DEVELOPING THE SKILLS TO BE A GLOBAL LEARNER THROUGH A MODEL UNITED NATIONS

Erin Frazier & Steven Asquith
Kanda University of International Studies

ABSTRACT

In this paper an EFL classroom unit designed for mixed ability, first year university students and based upon the Model United Nations (MUN) Forum is described and analysed using an action research approach. The unit is focussed upon developing specific skills, such as: negotiation, debate, using authentic materials, data analysis, audio visual analysis and written reporting, while encouraging students to develop important learning behaviours such as peer-support, self-analysis, and self-reflection. This utilizes a multiliteracies approach centered upon the development of proficiency in key communication processes. By critically appraising the administration of the unit, this paper provides a practical guide to educators who may wish to adopt a similar such pedagogical approach.

INTRODUCTION

The Model United Nations (MUN) is a program in which students become delegates for a country to discuss and negotiate international issues. This format is an ideal vehicle to complement the Freshman English (FE) process curriculum used within the English Language Institute (ELI). In this paper, first the context and the theoretical bases for the application of an MUN module to a FE curriculum is introduced. Then, the stages of the unit are described and analyzed following an action research methodology involving both teacher observation and student feedback. Finally, the unit as a whole is critically appraised and suggestions for future development are provided.

BACKGROUND

Every year students and language learners across the globe take part in forums recreating the processes that occur in the United Nations to debate, discuss, and collaborate about the important issues of our time. These educational simulations, or MUN forums, provide students the opportunity to not only understand the complexity of important topics, such as global warming, immigration, or poverty, but also give an insight into decision making processes. For language learners, they can provide valuable opportunities to develop authentic communication skills such as negotiation, assimilation of ideas, and presentation skills which might be easily transferred to the real world. By adapting the most applicable aspects of an MUN forum and shaping them into a 5-week unit, the authors have created a program which fulfills the aims of the curriculum and is accessible to first year students.

The MUN Unit was designed to become a part of the FE curriculum. This curriculum was developed based upon the multiliteracies approach implemented in this learning context,

and aims to provide students with the tools to become active and critical participants in the modern digital world, and members of the global community. The FE curriculum is designed based on six core processes, which expose students to various methods of learning through analyzing, interpreting, and interacting with themed units (Johnson, Lyddon, Nelson, Selman, & Worth, 2015). These six core processes (communication strategies, problem solving, extended interaction, audio visual analysis, self-analysis, and data analysis) not only provide learners tools to be more autonomous in their language study, but also better enables instructors to tailor their lessons to students' interests and needs. This means that topics might be more deeply explored using multiple different modalities than in other contexts constrained by text-based learning. Each unit utilizes activities based upon the processes, before culminating in a final project tailored to consolidate the learning based on a specific rhetoric type. This provides multiple opportunities for learners to be supported in specific skills before completing the main project. The MUN as a language learning tool may be considered a more authentic vehicle for learners to practice the skills of augmentation than a more traditionally prepared debate. As delegates representing a country debating concrete resolutions on global warming, students must not only understand in detail each country's position within the global community, but also, fight to negotiate the best deal in terms of specific strategic, economic and environmental factors. It is clear to see how such skills might be of practical benefit in learners' lives and careers after graduation.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

In developing this unit, the authors strove to fulfill the following criteria: 1) The unit would adhere to the principles proposed in Johnson et al. (2015)'s description of a multiliteracies curriculum; 2) It would foster peer-to-peer learning; 3) It would take advantage of the motivational qualities of providing an authentic learning experience. These criteria are described in more detail in the following section. Johnson et al. (2015) state that the Japanese tertiary education context requires a new direction in approach to curriculum design as communicative language teaching (CLT) has become unable to meet the demands of globalisation. The new approach they suggest should be founded upon the development of "awareness" or "the capacity to take control of one's own learning" (Benson, 2011, p. 58), through "interaction", or meaning making and applying language in use, while utilizing a broad range of multiliteracies. As described by the New London Group (1996) there are two goals to the application of this pedagogy. The first is "to account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies". The second is to account for "the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies," (p. 60) in order to develop a sophisticated approach to the creation and use of authentic multimodal texts. This approach should provide a grounding for first year students to develop their skills during their subsequent three years of university education. It also exploits the advantages of group project-based learning while encouraging learners to be more autonomous and engage with real texts.

