The Definite Article

WATESOL Newsletter Fall 2021

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- Planet Word: DC's New Interactive Language-Enlivened Museum Delights, Informs, and Challenges Visitors
- Creating Classes that Foster Cross-Cultural Conversation, Mutual Learning, and Inclusion
- The Impact of Employing Standardized English Language Proficiency Tests as a Graduation Requirement on Higher Education in Vietnam
- Laying the Foundation for Clarity, Creativity, and Consistency in Higher Ed ESL Courses

WATESOL NEWS

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Speaking Willow, sculpture by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer at Planet Word —
photo by Catherine Falknor

From the editors:

Dear Readers,

The theme for WATESOL's fall conference this year is *Striving for Justice and Innovation.* Our feature articles this issue likewise address *innovation* in a new museum and in the classroom and the topics of *equity* (with regard to standardized testing) and *inclusion*—sister topics to the issue of *justice*. We trust that from these articles and from our regular features, each of you will discover some content here that is informative, interesting, and applicable to your teaching or administrative contexts.

As always, we'd like to express our gratitude to our authors! This newsletter is valuable because of the content you've all contributed.

I (Heather) write this as I wrap up my sixth and final issue of the WATESOL newsletter (the fifth under its new title, *The Definite Article*). Serving on the board for three years and engaging with so many members of our community has been a rewarding experience, and I'm grateful for it. I encourage you to consider contributing to WATESOL in some capacity — as a board member or an event volunteer, or of course by writing for *The Definite Article*! Submission guidelines can be found on our web page, and you are welcome to reach out at newsletter@watesol.org with ideas or questions.

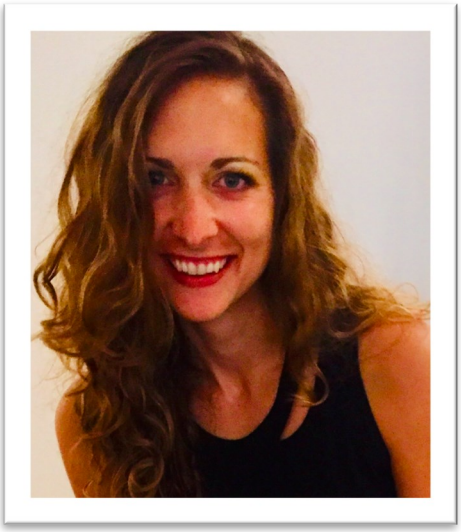
We hope to see you at our virtual conference on October 16th. In the meantime, happy reading!

Your Newsletter Editors,
Heather Gregg Zitlau and *Catherine Falknor*

WATESOL welcomes submissions from members for publication in *The Definite Article*. Deadlines and detailed submission guidelines can be found on our website.

Authors are responsible for the inclusion and accuracy of their references. The articles published in *The Definite Article* reflect the research, classroom experiences, and opinions of a wide range of contributing authors and do not constitute policy statements on behalf of the organization. WATESOL welcomes articles that reflect diverse perspectives on practices and issues relevant to those in the TESOL field.

Letter from the President



Dear Wonderful WATESOLers,

I hope all of you found some time to relax and recharge this summer, and that the start of the new academic year is going smoothly for you. We are looking forward to our 51st annual fall conference, which will take place over Zoom on Saturday, October 16th. Our conference theme is *Striving for Justice and Innovation*. This theme acknowledges the changes of the past 18 months. There has been increasing national attention to systemic racial injustice, spurring the TESOL field to reckon with its legacy and its future. The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the way we teach and interact with others. Additionally, some of us have faced job insecurity or have recently transitioned careers.

In the midst of these changes, we are excited to have three invited speakers who will all connect to our conference theme in different ways. Shannon Felt, the founder of the business TEFL Horizons, will give a workshop on "Teflpreneurship": Building a Successful Online ESL Business or Side Hustle. Dr. J.M. Paiz of George Washington University will lead a session titled "Navigating Sexual Diversity in ELT Contexts: Recommendations and Negotiations. Dr. Robin Barr, American University's Linguist-in-Residence, will lead a workshop on The Invisible Student: Identifying and Accommodating the Low-Literacy Learner.

Finally, we are thrilled to welcome Dr. Suhanthie Motha of the University of Washington to give our keynote address. Her talk is titled "Is Anti-Racist English Language Teaching Possible? Striving for Justice in TESOL." Dr. Motha is the author of *Race, Empire, and English Language Teaching: Creating Responsible and Ethical Anti-Racist Practice*, and she brings her significant expertise to this crucial question.

In addition to the invited speakers and the keynote, we also accepted over 15 proposals for live and pre-recorded sessions through our double-blind peer review process. Of course, we all look forward to when we'll be able to interact in-person. Still, this year's virtual conference will be an intellectually enriching space where participants can exchange ideas and support across a range of topics in TESOL.There will also be a structured networking hour where participants can move freely between breakout rooms, dropping in on topics including job search advice, and tips on how to design in-person lessons that are adaptable to a virtual environment, and vice versa. I hope you will join us, and contribute your ideas for TESOL and WATESOL.

