LTiC

Language Teaching in China

语言
教学
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Enseñanza de
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en China

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Fostering Learner
Autonomy

IN THIS ISSUE

Welcome to this special issue of Language Teaching in China magazine, in which our talented contributors reflect on the theme of learner autonomy after the successful Flying Solo Symposium held at XJTLU in Suzhou, China, last year.

As educators, equipping our students with the tools to become autonomous, lifelong learners is perhaps one of the most valuable things we can do. Undeterred by this responsibility, our contributors approach it in a variety of engaging ways, from the creative – involvement in a student club, use of creative writing techniques or podcasts in assessments – to the research-based – from student-led seminars to classroom grouping techniques.

Eagle-eyed readers will spot a reference to a certain Pink Floyd song; happily, education has come a long way since then, as the inventiveness and innovation of this issue's contributors demonstrates.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as I did!

-- Kat, LTiC Editor

As always, LTiC accepts articles in Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and Spanish, as well as English. If you are interested in contributing in any of these languages, please email: Kathryn.Paterson@xjtlu.edu.cn

Fostering Transferable Skills and Autonomy Through Running an Extracurricular Student Club

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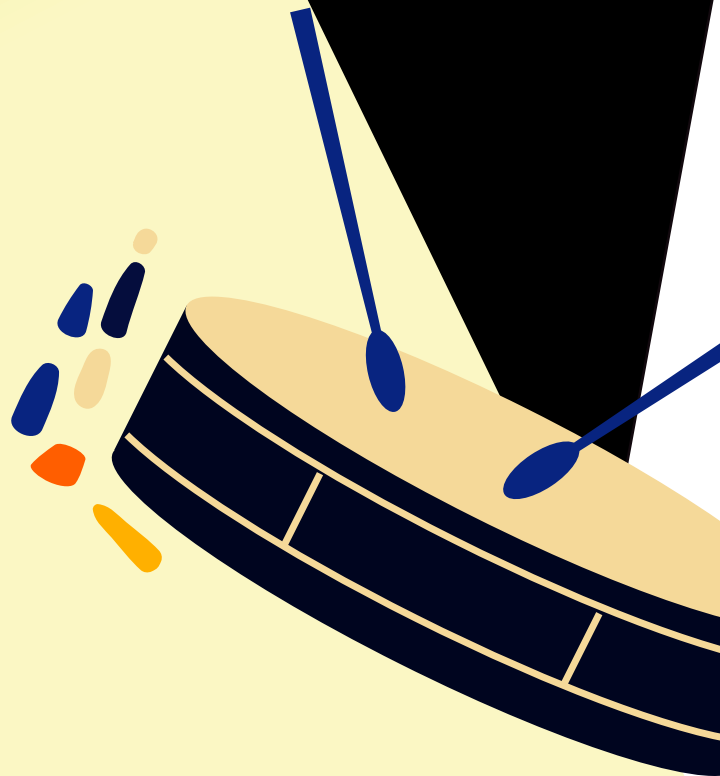
BEFORE BECOMING an english teacher, I worked as a musician and an educator in the performing arts. As a language lecturer, music is no longer greatly relevant to my work. However, running an extracurricular student music club not only enabled me to encourage students to have great fun playing music, but gave me the opportunity to share some of the transferable skills I had gained making music in my previous career. This article will outline some of those skills with reference to my own music projects, but for teachers who don't play music, transferable skills can be fostered by any number of activities, including (but absolutely not limited to): arts, crafts, sports, and outdoor pursuits. I would hope that teachers reading this article who are passionate about their hobbies and interests, might be encouraged to consider starting their own extracurricular student club.

My own music journey began whilst still at school when I was signed to a major record label and began touring and recording in the UK and USA. I later designed soundtracks for theatre and contemporary dance productions, and spent a number of years playing in a functions band, performing at weddings, parties and corporate events. When I resumed my studies, I realized that some of the most useful skills I had acquired making music were not specifically related to the performing arts. Without realizing, I had gained various transferable skills that were to prove invaluable to me as a student.

When I completed my undergraduate degree, I became an educator myself, initially working as a university outreach worker with 'hard-to-reach' youth in schools, community centres, and young offender institutions. Music was a key tool my colleagues and I utilized to try and engage young people who were resistant to formal learning, but the real goal was to try to impart broader skills that would help them move their lives in the right direction. I later founded a company that ran modules for a number of UK universities and drama schools, helping train Drama and Theatre Studies degree students to undertake creative work in the community. The transferable skills I had first developed as a musician, and that had helped me as a student, I was now utilizing as a teacher, employee and manager.

When, some years later, I came to Xi'an Ji-aotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), a joint venture university in Suzhou, China, to teach EAP to undergraduates, I was asked by the management what I could contribute to the university community. I suggested initiating student music groups, and was asked to found a music club. Playing in bands is second-nature to me, so I didn't have a set plan for the processes I would lead the students through. Similarly, although

I knew from my own history that a wealth of non-musical learning can come from the band-making experience, I didn't have a specific agenda of transferable skills that I hoped to foster. On reflection, I have identified that various parts of the process of forming a band can create space in which a number of specific transferable skills can be developed - many of which will be applicable to other types of extracurricular activity.

Extra English Practice

Perhaps the most obviously beneficial transferable skill that can be gained from participating in an extracurricular activity at an international university, is enhanced English practice. We can all agree that one of the major challenges we face is ensuring our students practice their English outside the classroom. With the decrease in the number of international students following the pandemic, it can also be a challenge to limit the use of Chinese during lessons. My music club at XJTLU comprised a majority of Chinese students, but also a number of international students including: Filipinos; Indonesians, and Kazakhstanis. English was the lingua franca in the rehearsal room, which meant students gained hours of additional functional English practice each week.

Fulfilling a Brief

As a result of the exceptional musical abilities of the students involved, the bands I mentored were offered professional engagements in bars, clubs and music festivals in and around Suzhou. Agreeing to play these shows provided the students with a wealth of learning - in particular, the necessity of fulfilling the requirements of an external brief. We have all graded papers where students have failed to understand the task properly, and we have all witnessed workplace conflicts that arise when staff and mangers have differing expectations. In the music club, ensuring the students understood that the brief (in this case, the clients' musical preferences) superseded their own choices, provided me with an opportunity to reinforce good practice applicable to both the students' studies, from following task sheets to applying the rules of grammar, and their subsequent working lives. Of course, not every extracurricular activity will involve professional engagements, but entering competitions or performing/displaying students' work for an audience could be useful contexts for fostering this skill.

Timekeeping and Workload Management

One of the challenges in running an extracurricular club is ensuring that the participating students' studies don't suffer, but this also presents an opportunity to foster invaluable time management skills. It could be suggested that attendance policies at the university sometimes do little to encourage good practice; on many courses, students can habitually miss classes and arrive late without any penalty. The individual nature of most academic work means the 'flaky' student has limited impact on their peers; however, this is not reflective of the standards expected in most workplaces. My experiences making music taught me that a lack of punctuality is top of the list of divisive factors that can lead to bands breaking-up. I also learned that 'talent' is a highly overrated and mis-attributed trait, and that many successful artists are born with limited abilities, but achieve greatness through hard work and the highest standards of professionalism. In the music club, I chose to implement a stringent attendance and punctuality policy. This meant that time management skills were fostered, but also that the student bands contained only the most committed, reliable individuals. Chinese students are well accustomed to following rules, but I tried to ensure there was a consensus towards band policy. Also, since

students will sometimes participate inextra-curricular activities out of a sense of duty rather than desire, I made it clear that they were under no obligation to stay in the club. When one student decided not to continue because they had decided to prioritize other activities, I was happy to commend them, both for their time management and autonomous decision making.

Teamwork

One of the things that surprised me when I came to China was how much individual virtuosity is admired by young musicians here. As someone without any formal musical training, who learned to play whilst immersed in subcultures defined by groove-based music, I have limited interest in the musical solo. I assumed that in a society with far stronger collectivist traits than my own, musicians would place even greater emphasis on the ability to perform as part of a group, but this was not the case; the majority of students who joined the music club were highly proficient in their individual instrument, but less well prepared to play in an ensemble. I therefore found that, although the student musicians' abilities often exceeded my own, a space existed where an understanding of the importance of teamwork could be fostered. As managers in any organization, from a football club to a university department will attest, star players can be an asset, but team players are far more valuable. In the music club, I focused

on emphasizing the importance of space in music ('it's about the notes you don't play' – as the old jazz adage goes); playing to serve the song not the self; and the satisfaction that can be gained from playing a small part in a successful collective endeavor – a key skill in students' future working lives.

Finding a Role

We can all agree that one of the most important journeys a young person can take is to discover their strengths and weaknesses. This can help an individual improve themselves, but also identify their essential character and what kind of workplace role they might be suited to in the future. In the music club, I encouraged the young people to identify their weaknesses and try different roles. This meant asking the lead star guitarist, who already worked professionally before joining the club, to step back on occasion and allow others the opportunity to play a solo. By doing this, students discovered musical attributes they didn't know they had. One Chinese violin player who had never previously played without notated music, was such a good improvisational soloist that we dubbed her 'the Jimmy Hendrix of the erhu'. At the same time, by stepping back, the lead guitarist was able to identify a weakness - that his rhythm playing could be improved. Of course, some of the musicians discovered that they were not suited to be soloists, but understanding one's limitations can also be an asset. In any

organization, many positions need to be filled, and it is often those less glamourous roles that have the greatest value to managers. (In musical circles, wannabe lead guitarists are ten-a-penny, but great rhythm guitar players are much rarer commodities). Similarly, when the bands were choosing songs to play, I would encourage them to stretch themselves in moments, but essentially play within their limitations in order to ensure their performances were impressive. As language teachers, we will encourage students to expand their palate of vocabulary and grammatical structures in manageable increments so they can maintain their accuracy and fluency. Maintaining accuracy and fluency in a musical context might mean choosing a simple pop song with a single complex section, rather than a progressive rock or jazz fusion track with complexity from start to finish.

Delivering in Challenging Conditions

Although much is written about the intolerable pressures currently facing university students, I would suggest that XJTLU is, on the whole, a nurturing environment, and teachers are highly sensitive to students' needs – certainly more so than managers in many workplace environments. Unlike most of

the undergraduates I taught in the UK, many of our students have limited or no experience of employment, so it can come as a shock to enter a workplace where they are subject to far greater pressure than they experienced during their studies. Although some courses include work experience placements, any additional opportunity for students to experience the rigors of the workplace can be invaluable. As I have already mentioned, the bands in my music club took on professional engagements, and this presented an opportunity to foster the skill of delivering in challenging conditions. Coping with performance anxiety is a hugely valuable skill that is applicable to various contexts, from speaking assessments, to job interviews and workplace presentations. In order to prepare the students to play shows in rowdy ex-pat bars and music festivals to crowds of thousands, I discussed various coping strategies that I had employed in my own career. These include, 'fake it till you make it' – understanding that only the most intense fear is usually visible to the audience, and the majority of nerves can be masked behind a smile (and perhaps a snazzy pair of sunglasses). Another key skill is how to cope with the inevitable mistakes that occur in performance. Again, understanding that the audience is far less aware of your errors than you are is key. Another strategy I employed to help prepare students for the unknown was to encourage improvisation in rehearsal. Not only does this make the process of

thinking on your feet more familiar, but it can also unlock brilliant musical moments than can enhance existing arrangements and can then be incorporated into songs. In the context of academia and language learning specifically, improvisation could be relevant to speaking practice that requires students to discuss topics without preparation time in order to test their argumentation skills and their ability to use language they haven't learned verbatim. More broadly, the ability to improvise and go off-script is surely an essential life skill in an increasingly unpredictable world.

Fostering Autonomy

I would hope that many of the transferable skills I have already mentioned would go towards fostering autonomous learners and citizens. Managing time, finding a role, improving weaknesses, recovering from mistakes, improvising – these skills could all hopefully encourage independence. However, any mention of autonomy in an academic context also suggests the ability to think critically. We are all aware of the cliché that Chinese students struggle with critical analysis, but those of us who teach here know that's a misconception. What may be true, though, is that our students are

sometimes reticent to express their views in front of their classmates. There may be a range of factors that contribute to this, but students' awareness of social hierarchies is likely relevant. In group activities, students will expect teachers to take decisions, and if the teacher abdicates that role, the group will usually try to elect a leader, who will often be the student with the most social currency. In the music club, I tried to foster critical thinking by encouraging the students to take decisions collectively.

I also insisted that if they did want to elect leaders for certain roles, those individuals should be chosen on merit, which was in contrast to practices I had observed in some other clubs. So, for example, the musical director would be the best musician, the student in charge of equipment would have the most technical knowledge, etc. My music club also included students with a broad range of backgrounds and identities, including women; those from countries without global influence; and those with minority sexual orientations, and my main concern was to ensure that in my club, they knew that their opinion was as valid as that of anyone else. This, I hoped, would help them to develop the confidence to express their opinions as they made their way in the world.

In summary, to teachers thinking of running an extracurricular club, I would say the benefits to students can be significant, and the learning outcomes may far exceed the skills associated with the activity itself. The experience may also enhance your own career development, as your efforts are likely to be recognized by managers in your annual work appraisal. More importantly, the activity might provide you with valuable personal insight about your role as a teacher. As a result of running an extra-curricular music club, I experienced the enjoyment that comes from a new band project, and my musical knowledge was expanded as I was introduced to a range of amazing traditional Chinese instruments. Far more valuable, though, were the insights I gained from observing how a diverse group of young people, studying and living in China, with varying identities and levels of social status, navigated the university and the wider society. That, in turn, led me to a better understanding of myself, my employer, and the country I now call home.

HEY, TEACHER, LEAVE THEM KIDS ALONE

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The Importance of Learner Autonomy

'LEARNER AUTONOMY' has become ubiquitous, especially in this dynamic realm of language learning. The concept of learner autonomy has emerged as a cornerstone of pedagogy as it shifts the focus away from traditional teacher-centered methodologies towards student-centered approaches, resonating with its emphasis on empowering learners to take ownership of their educational journey (Little, 1991). This paradigm shift underscores the special importance of fostering self-directed learning, a skill that extends beyond the confines of formal classrooms into the vast expanse of lifelong learning (Reigeluth and Joseph, 2002).

Several factors have contributed to the growing prominence of learner autonomy in language education. Firstly, the advent of technology has provided learners with unprecedented access to a vast array of learning resources, enabling them to engage in independent learning outside the classroom. This evolving landscape encompasses a broader spectrum of informal and out-of-classroom learning opportunities.

Secondly, the increasing recognition of diverse learning styles and preferences has necessitated a more individualized approach to language instruction, empowering learners to tailor their learning strategies to suit their unique needs.

Furthermore, the traditional model of knowledge transmission, where teachers impart ready-made knowledge to passive recipients, is giving way to a more collaborative approach, placing greater emphasis on student engagement and active participation (Ciubăncan, 2018). This shift in roles, from teacher-led instruction (i.e., subordinating the student) to student-driven learning (i.e., coordinating with the student), has placed renewed emphasis on the importance of learner autonomy, as individuals are increasingly expected to manage their own learning processes in a variety of contexts.

What is Autonomy?

'Autonomy' is not so easy to define as it is a multifaceted concept that has captured the attention of scholars across various disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, and politics. It encompasses a range of ideas related to self-governance, independence, and the ability to make one's own choices. Whether autonomy is a product or a process remains the subject of debate.

The concept of autonomy emerged in the 1960s as a response to the perceived overemphasis on authority and control in traditional educational settings. Over time, the understanding of autonomy has evolved, adapting to changing educational philosophies, societal norms, and technology. The table (1) below, presented by Raitskaya, Mekeko, and Golubovskaya (2021), illustrates the dynamic nature of autonomy, highlighting its transformation from a focus on individual freedom to a more nuanced perspective that incorporates elements of collaboration and interdependence.

Key Pedagogical Principles of Learner Autonomy

While interpretations may vary, several key pedagogical principles have emerged as consensus points in fostering learner autonomy.

Learner empowerment: Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, and make informed decisions about their learning goals, materials, and methods (Little, 2004).

Year	Researcher(s)	Definition or Attributes
1981	Holec, H.	the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981)
1991	Candy, P.C.	knowledge is ... built by the learner (Candy, 1991)
1997	Nunan, D.	fully autonomous learning exists only as an ideal concept; most beginner EFL learners are not autonomous (Nunan, 1997)
2007	Little, D.	LA involves critical reflection, decision-making and independent action (Little, 2007, p.30)
2010	Benson, P.	"a testable construct in foreign language education contexts" (Benson, 2010, p.95)
2021	Khaerudin, T. & Chik, A.	a "fully autonomous language learner can manage their learning in the absence of the classroom, teacher, or textbooks"; "LA is not synonymous with learning without teachers" (Khaerudin & Chik, 2021, p.39)

Table 1. Learner Autonomy and Autonomous Learner Definitions and Attributes

Guided autonomy: The teacher's role shifts from direct instruction to that of a facilitator, guiding students in planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating their learning decisions.

Learner reflection: Students engage in regular reflection on their learning experiences, identifying strengths and weaknesses to inform their future development. This reflection occurs at both the macro level (overall academic achievement) and the micro level (effectiveness of specific learning activities).

Freedom of choice: Learners are given the freedom to select from a variety of learning materials and methods, catering to their individual needs and preferences (Elliot et al., 2020).

Collaboration: This concept may seem paradoxical, for we try to emphasize the importance of our students' independence as individuals but at the same time, these individuals are also social beings who need to interact with others. Therefore, despite emphasizing individual independence, autonomy recognizes the importance of collaboration and interdependence. Students work together both inside and outside the classroom to exchange information, share ideas, and support one another's learning.

Autonomous Learners in the EAP Context

Alexander, Argent, and Spencer (2019) identify three key characteristics of autonomous learners in EAP contexts.

Activeness: Autonomous learners actively engage in the learning process, seeking out opportunities for practice and feedback.

Risk-taking: They are willing to take risks and are able to tolerate uncertainties, venturing beyond their comfort zones to try new approaches and strategies.

Reflectiveness: They regularly reflect on their learning experiences, evaluating their progress and identifying areas for improvement.

Navigating Cultural Differences

Many Chinese students entering EAP contexts come from high-context cultures characterized by power distance (Hofstede,
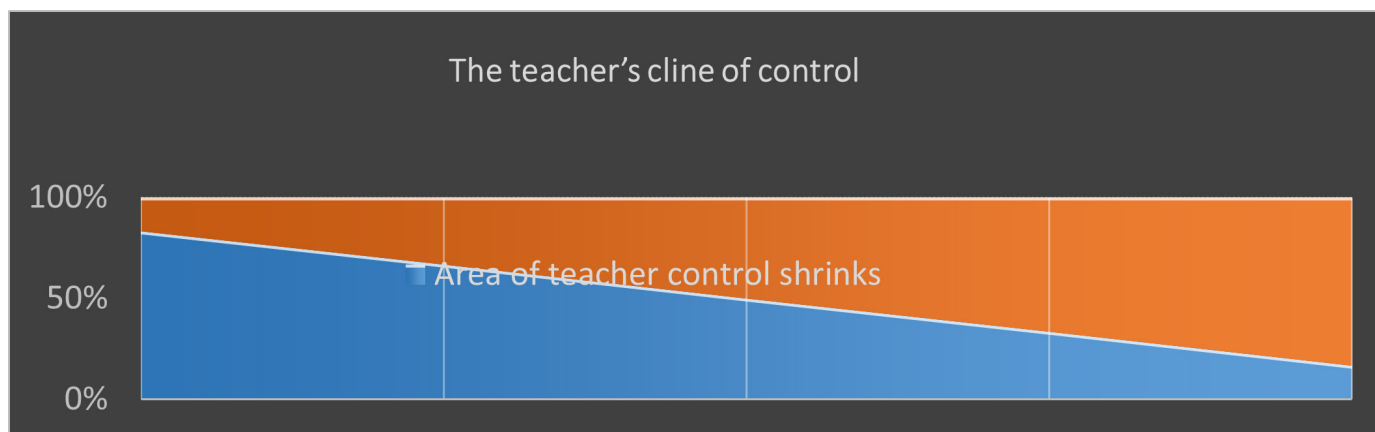
Image 1: The teacher's cline of control (Alexander, Argent, and Spencer, 2019)

2001), as shown in the top left corner of Image 1. In these cultures, teachers traditionally hold supreme authority with more control, with students expected to passively receive knowledge. This cultural background can make the transition to learner autonomy challenging for some students.

learner autonomy by guiding and supporting students as they develop their self-directed learning skills. This role is not one of abandonment but rather of empowerment, equipping learners with the tools and strategies necessary to navigate their own learning paths.

Teacher's Role in Fostering Learner Autonomy

What is the teacher's role in helping students to become more autonomous? Is it just "hey, teacher, leave them kids alone" (Pink Floyd, 1979)? While the phrase may seem like a call for complete autonomy, the reality is that teachers play a critical role in fostering

Importance of Teacher Cognition

Teacher cognition plays an important role in fostering learner autonomy. Teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy and their understanding of the process inform their teaching practices (Borg, 2009). It is essential for teachers to critically examine their own beliefs about learner autonomy. Do they view autonomy as a product to be achieved or a process to be nurtured? How

do their personal experiences and teaching philosophies influence their approach to fostering learner autonomy? For example, teachers will need to consider how much time in class can be used for such a purpose and decide how much freedom and guidance to give to students depending on their individualized experience or stage of development.

Putting Learner Autonomy into Practice

Though it was developed back in 1997, Nunan's (1997) five-step framework can still be relevant and valuable for cultivating learner autonomy.

Awareness: Raise students' awareness of their role in the learning process and the importance of taking ownership of their learning journey.

Involvement: Encourage students to participate in selecting learning objectives and tasks, gradually increasing their autonomy over their learning choices.

Intervention: Provide opportunities for students to make changes to their learning plans and tasks, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility.

Creation: Empower students to create their own learning objectives, tasks, and materials, encouraging creativity and self-direction.

Transcendence: Support students in extending their learning beyond the classroom, promoting lifelong learning habits and self-directedness.

Adopting a 'Meddler in the Middle' Teaching Approach

Which teaching mode, then, is most effective in the Chinese context of EAP to develop learner autonomy: sage on the stage, meddler in the middle, or guide on the side (Jackson, 2017)?

Sage on the stage: Teacher has control with no opportunity for students to take ownership.

Meddler in the middle: Teacher and students share knowledge in different areas: discipline and language.

Guide on the side: Laissez-faire, or care-free approach, may cause passivity in teachers.

