

# English language support: A dialogical multi-literacies approach to teaching students from CALD backgrounds

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*Abstract:* Students in Western university contexts require multiple literacies, numeracies, and critical capacities to succeed. Participation requires a blend of English language capacity, cultural knowhow, and cognisance of the often-hidden racialized assumptions and dispositions underpinning literate performance. Students from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds transitioning to Western university settings from local and international contexts often find themselves floundering in this complex sociocultural web. Many students struggle with the English language preferences of their institutions despite meeting International English Language Testing System (IELTS) requirements. Once enrolled, students from CALD backgrounds need to navigate the linguistic, semiotic, and cultural landscape of the university, both physically and virtually, to enter the discourses and practices of their chosen disciplines. Universities cannot afford to allow students to ‘sink or swim’ or struggle through with non-specialist or ad-hoc support. In response to a clear need for explicit and ongoing English language support for students from CALD backgrounds, the Student Learning Centre (SLC) at Flinders University in South Australia created the English Language Support Program (ELSP). The ELSP sets out to overcome prescriptive and assimilationist approaches to language support by adopting an eclectic blend of learner-centred, critical-creative, and multi-literacies approaches to learning and teaching. Rather than concentrate on skills and/or language appropriateness, the ELSP broadens its reach by unpacking the *mechanics* and *machinations* of university study through an intensive—and *transgressive*—multi-module program. This paper outlines the theoretical and pedagogical challenges of implementing the ELSP.

*Key Words:* English language support, critical pedagogies, academic literacies, multiliteracies, CALD/EAL/NESB/ESL teaching.

## Introduction

Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes “the practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Richard Shaull, ‘Foreword,’ *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire, 1996/1970, p. 16)

As bell hooks (1994) notes in *Teaching to Transgress*, the ‘...classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy’ (p. 12). It is in classrooms that students and teachers can challenge the boundaries of convention to create new possibilities. This explains why hooks celebrates ‘...teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom’ (p. 12). For us, the classroom and the relationships and dialogues we establish with students provide the possibility for *radical transgressions* in language and literacy development for students with English as an Additional Language (EAL). Our goal is (and was) to design and implement a critically-charged and genuinely student-centred approach to English language support, and in so doing transgress many of the prescriptive approaches commonly used in mainstream EAL/ESL programs.

Statistics from late 2016 tell us that Flinders University (2017) has approximately 26,000 students made up of 81% domestic and 19% international. We also know that significant numbers of our domestic students come from CALD (and EAL) backgrounds. The University also has ambitions to further grow its international student cohort, as well as broaden its widening participation base by increasing its intake of students with low entry scores. Therefore, the number of students needing language and literacy support will grow, and grow even faster than our Academic Language and Learning services can accommodate. This provides the perfect opportunity to rethink what we do. Do we want English language support to function as an instrument that inculcates students into the logic of an inequitable and racialized system and brings about conformity to it (as outlined by Richard Shaull above), *or* do we want it to become the ‘practice of freedom,’ whereby students, through critical and creative reflection and action, come to identify and resist the inequities and barriers they find?

## Challenges and Possibilities

The aim of the English Language Support Program (ELSP) is to provide an empowering and transformative educational experience to students from CALD (and EAL) backgrounds. We want them to decide how far they take it. We acknowledge that the English language needs of these students are as complex and diverse as their ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious, and educational backgrounds. Accommodating this diversity using critical and transgressive approaches is consequently challenging given international trends in higher education policy, programming, and pedagogy seem to privilege top-down massification models of education delivery, models that students often prefer due to former schooling experiences and entrenched educational habit (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Thompson-Whiteside, 2011). Similarly, the very language(s) and literacies we are attempting to teach are themselves evolving, diversifying, and multiplying. Given this, language support needs to include and go beyond traditional oral and written language skills, and explicitly address the often-hidden literacies required to succeed in university and life (Miller, 2015).

