Cambridge Assessment English

Research Notes

Findings of the Action Research in ELICOS Program 2017

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Editorial

Welcome to issue 69 of *Research Notes*. In this edition, we present the findings from the 2017 English Australia/Cambridge Assessment English Action Research in ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) Program.

Teachers are usually prompted to undertake action research (AR) in response to a challenge they face in the classroom. **Anne Burns** calls these challenges 'wicked problems', and provides a very interesting analysis of such problems in her introduction.

Penny Podimatopoulos and **Sharn Hammond** looked into the role played by patterns of stress, intonation and pausing (SIP) in listening comprehension. Seeing their students' struggle with listening, they decided to raise awareness of SIP to discover how this might improve listening skills. Through a cycle of observation, reflection and action, they experimented with a range of activities, including reading thought groups, in order to stimulate discussion on how SIP affects meaning. As a result, the authors decided to introduce formative listening assessment into their teaching.

In his paper, **Geoffrey Larsen** describes how he drew on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics to help his B2 level learners, who were finding it difficult to understand short bursts of speech, especially in everyday work situations. Larsen used awareness-raising activities to see if this improved listening comprehension and found that almost all students improved over two assessment cycles.

Ashley Carmody and **Ramesh Presser** identified three challenges in their teaching of listening skills: student engagement, monitoring and feedback. In their article, they describe their evaluation of an interactive platform, Nearpod, in helping address these challenges in the classroom, and sought feedback from students. Nearly half of the students strongly agreed that listening lessons were more engaging when using Nearpod, and almost all agreed that it enhanced learning.

An Sneyers and **Melissa Oldroyd** noticed that in speaking activities, their students' turn-taking seemed automatic and disengaged. They wanted to see whether a 10-week cycle of training in discourse strategies and active listening skills (ALS) would increase student engagement and generate more authentic communication both inside and outside the classroom. They describe their mixed methods study, which used journals, video recordings and the comparison of speaking scores. The researchers incorporated the findings from this learning-oriented study into their teaching practice.

Julia Gibbons wanted to find out if she could improve learning outcomes and the learning experience by giving her learners control of the audio clips during listening activities. Learners were allowed to use their smartphones to download the audio and listening to recordings at their own pace. The author encouraged learners to reflect, and the author refined listening activities in response to feedback. Fellow teachers at the author's school have adopted this approach to teaching listening.

Keren Stead Bomfim found that many students who experienced difficulty in listening and note-taking also struggled with pronunciation and reading aloud. Her paper describes the 12-hour course she developed to raise students' phonological awareness, and to determine whether bottom-up decoding practice improved listening skills. This study confirmed the author's view that pronunciation skills should feature more prominently in listening activities and, as a result, decoding skills are being integrated into the curriculum.

All of these examples of classroom enquiry show the value of putting the learner at the centre of AR. They also provide an impetus for future AR studies to help teachers understand the complex interplay of factors which leads to better learning.

'Wicked problems' and action research

Anne Burns University of New South Wales

Introduction

The idea of a 'wicked problem' has been around since the term was popularised by Rittel and Webber (1973). This concept, which came out of the policy planning literature, was used 'to describe emerging policy problems that did not correspond neatly to the conventional models of policy analysis used at the time' (Peters 2017). Wicked problems are problems that resist easy resolution, such as obesity or aged care, rather than problems that are 'evil'. They are problems that are complex, and that interact in intricate ways with other factors and systems, beyond the immediate functional or instrumental aspects of a situation. They are 'wicked' in the sense that they defy easy, pre-packaged solutions and require new, diverse, and creative thinking.

Wicked problems can be thought about in terms that relate to complexity theory (see Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008). Peters describes them this way:

> *... relationships among variables are not linear and small shifts (especially in the initial conditions) may produce large differences in the outcomes of the system dynamics. These systems are also conceptualised as being open, allowing influences from the outside, including the importation of energy. And finally complex systems tend to involve multiple actors, whether as causes or actors or both –, and therefore can be politically complex as well as technically complex (2017:386).*

These descriptions seem to me to chime with many of the features of action research (AR). In this article, I will highlight the characteristics of wicked problems and illustrate how they played out in the research reported in this issue. The teachers, who all participated in the English Australia Action Research in ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) Program, found ways to work through the wicked problems in their classrooms towards more satisfying outcomes. Each of the issues they addressed was related to the topic of teaching and learning listening, which was selected as a research theme for 2017.

Action research and wicked problems

In AR, teachers select an issue or dilemma that may have been problematic or unsatisfactory for some time. The variables teachers and learners experience in daily classroom contexts (of learning approaches, facilities, materials, curriculum requirements or assessments, for example) are dynamic and interactive; in AR, the aim is not to control variables in order to identify linear cause and effect relationships, but to treat the situation as it actually is and subject it to a new kind of action or intervention. Usually the changes are small-scale but the differences in the way the classroom operates as a result may be dramatic. Because new ways of thinking about the classroom (both by

teachers and learners) also emerge, there is often renewed energy and deeper understanding about language learning. AR is socially embedded as it focuses on practices within real-life situations that involve many interactions between different actors – students, teachers, colleagues, school managers, and the broader educational players involved. The processes of AR recognise too that there is no one 'solution' to the issues focused on, and that there will always be a place for further action.

Similarly, as Knapp (2008) notes when referring to wicked problems, the aim is:

> *... to shift the goal of action on significant problems from "solution" to "intervention." Instead of seeking the answer that totally eliminates a problem, one should recognize that actions occur in an ongoing process, and further actions will always be needed.*

Although the problems investigated by teachers may not be 'wicked' on the scale of those at policy planning levels – world poverty, or climate change, or mass migration and displacement – they are still concerned with how the key actors (teachers, managers) can create a better, fairer and more energising world, of learning for their learners. To that question there are no definitive answers that will apply in every classroom situation; finding a 'solution' requires constant exploration through action, reflection and innovation within a specific classroom context.

Features of wicked problems

Rittel and Webber (1973:161–167) identified 10 characteristics of wicked problems, several of which overlap with each other. I will highlight each one, explain them in more detail as they relate to teaching and learning, and identify examples from the teachers' reports, which readers can peruse in more detail in each of the contributions in this issue.

1. Wicked problems have no definitive formulation

It is difficult to clearly define a wicked problem. The 'problem' may be observable in the classroom but may not have a clear or finite solution. The most promising way forward is to try out some possible interventions that could make a difference and see what happens. Several of the teachers in this issue describe how they began by observing something they felt was unsatisfactory but ill-defined occurring in their classrooms. They realised they needed to experiment with various ways of improving the situation for their students. Here are two examples from Podimatopoulos and Hammond, and Gibbons respectively.

> *We give [students] listening opportunities in class and encourage them to take advantage of the many English language teaching websites. Essentially, we tell them to practise listening but we do not necessarily teach them the skills required for listening. Therefore, our students still struggle with their listening skills and lack both confidence and focus when approaching listening ... it was because of this situation that we were led to question our whole approach to teaching listening skills.*

> *Teaching listening is a balancing act; some learners complete a task during the first or second play of the recording whereas other learners need further replays. It is necessary for the teacher to try to find the middle ground.*

2. Wicked problems have no ends to the causal chains – 'no stopping rule'

The causes of the problems are not ones that can be resolved once and for all. It is more likely that the steps taken to deal with the problem will need to change and be continually revisited (often well beyond the research) according to different student classroom situations and needs. The interventions tried out as part of AR usually lead to further possible avenues for investigation. As there is no linear cause and effect explanation that can easily be identified, new questions arise. As Larsen suggests in his article:

> *However, it is unclear whether the improvement was due to the instruction, the exposure, or an increased familiarity with the task type. Future studies could further refine instruction in order to determine the source of the change. In addition, it is difficult to determine whether the improvement was due to the instruction at all as many of the students were simultaneously increasing their exposure to the English language through interactions with native speakers in the community and at work while also enhancing their understanding through the general coursework.*

Bomfim also notes that she became conscious of other possible avenues to explore:

> *There are a number of aspects of this AR project that would benefit from further investigation. Rhyming is one of these. Whilst it is seen as an essential component in the development of phonological awareness, many of the AR students either struggled to understand it, do it and/or recognise its importance. I would also like to do further research into whether weaker students benefit more than stronger students from developing phonological awareness skills.*

3. Wicked problems do not have 'true or false' solutions, rather 'good or bad' ones

What the researcher discovers from investigating a 'wicked problem' will only ever have a less or more positive outcome, rather than a final one. It is always the case that there could be other equally effective ways to teach the skill, use the materials, or conduct the student assessment. 'Solutions' to wicked problems are therefore partial, and bound by time and place. They are dependent on the particular circumstances within the sociocultural environment of the classroom at the time of the intervention, and could well change under other circumstances. As Larsen comments:

> *Although the students of Cycle 2 were at a lower level than those in Cycle 1, Cycle 2 participants produced similar results on the diagnostic test … by the final assessment, most students showed some improvement with a mean of 9.25. However, two of the students who had achieved low scores in the diagnostic test showed little or no improvement.*

4. Wicked problems offer no 'immediate' or 'ultimate' tests for a solution

Whether the interventions that have been tried out in the classroom have a lasting effect is usually difficult to determine. It is often the case that the research can identify some immediate results, but there is no guarantee that what learners have learned or achieved will continue with them beyond the research period. Action researchers aim to achieve effective actions to deal with a problematic situation they observe. While the immediate outcomes may show positive trends,

they usually need to continue experimenting and to keep testing out their interventions to see if they still work. Sneyers and Oldroyd express their awareness that, while there were positive outcomes from their research, these were unlikely to offer a definitive solution:

> *It is very difficult to demonstrate progress in listening, especially over a short period of time, and in drawing conclusions we are cautious about over-generalising and overstating the extent to which training in ALS [active listening skills] can improve students' listening comprehension in expository discussion.*

Similarly, Bomfim notes that despite a positive start, she feels the need to expand what she has learned.

> *… I feel the project took positive steps towards bridging the gap between the listening literature and classroom practice. I will certainly be applying what I have learned through my teaching, curriculum development work and future research projects.*

5. Wicked problems mean that every attempt at a solution is consequential

All interventions attempted by action researchers will inevitably have some kind of effect, as they change the 'status quo'. However, from the outset it is difficult to anticipate exactly what those effects will be, and action researchers often find that things do not turn out according to plan. In any event, there will be certain kinds of consequences that arise from the interventions they try out, unexpected or not. Carmody and Presser note that:

> *While we had anticipated that it may be those learners who had finished tasks quickly and so had to wait for others to catch up who had not enjoyed using Nearpod, several of our learners expressed an alternative, equally plausible explanation that we had not anticipated … As this explanation came in the final cycle of the case study interviews, it was too late to add a new survey question to investigate this aspect of the project. However, it was certainly a valid perspective that we as teachers had not considered.*

6. Wicked problems do not have an 'exhaustively describable' set or series of solutions

The outcomes or solutions to wicked problems are not easily explained or arrived at. In addition, the trends that action researchers notice in their data may be puzzling or contradictory, and there could be a number of explanations not easily identified in the course of the research. Sneyers and Oldroyd point to the fact that explanations could be multiple:

> *We found that there was no clear trend of improved relevancy of contributions; our students' scores remained much the same between the MCA [mid-course assessment] and the EOC [end-of-course assessment] … There could be a number of reasons for this result.*

Similarly, Podimatopoulos and Hammond refer to the contradictions that characterised their findings:

> *We had originally hoped that listening comprehension tests would provide a clear measure of students' listening improvement. However, as we progressed, reflected and read more widely from the literature, some contradictions were highlighted.*

7. Every wicked problem is unique

Wicked problems have their own relevance and set of characteristics that are specific to the social situation and to the actors in it. Their distinguishing features combine in particular ways to create a challenging issue or dilemma for the people within that setting. They therefore need creative solutions that will suit the particular circumstances and enable the participants involved to move ahead. Bomfim outlines the particulars of the issue she investigated as it related to her students and her setting:

> *I have noticed that the DEC [Direct Entry Course] students who experience most difficulty with listening and note-taking tasks are often those who also have poor pronunciation and struggle to read out loud … To be more specific, these students have difficulty translating both the speech input they hear and the written forms they read into speech sounds, words and clauses, and finally into a literal meaning.*

Gibbons, on the other hand, wanted to challenge something that was generally perceived to be negative, but she believed could be turned to the advantage of her students:

> *A common complaint from teachers is the perceived misuse of such [mobile] devices in the classroom, but instead of seeing them as a negative influence on learning, I wanted to explore the potential of smartphones for the development of listening skills.*

8. Every wicked problem points to another wicked problem – each a symptom of another

Wicked problems have no definitive endings because they often give rise to further dilemmas or other problems, and it is always possible to continue probing new dimensions of teaching and learning. In the course of exploring the solutions to the problem, action researchers often come up against other issues that deserve more investigation. Wicked problems are cyclical, as it is possible to continue indefinitely seeking solutions as the research moves in new directions. Sneyers and Oldroyd hint at a new problem that emerged as they did their research, which may have arisen from the way they tried to solve the original problem:

> *It may have been that the combined tasks of learning new skills of movie-making and developing the level of understanding needed to teach a new listening concept to others were too demanding for the students in such a limited time frame.*

Podimatopoulos and Hammond comment that their research opened their eyes to the whole issue of how listening assessment practices in their centre were hampering rather than facilitating student achievement. Their insights led on to new areas to investigate in the future:

> *The process of conducting this project has revolutionised the way we view listening assessment and has inspired us to do further research on this issue. We observed that our switch to formative assessment empowered the students to become more critical thinkers, take responsibility for developing strategies for improving their listening and increased learner engagement. Therefore, further exploration of how we can continue to build formative assessment into our classroom activities would be of interest in the future.*

9. Wicked problem discrepancies can be explained in multiple ways – each 'choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution'

As their AR proceeds, researchers come to find new explanations about why actions or activities may not be successful. By identifying different ways of looking at the problem, researchers have the opportunity to create alternative approaches and discard those that do not seem to be productive. AR reveals new ways of looking at practices that have been taken for granted, but which may be impeding the best outcomes for learners. Podimatopoulos and Hammond, for example, came to realise that the forms of testing they were using were not benefitting their students.

> *However, our observations and reflections in Cycle 1 led us to discontinue this testing in Cycle 2, as we came to believe that formative assessment was more suited to our research than summative.*

Carmody and Presser began to delve more deeply into their students' perspectives to find explanations for their findings.

> *It is the discovery of unexpected explanations … that highlight the value of more open research tools such as face-to-face case study interviews. More broadly, this finding emphasised to us the power of systematic AR itself to reveal learner perspectives that would otherwise remain hidden, allowing us to make more informed teaching decisions.*

10. Wicked problems pose particular problems for those aiming to resolve them – exempting them from the right to be wrong

AR on wicked problems usually leads researchers to become more cognisant of their lack of awareness of issues affecting the problematic situation. They may also come to recognise the assumptions they make about their students. Doing research on issues that affect them and their students means that they need to be open to the possibility that they may be working with preconceived ideas that are incorrect. These wrong assumptions may contribute to practices that hinder students' progress in learning. Gibbons, Larsen, and Carmody and Presser respectively comment on how their research sensitised them to the assumptions they had made in their practice.

> *Although I had analysed the transcript of the recording prior to each lesson, the problems I predicted students might have were often different from their actual errors. For example, rather than difficulties with connected speech, there were sometimes problems with words that I had assumed the students would know … or with mishearing words as other words.*

> *I feel the project has been a worthwhile endeavour as it has opened my eyes to issues affecting listening that I had not even considered … The research has raised my awareness and reminded me to not assume aspects of my classroom practice.*

> *However, through our investigation and experiences with Nearpod, it has become clear to us that the platform does not compromise or replace the teacher; rather it informs essential teaching decisions in lessons by providing a real-time overview of learner responses to tasks as well as facilitating the timely sharing of selected peer examples with learners.*

Embracing wicked problems in the classroom

Teaching, by its very nature, involves dealing with numerous complex, overlapping and unpredictable elements (see Burns and Knox 2011), which inevitably present teachers with daily challenges. Teachers can choose to see the 'problems' they encounter in their classrooms as insurmountable and immovable, or as something to embrace with curiosity and openness. The 'wicked problems' of teaching can become a source of motivation and stimulation and provide an impetus to find creative ways forward. The 'solutions' can be continually redeveloped in the light of contextually relevant evidence and new insights.

AR moves teacher researchers beyond traditional and linear approaches to curriculum delivery, and provides a powerful tool that provides new ways of making sense of their classrooms. Moreover, the findings from teachers' AR can go beyond the individual classroom and be shared with other colleagues in the institution as a way of spreading innovative practices more comprehensively. The teachers who contributed to this issue amply illustrate these various aspects of their research. Not only do they describe their classroom challenges, the interventions they adopted to counter them, what they discovered and where their research has led them, but perhaps even more importantly, what shines through their accounts is the difference conducting AR has made in their professional lives. In an era of accountability that seems intent on 'taming' education (Creasy 2018), providing teachers with a potent means of maintaining a critical and imaginative stance on teaching and learning seems ever more urgent.

2017 Action Research Program participants: (back) Geoffrey Larsen, Ashley Carmody, Julia Gibbons, Ramesh Presser, Penny Podimatopoulos, Sharn Hammond, An Sneyers; (front) Melissa Oldroyd, Professor Anne Burns (key reference person), Sophie O'Keefe (English Australia) and Keren Stead Bomfim

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SIP and listen: Raising students' awareness of stress, intonation and pausing

Penny Podimatopoulos UOW College, Wollongong
Sharn Hammond UOW College, Wollongong

Introduction

As English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers, we have found that students often ask us how they can improve their listening skills. We give them listening opportunities in class and encourage them to take advantage of the many English language teaching websites. Essentially, we tell them to practise listening but we do not necessarily teach them the skills required for listening. Therefore, our students still struggle with their listening skills and lack both confidence and focus when approaching listening. They feel demoralised when their listening comprehension test scores are low and they develop a perception of themselves as 'poor listeners', which further reduces their ability to listen effectively.

It was because of this situation that we were led to question our whole approach to teaching listening skills. Cauldwell's work (2013) provided insights that helped us in this quest. He describes current listening methodology as relying too much on the testing and practising of comprehension and too little on teaching decoding of what he refers to as the 'sound substance' of the stream of speech: stress, intonation and pausing (SIP). We realised that we often fail to focus on the various 'bottom up' factors involved in the process of listening. Therefore we decided to combine our passion for teaching pronunciation and desire to help our students take a more 'top down' approach to listening. Our action research (AR) project therefore focused on how raising students' awareness of SIP affected their listening skills.

Context and participants

Our research was conducted at UOW College, which is attached to the University of Wollongong. The college provides ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) courses in General English and EAP, providing direct entry to undergraduate and postgraduate courses. There is movement of students in and out of courses every six weeks. Our research was conducted in EAP classes over two 6-week cycles. The students came from China, India, Japan, Nepal, Oman, Pakistan, Russia and Saudi Arabia, and the cohort changed after the first six weeks, although some students remained as part of the research cohort in both teaching cycles. The number of days allocated to our teaching varied from two to five. One class, taught by Penny, was a pre-intermediate class (Academic Skills – AS) and the other, taught by Sharn, was an advanced English for Tertiary Studies (ETS) class. Some AS students were on a pathway to ETS, while others went on to study a Foundation or Diploma course. The ETS students were all on a pathway to the University of Wollongong. The majority of the Chinese students had recently completed high

school, while most of the other students already had a university degree from their country. The total number of students involved was 49.

Research focus

Many of our students believe they are 'poor listeners', reporting that they cannot understand native speakers because 'they speak too fast'. According to Gilbert (2013), this often means that learners are unable to process grammatical signals or contracted speech. These are some of the 'bottom up' cues, which ELT courses do not always teach.

We wanted to investigate the effect of teaching the 'bottom up' cues of pronunciation in developing students' listening skills. We had been interested in teaching pronunciation as a means of improving intelligibility in speaking, but we had not investigated its effect on listening skills. The question then became which skills should be our focus, and we had originally thought we would target not only SIP, but also phonemic sounds, word stress and linking. However, in order to streamline the research, we decided to narrow down our range. Our research question therefore became: how does raising awareness of SIP affect students' listening skills?

Action research cycles: What, how and why?

Our goal was to engage our students as actively and positively as possible in the process of developing awareness of SIP. Our action was based on a combination of ideas gained from current literature and our original ideas. Upon reflection at the conclusion of Cycle 1, we adapted previously used materials or introduced new materials in response to the students' needs and preferences, and our own observations.

Specific classroom activities to raise awareness of SIP

Rost (2011) refers to the short bursts of speech typically uttered as 'intonation units', which mark the speaker's rhythm for composing and presenting ideas. His analysis of this feature in processing speech was very helpful in our planning of classroom activities. Cauldwell (2013), Powell (2002) and Yates (2003) were also very informative and useful in planning activities.

Developing activities involved us in a cycle of observation, reflection, creativity and action, as we prepared and adapted materials and observed their particular strengths and weaknesses in relation to our research question. Some activities were given to both AS and ETS students, while others were specific to each class. By observing the students' reactions and their spontaneous feedback, we narrowed our range of activities to those they found to be the most engaging and enjoyable. We found the following to be the most productive.

1. Dictogloss

One sentence of 25–30 words was read at normal pace at intervals up to six times in total, and the students gradually added words to complete the sentence. They determined together where to place SIP and then read it aloud.

2. Dictation

Short dictations of 100–120 words were given with extended pausing after each thought group (Rost's 'intonation units'). Students then worked in pairs to mark and practise the SIP and read the text to each other for final checking. A variation of this activity was a dictation gapped for stressed words only.

3. Marking SIP

We found one of Cauldwell's (2013) ideas particularly helpful and adapted it to suit the students' needs. The activity, 'listen and decide', involves students in listening to a recording and marking the SIP. Another adaptation was to give the students a short text to read and mark the SIP, then listen to a recording and compare their placement of SIP. They could discuss the different ways SIP affects meaning. A further challenge which helped the students' focus on meaning as well as sentence boundaries was to mark SIP on an unpunctuated text and then listen to a recording to check their placement.

4. Jumbled thought groups

A very student-centred activity, this one proved to be particularly useful for raising awareness of pausing. The end result of the activity was that each student had a list of thought groups, rather than the normal paragraph presentation, which formed a complete text. Through the reading of the 'list text', the students were forced to pause between lines and so became very aware of the nature and benefit of pausing.

5. SIP for meaning

We adapted another idea of Cauldwell's (2013), his 'soft focus listening'. Its aim is to help the students listen to how SIP, rather than words, affects meaning. We asked them to differentiate between statements, statements with emphasis, and questioning statements just by focusing on the SIP. After listening, the students repeated the same SIP patterns aloud in pairs and discussed the differences in meaning.

6. Sound scripting

Sound scripting was used in the more advanced ETS classes, inspired by Powell's (2002) book, *Presenting in English*. The idea behind 'sound scripting' was to inspire students to use intonation, stress and pausing by marking punctuation by means of capitalising the most important words for emotional impact, bolding key content words and marking pauses/chunking on a pre-prepared transcript. The aim was to raise awareness of how pronunciation in English closely relates to meaning and to help students to be more expressive and in control of their SIP. All students found sound scripting very beneficial, especially students who weren't used to the concept of intonation for conveying importance and meaning.

