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Teachers researching their practice: Explorations in the Georgian classroom

Edited by Paula Rebolledo





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Introduction

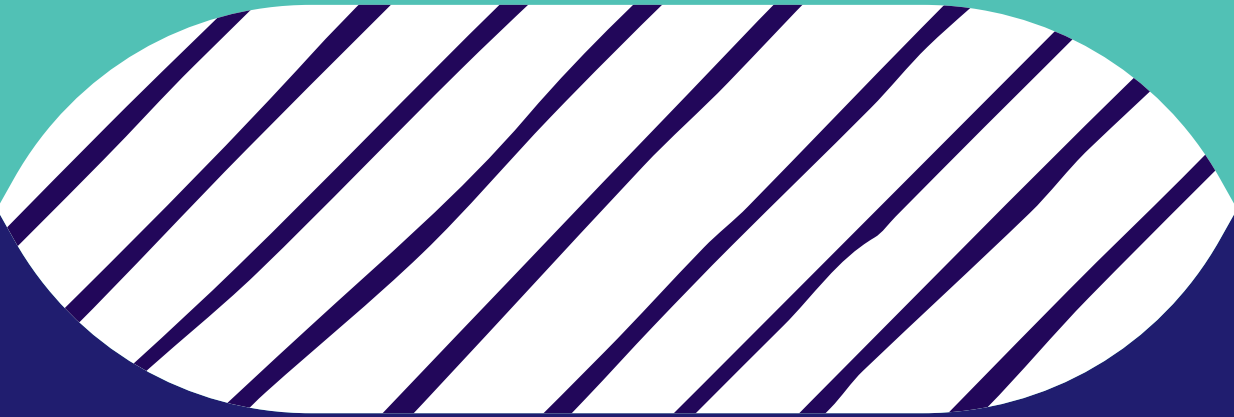
**Nato Kldiashvili, Paula Rebolledo,
Sirin Soyoz and Salome Zarkua**

English is becoming increasingly important in Georgia. Providing students with high-quality English classes is one of the top priorities for the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth (MESY) which is why reforms have been introduced that include introducing new, competence-based curricula and developing a teacher professional development scheme.

English is taught as a foreign language in every school in Georgia between I and XII grades, from the ages of six to 18, reflecting its high demand. Public schools typically schedule English lessons twice or three times a week for 40 to 45 minutes per lesson while private schools deliver English lessons four or five days a week. The number of students per class also varies. There are 30 students per class in public schools, but some schools split classes for English lessons. Private schools have smaller classes ranging from ten to 15 students.

Individuals who aspire to become an English teacher in Georgia need to have at least a bachelor's degree, complete a teacher preparation programme and earn a full certification. They can teach subjects related to their field of study, a bachelor of art (BA) or a bachelor of science (BS) degree, as long as they have completed a state-approved preparation programme. Every school teacher needs to have an individual professional development plan. Teachers are categorised into Senior, Leader and Mentor according to the results of teacher exams and the TPD (Teacher Professional Development) scheme. Some of the requirements and obligations outlined by the scheme include supporting the school community, designing the curriculum and doing research.

In Georgia, several institutions support English teachers' professional development. These include the Teachers Professional Development Center (TPDC) – a governmental organisation – and other institutions from the private sector. One of them, the British Council, was approached by the Minister of Education to support initiatives to improve the learning and teaching of English in the country. This led to the development of the Exploratory Action Research course, guided by the principles outlined in the Strategy for Teaching English in General Education announced in 2022.



The Exploratory Action Research (EAR) online course

The EAR online course was developed as an additional component to the Online Teaching Community (OTC), a British Council peer-led online platform for English language teachers. The platform provides a space where English teachers from the British Council’s ‘Wider Europe’ region (Central Asia, Western Balkans, Ukraine, South Caucasus and Turkey) can share ideas, knowledge and experience; take part in discussions; reflect on their practice; and conduct research. To support the last of these, the EAR course was developed and implemented in 2021, initially with a cohort of participants from five countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. It then continued for two more years with teachers from Georgia.

In terms of objectives, at the end of the course, participants would

- examine their beliefs about research
- reflect on their own teaching situation
- learn about exploratory action research
- plan and carry out the exploratory phase of their own exploratory research
- plan ways to develop as teacher-researchers.

The course was designed to be studied at the same time as participants conducted their research. It was sequenced in five modules to support them through the process of identifying the research topic and research questions, designing data collection tools, collecting and analysing data, and sharing findings. The course was 12 weeks long (see Table 1) and included a combination of webinars, readings and resources, and discussion forums for sharing. It also provided examples of research stories, samples of data collection methods, recommendations and plenty of opportunities for participants to reflect on their project.

