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Terrence Tianzhi Zhang
Nicholas David



MISSION

WAESOL Educator is the biannual, professional, peer-reviewed, online journal of the Washington Association for the Education of Speakers of Other Languages (WAESOL). *WAESOL Educator* publishes articles concerning the teaching of language in elementary and secondary education, higher education, adult education, and bilingual education, as well as teacher preparation for pre-service and in-service teachers.

The two main goals of *WAESOL Educator* are:

- to share information related to language-teaching practices, materials, research, and professional-development opportunities; and
- to support and mentor potential authors who teach, conduct research, administer programs, and/or study in classrooms with multilingual learners.

All manuscripts receive a double-blind review.

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GREETINGS TO OUR WAESOL COMMUNITY,

At the time of this writing, summer transitions to fall and most of us in education are in full swing with the start of a new academic year. We at WAESOL are preparing for our annual conference, bringing together the MLL community from around the region as we have been doing for over 50 years.

While the conference is the main event and focus of the board's undertaking, we have also been actively planning and offering WAESOL Online professional development opportunities. This began as a robust professional development opportunity during the pandemic while we were all online, and we have been working to offer more frequent, impactful sessions throughout the year. Our WAESOL Online committee is very enthusiastic and committed to building up this arm of WAESOL. By offering online PD sessions, this serves as another way to create access to professional development and clock hours.

In addition to WAESOL Online, our publication, the *WAESOL Educator*—where you are finding this letter—has adapted to one issue this calendar year as the new editorial team and host for the publication make their debut. We encourage all of you to share your voices, experiences, and knowledge of pedagogy by submitting to the *Educator*. Or, lend an eye to become a reader. It undoubtedly requires a team effort to see this publication flourish, and we are grateful for your consideration.

Our 2026 board has mostly been focused on the annual conference, WAESOL Online, and the *Educator*. However, we continue to follow the seemingly always emerging policy activity as it relates to the education of multilingual learners (MLLs) on the federal level and how that affects our institutions—from K–12 and higher education to teacher training and community programs. We recognize that most, if not all, who are involved in education are concerned and likely overwhelmed by the severe cuts and changes that affect our students and communities. A goal of the 2026 WAESOL board is to share resources that communities across the region can utilize to help disseminate policy and highlight community agencies that work with MLLs.

These are a few efforts that will continue as we near winter and a new board in 2027. We continue to navigate the challenges we all face with the increased need for resources and decrease in funding that so many are facing, not only in Washington State but nationally. These are similar words I shared a few years ago for my first letter from the president during my first term, and they still ring true. A reminder that it all begins with community and finding your helpers, like Mr. Rogers taught so many children all those years ago.

I would like to thank you, our WAESOL community, in addition to our 2026 board members and our WAESOL Educator team for their contributions to making these and other goals come to fruition.

¡SÍ SE PUEDE!
ROSEMARY COLÓN
WAESOL BOARD PRESIDENT

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



Dearest Readers,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the Summer 2026 issue of WAESOL Educator, Volume 51, Issue 1. The articles in this issue reflect the curiosity, care, and creativity educators bring to classrooms, teacher preparation, technology, and community learning.

This issue reflects a broader trend in language education as teachers and researchers respond to the rapid development of generative AI and digital learning tools. Laila Noor examines ChatGPT as a tool for clarifying complex linguistic concepts and considers how virtual-simulation principles can strengthen teacher preparation in low-resource settings. Terrence Tianzhi Zhang and Jiqing Xiang investigate a Custom GPT designed to scaffold phrasal-verb learning, illustrating both the possibilities of AI-supported instruction and the continuing importance of teacher mediation. Martha Young-Scholten introduces DigLin, an accessible digital platform for adult beginners with limited literacy, while Christina Torres reflects on multiliteracies, virtual exchange, and Learning by Design. Together, these articles encourage educators to approach new technologies with openness, sound pedagogy, and careful attention to learners' needs.

Other contributions emphasize the deeply human dimensions of teaching. In "Second Career, Second Chance, Third Chance?" Cecilia Martaus reflects on teaching young women in Afghanistan and the renewed purpose educators can find through service. Patrick T. Randolph draws on neuroscience to combine mindfulness, movement, and music in support of vocabulary learning and retention.

This issue also features a special tribute marking Dr. James Hunter's retirement after more than three decades of teaching, mentoring, leadership, and service. "A Retirement Conversation with Dr. James Hunter" brings together the voices of colleagues, students, and friends to honor a legacy grounded in curiosity, humility, courage, and human connection. James's influence will continue through the educators and learners he has inspired—and through his enduring reminder that language education is, above all, relational work.

We are grateful to our authors, reviewers, and editorial team for making this issue possible. Whether you are reading on a quiet weekend morning or after class, we hope these pages offer useful ideas, renewed curiosity, and encouragement for your work with multilingual learners.

With appreciation,
Terrence Tianzhi Zhang, Ph.D.
Nicholas David, Ph.D.
Editors, WAESOL Educator

Land Acknowledgment

Washington Association for the Education of Speakers of Other Languages (WAESOL) recognizes and honors our many diverse Indigenous and Native Peoples in the Pacific Northwest, in the United States, and globally—past, present, and future. We acknowledge that the arrival of the English language impacted the traditional languages and cultures of the Native, Indigenous, and First Nations Peoples and we celebrate the work to reclaim or maintain their languages and cultures. We stand in solidarity with the Native, Indigenous, and First Nations Peoples and respect their sovereignty, cultural heritage, and lives. May we all take a moment to honor the Indigenous tribes and Indigenous lands that we reside on and pay our deepest respects.



Enhancing Linguistic Comprehension in Intermediate ELs Using ChatGPT

LAILA NOOR

Summary: In this reflection, the author highlights the evolving role of teachers and the integration of ChatGPT in an English language learning classroom setting. Emphasizing both the tool's benefits and challenges, the author offers teaching tips, including training, setting boundaries, and encouraging critical thinking. The narrative underscores the importance of balancing technology with traditional teaching, advocating for judicious and adaptive use.

Keywords: AI, ChatGPT in the language classroom, English learner (EL), critical thinking using AI

Introduction

Teaching in a digitally connected world presents both challenges and opportunities. In my adult English language classroom at a U.S. community college, the primary goal is to enhance the linguistic comprehension of intermediate English Learners (ELs). This includes understanding complex language structures, vocabulary, and theories—such as syntax, semantics, and language acquisition frameworks—beyond basic reading skills (Oakhill et al., 2015). My students come from culturally diverse backgrounds, including Russia, Pakistan, Puerto Rico, Sweden, Kazakhstan, and South Korea—each bringing a unique perspective shaped by their native languages and lived experiences. This diversity enriches the classroom environment while also presenting challenges in ensuring consistent comprehension across students. When assigned to read a passage on second language acquisition, many struggled with theoretical concepts like Chomsky's *universal grammar* and Pinker's psychological models. This revealed a gap in understanding abstract linguistic content. I turned to ChatGPT as a possible solution—an AI tool capable of offering personalized, accessible explanations. This reflection shares how integrating ChatGPT supported deeper comprehension and critical engagement with difficult content, offering insights for educators seeking to merge traditional and technological instruction.

Introducing ChatGPT

ChatGPT, an AI language model developed by OpenAI, offers dynamic, interactive responses that go beyond the static results of conventional search engines. In my ESOL classroom, it allowed students to request simplified explanations tailored to their proficiency level, fostering greater clarity and engagement with complex linguistic concepts.

This adaptability made ChatGPT a valuable tool for enhancing comprehension and supporting learner autonomy.

Implementation

Recognizing the immense potential of ChatGPT as an instructional tool, I integrated it seamlessly into our classroom dynamics. The primary aim was not to replace traditional teaching methods but to supplement them, providing students with an additional avenue for exploration and clarification. Recent research highlights ChatGPT's capacity to foster personalized learning and interactive engagement by offering adaptive, real-time support tailored to individual student needs (Munaye et al., 2025). I asked students about their prior experience of using ChatGPT, and they said they had not used it before. I found that students were empowered to take charge of their learning, especially when faced with perplexing terms or abstract concepts. This autonomy cultivated a proactive approach to learning.

Instead of limiting their interactions to seeking straightforward definitions, students were actively encouraged to dive deeper. For example, after encountering the term *universal grammar* in their reading, students asked ChatGPT to explain its core principles, provide real-life examples, and clarify how it applies to second language acquisition (Meyers, 2013). They were nudged to treat ChatGPT as a virtual tutor, engaging in comprehensive dialogues and delving into topics until they felt confident in their understanding. This iterative process of questioning and clarifying mimicked a genuine tutor-student interaction, ensuring that learning was both thorough and personalized.

An illustrative example of this dynamic interaction came to the fore during our discussion on linguistic theories. One student was struggling to understand Noam Chomsky's *universal grammar* theory and asked ChatGPT to explain it in

simpler terms. True to its design, ChatGPT responded with a beginner-friendly explanation. Building on this foundation, the student then asked follow-up questions—such as requesting examples, comparisons, and clarification of related terms—to deepen their understanding. This process of asking targeted questions and refining their knowledge step by step helped the student move from initial confusion to clearer comprehension.

In today's digitally infused educational environment, the tools and resources we employ play a pivotal role in shaping the learning experience. Alongside our standard curriculum resources, which include textbooks, handouts, and supplementary reading materials, I introduced an additional layer of technology into the mix as every student had a smartphone with a stable internet connection. This technological addition was crucial because it served as the primary bridge between the students and ChatGPT, granting them the ability to engage with the AI model in real time.

Introduction to ChatGPT

Before letting my students navigate ChatGPT, I dedicated a session to introducing the platform and highlighting its unique features. Unlike static search engines, ChatGPT offers dynamic, two-way interaction—students can ask follow-up questions, request simpler explanations, or tailor responses to their English level. This personalized exchange helps them receive information in a format that matches their individual learning needs.

Guided Practice

Rather than expecting students to instinctively know how to extract the most value from ChatGPT, I adopted a hands-on approach. I conducted demonstrations, showcasing the best ways to frame questions and illustrating the importance of follow-up inquiries. For example, I demonstrated to the students how to use ChatGPT to understand a difficult concept. I asked ChatGPT, "Please explain the universal grammar theory in simple language (for intermediate ELs)." After I got the response from ChatGPT, some sentences were still too complicated for the learners to understand. Then I copied and pasted those sentences and asked ChatGPT, "Please elaborate this sentence/idea more with examples." ChatGPT provided a detailed elaboration with some examples. Following this, students assured me that they understood the concepts and theories better. After demonstrating the process, I asked them to tailor their questions based on their needs. These initial guided sessions paved the way for students to delve deeper and extract layered understandings from their future interactions.

Independent Usage

After equipping them with the necessary skills, I gradually allowed students more autonomy to interact with ChatGPT. This freedom enabled them to ask questions that aligned with their personal curiosities and to delve into topics at

their unique pace, cultivating a self-directed learning environment. I saw that students were asking more questions and requesting examples relevant to the topic and based on their needs. I asked for their feedback on their usage. They described their positive experience of using ChatGPT for better understanding. One student said:

When using Google, sometimes I cannot get the explanation and examples the way I want. But here, I can ask what I want and ChatGPT answers based on my questions. I can also ask for an explanation of a particular sentence from my text or lesson by typing that line in the chat box.

So, they found it helpful according to their needs.

Group Discussions

Learning is not just about individual comprehension but also about collaborative exchange. After their independent research sessions with ChatGPT, we convened for group discussions. Here, students told their newfound insights into the clarifications they had gleaned and reflected on their interactions with ChatGPT. Students described their experiences of how they formulated the questions to ChatGPT. Some said they typed the sentence from the text in the chat box and then asked ChatGPT to explain this line. Some said that they asked for examples to understand the concept better. However, their sharing of experience enriched the class's collective knowledge and fostered a sense of community and shared learning.

Assessment, Feedback, and Outcomes

To explore the impact of ChatGPT on learning, I assessed students on the topics they had researched. I then held one-on-one feedback sessions with each student to review their comprehension progress, discuss specific areas for improvement, and recognize their growth. Unlike the peer-based group discussions, these sessions were individualized and instructor-led.

The results were transformative. The depth of understanding improved significantly, as shown in class discussions, assignments, and tests. Students who previously hesitated to ask questions—worried about being judged—began engaging more confidently with the material. They learned to tailor ChatGPT's responses to match their level, starting with simple explanations and gradually exploring more complex ideas. The tool served as a supportive supplement, helping clarify concepts without placing all the burden on the teacher.

As we embarked on this experimental journey, I witnessed its profound impact on student comprehension. For example, some students found it challenging to grasp Noam Chomsky's theories on language acquisition and the concept of *universal grammar* due to the complex language used in the text. To address this, they turned to ChatGPT for explanations of these theories in simpler

terms, suitable for beginners or intermediate ELs. ChatGPT provided clear and straightforward explanations, aiding the students in understanding the basic concepts. With this foundational understanding, they revisited the original text. This time, equipped with a clearer grasp of the theories, they found it easier to comprehend the advanced and complex language of the text, overcoming their initial difficulties in understanding the concepts.

Teaching Tips

Train Students First

Before introducing any innovative tool into the classroom, it is paramount to ensure students are well-acquainted with it. Prior training sessions can help the students become acquainted with the tool's functionalities. By familiarizing them with the nuances of ChatGPT, or any other platform, the teacher can ensure a smoother transition and more productive engagements in actual lessons.

Set Boundaries

The allure of technology is undeniable, but without clear boundaries, it can easily become a source of distraction. It is essential to demarcate specific periods within the lesson for accessing tools like ChatGPT.

Encourage Critical Thinking

While AI platforms like ChatGPT offer a wealth of information, it is crucial for students not to take everything at face value. Encouraging a culture of skepticism and critical analysis ensures they do not become passive consumers of information. Urge them to cross-reference facts, pose challenging questions to the tool, and even discuss findings with

peers, promoting a holistic understanding and analytical mindset.