In this context, where many students may come from high-context cultures with a strong emphasis on teacher authority, the "meddler in the middle" (McWilliam, 2009; Cleave, 2019; BALEAP TEAP, 2022) teaching role has emerged as an effective approach to fostering learner autonomy. This role serves as a mediator who bridges the transition. It involves striking a delicate balance between providing guidance and support while gradually relinquishing control to students as they develop their autonomy. Below are some useful suggestions on how the teacher can be a 'meddler in the middle' while teaching:

- Teacher as a leader (capable and experienced) is active when working with students in a team.
- Teacher should be engaged and "provides support and direction through structure-rich activities where the teacher is highly involved but not taking over the work of thinking and doing" (McWilliam, 2009, p. 290).
- Teacher provides opportunities for learning opportunities, such as a collaborative learning environment through different grouping strategies.
- Teacher challenges students to assume more responsibilities.
- Teacher encourages students to take risks and be able to tolerate uncertainties.
- Teacher should encourage collaborative dialogues (Laurillard, 2012) in teaching and feedback, scaffolded through critical questioning.
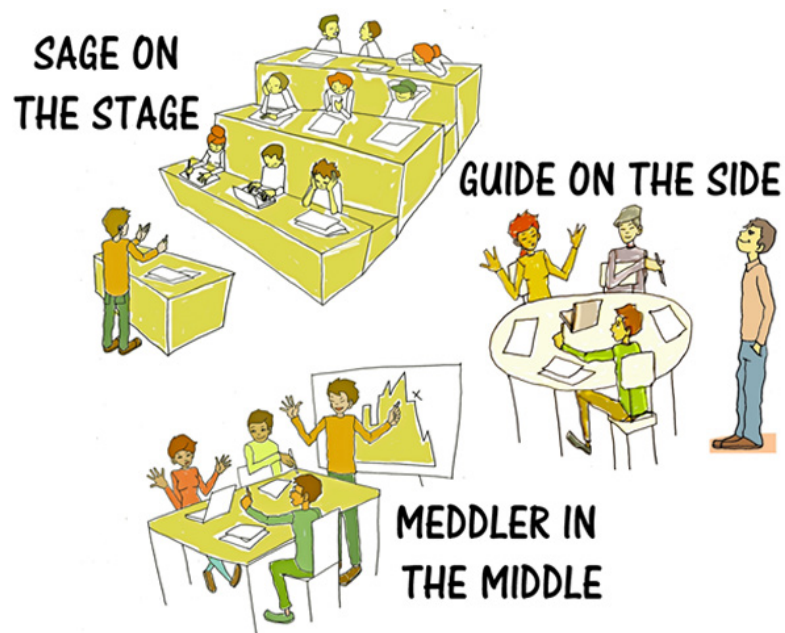
Image 2: Teaching mode (Jackson, 2017)

Practical Considerations

The concept of a linear cline of teacher control, with teachers gradually decreasing their involvement as students increase their autonomy, may not always hold true in practice because the dynamic nature of the learning process should be flexible and responsive. Therefore, it may require teachers to adjust their level of involvement based on the specific context such as time constraints, the balance between guidance and freedom as well as individualized needs.

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Approaching Controversial Issues Through Critical Discussions in an EAP Classroom

The Risks, Values, and Techniques
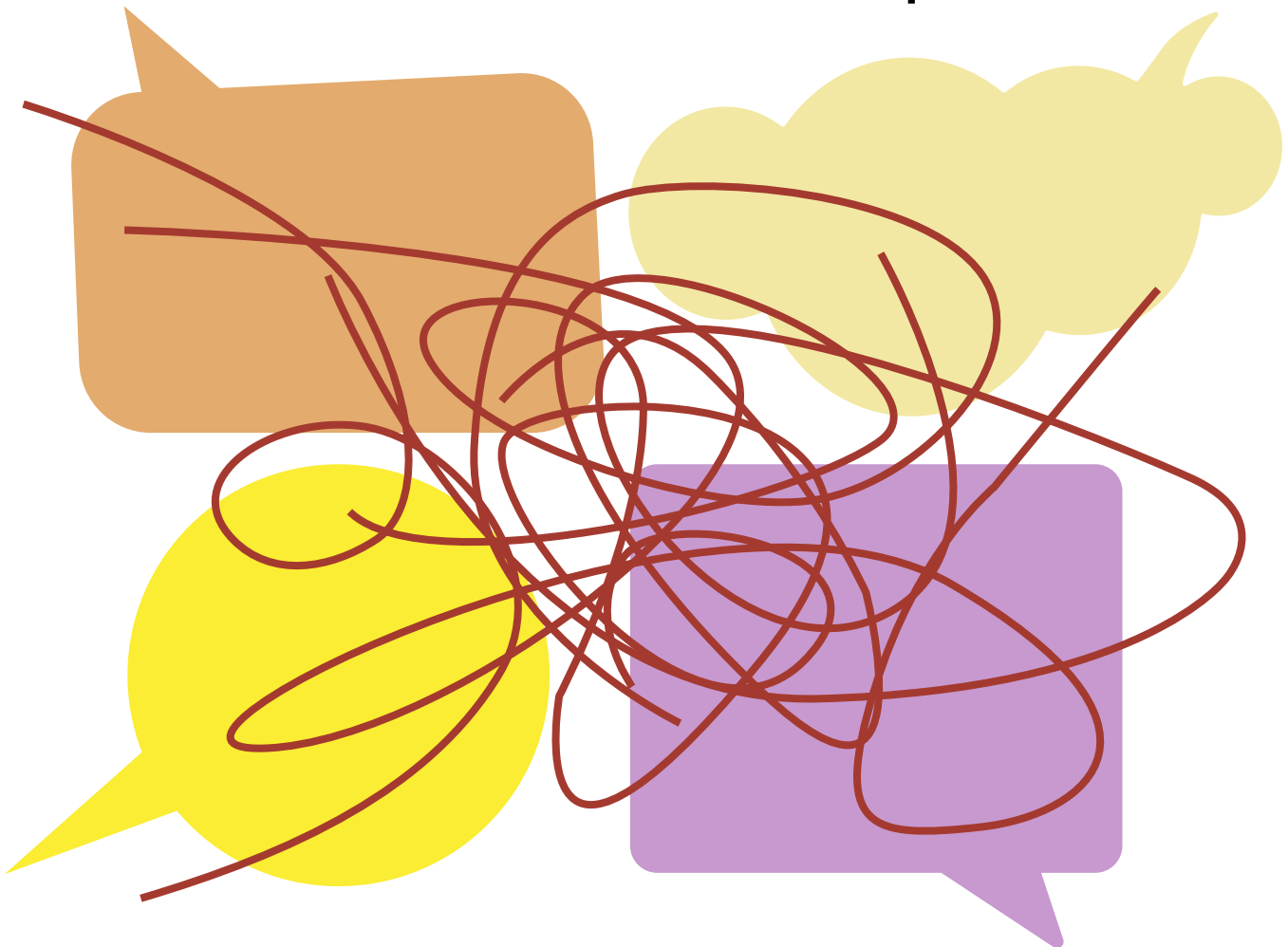
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Introduction

LANGUAGE TEACHERS and educational institutions are often intimidated by controversial topics in classrooms for different reasons. However, avoiding, ignoring, or deflecting from them deprives learners of the opportunity to enhance critical thinking and language proficiency in academic studies and participation in global conversations. Therefore, discussing important social issues that might be controversial and drawing on critical pedagogy in EAP classrooms is necessary. This article starts by listing possible controversial topics and addressing the concerns teachers may have, then discusses how appropriately approaching such issues benefits students' critical thinking skills with examples and strategies based on research and experiences, and finally, concludes with current limitations and future suggestions for EAP teachers and researchers.

Why We Should Stop Being So Nervous Around Controversial Topics: Responses to The Concerns

Gender, sexuality, race, religion, politics, narcotics, alcohol, all the "isms" ...when you look at these "PARSNIP"s, a term invented to conveniently warn teachers against controversial topics, how does that make you feel? Why are they often avoided? This section will discuss four common concerns.

1) Discomfort: I don't want to make students uncomfortable.

Considering the affective aspects of foreign language teaching, our worries about students' discomfort, anxiety, or resistance are not illegitimate. However, we must also remember that learning is uncomfortable, as with any changes or transformation. Therefore, this kind of risky move might be necessary. It is not that we can bring up such topics randomly or recklessly; on the contrary, a meaningful and appropriately 'uncomfortable' discussion on controversial issues requires careful consideration, preparation, and mindfulness.

2) Knowledge gap: Who am I to guide such a discussion?

As Chun (2016) argues, teachers do not have to be experts in everything to be critical and to create spaces for learners to have meaningful discussions. Similarly, according to Brown (2015), exposing our lack of knowledge as teachers to students is vulnerable, yet admitting that and figuring it out with students also makes us human. When our authoritative figure in knowledge is

undone, students could become knowledge producers themselves.

Discussing these topics is never about presenting our knowledge or forcing any predetermined agenda on students; it is about opening the space in the classroom as well as students' minds so that they can voice their own opinions and share their experiences on these crucial topics in society and around the globe using English. Holding this in mind, teachers would be less burdened by the colossality of these important topics and may be able to approach them one bit at a time.

3) Plans vs. Opportunities: Do I have the space and time in my lessons for this?

Chun (2016) highlights the challenge of engaging in critical discussions on topics that are not initially addressed in our curriculum or lesson plans. Similarly, Norton and Pavlenko (2004) suggest the concept of a "lived curriculum," where critical issues like feminism are directly addressed, yet such practices are rare in ELT institutions across all levels in China. If these discussions are considered extra activities by teachers or institutions, there may not be sufficient time

allocated for them. While researchers value critical pedagogy in language classrooms, educational institutions and practitioners may not prioritize it due to constraints such as school policies, curriculum settings, and lesson objectives. As a result, it becomes challenging to find an appropriate and meaningful place for these discussions. The precise answers to these questions often rely on the support or opposition from our institutions, which may not be evident until risks are taken.

If the inclusion of critical discussions is left to spontaneity, teachers must seize and enhance or dismiss such learning opportunities. Harmer (2001) discusses opportunistic teaching and moments in class that require immediate lesson modification, suggesting that planning should be viewed as a proposal rather than a fixed agenda. In my experience, being well-prepared for a lesson allows me more flexibility to adapt and modify it in response to the actual class situation. Therefore, whether or not we could preplan a meaningful discussion activity that is related to the lesson topic, we can find the space and time in our classrooms to include such conversations due to our familiarity with the lessons as well as our students.

4) Criticism and risks: What if I say the wrong thing?

Joseph Jeyaraj and Harland (2016) interviewed 13 critical pedagogues in the ELT field worldwide to explore less-discussed issues regarding implementing critical pedagogy in language classrooms. One of the main concerns raised is the question of legitimacy and the potential for indoctrination. The concept of "greater social justice for all" can be interpreted differently in different contexts, leading to debates about what is right. As a result, many teachers, especially novice ones, experience imposter syndrome and feel inadequate to engage in meaningful discussions on social issues in the language classroom (LaPalme et al., 2022). However, it is important to remember that our role as language teachers is not to engage in debates or impose our personal opinions on social matters. Instead, our goal is to provide students with opportunities, tools, and guidance to have meaningful discussions on topics that are deeply relevant to them as individuals with varied identities within society, reflecting their lived experiences.

Furthermore, avoiding indoctrination lies in teachers' awareness and conscience. In the study of Joseph Jeyaraj and Harland (2016), whether or not the interviewed

teachers advocate for critical pedagogy, all of them showed awareness of their influence on students and understood that they should never force their ideas on students but let students come to their own conclusions. This is what matters because once we recognize our inevitable impact on students (or during any social interaction with anyone), there is simply no way for us to stay completely neutral – we can only be fair. Therefore, indoctrination can be avoided by having such a principle in mind and combining it with mindfulness in our classroom interaction with students.

On the other hand, the risks teachers and students may encounter in different teaching contexts are inevitable. The teaching contexts and our estimation of the possible risks decide how much we may talk about critical topics in our classroom. This may sound frightening on the surface, but considering the nature of our classroom interaction and objectives, it is unlikely that language classroom participants would dive much deeper into debates on controversial topics. That is, the actual stakes might be lower than what the controversial topics themselves suggest.

However, what intimate us the most might be the unexpected reactions from students. For example, what if students feel a topic is too personal? What if extreme comments are made? What if students get into emotional arguments with one another? These are all valuable concerns that rely on teachers to be the mediators using professional classroom management skills which will be discussed in more detail later, yet it is also worthwhile to remember that students' different reactions can be expected from other activities we may normally include in a lesson as well.

Why We Should Be Excited Instead: Reasons to Include Critical Discussions in EAP Classrooms

Because of the uniqueness of our EFL teaching contexts, critical pedagogy may not seem directly applicable in our practice, especially when it comes to advocating for social justice, which is much less often discussed compared to Western or ESL societies. Controversial issues from politics to dietary choices may be well heard of but rarely discussed among newly admitted university students in China, let alone discussing them in a foreign language. However, it does not mean there are no valuable implications for us. Any institution that promotes learner autonomy would not

argue against the value of such a space for learners to take learning into their own hands and (re)shape or choose their own identity. The importance of incorporating critical discussions into our EAP classrooms, even with controversial topics closely related to language learning and students' lived experiences, will be discussed from three aspects.

1) Awareness and Perspective Gaining

Who cares? Why bother? This might be teachers' and students' first doubt when discussing social topics that are deemed controversial. However, what important topics are not controversial? It is not to say that any discussion on such topics would cause conflict, but people hold different views on all sorts of issues, whether they share them openly or not.

Chun (2020)'s study on the representations of anorexia in an EAP classroom reminded me of the recurring theme in Children's Literature, 'windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors' (Johnson et al., 2018). 'Mirrors' reflect personal experience; 'windows' show what's outside; and 'sliding glass doors' allow one to immerse in others' experiences with empathy. They are just as applicable in teaching college-level students, especially regarding content and

materials. Materials we use in our lessons that directly reflect learners' experiences are easily considered relevant, and students tend to feel engaged directly. However, the relevance of 'windows' sometimes could be harder to see. To engage students, we must point out the relevance and importance of looking through the windows, whether to broaden our worldview or to compare and examine our own situations. Specifically, for an EAP classroom, critical discussions on both 'window' and 'mirror' issues would facilitate students' critical thinking and provide language practice to discuss such vital issues. Therefore, bringing critical topics into the light is an empowering move.

2) Skill Training: Critical Thinking, Communication, and Language

Like language learning, students cannot become fluent in critical thinking and discussion without sufficient practice. When it comes to classroom discussions, listening and speaking are both involved. Compared with reading and writing, they are more immediate and require more intense attention. By listening to others' opinions that may be similar ("mirrors") or different ("windows") in an accepting

classroom environment, students are enhancing their listening skills not only linguistically but also socially, which allows them to be effective, constructive, and empathetic communicators. Similarly, by practicing offering their views on more serious topics, students' speaking skills – specifically, their accuracy, fluency, and appropriacy of language use will all be enhanced.

The main implication from Manalo and Sheppard's (2016) study for me, as an EAP teacher, is the need to bridge the gap between students' critical thinking performance and language proficiency. While students may be perceived as lacking critical thinking skills, especially Asian students studying in international or Western contexts (Lun et al., 2010), it is important to consider that their limited demonstration of such skills in academic tasks could be due to their proficiency level in a second language. Therefore, it is incorrect for us as teachers to assume that students lack the ability to think critically. Like Gloria, a character from the sitcom Modern Family, who asks, "Do you even know how smart I am in Spanish?" we should recognize that students' language proficiency does not determine their critical thinking abilities. Regardless of their language proficiency or output performance, students are capable of developing critical thinking skills in

our language classrooms, and it is our responsibility as teachers to support them. Additionally, we should acknowledge that critical thinking is a transferable skill that can be applied across different languages, and we should help students transfer and demonstrate it in a second language.

The findings of Fahim et al. (2012) regarding the impact of training critical thinking strategies strongly resonate with my experience as a second language user during my graduate studies. It is commonly assumed that complex tasks create a higher cognitive load for learners, hindering their language comprehension. However, the heavy reading workload not only served as language practice that significantly improved my linguistic proficiency but, more importantly, compelled me to spend more time reading and thinking in my second language. Consequently, I read more attentively and engaged in deeper analysis of the texts, which pushed me to surpass many of my native-speaking classmates. This realization leads me to believe that while students may initially struggle to perform critical thinking tasks in English as a foreign language, it can ultimately become a competitive advantage as their language proficiency grows.

3) Power Shifting and Identity Expanding

Recognizing, reflecting, and analyzing the roles and impacts of English, English learning in EFL or EAP contexts, learners, teachers, and materials, we can see that implementing critical practices in our classrooms helps both teachers and students to examine and expand their identities, and it changes the power dynamics between the teacher and the students in the classroom.

3.1) The Role of EAP Classrooms and Higher Education Institutions

Whether EAP or other subjects, a responsible higher education institution should prepare its students for their emerging societal roles in various ways – culturally, economically, socially, politically, mentally, etc. Simply evaluating the materials I have used in the past few years across two different tertiary-level institutions, I can see an evident lack of emphasis on the sociocultural aspects of language in the materials we use. It is understandably tricky because considering 1) in the beginning, our curriculum often does not directly mention their cultural,

emotional, or political goals; 2) in the middle, teachers are probably not willing to take the risk and approach the hard-to-explain, no-clear-answer discourse; and 3) at the end, the subtlety of these objectives makes them nearly impossible to assess in the short term – at least, it is nearly impossible to standardize them. However, ignoring them deprives learners of a meaningful learning experience.

3.2) The Role of English

Sung (2012) criticizes institutions with practices of ELT focusing solely on linguistic knowledge and functions, yet these practices can still be seen everywhere. Whether it was decades ago or today, my English learning experience in school verifies this phenomenon. Once again, the sociocultural aspects of language and language learning require more attention. In EAP teaching contexts, if we only view our learners and their learning experience as merely to survive academia instead of a whole social being and interaction, it also undermines their capacity, roles, and the impact and potential of the language. Therefore, it is vital to recognize that English is not only a language or a tested subject in schools, colleges, or job markets. English as a lingua franca or a global language for communication, is still the medium used in important economic, political, cultural, societal

conversations across the world. Teachers and students need to see the power of this language and understand that it can be both empowering and restricting. Sung (2012) asks a thought-provoking question: "What kinds of English am I selling to my students?", which I believe should be reflected on by all ELT practitioners.

3.3) The Role of Teacher and Learners

Sung (2012) discusses the resistance encountered when discussing critical issues with fellow teachers, a phenomenon that still exists today. However, the typical attitude of 'just a language teacher' is delusional because our interactions with teachers, students, and peers, all living human beings, are social and, therefore, influential. This is where our identities are shaped, reshaped, negotiated, and chosen.

It is not the intention of this article to burden language teachers or students with immense responsibilities to talk about significant social issues in depth, but to provide the space and ways for students to start to have meaningful conversations for their language learning and social experiences. Anyone can talk about hobbies and the weather; what our society lacks are conversations that are civilized, non-violent, empathetic, and constructive.

Considering students' linguistic level, many believe learners should only start with the basics before approaching meaningful, higher-level-thinking-invoking activities, which completely discounts learners' knowledge and capacity. This is especially important for teachers to be aware of in university-level classrooms where learner autonomy is heavily emphasized. When we view students as whole social beings, their identities in a classroom may be expanded, their lived experience recognized and valued, and their confidence increased as active language users instead of just passive learners.

Strategies and Techniques in Practice

A range of classroom examples can be found from research, such as the discussions of anorexia (Chun, 2020), immigrants and textbook representation (Chun, 2016), mental illness (Ortiz-López & Keitt, 2022), gender and feminism (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004), (neo)colonialism (Sung, 2012), sexuality and rights (Joseph Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016). In recent years, I have also included in my classroom discussions

such as gender roles (female entrepreneurs, male makeup products, gender options in questionnaires), mortality and faith (beliefs about the afterlife), cyber violence (causes, consequences, and laws), freedom of speech (cybercrime and government regulation), etc.

Based on the mentioned research and my own practice, teacher talk in these discussions exhibits five characteristics: 1) "I hear you." - acknowledging students' contributions and boosting their confidence; 2) "What do you mean?" - seeking clarification and inviting students to elaborate on their perspectives; 3) "Is that so? Why? How?" - challenging students to reason and analyze their viewpoints; 4) "What about you?" - engaging other students and encouraging diverse opinions; 5) "Why are we doing this?" - promoting reflection and evaluation, fostering metacognition and language awareness.

Other strategies from my teaching experience include: 1) Holding assumptions that facilitate and not debilitate, which means considering students' current abilities and their potential for future growth; 2) Encouraging responses and posing additional questions to delve deeper into students' thoughts; 3) Preparing students for future discussions by analyzing language usage in group discussions, focusing on accuracy, fluency, and appro-

priateness; 4) Embracing uncomfortable moments and fostering critical thinking by gradually introducing complex topics and addressing the discomfort, effort required, and potential benefits and explicitly discussing the reasons for incorporating critical discussions with students. 5) Co-establishing rules and etiquettes for discussion activities with students to ensure a safe, respectful, and constructive environment for ongoing conversations.

Conclusion and Implications:

After discussing why controversial topics should be approached through critical discussions and how we may implement critical practices in EAP classrooms, three keywords have come to mind: awareness (pre-class), mindfulness (mid-class), and reflectiveness (post-class). While awareness and reflectiveness are evident, mindfulness is often overlooked but crucial. Teachers must be attentive and engaged, actively listening to students' contributions, making connections, and seizing teaching opportunities.
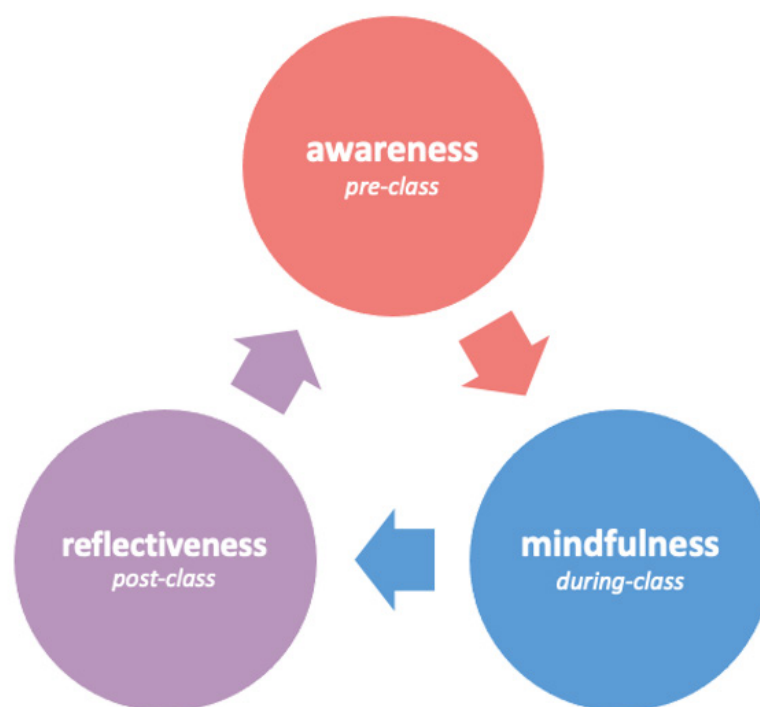
Figure 1. Requirements and reminders for teachers to guide critical discussions in the classroom

However, the main limitation of this practice is the difficulty of immediate assessment, and more empirical evidence from case studies on classroom interaction and discourse is necessary. Additionally, closer examination and reflection on the theories and strategies, the evaluation of their effectiveness in practice and impact on students' language learning, and further development of practical and updated techniques are also required. Exploring critical ELT practice in China is crucial, as it would provide meaningful insights for all stakeholders.

