Why assign themes and topics to teach writing? A reply to Tony Silva

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Introduction

Do I as a writing teacher have a right to assign to my students their topics for papers or even the content themes for a writing course?

Although at first glance it might seem obvious that writing teachers should be able to assign specific paper topics and course themes to their writing students, this has become a controversial issue recently. Within the context of an article entitled “On the Ethical Treatment of ESL Writers,” Professor Tony Silva (1997) asserted that writing teachers should prevent themes and topics from dominating or controlling the curriculum. With a broad sweep, he identified a wide range of topics and themes that he considers inappropriate as the primary focus of a writing class:

Third, those who deal with ESL writers must provide appropriate instruction, which, in my view, should explicitly recognise students as intelligent human beings and unique individuals with their own views and agendas and their own interesting stories to tell, not as blank slates for teachers to inscribe their opinions on nor buckets to be filled with their teachers’ worldly wisdom. Furthermore, ESL writers should not be subjected to bait-and-switch scams. If they enroll in courses with titles like Introductory Writing or Freshman Composition, I believe it is certainly reasonable for them to expect and to get courses that focus primarily if not exclusively on writing, as opposed to such interesting and important yet inappropriate topics such as peace education, conflict resolution, environmental concerns, political issues, particular ideologies, literature, critical thinking, cultural studies, or some other cause celebre du jour, and use writing merely as an add-on or reinforcement activity. I am not suggesting here that teachers conceal their personal interests or political views from their
students – this is unrealistic and perhaps impossible. I am suggesting that these interests and views should neither control nor become the curriculum. (Silva, 1997, p. 361)

His ethical advice is for writing teachers to focus on teaching students about “rhetorical, linguistic, conventional, and strategic issues about the distinct nature of writing in an L2 and its implications for these issues” (1997, p. 361). He continues, “I suggest that students be given control of the why and the what of writing and that teachers focus on the how, where, and when, on facilitating rather than controlling students’ writing” (1997, p. 362).

In contrast to Silva’s (1997) view, I argue in this paper that it is sometimes helpful, perhaps even necessary, for writing teachers to control the why and what of their students’ writing. I am not suggesting that all students in all places should always be denied all opportunities to develop their own themes and topics; instead, my point is that teachers who do choose to make extensive use of teacher-assigned themes and topics may have legitimate, practical, and ethical reasons.

My intent is to critique the views of this topic recently expressed by Professor Silva. Because he is a renowned scholar of considerable influence upon the teaching of second language writing and has been serving as co-editor of the prestigious Journal of Second Language Writing for several years, his published opinions are important. For these reasons, his words invite scrutiny and, whenever appropriate, vigorous challenge. Hence, it is in the spirit of academic scrutiny and debate that I pen this paper.

I would also like to point out that my discussion will focus on the teaching of university-level English writing in general, and EFL/ESL writing in particular. Some may choose to distinguish between the teaching of EFL and ESL writing by geographic context. Writes Silva (1998), “I think it is made clear in the title and my first sentence of my piece that I meant to address only ESL writers, specifically ESL writers in colleges and universities in North America” (1998, p. 342). Others have observed that such simple distinctions between the terms EFL and ESL are highly problematic (Nayar, 1997).

My own daily classroom experience in Taiwan informs me that the boundaries between EFL and ESL teaching - just like the borders between many nations and cultures - are often flimsy and porous. In my advanced
writing classes in Taiwan, I teach students who have learned English in Taiwan only, while many others have learned it in multi-lingual environments in Taiwan, in North America, and in other parts of the world. I even have some who could be classified as native speakers of English, Taiwanese people who hold dual citizenships and have learned English as young children for several years in predominantly English-speaking countries.

This difficulty in maintaining viable distinctions between the terms second and foreign language teaching appears even to be reflected in the research presented by prestigious academic journals. According to Santos (2000), between 1992 to 1998, only two of 84 articles published in the Journal of Second Language Writing "focused specifically and exclusively on permanent-resident ESL students" (2000, p. 9).

Hence, in my view it is appropriate, even essential, to reflect these practical realities by referring to the teaching of EFL and ESL academic writing, especially in my own advanced writing classes in Taiwan, as essentially the same activity.

Teaches the process of writing

Jones (1998a) argues that using teacher-assigned comprehensive course themes and specific writing topics could assist in teaching students about the processes and the conventions of writing an academic paper. The idea here is that having an entire class share the same theme or topic would provide a common experience for the group, a point of departure that all would share. As students would share reading materials and participate in discussions and debates about the theme or topic, they would develop their own reasoned views, which would help them in the drafting and revising of their papers.

Silva (1998) offers a curious response. He points out that Jones (1998a) offers no evidence to show that the use of comprehensive themes and writing topics can assist in teaching students about the processes of writing academic papers. Yet in an earlier article, Silva (1993) actually recommends for teachers to consider using "a set of assignments that look at one (student-chosen) theme or topic area from a variety of perspectives, thereby allowing students to build syntactic and lexical repertoire in this area through repeated use" (1993, p. 671). Unfortunately, Silva offers no explanation for his apparent change of view. Are we to assume from his words that looking
at one theme or topic from a variety of perspectives would somehow be less appropriate now for developing students’ language skills than it was in 1993?

Silva does remain consistent in his support of student choice in the selection of themes and topics. However, applying Silva’s (1993, 1997) advice to let students select their own course themes and writing assignments, a writing teacher with a class of 25 students could wind up with as many as 25 different individually selected course themes, one for each student. This would certainly give students freedom of choice and power to act in behalf of their own interests, but I believe that a course theme shared by all still has its own inherent value, even if it were to be assigned by the teacher. Of course, one might argue that students could be encouraged to develop their own course theme for various assignments in a writing class. This idea is democratic and appealing. But in a class of 25 students, how likely is it that they would all agree to accept on their own a particular theme for everyone to share? And in how many classes would there be such amazing unanimity?

If the writing students were to work independently on their own separate themes and topics within the same course, it would likely become more difficult for them to work together as a community of writers, a group of knowledgeable peers. In Bruffee’s (1984) words, “A community of knowledgeable peers is a group of people who accept, and whose work is guided by, the same paradigms and the same code of values and assumptions” (p. 642). Without a shared course theme, students might lack helpful expertise and understanding about the content of each other’s paper topics, making it more difficult for them to respond to the development of interpretations and ideas during collaborative writing activities, such as peer reviews.

Peer reviews are valuable activities in EFL/ESL writing classes. Evidence suggests that, whenever possible, peers try hard to provide helpful suggestions for the development of ideas within papers (Berg, 1999; De Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; Lockhart & Ng, 1996). There is some evidence suggesting that students of non-Western socio-cultural groups may not work well within peer reviews (Carson & Nelson, 1996; Nelson & Carso, 1998). Yet several other studies involving Asian-born students report that peers generally enjoy and value peer review sessions (Jacobs, Curtis, Braine & Huang, 1998; Roskams, 1999; Tang & Tithecott, 1999).

To prepare students to get the most benefit out of peer review, how
much expertise of the subject matter and the contents of papers should they be expected to share? Some researchers find that lacking shared knowledge of the paper's topic might force writers to explain their ideas more clearly for the non-expert readers (Berg, 1999; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Tang & Tithecott, 1999). Nevertheless, Mendonca and Johnson (1994) note that some students of their study actually preferred to be reviewed by peers of the same academic discipline, because of concerns about expertise in responding to the contents of papers.

This desire to have a knowledgeable, informed audience in peer review sessions is understandable. It recognises reality within the academic world. In academic writing, authors often draft papers for well-informed readers who are intent upon evaluating the effectiveness of support within arguments (Reid & Kroll, 1995). Hence, it seems very reasonable to me to ask student writers to learn how to write academic papers by having them write for readers (peers) who share background knowledge about the contents of papers. How would this be possible if, for example, 25 undergraduates in a research writing class were to pursue 25 very different course themes and write 25 different research papers on 25 different topics?

Evidence suggests that content-based instruction focusing on a common course theme can be a very effective method to improve EFL/ESL reading and writing skills. In a longitudinal study based upon an experimental design, Kasper (1997) found that students in her content-based, theme-focused ESL reading and writing sections out-performed the students of other sections of the same course on standard reading and writing assessments. Moreover, the benefits of the content-based writing instruction appeared to be long lasting. The students who completed the content-based sections continued to out-perform their ESL peers in other ESL skill courses. Kasper even found that students who had completed the content-based writing sections were more likely to graduate than their peers who were enrolled in other writing sections.

Motivates students

In the second part of his article, Jones (1998a) writes that assigning themes and topics could help to motivate students to want to write well. He argues that students often do not like being in a writing class and that there is no evidence in Silva's (1998) article to show that giving them choice in selecting their own paper topics would help them to enjoy it more. Moreover, Jones (1998a) argues that giving students a lot of freedom in selecting paper
topics can be counter-productive, as the freedom could lead to confusion and frustration among those who may need more guidance and direction. Jones (1998a) also maintains that assigning themes and topics for a writing class is an important responsibility of a writing teacher.

Silva (1998) supports an important premise of Jones’ argument here, which is that students often do not like taking writing courses. Writes Silva (1998), “It seems reasonable to me to suggest that students often dislike taking college composition classes because they are usually compelled to do so and that forcing topics on them could well compound the problem, adding insult to injury” (1998, p. 346). To the argument that giving students too much freedom of choice in topic selection might be counter-productive for the development of their writing, Silva responds by pointing out that Jones (1998a) offers no evidence for support and that Jones (1998a) underestimates the abilities of EFL/ESL writers who, Silva (1998) believes, can select their own topics and handle them well. Throughout his rebuttal, Silva (1998) offers no evidence to support his own assertion that allowing students to select their paper topics would be a stronger motivator for them to write than to give them a teacher-assigned writing topic or a course theme.

My hunch is that most experienced writing teachers, including those who may expect students to select their own topics individually, probably control selection of individual paper topics, at least to some extent. For example, if a student were to select as a topic for a research paper Taiwanese History, a writing teacher would probably want to encourage the would-be author to narrow the topic to something manageable. Therefore, the issue becomes less of whether or not teachers should control topic selection and development, but more of how much.

