Response to *Prospect* issue on ‘Re-thinking ESL pedagogy’

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The contributions to this special issue of *Prospect* mark out the theoretical coordinates of a new space for ESL (English as a Second Language) education. Working within the shared territory of a sociocultural orientation to second language education in the school context, each paper provides different, but complementary, perspectives on ESL education in this new landscape. We learn about the contextual conditions of effective scaffolded instruction in ESL (Michell and Sharpe), the semiotic features of ‘designed-in’ and ‘interactive’ scaffolding (Hammond and Gibbons), the interactive processes which lead students into new ways of ‘becoming’ in ESL classrooms (Dufficy), the cultural and linguistic resources which bilingual students themselves bring to the teaching situation (Wallace), and the policy implications of attending to the curriculum and pedagogic needs of second language learners in schools (Leung). Taken together, the papers demonstrate just how important cultural and linguistic difference is for helping us think more productively, not only about the needs of ESL students but also about the multilingual nature of the so-called ‘mainstream’. In this way, energy, vision and new theoretical insights in education most often come from areas marginal from the point of view of the mainstream.

If fact, of course, ESL education and the needs of students whom it is supposed to serve are currently submerged or ‘broad-banded’ within mainstream education. As Hammond and Gibbons remind us in their introduction, and as Wallace and Leung confirm in their papers, a preoccupation with the needs of mainstream, standards-referenced education can often subsume the needs and the potentials of ESL students and ESL curriculum. Furthermore, this situation is not unique to Australia but occurs in other western nations such as the United Kingdom. That is why the current work in this edition of *Prospect* is so important. Each paper offers a crucial perspective on a particular aspect of ESL education, while the collection as a whole amounts to an articulation of the kinds of work that (need to) go on in ‘high challenge, high support’ ESL education. In this brief commentary on the papers, I want to touch on the insights they opened up for me and then to explore some of the research questions that have emerged in the course of my reading.
Catherine Wallace’s paper focuses on the cultural and linguistic resources that advanced bilingual students bring to literacy learning in a multilingual London school. Her talks with four children featured in her ethnographic study provide evidence that advanced bilingual learners are relatively advantaged compared to monolingual peers when it comes to language awareness. The case study material she draws on underscores the importance of making space for students’ unique histories and language backgrounds in making sense of language, culture, religion and even politics. Wallace makes a compelling case for noticing and making space for even ‘off-task’ talk in literacy classrooms and the challenge that such exploratory talk presents for the ‘monolingual ethos’ of many so-called mainstream classrooms. The problem that the paper raised for me is how to manage the balance of often creative, ‘off-task’ talk with ‘on-task’ talk that inducts students into the specialised discourses of schooling.

In this respect, the two papers emerging from research into scaffolding by Michell and Sharpe, and Hammond and Gibbons offer valuable perspectives on the necessary qualities of pedagogies that initiate learners into such discourses. The former paper highlights the complex, collaborative, multi-modal nature of task-enabling teaching. Drawing on authentic classroom data collected during research into scaffolding in ESL classrooms, Michell and Sharpe analyse the social semiotic environment of two Year 7 classroom interactions and five underlying commonalities across these instances. First, they investigate the extent to which the interactions meet the conditions for truly effective exemplars of scaffolding: student ownership of the task, the existence of a challenging activity, an expertise gap between teacher and students, and teacher commitment to successful task completion. Second, they consider the balance of challenges and supports in place over the course of the interaction. Third, they explore shifts in co-regulation of the learning activity and the extent to which teacher ‘fade out’ and student ‘uptake’ occurs. Fourth, they monitor the nature of the public and private contexts in which scaffolding occurs, focusing particularly in their data on ‘collective scaffolding in front of the class’. Finally, they explore the kinds of meaning-making resources used at various points in the interaction – whether interactional (eg meta comment), inscriptive (eg a reflection sheet) or indexical (eg gesture).

Although the framework has emerged in the course of the authors’ analysis of specific classroom interactions in ESL classrooms, it could be applied more generally to all educational interactions, especially those aiming to induct students into specialised domains of school learning. Any learning situation could be analysed (indeed interrogated) from the point of view of its approximation to the above social semiotic conditions. In my
view, the framework is at least as useful as those developed to analyse ‘productive pedagogies’ or its variations in different Australian states.

