

# The English Connection

*A Korea TESOL Publication*

Winter 2022, Volume 26, Issue 4

## The “Less Is More” Edition

### How to minimize classroom procedures for increased benefits

Miller: Less is more... in pre-listening activities

Rian: Less is more... in coursebooks

Campbell: Less is more... in teaching reading

Thorkelson: More is less... in teachers' roles

Vande Voort Nam: Less is more... in speaking

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## Interview

A Member Spotlight on Garth Elzerman,  
2023 Intl. Conference Committee Chair

## Our regular columnist...

Curtis Kelly with The Brain Connection

## And 'Greetings' to our new columnist...

Bill Snyder with The Development Connection



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# The English Connection

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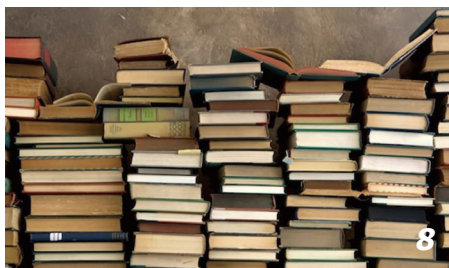
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To promote scholarship, disseminate information, and facilitate cross-cultural understanding among persons concerned with the teaching and learning of English in Korea.

## Editorial

# Less Is More... When Cubbyholing

By Dr. Andrew White Editor-in-Chief, *The English Connection*

The holiday season – a time to eat a little bit more, buy a bit more, go out a bit more, or depending on your age, stay in a bit more. In short, it's a time to celebrate, normally with the excesses that fortunate people like us are able to have and do.

As the year and the semester comes to a close, it should also be a time to contemplate the excesses in our teaching. If you're anything like me, in the last few years you've experienced the best (and the worst) of both face-to-face and online teaching. You've had a balance of traditional classroom activities that were morphed and off-shooted into on-line videos and video-conferencing sessions, and now with the ability to go back into the classroom, we are stuck with more resources than we need or can fit into our precious class time with our students. It's a time to contemplate what works and what hasn't worked, keep the tried and true while perhaps adopting some new advances, and decide how best to streamline your teaching. In short, how to get rid of the excess and organize the most effective parts to **economize the time** we have with our students.



Cognitive psychologists refer to **channel capacity**, the natural limit our brains have to store and process raw information, and if we exceed that capacity we as humans become overwhelmed. We thus cubbyhole groups of raw data to keep order in our lives. We no longer memorize phone numbers but keep them stored in our phone or in a book. Our appointments are kept in the day planner, the capitals of lesser known countries found on Google (this is also why I'd be helpless if I lost my cell phone!). To be more efficient, we encode and process information into different subgroups, and then put it away to be stored. We can thus stay under our channel capacity to focus on more pressing things.

Teachers do this, too. We keep our students' names in a roll book, the goals and weekly lesson plans in the syllabus, the daily activities in the coursebook (see *Less Is More... in Coursebooks*, page 8), the grading on a spreadsheet, and so on. We think we're simplifying the organizational management aspects of our profession, to ease our lives and reduce stress (see also *Less Is More... with a Gratitude Journal*, page 21).

But is there a limit to the number of subgroups, this constant need to organize the management of classroom teaching, in the name of efficiency? I once had a coworker (see *Less Is More... When Collaborating*, page 23, for more on sharing colleague ideas) who required his students to register for an on-line course, buy two coursebooks, sign a pledge of cooperation, sign-up for the school's digital learning platform (to receive progress checks and submit weekly homework), get an app for Bluetooth classroom attendance, and participate in a randomizer seating chart – all before classes had even started! And then, he couldn't stop complaining about the constant short-falls and glitches (both technical and human) that plagued him and his students day to day. Are these cubbyhole techniques really streamlining our class and making the teaching and learning more effective? How many of these actually free up time and reduce stress, rather than just adding another complex layer on top of our procedures (see also *More Is Less... In Teachers' Roles*, page 15)? To me there seems to be a limit on the organization management techniques we need to use, as we attempt to confront our channel capacities – it's a channel capacity of cubbyholing.

Let's look at lecturing with Powerpoint slides. It's a great way to store and visually transfer information to your students. But consider the visual overload students have gone through just to get to your class: the commute, programs, billboards, and of course, cell phones, videos, and games. Advertising specialists estimate we see between 4,000 and 10,000 just in ads every day, so just imagine the overall sensory input students (and teachers) are exposed to. Perhaps passively sitting down and staring at a slideshow isn't best, especially since English speaking is an aural/oral skill, not visual. And who hasn't had something go wrong with their Powerpoint at the worst moment? Conversely, perhaps think about adding a PPT delivery to your class, to capture and hold learners' attention. Human memory is shown to increase to 65% over three days when relevant images are paired with information, and you might want to cubbyhole that info when you repeat your same lecture five times a week. My point is not whether we should use PPT or not, but rather to examine and make the right choices to most efficiently manage our classes, without over organizing.

Management through technology isn't the only area in which teachers may consider downsizing our dependence on cubbyholes. Our teaching methods, as well, should be constantly reflected upon, for ways to maximize our class time exposure with our learners, which most likely is the only opportunity for them to engage with English. Do you believe in active learning? Then perhaps the highly structured teacher-fronted lesson plan you've been relying on needs reorganizing, or more likely, less organizing. This would no doubt lessen teacher talk time, reduce explanations on multi-faceted lessons and tasks that often trip up students, and ultimately give students more learner-centered time to engage and produce English. Several articles give methods for this less-structured lesson format, including less pre-listening activities (page 6), less reading instruction (page 12), and less speaking to promote more responding (page 18).

As you look to shed those extra pounds after this holiday season, I hope this special theme of *The English Connection* helps you to contemplate shedding some time and stress in your precious classroom engagement with your learners.

# President's Message (Re-)Introducing PD into Your Life: KOTESOL Sparks Joy

By Lindsay Herron KOTESOL President

I've always been a little befuddled by Marie Kondo and her trademark exhortation to get rid of anything that doesn't "spark joy." I'm a pack-rat, inclined to save *everything* on the off-chance that it might be useful in the future. Sure, that old calendar might not "spark joy" right now, but what if I need it someday? It was thus disconcerting but also incredibly freeing when I was forced to clean out my apartment in preparation for moving, creating discrete piles of possessions – *donate, dump, recycle, and keep* – while eagerly anticipating the relatively open canvas my new apartment promised.

I think for many of us, the pandemic has kind of felt like that – a mandatory reset that cleared our cache of commitments as we were forced to pause our busy lives. Now, as the world restarts and in-person events resume, we have a rare opportunity to emerge from our isolation nearly *tabula rasa*, with an almost-blank slate containing only our most treasured priorities – the family, friends, and self-care that helped us weather the pandemic – and then gradually (re-)adding commitments from there.

For KOTESOL, the months since the onset of COVID-19 have similarly been challenging but also have provided a valuable chance to experiment, re-evaluate, and figure out our priorities as an organization. We have had to streamline and operate from a lean online baseline, but the coming year offers new opportunities to (re-)introduce many activities, our fresh insights infusing former offerings to create innovative, efficient approaches to professional development. This year is an outstanding time to re-introduce KOTESOL into your life, as well; as you craft and curate your post-pandemic world, I hope you'll take a look at the many opportunities our organization offers – a truly dazzling constellation of choices that can enrich your personal and professional life.

First, the coming year boasts a wide variety of conference opportunities. In fact, it is a big anniversary for us: This will be our thirtieth international conference! As part of our celebrations, the 30th Korea TESOL International Conference will also be the 2023 Pan-Asian Language Consortium of Language Teaching Societies (PAC) conference, so participants can look forward to presentations by many representatives of our PAC partners, as well as opportunities for our students to interact with their global peers in the Asian Youth Forum. As with the 2022 conference, next spring's event will feature a Graduate Student Showcase that highlights and supports the research of graduate students, and tickets are free for residents of low- and middle-income countries. The conference will include a mixture of online and in-person options, with registration opening in early March for online-only and online-plus-offline tickets. While the online offerings will maximize access and convenience, the in-person part will feature a plethora of opportunities for interacting, networking, and re-connecting with KOTESOL peers.

If you can't attend the international conference, though, there are still abundant opportunities to share ideas and insights! KOTESOL members can usually get a registration discount at our partner organizations' conferences, or they can attend for free as our official representative (after receiving a KOTESOL conference grant or travel grant). Also, several chapters hope to host regional conferences in the coming months in addition to their regular workshops. Our special interest groups (SIGs) might have a few events in the works, as well; keep an eye on the KOTESOL website and our monthly email newsletter, *KOTESOL News*, for updates.

Speaking of *KOTESOL News*, don't forget about our publications! *KOTESOL Voices* shares members' stories each month online, welcoming non-traditional modes of expression and focusing on the more personal aspects of being a teacher/expat/human. Members can also publish their research in the *Korea TESOL Journal*; share a more practical perspective here in *The English Connection*; or drop a shorter teaching tip in *Scribes Square*, our online blog.

I am definitely in favor of streamlining and simplifying one's life – but we also have to be sure to seek out and hold fast to the items that "spark joy." For some, involvement with KOTESOL was that breath of joy during the pandemic; for others, it fell to the wayside. If you are among the latter group, I hope you'll enjoy rediscovering KOTESOL this year; like the colorful scraps I hoard in my craft bins, our organization has been here all along, patiently waiting for an opportunity to once again be of service to you. Conferences, workshops, SIGs, publications, grants and awards, social and networking events, volunteer opportunities, membership benefits... KOTESOL has something for everyone! I hope you find novel, exciting ways to integrate KOTESOL into your life this year, embracing all the aspects of our vibrant community of practice that spark joy. Here's to a rewarding, satisfying, safe 2023!



# Less Is More... in Pre-listening Activities: The non-interventionist approach and more focus on post-listening activities

By Christopher Miller

Field (2008) defines pre-listening as “a period before a teacher plays a recording, used for preparing learners for listening” (p. 350). Well-known pre-listening activities include mind maps, gap fills, and exploring pictures (the interested reader can see Houston [2016] for further explanation). Undeniably, pre-listening activities have their place in an English language classroom. Pre-listening activities can establish context, prime learners to recognize key vocabulary, establish a purpose for listening, activate prior knowledge, and elicit interest in the topic, just to list a few of the uncontroversial benefits (see Sui & Wang, 2005).

Nevertheless, there are potential drawbacks to overusing pre-listening activities. This article will briefly discuss issues with pre-listening activities and summarize an alternative approach advanced by Field, the non-interventionist approach (NIA), as well as additional activities recommended by Field that can be used to either supplement that approach or be utilized separately.



## Pre-listening Is Great... But...

Commentators such as Field (2008) have argued that excessive use of pre-listening activities can be problematic, and in certain contexts (particularly with advanced learners), any use of pre-listening activities may be problematic. The main issue is that an excessive use of pre-listening activities may allow learners to easily infer the content. Let's momentarily consider a few basic pre-listening activities: Showing a picture related to the listening content, providing a gapped/"mutilated" partial transcript, or pre-teaching vocabulary. These are great activities, as they provide learners with scaffolding among other benefits. However, typical authentic listening situations often (not always!) fail to provide such scaffolding. "In the real world", the learner will need strong listening skills to effectively engage in interactive, sustained communication. The learner and the teacher can both practice some self-deception upon their respective selves by using these activities – especially when or if follow-up comprehension checks lack precision. Did the learner really comprehend the text, or did the learner merely infer the meaning of the passages based on clues available during pre-listening activities? To be clear, inferring is a great skill for listening. However, it may allow the learner to display comprehension of a listening text that is based more on the ability to infer adequately as opposed to genuine listening skill. One approach that can best address this issue is the NIA.

## The Non-Interventionist Approach (NIA)

In the NIA, a teacher provides limited scaffolding. Field (2008) suggests that teachers play a listening passage up to five times in the NIA. Such a listening text should adhere to Krashen's  $i+1$  hypothesis. After each listening, learners are prompted by the teacher.

**After the first listening:** Learners write down what they have comprehended. The teacher doesn't comment.

**2nd listening:** Learners again check their understanding, then discuss in pairs. Again, it is important that the teacher not comment, unless there is significant misunderstanding.

