Editorial

This issue of *Prospect* reflects the wide variety of current issues within the field of TESOL and covers a range of educational settings in Australia, Thailand and China. A common thread across all articles is the importance of context in language teaching. Similarly, the two reviews note how language learning is affected by context.

In the first article, Saowadee Kongpetch, in her case study of the use of a genre-based approach to the teaching of writing in a Thai university, demonstrates how local context impacts on the introduction of new methodologies from a different context. She found, however, that this approach had benefits for her students. The genre-based approach encouraged students to think, plan and work at the whole-text level, resulting in students having an expectation of, and more expertise in, working with extended and elaborated ideas. The students also valued the integration of language skills used in this approach.

Also, in a study in Thailand, Kasamaporn Maneekhao, Natjiree Jaturapitakkul, Richard Watson Todd and Saowaluck Tepsuriwong examine the process of designing an innovative item type for a computer-based test of English. The aim in developing the test was to find a more authentic way to test the ability of engineers and technicians to follow instructions to read technical manuals. They did this in an innovative way by having test-takers follow instructions in order to assemble objects on the computer screen. Since, as they argue, existing tests cannot provide a guide to procedures, as they can in the case of more traditional approaches to testing, teachers faced with the task of developing a new kind of test should find their insights very useful.

The third article by Anikó Hatoss investigates the cultural learning needs and experiences of a group of international students studying English in Australia. Through her surveys of both teachers and learners, she found that learners preferred a focus on intercultural learning, rather than a culture-specific focus on Australia. Such intercultural learning, she argues, will help learners move away from stereotypical views of Australians and towards a deeper understanding of the target culture and the cultures of other learners in their classes.

In the fourth article, Runyi Chen and Bernard Hird address the important issue of the transportability of teaching methodologies across different contexts through the study of interactions within classroom groups in China. Despite its origins in Western educational settings, communicative methodology, including the use of groups, has been largely accepted in both
English-speaking and non-English-speaking EFL contexts across the world. Their study examines the collaborative behaviour of Chinese university students when they work in groups in English language lessons and shows that Chinese students can collaborate successfully in groups, but also that there are aspects of Chinese culture that may limit the effectiveness of group work in the language classroom in China.

Ashley Irving and Barbara Mullock, in the final article, examine one teacher implementing a new course, the Cambridge Certificate in Advanced English (CAE). They contrast this teacher’s learning and understandings of this course with that of experienced CAE teachers. They conclude that teaching institutions, testing agencies, materials writers and publishers, and teacher education programs need to provide teacher training for exam preparation courses, especially since such courses are often vital for student success on gate-keeping assessments such as the CAE.

As usual, we have included two book reviews. Kara MacDonald reviews an edited volume on the relationship between age and language acquisition, *Age and the acquisition of English as a foreign language* (2004) by María del Pilar García Mayo and María Luisa García Lecumberri, while Robyn Woodward-Kron reviews *English in medicine* (2005) by Eric Glendinning and Beverly Holmström, a textbook for teaching the English used in medicine.

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Book reviews

Age and the acquisition of English as a foreign language


Reviewed by Kara MacDonald

*Age and the acquisition of English as a foreign language* is a volume examining early foreign language (FL) integration. The first three chapters offer an overview of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) and other age-related factors. The remaining six chapters discuss the influence of age on different aspects of FL acquisition. The studies were conducted in Spain with Basque/Catalan–Spanish bilingual speakers between 4 and 18 years old. The studies indicate that early formal FL integration does not produce better proficiency in that language.

In chapter one, David Singleton explains that there are many factors influencing FL learning, such as motivation and exposure. By questioning other studies (Newport 1984; Curtiss 1988), Singleton argues that the CPH is insufficient to explain differences in FL acquisition. He acknowledges that changes in brain plasticity influence FL acquisition, but insists the interplay of numerous age-related factors determine FL acquisition. He contests the notion that age is the sole determining element.

