JALT Teacher Development SIG

Explorations in Teacher Development

Volume 30, Number 1 • Summer 2024
ISSN 2434-589X

Explorations in Teacher Development

Volume 30, Issue 1 • Summer 2024 • ISSN 2434-589X

http://td.jalt.org

Table of Contents

EDITORIALS

Editorial: Nurturing Teacher Development in an Ever-Evolving Educational Landscape 1

Yutaka Fujieda

PERSPECTIVES

Perspectives on the Passive Voice in Academic and Scientific Writing: Considerations for EAP Instructors 4

Richard Arber

EXPLORATIONS

How to Confuse a Dragonfly: Spontaneity and Improvisation in the Language Classroom 12

Brad Barker

REFLECTIONS

Are You One of Me? Reflection and Perspective of a Mid-Career Novice Teacher 30

Gee Lian Ng

About the TD SIG Publications Team 34

EDITORIALS

Editorial: Nurturing Teacher Development in an Ever-Evolving Educational Landscape

Yutaka Fujieda
Osaka University of Economics

When we reflect on the rapidly shifting landscape of language teaching, it becomes increasingly clear that educators at all stages of their professional lives must engage in continuous professional development, as it is not just beneficial but indispensable. This issue of our journal contains a collection of articles that emphasize a variety of aspects of teacher development, from innovative teaching approaches to reflective practices and the evolving norms of academic discourse.

The significance of adaptability and improvisation in the classroom is one of the primary themes that our contributors highlighted. Barker's investigation of spontaneity and improvisation in language teaching provides valuable insights into the ways in which teachers can establish more student-centered and engaging learning environments. His study demonstrates that teachers can cultivate more authentic communication and deeper learning experiences by accommodating unexpected moments and being responsive to student needs. This approach is consistent with recent research indicating that flexibility and responsiveness are essential skills for effective teaching in the 21st century (Richards, 2013).

Nonetheless, novice teachers encounter numerous obstacles when implementing such an approach. Ng's reflective piece serves as a poignant reminder of the obstacles faced by those new to the field, particularly those transitioning from other careers. Ng's experiences underscore the importance of reflective practice in teacher development, echoing Farrell's (2013) perspective on reflective practice as a way of life for educators. Ng's journey highlights the potential of critical reflection to help teachers navigate the complexities of cultural contexts and classroom dynamics, leading to more effective teaching practices.

Although it is necessary to focus on classroom practices, it is equally important for language teachers to keep abreast of changes in academic discourse. Arber's examination of the use of the passive voice in academic writing is a prime example of the development of linguistic norms. Traditional assumptions about academic writing have been challenged by Li's analysis of corpus studies, which has revealed a trend toward more active constructions in some disciplines (Hyland & Jiang, 2017; Li, 2022). This implies that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructors must continually update their knowledge and adapt their teaching approaches to reflect current academic practices in various disciplines.

These articles collectively reiterate the fact that teacher development is a multifaceted process that is not limited to pedagogical skills but also includes linguistic awareness and cultural sensitivity. To ensure the success of our students, we as educators must adopt a continuous learning and development paradigm.

Moreover, the diverse perspectives presented in this issue, from a seasoned teacher experimenting with new approaches to a mid-career professional transitioning into teaching to an analysis of evolving linguistic

norms, remind us of the rich tapestry of experiences and knowledge within the profession. We cultivate a community of practice that provides support and enriches all members by exchanging diverse perspectives.

It is evident that teacher development will continue to be a top priority in our field as we move forward. This involves the implementation of formal training and professional development programs as well as the promotion of a culture of collaboration, experimentation, and reflection among educators. By doing so, we are not only remaining current with the evolving educational landscape but are also actively shaping it to better serve our students and society as a whole.

We should regard teacher development as an ongoing journey of growth and discovery. We hope that the articles in this issue will motivate you to reflect on your practices, challenge your preconceived notions, and persevere in your language educator development.

In This Issue

Richard Arber examines the use of the passive voice in academic and scientific writing and considers its implications for EAP instructors. Arber's article overviews common functions of the passive voice, discusses learner issues, and discusses recent corpus linguistics studies that have revealed changes in academic discourse. Arber argues that although the passive voice remains prevalent, a trend toward more active constructions has been observed in some disciplines. This study aims to inform EAP instructors' curriculum choices and knowledge development.

Brad Barker explores the use of spontaneity and improvisation in English language instruction. Barker has documented his attempts to become a more improvisational teacher, describing classroom activities designed for open-ended outcomes. His research investigates what improvised classroom moments look like and how shifting toward spontaneity can promote teacher development. This article provides examples of improvised moments and discusses their potential benefits for student engagement and learning.

A reflective piece by Gee Lian Ng shares the experiences of mid-career professionals transitioning to English language teaching in Japan. Ng discusses the challenges faced by novice teachers and the insights gained through reflective practice. Key takeaways include adapting lesson plans, being mindful of language use in the classroom, and the importance of extensive reading for professional development. This article encourages reflective teaching among novice educators.

Call for Papers

We continue to invite submissions for the next issues (Volume 30, Issue 2) by September 30, 2024. Please refer to our website for guidelines and past issues: https://td.jalt.org/index.php/etdjournal/. Additionally, please contact us via email at JALT.TED.ETE.editor@gmail.com.

Acknowledgments and Gratitude

The editorial team extends its sincere gratitude to the reviewers, who contributed their time and expertise to evaluate manuscripts for this issue. Their thorough assessment and constructive feedback have been invaluable in maintaining the high quality of our publications. We thank Andrew Hofmann, Ewen MacDonald, Gordon Danford, Jon Thomas, Nick Kasparek, Patrick Mannion, Peter Clements, and Yutaka Fujieda.

References

Farrell, T. S. C. (2013). *Reflective teaching*. TESOL International Association.

Hyland, K., & Jiang, F. (2017). Is academic writing becoming more informal? *English for Specific Purposes, 45*, 40-51. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2016.09.001
Li, Z. (2022). Is academic writing less passivized? Corpus-based evidence from research article abstracts in applied linguistics over the past three decades (1990–2019). *Scientometrics, 127*, 5773–5792 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-022-04498-0
Richards, J. C. (2013). Creativity in language teaching. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research, 1*(3), 19-43.

About the Author

Yutaka Fujieda is a professor at Osaka University of Economics, in Osaka, Japan. He published a book, *Academic Discourse Socialization* (2022, Lexington Books), and several peer-reviewed articles. His research interests include second language writing, teacher education, and World Englishes. y.fujieda@osaka-ue.ac.jp

PERSPECTIVES

Perspectives on the Passive Voice in Academic and Scientific Writing: Considerations for EAP Instructors

Richard Arber
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and Meiji University

In many EAP curriculums, the passive voice is considered to be an essential grammatical component for many instructors and programmes. Historically, this language has been associated with an objective, impersonal style that is suitable for balanced argumentation and the reporting of data. From an EFL perspective, non-native writers struggle with issues of accurate form and understanding the rhetorical use of passive grammars, which are fairly well-documented in the literature. However, there is some debate around the use and value of the passive voice in academic communication. Studies in recent years would suggest that there is a shift in professionalized discourse which may have implications for those teaching academic English. Corpus linguistics of contemporary research writing would suggest a change in how often and when the passive voice is utilized. This article will (a) overview the common functions of passive voicing in EFL grammars, (b) present some learner issues related to this, and (c) cover some of the key changes in academic discourse using the available corpus data and debates. It is hoped that this article will be a valuable and accessible resource to support EAP instructors with their curriculum choices and knowledge development.

Keywords: passive voice, EAP, academic writing, corpus linguistics, research genres

One major element of academic writing is the acquisition and use of the non-causative passive voice (Feak & Swales, 2012). This grammar has a number of different functions and registers that correlate to an established style of academic prose. For non-native writers (NNW), this type of sentence structure is sometimes avoided, or is confused with other auxiliary verb forms and heavily associated with overly complex, 'difficult' expressions. By extension, the use of passive voicing is central to debates on what constitutes 'good prose' because some believe it generates long, complicated sentences that impact readability (; Baratta, 2009; Billig, 2013; Pullum, 2014). For some critics, academic writing has become unnecessarily 'passivized' and they have suggested that the active voice should be preferred to accommodate more readable articles (Billig, 2013; Inzunza, 2020). A cursory glance at university style guides online reveals a multitude of contradictory institutional perspectives which can be confusing to educator and learner alike. In contrast with this, there is the strong belief by EAP instructors that passive voicing is an essential component of any EAP curriculum in conjunction with other writing skills such as citation, lexical development, plagiarism, and abstract writing (Ferreira, 2022). But what is best practice for EAP instruction? According to recent corpus studies, there are major developments in the presence of passive, impersonalised language in academic texts, as well as changes in the culture of academic communication (Hyland & Jiang, 2017; Leong, 2020; Li, 2022;). Considering the

above context, this paper will focus on the present and past simple passive voice for academic writing by looking at a cross-section of the available literature on this topic. This article has been written for EAP practitioners, especially those supporting research paper writers, to concisely support their future pedagogical decision-making with these updates in mind. The paper is structured as follows: (a) to overview passive grammars, (b) to present a number of learner issues related to NNW use, and (c) to discuss a selected group of corpus linguistics studies as well as style arguments. By using evidence-based studies, this paper will consider what the passive is used for, how it impacts learners, and if EAP instructors should be teaching it.

Discoursal Features: Usage and Meaning

Before surveying the research on passive voicing in academic writing, it is worth foregrounding the literature against some of the most prominent grammars and review what is commonly understood. The passive voice, in contrast with the active, is a grammatical feature found in a variety of genres of English, though its presence in academic writing is important for a number of functions. Primarily, the passive alters subject/object emphasis without changing the inherent meaning of a sentence, usually to present new or important information (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). This includes who or what performed the action, or how something was performed. By implication, the emphasis or focus is shifted to the recipient of the action/object, thereby relegating the subject to after the verb, or omitting it entirely (Parrott, 2004). Therefore, passives can be used to highlight what is newsworthy and to maintain topic consistency over extended stretches of writing to support cohesion (Thornbury, 2005b). In academic use, the passive voice is seen to have five main functions which make it preferable to actively voiced sentences:

a) when emphasis is placed on what has occurred:
The paper was published last month.

b) when the instigator of the action is unknown:
Paper was invented around 100 BC in China.

c) when the instigator is irrelevant/unnecessary:
A mixed methods approach was used in this methodology.

d) to achieve a more objective tone and in order to diplomatically distance the subjective voice in critical writing:
The data analysis method was used inappropriately in this case.

e) to describe technical/manufacturing processes:
The substance is then spun in a centrifuge.

