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Editor's Note

Issues for Language Education Leaders in Asia

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Language Education in Asia publishes research and teaching practice papers with a practical focus on the classroom, yet the publication also aims to address all aspects of language education in this part of the world and so welcomes submissions from leaders in the field. Leaders have a broad perspective on and deep knowledge of language education issues, as well as experience with past changes in the field that may be applicable to current and future changes. Whether commentary or research, or describing successes or failures, these submissions represent potentially valuable contributions to the ongoing discussion and development of language education in this region.

Among numerous issues, it is suggested that the three briefly discussed below may benefit from examination by educational leaders in Asia: the professional development needs of primary school teachers in teaching English, access to language education, and the directions and applications of online education.

Throughout Asia, the increasing depth of globalization and the regional plan for the integration of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 have played a role in spurring national policies targeting English language education for primary-level students. These policies have created a need for professional development in teaching English and English language proficiency for primary school teachers (Spolsky & Moon, 2012; Stroupe & Kimura, 2013). Many of these teachers lack sufficient English language skills and confidence in teaching English (Fennelly & Luxton, 2011; Mathew, 2012; Sakamoto, 2012). Often additionally without adequate training, support, or resources, and with large classes, teachers at this level have been thrust into the role of providing the foundation for further language study. They may find they are expected to do this with methodologies that are at odds with their traditional classroom cultures (Hamid, 2010, Hu & McKay, 2012). Educational leaders, informed by experience and the teachers and researchers they represent, may be one of the best sources and advocates of appropriate and effective professional development in their particular contexts. Without their voices, the expected and actual outcomes of language education policies aimed at the primary level may be very different.

Secondary and tertiary students and those seeking to enter the workforce or already in it may find access to language education for enhanced job opportunities a challenge. With youth unemployment an issue in Asia, in particular in Southeast Asia (International Labour Organization, 2013), and as barriers to migration are dismantled, there is an immediate concern about better jobs going to workers who are newly mobile and more employable because of their language and

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professional skills ("Regional Integration," 2012). While English skills alone are not a guarantee of economic success, these skills may be of help in obtaining better opportunities. Uneven access to language education within countries and across the region may become a factor in exacerbating existing domestic and regional socioeconomic gaps. While the tendency may be to look to governments for answers, educational leaders may have innovative solutions to effectively address access to language education for youth who are seeking better economic opportunities.

Online education is continually evolving and presenting new opportunities in language education for public and private educational institutions. Examples from around the world aimed at learners and teachers can offer ideas in implementing online education locally. In Egypt, the free *Nafham* (We Understand) Project (http://www.nafham.com/), which seeks to enrich the country's primary and secondary educational curricula (Chiang, 2013), includes modules on English. In China's estimated $2 billion English learning market, alo7 (http://www.alo7.com/), a online startup specializing in English language education, has partnered with private English language institutions and public primary schools (Millward, 2013). The Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), a U.S. Department of State-sponsored program that encourages cooperation in key areas for the five Lower Mekong countries, has an online component in its English for Specific Purposes (ESP) program for government officials (U.S. Department of State, 2013). Online education platforms such as Coursera (https://www.coursera.org), a massive open online course (MOOC) provider, and Wiziq (http://wiziq.com), a for-profit platform, offer professional development courses for teachers, some of which may be useful for language teachers. For teachers of any language interested in using online applications in their courses, Michigan State University's Center for Language Education and Research offers an array of free internet tools to support language teaching at http://clear.msu.edu/teaching/online/ria/. From large projects and platforms to applications, online education has the potential to support language learning and teaching. As for-profit and non-profit online education providers increasingly partner with public and private educational institutions, leaders in the field may be able to shape the many forms that online education can take to ensure that students and teachers benefit.

Leaders in education are encouraged to investigate innovative ways to handle these challenges and opportunities and to in turn encourage their researchers and teachers to do the same. The further step of seeking to share achievements as well as missteps with a wider audience through publication should be taken. Without input from educational leaders, researchers, and teachers in the region, unsuitable and / or unworkable policies may be made, regional plans for economic integration may ultimately favor countries or areas that produce workers with better English and professional skills, and the opportunities that the various forms of online education offer may go unrealized. The consequences will be mainly borne by the most important - and vulnerable - stakeholders in language education: our students.

This publication would not be possible without the support of our Advisory and Editorial Boards. We are very fortunate to have a large body of editors who have made *Language Education in Asia* known as a publication offering constructive feedback to authors. I would like to thank the editorial team for Volume 4, Issue 1, Mr John Middlecamp, Ms Deborah Sin, Ms Alice Svendson, Ms Phanisara (Nina) Logsdon, and Mr Sophearith Ngov; they have dedicated many hours at all hours to bringing the Issue 1 articles to publication. A special thank you goes to Dr. Alan Klein, who helped behind the scenes whenever needed. We look forward to the addition of Dr. Caroline Ho to the editorial team from Issue 2.

Volume 4, Issue 1 is the second issue very ably supervised by Mr. John Middlecamp, Assistant Editor-in-Chief. The publication, our expanded editorial team, and authors benefited from his editing, training, and organizational skills as well as the tremendous amount of time he devoted to the publication process. John also brought fresh ideas to the publication; he is responsible for having the search feature added to the *Language Education in Asia* webpages. While John has stepped down as assistant editor-in-chief, he will generously support the publication by staying on to review from the next volume.

The research section of Issue 1 begins with Luna Jing Cai's investigation of the academic writing needs of postgraduate Chinese university students, as perceived by the students. These students, who may be required to write academic papers for their graduate studies or for publication after starting their careers, lack adequate knowledge of the specific features of the sections in academic papers and want to learn academic writing skills as well as the appropriate use of academic language. In Vietnam, Huong Quynh Tran's discusses EFL learners' competence in and perception of the use of commonly used figurative idioms. Although the study participants wanted to know and use idioms, they were found to have a low level of competence. The author offers recommendations on how to more effectively teach idioms.

The teaching practice section starts with Emily Harms and CeAnn Myers in Japan. The authors present an alternative to individual presentations to increase student speaking time, fluency, and confidence. Working in the same group over a semester, students practice various assigned speaking roles. The authors provide a framework for implementation and a useful set of materials. Collaborating in Thailand and Japan, Ditthayanan Punyaratabandhu, Edward Rush, Michael J. Kleindl, and Paul Wadden investigate two approaches to academic writing that provide students with higher-level writing and critical thinking skills that align more closely to what is expected in Western universities. While they encourage the use of one approach, writing using periodic development, they also describe another approach that offers more guidance for intermediate-level writers. From Vietnam, Le Pham Hoai Huong suggests using play activities in primary school English classes for the language skill practice and the practical and social skills that the games impart. The author discusses a wide range of play activities that can be easily adapted for various primary English lessons. The issue concludes with Daniel Ferreira in Japan; he describes how information and communication technologies (ICT) can be used to develop a learner-centered community to foster L2 identities in contexts where the L2 is a foreign language. Through blogs and newscasts, two classes began to form an online community together, first with teacher support and then more autonomously.

All of the authors who submitted papers to *Language Education in Asia* are to be commended for taking their inquiries through the long processes of investigation and writing and for seeking to share their work with the readership of the publication. *Language Education in Asia* continues to provide such researchers, teachers, and leaders an opportunity to contribute to the betterment of language education in the region.

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Research

Students' Perceptions of Academic Writing: A Needs Analysis of EAP in China

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Abstract

Academic writing remains a prominent issue for students and teachers in Asian EFL contexts. English courses offered in mainland China at tertiary levels mostly focus on teaching English for general purposes, and few concern writing for academic purposes, even for English majors. This small-scale needs analysis study reports on a survey of 50 Master of Arts students in English who are part of a new English for Academic Purposes program at a university in south China, as well as a focus group interview with a smaller group. Results indicate that 70% of the participants have never taken an academic writing course before and that the academic writing skills students found difficult are those less frequently taught. Students want a new course which provides them with generic features for writing the sections in a research article / thesis and, more importantly, the linguistic resources needed for writing academic papers appropriately.

Current Teaching of Academic English at the University Level in China

Tertiary students in EFL contexts are often faced with a gap between their limited command of L2 English academic literacies and their much more developed L1 academic literacies. In mainland China, while many universities are becoming more globally oriented, few institutions have established English language centers to provide specific linguistic consultancy for non-native English-speaking students, as those in English-dominant countries or other contexts in Asia (e.g., Hong Kong and Singapore) have done. The majority of universities in mainland China offer "College English" courses, employing a textbook oriented for College English Test (CET) preparation that emphasizes grammar drilling (Zhang & Luo, 2004) and overlooks academic writing. Due to local constraints such as "large class size, disjunction between classroom instruction and the CET test and students' test-driven learning styles" (You, 2004, p. 255), students' academic writing proficiency remains low.

As a result, Chinese students are constantly reported as able to attain high scores on grammar-based tests yet unable to write acceptable English compositions. According to Xu (2005), most Chinese students would like to rely on writing handbooks or directly imitate the format of published articles by borrowing certain expressions when required to write academic papers. Even though academic / thesis writing courses are offered in a few universities, they are usually teacher-centered lectures, with only referencing skills and thesis layout being taught, while elaborations on moves [the smallest discourse units that perform a certain communicative or

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rhetorical function (Swales, 1990)] or steps and linguistic features used in academic papers are ignored.

Non-English majors, except for the minority who want to apply for study abroad, do not seem to have much practical need to learn academic writing, as most colleges in mainland China do not require these students to write undergraduate or graduate theses in English, and some require theses to be written in Chinese only (personal communication with students in various disciplines). While some departments have taken the initiative to change textbooks for core courses to imported ones from the United States, answering the call for bilingual education in colleges (Department of Higher Education, 2001), most of these courses are still taught solely in Chinese due to the limited English proficiency of instructors. Students are thus free to choose which language to use in writing their assignments (Liang, 2006).

Needs for Academic Writing Instruction for English Majors in Mainland China

For most English majors in Chinese universities, especially the top ones, all assignments for courses and theses are required to be in English. However, although this group of students has been consistently required to write essays or research papers in English, the academic writing proficiency of English majors remains low (Sun, 2004). An important reason may be that few academic writing courses are offered. Sun (2004) surveyed 147 English-major Master of Arts (MA) students from 52 colleges and universities and found that only around 16% of the institutions offered academic writing courses for English majors and 15% of students had never been taught academic writing as undergraduates. Among these students, almost half reported having problems writing their Bachelor of Arts (BA) theses in proper academic writing styles. Major difficulties students experienced included their inability to express ideas in academic English, the lack of guidance on searching for proper references, and even uncertainty about the thesis or research paper format.

Taking into account the special context where postgraduate English majors in mainland China receive their ELT education, with academic writing being the most urgent need for the completion of their studies, they were chosen as the group to study. It is hoped that the results of this study can serve as a window for investigating the transformation of the College English unit, which is becoming a needs-based institute helping postgraduate students become international scholars across disciplines.

Needs Analysis

Needs Analysis (NA), i.e., identifying students' needs, is the essential initial step in developing an appropriate specialized English syllabus, as asserted by many researchers (e.g., Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hyland, 2006; Kavaliauskiene & Uzpaliene, 2003; West, 1994). It is the technique used to evaluate the how and what of a course. NA has been regarded as the most appropriate method as it "can tell us a lot about the nature and content of the learners' target language needs" (Hutchinson, 1988, p. 71). Generally speaking, in NA, the course designer has to gather information about students' present and target situations (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998), through present situation analysis (PSA) and target situation analysis (TSA). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) developed TSA and PSA into a more manageable framework, adopted in the present research. They identified three components of target needs: necessity (needs identified by the requirements of target situation), lacks (the necessary proficiency for the target situation compared to what the students already know), and wants (what the students desire to learn).

There have been a few large-scale empirical NA studies carried out in Asian or Chinese ELT contexts. Major investigations conducted at tertiary institutions in Hong Kong include Hyland (1997), Littlewood and Liu (1996), and Evans and Green (2007). All these studies indicated that productive skills and acquisition of specialist vocabulary were the central language concerns of participants. Evans and Green pinpointed the striking problem of vocabulary and suggested that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program design should attach great importance to the teaching and learning of "subject-specific and common core lexis" (p. 14).

However, due to the nature of comprehensive and large-scale surveys, none of these studies was specific to academic writing, and the specific nature of language problems as the most important hindrance was not identified in detail. The surveys provided a general picture of Hong Kong tertiary students' proficiency in all four English macro skills, while little was mentioned about the form and quality of academic writing courses offered. The present study thus aims to look into academic writing in particular. It attempts to explore students' attitudes towards learning academic writing, their current level in some academic writing skills, their biggest concerns in learning academic writing, and their opinions on previous and future academic writing courses. The findings are expected to help EAP practitioners develop an appropriate English academic writing course for English majors in south China and offer insights into the EAP agenda in the broader Asian EFL context.

This research was guided by the following three questions:
1. What are MA students' perceptions of the importance of academic writing to their current studies and future career? (What are the purposes and motivations that drive them to learn?)
2. What are the students' perceptions of the difficulties of academic writing skills?
3. What are the students' attitudes towards their previous academic writing courses? (What do they want to learn in future EAP courses? And how?)

Method

Participant Background

Participants were selected from first-year MA students at a key university in south China. Fifty students were available at the time of the study and were willing to participate. They had obtained their bachelor's degrees from various universities, and their diverse backgrounds offered rich information about their previous academic writing courses. This group of students was selected based on two criteria: a) they were the same cohort who would participate in a new EAP program and b) they represented the group of students who have the most urgent need in learning academic writing for their current studies and future careers.

There has been no academic writing course offered for postgraduate students in this university. The leaders of the Foreign Language School believe that students are able to acquire academic writing skills by themselves (personal communication with department head), and that what they need are the "research methods" and "basic structures" that can guide their design and the contents of research paper writing / thesis writing. It is assumed that academic language does not have to be taught explicitly. Thus even undergraduate students with little experience in academic writing who need to write BA theses in English are only provided with several hours of lectures about the basic structure and the format of a thesis.

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire items were developed according to Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) framework of NA. Fifteen items were divided into three major sections (see Appendix). Section I (necessity) focused on investigating students' motivation (orientations / purposes) for learning academic writing and the importance of different academic genres. Another item was added regarding students' intrinsic interest in learning academic writing, beyond "academic / personal goals" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 62), as intrinsic interest has been considered an important element in many second-language motivation studies (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005). Section II (lacks) explored students' perceptions on the difficulty of 18 important academic writing skills (adapted from Evans & Green, 2007). Section III (wants) first enquired about students' attitudes towards previous academic writing courses, if any, taken as undergraduates. Students who had not taken academic writing courses only indicated their preference for prospective teaching activities and materials. Further questions were asked on the aspects of knowledge (language problems or general writing skills) they would like to be emphasized and the five most important academic writing skills that should be included in the new academic writing course. The survey took around 30 minutes to complete.

Focus Group Interview

A follow-up focus group interview was conducted after the survey analysis to gain in-depth information which might not be shown in the survey. The interview was conducted mostly in Chinese because the participants were more comfortable expressing themselves in their native language. Each participant was given a sheet with the interview prompts in both languages. As the participants were English majors with sufficient proficiency to understand the prompts, no questions were asked to clarify anything on the sheet during the interview. The interview was fully transcribed and translated into English by the researcher.

Six students were selected based on their willingness to participate (two students had taken an academic writing course before). This number of students was considered optimal, as students could have a face-to-face roundtable discussion and build on each other's responses to think of ideas they might not have in individual interviews. The interview took around one hour and questions similar to those in the survey were asked, but in a clearer and simpler way, for example: "What do you want to improve most in your academic writing?" and "How did you learn to write a research paper?" Interviewees were also invited to give their comments on certain responses (that might or might not be theirs) and general results from the survey analysis. The interview was recorded and coded for content analysis.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: The Importance of Learning Academic Writing

In Section I, students were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale (*1* being the lowest value and *5* the highest) how important they considered academic writing to be to their current studies, future career, and publishing, and how much intrinsic interest they had in academic writing.

Results generally indicate that while students' imposed needs for learning academic writing are huge, they have little intrinsic interest in learning academic writing. The score of learning academic writing for the purpose of completing current graduate studies is the highest, with a mean of 4.55 (*SD* = 0.50), as students reported the need to write "for the courses, and for graduation" (focus group comment). While the need for learning academic writing for publication during graduate study is slightly lower (*M* = 3.98, *SD* = 0.80), it is slightly higher than the need for publication during one's future career (*M* = 3.78, *SD* = 0.97). Students find little inner pleasure in academic writing, presenting an average score of only 1.80 (1 = not interested at all).

In the focus group interview, students reported reasons for the relative lack of need for learning academic writing for a future career. First, the journals in the field of education or English language in mainland China are mostly published in Chinese. Except for students who will pursue a Ph.D., future need is much less than that for their current studies. The requirement for publishing a research-based paper is relatively lower if they opt to be secondary school teachers rather than college teachers. Finally, most students actually dislike using academic language, as it is "too formal and structured, and has little space for free writing" (focus group comment).

Among the eight text types which participants prioritized by preference, research papers / reports are of the highest concern (75%), followed by case studies (67.5%). The reason, indicated from the focus group interview, seems to be that research papers are the most widely assessed text type for their graduate studies. Additionally, students perceive that a research paper is like a mini thesis and is closely related to academic publishing. As for case studies, they are the text type the students "know the least about" but prefer to write, since they find that "doing experimental or empirical research is much harder because it is very difficult to control the variables" (focus group comment). Review articles, critiques, and theses are of similar importance; all were checked by about 60% of the students. The students explained that learning to review and critique is a basic skill for doing research; it is fundamental for developing research topics and identifying research gaps, a skill that might transfer to helping them write thesis literature reviews, one of their largest concerns.

The results agree with the findings of studies on non-native English-speaking undergraduates by Evans and Green (2007) and Al-Tamimi and Shuib (2010) that academic English is very important for the students' academic study. In addition, Evans and Green's (2007) study noted that in particular, "projects and reports play the most important roles in participants' academic lives" (p. 10). However, only a minority of students in Evans and Green's study attached importance to the text type of review, which seemed to suggest that students in Hong Kong tend to see it as less important than the participants in this study did. The authors' explanation was that students were not aware of the close connection of this academic genre with their dissertations. Another explanation, however, might be that as mainland Chinese students suffer from a strong lack of both research paper input (reading) and instruction in academic writing, they are more concerned about the full gamut of academic genres they are unfamiliar with, but which sound important.

Research Question 2: Students' Perceptions of Difficulties of Academic Writing Skills

Section II listed 18 important academic writing skills for which students indicated their perceived difficulty on a scale from 1 (very easy) to 5 (very difficult). The skills were divided into two parts: general academic writing skills and language problems.

The findings suggested that students experienced greater difficulty (M = 3.42 out of 5) in writing the structure and content than language-related problems (M = 3.38).

As seen in Table 1, the three most difficult general academic writing skills for these students are reviewing and critiquing the previous research and creating a research space (gap), designing research methods, and commentaries and discussions on the data. In contrast, writing references and the introduction posed little difficulty. (The focus group explained that in some undergraduate academic writing courses students had taken, the teachers only taught how to cite references).

With regard to language problems, students were generally confident about their grammar but found it difficult to achieve appropriateness in an academic context, e.g., by using appropriate lexical phrases to build sentences and paragraphs and by understanding the specific language features of the genre (such as the research paper). However, it should be noted that the students' perceptions varied conspicuously in terms of language problems, as indicated by the divergent *SD* scores in the items about grammar and lexical phrases (*SD* = 1.03 and *SD* = 0.98, respectively).

Table 1
Means of Perceived Difficulty of Academic Writing Skills

Items		Means (difficulty)	*SD*
General academic writing skills (*M* = 3.42)	Writing introductions	2.83	0.96
	Searching for appropriate literature using databases and library resources	3.53	0.85
	Referring to sources	3.28	0.82
	Reviewing and critiquing the previous research and creating a research space (gap)	4.30	0.88
	Designing the research methods	4.08	0.69
	Writing the methods section	3.74	0.88
	Summarizing and presenting the data	3.53	0.91
	Commentaries and discussions on the data	3.85	0.74
	Writing references / bibliography	2.38	0.90
	Writing conclusions	3.10	0.79
	Proofreading written assignments	3.08	0.96
Language problems (*M* = 3.38)	Understanding the specific language features of the academic genre (such as research paper)	3.48	0.85
	Using appropriate lexical phrases (such as *on the basis of, it should be noted that*) freely to build sentences and paragraphs	3.80	0.98
	Summarizing / paraphrasing	3.28	0.82
	Writing coherent paragraphs	3.41	0.88
	Linking sentences smoothly	3.25	0.84
	Using proper "academic" language and vocabulary (style)	3.70	0.91
	Using the proper grammar such as correct tenses, agreements, reporting verbs, and prepositions	2.79	1.03
Overall Mean Score		3.40	0.47

Compared with what was documented in the literature review, the results here seem to suggest that students in both Hong Kong and mainland contexts find language problems difficult. Evans and Green (2007) highlighted Hong Kong students' lack of confidence in the language-related aspects of academic writing, especially lexical and grammatical aspects. Students' perceived difficulties in lexical and stylistic aspects of academic writing were also reported in research from other EAP settings where non-native English speakers were required to write (e.g., Hinkel, 2003; Shaw & Liu, 1998). However, unlike the students in the current study, undergraduate students in Hong Kong found language problems posed more difficulty than content and structure. The reason for this could be traced back to the different goals in high school English education in Hong Kong and mainland China: while Hong Kong students are exposed to various academic genres and have a basic understanding about structure and content of academic genres before they enter university, mainland Chinese students are generally much less proficient in academic writing, as requirements for English writing for college entrance exams are low, with only general English essays covered. Most mainland Chinese students, up to the postgraduate level, have little knowledge about academic writing, especially the research genres.