**3rd listening:** Pairs check to see who was more accurate. Pairs may present their current understandings to the whole class. At this stage the teacher can summarize the learners' progress – that is, paraphrase the current level of understanding that learners have generated and displayed in pair discussion. However, at this stage, the teacher should refrain from commenting about the accuracy of the learners' comprehension of the listening text.

**4th listening:** The class confers as a group to determine which group had the most precise understanding.

**5th listening:** The class now listens with a transcript, and the teacher can respond to student queries.

This approach has several benefits:

1. It makes the learners focus on listening. In this approach, there is less reliance on pre-listening activities and context clues.
2. The NIA allows for integration with speaking.
3. In the NIA, the burden for processing and meaning building/decoding is put on the learners early in the activity. As Field (2008) states, "[the instructor acts] as a facilitator encouraging the class to compare ... information they have extracted ... themselves" (p. 41).

**"Did the learner really comprehend the text, or did the learner merely infer the meaning of the passages based on clues available during pre-listening activities."**

## NIA and the Role of the Teacher

The following are roles and actions teachers can implement to be more sensitive to listening challenges when employing the NIA.

One action teachers can take is to actively inquire about the student responses during listening comprehension checks. Consider a student who gives the wrong answer on a multiple-choice comprehension check regarding the meaning of the sentence: "They've lived in Seoul for two years." The misunderstanding could have stemmed from multiple sources. Did it come from a learner not understanding the grammar of the present perfect tense? Did the learner not recognize the reduced form for "they have?" Depending on

the response of the learner, different strategies to address the misunderstanding will be required. One simple way to inquire is to frequently employ this question stated multiple times in Dantonio and Beisenherz's (2001) practical text *Learning to Question, Questioning to Learn*: "What makes you say so?"

Another action that Field (2008) recommends is teachers observing students during post-listening activities and taking ample field notes (no pun intended) to establish if there are frequently recurring areas where listening-related breakdowns in understanding occurred among the learners. Based on those results, a teacher would need to adjust their methods depending on the "data" generated in such post-listening activities and observations. Armed with this learner-generated (or teacher-observed) data, the teacher is in a better position to address the learners' listening-related needs.

**"Such an approach may be augmented with teacher observations and several follow-up learner activities requiring a mixture of focused listening and guided reflection."**

### Post-listening

Field (2008) recommends a series of post-listening activities when using the NIA approach. These activities can be applied both in an NIA framework or outside of it. These activities need not (and some cannot!) be exclusively teacher-led.

**1. Micro-listening.** Students listen to multiple sentences related to a problematic utterance. For example, a student misunderstands the utterance: *He claimed he'd fixed the car.* If the learner heard *He claimed he'd fix the car*, the learner may have assumed this refers to a promise to perform a future event, but in fact the speaker of the utterance is referring to an action already completed. Here the teacher could provide comprehensible input related to reported speech to help raise the learner's awareness of this type of utterance during subsequent listening. Such targeted listening practice is more efficient than having a student listen to an entire listening exercise (such as a dialogue). The micro-listening could take the form of a dictation, or perhaps easier for learners, they could note if the input refers to the past or the future. Such an activity could be completed in under five minutes and be a useful way to end a listening focused lesson.

**2. Self-Reflection on Listening Performance.** Field suggests having students reflect on their listening. For instance, one item might be *Now look at each of the words and try to say why you had difficulty recognizing it.* (Reflective options include: *I did not recognize the sounds; I got the syllables wrong; The word was not said in a standard way; The word was not easy to hear; and I confused it with another word.*) Such a reflection sheet will likely need to be customized for a specific group of learners. This type of checklist facilitates student reflection outside of class and thus frees up class time for other purposes. If done electronically with the aid of instantly generated charts (with Google Forms, for instance), an instructor could quickly gain insight into the sources of learner difficulty. Table 1 provides a sample item from a self-reflection document. Alternatively, if a teacher wishes to integrate speaking, this could take the form of a verbal report performed with the teacher or as a peer reflection. According to Daly (2006), learners feel the aforementioned activities help them identify problematic issues with their listening and offer them ways to cope

with those challenges. Listener diaries could provide a less structured format to have learners engage in self-reflection.

**Table 1.** Sample of Self-Reflection Checklist Item

1. Circle the words, if any, that were difficult to understand during the listening passage. Please indicate the source of the difficulty.
  - a. I only vaguely (or partially) knew the meaning of the word.
  - b. I had no idea what the meaning was.
  - c. I knew the meaning of the word but couldn't recognize it when I first heard the word.
  - d. I knew the meaning of the word but was confused about the meaning of the word in this situation.
  - e. Other: \_\_\_\_\_.

From <https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org>

**3. Transcription** In this context, transcription refers to learners copying verbatim a series of sentences delivered by the teacher. Field (2008) recommends that the sentences are similar and focus on an area where a "perceptual difficulty" may arise, as in *She said she'd found the keys* and *She said she'd find the keys* (Field, 2008, pp. 88–89). Daly (2006) reports the following benefits for learners: "Transcription helps with identifying key words, stressed words, replacing omitted words, and noticing collocations" (as cited in Field, 2008).

### Conclusion

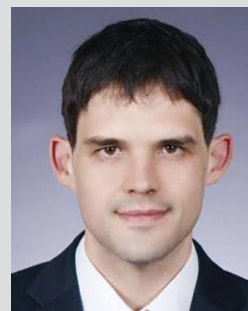
Pre-listening, while providing a wide array of benefits, arguably does have inauthentic dimensions that can mask listening deficiencies. The non-interventionist approach helps direct more of a focus on listening itself. Such an approach may be augmented with teacher observations and several follow-up learner activities requiring a mixture of focused listening and guided reflection.

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## Less Is More... in Coursebooks: Arguments against using four-skills coursebooks in general English classes

By Joel P. Rian

Coursebooks for university EFL classes. They're everywhere teachers are, stuffed into bookshelves and cabinets in break rooms, lounges, and offices. Every half-year, universities are blanketed with catalogs and flyers of the latest ones, hot off publisher presses. At annual academic conferences; there's often an entire room devoted to them. From booth after publisher booth, rows of them gleam at you with their shiny, glossy covers as you stroll past. The hopeful eyes of coursebook salespeople follow you from behind the gloss, scanning you for the slightest pause, the subtlest motion to suggest an interest in their wares. Some will woo you with sample copies and smooth explanations of just how their particular coursebooks can help you find and flip the secret switch that engages your students, gets them talking in English, captures their attention, as none other of their previous classroom experiences could.

With precious few exceptions, I find them tedious, cumbersome, and generic. I would not dare have my students buy them, unless university requirements dictated I must. I side squarely with Thornbury's (2013) book chapter titled *Resisting Coursebooks*, which like others of his publications articulately thumbs a nose at the plodding, mechanical tepidity of teaching practices and materials that have pervaded the EFL profession for as long as it has existed. In *Resisting Coursebooks*, Thornbury makes the compelling plea that "coursebooks are not only dispensable but that they are fundamentally flawed, to the extent that they may actually be detrimental, hindering rather than helping the business of language learning (although, not of course, the language learning business!)" (p. 205). Thornbury has noted particularly –

and repeatedly – that there tends to be a slavish devotion to grammatical accuracy in published materials (Thornbury, 1996, 1998, 2021) as well as the fact that they tend to drive teaching practices just as much as they reflect them (2016).

Coursebookery in EFL is a longstanding debate, and coursebooks will always have proponents and opponents. Recently the debate has centered on the subconcept of "global coursebooks," which Gray defined in 2002 as "that genre of English language textbook which is produced in English-speaking countries and is designed for use as the core text in language classrooms around the world" (pp.151–152; see also Gerday, 2019; Tajeddin & Pakzadian, 2020; Mishan, 2021). Jordan and Gray (2019), for example, argued that commercial coursebooks are influenced by commercial interests and reinforce assumptions about language learning that some SLA research contradicts, echoing Gray's (2010) and Thornbury's (2016) opinion that English language teaching has become commodified. Hughes (2019) countered that coursebook publishers do not necessarily shun educational research in pursuit of profit and emphasizes the benefits of explicit instruction in language forms within the backdrop of communicative teaching practices. Norton and Buchanan (2022) consider the merits and demerits of supporters and denouncers of global coursebooks, looking at the language used to describe coursebooks in the literature tends to reinforce polarized positions on the topic.

The particular ax I wish to grind is regarding coursebooks that are mass-marketed toward a very generalized set of learners, namely, university students in EFL classes that





are often labeled “general English” classes, and which are often required of all majors by universities to fulfill liberal arts credit requirements. The bulk of my own teaching experience, as it may be for most EFL teachers, is with students in “general English” classes at non-prestigious universities in Japan. Considering the inherent genericity of EFL coursebooks that are supposedly “global” in nature, the same sentiments toward these coursebooks as I have are likely shared by a good many other university teachers across the globe. It is for you, especially, that I record my personal experiences here, as I strongly suspect that I am not alone in my knee-jerk resistance to using coursebooks in so-called general English classes.

From what I have experienced along the course of my university EFL career in Japan, I have seen EFL teachers use coursebooks for three reasons:

**Reason 1: Because they have to.** At two universities I worked for, general English classes are part of the liberal arts requirements for all majors in all departments to graduate. The same classes (e.g., ones titled “English I,” “English II,” and so forth) are taught by multiple teachers. Students cannot choose which teachers they get. They are “placed” into classes whose “level” is appropriate to scores they get on “placement” tests that they take at the beginning of each academic year.

At one institution, the coursebook was decided by full-time (tenured) staff: the *WorldLink* series (3rd ed., 2016) by National Geographic Learning/Cengage. This series offers four “levels” of coursebooks: Intro, Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3. The subtitle in all of them reads “Developing English Fluency.” While the coursebook was mandatory for all students to buy, the full-time staff had, over the years, created a large repository of online materials, including quizzes, activities, and tests, for teachers to use as they saw fit. Further, teachers were given some leeway as to what percentage of the furnished materials (e.g., quizzes) would count toward final grades. So, some teachers relied heavily on the supplied materials, while others treated the textbook more minimally.

I remember feeling that I could not utterly abandon the coursebook as I’d have liked to, but I struck a compromise by assigning the coursebook quizzes as homework (which if not done, students could not pass the course). I touched on areas of the coursebook where students appeared to be having difficulty, but otherwise I did my own routine, which involved unscripted discussions in small groups. To note, when I compared the scores of my students’ quizzes with scores from my fellow general-English teachers’ quizzes – some of whom chose to treat the textbook heavily in class – I found that the scores were not significantly higher or lower. What is important, however, is the forgiving philosophy of the full-time teachers who governed the general English classes at that institution. They were not there to enforce coursebook allegiance. Rather, they acknowledged the desire from university powers-that-be for, at the very least, a topical semblance of uniformity and commonality across a broad range of EFL classes taught by an equally broad range of teachers. As I experienced it, this compromise tended to be a copacetic one.

Another institution I worked for, however, was comparatively chaotic. The structure of general English classes was similar: many classes, many teachers. For

years, teachers just taught the classes however they wanted, with whatever materials they wanted. Some used coursebooks, some used handouts, and some used copies from coursebooks as handouts. For years, too, there was increasing pressure from powers-that-be for the tenured staff to institute the same kind of uniformity and commonality as the other institution I mentioned. For years, tenured staff held meeting after meeting with part-time and term-limited-contract full-time teachers (which I was at the time) in order to either choose a common textbook to use or (even) to make one from scratch. Neither motion ever came to fruition, however, and all that seemed to remain was residual angst and clenched teeth from haggling over who liked or didn’t like which commercial coursebook, and what elements to include in an in-house teacher-generated text. Ultimately, some teachers continued to use commercial coursebooks, while others devised their own handouts. This brings us to Reason 2 that teachers use coursebooks.

**Reason 2: Because they want to.** Dodgson (2019) summarizes six reasons teachers choose to use coursebooks:

1. They provide structure;
2. They have plenty of optional extras;
3. They save time;
4. The materials have been professionally produced and edited;
5. They have engaging characters and stories; and
6. [Teachers] can work around their limitations.

For lack of space, I will suppress the urge to counterargue against each of these reasons. For some, I realize, they are legitimate reasons. I will concede, too, that when teachers make a conscious and unequivocal choice to employ a coursebook because they genuinely believe it will benefit their students’ experience with English learning, then by all means they should be encouraged to do so, and even lauded for their decisiveness. I will further concede that coursebooks – in all their glossiness – import a measure of face validity in terms of classroom materials, as if the fact that they are vetted, edited, and published by established publishing companies gives them prestige. It is the same with research articles in refereed journals, or in books printed by established publishing companies. They carry more face validity than, for example, a collation of self-edited, self-published PDFs thrown up onto an internet repository.

