

The English Connection

A Korea TESOL Publication

Winter 2025, Volume 29, Issue 4

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Wright

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Humor in the Classroom,

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Snyder with The Development Connection

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ISSN: 1598-0456

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Submissions Deadline for the Spring 2026
Issue: Jan. 5th (Mon.)



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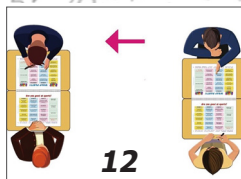
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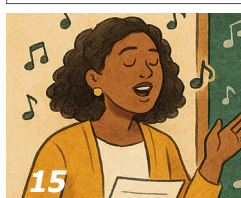
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To promote scholarship, disseminate information, and facilitate cross-cultural understanding among persons concerned with the teaching and learning of English in Korea.

Editorial

ChatGPT as Co-Author: Editing for the Human Touch in the Age of AI

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

A Subtle Shift Towards Submission Sameness

As the editor-in-chief of this quarterly KOTESOL magazine, I've spent several years poring over article submissions from thoughtful teacher contributors in our professional community. Our magazine isn't a peer-reviewed academic journal (we leave that work to our more rigorous sibling publication), but we do aim to publish smart, readable, and engaging content that speaks directly to our association's diverse members, and our Korean EFL industry as a whole.

Until recently, the job was fairly predictable. Submissions varied widely, of course, from academically brilliant to barely publishable, but the human hand behind the work was, for the most part, clear. Voice, tone, quirks, grammar flubs (consider the errors detected when converting from a Word to Google Doc file), and the occasional literary flourish, they told me something about the person behind the keyboard. But over the past year or so, I've noticed something strange. Submissions have begun to shift in tone. Perhaps smoother? Cleaner? Yes, but without the personal warmth.

At first, I chalked it up to better editing tools or an increase in submissions from more academically inclined writers. But the uniformity was too consistent. And then it hit me: ChatGPT. Or rather, its fingerprints. "No, how could they?" I disappointingly first thought. But as I see the trends and think about it more, I'm switching over to "Yes, how could they not?"

When the Muse Becomes the Model

This isn't going to be a takedown of AI-assisted writing; far from it. I use tools like ChatGPT myself, often to brainstorm titles, offer me five options on the turn of a phrase, or untangle a tricky paragraph (guess who just picked the word "untangle" for me). But as someone whose role involves selecting, editing, and shaping articles for publication, I'm starting to develop a sharper eye for distinguishing that still blurry line between writing that's been *supported* by AI and writing that's been *generated* by AI.

What follows is an informal taxonomy of traits I've observed in AI-generated (or heavily AI-assisted) submissions, followed by some thoughts on what this means for editors like me. I share these not to gatekeep but to open a conversation about what voice, authenticity, and human storytelling mean in an era when machines can simulate all three. And in the back of my mind, what will the future be like? If we're entering a period where everyone is suspect of AI support, who's going to get the kudos for maintaining the human hand of just a few years ago?

1. Impeccable Organization, Dot by Bulleted Dot

AI loves a good bullet point. And who doesn't? They're tidy and efficient. And likely gives the responses exactly as the writer's prompts directed. But when an entire submission leans on lists, numbered breakdowns, and signposted subheadings ("The following points will highlight..." "Summarized as..." "Additionally;" "In conclusion;"), it starts to feel like the author outsourced not just grammar, but structure itself. The result is often a submission that's logical, yes, but also overly templated.

2. The Curious Case of the Em Dash

Once the domain of literary stylists and the occasional long-winded columnist, the em dash has become surprisingly popular among AI-generated texts. It adds a conversational flair—a breezy pause—a witty aside. But when a novice writer, and half my submitters, suddenly start using them like Hunter S. Thompson, it's a clue. Not a crime—after all, who doesn't want to write like Malcolm Gladwell?—just a clue that ChatGPT has left its dashing little mark.

3. First-Person(al) Fog: Vague Voices and Vanishing Details

Many submissions come into the magazine written in the first person, which is great. And I realize there's always some vulnerable exposure when writers enter into personal narration. But something's often been missing lately. Opinionated stances are rarer, personal anecdotes are fewer, and more specific moments of failure or insight always seem to be appreciated and received more favorably by me.

Just as striking is the lack of detail. AI excels at summarizing big ideas, pedagogy, assessment, engagement, but rarely includes the names, places, or classroom moments that bring writing to life. What did that one student say to you during breaktime about the prior lesson? What caught you off guard, when discussing schedules with colleagues over coffee? Without these human fingerprints, the prose feels detached.

It is true: A writer's individual work space and context doesn't always apply to others' experiences, and that detail and narrow point of view can end up not connecting with readers. On the other hand, results nowadays are smooth, well-organized narratives that skim the surface; safe and polished for a magazine wanting casual yet member-driven personal viewpoints.



4. When the Words Don't Sound Like the Writer

A long-time contributor who usually sends in off-the-cuff, grammar-challenged rants suddenly submits a perfectly balanced, five-paragraph essay with SAT-level vocabulary? A non-native English speaker who's written an error-free essay on the pitfalls of learning English? My red flag goes up. Not because I mind improvement, but because the writing no longer feels like them. There's a dissonance.

5. Too Perfect Is... Suspicious

Editors love clean copy. But there's such a thing as too clean. Recent pieces read like they've been scrubbed by an AI grammar engine, then buffed to a mirror shine. Every sentence symmetrical. Every comma in place. It's impressive, and weirdly exhausting. Am I worried about losing my job as proofreader? No, not at all. But someone, or something, has been working overtime before sending submissions to me.

6. Analogies from a Parallel Universe

AI is fond of metaphors, and great at creating them. But they often feel out of place or oddly impersonal. I've seen pieces likening classroom management to orchestra conducting, lesson planning to raising children, and feedback to software updates. It's not that these comparisons are wrong, they just don't seem to come from a real, felt connection. But I still love me a good metaphor; like gardening with confetti (huh?), things don't grow the way you expect, but they're always colorful.

7. Vocabulary That Tries Too Hard

You can almost hear the algorithm reaching for the thesaurus. Words like "utilize," "delve," "foster," "embrace," and "underscore" pop up with uncanny frequency. They sound smart but also strangely generic, like the writer has been programmed to sound professional at all costs. Or at least to the level that the prompt requested.

A generous yet evenly spread layer of adjectives often reads as if lifted straight from a literary stylist's handbook, flawlessly balanced, tastefully ornate, and just a little too perfect. It's the kind of language that suggests not a writer reaching for expression but underscores an AI model utilizing from a curated shelf of approved eloquence.

8. No Questions Asked... Literally

Human writing often thinks aloud. It wonders, speculates, asks rhetorical questions: "You know what?" "What if you did ___ instead of ___?" "So what was I to do?" AI writing, on the other hand, tends to declare. It presents conclusions without inviting the reader into the thinking process. The absence of curiosity is its own kind of signal. Right? What do you think?

Submissions have begun to shift in tone. Perhaps smoother? Cleaner? Yes, but without the personal warmth.

Writers are going to use these tools, some sparingly, some heavily, and the line between assistance and authorship will continue to blur.

9. Echo Chamber of Enthusiasm

AI-generated content loves to affirm. Everything is valuable, every method promising, and every teacher inspirational. While optimism is welcome, untempered positivity can come off as vague and unearned. Nuance and critique, especially self-critique, are far rarer in AI prose than in the average teacher's honest reflection. Because it's hard for ChatGPT to refer back to personal experiences and detailed anecdotes when it has none of its own.

What Matters in the End... Finishing with Feeling

Now, none of this is to say I dismiss a submission just because it shows some of the signs above. Quite the opposite, actually. In a way, AI-assisted articles make my job easier. There's less copyediting. Fewer basic grammar issues. The structure is often sound. It's the content, if at all, that needs work, usually in the direction of being more human.

What I find myself doing more often now is writing back to contributors with requests like "Could you include a personal anecdote?" "Would you mind replacing the bullets with narrative transitions in the text?" "Could you elaborate on this concept in your own words, to help readers see the point?" Most often the answer is yes, as if the writer and I are on the same page with wanting more warmth or specificity.

But here's the thing: AI isn't going away. Nor should it. Writers are going to use these tools, some sparingly, some heavily, and the line between assistance and authorship will continue to blur. My job isn't to police that line but to hold onto what makes good writing worth reading: honesty, clarity, specificity, and voice. If those shine through, even in a draft that started in ChatGPT, I'm happy to work with it, and accept it. And to be honest, I'm not one to point fingers because, despite the nine AI-assisted tell-tale signs I brought up above, I still have no way of knowing for sure.

Still, I worry. I worry about losing the messy charm of first drafts (not too much, though). I worry about reading five pieces in a row that sound suspiciously alike in tone and style. I worry that in trying to sound polished, writers will forget to sound like themselves. I worry that despite the need, it's too early to establish clear guidelines for AI-generated submissions for our magazine, as the technology is still evolving and the debate over its benefits and drawbacks remains unsettled. I worry I'm missing the teacher's voice in our writing, and getting too much of the tempered academic's. But mostly, I worry that our readers will notice too. But in this regard, I am optimistic that they will continue to trust our publication's voice, as the discussion on AI generation continues in KOTESOL.

So I'll keep nudging, suggesting, and editing. I'll keep asking for the anecdote, the weird aside, the messy paragraph that shows real thought, the reflection. Because in the end, the best writing isn't perfect, it's first-personal.

President's Message

KOTESOL in 2025: A Year of Innovation, Connections, and Energy

By Dr. Lindsay N. Herron KOTESOL President

If I had to choose three words to characterize 2025 for KOTESOL, they would be *innovation*, *connections*, and *energy*. This past year included a remarkable number of unique offerings and novel endeavors to meet the ever-evolving needs of our members; our entire KOTESOL community – at the national, chapter, and individual levels – found creative ways to collaborate and build connections; and throughout the year, these amazing and inspiring endeavors showcased a truly remarkable amount of enthusiasm, dedication, and drive from the volunteers acting to make them a reality.

The year started off with a merger; officially approved by the National Council in December 2024, the Yongin-Gyeonggi and Suwon-Gyeonggi Chapters united to become the powerhouse now known as the Gyeonggi Chapter. Self-styled "GyoKo," the chapter has been very active this year, organizing multiple in-person events while simultaneously maintaining a dynamic online presence. Whether they're recording podcasts and videos, offering teacher-training sessions, or building social relationships at informal gatherings, the chapter and its innovative ideas and energy have been truly inspiring.

Our other newest chapter, the Incheon Chapter, similarly has proven a veritable dynamo. The chapter recently celebrated its first birthday, but it's already charging ahead! The chapter kicked off the spring with a well-received symposium and then, riding the success of that event, immediately stepped up to the challenge of hosting the 2025 KOTESOL National Conference. Held on October 18 at the SUNY Korea Incheon Global Campus in Songdo, the conference boasted 60 volunteers, 42 sessions, and more than a hundred attendees representing seven different countries.

The end of 2024 and the beginning of 2025 also saw the formation of two new special interest groups, the Well-Being SIG and the Book Club SIG. The Well-Being SIG, in particular, has hit the ground running, hosting multiple activities and events over the past several months. The SIG offers participants a welcome respite from the harried hurry of professional practice, providing opportunities for community, personal growth, and self-care in the form of rejuvenating outdoor retreats, yoga, meditation, and more.

These aren't the only KOTESOL entities bursting with energy, enthusiasm, and ingenuity; this year, many of our chapters and SIGs explored novel ways to address the needs of our community. The Busan-Gyeongnam Chapter, for instance, in March launched its "Dual-Purpose Initiative," or DPI, a program designed to provide skills, connections, and insights to educators staying in Korea long-term as well as those returning to their home countries. Indeed, the Busan-Gyeongnam Chapter has been creatively capitalizing on KOTESOL's resources in a variety of ways this year; they collaborated on the Daejeon Chungcheong Chapter's annual November Symposium, invited many of our more experienced members to present at the DPI program, and organized online evenings with the Publications Committee and the Diversity Committee chair. The Jeonju-North Jeolla Chapter, meanwhile, celebrated its new venue with a silent auction – possibly the first of its kind – that raised money for the chapter. Other chapters and SIGs similarly have explored new paths, especially in terms of building community and connections. Beach-hopping, film festivals, barbecues and picnics, outdoor adventures, book discussions, coffee-shop meetups, pizza parties (including one with Mongolian teachers visiting Korea), and more were scattered throughout the year.

At the national level, the new Marketplace @KOTESOL, which expands our ties to the local artisan community, is a perfect example of our innovative endeavors to build connections and proffer unique perks to our members. The artisan markets at our international and national conferences provided mutual benefit for vendors and attendees alike – and I, for one, managed to nearly finish my holiday shopping while also securing some delightful crafts for myself.