Sincerely,
Jessie

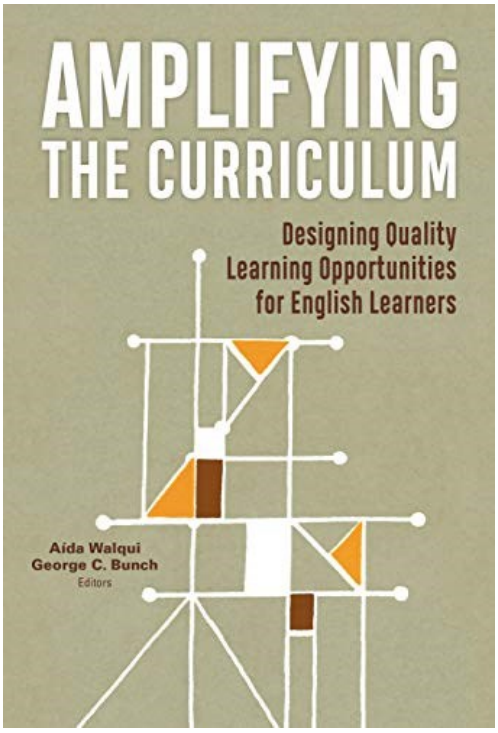
Jessie Ebersole,
WATESOL 2020-2021 President

Book Review

Amplifying the Curriculum: Designing Quality Learning Opportunities for English Learners

By Heather Tatton-Harris

If planning and implementing rigorous, academic lessons with ELLs is your goal, *Amplifying the Curriculum* is well worth the investment. Setting ELLs up for success with standards-aligned lessons and 21st Century skills is the essence of "amplifying" a lesson, as illustrated by Walqui and Bunch (2019). Approaching this text from the lens of an adult education setting, I find that while this book focuses on K-12, the lesson examples and strategies are equally relevant and essential for adult students.



Amplifying the Curriculum starts off with a clear explanation of why 21st Century skills are critical for all learners. Communicating and collaborating with diverse colleagues, solving complex problems, and being flexible to ever-changing contexts (Walqui & Bunch, 2019) are skills that our national standards elevate in both K-12 and adult education arenas. The authors eloquently illustrate the importance of those skills in order to lay the groundwork for their "high challenge, high support pedagogy" (p. 21). The lesson examples contained in this book, while "amplified" and adapted for ELLs, would be excellent scaffolding for all learners, especially with Universal Design (Rose & Meyer, 2009) in mind. Each example lesson leads to high quality outcomes and critical and academic thinking without simplifying or weakening the material for lack of language proficiency.

What do the authors mean by an "amplified" lesson? Before embarking on a deep dive into five exemplar lessons (one chapter devoted to each), the authors spend one chapter explaining their key tenets - the ingredients that make a lesson "amplified". These five key tenets include the following:

1 - Development emerges in social interaction. Also, development is a consequence of learning, not a prerequisite for it. This tenet stipulates that the notion of predetermined learning sequences is arbitrary, and when applied as a prerequisite to more challenging work, can hold a student back in remedial cycles. The authors remind the reader that there are three critical elements to development. First, quality lessons focus on the potential for growth in each student. Second, learners approach each lesson with different skills and strengths, and social interaction provides unpredictable opportunities for growth. And third, the objective of a lesson is not about transmission of knowledge, but about promoting and supporting learning as it unfolds (p.25) and may look different for each student. This tenet, in combination with the other four tenets (especially #2 - scaffolding), can make it possible for students to succeed in a rigorous lesson when their skills might not present as "ready."

2 - Quality learning is deliberately and contingently scaffolded. In this tenet, the authors take us back to the origins of "scaffolding" - what it is and what it is not. The point of this key ingredient is that scaffolding is pedagogical support that enables learners to develop beyond their current ability. It is temporary, and it is both planned AND responsive. This last element is important; the authors frequently use the word "contingent" to mean unplanned or responsive. In rigorous, amplified lessons, teachers must adjust to learners' needs in the moment - responding with additional scaffolding as necessary.

3 - Quality learning focuses on substantive, generative disciplinary practices. The authors' point with this tenet is that a rigorous lesson focuses on conceptual understanding, texts, problems, and phenomena related to the discipline (science, geography, etc.). Learners have immense potential, and the teacher's role is to envision each learner's growth by the end of the lesson. Most importantly, as learning is not a linear process, teachers should expect that the key concepts in the lesson will not be fully mastered by every student in the class. Taking that into consideration, the curriculum should spiral so that concepts reoccur time and time again, allowing learners to revisit, expand, and deepen their understanding. The "generative" element in this tenet is especially essential. For instance, in the book's example science lesson on contagious diseases, learners generate their own descriptions and words for what is scientifically happening as germs spread. Later in the lesson, the teacher then connects these student-generated descriptions to the scientific terms for the phenomena. At that point the students have already co-constructed their conceptual understanding, and now they have the proper words to attach to the concepts.

4 & 5 - Simultaneously develop conceptual, analytic, and language practices + Focus on Form. The last two key ingredients include concepts around language development:

1. Language skills develop simultaneously with conceptual and analytical skills (Kelley, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Faller, 2010).
2. A focus-on-form, as opposed to forms (Long, 1996), approach is recommended.

The example lessons that follow these five key tenets, filled with innovative tools and resources, include a language arts lesson on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the aforementioned science lesson investigating how viruses spread, a math lesson focusing on slope, a social studies lesson, and a beginning level English lesson.

I will be returning repeatedly to this text for ideas. It's an essential reminder of what ELLs can do and what ELLs need in a lesson to be successful in the classroom.

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Heather Tatton-Harris is the Curriculum & Assessment Manager at Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School. She earned her MA in TESOL and EdM in Applied Linguistics with a focus on pragmatics and classroom discourse at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is passionate about connecting research to practice.

The 10-minute rule: Taking a Technology Timeout

By Andrew Screen

If you Google it, you can find a rule for almost any length of time.

The 5-second rule
The 10-second rule
The 2-minute rule
The 5-minute rule

So, it turns out that when I had the idea to "create" *the 10-minute rule* and Googled it to see if it existed, I was feeling a little unoriginal because there were several *10-minute rules.* Then, what is *the 10-minute rule*? Glad you asked.

Think back to March 2020. It's not very hard, is it? In a moment's notice, the pandemic shifted how teaching and learning happened on a global scale — not just for English language learners. Teachers and students wrestled with new technologies, and in many cases, these wrestling matches were taking place for students in isolation without help from their peers or teachers.

