Research Notes

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Editorial

The impact of creativity on teaching practices is at the heart of this issue of *Research Notes*, which presents seven papers from the 2015 English Australia/Cambridge English Action Research in ELICOS Program. This Program has been delivered by Cambridge English and English Australia since 2010 and provides professional development opportunities for participating teachers, their institutions and wider networks and, equally importantly, fascinating insights into contemporary language teaching practices in the ELICOS sector. Other action research projects can be found in *Research Notes* issues 44, 48, 53, 56, 60 and 61.

In the opening article, Professor Anne Burns, the scheme's action research mentor, argues that creativity is essential for action research (AR), and outlines how the six projects presented in this issue employed such creativity to redefine teaching practice and students' learning habits.

In the opening article James Heath and Bianka Malecka's report on their use of a new ePortfolio approach to error correction and feedback for writing which draws on the existing use of e-portfolios for showcasing students' work and fostering learner autonomy. They discovered few descriptions of this approach being used with L2 learners, so set up a Wikispaces Classroom platform that allowed for monitoring of progress, revisiting corrections and the chance to try out different types of feedback. Through the use of reflective journals and focus groups, both the researchers and students created a dynamic learning process based on their own needs; as the authors put it: 'we see the *process* of developing the ePortfolio as more important than the final *product*'.

Next, Sally Crane and Elizabeth Furst describe their AR study which focused on the problems students were experiencing with finding, filtering and evaluating material for research essays. The first step of their solution was to increase class time on the essays and in response to student feedback, developing materials (such as a training video made by the library staff) to ensure their time was appropriately distributed between finding, filtering and evaluating. Throughout the research, data collection methods were adapted to enhance student participation, and a range of progress was examined: from the experienced research student who engaged enthusiastically with the task, to the student with no such database research experience who nevertheless found relevant materials. By the end of their study, the authors established a stronger of idea of what is required to overcome the remaining challenge of refining students' critical thinking skills to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Sonja-Lina Sasse and Sylvia Cher focused on academic vocabulary in their AR study, observing that neglecting to teach academic vocabulary potentially jeopardises student progress on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs. Their research allowed them not only to introduce a greater focus on vocabulary teaching but also to investigate which tools, both traditional and technological, would aid their students' progress. While the researchers are still considering how to ultimately implement this teaching into the curriculum, they report that students feel that they learned more academic vocabulary due to the AR intervention and the teachers are now in possession of evidence-based data to meet their future challenges in this area.

Gamification is the focus of the following article by Michelle Ocriciano. This AR project arose from Ocriciano's awareness that gaming had become a key study tool for second language learners and saw this as a means of overcoming students' difficulties in writing in her IELTS preparation classroom. Taking care to adapt gamification to suit the particular needs of the course, she found gaming had a mixed reaction amongst her students, whilst the process of researching this topic showed the benefits of more interactions with students and self-reflection on teaching practice.

Min Jung Jang and Jackson Howard decided to employ learning-oriented assessment and 'feed-forward' principles in the hope of eliminating a student tendency to repeat errors. Through the use of questionnaires and their institutional technology platform Blackboard, the researchers found that self-editing and self-reflection was not only a practice that further time needed to be made for, but which had to be actively encouraged and taught. The classes involved in this AR project showed encouraging progress in their writing but, more importantly, the researchers discovered a strategy for exploring a variety of learners' needs that could be applied on a long-term basis.

In the next article, Christa Snyman also addresses the issue of how to improve students' planning and writing of their work. She believed that students lacked scaffolding so introduced a guided writing task (GWT) that she hoped would incorporate writing skills as well as language skills. The key to her approach was to increase student responsibility and to make them feel empowered by feedback rather than to be simply evaluated. GWTs are set to become part of the syllabus of her institute as ongoing learner training, which demonstrates the success of her research, although Snyman notes that adjustments are needed to each task to make them fully appropriate for learners.

Finally, Diana Dunlop and Juliana Xhafer used their AR to enhance the skills of synthesis writing for their students. The use of scaffolded activities which blended the use of productive and receptive skills led the teachers to re-examine their beliefs regarding both summarising and synthesising tasks, and encouraged them to bring greater flexibility to their teaching practices. This project is an example of how an AR approach can lead researchers to a different research focus from the one they began with.

An important aspect of AR that is reflected in this issue is its cyclical and reflective nature, which encourages researchers to be flexible as the research unfolds and to reflect further on both the process and product of AR and the implications beyond their classrooms. All of the following studies represent the commitment of the teachers involved in finding out more about a specific area of personal interest, along with the hard work of their learners and the support of their peers and institutions. We look forward to supporting more teachers through funded AR schemes in Australia and the UK, and perhaps more widely.

Action research and creativity in the classroom

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Introduction

The notion of creativity is one that has received increasing attention in contemporary education in recent years, as can be seen in numerous references in curriculum and policy documents in various countries (e.g. Shaheen 2010) and in initiatives to inject creative partnerships and solutions into educational processes (e.g. Burnard 2006). The heightened interest in creativity in general education is now spreading into the field of English language education, as evidenced by two recent books on this topic (Jones and Richards (Eds) 2016, Maley and Peachey (Eds) 2015). In this article, I argue that creativity is an essential component of action research (AR), as it provides language teachers with opportunities to go, as Maley states in his preface to Maley and Peachey, 'outside the box' of the classroom, to explore their values and beliefs about teaching, to take risks, and to make discoveries by trying out innovations in teaching.

What is creativity?

Creativity is a slippery concept and difficult to define. Traditionally the notion of creativity has been associated with the arts and culture, and particularly special or even exceptional abilities in music, art, craft, theatre, dance and so on – what could be termed 'large-C' creativity. However, other concepts of creativity relate more to 'small-c' ideas to do with everyday problem-solving, experimentation, and new or different expression of common activities. They capture the idea of using imagination and innovative thinking to produce something 'original and worthwhile' (Sternberg 2011:479).

Definitions of creativity have encompassed both a product and a process perspective. Amabile (1988), for example, sees ideas as central products of creativity and innovation, and defines creativity as 'the production of novel and useful ideas by an individual or small group of individuals working together' (1988:126). This model of creativity consists of three skill areas that innovators capable of producing new ideas need to possess: domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant skills, and intrinsic task motivation. Domain-relevant skills are to do with technical skills, factual knowledge, and talents in the area of the innovation. Domain-relevant skills are seen as '"the raw materials" for creative productivity' (1988:131). For example, it would be difficult to be creative in teaching if one had little knowledge or experience about how classrooms and the people within them operate. Creativity-relevant skills are '"the something extra" of creative performance' (1988:131). Whereas domain-relevant skills allow individuals to perform adequately, creativity-relevant skills are to do with openness to new ways of thinking, employment of an outside-the-box mindset, an appetite to take risks, and an eagerness to perform at new levels. Intrinsic task motivation is to do with strong self-motivation or 'the difference between what one *can* do and what one *will* do' (1988:133). What one can do is related to domain- and creativity-relevant skills, but what one will do depends on internally motivated determination and persistence. Amabile argues too that task motivation is strongly linked to the environment within which one works and notes that environmental qualities such as freedom, or operational autonomy, resources, time, encouragement, challenge, and positive pressure all allow creativity to flourish (see Edwards and Burns (2016) for recent findings on the impact of organisational environments on language teacher AR).

Others have offered a process view of creativity. Wallas' (1926) early outline of the creative process is, perhaps, the classic description and is still acknowledged today as the basis for subsequent models (e.g. Amabile 1996, Truman 2011). The model consists of four stages: *preparation* (defining, observing and examining an issue), *incubation* (thinking about and reflecting on possibilities), *illumination* (reaching new ideas and insights) and *verification* (checking out possible ways to elaborate and apply the new ideas). Torrance (1993:233) expands as follows on Wallas' model:

> Apparently, the process flows somewhat as follows: First, there is the sensing of a need or deficiency, random exploration, and a clarification or "pinning down" of the problem. Then ensues a period of preparation accompanied by reading, discussing, exploring, and formulating many possible solutions and then critically analyzing these solutions for advantages and disadvantages. Out of all this comes the birth of a new idea – a flash of insight, illumination. Last there is experimentation to evaluate the most promising solution for eventual selection and perfection of the idea.

Yet others, for example Rhodes (1961), have offered models of creativity that combine product and process, and also encompass the people involved and environments in which they work. Rhodes' model – usually referred to as the 4P model – proposes that the key elements of creativity can be captured by *person*, *process*, *press* and *product*. Person 'covers information about personality, intellect, temperament, physique, traits, habits, attitudes, self-concept, value systems, defense mechanisms, and behavior' (1961:307), while process 'applies to motivation, perception, learning, thinking, and communication' (1961:308). The term press comes from the Latin, *pressare* (to press or squeeze) and 'refers to the relationship between human beings and their environment' (1961:308), in other words the conditions and constraints of their surroundings. The product is what emerges when ideas take tangible forms and outcomes. These elements should not, however, be seen as isolated from each other; the interrelationship of the four elements makes up the 'ecology' of creativity.

Moreover, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) has looked at what he terms the 'creativity flow', which occurs when people are deeply engaged in and intrinsically motivated by creativity. He argues that people are 'programmed for creativity' (1996:108),

finding motivation and personal satisfaction in processes of discovery that enable them to find something new or interesting about what they do. He argues that discovery provides pleasure and enlightenment, gives enjoyment, and assists in preparing for future demands or changes that may presently be unpredictable or unknown.

Creativity and the ELT classroom

The two recent collections mentioned in the introduction to this article provide very valuable insights into key ideas about creativity that are currently circulating in the English language teaching world, many of which link with some of the theoretical ideas outlined above.

Maley (in the overview to Maley and Peachey (Eds) 2015) draws out some of the 'common threads' running across the contributions to their collection. First, being creative in language teaching is viewed very positively, suggesting that it is an attribute of the classroom that enriches the lives of teachers and learners. However, current policies in many parts of the world, including rigid curricula, prescribed materials, and widespread testing regimes, can work against creativity when prescriptiveness and conformity take precedence over the professional judgements and expertise of teachers, and the particular characteristics, profiles and contexts of their learners. Creativity becomes important in such an environment in restoring balance and ensuring more effective learning opportunities than would otherwise exist. It is also seen as a quality that can characterise the practices of all teachers, and not just an exceptional few: 'creativity is universal, though its manifestations may be specific and local' (Maley 2015:6).

Paradoxically, creativity can also be said to thrive in an environment of constraint. Constraints can act both as a stimulant and a support to creativity, which requires both imagination and discipline. Nor does creativity require expensive equipment or resources to flourish in the language classroom; even small changes using materials and objects readily offered in the local surroundings can lead to 'disproportionately large' (Maley 2015:6), exciting and creative new practices. Positive relationships and trust between student and teachers also lead towards a more creative classroom, where a genuine learning community of teachers and students working together can develop. While the expertise of the teacher is important, it is the way the teacher balances this expertise with the natural curiosity of their students that allows creativity to thrive. Creativity is also about open-mindedness and awareness on the part of the teacher, a kind of 'reactive creativity', or creative state of mind that can seize on opportunities and affordances (van Lier 2004) as they present themselves in the classroom.

Further insights on current themes of thinking about creativity in ELT are offered by Jones and Richards (Eds) (2016). They identify several 'principles' of creativity that emerge from the contributions to their volume. First, they note that creativity in ELT should not be seen as something that is 'optional', just added on at certain times. Nor, in a similar vein to Maley, should it be considered as the province of a talented few. Rather, creativity is 'central to successful teaching and learning', and purposeful in its intent to bring about 'valuable

and concrete outcomes that are linked to the pedagogical knowledge and plans of teachers and goals of learners' (Jones and Richards (Eds) 2016:5). Second, creativity should not be confused with creative language or creative writing, ideas that have been influenced by literary studies. Rather it is to do with teaching, learning and understanding language in creative ways that are used to solve problems, conduct relationships, portray oneself in society, and express oneself according to situated needs and meanings. A third principle they draw out is that creativity cannot be accomplished alone, but is intrinsically relational and collaborative on many levels – dialogically, socially, conceptually and culturally. Like Maley, Jones and Richards point also to how both the limitations and affordances of constraints can operate to construct creativity, providing ways of pushing boundaries towards more ingenious options. Nor does creativity necessarily mean 'originality'; it can be built by reshaping and reorienting ideas from others, thus relieving teachers and learners wishing to be more creative of pressures from 'the cult of originality' (Jones and Richards (Eds) 2016:7). Finally, creativity is seen as transformative, whether it takes up existing or new ideas, since it has the potential to change ways of teaching and learning that may have become taken-for-granted, fixed, or routinised. In this sense creativity in English language teaching becomes linked to 'the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when they are engaged in inquiry and creative transformation' (Freire 1970:65, cited in Ollerhead and Burns 2016:238).

The various themes and strands relating to creativity presented in these two volumes chime with the notion of teachers exploring, evaluating and making innovative decisions in their classrooms that is central to teacher AR. Creativity and AR are ways of operating in the language classroom that go hand in hand.

Action research and creativity

I would argue that both the definitions and models of creativity, and the themes and principles of creativity in ELT described above, mesh well with the concept of AR in language classrooms. In an interesting recent article referring to the process of research in general, Saleem, Težak, Mercer and Xerri (2016) point out that creativity crucially underpins the characteristics of good research. They note that both research and creativity 'involve assessing, going backwards and forwards, reshaping ideas until a novel and useful solution is found' (2016:22). They also note that research is dynamic and cyclical in nature.

These ideas concur with the central processes of AR, which involves a systematic approach to investigating their own environments by people intimately involved in their local communities, who wish to gain insights and understanding and find solutions about events and relationships that occur in their everyday lives. The process is systematic because it draws on cycles of intervention, evaluation, investigation and reflection to draw out new ways for people to work together more effectively. In language teaching this means exploring aspects of the environments in which teachers and learners work and the relationships, classroom dynamics, materials, teaching processes and learning outcomes that

can eventuate when creative new ideas are tried out. This approach stands in contrast to the expectation that ideas (even those that are creative) that are derived externally from the classroom context will automatically be transferable to teaching and learning. A central premise of AR, which echoes the commentary in the sections above, is that creativity is indivisible from transformations in teaching and learning and is motivated by people's willingness to change, innovate, experiment and discover in their own local environment.

Creativity is present in all four stages of AR (plan, act, observe, reflect) that were used to underpin the teacher AR program reported in this issue (see Burns (2010) for an explanation of the stages; see Burns (2015) for the support structures used for the AR in the English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) Program). Planning their AR required the teachers to think deeply about their teaching contexts, their students, and their ways of teaching them. Together, they were engaged in hypothesising, questioning and puzzling about these areas in relation to an overall focus on the teaching of writing, and generating possible new strategies that could bridge the current gaps they saw. This was a collaborative stage where teachers shared their ideas and developed them further, as others offered comments and suggestions. In terms of Wallas' model of creativity this could be thought of as the *preparation* phase. Acting, which occurred when they returned to their classrooms, meant trying out these new ideas in a practical sense, putting them into operation and seeing what happened as a result; in other words the teachers were involved in *incubation*, formulating possible practical solutions, trialling them in the classroom, and reflecting on whether what happened created the changes they wished to see.

During their research, teaching and working with their students, the teachers simultaneously engaged in observing, collecting information, gathering data, and seeking feedback on where their new ideas and teaching strategies were leading them. Again they had opportunities to collectively share, question and evaluate their activities, which usually led to deeper understanding and further creative insights into where their research could take them. This phase relates to *illumination*, where ideas and understandings about practical experiments could come to fruition. Reflection, whether individual, in partnership with other teachers, within their institutions or with their teacher research colleagues, underpinned all the stages of the AR process. Reflection guided the directions that the teachers' creativity could take and supported the 'ah-ha' moments and ultimately the conclusions that emerged during the research. It also led towards the products of the research, a process of *verification*, where the outcomes and how they had creatively offered new solutions could be evaluated and reported to others.

Examples and implications

There are many examples in this issue of *Research Notes* and in previous issues (e.g. 44, 48, 53, 56, 60) of how English language teachers who work in the international student sector in Australia – and also in the UK (see issue 61) where the program has been replicated – have used their creativity to transform their practices in teaching, and those of their

students in learning. Here I highlight briefly some of the creative ideas adopted by the teachers in this issue.

James Heath and Bianka Malecka experimented with introducing a new e-portfolio approach to providing error correction and giving feedback in writing. The teachers found that not only did giving peer feedback this way considerably improve students' writing, but it also enhanced their technology skills, and transformed their sense of engagement with writing. The making of a video in collaboration with library staff at their university teaching centre assisted Sally Crane and Elizabeth Furst to find a creative solution to their frustration with their students' limited ability to select and evaluate suitable sources from the literature for the writing of a research essay. The video guided students to become more autonomous and also to develop critical cognitive skills important in more successfully managing these tasks.

Sonja-Lina Sasse and Sylvia Cher had observed the importance of developing academic vocabulary if students were to be successful in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs and felt there was a lack of its explicit teaching at their centre. They decided to focus intensively on vocabulary development and to identify which resources, both traditional and technology based, would most assist their students. Their research showed that the systematic teaching of vocabulary was indeed very beneficial to their students, but it also revealed that much more work was needed in raising students' limited awareness of how to identify their own needs and develop more effective vocabulary learning strategies.

Michelle Ocriciano's fascination with applications of technology to language teaching led her to introduce gamification into her *IELTS* preparation classroom. She hypothesised that using this approach would increase her students' motivation and engagement, in what could otherwise seem like a routine examination-focused experience for both teachers and students. Although a small minority of her students felt that using gamification was not serious teaching, several of her 'motivated' students made surprising and dramatic improvements in their *IELTS* scores, and Michelle herself felt very motivated to continue experimenting with this new way of teaching *IELTS*.

Min Jung Jang and Jackson Howard were dissatisfied with error correction that did not seem to result in improvements in their students' writing. Adopting the notion of learning-oriented assessment and 'feed-forward' (Carless 2007), they exploited their institutional technology platform, Blackboard, to encourage self-editing, supporting their students with checklists to evaluate and correct their own work. They found that even though their AR was short term, the students showed positive advances in their writing. They saw their research as a beginning to thinking creatively in the future about ways to take their ideas forward.

Most of the examples have shown how technology can be harnessed in developing creative ideas. However, the use of technology is not synonymous with creativity. Christa Snyman felt very frustrated with her students' slow pace of improvement and lack of planning and editing of their writing. She drew on theories of both writing as process and writing as product to develop a systematic and scaffolded guided writing approach. By putting this approach into practice in both out-of-class and in-class activities she supported students and gradually saw improvement both in their writing and

editing abilities. Diana Dunlop and Juliana Xhafer, on the other hand, felt they were working within a relatively prescribed curriculum where assumptions had been made about the lower level of challenge for students in writing summaries than in writing syntheses. They introduced a series of small-scale scaffolded activities to assist students with each of these writing tasks. Interestingly, their research challenged the curriculum assumptions by showing that students performed better in synthesis than in summary writing. Their research is likely to help other teachers at their centre to address the challenges in teaching both forms of writing.

Interestingly, as can be seen in the accounts that follow in this issue, the teachers' approaches sometimes relied on teaching and learning concepts that are well recognised and in current circulation. However, what made them creative was that they were adopted and systematically evaluated in new and constructive ways that were highly relevant in their local contexts, and often meant reassessing and changing taken-for-granted practices in their institutions. In this sense, they became the 'something extra' that, as Amabile (1988) argues, is so important to creativity and which in the end led to productive new courses of classroom action.

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Participants in the 2015 Action Research in ELICOS Program: standing (L-R) Michelle Ocriciano, Jackson Howard, Min Jung Jang, Elizabeth Furst, Sally Crane, Christa Snyman, Sonja-Lina Sasse, Bianka Malecka, Sylvia Cher, James Heath; seated (L-R) Diana Dunlop, Juliana Xhafer with Anne Burns and Aparna Jacob from English Australia.

Writing ePortfolios: Engaging academic English students in feedback and revision

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Introduction

In our teaching context, we have often noted that students who consistently redraft their weekly writing tasks based on feedback showed marked improvement. However, many lack the motivation to do this, perhaps because without an audience, redrafting is viewed as inauthentic practice. Thus, the purpose of our action research (AR) was to motivate students to plan, comment on, and rewrite weekly tasks by creating an ePortfolio.

Context and participants

The research was conducted as part of a high-stakes, direct-entry English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Institute of Languages. Students enrolled have conditional offers from the university and on successful completion of the course they commence undergraduate or postgraduate study in a variety of disciplines. A total of 36 students at the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001) B2/C1 level participated in the project over a 20-week period (see Table 1). These students were drawn from two classes where we were the teachers, and we exchanged classes after 10 weeks, as required by our teaching centre.

Table 1: Participants

Nationality	Chinese (33) (including 31 from mainland China and 2 from Hong Kong), Iraqi (1), Saudi Arabian (1), Thai (1)
Gender	Male (16), Female (20)
Pathway	Undergraduate (8), Postgraduate (28)
Age	18–34

The course is heavily focused on writing (48% of the final summative assessment), and students complete weekly writing tasks that combine a process and genre approach (Badger and White 2000). Students already received feedback on these tasks in a variety of forms, including paper-based peer and teacher feedback, weekly individual consultations and writing workshops (where a sample of students' work from the week is workshopped with the class). However, we felt that the paper-based feedback was sometimes not effective for a number of reasons. Firstly, students may have misplaced previous work and not completed revisions, and therefore teachers could not monitor the progress made over time. Also, while small corrections could be made on paper, rewriting more significant sections, or adding further ideas or support, was difficult. This meant that students were sometimes reticent to revise or rewrite their work. Additionally, although students had some opportunity to read each other's work during writing workshops, there was no collective, easily accessible system for filing and viewing peers' work. Finally, we felt writing all the tasks on paper was artificial for 'digital age' students who need to complete their university assignments using computers.

Research focus

For these reasons, we were interested in exploring an ePortfolio as a platform to provide peer and teacher feedback and engage students in the revision process. ePortfolios are commonly used as either a showcase of student work, as part of assessment, or to demonstrate students' development (Stefani, Mason and Pegler 2007). Our project used developmental ePortfolios, in other words, electronic collections of work that exhibit students' efforts and progress over time. In this sense, we see the *process* of developing the ePortfolio as more important than the final *product*. There are a number of edited volumes of research into ePortfolios (Cambridge, Cambridge and Yancey (Eds) 2009, Jafari and Kaufman 2006), but less with L2 learners specifically (see Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richardson and Freynik 2014). ePortfolios have been linked to developing critical thinking and learner autonomy (Chau and Cheng 2010, Stefani et al 2007), and fostering deep and continuous lifelong learning (Jenson and Truer 2014). As Jenson and Treuer (2014:55) note, 'the ePortfolio is uniquely suited for 21st century learning, an age when learning takes place anywhere and anytime, both inside and outside formal education.' In our EAP context, we wanted to explore to what extent ePortfolios could benefit our students in the writing and revision process, and therefore developed these initial research questions:

1. What effects do ePortfolios have on students' learning and writing?
   - Are students able to document and assess their progress?
   - To what extent does archiving students' work motivate them to be better writers?
2. Does the use of ePortfolios help students develop peer feedback and peer evaluation skills?

However, after some reflection and guidance from Burns (2010) we realised that the questions were pre-empting answers, and not allowing for a natural and flexible exploration within our context. Therefore, we simplified our question to the following:

1. What effects do ePortfolios have on students' academic writing skills?

Action research intervention

Students completed the weekly writing tasks compiled in Table 2 to make an ePortfolio that was housed in the Wikispaces Classroom platform (www.wikispaces.com/).

Table 2: AR cycles and writing tasks

Cycle	Timing	Writing tasks undertaken for the ePortfolio
1	5 weeks (March 2015)	3–4 summaries of short articles Cause/effect and compare/contrast sentences Summary and analysis of data from a graph
2	5 weeks (April 2015)	2–4 argument essays 1 discussion essay 1 problem-solution essay Weekly study goals set by students Independent study notes, including links to websites that students accessed and notes about self-study completed
3	10 weeks (May/ June 2015)	2–3 argument essays 1–2 discussion essays 2–4 problem-solution essays

We chose Wikispaces Classroom because the interface facilitated clear feedback given by peers and teachers, and the software is free for educators. In addition, the edits that are made are saved in a revision history, so that students can benefit from revisiting corrections and developments made by themselves and their peers (see Figure 1).

Also, the Wikispaces Classroom platform allowed for a flexible approach to the types of feedback we could give (see Figure 2). Our feedback included:

1. Error correction, or written corrective feedback (CF). This mainly involved (using Ellis' 2009 typology) metalinguistic CF, either using an error correction code, or giving a brief grammatical description of errors. Less commonly we used direct CF, where the teacher provides the correct form. Direct CF was used if, for example, we felt that providing students with a particular academic word, collocation or phrase would be useful.

2. Content feedback. This included suggestions for adding further support for claims, correcting misrepresentations in paraphrases, using more academic vocabulary, or improving the structure and cohesion of the writing.

Figure 1: Example revision history*

*Deleted parts are highlighted in dark grey and inserted parts in light grey. Teachers and students can navigate between the versions to see what changes have been made over time.

3. Overall feedback which was often a positive comment and one or two key areas to focus on for improvement.

4. Links to additional resources (e.g. if a student had problems with a particular grammar point, a link to a website with explanations or exercises was provided).

Most of our feedback was focused (in Ellis' sense) on the types of errors we felt were problematic for the individual student, or which related to the writing assessment criteria. Since various studies have promoted different types of feedback (Bitchener and Ferris 2012), or even argued that written corrective feedback is not useful (Truscott 2007), our choice to use mostly metalinguistic feedback related to our context, where students are given metalanguage for describing errors during class. When surveyed, our students said they preferred metalinguistic CF and direct feedback, over indirect feedback (see Appendix 1). We were also pleased to see that a number of students used the correction code in their own peer review comments.