Our international connections flourished this year, as well. In April, we finalized a partnership with the Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers (SPELT). In May, the 32nd Korea TESOL International Conference boasted more than 200 sessions, including 20 invited sessions (by 17 invited speakers), and attracted 580 participants from 35 countries. Six of our international partner organizations sent representatives to our conference, while we reciprocated by sending KOTESOL presenters to eight conferences hosted by our international partners.

This year also saw the inauguration of a new presenter travel grant, founded and funded by lifetime member Dr. Kara Mac Donald, who was awarded a rare KOTESOL Patron Award for her generous and unflagging support of our organization. Other awards presented this year included the *Korea TESOL Journal* Research Paper of the Year Award 2025 (Dr. Maria Teresa Martinez Garcia, "Bridging the Gap: Leveraging Neuroeducation to Enhance Teaching Methodologies," *Korea TESOL Journal* 20-2), the *TEC* Article of the Year Award 2025 (Michael Duddy, "Strategies to Implementing Task-Based Language Teaching in the Korean Context," *The English Connection* 28-3); the *KOTESOL Proceedings* Best Paper Award 2025 (I-Juan Ting, "Grammar and Vocabulary in Making Inferences: A Contributory Exploration of Reading Comprehension," *KOTESOL Proceedings* 2024), and the Reflective Language Teacher of the Year Award 2025 (Christopher Miller, Seoul Chapter). I'm glad our organization continues to recognize our members' professional endeavors.

As a new year dawns, I hope you're finding opportunities for both personal and professional growth, continuing to build connections in novel and personally meaningful ways. May this winter be relaxing, rejuvenating, and rewarding! I can't wait to see what 2026 brings for all of us – and for KOTESOL.



Teaching American Culture with Political Cartoons: A Tool for Linguistic and Cultural Inquiry

By Norman Fewell and Eng Hai Tan

Introduction

Humor is a central part of communication that can bring people together, reinforce social norms, or critique authority. In second language (L2) classrooms; however, humor often functions as a high-stakes arena for cultural and linguistic negotiation. Misunderstanding a joke or reference may cause learners to feel excluded rather than included. While humor can reduce anxiety and motivate learners, it also relies on cultural knowledge and pragmatic awareness that are difficult for students to access. Among the many forms of humor, political cartoons stand out as especially valuable in language teaching. They combine art, commentary, and language, making them powerful resources

Among the many forms of humor, political cartoons stand out as especially valuable in language teaching.

for courses such as American culture, where students examine cultural symbols, political debates, and shifting values through authentic texts. Unlike purely theoretical treatments, this discussion highlights classroom strategies, teacher reflection, and practical applications, showing how humor and satire can be transformed into tools of inquiry in an English language class. Ultimately, this article highlights practical ways of integrating political cartoons into the L2 classroom through a three-stage scaffolded framework that supports learners in working with challenging texts while equipping them with the interpretive strategies and cultural awareness needed to analyze complex texts in English.

Humor in the L2 Classroom

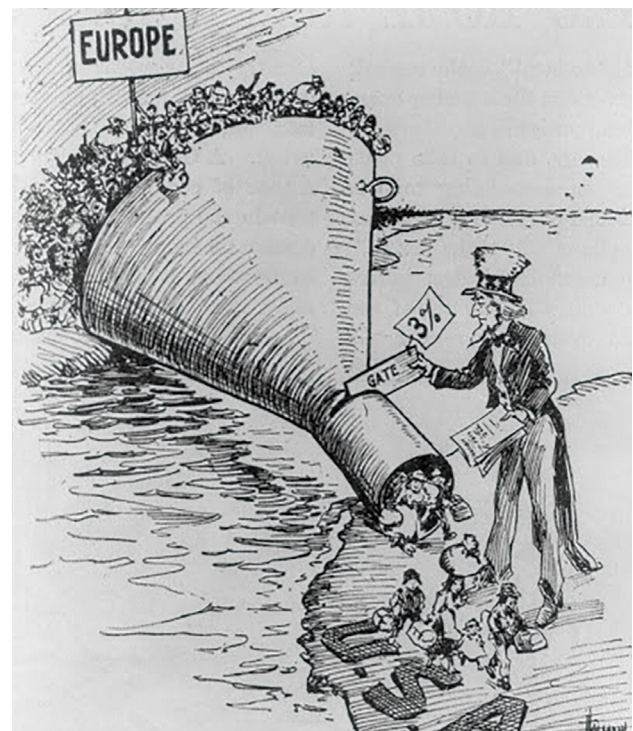
Research shows that humor can promote motivation, lower anxiety, and create a positive learning environment (Bell, 2017; Krashen, 1982). For L2 learners, humor comprehension is cognitively demanding: It requires awareness of pragmatic cues, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references. Successfully “getting the joke” is not only amusing but also a marker of successful linguistic and cultural problem-solving. Unlike generic icebreakers, political cartoons embed humor in real cultural issues, making them well suited for courses that combine language learning with cultural inquiry. Many learners find cartoons engaging because they are short, visual, and immediately relevant, yet the intellectual challenge of interpreting them pushes learners beyond surface-level understanding.

Why Political Cartoons?

Political cartoons are multimodal in form, requiring students to interpret both visual and textual cues. As Kress (2010) argued, communication today is predominantly multimodal, so students need practice with texts where images and words interact to create meaning. Building on explorations of digital graphic novels in EFL, which highlight the motivational and comprehension benefits of visual texts (Fewell & MacLean, 2014), cartoons also reveal cultural assumptions. For example (see Figure 1), a

cartoon showing Uncle Sam closing a funnel of people labeled “Gate” offers insights into U.S. political discourse. To decode such texts, students must ask, “Who is Uncle Sam?” “Who are those people?” “Why is the “gate” being closed?” and “Why might this image resonate with an American audience?” From a teacher’s perspective, cartoons are flexible resources. Their brevity means they can be integrated without replacing other materials, yet their density ensures rich linguistic and cultural content.

Figure 1. “The Only Way to Handle It” [Illustration of Uncle Sam controlling immigration through a funnel]. (Hallahan, 1921)



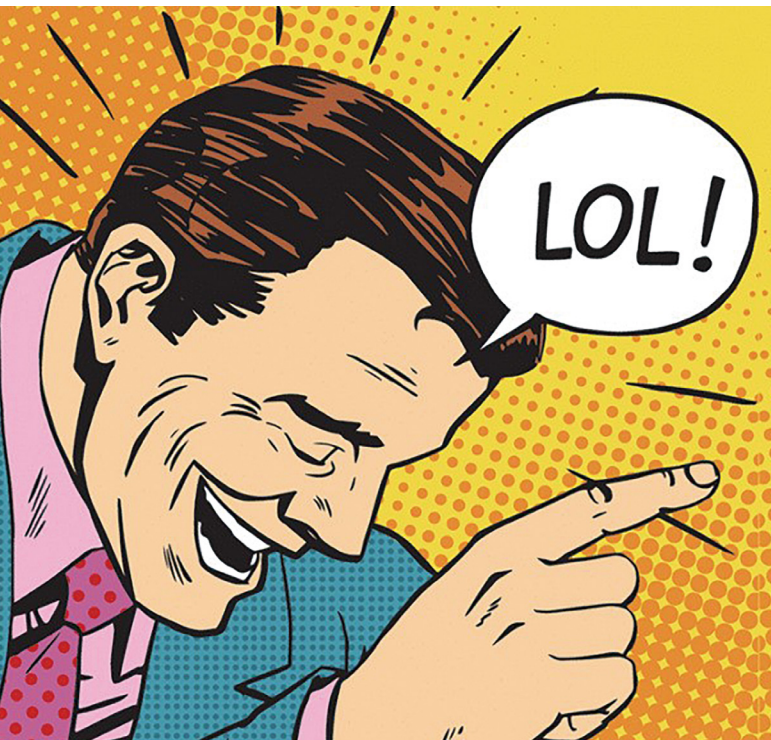
A Three-Stage Framework for Classroom Use

To make cartoons accessible, teachers should scaffold the process. The three-stage framework below works effectively.

1. Observation (What do you see?)

The goal of this initial stage is purely objective observation. This systematic, low-pressure entry point ensures that all students, regardless of their background knowledge, can participate successfully.

Teacher’s Role: The teacher acts as a facilitator and guide. Their primary job is to create a focused environment for observation and to provide essential linguistic and contextual support. Using visual thinking strategies (Yenawine, 2013), the teacher can prompt students with simple, open-ended questions: “What’s going on with this picture?” “What do you see that makes you say that?” and “What more can we find?” The teacher should insist on observation over interpretation, gently redirecting students who may jump to conclusions by asking, “What visual evidence do you see for that idea?” Before the activity, the teacher introduces key vocabulary that is essential



for basic comprehension but does not give away the cartoon's meaning. For Figure 1, this might include words like *funnel*, *gate*, and *shore*.

Student's Role: Students are active observers and recorders. Working individually or in pairs, they create a simple list of all the elements they can identify: characters, objects, text (labels, captions), and symbols.

Interaction and Procedure: A think-pair-share model is highly effective here. First, students spend 3–5 minutes silently observing and listing elements on their own (think). Next, they share their tasks with a partner, adding any details they may have missed (pair). Finally, the teacher calls on pairs to share their observations with the whole class, compiling a master list on the whiteboard (share). This collaborative process builds a comprehensive inventory of the cartoon's content.

Some students may point out that there is a crowd of people at the wide end of the funnel. Others may mention that there is a tall, thin man in a top hat and striped pants (Uncle Sam). While some other students may acknowledge the presence of a tag on the gate with "3%" written on it.

Once the list is complete, the teacher provides brief, neutral background information. For instance: "This cartoon was published in 1921, a time when the U.S. was debating immigration levels. The crowd of people at the end of the funnel represent immigrants wanting to enter the U.S. The man in the top hat is Uncle Sam, a symbol of the U.S. government. The '3%' tag represented a law that set restrictions on immigration based on a percentage formula."

2. Interpretation and Negotiation (Why might this be funny or critical?)

With a shared inventory of visual evidence, students are now ready to move from what they see to what it means.

Teacher's Role: The teacher transitions from a facilitator to a guide who leads through questioning. Instead of providing answers, the teacher circulates among student groups and asks probing questions to deepen their thinking: "What is Uncle Sam's attitude?" "How can you tell from his expression and posture?" "Is the caption 'The only way to handle it' a statement encouraging the public to support immigration restrictions?" The

teacher encourages students to support their interpretations with evidence from the deconstruction stage.

Student's Role: Working in small groups of 3–4, students collaboratively discuss the symbolism and potential message of the cartoon. They must connect the visual elements to the cultural issues at play and negotiate different perspectives within their groups. This process requires them to practice language skills in expressing opinions, agreeing and disagreeing politely, and building on others' ideas.

Interaction and Procedure: Group discussion is the core of the stage. Each group works towards a consensus or a summary of their main interpretations. After 10–15 minutes, a representative from each group can share their key ideas with the class. This often reviews a range of plausible interpretations, highlighting the richness of the text.

For example, in a group discussion of the political cartoon in Figure 1, students might hypothesize that it represents a restrictive immigration system designed to drastically reduce the number of people entering the U.S. One group might focus on the term *handle it*, suggesting the cartoon portrays immigrants negatively as a problem. Another group might point to Uncle Sam's calm, business-like posture as the government's cold, bureaucratic approach to this issue.

3. Critical Evaluation and Production (What does this mean, and can we do the same?)

In the final stage, students step back to evaluate the cartoons ideological position and then apply their new skills in a creative production task.

Teacher's Role: The teacher guides a final class discussion to critically evaluate the cartoon's message and its effectiveness. Questions might include "Who would agree with this cartoon's message? Who would disagree?" "Is this cartoon persuasive? Why or why not?" and "What values or assumptions does it promote?" From the production phase, the teacher acts as a consultant, helping students brainstorm relative topics and think through the conventions of the format (e.g., symbolism, caricature, labeling).

Facilitating discussion on politically charged texts demands neutrality and sensitivity.

Student's Role: Students first act as critical analysts, evaluating the cartoon's message and bias. Then, they become creators. The final activity is for them to design their own political cartoons on a topic relevant to their lives or cultural context. This empowers them to use language and visual persuasion to express their own opinions.

Interaction and Procedure: The evaluation can be a whole class discussion. For the production task, students can work individually or in pairs. They should first brainstorm an issue, decide on their message, and then sketch out symbols and images to convey it. The final products can be shared through a gallery walk, where cartoons are posted around the room and students circulate, view their classmates' work, and leave feedback. This creates an authentic communicative purpose for their work.