In addition to being designed based upon the multiliteracies principles central to the FE course, this unit aimed to also incorporate peer-to-peer learning. As Dale (1969) theorized with the Cone of Experience model, learners retain more information when they are "do[ing]", rather than simply passive learning. This model, better known as "experiential learning" or "action learning", shown in *Figure 1* below, complements the six processes

used in the FE curriculum, by focusing on peer-to-peer interaction to create a rich learning environment. This is achieved by creating opportunities for interaction between partners assigned to the same country, and larger blocs of multiple countries during group negotiations. The unit designers aimed to develop self-confidence and self-knowledge through scaffolding activities with a significant focus upon the development of interpersonal skills with learners from a different class. In this case, peers functioned as support, helping learners to move towards greater autonomy and away from the type of teacher-led activities which reinforce dependence on the educator, and neglect the type of academic communication skills required to develop as a more sophisticated user of English (Willis & Willis, 2009). This is especially important to first year students in the Japanese context who are usually exposed to form-based instruction throughout their years of compulsory education. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) (1978) suggests that learners can move beyond their limitations through scaffolding and support. However, "To learn in the ZPD does not require that there be a designated teacher; whenever people collaborate in an activity, each can assist the others, and each can learn from the contributions of the others" (Wells, 1999, p.333). Peer-to-peer learning is therefore an effective and supportive environment for shared discovery.
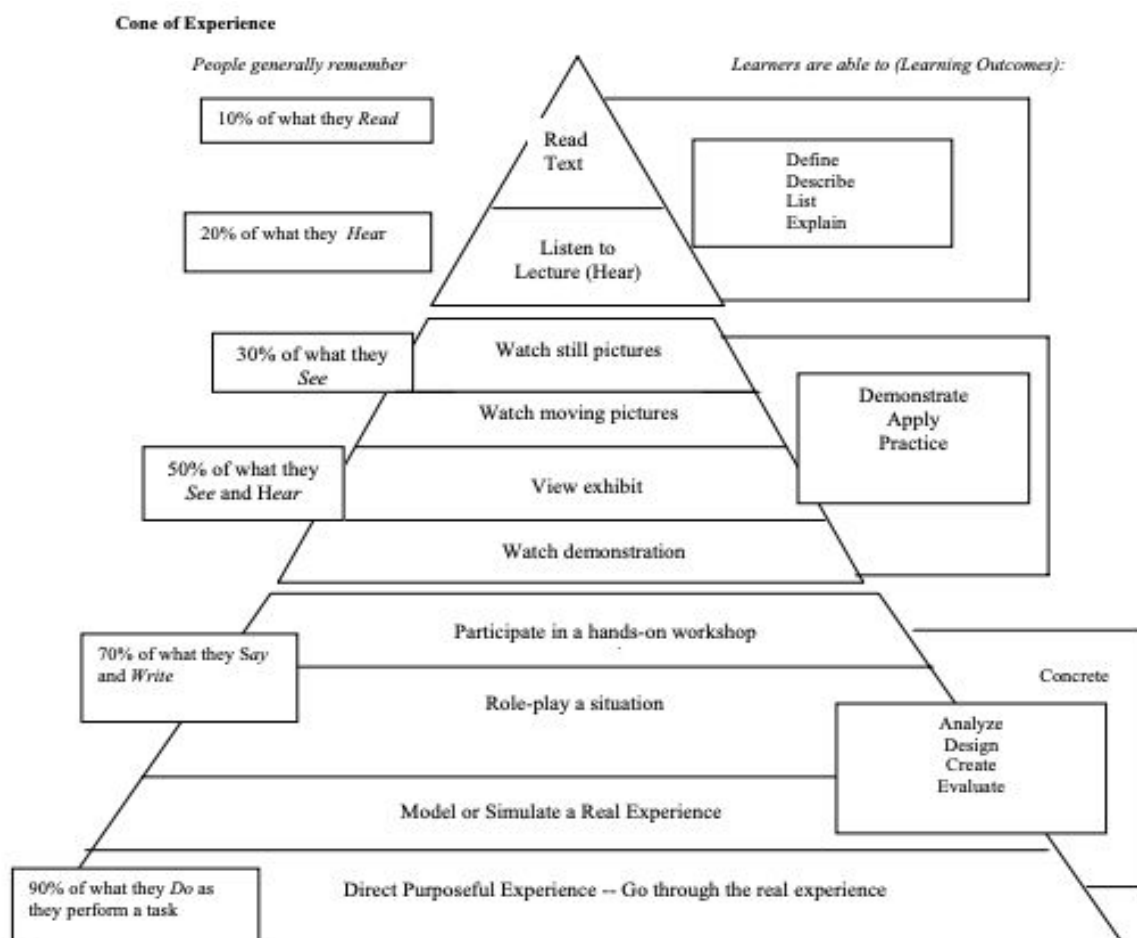
Figure 1: The Cone of Experience model (Dale, 1969, p.109)