In my teaching of advanced EFL/ESL writing among university students in Taiwan, I have found that asking them to draft an oral history paper of a senior family member or an older friend is an effective method to motivate them to learn how to write (Jones, 1998b). In addition to providing students with a personally relevant, immediate, and specific task, the oral history assignment taps into a powerful cultural value shared by my Taiwanese students, which is their respect for, and their love of, senior family members.

In the semester-long class, we focus on doing family oral histories. This assignment clearly dominates and controls the curriculum of the course. However, as the students conduct their field interviews, organise their data,
draft their papers, revise their drafts, and peer edit each others’ work, they also attend to academic writing conventions and learn how to write a research paper that is based upon the collection of primary field data.

Because of the strong oral history theme that requires them to write about a senior family member, their efforts are intense and deeply committed, as reflected in the following student comment, which appeared on a written survey at the end of one of my recent writing classes:

> And during the interviews with my families, I heard stories of my grandmother that made me moved and shocked. In that minute of time, I realised the relationship between me and my family had changed subtly. I found the intimacy between us, and I found most of us have the same essence in our blood that makes us have a similar characteristic. This discovery drove me to write the oral history as well as I could. This writing became not just an exercise in composition class, but it became a very important document - to me and my family.

A skeptic might argue that the teaching of oral history in EFL/ESL writing classes might be a quaint idea, but that it would probably be inappropriate for students studying in the sciences. Writes Silva (1998), “... how would writing oral family histories prepare students to write in, say, a physics or biology class?” (1998, p. 349). Allow me to respond.

First, it is very patronising to assume that just because students might be majoring in natural sciences or applied sciences that it would be inappropriate for them to learn to write an oral history, especially of a beloved family member or older friend. Likewise, it might be very appropriate, interesting, and helpful for students in the sciences to write oral histories about the careers of senior engineers and scientists.

Second, a student majoring in engineering or natural sciences who writes an oral history would learn some basic, valuable, and transferable skills, such as how to organise a research project, how to collect data systematically, how to examine data for patterns, how to present the data and the research findings in writing, and how to revise the paper multiple times, making it focused and coherent. These kinds of skills, in one form or another, are important for completing nearly any sort of important academic paper (Spack, 1985, 1988).
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Third, it is also a good idea to teach students how to write papers outside of their major fields. Undergraduates of every major field must complete general university course requirements, which often involve some academic writing. The writing assignments in non-major courses can be especially challenging. In a survey of EFL/ESL students attending content courses in an American university, Kroll (1979) found that 54% reported having to write term papers. In the same study, Kroll (1979) found that writing term papers far-removed from their major fields were the most difficult for the students.

Once again, my purpose is not to suggest that using oral history to teach writing is the best method for every teacher. Rather, my point is simply that writing teachers, after careful study of, and reflection about, their local classroom situations should have the freedom to develop challenging, interesting, and appropriate themes and topics for their own students.

Prepares students

In the third part of his article, Jones (1998a) claims that teacher-assigned themes and topics may better help students to prepare for the reality of writing academic papers for other professors in other classes. Citing Reid (1989), he points out that in academic writing, “the purpose of a writing assignment is usually designed, assigned, and evaluated by the audience (the professor)” (1998, p. 220).

In his reply, Silva (1998) questions how teaching writing students to write oral histories would help to prepare them for writing papers in a physics or a biology class. He appeared at one point to agree with Reid’s (1989) statement of how the purpose of academic writing assignments are usually “designed, assigned, and evaluated by the audience (the professor)” (1998, p. 220). Silva (1998) writes, “Although this statement [by Reid] may be accurate in many cases, in my view, the assignment of purpose does not entail the assignment of a topic or a theme. I see no difficulty in assigning a purpose, for example, persuasion, in a course where students choose their own topics” (Silva, 1998, p. 349).

For my part, I would like to affirm that Silva is entitled to hold his own views about the meaning of the word purpose or the value of teacher-assigned themes and topics. That is his right. But Reid’s (1989) original point should not be distorted. Her point is that in academic writing, the
audience often designs and assigns the writing task. The audience also evaluates the quality of the written response to the task. For support on this point, Reid (1989) quotes in the same paragraph L1 writing scholar Donald Murray, who writes: "... in the abnormal situation of school, the [writer] is rarely an authority ... usually the student writes on a subject and in a voice and form of the reader's choosing" (cited in Reid, p. 220).

Regarding Jones' point that giving students complete freedom to choose their own themes and topics in a writing class might be poor preparation for other classes in which they would be expected to write on a specific topic supplied by the teacher, Silva (1998) responds that this is not so:

This assertion seems extremely unlikely to me and rather condescending toward students. I find it hard to believe that if asked to write on a specific topic in, say, a psychology class, students who had been given the opportunity to choose their own topics in a composition class would ignore the psychology teacher's wishes (1998, p. 349).

I have some doubts about Silva's above-mentioned claim. Correctly interpreting and following the terms of a writing prompt is an important and a challenging task for EFL/ESL students. Leki and Carson (1994) discovered that 91% of 77 respondents in their survey of EFL/ESL students enrolled in university-level content courses reported that figuring out the assignment of a teacher was one of the most-important things that they learned how to do in their English writing classes. Yet not everyone apparently learns this lesson well. As in the case of "Luc," (Johns, 1991), some EFL/ESL students at the university level may often fail in trying to interpret correctly writing prompts, causing them considerable grief. Other EFL/ESL writers may understand prompts, but simply choose to resist the teacher's demands. Writes Leki (1995), "When the participants in this study resisted the demands of the assignment, they did so consciously because they recognised that they could not or did not want to do the assignment as they knew the professor intended" (1995, p. 255).

Although the students in Leki's (1995) case study apparently found resistance to the terms of a teacher's assignment to have been a useful strategy, she also points out that it is one "fraught with dangers" (1996, p. 258). Along these lines, Johns (1986) reports in her survey of tertiary-level faculty that failure to follow directions of an assignment was often cited as
an annoying feature of students' writing. In several studies of university-level writing assignments given by faculty who teach various content courses with EFL/ESL students, it is apparent that faculty carefully controlled the topics and the contents of the assignment (Braine, 1989; Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Horowits, 1986, 1989).

These findings have important pedagogical implications. As a writing teacher who regularly assigns general course themes and specific paper topics, I believe that I am being responsible by spending considerable time each term working with EFL/ESL students in learning how to interpret and how to implement carefully the requirements of an assignment.

**Prevents plagiarism**

According to Jones (1998a), another reason for a writing teacher to assign themes and topics for students is that it may greatly reduce problems with plagiarism. He claims that writing students who work cooperatively on paper topics and course themes selected by writing teachers would share more opportunities to help each other in developing the contents of papers, reducing the need or temptation to plagiarise papers. Silva (1998) apparently disagrees that plagiarism is an important or a common problem in the teaching of EFL/ESL writing. Writes Silva (1998), "I do not see plagiarism (however one may define this controversial notion) as a 'constant threat.' In my experience with ESL writers, plagiarism is a not a [sic] very common occurrence" (1998, p. 349).

My hunch is that many others involved in the teaching and learning of writing must also be wrestling with the plagiarism problem (Crowe, 1992; Cubbison, 1993; Currie, 1998; Liu, 1993, Moder & Halleck, 1995; Pennycock, 1996; Thompson & Williams, 1995). It must be a common problem because, as Moore (1988) points out, an entire industry has emerged that supports it. Term paper companies advertise ready-made and custom-made papers for university students. According to a spokesperson of one of the larger term paper companies, Research Assistance of Los Angeles, roughly 80% of its business comes from foreign (ESL) students (Moore, 1988, p. A36).

The internet has expanded business opportunities for those who sell products and services to help students to complete writing assignments. Typically, term-paper companies on the web have several hundred titles of papers readily available for immediate purchase by credit card, plus the
option of ordering a custom-made paper on a special topic of the shopper's choice. As one might expect, some companies appear to cater to ESL students on their web site promotions.

Several scholars have pointed out that cultural differences concerning the perceptions of text and idea ownership probably explain the causes of many plagiarism problems among EFL/ESL students (Currie, 1998; Moder & Halleck, 1995; Pennycoek, 1996). Although we should always respect the cultural values of our students, we as writing teachers must balance this by vigorously encouraging them to do their own writing. We must teach them how to identify and how to avoid plagiarism problems. We cannot ignore the problem, as the stakes for our students are simply too high.

There are many practical steps that we can take to help our students to avoid problems with plagiarism. I have found that teacher control of the topics about which students write may even help to eliminate it. For example, it is very difficult for students to plagiarise an oral history paper about a family member (Cubbison, 1993). The research procedures involve audio-taping interviews and submitting the tapes to the teacher along with rough drafts and final drafts of papers (Jones, 1998b). Throughout the research and writing processes, the students work as a class in small groups to help each other by giving advice as they become very familiar with the development of each other's work. Using this approach, I am confident that I have not received a single plagiarised term paper in my advanced writing classes for the past 5 years.

**Respects academic freedom**

I would like to begin this section by presenting the following question that was posed by Silva (1998) near the end of his article:

Would it not be hypocritical for me as an ESL writing teacher and scholar to compel students to write on topics that I choose when I (rightly, I believe) guard so fervently my academic freedom, one part of which is being able to choose what I want to study and write about? (1998, p. 351)

Before I attempt to answer this question, I would like to discuss briefly the concept of academic freedom, especially in its American context. Although the context is limited, I suspect that much of what I write about in this section may also apply to teachers in other countries as well.
Academic freedom is both a pedagogical and a legal term. As Kaplin (1989) points out, it describes "the legal rights and responsibilities of the teaching profession" (1989, p. 180). Writing in the context of American higher education, Lucas (1994) maintains that it has gradually evolved to include a professor's freedom to teach, to conduct research, to publish ideas, and to exercise basic civil rights. Prior to the 20th century, there was very little academic freedom in the United States, as professors were often fired for expressing their opinions about religious, social, political, and economic issues. Many professors eventually united in 1915 to form the American Association of University Professors (A.A.U.P.), whose mission was to fight for the principles of academic freedom and tenure for faculty.