7. Linguistic mimicry

The more advanced ETS classes were asked to memorise scripts from short segments of TED Talks or other famous speeches of their choice, then present in small groups, linguistically mimicking the presenter they were representing. The students were asked to imitate a presenter's every utterance, stress, intonation and pause as well as every physical gesture as precisely as possible. According to Yates (2003:22), 'mimicry provides teachers with a method to teach students how to internalize suprasegmentals first; later factors such as vowel and syllable stress and phrasing can be introduced and analysed'. We pursued this approach and the feedback from the students was very positive. They reported finding mimicry a unique way to embody and practise unfamiliar SIP patterns.

8. Various other reinforcement activities

Students were also asked to keep a vocabulary book where they were required to mark the word stress of all entries. They were also required to complete various online intonation and word stress quizzes for homework to reinforce and practise the activities we had done together in the classroom.

Data collection and initial data analysis

We used various data collection tools during our research, including questionnaires, checklists and interviews.

Questionnaires

We used two types of questionnaire in our research, the first focusing on prosody awareness and the second on listening improvement.

Before we began our classroom activities, at the beginning of Cycle 1 we administered a prosody awareness questionnaire (Appendix 1a) to collect qualitative data from all our students. This questionnaire was designed to investigate students' knowledge of SIP and its impact on their listening ability before any intervention had taken place. Our reflections led to a simplified version of this questionnaire (Appendix 1b) at the beginning of Cycle 2, which aimed to enable students to answer more easily.

Listening improvement questionnaires (Appendices 2a and 2b) were administered at regular intervals throughout the 12 weeks. These questionnaires were also intended to help inform us about the development of our class materials. They provided an opportunity for students to write comments about how the activities affected their listening and which ones they preferred. A final 'exit' version was given to students as they left each cycle.

The prosody awareness questionnaires indicated that 50% to 90% of the lower-level AS students had either 'never heard of' or 'knew a little' about stress and intonation, and 78% said the same for pausing. This contrasted with the ETS results, which showed 75% to 90% of students understood SIP quite well. In the listening improvement questionnaires, the majority of students reported a development in the way their understanding of SIP helped their listening skills. They progressed from reporting that it helped 'not at all' or 'a little' to indicating that it helped 'quite a lot' or 'a lot'.

Comprehension tests and listening self-assessment checklist

Initially we used listening comprehension tests to measure student progress as part of our research. These were in addition to the subject-related listening assessments conducted to measure each student's progress in the course. However, our observations and reflections in Cycle 1 led us to discontinue this testing in Cycle 2, as we came to believe that formative assessment was more suited to our research than summative. We were influenced by Vandergrift and Goh (2012) to introduce an adaptation of their listening self-assessment checklist (Appendix 3), which included completing the statement, 'To improve my listening next time, I will…'. Their description of the 'How?' of formative assessment focuses on observation, checklists and portfolios, more often associated with anecdotal comments than a mark. Their 'Why?' is to provide feedback to the student and teacher on progress in learning, and to determine the need for and/or type of remediation required. This approach to formative assessment allowed us to monitor the development of students' listening skills, provide them with constructive feedback and reflect on and adapt our teaching.

Student exit interviews

Throughout Cycles 1 and 2 we conducted spontaneous 'after task' interviews and discussions to facilitate and collect immediate feedback. This helped us gauge how students felt about their progress in terms of their comprehension and level of understanding and awareness of SIP. It also helped us gain insights into task engagement, perceptions of usefulness and overall enjoyment.

In addition, a group exit interview, which was audio-recorded, was conducted in Cycle 2 with four ETS students. The students were chosen based on their differing progression and improvement. Examples of student comments show that they were positive about the SIP activities (please note that all comments in this article are unedited for authenticity):

> *It has made us more confident [listeners].*
>
> *You can understand when someone moves to other point, key words and details. It's so useful for listening.*
>
> *One sentence can have different meaning. It's not just about knowing the vocab. Intonation can help you with meaning and so we become good listener.*

Further samples of students' comments gathered from questionnaires and interviews are contained in Appendix 4.

Findings

Our data, which is predominantly qualitative, indicates that students' listening skills were positively affected by raising their awareness of SIP. They believed it helped them understand key words, main ideas and details, to know when sentences begin and end, to differentiate between statement types, to have time to think and process speech, and their overall confidence in listening increased.

The prosody awareness questionnaire revealed that, at the beginning of their course, the ETS students had a better understanding of SIP than the AS students. However, the findings from both

questionnaires indicated that all students developed a greater awareness and better understanding of the role of SIP in assisting listening skills.

We had originally hoped that listening comprehension tests would provide a clear measure of students' listening improvement. However, as we progressed, reflected and read more widely from the literature, some contradictions were highlighted (Burns 2010). While test scores were not improving, and in fact in some cases were dropping, class discussion, observation and student answers to questionnaires revealed that listening skills were improving. In the spontaneous interviews, students reported that they approached listening comprehension tests with preconceived ideas of their poor listening ability. They felt anxious, afraid of misunderstanding the questions and getting the wrong answer. The decision to discontinue the listening comprehension test turned out to be a crucial turning point in our data collection because it removed pressure from the students, freeing them up from the label of 'poor listener' and allowing them to relax and enjoy listening practice tasks, which we believed allowed us to gather more insightful data.

The spontaneous class interviews also showed us that students had become increasingly positive and excited about participating in listening tasks. They seemed to have an increased level of confidence, ability and motivation, reportedly because they felt they had more control now that they understood how to apply SIP as a listening comprehension strategy. This method had the advantage of encouraging spontaneous, more authentic responses, with little time for students to self-censor or over-analyse.

The students who were involved in our project for two cycles reported a slightly greater improvement, indicating that time and familiarity played a role. In Cycle 2, we observed an interesting development in spontaneous student–student communication. The students who continued from Cycle 1 into Cycle 2 took on a teaching role with other students in Cycle 2, thereby demonstrating the benefits they had gained from focusing on SIP. They confidently explained and assisted with SIP tasks, offering advice and correction.

The self-assessment checklist introduced in Cycle 2 gave us an insight into the students' awareness of SIP when it was not the specific focus of a class activity. It indicated a gradual but definite improvement in their awareness of SIP. This was an exciting finding, as it revealed that students' awareness of SIP had developed to the extent that they were adopting it as a strategy to help their listening.

The student interviews, which we decided to undertake in order to probe for further detail, provided us with some of our most positive and insightful data. Since they were conducted after the students' final class results we believe that they encouraged uninhibited and frank responses.

Discussion

Prior to our project we believed that listening caused students an enormous amount of anxiety because of their training over many years to listen and then answer questions accurately, to be right or wrong, and consequently, to be characterised as 'good' or 'poor' listeners. The majority of students in the project were excited to learn to approach listening from a different, more accessible position. Through the project, we were able to confirm that learning by 'osmosis', the regular testing

and practising of comprehension, is clearly not enough. Although our students did not necessarily score high marks in comprehension tests, they were able to report a noticeable improvement in their listening skills.

Through questionnaires, observations, discussions and interviews, the students revealed they had learned to shift their focus from trying to understand every word to being aware of SIP and the meaning it conveyed. This gave them increased confidence with which to approach listening. They became less afraid of getting the answer wrong and became more focused on what they were able to understand. The activities helped them understand speech as a collection of manageable thought groups, or intonation units. If they lost focus, they knew they could 'plug in' again following a pause.

Another significant insight from our research was that our accepted methods of testing listening were not necessarily accurate measures of listening ability. However, these methods are part of the fabric of the courses we are required to teach. As teachers, we therefore now feel a responsibility to add to traditional course approaches by raising our students' awareness of SIP, and teach them that listening improvement is not only measurable through test scores. We feel that it would also be valuable if the listening tests at our centre could be revised to more accurately reflect our students' ability.

Reflections

To say that this AR project has changed our whole approach to teaching listening would not be an exaggeration. It is ironic that while we have been researching student listening improvement, we have learned to listen to our students more carefully. It has given us the opportunity to further explore a shared personal interest and passion for teaching pronunciation skills, and to see how these complementary skills can be successfully integrated in the classroom. In fact, we now find ourselves wondering how listening skills can be taught at all without reference to elements of pronunciation.

The process of conducting this project has revolutionised the way we view listening assessment and has inspired us to do further research on this issue. We observed that our switch to formative assessment empowered the students to become more critical thinkers, take responsibility for developing strategies for improving their listening, and increased learner engagement. Therefore, further exploration of how we can continue to build formative assessment into our classroom activities would be of interest in the future.

The program has also provided us with an opportunity to reflect on many aspects of our teaching that we believe will have broader implications for our college. We have researched, created, amended and integrated materials so as to best support the specific student and teacher needs of UOW College. These materials have evolved within the boundaries and limitations of our course curricula, time restraints and specific student pathways. They are intended to provide more relevant and effective lessons with positive outcomes for both teachers and students within our college. We are in the process of making our collected materials available to other teachers in the college who are interested in AR. Staff workshops on teaching pronunciation and listening have already been conducted during the research process.

In an attempt to best apply what we have learned more generally within our workplace, we have also had the opportunity to survey our colleagues and manager. Our colleagues' responses indicated that they were overwhelmingly supportive of including the teaching of pronunciation skills in teaching listening. In particular, we have been encouraged by our manager's reaction to our research, that it should become a focus for professional development in order to broaden teachers' thinking about the integration of language skills and to improve teaching practice.

The project has given us new insights into ways of doing research. Research does not have to be a highly academic exercise, involving specialised knowledge and an understanding of statistics. It can be successfully carried out by ordinary teachers like us who want to inform and improve their teaching practice. Building on the support and encouragement we have received from English Australia and our college, we are already thinking about our next project.

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Appendix 1A: First prosody awareness questionnaire used in Cycle 1

1. **Which statement best describes your current understanding of sentence stress?**

- ☐ I have never heard of it.
- ☐ I have heard of it, but am not exactly sure what it means.
- ☐ I understand a little about what it means.
- ☐ I understand quite well.
- ☐ I thoroughly understand what it means.
- ☐ Other:

2. **If you chose options 3, 4 or 5, please write your best definition of sentence stress below.**

_____

3. **Which statement best describes your current understanding of intonation?**

- ☐ I have never heard of it.
- ☐ I have heard of it, but am not exactly sure what it means.
- ☐ I understand a little about what it means.
- ☐ I understand quite well.
- ☐ I thoroughly understand what it means.
- ☐ Other:

4. **If you chose options 3, 4 or 5, please write your best definition of intonation below.**

_____

5. **Which statement describes your current understanding of pausing?**

- ☐ I have never heard of it.
- ☐ I have heard of it, but am not exactly sure what it means.
- ☐ I understand a little about what it means.
- ☐ I understand quite well.
- ☐ I understand thoroughly what it means.
- ☐ Other:

6. **If you chose options 3, 4 or 5, please write your best definition of intonation below.**

_____

7. **When you're listening to English, are you aware of sentence stress?**

- ☐ I don't know what sentence stress is.
- ☐ Yes, I am aware. I can hear it. (Go to question 8)
- ☐ No, I'm not aware of it. I can't identify it.
- ☐ I don't know if I am aware or not.
- ☐ Other:

8. **How do you think sentence stress affects your listening comprehension? (Check all boxes that apply).**

- ☐ It helps me to identify the important information.
- ☐ It helps me to identify key words.
- ☐ It helps me to identify main ideas.
- ☐ It doesn't help me at all.
- ☐ I don't know if it helps me or not.
- ☐ Other:

9. **When you're listening to English, are you aware of intonation?**

- ☐ I don't know what intonation is.
- ☐ Yes, I am aware. I can hear it.
- ☐ No, I'm not aware. I can't hear it.
- ☐ I don't know if I am aware or not.
- ☐ Other:

10. **How do you think intonation affects your listening comprehension? (Please check all boxes that apply).**

- ☐ It helps me to understand the important information in a sentence.
- ☐ It helps me to hear key words.
- ☐ It helps me to identify main ideas.
- ☐ It helps me to understand sentence type (question, imperative, declarative, tag etc.).
- ☐ It helps me to understand suggested meaning.
- ☐ It helps me to understand how the speaker is feeling.
- ☐ It doesn't affect my listening comprehension.
- ☐ I don't know.
- ☐ Other:

11. **When you're listening to English, are you aware of pausing?**

- ☐ I don't know what pausing is.
- ☐ Yes, I am aware. I can hear it.
- ☐ No, I'm not aware. I can't hear it.
- ☐ I don't know if I am aware or not.
- ☐ Other:

12. How do you think pausing affects your listening comprehension? (Check all boxes that apply).

- ☐ It helps me to understand the important information.
- ☐ It helps me to understand chunks of language.
- ☐ It helps me to group ideas together.
- ☐ It gives me time to process what is being said.
- ☐ I don't think it does help my listening comprehension.
- ☐ I don't know.
- ☐ Other:

13. How would you best describe how you feel when you listen to English? (Check all boxes that apply).

- ☐ I hear English as one long stream of sounds.
- ☐ I often give up and stop listening.
- ☐ I understand small chunks of what is being said.
- ☐ I understand most of what is being said but not all.
- ☐ I understand at school, but not out in the real world.
- ☐ I often feel anxious when listening to English and it often stops me from understanding what is being said.
- ☐ I feel fine when I am listening (not anxious) and understand most of what is being said.
- ☐ I try and apply listening strategies I have learned when listening to English.

If you do apply strategies, please list what strategies you apply below.

_____

_____

_____

- ☐ Other:

14. On a scale of 1–10, how would you rate your listening comprehension?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Poor											Excellent

Appendix 1B: Simplified prosody awareness questionnaire used in Cycle 2

1. **Tick the best option:**
   - ☐ I have never heard of sentence stress.
   - ☐ I have heard of sentence stress, but am not exactly sure what it means.
   - ☐ I understand a little about what sentence stress means.
   - ☐ I understand sentence stress quite well.
   - ☐ I understand sentence stress very well.
   - ☐ Other:

2. **Tick the best option:**
   - ☐ I have never heard of intonation.
   - ☐ I have heard of intonation, but am not exactly sure what it means.
   - ☐ I understand a little about what intonation means.
   - ☐ I understand intonation quite well.
   - ☐ I understand intonation very well.
   - ☐ Other:

3. **Tick the best option:**
   - ☐ I have never heard of pausing.
   - ☐ I have heard of pausing, but am not exactly sure what it means.
   - ☐ I understand a little about what pausing means.
   - ☐ I understand pausing quite well.
   - ☐ I understand pausing very well:
   - ☐ Other:

4. **Tick all that are true for you:**
   - ☐ Sentence stress helps me to hear key words.
   - ☐ Sentence stress helps me to hear main ideas.
   - ☐ Sentence stress helps me hear details.
   - ☐ Sentence stress doesn't help me at all.
   - ☐ I don't know.
   - ☐ Other:

5. **Tick all that are true for you:**

- ☐ Intonation helps me to hear key words.
- ☐ Intonation helps me to hear main ideas.
- ☐ Intonation helps me to hear details.
- ☐ Intonation helps me understand how the speaker is feeling.
- ☐ Intonation tells me if the speaker asks a question.
- ☐ Intonation helps me know when the sentence ends.
- ☐ Intonation doesn't help me at all.
- ☐ I don't know.
- ☐ Other:

6. **Tick all that are true for you:**

- ☐ Pausing helps me to hear key words.
- ☐ Pausing helps me to hear main ideas.
- ☐ Pausing helps me to hear details.
- ☐ Pausing doesn't help me at all.
- ☐ I don't know.
- ☐ Other:

7. **Describe how you feel when you listen to English?**

_____

_____

_____

8. **On a scale of 1–10, how would you rate your listening comprehension?**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Poor											Excellent

Appendix 2A: Listening improvement questionnaire given throughout both research cycles

1. Do you think your listening is improving?

|.....|.....|.....|

Not at all A little Quite a lot A lot

2. Does your understanding of stress and intonation help your listening?

|.....|.....|.....|

Not at all A little Quite a lot A lot

3. How does it help? Tick *all* answers which are true for you.

- ☐ A. It helps me understand key words.
- ☐ B. It helps me understand main ideas.
- ☐ C. It helps me understand details.
- ☐ D. It helps me to know when each sentence ends.
- ☐ E. It helps me be more confident in my listening.
- ☐ F. Comments:

4. Does your understanding of pausing help your listening?

|.....|.....|.....|

Not at all A little Quite a lot A lot

5. How does it help? Tick *all* answers which are true for you.

- ☐ A. It helps me understand key words.
- ☐ B. It helps me understand main ideas.
- ☐ C. It helps me understand details.
- ☐ D. It gives me time to think.
- ☐ E. It helps me be more confident in my listening.
- ☐ F. Comments:

Appendix 2B: Listening improvement exit questionnaire

Circle one of the following:

A. I was a student in both Module 1A and Module 2A.

B. I was a student in Module 2A only.

1. Do you think your listening has improved during your course(s)?

|.....|.....|.....|

Not at all A little Quite a lot A lot

2. Does your understanding of stress and intonation help your listening?

|.....|.....|.....|

Not at all A little Quite a lot A lot

3. How does your understanding of stress and intonation help your listening?

4. Does your understanding of pausing help your listening?

|.....|.....|.....|

Not at all A little Quite a lot A lot

5. How does your understanding of pausing help your listening?

|.....|.....|.....|

Not at all A little Quite a lot A lot

Appendix 3: Listening self-assessment (adapted from Vandergrift and Goh 2012:244)

Before listening Date:	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
I understand what I have to do during and after listening, and I have asked the teacher to explain anything I did not understand.						
I have thought about the vocabulary of the topic.						
I have thought about what I know about the topic.						
I have made predictions about what I think I might hear.						
I have prepared myself to focus on what I will hear.						
I have read the questions I have to answer or other material the teacher has given me.						
I have encouraged myself: I can do this!						
After listening						
I concentrated on the listening task.						
I tried to check my predictions.						
I understood if my predictions were true or not.						
I noticed stress and intonation.						
I noticed pausing.						
I used my knowledge of the topic to help me guess the words I did not understand.						
How well did you complete the activities? • Very well • Quite well • Not well • I didn't complete them • Other						

To improve my listening next time, I will:

1. .....

2. .....

3. .....

4. .....

5. .....

6. .....

Appendix 4: Sample of comments from students' interviews and questionnaires

'I think pausing help me understanding key words and give me time to think.'

'There are many vocabulary I cannot understand. If people say quickly I don't have enough time to think what he said. If they have pausing, I can think.'

'I can have enough time to thinking and when speaker is pausing, I know the sentence is finish.'

'It is help me how I can [differentiate] between another sentence [type].'

'[I can] get new words and [have] more focus on them [and] know fast speech [better with] this skill.'

'Its give me a moment to think and know what's the speaker talk about.'

'It has made us more confident [listeners].'

'You can understand when someone moves to other point, key words and details. It's so useful for listening.'

'One sentence can have different meaning. It's not just about knowing the vocab. Intonation can help you with meaning and so we become good listener.'

'It's important to think stress, intonation and pausing because it is important. When I learnt SIP it gives me time to understand better than before. I didn't know SIP before. It helps me.'

Exploring the effects of raising metacognitive and grammatical awareness on students' ability to listen to short bursts of speech

Geoffrey Larsen Kaplan International English, Sydney

Introduction

As in many other schools, at Kaplan International English, where I work, listening tasks aim to develop the students' ability to determine overall meaning, specific information, and detail in texts. These texts then gradually develop in terms of length and complexity with the rise in the students' level. However, over several months, the staff at Kaplan International English noticed that students across all levels were performing poorly in the listening tasks in our proprietary electronic assessment tool, the KITE (Kaplan International Tools for English) test. This poor performance was linked to listening items based on short imperatives presented at near-native speed. Students often reported that the text was presented at a speed that was too fast or that they were not adequately prepared despite having control over when the text would begin. In addition, students often linked this difficulty to the challenges they had understanding the speech of native-speaking Australians; they reported that they could understand the slow, measured speech of their teachers but could not understand short command forms uttered by native speakers outside class.

In addition, when listening for answers to listening tasks, students would miss the beginning of the clause in the utterance. As a result, the students appeared to be unable to orientate themselves and establish the context of the text and thus were unable to attach meaning to the remainder of the clause.

As many of our students work part-time with native speakers, much of their interaction with people outside the school environment involves short, imperative sentences spoken quickly. Students are given short orders by their managers and are expected to comprehend and act on the information immediately. Lengthy texts typical of classroom activities do not specifically train them to listen to such forms of speech, so my research aimed to investigate whether comprehension could be improved through general exposure to short texts. To investigate these issues, my research addressed the following questions:

1. How can gradual but ongoing exposure to dictations of short utterances help with ability to react to these utterances and improve overall listening performance?
2. How can an awareness of the positioning of meaning in the clause help prepare a student to comprehend short utterances?

Context

This project was carried out at Kaplan International English in Sydney, New South Wales. This school offers a wide range of English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS); however, the majority of courses teach General English from A1 to C2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001). The campus also offers English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes and exam preparation classes, specifically for IELTS and Cambridge English Qualifications.

The initial cycle of research took place during a 12-week *Cambridge English: First (FCE)* (now known as B2 First) exam preparation class. The class consisted of 15 students varying between B1 and C1 level. Although the class size stayed consistent, several students exited and entered over the duration of the course as it was an evening course designed to operate around the work responsibilities of students. The sample size was further impacted by a rolling intake which introduced new students into the class every Monday. However, during the research, there were six who were able to complete the majority of the assessments.

The students themselves were from a wide variety of backgrounds and ages. Ages ranged from 21 to 44; however, the vast majority of students were in their 20s. The students in the class came from Brazil, the Czech Republic, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia.

Prior to commencing the course, the majority of students had already been studying in one of Kaplan International English's General English classes; one of the requirements of entry is that students have to demonstrate the ability to perform at CEFR B2 level or above. Students also came from the IELTS course, which maintained similar requirements. Students new to Kaplan International English could also enter the class on condition that they scored at B2 level on the entrance exam completed through the KITE.

The second cycle consisted of 15 students studying in a General English intermediate level class. Unlike the *FCE* students, participants in General English courses are not studying to prepare for a specific test but rather have a variety of goals in mind. Entry into this course requires an average of B1 level on the Kaplan International English entrance exam or a recommendation from multiple teachers at the school. The background of the students in the second cycle was also substantially different. While the majority of the students in the first cycle were from South America, the students in the second cycle were an almost even spread of students from South American, European and Asian countries. This resulted in a wider variety of first languages (see Table 1).

Table 1: Class demographics

	Cycle 1	*Cycle 2*
Class size	15	15
Level	*FCE*	General English intermediate
Countries of origin	Brazil, the Czech Republic, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia.	Chile, China, Colombia, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, Spain, Thailand and Turkey.

In contrast to the *FCE* course, the General English course has no time limit. Instead, students enter through a rolling intake and continue to study the material until they exit or are able to demonstrate a level equivalent to B2. Therefore, several of the students had been in the class much longer than others and were more accustomed to my voice, my style of dictation and to Kaplan International English's version of listening tasks. Due to the rolling intake, several students entered and exited the course; however, only students who completed all of the assessments were included as research participants. I could only determine any measurement of growth after students had completed more than one assessment. As a result of the high frequency of student turnover, the second cycle ran for six weeks.

