should prevail. I hope this brief discussion may impress on some readers why. At the same time, I would appeal to reviewers of empirical research in journals such as *TESOL Quarterly* to be more demanding on the detailed information supplied and the interpretation of the results, and less demanding on reams of statistical analyses. As for applications, they must primarily depend on the rational interpretation of the results, a point Han rather missed.

## References

- Bruton, A. (2007). Partial lexical knowledge in tests of incidental vocabulary learning from L2 reading. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 64(1), 161-178.

- Carver, R. P. (1993). The case against statistical significance, revisited. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 61, 287-292.
- Chapelle, C.(2007). Pedagogical implications in TESOL Quarterly? Yes, Please! *TESOL Quarterly*, 41, 404-405.
- Han, Z. (2007). Pedagogical implications: Genuine or pretentious? *TESOL Quarterly*, 41, 387-393.
- Kim, Y. (2006). Effects of input elaboration on vocabulary acquisition through reading by Korean learners of English as a foreign language. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40, 341-373.
- Waring, R., & Takaki, M. (2003). At what rate do learners learn and retain new vocabulary from reading a graded reader? *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 15, 1-27.

# Researching the influence of language embedded in the pre-task phase on task performance

Theron Muller, Noah Learning Center, Japan

## Introduction

Task based learning has been promoted as a pedagogical alternative to traditional PPP methods of instruction (Willis & Willis, 2007), but tasks are often difficult to implement with students who have limited linguistic resources (Ellis, 2003). One potential source of this difficulty is the task literature, which states the task should be the starting point for the lesson and students shouldn't be provided with sample language before the task, as sample language has the potential to taint the authenticity of the task interaction (Edwards, Undated; Willis, 2007). While there is potential for such input to influence task interaction, the nature of that influence appears to remain largely unexplored. One exception is Boston (2008), who found students apparently mined input from task instructions when completing an information gap task. More specifically, in an information gap activity where two different pairs of students were given different task instructions, of which one set included "going to do" and the other "plans," the students tended to use the language from their task instructions when completing the task, indicating the language from the task instructions influenced the language the students used (Boston, 2008: 73). While compelling, Boston's (2008) research was restricted to a small sample size and didn't include a control group; all students received some English input, which leaves open the question of what their production might have been without any English input. To address this remaining gap in knowledge, this research empirically investigates how different levels of English language input embedded in task instructions influenced student task production, including a no English input control; one word of input; a simple grammar input; a more complex grammar input; and finally a sample dialog (see Figure 1, below). The research also incorporates a longitudinal

element in an attempt to determine whether any differences between groups persist beyond the initial task performance. It is hypothesized that the group receiving no English input will exhibit a variety of grammatical forms, but the groups which receive grammatical input will exhibit less variety of forms, and will tend to use the sample grammar form from their input more frequently than the control group. In regards to longitudinal effects, it is hypothesized that the influence of the task input in differentiating student production will decrease over time.

## Participants

The students were first year high school students at the Nagano National College of Technology in Nagano, Japan. Approximately 210 students were divided by the school into five classes of about 42 students, who were all enrolled in a mandatory English conversation class. The classes used were intact, and the research was conducted during one regular class period outside of students' normal classrooms in an on-campus language lab. The researcher was also their regular teacher. All students had at least studied English for three years in junior high school and for about a semester at the high school level.

## Methods

The five classes were assigned to five different experimental groups. The research was multi-staged, with a pre-task, where the language input was included, a task with no additional language input, a homework completed within a week of the original task, and a delayed homework completed about six weeks after the initial research. In the pre-task the five groups were controlled for their English input, as outlined in Figure 1 below. A sample of the student input for the control group has been included in Appendix A.

Group	English input
Control	No English
One word	Plan
One word & simple sample grammar	Plan + He is going to...
One word & more complex grammar	Plan + He is going to be...ing...
One word & more complex grammar sample dialog	Plan + On Monday Alan is going to be studying at

Figure 1. Description of five experimental groups

English input was controlled by giving all instructions and directions orally in the students' native language, Japanese. Additionally, the task instructions were printed in Japanese on the handouts that the students received (Appendix A). English input was included on the handout in written form but was not explicitly mentioned or highlighted in the task instructions, consistent with the way Boston (2008) implemented his research design.

The pre-task was an information gap task, modeled after Boston (2008), where students each had incomplete information about Alan's plans for the week. Students had completed similar tasks in class in the past, but this was the first time they were exposed to this particular task. They were asked to share the information they had with their partner and to write down the information they didn't have. To control English input, Alan's plans were represented by pictures (Appendix A). The task was also modeled after Boston (2008) and included information about four different people's weekend schedules. Students were told that the people in the task wanted to see a movie together, so they should exchange information about their schedules and decide when they would all be able to see a movie together. Students were assigned into pairs for the purposes of completing the pre-task and task. Originally pairs were to be randomly assigned within groups, but due to technical limitations with the language lab software, students were instead seated according to student number, which is assigned alphabetically. The pre-task was allotted about 5 minutes and the task about fifteen minutes. Students were given two minutes of preparation time both before the pre-task and the task. For homework, students were asked to write a diary entry about their plans for the weekend, as if they were one of the characters from the task. Finally, the delayed homework asked students to share their winter vacation plans via email.