Adapt and Evolve

As with all teaching methodologies, it is essential to remain adaptive when integrating technology. Regularly monitor how students are interacting with ChatGPT: Are they overly dependent? If the tool is used in the classroom, the teacher should monitor every student. Are they engaging critically? Based on these observations, be prepared to adjust the teaching strategy, ensuring the tool remains an asset and not a hindrance.

Conclusion

In today's evolving educational landscape, educators are no longer just transmitters of knowledge but strategic guides navigating a growing array of tools. My integration of ChatGPT reflected this shift, offering students an accessible way to engage with complex linguistic concepts and deepen their understanding. The results were immediate: students gained clarity and confidence through interactive, personalized explanations. However, the tool also presented challenges. Some students began relying on ChatGPT even for basic concepts, highlighting the need to set boundaries and promote critical thinking. This experience reinforced an important lesson: technology should enhance—not replace—traditional instruction. When used thoughtfully, tools like ChatGPT can support meaningful learning while maintaining the core values of curiosity, independence, and teacher guidance. Ultimately, balancing innovation with intentional use is key to reshaping how students access, process, and engage with knowledge in the modern classroom.

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A Retirement Conversation with Dr. James Hunter: Teaching, Curiosity, and a Life of Connection

TERRENCE TIANZHI ZHANG

Summary: This article celebrates Dr. James Hunter's retirement after more than three decades of teaching in the English Language Center (ELC) and MA TESOL program at Gonzaga University. Since joining Gonzaga in 1994, he has directed the MA TESOL program, helped develop the Community, Culture, and Language program, and mentored generations of language educators while supporting multilingual students through community-based language programs. His scholarship includes two teacher's books, a book chapter, and 15 refereed articles published through prestigious venues such as System, ELT Journal, and WAESOL Educator.

Dr. James Hunter's retirement gathering was never meant to be a grand speech. In fact, that would not have been James's style. Those who know him know that he has always preferred to support others rather than make himself the center of attention. Therefore, in the spirit of James himself, we gathered for a roundtable conversation: colleagues, former students, and friends sitting together, asking questions, sharing memories, laughing, and reflecting on the many ways James has shaped Gonzaga University and the wider TESOL community.

What emerged from that conversation was more than a professional biography. It was a portrait of a teacher whose work has always been rooted in curiosity, humility, courage, and deep human connection.

What First Drew James to Teaching English and Working With Language Learners?

James described his entry into English language teaching with characteristic honesty and humor: he "kind of fell into it." As a young person interested in languages, he went to Fukuoka, Japan, during a gap year. There, almost by chance, he attended a speech contest at the YMCA and was asked whether he would like to teach English. At seventeen, James began teaching.

He was quick to admit that he was not, at first, the teacher he would later become. He remembered teaching in ways that now make him laugh and cringe. A turning point came when he watched Bridget teach. In her classroom, he saw something different: students interacting, laughing, playing games, and engaging with language in meaningful ways. He

realized that teaching could be joyful, creative, and deeply human. As he put it, once he discovered that teaching could be fun and interesting, he was "hooked."

That beginning reveals something central about James's career. He did not enter teaching as someone claiming to have all the answers. He entered as a learner. Throughout his career, that learner stance remained one of his greatest strengths. James became the kind of teacher who kept revising his assumptions, learning from his students, and asking what language education could become when grounded in relationships rather than performance.

How Did Living and Teaching Across Cultures Shape His Understanding of Language, Culture, and Education?

For James, cross-cultural experience was not about collecting impressive stories from around the world. It was about learning to recognize one's boundaries and prejudices and then working to move beyond them. He shared the example of teaching at a women's college in the United Arab Emirates, where several students wore niqabs and he could see only their eyes. At first, he wondered how he could connect with students when he could not see their faces. He later realized that this concern arose from his own assumptions. The connection happened: the students connected with him, and he connected with them.

That story captures James's pedagogy beautifully. He has always approached teaching with curiosity rather than certainty. He learned that connection does not require sameness. It requires attention, humility, and a willingness to let go of one's assumptions.

What Makes a Truly Great ESL Teacher?

A great ESL teacher is not simply someone who knows grammar, teaching methods, or theory. A great ESL teacher is someone who sees learners fully and creates the conditions in which they can grow.

James spoke about curiosity and courage. Curiosity means wanting to understand why a student challenges something, resists something, or asks a difficult question. Courage means being willing to release some control in the classroom and follow the conversation where it needs to go. He recalled moments when students challenged texts or ideas. Rather than treating their resistance as a failure, he treated it as the beginning of genuine learning.

One student described James as “not only a mentor, a professor, a professional, but just a good man,” adding that “the only thing bigger than his mind is his heart.” Another student remembered how James took her ideas seriously, even when she was only beginning to develop them. His colleague described his remarkable ability to sit with people, listen deeply, and bring many voices together.

How Has the Field of TESOL Changed During James's Career?

James first acknowledged the obvious: artificial intelligence is changing the world of language teaching and learning. However, he then turned to a larger and deeper historical shift.

Early in his career, James wrestled with the colonial legacy of English. He asked why he was teaching a language that had been used in many places to dominate, marginalize, and even erase other languages and cultures. That tension never disappeared, but the field changed. Over time, TESOL moved further away from the idea that English belongs only to so-called core English-speaking countries. The myth of the “native-speaker” teacher has been challenged and, in many ways, dismantled. English is now understood more fully as a global language shaped by the people and communities who use it.

James also reflected on the field's movement away from perfection as the goal of language learning. He challenged the idea that learners must reach a particular level of accuracy before they can do anything meaningful with a language. For him, that idea gets things backward. People become proficient in using language by using it. Language

learning is not merely preparation for communication; communication is the process through which language learning happens.

This belief has shaped James's teaching and work in the MA TESOL program. He has helped prepare teachers who understand that multilingual learners are not deficient versions of monolingual speakers. They are people with rich linguistic, cultural, and intellectual resources. Good teaching does not ask learners to leave those resources behind. It invites them to use those resources as part of learning.

What Changes Matter Most for the Next Generation of Teachers and Learners?

For James, the next generation of teachers must move away from rigid ideas about correctness, perfection, and authority. Teachers need knowledge, but that knowledge should be used to support learners, not to make them feel small. As James recalled through a humorous classroom memory, knowing grammar does not give a teacher permission to “lord it over” others. The purpose of expertise is not to prove how much we know; it is to help. So, do not teach from the need to prove yourself. Teach from the desire to support others. Help students discover what “sparks” them. Create classrooms where learners can take risks, ask questions, challenge assumptions, and use language for authentic purposes.

James also emphasized the importance of collective and collaborative learning. His vision of TESOL has never been individualistic. It has always been relational. Students, teachers, tutors, mentors, colleagues, and community partners all learn from one another. In the Gonzaga MA TESOL community, former ESL students become graduate students, graduate students become teachers, and teachers continue learning from the multilingual learners they serve. The boundaries between teacher and learner are real, but they are also porous. Everyone has something to teach, and everyone has something to learn.

What Is James Looking Forward to in Retirement?

James made it clear that retirement does not mean he is finished teaching. He and Bridget (James's wife) plan to move to England to be closer to their children and extended family. Even as he spoke about this next chapter, however, he was already imagining new forms of language and literacy work.

He described the community near Bradford, Yorkshire, where many families from Indian, Pakistani, Afghan, and other backgrounds live. He noted the need for community language and literacy support, not for assimilation, but to help people navigate life in that context.

In other words, James is not leaving the work. He is carrying it with him.

He also spoke enthusiastically about the possibility of future collaborative writing and research. Rather than writing alone, he seemed most energized by the idea of an edited collection or shared project that could capture what is distinctive about Gonzaga's approach to TESOL: the complex, relational, and deeply human connections among applied linguistics, language teaching, community engagement, and teacher education.

A Legacy of Hope, Humility, and Connection

Near the end of the gathering, his student Ethan Sams called James a "wall breaker." The phrase fits. James breaks walls between teacher and student, theory and practice, in-

stitution and person, and language and life. He helps people reconsider their assumptions and imagine more humane ways of teaching.

James Hunter's career reminds us that TESOL is not only about teaching English. It is about listening across differences. It is about honoring multilingual lives. It is about helping people find their voices while allowing their voices to change us. It is about curiosity, courage, humility, and love.

As James begins this new chapter, we celebrate not only his decades of teaching, mentoring, leadership, and service but also the countless lives he has touched and the many teachers, learners, and colleagues who will continue carrying his influence forward.



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Second Career, Second Chance, Third Chance?

CECILIA MARTAUS

Summary: This article describes my experience teaching English online to young women living in Afghanistan through the organization Girls on the Path of Change, and discusses how seasoned and second-career teachers may be uniquely situated to share their expertise as a way of pursuing professional development and giving back.

Keywords: online teaching, volunteer, Afghanistan, change, second career, professional development, giving back

It's never too late to be what you might have been.

I almost left it too late to answer my calling as a teacher. In 2014, after retiring from a business career, I attended Georgetown University and emerged with a certificate to teach English as a foreign or second language. More than 10 years have passed. I now introduce myself as a teacher. I have had a second career, and that career and the title of teacher feel real, satisfying, and fulfilling. My decision to begin a second career and become a teacher—my “second chance”—prepared me for my “third chance,” the story I want to share with you today.

In 2024, as I was getting ready to celebrate 10 years as a teacher, I had a health emergency. I quickly realized that I would need to refocus my priorities and stop teaching. This transition was very difficult and different from my earlier career transition. Teaching had become a fundamental part of me in a way that my first career had not. I wondered if I would teach again. Was this part of my life—and my identity—finished? The answer and my third chance came almost a year later from a distant and unexpected location: Afghanistan.

Girls on the Path of Change (GPC) was looking for experienced teachers to teach English online to young women living in Afghanistan. These young women could no longer attend school and pursue their education due to political changes in their country. For many, this meant that their studies in fields such as education and medicine came to a complete and jarring halt. GPC was started by Robina Azizi, who was forced to abandon her studies and to flee with her family from Afghanistan in 2021. She was determined to support her friends and sisters remaining behind in their shared country and founded GPC in 2023 (Azizi, 2025a, 2025b). More information on GPC is available on the organization's Linktree page (Girls on the Path of Change, n.d.).

I volunteered to teach the spring term. My initial class roster included about 20 students. Their English level was high intermediate to advanced. They ranged in age from teenagers to young women in their twenties. Some had not been allowed to finish high school; others were prevented from finishing medical studies. One student was the mother of a newborn. All were born in Afghanistan and most still lived there. A few lived in Pakistan or Iran. I also had an invaluable teaching assistant who lived in Abu Dhabi.

Anything I could tell you about the wonderful experience of teaching these amazing young women would probably be familiar to you. As teachers, we know that our students give us more than we give them, and that they often delight and amaze us. These students were no different. What was different was how they maintained their hope, resilience, and thirst for learning under the most trying of circumstances.

Because most students were based in Afghanistan, we faced many logistical and technological challenges. Internet service could be intermittent. Students joined, then dropped, then joined again. The time difference meant that the students were participating late in the evening, often in the midst of family activities with a lot of background noise and distractions. Any technology we used needed to be free and ubiquitously available.

I learned how to split the screen so I could enlarge and advance Google Slides. Google Classroom allowed the students to log on at a time convenient for them to review the class content. Google Meet was free for only the first hour. I scheduled the class in two sessions. Midway through class, students had to log out, then log in to a new session. It is a testament to their commitment that they all made every effort to log in and log back in as many times as necessary.

Of course, teaching (or learning) is more than simply mastering technology. The courage with which these young

women faced the challenges, not only of participating in class but of living their daily lives, gave me a new confidence that I could accept whatever a class situation might be and turn it into a welcoming learning environment. For the medical students, I taught a class on medical vocabulary using content based on similar classes in the United States. A licensed nurse practitioner co-taught the class with me. For the teenagers, I enjoyed developing classes on dance and nature, as well as using music clips from various pop and K-pop stars. They, in turn, proudly shared their national dances and stories they had written full of colorful imagery. We were creative together. The students took deep pleasure in being able to learn again and brought joy and celebration to our class time. I grew as a teacher and as a person.

These young women and so many others are brimming with vitality, talent, and dreams. It is my sincerest hope that they are given the opportunity to develop and share these gifts. I was pleased to be able to support that hope in the only way I could: with my teaching.

When I first started working, I had a traditional view of what work, a job, and a career meant. A job was, at its most fundamental, a structured time, in a structured setting, for which you got paid. The GPC opportunity was the opposite

in many respects. My embrace of it reflects, at least in part, my becoming a teacher later in life (Shin, 2016). I no longer had the same financial goals and family commitments, but I still needed to work to support my sense of self and to use the gifts I had been given. At different times in our lives, our work gives us different things.

Facing that health challenge and reflecting on the situation of women in Afghanistan also helped me truly understand that teaching is not simply a job but a calling. All teachers—even part-time, volunteer, and later-in-life ones—are responding to this calling. And with all the opportunities and challenges in today's world, the response of teachers is more important than ever.

My Afghan students gave me a third chance to become the teacher and person I am meant to be. My education is one of my most valuable possessions. I had dreamed of being able to help girls and women worldwide who are denied access to this opportunity. I am so grateful to have finally realized this dream. Yet I also understand that the path of change—and becoming what we might be—is the challenge and calling of a lifetime. GPC's mission speaks to me: I realize that I too am a woman on the path of change. Perhaps we all are.