Controversial issues can appear daunting in language classrooms; however, as comedian Mae Martin said discussing sexuality issues on a podcast episode of We Can Do Hard Things with Glennon Doyle, if we could remove the heaviness from them, we make room for creativity in our conversations.

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STUDENT-LED

Enhancing Learner Engagement & Autonomy Through Student-Led Seminars and Developing an Instrument For Assessment

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THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS and recent advances in AI have forced educators to rethink how they assess student learning. This is particularly true in the areas of English speaking and listening assessment where traditional speaking presentations have proven unreliable in an online environment. Online settings allow students to easily populate AI-generated scripts for speaking and AI-translation for listening exercises, making them both inauthentic and futile. In this article, I introduce a particular intervention aiming to simultaneously solve the problem of AI-generated student responses while providing a strong push towards greater learner autonomy in the classroom.

The intervention was a series of student-led seminars and the development of an assessment instrument to measure student engagement in an authentic classroom discussion context in both on-site and online learning environments. The instrument is aligned with growth mindset principles and the concept of feedforward, which have been shown to improve English language performance in Chinese ESL students (Hu et al., 2022). This article introduces the rationale behind the student-led seminars, how these were implemented in the classroom, and the development of the assessment instrument. I will also share the results of action research undertaken to evaluate and further develop this approach to teaching, learning and assessment.

Background

The student-led seminar concept originated from classroom practice I first encountered on the University of Bristol's 2016 pre-sessional course to support non-native speakers in meeting the English language entry requirements. I had the opportunity

to further pioneer this approach on the University of Bath's pre-sessional courses 2017-2019. The impetus for including such student-led activity on these programmes stems from the importance of learning through peer discussion in tutorials or seminars at university level, but takes in to account that students from English as a Second Language (ESL) backgrounds are often found to be ill-prepared for such experiences and need to boost their communicative confidence in authentic discussion environments (Alexander et al., 2018; Aguilar, 2016; Robinson et al., 2001). The literature recommends authentic real-world listening contexts would be preferable to the inauthentic scripted texts that comprise much current listening skills instruction, practice and assessment (Wagner, 2014; He & Jiang, 2020). The English language classroom can become a space where assessment focuses on more authentic performance and interaction rather than relying on inauthentic materials targeting high stakes exams, and student-led seminars are one way of achieving this in a way that also strongly encourages student autonomy.

I spearheaded the construction of a student-led seminar programme over the course of one semester in a university in China where English was the medium of instruction for Chinese students aiming to complete a degree awarded by a UK university. The assessment instrument was originally constructed to measure student engagement in these authentic discussion contexts and was deliberately designed to be as simple to implement as possible to cope with the practical issues arising from online teaching and learning during COVID lockdowns. The instrument was also intended as a means of providing feedforward (Careless, 2007; Orsmond et al., 2011) to foster growth mindset and maximise student engagement in the learning process. At the end of this course, students reported that the student-led seminar process had boosted their confidence in communicating in English, and the teachers delivering the course deemed the results to be sufficiently reliable to inform student speaking and listening grades, although no formal data analysis was undertaken.

I then moved to work in a bilingual (English & Chinese) middle-school environment and realized that the concept of student-led seminars could be adapted to fit the requirements of the International Bacca-laureate's (IB) inquiry-based learning. A colleague was interested in this work and together we undertook action research (Clark & Terrett, 2023) to enhance student engagement through student-led, inquiry-based seminars in which students practiced listening, speaking, and writing skills in an authentic discussion context.

Implementation of the Student-led Seminars

Student-led seminars, by their very nature, generate a strong student-centered learning environment. Students take ownership of their learning and work together to explore topics. During the process, they may choose the topics they want to study, design their own learning experiences, and lead discussions with their peers. Provided with such opportunities to collaborate, students learn from each other and are encouraged to work together on projects and assignments. Student-led seminars can therefore be a very effective way to engage students in their learning and assessment.

The seminar sessions were implemented in a similar way in both university and middle school contexts. In the university, the student-led seminars were trialed for half a semester and then run for a further six weeks with topics drawn directly from the students' majors and English for Academic Purposes classes functioning as a means of review as well as promoting discussion skills. The student-led seminars in middle school were run over an eight-week IB unit in an English Language Acquisition class with students whose speaking and listening skills

had previously been assessed as between B2 and C1 on the CEFR framework. In both cases, teachers modeled the seminar format in the first week, explaining the instrument and how students would be assessed. Students reflected with teachers on what parts of the teachers' example presentations and classroom activities led to more class discussion and which activities were less successful. This feedforward growth mindset through reflection was thereby instilled early in the course, modeled by teachers and repeated after each seminar. In the second week, students chose their groups, chose topics within the scope of the unit's 'statement of inquiry', and began to research content for the seminar they would be leading. Middle school IB students initially brainstormed the unit topic as a class and each group selected their specific focus from the results on the board. Students were given agency in choosing topic and group members, thereby increasing student autonomy and, hopefully, student engagement.

Each week, the student seminar leaders typically started with a short PowerPoint presentation. Those who had fully understood the concept of a seminar then initiated a variety of activities aiming to provoke classroom discussion. The most effective seminar leaders considered the seating arrangements in the classroom and even brought in realia for their classmates to discuss. The most successful presentations

included visualized data or images that sparked discussion. The least successful tended to deliver slides of dry textual information and then simply end with the instruction to 'Discuss!'
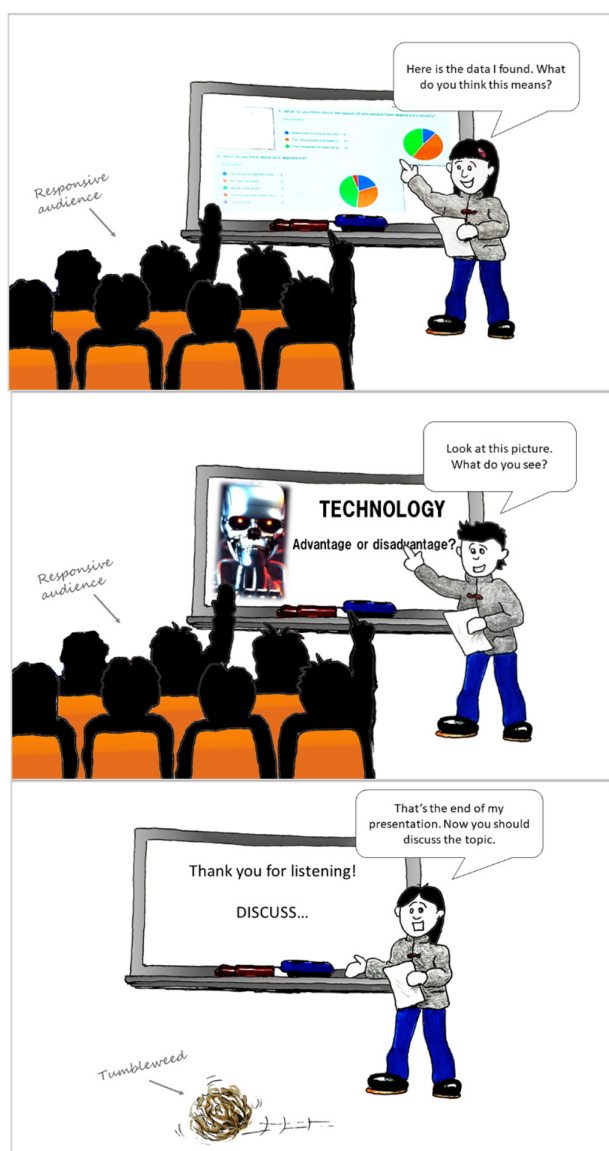
Illustrations: M. A. Terrett (2023)

During the seminars, the teacher's role was to stay in the background and monitor the students' performance, allowing the students to take control of the classroom, thus maximizing learner autonomy. I would occasionally interject if a student raised an interesting point that I felt was worthy of more discussion through follow-up questions. Otherwise, my role was predominantly focused on scoring the students' efforts on the instrument. Towards the end of the sessions, I also dropped hints to the seminar leaders about students who they might want to encourage into the discussion based on my scoring in the instrument.

Development of the Instrument

The instrument has gone through several iterations since its initial outing measuring just the number of spoken turns and quality of contributions students made in the seminars. Quality of contributions was defined simply as contributions that extended, challenged or otherwise developed from a previous speaker's contribution, indicating that the student was following the discussion and capable of appropriate response. The students

were awarded zero, one or two on an Excel sheet depending on the number of times they exhibited each criterion, with two representing two or more (i.e., scoring was capped at two). These were colour-coded to aid reflective practice and feedforward (see below).

After the first few weeks, students had realized that they could call on each other during the seminars, allowing their classmates to deliver prepared contributions. Cynically, I might suspect that the students were trying to game the system, but this at least demonstrated that they were preparing appropriately for class, which for many students represented a significant improvement in study skills. I might also add that this could be considered evidence of student autonomy in action, whereby they were meeting together before the session to prepare their performance on their own volition. This was deemed worthy of explicit acknowledgement in the instrument under the new criterion evidence of preparation, which was scored on the same 0-2 scale with students

who did not provide evidence marked zero. Minimal evidence scored one, and evidence of in-depth research was awarded two.

However, this did not offer much progress away from the AI-prepared scripts, so teachers and students felt recognizing those who took the initiative to raise their hand and contribute in unscripted discussion (or 'freestyle' as the students called it) was also very important. The updated instrument was used for the remainder of the university course.

Quality of contributions was the only criterion that required students to have listened to and understood their peers' contributions, so when I proposed the student-led seminars in the middle school environment, my collaborative colleague added more measurements for listening as part of our action research (Clark & Terrett, 2023). Figure 1 shows the third iteration of the instrument with the original criteria on the left and the new listening criteria on the right.

Students	Speaking (0, 1 or 2 with 2 representing 2 or more)				Listening/engagement (off task=0; on task=2)			
	Number of spoken turns	Quality of spoken contributions*	Initiative	Evidence of preparation	at 5mins	at 10mins	at 15mins	at 20mins
Student 1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	
Student 2	1						2	
Student 3	2	1	2			2	2	

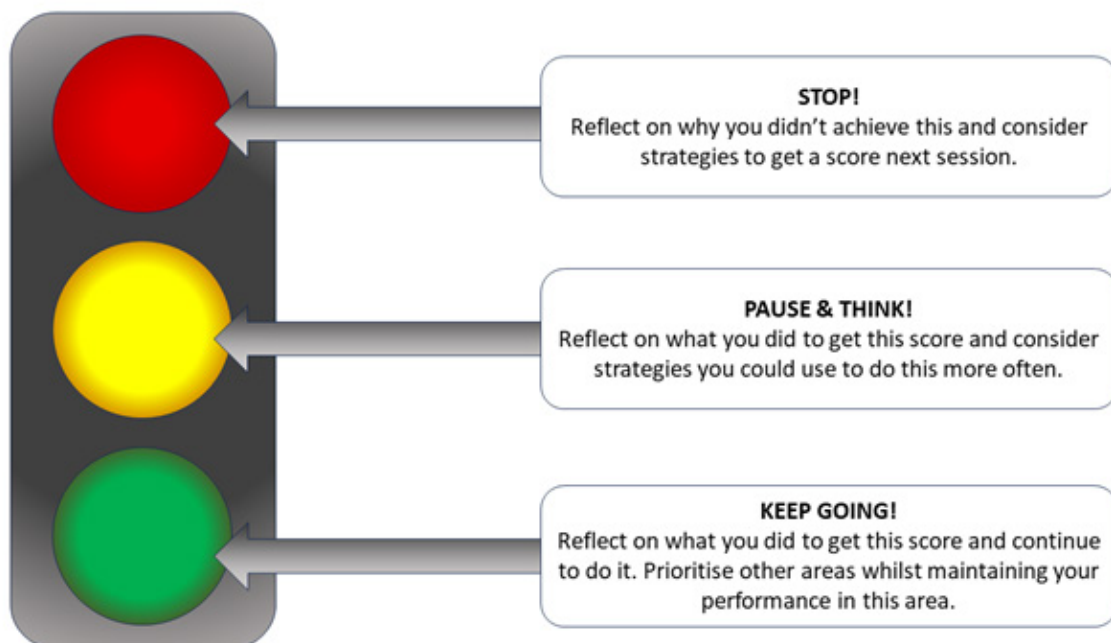Figure 1: Third iteration of the instrument

Listening was scored as either zero or two at five-minute intervals, representing that the students either were or were not presenting observable listening behaviors. We defined positive observable listening behaviors as eye contact with the speaker, note-taking, and physical gestures of agreement or disagreement. Negative behaviors were inappropriate body posture such as head on desk, attention not focused on the presenters, and doing work unrelated to the topic presented. The traffic light colour coding was maintained to aid feedforward.

Feedforward

Research has shown that feedforward is particularly effective in boosting student engagement. Feedforward is a type of feedback that focuses on helping students to improve their work in the future. It is specific, actionable, and oriented towards future performance. When students receive feedforward, they are more likely to reflect on their work and identify areas where they can improve. This can lead to increased motivation and engagement in the learning process. To this end, the scores of zero, one or two on the instrument were categorized into a simple red, yellow and green traffic light colour code providing a convenient way of visualizing students' performance so students and teachers could easily reflect on it in the seminars and see where improvements could be made in future seminar sessions. In the middle school environment, this also had the benefit of foregrounding student reflection which is explicitly required by IB.

STOP!
Reflect on why you didn't achieve this and consider strategies to get a score next session.

PAUSE & THINK!
Reflect on what you did to get this score and consider strategies you could use to do this more often.

KEEP GOING!
Reflect on what you did to get this score and continue to do it. Prioritise other areas whilst maintaining your performance in this area.

Illustrations: M. A. Terrett (2023)

Results of the Action Research

The first action research project (Clark & Terrett, 2023) compared the student scores on the instrument for the first and last seminar. We were hoping that this would provide evidence of improvement in student speaking and listening skills during the course. The results indicate that the student-led seminars approach increased observable listening behaviours among students and significantly improved initiative and number of spoken turns. However, no significant increase was seen in the overall speaking scores. In particular, quality of contributions did not improve and, rather counterintuitively, no correlation was found between evidence of preparation and quality of contributions. Our conclusions were that this student-led seminar approach encouraged more speaking and improved willingness to contribute to classroom discussion. The application of the instrument for feedforward seemed to have been very effective in improving observable listening behaviours and, therefore, an increased potential for listening comprehension and successful listening engagement. However, observable listening behaviours do not necessarily indicate an improvement in listening for understanding.

We continued to explore the student-led seminar approach and further develop the instrument in a follow-up study. For this we created a graphic organizer as scaffolding to support the students' preparation and to also help them make additional notes during the seminar. We felt this was important for two reasons. First, we supposed this might improve the evidence of preparation to a level where it did positively correlate with quality of contributions. Second, a score for note-taking could contribute to the listening score, which was currently only measuring appropriate listening behaviours rather than actual understanding through listening. Another change made to the instrument based on our first round of action research was the division of the quality of contributions criterion into three levels based on Bloom's taxonomy. This, we felt, would give students clearer and more specific guidance as to what they needed to do to improve their performance in the seminars, thus bolstering the feedforward aspect of the instrument concerning quality of spoken turns. We also determined to compare the results of the instrument with student scores on external standardized speaking and listening tests, which might help to validate the instrument for its role in assessing language.

Another important aspect of this research is that from the beginning, the students were involved not only in the learning, but also in the development of the assessment.

Figure 2: The latest iteration of the assessment instrument

When we reflected on the first middle school student-led seminar course and discussed improvements to the instrument, students said that those who were not reliant on reading prepared scripts or PowerPoint slides should be rewarded for more authentic speaking fluency. Some students also felt quite strongly that the scores should not be capped at two. These proposals were accepted by the teacher-researchers and the resulting instrument can be seen in figure 2.

The latest iteration of the instrument (figure 2) is clearly far more complex than the earlier iterations. This was of some practical concern when starting our second round of action research but it proved to be readily manageable for teacher-researchers to use in the classroom. Indeed, when one of my classes had to be covered by another teacher, she reported that the instrument was easy enough to use. The speaking and listening scores were now derived by totalling the criteria as per table 1.

Another category was added under number of spoken turns to record utterances less than one clause, which we temporarily labelled 'backchannel'. This did not contribute to the speaking or listening scores, but we wanted to record it because it represents an important part of discussion skills (Mercer, 2001; Robinson et al., 2001) and we wanted to explore whether we might build this into the speaking and listening scores in future iterations of the instrument. Evidence of preparation was removed as contributor to

Speaking score	• *number of spoken turns (utterances of more than one clause)* • *initiative* • *authenticity of fluency* • *quality of spoken contributions (low, middle and high)*
Listening score	• *quality of spoken contributions (middle & high)* • *listening/engagement intervals* • *note-taking*

Table 1

the final speaking score, but we recorded it because we wanted to further explore the unexpected lack of correlation between preparation and quality of contributions.

Data from the second action research project are currently being analysed but preliminary analysis is consistent with the first study's findings that preparation does not correlate with quality of contribution. The results from the instrument's speaking score correlate with an established external standardized test that our students took, which is promising and arguably helps validate the instrument for assessment purposes. The listening scores did not correlate with the external standardized test scores, but evidence suggests that isolated contributing criteria do (initiative and middle & high quality of contributions). All this needs further analysis and we are planning to undertake a third round of action research to test specific aspects of both the student-led seminars process and the assessment instrument. Perhaps most important would be to incorporate specific language teaching that focuses on extending, challenging, synthesising and evaluating ideas to help support students in their effort to improve quality of contributions. Success in raising the quality of discussion contributions is likely to further improve engagement in the learning process and promote learner autonomy with respect to the preparation and performance in seminars in a kind of virtuous circle.

How to use the Student-led Seminar Approach with the Assessment Instrument in the classroom?

If you are interested in trying the student-led seminar approach with the assessment instrument in your own classroom context, here is a summary of the main steps and points to consider:

1. Topic & Schedule: Define your series topic, build your class schedule (one student-led seminar per week works well), and consider whether you have a preferred seminar format.

2. Brainstorm & Group: With students, brainstorm sub-topics. Student groups choose their seminar topic and presentation order. Start with a teacher-led example and reflection session to model procedure. Introduce the preferred format (if any). Emphasize student leaders' role as discussion facilitators, not lecturers.

3. Facilitate & Monitor: Allow student groups to run their planned seminars. Minimize interference/suggestions (failures offer reflection opportunities). Engage through extension questions when key points are missed or prompting leaders to draw low participation peers into the discussion.

4. Track & Reflect: Monitor student participation and performance using the pre-prepared, easily updatable instrument (an Excel spreadsheet works well). Use Clark and Terrett's (2023) criteria (Figure 2, exclude note-taking/preparation). For speaking score assessment sum the criteria as per Table 2. For listening score assessment, sum initiative and quality of spoken contributions middle and high (differentiate quality using Bloom's taxonomy). Add seminar-specific notes for post-seminar reflection.

5. Reflection: Use recorded data for feedforward, highlighting criteria needing attention via traffic light coding (green = evidenced multiple times). Evaluate the seminar: activities promoting discussion, less successful aspects, and potential reasons. Consider these points:

- Information presented by student leaders
- Vocabulary adapted for peers
- Question type and usage
- Specific student engagement methods
- Voting/polling usage
- Visual aids and seating arrangements

Conclusions and Future Development

The work to date shows that student-led seminars using the instrument for feedforward fosters learner autonomy and raises student engagement with learning and assessment. This is evidenced by students becoming actively involved in the development of the assessment instrument and significant improvement in listening behaviours and willingness to speak (as evidenced by initiative). It has also raised the number of spoken turns. The current iteration of the instrument may also prove reliable as a means of assessing student speaking scores. Teacher-researchers therefore conclude that this student-led seminar approach and further development of the assessment instrument are worth pursuing in future research, perhaps by trying it in different academic contexts. The student-led seminar approach has the added benefit of enabling students to use AI and other digital apps to help them prepare for authentic classroom discussion, but also allows teachers to check that students are engaged in the learning and not overly reliant on those devices and apps.

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Promoting Learner Autonomy & Engagement in the Classroom

by Daniel Pigou

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Introduction

Common issues observed in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classrooms include low levels of student engagement, low levels of learner autonomy, and reticence about speaking in class. These issues may have worsened by the turn to online course delivery between 2020 and 2022. As a result, in early 2022, I set out to investigate reasons for my students' apparent lack of engagement and whether promoting learner autonomy could increase motivation and engagement. At the onset of this study, possible reasons for these observations were hypothesised to include little interest in the classes and the EAP curriculum and little or no self-study outside of occasional completion of homework assignments. A brief literature review and early observations of my students around this time confirmed these issues, with Wang & Ryan (2020) describing appeared reticence as an effect of authority-oriented views of teachers coupled with an exam-oriented education system. Jin and Cortazzi (2011) further emphasised the lack of opportunities to speak and a fear of embarrassment contributing to a lack of engagement in communicative classes. Considering the context of transnational higher education in China, where the curriculum is taught in English, it seems important to investigate how engagement could be effectively promoted among students.

Literature Review / Theoretical Framework

Understanding motivation, engagement, and learner autonomy, as well as the relationships between these, is therefore key to this study. Drawing on self-determination theory, motivation could be separated into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, with the former being more relevant for long-term engagement and effort. Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested that intrinsic motivation would best be facilitated where students' needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy were fulfilled. In practice, this would involve students being given realistic and achievable tasks in class for increased self-efficacy or perceived competence, a sense of community and connection with their peers and teacher for relatedness, and some control over the types and content of tasks and activities on a regular basis. Engagement, in turn, could be defined as the active realisation of, ideally, intrinsic motivations and could include behavioural (action), affective (feeling), and cognitive (thinking) dimensions (Mercer, 2019). While all of these are important for successful learning, only the behavioural is readily observable, and cognitive and affective engagement can only be studied indirectly through observing peer relationships and conversations with individual learners.

Learner autonomy is a complicated concept to define due to the many different aspects that could be involved. However, one commonly accepted definition is of 'learners having the ability or capacity to take charge of their own learning' (Holec, 1981, cited in Benson, 2011), which could involve cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies such as reflection, goal setting, assessing and evaluating one's own progress, and making relevant and meaningful decisions about their own learning (Benson, 2011). Other scholars have emphasised the importance of students being given a sense of control over their own learning as important for engagement, and this could be considered to include learner autonomy (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021). Research (e.g. Little, 2007; Palfreyman, 2018) has also emphasised the importance of groups for facilitating the development of learner autonomy within the classroom as students negotiate meaning and construct knowledge together with peers. Whether independently or in groups, for students to effectively develop these skills, it is important for the teacher to involve students in scaffolded reflexive practice, negotiation of the curriculum, needs analysis, and goal-setting in what has been termed a framework for learner autonomy (Reinders, 2010). This study includes elements of this framework in regular reflective practice coupled with goal setting and collaborative group learning.