For example, after analyzing the 1921 cartoon, students might critique its dehumanizing portrayal of immigrants. For the production task, the teacher might ask students to address a contemporary issue they care about. Students might attempt to tackle the intense societal pressure related to university entrance exams in Korea. In a similar design to the 1921 cartoon, a group could modify the image to a narrow gate labeled "SKY Universities" (acronym for the top three universities in Korea) with many students trying to squeeze through. The cartoon could be captioned with "Parental Expectations" to more strongly signify its meaning.

Challenges to Anticipate

Teachers must also prepare for challenges. Political cartoons rely heavily on background knowledge; without scaffolding, learners may feel lost. Because political humor can be provocative, some cartoons may offend. Teachers should establish respectful discussion norms and carefully select examples.

The dense language of cartoons (puns, idioms, intertextual references) requires pre-teaching and careful facilitation. Teachers must also recognize their own positionality: Facilitating discussion on politically charged texts demands neutrality and sensitivity.

Implications for Practice

For instructors of American culture or similar courses, incorporating political cartoons into the curriculum offers several distinct pedagogical advantages. First and foremost, they provide authentic cultural texts that immerse learners in real social debates and controversies. Unlike simplified materials typically designed for language learners, political cartoons offer a genuine glimpse into the cultural conversations of a particular era, complete with their nuances, biases, and underlying assumptions. The framework provides clear steps for exploring aspects of culture, making more challenging content more accessible for L2 learners. By guiding students through the stages of deconstruction, interpretation, and evaluation, teachers equip students with a methodology for asking critical questions about symbolism and perspectives, a skill essential for developing deep cultural understanding. Furthermore, the framework encourages creative production tasks that shift students from being passive interpreters to active cultural commentators. Finally, when learners design their own cartoons, they internalize the medium's conventions and apply them to express their own views, developing a sense of creative ownership over their learning.

Student Reflections

From experience, students respond enthusiastically to political cartoons once the initial barrier of cultural unfamiliarity is overcome. When the teacher first introduces a complex cartoon, it may be noticeable that some students are having some difficulty in understanding its meaning. Learners may be hesitant at first, worried about "not getting the joke." The role of the teacher is to reassure them that there isn't just one right answer and to guide them back to the visual evidence with the simple question: "What do you see?"

With scaffolding, however, the students begin to enjoy the interpretive challenge. After one group successfully deciphered a political cartoon's meaning, one of the students remarked that it was challenging and felt like "cracking a puzzle." The feeling of solving something challenging is precisely what motivates many students to take on the next task with more confidence. Other students have remarked about the political cartoons being both "difficult and fun." Such sentiments have been repeated in many classes after this activity.

Another key insight from class was the issue of ownership. Teachers may sometimes need to step back and allow students to generate their own viewpoints, even when ideas differ from the "correct" interpretations. Often, the most profound moments

have come in simple packages. I recall one student struggling to speak English but pointed directly to Uncle Sam's face in the cartoon (Figure 1) and said, "He is not happy. Not sad. For him, it's just a job." This simple and direct observation captured one message in the political cartoon: the presence of a cold, bureaucratic government with little empathy towards immigrants. When learners generate their own interpretations, they gain a sense of empowerment.

Conclusion

Political cartoons are more than humorous images; they offer cultural insight that challenge learners to engage with multiple layers of meaning. When introduced through a scaffolded framework, political cartoons can transform the L2 classroom into a forum for inquiry, debate, and creative expression. For courses such as American culture, this provides a particularly rich avenue for exploring how language and culture intertwine.

Teachers who integrate these thoughtfully can promote both linguistic development and intercultural competence, equipping students with skills to navigate the cultural contexts of English with humor and critical insight. While not without challenges, political cartoons offer a distinctive pedagogy: one where laughter becomes an entry point into cultural critique.

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Equations for Creativity

By Jocelyn Wright

Context

With curriculum reform thrust upon us, I recently decided to open a course entitled Creative Communication. The purpose of this beginner-level, undergraduate English major course is to get students to reflect on creativity, communication, and the intersection between them, and to do language arts activities to develop both high-demand skills.

Among other things, in this course, I tried to draw parallels between disciplines. For instance, as an introduction to a lesson

The “equation” led me to wonder what language learners might come up with for the term “creative communication.”

on tone, I asked students to contemplate and discuss the commonalities between language and eleven elements of music (rhythm, tempo, structure, harmony, etc.). In another case, I connected language and mathematics. That activity is the focus of this article.

The activity, which I call Equations for Creativity, was inspired by my encounter with Andrei Aleinikov’s work on an emerging area, creative linguistics. In “Creativity Definitions: Approaches” (2020, p. 585), Aleinikov shared Ruth Noller’s “equation” for creativity as in (1):

$$(1) C = fa(K, I, E)$$

Aleinikov went on to offer Isaksen, Dorval, and Treffinger’s (2011) explanation of this equation: “creativity is a function of an interpersonal attitude toward the beneficial and positive use of creativity in combination with three factors: knowledge, imagination, and evaluation” (p. 585).

Based on my own study of the science of creativity over many years, I know that the multifaceted concept is notoriously difficult to define, and it would only be natural for some readers of this “equation” to raise eyebrows and subsequently engage in debate. Aleinikov, of course, did offer a critique and requalified this more as a “symbolic representation for Noller’s understanding of creativity, some abbreviation” (p. 585). As it turns out, defining the concept of equation is also a challenge (Marcus & Watt, 2012), but I digress.

The important point is that I saw an opportunity for a meaningful communicative activity! The “equation” led me to wonder what language learners might come up with for the term “creative communication” and how creative and different those and their explanations might be.

I decided to use this idea as a quick warm-up at the beginning of a class at the tail end of the semester. In this sense, I hoped it would also serve to get students to recall the theory they had studied over the previous three months. As it turns out, the activity did not go quite as expected! Below, I describe how I initially presented the activity along with some outcomes. Then, I offer reflections on the procedure.

My Presentation of the Activity and Outcomes

To begin with, I showed and explained a slide entitled “Math Equation Challenge” with Noller’s equation for creativity as a model and the prompt: “If you had to write a math equation for creative communication, what would it look like?” Some learners put on their creative hats and got straight to work; others were a bit puzzled. Reflecting in practice,* I wrote a few mathematical operators (+, -, x, /, <, >) on the board to offer encouragement and better facilitate the activity. After the students had finished, I asked them to share their creations.

In the end, some of these did not result in equations. Furthermore, not all equations were about creative communication! A sample of student-generated work (used with permission) appears in Figure 1. The top two are mostly on topic, with the first one emphasizing the quality and effect and the second one demonstrating generativity in progress. The bottom two have different foci, with the third one demonstrating playfulness and the last one taking advantage of a simile to express humor.

Figure 1. Student-Generated Work

If creative communication is good, it will plus or multiply. If creative communication is bad, it will minus or divide.
Creative + communication = creative communication
Brilliant ideas + people = creative communication
Multiple brains x conversation = creative communication
(People x communication) + interesting topics = ?
Professor = π (3.141592635 ...) + Me = π (“ = ∞ can’t count
Mathematical formulas look like alien script.

Whether any formula was actually accurate, logical, or used proper mathematical notation or not did not really matter to me. It was the chance for students to extract knowledge, play with symbols (linguistic and other) and imagery, and discuss their creations with peers that was of real value, and this is what happened!

Reflection on the Activity Procedure

Nevertheless, when reflecting on practice* in hindsight, some ideas for improving the activity came to me. The first relates to helping to reduce initial confusion about how to approach the equation writing at the production stage. This was to stimulate curiosity and imagination by first providing random examples for students to decipher and negotiate, such as those generated by ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) in Figure 2. However, reflecting further on this, I decided a risk is that these could limit students’ creative expression. Instead, giving students more time to review key elements of the course and recall their mathematical knowledge about elements of equations before starting might be more fruitful.

Figure 2. ChatGPT-Generated Equations

Creative Communication = $(I+E) \times C \times A$
Creative Communication = $((T + L) \times D) / B$
Creative Communication = $(K + P)^m \times S$
Creative Communication = $(E \times M) + F + U$

Second, on my first attempt, I had students mingle and freely share their prepared equations with others, which they were happy to do, being very familiar with each other at this stage. However, a more structured activity, such as a gallery walk (Yeourng, 2021), in which participants circle around a class, looking at posted exhibits and interacting amongst themselves or possibly with exhibit presenters, could be another, more formal variation. In addition to this speaking skills part, the activity could include a target language focus and writing components, such as a descriptive-interpretative caption or, more extensively, an expository paragraph task.

The above would obviously require extra time, and I would suggest spending more than the 20 minutes I actually allotted. This activity, initially intended only as a warm-up, certainly merits being developed into a full-fledged lesson and could be used for a huge number of concepts in all kinds of classes with learners of different ages from secondary school or above.

Finally, having blank B4-sized paper and art supplies on hand for poster preparation is also recommended, although digital canvasses could serve as greener alternatives if available.

I had students mingle and freely share their prepared equations with others...



Whatever you decide, I hope this article, which gave me an opportunity to more deeply reflect for action,* allows you to creatively enjoy Equations for Creativity!

Note

* Reflection in, on, and for practice are discussed in Farrell (2004).

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The Power of Speed Dating in Language Learning

By Gunther Breaux

In Korean university classrooms, students often arrive with strong grammar skills but little real-world speaking experience. Enter speed dating conversations – a fast-paced, partner-rotating activity designed to get students talking, often and with many peers. Every seven minutes, they switch partners, repeating similar content, which builds fluency, confidence, and self-correction without grammar policing. With structured writing beforehand and conversation tests after, this method transforms passive learners into active speakers. Repetition is the engine; conversation is the vehicle. It's efficient, scalable, and ideal for large classes where authentic speaking practice is otherwise hard to come by.

For context, this article focuses on a required freshmen English program course. This is a graded course, for three hours a week. Class size is up to 30 students. They are smart, motivated, and have had 10 years of grammar-based English. And most cannot tell you what they had for lunch.

The goal is improved speaking ability, the method is 30 hours of conversations, and the test is a conversation test. Homework is what makes them speak, and it's 40% of their grade. They do it or they fail.

Key Points to Speed Dating

Speed dating is an energetic, student-centered activity that turns conversation practice into a structured routine of frequent, focused exchanges. Students rotate partners every few minutes, gaining repeated opportunities to speak, listen, and adapt to different interlocutors. The following ten principles explain why this simple format consistently boosts fluency, confidence, and motivation in EFL classrooms.

1. *Everybody gets a new partner every seven minutes.* Every time your English runs out of gas, you get a new partner. This steady rotation keeps the activity dynamic and prevents conversations from going stale. It also ensures that all students engage with multiple classmates, not just their usual friends.
2. *Everybody's speaking half the time; half the time your partner is a better speaker.* This balance provides students with both practice and input. They gain confidence when speaking, and they pick up new language structures when listening. Through repeated trial and error, listening and pronunciation improve.
3. *Many partners make you speak smoother; better partners make you speak better.* Repetition across multiple conversations helps learners polish their delivery. Exposure to stronger

speakers challenges them to stretch their skills further, and forces them outside their comfort zone.

4. *After two weeks of no grammar police, students start to self-correct.* Without constant correction, learners feel freer to communicate. Over time, they begin noticing and adjusting their own mistakes naturally.
5. *The better speakers are role models and provide gentle language gain.* Students unconsciously adopt useful phrases, patterns, and intonation. This kind of peer modeling accelerates language development in a natural way.
6. *Students write what they will say, and talk about what they wrote.* Preparing ideas in writing gives structure and clarity to their speaking. It bridges the gap between accuracy on paper and fluency in conversation.



7. *Writing before speaking improves accuracy. Speaking to many partners improves fluency.* This two-step process ensures that learners are practicing both sides of the skill set. They first get their language right, and then they get it fast.
8. *The bigger the class the better. More partners = more repetition = more improvement.* Big classes offer greater variety in partners, questions, and responses. This diversity makes the activity more authentic and more effective. And, big classes have more energy.
9. *Students speak because the more they speak, the higher their grade.* Linking participation directly to assessment motivates learners to put in genuine effort. The reward system encourages consistent practice over time.
10. *This is fundamental human nature.* First, everybody loves to talk about themselves. Sharing personal stories makes the task engaging. Second, to get better at something, you do it more than once. Repetition reinforces skill. Third, what gets tested gets done. Clear accountability drives consistent participation.

More speaking means more self-correction, which means more improvement.

How Do You Set It Up?