When it comes to individual teachers’ decisions to use coursebooks in EFL classes, however, I have noted that many teachers are not so decisive. Silently, they seem to waver in their decision, as if they are as unsure of themselves as they are of their students. This brings us to Reason 3 that teachers use coursebooks.

**Reason 3: Because they feel they should.** At the “chaotic” institution I mentioned earlier, this reason was fodder for a large portion of water-cooler talk in the teachers’ offices and break rooms. There was a great deal of debate over what materials worked best for whom, under what conditions, and with which students. As I said, some favored self-made handouts, while others were devoted to commercial course books. Sometimes the coursebookers and handouters would trade darts over which was better, which was more valid. What I have noted of coursebookers, however, is a latent sense of guilt

– as if they are admitting, or confessing, to the choice to employ a coursebook. Sometimes these admissions are accompanied by word-salad explanations of just how unmotivated their students are, how reticent, how silent, how unengageable they are in class, and especially how low-level their English is.

I can empathize. That was my first impression of my students when I started teaching at the “chaotic” institution. I’d had no prior experience teaching at university and little idea what to expect. Some of my colleagues were using coursebooks, and there was pressure in meetings for all staff to choose one. Frequently and sometimes frantically, I thumbed through coursebook after coursebook that had been stuffed into break room shelves, left as samples from salespeople or left behind by departed teachers. None interested me for more than a minute or two. Ever. They all looked the same, seemed the same, felt the same, as if they had been churned out of the same mind – not unlike endless variations of chicken sandwiches at fast food chains. They had glossy covers, colorful photos, and accompanying video and audio in some cases. But in the end, they all reeked of the same dullness and tedium. Here is some vocabulary, here is a situation, here are some sentence patterns, here are

“I strongly suspect that I am not alone in my knee-jerk resistance to using coursebooks in so-called general English classes.”

some info-gaps. Push the students through these tasks for 90 minutes a week, for 30 weeks a year, and call it language learning.

What I did not grasp until recently is why, exactly, these coursebooks were so off-putting, why I found myself loathing the idea of using them in my classes. Perhaps I was influenced by the constant din of negative water-cooler talk from other teachers. They would regale me with stories of how many students forgot their coursebooks, failed to buy them, or otherwise lost them, as well as how unenthusiastically they plodded through them. I tried out some of the activities in those coursebooks for a few weeks and fell flat on my figurative face.

Ironically, there was one coursebook hiding in those shelves that, when I leafed through it, I did not instantly despise. I had attended a presentation by the author just before I started my university teaching career. It was titled *The Active Learner*, by Don Maybin and John J. Maher (2007, Macmillan LanguageHouse). It featured communication strategies as unit titles rather than the conventional notional-functional structure that most coursebooks follow, and would help launch me into my research field of specialization: communication strategy teaching and learning. I never wound up using that

coursebook, but I did generate communication strategy training materials based on its concepts, and for that I am grateful. That is why I will concede that not all coursebooks are worthless. Most, perhaps, but not all.

My classroom approach was further influenced by one of my colleagues at the “chaotic” university. He had been using self-made handouts in his higher proficiency classes and coursebooks for his lower-proficiency classes. Fed up with the lackluster of his coursebook-based classes, and partly out of desperation to engage these lower-level students, he decided to try out some small-group free-discussion activities he had been using in his higher-proficiency, higher-motivation classes. To his (and my) amazement, the change in student engagement was like night and day. Students spent the majority of class time using whatever English they could muster in order to role-play a discussion/debate. He cataloged the transition from using a coursebook to using his own materials and approach (Murphy, 2013), and found that students talked more and longer in semester-end speaking tests in open-ended discussion/debate activities than they did with speaking tests based on memorized dialogues that the coursebook had provided. In short, he found that students in coursebook-based classes took fewer risks, thinking that “less language is best,” that deviating from what was prescribed in the coursebook would result in lower scores. Conversely, the open-discussion approach prompted a “more language is better” mentality among students, where communicating by any means possible was more desirable than not communicating.

As Murphy and I would both learn later, this open-discussion approach aligns with Thornbury’s (2000) dogme approach (see also Meddings & Thornbury, 2009), as well as with the “strong” version of CLT (Howatt, 1984; East, 2015, 2017) This approach, among other things, advocates for minimal materials and fluency over accuracy, as well as for the “strong” version of TBLT, which puts primacy on eliciting and using the L2 that students collectively already know. This contrasts to the “weak” version, which tends to follow the time-honored tradition of first presenting (or prescribing) language and then practicing (drilling) it before using it in open-ended discussion, if at all.

This is the crux of my beef with four-skills coursebooks. Essentially, as I argued in *KOTESOL Proceedings 2019* (Rian, 2020), the linguistic content of lower- and intermediate-level coursebooks is substantively the same as what most Japanese students encountered in their compulsory middle school English classes – and assumedly again at the high school level. Four-skills coursebooks are in essence a repackaging, a reconstitution, of linguistic content that many students have seen before, no matter what new, glossy veneer we apply to it. It is the second, if not third, time we are approaching our students with it. Jack Richards (2011) dubbed this phenomenon “eternal false beginner syndrome,” where students repeat a cycle of learning and forgetting the English that we teachers prescribe for them.

Most pointedly, I stand in opposition to what commercial coursebooks seem to represent: the undying notion that accuracy trumps fluency, and as Thornbury (2016, p. 229) observes, the persistent view that mastery of linguistic systems is an absolute “precondition for communication.”

I have found quite the opposite to be true in my own classes. On the contrary, a majority of so-called lower-proficiency students have some of what they learned previously at their disposal. Collectively, each class has quite a bit of their middle school vocabulary and simple grammar patterns intact, and though choppy and unpolished in some cases, they are able to collectively deploy those words and forms in unscripted communicative acts. The teacher, then, acts as an intermittent reminder to students of words and forms, when appropriate, encouraging them to use whatever English means they can in order to engage in conversation, in class, in English. And to use communication strategies when words should fail them.

Research suggests that a majority of EFL teachers are at least partially coursebook-dependent (Tosun & Cinkara, 2019). In sum, my message is this: To those who swear by the efficacy of coursebooks to help their students enjoy English, by all means, use them.

To those who have no choice, it is an opportunity to learn how to cope, to adjust, to fuse forms with form. Ideally, less is more. That is, the less you rely on coursebooks, the better. But to those who feel they should use coursebooks, while in their hearts they would really rather not, there are viable alternatives. The question is whether you are willing to (a) seek them out, (b) rethink your own classroom priorities for your students, and (c) take some hops, skips, and jumps of faith here and there. I can tell you from personal experience that the act of shamelessly deviating from well-worn paths and stepping into the approach-less-taken engenders a deliciously subversive feeling. The discovery by both you and your students of their hidden fluency is refreshing at least and intoxicating at best. In my case, it has proven highly addictive.

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# Less Is More... in Teaching Reading: Next-generation reading instruction – A happy medium?

By Tania Campbell

It's hard to overstate the complexity involved in learning to read, so one could be forgiven for believing that "more is more" in terms of support and scaffolding when teaching reading to students. This is especially true for those who are learning to read in English as a second language. However, some would argue that when it comes to reading, less is more, and here I outline how I use aspects of what former educators Burkins and Yaris (2016) call "next-generation reading instruction" to teach reading.

## Teachers Teaching Less

In Burkins and Yaris's (2016) seminal text, *Who's Doing the Work*, the authors propose an idea that may be considered counterintuitive: that when it comes to teaching reading, teachers can be more effective by doing less. Too much scaffolding, they argue, can often hinder students' ability to exercise agency and may even contribute to a sense of learned helplessness. Their model is explained by way of a dance metaphor, which they use to explore each context and mirror the teaching and learning cycle teachers and students engage in. In the first, read-aloud context, students watch the dance, while in shared reading, they practice the dance led by the teacher. Guided reading is the dress rehearsal, while finally, independent reading is thought of as the recital.

The authors argue that in next-generation reading instruction, teachers should take a step back from conventional methods of reading instruction where they have traditionally advocated scaffolding to support students in moving from dependence towards independence. Burkins and Yaris draw on Dweck's (2006) much-celebrated work of growth mindset to suggest that when students reframe difficulty as opportunity, they become aware of the connection between their effort and their success. This, in turn, helps them develop inner resources to tackle reading difficulties rather than relying on the teacher.

## Guided Reading

To give a more specific overview, I will outline a few salient points for guided reading (i.e., the dress rehearsal). Guided reading can be challenging for many students because this stage is the application phase of skills and strategies that have been explicitly taught during read-aloud and shared reading. As emphasized by the authors, guided reading is where the integration of print and meaning occurs and when students are encouraged to fall back on their learning and decide which strategies they will use to confront challenges presented by the reading material.



In conventional guided reading the teacher leans heavily on direct instruction and decides which strategies and prompts will be used in advance, whereas in next-generation guided reading, the teacher acts as a facilitator and coach, encouraging students to experiment with strategies and guides them with more open-ended prompts such as *What strategy could you try?* As stated by the authors, "Next generation scaffolding aims to find a happy medium between under- and over-scaffolding. It optimizes the benefits of both the grandmother method and traditional prompting" (2016, p. 134).

### Reading in a Second Language

Next-generation reading methods have been useful in my own practice as a literacy specialist. Specifically, I work with students as they engage in Teachers College Reading and Writing Project's (TCRWP) Units of Study in their English Language Arts class as well as in engaging in Fountas and Pinnell's Leveled Literacy Intervention. Working in Grade 8, most students are reading at grade level and have accumulated a repertoire of strategies and problem-solving skills needed in order to be successful independent readers. However, in an international school setting here in South Korea in which the overwhelming majority of students are host country nationals, most of the students I work with are learning English as a second or even third language. This means that reading proficiency in English is necessary for them to be able to access and meet the demands of a rigorous American curriculum.

When providing push-in support to the Reading Workshop in the English Language Arts classes, next-generation reading instruction is helpful. It shares an affinity with the TCRWP's Units of Study, especially in the way they both promote the importance of student voice, choice, and agency. Moreover, the concept of conferring is of particular importance to both frameworks – the process of engaging in individual conversations with students in order to provide targeted instruction and feedback – and helps the teacher to engage with students more as a coach. In conferring, the teacher researches what the student might be having difficulty with, decides on a strategy, teaches the strategy, and allows students to try it out.

### Teacher as Coach

Conferring can also be done in small groups. For example, when students are working in book clubs, the teacher can engage in a conference for the whole club, and this can resemble next-generation guided reading. These clubs are usually composed of 3–5 students who are reading at a similar level and who are reading the same text chosen by them from a range of options. As previously mentioned, this is the dress rehearsal stage, and it can be challenging for many students because it is where students apply the skills and strategies that have been explicitly taught during the read-aloud and shared reading stages, which usually occur during the mini-lesson. The teacher facilitates rather than directs the reading, encouraging students to experiment with different strategies as they navigate the text. One advantage of doing this in a small group is that students can undertake this work together, supported by each other and encouraged by the teacher.

The TCRWP Units of Study in reading lean heavily on next-generation reading instruction, especially in the read-aloud and shared reading phases of a lesson. To reiterate,

the conventional approach has the teacher doing much of the heavy lifting with an emphasis on explicit teaching, whereas in the next-generation approach, "the teacher carries all of the print work but leaves to students most, if not all, of the work of teasing out and constructing the meaning of the text" (Burkins & Yaris, 2016, pp. 677–678).

Recently, for example, students were engaged in a unit called *Dystopian Book Clubs* (Calkins et al., 2018). During independent reading time, I was able to sit with groups and facilitate next-generation guided reading. When analyzing dystopian story elements (such as plot, setting, characterization, symbolism, theme), students display different problem-solving strategies for parsing these out and provide different responses that all students in the group can benefit from. It also encourages students to think deeply about story elements in that there is no one right answer. As the coach, it's a crucial time to prompt, observe, and take anecdotal notes in order to better understand students' individual processes, strengths, and

"...when it comes to teaching reading, teachers can be more effective by doing less. Too much scaffolding, they argue, can often hinder students' ability to exercise agency..."

areas of growth, and to consider next steps. As noted by Burkins and Yaris (2016), "By asking agentic questions such as *What do you know*, *What can you try*, and *What else can you try*, teachers support students as they grapple with the problems presented by incrementally challenging texts" (pp. 1468–1469).