## Students as Co-creators

Our experiences have also shown that well-intentioned commitments to addressing the needs of students from CALD backgrounds often fail to consider the perspectives (and input) of students themselves. In other words, we tend to *predetermine* curriculum content before semester rather than develop this content in dialogue and praxis with students *as we go*. Curriculum negotiation therefore tends to happen after the planning event, far too late for the students to make deep interventions in the learning trajectory or pedagogical process (Boomer, 1988; Freire, 1996). Large student cohorts, heavy workloads, short turnover times for curriculum innovation, and staff and student ideological and pedagogical differences, often serve to sustain the status quo. And the status quo, in our experience, usually relies on teacher-directed, skills-and-drills, functionalist approaches to language teaching, with little or no input from students. But there is also a racialized component to these standardising pressures. As Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa (2015) point out, *appropriate-based approaches* to language learning perpetuate and reproduce racial normativity and deficit discourses, whereby CALD learners are expected to model their language and literacy practices on the dominant culture or 'white speaking subject.' To combat this, they argue, teachers (and students) need to move beyond the discourse of language appropriateness (and mimicry) to approaches that transform hege-

monic language practices and ‘denaturalize standard linguistic categories.’ This, in our view, makes transformative dialogical teaching in the Freirean tradition urgent and necessary, *especially* in the context of teaching EAL to students from a myriad of cultural, ideological, and political backgrounds who arrive at university with an abundance of largely untapped ‘community cultural wealth’ (Yosso, 2005).

We therefore believe that discussions about learning and teaching must occur *with* and not *for* students to resist the prescriptive and assimilationist approaches to curriculum development often required in universities for the sake of accreditation and planning convenience. To do this, students need to learn to become ‘co-creators and co-intentional recreators’ of curriculum content rather than passive recipients of pre-packaged and mass-produced skill-sets (Freire, 1996). After all, as Freire (1996, p. 76) suggests: ‘One cannot expect positive results from an educational ... program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people [i.e. the students].’ The ELSP therefore endeavours to move beyond a passive skill-acquisition approach to EAL (what Lea and Street [2006] call the ‘study skills’ model) and into genuinely critical and creative multi-literacy approaches (as advocated by The New London Group in 1996, and later by New Literacy Studies more generally [Lea, 2004]). These latter approaches are premised on the genuine pursuit of student agency and collaboration in learning and not on passive inculcation or ‘banking’ methods (Freire, 1996; Miller, 2015; Perry, 2012). Again, to return to Freire:

It is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality. They must *act together* upon their environment in order critically to reflect upon their reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection. (Freire Institute, 2017, emphasis added)

The allure of abandoning such reformative and empowering initiatives for the safety of standardised teaching and student disablement must be resisted, even if such mass-produced offerings are easier to implement and often more palatable to institutional hierarchies and many staff.

## Pedagogical Contradictions and Tensions

Unfortunately, our ‘consensus-led’ and collectivist approach to planning has tended, at times, to pare back the curriculum to generic skills-based content, thus shaving off the very nuances and complexities we wanted to

*put back in* to our teaching. This, in turn, has tended to create unresolvable philosophical and pedagogical tensions between staff, whereby our stated Freirean ambitions have been subsumed or blunted by systemic conventions, historical precedence, and/or teacher resistance. What's more, we acknowledge that our philosophical approach is consequently fluid and inconsistent, relying as it does on a shifting mix of critical literacies, critical pedagogies, critical language awareness, constructivism, social constructionism, multi-literacies, and other pragmatic approaches and compromises, all in orbit simultaneously. This is probably not uncommon in such large and diverse teaching teams and student cohorts, where different approaches and ideas are either contested, resisted, adopted, or redesigned depending on context and circumstance.

## **Liberation, not Domestication**

As the great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire famously noted in the 1970s, it is against a liberatory educational agenda to merely attempt to change 'the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation that oppresses them' (Simone de Beauvoir, as cited Freire, 1996, p. 55). While we do not pretend that liberation is our primary goal, nor do we assume students from CALD backgrounds perceive themselves as oppressed, we do believe that education can (only) be liberatory if students actively participate in the process of building their understandings of the educational context and its workings. It is here that English language learning can be crippling and reproductive or empowering and transformative. Teachers and students need to be aware of the many practices and prejudices that work to disadvantage and/or oppress students from CALD communities (Peirce, 1995). This includes an awareness of (1) the *deficit discourse* that constructs them in the Australian tertiary sector (Jackson, 2002; Mok, 2006); (2) the *hidden curriculum* that takes for granted certain social and cultural capitals while excluding others; (3) the *top-down, one-size-fits-all pedagogies* driven by grammar-focussed skills methods used in mainstream ESL; (4) the lack of critically-informed *sociocultural support* for EAL students; and (5) the actual *unmet needs* of students as defined by students themselves.