Figure 2: Example of different feedback types in Wikispaces

Cycle 1

In Cycle 1, the wiki was organised with each weekly task as a 'Project' (e.g. 'Week 1: Summary 1'; 'Week 2: Summary 2') and all students' contributions were collected together under this 'Project'. Each weekly task followed the process shown in Figure 3. In order to give peer feedback, students were randomly assigned a different partner every week. In the initial weeks of our AR, we strived to familiarise students with the new tool and show them the value of collaborative work by exhibiting examples of valuable peer feedback and student redrafts in class.

Figure 3: Process for each weekly writing task in Cycles 1 and 2

Cycle 2

For Cycles 2 and 3, in order to focus more on having each student build a complete ePortfolio, we revised the structure so that each student had their own individual 'Project' and all their writing tasks were collected there (see Figure 4). This was designed to motivate students to create a complete ePortfolio, including different writing samples and genres, and help collect their work for easy revision prior to the final exams. Some students decided to include motivational quotes and photos to personalise their ePortfolios. We also expanded the ePortfolio to include students' recording of their weekly learning goals and writing of independent study notes to allow for more individual input. However, writing goals online was not embraced by many students and we reverted to completing goal-setting in the classroom. Initially, we planned to complete our AR project after two 5-week cycles, but following a survey where nearly 91% of students expressed a desire to continue building their ePortfolios (Appendix 2), we extended it for 10 more weeks.

Cycle 3

Following student feedback from the first focus group interview, which was conducted in the middle of Cycle 2, we changed the process, so that students wrote first drafts on paper. The peer-review was completed either on paper or on Wikispaces, then the students' rewrites and teacher feedback were generally conducted on Wikispaces (see

Figure 4: Example of a completed ePortfolio homepage
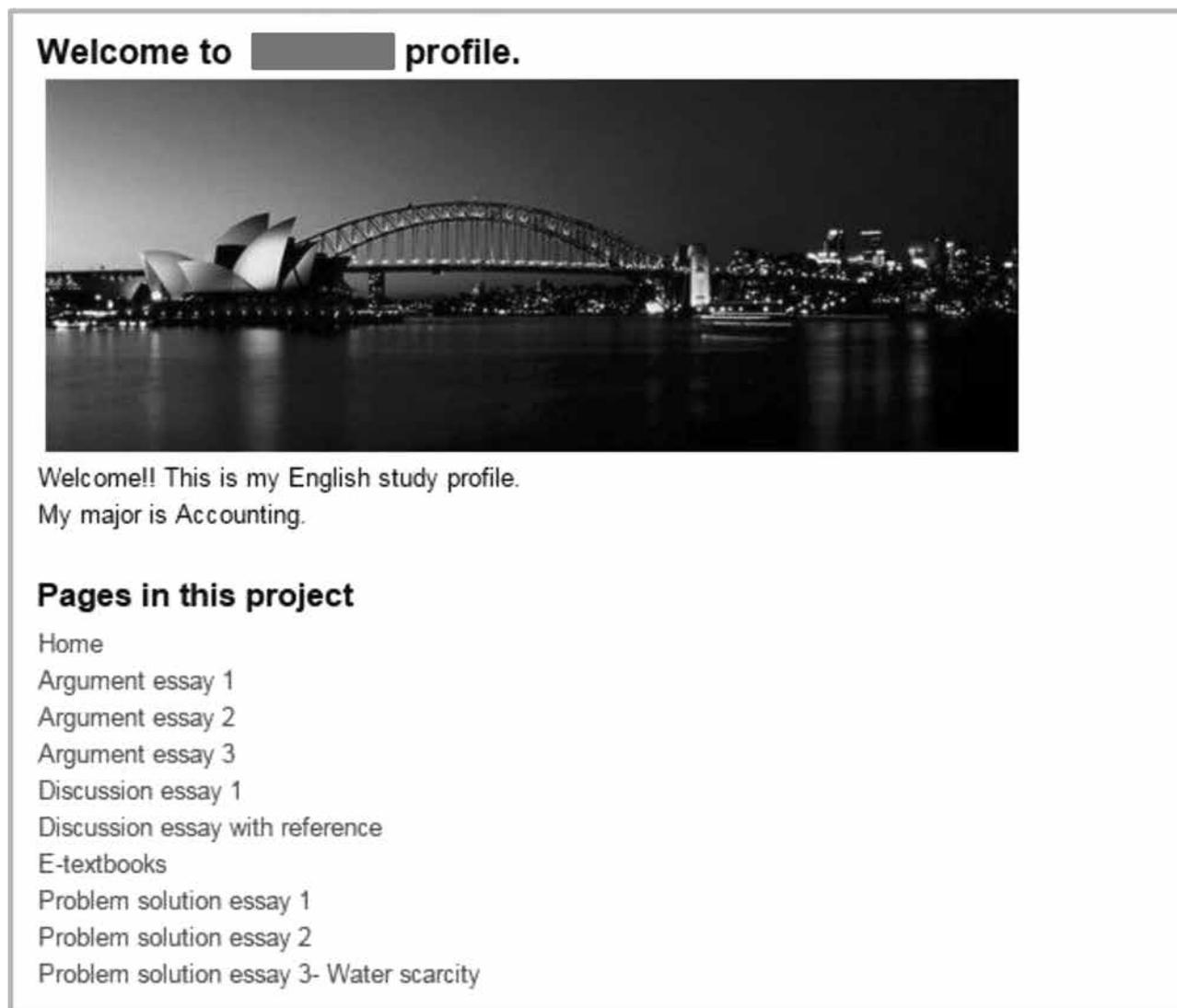
Figure 5). This approach reflected the fact that students would have to complete a number of handwritten, timed assessment tasks and exams in the final ten weeks of the course and therefore needed practice in writing quickly by hand. We were initially reticent to make this change, as we felt the process adopted in cycles one and two gave students a good opportunity to exploit the interactive features of the wiki. As Bianka put in her reflective journal at the time 'to be honest, I don't feel like changing [the process] but our AR comes secondary to students' performance at the exam.' Adopting a new revision process meant that peer feedback for this cycle was probably not as efficient and consistent as it had been, and not all students rewrote their redrafts in their ePortfolios.

Figure 5: Process for each weekly writing task in Cycle 3

Data collection

Prior to commencement of the study all students attended an introductory session explaining the research project and were informed about ethical research standards including voluntary participation, their right to remain anonymous when reporting data, as well as the right to withdraw from research at any time. All 36 students agreed to participate in the project and signed individual consent forms.

We collected the following data during the three cycles:

1. Students' writing and feedback on Wikispaces. This included the writers' first drafts and redrafts (including the revision history), peers' comments and edits, and teachers' comments and edits.

2. Two surveys (one conducted after Cycle 1 and one after Cycle 2). The surveys were designed to collect attitudinal and behavioural information in order to assess students' involvement in the project as well as plan further inter-ventions. Questions in the surveys included rating scales, ranking, closed and open-ended items. The answers were collected via SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com).

3. Three focus group interviews. During Cycle 2 we
    conducted two focus group interviews with two groups
    of six volunteers from each class. We followed up with
    a third focus group after Cycle 3, with six of these same
    participants: three from each class with higher, middle,
    and lower levels of writing proficiency. The focus groups
    were audio-recorded and transcribed. The focus group
    interviews aimed to examine ideas arising from the
    surveys, reflective learning journals and our observations
    in more depth. We chose focus groups as they allow
    participants to hear each other's responses and build on
    them (Patton 1987), and in this creative format, 'ideas
    emerge and are introduced that the interviewer might not
    have considered' (O'Reilly 2012:135). The participants
    in the third focus group also became the participants for
    our rewriting case study (see the section 'Feedback and
    rewriting'). This allowed us to gain richer insights into their
    rewriting process.

4. Students' reflective learning journal entries (completed
    during Cycles 1 and 2). As an existing part of the
    curriculum, students were required to submit eight
    reflective learning journal entries throughout the course
    and students referred to the ePortfolio project in some
    of these entries. We also modified three of the existing
    reflective learning journal prompts to include questions
    specifically related to the ePortfolios.

5. Teacher observations and reflective journals. These
    noted comments that students made during class, and
    interesting examples of students' use of the ePortfolios, as
    well as our own attitudes toward the project.

6. Engagement data. Wikispaces provides inbuilt engagement
    statistics reporting, which tracks the number of edits
    students complete using the system. Every time a student
    clicks 'save' on their work, one edit is logged. This provides
    a broad measure of engagement with the editing process,
    but there are some limitations in this data as each 'save'
    clicked could include more or less substantial changes to the
    text.

7. Official assessment results. Participants undertook four
    summative writing assessments during Cycle 3.

Findings

For the focus group interviews, reflective journals and teacher
observation notes, we both individually used an inductive
coding approach in order to identify specific patterns or
categories in these data. We then compared out categories
and established a combined set of categories. From this
process a number of themes emerged in response to our
research question. These include feedback and rewriting,
value for future study and autonomous learning.

Feedback and rewriting

In focus group interviews, students described many of the
benefits of giving and receiving feedback and rewriting their
work. A number of students commented that the ePortfolio
allowed them to make more frequent and substantial
revisions. For example, one student said, 'I like to use
Wikispaces . . . it give me opportunity to rewrite my essay,
rather than on paper, because I can add more information,
maybe I can make a new idea. It has give me good chance to
rewrite for three times, four times [sic].'

However, as we had expected, some students were wary
of receiving peer feedback from other students whose
grammar may be no better than their own, and said they
mostly paid attention to teacher feedback. In the first survey,
95% of students indicated a preference for teacher over peer
feedback (Appendix 1). Nevertheless, a distinct benefit of
using Wikispaces is the option for the original author to write
a response to a peer's comment and question whether their
feedback should be followed (see Figure 6). In focus group
interviews one student said: 'if I think I'm right, maybe I'll
insist my opinion, not just watching their feedbacks [sic].' This
response indicates a level of engagement with the feedback
process which may be beneficial for developing students'
critical thinking skills. As Rollinson (2005:24) suggests: 'it may
be that becoming a critical reader of others' writing may make
students more critical readers and revisers of their own writing.'
This raises the interesting question of whether some students
may gain more in the process of *giving* peer feedback, than
receiving it. Some students supported this idea, with one saying,
'even when we are at the same level, maybe we are making
mistakes in this feedback, but just the point when we think
about each other, about each writing, I think it's good for us'.

Figure 6: Example discussion between peer-reviewer, original author and teacher

The visibility of the dialogue between authors and peer reviewers in Wikispaces also allows teachers to adjudicate if desired (see Figure 6). We found that in some instances both the original author and peer reviewer benefited from reading teacher input into their feedback discussions.

Rewriting case study

In order to analyse the effectiveness of the revisions made in response to feedback, we undertook a case study of six students' writing. It included three students from each class, two each with lower, average and higher-level writing skills (as indicated in formal assessments). We analysed 60 texts written by these students on Wikispaces over the three AR cycles. Of these, 55 received teacher feedback and 27 received peer feedback. (The lack of peer feedback on half the texts is due to changing the process in Cycle 3, where peer feedback was generally provided on the paper drafts, then rewrites undertaken on Wikispaces.) We looked at corrective feedback (i.e. pointing out errors) and assessed if these were comments on form (grammar) or content. We then looked in the revision history at edits students made following the feedback and assessed if these edits were correct (in terms of grammatical accuracy or content edits we deemed as improvements). Each 'edit' was defined as one change to the text, which may include editing one word, a phrase, clause or sentence. The results of this analysis are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: Analysis of peer feedback on 27 texts

Peer feedback			Edits made following peer feedback		
Form	Content	Total	Correct	Incorrect	Total
125	24	149	83	2	85
84%	16%		98%	2%	
Average number of comments per text		5.52	Average number of edits per text		3.15

Table 4: Analysis of teacher feedback on 55 texts

Teacher feedback			Edits made following teacher feedback		
Form	Content	Total	Correct	Incorrect	Total
455	87	542	416	23	439
84%	16%		95%	5%	
Average number of comments per text		9.85	Average number of edits per text		7.98

As can be seen, when peer feedback was provided, peers gave on average 5.52 comments and authors made an average of 3.15 edits in response (57% of comments). When teacher feedback was provided, teachers gave an average of 9.85 comments per text and authors made 7.98 edits in response (81% of comments). It appears, therefore, that in many cases students may have ignored peer feedback that they disagreed with, which further supports the critical approach students take to peer feedback discussed above. (Alternatively, it may indicate that peer suggestions were less easy to follow, but this did not seem to be the case when the comments were analysed.)

Encouragingly, 98% of edits made following peer feedback and 95% following teacher feedback were deemed 'correct'. This indicates that individual texts were generally improved by both the peer and teacher feedback process. Interestingly, approximately 84% of feedback from both peers and teachers was on form. Although this may simply reflect students' and teachers' focus on form in the course, it probably actually indicates that more grammar 'errors' were made. When asked in focus group interviews which aspects of their writing had improved the most, a number of students mentioned 'structure' or 'argumentation and development of ideas', whereas, in terms of areas to improve, the same students mentioned grammar, including passive voice, prepositions and relative clauses. This may suggest that these students would benefit from further explicit grammar instruction in the course.

Value of ePortfolios for future study

ePortfolios are increasingly being used as assessment in higher education (Chatham-Carpenter, Seawel and Raschig 2010). Therefore, most students saw value in becoming familiar with this approach during the course. In fact, when surveyed, just over 88% of students said they would like to have an ePortfolio added to the course as a formal, summative assessment (Appendix 2).

A number of students noted other benefits of ePortfolios for their future study. In the first focus group interview, students mentioned that their prior education had not prepared them for the extensive use of computers for writing: 'in Chinese education we write [on] paper,' 'I am not happy about the [education] system in my country [Saudi Arabia] because nowadays everyone use computers [and we didn't] [sic].' Many credited weekly wiki writings with improving their computer skills. As one student who was initially a reluctant computer user explained, 'Wikispaces improved my typing and my father when he heard me write in computer he said, "oh lord, this is not my daughter."' Interestingly, the language help offered by writing on computer such as inbuilt grammar and spellchecking was seen as both a positive and negative feature.

Autonomous learning

The ePortfolio's focus on archiving one's own work, as well as accessing the work of others was seen as an important motivational factor. It facilitated independent learning and traced personal progress. As one student put it, 'I wanted to improve my grammar so I read my comments again, and other students' comments.' It also made the exam revision easier as students mentioned that if they had written on paper, their work would have likely been lost or misplaced. Links to additional writing resources (both general on the class homepage and personalised in teachers' feedback) further encouraged autonomous learning.

Conclusions

The ePortfolios seemed to have a positive impact on students' academic writing skills overall, and participants showed very positive attitudes to the project. The students were highly engaged in the revision process, and commented on the benefits of giving and receiving feedback through the system. Although they showed a preference for teacher feedback, the software allowed students to reflect on and reply to peer feedback that they disagreed with. The ePortfolios were beneficial for developing computer skills, and appeared to foster critical thinking and autonomous learning, as found in previous studies (Chau and Cheng 2010, Stefani et al 2007). The revision case study showed that students made improvements in accuracy in individual texts through the feedback and revision process. Although this is a positive result, in future studies it would be valuable to gauge if ePortfolios can help this development in a more sustained way in longitudinal studies. It would also be interesting to explore the effectiveness of different types of feedback in the ePortfolio context, such as more feedback focused on content, or more positive feedback.

With ePortfolios increasingly being used for assessment in higher education, we believe there is potential for ePortfolio-based formative or summative assessment in pre-sessional or direct-entry EAP programmes. We also feel that ePortfolios may be useful in other English language learning contexts, such as General or Business English courses. They may also be particularly beneficial in preparation courses for large-scale English exams, where students need to develop their writing in different genres over a period of time.

Personal reflections

Undertaking AR has been a very positive experience for us both. The opportunity to reflect more deeply on our day-to-day teaching has been extremely beneficial. Speaking with students in detail during focus group interviews not only revealed students' attitudes to the project and ePortfolios, but also incidentally produced insights into our teaching practices. For example, some students requested quicker writing feedback from James (within 3 days), causing him to try to give more succinct and focused feedback more rapidly.

Although it took time to familiarise ourselves with the possibilities and limitations of Wikispaces, once this was achieved, we noted several benefits of the ePortfolios as teachers. Firstly, we found it easier to give clear and precise feedback and monitor revisions students made in response. This meant that in teacher-student consultations, instead of correcting grammar and usage errors together, students had often already made edits based on our feedback, and we could spend time on specific areas needing development, or in extending the writing further. It was also easy to monitor students' participation and follow up with those who did not complete the assigned tasks. Finally, we also enjoyed working in a paper-free environment. Overall, we are happy with how the project progressed and plan to keep using ePortfolios with our future classes.

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Appendix 1

Extract of results from first survey (after Cycle 1)

Q2. Which feedback is more useful for you to improve your writing?

Teacher	95%
	19 students
Peer	5%
	1 student

Q4. What is more useful for you to improve your writing?*

	First preference	Second preference	Third preference
Teacher corrects your mistakes	42.11%	42.11%	15.79%
	8 students	8 students	3 students
Teacher identifies types of errors using correction code, e.g. word form, sentence structure	55.56%	44.44%	0.00%
	10 students	8 students	0 students
Teacher highlights errors without any comments	0.00%	11.11%	88.89%
	0 students	2 students	16 students

*Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Appendix 2

Extract of results from second survey (after Cycle 2)

Q3. Using Wikispaces has helped me improve my writing

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
42.86%	51.43%	5.71%	0.00%	0.00%	
15	18	2	0	0	35

Q6. I would like to continue using Wikispaces after UEEC 15*

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
36.36%	54.55%	3.03%	6.06%	0.00%	33
12	18	1	2	0	

*University English Entry Course (UEEC) 15 is the name of the course that students undertook in Cycle 2.

Q9. Would you like an ePortfolio like Wikispaces to be one of your formal assessments for UEEC 10* (i.e. it would contribute to your grade)?

Yes	88.24%
	30
No	11.76%
	4

*University English Entry Course (UEEC) 10 is the name of the course that students undertook in Cycle 3.

Researching research: High support for a high-challenge English for Academic Purposes writing task

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Introduction

As part of the preparation for the research requirements of a postgraduate course, our program required English as a Second Language (ESL) students to write an 850-word research essay based on six journal articles, which students had to find in the university library database. We noticed that our students were having significant problems finding the articles and filtering them for relevance to the essay question. They were also having difficulty evaluating material in order to develop an argument and essay taxonomy. Thus, our project addressed these two questions:

1. What is preventing our students from effectively finding, filtering and evaluating material?

2. What kind of tasks will most effectively equip our students with the research skills needed to successfully complete their essay?

This report will first describe the context and participants involved in our project and then outline the literature that informed our research focus. It will then show the development of our project over the research cycles by explaining the changes that were made in response to student feedback and teacher observations. Next, the methods used to collect data are detailed. Finally, an analysis of the impacts of the interventions is given, followed by some reflections on the action research (AR) process and outcomes.

Context and participants

This AR was conducted at the University of Tasmania English Language Centre in Hobart, Tasmania. Our centre offers 5-week study periods at seven levels, with Levels 1 to 3 offering General English (GE), and Levels 4 to 7 offering English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Successful completion of Level 7 enables students to achieve a conditional offer of direct entry into Bachelor, Masters' and PhD courses, and it is at this level that we require students to complete a research essay. Entrance into the Level 7 class requires either successful completion of Level 6, or an overall *IELTS* score of 6.5 with no band less than 6.0.

We undertook our AR with Level 7 students across four 5-week study periods, with each study period representing one AR cycle. Each cycle involved a new cohort of participants, and in total 70 students, who were members of the Level 7 classes that we were teaching, participated in the AR. Student demographics are included in Appendix 1.

Research focus

The research essay presents a very challenging task for the majority of Level 7 students and we wanted to make it achievable by providing a high level of support at those stages of the task where students were having the greatest difficulty. Scaffolding theory, which in the context of Academic Language Learning (ALL) can be defined as placing students in a 'high challenge: high support' situation (Mariani 1997:4), provided us with a useful tool for thinking through our ideas. Mariani (1997:7) defines a high-challenge task as one that is 'far beyond' the present capacity of students. He explains that high support for such a task involves being explicit about expectations, how to meet these expectations and why these expectations are important. This high challenge: high support combination can then lead students into their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a concept first defined by Vygotsky (1978) (as cited in Wilson and Devereux 2014:91). Wilson and Devereux (2014:92) describe the ZPD as a student's potential for new learning – that is, 'the fertile zone in which they are ready to participate in learning'. This fertile zone is where students undergo the critical cognitive development that is an essential foundation to becoming an independent learner. The scaffolding theory we drew on was both contingent and designed-in scaffolding. Contingent scaffolding is described by Hammond and Gibbons (cited in Wilson and Devereux 2014:94–95) as teachers having 'on-the-spot interaction with students both in the classroom and/or online, and in feedback on their work', and designed-in scaffolding is described as occurring 'largely through planned selection and sequencing of sub-tasks within the context of a major, high-challenge task'.

Recent literature discussing ESL students' use of library resources (Bordonaro 2006, Hurley, Hegarty and Bolger 2006, Knight, Hight and Polfer 2010, Tour 2010, Zhuo, Emanuel and Jiao 2008) helped us realise the importance of creating a concise, clear and practical resource that would not only help students develop the technical skills necessary for finding library material, but that would also encourage students to develop a positive orientation towards the library and its resources. The literature introduced us to the idea of greater collaboration with library staff, as an environment of such open communication has not only been found to make the library more welcoming and functional for international students, but has also been found to have a positive impact on international student achievement and retention (Knight et al 2010).

The growing body of literature examining the impact of different factors on the utilisation of *critical thinking* (CT) skills amongst ESL students provided some useful frameworks for thinking through how to guide students into their ZPD through scaffolding (Jones 2005, Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi 2015, Minakova 2014, Ouellette-Schramm 2015, Ryan, Shuai, Ye, Ran and Haomei 2013, Unsworth, Sears and Pexman 2005). To support our students in the application of CT skills to an academic writing context, our aim when developing resources was to give students maximum exposure to enquiry-based learning that involves hands-on tasks which encourage questioning, collaboration, reflection, analysis, deduction and inference.

Action research cycles

In each of our research cycles, we built on the work undertaken in previous cycles by adapting and introducing materials in response to students' needs and preferences. We developed teaching resources to help students find journal articles on the university library database; filter these articles for relevance against a model essay topic; and evaluate their articles in order to develop an argument (see Figure 1). This resulted in an additional 7 hours of class time being spent on the research essay. Prior to the intervention, within class time 0 hours were spent on finding and filtering material

Figure 1: Progression and adaptation of tasks over the four cycles and image from video introduced in Cycle 2

Opening scene of research skills video

◯ Original task

⬡ Adaptation 1

⬡ Adaptation 2

⬡ Final product
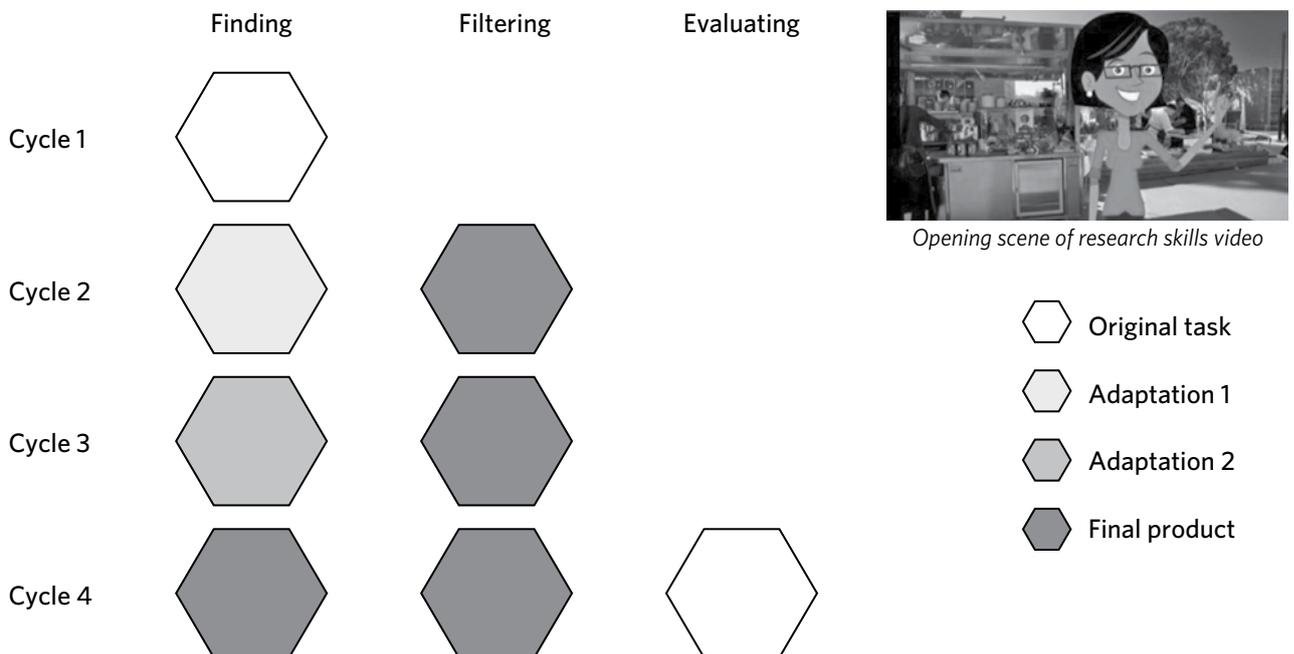
and 2 hours were spent on evaluating material; after class, students attended a 1-hour lecture or workshop. By Cycle 4 of the intervention, within class time 2 hours were spent on finding material, 2 hours on filtering and 5 hours on evaluating; after class students still attended a 1-hour workshop.

Cycle 1

In our first cycle, we focused on answering part of Research Question 1: What is preventing our students from finding research material? Based on initial data collection, we knew that the majority of students had little to no experience in using databases, and we already suspected that the introduction to library skills lecture was problematic because information was only heard once, library jargon was used without being pre-taught, several different terms were used for the same concept, and students had little opportunity to apply the techniques in a supported environment.