From a discoursal perspective, this voicing provides a number of varied stylistic choices that can augment meaning, especially when subject repetition is negatively perceived and when semantic precision is highly valued. Further use concerns the description of various academic forms of narrative:

a) historical events (e.g., *The Oxford curriculum was reformed in 1852*),

b) biographical details (e.g., *William of Durham was educated in Wearmouth monastery and in France*),

c) recent changes (e.g., *The new legislation towards immigration was passed last month*). (Thornbury, 2005a)

It is also important when constructing formulaic reporting phrases of detached, impersonal style (e.g., '*it is stated that….*') and with the infinitive (e.g., *it is thought to be an essential theory*) (Byrd & Coxhead, 2010; Flowerdew, 2013). In terms of frequency, most genres of academic prose are more likely to use dynamic passive forms (be-passive constructions) when presenting positions:

a) *to postulate (e.g. The results are thought to show an upward trend in sustained abnormal behaviour)*

b) *to avoid subjective focus (e.g. The infected room is gradually emptied as experiments are terminated)*

That said, academic discourse usually favours concrete and abstract ideas, seldom using verbs related to mental processes such as thoughts and emotions (Biber et al, 2007). This means that verb choice relates to the existence of things and the occurrence of events (e.g., *is recognised that, are involved in, are exerted on, were used, etc.)*. A final key feature of the passive is the use of omission. Agentless passives are often a stylistic decision based on the relevance or knowledge of the agent at work to provide a more 'scientific' description (Lewis, 1986; Willis, 2003). As academic style has historically favoured the avoidance of generic subjects/pronouns in the place of the agent, omission is highly possible.

This means the verb can produce clause completion (Biber et al, 2007):

> *The current cohort for neurological tests was performed (by researchers/us/the institution).*

Given the range of applications, the need for these basic passive constructions is potentially fundamental in EAP courses, highlighting the importance of their accurate use.

Pedagogical Studies and Learner Problems

From the perspective of non-native academic writers, there are a number of error types that relate to utilizing the passive for academic assignments. Firstly, a common problem is that students can confuse auxiliary verbs, such as 'be', 'have' and modals, when forming the passive in their writing. This leads to very different impressions of aspect, tense, or coherence that may be erroneous (Parrott, 2004), as exemplified below:

> *For this study, 90 participants were interviewed.*
>
> *For this study, 90 participants had (been) interviewed.*
>
> *For this study, 90 participants may (be) interviewed.*

In a study by Muziatun et al. (2022), Indonesian students inaccurately used the 'be' auxiliary 70% of the time precisely because they favoured using the active voice when communicating. In contrast, error rates for Chinese learners were low but there were significant weaknesses in the areas of tense and verbal agreement (Romano, 2019). Conjunctively, the prepositions that follow passive forms cause problems for learners of many nationalities because rules are overgeneralized:

> *The samples were sent (to) the lab.*
> *The research was performed (in) a controlled environment.*

This causes further issues for a wide range of NNW because of the multifunctional nature of prepositions in their respective L1s which operate similar to English, leading to transfer errors (Swan & Smith, 2002). NNW can also struggle with untrue or agentless elements, such as using 'on' or 'in' as ways of expressing means (e.g., *in the supermarket/on a sheet of paper*). Furthermore, due to the subtle nature of agent use, it can be difficult for learners to decide whether or not to include such information. Knowing when a subject is responsible for an action or not, or knowing when this information is expendable can cause confusion (e.g., *The town was rebuilt (by the government/builders) after the earthquake*). Finally, past participles, a non-finite post-modifying verb form that usually end with the regular *-ed* form or the irregular *-d*, *-t*, *-en*, or *-n* variants, are used to form the passive (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). These spelling variants have less impact in academic work because of word processors and correction aids but the overgeneralization of these suffixations can have an effect on the accuracy of spelling.

There are a number of empirical studies related to NNW behaviours and preferences. In a study that compared English native writers and Armenian NNW, it was discovered that the *be* passive dominated in terms of frequency across both cohorts, that native users demonstrated a wider range of aspect and tense, and that NNW avoided past tenses

much more (Nemishalyan & Soghomonyan, 2023). In this same study, NNW favoured using a range of formulaic structures because it thematized their stance and supported cohesion. In an additional case of Indonesian English thesis writers, there was a low frequency of passive usage evidenced in their writing as these structures were avoided due to preferences for active voicing (Yannuar et al, 2014). Some studies suggest that learners will often avoid syntactically complex structures which may account for reduced deployment and semantic precision in their writing (Granger 2013; Hinkel, 2002).

There are a number of L1 factors that may contribute to this behaviour. Some languages value formality over others and this conceptualization can be a factor in the frequency of passives used (Horbowicz et al, 2019). Another reason for this is that students are often uncertain about when to use the passive or understanding the difference between the object and subject. This is because conceptual difficulties occur with tense-aspect changes and syntactical structuring, confusing this with past and perfective voicing (Amadi, 2018). For these learners in particular, a working knowledge of transitive verbs supported memorization and use, as it provided a more refined conceptual distinction. It is important to note that L1 impacts higher error counts and types. Higher error rates tend to occur in Japanese learners compared to French or Italian learners because of the syntactic similarity of the languages (Oshita, 2000). Error correction is said to support accuracy issues and overuse, but learners need to be acquainted with differences in transitive verbs and the passive (Cowan et al, 2003). Another consideration made in the literature is how conceptualization of noun animacy may influence L2 passive expressions.

Lexical animacy can impact the perceived agency of a noun because of sentience and the transitive features of any noun. This can be especially difficult for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean users because passive constructions are usually performed by inanimate subjects (Hinkel, 2002). Such conceptual grounding clearly has an impact on how teachers may perceive learner competence of passives and noun-based issues. One final observation is that educational prescriptivism may impact passive voice in non- native writing. There is evidence to suggest that perspectives on this grammar preference for NNW may be institutional or a teacher-led bias. Advocating voicing strategies may have meaningful consequences for how academic style is perceived and operationalized (Romano, 2019). A range of genre-based pedagogies such as noticing and genre analysis using authentic materials can acquaint learners with how passives are used accurately and in context.

Linguistic and Language Research: A Look at Professional Practice

While for many EAP instructors it is clear that the passive should be included in their EAP curriculum, perhaps an underappreciated consideration is how the language is deployed in real-world contexts. As many of the assumed genre norms are derived from the professional practice of discourse communities in research, it is worth overviewing what changes are occurring and how this might impact EAP teaching. One major diachronic study surveyed the passive in academic writing from the 17th to 21st century (Leong, 2020). In line with the general trends to make research more accessible, there was a 25% fall in passive use from 2017 and an increase in the first person. Prior to this change, the conventions in the corpus have remained relatively stable since the 1800s. From the data, writing behaviours reveal that as the use of passive structures decreases, the rise in the active voice has led to more personalized texts, while alternative strategies are being used to produce 'academic' tone through lexical choice and nominalization. However, base passives were not necessarily linked to accessibility or readability issues because they were deployed when the agent was unknown or as an omission strategy. Additionally, the highest frequency of passive

constructions was implemented with formulaic structures to aid cohesion at the sentence head.

Concurrently, Li (2022) has provided corpus data of applied linguistics writing that reveals a similar 30-year decline in passive use, parallel with the increase in personal pronouns. In both of the above studies, evidence shows that this change is not indicative of increased informal voicing in writing as language remains tonally discursive and because a wider range of strategies are used. This suggests a shift in the social mores of academic discourse and the relationship with the readers (both specialist and non-specialist).

More specifically, there are various studies that consider how research discipline may determine these behaviours and trends, and how they might be evolving. One corpus study covering informal style in four different disciplines discovered that personal voicing has increased by 45% and the passive has reduced (Hyland & Jiang, 2017). But more specifically, the data showed that scientific disciplines are becoming more informal and applied linguistics more formal (though marginally so). The authors claim that informality may not be evidenced by changes in the passive but rather in the pronouns, unattended references, and initial conjunctions, which have all increased. Likewise, listing, contractions, and exclamation marks are beginning to feature in peer reviewed research papers. Some decline in passive structures has additionally been confirmed in other studies that show hard science writing features a higher frequency while the humanities or law feature a much lower frequency which is concurrent across these micro-disciplines, especially in technology fields (Farhady et al, 2018; Hiltunen, 2016). Hundt et al. (2016) found that discipline primarily determines the characteristics of discourse, not just regionality or first language. When comparing a range of Englishes, humanities texts showed a lower frequency compared to social science and hard science disciplines, while British academic writing featured more than American. In most research arenas, quite reasonably, things are the focus of evidence and analysis which justifies the use of a range of impersonal strategies, not just the use of the passive (Ding, 2002). This is not only limited to field but also to the structural 'moves' or sections of papers. For example, physics journals commonly featured the use of active, pronoun-focused sentences, but these were used to specifically express decision making and positions of ownership in methodology sections precisely to indicate the agency of the researchers (Tarone et al, 1998).

This study suggested that passives represent a range of contextual strategies for academic voicing for specific sections rather than an optimum approach to whole texts. A final consideration is washback from scientific journals that showed a preference for active voicing because it is seen as clear, concise, and more accessible for non-technical audiences (Okamoto, 2022). Professional writers are being asked to consider the subject focus before deciding which is appropriate for the paper. The influence of publishers and journals has an enormous impact on written presentation because they set the cultural standards. However, these guidelines are becoming more confusing for academic writers when publishers themselves fail to follow their own preferences, or when they offer no voice preference across their various publications (Billig, 2013; Minton, 2015).

Conclusion

Overall, the use of passive voicing still remains highly pervasive in academic English. As is shown in this paper, there is a wide spectrum of potential uses, learner issues, and practice- related revaluations. But what do these changes mean for EAP instruction? Firstly, one key to cohesion in academic communication is the range of structural strategies available to express a variety of ideas, relationships, and progressions of which the passive contributes. For Minton (2015), arguments against passivized language in academic discourse are

problematic because they limit the range and precision of academic writers. Importantly, when looking at the established grammars, corpus data, and learner issues, these stylistic judgments may reveal more about taste than the correct function or placement of the language (Pullum, 2014). It is also true that complaints related to passive voicing stem from accusations of overuse and redundancy (Leong, 2020). Some responsibility must be placed on the writers for the high frequency, and by implication, on the educators of academic discourses. The purpose of this language is not necessarily to generate longer or more complex language, nor is it to conceal a sentence object (Smith & Swan, 2002; Thornbury, 2005a). This may be a misperception on behalf of writers and educators. Secondly, in order to develop proficient writers in most academic fields, it is important for learners to be sensitized to this grammar-genre relationship by their EAP instructors. This includes where, when, and how often to use certain structures for maximum effect on learner literacy in a bid to cultivate communication techniques relevant to their field of study. This is where genre analytical approaches, especially those focused on contemporary writing, can be enormously rewarding to students attempting to complete written academic tasks. This is supported by the corpus studies presented above. However, this may be contradicted by the quantity of overly simplified advice through academic guides and misinformation available online. This is further problematized by the promotion of active voice use by established style guides like APA (7th edition), which continue to provide models that are predominantly filled with passive structures (Li, 2022). Finally, linguistic prescriptivism seems to be a counterproductive approach and limiting for learners and professional writers alike, irrespective of discourse community standards. Biber and Gray (2016) state that EAP teachers may need to challenge some of the expectations and perceived conventions of academic discourse based on how these fields may be changing. This includes developing an awareness of the wider range of developments occurring in professional practices to better inform their learners on how to write and what might serve their desired post- course outcomes. Crucially, attitudes towards the passive are changing in conjunction with the introduction of simplified abstracts, 'research snippets', and other such micro-genres, all of which are designed to promote the accessibility of research to wider audiences. By reassessing the passive with a context-led and pragmatic view, students will acquire authentic forms of language practices that will support their academic writing and beyond.