While the latter approach has undeniable value for students, it cannot be overlooked that, for some, this work cannot be successfully engaged in unless they have reached a degree of reading proficiency, especially in terms of comprehension. The work of linguists such as Laufer (1997) has empirically shown for quite some time that for students who are non-native speakers of English, a minimum vocabulary of 3,000 word families is required to be a successful reader. If such students are lacking basic vocabulary, then all the problem-solving skills and strategies at their disposal will be rendered ineffective.

One of TCRWP's reading units for Grade 8 that students study is entitled *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*:

“By incorporating aspects of next-generation guided reading, I have found it more engaging and beneficial to elicit from students what they notice and wonder throughout the process...”

*Literary Nonfiction* (Clements & Robb, 2018), and the anchor text that is used throughout the unit to teach reading strategies is *Hidden Figures: Young Readers’ Edition* (Shetterly, 2016). This compelling text outlines the trajectories and impact of three African American women working in space technology in the US from the 1940s onwards and spans World War II, the space race and the civil rights movement. Students need to be familiar with a range of sophisticated vocabulary from the outset (i.e., *segregation, discrimination, marginalization, minority, and racism* to name but a few).

### Direct Instruction

Moreover, in order to successfully interact with the text, students also need background knowledge of the social, cultural, and political landscape of the southern United States at that time. It is safe to assume that most Grade 8 Korean students in Korea, even when engaging in an American curriculum, will need scaffolding and support in order to build their background knowledge of events and contexts they may not be familiar with. For such texts to be successfully used as a vehicle for developing students’ reading skills and strategies, a more traditional approach may be required.

Some tenets of next-generation reading are applicable when undertaking Fountas and Pinnell’s Leveled Literacy Intervention. This program is used for small group instruction of students who are deemed to be reading below grade level. They read a series of the same texts that move between their instructional and independent levels, and discuss text features and story elements. However, it is heavily teacher-driven, scripted, and undergirded by explicit and direct instruction.

In the conventional approach, the teacher introduces the text, the students quietly read the text, then the group engages in a discussion focusing on pre-selected aspects of the text and teaching points. Finally, there is usually a

writing activity related to the text or some word study, all directed by the teacher. By incorporating aspects of next-generation guided reading, I have found it more engaging and beneficial to elicit from students what they notice and wonder throughout the process – prompting and eliciting responses that may veer from the narrow confines of what is expected based on the script, but are often still relevant and valid.

### Final Thoughts

Being responsive and patient as a facilitator is essential to help students develop voice, choice, and agency over their learning. Eliciting from students what they found most interesting in the text and encouraging them to discuss it amongst themselves, and using simple prompts such as *Say more about that* can extract many insightful nuggets in terms of their analyses that I never would have considered. Furthermore, when a student is demonstrating mastery over a skill, asking them *What makes you say that, How do you know that, or How did you do that* is helpful for their peers – it’s a powerful way to model how to successfully interact with a text. By focusing on strategies and problem-solving, students feel more empowered. They come to see that they’re not “bad at reading” but rather that they just need to learn and experiment with different strategies, that they are capable of learning and leading the dance if they put in the effort to learn the steps. There are certainly times when the teacher can take a step back and see that less is more when it comes to teaching reading.

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# More Is Less... in Teachers' Roles: How the pandemic shifted teachers' duties away from teaching

By Tory S. Thorkelson

The Cambridge Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT) specifies a number of roles for the teacher in relation to classroom management and lesson planning. These include manager, monitor, informer, diagnostician, involver, and planner. Harrison and Killion (2007), on the other hand, list ten roles teachers take on formally or informally as school leaders; these are resource provider, instructional specialist, curriculum specialist, classroom supporter, learning facilitator, mentor, school leader, data coach, change catalyst, and learner. Clearly, there is some disagreement over when and where educators take on a variety of roles within the school and classroom, but their importance has only grown during the pandemic with the online absence of other members of the school community. Ultimately, this moves teachers further and further away from what they are trained and ready to do, namely, teaching.

## Less Support

In this case, the absence of various other staff members normally present and involved in the day-to-day lives of students attending a brick-and-mortar school meant the teacher had to take on more accountability for students' success or failure. According to Aldeman (2021), job losses in public education reached 8% in K-12 and 11% for public higher education in the U.S. This, however, is not entirely due to layoffs or firings. Rather, it was partly due to jobs not normally filled including substitute teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria staff, janitors, or other employees who are presumably only needed when schools and classes are normally being attended in person. On the surface, it may not appear to matter, but teachers who cannot rely on people like administrators or librarians for daily assistance and support are being asked to do more than normal seemingly on their own.

## Lessened Teaching Role and More Responsibility

Davis (2007; cited in Hawkins & Graham, 2012, p. 127) summarized the roles and responsibilities of teachers in a physical classroom (left column) and a virtual classroom (right column), as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Teachers' Roles in Offline and Online Classes (adapted from Davis, 2007)

Role in a Physical Classroom	Role in a Virtual Classroom
Teacher	Teacher Course Facilitator
Designer	Instructional Designer
Site Facilitator	Local Key Contact Mentor Technology Coordinator Guidance Counselor Administrator

While Table 1 was created prior to the pandemic period, it clearly demonstrates that the traditional classroom teacher's responsibilities and roles increase significantly when classes are predominantly or entirely online. While the expansion of the teacher and designer roles make perfect sense, the absence of facilitators other than the classroom teacher mentioned in the previous section highlights the significant downsizing of school staff during the COVID-19 period. These other facilitators could include people like librarians, other subject area educators, or even guest speakers, who would not have been as readily available or accessible to students and educators during



online classes. As a result, their absences put more pressure and responsibility on the classroom teacher. Most significant is the last area, where the responsibility of site facilitator expands into local key contacts, mentors, technology coordinators, guidance counselors, and administrators.

Though the first two roles are not really new for a typical classroom teacher, the other three roles clearly represent jobs that would be filled and staffed onsite by professionals, presumably with years of education, certifications, or experience related to these specific jobs. While teachers are willing to rise to the challenges on a day-to-day basis, some teachers were more capable of successfully overcoming the abrupt nature of this paradigm shift than others. For example, when considering the technology coordinator aspect of online teaching,

Inside Higher Ed's 2019 survey on faculty attitudes on technology, discussed in Lederman (2019), found that in terms of educational technology and comfort level, 86% of digital learning leaders said they fully supported it. Those opposed to it did so for a variety of reasons, including "Instruction delivered without using technology most effectively serves my students" (65%), "There is too much corporate influence" (47%), "I don't believe the benefits to students justify the costs associated with adoption" (41%), and "Faculty lose too much control over the course when they use technology" (35%) (para. 36). Technology can serve to enhance a classroom and enrich the experience for both students and teachers, but it can also serve as an additional burden on the teacher and a barrier to effective education. The responses from those who opposed using digital tools for learning highlight yet again how something viewed as an enhancement to learning and teaching turns into a barrier between students and less-tech-savvy teachers.

"...teachers who cannot rely on people like administrators or librarians for daily assistance and support are being asked to do more than normal seemingly on their own."

Further, anxiety and stress levels for everyone involved were naturally heightened during the abrupt move online and then again as they returned to the classroom post-pandemic. Teachers were the ones shouldering the extra burdens of supporting and nurturing students while simultaneously trying to keep their classes and lessons on track and as normal as possible. In fact, when Silva et al. (2021) reviewed a number of studies on teachers' anxiety, stress, and depression levels during the pandemic, they found that

*The prevalence of anxiety among teachers was high during the COVID-19 pandemic, varying from 10% to 49.4%, with the highest prevalence among participants ... in Spain (where face-to-face classes were witnessing a return). The rampancy of stress was also higher in the participants of the European study compared to ... the Americas. Depression was more prevalent among teachers who worked in schools. The results show a high prevalence of anxiety, depression, and stress among teachers and alerts us to the need for greater care of mental health issues. (p. 7)*

Anxiety and depression were associated with movements in both directions, raising stress levels at the same time. Once again, the definition of a "good teacher" has been redefined by circumstances that should not be directly related to their jobs as educators.

#### **Less Teacher-Centered**

According to Harrington and Debruler (2019),  
*Student-centered learning is an educational philosophy*

*or approach to learning that places students' needs and interests at the forefront of the operations and decision-making of a school or district. ... Conversely, blended learning is a format or a method of learning experienced by students. In short, blended learning combines traditional face-to-face instruction with online experiences that work together as an integrated experience for students. (para. 2-3)*

This is an idealized example considering what online education could offer in practice. However, done en masse, as during the pandemic, and as an emergency response done abruptly, things did not go so smoothly. Certainly, as the Higher Ed survey above demonstrated, those who were already using technology in their teaching or learning prospered and did well, but others who were more comfortable and successful within the traditional classroom setting did not. The situation was not "blended" or "hybrid" in most cases, and for most students, that meant that educators and students were in a sink-or-swim situation. Reyes et al. (2022) summarized that distance education for students and educators "fostered new study habits such as self-training, time management, and the ability to use various technologies. In addition, [when asked about] progress in digital literacy ... 83% of respondents considered that distance education improved their ability to use technologies, and 82% saw broad mastery of learning technologies in their teachers."

#### **Less Attentive Students**

Unfortunately, since students were also online, and sometimes on more than one device, they were also most likely easily distracted at times. According to Reyes et al. (2022),

*virtual education led 66% of university students to acquire between one and two devices to attend classes remotely. Although many students had already used various technological devices for entertainment in their daily lives ... one of the main challenges evident during the pandemic was learning to use these devices for educational purposes. In addition, due to the unforeseen change in the study modality, students had to abandon the classroom, enable spaces in their homes, and even share their devices with other family members. (para. 6)*

Thus, the pandemic allowed them to develop new skills and proficiencies, but also forced them to share space and possibly their devices with other family members. With students stuck at home and struggling with pursuing their studies, frustration at these challenges and the expectations of more support from their teachers were inevitable. However, these expectations were occurring at a time when teachers were also having to do more for their students while concurrently learning to teach using new technologies and modalities they never had to use previously. For the students, maturity and good study habits certainly would have helped mitigate this problem to some extent, but these students will or have already brought these habits back to the offline classroom. For the teachers, the return to a physical classroom from a virtual one may be a relief in some ways, but they too return with a new set of skills and a better appreciation for the tools that enabled online classes to become a reality during a challenging time. This will undoubtedly impact the effectiveness of traditional education for at least the short term, unless a hybrid approach is used that helps students ease their way back into face-to-face classes.



## Final Thoughts

No one could have predicted the onset of COVID-19 nor its seismic impact on education and the expanded roles and responsibilities that educators at all levels were forced to take on. Teachers were pressured to take on jobs and tasks that normally would have been handled by school administrators, librarians, school counselors, and other support staff (see Aldeman, 2021). This understandably raised their levels of anxiety, depression, and stress during the transition to online, which did not disappear when they returned to face-to-face classes and had to become COVID-19 monitors on top of everything else they were being asked to do (see Silva et al., 2021).

This could be the root cause for teachers to quit or retire during the pandemic years (see Aldeman, 2021), but it also indicates one clearly negative outcome of expecting teachers to pick up additional roles and responsibilities during such a challenging period for them and their students. Without the support that they had come to expect and rely upon, both teachers and students were forced to rise to the challenge or fail to achieve their best during the pandemic years. Both of these groups were required to do more than should have been expected of them, and the final post-pandemic results are as yet unclear, even though this article has tried to make some educated guesses and predictions.