In my case, I specifically remember one day opening the Zoom room for class and thinking that my students would gracefully glide through a short presentation that they had completed for homework in Google Slides—only to find that nobody had completed it. Why could this be? Sure, I had noticed the slides were blank the previous afternoon, but that's just because the students were procrastinating; they do their best work at 1:00 am while I'm sleeping. Unfortunately, it turns out that the Slides had been set as "view only." Ok, enough passive voice — "I" forgot to check the box to make the slides editable. My little slip-up set off a chain of events that might sound familiar to you and what might happen in your classroom. Here is how my students and I responded to the situation:

- **Ahmed, "The Connector"** - Hearing through the class Whatsapp that Sara, Juan, and Mohammed didn't know how to complete the assignment, Ahmed attempted to work on the slides. The four students "Whatsapped it up" for close to an hour trying to figure out how to do the assignment.

- **Rawan, "The Perfectionist"** - After eight "share requests," sent in five-minute intervals from 11:30 pm to 12:15 am, Rawan finally decided to create her own slides.

- **I, "The absent-minded teacher"** - I slept through it all.

This particular experience, though I'm embarrassed to say is not unique, enabled me to reflect on other instances when students struggled in silence, weren't privy to passwords, got denied by discussion boards, were vexed by VoiceThread -- while I found out only after these trials and tribulations had occurred. Getting through the pandemic was challenging enough for these students. Why allow human error and technology to be one more problem on their plates? So, Ahmed, Sara, Juan, Mohammed, Rawan, and all of my students since have become the beneficiaries of *the 10-minute rule*, which is now posted in my syllabus.

The Ten-Minute Rule

If you are attempting to complete a task in Google or Canvas or using another type of technology and you are unable to do so, due to technical difficulties, please stop after ten minutes, take a breath, contact a classmate or your instructor, or just wait to tell me in class. Please do not spend more than ten minutes being frustrated due to technical difficulties.

The 10-minute rule is not intended to allow a student to shirk their responsibilities, nor is it an attempt to refute the merits of a little ol' fashioned grit and determination. After all, Angela Duckworth's TED talk on this very topic has over 24 million views; grit clearly does have merit. What the *10-minute rule* is intended to do is account for human error (often mine) and relieve a little unnecessary stress in an ever-increasingly stressful world.

When introducing this rule to my students in new courses that I teach, I see smiles light up when students realize that I'm a human too, and we're all in this together.

When introducing this rule to my students in new courses that I teach, I see smiles light up when students realize that I'm a human too, and we're all in this together.

Andrew Screen is an Assistant Teaching Professor in the English Language Center at Georgetown University. He enjoys experimenting with creative ways of enhancing learning for students.

Readers Respond

What teaching-related change/ritual that you started as a result of COVID-19 do you hope to continue?

Hybrid modality

Krisztina Domjan,
American University

Keeping a teaching journal: I have been journaling for a class I am teaching this year. Actually, it's not a journal but a daily log that I send to my bosses, and it has become an invaluable tool as I navigate unchartered waters. Consistent reflection has helped me to focus on learning objectives and outcomes, student progress, and planning. And it has given me confidence to try new approaches in an unfamiliar teaching context. Pre-pandemic, I tried numerous times to keep a teaching journal. However, I always gave up; it seemed a waste of time, and I didn't see any return on the investment. In February 2021, beginning with a new teaching assignment, I started writing daily logs about the class to my manager and curriculum developer. It began from anxiety – I wanted them to tell me immediately if they saw problems with how the classes were progressing. The logs, which I write as a weekly email with daily additions, are simple: a summary and a self-evaluation. The evaluations tend to focus on what could have been better and what I can do to make it better in future classes. I set myself a writing time of 15-20 minutes, usually right after the class. A commitment, a time limit and consistency made the difference. Regular reflection on my teaching helps me to see a bigger picture and better plan to meet learning objectives in individual classes and the course. I hope to continue this practice when things are "normal" again.

Kathleen F Kearney,
Georgetown University

Something that COVID taught me as an educator is the importance of **taking the time to pause and reflect.** As teachers, we are often expected to have all the answers. I've learned that it is so powerful to admit to students when something doesn't go as planned. Admitting mistakes or hardships models for students the importance of being authentic. Not everything will always go as planned, but by having a growth mindset and a "can-do" attitude, we as teachers are modeling for students that flexibility is so integral in the learning process and in life.

Katelyn Scott,
Loudoun County Public Schools

Having check-ins with students at the beginning of each class - both for me to get to know students and for them to get to know each other better!

Tabitha Kidwell,
American University

I still **use virtual shared documents** even in our classroom. I share links to google slides and docs with my entire class who is now face to face. We all collaboratively still work together on shared writing in a shared document. I started that last year when we were virtual and have continued every class since we returned.

Greer Mancuso,
Fairfax County Public Schools

What teaching-related change/ritual that you started as a result of COVID-19 do you hope to continue?

Using PearDeck with Google Slides as a way to engage students and to receive immediate feedback.

Melissa Hauke,
Fairfax County Public Schools

Be on the lookout for the next issue's ***Readers Respond*** prompt, to be posted on social media and distributed via email. We'd love to hear your responses!

Teaching Hack

Turn Reading Circles Into Writing Circles

By Nancy Overman

Reading circles, while not new, can be re-engineered to give students both a sense of autonomy and the opportunity to begin the research and research reporting process. Textbook readings provide useful exercises that target reading skills, but textbook topics don't always match students' interests. Therefore, allowing student groups to select their topics can give them a sense of autonomy and ownership. Allowing students to choose their topics and sources provides not only reading practice, but also opportunities to hone important skills such as note-taking, summarizing, and critical thinking. Creating follow-up writing assignments encourages careful text analysis of their chosen sources.

In my classes, students form reading circles in one of two ways: either I choose three or four topics and have students join one of the groups based on their interests (Doodle.com is useful for this kind of sign up), or I form groups and allow students to choose a group topic that they all care about.