Research Question 3: Previous and Future Academic Writing Courses

What they learned. Section III enquired about students' perceptions of previous and future academic course design and curricula. Results show that 70% had never taken an academic writing course. This lack of experience is reflected in the remarks of a focus group participant:

> We were really surprised when we found out that as research postgraduate students in this university, we were not expected to be taught on how to write academic genres such as research paper and thesis in appropriate language besides the format and structure. We could only learn from imitating the model research papers in the journals which we have limited access to. We don't have much confidence in writing as a result.

Among the 12 students who had taken academic writing courses as undergraduates, eight found the courses "just so-so," one was "not satisfied at all," while four were "generally satisfied." Additionally, in the focus group interview, two students mentioned that "we have almost forgotten what we have learned in the previous academic course." Their teachers did not tell them how to write the sections of academic papers in detail, i.e., the moves and steps in each specific part of a piece of academic writing. Language features such as lexical phrases, academic vocabulary, and coherence were even less frequently addressed. The courses or lectures on academic writing only provided students with "a vague and general picture on what a thesis should be composed of" (focus group comment).

This point is supported by the findings displayed in Table 2. The average frequency for the academic writing skills included in previous academic writing courses is only 2.69 (5 = most frequent). For general academic writing skills, designing and writing research methods were least frequently included in previous academic writing courses (proofreading skills were also ranked low). Language problems were introduced less frequently ($M = 2.56$) than general academic writing skills ($M = 2.78$), with lexical phrases, academic vocabulary, and style the least frequently taught ($M = 2.07$ for each).

Furthermore, a significant negative Pearson correlation coefficient ($r(50) = -0.51$, $p = .032$) was found between the students' perception of difficulty of academic writing skills and the frequency of these aspects in writing courses; this suggests that the less these skills are taught, the more difficult the students feel they are.

Table 2

The Frequency of Academic Writing Skills Taught in Previous Academic Writing Courses

Items		Means (frequency)	*SD*
General academic writing skills (*M* = 2.78)	Writing introductions	3.36	1.34
	Searching for appropriate literature using databases and library resources	2.57	1.28
	Referring to sources	2.79	1.12
	Reviewing and critiquing the previous research and creating a research space (gap)	2.93	1.33
	Designing the research methods	2.36	1.39
	Writing the methods section	2.21	1.25
	Summarizing and presenting the data	2.86	1.29
	Commentaries and discussions on the data	2.71	1.14
	Writing references / bibliography	2.93	1.27
	Writing conclusions	3.31	1.25
	Proofreading written assignments	2.50	1.09
Language problems (*M* = 2.56)	Understanding the specific language features of the academic genre (such as writing research paper)	2.50	1.09
	Using appropriate lexical phrases (such as *on the basis of*, *it should be noted that*) freely to build sentences and paragraphs	2.07	1.00
	Summarizing / paraphrasing	2.64	1.08
	Writing coherent paragraphs	2.79	1.05
	Linking sentences smoothly	3.00	1.18
	Using proper “academic” language and vocabulary (style)	2.07	0.92
	Using the proper grammar such as correct tenses, agreements, reporting verbs, and prepositions	2.86	1.17
Overall Mean Score		2.69	0.37

The frequency of other teaching activities in previous academic writing courses also confirmed that language-related activities were rare. Academic grammar and vocabulary drills were the least employed (*M* (freq) = 1.88 and 2.06, respectively). Reading authentic papers was usually not included as a task in the courses (*M* (freq) = 2.20). Generally, teacher-centered lecture was the most frequent teaching method (*M* (freq) = 4.19).

What they want to learn. All survey participants indicated the necessity of taking academic writing courses during their graduate studies. For the focus of the proposed new academic writing course, 58% of them chose “general academic writing skills,” and 42% chose “language problems.” Students further emphasized in the focus group interview that even though what they need most at present are general writing skills, they were, according to one member, "very unconfident about their use of [academic] language." They noted that it would be more efficient if academic language features were explicitly taught in class rather than learned from model papers.

Students were asked to brainstorm and write the five most important skills they wanted to learn in the new course. The results are presented in Table 3. Four general categories emerged from the answers: thinking, organization, searching for information, and language and vocabulary. Among the 31 respondents, 77% mentioned learning how to write the different sections (e.g., introduction, literature review, discussion). Commenting on and summarizing findings was also identified in particular (58%); this may be because students are "not sure what should be presented and how to organize data after analyzing them." They were never taught such skills, and are thus unsure how "to explore on their own after collecting data" (focus group comments).

Table 3
The Most Important Skills Students Want to Learn in the New Course

Category		%
Thinking	Critical thinking	32%
	Creating research gap	32%
	Designing research method	45%
Writing and organization	Writing different sections of RA (move / steps)	77%
	Referring to sources	13%
	Commenting and summarizing findings	58%
Searching for information	Finding academic resources, using E-databases	32%
Language	Academic language (Style and academic vocabulary)	30%
	Coherence and cohesion	16%
	Chunks and phrases	31%

Preferred teaching activities and materials. Table 4 shows the students' preferences towards possible teaching activities and materials that had been applied in the previous course or that could be used in the new course. Students regarded reading exercises, especially reading authentic research papers, as the most preferable (M = 4.32), as well as other kinds of activities, such as group discussion (M = 3.81) and academic writing exercises (M = 3.75). For teaching materials, students prefer supplementary authentic research papers as models and supplementary handouts slightly more than other materials.

Table 4

Students' Preference Towards Possible Teaching Activities and Materials in the New Course

Items		Means (preference)	SD
Teaching activities	Teacher centered lectures	3.83	1.15
	Student oral presentations	3.55	1.21
	Group discussions on tasks	3.81	1.28
	Academic grammar drills	3.41	1.32
	Academic vocabulary drills	3.38	1.34
	Academic writing exercises	3.75	1.08
	Academic reading exercises (reading text books)	4.00	0.88
	Reading and analyzing authentic research papers	4.32	1.01
Teaching materials	The key text book used in class	2.57	1.16
	Other supplementary hand-outs	3.53	1.11
	Supplementary authentic research papers as models	3.84	1.08
	Supplementary exercises	3.47	1.05

Comparisons to Other Studies

Unlike this study, little information has been found in other empirical studies concerning what students felt about their previous courses and what they want to be taught in new courses. Difficult skills in academic writing have been identified in broad terms such as "writing correct sentences" (Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2010, p. 23) and "communicating ideas properly accurately and smoothly" (Evans & Green, 2007, p. 11), while specific wants, such as those presented in the current study as potentially beneficial for EAP course designers, have not been addressed.

Besides identifying the suitable curriculum content of an EAP course and its pedagogy, the sociocultural context in mainland China must be taken into account. Unlike their counterparts in Hong Kong (see Evans & Green, 2007; Hyland, 1997), where there is a long history of ESL-medium education at secondary and tertiary levels, mainland Chinese students have much less exposure to academic genres and language in secondary and tertiary education. This may have resulted in the difference between the findings of this study and the ones obtained in a Hong Kong context, i.e., that mainland Chinese students have problems with basic knowledge about structure and content and more serious linguistic needs. These needs could possibly be fulfilled by EAP genre-based pedagogy (e.g., Swales & Feak, 2004), which addresses the specific move / steps and language features in the research genres and is mostly task-based with rich classroom discussion. This approach also puts strong emphasis on the in-class guided analysis of authentic genre exemplars where students can develop a strategy for independent learning of different genres in academic writing in the future.

Conclusion

From detailed survey and focus group interview data, mainland Chinese students' needs in learning academic writing have been suggested. Besides identifying target needs and difficulties students have in academic writing skills in general, as previous studies carried out in Asian contexts have done, this study specifically looks at students' perceptions and attitudes towards their previous academic writing courses and prospective new courses. The skills students find difficult are those less taught in their previous academic writing courses. Reviewing and critiquing are perceived as the most difficult general academic writing skills, while using proper academic phrases and style are the most difficult language-related problems. In their previous courses, students were not taught how to write each section of a research paper with appropriate moves / steps and were infrequently introduced to academic language features and styles. As a result, in a proposed new course, they would like to receive more help on these aspects. As for how the knowledge should be delivered, they prefer more reading of authentic research papers with group discussions in class.

Considering these results, an EAP genre-based pedagogy could be a possible and promising solution for EFL learners in mainland China or other Asian countries with similar problems in academic writing. To effect such change, teachers and instructors in university English departments in these contexts may need to consider transforming their thinking about academic writing instruction into an EAP- and ESP (English for Special Purposes)-oriented mode. For example, as a first step, they need to gradually replace outdated textbooks and develop new teaching materials that are compatible with the students' linguistic needs.

Finally, there are several limitations to this study. First, the sample size was relatively small as this study was targeted at developing a contextualized approach for teaching academic writing at the target university. Secondly, whether the results of this study can be generalized to university students in China with other majors who have similar needs remains a question to be further investigated. To inform EAP in China, especially across disciplines, the university's College English unit should conduct a more specific and larger-scale needs analysis across disciplines, including both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

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Appendix
Summary of Questionnaire Items

Section I. Your Perceptions on Learning Academic Writing

On a scale of 1 (least important) to 5 (most important), indicate how important you think academic writing skills are in your current studies and future career.

		Least important				Most important
a)	How important do you think academic writing skills are to your current graduate studies?	1	2	3	4	5
b)	How important do you think academic writing is to your future career in the long run?	1	2	3	4	5
c)	How important it is to have your academic work published during your graduate study?	1	2	3	4	5

Are you interested in academic writing at heart? Please choose from 1—not interested to 5—very interested.

1 2 3 4 5

Which one(s) of the following text types do you think should be of priority to be taught in an academic writing class? Please check in the box. You can check more than one answer.

☐ Writing research papers / reports
☐ Writing research proposal
☐ Writing short summaries
☐ Writing thesis
☐ Writing general argumentative essays
☐ Writing review articles
☐ Writing critiques
☐ Writing case studies

Section II. Your Perceptions on Academic Writing Skills

On a scale of 1 to 5, indicate how easy or how difficult you think the following skills are.

		Very Easy				Very Difficult
General writing skills						
a)	Writing introductions	1	2	3	4	5
b)	Searching for appropriate literature using databases and library resources	1	2	3	4	5
c)	Referring to sources	1	2	3	4	5
d)	Reviewing and critiquing the previous research and creating a research space (gap)	1	2	3	4	5
e)	Designing the research methods	1	2	3	4	5
f)	Writing up the methods section	1	2	3	4	5
g)	Summarizing and presenting the data	1	2	3	4	5
h)	Commentaries and discussions on the data	1	2	3	4	5
i)	Writing references / bibliography	1	2	3	4	5
j)	Writing conclusions	1	2	3	4	5
k)	Proof-reading written assignments	1	2	3	4	5
Language problems						
a)	Understanding the specific language features of the academic genre (such as research paper)	1	2	3	4	5
b)	Using appropriate lexical phrases (such as on the basis of, it should be noted that) freely to build up the sentences and paragraphs	1	2	3	4	5
c)	Summarizing / paraphrasing	1	2	3	4	5
d)	Writing coherent paragraphs	1	2	3	4	5
e)	Linking sentences smoothly	1	2	3	4	5
f)	Using proper academic language and vocabulary (style)	1	2	3	4	5
g)	Using the proper grammar such as correct tenses, agreements, reporting verbs, and prepositions	1	2	3	4	5
h)	Please specify other academic writing skills and mark the difficulty, if any:	1	2	3	4	5

Section III. The Previous and Future Academic Writing Courses

The Previous Academic Writing Course

Is there any academic writing (or thesis / research paper writing) course offered at your university for graduate students?
☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you taken any academic writing (or thesis writing) course during your undergraduate studies?
☐ Yes, the name of the course is ____________
☐ No (Please skip Questions 7-9 and answer Questions 10 and 11)

Are you satisfied with the previous academic writing course generally?
☐ It was perfect ☐ Generally satisfied ☐ Just so so ☐ Not satisfied at all

Have you learned the things that you need to learn most in your previous academic writing course?
☐ Yes, I have learned a lot and they are still useful now.
☐ I have learned something useful.
☐ The course was generally OK, but it did not teach me the things that I want to learn most.
☐ The course was organized very poorly and I learned nothing useful.

Which academic writing skills were taught in your previous academic writing course?

		Very Easy				Very Difficult
General writing skills						
a)	Writing introductions	1	2	3	4	5
b)	Searching for appropriate literature using databases and library resources	1	2	3	4	5
c)	Referring to sources	1	2	3	4	5
d)	Reviewing and critiquing the previous research and creating a research space (gap)	1	2	3	4	5
e)	Designing the research methods	1	2	3	4	5
f)	Writing up the methods section	1	2	3	4	5
g)	Summarizing and presenting the data	1	2	3	4	5
h)	Commentaries and discussions on the data	1	2	3	4	5
i)	Writing references / bibliography	1	2	3	4	5
j)	Writing conclusions	1	2	3	4	5
k)	Proof-reading written assignments	1	2	3	4	5

Language problems						
a)	Understanding the specific language features of the academic genre (such as research paper)	1	2	3	4	5
b)	Using appropriate lexical phrases (such as on the basis of, it should be noted that) freely to build up the sentences and paragraphs	1	2	3	4	5
c)	Summarizing / paraphrasing	1	2	3	4	5
d)	Writing coherent paragraphs	1	2	3	4	5
e)	Linking sentences smoothly	1	2	3	4	5
f)	Using proper academic language and vocabulary (style)	1	2	3	4	5
g)	Using the proper grammar such as correct tenses, agreements, reporting verbs, and prepositions	1	2	3	4	5
h)	Please specify other academic writing skills and mark the difficulty, if any:	1	2	3	4	5

What types of teaching activities took place in your previous academic writing class? Please also indicate your preference of these activities if they were to be provided in a new course by checking in the box (from 1, least preferable, to 5, most preferable). If you have not taken an academic writing course before, please indicate your preference only.

	Least preferable				Most preferable
The key textbook used in class	1	2	3	4	5
Other supplementary handouts	1	2	3	4	5
Supplementary authentic research papers as models	1	2	3	4	5
Supplementary exercises	1	2	3	4	5
Others (please specify ___________and check for preference)	1	2	3	4	5

	Least frequent				Most frequent	Preference
Teacher-centered lectures	1	2	3	4	5	☐
Student oral presentations	1	2	3	4	5	☐
Group discussions on tasks	1	2	3	4	5	☐
Academic grammar drills	1	2	3	4	5	☐
Academic vocabulary drills	1	2	3	4	5	☐
Academic writing exercises	1	2	3	4	5	☐
Academic reading exercises (reading textbooks)	1	2	3	4	5	☐
Reading and analyzing authentic research papers	1	2	3	4	5	☐
Others (please specify ___________and check for preference)	1	2	3	4	5	☐

How did you like the teaching materials in your previous writing course? For those who have not taken a course before, you can still check for your preference if they were provided in a new course.
☐ reading textbooks
☐ writing one complete essay / research paper / proposal as term paper
☐ writing parts of an essay / research paper
☐ reading other materials, such as research papers
☐ other (please specify):

What kind(s) of after-class assignments did you have in your previous academic writing class? You can check for more than one answer. If you have not taken an academic writing course, please skip this question.
☐ reading textbooks
☐ writing one complete essay / research paper / proposal as term paper
☐ writing parts of an essay / research paper
☐ reading other materials, such as research papers
☐ other (please specify):

The Future Academic Writing Course

Do you think it is necessary for you to take an English academic writing course (specifically research paper writing) in your graduate studies? ☐ Yes ☐ No

What do you think the focus of the academic writing course should be more on?
☐ General writing skills ☐ Language problems

If a new academic writing course is offered, please write down the most important five skills that you want to learn in the new course:
1. __________ 2. __________ 3. __________ 4. __________ 5. __________

Personal Information
Age__________ Gender__________

The name of the institution where you did your undergraduate studies __________

Have you ever been to English speaking countries? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, for how long? __________

Figurative Idiomatic Competence: An Analysis of EFL Learners in Vietnam

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Abstract

This article explores the figurative idiomatic competence of language learners and their perceptions of idiom learning in an EFL context. As a descriptive statistics case study, it investigates the students' knowledge of 50 idioms collected from the lists of frequently used idioms by Grant (2007) and Liu (2003) and from two common idiom textbooks. The findings show the students' poor idiomatic competence, especially their very limited knowledge of the frequently used idioms. The analysis uncovers the paradox between the students' situation of using and learning idioms and their desires to learn. The study argues that figurative idiomatic competence should receive adequate attention in the learning process. Figurative idioms should be inclusively taught with the skills of negotiation of meaning. Also, learners should be exposed to a variety of idioms which are not only from traditional English-speaking countries but also from the countries of the outer- and expanding-circle contexts.

Idiom learning has recently attracted a greater level of interest in English learning contexts, from online learning websites to language textbooks. The website *BBC Learning English*, for example, has introduced a series of idiom-related sections called "Today's Phrase" and "The English We Speak." Additionally, the latest coursebooks widely utilized in teaching English programs in Asia put more emphasis on idioms in use. This tendency reflects the requisite necessity of idioms in the process of learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Indeed, the ability to use idioms helps establish figurative competence in the communicative competence model by Celce-Murcia (2008).

Within this trend, the assessment of how well Asian language learners use idioms in communication is a growing need. English users in Asia, such as pupils, university graduates, and teachers of English, have to be qualified in accordance to the requirements for English as a second / foreign language (ESL / EFL) in the national curricula. For example, in Vietnam, English language learners are evaluated either in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) or in international testing systems such as TOEFL, IELTS, and TOEIC. The National Foreign Languages 2020 Project in Vietnam states that the overall English proficiency of English teachers at secondary schools and of university graduates certified to teach English as a foreign language (TEFL) is expected to be at the C1 level in the CEFR or equivalent. One of the indicators, as listed in the CEFR listening skill band descriptors, is "I can understand a wide range of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms" (Council of Europe, 2012, p. 66). In the IELTS speaking band descriptors, mastery of idiomatic expressions is mentioned as a criterion of lexical resource from Band 7 onward, which is equivalent to the C1 level in the CEFR. In Band

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7, language users are expected to be able to "use some less common and idiomatic vocabulary" (British Council, n.d., p. 1).

However, idiom teaching might have not received adequate attention in foreign language teaching contexts yet (Tran, 2012; Vasiljevic, 2011). Few teachers in Asia are aware of the roles of idioms in communicative competence. They may have encountered difficulties in choosing a suitable teaching method, selecting idioms, and explaining the use of an idiom in its appropriate contexts. Many teachers tend to avoid idioms in their language and teaching (Tran, 2012). Although there have been significant studies of learning and teaching approaches for idioms (Cooper, 1999; Lennon, 1998; Levorato, Nesi, & Cacciari, 2004; Prodromou, 2003; Zyzik, 2011), research on the assessment of the idiomatic competence of EFL learners in Asia is limited.

Therefore, this study focused on the figurative idiomatic competence of Vietnamese EFL language learners at a leading pedagogical university in Vietnam. The findings revealed the participants' low level of figurative idiom competence. This poor idiomatic competence might also be found in other Asian countries.

Literature Review

Figurative Idioms

Many attempts have been made to define and classify idioms (e.g., Cooper, 1999; Grant & Bauer, 2004; Lennon, 1998; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). Some scholars such as Lennon (1998) have emphasized the continuous scale of idiomaticity in language. Others such as Zyzik (2011) have focused on the fixed characteristic in the syntax of an idiom. In this viewpoint, the constituents of an idiom appear to co-occur (words that comprise an idiom may not be substituted or transformed). Idioms can also be categorized by the scale of non-literal meaning (e.g., Fernando, 1996), or length (e.g., Makkai, 1972).

The notion of figurative idioms in this study follows Grant and Bauer's (2004) definition and classification in which the degree of compositionality and figurative interpretation is counted. For example, the phrase "my cup of tea" in "some people fancy tennis, but it's not my cup of tea" is a figurative idiom. This idiom does not refer to a drink but to something or someone that one finds pleasing. In figurative idioms, there are figurative and literal meanings; therefore, listeners have to decide the meaning of a figurative idiom in a particular context.

Idiomatic Competence

Idiomatic or figurative competence has recently been discussed in accordance with communicative competence, which was inspired by Chomsky (1965) and Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980), and Celce-Murcia (1995, 2008). In the revised model of communicative competence by Celce-Murcia (2008), the ability to use idioms is regarded as a component of formulaic competence. Formulaic competence refers to the selection and use of fixed chunks or stretches of language in communication (Celce-Murcia, 2008). As part of formulaic competence, idiomatic competence is the ability to appropriately communicate with idioms in the roles of both an addressor and an addressee (Buckingham, 2006; Burke, 1988). It helps communicators fully encode and decode the meaning of a conversation.

