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Mentoring Ecuadorian classroom practitioners in Action Research under COVID-19: Facilitating enhanced performance in super-difficult circumstances

Erzsébet Ágnes Békés

Supporting practitioners in classroom research requires special mentoring skills. The present narrative account is based on the experiences of an emerging research mentor whose reflections describe how an Action Research (AR) mentoring scheme at an Ecuadorian public university was resurrected despite a funding emergency and the COVID-19 health crisis. The redesigned Action Research project made it possible for a cohort of five student- and six teacher-mentees to explore their vocabulary learning strategies and publish their findings in indexed, open-access journals. The account focuses on the teacher-research mentor's specific skills and roles performed under the super-difficult circumstances created by the pandemic and explores the factors contributing to the effective accomplishment of the restructured mentoring scheme. The author concludes that 'relentless flexibility' combined with proactivity and enhanced teacher-research mentoring skills as well as the mentees' resilient attitude were some of the main factors behind the success of a mentoring scheme whose outcomes might inform other teacher-research mentors and mentees working under 'super-difficult' circumstances.

1. Introduction

1.1. Rapid response to the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly changed the educational landscape of language teaching and learning. It has affected the working conditions and psychological wellbeing of millions of language teachers in unprecedented ways (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). About three months into the pandemic (in June 2020), as facilitators and group members of TESOL's Electronic Village Online Mentoring 2020, Richard Smith, Seden Eraldemir Tuyan, Mariana Serra and the author of the present article came together to look for a rapid response to alleviate the super-difficult circumstances (Phyak, 2015) language teachers found themselves in.

Within six weeks, the four of us collaboratively developed an innovative way of mentoring teacher-research, which we termed Enhancement Mentoring for Teacher-Research (EMTR) (Smith et al., 2021). This approach aimed at providing a means for teachers to focus on their *achievements* and other positive experiences during the crisis brought about by the pandemic. We intended to support teachers by helping them identify a way forward through recognizing and building on the resourcefulness and resilience of their pedagogic responses, which often led to unexpected positive

outcomes, providing opportunities for experience sharing and exploratory teacher-research projects in the future.

Therefore, what follows here is both a narrative account of my experience as a volunteer teacher-research mentor under COVID-19 and a contribution to a less studied element of Exploratory Action Research (EAR), namely, exploring *success* (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, p. 32). This is because even though Exploratory Practice (EP) encourages practitioners to explore *why* things seem to work well (Allwright, 2003), beginning teacher-researchers routinely tend to focus on problems or puzzles (Hanks, 2017). However, as a *beginning teacher-research mentor*, what I am recounting here is the story of a successful mentoring process and the exploration of some of the reasons for its positive outcomes, including my mentees' dedication and perseverance.

Under the particularly difficult circumstances that evolved as a result of COVID-19, we in the EMTR core group felt that there was a need to identify and highlight success stories, and explore how they can be built on and extended. The trialling of the EMTR approach in the summer of 2020, which involved collaborating with eighteen international teacher educators and teacher-research mentors (Smith et al., 2021), helped conceptualize and consolidate my own experience, namely, the successful accomplishment of an Action Research mentoring scheme at an Ecuadorian university, one which needed to be entirely overhauled owing to the pandemic (as well as the local and country-specific crises in Ecuador).

Consequently, the present article aims to look at the interplay between the development of my teacher-research mentoring roles and skills and the way my mentees were able to cope with and, to some extent, thrive on the challenges posed by the global health crisis. In the account that follows, I briefly describe the events *before* COVID-19 as Phase 1, while the developments *after* the lockdown in Ecuador (17th April 2020) belong to the 9-month period of Phase 2 (see Appendix Table 1 for the original and the modified project plan).

1.2. Antecedents

On Friday, 13th March 2020, the first COVID-19 patient died in Ecuador and four days later the country went into full lockdown. As an emerging teacher-research mentor, I had already been struggling to sustain an AR mentoring scheme that I began on a voluntary basis for 11 teachers and five student teachers in December 2019. Only days after the original mentoring scheme began (at the very start of Phase 1), the university's budget for 2020 was cut by more than half, and the well-liked rector was forced to resign, which led to massive student demonstrations. The new management announced that redundancies were unavoidable, while pay cuts and part-time contracts would have to be accepted by those who wished to keep their jobs.

"I need to find ways of energizing the team and stay in touch with its members," I wrote in my mentoring journal on the day the lockdown started, thinking that perhaps we could carry on with small-group mentoring sessions in my apartment without creating any health risks. By the time the lockdown was announced, the student- and teacher-researchers had already been working on piloting their AR projects and analysing the initial findings. However, right after the announcement of the lockdown, it transpired that all teachers would need to switch to emergency remote teaching within days. Furthermore, the arrival of the second semester students, who would have participated in the improved versions of the exploratory projects, was to be severely delayed. Moreover, within a couple of weeks, all teachers were forced to sign part-time contracts with essentially the same amount of work as before but half the salary, and were not allowed to teach English classes with *fewer* than 40 students online. It came as no surprise that seven of the teacher-researchers requested to be immediately released from the mentoring scheme and the other four asked to postpone their projects until September 2020. The student teachers also withdrew since the research groups in which they had worked were dissolved.

The scheme lay in ruins.

In this article, I would like to present an account of how, through the extraordinary resilience and collaborative effort of my mentees, facilitated by my support as a teacher-research mentor, we

managed to carry on with the mentoring scheme despite the dire situation that had evolved at three levels: local (steep budget cuts at the university), national (economic crisis) and international (COVID-19).

Before describing the context of the Action Research mentoring scheme in Phase 1 and then providing a more detailed account of Phase 2, I would like to offer an overview of the relevant literature that guided me in my volunteer assignment as an emerging teacher-research mentor and helped me gain confidence as well as achieve a fair degree of autonomy (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017) as the mentoring process evolved over the period between December 2019 and December 2020.

2. Literature Review

In this section I approach the issue of teacher-research mentoring by discussing some recent developments in this field, and focus on the views related to the mentoring support that teacher-researchers may commonly need when carrying out practitioner research in their classrooms. I refer to the experiences of teacher educators who transitioned into *teacher-research mentoring*, and the kind of support such teacher-research mentors would need (and may or may not receive) via *teacher-research mentor mentoring*.

2.1. Teacher-research mentoring as an emerging practice

Even though there is a relative lack of literature on how language teachers can be most effectively supported in their classroom research, mentoring schemes (often based on Action Research and Exploratory Action Research practices) have expanded exponentially in the past decade and are already delivering insights. The specificity of these initiatives is that they are fairly large scale, focus on developing and coaching local mentors, and employ a bottom-up approach. They are often run by the British Council (e.g., the Champion Teachers programme in Latin America and the Action Research Mentoring Scheme (ARMS) in South Asia), but the movement is spreading to Africa as well, such as the teacher-research initiative included in the Secondary Education Improvement Programme in Sierra Leone (Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education , 2021). There are numerous mentor- or peer-mentor-supported Action Research projects arising in local contexts, facilitated by dedicated teacher educators and teacher-research mentors (Dikilitaş & Bostancıoğlu, 2019; Hanks, 2019).

2.2. Changing concepts of teacher mentoring

The mentoring of teachers that are new to the profession or transition to a new job is usually assigned to one of the more experienced colleagues in order to help the settling in / induction process. Perceptions about mentoring in educational contexts have changed over time. Roberts' definition appears to describe a classic – master-apprentice – mentoring relationship (often held in such cultural contexts as Japan or India):

> …a more knowledgeable and experienced person actuates a supportive role of overseeing and encouraging reflection and learning with another less experienced and knowledgeable person so as to facilitate that person's career and personal development. (Roberts, 2000, p. 162).

Malderez (2018) applies a less formal definition when she says in an interview that "mentoring … in a nutshell is the one-to-one support by a relatively more experienced teacher for the growth and learning of another" (p. 110). Smith, for his part, (2020) formulates mentoring in a way that emphasises that the support provided would need to lead to higher levels of autonomy and empowerment:

> Mentoring can be defined simply as sharing knowledge, skills and experience in order to encourage and empower another person. In contexts of teacher development, this process

> involves enhancing teachers' autonomy to develop for themselves, increasing their ability and willingness to take control of their own learning rather than judging or directly advising them or telling them all the answers. (p. 14)

Judging or *judgementoring* (Hobson & Malderez, 2013) may arise from the fact that mentors are often obliged to perform both a developmental and an assessing (judgemental) role (Kullman, 1998). However, moving away from this approach can lead to collaborative relationships and result in co-mentoring, such as in the case of Kochan and Trimble (2000), where it was the mentee (Susan Trimble) who pro-actively sought out a mentor, just as I was keen on doing when faced with a research design dilemma in Phase 1.[1] Fletcher (2005) calls this "learning through co-inquiry" (p. 177) explaining that it is a process in which "both mentor and mentee are seeking to improve their work-based practice" (p. 179). Nevertheless, the term 'co-mentoring' is generally understood as a way of "mentoring a group of teachers together with another person (a 'co-mentor')" (Smith, 2020, p. 16), and this is how I am using it in the present account unless otherwise specified.

2.3. What kind of support do teacher-researchers need?

Language teachers' engagement in research requires support (Renandya & Floris, 2018), both as regards institutional mechanisms which allow teachers to carry out research and the creation of spaces for professional development where they can acquire the necessary research skills. Hanks (2018) emphasises that teachers (as reflective practitioners) possess many of the skills required for research, such as critical thinking and the ability to systematically "observe, analyse, record and interpret the progress of [their] students" (p. 54). In her view, supporting teacher-researchers should not be confined to allowing release time and funding their continuing professional development (of which classroom research is a powerful tool). What is needed is "respect and encouragement […] and enough autonomy and empowerment for teachers to undertake research that is deeply relevant to learning and teaching" (pp. 53–54). Likewise, Dikilitaş and Griffiths (2017) firmly believe that Action Research is eminently capable of developing teacher autonomy, because AR projects can lead to practical and pedagogical considerations resulting in improved instructional practices. This is related to teacher autonomy, since "rather than teaching with the results of professional researchers' recipes or top-down curriculum decisions, or coursebooks, teachers can enjoy taking control of their own learning and teaching process" (p. 166).

Overall, there appears to be a consensus that teacher-researchers can benefit from guidance and facilitation when they go through the stages of AR or EAR type classroom research (Smith, 2018). Beyond managerial backing (Burns, 2018) and material resources, classroom practitioners "need intellectual and affective support, which may effectively come from a combination of outsider mentors, like trained researchers, and insider supporters, like experienced peers" (Padwad, 2018, p. 46). In fact, our mentoring scheme did have a similar support system set up: we had access to a *mentor-advisor*, I acted as *a non-campus-based volunteer research mentor* and the *on-campus research coordinator* of the AR mentoring scheme provided peer support.

2.4. Teacher-research mentor mentoring

Even though to date there is a dearth of accounts written by teacher-research mentors on their practice, the freely downloadable volumes published by IATEFL's Research Special Interest Group (http://resig.weebly.com/books.html) contain several articles written by teacher educators on their mentoring experiences involving systematic inquiry and reflection (see, for example, Doğan, 2018; Eraldemir-Tuyan, 2019; Rakıcıoğlu-Söylemez, 2018).

Teacher-research mentors also need support and facilitation, and this can come from more experienced research-mentor mentors. From the point of view of the present reflective account, Dikilitaş and Wyatt's qualitative case study (2018) is especially meaningful because it recounts the journey of three novice research mentors, and describes the systematic and ongoing support that was

provided by the first author to the emerging mentors. One of the authors' conclusions is that it is not only teacher-researchers that need managerial support, but their mentors, too. The recommendation, therefore, is that "educational institutions need to take on supportive nurturing roles, facilitating career progression from teacher to mentor to teacher-research-mentor" (p. 551). Such career moves can then provide sustainability to teacher-research mentoring schemes, which seem to work best when carried out jointly by the ever-growing and highly motivated cohorts of experienced and 'near-peer' mentors (Padwad, 2018; Smith, 2018).

3. Context

The present narrative account can be perceived as a continuation of a previous article that I wrote as my mentees and I were coming up to the end of Phase 1 of the AR mentoring scheme (Békés, 2020). In that article, I described how the AR projects of my mentees were shaping up and how we were getting ready for the next stage, which would have started with piloting the projects with the incoming students of the second semester (2019/2020).

My experience as an emerging mentor in the first three months was based on four interrelated and synchronous elements:

- running regular mentoring sessions;
- setting up a co-mentoring group;
- being mentored by our mentor-advisor (see Appendix Table 2 for the mentoring structure);
- taking part in TESOL's first online mentoring course (EVO Mentoring) in January-February 2020.

This meant full immersion in mentoring practice and theory. In the article I also provided a detailed account of what I had learnt about teacher-research mentoring and included some of the incidents when I felt that I had made a blunder. Mentored by Kenan Dikilitaş, I was carefully observing and reflecting on the way he mentored me and aimed at emulating the mentoring skills that he exhibited. However, two weeks after that buoyant and optimistic article was published, the whole AR mentoring scheme disintegrated.

3.1. From Ground Zero to redesigning the project

In the immediate days after the full lockdown was introduced in Ecuador (17th March 2020), it seemed that the mentoring scheme was beyond salvage. Nevertheless, I carried on looking for various options as to how I could still support my student- and teacher-research mentees in a meaningful way. On 29th March 2020, I spotted an invitation via *EFL Magazine* to sign up to a free online vocabulary tournament. It offered a chance to compete in groups of minimum 8 contestants. The organisers explained that the WordEngine application to be used for competing adjusts to the vocabulary ability of the team members and, therefore, "all that matters is team spirit and player effort" (EFL Magazine, email communication, March 29, 2020).

WordEngine is a subscription-based online flashcard application, so the prize the organisers were offering – free licences for a whole year to every member of the winners' educational institution – was exceptionally enticing, particularly because owing to the online mode of delivery, fewer than the usual number of students were receiving English tuition and this caused concern among students and teachers alike. The deadline to join was only two days away. Re-energised, I asked the organisers of the tournament if students and teachers were allowed to compete in one and the same team. The answer was yes.

An eight-member team was hastily put together by Ivy (not her real name)[2], a stalwart member of the research group which had intended to do AR on vocabulary learning and was specifically interested in gamified online applications. Since we were in between semesters and under the restrictions of COVID-19, there were few students and teachers available, so Ivy (in her capacity as prospective Team Leader) invited three other teachers (one from the original AR mentoring scheme

and two teachers new to it). Our student co-mentor, a student-researcher, and a student new to the mentoring scheme were also asked to join the group, and I offered to take part, too. This setup necessarily meant that the participants of Phase 1 and Phase 2 did not fully overlap. However, in the dissemination and publication phase several student- and teacher-researchers from Phase 1 were successfully re-engaged (see the student- and teacher-researchers' detailed profile and status in Appendix Tables 3a and 3b).

3.2. Research design and data gathering

My thinking as a teacher-research mentor was as follows. We could turn this authentic, real-time Vocabulary Challenge tournament into the first cycle of an AR project that aimed at *exploring* vocabulary acquisition and retention if:

- we all took the WordEngine vocabulary test to establish our vocabulary size (benchmark);
- learned vocabulary items intensively for four weeks by using the WordEngine online flashcard application for vocabulary acquisition and retention (intervention);
- wrote vocabulary learning diaries on our experience and the vocabulary learning strategies we applied (reflection);
- took another vocabulary test at the end of the tournament (to measure improvement);
- analysed our quantitative and qualitative data (in self-study genre);
- reflected on the whole learning experience and how we would wish to improve the teaching and learning of vocabulary;
- disseminated the results.

And so, less than two weeks after the lockdown was declared, the AR mentoring scheme was revitalized by exploiting an opportunity to participate in an international online vocabulary contest and by designing a piece of exploratory research around it.

4. Outcomes

On Monday, May 4th 2020, the final results of the WordEngine Team Challenge were announced. We were declared the best team and won the first prize: 3000 free licences for the online flashcard application for a whole year for each and every member of the Ecuadorian public university, including not just the students and the teachers, but all members of the administrative staff as well.

Furthermore, between the beginning of May and the end of June 2020, we wrote up two full-length academic articles on our experience, which were published in indexed, open access journals (Cherres Fajardo et al., 2020; Herrera Caldas et al., 2020). The student team members also published their first-ever piece in English by writing a guest blogpost for IATEFL's Learning Technologies SIG (Calle et al., 2020), and I wrote an article on supporting student- and teacher-researchers in the collaborative write-up phase (Békés, 2021). It seemed that under the super-difficult circumstances we overperformed.

5. Research questions

1. How do I perceive my contribution as a teacher-research mentor to what has eventually evolved?
2. What made it possible to resuscitate the moribund AR mentoring scheme?

6. Insights

6.1. Teacher-research mentoring roles and effectiveness

It is impossible to establish how effective my teacher-research mentoring skills would have been if we had kept to the timeline and the activities contained in the original AR mentoring scheme (see Appendix Table 1 for the original and the modified project plan). Switching from a regular mentoring scheme to what could be called an opportunistic design required flexibility and resourcefulness. The *ad hoc* team of contestants became the *sample* whose members studied their own vocabulary learning and retention strategies to explore an Action Research question ("Why do my students find it difficult to remember words?") with the ultimate aim of improving the learning and teaching of vocabulary. The student-researchers were able to supply data from their own perspective, while the teacher-researchers could explore their own approaches to *vocabulary learning*, hoping that the resulting insights would offer an opportunity to reflect on their *vocabulary teaching* strategies.

How was I able to support the transition from Phase 1 to Phase 2, and switch to a different mix of roles and add new skills to it? In what follows, I look at the mentoring roles that I fulfilled initially (Phase 1) and how these roles changed over time as a result of the redesigned mentoring project (Phase 2), whose focus and timeline were different from the original. For the description of mentoring roles, I follow Malderez and Bodóczky (1999) and Halai (2006), but I am also adding the mentoring skills/roles that Fletcher (2012) describes as pertaining specifically to *research mentoring.*

Table 1. Roles in mentoring teachers and teacher-researchers

Malderez and Bodóczky (1999)	Model	Acculturator	Support	Sponsor	Educator
Halai (2006)	Expert-coach	Learner	Critical friend		Subject specialist
Fletcher (2012)	Nurturer and model of specific research skills				Subject specialist expert (knowledge about research) Research mentor (knowledge about how to teach teachers to research)

These mentoring roles are not as clear-cut as Table 1 would suggest. After all, mentors can *model* each role; for example, they can model how to *acculturate* beginning teacher-researchers into a community of practice or how to *sponsor* their mentees by using their "knowledge […] and connections with powerful people in the service of the mentees" (Malderez, 2018, p. 111). In our case, the construct was even more complex, because my teacher-research *mentees* were also AR *mentors* in their own right since their job involves mentoring the AR projects of their students in the English teacher major programme. As a result, they needed support in their own classroom research projects while also wishing to learn more about research mentoring.

In Phase 1 of the project, I fulfilled several of the roles described above:

- as suggested by Smith (2020, p. 43) I acted as role model by carrying out research on my own mentoring practice and disseminating the findings (Békés, 2020);
- acculturated my mentees by nudging them to sign up to and participate in AR and mentoring-related professional development activities, for example, EVO 2020 Classroom Research, EVO 2020 Mentoring and FB groups (Teachers research!, Teacher Voices, Mentoring-TR);
- provided psychological support when redundancies were announced and two English teachers were sent back to their original jobs in secondary schools with their salaries cut by half;

- sponsored my mentees by drawing their attention to and helping to put together a proposal for the British Council's small grant for teacher educators;
- shared subject specialist knowledge on research by supplying information and giving a presentation on the differences between academic research (namely, Applied Linguistics / Second Language Acquisition studies) and Action Research.

The dynamics of my mentoring experience changed profoundly when it came to redesigning the project for Phase 2. As opposed to Phase 1, when the university's management was, to some extent, aware of my existence and activities, starting from the lockdown in March 2020, institutional support ceased to exist: the Research Department was shut down indefinitely and teachers' time release for research activities was withdrawn. Unlike in the case of the mentoring schemes run by the British Council cited above, for me there were no applicable rules of engagement anymore, and this (as well as my volunteer status) gave me a measure of freedom and autonomy (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017).

I made a special effort to model the kinds of mentoring behaviour that had become more prominent owing to the 'treble trouble' we experienced at local, national and international level (see Antecedents section above). *Proactivity*, *relentless flexibility* and *organisational skills* were required right at the beginning of the project in Phase 2, which was identified as an opportunity (*sponsor* role - Malderez & Bodóczky, 1999) at a time when the original mentoring scheme seemed impossible to continue. *Leadership* was required to initiate our participation in the vocabulary tournament, and *skills in delegation* were necessary when it came to setting up and running the competition. The role of *nurturer* (Fletcher, 2012) became more pronounced as I withdrew and stayed in the background providing sustained *support* (Malderez & Bodóczky, 1999) at a level that would not stifle my mentees' initiatives and creativity. For example, it was one of our student contestants who came up with our slogan for the vocabulary challenge: TEAM = Together Everyone Achieves More.