The third aspect which was important to the development of this unit was use of authentic materials and processes to foster motivation in students. This was achieved not only through having students work with real sources of information, but also, by simulating the processes of the UN, learners were able to feel that they were engaged in activities rooted in the real workings of a genuine institution. This conforms with Nunan's notion of providing learners with an authentic task in which the task itself closely mirrors the real world, leading to enhanced communicative behaviors. This incorporates the need to complete a task, which thus necessitates communicative practices that are essential to completing a similar such task outside of the classroom (Nunan, 1988; Nunan, 2004). The discovery of a world issue, in this case global warming, through the varying cultural, social, and economic lenses of many different countries, provides analysis from multiple perspectives. Furthermore, Dewey (1938) argues that teaching global issues may have a more positive influence than just another *subject* as the learners themselves have a hand in shaping a potential future. This focus on authenticity and critical analysis, combined with the support structure provided by peers during carefully scaffolded group work, created a unit which was interesting, motivational, and encouraging for students.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted as action research on the curriculum materials. As one of the goals of the unit was to expose learners to authentic materials of which they had little experience, it was important to understand how students were able to interact with these materials. Throughout the unit, problematic materials and tasks were noted for further evaluation and redesign. Burns (2010, p2) points out that the "*action* part of action research is to intervene in a deliberate way in the problematic situation in order to bring about changes and, even better, improvements in practice." To improve upon the unit, teachers made observations while students were completing various tasks. In addition, students were asked to write reflections after the unit was complete. Students were given a short survey asking them to reflect on their unit as a whole. Their answers were categorized into four general response types described as: 1). Enjoyment/ a sense of achievement 2). Partnership, 3). Language, and 4). Real world awareness.

UNIT IMPLEMENTATION

The unit was carried out with two separate classes of first year university students. The use of two separate classes, rather than one, was deemed preferable as this provided each group the opportunity to move out of their comfort zones and collaborate with unfamiliar peers. The first group was a mid-tier level class of 16 students (5-male and 11-female) and the other group was comprised of a lower-tier level with a similar make-up of 16 participants (4-male and 12-female). As this unit was taught during the second semester, students were accustomed to the structure of FE and its requirements. Students understood that this unit would culminate in a debate type project, and that working towards being able to participate fully was their goal.

Classroom stages

The stages within this unit were designed based on the six core processes of FE: self-analysis, data-analysis, extended interaction, communication strategies, problem solving, and audio-visual analysis. These processes were utilized according to the unit requirements and the needs of the learners. Each stage will be presented in the order they were taught and the process or processes addressed will be highlighted.

Stage 1: Meet and greet problem-solving
This unit was designed to be used with two different classes. First, a good rapport between the students in a low stress situation was established. This was achieved through a lesson of communicative, problem-solving icebreakers which helped students to get accustomed to one another. These games included: the evolution game (a rock, paper, scissors conversation game in which students climb the evolutionary ladder); the perfect square (a whole class activity in which students must communicate effectively to move from being in a circle to a square whilst blindfolded); and the animal kingdom (a game in which students form groups based upon animal species families before engaging in a short teacher-prepared discussion).