We therefore believe the student-teacher relationship and the pedagogical ramifications of this dialectic should be collectively and critically examined throughout the learning journey to minimise 'oppressive' relations in the classroom—which are inevitable at many levels due to the political and ideological nature of all social contexts (Apple, 2004). Students should be invited into these *meta-level* activities to discover the political and ideological mach-

inations that circulate behind and around the more visible (and innocent-looking) learning activities at the surface (Apple, 2004; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Peirce, 1995; Shor, 1992). For us, this involves firstly introducing students to ‘critical language awareness,’ and then, once understood, to ‘critical praxis’. Critical language awareness allows students and teachers to examine the social, cultural, political, and ideological aspects of language use (Fairclough, 1999; Pennycook, 2009), while critical praxis involves students and teachers gaining critical consciousness (i.e. conscientisation) about their social realities through ongoing action and reflection (praxis), and then using this knowledge to change and transform the world around them (Freire, 1996; Freire Institute, 2017). In other words, students (and teachers) learn to ‘perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality’ (Freire, 1996, p. 17). In our context, critical consciousness thus involves two moves: firstly, to start ‘a critique of [the] ways in which language perpetuates inequitable social relations’—as per *critical sociolinguistics* (Pennycook, 2009, p. 5) and *critical literacies* (Luke, 2006); and then, secondly, to dismantle learning hierarchies and transform hegemonic language practices—as per Freirean or *raciolinguistic* pedagogies (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Without these kinds of insights and attitudes, students cannot genuinely grasp the powerful forces (i.e. values, ideologies, discourses, practices, etc.) underpinning everyday language and literacy practices and act *knowingly* and *strategically* in response—both within and beyond the university. This is the bedrock upon which critical literacies, multiliteracies, and critical pedagogies rely (Luke, 2006; Miller, 2015; Morgan, 1997; Shor, 1997; Stevens & Bean, 2007).

## Collaborative Resonance

As ELSP teachers we struggled with the professional and institutional perspectives and demands that pulled this endeavour in multiple directions. Staff were forced to confront the tensions and challenges faced when multiple teaching philosophies came together and clashed, while still striving to unpack with students the often-hidden knowledges required to succeed in a Western university context. These philosophical and ideological tensions remain to this day. A critical approach to teaching and learning does not ignore staff and student resistance to change, nor does it cover up the contradictions that emerge; rather, it sees these fissures and tensions as opportunities to deepen theory and practice. As Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1991) notes in *Learning to Teach against the Grain*, teachers should work through these tensions and competing discourses and practices in ‘collaborative resonance’ (rather than ‘critical dissonance’) to ensure their teaching is as

critically refined and learner-centred as possible. After all, as Michael Apple (2004, p. vii) points out: 'Education is ... a site of conflict about the kind of knowledge that is and should be taught, about whose knowledge is "official" and about who has the right to decide both what is taught and how teaching and learning are to be evaluated.' Collaborative resonance between teachers—and teachers and students; and students and students—is therefore essential.

While the teaching team struggled to achieve 'collaborative resonance' while designing the ELSP, the final program did receive the full support of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (International) to continue. This support is key to meeting the ongoing needs of students and the program's expansion. The future of the ELSP will depend on the synergy—and vision—of multiple stakeholders to work together to do what is best for students rather than what is most familiar (or comfortable) for teachers and administrators (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). To repeat: the temptation to allow the ELSP to revert to a functionalist and instrumentalist boot camp must be resisted, even if this approach requires less energy and imagination than its critical-creative counterpart.

## ELSP Background

Historically, the mandate of the Student Learning Centre (SLC) had been to provide academic advice and language support to *all* students seeking learning assistance across a wide-range of disciplines, as per 'The Good Practice Principles' advocated by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA, 2009). It was, however, becoming increasingly apparent to SLC staff that students from CALD backgrounds needed far more assistance than was traditionally offered. Intermittent, ad-hoc, and just-in-time support was not sufficient. The SLC's student data showed that such students were becoming the largest cohort seeking assistance in the SLC's Learning Lounge. These numbers were rising despite the SLC's best efforts to extend opening times and to employ more Academic Language and Learning staff, and despite the efforts of many faculty staff to *embed* language development into curriculum content and assessment (as per Principle 6 of The Good Practice Principles [AUQA, 2009, p. 8]) (Thies, 2012; Webb, 2012). Most of these students actively sought English language support and cultural insight from the academic advisory team. Student queries overwhelmingly focussed on grammar, punctuation, editing, proofreading, question analysis, and the largely invisible *sociocultural* assumptions embodied in these activities. In addition, SLC staff were also becoming increasingly concerned by the