Originally the homework was also planned to be completed during class, allowing control of the amount of time spent completing the assignment across groups, but due to time limitations, it was assigned as homework, and along with the delayed homework was completed outside of class, meaning it is impossible to verify whether students consulted one another or internet sources in completing those assignments.

## Data

Student interaction during the pre-task and task were recorded except for the two minutes of preparation time before both the pre-task and task. The students were all aware of the recording. The homework was handwritten then transcribed into a digital format for analysis. The delayed homework was submitted by students via email.

After transcription, student utterances were assigned to six grammatical categories for analysis, as outlined in Figure 2.

Category	Example (from data)
Present (PR)	On Monday Alan studies at school. Alan plans go to the library on Saturday. Alan is reading in library.
Future progressive (FP)	Alan is going to go to the school.
Going to with be (FPB)	He is going to (be) playing baseball.
Future with will (FW)	Alan will do the laundry.
Incorrect usage (IU)	He baseball. He is study in the school.
Past (PA)	Alan studied at the school. Sunday Alan was shopping.

Figure 2. Grammatical categories of analysis and examples

These categories were determined based on analysis of transcripts from the pre-task, and it is worth noting that FP corresponds to the simple sample grammar input group and FPB corresponds to the more complex input group. Categories PR, FW, and PA were not part of the input for any of the groups. IU was reserved for unclassifiable utterances where it wasn't clear which category was appropriate, such as instances where there was a missing verb.

Due to time and space restrictions and for the purposes of this research the pre-task, homework, and delayed homework data will be analyzed below and the task data will not be included in the analysis.

While it is possible to perform more standardized analysis on the data such as words per minute, or s-score, since this investigation is primarily interested in verifying Boston's (2008) conclusions regarding the influence of embedded language on student production, for the purposes of this paper the analysis is centered around the grammar students used. Additionally, a surprising aspect of this research is how central Japanese was to completion of the pre-task and task. Unfortunately, there isn't currently a model of conversation analysis designed to take into account the use of two languages in quantitative measurements of task performance. Fortunately, for the purposes of replicating Boston's (2008) findings, a grammatical analysis proved sufficient.

## Results

Due to absences and technical difficulties with some of the recordings, there were about 18 pairs per class included in the final data analysis. Because of the possibility of one student in a pair influencing their partner's production, the pairs weren't separated for the purposes of analysis; the intact pair was the unit used for statistical analysis. As the pre-task input included seven different events, each of these seven events were assigned a value of one in a grammatical category, regardless of repetitions. In the case of self-correction, such as present followed by future with will, the final utterance was counted as the primary utterance. In cases where a final grammatical category wasn't clear, the categories used were given equal weight (.5 each).

The frequency of the different grammars used during the pre-task were compared across groups using ANOVA. The results of the analysis are included in Figure 3.

Group	PR	FP	FPB	FW	IU	P
No English	55% (43)	12% (26)		22% (34)	4% (9)	7% (24)
One word	68% (30)	4% (14)	0% (2)	21% (30)	4% (8)	3% (8)
Word + grammar	23% (34)	73% (38)	2% (8)	1% (4)		3% (11)
Word + more complex grammar	30% (36)	57% (39)	12% (27)		1% (3)	
Word + sample dialog	3% (10)	44% (33)	49% (32)	4% (12)	Average % (Stdev)	

Figure 3. Grammatical characteristics of student pre-task production

The results of the ANOVA indicated there was no significant difference between groups regarding the grammatical characteristics of their production. A Turkey's SD analysis verified there was no apparent significant difference between the groups regarding the grammar they used during pre-task completion.

While not all students completed the homework and the delayed homework, the small differences in the grammar

used outlined in Figure 3 disappeared altogether in the delayed homework data.

## Conclusion

It appears that the results of this research do not support the view that pre-task language consistently and predictably influences the grammatical characteristics of student production. However, it would be of interest to repeat the research, explicitly drawing attention to the grammatical forms included in the task input and relying less heavily on Japanese and more on English instructions. It may then be that in drawing explicit attention to the grammatical forms, the groups will be much more clearly differentiated with respect to the grammar they use in completing the pre-task, and that influence may prove more persistent over time. Additionally, some attention to how students used their two minute preparation time might have been revealing. Finally, it appears that the influence of input does indeed decrease over time, as in the delayed homework there was minor differences in the grammar used between groups.

Teachers interested in the pedagogical implications of this research may conclude that language input at the pre-task stage may not be as detrimental to the communicativeness of a task as the literature to date seems to imply.

## Acknowledgment

I would like to thank International House London and the John Haycraft Memorial Foundation for making this research possible. This research is based on a presentation given at IATEFL 2009 Cardiff and a shorter version may be published in the *IATEFL 2009 Cardiff Conference Selections*.