Hammond and Gibbons’ paper offers an additional picture of scaffolding pedagogy. Theirs is less exhaustive than the framework proposed by Michell and Sharpe, though more semiotic. Drawing on data from six ESL classrooms (either late primary or early secondary schools), the authors explore the social semiotic features of ‘designed-in’ and ‘interactive’ scaffolding. They argue persuasively from the data that ‘the hallmark of effective teaching lies both in teachers’ abilities to plan, select and sequence tasks in their programs in ways that take account of different levels and abilities of specific groups of students, and in their ability to make the most of the teachable moment’ (my emphasis). The authors provide detailed exemplification of the social semiotic features of both levels of scaffolding (macro and micro), drawing explicitly on systemic functional linguistics, most notably in the use of system networks to display the range of choices available to teachers at different levels of scaffolding.

For me, the power of this exposition lies in the interconnection the authors make between the proleptic (forward-looking) orientation of ‘designed-in’ scaffolding and the contingent (moment-by-moment) orientation of ‘interactive’ scaffolding. They argue that careful attention to planning for learning provides the basis for effective teaching moments. This paper also extends the observation made by Michael Halliday in the early 1980s that language enters into school learning in (at least) three ways: students learn language, learn through language and learn about language. This paper makes this insight once again central to ESL education and puts the task of conceptualising the relationship between these three aspects of language learning back on the agenda. Except, of course, 20 years later, we need a much broader image of meaning-making than the overly linguistic image available in the early 1980s. The notion of ‘message abundancy’ makes a connection with multimodality and the need to exploit the communicative potential of multiple signs systems such as image, verbiage, gesture and space in language learning and teaching.

Of course, as Hammond and Gibbons acknowledge, further research is needed on the dynamics of classroom planning. A detailed specification of necessary (but static) features of scaffolding in ESL teaching needs complementary work on the ‘interweaving of choices within the dynamics of classroom interaction’ and the ways in which ‘handover’ occurs in ESL classrooms. The authors also acknowledge the need for greater attention to the affectual dimensions of classroom interaction. In this arena, another paper in the collection offers us material for reflection and hope.
Paul Dufficy’s paper is a beautifully crafted exploration of the intersubjective dimensions of teacher–student talk. It provides a complementary perspective on students’ cultural and linguistic resources to that offered by Wallace. Dufficy argues for greater attention to the role of ‘expanded talk roles’ in facilitating sustained engagement in classroom learning. Most powerful (for me) is Dufficy’s link between processes of talk and the kinds of ‘becoming’ which such processes offer our students. The constitutive processes he observes in conversations collected from a Year 3/4 multilingual classroom aptly demonstrate the importance of collective learning tasks, of reciprocity (symmetry) between teacher and students in talk roles, and in the cumulative development of coherent lines of thought over time. This paper provides a series of snapshots of what ‘substantive conversation’ might look like in ‘productive pedagogies’ (another example of what the current research has to offer both ESL and mainstream education). Dufficy reminds us of the underpinning importance of ‘emotional resonance’ and ‘relatedness’ between teacher and students – something that cannot be embedded mechanistically in classroom interaction but rather can only spring from a mutual desire to ‘share challenging thinking and guide its development’.

Beyond the intensive focus on classroom interactions in ESL education there is the broader policy arena itself. As Constant Leung notes in his paper about policy developments in the United Kingdom, learning an additional language is often crisscrossed by contradictory policy messages with little thought given to the specific needs of students whom policy is supposed to serve. Leung provides a balanced critique of educational policy as this affects two different groups of ESL learners in the United Kingdom: students (under 16 years of age) who are currently integrated into mainstream classrooms and those (post-16-year-olds) who can access a special program of English for speakers of other languages with its own curriculum specifications and timetable. Evidence of underperformance of English as an additional language (EAL) students is emerging which challenges the prevailing approach to mainstreaming of ESL. Leung argues that current policy provides a limited ‘pupil support’ strategy without a recognised curriculum base. He proposes that while mainstreaming of EAL students is a desirable and necessary step towards greater social integration, this process ‘should be accompanied by a pedagogy that integrates EAL with curriculum content in systematic and principled ways’ (my italics).

The contributions of the current edition of *Prospect* provide the basis for a systematic and principled framework of ESL curriculum and pedagogy. Early in the commentary, I suggested that the papers offer complementary
perspectives on the territory of ESL education. We could in fact represent the relationship between the different perspectives outlined in a semiotic figure as follows:

Of course, the work in the current volume is only a beginning. More research is needed to connect pedagogic processes (teaching and learning) with different ways of ‘becoming’ in ESL classrooms. Attention to different kinds of talk about text (linguistic and multimodal) is needed at both planning and contingent moments of scaffolding. We need to monitor the extent and kinds of student ‘uptake’ that occur in scaffolding-rich classrooms and the contextual conditions that contribute to this. And we need policy initiatives that support the rich work at the ‘margins’.