number of students who had met the University's IELTS requirements but who could not meet the University's linguistic or grammatical preferences regarding Western academic writing, and/or who struggled to build texts and arguments according to Western scholarly conventions. Students also struggled to adjust to Western notions of academic integrity and plagiarism, for which they were often penalised and/or stigmatised. It was apparent to some SLC staff that there was a significant mismatch between the needs of students from CALD backgrounds and the institution's racialized expectations and offerings.

Too many students were telling us they had not been adequately supported to 'adapt to their academic, sociocultural and linguistic environments' during their studies (as per Principle 8 of The Good Practice Principles [p. 10]). In fact, when asked, most students suggested their teachers and supervisors had explicitly told them that language support was *not their job*. While The Good Practice Principles (p. 2) make it clear that universities cannot assume students arrive with the academic language 'proficiency' required to participate fully, particularly in a widening participation era, many faculty staff have told us they do, in fact, expect students to be language-proficient and study-ready from the outset, and have too much work in their subject teaching to add language support to their already burgeoning workloads. Many of these same teachers even suggested they would rather see the University tighten entry requirements than embed explicit language teaching into their already crowded curricula. Many teachers go so far as to suggest this as a form of 'dumbing-down' the curriculum.

## ELSP Implementation

The ELSP pilot consisted of four independent modules: (a) *Listening and Discussion for University*, (b) *Reading Academic Texts*, (c) *Grammar and Academic Vocabulary*, and (d) *Academic Writing*.<sup>1</sup> To provide choice and flexibility, students could enrol in as few or as many modules as required. Each module ran for 12 hours over three weeks, with modules 'a' and 'b' running in the opening weeks of Semester 1, followed by modules 'c' and 'd' shortly after. The modules *Grammar and Academic Vocabulary* and *Academic Writing* would be repeated late in the Semester to meet anticipated demand. Students would need to attend two (2-hour) workshops per week (on set days) in

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<sup>1</sup> These module titles had already been determined prior to our involvement in the program. We may have shaped content differently had we been able to determine the scope and title of each module.



one of three timeslots (9.00am, 1.00pm or 5.00pm), with all activities run in class. On completion, all students would receive one certificate per module in a formal 'graduation' ceremony, with staff, students, family, and friends invited. Class sizes were capped at 15 to emphasise the student-centred, dialogical, and interactive nature of workshops. The pilot saw a total of 323 students attend the ELSP in semesters 1 and 2 of 2015. These numbers continue to grow in 2016 and 2017.

Initially, eligibility requirements were placed on ELSP enrolments to target students most in need. Firstly, to enrol in the ELSP, students needed to self-identify as local or international (EAL) students needing assistance. Second, students needed to attend the SLC's Learning Lounge and ask our academic advisors for enrolment forms and program details. Our advisors would then discuss with students the time commitments required to complete one or more modules and the knowledges they would likely gain, before signing the student's enrolment 'referral' form. Third, students could also be referred to the program by faculty-based tutors and lecturers. However, faculty teachers were asked not to use this process as a *punitive* measure, but rather to promote the program as a voluntary opportunity. The last thing we wanted was for staff to demand students attend the ELSP due to their own increasing frustration at the perceived language 'deficiencies' of students from CALD backgrounds, something that would further marginalise and demean the very students we hoped to help and empower. Finally, students would need to take these referral forms to the SLC office to formally enrol. Staff could then ensure that all students found their way into suitable timeslots and knew when and where to attend. In all, students needed to be active in the enrolment process and staff needed to be available to give face-to-face advice and encouragement. The point here was to make the process interactive and personal, and to build rapport.

Critically, this was a *university-wide* endeavour. Academic staff from multiple disciplines were quick to recommend students to the program. This process was assisted by ongoing dialogue with the University's International Students Services office, and with students themselves (Brady, 2015). This collaborative approach allowed us to access diverse perspectives on students' needs and learn about which aspects of language development were privileged by staff in multiple disciplines, and by students learning in a range of subjects and stages of study (from first-years to post-graduates). These revelations then informed our planning.