The skills associated specifically with teacher-research mentoring became more explicit in Phase 2. Alongside supporting and enthusing the team throughout the vocabulary competition, I needed to act as an *educator* related to the issues of research design, research questions, data gathering, data analysis and I also provided *language support* in the write-up phase. By having to carry out a series of logistical tasks (liaising with the organisers of the tournament, creating a project timeline for the write-up phase and managing the rounds of re-writes), I took on *project manager* responsibilities as well. Altogether, except for the weeks when the vocabulary tournament was actually taking place, and I could gently melt into the background as an 'ordinary' team member, I had taken on a more directive role for a short, intense period, especially during the collaborative write-up phase. Even though this 'forceful' approach (Ponte, 2002, p. 420) may have been justified by the circumstances, it could be perceived as problematic since the approach, to some extent, curtailed my mentees' autonomy.

Modelling specific research skills (Fletcher, 2012) was important when I designed the new project in such a way that it led to data gathering 'in situ' and with little extra effort (the writing of vocabulary learning diaries). Beyond the general skills as an *educator* (Malderez & Bodóczky, 1999), which helped me provide information on vocabulary learning and become a *subject specialist* (Halai, 2006) in this field of applied linguistics, I quickly grew into an active *learner* (Halai, 2006) acquiring the subject matter knowledge (namely, a large amount of less frequently used vocabulary in English) required for the competition.

6.2. Resuscitating the moribund AR Mentoring Scheme: the role of language teacher resilience

During our Enhancement Mentoring sessions in the summer of 2020 (Smith et al., 2021), one of the tasks the core group (Richard, Seden, Mariana and myself) set for ourselves was to reflect on whether there had been factors in our previous experience that made it possible for us to turn the dire situation created by the global health crisis into a success. Most of us were able to recall instances in our lives as educators when we displayed a high level of *resilience*, a concept that I found useful in order to interpret the attitude and conduct of my mentees.

Hiver (2018) defines a resilient practitioner "as a teacher using all the resources available to maintain personal well-being alongside professional productivity in the face of adversity and detrimental conditions" (p. 235). He also describes how "teacher resilience is part of the shift towards models of success and perseverance" (p. 234). Next, I will look at how resilience manifested itself in the course of our project. The subheadings are direct quotes from Hiver (2018, p. 236).

6.3. "Resilient teachers approach their practice with higher self-efficacy"

Our Team Leader, Ivy, put the WordEngine Team together in less than 24 hours, and managed the tournament with the precision of an aerospace engineer and the diplomatic skills of a UN goodwill ambassador, discreetly warning contestants if they were falling behind and encouraging others if they appeared downhearted. Members of the team communicated on WhatsApp and exchanged 574 messages during the 4-week tournament. A large proportion (261) constituted interactions among the contestants, but 223 were related to organisation and logistics coming from the Team Leader (Cherres Fajardo et al., 2020).

6.4. "[They] draw more on active coping strategies"

The way both the student and teacher participants approached the task of competing was based on the omnipresent characteristic of humans: playfulness, as described by Huizinga's Homo Ludens (1949). Under the conditions of COVID-19, the tournament became a welcome distraction as well as a coping strategy: "[it] was fun … in the middle of the pandemic… We started not competing only with the rest of the world and the rest of the teams but we started competing each other inside of the group," said Mathew and Ivy concurred, "I really enjoyed it because I learned so much. For me, during this quarantine, the experience was amazing."

6.5. "They possess the meta-cognition and self-regulation skills needed to be autonomous"

Vocabulary learning requires meta-cognitive skills, for example, memory strategies (Schmitt, 1997). Another one is looking for patterns and relationships. During the tournament, Catalina was on the lookout for cognates (words that have a common origin) when trying to guess the meaning of English words and score points, because "…academic Spanish has a lot of Latin words and that's why I could relate words from English to Spanish". This is, in fact, a useful strategy because in English "a high percentage of general academic vocabulary words are Latin-based cognates" (Lubliner & Hiebert, 2011, p. 2).

As for self-regulation skills, all contestants displayed a high level of discipline, often having to fight boredom from spending many hours in front of the screen performing monotonous vocabulary-related tasks. In fact, one might say that, as a mentor, I was unable to shield my mentees from severe fatigue. They were so driven by intrinsic motivation (wishing to expand their vocabulary) and extrinsic motivation (gaining free licenses for the application for themselves) as well as social motivation (winning thousands of licenses for everyone at the university) that there was no way of holding them back in order to find a 'normal abnormal' state. As Teacher Mathew said in the interview that I conducted with him:

> I started working in the middle of the day and night and the morning and the afternoon all the time. It was in the benefit of everybody… first, to get the first prize of the competition and then, second, to get the licenses for the whole university… Inside the group there was a lot of motivation because we shared the WhatsApp group and everybody was pushing each other … and try to find ways to help each other.

The desire to win, on occasion, led to what could be termed reckless behaviour, such as when our student co-mentor made an attempt to overcome connectivity challenges – an everyday occurrence

in countries of the Global South. In the third week of the tournament, Joe did not have internet service at home, so he ventured out in his car to look for free internet in the city centre. His problem was that on that day, because of the lockdown restrictions, only even number licence plate cars were allowed to be driven around. Joe's licence plate ends in an odd number. He was caught by the police, and warned to go straight home: "I felt happy when the police told me to go… [they said] if they see me, I was going to be arrested."

6.6. Student resilience

Hiver (2018) cites authors who claim that "students cannot be expected to develop resilience if their teachers do not exhibit this ability themselves" (p. 238). All three student contestants could see the extraordinary efforts of the teacher participants and the steely determination to not let anyone fall behind. Our Team Leader, Ivy, exhibited this trait when she calmly but firmly insisted that one of the student contestants should not give up and should stay in the competition.

Right from the beginning, Aiden spent about six hours or more per day trying to score points. He had an A1 level of proficiency when he started, and he often listed down more than 100 new words to learn every day. At the end of the first week, he was on the verge of giving up (the teams had the right to replace underperforming contestants by new ones):

> I saw that all my teammates' scores were very far from mine. … I asked Teacher Ivy if she wanted to put another person instead of me because I wasn't getting a good ranking. She said, "No, Aiden, you can do it."

Aiden was No 150 when he started and he finished in 6th place – between Teacher Catalina and Teacher Maribel. On the last day of the tournament, all eight contestants were among the first 13 in the ranking list that usually contains thousands of players (see Appendix Table 4).

6.7. "[Resilient teachers] seek out friends and partners who are supportive"

The contestants' families were particularly caring during the tournament. For example, Maribel could rely on her husband's help when she realised that the only time she could set aside to play and score points was late at night:

> I was always thinking about when is the perfect time, and I started doing it at night. That was my strategy because that was a perfect time. My husband was really supportive, he was like 'How is the competition?', he was playing video games next to me so that I wouldn't fall asleep.

6.8. Collaborative student/teacher resilience

Hiver (2018) mentions "building positive relationships with competent and nurturing colleagues" alongside "seeking out supportive friends and partners" (p. 236). These characteristics were prominent in our practice, both in the competition and the write-up phase. An overarching term might be *collaboration* in the broadest sense. Collaborative teamwork was the essence of the mentoring scheme that I had set up (urging, for example, that student-researchers should be involved and given meaningful tasks) and became rich and multi-layered in the vocabulary contest phase. Members of the team included students and teachers as well as myself as the teacher-research mentor, but only in the capacity of an ordinary member. This led to an exceptionally high level of non-hierarchical cooperation, a democratic way of working (with each pulling their weight according to their vocabulary level) spiced with a healthy level of competitiveness, leading to camaraderie and mutual appreciation.

6.9. Teacher-research mentor's resilience

Hiver's (2018) point on how students cannot develop resilience unless they can see their teachers displaying this capacity can be extended to our practice, namely, teacher-research mentors need to be as resilient as their student/teacher-researchers. I was adamant to set an example even before COVID-19 (Békés, 2020) and my efforts doubled after the pandemic hit Ecuador.

I agree with Hiver (2018) that resilience "can develop and change continuously with emerging conditions or contexts" (p. 236). I worked in Ethiopia as a volunteer English teacher for Voluntary Service Overseas on an assignment lasting almost three years setting up English Language Improvement Centres. The two Ethiopian universities at which I volunteered constituted singularly challenging environments where I learnt the rule that "you ask before you question" (cultural accommodation), and I was also able to hone my skills of being relentlessly flexible.

Finally, a comment on Hiver's (2018) observation that resilient practitioners exhibit greater than average *altruism*. My mentees were aware of and appreciated my volunteering past and present. I often gave them relevant examples of my work in Ethiopia and the Amazonian jungle demonstrating self-efficacy, resilience and resourcefulness, and they knew that I had undertaken the mentoring project as another volunteer assignment. The fact that I did not opt out when the scheme was on the brink of collapse proved to be an inspiration to all.

7. Reflections on the lessons learnt

7.1. How do I perceive my contribution as a teacher-research mentor to what has eventually evolved?

The successful accomplishment of Phase 2 of the Action Research mentoring scheme required proactivity, adaptability, leadership and organisational skills over and above the roles and skills that are understood as being part of mentoring teacher-researchers. At the height of Phase 2, proactivity may have bordered on being over-directive but this mode of operation was counteracted by working non-hierarchically as an ordinary team member during the Word Challenge tournament. My *volunteer* status allowed me to explore unusual opportunities for my mentees to shine and succeed. As a result of the process, my research mentoring skills have become more refined and more wide-ranging. The process brought about a 'co-mentoring' situation in Fletcher's understanding (2012), whereby my mentees mentored me in becoming a better research mentor as the dynamics of our collaboration pushed me to overcome the challenges of a time-limited project and the pressures of publication while working to a tight deadline.[3]

7.2. What made it possible to resuscitate the moribund AR Mentoring Scheme?

The setting up and accomplishing of Phase 2 required all the mentoring skills that have been described, but they would have been useless without the approach and attitude of my mentees. They displayed all the characteristics of resilient practitioners; their resoluteness as well as their level of commitment (heightened by social motivation) brought about exceptional results both as regards the outcome of the Word Challenge tournament and the employment of the experience for their Action Research project on vocabulary acquisition and, soon afterwards, the dissemination of its results.

7.3. Achieving 'more' under super-difficult circumstances

The mentoring scheme hit rock bottom on 17th March 2020 when Ecuador went into lockdown. It would have been easy to walk away from the project and it is almost certain that had I been a paid ELT consultant, the university would have terminated my contract treating the pandemic as "an act of God". Carrying on with my work as a volunteer teacher-research mentor (under the radar, as it were) and resuscitating the project was probably more than what could have been expected under ordinary

circumstances. Likewise, the attitude and behaviour of the three students and four teachers who decided to participate in the Word Challenge experience (at very short notice) exhibited extraordinary resilience and grit. Such dedication (see Appendix Table 4 on the number of hours spent on scoring points) would not have been expected in the original AR mentoring scheme envisaged to run over 12 months (from December 2019 to December 2020).

Looking at some of the more tangible outcomes, it is the following aspects that are worth highlighting:

- The contestants increased their vocabulary size considerably (see Appendix Table 5). According to the data provided by the organizers (Lexxica), seven participants moved up one level in CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) terms, one participant moved up two levels. This would not have been achieved if the student- and teacher-researchers had carried out a standard Action Research study.
- The teacher-researchers had an opportunity to explore their own vocabulary learning strategies in an authentic (competitive) situation. It is quite possible that the teacher-researchers would have reflected on their own vocabulary acquisition strategies (as students of an L2 at school), but in our case the process was simultaneous (learning words and reflecting on how they are learnt in order to guide *vocabulary teaching*). This led two of the teacher-researchers to introduce the *systematic recycling* (spaced repetition) element for vocabulary learning even before the vocabulary competition was over (Herrera Caldas et al., 2020), so Phase 2 brought about changes in teaching and learning faster than it may have happened in the original mentoring scheme.
- The WordEngine Challenge constituted an interface between an ordinary classroom and the "real world". There were a series of activities that were specific to the tournament and led to the enhancement of collaborative skills in a team that was explicitly non-hierarchical. This is not a usual setup when practitioners explore their classrooms.
- As a result of winning the tournament, all students, teachers and administrative staff at the university were awarded licences to use the WordEngine application for a whole year. Almost 3000 licences were made available.
- An effort was made to "repair the damage" caused by COVID-19 and re-engage student- and teacher-researchers from the original project (Phase 1) as well as recruit new participants. Altogether, five student-researchers and seven teacher-researchers (including the teacher-research mentor) took part in Phase 2 rising from the ruins of Phase 1.
- Disseminating the results and getting published within 5-6 months after the vocabulary learning experience is an aspect where the participants definitely "overperformed". In the original project, participants were expected to present their data at an ELT conference (in 2020), which was cancelled. Had it been held, the preliminary data would have been presented in small-group sessions and the presentations would have been published in the conference proceedings. The initial plan in the AR mentoring scheme did contain the idea of submitting articles, but the fact that the two full-length articles on the experience were not just written up but they were submitted, accepted and published within 6 months appears to be a true feat. Moreover, the student contestants published a guest blog post on their experience and I also wrote an article on mentoring collaborative academic writing under COVID-19. Altogether, four pieces of writing emerged, three of them in reputable open-access journals (Békés, 2021; Calle et al., 2020; Cherres Fajardo et al., 2020; Herrera Caldas et al., 2020).

Resourcefulness and resilience need to be in the armoury of dedicated classroom practitioners who may wish to reflect on and improve their practice. Alongside investigating problems and puzzles, the exploration of the ingredients of success can help recognise and build on achievements (Smith et al., 2021), which are often the result of a proactive attitude combined with persistence and perseverance as well as creativity and an optimistic outlook on life (Hiver, 2018).

The research mentor's volunteering experience, of which problem-solving and troubleshooting had been an integral part when she worked in under-resourced contexts (Ethiopia and the Amazonian jungle) and which she perceived as problematic in the first phase of the mentoring scheme, were put to good use in the second phase. Her resilient search for alternatives created an opening, which was then fully exploited by her mentees during a contest that gave rise to both collaboration and competitiveness among members of the group driven not just by intrinsic/extrinsic, but also social motivation.

In sum, the exceptional state of affairs that was the result of a local, national and international crisis pushed the research mentor and her mentees up a steep learning curve. They were forced to adapt to an evolving emergency and, as a result, they advanced at a higher speed and went further.

8. Limitations and recommendations

The narrative account provided in this article is necessarily limited in its scope, owing to the far from ordinary circumstances under which the AR mentoring scheme needed to be redesigned and then accomplished at an Ecuadorian public university. However, about 80% of English language teachers work in the Global South and the challenges they face in their large and often under-resourced classrooms create circumstances ranging from difficult to super-difficult. A possible takeaway from the experience described above, as well as the stories recounted by teachers in Smith et al. (2021), is that resilience combined with context-sensitive scaffolding by teacher-research mentors can lead to unexpected positive results.

Suggestions for ongoing research include further exploration of research mentoring skills, especially the concept of linking classroom researchers with academic researchers by research mentors acting as intermediaries, what Fletcher (2005) calls 'the missing link'. Research concerning how research mentors can support the efforts to disseminate the findings of classroom practitioners is another area worth pursuing, since language support (Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018) can be crucial for teacher-researchers whose first language is not English, and for whom the conventions of academic writing constitute an additional challenge. Narratives of emerging research mentors and the support that they receive via mentor mentoring is another field of inquiry. In addition, language skills for the 21st century should include resilient learning strategies and these can only be learnt from resilient teachers and resilient teacher-research mentors. Therefore, exploring the interplay of (collaborative) teacher resilience and research mentor resilience, namely, the modelling of this aspect of mentorial behaviour (Malderez, 2018) could result in findings that might enhance the mentoring experience and lead to co-inquiry and co-mentoring (Fletcher, 2005), a beneficial experience to all those involved.

9. Conclusion

In this article, I have made an attempt to provide an account of how a redesigned Action Research mentoring scheme was successfully accomplished at an Ecuadorian public university during the global health crisis. Even though initially it seemed that the original mentoring scheme could not be continued owing to COVID-19, collaborative resilience exhibited by the mentees and carefully administered teacher-research support provided by the volunteer mentor made it possible for the student- and teacher-researchers to carry out a piece of Exploratory Action Research whose findings were then disseminated in acknowledged academic journals. The outcomes of the mentoring scheme suggest that resilient student- and teacher-researchers can overcome the challenges created by super-difficult circumstances when, along with their own persistence, they can rely on the support and careful scaffolding of their research mentor.

Notes

A general note:
In our case, the term "classroom practitioners" (as referred to in the title) has been extended to the student teachers that participated in the scheme because, as future English teachers, they had already done micro-teaching sessions and all of them were keenly interested in exploratory classroom research.

[1] Kenan Dikilitaş kindly offered to act as a mentor-advisor in the scheme and provided wide-ranging guidance as well as to-the-point feedback throughout Phase 1 and Phase 2 both to me and my mentees.

[2] All names have been changed to protect the identities of the participants.

[3] For example, in the course of the mentoring scheme, I got in touch with and had meaningful email exchanges with Sarah Mercer, Norbert Schmitt and Charles Browne – all highly acknowledged experts in their respective fields. If I were not a research mentor, I doubt I would have contacted them, but I needed to prove to my mentees that they should aim high and that the biggest names in ELT will be surprisingly responsive and accommodating. One of my mentees made a mention of this 'lesson' in Békés (2021, p. 99).

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I wish to thank all my mentees (students and teachers) for their resilience and the resulting achievements. Our mentor-advisor, Kenan Dikilitaş, has been a wise and enthusiastic supporter of our project and kept me on an even keel, for which I am especially grateful. It was a privilege to work with Seden Tuyan, Mariana Serra and Richard Smith on the Enhancement Mentoring for Teacher-Research project and the resulting publication.

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Appendix

Table 1. The original and the modified project plan

Phase 1

Timeline	**Original plan**	**Major events**	**Modified plan and outcomes**
January – February 2020	Designing Exploratory Action Research projects for piloting Co-mentoring to start	First redundancies at the University	Designing Exploratory Action Research projects for piloting Co-mentoring started Research mentor's article on initial months of mentoring published in ELTAR-J
March 2020	Starting Exploratory Action Research projects with students arriving for Spring Semester	Ecuador goes into lockdown on 17th March 2020 2nd semester delayed Redundancies, part-time contracts for remaining staff, release time for research withdrawn 7 teachers of the original 11 dropping out; 4 teachers asking for deferral; 5 students dropping out Research Department shut down indefinitely	Starting Exploratory Action Research projects with students arriving for Spring Semester: cancelled Co-mentoring group: dissolved

Phase 2

Timeline	**Original plan**	**Major events**	**Modified plan and outcomes**
April 2020	Action Research intervention carried out	Signing up for an international vocabulary learning tournament: 5 teachers and 3 students as one single team	Exploring the vocabulary acquisition and cooperative teamwork strategies of the team during the 4-week competition Gathering data on the experience

May 2020	Action Research intervention accomplished	Winning the competition, university gains 3000 free licenses to use the web-based online application for vocabulary learning	Authentic 'intervention' by taking part in a live, international competition Expanding vocabulary size for students and teachers in the team Reflecting on the experience
June 2020	Writing up the AR reports and preparing presentations for the University's first ELT conference in July 2020	ELT conference postponed until spring 2021	Writing up articles about vocabulary learning strategies and teamwork for indexed journals
July 2020	Presenting projects at ELT conference organised by the university Publishing findings in conference proceedings		Students' guest blog post published Submitting two articles: AJELS AJAL
August 2020	Writing up findings for publication in indexed journals		Revising peer-reviewed article for AJELS
September 2020	Submitting articles to indexed journals		Revised AJELS article accepted for publication
October 2020	Article revision	Full-time contracts reinstated Research release time reintroduced Research-mentor invited to carry on with 'work in progress' and facilitate future projects On-campus research coordinator stepping in as new research-mentor	Revising peer-reviewed article for AJAL Revised article for AJAL accepted for publication AJELS article published online
November 2020	Article revision		AJAL article published
December 2020	Follow-up of submissions, closing the project		AJELS article published

	New phase, mentoring offered on an *ad hoc* basis		
February 2021			Research mentor's article on supporting collaborative write-up is published in ELT Research

Table 2. The mentoring structure

Mentor-advisor Kenan Dikilitaş
Non-campus-based research-mentor volunteer Erzsébet Ágnes Békés
On-campus research coordinator Julia Sevy Biloon
Teacher-research mentees
Student-research mentees

Note: Table 2 suggests a hierarchical structure but, in fact, the scheme was by far not hierarchical, especially in Phase 2, when teacher-researchers, student-researchers and the research-mentor volunteer were collaborating (and competing) in the same team. The co-mentors' group (research-mentor volunteer, on-campus research coordinator and one of the student-researchers) ceased to exist when the rest of the mentees opted out of or asked for the deferral of their projects.