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Strengthening Teacher Preparation Using Virtual Simulation Insights in Low-Resource Settings

LAILA NOOR

Summary: This reflective article demonstrates how key findings from virtual-simulation research can strengthen teacher preparation programs, even in institutions without access to technology such as TeachLivE. Drawing on research about virtual-simulation applications, the article highlights communication strategies, adaptive questioning, scaffolding, and nonverbal responsiveness that teacher candidates can transfer to classrooms with English learners. By integrating structured rehearsal, real-time coaching, and reflective practice, programs can replicate many benefits of simulation and prepare confident, culturally responsive educators in resource-limited contexts.

Keywords: virtual simulation, teacher candidates, English learners, communication strategies, teacher preparation, scaffolding, zone of proximal development

Introduction

Virtual-simulation platforms such as TeachLivE™ have transformed how teacher candidates (TCs) rehearse communication strategies with English learners (ELs). Through realistic avatars, immediate coaching, and a risk-free environment, TCs learn to adapt language, differentiate questioning techniques, and respond to nonverbal cues—skills essential for successful EL instruction. My doctoral research explored how these virtual-simulation experiences shaped TCs' communication strategies with real-life ELs, revealing significant growth in their preparedness, adaptability, confidence, and ability to scaffold language effectively. However, a common and important question remains:

What about institutions or teacher preparation programs that do not have the financial or technical capacity to implement virtual simulation?

For the past three years, I have served as a TeachLivE virtual-simulation coach, preparing teacher candidates to work with ELs at varying proficiency levels. While TeachLivE offers valuable opportunities, I have repeatedly met teacher educators and program directors who express frustration: They recognize the value of simulation but lack the budget, staff, or technological support to implement it. This reflection speaks directly to them.

Drawing on major findings from my simulation-based research and my coaching experiences, this article outlines practical, low-cost strategies that teacher candidates and educators can adopt without access to TeachLivE to strengthen EL instruction. These strategies translate the essence of what TCs learn in virtual simulations into feasible classroom practices, helping teacher preparation programs remain equitable, effective, and grounded in evidence-based practice.

Translating Virtual-Simulation Learning Into Accessible Practice

Virtual-simulation training aligns with Grossman et al.'s (2009) approximations of practice and Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD). Both frameworks emphasize opportunities for TCs to rehearse teaching, receive feedback, and refine their approaches in authentic yet supported settings, working just beyond their current competence with expert support. The iterative feedback loop—practice, immediate guidance, and adjustment—creates a powerful learning cycle that accelerates skill development. Even without technology, teacher candidates can benefit from the same instructional cycle by replicating three core elements:



Figure 1. TLE TeachLivE Avatars, Kindergarten Through Grade 5.

Image by Eric Imperiale.

1. **Structured rehearsal.** TCs role-play with peers who simulate beginning, intermediate, and advanced ELs by responding with limited language, gestures, silence, or culturally influenced behaviors, much like the avatars in TeachLivE.
2. **Real-time coaching.** During these role-plays, educators pause the interaction to model clearer questioning, simplified language, or visual scaffolds—for example, reminding a TC to use shorter sentences because, for beginning ELs, “less is more.”
3. **Immediate reflection and correction.** After each rehearsal, TCs discuss what worked, where misunderstandings occurred, and how nonverbal cues shaped communication.

This cycle of practice, coaching, and reflection mirrors the ZPD-based learning process found in virtual simulation and can be fully implemented in any resource-limited teacher preparation program.

Key Communication Strategies That Transfer From Simulation to Classrooms

Noor’s (2024) findings show that teacher candidates transferred communication strategies practiced in virtual simulations to their classroom interactions with ELs. These strategies—which address questioning techniques, language adaptation, multimodal support, wait time, and nonverbal communication—can be taught effectively even in institutions without access to simulation. By intentionally embedding these practices into coursework and field experiences, programs can ensure that teacher candidates develop the same skills simulations help cultivate.

Level-Appropriate Questioning

One of the most significant strategies TCs developed was level-appropriate questioning. TCs learned to tailor questions to EL proficiency levels: Beginning ELs responded best to *yes/no* or *either/or* questions, intermediate ELs benefited from *why* and *how* follow-up questions, and advanced ELs could engage in analytical and open-ended responses. This became particularly clear when beginning EL avatars responded with silence or lowered heads, signaling confusion when they were asked a complex question. Without simulation technology, teacher educators can replicate

this learning through role-play by assigning peers EL profiles that imitate beginning, intermediate, and advanced language levels. Beginning-level peers use gestures or one-word answers, intermediate-level peers respond in short phrases, and advanced-level peers provide full responses, requiring TCs to adapt their questioning strategies accordingly.

Visual and Nonverbal Supports

The integration of visual aids and nonverbal cues also emerged as a powerful communication strategy, especially for beginning ELs who relied heavily on pictures, gestures, pointing, and modeling. In lieu of virtual simulation, TCs can practice this strategy by delivering micro-lessons that include an anchor visual, one gesture per keyword, and a quick sketch or graphic organizer. Peers respond only when they can genuinely comprehend the message, mirroring the avatar responses in TeachLivE and reinforcing the importance of multimodal instruction.

Wait Time

Wait time also proved essential, as TCs often underestimated how much processing time ELs need. In the simulation, delayed avatar responses made TCs aware of their tendency to rush or prematurely rephrase questions. Teacher educators can replicate this learning by implementing a five-second silent-wait rule, training TCs to pause after each question and allowing peers to delay their responses. This practice helps TCs internalize the importance of giving ELs space to think and respond.

Responding to Nonverbal Cues

Noor's (2024) study also showed that TCs became more attuned to nonverbal cues, identifying confusion, anxiety, disengagement, or overwhelm through lowered heads, nervous laughter, or lack of eye contact. To simulate this learning in low-tech environments, peers acting as ELs can communicate confusion solely through body language. TCs must then interpret these cues and adjust their instruction accordingly. This approach mirrors the simulation theme of recognizing and responding to nonverbal cues and prepares TCs to be more responsive and supportive in classrooms.

Adapting Virtual-Simulation Principles to Field Placements

Even without simulation technology, teacher preparation programs can embed its core principles into field experiences by reframing how TCs observe, teach, and receive feedback. Guided observation using simulation-based lenses can replace general observation tasks. Instead of focusing on broad impressions, TCs observe teachers using specific indicators such as teacher talk, question type, wait time, language adaptation, nonverbal cues, visual supports, and repetition. These categories align directly with the com-

munication strategies identified in virtual-simulation research and help TCs notice the nuanced instructional moves that support ELs.

Targeted microteaching with feedback is another powerful strategy. By having TCs conduct short, five-minute EL-focused teaching segments with students, programs can recreate the focused practice that virtual simulations provide. Cooperating teachers can then offer feedback using the same indicators used in the simulation environment, strengthening the connection between rehearsal and classroom practice.

Finally, teacher educators can incorporate a freeze-and-coach method inspired by TeachLivE coaching. During a practicum lesson, a mentor can briefly pause the instruction to model clearer phrasing, suggest a more appropriate question type, or demonstrate a scaffolded prompt. This immediate intervention replicates one of the most impactful features of simulation coaching and supports the transfer of learning to practice. Together, these strategies allow field placements to function as dynamic rehearsal spaces where TCs practice, refine, and master the communication skills essential for teaching ELs effectively.

Research has shown that virtual simulation reduces teacher candidates' anxiety and strengthens their psychological readiness for classroom interactions, helping them feel more confident, prepared, and less overwhelmed when teaching ELs (Regalla et al., 2016; Noor, 2024). Even without simulation, programs can build this sense of readiness by incorporating repeated microteaching cycles, creating low-stakes peer role-play environments, offering constructive coaching rather than evaluative criticism, and promoting a growth mindset that frames misunderstandings as part of the learning process. Together, these practices replicate the confidence-building mechanisms found in virtual simulation and equip TCs to approach EL classrooms with greater assurance and resilience.

Why These Strategies Matter for Resource-Limited Institutions

These strategies matter greatly for resource-limited institutions because the true value of virtual simulation lies not in the technology itself but in the pedagogical transformation it enables. Research consistently shows that teacher candidates become more adaptive, develop responsive communication skills, build stronger scaffolding techniques, improve classroom management, recognize ELs' linguistic and emotional needs, and successfully transfer these skills to classrooms (Dieker et al., 2014; Regalla et al., 2016; Noor, 2024). Importantly, these outcomes do not depend on access to simulation technology; they depend on intentional instructional design.



Figure 2. TLE TeachLive Middle- and High-School English Learner Avatars.
Image by Eric Imperiale.

By implementing the core strategies described above, teacher preparation programs can reproduce many benefits of virtual simulation and achieve many of the same learning outcomes without a virtual environment.

Conclusion

Virtual simulation offers powerful, evidence-based support for developing strong communication strategies with English learners, but its core benefits are rooted in pedagogy

rather than technology. When programs adopt structured rehearsal, real-time coaching, and reflective practice, teacher candidates can gain the same adaptive, responsive, and culturally attuned skills cultivated in virtual environments. Resource-limited institutions can therefore prepare confident and effective educators by thoughtfully applying the principles behind simulation-based learning.

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Developing the Language Learner's Mind and Soul with Mindfulness, Movement, and Music

PATRICK T. RANDOLPH

Summary: This paper surveys the employment of discoveries in neuroscience as the fundamental tools in building a vocabulary acquisition method. Once the neuroscience discoveries are explained, the author shows how they can be applied to help English language learners encode, learn, remember, and use English lexical items. Data to illustrate the effectiveness of the method are offered along with possible limitations of its use.

Keywords: the Ebbinghaus curse, embodied semantics, mirror neurons, mindfulness, movement, music, spaced-intervals of learning

Introduction

The fundamental significance and intrinsic value of learning vocabulary for English language learners (ELLs) can never be overemphasized. Both teachers and students of languages inherently understand the pivotal role of lexical items. The purpose of this paper, then, is to offer a very engaging method that helps ELLs encode, learn, remember, and use lexical items with ease and enthusiasm. This method includes the employment of recent discoveries in neuroscience and the use of mindfulness, movement, and music. First, I will survey and explain six highly important neuroscience- and well-being-based tools that lay the foundation of the method. Second, I will briefly touch on my *Head-to-Toe Method of Associations for Vocabulary Acquisition* that helps set the stage for effective vocabulary learning. I will, then, explain the roles of mindfulness, movement, and music in the featured method. I conclude with a sample of selected data on the method and some possible limitations that teachers may want to consider.

Setting the Stage

In the cult film *The Matrix*, Morpheus, the rebel leader, tells Neo, the young prodigy, "Don't think you are. Know you are." Moments later, Morpheus tells Neo, "I'm trying to free your mind, Neo. I can only show you the door. You're the one who has to walk through it" (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999, 52:50). These moments in *The Matrix* parallel the English language learning experience. It is the teachers' job to show the students that they must be confident and "know" that they know the lexical items and that they can, in fact, effectively use English vocabulary. The teachers must also equally free the students' minds and help them walk through the door of vocabulary acquisition and use.

How this is done is the real question. Scholars of English vocabulary acquisition such as Krashen (2012) often make troublesome and puzzling claims that marginalize the need and importance of explicitly teaching lexical items. In addition, there is a daunting reality I have termed *the Ebbinghaus Curse* (Randolph, P. T., 2017). According to the work of Ebbinghaus (1885/1913), we forget 90% of what we learn within 30 days. However, what is even more troubling about the Ebbinghaus Curse is that most of the forgetting actually takes place within the first few hours of the initial exposure. Given, then, what the scholars tell us about teaching vocabulary, compounded with the steep forgetting curve, need we even bother teaching vocabulary in our English language programs? With this question in mind, I responded by challenging myself to get my ELLs to retain 90% or more *after* 30 days. The result was my *Head-to-Toe Method of Associations for Vocabulary Acquisition* and the development of my *Mindfulness-Movement-and-Music Method*.

Literature Review & Research

The Neuroscience Components

Before I shed light on these two methods, I would like to briefly touch on the six key components that I consider essential tools for learning vocabulary. These are embodied semantics, mirror neurons, mindfulness, movement, music, and spaced-intervals of learning. These components are paramount in the learning and memory process (i.e., encoding, storage, and retrieval) because they encourage the language learners to genuinely learn the lexical items and gain a stronger sense of sincere ownership of the terms. Let us now survey each one to see how they assist ELLs in the process of vocabulary acquisition.

Embodied Semantics

Embodied semantics plays a crucial role in both physical actions and the corresponding cognitive ideas of those actions. According to Aziz-Zadeh and Damasio (2008), “embodied semantics states that concepts are represented in the brain within the same sensory-motor circuitry in which the enactment of that concept relies” (para. 1). For instance, when one *passes* a volleyball, that same sensory-motor area is being activated as when one simply *thinks* about passing the volleyball. Both thinking and doing are intricately related. This is central in terms of vocabulary acquisition because if we say words and idioms, hear their unique sounds, and then have the students act the terms and their meanings out, they are getting significant reinforcement of the lexical items during the initial encoding process (Randolph, P. T., 2018).

Mirror Neurons

The discovery of mirror neurons highlights the importance of modeling activities in class and also using gestures and facial expressions when teaching vocabulary (Randolph, P. T., 2013a). According to Acharya and Shukla (2012), “[m]irror neurons are one of the most important discoveries in the last decade of neuroscience” (para. 1). For these unique neurons fire when we *do* a particular activity (e.g., pick up an apple and eat it) as well as when we *watch* someone doing the same or a different action (i.e., picking up an apple and eating it or singing and dancing). Mirror neurons are the reason we can live vicariously through characters in a novel or feel sympathetic or empathetic when we watch a film (Iacoboni, 2009). These neurons help us “feel” what “the other” is going through. It is important to note that there are a number of different kinds of mirror neurons that help with everything from developing skills in sports to acquiring lexical items. For a survey on these, see McPherron and Randolph (2014).