As we only had two Level 7 classes in this study period, we had the opportunity to replace this lecture with a workshop in the computer lab. The librarian presented the same information they usually give in the lecture theatre; however, the workshop enabled students to immediately practise finding material in the University of Tasmania library database with the librarian available to answer questions and give help where needed. Feedback from two repeating students indicated that the workshop was a more effective format as it gave the librarian more time to provide advanced guidance. However, we often have multiple Level 7 classes making workshops unviable due to limited access to a computer lab, so we needed to develop teaching materials suitable for this situation.

Cycle 2

Our first step in this cycle was to introduce a video version of the librarian delivering the lecture. We also developed a computer-based activity we named 'the treasure hunt' (Appendix 3) which was designed to give students practical experience with the mechanics of using the library databases. Whilst the majority of students enjoyed the treasure hunt, and found both the video and treasure hunt useful, they were unanimous in their agreement that the video was 'boring'. The video had the library database as the visual with the librarian's voice explaining how to use it.

Our second step in this cycle was to enhance the effectiveness of our scaffolding by developing an essay that could be used as a consistent model for all our activities (Appendix 2).

Our final step was to investigate what was preventing our students from effectively filtering material for their research essay. We found that the majority of students were not used to thinking about how and/or why something may or may not be relevant. Therefore, we developed a hands-on enquiry-based filtering activity in which students used the model essay question 'Critical thinking is crucial to the essay writing process. Discuss' to determine the relevance of journal article titles and abstracts. Students were given 10 journal article titles which were all related to CT. They had to identify which article titles were specifically relevant, possibly relevant or not relevant to the model essay question. It was possible for student opinion to differ on a couple of titles, so it was

important that they were able to justify their rating. The activity was repeated using the journal abstracts. When asked to rate this activity, 100% rated it as 'interesting' or 'very interesting' and 'useful' or 'very useful', a view that was reiterated in follow-up exit interviews.

At this point, we were still dealing with evaluation through contingent scaffolding by assisting students to evaluate their material through one-on-one feedback sessions during in-class writing workshops. We designed an observation chart to help us identify the issues that were arising in relation to this skill.

Cycle 3

Based on the feedback from the previous cycle, we felt it was important to enliven the video so that students could both learn from and feel engaged in the experience. In this cycle, we addressed this issue by changing the video into an animated video using PowToon software[1]. We developed four short animated videos and revised the treasure hunt, breaking it into four sections to follow each video. The students found these videos more engaging; however, the combination of four videos plus the treasure hunts took up 3 hours of class time, which was more than we could allocate to this step of the research process. Therefore we knew further adaptations would be necessary.

The filtering activity continued to be well received and resulted in the majority of students coming to class with relevant articles. We continued to assist students to evaluate their material by providing one-on-one feedback on their essay outlines. Whilst providing feedback we observed issues with illogical categorisation and organisation of ideas and inclusion of irrelevant ideas.

Cycle 4

In order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the research skills videos, we collaborated more closely with the university librarians. Based on the knowledge gained from this collaboration, we developed two new videos of 5–10 minutes each and a corresponding treasure hunt (Appendix 3). We also augmented the collaborative nature of the project by inviting the librarians to be the voices of their animated avatars. The university uses an online platform called My Learning Online (MyLO) to deliver a broad range of content and services, and to communicate with students. The two shortened videos were easily embedded into this learning system, enabling students to revisit them at home. The students said these videos were enjoyable, easy to follow, and very informative.

We then turned our attention to the problems students were facing with evaluation. The importance of helping students to develop evaluation skills was reinforced at the second AR workshop we attended in Sydney. At this workshop, the representative from Cambridge English introduced us to Cambridge English Thinking Skills Assessment, a university entrance test that focuses on a student's potential ability to assess, analyse, deduce and infer.

Although we had already been assisting students to assess,

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[1] www.powtoon.com

analyse, deduce and infer in the annotation and planning stage of their essays through contingent scaffolding, our aim now was to develop a 'designed-in' scaffolding activity to support students' evaluation skills. We created an enquiry-based activity in which students were given a model essay topic, Cornell note-taking sheets[2], short extracts from four journal articles and a template outlining a taxonomy for structuring arguments (Appendix 4). We guided the students through the identification and evaluation of main points, the categorisation and sub-categorisation of these points, the application of these points to the development of an argument and the logical presentation of these points on the taxonomy template. During this guided activity we modelled CT by eliciting what kinds of questions students needed to be asking themselves in order to complete the task, such as: what are the main points of this article? Are these points relevant to the essay question? How are they relevant? Do the articles contain similar ideas? How can I group these ideas/points to develop an argument?

Data collection

Ethics permission for data collection was provided through the AR program under the auspices of the University of New South Wales.

Ascertaining obstacles to research and formulating ideas for interventions

Our focus in Cycle 1 was to ascertain what was hindering our students in the research process. Initially we used a student questionnaire to identify an understanding of the students' prior research experience. We also gave students a research diary where they wrote the search terms they were using; how many relevant articles they found; how long it took them to find these articles; which library database they used, and how difficult they felt the search was. The aim of the diary was to find out how much of the library workshop they had understood, to track their success in finding relevant articles, and to identify the level of difficulty they experienced. We held a focus group discussion (Burns 2010) to determine the students' understanding of the term 'research' and their understanding of the process involved in sourcing material, and we asked about any difficulties they had had with the current library workshop and any techniques they had used to overcome difficulties. End-of-course guided group interviews were conducted and audio-recorded, asking questions such as: what issues did you face in finding, filtering and evaluating material? What learning activities did you find useful in helping you understand/ complete your research?

We used the focus group discussion and end-of-course interviews again in Cycle 2 and continued to use the student questionnaire in all subsequent cycles.

Ascertaining student engagement in and the effectiveness of our interventions

In Cycles 2, 3 and 4 we continuously adapted our interventions based on data collected from the methods mentioned above as well as from spontaneous student surveys, teacher observation checklists, reflective and analytical observations, semi-structured interviews and research essay results.

We conducted the spontaneous student surveys immediately after students had completed the intervention tasks, providing us with immediate feedback while the activity was fresh in the students' minds. Although this method of data collection may lack the rigour of more formal methods, we found that students were enthusiastic and appeared to derive a sense of empowerment from being asked for their opinions. Also, students were quite open about providing negative feedback, so did not appear to be inhibited by this format. The surveys involved asking students for a show of hands to a set of questions we asked verbally, such as: Do you feel that activity was: not useful, useful, quite useful or very useful? Do you feel that activity was: boring, quite boring, interesting or very interesting?

Teacher observation checklists (Burns 2010) were used to track student progress through the finding, filtering and evaluating process. For example, records were kept of the number of articles students found, their relevance and time taken to find these articles. Reflective and analytical observations (Burns 2010) were used to record the level of engagement, success and difficulty students were having with the intervention activities. These observations were recorded on a checklist we developed, designed to keep track of each student's progress. As class sizes ranged from seven to 15 students, we were able to track students' progress effectively; however, larger classes could make this more difficult.

In Cycles 3 and 4 we replaced the group interviews with audio-recorded guided interviews with two students to probe their response and reactions to the intervention activities and to elicit any suggestions they may have. These students were selected based on the fact that they were both engaged but performing at different levels. Involving only two students enabled us to gain a more in-depth picture about individual development.

The students' essay results were analysed using section 1 of our research essay rubric, which focuses on the essay structure, thesis statement, relevance of supporting detail and logical organisation of the essay. In Cycle 3 we introduced a short CT test (Cottrell 2011), which included sections on categorising, following directions and recognising similarities, as well as a student CT self-evaluation survey. The CT material was introduced to determine if there was any connection between students' CT scores and their essay results or between students' over- or under-confidence in their CT ability and their essay results.

Findings

Overview

The aim of our research was to develop tasks that would equip our students with the necessary skills to effectively find, filter

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[2] There are a number of versions of Cornell note-taking sheets. The version used in our centre is a sheet divided into three sections for the recording of the main topic and key words, detailed notes and quotations, and how the notes could be used in their essay.

and evaluate material for the research essays. We knew that the research essay was a task valued by nearly all students because they commented it would 'definitely' benefit them in the future and said they 'liked doing it on [their] future career area'. Based on our data collection, we identified three core groups of students in Cycle 4, with respect to Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD (as cited in Wilson and Devereux 2014).

Group 1 (G1) constituted a minority of our student cohort. These were students who had previous research experience and were already working within their ZPD in relation to the research essay. Group 2 (G2) comprised nearly 50% of our student cohort. The students in this group had limited or no previous research experience, and were not working within their ZPD. These students were, however, ready to participate in the new learning involved in the research essay because they already had some of the building blocks needed for this activity; thus, with scaffolding and guidance we were able to support their progression towards their potential development and thereby move them into their ZPD, enabling them to effectively find, filter and evaluate material.

The final group, Group 3 (G3), formed the rest of our student cohort. Like G2, G3 comprised nearly 50% of our cohort and had limited or no research experience, with one representative saying 'I never came across this type research essay in my home country where I study' [sic]. While the intervention supported this group's movement into their ZPD for finding and sometimes filtering material (see Figure 2), it was not successful in moving them into their ZPD for the evaluation of material. We believe this is because these students did not have the building blocks that are necessary to guide them into their ZPD with respect to evaluating material. Based on an analysis of the Cambridge English Thinking Skills Assessment, we identified these building blocks as the ability to focus, reflect, assess, analyse, deduce and infer.

Figure 2: Progression of groups into their ZPD
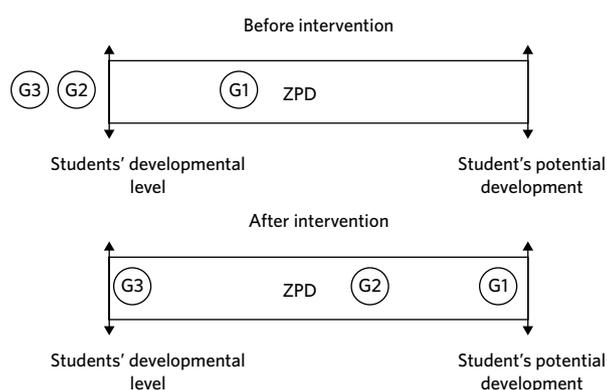
Case studies from Groups 1, 2 and 3

In order to further highlight the skills of students in each of the three groups, we describe three individual student case studies. For the purpose of anonymity, we'll call the G1 student Pedro, the G2 student Michael, and the G3 student Ben (see Appendix 5 for data on these students).

Finding and filtering

Following the interventions, Pedro was able to quickly and easily find and filter journal articles. He found eight relevant and zero irrelevant articles overnight. Given Pedro's research background and high-level reading skills, it is probable that he would have been successful in his research regardless; nevertheless, he was engaged in the learning experience and expressed enthusiasm about both the research video and the relevance activities.

Michael also found and filtered articles successfully following the intervention tasks. Michael found five relevant and one irrelevant article over three days. Michael had no experience of database research and took longer to find articles compared to Pedro. Nevertheless, he clearly understood the task, was persistent when faced with obstacles, and displayed a willingness to develop independent learning skills. Michael approached us with a degree of confidence regarding the relevance of his articles, only seeking confirmation of his own judgement. He was particularly responsive to the enquiry-based learning activities and in class we observed him taking a leading role in these activities.

Ben showed some success in finding and filtering articles following the intervention tasks. Like Michael, he had no experience of database research and took longer to find articles compared to Pedro. Ben found three relevant, two irrelevant and one non-academic article over three weeks. However, unlike Michael, Ben found it harder to persist with the task, struggled to think in depth, and therefore often failed to assess the relevance of material. Ben was very dependent on the teacher to help verify the relevance of an article.

Evaluating

The differences between the groups became more pronounced in relation to students' ability to evaluate material and formulate an argument based on the material. Pedro had the strongest evaluation skills, most notably in regard to the ease and confidence with which he identified the core argument he wished to present in his essay. By Week 2, he had identified his core argument, which was that 'due to the fragmented approaches of state governments and the limited Australian Federal Government attitudes in response to the risks of climate change, a consistent national legislation is required to effectively mitigate the impact of SLR on Australia's coast'. Despite his confidence, Pedro benefitted from the designed-in scaffolding activity, which specifically enabled him to improve the logical categorisation of his ideas. Mary, another student in G1, expressed a similar appreciation for the way in which the scaffolding helped improve her essay structure. Mary was a highly experienced researcher and had published several times in English-medium medical journals, but she made the following comment about the impact of the scaffolding intervention:

> . . . I have learnt to categorise my research. I always fell into the trap of organising my research or papers by source rather than by point, demonstrating a lack of creativity. Common categories include background information we use to support or not support a position, evidence for or against a position, and examples of who, what, where, when, why a situation or event [sic]. Spending time categorising my notes will help me write my paper faster and better.

Michael found the evaluation of material and formulation of an argument considerably more difficult than Pedro, claiming

'most difficult for me is to write outline' [sic]. Michael recognised the problems he had with evaluating evidence and structuring an argument, scoring 54% in the CT self-evaluation, whilst actually scoring 74% in the CT test. Despite these difficulties, his commitment and focus enabled him to analyse and reflect on the task, and therefore independently produce a taxonomy that had logical groupings of ideas. Following a contingent scaffolding session in which he received individual feedback on his outline, Michael was able to adapt his thesis and strengthen his argument to be 'globalization has given more functions to accounting standards which has helped to promote global economic communication and development'. Thus, by Week 5 Michael had produced a clear, coherent and logically argued research essay.

Ben found evaluation extremely difficult, stating 'the most difficult [sic] for me is categorization'. Unlike Michael, Ben failed to recognise his weaknesses in CT, scoring 71% on the CT self-evaluation whilst actually scoring 34% on the CT test. Ben struggled with the analysis and deduction required in the evaluation activity, and this was reflected in his failure to produce a taxonomy with logically grouped ideas. Despite several contingent support sessions, Ben made little to no progress in terms of the logical and coherent presentation of his argument. He argued: 'This research essay supports that pharmaceutical research will continues to deliver the greater impact on the global economy making the future market increase and expanding.' Thus, whilst Ben may have learned the importance of logical categorisation and ordering of ideas, he failed to demonstrate any capacity to apply these ideas within the 5-week study period.

Reflection

The cyclical nature of the AR process inspired us to continuously rework and adapt the teaching materials we had created until we felt they were appropriately addressing the needs of students in relation to finding, filtering and evaluating research material. This reworking of materials also led us to collaborate with the university librarians, who gave us greater insight into our students' requirements, thereby facilitating the production of more relevant and concise teaching materials. Furthermore, the reworking of material enabled us to develop resources that met the demands of our centre as it resulted in us producing materials that are both sustainable and readily adoptable.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the AR process for us was the growth in our understanding of students' learning. By observing classroom practices, and then thinking through them in terms of the high challenge: high support framework, we were able to identify whether the research essay was in students' familiar territory, within their ZPD, or beyond their ZPD (Mariani 1997). Recognition of the fact that supporting students to work within the ZPD enabled them to effectively find, filter and evaluate material, assisted us to produce materials that supported students to acquire new skills in the writing of a research essay. It also helped us to understand that if the research essay was beyond the ZPD of students, more than the available 5-week study period was needed to provide sufficient support to bring them into their ZPD. We

recognised that a crucial skill which enabled students to work within their ZPD with respect to the research essay was the ability to think critically.

As evidenced by the recent introduction of the Thinking Skills Assessment by Cambridge English, higher-order thinking skills are considered to be an essential foundation for success at university, and the vast majority of Australian universities expect students to demonstrate these skills. The only explicit experience or information many ESL students have of the educational expectations at Australian universities comes from their time spent in EAP or Direct Entry programs. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers in these institutions prepare students effectively by scaffolding their learning to meet the high-challenge tasks they will encounter in their degree studies. This can be most readily achieved by EAP institutions and Direct Entry programs in the English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sector constructively aligning their programs with university graduate attributes.

Conclusions

Our AR project arose from our recognition that the research essay caused stress to both students and teachers because of insufficient designed-in scaffolding. When students are presented with a high-challenge task such as the research essay, it is not surprising that some will feel the task is impossible and therefore 'become frustrated, lose confidence, lose interest, and possibly resort to "short-cut" strategies including various forms of plagiarism' (Wilson and Devereux 2014:98).

The increased level of designed-in scaffolding implemented during our AR did reduce levels of stress, frustration and plagiarism as it enabled students for whom the research essay was within their ZPD to acquire the necessary skills to find, filter and evaluate material for their research essay; thus, the answer to our first research question – what is preventing our students from effectively finding, filtering and evaluating material? – was insufficient support for a high–challenge task.

With an emphasis on stimulating critical thinking skills in our students, we developed hands-on tasks that would encourage questioning, collaboration, reflection and analysis as well as focus, deduction and inference. The majority of students found these tasks engaging, resulting in a significant improvement in their ability to find, filter and evaluate material; thus, the answer to our second research question – what kind of tasks will most effectively equip our students with the research skills needed to successfully complete their essay? – was enquiry-based activities that supported the student in the process and stimulated critical thinking.

However, limited previous practice with the above skills prevented one cohort of our students from moving into their ZPD with respect to evaluation. Despite this remaining challenge, the AR process has enabled us to reflect on and recognise the types of teaching material that may guide such students towards achieving the CT foundations that will enable them to find, filter and evaluate research material.

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Appendix 1: Student demographics

	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Cycle 4
Number of students	9	26	30	5
Age range	22–32	21–39	23–31	26–36
Nationality	Afghanistan 1 China 3 India 1 Nepal 3 Thailand 1	China 6 India 11 Japan 2 Nepal 6 Taiwan 1	China 14 Hong Kong 1 India 12 Japan 1 Nepal 1 Pakistan 1	Brazil 1 China 2 Thailand 2
Study purpose	Bachelor 0 Master's degree 9 PhD 0 Visiting professor 0 General English 0	Bachelor 2 Master's degree 24 PhD 0 Visiting professor 0 General English 0	Bachelor 0 Master's degree 29 PhD 0 Visiting professor 0 General English 1	Bachelor 0 Master's degree 1 PhD 2 Visiting professor 2 General English 0
Future area of study	Accounting 3 Business 1 Environmental science 1 Information technology 1 Medicine 1 Public policy 2	Accounting 9 Business 3 Environmental science 1 Information technology 6 International business 3 Marketing 2 Physical science 1 Teaching 1	Accounting 11 Applied science 1 Business 8 Information technology 3 International business 1 Marketing 1 Microbiology 1 Pharmacy 3 Teaching 1	Nursing 1 Tourism 1 Marine science 1 Medical professional (currently practising) 2

Appendix 2: Excerpt from model essay

Critical thinking is crucial to the essay writing process. Discuss.

THESIS STATEMENT:

This essay argues that because critical thinking skills are integral to the formulation and presentation of a logical and coherent argument, they are crucial to the essay writing process.

BODY PARAGRAPH 1:

Critical reading and effective annotation are two ways in which critical thinking facilitates the development of a clear argument. Identifying relevant information in and formulating an argument from source material requires critical thinking. For example, studies conducted by both Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi (2015) and Karras (1994) show that students who give precise attention to critical reading are able to produce thesis statements that are relevant to an essay topic and argumentative in stance. Similarly, Ouellette-Schramm (2015) states that students who cannot identify the main idea of a text nor synthesize source material will produce writing that is, according to Taylor (cited in Ouellette-Schramm 2015:15) 'a brain dump of disconnected and unedited thoughts'. Effective annotation of a text is also essential for the coherent development of an argument. This is demonstrated by Liu (2006), who showed that students who annotated a text in detail whilst reading were able to direct their cognitive thinking and thereby produce writing that demonstrated a clear argument and non-repetitive evidence. In contrast, students who failed to annotate their text demonstrated shallow engagement, resulting in 'verbatim repetition and a lack of analytical argument' (Liu 2006:204). Thus, using critical thinking to engage deeply and selectively when reading and annotating material has a significant impact on the clarity and concision of argument presented in the final essay.

Appendix 3: Images from video and excerpt from treasure hunt

Appendix 4: Evaluation activity – taxonomy showing argument
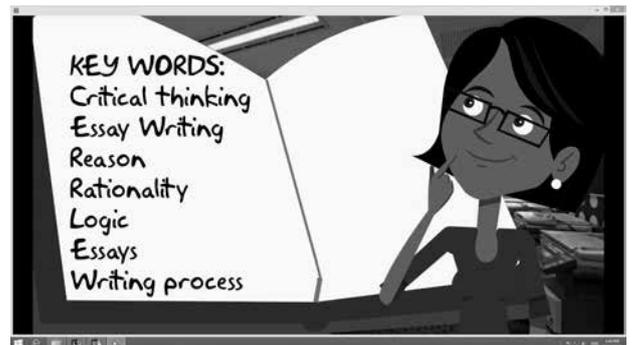
Critical thinking is crucial to the essay writing process

This essay argues that because critical thinking skills are integral to the formulation of and presentation of a logical and coherent argument, they are crucial to the essay writing process.
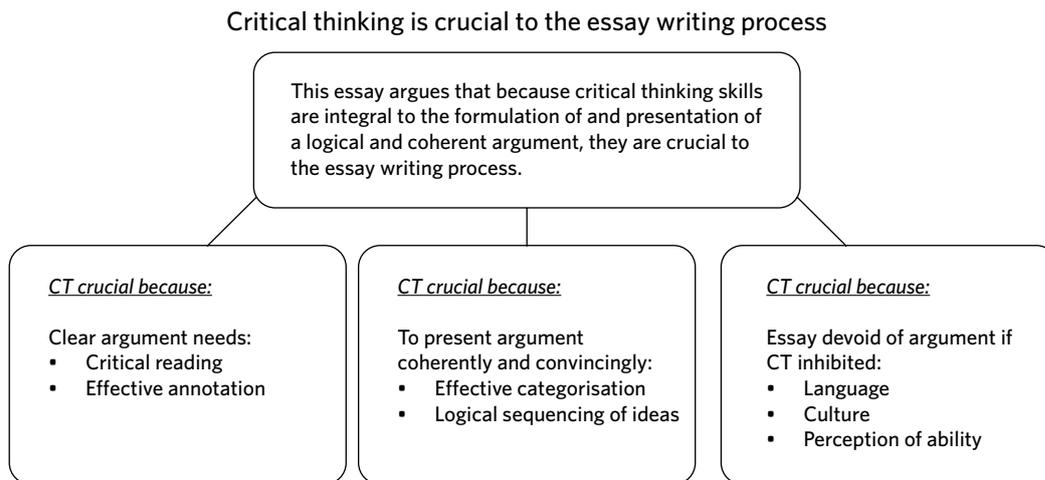
CT crucial because:

Clear argument needs:
- Critical reading
- Effective annotation

CT crucial because:

To present argument coherently and convincingly:
- Effective categorisation
- Logical sequencing of ideas

CT crucial because:

Essay devoid of argument if CT inhibited:
- Language
- Culture
- Perception of ability

Appendix 5: Case study data

	IELTS/ SCORE	EAP Reading test	CT self-evaluation	CT test	Finding articles	Formulation of argument	Categorisation of ideas	Research essay score
Pedro Offer: PhD Oceanography	Reading 7.5 Writing 6.0	88%	80%	86%	8 relevant articles 0 irrelevant articles	Clear position by Week 2	Initially undeveloped but clear and logical categorisation of ideas immediately following discussion in Week 2.	90% Sophisticated argument with clear and logical development.
Michael Offer: Master's Professional Accounting	Reading 6.0 Writing 5.0	59%	54%	74%	5 relevant articles 1 irrelevant article	Position unclear by Week 2	Clear and logical categorisation of ideas by Week 2 but needed in order to support development of argument.	90% Sophisticated argument with clear and logical development.
Ben Offer: Master's Pharmaceutical Science	Reading 5.5 Writing 6.0	61%	71%	34%	3 relevant articles 2 irrelevant articles and 1 non-academic article	No position by Week 2	Illogical categorisation of ideas in Week 2.	55% Weak argument, illogical grouping of information and inclusion of irrelevant material.

Appendix 6a: Excerpt from research essay – Pedro

This essay argues that due to the fragmented approaches of state governments and the limited Australian Federal Government attitudes in response to the risks of climate change, a consistent national legislation is required to effectively mitigate the impact of SLR on Australia's coast.

The Australian Federal Government has been releasing a number of reports warning the risks of climate change since 2008, but until now has not introduced any new legislation with respect to climate change adaptation. The main responses from the federal government is the introduction of the Coastal and Climate Change Council in 2009 and the publication of reports informing their position on climate change adaptation. According to Kellett et al. (2014), the current policy can be observed in the Australian Government Position Paper *Adapting to Climate Change in Australia* (Australian Government, 2010). Another important document is a major government report *Climate Change Risks to Australia's Coast* (DCC 2009), which is the first national coastal vulnerability to climate change assessment. However, despite these federal government actions, there is still a call for the creation of specific policy or legislation in response to the risks of SLR. Harvel, Clarke & Nursey-Bray (2012) state that the recent national coast and climate change inquiry showed the need for national action, which must consider a consistent approach to climate change within coastal management. Thus, although the national initiatives against the risks of climate change and SLR have increased in the last 5 years, a reform of coastal management in a national level is still necessary.

Appendix 6b: Excerpt from research essay – Michael

This essay argues that globalization has given more functions to accounting standards which has helped to promote global economic communication and development.

Due to the impact of globalization, the international accounting standard as a uniform communication tool provides considerable convenience for global investors. Investors around the world are linked together through global market. They need the common accounting language to ensure fair and smooth trades, so global accounting standards increase international trade facilitation. The uses of accounting standards simplify communication between lenders and investors, which creates in more opportunities to attract international capital (Beke 2010). In addition, global accounting standards allow the transmission of accounting data more smoothly. According to Amiram (2012), information asymmetries in different investment climates between local and overseas makes investors reluctant to invest in foreign markets. They are very worried about the high-risk due to lack of understanding of the international investment environment. Prior to the rapid development of globalization, investors in various countries implemented national accounting standards. This will cause very large communication barriers when investors are expected to participate in a cross-border trade. However, globalization has brought changes in accounting standards, which provides more quality international financial reporting standards for investors than local accounting standard. (Barth et al cited in Amiram 2012). This helps to decrease the information asymmetry and eliminate communication barriers between local and oversea investors.