Next Jonathan Leather examines the CPH and FL pronunciation acquisition. He provides a summary of theoretical frameworks, such as the structuralist paradigm, natural phonology, optimality theory and auto-segmental phonology to inform his argument. He explains second language (L2) speech is a function of linguistic, social, psychological and phonological factors. The learner's age, social context, motivations and previous language knowledge must be taken into account to understand his/her developmental process of L2 perception and production.

Stefka Marinova-Todd discredits the idea of the CPH in the third chapter, discussing FL grammar acquisition. She explains adult learners can acquire similar FL language skills to children, and sometimes outperform them (Bongaerts 1999; Birdsong 1999). In her view, there is a need to further examine adult FL programs.

Next, Jasone Cenoz examines third language acquisition. He compared learners of different ages (4–11 years) exposed to the same amount of formal English instruction and learners of the same age exposed to different amounts of instruction. Cenoz’s study indicates older learners achieve higher proficiency levels more quickly than younger learners. Cenoz argues the
rationale for offering a FL at school is to take advantage of the high motivation and positive attitudes of younger learners, rather than because of the assumption that they are better learners.

In chapter five, María del Pilar García Mayo first asks if the period of FL exposure influences a learner’s (8–12 years) grammatical performance. She found that the longer the exposure, the better the students preform. Second, does early exposure to the FL increase achievement? Her study shows older learners outperformed younger learners. Third, does higher cognitive development correlate to a higher level of metalinguistics awareness? Learners exposed to English after age 11 were more capable of identifying errors and correcting them.

María Luisa García Lecumberri and Francisco Gallardo, in the sixth chapter, examine the relationship between age and vowel and consonant perception skills (4–11 years). Their results support other studies (Cummins 1981; Fullana and Muñoz 1999) identifying the fact that older learners achieve a more target-like pronunciation. They conclude that early exposure is not a factor that facilitates FL pronunciation acquisition in a formal classroom context.

In chapter seven, David Lasagabaster and Aintzane Doiz discuss writing, evaluating learners (12–18 years) with the same amount of instruction, but who began learning English at different ages. Older students performed better as a result of their advanced cognitive state on tests scored both on the overall sense of the text and by counting grammatical and lexical errors.

Carmen Muñoz, in chapter eight, examines two questions relating to age and oral development. First, how do younger learners (8 years) perform compared to older starters (11 years) in oral communication? She found that late starters performed better. Second, what is the relationship between the instructional period and the language development of different aged learners? Older students outperformed younger learners in a formal context because they were less affected by the limited exposure constraints of the school curriculum and benefited from explicit teaching methods.

The ninth study, conducted by Mia Victori and Elsa Tragant, looks at learner strategies. First, they examined whether different age groups (10–18 years) used diverse strategies. They found older learners used a wider range of strategies that become increasingly complex, relying less on memorisation. Second, they aimed to see if a strategic developmental trend emerged among older students, and found this did not occur progressively with age, revealing a lot of variation among learners.

This book is valuable for graduate students studying FL classroom integration and for school administrators making decisions about such
programs. It provides an overview of current research on age and FL learning, while addressing key issues related to language planning. It revises beliefs about age and FL acquisition in a formal setting, offering insight into a wide range of areas: syntax, phonology, writing, oral and learning skills. The book's slender spine is deceptive of the wealth of information that it offers.

REFERENCES


English in medicine (3rd ed.)
Reviewed by Robyn Woodward-Kron

Australian TAFE colleges have for a number of years offered English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses for migrant overseas-trained doctors and other health professionals seeking to gain professional registration in Australia. This ESP approach has been adopted by several Australian universities in order to address the language and cross-cultural communication needs of the increasing number of overseas-born students enrolled in their medical and health science degrees. However, for the English as a Second Language (ESL) and ESP teachers working in these campus and clinical settings, there are few specialised teaching resources available that can help induct students and overseas-trained professionals into the language demands and discursive practices of the profession in a Western context. Similarly, there are few resources that can help bring the ESL teacher new to the medical field ‘up to speed’ in this specialised area of teaching. Cambridge’s English in medicine, part of its professional English series, is one such resource.