References

Amadi, S. (2018). Learning the English passive voice: difficulties, learning strategies of IGBO ESL learners and pedagogical implications. *International Journal of English and Literature*, *9*(5), 50—62. https://doi.org/10.5897/ijel2018.1146

Baratta, A. (2009). Revealing stance through passive voice. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *41*(7), 1406—1421. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2008.09.010

Biber, D., Johnasson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, E. (2007). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Pearson Education Press. Biber, D. & Gray, B. (2016). *Grammatical complexity in academic English*. Cambridge University Press.

Byrd, P. & Coxhead, A. (2010). On the other hand: lexical bundles in academic writing and in the teaching of EAP. *University of Sydney Papers in TESOL*, *5*, 31—64.

Billig, M. (2013). *Learn how to write badly: how to succeed in social sciences*. Cambridge University Press.

Cowan, R., Choi, H., & Kim, D. (2003). Four questions for error diagnosis and correction in CALL. *CALICO Journal*, *20*(3), 451—463. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24157524

Ding, D. (2002). The passive voice and social values in science. *Technical Writing and*

Communication, *32*(2), 137—154. https://doi.org/10.2190/EFMR-BJF3-CE41-84KKFarhady, H., Tavassoli, K. & Irani, F. (2018). Selecting corpus-based grammatical structures for ESP/EAP materials. *Key Issues in English for Specific Purposes in Higher Education*, *11*, 77—92. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70214-8_5
Feak, C. & Swales, J. (2012). *Academic writing for graduate students*. The University of Michigan Press.
Ferreira, M. (2022). In service EAP teachers' beliefs about academic writing and its influence on instruction. *Revista Brasileira de Linguística Aplicada*, *22*(2), 395—422. https://doi.org/10.1590/1984-6398202217330
Flowerdew, L. (2013). Corpus-based research and pedagogy in EAP: from lexis to genre. *Language Teacher*, *48*(1), 99—116. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444813000037
Granger, S. (2013). The passive in learner English: corpus insights and implications for pedagogical grammar. *Papers from LCSAW2013 Kobe School of Languages and Communications*, *1*, 5—15.
Hiltunen, T. (2016). 7 passives in academic writing: comparing research articles and student essays across four disciplines. In M. Lopez-Couso, et al. (Eds.), *Corpus Linguistics on the Move* (pp. 132—157). Brill Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004321342_008
Hinkel, E. (2002). Why the English passive is difficult to teach (and learn). In E. Hinkel & S. Fotos (Eds.), *New Perspectives on Grammar Teaching* (pp. 233—260). Routledge.
Horbowicz, P., Skrzypek, D., Sobkowiak, M., & Kolaczek, N. (2019). The use of passive voice in academic writing: evidence from Danish, Norwegian and Swedish as L1 and L2. *Folia Scandinavica*, *26*, 4—26.
Hundt, M., Schneider, G., & Seoane, E. (2016). The use of the be-passive in academic Englishes: local versus global usage in an international language. *Copora*, *11*(1), 29—61. https://doi.org/10.3366/cor.2016.0084
Hyland, K. & Jiang, F. (2017). Is academic writing becoming more informal?. *English for Specific Purposes*, *25*, 40—51. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2016.09.001
Inzunza, E. (2020). Reconsidering the use of the passive in scientific writing. *The American Biology Teacher*, *82*(8), 563—565. https://doi.org/10.1525/abt.2020.82.8.563
Leong, A. (2020). The passive voice in scientific writing through the ages: a diachronic study. *Text and Talk*, *40*(4), 467—489. https://doi.org/10.1515/text-2020-2066
Lewis, M. (1986). *The English verb: an exploration of structure and meaning*. Cengage Learning.
Li, Z. (2022). Is academic writing less passivized? Corpus-based evidence from research articles in applied linguistics over the past three decades (1990-2019). *Scientometrics*, *127*, 5773—5792. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-022-04498-0
Minton, T. (2015). In defence of the passive voice in medical writing. *The Keio Journal of Medicine*, *64*(1), 1—10. https://doi.org/10.2302/kjm.2014-0009-re
Muziatun, M., Malabar, F. & Mustapa, L. (2022). Analyzing student's passive voice difficulties. *Indonesian EFL Journal*, *8*(2), 155—164.
Nemishalyan, E. & Soghomonyan, Z. (2023). Corpus-based analysis of the use of the passive voice by Armenian learners. *European Journal of Teaching and Education*, *5*(2), 36—52. https://doi.org/10.33422/ejte.v5i2.964
Okamoto, S. (2022). Active vs passive voice: current landscape in science writing. *Bulletin of KIKAN Education*, *9*, 19—31. https://doi.org/10.15017/6769086
Oshita, H. (2000). "What is happened" may not be what appears to be happening: a corpus study of 'passive' unaccusatives in L2 English. *Second Language Research*, *16*(4), 293—324. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43104596
Parrott, M. (2004). *Grammar for English language teachers*. Cambridge University Press.
Pullum, G. (2014). Fear and loathing of the English passive. *Language and Communication*, 37, 60—74. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2013.08.009

Richards, J. & Schmidt, R. (2010). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. Pearson Education Press.

Romano, F. (2019). Grammatical accuracy in EAP writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *41*, 1—10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2019.100773

Swan, M., & Smith, B. (2002). *Learner English.* Cambridge University Press.

Tarone, E., Dwyer, S., Gillette, S., & Icke, V. (1998). On the use of the passive and active voice in astrophysics journal papers: with extensions to other language and fields. *English for Specific Purposes*, *17*(1), 113—132. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906(97)00032-X

Thornbury, S. (2005a). *Beyond the sentence: introducing discourse analysis*. Macmillan Education. Thornbury, S. (2005b). *Uncovering grammar*. Macmillan Education.

Willis, D. (2003). *Rules, patterns and words*. Cambridge University Press.

Yannuar, N., Shitadevi, I., Basthomi, Y. and Widiati, U. (2014). Active and passive voice constructions by Indonesian student writers. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, *14*(7), 1400—1408. http://dx.doi.org/10.4304/tpls.4.7.1400-1408

About the Author

Richard Arber is an EAP Lecturer at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and Meiji University. Working predominantly in tertiary contexts, he has taught EAP and research methods to students in Japan, Taiwan and the United Kingdom. His main research interests are related to postgraduate discourse acquisition and genres of research communication. richardarber.tokyo@gmail.com

EXPLORATIONS

How to Confuse a Dragonfly: Spontaneity and Improvisation in the Language Classroom

Brad Barker
Rikkyo University

Improvisation has been called the "dark matter of teaching" that may make up the bulk of lessons but cannot be scripted or planned (Maley & Underhill, 2012); research in this area is scant. Making connections with "explicitly improvisational professions" (DeZutter, 2011) such as music, this exploratory case study describes my initial attempts to become a more improvisational teacher during university English language courses. I investigate what improvised classroom moments look like, and how a shift toward spontaneity and improvisation can promote teacher development. I recorded field notes on the results of "unplannable" activities, improvised moments, classroom interactions, and teacher reflections. In addition, I attempt to show that building space into lesson plans can allow for room to breathe and for student contributions to fully develop. With this focus, I noticed that the emergent moments were more interesting than anything I as a teacher could have pre-planned.

Keywords: Dogme ELT, improvisation, spontaneity, emergent language, creativity

You've got to learn your instrument. Then, you practice, practice, practice. And then, when you finally get up there on the bandstand, forget all that and just wail.
- Charlie Parker, Musician

There has been recent interest in the role of spontaneity and improvisation in teaching, but comparatively, it is a neglected part of educational research and teacher education, and few teachers discuss teaching as an act of improvisation. Maley and Underhill (2012) call improvisation "the dark matter of teaching" that may make up the bulk of lessons but cannot be scripted or planned. In the field of astrophysics, dark matter is thought to make up more than eighty percent of the material in the universe, but it cannot be directly detected (Ananthaswamy, 2022), and this concept may have parallels to teaching. Richards (2013) talks about teaching as a kind of skilled improvisation and gives examples of teachers improvising to make the most of teachable moments. However, a search for "improvisation" on The Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) Publications website, which contains archives of multiple journals spanning nearly five decades, found only 9 results (as of March 2024). Among these results, only one article had the word "improvisation" in the title, and most others mentioned the word only in passing or as part of an improv drama activity. An interview with teacher trainer Ken Wilson began to touch on the heart of the matter, but in a tentative way (Cornwell, 2011). In contrast, "lesson plan" found 73 results, and "motivation," an example of an established research field, yielded 535 results.

Improvisational teaching has its supporters. Sawyer (2011, p. 1) discusses the finding that experienced teachers "were better at improvising in response to each

class's unique flow [and that] they tended to spend less advance time planning than novice teachers" (e.g., Borko & Livingston, 1989). DeZutter (2011) contends that teaching is inherently improvisational and proposes a redefining of the profession as an improvisational one, much like unscripted theater and jazz music. She identifies these explicitly improvisational professions as useful sources to draw upon because in these disciplines, "conscious efforts are made to develop improvisational expertise, and [...] a body of knowledge has been built up for doing so" (DeZutter, 2011, p. 27). She notes that teaching lacks a body of knowledge about what excellent classroom improvisation is, and how teachers learn to improvise. Importantly, DeZutter (2011) emphasizes that rather than using the more commonly used words teacher "flexibility" or "responsiveness," it is important to use the word "improvisation" as, among other reasons, it "helps us see teachers as creative, knowledgeable, and autonomous professionals [...] rather than as technicians whose work mainly involves implementing procedures prepared by others" (p. 33).

In the English language teaching world, Dogme ELT (e.g., Meddings & Thornbury, 2009) is probably the most well-known example of an improvisational approach. The Dogme ELT movement began with a provocative paper written by Thornbury in 2000. His frustration based on the supposedly "communicative" teaching practices of the day was palpable. Thornbury, a teacher trainer at the time, describes his rules as he waged war on materials-driven lessons: "Photocopies were proscribed; the OHP [Overhead Projector] was banished. Grammar presentations had to be squeezed into 5 minutes. Real talk, usually relegated to the bookends of the lesson proper, had to form the lesson core. And the teacher had to talk – not *at* the students or even *to* them – but *with* them" (Thornbury, 2000). The Dogme ELT approach focuses on conversation-driven lessons, reduced reliance on materials and technology, and emergent language.

Improvisational teaching is entwined with the concepts of creativity and play. For example, Kasparek (2017) found that activities with explicit creativity aims can open up space for the unexpected. Unexpected outcomes may require teacher improvisation. Kasparek (2024) also proposed the concept of "playfully studious teaching" as a response to the harsh realities of schooling, such as the "microfascist desire for control" (p. 201). An improvisational mindset involves letting go of the desire to control. With these more theoretical and political connections in mind, however, the everyday practice of improvisation ultimately deserves its own specific focus.