## References





- Boston, J. (2008). Learner mining of pre-task and task input. *ELT Journal*, 62, 66-76.
- Edwards, C. (Undated). *Activity Cycle 2: What counts as a task*. Retrieved April 28, 2006, from [www.delphi.bham.ac.uk](http://www.delphi.bham.ac.uk).
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Willis, D. & Willis, J. (2007). *Doing Task-Based Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## Appendix A. Sample pre-task student input; no English group

### Pre-task: Group 1

この課題の目的は Alan の予定を情報交換出来ることです。A の人は、アランの月曜、水曜、金曜、日曜の予定を知っています。火曜、木曜、土曜の予定は知りません。B の人は逆です。アランの月曜、水曜、金曜、日曜の予定は知りませんが、火曜、木曜、土曜の予定を知っています。パートナーと話し合っ、自分の知らないアランの予定を記入してください。パートナーと話す前に 2 分の準備時間があります。何を話すか考えてください。

A

	月	火	水	木	金	土	日
Alan 男							

# Exploring student engagement dynamics: Initiating model-building from a case study

Duane Kindt, Nagoya University of Foreign Studies

This report summarizes a study that employed procedures from *Grounded Theory* (GT) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and *qualitative data analysis software* (QDAS) (Weitzman, 2000) to examine student engagement in an oral communication course at a private Japanese university. Using textual data from response journals, called *action logs* (Murphey, 1993) (see Appendix 1), and exit interviews, engagement factors and their interrelations were identified and coded using QDAS. This coding helped analyze engagement propensities and factors influencing engagement, which contributed to a *Model of student engagement dynamics*. Besides showing the benefits of QDAS, this study illustrates the complexity of student engagement and the primacy of feedback in raising participants' awareness and restructuring of engagement propensities.

## Background to the Study

QDAS are computer programs designed to assist in analyzing qualitative data (Richards, 2002). The software used in this study, NVivo (Richards, 2006), helped categorize interview data. Basit (2003: 144) describes these categories or codes as "tags or labels for allocating units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study." Engagement factor categories were developed from the data, combining a *grounded* approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and *a priori* categories supplied by Williams and Burden (1997). Six *internal categories* (Beliefs, Interest, Courage, Ability, Perceived Value and Sense of agency) and 6 *external categories* (Materials/activities, Peers, Teacher, Other people, Learning environment, Greater context) were used.

To illustrate the QDAS coding process, the text, "I enjoyed talking with partners," could be linked to categories representing factors such as *Interest* ("enjoyed") or *Peers* ("partners"). Once the text is coded, searches can be conducted showing the instances when one, the other, or both codes (called the *intersection*) occur.

In this study, after coding for the 12 engagement factors, the NVivo intersection function was used to derive *Engagement Factor Intersections* (EFIs), pinpointing significant interrelations (see Appendix 2 for exemplary intersections). Strauss and Corbin's (1998) *axial coding*, which relate categories around a central theme (axis), was then applied to explore a predominant theme *Meeting expectations*, providing a detailed description of one student's (Kumi, pseudonym) engagement. The action log and interview text was coded for the 5 fundamental elements of GT axial coding, which are: 1) *formative events/causal conditions*, 2) *intervening conditions/factor interrelations*, 3) *adaptive strategies*, 4) *actions and interactions*, and 5) *consequences/engagement outcomes* (reproduced in Gibbs, 2002: 171). EFIs coded for each of these elements were then used to describe Kumi's engagement and engagement propensities, leading to a *Model of student engagement dynamics*.

## Analyzing Student Engagement

To study Kumi's engagement, a profile of her *Individual Engagement Propensity* at the beginning of the course was established. This profile was informed by her language learning history journal entry and general attitudes toward learning English in a classroom setting.

## Formative Events and Initial Engagement Propensity

Using NVivo to code Kumi's *formative events* was informative, especially when looking at expectations in relation to active engagement in class activities. She wrote, for example, "I was full of much fear...a feeling of gloom entering the classroom. But...I made a little progress. Afresh, I've expected you to improve us" (action log, 4/14). Kumi had high expectations that contributed significantly to her emphasis on: 1) what others think of her and her ability, noting "I'm very poor at speaking English" and was "nervous...to show [my conversation] to the classmates" (4/21); 2) her image of herself as a "negative student" who was often "depressed"; and 3) the teacher as a change agent: "[I am expecting] you to improve us" (4/14).

Kumi's enthusiasm increased a couple of months before the course began when a friend talked to her about studying abroad. Kumi noted, "It came as a thunderbolt to me. Then, I reflected on my negative attitude....I think I could be more enthusiastic." Kumi also became aware of the influence of her peers: "I little imagined other's words would have an influence on my idea and life."

Kumi's initial engagement propensity, therefore, can be described as depending on positive influence from internal factors (*Courage*, "I could get used to them;" *Ability*, "I can be active") and external factors (*Teachers*, "highly praised for doing well;" *Peers*, "it was a turning point for me") that helped her feel she was reaching—or needed to reach—expectations.