During the final 15 minutes of the lesson the instructors explained that both classes would be doing the upcoming unit together, and that pairs, one student from each class, would represent a single country. The countries were chosen based upon two important criteria: firstly, countries needed to fit roughly into four separate geographical blocs, for example, Asia, The Americas, Europe etc.; and secondly there should be a variety of positions on each issue presently. The countries chosen in this case were: Japan, the United States, England, Germany, Russia, Canada, Colombia, Argentina, Sweden, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Nigeria, South Africa, China, and India. In this case, students simply chose their own partners with countries selected randomly. This, however, was not completely satisfactory. Therefore, it would be better to use a more systematic approach based on students' abilities, characteristics, and the relative difficulties of researching the different countries, if this were practical.

Stage 2: United Nations background research: Data analysis
To familiarize themselves with the workings of the UN, students researched its structure and purpose using the UN.org website. This research was conducted in individual classes in small groups of four students, and was an opportunity for the instructor to provide students with help and strategies for finding information on authentic websites. Although this was challenging for the students, it was essential scaffolding to provide preparation for conducting online research in English later during the unit.

Stage 3: Learning about my country presentation: Data analysis and presentation
In order for students to become familiar with the political, economic, and world status of the country they were representing, each pair, one student from each class together, were tasked with creating a short mini-presentation of approximately 3-minutes. Students first researched individually, then came together to create the presentation. Each presentation was given in a speed-dating format so that both members had the opportunity to view multiple presentations on different countries. This was important as each group needed to understand all the other country's positions in order to be able to negotiate successfully later in the unit. This was also useful in training learners how to summarize and extract the

most relevant information. The slides and presentations were evaluated based upon the quality of the content and the delivery.

Stage 4: What is MUN? (Video) Audio-visual analysis and Problem solving
This activity was designed to be done on a day when the two classes would not meet. It reviewed important vocabulary that students need for the unit. After reviewing vocabulary, the class watched a video explaining the MUN. This is a short 4-minute film with an easily accessible explanation of the MUN's aims. After watching the video, useful language for discussion and negotiation was introduced, leading into a problem-solving activity centered upon an issue relevant to student life. This was the first step in scaffolding how to negotiate for the MUN.

Stage 5: Communication language for negotiation: Communication strategies
Students organized a list of phrases according to the different types of strategies for negotiation. Then, students were given an accessible issue which needed to be negotiated, for instance, planning a class party. Students prepared a dialog using the phrases from the negotiation language and then roleplayed it for the class.

Stage 6: Global Warming research and country statement: Data-analysis and Self-analysis
In this stage it was essential for learners to work together to research and determine the position of each country on the issue of global warming. Over the course of two classes, students must research four themes: national policies, improving awareness, sustainable development goals, and affordable solutions for their country. As this research was the basis on which the subsequent debate would be founded, significant teacher support was necessary in the form of worksheets and/or graphic organizers to focus the student pairs on the key elements of the country's stance. One-on-one teacher/student guidance was also essential. This stage culminated in a 300-word written report in which each student had to summarize their country's stance.

Stage 7: Writing Resolutions: Problem solving
Using the knowledge acquired in the previous stages, students analyzed the situation, context, and needs of their representative countries to write two resolutions to put forward to the other blocs. Students needed to identify the overall issue and how to best address it. Also, the student delegates must think how their solutions would affect the bloc. In addition, students had to be aware of generalized statements (e.g. all countries or developed countries), modal verbs, and grammar for percentages, so that they could express their countries' positions in a precise manner. Pairs formulated a first draft as a shared Google Doc, on which the instructor then provided detailed feedback. This was difficult for the students and required considerable guidance from the instructor.

Stage 8: Bloc Negotiation of resolutions: Extended interaction and problem solving
By this stage students had become well-versed in their countries' positions on the issue. Therefore, using all the knowledge and skills acquired in the earlier stages, learners engaged in an extended discussion to negotiate three final resolutions decided by each bloc of four countries. Student delegates first explained their country's position before presenting the resolutions to each other. During this discussion students selected, negotiated and rewrote their original resolutions based upon the needs of individual

countries and the goals of the bloc. By the end of the class period, students could share their final resolutions with both classes using a shared Google doc. Students reviewed and considered the various merits and drawbacks of each resolution for homework.