Easy. Partners. Many new partners. The teacher's main weekly task is to arrange the greatest variety of new partners. Repetition increases fluency, and new partners enable more repetition. Students walk in, find their seat and partner on the big board, and sit. I use a free internet timer, and set it to seven

minutes. Then, I yell, "What did you do last weekend? SPEAK!" And off they go. When the bell rings, they switch. In the middle of their second or third conversation, I suddenly blurt out "For example?" and "What about you?" These make answers, and conversations, longer, which results in the improved data that I want. A key component of improvement is students giving longer answers, with specific details, from their own life.

But, How Do You Get Students Speaking?

Easy. A conversation book. Students write what they will say and talk about what they wrote. All homework is writing what they will say. Students answer the 16 basic topic questions. And as the semester progresses, they answer the short descriptive paragraph/elevator speech. And then after midterm, they write a simplified TOEFL essay. There's no reading and guessing. Students write it, and bada-bing, they want to use it. After investing 30 minutes in writing what they will say, they want to say it. Trust me, college kids love to talk. Homework is important. It makes them speak, and it's 40% of their grade. They do it or they fail. There's no more pulling teeth to get shy Korean freshmen to speak.

The book uses a spiral binder so each student views questions from a different page, seeing only their own questions and answers, not their partner's. Though they could flip pages to find the question and their written response, they rarely do; 98% answer spontaneously, knowing that speaking more raises their grade and that reading prewritten answers slows the flow and feels lazy to a partner. And no memo cards! Since they must listen rather than read, this setup naturally fosters genuine speaking, and as quantity increases, quality follows.

There's a method to the madness. At the get-go, students are taught to ask "What about you?" So, if I want to talk about my elective course, I will ask: "Do you have any elective courses?" And I am pretty sure, my partner will soon have to ask "What about you?" and then I can answer the question that I want.

How Do You Get Students to Speak for Hours and Hours?

Easy. Many new partners. The bigger the class the better. Thirty is perfect. With speed dating, everybody gets a new partner every seven minutes. The first three weeks are boot



camp. Everybody meets everybody. Students introduce themselves and talk about their major, courses, and club with 29 partners. Remember, these are first-time and beginning speakers, who've never had an English conversation in their whole life. In three weeks, their speaking ability has improved dramatically. More partners allows for more repetition, which means more improvement.

How Do You Test Their Speaking?

Easy. A conversation test. This is not a test of English for academic purposes. This is a real-world conversation that's used as an academic test. Three students of similar ability have a

Everybody's speaking half the time, half the time your partner's a better speaker.

15-minute conversation. They record it with their phone and transcribe what they say. MS Word gives how many words they spoke, and their average words per utterance. Total words gives an accurate measure of ability, and average words gives an accurate measure of improvement. Students do all the talking and transcribing, and MS Word gives their ability and improvement. Easy. The more students speak, the higher their grade. Thus, they speak.

Beginning Speakers Make a Lot of Mistakes. How Do You Correct That?

Easy. Students transcribe their conversation test. This takes two hours or less. When they transcribe, they hear, type, and read every mistake they have made. Then, they correct their top 5 or 10 mistakes. This is a new century with new technology. Finding and fixing mistakes is no longer a teacher's job. The best tennis players in the world make mistakes all the time. They self-correct. And so do your students. More speaking means more self-correction, which means more improvement.

What Does the Teacher Do?

Easy. As little as possible. The more students do, the more they improve. There are instructions in my book, *Speed Dating English*, and videos on the website. If the teacher has to talk in class, they're lazy or did something wrong.

I consciously do not mingle with the students or walk around and listen. I've been doing this for almost 30 years, I know what mistakes they make. And I never correct their mistakes because that tells them that grammar is the way to go, and it's not. If I correct mistakes, it means that mistakes are bad and important. Mistakes will be corrected on their conversation test transcript. A lot of speaking is the engine of fluency. Mistakes will occur, and be corrected, in the normal course of human events, and their transcripts will show their mistakes. Attention to mistakes in class, however, tells the class that mistakes are bad, and they should think more before speaking, and thus talk less. I do not want anything teacher-centered. I want happy, unencumbered speakers.

While students are speed dating, I often go over numbers to ensure that in the next class everyone will have new partners. On homework-check day, I check their homework (which takes about 10 minutes). If all that is done, and I get really bored, I might walk around, and once in a while mingle. However, in the first half of the semester, I mainly stay away. Freshmen can be intimidated by the teacher's presence. I want them having conversations, not distractions. Years ago, I sat in with a pair of students, and it quickly became obvious they were having a great conversation, and small talk with the teacher was not welcome. So I left! That's when I knew I was onto something.

A Structured Approach to Speaking Skill Development and Assessment

This framework combines four essential elements of speaking development: fluency, ability, accuracy, and improvement. Through structured conversation practice, testing, transcription, and progress tracking, students build confidence, refine their language use, and see measurable growth over time.

1. Every student has about 100 conversations, with about 28 different partners, and has about 30 hours of conversations. This improves their fluency. Speaking with such a wide range

of partners forces students to adapt to different accents, speeds, and styles. The sheer number of interactions provides the repetition needed for smoother delivery and more natural expression. Over time, this variety reduces hesitation and builds confidence.

2. Every student has three conversation tests, with six different partners, for a total of 45 minutes. This measures their ability. By testing across multiple partners, the results give a fairer picture of a student's communicative competence rather than relying on one single interaction. The timed nature of the tests also ensures that students demonstrate their real-time speaking ability under consistent conditions. This makes assessment both valid and reliable.
3. Every student spends six hours transcribing and self-correcting their conversation tests. This improves their accuracy. Writing out their own spoken words helps students notice patterns of error they normally miss in conversation. Self-correction encourages ownership of learning and strengthens the connection between spoken and written accuracy. This process trains learners to monitor their language more effectively during future interactions.
4. In every student the difference between total words and average words in the first and third tests measures their improvement. Tracking progress over time provides concrete evidence of growth, making improvement visible and motivating. Comparing results helps both teachers and students (and parents and deans) see which areas have strengthened and which still need support. This data-driven approach ensures that progress is not just felt but measured.

Write what you will say, talk about what you wrote.

Interview with Gunther Breaux

The editors of *The English Connection* magazine were fortunate enough to speak with Gunther Breaux, long recognized in Korea for his innovative speed dating approach to English fluency. In the following short interview, he shares his uncompromising view on real-world speaking, the teacher's role, and how fluency is best built through authentic communication.

The English Connection (TEC): Many teachers see speed dating as a fun classroom activity. You've said it's much more than that. Why is it so central to fluency?

Breaux: My method is that speed dating is not just a worthwhile activity. It is the core part of the only viable path to fluency. There is no hope of fluency without hours and hours of conversations, and the best conversation format is speed dating pair conversations. Speak and learn. Not learn, then speak. Speaking is a big ship, all else follows in the wake. Teacher talk not required.

TEC: What is your role as a teacher while students are doing speed dating?

Breaux: While students are speed dating, I try to limit my interaction as much as possible. This is a conversation class, not a teacher-talking class. Anything I would need to say is in the book or instruction video. Any teacher interaction would be distracting, and turn attention away from peer conversations to teachers.

TEC: How do you connect students' speaking practice with their writing and testing?

Breaux: Writing beforehand is enough to get them going. Of course, their spoken answers often do not resemble their written answers. No big deal. These are real-world conversations. And the human nature, natural impulse, is to answer.

For the real-world conversation test, students usually use questions from the book, which they answered in the book. Therefore, when students correct their conversation test transcript, they are also correcting their writing.

Again, I do not see speed dating as an occasional, break-the-boredom activity. Speed dating is the only hope of approaching fluency. Which should be the goal of a 10-year English education.

TEC: Some teachers worry about students' grammar accuracy. What's your perspective?

Breaux: Any attention to grammar slows down, gums up speaking, it becomes slow, halting. And the class goal is about improvement. So I never, ever, ever mention or cover grammar. Never in 30 years. Grammar improves AFTER a lot of speaking, not before. Improved grammar is a result, not a pre-requisite.

Further, here are a couple quotes from two Korean freshmen. This is the reason I never covered grammar: "Too much emphasis on grammatical knowledge makes me unable to speak." "I have a bad habit which I can never overcome. I never open my mouth until I make a complete sentence with correct grammar in my head."

Real-world conversations are possible because the test is a real-world conversation. What gets tested gets done. So yes, in a real-world conversation class, teaching to the test is the way to go.

TEC: You once mentioned a story about sidewalks as a metaphor for language learning. Can you tell us about that?

Breaux: In the 1970s, a new university was built in America. They built everything – except the sidewalks. Then, after one semester, there were dirt paths where students naturally walked most frequently. Then, that is where they built the sidewalks. In the same way, we let students speak about what is important to them, and correct that. We do not try to prevent or correct 1,000 Oxford–Cambridge mistakes. Students do not try and fail to learn the whole English language; they master the small part of the English language that is important to them.

TEC: Thank you, Gunther!

Breaux: You are most welcome. I greatly appreciate this attention you've given to speed dating.

The Author

Gunther Breaux has been in the freshmen English conversation business in Korea since 1996. He's the author of several EFL textbooks and has presented at international conferences in Korea, Japan, China, Thailand, England, and the U.S. His contribution to English education is conversation-based learning. Email: plangbro@gmail.com



Using AI to Quickly Create ELL Materials from Authentic Sources

By Josh McNicoll

Introduction

The emergence of AI in education is creating new possibilities for English language teaching. Traditionally, teachers have relied on textbooks, hand-crafted worksheets, and classroom discussion to provide learners with input and practice opportunities. While these methods remain central, teachers today face increasing pressure to diversify materials, address learner differences, and integrate authentic sources into their lessons. Yet preparing customized lessons that draw on real-world content is time-intensive, and many instructors simply do not have the hours to adapt every song, article, or conversation topic for their learners' proficiency levels.

AI, however, has been offering a solution. By using large language models such as Google Gemini, teachers can generate classroom-ready activities within minutes. These tools allow instructors to paste in authentic input, whether a song, an article, or a list of vocabulary, and then prompt the AI to the materials for learners at different levels of performance (for example, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [CEFR], an international standard that describes language proficiency across six levels, from beginner [A1] to proficient [C2]), to help assess and compare learners' language abilities consistently).

In this article, I demonstrate how AI can help teachers quickly create engaging and pedagogically sound ELL materials across five common classroom scenarios, ranging from teaching with songs to assisting with pronunciation and customized role-play activities. Each section highlights the practical steps teachers can take, the advantages of AI-generated resources, and the pedagogical considerations needed to ensure that AI enhances rather than replaces thoughtful teaching. Ultimately, the goal is to persuade teachers that AI is not a threat to professional expertise but rather a powerful tool to amplify it.

Scenario 1: Teaching with Songs

Songs are a beloved tool in ELT. They bring rhythm, melody, and cultural resonance into the classroom. Many learners already listen to English music outside of school, making songs a natural bridge between their personal lives and language learning. However, while the potential benefits are clear (improved

listening comprehension, vocabulary development, and pronunciation) teachers often avoid using songs because of the preparation involved. Creating a gap-fill activity from song lyrics requires selecting suitable vocabulary, formatting lyrics, and ensuring the task is neither too easy nor too difficult. Designing follow-up conversation questions or jigsaw tasks can take even more time.

This is where AI truly shines. It not only automates the time-consuming mechanics of worksheet creation but also tailors materials to specific learner levels and needs. By copying the URL of a YouTube song into Gemini and giving a prompt such as "Create a gap-fill activity for this song for beginner, CEFR A2 learners of English," a teacher can instantly generate a worksheet. Gemini will even include a word box of missing terms, ensuring learners can check comprehension and spelling independently. What makes this especially powerful is the AI's responsiveness; if the activity seems too easy or too challenging, the teacher can simply refine the prompt (e.g., "Make the vocabulary appropriate for CEFR B1 learners"), and Gemini will recalibrate both the language and the task complexity. In this way, AI functions like a flexible teaching assistant, handling the mechanical aspects of task design while the teacher focuses on aligning activities with lesson goals, classroom dynamics, and student engagement.



Beyond gap-fills, AI can help generate conversation questions that encourage learners to reflect on the song's themes. For example, a pop song about friendship could lead to questions such as "What makes a good friend?" or "Have you ever had to repair a friendship?" Teachers can also request jigsaw-style activities where students each learn part of the song or its background and then share with peers. The result is a suite of

AI is not a threat to professional expertise but rather a powerful tool to amplify it.

activities (listening, vocabulary, speaking) that link authentically to students' interests while saving teachers hours of preparation.

Scenario 2: Supporting Academic English Goals

Another common challenge in adult education is meeting learners' individual goals. During conferences or informal check-ins, a student may share that they want to improve their academic writing or prepare for college-level English. Teachers recognize the importance of honoring these goals, but they also must balance them against the needs of an entire class. This can leave instructors unsure where to begin; how do you create tailored support for one student without redesigning your entire course?