Within the context of teaching students and giving them writing assignments, U.S. federal court has supported the rights of faculty to exercise reasonable control vis-à-vis students over the curriculum and course content. This is illustrated in the 1995 case of Settle vs. Dickson County School Board, in which the Sixth Circuit Court of the United States Court of Appeals ruled that a public school teacher was within her right to fail a student who had refused to follow instructions concerning the selection of an appropriate research paper topic. Although the court noted that students have the right to express their opinions about academic issues, it found that their rights of expression are bound by the limitations contained within a teacher's assignment.

The court's decision appears to reflect a general consensus in the American academic community concerning the professional relationships between students and teachers in the classroom. Whereas students have the right to discuss, question, advocate, and criticise ideas freely (as do faculty) they are still expected to learn what a teacher requires in a course. This sentiment is reflected in the following passage of the Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students, which is supported by the A.A.U.P.:

Students should be free to take reasoned exception to the data or views offered in any course of study and to reserve judgment about matters of opinion, but they are responsible for learning the content of any course of study for which they are enrolled (Mullendore, 1992, p. 14-15).

Now I would like to rephrase and then offer a reply to Silva's (1998) question: Would it be hypocritical for us as writing teachers and scholars to compel students to write on topics that we choose to assign when we guard
so fervently our academic freedom, one part of which is being able to choose what we want to study and write about? By now I think that the answer is clear. We as writing teachers may compel students to complete the assignments we choose as long as we are convinced that we are achieving the goals of the course and are acting reasonably in the best interests of the students' academic learning. This is not being hypocritical. It is being professional and responsible.

Discovering themes and topics

Although writing teachers have the right and (I believe) the responsibility to select themes and topics for the class, the selection process can be a cooperative effort. Certainly teachers and students share a common desire to have an interesting, enjoyable, and challenging class.

An excellent way to begin is to apply some action research to investigate systematically the academic needs and interests of the students. As McNiff (1988) explains, action research is systematic inquiry conducted by classroom teachers to explore their own practice, "to be critical of that practice, and to be prepared to change it" (1998, p. 4). An action researcher will follow a cycle of steps in the research process, including observation of the situation, reflection about the meaning of events and discoveries, planning to improve the situation, and action to implement the plan. The cycle continues until the problem has been solved or at least improved.

In order to select a challenging and meaningful topic or theme for a writing class, the teacher could begin the term by collecting information from the students about what they would like to read, write, and discuss during the term. Keeping in mind the need to balance the needs of the course with the interests of the students, the teacher might later propose an edited list of potential topics, inviting students to select one as a general theme for the course. I have learned that student input may be gathered through a variety of means, such as written surveys or class discussions conducted at the beginning of the term. Another way is to survey the students at the end of the term about what they would recommend to make the course better for the next term's students. Including a specific question asking students to recommend a future theme or topic for the course might be very helpful.

Although the teacher could work with the students to develop a new course theme in the conclusion of a writing class, I have found that this is generally unnecessary. An interesting and challenging theme that develops
in one section of a class could be assigned in others, as long as most of the students and the teacher continue to find it valuable.

Conclusion

The study of ethics is an examination of oughtness, of right and wrong, of good and bad (Shaw, 1996). The issue of how to ethically treat EFL/ESL writers is an important and sensitive one, because it proposes a moral decision of how we as teachers should teach our students. In order to develop an ethical system or a code of conduct, it is essential to begin by identifying important principles that are strong enough to withstand professional scrutiny. Ideally, these should be principles that most of us who actually teach in our complex field would be willing to embrace. For the reasons that I have presented here, Silva’s (1997) conception of appropriate instruction is a weak pillar upon which to build an ethical system or code of conduct for teaching EFL/ESL writing. A more workable approach might be for classroom teachers to apply action research to explore ways in which to deliver appropriate instruction within their various local contexts. From this acknowledgment of the local diversity within the broader field of EFL/ESL writing might emerge many ethical systems, each based upon a solid and responsible understanding of local learning and teaching contexts. This is my hope.

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ESL and subject specialists negotiating pedagogic knowledge

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Introduction

One of the critical aspects of teaching English language development in schools has been that it is largely seen as the responsibility of the English teacher. Yet research into English language development highlights the need for developing students’ academic language proficiency across different subject areas, rather than only in English language classes. Implicit within this is a coordinated system of English language development across the curriculum, is that subject specialists and English language teachers need to negotiate their pedagogic knowledge as they discuss ways of planning curriculum together. This is a relevant issue for English medium schools in Hong Kong, where teachers need to coordinate and facilitate English language development across subject disciplines.

This paper reports on a study of an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher and a science teacher planning curriculum for a senior secondary science class in Melbourne, Australia. Applying Martin’s (1997) Appraisal Theory and Harré’s (1991) Positioning Theory to the teachers’ planning conversations reveals the difficulties and the sources of tension that can emerge as the teachers plan curriculum tasks. There are genuine dilemmas and difficulties in attempting to bring together the different and competing epistemological assumptions of two teachers who come from very different disciplinary discourse communities. This paper concludes that the process of negotiating pedagogic knowledge is not as simple as has been implied in policy directives. A model that theorises the personal/professional development project implicit within the development of language across the curriculum is presented to assist English language teachers in their work.
Problematising the issue: Subject departments as discourse communities

Recent research (Siskin, 1994a; Siskin, 1994b; Siskin & Little, 1995; Corrie, 1995; Goodson, 1995; Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995; Gutiérrez, 1998) reveals that subject departments play a critical role in teacher identity and the social organisation of teachers’ working lives in secondary schools. Yet in secondary schools the division amongst staff is very much along subject discipline lines where subcultures are formed (Siskin, 1991). Departments, Siskin found, function as distinctive - and often primary - social worlds, each with their own critical micro-political aspects. Siskin (1994a) suggests that the best place to find a socially cohesive community in a secondary school is within a department. The reason for this, she concludes is that this is where teachers have concrete things to tell one another and where they can provide concrete instructional help. Teachers in departments turn to each other for assistance; these interactions between people create ‘social worlds’ with distinctive and shared perspectives. In these social worlds Siskin found that teachers limit conversations about their school to their department, referring to it as ‘we’. She concludes that membership of a department means being part of a collective community, with particular ways of talking about their subject discipline, shared perspectives on canons of pedagogic content knowledge of their discipline and shared views about the power of their curriculum area within the school institution.

However, the discourse disciplines are not necessarily a homogenous group in the sense that there can exist within them debates about teaching and learning. Within science education there have existed debates about constructivist views of teaching and learning. Roberts (1996, p. 420) seeks to clarify what the epistemological authority for teachers’ beliefs in student learning may mean in practice for students and teachers, by presenting a dialogic model of constructivist teaching. He presents a triologue style of teaching shown in Figure 1 and contrasts this with an ‘imposition’ model of teaching.
Figure 1. The ‘Triologue’ style (Roberts, 1996, p. 420)
Code: ‘O’ = Observations; ‘R/E’ = Representations and / or explanation; ‘S’ = by the student; ‘HR’ = by (other of) the human race.

Figure 1 represents a three-way pedagogic relationship between the teacher, student and the domain being investigated in the classroom. In the triologue style the students observes the events in the domain and brings to it some constructed representation of their own, R/E (S), or background knowledge. The existence of the student’s embodied prior concepts is acknowledged by the teacher. The student has the opportunity to compare his/her understandings to what the teacher has to offer as justified knowledge on behalf of attempts by ‘the rest of the human race’ (Roberts, 1996, p. 422). Through their discussion the student is then able to construct representations and explanations, R/E (HR), of the domain. The student is given the chance to compare his/her knowledge to what the teacher has to offer as justified knowledge, and to seriously consider what others have constructed. The three-way dialogue among teacher, student and domain represents a dialogic style of teaching or inquiry, grounded in discourse and leading to a clarification of views and assumptions. Knowledge is constructed in a dialogue about the particular topic.

Roberts (1996) contrasts constructivist approaches with a more traditional style of teaching where the teacher is the transmitter of knowledge, which he refers to as the imposition model. In this model, the teacher gives the students the information and does not allow for opportunities to discuss their understanding of the material presented. It is assumed that the students will take in the information and that learning involves the imparting of knowledge to the learner.
teacher in science education, we need to understand the actions that the teachers engage in when planning together. Roberts (1996) in his discussion of the epistemological authority of teachers' beliefs, calls for a shift from descriptive research which asks, 'How is it that teachers come to believe things?' to more normative studies which focus on 'How might teachers justify and support these beliefs?'. This is a view supported by Orton (1996). Roberts and Orton’s emphasis on the need for more normative research has been influential in the selection and shaping of the methodology for this research. There has been little focus on ESL teacher’s work in practice, where the teacher needs to justify her pedagogical beliefs to a science teacher. Orton (1996) argues that the private beliefs of an individual teacher can be subjected to what he refers to as epistemic authority in a trusting community of fellow teachers. Within their planning conversations, the teacher’s private knowledge is made public to the other teacher, and they attempt to justify their views from the authority of their positions as an English language teacher and a science teacher within the school. The study reported in this paper seeks to contribute beyond the person of the teacher to the public knowledge of the wider English language teaching community.

Framework of analysis

This study draws on two theoretical frameworks for the analysis of the teachers’ planning conversations. These are appraisal theory (Martin, 1997; White, 1998) and discursive positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991). The use of the two theoretical frameworks allows the study to focus on points of negotiated difference in the conversations and to find evidence how the professionals position themselves in the conversation.

Positioning theory

Positioning theory is a theory of social behaviour that highlights the ‘fluid patterns’ of ‘dynamic and ever-changing assignments of rights and duties among a group of social actors’ (Varela & Harré, 1996). It attends to the study of the planning conversation in terms of mutually contested rights and obligations of speaking and acting. Within positioning theory, Harré provides a framework that focuses on the capacity of the teachers to position themselves and each other in the conversation (see Harré, 1991). It allows us to explore the mutual co-operation in the positioning and reasons as to why this is occurring. This is revealed through the teachers’
perceptions of themselves and each other as they negotiate the science and ESL curriculum in the planning conversation. This in turn offers some insights into how the teachers work together.

**Appraisal theory**

Appraisal theory (Martin, 1997; White, 1998), based on the systemic functional model of language, offers a linguistic analysis that explores the interpersonal relationship between the teachers by understanding the linguistic resources they use for adopting and managing evaluative positions. Appraisal theory divides evaluative linguistic resources into three broad categories, attitude, engagement and graduation and involvement.