Promoting autonomy and independent language learning in East Asian classrooms could be complicated by learner reticence to speak and a lack of opportunities for meaningful communication (Jin & Cortazzi, 2011), as well as views of the teacher as a trusted authority figure not to be questioned (Wang & Ryan, 2020). Furthermore, research by Wong and Nunan (2011) indicates that mainland Chinese students may be socialised into passive learning roles from education systems that emphasise rote learning and exams while also finding that effective learners are predominantly communicative. It is, therefore, important for efforts to promote autonomy to be effectively tailored to the learners and local context.

Research Questions

- What factors inhibit student engagement in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes at a transnational higher education institution?

- To what extent can learner autonomy increase student engagement in EAP classes at a transnational higher education institution in China?

Methodology & Process

My study was an action research project that aimed to improve EAP teaching and student interactions through a few deliberate interventions in line with Burns's (2015) definition of action research. The students were from my four classes of year 2 EAP for Mathematics students at a transnational Sino-British EMI university, and the intervention lasted ten weeks. At the start of the semester, I used a pre-intervention survey, including self-reflection in a teacher journal continuing from week 1 through week 10 in a 13-week semester. Finally, post-intervention interviews with a smaller group of students were held in weeks 10 to 11. This framework allowed for a clear understanding of student engagement in class with data from both self-reflection and interviews and learner autonomy both within and outside the classroom, as clarified in interviews.

During the first two weeks of the semester, I distributed a survey of student demographics and perceived engagement or autonomy among four classes of students. This survey was developed by adapting surveys used in studies by Wong and Nunan (2011) on effective language learning, Lin and Reinders (2018) on learner autonomy, and Sakai, Takagi and Chu (2010) on perceived responsibilities.

Since all components in the survey had previously been piloted and used published studies, the validity and reliability of the survey were increased. In combination with ongoing in-class observations from week two to week 10 and semi-structured and open-ended interviews at the end of the semester in mixed-methods research (Byrne & Humble, 2006), a complete picture of student perceptions, needs, and preferences gradually emerged. I then confirmed most findings during the following semester's classes.

The intervention mainly involved using various reflexive and collaborative activities in the classroom, during which my students were encouraged to take notes and construct meaning independently and with peers. I also largely successfully engaged individual students in regular conversations on their language learning outside the classroom and on various topics of interest to them. This strategy was adopted to capitalise on the role of the teacher as a source of motivation and in consideration of the traditional teacher role in East Asian societies such as China.

Results & Discussion

My early findings from the survey questionnaire generally aligned with expectations and predictions from observations and literature on Chinese students' learner autonomy and engagement. Students mostly perceived their responsibilities within the classroom passively, and 66.6% agreed that 'I like the teacher to explain all answers', with 79.1% agreeing that 'I expect the teacher (not me)
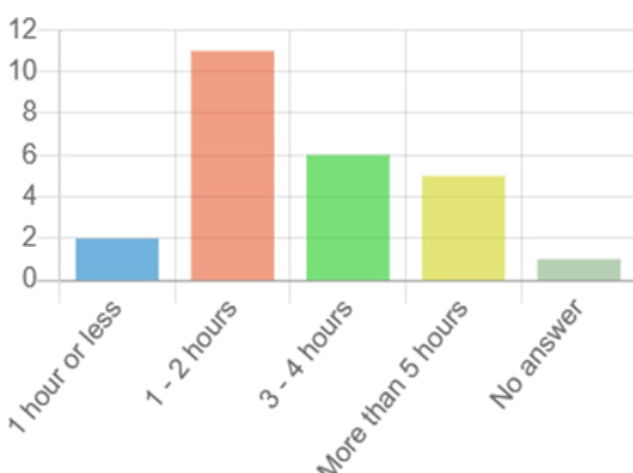

Image 1. How many hours do you spend learning English outside of class each week?
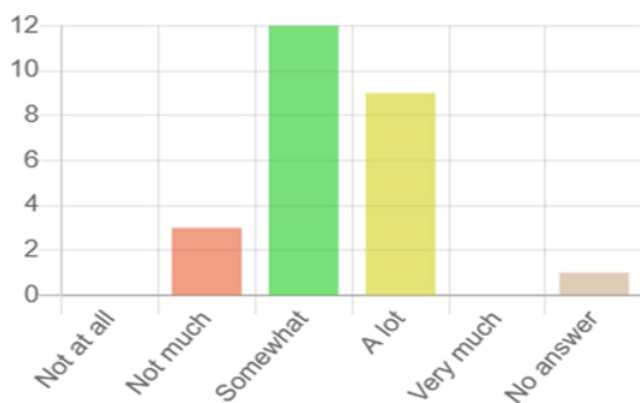

Image 2. How much do you enjoy learning English?

to give feedback and evaluate my learning'. Open-ended questions also revealed that most students felt shy or apprehensive about speaking in class, were mostly active in answering teacher questions, and had a lack of self-discipline, which limited their autonomy. These findings suggest that issues with teacher dependency inhibit autonomy and engagement in transnational higher education, similar to findings from public universities in previous studies by Yao and Li (2017) and Lin and Reinders (2018).

Communication and engagement were limited during the first weeks of online lessons, and my students appeared apprehensive about speaking with unfamiliar peers and the teachers over video conferencing software. Confidence in speaking in class improved by week 4 when classes were mostly delivered on-site. During the semester, scaffolded speaking, think-pair-share activities, and regular scaffolded reflexive practice with opportunities for peer collaboration had an impact on both whole-class communication and group discussions. Improved rapport between myself and students coupled with increased familiarity with peers and successful completion of scaffolded tasks also likely improved relatedness and competence, leading to increased intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Question (1 – 5) (N=25)	Mean	SD
In the classroom, I like the teacher to explain all answers, tasks, etc.	3.68 (N=22)	1.04
I expect the teacher (not me) to evaluate my learning	4.14 (N=22)	0.89
I think students should be responsible for deciding what they learn	3.91 (N=22)	0.81
I think students should be responsible for deciding how they learn	3.91 (N=22)	0.97
Study English by myself outside of class (not at all – always)	3.29 (N=21)	1.01

Image 3. Initial results from surveys.

The interviews at the end of the semester provided increased clarity to many of the themes I had observed in class. Most participating students were unclear on the relevance of EAP materials to their future lives and studies but also recognised the importance of independent learning to 'prepare for the future'. Almost all expressed clear preferences for communicating in groups while acknowledging that this was often in Mandarin Chinese rather than English, which suggests that they appreciated the opportunity for communication. Since they often have few opportunities to communicate with their peers in English outside of class, they may have taken this as an opportunity to socialise. Finally, most students remain extrinsically motivated by IELTS and TOEFL exams, and poor self-discipline is still an issue, as could be expected at the end of a single semester of promoting learner autonomy with reflection and collaboration.

With regular practice, students appeared to get more proficient in both the preparation stage and in having effective discussions with each other.

Research Takeaways

- Scaffolded communicative practice appeared to affect student engagement. All participating students enjoyed group work, and most were actively engaged while in groups.

- Meaningful and relevant themes, topics, and activities in class appeared to motivate increased engagement from most students. In particular, students appreciated topics and tasks linked with what they were doing in their mathematics classes.

- Regular reflective practice and goal setting appeared effective in promoting increased autonomy and independence. A growing number looked for opportunities to improve their English during the semester and appreciated the usefulness of such activities.

- Meaningful choices with clear consequences and responsibilities are needed for students to develop autonomy or agency in their learning. This may include setting goals and being held accountable for completing these with clear consequences.

Conclusion

In summary, this study confirmed a relationship between increased opportunities for learner autonomy and improved motivation, which often but not always translated into increased engagement in the classroom. However, efforts to promote autonomy in the classroom were not straightforward, and students continue to need instruction in skills and strategies for independent learning with motivation from engagement with their peers and teachers to develop greater autonomy. As a result, it is essential to consider what realistic steps can best be taken towards learner autonomy within the contexts of EAP or EFL instruction generally and within local and in-class contexts more specifically.

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Exploring Different Classroom Grouping Strategies

to Encourage Online Learner Engagement & Autonomy Through Student Reflection

by Kuiyin Chen (Please refer to page 12 to find the author's biography.)

Introduction

EARNING "SHOULD BE understood broadly to include not only disciplinary knowledge or skill development but also the cultivation of attitudes or habits that connect to learning" (Felten, 2013, p. 122). Skinner and Pitzer (2012, p. 23) believe that "engagement is the active verb between the curriculum and actual learning". Active engagement can be understood as student "identification with and participation in academic learning" (Strambler and McKnown, 2013), which theoretically and empirically is a multidimensional construct (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, 2004) including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects of learning. Learning should also be about developing the ability to develop independently and effectively, also known as 'learner autonomy', as students need to be able to assume more responsibilities and take ownership of their learning (Little, 1991; Reigeluth and Joseph, 2002). Learner autonomy is crucial for students as it enhances their learning experience, promotes academic achievement, and supports their overall development as lifelong learners. However, despite this importance, I have observed that during their online classes, some students, especially those with lower English language proficiency levels, seem less engaged than their peers.

My specific teaching context is a transnational education institution (TNE) in China. The two English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes I teach are on a Year 2 advanced module where students join with diverse academic interests (10 departments with 37 programs of study), different proficiency levels (ranging from CEFR B2 to native speaker), learning backgrounds (with two-thirds of students who have completed a one-year EAP course and one-third direct-entry students who have stronger English language abilities but may lack input on academic skills), and cultural backgrounds (with around one-third comprising international students).

In this transnational university context, during online EAP classes, for example, some students tend not to turn on their camera or microphone in the main room as well as in the smaller breakout rooms for group discussions. Some students remain

'lurking' instead of initiating or engaging in small group discussions. Therefore, a significant amount of class time is devoted to checking these less engaged students in order to track their study progress or even to get responses from them about reasons for failing to complete tasks on time.

Students receive significant support through staged scaffolding with the aim of achieving inclusivity – one of the most essential considerations for EAP practitioners and TNE providers. I noticed that the main focus of the class materials tended to be directed toward these relatively weaker students, so I became interested in finding out whether my classes allowed for adequate differenti-ation to respect individuality and diversity in the learning environment. I wanted to explore whether the online group work and the goal of inclusivity is effective given the apparent reluctance of weaker students to engage, not only from their perspective but also how this was perceived by their higher language proficiency level classmates. Therefore, this research employs a flexible grouping strategy over the course of one semester to encourage engagement and foster the autonomy of students irrespective of language proficiency. It aims to find out how students feel about grouping strategies, and whether they get the optimum value from participating in group discussions. I explore this issue through student perspectives of the flexible grouping strategies used in class.

Literature Review:

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977; Johnson and Johnson, 1989) emphasizes the importance of social interaction and collaboration in the learning process. As Tinto (2012, p. 5) asserts, "the more students are academically and socially engaged with academic staff, and peers, especially in classroom activities, the more likely they are to succeed in the classroom". A growing body of research (Kagan, 1994; Slavin, 1996; Johnson and Johnson, 1998; Kagan, 2002; Johnson and Johnson, 2009) consistently suggests that cooperative learning enhances social interdependence where an individual's outcome can potentially influence other's actions and then ultimately promote student engagement. This could be achieved through the use of instructional approaches in small collaborative learning groups.

Ciubăncan (2018) argues that the shift from a traditional model of knowledge transmission to a more collaborative teaching approach with greater emphasis on student engagement has highlighted the importance of learner autonomy as the student role has evolved from being one of subordination to being one of coordination. Differentiation is a teaching strategy that can help instructors to create an inclusive learning environment to address the diverse needs of learners by adapting instruction.

It is based on the principle that learners differ in their readiness, interests, and learning styles, and that instruction must be adjusted to accommodate these differences, providing "opportunities for all students to access rigorous, meaningful learning experiences" (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 2). Flexible grouping is a cooperative learning and collaborative grouping strategy that seeks to create learning environments that foster positive social interaction and support as well as create opportunities for students to observe, learn from each other, and apply new skills.

Flexible grouping as collaborative learning

Collaboration, as one of the key pedagogical principles in consensus, is an effective framework to foster autonomy because one of the key features of fostering autonomy is to emphasize the importance of collaboration and interdependence despite emphasizing individual independence. Flexible grouping is a practice where students are grouped and regrouped based on differentiation practices (Tomlinson et al., 2003). It can positively impact student achievement, motivation, and social skills (Kagan, 1994; Slavin, 1995; Tomlinson et al., 2003). Flexible grouping can also improve students' attitudes toward learning and increase their

engagement in the classroom (Dunn et al., 1995). However, group dynamics can be complex and require careful management to ensure that all students feel included and valued. Additionally, some students may struggle to collaborate effectively with their peers, which this study explores in my teaching context.

Justification of Applying Heterogeneous Grouping

Teachers can use flexible grouping strategies to create heterogeneous or homogeneous groups depending on the learning objectives, the nature of tasks, and the needs of the students. Mixing students of different proficiency levels with a jagged profile (Rose, 2015) can foster peer learning, as the more proficient students can support their peers (Swain, 2000, as cited in Lantolf, 2000). 'Jagged profile' is a concept which brings the power of individuality together in a flexible environment to support all those who interact in it (Rose, 2015). This can also help build a sense of community, encourage collaborative learning in an inclusive learning environment, and improve students' communicative skills by mimicking real-life communication situations where speakers with different language abilities interact and

communicate (Johnson and Johnson, 2009). This method may cause some potential problems, such as instructional challenges for the teacher (Tomlinson, 2014) and stronger students potentially being disadvantaged because they may have to spend time supporting their less proficient peers and thus are less likely to experience opportunities to extend or challenge their own learning. Nevertheless, the application of heterogeneous grouping is supported by Cohen and Lotan (1995), who demonstrate that the engagement of low-level students increases while the engagement of the stronger students does not decrease.

It has been noted that high-ability students may benefit from a more effective and cohesive learning environment when grouped together, especially if they are permitted to choose group members instead of being assigned with whom to work (Lou, Abrami, and Spence, 2000; Colangelo, Assouline, and Gross, 2004; Rogers, 2007). Pica (1994) discusses how negotiation can be used to inform teaching practices and concludes that giving students choices through negotiation may encourage their participation. Thus, allowing students to have a voice and choice in their group work can foster greater engagement and learner autonomy as well as add greater experiential value to the course.

Rotating Grouping

Rotating student groupings encourages collaboration and prevents students from being 'stuck' in unproductive group dynamics (Kagan, 2002). This provides students with new learning experiences, promotes academic achievement, and improves social skills (Slavin, 1996; Gillies, 2004).

Research Aims and Objectives:

This present study involves a flexible collaborative learning environment to accommodate the diverse needs of students offering students agency through deci-sion-making opportunities. The intention is to enhance active engagement among students with lower levels of engagement in groups (Cohen and Lotan, 1995) and to foster learner autonomy so as to maximize students' learning experience. This action research is a reflective process of collecting and utilizing data to enhance my professional development using evidence-based practices to better accommodate the needs of all my students.

In the second semester of 2021-2022, I experimented with flexible groupings with rotation including random, heterogeneous (based on jagged learner profiles), and students' own choice. My observations

led me to choose this area for my formal action research and I began to document my grouping interventions in the following semester and considered how to evaluate the relative success of different grouping strategies.

I designed a research instrument with a thorough structural analysis based on student reflection and teacher observation and applied it in my TNE context.

This study focuses on students' perception of their flexible grouping experience to explore whether the strategies enhance their engagement. Two research questions were developed:

- RQ1: To what extent do students feel the flexible grouping strategy helps with their engagement during online EAP lessons in a transnational university in China?

- RQ2: Which grouping strategy do students prefer (i.e., teacher-allocated heterogeneous grouping, student-own choice, or random), and why?

It was assumed that the flexible grouping strategy would significantly help with student online engagement and autonomy through carefully staged and structured grouping methods. The grouping based on students' own choice was hypothesized to be preferable.

Methodology:

Sample:

Participants were two groups (44 students in total) of undergraduates with diverse learning experiences in the Year 2 Advanced module from a TNE institution in China.

Materials:

A personal computer, survey software (i.e., Wenjuanxing), and social media (i.e., class WeChat groups) were used for producing and distributing two surveys (Appendix 2). Teachers' notes of real-time class observations and survey results collected from students were used for data analysis using MS Excel.

Procedure:

This action research is evidence-based on the specific problem identified. An intervention with a detailed plan and specific timelines (Appendix 1) was created to explore the effectiveness of the flexible grouping strategy to deal with the issue of low student engagement. The semester was divided into three phases with two rounds of surveys (Figure 1).

Phase 1 used a random grouping strategy to get to know students' profiles and needs during the first two weeks (i.e., Weeks 2

and 3). I randomly divided the class into four groups using the grouping function embedded within BigBlueButton, an online interactive teaching and learning platform. I joined each group for short periods of time taking on the role of "meddler in the middle" (Cleave, 2019) by giving explanations of questions raised by students, encouraging less active students, acknowledging commendable practices, asking questions to challenge, or eliciting more ideas. These practices model the expectations of active engagement and help build a bridge to help with student transmission to become autonomous.

Phase 2 (Weeks 4 to 7) introduced teacher-allocated heterogeneous grouping with jagged learning profiles, establishing a relatively long-term group collaboration without disturbing the class routine so as to foster students' engagement. This involved the instructor dividing the class into four groups based on the needs analysis profiling that I carried out in the previous two weeks. The same profiling criteria I used to ensure a balanced jagged profile were used in my survey. In this phase, the learning responsibilities were further shifted to the group with the teacher mainly facilitating but still as a 'meddler' (Cleave, 2019). The first survey (Appendix 2) was sent to students to reflect on experiences of random and heterogeneous grouping strategies at the end of Week 7 to collect feedback on the effectiveness of these teaching practices.
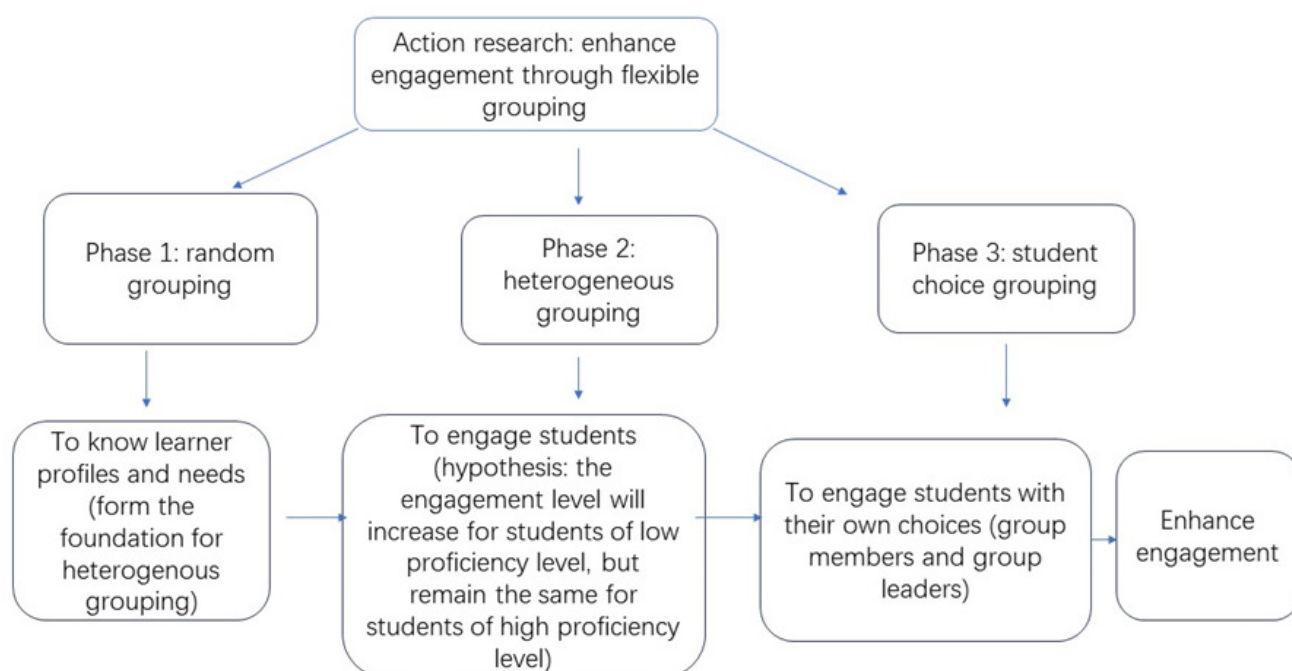

Figure 1: my research instrument

Phase 3 introduced students-own choice grouping from Weeks 8 to 11. It is hypothesized that stronger students will group themselves if they experience any dissatisfaction with the previous grouping strategy in order to maximize their own learning experience. In this phase, students were given more choices to decide how they would like to work together toward a particular task. For example, while working on their writing coursework, they chose their own topic and selected materials based on their subject. At the end of Week 11, the second survey was sent out (Appendix 2).

In addition to following the schedule for the grouping strategies and surveys as detailed in Figure 1, I also made notes of my observations during the group work during the semester.

After sending out the initial survey, 28 out of 44 participants responded. Only those 28 students who filled in the first survey completed the second in order to control variables and maximize the reliability and validity of this research. Both surveys included both closed and open-ended questions (Appendix 2). In order to further increase the credibility and validity of this research, my real-time observation notes were used to record student performance in group discussions for future reflection and analysis.

Results

The results presented in this section are organized according to the two research questions.

RQ1: To what extent do students feel the flexible grouping strategy helps with their engagement during online EAP lessons in a transnational university in China?

The first aim of this research is to find out whether the flexible grouping strategy helps with student engagement during online EAP classes. Students were asked at the end of the semester in survey 2 whether they had had enough opportunities to contribute fully in their groups. Among the 28 respondents, over 86% of students responded with yes, while just under 14% of students responded with no (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Do you have enough opportunities to contribute fully in group work?

13.8

86.2

■ Yes ■ No
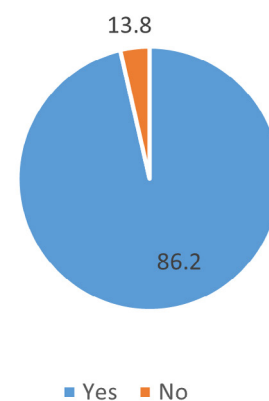
RQ2: Which grouping strategy do students prefer (teacher-allocated, student-own choice, or random) and why?