Here again, AI can provide a solution. By instructing Gemini with a prompt such as "Create an academic vocabulary exercise suitable for CEFR A2 (upper beginner) learners of English," teachers can quickly obtain targeted practice materials. For instance, Gemini might generate a short matching activity where students pair academic terms (e.g., *analyze*, *define*, *compare*) with simple definitions or example sentences. If the AI's first attempt is too advanced, the teacher can refine the prompt: "Simplify the activity for beginners." Within moments, a customized set of materials is ready, often including worksheets, short dictation exercises, or PowerPoint slides that can be used in class or assigned for self-study. The teacher can then print these as a supplement or email them directly to the student, offering individualized attention without consuming hours of planning.

The pedagogical value of this lies not only in efficiently creating course content but also offering individual motivation for students. Students feel their personal learning goals are taken seriously, which strengthens their engagement. Furthermore, because Gemini and similar tools allow easy exporting to Google Docs or email, materials can be quickly shared with learners or colleagues. In a broader sense, this points to a future in which teachers act less as the sole creators of content and more as facilitators who guide learners in accessing resources aligned with their goals.

Scenario 3: Simplifying Authentic Texts

Authentic materials (such as newspaper articles, blog posts, public health flyers) are invaluable for exposing learners to real-world English. They introduce vocabulary and discourse patterns that go beyond the textbook, while also preparing learners for the kinds of texts they will encounter in daily life. Yet authentic texts are rarely written with English learners in mind. The syntax may be complex, the vocabulary dense, and the cultural references opaque. Teachers who want to use authentic texts must often spend significant time rewriting them at an accessible level, a task that can be daunting on a weekly basis.

AI makes this process far more manageable. Teachers can paste the text of an article directly into Gemini and request: "Recreate this text for CEFR A2 (upper beginner) learners without using bullet points." The AI then produces a simplified version that retains the core content but adjusts the language to be more accessible. For example, a complex article on healthcare costs can be transformed into short paragraphs with clear sentences, allowing learners to access important information without feeling overwhelmed.

However, the teacher's perennial role in delivering reliable information and learner-centered instruction is crucial here. AI simplifications must be checked for accuracy, appropriateness, and alignment with the lesson's focus. This review process ensures that students are not misled or given oversimplified texts that strip away nuance. Nevertheless, by handling the bulk of the simplification, AI allows teachers to focus on designing comprehension questions, pre-reading vocabulary activities, or post-reading discussions. Thus, authentic texts become more viable for regular classroom use, enriching students' exposure to real English while maintaining pedagogical scaffolding.

Scenario 4: Tailor Vocabulary with the Oxford 3000

Vocabulary acquisition is at the heart of language learning, but it is also one of the areas where learners' needs differ most. The Oxford 3000 provides a curated list of essential English words, but within this core list, the priorities of learners vary. For example, a student working in a restaurant will benefit from mastering food-service vocabulary, while another planning to attend community college may need words related to academic study. Teachers can try to anticipate these needs, but it is difficult to meet everyone's priorities simultaneously.

Figure 1.
A Targeted Vocabulary List Can Be Produced Quickly

4. Student use Gemini to scour Oxford 3000 - Results

Give me a list of 10 words from the Oxford 3000 that are RESTAURANT related. Give me a GAP-FILL exercise.

Here are 10 words from the Oxford 3000 that are related to a restaurant setting:

- Service:** The way customers are treated by a waiter or waitress.
- Order:** To ask for food or drink in a restaurant.
- Menu:** A list of food and drink you can choose from.
- Table:** The place where you sit to eat a meal.
- Bill:** The piece of paper that shows how much money you need to pay.
- Glass:** A container you drink from.
- Drink:** A liquid you can have with your meal.
- Meal:** The food you eat at a certain time, like lunch or dinner.
- Dish:** A type of food that is prepared in a special way.
- Book:** To reserve a table in a restaurant for a future time.

Gap-Fill Exercise: A Meal at a Restaurant

Complete the sentences below using the correct word from the list above.

- I need to _____ a table for two for Friday night.
- The waiter was very kind; the _____ was excellent.
- Can I see the _____ to choose what to eat?
- Our _____ is ready, we can sit down and look at the menu.
- I'd like to _____ the chicken and a _____ of water, please.
- The lasagna is a very popular _____ here.
- The food was delicious, a perfect _____.
- Could you bring us the _____? We would like to pay now.

With AI, personalization becomes much easier. Gemini can be prompted with commands such as "Give me 10 Oxford 3000 words related to restaurants and create a gap-fill exercise." The AI quickly produces a targeted vocabulary list and corresponding activity. In practical classroom terms, students can then complete the exercise in pairs, reinforcing their learning collaboratively. In addition, learners can be shown how to generate their own lists by entering prompts based on their interests or professional goals (office work, music, education). Such personalization enhances motivation and demonstrates the relevance of English to learners' immediate lives. This empowers them to take control of their vocabulary development, turning AI into a self-directed learning tool. For teachers, the benefits are twofold: They save preparation time while also fostering learner autonomy.

Teachers must model critical engagement with digital tools.

Scenario 5: Practicing Pronunciation and Role-Play

Pronunciation and speaking confidence are enduring concerns for learners, particularly those seeking jobs or navigating professional environments. While classroom practice helps, students often need additional opportunities to rehearse in low-pressure contexts. AI role-play functions offer a promising avenue, as they provide personalized, on-demand speaking practice that can adapt to a learner's level, pace, and communicative goals. Gemini, for example, allows learners to engage in live role-plays where the AI takes on the role of an interviewer, a doctor, or a conversational partner.

A student can specify "I am a second-year university student," "I have an intermediate level of English," or "I am a CEFR B1 learner" along with "Please role-play a job interview with me for a restaurant position." The AI then generates realistic prompts and responds dynamically, giving the student repeated practice in a scenario they are likely to encounter. This kind of rehearsal helps learners build fluency, anticipate questions, and practice pronunciation. Crucially, it reduces anxiety: Students can make mistakes, retry, and experiment without the social pressure of a real interview.

Teachers can build on this by integrating AI role-plays into classroom activities. For instance, after students practice with Gemini individually, they can role-play the same scenario with a peer, applying what they learned in a communicative context. This combination (AI for individualized practice and classroom work for social reinforcement) offers a balanced approach. It highlights how AI is best used not as a replacement for teacher-led activities but as a supplement that increases learners' confidence and readiness for authentic communication.

Additional Considerations for Using AI in the Classroom

The scenarios above highlight the many benefits of AI, but they also point to important questions about pedagogy and practice. First, teachers must remain critical consumers of the output generated by AI tools. Errors, cultural mismatches, or oversimplifications are possible, and unchecked use of AI materials could undermine learners' independence. Second, not all teachers and students are immediately comfortable with AI. Some may find it impersonal or intimidating. For both students and instructors, building digital literacy and offering professional development geared towards the ethical use of AI, perhaps through workshops and the sharing of best practices, are key steps in addressing this. In the end, AI should not replace human judgment, creativity, or empathy; instead, it should extend teachers' capacity to provide timely and personalized instruction. Finally, the potential for misuse cannot be ignored. AI can generate incorrect or biased information, and teachers

Authentic texts become more viable for regular classroom use, enriching students' exposure to real English while maintaining pedagogical scaffolding.

must model critical engagement with digital tools. By involving learners in this evaluative process, teachers can also strengthen students' digital literacy, preparing them not just as English users but as informed participants in an AI-mediated world.

Conclusion

AI is not a magic solution, but it is a powerful ally for teachers. The scenarios explored in this article – from using songs to personalizing vocabulary and rehearsing job interviews – illustrate how AI can reduce preparation time, increase learner engagement, and open new possibilities for authentic and personalized instruction. The key lies in adopting AI thoughtfully: Teachers must evaluate the output generated by AI for accuracy and reliability, adapt it to their pedagogical aims, and use it to complement rather than replace human interaction.

The future of English language teaching will not be a contest between human and machine but a collaboration where AI amplifies the teacher's ability to provide engaging, student-centered learning experiences. By experimenting with AI tools today, teachers can position themselves and their students to thrive in this new landscape.

(An earlier version of this article was presented through Johnson County Adult Education, Kansas, US.)



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The Author

Josh McNicoll spent several years teaching in Seoul, including positions at Dongguk University and Ewha Womans University, where he embraced the ongoing challenge of living authentically in a fast-paced, high-pressure culture. He now resides in Overland Park, Kansas, where he teaches university-level ESL. In his free time, he enjoys working on cars, Vietnamese coffee, and walks with his dog, Lemon. Email: mcnicolljosh@gmail.com



Let's Ask the Experts – Our Students!

Survey Ideas to Help Students Reflect on Speaking English

Ever wonder what your students really think about learning English, working in pairs or groups, and reflecting on their own progress?

These three short surveys are designed to give you a quick peek inside their learning world. They're easy to use, light in tone, and can spark some great classroom conversations.

Whether your students prefer solo study or thrive in teamwork, these questionnaires help you see what motivates them, and how they feel about their English speaking journey. Think of them as a friendly "temperature check" before and after your next round of task-based activities.

And for a more in-depth look into examining the learner's role in task interaction, see Jake Kimball's column "The Classroom Connection" on page 28.

Here's one survey to understand more of your students' learning preferences.

1. I like working alone / with a partner / in a small group / with the whole class.
Because _____
2. I feel comfortable / nervous when I talk with a classmate.
Because _____
3. I feel confident / shy when I speak in front of everyone.
Because _____
4. I think I learn more / less when I talk to classmates.
Because _____
5. I speak more / less English when I work in pairs or groups.
Because _____
6. When I work with a partner, it is easy / difficult to share ideas.
Because _____
7. When I speak English, I am worried about mistakes / not worried about mistakes.
Because _____
8. I like listening / speaking more in English activities.
Because _____

This survey can gauge how valuable students think group work is to their class time.

1. During speaking activities, most important is to communicate a lot / make as few mistakes as possible.
2. We get better ideas and say more interesting things in pairs or groups / in front of the whole class.
3. It is good / bad that the teacher can't hear everything we say in group work.
4. Pair or group work is useful / a waste of time because _____.
5. If I make mistakes in pair or group work, I usually try to correct myself / wait for the teacher to correct me.

The survey below can be used after students complete a group project or collaborative task. It also works well as a brief strategy-training tool to benefit both learners and teachers.

Statement	1 Never	2	3 Sometimes	4	5 Always
1. When I speak with classmates, I try to notice my grammar and fix it myself.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Working with classmates helps me remember and use new words and phrases later.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. After group discussions, I check how accurate my English was and try to improve it.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I like it when the teacher and classmates help me correct mistakes together.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I learn English when I listen carefully to classmates' corrections or explanations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. When I work in groups, I try to stay focused and help my team finish the task.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I feel more confident and motivated when classmates listen to and use my ideas.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. When I don't understand something, I ask questions in English to make the meaning clear.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. When my partner makes a mistake, I help by repeating or correcting politely.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I like to use English expressions for group work (for example, Do you mean ...? Let's check that.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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A Final Project That Can Bring Joy and Meaning

By Peter C. Herman

With the rise of AI-enabled cheating, a creative assignment can be a powerful alternative to the traditional term paper.

For decades now, professors have been complaining about the futility of asking students to write term papers, otherwise known as a research paper. In theory, research papers teach students how to gather a large body of information, weigh conflicting interpretations, and come up with their own ideas about the subject, all while honing their writing skills.

But the reality is very different. The prose is usually terrible and the ideas a bad rehash of class lectures. Grading these essays is pure torture. Anecdotally, I've heard many say that evaluating papers is the worst part of teaching. If Dante had known about grading, he would have added a new circle of hell where the damned have to grade one bad paper after another for all eternity.

If Dante had known about grading, he would have added a new circle of hell...

And now we have AI, or "artificial intelligence," in the form of ChatGPT, Grok, Gemini and a host of other platforms. Submit a prompt, and these programs spit out an essay that, aside from the occasional hallucination, is actually pretty good. Grammatical mistakes are rare; there's a thesis, evidence, and organization.

Even worse, using AI for schoolwork is rampant in both K–12 and higher ed. As James D. Walsh (2025) puts it in his now-infamous *New York* magazine article, "Everyone Is Cheating Their Way Through College." And it's nearly impossible to catch cheaters, especially now that the airless, robotic prose that's often a marker of an AI-written essay can be masked by programs that promise to "unlock truly human-like AI text" (Humanizer.org, n.d.).