Once the groups are formed, outside of class, each student finds a source (an article) on the group's topic, reads it carefully, completes a worksheet that I provide (see next paragraph), and then, in class, summarizes the article for the rest of their reading circle group.

The "universal reading worksheet" first asks students to identify main ideas and important details by answering general "Wh" questions. The worksheet also asks them to find and report on relationships between ideas (using contrast, cause-effect, and concession signals), and to choose an appropriate note-taking method (e.g. a timeline, pros and cons) for organizing the information in preparation for an oral summary. Students use these notes when reporting on their article at their next reading circle group meeting.

*The Urban Dictionary defines a **hack** as "a clever solution to a tricky problem." This series in the newsletter offers practical teaching suggestions that are immediately applicable to your classroom.*

The last step in the process is to turn their sources into a written report, i.e., a literature review. In their reading circles, they discuss and identify common themes in their articles. From these common themes, they create, with my help if necessary, a thesis statement for a lit review. Then, individually, they write a report on the topic chosen by the group, using all of the sources presented in their reading circle group.

In the ideal world, a student doing research would formulate a research question first and then find sources that address or confirm the research question, formulate a thesis, and write a research paper. However, this reading circle process approximates library research without the library research. Students gather their sources as a team and settle on a thesis that will draw on all of their sources to make their written report cohesive. It is a way to illustrate to students that starting with a research question is exciting but can be very time-consuming. First reviewing what the literature says can help a student formulate a manageable thesis – one that can be supported by the available sources.

Because students have chosen their own topics and their own sources, they are motivated to read articles that may challenge them. Their sense of ownership is evident when they report to their group. During that activity, they are the experts and can field questions from the group. Students appreciate and respond to this chance to have more agency in what they are learning.

Nancy Overman is an Associate Teaching Professor in the English Language Center's Intensive English program. She specializes in preparing students for undergraduate work, graduate research, and professional interactions, putting special emphasis on helping students to take charge of their own learning. She has taught English in Japan and Panama and has done teacher training in Cuba and in China, (supporting English programs at medical schools for WHO).

Join Nancy at her WATESOL Fall Conference session on Oct. 16th to learn more about this "hack!"

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Feature Article

Planet Word: DC's New Interactive Language-Enlivened Museum Delights, Informs, and Challenges Visitors

By Catherine Falknor

When visiting Washington's newest museum, Planet Word, our first reaction might be—why did it take so long to build a linguistic venue in a city whose residents are so verbose?! But it isn't stuffy, heady, or sedentary at all. It's a playground of ideas, jokes, stories, languages, persuasion, vocabulary, idioms, babbling, and more. It's a multimedia engagement of communication housed in the beautiful historic Franklin School, on McPherson Square, easily accessed by Metro and pedestrians from downtown and the nearby National Mall.

The outdoor entrance patio is shaded by a willow sculpture that greets visitors in a symphony of languages, playing as we pass beneath its stems and fruits (conical speakers). Greeters on the floor level that opens into its bookstore behind the information desk lead us into the elevator/stairwell to begin the journey at the top floor, working our way down.

Stepping onto the third floor, we hear an excitement of voices in the first room where an electronic word wall alternately highlights, shuffles, pauses, and questions audience members who are eagerly standing at mikes guessing answers and offering ideas about the history of the English language and words that captivate them. Youngsters who want to be heard and adults who recognize the word play alternate engaging in the banter, unable to pull themselves away.

The next room, though, presents *Spoken Word*, an enormous globe surrounded by small audio-video stations, inviting patrons to converse with fresh-faced tour guides bilingual in English and their heritage language, asking for background knowledge and sharing phrases and history in and about their mother tongues.

Beyond, in the hallway, *First Words* shows a video exhibit capturing infants and toddlers as they make their first attempts at language learning, babbling and testing mouth sounds and landing on words that form the basis of their native linguistic foundation.

Arriving on the second floor, patrons can really throw themselves into their fantasies, from public speaking, to singing with a karaoke machine, to dabbling in comedy, to painting with words. Beyond that, the elegant library reading room is meant to be extraordinary, as the books truly speak to us when they are placed under the reading lights.

Returning to the ground floor, words become more serious as the exhibit *I'm Sold* engages visitors in the language of persuasion, marketing, and rhetorical argument. Visitors enter the Media Spiral where they watch, learn, and identify copywriting strategies and then ultimately create their own advertisements from prompts. And then, as a counterpoint to media manipulation, the highly interactive exhibit *Words Matter* brings home the power of words in our humanity, inviting visitors to watch short conversations with those who live among us and then to record our own stories in a professional booth.