Appendix 6c: Excerpt from research essay – Ben

This research essay supports that pharmaceutical research will continue to deliver the greater impact on the global economy making the future market increase and expanding.

The pharmaceutical research is helping the global economy to increase in every aspect; enabling patients with the drug advancements, providing employments and supporting free trade agreements. Globalization of clinical research has evolved in part in response to the high unit costs of clinical research in developed economies, but it has not enabled the development of a different business model for clinical research (Glickman et al., 2009). The safety of clinical trials is also very important that monitoring activities should be planned at the appropriate trial phase of the research. The preliminary monitoring plan should be prepared before actually starting the clinical trials. As pharmaceutical research is expanding globally at greater pace, the measures for the best practices and safety regulations should be considered strictly. The pharmaceutical industries should maintain ethical and responsible rules to continually assess the safety issues of clinical trials and health practices. There is a need for more clinical trials to address the new increasing health risks and diseases; the shift of pharmaceutical industry towards low-income countries is a good sign for more globalization in the coming future.

Systematic teaching of academic vocabulary including the use of technological tools

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'While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.'
(Wilkins 1972:111–112)

Context and participants

Our research was conducted at Deakin University English Language Institute (DUELI). The 5-week courses offered in both General English and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) cater to a range of levels from beginner to advanced. The action research (AR) was conducted in two of the EAP classes over two cycles. The EAP branch consists of four levels (EAP 1 to EAP 4). The EAP 2 level was chosen for this AR and students at this level are considered 'modest' users of English (IELTS band 5–5.0).

Our research focused on EAP 2 students because at this level many students have had some exposure to academic English skills (EAP 1) and are potentially finishing their formal English language classes to commence further tertiary studies. Successful completion of EAP 2 allows students to graduate and start their certificate or diploma courses at Deakin College. Alternatively students can continue studying at the next level (EAP 3) and then transition to a bachelor course at Deakin University. Students who complete another two levels (EAP 3 and EAP 4) can transition to a postgraduate course (Masters or PhD). Thus, while for some students EAP 2 is the final stage in their English preparation, for others it is one step toward their future studies.

The EAP 2 level was also chosen because this course is due to be renewed, and we felt that evidence-based data from the

AR would be invaluable in helping to determine features of the new curriculum.

Each cycle involved two EAP 2 classes taught concurrently. We taught one class each and thus each class was given the same tasks and assessments and the changes implemented for Cycle 2 were implemented in both classes of Cycle 2. Each cycle was four weeks in length and each cycle had a new cohort of EAP 2 students. Table 1 shows the cohort composition.

Table 1: Cohort composition

	Cycle 1	Cycle 2
Total number of students	2 classes (EAP 2) = 26	2 classes (EAP 2) = 29
Age	18–37	17–36
Nationality	Chinese, Iranian, Iraqi, Saudi Arabian, Vietnamese	Chinese, Colombian, Saudi Arabian, Sri Lankan Taiwanese, Vietnamese
Pathways	Certificate or Diploma courses at Deakin College. Undergraduate or postgraduate courses at Deakin University.	Certificate or Diploma courses at Deakin College. Undergraduate or postgraduate courses at Deakin University.

Research focus

While the EAP courses at DUELI focus on academic skills such as note-taking, summary writing, research and report writing via class books specifically designed by DUELI for the EAP levels, we felt that there is currently a lack of explicit teaching of academic vocabulary. When we refer to academic vocabulary we are referring to the words in the Academic Word List (AWL) which is a list of 570 headwords first developed in 2000 by Avril Coxhead. Research shows that students want to expand their vocabulary but do not know how (Zhou 2009). Furthermore, students find it difficult to move from informal and everyday language to the formal and specialised language required in academic contexts (Coxhead and Byrd 2007).

At DUELI, we are mindful that while students progress through levels and improve in some skills, they may not improve in developing or using academic vocabulary in their writing. Research suggests that instruction needs to be deliberate with outcome-appropriate activities that are scaffolded so that students can go from identifying a new word to competently using it (Yahia and Sinatra 2013). Nation (2001) has identified that students need time and numerous occasions to acquire and use new vocabulary. Moore (2012) believes that as most EAP courses are very dense and skills-focused, vocabulary should be taught in small regular slots. Moore (2012) also supports the teaching of independent study skills so that students can keep improving their vocabulary.

After discussions with teachers and students as well as drawing on our own teaching experience, we felt that although students understand the significance of learning vocabulary they do not feel confident in acquiring or using new academic vocabulary. Therefore we developed a number of activities incorporating both traditional and contemporary methods. We also wanted to enhance the vocabulary learning experience by incorporating technological tools. We recognised the appeal of technology to our students and postulated that using apps and online tools would further assist and motivate them as shown by Alzahrani's (2015) study using mobile phones. Studies by Horst, Cobb and Nicolae (2005) where the AWL was used as the basis for learning vocabulary in an interactive online database also found that students processed new words better and had higher engagement levels.

The key questions we developed for our research were:

1. In what way would systematic teaching of academic vocabulary lead to increased use of that vocabulary by students?

2. In what way would technological tools assist in the students' academic vocabulary learning and usage?

Action taken

We undertook two cycles of AR. In both cycles we taught topic-based academic vocabulary using a variety of activities in the classroom and in the computer lab. A number of student-led amendments were made in Cycle 2 but most of the activities remained the same.

Traditional activities

Topic-based teaching activities formed the basis of our AR and the tasks included: reading comprehension, vocabulary in context, wordforms in sentences, and collocations, with material drawn from Huntley's (2006) *Essential Academic Vocabulary*. These activities usually lasted for 20 minutes and were implemented most days over each of the four weeks in the two cycles. Approximately 30 words taken from Coxhead's (2007) AWL and relevant to the week's topic were introduced each Monday. The topics we introduced for Cycle 1 were: 'Learning Styles', 'Student Housing', 'Business', and 'Economics', while for Cycle 2 they were: 'Learning Styles', 'History', 'Business', and 'Economics'. The topics in Cycle 2 were chosen by the students and while they chose three of the same topics, the fourth 'Student Housing' was superseded in Cycle 2 by 'History'. Foley (2009), by acknowledging that AWL lists are now often included in published EAP-type materials, confirms the fact that these lists are used in some form or another for many EAP courses. Foley (2009:19) discusses that 'receptive and productive knowledge' can be activated by dealing with targeted vocabulary through various tasks that focus on form, meaning and use.

Wall chart

In each cycle, the weekly target vocabulary was introduced each Monday with a kinesthetic activity involving small groups matching laminated terms with their appropriate definitions. These laminates were then placed on the wall for easy access throughout the cycle. Students also received a weekly word list with the terms and definitions each Monday. Thus as the cycle progressed the wall chart and word lists expanded.

Paragraph writing

Also on the Monday of each week of the two cycles, each student was required to write a paragraph-long response to a

written stimulus. The stimulus was chosen to elicit vocabulary relevant to that week's topic. The initial paragraph was written before the students were given the target vocabulary. On the Friday of each week, students' initial paragraphs were returned and they were asked to edit and improve their original version with a focus on including more of the target vocabulary.

Quizlet (online tool)

Quizlet (quizlet.com) is a free website providing learning tools for students, including flashcards, study and game modes. Each week students were given a link to Quizlet and the specific study set for that week's vocabulary. This tool was used by the students as a self-study access tool and as such could be utilised by the students at any time with each week's study set being released on the Monday and available for the entire duration of the course.

Kahoot (online tool)

Kahoot (getkahoot.com) is a game-based platform that students accessed at the end of each week during their computer lab session. The game consisted of approximately 20 multiple-choice questions made up from the specific vocabulary from the current and preceding weeks. A leader board was made up in the classroom with the top five students' names being placed there each week.

Data collection

As we continued the research, we analysed the data we were collecting to inform us of possible improvements we could make for the next cycle and to assess if the implemented activities were in fact having a positive impact.

Student survey

At the start of both cycles, a survey (Appendix 1) was given to all students to gauge their current perception of the differences between general and academic vocabulary, their current methods of and issues with learning academic vocabulary, and their current use of academic vocabulary. The survey also allowed us to ascertain their current use of technology in learning vocabulary. Students agreed that learning vocabulary was important (Q1) and they had positive attitudes to learning (Q2, Q3). Most of the problems surrounding academic vocabulary involved not being able to remember words and not having the opportunity to use the words (Q7, Q9). Most students only used dictionary type applications (Q8). This data helped to form the basis of the AR tasks.

Vocabulary test

A multiple-choice test was conducted at the start of each cycle to see how much vocabulary was already known by the students. In the first cycle, the test consisted of 25 questions with five words chosen from each of five topics (however, only four topics were taught as the cycle was shortened to four weeks due to attendance issues in Week 5). In the second cycle, the test consisted of 20 questions with five words chosen from each of the four topics taught. The tests consisted of academic terms with a choice of four definitions for each. The same vocabulary test was given again to the

students at the end of each cycle. The data was then analysed to see if there had been any changes in the results attained between pre- to post-teaching of the academic vocabulary.

Paragraph writing

The students' paragraphs were analysed to review the number of specific academic words (i.e. those in the weekly word lists) used at the end of the week (after self-editing) compared to the start of the week.

Kahoot results

The results from the Kahoot online game were downloaded and analysed weekly.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews have a structure but are still open enough to allow for probing and exploration (Burns 2010:75). At the end of both cycles, students were taken out of class in groups of 3–5 and were asked a series of questions relating to their experience of, their ongoing motivation towards, and feedback on, the tasks and activities (the full set of questions is provided in Appendix 2). As each cycle was only 4 weeks long it was decided to do the interviews at the end of each cycle. The recordings from these sessions were analysed and were used to modify and improve the AR prior to Cycle 2 and also for further information to assist in the curriculum review.

Amendments for Cycle 2

The feedback from students and our own observations formed the basis on which amendments and improvements were made prior to Cycle 2. First, the student survey was simplified as the Cycle 1 survey was found to require a great deal of teacher input in terms of assisting students in understanding the questions and how to answer them. The Cycle 2 survey while asking the same questions used simpler language and a simpler layout. A question was also added to elicit which topics students were interested in. It was interesting that, apart from one, the students chose the same topics as we had chosen for them in Cycle 1. Being able to choose the topics (via Cycle 2 student survey, see Appendix 1) made students part of the decision-making process and gave them more ownership of their learning.

Second, the Cycle 1 feedback from the semi-structured interviews highlighted the fact that, while acknowledging the benefits of paragraph writing, students felt that this task was very difficult and they wanted more feedback on their progress. Thus a scaffolded editing exercise was added to the teaching activities and the students' paragraphs were returned with grammar mistakes and target vocabulary highlighted.

Students also felt that they had trouble recognising and using the different wordforms (noun, verb, adjective, adverb) of a specific word so for the second cycle a number of new strategies were implemented. The word list was amended from being a complete document with terms and definitions to a semi-complete document that required students to complete wordform (noun, verb, adjective and adverb) columns. Students in Cycle 2 also gave mini presentations to the class with their chosen key words, the wordforms and their words in sentences. Thus, the students were learning

from each other on a daily basis as evidenced by the fact that many students wrote the wordforms on their weekly word list document and mentioned it in their interviews. The sample sentences were placed on the classroom walls alongside the word charts. Giving a mini-presentation regarding two to three words from the weekly word list meant that students had to investigate these words thoroughly, be able to pronounce them correctly, use them in a sentence, and be confident in presenting them to the class.

Students overwhelmingly chose the online tools as their favourite and did not recommend any major changes. The only comment was that Kahoot could be varied by having some questions in a term-definitions format and others reversed (i.e. definition-terms format).

Data analysis

Data collected from the first cycle via the paragraph activities, the vocabulary tests and the Kahoot results showed a vast improvement in students' knowledge and use of the specific academic vocabulary taught. Students overwhelmingly chose the Kahoot activity as their favourite, but also found the more traditional activities valuable. They all agreed during the semi-structured interviews that they had learnt many more words than they would have without the AR.

Students chose the online tools over traditional tasks as their preferred choice (interview Q17) for both Cycles 1 and 2. Table 2 gives a sample of their comments on these tools. In Cycle 1, Kahoot was chosen as the activity that students most enjoyed (interview Q18). Kahoot was also chosen as the activity that students found most helpful and useful for learning (interview Q19). Quizlet was chosen as the second most helpful activity. In Cycle 2, Kahoot was again chosen as the activity that students most enjoyed, with Quizlet as second choice (interview Q17). Quizlet was chosen as the second most helpful activity (interview Q19).

Table 2: Student comments on online tools

	Quizlet comments	Kahoot comments
Cycle 1	Clear, easy, convenient, can use repetitively, mobile, speller good, clear pronunciation, learning with play is enjoyable, test good.	Enjoy, fun, good for revision, communicative, interesting, competition game fun, game good, play together.
Cycle 2	Helpful, convenient, easy to use, definitions good, good to use on public transport, games, vocabulary match good, practise pronunciation, tests, new words, remembering, quick reaction in games, easy to do in free time, variety of tasks.	Helpful, competition, exciting, fun, interesting, can check results, can check knowledge, like competition, funny, fast, revision, good music, competition can enhance us to remember new words, we all want to be first.

Figures 1–4 show the number of students and their percentage of correct responses for each week's Kahoot game. Each week the Kahoot game consisted of vocabulary from the current week as well as previous weeks so in Week 1 the vocabulary was only from Week 1 while in Week 4 the vocabulary came from all 4 weeks. These graphs show the number of students in each of four categories. The categories were; those who achieved 0–25% correct answers, 26–50% correct answers, 51–75% correct answers and 76–100% correct answers.

For Cycle 1, in Week 1 most students achieved between 51–75% correct responses while in wWeek 2 the numbers were spread more evenly over the 51–75% and 76–100% correct range. By Week 3, more students achieved a 76–100% score and only one student fell in the 26–50% category. In Week 4, the majority (16 from 25 students) scored above 75% correct answers.

For Cycle 2, the Kahoot result progression was not as clear. While most students still achieved above 51% every week, the ratio of students in the top two categories fluctuated. This variation may be due to a different topic being chosen for Week 3 of Cycle 2 (History in Cycle 2 compared to Student Housing in Cycle 1). Although they chose it, students found the topic of History quite difficult. Another reason for the fluctuations in Cycle 2 may be because of the amendments made in the question types for Cycle 2.

Student feedback from Cycle 1 indicated that they thought the Kahoot questions should be varied. Thus for Cycle 2, half of that week's Kahoot game had the terms as the question and a choice of four definitions while the other half of that week's game had the definition as the question with a choice of four terms. Students found this more enjoyable but also more challenging. The Kahoot results across both cycles showed that all students correctly answered at least 25% of the words.

Figure 1: Number of students and their percentage of correct responses for Cycle 1, Week 1 Kahoot
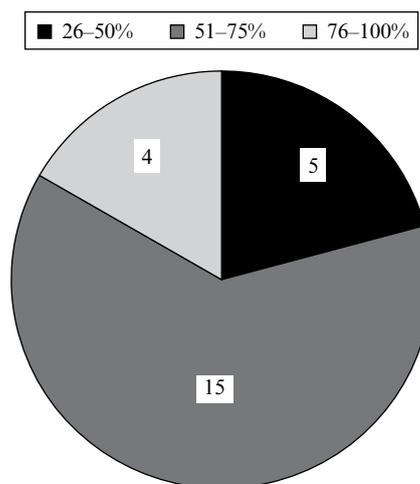
Figure 2: Number of students and their percentage of correct responses for Cycle 1, Week 4 Kahoot
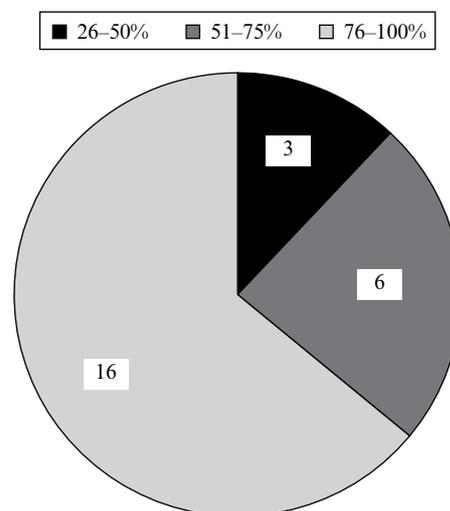
Figure 3: Number of students and their percentage of correct responses for Cycle 2, Week 1 Kahoot
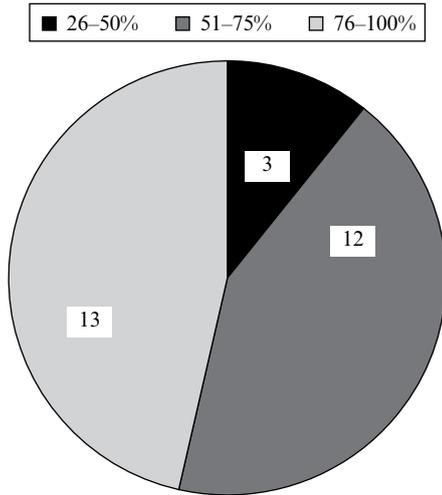
Figure 4: Number of students and their percentage of correct responses for Cycle 2, Week 4 Kahoot
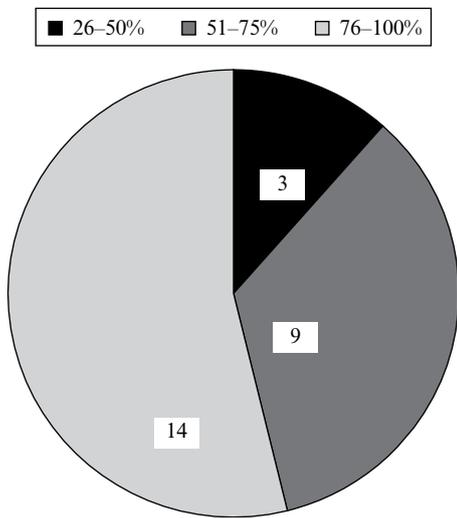
Figures 5 and 6 show the number of correct responses to the multiple choice vocabulary test. The students were given the same multiple choice test before starting the cycle and at the end of the cycle. In both cycles there was a marked shift towards higher levels of correct responses in the final (post AR) test: the Cycle 1 average mark was 12/25 pretest, 20/25 post-test, while for Cycle 2 the average mark was 11/20 pretest, 15/20 post-test. It can be clearly seen that the students

Figure 5: Cycle 1 results of a vocabulary test done before and after the AR activities
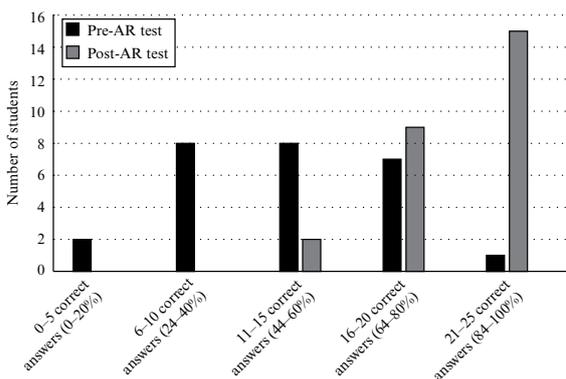
Figure 6: Cycle 2 results of a vocabulary test done before and after the AR activities
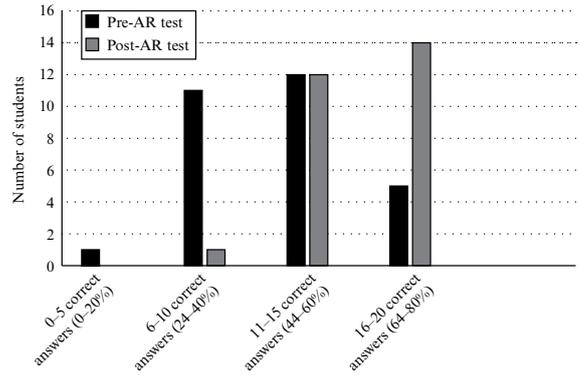
improved considerably in their knowledge of the definition of these specific academic words over the course of the AR.

In the weekly paragraph activity each student was asked to produce a paragraph from the same given stimulus. The stimulus topic changed each week in line with the weekly topic. The first draft was written on the Monday of each week prior to knowing the academic words for that week. The second draft was then written on the Friday of each week after the completion of all teaching activities for that week's vocabulary. The students were encouraged to edit their original version and use more of the new vocabulary. Results show the total number of target academic vocabulary used in both activities each week. The results were similar for both cycles with students incorporating many of the new academic vocabulary into the edited Friday paragraphs. In fact, at times students even used words from previous weeks (see Figures 7 and 8). In some cases students used words from future weeks which had not been taught explicitly yet and this indicated that they already knew these words.

Figure 7: Cycle 1 results for the paragraph writing activity (Mondays and Fridays)
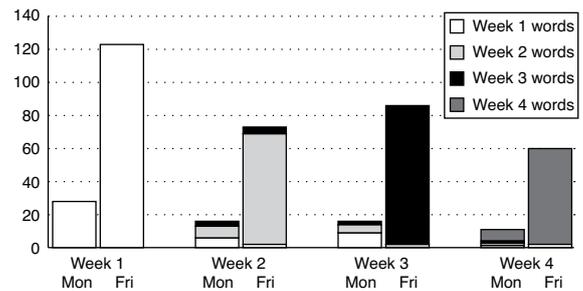
Figure 8: Cycle 2 results for the paragraph writing activity (Mondays and Fridays)
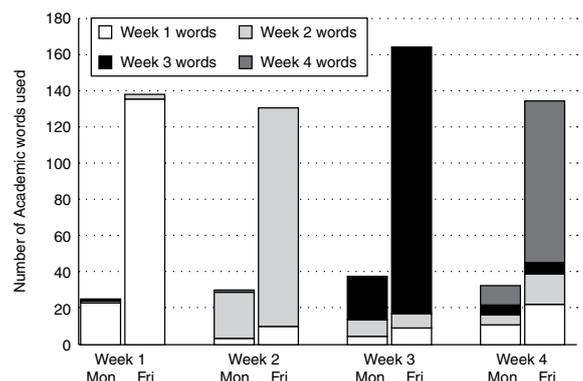
Reflection

Nation (2001:2) maintains that 'a course should involve the direct teaching of vocabulary and the direct learning and study of vocabulary.' The data from our study certainly indicated that the systematic teaching of vocabulary is effective and beneficial to students. It has been an area that is not often focused on in class in our experience. While we have only concentrated on one area, namely EAP, the learning of academic and high frequency vocabulary in a systematic way should begin early and continue throughout all levels. The deliberate teaching and studying of words should be an integral component that can be incorporated into any English language teaching program. We feel that our positive findings will resonate with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) teachers working not only in language centres but throughout the education system.

Further exploration could be done in terms of assisting students to develop independent vocabulary learning strategies. The semi-structured interviews showed that students were not aware of self-study strategies in relation to learning academic vocabulary. Most would continue to rely heavily on being guided by a teacher. They had not considered an independent and systematic way of learning vocabulary and would continue to just note down words as they came up without implementing any further action. However, at the end of the second cycle, students were starting to be motivated to learn vocabulary and wanted to know how to use Quizlet for self-study. This proved to be a bonus outcome as self-study strategies were not part of our research focus.

Another area that could be further explored is the use of technology for learning and teaching vocabulary. We have seen from our research that students were very enthusiastic about using technological tools. They were particularly enthusiastic about playing Kahoot. We believe that using technological tools can be applied to all levels of English. There is an ever increasing plethora of online games and apps that teachers and students could use to enhance teaching, learning and motivation. If students became adept at using a tool like Quizlet early on, their vocabulary learning strategies would be enhanced by the time they reached EAP levels. With the use of technology, students would have more tools to assist them in becoming competent independent language learners. Technology has also broadened the teaching strategies that teachers can employ.

One of our major challenges was implementing the activities in an already crowded curriculum, which involved high priority assessment tasks. However, the quantifiable success and the feedback from our students definitely verified the benefits even in such short 4-week cycles. Furthermore, we now have evidence-based data that we can refer to when developing the new EAP 2 curriculum. Students also incorporated the new vocabulary, not only in the AR activities, but also in other areas of their EAP 2 work such as timed writing tasks, the research report, and the summary writing. In fact, examples of the target academic vocabulary were even evident in the semi-structured interviews. In explaining why he liked Kahoot, one student, using the term 'enhance' from the Week 3 vocabulary items, said: 'competition can enhance us to remember more words.'

A significant benefit to the students has been a better understanding of the process of learning academic vocabulary. They gained an awareness of the use of apps like Quizlet and Kahoot. They saw that they can be responsible for their own learning and that learning vocabulary demands self-study strategies. Students stated that before the AR they never really knew how to learn vocabulary in a systematic fashion. Through this project students came to appreciate the effort required on their part to expand and consolidate their academic vocabulary.

For us, one of the major benefits of this AR project arose from the collaboration not only between us and other teachers but also between us and our students. In a busy schedule, there is often little time for discussion about teaching or students' progress. However, with the AR project we constantly reassessed and refined the activities we were doing in class with our co-teachers. The sharing of ideas has been invaluable and we feel that it has impacted positively on our teaching practice. We have become more reflective about what happens in the classroom and more aware of our students' needs and interests. Often, students are infrequently consulted on their views about their learning experience and are only rarely given the opportunity to give feedback to teachers. For our AR, students' input was used to define the weekly topics and also to modify tasks such as the word list. Additionally, at the end of each cycle the students participated in small group semi-structured interviews to give feedback about the AR project. Students knew that their opinions mattered and they realised that their responses were essential to the project. They actively participated in the process with honesty, enthusiasm and astuteness. Their level of engagement not only benefited the project but also the teachers and the students themselves. Their responses indicated an overwhelmingly positive perception of the AR. We feel that the AR project has enriched our teaching and empowered us to competently pursue future opportunities presenting themselves in the classroom.