Based on this writer's experience, there was a lot of uncertainty entering the prolonged online education necessitated by the pandemic, but as students and educators exit the virtual environment and return to face-to-face classes, the idea that it is a return to normalcy is not realistic. Students and faculty have forgotten or lost some of the essential skills for face-to-face classes, such as meeting schedules or doing homework in a timely manner. Communication now involves the LMS, SNS programs, and the ubiquitous email, as well as in-person announcements and communications. The presence of so many devices can interfere with the students' focus during class time, and paper textbooks are a thing of the past. Students struggle to have conversations with their peers and teachers, since they have been isolated online for so long, and teachers are anxious, since they also have to monitor for and be aware of potential COVID cases, which could not only delay or disrupt the progress of a class, but also cause problems during tests and exams. Maintaining a hybrid approach could ease this transition or enhance education in the long term, but it also means educators are being forced to offer online and offline classes simultaneously to meet the needs of students who are present in class as well as stuck at home with COVID or for other reasons. It is no wonder that educators at all levels are considering not returning to the classroom when levels of anxiety are so high. Too many other roles and responsibilities are taking away from their time and energy that they need to teach and teach well.

Students and faculty exit the pandemic with new skills and abilities to utilize and appreciate technology and how it can enhance learning. However, they also re-entered the normal classroom encumbered by some bad habits. Cannon et al. (2022) showed that students not only suffered from the unexpected class changes during the pandemic but also from bad study habits, problems with their instructors, external pressures, and effectively managing their time. As a result, what is clear is that

"Once again, the definition of a 'good teacher' has been redefined by circumstances that should not be directly related to their jobs as educators."

education going forward will be impacted greatly by what has happened from the winter of 2019 until the present day. Whether these changes will be mostly positive or negative remains to be seen, but it is unlikely that education per se or those who are in charge of educating students at all levels will return to pre-pandemic normalcy anytime soon if at all.

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# Less Is More... in Speaking: Six activities that limit speaker turns to promote listener responses

By Heidi Vande Voort Nam

Although we know that conversation is two-way communication, in an English conversation class, it's often tempting to focus more on the production side of a conversation and less on the listening side. Yet skilled listeners can help increase the quality of communication by showing interest through short responses and by asking questions that encourage the speaker to express their ideas more clearly for the listener.

The following six activity ideas shift the focus from the role of the initial speaker to the role of the listener. The activities generally work by limiting speaking turns (less speaking) in order to maximize the opportunities for the listener to respond (more active listening). The speaker does not say more than one sentence in the beginning, and this limitation provides an opening for listeners to practice a variety of active listening skills. The first two activities invite listeners to give short responses, and the following four activities provide opportunities to practice different types of questions.

## Reaction Cards

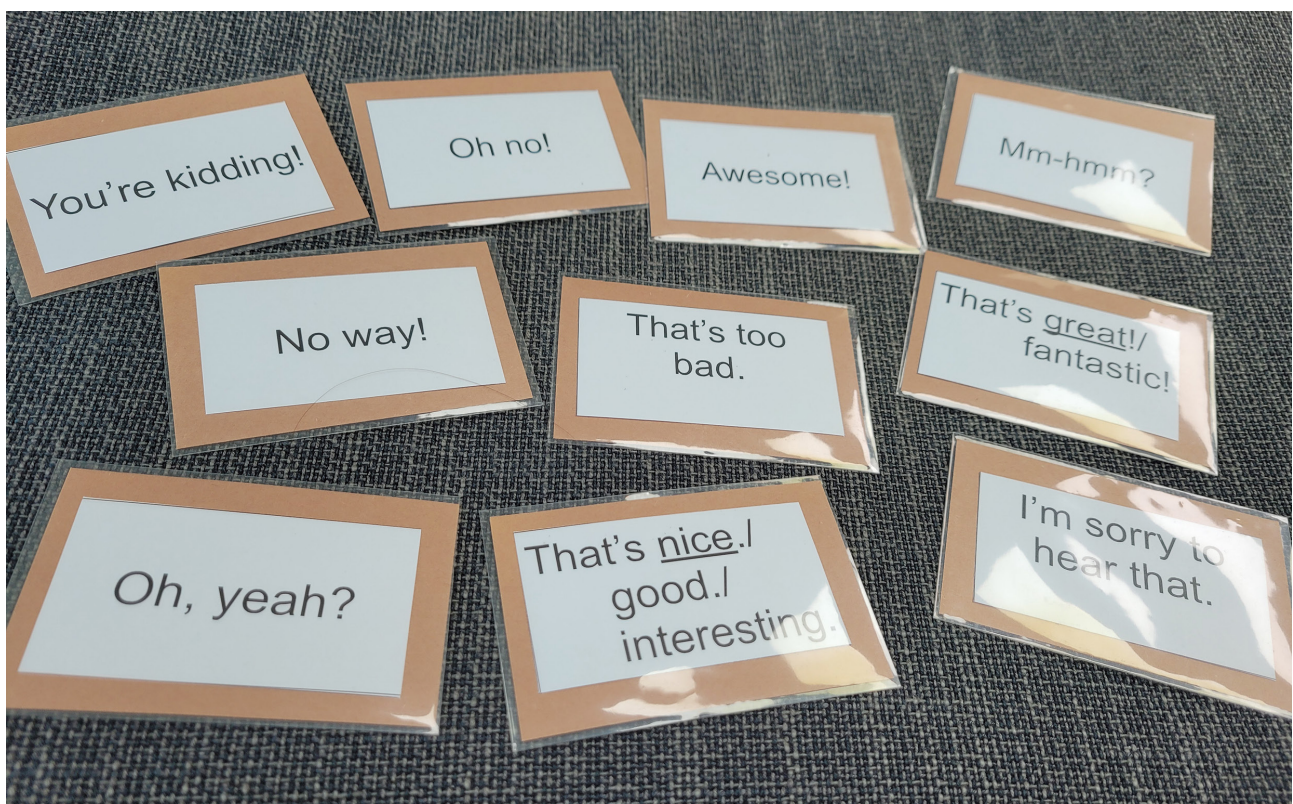
This activity is designed to encourage listeners to do more than smile and nod. It invites them to practice using short verbal responses such as *Oh no!* and *Oh yeah?* In preparation for this activity, I create a set of 10 reaction cards for each group of four students (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Sample Reaction Card Set

It's useful to check that students understand the meaning of the word cards and the differences in formality. I have done this by asking the students to arrange the cards in groups, and students usually chose to arrange the cards according to meaning. This has revealed a few misconceptions about the expressions – a number of students have thought that *No way* and *You're kidding* would be a response to bad news – and it has provided a springboard for discussion about the differences between the expressions. More advanced students may wish to add more expressions to the mix by making additional response cards.

In class, the students write sentences about news or personal experiences: something good, something bad, something neutral, and something surprising. Once the students have finished writing, they take turns reading their sentences. Each of the other students in the group should respond with one of the expressions on the cards. I ask students to take a card whenever they use the expression on the card. Other students can steal the card if they use the same expression later in the game. The activity continues until all of the students in the group have read their sentences.

These quick reactions demonstrate that the listener has understood something about the intensity or emotion of what the speaker has said. By giving short stretches of speech for listeners to respond to, the activity multiplies opportunities for the listeners to respond.



### Things in Common

Like Reaction Cards, Things in Common aims to help students give short verbal responses, but the target is specifically identifying things that the speaker and listener have in common. This type of reaction is worth additional practice for several reasons. A social reason is that students may feel more comfortable talking with their classmates once they have found that they have things in common. A pedagogical reason is that students often find the responses *Me too* and *Me neither* confusing. *I don't like mosquitoes* (grammatically negative) gets a *Me neither* response but *I hate mosquitoes* (grammatically positive) takes *Me too*.

To help students overcome this confusion, it's helpful to point out that *Me neither* is a response to a sentence that has *not* or *don't*. The teacher can provide some examples of grammatically positive and negative statements while students practice responding *Me too* to positive statements and *Me neither* to negative statements. More advanced students may wish to brainstorm other ways of responding to things in common (e.g., *I do too*, *Same here*, *What a coincidence*, *I don't either*) or ways of responding when they are different (e.g., *Really? Not me!*)

When students seem to understand when to use the different responses, they can each brainstorm a list of five grammatically positive statements (e.g., *I'm studying English*) and five grammatically negative statements with *not* or *don't* (e.g., *I don't have a pet unicorn*.) When students have finished writing their sentences, they should work in pairs. Students listen to their partners' sentences and make responses like *Me too*, *Me neither*, or *Really? Not me*.

As in Reaction Cards, the speakers say one sentence at a time, and this provides space for the listeners to practice responding.

### Background Noise

While the activities so far have focused on helping students feel more comfortable with short verbal responses, the next four activities invite listeners to ask questions. Background Noise zeros in on asking for repetition, particularly in situations where it is difficult to hear the other speaker.

To start off, the speakers should prepare one sentence. If the students have had a reading or listening assignment for homework, I ask them to say one sentence about the content of their homework assignment. If students have not done any preparation before class, I ask them to find an English headline on their smartphones. Once everyone has a sentence, I provide a model dialog.

A: What's the news?  
B: [Reads their sentence]  
A: Sorry, I didn't catch that. What did you say?  
B: I said [reads their sentence again]

Partners stand across the room from each other and attempt the dialog. Because they are standing far apart, they have to speak loudly and the room gets noisy. Partner A often genuinely can't hear what Partner B is saying, so the situation creates a natural context for asking for repetition.

Of course, in many classrooms, it is not possible to do such a noisy activity. If a quiet version of the activity is desired, partners may sit back-to-back and whisper their lines to each other. With either version of the activity, students will have a chance to practice asking for repetition.

### Gibberish Words

Gibberish Words is similar to Background Noise, but this time the speaker will ask about the meaning of a word instead of asking for repetition. I often use the two activities together in the same class period, and speakers use the same sentence for both activities. This time, the speakers should replace one of the words in their sentence with a gibberish word. For example, a student might change the sentence *There is a culture festival this*

"...six activity ideas  
shift the focus from the  
role of the initial  
speaker to the role  
of the listener."

*weekend* to *There is a culture blabla this weekend*. When the students have prepared their gibberish words, I give them a new model dialog like this:

A: What's the news?  
B: [Reads their sentence with the gibberish word.]  
A: Sorry, I'm not sure I understand. What does [gibberish word] mean?  
B: It means [English meaning].

The dialog sets up a situation where the listener will genuinely not understand a word, which creates a context for asking for clarification. I ask students to repeat the dialog with five different partners, using their own sentences with gibberish words.

Background Noise and Gibberish Words each help students practice different kinds of clarification questions. Since each activity provides a context for gaps in comprehension, students can practice asking clarification questions without the stress of losing face because of an unintentional comprehension gap.

“Since each activity provides a context for gaps in comprehension, students can practice asking clarification questions without the stress of losing face because of an unintentional comprehension gap.”

Students pass their own papers to another member of their group, and on the paper they receive, they write a paraphrase of the opinion at the top. The students continue passing their papers around until each member of the group has written a paraphrase for each opinion.

At this point, the students can work in pairs. One partner can read their opinion, and the other partner can respond with a paraphrase. Students repeat the activity with the other members of their group. If students find it difficult to do the activity without looking at their papers, they can try the activity first by reading, and then try it again, this time maintaining eye contact while they are speaking.

Paraphrase Chains provides students with practice both in creating paraphrases and using those paraphrases in clarification questions to confirm whether they have understood correctly.

### Start with One Sentence

While the previous three activities centered on clarification questions, the objective of Start with One Sentence is asking for more information. For this activity, the speakers should know enough about the topic that they can answer questions about it. A familiar story, a personal experience, or a recent reading or listening activity can serve as a topic.

Since the point of the activity is to give the listener opportunities to ask questions, it's important that the speakers do not reveal everything they know about the topic all at once. I tell the speakers to say only one sentence about their topic at first and then wait for the listener to ask questions. If the topic is a story, I provide some example questions such as *How does the story begin*, *Who are the characters*, and *What happens next*? The listener should ask as many questions as possible within a two- or three-minute time limit. As a follow-up to the activity, the listener can report to the class about details that they discovered by asking questions about the topic.

These six active listening activities target providing feedback to speakers with short responses and asking clarification and information questions. By limiting the initial output of the speakers, these activities give listeners more opportunities to practice active listening skills.

### Paraphrase Chains

Like the previous two activities, Paraphrase Chains targets clarification questions, but it gives the listener more time for preparation because paraphrasing can be a challenging skill even for advanced students. To reduce the cognitive load, it is helpful to break the task down into steps and allow students to prepare and practice their paraphrases before they try paraphrasing for clarification in the context of a conversation.

I like to do this activity in groups of about four students. I provide a handout of sentence starters to each student (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Sentence Starters

Your Opinion	It seems like _____.
Paraphrase 1	So, you're saying that _____?
Paraphrase 2	Do you mean that _____?
Paraphrase 3	Are you suggesting that _____?