Research focus

The primary focus of this project was to determine whether gradual exposure to short utterances of speech would help students comprehend quick and rapid speech in the real world. To supplement their exposure, I also aimed to help students raise their awareness of where meaning lies in the clause. I hoped that students would then be able to use this knowledge to mitigate the challenges they experienced when speaking with native speakers. The assumption was that students would be able to isolate meaning more easily when they understood what to listen to.

According to Halliday (1985), the most important part of the clause is the starting point, or the theme of the clause. Theme indicates to the reader the direction that the information will take. For instance, when a sentence starts with a person's name, it is clear to the listener that the person is the topic of the clause; however, if the sentence were to start with a circumstance of time, such as 'in the morning', the listener would interpret the time as being essential to the rest of the information being delivered.

As can be seen in Table 2, the theme contains the subject and everything before the beginning of the first verb group, while the rheme, or remainder of the clause, contains the verb and any direct or indirect objects and optional portions of the clause (Matthiessen 1992). Since the theme of the clause contains such essential information, I designed gap-fill activities that would direct students' attention to missing thematic information. To help students better understand theme, they were given sentences and asked to identify the functions, as in Table 2.

Table 2: Sample exercise

In the morning,	**I**	**ate**	**some toast.**
Theme		Rheme (remainder)	
	Subject	Process	Object

In these exercises, the subject and any earlier circumstances were omitted from the students' worksheets. For example, in the sentence 'in the morning, I ate some toast', the words omitted would be 'in the morning, I'. In imperative clauses, the finite verb and its direct object – if the verb was transitive – were omitted. For instance, in the sentence 'apply the cream to the irritation before sleeping', the verb and direct object, 'apply the cream', would be omitted. To aid the students in their recognition of these features, I gave them instructions on how to identify theme through short

worksheets that showed them where the theme lies, and then asked them to identify theme in example sentences (see Appendix 1).

Method and data collection

The intervention itself consisted of two parts: exposure through gap-fill exercises which omitted the start of the clause, and supplementary exercises designed to build students' awareness of the grammar structure of the clause.

Prior to this intervention, a pre-test interview was conducted with students to determine their current views on listening at native speed. After the interview, students were given a diagnostic assessment to determine their performance. This assessment consisted of 12 gap-fill dictations delivered at native speed covering instructions likely to be heard in the workplace or in everyday life. The gap-fill varied between declarative and imperative clauses and omitted the first part of the clause; assessment items required students to fill in either noun groups, verb groups or prepositional phrases (Appendix 2). Items were presented twice with a 20-second gap in between each item. In the first cycle, the assessment was performed four times over the duration of the course. To better prepare the students for these assessments, they were reminded of the strategies we had covered before their regularly scheduled listening exercises as well as before the assessment itself.

In the second cycle, the assessment was once again performed four times; however, the structure of the course only allowed for more extended listening lessons twice per week. Also, due to time constraints, the four assessments were delivered over six weeks as opposed to the 12 in the *FCE* course. This meant that students had substantially less time between each assessment.

Once data from the diagnostic assessment had been compiled, students were given a basic overview of theme and rheme, and instructed to actively listen for the start of clauses in the imperative and declarative forms, which signals the intention of the rest of the clause. Students were asked to identify the theme and then they created and deconstructed a text with me. Finally, I asked them to create several sentences themselves and then to deconstruct their peers' work independently. To determine the effectiveness of this instruction, I gave students a gap-fill dictation. The dictation also served as the exposure to the form.

Early findings suggested that students were likely to mishear the same grammatical forms that they were having difficulty with due to the structure of their L1. A student who had difficulty with articles, or whose L1 did not contain articles, would not record any articles on the worksheet.

To determine whether these errors were due to inability to perceive the form or to insecurity related to using the form, I gave the students an additional listening gap-fill activity focusing on commonly omitted forms: articles and to + infinitives (Appendix 3).

Finally, at the end of the course, I interviewed students using three open discussion questions in order to gain insights into their perceived growth.

Findings

Cycle 1

Of the six students in the first cycle who completed more than three of the assessments, all showed slight to substantial improvement. Due to absences, not all of these students completed the same tests, yet all showed some improvement. High performers were able to increase their overall scores by a range of 2–3 marks while two of the students who performed poorly on the initial assessment (<5) were both able to double their marks by the final assessment.

Through the entire course, only three students regressed on subsequent assessments. One initially scored a 9 but then scored an 8 on the next assessment and then improved on the final one with a score of 12. Other drops in performance were in the range of 1–3 marks. The mean of the original test was 4.33 while on the final test it increased to 9.6. Similarly, the median in the diagnostic was 3 and increased to 10 in the final. The most frequent score in the diagnostic was 2 while it was 10 in the final (see Table 3).

Table 3: Diagnostic and final test results – Cycle 1

Test	*Mean*	*Median*	*Mode*
Diagnostic test	4.33	3	2
Final test	9.6	10	10

The most common cause of error was word omission or a lack of vocabulary (*e.g. wheelbarrow*).

In the post-course interview, three students indicated that they felt as if they were better prepared to listen to native speakers as a result of the assessment. Two also indicated that they found the assessment a lot easier once they were familiar with its structure.

Cycle 2

The second cycle progressed for two weeks before it needed to be restarted due to a sudden change in student numbers. After the restart, numbers remained constant and nine of the 15 students were able to complete all of the assessments.

Although the students of Cycle 2 were at a lower level than those in Cycle 1, Cycle 2 participants produced similar results on the diagnostic test (see Table 4). Cycle 2 students achieved a mean of 5. By the final assessment, most students showed some improvement with a mean of 9.25. However, two of the students who had achieved low scores in the diagnostic test showed little or no improvement.

Table 4: Diagnostic and final test results – Cycle 2

Test	*Mean*	*Median*	*Mode*
Diagnostic test	5	4	4
Final test	9.25	10	7

In the post-course interview, a student stated 'I feel better with the listening. I still can't understand Australians because of the slang, but I know pay attention to the words' [sic]. Another student suggested that by doing the exercise they became aware of the correct positioning of articles and other word forms. In contrast another student continued to feel overwhelmed by listening in general and stated: 'Its good but difficult. You know, in here listening is ok. Sometimes. You can see my answer. [laughs]. But at the work, I understand nothing' [sic].

Discussion

Although few students were able to participate in the entire course, the findings show that almost all students improved after each test. However, it is unclear whether the improvement was due to the instruction, the exposure, or an increased familiarity with the task type. Future studies could further refine instruction in order to determine the source of the change. In addition, it is difficult to determine whether the improvement was due to the instruction at all as many of the students were simultaneously increasing their exposure to the English language through interactions with native speakers in the community and at work while also enhancing their understanding through the general coursework.

However, several factors seemed to aid performance. Over the duration of the course, I gradually increased my speech and began speaking at near-native speed. Although the speed increased the general anxiety of the class, who expressed their feelings by stating they were 'tired' or 'more exhausted than the usual [sic]' after class, the increase in speed coincided with the increase in scores, with the same students being able to double their marks (from 4 to 8) over the course. Students who consistently performed well did not express any similar feelings.

In regard to the exercise designed to help them identify words missing in their L1, I found that students were able to identify the missing words and they omitted fewer words of these classes during subsequent exercises. The students' performances would suggest that dictations targeting specific word classes increase perception of these forms.

Reflection

The experience of participating in the action research project has been a beneficial one both to myself and my colleagues. My school has been extremely supportive of the project and has used every opportunity to draw attention to it internally. As a result of this attention, many other teachers have requested updates and provided suggestions. Some have then gone on to speculate about creating their own action research projects.

Furthermore, the structure of the project has made it accessible for other teachers, which has meant it is easier to brainstorm ideas with other teachers and to expand the project. As the research does not have to adhere to a single method of data collection, I felt more able to approach other teachers and request input or suggestions.

Regarding my personal reactions, I feel the project has been a worthwhile endeavour as it has opened my eyes to issues affecting listening that I had not even considered. When I began the project, I had not considered that word classes that did not occur in students' L1 would affect their ability to perceive these words while listening; however, after only a small intervention, I was able to see that this was the case. The research has raised my awareness and reminded me to not assume aspects of my classroom practice. More specifically, it has helped me realise the importance of targeting grammar issues in the students' L1 during listening exercises.

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Appendix 1: Theme identification worksheet – student copy

Intermediate Cycle 2

Ex.1 Underline the *theme* and circle the *rheme* in the following declarative sentences. Remember, the *theme* of a clause is everything before the first verb.

A) At the end of the day, we will throw out the leftovers.

B) The people living at the end of the street want to become friends with us.

C) In the early morning, the hotel manager will inspect the rooms.

D) Workers in the quarry are expected to attend work safety meetings.

E) By the time we arrive at the station, the trains will be leaving.

Ex.2 Write the theme of three sentences for your partner. After you've completed this, switch papers with your partner and complete their sentences.

A) _____

B) _____

C) _____

Appendix 2: Cycle 1 and 2 exposure exercises – teacher's copy

Prompt: Fill in the gaps using the exact wording from the text. If you are unable to do so, fill in the gap with the meaning of the missing section.

The student, whose name is Rita,

1._____ will be visiting in the next few weeks.

In the event of a fire,

2. _____ please move to the exits located at the bottom of the stairs.

Fill the petrol tank

3. _____ until the nozzle stops pumping.

Insert the card right side up

4. _____ otherwise it will not be accepted.

Split the cash

5. _____ into groups of fives, tens and twenties.

You need to get an injection

6. _____ so ensure that you do not eat beforehand.

Clean every second wastebasket

7. _____ so that the staff do not complain.

Cut the onions and carrots

8. _____ and then wash them.

On the ground floor,

9. _____ there are several bathrooms.

Tell them we are standing on Pitt St

10. _____ and that it is about to rain.

The box on the reception desk

11_____ contains your ID card.

The president of The Republic of Korea

12. _____ was assassinated.

Appendix 3: Cycle 2 grammar awareness exercise – teacher's copy

Listening practice

Intermediate Cycle 2

Fill in the gaps with the missing words. All words will be grammar words.

1. **The** cats all live in **the** big, blue house and **the** girl loves to visit them there.
2. Carol, I heard a noise come **from inside** the closet. Can you check it **for** me?
3. **The** pieces **of the** chess set seem **to** be stuck **under** the couch.
4. **The** fault lies not **in** our stars but **in** ourselves.
5. **In the** new TV series, **the** contestants need **to** try **to** be better than **the** past series.
6. There is **a** new opera being performed **at** the local studio **on the** weekend.
7. **The** sea has many voices. **The** voice **this** man is listening **for** is the voice **of his** mother.*
8. And **the** Snowy River Riders **on the** mountain make **their** home.**
9. She looked **toward the** sky and noticed **a** solitary mountain **in the** distance.

*Adapted from Malouf, D (2009) *Ransom*, North Sydney: Knopf.

**Adapted from Paterson, A B (1895) *The Man from Snowy River and Other Verses*, Sydney: Angus and Robinson Print.

Influencing student engagement in listening tasks through mobile technologies

Ashley Carmody La Trobe Melbourne
Ramesh Presser La Trobe Melbourne

Introduction

Our college, La Trobe Melbourne (LTM), and its partner, La Trobe University (also in Melbourne), are presently undertaking a digital transformation project which aims to redesign courses and modes of delivery to better utilise digital technologies and to embed blended learning into curricula. Prior to undertaking this action research (AR), we had already been experimenting with the use of digital platforms in our lessons in response to specific learning and teaching issues that we had been encountering in our classrooms since 2015. This AR project centred on investigating the extent to which blended learning could combat challenges in the areas identified in our teaching context: student engagement, feedback and monitoring. Specifically, our main focus in this research was on evaluating the effectiveness of one digital application, Nearpod, in overcoming these learning and teaching challenges in our listening and note-taking lessons.

Context and participants

Our AR was conducted in our classes at LTM, which is a pathway college to La Trobe University. The centre offers courses at five levels of English, with General English being offered up to level 5 and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) offered at levels 3 to 6 via our English for Further Studies (EFS) program. Those learners who exit after level 4 EFS enter our foundation studies or diploma programs, while our level 5 EFS students either exit directly into undergraduate study or continue to complete level 6 EFS in preparation for postgraduate study. In terms of backgrounds, learners at LTM generally originate from a wide variety of countries, but the majority are from Asia (mainly China, Vietnam and India) with smaller minorities from the Middle East (for example, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Iran) and South America (such as Colombia and Brazil).

The learners who took part in our AR were predominantly studying at levels 4 and 5 EFS, which equates to intermediate to advanced English, ranging from B1 to B2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001). Within our 10-week EFS courses, we both taught listening and note-taking skills to our research participants in dedicated 2-hour slots as part of the 20 core hours of face-to-face teaching each week. Within our learning and teaching context, there is a particular emphasis on appropriate skills for listening at university, for example note-taking for lectures, and it is in this area that we identified the learning and teaching challenges that would form the focus of our research.

Learning and teaching challenges

In our classroom experience at LTM, especially over the past three or four years, we have noticed two increasingly prevalent challenges which we have aimed to better understand and overcome through this project. First, we have identified a significant lack of engagement in listening lessons, especially in our academic skills context when learners are confronted with longer, lecture-style listening and note-taking activities. In our listening lessons, learners need to develop skills that enable them to listen to extended passages, i.e. like they would experience in academic lectures or seminars. This requires learners to practise and develop listening and note-taking skills. Furthermore, it seems to us that this problem is exacerbated by the presence of mobile devices, which often prove to be a major source of distraction to our learners. Second, from a teaching perspective, monitoring and providing individualised, prompt feedback during listening lessons is a major challenge that has presented difficulties in our classrooms. In particular, moving around the room completing these tasks for each learner and response is both time-consuming and disruptive. Thus, we felt that our ability to monitor and provide appropriate feedback on learner responses was compromised.

Research focus

In response to these learning and teaching challenges, we formulated the following two research questions. Our aim was to focus our investigation into our learners' experiences as they used one particular digital platform, Nearpod. We also wanted to explore the use of this platform from the point of view of how it would assist our teaching with regard to monitoring and feedback.

To what extent does delivering listening lessons via a mobile platform such as Nearpod increase student engagement during lessons?

To what extent does delivering listening lessons via a mobile platform such as Nearpod enhance monitoring and feedback provided to learners during lessons?

Intervention

Nearpod is a mobile-based interactive platform for the online delivery of learning materials and collection of student responses via mobile devices. This application enables teachers to deliver lessons, monitor learner progress by viewing all learner responses live, and provide feedback on student responses in real time. Having registered online, teachers can use the Nearpod portal prior to lesson time to convert almost any form of existing learning materials for delivery via mobile devices. Nearpod offers a range of question types, including polls, short answer, multiple choice, quizzes, gap fills and drawn responses (i.e. students draw answers on their mobile device screens using their finger), so teachers are able to convert existing materials flexibly or create new lessons with a wide variety of task types.

For all Nearpod lessons, the timing of tasks is controlled by the teacher from the classroom computer. Teachers can decide on receipt of responses from students whether to move straight to the next task if all students responded well, to send selected exemplars of good responses to all devices where only certain students responded well, or, where few or no students have provided good responses to a task, to temporarily interrupt the live lesson in order to offer guidance, for example on the class white board. This monitoring of responses from the entire class is possible on one central screen, the classroom computer (Figure 1). Nearpod thus enables teachers to monitor and provide feedback to learners on their mobiles in real time, allowing a relatively seamless, ongoing learning experience while allowing the teacher to control the pace and to interrupt a lesson where necessary.

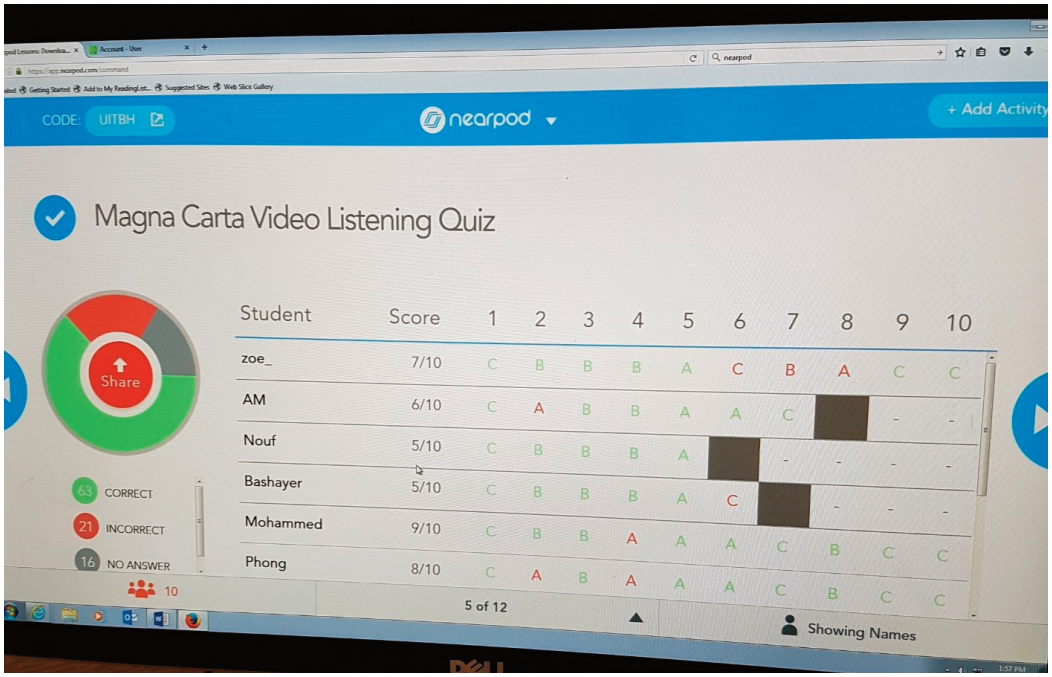


Figure 1: Monitoring student responses on staff classroom computer

In our project, we took advantage of all the aforementioned capabilities of Nearpod. Specifically, we uploaded or linked listening resources (i.e. podcasts, video clips or recordings) and used the variety of question types within Nearpod to create customised listening lessons that were saved as part of our library for reuse. To access these lessons in the classroom, our learners enrolled in Nearpod sessions on their mobile devices by visiting the site and entering a specific class code generated live when we logged on as teachers. During our research, students took notes while listening to the embedded sound/video file either on their mobile devices using headphones or via the classroom audio visual facilities. Despite having accumulated a bank of Nearpod lessons, we decided to select two specific lessons to create greater consistency for our data collection. All participating classes either experienced a Magna Carta lesson covering the history of human rights, or a problem–solution-style lesson on technology and driver safety. These lessons were selected because they were broadly accessible to a range of learners. After listening and note-taking, the learners responded to a series of tasks on their personal devices (see Figures 2 and 3). During our lessons, we often utilised the sharing function to send exemplar answers received live from our learners to classmates via their smart devices for comparison as well as sometimes taking

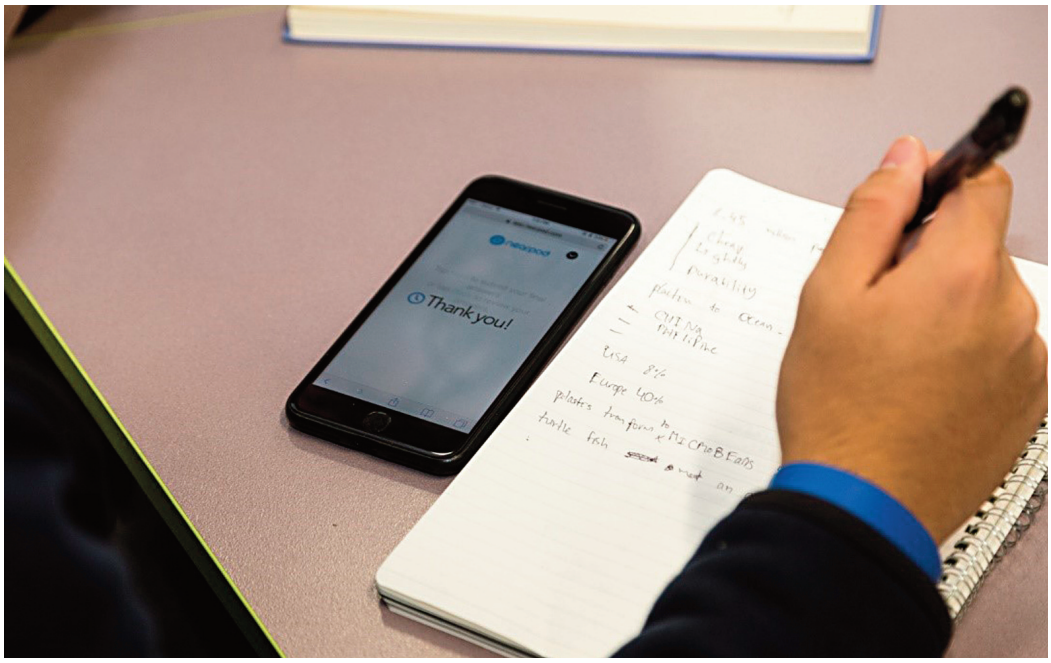


Figure 2: Tasks and responses via learner mobile devices

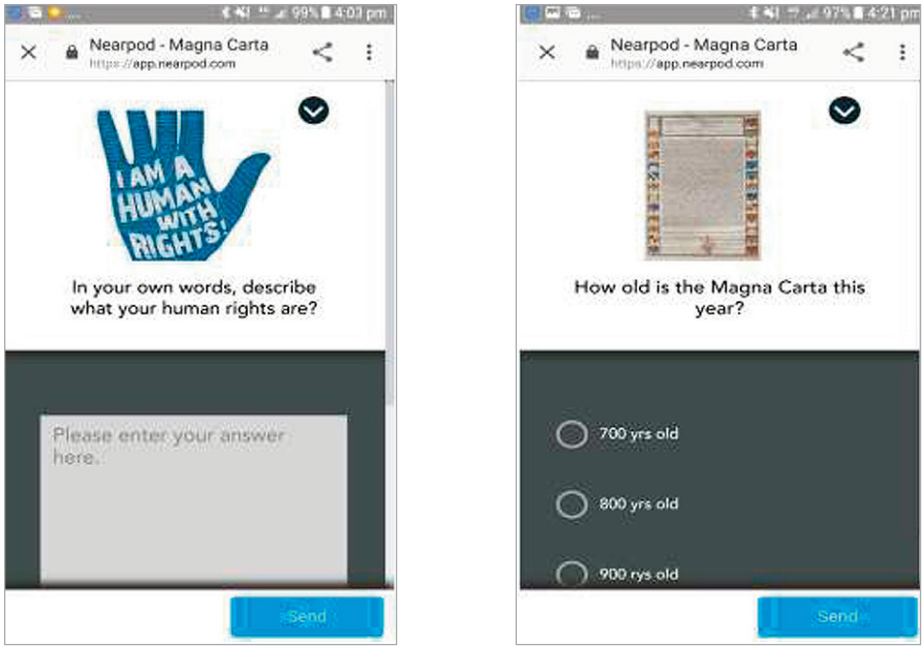


Figure 3: Screenshots of task types on learner mobile devices

the opportunity to briefly interrupt the online lesson to discuss a task or teaching point that we had recognised as causing difficulty to the majority of learners. Once students had experienced either one or two Nearpod lessons, they were provided a link to the research survey via their institutional email address and asked to complete it during the lesson time. This was done to ensure that the maximum number of participants completed the survey.