Stage 9: UN voting on final resolutions and amendments: Extended interaction
Finally, the classes met as the whole MUN to discuss and make amendments to any of the resolutions they felt would be harmful to their country. Each resolution was presented to the class, and then each country's delegates proposed amendments. Once all the amendments had been made, all the countries' delegates voted to pass or reject each resolution and ratify it into law.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The student's comments in the surveys were recorded, analyzed, and coded. Based upon the researchers interpretations of comments, they were organized into four general themes and eleven sub-themes. The comments categorized under the partnership and language themes were also organized according to whether they were deemed to be positive or negative in tone. The coding seemed to provide a good indication of the varying views of the students on the unit.

Table 1: Codification of student's surveys

Main Theme	Sub-theme	instances
Enjoyment	Sharing opinion	Class A: 2
	Rise in confidence in skill (speaking)	Class B: 23
Partnership (+, -)	Leadership	Class A (+) 4 (-) 2
	Group dynamic	Class B - (+) 12 (-) 7
	Cooperation	
Language (+, -)	Speaking	Class A (+) 2 (-) 7
	Research	
	Level Awareness	Class B (+) 6 (-) 5
	Need for L1	
Real World Topic	New knowledge	Class A: 3
	Functional knowledge	Class B: 9

*The + and – icons used in the Partnership and Language sections signify whether comments were coded as being positive or negative in tone.

Enjoyment/ A Sense of Achievement

The theme of enjoyment and a sense of achievement was commented on the most. However, Class B, which was the more advanced class, seemed to comment more on this theme. Students felt that sharing their opinions with another class was the key factor to this enjoyment. Also, because the unit was conducted in the second semester, working with different members of another class seemed to be motivating, and brought new life to the classroom, as the comment E1 highlights. Furthermore, students reflected on their growth as English learners from semester one to semester two, and were able to gain a strong sense of achievement (E2). It is important to have this sense of enjoyment within the classroom as "playful experimentation as a pathway to creativity" (Resnick & Robinson, 2018, p 17) may lead to more authentic language production and decreased anxiety. This combined with the challenging nature of the unit meant that students could feel proud of completing it. Two comments which illustrate this are provided below:

> Enjoyment 1- Class A "Enjoyed work with the other class"

> Enjoyment 2 - Class B "I felt that it was very fun for me. I could learn many things, and I realize than my speaking skills is better than before first semester, so I felt it was great for me"

Partnership
The students placed value in the partnerships developed between the classes. Learners found that having a greater variation of input and opinions increased the depth of the discussions as comment P2 addresses. As anticipated, students of the lower-level class were slightly unsettled by the higher-level class students. This is highlighted in comment P3. However, through partnerships these students felt they grew as learners. Tasks like the Stage 1 *(meet and greet)* were a necessary step to build rapport with the learners so that these partnerships could take root naturally. However, some students did express frustration stemming from an imbalance in the amount of effort made between partners. In the future, this could be improved by having more checks of each individual's work to hold them responsible. In addition, having pairs collaboratively create a work plan and timetable to complete each step would be particularly useful. Including an element of personal planning and time management would be a great, practical addition to the unit.

> Partnership 1- Class A "Partner kind clever than me, helped me."

> Partnership 2- Class B "I think the benefits of working in groups is I could get many new ideas and opinions that I did not come up with. Those ideas helped me to think about our country."

> Partnership 3- Class A "At first nervous and thought couldn't communicate with partner but I was able to do this."

Language
Students comments about language use in the unit were both positive and negative. Many of the learners commented that they felt that their speaking ability was greatly improved as they used it when negotiating. As with *enjoyment*, the learners had a positive reaction to using the negotiation language at various stages. However, both classes used the first language, Japanese, excessively to complete several of the tasks within the unit. Students

needed to focus on researching and communicating complex ideas so they had a reason to want to use their first language. However, learners' were limited in their specialized vocabulary on the topic of global warming and policy, and therefore student comments highlighted the problems arising from this shortfall. A greater focus on language scaffolding, and specifically the specialized vocabulary needed, would be beneficial to the further development of this unit.

> Language 1- Class A "Searching in English is very difficult, They tried to do all the research in English"

> Language 2- Class B "I want to fix it by speaking English it caused misunderstandings, and I didn't know how to fix it without using Japanese."