Knowles (2004) described the learning process in five steps ranging from familiarization, recognition, and comprehension to mastery and automaticity. When students reach automaticity, they are able to confidently communicate in the language they are learning. Automaticity can be achieved through the practice of phrases and thought groups and the exposure to the target language, Knowles (2004) argues. This implies that language learners should be exposed to idiomatic expressions and should have intensive practice to be able to use idioms for communication.

Measuring Idiomatic Competence

Measuring idiomatic competence is problematic. Although the aspects of knowing a word can be academically described, designing a test for measuring multiple traits of words, such as forms, positions, functions, and meaning, tend to be unfeasible (Zareva, Schwanenflugel, & Nikolova, 2005). Some frequently used models for measuring vocabulary knowledge focus on two dimensions – the size and the quality (Nation, 2001; Richards, 1976). Other models, such as Henriksen's (1999), may add the receptive and productive control of vocabulary in communication to establish a third dimension of vocabulary development. Idioms are considered multi-unit words; therefore, a measurement of idiomatic competence may follow the above attributes. It should determine the breadth and depth of idioms that a learner is able to comprehend and use for communication.

Idiom-Related Research in Language Learning and Use

Studies of idioms in language learning and use can be divided into three main categories. Firstly, early research concerned the constitution of idioms (e.g., Fernando, 1996; Grant & Bauer, 2004; Makkai, 1972). Secondly, a great deal of research focused on methods of teaching idioms (e.g., Buckingham, 2006; Copper, 1999; Lennon, 1998; Tran, 2012; Vasiljevic, 2011; Wray, 2000; Zyzik, 2009). These studies attempted to find effective ways of teaching idioms for language learners in ESL / EFL contexts. For example, Zyzik (2009) discussed some activities for teaching idiom comprehension as well as literal and figurative meanings. Tran (2012) suggested four-skill-integrated tasks for teaching idioms. Vasiljevic (2011) argued that using conceptual metaphors and code switching to the mother tongue in discussing idiom meaning may be effective teaching methods. Thirdly, selection of idioms to be learned is also of research interest. Liu's (2003) and Simpson and Mendis' (2003) have focused on idioms which are the most frequently used in different contexts by using a corpus-based research approach. However, there is little research that explores the idiomatic competence of language users in EFL contexts. Therefore, this empirical study is an attempt to partly fill this gap in idiom-related research on language learning and use.

Research Questions

The study seeks the answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent do EFL students know and use frequently used idioms?
2. To what extent do they desire to know and use frequently used idioms?

Methods and Procedure

The research design is a descriptive statistics case study, which is a combination of descriptive statistics research and a case study. Descriptive statistics research is used to explore and describe people's characteristics, perceptions, and viewpoints (Brown & Rodgers, 2002). In this study, the research questions focus on the students' understanding of their knowledge and use of idioms. A case study, on the other hand, uses a case or cases as an instrument to obtain insight into a question (Stake, 1995). This design helps explore multiple aspects of the idiomatic competence of language learners. The answers to the two research questions in the present study are drawn from a measuring test on idiomatic competence, questionnaires, focus groups, and observations. These data collection tools were treated as triangulations to assure data reliability.

Seventy-four students in Year 1 and Year 2 at a university of education in Vietnam were the informants of the study. The former group was comprised of 47 freshmen who have learnt English for between 4 and 10 years. They were at the pre-intermediate level of English. The latter was a group of 27 sophomores at the intermediate level of English. They were pre-service teachers of English, so they were learning English in the roles of language learners and pre-service teachers. They were expected to achieve C1 in the CEFR or the equivalent after four years at the university.

The data collection procedure was prepared and conducted in three stages. Firstly, 50 figurative idioms were collected to design the test. The idioms and the questionnaires were grouped into two sets. The selection of the first set of 20 idioms was grounded in the findings of the corpus-based studies by Grant (2007), Liu (2003), and Simpson and Mendis (2003). These scholars presented a list of frequently used figurative idioms in several corpora. These idioms, regarded as fixed phrases, were searched for with advanced techniques in the Google search engine to estimate the number of online documents for each idiom. There was a very wide range in the number results from the Google search of the different idioms, but most were over two million per idiom. The second set of thirty idioms was selected from the books on idioms that were available in Vietnam; if the search results in Google search were over two million, the idiom was included.

Table 1
List of Selected Figurative Idioms

	Idioms	Google search results		Idioms	Google search results
1.	a piece of cake	9,950,000	26.	speak your mind	60,000,000
2.	not my cup of tea	3,310,000	27.	cross your mind	30,600,000
3.	add fuel to the fire	6,660,000	28.	in the long run	253,000,000
4.	make up one’s mind	10,870,000	29.	at the end of the day	123,000,000
5.	off the top of one’s head	26,000,000	30.	black and white	391,000,000
6.	have/get a say/voice in	21,500,000	31.	wouldn't hurt a fly	2,640,000
7.	all of a sudden	60,800,000	32.	be your bread and butter	5,930,000
8.	be over one’s head	4,660,000	33.	middle of the road	12,400,000
9.	a rule of thumb	24,000,000	34.	down to earth	73,100,000
10.	push the envelope	3,120,000	35.	over the moon	8,510,000
11.	bits and pieces	15,700,000	36.	your heart sinks	2,730,000
12.	thinking on my feet	8,810,000	37.	a long face	3,280,000
13.	draw the line between	5,490,000	38.	hit the sack	4,770,000
14.	take my word for it	33,000,000	39.	odds and ends	10,100,000
15.	goes to show	78,000,000	40.	call it a day	5,320,000
16.	down the line	20,700,000	41.	have a ball	14,700,000
17.	get to the bottom of things	2,601,000	42.	drop me a line	60,200,000
18.	have second thoughts	5,800,000	43.	flesh and blood	8,690,000
19.	out of the blue	26,000,000	44.	make yourself at home	14,000,000
20.	I can take it or leave it	11,400,000	45.	under the weather	5,720,000
21.	if all else fails	5,680,000	46.	make ends meet	10,300,000
22.	in your shoes	146,000,000	47.	a know-it-all	22,400,000
23.	on top of the world	11,800,000	48.	paint a picture	3,400,000
24.	make it big	5,890,000	49.	go all out	23,000,000
25.	snowed under	2,160,000	50.	lift a finger	10,800,000

Secondly, one measurement test and two questionnaires were designed with the selected 50 idioms. The test (see Appendix) was designed in three parts to assess the students’ knowledge and use of idioms. The first part, consisting of 20 items, was a task to complete the idioms based on the meaning descriptions of these idioms. The second part was a task to match the meanings and the idioms. The third part was a gap-fill task. Questionnaire 1 focused on the students' frequency of using idioms. It consisted of 50 selected idioms with four levels of frequency: never, rarely, sometimes, and often. Questionnaire 2 explored the students' attitudes toward learning and using idioms for communication. This questionnaire contained 10 five-point Likert scale items.

Thirdly, the informants were asked to complete the test and the questionnaires. A week later, six participants were randomly selected to form two focus groups. The purposes of the focus groups were to examine if the students cognitively understood the figurative meaning of the idioms and if they often used these idioms. The data were used to triangulate the findings accumulated from the test and the questionnaires. The focus groups were conducted in English and in Vietnamese. The researcher gave instructions and asked questions first in English and later in Vietnamese. The participants could speak either in English or in Vietnamese as they wished. All the responses in Vietnamese were translated into English by the researcher. The data in these focus groups were confidential; pseudonyms were used in analysis and discussion.

Findings

The findings showed that the investigated students knew and understood little about the frequently used idioms. Most of the selected idioms were unfamiliar for the students. They rarely learned and used idioms in their conversations, though the majority of the students acknowledged the importance of idioms and learning idioms in their process of learning EFL.

Table 2

Correct Answers Per Idiom

Group		20 idioms in frequently-used list (Group 1)		30 idioms selected from idiom books by Google search (Group 2)		50 idioms	
Group	*n*	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean	%
Year 2	27	1.3	5%	4.7	17%	3.3	12%
Year 1	47	3.3	7%	7.4	16%	5.8	12%

Table 2 shows the percentage and mean of the students who gave the correct answers to each idiom-related item in the test. The mean and percentage were calculated for the 20 frequently used idioms, for the 30 idioms selected by Google search engine, and overall for the 50 idioms. The percentage of the students who gave the correct answers to each test item was quite low, and there was no significant difference between the results of the freshmen and sophomores. Only 12% of the students gave the correct answer to each question on average for both groups.

There was a slight difference between the results of the 20 idioms in the frequently-used-idiom list and the 30 idioms selected from the idioms books by Google search. Five percent of 27 sophomores (*M* = 1.3) gave the correct answer per idiom in the former, whereas nearly 17% (*M* = 4.7) gave the correct answer per question in the latter. For the freshmen, the means are 3.3 (7%) and 7.4 (16%), respectively. These figures mean that roughly 3 out of 47 students answered each question correctly for the first 20 questions whereas 7 gave the correct answer per question in the latter 30 questions. These results indicate that the students are more familiar with the idioms in textbooks than those on the frequently-used list. These figures seem to indicate that the frequency of use should be considered in selection when teachers and students choose idioms to study.

Table 3
The Students' Scores

Group	%	Mean	Mode	Median
Year 2	12%	6.1	5	5
Year 1	12%	6.2	4	4

Table 3 describes the students' test scores. Both Year 1 and Year 2 groups answered 12% of the questions correctly. On average, each student gave six correct answers out of 50 questions (*M* = 6.1 and 6.2 for sophomores and freshmen, respectively). The mode and median were 5 and 4, respectively. These numbers revealed that the students' scores were low.

The figures in Tables 2 and 3 were also confirmed by the data from the focus groups. When asked about their knowledge of idioms, Student 1 said "in fact, I am not good at learning idioms. I have known few idioms, so I hardly use idioms in my conversation."

Table 4
Students' Use of Idioms

	Mean	Mode	Median	*SD*
Year 2	1.51	1.37	1.37	0.3
Year 1	1.7	1.3	1.6	0.4
Year 1 + Year 2	1.6	1.3	1.5	0.4

Table 4 indicates the frequency of using figurative idioms in students' communication. This data came from the four-point Likert scale items asking how often the students used these 50 idioms. They were asked to choose never, rarely, sometimes, or often; the options were coded 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. The means for using idioms in conversations were 1.51 for sophomores and 1.7 for freshmen. These figures indicate that these idioms were never or rarely used in the students' conversations.

Table 5
Students' Learning and Using Idioms Versus Students' Desires of Learning and Using Idioms

	Usually (4)	Often (3)	Sometimes (2)	Rarely (1)	Never (0)	Mean	Mode
Idioms learned	0%	8%	32%	60%	0%	1.12	1
Idioms used	0%	0%	20%	72%	8%	1.48	1

Table 6

Students' Desire and Perceptions Toward Learning and Using Idioms in Their Conversations

	Strongly agree (4)	Agree (3)	Neutral (2)	Disagree (1)	Strongly disagree (0)	Mean	Mode
Learning idioms is important	8%	60%	32%	0%	0%	2.76	3
I want to use idioms to communicate	32%	52%	16%	0%	0%	3.16	3

Tables 5 and 6 compare the students' actual learning and use of idioms with their desires and perceptions of learning and using idioms to communicate. It is likely that although the students rarely learned (M = 1.12; mode = 1) and used idioms (M = 1.48; mode = 1), they wanted to learn (M = 2.76; mode = 3) and be able to use idioms to communicate (M = 3.16, mode = 3). The significant gap between the reality and the desires of learning and using idioms reflected the inadequate process of learning of idioms. Sixty percent of students rarely learned idioms while over 60% agreed or strongly agreed that learning idioms was important in their learning process. Meanwhile, just under 80% of the students rarely or never used idioms in their conversations. In contrast, well over 80% of the students wanted to use idioms.

It can be seen from the findings that the students' perceptions of learning and using idioms have been changing since they entered the university. As Student 2 expressed,

> Before I went to university, I used to think idioms were not important. And the teachers rarely taught us about idioms. When I entered the university I started learning something about idioms. And then I changed my mind. I think that learning idioms is very good. I think students should be encouraged to learn idioms more and more to use idioms as well as possible.

Most of the participants in the focus groups agreed that idioms were part of the target language. They acknowledged that learning idioms was, moreover, very important, as idioms also contain many cultural values.

> In my opinion, learning a language is learning about its culture, so to learn a language effectively, we should learn about its culture. Idioms are part of the culture so, for me, learning idioms is very important and interesting. (Student 3)

However, they also admitted that they rarely or never used idioms for several reasons. First, they had difficulty remembering the idioms. As Student 6 responded, "I make mistakes when I remember and recall idioms as long phrases to express my ideas." Student 4 agreed by saying "Because it is a fixed phrase, so I can't change it, we have to remember that long phrases. If we change any word in that group, it's wrong." Second, the students are likely not encouraged to use and learn idioms in practice. Student 5 said that "in class, we don't pay much attention to idioms; sometimes we note down some idiomatic phrases in the listening and speaking sessions with its explanation, but we do not fully understand its uses." Third, they probably did not learn idioms systematically to fully understand the meaning, use, and context of each idiom. Student 1 admitted that

> although learning idioms is interesting, we meet difficulties in learning idioms because it's different in thinking when we use idioms. Some metaphors in idioms are not familiar to our culture. We do not know whether we use this or that idiom in this or that context is appropriate or not.

Student 3 stated, "I don't use idioms because I am not sure it's right or wrong in terms of meaning and context." Fourth, their process of learning idioms appeared sporadic and unsystematic. As Student 6 noted, "I learn idioms just for fun. Whenever I want to find or learn more idioms, I read them in the books such as novels or newspapers, [or] watching films."

Discussion

The students' figurative idiomatic competence is extremely low from different perspectives. Firstly, they seem to be very limited in their ability to recognize, understand, and use basic figurative idioms. The analysis mainly focuses on the students' ability at these low levels. Secondly, in comparison with Burke's (1988) and Buckingham's (2006) views of idiomatic competence, the investigated students are not able to appropriately communicate with idioms as addressors and addressees. Thirdly, while according to Knowles (2004), the learning process should be grounded from familiarization, recognition, and comprehension to mastery and automaticity, the participants are still struggling with familiarization and recognition. They need more effort to reach automaticity in using idioms. Fourthly, for the two-dimension measurement by Richards (1976) and Nation (2001) focusing on the breadth and depth of idioms, the participants' idiomatic competence is significantly low. Similarly, using the three-dimension model by Henriksen (1999), focusing on the quantity, quality and receptive-productive control, the students' idiomatic competence is considerably limited.

The students have limited knowledge of figurative idioms in their conversations for three main reasons. The first is the underestimation of the importance of idioms in language teaching in Vietnam. Both teachers and students appear to avoid idioms in the process of teaching and learning. In contemporary textbooks in secondary schools in Vietnam (*English 10, 11, 12*), few idioms are presented in reading or listening passages. Second, language learners are unfamiliar with the move from individual words to chunks. Learning vocabulary in Vietnam tends to mean learning individual words and associating each with a Vietnamese equivalent. This appears to prevent students from remembering multi-unit words such as idiomatic phrases, and later achieving automaticity in Knowles' (2004) learning diagram. Moreover, students do not have adequate repetition and practice over a period of time to step further toward automaticity (Knowles, 2004). Only 24 idioms are introduced in the three textbooks (six in *English 10*, six in *English 11*, and twelve in *English 12*). Among these, only one idiom is on the list of frequently used idioms by Grant (2007) and Liu (2003). These idioms are sporadically presented without any consolidation or practice. Indeed, there are no idiom-related exercises or practice in the textbooks.

If the communication strategies for the negotiation of meaning are integrated into the process of learning idioms, however, language learners become more confident in dealing with not yet known figurative idioms in their interactions. Such negotiation of meaning occurs when "the flow of conversation is interrupted" (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 317) and participants stop the flow of the ongoing conversation to solve communicative troubles. The process may use communication strategies such as clarification requests, recasts, confirmation requests, or comprehension checks. These communication strategies can be integrated into the process of learning idioms. For example, language learners can use one of these strategies to request conversational help when miscommunication occurs due to a lack of figurative idiom knowledge during their conversation. Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis argued for the value of interaction in second language acquisition, and a more recent study (Mackey, Abbuhl, & Gass, 2012) has also emphasized the strong connection between interaction and learning. Therefore, the integration of communication strategies for negotiation of meaning into learning idioms helps students have a deeper understanding of the use and the meaning of an idiom and assists learners in learning a language as a whole.

Limitations of the Study

The current study is still in the process of test design. If item difficulty and discrimination had been analyzed before the data collection period, the reliability of the findings would have been increased. Additionally, test items did not focus on the use of idioms in real communication either in class or outside class. Another limitation concerns extraneous variables such as the students' learning context and background. In the test, there was one item that almost all participants in Year 1 answered correctly because they had learnt this idiom in class a short time before the test. Despite these limitations, this study raises an alert about the low idiomatic competence of language learners in EFL contexts. Future studies should explore learners' ability to use idioms in conversation. Also, longitudinal studies should be conducted to comprehensively assess the idiomatic competence of EFL language learners.

Conclusion

The study focuses both on the figurative idiomatic competence of EFL learners in the dual role of language learner and pre-service teacher and the low idiomatic competence of other EFL learners. The investigated students knew and understood little about frequently used idioms. The majority of the selected idioms were unfamiliar to the students. Most of the students rarely learned and used idioms in their conversations although they acknowledged the importance of idioms and learning idioms in the process of learning English in EFL contexts. Their poor idiomatic competence was consequently derived from a lack of exposure to idiomatic language in their learning programs, inadequate guidance in learning and using idioms from teachers, and an insufficient habit of learning idioms as phrases and chunks.

The analysis also uncovers part of the learners' desires and abilities to learn idiomatic expressions, which language educators, teachers, and policy makers may want to consider when designing an English course or making a language policy. The investigation also urges EFL teachers and syllabus designers to give idioms a higher priority in their language teaching and learning programs.

The study additionally argues that figurative idioms should be inclusively taught with the skills of negotiation of meaning as a new pedagogical method for teaching figurative idioms. Furthermore, learners should learn idioms from the expanding circle of countries where English has not traditionally been used. This idiomatic exposure reflects the tendency of using English in the context of postmodern globalization (Canagarajah, 2006), in which English is no longer the possession of inner-circle English-speaking countries such as the U.K., the U.S.A., and Australia (Kachru, 1992), or outer-circle countries where English has had a traditional role as a second language. Language users may need negotiation skills to facilitate communication in English as a lingua franca to negotiate global and local norms (Canagarajah, 2006; McKay, 2010), especially when communication breakdown occurs. These skills of negotiation of meaning are apparently useful for language learners when they have to deal with figurative idioms, which contain typical cultural values.

To improve the situation of learning idioms, both teachers and students should be aware of the significant role of figurative idiomatic expressions in the language learning process. Teachers and students should have clear criteria of idiom selection and idiom teaching aspects so that students are able to learn and become familiar with frequently used idioms and their contexts. Students should be exposed to idioms from inner- and expanding circle contexts as well. In addition, communicative strategies for negotiation of meaning should be integrated into the process of learning idioms to help students overcome breakdowns during interactions caused by misunderstanding figurative idioms. Consequently, they will be more confident in communicating with figurative idioms in everyday conversations.

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Appendix
Idiom Test

Dear students,

I am conducting a study on idiomatic competence of language learners at the Faculty of English. Your responses are completely anonymous and confidential. Please feel free to respond to the questions. Your responses will be of great value to the findings. Thanks a million for your contribution!

PLEASE WRITE ALL YOUR ANSWERS ONTO THE ANSWER SHEET!