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Appendix 1: Action Research Student Survey: Cycle 2

1. Learning vocabulary is important when learning a language.
   - ❍ Strongly agree
   - ❍ Agree
   - ❍ Undecided
   - ❍ Disagree
   - ❍ Strongly disagree

2. What is your attitude to learning **general** vocabulary?
   Hate   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   Love

3. What is your attitude to learning **academic** vocabulary?
   Hate   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   Love

4. What do you think are 3 differences between **academic** and **general** vocabulary?
   1)
   2)
   3)

5. Name 3 things you do to:

Learn new **general** vocabulary
   1)
   2)
   3)

Learn new **academic** vocabulary
   1)
   2)
   3)

6. Are you successful when learning new vocabulary?

Academic	General
❍ Yes	❍ Yes
❍ No	❍ No
❍ Sometimes	❍ Sometimes
Why?_____	Why?_____

7. What problems do you have with learning new vocabulary?
   1) _____
   2) _____
   3) _____

8. Have you used technology to learn vocabulary?
   - ❍ Apps   Give examples:
   - ❍ Internet   Give examples:
   - ❍ None

Why?_____
_____

9. How often do you use new vocabulary?
General vocabulary:
   - ❍ Never
   - ❍ 1–2 times/week
   - ❍ 3–4 times/week
   - ❍ 5–6 times/week
   - ❍ Every day

Academic vocabulary:
   - ❍ Never
   - ❍ 1–2 times/week
   - ❍ 3–4 times/week
   - ❍ 5–6 times/week
   - ❍ Every day

10. I am happy with the academic vocabulary taught in my previous DUELI classes
   - ❍ Strongly agree
   - ❍ Agree
   - ❍ Undecided
   - ❍ Disagree
   - ❍ Strongly disagree
   - ❍ I don't know as this is my first DUELI class

11. How could your EAP2 teacher help you with learning vocabulary?
   1) _____
   2) _____
   3) _____

12. Choose 4 topics that interest you to learn academic vocabulary from.
   - ❍ Learning Styles
   - ❍ Stress in College Life
   - ❍ Student Housing
   - ❍ Student Activities
   - ❍ Education
   - ❍ Business
   - ❍ Marketing
   - ❍ Economics
   - ❍ Psychology
   - ❍ History
   - ❍ Political Science
   - ❍ Linguistics
   - ❍ Environmental Science
   - ❍ Geology
   - ❍ Chemistry
   - ❍ Information Science & Technology

Appendix 2: Semi-structured interview questions

General

1) Do you think you know more academic words now than at the beginning of this intake?

2) Do you know how to use the new academic words that you learnt every week?

3) Are you confident using them?

4)   Have you used them?/ Did you try to use them (how)?

5)   Did you know some of the words already?

❍   Yes & use them already

❍   Yes but haven't used them before

❍   No, all new

6)   Will you use those academic words in the future?

7)   Do you think learning these new words each week helped you in EAP2, or do you think it made the course more difficult? How?/Why?

8)   What problems did you have in learning the new words each week?

9)   How did you learn the new words each week? Old/New techniques? Only from AR activities or other?

10) Do you think you would have learnt this many new words without the research project?

11) Did you find having the weekly words organised under topics helpful/useful or 'restrictive'? Why?

12) Has this project motivated you to learn more Academic words?

13) Do you feel confident in your ability to keep learning new words?

Paragraph activity

14) How difficult was it to use the new words when you re-wrote the paragraph on Fridays?

❍   Didn't use any new words. . ..Why?_____

❍   5 (very difficult)

❍   4

❍   3

❍   2

❍   1 (very easy)

14b)   Did you find the paragraph activity (4) helped you?

15)   Which phrase best describes you?

❍   I tried to use many new words

❍   I was happy if I only used a few new words

❍   I was happy if I didn't use any new words but my grammar was better

16) Which phrase/s best describe/s you?

❍   I used new words but I wasn't sure of the meaning

❍   I only used words if I knew what they meant

❍   I only used words if I knew what they meant and how to use them

❍   I tried to use words from different weeks

❍   I tried to change the wordform for the context

Tasks specific

17) Did you prefer the traditional tasks (matching words, worksheets) or the online tools (Quizlet, Kahoot)? Why?

18) Which activities did you enjoy/like the most?

❍   Paragraph writing

❍   Matching the word-definition

❍   Quizlet self-study site

❍   Worksheets

❍   Kahoot online game

❍   Presentation of word/sentence

19) Which activities did you find the most helpful/useful for learning?

❍   Paragraph writing

❍   Matching the word-definition

❍   Quizlet self-study site

❍   Worksheets

❍   Kahoot online game

❍   Presentation of word/sentence

20) Which activities did you not like? Why?

❍   Paragraph writing

❍   Matching the word-definition

❍   Quizlet self-study site

❍   Worksheets

❍   Kahoot online game

❍   Presentation of word/sentence

21) Matching word-definition activity & word list

Good things	Bad things

22) Worksheets

Good things	Bad things

23) Quizlet-online self study tool (what aspects did you use?)

Good things	Bad things

24) Kahoot & Leader Board

Good things	Bad things

25) Presentation of word/sentences

Good things	Bad things

Suggestions on how to improve the activities in this AR

IELTS Writing: A gamification journey

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Introduction

In 2014 Gartner, the information technology guru famous for his impressively accurate predictions, mentioned that gamification had become an essential part of any digital business or learning strategy as a way of digitally motivating people and overcoming communication barriers. Although the term gamification is controversial, researchers from diverse fields seem to agree that it refers to the application of typical elements of game playing to other areas of activity. Whereas the use of some types of games in English language teaching (ELT) has been constant for decades, they are far less common in exam classes such as an *IELTS* preparatory course.

Exam classes can be very challenging to teach in the ELT world. Teachers have to deal with many internal and external factors such as time constraints, students' lack of motivation, excessive anxiety, and frustration. When it comes to *IELTS* exam classes, which I teach at my centre, students' responses seem to be even more challenging. For this reason, gamifying the process of language learning through educational technology could provide a framework for achieving more positive student engagement and possibly increase their performance as suggested by the New Media Consortium *Horizon Report* (2014) when describing the example of Kaplan University and their Gamification software embedded in the Learning Management System (LMS): 'Students' grades improved by 9% and the number of students who failed the course decreased by 16%'.

Since July 2014, I have taught 62 students in the *IELTS* program. Every time there was a new student, a needs analysis was conducted. Together with this needs analysis, three questions were asked: Given the four abilities (listening, speaking, reading, writing) which do you find the most difficult to improve? Do you prefer to study using a notepad and books or a computer/tablet/phone? Do you play any kind of computer games? 90% of the students replied that writing was the most difficult ability to improve and 77% of students preferred to use some kind of technology to study and 100% engaged in some sort of online gaming.

Given that most learners were engaged in some form of gaming and that they believed writing was the most difficult skill to improve, having both together seemed to make sense. Therefore, I decided to follow the gamification trend in this action research (AR) and focus on investigating whether gamification could have an impact on students' writing skills for the *IELTS* exam.

The research questions that guided this AR were:

1. Can gamification have an impact on students' writing skills for the *IELTS* exam?

2. Can gamification speed the process and make it less monotonous?

3. Can gamification help learners gain autonomy and become more independent?

4. Can technology that students use on a daily basis in their personal lives to play games be integrated into and beyond the classroom in order to maximise practice time?

Context and participants

Research was conducted over four 5-week cycles with 19 participants in Cycle 1 and 15 students in Cycles 2, 3 and 4. There was no clear majority of nationalities, yet, most students spoke Spanish (around 45%). Students in each cycle were Brazilian, Chinese, Colombian, Czech, Italian, Japanese, Lithuanian, Peruvian, Polish, Venezuelan, Saudi Arabian, Spanish, Taiwanese, Thai and Vietnamese. In terms of gender, there were 21 males and 12 females. Regarding

students' levels, they varied considerably between B1 and B2 with a few at C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001). All the students were studying an *IELTS* preparation course at the Kaplan International College, Adelaide (KIE Adelaide).

All students in the *IELTS* preparation course were involved in the AR project. The project was conducted from mid-April to mid-August. In the four independent cycles of AR, the 33 participants were my students in the *IELTS* class. Due to rolling enrolment there was overlapping, and four students participated in all cycles, 10 students participated in both Cycles 1 and 2, and six students participated in both Cycles 3 and 4. An overview of the students' backgrounds is given in Table 1.

Figure 1 shows the reasons why students participated in the course. Most students were interested in the course for immigration purposes (21 out of 33), but a few were planning further study in Australia either at a Master's level (two out of 33) or at Vocational level (four out of 33) and the other students had finished the Kaplan's Collection K+ Higher Intermediate course (B2 level on the CEFR) and were sent to the *IELTS* preparation course as the Higher Intermediate course is the highest level available at the college.

Figure 1: Reasons for undertaking IELTS preparation
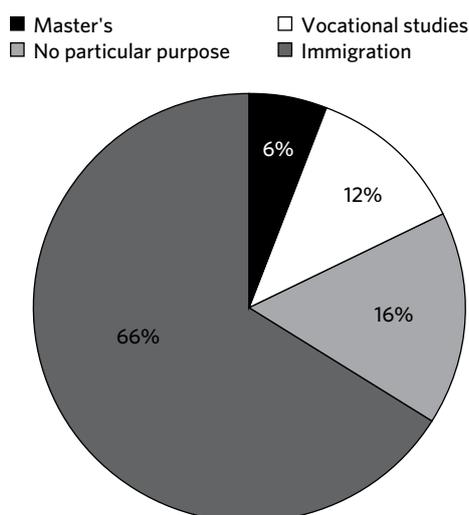
Research focus

The main objective of gamification is to increase participation and to motivate users through the use of game elements. Werbach and Hunter (2012) define gamification as the use of game elements and game design techniques in non-game contexts. Essentially, any activity, task, or assignment could

be gamified. In order to gamify a task or, in my case a course, it is important to consider the elements or components in gamification such as points, leaderboards, and immediate feedback among other things.

These components are explained in the work of Sailer, Hense, Mandl and Klevers (2013) and summarised in Table 2. Points, badges and leaderboards can, perhaps, be considered the most important components of gamification and together they are often referred to as PBL. Points are used to encourage people to do things by collecting them. They seem to be popular with those who like collecting things or competing against each other. Badges are an extended version of points. A badge is a visual representation of some achievement within the gamified process. They present five main motivational characteristics:

1. They set a goal.
2. They provide guidance as to what is possible within the system.
3. They give reputation and visual markers of what users are capable of.
4. They show virtual status symbols and affirmations of the personal journey.
5. They are a way of connecting (tribal markers) as users with the same badges will feel connected.

Leaderboards are the last component of the PBL triad. Users often want to know where they stand in relation to their peers; thus, the leaderboard gives context to progression in a way the points or badges cannot.

In this AR project, I used points, badges, leaderboards and games to gamify the *IELTS* Writing section of the preparation course. Figure 2 is an example of how the leaderboard was used and Figure 3 shows the badges adopted throughout the four cycles of this AR.

As previously mentioned, gamification has different definitions using varied perspectives. Although some of the theories behind gamification suggest the whole course should be redeveloped and redesigned, as in most colleges around the world, the *IELTS* preparation course had a set and tight curriculum that needed to be followed; therefore, for this AR, gamification was incorporated and functioned as one more tool to help achieve learners' goals.

It is common knowledge among teachers that exam classes are well known for their many hours of practice. The *IELTS* preparation course that I taught was not much different. Even though I understood how important practice tests are, I also know that they are long, tiring and results from using them are not usually easily noticeable in exams scores. With this in mind, I wanted to incorporate something that would make lessons lighter and less tiring and that would give students

Table 1: Student overview

	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Cycle 4
No. of students	19	15	15	15
No. of females	10	6	7	6
No. of males	9	9	8	9
Age range	18–39	18–39	18–50	18–42
L1s represented	Italian, Japanese, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish	French, German, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, Thai	Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Thai, Italian, French	Spanish, Portuguese, Thai, Polish, German, Italian, Arabic, Korean

Table 2: Elements of gamification and their definitions

Element	Definition
Points	Numeric accumulation based on certain activities
Badges	Visual representation of achievements for the use shown online
Leaderboards	How the players are ranked based on success
Progress bars	Progression shows the status of a player
Performance graph	Shows player performance
Quests	Some of the tasks players have to fulfil in a game
Levels	A section or part of the game
Avatars	Visual representation of a player or alter ego
Social elements	Relationships with other uses through the game
Rewards/reward system	System to motivate players that accomplish a quest

Figure 2: Leaderboard example

Figure 3: Badges used during the four cycles of the AR
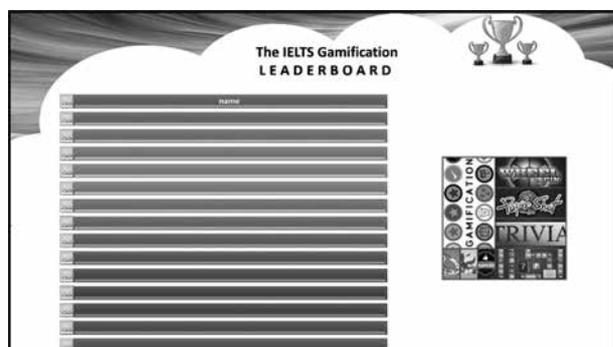
faster results. For me, the answer to this complex equation was the use of gamification.

According to my initial survey, the majority of students were involved in some form of gaming mainly by using their mobile phones. As a new platform, mobile phones allow for constant connectivity including games. Mobile gaming has expanded how we interact with games. For example, according to the 2014 *Ericsson Mobility Report*, 65% of the 2 billion apps downloaded in 2014 were games.

Through this AR I hoped to test my idea that since gaming is relevant to and present in peoples' lives and games are designed to engage players as participants, then gamification is likely to be relevant to 21st century education. As Stern (2011) points out, our classroom spaces today occupy traditional, physical outlets, but also imaginary, online gathering places such as course management systems, blogs, and social networks like Twitter and Facebook have become extensions of our pedagogical bodies.

Overall, this AR wanted to investigate if technology that students used on a daily basis in their personal lives to play games could be integrated into and beyond the classroom. By using technology to design material and allow students to access this material and the tools used to develop them whenever they wanted to, my intention was also to try to generate students' autonomy.

The games

There were five different main games that were introduced weekly (see the Appendix for examples) accompanied by

other smaller games made using Class Tools, Cram, Kahoot, Quizlet and Super Teacher Tools. Since the games were used both in classroom and outside the classroom, I needed to monitor and count points. In order to do it, all resources used had to somehow be SCORM compliant.

SCORM stands for Sharable Content Object Reference Model and it is a set of technical standards developed for eLearning software products. In its essence, SCORM enables interoperability between eLearning software products. Specifically, the model determines how online learning content and Learning Management Systems (LMS) communicate with each other.

All scores were either sent or added to Moodle, which allowed the LMS to automatically generate leaderboard data that later was used to keep track of participants' performance.

The cycles

Overall, the project involved the development of a platform using the LMS Moodle, the design of games, students choosing badges, an initial writing assessment, introductory lessons in the classroom, game playing in the computer room, weekly writing, an individual feedback session and, at the end of each cycle, a 20-minute feedback session comparing and contrasting their last piece of writing with their initial diagnostic one in each of the four cycles. (See the Appendix for a sample of the gamified Moodle platform.)

There were slight modifications in the games throughout the four cycles. However, there were significant changes in the design and descriptions of the badges. Since there is continuous enrolment in the *IELTS* preparation course, redefining students' badges was important so that both newcomers and longer-term students could engage in the platform and play the games. In the first cycle, I realised that students also needed help writing the essays (Task 2), so some of the initial games were replaced with new ones aiming at developing essay structure and specific

vocabulary. In Cycle 2, when I conducted a focus group, students mentioned that it would be advantageous to incorporate material that could be used as references for the remaining three skills. Four new videos were added with explanations and tips covering listening, reading and speaking. Finally, in Cycles 3 and 4 there were no changes with the exception of the badges. Table 3 gives a more detailed overview of the content covered throughout Cycles 1, 2 and 3. Cycle 4 is not described as it was the same as Cycle 3 except for the meaning given to the badges.

Towards the middle of Cycle 2, as I observed students using the platform in the college's computer room, I approached one of the students who seemed to be bored by asking a simple question, 'Is everything OK?'. What she replied next will be on my mind forever. She looked at me with a frown and said that I was trying too hard and that if she wanted to learn, she would be doing something about it and that I should stop using 'those crazy things'. By no means was I ready to reply to that; I simply said that I was sorry she felt that way and that I would be there if she needed me.

Unhappy and intrigued by what had happened, I decided to approach individually each of the eight students who did not seem to be enjoying the class and the project. The conversations were short and had something in common: all students said that they were in the *IELTS* preparation class for visa reasons and were not willing to learn anything else.

Fortunately and surprisingly, the eight students had something else in common: they were all engineers. I then decided to design games that dealt with the lexical field of engineering. Because they were not related to the *IELTS* class, I did not add these games to the platform, but gave students the choice of accessing the regular Moodle platform, using the new games or ceasing the project. To my surprise, none of them decided to leave the project and five of them decided to switch to the engineering games.

Data collection

Throughout Cycles 1 to 4, I used observation journals, which were both descriptive and reflective (Burns 2010), focus groups to explore my students' perceptions of their engagement in the AR program, and Moodle data tracking. Since there was continuous enrolment, I also conducted student exit interviews at the end of each cycle or whenever it was their last class. In addition to these data collection tools, I also used students' initial and final pieces of writing which provided extensive data on their understanding of the *IELTS* Writing exam and also allowed me to analyse their level of progress in their writing skills. Table 4 displays how often each participant logged into the platform in and outside the classroom during the cycles – Students 1, 2, 3

Table 3: Overview of cycles

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Extra week
Cycle 1	Badge selection Brief needs analysis Initial writing task General writing information	Parts of speech: adj, adv, noun, verb Upwards and downwards trends vocabulary	Analysing graphs, tables and maps Describing a process	Types of graph Linking words	Giving an overview and talking about detail Final task and comparison with initial task	
Cycle 2	Badge selection Brief needs analysis (new students) Initial writing task General writing information	Parts of speech: adj, adv, noun, verb Upwards and downwards trends vocabulary Understanding *IELTS* Task 2	Types of graph Linking words	Comparing and contrasting ideas	Academic vocabulary Final task and comparison with initial task	Video about the listening, reading and speaking sections of the *IELTS* exam
Cycles 3 and 4	Badge selection Brief needs analysis (new students) Initial task General writing information	Parts of speech: adj, adv, noun, verb Upwards and downwards trends vocabulary Understanding *IELTS* Task 2	Types of graph Linking words	Comparing and contrasting ideas	Academic vocabulary Final task and comparison with initial task	Video about the listening, reading and speaking sections of the *IELTS* exam

Table 4: Moodle digital tracking: No. of logins

Student 1	211	Student 8	160	Student 15	141	Student 22	110	Student 29	84
Student 2	199	Student 9	159	Student 16	140	Student 23	104	Student 30	78
Student 3	185	Student 10	158	Student 17	137	Student 24	99	Student 31	62
Student 4	181	Student 11	155	Student 18	134	Student 25	97	Student 32	55
Student 5	175	Student 12	152	Student 19	132	Student 26	93	Student 33	30
Student 6	174	Student 13	150	Student 20	131	Student 27	89		
Student 7	163	Student 14	147	Student 21	129	Student 28	86		

and 4 participated in all four cycles; Student 5 to Student 14 participated in Cycles 1 and 2; Student 15 to Student 21 participated in Cycles 3 and 4; Student 22 to 25 participated only in Cycle 1; Student 26 to 28 participated only in Cycle 2; Student 29 to 31 participated only in Cycle 3; finally, Students 32 and 33 participated only in Cycle 4.

Findings

From Cycle 2 it became clear that there were two distinct groups in the class: one, with 25 students, who were very motivated and curious about the platform and how it could help them reach their *IELTS* scores, and a second smaller group of eight students, who did not seem to be especially motivated and did not particularly appreciate the idea of playing games. For this reason, I now describe my findings in relation to each group.

Motivated student group

Regarding language development, there was an overall improvement in students' writing in four weeks after they joined the course. Spelling and sentence structure improved dramatically, their vocabulary grew significantly and as a result, their writing was also less repetitive. The most impressive result I noticed was that, in a regular *IELTS* group, students would generally take 10 weeks to start showing some progress, and yet with the gamified Moodle platform, much better results were achieved after only four weeks. Students' engagement also led to their sense of autonomy and they took ownership of their learning by using the tools that had been previously introduced. One of the quotes from the focus group in Cycle 1 shows how students were engaged and became autonomous: 'It's so cool. We made a WhatsApp group and we comment on new vocabulary. We made new lists with great sentences (using Quizlet.com). Now I remember to use all good English I have but never remembered to use. I know it's geek stuff, but I got my 7.5 each band!' Another interesting and unpredicted result was students' levels of engagement. Because students were engaged, my feedback became more meaningful as they became more assertive and asked questions that were to the

point. In addition, language aspects aside, the gamified Moodle platform encouraged closer teacher–student relationships even with the most introvert students. During his last feedback session, one of the participants said: 'I'm so happy that someone finally understood how I learn! The games were great. I repeated them many times and learned a lot. I also loved to be on top of the scoreboard!' In addition, some students who have finished their courses still currently participate actively in the platform and in their self-created WhatsApp group. Finally, students' positive responses and score improvements demonstrated a possible potential of gamification as a tool not only in *IELTS* exam classes or exam classes in general but also in any type of ELT. Table 5 illustrates official *IELTS* score results with some of the participants that stayed the longest and the shortest periods after joining this AR.

Unmotivated student group

On the other hand, there were results that were not particularly encouraging. After the games focused on engineering were created, it seems that gamification had some impact on the students, at least partially. The group of five students who had decided to use the games related to engineering vocabulary saw improvement in that specific lexical field and mentioned during the exit survey that they had enjoyed learning in that way and thanked me for tailoring the course for them. However, the student who said 'I was trying too hard' did not want to take the end-of-course survey. It would have been interesting to follow up on the reasons for these students' attitudes but opportunities to do so were limited during the research.

Reflections

Being one of the teachers selected to join the AR project was overwhelming but not as much as my project itself. Initially I did not know where to begin, there were many hours spent learning new technologies, perfecting designs and configuring the platform. It was one of the most demanding experiences in my life but it was also one of the most rewarding periods of my teaching career. I envisioned, designed, tested, fixed and saw the project coming into life.

Table 5: Some students' IELTS scores after participating in the AR

	Initial official IELTS Writing score	Initial overall official IELTS score	Number of weeks in the course	Number of weeks in the project	Final official IELTS Writing score	Final official overall IELTS score
Student 1	4.5	Overall 4.5	22	20	7	7.5
Student 2	5.5	Overall 6	22	20	6.5	7
Student 3	5	Overall 6	10	10	6	6.5
Student 4	5	Overall 5.5	10	8	7	7
Student 5	6	Overall 6.5	10	10	7	7.5
Student 6	5.5	Overall 5.5	6	4	6.5	7
Student 7	5.5	Overall 5.5	5	5	6.5	6.5
Student 8	5	Overall 5.5	5	5	5.5	6
Student 9	5	Overall 5.5	5	5	5.5	6
Student 10	4.5	Overall 4.5	5	5	5	5

Paulo Freire (1996) says that there is no such thing as teaching without research and research without teaching. This AR has been incredibly rewarding and stimulating as it has taught me perhaps more than I taught my own students. It has allowed me to reflect on my teaching and mainly to work even more collaboratively with my students. It is always amazing to observe students' progress, especially when they reach their goals, but the AR has given me a different level of satisfaction, especially when students reported that they had finally learned to learn, or when they achieved their *IELTS* results in only four weeks.

Answering my initial research questions was undoubtedly gratifying. Yet, perhaps the most meaningful part of my AR project is the fact that because I researched the technology thoroughly, I have also managed to find software and online applications that are surprisingly user-friendly which can readily be used by other teachers in the ELT community. The list below presents the five free online resources used in this project. Through these tools teachers can gamify their courses and, most importantly, teach their students how to use the tools themselves so that they can become more autonomous and take ownership of their learning process. These are some of the tools used:

- Class Tools – www.classtools.net
- Cram – www.cram.com
- Kahoot – getkahoot.com and kahoot.it
- Quizlet – quizlet.com
- Super Teacher Tools – www.superteachertools.us

Next steps

Every year since the term gamification was coined, the number of researchers interested in investigating the topic grows significantly, especially in the educational field and more recently those interested in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Second Language Acquisition (SLA). There is now quite extensive discussion on the benefits of using gamification and on its relevance in language learning (Flores 2015, Lam 2014, Murta and Valadares 2013). This field is relatively new and for this reason allows for extensive investigation in the classroom by teachers. As for myself, I know that my AR was a small-scale study yet I strongly believe that the evidence I found in my classroom was enough to convince me to continue using this approach with other groups of students.

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Appendix: Example of the gamified Moodle platform
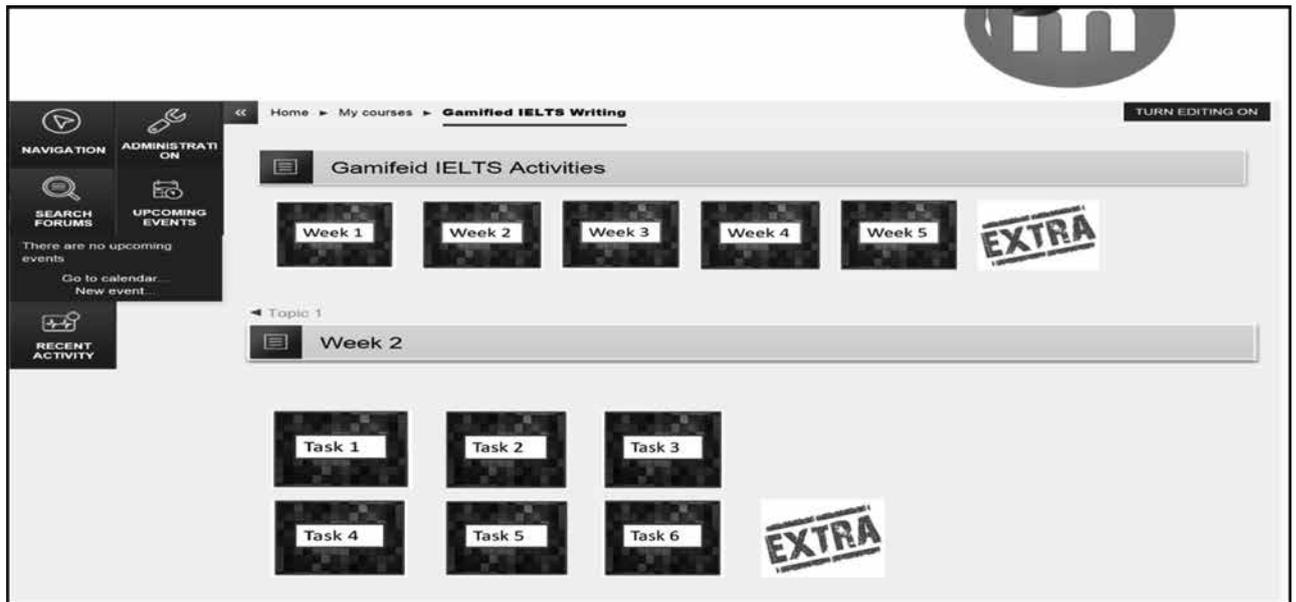
Selected games used

Apart from the tools mentioned in the article, there were five different games, described below.