In this exploratory case study, I document my initial attempts to become a more improvisational teacher during English language courses at a university in Japan. For this study, I designed and implemented classroom activities that allowed for more open-ended outcomes than what I was used to. One activity was designed to be impossible to plan for as a way to foster spontaneity and hone my improvisational abilities. Examples from the classroom illustrate what improvised classroom moments look like. These emergent moments were often engaging and bizarre, and they became the focus of lessons that seemed to unfold naturally. The purpose of this study was to investigate the following:

1. What do improvised classroom moments look like?
2. How can a shift toward spontaneity and improvisation promote teacher development?

By addressing these questions, I attempt to:

1. Add to the body of knowledge about spontaneity and improvisation in teaching.

2. Provide examples of improvisation in the language classroom.
3. Explore how spontaneity and improvisation can be fostered.
4. Make connections with writings from researchers in general education that have not received much attention in ELT (English Language Teaching) (e.g., Sawyer & DeZutter).
5. Make connections with existing bodies of knowledge in fields that have established improvisational traditions, such as music.
6. Draw attention to the polarizing and inaccurate way the topic of improvisation is often discussed in ELT as only a component of the perceived radical and idealistic approach that is Dogme ELT.

In this study, I characterize improvised lesson moments as the teacher getting out of the way of students' learning. More so than before, my role was mainly to help students articulate what they wanted to say. Without restrictions or expectations placed on them by me or the coursebook, the student output took on a life of its own and was filled with personality and detail.

Background

My teaching approach before this study was based on a CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) approach, but it was also planning-centric, and characterized by a relative lack of spontaneity from my point of view as the teacher. While it is true that any activity in which students do not have much time to prepare is spontaneous for them, there were relatively few moments during my lessons that deviated from the lesson plan or seemed genuinely spontaneous to me. For instance, I would often ask students to answer open-ended questions such as, "What is the best country to visit?" I could not know beforehand what students might respond with, but I could make predictions about what they might say, and dialogue would often follow predictable and formulaic patterns (e.g., Opinion? Opinion. Reason? Reason. Example? Example.). Although classroom dialogue had the potential to expand in different directions, it often did not.

More than simply the implementation of an activity, mindset seems to be an important component of improvisation. I first heard of Dogme ELT (e.g., Meddings & Thornbury, 2009) after five years as a full-time teacher when I read an unpublished article written by a colleague (Lowe, 2012). The approach was never mentioned in my MA TESOL (Master of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) courses, including a methodology course that covered historical approaches and methods (e.g., Total Physical Response, Suggestopedia, and PPP [Presentation Practice Production]). Dogme ELT was intriguing, but my teaching context demanded a high degree of uniformity and somewhat rigid lesson planning that left little space for a Dogme ELT approach. The first I heard anyone talk about teaching and improvisation was seven years later at a talk by a colleague at a small ELT conference in Tokyo (Brereton, 2019). By hearing from others that teaching could be improvisational, I was liberated. I was inspired to read everything I could on the topic and start focusing on spontaneity and improvisation, or lack thereof, in my daily teaching. As is often the case with reflective practice, simply talking or writing about a concept can have a meaningful impact on teaching and learning. This exploration opened a mode of teacher development for me even after years of teaching, but at the same time, it made me realize how undeveloped my teaching was.

I felt underprepared for the "dark matter of teaching" that Maley and Underhill (2012) discuss. The emphasis on planning seemed to place most important decision-making with me the teacher, or even with the coursebook authors (in terms of topics, activities, target language, texts, etc.).

Teacher trainers and texts did occasionally talk about lessons "not going to plan" or a vague idea of the importance of being flexible, but if a lesson did not go as planned, it would be seen as a flaw in the plan rather than a flaw of a planning-centric approach to teaching. A lesson diverging from the plan was not presented as an opportunity to respond to emerging student needs and interests. The idea of building unplanned space into lessons, or going to class with a "loose plan" and a few materials was not seen as a viable option. There was little focus on the moment-to-moment decision-making that occurs while teaching. At first, when trying a less-structured approach, it felt like I was not teaching the way I was supposed to, even though these types of lessons often led to student-driven dialogue and a strong focus on meaning-focused communication.

Context and Participants

In this exploratory case study, I document a shift in my conceptual understanding of what is possible or desirable in language teaching. Biesta discusses De Vries' distinction between the *technical role* and the *cultural role* of educational research. The purpose of this study was mainly in line with the cultural role that helps practitioners "acquire a different understanding of their practice" (Biesta, 2007, p. 2). Case studies are a hybrid research method that generally uses "a range of methods for collecting and analyzing data, rather than being restricted to a single procedure" (Nunan, 1992, p. 74). I typed field notes following each lesson that included noteworthy spontaneous and improvised classroom moments. For this study, I use the descriptions of improvisation proposed by Sassi (2011). Level one improvisation involves the curriculum development process "when teachers design their own lessons, activities, or investigations" (Sassi, 2011, p. 214). Sassi (2011) explains that "at a second level, improvisational teaching can also refer to actions in the classroom that vary from what the teacher had planned in advance – for example, when a teacher who is following a particular lesson plan shifts direction in response to what students might say or do." The third level improvisation occurs "in the spaces between planned moments" and is "the improvisation that can occur within the context of a planned lesson. Specifically, the [...] teachers' abilities to respond to students in the classroom and to actively engage students in learning" (Sassi, 2011, pp. 214-215). Field note data includes the results of "unplannable" activities, improvised moments, classroom interactions, and teacher reflections. Images of board work were also collected.

Student participants were 95 first and second-year university students taking one of two compulsory English language courses with me as their instructor. Students were all English language majors and classes which ranged from 20–25 students met twice a week during the 15-week semester. I present data from five classroom groups that were collected during Spring Semester 2019. All participants signed bilingual consent forms. Student names are pseudonyms.

Teaching Constraints

Schools and institutions can sometimes discourage creativity. Richards (2013, p. 18) gives an example of a teacher being told not to add anything to a course that is not in the coursebook. In this context, the students and the company funding the lessons measured progress solely by how much of the textbook was covered. Berliner (2011) talks about the phenomenon of "creaticide" that is present in some schools in the United States and the United Kingdom. Contexts in which the extreme focus on protocols, routines, scripts, and standardized test scores can kill creativity. Teachers are constrained and students have few opportunities for creativity or development of higher-order thinking.

In teaching contexts in Japan, teachers will have constraints to negotiate. Somewhat traditional academic English courses with pre-planned syllabuses and required coursebooks are common at universities. Classes that meet once a week during a 15-week semester may have little breathing room. Moreover, one precursor to good improvisation seems to be a good rapport between the teacher and students, and between the students, in whatever way it may be developed. Sawyer (2017) talks about familiarity between participants as one thing that can foster group flow. But how likely is it that good rapport can be established after only 15 meetings or less?

It may seem that there is little possibility of improvisational teaching, but there must be something more than simply getting through lessons. There must be space to teach and connect with the humans in the room, which seems to be the entire point of meaningful education. Teachers can identify the constraints that can be removed or adjusted. For example, a rigid course could be distilled down to its most basic topical elements. If there is a required textbook covering a common topic like People or Customs, there is a lot of room for expansion or supplementation that can transcend the pages of the textbook.

Teachers in Japan also have considerable freedom in many cases. Although prescribed course aims are the norm, it is usually mostly up to teachers how they achieve those aims. There does not seem to be a general push to implement more scripts and teaching protocols. Is there space for a warm-up activity? Often, teachable moments emerge during everyday lessons, and teachers can change course to take advantage of these moments.

Exploring through Classroom Improvisation

This first example of classroom improvisation happened after I started building more unstructured space into lesson plans, something I had rarely done before. During a first-year writing class, after reading a paragraph in the required coursebook that talks about a man's fear of flying, the class discussed their fears. Several students said they were quite afraid of insects, especially cockroaches. Realizing that students may have strong feelings about this topic, I had them discuss the best and worst insects in small groups in the next lesson. The prompt was a slide on the projector screen with two questions (1. What is the best insect? / 2. What is the worst insect?) and a page from a visual dictionary.

After the discussion, I had nothing specific planned apart from one primary lesson aim: students should understand how to write a good title for a text. Students checked visual dictionaries of insects on their smartphones to aid them during discussions and several had electronic dictionaries. The discussion became a good opportunity for emergent vocabulary (e.g., How do you say *kimoi* in English? Japanese: キモい; English: gross, disgusting). After a brief student-to-student discussion, we began a whole-class discussion. I started by asking a student in the front row what the best insect is. She responded with "dragonfly." My next question was, "Why?" She struggled to give her reasons but pointed her index finger and repeatedly traced the shape of a circle in the air. Another student helped her by saying "eyes." Another said, "confuse." Another said, "Drunk, like drunk." Everyone seemed to understand, except for me. After a lot of negotiating meaning between me and the students (e.g., So, are you saying…?), I understood that students were saying that they move their finger in a circular motion in the air to confuse the dragonfly, just before reaching out and catching it by the wings. I asked follow-up questions such as "Where do you catch dragonflies?" "In the park." And importantly, "Why do you do it?" "For happiness." "It's traditional Japanese culture." Next was a brief whole-class discussion about how the dragonfly feels, followed by playful accusations from me that

the students do not care about the dragonfly's feelings. "What happens after you catch the dragonfly?" "Release it. Throw it." "Who taught you to do this?" "Grandmother" "Grandfather" "Dad." During the interaction, I reacted with expressions of shock and disbelief. There was whole-class laughter and positive group tension. In the end, the discussion concluded with a few of my final comments: "I can't believe it" and "I'm going to tell all my friends about this."

I transitioned by asking students to open their textbooks to page 25, which was not smooth, but it still worked well enough. Students then proceeded to the "planned" part of the lesson for the day: how to write a good title for a paragraph. In their coursebook, students read about how to write a good title, followed by a few examples of good and bad titles. As students were working, I wrote two possible titles for a paragraph about the dragonfly technique: 1. *Traditional Japanese Culture*, 2. *How to Confuse a Dragonfly*. Later, we talked about which title is better and why.

At the beginning of the next lesson, I asked students to tell me one word that describes the previous lesson the week before. Naturally, they said "dragonfly." We watched a short video on YouTube of someone demonstrating the technique. Then, after a brief review of the prior lesson, students began writing their titles and paragraphs about various topics that I had approved. During the lesson, I began writing a paragraph entitled *How to Confuse a Dragonfly*.

In the next lesson, I presented my *How to Confuse a Dragonfly* paragraph to students but cut into individual sentences. Groups were tasked with putting the sentences in order. They seemed to enjoy the task and were successful after a few minutes. Groups spontaneously collaborated with other groups to solve the problem.

> How to Confuse a Dragonfly
>
> I'll never forget the day I learned how to confuse a dragonfly. It's a popular pastime in Japan that I heard about from my students. Many children learn the technique from their grandfather, father, or other children. First, point your index finger towards a resting dragonfly. Then, move your finger in a circular motion in the air. If you're lucky, the dragonfly will get confused and fly towards your finger. If you're fast enough, you can catch it by the wings. People do this for fun, but I wonder what the dragonfly thinks.

Students tried their best as one group to help communicate this one idea. This happened in a classroom of quite low-proficiency students. Most students had TOEIC scores around 300-400 or lower. Likely, each student as an individual was not yet able to explain how to confuse a dragonfly. One student provided one word or described one part. Students may have only been able to reach the communicative outcome with the help of their peers. But together, they were able to express complex ideas. The lesson seemed to be driven by students' natural desire to express their ideas and my natural desire to understand what students were trying to tell me.