I. Write ONE or TWO words to complete the idioms based on their meaning in the next column.

No.	Idioms	Meaning
1.	A piece __________	A thing that is very easy to do
2.	Not my cup __________	Not what I like or am interested in
3.	__________ to the fire	Make a bad situation worse
4.	__________ your mind	To decide what to choose
5.	Off __________ of my head	Recall / speak something without preparation
6.	Have __________ in	The right to express your opinion and influence decisions
7.	All of __________	Quickly, unexpectedly
8.	Be over __________	Too difficult or complicated for me to understand
9.	__________ of thumb	A practical method of doing or measuring something, usually based on past experience, not based on science or exact measurement
10.	Push the __________	Go beyond the limits of what is allowed or thought to be possible
11.	Bits and __________	Small objects or idioms of various kinds
12.	Thinking on __________	To be able to think and react to things very quickly and effectively without any preparation
13.	Draw the __________	Distinguish between two closely related ideas
14.	Take __________ for it	Believe me, trust me, I am telling you the truth
15.	It goes __________	Used to say that something proves something
16.	Down __________	All the way, throughout
17.	Get to the __________ of things	Figure everything out
18.	Have __________	Change your opinion after thinking about something again
19.	Out of __________	In a way that was not expected, unexpectedly
20.	I can take it or __________	I do not hate something, but don’t particularly like it either

II. Match the meaning and the idiom.

1.	if all else fails	A.	very practical
2.	in your shoes	B.	written, not just a spoken agreement
3.	on top of the world	C.	something you say before stating a very important fact or idea
4.	make it big	D.	succeed, become famous
5.	snowed under	E.	very busy at the moment
6.	speak your mind	F.	a long time from now
7.	cross your mind	G.	be an activity or job you do to get the money
8.	in the long run	H.	is totally harmless and would never hurt anyone
9.	at the end of the day	I.	very happy indeed
10.	black and white	J.	in your position
11.	wouldn't hurt a fly	K.	state your opinion very clearly and openly
12.	be your bread and butter	L.	extremely happy
13.	middle of the road	M.	has no radical views
14.	down to earth	N.	if all other plans do not work
15.	over the moon	O.	think about something for a short time

III. Use the following idioms in their correct situations.

A. flesh and blood
B. have a ball
C. make yourself at home
D. under the weather
E. hit the sack
F. know-it-all
G. paint a picture
H. odds and ends
I. go all out
J. make ends meet
K. call it a day
L. lift a finger
M. your heart sinks / sank
N. drop me a line
O. a long face

1. ________ when I opened the letter and realized I had not been accepted into graduate school.
2. Little Mikey had ________ when he was told he couldn't go outside to play
3. I'm so tired that the only thing I want to do is take a shower and ________.
4. This weekend I stayed at home and did some ________ around the house.
5. Look, it's already 4:30. Time to ________.
6. Thanks so much for inviting us to the party. We really ________.
7. Why don't you ________ some time to let me know how you're going?
8. All of our ________ came to the big family reunion.
9. I'm glad you could come. Please ________.
10. Jane's head and neck hurt, and her nose is stuffy. She must be ________.
11. Every month we have to plan our budget carefully in order to ________.
12. No one listens to Greg at meetings because he always acts like such a ________.
13. The nation's leading economist ________ about continued growth in the automobile industry.
14. No one will complain if you ________ but still don't succeed.
15. Mrs. Waters is upset with her husband because he doesn't ________ to help with chores around the house on the weekend. He just watches sports programs on TV.

Teaching Practice

Empowering Students Through Speaking Round Tables

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Abstract

Oral communication teachers constantly strive to empower students to become confident English speakers. In order to become fluent, students must spend class time speaking English, but it can be difficult to increase individual speaking time and still meet the goals of the curriculum. Many teachers focus on individual presentations; however, this is time-consuming and difficult in large classes. This paper will explain Round Tables, a practical, engaging alternative to the traditional classroom presentation. Round Tables are small groups of students, with each student given a specific speaking role to perform. The roles allow students to practice different types of presentations and build fluency. Throughout the course, students present to their Round Table several times, improving their confidence and competence, while still allowing teachers to achieve other goals. This paper will also provide an implementation structure and offer materials that can be adapted for different classrooms.

Developing speaking skills is essential for students to become fluent in a language. According to Folse (2006), one key factor in a speaking course is that students should be doing the majority of the speaking throughout the class. While informal conversation can be practiced and improved through group work and pair work, in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) setting, the goal is not only informal conversation but also formal presentation practice. It is essential to provide students more formalized opportunities to develop their self-expression and help build an authentic voice (Roberts & Cooke, 2009). Yet individual presentations are time-consuming and difficult in large classes, with only one student speaking at a time while all other students are listening. In large classes, it can easily take more than one full class period for each student to give a standard five-minute speech. In addition, for the majority of this class time, students are primarily developing listening skills instead of interacting with the presenter or developing their own presentation skills. This represents a huge loss of student speaking time. Therefore, lost time and the limited linguistic output of the majority of the students during individual presentations are major disadvantages of heavily focusing on this activity throughout the semester. However, acquiring the skills necessary to give effective presentations is one major component of effective speaking, especially within an EAP environment. Of the four

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language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), English language learners experience the highest level of anxiety with speaking, and therefore need to practice this skill (Kim, 2009).

Furthermore, traditional presentations can require a large amount of in-class preparation. This, combined with the time needed to conduct the actual presentations, makes it difficult to prioritize this type of formal presentation practice. Considering these challenges, how can teachers give students the formal presentation practice needed to succeed in academia while also using class time efficiently and allowing ample time to achieve other course objectives? Implementing Round Tables is a practical and engaging way to overcome these challenges and offers many benefits to oral communication classes. This article will explain Round Tables, provide detailed information on the five different roles, give step-by-step advice for implementation, clarify the benefits of using this activity, present student reflections, and describe how Round Tables can be adapted to fit any classroom setting.

Round Tables Explained

Round Tables are a student-led approach to individual presentations. Round Tables consist of small groups of five students, with each student having a specific role. These roles rotate among students throughout the semester, allowing students to practice each role. The roles are: Facilitator, Word of the Day Speaker, Impromptu Speaker, Introduction Speaker, and Informative Speaker. Each role requires a different type of presentation, providing students with opportunities to practice a variety of presentations. Throughout the semester, each student gathers with his or her group and participates in five Round Tables (each time performing a different role). At the conclusion of the semester, each student will have presented each role once, for a total of five different presentations.

Round Table Roles

There are five distinct Round Table roles:

Facilitator

- Responsible for leading the group:
    - welcoming students to the Round Table
    - providing introductory remarks
    - following the Round Table agenda (see Appendix A)
    - monitoring time
    - facilitating discussion after each member’s speech
    - encouraging all students to participate
    - tallying participation (see Appendix B)
    - closing the Round Table by thanking everyone for their participation
- Preparation:
    - making the agenda
    - bringing a timer
- Note:
    - This role does not include a formal speech; instead, it focuses on practical, academic, and professional facilitation skills (e,g., leading a meeting, encouraging participation, and keeping students on task).

Word of the Day Speaker

- Responsible for teaching a new vocabulary word:
    - choosing a new vocabulary word to teach to the group (the speaker can choose an academic word, an idiom, slang, or a course-content word)
    - preparing for their speech
    - delivering a 3-minute speech teaching the new lexical item
    - answering clarification and follow-up questions during the question and answer session
    - tallying use of the word of the day (see Appendix C)
    - listening for and tallying hesitation markers (*umm*, *err*, etc.) (see Appendix C)
- Preparation:
    - choosing a word that will build their group's vocabulary
    - getting teacher approval
    - preparing a handout explaining the word, including the definition(s) as well as one to three sample sentences (see Appendix D)
    - practicing their speech
- Notes:
    - Once the word of the day has been taught to the group, each member is encouraged to use the word throughout the Round Table. The Word of the Day Speaker monitors the number of times the word is used by tallying each student's use of the word. Students often utilize their new vocabulary knowledge during the post-presentation discussion for each role, when they are asking and answering questions.
    - There is no set limit on how many hesitation markers are acceptable in students' speech. The purpose of this is to raise students' self-awareness of the use of these markers. It can be beneficial to have students tally a teacher's hesitation markers during a sample presentation, to show students that the use of these markers is acceptable.

Impromptu Speaker

- Responsible for delivering an impromptu speech:
    - receiving a topic from the teacher (see Appendix E for sample topics)
    - spending 2 minutes to prepare a speech, taking notes and referring to a dictionary as needed
    - delivering a 2-minute speech on the topic
    - answering clarification and follow-up questions during the question and answer session
- Preparation:
    - none

Introduction Speaker

- Responsible for delivering a formal speech introducing a person or thing or explaining a process:
    - choosing an appropriate introduction topic (some sample topics are "My Best Friend," "My Family Trip to Hawaii," or "How to Make Pad Thai")
    - preparing for their speech
    - delivering a 4-minute speech
    - answering clarification and follow-up questions during the question-and-answer session

- Preparation:
    - choosing a topic
    - getting teacher approval
    - creating a speech outline
    - preparing a visual aid (e.g., a PowerPoint, either on a computer or a printed copy of the slides; photos; or anything else to help explain the student's topic)
    - practicing their speech
- Notes:
    - Students are encouraged to use content that they are already familiar with and to focus on improving their formal speaking abilities. Allowing students to choose this type of content lowers students' affective filter, which encourages them to produce more complex language and limits their anxiety as they build on their presentation skills (Dörnyei, 2005).
    - This presentation and the question-and-answer session creates authentic, meaningful discussion and promotes team building, as students are genuinely interested in the Introduction Speaker's topic.

Informative Speaker

- Responsible for delivering a formal, academic speech:
    - choosing an appropriate topic (some sample topics are "Social Networking Services" and "The Importance of Water in Developing Countries")
    - preparing for their speech
    - delivering a 5-minute speech teaching the group about the topic
    - answering clarification and follow-up questions during the question-and-answer session
- Preparation:
    - choosing a current and relevant topic
    - getting teacher approval
    - researching the topic
    - creating a speech outline
    - preparing a PowerPoint presentation and outline
    - practicing their speech
- Notes:
    - This is the most formal speech in Round Tables.
    - The content of this speech is different from that of the Introduction Speech as it is academic in nature and should be supported by research.

Throughout the Round Table, each group member is actively engaged in a number of ways: giving presentations, taking notes, and asking and answering questions. The five prescribed roles give students practice in a variety of presentation styles. For clarification, the General Description of Roles (Appendix F) provides a brief but detailed overview of the distinct roles and the associated tasks. In addition to this description, students can also use the general overview chart (also shown in Appendix F), which lays out the expectations for each role and explains what students need to do before, during, and after the Round Table (including time limits). Using these two supplemental documents helps to clarify the expectations and to simplify the process.

Implementing Round Tables

Round Tables may appear complex at first, but with careful introduction, teachers can implement them with great success.

Step 1. The teacher introduces Round Tables in general, explaining their purpose and generating enthusiasm for the activity.

Step 2. The teacher explains each role in detail. The most effective way to introduce each role is for the teacher to model it, so students have a clear idea of what is expected of them and have a concrete example to look back on. Introducing all five roles at once would be overwhelming for students; so teachers should present and focus on each role individually, introducing two roles per class period at the most. This means that introducing Round Tables may take three to four periods, but only about fifteen minutes per class. As the roles are revealed, it is important to remind students that when they do Round Tables they will only be presenting to their small groups, in a low-stakes, comfortable environment, and they will focus on only one role for each Round Table. This is also an appropriate time to introduce other skills that will be used throughout the activity, such as common linguistic forms for presentations, presentation skills, and strategies for creating an effective speech outline. Once these skills have been introduced, students continue practicing them throughout each of the Round Table roles.

Step 3. The teacher introduces the Note-Taking Sheet, Peer Evaluation Form, and the tally sheets. According to Lazaraton (2001), providing listeners with a task to complete helps them focus their listening, encouraging active listening and providing motivation throughout the activity. During Round Tables, students complete the Note-Taking Sheet (see Appendix G). This sheet allows students to practice and improve their note-taking skills while listening to their group members' presentations and helps them to prepare a question to ask during the ensuing discussion. In addition, students complete the Peer Evaluation Form, which is a low-stakes way to evaluate their peers' presentation skills, e.g., eye contact, volume, or gestures (see Appendix H). At the end of each Round Table, students distribute these evaluations to their peers. This evaluation is not graded by the teacher; rather it is used to raise awareness of presentation skills and to help students to become their own self-monitors. According to Avery and Ehrlich (1992), self-monitoring has been emphasized in instruction as part of learners' taking responsibility for their own learning. It provides students with the opportunities and the strategies to continue their learning beyond the classroom. Practicing peer evaluation also assists students in recognizing effective presentation skills, both for their peers and for themselves. It is useful to introduce the Note-Taking Sheet and Peer Evaluation Form early on, so that students can practice taking notes and evaluating the teacher during the sample presentations. This is also the time to introduce the tally sheets:

- Participation Tally Sheet, completed by the Facilitator:
    - each time a student participates in any way in the discussion, the Facilitator marks the sheet (see Appendix B)
- Word of the Day Tally Sheet, completed by the Word of the Day Speaker:
    - each time a student uses the word of the day or a hesitation marker (e.g., *umm, err, uh*), the speaker marks the sheet (see Appendix C)

It is also beneficial for students to practice this type of tallying during the introduction of the roles, before Round Tables formally begin.

Step 4. The teacher forms student groups, and each group chooses a group name and fills out the Schedule (see Appendix I). While scheduling may seem complex, it is actually quite simple as students begin by only signing up for Round Table 1. Once students have chosen their first role, they rotate through each of the roles in order. It is very important for students to write these dates and their roles in their calendars as it is their responsibility to prepare for their speeches before class. Finally, the teacher collects the schedule and affixes it to an A4-sized envelope, for easy organizing of each group's papers. The teacher brings these envelopes containing all the materials the group needs to each Round Table, and the students submit all their materials in the same envelope.

Step 5. Students begin Round Tables. During the first Round Table it is useful for the teacher to circulate among the groups to ensure that students understand their tasks and roles, to remind the Facilitator and Word of the Day Speakers to use their tally sheets and give a report at the end, and to check that presentations are appropriate to the roles. While this first Round Table is slightly confusing for the students, ensuing Round Tables are much smoother, as students become familiar with the format and the procedure. Once students become accustomed to the process, Round Tables are 45 to 60 minutes of student-led interaction. During these subsequent Round Tables, the teacher's role is to circulate and listen in on presentations, offer questions during the question-and-answer sessions, and take notes to assist in providing feedback.

Assessment of Round Tables is based on student preparation and engagement, as noted by the teacher while circulating during each Round Table, as well as the student Note-Taking Sheet. Teachers grade the Note-Taking Sheet for completion and effort and combine this with their observations to determine students' grades. As multiple Round Table groups are presenting simultaneously, it is difficult for teachers to accurately assess each student's individual performance. However, experience has shown that students find Round Tables intrinsically motivating, meaning that rarely are group members unprepared. One option to increase individualized student feedback is for a teacher to choose one group per Round Table and provide that group with more focused feedback.

It is extremely important for students to understand the importance of attending and being prepared for their Round Table presentations; however, teachers should also be prepared for absences. For occasions when a student is absent, one easy and practical contingency plan is to prepare extra impromptu speech topics. Students can volunteer for extra presentation practice, or these topics can be used as discussion prompts.

Step 6. At the end of the semester, students complete a Round Tables Reflection Form which asks them to reflect on their experience, what they've learned, and how their presentation skills have changed (see Appendix J). This also provides the teacher with useful feedback on how Round Tables worked in their classroom.

Benefits of Using Round Tables

Setting up Round Tables at the beginning of the semester is complex and requires class time. However, the benefits of Round Tables justify this initial effort. The numerous benefits include:

1. strengthening classroom relationships
2. integrating listening and speaking skills
3. building confidence and speaking fluency
4. improving student autonomy
5. using class time efficiently
6. providing students with multiple opportunities to speak throughout the semester

Round Tables create a strong sense of community as each group learns and shares together. Students share personally relevant topics, giving insight into each student as an individual outside of the English classroom. By developing stronger relationships within the classroom, students are more likely to feel comfortable practicing their language skills and, therefore, are more likely to improve their linguistic skills.

Round Tables require students to consistently integrate their listening and speaking skills, which is one of Brown's key principles (2007). Every student in the group is expected to actively participate through taking notes, presenting, and asking and answering questions. Round Tables provide a perfect opportunity for students to comprehend the relationship between listener and speaker and to practice both roles.

Round Tables also build confidence as students practice presentation skills in a low-stakes, friendly environment. The familiar format and community allow students to feel comfortable to take on new linguistic challenges. Both the actual presentations and the informal question-and-answer discussions at the end of each presentation improve fluency, especially as students feel more confident to share ideas and opinions within their supportive community. As explained by Nation and Newton (2009), encouraging students to negotiate with each other improves communication and is good for second language acquisition. By participating in engaging and thoughtful follow-up question-and-answer sessions at the end of each presentation, students negotiate with their group on a regular basis, thus improving their language, critical thinking skills, and confidence in actively engaging with each other.

Round Tables are completely student-led and utilize class time efficiently. After the teacher-fronted introduction and the teacher-guided first Round Table, the students control everything. This encompasses everything from the structure (i.e., when to start and end a discussion) to the student-driven speech content, as recommended by Lazaraton (2013). In addition, Round Tables are an efficient use of class time when compared to individual presentations. During Round Tables, one person in every group is presenting at the same time, meaning that many students are giving simultaneous presentations. Furthermore, because students work in small groups, the post-presentation discussion time is very interactive and productive. Finally, students are excited to share topics that are personally thought-provoking to them, and they are genuinely interested in their peers' speeches.

Student Reflections

Overall, student response to Round Tables has been overwhelmingly positive (see Appendix K for student comments). Students frequently use words like *love* and *awesome* to describe Round Tables. They appreciate learning about their classmates, the group's self-sufficiency, and the chance to communicate in English. Students are quick to say that Round Tables are a lot of work and require preparation time outside of class, and yet this effort is perceived as worthwhile. In the most recent student survey, 101 out of 104 respondents liked Round Tables. The three students who didn't like Round Tables still acknowledged their value as a tool to help students improve their English.

Adapting Round Tables

Every teaching context is different: different needs, different goals, and different constraints. Yet Round Tables can be adapted to work across a wide range of settings and in a variety of classrooms. Time limits can be modified depending on availability of class time or to adjust for students' linguistic proficiency. Additionally, roles can be added or deleted to suit curricular needs. The implementation of Round Tables described in this article calls for five roles and five Round Table meetings per semester. However, the frequency of Round Tables is malleable, as the teacher could choose to increase or decrease the number of roles and meetings. Another variable to consider is the use of technology. Is PowerPoint required, merely suggested, or completely unfeasible? For contexts with limited access to technology, a poster, a photo or even a hand-drawn picture would suffice. Or, if building technological skills is a classroom objective, a PowerPoint could be required and more classroom time could be devoted to technological instruction. Finally, each Round Table could have a specific emphasis on one type of presentation skill (e.g., eye contact) or linguistic feature (e.g., transitions). Taking advantage of these possible adaptations ensures that Round Tables can be effectively utilized in a variety of classroom settings and can be modified to accomplish a diverse set of objectives.

Conclusion

According to Toth (2012), students who experience elevated levels of oral presentation anxiety will receive lower scores on assessments (regardless of their linguistic proficiency) and will be perceived as less fluent and competent communicators. Round Tables have proven to be a highly successful method of increasing student confidence, improving presentation skills, and creating more motivated independent learners. The rotating roles help students increase their confidence and integrate their listening and speaking skills, and are practical to implement in the classroom.

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Appendix A
Sample Facilitator's Agenda

Agenda for ______(date)______

Facilitator: ______(name)______

I. **Welcome** (1-2 min.)

II. **Checks** for Attendance / Prepares Time Cards and 'Ah' Meter Sheets (2 min.)

III. **Word-of-the-Day:** ______Classmate's Name______ (5-6 min.)

   A. Delivery (3 min)

   B. Word-of-the-Day person prepares Word-of-the-Day Tally Sheet for group (1 min.)

   C. Questions/feedback from others (1-2 min)

IV. **Impromptu Speech:** ______Classmate's Name______ (6-8 min.)

   A. Speaker chooses a question.

   B. Speaker is given 2 minutes to think (2 min.)

   C. Speaker speaks for 2 minutes (2 min.)

   D. Questions/feedback from others (2-3 min.)

V. **Introduction Speech:** ______Classmate's Name______ (8-9 min.)

   A. Delivery (4 min.)

   B. Questions/feedback (4-5 min.)

VI. **Informative Speech:** ______Classmate's Name______ (10-11 min.)

   A. Listen to speaker (5 min.)

   B. Questions/feedback (5-6 min.)

VII. **Meter Checks** (2 min.)

   A. Facilitator—Time-Keeping

   B. Word-of-the-Day Person—'Ah' Meter

   C. Word-of-the-Day Person—Word-of-the-Day Uses

VIII. **Concluding Remarks / Questions** (1-2 min.)

Appendix B
Participation Tally Sheet

Round Table Participation—Facilitator	
Facilitator's Name:	**Speaking Participation** **(# of times)**
Classmate 1:	
Classmate 2:	
Classmate 3:	
Classmate 4:	
Classmate 5:	

Appendix C
Word-of-the-Day Tally Sheet

Word-of-the-Day Tally Sheet		
WOD Speaker's Name:	Uses of WOD (# of times)	Ah-Meter (# of times)
Classmate 1:		
Classmate 2:		
Classmate 3:		
Classmate 4:		
Classmate 5:		

Appendix D
Sample Word of the Day

Slang

Word of the Day: Sweet

sweet (adj) – American slang, especially on the West Coast. Very informal.

- Awesome! Excellent! Really nice!
- Used for things, situations.
- Not used for people. If a person is sweet, then they are kind, polite and nice.

Example sentences:

1. We don't have homework today! Sweet!
2. That is a sweet motorcycle. Did you see it?
3. Dude! His t-shirt is sweet! I totally want one!

Note: The longer the vowel, the stronger the word.

For example:

- No homework? Sweeet!
- I just won a million dollars? Sweeeeeeeeeeet!

Academic

Word of the Day: Revision

revision (n) – the process of changing something in order to improve it by correcting it or including new information or ideas

related words: revise (v), revised (adj)

Example sentences:

1. After I received my teacher's comments on my essay, I made a lot of revisions.
2. My teacher said that my revised essay was much better than my first draft.