Table 3a. Student-researchers in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the AR Mentoring Scheme (Source: Author's own elaboration)

Participants' name (pseudonyms)	Took part in Phase 1	Opted out of Phase 1	Joined Phase 2 after opting out of Phase 1	Newly recruited for Phase 2	Re-engaged from Phase 1 for the write-up in Phase 2	Notes
Aiden	No	N/A	N/A	Yes	N/A	One of the 3 student authors
Alexander	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	One of the 3 student authors
Carlos	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	
Joe	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	Acted as student co-mentor One of the 3 student authors
Silvia	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	
Samuel	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Left the AR Mentoring Scheme before it started in earnest

Table 3b. Teacher-researchers in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the AR Mentoring Scheme (Source: Author's own elaboration)

Participants' name (pseudonyms)	Took part in Phase 1	Opted out of Phase 1	Joined Phase 2 after opting out of Phase 1	Newly recruited for Phase 2	Re-engaged from Phase 1 for the write-up only in Phase 2	Notes
Catalina	No	N/A	N/A	Yes	N/A	One of the 5 teacher authors*
Deborah	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	
Elisa	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	
Isabel	Yes	No	Yes	N/A	N/A	Mentor of the AR Mentoring Scheme

Ivy	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	One of the 5 teacher authors
Jennifer	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	On-campus research coordinator Acted as teacher co-mentor in Phase 1
Katty	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	One of the 5 teacher authors
Leticia	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Joined another research group early on
Maribel	No	N/A	N/A	Yes	N/A	One of the 5 teacher authors
Mathew	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	Opted out of the write-up phase
Talia	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	
Teresa	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	No	
Umberto	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	Opted out before lockdown on account of being promoted
Valentina	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	One of the 5 teacher authors

*The 6th author was the research mentor herself. She joined the teacher-researchers writing up one of the two full-length articles when Mathew opted out of the write-up phase.

Appendix Table 4. Number of hours team members spent practising (Source: VAdmin data (WordEngine) in Cherres et al. [2020, p. 26))

	Week 1	**Week 2**	**Week 3**	**Week 4**	**Total number of hours**	**Correct Responses (CRs)**	**Rank on last day (3rd May 2020)**
Teachers:							
Catalina	02:34:33	06:03:12	04:03:23	11:57:11	24:38:19	13 255	5
Isabel	04:36:56	05:39:28	03:48:59	02:33:42	16:39:05	10 010	12
Ivy	06:19:10	09:08:59	05:52:08	10:43:08	32:03:25	16 865	3
Maribel	05:40:31	05:49:06	04:58:02	05:46:52	22:14:31	12 544	7
Mathew	04:24:15	06:56:25	03:56:51	07:01:47	22:19:18	11 393	10
Students:							
Aiden	03:09:02	07:12:15	06:25:33	11:12:43	27:59:33	12 705	6
Alexander	12:07:28	07:28:15	07:37:25	14:39:06	41:52:14	17 900	2
Joe	07:19:05	07:35:18	00:32:43	07:40:10	23:07:16	9 841	13
Total	46:11:00	55:52:58	37:15:04	71:34:39	210:59:41	104 513	

Table 5. Team members' vocabulary gains (Source: VAdmin data (WordEngine) in Cherres et al. [2020, p. 27))

	Vocab size at start	CEFR	IELTS	Vocab size at end	CEFR	IELTS
Teachers:						
Catalina	8,615	B1	5.7	13,073	C1	7.0
Isabel	11,379	B2	6.8	14,208	C1	7.0
Ivy	6,453	B1	4.9	11,061	B2	6.3
Maribel	8,548	B1	5.7	12,274	B2	6.8
Mathew	4,216	A2	4.2	7,955	B1	5.3
Students:						
Aiden	1,094	A1	3.4	4,101	A2	4.0
Alexander	5,509	A2	4.6	9,950	B1	7.0
Joe	7,065	B1	5.2	9,675	B2	6.1

Exploring Chinese higher vocational college teachers' perceptions of critical reading in EFL classes

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This study explored teachers' perceptions of critical reading in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes through a teacher professional learning programme at a higher vocational college in southeast mainland China. The results showed that all participants gained a broader understanding of critical reading, shifting from a pathway to cultivating critical thinking skills to an approach to constructing different ways of thinking, being, and doing. The findings indicated the possibility of integrating different views of the critical across cultural boundaries. The culturally relevant criticality practice thus contributes to the international literature on developments in critical literacy studies.

1. Introduction

Reading in an L2 (L2 refers to languages other than L1) enables us to see the world across languages and cultural differences in order to understand a wide range of perspectives in and on this world (Butler, 2013). We need to develop a critical eye in order to understand the attitudes, beliefs, and values of others so that we could better understand our positions in the globalising world (Freire, 1985; Wallace, 2012). This leads to what we might mean by being critical (Simpson & Dervin, 2020).
From a review of the literature, I have made three observations. First, at a theoretical level, the dominant critical discourse in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts is cognitive-oriented, viewing criticality as critical thinking ability (e.g., Eunjeo, 2017, 2018). Within the cognitive trend, research tends to focus on the cultivation of critical thinking skills based on the American Philosophy Association (APA) Delphi Report (Facione, 1990) and/or Paul and Elder's (2006) model of critical thinking. The Americanisation of critical thinking, as Simpson (2020) argues, is problematic as it seems to exclude other ways of thinking about criticality. A multipolar vision for criticality is thus put forward to challenge the Anglo-centric and Americanised forms of critical discourses (Simpson & Dervin, 2020). However, this vision does not seem to be given sufficient attention in EFL contexts.

Second, at a professional level, an area of research on criticality development in EFL contexts has addressed teachers' practices of criticality from a literacy perspective (e.g., Huang, 2012; Ko, 2013; Kuo, 2013). The work has helped teacher educators, researchers and practitioners to enhance their understanding of the complexity of criticality development, given the diverse theoretical perspectives associated with criticality practice (Foley, 2017). Missing from the literature is enquiry into individual teachers' perceptions of criticality and criticality practice rooted in the specific cultural and educational contexts.

Third, methodologically, questionnaire and interview are the main instruments to study EFL teachers' mental lives (Li, 2013). While these instruments are of value, they are insufficient to yield insights into teachers' stage-by-stage professional learning from their own classroom practices.

Evidence is needed to support approaches to teacher professional learning so that teachers are equipped with knowledge, experience and skills to assist learners in becoming critical readers (Li, 2016).

Addressing these gaps, the current paper presents the findings of a qualitative study which involved six Chinese higher vocational college teachers reporting on their evolving understandings of critical reading through a teacher professional learning programme, shifting from skill-based to a more sociocultural view of reading the word and the world. The study bears significance for challenging a singular perspective of criticality, for exploring culturally relevant criticality practice, and for implementing innovative research-based approaches to EFL teacher professional learning.

2. Context of the study

The exploration of teachers' perceptions of criticality and criticality practice in this study is situated in China's vocational contexts. In mainland China, vocational education is provided at three levels: primary, secondary, and post-secondary vocational education (State Council, 2006; Zhao & Lu, 2007). The present study concentrates on post-secondary vocational education, namely the higher vocational education with the schooling lasting two or three years (MOE, 2006). At vocational education level, as is also the case at university education level, the acquisition of language knowledge and skills is a basic requirement for learning English in the curriculum (Basic Requirements for English Language Teaching at Higher Vocational Colleges, MOE, 1993, 2000, 2009; English Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education, MOE, 2021; Xu & Fan, 2016; Wang & Luo, 2020). While skill-based learning is foundational, it may be insufficient to enable learners to reach their full potential, which can be developed through critical approaches to reading the word and the world. However, a widespread assumption is that a critical approach is largely absent from reading and teaching reading in English in China's vocational contexts (e.g., Xiao & Bao, 2011). The lack of knowledge and practice of critical reading raises a question on teacher cognition: what do teachers think and know about critical reading in EFL classes? Although a growing body of literature has examined L2 teacher cognition (Li, 2016), there is scant research on EFL teachers' perceptions of criticality and criticality practice in China's vocational contexts. The present study explored this research area through a teacher professional learning programme.

Professional learning plays a central role in higher vocational college teacher professional development (e.g., Liu & Qi, 2013; Yuan & Zhang, 2018). However, many practitioners contended that there was a lack of access to professional learning opportunities and resources for Chinese teachers of English in vocational contexts (e.g., Han, 2014; Liu, 2012; Liu & Qi, 2013; Wang, 2015; Xu et al., 2012). The limited opportunities might be the ones that are provided and sponsored by the Ministry of Education at national, provincial and municipal levels. In some cases, only the gu-gan (leading, exemplary) teachers are selected to apply (e.g., Liu, 2019; Yang, 2011). The majority of teachers learn to improve their classroom practices through school-based teacher professional development (e.g., Hong & Tang, 2013; Li et al., 2011), and forms of professional learning include lectures, seminars, peer mentoring, peer observation, and participation in teaching contests (Li, 2014; Ruan, 2014). Nevertheless, only a handful of studies have looked into how these forms are undertaken to promote EFL teacher professional learning in vocational contexts (e.g., Cao, 2016; Ma & Li, 2021; Zheng, 2007). The present study contributes to the research area by designing and implementing a teacher professional learning programme through a systematic approach.

3. Literature review

3.1. Theoretical framework

In this study, Chinese higher vocational college teachers' perceptions of criticality and criticality practice are explored from a sociocultural lens based on the work of Vygotsky, his colleagues and

students (Johnson, 2009; Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019). A core principle of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning is that the human mind is social in nature. According to Vygotsky (1978), the human mind is situated in social contexts where it interacts with internal and external actors. During this interactive process, human perception is mediated by a set of psychological tools among which language is the most salient one (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). From this perspective, teacher cognition is seen as a dynamic and fluid practice situated in a specific context, and it can be studied using conversation (Li, 2016). The evidence-based, learning-focused and improvement-directed professional learning conversations are selected to facilitate teacher learning in this study because they would enable teachers to critically reflect on and in the practices of critical reading as well as to deeply engage in their classroom practices within the teacher professional learning programme (Earl & Timperley, 2009).

While there has been an increasing body of research that explores criticality practice from a sociocultural perspective within teacher professional learning programmes, it seems that most of these studies were conducted in the Global North (e.g., Janks et al., 2014; Luke, 2000; Rogers & Mosley Wetzel, 2014; Sangster et al., 2013). Relevant research is scarce from the Global South, and within the limited studies, the focus is on teacher cognition of critical thinking (e.g. Ma & Luo, 2021; Ma & Liu, 2022). Although these studies have enabled us to gain a better understanding of the localised criticality practices, it should be noted that the dominant critical thinking discourse is still Anglo- and American-centric (Simpson, 2020). In light of multiple ways of conceptualising, developing and practising criticality (Simpson & Dervin, 2020), it might be worth exploring a hybrid of critical approaches for use in teacher professional learning programmes (Foley, 2017). In this sense, it is necessary to broaden the knowledge base of teachers. The exploration of Chinese higher vocational college teachers' perceptions of critical reading in this study is expected to extend our knowledge about how EFL teachers achieve a better understanding of criticality and criticality practice through a teacher professional learning programme.

3.2. Interpretations of critical reading

While criticality has been a topic of much discussion in education research, the meaning of criticality is often assumed without questioning (Simpson & Dervin, 2020). Following a cognitive-oriented conception of criticality originated from Greek and Enlightenment philosophies (Tan, 2017), critical reading is conceptualised as a strategy for analysing texts for logic and credibility (Macknish, 2011). With the emergence of social theories, there has been a shift in understanding critical reading from cognitive processes to social practices (Wallace, 2003, 2012, 2018). Within this shift, broader interpretations of critical thinking have emerged (Macknish, 2011). For instance, in view of Ko's (2013) orientation to critical reading as engaging with the deconstruction and reconstruction of texts, Chen (2016) assumes that this orientation is intended to promote critical thinking in reading. From a social-practice perspective, two critical approaches to reading are notable. One approach is ideology critique derived from Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, and the other is a genre approach drawn from Halliday's (1994) systemic functional grammar (Luke & Dooley, 2011; Wallace, 2012). Both approaches recognise the link between language, power, and identity (Foley, 2017; Janks, 2010), and they are often discussed with reference to critical literacy in the international literature (e.g., Luke & Dooley, 2011; Paran & Wallace, 2016; Wallace, 2018).

The interchangeable use of these terms in the literature (critical thinking, critical reading, and critical literacy) seems to indicate that these processes share more similarities than differences. Macknish (2011) argues that it might be impossible to draw a firm line between them considering that "some processes overlap or are necessary for building others" (p. 446). In her view, critical reading involves a range of cognitive processes and social practices, depending on the context (Macknish, 2011, p. 446). This integrated view of critical reading bridges the gap between a cognitive- and a social-oriented conception of criticality. While sharing Macknish's (2011) integrated view of critical reading, Paran and Wallace (2016) take a step further, considering critical reading as a fluid construct, moving between "evaluating texts analytically (critical thinking)" and "considering texts from a power

perspective (critical literacy)" (p. 444). The continuum of critical reading processes distinguishes critical reading from critical thinking and critical literacy. Concurrently, it illustrates the interdependence between these processes. More significantly, it recognises the context-dependent interpretations of critical reading (Macknish, 2011; Paran & Wallace, 2016).

Within the Chinese context, critical reading is generally perceived as a higher order reading skill, encompassing comprehension and interpretation of text (Chen, 2016; Fan, 2008; He & Liu, 2003). Although social elements can be found in this perception of critical reading, the focus is on the cognitive implications of language choices (Wallace, 2018). In light of the continuum of critical reading processes (Paran & Wallace, 2016), it might be necessary to extend the current understanding of critical reading as processes of analysing texts for logic and credibility to practices of analysing texts from a power perspective in the Chinese context. Analysing texts from a power perspective, as Wallace (1999) argues, indicates a stronger sense of being critical in reading processes as it examines the ideology and power relations embedded within texts in everyday life (pp. 98-99). This orientation to critical reading, however, does not seem to be given sufficient attention in Chinese EFL classrooms. The present study addresses this issue in the teacher professional learning programme where teacher learners are guided to challenge and negotiate the normative ways of thinking, being, and doing by analysing the ideological bases of discourses within specific texts.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research questions

The present study was guided by two research questions:

1. What are Chinese higher vocational college teachers' perceptions of criticality?
2. What are Chinese higher vocational college teachers' perceptions of critical reading in EFL classes?

4.2. Research site and participants

The teacher professional learning research reported here took place at a higher vocational college in southeast mainland China. With 71 faculty members, School of English Studies currently provides English for specific purposes courses for students majoring in Business English, Applied English, Tourism English, and Pre-school Education. The participants in this study are in-service teachers who have taught English for general academic purposes for many years and are keen to improve their classroom practices. Therefore, they volunteered to take part in a teacher professional learning programme over three months. From a six in-service teachers who attended the teacher professional learning workshop, two teachers contributed to the pilot conversation and four agreed to participate initially. At a preliminary stage, one teacher withdrew. Concurrently, three other teachers joined the team.

4.3. Data collection: teacher professional learning programme

Comprising teacher professional learning workshop, professional learning conversation, classroom observation, and reflective practice, the teacher professional learning programme implemented in this study created the space for the researcher to explore participants' evolving understandings of criticality and criticality practice in relation to language and literacy education. In brief, it was a process of gathering data to inform the research and a collaborative journey to evidence learning.

To begin with, a one-hour teacher professional learning workshop was organised with an intention of providing attendees with a broader sense of reading and critical reading in English. Preceding the workshop, all participants were provided with the teaching material – an electronic copy of the novel *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* (Boyne, 2006). The workshop was divided into two sections: one was a discussion surrounding different understandings of reading and critical reading in

English. In the second part, I introduced the four resources model (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999; Luke, 2000) to participants and shared my ideas on how to practise critical reading in English through micro-teaching.

Following the workshop, teacher professional learning conversation was selected as the primary method for data collection in this study. Additionally, classroom observation and reflective practice were employed for the purpose of data triangulation. Specifically, I split the processes of professional learning conversation into three stages: pre-, while-, and post-learning conversation. The pre-learning conversations with nine participants began with each reflecting on their own understanding of reading and critical reading in English after the workshop. Next, while-learning conversations with six participants (two participants for the pilot decided not to continue with this journey and one participant recruited for the main study withdrew after three conversations) were held before and after my classroom observations. Before observing their lessons, I aided each participant to analyse texts from the textbook and supplementary materials based on a set of questions in relation to identity and power (Pratt & Foley, 2012). Therefore, I was able to explore their perceptions of critical reading and how these perceptions shifted over time. After each lesson, participants verbally reflected on how they engaged their students in the practices of coding, meaning-making, text-using, and text-analysing based on Freebody and Luke's (1990, 1999, 2000) four resources model. Moreover, they wrote a reflection after teaching. With my assistance, participants were able to interrogate their classroom practices and to conceive ideas for improving their lessons. The post-learning conversations enabled participants to critically engage with their perceptions of critical reading and how these perceptions influenced their own classroom practices over the three months.

4.4. Data analysis

With participants' written consent, the qualitative data were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. When transcribing the textual data, I was mindful of the issues surrounding transcription in the research literature (Green et al., 1997; Ross, 2010; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Hence, initial analysis of the data involved the researcher and participants during the research process in order to increase its rigour and trustworthiness (Saldaña, 2011). Concurrently, I listened to each recording numerous times, read and re-read through the transcripts, and returned to the recordings to ground my interpretations (Miles et al., 2014; Tilley & Powick, 2004). Thematic analysis through deductive and inductive reasoning was employed to analyse data in this study (Saldaña, 2011). Adopting Braun and Clarke's (2006) coding framework, I identified a set of key themes as a result of thematic analysis.

5. Findings

5.1. Criticality as a dialectical discourse

The word criticality has a negative connotation in the Chinese language due to its historical and cultural implications (e.g. China's Cultural Revolution 1966-1976, Wen, 2008). This is probably why participants felt uncomfortable with the term. Two participants questioned the translation of critical/criticality in the Chinese language:

> Why use pi-pan-xing (criticality)? The ideology of pi-pan (criticise/critique) in the Chinese language is too strong…how about bian-zheng yue-du (dialectical reading)? (Teacher D)

> Would it be better to change the name of critical reading to critical thinking? (Teacher H)

Obviously, critical/criticality has a strong ideology in the Chinese language and thus both participants would like to re-design the discourse to make them feel more comfortable. A dialectical view of criticality happened to be the result of this redesign, which was clearly reflected by Teacher D:

> The author’s perspective is not always true so it can be questioned. We can have a new perspective based on a dialectical view. The word pi-pan (critique) feels like right and wrong literally, bian-zheng (dialectic) feels better.

From a dialectical point of view, Teacher C described criticality as reflection at an early stage and enlightenment at a later stage of the teacher professional learning programme. It seemed to me that both were referred to the ways of thinking. For instance, Teacher C raised a question in relation to the content of reflection:

> What is there to reflect, to reflect on one’s behaviour, moral, worldview, and value?

By the same token, other participants associated criticality with inspiration (Teacher F), diversity (Teacher D, Teacher F & Teacher G), and extension (Teacher H & Teacher I) at a later stage of the teacher professional learning programme. Criticality was perceived as a positive discourse when it was associated with critical thinking mainly because participants took a dialectical view of it. In other words, participants viewed critical thinking as thinking from different perspectives, which was compatible with Chinese dialectics. Correspondingly, the participants tended to translate critical thinking to si-bian (dialectical thinking) in the Chinese language.

5.2. Critical reading as the ways of thinking, being, and doing

There was a clear indication that all participants gained a broader understanding of critical reading as a result of the teacher professional learning programme in this study. The key to this broader understanding lay in their conceptualisation of criticality, shifting from a dichotomous to a dialectical view. Accordingly, there was an extension in participants’ perceptions of critical reading, moving from the ways of thinking to the ways of being and doing. This extension seemed to suggest a holistic view of critical reading, encompassing the ways of thinking, being, and doing. To start with, critical reading as the ways of thinking was perceived by all six participants before and after their classroom practices. In regard to the ways of thinking, I recognised a dialectical thinking pattern, which was neatly captured by Teacher C at different stages of the programme:

> Actually we don’t have to critique a text, we can think about it from different perspectives. Are we following the author to view this issue? Or can we get something different from the author’s thought? Do you agree or disagree with the author? What is your reason if you disagree with the author? What action will you take if you agree with the author? How does it affect you? (1/2)

> Now it’s about constructing one’s own opinion when I read an article. I have my own thought. I can support or refute you. Yet all the ideas have to come from me. I used to follow the author and to agree with him/her no matter what he/she said. Now I can support the article. If I disagree with it, I can hold onto my position. Now it’s about independence of viewpoint. (2/2)

By these accounts, we can see that reading from different perspectives and reading to construct one’s own viewpoint remained in the cognitive domain. Nevertheless, there was an orientation to social practice in the participant’s perception of critical reading. This orientation was also manifest in participants’ perception of critical reading as the ways of being, moving from outsiders to insiders. This was best reflected in the following extracts:

> Initially it stayed at the thinking level. Later it involved practice and ideology. Now I might situate myself in the particular context, to understand the text from the perspectives of the people in that context and from their power relations. (Teacher D)

> Critical reading is not about right or wrong. It's about understanding one thing from different perspectives on the one hand. On the other I have never thought about reading a text from other identities. I used to read from a reader's perspective. Now I think critical reading is, I can't always put myself in the position of a reader. I can also read a text from the author's or the third party's position. (Teacher G)

Reading from other identities was performed by participants who considered themselves as insiders situated within that particular context. This perception of critical reading as the ways of being transformed participants' ways of thinking about and doing reading.