Week	Module	Module	EAR step
1		Getting started	-
2	0	Starting with EAR	-
3	1	Choosing a focus area	Plan to explore
4	2	Choosing a focus area	Plan to explore
5	3	Preparing to explore	Plan to explore
6		Preparing to explore	Plan to explore
7		Preparing to explore	Explore
8		Preparing to explore	Explore
9	4	Analysing data	Analyse and reflect
10		Analysing data	Analyse and reflect
11	5	Sharing your research	Analyse and reflect
12		Sharing your research	-

A central component of the course was the involvement of mentors who supported the work of teachers both in the course platform and in the development of their research. Each teacher was assigned a mentor to answer their questions through one-to-one meetings and asynchronous conversations. Teachers also participated in monthly live tutorials with all mentors and fellow participants. These sessions allowed for knowledge sharing, real-time interaction and support.

In its first and second years, two OTC facilitators with experience in online mentoring and research were selected to act as mentors for 20 teachers. For its third iteration, two former participants of the programme were selected as peer mentors in order to offer a career path to participants, promote local expertise and ensure programme sustainability. Peer mentors received support from experienced mentors, orientation on effective communication and strategies for providing constructive feedback. A feedback mechanism was in place through bi-weekly team meetings with other mentors and the lead mentor, during which they were encouraged to reflect on their mentoring practices and discuss course-related issues.

On the platform, mentors supported participants by moderating discussions and monitoring participants' progress. To assist teachers in the development of their research, mentors guided them in conducting their research according to a schedule, ensuring that all deadlines were met and providing constructive feedback on the different research documents produced. To guide teachers effectively, mentors provided them with a calendar at the beginning of the project with set deadlines for completing different tasks in the exploratory action

research process according to key steps such as:

- Identifying a research topic and writing research questions
- Selecting data collection methods and designing tools
- Collecting and analysing data
- Presenting the final research projects within the OTC community

Exploratory Action Research

'Before learning about exploratory action research, I used to tackle classroom issues by making changes and taking action based on my assumptions, without thoroughly understanding the situation.' (Inga Mdivani)

Inga's reflection on the power of exploratory action research captures the key takeaway of the research reports contained in this book. Each report is the result of a thorough research process carried out using exploratory action research (EAR) which is a form of teacher research that invites teachers to reflect and make local and evidence-informed decisions about their practice. Thus, the process gets triggered by a puzzling or problematic classroom situation which is later explored through the collection of evidence before trying to fix it. As a result, improvements or changes are advised by the data originating from within the classroom rather than externally. Then the EAR process is comprised of two cycles of data collection, one with a focus on exploration and the second with a focus on action (see Figure 1).



Figure 1.

Smith & Rebolledo (2018) ¹

During the exploration phase, teachers define whether they want to explore a successful classroom event, a puzzling situation or a challenge. They define their research questions, design tools to collect data, collect and analyse their data, and reflect on the possible need for an improvement plan. Then, if desired, teachers continue with the action phase of the process in which they develop their action plan, collect data to evaluate its effect and reflect on the results obtained. At the end of this process, teachers can end their research with the lessons learned. Alternatively they may decide to collect data again to continue to fine-tune their action plan or to explore another situation.

This publication contains reports which describe the research carried out by 17 English language teachers across Georgia (see Figure 2). They are focused on the exploration phase of the exploratory action research process. They describe the setting where the research was carried out, the situation that originated the study, the area of focus, the methods used to collect data, the findings obtained, the improvements proposed and the lessons learned. They explore critical aspects of language learning and teaching addressing a broad spectrum of challenges faced by students and teachers, from speaking and writing difficulties to the integration of technology in the classroom. Together, these reports offer an overview of the multifaceted challenges English language teachers face in Georgia and how, through research, innovative and more pertinent solutions can be offered.

¹ Smith, R. & Rebolledo, P. (2018). Handbook for Exploratory Action Research. British Council: London.