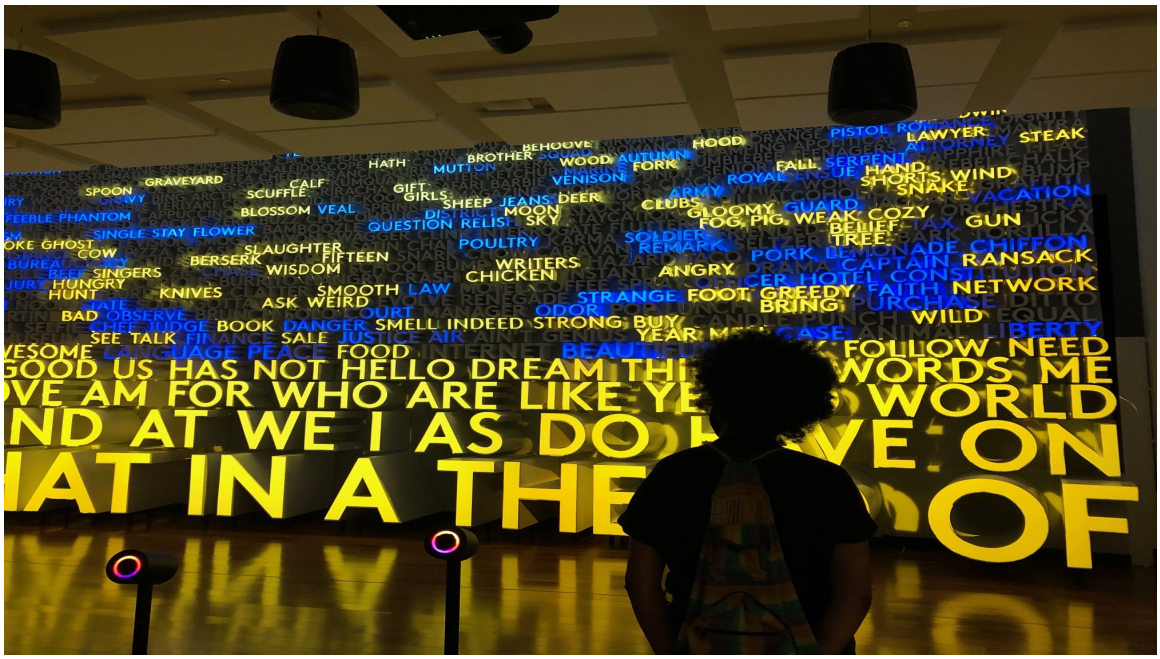
As a new museum, Planet Word continues to mature; the restaurant that will be housed in its lower level is not yet finished. New exhibits will come online, and its true mission, from its founder, Ann Friedman, a retired reading teacher in Montgomery County, is ever-blossoming: to do its part to improve literacy in our community, especially Washington, DC.

To that end, the museum's educator resources are the real treasure. There are lesson plans to use along with visits, both virtual and in-person. In addition, scheduled events, such as educator workshops, from poetry readings with a workshop component or an exploration of the power of words, such as in a conversation with an author who explores triggering words, help stimulate our creativity to enhance all our language lessons with a heightened awareness of how powerful words can be.

Many of us, unconsciously perhaps, hoped for such a literary and linguistic space, and it doesn't disappoint. The visitors who were there on that sweltering August day ranged from the youngest to the elderly, and many were speaking multiple native languages. All were delighting in the fun Planet Word Museum has presented for us.

And we must remember, too, the seriousness of our words. In the museum's not-to-be missed blog, multiple posts abound on topics including book-making and Halloween costumes, the urgent need for translator protection, and language entrepreneurship. In a post from June 5, 2020, at the height of Black Lives Matter demonstrations throughout the world, Planet Word Museum founder Ann Friedman reflects on the critical role of words in our times and poignantly affirms for us:

> *At Planet Word we will provide a forum for such civil discourse and a place where our community, in all its vibrant diversity, can gather to share the words that bridge differences and forge solutions. We know that words will never be enough, but they are certainly the necessary precursors to action and progress.*



Feature Article

Creating Classes that Foster Cross-Cultural Conversation, Mutual Learning, and Inclusion

By Lee Shainis

Mutual Learning

Adult English programs are one of the few places where we see ongoing and profound connections and conversations that cross barriers of race, class, ethnicity, language, religion, work status, and many other areas of difference. Crossing these barriers makes our work extremely challenging, but also exciting and uniquely important.

As educators in such contexts, we can approach our work the old-fashioned way - focused on English learners doing all the learning - or we can open doors to create a mutual sense of welcoming, learning, and skill building to impact social cohesion. And we can do that in ways that also accelerate language acquisition!

First, we need to acknowledge and understand the power dynamics within adult education. The language that we often use to describe the work and purpose of adult education sets a "dominant culture" social dynamic in place between teacher and student. It is about *us* and *them*. They need our help, and we lift their lives. We often call our learners "clients." We often see the primary purpose of our work as teaching immigrants to integrate into our way of life and adapt to the prevailing, dominant culture. Consider the following quote:

> *So many prominent Americans, many of whom we celebrate for their progressive ideas and activism, many of whom had very good intentions, subscribed to assimilationist thinking that has also served up racist beliefs about Black inferiority. Anytime we say that racial group should change to be more like our racial group—or to be more American, which is code word for White American—we are articulating an assimilationist idea."*
> *- Ibram X. Kendi*

Many curricula do not open enough doors for education to be reciprocated back to the receiving community. Our well-meaning but disempowering one-directional messages focused on fixing the deficiencies of our adult English language learners (ELLs) perpetuate problems and systems of power.

My wife, who is from Colombia, pointed out to me that *English is the language of power.* She said that if an English speaker goes to Colombia and does not speak Spanish, people will still view them as well educated because they speak English. But when a Spanish speaker comes to the United States, if they do not speak English well, they are often perceived as less, as uneducated, and people do not listen to them as much.

Our well-meaning but disempowering one-directional messages focused on fixing the deficiencies of our adult English language learners perpetuate problems and systems of power.

We must start with a more equitable approach and practice to the way people teach, listen, and learn. Such an approach represents a fundamental shift from a one-way savior/helper mindset to a two-way mutual learning mindset, a beneficial learning experience for both teacher and student.

The mutual learner mindset inspires our English-learning students to talk more often and honestly about their lives and perspectives. This increased production and interaction can accelerate language acquisition, amplify students' voices, and open doors for teachers to learn more and for students to teach. Our adult students have knowledge and life experiences that we can learn from. Reciprocal learning also deepens connections, reduces biases and assumptions, and increases a sense of belonging. All these changes lead to a more cohesive society and to increased participation and persistence rates in English programs.

At Intercambio, we have had over 5,000 volunteers train and become teachers through our program. Approximately half of them had never had the opportunity to gain perspectives from directly talking to an ELL before working with us. Hundreds of our most effective teachers have said "I feel that I am learning more than my student!" and "I thought I

understood the immigrant experience before, but I learned how little I really knew." Shifts like these are key to advancing equity and inclusion. *We cannot expect the immigrants we teach to do all the learning and heavy lifting.*

Bringing Up Difficult Topics

I had the opportunity recently to facilitate online conversation groups with our students about racism and racial justice. They shared personal experiences and were extremely engaged. Our students are hungry to have these conversations and to learn more about these topics. These conversations did not require the teacher to be an expert on racial justice; they simply required facts and a brief history lesson followed by a few starter questions that opened doors for students to talk and listen to each other in small groups. They stretched their language skills as they shared their opinions and experiences, and they gained confidence around the language being used in those conversations.