Multiple full-time and casual staff were employed to teach the 30 ses-

sions delivered each week in the various ELSP modules. One of the ELSP coordinators, (K. Berniz), asked staff to provide written feedback after each session on students' engagement with delivery and content, and to make suggestions about aims, activities, timing, and content. Consequently, staff became co-collaborators in the curriculum development process, and could demonstrate the creative ways in which they adapted (or subverted) lesson plans to meet student need or to favour personal pedagogical preferences. This grassroots approach helped foster democratic and participatory practices that we hoped would permeate the learning environment and the relationships developing between staff and students.

Throughout the pilot the ELSP coordinators received both complimentary and critical feedback on lesson plans and resources from teachers (and students). Some teachers suggested the lesson plans enriched their teaching and stimulated deep and meaningful learning for all. Others were less enthusiastic about the critical and dialogical activities and sought ways to convert their lessons back to teacher-directed skills sessions in keeping with their pedagogical preferences. This is probably not uncommon in such diverse teaching teams. Understandably, some staff felt more comfortable using (something like) what Lea and Street (2006) call a *study skills model*, which '...sees writing and literacy as primarily an individual and cognitive skill' (p. 368). Others felt more comfortable using something like what Lea and Street (2006) call an *academic socialisation model*, which '...is concerned with students' acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres' (p. 369). Few teachers, however, were prepared to fully embrace Lea and Street's more challenging and transgressive *academic literacies model*, which foregrounds '...the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context ... [and explores] epistemological issues and social processes, including power relations among people, institutions, and social identities' (p. 369). Put simply, the *study skills model* aligns with teacher-directed transmission methods, the *academic socialisation model* aligns with situated learning and constructivism, and the *academic literacies model* aligns with critical pedagogies and student-centred social constructionist approaches. A blend of all three with an emphasis on the latter would probably go a long way to revolutionising the classroom. To help staff understand alternative models like the *academic literacies model* outlined above, or the similar but extended Freirean (multiliteracies) model advocated elsewhere, will require ongoing whole-team discussions about teaching philosophies and pedagogical possibilities in the manner described by Cochran-Smith (1991).

## Fostering Critical Capacity

The goal for Berniz when developing the aims of the ELSP was to raise students' critical language awareness and critical consciousness about language and literacy practice in the contemporary multimodal university context; for other ELSP teachers it was to provide students with a useful toolkit of language skills and institutional knowhow. In our view, we were not aiming to teach students how to produce a narrow range of academic texts using a narrow set of language skills. Rather, we wanted students to understand and employ critical strategies emerging from their broader *meta-level* knowledge of what goes on in and around language and literacy practice in the tertiary sector (and beyond). This approach to English language support involves raising students' consciousness about the politics and polemics of university study, student-teacher relations, and what constitutes success in Western academic contexts—as a *precursor to enacting and showcasing useful literacy skills* (as advocated by Lea and Street [2006]). For us, critical pedagogies involve a genuine commitment to dialogue, problem posing, power sharing, curriculum negotiation, cultural inclusivity, joint feedback, and praxis (Freire, 1996; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Hooks, 1994; Miller, 2017; Shor, 1992; 1999). As such, this is a *sociocultural* approach to language development that foregrounds literacy as a *social practice* that happens in specific contexts, for specific audiences, and for specific purposes (Perry, 2012). It includes texts and interactions that happen in person, online, or through different media; and involves using a range of discourses, practices, and interpretive lenses, which in turn develop student and teacher cognisance and critical consciousness about the different forms of power, authority, and legitimation that enable or disable these types of activities and identities (Miller, 2015). There is a lot more going on in this language/literacy space than simply divulging a handful of discrete skills that can then be applied—uncritically—to educational purposes and contexts.