Secret mission or mission impossible – Linking words

This game board is a spy/secret mission type of board game where learners have to click on the blue dots to be prompted to answer 40 randomised questions regarding linking words.

S is for structure – IELTS Writing structure of Task 1 and Task 2

The game board is a jeopardy type of game with 24 randomised questions focused on the structure of both writing tasks, where learners have to choose the topic and select which question to answer based on the level of difficulty.

Rise or Raise?

This is a board game with 40 randomised questions on common mistakes on grammar and vocabulary found in both Tasks 1 and 2.

How much do you know about IELTS? – Exam criteria

This is a wheel-spin type of game focused on explaining the criteria used to mark essays.

Graphs, graphs and more graphs

Vocabulary related to the nomenclature used in Task 1 and up and down trends. By answering questions, learners collect time and points to be used in a football setting after the end of the 30 randomised questions.
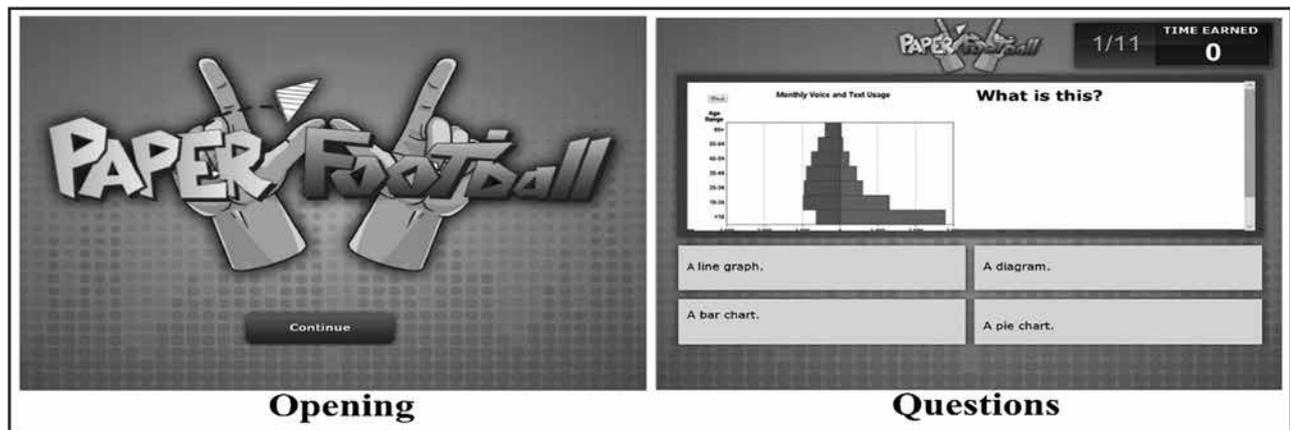
Using a feed-forward approach to provide error correction through technology

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Introduction

Many teachers spend considerable time marking, correcting and reformulating text when they teach writing to international students studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP). This process often involves extensive written and spoken feedback to students yet many continue to make the same errors in their writing. At The College – Western Sydney University (WSUC) (formerly known as University of Western Sydney (UWS) College) the EAP courses run for 10 weeks and are sequenced at five levels. Throughout their studies, some students make noticeable progress in their writing; however, many do not. While the latter seem to show a desire to develop, they often demonstrate little improvement even with written feedback and practice on their part. One reason could be their inability to notice their errors.

In 1996, Truscott (1996) put forward the view that error correction should be abandoned as it is ineffective. Citing numerous studies, he found that even after extensive and sustained teacher feedback students often showed little improvement in writing accuracy. However, other findings have shown that error correction can be constructive when different methods such as using computer-assisted corpora or giving students time in class to study their corrections have been utilised. Furthermore, research conducted in recent years has indicated that using technology can be effective to assist learning. For example, recent research conducted by Jane Hunter (2014) showed that when students utilised social media for their writing tasks, they were more careful and therefore made fewer errors.

These debates led us to much consideration and discussion on which area our action research (AR) on teaching, learning and assessing writing should be conducted. Our main thought was to progress students' writing by improving their self-editing skills. Our foremost assertion was that if students understood and were more aware of the errors they commonly made, they would be able to identify them and therefore correct them. Thus, this project aimed to use a 'feed-forward' approach to error correction, by assisting students to become aware of the errors they commonly made prior to a writing task. By helping them to become more aware of these errors, we hoped students would be less likely to commit them. In addition, the research aimed to address a general belief among many teachers we have worked with that students do not reflect enough on feedback given to them about their writing errors. We attempted to discover whether this was the case, and whether our intervention of 'feeding-forward' our evaluations of common errors could affect student learning positively. In addition, our research aimed to discover if students took more care with their work when writing online than on paper.

The main questions we focused on were:

1. Will using a 'feed-forward' approach, with use of a self-editing list of common errors, encourage students to become more self-aware of their errors and therefore correct them?

2. Will using an online platform, such as Blackboard, encourage students to correct errors?

Background

The 'feed-forward' approach was used to guide students to understand their individual common area of errors and to assist them in self-editing their work. Feed forward involves making students aware *before* their writing task of the habitual errors they make and contrasts with feeding back in this manner. It is an idea that has been used effectively in previous AR by Mason and Nazim (2014). This was encouraged through editing practice conducted mainly on paper at sentence and paragraph level in pairs and groups of three. As Li and Hegelheimer (2013) point out, making students aware of their errors and assisting them with editing practice enables them to be more active in their learning process and therefore more able to notice further errors.

Kao (2010) also outlines that Vygotsky's theory of mediation proposes that it is important for learners to have learning materials and tasks where they can learn actively. Using collaborative tasks to encourage editing practices can therefore be beneficial for language learners who have ready access to the help of their peers. When students work in collaboration with peers, they enter a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which Vygotsky believed to be where learning occurs. In collaborative work students can scaffold each other's learning, with the teacher also present to provide expert input if needed. Hanjani and Li (2014) concur with this approach, believing that collaborative work fosters learning. Interestingly, Cullen, Kullman and Wild (2013) found in their research that use of technology, such as a wiki, could provide a collaborative platform; however, it did not necessarily mean that collaboration occurred and they recommend that teachers facilitate student collaboration accordingly.

As such, we thought we would introduce a social media platform for writing practice, such as Facebook, but we eventually chose to use Blackboard as the technology medium as it would benefit students in future studies at Western Sydney University (WSU) and guard against confidentiality issues that could arise with other social media sites. Blackboard will be used in all their future courses at WSU and being a competent user would be essential. The discussion board and wiki are learning tools on Blackboard that provide

space for interactive work. These were used to provide a social aspect, where students could view each other's work and collaborate in their learning.

In order not to vary far from the curriculum and also not to disadvantage other classes on the same level we did not add or change the teaching program greatly. After the first cycle of research some small interventions were made to our procedure. Reflecting on the number of questions and the manner in which the questionnaires were formed, the second questionnaire was changed. Also, the type of editing exercises varied.

In assessing if the feed-forward approach and editing practice assisted in the progress of students' writing, we looked at the mid-term and final writing exam results. Different teachers mark these tests in week 5 and week 9; therefore a more objective result could be achieved.

Educational context and participants

The English division of WSUC, where we work, offers international student pathway programs into the UWS, for students wishing to complete Diploma, Bachelor, Masters' and PhD courses. There are five EAP-level courses (EAP 1–5) that last for 10 weeks each and require students to complete a range of written assessments. As a result, learning activities are often focused on developing understanding of different writing genres that students will be tested on. In the higher levels of study, less time is allocated for development or revision of grammar than in the lower levels.

The participants in the first cycle of the AR were students from the EAP 4 level, Level B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001). The 27 research participants were mostly from Asia (Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Japanese) with two from the Middle East and one from Brazil. They ranged in age from 18–45 years old. The majority of students went on to study at the next level, EAP 5, while others went on to study Diploma courses. The three Japanese students, who were on an exchange study tour program, finished at this level. At our College, two teachers are assigned to each class, dividing a 5-day teaching week between them. In this first cycle, we were assigned to the same class, 4b and another class, 4a, was taught by one researcher over three days. Overall, there were three classes at this level during the research period, of which we only taught on two. We compared mid-term and final written test results from 4a and 4b with the third class, which did not participate in the research.

The second cycle consisted of 25 students who were mostly from Asian (Chinese, Vietnamese and Filipino) backgrounds with another four from the Middle East and one from Turkey. Like the students from Cycle 1, at the end of the course the majority went on to study at the next level, EAP 5, while a number went into Diploma courses. In this second cycle, there were again three classes at the level. However, unlike the first cycle, we were not assigned to the same class and each individually taught different classes over three days. Like Cycle 1, mid-term and final written test results were compared with the third class, which did not participate in the research. In addition results from the previous session (prior to action research) were looked at to compare results and progress.

Action research cycles

We applied the same approach for both cycles of the research. Although there were some changes between the two cycles, they were minor. The differences were mainly related to how the self-editing exercises were conducted, with 4a completing more of them than 4b. In Cycle 2 we also were not able to use a wiki as there were some technical difficulties with access and therefore we could not see if students continued to collaborate using this technology.

In the first week of each cycle, students were given a 40-minute diagnostic writing task in the form of an essay. In the first cycle, this diagnostic task was drawn upon to devise a self-editing process; common errors were noted which were used to form an editing list for students to use for review and reference (given in Appendix 1). Interestingly, these errors were consistent with items assessed in the general marking rubric for EAP 4 essays at our college. This meant that through the editing process, students could directly work on their errors to increase their writing scores. As the student groups in each cycle consistently made the same types of errors, the same editing list was used in the second cycle, as we saw no need to change or adapt it.

During the second week of each cycle the contents and purpose of the editing list were explained to students prior to their first assessment-based writing task. They were given time to study and review their own work for the diagnostic task completed in the previous week, which was provided to them with teacher feedback. They were asked to use the editing list to highlight their individual common errors. Later in the week, the students completed their writing assessment, where they were asked to write an opinion paragraph on a given topic, as usual on paper. The next day, they were asked to write an opposing view to their original opinion on the discussion board on Blackboard. The discussion board allows classmates to view each other's work; using this medium meant that the students were correcting their errors in the knowledge that their peers may read and judge them. In addition, being able to view their classmates' work allowed them to learn from one another.

After the Week 2 writing assessment, in addition to the exam results we thought it would be interesting to gauge students' attitude to the research so a questionnaire consisting of five questions was administered which asked students to reflect on their attitudes towards using the editing list, and if, in their opinion, it had helped improve their writing. It also sought to find out whether students felt they had benefited by using the discussion board to complete their writing. We limited student answers to mostly 'Yes' and 'No' to simplify the process for both the respondents and ourselves. We thought that this would increase student participation and minimise any ambiguous results. The questions in the questionnaire from the first cycle were deliberately chosen to allow us to make helpful changes to the questions in the second cycle if need be. In fact, this questionnaire resulted in interesting findings which are discussed in this article. (The full questionnaire is given in Appendix 2.)

During the five weeks between the two in-class writing assessments, self-editing exercises covering common errors from the editing list at both the sentence and paragraph

level were completed in class (sample exercises are given in Appendix 4). These exercises were conducted in pairs or groups of three to promote collaborative learning. Students were also encouraged to do exercises on the Blackboard discussion board and wiki in their own time. In between the two in-class writing assessments (essays), students completed other writing tasks in different genres and a mid-term exam in Week 5. Students received written and oral feedback on these tasks as part of the curriculum.

The next in-class writing assessment in Week 7 was conducted slightly differently to the task in Week 2. This time the writing was done first on the discussion board and then the next day on paper on the same genre and topic so that we could analyse any differences in the quality of work between the two media. Students were reminded about the editing list prior to and during these writing tasks.

Following this written task, the second questionnaire was completed by students to determine whether, having spent more time using the editing list, their attitude towards it and their overall writing had changed. As most of our students had not been introduced to this learning platform, similar insights were sought about how positive their attitude was towards using Blackboard for writing practice. (The full questionnaire is given in Appendix 3.)

Findings and discussion

Our research findings were encouraging in relation to the students' responses but unexpected in terms of their progress. Although students' motivation to correct their work increased, their progress was not consistent in their exam results. First, questionnaire results will be discussed then exam results.

The first questionnaire administered after the first in-class writing assessment indicated that students could see the benefits of the editing list (Figure 1) as they felt it could help improve their writing. However, 17% were not as convinced it was helpful. This response was perhaps because, even though the list was discussed with the class as a whole, they were not able to see the errors they were making individually or may not have understood how to use the information, to correct their work. It is also possible that students did not have enough time to evaluate their writing during the task, as they were focused on producing the text.

Figure 1: Questionnaire 1 Question 3

Do you think the editing list could help you improve your writing with continued use?

no 0%
maybe 17%
yes 83%
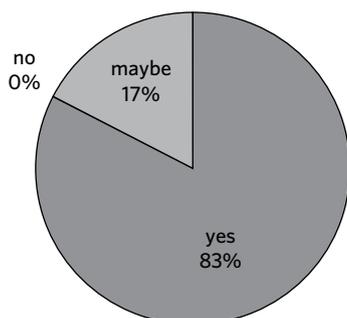
More positively, there was near-unanimous agreement that they self-edited more when made more aware of it (Figure 2). Not only were they more aware of editing their work but, in fact, a further 90% of students over the two cycles stated that they continued to use the list. Teachers may assume students will self-edit, when, in fact, it could need to be explicitly instructed. Prior to this research, we realised that we did not incorporate specific editing strategies and instead made reference to it and expected students to know what to do and to edit their work. However, this finding and this action research showed that students need more specific instructions on editing.

Figure 2: Questionnaire 1 Question 4

Now that you are more aware of editing, do you think more about correcting your work?

no 8%
yes 92%
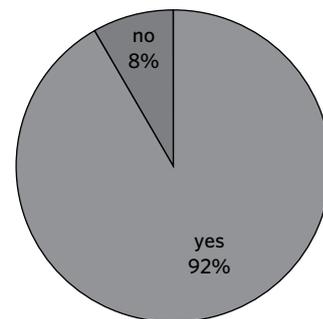
Student responses further explained this support for the list, with a number of students making comments such as 'it helps', 'it's a good model' and others also indicating that it would 'improve' and 'enhance' their writing. Respondents also substantiated that they took more care when writing online (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Questionnaire 1 Question 5

Were you more careful in your writing on the discussion board than on paper?

more than usual 40%
yes 48%
no 12%
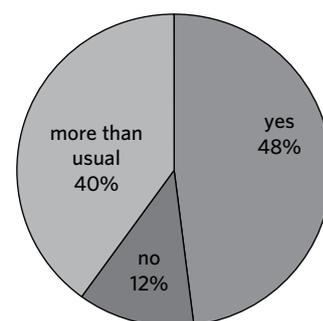
Interestingly, although in previous courses we had noticed that students found using Blackboard difficult and did not actively participate in work online, when given the opportunity in class and motivated with the goal to improve their writing, their participation rate rose greatly. Most students agreed they felt more comfortable than before in using Blackboard and wanted more writing practice as 'it was easy for us to edit our ideas on the computer . . . you enjoy it'. However, around 30% did not want to use it for writing practice. At first, it was assumed that they had found using Blackboard complicated in comparison to other social media sites. Also, this course was the first time

that they had had to access such a complicated web format in English. However, when asked informally, one student explained that they 'could not type very quickly', which was similar to feedback from other students that 'pressure' and 'time limitations' were felt when writing.

The questionnaire results were more consistent across the two cycles than the exam results. In the short timeframe of about six weeks it was encouraging to see progress in students' writing results, as in our experience of teaching this course over a number of years before the research, there was less progress. These results may not, of course, be directly related to the research; however, when compared to the classes in the course just prior to our research (as the table below indicates), where this research was not applied, the AR class results were more positive.

As can be seen from Table 1, students from the '5-day' group (where both of us taught the class over the five days) in the first cycle, increased their average writing score by 1.46 marks between their mid-term and final writing tests and the '3-day' group increased by nearly 1 mark. Meanwhile, the non-research group showed a decrease in their average score. The results in the second cycle, with 0.71 and 0.2 mark increases, were not as clear as in the first cycle. However, the two research classes increased their score more than the one non-research class. Within the context of the type of students at our college, these increased scores coincided with what can be perceived as increased confidence from students and awareness of their errors.

A possible explanation of why there was a lack of consistency in results in the two cycles could be that all learners are different and the students in the second cycle may not have had the same level of competency in grammar as those in the first. Although we thought there would be higher objectivity, we realised that even with a moderation process, teachers marking the exams are not always consistent in their ratings. It is well recognised in the literature (Lumley 2002) that teachers' marking consistency varies.

Most importantly, through this research students were able to see the value in self-editing when compared to over-reliance on teacher correction, and based upon questionnaire results from Cycle 2 where students indicated they would continue using the editing list, they were motivated to continue doing so. We believe that our aim to empower students to improve their writing and be more self-reliant was effective.

Conclusion and reflections

We began this research in search of a method to better assist students in their writing progress, to lessen dependence on teacher feedback and to demonstrate better habits of self-editing. To some degree, in the short period of time that this research was conducted, there were some positive indications that the 'feed-forward' approach and different media use could assist students in their writing progress. It would be interesting to conduct further research that includes students with lower levels of English and over a longer period of time to see if results were consistent with our findings.

An informal comment from a student ('we need more computer work because we cannot type very quickly still') indicated that because of their slow typing they were not able to express their ideas as clearly as they would like. Scheduling in-class computer time to improve their digital literacy and encouraging further practice outside of class, in particular their typing speed, would allow students to express their ideas more quickly and thus be able to focus more on their editing.

Since the end of the research we have both moved to other institutions and have experienced once again that students are dependent on teachers' feedback and are limited in their knowledge of how to amend their reoccurring errors. Our observations confirm our belief in a need to move from teacher-focused error correction to teacher-assisted and student-focused discovery which would follow the type of collaborative learning suggested by Vygotsky's ZPD theory, and would seem to us to be more effective.

Participation in this research has been a rewarding experience that has helped refresh our teaching practice. AR provided us with a structure and through the support of the college allowed us the time to act upon our teaching observations. We were able to discuss our ideas with colleagues and put a program together to conduct research. As the research occurred in our own classrooms it held personal meaning and perhaps changed the relationships we had with our students. Instead of being instructors, we were part of a journey with our students, discovering another way to progress. There is no doubt that the experience has made us better teachers.

As for our students, they appreciated the added support for their writing. They expressed their view that having models, being able to learn from their peers, and having a

Table 1: Mid-term and final writing exam results

Date 2015	EAP 4A		EAP 4B		EAP 4C		EAP 4D	
	Mid-term – average score (out of 20)	Final – average score (out of 20)	Mid-term – average score (out of 20)	Final – average score (out of 20)	Mid-term – average score (out of 20)	Final – average score (out of 20)	Mid-term – average score (out of 20)	Final – average score (out of 20)
16 Feb–14 Apr	11/20	13.7/20	10.5/20	10.68/20	10.76/20	10.76/20	11.82/20	10.81/20
Difference	Increased by 2.7		Increased by 0.18		No difference in average score		Decreased by 1.01	
After the research								
27 Apr–3 Jul (Cycle 1)	11.04/20	11.12/20	11.58/20	13.04/20	11.96/20	10.88/20		
Difference	Increased by 0.8		Increased by 1.46		Decreased by 1.08			
	research class – 3 days		research class – 5 days		non research class			
13 Jul–18 Sep (Cycle 2)	11.29/20	12/20	13.29/20	13.09/20	11.62/20	11.71/20		
Difference	Increased by 0.71		Decreased by 0.2		Increased by 0.09			
	research class – 3 days		research class – 3 days		non research class			

tool to improve their writing by themselves was empowering. They also gained confidence from their belief that they were learning more in class. Being part of our research was exciting for some of our students.

The response amongst our colleagues was supportive and enthusiastic. Our findings so far regarding the increase in students' motivation and the benefits of the self-editing list were both encouraging to us and to our peers. The incidental finding about the students' greater use of Blackboard was also pleasing. It showed that instead of teachers prejudging that new technology learning platforms were too complex for language learners to manage, with enough encouragement, purpose and scaffolding, they can be effectively operated. This gives language students much-needed practice and access to aid their future studies. As a result of these positive findings, plans are underway at the centre to discuss the use of more online content in future EAP courses.

In the English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sector, being able to create a writing reference tool such as an editing list for students is a supportive practice both for teachers and learners, and one that can easily be implemented. It gives learners the opportunity to realise what they should be editing when they write and assists in developing their habit of editing, which is an important step in improving their writing.

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Appendix 1: Editing list

List of EAP 4 Language and Grammar

Sentence structure

All sentences are made up of a subject and verb, this simple sentence is also called a clause. A simple sentence has one S + V, a compound sentence consists of two or more clauses that are linked with a conjunction (and, but etc.), a complex sentence consists of dependent and independent clause.

To visit and say goodbye to some friends...	The student with the interesting stories to tell...
incomplete sentence, this is a nominal group	*incomplete sentence, this is a nominal group*

Simple sentence

International <u>students</u> who come from various countries   study   at UWS College.
      S   *(nominal group with students the 'head' noun)*   V   C

Compound sentence

These students   study   at UWS College   for   they   need   a higher level of English to study at University.
   S   V   C   S   V   O

Complex sentence

Although students   say   they would like   to pass with high grades,
     S   V   modality   O
dependent clause
they   do not spend   enough time on their studies.
  S   V   O
independent clause

Passive Voice

The EAP4 students   <u>wrote</u>   *an essay on globalisation*.
S   V   O

An essay on globalisation   <u>was written</u>   by the EAP4 students.
The object from the active sentence   verb phrase   'O' of the action
becomes the 'S'   'be' verb + past participle

S + V agreement

There *are many **reason*** for coming to Australia. X	There are many reasons for coming to Australia. √
*They **has** been sleeping for three hours.* X	They have been sleeping for three hours. √
English **teachers** who **talks** too much are boring. X	English teachers who talk too much are boring. √
I was happy to discover that **a little students** in my class could speak Chinese. X	I was happy to discover that a few students in my class could speak Chinese. √
I think it is interesting that we don't hear **many news** about the environment anymore. X	I think it is interesting that we don't hear much news about the environment anymore.√

ARTICLES

Use *a / an* with singular countable nouns

the first time you mention a thing / person : I saw **an old man** with **a dog**

when you say what something is   :   it's **a nice house**

~~when you say what somebody does : she's **a lawyer**~~

~~in expressions such as 'three times **a week**'~~

Use *the*

when we talk about something we've already mentioned : I saw an old man

with a dog and **the dog** was barking

when there's only one of something : the moon goes round **the sun**

when it's clear what you're referring to : he opened **the door**

~~with places in a town eg. *cinema* and *theatre* : I'm going to **the cinema**~~

~~with superlatives : it's **the best** restaurant in town~~

Don't use *the*

when you're speaking about a general topic : **Women** talk more than **men**

Love is more important than **money**

with some nouns eg. *home, school* after 'at/to/from' : She's not **at home** today

WORD FORMS

see 'Sentence structures' above

Nouns are the Subject and Object of a sentence : 'teacher' / 'example'

Adjectives describe/add detail to the noun : '**tall** teacher'

Verbs are the action that a noun completes : 'wrote'

Adverbs describe / add detail to the verb : '**carefully** wrote'

eg. A tall teacher carefully   wrote   this example. **CORRECT**

Appendix 2: Questionnaire 1

1. Was/is the error correction editing list helpful?

☐   ☐   ☐

Yes   no   maybe

2. Did you use the editing list?

☐   ☐

Yes   no

3. Do you think the editing list could help you improve your writing with continued use?

☐   ☐   ☐

Yes   no   maybe

4. Now that you are more aware of editing, do you think more about correcting your work?

☐   ☐

Yes   no

5. Were you more careful in your writing on the discussion board?

☐   ☐   ☐

Yes   no   more than usual

Appendix 3: Questionnaire 2

1. Do you think the editing list and self-editing practice has helped you to improve your writing?

☐   ☐   ☐

Yes   no   maybe

2. Have you continued to use the editing list?

☐   ☐

Yes   no

Why?/Why not?

_____

3. Are you more comfortable using Blackboard since the beginning of the course?

☐   ☐

Yes   no

4. Would you like more writing practice on Blackboard?

☐   ☐   ☐

Yes   no   more than usual

5. Any comments or suggestions on improving your writing:

_____

Adapted questionnaire for Cycle 2

1. Do you think the editing list and self-editing practice has helped you to improve your writing?

☐   ☐   ☐

Yes   no   maybe

2. Have you continued to use the editing list?

☐   ☐

Yes   no

Why?/Why not?

_____

3. Would you like more writing practice on Blackboard?

☐   ☐   ☐

Yes   no   more than usual

Why?/Why not?