What makes these neurons so salient is that their location overlaps with the sensory-motor areas, so the pedagogical tools of using gestures, facial expressions, and acting out the terms to help explain the meanings become highly significant. The tools are very beneficial for the teacher’s growth as an educator and the students’ growth as learners. The teacher guides the students through “seeing” and “understanding” the meaning of the terms via gestures and facial expressions while the students “mirror” or “mimic” this with their mirror neuron systems. Their brains are essentially mirroring what the teacher is doing and conveying. That is, this method encourages the teacher to become better at using gestures and facial expressions as learning tools, and that helps the students learn the vocabulary at a deeper level.

If one, for instance, is introducing the tri-part phrasal verb *come up with*, he or she might create a gesture by moving the hands and fingers about as though they were discover-

ing something of great import while simultaneously making a facial expression that represents a moment of fantastic insight. This initial phase is vital, and it is reinforced even more by having the students mimic the gestures and facial expressions. In doing so, the ELLs will activate both the embodied semantics and their mirror neuron systems, and they will also employ mindfulness and develop acute observation skills, our next tool of interest.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness, according to Kabat-Zinn, is based on three important factors. It requires one to focus and pay attention “on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Kabat-Zinn explains that this kind of attention allows us to become more aware of the present while nurturing a sense of mental clarity and calmness. Being both mindful and an acute observer of a language’s lexical items’ use and meaning helps develop an intrinsic understanding of how they function in both spoken and written English. That is, by being mindful as we study a language, we can become more engaged in the moment and make life itself our 24/7 language classroom. By using and practicing mindfulness, learning a language can become a very spiritual as well as a very profound educational experience.

Mindfulness practices also reinforce the above brain tools of mirror neurons and embodied semantics by using observation skills and incorporating the linguistic moves we see and make in various language settings. For example, an ELL might be mindful of an English language user’s proxemics (i.e., the personal space given in spoken conversation) or how a certain word like *apparently* is used in daily interactions, or even perhaps how a fabricated word like *disconcerting* is misused. In short, the more mindful our ELLs are, the more they will understand how daily interactions are accomplished, and the more they will acquire new terms and start to understand how to employ these terms in a natural and effective way.

Movement

From what the neuroscience community currently knows and understands, there is no better tool for brain development and learning than physical exercise (Randolph, J., 2020; Ratey & Hagerman, 2008). Whether it be learning a language or understanding math, creating a poem or observing a social habit in one’s immediate environment, physical exercise is the most effective tool for the learning process (Randolph, J., 2020; Randolph, P. T., 2016b; Ratey & Hagerman, 2008). In fact, exercise, even in modest doses, can help the brain focus and learn at impressive rates (Randolph, P. T., 2020).

What makes physical exercise so significant is that it has numerous specific benefits for the brain that help with learning and memory. For example, it promotes clarity of thought, enhanced problem-solving abilities, and better

focus and attention (Randolph, J., 2020). In addition, exercise stimulates the release of important neurotransmitters (e.g., acetylcholine, dopamine, epinephrine, norepinephrine, and serotonin) and the all-important brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF). The reason these neurotransmitters and BDNF are so essential is that they, as above, enhance all the necessary components of learning and memory. Physical exercise also increases the size of the hippocampus, which is one of our major learning and memory centers; and, perhaps even more important, exercise promotes neurogenesis—that is, the creation of new neurons (Randolph, J., 2020; Ratey & Hagerman, 2008). These new neurons, of course, make us better learners and more creative thinkers.

Music

Music is another highly significant pedagogical tool for vocabulary acquisition. Music, as is the case for physical exercise, has been a very rich and profound part of our cerebral and evolutionary development. In fact, Levitin (2006) claims that “[w]e can say, conservatively, that there is no tangible evidence that language preceded music” (p. 256). To be sure, music and musical instruments date back thousands of years. In a certain way, mindfulness, movement, and music have been in our DNA and acted as our intimate survival tools for centuries: We needed to be *mindful* to escape wild predators; we needed to *move* to find food; and we needed *music* as a spiritual and inspirational element for our cognitive and social well-being.

Music has been found to employ and enhance numerous parts of the brain from the amygdala and the hippocampus (the centers of emotion, learning, and memory) to the frontal and temporal lobes (the centers of language growth and learning). Each of these regions is paramount for the specifics of language development, as they assist in learning and memory and establish the neural connections necessary for brain growth and plasticity. Music can also calm the heart rate or speed it up; the result of either the former or the latter will elicit various neurotransmitters that can help secure the learning and retention of the lexical items. In addition, music provides an inspirational element via the personal links to favorite artists, genres, and songs. Furthermore, the associations created by the memories of those songs add to a more profound level of in-depth processing and elaborate encoding. These personal links are specific to each student, and they help the students make crucial associations with the music and the vocabulary terms. So, by employing music to learn vocabulary, ELLs develop more personal connections with the process and truly encode, learn, and remember the lexical items and their subtle nuances.

Spaced-Intervals of Learning

The last tool for our current purposes that I would like to touch on is what I call *spaced-intervals of learning*. This is

also referred to as *distributive practice* or *spaced practice*. Spaced-intervals of learning is really modeled after what naturally takes place when we learn new information or skills. Often, we do not necessarily grasp something the first time we are exposed to it. However, after multiple reexposures and spaced-intervals of learning, it is learned, developed, and transferred to our long-term memory, and it becomes acquired knowledge. This is what spaced-intervals of learning is all about. We are exposed to certain kinds of information or skills at different times until they are learned. This can be done either in an ordered way or randomly. Much research (Noraini et al., 2021) has been done on this method, and it is a surefire way to help students encode the lexical items, store them in their working memories, and then permanently learn the vocabulary by securing it in the students’ long-term memories. So, after initially teaching a lexical item like *meticulous*, it is best to reinforce that with multiple reexposures. This can be done with daily review sessions or by having the students use the terms in their weekly assignments as a way to use what they learn.

Methods Used

The Head-to-Toe Method of Associations for Vocabulary Acquisition

I typically introduce my students to new vocabulary by using a method I have been developing for the past 25 years called the *Head-to-Toe Method of Associations for Vocabulary Acquisition*, hereafter referred to as the *Head-to-Toe Method of Associations*. This method is highly effective because it helps students own the new terms by making personal connections or tangible associations with the terms and link them to their unique personhood (Randolph, P. T., 2013b). There are over 40 components in the method, but I usually use the six basic ones that set the foundational knowledge and understanding of the terms. These six include:

1. eliciting the definitions from the students,
2. selecting the lexical item’s part of speech,
3. choosing the term’s *verbpathy*, (i.e., *the intuitive and visceral feeling that a term elicits*)
4. associating a color with the lexical item,
5. associating an emotion with the term, and
6. associating a body part/region/organ with the lexical item.

For an overview of this method, see P. T. Randolph (2016b).

I use the Head-to-Toe Method of Associations to initially teach my students the new vocabulary, as it helps reinforce the intuitive feeling, meaning, and use of the terms. Then, at the end of the week or at the beginning of the following week, I review these terms by using the *Mindfulness-Movement-and-Music Method*. This latter method could be used

to introduce the terms as well. I usually employ it, however, as a tool to review and reinforce the meanings and uses of the terms.

I suggest that teachers employ it in a way that is most beneficial for their own teaching style and the manner in which their students learn best.

The Mindfulness-Movement-and-Music Method

Let us now turn to how I use the Mindfulness-Movement-and-Music Method. As I explain each part, the reader will see how the above components from the neuroscience and mindfulness communities play pivotal parts in the way ELLs encode and learn the lexical items. For the purpose of this paper, I will use the adjective *blissful* as our working example.

1. Pronunciation—Feeling the Term Through Sound
2. Pronunciation and Action—Acting Out the Understanding
3. Pronunciation, Gesturing, and Showing—Reinforcing the Understanding
4. Creating Examples in the Mind’s Eye—Conceptualizing & Visualizing the Term
5. Conveying the Examples—Sharing the Concepts
6. Writing Examples—Putting the Action and Concept into Writing
7. Culminating the Experience Through Music—Enhancing the Understanding Through Emotion

MINDFULNESS-FOCUSED

Pronunciation—Feeling the Term Through Sound

Before we start the pronunciation practice, I ask the students to take two to three relaxing breaths while focusing on the moment. Next, I ask them to close their eyes as they slowly and mindfully pronounce the term three to four times. When the students slowly pronounce a word like *blissful*, they develop a visceral experience and claim they “feel the word’s meaning through its pronunciation and texture.” This is a very effective way of having the students make a word their own and understand it on a very personal level (Jensen, 2008).

MINDFULNESS & MOVEMENT-FOCUSED

Pronunciation and Action—Acting Out the Understanding

The second step of this method links the power of mindfulness with the activation of embodied semantics. Here, I have the students pronounce the term in question three more times while simultaneously making a gesture or facial expression that replicates the meaning of the term. This gesture or facial expression can be the same one that I used to introduce the term when I initially taught it, or they can create their own. So, for instance, with our working example in mind, a student might close his or her eyes while raising his or her arms in the air and smile to show the state

of being *blissful*. As he or she does this, the student slowly pronounces the word three times. By combining these actions, the sensory-motor area is activated along with the temporal lobe, the prefrontal cortex, the hippocampus, the motor cortex, and the cerebellum (McPherron & Randolph, 2014; Ratey & Hagerman, 2008; Willis, 2006).

Pronunciation, Gesturing, and Showing—Reinforcing the Understanding

Next, the students pair up and share their pronunciation and gestures with one another. I usually have the pairs face each other and then take turns sharing their pronunciation and performing their gestures. What makes this part so effective is that now the students’ mirror neuron systems are being activated, and so there is *double reinforcement* in terms of learning the vocabulary terms. That is, one student performs the pronunciation and gesture segment and then gets to watch his or her partner do it (Randolph, P. T., 2016a).

MINDFULNESS-FOCUSED

Creating Examples in the Mind’s Eye—Conceptualizing & Visualizing the Term

Before we begin the next step, I once again ask my students to close their eyes and take three relaxing and slow breaths. After they find their focus, I ask that they create a scene in their mind’s eye that represents the lexical item we are studying. For instance, a student might see her parents dancing in a *blissful* manner in a field of spring flowers. Not only does she “see” the word in action here, but she also summons positive and loving emotions about her family. In doing so, she will release a number of the learning and memory neurotransmitters, which will help in solidifying the term (Immordino-Yang, 2016; Willis, 2006).

Conveying the Examples—Sharing the Concepts

After the students have created a visual example of the term, I ask them to pair up and share their work with a classmate. This part is also highly beneficial for the students because they get to share their ideas by speaking and get new ideas by listening. Here, the embodied semantics and mirror neuron systems are at full tilt, as the students will hear the terms being spoken around the room while their brains absorb the terms, their meanings, and uses. Moreover, the students hear the terms both consciously and subconsciously, so they get optimal exposure to a lexical item’s sound, meaning, and use.

Writing Examples—Putting the Action and Concept into Writing

Once the students have completed the first five steps of the method, I ask them to write down their example sentences on a designated worksheet. I prefer this to be done in class for three reasons. First, when everyone writes at the same time, it promotes and inspires a classroom community of writers. The students feed off of each other, and it creates a

special creative and productive environment. Second, the students will write original sentences and not use the internet or any online sources. This experience thus becomes a very natural and mindful writing session whereby they are employing what is currently in their minds. Third, the students are more likely to use themselves, their classmates, and their teacher in their examples. This, in turn, will help make the terms more tangible and concrete (Immordino-Yang, 2016), and it allows the students to take immediate ownership of the terms.

MUSIC-FOCUSED

Culminating the Experience Through Music—Enhancing the Understanding Through Emotion
(Randolph, P. T., 2018, 2019)

Just as mindfulness and movement are a part of our DNA, music is also a component that has kept us spiritually alive and added so much joy and satisfaction to our daily lives. In fact, “[t]he archaeological record shows an uninterrupted record of music making everywhere we find humans, and in every era” (Levitin, 2006, p. 256). The neuroscience and education communities have also found a number of benefits that music offers the body and the brain (Jensen, 2008; Randolph, P. T., 2021). For example, as mentioned above, with respect to the body, music can positively affect the heart rate. That is, the faster the tempo of the music, the faster the heart beats. This, in turn, promotes more blood to the brain for better learning (Jensen, 2008). Moreover, another key area of the brain that is enhanced during the “music experience” is the frontal lobe (Levitin, 2006). This lobe is highly important because it deals with planning, problem solving, critical thinking, and working memory, all of which are paramount for the language learner. In short, as music is such a significant part of our cognitive and spiritual well-being, I feel it is a natural tool for language learning (Randolph, P. T., 2019).

Once the students have completed steps one through six, I have them find a piece of music or even part of a song that they feel best represents each vocabulary term studied during the week. In order to give the students time for this part of the activity, I assign it either as homework due at the end of the week or as a weekend homework assignment. I want to give them time to reflect on the best piece of music for each term. It should be noted that ELLs may use a musical piece from their own language. The importance here lies

in the music-lexical item connection and not solely in the use of an English song.

This activity concludes the worksheet I give the students each week. The part reserved for this is very simple. I have the students write down the lexical item and draw an arrow to the song or musical piece they have selected. They include the song title, the artist, year, and a time stamp for a video if possible. They, then, write a two- to three-sentence justification as to why they chose that particular piece of music. Below is an example of this activity.

Term:
blissful “Introspection” by Estas Tonne (2018); Time Stamp: 0:30–0:45

This song epitomizes the term *blissful*. As Tonne plays, he shows how happy he is. This emotion, then, inspires his playing and the musical piece is soaked in blissfulness. I focused on 0:30 to 0:45 to show a specific moment of “bliss.”

Findings

Data on the Method

I have had the opportunity to collect data from a wide range of students from various proficiency levels. From 2023 to 2024, I taught a small group of elementary ELLs from Kobe, Japan (*N* = 7). The results of the pop quizzes and scheduled tests given to each student showed that the method was effective, as it promoted solid vocabulary acquisition and helped develop their other language skills (see Tables 1 and 2). The children scored between 96% and 98% on their vocabulary evaluation opportunities.