Attitude refers to the values by which the teachers pass judgments, make assessments and associate emotional responses. It is graded in terms of positive and negative evaluations and it reveals the positions the speakers are explicitly adopting. These are outline below with some examples.

- Affect - values of emotional response.
- Judgment - values by which human behaviour is socially assessed.
- Appreciation - values which address the aesthetic qualities of objects and entities.

The second category is concerned with managing and negotiating positions through engagement and graduation. These are outlined very briefly below.

- Engagement - meanings by which the teachers manage and negotiate positions within the conversation. In the case of this study, the teachers usually use open engagement, which signals that the teacher is open to negotiation, or closed engagement, when the teacher tends to assert their opinion. See White (1998) for a more detailed discussion of engagement.
- Graduation - values by which the teachers either raise or lower the interpersonal impact of their utterances (for example, very successful), or blur or sharpen their utterances (for example, sort of successful).

A further category of appraisal is involvement. This area has not been explored as fully as the categories mentioned above. Involvement refers to how the teachers share their interpersonal worlds. It includes the use of
vocatives, slang and technical language relating to the teachers' subject
discipline knowledge and general school terms.

The appraisal resources offer insights into the way the teachers
negotiate their positions and maintain the solidarity between them.
Furthermore, the appraisal analysis strengthens the positioning theory by
focusing on the analysis of evaluative language, which assists in the
commentary on the planning conversation (Freeman, 1996).

Analysis of an episode in the conversation

Frilled up science

The following extract is taken from the genetics planning conversation.¹ The teachers, Alex the science teacher and Victoria the ESL
teacher, have been discussing what they wanted to achieve in the planning
conversation. In response to Victoria’s comments about Alex accessing
students background information on the topic, he says:

27 A: Yes, I do (engagement: close proclaim). But what I’m really wary
(graduation: high grade) of is umm is that disparity between science and
humanities. I mean I wouldn’t (engagement: close deny) like to sort of
(gradation: focus soften) say, well OK I understand the social implications of
this but I’m not really (engagement: close deny/gradation: high grade)
going to APPLY (gradation: high grade) myself to the understanding of
the process, the causes, and the preventions and all of the other, that word
rigorous (gradation high grade) (they both laugh) - it’s ACTUALLY
(gradation: high grade) very hard to understand (gradation: high grade)
and does require you to think in a very disciplined way (gradation: high
grade) about what’s going on, if you really (gradation: high grade) are
going to get the ultimate (gradation high grade) understanding of what’s
going on. So yes (engagement: close proclaim), I’m wary of it being, like
SO MANY (gradation high grade) of the so-called (engagement: close

¹ Key:
Appraising lexis is underlined.
Appraisal analysis in italics.
Overlap between speakers is indicated with ==.
Capital letters are used to show emphatic stress and/or increased volume.
Short hesitation within a turn (less than three seconds) are marked by ...
extra vocalise) girlfriendy things that happened in the seventies and eighties in science, but really (graduation: high grade) ended up being, I think, (engagement: open probabilise) just (graduation: low grade) fairly trivial (graduation: high grade) explorations of science. And I think (engagement: open probabilise) the girls saw through these in the end, that really (graduation: high grade) they were just (graduation: low grade) being presented with FRILLED-UP (graduation: high grade) science and not being exposed (engagement: close proclaim) to some of the more DEMANDING (graduation: high grade) aspects of the subject. I DON’T WANT TO GO DOWN THAT PATH TOO FAR, (engagement: close proclaim/high graduation) but I do want (engagement: close proclaim) to motivate students in the beginning.

28 V: The thing is with what students come though, I mean ... you know with myself; I remember my understanding of genetics, I can imagine that this is quite common, (graduation: soften focus) that sort of (graduation: focus soften) umm sense of umm blending that idea of it sort of (graduation: focus soften) ... you know ... if you know ... if you have black and white you’ll end up with grey or kind of like sort of, (graduation: focus soften) which is a very naive (graduation: high grade) notion, BUT (graduation: high grade) in some ways (graduation: soften focus) I see that as (engagement: close proclaim), like to me (engagement: open probabilise), that sort of (graduation: soften focus), just because I went through that, that’s some sort of (graduation: soften focus with low grade) preliminary understanding that’s necessary and it needs to perhaps (engagement: open probabilise) be refined, but I’m interested (engagement: close proclaim) just in how umm you work, I mean would students in Year 10 have those sorts of naive notions or do you think that they would by that stage they would have something more (graduation: high grade) ... developed ... scientifically?

In his turn Alex uses a high number of valuations to make his subject position clear - that for him science is a highly disciplined area. The negative valuation in the term “frilled-up science” demonstrates his stance on the issue they are discussing. He views the adoption of Victoria’s strategies as “frilling up” the science content and somehow taking away the disciplined nature of the subject. The end of this turn signals that Alex is unequivocal about this issue. For him science can only be understood if students “think in a very disciplined way”. This is his image of science teaching and what Victoria is suggesting has trivialised his subject area.
In contrast, Victoria uses a high amount of modality to soften what she is saying. She is not forceful in her opinions and the constant softening of her stance make it difficult to understand the point she is making. At times she sounds indecisive, and she is constantly hedging her stance. One possible explanation for this is that she is challenging what Alex has stated in the previous turn, and deferring to him as the more dominant speaker. She is advocating developing students’ understanding as a foundation to teaching genetics, so that the concepts are brought closer to the students (Prawat, 1998). She completes the turn by requesting clarification of what students need in Year 10. This opens up the negotiation and signals that Victoria wants to discuss this issue further.

This extract is representative of the planning conversation in the larger study (see Arkoudis, 2000) in that it does not involve a blending of the science and language domain, but is located in the art of teaching. The teachers are presenting their experience of what works in the classroom for them. This centres on science and social values from Victoria’s perspective and science and the personal/individual from Alex’s side. In other words, it is about two differing perspectives on learning and motivation: dialogic versus cognitive. These differences point to the different discourses that the teachers use to express their methodological views and assumptions. Alex has a clear idea of what he wants to teach in this topic and what the students are capable of doing. The image that he has of his subject is one where it is “very disciplined” and he wants to expose students to “the more demanding aspects of the subject” (turn 25). Alex’s image of science pedagogy is in a “theoretical sense” (turn 29), in other words it is concept driven. He stands between the domain of science and the students, where he coaches the students about the nature of the knowledge being learnt. Roberts (1996) terms this as an imposition style of teaching. This is further exemplified by his reference at the end of the discussion to the worksheet. It represents for him the way that the students can understand the concepts. Alex has positioned himself as a serious scientist, who understands the finer details of genetics. He does not want to trivialise the significance of scientific knowledge. Alex acknowledges that the students are probably not capable of understanding some of the aspects of genetics, and he wants to be able to help the students understand. However, while he positions himself as the scientist and views his subject knowledge as “very disciplined” he is unlikely to incorporate any of the ideas that Victoria suggests in this extract. Teaching the concepts in a disciplined and theoretical manner is how he sees the teaching of science. Alex has firmly positioned himself within his subject discipline, claiming responsibility for the content and not
necessarily for the education of ESL students, if it means “frilling-up” his teaching of science.

Discussion

The above extract offers some insights into how two experienced teachers work together when planning a unit of work on genetics. The appraisal analysis reveals that Alex asserts his opinion, using resources of high graduation and closed engagement. Victoria tends to defer to Alex’s opinion, revealing that the power relations are not equal in their relationship. However, this study seeks to explore the dynamic nature of the teachers’ professional relationship by moving beyond generalisable comments about power relations. Research (Cahill, 1981; Clandinin & Connelly, 1987; Corrie, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1998) into joint planning has indicated that the power relations between the teachers involved are unequal. Victoria has a higher status position in the school than Alex, and I have observed her being very assertive in her role as Professional Development coordinator. The analysis has revealed that when she plans with Alex she positions herself, and is positioned by Alex, as supportive to the conversation. This is reflected in their appraisal choices and in part mirrors the status of the subject disciplines and the teachers’ own experiences of working together. While Alex has the moral authority, in terms of his obligations and responsibility as the science teacher, Victoria is unable to assert her opinions about his science teaching. Therefore, by using open engagement and low graduation, she acknowledges Alex’s different views and engages with him in conversation and positive positioning (Howie, 1999). Throughout the analysis of the extract, the teachers maintain the conversation by choosing linguistic resources which do not put at risk their professional relationship. This demonstrates their commitment to continuing this conversation and allows for the possibility of future conversations.

While the teachers fuse their horizons in matters concerned with the educational needs of ESL students, tensions are obvious when they discuss the educational practicalities of how this can be achieved in the planning of the unit of work. Harré (1997) argues that realism in the human sciences and realism in the physical sciences are not the same. The teachers reveal their divergent views in the genetics planning conversation. For example, Victoria’s social triologue (Roberts, 1996) views of teaching and learning collide with Alex’s formal concept-driven notion of teaching and learning as data processing and concept acquisition. Alex positions himself as the
scientist and he expresses his views of science teaching. He also has a
definite view of what Victoria’s role should be. Victoria, on the other hand,
is an ESL teacher. Her identity is not as firmly planted in her subject
discipline as Alex’s. Victoria acknowledges that she experiences difficulty
in expressing her theoretical understandings to Alex. This is evident in the
appraisal analysis, as at times she seems uncertain when expressing her
ideas to Alex. The analysis has also revealed that the teachers’ utterances
are embedded in different discourses. Alex expresses a cognitive view of
teaching and Victoria expresses a social view of teaching. Locating their
planning conversation within a broader framework of the art of teaching
means that the two teachers find a common ground within which Victoria
can share teaching strategies with Alex, and allows opportunities for them
to engage in ongoing conversations as well as allowing for the potential of
repositioning the way they work.

Conclusion: Crossing the rough ground

The discussion above has highlighted that negotiating pedagogic
understandings is a profound journey of epistemological reconstruction and
not a simple process of exchanging ideas. This is because the two teachers’
views of language and teaching are negotiated through their disciplinary
prejudices and biases. We have on the one hand subject disciplines that are
content rich and on the other hand ESL that is seen as content free and able
to accommodate all areas of the curriculum. As long as the ESL field
positions itself as a support to the mainstream curriculum, offering little
more than a ‘bag of tricks’, then the mainstreaming of ESL is unlikely to
succeed. How do we recover from this powerless role? There needs to be an
emphasis on pedagogical relations. This would position the ESL teacher to
frame discussions of her own and the other teacher’s disciplinary prejudices
as a condition of constructing new teaching knowledge and ‘roles’. The
concern should be about the processes that sustain conversations. Such
engagement becomes less a matter of being for or against certain practices
and more a matter of creating new practices. The question is how can we
best bring together teachers with different discourses traditions and
concerns and get them into sustained and productive dialogue?