### **Factor Interrelations, Adaptive Strategies, and Actions/Interactions**

Since Kumi's engagement level was dependent on her mood, peers, and activities—all closely related to her expectations—her adaptive strategies varied. By the third class, Kumi indicated change, "I think you gradually made me relaxed" (4/17). The interrelation of factors, *Teacher* influencing *Courage* (T-C), is represented by Figure 1 (below). In all figures, time moves from left to right, though internal and external factor interrelations and individual and group propensities should not be seen as necessarily linear or the boundaries distinct.

#### **"I think you gradually made me relaxed." Teacher impacting courage positively (T-C)**

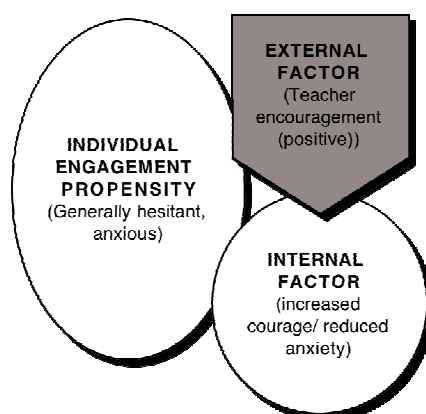


Figure 1: T-C positive interaction (time → )

Kumi placed the reason for her lessening anxiety on the teacher. My verbal comments and her reaction form a *positive* feedback loop, *Teacher* influencing *Courage* (displayed as T-C+).

Another example of the same relatively straightforward, linear-like structure of factor interactions, but with *negative* impact, involved *Materials* and *Courage* (M-C-). Kumi noted an unexpected reaction to a recording activity, "In the end, my anxiety was in vain" (4/21). In this instance, her expectations of the recording activity influenced her level of nervousness, and thus, her level of initial participation.

By the fourth Fishbowl—an activity in which 4 students in a center "bowl" engage in conversation while others

observe (Cholewinski, 1999)—Kumi's comments indicated that the class's level of engagement was also important to her. She noted, "it was really welcome that last fishbowl brought such a good result, though I couldn't do it" (6/26). This comment indicates that Kumi was attempting to be more positive, possibly to reach her perception of teacher and peer expectations. Consider the following: "I was in a good temper. So I could talk....I think temper has a great effect on the works in class. I have a day I can talk...and [days] I don't feel like join the class" (6/28).

Kumi described her lack of participation as dependent on her *Courage* and her success as dependent upon support of *Peers* and *Teacher* and the nature of the activities (*Materials*). It appears, however, that her participation depends on her success in reaching expectations.

### Engagement outcomes and restructured engagement propensities

Although Kumi's comments indicate that her engagement propensity in the recording activity was altered by her experience, there was no evidence at the time that the adjusted propensity would apply to other activities. Kumi was able to record subsequent conversations with less nervousness, due in large part to her having experienced recording and realigning her expectations. In the first Fishbowl activity, she laments: "I couldn't go into the fishbowl....I couldn't take courage this time. I feel sorry" (4/26). This interaction shows the negative

effects of 2 external factors, *Materials* and *Peers*, on a single internal factor, *Courage*.

Feedback on Kumi's initial recording experience, such as encouragement and realigning expectations from the *Teacher* and *Peers* and her own awareness of the activity (*Materials*), made subsequent video recording easier: "I didn't feel embarrassed in spite of videoing. I think there isn't a difference between ordinary conversation and videoing" (5/7). Without feedback to compare to her expectations, Kumi may have retained a debilitating propensity to nervousness when videoing.

Displaying this dynamic, emergent phenomenon in a static model is challenging. Even at this limited level of interaction, the complexity of interrelationships between engagement factors and engagement propensities is apparent. Nevertheless, Figure 2 (below) displays a highly simplified model of this event.