The second aim of this research is to find out students' preference for different groupings including teacher-allocated heterogeneous strategy, student-own choice, and random grouping through the use of two surveys. In the first round of the survey, more than half of the students thought that the tea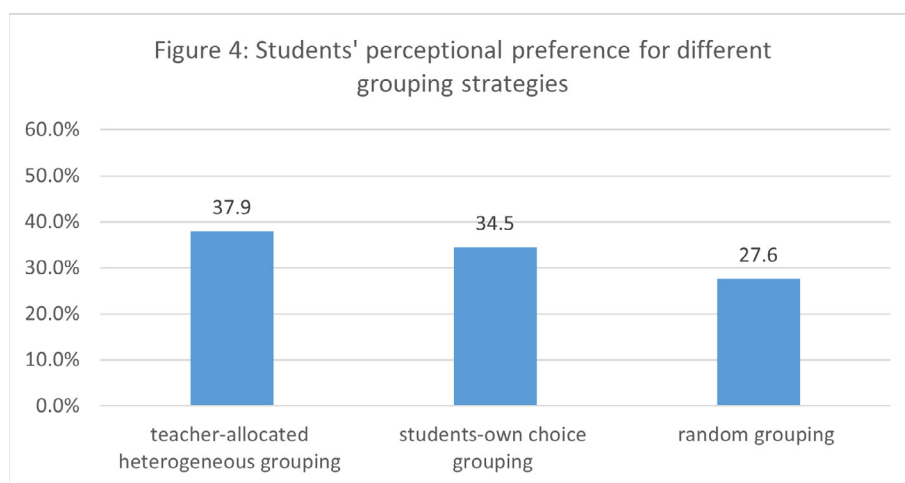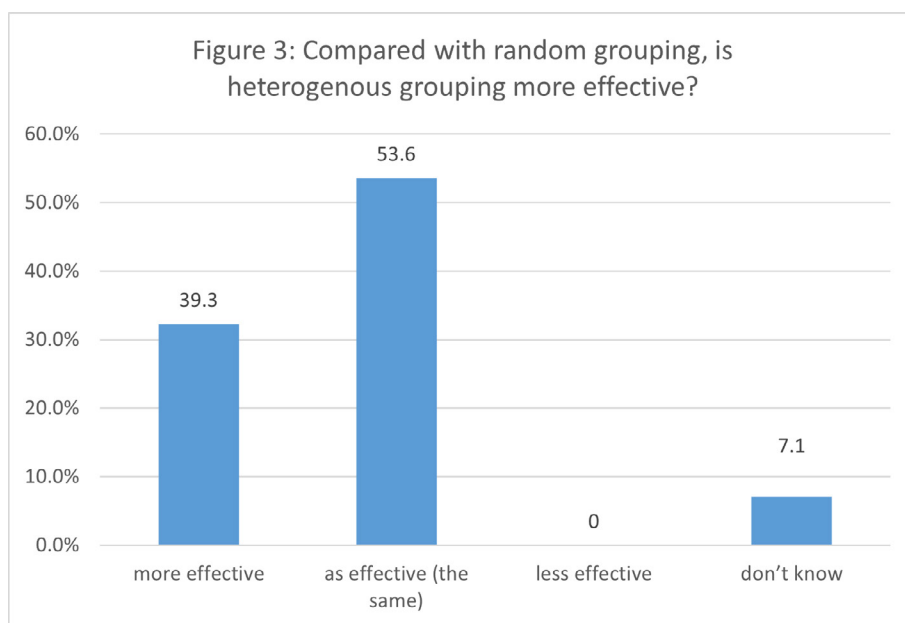cher-allocated heterogeneous grouping strategy is as effective as the random grouping strategy while nearly 40% of students thought that teacher-allocated heterogeneous grouping is more effective (Figure 3).

In survey 2, the same students were asked the same questions with the addition of students-own choice grouping to compare views. As can be seen in Figure 4, all three grouping strategies have quite similar percentages (around 30%), but the heterogeneous grouping, pre-allocated by the teacher, is slightly preferable with around 38%. The random grouping strategy has the lowest preference among the three.

Students were asked about the reasons for choosing the teacher-allocated heterogeneous grouping strategy. Over half of the participants believe this grouping strategy can help them learn from each other, and over 30% of students reported this grouping strategy can help them cooperate with each other.

Table 1 shows students' responses detailing their rationale for their own choice of group

Figure 3: Compared with random grouping, is heterogenous grouping more effective?

Figure 4: Students' perceptional preference for different grouping strategies

members. Reasons that were mentioned only once were excluded whilst some very similar responses were subsumed into the same category. The most frequently mentioned reasons were familiarity and efficiency, which were both mentioned five times. This was followed by academic level which was mentioned four times.

Students were asked to rank profiles from least to most valuable (with 1 least valuable and 6 most valuable). The options were derived from my own criteria that I used for the phase 2 heterogeneous grouping strategy.

According to Table 2, the confidence level is ranked highest and disciplinary major is the profile that students consider least important.

Discussion and Implications:

The findings of this study suggest that the use of flexible grouping strategies is beneficial for enhancing student engagement and therefore learner autonomy in online EAP classes in a transnational university in China. The positive responses from students regarding their opportunities to contribute fully in class indicate that they perceive the flexible grouping strategy effectively promotes student engagement and autonomy. These results align with

previous studies that flexible grouping can improve student learning outcomes and enhance their overall academic experience (Dunn et al., 1995; Slavin, 1995; Tomlinson et al., 2003; Hattie, 2009). This finding also supports the effectiveness of the guided autonomy approach – one of the key pedagogical principles for fostering learner autonomy, or collaborative autonomy (Murphey and Jacobs, 2000).

That teacher-allocated heterogeneous grouping was the most preferred among the three grouping strategies highlights the importance of teacher guidance and direction in promoting student collaboration and interaction. This result aligns with the notion that the teacher's role in flexible grouping is critical for its success (Mills, 2003; Tomlinson, 2014) and supports the previous study that have demonstrated the effectiveness of teacher-allocated grouping in promoting learning and engagement

Table 1: Reasons for students choosing their own groups

Reasons	Frequency of being mentioned
familiarity	5
efficiency (better communication/cooperation)	5
academic level	4
personality (more active, mature and not lazy)	3
major	2
research interest	2

Table 2: Average ranking value (1-6) of profiles to work with

Ranking	Profiles	Average value (1-6)
1	major	3.28
2	research interest	4.34
3	learning style	4.41
4	English language ability	4.52
5	study skills	4.59
6	confidence level	4.66

among students (Muir-Herzig and Mulholland, 2016). However, it also suggests that empowering students to choose their own groups may not be particularly valued at this stage and/or in this context perhaps because students are not yet ready to take ownership of their learning.

Students who chose their own group members mostly cited being familiar with each other as the main reason for their choice. This finding is consistent with a previous study that has shown that students tend to form cliques and are less likely to interact with other students outside their group (Ertmer, 2005). That students prefer familiarity while choosing their own group members suggests that the teacher should not rotate the grouping frequently. This also means my initial hypothesis that students of higher proficiency levels prefer homogeneous grouping is rejected.

This study also found that the students ranked confidence level as the most valuable profile to work with, with their major considered the least important. This finding suggests that teachers should consider factors, such as confidence and study skills, when allocating groups in EAP classes.

How This Study Has Enhanced My Professional Practice

This action research project involved implementing a carefully planned grouping strategy in online lessons to promote learning engagement and autonomy. This helped me develop the instructional design, assessment, and data analysis needed to evaluate this strategy. I have learned that the key to effective flexible grouping is to understand students' needs and to monitor the progress of their learning. My findings show that teacher-allocated grouping based on confidence and study skills is preferred.

This action research project challenged one of my assumptions that high-level students would group themselves together to maximize their learning experience. The results suggest that academic level is not the students' priority but that they gauge familiarity to be more important. This insight has influenced my teaching practice, so I will incorporate this preference in my class design and not rotate the groupings too frequently, perhaps limiting rotations to around 2-3 times a semester, which was a survey suggestion.

Limitations and Future Action Plans

Due to the small sample size and limited intervention period, the findings are not representative of all undergraduates in the TNE context. In the future, I could employ a more longitudinal design to conduct the study with different groups of students or try different combinations of grouping strategies to see whether I would have the same findings. I should further explore why the 13% of the participants (Figure 2) felt they were not able to fully participate in their group. I could develop criteria for measuring student engagement in groups to compare such data with student self-reported participation.

Further investigation can be carried out with a larger sample size, and I will redesign my instrument to be better able to make statistical comparisons of the different groupings. It was also observed that group leadership may play an important role in student engagement and participation, with 20 out of 28 students reporting they attached great value to being a group leader. My observations note that random groups or groups without a leader tended to be quieter or students lacked the initiative to start discussions. This finding suggests the inclusion of assigning group leaders to promote engagement and facilitate discussions among students should be considered in future studies. I would also like to conduct a further study about the students' criteria for selecting their group leaders and to compare them with the teacher's.

Conclusion

In conclusion, flexible grouping is an instructional strategy that can have a positive impact on student engagement. However, it also has its limitations and requires careful planning and management to ensure that all students are engaged and included in the learning process. Results suggest teachers need to consider students' confidence and study skills when deciding which strategy to use and should be aware that students tend to prefer grouping arrangements based on familiarity. Thus, limiting the number of times groups are rotated may be beneficial.

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Appendix 1: My intervention with specific timelines.

phase	what	when	who
1	Use the random grouping strategy mainly to get to know the learner profiles well during the first 2 weeks (week 2 and week 3). This grouping strategy will be used throughout the whole semester to accommodate the nature of particular tasks which do not require close cooperation, such as checking answers in a small group or a leading-in activity. This will also help to encourage engagement with a wide range of learner profiles and to rotate groups to avoid students being stuck with a certain group.	throughout the semester	All students
2	Introduce teacher-allocated heterogeneous grouping with jagged learning profiles at the start of Week 4 to maximize relatively long-term collaboration without disturbing the class routine.	Weeks 4-7	All students
3	Send out a survey about the student experience of this strategy at the end of Week 7 while their memory is still fresh.	Week 7	All students
4	Introduce a free-choice grouping strategy at the start of Week 8 encouraging learner ownership and autonomy. It is hypothesized that stronger students will group themselves to maximize their learning experience.	Weeks 8-11	All students
5	Send out the second survey to get data about student experience on both strategies at the end of Week 11 before their busy assessment weeks.	Week 11	Those students who participated in the first survey
6	Start to analyze data and write up the report	From Week 12	Myself
7	Finalize the writing and submit	Before July 10th, 2023, 23:59 pm	Myself

Appendix 2: Questionnaires

Questionnaire questions were sent to my 2 groups of students at the end of Week 7:

Part 1:

1. What is your gender?
   male \ female

2. What is your major?
   hard science \ soft science

Part 2:

1. How do you prefer to work during online EAP lessons?
   a. work by myself/alone/individually
   b. work in groups

2. How many students in a group do you think is an appropriate number for you?
   a. 2-3
   b. 4-5
   c. 6-7

3. How much do you value working in groups?
   a. very important
   b. important
   c. don't know
   d. not important
   e. not important at all

4. Do you prefer to work with the same group of students for the whole semester or do you prefer to work with different groups of students?
   a. same
   b. different

5. How often do you like to change groups a semester?

    a. once

    b. twice

    c. 3 times

6. Compared with the random grouping, how did you feel about working with the group allocated by the EAP teacher?

    a. more effective

    b. as effective (the same)

    c. less effective

    d. don't know

7. Did you act as a group leader this semester?

a. yes

b. no

8. How do you value being a group leader in the group work during online lessons?

9. What prevents you from taking the lead/initiative during group discussions?

_____

Questionnaire questions sent to my students at the end of Week 11.

Part 1:

1. What is your gender?
male / female

2. What is your major?
hard science / soft science

Part 2:

1. Which grouping strategy do you prefer?
a. a group allocated by the teacher with a mixed profile (major, research interest, different learning style, language level, and confidence level)
b. a group with my own choice of who to work with
c. random groups

2. What are the reasons for working with groups allocated by the EAP teacher?
a. cooperate with each other
b. learn from each other
c. support each other
d. other

3. What are the reasons for choosing who you want to work with? Please write them in the space provided.
_____

4. If you could choose, rank which profile you prefer to work with, from most useful to least useful (1-6).
English language ability, confidence level, study skills (such as time management, etc.), learning style, major, and research interest
_____

5. Do you have enough opportunities to contribute fully in class?
a. yes
b. no

Promoting Learner Autonomy through the Research Process:

Fast Tracking the Solo Flight

by Dr. Gareth Morris, Ji Zhang, Ma Xuan, Samuel Feng.

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Mr. Samuel Feng is an educational consultant and tutor. He has led on English programmes and managed pastoral provision in international schools. His current research interests are in the areas of student motivation, language learning and autonomy.

O NE OF THE MOST fundamental metrics by which universities gauge success is through the volume and quality of internationally recognised academic research and publications. Typically, this relates to the work of institutional staff and postgraduates. Occasionally undergraduates also excel in this, although this usually involves participation with internal events or supporting, as assistants, vacation period projects. A reason for this gradual uptake is that it takes deliberate practice, as Ericsson and Pool (2017) advocate, time to acquire the skills, motivation to engage, and the foresight and value appreciation required to seek out opportunities. This therefore raises an interesting proposition. What would happen if students were given opportunities earlier to engage with academic research and mentored through the process? How much learner autonomy could truly be afforded and realised and what kind of product would result? This article reflects on a case study experience in which a group of K12 IGCSE students, with no previous experience in the activity, opted to sign up for a research project which involved supporting staff to propose, draft, write and refine a book chapter. The paper considers how learner autonomy was fostered and reflects on the process and end result.

Stage 1: Developing Autonomous Skills

Before initiating the academic activity, which was designed to help students gain experience with an authentic research project and see it through from start to finish, the learners were guided through smaller, but no less arduous academic experiences. The purpose of these were to scaffold the development of skills and habits, the importance of which Duhigg (2014) stresses, which are so fundamental for initiating, working through and completing an academic piece of writing fit for publication. This included engaging with internal activities such as learning from academic researchers from a range of varied disciplines each month as part of the school lecture society, and acting as researchers, writers and editors for the school newsletter. It also included involvement with external competitions, such as the Oxford and Princeton University judged John Locke Institute essay competition.

Stage 2: Brainstorming and Project Planning

The next step in the process began with considering and deciding upon what the purpose of this academic extension course would be, and what the asscoiated needs and constraints were. This meant starting with some brainstorming which can be highly beneficial as Miani (2023) stresses. At the conception stage it was collectively decided that beyond enhancing academic writing and study skills the students who had enrolled on the course would like to engage with and learn from authentic material and processes as far as possible. Under the guidance of two institutional staff, the students then selected an appropriate research initiative, which was to work alongside three of the school educators in a support capacity in proposing a book chapter for an advertised edited volume titled Cases on Teaching English for Academic Purposes during Covid-19: Insights from Around the World (See Kohnke, 2022). There were no guarantees that this proposal would be successful, but it was felt that learning to deal with rejection would be an equally valuable experience if this was the end outcome. Once the proposal was accepted a semester long week by week plan was devised for the project. The rationale for

this was explained to the students and divisions of labour were split between the three staff, with the students acting as junior assistants, shadowing the staff, but also fully engaging with initiatives.

Stage 3: Reading, Drafting, Refining and Submitting

Given the length of the semester, and the writing stages that had to be completed to meet the first submission deadline, the work was split into distinct time blocks in which a task was set for each period. The course was also designed to be motivational and adhered to the principles outlined by Ordorica, Crolla and Garner-Foy (2023) which advocate that to promote student engagement short courses should be bite size, varied, interactive, meaningful, community based and measured. Each teacher-led group would feed back what they had worked on and been guided through. The larger group would then see as a whole how synthesis and refinement worked through staged writing chains that utilised Microsoft Teams. The first few weeks saw the basics of research introduced, alongside some fundamentals of project

management. The following four-week block saw students then apply what they had been learning, whilst also being guided through the process step by step by the staff. For example, working on the literature review, one group researched education during the pandemic and the associated challenges. Another group considered English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) more specifically during this period. The final group looked more closely at the case study context. The next four weeks saw the work stepped up with the entire manuscript compiled section by section before a period of systematic reviewing was initiated for content and language.

Stage 4: Submission, Revision and Publication

Having experienced, within a guided team capacity, the process of producing a book chapter from idea conception to topic focused research (which included source evaluation and selection, alongside referencing) before finishing with synthesising the ideas and sections into

a coherent whole, students also had opportunities for verbal presentation of what they had been learning about as they went through the semester at various stages. This was done in a reflective and critical capacity, and equally importantly supportive and respectful environment. Finally, the lead author walked students through the process of ensuring that the work presented a single voice and style which was academic and consistent. With students having already worked on John Locke essays that previous summer, and now beginning to draft for the following one, the skills they were enhancing were transferred back into this academic endeavour. When the chapter feedback was received from the editorial board, the students also experienced first-hand the process of revising work based on such feedback, just as in their academic studies, seeing the broader relevance of what they too had to do and in due course, the end product (See Morris, Zhang and Dai, 2022). In this case, it was a published book chapter in which their support was publicly acknowledged and credited, hopefully encouraging their longer-term motivation, resilience and sheer grit, which are so important, as Duckworth (2013) notes.

Summary

It is highly unusual for students in K12 to have the opportunity to engage with academic writing, even more so if they are studying in their L2. Because of a fortuitous set of circumstances in which self-directed staff CPD initiatives of the time enabled a project to be conceived and completed in this area, the students, who were aged between 15-17, had the opportunity to be a part of a research team years before they might have otherwise. They had the chance to draw on prior learning, receive directed input, apply this in a smaller team and then see how their ideas and work could be received, synthesised and presented. As the chapter writing progressed, so too did the autonomy the students were afforded, and the quality of their input subsequently increased. The real benefit of this process was that it also fed into other external academic writing endeavours that they had been guided towards in their courses. The forward-looking advantages of this autonomy scaffolded experience ought to be extremely beneficial, as the learners' work can feature on their resumes, support future learning and also help further enhance the study skills which are highly valued at all stages of their educational journeys.

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Drawing on Creative Writing

to Promote Learner Autonomy & Develop Inter-Transferable Skills

by Dr. Gareth Morris, Ji Zhang, Ma Xuan and Samuel Feng.
(Please refer to page 71 to find the authors' biography.)

COMPETITIONS CAN PRESENT an excellent way in which to promote learner autonomy, as by the very nature of such events the expectation is that participants will produce independent (individual or group) work. Between 2021-2023 the authors of this paper worked within the English language department at an international K12 provider in Suzhou and helped students engage with external competitions as a way of promoting learner autonomy and enhancing inter-transferable skills. Many of these events and competitions built on earlier in class learning which was either topical, project based or bore real world applicability. This helped to ensure that autonomy was scaffolded, multi-disci-plinary skills were promoted and the learning experience in general was enhanced. Examples included city wide speech and microfilm production competitions, nationwide creative writing activities and international essay writing events. This article will consider one of these, namely a creative writing competition that the learners took part in and which was hosted by an international publisher. It will highlight the multi-phase autonomy promoting process that was utilised and draw on case study examples to illustrate how learner autonomy was promoted and inter-transferable skills enhanced and an outstanding end product produced.

Background:

Every piece of academic writing presents an opportunity to learn and is arguably creative in the truest sense of the term as McVey (2008) acknowledges. It is also important for students to be able to enhance their writing skills, academic literacies and to be able to engage with a range of curriculum areas more generally, as Defazio et al. (2010) note. Given both the current and future academic needs of the students, the wide range of reading and writing which they had to master, and the likely motivational impact of making the learning more creative (as educational models such as Bloom's taxonomy and psychological ones like Maslow's hierarchy of needs might advocate) having the students extend their learning was considered to be highly beneficial. It would also provide good opportunities for scaffolding, as Bruner drew attention to, and was well within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as Vygotsky advocated (Wright, 2018).

Staging Targeted Practice:

Initially the students were presented with learning extension activities that supplemented their IGCSE EAL and EFL curriculums. These included taking part in a short story writing task in which a finite word limit was imposed, just as such word limits feature on numerous examination questions, whether these are synthesising activities or informal or formal writing ones. These high school short stories were then converted into an anthology of work, and with each new iteration the quality, diversity and pride exhibited increased exponentially. This experience also enabled extension activities to be introduced and refined, such as comic book creations and top trump designs, that drew on story boarding and academic essay writing that had earlier featured brainstorming, although with the latter it became clear that time constraints, conflicts and existing ZPDs presented hurdles. That said, a teacher modelled, but student involved, academic book chapter presented an interesting work around which to introduce and engage with academic writing in terms of the process and end product.

The Writing Process:

As far as guiding the creative writing process went, just as academic writing can be taught in a very structured and guided way, deconstructing existing creative work in to component features and then re-engineering it to see what works, how and why, is also possible. In this instance, with the creative writing there was also some guided input, although in a much less mechanistic manner than one might expect in an academic writing context. This is not surprising given the flexibility of creative writing in terms of the scope, structure, presentation and language, as acclaimed writers who look into the craft highlight, for example King (2000). It was also important because of the ages, experience and knowledge levels of the learners. Although a quality end product was sought, greater emphasis was placed on the process with drafting expected and necessitated which can be hard for younger writers to accept. The plan was also to build on the science of expertise and deliberate practice as advocated by researchers Ericsson and Pool (2016) in a wide range of life settings.

The End Product:

When an opportunity to then apply these internally practiced skills more widely became available in the form of a nationwide media driven writing event all of the students were encouraged to participate. The quality of the work which was received was extremely diverse, ranging from descriptive pieces to first-person narratives. The students performed exceptionally well in this, producing pieces that paid homage to writers such as Jane Austen, H Rider Haggard, Jack London, Philip K. Dick, John Grisham, Michael Crichton, and many more. A third-placed time travelling science fiction entry in the first year and a second-placed descriptive piece about a mysterious helicopter pilot's island crash and apparent amnesia were standout examples of what can be produced when high school students, with some guidance, have the licence to imagine. One of the middle school students produced a text combining elements of King Solomon's Mines and the Call of the Wild which reached the story reading stage. What was interesting was that the IGCSE examination results for those students who did perform well were excellent, as was their academic progress, motivation and the impact on their sense of self and identity was also noticeably positive.

Extension Language and Academic Skills

With the competition finals also necessitating a live reading for the award ceremony in Guangzhou that could be delivered either online or onsite, students were able to draw on their experiences of public speaking afterwards when in class, in activities like assemblies and for other competitions. Public speaking at the best of times can be nerve wracking, but more so when there is something riding on the outcome of performance and the assessment measures both the written work produced and the oral presentation of this. It also mirrors world book readings that authors engage with so provides early experience in a similar, albeit staged, setting.

Having seen the quality of work that students could and did produce at the IGCSE level when they were guided and scaffolded, and then seen the level the bar can then be raised to through competitions and creative writing, it was apparent that this provided an excellent opportunity to promote learner autonomy. The added advantage is that they avoid the comparison mentality that exists with internal initiatives, and so a collaborative spirit can be fostered and facilitated, with knock on effects in other academic areas. Just as team sports against other institutions promotes a sense of shared identity, and hopefully pride in collaboration, so too can participation in external events enable learning crossovers to be realised, and skills enhanced. When all of these features are considered holistically the quality of an inclusive education becomes increasingly apparent, while also helping to ensure that students entering higher education demonstrate increased ability and confidence.