## Praxis at Work: Action Research

Our approach to the ELSP saw teachers and students begin the program as *co-learners* and, for some, as *co-teachers*. In the first session of the *Listening and Discussion for University* module (developed by Berniz) students and teachers were asked to share their expectations, needs, and assumptions about language learning as a foundation upon which to build future teaching and learning. Establishing trust and relevance—and an ethic of care—was essential. Problem posing involved unpacking discourses, behaviours, values, and dispositions that enable or disable participation in

multiple disciplines and media throughout the University. For example, we discussed how some tutors perceive student ‘contemplation’ (i.e. silence) in tutorials as a passive or lazy response to learning and participation—an invisible activity for which students could be negatively perceived and/or penalised. We debated how active participation through outspoken input based on lecture and reading content is privileged in the Australian university context. Some students found these ‘cultural’ ways of interpreting participation as confronting and unfair. Some noted how being shy or valuing teacher knowledge could be misconstrued. These conversations made certain cultural capitals *public* and highlighted how educational expectations change depending on context and teacher—meaning that students need to ‘read’ both to know the difference. Power sharing was thus achieved, in part, by providing students with *insider* knowledge on curriculum design and decision-making. Discussing these private knowledges enabled students to begin to act consciously and strategically in learning contexts (Peirce, 1995; Rogers, 1969). Berniz also provided students with rubrics to unpack what ‘desirable’ participation might look like. We then discussed how these different qualities are encouraged or discouraged in different countries, cultures, and contexts. Students could voice their impressions, such as surprise or intrigue, and openly reflect upon new demands and lived experience.

As such, these conversations brought the students’ identities, cultures, interests, and emerging perspectives to the fore, and enabled them to participate in knowledge production and teaching. Cultural inclusivity and critical praxis were thus achieved by making parts of the hidden curriculum visible and tangible, and by building critical lenses through which to scrutinise lived experience and social injustice. In turn, a space opens for cultural representation without censorship, and for genuine feedback and negotiation to influence future activity and content (Hooks, 1994). Here, to borrow from Tara Yosso (2005), students brought their own Community Cultural Wealth to the table to reveal the aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, resistant, and navigational capitals they already had in abundance, as a precursor to the invidious task of adopting (or resisting) the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) of the prevailing system and ‘white speaking subject’ to participate fully (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Or, in the words of Bonny Norton Peirce (1995), it is the *power relations* between language learners and target language speakers in social interactions that determines whether students from CALD backgrounds *invest* in the capital on offer or have genuine opportunity to enact that capital beyond (or even in) the learning context. We thus created a safe space for student voice and identity to contribute to learning while demonstrating key attitudes, knowledges, and behaviours required to

navigate Western university study (i.e. what Yosso [2005] calls ‘resistant’ and ‘navigational’ capitals). Teachers, too, learned through these Freirean-like ‘cultural circles’ about students’ cultures and educational backgrounds, as well as the many and varied privileges afforded the teacher positioning, which in turn permitted students to create learning pathways and disruptive and counterhegemonic curriculum content.

The authors also used a *multi-literacies* framework to underpin their ELSP teaching. Applying the view that literacy is a complex and dynamic *sociocultural* concept and practice—not just the three Rs—we role-modelled the multiple literacies required to succeed in university contexts (see Miller, 2015). Exploring six key literacy domains, including (1) *institutional*, (2) *critical*, (3) *academic*, (4) *language*, (5) *digital*, and (6) *social and cultural literacies* in our modules, we demonstrated the various knowledges, dispositions, and critical capacities necessary to successfully engage people and contexts. In our contributions to the development and teaching of the *Academic Writing* and *Academic Reading* modules we outlined how these literacies typically work in constructive combinations to achieve diverse semiotic outcomes. For example, in the *Academic Writing* module instead of presenting students with discrete sessions on text types and writing process skills, we introduced these practices by first outlining the diverse views on what constitutes academic writing in different disciplines and contexts. For instance, we introduced students to peer-reviewed first-person narratives to counter the dominant representation of texts in ESL classrooms as ‘dispassionate’, ‘objective’, and ‘third-person.’ We then used popular everyday multimodal texts (such as YouTube) and conventional paper-based academic texts (such as journal articles) to show the power of ‘argument’ and ‘evidence’ in different media. These multimodal and multi-literacy approaches taught students new ways of designing (and reading) scholarly texts for different contexts, purposes, and audiences. Most importantly, our approaches responded to current trends towards multimodal texts and/or first-person accounts being used in many disciplines, such as Education, English, Creative Arts, Media, Communication, Philosophy, and Nursing and Midwifery, where many of our students were already struggling with reflexive (first-person) journal writing. In sum, by unpacking a range of texts in a range of media, we demonstrated that for most university assignments—whether essays, journals, presentations, or posters—students needed to use a combination of institutional knowledges, language strategies, critical capacities, digital processes, social and cultural sensitivities, and academic conventions—i.e. *multiple literacies*—to (re)produce ‘effective’ assessment products.