A class of international university students who took my freshman composition course (*N* = 18) scored between 92% and 98% on eight pop quizzes and one scheduled quiz (see Table 3). A very significant point to bring to my reader’s attention is that these ELLs scored 100% on the definitions and the original student-generated example sentences in the written or spoken parts of the quizzes. The only points deducted were due to spelling or grammar mistakes. The actual retention of the vocabulary definitions and how the terms were used in both spoken and written situations were exemplary.

Table 1
Fall 2023 and Winter 2024 Terms

Number of Pop Quizzes	Average Score
14	96.6%
Number of Scheduled Tests	Average Score
6	98%

Note. *N* = 7

Table 2
Spring and Summer 2024 Terms

Number of Pop Quizzes	Average Score
7	97.8%
Number of Scheduled Tests	Average Score
3	98%

Note. N = 7

Table 3
Fall 2018 Term

Number of Pop Quizzes	Average Class Scores
8	92% 94% 95% 94% 96% 98% 97% 96%
Number of Scheduled Quizzes	Average Class Score
1	96%

Note. N = 18

Populations, Limitations, and Uses

Due to the flexibility of my method, I have found it works for a wide variety of ELLs; that is, from elementary ELLs to university students in intensive English programs. Colleagues whom I have demonstrated this method to at various conferences and workshops have reported that it also works for ELLs at community colleges. However, if a student's spoken and/or written English has yet to be developed, steps four through six can be omitted until they enhance those language skills. Step seven, implementing the music as a representation of the vocabulary item, can still be used by writing its name next to the vocabulary term. In terms of the most effective time to use this method, as mentioned above, I use it to review the vocabulary once the students have had an initial exposure to the terms. That said, as I previously mentioned, I believe that one could use this method to introduce the lexical items, as all seven components will help reinforce the meaning and use of the terms.

tive method that helps the students acquire the lexical items is of equal importance. Students ought to discover a method that nurtures a joy for learning as well as one that inspires them to discover a passion and desire to learn inside and outside the classroom. Based on years of developing and implementing my method, I can truly claim that it both helps students learn and inspires their curiosity regarding the learning process. I have observed my students and found that the use of mindfulness, movement, and music is motivating, intriguing, helpful, and memorable. In fact, many students who have taken my classes and continued on to pursue graduate degrees in their respective fields have continued to use my method to help them acquire lexical items specific to their subject matter. By employing the various parts of the brain discussed above, and by using mindfulness, movement, and music, students not only acquire vocabulary, but they also find a method that motivates them to learn on their own and retain the terms they study in a robust and effective manner.

Concluding Remarks

Learning vocabulary is perhaps one of the most important experiences for our language learners, and finding an effective

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Learning Multiliteracies: Lessons as a TESOL Teacher Educator

CHRISTINA TORRES

Summary: A TESOL teacher educator shares her experience learning about multiliteracies and Learning by Design as part of her Fulbright grant experience, which involved coordinating a virtual exchange project. Learn about this flexible pedagogy and its value in creating modern, student-centered classrooms which emphasize intercultural communication. The author shares how the experience of learning multiliteracies helped her to think more critically about the role of the language teacher and teacher educator in transformative learning.

Keywords: multiliteracies, Learning by Design, virtual exchange, teacher training, intercultural communication

Introduction

My first exposure to the term multiliteracies was in the process of designing a Fulbright grant application. A university in Spain had received my proposal to use grant time as an opportunity to collaboratively design teacher-education materials which would be applied and used with students in both of our programs. My proposal was to develop a pilot semester of a virtual exchange, an educational opportunity for sustained intercultural collaboration via online technology between our students from geographically distant locations and different cultural backgrounds towards a shared aim (e.g., Helm, 2024). In this case, the aim of the virtual exchange would challenge students working within international groups to co-design and enact live online lessons for adult English language students. I proposed creating a teacher-education collaboration which could continue over multiple years so we could collect longitudinal data on students' interpretation of shared content and virtual exchange in our teacher education classes.

My Spanish host faculty were receptive to the ideas I proposed during our first meeting to formalize the grant proposal, but their feedback was that I would need to ground the project in multiliteracies. Multiliteracies was the subject of a large grant and research working group at my soon-to-be host university. As this was my first encounter with the term multiliteracies, I left the meeting and promptly downloaded the New London Group's (NLG, 1996) seminal paper from the *Harvard Educational Review* which coined the term. From that starting point, I would begin my exploration of multiliteracies over the next two years.

Reading and working with multiliteracies informed the design of the virtual exchange project, which took part during

my grant and was a transformative learning opportunity for me. I discovered the value in this flexible pedagogy which has been and continues to be a rich area of study in international research literature and instructional practice, and is highly relevant for language education contexts (e.g., Paesani & Menke, 2023; Zapata, 2022). Ultimately, I believe that multiliteracies is useful for language educators across multiple contexts, as they prepare to engage with diverse classroom communities of language learners, engage in teacher education, and while approaching professional collaborations. Therefore, it is my hope to share some of what I learned in that process from my initial impressions of its academic literature to takeaways after the conclusion of the grant year.

Initial Reactions: What Is (and Isn't) Multiliteracies?

Multiliteracies is a broader definition of literacy coined by an international group of educators in response to the growing need for a more nuanced approach to literacy education, beyond the traditional definition of reading and writing printed form in a standard national language (NLG, 1996). Multiliteracies recognizes that meaning-making includes the intersection of students' diverse lifeworld differences and multimodal/multiform texts. Texts in this case do not refer only to written texts but can also include multiple modes/forms of communicating including speech, sounds, images, objects, space, the body, or a combination. Multiliteracies also refers to a reflexive pedagogy grounded in inclusivity which emphasizes agency in learning and uses critical engagement with texts as a basis for meaning-making and designing/re-designing. Analyzing the meaning of a text requires asking questions about what the text is about,

who is responsible for the text, how the text is structured, the physical and historical context of a text, and why or what the text is for (Kalantzis & Cope, 2023).

I will admit that I had mixed reactions during my initial exploration of multiliteracies based on the NLG (1996) article and Cope and Kalantzis' (2000) book. I agreed with the NLG (1996) argument on the why of multiliteracies, namely that contemporary literacy education should acknowledge and celebrate students' lifeworld diversity and that being well-versed in critical thinking as well as designing texts through multimodal/multiform transpositions prepares students for modern – and often virtual – interactions. This idea of multiliteracies embracing meaning-making at the intersection of student lifeworlds differences, whether these be material, embodied, and/or symbolic differences and multiple modes/forms of communication described by Cope and Kalantzis (2000) made sense to me. On the other hand, the concepts felt theoretical in my initial readings, at least until I read some extensions of the pedagogy of multiliteracies in Learning by Design (LbD) (e.g., Kalantzis & Cope, 2010; Zapata, 2022). I appreciated Zapata's (2022) preface of her book which shared that her motivation to write it was a common reaction from educators to want more guidance on what to do next after her multiliteracies workshops. I was a bit relieved to learn that it was not uncommon to feel this way. LbD offered clarification for educators on how to put multiliteracies into practice using four knowledge processes (experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing and applying) and intended to move beyond argumentative dichotomies of didactic vs. authentic pedagogy towards one which reflexively offered tools to address student needs through this repertoire of knowledge processes (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015).

As a TESOL educator, I drew some connections between my initial readings on multiliteracies and arguments made in classic Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature. For example, Firth and Wagner's (1997) recommendation that language education move beyond several problematic dichotomies like native vs. nonnative speakers and cognitive vs. sociocultural lenses, to instead use more participant-centric perspectives. I thought this classic article aligned with multiliteracies in theme and the timeframe in which it was published. I also remembered Swain and Deters' (2007) article illustrating the shift in SLA research towards the social nature of language learning, situated learning (language socialization and communities of practice frameworks), poststructuralism, and dialogism. I thought about how these shifts in SLA aligned with training in multiliteracies because the pedagogy can provide a wide lens with which to situate pedagogical choices, orienting these choices towards students' needs. Because multiliteracies covered a lot of ground, I found myself making a list in parallel of what is *NOT* multiliteracies, with the intention of clarifying the concepts for myself. An abbreviated list of things that

are *NOT* multiliteracies, inspired by Cope & Kalantzis (2024) is found below:

- Limited to one standardized/idealized version of reading and writing in a target language
- Discriminatory towards students' diverse lifeworlds
- Ignoring social justice issues
- Reliant on passive learning with teacher-fronted instruction
- Fearful of technology
- Emphasizing only individual intelligence/cognitive ability
- Intending to create uniform, compliant citizens

In general, multiliteracies is *NOT* an "Old narrowly textbound approach to literacy" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2023, p. 29).

While I would never knowingly intend to implement this list above in a classroom (and hope others feel the same), having it written helped me to think critically about the choices I was making in teacher training and lesson design with my own groups of students. For example, was I creating sanitized lessons that were meant to teach language at a superficial cultural level? If I avoided tougher and sensitive issues like the immigrant experience in a classroom because of a desire to focus more time on teaching grammar and vocabulary, for instance, was I reducing broader learning opportunities for my students? My takeaways from the initial exploration of multiliteracies is that teaching with this philosophy means using authentic texts and creating lessons that do not shy away from emotions, that provoke critical thinking, implement technology thoughtfully, and offer students various creative ways to approach and respond to content.

Explaining and Applying Multiliteracies: Learning by Design and Virtual Exchange

After initial readings, the next step in my multiliteracies journey was to learn more about its application to classroom settings and design instructional materials for communicating this to teacher training courses. This was in preparation for a virtual exchange which tasked teachers in training with designing lessons for use in synchronous online teaching. I understood how multiliteracies invites educators to begin with backwards design, the identification of learning objectives first before deciding on what the evidence of these learning objectives will be and concluding with the plan for the instructional experiences that support these goals (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Therefore, student teachers needed to grasp backwards design. The knowledge processes in Learning by Design (LbD) (Kalantzis & Cope, 2010; Zapata, 2022) were helpful guides for considering various instructional experiences to guide learners. Reflecting on the knowledge processes in LbD, *experiencing, con-*

conceptualizing, analyzing, and applying represented steps that can be taken to guide students through lessons. I appreciated the helpful diagram which shared the knowledge processes as Kalantzis and Cope (2010) described them, also available in the visual overview of their website, [New Learning Online](#). While there is no prescribed order to the knowledge processes in LbD, Zapata (2022) recommended following the listed order above, beginning with *experiencing* to anchor lessons in student belonging. Examples of one interpretation of the applying knowledge processes into learning experiences for a language classroom are shared below using the premise of designing a campaign around the environmental issue of single-use plastics.

- **Experiencing the known**

- Students brainstorm personal experiences with single-use plastics, plastic water bottles, shampoo bottles, disposable cups, etc. They consider the pros and cons of plastics in their experiences.

- **Experiencing the new**

- Students read and reflect on a pro-plastics campaign from the 1990s in the U.S. as well as read and reflect on an anti-plastic campaign to stop ocean pollution. The point of these readings is to understand the main ideas and overall messages delivered.

- **Conceptualizing by naming**

- Students consider how the messages of both campaigns are delivered, their features present in the combination of text and images.

- **Conceptualizing with theory**

- Students note the similarities and differences between the campaigns, consider the concepts in the structure of the campaigns (e.g. slogans, arguments, use of statistics, etc.)

- **Analyzing functionally**

- Students focus on language (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.) to consider the kind of meanings expressed by the text in these campaigns, how they are expressed, and the language that is needed to achieve this function.

- **Analyzing critically**

- Students explore the context of these campaigns: who created them, who funded them, when they were created, why they were created, if they are effective and why. They consider, what makes an effective campaign for this environmental issue?

- **Applying appropriately**

- In small groups, students create an updated print ad campaign to spread awareness of the impact of single-use plastics for the target audience of their local school context. Include a slogan and an image to amplify a desired emotional impact and promote action.

- **Applying creatively**

- In small groups, students convert the print ad into a short commercial to be shared with the local school community that addresses the impact of single-use plastics and is targeted towards the intended student audience to enact change in behaviors.

I collaborated with my colleagues on creating instructional materials for student teachers which were placed into online course shells across courses in my home (U.S.) and host institution in Spain. These materials included definitions, applications, examples, and multimodal reader-viewer activities (Torres & Toscano-Fuentes, 2025). A challenge with the goal of creating and implementing lessons in an online synchronous environment within my Fulbright project is that I knew my student teachers would be limited in time with their English language students. With this in mind, I invited them to consider the knowledge processes as options in their teacher toolkit rather than completing all of them as a required checklist.

After being presented with the introduction to multiliteracies and LbD content, I found that student teachers gravitated towards emphasizing multimodality as they collaboratively designed their lesson content during the virtual exchange. They applied interactive games through, for example, [Genially](#) to gamify their lessons. They considered how their language students would engage with each other to maintain interaction with the Zoom chat, microphones, polls, or shared Google Docs. I understood why, since the live online teaching space required creative applications of multimodal tools to increase student interactivity. Indeed, the emphasis on multimodality in multiliteracies aligns with principles within Universal Design for Learning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2023). Additionally, in the lessons that student teachers designed during the virtual exchange, there was evidence of opportunities for language students to share their different lifeworld experiences.

Textual analysis was a concept that I noticed student teachers found more challenging to apply in live online settings. They presented texts in their lessons, but I noticed opportunities for in-depth analysis of the texts were not as common as interactive games related to comprehending the text. While there were other circumstances at play in live online lessons such as time constraints, this observation about the use of texts aligned with previous research indicating that teachers learning to work with multiliteracies can have difficulty understanding how to teach vocabulary and grammar through texts (Paesani, 2025). Understanding how to ground a lesson in authentic texts was something that took me some time too, and I recommend Paesani and Menke's (2023) book as well as its accompanying website [CARLA](#) as a helpful step-by-step guide with useful templates and examples on how to go about this process. While multiliteracies is adaptable, having examples to work from can be

helpful as a starting point when putting the pedagogy into practice.