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Implementing Podcasts

in the Spanish Language Classroom:

A Successful Experience in Learning and Assessment

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ABSTRACT

THIS STUDY EXPLORES the integration of podcasts in a Spanish language classroom, focusing on the impact of its implementation on a fourth-year module's oral assessment. Amidst challenges in non-immersive environments, the conventional oral assessment's limitations prompted a shift toward podcasts. Students, organized in pairs, produced original interviews reflecting on a Spanish series and their language-learning journey. Results indicate improved grades, reduced absenteeism, and positive student perceptions. The qualitative approach prioritized process over product, fostering creativity and collaboration. The study reflects the potential of podcasts in enhancing language learning, offering insights into innovative assessment methodologies in diverse academic settings.

1. Introduction: Academic context and encountered challenges

The Spanish division in the Modern Languages Centre within the School of Languages at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) is currently comprised of nearly twenty language lecturers, including local Chinese and Spanish academic staff, each with diverse academic backgrounds and extensive experience in teaching and learning Spanish as a foreign language. Among the various modules offered, Spanish is taught to almost fifteen hundred students from different university programs, with the majority coming from the International Business with a Language program. In this program, students choose an optional foreign language —either Spanish or Japanese— to study for four academic years, culminating in a foreign language proficiency equivalent to level B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It is worth noting that until the previous academic year (2022-2023), the expected proficiency level was higher, set at level B2. However, after extensive consultation and review of benchmarking standards this exit level was deemed to pose too great of a challenge for students who are studying Spanish in a non-immersive setting with somewhat limited exposure to the foreign language (amounting to a total of sixty-five hours per academic year).

In addition to the undeniable disruptive effects of the pandemic in the last few years, there are other challenges that frequently influence foreign language learning and teaching in Sinophone contexts, hindering the creation of an effective communicative learning environment. These challenges include the inherent difficulties arising from the linguistic distance between the two languages (Cortés, 2014); the peculiarities of educational and methodological contexts in China including Confucian heritage, structuralism, grammar-translation method, and memorization, among others (Arriaga, 2014); and the characteristics of Sinophone learners who have been identified as introspective, reluctant to proactively participate in class , extrinsically motivated, having the utmost respect for the teacher's authority, as well as the significance of affective factors. (Sánchez Griñán, 2010). Consequently, it is not surprising that both Spanish students and teachers have faced increasing difficulty in achieving both high grades and meeting academic expectations given the aforementioned challenges.

In this academic context, numerous and varied strategies have been proposed across different academic years and modules to meet expectations, foster a cooperative and communicative atmosphere in the classroom, and increase effective learning and student performance. Upon reviewing the students' results from the academic year 2019-2020, it became evident that as students progressed in their Spanish learning and consequently faced increased difficulty, their academic performance became poorer. Specifically, the highest percentage of failures and grades in the range of 40 to 50 were recorded mainly in the third and fourth years (on modules SPA205 and SPA307), particularly in the area of oral production and interaction. The averages obtained in the speaking coursework of SPA307 were surprising, and the module had the dubious honor of having the highest average failure rate on the speaking section among all Spanish modules, along with clear signs of poor performance persisting over time.

On the other hand, SPA307 had a history of other challenges that, needless to say, would not foster an ideal environment for students to acquire the expected level of language skills: low attendance rates, relatively high absenteeism rates at the speaking-component assessments, and frequent students' comments on the Module Questionnaires (MQ) demanding more contact hours and engaging speaking practice throughout the semester. Faced with this disheartening scenario, it was evident that structural

changes were necessary to turn the situation around, particularly in terms of promoting students' engagement, and creating a suitable environment to improve their speaking skills with the hope that this would also boost their grades.

My role as Module Leader for this module, starting from the second semester of the academic year 2021-2022, provided me with such an opportunity.

2. Implementation of Podcasts for the Oral Evaluation of the SPA307 Spanish Module

Since its emergence in the early 2000s, the podcast has not only become an extremely popular form of entertainment for both young and old including in China, where it is often named the Ear Economy due to its significant annual market revenue (Celik & Wu, 2020), but also an excellent digital tool with multiple applications in the foreign language classroom. In this regard, the benefits of its implementation in the classroom, from the perspective of both teacher- and student-produced podcasts, have been extensively documented. Special emphasis has been placed on its value as an innovative and authentic input source, as well as on the flexibility, availability, and familiarity it offers to students who interact with this resource daily in their private lives (Talandis, 2008).

Similarly, authors such as Celaya, Ramírez-Montoya, Naval, and Arbués (2020) have pointed out the benefits of incorporating podcasts into the language learning process, as it increases learner motivation and autonomy, stimulates creativity and collaborative learning, and fosters a sense of responsibility and belonging by turning students into creators of original content for others. Furthermore, working with podcasts enhances various skills and learning strategies at multiple levels: organization and planning, digital skills, oral and written interaction skills, etc. (Chacón & Pérez, 2011).

Finally, it is worth noting that producing podcasts is, per se, a multi-stage process comprising different skills and steps including planning, organizing and writing the script, recording, editing, uploading the audio, etc¬. (Celaya et

al., 2020). That was, in fact, one of the key aspects that motivated me to incorporate podcasts as part of the assessment. By introducing the podcast as a cooperative group project to be submitted by the end of the semester, I hoped to create a sustained, planned piece of work that would extend throughout the whole semester. At the same time, this work would also serve as regular practice for different skills in the target language during the various phases of the podcast's planning and preparation. Thus, immediately after beginning my term as Module Leader (semester two, AY21-22), I started implementing a podcast-based assessment for the speaking component of the module.

It is worth noting that before the podcast was incorporated as part of the summative assessment, the oral assessment on the SPA307 module had consisted solely of a series of individual student interviews (initially in person and later online during the pandemic). Students would typically meet the examiner who, after the student's initial monologue on a pre-prepared topic, asked several follow-up questions aimed at creating a spontaneous interaction (see Figure 1). Student's oral production was assessed through an analytical rubric that included criteria such as vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and pronunciation at a B1.2/B2.1 level of the CEFR.

Looking at the results obtained through the years, they were generally below expectations. Furthermore, examiners would also often report that students were clearly overwhelmed by stage fright, delivering memorized and automated responses lacking spontaneity, naturalness, and coherence on many occasions. Subsequent satisfaction surveys confirmed that students perceived the exam as too stressful and intimidating, and something they did not fully understand as it seemed detached from the communicative dynamics and tasks performed throughout the semester in class. For this reason, I ensured that the implementation of podcasts was gradual and carefully articulated to students to ensure that all students understood the mechanisms through which the speaking

One week before the exam
Students received a list of five possible topics to prepare in advance.

First task of the exam
Students delivered a sustained monologue in Spanish on one of the topics.
(3-5 mins.)

Second task of the exam
Examiner asked three topic-related questions and students interacted with the examiner with no prior preparation.
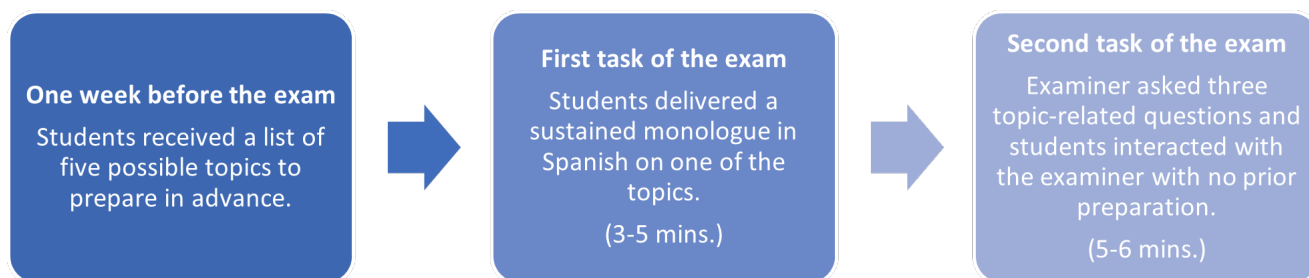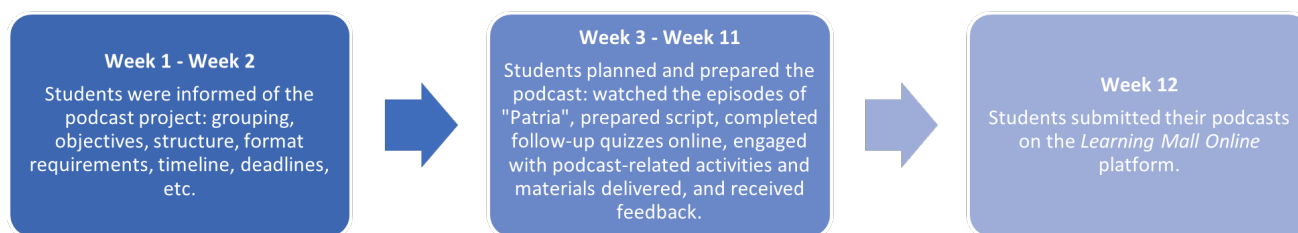(5-6 mins.)

Figure 1. Previous oral assessment.

Figure 2. New oral assessment with podcast project.

component would be assessed (see Figure 2). I repeatedly emphasized the importance of the process of creating the podcast and the various steps that needed to be followed throughout the second semester over simply focusing on the end product. Thus, the podcast emerged as a means rather than an end.

Students were organized in pairs, and the task involved planning, creating, and uploading an original podcast lasting between eight and ten minutes in total with the requirement that each student must speak for four to five minutes. The format was an interview in which students would discuss two topics: a) the Spanish TV-series "Patria" (2020), which had been watched throughout the semester in the module (and on which students had completed various activities, such as online quizzes), and b) their reflections as final-year students who were almost about to graduate. Examples of this experience would include their best and worst memories, university life, classmates, their experience learning Spanish, etc. In this way, I managed to link the assessment

task significantly and relevantly to both the socio-cultural content studied throughout the semester and the personal-affective motivations of the students. I believed this would encourage not only greater motivation in actively preparing for the task, but also personal identification with it while also fostering personal, linguistic, and academic self-reflection.

In addition to the final product submitted online through the Learning Mall Online (LMO) platform, students had to submit the recording's script. While it would not be evaluated, it served to verify that the work had been cooperatively generated among peers. It also acted as a practical guide that would aid the process of listening to the recording by the examiner. Furthermore, to ensure students' familiarity with the entire process, address potential technical questions or issues, and enhance their motivation and comprehension in the realm of podcasts, additional activities and materials were delivered throughout the second semester in a properly sequenced manner. Some of these included:

I.   A lecture session on the podcast culture in the Spanish-speaking world: popular podcasts and podcasters, podcast platforms, most-listened to genres, etc.

II.   An English-language video tutorial with basic tips for creating a podcast, including apps and software recommendations, audio editing tips, voice and sound theory, tips for creating an engaging podcast, etc.

III. A student guide on the speaking assessment, in English, with detailed information about the exam's structure, format, evaluation criteria, technical requirements, etc.

IV.   An optional online Q&A session in English.

V.   Weekly office hours to address any related issues.

Finally, regarding the adopted assessment criteria, a strong emphasis was placed on giving greater prominence to the process rather than the final product itself with creativity, pronunciation, and naturalness in execution being more heavily weighted than grammar, vocabulary, or discourse cohesion through linking words. This approach slightly alleviated the pressure on students who were now focused more on creating an original product that sounded natural, with good pronunciation and fluency, rather than a perfectly crafted but entirely artificial, memorized discourse. With this new approach, students could create their podcast at their own pace, and were able to record it as many times as necessary until they polished a final product that satisfied them. Along the way, there was undoubtedly cooperative practice through which the students became more aware of their own learning process. In this regard, a slight percentage of the final grade was also added as a "Group Grade," mainly focused on the creativity, design, and technical quality of the final product presented. This aimed to encourage collective responsibility and collaboration among group members in order to create the highest-quality product possible.

3. Outcomes and Conclusions

In quantitative terms, the outcomes obtained in SPA307 since the beginning of the second semester of the 2021-2022 academic year, just after I became module leader, and throughout academic year 2022-2023, improved in all analyzed categories compared to the previous data (see Figure 3):

- An average grade of 63 was achieved on the module between both academic years, which represents a noticeable improvement compared to the average grades obtained in the speaking section in the three immediately preceding years (43 / 48.8 / 57.9).

- With only a 2.3% average absenteeism rate in the exam/podcast submission, there was a clear improvement compared to higher average rates of absenteeism recorded in the three previous years (9% / 7.3% / 6.1%).

- A 4.9% average failure rate, which significantly improved upon the rather alarming average failure rates in the three iterations of the module prior to the introduction of the podcast assessment (34.9% / 34.7% / 21.7%).

Additionally, results obtained in the module feedback questionnaires (MQ) conducted at the end of semester two of 2021-2022 indicated a positive impact on students' perceptions, particularly in two areas: the level of guidance on the assessment processes, and, most importantly, their overall learning experience within the module. Thus, in semester one, only 24.6% of students "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that "Module assessments were explained clearly with an appropriate level of guidance," whilst in semester two, 85.7% "agreed" or "strongly agreed." Furthermore, when asked if "I found this module a valuable learning experience" in semester one, only 28.9% "agreed" or "strongly agreed", compared to 85.7% in semester two (see Figures 4 and 5).
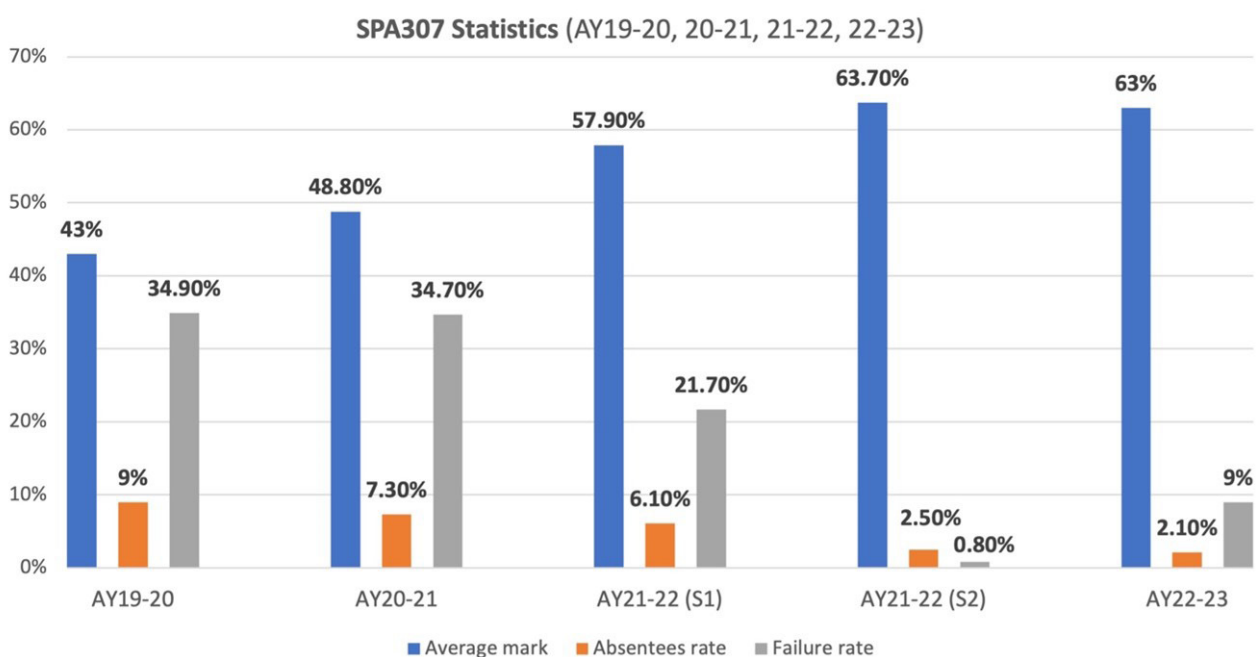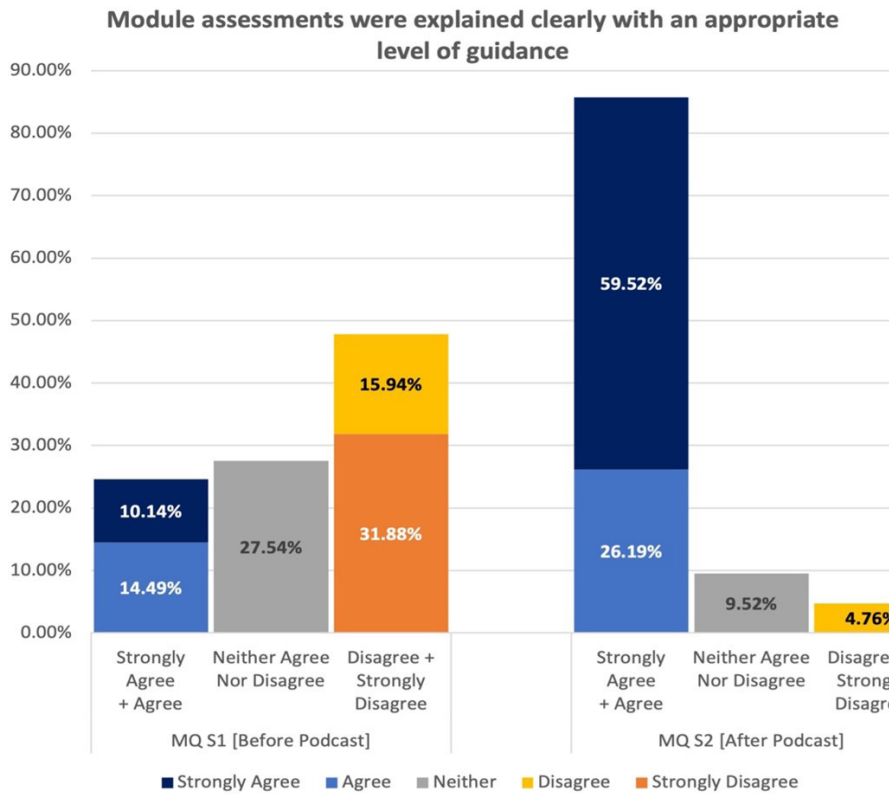

Figure 3. Module outcome statistics.
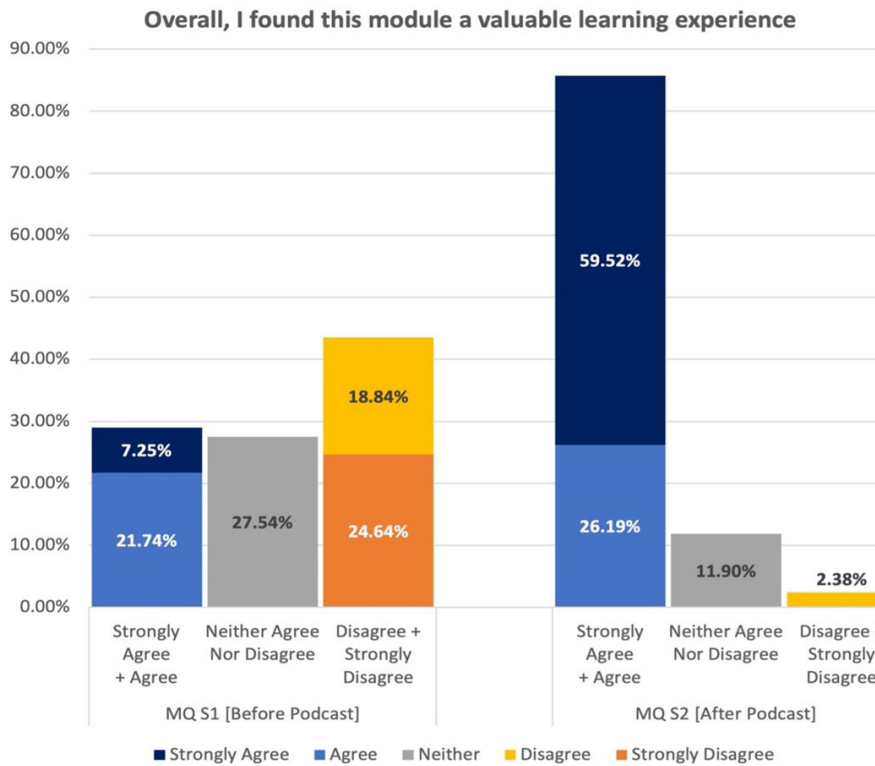
Figure 4. Student feedback A.

Figure 5. Student feedback B.

Although it is impossible to
certain whether the impr
outlined above were solely as
of the changes made to the
assessment, the fact that thi
only major change implemen
second semester seems to sug
very least it had a positive impa

Qualitatively, anecdotal data
that this new method was enth
ly accepted by the students as
from satisfaction surveys con
the end of the academic year 2
and 2022-2023 indicate. For
when asked about their gener
on the podcast-based a
recently implemented, multip
comments were made in
dimensions, but which mostly f
a) the new structure of assess
b) the effect that this had on
perception of the module:

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Examples of comments obtained about the new structure of the speaking assessment include:

- "I really like the new method this semester: I can focus more on my pronunciation, and the coursework is difficult but fun to make."
- "This semester's speaking assessment format has been improved to take into account our regular study effort, like the Patria quiz. The course content is less boring than before."
- "The new course and exam design are great and interesting, which makes seminars and lectures finally an enjoyment.

Examples of comments about affective factors (motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, etc.) include:

- "The assessments are nicer than before, which makes me finally get some confidence in my learning."
- "I don't like to hear my voice on the radio, but now I can take my time to prepare everything at my pace, and I feel less anxious."
- "The materials are very interesting, especially the Patria show, motivating me to explore and learn the domestic culture of Spain."

Simultaneously, both Internal Moderators (IM) and External Examiners (EE) who reviewed both the assessment proposal and the final grades, referred to it in similar terms. In particular, they highlighted the innovative nature of the proposal, its value in motivating proactive, autonomous learning, and its evident stress-relieving effect on students compared to individual interviews. As both a teacher on the module and the module leader, directly involved throughout the entire process, I also observed a positive shift in students' engagement and attitude towards the module and the oral assessment. For example, students would often attend office hours and Q&A sessions to solve any issues, to show their progress on the podcast creation, or to share ideas with their classmates about the project.

Finally, it seems clear to me that more systematic research would be necessary to analyze whether the improvement in the parameters shown above, most notably the grades obtained has a correlation with the actual improvement of oral proficiency, and to what extent. In this regard, it could be worth exploring a combination of podcast-based tasks with other non-rehearsed tasks that could replace more spontaneous oral production.

Having said that, at this current stage, results do suggest a positive effect both in terms of numbers (average grades increased, the rate of absenteeism decreased, and there was a dramatic drop in the failure rate in the speaking component) and students engagement and perceptions of their own learning experience within the module. In addition to this, there was a significant number of podcasts whose artistic and linguistic value was truly remarkable; some of them, surprisingly, coming from students who had previously received low grades or had relatively low engagement in class. This could be indicative, in addition to the actual engaging value of podcasts, of their great potential to encourage students to actively use multiple skills through which to communicate in the target language in a creative and integrative way.

As for the challenges that this tool may present in the near future, it seems clear that with the advent of Artificial Intelligence, new questions arise about its effective application in the evaluation process. Issues that may arise connect to: identity verification (e.g., AI technology that can perfectly clone a person's voice) or even the role of AI writing assistance for script creation. Perhaps the debate now revolves around how to seamlessly integrate such technologies with other digital tools to maximize the benefits for both students and teachers.