What to do? If you have a large class, interviewing students about their essays to ensure they didn't use AI is impractical, and randomly choosing students to interview could lead to charges of bias. Besides, suspecting everyone of plagiarism destroys the class atmosphere.

Many have gone back to handwritten exams and in-class writing assignments. But grading a pile of blue books is as agonizingly tedious as a pile of papers.

My solution has been to replace the final research paper with a creative project.

Instead of a detailed prompt or instructions, I give my students very wide latitude to do, as the phrase goes,

whatever floats their boat. Nonetheless, I still set a few parameters. They have to tell me several weeks in advance what they have in mind. They can't take a piece of paper, draw a line across it and say, "Behold: My interpretation of *Hamlet*."

I have only two hard rules: The project must reflect a good-faith effort to interpret something we've read in class, and they have to hand in a brief description of what they tried to accomplish. For those willing (most are), the students present their projects to the class during the period allotted for the final exam. Other than that, they do what they want – and I've gotten amazing results.

When I was teaching the literature of terrorism, one student happened to be going to New York for spring break, so she went to the Sept. 11 memorial and interviewed people. Another student composed a rock opera based on Thomas Kyd's Elizabethan play *The Spanish Tragedy*. A group put together a postapocalyptic performance of *King Lear* on the heath, using the university's loading docks for their stage. I've gotten raps, short stories, children's books, parodies performed and written, musical compositions, and paintings.

For example, a student produced this project (see drawing below) for my last Shakespeare class (created by Teresa Cousillas Lemare; reproduced with the student's permission):

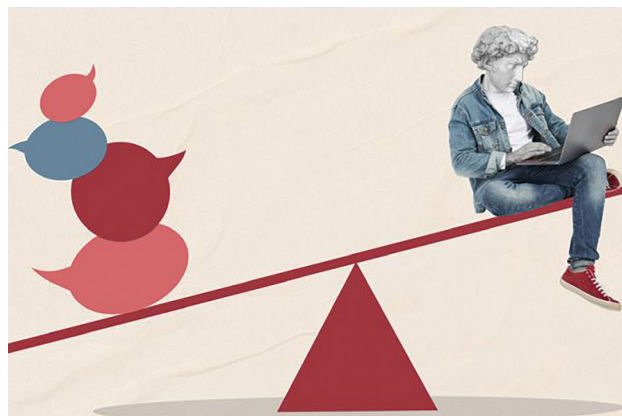


This pencil drawing represents the student's response to Al Pacino's delivery of Shylock's "Hath Not a Jew" speech in Michael Radford's 2004 film, *The Merchant of Venice*. The three images represent the different emotions Shylock displayed over the course of his speech: rage, sadness, determination.

For the background, this student wrote out Shylock's speech, thereby committing it (she told me) to memory. But this project represents more than a pretty picture: It demonstrates a profound response to Shakespeare's words and Pacino's delivery of them.

This project accomplished nearly the same goals a term paper is supposed to accomplish: reflecting on the material and responding to the play both emotionally and intellectually. As a final payoff, while most students forget about their term papers seconds after they submit them, I'm guessing this student will remember this one and carry forward a deep appreciation of Shakespeare.

Granted, switching to creative projects does not entirely eliminate the possibility of using AI to cheat. Students could still resort to AI if they want to produce anything that involves writing (e.g., a screenplay or a short story), or for visual projects, they could use an AI art generator. But the opportunity to create something they're invested in, as opposed to responding to the professor's essay topics, reduces the incentive to not do the work. The project is something the student wants to do rather than something they have to do.



method that not only accomplishes nearly the same aims but, in the end, brings joy to both student and teacher.

This article originally appeared in Inside Higher Education (Sept. 26, 2025). Reprinted with author's permission.
<https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/career-advice/teaching/2025/09/26/light-ai-creative-alternative-essays-opinion>

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This project accomplished
nearly the same goals a
term paper is supposed to
accomplish...

Yet there is something lost. When the creative project replaces the research paper, students will not have the experience of sorting through multiple and contradictory interpretations. They won't learn about literary theory and different approaches to literature. And they won't learn how to write critical prose.

In short, in my discipline, replacing the research paper with a creative project means moving away from teaching English majors how to be literary critics, and that's not small. It means reorienting the undergraduate English major away from preparing our best students for graduate school and more toward historically informed response.

Nonetheless, it makes no sense to continue with an evaluation method that just about everybody agrees has long since lost its value. So I suggest abandoning the essay for another

The Author

Peter C. Herman teaches at San Diego State University. His most recent books are *Early Modern Others: Resisting Bias in Renaissance Literature*, *Unspeakable: Literature and Terrorism from the Gunpowder Plot to 9/11*, and *Destabilizing Milton: "Paradise Lost" and the Poetics of Incertitude*.

In addition, Dr. Herman has published public-facing articles and opinion pieces in such venues as *Public Humanities*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *Quillette*. Email: herman2@sdsu.edu



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Developing College Curricula: Convenience Versus Market-Driven Approaches

By William J. Rothwell

Designing and implementing college curricula is an important responsibility of higher education institutions. A curriculum represents the philosophy, priorities, and practical commitments of a university toward students, employers, and society at large. How a curriculum is constructed directly influences the employability of graduates, the reputation of the institution, and the long-term relevance of academic programs.

Among the many ways universities design curricula, two approaches stand out in stark contrast. The first may be termed the “convenience” approach, in which curricula are built largely around faculty preferences and teaching loads. The second is the “market-driven” approach, which emphasizes research into employer needs and aligns curricula with competency models, industry certifications, or established bodies of knowledge. This essay compares and contrasts these two approaches, highlighting their advantages, drawbacks, and long-term implications for higher education and workforce readiness.

to faculty interests. Professors enjoy autonomy, and the ability to design a program around their strengths and passions may enhance their engagement and job satisfaction. Third, the approach requires fewer upfront resources. Instead of investing in external market research, building advisory boards, or designing entirely new courses, the institution can repurpose existing assets.

But the convenience approach has clear shortcomings. Its most significant limitation is its insularity. By prioritizing faculty preferences, the curriculum may be completely disconnected from the realities of the labor market. Courses might reflect niche research interests rather than the competencies employers demand. Students graduating from such programs may find themselves with degrees that hold limited value in the workplace, undermining both their career prospects and the institution’s reputation. Moreover, because there is no systematic effort to align the program with industry needs, it risks becoming outdated quickly. While convenient for faculty, this approach often serves students poorly in terms of employability and long-term career success.



The Market-Driven Approach: Competency-Based Curriculum Development

In contrast, the market-driven approach begins not with faculty preferences but with a careful examination of what employers require from graduates in a given field. This method often draws upon competency models, occupational certifications, or professional bodies of knowledge that define the skills, knowledge, and behaviors necessary for success in a given industry. For instance, in fields such as accounting, project management, human resources, or cybersecurity, widely recognized certifications serve as benchmarks for professional readiness. Universities adopting this approach compare existing courses with the requirements laid out in such models or certifications. If essential courses are missing, they initiate the curriculum approval process to create them; if relevant courses already exist, faculty negotiate teaching assignments accordingly.

The Convenience Approach: Faculty-Centered Curriculum Development

The convenience approach begins with an institutional decision to establish a new program. Once the decision is made, administrators typically ask faculty members to propose courses they are most interested in teaching, often with the additional requirement that such courses guarantee them a predictable workload. Faculty respond by putting forward courses they enjoy or feel comfortable teaching – sometimes repurposed from existing programs. The university then compiles these courses, packages them into a sequence, and designates the result as a new degree program or college major.

This method is attractive for several reasons. First, it is administratively simple and relatively quick. Because courses already exist and faculty are ready to teach them, the program can be launched without extensive research, consultation, or approval beyond basic internal processes. Second, it appeals

Another hallmark of the market-driven approach is the establishment of an advisory committee composed of industry professionals. This group provides ongoing feedback, ensuring that the curriculum remains aligned with dynamically evolving workplace demands. By continuously integrating external perspectives, universities can keep their programs current, relevant, and attractive to both students and employers.

The advantages of this approach are substantial. Students benefit most directly, as their education is tied to tangible employment outcomes. Graduates of market-driven programs often enjoy higher employability and smoother transitions into professional roles. For institutions, these programs enhance reputational capital, attracting more students and strengthening partnerships with employers. Furthermore, market-driven curricula demonstrate accountability to stakeholders – students, parents, accrediting bodies, and policymakers – who increasingly demand evidence that higher education provides a return on investment.

However, the market-driven approach is not without challenges. It is more resource-intensive, requiring investments in labor market research, course development, and advisory committees. Faculty may resist if they perceive a loss of autonomy or feel that their intellectual interests are being subordinated to employer demands. Additionally, overemphasis on immediate market needs risks narrowing education to vocational training, potentially neglecting the broader intellectual, ethical, and civic purposes of higher education.

Comparing the Approaches

The differences between the convenience and market-driven approaches can be analyzed along several dimensions: orientation, process, outcomes, and sustainability.

Orientation. The convenience model is faculty-centered and emphasizes shared governance, while the market-driven model is employer-centered. The former prioritizes academic freedom and internal expediency; the latter emphasizes external accountability and alignment with workplace realities.

Process. Convenience-based curricula are constructed internally through faculty brainstorming and repurposing of existing courses. Market-driven curricula require external research, consultation with industry stakeholders, and possible development of new courses. The processes differ in speed and complexity, with the convenience model being quicker but less rigorous.



Outcomes. Convenience curricula may provide faculty satisfaction but often lead to weaker employment outcomes for students. Market-driven curricula, by contrast, are more likely to produce graduates who are competitive in the job market and hold credentials recognized by employers.

Sustainability. Over the long term, the convenience approach risks obsolescence as employer demands evolve and students gravitate toward programs with stronger employment linkages. Market-driven programs, though harder to maintain, are more sustainable because they are continuously updated through industry input.

Toward a Balanced Approach

While the two approaches stand in sharp contrast, they need not be mutually exclusive. A balanced strategy could integrate the strengths of both. For example, universities might start with a competency model to ensure relevance but allow faculty flexibility in designing electives that reflect their expertise and intellectual passions. Advisory committees can safeguard alignment with industry trends, while faculty governance ensures

How a curriculum is constructed directly influences the employability of graduates, the reputation of the institution, and the long-term relevance of academic programs.

academic rigor and integrity. Such hybrid models would respect both the professional aspirations of students and the academic freedom of faculty, fostering programs that are both relevant and intellectually robust.

Moreover, higher education institutions must remember that employability is only one dimension of their mission. While market-driven curricula address pressing concerns about return on investment, universities also cultivate critical thinking, creativity, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement. The danger of an overly expedient approach lies in irrelevance; the danger of an overly market-driven approach lies in reducing education to job training. Effective curriculum design requires navigating this tension thoughtfully.

Conclusion

In the ongoing evolution of higher education, curriculum development stands at the intersection of faculty interests, institutional imperatives, and societal needs. The convenience approach, though simple and appealing to faculty, often fails to prepare students for the realities of the workforce. The market-driven approach, grounded in competency models and industry certification frameworks, offers greater alignment with employer needs and enhances student employability, though at the cost of greater complexity and resource demands.

The challenge for universities is to recognize the limitations of expedience while harnessing the strengths of market responsiveness. By integrating faculty expertise with employer input, institutions can create curricula that are both academically meaningful and professionally valuable. Ultimately, the future of higher education lies in striking this balance – honoring the traditions of scholarship while ensuring that graduates are equipped to thrive in a dynamic world.

The Author

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Humor in the Classroom: A Guide for Language Teachers and Educational Researchers

Reviewed by Christopher Miller

Humor in the Classroom: A Guide for Language Teachers and Educational Researchers
Nancy D. Bell & Anne Pomerantz, (2016), Routledge.
Pages: 222. ISBN: 978-0-415-64054-1 (pbk)

Introduction

High expectations may equal heartbreak. I was looking forward to this book after approximately a year and a half of reading academic articles on humor in education, giving a presentation and writing a short article related to the topic. The book left me with mixed feelings. Bell and Pomerantz's *Humor in the Classroom* is theoretically successful, yet could have provided additional concrete strategies for using humor in the classroom.