During the whole class improvised moments, the students seemed to be engaged and focused on what was unfolding. This may be related to the "close listening" and "complete concentration" that Sawyer writes about in his "Ten Conditions for Group Flow" (2017, pp. 53-56). Maley and Underhill (2012) write, "In a flow state, we are so into the activity we are engaged in that time passes unnoticed and events take place in a seemingly effortless way, with all the elements complementing each other as in a dance" (p. 7). I am unsure if we reached this kind of group flow state, but intercultural exchange and communication as the main drivers of the lesson were enjoyable for me and hopefully for students as well.

For me as a teacher, these were giant steps toward identifying the role improvisation plays in teaching, and that it is desirable if the teacher and students can improvise together. By slowing down and being patient, student contributions had the chance to fully develop.

After the dragonfly lessons, I attempted to design an activity with the specific aim of fostering spontaneity and improvisation. The result was an activity that is impossible to plan for: one that I call "Tell Brad something he doesn't know."

Tell Brad Something He Doesn't Know - Take 1 - The Tables Are Turned

The activity began by showing a prompt on the projector screen. The prompt was a PowerPoint slide with large white text on a dark background that said, "Tell Brad something he doesn't know." After a few seconds, a student offered the initial idea which was a piece of notebook paper with Japanese words that are very difficult to pronounce for learners of Japanese as an additional language. In contrast to later versions of this same activity, the idea was delivered in writing instead of orally as it was in all other instances. However, this student had no way of knowing what kind of activity we would be doing in class and could not have prepared for it in any specific way. I suspect the student wanted to share it with classmates or show it to me after class.

高級	*koukyuu*	luxury
公共	*koukyou*	public
呼吸	*kokyuu*	breath
皇居	*koukyo*	Imperial Palace
故郷	*kokyou*	hometown
国境	*kokkyou*	national border

I asked the student to write the *kanji* on the board. Every student seemed to be involved in some way. For instance, a couple of students came up to the front of the classroom to help with the board work, and others were providing English translations while seated at their desks. I asked a few questions to the students about some features of the *kanji*. Students then gave me an impromptu lesson on advanced Japanese pronunciation. Suddenly, I was being tested on my Japanese pronunciation by the students standing near the front of the classroom and I was not doing well. Students were laughing at me and with me as I did poorly on their test. It was one of the most difficult tests I had ever taken. They gave me feedback and instructions (e.g., Student: Try this one. / Teacher: Can I hear you say it again?). Next, partly to include more students, I transitioned by introducing a related idea I had been thinking about but had not yet discussed with this group. I told students that when Japanese words emerge when they are speaking English, it is okay to pronounce the word normally in Japanese. There is no need to pronounce it as English speakers do, for example, karaoke as /ˌkɛriˈoʊki/. And similarly, it is often not necessary to translate Japanese words into awkward English. For instance, it is much better to simply say miso than "fermented soybean paste" in most cases. As an example, I then asked students how to say Tokyo in English (or, more accurately, how many English speakers pronounce Tokyo). They tried and failed multiple times to figure it out. Students who were seated were also discussing and trying to figure out how it might be pronounced. As a hint, I sounded out a few of the Japanese words on the board as if they were English words. One word was similar: *koukyo* [Imperial Palace]. A single student got it first. The key was to read it as if it were an English word: /ˈtoʊkiˌoʊ/ I hoped that students would notice the differences in languages that can cause difficulty for learners and the strange ways that words can change when incorporated into another language. Next, after a student question about what I had studied in university, the discussion shifted to a discussion about university life. A few students asked questions about my university life, such as my major. I also told students

that my university life was much different from theirs and gave examples. Among other things, we talked about the idea of "my job is a university student." This was discussed both in pairs and as a whole class with me asking questions to students about whether they agreed or disagreed with the idea.

This may be an example of the lesson flow emerging from "collaborative classroom dialogue" (DeZutter, 2011, p. 40). Students had a large hand in shaping the direction of the lesson—they had agency. Although this activity was meandering and somewhat unfocused at times, a positive is that it was largely driven by dialogue and meaning-focused interaction.

During my formative years as a teacher, I was trained to aim for a one hundred percent English classroom. I do not subscribe to the idea anymore, but through this activity, I found that I was reluctant to bring certain themes into the classroom. Leaving a part of the lesson open to a pure form of student contributions allowed me to reconsider my pedagogical assumption about what should be allowed or what is desirable in the classroom. During this moment, I remember feeling somewhat uncomfortable as the *kanji* were being written on the board. Lessons were not supposed to begin with students writing *kanji* on the board. But rather than descending into chaos, the lesson turned into a discussion about the cross-influences of the L1 and L2. While typing notes and reflecting after the lesson, I realized that discussions about *kanji* were basically absent from past lessons I had taught. It was likely that there was a gap in students' knowledge and a missed opportunity here. Were most students able to talk about their L1 using their L2? Did they have an interest or need to be able to do this? Terms like On-reading, Kun-reading, radical, and stroke order came to mind as possibly relevant. However, it is also likely that talking about the Japanese language was something that does not match student expectations of what should happen in an English language course, and this must also be considered.

Tell Brad Something He Doesn't Know - Take 2 - Same Birthday

The activity began by showing the prompt on the projector screen. The prompt was the same PowerPoint slide with large white text on a black background that says, "Tell Brad something he doesn't know." After a couple of minutes of student thought, I gave a couple of examples (e.g., dark secrets or school rules). Then one student began. I recorded this exchange in my field notes after the lesson:

> Student: Birthday! Question okay?
> Teacher: Yeah! Go ahead.
> S: Huh?
> T: What are we talking about? Do you want to know my birthday?
> [pause]
> Okay, when is your birthday, Kenji?
> S: April 20th.
> T: April 20th? Your birthday is on April 20th?
> S: Yes.
> [pause]
> T: You have the same birthday as my wife.
> [The classroom erupts into laughter, surprise, and disbelief.]
> S: Really?
> T: Yes, really.

To conclude, there was a brief moment of joking with Kenji, "Next year, we'll have a birthday party with you, me, and my wife. Just the three of us. There will be cake and presents. It'll be great." Kenji seemed to be wondering if I was joking or serious. The activity was under five minutes from start to finish.

It was great to begin a lesson with a peak experience. Although spontaneous and in the spirit of the activity as designed, this does not appear to be a good example of improvisation but rather an unlikely outcome that happened by chance. The exchange was

unscripted and unplanned, but it could have occurred anytime during a lesson. It was also not representative of the activity as all other versions lasted much longer and did not have as dramatic an outcome. I did learn that it might be a good idea to conclude the activity with a peak, wherever it may be. It should also be said that due to the unpredictable nature of this kind of activity, it was often difficult to tie it into the overall theme of the planned coursebook lesson. A few times the class referred back to something that happened in "Tell Brad something he doesn't know" as a kind of inside joke, but at times it was confined to a warm-up activity. Tying lesson moments together to make a cohesive whole is one of the more challenging aspects of this approach that I identified as one area for personal improvement.

Tell Brad Something He Doesn't Know - Take 3 - Daruma from Funabashi

After displaying the same prompt (a PowerPoint slide with large white text on a black background that says "Tell Brad something he doesn't know."), a few minutes passed before the initial idea emerged. I had to be patient, but eventually, an idea was offered by a student in the back of the classroom. I recorded the following exchange in field notes after the lesson:

Student 1: Do you know Chiba-kun? [a mascot for Chiba Prefecture]
Teacher: Yes.
S1: Funassyi? [an unofficial mascot for Funabashi City, Chiba Prefecture]
T: Are you from Funabashi?
S1: Yes.
T: I've passed through there on the train, but I've never been. Tell me about Funabashi.
S1: There are spiritual spots.
T: Spiritual places?
S1: Shrines, Daruma (a traditional doll or talisman).
T: Okay, I know a little about Daruma. I used to live in Takasaki, Gunma Prefecture, and Daruma is famous there too. Can someone please draw a picture of Daruma on the board?

[No one volunteered, so I gently lobbed a whiteboard marker to someone in the back of the classroom. A student who was not the first speaker caught it and drew a picture of Daruma that included details such as *kanji*. I asked students to explain the *kanji* and two other students wrote the *kanji* reading and the meaning in English (Japanese: 必勝 *hissyou* | English: certain victory).]

T: What kinds of things do people wish for?
S2: Passing a test.
S3: Girlfriend.
T: Okay, how do you make the wish?
S4: You draw eyes on Daruma when making a wish.
T: Anything else?
S4: Then you go to the temple to pray for the wish to come true.
T: Who do you pray to?
S4: Buddha. [pause]
S4: You color Darama's left eye first and then, if the wish comes true, you color the right eye too. [Pause and brief student discussion in Japanese to confirm with others that this was correct.]
T: What's next?
S4: Take Daruma back to the temple and burn him. [I reacted with expressions of shock and horror.]
T: Thank you, Daruma! [burning up in flames sound; a few students laughed] What if your wish does not come true, how long do you wait?
S4: One year. Then burn him.
T: Sometimes I see big Darumas and small Darumas [for sale at temples]. I live near a temple and often see many different sizes. What does the size mean?

S4: Big ones are better but very expensive.
T: I see. Has anyone ever bought a Daruma and made a wish? [Only two students raised their hands.] Really? Only two? Okay, Rikako, tell us about the time you got a Daruma and made a wish.
S5: In high school, I had a basketball tournament. We got a Daruma.
T: One for the team or one for each member?
S5: One small one for each team member, and one for the team that was bigger.
T: And your wish was to win the tournament?
S5: Yes.
T: Did you win?
S5: Yes.
T: Okay, nice! How much was the team's effort and how much was Daruma? How much did Daruma help? Was it 50-50?
S5: Maybe it was 40% Daruma and 60% team.
T: Please explain. [Student struggled to think of any reasons or ideas.] Okay, thank you.
T: What about you, Ayaka? Tell us about your Daruma story.
S6: I was four years old when I got the Daruma. I can't remember what I wished for.
T: Where did you get it?
S6: Somewhere away from home. We were traveling. Maybe Nikko?
T: Okay, beautiful place! Thank you very much for sharing.

This was a pleasant exchange with students. I knew basic information about Daruma beforehand, but few details. I thought students did a great job of explaining them. Of course, this exchange could have emerged from a coursebook-based lesson, as topics like customs and traditions are fairly standard. However, for whatever reason, detailed exchanges like the one above often do not emerge from coursebook-based activities. Although hard to put a finger on, the example above seems more plausibly authentic than other activities I have done in the past (e.g., Talk about Japanese customs with your partner). It began with a genuine request (i.e., Tell me about your hometown) and led to a student giving an example of a local custom that seemed relatively unforced. There may be something important about not forcing a topic and not having strong teacher expectations about what students should say about a specific pre-planned topic.