Impacting enrollment, persistence, and belonging

According to American Community Survey (ACS) data from 2015, approximately 20 million adults in the U.S. are limited English proficient, yet only around 5% attend English classes (Jaros-White, 2017). Persistence rates are traditionally low in our field.

When we address topics in our classes that interest our students, such as topics related to their experiences or cultural perspectives, our students stretch to speak more. When they share and speak more, relationships within the class deepen. When relationships deepen, students feel a greater sense of belonging, they prioritize coming to class, and persistence rates increase.

Sparking cross-cultural conversations

We must begin to talk about the power of mutual learning with our teachers more often and provide them with the tools and training to walk the talk.

English learners are often capable of communicating more than we think they can, but their communication is sometimes restricted by lessons that do not spark their interest or that confine their ability to share and practice the words they do know. This became clear to us when we started leading our *Community Conversations* in 2018, where we connect community volunteers (who go through a brief training) with English learners for one-on-one or small group conversations, speed dating style. We were worried that our beginner students would not be able to hold several 15-minute conversations. We have since facilitated Community Conversations for over one thousand people. Even most of our level 1 students enjoy the experience and want more! The fear that they enter with turns to confidence when doors open for them to share about their lives, and the community volunteers walk away having learned a little bit about the lives of three or more new English learners in their community.

English learners are often capable of communicating more than we think they can, but their communication is sometimes restricted by lessons that do not spark their interest or that confine their ability to share and practice the words they do know.

Having conversation starters in a curriculum or lesson plan can make conversations feel safer and easier for teachers to initiate. If these prompts are in a book, they feel like a part of English class and students may be less likely to wonder about the teacher's intentions around that specific topic.

In the *Confidence and Connections* curriculum, for instance, every lesson culminates with a "Connect with Conversation" activity, where students share about their lives and perspectives. Each lesson also contains a "Culture Tip" that includes a practical bit of information about everyday life, such as cultural norms, laws, finances, health, housing, education, scams, or jobs. Then students are asked to share similarities and differences about the issue where they grew up and about their perspective on how it works in the U.S. It is a simple but powerful concept to ask those questions.

Organizational leaders have the unique opportunity to prepare teachers by looking at real-life examples to transform potential cultural conflicts into learning opportunities.

Sparking these types of conversations takes courage. It can be helpful for teachers to share their stories and perspectives first to initiate conversations. Doing so can humanize the teacher, balance the power, and make it feel safer for the students to then share. Many, but not all students want to share deeply about their lives, and we need to recognize and respect those who do not by always providing an opportunity to "pass." Students need to know that they will not be judged by their teachers or peers if they choose this option.

Cultural Humility

The ability of teachers to model cultural humility is essential to create a welcoming, safe environment. According to Psych Hub (2020), the goal of cultural competency (learn about other cultures, control your biases, and adapt your behaviors and communication style considering the background of those around you) sounds ideal, but it may lead us to generalize rather than recognize uniqueness of each individual. And it's not realistic. Cultural competence is a goal. Cultural humility is a mindset.

We can practice humility in the following ways:

- Recognizing that no culture is superior or inferior
- Ongoing self-reflection and critique
- Curiosity, ongoing learning about other cultures
- Having open, honest dialogues
- Being open about what we haven't learned yet

Cultural humility is at the heart of our work, and we need to talk about it more.

Summary

Adult English classes create unique opportunities for special kinds of connection and learning. Teachers and students can learn by talking to each other and demonstrating loving curiosity and a genuine interest in listening, learning, and connecting. Fostering these powerful cross-cultural conversations is not rocket science, but having the right tools, training, and cultural humility will help.

I encourage you to try new conversation topics. Be brave. See what works and what doesn't. Don't worry about saying the wrong thing. Have fun and be yourself, and your students will continue to enjoy being with you and learning together.

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Feature Article

The Impact of Employing Standardized English Language Proficiency Tests as a Graduation Requirement on Higher Education in Vietnam

By Thuy T. Tu

For more than a decade, the central government of Vietnam has tried to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning English and other foreign languages in the national education system. To show a strong commitment in renovating the teaching and learning quality of foreign languages in the national education system, on September 30th, 2008, the central government of Vietnam enacted an official Decision to approve a twelve-year national plan, known as the National Foreign Language Project 2020, which states:

> By 2020, most young Vietnamese graduates of professional secondary schools, colleges and universities will have a good command of a foreign language, which enables them to independently and confidently communicate, study and work in a multilingual and multicultural environment of integration; to turn foreign languages into a strength of Vietnamese to serve national industrialization and modernization (The Government, Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg, 2008).

With this policy, the government of Vietnam wanted to see, by the year 2020, a workforce of strong English language competence, which is an advantage for the nation's full participation in regional and global integration (Bui & Nguyen, 2016). According to the ministry of education and training, this policy could benefit an estimated 22 million students of all levels of education across the nation.

This Decision identified changes to be made to advance the quality of English teaching and learning. At the university level, major changes include adopting the nationally unified framework of foreign language proficiency called Vietnam Foreign Language Framework (VFLF) and establishing English language proficiency benchmarks for assessing all Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors and undergraduate students (Nguyen et al., 2018). English is a compulsory foreign language subject for almost all undergraduates nationwide. The desired outcome is to have all university graduates, regardless of their undergraduate majors, reaching level three of the VFLF upon graduation.