Data collection

Although we teach on an integrated skills course, 2 hours of the 20 hours of face-to-face teaching per week are dedicated to specific lecture listening skills lessons. During the course of our AR project, we collected feedback from 95 learners across nine different classes which we taught or visited only for specific classes. In other words, we ran a single 2-hour listening lesson with classes otherwise taught by colleagues strictly for the purpose of data collection. One of us collected data from five classes and the other from four classes. Class sizes ranged from 12 to 18 learners and were conducted in 10-week blocks from June to September 2017. During the project we used four data collection methods described in the next sections.

Method 1: teacher forum

Having formulated our working research questions, our first step was to check whether the issues we had chosen to focus on were also being experienced by our LTM colleagues. To this end, we created a brief survey about teaching listening and invited our colleagues to participate in a forum in which they were asked to reflect on and discuss their survey responses with us. The key elements of our planned research, namely a lack of student engagement and teacher difficulties in monitoring listening and note-taking tasks did indeed feature among the main issues raised. Having confirmed the validity of our research focus within our teaching context, we moved on to investigating attitudes among our learners.

Method 2: learner survey

Two surveys were designed to investigate learners' attitudes to using Nearpod in listening lessons. First, a before and after survey with a variety of question types including open questions was designed to be used at the beginning and end of each 10-week course, but it proved too complex and time-consuming as a method of data collection within the scope of this research project. Therefore, we instead designed and adopted a simplified six-question 'after only' survey to capture students' experiences of using Nearpod (see Appendix 1). We also reduced the question types to statements with Likert scales. The simplicity of this data method made the project more accessible, enabling us to conduct our research not only in the classes we taught full-time ourselves, but also to collect data in the EFS classes taught by our colleagues, which we visited only for the purpose of delivering listening lessons via Nearpod. We used the online survey tool SurveyMonkey to create and distribute the survey as well as to collate and display the findings.

Method 3: case study interviews

In order to get more in-depth information about how students were responding to using Nearpod, we also conducted 12 'case study' interviews with individual students. This method provided selected learners with a more open forum to express their opinions. These interviews also formed a feedback loop that allowed us to better understand our learners' responses. The valuable insights we gained from these interviews (see Appendix 2) led us to add a question to our learner survey and to adopt reflective learner journals with our final group of learners.

Method 4: learner journals

We used the journals to offer learners the opportunity to reflect more openly on their experiences with Nearpod, beyond simply their responses to the survey. In contrast to the closed, Likert scale questions in the survey, learners completing the journal were prompted to reflect freely on their experiences. Through this method of feedback, utilised with our last group of learners, we aimed to gain a better understanding of the responses underlying our survey findings.

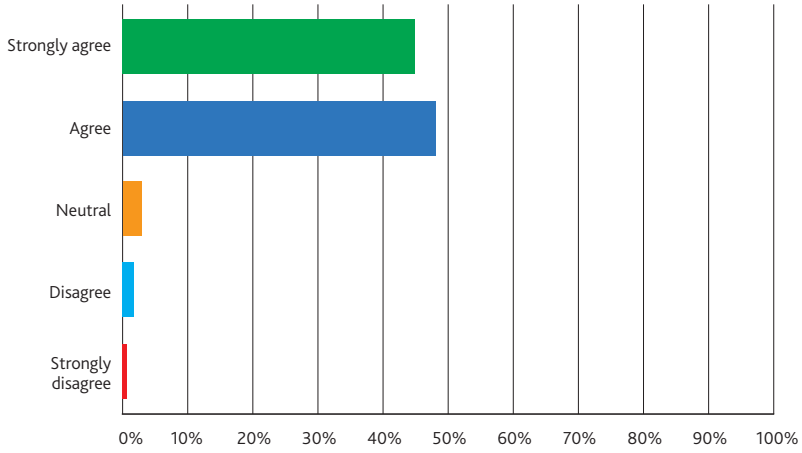
Findings

The clearest findings from the surveys were ascertained in two of our key research areas: engagement and monitoring. In terms of engagement, 93.7% of respondents agreed with the statement: 'Using technology such as Nearpod makes listening lessons more engaging and interesting' (see Figure 4). In fact, a greater proportion of respondents, 45%, strongly agreed with this statement – more than that for any of the other six research questions posed (see Appendix 1). Regarding monitoring, respondents also expressed strong agreement that: 'Using technology such as Nearpod allows the teacher to monitor my responses and answers'. This question received the second highest level of strong agreement, 42% of 95% (see Figure 5). Overall, more than 85% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with all six statements presented in the survey. The highest level of overall agreement was in response to the statement: 'Using technology such as Nearpod helps to enhance and improve my learning', with 97% agreement, of which 40% strongly agreed (see Figure 6).

In relation to the case study interviews, initially, the main intention was to provide selected learners with the opportunity to give more open and extensive responses regarding their experiences with Nearpod. However, as our survey findings began to crystalise, we also utilised these interviews to gain a better insight into student perspectives on outliers in the data we had collected as well as to elicit possible explanations for the main data trends. In terms of outliers, for example, several learners explained that the minority of respondents who had not enjoyed using Nearpod were likely to be those who had experienced difficulty using their mobile devices, resulting in frustration and a loss of face with classmates.

In terms of possible reasons for the main survey trends, we asked respondents to reflect on why most of our learners had found Nearpod engaging. We received a variety of responses, which led us to compose a question which we added to our final survey wave in an attempt to establish which of the possible reasons for engagement suggested by case study learners would be selected by most respondents in the broader survey (see Appendix 1, question 6). Surprisingly, the response 'competing with my classmates to get the best answer' was selected by a clear majority of learners, with nearly 60% of respondents choosing competitiveness as the most significant reason for engagement when using Nearpod (see Figure 7). In fact, by comparison, 'enjoyment of using my mobile device to answer questions' was chosen by only 25%. Thus, by utilising individual responses from our case study interviews for a broader group of learners via our survey, we learned that a feeling of competitiveness among learners was a more significant driver of learner engagement than the mode of delivery per se.

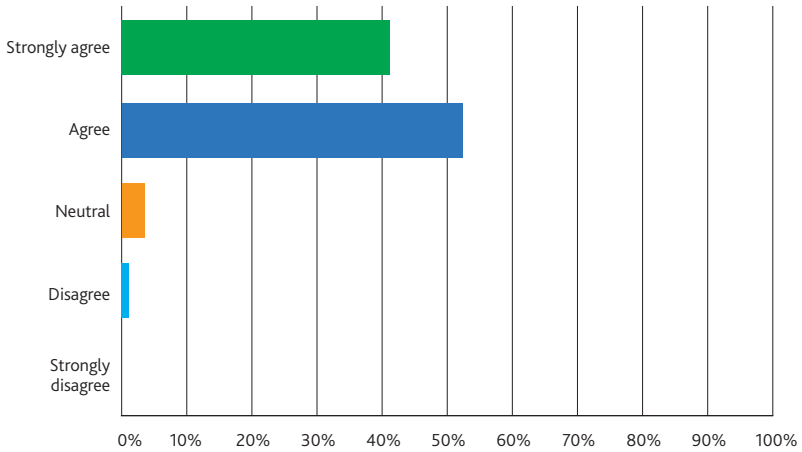
Answered: 95 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	45.26%	43
Agree	48.42%	46
Neutral	3.16%	3
Disagree	2.11%	2
Strongly disagree	1.05%	1
TOTAL		95

Figure 4: Using technology such as Nearpod makes listening lessons more engaging and interesting

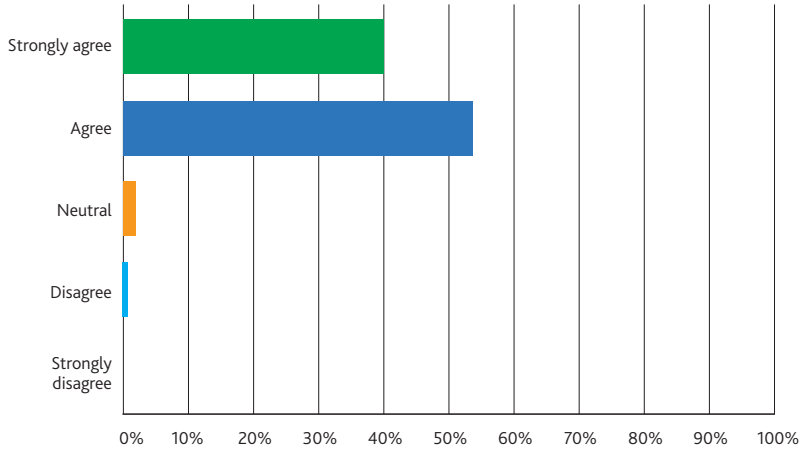
Answered: 95 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	42.11%	40
Agree	52.63%	50
Neutral	4.21%	4
Disagree	1.05%	1
Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
TOTAL		95

Figure 5: Using technology such as Nearpod allows the teacher to monitor my responses and answers

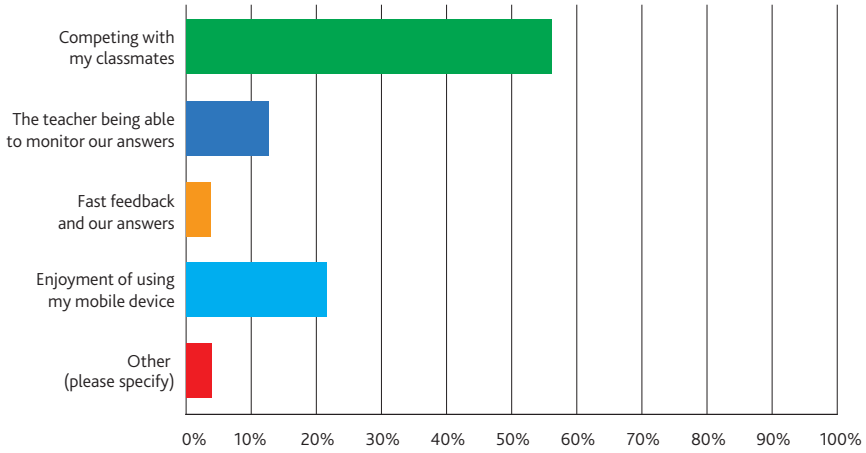
Answered: 95 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	40.00%	38
Agree	56.84%	84
Neutral	2.1%	2
Disagree	1.05%	1
Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
TOTAL		95

Figure 6: Using technology such as Nearpod helps to enhance and improve my learning

Answered: 23 Skipped: 72



ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES	
Competing with my classmates to get the best answer		56.52%	13
The teacher being able to monitor and see all of our answers		13.04%	3
Fast feedback on our answers		4.35%	1
Enjoyment of using my mobile device to answer questions		21.74%	5
Other (please specify)	Responses	4.35%	1
TOTAL			23

Figure 7: Selected aspects of Nearpod that made it more engaging and interesting

Reflections and implications

One important reflection that we have taken away from our AR project is the necessity to maintain an open mind regarding the possible reasons for observations, as well as of carefully considering possible implications. For example, during our case study interviews, we asked participants to reflect on why a minority of learners had reported not enjoying using Nearpod. While we had anticipated that it may be those learners who had finished tasks quickly and so had to wait for others to catch up who had not enjoyed using Nearpod, several of our learners expressed an alternative, equally plausible explanation that we had not anticipated, for example: 'I think it is probably the students who find it difficult to answer quickly, that took longer to answer, that said it was not so interesting; maybe these students say it is not so interesting for them.'

As this explanation came in the final cycle of the case study interviews, it was too late to add a new survey question to investigate this aspect of the project. However, it was certainly a valid perspective that we as teachers had not considered. It is the discovery of unexpected explanations such as this that highlight the value of more open research tools such as face-to-face case study interviews. More broadly, this finding emphasised to us the power of systematic AR itself to reveal learner perspectives that would otherwise remain hidden, allowing us to make more informed teaching decisions. Another unanticipated result of our research was that learners identified competition as a significantly more important reason for engagement in Nearpod lessons than the enjoyment they derived from using their smart devices for classroom learning. This finding raises the question of whether smart devices are the only or indeed the best way to generate a competitive atmosphere among our learners. Furthermore, there is the additional issue of whether competition is desirable at all, especially with regard to the negative effect it may have on learners who are less competitive by nature. Investigating these questions lies beyond the scope of this project, but is certainly an area for future research.

Furthermore, although our project has revealed a very positive attitude among our learners toward the use of digital platforms, it is important to bear in mind that Nearpod was only implemented for one 2-hour listening lesson with each class per week over a period of one to two weeks for each group as part of this research. More frequent use of Nearpod or, indeed, other mobile learning applications, may not in fact result in greater learner engagement due to possible saturation. Therefore, it is important to be aware that overuse of such methods may actually reduce or reverse the positive effects we have identified here. Again, further research is recommended.

In terms of the adoption of such digital applications into curricula on a long-term basis, there is a further implication that requires consideration: the need for mobile device policies across the English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sector in which we work. As mobile smart devices continue to become a necessary tool for learners to participate in lessons, it is essential to have a transparent policy detailing, for example, minimum system requirements. Otherwise, not all learners will be able to fully benefit from the use of such digital tools in their learning environments. It may, for example, be necessary to formulate a specific bring-your-own-device policy to avoid such digital learning applications inadvertently resulting in any inequality of access among our learners.

Through the course of this research we have communicated at length with our teaching colleagues here at LTM, and one recurring concern expressed regarding using mobile technologies such as Nearpod more extensively in the classroom has been where the teacher fits in. Indeed, many staff

are fearful that such technologies will reduce the role and importance of teachers in lessons. However, through our investigation and experiences with Nearpod, it has become clear to us that the platform does not compromise or replace the teacher; rather it informs essential teaching decisions in lessons by providing a real-time overview of learner responses to tasks as well as facilitating the timely sharing of selected peer examples with learners. In this way, the teacher is empowered rather than diminished and retains an essential role in guiding and advising learners through lessons.

In conclusion, in response to our learning and teaching challenges, we attempted to harness the obvious attraction of smart devices among the 21st century 'digital natives' in our classrooms to try and increase learner engagement as well as taking advantage of the utility of smart devices to facilitate monitoring and feedback on learning tasks. Using a simple and free teaching application, Nearpod, we aimed to turn what was being perceived by many teachers as a 'classroom problem' – the increasing prevalence of smart devices within our teaching context – into a solution. Our experiment with Nearpod to better engage learners coincided with broader changes being implemented within our curriculum and workplace as part of the digital transformation project led by our university partner, and our findings have resulted in many of our colleagues at LTM incorporating Nearpod lessons into the new curricula presently being developed. This would not have happened had we not been able to support our anecdotal classroom observations with systematic AR findings. This development has made clear to us the benefit of AR, not only to our own classroom practice but also to the enhancement of teaching and learning throughout our programs. Overall, we strongly recommend, firstly, that teachers seeking to improve engagement in and monitoring of listening lessons, especially when acknowledging the ubiquitous presence of mobile devices in contemporary classrooms, should consider Nearpod or similar mobile platforms as a mode of delivery and, secondly, that those and indeed all teachers should consider conducting AR to better understand the effects of their teaching choices in their classrooms.

References

Council of Europe (2001) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix 1: Survey questions

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Q1. Using technology such as Nearpod allows the teacher to monitor my responses and answers.

Q2. Using technology such as Nearpod helps to enhance and improve my learning.

Q3. Using technology such as Nearpod is an improvement to the way I practise and improve listening skills.

Q4. Using technology such as Nearpod helps me receive better feedback during listening lessons.

Q5. Using technology such as Nearpod makes listening lessons more engaging and interesting.

Q6. If you agreed or strongly agreed that Nearpod makes listening lessons more engaging and interesting in the previous question (Q5), from the list below, please select the one part of Nearpod that made it more engaging and interesting for you.

- Competing with my classmates to get the best answer
- The teacher being able to monitor and see all of our answers
- Fast feedback on our answers
- Enjoyment of using my mobile device to answer questions
- Other (please specify)

Appendix 2: Sample of student case study responses

Please note all comments are unedited for authenticity.

'We all feel very positive about this, I think. It is convenient way to listening and it activate our motivations.'

'The boys, before they play silly game on phone. In this lesson, we are all interested and connected.'

'I prefer the way of getting feedback through the smart phone. I think it is peer to peer way, so that is good to see the other answers and see advantages and disadvantages of my answer.'

'In my opinion in terms of the new style of listening lessons, every student is interested in it, more concentration on it, even higher speed of answering questions by hand, touching the mobile.'

Using active listening skills to improve listening comprehension in expository discussion

An Sneyers Monash University English Language Centre, Melbourne
Melissa Oldroyd Monash University English Language Centre, Melbourne

Introduction

To prepare students at Monash College for participation in university tutorials, opinion-based discussion practice is integrated into the 10-week Upper-Intermediate (UI) curriculum. In our experience we have often observed students not engaging well with such discussions, neither with what is said nor with each other. As teachers we generally provide students with a communication 'toolbox', providing them examples of the various speaking functions needed to participate in discussions – giving an opinion, disagreeing politely, asking for clarification and so on – but the uptake tends to be disappointing. Students wait to take their turn and often share an opinion that seems barely related to what was said before, and then pass on the turn with 'How about you?'. It was apparent that providing opportunities for discussion practice and 'telling' students what to do was not enough.

Thus, the goal of our action research (AR) was to find out if 'training' students in discussion discourse strategies would encourage better listening attention and comprehension. More specifically, we planned to introduce active listening skills (ALS), a communication technique often used in counselling and conflict resolution. Through this approach, we hoped to encourage more authentic communication, both in the classroom context and beyond, in students' future faculty courses and broader social circles.

Context and participants

Monash College UI level has an overall IELTS 5.0 (CEFR B1+) entry requirement, and leads directly to the Monash University Foundation Year (MUFY) or the Monash English Bridging Program (MEB), and then on to entry to Monash University. The course runs for 10 weeks and consists of two modules of five weeks each. It aims to give exposure to both General and Academic English.

Of the 17 students in the class, 13 were on a pathway to Master's degrees in various fields. One student was on a pathway to a Bachelor's degree (repeating UI for the fourth time) and the three youngest students were on a pathway to diplomas, a 12-month intensive course equivalent to the first year of a Bachelor's degree. At the start of Module 1, 11 students were new to Australia, one had been here for five weeks, four for 10 weeks and one for longer. We had the same students for both modules of the course, with one student joining us in Module 2. Demographic details are in Table 1.

We co-taught the same class, with one of us teaching this class on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and the other on Thursday and Friday.

Table 1: Participants

Participant information	*Module 1 term 4*	*Module 2 term 5*
Number of students	17	18
Age range	17–26	17–26
Nationality	15 Chinese 1 Vietnamese 1 Korean	16 Chinese 1 Vietnamese 1 Korean

The UI students were targeted for this AR because Monash College is interested in exploring ways to help this cohort successfully transition into a higher education environment and the workplace, as well as integrate into the wider community. We hoped that the ALS our students acquired from our program would assist them by increasing their competence in communication, collaboration and rapport building.

Research focus

Expository discussions form an ideal context for assisting second language learners' listening skills and thus allow them to become more competent communicators. Field (2008) states that one of the limitations of the traditional comprehension approach as a pedagogical model for developing L2 listening skills (pre-listening, listening, and testing for understanding) is that it restricts the role of the listener to a non-participatory one. He argues for the value of a greater range of listening types and tasks that better reflect the world outside the classroom. He recommends more opportunities to practise participatory listening with the particular interactive imperatives that characterise it – 'time pressure, the need to trace connections between turns, greater attention to the speakers' form of words, the use of appropriate repair and back-channelling formulae' (Field 2008:75). Likewise, Rost and Wilson (2013) recognise the language acquisition potential of 'pushed output' associated with interactive tasks where the speaker is 'pushed' to make their speech more comprehensible based on feedback from the listener (Krashen et al 1984, Swain 1993, Weinart 1995, cited in Rost and Wilson 2013).

To support students in developing communication skills for discussion, it is important to instruct them in how to manage some of the difficulties they may encounter in the process. Faced with the challenge of making sense of auditory input, much of an inexperienced listener's attention will be taken up with decoding at the word level rather than meaning building (Field 2008). Training in strategy use to compensate for decoding gaps has a tangible benefit because having the ability to extract basic meaning, despite limited vocabulary and grammar, is highly motivating for learners and equips them for real-life listening (Field 2008). Rost and Wilson (2013:3), in discussing the affective aspects of active listening, stress the importance of motivation to L2 learner success, stating that 'strong motivation can even compensate for weaknesses in language aptitude' and that stimulating learners' motivation is essential. This statement points to the potential for explicitly teaching students strategies to bridge the decoding gaps to create a virtuous circle of learning and motivation.

Strategies, of course, can cover a wide variety of techniques. Our backgrounds in coaching and business communication led us to consider ALS as this approach includes non-verbal as well as verbal strategies. ALS also has the potential to make interaction more potent, creating 'a degree of interpersonal solidarity' where interlocutors are more 'tuned in' to each other, and such 'affective involvement' enhances 'the quality of understanding' (Rost and Wilson 2013:13). Based on these understandings from our reading, we asked the research question:

How can the explicit teaching of active listening skills improve listening comprehension within the context of expository discussion?

The action research cycle

We conducted a single AR cycle over the 10-week course, training our students in ALS and observing how it impacted their ability to listen to each other and respond appropriately in expository discussion. The program we designed consisted of two series of three input lessons (Weeks 1–3 and 6–8), as well as revision lessons in Weeks 5, 9 and 10 to consolidate learning. Our students participated in the Monash College mid-course assessment (MCA) and end-of-course (EOC) assessment in Weeks 4 and 9, the speaking component of which includes expository discussion.

We began with a class survey asking students to evaluate their own listening ability in group discussions and indicate any strategies they used to enhance comprehension in this context (see Appendix 1). A mid-cycle and end-of-cycle survey monitored any changes in students' perceptions and confidence.

Weekly 2-hour lessons scaffolded the learning of ALS by focusing on various sub-skills and building on what was learned previously each lesson. The sub-skills included:

1. Introduction to active listening skills.
2. Use of non-verbal signs and back-channelling (brief verbal/semi-verbal signs).
3. Echoing – remembering and restating key words.
4. Clarifying – paraphrasing and asking questions to check meaning.
5. Reflecting – paraphrasing meaning and emotion to build rapport/empathy.
6. Questioning and commenting to build on the speaker's idea and drive talk.

(Skills You Need 2017)

Lessons focused on interactive activities for students to explore the various sub-skills and then integrate them into regular discussion practice built into the curriculum. Beyond this, whenever there was a discussion opportunity in class, students were encouraged to apply the skills they were learning (see Appendix 2 for a sample activity).