What is involved in sustaining the planning conversations becomes
tangible in Victoria’s and Alex’s conversations. Based on Vygotsky, van
Langenhove and Harré (1999a) have offered a two-dimensional conceptual
space within which socio-psychological phenomena are located. The two
axes of this scheme are a public axis representing the degree to which the
Teachers' psychological attributes are public or private; and an individual collective dimension representing the degree to which the some attributes can be realised as the property of the discursive interactions of one or many people. Combining these two dimensions gives a two-dimensional space of four quadrants, representing the relations between a person and his/her discursive environment, presented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Mainstreaming ESL: The personal/professional development project (adapted from van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 131)**

In the knowledge quadrant are all the social and psychological phenomena which are collective and public. This includes the teachers' subject knowledge, the needs of the students, the routines of teaching at a secondary college, the power relations between subject disciplines. This is what Harré would refer to as the local moral order. Movement to the understanding quadrant occurs when teachers have appropriated knowledge from the local moral order, which are developed into habits of teaching. It is in this quadrant that, for example, where working and teaching becomes a routine, where the content and teaching of year 9 science is the same year after year. This can be seen as the teachers' comfort zone, where very little about their epistemological assumptions is questioned or challenged. In sharing ideas and perception about teaching with another teacher, the pedagogical assumptions of the teacher can shift. The mainstream teacher reflects on how the new ideas presented by the other teacher, relate to his existing teaching practices. When the mainstream teacher has internalised the new ideas, he is able to publicise them by presenting them as information, such as Alex does when outlining how he will approach group work in the motion conversation. Once the information is publicised, then it becomes part of the knowledge bases that form the local moral order. The movement across the quadrants can lead to mainstreaming of ESL and
The movement around the quadrants is not unidirectional, as was demonstrated by Alex’s and Victoria’s conversations. Alex and Victoria move backwards and forwards across the quadrants, sometimes spending a lot of time attempting to appropriate certain ideas. For example, in the second extract discussed in this paper, the two teachers stayed within the knowledge quadrant as Alex challenged Victoria’s interpretations of ESL teaching. The aim would be for ESL and mainstream teachers to be able to work in all four quadrants in their attempts to achieve shared understandings. The model redresses the pedagogical relations between mainstream and ESL teachers, and allows the ESL teachers to have epistemological authority within the mainstream curriculum, and lead to achieving the goal of English language across the curriculum.

References


Linguistics.com: Evaluating language resources on the Internet

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Introduction

One of the most recurrent artefacts in the 21st Century home, office, and school is a computer with internet connection. We are witnessing a massive surge of the Internet and allied Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) into almost all sectors of the economy: academia, government, and the corporate world. Within the academic community, not only has the Internet proven to be a powerful medium for communication among students and teachers, it has become a powerful tool for research analysis, dissemination, and documentation. Much research data and analysis are now available on the Internet and World Wide Web for consultation, thus making the Internet an exciting source of research work.

The aim of this paper is to examine how the Internet can be used as a useful source of information for learning and doing research about language and linguistics. This will involve describing what is necessary for the creation of new websites, the location of existing websites and the development of a set of criteria for the evaluation of language websites.

The paper begins with a definition of basic terms and issues connected to the internet as a major tool for access to linguistic material. We will emphasise what the term language websites involves. Part two of the paper will discuss how to design language websites. We will describe how to upload i.e. publish materials on the web using various tools. Part three of the paper concentrates on a description of how to search for and evaluate various language websites. We will develop a set of criteria to consider in deciding the quality of information on a language website.
Definitions and types of language websites

Basic terms

The internet revolution has left in its wake a myriad of terms that sound esoteric for the neophyte and baffling even for many Information Communications Technology (ICT) professionals. We often hear of many terms and abbreviations such as HTML, WWW, FTP, URL, a basic understanding of which is necessary to begin using the internet as a tool for language processing. We begin with a brief description of some of these terms, starting with the term internet.

Cooke (1999, p. 155) defines the internet as a “worldwide network of interconnected networks, connected together using recognised standards to enable electronic communication and the exchange of information.” The internet has fast established itself as a recurrent artefact with regards to the use of the computer as a tool for information processing. The internet mostly makes use of the hypertext transfer protocol, http, which is a specific way or protocol of sending documents. A hypertext is a text which contains cross-references or links (hypertext links) to different parts of the same page or to different pages, and information can be browsed by simply clicking on the links (Cooke, 1999). The computer language which is used to produce information in a format suitable for dissemination via the internet is the Hypertext Markup language, html (Cooke, 1999). There is a popular misconception that the internet and the World Wide Web are synonymous. However, the World Wide Web is only a part of the internet. As Cooke suggests, the World Wide Web (WWW) is that part of the internet based around HTML documents. These hypertext links enable users to move between different parts of the same document, as well as to different documents in different locations (Cooke, 1999). Another recurrent term in internet browsing is Uniform (or Universal) Resource Locator (URL), which is the full address of a resource on the Internet; every site or page on the Internet has a unique URL which consists of the protocol (e.g. http), the server name, the domain name, and the pathname of the resource (Cooke, 1999, p. 158).

Other terms worthy of attention, especially in relation to our topic are website, webpage and homepage. A website is a collection of linked HTML pages available via the WWW generally owned or produced by a single institution or individual (Cooke, 1999, p. 158). A web page is an individual HTML page which is available via the WWW; a collection of related pages
is usually referred to as a WWW site (Cooke, 1999, p. 158). A homepage is
the opening page of any site on the WWW; for example, the first page of an
organisation's site is the "home page"; an individual's personal site or page
is also referred to as a personal home page (Cooke, 1999, p. 155).

Language website

Since the subject matter of this paper is the use of the internet as a tool
for access to and understanding of linguistic material, the concept of a
language website is of paramount importance to us. Linguistic data is surely
different from that of many others. A website that contains linguistic data
should necessarily be unique in several respects. We will like to think of a
language website as a collection of linked html pages available via the
World Wide Web for the purpose of providing information about some
aspects of language and linguistics. The authors of a language website are
most likely to be individuals or groups of linguists or other language experts
and enthusiasts. One of the most famous examples of a language website is
the Linguist List at the following URL: http://www.linguistlist.org/. From
this homepage, catering for linguists all over the world, one can follow links
to a whole lot of other important language websites, of which there are
many kinds. Below is a typology of websites with examples of one or two
websites and their URLs in each category.

Types of language websites on the Internet

1. Language and Linguistic Association websites:
   (i) Linguist List (http://www.linguistlist.org)
   (ii) Linguistic Society of Hong Kong
        (http://www.hku.hk/linguist/lshk)
   (iii) Linguistic Society of America (LSA) (http://www.lsadc.org)
   (iv) Linguistics Association of the Great Britain (LAGB)
        (http://clwww.essex.ac.uk/LAGB)

2. University and Institutional Departmental websites:
   (i) HKU Department of Linguistics (http://www.hku.hk/linguist)
   (ii) Stanford University Department of Linguistics
        (http://www-linguistics.stanford.edu)
   (iii) NTNU Department of Linguistics
        (http://www.ling.hf.ntnu.no/index_en.php)
   (iv) University of Ghana Department of Linguistics
        (http://www.ug.edu.gh/lingdept.htm)
3. Theoretical Linguistic websites:
   (i) LFG (http://clwww.essex.ac.uk/LFG)
   (ii) HPSG (http://hpsg.stanford.edu)
   (iii) Minimalism (http://www.minimalism.linguistics.arizona.edu/)
   (iv) OT-LFG (http://www-lfg.stanford.edu/lfg/ot-lfg/ot-lfg.html)
   (v) GB (http://www.jtauber.com/linguistics/synthinar/)

4. Dictionaries and Glossaries websites:
   (i) SIL Linguistic Glossary
       (http://www.sil.org/glossary/linguistic_glossary.html)
   (ii) Oxford English Dictionary (OED Online) (http://www.oed.com)
   (iii) Cobuild (http://titania.cobuild.collins.co.uk/)
   (iv) Merriam Webster (http://www.m-w.com/dictionary.htm)
   (v) Web of Online Dictionaries (http://www.yourdictionary.com)

5. Individual or Language Group (Grammar) websites:
   (i) Chinese (http://pears.lib.ohio-state.edu/China/linguist.html)
   (ii) Japanese
       (http://members.xoom.com/_XMCM/bridge2japan/tutorial_index.html)
   (iii) French (http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/data1/ir/info/french.html)
   (iv) English (http://www.chompchomp.com/)
   (v) Swahili
       (http://conn.me.queensu.ca/~kassim/documents/kiswa/swahili.htm)
   (vi) Dagaare
       (http://www.hku.hk/linguist/staff/_ab.DagaareProficient.html)

6. Online Language and Linguistic Course websites:
   (i) WebCT course websites (syntax II, LFG, Language and Literacy ... etc.)
   (ii) Let’s Speak Dagaare
       (http://www.hku.hk/linguist/staff/_ab.DagaareProficient.html)
   (iii) Online Phonology Course
       (http://www.stir.ac.uk/epd/celt/staff/higdox/stephen/phono/phonolg.htm)
   (iv) Internet Grammar of English
       (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/internet-grammar/home.htm)