Within the trend of social practice, I identified a continuous extension to the ways of doing in participants' perceptions of critical reading. The ways of doing were embedded within the ways of being while practising critical reading. In regard to the ways of doing, two types of social practices were included: practices within and beyond texts. With respect to social practices within texts, it was mainly referred to the critical practices of reading based on Freebody and Luke's (1990, 1999, 2000) four resources model, involving text analysis and text transformation. Through the teacher professional learning programme, participants gained a broader understanding of text analysis, evolving from decoding and comprehension to interpretation. Teacher G captured this change in the following extract:

> Before the teacher professional learning programme, I thought text analysis was to understand sentence structure and meaning. Now I know that isn't text analysis but decoding and comprehension. Text analysis is situated in the social forms, such as the background of writing, the intention of writing, and the target of writing. This is text analysis.

Apart from text analysis, text transformation was another type of social practice perceived by participants in this study. At an early stage of the teacher professional learning programme, Teacher D had a reservation on the feasibility of text transformation. At a later stage of the programme, however, Teacher D acknowledged that it was viable to transform texts in textbooks. This acknowledgment emerged as Teacher D and I were comparing a TED Talk *Why 30 is Not the New 20* (TED, 2013) with the text *Is 30 the New 20 for Young Adults* from the textbook (Unit 4, Book 3, Li et al., 2017). In our conversation, Teacher D recalled how the TED Talk influenced her understanding of text transformation:

> This text, the video I presented in class, conveyed a perspective that is opposed to that of the text in the textbook. It has re-designed the text completely. That is, to interpret the author's viewpoint in a completely different way. It seems that the author's perspective can be critiqued so the whole text can be re-designed.

As the extract suggests, there was a shift in Teacher D's perception of texts in textbooks. That is, the texts in textbooks could be questioned and critiqued. This shift could not have happened if alternative texts had not been provided. With this provided text, Teacher D was able to see the possibility of re-designing texts in textbooks.

When I asked her if transforming a text was important, Teacher D made the following comment without hesitation:

> Yes. The transformation of texts means a qualitative change. The text producers do not always tell the truth, thereby, what do you think? How would you re-design it? Isn't this sheng-hua (a qualitative change)?

In line with her previous comment, Teacher D seemed to acknowledge that the textbook authority could be challenged. By challenging the existing view, it signified a transformative change of the text. Subsequently, Teacher D was able to define the concept in her own words:

> To transform a text is to redesign it, including the perspectives. I might disagree with the author's perspective, but I might agree with part of it. This is the redesign of the text.

In her definition, the desire to transform a text stemmed from her suspicion of the text. The result of this suspicion might lead to support and refute the author's perspective, perhaps indicating a dialectical view of text transformation.

In summary, all participants gained a broader understanding of critical reading through the teacher professional learning programme, starting with the perception of criticality. Criticality is associated with a negative attitude and stance in the Chinese language. Not surprisingly, all six participants expressed negative feelings for the use of criticality. During the teacher professional learning programme, there was a shift in their perception from a dichotomous to a dialectical view of criticality. Within the trend of dialectics, the participants conceived of critical reading as an approach to developing the ways of thinking. As situated in social and cultural contexts, participants were able to extend their view of critical reading from the ways of thinking to the ways of being and doing. While the ways of thinking seemed to be a dominant discourse, participants' awareness of critical reading as a series of social practices was heightened during the teacher professional learning programme. As a result of further data analysis, I realised that the ways of thinking, being, and doing were interwoven, perhaps indicating the unity of the three.

6. Discussion

The results of the present study revealed fluidity and dynamics in participants' perceptions of critical reading. On the one hand, the findings supported the mainstream understanding of critical reading as a pathway to critical thinking development within the Chinese context (Chen, 2016). On the other hand, they implied a broader understanding of critical thinking in participants' perceptions of critical reading. That is, critical thinking involves cognitive, affective and sociocultural dimensions. The cognitive and affective dimensions are included in the definitions of critical thinking in the American Philosophy Association (APA) Delphi Report (Facione, 1990), in Paul and Elder's (2006) model of critical thinking, and in Wen et al.'s (2009) critical thinking framework. Although research has to some extent recognised the sociocultural dimension in the conceptualisation of critical thinking (Chen, 2016; Li, 2016), it fails to understand that such dimension cannot be easily measured in terms of identity construction and value formation (Butler, 2013).

Another view of criticality is associated with power and ideology, as reflected in the participants' perceptions of pi-ping (criticism) and pi-pan (critique) in the Chinese language. The act of expressing disapproval of somebody or something did not seem to find participants comfortable in this study. This is probably because criticality is perceived as a negative discourse in the Chinese language. This perception was confirmed by Wen (2008) when she attributed it to misuse of the expression in China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). A psychological study indicated that Chinese people were very sensitive to criticism (People's Daily Online, 2010). In China where the cultural emphasis is put on unity and harmony, being criticised is considered a shame rather than a form of guidance and suggestion in the Western culture (People's Daily Online, 2010). This might explain why participants in this study would request the change of naming, from pi-pan-de (critical) to bian-zheng-de (dialectical) reading in the Chinese language. The struggle with the conception and translation of criticality was implied by some Chinese researchers. For instance, Wen (2008) posited that caution should be taken in the use of critical in the Chinese context. With the term critical thinking, she

suggested translating it to higher-order thinking or reflective thinking. In the current Chinese literature, critical thinking is translated to pi-pan-de (critical) thinking and bian-zheng-de (dialectical) thinking.

In the international literature, the discussion of criticism and critique is often related to ideology and power in the study of society. Reading through the lens of power, as Wallace (2012) points out, is an alternative view of critical reading which is associated with Janks' (2010) work of literacy and power. According to Janks (2010), a critical approach to reading focuses on the identification and negotiation of power that is hidden in the text. Reading from a perspective of power was a new approach to most participants in this study. One of the participants, Teacher H, reflected this view when she said:

> With the chapter from the novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, for example, I can see power relations in the text. Maybe I rarely pay attention to the ideology in the text, but I've realised the power, status, and identity. When I read the novel *The Joy Luck Club*, I discovered the differences between the U.S. and China, including the power and identity. However, I'm not sensitive to the ideology in the text, perhaps.

By this account, Teacher H's consciousness of power seemed to be fostered through imagining herself in the situation of characters from texts so that she could understand their perspectives. The switch in perspective seems to suggest a sense of "doubling and 'othering' of the self from dominant text and discourse" as posited by Luke (2004, p. 26).

Within the Chinese context, the otherness constitutes the wholeness. Dealing with the self-othering, therefore, is driven by a dialectical rather than a dichotomous view of thinking, being, and doing. However, this sense of being beside oneself was not always invoked in the practices of critical reading in this study. While teaching the text All Grown Up and Still in Tow (Unit 2, Book 1, Li et al., 2017), Teacher G asked students to consider the author's attitude from the use of word "humiliating" in the following sentence: "How humiliating in a university registrar's office with your father taking charge" (Paragraph 1). Most students inferred the author's attitude from decoding the word "humiliating", as I observed, and they were able to link this event to their own experiences with the teacher's assistance. While making a connection between the two worlds, students disagreed with the author, arguing that it was normal for Chinese parents to take charge of children's registration on their first day at university. In response, teacher G seemed to acknowledge the phenomenon but she did not guide students to challenge the normalised discourse or to consider the power dynamics in parent-child relationships within the Chinese context. Instead, she questioned the discourse within the text by offering a different perspective: "Starting university is an important milestone. Don't you think it is important to have senior family members be witness?" The teacher's response to the phenomenon was probably given on the basis of the internalisation of the power hierarchy in Chinese families. Hence, it did not occur to her that patriarchy should or could be questioned. This assumption seems to find support in Hofstede and Hofstede's (2004) cultural dimensions theory.

According to Hofstede Insights (n. d.), China scores 80 out of 100 on the Power Distance scale, indicating it is a large-power-distance nation (https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/china/). In this situation, as Hofstede and Hofstede (2004) posit, people tend to "accept and appreciate inequality but feel that the use of power should be moderated by a sense of obligation" (p. 64). Within this cultural norm, it is not surprising that children are expected to show respect for and obedience towards their parents and other elders (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004, p. 51). In Confucian traditions, this is a manifestation of harmony as the core value of Chinese culture (Zhang, 2013). The value of harmony, as suggested in previous research, was a determining factor of Chinese conflict management and resolution (Chen & Starosta, 1997). Due to the emphasis on harmony, Chinese people tend to avoid confrontation in social interaction (Chen & Starosta, 1997). The maintenance of a harmonious balance appears to counteract the experience of being othered, which

might explain why some participants in this study were insensitive to power relations in their practices of critical reading.

For those who choose to maintain harmony, is it possible for them to practise criticality? In this study, participants' engagement in critical reading indicated an integrated view of criticality emerged across cultural boundaries. Therefore, criticality practice is not only possible but also necessary in terms of how to establish the self in relation to others. Having the experience of being othered might cause a cultural mismatch leading to potential confrontation and conflict. As a result of navigating across different cultural realities, this sense of mismatch might also be an opportunity for the self to reconnect with others. Nevertheless, the engagement in "disruptive, sceptical and 'other' social and discourse relations" (Luke, 2004, p. 26) appears to be missing in vocational contexts. Recognising this gap, the teacher professional learning programme in this study created the space for teachers to critically engage with normalised social and cultural discourses through professional learning conversations.

Evidence shows that professional support is a key factor for the implementation of culturally relevant practices in classroom settings (Ladson-Billings, 2013), as also reflected in the present study. Given the limited opportunity for EFL teacher professional learning in the situated context, more support should be provided to enable teachers to continuously explore criticality practices that are relevant to their own contexts. Considering that there has been little research on EFL teacher professional learning in vocational contexts, the research procedures demonstrated in this study might be of some use to researchers in similar contexts.

7. Conclusion

It should be noted that the present study had limitations in the aspects of the researcher's subjectivity and the small sample size (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Yet, the implementation of a three-month teacher professional learning programme in this study was testimony to what could be achieved from teacher professional learning within a short period of time when close attention was given to the process of change in teacher perception. Participants in this study reported a high level of satisfaction with the teacher professional learning programme and found it transformative as it challenged their existing knowledge about criticality and critical reading and thus informed their subsequent classroom practices. The professional learning conversation facilitated teacher professional learning in this study, indicating that it might be a useful tool for the professional development of teachers in similar contexts.

The present study responds to a call for multipolar versions of criticality and criticality practice in education research (Simpson & Dervin, 2020). While critical reading as a strategy to develop critical thinking was reflected in this study, alternative ways of understanding critical reading emerged as a result of interactive meaning-making of texts from a power perspective through the teacher professional learning programme (Macknish, 2011; Paran & Wallace, 2016). The emergence of an integrated view of critical reading in this study challenges the mainstream perspective on critical reading in the Chinese literature and adds insights into the international literature on developments in critical literacy studies. The culturally relevant practices of critical reading confirmed Morgan and Ramanathan's (2005) assumption that non-Western versions of critical literacy do occur and Crooke's (2010) statement that not all critical education derives from the Western Marxist philosophy of the Frankfurt School. This study has thus made significant contributions to the field of critical literacy on an international basis.

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About the author

Jing Xu has worked as an EFL teacher in mainland China for many years and developed research interests in the areas of language, literacy and teacher education. She is particularly interested in exploring the ways in which culturally relevant critical approaches to reading can be implemented in EFL classrooms. She enjoys collaborating with other teachers to develop professional identities and agency in professional learning programmes, as well as to explore innovative pedagogical strategies for empowering learners in EFL classrooms.

A framework for navigating the review and revision of the ELT curriculum

Eman Elturki

This article offers procedures and tools grounded in the backward design approach to guide the English language teaching curriculum review and revision process and maximize its effectiveness. The framework is systematic, data-informed, and teacher-driven. It seeks to cultivate a culture of continuous improvement and foster teacher collaboration and engagement. Language programs can adapt the procedures provided as suitable to their educational settings. Teachers can also draw upon this framework for curriculum planning.

1. Introduction

A curriculum can be defined as a comprehensive teaching and learning blueprint devised to reach the intended outcomes of a course (Richards, 2013). The term *curriculum* can be used to refer to the curriculum of a particular course as well as the holistic curriculum of a program or an institution. Curricula are designed and sequenced based on the purpose, goals, and mission of an educational program. For example, if a language program exists to help learners acquire academic English language skills, then the curriculum of individual courses would be designed to meet this overall goal. It is important to note that *curriculum* and *syllabus* are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to the educational plan for a given course. In this article, the term curriculum is used to refer to the overall teaching and learning plan of a course in relation to other courses and the program as a whole. This learning plan includes (1) course goals, objectives, and outcomes; (2) ways of formative and summative assessments; (3) the sequencing of objectives and outcomes of courses within and across levels of English language proficiency; and (4) learning activities and resources. This information is then translated into a course syllabus, which is a written document that provides students with information about course expectations (e.g., objectives, assignments, grades, and timeline) and policies (e.g., attendance, late work, and academic integrity). It is important to emphasize that the curriculum is dynamic in nature rather than fixed (Christison & Murray, 2014; Kalu & Dyjur, 2018) as it is shaped by various factors including changing student needs and educational trends. Hence, curricular components must be systematically planned and regularly evaluated and revised to ensure their effectiveness in meeting student needs and the purpose they are designed for. This article offers a framework to guide the ELT curriculum review and revision process, which has been operationalized and continually refined in a multi-level intensive English language program. The proposed framework in this paper is grounded in backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006, 2011), led and operated by teachers, and informed by various sources of accessible data.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Backward design

As described by Wiggins and McTighe (2006, 2011), a backward design approach involves three phases: (1) identifying the desired outcomes, (2) determining appropriate assessment evidence, and (3) planning instruction and learning accordingly. An essential step in backward design is the diagnosis of student needs through needs analyses to inform the specification of student learning outcomes (SLOs) (Richards, 2017). Following a backward design approach to curriculum allows "lessons, units, and courses [to] be logically inferred from the results sought, not derived from the methods, books, and activities with which [teachers] are most comfortable" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006, p. 14). Christison and Murray (2014) add that "unfortunately, in the field of ESL/EFL, very often curricula and/or textbooks are adopted from elsewhere, usually from an English-dominant country. It is no wonder, therefore, that they find minimal acceptance from teachers or learners" (p. 12). Applying backward design in curriculum planning and implementation has demonstrated to have a positive impact on the teaching and learning of English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) learners (e.g., Chaisaa & Chinokul, 2021; Hodaeian & Biria, 2015; Llerena, 2020; Yurtseven & Altun, 2016). Backward design is not exclusive to curriculum design as it has also been successfully employed to guide curriculum evaluation (e.g., Miller, Klassen, & Hardy, 2020; Paesani, 2017). The curriculum review and revision framework described in this article follows the principles of backward design. It first examines the desired results (course goal, objectives, and SLOs), then evidence of learning (assessments), and finally the learning plan (content).

2.2. Teacher-led approach

Engaging teachers in the evaluation and revision of the English language teaching (ELT) curriculum is vital to optimize its effectiveness. Richards (2017) asserts that language teaching necessitates more than merely teaching a language. He explains that language teachers need to make decisions concerning student needs, identify the best ways to plan and organize course content to meet SLOs, determine teaching and assessment methods, and identify and create pedagogical materials. Christison and Murray (2014) argue that curriculum changes that result as top-down requirements without buy-in from teachers are "rarely diffused throughout the educational enterprise" (p. 11). Teachers are the ones that interact with the curriculum and plan ways to deliver and assess SLOs. Consequently, "if all aspects of English language instruction are not aligned with the reform, then it is rarely adopted" (Christison & Murray, 2014, p. 11).

In the backward design approach, teachers are viewed as designers who engage in "the crafting of curriculum and learning experiences to meet specified purposes" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006, p.13). They are designers of assessment tools to diagnose needs, monitor progress, measure how well SLOs have been met, and, as a result, inform students, administrators, and other stakeholders (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). The curriculum review and revision framework presented in this article is led and operated by teachers. It provides opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively towards optimizing the curriculum and reflect on and adapt their teaching practices. Such engagement is central to professional development as "the conversations focus on the heart of teaching and learning" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006, p. 27).

2.3. Data-informed approach

A curriculum must be monitored periodically to ensure its effectiveness in achieving the purpose it is designed and offered for. Educational programs often conduct curriculum review for accreditation purposes, accountability, and/or as a means of continuous improvement. Several sources can be used to inform this process including assessment data, input from students and teachers, best practices and research, standards and/or guidelines by professional organizations (Christison & Murray, 2014; Macalister & Nation, 2020; Miller et al., 2020; Paesani, 2017). Assessment data in English language

programs is typically comprised of overall pass/fail rates for courses, levels, and the program as a whole in addition to enrolment numbers. It could also consist of data from specific assessment instruments or events (e.g., student writing portfolios, timed-writing exams, or oral presentations). Macalister and Nation (2020) state that "information gained from assessment is a useful source of data about the effectiveness of a course" (p. 11). Informal or formal input from students and teachers gathered through interactions, observations, interviews, or questionnaires/surveys is another valuable source of data. Information gathered from needs analyses, in particular, assists in evaluating whether exiting courses sufficiently attend to student needs (Richards, 2017). Keeping abreast of best practices and recent research through professional development and engaging in teacher-led research on a specific language skill from a learning, teaching, or assessment angle are also invaluable in guiding curricular improvements. Finally, national standards, language benchmarks, and guidelines set by professional organizations (e.g., *Common European Framework of Reference for Language-CEFR*) can also inform the process. Such resources provide "descriptions of the outcomes or targets students should be able to reach in different domains of curriculum content" and are often used to guide the specification of SLOs in backward design (Richards, 2013, p. 25).

3. The ELT curriculum review and revision framework

This section offers guidelines, procedures, tools, and sample curriculum review tasks. A holistic view of the process is provided in Figure 1.