In the Week 5 revision lesson students viewed a video-recorded discussion of themselves and self-assessed for ALS using a rubric we generated (see Appendix 3). They were then asked to re-record the discussion with increased application of ALS. The Week 9 revision lesson involved students transcribing a 2-minute audio-recorded discussion of themselves and analysing it for ALS, checking

the extent to which their comments and questions followed on as appropriate responses, and then re-recording to improve their interaction (see Appendix 4 for a conversation sample where students have highlighted evidence of back-channelling in yellow and questioning and commenting in blue). In Week 10, students created a movie to explain and demonstrate ALS to peers in other classes, therefore taking their skills to the next level using higher-order thinking skills (Bloom no date, cited in Forehand 2005).

Data collection

We took a mixed methods approach to data collection. Qualitative data was gathered from surveys in Weeks 1, 5 and 10, weekly student reflective journals, our own observation journals, which were both descriptive and reflective (Burns 2010), as well as analysis of video recordings of discussions in the MCA and EOC speaking assessments. We also did a case study of one of the weaker students in the class, Student M (StM), drawing on analysis of transcriptions of discussions to track any development in his participatory listening comprehension over time. In addition, we collected quantitative data from the MCA and EOC speaking scores for our class to measure any improvements, and also results for the whole UI level, for comparison of our students' performance on the speaking MCA and EOC with that of other classes.

Findings

The data shows that our AR intervention had some positive effect on both students' confidence and ability in participatory listening comprehension in the context of expository discussion.

Qualitative data

At the start of the cycle, students commented in Survey 1 that a major reason discussions were seen as not going well was that participants did not understand the meaning of the discussion topic or the words others were using or others' 'weird accents'. If they did not understand each other, they did not ask questions and so the discussion became 'boring'. This finding is also supported by the majority of affirmative responses to the statement 'If I don't understand something in discussions, I don't know what to say or how to respond'. However, students did not specifically identify listening comprehension as a problem in discussion, with half the class rating themselves 7 out of 10 or above.

By the end of the cycle, three quarters of the class rated themselves 7 out of 10 or above for listening comprehension in the EOC discussion. In Week 9 only a minority of students indicated that they were not sure how to respond if there was a breakdown in discussion. Overall, students' confidence in handling comprehension breakdowns increased across the 10-week program by approximately 60%.

More specifically, students' qualitative remarks in their reflective journals suggest great overall enthusiasm for the practical value of ALS to facilitate conversation. The majority expressed a growing sense of empowerment in their speaking skills which some associated with the ALS they

were equipped with, as evidenced by the following comments (please note all comments in the article are unedited for authenticity).

> *'I think I have improved a lot in listening because I learned to find the keywords in my listening. I think speaking has also made some progress. It used to be afraid of speaking English, afraid of making mistakes, but not now.'*
>
> *'I think the speaking is the area of greatest improvement for me. Ten weeks ago, I felt nervous when I talked to the people who I was not familiar with. But now, I can be a confident person to communicate with other people.'*
>
> *'I think my speaking has a good progress. Between the hole semester, I gained lots of knowledge, such as how to become a good listener, how to explain your opinion.'*

In responses to the question, 'What have you learned about the relationship between speaking and listening skills?', they articulated that the two skills are interconnected and essential to conversation and they should be learned together:

> *'The active listening skills can used into speaking and make the conversation much better.'*
>
> *'They will affect each other, when listener got a good listening and give a feedback of good understanding and interests the speaker will perform well and vice versa.'*
>
> *'Very closed.we need to study them together.'*
>
> *'It was very rewarding to see that students felt they had improved their speaking and had made the connection with listening.'*

Although the students really enjoyed creating the movie in Week 10 and said they learned a lot from the task, we noted that they seemed challenged when trying to explain the ALS they had learned in a clear manner to peers in other classes. It may have been that the combined tasks of learning new skills of movie-making and developing the level of understanding needed to teach a new listening concept to others were too demanding for the students in such a limited timeframe.

Quantitative data

We chose to measure listening comprehension in the context of expository discussion by assessing whether students were able to produce relevant responses to what was being said, and through their level of engagement with one another. Differences between our students' scores in the MCA and EOC speaking assessments were therefore analysed for these two criteria, which are part of the UI Speaking Rating Scale and Feedback Sheet (Monash College no date). These criteria capture:

- **Relevancy**
  - 1a Relevancy of ideas
  - 1b Production of functions needed
    - to give and support an opinion
    - to ask and answer questions
- **Engagement**
  - 2a Discourse management – initiate, sustain, close exchange
  - 2b Adapting to changes in communication – repair strategies/manage breakdowns

We found that there was no clear trend of improved relevancy of contributions; our students' scores remained much the same between the MCA and the EOC (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). There could be a number of reasons for this result. First, it may be due to test limitations. The measure we used for relevancy is based on how students performed under exam conditions assessed by one teacher, who in the space of a few minutes is tasked not only with assessing relevancy, but also other criteria – task completion, coherence, fluency, grammar, lexis and pronunciation. Ornstein (1997) argues that the human brain is wired such that it is difficult to focus on detail at the same time as taking in the bigger picture. Therefore, a teacher who is focused on assessing a student's grammatical accuracy or pronunciation could find it challenging to simultaneously observe whether what is being said is directly relevant to what preceded it.

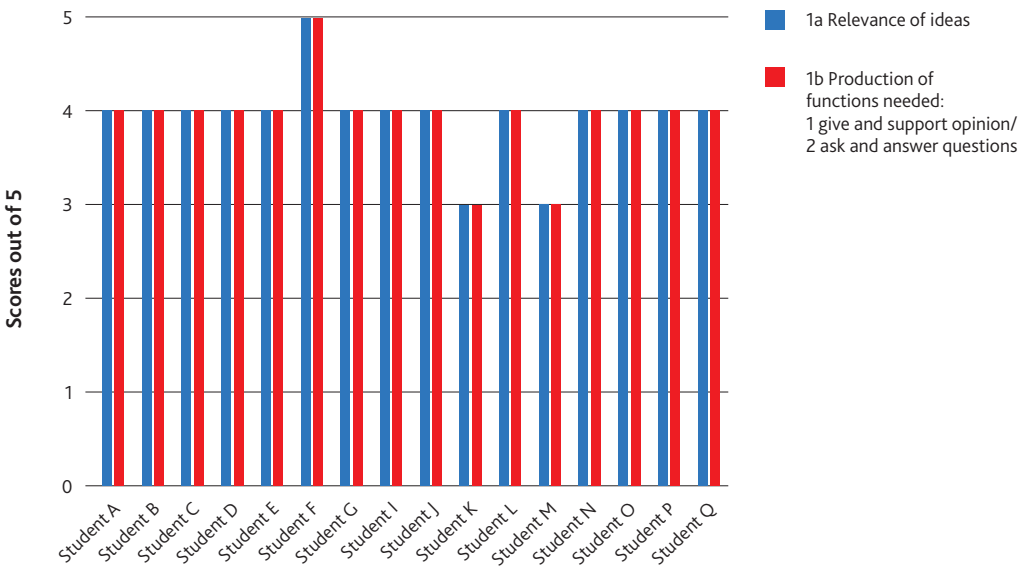


Figure 1: MCA assessment relevancy criteria

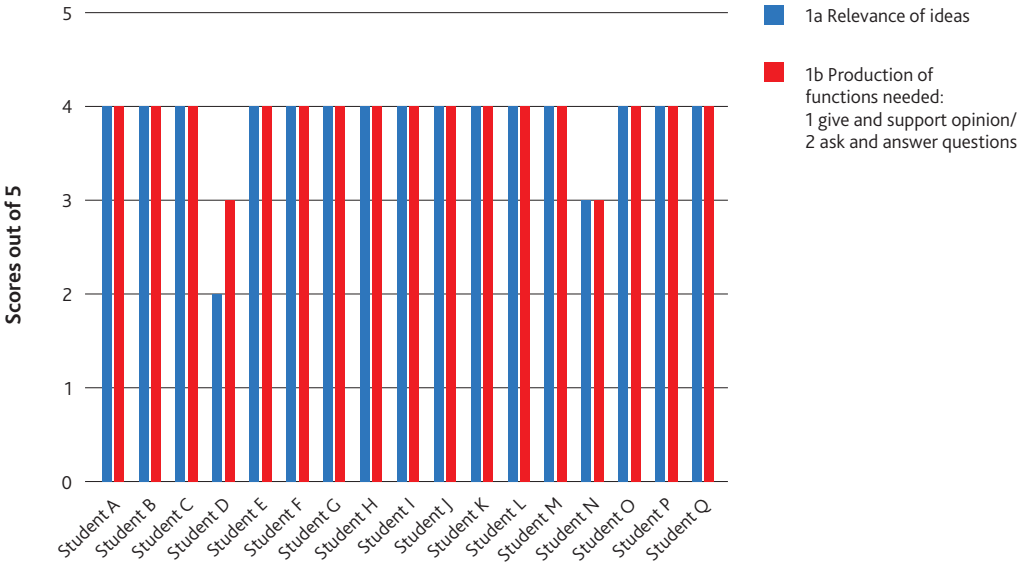


Figure 2: EOC assessment relevancy criteria

Second, it may be that the language development needed to make responses more relevant in an unfolding discussion requires more time than we had available in the 10-week cycle. Engagement, however, involving 'the use of appropriate repair and back-channelling formulae' may be increased quite quickly regardless of the pace of language development (Field 2008:75).

Our data did indeed show a clear trend of improvement in engagement between the MCA scores and EOC scores (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). It is likely that strong engagement is more readily noticed by the assessing teacher compared with relevancy. Students showed a marked improvement by the end of the course, both in terms of their ability to manage the discussion and to effectively negotiate challenges that arose from breakdowns in communication.

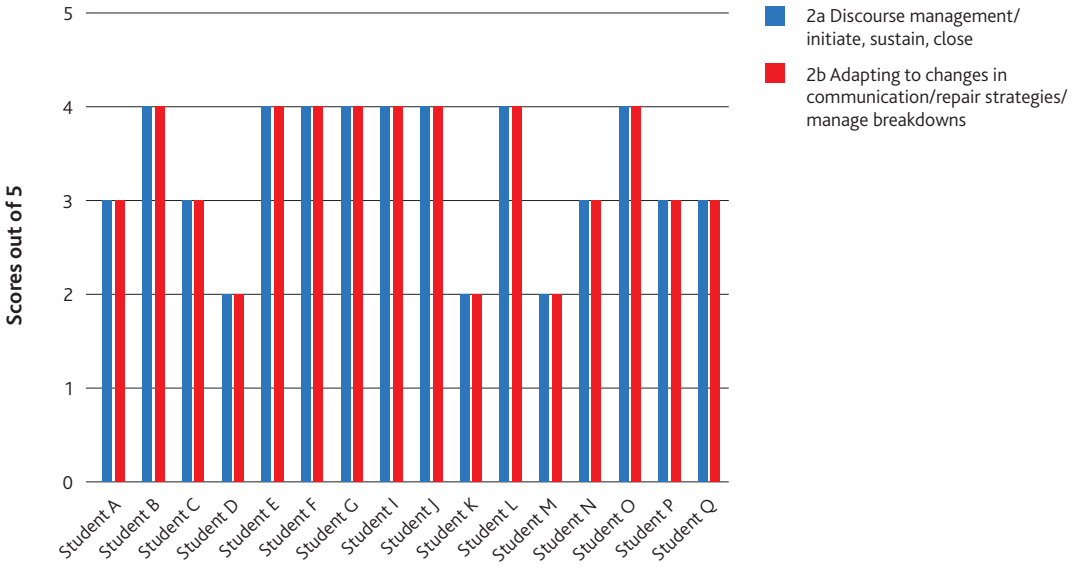


Figure 3: MCA assessment engagement criteria

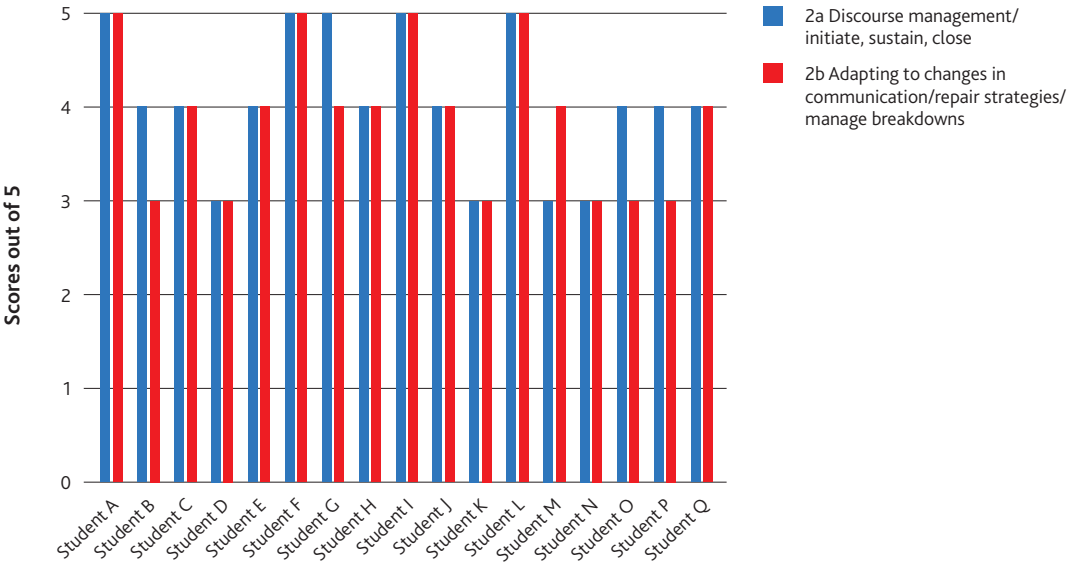


Figure 4: EOC assessment engagement criteria

In comparison with the rest of the UI cohort, on average our students were initially weaker in speaking, but by the end of the course they were almost on a par with other classes (see Figure 5). As with the average, the median score in our class at the time of the MCA was lower than in other UI classes. However, by the EOC the median in our class was 80%, 5% higher than other classes, and had increased by 7.5% overall while the median for other classes had not changed (see Figure 6). With roughly half our students scoring 80% or more in their final speaking assessment, we had a stronger top half of students than the top half of other classes. The standard deviation was approximately 10% for all classes (see Appendix 5).

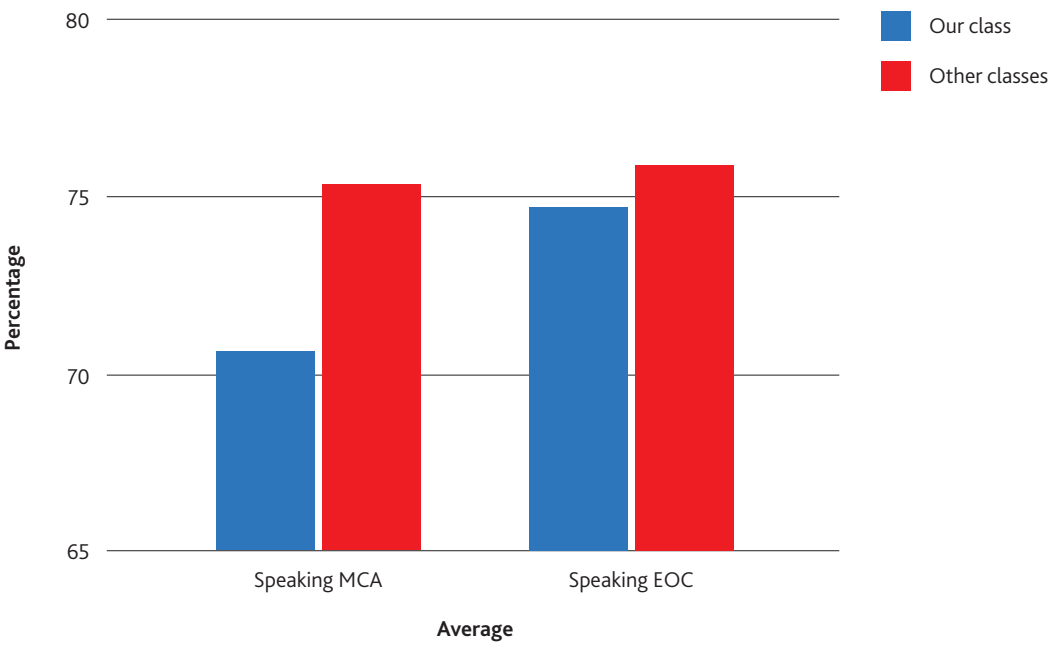


Figure 5: Changes in average speaking results between our class and other classes in the UI cohort

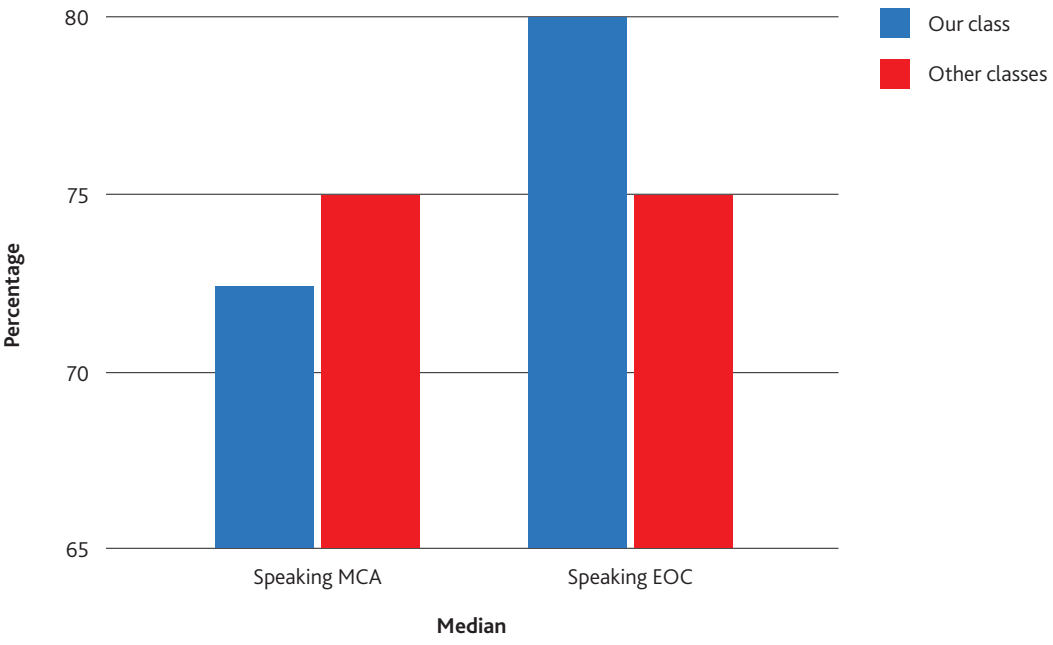


Figure 6: Changes in median speaking results between our class and other classes in the UI cohort

Case study

As a way of illustrating changes in student performance, we highlight the case of Student M (StM). He was identified as a weak student at the start of the course but he chose to stay in the class, despite recommendations to move to a lower level. From the beginning, it was clear that he struggled to express himself verbally in English, and had great difficulty understanding others when they tried to communicate with him.

His Week 3 journal entry, however, indicates that he enjoyed participating in group discussions in spite of his difficulties, and Week 4 video recordings show that even though he did not take speaking turns or interrupt, his body language suggested a high level of engagement. By Week 5 it appeared that something had started to change for StM. His body language continued to show engagement in group discussion, and he continued to ask for clarification where needed (e.g. 'What's a polar bear?', 'Seals?'). When a peer encouraged him to take the lead in asking the next question, and later to elaborate on his reasons for his opinion, he took the opportunity. It was evident that StM was negotiating meaning with his classmates, and that they were prompting and building authentic communication together. Back-channelling was still minimal, but occasional echoing was starting to occur.

In a formative assessment speaking task in Week 7, StM was still struggling to express coherent thoughts. Nevertheless, he was embracing ALS by back-channelling multiple times, attempting to paraphrase, attempting clarification, and follow-up comments. In his EOC exam, StM scored 70% – 20% more than his MCA result of 50%, the difference being due to his higher scores for engagement. In the end, StM did not pass the course because his results in other required components were too low. However, against all odds he passed his speaking assessment and had clearly grown more confident in his ability, as evidenced by his reflective journal comments.

Reflections

It is very difficult to demonstrate progress in listening, especially over a short period of time, and in drawing conclusions we are cautious about over-generalising and overstating the extent to which training in ALS can improve students' listening comprehension in expository discussion. What is certain, however, is the students were clear about the benefits to them. They felt a sense of empowerment in their listening and showed striking confidence in their speaking, all of which enhanced their communicative ability and social interaction, and resulted in higher speaking scores.

In the case of students with more limited linguistic skills, the successful use of non-verbal signs of active listening – eye contact, smiling, nodding, leaning forward and back-channelling – played an important role in compensating for linguistic limitations, creating the impression of greater communicative competence. As in our class, this ability can mean the difference between passing and failing a speaking assessment in borderline cases.

We observed that when active listening (both verbal and non-verbal) is applied within the classroom, the affective involvement of students who really tune in to each other does indeed

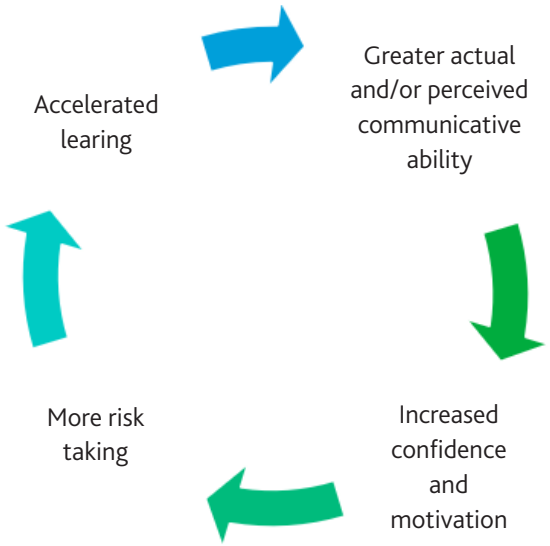


Figure 7: Virtuous circle of learning

improve the quality of understanding. The process feeds positively into motivation, builds trust and freedom to speak without fear, and encourages risk-taking which in turn accelerates learning (see Figure 7).

In our research, we visualised this process as a 'virtuous circle' of learning that began to assist our students in expanding their listening and speaking skills, both inside and outside the classroom.

Through our research we have learned that ALS does not imply instructing students to give their full undivided attention in every listening situation. Rather, students can be helped to understand that it is natural for listeners to choose certain levels of attention depending on their goals; 'tuning out altogether' may be an appropriate choice at times (Field 2008:59). In adopting ALS, teachers also need to keep in mind that cultural differences exist in how a listener shows respect for and engagement with a speaker. We would encourage teachers interested in applying ALS in their classroom to explore these potential differences with the students as they learn each new skill.

As a result of our research, we have become strong advocates for the inclusion of ALS development in English language curricula. Not only does ALS instruction enhance listening, but it also provides a mechanism for improving speaking skills and making oral communication seem more authentic and natural. We would argue that ALS training is therefore helpful in enhancing class participation and interaction with the teacher, which helps students to develop intercultural competence and adopt new kinds of classroom interactions in educational contexts outside their country. In turn these skills give students the potential to become more socially connected outside the classroom.