I found the layer of virtual exchange helpful within my exploration of multiliteracies training because it allowed for a focused opportunity to engage in intercultural communication with international groups. Multiliteracies pedagogy has been used as a vehicle for intercultural language learning development with language teacher education (García-Barroso & Torres-Vélez, 2023). It is important for English language educators to develop and teach intercultural skills since language teaching naturally involves discussing the relationship between language and culture, often with students from different cultural backgrounds. One of the major purposes of virtual exchange is to grow participants' skills in intercultural communication (Helm, 2024). Applications of multiliteracies within virtual exchange for teacher training provide unique opportunities to examine growth in intercultural awareness during artefact co-creation.

Broadening Perspectives

Learning multiliteracies greatly impacted my perspective as a teacher trainer and researcher. One impact is that I have more deeply considered the themes of units I cover in my class and the texts we use to explore them. I understand that navigating sometimes tense emotions while learning how to express agreement and disagreement due to life-world differences in a classroom can be necessary for a more meaningful learning experience compared to lighter and more superficial themes often found in textbooks. Simply put, I have come to reframe how I approach lesson design. I ask myself questions about what multiliteracies is (and is *NOT*) as I consider the design of lessons for English language students which will be put into practice in synchronous online environments that I supervise while coordinating TESOL student teacher service-learning hours. I also consider multiliteracies as I lead teacher education courses.

A common thread in multiliteracies and its application to virtual exchange is transformative learning. Transformative learning “involves how to think critically about assumptions supporting one’s perspectives and to develop critical reflective judgement in discourse regarding one’s beliefs, values, feelings, and self-concepts” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 29). From its beginning, the NLG (1996) shared that a goal within multiliteracies has been to encourage personal transformation through the act of designing. Confronting emotions such as intercultural tension during groupwork and decision-making is an aspect of transformative learning in virtual exchange. Also, regardless of the presence of online interactions, the opportunity to set the stage for these experiences can be found in multiliteracies pedagogy.

If I aim to promote classroom scenarios that guide English language students and student teachers through transformative learning, I need to invite them to critically analyze

texts and apply language creatively. If I want to train teachers in multiliteracies pedagogy, I will need to authentically apply its principles to the coursework I design for them at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

When working in intercultural collaborations, or preparing students to do so, I also found the term lifeworlds particularly useful. Discussed in multiliteracies since the NLG (1996) paper, lifeworlds refers to an individual’s material, embodied, and symbolic differences. Material differences include socioeconomic status and access to resources. Embodied differences include age, biological sex and differences of ability. Symbolic differences include socialized gender, ethnicity, and language. The combination of the material, embodied, and symbolic differences is a personal lens through which multimodal/multiform communication is experienced. Multiliteracies does not deemphasize differences that individuals bring to a collaborative space. Rather, understanding that lifeworld differences impact how anyone approaches a text helps to frame differences of opinion and experience when approaching conversations about texts, pedagogy, and collaboration. Something as simple as saying, “Hey, this is a lifeworld difference” during a disagreement in a collaboration reminds the others in a conversation to stop, reflect, and approach the conversation with curiosity of learning rather than judgement. Conversation around lifeworlds also encourages the type of critical self-reflection which is associated with transformative learning.

Takeaways from the Multiliteracies Experience

As an educator, I know that I will always continue learning, and this is something I enjoy about the profession. I approached this reflective piece from the perspective of someone who is still in the early years of working with multiliteracies. I am grateful for the opportunity I was provided to take an initial dive into this area of study, and I feel the impact that it has had on my mindset as a teacher educator and learning designer (Kalantzis & Cope, 2023). Going back to the beginning of this experience, the concepts in multiliteracies are not necessarily new. Indeed, the NLG recognized that multiliteracies represented, “a coming together of ideas developed before and since” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015, p. 2). It’s the coming together of these ideas in multiliteracies which provides a framework to approach teaching from a flexible, authentic, and student-centered way, encouraging transformative learning in designing and re-designing texts. With Learning by Design, there are pedagogical tools in knowledge processes to work with students in ways that will invite them to critically think and become critical consumers/creators of texts in various modalities. Knowing that the traditional definition of literacy – reading and writing in a print version of a standardized national language - is no longer sufficient, multiliteracies can help

students to understand that literacy is multifaceted and includes – among other things - technology literacy.

I found multiliteracies as a useful tool for self-reflection in my identity as an educator. A list of what is NOT multiliteracies helped me to critically evaluate materials, texts, and lessons I encountered in a systematic way. I also used the term lifeworlds to frame conversations in collaboration, especially when approaching creative differences and negotiating towards mutually beneficial outcomes. I found that to teach multiliteracies authentically requires constant self-reflection about my own lifeworld and how this impacts my approaches to teaching while remaining flexible to understanding how others' lifeworlds impact their own pedagogical decisions.

There are several reasons to explore multiliteracies and consider its application. First, the broad scope provides a flexible pedagogy to work from. Additionally, using the knowledge processes with authentic texts is a way to cus-

tomize teaching to suit students' needs and curiosities. There are so many opportunities for creativity within multiliteracies pedagogy, particularly in a classroom which embraces lifeworld differences and multimodal/multiform expression in design. Finally, multiliteracies encourages personal growth, in both students and educators, through reflective engagement which supports transformational learning (Lee, 2025; Zapata, 2022).

I would recommend anyone interested in exploring multiliteracies to start one step at a time. Design one lesson unit with one text you think is great for your students like a poem, a print ad, or a commercial. Work through the knowledge processes with your students. Reflect on and evaluate how it went. Get student feedback. Refine and improve the lessons for next time. I hope that reading about this experience has provided some encouragement to explore multiliteracies in your own educational context.

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Teaching with GenAI: Custom GPT as a Scaffolding Tool for Phrasal Verb Learning

TERRENCE TIANZHI ZHANG, JIQING XIANG

Summary: This study explores the potential of customizing ChatGPT as a scaffolding tool for multilingual English learners (MELs) studying phrasal verbs. Grounded in sociocultural theory, we designed a Custom GPT following a seven-step scaffolding sequence to guide MELs in understanding the semantic roles of particles in phrasal verbs. Four college-level MELs participated in five GPT-assisted tutoring sessions. Findings indicate high technical feasibility and strong conversational accuracy of the GPT tool, although occasional glitches and cognitive overload were observed. Students reported that the GPT mediation enhanced their conceptual understanding and made phrasal verbs easier to remember.

Keywords: generative AI, Custom GPT, scaffolding, phrasal verbs, vocabulary instruction

Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has become an emerging presence in language education, with over 180 million people engaging with tools like ChatGPT daily. Studies indicate that many users report using these tools specifically for language learning (Kim et al., 2023). Its widespread adoption by language learners has made it an unavoidable part of the learning landscape, influencing how language is acquired and practiced. As AI continues to shape language education, learning how to effectively use it has become inevitable for ESL teachers. Exploring its potential, considering ways to integrate it into teaching strategies, and reflecting critically on its benefits and limitations has become a hot-button topic in language education since the advent of ChatGPT. While many ESL practitioners and scholars have raised concerns about AI's role in language learning, such as discouraging critical thinking and leading to over-reliance on AI for language learning (Pack & Maloney, 2023), many scholars and educators see its potential as a valuable teaching tool. They recognize its ability to personalize learning, provide instant feedback, and support students in refining their language skills (Baskara, 2023). However, in most cases, ChatGPT is used to enhance language performance, such as providing automated writing feedback and adaptive grammar correction (Al-khresh, 2024), but not necessarily to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying linguistic principles that govern these outputs. As a result, rather than scaffolding learning, AI often functions as a tool for immediate results, reinforcing language output without fostering metalinguistic awareness

or conceptual understanding of complex grammatical structures (Teng, 2025).

Building on these discussions, there remains a lack of research into whether ChatGPT can be leveraged not just as a tool for improving English output but as a scaffolding mechanism to deepen conceptual understanding of linguistic knowledge in English. This study addresses that gap by examining the effectiveness of a customized GPT-based tutoring tool in facilitating the learning of English phrasal verbs for intermediate-level multilingual English learners (MELs). Grounded in Vygotskian sociocultural theory and scaffolding frameworks (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994), we investigate the potential of a customized GPT as a scaffolding tool for MELs to develop a deeper conceptual understanding of English phrasal verbs. Additionally, this study provides a practical implementation framework, offering insights into how ESL educators can effectively integrate ChatGPT into their teaching without requiring advanced coding skills. By presenting a replicable model, we aim to empower educators to harness AI-driven scaffolding in a way that is both accessible and pedagogically feasible.

How Did We Leverage ChatGPT as a Customized Tutoring Tool?

Custom GPT is a customizable version of ChatGPT that allows users to tailor the model's behavior, focus, and knowledge base to meet specific needs. Unlike the default version, Custom GPT enables users to define personas (e.g., an ESL tutor specializing in academic writing for intermediate Chinese-speaking learners), objectives, and instructional approaches, making it an adaptive tool for personalized

learning and teaching. A key advantage of Custom GPT is its ability to follow user-defined instructions that shape interactions. Educators can specify the tutor's role, tone, and pedagogical approach to ensure structured guidance and effective feedback. This customization enables scaffolded learning where students receive purposeful, adaptive guidance that fosters internalization of the phrasal verb as a concept. The Custom GPT can detect errors, offer corrections, and explain linguistic principles, thereby promoting metalinguistic awareness of linguistic structures and usage. For example, in our study, we structured the Custom GPT to follow a scaffolding approach for teaching phrasal verbs. This structured approach enables the AI tool to progressively support learners on an implicit-to-explicit continuum (e.g., starting with contextual observation of phrasal verbs in authentic texts before providing conceptual hints and explicit explanations) to enhance both linguistic accuracy and a deeper conceptual understanding of phrasal verbs.

Another critical feature of Custom GPT is knowledge integration, which allows educators to embed domain-specific content to enhance instructional quality. Teachers can upload instructional materials, such as assignment guides, vocabulary lists, explanations of linguistic concepts, and task samples, enabling the AI to reference and apply the information in responses. The uploaded knowledge enhances the accuracy and relevance of AI-generated responses to enact more precise and contextually appropriate interactions with students. In our study, we developed documents explaining phrasal verbs by their particles (e.g., *in*, *out*, *up*) based on existing scholarship on their semantic roles within the framework of conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For example, the document explains how *off* conveys a sense of separation, as seen in *take off* (departure from a surface) and *cut off* (disconnection), while *in* represents containment, as in *bring in* (movement into a space) and *sink in* (gradual absorption of information). These materials included definitions of particle meanings and concrete example sentences that demonstrate how particles contribute to the meaning of phrasal verbs with different semantic meanings. These documents serve as a knowledge base for the AI, allowing it to incorporate new data points into its pre-trained model. By integrating these materials, the AI can retrieve relevant information from the uploaded documents to generate precise, contextually appropriate explanations of phrasal verbs, therefore providing students not just definitions of phrasal verbs but nuanced semantic meanings of phrasal verbs to deepen their understanding of phrasal verbs as a linguistic construction.

In addition to instructions and knowledge integration, Custom GPT offers features such as descriptions and conversation starters, which guide users to use the Custom GPT. Descriptions provide users with a clear understanding

of the GPT's purpose and capabilities. Conversation starters serve as prompts that guide students in using the Custom GPT. For example, we designed prompts such as “Explain *kick off* for me” and “Can you help me understand the difference between *take in* and *take out*?” These features ensure that students can efficiently navigate the tool and actively engage in meaningful linguistic exploration.

The Scaffolding Procedures of the Customized Tutor Tool

Scaffolding, rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, is a dynamic instructional strategy that provides learners with structured support within their zone of proximal development, which conceptualizes the cognitive space between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with guidance. This study designs scaffolding procedures within the framework of Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Developing the scaffolding process begins with implicit support, such as prompting students to locate a contextual sentence for a target phrasal verb, and gradually transitions to explicit guidance, including direct explanations of conceptual metaphors underlying particle meanings (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). This structured sequence ensures that students engage in guided discovery before receiving explicit instruction, allowing them to develop a deeper conceptual understanding of phrasal verbs. The following section details the seven-step scaffolding process implemented in the Customized Tutor Tool (see Figure 1).

Initially, learners engage in a low-support task to activate prior knowledge, searching for a contextual sentence that contains their target phrasal verb. This encourages self-directed exploration and prepares them for deeper analysis. Next, the Custom GPT retrieves conceptual meaning categories of the particle based on pre-uploaded instructional materials to provide learners with example sentences to infer meaning from context. This aligns with the Noticing Theory (Schmidt, 1990), which emphasizes the importance of directing learners' attention to linguistic features.

To further deepen understanding, the AI provides metaphorical hints that prompt students to analyze the verb's meaning through visualization. For example, students were asked to imagine a book sliding off a table to conceptualize *off* as separation. This stage draws on cognitive linguistics principles, which emphasize how embodied experience shapes language comprehension (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Following this, categorization prompts explicitly guide learners by presenting common meanings of the particle and asking them to classify their verb accordingly. For instance, *off* may denote detachment (e.g., *take off*), deactivation (e.g., *turn off*), or removal (e.g., *cut off*).