A major consideration in our planning and teaching in the ELSP was the genuine acknowledgement and application of students' *prior knowledge* and *cultural wealth*. For instance, to build on students' emerging understandings on the function of 'reflective writing' in some academic contexts, we first invited students to talk about a transformative moment in their lives. We then showed students examples of powerful personal reflections we found on YouTube, such as a poet using rap to critically reflect on his lived experiences with social media (Prince Ea, 2014). We analysed the words, rhymes, gestures, metaphors, and arguments he used to make sense of his experiences and to communicate his ideas and emotions to others. While some of our teachers were hesitant about using a non-academic text, and questioned the relevance of reflective writing to academic study, the students themselves told us they understood its relevance and found it thoroughly engaging. Earlier in the lesson, most students said they had been told to never use the pronoun 'I' in academic texts. This idea had been drilled into them and needed revision and critique. We needed to (re)legitimise reflexive writing (and thinking) as a genuine form of scholarship in certain disciplines and contexts. We later showed students an example (selected by Berniz) of a peer-reviewed journal article written by Miller (2006) using first-person writing to reflect upon former education experiences. We used a literary analysis approach to unpack the author's use of words, metaphors, imagery, structure, and repetition. Students were moved by the power of first-person narration and how the text made strategic links between theory and experience. By scaffolding the texts in this way, from the everyday to the academic, from the known to the unknown, students could link new knowledge to prior knowledge and challenge various assumptions along the way (praxis). They then recognised they used reflective writing in their everyday lives and could adjust these discourses to suit the expectations of university study and certain assessment tasks. Reflective writing is a key requirement in Nursing (Muller, 2011) and something students frequently ask about in the SLC Learning Lounge. So, while some of our teachers were not convinced about the legitimacy of using everyday texts as a means of bridging the gap between the everyday and the academic, nor the relevance of reflexive thinking and reflective writing to academic learning, the level of learning and engagement shown by students proved otherwise.

Another way in which we drew on students' prior knowledge and cultural wealth was to directly invite them to reflect on their language learning experiences in EAL/ESL and to tell us what they identified as learning obstacles and/or necessities. We regularly collated students' views on what they found challenging in their English language usage and academic learning. For in-

stance, in the *Grammar and Academic Vocabulary* module, Berniz created a list of student-generated challenges and planned sessions to target these issues in a sequenced manner. Indeed, most ELSP lessons began with key questions about what students struggled with in their chosen disciplines. We then set aside time for students to explore technical issues, production processes, creative language use, self-evaluation, and cultural insights. Difficulties with articles, word order, subject/verb agreement, and tenses regularly came up—but so too did reflexive conversations emerge on the difficulties of navigating new educational contexts, cultures, and expectations. These reflections stimulated rich discussion and emotional input, as well as new technical and strategic ways of being, doing, and knowing in and beyond the university. We always concluded lessons with hands-on learning – with students writing ‘real’ texts in pairs or groups which the whole class then examined and evaluated. This ground-up approach to teaching the ‘grammars’ relevant to student-specific texts and contexts proved less intimidating (and more collaborative) than individualised skills-and-drills approaches. The aim, facilitated by students, was not to study language parts in isolation, in lock-step, but to strategically isolate parts of relevance to students *as we went*.

## Reciprocity and Voice

By paying close attention to students’ voices and needs our curriculum planning and teaching delivery changed, thus becoming more responsive, innovative, and motivating for both students and (most) teachers. There is a kind of palpable reverberation effect when all voices matter—a sense of solidarity, mutual respect, and community. Planning lessons that engage students deeply requires a huge investment in time and energy—more time, in fact, than most academic workloads allow for. This includes time to carefully craft lesson content and activity; time to converse with students to receive their input; time to improve the aesthetics of presentations to make them intellectually and visually stimulating; time to exchange student and teacher feedback on aims and activities; and time to consider how to meaningfully engage the ‘whole’ person in learning (e.g. intellectually, emotionally, culturally, etc.) (Rogers, 1969). Our discussions about the disadvantages international students face in Western universities gave students a safe space to voice fears and build supportive networks. Students talked about how the program assisted with isolation, gave them a sense of joint purpose, and enabled them to broaden their social networks (as per Principles 8 and 9 in *The Good Practice Principles*). Importantly, it also enabled students to develop genuine critical awareness about how the institution—through its

people, cultures, policies, practices, and values—positioned them as learners and consumers, and gave them some strategies for self-determination and agency in the future.