7. Bibliographical Databases:
   (i) Bibliography of Dagaare Studies
       (http://www.hku.hk/linguist/staff_ab.DagaareBibliog.html)
   (ii) Lexical-Functional Grammar
       (http://www-lfg.stanford.edu/lfg/bibliography.html)
(http://deall.ohio-state.edu/chan.9/g-bib.htm#c-bib)
(iv) (Others: see Linguist list)
E-linguistic resource websites (e-books, e-libraries, e-journals, etc)
E-libraries:
(i) The World-Wide Web Virtual Library: Linguistics
   (http://www.emich.edu/~linguist/www-ql.html)
(ii) Linguistics Bookshelf
     (http://www.sil.org/lingualinks/Linguist.html)
(iii) Lancaster University Library (http://libweb.lancs.ac.uk/g47.htm)
(iv) UCLA Library Collections and Internet Resources in General
    Linguistics (http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/url/colls/ling)
E-books and Encyclopedia:
(i) MSN Encarta (http://encarta.msn.com/)
(ii) Encyclopedia.com (http://www.encyclopedia.com)
E-journals:
(i) Language and Linguistic Science Electronic Journals
    (http://www.york.ac.uk/services/library/ejournal/linguist.htm)
(ii) Penn Library: Electronic Journals
     (http://www.library.upenn.edu/resources/ej/ej-linguistics.html)
(iii) UM Library: Electronic Journals & Newspapers
     (http://www.lib.umich.edu/libhome/ejournals/lists/lingui.html)
(iv) UCL Library: Linguistics Internet Resources
     (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Resources/Arts/phonling.htm)
(v) Journal of Dagaare Studies
    (http://www.hku.hk/linguist/staff_ab.DagaareJournal.html)

Designing a language website

Design involves issues of both technological know-how and art. By
the design of a website we mean the creation of a website and the
subsequent arrangement and rearrangement of its contents. A good design of
a language website will surely depend on how adept we are at manipulating
the technology involved and how artistically sophisticated we are. We will
concentrate more on the technological procedures here. Specifically, we will
outline some of the tools or packages necessary for creating language
websites and briefly describe the procedures involved for one of the tools or
packages.
Tools for designing language websites

There are several tools and packages available for creating language websites. The computer savvy, especially those who are literate in programming languages such as html can work directly with this language and write out page contents and upload these directly to the web. Webpages are created by using HyperText Markup Language (HTML). This involves the use of HTML Editors, or WYSIWYG (What you see is what you get)-editors.

However, there are quite a lot of software packages available that enable one to code the contents of the language website in plain ascii codes. Some of these include Netscape browser called the Netscape Communicator, the Dreamweaver and the popular Microsoft Frontpage (http://www.thats.nu/articles/netbasics/hp03.htm). Some popular course tools such as WebCT also have facilities for creating student webpages. We now describe in detail how to create a website/webpage using one particular package.

Creating a webpage by using Microsoft FrontPage Editor

The Microsoft FrontPage is an easy-to-use software for creating a simple homepage even if you are not familiar with HTML codes, since most of its functions and features are similar to those of Microsoft word.

What does one need?
- the software for uploading the pages (e.g. CuteFTP, WSFTP)
- a server for storing the pages (e.g. Geocities.com)
- Microsoft FrontPage

Writing the page

Using Microsoft FrontPage to write a webpage is as easy as using Microsoft Word since their commands and features are quite similar. With FrontPage, one can create a banner, the main text, multimedia such as sound and movie clips, etc., and change the colour of the background.

Uploading the page

After one has finished creating one's webpages, the most important step is to upload the files to one's server. To upload the pages, the easiest
way is to use an FTP Programme. For instance, CuteFTP or WS_FTP are
good FTP programmes which are easy to operate. This kind of programmes
allows the designer to connect to his/her server simply with a username and
a password and can thus transfer the files from a local computer to the
designated server. Some free webspace servers such as Geocities.com allow
people to upload and manage/edit their files directly on their website, so that
one does not need an additional programme. One must ensure that one has
uploaded all the files included in the webpage.

How to evaluate a language website

Search for website

Unless a website URL is already known, the process of evaluating a
website should begin with locating it on the internet. This is where the issue
of searching comes in on matters of evaluation. A myriad of search engines
are available on the internet for locating useful language websites. All one
has to do is choose from one of the many search engines such as Excite,
AltaVista, Yahoo ... etc., or meta-search engines such as Google or
WebCrawler. It is important to understand the syntax of the particular search
engine in order to get optimum result. One should know how to combine
key words using logical symbols like AND, OR, +, =, etc.

Once at the right website, it is still possible, in many cases, to search
within the text of the particular website. As a result one way to create a
quality language website is to have a search function within the language
website. Once we have searched and found a particular language website,
the next thing is to evaluate the information therein. For that we need a set
of criteria.

Criteria for evaluating a language website

One may easily be tempted to accept online information without
judging its reliability and accuracy. It is, however, very important for
internet users, especially students, to choose and evaluate very carefully
before accepting and adopting any information on the web since in many
cases there are neither restrictions nor reviews of on online publication i.e.
anyone can produce any information on the web! Therefore, a set of criteria
should be necessary for us to think critically and evaluate a particular
website. Here, our emphasis will be placed on evaluating language websites.
There are many proposals for evaluation criteria in the literature, such as
Cooke (1999), and Alexander and Tate (1999), which proposes the following criteria (see also the website: http://www2.widener.edu/Wolfgram-Memorial-Library/webevaluation/inform.htm)

Most of these are, however, criteria that apply to general websites. To the best of our knowledge there do not exist specific criteria for evaluating language websites. Our approach here then is to build on these existing general criteria, especially that of Alexander and Tate (1999) by reinterpreting and modifying them and, in addition, proposing a number of supplementary criteria that apply to language websites, such as multilingual retrievability. In the following, Alexander and Tate (1999) provides a description for each criterion and then goes on to explain it and outline what questions need to be asked by way of evaluation.

**Criterion #1: AUTHORITY** – i.e. whether the material is the creation of a person or organisation that is recognised as having definitive knowledge of a given subject area.

Traditionally, the authority of a print material can be evaluated by the author’s background and qualifications, and the publisher’s reputation. As for web resources, however, it is difficult to look for these kind of information because almost everyone can be a web publisher. There is no guarantee that an author’s name and qualifications are given. So it is hard to verify who has the ultimate responsibility for a particular material. The following questions in the checklist will help us to determine whether a web page is regarded as authoritative:

- Is it clear who is responsible for the contents of the page?
- Is there a link to a page describing the purpose of the sponsoring organisation?
- Is there a way of verifying the legitimacy of the page’s sponsor? That is, is there a phone number or postal address to contact for more information? (Simply an email address is not enough)
- Is it clear who wrote the material and are the author’s qualifications for writing on this topic clearly stated?
- If the material is protected by copyright, is the name of the copyright holder given?

**Criterion #2: ACCURACY** – i.e. whether the information is reliable and free from errors.
Accuracy is interrelated to the criterion of Authority. We can determine the accuracy of print resources by examining whether the material is checked and edited by editors; whether it has been reviewed; whether it has a style manual to promote uniformity in language usage and format ... etc. As mentioned earlier, everyone is free to publish information on the internet. Therefore one cannot always assure the accuracy of web materials. The following is a checklist for ensuring web resources accuracy:

- Are the sources for any factual information clearly listed?
- Is the information free from grammatical, spelling, and other typographical errors? (These kinds of errors not only indicate a lack of quality control, but can actually produce inaccuracies in information).
- Is it clear who has the ultimate responsibility for the accuracy of the content of the material?
- If there are charts and/or graphs containing statistical data, are the charts and/or graphs clearly labeled and easy to read?

**Criterion #3: OBJECTIVITY** – i.e. whether the material expresses facts or information without distortion by personal feelings or other biases.

It is important for web surfers to assess the objectivity of the information provider. One thing we can do is to identify the intent of the organisation or person that provides the material. But it can be difficult to evaluate objectivity on the web since the purpose of the information is not always clearly stated. Below is a checklist of questions that can help in deciding whether the resource is an objective piece of work:

- Is the information provided as a public service?
- Is the information free of advertising?
- If there is any advertising on the page, is it clearly differentiated from the informational content?

**Criterion #4: CURRENCY** – i.e. whether the material can be identified as up-to-date.

Currency of information can be evaluated by looking for the publication date, or, if it is copyright protected, its copyright date. For publications on the internet, however, there are no guidelines for including publication dates on web pages. Also, since materials on the internet can be updated and revised easily, dates of revising and updating of information are even more crucial for web currency.
Adams Bodomo

- Are there dates on the page to indicate
  - When the page was written?
  - When the page was first placed on the Web?
  - When the page was last revised?
- Are there any other indications that the material is kept current?
- If material is presented in graphs and/or charts, is it clearly stated when the data was gathered?
- If the information is published in different editions, is it clearly labeled what edition the page is from?
- If the material is from a work which is out of copyright (as is often the case with a dictionary or thesaurus) has there been an effort to update the material to make it more current?

**Criterion #5: COVERAGE and INTENDED AUDIENCE** – i.e. whether the subject matter and the depth of the topic are addressed; whether the group of people and who are intended readers are stated.

One can easily understand the coverage and intended audience of print resources by reading the introduction or preface at the beginning. Information such as the scope of topics, the level or the depth to which these topics are addressed, and the intended audience ... etc. are provided in a print publication. Many web resources, nevertheless, lack an introductory section and hence there is no trace of information on coverage and intended readers. The following questions may help in evaluating the coverage of a web material:

- Is there an indication that the page has been completed, and is not still under construction?
- If the page is still under construction, is the expected date of completion indicated?
- If there is a print equivalent to the Web page, is there a clear indication of whether the entire work is available on the Web or only parts of it?
- Is the intended audience for the material clear?

*Extra-criteria for evaluating language websites*

The above apply generally to any website. In addition to these criteria, one may also want to consider the following in the further evaluation of all or particular language websites.
Criterion #6: EVIDENCE OF PATRONAGE – This is an old and general commercial criterion: the quality of a product may be measured by how many customers patronise it. Of course, one may claim that advertisement may play a part, but advertisement cannot sustain a poor quality product indefinitely. So one way to consider if a language website is worth its salt is to check out guest statistics and comments. A good language website should have a counting tool (i.e. counter) that registers the number of visitors to that site and what they say.

Criterion #7: EVIDENCE OF COLLABORATION/ CORROBORATION – Another way in which we can decide on the quality or otherwise of a language website is to see if the author(s) collaborate with other linguists and language experts in that area of language and linguistics. In addition, do some experts in the field corroborate i.e. confirm some of the statements and conclusions made about a particular body of knowledge in the field?