Appendix E
Sample Impromptu Speech Topics

- What are some popular places for university students to go in Tokyo? Be specific. Include details in your answer.
- What is the best thing to do in Tokyo on a sunny day? Be specific. Include details in your answer.
- If you could meet any famous person (alive or dead), who would you like to meet? Why? What would you want to talk about?
- If you could have one superpower (for example, flying, becoming invisible), what would you like to be able to do? Why? How would you use your superpower?
- Describe someone you respect or admire. Why do you look up to this person (why do you respect/admire this person)? Explain.
- In your opinion, what is the most important invention from the past 50 years? How has it impacted (influenced, changed) our lives? Explain.
- If you could go back in time, what time period would you like to go to? When and where would you go? Why?
- If someone gave you $1,000,000 to spend in 1 week, what would you do? How would you spend the money? Explain.

Appendix F
General Description of Roles

Round Table Roles—OVERVIEW

During this course, we will have 5 Round Table sessions. During each Round Table session, you will have a different role, or job. The Round Table Roles are as follows—

1. **FACILITATOR:** As the facilitator, you are like the teacher in your small group. You will have to prepare an agenda for your classmates and the teacher, keep time with your watch or cell phone, mark down the participation of each group member and lead your classmates through each of their tasks.

2. **WORD-OF-THE-DAY SPEECH:** As the deliverer of the Word-of-the-Day speech, you will use time outside of class to find a new and interesting vocabulary word. You can use your dictionary, the class academic words list, or www.urbandictionary.com. Please check your word with your teacher the week before you deliver the Word-of-the-Day speech. In the Round Table session you will teach your classmates the definition(s) of the word, use it in 1-3 example sentences and encourage your classmates to use the new word throughout the Round Table session. Also, you should record the number of times each person uses the word-of-the-day and the phrases "ah" or "um". You will have 3 minutes to teach your word.

3. **IMPROMPTU SPEECH:** As the deliverer of the impromptu speech, you will not be able to prepare for your topic outside of class. Instead, you will choose a question topic in class, and the facilitator will give you 2 minutes to think about your speech. You will then have 2 minutes to deliver your speech.

4. **INTRODUCTION SPEECH:** As the deliverer of the introduction speech, you will have 4 minutes to introduce a favorite person / thing or explain a process ("how to") to your group members. You should prepare for this speech before class time. Be sure to prepare key points and examples in your outline, practice, and bring in a visual aid (PowerPoint, photo, etc.)

5. **INFORMATIVE SPEECH:** As the deliverer of the informative speech, you will act as a professor in order to inform or educate your group members about a specific academic topic, such as biology, music, or economics. You will have 5 minutes to give your speech. You should use time outside of class to prepare, including doing research, preparing a PowerPoint and outline, and practicing.

Tasks	Round Table Roles				
	Facilitator	Word-of-the-Day Speech	Impromptu Speech	Introduction Speech	Informative Speech
Before class	-prepare and copy the agenda -bring timer	prepare: -word / phrase choice -definition(s) -example sentences (1-3)	-no preparation	-prepare a speech using notes -use an OUTLINE (not an essay) -choose a topic -bring visual aids	-prepare a speech using notes -use an OUTLINE (not an essay) -choose a topic -bring visual aids
Papers to use in class	-agenda -listening sheet -participation count sheet -time warning sheets	-agenda -listening sheet -notes for your speech -visual aids -WOD/"uh" count sheet	-agenda -listening sheet -topic paper (from teacher)	-agenda -listening sheet -notes for your speech -visual aids	-agenda -listening sheet -notes for your speech -visual aids
During your speech	-give a 1-2 min welcome -lead 1-3 min speech discussions -give 1-2 min reports on time, etc. -give 1-2 min closing	-speak for 3 min	-think for 2 min -speak for 2 min	-speak for 4 min	-speak for 5 min
Papers to give the teacher after class	-agenda -listening sheet with notes / Qs -participation count sheet -time warning sheets	-listening sheet with notes / Qs -speech notes/outline -WOD/"uh" count sheet	-listening sheet with notes / Qs	-listening sheet with notes / Qs -speech notes/outline -visual aids	-listening sheet with notes / Qs -speech notes/outline -visual aids

Appendix G

Note-Taking Sheet

Name: ___________________

Round Tables: Note-Taking Sheet

Word-of-the-Day SPEECH ____
Topic: ____

Q:

IMPROMPTU SPEECH ____
Topic: ____

Q:

INTRODUCTION SPEECH ____
Topic: ____

Q:

INFORMATIVE SPEECH ____
Topic: ____

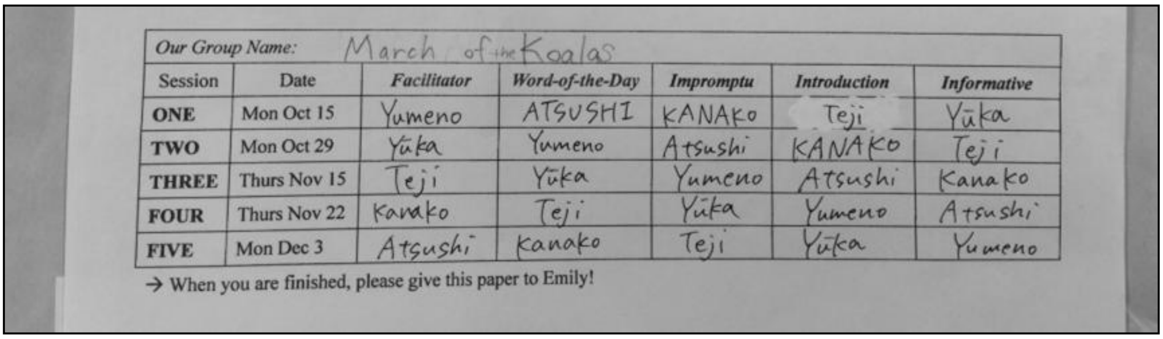
Q:

Appendix H
Peer Evaluation Form

Round Table—Evaluating Your Peers

Speech Evaluation Form									
Your Name:					Date:				
Classmate's Name	Type of Speech	Posture	Eye Contact	Gestures	Confidence	Fluency	Main Ideas	Details	Overall Delivery
! excellent	+ good	~ okay	< needs work	*needs a lot of work					

Appendix I
Schedule



Our Group Name: March of the Koalas

Session	Date	*Facilitator*	*Word-of-the-Day*	*Impromptu*	*Introduction*	*Informative*
ONE	Mon Oct 15	Yumeno	ATSUSHI	KANAKO	Teji	Yūka
TWO	Mon Oct 29	Yūka	Yumeno	Atsushi	KANAKO	Teji
THREE	Thurs Nov 15	Teji	Yūka	Yumeno	Atsushi	Kanako
FOUR	Thurs Nov 22	Kanako	Teji	Yūka	Yumeno	Atsushi
FIVE	Mon Dec 3	Atsushi	Kanako	Teji	Yūka	Yumeno

→ When you are finished, please give this paper to Emily!

Appendix J
Round Tables Reflection Form

Name: ____________________

Round Table Reflection

Directions: Please think about the last 10 Round Table presentations that you gave this year and answer the following questions. Please be specific and give a lot of information!

1. What skills did you improve by doing Round Tables? How did participating in Round Tables help you?
2. What was your favorite Round Table Presentation to give and why?
3. What was your least favorite Round Table Presentation to give and why?
4. What is one thing that you liked about Round Tables and why?
5. What is one thing that you would like to change about Round Tables and why?

Appendix K
Student Reflections from Fall 2012

1. "Round Tables are perfect!! I want to try again Round Tables."
2. "Round Tables has many opportunities we speak English. It's very fun!"
3. "I become positive about perticipating [sic] in discussion and asking some question! I think it's great & awesome!"
4. "It's useful for me because it is not only hearing my friend's thinking, but also talking about my thinking."
5. "I love Round Table! Especially word of the day is useful for me."

Towards More Sophisticated Academic Writing: Moving Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay

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Abstract

This article argues that due to test washback, simplicity of instruction, misconceptions of Western-heritage teachers about Asian students, and prevalence in ESL textbooks, the conventional five-paragraph essay is the dominant writing form taught to Asian university students. Yet as Dombek and Herndon (2004) observe, such a simplified form does not reflect the "periodic development" commonly found in the essays of proficient English-language writers and expected in Western university courses. To address this shortcoming, two sophisticated teaching methodologies used in language and liberal arts programs in Thailand and Japan are presented: the essay based upon periodic rather than cumulative development, and the Situation-Problem-Solution-Evaluation (SPSE) approach. Such pedagogies, it is argued, challenge students to move beyond formulas, to incorporate and integrate sources (in addition to personal experience), to engage in critical and creative analysis, and to enact a richer process of thinking in their writing.

The Orthodoxy of the Five-Paragraph Essay

In a compilation of critical perspectives on language instruction in *TESOL Quarterly* in 1999, Alastair Pennycook observed that work in TESOL had for a long time been "too narrowly constructed to be of much interest to people outside the area" (p. 346). In other words, the instrumentalist assumptions that underlie much of the field seem to have been accepted to degree that analysis rarely occurred in the discipline. This rigidity continues to be illustrated in the widespread use – and misuse – of the "five-paragraph essay." Any student who has been required to take an English proficiency examination, such as the TOEFL or IELTS, will have been taught this familiar several-paragraph thesis-driven form (typically five paragraphs, but

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ranging from three to six). Driven by test washback (the back-to-front influence tests have on teaching and learning) and its ease of instruction, this model has become the norm in ESL courses and texts around the world. However, authentic writing by authors fully proficient in English rarely takes this form. Instead, as Dombek and Herndon observed,

> professional essayists tend to write . . . in the periodic style, leading up to the most important thought . . . in their final sentences. They do this because their ideas are so complex or counterintuitive that they could not be understood without the train of thought and pieces of evidence that precede them (2004, p. 27).

As Dombek and Herndon pointed out, while the five-paragraph essay can serve as a good base for beginners, it is often inappropriate for higher-level writing. Thus, this paper will suggest and evaluate teaching methodologies which can be used to help students move beyond familiar formulas and challenge them to employ more sophisticated writing styles and rhetorical forms to better engage in the kinds of critical and creative analysis common in authentic discourse.

The authors of this paper teach at two institutions. One is the Preparation Center (PC) for Languages and Mathematics, a pre-university program for Mahidol University International College (MUIC) in Thailand; the other is the English for Liberal Arts Program (ELA) at International Christian University (ICU) in Japan. Both programs are considered to be elite within their respective domains, and the English language skills of their students are generally higher than their peers in comparable universities. The common aim of these programs is to produce graduates who not only can use English to communicate functionally to complete basic academic tasks, but who also can use their language abilities critically and creatively. It is for these reasons that teachers in both programs have sought to introduce approaches to writing which move beyond the five-paragraph orthodoxy. To understand how these approaches can be used successfully, it is first necessary to understand why they are needed.

Literature Review

Situation

Recent data produced by Educational Testing Service (ETS) show that Thai speakers rank 85th out of 113 national language groupings on performance on the TOEFL-iBT, while the Japanese rank 102nd (Educational Testing Service, 2011). However, data suggest that Japanese have developed better critical thinking skills than Thais. A comparative survey of the capacity of 15-year-old students to integrate, interpret, reflect on, and evaluate material contained in reading texts shows Thais ranked 52nd out of 65 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), while the Japanese ranked 8th (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010). Therefore, though the linguistic challenges facing students in both countries are similar, the task of improving thinking skills in Thailand appears more formidable. The position of this paper is that the conventional approach to ESL writing is largely unsuitable for cultivating higher-order thinking skills.

As stated before, the unsatisfactory orthodoxy in writing instruction stems largely from the washback effect of standardized testing. This concern has been raised for many years. Writing in 1991, Raimes referred to the “formulaic essay writing and assembly line grading of ETS’s [then] Advanced Placement [AP]Essay” (Vopat, cited in Raimes, p. 439). She further observed that it is doubtful whether standardized tests such as the AP Essay “recognize[d] a wider variety of rhetorical modes” than the ethnocentric deductive linear argument (Raimes, 1991, p. 439). She concluded that language instructors “should avoid recommending and using reductive methods of instruction and materials for test preparation” and that “students should be spending time learning English, not learning ETS coping skills." Nevertheless, almost all universities whose language of instruction is English still require non-native students to pass some sort of standardized English proficiency examination, preparation for which usually involves reductive coaching techniques and simplified writing forms.

The most commonly accepted proficiency standards are the TOEFL and IELTS tests. A student's performance on such tests often determines whether the applicant is accepted or rejected. Yet with such high-stakes tests, there are tricks and strategies which can be employed in order to raise test-takers' scores. Qi (2007) emphasized the effect of such tests on writing instruction when she stated "teachers and students [focus] only on the aspects of writing that they [believe] would help to achieve higher test scores, while completely ignoring the need to be able to write communicatively in real-life situations" (p. 65). To clarify, emphasis is placed on producing a clean piece of writing which follows set formulas and is easily graded. As a consequence, students are not pushed into the higher levels of thinking: analysis, synthesis, evaluation as in Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). Instead, they are tested on their recall and application of set patterns and models (Cheng, Rogers, & Hu, 2004; Hamp-Lyons, 1997; Raimes, 1990).

Problems

One problem with this approach is that students become more focused on "getting it right" (Blanton, 1987) than becoming skilled writers. Writing, especially for lower-level students, thus becomes a chore which is often approached with fear or boredom (Blanton, 1987). When writing is attempted, it tends to be formulaic (Vopat, cited in Raimes, 1990). Popular textbooks, whether for classroom instruction or exam preparation, often design topics to fit the five-paragraph essay structure. These topics generally present students with a choice which they must support using their own knowledge and experience, and because there is often no input resource from which students can draw to support their ideas, their topic development is limited to the extent of their personal experience. The result, as the authors and other professional writing teachers have observed, is essays written mechanically, "following the guidelines" of the standard five-paragraph format often consisting of claims or ideas supported minimally through limited knowledge of the topic (Dombeck & Herndon, 2004, p. 10).

Another problem stems from misconceptions of Western-heritage teachers about Asian learning styles and capacities. As Biggs has suggested, most Western-heritage teachers never seriously examine their assumptions that all Asian classrooms are "highly authoritarian; [use] teaching methods [that] are mostly expository, [and are] sharply focused on preparation for external examinations" (1996, p. 46). This leads to beliefs that Asian students will nearly always show a preference for "low cognitive level learning strategies" associated with poor learning outcomes (Biggs, 1996, p. 46). In other words, Western teachers often assume that Asian students do not want – or are unable – to think critically and instead benefit more from mastering set patterns in order to pass exams. Several studies have shown, in fact, that as a result of their preconceptions of ESL students, teachers often give feedback to L2 writers which focuses more on grammar and structure errors than on content (Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011; Matsuda & Matsuda, 2010).

Methodology

Strategies for a Solution

Two strategies have been used by the authors of this paper to try to move beyond the simple prescription of the five-paragraph essay. Both approaches introduce students to a different way of thinking about their ideas. At ICU, some advanced writing classes now focus on developing periodic writing. The essays written in these classes look drastically different from typical ESL essays. Whereas the five-paragraph essay is thesis-driven and displays what Dombek and Herndon (2004, p. 26-27) termed "cumulative development," these essays are content-driven and display "periodic development." At MUIC, the Situation-Problem-Solution-Evaluation (SPSE) approach advocated by Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (2006) has been introduced to pre-university students. Each approach is explained in more detail in the following sections.

Cumulative vs. periodic development. This approach is employed by select teachers at ICU to teach upper-intermediate to advanced-level students with TOEFL ITP scores of 550 and higher. The course is a reading and writing class, and instruction is delivered via 3 classroom and 2 tutorial hours per week for 10 weeks. The students are first-year Japanese university students yet to declare a major. In addition to requiring students to write a traditional five-paragraph style persuasive essay based upon cumulative rhetoric, the course introduces students to periodic development in essays that draw upon this more sophisticated rhetorical pattern (Dombek & Herndon, 2004).

In traditional five-paragraph essays that follow cumulative development, the essay writer presents a thesis statement in the first paragraph, followed by paragraphs in which each opening sentence describes the topic of the paragraph, often referring directly back to the thesis statement; the essay ends with a conclusion which sums up the ideas presented in the essay and restates the thesis. While cumulative development may be appropriate for English proficiency examinations, this style of writing – as Dombek and Herndon (2004) have argued – tends to produce essays where topic development is simplistic and one-dimensional.

In contrast, sophisticated readers of English (including university professors) expect more complex forms of writing. Thus, in the ELA of ICU, some teachers introduce students to essay writing that uses periodic development. Under this approach, sentences at the beginning of the paragraph drive ideas forward and are used to link reasoning between paragraphs (Appendix A shows a visual representation of the rhetorical structure of periodic development in contrast to that of cumulative development). Furthermore, the thesis is often not presented until the conclusion of the essay, after the supporting ideas have been developed and elaborated upon. It can be argued that this approach is more authentic as it allows students to display their thinking process and, because ideas are explored as they arise, does not limit students to one idea from the very beginning. Thus, oftentimes student writers will discover that by the end of the essay they have moved from answering a simple question to asking (and answering) much more complex questions because they have been able to examine different aspects of the topic.

The differences in how students think about the topic are usually reflected in the transition words used in the essays. With cumulative development, transition words generally reflect linear thinking (e.g., *First*, *Second*, *Third*, *In addition*, *For example*), whereas with periodic development, they tend to reflect progressive thinking (e.g., *This being the case*, *Considering this*, *If so*). The end result is an essay where students have analyzed and evaluated several different aspects of a topic and have a formed a conclusion based on information and analysis which has not been manipulated to fit a pre-set idea. See Appendix B for a model of a periodic essay and Appendix C for an example of a student essay using this approach.

SPSE. MUIC PC started using the SPSE approach recently in their highest-level class in which students study writing 8 hours a week for 10 weeks. Students at this stage are at the intermediate level, most having entered the program at the lower-intermediate level, with TOEFL ITP scores between 420 and 530. For this approach, essays are referenced from input texts and lectures provided by teachers and from the student's own research.

To reiterate, SPSE stands for Situation-Problem-Solution-Evaluation. Firstly, students discuss the situation or background of the topic. This can include facts, current news, and different viewpoints related to the subject. Students then consider the problems associated with the issue, such as controversies or negative effects. From there, students are either asked to suggest solutions to the problem or explain solutions presented in the input sources. Finally, students evaluate the solutions. Evaluation includes not only an assessment of how effective the solution is, but also how ethical it is.

As the aim is to encourage integration of skills, essay topics are centered on a single theme which the students study all term. Thus, the students do not compose based on their own limited experience but instead are required to use information from several sources, including websites, books, adapted texts, and lectures. They are taught the Cornell University note-taking system, which has been shown to improve understanding and recall through the use of critical thinking questions and summary writing (Pauk & Owens, 2005). Students are also introduced to basic logical fallacies and ethical frameworks so they have a foundation on which to assess and evaluate information. To illustrate, a theme used at the MUIC PC in 2012 related to Jared Diamond's theory of social collapse. Students took notes of the material in the book during the term and were introduced to some of the more basic logical fallacies (e.g., "slippery slope" and "excluded middle") as an aid to critical analysis. Their final assessment task, after formative development, was to use notes they took of a lecture and reading on a related topic to write a fully referenced essay under exam conditions. They were given an opportunity to develop their ideas in a 25-minute group discussion. The assessment process was designed to move the students towards higher-level cognitive skills. Thus, after demonstrating understanding of the reading and lecture through their summary notes, the students were required to analyze and synthesize the arguments in their written responses, before evaluating the arguments using logical analysis in the final discussion. Appendix D presents a description of a particular SPSE task and a sample student response.

Process Writing

In both the MUIC PC and the ICU ELA programs, students follow a writing process consisting of planning, writing, and editing. Prior to writing, they produce a plan which they will use as an initial guide for their composing. Students then write several drafts edited first by themselves, then by their peers, and then by their teacher before a final draft is submitted for grading. In both programs, editing focuses mainly on content and organization, and, to a lesser extent, grammar. Thus, students not only make corrections to their essays but must also explain their errors and their corrections. In this way, students reflect on both the content and the technical aspects of essay writing.

Assessment

In ICU's ELA, the students' writing is assessed through graded drafts and a series of one-to-one writing tutorials with the teacher during which the student can ask for advice or clarification, describe intentions or problems, and receive direct teacher feedback on their writing. Many teachers use rubrics to give students feedback, such as the ICU Writing Rubric illustrated in Appendix E, which includes the criteria of Content (critical / creative thinking), Organization, and Language Control and Convention.

At MUIC PC, writing is assessed in three ways. Firstly, class essays are graded. Students spend two to three weeks on each essay and experience the entire writing process with peer comments and teacher guidance. Secondly, as mentioned previously, at the end of the term, they take an integrated exam. This starts with a 30-minute lecture and a 750-word reading over a 2-hour period. Students are then given 2 hours to write a response essay on the topic, referencing the inputs they were provided with. Thirdly, students take part in a 30-minute videotaped discussion related to the topic.

Discussion

In both cases, writing using periodic development is encouraged. However, as the students in the Thai program are often of a lower skill level than those in the Japanese program, they require a more guided approach in their writing. Thus, SPSE provides a framework for them to elaborate their thinking.