On a final note, participating in the English Australia AR program has been a revelation and a privilege. It has been a great pleasure and very enriching to collaborate with each other and with other ELICOS teachers, and a stimulus to our own continuous improvement in teaching and the way we support our students. We move forward with more pride in our professionalism and confidence in our ability to target a problem and make a real change.

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Appendix 1: EA action research survey Week 1

With this survey your teachers, An Sneyers and Melissa Oldroyd, want to find out how you assess your own listening ability in group discussions and if you use any strategies to help your listening ability in group discussions. Your responses are confidential.

1. How old are you?
   - ☐ Under 18
   - ☐ 18 or above
2. Are you male or female?
   - ☐ Male
   - ☐ Female
3. How many years have you been learning English?
4. How long have you been studying English at Monash College?
5. Do you enjoy group discussions? Why or why not?
6. Think about a time when a group discussion went badly. What was wrong?
7. How important are the following things for having a good discussion?

	Not at all Important	*Not so important*	*Important*	*Very important*
People don't interrupt each other				
People wait to be invited to speak				
Everybody gives their opinion				
Nobody dominates				
People listen carefully to each other				
Everybody agrees with each other				
People make their point clearly and concisely				

	Not at all Important	*Not so important*	*Important*	*Very important*
People respond to each other's ideas				
Nodding and smiling when someone is speaking				
Looking at people when they are speaking				
Asking/checking if you can't understand someone's point				

8. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	*Disagree*	*Somewhat disagree*	*Somewhat agree*	*Agree*	*Strongly agree*
I find it difficult to concentrate on what the other people are saying in discussions.						
If I don't understand something in discussions, I don't know what to say or how to respond.						
I feel nervous when we have a discussion in class.						

9. How would you rate your listening comprehension during group discussions?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Terrible	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Excellent

10. Why is it sometimes difficult for you to understand what other students are saying during discussion? (Tick as many as apply)

- ☐ I am not listening because I am thinking about what I want to say next.
- ☐ I can't catch other students' pronunciation.
- ☐ Other students speak too fast.
- ☐ My vocabulary and grammar are too weak to follow their meaning.
- ☐ I cannot concentrate because I feel too stressed and nervous.
- ☐ Other:

11. Which is the most important reason why you sometimes find it difficult to understand what other students are saying during discussion? (Tick ONE answer only)

- ☐ I am not listening because I am thinking about what I want to say next.
- ☐ I can't catch other students' pronunciation.
- ☐ Other students speak too fast.
- ☐ My vocabulary and grammar are too weak to follow their meaning.
- ☐ I cannot concentrate because I feel too stressed and nervous.
- ☐ Other:

12. What do you usually do when you don't understand what someone is saying in a discussion? (Tick as many as apply)

- ☐ I politely ask them to repeat their point using other words.
- ☐ I repeat their point so I can check I understood correctly.
- ☐ I ask the question, 'Do you mean...?'
- ☐ I ask them a question about what they said.
- ☐ I don't worry about it but try to make my own point clear.
- ☐ I pretend I understood and wait for someone to say something.
- ☐ Other:

13. What do you find most useful when you don't understand what someone is saying in a discussion? (Tick ONE answer only)

- ☐ I politely ask them to repeat their point using other words.
- ☐ I repeat their point so I can check I understood correctly.
- ☐ I ask the question, 'Do you mean...?'
- ☐ I ask them a question about what they said.
- ☐ I don't worry about it but try to make my own point clear.
- ☐ I pretend I understood and wait for someone to say something.
- ☐ Other:

14. Do you think it is useful during a discussion to stop from time to time to summarise the group's ideas? Why or why not?

15. How often do you feel this way?

	Not at all	*Not usually*	*Sometimes*	*Usually*	*Always*
I feel more interested in what someone is saying in discussion if they look at me when they speak.					
I feel better understood in discussion if people look at me when I speak.					
I find it helps me understand someone in discussion if they use gestures to help make their point.					
It helps me make my point in discussion if I use gestures.					
I feel better understood in discussion if people smile and nod when I speak.					
I feel better understood in discussion if people make a relevant response to my point.					

16. How do you know if another student has understood your point in a discussion?

17. Please complete the sentence:
    I feel most encouraged to speak in discussion when…….....…….....….

Thank you for your answers.

Appendix 2: Sample activity

Exploring body language and 'listening noises' to build rapport and improve listening comprehension

ACTIVITY 3 **An excellent friend & a terrible friend**

PAIR DISCUSSION

'Your friend is telling you about a personal problem he/she has. What is the best and worst thing to do with ..... (a) your face (b) your head (c) your hands?'

GROUP DISCUSSION IN GROUPS OF 3

- Student A shares a story about a (real or imaginary) problem they have.
- Student B first plays the role of an excellent friend, then a terrible friend.
- Student C observes and reports the differences they observe in the facial expressions, head movements, hand movements and listening noises.
- Other students also report on their experiences and what they've observed.
- Is it possible to do the activity multiple times and have students change roles.

Appendix 3: Peer-/Self-assessment rubric

Watch the video recording of your discussion on endangered animals from last week and write down in the table below how often you and one team member used the following active listening techniques.

	My name:	My team member:
Example: Making listening noises	𝍸	𝍸
Eye contact		
Nodding		
Smiling		
Making listening noises e.g. mmm, really?, ok, uh huh, absolutely etc.		
Echoing i.e. repeating the other person's words to buy time and show that I heard what they said		

If your hear any particular listening noises or echoing language, please record them here. E.g. MMM

Appendix 4: Student conversation sample

S: Do you have any vacation plan?

M: Yeah, During the two weeks break, I plan to go to New Zealand

Mu: New Zealand? It's at an amazing plan. Why chose New Zealand?

Mu: En, yeah

S: yep

M: yeah, to do sky-drive, maybe. Because the queen town is famous for the sky-dive and beautiful view

S: wa, so exciting

Mu: Have you tried to make a plan for sky jump before?

M: sorry?

Mu: Have you tried to sky jump before?

Mu: no, i am afraid of height, but i would like to try for it.

Mu: Ok,

S: yep

S: which other sites do you want to visit in the NZ during his trip?

M: the queen town.

S: queen town, yep

Mu: Queen town, enh.

M: I know the town is famous for the fairy story. I would like to go sightseeing.

S: fairy story?

MU: Yeah, I remember there had a movie which names The king of ring in New Zealand.

M: yeah yeah yeah, the king of ring.

Appendix 5: Data analysis

In percentage points (pass mark 60)	*Our UI class speaking MCA*	*Our UI class speaking EOC*	*Other UI classes speaking MCA*	*Other UI classes speaking EOC*
Mean	70.6	74.7	75.4	75.0
Median	72.5	80.0	75.0	75.0
SD (standard deviation)	9.8	11.2	8.9	9.0
CV (coefficient of variation)	0.138	0.149	0.118	0.120
Maximum	85.0	90.0	95.0	95.0
Minimum	50	50	55	60

Comparing the outcomes of teacher-controlled and student-controlled listening tasks

Julia Gibbons UTS Insearch, Sydney

Introduction

Teaching listening is a balancing act; some learners complete a task during the first or second play of the recording whereas other learners need further replays. It is necessary for the teacher to try to find the middle ground. To avoid disengaging both stronger and weaker listeners and limiting the development of their listening skills, I wanted to give learners control over replaying the recording. The aim of my research was to explore how giving learners this control affected the learners and the learning experience.

Context and participants

My action research (AR) project was conducted at UTS Insearch, a pathway provider to the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), where students study English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in 5-week terms. The EAP courses run from pre-intermediate to advanced level (Levels 1–6). My project involved intermediate students studying the Level 4 course, successful completion of which is equivalent to an overall IELTS score of 6.0. In this course, students sit listening, speaking, reading and writing exams at the end of term, and if they achieve the required grades, they either exit to a Diploma course at UTS Insearch (equivalent to the first year of a Bachelor's degree) or continue to the Master's level direct entry program at UTS.

A total of 42 students participated in my research project. This group was comprised of 36 Chinese, three Vietnamese, one Cambodian, one Lebanese and one South Korean student. The ages of the students ranged from 18 to 26 years old, with an average age of 20. Two students were new to the school, 29 students were proceeding from the previous level, and 11 students were repeating the course.

Research focus

My interest in researching listening was based on my observation that learners who were disengaged in the classroom often had comparably weaker listening skills, and would quickly fall behind their peers and withdraw during listening activities. I felt that whole-class listening tended to disadvantage and, consequently, demotivate weaker learners. According to Field (2008), the inability to control the replay of a recording is a contributing factor in learner anxiety and leads to

difficulty in the development of listening skills. Consequently, I wanted to explore whether both stronger and weaker listeners would be more engaged and have greater opportunities to develop their listening skills if they were able to listen and control the recording by themselves.

In the past, providing individual copies of a recording to students required access to language laboratories or computer rooms, but this is no longer the case. The students in my teaching context all have smartphones which can be used to access online recordings easily. A common complaint from teachers is the perceived misuse of such devices in the classroom, but instead of seeing them as a negative influence on learning, I wanted to explore the potential of smartphones for the development of listening skills. This would allow me to individualise the listening experience and introduce 'an element of recursion into listening, but recursion which is driven by individual needs rather than the prescriptions of the teacher', as advocated by Field (2008:57).

Rather than the typical comprehension approach taken in many EAP course materials, which focuses on the product of listening, I based my research on activities which explored a process approach to listening. The comprehension approach is more concerned with whether students understand the listening text and can provide the correct answers to questions about the text, whereas the process approach involves giving consideration to such factors as the particular difficulties students face when listening and why these difficulties occur (Graham and Santos 2015).

I implemented this approach in conjunction with a focus on decoding speech signals, with the aim of helping students make sense of the speech signal. This was mainly done through lexical segmentation, that is identifying words within the stream of connected speech, which Field (2003:327) states is 'arguably the commonest perceptual cause of breakdown of understanding'. The type of listening task I chose to focus on in my lessons was transcription, which allowed real instances of language to be analysed in context. Vandergrift (2007:198) suggests that comparing the transcription of a recording to the aural text can help to develop 'form-meaning relationships and word recognition skills', and I thought that having students produce the transcription themselves would lead to more meaningful processing of the text.

The key focus of my research was:

- In what ways does the medium of listening impact learners in developing their listening skills?

In particular, I wanted to compare the effects of teacher- versus student-controlled listening tasks. I found that research in the field of teacher-controlled versus learner-controlled listening tasks is currently limited, although de la Fuente (2014) found that learner-controlled listening tasks produced noticeably higher levels of bottom-up and top-down listening comprehension and noticing of target forms than teacher-controlled listening tasks.

Action research cycles

My research was conducted over three 5-week cycles with three different classes. This process allowed me to introduce different kinds of activities and refine my approach based on evidence from student responses. Each week, learners listened to and transcribed a short passage of recorded speech, focusing on decoding the stream of speech, and then analysed their transcription.

The lesson procedure began with activities, such as discussion and focus questions, which helped the learners to gain an overview of the main ideas in the recording. As I had a full program of lessons to cover, I decided to use the recordings from the coursebook, which was produced in-house. The coursebook included a combination of authentic and scripted recordings which introduced and recycled the content and vocabulary from the course. The next stage of the lesson focused on drilling down into particular sections of the recording which were transcribed by the students. These ranged from a 6-second extract of 20 words to a 1-minute-20-second recording of 160 words.

In the first two weeks, I controlled the recording in both the first and second stage of the lesson, and in the transcription stage, I broke it into small sections that I replayed until there was general verbal consensus from the students that I did not need to play it again. In the second two weeks, I provided a QR (quick response) code for the students to access the recordings and they listened using their mobile phones and headphones and transcribed them independently. The recordings were available in my school's learning management system (Blackboard) although I also utilised my educational YouTube account as this did not require students to sign in.

In the third stage of the lesson, students checked their transcriptions. They did this in a variety of ways, such as pair checking and joint reconstruction of the text on the board. The recording and transcriptions were then deconstructed in a class group and the reasons for particular difficulties that the students had with the recording and transcription task were discussed. This included phonemic errors (e.g. *living* instead of *leaving*), errors involving connected speech and unknown words. In Cycles 2 and 3, I also included a self-reflection component where learners analysed and classified the errors they had made. This activity was designed to help learners understand the reasons for the difficulties they had in transcribing particular words and phrases. The categories I used (see Appendix 1) were adapted from Field's (2008:87) categorisation of listening problems at the word level. By identifying problems that individuals commonly had, I felt students would be empowered by knowing the areas that they needed to focus on.

Data collection

To collect information about the students' opinions of my AR interventions, the students completed questionnaires at the beginning and end of each cycle, as well as after selected listening activities. These were largely closed questions in the first cycle, but in the second and third cycle I added more open-ended questions so that students would have the opportunity to provide reasons for their learning preferences (see Appendix 2 and Appendix 3). I also reduced the number of surveys from six to four in order to avoid survey fatigue. Furthermore, I conducted focus groups in the fifth week of each cycle, which proved to be a rich source of data on students' perceptions. These focus groups were recorded and transcribed. I also kept an observation journal to monitor student engagement.

To assess students' overall listening progress, I collected end-of-term exam results from the previous term and from the term in which they participated in my AR project. I also collected the listening results from the other classes on the same level who were not participating in my project as a comparison. In Cycles 2 and 3, I added a listening diagnostic test, which I also repeated at the end of Cycle 3. This was a combination of the Clear Speech listening diagnostic test (Gilbert 2005)

and a dictation activity. The former included sound discrimination questions and questions which targeted specific decoding skills such as elision in the form of multiple-choice questions and short dictations (see Appendix 4) whereas the phrases used in the dictation activity were chosen from the recordings used in my project. These were phrases which had caused difficulty for the Cycle 1 participants, so I could see whether teacher- or student-controlled tasks had a greater influence on accuracy. Completed worksheets were also collected and analysed by myself and the students.

After reflecting on my three AR cycles, I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with several teachers at my school to learn more about how other teachers approached teaching listening in their classrooms, and to consider how the research insights I gained might be received and applied by other teachers.

Findings

In relation to the research question, the findings have been divided into four sections. These are student preferences, student engagement, student perceptions of the development of their listening skills, and the actual development of their listening skills.

Student preferences

My assumption before I started the research was that students would prefer controlling the recording themselves so that they could replay it as many times as they needed to. Indeed, two thirds of the students expressed a preference for controlling the recording, with their main reasons being that they were able to replay specific sections of their choosing, and they felt more relaxed and in control of the speed of playback. One student noted the following in a Cycle 1 focus group: 'If I can use my phone, I feel relaxed. There's no stress, you feel really relaxed.' Oxford (1999:67) advocates creating a 'comfortable, non-threatening environment' and giving students multiple opportunities for success as factors which contribute to diminishing language anxiety. My research showed that allowing students to control the recording themselves and listen multiple times helped them to relax during listening tasks. Furthermore, according to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, any listening activity which is enjoyed by students will generally be beneficial and students need 'to be relaxed before they can be expected to take on challenging tasks' (Rost 2016:134). Elkhafaifi (2005) found that reducing student anxiety had a positive effect on students' listening comprehension proficiency, and I believe it can also help with decoding.

However, the reasons given by students who preferred teacher control were equally compelling. When they controlled the recording themselves, some students worried they were pausing the recording too frequently, which meant they had trouble understanding the meaning of the words in context. Other reasons were that students felt they could concentrate more if the teacher was in control, and that limiting the number of plays was better practice for the exam. The teacher could also help by answering their questions and by playing the recording in more meaningful chunks. According to one student's questionnaire response, 'when the teacher controls it, you can differentiate the parts of the recording more'.

I had assumed that weaker listeners would particularly value the opportunity to control the recording themselves. However, there did not appear to be a connection between listening ability

and preference for controlling the recording. I also surveyed the students to find out how confident they were in using technology and how much they enjoyed using technology for study purposes. There was no apparent relationship between these results and the students' preference for teacher- or student-controlled playback.

Student engagement

From my lesson observations, when students were listening and controlling the recordings on their mobile phones, almost all students in the three cycles remained on task and were fully absorbed in the activity. I only observed a student using social media during the listening activity on one occasion and another student reported in a focus group being distracted by games. Stronger listeners did finish earlier, but they sat quietly while the rest of the class finished. I was able to give immediate feedback to some students during the lesson and encourage them to listen to particular sections of the recordings again where necessary.

It was more difficult to monitor the engagement of individual learners when I was controlling the recording from the teacher's desk. When I looked or walked around the room to check students' progress, it did appear that some students were not remaining on task and were having trouble focusing, and the weaker listeners appeared self-conscious when I checked their work. One student commented in a Cycle 2 focus group that 'if we listen by ourselves, we will only pay attention to our own work. It's better'. This student felt more pressure and was more aware of his performance compared to his classmates during whole-class listening than when he listened on his own.

Student perceptions of the development of their listening skills

Fifty-seven percent of students believed that controlling the recording themselves gave them more opportunities to develop their listening skills than when the teacher controlled it (see Table 1). One student commented in a Cycle 1 focus group: 'I know where I cannot follow … I replay the place I need to hear.' In addition, 67% of students noted that being able to control the recording themselves helped them to listen for specific words. Conversely, 62% of students felt that the teacher controlling the recording helped them to understand the main idea. A comment from one of the focus groups was: 'I think when the teacher is controlling the recording, I will concentrate more on the meaning of the recording'.

In regard to the self-reflection component of my research, 75% of the students in Cycle 3 reported having greater awareness of their weaknesses in listening skills after taking part in my AR project. However, one student reported in the end-of-term focus group that while he was more aware of his weaknesses, he did not know how to improve them. It would be valuable to have follow-up activities prepared for students to work on their particular listening weaknesses.

Table 1: Student perceptions of improvement in listening skills

Activity which students felt improved the following listening skills more	*Teacher controlled*	*Student controlled*
Overall improvement	43%	57%
Understanding the main idea	62%	38%
Listening for specific words	33%	67%
Hearing word endings (e.g. -ed, -s)	52%	48%
Understanding fast speech	50%	50%
Separating the sounds into words	48%	52%
Understanding different accents	54%	46%
Understanding vocabulary	31%	69%
Understanding grammar	44%	56%
Missing the recording while I am writing	44%	56%

Development of listening skills

Although the majority of students had felt their listening skills improved over the term, the end-of-term results do not appear to indicate significant progress in overall listening ability. A key reason for this may be the limited timeframe of my project. Field (2008) points out that it is difficult to demonstrate an improvement in results even with significant amounts of practice.

While the diagnostic test that I repeated at the end of Cycle 3 showed that half the students were able to double their scores and 75% showed improvement, it is not possible to determine whether it was the teacher- or student-controlled listening which was the primary influence on this result, or indeed something else. Burns (2010:133) points out the difficulty of 'claiming direct cause-effect relationships' in AR due to the scale of the research and the complexity of the classroom environment. This is an area in which it would be worthwhile doing further research.

On a more micro level, I also compared the dictations from the diagnostic test with the transcriptions produced by students in the listening tasks, but there was no clear difference in accuracy between the two mediums of listening. However, it was quite difficult to decide whether to allow for phonemic approximation, for example, or incorrect spelling, and doing further research into the analysis of listening transcriptions may enable me to better analyse these results.

Conclusions and reflections

I plan to continue integrating both teacher- and student-controlled recordings into my listening lessons. My research showed that allowing students to control the recording has the potential to create a more relaxed learning environment for listening tasks and that students appreciate being given control so they can develop their listening skills at their own pace. I also believe that students being able to control the recording themselves has a positive influence on their engagement in class. The students in my context have a strong connection to their mobile phones, and it was valuable to be able to use this technology productively in the classroom.

Based on my interviews with teachers, I found the listening procedure and activities I developed for individual listening have already been adopted by other teachers at my school. I also received positive feedback after I presented my research at a recent Professional Development day at my school, from teachers who have since tried out student-controlled listening tasks. However, it is important that the type of listening skills which are being developed needs to be taken into consideration when choosing between teacher- and student-controlled playback. For example, exam practice may be better suited to whole-class listening, whereas decoding connected speech may be better suited to student-controlled listening. Student-controlled listening tasks could also be adapted to meet the varying needs of learners in mixed-ability classrooms by grading worksheets for stronger or weaker listeners. This would reduce the time gap between such listeners completing the activities and provide an appropriate level of challenge for all learners.

I will also continue to include decoding activities in the classes that I teach. Taking this approach has allowed me to learn more about the types of listening errors that students commonly make and has contributed to my professional development. Although I had analysed the transcript of the recording prior to each lesson, the problems I predicted students might have were often different from their actual errors. For example, rather than difficulties with connected speech, there were sometimes problems with words that I had assumed the students would know, such as 'efficient', or with mishearing words as other words. I will use this information to create listening activities which target common problems.

Furthermore, my AR project has enabled me to gain greater insights into the minds of my students and discover their preferences. Students seemed to value the opportunity to try out new activities and to share their opinions, which helped to create a positive classroom atmosphere. As a teacher, I valued the opportunity to conduct my own research which was grounded in my continued attempts to meet the needs of my students.

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Appendix 1: Self-reflection

8.6 Listening transcript Name: _____

Planning sustainable cities

So I'm going to start off with a general definition, and say that *sustainable urban development* refers to improving the quality of life in a city without leaving problems for future generations. That is, we need to protect the environment for our children, and our grandchildren, and so on. And that includes environmental, social and economic issues. So it might mean looking at the amount of greenhouse gas emissions per capita, sanitation and waste, good housing and living environments, using resources efficiently, access to education and health care, and even the availability of jobs. So these indicators help us to assess the sustainability of a city.

And it's important to note that urban planning is essential for sustainable urban development. *Urban planning* refers to planning the physical aspects of a city, such as the use of land and the design of the urban environment. This includes the density of a city, sustainable transport, mixed land uses and the amount of green space.

A) I know the words, but I couldn't hear them clearly.	C) I know the words, but I didn't know how to spell them.
a emsiss emissions access physical aspects a the amount and a mixed the	sanitation efficiently physical
B) I know the words, but I confused them with other words.	D) The words were new to me.
leaving amount housing resources.	Per capita essential

Appendix 2: Post-task questionnaire

Post-listening questionnaire 2 (Lesson 8.6)

Name: .....

1) How difficult was the listening task? **(1 = easy 10 = difficult)**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (8) 9 10

2) Why was it easy/difficult?

d many difficult word

3) Did you enjoy using your own phone to listen to the recording? **(1 = not at all 10 = yes – a lot)**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 (10)

4) Why/why not?

It is because I can listen a lot of time

5) What difficulties did you have when writing down every word?

- ☑ Understanding the main idea
- ☑ Listening for specific words
- ☑ Understanding different accents
- ☐ Understanding the vocabulary
- ☐ Understanding the grammar
- ☐ Speed (too fast)
- ☑ Spelling the words
- ☐ Missing the recording while I am writing answers
- ☐ Separating the sounds into words
- ☐ Hearing word endings/word forms (e.g. –s or –ed)
- ☐ Controlling the recording (pressing play/stop etc)

6) How many times did you play the recording?