As part of the foreign language education policy, institutions of higher education in Vietnam are encouraged to utilize standardized English language proficiency tests for graduation requirements. These standardized tests include both a locally developed test, the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP), and internationally recognized tests, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) (Le, 2017). Undergraduate students are expected to achieve a satisfactory score on one of the above tests prior to their graduation. These standardized language proficiency tests are considered high-stakes tests as they serve as the largest exit gatekeeper to professional employment and further educational opportunities for undergraduate students.

At the end of 2017, when the National Foreign Language Project 2020 was nearing completion, the central government of Vietnam reaffirmed the strategic significance of foreign language competence to the national economic development and approved of extending the project to the year 2025. Employing standards-based assessment is still one of eight targets established by the government by 2025.

By enforcing the same foreign language standards and the standardized English language proficiency tests, the government expects all students, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, culture, gender identity, socioeconomic status, age, and ability, to have equal access to compulsory foreign language education. At the national level, it is expected to ensure social justice and equity in foreign language learning in higher education for all students. At the institutional level, university administrators are convinced that the use of standardized language tests offer their students fair, reliable, and valid measures of foreign language proficiency. They also believe that using standardized language tests can help them monitor the quality of foreign language education and provide students a certification of their English

proficiency and that students will have more career opportunities and better international communication skills after graduation.

Psychological and Emotional Effects of the Current Foreign Language Policy

With on-going efforts from the Vietnamese government, the national foreign language education policy has been in place for more than a decade. More and more higher education institutions in Vietnam have implemented the graduation benchmark requirement by adopting standardized English language proficiency tests for assessing students' English competence for graduation. However, the results have been far from satisfactory. Local mass media consistently report that foreign language skills among undergraduates are not adequate to help students express their ideas or to communicate in everyday conversations in a foreign language, and many university graduates do not meet foreign language skills required by employers (Tran & Margison, 2018). Undergraduate students fail to use foreign languages for the purpose of communication, and universities are not producing the educated workforce that Vietnam's economy and society demand (Clark, 2014).

The current attention on standardized language proficiency tests as a graduation requirement appears to improve the prospect of a very small proportion of undergraduate students who are financially-advantaged and have access to English language education. At the same time, it marginalizes a majority of vulnerable student populations who come from ethnically diverse and impoverished backgrounds (Bui & Nguyen, 2016). In a study conducted by Bui (2009), 95% of undergraduate students in a mountainous province in the North of Vietnam who were economically disadvantaged maintained that English proficiency had virtually no role in assisting them in seeking employment, in engaging in economic activities, or in pursuing advanced education. At the local level, the foreign language policy even limits minority students' socio-economic, social, and educational opportunities (Bui & Nguyen, 2016). Students coming from remote and economically disadvantaged areas are constrained by a serious shortage of learning resources, and limited exposure and limited access to foreign language learning. If these groups of disadvantaged students fail to be proficient in English, they are likely to lose their opportunities to have access to technology, professional knowledge taught in English, equal employment recruitment, professional development, and career promotion (Coleman, 2011).

The current focus on standardized language proficiency tests appears to improve the prospect of a very small proportion of undergraduate students who are financially advantaged and have access to English language education. At the same time, it marginalizes a majority of vulnerable student populations who come from ethnically diverse and impoverished backgrounds.

The increasingly prevalent use of standardized English language proficiency tests as a graduation requirement has partly manipulated what and how EFL instructors teach and assess student outcomes (Nguyen et al., 2018). To some extent, English teaching has become test-driven (Nguyen & Bui, 2016), which may pose a major challenge for EFL instructors in higher education. They may feel direct or indirect burdens of pressure to produce progress in their students' test scores, and the problem with such pressure is that "even small improvements in students' scores could only be brought about by eliminating virtually all classroom activities that promote speaking ability, cultural awareness and communicative confidence" (Koelbleitner et al., 2003, p. 119).

The current foreign language education policy has extremely divergent impacts on undergraduate students. On the one side, it tremendously accelerates individual positive attitudes towards English language learning which can bring them brighter prospects for their further education and career opportunities. On the other side, in some ways, the dependence on standardized English language proficiency tests as the largest gatekeepers for university graduates has changed how undergraduate students learn in the classroom (Nguyen et al., 2018). Test preparation for standardized language proficiency tests has become increasingly significant for many university students. The foreign language requirement produces excessive pressure on undergraduate students because of the concern that they may not be able to graduate if they do not pass these tests. Some students, especially those with low-proficiency levels and little interest or motivation to learn English, have strong feelings of anxiety and fear over their upcoming tests (Pham & Bui, 2019).

Overall, in the Vietnamese EFL education context, the use of standardized English language proficiency tests for the purposes of accountability is not the best way to assess students' language learning in higher education. It does not truly reflect what has been learned and taught in foreign language classrooms and to a certain extent, makes English instruction test -driven. To better serve diverse learning needs of undergraduate students, it is recommended that more flexible assessments be deployed at the university level for graduation requirements. It is of utmost importance that educational institutions have a long-term commitment and patience towards advancing equitable and excellent foreign language education, in which, all students are educated to the very best of their ability. Only in that way can Vietnam be capable of fully utilizing its human resources with foreign language competence as its main competitive advantage to advance regionally and globally.