Writing produced by students using these two approaches displays more sophisticated thinking than that which results from the five-paragraph model. Writers are able to move beyond the narrow context provided in a typical opinion essay topic and examine a much broader range of views. Since the focus is not on finding reasons to support the initial thesis, but rather on investigating and exploring different relevant ideas and then drawing a conclusion, students are able to – and in fact, must – ask more questions and gather information. In such writing, students often end up challenging the initial assumptions of the topic instead of simply accepting the choices they have been given. Accordingly, their writing shows evidence of the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation taxonomized as higher-order thinking skills (Bloom et al., 1956).

By providing students with input resources (texts and lectures), the writing task becomes easier and more difficult at the same time. Students are relieved of the burden of trying to tap their limited knowledge relevant to the topic, but they must learn to utilize several additional skills such as note-taking and listening to analyze and evaluate information they have been given. This is a more authentic writing task than a traditional five-paragraph essay as it provides students with practice for university classes where professors will give readings and lectures and ask students to hand in a written response or compose research-based essays or reports. The writing task becomes much more integrated, in line with the goals of a liberal education. Moreover, students begin to realize that writing does not happen in a vacuum; their topics and their ideas have real-world relevance.

In general, periodic development challenges students to think more deeply about the topic and information they have been given. Because this type of development requires students to connect their ideas forward—going more deeply into one idea or moving on to a new, expanded idea—they are pushed towards higher-order thinking skills resulting in more complex thought processes. This process of increased sophistication can be seen in the model essay in Appendix B, “The Myth of Uniqueness,” in which O-Young Lee poses and answers strategic questions, quotes leading scholars, and debunks their statements to arrive at a conclusion, which his analysis logically builds toward but which is not apparent at first. It is also illustrated in the student essay on Muslim headscarves in France in Appendix C, in which the writer uses logic and analysis to unwrap the complexity of the issues, rather than taking a for-or-against position at the outset. Writing produced through periodic development, as these two essays suggest, becomes more interesting for both the teacher and the student and is more personal than writing in a five-paragraph essay based merely on private experience because students must examine, question, and sometimes revise their beliefs and assumptions. When students understand that essay writing involves more than just fulfilling a set pattern, they begin to see that differing essays can be written on the same topic. The most obvious consequence of this is that they stop trying to be “right” and start trying to be “good.” They realize that they can be different from their peers and those differences are what will potentially make their work outstanding.

One problem the authors still face is grammatical accuracy, especially in lower-level pre-university programs. The elimination of set patterns and models and the introduction of complex inputs mean that students are challenged on a much higher cognitive level. Under time constraints, such as essay exams, students tend to produce writing which displays more sophisticated thinking but less grammatical accuracy. More research needs to be done to find the balance between teaching grammar and teaching critical thinking.

Conclusion

Based on the experiences of the authors in both programs, a few practical recommendations can be made.

1. Periodic development should be introduced to intermediate and advanced writing classes to encourage more authentic and complex forms of writing.
2. Lower-level classes may find it useful to employ the SPSE approach as a framework for students who may find this type of thinking challenging.
3. Additional skills, such as logic, ethics, and referencing, should be taught to enhance students' ability to analyze and evaluate information.
4. Writing tasks should be integrated with other skills, and such integration should be reflected in the assessment.
5. Teachers should encourage self-reflection throughout the writing experience.

While the cumulative development form used in the conventional five-paragraph essay may serve as a good starting point for beginning writers, it should be just that – a starting point. Writing instruction should aim to produce writers who are able to critically examine a wide range of topics and employ a variety of forms to express more complex thinking. Periodic development, through the SPSE approach initially and then independently, can challenge students and foster the higher-order thinking and writing skills necessary to produce the sophisticated and authentic writing required at the university level and beyond.

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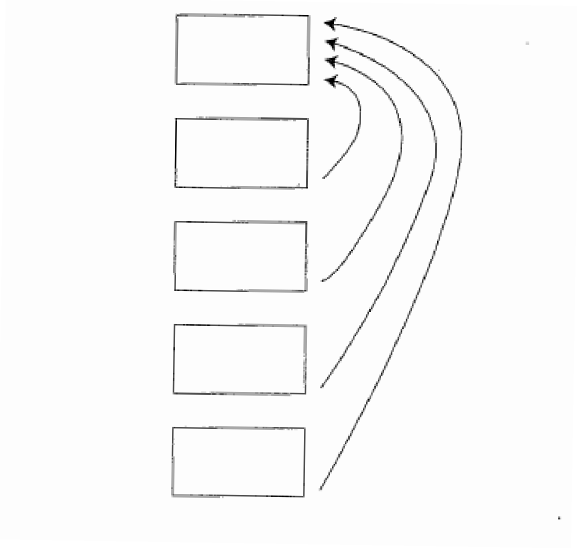
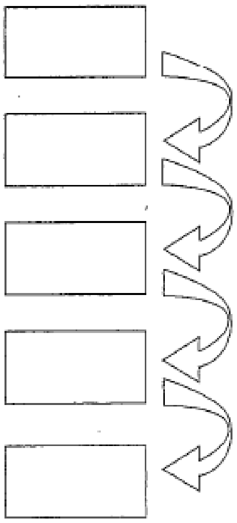
Appendix A

Visual Representations of Rhetorical Structure Underlying Cumulative and Periodic Approaches to Writing

(from Dombek & Herndon 2004, p. 28-29)

Cumulative Approach	Periodic Approach
Figure 2.1 Structure of the Thesis/Supporting Point Essay	Figure 2.2 Structure of the Periodic Essay with Subordinate Modification
	

Appendix B

Model of a Periodic Essay Used at International Christian University, Tokyo The Myth of Uniqueness by O-Young Lee*

Many of the countless books that have been written about Japan have been showy, like French fashion magazines, and popular because of that. Since the end of the war alone, there have been innumerable interpretive works written about Japan. Some of them, such as Ruth Benedict's The Chrysanthemum and the Sword, The Anatomy of Dependence by Doi Takeo, and Japanese Society by Nakane Chie, have contributed new words to the popular vocabulary. Others, particularly Japanese books, have taken their titles from such phrases already in popular use as "economic animal" and "Japan Inc." In Japan these interpretations of Japanese society inevitably become best sellers, and large numbers of people pick up the jargon in them just as they would pick up and carry the portable shrine at a local festival. Such jargon appears in newspaper headlines, in magazine editorials, in talks given by television and radio commentators. In the hands of writers with more artistic inclinations, this vocabulary that began in the halls of academia end up as words to a popular ballad. This festival of interpretations makes it all but impossible to see the real, the naked Japan with one's own eyes. Before one knows it, that naked Japan is dressed in illusory clothing by the masses and pop culture. That is why I decided here to examine Japanese culture through the eyes of an elementary school child.

Why should it be that interpretations of Japan, whether they be by Japanese or Westerners, are cloaked in this illusory clothing? And what is the nature of the child's vision that could expose this cover-up? The Anatomy of Dependence, one of the most widely known interpretations of Japan, provides some clues. It is typical of the genre. I am particularly interested in this book, not so much because of its content but because of its attempt to discover what is unique about the Japanese psychology and because of the way its author, Doi Takeo, makes his case.

Doi states his methodology quite clearly: "If there is anything unique about the Japanese psychology it must be closely related with the uniqueness of the Japanese language." And Doi hits upon the concept of amae (dependence) and is convinced of "the uniqueness of the word amae as an item of vocabulary in Japanese." But is "dependence" as Doi defines it peculiar to the Japanese language? For if it is not, his whole argument goes up in smoke. And indeed, it is not.

The fact is that in Japan's nearest neighbor the concept of “dependence" is as common as pebbles scattered by the roadside. In Korean, there are two equivalent terms for the Japanese word amae: origwan and unsok. Both are an integral part of daily speech. Not only are there equivalent words, but the concept of dependence plays such a crucial role in child rearing in Korea that one could say dependence is even more inextricably bound up with the Korean psyche than it is with the Japanese. Such Korean words as omsal, used to gain the sympathy of others by exaggerating one's pain and suffering, are far more complex than the simple Japanese term amae.

This being the case, why did a learned scholar like Professor Doi make such a grave error by asserting that the concept of dependence as expressed by the term amae is peculiar to Japan? The problem is not Professor Doi's alone. His argument is merely the product of a sense of separateness from the rest of Asia, a feeling that the Japanese have entertained ever since the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Professor Doi relates that what convinced him amae was a word peculiar to the Japanese language was a conversation he once had with a British woman who spoke fluent Japanese. She was talking in English about her child's infant years but suddenly switched to Japanese to say, "Kono ko wa amari amaemasen deshita" (we were not especially indulgent with this child). When Professor Doi asked why she had used Japanese only for that one sentence, she replied there was no way to say such a thing in English.

From this Doi adduces that amae is a word unique to the Japanese language. It is a strange leap of logic, and it is an indication of just how deeply the Japanese have come to believe, since the Meiji Restoration, that English is the language of the West, and even all the rest of the world. How else could Doi have been led to believe that if a Japanese word does not exist in equivalent form in English it must be peculiar to Japanese? Perhaps this is the key to the "illusory clothes" that cloak Japan and interpretations of Japan.

This sort of premise, that if it does not exist in English it must be peculiar to Japanese, is not uncommon. Many interpretations of Japan written by Japanese revolve around just such simple Japan versus Britain / America comparisons. Even those works that take a somewhat wider view broaden only one side of the equation, substituting Westerners for British and Americans. Although we can imagine Doi substituting a French or German mother in his story, would he have ever considered a Korean woman? Yet if one is trying to find out whether or not amae is a uniquely Japanese concept it seems that a normal first step would be to look at a language such as Korean, which has a much closer linguistic relationship to Japanese than do any of the European languages.

This reluctance among Japanese writers to "look East" is far from uncommon. As a result, they often call something uniquely Japanese when it would be more relevant to call it common to Japan and Korea, or to all of East Asia. We need not go far to find examples. The popular historian Higuchi Kiyosuke has written, “Among the civilized countries of the world Japan is the only one where seaweed is eaten.” But he has apparently forgotten that Korea is a major producer and consumer of seaweed. In the book Nihonjin no Kokoro (The Spirit of the Japanese) by Umesao Tadao and four other Japanese scholars, it is boldly asserted: "The realization that night soil, human excrement, could be used as an organic fertilizer for vegetables was an amazing discovery." Umesao and his fellow authors conclude that it was originally a Japanese idea, failing to recognize that other people have long made use of this "high-level agricultural technology" (to use their own words). Anyone could tell after a few minutes in a Korean village that this wonderful organic technology is hardly unique to Japan. This is the same kind of short-cut logic we find in the amae argument: if it does not exist in the West, it must be peculiar to Japan. I have no desire to enter into a debate here on Japan’s claim to the dubious distinction of a monopoly on amae, much less night soil. Nor do I seek to refute the work of these scholars. What I wish to point out is that sometimes popular books interpreting Japan, be they by Japanese or foreigners, wrap Japanese society in illusory clothing that bears little relation to reality. And this is usually because the basis of such books is a comparison only between Japan and the West.

The counterpoint to Western culture is not simply Japanese culture. Asian culture, although it does include Japan, is not defined merely by the experience of that one people. Characteristics of European culture must be seen in relation to all of Asia, not just Japan. For if we compare Japan only to the West, we run the risk of jumping to the mistaken conclusion that something is peculiar to Japan when in fact it might well be common to the entire Northeast Asian cultural sphere.

*Excerpt from The Compact Culture: The Japanese Tradition of "Smaller is Better." Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1984, pages 10-13. O-Young Lee, a prominent Korean writer and literary scholar, served as his nation’s first Minister of Culture.

Appendix C
Student Essay in Periodic Form

Moslem Headscarves:
The Veiled Reality Behind the Islamic Dress and Western Society

On September 2, 2004, a law banning students' displaying of religious symbols in French public schools came into effect. It forbid the wearing of ostensible religious apparel such as the Islamic veil, the Jewish Kippah and large Christian crosses (Jones). The French government had been debating the issue for nearly two decades, and it had intensified over the years with dozens of Muslim girls being expelled from secular schools for refusing to remove their headscarves on school grounds (Rhodes).

The government had claimed that there were several reasons to bring this law into effect. They insisted that wearing headscarves in schools showed submission to men and symbolized the inferior status of women, and the new law was significant because it encouraged Muslim women to be treated as equals to men in their French-Muslim culture. The change was also vital in that it protected the 1905 law of separation of church and state, known as laicite. France was sending a strong message to the world that they were maintaining a solid secular state with the new law that protected the laicite and stopped the human rights abuse of Muslim women (Benhold).

The issue would be settled by now if this was the end to the story. However, this scarf issue, or l'affaire du voile, is a lot more complicated than it may appear.

First of all, do women really feel that the headscarf is a sign of oppression? IslamiCity, one of the world's largest online sources of Islamic information, addresses how Islamic garments such as the veil are not a symbol of oppression, but rather a sign of self-respect and social status. The French government also announced in 2002 that out of 1.8 million French Muslim school girls, only around 2000 of them wore their headscarf to school. Moreover, only 157 girls refused to remove their headscarf when asked to do so (Taheri). The article and research manifest a misunderstanding of the symbolism of Islamic dresses by the French government and further shows that in reality, many woman are not being forced but have the choice to wear Islamic clothing.

If so, are Muslim headscarves not a symbol of human rights violation? Facts by IslamiCity and the French government suggest that perhaps the answer is, "Yes." But when it comes to the new law, the answer is much different. For the individuals that consider the veil to be a symbol of belonging to the Muslim community, the new law is an oppressing law that deprives them of their freedom of expression. London Member of the European Parliament Human Rights and Civil Liberties Committee Jean Lambert criticizes the law that "[banning] the wearing of religious symbols is a clear human rights violation" (Meade). Although the French government explains that one of the central aims of the new law is to save women's human rights, without any clear evidence, the law has much more power to violate human rights than it does to save it.

With that said, it is reasonable to state that the case here is not just about religious symbols in school, or about maintaining secularism in France or any European state—it is about whether Muslims have a place and a right in a Westernized society. And judging from the direction that this debate is headed, many Western societies seem to be moving toward even greater marginalization of Muslims in their country. A study by the International Helsinki

Federation for Human Rights (IHF) states that in 11 EU member states, Muslims have faced increased discrimination since the September 11 attacks and that there are widespread negative attitudes toward Muslims. For example in Germany, more than 80% of those surveyed answered that the word "Islam" is related to "terrorists" and "oppression of women." IHF also claims that the debate over the adoption of the French law banning ostensible religious attire in schools helped to encourage discrimination against Muslim women wearing headscarves across Europe. They see a rise in the anti Muslim sentiment known as Islamophobia, and that such attitude is salient in recent politics (Rhodes).

However, prohibiting Islamic attire for the mere fact that Islamic values are incompatible with Western values will not lead to mutual understanding and will only lead to a closed society without a place for Muslims to fit in. Western societies need to allow religious attire in public schools so that children can have a better understanding of non-Western values such as Islam and so that non-Western people living in Western societies will come to receive greater respect. If European societies start banning the headscarf at school, children in Europe might start perceiving the scarf as something immoral. It has the power to implant a negative image of Islamic clothing that would very easily lead to a negative image of Islam in general. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) insists that "knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person, but it is also absolutely necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity" (Study About Religions), and it would certainly not hurt to know that there are many ways to express those beliefs, which will help children adapt better to different values.

The culmination of this debate will be a decisive moment for the Muslims living in Western societies. Even though it may be better for countries to prohibit ostensible religious apparel in some cases where clear evidence shows violation of health or human rights, generally speaking, it is crucial for Western societies to allow conspicuous religious attire to be worn in school and to allow Islam to integrate into the Western world. The new law violates the freedom of expression, and it is wrong to justify the violation of human rights by concluding that Islamic veils are a symbol of oppression of women when there is no clear evidence. The governments' answers will tell Muslims if they will be allowed to be who they are, or if they need to be "Westernized Muslims"—that is, Muslims without freedom of expression of their religious belief.

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Appendix D

SPSE Response to Integrated Task Question at MUIC PC, Thailand

This task was set for students preparing to enter Mahidol University International College. The entry standard is set at IELTS 5.5-6 or equivalent. The national average for all Thai students – at high school, undergraduate, or graduate levels – is 5.3.

Students were required to take notes on a 3000-word lecture on the state of the world (as determined by the Global Peace Index) and a 1500-word reading which explained possible causes for and solutions to instability. The students were then required to write a timed essay which integrated understanding of these texts in response to the following question: "Why do you think Thailand's GPI score is so low, and what actions could be taken to improve conditions in the country?" In the essay which follows, the student has used the SPSE structure.

Nowadays, Thai society is getting more dangerous and worse in these recent years. Thailand has been called the "Land of Smiles" for a long period of time (Punyaratabandhu, 2012). However, Thailand also has been recorded as a "flawed democracy", and one of the Asian countries which is at the risk of becoming a failed state (Punyaratabandhu, 2012). The Institute for Economics and Peace has established the program called the Positive Peace Index (PPI), which helps to improve the social's structure in each country all over the world (Punyaratabandhu, 2012). It shows most of the high level of education and low level of corruption is in the Scandinavian countries (Rush, 2012). However, Thailand ranks 66 out of 108 countries, which means that Thailand is one of the most unpeaceful countries in the world, so the Thai government still needs to improve the high level of corruption, and the inequality between rich and poor, well educated and less educated, in Thai society (Punyaratabandhu, 2012).

The most significant problem which has made Thailand become one of the most unpeaceful and undeveloped countries of the world, is the lack of education in rural areas of Thailand and the inequality between rich and poor people (Punyaratabandhu, 2012). About 50% of Thai children have not graduated from high-school and do not have enough efforts for the national standard (Punyaratabandhu, 2012). These problems are caused by "Thailand's social structure" because most of Thai children in rural areas do not have enough money to go to school. This problem makes more Thai children cannot chase their dreams or pursue that happiness in their lives (Punyaratabandhu, 2012). Furthermore, this shows the inequality between rich and poor people which still exists in the Thai society. People who have enough money can go to school. On the contrary, people who are poor cannot go to school. This situation seems getting worse every day. Moreover, the Thai government always focuses to improve only urban cities such as Bangkok, but they do not concentrate on development in the rural areas of Thailand. According to Punyaratabandhu (2012), many policies in Thailand have been created by the authority of a rich people which is unfair for poor people. As a result, this situation could lead to another problem such as poor people cannot express their ideas or opinions on what they want and their needs. Since this situation is getting serious, if the Thai government does not stop these problems or figure out the solution as soon as possible, Thailand will not be as a peaceful country as those Scandinavian countries.

To solve the problems, the Thai government should concentrate more on problems in the rural areas because they are the part of Thailand too. One of the popular foundations which helps to improve the education for children all over the world, known as the United Nations Children's Education Fund or the "UNICEF" (Punyaratabandhu, 2012), has been working in Thailand for many years because they want to make sure that Thai schools become "Child-Friendly

Schools", or CFS. This program has been established for all Thai children in order to give them chances and opportunities equally to study in Thai schools (Punyaratabandhu, 2012). In order to become successful as a peaceful country in the globalized world, Thailand needs to improve the fundamental problems such as the social structure by creating a law to protect all of Thai people, not only rich people, and also it is essential for the Thai government to give an opportunity to poor people to have their freedom or rights to speak for their needs.

UNICEF might be a great idea or plan to reduce the problem of the unequal education for rural areas in Thailand because the UNICEF has been working in many countries around the world for such a long period of time. Therefore, they have their potential to reduce the inequality of the poor children to have their rights for studying. If the Thai government is concentrating about the rural areas' issue, the unpeaceful problem in Thailand will be eliminated as well. As a result, Thai people will live happily, and there will be no more fear about social discrimination again.

Appendix E
ICU Writing Rubric

	Excellent 3	Good 2	Developing 1
Content: critical / creative thinking			
• sufficient evidence			
• quality of evidence			
• logic			
Organization			
• intro-body-conclusion structure			
• arguable thesis			
• topic sentences			
Language control and convention			
• grammar, word choice, spelling			
• format (margins, spacing, indentation, font size)			
• citations and works cited			
Total			

Comments:

Play Activities for Primary English Learners in Vietnam

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Abstract

This article discusses the play activities that are used in primary English classes in a city in Vietnam. Video recording the classes and interviewing the teachers show that various play activities, for example, bingo, miming, hangman, and TPR (Total Physical Response) activities were employed in these classes. Through the play activities, students practiced vocabulary, simple grammatical structures, and language skills such as listening and speaking. In addition, the students learned to follow game rules, support team members, and lead when necessary. Based on the practical values of play activities, the paper provides suggestions on how to use specific play activities in primary English classes, the language skills / areas to be targeted at with play activities, and how to manage the play activities.