I provide an example opinion and invite students to write their own opinions in the first line on their handouts. When they are finished writing their own opinions, I provide model paraphrases of my example opinion.

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# Less Is More... with a Gratitude Journal: Minimal effort for maximum joy

By Virginia Hanslien

## A Student's Small Expression of Gratitude

Sometimes a student can do wonders in expressing their appreciation for you as an educator at just the right time. My own story is from the winter semester four years ago. I had a student come into my office just as the term was coming to an end. Min Lee popped into my office, smiled, and made his approach. I was not in the best mood, since I had just finished grade consultations ten minutes before he showed up. I was more than a little stressed thinking about grades, grabbing my coat, and wishing I was home.

"Hi. I was just packing up to go home," I explained in a slightly depressed tone, but I did sit down with him, showed him the spreadsheet from his class, and assumed he wanted to go home as much as I did. I had ranked him rather high, and he seemed pleasantly surprised. He was one of the better students in the class, putting a great deal of effort into assignments and exams.

This same student then surprised me. He proceeded to grab my bag and my books. He walked down five flights of stairs with me, making small talk as we walked. He did not put anything down until I opened the trunk of my car.

Right before he left, he expressed his gratitude for teaching him for a year. He had taken two classes from me, and he was very thankful for the experience. He said I had a very kind heart and a helpful mind in explaining concepts easily, and he appreciated the extra help I had given him on his book project that semester. He was that rare person who wanted to express appreciation. It was a surprise blessing of gratitude because I had gone from completely stressed out to quite happy in less than ten minutes. Min Lee was on my gratitude list later that day, and he had me thinking about gratitude for quite some time after that.

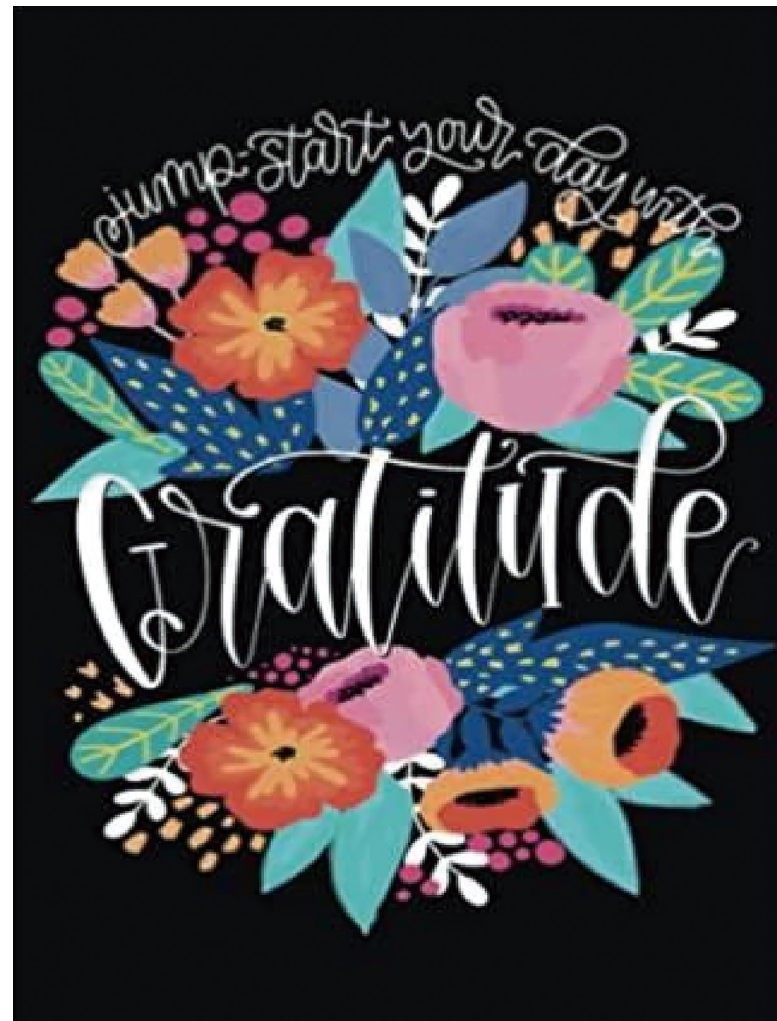
All educators have moments when they are stressed out or even depressed with teaching. It can be a normal part of the day. It could be a student refusing to listen, a colleague who does not see things the way you do, a textbook that is not working for most of your students anymore, or a long-standing frustration with administration that could easily be fixed (if only someone would listen). Or it could also be a combination of any of the above in addition to other factors in life.

As English educators, all of us, in some capacity or other, deal with stress and depression. For those who are new to the classroom, getting used to the challenge of teaching might be part of the stress. For those of us who come from other countries, getting used to the way Korean people do things and how Korean students learn can be a challenge. For those who have been here for a while but have intentions of going home, it is easy to get bogged down with administration disappointments and unaddressed mental health issues with our students and

possibly colleagues. For those of us who have been here for a long time (I have been here for 24 years), teacher burnout is another layer to the very complex depression issue.

## Getting Started with a Gratitude Journal

One of the better ways to deal with stress and depression is to keep a gratitude journal. It can be all the little things,



anything, and everything that happened over the course of a day that brought a smile to your face. Gratitude will increase dopamine and serotonin, the "happy" hormones in your brain. So, if you want to take care of your mind, triggering these hormones is an important tool we have at our disposal. This exercise can help with creating a peaceful state of mind right before going to sleep as well as positivity.

The first step is to buy an empty journal. It does not have to be a gratitude journal. It could be a simple notebook with blank white pages that are appealing to you. It might

**“One of the better ways to deal with stress and depression is to keep a gratitude journal. It can be all the little things, anything, and everything that happened over the course of a day that brought a smile to your face.”**

be one of the fancier journals in terms of the cover but still has blank white pages. Or you may want to splurge and buy a journal that has a cover design that you like.

The second step is to start writing in the journal. This may seem like a mute point, but I am going to make it anyway. If you only do step one and then forget about it, you have only done half of what you had intended. You could plan a start date, and then begin to write in the evening after supper before bed. You could also plan for a different time of day if that suits you.

### **Take a Look at My Own Gratitude Journal**

My own gratitude journal has a list of a minimum of three and a maximum of five items written in it daily. What have I been thankful for? Back in the spring, April 4 to be exact, the first item was the sweet apple I had for lunch. The second one was about an interaction I had with a colleague that I had come to know and appreciate. The third one was about a great interaction that I had with a student. Please note that the second and third items are work related while the first one was not. All the little things, anything and everything, that brings a smile to your face is fair game for your daily gratitude list.

Let's take a closer look at what is on my list. The first item is always about different types of food. I have a bit of a sweet tooth, so fruit like apples, oranges, and Korean raspberries tend to be in the list along with chocolate, sweet Korean cinnamon pancakes, and other Korean treats. Though it is such a little thing, it might be a good way to handle the stress of being in another culture, as it is always good to remind yourself of the good things Korea has to offer.

The second item was about a positive response I got from a colleague about classroom activities. We were both getting water and had started a casual conversation about the difficulty in getting students to participate in conversation after COVID. He expressed his frustration with the awkward silences that he was getting in class. I had mentioned that I only give the groups about five minutes to talk about any of the four questions that were put up on a PowerPoint. This younger colleague thought giving them a time limit was a great thought, and he said that he was going to try it. I left the conversation feeling like I had contributed something simple and positive.

The third item on my list was a student who stayed after class to talk to me. She was very self-conscious about how she was being perceived in class, wondering why I had implemented the conversation activity mentioned above. I simply explained that I wanted to give students an opportunity to interact with certain concepts in the

textbook and that I was not going to be grading anyone on their conversation ability. She did relax after that and even spoke to me a couple of times in class.

### **Benefits**

I would like to share that keeping a gratitude journal over time has led to a much more positive outlook on life in general, and it has affected the classroom. The train of thought is as follows: Gratitude is going to help increase your happiness and decrease the amount of time thinking about things that bother you. This simple practice has made interactions with students easier, improved my teaching, and has made life a little easier. It's a small thing that I can do for myself. It puts a bit of spring in my step and lets me enjoy the class activities planned for the day. Furthermore, it has changed the way I see the classroom and the outside world.

I also want to share the belief that grace is a direct response to gratitude. Grace is related to joy. Joy is a function of gratitude, and gratitude is a function of perspective. When you can change how you see what is

**“You can choose joy. The more grateful you are, the more grace steps in and shows itself. It mirrors the gratitude that you have.”**

going on around you, you can choose mindfulness and thankfulness. You can choose joy. The more grateful you are, the more grace steps in and shows itself. It mirrors the gratitude that you have. You can go from feeling down and depressed to having a relative absence of stress. Taking just a little time out of your day for gratitude journal writing can reap an abundance of joy.

I would like to share that there is a biblical basis for this exercise, but even if you are one of those people who has no interest in the Bible, the mental power of keeping a simple gratitude list to create a positive state of mind cannot be understated. Forgive the platitude, but gratitude really can be a powerful, beautiful attitude for the classroom and for life.

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# Less Is More... When Collaborating: Teachers lighten the load by sharing ideas and working together

By Kirsten Razzaq

Collaboration in an educational setting has many benefits. It can lighten the workload of individual teachers, reduce stress and save time when planning courses, and help to deliver meaningful and connected learning experiences that satisfy the curriculum goals. In this article, I would like to explore the positive ways in which I have experienced collaboration and why I believe it is so important on a personal and professional level.

## What does collaboration look like in a higher educational setting?

Sharing resources amongst colleagues who are teaching a similar course or topics in class can be one way to spend less time producing materials. If you have a favorite activity, lesson, or even a project that has worked well for you, sharing materials reciprocally can bring in some fresh ideas or materials into your repertoire. If someone develops your resources for their own course materials, invite them to give feedback to you about what went well, what they changed, and what they got rid of. I have seen interesting iterations of my own class projects and some of the changes I have been happy to adopt into my own teaching practices.

One of the great things about sharing resources is that co-workers have varied areas of expertise and diverse backgrounds and cultures, so this inevitably creates a range of perspectives that collaboration can tap into. Innovation is not the only advantage, our interpersonal relationships are strengthened as we learn more about each other.

## How does collaboration lighten the load?

For educators, planning courses and developing materials is time-consuming, perhaps even more so than the actual teaching, which is especially true for those nearer the start of their careers or transitioning into a new job or position.

Choosing to collaborate on a course from the initial content planning through to implementation allows for many stages of work to be divided, lightening the mental load as well as saving time. Instead of planning and creating materials for multiple projects or learning modules for a single course, dividing the work allows for deeper and more-focused attention. Once materials are shared, each project can be reviewed either by one other individual or all collaborators, and light edits can be suggested. My preference is for one person to suggest simple edits for efficiency, as each person will no doubt want to develop the teaching materials to suit their individual teaching style and the requirements of their own learners.

For a textbook-based course, I was part of a team where the course leader assigned each module to one specific teacher. One module consisted of three lessons that expanded

a particular discussion topic, providing skills for debate. Therefore, each teacher was tasked to develop materials for one module, which were peer reviewed, signed off in a group meeting, and then made available to all teachers for use in class. While each teacher put their own personal touches on the module content, the core course requirements were prioritized for the standardized assessments.

Another benefit of collaboration is that working together towards a common goal can promote a sense of belonging, a feeling that we are not alone. It can be easy to forget that as educators, we are often struggling with the same things, be it student motivation, managing our workload, dealing with the emotional impact of cultural and societal pressures on our field of work, or finding the time to pursue personal and professional development opportunities. As the saying goes, a problem shared is a problem halved. Understanding that people around us are also struggling with similar problems can reduce feelings of overwhelm, shame, and other intrusive emotions.



In my case, I was challenged with developing a course from scratch. With no syllabus or curriculum to guide me, just a sample timetable from a previous semester, I was at a total loss about where to start! However, once I started to design projects, colleagues were eager to give guidance and suggest further reading. Through a combination of verbal feedback, online resources, and books, I was able to gain confidence in my ability to produce purposeful and relevant projects for English language learning. Beyond that, I was then able to give back to the colleagues who had assisted me, by sharing some of the projects that they had inspired.