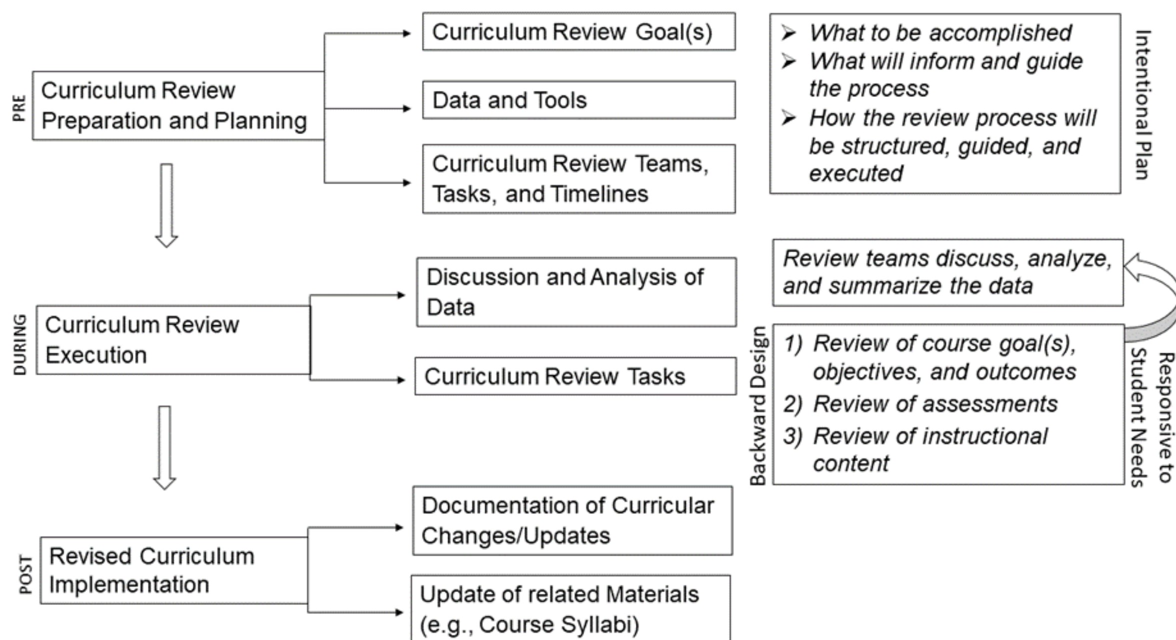

Figure 1. An Overview of the ELT Curriculum Review and Revision Framework: Pre, During, and Post

3.1. Expectations and shared understanding

It is helpful for language programs to create a *written plan* that outlines when the curriculum review process is conducted, who is responsible for preparing for it, what the process is, who is involved in it, what resources are needed, and how it is documented. Having a written plan in place informs all stakeholders- including new hire- of expectations and standard procedures. This written plan is to be periodically reviewed and updated to respond effectively to programmatic needs. Additionally, a *shared understanding* of curricular elements needs to be established to ensure a consistent and

mutual interpretation and use of terms at the program level. This can be achieved through creating a guide, offering in-house professional development (e.g., brown bags), and/or briefly orienting instructors on what each curricular component entails before engaging in the curriculum review process. Table 1 offers a sample set of curricular elements. Note that some educational programs might have course/learning objectives in place but not SLOs or vice versa as such curricular elements may overlap, but subtle differences are highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1. A Set of Sample Curricular Components and their Explanations

Curricular Element	**Definition**	**Example**	**Characteristics**
Course Goal(s)	A general statement describing the overall intended outcome for the course	*In this course, students will improve their comprehension and production of spoken English at an upper-intermediate level.*	Broad, abstract, and long-term
Course Objectives	A set of statements outlining the intended consequences of instruction; what will be taught	*In this course, students will learn to prepare and deliver logically structured presentations using relevant content and appropriate visuals, body language, eye contact, volume, and speed.*	Intentions, teaching-centered, detailed, discrete knowledge and skills
Student Learning Outcomes	A set of statements outlining what students will know or can do as a result of instruction; evidence that learning took place	*Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to give oral presentations effectively.*	Products, learning-centered, succinct, overarching skills and knowledge
Formative Assessment	Ways of assessing progress, providing feedback, and informing teaching	Worksheets, journals, quizzes, discussions, mini oral presentations	Low stakes, ongoing, assist the learning process
Summative Assessment	Ways of measuring how well students have met course objectives/outcomes	Tests, projects, oral presentations	High stakes, end of units and course, determine if benchmarks have been reached

3.2. Curriculum review preparation and planning

Depending on a program structure and the roles in place, the curriculum review preparation and planning can be facilitated by a curriculum coordinator, a program director or assistant director, a standing curriculum committee, or a curriculum review task force. Furthermore, since this framework utilizes data to inform the review process, student achievement data (Table 2) needs to be compiled and analyzed for every semester using, for instance, Excel. Depending on the different roles available in a program, data compilation and analysis can be performed by an IT person or a staff or faculty member with some technical knowledge. Examining trends in pass/fail rates across courses and levels helps identifying classes with major inconsistencies in progression rates and then taking a closer look at the curriculum of those courses. Additionally, it is important to identify goals to have an intentional and efficient curriculum review process (e.g., will the entire curriculum or specific courses/levels be reviewed? Is it a routine review or are there any special circumstances such as a change in the program length, the structure of courses, student demographics, or concerns on student performance in

specific courses? After identifying the purpose of the curriculum review purpose, materials and tools to guide the process can be prepared accordingly (Table 2).

Table 2. Sample Materials and Tools for the Curriculum Review and Revision Process

Materials and Tools	**Description**
Curriculum Review Guide	An agenda, or a Gantt chart, to guide the curriculum review session containing the goals, schedule, review teams, tasks, and timeframe
Student Achievement Dataset	A comprehensive summary of progression rates and enrollment numbers per course, level, semester, and year at least for the past 2-3 years to allow for identifying trends and making comparisons
Analysis of Student Achievement Dataset Form	Review teams use this form to analyze the dataset focusing on their assigned courses/levels and identify (a) any inconsistencies in progression rates across levels or courses and from session to session, (b) possible factors that can explain trends in the data, and (c) follow up actions with regard to the curriculum review
Summary of Student Evaluations	A snapshot of the most recent student evaluations (preferably from at least three semesters) highlighting students' feedback on course contents only not instructors
Curriculum Mapping Tool	A chart for mapping course objectives, SLOs, and assessments to ensure assessments are outcome-based and aligned with objectives/SLOs [see Elturki, 2020, p.15 for a sample]
Verb Wheel	A tool based on Bloom's taxonomy available online to guide the choice of verbs when writing/revising objectives/SLOs and identifying learning activities in relation to comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and knowledge
Research Highlights	A summary highlights findings from published research or faculty-driven research focusing on a specific aspect in the curriculum to be enhanced during curriculum review (e.g., writing within the disciplines, extensive reading, or vocabulary integration)
Progression of Topics and Skills Chart	A pre-prepared chart to be reviewed and updated as necessary containing the progression of topics and skills across three periods of a semester (beginning, middle, and end) for the courses that make up a level (e.g., what to be covered in level 5 Academic Reading, Academic Writing, and Academic Listening and Discussion during the beginning, middle, and through the end of a session) to ensure close coordination and smooth progression of topics [*click here for a sample*]
Materials Review Chart	A chart to guide to what extent a course textbook aligns with objectives/SLOs. Review teams use the chart to map objectives/SLOs with textbook units/pages and pinpoint any gaps that need to be supplemented [*click here for a sample*]
Post Curriculum Review and Revision Form	A form to be completed by the review teams after the curriculum review to summarize and justify changes/updates made to their assigned courses/levels and what informed those changes [*click here for a sample*]

How to structure a curriculum review and revision session depends too on what needs to be accomplished and the size of the review teams. In a multi-level program, for example, to ensure smooth progression and *vertical* alignment across levels, a review team can be assigned the same course or skill from different levels. To illustrate, for a curriculum review that aims to look at lower levels, review teams can be structured as follows:

- Team A: Level 1, 2, and 3 Reading and Writing (RW)
- Team B: Level 1, 2, and 3 Listening and Speaking (LS)
- Team C: Level 1, 2, and 3 Grammar (G)

After those teams complete the curriculum review of their assigned courses, they form a new team consisting of a representative from Team A, B, and C to review the curriculum of a given level (e.g., Team A: Level 1 RW, LS, G) and its *horizontal* alignment within the level. This measure is particularly beneficial for language programs that put an emphasis on coordination of SLOs for the set of courses within a level. For example, if one of the course objectives in a Level 3 RW course is composing and comprehending compare/contrast text, the Level 3 G class may include an objective on the use of comparative and superlative forms. Likewise, a Level 3 LS course objective can reinforce the use of compare/contrast language in oral production and listening comprehension. Thus, having a

representative from each level ensures that language skills, when possible, are reinforced across the language domains.

Another variation of this structure is assigning a review team to the curriculum of a specific level. For instance:

- Team A: Level 1 RW, LS, G
- Team B: Level 2 RW, LS, G
- Team C: Level 3 RW, LS, G

After the teams complete the curriculum review and revision of their assigned level, they form a new team consisting of a representative for a specific course from every level (e.g., Team A: Level 1, 2, and 3). Examining a language curriculum horizontally and vertically ensures curricular alignment and that there is a smooth and linear progression in skills and knowledge within and across levels.

3.3. Curriculum review and review execution: Sample tasks

This subsection provides a sample curriculum review and revision tasks. Figure 2 offers a bird's eye view of a curriculum review and revision session.

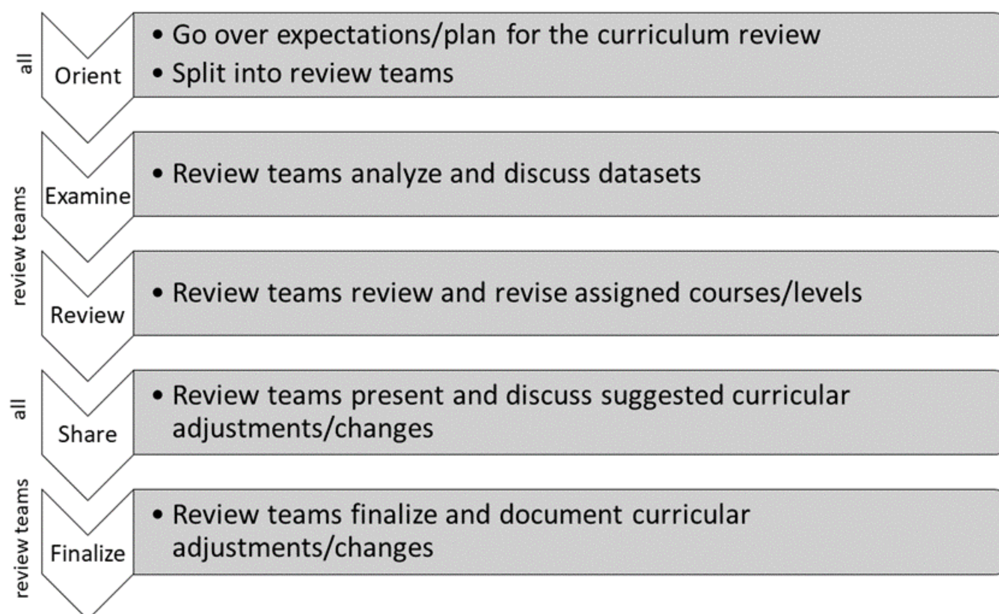

Figure 2. An Overview of a Curriculum Review and Revision Plan

A brief orientation meeting can be held before splitting into review teams to go over the agenda/guide, hand out any materials, and form review teams. Review teams need to be thoughtfully formed taking into account the level of experience with certain courses as well as group dynamics. Assigning roles to team members- such as facilitator, editor, timekeeper, and presenter- can make the process more efficient. The following are sample tasks that the review team complete in the order below following the backward design approach:

Figure 3. Order of Tasks Following the Backward Design Approach

- Task 1: Review of student achievement and student evaluation data
    - Examine the summary of progression rates from 2020-2021 and student evaluation data and for your assigned courses/level. Identify any inconsistencies in progression rates for your assigned level from one session to session and in comparison to data from other courses/levels in the *Analysis of Student Achievement Dataset Form* and note any trends in the summary of student evaluation data to be considered in the review.
- Task 2: Review course goals, objectives, SLOs, and then assessment events for your assigned level with regard to being measurable/assessable, clear, and well sequenced among and across levels and then make necessary revisions using track changes. For the process, please use the *Curriculum Mapping Tool* (see Table 2) and refer to the following guiding questions:
    a. Does the course goal accurately and adequately capture the skills developed?
    b. Are the course objectives and SLOs specific and focused (begin with an active verb)? [refer to the *Verb Wheel*]
    c. Are the summative assessments outcome-based?
    d. Can the SLOs be assessed and measured directly?
    e. Are all SLOs addressed by assessments?
    f. Are the course objectives and SLOs teachable within the semester length? [refer to the *Progression of Topic and Skills Chart*]
    g. Does the sequencing of the course objectives and SLOs demonstrate a linear, smooth progression among and across levels? [refer to the *Progression of Topic and Skills Chart*]
    h. Is the number of summative assessments reasonable?
- Task 3: Review and update the *Progression of Topic & Skills Chart* as needed using track changes.
- Task 4: Review required textbooks' alignment with course objectives and SLOs. Use the *Materials Review Chart* for this purpose.
- Task 5: Summarize and justify any changes/updates in the *Post Curriculum Review and Revision Form*.

After carrying out those tasks, a meeting can be held at which each review team presents proposed changes or modifications to the curriculum of their assigned courses/levels and explain the rationale behind those changes. This ensures that there is an agreement that the proposed changes are deemed necessary as course objectives/SLOs should be "collaboratively authored and collectively accepted" (Maki, 2010, p. 88). After this meeting, review teams can finalize the revision of the curriculum based on what was discussed and agreed upon.

3.4. Revised curriculum implementation

Preferably, revisions by review teams are to be made to the original curriculum document electronically using track changes. The individual, committee, or task force responsible for coordinating and overseeing this process then finalizes those revisions and updates curriculum documents. The *Post Curriculum Review and Revision Forms* can be stored as documentation for the review process and also used for future curriculum and review sessions when needed. The implementation of the revised curriculum should be in accordance with the timeline specified in the curriculum review and revision written plan.

4. Conclusion

The framework described here is flexible and can be adapted to better serve and fit a program's scope, structure, size, curriculum offerings, number of instructors, and session length. It is meant as an

inventory of resources and ideas to carry out curriculum review in a systematic manner guided by data and tools and operated by teachers. A wide range of procedures are offered, which could be overwhelming for a program commencing curriculum review for the first time. Curriculum review is an ongoing effort. It took several curriculum review and revision sessions to put those procedures in place, refine them, and develop materials and tools for the process. For a first-time curriculum review experience, I recommend planning a smaller number of tasks with a specific focus such as refining objective/SLO statements and mapping curriculum components. The ultimate goal of such processes is to cultivate a culture of continuous improvement and foster student success.

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A CEFR-based approach to helping students construct personal English-learning goals

Maki Taniguchi

Graham Jones

Students learn English for a multitude of reasons, and studies around the world have linked personal goal-setting to higher levels of motivation, ownership and language achievement. One of the aims of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is to help students establish learning objectives, but there has been little research done on this, especially within higher education. We conducted a study at a university in Japan to investigate whether CEFR could act as a common tool to help students construct personal English-learning goals. The four stages of our project were (I) a paper-based survey of all first-year students, (II) a focus group interview with English teachers at a local high school, (III) a 15-week action research project with a class of environmental science students, and (IV) follow-up interviews 17 months later. We found that CEFR functioned well as a universal, personal and open-ended framework for helping students think about and formulate their future goals.

1. Introduction

> In thrall to content and qualifications, we have forgotten the deeper purpose of education. In the rush to make young people successful exam passers, we have overlooked the deeper need to become successful people, eager to learn and grow in the real-life world of work, leisure and relationships. (Claxton, 2008, p. ix)

What is the purpose of learning English? What is the definition of a successful English-speaker? It is not possible to give a single answer to these questions: around the world, students with a multitude of different backgrounds and personal circumstances are learning English for a multitude of different reasons. Often, however, people's success at English — the determination of whether or not their English is fit for purpose — is measured in the same way, by taking an exam. The value of these exams is that they provide a common standard for measuring success: it is one exam for all. The flip-side to this, and the drawback of these exams, is that, in the real world, there is no single reason why people study English in the first place, and no single set of English-speaking competencies that constitute success.

Personal learning goals provide a way for students to plan and measure their progress in terms of the deeper purpose of their lifelong English studies. Clearly, personal learning goals lack the status and authority of formal exams — there is no stamped certificate that acts as evidence as to what has been achieved. But personal learning goals can motivate students in a different way to exams, being more a form of internal, self-driven motivation, as opposed to external or forced motivation. (It is

interesting to note that the Japanese word for study, as in studying for exams, is made up of two characters, the second of which represents the idea of compulsion or being forced to do something.)

Studies suggest that personal goal-setting is one of keys to students taking responsibility and ownership of the learning process (Turkay, 2014). In the area of language learning, a statistically significant relationship has been identified between the goal-setting process and language achievement (Moeller et al, 2012). Nevertheless, it is far from easy for students to make meaningful and realistic goals for language learning. Languages are abstract and complex systems (Bley-Vroman, 1989); although curriculum descriptions present students with a clear and accessible pathway toward learning a language, "the day-to-day reality of teaching is far less accessible to scrutiny and is infinitely dispersed" (Tudor, 2003, p. 6).

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, or CEFR, was created partly to address this challenge. The framework is based on a series of can-do descriptors. According to the Council of Europe (2020), CEFR makes it possible to:

(a) establish learning and teaching objectives
(b) review curricula
(c) design teaching materials
(d) provide a basis for recognising language qualifications thus facilitating educational and occupational mobility.

Within teaching and learning communities, CEFR is perhaps most closely associated with point (d) above, followed by points (c) and (b). As far as we (the authors of this paper) are aware, there has been little research carried out into point (a) at university level, particularly the effectiveness of using CEFR to support the development of students' personal English-learning objectives and goals for life. We decided to investigate this at the university where we worked in Japan. This is a small public university near Kyoto that is divided into four schools: engineering, environmental science, humanities and nursing. Here we have a body of students with an enormous variety of potential career and life paths stretching out in front of them, which involve English in very different ways, and to very different degrees of importance. Given this variety, could CEFR act as a common tool to help these students construct personal learning goals for their English?

A Japanese version of CEFR, known as CEFR-J, was created in 2012 (Tono, 2019). The reason for creating a country-specific version of CEFR was that the level of English spoken in Japan is much lower than in Europe, and consequently more sub-levels were needed at the lower end of the scale. The relatively low standard of English in Japan is illustrated by a (EF, 2021) survey that rates Japan as "low proficiency" for English skills, and ranks it 78th among non-anglophone countries and regions. For comparison, other populous countries with a "low proficiency" rating include Brazil (ranked 60th), Ethiopia (63rd), Turkey (70th) and Indonesia (80th). It is important to note that CEFR-J is not well known among students in Japan. Part of our research, therefore, would involve introducing students to the concept of a language framework built around can-do descriptors.

2. Methods

This paper describes and discusses four stages of our project that were conducted between January 2019 and January 2021. Stage I was a paper-based survey given to all 537 first-year students at our university (Taniguchi & Jones, 2021). The survey questions are attached to this paper as an appendix. The form was written entirely in Japanese, so as to create a level playing field between students of different English levels. The initial questions in the survey were designed to discover if students had goals for their English-learning, and, if not, why not. Next, students were given a self-assessment exercise to familiarize themselves with CEFR-J's can-do descriptors. The final questions were designed to gauge students' initial reactions to the idea of using these as the basis for personal learning goals.

Stage II of our research project was a focus-group interview with English-language teachers at a local private high school in Japan. The aim here was to gain insights into the language-learning goals

and ambitions of students as they work toward university-level education. This was a 90-minute discussion involving three teachers.

Stage III was a semester-long action research project at our university. We team-taught a compulsory English course to a class of 30 first-year students in the school of environmental science (Taniguchi & Jones, 2022). Our course consisted of one 90-minute class per week, and ran for 15 weeks. The theme we chose for the course was "English is a skill for life". The syllabus and lesson plans were designed to include elements related to goal-setting, lifelong learning, language frameworks, and can-do descriptors. The syllabus also contained many elements of a general English communication course (the course textbook was "Breakthrough Plus Level 2" (Craven, 2012). There were two assessment points during the course: a written test at the halfway point, and a speaking test at the end.

Stage IV took place 17 months after the end of the stage III course, when the students were nearing the end of their second year at university. Three students came for one-to-one follow-up interviews, which were designed to see how much of the course they remembered. The selection of the students was based on (a) random choosing, (b) wanting to include an above-average, average and below-average student (based on the assessment results), and (c) the availability for interview of the students themselves. Students were given no indication in advance of what the interview would be about. It was stressed that their participation was entirely voluntary, and there would be no consequences for them whether they accepted or refused the invitation. Each of the three students came for an interview on a different day. During the course of each interview, each student confirmed they had not spoken to any of their classmates about the content of the discussion, and were given no forewarning about the kinds of questions we might ask.

We decided not to make audio or video recordings of the various activities within stages II, III and IV. We felt that the presence of recording devices would severely inhibit participants, and we were keen to encourage an open and free-flowing exchange of ideas and contributions.

3. Results

3.1. Stage I, Paper survey

When all first-year students at our university were asked "Do you have a written list of goals for your English?", 4% of them said yes, 9% said they had a mental list, and 58% said they had some ideas. In response to the follow-up question "If you don't have a written list, why not?", 40% of students said they had never thought about it, 25% said they did not know how, and 15% said it was because they did not know their goals.

After completing an exercise to familiarize themselves with CEFR-J, students were asked "Do you think that can-do statements could help you to make a list of goals for your English?" They gave a cautious welcome to the idea, with 56% replying "yes, a bit" and 20% replying "maybe". A small group of students gave a strong welcome to the idea: 16% replied "yes, a lot". Who were the students who gave a strong welcome to the above idea? The breakdown showed that it includes students from all four schools, with humanities students being the most enthusiastic. The group also included students at all TOEIC levels, with those having relatively low or relatively high scores being the most enthusiastic.

3.2. Stage II, Focus group

The most notable finding of the focus group with high-school English teachers was their anecdotal evidence from overseas trips. These trips involve groups of high-school students having to use English to communicate with local students in a foreign country, for example, China. The evidence from the teachers included the observation that "lower-level [English] classes use more non-verbal communication" and "tend to be better communicators". There was also an observation concerning the lessons that students take away from their overseas experiences. Upper-level students, who are

perhaps disappointed with the results of their communication, tend to conclude that "we should learn English more" and "we need deeper communication". On the other hand, lower-level students, who may be pleasantly surprised by their communication success, tend to reach the conclusion that "we don't have to study English" and "we don't need deeper communication".

Of course, the teachers felt that these were not the best lessons for students to derive. In their words, they felt that a better conclusion for upper-level students would be that they needed to develop "broader" communication skills. A more helpful conclusion for lower-level students would be "OK, we can survive. Next, going deeper will open up new levels". The teachers saw it as part of their role to help students interpret their experiences, and draw the most useful lessons from them on their own, through their goal setting.