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利用基于"三一语法"观念的学习指南提升学生的自主学习意识

Enhancing Autonomy Awareness in Advanced Chinese Language Learners through Trinitarian Grammar Based Study Guide

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摘要：

二语言习得领域的研究表明，一些学习者能够快速、轻松地习得第二语言，而另一些学习者则不能完全流利地使用第二语言准确地表达自己的意思。不同的变量共同影响着语言学习的最终效果，包括学习者的动机、学习策略、学习风格等。本研究尝试利用基于"三一语法"观念设计的学习指南，增强高级阶段中文学习者的元语言知识，进而提升学生的自主学习意识。

Abstract:

Research in the field of second language acquisition has shown that some learners are able to acquire a second language rapidly and easily, while others are unable to achieve complete fluency or to express themselves accurately in a second language. Multiple variables jointly affect the language learning outcomes, including learner's motivation, learning strategy, and learning style. This article explores how to use a Trinitarian Grammar based study guide to enhance the metalinguistic knowledge of advanced Chinese learners and foster advanced Chinese language learner's autonomy awareness.

自 20世纪60年代末以来，语言的有效学习一直是语言研究的热点问题（Nandi，2011）。人们下意识地认为高级阶段学生的学习能力应该优于初级、中级的学生。事实上，一线教师会发现高级阶段的学生在学习能力上也表现出较大的差异。上世纪70年代，一些学者和教育家观察到语言学习者表现出了对自身学习不同程度的掌控能力，"自主学习Leaner Autonomy"这个概念由此从政治、哲学领域（"自治Autonomy"）引入（Smith,2008）。该研究领域的先驱Holec（1979、1981）主张自主学习能力具体表现为语言学习过程中的决策能力，包括对学习目标、学习内容、学习阶段、学习方法、学习进度、时间和地点、评价过程的决策能力。

近二十年来，国内外对自主学习的研究方兴未艾。国内的研究率先在英语教学领域兴起，研究手段相对单一，以思辨性研究为主（高吉利，2005）。近年来，越来越多汉语学界的学者开始关注自主学习，并借鉴国外研究成果展开了实证性研究。现有研究大多从理论角度提出了对教师的建议，比如加强与学习者的沟通，推广有效的学习策略等等，但还缺乏实际操作的例证，也没有提出对提升学习者自主学习意识的具体策略。本文将介绍如何利用基于"三一语法"观念设计的学习指南增强学生的元语言知识，进而提升学生的自主学习意识。

冯胜利、施春宏（2011）从教学实际出发，确立了一种新型的二语教学语法体系--"三一语法"，在语言教学与语言学理论之间架设了一座桥梁（郭利霞，2017）。"三一语法"的基本框架由三个维度构成：句子的形式结构、结构的功能作用、功能的典型语境。第一个维度，即"句子的形式结构"中，关注点在于句子和短语中各成分的语义特征和语法作用；第二个维度"结构的功能作用"则深入挖掘提炼出该句结构的语体用途，即"干什么用的"；最具

特色的第三个维度"功能的典型语境"（冯胜利，2011），指根据教学对象的认知经验、学习的特定阶段和语言教学的便捷性而归纳出的有针对性的"教学型"语境。"三一语法"不仅对教师的备课、授课提出了要求，也明确了学生的学习内容：任一语法点，都应从三个维度进行习得、理解、记忆和使用。为西浦高级阶段中文课CLT109设计的学习指南正是依据"三一语法"的理论框架编制而成的。

图1："三一语法"的三个维度

观察现有教材，对于语法点的注释或多或少会涉及上述三个维度的部分内容，但是大部分以线性排列的文字叙述为主。注释的服务对象主要是教师，通常由教师内化这些语法知识再传授给学生。

> ## 以致
>
> 连词，"使……事情发生"之意，偏书面语，表示由于"以致"之前小句中原因而导致的结果，大多是不好的或说话人所不希望发生的情况，"以致"后面通常接完整的小句或动词短语。
> 1. 中国对钢铁等原材料的需求促使全球废金属价格达到历史新高，以致废弃的窨井盖都成为废品收购的新宠。
> 2. 这位考生事先没有按照规定的参考书进行认真的复习，以致考试极为糟糕。

> 3. 他的腿在车祸中遭受了重创，以致几个月都被困在床上。
> 4. 由于这位将军在打仗中骄傲轻敌，以致被对方层层包围，士兵伤亡惨重，他自己也被敌军擒获。

上例中，注释包含了该语法的语义、适用语体、结构形式及语用方面的信息，为教师备课提供了较为充分的说明。但即使是高级阶段的学生读起来也有不易理解的地方。基于"三一语法"观念设计的学习指南在形式设计上体现三个维度，形式结构以句子或短语为单位出现；语言力求简明、易懂；例句的编排紧扣"功能的典型语境"，这往往是得体使用该语言点的关键，即"在哪儿用"。每个例句根据学生的真实语言水平，以不借助词典能理解为标准编写，必要时对专有名词辅以英文注释。同时尽量考虑以新的语法知识复现之前学过的内容。如：

> ## 以致
>
> 形式结构：原因，以致+结果
> 功能作用：【书】连词，一般用在第二个分句的开头，引出不理想的结果
> 典型语境：叙述一个已经发生的事实及其原因
>
> 1. 今年的降雨量(rainfall capacity)下降了 3.65%,以致部分地区粮食产量(grain output)大 大下降。
> 2. 小安意识到自己网购成瘾的时候没有尝试去戒网瘾，以致欠了不少信用卡账，最后信用卡被停用了。

在教学实践中，教师在词汇教学的过程中也会包含意义及搭配的讲解、操练，对于第三个维度的典型语境说明却并不总是涉及。一些在中文语境中有特殊含义的词语，比如"刺头"，往往难以找到合适的翻译，此时，学习指南中对功能作用的说明及根据"典型语境"设计的例句就显得尤为重要。

刺头

形式结构：S+是(一)个刺头
S+冒出来/出现(了)+几个/一个+刺头
功能作用：【口】名词，指在团队中没有合作精神，事事反对，故意找麻烦的人。
典型语境：评价人

1. 新来的小张看上去老实，没想到是个刺头，我们老大现在看见他就头疼。
2. 新兵训练中冒出来了几个刺头，这几个人训练结束后又加练了一个小时。
3. 员工培训中出现了几个刺头，导致培训的进度拖延了。

图2：团队中的"刺头"

如上例所示，"刺头"一词对于来自不强调集体意识的文化背景的学生来说很难理解。如果仅仅以英文注释说明的话，学生无法正确把握这个词语，也会因此错过这个掌握地道表达，加深对中国文化理解的机会。

作为教学活动最主要的两个变量，教师和学习者应该是沟通合作的关系，教师既应该设计符合学生学习需求的材料，也应该有意识地培养学生的元语言知识，正如"三一语法"所主张的，学生应该三维地习得和理解，三维地记忆和使用每一个语言点。因为动机、学习策略、学习风格等多重因素的作用，学生的自主学习能力差异比较大。自主学习能力是一种综合性的能力，表现为对学习过程、学习策略、学习内容、学习环境的决策能力。自主学习能力的提升是无法通过简单地改变上述某项或者某几项因素就能实现的，这需要长期的、系统的培养。作为个体教师，可以在教学过程中有意识地提醒学生关注语言学习的规律和技巧，进而提升学生的自主学习意识。

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Using Blended Teaching Approach and Mnemonics to Motivate Chinese Students' Autonomous Vocabulary Learning in EAP Teaching at XJTLU

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1. Introduction

Blended learning at XJTLU

Blended learning is an educational delivery mode that "contains both face-to-face and computer-mediated portions" to guide students' learning (Alamarry et al., 2014). It has been widely used by universities and institutions to facilitate student learning in various forms such as quizzes, engaging students to strengthen and reflect on what they learned, while encouraging students to recall for long-term retention (Dunlosky et al., 2013). Students' autonomous vocabulary learning is an important goal for language learners (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004). For EAP learners, grasping sufficient academic English words is an important foundation for academic writing, reading, speaking and listening (Shirzad et al., 2017). At Xi'an Ji-aotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), an EMI in Suzhou, China, Learning Mall, a Learning Management System powered by Moodle, is used as a capable and competent online learning system to promote students' learning and to meet the challenge of global transition in the context of Uncertainty, Ambiguity, Complexity and Changeability (UACC) (Xi & Li, 2021). To teach and support learning, students can use Quizlet and other vocabulary learning functions as tools for autonomous learning on Learning Mall to review the vocabulary for long-term retention at XJTLU. At the School of Language (SoL) at XJTLU, lecturers use Learning Mall as an effective blended teaching tool to facilitate flipped learning and assist with students' revision after class.

Mnemonics in vocabulary teaching

Mnemonics, a term which originates from the word 'memory', are techniques that improve memory by simplifying information and making it easier for students to remember. These techniques have been used for centuries to assist in tasks like memorizing sequences and lists (Doe & Smith, 2020), and can benefit vocabulary learning significantly in the modern context. Strategies such as associative mnemonics help students create strong connections between words and their meanings, leading to better retention. Research suggests that students who utilize techniques tend to remember vocabulary more effectively compared to those who do not (Doe & Smith, 2020). By creating associations, though sometimes amusing, students can enhance their ability to recall words and their meanings.

Why was the research done?

This study was initiated after the researcher noticed the difficulties faced by Year 1 EAP students at XJTLU when completing their formative and summative writing tasks. These challenges were identified through various sources, including lower-than-expected grades, teacher observations highlighting specific areas of difficulty and direct feedback from students expressing their struggles. The main objective of this study was to investigate the underlying causes behind these difficulties, with a primary focus on the barriers that hinder effective learning. A survey was conducted to gain detailed insights and evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching methods. The survey acknowledges the interconnectedness between learning barriers and instructional efficacy since addressing one inevitably affects the other. The findings brought attention to a few significant challenges, the most prominent among which was the limited command of academic vocabulary. This was closely followed by difficulties concerning paragraph structure and discursive essays. When the research mentions "content issues" below, it refers to students facing difficulties in generating ideas and arguments, which indicates a lack of depth in their understanding of the subject matter. Additionally, grammatical mistakes and general unfamiliarity with academic writing conventions were notable concerns (as shown in Figure 1).

This research was inspired by the findings of Blachowicz, Fisher and Watts Taffee (2005), which showed that having a good command of vocabulary significantly impacts the academic performance of EAP learners. The main goal of this study was to examine the specific difficulties faced by 115 first-year students enrolled in an EAP module during the 2021/22 academic year as they learned academic English vocabulary. The aim was to identify the obstacles encountered by these students and explore how instructors can
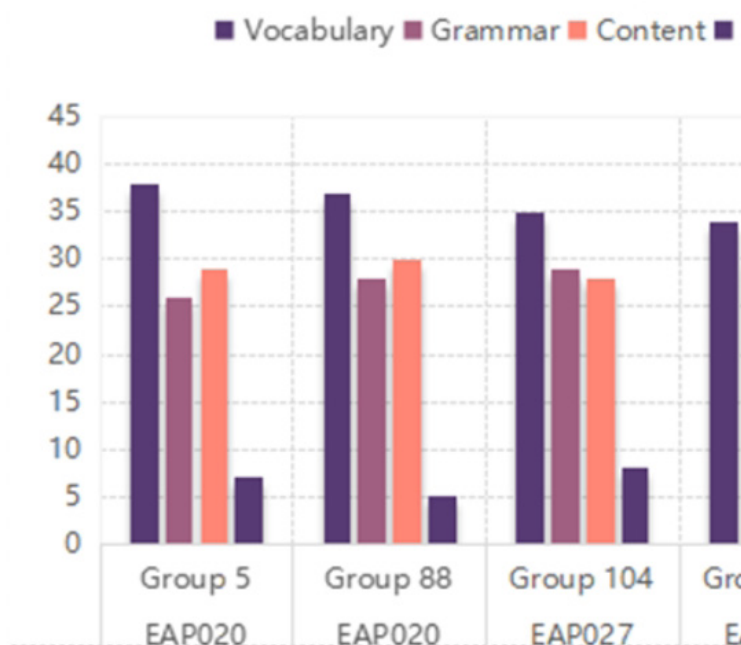

Figure 1: The barriers of formative and summative wr
by May 2021 and November 202

help them overcome these challenges, ultimately improving their ability to learn vocabulary independently. The methodology involved a comprehensive year-long investigation that focused on both the difficulties faced by students and the instructional strategies employed by teachers.

What is in the study?

The action research mainly has five parts. First, the literature review part shows current research on vocabulary teaching and blended teaching approaches, and explains how this study aims to close the research gap on how students use blended learning with mnemonics strategies to enlarge EAP vocabularies. Second, the study uses a quantitative method to demonstrate the subjective and objective factors contributing to students' difficulties in vocabulary learning and utilizes both qualitative and quantitative research to prove how students' use of blended learning with associative

Knowledge

up 156   Group 29

AP027   EAP027
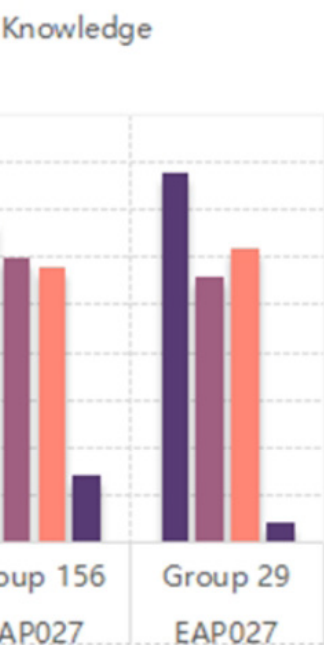
riting (The survey done
1).

mnemonics and affix mnemonics could expand vocabulary. Following the results in the third part, the fourth and fifth parts cover the discussion and conclusion, analyzing the data and providing recommendations on how students could perform better on EAP vocabulary learning and how lecturers support students in achieving this goal.

2. Literature review

Blended learning approaches

Blended learning is both based on teachers' pedagogies and a combination of face-to-face and online components and aims to strengthen the establishment of connections enabled through traditional classroom learning and the self-directed, adaptable accessibility provided by online learning (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Walker et al., 2016; Markanastasakis, 2019; Wang, 2019). According to Marshall (2020), there are four types of blended learning based on different pedagogies. The first type is the flipped classroom, which refers to providing students with online content before onsite classes. The second type is flexible learning, where students mainly learn online but occasionally

engage in offline activity. The third type is self-directed blended learning in which students use a mixture of online and onsite methods to meet their learning needs. The last type is supplemental blended learning, which is an approach that mainly consists of onsite learning but uses online materials as additional resources.

According to research based on Bloom's Taxonomy in Figure 2, online learning techniques are the most successful when certain conditions are met. Firstly, they are effective for teaching concepts in the lower cognitive domains in Bloom's Taxonomy, which generally involve less intricate theoretical knowledge. Secondly, these techniques work well when students have the freedom to interact with the online system autonomously, enabling them to assess and strengthen their understanding at their preferred speed (Marshall, 2020).

Based on the research, vocabulary learning is a basic and major skill for EFL learners. Students should have a good understanding of English vocabulary and apply it to practice (Nation, 2013). Therefore, it is desirable to apply blended learning approaches to students' autonomous vocabulary learning in order to use appropriate learning technologies to develop an effective learning environment.
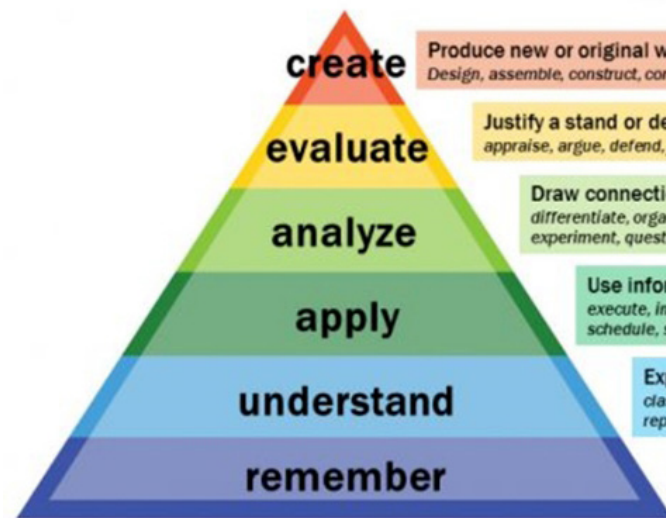

Figure 2: Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), Vanderbilt

Vocabulary teaching

Many research identified specific challenges in teaching vocabulary at the senior high school level. These challenges include waning interest in vocabulary acquisition and limited time devoted to expanding one's vocabulary. This decline in engagement and time allocation is often attributed to the emphasis placed on exam preparation and the overwhelming workload associated with College Entrance Examinations. Consequently, vocabulary learning has become a neglected aspect of language education, sometimes referred to as the disregarded "Cinderella" of language learning (Chen, 2020; Yan, 2020; Zhou, 2019).

Bloom's Taxonomy

...ork
...njecture, develop, formulate, author, investigate

...ecision
...judge, select, support, value, critique, weigh

...ons among ideas
...nize, relate, compare, contrast, distinguish, examine,
...ion, test

...rmation in new situations
...mplement, solve, use, demonstrate, interpret, operate,
...sketch

...plain ideas or concepts
...ssify, describe, discuss, explain, identify, locate, recognize,
...ort, select, translate

Recall facts and basic concepts
define, duplicate, list, memorize, repeat, state

...University Center for teaching.

Vocabulary learning should be systematic, requiring students to master the relevant principle of vocabulary formation and learn effectively (Beglar, 2010). Numerous studies have established a positive connection between effective vocabulary acquisition and the utilization of online resources, which include gamified learning methods, memory aids and educational applications, all designed to enhance the efficiency of vocabulary learning (Markanastasakis, 2019; Yang & Dai, 2012; Yang & Dai, 2011; Wang, 2019; Shirzad et al., 2017).

In addition to utilizing online resources for vocabulary teaching, some researchers used Affix mnemonics and associative mnemonics to help students strengthen vocabulary memorization (Li, 2011; Bierig & Krueger, 2020; Xiang & Niu, 2014). Associative mnemonics is a learning approach that facilitates memorization by associating the learner's familiar knowledge with new knowledge using imagination strategies, such as Memory Palace (Legge et al., 2012; Xiang & Niu, 2014; Madan & Singhal, 2012a; Madan & Singhal, 2012b). According to Legge (2012), the Memory Palace technique can greatly improve students' desire to learn vocabulary, thus increasing their interest and motivation in acquiring new words.

This study aims to build on these findings by examining the effectiveness of combining associative mnemonics with affix mnemonics, which is a technique where learners utilize common prefixes and suffixes in English to comprehend and remember unfamiliar words. By connecting word roots with their affixes, students can more easily understand and retain the meanings of complex vocabulary (Ur, 2022).

Research gap

The current research aims to close the gap in the current research on how to use effective mnemonics, such as associative mnemonics, to motivate students' autonomous EAP vocabulary learning and how to use blended learning to support this. Thus, the research aims to promote an effective learning approach to support

students and answer the following three research questions:

1. What difficulties affect EAP students' autonomous vocabulary learning in Year 1?
2. What teaching approaches will guide students to learn academic English vocabulary effectively?
3. To what extent can the blended teaching approach support EAP students in tackling the difficulties in autonomous vocabulary learning?

3. Methodology

Participants

A total of 115 students from EAP027 and EAP020, which are two Year 1 EAP modules at XJTLU, were invited to participate in the study. These students are from 5 classes. Two classes in EAP020 participated in the research in semester 2 in the Academic Year 2020-2021 between April 2021 and May 2021. Three other classes in EAP027 joined the research in semester 1 of Academic Year 2021-22 between September 2021 and January 2022.

Procedure

The main focus of the study was to answer three key research questions. The research used a quantitative approach that was divided into three phases: pre-test, mid-test, and post-test. These phases were carried out during 2021 for five different student groups enrolled in EAP027 and EAP020 courses. The main objective was to assess how effective a combination of associative and affix mnemonics with online learning tools can be in enhancing vocabulary acquisition. The study started with the EAP020 group, followed by the EAP027 group. To evaluate the initial English vocabulary levels of these groups, the study conducted pre-tests in March and September 2021. The mid-tests and post-tests were then conducted in May and December 2021 respectively to gauge the impact of a blended learning strategy that combines traditional teaching methods with online resources on students' independent vocabulary development.

This research aimed to contribute to improving the quality and effectiveness of academic and professional practices, specifically in teaching. In order to achieve this goal, a questionnaire as well as interviews were conducted at the beginning of the study to examine the hypotheses and uncover the initial difficulties students encounter when learning vocabulary.

The first hypothesis suggests a connection between students' vocabulary proficiency and the economic growth of their local area, implying that socioeconomic factors may influence students' language acquisition. This hypothesis is based on the idea that economic conditions can impact educational resources and opportunities, thereby affecting how students acquire new words. The second hypothesis postulates that English learning experiences in high school have an impact on students' vocabulary development at university level. It seeks to investigate how prior instruction in English during high school can shape students' language skills in the long run.

After completing the test, five students from each group were interviewed, making a total of 25 participants. The main purpose of these interviews was to gather in-depth feedback from the students regarding their experiences and lessons about how to improve vocabulary learning. The discussion mainly revolved around the effectiveness of different strategies for learning, as well as teaching methods and assessment techniques used for vocabulary development.

4. Results

4.1. The result of research question 1

Results from the pre-test and questionnaire are shown below and are compared with the hypotheses.

1) The relationship between students' vocabulary proficiency and local economic development

According to the R-values, the result can be concluded as in figure 3:

	r-value	Correlation
Group 5 EAP020	0.465	Moderate positive (0.45-0.74)
Group 88 EAP020	0.200	Weak positive (0.25-0.44)
Group 29 EAP027	0.272	Weak positive (0.25-0.44)
Group 104 EAP027	0.497	Moderate positive (0.45-0.74)
Group 156 EAP027	0.504	Moderate positive (0.45-0.74)

Figure 3: The relationship between students' vocabulary proficiency and local economic development

Based on the findings, it is clear that the correlation differs across groups. Although the R-value for group 88 indicates a weaker correlation, it is crucial to acknowledge that a positive correlation still exists. These results highlight how vocabulary acquisition is influenced

by factors beyond teaching approaches, and broader socioeconomic factors also play a role.