The course book provides opportunities for practising a range of authentic communicative tasks in clinical settings, tasks which are introduced by audio-taped simulated doctor–patient and doctor–doctor role plays. The text also includes a wide range of written medical communications such as referral letters, discharge summaries, case notes and laboratory results. First published in 1987, this third edition reflects developments in contemporary medical practice, incorporating tasks such as searching and retrieving information from Medline, the largest online biomedical database.

English in medicine is written primarily for overseas-trained doctors and medical students in the clinical phase of their studies. The book has seven units: history taking with a focus on chest pain, history taking with a focus on the body systems, patient examinations, specialist patient examinations (for example, neurological, obstetric, paediatric), investigations (for example, lumbar puncture), diagnosis and treatment. Each section incorporates audio-taped simulated role plays between a doctor and patient and provides opportunities for developing listening and speaking skills with reference to the role plays. For example, in the physical investigations section, students practice giving instructions, providing reassurance and explaining. Some consideration is given to register variables such as the need to modify instructions and technical language when speaking to a child in a paediatric consultation. Reading and writing skill development focuses on authentic
clinical communication between health professionals. Tasks include information gap-type activities, cloze passages, role-plays and problem solving.

This publication would be useful as a course book for overseas-trained doctors in a bridging course context. The extensive incorporation of role plays and clinical communication documents also means that it is a rich source of material for teachers designing specialist classes. ESP teachers can use the role plays to practise general history-taking skills such as practising open-ended questioning styles (for example, ‘What’s brought you along today?’, ‘Can you describe the pain?’), as well as to build knowledge of technical medical terms and their corresponding everyday terms. The role plays include some colloquial expressions frequently used in clinical contexts (for example, ‘Any problem with your waterworks?’); however, such expressions, which can be baffling to non-English-background speakers, are not explained in any detail. The appendices include an extensive list of frequently used medical abbreviations, which this reviewer finds particularly useful, as well as speech functions for a range of spoken medical genres.

One criticism of *English in medicine* is that the approach appears to be very much a biomedical one. With an increasing move towards a biopsychosocial approach in medical education, the doctor-centredness of many of the doctor–patient role plays is questionable. For example, in the role play focusing on history taking and the patient’s headaches, the patient’s feelings and concerns are completely ignored by the doctor.

Patient:  Well, doctor. I’ve been having these headaches and I seem to have lost some weight and …

Doctor:  I see, and how long have these headaches been bothering you?

Patient:  Well, I don’t know. For quite a while now. The wife passed away you know, about four months ago and I’ve been feeling down since then.

Doctor:  And which part of the head is affected? (p 94 transcript)

In this exchange, the doctor failed to establish any empathy with the patient, and it is unlikely that there was any rapport in the doctor–patient interaction. This is precisely the type of interaction which the bio-psychosocial model of medical communication aims to avoid. Such exchanges, however, can be useful to teach how not to interact with patients. There is also minimal cultural content on interacting with patients from a range of cultural backgrounds; for example, how to deal with culturally sensitive issues such as negotiating the use of blood products with a patient whose cultural or religious background prohibits such interventions. Another criticism is how other health professionals are portrayed, perhaps unintentionally, in the text.
A physiotherapist who saw *English in medicine* on my desk reacted to the drawing of a grimacing patient undergoing spinal extension exercises with a physiotherapist. My physio colleague exclaimed, ‘No wonder doctors have such a low opinion of physiotherapists!’

For ESP teachers working in medical contexts, the book would be greatly enhanced by a teacher’s guide. For example, the novice ESP teacher would have little idea of the systematised questioning informing the characterisation of the patient’s pain in unit one. The section on the structure of medical journal articles likewise requires more background information, both for the student and teacher. Despite these shortcomings, *English in medicine* would be a useful addition to the medical ESP teacher’s resource shelf. It is also a useful resource for overseas-trained professionals undertaking independent study.
Notes on contributors

Runyi Chen is a lecturer in English at School of Foreign Studies at South China Normal University. She has been teaching English to non-English Major university students in mainland China for 15 years. She completed the program of Master of Applied Linguistics at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia in 2004.

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