Setting the Problem

The authors define "humor as a subset of language play that elicits a feeling of mirth" (p. 187). They also note that humor as a pragmatic skill is given marginal attention in language education. Citing ACTFL, MLA, and CEFR policy statements (among others) on purposes for learning a second language, only the CEFR statement under the umbrella of existential competence gives a nod to "creative, ludic, and aesthetic uses of language" (p. 5). This relative oversight in L2 curricular planning leads to learners who receive high marks in their formal classes but are deficient communicators outside of the classroom, as one L2 Spanish learner laments upon visiting Spain, "I felt like a terrible bore, acutely aware of my lack of sociocultural and sociopragmatic competence" (p. 4). The authors then set their sights higher, arguing teacher education needs to give greater attention to humor. Thus, this volume argues for formally recognizing (a) humor as a valid learning objective, albeit one couched as a subcomponent of broader pragmatic competence, and (b) humor as a strategic pedagogical tool, albeit one that the authors caution should not be abused, as they state, "The biggest risk, of course, is that your lessons will involve too much learning to play and not enough playing to learn" (p. 159).

Strong Points

Bell and Pomerantz establish the vital role of humor for L2 competence both interpersonally and professionally (p. viii). They make a similarly potent case for its relevance in many dimensions of classroom life. Drawing on work from Bakhtin and Goffman, the authors argue humor is essential for the functioning of any "complex and highly stratified social situation" (p. 95), such as a typical classroom. The authors rail against teacher evaluation protocols that do not give attention to effective use of humor by teachers (pp. 56–57). They offer clear arguments in favor of humor for pedagogical ends (including adding enjoyment, building student–teacher rapport, and for classroom management, p. 101) and serving students' needs (including giving an outlet to temporarily escape institutionally mandated identities and save face, p. 121).

The authors make their stance clear throughout the book. They take a critical view of positivism in classroom research and, given the highly situated nature of teaching and learning, a search for generalizable best practices (p. 55). Rather, the authors draw from a wide range of classroom-based qualitative studies and theoretical arguments to make their case.

Readers can expect to gain a solid understanding of core concepts related to the subject of this book. The authors spend a substantial portion of the book providing a theoretical

Humor in the Classroom

A Guide for Language Teachers and Educational Researchers



Nancy D. Bell and Anne Pomerantz



overview of humor, most notably the general theory of verbal humor associated with Victor Raskin (pp. 23–26). Competing views of language play among leading scholars commenting on L2 development are contrasted (pp. 190–191). Bakhtin's notion of "carnival" (essentially the institutional need for the powerful to provide spaces in which subordinate members engage in restricted forms of subversive activity) is explained and referenced frequently. Additionally, the authors offer a wide range of more minor concepts that have less relevance to the core arguments of the book but are fascinating in their own right, including mock language (pp. 86–89), mode adoption in co-constructed humor (p. 36), and sequences in building comical hypotheticals (p. 172).

"The biggest risk, of course, is that your lessons will involve too much learning to play and not enough playing to learn."

The authors make a larger number of distinctions that will give the reader some nuance when considering the role of humor in the L2 classroom. The reader will come to appreciate the difference between language play and mirth, dark and light humor (p. 133), humor as norm-challenging and as norm-upholding (p. 31), and key factors distinguishing bullying and teasing (p. 134) among many other parsings of key concepts related to this area of study.

Issues

The authors cover a lot in 198 pages of main text. We get mini lit reviews on all things humor and language play. There are flashes of polemics against existing teacher evaluation regimes and “positivist” classroom research paradigms. There are principles for designing activities that promote L2 development (p. 112); a list of essential dispositions for L2 teachers in the 21st century (p. 112), none of which are groundbreaking; a recurring summary, primarily informed by Kramsch, on evolving conceptions of language acquisition, language education, and language itself (e.g., pp. 5, 11, 119); a contrast between attitudes towards using humor by L2 teachers in Asian and Western contexts (p. 142); an overview of a history of classroom studies connected to SLA and beyond; and a final chapter on constructing research related to humor coupled with many aspects of SLA, including classroom life. Is it thorough or overambitious?

Somewhat ironically, the authors via their thorough listing of impediments to effectively utilizing humor as a pedagogical strategy and implementing a curricular focus on humor undermine not the veracity of their central argument but make it clear that practical challenges to realizing their vision may be overwhelming. The authors note the challenges for L2 users in effectively employing humor: incompatible scripts due to culture difference (p. 24), incomplete awareness of connotation, a tendency for native speakers to misinterpret or disregard L2 speakers attempts at humor (p. 40), and teachers’ hesitance to embrace humor, both due to a lack of training and a belief it can hurt “instructor credibility” (p. 142). Beyond these L2 speaker-specific challenges, the authors note the general murkiness of using humor. Appropriate usage of humor in social spaces is quite specific and influenced by culture. For instance, in a Japanese workplace, those with more status often initiate humor, but in a New Zealand workplace, anyone can initiate humor (p. 35). In contrast, skills like job interviewing are much easier to teach and evaluate than humor, which involves countless subtle nuances that remain only partly understood, as the authors acknowledge in the final chapter: “Further information about what is joked about, what can be joked about, and how different topics are treated humorously by L2 users is needed” (p. 194).

Though perhaps most frustrating for the classroom practitioner is the lack of granular detail in implementing a humor-informed curriculum. The authors utilize Wiggins and McTighe’s well-received *Understanding by Design* (2005) framework. They illustrate how a humor-informed curriculum could be used to teach giving advice, going so far as to provide an overview (using a *UbD*-based template) of a unit focused on advice (p. 160). The authors are fond of using role play and often return to the theoretical justification for adopting an alternative persona in classroom activities (pp. 77, 105, 119, 161). Elsewhere, the authors reproduce an assignment for pre-service teachers to design a lesson for identifying humor (pp. 167–168) and provide four aims to incorporate humor in the L2 curriculum: (a) identifying humor, (b) comprehending humor, (c) producing humor, and (d) responding to humor.

That is the good news. However, guidance for putting these aims into a more coherent course or language program is lacking. We get large lists of microskills (p. 170) for both spoken and written humor, as well as a series of contextualization cues signaling the onset of humor (p. 33). The authors are largely silent concerning suggestions about sequencing those items for instructional purposes for either receptive or productive aims. There is an

“further information about what is joked about, what can be joked about, and how different topics are treated humorously by L2 users is needed.”

insufficient partial syllabus of five topics (puns, responding to humor, situational irony, sarcasm, and self-deprecating humor) intended for beginners to advanced learners (pp. 180–181). There are allusions to 15 classroom activities suggested intermittently throughout the text. The authors rarely discuss them in detail. To take one example, “Students might be given the punch line and be asked to come up with the trigger” (p. 180). That’s the extent of the activity description. This volume could have been both strengthened and lengthened by using the *UbD* framework (pp. 154–159) to add specific lesson plans, additional unit plans, and sequencing guidelines for foundational skills offering learners practice in developing what I dare to playfully term “ludic competence.”

Conclusion

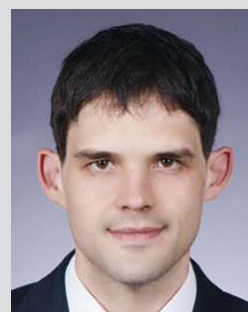
The authors deftly make the case that there is a problem: Language education is producing too many speakers deficient in humor-related skills. How to overcome this challenge institutionally and pedagogically? The authors are essentially mute on the former and only provide broad guidelines for the latter. The vision is admirable, but this book is incomplete. The authors clearly took much inspiration from Wiggins and McTighe (2005). They should take more and produce additional literature clarifying what an innovative curriculum providing ample attention to humor might look like – especially at the elementary and secondary level (the authors are teacher educators after all). McTighe and his colleague Harvey Silver, provide excellent illustrations for what a curriculum infused with *UbD* principles would look like at the activity and day-to-day level in *Teaching for Deeper Learning* (2020). If Bell and Pomerantz could create a similar text for their innovative approach for moving humor away from the curricular periphery and closer to its center, classroom practitioners would be well-served. As Ilchi Lee once said, “There is much work to be done.”

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The Reviewer

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The Development Connection



The Currency of Time

By Bill Snyder

realization about the lessons they've planned when they try them out. Everything takes more time than they think. There are a few reasons for this. First, my students never plan for all the little bits of time that get eaten up – time is also apparently edible – at the start and end of activities as learners get started and wind down: getting books or notebooks out or putting them away, accessing the online LMS for our textbook, finding a pen or pencil. So many small things frequently pass unnoticed in our daily practice but add up to a significant portion of the time we have together in class.

We spend time, save time, waste time, and run out of time. We don't say "Time is money" for nothing.

When Andrew White wrote a note to us columnists letting us know that a special issue would focus on the topic of time, I thought about how we talk about time. Time is the 4th dimension, the one that stands apart from the spatial dimensions of length, width, and height. Those dimensions have a physicality that makes them easier for us to grasp. Time is different. We often have to turn it into a thing to take hold of it. One common metaphor sees time as a kind of currency. We spend time, save time, waste time, and run out of time. We don't say "Time is money" for nothing.

Time is the essential currency of teaching and learning. Everything we do as teachers with students takes time, for both us and them. Our time spent with students in the classroom is limited. My second-year English class meets only once a week, for 90 minutes. I don't want any of that time with my students to be wasted for me or them. I am fortunate to have students who are really interested in working on improving their English. They all are in the classroom before the bell rings, giving me a little time to chat with some of them. They all come prepared with their books and any other materials they are asked to bring (e.g., word cards). My graduate student TA and I have met the day before to make a plan for the class, setting out a chain of activities to fill the 90 minutes and, hopefully, have the students feeling that their time has been well spent learning.

It does not always work out so smoothly.

Both my undergraduate teaching methodology students and my graduate practicum students quickly come to the same

My students also suffer from the "curse of knowledge." They can do the activity more quickly than the learners can because they planned it and know what to do at each stage of the activity and also because they simply know the language required for the activity better than the learners in front of them. Our students need more time to process what they are being asked to do, to figure out how to do it, and ultimately, actually carry out the activity. Where we, the more expert, can be fluent and graceful, learners are often unsure, halting, and sometimes failing and having to start again. Not noticing this gap in knowledge between us and our students adds to a lack of awareness of how long things take in classrooms.

But mostly, things take longer than my students expect because they don't pay such close attention to time in their planning. I'm not surprised by this. I did the same things when I was starting out as a teacher: focusing more on the content of my lessons and what I wanted to do in class than on the structure of the lesson and how it fit the scheduled class time. The *what* of the lesson felt more important than

the *how* of it at the time. Over time, with enough activities that didn't get finished the way I wanted or didn't happen at all because the bell rang, I became more sensitive to the factors that affected how much time I had and made adjustments in lesson planning. It's never perfect because timing in the classroom depends on the learners as much as it does on the teacher, but I have become better at balancing what I want to do with how I can do it in the time allotted. Perhaps this growing sensitivity to time is something that all teachers have to develop through the experience of teaching.

I would like to help my students get a head start on this process of mastering classroom time, though.

For my undergraduate students, I require them to write out a timetable for the microteaching activities they lead in class. Then, when they do the activity in class, I keep strict time, and cut off the activity regardless of where it is at the limit of their turn. The students get feedback on the activity from their peers and reflect on how they could improve, including timing. The next week, they come back and repeat the same lesson, followed by another reflection on what went better. Both the students and I notice that they have better timing during the repeat lesson. One student said in her reflection after a recent lesson, "I'm beginning to feel the clock inside of me."

My graduate students work with a cooperating teacher on the practical aspects of classroom teaching in their practicum, including planning and delivering lessons. My part of the practicum experience includes weekly group reflections on what they are doing and what has happened in their experiences in the classroom. Of course, the issue of time comes up. One thing that I have them do to feed discussion is read two short articles by James Lang (2016, January 11; March 7), the guru of small teaching, that talk about how to start and finish classes productively. What is interesting to me is that Lang frames these articles specifically in terms of time: the first and last five minutes of class. Lang points out that these minutes are often unfocused and argues that better use of them makes the class as a whole more productive. For my students, the Lang articles help them see the class period as an articulated whole, with different parts fitting together to promote learning. The articles move them from seeing the activities they carry out as separate *trees* to understanding the structure and timing of what they do as a *forest*, a complete ecology.

.....

As you can see, this column was originally meant for the previous issue of *The English Connection*, which focused on time. I had gotten as far as I have written above, and was thinking of how to conclude, when things happened that forced me to reorder my time and put finishing this column aside until now. My wife had a reoccurrence of a health issue that required a short hospital stay, and almost immediately afterwards, received some very disappointing news at work, both of which sent her into a tailspin. At the same time, my brother in the U.S. received a much more serious health diagnosis. Both of these things required my immediate attention and took priority over finishing this column.

We can only make decisions and prioritize our time if we are conscious of it and sense its limits.

Maybe this is the big lesson about time: It is limited, and we have to make decisions about what we are going to do with it, both within the classroom and in our lives. If managing time in the classroom is difficult, making decisions about work-life balance can be even more so, especially in a profession that requires us to give parts of ourselves and our time to our students to support their learning. We can only make decisions and prioritize our time if we are conscious of it and sense its limits.