3.3. Stage III, Action research

We began our 15-week English course for 30 first-year environmental science students by introducing the concept of "English is a skill for life". We stressed to students that they were entering a new phase of their English learning. In the educational stages in Japan up to and including high school, there is a tendency to regard English as a skill needed to pass exams and, ultimately, gain a university place. Now, having safely arrived at university, students were able to focus on English as a skill that would enrich their future lives. As part of this, when students made their traditional name cards for the course, we asked them to include some of drawing or illustration to indicate one of their life goals. All students responded with great energy. Figure 1 shows the name card of a student whose ambition was to conduct research into whales.

Figure 1. Name card

Also, instead of taking an attendance register each week, students were asked to write a short check-in note when they arrived at the class, and to put it in an attendance box. In addition to writing their name, students were asked to mention one goal they had for the coming week, or some achievement from the previous week. Again, students responded positively. Figures 2 and 3 are examples of typical messages.

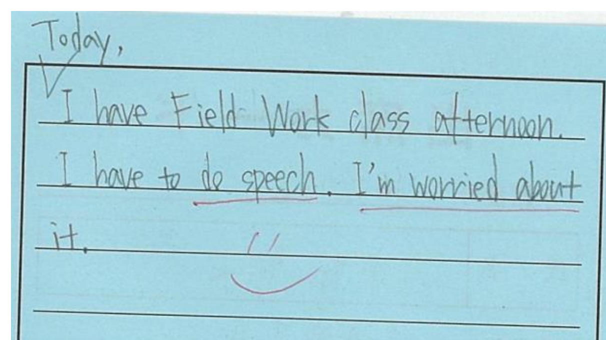


Figure 2. Goals.

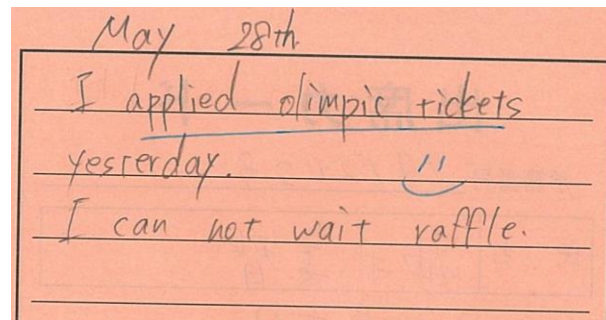


Figure 3. Experiences.

From the beginning of the first class, the entire course was conducted solely in English. Even when working one-to-one with a partner, or as part of a larger group, students were encouraged to avoid Japanese and conduct their communications in English only. For most of the time, students managed to do this successfully, and we were happy to allow students to use the occasional phrase of Japanese among themselves.

Throughout the course, students were asked to consider how English could benefit their life or professional career. For the written test at the halfway point of the course, students were asked to write an essay titled "My future: How I might use English in my life". All students were able to visualize ways that English could be important to them, and this formed part of the marking criteria for the test; the evaluation rubric assessed how well students addressed or extended the topic, and applied or added to the material studied in class. Figures 4 and 5 are extracts from two of these essays.

I'll use English for my job. City hall member often use English when foreign people comes city hall. So, I think city hall member must can speak English. People come to the city hall when they are troubled by life. If city hall member can't speak English, going city hall is hard for foreign people. The most important thing for city hall member is communication skills.

Figure 4. Essay extract

The first reason is that I think that being able to use English is very cool. Because most Japanese can't speak English. Such time if Japanese speak English, I think it's very cool. And if I can speak English, around people will be surprised. For example, Ota yuki's presentation. He is Japanese but his presentation is all English. That was so cool. I want to be speak English fluently that much.

Figure 5. Essay extract

"Ota yuki" in Figure 5 refers to a fencer, who, despite being nervous about his English, gave a highly influential presentation as part of Tokyo's bid to host the 2020 Olympic Games. In one of our classes, we used Ota's presentation as part of a discussion about how communication skills can be more effective than language skills for expressing ourselves. (This also built upon the finding from our stage II focus group, about the need for some students to develop "broader" communication skills.)

Students were given a number of exercises to introduce the CEFR-J framework, and the concept of can-do statements. In one exercise, students interviewed a partner about their self-perception of their current English level, and their ambitions for their English level in five years' time. Some typical results of this exercise are shown in figures 6 and 7.

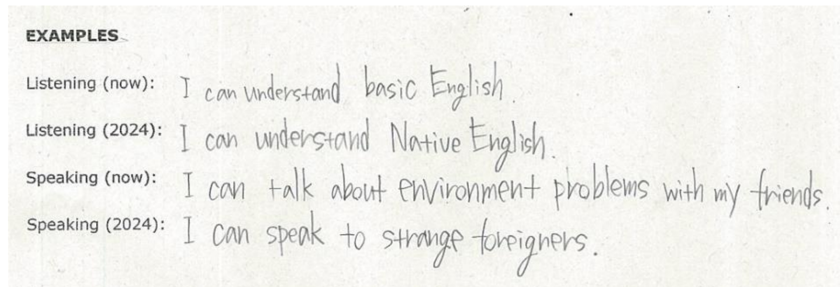


Figure 6. Self-perception

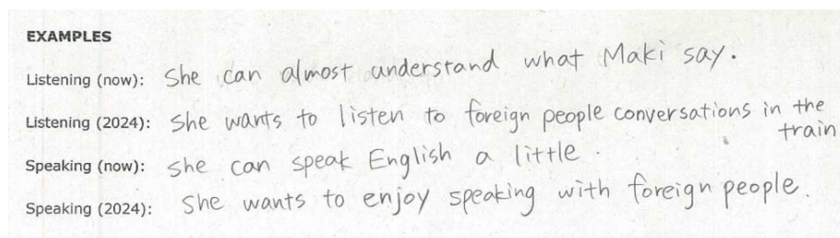


Figure 7. Self-perception

At this point in the course, students were asked to think about developing strategies to realize their English-language ambitions. Together with the students, we developed the model shown in Figure 8.

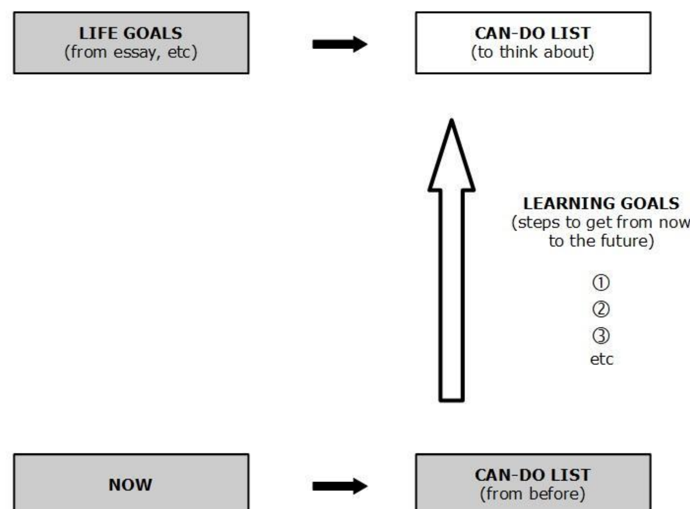


Figure 8. Proposed model

For the speaking test at the end of the course, students were asked to give a short presentation titled “My future: How I can keep levelling up my English”. All of the students were able to look ahead beyond university, and put forward simple and specific strategies. Again, this formed part of the marking criteria for the test. Figures 9, 10 and 11 are some of the note cards one student used for this presentation.

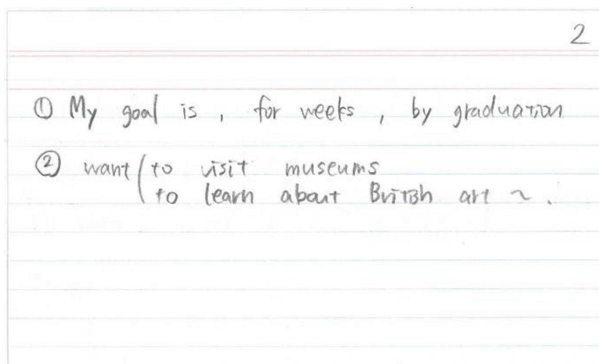


Figure 9. Note card

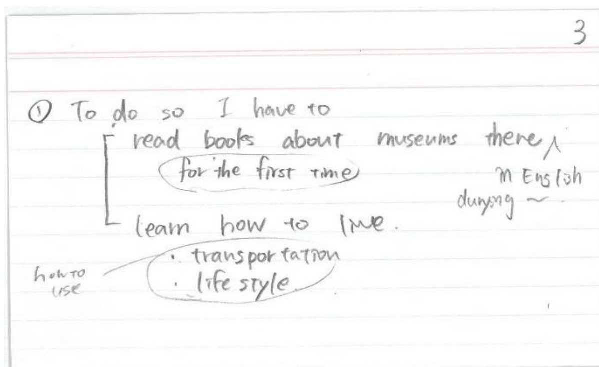


Figure 10. Note card

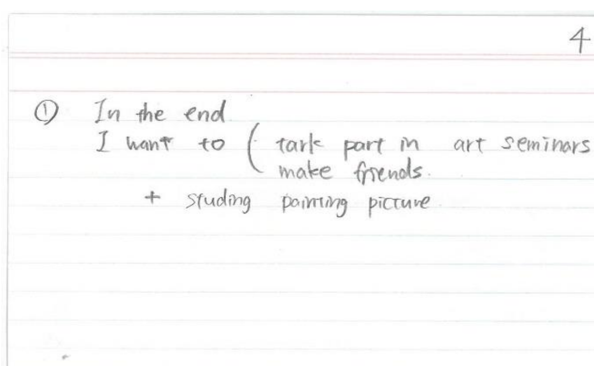
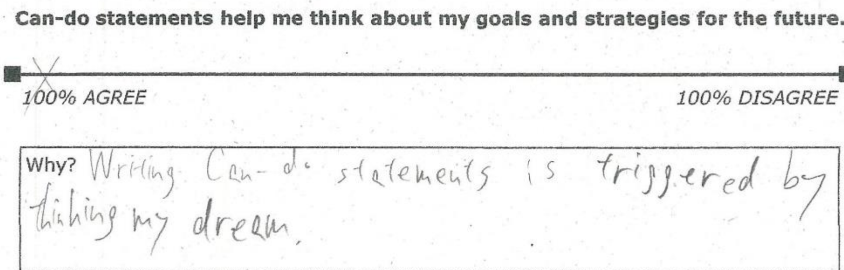


Figure 11. Note card

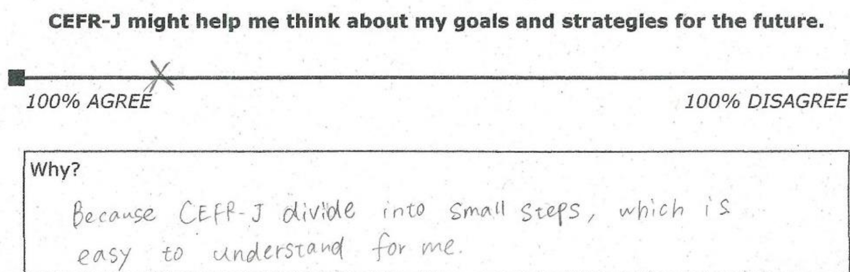
After the completion of the course, students were asked to reflect on the value of can-do statements and the CEFR-J framework in terms of forming goals and strategies. Figures 12 and 13 show typical responses.


Can-do statements help me think about my goals and strategies for the future.

100% AGREE — 100% DISAGREE

Why? Writing Can-do statements is triggered by thinking my dream.

Figure 12. Responses on can-do statements


CEFR-J might help me think about my goals and strategies for the future.

100% AGREE — 100% DISAGREE

Why? Because CEFR-J divide into small steps, which is easy to understand for me.

Figure 13. Responses on can-do statements.

Tables 1 and 2 show the overall results for the above questions. The AGREE-DISAGREE line has been divided into 11 zones, and the number of the crosses in each zone has been recorded.

Table 1. Survey response

"Can-do statements help me think about my goals and strategies in for the future"

100% AGREE   100% DISAGREE

12	7	5	1	-	2	-	-	-	-	1

Table 2. Survey response

"CEFR-J might help me think about my goals and strategies for the future"

100% AGREE   100% DISAGREE

10	9	3	2	-	2	-	-	1	-	-

We were grateful for the two cases of disagreement, since negative feedback tended to be more useful than positive feedback — particularly when it revealed specific doubts, uncertainties and other issues. These two negative responses are shown in Figures 14 and 15.

Can-do statements help me think about my goals and strategies for the future.

Why? The reason is that the time you make the Can-do list is useless. You should use the time for practice of English

Figure 14. Negative feedback.

CEFR-J might help me think about my goals and strategies for the future.

Why? I think I don't want to read CEFR-J because CEFR-J is very long.

Figure 15. Negative feedback.

3.4. Stage IV, Follow-up interviews

The first student from stage III who attended a follow-up interview 17 months later (hereafter referred to as student #1) was above average in terms of their grade for the course. We both observed that this student was extremely relaxed and comfortable using English in a conversational way.

Student #1 presented us with mixed messages. On the one hand, we began by asking what they could recall about the final presentation they gave at the end of the course (17 months earlier). The student could recall nothing, even when they were shown the note cards they had used for their presentation. On the other hand, student #1 could recall much of the general content of the course. For example, unprompted by us, the student talked in some detail about how we focussed on "goals and strategies" throughout the course, even if "I can't remember *my* goals and strategies".

The next student (student #2) was below average in terms of their final grade. It was notable that this student switched from English to Japanese near the beginning of our discussion.

Once again, we began by asking the student what they could remember about their final presentation. The initial response of student #2 was "can't remember". A few moments later, however, the student had almost perfect recall, which closely matched the note cards we later shared with the student. One of the personal learning strategies that student #2 had described in their presentation was listening to English songs. Unprompted by us, the student described in some detail the English songs they were currently listening to (i.e., 17 months later).

The final student (student #3) had achieved an average grade for the course. They used English throughout our follow-up discussion (although during some 'small talk' after the interview had finished, they switched to Japanese).

Student #3 had set out very clear goals and strategies during their final presentation: they had a clear vision of a particular country they wanted to travel to during their second year in order to practice English. During our interview, student #3 had near-perfect recall of the content of the course, and the details of their own goals and plans. Unfortunately, they had been unable to put their plans into action because the covid crisis had prevented them from leaving Japan. Nevertheless, the student had come up with alternative strategies for English practice (e.g., studying TED Talks).

4. Discussion

In Stage I, our paper survey of all first-year students, revealed that, in general, students did not have personal-learning goals for their English, and were willing to consider CEFR as a way of addressing this. In Stage II, the high-school teachers in our focus group gave us the cautionary tale of how students can arrive at goals that may not be for the best for them, and how they need help in making sense of the highly complex process of learning a language. Our Stage III semester-long action research project demonstrated to us that students were able to use a CEFR-based approach to forming meaningful and relevant English-learning goals and strategies. Finally, in Stage IV, our follow-up interviews with students confirmed that general ideas and specific strategies from stage III remained in students' minds 17 months later, when the students were at a totally different phase of their undergraduate university career.

To us, CEFR proved its value as a tool for personal goal setting in three ways. Firstly, CEFR is universal. No two of the students we worked with during this project were alike. The ambition of one student (Figure 1) was to study killer whales, while the ambition of another (Figure 4) was to get a job in their local city hall. These future career paths could hardly be more different, and, in both cases, it would be difficult to find an exam that dealt specifically with the unique set of skills required for each line of work. Nevertheless, all the students in our stage III group were able to work together constructively using a CEFR as the basis for thinking about personal English-learning goals.

The universality of CEFR was also shown by the results of our stage I paper survey. Across all four schools at our university, and across all English levels, students welcomed the idea of using CEFR to help them formulate personal English-learning goals. To recap, these four schools are engineering, environmental science, humanities and nursing. Each of these schools is very different in terms of the way it prepares students for the future. For example, the highlight of the undergraduate programme for humanities students tends to be a year abroad at an overseas university, whereas for nursing students it is interacting with members of the public at a local hospital. Likewise, the pre-existing English levels that students bring from high school are very different. As we saw during the stage II focus group, the attitudes towards English that students bring from high school can also vary considerably. Indeed, one of the key challenges of teaching compulsory English courses at our university, such as the class for environmental science students in stage III, is that these classes are not streamed by TOEIC score or other indicator of English level.

At the same time, it is interesting to note that the students who gave the strongest welcome to CEFR in stage I were humanities students, and students with relatively low or relatively high TOEIC scores. Students within the humanities school tend to have more of a linguistic background than students within the other schools, and this may help them to more readily grasp the potential of a language-learning framework such as CEFR. Similar factors may be at work for students with relatively high TOEIC scores. On the other hand, for students with relatively low TOEIC scores, it may be that the opposite applies: they tend to have less of a linguistic background, and may be more open to the idea of a language-learning framework that can give them support in this area.

Secondly, and following on from the above, CEFR is a personal framework. The theme of our Stage III course was "English is a skill for life" (as opposed to the more traditional view among Japanese students that English is simply an exam subject) — we encouraged students to think less in terms of English goals, and more in terms of life goals, and the can-do abilities needed to reach them. The CEFR-based approach was able to accommodate this way of thinking in an effective way. During our Stage IV follow-up interviews, we were struck by how 'sticky' the ideas from Stage III appeared to be.

What do we mean by 'sticky'? In our Stage IV follow-up interviews, student #2 and student #3 had excellent recall of the personal goals and learning strategies they had developed in Stage III. It is important to remember that Stage III took place during the first semester of the students' first year, whereas Stage IV took place at the end of the second and final semester of the students' second year — a gap of 17 months. During this time, students were free to forget everything, especially as the

Stage III English course was a compulsory class that did not deal specifically with the students' chosen major (environmental science). Despite all this, details had remained in students' minds.

The feedback that students gave immediately after the end of Stage III emphasised the personal element of the course: "Writing can-do statements is triggered by thinking my dream", as the student from Figure 12 wrote. Likewise, in their end-of-course presentations, students were able to talk about levelling up their English skills in a very personal way, from their personal goals ("My goal is...", figure 9), to their personal strategies ("To do so I have to...", Figure 10), to the general outcomes they personally wanted in life ("In the end...", Figure 11).

Thirdly, CEFR is an open-ended framework. The focus of our Stage III course was firmly on the future, well beyond the end of the students' undergraduate university careers. Of course, some students have little or no idea about what they want to do after graduating. This is a completely normal and reasonable approach to life, and we were reassured by the Stage IV feedback from student #1, who could not recall their own personal goals from Stage III, but had good recollection of the general principles and strategies we discussed. This indicates that students can benefit from thinking about the development of can-do abilities, even if there are uncertainties or changes within their own minds about what specific abilities they might need for their self-development. In a similar way, the sad case of student #3 — who had clear plans, but had been forced by the covid crisis to adapt them — showed that a CEFR-based approach is flexible enough to handle the inevitable roadblocks and diversions that stand between students and their life goals.

It is interesting to consider student #1's "how I might use English" essay and "levelling up" presentation from Stage III. It is not that this student was bereft of ideas for the future — it is more that they lacked a single big vision for what they wanted to do. We found this still to be the case when we questioned student #1 at Stage IV: the student was happy, relaxed and confident about their future, but vague about exactly it might entail. Likewise, the student was positive about the CEFR-based approached to forming personal goals and strategies, despite the fact that, in their words, "I can't remember *my* goals and strategies".

The value of CEFR as an open-ended framework was also highlighted by the feedback in Figure 13, on how CEFR might help students think about future goals and strategies: "Because CEFR-J divide into small steps, which is easy to understand for me." This is, in fact, one of the key principles that underpins CEFR: according to the definition of Carson (2016, p. 156), CEFR is a framework that "permits the language learning process to be broken down into a coherent series of transparent, manageable steps".

The negative comments (Figures 14 and 15) we received about the use of can-do statements gave us two more reflections. The first negative comment was that time would be better spent on practising English, rather than making can-do lists. To us, this suggests that we did not do a good enough job of helping this student understand that, if this process is done in English, it is a form of highly targeted language development. For example, as part of the essay on how English might be helpful in the future, this student had to look up many new words. By the very nature of the essay, all of this new vocabulary was extremely relevant to this student's career ambitions.

The second negative comment demonstrated that long lists of can-do statements can be off-putting and hard to process. To us, this underlines the importance of personalization, and of giving students lots of time and space to think about all of the above, and providing lots of ways for them to process their thoughts, for example, partner interviews, essays and presentations. When students were making, sharing and discussing their own can-do lists, this student who wrote the second negative comment was as engaged in the process as any other member of the class.

5. Conclusions

Even among a class of first-year university students taking the same major (in this case, environmental science), there was little commonality between students in terms of their life goals, and the English

skills required to achieve these. This supports the notion that, in general, there is no single purpose for learning English, and no single definition of a successful English-speaker.

Nevertheless, within this same class of students, CEFR functioned well as a common tool for helping students think about and construct personal English-learning goals. CEFR demonstrated its potential as a universal, personal and open-ended framework that could be applied to a wide path of career ambitions, and also in cases where students had no firm future plans.