I think it is also important both to expect that an interesting idea will emerge and to be willing to slow down and be patient. Sometimes ideas emerge immediately, but sometimes it takes a couple of minutes of silence, as in the case above. But the result will likely be on target with students' interests. When something does emerge, it is good practice to accept it enthusiastically and keep developing it as you explore tangents deeply. The class can follow the emerging ideas wherever they lead. The teacher can re-cast and negotiate meaning frequently. In my experience, students will often join the discussion to correct me if I misunderstand their idea and if I ask for clarification. It is helpful to keep working on an idea until we have a clear understanding of it.

Although I cannot be sure, as no attempt was made to measure student learning during this activity, this exchange could be an example of learning by doing. Language acquisition can be defined as "the (mostly) implicit process of building a linguistic system by making form-meaning connections from the input. Basically, acquisition is what happens to you while you are busy understanding messages" (Henshaw & Hawkins, 2022, p. 3). The activity was based on communicative need and interaction. The emphasis was on the functionality of language rather than an explicit focus on grammatical forms (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009).

It is useful to contrast emergent language with target language. This is based on the belief that acquiring a language is "not a linear process whereby linguistic items are introduced and learnt one after another in a set pattern. Instead, language is learnt through interaction with others and the world around us" (Chinn & Norrington-Davies, 2023, p. 13). The exchange above contains simple present, present perfect, simple past and other grammatical forms that could have been isolated and presented as the target language of an explicit grammar-focused lesson. However, research indicates that "explicit instruction is not necessary for acquisition" (Henshaw & Hawkins, 2022, p. 77). Moreover, "robust, reliable evidence from SLA research findings" shows that explicit knowledge of the L2 does not form the basis for language learning (Jordan & Long, 2023, p. 130).

Specific intervention techniques have been identified by Chinn and Norrington-Davies (2023) as a way to work with emergent language and scaffold student learning. They (2023, p. 54) offer a list of ten intervention techniques that may be initiated by the teacher or other learners. The example from the exchange above may be an example of a gentle clarification request that scaffolds student speech and learning:

Student: There are spiritual spots.
Teacher: Spiritual places?
Student: Shrines, Daruma.

Several weeks after the Daruma lesson, I purchased a small Daruma. To begin a lesson, I showed students the Daruma, told them it was my first one, and asked them to explain the procedure for making a wish and coloring the eye. A student lent me a marker, and I made a wish and colored in Daruma's eye while standing in front of the class. The activity was naturally communicative and hopefully meaningful to students to again share a part of Japanese culture with their teacher.

Additional Examples

According to field notes, I recorded only twelve instances of spontaneous classroom moments throughout the semester. It is worth noting that even when explicitly focusing on this research topic, my lessons were not very spontaneous as a whole. Most lessons were characterized by traditional coursebook-based activities, often with supplementation and expansion, but they did not lead to unpredictable outcomes in most cases.

"Tell Brad something he doesn't know" was implemented seven times during the semester with five classroom groups. The first three attempts were detailed above to shed light on the nature of classroom improvisation in this context:

Take 1 - The Tables are Turned
Take 2 - Same Birthday
Take 3 - Daruma from Funabashi
Take 4 - Split Personalities
Take 5 - Blood Types (Featuring Mysterious Blood Type M)
Take 6 - Do you sleep on the train?
Take 7 - Pusuke the Parakeet

Freeform activities such as "Tell Brad something he doesn't know" may appear to lack structure, but there is always an underlying structure (Sawyer, 2011), even if it is unknown exactly what will happen next. During a lesson, teachers have different structures to choose from, such as individual work, pair work (free or with assigned speakers and listeners), small group work, and whole-class discussion. Add to this basic patterns such as question and answer, or more specialized communication like negotiation of meaning (e.g., So, are you saying that…?). Often a simple "Tell me more about X" is the best way to move things forward. The logical next structure often seems to suggest itself. For example, in "Take 5 - Blood Types" when the topic of blood types emerged, it made sense to have students separate into groups based on their

blood type and write the supposed personality traits connected with each type on the board (the connection between blood type and personality is a common topic of discussion in Japan). In "Take 6 - Do you sleep on the train?" the class found itself separated on two sides of the room according to their agreement or disagreement with the proposition that "money equals happiness." I decided to have students do a mini-debate, although that was not in my normal repertoire of activities. In "Take 7 - Pusuke the Parakeet," one student introduced an idea that I thought other students could relate to: childhood pets. After a whole-class discussion, I asked students to talk about their childhood pets in pairs for a few minutes before coming back to a whole-class discussion which featured new participants. The activities can emerge along with the topics. There is not only one correct path, as multiple directions could all lead to successful outcomes. Other examples of notable improvised moments are included below to add detail about in-the-moment decision-making.

An Emergent Activity

When starting a new textbook unit about politeness, the lesson was uneventful until someone jokingly said, "Shut up!" to a classmate. I could have ignored it, but instead, I had students write on the board as many phrases as they knew to say "be quiet," ranked in order from most polite to most rude. Several students came up to the board and added phrases. It turned out that most of the phrases except for one sounded quite rude: "Would you mind be quiet? *[sic]* / Please be quiet. / Could you be quiet? / Can you close your mouth? / Zip your lips! / Save your breath. / Go away! / Shut up!" We worked on the one phrase by adding a reason and mitigation strategies until we got an acceptably polite request: "Would you mind keeping it down a bit? We're having an important meeting. Thank you so much." Even with that, it could still come across as somewhat impolite. It is an incredibly difficult speech act to ask someone to be quiet in a way that does not offend. We also had fun with ridiculous phrases like, "Excuse me, but would you mind shutting your mouth?" Several students took pictures of the boardwork.

The emergent activity seemed to be in line with students' needs based on their initial responses being overall quite impolite. The students' needs emerged along with the activity. A teachable moment emerged and was followed by an in-class needs analysis and targeted awareness-raising follow-up. One weakness of this example was that it was decontextualized. There is recent emphasis in language teaching to present authentic discourse in context to attempt to increase students' pragmatic awareness of face-threatening speech acts such as disagreeing (e.g., Charlebois, 2023). It may have been useful to set a short homework task of finding a short video example of a similar "be quiet" request to compare to our classroom example. Overall, the outcome seemed satisfactory in this case, but how might I have handled the same situation as a novice teacher? There is comfort and safety in sticking to a lesson plan. It has to be considered that this kind of improvisation may not be advisable for every teaching context, but in many cases, it could be worth the risk.

Changing Materials on the Fly

In one instance, I had a speaking prompt on the projector that said, "Does anyone have an interesting story?" This was after a short pair-work task about unlucky or lucky things that had happened to students. The topic was related to a coursebook activity. Students in this class could sometimes be a bit reluctant to speak out. No one seemed to want to share with the whole class during this activity. I asked one student who was making eye contact if she had an interesting story. She said she had a

story, but it was not interesting. I immediately deleted the word "interesting" from the slide and got a positive response from the class. Everyone seemed to relax and two students shared their stories, although I wish we had time for a few more.

Many aspects of the lesson, materials, or environment can be modified in real-time to produce spontaneity. I find myself writing and re-wording prompts more and more to match students' needs and interests as the lesson unfolds. In this case, deleting a single word from a slide was sufficient to produce a lively reaction and cause a boost in classroom atmosphere and mood. That being said, there is also the danger of appearing unprepared in front of students. If students see a teacher modifying or writing a prompt during the lesson, it could be seen as laziness or lack of preparation. This is a legitimate concern that must also be considered.

Exploring Others' Work

Dogme ELT has its supporters, myself included, but it has always been polarizing, and some teachers seem reluctant to speak positively of the approach to seemingly avoid being labeled as some kind of extreme "dogmetist" who does not plan their lessons. Dogme ELT was not solely focused on spontaneous communication and improvisation, but it also came with a rejection of a perceived over-reliance on materials and technological aids that can get in the way of meaningful communication and learning (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009). I have observed that teacher discussions of Dogme ELT often suffer from it being talked about in false and all-or-nothing ways, for instance, that there either should be a coursebook and materials or there should basically be no materials (e.g., Gill, 2000). Critics say that Dogme ELT is simply "winging it elevated to an art form" (Meddings & Thornbury, 2003) even though a Dogme approach does not reject planning and preparation. Dogme ELT has been dismissed by Dellar (2017) because "it's a lovely idea, but it's really bloody difficult to do." He adds that "[basically] Dogme doesn't exist outside of Scott Thornbury's head a lot of the time, I think." It is easy to see why teachers might have strong feelings about this imagined approach.

Teachers need to begin with the teaching and learning context, but in my view, whether the teaching approach includes a coursebook or is "materials light," the principles of Dogme ELT should be considered. Dogme ELT principles are powerful; for instance, they focus on interactivity, make space for the learner's voice in lessons, and focus on emergent language (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009). Whether technology is used frequently or not, I think space should be made for interesting things to emerge during lessons. Teachers are not neglecting their professional duties if not every part of the lesson is pre-planned – if there is a bit of room to breathe. It does not benefit anyone to reject spontaneity and improvisation along with the Dogme ELT package because it is perceived as too radical, idealistic, or difficult.

A planning-centric view of teaching and teacher education may give the impression that a good lesson is a well-planned lesson. While analyzing fourteen general methods textbooks used by pre-service teachers, DeZutter (2011) found only one text that used the word "improvisation" and only a handful of brief mentions of the improvisational nature of teaching. This is in contrast to one hundred pages on teacher planning. She is not arguing against a focus on teacher planning, but she concludes that there is "a sense that what is most important is to have one's lesson carefully planned out, perhaps even scripted, prior to engaging with students" (p. 40). She observes that these books give the impression that:

> The important teacher's decision making is in the past, having occurred when the lesson was

> planned. Such descriptions also create the sense that the teacher is the only one who is shaping the direction of the lesson, because it is almost never made explicit that the flow of the lesson emerges from collaborative classroom dialogue. (p. 40)

In my opinion, lesson planning, or more accurately, lesson preparation, is essential, but teachers should not be expected to plan all classroom interactions. When space is made, authentic communication can emerge, along with the language, topics, activities, student needs, and the syllabus.

A Principled Approach

Expert teachers have been observed improvising in response to student needs even in subjects like Mathematics (e.g., Borko & Livingston, 1989). However, there is a danger that "if teachers stray too far from their lesson plan, students do not learn the material" (Erickson, 2011, p. 115). In ELT, our material and our subject can be the communication and interaction that happens between the people in the classroom. We may have more freedom to let tangents and ideas develop as they can make lessons more in line with the communicative aims of the course. A quotation from Allwright fits nicely here: "The importance of interaction is not simply that it creates learning opportunities, it is that it constitutes learning itself" (Allwright, 1984, as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 43). However, teachers still need to have a principled approach. Sawyer (2004) talks about disciplined improvisation and the balance of structure and improvisation that always must be negotiated. Similarly, Brereton and Kita (2020) discuss the idea of principled creativity and an article by Richards (2013), who uses the term "mis-placed creativity," or creativity without a solid knowledge base or theoretical grounding. Richard's (2013) humorous example of a misguided colleague developing a technique called "Sponting" serves as a warning of how things can go wrong (p. 5). Even the act of creating materials is not synonymous with creativity (Brereton & Kita, 2020). Kita (Brereton & Kita, 2020) emphasizes that "there's a difference between being creative and just being different" (p. 11).