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Feature Article

Laying the Foundation for Clarity, Creativity, and Consistency in Higher Ed ESL Courses

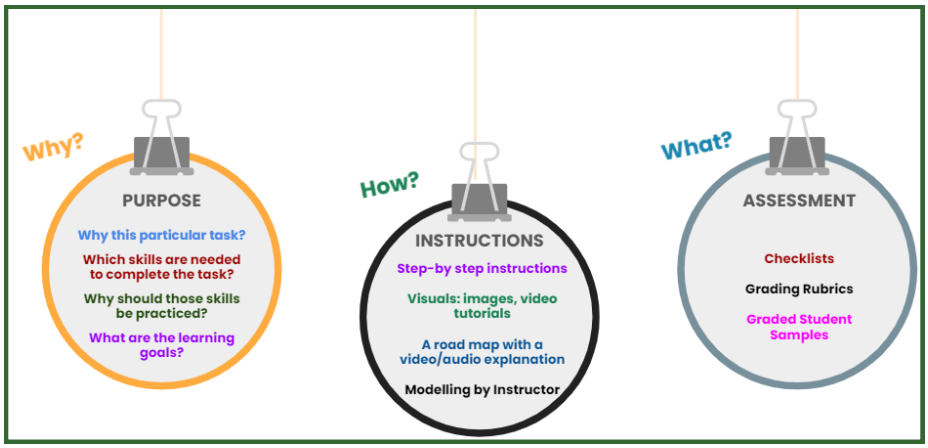
By Krisztina Domjan

I keep a log of office hour meetings with my students, and I've noticed a couple of things lately. Students rarely ask for meetings, and when they do, their questions are not what they used to be. Up until about three years ago, they would ask mainly about the content of missed classes or assignment details, or for an explanation of a more complex concept or an academic skill they are expected to demonstrate. Recently, however, the subject matter of the office hours and student emails have revolved around extension requests on tasks, or the revision of previously submitted assignments and whether I would offer incentives for revision (I do, and it is normally 10%).

My key objectives and responsibilities as an educator are that the learners each semester meet course learning outcomes and that together we thrive in an inclusive learning-centered environment. I constantly seek ways to offer students efficient learning strategies so that even the uncertain and reluctant learners will become engaged and will be able to demonstrate progress and mastery, and I have found answers to this challenge through a trifecta of influential public educators.

The core foundation of the way I currently facilitate learning is based on the influence of three public educators: Sir Ken Robinson, Richard Culatta and Mary-Ann Winkelmes. Winkelmes' hands-on workshop in 2017 at GWU was so insightful that I was finally able to put the pieces together about the issues I had been desperate to solve in my courses. By then I had taught online classes, and I knew how to do basic and accessible assignment design, yet her research-based tips made me realize what was missing: full assignment transparency with these three pillars: (1) the *why* or the clearly explained learning objectives (2) the *how* or the clearly described steps to follow and (3) the *what* or the clearly explained grading.

You really only need to revise one of your course assignments to get it, to have that *aha!* moment, and never look back but to routinely provide transparent assignments communicated in multiple ways: explaining and/or modelling it in class and posting the written description of it on the LMS with additional elements such as assignment templates, writing frames, student samples, instructor-made tutorials, interactive road maps, or instructional videos.



The more modalities you offer, the more of your students will be able to complete the assigned task. Making any task attainable to all the learners does not stop with the three pillars of transparency.

When integrated mindfully, according to my experience, technology can effectively boost the cognitive skills of learners by providing greater access to course material and the retention of it. Tech tools, by nature, are constantly in flux, requiring learners and teachers to adapt. Some tools will be discontinued, some will become obsolete; however, as a lifelong learner, I am here to embrace the change and constantly seek what works best to ensure that all learners are able to participate and complete my courses with success.

The temptation is real, but technology should never drive your assignments; rather, it should assist with them. Inspired by the many powerful speeches of the CEO of the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), Richard Culatta, and the numerous workshops and presentations offered by the organization, I have been implementing the seven ISTE Standards for Educators and for Students as I plan my course assignments in a way that students can grow as independent, constructive, and inclusive digital-age learners, being aware of how to leverage technology for their benefit. Inclusion should not only be expected from me, the instructor, but also from my students, the course participants. Learning and teaching become truly effective if both teacher and students intentionally live up to the principles of inclusion.

While both Winkelmes and Culatta have emphasized the need to appeal to and intentionally include the diverse students in the learning process, Sir Ken Robinson was perhaps the ultimate advocate for diversity and the educator who had a lasting impact also on how I view the role of creativity in my college courses. Thanks to his teachings, I have been encouraging my students to creatively construct, communicate and demonstrate their learned skills and content on a weekly basis. His teachings have also led me to develop stimulating course plans (which I constantly tweak) to facilitate various learning styles that fit my diverse and multicultural student population, keeping their ever-changing needs in mind. Meeting the needs of current and future students requires creativity: rethink and reimagine the approach to content delivery and knowledge demonstration.

To ensure greater student learning, I add consistency to the learning process on a weekly basis. I post a brief video of the weekly overview of assignments regardless of the learning modality of the course (in-person or remote). Weekly course tasks follow the same instructional design pattern to reduce confusion and to give the students a sense of routine and familiarity. There are categories, such as before-class, in-class, and after-class activities. I add road maps to complex tasks and brief instructional videos to nearly every task. Students are typically required to view authentic texts from diverse authors and take enhanced Cornell-style notes before class sessions so that they can fully participate in and contribute to graded interactive

activities such as academic class discussions in class. They post a journal entry on a weekly basis with the purpose of increasing self-efficacy, as they prepare for more challenging tasks. If they are new to the discussion protocol called Philosophical Chairs, for example, the students will study the description of it and write about how they can meet the expectations. They complete weekly vlogs to either reflect on weekly topics or on major assignments, or to provide feedback to each other as they might show and share their plans or their finished tasks. As they analyze and evaluate their peers' work, they also practice metacognition and develop an understanding of the recursive nature of academic work. There is also consistency in the way I assess student work: By now the purpose of my colorful interactive single-point grading rubrics has become twofold: students use them as their checklist, and I use them to evaluate their work objectively.

My students are required to become active participants in the learning process. It is my hope that they stay curious about the subject matter and leave knowing that they could transfer their newly acquired skills to other classes, to their profession, or to their personal life. I set high standards as I challenge and inspire them. Greater transparency has been a cornerstone for inclusion and equity in my courses.

Creativity has made it possible for students to demonstrate their skills and content knowledge in various fitting ways. Technology has been the vehicle, the medium that has allowed for inclusive and creative learning practices and has allowed me to redefine my teaching.

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