Criterion #8: MULTILINGUAL RETRIEVABILITY – Multilingual retrievability as a criterion of quality control is particularly related to online dictionaries and glossaries. In general, it is better to be able to search a multilingual online dictionary and come up with various equivalences for one or more languages. Such a dictionary would be far more useful than one that does not have this kind of multilingual retrievability. But beyond online dictionaries and glossaries most other linguistic data depend on a good technique of multilingual retrievability. And one such is a good programme of glossings. Among theoretical and computational linguists, any corpus of text that is well glossed or tagged is far better than one that lacks this, all things being equal.

Towards a model for language website evaluation

The above taxonomy of criteria constitutes a useful place to begin an attempt to model a paradigm of language website evaluation. The figure below is a diagrammatical sketch of such a model. It consists of three main parts - a candidate set of websites, a set of criteria for evaluating these websites, which may or may not be ranked, and a ranked output showing how the websites fare in terms of their satisfaction of the evaluation criteria. The candidate set should contain only reasonably comparable website in order to achieve a fair and objective comparison. The figure below shows websites devoted to the learning of English online. The illustration shows that of the four websites English4us’ has outranked the other three
candidates as it has satisfied more criteria that the others. It is followed by the ‘Internet Grammar of English’ website, with ‘BBC English’ and ‘English for Internet’ following in third and fourth places respectively.

**Figure 1: An optimal model for language website evaluation e.g. online English learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate Website</th>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>ACC</th>
<th>ATH</th>
<th>OBJ</th>
<th>CUR</th>
<th>COV</th>
<th>PAT</th>
<th>COL</th>
<th>MR</th>
<th>Ranked Output</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet Grammar of English</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(<a href="http://www.ucl.ac.uk/internet-grammar/">http://www.ucl.ac.uk/internet-grammar/</a>)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English4us</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(<a href="http://www.english4us.com">http://www.english4us.com</a>)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English for Internet</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(<a href="http://www.study.com">http://www.study.com</a>)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC English</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(<a href="http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningEnglish">http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningEnglish</a>)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key to abbreviations**

- ACC: Accuracy
- ATH: Authority
- OBJ: Objectivity
- CUR: Currency
- COV: Coverage
- PAT: Evidence of Patronage
- COL: Evidence of Collaboration
- MR: Multilingual Retrieval

As has been illustrated in this last section, while developing a taxonomy of criteria may be a worthwhile enterprise, for a more systematic constrained and principled approach to language websites - or indeed any other kinds of websites -, there is the need to develop an optimal evaluative model for websites.

**Summary and conclusion**

It has been observed in this paper that the ubiquitous presence of computers with internet connection in most homes, schools, and workplaces in many parts of the world enables students and educationists to have a prevalent and an important source of data for language learning and research. That teachers constantly point their students to various web-based resources testifies to the growing importance of the internet as an educational resource.

But unlike traditional print publishing where the product usually goes through a number of quality control procedures, anybody can publish anything on the internet. Far from being a safe and reliable source of data, parts of the internet can indeed contain a lot of inaccuracies and unethical material that are not worthy for academic referencing.
It follows logically therefore that quality control and, consequently, issues of evaluation should be more paramount than ever. In the age of dotcoms, it behooves on the linguistic and IT research community to develop theoretical and practical models of evaluation to filter out the good language websites from the bad. To provide educationists and parents with the framework to responsibly recommend language websites to learners, it is necessary to put in place a set of criteria and, more substantially, a rigorous model of language website evaluation.

In this paper we have provided information about language webpage creation before discussing criteria for language website evaluation, ending up with proposals towards a model of language website evaluation. In the model we recommend that language websites be subjected to a set of eight criteria including authority, accuracy, objectivity, currency, coverage, evidence of patronage, evidence of collaboration, and multilingual retrievability. Given the nature of the internet, the need to pay attention to the evaluation of online language resources cannot be overemphasised.

References

The ethical dilemma abroad: Preparing Hong Kong teachers for oral assessment at an Australian university

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Introduction

The power of backwash from a high-stakes, international second language test such as TOEFL has been critically examined (Hamp-Lyons, 1998) in terms of negative influence on course content and methodology in designated test preparation courses. The recently introduced (2001) Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers of English (LPAT) in Hong Kong is another high-stakes test which inevitably dominates the aspirations of candidates undertaking preparation courses for this test. In one such course, conducted at the Queensland University of Technology, lecturers attempted to resolve the ethical dilemma of narrowly ‘teaching to the test’ by adopting a more comprehensive and ‘communicative’ approach.

Focusing on the oral component of the course only, this paper outlines a process of assisting clients to pass the above test while simultaneously maintaining sound pedagogical practice in meeting their broader linguistic, professional and socio-linguistic needs. The paper looks firstly at theoretical issues relevant to washback and to the teaching of oral English. It defines the ‘dilemma’ in terms of this LPAT course and describes resultant content and methodology in one specific area of the test - the reading aloud of poetry. It concludes optimistically with a proposition that ‘positive washback’ can be compatible with test preparation.

Theoretical issues in a language test preparation course

In designing and implementing a course primarily aimed at assisting clients to pass a high-stakes assessment of second language proficiency, a number of theoretical issues may mould the teaching philosophy. The most
obvious is the concern with negative test washback/backwash, a phenomenon which is apparently incompatible with the current emphasis on a ‘communicative approach’ to language teaching (Bailey, 1996). More specifically relevant to preparing students for an oral assessment, current theories in relation to the teaching of speaking and, in particular, teaching English ‘pronunciation’ demand attention. An overview of research in these areas can be of assistance in helping programme deliverers ‘develop a code of ethical test preparation’ (Hamp-Lyons, 1998).

The issue of washback

Investigations into the power which high-stakes language tests (those with important consequences) exert over policy, teaching and learning have been conducted by concerned researchers (e.g. Alderson & Wall, 1993;Messick, 1996; Shohamy, 1992, 1997; Bailey, 1996; Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996) with an emphasis on determining the extent of washback, either positive or negative on those affected by the test. From a teaching point of view, the negative aspects of washback, as summarised by Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996, p. 281), are disturbing:

1. *Narrowing of the curriculum* (Madaus, 1988; Cooley, 1991)
2. *Lost instructional time* (Smith et al., 1989)
3. *Reduced emphasis on skills that require complex thinking or problem-solving* (Frederickson, 1984)

Despite this evidence of negative washback, however, Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) conclude that the amount of washback will vary according to the nature of the test, the level of the stakes and the knowledge and participation of the stakeholders.

Discussion of positive washback appears to be linked primarily to the notion of construct validity intrinsic in the design of the test. Messick (1996, p. 241) claims that for optimal positive washback, there should be little if any difference between activities involved in learning the language and activities involved in preparing for the test. He demands authenticity and directness as standards of validity. ‘Authentic’ assessments *pose engaging and worthy tasks* while ‘direct’ assessments *involve open-ended tasks in which the respondent can freely perform the complex skill at issue.*
Ethical dilemmas

This close relationship between the construct validity of the test and the development of a test preparation course is one which can create a dilemma for teachers if the test is lacking in construct validity, for example, if it measures oral skills through multiple-choice written items, or if it is based on outmoded theoretical constructs (Bailey, 1996, p. 276). One such fundamental construct which Bailey notes has changed in recent years is the concept of ‘communicative competence’. Canale and Swain’s (1980) classifications of communicative competence as ‘grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic’ are quoted by Hartley and Sporing (1999) to describe the skills required to communicate effectively in a foreign language (1999, p. 74). Teachers who subscribe to these definitions of language proficiency will presumably wish to see all of these elements both tested and taught in a test preparation course. Similarly, teachers who support principles of communicative language teaching such as using authentic materials, using the target language in ‘real-life’ contexts and developing learner autonomy via self-assessment, will be ethically challenged by tests which may run counter to current instructional practice (Hamp-Lyons, 1998, p. 330). Significant advice comes from Shohamy (1992) who sees the need for involvement of teachers and administrators in test development if tests are to have a positive instructional impact.

From a teaching-test preparation perspective, the following case study serves to illustrate that, even if a test does have construct validity, teachers are still required to make ethical decisions based on learner needs and on what are appropriate test preparation practices (e.g. time spent on same format practices). Bailey (1996) recognises that producing beneficial washback from tests is not an easy task for teachers, given that test-takers will most likely have two competing goals - one to pass the test, the other to enhance their language proficiency. Hamp-Lyons (1998) decries the fact that no guidance is available to (TOEFL) teachers on good practice in test preparation but maintains, referring to Bailey (1996) and Shohamy (1993), that teachers can produce beneficial washback if they see their principal ask as helping learners increase their knowledge of and ability to use English, think about what is appropriate in test preparation and consciously choose appropriate content and methods (1993, p. 330).
Preparing candidates for an oral test

Preparing students to sit the oral component of a high-stakes test carries its own challenges. In some ways, current research into the teaching of speaking, and, in particular, the teaching of ‘pronunciation’, mirrors the overall dilemma which faces the teacher as test-preparer: the need to focus on top-down communicative skills balanced against the need to remediate in specific areas of pronunciation, word-stress and intonation. Morley (1991, p. 491) advocates a ‘multidimensional teaching process’, which includes both a microlevel focus on discrete elements of pronunciation and a macrolevel focus on general elements of communication such as overall fluency and clarity. Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (1996) also recommend attention to both segmentals (individual vowels and consonants) and suprasegmentals (word stress, sentence stress, rhythm and intonation) and all authors emphasise the importance of addressing these issues in the context of discourse.

The juggling act of meeting all these needs in a test preparation course is not easy, particularly when compounded by the pressure of specific test requirements. Prioritising can be difficult. Helpful theoretical findings come firstly from Burgess and Spencer (2000, p. 199) who make the point that pronunciation is best dealt with as the need arises, rather than in an extremely pre-determined way. Diagnosing needs can then be followed up by ‘noticing’ or ‘consciousness-raising’ (Fotos, 1993, Van Patten & Cadierno, 1993) to draw attention to significant features of a second language, with learners comparing existing linguistic knowledge to new input and testing hypotheses through new output. This paper hopes to highlight the application of these theories to test preparation in practice.