Having a principled approach with a theoretical rationale is important as teachers become comfortable taking risks in the classroom. A basic theoretical foundation could be based on Nation's (2007) four strands of learning conditions that run through a language course: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. A well-designed activity could easily check a few of these four boxes. If a primary aim of an activity is to devote more time to meaning-focused output during classroom discussions, that is a strong start. If the activity is driven by the desire for meaning-focused output, it is even better.

Giving students more control over course topics and content is another important principle that gives purpose to classroom decisions. Fostering spontaneity in the classroom is a worthwhile aim in itself. Other goals may include making lessons more learner-centered, taking advantage of teachable moments, customizing lessons to match students' needs, and adding a personal element (Richards, 2013). Creating opportunities for meaningful interaction between the teacher and students should be a primary principle, but it is too often forgotten and replaced by teacher talk that mostly involves giving instructions or setting up activities. Teachers claim to have a communicative approach, but how often do we talk *with* our students? With these principles in mind, teachers can have the confidence to step into the unknown.

Insight from Other Fields

As DeZutter (2011) and others have pointed out, there is a wealth of knowledge

to tap into from fields with improvisational traditions, such as jazz music or unscripted theater. What can teachers learn from the Charlie Parker quote on the first page of this article? Another piece of wisdom from Maley and Underhill (2012) is that "mistakes in jazz are not fatal. They may even be a doorway into something new" (p. 7). This mindset could be valuable when teaching as it looks for opportunities wherever they can be found, instead of framing missteps as mistakes. I would like to add that improvisational music is not limited to jazz, although it is the most obvious example of music that has an improvisational tradition. Not everyone appreciates jazz music, but other genres are also often improvisational: blues, bluegrass, rock, and funk, for example. Even classical music has a forgotten history of improvisation. Nowadays, classical pianists attempt to play a piece exactly as it is written on the page, but the actual composers "were all improvisers." "Bach, Mozart and Beethoven all thrilled audiences with their spontaneous improvisations. But today's classical pianists have lost the art [and] performances suffer because they are so dependent on the printed score" (Steibelt in Alberge, 2020). I think there may be parallels between this example and teaching. The focus on lesson planning has diminished my ability to go beyond the script and the lesson plan. Musicians often talk about the nature of improvisation with other musicians and they have also talked about it during interviews. While music is not the same as teaching, the improvisational element seems to be quite similar, much like the observation that actors in unscripted theater and members of corporate work teams collaborate in surprisingly similar ways (Sawyer, 2017, p.17).

Sawyer (2011) writes about the common misconception that "improvisation means anything goes; for example, that jazz musicians simply play from instinct and intuition, without conscious analysis or understanding. There are parallels between this misconception and the teacher artistry perspective" (p. 12). This mirrors the mischaracterization of Dogme ELT as no planning, no materials, and no technology. He explains that "jazz requires a great deal of training, practice, and expertise – it requires many years simply to play at a novice level [and] requires of the performer a deep knowledge of complex harmonic structures and a profound familiarity with the large body of standards – pieces that have been played by jazz bands for decades" (p. 12). What if improvisational music was never attempted because it was "too bloody difficult to do?" This relates to Dellar's comments on Dogme ELT (2017) highlighted above. The balance between structure and improvisation always must be skillfully negotiated (Sawyer, 2011). To become a more improvisational teacher, it may take some time to practice and reflect. After sixteen years of teaching, it often seems like I am only just beginning to figure it all out.

Limitations

The purpose of this study was to document my initial attempts to implement a new approach to lesson planning and teaching as I engaged with the literature, experimented in the classroom, and reflected on my practice. The results attempt to show what improvised moments look like and how a shift toward spontaneity and improvisation can promote teacher development. The purpose of the study was not to make generalizations about the suitability of the approach to other contexts. I only sought to paint a picture of spontaneous classroom moments in one context from my point of view as the teacher. The results are not intended to be strongly reliable or reproducible. The methodology is tentative and the focus is on finding potential areas for future study that include more rigorous data collection and analysis. Notably absent from the study is direct data from students about what they thought about the spontaneous moments. There were hints that unplanned lesson moments may have been effective on

some level, but it is unknown whether students on the whole found value or enjoyment in the classroom activities. One study found that students valued Dogme ELT-style lessons for natural speaking practice, but they also valued coursebook-based lessons which they perceived as more effective for learning grammar and test preparation (e.g., TOEIC) (Worth, 2012). Whether that dichotomy is actually true is a separate question worth investigating.

Conclusion

I suspect that there are quite a few teachers out there improvising at a high level but not talking much about it. McLaughlin (1999), when talking about the intuitive appeal of reflective practice, asks, "Who, after all, would want to champion the unreflective practitioner?" A similar question can be asked in this case: Who, after all, would want to champion the unimprovisational teacher (or unresponsive teacher)? The teacher who sticks to the lesson plan at all costs. The teacher who stifles spontaneity. The teacher who is unwilling to change course in response to emerging student needs and interests. To me, the appeal is intuitive, and it is surprising that improvisation is so rarely discussed. The unplanned moments are the highlights of the semester for me as the teacher, and I hope, for students.

I would like to continue my exploration in future classrooms. As a language teacher, I am interested in teaching in the moment and facilitating the kinds of classroom interaction that could only happen with a specific group of individuals at a specific point in time. Much like music, the possible interactions, outcomes, discussions, speech acts, activities, topics, and journeys seem nearly infinite. We can make space, but we cannot completely plan it.

References

Alberge, D. (2020, June 6). Why today's musicians should follow classical greats … and improvise. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jun/06/why-classical-musicians-need-to-learn-how-to-improvise

Ananthaswamy, A. (2022). Astronomers might see dark matter by staring into the void. *Scientific American.* https://www.scientificamerican.com

Biesta, G. J. J. (2007). Bridging the gap between educational research and educational practice: The need for critical distance. *Educational Research and Evaluation, 13*(3), 295–301. https://doi.org/10.1080/13803610701640227

Berliner, D. C. (2011). Forward. In R. K. Sawyer (Ed.), *Structure and improvisation in creative teaching* (pp. xiii–xvi). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511997105

Borko, H., & Livingston, C. (1989). Cognition and improvisation: Differences in mathematics instruction by expert and novice teachers. *American Educational Research Journal, 26*(4), 473–498. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312026004473

Brereton, P. (2019, May 12). *Teacher response-ability* [Conference presentation]. ExcitELT 2019, Tokyo, Japan.

Brereton, P., & Kita, S. (2020). Exploring teacher creativity through duoethnography and reflection. *Teacher Development Academic Journal, 1*(1), 7–19. https://tdsig.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/TDAJ-V1N1-BreretonKita.pdf

Charlebois, J. (2023). Developing L2 pragmatic competence through project-based learning. *The Language Teacher, 47*(1), 20–24. https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTTLT47.1-4

Charlie Parker. (2022, September 22). In *Wikiquote.* https://en.wikiquote.org/w/index.php?title=Charlie_Parker&oldid=3168448

Cornwell, S. (2011). Interview with Ken Wilson. *The Language Teacher, 35*(4), 19–23. https://jalt-publications.org/files/pdf-article/plen4.pdf

Dalke, A., Cassidy, K., Grobstein, P., & Blank, D. (2007). Emergent pedagogy: Learning to enjoy the uncontrollable—and make it productive. J*ournal of Educational Change, 8*, 111–130. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-007-9021-2

Dellar, H. [Teaching House]. (2017, July 27) Teaching House Presents - Hugh Dellar on Speaking [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsko2by2xsY

DeZutter, S. (2011). Professional improvisation and teacher education: Opening the conversation. In R. K. Sawyer (Ed.), *Structure and improvisation in creative teaching* (pp. 27–50). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511997105

Erickson, F. (2011). Taking advantage of structure to improvise in instruction: Examples from elementary school classrooms. In R. K. Sawyer (Ed.), *Structure and improvisation in creative teaching* (pp. 113–132). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511997105

Gill, S. (2000). Against Dogme: A plea for moderation. *IATEFL Issues, 154.*

Jordan, G., & Long, M. (2023). *English teaching now and how it could be.* Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Henshaw, F., & Hawkins, M. (2022). *Common ground: Second language acquisition theory goes to the classroom*. Hackett Publishing Company.

Kasparek, N. (2017). Creativity through dialogue writing: Letting it get a bit weird. In J. Leslie, M. Livingston, M. Y. Schaefer & D. Young (Eds.), *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion, 5*, 172–181. https://rikkyo.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/16186

Kasparek, N. (2024). Playfully studious teaching as a reparative affective replacement for microfascism, *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy, 21*(2), 201-221. https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2022.2107587

Kumaravadivelu, B. (1994). Intake factors and intake processes in adult language learning. *Applied Language Learning, 5*(1), 33-71.

Lowe, R. (2012). *Self-reflection* [Unpublished article]. Rikkyo University.

Maley A., & Underhill, A. (2012). Expect the unexpected. *English Teaching Professional*, 82, 4-7.

McLaughlin, T. H. (1999). Beyond the reflective teacher. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 31, 9-25. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.1999.tb00371.x

Meddings, L., & Thornbury, S. (2003, April 17). Dogme still able to divide ELT. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/education/2003/apr/17/tefl.lukemeddings

Meddings, L., & Thornbury, S. (2009). *Teaching unplugged: Dogme in English language teaching*. Delta Publishing.

Nation, I. S. P. (2007). The four strands. *International Journal of Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, *1*(1), 2–13. https://doi.org/10.2167/illt039.

Nunan, D. (1992). *Research methods in language learning*. Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J. C. (2013). *Creativity in language teaching*. https://www.professorjackrichards.com/wp-content/uploads/Creativity-in-Language-Teaching.pdf

Sassi, A. (2011). How "scripted" materials might support improvisational teaching: Insights from the implementation of a reading comprehension curriculum. In R. K. Sawyer (Ed.), *Structure and improvisation in creative teaching* (pp. 209–235). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511997105

Sawyer, R. K. (2004). Creative teaching: Collaborative discussion as disciplined improvisation. *Educational Researcher, 33*(2), 12–20. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033002012

Sawyer, R. K. (2011). What makes good teachers great? The artful balance of structure and improvisation. In R. K. Sawyer (Ed.), *Structure and improvisation in creative teaching* (pp. 1–24). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511997105

Sawyer, R. K. (2017). *Group genius: The creative power of collaboration.* Basic Books.

Thornbury, S. (2000). A dogma for EFL. *IATEFL Issues, 153*, 2. http://nebula.wsimg.com/fa3dc70521483b645f4b932209f9db17?AccessKeyId=186A535D1BA4FC995A73&disposition=0&alloworigin=1

Worth, A. (2012). A dogme based approach from the learners' perspective. *The Journal of Kanda University of International Studies, 24*, 77–99. http://id.nii.ac.jp/1092/00000604

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Peter Brereton for his invaluable support. The first I heard anyone talk about teaching and improvisation was at his session at the ExcitELT Conference in Tokyo in 2019. After concluding his talk, he demonstrated his improvisational prowess in real-time when he found out he still had 20 minutes left. Without Peter's insight and ongoing feedback, this project would not have been possible.