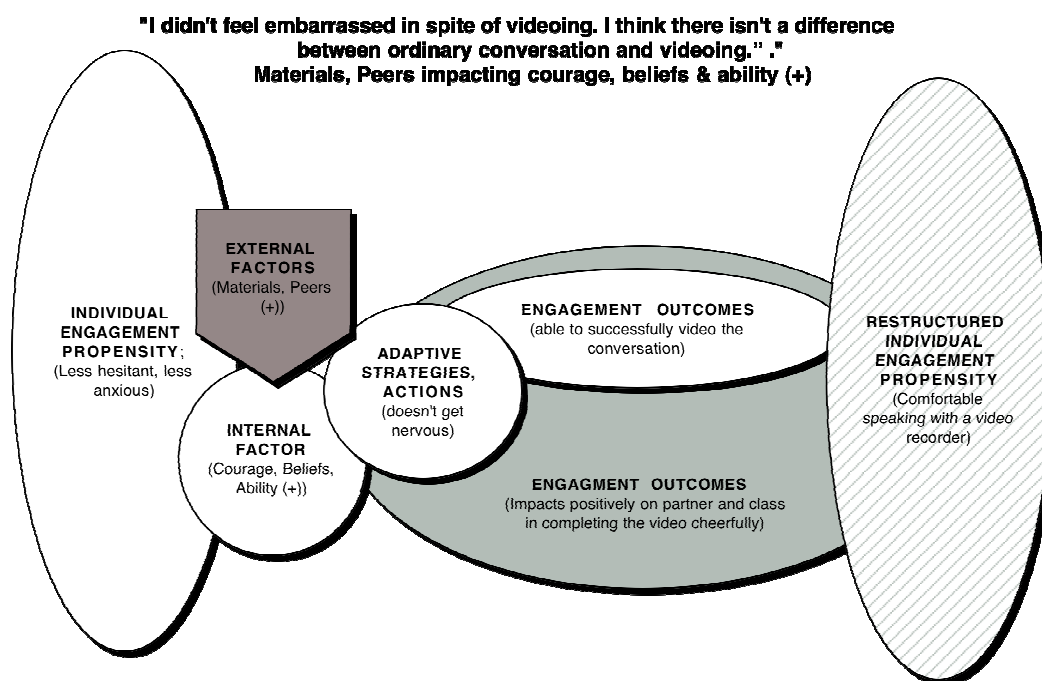


Figure 2: M-C, M-B, P-C, P-B positive interaction and resulting strategies, outcomes, and restructuring (time →)

Assuming Kumi's engagement propensity for recording had restructured, she began the videoing activity with a less hesitant, less anxious propensity. As the activity and Kumi's *Peers* positively influenced her *Courage*, *Beliefs* and *Ability*, she was able to video successfully. Feedback from *Materials*, *Peers*, and *Teacher* had

realigned her expectations and her subsequent success became a positive influence on her recording partner, and this restructuring in turn influenced the class propensity as well.

Since Kumi was experienced with recording by this time, and receiving praise—“[a classmate] said to me, ‘I think your English has improved.’ I was very happy to hear that” (5/26)—her comment that her “uneasy feeling is getting clear day by day” (5/26) might indicate that her propensity had restructured to support greater participation in all class activities. In the next Fishbowl activity, however, Kumi again did not participate. She noted, “I can’t take courage without holding myself in readiness for fishbowl” (6/5). Though Kumi did not enter, she supported its use: “Fishbowl makes me nervous, but plays an important role in English study” (5/22).

It appears that Kumi began the class (5/22) with a general propensity to be less hesitant in activities except the Fishbowl, where the impact of perceived expectations was so strong that she avoided participating. The Fishbowl put her in a situation where *Materials* and *Peers* had such a powerful impact on her *Courage*, *Beliefs*, *Ability*, and *Value* that she could not participate. The external factors, Fishbowl and classmates, resulted in Kumi’s increased nervousness, but she still believed that the activity was valuable for increasing her language skills.

### Final restructured engagement propensity

At the beginning of the course, Kumi believed—and continued to believe—that her English ability was inferior to many of her classmates:

I always compared myself with [active students] so doing that I was very depressed always. I have to make more confident and make more effort....They are friends who engage me to be active but on the other hand they are a burden. It’s a bad view but... (Interview)

Though some restructuring occurred, Kumi’s expectations remained unrealistically high, comparing herself to the most fluent and active students in the class. When not comparing herself to others, Kumi’s self-evaluations tended to be more positive. She noted that in the second cassette recording she “was a little nervous...but compared to the first...it was clearly less” (Interview). Her decrease in nervousness was accompanied by what she described as “the biggest change for me.”

### Model of student engagement dynamics

Building on insights from the analysis of engagement dynamics in this case study, a *Model of student engagement dynamics* is presented below (Figure 3) as a point of departure for increasing educators’ awareness of classroom engagement dynamics and for future exploration of the complexity of student engagement.