A language proficiency test for teachers of English

In April 2000, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region announced established language benchmarks for English teachers and gave serving teachers the option of attending authorised training courses before undertaking the associated internal assessments. The TESOL Unit, Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia became an authorised course provider and a contingent of prospective candidates undertook a training course and Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT) in July-August 2001.
The ethical dilemma abroad: Preparing Hong Kong teachers for oral assessment at an Australian university

The format of the Speaking assessment comprises two parts. Part 1 consists of:

Task 1A  Reading aloud a poem
Task 1B  Reading aloud a prose passage
Task 1C  Telling a story/Recounting an experience/Presenting an argument

Part 2 is a Group Interaction where candidates are required to participate in a group discussion about pupils’ writing problems.

The QUT training course was conducted over 6 weeks with time divided among the 4 macro skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Visits to local schools were also included. Time was allocated for both formative and summative assessment.

Hong Kong Education Department Guidelines

In planning and delivering the LPAT training course (speaking) at QUT, the initial steps involved becoming familiar with the format of the test itself and the parameters prescribed by the Hong Kong Education Department (2000) for course providers. These guidelines state that the overall objective of the authorised courses is the enhancement of trainees' language proficiency with reference to the benchmark requirements. Course providers are also strongly encouraged to design their courses with creativity aimed at enhancing trainees' language proficiency to attain and exceed the benchmark requirements.

With regard to the teaching on the training courses, the Department also makes it clear that course providers are free to design teaching methods and materials … conducive to achieving the above aims and may explore the use of a variety of teaching and learning activities.

The guidelines also clearly state that the courses are not (sic) meant to be test drills to prepare the trainees to attempt the internal assessments and materials should not be confined to only the task and text types stipulated in the benchmark specifications.

From the extracts above, it can be seen that the guidelines allow course providers a certain flexibility and encourage ethical test preparation. Furthermore, the competency-based tasks appear to replicate ‘real-life’
demands placed on teachers in Hong Kong schools (Coniam & Falvey, 2000). These features indicate the construct validity of this assessment tool and the potential for positive washback on the preparation course.

The ethical dilemma for teachers of an LPAT course

Where then lies the ethical dilemma? Firstly, the clients had enrolled and paid primarily to pass the benchmark assessment, which seemed to invite all the concerns expressed by Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996), particularly with regard to ‘narrowing of the curriculum’ to the specific tasks required in the LPAT test. Furthermore, in the case of the QUT course, this professional concern was then compounded by the results of a standard needs analysis (Graves, 1996) administered to the clients at the beginning of the course. The results were consistent with the fact that this group of students had chosen to undertake their assessment and preparation course in Australia. Although the ‘Reasons for choosing this course’ highlighted ‘To pass the benchmark’ and ‘To improve my English skills’, they also demonstrated a desire ‘To see how English is taught in Australia’ and ‘To know more about Australian culture’ as well as, interestingly, ‘To learn to open up’.

Thus, other valid teaching and learning goals became apparent, potentially competing for time and priority with ‘passing the test’. Overall the wider goals crystallised as follows:

- To improve language proficiency with regard to achieving or surpassing the benchmark assessment requirements
- To share ideas of teaching methodology as currently practiced in Australia
- To provide some cultural input from an Australian perspective
- To develop learner autonomy (felt to be intrinsic to any course and related perhaps to the last learner’s request) and in the oral component,
- To cover the multi-componenential aspects of developing ‘pronunciation’ skills.

The ethical dilemma therefore lay in justifying the existence of an assessment related course while simultaneously satisfying broader principles of second language teaching and learning.
Promoting positive washback in a poetry reading task

Due to limited space, a description of the content and methodology which evolved in one specific section of the course, the teaching of ‘Reading a Poem’, may serve to illustrate how the multiple needs above were met by choosing motivating content and materials, by varying teaching methodology, while also covering technical aspects of the test and developing autonomy in learning. A similar approach applied to other sections.

(a) Choosing motivating materials

Each lecture in this course based practical applications on relevant theoretical principles. In the case of poetry reading, the role of motivation in second language acquisition was the focus. Falvey’s (1997) Hong Kong classroom-related article provided a highly relevant discussion stimulus for these sessions.

As the student group were all experienced teachers interested in working with primary school children, the poems for reading aloud were chosen specifically for this age group. The students themselves were assigned to select a number of poems from the curriculum section of the QUT library according to their own interest and these became the core ‘texts’ which were finally compiled into a small compendium. Although the demands of the ‘test’ dominated, the backwash in the materials area was varied, relevant and motivating as well as including local cultural input. It was also hoped that some of these poems would actually be used by the teachers later in their ‘real-life’ classrooms, for example, the wonderfully onomatopoeic:

Two Food Poems
Hot potatoes, crackling brown,
Melted butter running down.

Icecream, piled-up cone,
Frosty white to taste.

Zelie Stanton

Thus, although Hamp-Lyons (1998) found evidence of negative backwash in commercial materials developed for TOEFL preparation, it seems that
preparation for a high-stakes test such as the LPAT need not necessarily result in restricted content and materials.

(b) Varying methodology

In their survey of TOEFL preparation teaching, Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) referred to some teaching as ‘battery farming’ and conclude that this negative washback could be related to the extent to which the test is counter to current instructional practice in English language teaching and the extent to which teachers ... are willing to innovate (p. 295). Because of the imprimatur given by the Hong Kong Education Department to explore a variety of teaching and learning activities, and also because of the expressed aims of the group themselves, methodology in this course tended to be responsive to learner needs rather than simply ‘rehearsing the test’.

In the case of poetry reading, the Hong Kong teachers were strongly self-motivated to investigate teaching approaches currently used by Australian primary teachers. This was a case of using methodology to demonstrate methodology (based on Kolb’s theory of experiential learning). The experience of ‘sitting on the floor’, with ‘eyes closed’ and focusing firstly on experiencing the sensory appeal of poetry was the introduction to an alternative form of methodology, and perhaps cultural activity, which may or may not be applicable in Hong Kong classrooms. Students showed imagination and creativity during this exercise (‘opening up’?) but commented on the impracticality of using movement in a crowded classroom. Nevertheless, as part of their final assessment, the sensitivity demonstrated by the students in reading a poem entitled ‘Poor Whale’, about the slaughter of whales ‘for lipstick’, indicated that they were indeed ‘feeling the meaning’ and were able to convey this feeling to others.

(c) Meeting the technical requirements of the test

Open discussion of the scales and descriptors for Reading a poem revealed criteria related to pronunciation, stress and intonation as well as reading aloud with meaning. While the candidates in this group were well able to communicate in English on a social level, certain features stemming from L1 transfer could have caused comprehension problems for L2 listeners. Consciousness-raising (Fotos, 1993, VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993) of these features was begun by a frank discussion of the significant phonological differences between Chinese and English as outlined by Chang (2001). Chan and Li (2000) provide a more detailed contrast. Although
some of the differences in intonation, stress and pronunciation were strongly questioned by the group, an awareness of the classification served as a stimulus for self-assessment.

Acting on Chang's insights, and responding to the oral language of the group members, attention was drawn to the suprasegmental features of rhythm and intonation in English. *Tapping, clapping or rapping* to the beat of an Australian musical group “The Seekers” combined creative kinaesthetics in a children’s song, *Morning Town Ride*, with some technical exercises in phonology. Although singing and dancing were not ‘tested’, it was hoped that an awareness and enjoyment of the rhythm and intonation of English would be stimulated.

The choice of which segmental features of the language to focus on was determined by analysing student language and by specific requests for help, for example with consonant clusters. Discrimination exercises, such as those from Baker’s longstanding *Ship or Sheep* were often combined with verbo-tonal illustrations and practice in gradually combining phonemes such as those found in *fr-o-sty white to taste*. Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) have a culturally convenient exercise on past tense endings using *Walzing Matilda*, Australia’s *de facto* national anthem (also fun for folk dancing!).

(d) Developing autonomous learning

*One way of promoting washback to learners is the possible introduction of self-assessment mechanisms in standardized external-to-programme tests.* (Bailey, 1996, p. 271). As a routine exercise in this course, students were recorded individually either speaking freely on course-related matters, or demonstrating one of the required tasks. They were then asked to transcribe a few sentences from the tape for homework, and to listen for particular phonological features which they had been alerted to during the class. Below is an example of a reflection from one of the students, followed by feedback from the teacher:

*S: I was very nervous when I told my anecdote, so the organization of my story was not well organised, eg “mm ... a ... mmm” and some pauses appear quite often. (T: That is usual for a first attempt.)

S: I also have to practise the sounding of the final consonants in the past tense, eg arrived, enjoyed, cooked, watched etc. This is
my weakness and I am confused as they are pronounced differently. (T: We'll do some work on it!)

By encouraging reflections of this nature, regardless of whether they were test-related or not, it was hoped that, in Bailey's terms, these autonomous learners would develop their own internal values with regard to judging progress on the material or skills to be learnt (p. 271). A collaborative approach to error correction and to developing strategies for language learning was made easier by the willingness of the students to engage in self and peer assessment.

The examples above may serve to illustrate that washback from high-stakes language tests need not necessarily be negative and that a range of professional goals, including a communicative teaching approach can be compatible with test preparation.

Conclusion

Teaching a course which leads specifically to a high-stakes assessment inevitably places the teacher in an ethical dilemma. Should one concentrate only on ensuring that the students achieve their goal of passing the test or should one aim at developing a broader view of language proficiency? To some extent, this decision depends on the construct validity of the test itself. If the tasks and content of the assessment are consistent with the philosophical and theoretical principles of 'communicative competence' and 'communicative language teaching', there should be what Messick (1996) refers to as a 'seamless transition' from learning to assessment (and then presumably to real-life usage). However, the wider the gap between test construct validity and principles of second language acquisition and teaching, the more difficult the dilemma.

In the case of the Hong Kong LPAT, the speaking test content and tasks do, in general, coincide with the real-world content and tasks expected of the teacher-candidates in their daily professional life\(^1\). Guidelines from the assessing authority recommend the enhancement of language proficiency with reference to the benchmark requirements and there is freedom to design methods and materials conducive to the above. In this paper, it has been shown, from a survey of one aspect of a speaking course delivered at an Australian university, that it is possible to cater for individual needs and goals which go beyond the strict requirements of the test. It seems that positive washback can be achieved from a high-stakes test.
Note

1 Whether an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) test such as the LPAT should focus only on an ESP context is a theoretical issue which relates closely to the aims and the construct of language proficiency held by the designers of the test.

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