## Moving Forward with Activism

For students to gain *critical awareness* about the mysteries and machinations of the Australian university system, they must be given ample opportunity to openly examine the values, ideologies, processes, products, epistemologies, and power structures that circulate behind and underneath the skills and knowledges valued by that system, as well as express and enact the community cultural wealth they carry with them (Yosso, 2005). This is the real *wealth* and *capital* underpinning literate performance. Students can then use this knowledge (and the languages and literacies this entails) to strategically engage with—and appropriate, use, and subvert—other knowledges, opportunities, and credentials on offer (Carrington & Luke, 1997; Miller, 2015). As Peirce (1995, p. 13) suggests: ‘It is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to—or is denied access to—powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak.’ To deliver this kind of empowerment in English language support using a critical, multiliteracies approach means facing numerous challenges. Institutions need to value genuine reform and the time and energy required to make real changes to the pedagogies and practices that will facilitate this reform. The reluctance of some staff to explore alternative approaches to teaching and learning was frustrating but understandable. While this reluctance potentially hindered new imaginings for pedagogy and practice, it also showed us how difficult reform can be. While we can never expect absolute pedagogical consensus, we should strive for considered debate and *collaborative resonance* to nurture possibility (Cochran-Smith, 1991). Otherwise, unfortunately, genuine reform cannot occur.

As the late great South Australian literacy advocate Garth Boomer (1988; 1989) noted, teachers seeking to innovate through pedagogy and curriculum design need to look for ‘strategic gains’ when up against entrenched educational habit. Establishing the ELSP was the first strategic gain. The second was to invite student input into the planning and teaching process. The third was to deploy an eclectic and sometimes contradictory blend of critical approaches to foster teacher and student uptake and engagement. The long-term plan should be to make strategic gains annually until the full ideological and pedagogical ambitions of this program are met. To realise



this ambition we need teachers, students, and administrators to break, as hooks (1994) might say, habit barriers preventing innovation in teaching—or, in Boomer's (1988; 1989) and Cochran-Smith's (1991) words, 'to teach against the grain.' To do this we need to challenge our own pedagogical assumptions and practices in 'collaborative resonance' with others to find the toxicities and complacencies lurking beneath our best intentions (Boomer, 1988; 1989; Miller, 2017). Otherwise, the temptation might be, through fatigue and coercion, to surrender our reformative ambitions and passively go with the flow. After all, as Cochran-Smith (1991, p. 280) reminds us, '...teachers are decision makers and collaborators who must reclaim their roles in the shaping of practice by taking a stand as both *educators* and *activists*' (our emphasis). That is, to revitalise practice teachers need to see themselves as frontline *reformers* rather than background instruments. Students too will need to challenge their own assumptions about teaching and learning and be open to change. Administrators too will need to challenge their racialized assumptions about the preparedness or otherwise of students and staff entering their institutions, and find the resources necessary to overcome shortcomings (as per The Good Practice Principles). Institutions, welcoming and recruiting students from CALD and EAL backgrounds as part of their business models, will need to meet their needs in meaningful and substantive ways—lest they lose them.

## Conclusion

For students to 'act' rather than be 'acted upon', as Garth Boomer and Paulo Freire have argued, students need more than technical knowledge and superficial awareness of language features to fully engage the wor(l)d. They need *meta*-level understandings of the often-hidden workings of literacy and language use, coupled with contextual awareness about how the ideologies and concrete conditions that circulate in, around, and behind literacy practices often act to prevent or promote social inclusion and mobility. Avoiding these nuanced discussions and only concentrating on individual academic skill-sets does not empower students to know—and understand—and *eyes-wide-open see*—just what is at stake in the battleground that *is* literacy and its social enactment. It is in understanding these issues that we believe English language support shifts from being a potentially crippling and reproductive status-quo preserving device to an empowering and liberating form of critical consciousness and transformative praxis. And it is *this* realisation—this *transgression*—that drives us to do what we do. In the words of Cochran-Smith (1991, p. 285): '...teachers who work against the grain must name and wrestle with their own doubts, must fend off the

fatigue of reform and depend on the strength of their individual and collaborative convictions that their work ultimately makes a difference in the fabric of social responsibility.’ And we do!<sup>2</sup>

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