About the Author

Brad Barker teaches at the Center for Foreign Language Education and Research (FLER) at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan. His main research interests are spontaneity and improvisation in the language classroom, Dogme ELT, emergent language, and process syllabi. bbarker@rikkyo.ac.jp

REFLECTIONS

Are You One of Me? Reflection and Perspective of a Mid-Career Novice Teacher

Gee Lian Ng
Soka University, Japan

After working for 13 years in the corporate sector, exacerbated by the seemingly endless pandemic lockdown, I decided to change how I want to live my life. This decision included a change in career as I realized the importance of living to the fullest with what I had. The pandemic lockdown made me realize that perhaps I had been living the way that my prescribed societal norms expected me to be, instead of what I wanted to be. From a risk-averse person who values stability and security in life, I crossed over to the other end of the spectrum where I set foot in Japan to pursue a Master's degree in TESOL and began my study and living abroad journey as a novice university teacher of English in Japan. I felt that I needed to widen my life perspective and, having studied Japanese for many years in my home country where the language is hardly used or spoken, I felt it was high time to conquer a to-do item that has been on my mind for the longest time.

However, I was not prepared to completely discard the working experiences I had painstakingly accumulated in the corporate sector and believed these experiences could be put into good use in academia. After all, the purpose of education is to seek knowledge and skills so as to gain footing in society and earn a living. As a mid-career novice teacher, I feel I have life skills advantages when compared to other novice teachers in two ways. First, I am already seasoned to handle dynamic or unexpected situations in the corporate world, hence, I believed I could better manage any difficult classroom situations. Second, I could bring insights and impart soft skills such as effective email and report writing as well as presentation and negotiation skills to my students. As such, I launched myself enthusiastically as I began my first semester of teaching. However, two weeks into the semester, I felt disheartened, frustrated, torn, and crippled. The feeling as I walked out from most of my classes was just one word: messy. At the end of the semester, all I felt was that I had only pretended to teach!

Through this article, I am reaching out to young novice teachers as well as mid-career novice teachers to share how reflective practice has helped me to learn and teach better. More importantly, I discovered some quick solutions that are useful to reduce unnecessary distress and anxiety. Nothing is wasted if we choose to reflect upon the good, the bad and take actions to teach better in the future.

Purpose of the Article

I have two purposes in mind. First, I hope to encourage novice teachers to practice reflective teaching. Novice teachers like myself will, without fail, feel that they have taught terribly in their first semester of teaching. But embrace yourself in critical reflection. Do not spiral down into self-doubt or putting blame on the environment. Professional training does not end once we have obtained our teaching qualification. Actively reflecting on our experiences of teaching is a valuable source of knowledge which we can readily tap into in order to grow professionally. Such knowledge comes from having actual interactions with our

students (people), being in classrooms (physical setting), and working under specific contexts (such as prescribed teaching resources and institutional policies) which are great *teachers* for teachers.

Second, I hope by sharing my struggles with other mid-career novice teachers, we can support one another and be assured that we are normal beings. While we do not belong to the majority in this profession, we exist and face similar but slightly different dilemmas and challenges. I hope that more of our voices can be heard where we share useful coping mechanisms and develop ourselves more efficiently in this new career path we have chosen.

Reflective Practice as Language Teachers

As novice teachers, we tend to focus on applying and reflecting the pedagogical knowledge and skills that work or do not work for our students. Consequently, we often neglect another important aspect of the reflection which is our emotions. A senior teacher once said to me (paraphrased), "If a teacher is emotionally unwell, the consequences could be far greater than a poor lesson plan." In other words, a teacher could potentially say or do something in class that causes irrevocable damage to student learning. Reflective practice is about understanding and reflecting on both the cognitive and affective aspects of teaching (Richards & Farrell, 2011). In addition, Farrell's perspective of viewing reflective practice as a way of life (2013) is what resonates deeply in me. Teaching is a people profession. We are bound to meet different kinds of students and together, we create unique learning environments. To teach effectively, the fastest way is to review and improve our teaching.

Reflective practice can be done during teaching (reflection-in-action) or after teaching (reflection-on-action) (Schön, 1983). For most teachers, especially for novice teachers like me, reflection-on-action tends to be more natural and easier as classroom management often takes up our energy substantially, leaving us little cognitive capacity to reflect while executing our lesson plans. Reflection-on-action could also remove any strong emotions that we might have during or right after class which could be biased in nature.

My reflections on my first semester of teaching were mainly based on reflection-on-action, and they resulted in the following three key takeaways.

Learn to abandon your plan

As a mid-career novice teacher, I was eager to impart my corporate knowledge and skills to my students. I decided to set aside six lessons, dedicated to teach life skills such as improving communication skills and problem solving. I adopted a life skill framework backed by research, customised the lesson plans based on the English proficiency of my students, and created visuals to scaffold the activity instructions. I also did L1 translation for one of the tasks which were self-assessment questionnaires. I thought I was all ready.

Unexpectedly, after conducting two life skills lessons with three different classes, I decided to abandon my plan. The lesson plans consisted of an overview on the purpose and benefits of learning life skills. Students were then asked to complete self-assessment questionnaires on their speaking and listening skills in general which were adapted from The Universal Framework (Skills Builder Partnership, n.d.). The main activity was for students to work in pairs where they would describe a picture orally without using gestures to their partners, who would try to reproduce the picture in exact accordance. As a round-up activity, students were to reflect on the difficulties of describing the picture (speaking) and listening to their partners to reproduce the picture as they switched roles. Most students struggled to describe the picture as they lacked the vocabulary as well as the familiarity of describing shapes, lines, and directions even though the necessary

vocabulary was provided as part of the scaffolding.

The decision to abandon was painful but necessary. First, I began to realise that some parts of the life skill framework were not relevant to Japan. For example, Japanese rarely interrupt their interlocutors in discussions and conversations as part of their cultural norms. As such, raising such an awareness to the students was irrelevant within the context of a Japanese setting. Second, students were not ready for critical thinking, especially when such reflection was made in L2 which meant more scaffolding was required before the students could work on the main activity.

In summary, the class time needed to teach life skills was way beyond my expectations and students did not achieve the intended learning goals. I needed to re-examine the life skills syllabus to find the right balance to match the readiness and context of my students.

Your words can be powerful

During my practice teaching, one of the comments that my cooperating teacher said was that I once said, '*Do you understand me?*', to my students. Upon reflection, the question was not said out of anger, but, to some extent, the frustration I had for not getting any response from my students. I needed cues to assess if my students understood me or needed more scaffolding. However, my cooperating teacher highlighted that the question might sound daunting to the students, especially to Japanese who uphold a strong culture of being implicit when responding or making requests to others. Putting a direct request to students to respond is also likely to be fruitless as students would just nod their heads.

Learning does not stick in the head unless repetition is made. In one of my classes, I did it again, asking the students, '*Do you understand me?*', only to realise during reflection-in-action what I had said. Perhaps, this was the only time where I could do reflection-in-action because there was already some awareness of the issue. Although this time, even though the question was asked without anger or frustration, the outcome was the same. Some students appeared 'paralysed' while most simply nodded their heads. In the end, none of the students performed the task correctly. In the corporate world or while having conversations with highly proficient English speakers, asking, '*Do you understand me?*' would be almost harmless even though the tone and context with which the question is said does matter. However, given the power relationship between teacher and students, novice teachers, especially mid-career novice teachers, have to be mindful with the words we choose and the cultural context we are working under. Certain phrases may turn out to be powerful swords that can move us away from our goals and even hurt the teacher-student relationship we have painstakingly built up along the way. Instead of asking the students, '*Do you understand me?*', a better approach may be to ask Instruction Checking Questions (ICQs) or instruct students to discuss and check their understanding with one another collectively.

Read extensively

I often find myself feeling stuck in teaching and research. I feel that my repertoire is very limited, yet building up the repertoire is a chicken-and-egg problem. A teacher needs to first gain opportunity to teach in order to gain experiences, yet academic institutions do not hire teachers with no teaching experience. Even after landing in a teaching job with much effort, a novice teacher often lacks ideas to create activities that expand learning from the textbook; activities that are more authentic, interactive, and engaging. While a quick solution may be to talk to fellow colleagues or senior teachers, I personally find this approach not readily accessible as everyone is busy and I often experience the lurking

fear from others that their ideas may get stolen. To make the situation worse, I was assigned to take over another teacher's classes in my first semester of teaching which meant that the challenge to break the ice and create a (new) learning momentum was harder.

Eventually, I realised the way around was to read extensively. I began to read language teaching and research journals that cover various topics and different continents. I also made a point to read self-development books to improve general skills such as speed reading and improve my memory skills. I learnt to let go of my ego that I have in order to start afresh as a young teacher even though I am much older than most of my colleagues. My conclusion as to why I often feel stuck is that I have not read enough. When I read more, ideas begin to sprout, and I begin to find myself busy organizing ideas to make them work for my context – which is a happy problem. When reading extensively, it is important to check and ensure that the resources are well-accredited, and always be critical in assessing the suitability of the approaches to your current teaching context.

Conclusion

"Knowledge alone does not produce wisdom. Transforming knowledge into wisdom requires input from the heart" (Ikeda, n.d.). If we do not reflect on our teaching, our teaching experiences would just be knowledge and not wisdom. By reflecting on the cognitive and affective aspects of my teaching, I transformed my knowledge into wisdom where I no longer feel stuck or frustrated when student learning does not go by plan. I learnt to admit to my failed plans, be more aware of my oral instructions, and to continue my professional development through lifelong learning. The initial phase of teaching is no doubt challenging and what we feel is absolutely normal. Especially for mid-career novice teachers, making a career change is already tough and the path just gets tougher as you learn more about the field and what it takes to excel. However, by focusing on areas where we can receive positive energy and continue to offer our best, our students will definitely be able to feel our sincerity and together, learning happens.

References

Farrell, T. S. C. (2013). *Reflective teaching*. TESOL International Association.

Ikeda, D. (n.d.). Quotations by Theme: Education. Daisaku Ikeda Website Committee. https://www.daisakuikeda.org/sub/quotations/theme/education.html

Richards, J. C. & Farrell, T. S. C. (2011). *Practice teaching*: *A reflective approach*. Cambridge University Press.

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic.

Skills Builder Partnership. (n.d.). *The Universal Framework*. https://www.skillsbuilder.org/universal-framework

About the Author

Ng Gee Lian is an Assistant Lecturer at the World Language Center in Soka University, Japan. Her research interests include L2 listening, study abroad, and curriculum development using CEFR. geelian@soka.ac.jp

About the TD SIG Publications Team

Yutaka Fujieda,
Editor

Yutaka Fujieda, Ph.D., is a professor in the Faculty of International Co-creativity and Innovation at Osaka University of Economics. His research interests include second language writing, teacher development, and World Englishes.

Nick Kasparek,
Layout Editor

Nick Kasparek teaches English for liberal arts at Eikei University of Hiroshima. His interests include curriculum theory, English-mediated instruction (EMI), the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), university faculty development, and post-qualitative research.

Andrew Hoffman,
Proofreader

Andrew Hoffman has taught at every level from kindergarten to senior high school. His research interests include the practical applications of corpus linguistics, task-based teaching, teaching young learners, teacher development, and team-teaching.