## How can we collaborate effectively as educators?

Collaboration requires trust. When we trust people, we feel eager to be a part of the group, feel comfortable depending on each other, and are genuinely happy to contribute by sharing our talents, energy, and feedback. When trust is

broken, we withdraw, focusing our energy and attention elsewhere. We might pull back from a person or group even without them realizing it, as we continue to go through the motions while being inwardly disengaged. So what are the main ways that trust is built and maintained in working relationships?

Firstly, we need psychological safety. It takes courage to share our work for other teachers to review and edit, especially if this is not a standard procedure already in place. We are scared of judgment, scared of being seen to be making mistakes or being told there is something that we could be doing better. As with our students in the classroom, we need to be mindful of creating an environment where feedback takes the form of actionable suggestions for improvement. When we feel safe to share our ideas, and believe we will receive feedback that is constructive, we are more open to new points of view and alternative ways of doing things. Another side of the same coin is being able to listen. Someone who is unreceptive to feedback will quickly lose access to the truth from their peers.

Secondly, collaboration requires openness and transparency. We need to believe, and I mean really believe that our time spent meeting with colleagues will be useful and result in productive outcomes. There is little point in collaboration that adds more to our workload and creates more meetings but reduced output. Ideally, the format and length of meetings should be agreed in advance, and it should be clear to all participants what the benefits of the collaboration will look like. Planning how the team will communicate and exchange ideas before starting to collaborate on materials can also save time. The initial process can adapt as time goes on, but changes should be intentional and consensual, and all team members should be genuinely invested. Sometimes the hardest part of collaborating is recognizing that perhaps something isn't working and the workload and stress is increasing. In this case, it is important to identify where the process is not satisfying the original objectives. Without transparency, or the willingness to adapt and improve processes, it is hard to trust others with our attention and time.

Thirdly, it should be clear what each collaborator is expected to bring to the table. A fair division of labor means each person is clear on their role and required contributions. For some teams, it can be helpful for someone to assume a leadership role, especially with less-experienced educators who may require more guidance and support. It is also a good idea to consider that some of the work will require input from multiple people, while other work can be owned by individuals. There should be a transparent division of labor and understanding of what each team member is contributing and how that fits into the bigger picture.

#### **How do you lead a collaborative effort effectively?**

For those who want to lead a collaborative effort, aside from the work itself, there are other aspects of managing a team that need to be considered. Respecting boundaries, valuing individual working styles, clear communication, and mentorship are all important skills that enhance collaboration. These skills can be developed and nurtured for the benefit of all.

- Recognize what people can and are willing to contribute, and respect their boundaries. If the collaborative project is voluntary, it is unfair to pressure people into joining. No always means no. I have experienced projects where members have been coerced into contributing; no one is satisfied at the end of the day, and all are generally

relieved when the project is over. A negative experience makes future collaborations considerably less likely.

- If the dynamics allow, it can be especially beneficial for co-workers of varying experience or those with different areas of interest to be paired together. This can encourage mentoring and also a mutual exchange of knowledge. As someone who remembers a time both before and after the internet, I have learned a lot about incorporating social media and relevant terminology seamlessly into my media course, thanks to a younger colleague who approached to share their insights. Even though we use the same social media apps, we use them in very different ways, and this new knowledge helped me improve engagement with students in the classroom.
- It is unrealistic to expect everyone to work at the same pace or generate the same kinds of ideas – meet people as they are. There is value in every contribution, and each team member will bring a unique perspective and experience. Micro-managing other people's work is a sure way to demotivate and block creative flow, so trust your team to meet the project goals using their own special skill set.
- Teamwork makes the dream work! And strong teamwork comes down to a few key ingredients. Having clear lines of communication is important. As I mentioned above, this includes clear expectations of what needs to be completed as well as achievable deadlines. If you are unclear about expectations and keep shifting deadlines and meetings, you will lose trust very quickly. There is a fine line between flexibility and reactivity. A flexible work flow makes it easier to collaborate, but reacting to foreseeable issues too late creates unnecessary stress for contributors. Check-in with collaborators sooner rather than later.

Effective collaboration reduces individual workloads, lowers stress and cuts down work time, but results in better materials that have a wider range of sources and perspectives. Through feedback before and after implementation, further benefits include discovering new approaches to a topic, improving delivery of content in the classroom, and learning new methods to extend or grade tasks for mixed-ability students. Undoubtedly, working together has its challenges and even with the best of intentions, we might not see the results we initially want. However, we can only see growth where we direct our attention. Collaboration, in the long run, involves less work and more benefit for all involved.

#### **The Author**

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## Member Spotlight: Garth Elzerman

*Tucked away in the far northeastern reaches of Korea, you will find Sokcho, and in this quiet city, you will find the Global Campus of Kyungdong University, where you are likely to find in one of the campus's classrooms a gentlemanly Korea TESOL member. You may have noticed him working at the 2019 International Conference (IC), where he was human resources coordinator, or at the 2021 IC, where he was co-chair. Here is our interview with Garth Elzerman — Ed.*

**TEC:** Thank you, Garth, for making time for this Member Spotlight interview for *The English Connection*. I know that you are originally from South Africa, but I know little else about you before coming to Korea. Could you give us a little pre-Korea background and tell us what made you decide on relocating to this part of the world?

**Garth:** Well, before coming to Korea, I ran my family's business for about seven years. Our business is concerned with the powder coating industry, so it is worlds apart from what I am currently doing. I have wanted to be in academia for a number of years and found that it was becoming increasingly difficult to find a suitable position in South Africa. I had also wanted to explore Asia, so I decided to get a qualification in English education and travel abroad. Korea offered me a great opportunity to work, live comfortably, and travel.

**TEC:** What are your general thoughts on English language policy and teaching in Korea?

**Garth:** I fear that Korea's current policy and approach to English education is incorrectly focused and does not really function to impart the pleasures or benefits of the English language to students. This misaligned focus appears to also make it challenging for educators to achieve what they believe to be central to English education.

**TEC:** You have taught at both a language academy and a university. How do the two teaching experiences compare?



**Garth:** Both spheres of teaching exist within the greater Korean education system context, so naturally there are overlaps between the two experiences. The biggest difference between the two experiences is the student's being taught and the context of the learning. While at a language academy, I taught Korean students. Currently, I am teaching non-Korean students. That change has required some adjustment to my approach and materials. What is similar in both contexts is the typically Korean way in which the institutions are run and managed.

**TEC:** You said that your students now are not Korean students. Could you elaborate on your present teaching situation?

**Garth:** Certainly! I am currently working as an English instructor at Kyungdong University's



▲ Garth as MC at the Kyungdong University fall 2022 matriculation ceremony.

“I hope that people will realize the value and benefit that KOTESOL can bring to their lives and teaching.”

Global Campus. The Global Campus only accepts students from outside of Korea, so we currently have 28 different countries represented on the campus. It is a unique teaching environment compared to other Korean universities.

**TEC:** What do you like most about teaching EFL in Korea? What do you like least? Any anecdotes that you have related to these answers would be appreciated.

**Garth:** What I enjoy most is being able to impart a love of English and language learning to my students. English, like most languages, is closely tied to history and culture; thus, it is easy for me to become passionate about showing my students the threads that link our past to our present through our language. The dark side of this passion is that students, often when exam-taking is the main focus, are not interested in developing a love for language.

**TEC:** I believe you joined KOTESOL very soon after you came to Korea. What attracted you to the association so quickly?

**Garth:** An acquaintance of mine was involved in the Jeonju-North Jeolla Chapter and alerted me to the National Conference that was held in Jeonju in 2019. While at the conference, I stumbled into a session at the moment that a call was made for people who might be interested in getting involved to add their names to a register. A few months later, I received a call and was asked if I was willing to assist with the 2020 International Conference, and so my KOTESOL journey began.

**TEC:** And the highway gets wider and longer! You are presently busy preparing for the 2023 KOTESOL International Conference as conference committee chair. What prompted you to take on that herculean task?

**Garth:** You did Dave! As was the case in 2019, I received a call asking if I was willing to assist with the 2022 International Conference, which saw me filling the position of IC co-chair. I have always enjoyed organizing events, logistics, and problem-solving, so I often find myself gravitating to these types of responsibilities and rarely run away from them.

**TEC:** Can you tell us a little about what kind of conference IC 2023 is going to be?

**Garth:** The 2023 IC will be a hybrid conference held at Sookmyung Women’s University in Seoul, April 29–30. We have decided to follow the hybrid route to keep up with the current international conference trends, while also satisfying our members’ calls for a return to face-to-face interaction. We believe the 30th Annual IC will be a great time to mark this new chapter on the conference’s journey and will be strengthened with a theme on collaboration: Advancing Collaboration – Exchanges Among Scholars, Instructors, and Students. By the way, the call for presentations is now open, and we are expecting a lot of quality submissions on a variety of topics.

**TEC:** Outside of your work at your university and your volunteer work for KOTESOL, what do you like to do in any free time that you might have?

**Garth:** I have far too many hobbies and interests to list. I enjoy everything from reading, wine tasting, and visiting art galleries to hiking, traveling, and cycling. I am currently rediscovering my love of literature by revising some of the classics and reviving some of my old interests such as mineralogy and archeology.

**TEC:** That is an interesting list of interests! Now, a couple of forward-looking questions: What would you like to see KOTESOL doing – or doing more of – in the coming months and years?

**Garth:** KOTESOL is an amazing organization filled with passionate and dedicated people. I’d love to see us expand and grow in support and membership. Despite the speed



▲ *Garth on a semester excursion to the top of Seoraksan via cable car.*

at which the world is growing more connected, people appear to crave and need more meaningful community and collaboration. I hope that people will realize the value and benefit that KOTESOL can bring to their lives and teaching.

**TEC:** And the second question: If you were to gaze into the crystal ball of Garth Elzerman’s future, what do you think you might see?

**Garth:** From next year, I will be undertaking my PhD in philosophy. While studying, I will continue working and am hoping to publish a few articles in a number of different fields. Once my PhD is finished, I am hoping to get a permanent lecturing position at a university in Korea.

**TEC:** Well, thank you, Garth, for allowing us to get to know you better. And good luck with your doctorate studies, your KOTESOL international conference organizing, and work and life in general!

Interviewed by David Shaffer.

# The Development Connection

## Professional Development Versus Uncertainty

By Bill Snyder



*“Teaching is evidently and inevitably uncertain”* (Floden & Buchmann, 1993, p. 211).

I imagine that every teacher would agree with Floden and Buchman’s statement. You just don’t know what is going to happen in any classroom on any given day and how that will impact what you do as a teacher. An absent student may make grouping students for activities more difficult. A student may ask a question that sets the whole lesson off in an unexpected direction. Your technology may fail to work for whatever reason. Or, as once happened to me, a planned listening activity had to be canceled due to the university drumming club holding their meeting under the window of my classroom. I could list so many more examples, and probably so could you. Unexpected events, and the delights and frustrations that come with them, make up a large part of teachers’ stories about their work.

Beyond these specific classroom events, teachers’ work lives are marked by the greatest uncertainty of all – whether what they do makes a difference in students’ learning. The lack of a clear, direct connection between teaching and learning is perhaps the greatest source of vulnerability for teachers. I am always struck by how widely my students vary in terms of what they seem to take away from the classes I teach.

Teaching is not alone as a field that is marked by uncertainty. This not-knowing-the-outcome occurs in all the professions. For doctors, every patient is unique, and they cannot be certain that treatments will produce particular results. For lawyers, every case stands on its own, and again, the outcome cannot be certain. It is true that there is history that can be used to guide practice in all the professions, but that still does not mean that the same result will occur every time in similar situations. For teachers, more than for people working in other professions, the fact that we deal with multiple students at one time complicates things even more. What is successful in engaging one student and helping them learn may bore

another and lead to demotivation. And we may not have the resources of attention to know which student is which.

***“If uncertainty marks the professions, then the hallmark of professionalism is the ability to cope with uncertainty. And what professional development should do is help us develop that ability.”***

This might seem a bit frustrating, that we teachers simply cannot know with certainty what will happen in a lesson nor that what we are doing is actually working the way we intend. Or perhaps, that we can know that it never is working consistently the same way for all our students. But I don’t think it should be a source of despair. If uncertainty marks the professions, then the hallmark of professionalism is the ability to cope with uncertainty. And what professional development should do is help us develop that ability. I think that participating in professional development activities helps teachers develop the ability to cope with uncertainty in three ways: helping teachers increase their teaching repertoires, creating community, and promoting reflective practice.