The Importance of Play in Learning

Play in learning at the primary level. The definitions of play vary, but the emphasis always includes the fun that play brings to young learners. Play is anything done in a playful manner, as play is a "communication style" (Beresin 1993, p. 252). Play includes learning games and games promoting physical play. In this sense, learning is a precondition for and an integrated part of children's play activities (Sorensen & Meyer, 2007). Play promotes learners' active involvement and engagement, both verbally and non-verbally, with materials, peers, and the learning environment (Shipley, 2008). The British Council (2007) pointed out that at primary-school age, students do not realize of the importance of learning; therefore, teachers should know how to combine learning and playing in group and pair activities to create excitement. In other words, play motivates learners to learn (Cook, 1997; Shipley, 2008), even when learners become frustrated due to losing a competition.

Play is also considered as experiential learning (Verenikina, Harris, & Lysaght, 2003); when children participate in play activities, they subconsciously self-reflect and develop abstract thinking as well as social communication skills. In play activities, children learn and have to abide by rules but also feel free to express their emotions. According to Bodrova and Leong (2001), play provides a unique context where children can develop the ability to self-regulate their behavior at the highest attainable level.

Sociocultural theorists view play as a vital activity of the early childhood years (Vygotsky, 1978). For Vygotskians, play can be imaginary situations and activities with roles and rules.

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The former are usually explicit, but the latter are typically implicit. Children are expected to know the general rules and roles in play activities (Bodrova & Leong, 2001).

Play in language learning. Play activities are described in different ways in language learning. They can be small-group discussions, games, and skits in which the creative and playful use of language is facilitated (Pomerantz & Bell, 2007). They can also use music, games, and TPR (Total Physical Response) activities, verbal play, vocabulary building, talking to oneself in the classroom, or even creating "crazy" sentences such as, "The octopus ate the giant purple banana" (Bacha, 2011, Play section, para. 3).

There are various reasons to use play in language learning. Play provides a rich, complex environment for learning with both form-focused and meaning-focused activities (Cook, 1997). Play includes types of games which are beneficial in many ways both for learning and the emotions of learners (Gee, 2008). In Gee's (2008) point of view, play promotes sharing knowledge, collaboration, and problem solving; players become the owners of their actions and language and can situate meanings of words from actions, images, interaction, and the participation of others.

Discussing play in more detail, Cook (2000) has said that play in language learning is classified into two groups: patterned sound and pragmatic contextualized meaning. The first group contains verse, speech, and semantic meaning, while the second shows the interaction between interlocutors. Pomerantz and Bell (2007) argued that language play is necessary for language production in EFL classrooms. Instances of spontaneous, creative language play help learners practice various vocabulary and sentence structures. In addition, humorous moments in play provide opportunities for participants to use language, contributing to the growth of learners' communicative ability in general. Language play is fun and commonly marked overtly by laughter or other signs of enjoyment. In classrooms where play with language happens, class members develop a sense of community and construct a play frame around utterances or interactions (Sullivan, 2000).

In this study, a play activity refers to the actions and language used in learning English by young learners. It could be each member in the class using words to make a sentence when it is his / her turn to do this in competition with another member, acting out a song, or calling out a word starting with a letter of the alphabet. In these play activities, students usually have fun learning simple words and grammar structures or practicing language skills.

Primary English in Vietnam

English at the primary level in Vietnam has been neglected for years, although English has gained popularity in this country since the *Doi Moi* (innovation) Policy in the 1980s. According to the Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training (2010), Vietnam has a high demand for teachers of English for primary schools (the ministry claims that by 2020 all Grade 3 students will have to study English). However, at present, only a few pedagogical junior colleges and universities in Vietnam offer courses to train English teachers at the primary level. As a result, Vietnam severely lacks primary English teachers (Minh, 2011; Tran & Tran, 2011). Nguyen (2011) revealed that some private schools in the larger cities in Vietnam have started to offer English courses for Grade 1 learners for as many as 12 periods per week; however, the practice of teaching and learning English at the primary level varies across the regions of the country.

Recently, the Ministry of Education and Training launched a project for the period up to 2020 (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 2010) to improve the competence of primary English teachers and so promote the effectiveness of learning in young learners. In 2010, a pilot English primary program was implemented with four 40-minute periods per week starting from Grade 3 (Nguyen, 2011). In the city where this study was carried out, students learn English from Grade 1 to Grade 5, and the number of periods for English ranges from 2 periods to 4. Each school has certain English textbooks for primary English learners, published either abroad or in Vietnam. Apart from learning English at school, students can go to English language centers for extra English lessons. Learning at the centers focuses on topics similar to those taught in primary schools.

The Study

Given that primary English in Vietnam is highly important but neglected, and that play has an influential role in English learning, it is worth investigating how play, specifically, physical games, language games, and verbal language play, is used in primary English classrooms in an area of Vietnam and which language skills or areas are targeted. The research questions of this study are thus:

1. How are play activities employed in primary English classes in Vietnam?
2. What do learners practice with these play activities?

Participants

To collect data, 11 groups of primary English learners at an English language center in Vietnam and 11 teachers teaching at the center were invited to take part in the study. The number of students in each class varied from 8 to 20. The students who came to the English center were from Grade 1 to Grade 6 in various primary schools in a city in Vietnam. They studied twice a week, and they had been studying at this center for periods ranging from about 2 months to 2 years. The teachers had graduated from university with a bachelor's degree in English, specializing in English pedagogy or interpretation. One teacher has a master's degree in TESOL. They had been teaching English at the primary level for at least 3 months. Some had up to two years of experience of teaching at this level. The teachers are all female, and about 65% of their students are also female.

Data Collection

Video recording and interviews were the two main data collection tools. The researcher recorded the activities in which the teachers facilitated learners' play (e.g., games, TPR activities, language play with sounds and vocabulary). Recording was conducted for a period of 2 weeks. Six teachers out of the 11 working at the center, teaching a total of 11 classes, were recorded. Only play activities were recorded for data analysis. Each recording lasted from 5 to 19 minutes. The researcher asked for consent from the classroom teachers to video record the classes and arranged with the classroom teachers when to do the recording to ensure that the normal classroom process was not altered. The play activities were part of the teaching and learning in these classes. They were not set up for research purposes.

Interviews with the six participant teachers who taught the 11 classes mentioned above were conducted after the video recordings. The interviews were in English and, when necessary, in Vietnamese to ensure a smooth flow of ideas. Any Vietnamese language used was translated into English by the researcher. Each interview lasted about 10 minutes and was conducted at the teacher's convenience. The interviews were facilitated with interview questions prepared in English (Appendix A). The play activities listed in the interview questions came from a teacher-training guide for motivating learning from the British Council (2009). When all data were collected, the researcher viewed the video recordings and described the play activities seen. All the video descriptions were compiled according to classes and dated (see Appendix B for a sample video recording description).

Findings and Discussion

Play Activities in Primary English Classes

Although play is a common activity in primary classes because of its many benefits (Cook, 1997; Shipley, 2008; Sorensen & Meyer, 2007), there is no fixed recipe for how frequently teachers should employ play in the classroom. The type and frequency of the play activities reported by the interviewed teachers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Play Activities Reported by Primary English Teachers

Play activities	Number of times used during the data collection period
Bingo	10
Miming	10
TPR activities	10
Vocabulary building	10
Hangman	10
Slap the board	9
Whispers	8
Guessing	8
Shark attack	8
Hot seat	7
Number grab	6
Acting out a song	6
Feely bag game	5
Pretend game	5
Creating “crazy” sentences	4
What's missing?	3
What number is it?	1

The first four kinds of play activities, bingo, miming, TPR activities, and vocabulary building, were reported to be used by nearly all the interviewed teachers. This could be because these activities are common and easy to apply in primary classrooms. The teachers could also have been familiar with them or trained to use them. Moreover, these activities do not require much preparation by teachers. For example, teachers can at any time during their class ask students to search for words from a piece of paper and call out “bingo” when they have found all the words or just to mime an action without using language.

When interviewed, the teachers also said that they employed other play activities not mentioned in the list. For example, Teacher A pointed out that she used various musical toys to help students have fun. Her class occasionally also made animal sounds, listed words by groups, and played a dice game. Teacher B said she asked her students to make up songs with words, make a song from sentences, and draw pictures from words she gave them. Teacher C said her class enjoyed dice games, crosswords, and noughts and crosses. Teacher D used games on the computer, especially *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* Teacher E reported that she asked her students to retell the words written on pieces of paper in a box and used ball passing to play with vocabulary. Teacher F described the use of a dice game and "Simon Says." Teacher F also asked her students to create funny portraits and play crosswords. In the interviews, the teachers said that play activities came from university and graduate courses, colleagues, classmates, and the Internet, or were made by themselves. Overall, the interviews and video recordings indicated the teachers' creativity in teaching young learners.

When asked how often they used play activities in their classes, all of the teachers said they used them in every lesson and at different stages. Two added that they used play activities to cheer students up when the classroom atmosphere seemed tired. Two others reported they often used play activities as warm-ups. One emphasized that she considered students' levels and attitudes to choose play activities for her class. To manage play activities, all the teachers interviewed remarked that they involved the whole class in play activities for the warm-up stage. Four added that they had play activities in the warm-up and production stages. Two teachers said they had play activities in the practice stage.

The video recordings of 11 classes show that all the play activities started with instructions mainly in Vietnamese. Few teachers used English alone to explain what students needed to pay attention to. Teachers sometimes provided models involving students. In summary, play activities were used in all lessons, with patterns varying according to teachers' preferences. The activities were executed with instructions, rules, and models.

Skills / Language Areas Practiced in Play Activities

The 11 video recordings were viewed and the observed play described in categories: play activities, language practice, language skills, and other skills involved in the play activities. Table 2 presents a summary of the recordings.

Table 2

Play Activities and Targeted Language Skills / Areas

Play activity	Description	Language Practice	Language Skills	Other Skills
Hot seat	Two chairs were put in front of the class and labeled with "Animals" and "In the classroom." Students had to sit in the correct chair.	Reviewing vocabulary related to animals and items in the classroom	Listening, pronouncing	Competing to sit on the "hot seat" faster Cheering and supporting team members
Bear grabbing	Students asked and answered questions and grabbed the bear.	Practicing the question "How many?" and simple words to be used with "How many?"	Listening and speaking	Turn taking and being alert in giving correct answers
Ball passing with vocabulary	Students passed the ball. The student who received the ball had to make a word starting with a letter of the alphabet.	Reviewing vocabulary of a wide range	Listening and pronouncing words	Waiting for turns, being prompt in doing an action
Bicycle race	Students played with words. For example, one student wrote *sun*, and another used the last letter in *sun* to make a new word starting with *n*: *night*.	Reviewing a wide range of vocabulary	Writing and spelling words	Judging if the words written by the other team members were correct Supporting team members
TPR activities	Students performed actions according to the imperatives or commands of the teacher. Students responded to simple imperatives from the teacher and the CD.	Reviewing simple imperatives such as "stand up," "sit down," and "clap your hands"	Listening comprehen-sion.	Accepting fun punishment for not responding correctly to the teacher's commands Doing physical movements
Flower drawing	Students competed to draw petals for their group's flower. If they said the words correctly their team would have one petal for their flower.	Reviewing words related to classroom items	Writing and spelling words	Supporting their team members
Hangman	Students worked in two teams to spell correct words with hints from the teacher. If they could not spell correctly, their hangman picture would have more strokes, denoting losing the game	Reviewing words related to animals, e.g., *grasshopper* and *dragonfly*	Spelling words	Competing to win Supporting team members

Keep and take	The class was divided into two teams. Members of each team took a turn on the chair to ask and answer a question and grab the wool strawberry to get scores for his / her team.	Practicing simple questions and answers such as "How old are you?", "What's your name?", "What's the weather like?"	Listening comprehension	Turn taking
Dice game	Board game with dice: Students from the two teams did actions according to the teacher's commands.	Reviewing a wide range of vocabulary	Listening comprehension.	Following game rules Having prizes and fun punishment in a game Singing songs in English
Object passing with music	The teacher played music and students passed the doll. When the teacher paused the music at different intervals, the student who had the doll had to do something as asked by the teacher or classmates.	Asking and answering questions from the teacher and other students in the class	Listening to songs and chants	Being alert to promptly do the action as required

The video recordings show that by participating in play activities, the students reviewed vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation, and practiced listening and speaking skills as well. On the social level, they demonstrated team spirit and competition, and also abided by rules.

Why Teachers Used Play

In the interviews, the teachers gave different opinions about why they used play activities in their classes. All the teachers agreed that students had fun with play activities, which stimulated and motivated them. The teachers also pointed out that students learned and remembered words and simple sentence structures longer. Teacher D said, "Play activities help students remember words used in the play activities, love teachers more, and have more rapport with the teacher." Similarly, Teacher F added, "Play activities create a relaxing learning atmosphere and build confidence and team spirits." Play activities also gave students practice in speaking and presenting skills as well as pronunciation (Teachers A and B). Teacher C elaborated, "In play activities, students learn imperatives and remember lessons longer. Furthermore, shy students are encouraged in play activities." Teachers B and F remarked, "Students practice speaking at the basic level and learn social skills such as group work, leadership skills, and competition." Reflecting a broader sense, Teacher D noted, "In play, students also learn cultures and festivals of English speaking countries, which stimulate curiosity and interest of students in learning English."

Conclusion

Play in teaching young learners is highly recommended, especially in language learning and teaching for learning form and meaning (Cook, 1997) and for enhancing the emotions, shared intelligence, and collaborative skills of learners (Gee, 2008). The current study shows that students had fun playing and reviewing and remembering words from previous lessons. They learned to support each other and compete just for fun. All the students looked cheerful in the video recordings, perhaps because play activities do not create tension and challenge children to think beyond their level. They are just for fun and practice.

This paper reports the findings of a small-scale study which cannot be generalized; however, where contexts are similar, the following suggestions are offered regarding kinds of play activities to be employed and how to use them to target certain skills and language areas in primary English classes.

Classroom teachers can employ available games, such as hot seat, dice game, shark attack, and hangman, but vary the content to match specific lessons. Primary teachers may even make up play activities. They may also ask students to compete for an object, for example, a toy bear, a ball, or a flower. Such simple games will make the class a fun environment for learning.
Play activities can be used as warm-ups, at the production stage, or at any other stage of the lesson, provided that they engage students in a learning task. The time for each play activity should vary from 5 to 15 minutes. In conducting a play activity, teachers need to give instructions, model the activity, and check students' understanding of the rules. In addition, encouraging competition between students in games by giving prizes and fun punishments (e.g., losers have to sing a song or skip around the classroom, as requested by the winners) will make students more excited.

At the primary level, students taking part in play activities practice listening, speaking, and writing skills. They seldom read when playing, but they review vocabulary and grammatical structures. The students could have learned these language areas and skills in previous lessons, or they could learn these new skills from participating and observing other students. Either way, the students reinforce or practice targeted skills.

The study focused on the play activities at an English center and explored how they were employed and for what purposes. It did not go as far as looking at each transcript to compare the language used by young learners to make recommendations concerning various learning opportunities which different types of play activities can offer. Perhaps a future study is needed to investigate what, in specific terms of language, primary students learn through play activities. Such a study would need to take place over a longer period of time, recording students in several play activities.

Play not only stimulates the learning process but also makes teaching less daunting. With play activities, teachers adopt a different role. They, to some extent, move away from the traditional image of a teacher just giving knowledge, because they have created a fun way for students to learn through mental and physical involvement. In this process, teachers become participants and organizers. Therefore, to meet the need of young learners to learn in a relaxing atmosphere, teachers should have a collection of games and use them flexibly. For primary teachers to be equipped with knowledge about play and how to use it effectively, it is important that they seek out activities and, even more importantly, are trained systematically in their courses at college or university on how to use games and other play activities.

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Appendix A
Questions for Interviews With Primary English Teachers

Please tell me if you use the following play activities in your class	Yes
Bingo: Students find the words/pictures according to instructions.	
What number is it? For example, children stick a number on a child's back and ask the question "What number is it?" The class repeats the expression and answer to practice vocabulary for numbers and pronouncing them.	
Whispers: Students whisper the questions to practice chunks of language "What's your favorite sport?", "Why do you like it?" Students whisper from a student at the last row of the class to a student in the first row who will write the whispered sentence on the board.	
What's missing? Learners find the missing pictures in a story.	
Number grab: The teacher says a word "a pencil" and the children have to grab the right picture.	
Mime game: Learners mime the actions.	
Guessing game: Learners guess words from pictures.	
Feely bag game: Learners describe objects in a bag and others have to say the words.	
TPR activities: Learners do actions according to imperatives given by teachers or other classmates.	
Creating "crazy" sentences, such as, "The octopus ate the giant purple banana."	
Acting out a song: For example, for the song "Five little ducks," learners act as the little ducks and a mother duck and sing along the song.	
Pretend game: Learners act the role of somebody else and pretend.	
Vocabulary building	
Hot seat	
Slap the board	
Hangman	
Shark attack	
Others? Please specify	

1. How often do you have play activities in your class?
2. Do you involve the whole class or just some volunteers in play activities?
3. At which stage of a lesson do you use play activities?
4. Where do you get ideas for play activities from?
5. How do you manage play activities?
6. How do you think learners benefit from play activities?

Appendix B
Sample of Video Recording Description

Video Recording 1. Date: 24 June 2012
The class has 18 students. They were in Grades 3-5 at primary schools. The play activity was carried out near the end of a 90-minute class. The teacher organized the "hot seat" activity. She put two chairs in the front of the class of a U shape. The teacher explained to the students how to participate in the game. The students joined enthusiastically and noisily. The students stood in two lines. The two chairs were labeled "Animals" and "In the classroom." The teacher read out loud one word, for example, "crayon," then two students in front of each line would run quickly to sit in the right chair. In this case, the student who was faster to run to sit on the chair labeled "In the classroom" would win one point for his team. If the student sat on the wrong chair, no point was recorded. The activity ended when the teachers finished using the cards to call out the words for both teams.

The students practiced listening skills when they paid attention to the teacher reading the words out loud. They also had the opportunity to recall the vocabulary related to their previous lessons: animals and items in the classroom. At the social level, the students learned how to compete with other team members to be faster to sit on the hot seat. They cooperated in yelling and cheering their team members to win.

Creating Communities:
The L2 Self and ICT in an EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Developing communicative skills in English where it is a foreign language is a frustrating challenge for the L2 learner. Information and communication technologies (ICT) offer the possibility for L2 students to develop those skills collaboratively. The purpose of this article is to share the idea of building a student-centered community online where the students use the Internet as a creative space to develop their L2 identities. In this project, a first-year university class at a Japanese women's college used blogging as a space to develop and communicate their learning experience in English. A second class used video screen capture software to record a news report and then share their imagined L2 identities with the first class via the blog. By the end of term it was revealed that the learners' positive response to this project could be an instrumental approach to developing autonomous L2 communities beyond the classroom.

The continuing significance of English as a common tongue for global communication is well documented (Kirkpatrick, 2007, 2011; Ryan, 2006, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2004). Although the number of native speakers of English is declining, by 2050 half the world is expected to be using English to some extent (Graddol, 2003; Johnson, 2009). This prediction is due in large part to the continuing dominant role that English plays in the areas of science and technology, international / local business, and global communications. With the push towards globalization, the need for communicating in English has influenced many national educational policies to develop teaching methods to address that need.

A pedagogical approach to teaching English to non-native speakers in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) environment is challenging. Unlike the ESL (English as a Second Language) setting, the EFL environment outside the classroom does not easily reinforce nor support the development of the necessary language skills required for effective communication. Access to the target-language community is either not readily accessible or may be financially unattainable. The development of Web 2.0 technologies, along with growing access to the Internet, is bridging that gap. Preparation for communication via the Internet requires important pedagogical considerations. This project will show how the use of Information and communication technology (ICT) tools can be balanced with a theoretical framework that considers the following: imagined communities, the L2 self-motivational system, and ICT in education.

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Theoretical Framework

The following section discusses three theoretical concepts that are instrumental to creating a stimulating framework for EFL students to develop their skills using Web 2.0 technologies.

Imagined Communities

Discussions of group dynamics in relation to how they affect learner motivation have tended to focus on the immediate classroom environment in which learning takes place (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Arguably, learning concerns not just the acquisition of language skills but the engagement with others who share in the same "situated learning" context (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Anderson (1991) coined the term "imagined communities" to explain how national identity can give one the sense of belonging with those they have yet to meet and are removed from in space and time. Kanno and Norton (2003) call for a broader understanding of community that includes others who are "not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination" (p. 241).

Helping learners to imagine that they are part of a larger worldwide EFL network that goes beyond the space of the classroom is an important step to increasing their motivation to learn the necessary language skills they will need to communicate with an imagined community. Wenger (1999) points out that the power of imagination can be instrumental in transcending space and time to open up new worlds for learners. Instructors can assist the learners in the "learning trajectory" needed to reach out to a transnational global community that is "no less real than those in which the learners have daily engagement and might even have a stronger impact on their current actions and investment" (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 242).

L2 Self-Motivational System

The link between language identity in the foreign language context and motivation has been understood in L2 research for over 50 years (Gardner, 2001; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). While English remains the dominant language for globalization, the traditional concept that learners' motivation for learning the language is integration with "the norm-developing inner circle countries" may not be entirely accurate (Ryan, 2006, p. 42). Lamb (2004) found that Indonesian learners associated English more with international culture than with any community bound by geographical location. Similarly, Ryan (2009) observed that Japanese students rated their reasons for studying English higher when the target culture was left "undefined" (p. 131). These studies present an important shift in our re-evaluation of the L2 self as a motivational system and how our learners identify with their sense of belonging in a global community. Perhaps what is really intrinsic to EFL students' motivation in learning English is the opportunity it affords them to restructure "a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world" (Norton, 2000, p. 444).