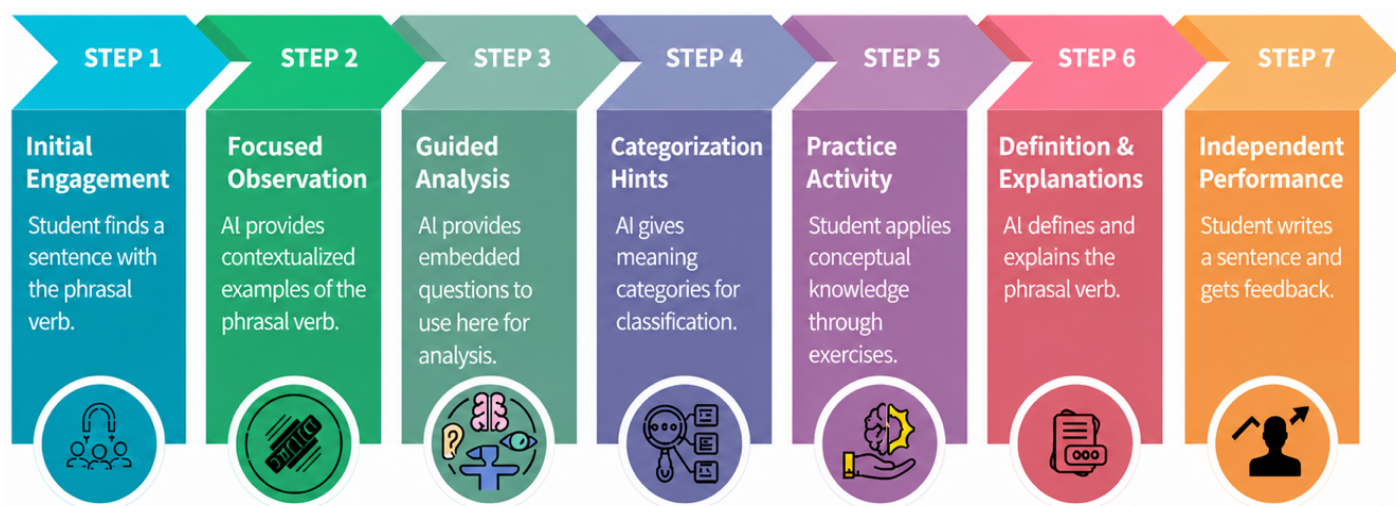


Figure 1. Seven-Step Scaffolding for Phrasal Verb Learning

After categorization, students engage in a practice activity where they select the most appropriate explanation for a given phrasal verb in multiple-choice tasks. This phase fosters metalinguistic reflection and assesses learners' understanding of the semantic roles of particles in the phrasal verbs. Subsequently, the AI tutor provides the definition of the phrasal verb and explicit conceptual clarification, explaining the underlying metaphorical meaning of the particle. For example, *off* in *take off* conveys separation, whether from the ground (airplane) or from the body (removing clothing). This phase bridges implicit discovery with explicit instruction.

Finally, learners moved on to independent application by generating their own sentences using the target phrasal verb and receiving GPT's feedback. This step encourages self-regulation, which aligns with Vygotsky's principle that externally mediated learning is intended to support learners in internalizing and independent performance (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). By progressing from implicit engagement to explicit instruction, the customized GPT fosters a deeper conceptual understanding of phrasal verbs, ensuring that students grasp not only their usage but also the underlying cognitive and semantic relationships between the verb and its particle.

Method

This study performed a qualitative examination of the effectiveness of a Custom GPT in scaffolding phrasal verb comprehension among higher-intermediate MELs. The investigation specifically focused on the feasibility of Custom GPT as a scaffolding tool and the learners' perceptions of this GPT tool.

Context and Participants

This study took place at an English Language Center (ELC) in a private university in Washington State, U.S., which offers both coursework and supplemental tutoring for international students seeking to improve their English profi-

ciency for academic purposes. Four MELs, all Level 5 students at the ELC, participated in this research: two were native speakers of Vietnamese, and two were native speakers of Chinese. They regularly visited the tutoring center for additional support with class assignments and language development. The participants were recruited through informational posters and an email invitation circulated by the ELC staff.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our data collection lasted seven weeks, with weekly meetings with each student. At the outset, each learner took part in a pre-interview exploring their existing knowledge of phrasal verbs and typical self-learning practices. Afterward, they engaged in five GPT-assisted tutoring sessions, during which they learned six targeted phrasal verbs; a human tutor was present but offered minimal instructional input, instead clarifying the GPT's instructions as needed. Finally, a post-interview was conducted, focusing on learners' current understanding of phrasal verbs, evolving study habits, and attitudes toward the GPT tool.

Data for this study comprised:

1. **Transcripts of pre- and post-interviews:** Audio recordings were transcribed and coded for insights into participants' perspectives on phrasal verbs and on using AI for language support.
2. **GPT interaction logs:** The text-based exchanges on ChatGPT were collected to document how learners and the AI co-constructed understanding of the target phrasal verbs.

The GPT interaction logs were analyzed through three interrelated criteria, adapted from holistic evaluation frameworks for AI in education (Mittal et al., 2024; Virvou & Tsihrintzis, 2023) to assess the Custom GPT's feasibility and effectiveness as a scaffolding tool: (1) technical feasibility, focusing on whether the GPT followed the seven-step scaffolding procedures as designed; (2) conversational in-

telligence, referring to the model's ability to provide accurate and contextually appropriate explanations using uploaded materials; and (3) student uptake, examining the accuracy of learner responses and the appropriateness of their self-generated example sentences. Together, these criteria were developed to offer a comprehensive evaluation of how well the Custom GPT supported learners' conceptual development and independent application of phrasal verbs. The interview transcripts were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify MELs' attitudes, preferences, and concerns about AI-assisted vocabulary learning.

Findings

Technical Feasibility

The Custom GPT demonstrated strong technical feasibility, successfully following the instructed seven-step scaffolding procedure with an overall adherence rate of 97.6%. This high rate suggests that the tool reliably delivered structured support to learners across most interactions. All seven scaffolding steps exhibited robustness above 95%—except for Step 4, where notable inconsistencies emerged. Specifically, Step 4 occasionally failed to prompt learners to categorize the phrasal verb by particle meaning, either skipping the step entirely or giving less than three possible particle meanings as instructed. Other glitches included prematurely offering a direct definition of the phrasal verb in Step 1 before other scaffolding steps had been completed, misordering Step 2 and Step 3, and occasionally skipping Step 6, a final explanation reinforcing the phrasal verb's meaning. Importantly, these misfunctions were not evenly distributed across participants. Two students experienced seamless tutoring sessions with no procedural violations, while the other two showed adherence rates of 97.6% and 92.9%, respectively. Closer examination of the AI-learner interactions revealed that most deviations stemmed from learner-initiated disruptions, such as requesting a new phrasal verb explanation before the previous scaffolding cycle concluded. However, a small number of glitches could not be traced to any user input or identifiable trigger, suggesting some instability in the AI's ability to consistently retrieve and execute certain scaffolding instructions. Despite these isolated issues, the overall high fidelity indicates that Custom GPT is a technically robust tool for delivering conceptual scaffolding steps following the researchers' instructions.

Conversational Intelligence

The Custom GPT exhibited robust conversational intelligence—its ability to generate context-appropriate and accurate responses at each turn—achieving 97.5% accuracy across 840 coded scaffolding moves in 20 tutoring sessions. The tool performed flawlessly in the opening two steps—diagnosing each learner's sentence and providing an initial semantic hint—and it maintained accuracy above 98% in

Step 3, where the AI supplied metaphor-based visualization hints to help learners infer the particle's meaning, and in Step 7, where it evaluated learners' self-generated sentences and offered formative feedback. The only glitch in these phases was a mismatch between the explanation provided in Step 3 and the semantic hint given in Step 1. These near-perfect scores show that GPT reliably guides learners through the instructed scaffolding procedures from initial hinting to meaning negotiation and final sentence production. The main challenges surfaced in Step 4, where GPT prompted learners to categorize the target phrasal verb under a set of particle meanings drawn from the uploaded knowledge. Though Step 4 accuracy remained at a solid 93.3%, 8 of the 120 Step 4 instances were problematic: four delivered an incorrect conceptual explanation after the learner selected a particle meaning, and four omitted the step altogether. These glitches show that GPT can still misapply or fail to retrieve the uploaded knowledge when generating explanations of the particles in the phrasal verbs. These findings suggest the value of human intervention during concept-heavy explanations. In fact, students themselves noticed these discrepancies during interaction; the researcher then negotiated the correct meaning with them, and learners ultimately achieved accurate understanding. Therefore, human mediation and ongoing monitoring of AI–student exchanges remain indispensable.

Student Uptake

The overall student accuracy rate across Steps 4, 5, and 7 was 90.1%, with individual step accuracies of 92.1%, 93.2%, and 85.1%, respectively. The high accuracy of selective responses in Steps 4 and 5 suggests that students grasped the metaphorical or spatial logic of the particles used in phrasal verbs. No clear upward or downward trend was observed across the five sessions, indicating that GPT's explanations were generally accessible from the outset, and no prolonged exposure is needed.

The slightly lower performance in Step 7, where students independently produced example sentences using the target phrasal verbs, revealed nuanced challenges. Out of 120 total responses, 18 were incorrect. Two primary patterns of error emerged. First, some students demonstrated an understanding of the general meaning of the phrasal verb but had difficulty applying it appropriately in context. For example, in one participant's sentence, “fight beat up him” (Session 5, *beat up*), the intended meaning aligns with the target verb, but the usage lacks contextual appropriateness and natural phrasing. Second, a few students formed a basic understanding of the phrasal verb through GPT's English explanations, but their comprehension was limited by the lack of support in their first language. For instance, in another participant's sentence, “She smuggle in a textbook into the lecture class” (Session 1, *smuggle in*), the structure is appropriate, but the incorrect use of *smuggle* suggests a gap in her conceptual grasp of the verb, likely due to the ab-

sence of an equivalent term or insufficient translation support.

These observations suggest that while GPT facilitated conceptual understanding, productive accuracy was mediated by students' L1 knowledge and language transfer. In fact, two students mentioned in the post-interview that having L1 definitions available during Step 6 would have improved their understanding, highlighting the value of translanguaging support during AI-assisted instruction.

MELs' Attitudes Toward GPT-Assisted Language Learning

The thematic analysis of post-interview transcripts revealed that students' perceptions of the GPT-based scaffolding tool clustered around four interrelated areas: conceptual understanding of phrasal verbs, usability of the tool, emotional responses, and user feedback. Overall, participants expressed that GPT was helpful in understanding the conceptual structure of phrasal verbs, particularly the semantic role of particles. One student reflected,

[Understanding the preposition] will help me to guess the meaning like, because when I know the meaning of the verb, but we just feel different or difficult to differentiate the preposition. So if you know the meaning of preposition, it will help you understand the whole set.

This comment highlights how the conceptual scaffolding provided by GPT helped students understand the semantic role of particles in shaping the overall meanings of phrasal verbs, supporting the study's aim of fostering deeper, meaning-based vocabulary comprehension.

Students also valued the structured feedback and cumulative nature of the GPT scaffolding process, contrasting it with traditional dictionary-based approaches. One participant noted, "Using GPT really gives you more feedback. . . . you know, dictionaries are dead. They just tell you what it is. They don't tell you how and why the phrasal verb means that." This comparison illustrates that students saw the GPT as a conceptual tutor that helped them understand the semantic roles of the particles and enhance their abilities to analyze phrasal verbs as a grammatical structure.

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Despite these benefits, some participants raised concerns about the cognitive load of the tool. As one student said, "I'm really confused sometimes because they give me too much." This sentiment highlights the potential for scaffolding overload, particularly when learners are required to navigate multi-step explanations for each phrasal verb. Two of the four participants specifically recommended integrating L1 definitions into Step 6, suggesting that bilingual explanations would significantly aid comprehension. Additionally, several students expressed a preference for shorter, more direct explanations in each step to reduce reading time and minimize cognitive fatigue. These comments indicate a need for calibration between depth of explanation and cognitive accessibility.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Custom GPT can serve as a feasible and intelligent scaffolding tool to support multilingual English learners' conceptual development of phrasal verbs. The GPT tool effectively guided learners through the instructed scaffolding steps to understand both the overall meaning of phrasal verbs and the nuanced meanings of the particles within them. We suggest that its potential as a scaffolding tool can extend to other grammatical knowledge in English, such as verb tense and aspect, or other context-dependent linguistic constructions that require contextual, step-by-step scaffolding. However, it is not surprising that GPT occasionally failed to deliver or correctly explain key conceptual steps, which underscores the necessity of teacher mediation in AI-assisted learning. As such, while Custom GPT serves as a promising tool for vocabulary instruction and conceptual scaffolding, it should not be viewed as a replacement for teacher-guided learning. Instead, it can serve as a practical self-learning aid when individualized support is needed but difficult to provide in limited class time. Moving forward, we believe that knowing how to leverage the strengths of AI tools like Custom GPT while remaining mindful of their limitations will be one of the essential skills for ESL teachers navigating the evolving landscape of language education.

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A Digital Platform for Adult Beginners in North American English

MARTHA YOUNG-SCHOLTEN, ROLA NAEBB, JAN DEUTEKOM

Summary: Adults with limited literacy face barriers to learning to read in a new language. To address resource scarcity, a UK-European team designed an autonomous learning platform.

Keywords: adults with limited literacy, digital materials, autonomous learning, drag and drop

Introduction

Approximately 773 million adults worldwide lacked basic literacy skills (UNESCO, 2023). Some of these adults had little or no formal schooling in their home or another language, and some migrated to highly literate postindustrial societies. They face the challenge of acquiring a new language and developing literacy skills for the first time in that language. In a large-scale U.S. study, Condelli et al. (2003) note that these adult immigrants take up to eight times longer than their literate peers to acquire language and literacy skills in a new language. Research suggests that adults do not lose the ability to learn to read for the first time in adulthood (e.g., Young-Scholten & Naeb, 2010). One reason for slow progress could be a lack of materials designed expressly for this learner group. In recognition of this situation, a team developed beginning reading materials in digital form. From 2013 to 2015, experts in the Netherlands (Radboud University and Firda College) led a team from the Universities of Jyväskylä in Finland, Leipzig in Germany, and Newcastle in the UK to design materials for Finnish, with its highly transparent (regular) orthography; English, with its highly opaque (irregular) orthography; and Dutch and German, which fall in between.