_____

Appendix 4: Self-editing practice

Subject–verb agreement editing exercise (Ascher 1993)

There are many problem at my school, but one problem is the examination to test foreign students. There are two kind of tests: the oral test and the reading test. These test cannot prove the ability of the students because the student simply mark an answer on the answer sheet. For example, in the oral test, you listen to a conversation on a tape and mark the right answer for three or four choice. Sometimes, if the student don't understand the conversation, you can guess. If you get many right answer by guessing, the school will put you in a high-level class. The class will be very difficult because you will see that everyone understand except for you.

Sentence-level editing exercise

1. My friend, Theresa, who studied English with me, looking for a new apartment.

2. Lois has visit Boston many times.

3. Jack been studying Spanish.

4. Judy has to came back home immediately.

5. After class, Bob will working at the restaurant.

Using a guided writing task as a tool to scaffold learners' writing and nurture learner autonomy

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Introduction

The importance of teaching writing to English as a Second Language (ESL) learners on a pathway to a mainstream university degree cannot be underestimated. Most of these learners come into an English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) centre with low confidence in their writing abilities but with a clear understanding of the importance of being able to communicate well in this productive skill. I felt frustrated by the slow pace with which learners in my class showed improvement in their writing and even more so, I felt that learners lack the ability to plan and edit their work and to integrate language skills.

Furthermore, I noticed a general absence in the support given to learners going into writing assessments and an unfair expectation that learners had to produce writing 'cold' without meaningful scaffolding. Thus, the purpose of my action research (AR) project was to provide learners with a scaffolded writing task in order to expand learner autonomy, increase opportunities for writing practice, create an awareness of the writing process (planning, drafting, editing) and to integrate language skills (White and Arndt 1991). After a period of trial and error, I decided on the use of a guided writing task (GWT) to incorporate all these elements. A GWT is defined as a task that supports learners through a cognitively challenging task, sometimes by the teacher playing the role of facilitator but in this case, the task itself is designed to scaffold the learner in order to produce good writing (British Council 2008). Scaffolding is defined by Hammond (2001) as the support given to learners in a similar way that scaffolding around a building holds it up until it can stand alone. Bruner (as cited in Hammond 2001) describes it as a restricted task with the purpose of allowing the learner to only focus on what they need to learn. Hammond also points out that the scaffolding should be reduced when the learner is at a stage where they can successfully complete the task and become independent in the specific skill.

Context and participants

I conducted my AR at Curtin English (CE), which is attached to Curtin University in Perth in Western Australia. ELICOS courses are offered in 5-week modules (two modules per level) in both a General English (GE) band and an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) band, with the learners who used the GWTs being in GE 4 (10-week) and GE 5 (10-week) courses for pre-intermediate and intermediate learners (at Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001) Level A2 and B1+). Most learners are on a pathway to study an undergraduate degree at Curtin University.

A total of 71 learners in various classes at different levels used the GWTs but my AR mainly focused on the nine learners in my GE 5 class (Class 1) whom I taught for two modules (10 weeks) and whose writing I was responsible for assessing. These nine learners were from Brazil (1), China (4), Iraq (1) and Saudi Arabia (3). The 17 learners in Class 2 used the GWT under my supervision but I did not grade their writing, as their afternoon teacher was responsible for

their assessments. However, I was responsible for setting up and introducing each GWT to both Class 1 and 2. The remaining 45 learners were using the GWTs but not under my supervision and I mainly relied on feedback from their teachers as input on the use of the writing tasks.

Research focus

A fundamental focus in developing the GWTs was to give adequate opportunities for writing practice without increasing teachers' marking loads or giving up class time. Furthermore, I was hoping that learners might become more aware of their own learning and in doing so, become more autonomous and reflective learners. I realised that giving individual and meaningful feedback would assist learners in reflecting on ways to improve (Goldstein 2012). Another outcome I was hoping for was to increase the enjoyment of writing and to eliminate the fear and stress associated with it. My previous observations of many learners before and during formal writing assessments had led me to wonder whether this stress could be caused by a personal realisation of not being prepared well enough in the time leading up to the assessment. The GWTs were constructed to give learners the opportunity to practise good writing habits and, in doing so, to build their confidence for assessments.

In the GE course, learners are required to write eight writing tasks over a period of nine weeks with Week 10 mostly dedicated to formal assessments, as explained in Table 1.

The GWTs were used for the portfolio writing pieces and the process writing assessment. The process of activating schemata, planning, drafting and editing (Harmer 2007) was applied to the timed writing assessment but the learners were given a limited amount of time within one session to complete this task.

The intervention

The challenge was to scaffold the tasks in such a way that not only included the writing process, but also language practice, reflections, and goal setting. It was important to me to construct the GWT in such a way that it provided optimum support for the learners but also allowed for personalised feedback, learning and reflection. As such, my aim was to provide what Underhill and Scrivener (2012) refer to as a demand high atmosphere in my classroom where every student is challenged to their own *learning edge*. By setting one task, students are encouraged to produce differential

responses and by providing learners with the tools to reach a sense of achievement, success is put within their reach.

The first step was to create the GWT based on the course-book used at my centre and the outcomes of the course. Most of the GWTs had the same structure and aims but the setting up of tasks differed. Figure 1 outlines details of the scaffolding framework I used and the content and structure of the tasks.

Figure 1: Structure of GWTs
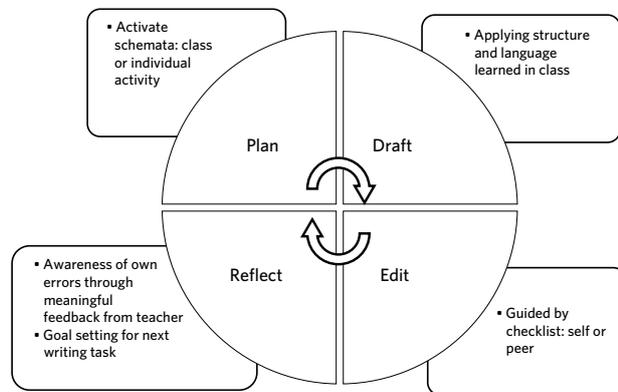
Tasks were set up in different ways to help learners to activate the schemata they needed for the task (some of these tasks were class activities and others were individual, guided exercises) leading into the planning stage of their writing. As shown in Appendix 1, for one task, I used a visual source and questions to lead learners into writing about a special building in their country. The language focus for this activity was the passive verb form. When questions are asked in the passive, the answer is given in the passive and therefore the target language for the task is practised. The rationale behind being so explicit in using the focus language was that I felt that learners often miss the connection between what they learn in class and the expected outcome for language use in their writing. In this way, I hoped to narrow the gap between the grammar practice exercises in the coursebook and integrating this language into their writing.

I also used a product approach where learners would look at a model of the writing they were asked to do and then would identify key characteristics in language and structure (see Appendix 2). The focus here was often on structure and by applying self-discovery, learning became more personal. This type of learning is roughly based on Krashen's I+1 where the task becomes the '+1' in the learning and the learner is challenged to produce language slightly above their level (Krashen 1982). The challenge in providing a model was for learners to notice the structure but not copy the content and it was difficult to draw the fine line between the two. Combined

Table 1: Writing tasks and assessments for GE 4 and GE 5

Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Portfolio task 1	Assessed: 10% of overall result	Portfolio task 2	Assessed: 15% of overall result	Group writing activity	Portfolio task 3	Assessed: 10% of overall result	Portfolio task 4	Assessed: 15% of overall result
GE 4	Describe a person	Process writing	Stereotypes: opinion	Timed writing	Writing a story	Film review	Process writing	Covering email with CV	Timed writing
GE 5	Describe a room	Process writing	Childhood memories	Timed writing	Writing workshop	Describe a process	Process writing	Describe a building	Timed writing

with this stage, I focused on teaching different ways to plan for writing by making learners aware that planning does not imply a one-size-fits-all approach. Emphasis was placed on personal learning styles and becoming more aware of their own cognitive processes by giving them different options for planning structures and encouraging them to pick the one that complements their learning style the best.

The writing stage of the task was mostly done outside of class time and often followed a process writing approach. The GWT was distributed on the Monday and the final draft was expected to be handed in on the Friday. Every day had specific scaffolded activities to guide the learner in the writing process. The rationale was to set up the task within a short period of time during class and only answer questions related to the task if needed during the week. No part of the writing was to be marked during the week, but learner peer checking and self-editing were not only encouraged but also built into the task. This form of editing was scaffolded through checklists and the highlighting of specific elements as ways to get learners to edit their own work before submitting it for feedback from the teacher. For example: learners would be asked to highlight all the passive sentence constructions within their writing and then follow a checklist to ensure the grammatical structure is applied correctly. Most GWTs also included a reflective section where learners reflected on their writing process but also set goals for future writing after seeing the feedback from the teacher.

The challenge was to guide the learners in such a way that ample, in-depth writing practice was achieved each day, linking to the syllabus taught on that specific day, and keeping the end product in mind. I also attempted to incorporate different learning styles and catered for different levels of competence as far as possible within each task, increasing the level of difficulty throughout the 10 weeks. It was important to me to challenge the learners but never to the level where they would disengage from the task.

Data collection

Learners completed an initial survey at the beginning of the 10 weeks to inform me of their writing background, preferences and confidence in writing. I kept examples of learners' writing over the 10 weeks in order to be able to ascertain, mostly by observation, whether there had been an improvement in their attitude towards writing. Firstly, I used the reflective sections of the GWT for individual feedback on the learners' cognitive understanding of the writing process and their engagement in it. Secondly, I kept a reflective journal for my own learning and also noted the input from different teachers using the GWT in their classes. This journal allowed me to change and adjust the tasks when I felt that certain aspects could be improved on according to the need and level of the class.

I also conducted an out-of-class electronic survey in order to get quantitative feedback and an in-class survey for qualitative feedback. These focused on getting feedback from the learners on the use and usefulness the GWTs.

Initial analysis

From the initial analysis of the background survey, it became clear that many learners had not received formal training in writing in either their first or second languages. When asked how they were taught to write paragraphs, most of the Asian learners mentioned gap-fill activities as the main learning strategy in their previous education and only one learner felt that he had been trained in the writing process. Learners also confirmed my initial observations that they find writing in English a very stressful and challenging activity.

The GWTs were marked with an error correction code, by giving feedback on general areas for improvement and content but no grade was given, whereas the process and timed writings were marked using grading criteria. Through the marking of the GWTs, process writing assessments and timed writing assessments, the improvement in learners' writing became clear. Not only did they improve in the accuracy of the language they used, but most impressive was the improvement that happened in the content and structure of their writing. They found it much easier to expand on ideas, leaving the reader better informed. By learning the planning stage of writing, learners found it easier to stay on topic, develop specific themes and structure their writing in a logical, comprehensible way.

The surveys revealed another pleasing response in that the GWT took the fear of writing away. Even going into assessed writing tasks, learners felt they were better prepared and felt more confident in their own ability to complete the task. The panic of writing 'cold' was mostly alleviated and learners saw the assessment as part of the learning process. Their survey responses and reflections showed that they had applied the feedback of the portfolio tasks to improve their formal assessments. The focus on structure and the strengthening of the connection between classroom grammar and application in their productive skills certainly meant that in their view learners felt better equipped to complete the assessments. They indicated that they had a greater sense of being in charge of their own learning: the more effort they put into the GWT, the better they were prepared for assessments. Learner autonomy was said to increase (as seen in Figure 3) as learners realised that their success was linked to their own efforts. 'Blaming' the teacher for poor results was not an option, because they were given ample opportunity to improve and it was their responsibility to take full advantage of it. There was a significant increase in the average results obtained for writing assessments and even though it would be inaccurate to solely credit the GWTs for this improvement, it became apparent that the learners who improved the most were those who followed the GWT instructions closely and were committed in their preparation.

The reflections and goal-setting sections of the GWT revealed that the learners were more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and felt empowered by the feedback received from their teachers. In my own reflective journal I noted that finding appropriate ways of guiding the learners to reflect on their own writing was challenging as I found that asking open questions often resulted in learners leaving blank spaces in the answer sections. In the end I resorted to a tick box system (see Figure 2), which was not ideal but could still be expanded on in the future. I also

Figure 2: An example of reflective questions

Reflection: thinking about your own learning
Please answer the following questions:
1. Did you enjoy describing your room? YES/NO
2. Do you feel that you had enough help to write a good description? YES/NO
3. Did the floor plan help you to plan your writing? YES/NO
4. Pick the best description for the following statements:

	Easy	Struggled a little bit but possible with help.	Difficult
Knowing the right vocabulary for the furniture, decorations and atmosphere.			
Using the adjectives in the correct way.			
Using the correct articles with the nouns.			
Using linking words to form complex sentences.			
Using the correct punctuation.			
Knowing what to write.			
Putting my plan into words.			
Finding my mistakes and correcting them.			

understand that some of the questions might have been leading as the students would have been hesitant to say 'no' as they would want to avoid any implied criticism from the teacher. However, the improvement in the learners' writing (as discussed) aligned with the feedback from the reflective questions.

It was important to me to 'train' the learners in the process of reflecting first as it became apparent that the idea of reflective practice was foreign to most of them and they did not understand the reason or the importance of it. Training them by using tick boxes or yes/no questions in the initial GWTs prompted them to be more willing and able to express their own progress in words by the end of the 10-week course (see Appendix 3).

The surveys made it clear that most learners felt that they had learned good writing habits: always plan first, decide what language and structure is appropriate for the task, edit before submitting, be aware of habitual mistakes, and try to spot their occurrence and avoid making them. They felt that they would want to apply this process to their writing in future (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Feedback on use of GWT
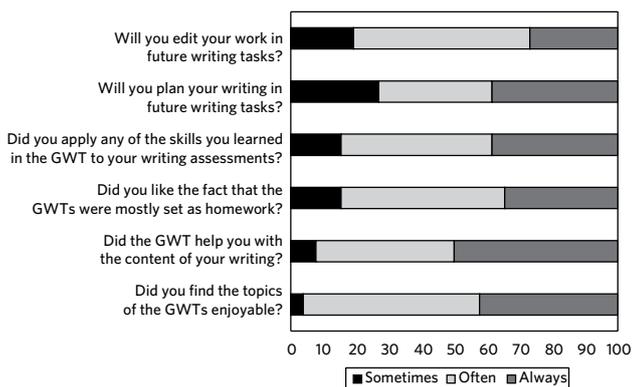
I found (by observation and through learner feedback) that the editing of their own work is the most challenging step for learners and motivating them to do it was as difficult as teaching them how to do it. This area was also confirmed in a survey on what learners would like more assistance with (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Feedback on which areas learners would like more help in
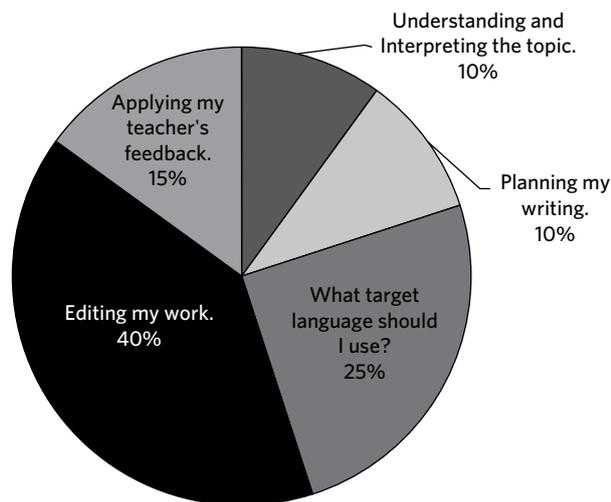
Learners needed a step-by-step checklist (Appendix 4) to help them to look for mistakes as very often they did not find any or did not know how to correct them. I tried to support learners in the process by having them work in pairs and do peer checking. The most challenging aspect of my research was to change the mindset learners had that the teacher should find the writing errors and that the feedback of the teacher is the final stage of the writing (Hyland 1990). Showing them how editing improved the quality of their writing motivated some learners and most of them indicated

in the survey that they will apply editing to future writing (Figure 4). However, I cannot be certain that the habit of editing was solidified within the scope of my research and further investigation would be needed to follow up on whether learners continued this practice. I found that learners not having enough time or holding the perception of not having enough time in assessments was the biggest threat to thorough editing.

Future actions and reflection

Because of the positive outcomes from this research, the GWTs are now to be incorporated into the Curtin English syllabus as ongoing learner training. The feedback from teachers using the tasks in other classes and at different learner levels was very positive and they agreed that it reduced their workload in terms of lesson planning and gave them the opportunity to offer learners more specific and personalised feedback.

The next step will be to adjust the GWTs somewhat as they need to be scaffolded appropriately to the learning level where they will be used (not only for content but also in training learners in the writing process). For example, a learner starting at the GE 4 level would need more help with planning their writing and will be given a template for their plan, but a learner at the GE 5 level will be asked to produce their own plan without a template. Reducing the scaffolding as the learners progress through the levels will potentially build learner autonomy and develop appropriate skills. Up to now, the focus has been on the progression within one level; however, this approach needs to be broadened in order to incorporate the bigger picture of the learners development. For example, allowing learners to generate their own GWT based on what they have learned from the more scaffolded examples would strengthen learner autonomy further. More reflective practices should also be introduced during the preparation stages, using a 'feed-forward' approach (i.e. looking back to previous writings and using them as goal-setting opportunities) and not just having learners reflect at the end of the writing process.

A priority now is to develop GWTs for the Academic English levels as well and it would be interesting to see how the learners who have been involved in the AR process at the GE levels have developed in their writing and whether or not they have retained their 'good writing habits' as fostered by

the GWTs. I would also like to develop more in-depth writing lessons and tasks for the lower GE levels to help correct and strengthen their understanding of basic sentence and paragraph structure and formation, as this is a weakness I have identified in our learners' learning and in our teaching. As teachers, we often assume that learners know how to construct a basic sentence from their previous educational experiences, but I have reflected often in my journal on the lack of this basic skill.

Being a part of the AR program has not only deepened my understanding of the teaching and learning of writing but it has contributed to my development as a teacher in general. It has led to other questions and possible areas to explore, and it has given me a place and purpose within my language school. It has reminded me of the importance of reflecting on my teaching and how my continuous questioning and growing benefit my learners.

The AR program has given me the opportunity to put theory into practice and even though I felt at the beginning that my research focus was not 'groundbreaking' enough, I learned that for me and my learners, it was. It gave us new insights and a deeper understanding of our own learning. It truly has been a transformative experience.

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Appendix 1: Using visual input and target language as planning structure

Portfolio task 4: Describing a building

Monday homework		
What is the most beautiful building in your town or country?		
Find or print a picture of this building and stick it here:		
Vocabulary for describing a building		
General	**Adjectives**	**Nouns**
It is __m tall and __m wide. The wall is __m long. You have to pay an entrance fee./ Entrance is free. It was built by . . . It was designed by . . .	magnificent, amazing, fascinating, brilliant, impressive, classic/modern, historic, lovely, beautiful, special . . .	the architecture, the ceiling/roof/dome, the entrance, the main area, the inside/outside, the doors/windows/stairs, the façade/tower/balconies/minarets/columns, the tiles/murals/mosaics/paintings.
Answer the following questions about your building:		
1. Where is it?		
2. Who was it built by and when was it built?		
3. What was it used for originally and what is it used for now?		
4. What does it look like outside?		
5. What does it look like inside?		
6. How much does it cost to go in?		
7. Would you recommend it? Why or why not?		
You can use information from the internet but you are NOT allowed to copy sentences from the websites.		
Tuesday homework		
Write your description using the questions in the following order:		
Paragraph 1: Questions 1, 2 and 3		
Paragraph 2: Questions 4 and 5		
Paragraph 3: Questions 6 and 7		
Remember: At least 4 sentences must be in the passive form.		

Appendix 2: Using a model approach

Tuesday homework

Read the following description of my good friend, Adam.

• Use highlighter pens and highlight the useful language used in this paragraph in one colour.

• Use another colour and highlight the adjectives that you learned in class.

• Use a third colour to highlight adjectives for describing people, which are not in your book.

> *My friend Adam is very energetic and quite outgoing. He is 19 years old and currently studying to become a wildlife photographer. He loves animals and spends most of his time hiking and taking photographs of interesting things in nature. He is one of three brothers and he is the youngest which is why he is sociable and independent. He grew up on a farm and his love for animals grew when he did volunteer work for the RSPCA.*
>
> *He is incredibly mature for his age and very responsible. I trust him and he is a great friend because he is so reliable. If ever I am in trouble or need help, I would phone Adam. He is also quite imaginative and creative and this you can see in the wonderful photographs he takes of wildlife. He is very patient and will wait for hours to get the right shot.*
>
> *Besides being such a good photographer, Adam is also good at cooking. He loves trying new things and often invites people over for dinner. He is a vegetarian and he can make the most amazing vegetable curry dish which he cooks in a pot on a wood fire.*
>
> *On the negative side, Adam is quite untidy and can often be a bit unorganised. He is so busy that he does not always have time to organise his life. He can also be a bit aggressive towards people who are not kind to animals but he is generally a good guy who loves life.*

If you had to give a **heading** (based on the content) to each of the paragraphs in this description, what would they be?

Paragraph 1: _____

Paragraph 2: _____

Paragraph 3: _____

Paragraph 4: _____

Appendix 3: Examples of open-ended reflection questions

Week 10 reflection

Please answer the following questions about your writing:

1.   Did you enjoy writing about the topics in the level? Why/Why not?

   _____

   _____

2.   Do you think you were helped enough to improve your writing? Why/Why not?

   _____

   _____

3.   What was difficult/easy about the writing assessments and portfolio tasks?

   _____

   _____

   _____

4.   Did you like the procedure for the timed writing: brainstorming with your group/planning/editing? Why/Why not?

   _____

   _____

   _____

5.   Do you think you did a good job with your editing in your timed writing? Why/Why not?

   _____

   _____

6.   What mistakes are you still making too many of? What should you do to change this?

   _____

   _____

7.   Which mistakes have you stopped making due to the writing practice you have had? Why do you think you stopped making these errors?

   _____

   _____

Appendix 4: Example of scaffolding the editing process

Self-editing checklist: Circle the correct option

Content of task:		
Did I include all the aspects of the task?	YES	NOT SURE
Organisation and layout:		
Did I use paragraphs?	YES	NOT SURE
Is the layout correct for the specific task? (How it 'looks' e.g. email/story?)	YES	NOT SURE
Language use:		
Did I use the correct and relevant vocabulary for the task?	YES	NOT SURE
Have I used the target language for the task?	YES	NOT SURE
Have I checked general grammar:	YES	NOT SURE
• Articles (a/an/the) before nouns where needed	YES	NOT SURE
• Subject–verb agreement (he is/they are)	YES	NOT SURE
• Tense (If it happened in the past, am I using the past tense?)	YES	NOT SURE
• Linking (Using and/but/because/so and not commas to link simple sentences)	YES	NOT SURE
• Capital letters (at the beginning of sentences and for names)	YES	NOT SURE
Communicative success:		
I think the reader understands the overall meaning.	YES	NOT SURE
Add your own goal according to the feedback from your last writing or **highlight your goal** if it is already on the list:		
	YES	NOT SURE

Development of synthesising skills in academic writing

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Introduction

Our action research (AR) investigates methods that would assist students in appropriating complex skills such as synthesising strategies in academic writing. We discovered that there was limited research on synthesis writing among second language learners (Plakans 2009, Zhang 2013) which further motivated us to observe that students were able to apply the technique of synthesis in writing through visual representation in tutorial activities.

Synthesis is an academic term recognised by most ELT teachers. The process involves reading from a range of sources and integrating the ideas into one whole new idea which is coherent (Kroll 1996, Plakans 2009). In order to synthesise information various skills are needed such as being able to actively and critically read and understand text (Hinkle 2003). To be an active reader requires the skills of skimming and scanning in addition to possessing sound knowledge of English vocabulary in order to be able to paraphrase and summarise effectively. It also involves being able to quote and cite information accurately thereby actively engaging the student with the information (Hinkle 2003).

Context and participants

Our AR was undertaken at Insearch, University of Technology (UTS) in Sydney. Insearch provides a pathway of Academic English courses ranging from pre-intermediate level to advanced level (AE1 to AE5). Each level is a 10-week program divided into two parts (A and B) of 100 hours each, with a coursebook of lessons, three portfolio tasks, three set readings and one main assignment. At the end of each 10-week program, there is a final exam, and students who pass the course can move to the next level. The entry requirement for the AE5 program, in which we conducted our research, is the equivalent of an *IELTS* 6 overall with a 5.5 in Writing. Students who successfully complete the AE5 program gain direct entry into both UTS undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The program's major assignment is a synthesis task where students have to write a comparative review of three different texts. The final writing exam, however, has undergone recent changes and is now a summary of a short single text. The assessments are still undergoing review by the Insearch curriculum management team in consultation with the Language Testing Research Centre (LTRC) of Melbourne University.

Our research involved two AE5 classes over the 10-week program. There were 30 participants in total, with 16 in one class and 14 in the second class. The overwhelming majority

were Chinese. The other nationalities represented were Vietnamese, Korean, Thai and Indian. The students were mostly in their 20s and there was a reasonably even balance of males and females. All students in both classes were graduates whose aim was to undertake UTS Master courses in various fields. Most students in both classes had completed the previous AE4B programme; however, there were two new students in Juliana's class and three in Diana's class.

Research focus

Stemming from the fact that we were working with a fixed curriculum where the major objectives and readings could not be changed, we decided to focus our research on synthesis in academic writing as this was fundamental to the students' major assignment. The processes involved in synthesising various ideas and perspectives from different sources are quite complex as they entail the integration of multiple skills and content, and this can be quite challenging especially for second language learners. The current programme is based on a combined process and genre approach, in which a model of the relevant text type is provided and deconstructed in class so that students can become familiar with the structural and linguistic features of the genre. Teacher support is also given throughout the writing process, which includes outlining, drafting and re-drafting the assignment. Nevertheless, in our previous experiences in teaching this course, we had found that many students seemed to follow the model mechanistically, and did not fully grasp the concept of synthesis and the processes involved in it. Thus, their essays lacked a high level of analysis and integration of ideas. Therefore, we decided to take a different approach, introducing activities that more specifically scaffolded the process from speaking through to writing.