1-2 3-4 5-6 (7-8) 9-10 More than 10

7) Was it (circle one)

Not enough (Just right) Too many

8) Could you write down all the words? (circle one)

None (Some) Most All

Appendix 3: End-of-term questionnaire – Part 1

End of term questionnaire Name: .....

1) How would you rate your listening skills out of 10 (where 10 is excellent)

1 2 3 4 (5) 6 7 8 9 10

2) Do you think your listening skills have improved this term? (1= not at all 10 = a lot)

1 2 3 4 (5) 6 7 8 9 10

3) Why/why not? ~~.....~~ I did a lot listen parctice

4) Which type of listening activity do you think has most improved your listening skills this term? Choose one.

☐ Teacher controlling the recording

☑ Controlling the recording myself using my mobile phone

5) Why? I can listening many time

6) Which type of listening activity improved the following skills more? (choose one option for each line)

	Teacher controlling the recording	Controlling the recording myself using my mobile phone
Understanding the main idea		✓
Listening for specific words		✓
Understanding different accents	✓	
Understanding vocabulary	✓	
Understanding grammar	✓	
Understanding fast speech	✓	✓
Spelling the words		✓
Missing the recording while I am writing answers		✓
Separating the sounds into words		✓
Hearing word endings/word forms (e.g. –s or –ed)		✓

7) Which type of listening activity did you enjoy more this term? Choose one.

☐ Teacher controlling the recording

☑ Controlling the recording myself using my mobile phone

8) Why? I can listening many time

Appendix 3: End-of-term questionnaire – Part 2

9) How do you feel when the teacher controls the recording?

I just can listen 2-3 time

10) How do you feel when you control the recording yourself?

it is good

11) What are the advantages and the disadvantages of the teacher controlling the recording?

Advantages	Disadvantages
teacher will help you	just 1-2 time

12) What are the advantages and the disadvantages of controlling the recording yourself using your mobile phone?

Advantages	Disadvantages
☺ I can listen many time	☹ no one will help you

13) How useful are the listening activities where you have to write every word?

1) Not at all useful 2) Not very useful 3) Useful 4) Very useful

14) Why/why not? can improve listening skill

15) How enjoyable are the listening activities where you have to write every word?

1) Not at all enjoyable 2) Not very enjoyable 3) Enjoyable 4) Very enjoyable

16) Why/why not? can improve listening skill

17) What are your main weaknesses in listening?

☑ Hearing the words clearly (separating sounds into words) ☑ Vocabulary (not knowing words)

☑ Confusing words with other words ☐ Spelling words

18) Are you more aware of your weaknesses in listening than before?

☑ Yes ☐ No

Please write down your email address and/or phone number if you agree to future contact from Julia regarding her research project.

Appendix 4: Diagnostic test

Name: _____

1. claim out
2. quickly replaced ✓
3. concriel steps
4. desence places
5. increased density ✓
6. densily populated
7. bigger problem ✓
8. caused by ✓
9. future generation
10. funds and commitments
11. current patterns ✓
12. Curitiba ✓
13. start of with
14. without living problems
15. good housing ✓
16. physical aspects ✓

(8)

The impact of teaching phonological awareness on listening (and note-taking) skills

Keren Stead Bomfim Centre for English Teaching, The University of Sydney

Introduction

The main course at the Centre for English Teaching (CET) at the University of Sydney is the university pathways program, the Direct Entry Course (DEC). Listening assessments on this course involve listening to and taking notes on an academic lecture and then answering questions based on the notes. Whilst being fairly authentic, this task can be very challenging for the DEC students. Current DEC curricula attempt to address this problem by teaching the students note-taking strategies and focusing on top-down approaches to listening, such as pre-listening discussions on the topic. Bottom-up approaches to listening, by contrast, are largely ignored.

At the same time, in my own classroom practice, I have noticed that the DEC students who experience most difficulty with listening and note-taking tasks are often those who also have poor pronunciation and struggle to read out loud. It is my view that these difficulties are all connected to a weakness in bottom-up processing, a term also known as decoding. To be more specific, these students have difficulty translating both the speech input they hear and the written forms they read into speech sounds, words and clauses, and finally into a literal meaning (Field 2008). Due to this incongruity between the DEC curricula and my perception of student needs, I wanted to investigate if the teaching of decoding skills could have a positive impact on the listening and note-taking skills of my students.

Context and participants

Students studying on DEC can join the course for 10, 15, 25 or 36 weeks. Students who take the full 36-week course experience four iterations of DEC: DEC36 (11 weeks), DEC25 (10 weeks), DEC15 (five weeks) and, finally, DEC10 (10 weeks). The DEC36 course has two streams, one for students entering the course with an IELTS score of 5 and the other for those entering with an IELTS score of 5.5. Students who pass the DEC program at the end of DEC10 receive unconditional offers to study either an undergraduate or postgraduate degree at the University of Sydney. The vast majority of the students on this course are Chinese.

I undertook my action research (AR) with DEC36 students across two cycles. However, due to the fact that at the time of the research I was only teaching 1.5 days a week, the research took place as extra non-compulsory 1-hour classes. In order to find volunteers, I visited all four of the DEC36 classes, told the students about my project and asked for their participation. In total, 36 out of the 54 DEC36 students originally volunteered. All of these volunteers completed a pre-course assessment and questionnaire at the same session. Then, I divided these students into two class

groups, Cycle 1 and Cycle 2, with a range of abilities in each class. All these students were Chinese, except for one Saudi Arabian (see Table 1). Cycle 1 took six weeks (DEC36 Weeks 3–8) and Cycle 2 took eight weeks (DEC36 Weeks 9–11 and DEC25 Weeks 1–5).

Table 1: Student demographics

	Cycle 1	*Cycle 2*
Number of students who completed the AR course	16 completed	12 completed
Age range	19–29	19–34
Nationality	Chinese: 15 Saudi Arabia: 1	Chinese: 12
DEC36 stream	Standard (IELTS 5): 5 Advanced (IELTS 5.5): 11	Standard (IELTS 5): 4 Advanced (IELTS 5.5): 8
Study purpose	Undergraduate studies: 6 Postgraduate studies: 10	Undergraduate studies: 2 Postgraduate studies: 10
Study at CET prior to DEC36	Yes: 1 student No: 15 students	No: 12 students

Research focus

In order to teach decoding skills to the students, I decided that the classes would focus on developing phonological awareness, which I had learned about when doing a Master's degree in Speech Language Pathology from 2012 to 2014. Phonological awareness involves some of the same skills as typical English as a Second Language (ESL) pronunciation skills. However, the two are distinct. Phonological awareness can be defined as an awareness of the sound structure of the spoken language (Gillon 2000), including the ability to think about, reflect on and manipulate sounds (Kirk and Gillon 2009), and being able to link phonemes (spoken forms) to graphemes (written forms). This, in turn, supports word decoding ability (Carson, Gillon and Boustead 2013). Research into phonological awareness skills has found that it can lead to significant improvements in L1 reading levels in children (Carson et al 2013, Carroll and Snowling 2004, Catts, Fey, Zhang and Tomblin 2001, Gillon 2000) and, as a result, it is part of the primary school K6 syllabus (NSW Education Standards Authority no date). In my research, I wanted to see if teaching phonological awareness could also have an impact on the listening and note-taking skills of my students.

I originally formulated my research question with the term phonemic awareness, which is a subset of phonological awareness specifically focusing on awareness of individual sounds. However, I quickly realised that I not only wanted to teach about individual sounds, but I also wanted to look at how sounds changed in context. Therefore, I decided to use the term phonological awareness, which also encompasses units of oral speech, such as syllables and words, and other features, such as consonant clusters and rhyming. Therefore, my final research question became: How can teaching phonological awareness impact on students' listening (and note-taking) skills?

Action research cycles

For my AR, I developed a 12-hour course called 'Learning to Listen to Sounds'. I completed two cycles of this course, with two different groups of DEC36 students. The course consisted of one pre-course assessment session, 10 classes and one post-course assessment session. Each class consisted of two sections: 'Focus on Sounds' and 'Focus on Letter-sound Relationships'.

The 'Focus on Sounds' component of the course consisted of systematically teaching a hierarchy of pronunciation features, beginning with the sounds in isolation and then working up to sounds in context at sentence level. The full hierarchy consisted of the following:

- sounds in isolation (phonemic chart)
- rhyming
- syllables
- word stress
- consonant clusters
- linking sounds between words
- contractions
- sentence stress and weak sounds.

This hierarchy is very similar to the hierarchy of phonological skills (see Appendix 1), which outlines phonological awareness skills in the order in which children acquire them (Konza 2011). In order to teach my hierarchy, I introduced each skill using PowerPoint slides and then asked students to complete a variety of exercises or activities to practise them; for example, a minimal pairs activity to practise sounds or matching the stress patterns of multi-syllabic words to practise word stress.

The 'Focus on Letter-sound Relationships' component of the course consisted of teaching the connections between phonemes and graphemes. To do this, I adapted material from an evidence-based literacy course I had attended called Spalding (Bishop Spalding 2012, Bitter and White 2010). I adapted and introduced 77 of their phonic cards (see Figure 1), which I made into electronic flashcards using Quizlet (see Figure 2). I also introduced the seven sound-related spelling rules that I had learned on the course.

Throughout the AR course, I designed activities, such as dictations and reading aloud activities, using words from the Academic Word List (Coxhead 2000) and non-words. I chose the former because of its complexity and relevance to the students' studies, and I chose the latter so that the students would be forced to complete activities by relying on their letter-sound knowledge rather than any prior vocabulary knowledge.

In Cycle 1, students were encouraged to complete self-study between classes, with an emphasis on the use of apps and websites (see Appendix 2). I also recorded some of the in-class exercises to allow students to complete listen and repeat activities at home. In addition, mini tests were conducted at the start of some lessons as a form of formative assessment, which I also hoped would motivate students to complete self-study.

At the end of Cycle 1, the students gave feedback on the class content and self-study materials. The majority thought that there had been too much focus on individual sounds and that the self-study materials had not been motivating enough. As a result, for Cycle 2, I reduced the number of classes on individual sounds from five to three and provided more specific homework tasks (see Appendix 3).

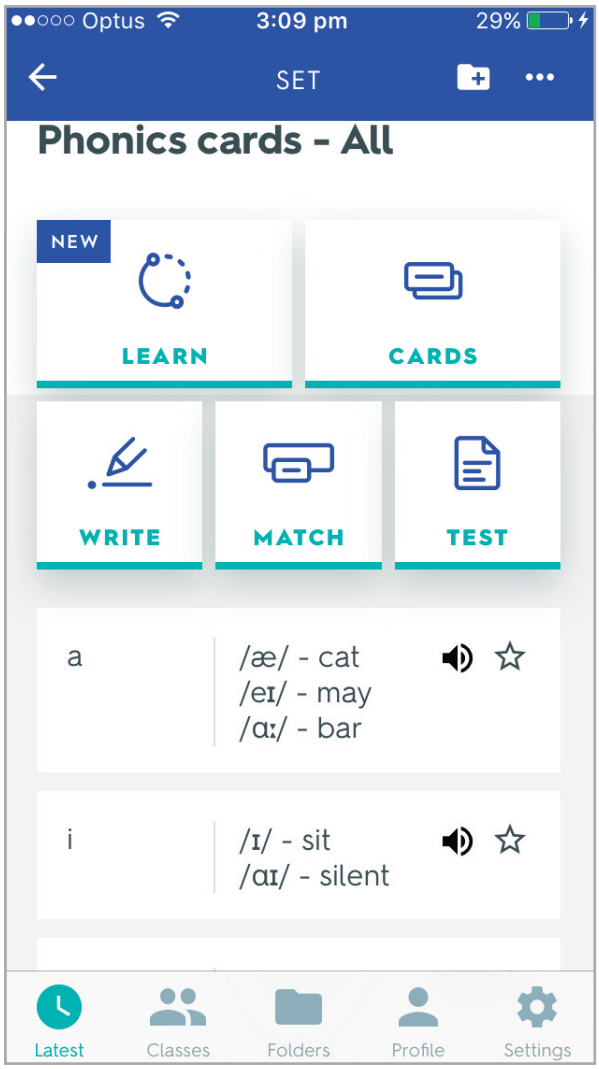

Figure 1: Spalding phonics cards

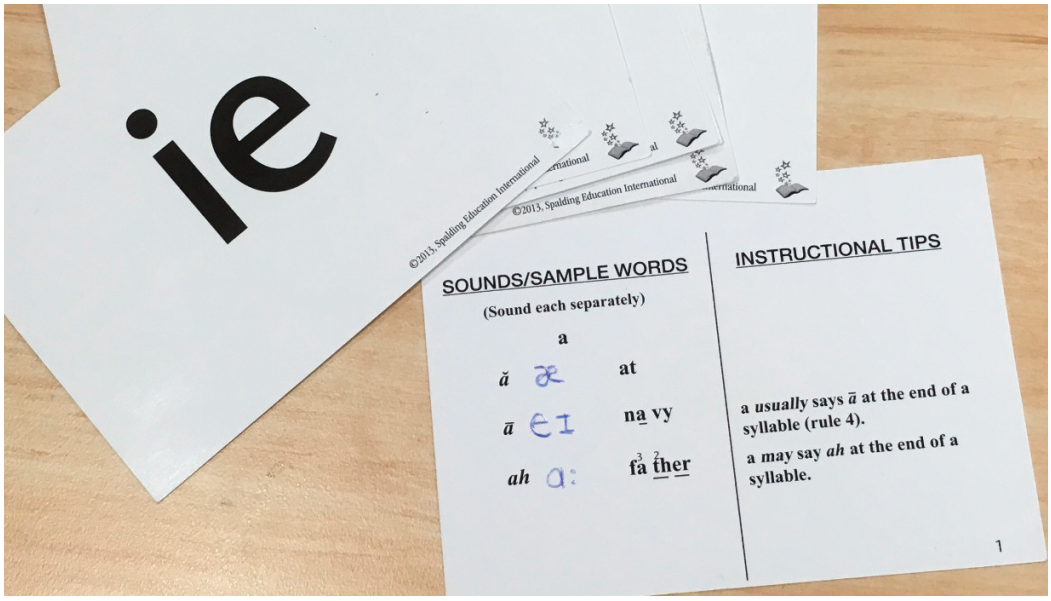

Figure 2: Quizlet phonics cards

Data collection

Data was collected on three different groups of DEC36 students: students who completed Cycle 1 (16 students), those who completed Cycle 2 (12 students) and non-research students (15 students). Comparison of these groups could help provide an answer to the research question: How can teaching phonological awareness impact on students' listening (and note-taking) skills?

Three types of listening assessment results were compared:

1. AR course assessment, which contained six parts: minimal pairs discrimination, syllable structure dictation, rhyming, academic word dictation, non-word dictation and sentence dictation. Both Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 students took this assessment before and after Cycle 1, with Cycle 2 students acting as a form of control group for the first cycle. Cycle 2 students also took the assessment after Cycle 2.
2. The DEC36 Diagnostic Listening test, which was conducted in Week 1 and repeated again in Week 11. This consisted of an IELTS-style listening test (Parts 1, 2 and 3), with no listening and note-taking component. Cycle 2 student results were not analysed, because they were in the middle of my course in Week 11 of DEC36.
3. The Listening and Note-taking section of the DEC Listening assessments, which was conducted in Week 6 of DEC36, Week 11 of DEC36 and Week 4 of DEC25 (25 out of 40 points).

I also compared the DEC Listening assessment scores with the DEC Reading assessments scores for the three DEC36 groups, because I believed this comparison could provide more insight into the effect that the AR classes had on the students' listening skills. For example, if the AR students improved more in both skills then this could mean that factors such as motivation and application to learning could have had more of an impact on the results than the AR classes had.

Other data collection included a pre- and post-cycle questionnaire and a post-cycle focus group session with the whole class. I also conducted two short individual interviews with research students whose listening skills improved a lot in order to identify different factors that may have contributed to this improvement.

Findings

Approximately half of the students in both cycles reported that they had only 'a little' knowledge of the different features of pronunciation prior to the start of the course (Appendix 4), although it is unclear if all students understood the terminology. It is interesting to note that in the post-research questionnaires, five students added comments that they had not done a course or learned material like the AR course before.

Eighty-seven and a half percent of the Cycle 1 students thought that there had been 'some' or 'a lot' of improvement in their listening skills as a result of the program. The figure was not quite so high for Cycle 2 students (50%). The findings show student confidence in their own listening skills also improved, with the percentage of Cycle 1 students being at least 'somewhat confident' in their own abilities rising from 12.5% to 75% by the end of the course. Again, Cycle 2 results were slightly lower (from 16.67% to 58.33%) (see Figures 3 and 4).

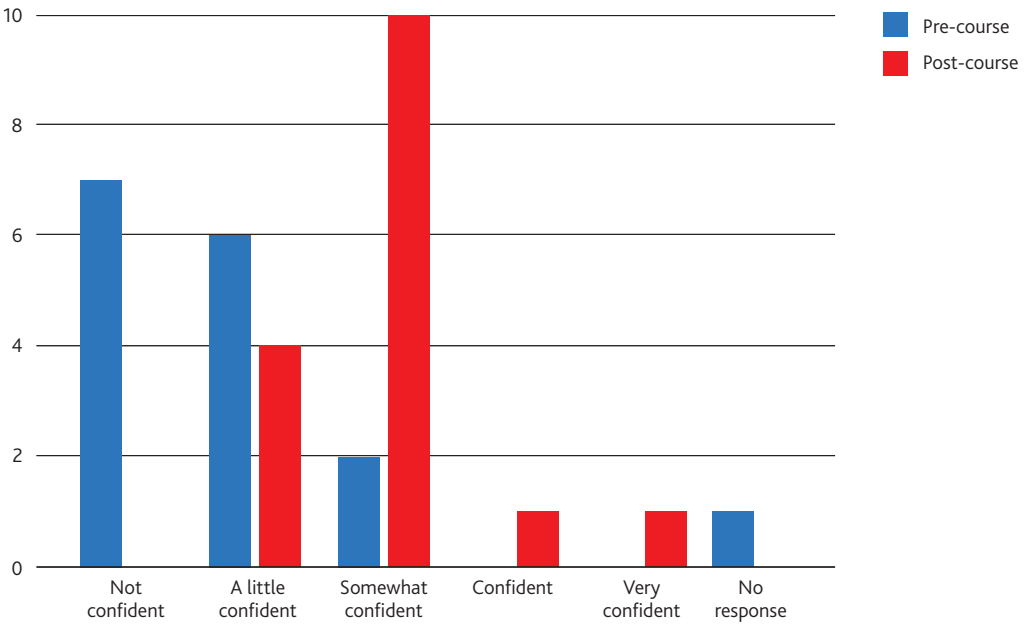

Figure 3: Confidence levels in own listening skills (Cycle 1)

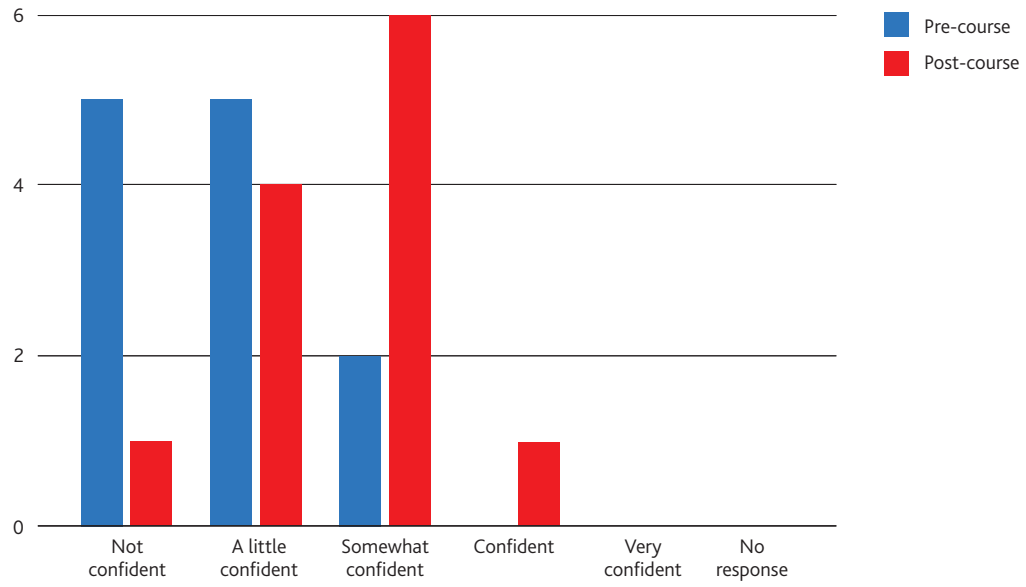

Figure 4: Confidence levels in own listening skills (Cycle 2)

Overall, the assessment results were very promising. In terms of the AR class assessment, Cycle 1 students improved their scores by 16.59%, whilst Cycle 2 students improved by only 10.13% (see Table 2). After Cycle 2, the students had improved by another 5.55%. The fact that the Cycle 2 students improved more before they had started the AR classes can probably be accounted for by the fact that almost all the students had arrived in Australia for the start of DEC36 and so a large improvement in all skills immediately following their arrival was to be expected. The more notable data in terms of answering my research question is that the Cycle 1 students had improved more than the Cycle 2 students by the end of Cycle 1.

Table 2: Results of the AR class assessment

Stage	*Pre-cycle 1*	*Post-cycle 1*	*Performance*	*Post-cycle 2*	*Performance*
Cycle 1 students	58.28%	67.95%	+16.59%	-	-
Cycle 2 students	58.33%	64.24%	+10.13%	67.78%	+5.55%

The analysis of the DEC36 Diagnostic Listening test results shows that the listening skills of Cycle 1 students improved more than those of the non-research students (29.62% and 19.56 % respectively). However, this was not the case for their reading scores (see Table 3).

Table 3: Comparison of DEC36 Diagnostic Listening tests

Groups	*Transactional listening test*			*Reading test*		
	Week 1	*Week 11*	*Performance*	*Week 1*	*Week 11*	*Performance*
Non-research students	60.22%	72.00%	+19.56%	58.72%	68.97%	+17.46%
Cycle 1 students	50.31%	65.21%	+29.62%	60.58%	68.03%	+12.30%

The difference in Listening results was even more notable in the DEC Listening and Note-taking assessment. Whilst the non-research students improved their score by only 9.38% across the three assessments, Cycle 1 students improved by 63.54% and Cycle 2 students saw an improvement of 48.92% (see Figure 5). These results were again in contrast to the Reading assessment scores, which showed the non-research students improved slightly more than the other two groups (see Figure 6).