In this article, I describe the Digital Literacy Instructor (known as DigLin) reading materials, how the team developed them, and the learners who use them. I close with a description of the recently launched North American version, which is free until the end of 2026.

The Digital Literacy Instructor

The starting assumption was that the target users had no reading skills in any language and minimal oral proficiency

skills. The DigLin team acknowledges that the profiles of those who fit into the limited- or no-literacy category are highly variable. However, those with such limited skills and knowledge clearly have the greatest need for materials designed for them. Moreover, the nature of the platform means that users can select what best suits them, including the appropriate skill level.

The team followed learning principles relevant to the use of digital materials, including user agency and independence, based on the premise that users - even those with little education or literacy - can develop individual strategies. DigLin provides the user with access to all materials at once. That is, there is no built-in route for using the materials. Feedback and performance tracking are visual and immediate.

The team began by gathering facts about the phonology and orthography of each language and agreeing on selection criteria for a set of 300 words for the materials. A key criterion was phonological simplicity: word selection started with less marked vowels and consonants (that is, sounds occurring in all languages) and involved single consonants and vowels, as shown in Table 1. The team considered frequency but abandoned it as a criterion because there was little systematic research on the words most frequent in these adults' lives; instead, the team relied on its own and practitioners' intuitions. Words were mostly nouns so that the photos used could easily show meaning. Monosyllabic words were favored, although this was only straightforward in English and not in the other three languages. Finally, orthography needed to be regular, a criterion most challenging for English. The English DigLin team was guided by the pioneering work of Vainikka (2013).

Table 1
Phonological and Orthographic Criteria as Applied Across the Project Languages

Dutch	German	English	Finnish
<p, t, k, m, n, b, d, l, r, s, v>	<l, m, n, f, g, r, s, sch>	<p, t, k, m, n, d, f, h, l, r, v>	<p, t, k, m, n, l, s>
<a, ie, oo>	Long <a, e, o> and <au>	<a> = /æ/	<i, u> <a, i, u>

The DigLin team for English divided words into 15 sets for the exercises shown in Table 2. Photos were attached to all the words, and the exercises were recorded by members of the team. The entire team then tested the materials in each

language with learners and their teachers at local language instruction providers in each country.

Table 2
DigLin Exercises

Exercise Description	Aim
List of 20 words, with photos, audio, and a soundbar	Learning the words
Drag and drop letters to words	Grapheme-phoneme correspondences
Drag and drop words to photos	Recognizing whole words
Listen to individual sounds and drag the word to the sounds	Auditory synthesis
Flashcards with dragging words to photos	Automatization of word recognition
Bingo	Speed of recognition
Listen and type	Automatizing grapheme-phoneme correspondences

As noted above, the exercises are not designed to be worked through in any particular order. The materials lend themselves to individual, pair, and group work.

DigLin Users

The role of the teacher has long been a sensitive issue in learners' use of digital materials. The concern is that teachers could be superfluous. The following remarks, personal communications from teachers of Dutch, indicate that teachers are essential in supporting users who are capable of developing their own strategies but may need various types of help.

"I point out the exercise the student is looking for, I do a final check, I provide worksheets that support students with specific help questions."

"Nine times out of ten a student who comes to me for the final check turns out to have mastered everything sufficiently."

"Because of the amount of material in DigLin+, students are often unable to find a suitable additional exercise entirely on their own, but because of the way the program gives feedback, they usually know where they need help."

In response to the need for and effectiveness of these digital materials, I have worked with various organizations and individuals to expand the materials from the original 225 activities to those shown in Table 3. This work includes

adding exercise types (Bingo, dictionary use, and stories) as well as more words and sentences.

DigLin has received several forms of recognition. In 2015, for example, the Danish version was awarded the LærdanskABC European Language Prize for "creative and innovative projects in language learning and teaching." In 2021, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning included DigLin in its LitBase database of effective literacy and numeracy practices (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2021). The program was also featured in a 2022 UNESCO report on innovative technology in literacy and education for refugees, migrants, and internally displaced persons (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022).

North American English

This version of DigLin+ represents the North American variety of English, suitable for users in the United States and Canada and anywhere this variety is preferred. There are currently 5,827 activities in these exercise types: write the words, Bingo, drag the letters, listen and type, dictionaries, and stories.

I urge practitioners to try DigLin by exploring it in Dutch, a presumably unfamiliar language. Use tinyurl.com/ms889bxn to begin. If you would like to learn more Dutch (or German, Finnish, or Spanish, all for free), use the same link to subscribe.

Use of North American DigLin is free until the end of 2026. Practitioners and learners can register individually at nae.diglin.eu/login. The North American version is still be-

ing refined; please send feedback to martha.young-scholten@newcastle.ac.uk.

Table 3

Current DigLin and DigLin+ Materials

Language and Website	Access	Activities
British English en.diglin.eu	Free registration	2,500
North American English nae.diglin.eu	Free registration	5,827
Finnish app.fcsprint2.nl/menu/5	Free open access	225
German de.diglin.eu	Free registration	3,580
Dutch app.diglinplus.nl	Paid subscription (39 euros/year)	7,625
Danish	Municipal schools in Denmark only	1,036
Spanish app.fcsprint2.nl/menu/24	Free open access	170

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WAESOL Project Funding Grant Report

Elle Seidensticker & Dr. Kate Mastruserio Reynolds

Central Washington University

In receiving the WAESOL Funding Grant for \$500 to support our research study, *Gamifying Language Learning: Is Duolingo Effective for SLA?*, we felt both honored and encouraged to know that others also recognized the value and relevance of our work. Our study examined the effectiveness of Duolingo for second language acquisition (SLA) and its congruence with established SLA theory and English Language Development (ELD) pedagogy. Specifically, we explored how the application supports or constrains language acquisition through its instructional design, feedback systems, gamified structures, and approaches to vocabulary, grammar, and communicative practice.

Using a heuristic inquiry methodology, our multilingual research team immersed ourselves in the application as language learners while documenting our experiences through screenshots, reflective notes, coding processes, and collaborative analysis discussions. Across the study, we analyzed approximately 274 screenshots, 20 pages of notes, and multiple hours of collaborative discussion and coding. Through this process, we identified patterns related to Duolingo's alignment with theories such as Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Monitor Model, while also recognizing tensions connected to grammar-translation approaches, decontextualized language use, and limited opportunities for authentic interaction.

Our findings suggested that Duolingo can be effective for building high-frequency vocabulary, generating learner output, reinforcing spelling, and providing immediate feedback in developmentally staged ways. However, we also found limitations related to advanced grammar development, authentic discourse production, pronunciation instruction, academic language, and opportunities for meaningful communicative interaction. One particularly important finding involved the disparity between larger language courses, such as Spanish, and less commonly taught

languages, such as Arabic and Greek, where opportunities for interaction and communicative practice were significantly more limited.

Receiving this grant allowed us to dedicate additional time and energy to the research process, including coding, categorizing, discussing findings, and engaging more deeply with SLA and ELD scholarship. As researchers affiliated with Central Washington University and our partner institutions, we learned a tremendous amount through this collaborative process. Working together across perspectives and experiences strengthened our understanding of both language-learning technologies and qualitative research methodologies. We are especially grateful for the mentorship, collaboration, and ongoing dialogue that shaped this project throughout every stage of the research process.

This experience also deepened our understanding of the broader TESOL and multilingual education field. Through this work, we engaged more fully with the professional and academic community surrounding language education and advocacy for multilingual learners, including participation in the Washington Association for the Education of Speakers of Other Languages conference community. Receiving this grant and conducting this research reinforced for us the importance of collaborative inquiry, reflective practice, and continued professional engagement in advancing language education.

We strongly encourage students, educators, and emerging researchers interested in contributing to the field of education to apply for the WAESOL funding grant. We are deeply appreciative of the support and encouragement provided by the WAESOL funding committee and honored to have been selected as recipients. This experience contributed meaningfully to our personal, academic, and professional growth as researchers and educators.

RESEARCH AT A GLANCE

274

screenshots
analyzed

20

pages of reflective
notes

KEY FINDING

Duolingo supported vocabulary, spelling, learner output, and immediate feedback, but offered fewer opportunities for advanced grammar and authentic interaction.

2025 Sally Wellman Excellence in Teaching Award Nomination Letter

for Mahrijemal Taganova

Nominated by Zyyarat Kamylyjanov

Mahrijemal Taganova is an excellent teacher from Turkmenistan. She works as an ESL teacher at The Circle Community Navigation Organization and is also a PhD student at Seattle Pacific University. Even with her demanding studies, she gives her full energy to her learners and makes sure each of us feels valued and respected.

One reason she is special is the way she explains why English is difficult for people like me. In Turkmen, one letter always means one sound, but in English, the same letter can have many different sounds. Even though both languages use Latin letters, they work differently. I never understood this before, but after she explained it, I could finally see why I was making mistakes. She makes a complicated subject simple, and that gives me confidence to continue learning.

What makes her teaching unique is her respect for our first languages. She does not ask us to put them aside; instead, she uses them as bridges to English. For example, in our class we have both Turkmen- and Spanish-speaking students. On the first day, she gave us our own alphabets and then showed us the English alphabet on the board. We compared them together, and for me it was a powerful moment. I realized that my language is not a problem, but a tool that helps me learn English better. This respect makes us proud of who we are.

Her lessons also opened my eyes to details I never knew. She explained clearly that some letters can make more than one sound. For example, I had no idea that s can sound like /s/ in house and like /z/ in rose. These details changed the way I read and helped me understand why people sometimes did not understand me.

Every class with her is full of discovery. She teaches phonology, orthography, suffixes, daily vocabulary, and how native speakers actually speak. She explains why the “k” in know is silent, why “listen” is /ˈlɪsən/, and why the “w” disappears in answer. She also shows us how native speakers connect words together in sentences, so we can sound natural and fluent.

Her care continues beyond the classroom. For homework, she gives us passages to read and asks us to record our voices. She listens to every recording and gives personal feedback. This shows how much she invests in our progress.

I am 33 years old and have studied English with many teachers, but none compare to Mahrijemal. She is talented, patient, and knowledgeable, but also kind and motivating. She never ignores our questions, understands our frustrations, and always encourages us to continue.

Mahrijemal is not only teaching us English, she is changing how we see ourselves. She shows us that our languages are not barriers but bridges. She gives us confidence, respect, and hope. A teacher like her is rare, and I strongly believe she deserves this award.

GRANTS, AWARDS, SCHOLARSHIPS

Apply for a grant or nominate a colleague

WAESOL distributes **\$2,500 in grants and awards** and offers **ten scholarships** to attend the WAESOL Conference.

The impact of WAESOL grants, awards, and scholarships is great! A 500-word grant application could spark a meaningful project; an application for a scholarship could create a new professional opportunity. An award nomination could give back to someone whose generosity and dedication has impacted countless others.

Grant applications open June 1.

*Only current members are eligible to submit a nomination or an application for a grant/scholarship. To become a member or renew your membership, visit the [Membership](#) page of the WAESOL website.

Apply for a

- Professional Development Grant (\$500)
- WAESOL Project Funding Grants (up to \$500)
- WAESOL Conference Scholarship

Nominate a colleague for the

- Sally Wellman Excellence in Teaching Award (\$500),
- Outstanding Volunteer Award (\$500).

Application deadline: October 1st each year

2025 Grants and Awards Recipients

Sally Wellman Excellence in Teaching Award

Mahrijemal Taganova

Circle Community Navigation Organization

Project Funding Grant

Geraldine Werts

TESOLCREATIONS LLC

Project Funding Grant

Elle Seidensticker and Kate Mastruserio Reynolds

Central Washington University

Professional Development Grant

Muhammad Ahkam Arifin

Washington State University

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

October 16, 2026	Regular registration deadline
October 17–24, 2026	Week-of-conference registration
October 24, 2026	53rd Annual WAESOL Conference, Renton Technical College
November 17, 2026	2027 WAESOL Board nominations close

WAESOL ANNUAL CONFERENCE October 24, 2026 Renton Technical College



2026 REGISTRATION PRICING

Registration period	Members	Non-members
Early bird · through Sept. 26	\$95	\$135
Regular · Sept. 27-Oct. 16	\$115	\$155
Week of · Oct. 17-24	\$145	\$185

Group registration is available. Email board@waesol.org for information.

waesol.org/annual-conference-3/

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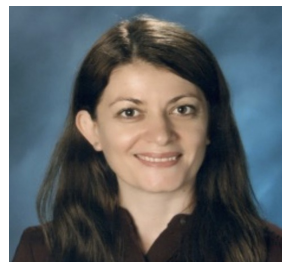
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Grow your professional community by joining the **WAESOL Board!**

Elections take place in November. Board members attend four meetings each year and help plan and implement the annual conference.

WAESOL members are welcome to attend board meetings.

Learn more:

waesol.org/board/elections/



2027 Board Nominations

are open!

Open Positions Include:

- President
- President Elect (serve as President Elect in 2027, President in 2028, Past President in 2029)
- 2 Members-at-Large (2-year terms)

Nominations are open until November 17th

Join the 2027 WAESOL Board and share your talents.

SAVE THE DATE



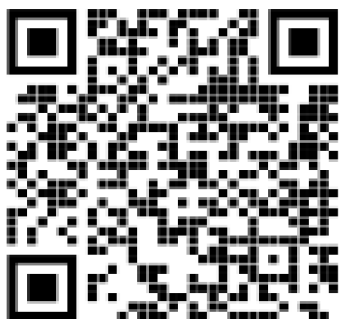
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Submission guidelines:
educator.waesol.org



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YOUR
IDEAS!

DEADLINE: MAY 1, 2027