Research questions

We formulated the following research questions:

- How can students' academic writing be further developed in terms of synthesising ideas and perspectives from different sources?

- How can a variety of tasks be used to develop fluency in this area?

- Can tutorial discussions and other speaking activities be used as a learning tool to enhance writing skills in this area?

Intervention

We focused on four major intervention tasks:

- AR Task 1 and Task 2 were conducted in Phase One of Cycle 1

- AR Task 3 and Task 4 were conducted in Phase Two of Cycle 1.

The process above was repeated in Cycle 2.

The action taken in this project involved two cycles which involved two 5-week phases corresponding to AE5A (Phase

One), and AE5B (Phase Two). Juliana taught on Cycle 1 (see Figure 1, left-hand side); and Diana taught on Cycle 2 (see Figure 1, right-hand side). We utilised a variety of discussion tasks together with smaller scaffolded writing tasks. The focus in our report was on four major intervention tasks described above and illustrated below.

Figure 1: Cycles of action research
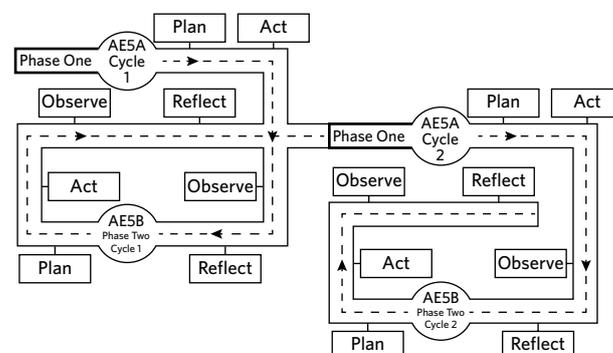
Phase One: Cycle 1 Task 1 and 2

With AR Task 1 we introduced a new tutorial on the topic of 'Family Structures' in keeping with the overall course topic and readings 'Organizations and Informal Collectivities'. The tutorial was designed to make students aware of how to bring ideas together through the process of research, to provide discussion in groups of the information researched, and to generate a synthesis of these ideas as a class, followed by a writing task which summarised the ideas elicited from the group discussions. A sample of this writing task was then given to the class and linguistic features identified (see Appendix 1, Cycle 1 Sample Task 1).

AR Task 2 emerged out of a spontaneous interaction in the class on students' experience of dilemmas. This served as 'food' for Juliana to construct a simpler and more accessible practice writing task that reflected part of their set major assignment. The task involved comparison or contrast of views and integration of the students' reflection or opinion with experts' views.

Phase One: Cycle 2 Task 1 and 2

In Cycle 2 it was noted that the level of students' reading proficiency and critical awareness was lower than that of the students in Cycle 1. Diana could see that this was partly due to the speed at which students were taking in information and analysing it in order to make sense of it, which challenged the students' abilities. Diana felt spoken activities would assist the students in transferring the visual context of learning to a much deeper level of understanding in which the skill of synthesis could later be applied across different content domains (Duke and Pearson 2002).

At the beginning of Task 1 students were shown a video that had been constructed with two students explaining the concept of synthesis and the steps involved in this process

(which was written by Diana and made by the students). The video was used throughout the task in guiding students through this process. Students were placed into groups of three and were given the original text supplied in Task 1 Cycle 1 and two additional texts (A and B – see Appendix 1) in which they analysed the authors' viewpoints. Then the students role-played the three authors' perspectives.

Whilst they were doing this the rest of the class noted down the similarities and differences in what was being said and transferred this information to a table representing the three different authors and their viewpoints. This stage was repeated in order to give students the time to process and organise information accurately. Then the students in their groups followed the guidelines from the video to write up a comparison of the texts. This step-by-step process allowed students to be more attentive, engaged, and confident in processing and organising information to be used in synthesis writing through repetition of this skill concept.

AR Task 2 followed on from AR Task 1 to further reiterate the structural and linguistic features of synthesis outlined in the video used in AR Task 1. Students engaged in debating a focal point of the topic, 'The Roles of Men and Women in Management'. Two groups debated the same issue (an aspect of the topic but from differing perspectives), whilst the other groups acted as observers noting key points, similarities and differences in order to compare and contrast the differing views during the feedback session. After all the groups had rotated and taken turns, they wrote up a summary from their notes integrating the differing perspectives. Although this was a challenging exercise demanding students' full concentration, it provided an opportunity for students to participate in a collaborative learning environment further enhancing the skill of synthesis.

Phase Two: Cycle 1 Task 3 and 4

AR Task 3 was also a small scaffolded writing task in which notes selected from three writers' perspectives were given to students in a table so that they could clearly identify and analyse the similarities and differences between the authors, and then write up a comparative summary from this. In Task 3, the reason for providing a set of notes rather than getting the students to source their own information was, firstly, to keep the tasks small and manageable, and also to focus on specific sub-processes of synthesis writing, namely identifying relationships and organising these into coherent paragraphs (see sample Cycle 1 Task 3 in Appendix 1). In addition to this the teacher had some form of control in relating the texts directly to the assignment requirements of this part of the course.

AR Task 4 involved the grammatical transformation of specific sentences that we had selected from their main assignment model essay in the coursebook. After the students worked on the restructuring of sentences, these sentences were re-inserted into the original model paragraphs to show how the paragraph could be modified. This task was designed to work on grammatical structures as well as on the integration of ideas into coherent and well-connected paragraphs. Through this activity the teacher and students together effectively changed some parts of the given model to make students more

explicitly aware of different ways to integrate ideas. This task paid particular attention to the details of linguistic features.

Phase Two: Cycle 2 Task 3 and 4

AR Task 3 and Task 4 continued with similar speaking activities to those conducted in Task 1 and 2 in Cycle 2 to reinforce the skill and concept of synthesis.

Data collected

Data was qualitative and mainly consisted of samples of students' writing including the intervention tasks, assignments and exams. It also included our own observations and reflections throughout the process which we diarised. In Cycle 2 students' interactions and comments were recorded as audio and video. This was done with an iPhone and sent to the students for their reflection and comments. Following this students were then interviewed individually and in groups, and their comments were noted.

Analysis and discussion

After analysing the students' work in terms of coherence, integration of ideas, and relevant linguistic features, we concluded that overall both classes (with a few exceptions) seemed to develop a good understanding of the process of synthesising information and ideas from different sources through the tasks done. The students' writing was more cohesive. Ideas were well integrated and extended, resulting in good linking, fluency and readability. Examples of this writing can be found in Appendix 2.

For students the speaking tasks seemed to be successful in building an awareness of topics, perspectives and reflection; that is, making students more aware of their own voice and how it integrates with ideas from sources. In Cycle 2 the visual discussions provided a forum for students to view and clearly identify the elements in the process of synthesis. Through this collaborative learning environment the students are able to retrieve the visual concepts related to synthesis more easily than in an abstract form. After identifying these features, students could then consider the metalanguage and structure for synthesising which provided support for students to complete their task. Students gave feedback on the transfer of one skill to the other and many voiced that this process helped them to understand synthesising better: 'I'm happy and like talking in group and step by step process is helping remember' (this is a quote from a student after being interviewed).

These basic speaking tasks have also proved useful as a resource for other teachers working on the same programme as they could be modified and extended in various ways to suit the students' level and ability and the teachers' pedagogical style.

However, the small-scale scaffolded writing tasks gave students direct practice and input into the detailed processes of complex synthesis writing and the language relevant to

it. Many students managed to incorporate the skills learned from these scaffolded tasks into their final assignment. As expected, the students who already had a higher linguistic proficiency achieved the more complex and coherent writing (see Appendix 2, Sample 1). Nevertheless, even students with an average or medium level of language proficiency demonstrated an ability to appropriate the processes of synthesis writing and produce well-integrated assignments.

To illustrate the changes in students' writing, we present samples of writing from two students. The first student had significant problems in terms of his use of grammatical structures, especially when paraphrasing (see Appendix 2, Sample 2). Sample 2 is an extract from the student's summary of a short section of a text. As can be seen, there are problems such as incomplete clauses or a lack of correct subjects throughout the text. Overall, the flow of ideas is not smooth and his text does not give the reader a clear understanding of the original text. However, he seemed to achieve better overall coherence in his writing when doing the scaffolded synthesising tasks and in his final assignment, which involved a complex integration of multiple sources. Sample 3 in Appendix 2 illustrates his writing in a synthesising task. Although there are some grammatical errors, these are less evident and seem to interfere less with the overall fluency and coherence of his writing. Sample 3 shows an appropriate use of cohesive devices and a logical organisation of the relationships of the three texts.

Similarly, the second student, who initially struggled with writing in an academic context (see Appendix 2, Sample 4), mastered the process of synthesising ideas from different sources and produced an assignment that illustrated a high level of analysis and an appropriation of relevant linguistic features (see Appendix 2, Sample 5). It needs to be noted, though, that these two students had very good interaction skills despite making grammatical errors, and they also demonstrated a critical understanding of the readings and

topic. Apart from this, they both had experience working in their chosen fields. Any of these factors may have influenced their ability with regard to synthesising tasks. Plakans (2009:572), in her research on discourse synthesis, notes the 'interaction of factors', which make it difficult to interpret 'integrated task results'. Apart from L2 proficiency, these factors may include 'the writer's experience and background knowledge, and the personal or cultural relevance of the topic' (Plakans 2009:578).

Due to recent changes made to the final exam, where students are required to produce a summary of a single short text rather than a comparative review of three texts, we were unable to test the students' ability to synthesise from multiple sources independently of teacher support, so our conclusions remain tentative.

Nevertheless, one of the most surprising outcomes of our research was the fact that a number of students produced more coherent writing in the more complex synthesis tasks, such as the comparative review, than in summary tasks that involved a single short text or extract in isolation (as in the final exam). The discrepancies in students' results are illustrated below. Table 1 compares the results of paraphrasing and summary tasks done in class during Cycle 2 with the results of synthesis tasks. As can be seen, there are sometimes significant differences in results, especially between the assignment task and the final summary exam.

Thus, it seems that the exam summary writing results did not reflect the level of achievement that the higher and medium level students were capable of in the more complex tasks. Although the results were not uniform, and a number of factors may have come into play, especially under exam conditions, paraphrasing issues interfered with fluency and cohesion to a greater extent, and even students who had demonstrated a good command of academic reading and

Table 1: Results of the tasks of the students from Cycle Two in summary and synthesising skills

	Task 1		Task 2		Task 3		Task 4	5b Exam
	Summary	Synthesis	Summary	Synthesis	Summary	Synthesis	Assignment	Summary
Student 1	P	D	P	D	P	C	C	C
Student 2	F3	P	P	C	P	C	C	F3
Student 3	C	D	C	D	C	C	C	P
Student 4	P	D	P	D	C	D	C	F3
Student 5	P	C	C	C	P	C	C	P
Student 6	P	C	P	D	C	D	D	C
Student 7	F3	C	P	C	P	C	P	F3
Student 8	F3	P	F3	P	P	C	C	F3
Student 9	P	C	P	C	P	C	P	P
Student 10	F3	P	F3	C	P	C	C	C
Student 11	F2	F3	F2	F3	P	P	P	F3
Student 12	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	C
Student 13	F3	P	P	C	P	P	C	P
Student 14	P	D	C	C	P	C	C	C

Key
F3 – Fail
P – Pass
C – Credit
D – Distinction

writing during the course resorted to significant verbatim use of the source text (see Appendix 2, Sample 6, where the underlined sections indicate copying). These observations were also confirmed by other teachers on the same programme who felt that the summary did not allow students to fully demonstrate their synthesising skills. As previously mentioned, although we felt that the tasks we set aided the students' synthesising skills, we were unable to answer the questions we posed at the start of our research. Therefore, because of this our conclusion remained tentative.

Implications

The discrepancies mentioned in the previous section led us to reconsider our assumptions about writing. Therefore, we had to reconsider our assumptions as they were not conclusive, but an implication which we felt needed to be further explored. We had assumed that writing a summary of a single source was less challenging than synthesising and in many English as a Second Language (ESL) courses there is a progression from paraphrasing and summarising of a short text to analysis and synthesis of multiple texts. The skills of paraphrasing and summarising are considered basic and integral to academic writing in general, and transferable to different genres. Our results, however, did not seem to indicate this, and thus raised a host of questions for us: Were the writer's thought processes really quite different when doing the complex synthesis tasks than in the summary? Were we adhering too prescriptively to a 'genre' approach, thus making the transfer from one genre to another difficult for students? Were the paraphrasing techniques taught at lower levels relevant or more of a hindrance? Were we teaching summarising to students as a descriptive task rather than a reinterpretation of the writer's ideas?

These questions cannot be answered within the scope of our research, and would require further extensive investigation. Nevertheless, we would like to note that research carried out in the United States among second language learners (Shi 2012) reflects our experiences in Australian ESL colleges. This study highlights the fact that students are often instructed to 'present a faithful account of the source' in contradiction to the idea that good paraphrasing involves one's own interpretation (Yamada 2003, cited in Shi 2012:135) and that a rather 'mechanistic' approach is taken in teaching paraphrasing and summarising. Students are shown the techniques of paraphrasing, involving changing structures and substituting synonyms for original words. Thus, students may get caught up in thinking at the word and sentence level without interpreting the ideas. However, from our observations on this research project, this does not seem to be the case when doing a synthesis of multiple sources, as the process of identifying relationships between key concepts becomes the major focus and summarising these relationships is implicitly undertaken at the same time. We felt throughout this whole process other issues have come to the fore which lead us to think about the academic skills of synthesising in a more comprehensive way. This we believed was part of the AR journey which takes you from one point and leads you into another direction. In our case, the implications resulted in us having to look at other issues that had arisen that needed to be addressed before we continued with issues related to synthesis in writing. Therefore we felt we could not be conclusive in our findings because they lead us to other issues.

Reflection on AR process

The AR raised a number of questions about the teaching of academic writing which we had not anticipated when we embarked on the project. Thus, we felt that our AR project could take many different directions and indeed have flow-on effects which could lead to wide-ranging changes if further investigation was undertaken in future cycles or in other projects.

Nevertheless, despite the limitations we faced, the AR process proved valuable to us, providing insight into our pedagogical practices in the classroom, methodologies and influences and giving us the freedom to explore issues which could be further developed. The dissemination of our materials to other teachers and their development of these in their own way was rewarding for us. We were encouraged by the fact that the AR process enabled us to pinpoint and more concretely formulate our concerns and questions about our curriculum, and thus constructively discuss these with our curriculum management. We were given the opportunity to present our AR at the in-house professional development day in addition to uploading some of our tasks to the curriculum shared-drive for teachers to use in their lessons. However, the most valuable aspect of our research lies in the undermining of our assumptions, and not only our own individual assumptions as teachers but the processes, beliefs and methods that have become established in ESL teaching. That is, it allowed us to reflect on the methodologies and theories that underpin our teaching practice, such as the widely accepted 'genre' approach and to question the validity of these underlying theories within our context.

After reflection on the process of our project, we now feel that the ultimate aim of this research was to enable ourselves to go beyond just the practical implications of the research and consider the 'emancipatory' nature of AR (Burns 1999, Denscombe 1998). We felt the research did allow us to go beyond the practical implications and at the same time was challenging for the students. The research pointed out to us that it was important to challenge these institutional constraints, which is the point of what we had undertaken. It is important not only to reflect on our teaching practice and how to improve it, but also to enhance our awareness of the barriers that limit our creativity and aim to change 'those conditions that impede desired improvement in the system' (Zuber-Skerritt 1996, cited in Denscombe 1998:126). The research revealed how important it is to challenge current thinking. We feel we have not changed the conditions, but taken a small step towards changing these conditions. If we think about this we are raising people's awareness about what is limiting us and how we can make changes in the system. This has not remained in the confines of something small and practical; for us, it was quite the opposite – it led us to wider issues.

The research process we have undertaken stimulates us to extend our reflections to other teachers and to the international ESL community, hoping that it will lead to further enquiry and encourage others to research the issues that have arisen for us.

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Appendix 1: Sample Tasks 1 and 3

Cycle 1 Task 1

Informal collectivities – Family structures and influence

Research the following:

Part One:

1. What are the different kinds of family groups?

2. What are the common characteristics of family groups?

3. How have family structures changed over time?

Part Two:

1. How important is family in your culture?
•   Has this changed over the generations?
•   What roles/influence do the different members of the family have?

2. What do you think has the greatest influence on young people's values today?

a. Their parents?

b. Their peers?

c. The media?

Teacher note: Ideas are pooled and noted on the whiteboard. A summary writing is based on collective notes. A sample summary is given out later.

Cycle 2 Task 1 Extension

The task begins with a short video explaining the concept of synthesis.

Additional texts (+ sample summary from Cycle 1)

(A)

There have been extensive changes in the way that families are structured and function. Research and policy interest has shifted from the traditional family form (a married couple and their children) to smaller nuclear families. This is due to globalisation, technology which is reflective of changing demographics – as the population ages and fertility rates have declined over the long term, there are more couple only (no children) and single person households, regardless of social trends. Also, more people are seeking further education which increases awareness resulting in couples opting to have smaller families and a better standard of living. Other changes in family composition represent choices made by family members, including that of achieving better functioning family structures. Many people are choosing not to have children and therefore new and emerging forms of family structure represent progress. Yet, for those members of the community who hold traditional values, there is a decline in traditional family structures.

S Henchman (2013) 'Changing Demographics' Magda Publishing House

(B)

Families have changed in many ways in our society. For example, marriage is being postponed and sometimes deliberately avoided. Divorce has risen, and single parenthood has grown. Dual career family is becoming more prevalent in our society with two thirds of nuclear families having parents working outside the home. These rapid changes in family structure in Australia over the past 40 years has resulted in increased income inequality. This is largely due to the growth in single parenthood where children are being supported by one carer and earner, usually a woman. Therefore, the consequences of individualistic choices are a rise in modern families with few or no children struggling to maintain the family.

L Jones (2012) 'From changing structures to increased poverty' Penguin Publishers

The students role-played the three authors' perspectives and considered the topic discussed and how the authors' viewpoints were different or similar.

Cycle 1 Task 3 A comparative summary

Task: Compare and contrast the three writers' perspectives on styles of leadership in terms of autocratic leadership and democratic leadership. Write two paragraphs.

Read the notes on the three writers.

1. What is the main focus of each writer?

2. Underline/note any concessions within each writer's points.

3. Draw arrows between any similarities between the writers.

4. Highlight/note the main differences.

Styles of leadership	Burton (2012)	Richardson (2013)	Andersen (2013)

Autocratic	Main focus:
	• Mobilises people towards a vision.
	• Leaders see themselves as "expert", the visionary, one to lead.
	• Useful: especially when a new vision is needed.
	• Inspires enthusiasm to work towards a common goal.
	• Fast and effective decisions.
	• Expertise and knowledge most important for an authoritarian leader.
	• Strong determination or belief in oneself.
		• Often resented by staff.
		• Tendency to be bossy and coercive.
		• Decisions may be hasty and may lead to wrong decisions
		  o Cannot be expert on everything.
			• Can make fast and effective decisions
			  o Especially important in emergency situations.
			  o Does not waste time.
			• But
			  o Needs to share responsibility.
			  o Cannot be expert in all areas.
			  o Often does not show respect to staff – de-motivating.
			  o Needs to consult more.

Democratic	Little focus:
	
	Only refers to:
	• Disadvantage: time-wasting, too much consultation, too many disagreements.
	• Leaders afraid to make decisions
		Main focus:
		
		• Respects expertise of staff and consults with staff before making final decisions.
		• Gives employees greater decision-making power
		  o Motivating.
		  o Able to get co-operation of staff.
		  o More focused on common goal.
			Main focus:
			
			• Not effective in emergency situations.
			• Too much listening, can waste time, but is able to easily motivate staff.
			• Respectful towards employees.
			• Effective communicator.
			• Builds trust and consensus.
			• Generally common goals better achieved.
			• Staff more committed or part of team.

Appendix 2: Samples of student writing

Sample 1: An example showing high proficiency in synthesis writing

A number of recent articles (Burton 2012; Richardson 2013; Andersen 2013) discuss the advantage and drawbacks of leadership styles in relation to autocratic and democratic leaders. While the article written by Burton (2012) mainly identifies autocratic leadership as more effective than democratic leadership, Richardson (2013) and Andersen (2013) regard democratic leadership as a better choice to manage a company. Whereas Burton points out that autocratic leadership can motivate staffs toward a vision and inspire personnel to be more enthusiastic, both Richardson and Andersen argue that such style of leadership which often does not show respect to staffs can displease and demotivate the workers. In terms of efficiency, Burton and Andersen concur that decisions can be made fast and effectively in autocratic leadership, especially when a new vision is needed or the decision is important in emergency situations. Burton admits that authoritarian leaders lacking ability can cause conflict. Similarly, both Richardson and Andersen stress that decisions made by an autocratic leader may be hasty and wrong. Furthermore, they also state that the leader cannot be expert on everything and needs to consult more with colleagues. According to Burton, autocratic leadership can display strong determination and belief in oneself. This contrasts with Richardson who points out that this kind of leadership could be bossy and coercive.

Regarding democratic leadership, both Burton and Andersen consider that this sort of leadership which is not effective in emergency situations spends too much to make the decisions . . .

Sample 2: An example showing a student's summary of a section of a single text revealing grammar and language problems

In the section *Adaptation of labor practices* from *'Disney's successful adaptation in Hong Kong: A globalization perspective'*, Matusitz (2009) analyses there are two problems in this theme park and shows methods that used by the park. Firstly, unsuccessful strategy of smile-factory because local staff did not want to smile to extent Disney standards. The reasons are people who always smile or fake smile are not trusted and looked suspicious by another and Chinese are more traditional which mean people do not want to express fake feeling which against their real feeling. The Disney's executive adapt these strategy to show flexibility and diverse of cultures; for example, staff can speak multi-language including: English, Cantonese and Mandarin. Secondly, the issue is poor working condition and low salary of employees working for Disney. For example, staffs have short lunch break and long working hours. These issue leads to inadequate staff for working in park. The solution of this challenge that Disney faced is change their method to allow their employees organise union which improve salary and work condition. These strategies which used by Disneyland contribute to be successful theme park in Hong Kong.

Sample 3: An example showing the same student's coherent and well-integrated synthesis of three sources

While Burton (2012) supports autocratic leadership style, both Richardson (2013) and Andersen (2013) agree with democratic style. Firstly, in relation to autocratic leadership style, Burton (2012) believes that authoritarian leaders must have knowledge and expert on everything, but other author, including, Richardson (2013) and Andersen argues that no one can be expert on everything. Burton (2013) also claims that this style of leader not only make decision fast and effectively, but also motivate their staff work toward common target. Although, Andersen (2013) agrees with Burton that autocratic leader can make fast and effective decisions especially in emergency situation he and Richardson (2013) see this kind of leader to be too bossy and coercive which do not show respect to their staff. These behaviours lead their staff to resist their boss and de-motivate them. In addition, Richardson (2013) claims that the leader with hasty decision without consult anyone may make wrong decision.

Sample 4: An example showing a student who initially had problems with grammar and language when summarising from a single text source

In the section, *Adaptation of labor practices* from *Disney's successful adaptation in Hong Kong: A globalization perspective* Matusitz (2009), the author analyses the problems faced by Disney executives in terms of labor practices, and he also explained how managers adapted conflict between local staff and Disney over labor practices. Firstly, Matusitz argue that cultural issue result in smile factory strategy problem. As we known Chinese people are more conservative and usually do not trust people who smile too much, thus the local staff did not feel comfortable with smiling to the extent that Disney required. Face to this problem, the author claimed that Disney adjusted globalization strategy to show flexibility. Secondly, though Matusitz pointed out that poor working conditions which includes short lunch break and long hours and low pay were complained by employees, he conceded that a trade union which aim to protect labor's right has been formed in Disney. Generally speaking, the author concluded that adaption strategy to local culture is an important consideration for foreign companies if they want to succeed.

Sample 5: An example showing the above student's ability in synthesising in writing

According to Ladkin and Weber, leaders are completely responsible for communicating company goals to their employees clearly (p.27). Whereas these articles differ in diverse industry background, there is a consensus among the authors that leaders who are good at communication will motive team members well. Apart from the effectiveness of communication, all the authors explain how leaders communicate with employees. Cappelli et al. claim that online system provides a freedom platform to communicate problems with subordinates. In contrast, Useem notes that straightforward personal interaction could result in a clear business objective conveying to employees. Like Useem, Ladkin and Weber focus on elaborating direct and open-minded with subordinates; however, they point out that successful leaders ought to think of how to dealing with new technology issues.

All three articles are similarly concerned with mission sensitivity requirement of leaders. All the authors point out it is important for qualified leaders to focus on mission. Useem claims that company values drive leader's actions (p.77). This is exemplified by a leadership reaction course which he notes that mission should come first. By citing participants' reflection, the author emphasises that it is important for leaders to paying more attention to achieving company goals than pursuing self-interest.

Sample 6: An example showing issues with copying due to changes from synthesis to summary

Jones outlines the literature streams on dimensions of leadership. <u>One is</u> reaching <u>comparative leadership which explores the similarities and differences of leadership</u>. The other stream is studying global leadership (Chan 2009; Brown 2011; Rasal 2005). He emphasises that <u>'core' leadership attributes are universal.</u> Compared with Senior Executive A, Senior Executive B believes that he should change his leaderships from culture to culture and he argue that <u>trustworthiness, fairness and intelligence</u> are <u>universally</u> for <u>an effective leader (para 6</u>). Jones concludes that the data which is mentioned by the study shows <u>each set of beliefs </u>has been changed depending on individuals and <u>the value of qualitative interview-based data</u> is important for <u>perceptions of leadership</u> (para 7).

This study focuses on a 'recent' study in the global leadership stream and it is very important for completing the understanding and definitions of leadership. Compared with early research, this study deals with <u>the perceptions of the executives leaderships</u> held by two senior executive instead of <u>peers or subordinates</u>. Moreover, this study analyses the cross-cultural working career of two senior executive and highlights that <u>set of beliefs</u> depends on <u>individual life experience</u>.

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