Real World Awareness

As the unit progressed students learned about real world problems that in the near future may have a direct impact on their lives. Learners seemed to feel this information enriched them as it gave them a wider view of the world as a whole, as R1 and R2 demonstrate. Dewey (1938) argues that teaching global issues may have a more positive influence than just a *subject,* as the learner themselves have a hand in shaping a potential future. This unit allows for the learners to have the same type of experience as doing real world research, in addition to developing negotiation and problem-solving skills. It was also clear that many learners gained a better understanding of other issues occurring around the world as shown in the following examples.

> Real World Awareness 1- Class B "[This country] has a little information except oil but I learned women's rights and how it struggles against global warming and I was surprised every time I found these information."

> Real World Awareness 2- Class B "My travel unit was also Poland. At that time, I searched about sightseeing. However, this time was to search Poland's problems. I didn't know how hard Poland is. The most impressive thing was refusing refugees and thinking about dropping out [of the] EU."

Unit Reflection

Throughout the unit the tasks promoted real world learning opportunities for the students by using authentic materials and processes. Furthermore, the MUN was a way of packaging a critical and academic topic in an engaging way. During the unit, the first stage (*The meet and greet)* was necessary to build rapport between classes. Stage 2 (*United Nations background research)* was more difficult as the students had to navigate the actual United Nations' website (un.org) to find the information to complete their worksheets. This was invaluable in introduce students to working with authentic materials using skimming and scanning for relevant content. These skills were integral to Stage 6 (*Global Warming research and country statement)* and an even greater focus upon building these skills might be preferable. In contrast, Stage 3 (*Learning about my country presentation)* was important for confidence building as this task (research and presentations) was similar to tasks students had previously completed many times.

The students' reflections provided insights that would help to develop improved materials. First, the *communication language for negotiation* (Stage 5) needed to be simplified. This was because there was a large number of new phrases and it was difficult for the lower-level class to apply this somewhat abstract language in a natural way. Therefore, more controlled practice in which learners produced scripted roleplays was an effective method of gaining familiarity with the new material. Also, a larger degree of teacher modeling for this task would be beneficial for students to better understand the use of the language within context. Additionally, more scaffolding of the amendments (Stage 9) ought to be added to help students to understand the importance of precise language to avoid ambiguity. For this, it would be useful for students to have more time to analyze the resolutions before the whole class meet to discuss the changes. The students were able to complete this task within a single class period with coaching, but to make the stage more effective and to get a broader range of possible changes to the resolutions, a task in which learners recorded and discussed possible changes using a Google Doc in class would be a useful addition to the unit.

CONCLUSION

This unit, founded on problem-solving through peer-to-peer engagement and critical analysis of international issues through interaction, negotiation, and cooperation, is beneficial for the development of global citizens. The curriculum design of Freshman English's six processes allows for the freedom to immerse learners in real world issues from multiple perspectives. In some respects the unit might be further adapted to better meet various learners' needs and this action research project has provided insight into how this might be achieved. Many of the greatest benefits of this unit resulted from collaboration between two classes, and the authors would encourage other educators to try this for themselves. Learners saw the value in creating peer-to-peer partnerships to overcome the difficulties of a demanding and authentic unit. Furthermore, students could develop practical skills to become more autonomous when researching and critically appraising a topic. Even though this unit was a challenge, the learners excelled beyond their individual abilities by supporting each other. Overcoming adversity through student collaboration was the most important achievement of this unit.

REFERENCES

Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. Harlow: Longman.

Burns, A. (2010). *Doing action research in English language teaching: A guide for practitioners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dale, E. (1969). Audio-Visual Methods in Teaching (3rd ed., p. 108). Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, New York: Dryden Press.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience & Education*. New York: Touchstone.

Johnson, N. H., Lyddon, P. A., Nelson, M. E., Selman, A., & Worth, A. (2015). JALT forum: Reimagining contemporary EFL curricula. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *JALT2014 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review, 66*, 60-93.

Nunan, D. (1988), 'Principles for designing language teaching materials', *Guidelines* 10.2: 1-24.

Nunan, D. (2004). *Task-based language teaching.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Resnick, M., & Robinson, K. (2018). *Lifelong kindergarten: Cultivating creativity through projects, passion, peers, and play*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Wells, C. G. (1999). *Dialogic inquiry: Towards a sociocultural practice and theory of education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Willis, D. & Willis, J. (2009). *Task-based Language Teaching: Some Questions and Answers. The Language Teacher 33*(3). March 2009

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.