Dörnyei and Csizer (2002) observe that L2 learners narrow the gap between the imagined self and the real self the more they engage in creative scenarios using the language. Research has also shown that another distinction known as the "ought-to self" controls against negative outcomes as the learners integrate their new identity into the present (Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009). The role for the teacher is to help make imagined communities accessible for learners. Learners can then practice linking new words and honing new language skills through the creation of "possible selves," as well as reaffirm and redefine their already existing L2 selves (Ryan, 2009).

ICT in Education

The popularity of using Web 2.0 technologies for language learning is due in large part to the creation of new social spaces where learners can interact with each other. Vygotsky's claim that human beings learn through the manipulation of tools and verbal interaction with others supports the use of such technology for cognitive and social development (Erben, Ban, & Castaneda, 2008). However, it must be remembered that success with ICT tools in a language-learning environment is largely dependent on the proper scaffolding of its use. Although the introduction of new technologies can be frustrating for some learners, the CALL (computer-assisted language learning) setting is a perfect opportunity for encouraging a collaborative environment where more proficient users of technology can assist novices to overcome difficulties. Allowing for "technology tinker time" (Erben et al., 2008, Teaching Tip 1 section, para. 1), becomes a metaphor for the trial-and-error atmosphere teachers want to foster in the classroom. Once the learners have acquired a reasonably proficient use of the tools, the teacher can take on the part of facilitator and creator of projects that stimulate the learners to apply their language skills and creativity. For example, blog sites can be set up easily so that the students can explore their L2 selves as authors and editors. According to Godwin-Jones (2006), blogs enhance students' abilities to be critical thinkers and better readers, encourage the sharing of opinions, and create an overall environment that is more student-centered.

The Project: Bringing Two Communities Together

Following the already mentioned theoretical concepts, the instructor used two CALL classrooms at the same university to experiment with ICT tools and curriculum development.

Participants

Two classes at the same women's university in urban Japan participated in this study. The participants in one class (Class A) were 36 intermediate-level first-year students enrolled in an intensive English program. The participants in the second class (Class B) were 10 students in an elective class, ranging from first to third-year. Each class met once a week for 90 minutes throughout a 15-week term in a CALL classroom. Both classes willingly participated in sharing their work with each other online. Class objectives and a breakdown of assessments for their respective performances were explained at the start of the term.

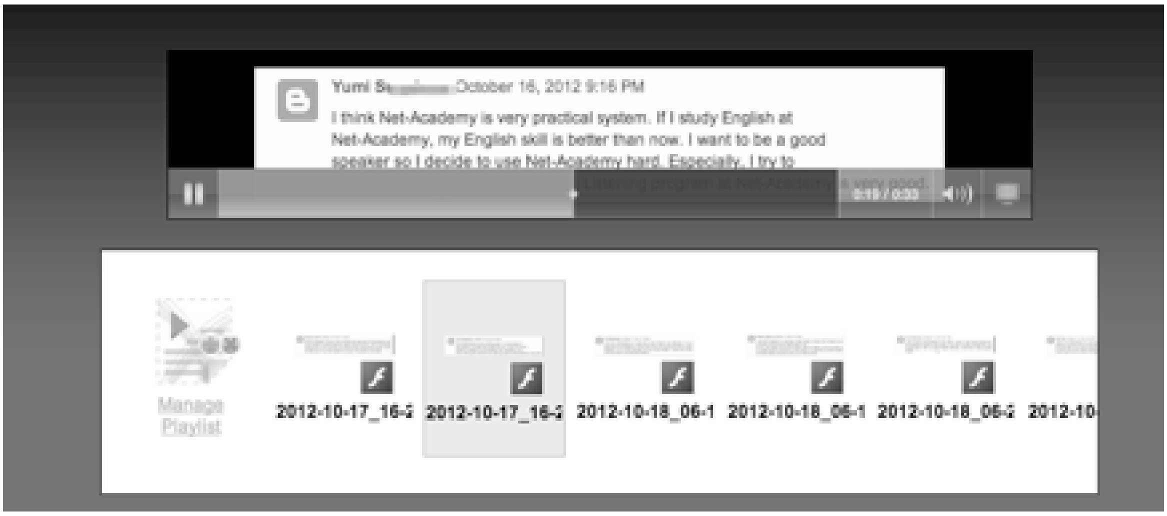
Objectives

The objectives of the project were:

- Supporting the learners in the creation of an imagined community online through interactive blogging as suggested by the work of Kanno and Norton (2003), and
- Helping students to collaborate in the development of technological skills necessary for meaningful interaction within the community.

Procedure

Setting up the blog with Class A. Class A was expected to use a software program (with instructions in Japanese) called ALC NetAcademy 2 (ALC Education, 2013) to develop their receptive (reading and listening) skills in order to improve their TOEIC scores. The reading material is not authentic and is graded according to the level that the student chooses. Since the software does not challenge the students to improve their productive skills, supplementary tasks using inspirational TED.com videos, e.g., *The 3 A's of Awesome* (Pasricha, 2010), were also assigned to encourage learners to reflect on authentic, meaningful content and practice fluency in writing blogs. Every week, the students had to write a response to blog questions related to the use of ALC NetAcademy and the TED.com video materials for that week (see Appendix). Video screen capture software called Snagit (TechSmith, 2013) was used to record the instructor's responses to each student's blog entries, and all the recordings were assembled into one playlist (see http://www.screencast.com/help/tutorial.aspx?id=301). Figure 1 is a sample of what students see in a browser when they click on the link to the playlist. Students are not required to register for an account to see the playlist.

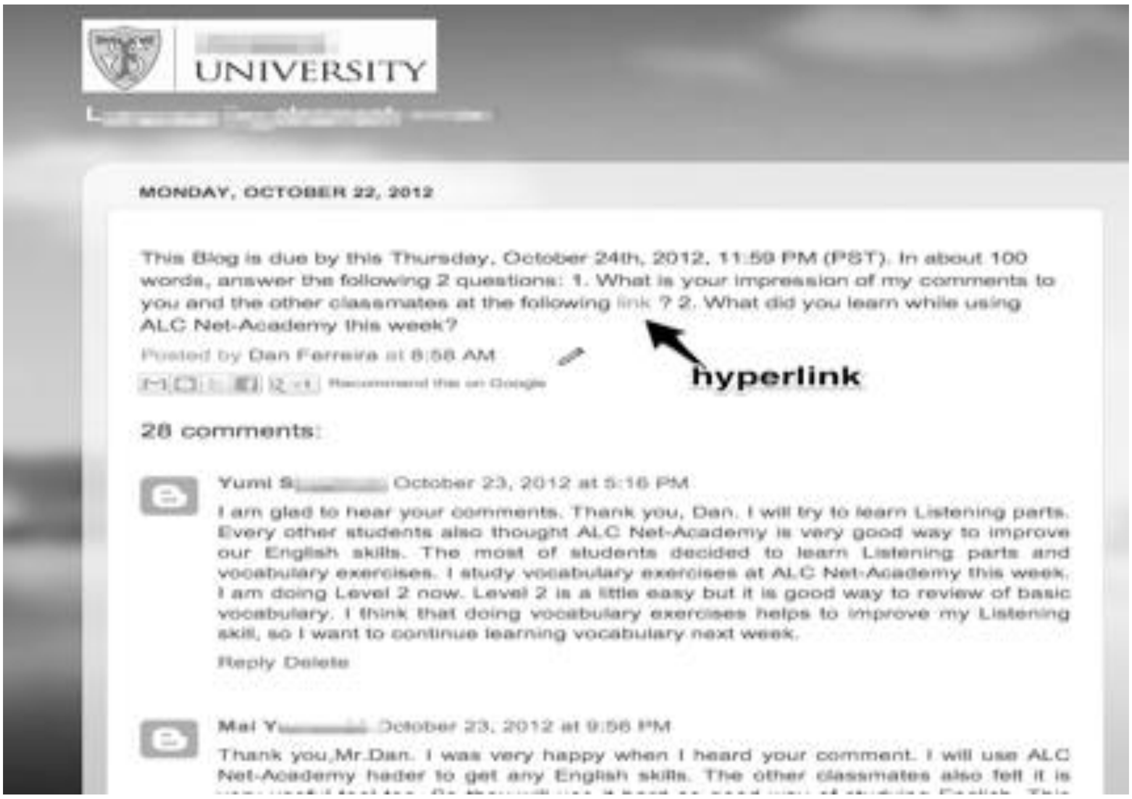


Yumi S[redacted] October 16, 2012 9:16 PM

I think Net-Academy is very practical system. If I study English at Net-Academy, my English skill is better than now. I want to be a good speaker so I decide to use Net-Academy hard. Especially, I try to

Figure 1. A playlist of the teacher's video screen captured recordings, responding to individual student blog entries.

The hyperlink link to the playlist was included in the following week's blog homework assignment (see Figure 2).



[redacted] UNIVERSITY

MONDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2012

This Blog is due by this Thursday, October 24th, 2012, 11:59 PM (PST). In about 100 words, answer the following 2 questions: 1. What is your impression of my comments to you and the other classmates at the following link ? 2. What did you learn while using ALC Net-Academy this week?

Posted by Dan Ferreira at 8:58 AM

28 comments:

Yumi S[redacted] October 23, 2012 at 5:16 PM

I am glad to hear your comments. Thank you, Dan. I will try to learn Listening parts. Every other students also thought ALC Net-Academy is very good way to improve our English skills. The most of students decided to learn Listening parts and vocabulary exercises. I study vocabulary exercises at ALC Net-Academy this week. I am doing Level 2 now. Level 2 is a little easy but it is good way to review of basic vocabulary. I think that doing vocabulary exercises helps to improve my Listening skill, so I want to continue learning vocabulary next week.

Mai Y[redacted] October 23, 2012 at 9:56 PM

Thank you,Mr.Dan. I was very happy when I heard your comment. I will use ALC Net-Academy hader to get any English skills. The other classmates also felt it is

Figure 2. A blog homework post including a hyperlink to a video screencast playlist.

Eventually, as the students became more adept at using the blog site, they were asked to listen to the instructor's comments on their classmates' blog entries and remark on any aspect that resonated with their own learning experience. This was the first stage of creating the community-like experience online. Figure 3 illustrates the initial set-up of the online blogging community.

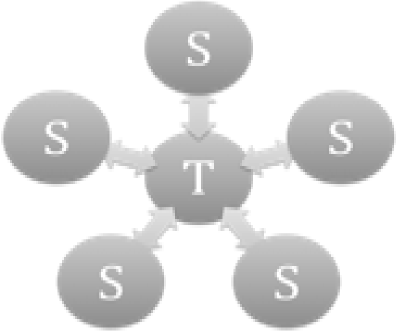


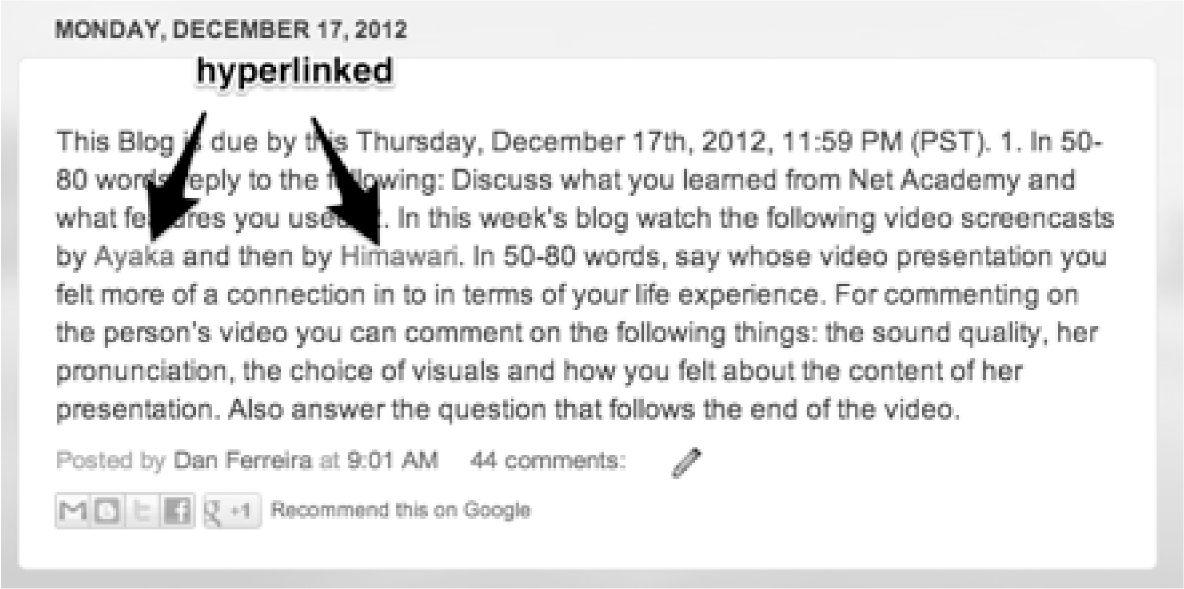
Figure 3. The first stage of creating the blogging community.

The "T" at the center of Figure 3 represents the teacher-fronted approach of posting the single weekly blog post. Creating one blog thread centralized students' access to each other's posts for that week. The two-way arrow between "T" and "S" illustrates the interaction between the teacher and each student. Although this first stage of creating on online community is somewhat teacher-centered, the instructor really serves as a conduit to the other class members due to the playlist feature (Figure 1) of sharing each other's blogs. More specifically, the students have access to each other's work, and the interaction takes place on a blog thread for all to share and comment on.

The newscast video screen capture with Class B. Class B, the other class of 10 students in an elective course focusing on news media English, engaged in activities that prepared them to work with news media texts and videos. Students were introduced to the idea of creating a university vidcast (video podcast) online for the following Fall semester. It was explained that the vidcast would be a bi-weekly newscast that would be controlled, produced, and presented by the students and would feature news related to campus activities and local community events in a news-style format. The students understood that their newscast recordings would be evaluated by another community of learners (i.e., Class A) on the following criteria:

- Content being adapted to the local area (preferably around the university locale)
- Creative use of PowerPoint
- Humor (one or more news items had to be humorous)
- Clear pronunciation
- Good intonation

Students were taught how to record with the Snagit video screen capture software. Each student was assigned a news item from a site called Elllo (2013) where she replaced all the content words and adapted the news content to the listed criteria (see https://vimeo.com/57753067 for a sample). This approach allowed the students to focus on the above criteria while feeling relatively confident about the grammatical aspects particular to the genre of news reporting. The teacher provided corrective feedback on the written scripts on an individual level. However, feedback on the technical aspects of the video recordings was shared as a whole-class activity. After the news video screencasts had been completed, two videos a week were shared and hyperlinked with the blogs of Class A as shown in Figure 4.



MONDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2012

This Blog is due by this Thursday, December 17th, 2012, 11:59 PM (PST). 1. In 50-80 words reply to the following: Discuss what you learned from Net Academy and what features you used it. In this week's blog watch the following video screencasts by Ayaka and then by Himawari. In 50-80 words, say whose video presentation you felt more of a connection in to in terms of your life experience. For commenting on the person's video you can comment on the following things: the sound quality, her pronunciation, the choice of visuals and how you felt about the content of her presentation. Also answer the question that follows the end of the video.

Posted by Dan Ferreira at 9:01 AM 44 comments:

Figure 4. A sample blog assignment with hyperlinks to Class B's video screencasts.

Each student in Class A commented on the newscasts. The Class B students whose newscasts were profiled for the week were also invited to share their comments. The comments from both classes focused on the specific criteria in addition to the video production quality. By this stage, the instructor had stopped responding to the individual blogs and had become the facilitator for both classes in a new community. This second stage of the merged blogging community is illustrated in Figure 5.

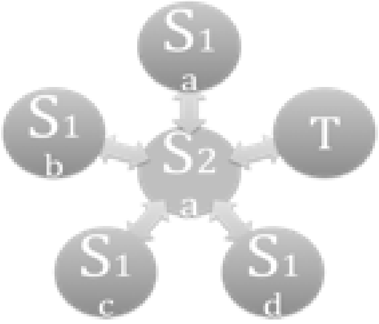


Figure 5. The blogging community becoming more autonomous in Stage Two.

In the second stage of the blogging community, a new group of students started to participate. S2a at the center represents the student from Class B who produced the newscasts, and S1a-d represent the Class A students. At this point, the teacher took the role of facilitator and coordinated the interaction between the two classes. Throughout the remaining weeks of the course for both classes, the teacher continued to provide open class feedback on submitted blogs and technical assistance to the second class in their newscast productions.

Student Evaluation

At the end of the term, Class A chose three candidates from Class B for the role of main newscaster. A playlist of all the videos was made available for all the students to see and evaluate. Additionally, at the end of term, the students were asked to rate which of the following three components of the course inspired them the most: the video screencasts from the students of the other class, the teacher's vocal comments, or the classmates' blog entries. Of the 27 respondents, 40% chose the classmates' blogs, 33% the screencasts of the other class, and 25% chose the teacher's vocal comments. Overall, the results show a balance of appreciation for all three contributions by the community.

Discussion

The newscast project was primarily inspired by the theoretical concept of using the imagination to create a "possible L2 self" (Dörnyei & Csizer, 2002). However, the written communication between the two classes on the blogging site and the possibility for members of Class B to be elected as the main newscaster for the upcoming News Vidcast project in the Fall semester showed a "narrowing of the gap" between the imagined and the present L2 self (Dörnyei & Csizer, 2002). The pace of language production in an asynchronous environment that the blogging community provided allowed the learners to self-regulate their own growth while developing and expanding their "knowledge capital" with other learners (Erben et al., 2008, Implications for the Classroom section 1, para. 1). Moreover, the learners seemed to appear to distinguish quite well between the act of language learning and using language to reaffirm their present L2 identities (Ryan, 2009).

The newscast presentations for Class B required a lot of technical support. When introducing IT (instructional technology) tools into the learning cycle, teachers have to assess where their students' abilities lie in the continuum. In Erben, Ban, and Castañeda's "nine-point continuum of IT use" (2008), video podcasting and blogging are rated as the highest skills for IT use. If students' experience with IT places them lower on the continuum, then advancing them too soon may prove to be frustrating for them. Since Class B was an elective class, student motivation and group collaboration to overcome the learning curve using the video screencasting software proved to be an advantage. Through trial and error, students were able to use the technology to creatively achieve the objective of the newscast presentation.

However, the author did face some difficulties with the newscast presentations. Since the students possessed varying ranges of ability in language and technical abilities, the following changes would be recommended for the future:

- More collaboration during class between the higher- and lower-level students in the use of technology;
- More peer support in editing written drafts for the newscast;
- More opportunities for the students to give each other feedback on their work;
- Time during class for students to practice pronunciation and spoken presentation of their drafts prior to recording; and
- More one-to-one support from the teacher for pronunciation and intonation.

Conclusion

This research has found the following results. In Stage 1 of the blogging community, students in the first-year responded well to the teacher's comments on the weekly blog posts. Although this was somewhat teacher-centered, the students were able to access each other's work thanks to the playlist feature of video screencasts. After a month of teacher feedback on individual posts and writing fluency assignments, the class was ready for the second stage of blogging that allowed for the introduction of a second community to participate and share their work.

Creating the community online was more than just learning language; as the students worked to control the tools for communication, they were engaging with each other and sharing knowledge and expertise. The blog site became an extension of the learning space where the learners could meet and communicate, albeit asynchronously. Class B drew inspiration from both the inter- and intra-group communication. The enthusiasm students expressed about using the technology for learning and communicating was shown in their responses on the blogs. What remains to be seen is whether this approach to using the Internet to reaffirm their L2 identity would be as successful if the Japanese learners were to engage with a community of EFL / ESL learners of a different L1 background. Moreover, it remains unclear how effective the newscast project was for preparing the students of Class B to produce their own texts for the proposed university vidcast idea. As the goal was not to focus on newscast genre writing per se, using ICT to bridge two separate classes while exploring the creation of L2 selves proved relatively successful.

It is envisaged that the ideas in this study will encourage other instructors to look at the use of ICT tools as a means for helping EFL students explore many possible L2 selves and to help the learners realize that they are part of a larger imaginable community.

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Appendix
Sample Blog Homework Post

This blog is due by this (Insert Date).

1. In 50-80 words, reply to the following: Discuss what you learned from Net Academy and what features you used (Reading, Listening, Vocabulary).
2. In this week's blog, watch the following video screencast: Neil Pasricha

   http://www.ted.com/talks/neil_pasricha_the_3_a_s_of_awesome.html

   In 50-80 words, say what you learned about the video presentation and how it connects to you in terms of your life experience.

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The language learning and teaching context in the Asian region is as varied and complex as the countries encompassed in this part of the world. Each context is defined by the history and culture of each specific country and the region as a whole and the language policies and languages involved, including a myriad of local, indigenous, colonial, and "global" languages.

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