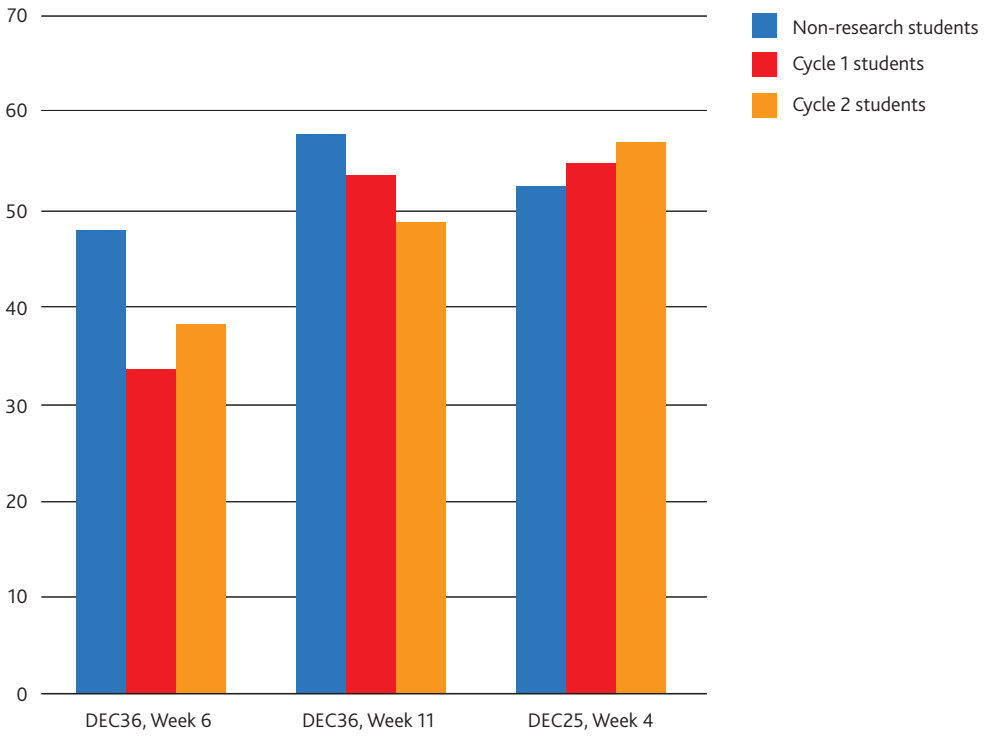

Figure 5: DEC Listening and Note-taking assessment results

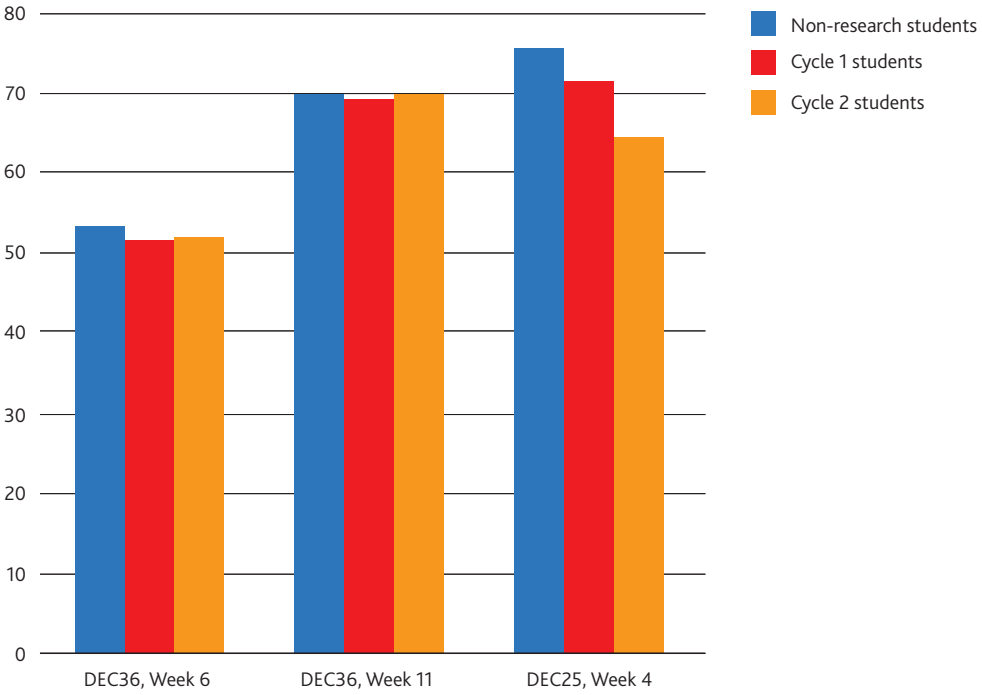

Figure 6: DEC Reading assessment results

There are a number of possible reasons for the different performances in the Listening and Reading assessments. First, the research students had weaker listening skills than the non-research students prior to the start of the AR course, whereas their reading skills were at a similar level. This may have made it easier for the listening skills of the research students to improve. Second, as voluntary participants in the AR course, the research students may have been more motivated to improve their listening skills than the non-research students, who had chosen not to participate in the classes. By contrast, the non-research students may have been more motivated to improve their reading skills. Third, participation in the AR classes could have led to the difference.

It is also worth noting that the AR classes also had a positive impact on student perceptions of their pronunciation skills. The research students reported substantial increases in confidence levels and improvements in this skill area after their cycles had completed (see Appendix 4). Feedback from the AR indicated that some students felt that it had also helped their reading and writing skills. Student comments included 'I gradually know how to spell the words when I listen' and 'When I see an unknown word, I can sound it now'.

Overall, students made some very positive comments about the AR course's effects on their English skills. Here are two examples:

> *I [have] a lot of improvement after the course. I am more sensitive [about] the sounds of different letters. Furthermore, I know about [the] letter-sound [relationship]. [It] can help me to spell English words more accurately than before.*
>
> *Combined with the pronunciation rules, it is much easier to understand listening. I can hear some linking sounds properly now. Through the sentence stress, I can highlight the main point.*

Conclusion and reflections

As an English language teacher with experience in the field of Speech Language Pathology, I have long advocated the need to include more pronunciation skills in curricula. Completing this AR project has strengthened this view, because it has given me insight into how teaching such skills can also improve decoding skills and, thus, listening skills. This view is also represented in the literature, with leading experts such as Field (2008) advocating for decoding skills to play a larger part in listening programs. The research students were also in agreement, with 53.33% of Cycle 1 students and 75% of Cycle 2 students supporting the idea that most or all of the material from the AR course should be included in future DEC curricula (see Appendix 4). In fact, CET is currently redesigning its DEC courses and, following my research, decoding skills are being included as a bridge between listening and speaking skills. As one of the AR students insightfully commented, 'a good habit of correct pronunciation is a necessary link between speaking and listening'.

I faced a number of challenges in completing this AR, particularly in respect to setting up separate classes. Most importantly, student fatigue was a real issue. The majority of AR students were taking 2 to 4 hours of extra support classes a week on top of their usual classes. As a result, lack of homework completion and student drop-outs were real issues throughout the AR, but particularly towards the end, with three students dropping out of Cycle 1 and five students dropping out of Cycle 2. An additional problem with completing this research through 1-hour extra classes was that the material had to be taught intensively, rather than little and often, which would have been preferred. Conducting the AR as an extra class also led to a limitation in its findings, because the students who took part were all volunteers and, therefore, potentially more motivated to improve their listening skills than the students who chose not to participate. The individual interviews I conducted with three AR students confirmed that they were highly motivated to improve their listening skills, with each student revealing that they were completing listening self-study, using resources such as TED Talks, for up to one hour a day.

There are a number of aspects of this AR project that would benefit from further investigation. Rhyming is one of these. Whilst it is seen as an essential component in the development of phonological awareness, many of the AR students either struggled to understand it, do it and/or recognise its importance. I would also like to do further research into whether weaker students benefit more than stronger students from developing phonological awareness skills.

Completing this AR project was a very motivating experience for me as a teacher, because it allowed me to spend more time in the classroom applying my passion for pronunciation. It was also a very validating experience, because it made me realise that what I do in the classroom can make a real difference to student outcomes. In addition, I feel the project took positive steps towards bridging the gap between the listening literature and classroom practice. I will certainly be applying what I have learned through my teaching, curriculum development work and future research projects.

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Appendix 1: The hierarchy of phonological skills (Konza 2011)

The hierarchy of phonological skills
Rhythm (clapping to syllables)
Rhyming
Onset and rime
Phonemes in isolation
Phoneme blending
Phoneme segmentation
Phoneme manipulation

Appendix 2: List of websites and apps recommended to students

	Websites
Sounds	Macmillan Phonemic Chart www.macmillanenglish.com/pronunciation/phonemic-chart-in-british-english Sounds of Speech soundsofspeech.uiowa.edu/index.html#english BBC Learning English – Pronunciation Tips www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/grammar/pron/sounds Ship or Sheep www.shiporsheep.com Cambridge English Online – Phonetics cambridgeenglishonline.com/Phonetics_Focus
Rhyming	English Club - Rhyming Games www.englishclub.com/esl-games/pronunciation/rhyming-pairs.htm
Consonant clusters	Espresso English www.espressoenglish.net/english-pronunciation-practice-six-tricky-consonant-clusters Ted Power www.tedpower.co.uk/clustersindex.html Useful English – Phonetics usefulenglish.ru/phonetics/practice-consonant-clusters
	Free apps
Sounds	Sounds: The Pronunciation App Pronunciation Power Pronunciation – for BBC Learning English Quizlet – phonemic chart cards
Phonics	Quizlet – phonics cards

Appendix 3: Content differences in Cycle 1 and 2

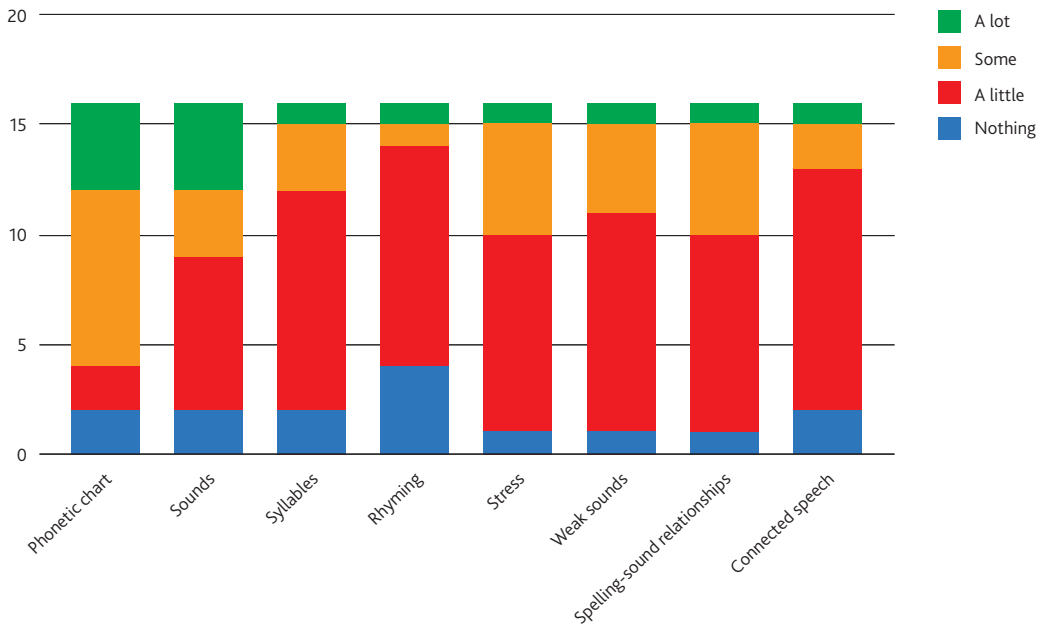
	Cycle 1	*Cycle 2*
Class 1	• Introduction to the phonemic chart and monophthongs • /e/, /æ/ and /_/ comparison • Phonics: single vowel letter – sounds (1)	• Introduction to the whole phonemic chart: monophthongs, diphthongs, plosives, fricatives, affricates, nasals and approximants
Class 2	• Diphthongs • Short and long vowels • Rhyming • Phonics: vowel letters – sounds (2) • Spelling-sound rule 1	• Homework check and mini test 1 • Syllables • Short and long vowels • Spelling-sound rule 1 • Phonics: vowel letters – sounds (1)
Class 3	• Mini test 1 • Plosives • Past tense endings • Phonics: consonants – sounds (1) • Spelling-sound rule 2	• Homework check • Past tense endings • Phonics: vowel letters – sounds (2) • Spelling-sound rule 2
Class 4	• Fricatives and affricates • Syllables • Phonics: consonants – sounds (2) • Spelling-sound rule 3	• Homework check and mini test 2 • Phonics: vowel letters – sounds (3) • Spelling-sound rule 3
Class 5	• Mini test 2 • Nasals and approximants • Syllables, word stress and weak forms • Phonics: consonants – sounds (3)	• Homework check • Word stress and weak forms • Spelling-sound rule 4
Class 6	• Word stress rule 1 • /_l/ vs /i:l/ review • Rhyming • Spelling-sound rule 4	• Homework check • Word stress rule 1 • Phonics: c and g • Spelling-sound rules 5 and 6
Class 7	• Mini test 3 • Word stress rules (suffixes) 2 • Rhyming • Phonics: other	• Homework check • Limericks • Word stress rules (suffixes) 2 • Phonics: consonants – sounds (1) and cheat sheet 1
Class 8	• Consonant clusters • Tongue twisters • Sound deletion • Phonics: cheat sheet • Spelling-sound rules 5 and 6	• Homework check • Sentence stress and weak sounds • Contractions • Phonics: consonants – sounds (2) • Spelling-sound rule 7

Appendix 3: Content differences in Cycle 1 and 2 – continued

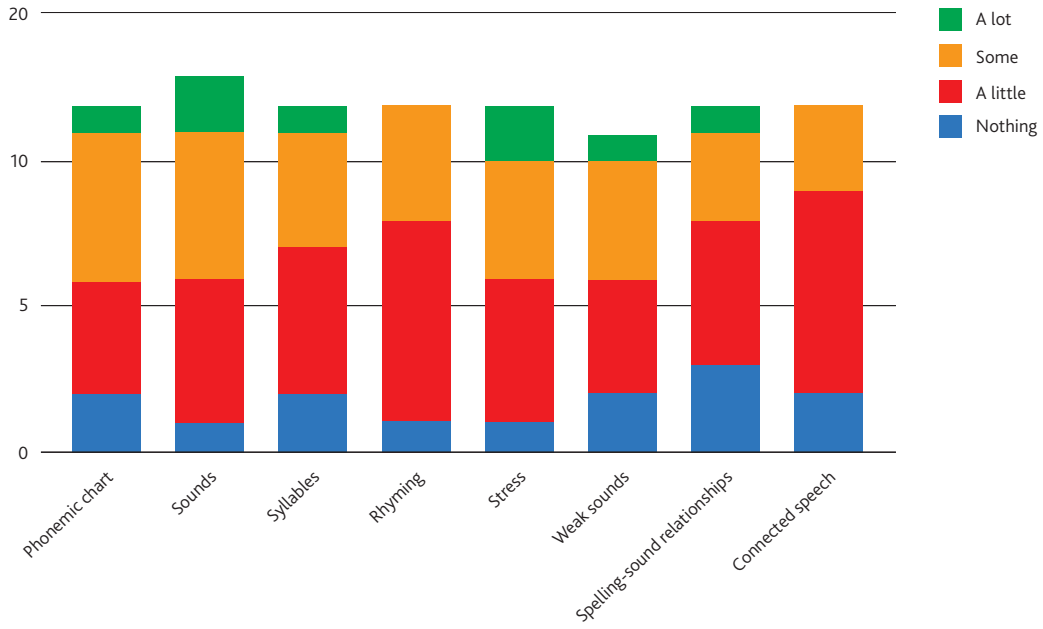
	Cycle 1	*Cycle 2*
Class 9	• Mini test 4 • Linking sounds • Phonics: foreign words	• Consonant clusters and tongue twisters • Homework check • Sound deletion • Plural endings (student request) • Phonics: consonants – sounds (3) and cheat sheet 2
Class 10	• Sentence stress and weak sounds • Contractions • Phonics review • Spelling-sound rule 7	• Homework check • Linking sounds • Homophones • Phonics: foreign words

Appendix 4: Questionnaire results highlights

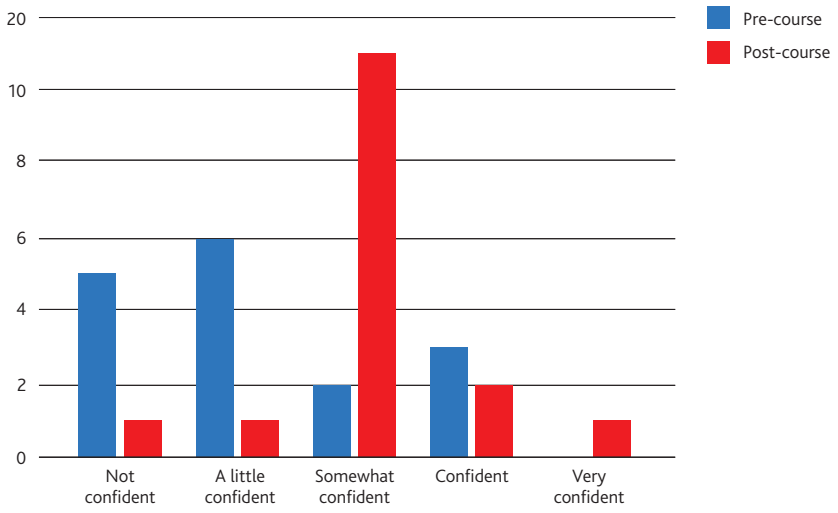
Q1. Cycle 1: How much do you know about the features of pronunciation?



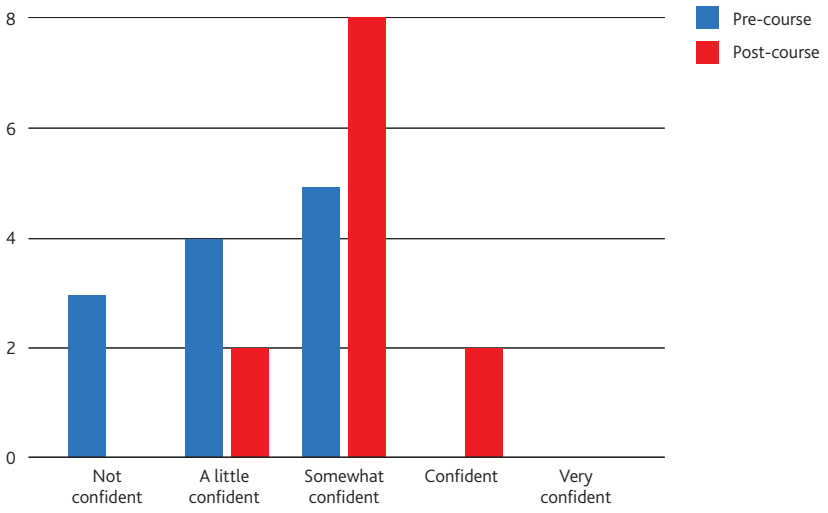
Q1. Cycle 2: How much do you know about the features of pronunciation?



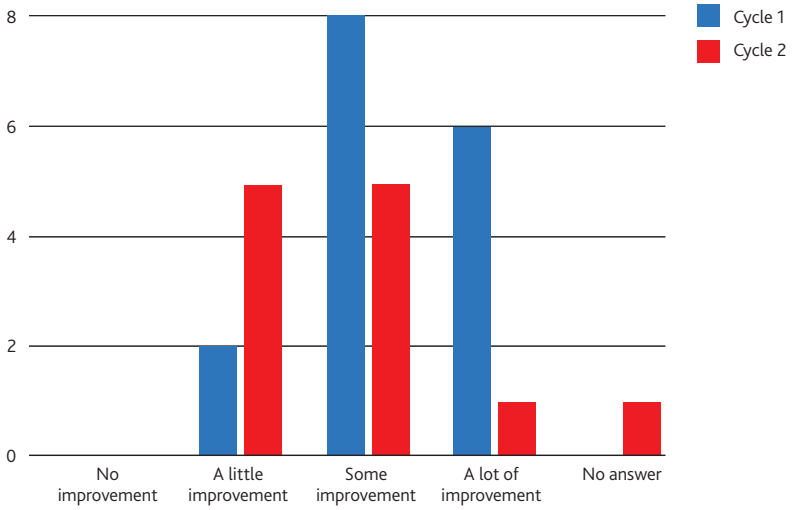
Q2. Cycle 1: How confident do you feel about your English pronunciation skills?



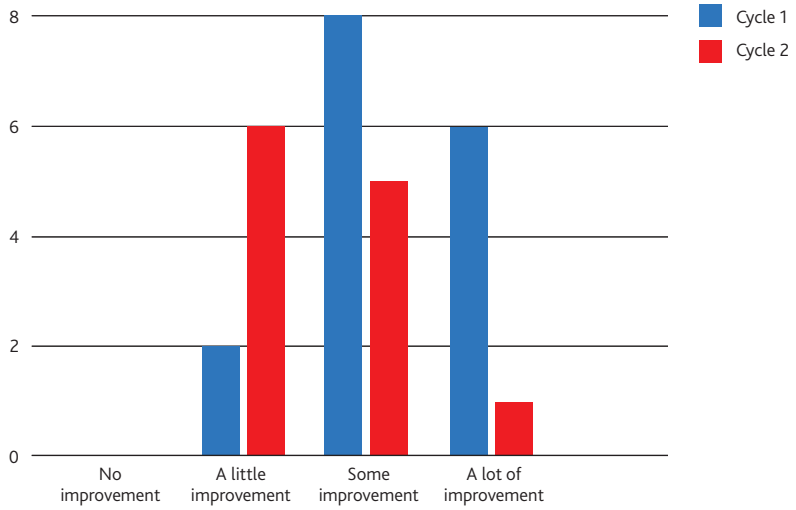
Q2. Cycle 2: How confident do you feel about your English pronunciation skills?



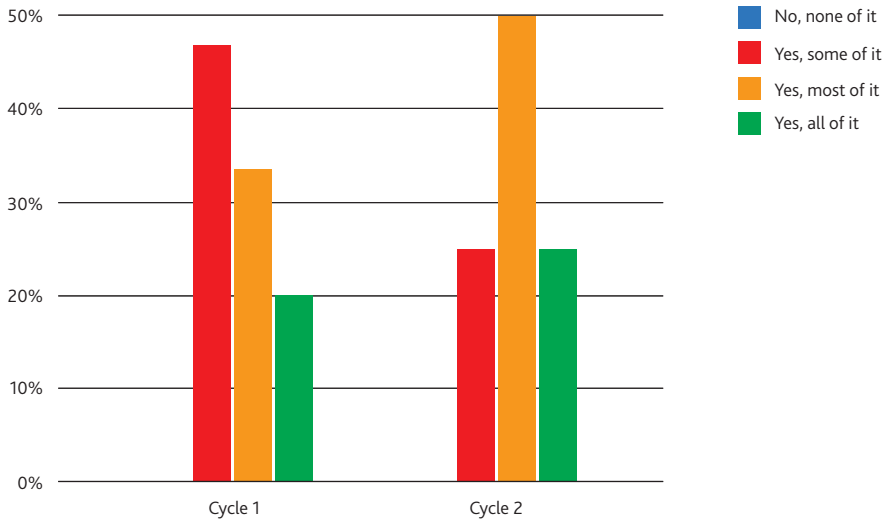
Q3. How much do you think your English pronunciation skills have improved?



Q6. How much do you think your English listening skills have improved?



Q9. Would you recommend that the material from these classes be added into your normal DEC36 classes (curriculum) in the future?



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