Both of the things I had to deal with have resolved themselves as positively as they can. I'm glad that I had the time to do what I could when it was needed. We also need to know that the choices we make about our time impact other people, not just our students. I feel good about the choices I made last summer. At the same time, I appreciate Andrew White's acceptance of my letting him know last minute without full explanation that I couldn't finish the column. He had to finish an issue and did so excellently, filling that gap in the issue without complaint. I am grateful.



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The Columnist

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The Classroom Connection

Reflections on Collaboration: Revisiting a Core Practice in CLT

By Jake Kimball

Pairwork and group work are fundamental building blocks of communicative language teaching (CLT). We all know we should mix it in when sequencing our lesson plans. A quick check of teacher resource books in my personal library highlights group interactions as a best practice in our field. CLT and S-S interaction are not new concepts, either. So, is it worth writing a Classroom Connections article about the virtues of groupwork? Ahem. Psst! Come closer. I'd like to share a startling secret. In many classroom contexts, the hallmarks of CLT – namely, pairwork and group work – are seldom featured in practice. At least not regularly. After all these years, lockstep teaching and learning remain ubiquitous.

Reflection Point 1: Do you set up group work? Regularly? List the pros and cons of group work and note any barriers to organizing pairs or groups. How might these problems be overcome?

Getting Buy-In From Teachers

Teachers and administrators, too, sometimes need convincing of the value of pair and group work. One objection I have heard from teachers is that group work may lead to unchecked use of L2, resulting in excessive use of interlanguage, or more pejoratively, Konglish, which may then lead to fossilization. Granted, accuracy is a necessary component of L2 development. However, it is worth noting that studies have been conducted on whole-class and small-group engagement in tasks. These studies comparing the same-task output show that the issue is far more complex than simply calculating raw error counts. Other factors that may impact accuracy include task design, opportunities for negotiating meaning and repair, as well as

group size and composition (see Table 1). Pica and Doughty (1985) is a seminal work on this topic, and a literature review based on their article, for the most part, offers assurance that we are not doing our learners a disservice by engaging in pair or group work. In fact, just the opposite.

Table 1. Key Factors Influencing L2 Accuracy in Group Work

Factor	Effect on Accuracy	Classroom Application
Task type	Meaningful two-way tasks enhance accuracy.	Use information-gap or problem-solving tasks.
Interaction pattern	Collaborative interaction leads to greater accuracy.	Train learners in turn-taking and feedback strategies to enhance speaking skills.
Pre-task modeling	Increases grammatical accuracy.	Include a brief form focus before tasks.
Peer feedback	Raises awareness of language form.	Add peer-checking expressions and short peer-review stages.
Group size	Smaller groups or pairs often produce more accurate output.	Use pairs or trios where possible.
Proficiency mix	Mixing proficiency levels is beneficial.	Pair mid-level learners with stronger peers.
Teacher monitoring	Supports error repair through scaffolding.	Circulate and offer prompts or recasts.
Task type	Meaningful two-way tasks enhance accuracy.	Use information-gap or problem-solving tasks.

Note. From findings by Pica and Doughty (1985), Storch (1999), and Baghdadi and Keskes (2014).

Table 1 shows that several classroom and task design factors influence learners' grammatical accuracy. Meaningful, two-way communicative tasks such as information-gap or problem-solving activities promote greater accuracy, especially when done in small groups or pairs. Collaborative interaction, supported by training in turn-taking and feedback, further

Pair and group work are...
among the most effective ways to
promote accurate and confident
language use.

enhances accurate language use. Pre-task modeling and teacher monitoring both help scaffold learner output by drawing attention to form and providing corrective support. Peer feedback also raises learners' awareness of language forms when incorporated into short review stages. Finally, mixing learners of moderately different proficiency levels – pairing mid-level students with stronger peers – encourages improved performance and more accurate communication overall. Taken together, these findings confirm that thoughtful task design, balanced grouping, and guided interaction can significantly enhance learners' language accuracy. The information reassures teachers that pair and group work are not a disservice to learners; rather, when structured purposefully, they are among the most effective ways to promote accurate and confident language use.

Getting Buy-In From Learners

Getting learners to accept the value of pair and group work is not so easy. It has been noted that in Asian contexts, teacher-centered learning is a traditional and expected instructional approach. Even today, as we all know, a high-stakes exam culture continues to shape classroom dynamics and our student expectations – particularly their willingness to communicate and, consequently, their overall course satisfaction.

What to do? How about eliciting their feedback from surveys or questionnaires? I think this is a great way to engage students and get them to reflect on different types of classroom activities. A needs analysis can offer new perspectives on syllabus design and lesson planning, enabling teachers to better target learners' specific needs and interests. As a course progresses, getting feedback from learners is also helpful. You may be surprised by how much your students appreciate it when their opinions are genuinely considered.

When It All Falls Apart

A second issue to address is that once students are in pairs or groups, they often lack the linguistic repertoire to engage in productive pair or group work, such as negotiating meaning, checking understanding, asking for help, or politely correcting their own output. That is one major shortcoming of coursebooks. Topic content is provided early in a unit, with lexical sets and associated grammar. Is that enough scaffolding for students to do pair or group work? Are they really set up for success? We teachers often assume that students possess the language skills and soft skills necessary to engage in authentic interactions, but this is seldom the case. Teachers, therefore, need to monitor learners as they complete activities, noting where, how, or why communication breaks down.

Reflection Point 2: Brainstorm a list of "Useful English for Pair and Group Work," a resource or phrase bank that students can refer to when doing group work.

For a more comprehensive list of helpful phrases to use in class with students, visit KOTESOL's website and navigate to the Classroom Management SIG. There you will find additional materials related to this issue's column.

Reflection Point 3: When your learners are doing pair or group work, what have you observed when you monitor their task behavior and output? What strategies could you teach next time to help students repair communication?

Well-Designed Group Task Goals

A final consideration involves the goals and outcomes of group work. For collaborative tasks to succeed, they need to move beyond simply completing an activity in the textbook. Tricia Hedge (1993) describes project work as "an extended task which usually integrates language skills through a series of activities...working towards an agreed goal" (p. 276). This apt description is a reminder that successful collaboration requires both clear objectives and tangible outcomes.

Whether it's producing group presentations, class displays, or written reports, the project's goals should be meaningful to learners and achievable. Clearly defining the purpose of each task not only guides students but also helps teachers assess language use and teamwork.

The Wrap-up

Pair and group work are valuable means of developing communicative competence. While many readers may already sprinkle in a judicious amount of it throughout their lessons, it is much less common in practice than we might expect. By gradually introducing pair and group work to students, prefaced by careful planning, students will become more comfortable with it. Overcoming objections to collaborative work is easier if we can articulate its benefits. Finally, to promote the successful completion of tasks and projects, providing students with a phrase bank of useful expressions would go a long way to facilitating their experience.

This repetition and variation help move information from short-term to long-term memory...

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The Columnist

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The Brain Connection



How Surprise Represents Learning and the Predictive Brain

By Dr. Curtis Kelly

Surprise is not just some random phenomenon of the brain. It is there for a reason, a good one, and it has a lot to do with learning. The key to understanding surprise is by knowing it is a prediction error. The theory of predictive processing holds that rather than taking in extensive sensory data to figure out our current environment, we instead *predict* what is there according to previous experiences of similar situations. After taking in just a smidgen of sensory data, we fill in the rest automatically.

For example, imagine you are in class. You say, "Open your books to page 18," and the class starts moving. You see them open their textbooks, but then one student who isn't moving at all catches your attention. You look her way and see there is no book on her desk. The student says, "Sensei...," and you already know she is going to say, "I didn't bring my book" (60% probability), "I left my book at home" (30%), or "I lost my book" or some other still expected but less likely utterance (10%).

So how is prediction happening in this situation? Of course, your prediction of what the student will say even before the words come out of her mouth is part of it. This is what's known as predictive language processing, and we do it all the time. It also explains why our language has grammar. Grammar aids prediction, limiting the possibilities of what words will come next. Once the student says, "Sensei," and "I left...," the probabilities of the following words, because of the situation and grammar, become "my book" (90%) or "my house" (10%). Grammar greatly narrows what can come after "Sensei I left my book" as well, with basically just three potential words: "at" (80%), "in" (10%), or "on" (5%)," and so it goes after those words as well. Our brains use statistics to figure out likelihoods: "...the human brain can be seen as

a Bayesian inference machine" (Harkness & Keshava, 2017, para. 4).

Our predictive language processing gives us huge advantages. Being able to predict what words finish an utterance frees your mind from a ton of language processing and lets you use those mental resources to deal with the situation.

I mean, think about it. The traditional model of how we listen – that we process each phonetic unit one at a time before ascribing meaning – is almost laughable. If, to get the words, you had to listen to each phoneme of an utterance one by one, some of which are blended together or barely comprehensible, and then figure out how each word fits into a sentence, and only after you get the full sentence, process it for meaning, you'd spend your social life frozen in linguistic computation for minutes or hours after each utterance. Instead, our brains take a proactive approach. They predict what will be said, usually with just a tiny bit of input to get the predicting started: "Sensei" in our example above.

So that explains how we processed the student's utterance, but now think about how much processing was going on in the rest of this situation. When the rest of the class started moving after saying, "open your books to page 18," did you have to look at each student one by one to see if they were opening a book? Did you have to direct your attention to

Being able to predict what words finish an utterance frees your mind from a ton of language processing...

the books, one after another, to verify each one was the textbook? (I've taught in places where one did!) Did you have to walk around the room to see if each student opened to page 18? No. Just perceiving motion, the smidgen of sensory input, let your brain fill in the rest. In fact, your higher cortical areas are sending more sensory signals downwards through the cortical hierarchy than upwards. The downwards signals, representing the predictions, cancel out upwards bound sensory signals that match, letting only the prediction errors through (Kanai, et al., 2015). Your brain tells you what you are seeing, not your eyes.

Sometimes the emotional components of models are so strong, especially those related to danger, that we override our Bayesian statistics and see or hear something that is not even there! That is why police might shoot down a boy in a hoodie pulling out a phone. Their strong instinct for survival makes them actually see a gun. That is why your child's chocolate ball rolling across the kitchen floor becomes a cockroach. That is why your spouse talking in a quiet voice on the phone makes your antenna go up.

How does this relate to surprise and learning? Well, imagine rather than the expected, your student had followed "Sensei..." with: "I have cancer, so I won't be taking your



class anymore." You'd be stunned, wouldn't you? And so would everyone else in the room, since this violated their own predictions. In this case, your models failed you. They were completely wrong in making predictions and left you hanging. That's prediction error and what surprise is all about. When that happens, your brain releases neurotransmitters like noradrenaline and cortisol to make you focus your attention on the situation and feel excited, anxious, or alert. It might also activate the reward system if the surprise is pleasant. Then your brain activates your hippocampus and bilateral inferior frontal gyrus, regions associated with memory and attention, and releases dopamine, a neurotransmitter that causes curiosity and reward (Kouider et al., 2010). Dopamine also causes new synapse formation. After all, your models were wrong. They need to be revised. As Stephen M. Ryan, one of our editors on the Think Tank team, puts it, we can think of this revision of models, because of prediction errors, in a different way: "It is learning!" He continues,

The reward system is activated, creating curiosity, and this makes the learners want to know more.

This is learning: using the unexpected elements of our environment to modify our expectations so that the next time we encounter this kind of environment, we can make better predictions, using our bandwidth more effectively, more efficiently. This is learning. This is learning about life. This is learning about our immediate environment. This is learning about our social environment, and the same principles apply to learning language. (Ryan, 2024; from Kelly, 2024, iTDi Course video: 16:04)

That intense reaction to prediction error only happens when the error is about something meaningful to us, not for the small stuff, and for good reason. Across our evolution, surprise often meant life or death: a springing predator, a crumbling slope, or a violent kinsman. Learning, deep learning, was critical to survival and social success, and in many ways, it still is today. If you meet that student again, it is good to remember that she has cancer. But even with little things, our ability to make accurate predictions aids us at every level.

In short, surprise increases the potential to learn. Those neurotransmitters mentioned above arouse curiosity, increase engagement, and prime the brain to remember whatever information was present at the time. The reward system is activated, creating curiosity, and this makes the learners want to know more. Incorporating surprise facts, discovery-based methods, unexpected activities, and other novel experiences makes learners focus and engage, creating the "ever-sought teachable moment." Retention is enhanced as well.

So, to repeat what I wrote at the outset, "Surprise is not just some random phenomenon of the brain." It is the basis of all learning and a wonderful resource for making your classes more satisfying and effective. Go surprise them!

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The Columnist

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