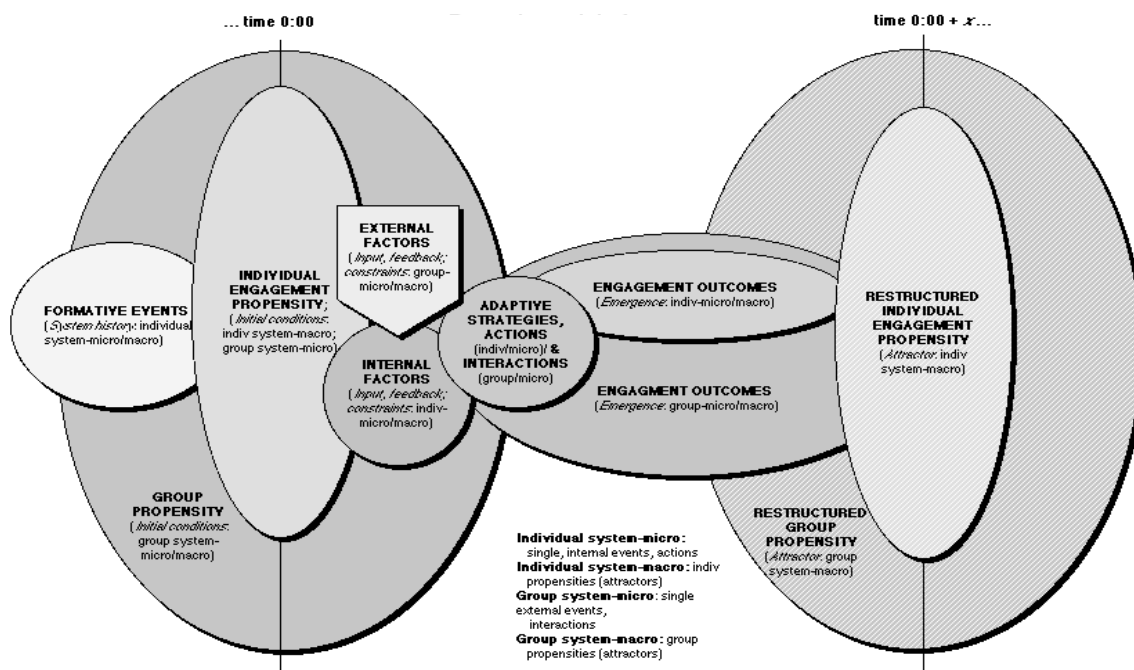


Figure 3: Model of student engagement dynamics (time → )

Moving from left to right, *causal conditions/formative events* contribute to individual engagement propensities, which contribute to the *group engagement propensity*. Since the moment a class starts interactions cause propensities to restructure, the stasis point merely indicates *initial engagement propensities*. For every individual in a learning system other participants are potential positive and negative external factors. Thus, individuals' internal factors can become external factors for others. Even so, external factors are displayed as catalysts (*input, feedback*) influencing internal factors that result in individuals employing *adaptive strategies, acting, and interacting*. *Feedback*, whether immediate or delayed, oral or written, stimulates interaction of engagement factors leading to individuals applying adaptive strategies. Using these adaptive strategies results in actions that lead to *individual engagement outcomes*. These individual outcomes interact and combine in *group engagement outcomes* that in turn influence *restructuring* of individual and group engagement propensities.

## Conclusion

This study employed QDAS to explore the qualitative aspects of student engagement in an oral communication class. Twelve predominant engagement factors emerged that were coded in the journal and interview texts. Subsequently following a GT procedure to examine a principle theme, *Meeting expectations*, a description of engagement factors and propensities was presented, leading to a *Model of student engagement dynamics*. Considering this model, the author promotes a view of engagement dynamics that begins with a perception of group engagement propensities based on experience and intuition that subsequently responds to qualitative feedback from individual interactions and remains open to constant restructuring of engagement propensities.

## References

- Basit, T. N. (2003). Manual or electronic? The role of coding in qualitative data analysis. *Educational Research, 45*(2), 143-154.
- Cholewinski, M. (1999). Fishbowl: A speaking activity. *English Teaching Forum (TESOL), Oct-Dec*, 24-27.
- Gibbs, G. R. (2002). *Qualitative Data Analysis; Explorations with NVivo*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Murphey, T. (1993). Why don't teachers learn what learners learn? Taking the guesswork out with Action Logging. *English Teaching Forum*(January), 6-10.
- Richards, T. (2002). An intellectual history of NUD.IST and NVivo. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 5*(3), 199-214.
- Richards, T. (2006). NVivo 7. Melbourne: QSR International.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Weitzman, E. (2000). Software and Qualitative Research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed., pp. 803-820). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Williams, M., & Burden, R. L. (1997). *Psychology for Language Teachers: A social constructivist approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

# Research in peril: Constraints of conducting research in the Malaysia's education context

**Habsah Binti Hussin, Universiti Malaysia  
Sabah**

## Introduction

It is imperative for university lecturers/academics in Malaysia to conduct research in their areas of expertise, aligned to the niche areas of their universities. Lecturers are expected to be well-versed in all the research paradigms available and competent in conducting research that enables them to explore and discover new frontiers and advance knowledge in their areas of specialization. Moreover, their knowledge and skills in research will aid them in supervising their students' project work accordingly (small scale research studies related to academic writing for undergraduates; major piece of research related to dissertations and theses at graduate and postgraduate levels).

To encourage Malaysian academics to conduct research, the government as well as the private sector in the country, have provided many grants and incentives for eligible researchers. Despite the incentives, many of these academics may still be reluctant to conduct research due to the constraints they face in doing so. In this paper, I shall discuss the factors that may constrain academics in Malaysia from conducting research, the implications of these constraints and offer some suggestions how these constraints can be reduced. The reduction of the aforementioned constraints can help the country achieve its zealous aims of instilling the research culture amongst its academics and developing a vibrant research community in its academia. The constraints can be categorized into three main areas, namely factors related to bureaucratic procedures, to the conducting of fieldwork and to academics as researchers.