2) The result of the questionnaire and interview relating to research question1

The research summarized the possible problems that students may encounter in their study based on other researchers' qualitative research and listed these problems in the questionnaire for further confirmation (Sun & Chen, 2007; Liu, 2020; Chen, 2020). The possible problems can be concluded as follows:

a. *Students overlooked vocabulary learning before studying in XJTLU because they were overburdened by heavy learning tasks for the College Entrance Examination (Gao Kao).*

b. *Students use rote memorization rather than other effective memorization skills, which causes them to forget vocabulary quickly and lose motivation.*

c. *Students seldom use English to write for practice.*

d. *Students do not have the knowledge of vocabulary mnemonics, such as affix mnemonics or associative mnemonics.*

e. *Students are not guided to learn vocabulary and lack learning resources in senior high school, which leads to demotivation in vocabulary expansion.*
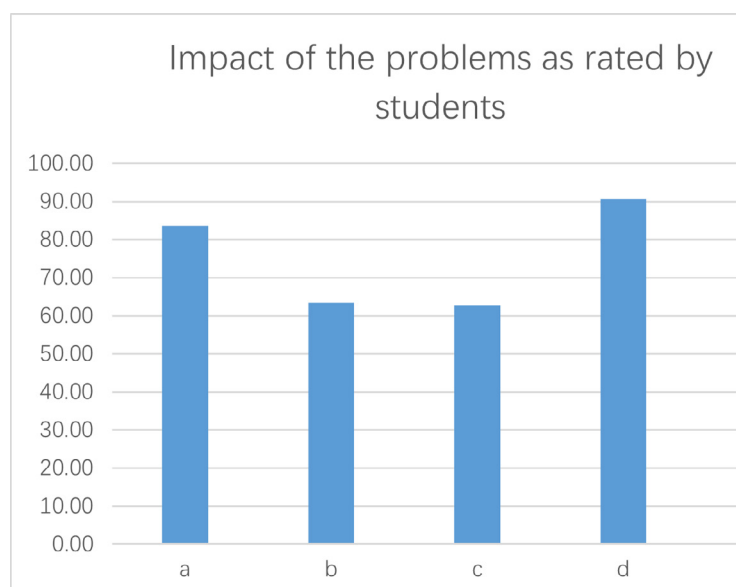

Figure 4: The result of the problems that students in five groups rated in the questionn...

To explore how these problems affect students' autonomous vocabulary learning, the research incorporated other lecturers' suggestions at the School of Languages. Students were allowed to rate these problems on the extent of their impact on their learning. The results are shown in Figure 4.

The findings showed that nearly 90% of the students recognized problem 'd' as having a significant impact on their learning. A smaller percentage of students also identified problems 'a' and 'e' as influential. These results then informed the next stage of the research, which is an experiment specifically aimed at investigating teaching strategies that could effectively support students in improving their independent vocabulary learning. This decision was directly influenced by the main challenges (problems 'd', 'a' and 'e') reported by the students.
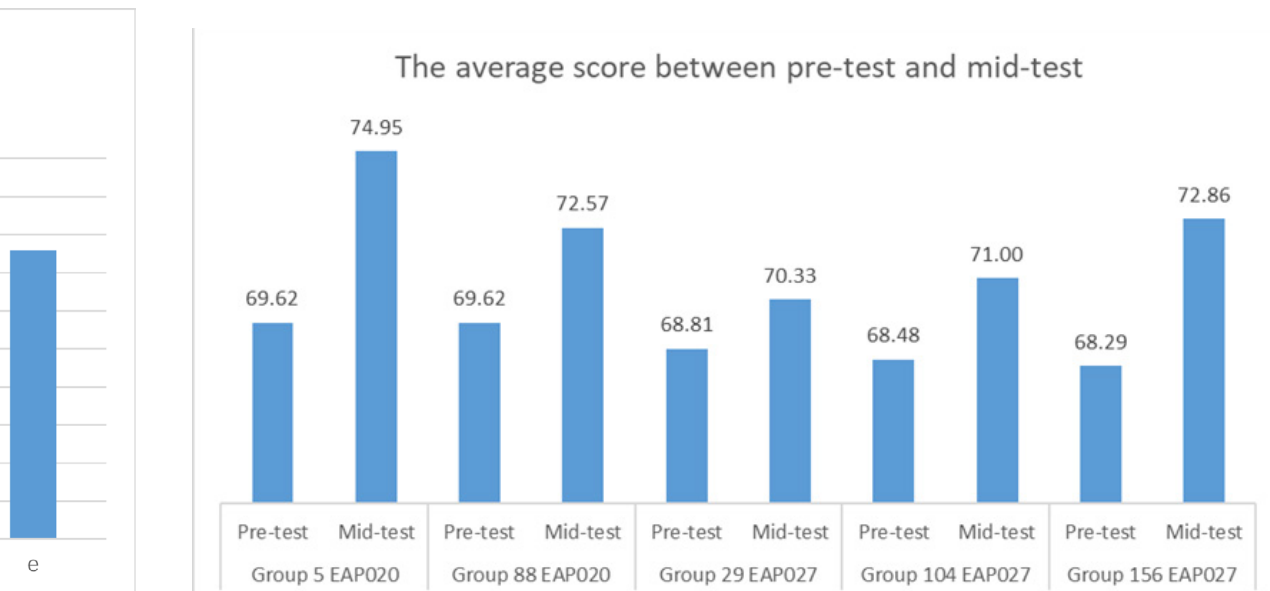
The average score between pre-test and mid-test

Figure 5: Comparison of the average score between the pre-test and mid-test.

The result of research question 2

The study used affix mnemonics and associative mnemonics in teaching to guide students in strengthening their autonomous learning in the second phase, which lasted for four weeks. During this phase, online resources were not applied to facilitate students' learning. A mid-test was administered to compare the pre-test results (Figure 5).

According to the data, the increase in average scores from the pre-test to the mid-test is 5%. Additionally, both results were analyzed to show the correlation between students' performance and the use of affix and associative mnemonics in teaching. According to the R-values, the result can be concluded in Figure 6:

In summary, group 5 shows a strong correlation, and the other four groups show a moderate correlation.

	r-value	Correlation
Group 5 EAP020	0.7695	Strong positive (0.75-1)
Group 88 EAP020	0.6602	Moderate positive (0.45-0.74)
Group 29 EAP027	0.6782	Moderate positive (0.45-0.74)
Group 104 EAP027	0.6209	Moderate positive (0.45-0.74)
Group 156 EAP027	0.6841	Moderate positive (0.45-0.74)

Figure 6: Correlation between students' performance and the use of affix and associative mnemonics

The average score between mid-test and post-test

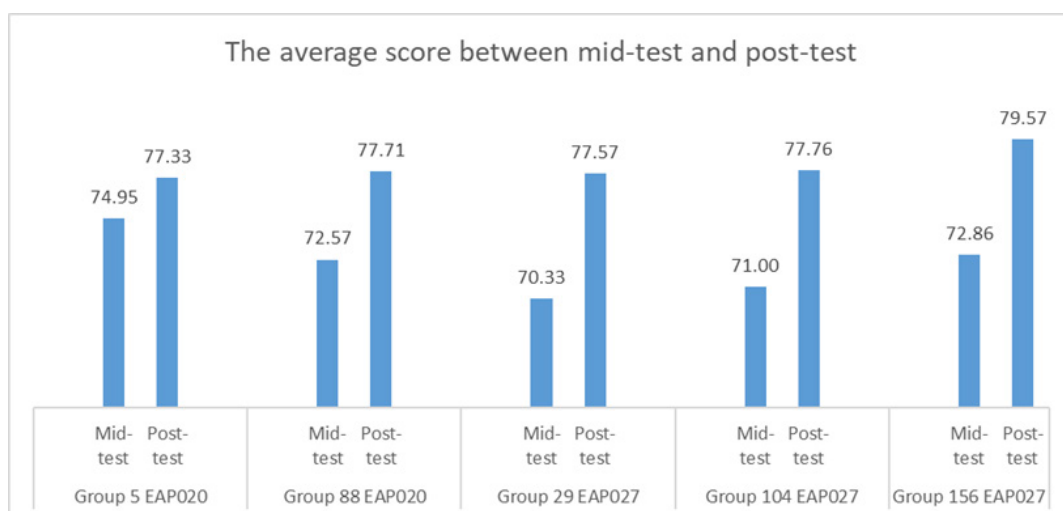Figure 7: Comparison of the average score between mid-test and post-test.

The result of research question 3

To explore how blended learning affects students' autonomous learning, the research required students to use online resources, such as Youdao and Quizlet, to facilitate learning in the third phase. The lecturer had set the learning content on the applications in advance, and students reviewed the vocabulary within the time set by the system. The purpose is for students to use appropriate learning technologies. The third phase, which lasted for two weeks, consisted of two teaching approaches: face-to-face teaching and blended learning. A post-test was administered to compare it with the mid-test (Figure 7). According to the data, the average increase from mid-test is 8%.

5. Discussion

Research question 1: *What difficulties affect EAP students' autonomous vocabulary learning in Year 1?*

According to the results, the difficulties that affect EAP students' autonomous vocabulary learning in Year 1 can be summarized as follows:

1) The economy of students' hometown

The research discovered a connection between students' vocabulary knowledge and the economic conditions of their hometowns. While three groups had a decent positive correlation and two groups showed a weaker correlation, it suggests that the local economy does have a particular influence on vocabulary learning. This aligns with Li's (2016) findings on educational disparities in China caused by economic differences. Based on these results, it is recommended that teachers adjust their teaching methods, especially for teaching vocabulary, to accommodate the diverse socioeconomic backgrounds of students. This could involve incorporating different learning materials or activities that students from different economic environments can relate to and quickly access. However, the study also acknowledges individual differences. Some students from areas with lower GDP exceeded expectations, while others from more developed cities performed below expectations. This highlights the importance of future research considering factors such as learning motivation.

2) The influence of curriculum setting in high school

The study found that their academic workload hinders students' ability to learn vocabulary independently. This discovery suggests a connection between the high academic pressures faced in senior high school, especially in preparing for college entrance exams and the difficulties encountered at the university level. It aligns with previous research that indicates English vocabulary learning often takes a backseat due to these pressures in the broader context of language education (Chen, 2020; Yan, 2020; Zhou, 2019). As a result, it is recommended that teaching staff provide specific guidance on practical and manageable learning strategies. These strategies should consider students' past educational experiences, which may not have been prioritized in the past, or equip them with tools for independent learning, especially when students are faced with heavy academic workloads.

3) The lack of learning strategies

The research discovered two main factors contributing to students' lack of motivation. The first is a lack of knowledge about effective learning techniques, and the second is their unfamiliarity with specific ways to learn new vocabulary. These findings emphasize the significance of explicit instruction and support. As a result, when students were given clear guidance and relevant materials aimed at expanding their vocabulary, there was a noticeable increase of 5% in their mid-test scores. The data fits the research findings that affix and associative mnemonics would arouse students' interest in vocabulary learning and increase their motivation (Li, 2011; Bierig & Krueger,

2020; Xiang & Niu, 2014). Accordingly, clear instructions to develop effective learning could support and guide students.

Research question 2: *What teaching approaches will guide students to learn academic English vocabulary effectively?*

The study revealed that there was an average score improvement of 5% between the pre-test and the mid-test after affixes and associative mnemonics were used in class. However, it is important to consider that these findings could be influenced by various factors related to student engagement and participation. In future research, it would be beneficial to categorize participants into different proficiency levels. This way, tailoring teaching methods based on these distinct levels could give future research a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of specific pedagogical approaches.

Research question 3: *To what extent can the blended teaching approach facilitate EAP students in tackling the difficulties of autonomous vocabulary learning?*

The data shows that the average increase in the post-test compared to the mid-test is 8%, which is higher than 5%. Students can get clearer guidance with online assistance for vocabulary retention because the vocabulary is inputted into the online system, and the system can automatically remind students to review regularly on a mobile device. This would increase the effectiveness of autonomous learning. The result fits the fact that supplemental blended learning would improve the efficiency of students' autonomous vocabulary learning (Markanastasakis, 2019; Yang & Dai, 2012; Yang & Dai, 2011; Wang, 2019; Shirzad, et al., 2017). However, as mentioned in 5.2, the research should consider participants' performance and experiment with the teaching approach with students of similar levels.

6. Conclusion

The main objective of this study is to assess the effectiveness of a blended learning method that integrates both traditional and technological educational approaches with specific mnemonic techniques, specifically affix and associative mnemonics. The aim of this approach is to enhance students' ability to learn vocabulary independently. Mnemonics, especially those involving prefixes and associations, have demonstrated their ability to improve memory retention, which plays a vital role in acquiring new vocabulary. By linking new words with familiar concepts, mnemonics assist students in creating more robust and longer-lasting mental connections, resulting in improved retention. The research findings suggest that this combined teaching approach not only increases students' interest in learning but also enhances overall learning outcomes. Furthermore, the study proposes that incorporating educational technologies alongside these mnemonic methods could further enhance vocabulary retention. Future research should focus on verifying the effectiveness of this approach across various proficiency levels and investigating long-term motivation in vocabulary learning beyond intensive training periods.

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THIS OR THAT

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Overview

This or That? is a speaking activity that we have been using in various EAP courses, and it can be used for any student level in any course with speaking activities. It is versatile because it can be used as a simple ice-breaker, warm-up activity, or a practice accompanying a taught speaking skill. This or That? itself is designed to be simple, so it can be quickly adapted to accommodate any language level, topic and learning outcome. With a quick setup on Moodle or another VLE, it can be used on-site, online, Hyflex, individually, or as a group.

So how does it work? The teacher will need to prepare a question bank for *This or That?* questions and set it up on Moodle. Students will then access the activity on their own devices and choose a category such as "Food". The system will then randomly pull some questions from the question bank, for example "Coffee or Tea?". For the speaking practice, a student must choose an option from this question, explain their choice, then go to the next question. Students can choose their own category and take turns to retrieve questions. This works best in pairs, and the activity can be timed as desired.

This activity can easily be tailored to different difficulties or learning outcomes. It could be a simple 5-minute warm-up, or more elaborate choices could be included to practice argumentation skills. Topics are also almost limitlessly flexible; they can be general or course topic related. Students also do not need to be given any specific instructions, and they can produce language however they interpret the questions and talk about whatever they want to say. This article on *Ready to TELL* includes examples of how to use *This or That?* in different ways.

Theoretical Background

In implementing *This or That?* as a classroom activity, we are not just working to improve students' fluency, but also critical thinking and learner autonomy. The second of Nation & Macalister's (2010) "Twenty principles of language teaching", concerning strategy and autonomy, states: "A language course should train learners in how to learn a language and how to monitor and be aware of their learning, so that they can become effective and independent language learners." As a flexible activity that students can use on their own, *This or That*? helps promote this autonomy by also being useful outside the classroom and adaptable to each student's own interests. For example, a student doing individual practice could choose a learning goal (e.g.: explaining a choice), call up a prompt and work out an answer.

In a classroom context, *This or That*? is primarily partner-based, so it is worth bearing in mind that learner autonomy need not mean each student is on their own. David Little of Trinity College Dublin warns that in focusing too much on the individual learner, "we may overlook the fact that learning is never solitary…" and reminds us that "all learning depends on social interaction" (2004). Indeed, the quick, low-stakes nature of this activity makes it very social, and is just right for setting the tone that most oral language teachers desire for their lessons. That it may very well be used for fun outside of the classroom is an even greater bonus.

Advanced Techniques

If more specific outcomes are in mind for the lesson, the teacher can also add further instructions to the prompt. For example, if the students are practicing idea development with structure, the instructions could be "Choose one option, and explain why you have chosen it with at least two detailed reasons." Alternatively, a comparison element could be added into idea development, such as "Choose one option, and explain why it is a better choice than the other."

The difficulty can also be increased by making it a practice for argumentation. For example, in teaching students the skill of being able to see benefits to both sides of the debate without bias, one partner can be asked to choose an option for the other, who will then have to justify why that option is better. This can help students practice generating valid counterarguments in a debate or argumentative essay writing.

To take it even further, the instructions can be adapted to ask students to offer counter-argument of a choice, and provide refutation. Certain skills may also be targeted: In one lesson introducing Aristotle's Three Modes of Persuasion, students were asked to make a choice, and then to apply appealing to ethos or pathos in their justification for their choice.

Given the surprising depth of what might seem a simple party game at first, the potential usefulness of *This or That*? should now be apparent. The design of the activity itself is simple, setup is quick, and the possibilities are nearly endless.

Related Reading

Check out this article on *Ready to TELL* (https://www.readytotell-xjtlu.com/collections/2023-collection/1333961_this-or-that-a-versatile-speaking-activity-pow-ered-by-moodle-quiz) to view the setup steps and download all resources for this activity. It also includes examples of how to use *This or That?* for different language levels and learning outcomes.

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Reader Autonomy in the Digital world

b is a Senior Lecturer in the ELC of School of Languages at XJTLU. Her teaching centers
communicative purposes and she often refers to the communication process to identify
nication breakdown. Acknowledging the developments in technology and digital media,
e challenge of adapting her teaching philosophy to correspond with the ever-changing
ent. Even when it takes a little time.
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I KNOW WHAT I say next will date me. I remember when we had a party line telephone with one ring for my family and two rings for the neighbors. I remember getting three or four local newspapers in the mail, some daily and some weekly. I remember using microfiche. I remember my first cell phone that was as big as my regular phone and could only make calls. I remember when I started my first Hotmail email account. I remember my first cell phone that had text messaging and then my Blackberry with Internet messaging.

Each of these developments was amazing and helpful to the younger generations, but often overwhelming to the older generations. It usually involved change that rendered old methods obsolete and required new approaches. Thus, the older generation often mourned the loss of skills that the younger generations would just never know. To be honest, I would argue that the older generation was not always as concerned about the loss of skill for the younger generations as much as becoming acutely aware that the skills they had to pass on to the young were no longer required.

Still, whether passed on from older generations or not, the need for communication persists. The need for reading persists. And indubitably brings groans of agony from teachers and students alike. Students visibly wilt upon the first glance at their course reading list and teachers silently pray to the heavens that maybe this semester this group of students might actually like reading.
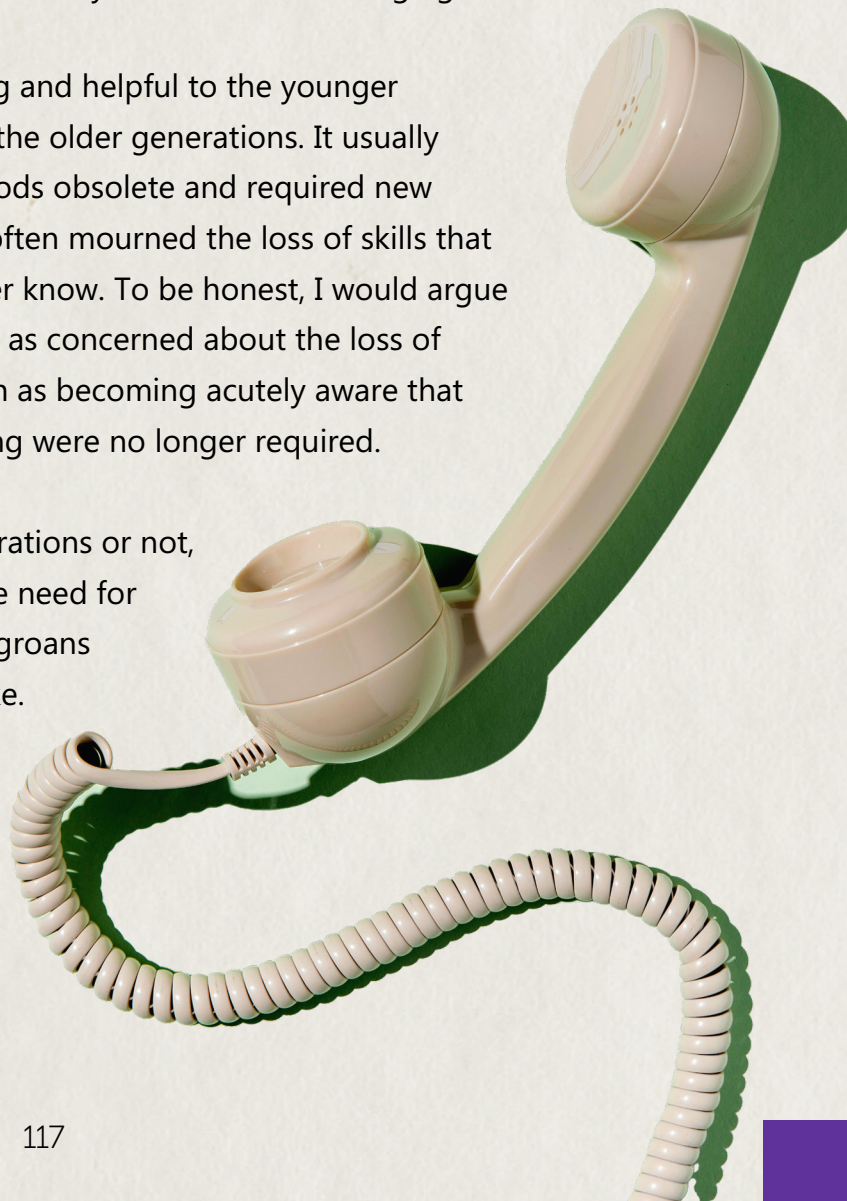
It's too long. It's too boring. There are no pictures.

When teachers hear these sentiments from their students, they usually shake their heads and wonder at the fortitude of the student and fear for the future. Teachers commiserate with colleagues.

They are in university now. Life is tough. Just do it and get it done. I did it when I was in university.

Students then roll their eyes and wonder what rock their teacher just crawled out from under and why their teacher has to be so unreasonable. Doesn't the teacher realize that things have changed?

Vector credit to Freepik

That was the past.

It has been a long struggle with heavy pondering, but lo and behold, I believe I have gotten to the place where I wholeheartedly agree with our students. That was the past. Until the development of the Smart phone, while communication was getting easier and faster, it was still relegated to a few locations and media materials. The idea that I would one day in my life access video, audio, visual, and text of various genres with a choice of language all on one device was not something I worried about learning how to do. I read books on boring paper in black and white, not because it was the best, but because it was the cheapest. The glossy color magazines were expensive and newspapers only had color on the front page, with black and white thereafter. Images were also in black and white. Slowly color became more common, but who could afford to publish unending numbers of thick tomes filled with color pages and color images? Let alone purchase them, aside from university students.

Now there is digital.

Color, visuals, larger fonts, as many pages as necessary, embedded video and audio, and links to other sources can all be included in one file for a minimal cost which in turn requires a minimal user fee. And aside from a more engaging interface, digital can also facilitate greater reader autonomy. With the hyperlinked and interconnected text, students can traverse the material without need of a teacher nearby to guide them every step. This is not to suggest that traditional reading texts are too difficult for the current generation of learners or that reading has become unnecessary, but rather the textual presentation of the information does not need to be part of the difficulty.

While I may find it much simpler to read the research article about geothermal heating in a more traditional text format as that is the skill set with which I feel most familiar, it doesn't mean that an interactive workbook created with something like H5P is any less effective and communicative. It means that I as a teacher of this newest generation during this current technological development stage need to know how to utilize and possibly create these types of reading files so that I can instruct and guide my students. If they are unable to accumulate all the information presented digitally via textual, visual, and audio, then we are no further ahead than before with the heavy black and white tomes.

Reader autonomy allows for movement and development. We may not need to teach the old reading skillset as there is a new and engaging digital reading world, but we still need to ensure that readers can navigate the new reading world and what that entails. Then they will be better equipped and enabled to access the necessary information as they journey through their university degree programs that will widen their skill sets and scope and prepare them for the wider learning world of employment and societal participation.