The biggest limitation of our research was that, notwithstanding the enormous variety of their life goals, the students were of the same nationality and cultural background. Japan tends to be regarded as a monolingual and monocultural nation, and there exist "concerns about a growing insularity among young Japanese" (Fujita-Round & Maher, 2017, p. 1). In other countries, there are fewer such concerns — the Netherlands, for example, has been ranked first for English skills (EF, 2021), and 40% of first-year students at Dutch universities are from overseas (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022). An interesting question for future research would be to look at whether, within a very different cultural environment such as this, CEFR has a similar role to play in terms of helping to nurture students' internal, self-driven motivation through the process of forming personal English-learning goals.

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We were interested to find that a wide range of teachers, in an extensive range of educational settings, instinctively agreed with the findings of our research. To us, this was further evidence of the universal relevance of the CEFR framework.

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Appendix: Stage I, Paper survey questions

Translated from Japanese

(A) About this survey

Do you have a list of goals for your English learning...? We would like to know! This survey will take you about 5 minutes to complete, and it's completely anonymous (please don't tell us your name or student number).

Thank you for helping us with our research — Maki Taniguchi + Graham Jones

(B) About you

(1) Your USP school
- □ Environmental science
- □ Engineering
- □ Human cultures
- □ Human nursing

(2) Your year
- □ 1
- □ 2
- □ 3
- □ 4

(3) Your gender
- □ Female
- □ Male

(4) Your most recent TOEIC score
- □ 10-99
- □ 100-199
- □ 200-299
- □ 300-399
- □ 400-499
- □ 500-599
- □ 600-699
- □ 700-799
- □ 800-899
- □ 900-990

(C) About your goals

(1) Do you have a written list of goals for your English?
- □ Yes, I have a written list
- □ No, but I have a mental list
- □ No, but I have some ideas
- □ No, I don't have any goals
- □ Other (please write here) ____________________________________

(2) If you don't have a written list, why not?
- □ I have never thought about it
- □ I don't know how to do it
- □ I don't know what my goals are
- □ I'm not interested in improving my English
- □ Other (please write here) ____________________________________

(D) Making goals

One way to make a list of goals is with 'can-do' statements. For example: "Right now I can do X. In the future, I want to be able to do Y."

Here are some can-do statements about different English levels. What do you think your level is now? Where would you like to be five years from now (in the year 2023)?

Here students were given a series of can-do statements, in Japanese, from CEFR-J for listening and speaking. For each series, students were asked to select a can-do statement for

- □ This is my level now
- □ I'd like to be here in 5 years

(E) About the can-do statements

(1) Do you think that can-do statements could help you to make a list of goals for your English?
- □ Yes, they would help a lot
- □ Yes, they would help a bit
- □ Maybe — I'd like to know more
- □ No, they wouldn't help
- □ Other (please write here) ____________________________________

(2) If you don't already have a list of written goals for English, has this survey encouraged you to think about making one?
- □ Yes, I will think about it
- □ Maybe — I'd like to know more
- □ No, I don't think a written list will help me
- □ No, I'm not interested in improving my English
- □ Other (please write here) ____________________________________

Teaching English with film materials: Promoting speaking in EFL classes

Rafael Cárdenas

Film viewing activities can support learning through pre, during, and postviewing blocks. This organization aids comprehension, but it is not comparable to the movie-going experience. In this article, I advocate for the inclusion of film paratexts and other film industry elements to promote speaking skills practice during remote classes. Twenty intermediate-level students enrolled in an online English as a foreign language (EFL) speaking course for pre-service teachers at The University of Panama participated in this experience during the 2021 mandatory lockdown. Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic started, EFL teaching has become intermittently remote, and film-based activities have become a facilitative ally in improving speaking.

1. Introduction

In English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction, content-based language teaching is valuable for its dual focus on language and content; however, the lesson content remains underused as it is generally accepted without much analysis, and most of the attention goes to language development. Films provide materials to bridge this language-content gap as content can be analyzed before, during, and after viewing sessions. From an instructional perspective, film materials are especially important as authentic materials are scarce in EFL contexts; however, their value for speaking rests on the viewing approach used and their nature.

One controversial issue in discussions of film viewing in English teaching has been the customary film viewing approaches focused on the curriculum (Stoller, 1988, 1995). Viewing films should promote discussion and the integration of paratexts for enhanced motivation and comprehension. On the one hand, many argue that course material activities and similar formats should remain the norm (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Wen-Cheng et al., 2011) On the other hand, others maintain that in-house materials are more relevant for students because they are context-based and adaptation supports movie acceptance (Babaii & Sheikhi, 2018; Bori, 2022). My own opinion is that film paratexts (posters, trailers, and scripts) are authentic resources to be adapted for in-house speaking skill development and discussion. Questions are key to developing a comprehension of the resources involved in the viewing stages as they unveil the movie contents, narrative, and characters in a discussion that relates to real life and resembles the movie-going experience (King, 2002).

2. A previewing experience with posters and other film elements

Film posters are unexplored resources that further film enjoyment and audience appeal through their profile-raising nature. Their helpfulness derives from their origin, as they are a tool of advertisers and communicators involved in show business and promotion (Grandbacka, 2016). Posters contain images, texts, and symbols designed to introduce a story, so they are inviting and engaging previewing

elements from the movie theater venue. From a second language perspective, they also belong to the authentic printed materials category (Oura, 2001).

Similarly, trailers are natural previewing elements appropriate for pedagogical attention that encapsulate a great deal of film information in less than three minutes. Intended to sell a film to captive audiences in theaters, they also invite audiences to learn a story through attention-grabbing snippets and it is a perfect segue into subtitle text and scripts. They are popular because of their upfront approach and access to vocabulary, dialogues, accents, and characters. Unfortunately, they are often set aside precisely because of their commercial and fast-paced nature. Regarding trailers, (Kernan 2004) explains, "While trailers are a form of advertising, they are also a unique form of narrative exhibition, wherein promotional discourse, and narrative pleasure and conjoined" (p. 1). Because of their richness, trailers also reveal elements of film narrative and genre that improve film comprehension.

Film scripts are also potentially enriching for previewing, during viewing, and postviewing, supporting language comprehension and lexical memory. Scripts are especially useful for vocabulary study as they may come to us as ordinary subtitle texts, expanded scripts, or novelized versions (Iwasaki, 2011). Subtitle texts are printed versions of conversational exchanges; expanded scripts are similar to subtitle texts except for the inclusion of commentary in the form of footnotes. Novelized versions are scripts based on books and fiction that expand the character, plot, and setting information. In other words, foreign language learning contexts particularly benefit from scripts and subtitle texts as resources to help students notice their communication gaps, discover new language patterns, and increase vocabulary. I propose using subtitle texts and not subtitled or captioned films because EFL students' limited exposure to spoken English limits their ability to listen and read without repetition. Texts can be pre-read and post-read whereas subtitled and captioned films require fast reading and good comprehension.

Since this article's goal is enriching the viewing of feature films with authentic content for speaking, successful film viewing depends on strategies that facilitate speaking, a critical skill and one that takes longer to develop. In this article, I explain how to benefit from "printed" film scripts for speaking activities aimed at intermediate-level students through diverse questions: descriptive, inferential, and critical. Lastly, I raise awareness of pragmatic knowledge through opinions.

3. What film elements can we use from the movie-going experience?

3.1. Characters

They are the agents of film narratives that communicate filmmakers' values and vision. Their importance interacts with stardom, a social phenomenon comprising viewers' identification with social, gender, racial, roles, and behaviors (Villarejo 2007). Characters aid contextualization by improving viewers' comprehension of roles: protagonists and antagonists. Characters give the film a human face that transcends paratexts to include videogames, action figures, memorabilia, and acting. The following three websites are great resources for free high-quality posters from major film franchises containing known characters:

- https://mypostercollection.com/movie-posters/
- https://www.joblo.com/movies/
- http://www.impawards.com/

It is also worth exploring websites dedicated to releasing free trailers in our quest for major movie characters. These condensed movies bring characters to life and become the first contact with characters' strengths and weaknesses. The following three websites offer free trailers:

- http://www.hd-trailers.net/
- https://www.traileraddict.com/
- https://www.firstshowing.net/

Next to posters and trailers, Websites like IMDB.com and Rotten Tomatoes.com offer movie synopsis and reviews from diverse audiences with and without spoilers. This is great information for character introduction and further discussion in class. Finally, many movie characters are originating from video games and vice versa.

3.2. Atmosphere

According to Filmsite.org, this is “any concrete or nebulous quality or feeling that contributes a dimensional tone to a film's action” (Dirks, n.d.). Filmsite.org’s online glossary also provides some metaphoric examples: “spookiness, howling wind, searing heat, blinding light, a rain downpour, etc.” (Dirks, n.d.). An often-overlooked film element, film atmosphere is used to instill emotional states, expectations, and notions in the audience. Also known as “film tone or mood”, it is found along with story and genre classification in film reviews (Spadoni, 2020). Websites dedicated to movie reviews contain references to film atmosphere along with information about music, art, lighting, and art direction, the key material for viewers to speak about. These are excellent free online choices:

- The Movie Database https://www.themoviedb.org/
- Metacritic https://www.metacritic.com/
- Internet Movie Database https://www.imdb.com/

3.3. Storyline

Generally linked to atmosphere and genre, this is information which viewers need in order to define events as important or irrelevant to film comprehension. Film storyline or narrative is also offered on different websites dedicated to movie criticism from the viewer’s perspective like IMDB and others. However, these are other great choices that deserve some attention because of their variety and relation to other media:

- https://rate.house/
- https://movielens.org/

3.4. Genre

Information about the genre is also available through movie rating/ comment websites. The best way to understand genre is through websites dedicated to the topic like:

- Tim Dirk’s filmsite.org: (https://www.filmsite.org/filmgenres.html)
- Milne library: https://milnepublishing.geneseo.edu/exploring-movie-construction-and-production/chapter/2-what-is-genre-and-how-is-it-determined/.

These are two good sources to understand not only the genre but also sub-genres among other rather speculative topics related to the film. I advise Letterbxd.com (https://letterboxd.com/), a platform to post personal movie reviews, because of the possibility of engaging in film discussion and learning more about the topic.

Film script text is available from websites such as:

- https://www.simplyscripts.com/a.html
- https://imsdb.com/ (the internet movie script database)
- https://scriptpdf.com/

3.5. Script text

They serve well to explain that incomplete clauses, chunked language, heads and tails, and subject repetition are acceptable in spoken grammar (Celce-Murcia et al., 2014). The film script is unaffected by speaking constraints that occur in everyday conversation, so this makes it unnatural compared to the real conversation; however, it is a second to none aid for noticing gaps and promoting fluency through repetitive reading and performing.

4. How to include film elements in an EFL class?

We have three tools that assist our efforts: a wide selection of information about the film, knowledge of our classes, and a focus on film elements. This is a powerful combination to turn multisensory film viewing into convenient viewing experiences. The modern-day film is such an enriched medium that it is structured like a language; therefore, silence is required to understand it (Villarejo 2007). However, information overload may also silence subsequent speaking because of poor contact with reality. Questions ease comprehension and break the cycle of silence; therefore, questions about the film are an additional tool to support speaking that is comprehensible for diverse classes. The questions presented for paratext analysis are organized at three levels: descriptive, inferential, and critical. Each viewing activity requires a question-and-answer exchange based on the paratexts used to enrich the overall viewing experience.

4.1. Before watching

Divide your viewing session into three parts that match previewing, during viewing, and postviewing. It may take more than one day to watch the complete movie, so it is advisable to watch around one-third of the movie.

4.2. Previewing

Design at least one speaking practice activity for the previewing stage that includes a paratext (poster, trailer, and subtitle text scaffolds) to initiate speaking about film elements (the characters, atmosphere, storyline, and genre). This previewing activity should take place before the first viewing.

4.3. During viewing

Design at least one during speaking activity based on a selected scene that appears in the trailer for the viewer's awareness-raising (gap noticing) and supports fluency development. You may select another scene, but it is ideal to use something learners have either watched or read.

4.4. Postviewing

Develop at least one postviewing activity to teach students how to express their opinions about the film in class. It may be an excellent segue to design a follow-up that involves writing movie commentary for a film website or internet database.

5. Why should we create speaking activities based on film materials?

Connecting film elements with the teaching of speaking requires using viewing resources to help learners notice gaps in their speaking. In general, paratexts expose learners to skilled speakers that raise their awareness of their current speaking skill to improve it (Thornbury, 2005). Likewise, Burns and Goh (2012) discuss that speaking skill development requires awareness of speaking features conducive to improved speaking. In addition, Mishan and Timmis (2015) explain that noticing the gap is a pedagogical trend that detaches from the established PPP method so that learners obtain exposure to sophisticated speaking materials:

- exposure to the feature through a semi-scripted listening text
- global comprehension task on the listening text
- focus on the target feature (through repeated listening or use of the transcript)
- brief explanation of the feature and questions

- short controlled practice activity (Mishan & Timmis, 2015)

In addition, linking film elements and speaking requires activities that expose learners to speaking situations through scaffolds that enable them to outperform. For example, (Thornbury 2005, p. 62) suggests how learners may ideally notice gaps in their ability from an input source in three steps:

(1) performing by using their current ability first,

(2) watching/listening to a source to learn how to say things from an "expert" speaker a second time,

(3) and finally try saying an improved version that includes the "noticed" in two rounds. Perhaps, the first time using the subtitle text as a scaffold, and a second time without support. In sum, he advises creating a Zone of Proximal Development similar to the one proposed by Lev Vygotsky.

Moreover, fluency is another key component of the connection between film elements and speaking skill-building. (Nation 2009, p.116) explains that "pushed output" is the best way to turn receptive knowledge into productive use. Pushed output activities require learners to produce language based on input processing for the development of an interlanguage internal grammar (Adams, 2003; Erturk, 2013). Nation (2009) also discusses that effective pushed output requires diverse topics, discourse types, and performance conditions that favor planning for improved fluency and accuracy. Ultimately, he draws attention to retellings as an ideal way to rehearse and perform fluently, and he further advocates the benefits of repeated shortened time performances to gain fluency. Finally, (Mishan & Timmis, 2015) also recommend task-based arrangements and repetition for improved fluency and accuracy. They propose cycles that comprise "reading, repeating, and performing" as key components for good speaking activities.

However, the question remains "What exactly do learners need to learn about spoken English from film materials for enhanced viewing?". (Thornbury, 2005) advocates attention to communication strategies, discourse markers, language chunks, cultural information, stress, intonation, spoken grammar, production effects. Mishan and Timmis (2015) argue that a great deal of ELT materials excludes spoken grammar features and discourse types. In other words, they inform that spoken grammar and discourse genre are gaps to be cared for through speaking programs. Nation (2009) considers that speaking and output are ideal to turn receptive language knowledge into productive use. He further claims that diverse topics, discourse types, and performance conditions are conducive to improved speaking. In sum, connecting film elements, paratexts, and speaking activities should help learners speak beyond their current ability level. This is possible by helping them notice their limitations through comparisons with language models.

6. A note about teaching speaking online: The human factor

The absence of a physical school environment, which directs and informs our teaching, compels organization and flexibility for our classes. There are three important points to consider for successful online lesson deployment:

1. Lessons have to be as student-centered as possible:
2. Their emotional and mental well-being is more important than ever
3. Motivation is key for task development

7. Teaching suggestions for film viewing

7.1. Previewing

You can enhance the previewing section of your movie presentation by designing visual comprehension activities based on the film paratexts. The focus is the visual understanding of what they are about to watch, so it is important to ask questions.

Everything starts with the poster. The first thing to do is to identify the poster characters as a group activity. It is important to identify the central, larger, or prominent ones and to inquire about what he/she does in the poster. Possible literal, descriptive questions could be:

- "Who is he/she?"
- "What is he/she doing?"
- "What is he/she holding?"
- "Is he/she going somewhere?"
- "Is he/she pointing somewhere?"

It is also important to classify them according to their appearance: male-female, young-adult, human-animal, or unknown.

They also need to identify all the poster verbal elements, especially the "poster tagline". The discussion of film visual and textual elements is an excellent way to generate interest in the film and to start speaking about it with the minimum information.

The second element in previewing is the trailer; nevertheless, it is important to use a movie synopsis to supplement it. Official film summaries are available on movie commentary websites, or on the film's official website. It is important to divide the movie summary into events so that we can list them chronologically. Then, we may compare trailer events to a synopsis/summary. The purpose is to predict events from the trailer and confirm them from the summary.

7.2. During viewing

Teaching speaking is important to help learners gain confidence and overcome their fear of producing the language, a serious problem across contexts. Therefore, it is a good idea to interrupt the viewing session and promote active viewing. (Kabooha, 2016; King, 2002b).

Trailer discussion should also focus on comparing taglines, slogans, and movie quotes extracted from trailers, posters, and movie summaries. Good inferential questions for speaking could be:

- How do the poster tagline and the trailer quote relate?
- How do the trailer quote and the movie summary relate?
- What do you think (X) is about in the trailer and the poster?
- Who says (X) in the trailer, how does he/she say it and why?

The last film component is the film script text. It is important to read the script text to promote reading fluency and raise viewers' awareness of comprehension gaps after watching the trailers. Watch and read at least one scene from the trailer, so I recommend you to find/identify one trailer scene in the script so that they contrast input from the resources: the trailer provides discourse input whereas the text provides support to cope with spoken grammar.

Good additional questions as they watch the movie and read the script aloud could be:

- "Who is speaking?" "Why is he/she saying_________?" "What did he/ she say?"
- "What language did he/she use to say _______________?"

7.3. Postviewing

Moving into the teaching of speech acts is the natural follow-up to building students' confidence. To do this, I focused on the pragmatics of giving opinions as movies cause positive or negative impressions in audiences. Expressing opinions is important; however, saying it the right way makes a huge difference for second language learners. (Bouton et al., 2010) explain that the usual "I think" and" In my opinion" limit learners´ ability to say their opinion, as they are recurring and overused. Sounding natural is important, so learning ways to express an opinion that diverges from "I think", and "in my opinion" makes service for learners interested in speaking about film or any other topic with more sophistication. To help learners express their opinion, I included an activity that uses softeners and intensifiers (Table 1) to modify opinions (Bouton et al., 2010). Critical questions for postviewing may include:

- "Did you like the movie?"

- "Why or why not?"
- "What part did you like the most?"
- "How would you rate the movie? Explain your opinion".

Other possible critical questions to expand the discussion may be:

- "Was the trailer similar to the movie?"
- "Did the poster/ trailer/ soundtrack fulfil your expectations of the movie?"
- "What do you think about acting?"
- "Did the director do a good job?"
- "Would you watch a second part?"

Table 1. Common softeners and Intensifiers

	Modifiers of adjectives and adverbs	**Modifiers of verbs**	**Modifiers of nouns**	**Modifiers of comparatives of adjectives**
Softeners	a little, a little bit, kind of, sort of, not, not so, not that	kind of, sort of		
Intensifiers	not, so, too, as	not, so, too, as	so much, such (a)	so much

Film paratexts help viewers give opinions based on information about film elements. This is important to refer to film topics and generate an intelligent class discussion that takes sides and encourages thinking about film. Helpful general information for "opinions" is available in the film summary and the subtitle texts.

8. Conclusion

Viewing the film in EFL classrooms provides listening input in the absence of enough speaking practice; however, the inclusion of paratexts and film scripts requires taking an interest in film and potential online resources for language teaching/ learning. The use of questions about paratexts as a way to enhance the viewing experience enriches the discussion about movies in EFL classes, and it also makes viewing more enjoyable and similar to going to the movies. I hope this viewing model based on free and available online resources motivates teachers to watch films differently and get the best out of the film and the internet. In sum, adapted film materials are a way to keep students connected to English learning during online semesters away from schools and universities, so this is an ideal assignment model for school lockdowns in the absence of face-to-face classes.

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Review of *Teachers researching their classroom issues: Reports from Africa*, edited by Kuchah Kuchah, Amira Salama, Ana Inés Salvi (2022). IATEFL in association with Africa ELTA, 52 pp. ISBN: 978-1-912588-37-4 (digital). ISBN: 978-1-912588-41-1 (print).

Valeria Chumbi

Ella Maksakova

Why are my students, after several years of studying English, still unable to communicate? How can a *Sewing and Dressmaking* lesson be adapted to enhance students' speaking skills? And should we stop students using L1 in our L2 classes? Written by teachers and for teachers, *Teachers researching their classroom issues: Reports from Africa* pinpoints teachers' concerns about whether their teaching facilitates successful learning. The publication describes the process of teacher research through the eyes of seven African ELT teachers, who took stock of their pedagogical decisions and perceptions in order to find answers, among others, to the questions mentioned above.