## Bureaucratic procedures

Malaysia is a procedural society with legally binding protocols, which in relation to conducting research, can be very inhibiting (Sun, 2002). The hierarchy of authorities researchers are subjected to – in order to seek permission to conduct research – can act as deterrent for researchers. The process of obtaining permission can be more challenging than conducting the research itself. According to Mohd Rosdhi Hassan (2007), when a research proposal is submitted, it has to go through a number of screening boards and has to get approval from a number of administrative strata. For instance, research proposals by Malaysian academics are screened at three different levels, namely the faculty, university and federal levels. This hierarchy of authorities can result in a prolonged duration of research since the long period of deliberation on the part of the involved authorities to approve or even to respond to an application (Rozaman Ismail 2007) may require an extension of the research time. The delay could render the research findings irrelevant, since it gives other researchers time to find answers. The hierarchy of authorities also may necessitate Malaysian researchers to reduce the size of their research projects, that is, to conduct the research at fewer sites, so as to avoid complicating the process, resulting in limited findings of the study.

Another bureaucratic issue is that people who do not have expertise in a particular research field might be appointed to a panel that evaluates research conducted by an expert in the discipline. Mohd Rosdhi Hassan (2007) believes that comments from such a panel could do more harm than good. Apart from not bringing about much improvement to the proposed research, their comments may lead to a change in research focus and a much-reduced research grant. This is especially true for research funded by private organizations, in which researchers are required to orient their research to the needs of the sponsoring organizations. In doing this, researchers may not have the freedom to explore the topic at hand from their point of view. All this can be very de-motivating for would-be researchers.

Another constraint is the requirement to apply for major research grants (e.g. e-science research) online, to ensure that grant applications reach the authority without hindrance, as well as to speed up the approval process by the respective authority. However, in reality, there is a risk involved of data being lost due to the time frame of using internet websites. Furthermore, not all academics are familiar with the online application process. Although the process is tedious, every academic is expected to be acquainted with applying online themselves.

## During field work

Among the issues that arise during fieldwork are the power relations, factors affecting the timing and the duration of the research, uncooperative participants, response rates and cultural sensitivity.

The relation of power can be an issue in conducting research in Malaysia. It is easier to conduct research with people of lesser authority than with fellow researchers since the respect they demand might make the participants succumb/ acquiesce to their wishes. Students as participants in a lecturer's study would be more suitable compared to the researcher's colleagues or her superior(s). In fact, conducting research with colleagues can give the conducting researcher a difficult time – if the researcher is persistent (in asking for the data) this might be interpreted as being pushy and might put pressure on the relations. With those in higher authority (e.g. one's own boss) the conflict will be greater. The boss could ask his/her personal assistant to give information to the researcher, resulting in the researcher not getting real, authentic and detailed data relevant to the research topic, as opposed to receiving information directly from the source.

Researchers in Malaysia need to be organized and must plan ahead to ensure that the agreed duration of research at the site of study is not exceeded (Habsah Hussin, 2006). This is especially true when research is conducted at schools or university campuses. Schools and universities are not accessible to researchers at the beginning of the semester, during revision week at universities, during examination preparation periods at secondary schools (July to August every year), during final examinations at the end of the university semesters, and the three national examinations (from September to December every year) at the secondary school level. The multiethnic races in Malaysia provide various festivals and public holidays in the country as well. Thus, without proper planning, researchers may not be able to access the site of study or complete fieldwork on time.

Lack of research culture among academics may make them not care much about helping their colleagues with research. Researchers may have to put up with the possibility of poor response rates in questionnaire studies. For instance, the author of this article distributed 75 questionnaires to her colleagues at six faculties at university (Universiti Malaysia Sabah) of which only 25 were returned. Researchers may have to cajole, persuade or repeatedly remind the participants to return questionnaires. The dilemma researchers are faced with is that continuous and persistent pleas to return questionnaires on their part may result in the opposite. Conversely, not asking may make participants conveniently forget, and questionnaires might not get

returned at all. Giving participants extra time to fulfill the request means the researchers may have less time to analyze the data. Poor response rates also mean that researchers have to settle for less analyzed data, which will certainly affect findings.

Another predicament in conducting research is the uncooperative participants who do not give true honest data. This can make skew findings not reflective of the actual situation. Examples of unrealistic data provided by the participants are "How long have you worked with UMS?" - "26 years" ( although the institution is only 14 years old). "How long have you been an engineer?" "50 years". "How long have you taught your subject (science-related subject) in English?". Answer: "Since the day I was born." Such responses are not valid and therefore useless.

In selecting areas or topics to research on, researchers have to keep Malaysia's multi-ethnic society in mind. However, sticking to safe topics will continue the tradition of not researching controversial issues. Thus, significant problems are not actually being highlighted and the findings of the research may not have much of an impact on the society.

## Academics as researchers

Malaysian academics aim to be established researchers because this will bring about recognition in the form of a promotion and enhance their academic statuses, as well as the university they are affiliated to. To be established as a researcher, one has to attain grants and research in areas hitherto still unexplored by other researchers, and thus contribute to knowledge and society significantly. Competition for grants is tough and the criteria for selection by the awarding body very stringent.

Organizations are highly selective, resulting in only a handful of academics who have successfully obtained these. Academics whose areas of expertise do not reflect the wishes of the awarding organizations may not be able to receive a grant.

Another issue is that grant-awarding organizations and the Malaysian government seem to favour research within the quantitative paradigm. However, in doing so, those researchers conducting research with the qualitative paradigm may be disregarded. Similarly, it is easier for researchers of science-related disciplines to obtain research funding and grants, compared to those of the social sciences. The implications are that research projects using qualitative methods may not be given a chance, and unresearched areas within social sciences that can be pertinent to society are left unexplored.