For many teachers, the main goal of participating in professional development events is to learn about teaching ideas that they can use in their classrooms. Learning new techniques for presenting vocabulary, getting students to participate in groups more effectively, or using a new tech tool to provide feedback, for example, are practical outcomes that add to what a teacher can do in their practice, which should increase their confidence in their choices and strengthen their identity as professional educators.

Expanding the repertoire of choices for action that teachers have available can help teachers target student

needs more accurately in their lesson planning. Entering the classroom with a feeling that what you have planned has been well chosen from a wide repertoire of teaching techniques is going to reach students and help them learn, which should reduce uncertainty about what will happen that day. But, as we know, things don't always go as planned. Beyond helping with planning, a wider repertoire of teaching techniques provides teachers with more ways to respond in the moment to unexpected occurrences in the classroom. Having backups available and knowing how to use them can build a teacher's confidence that whatever happens in the classroom, they have the tools to cope.

Another benefit for teachers of participating in professional development activities is that it brings them together with other teachers. While it is possible to carry out professional development independently, becoming part of a community of teachers is valuable just in terms of reducing the isolation of teaching. Fellow teachers can be the sources of those repertoire-widening ideas mentioned above. And when those teachers work in contexts similar to your own, with students who you can relate to your own, the use of teaching practices verified by their experiences can seem more certain with your students. In this way, the community provides support for trying out new ideas with greater confidence.

From a recent My Share event at my university, I learned from two teachers about a new slideware app that I've decided is more flexible than what I had been using previously and has better options for including video in slides. I had been happy with what I was using before, but



seeing something new and knowing that these teachers were using it successfully with students like mine moved me to experiment with the new tool and incorporate it into my classes. In addition, through interaction with other teachers, hearing their ideas, and observing them

teaching, we see what we can aspire to in our teaching. Membership in the community of professionals helps us set standards for ourselves. When we have clear goals for our teaching, we know what we are looking for, and it becomes easier for us to focus our attention and notice what is happening in the classroom.

Finally, professional development reduces uncertainty by promoting reflection. Of course, you could argue that reflection is at the heart of professional development because reflective practice is the essence of being professional. And that same reflection is what helps teachers feel confident that they have made good choices and set proper goals for their own teaching. Promoting reflection may be the most important function of professional development because reflection is the foundation of teacher learning. And it is through learning about our teaching that we improve as teachers.

Uncertainty is a given in teachers' work. We just can't know what will happen, what the outcome of our actions will be. But professional development, with its emphasis on reflection, can help us acquire the tools to manage uncertainty – techniques that we can call upon at a moment's notice when things go unexpectedly in the classroom, a sense of community to boost us when we feel isolated, and to help us set goals for our own development as teachers. Professional development will never make teaching completely certain, but it will help make us professionals, people who cope with uncertainty every day.

**Author's Note:** It has been 15 years since I last wrote a Professional Development column for *The English Connection*. I'm pleased to have been asked back. I think I've learned some more about professional development in the years since to share, and I hope that you find what I write in this column useful.

There is a saying in Russian, *The first pancake falls like a stone*, pointing out that first attempts are often less than successful. A good piece of wisdom for anyone trying something for the first time (in a long time) to not be too hard on yourself. Writing this column has been a struggle, and it still feels rough, even after a number of drafts, a bit like a fallen stone. So, this is the stone pancake I've made. The point of the saying, though, is not about the result of the first try, but that as you keep trying more, your pancakes will improve. I will endeavor to deliver something more like a pancake and less like a stone in my next article. Thank you for reading!

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#### The Columnist

Bill Snyder is Professor in the International Language Education Program: TESOL at Soka University in Japan. He has worked in teacher education for over 25 years in the US, Korea, Turkey, Armenia, and Japan. His current research focuses on the lives and wellbeing of teachers across their careers and on the mentoring of novice teachers. Email: [w Snyder7@gmail.com](mailto:w Snyder7@gmail.com)

# The Brain Connection

## Listening: Hearing Well or Guessing Well?

By Dr. Curtis Kelly

### Listening as Hearing and Processing

Is listening just another of the “four skills” to be taught to language learners? Or is it special? Reading pundits like Marc Helgesen say reading is the “magic skill,” the one that eclipses the others, but I wonder. Input is input. Shouldn't listening be the magic skill too? After all, if you think about it, there are 7,100 or so languages in the world, but only about half have writing systems and writing itself is only 5,000 years old. Language is predominantly speaking and listening.

The Natural Language Institute gives us “3 reasons listening is the most important skill to tackle first.” (Hart, 2021, paras. 2-15) These are:

#### 1) Human brains evolved to acquire oral comprehension first.

...it is the first of the four skills babies learn.

#### 2) Listening skills allow social interaction to begin.

...and we know how important that is for brain development and enculturation.

#### 3) You need to acquire the correct “mental pronunciation” early on.

...at least in the beginning, language mastery comes from listening.

Okay, I can go along with that. But then they add: “And listening is the easiest skill to practice.” Sound of screeching tires. I think not. For the students and classes I have taught, this is not true at all. Most of the movies and TV shows I've played for them, the audiobooks, the listening exercises in EFL materials, and everything else have either crashed (for being incomprehensible) or crushed (for being boring). As for the methods I use, they seem byzantine: dictation, gap fills, and comprehension questions. Not easy for my students. Not easy for me.

Listening has NOT been easy to teach, and now I know why. I have been on the wrong path. The whole basis of what I did in the classroom was built on the notion that listening is basically hearing and then comprehending.

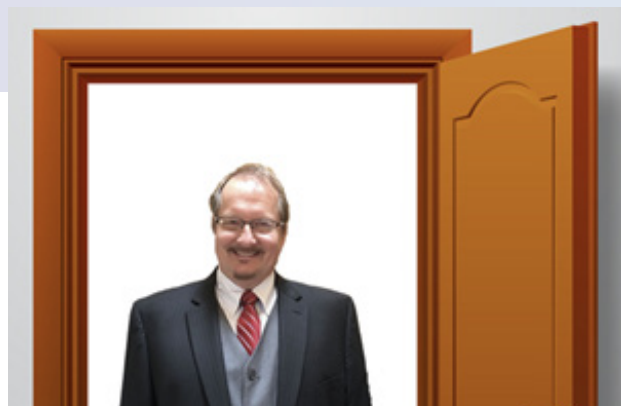
For my students, I played language bits for aural input, assuming the brain would take that input and identify words. Then it would take those words and process them into meaning-bearing sentences. From small to large. From input to comprehension.

And so, most of my teaching went like this: “You are still missing a lot of words in your dictation! Rewind your tape (1980) / Go back a track on the CD (2000) / Push the back arrow on your smartphone (2015), and listen again. Try to catch every word. Pause the tape/CD/mp3 if you have to.

Naturally, it didn't work. I was operating under false pretenses.

### Listening as Predicting (and I don't mean conscious predicting)

So, what was wrong? Thanks to neuroscience, I now know that listening is less of a story of outside to inside than inside to outside. Why is that? Because the brain predicts. You see, the brain does not take in aural input first and then sort it out. It actually predicts what is being heard before it is heard, without bothering to process any input that fits that prediction. The brain tells the ears what it is hearing before it hears more than a smidgen of it. That sounds counterintuitive, but it is how the brain keeps from going into brain freeze.



Brain Freeze. Have you ever opened your door and found someone standing there that you did not expect, such as a friend? What happened? You jumped. You stared. For a whole two seconds your brain went into hyperdrive trying to figure out what was happening. It examined all possibilities: Is this the right place? Am I in danger? Did I forget a promise? Then your friend says “Hi. I just came by to see if you wanted a ride.” In a low voice, you say back, “Oh... I did not expect that.”

Exactly.

You froze because your brain did not predict that occurrence. Now, imagine if you were like that every second of every day. Because that is what life would be like if our brains did not develop something we call predictive processing to relieve it of all that work. It predicts. Not once in a while. Not just about what will happen later in the day. But rather, constantly, about what is happening now and what is likely to happen in the next second.

Were the brain to process all visual and aural input from scratch, bit by bit, we'd be in permanent brain freeze, like in the example above. So, the brain has developed this wonderful strategy to reduce the load. It considers the situation and looks at past experiences to predict what it will encounter. Then it ignores what fits those predictions, so it only has to process prediction error. It is pretty amazing how it does this. It sends brain waves representing the prediction down to the sensory areas that cancel out upcoming waves that match it.

So, it just needs a fraction of sensory input about an object or action to stimulate the neural routine it has already activated as a prediction.

You see a blurry round shape on a wall, and your brain tells you it is a clock even before you see the hands and numbers, because your brain already knows walls have clocks on them. You hear a phoneme pattern like “ee-yeha-berg” and your brain hears it as “he ate a burger” because it fits the conversation topic.

In short, the brain does not just sense the world, it fills it in.

Amazing. And even more amazing is this: As opposed to remembering the past, we now believe the sole reason we have memory is to predict the future. Your brain takes all your prior experiences of the world, which it has crafted into simple cartoon-like models, and calls up the most likely ones relevant to what you are doing now. It predicts the now by using the before.

So, what does this have to do with listening? Quite a bit, actually. Our brains have developed models of sound patterns that represent words, phrases, and other kinds of utterances along the same line as the visual mental models we have for clocks and walls. But more. Those are just static objects. More important are processes. Does that dirty look on that dog mean it will attack? Will that car be able to stop before it hits someone?

And so it goes with language. Our brains have developed these wonderful predictive models to reduce the otherwise massive load of language processing. They include gestures, intonation, timing, etc., but the interesting one is grammar. Grammar is a tool we use to predict what words we are hearing (or reading, writing, etc.) now, and what words will come next. If someone utters the pronoun he, we are already primed to hear a verb come next. If the verb is went (He went...), we expect to and a place as being the most probable items coming next, but we also have crazy or ballistic activated as less likely possibilities. We do not at all expect the next word to be receipt or the tens of thousands of other words that do not fit that grammar or situation. So, grammar constrains the possibilities of what the next word will be and helps us understand what someone is going to say even before the words come out of her...

Grammar, then, and rock-hard models of words, word families, and collocations are the things students must have in order to do listening. To make correct language predictions in listening, learners must have simple grammar automaticity, familiarity with the topic, and lots of previous exposure to how and when the most basic words (1,000 or so) are used. After all, the brain is constantly doing corpus studies.

The listenings should be easy. Obviously giving students hard texts full of new vocabulary does not lead to listening; vocabulary study maybe, but not listening.

So, what is a great way to improve listening skills? The answer came to me just as I was writing the last two paragraphs. Those requirements sound exactly like graded reading! Simple texts (to master basic vocabulary and grammar) in interesting stories (which by definition means familiarity) and in large quantity (to build automaticity and fast language processing skills).

So, graded reading is an ideal way to build listening skills. Now that I think about it, I remember a conversation with ER specialist Atsuko Takase when she told me about her research. She said that she discovered her students made the greatest improvements when the reading level was way below their proficiency level and the biggest gains were in listening first, not reading!

Realistically, you probably cannot do extensive reading in your listening class, but why not use that same strategy for listening? Easy, fun, lots of listening, few new words.

Once we understand that listening is predicting, it seems some of the traditional ways to teach listening are on target and some not.

For students at the late beginner or intermediate level, if I may, I deem having lots of pictures to clarify the situation as good. I deem long listenings involving unfamiliar people, places, or events as bad. I deem having students listen to a text and filling in blanks with a few carefully chosen words as good. I deem having them do a complete dictation, stressing that they must hear every word, as bad, or at least not representative of how people really listen. After all, even native speakers do not hear every word.

So, the next time you teach listening, take what you know about extensive reading and use it in extensive listening.

Go easy on that little guy.

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#### The Columnist

**Curtis Kelly** (EdD) founded the JALT Mind, Brain, and Education SIG, and until 2022, was a professor of English at Kansai University in Japan. His life mission is “to relieve the suffering of the classroom.” He has written 35 books, over 100 articles, and given over 500 presentations. This article was based on one he wrote for the MindBrainEd Think Tanks, so please subscribe! [mindbrained.org](http://mindbrained.org)



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