The concise book is truly educational because it addresses issues in a variety of teaching contexts and touches on a range of topics, such as lack of motivation, large classes, low-resource environments, and the role of local languages in English lessons. The seven research stories written by teachers from Cameroon, Cote D'Ivoire, Nigeria, Senegal, and South Africa provide an account of how teachers can play an important role in decision-making regarding their classrooms and bring effective changes into their teaching practice for the improvement of their student's learning. The book is also a powerful testimony to the teamwork carried out by Africa ELTA and IATEFL's Research Special Interest Group. The vision of Africa ELTA to develop and advance local expertise in ELT inspired 31 representatives from 12 African countries to join a call for a continent-wide teacher-research project and, ultimately, seven teachers succeeded in submitting a written report on what they had accomplished. Throughout their research journey, these teachers were supported by international mentors, whose facilitation became possible thanks to the joint commitment of Africa ELTA, which promoted and monitored the project, and IATEFL's ReSIG group, which provided speakers for a series of interactive webinars on Exploratory Action Research (EAR).

The volume also showcases an emerging trend referred to as "decentring ELT" (Banegas et al., 2022) namely, a conscious effort aimed at "recognizing contextually situated, 'insider' expertise and creativity in actual practice, and […] supporting teachers and groups of teachers in understanding and extending practices that are effective for them" (p. 70). The publication of this volume is, therefore, both a celebration of local achievements reflecting African teacher-researchers' identity and an acknowledgment of the relevance of their expertise.

Undoubtedly, EFL teachers from low- and middle-income countries are increasingly making their voices heard, and language teachers around the world can easily identify with the issues

narrated. The seven stories describe the reality of large classes with limited resources aggravated by the intermittent supply of services (such as electricity or reliable Internet connection), often resulting in students' lack of motivation, falling back on L1 language use, and insufficient communication skills. So, let us look at the teacher-research reports and reflect on what they tell us, the two authors (from Ecuador and Uzbekistan) of this review, and explore how far we can identify with the issues raised and the solutions offered in our own context. Our review does not strictly follow the way the volume is laid out. Instead, we bring together chapters with overarching themes, such as teacher and student agency, or challenges that classroom practitioners often face in the Global South. The authors chose to write on the chapters that were related to their context and interest the most. The first three research accounts describe the stories of how teachers re-evaluated their own roles and that of their students as equal agents in the educational process. The findings demonstrate that teacher-student and teacher-teacher collaboration can be key to the construction of an engaging and motivating learning environment.

The publication starts with the story of Annette Obahiagbon from Nigeria, who depicts the situation where a teacher's and her students' perceptions of what is important in language learning differ considerably. This discrepancy in expectations turns out to be a disappointing experience for the teacher, who says, "This was really discouraging to me because I was investing all my time and energy to help them learn what was required of them to be successful in their exams" (p. 1). This gap in expectations led to low exam results, but more importantly, students displayed a general lack of engagement in classroom activities and in their homework. Annette's research on the reasons for the lack of enthusiasm among her students started with 200 anonymous questionnaires, out of which 197 were returned with teaching suggestions. As Annette tells us, this was her first attempt, "to seek to understand her students" (p. 3). The research helped her realize that covering the syllabus does not guarantee successful learning. Moreover, she came to the conclusion that students' language needs and personal interests should be given space in lesson planning in order to nurture students' engagement and focus.

The story of Ernest Kalotoueu Gbeada from Côte D'Ivoire, in Chapter Three, demonstrates how a proactive position of a teacher can make a difference in a situation seemingly out of the teacher's or their students' control. The research describes an attempt to come to some agreement regarding the materials mandated by the supervising bodies and student motivation, plus the learning needs to meet the curriculum requirements for reading skills. The situation Ernest faced can resonate with teachers from other teaching contexts, in cases when "textbooks do not match the topic [teachers] have to cover in each teaching unit" (p. 11). The research journey demonstrates how this challenging situation was resolved through the joint efforts of students, teachers and external pedagogical advisers. An initiative of one teacher for better adaptability of the textbooks has, eventually, promoted a higher level of ownership of learning results among students and teachers and led to the creation of a teachers' community of practice and even a students' reading club.

In Chapter Six, Rethabile Mawela, a university teacher from South Africa, shares her findings about the challenges she experienced when working with ELT in-service teachers taking an academic writing course. The author describes the actions she took to help her teacher-trainees to succeed with written assignments required by the course "Introduction to research". Her research started with setting up a focus group discussion to identify areas and the amount of support needed. The focus group discussion proved to be very effective, and the format was utilized for a further guided discussion, where the researcher acted as a moderator, helping teacher trainees refine their understanding of what constitutes academic writing. Mawela reports that while researching the issue she changed her attitude towards her trainees' lack of academic writing skills; instead, she "took responsibility for their development and treated them as partners in this journey" (p. 28). Building on the results of the discussion, she promoted the environment of partnership further among the trainees, and arranged the teachers in writing groups, where they could develop all stages of academic writing, from brainstorming, outlining, and drafting, to reviewing, and editing, in a risk-free environment. In this way, trainees could support and learn from each other.

The other four research projects have been carried out by teachers who usually conduct their lessons characterized by limited access to educational resources and classes with a large number of students. Besides having to solve resource-related issues, these teachers have been challenged by students' lack of motivation to learn the language and to communicate in English even during lessons. Overcrowded classes have been considered one of the most serious challenges that schools and teachers face, especially in remote areas around the world. In Chapter Two, Fatoumata Khoto, an EFL instructor from Senegal, narrates how she is facing this situation in a class with low resources. A survey administered in the research project conducted by Fatoumata revealed that a large number of students (more than 60 in her case) affected motivation and performance, and due to the limited space, as shown in the photo on page 6, students seem to struggle to concentrate and take part in the various activities. In order to explore possible solutions and get ideas on how to manage the situation, the researcher administered questionnaires and interviewed other EFL teachers and students. From the interviews with her colleagues, the idea of using outdoor areas emerged as a possible solution for large classes. They seem to "reduce students' distraction, and decrease behavioral problems", and help students be more active and comfortable (p. 7). Equally important is group work, which promotes collaboration among students and can facilitate the teacher's work. Finally, Fatoumata suggests teacher training in order to embrace new techniques to alleviate this problem.

In Chapter Four, another frequent issue, namely, poor communication skills among EFL students is explored. Ita Frinwie's research aimed to analyze the factors that impede students' effective communication after 6 years of studying English. Through her piece of exploratory research, she demonstrates how paying attention to students' interests and needs can help enhance and promote speaking skills in an EFL class. Ita observed that students in her class were unmotivated to speak, and this was confirmed through peer teacher observations in her class, when it was found that "students were distracted or doing other activities [and] secretly doing an assignment under the table for the next teacher" (p. 15). Thus, in order to examine students' perceptions, she administered questionnaires and conducted interviews that revealed that her students were afraid of making mistakes and did not feel engaged and comfortable with the speaking activities (mostly debates) included in the lessons. She came to the conclusion that students needed more assistance and help with vocabulary so that they could feel comfortable when speaking. Therefore, in order to plan her speaking lessons more effectively, she would first create an effective dialogue and brainstorm with the students the possible topics and even the activities that they would prefer to be included in the class. For instance, in the lesson titled "Sewing a dress", she first explored students' necessities and planned the activities they needed in order to produce the language. Thus, some techniques such as drilling, and working in pairs were chosen by the students. She observed that during the activities they unconsciously learned questioning techniques and collaborated with their peers. Consequently, they were able to "take more responsibility for their learning and express their opinions freely" (p. 17). This research shows that teachers can learn from their students' feedback and improve the techniques applied in large and otherwise under-resourced classes.

The stories in Chapters Five and Seven contribute to the debate of whether to use L1 in class or not. The use of L1 in EFL classrooms has been a topic of discussion for a long time. Some authors claim that L1 does not have an essential role in language teaching and that using L1 could deprive learners of L2 valuable input (Almoayidi, 2018) while other studies claim that it is hard to avoid using L1 and describe the pedagogical and affective benefits (Zulfikar, 2019). Moussa Ngom from Senegal and Ruth OnyecheOgboji from Nigeria encountered this puzzle when teaching English to their multilingual students. They observed that students would frequently communicate in mother tongues, such as French, Pidgin, Wolof, Sérère', and 'Puular rather than English. They were concerned this would hinder learning and wondered in which situations the use of L1 should be allowed in an EFL class. In both studies, researchers administered questionnaires to teachers and students in order to explore their students' preferences and perceptions of using other languages in the class compared to the teachers' opinions. The research results helped the teacher-researchers realize that allowing students to use their mother tongues in class creates a more comfortable environment for them to

work in. Students feel less intimidated and their performance is not affected. The researchers' conclusions support the view of L1 as an integral part of teaching and acquiring a second language. In terms of multilingual classrooms, translanguaging, which is defined as the ability to access and switch between L1 and L2, is considered a resource that "seeks to understand the fluidity of language use and examine how teachers and students move freely across language boundaries'' (Sahan & Rose, 2021, p. 352).

In sum, the stories do not only narrate Exploratory Action Research, but they also describe a truly impressive level of collaboration among groups of teachers and students, a situation in which educators feel empowered by taking action in their classes. This is a crucial aspect of the "decentering ELT" initiative. Banegas et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of creating spaces for empowerment, which implies "encouraging teachers to collaborate with each other to articulate key features of their work, reasons for these, and ways they feel their practice can be improved" (p. 70).

In general, each of the chapters of this book marks an important contribution to the EFL teachers' community, members of which will be able to connect to present or past teaching experiences and think deeper about the importance of small changes introduced in a classroom. A significant takeaway from the volume is the story of Ernest Kalotoueu Gbeada from Côte D'Ivoire, which underpins the shift in teachers' perception of their roles in a pedagogical decision-making process. It was truly inspiring to learn about the proactive position of the teacher, whose research project contributed to the development of the entire school community, enabled him to pursue his professional growth, and serves a greater audience by having shared his experience through this volume.

Altogether, we highly recommend this book to teachers, pre-service teachers, and researchers who want to explore their students' learning needs and wish to start taking action in their classrooms. For us, beginning teacher-researchers, the main merit of the book is that it narrates stories that have evolved in real contexts. The accounts can definitely motivate other teachers to contemplate starting their own research. Even though initially the process might seem daunting, the experience of the seven teachers from Africa show that we do not need a high level of expertise to start exploring our classrooms and, in due course, act on what we have found out.

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Review of *Understanding multimodal discourses in English language teaching textbooks: Implications for students and practitioners*, written by C.A. Smith (2022). Bloomsbury Publishing, 231 pp. ISBN 978-1-350-25695-8

Suling Chen

When I was in junior high school in China, I regarded textbooks as the undoubted source of knowledge even though more than 2000 years ago Mencius had already reminded people 'Do not blindly believe everything written in books.' However, since I knew nothing about English at that time, the English textbook was a holy book to me as a thirteen-year-old boy living in a rural area in China in 1994. My English teacher was so committed to the textbooks that she would assign every classmate an English name only because all main characters in the textbooks had English names. To be honest, I felt uncomfortable when she called me David. This might be the reason I keep using my Chinese (and only) name even though I study and live in the UK now. This personal vignette shows the struggle faced by English practitioners and learners in expanding-circle nations when dealing with English and English textbooks, the ostensible carrier of legitimate linguistic knowledge, and embedded power relations and ideologies. To help English teachers and learners critically engage with the multimodal discourses in English language teaching (ELT) textbooks, Christopher A. Smith, in his book *Understanding multimodal discourses in English language teaching textbooks: Implications for students and practitioners,* proposes a triangulated framework to analyse underlying ideological perceptions and cultural values in ELT textbooks.

Before Smith expounds his framework in Chapters 2 - 4, he first discusses the production and consumption of ELT textbooks in Chapter 1. The production of ELT textbooks is mainly focused on maximizing global sales rather than the concerns of English practitioners and learners. In terms of consumption, Smith regards English practitioners and learners as the primary consumers of ELT textbooks, and they play a significant role in negotiating multimodal content in the textbooks in classrooms. Smith holds that ELT textbooks are never neutral, which necessitates various critical studies of ELT textbooks. Through a concise literature review, he concludes that there is a dearth of critical studies of ELT textbooks, especially those investigating underlying power relations and ideologies in textbooks. He sees this book and the framework he proposes as his response to the paucity.

Chapter 2 presents the first component of the triangulated framework, which is the Critical Multimodal Analysis Template (CMAT) framework. Smith derives this framework from contextual analysis of multimodal discourses in ELT textbooks and theoretical analysis of the foundations of critical discourse studies. In CMAT, he proposes the multimodal discourse analysis of ELT textbooks can be conducted through five lenses sequentially, namely the holistic lens, inventory lens, latent lens, compositional lens, and critical lens. Detailed questions are provided to assist the analysis in each lens. A vignette is followed in the chapter to show how CMAT can be applied to analyze a globally published ELT textbook, *Top Notch*. At the end of the chapter, Smith maintains the analysis of multimodal

discourses in ELT textbooks should be corroborated by how these textbooks are negotiated in the classroom, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapters 3 and 4 present the second and third components of the triangulated framework respectively, a Multimodal Analysis of Visually Recorded English Classrooms (MAVREC) and a Semi-Structured Interview Coding framework (SSInC). Smith suggests that MAVREC and SSInC should be deployed to validate the analysis of the multimodal discourses because, from an ecological perspective of language teaching, the multimodal discourses in ELT textbooks will be consumed by teachers and learners through context-dependent negotiations in the classroom. Furthermore, he notes that it is essential to understand how teachers and students evaluate the negotiated multimodal discourses in ELT textbooks since they are the major consumers of these globally published ELT textbooks. At the end of both chapters, detailed illustrations of how to use the two frameworks are also provided through empirical vignettes.

In Chapter 5, Smith foregrounds the triangulation in critical discourse studies and presents the synopsis of CMAT, MAVREC, and SSInC. A detailed synthesis of the findings of three vignettes in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 is illustrated as a sample. Smith concludes that the three components are in a linear alignment for English practitioners and learners to use. At the same time, he advocates that there are alternatives to how this triangulated framework can be applied and combined with other possibilities. He maintains the fundamental part of the framework is CMAT, but researchers can adapt MAVREC and SSInC by deploying other methods to investigate the negotiated multimodal discourses in ELT textbooks and how they are perceived by English teachers and learners.

I was wondering who the possible readers of this book would be when I was writing this review. English teachers in expanding-circle nations? Could well be. However, they might be concerned with how much space they can have to critically analyse the multimodal discourses in ELT textbooks under test-centric regimes. English textbooks tend to be considered the legitimate source of knowledge for test preparation. This notion may be quite different from the one illustrated in this book, which problematises textbooks as carriers of ideological assumptions and cultural values. I believe that one of the most precious takeaways from this book for English practitioners in expanding-circle nations would be the raised awareness of applying criticality in the engagement of multimodal discourses in ELT textbooks or academic books.

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Review of *Professional development through teacher research: Stories from language teacher educators*, edited by Darío Luis Banegas, Emily Edwards, and Luis S. Villacañas de Castro (2022). Multilingual Matters, 213 pp. ISBN 878-1-788892-771-0 (hardback)

Leijun Zhang

In the language teacher education literature, researchers have focused primarily on language teachers. Scant attention, however, has been given to language teacher educators, who we may call *teachers of language teachers*. Although the professional development of second language teachers has been the object of discussions (e.g., Borg, 2013; Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Richards, 2008), the professional growth of language teacher educators has received comparatively little attention. In other words, how language teacher educators acquire and maintain the professional skills and knowledge required in order to educate language teachers has long been under-represented in the literature. Language teacher educators are, to a large extent, "at the top of the pyramid in the formal preparation and development of language teachers" (Banegas et al., 2022, p. 4). Given the central role that teacher educators play in teacher education programmes, what language teacher educators do when they are working with language teachers is a significant area that warrants exploration (Wright, 2010).

The book edited by Banegas, Edwards, and Villacañas de Castro comes as a fresh and timely contribution to the understanding of language teacher educators' professional development in terms of the ways in which teacher educators improve the quality of their own teaching through engaging in research. This publication brings together diverse accounts of teacher educator research from a wide range of professional and institutional contexts (i.e., Argentina, Australia, Colombia, Ecuador, Kenya, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and Vietnam). The integration of international aspects qualifies the book as a useful guide for language teacher educators working at various universities or institutions around the globe, and it is also geared towards academics interested in the professional development of language teacher educators.

The book consists of 12 chapters. Having *teacher professional development*, *teacher education* and *teacher research* as a binding thread running through the entire volume, Banegas, Edwards, and Villacañas de Castro, in the introductory chapter, provide an innovative illustration of the relationship between the three interrelated domains by associating it with the interplay between what constitutes John Dewey's philosophy of education, namely, *growth, education, and scientific inquiry*. This parallelism helps equip the reader with an understanding of the somewhat complex nature of the fundamental aspects of language teacher education, and it depicts teacher professional development as "an ever-expanding spiral of internal and external transformation" (Banegas et al., 2022, p. 203).

In the past decades, second language teacher education (SLTE) has undergone considerable change. Teacher education has shifted from a knowledge-transmission view to a sociocultural view which

emphasizes the nature of teachers' knowledge, and its role in SLTE, and the contextual influences on its nature and acquisition (Freeman, 2001; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Richards, 2008). Recently, change and innovation have become integral elements of a great deal of SLTE activity and also the new agenda in SLTE (Wright & Beaumont, 2015). SLTE and change are closely intertwined through language teacher education, which necessitates the discussion of SLTE pedagogy and practice, that is, "what language teacher educators do" (Johnson & Golombek, 2020, p. 117). Yet, there is a well-documented paucity of research and reflection on the work of language teacher educators; that is, how they go about exploring and self-reflecting on their work as SLTE practitioners and researchers (Barkhuizen, 2021; Peercy et al., 2019). Such inquiry could open up our understanding of teacher educators, their contexts, and their pedagogies of teacher education, which may in turn create a climate in which change and innovation in SLTE is enabled.

This book seeks to uncover teacher educators' professional practice in initial teacher education programmes and understand their professional gains through research with their own student-teachers. It is clear that the contributors are all sensitive and responsive teacher educators. They scrutinize and evaluate the issues that they encounter in their immediate professional practice, which ultimately inform their studies. Positioning themselves as "change agents" (Wright & Beaumont, 2015, p. 3), they act on the identified issues through pedagogical interventions or actions in pursuit of possible solutions or transformative change to these issues. The contributors present their professional inquiry on a wide range of topics and even on those less well-trodden ones in the SLTE literature such as student-teacher agency (e.g., Yang, Chapter 4), prospective teacher emotions (e.g., San Martín, Chapter 5) and engagement in their learning (e.g., Khurram, Chapter 7), or student-teacher identity and needs (e.g., Sarasa, Chapter 8).

In most of the research in the volume, reflective practice functions as a tool for guiding the contributors' research processes. In particular, Tran's chapter (Chapter 2) on promoting reflective practice as a collaborative activity and Sucerquia's (Chapter 9) contribution on the development of "critical consciousness" through reflection and praxis are revealing. It is instructive to see how reflection practice is being used in teacher education programmes. For instance, Huang (Chapter 6) provides an excellent account of the processes involved in embedding practitioner inquiry as part of teacher education programmes and the potential of reflective practice in facilitating teacher professional learning. The chapters also hold practical evidence of teacher educators' pursuit of professional growth through dialogic and collaborative activities with student-teachers, colleagues, and postgraduates. In a study on the use of collaborative dialogue between supervisors and supervisees, Fajardo-Dack, Célleri and Serrano (Chapter 10) report how the integration of students' perspectives into their own narratives prompted them to delve into their own supervision practice, and subsequently opened up opportunities for their professional development as supervisors and researchers. The authors suggest that such collaborative inquiry appears to contribute to more successful supervision practices that could in turn benefit the students' progress and learning.

The chapters also offer clear and detailed accounts of the motivation and rationale underlying their research, how it was conducted as well as how it contributed to their own professional growth. All of the contributors have engaged in exploring and theorizing of their own practice systematically through the interplay between reflection, pedagogy and research. Collectively, these ten chapters provide rich, illuminating, and useful insights into how language teacher educators might go about researching their own practice. However, I feel that quite often, the research practices are presented somewhat uncritically, and little is known about any contextual difficulties they may have encountered in the process, with a few exceptions (e.g., Medina & McDougald, Chapter 11). These discussions could have made for an interesting reading experience and future researchers would also benefit from this information.

This edited collection is a worthy attempt to fill the gap that the professional development of language teacher educators has been neglected in the research literature. Regardless of the growing recognition of teacher educators as agents of change, few attempts have been made to explicitly investigate the experiences of language teacher educators who agentively embrace teacher research

in their modules and programmes in pursuit of professional development and quality language teacher education provision. This book can provide language teacher educators with inspiration and resources to engage in inquiry into their own professional practice and illuminated the extraordinary power that language teacher educator research can offer SLTE as they scrutinize, understand, intervene, and enhance language teachers' professional learning and development. As Wright (2010) puts it, "embracing the twin functions of teaching and of research is a good way of continually upgrading quality in SLTE" (p. 287), and I believe this book has made a convincing case for teacher educator researchers to exercise their agency by engaging in teacher research that seeks to enact change in SLTE.

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