One of the dilemmas of novice academics is that conducting small-scale research studies will not earn them recognition nor any research grants, while conducting large-scale research may not yet be in accordance with their experience and expertise. Perhaps they can overcome this problem by teaming up with senior academics who will guide them in doing research. Problems arise when these novice academics do not get the recognition they deserve, because their work is overshadowed by that of senior academics who choose to lead the project. Moreover, unfair distribution of duties amongst the team members can invoke feelings of dissatisfaction, which in turn will affect the quality of the research. Additionally, a heavy teaching workload and large number student enrolments in courses may prevent academics from being actively involved and hinder their research.

## Suggestions

To develop a culture of research among academics, all parties involved – specifically the grant awarding organizations – should reduce bureaucratic procedures to enable researchers to pursue their research interest in conducive environments. For instance, researchers should be allowed to submit their e-science application form either electronically or on paper. Determining who will cooperate in the study before distributing the questionnaires could ensure a more substantial return rate. Busy participants should express their reluctance to participate early on, so that the researcher can look for other participants and time is not wasted waiting. Since researchers working in a team should be compatible professionally and personally, the selection of team members by a team leader must be based on professional criteria (i.e. areas of expertise, ability to work independently, flexibility, and ability to cooperate etc.) to ensure the success of the project.

## Conclusion

Despite all the constraints, Malaysian academics who know how to play the system have managed to secure these research grants. However, the government and universities should provide a more conducive environment for researchers, to motivate them to conduct research, so that the research culture can flourish in Malaysian academia and improve the academic profiles of these universities. Steps should be taken to improve the research scenario in Malaysia; otherwise all suggestions put forward will be merely rhetoric.

## References

- Habsah Hussin. (2006). Dimensions of questioning: A qualitative study of current classroom practice in Malaysia. *TESL-EJ*. 10(2), 18.
- Mohd Roshdi Hassan. (2007). Menjayakan universiti bertaraf dunia. *Utusan Malaysia*. pp. 2.
- Rozaman Ismail. (2007). TPM: Rombak sistem penyelidikan universiti. *Utusan Malaysia*. August 3, 2007. pp. 1.
- Sun, M. (2002). Going Global. Learning Curve. *New Sunday Times*. November 3, 2002. pp. 2.

# MyLinks

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

» *ContextMiner* is 'a framework to collect, analyze, and present contextual information along with the data from a variety of source.'

<http://contextminer.com/>

» *Directory UK ELT Research 2005-2008* is a free downloadable book which contains information on 857 research outputs from 52 institutions, including books and chapters in books, articles, conference papers, doctoral theses, and unpublished research, as well as funded projects.

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/transform/books/directory-uk-elt-resea>

» *Penzu* is an online diary and personal journal which you can keep private or share with colleagues, students and tutors. A powerful tool for reflection and research projects.

<https://penzu.com/>

» *Semantic Publishing: the coming revolution in scientific journal publishing* is an article about how the 'recent developments in Web technology can be used for semantic enhancement of scholarly journal articles, by aiding publication of data and metadata and providing "lively" interactive access to content'. Please note this is a PDF.

[http://imageweb.zoo.ox.ac.uk/pub/2008/publications/Shotton\\_Semantic\\_publishing\\_evaluation.pdf](http://imageweb.zoo.ox.ac.uk/pub/2008/publications/Shotton_Semantic_publishing_evaluation.pdf)

» *Twitter for Academia* is a blog post which offers advice and practical ideas on how to use twitter in academia.

<http://academhack.outsidethetext.com/home/2008/twitter-for-academia/>

» *Edmodo* is 'a private social platform for teachers and students to share ideas, files, events and assignments'. Some say it is twitter made safe for education. Great for online and blended learning.

<http://www.edmodo.com/>

» *RoohIt - Micro-info: Blog, Share, Save* is free online software to highlight any webpage. Rooh means soul/essence. It looks like a very handy research tool for keeping small bits of info... and saving lots of time! Check out the help page for demo.

<http://roohit.com/site/home.php>

» *The Student Learning Centre YouTube videos* help students study effectively and develop their academic writing skills: analysing case studies, APA referencing, understanding assignment questions, and more.

[http://www.youtube.com/view\\_play\\_list?p=BCB5EF2A5A4F24AD](http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=BCB5EF2A5A4F24AD)

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



[anacik@gmail.com](mailto:anacik@gmail.com)

<http://foryoualwaysonawednesday.blogspot.com/>

PS. Thanks to Nik Peachey, Valentina Dodge and Carl Dowse for pointing me to some of these links via twitter.



**44th**  
**ANNUAL**  
**INTERNATIONAL**  
**IATEFL**  
**CONFERENCE**  
**AND**  
**EXHIBITION**



**HARROGATE**

7th - 11th

APRIL 2010

See the Website for details - [www.iatefl.org](http://www.iatefl.org)