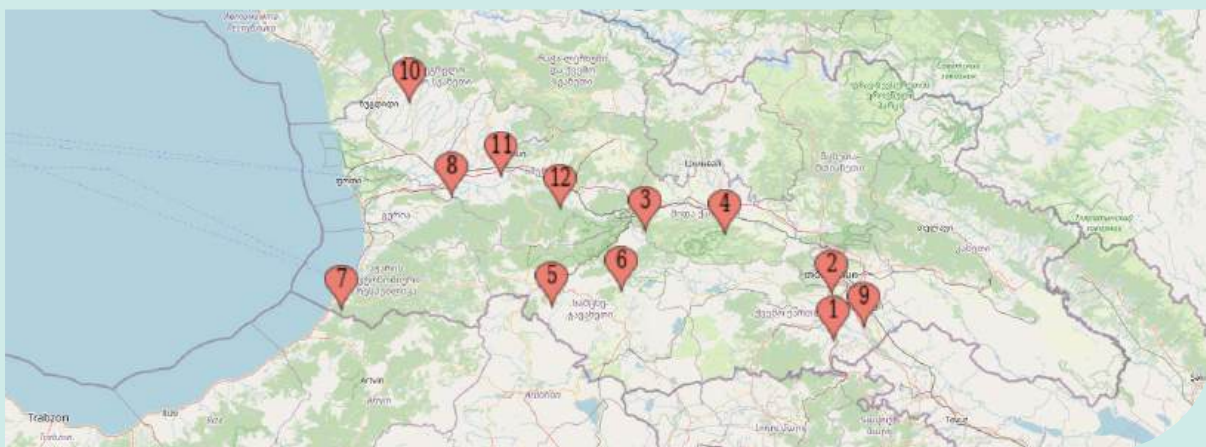


Figure 2.

1. Marneuli
2. Tbilisi
3. Khashuri
4. Gori
5. Akhaltsikhe
6. Tsikhisjvari
7. Batumi
8. Samtredia
9. Rustavi
10. Tsalenjikha
11. Kutaisi
12. Zestafoni

Each contribution highlights each author's research journey and the whole collection provides examples for educators seeking to enhance their teaching practices through research, offering valuable guidance and examples for teachers, teacher educators and researchers alike.

Acknowledgements

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Most importantly, we would like to thank the 17 author-researchers and main contributors to this publication: Armenui Bijoyan, Tinatin Gabunia, Nana Gelashvili, Ketevan Gogaladze, Nino Gurgenadze, Nino Kalandia, Rusudan Karkadze, Natia Katamadze, Khatuna Kharkheli, Lika Khurtsilava, Nato Kldiashvili, Inga Mdivani, Nino Sturua, Lela Tsagareishvili, Nino Tsereteli and Salome Zarkua.

Lastly, we would like to thank the school administrators for permitting and motivating their teachers to conduct their research, and to the students who kindly agreed to take part.

Note on permissions

All photographs featured here were supplied by the teachers. In adherence to British Council protocols, photos lacking the necessary permissions have either been excluded or edited to cover learners' faces.

Reasons behind students' lack of involvement in speaking activities

Inga Mdivani

bilisi Green School

What are the reasons behind my students' lack of involvement in speaking activities?

Grade 10 B1
4 students

short answers
Reluctant to speak

Importance of EAR
Informed decisions
Immediate impact

EAR QUESTIONS

- What opportunities do I create for my students to engage in speaking activities?
- What kind of activities do my learners prefer when speaking in English?
- What do I do when I see that some students don't engage in speaking activities?
- How do my students feel when they have to speak in English?

varied activities
varied interaction
pre-taught vocabulary
clear instructions

"I ❤️ discussions"

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

- Questionnaire
- Lesson observation
- Journal

Findings

- Uninteresting topics
- feeling nervous/rushed
- fear of making mistakes
- Lack of feedback

"In some activities, some students dominate - teacher just let some students be silent"

Reasons for hesitation to speak

Reason	Percentage
Lack of feedback	80%
Other reasons (Fear of mistakes, vocabulary, Lack of ideas, topics, Feeling rushed/pressured, pronunciation, Don't want)	20%

"I feel way more confident when talking about topics which I genuinely like and have information about."

Suitable topics
Round-Robin discussions, peer interviews, Think-Pair-Share
Regrouping
Rearrangement of seats
Nomination
Regular feedback

Inga noticed that her tenth grade students were not participating in speaking activities as expected. After analysing the data collected, she was surprised to learn that her lack of feedback and encouragement strategies affected her students' involvement. In this report, she tells us how this discovery has allowed her to develop an improvement plan to address the situation.

Teaching context

I work for Tbilisi Green School located in Tbilisi, Georgia. The school provides a 12-year comprehensive general education programme which is carried out in three levels: primary, basic and secondary. English classes are offered five times a week and last for 45 minutes.

Currently, I teach basic and secondary school students aged 12 to 18.

The students I carried out this exploratory research with are 14 students in the tenth grade. They are 15-year-old students and their level of English is intermediate.



Tbilisi Green School

Research focus

I chose to explore the reasons behind my students' lack of involvement in speaking activities because generally, they were good at English, did tests well, and did controlled grammar and vocabulary exercises effectively. Not only that, but they also did all the classwork and other assignments properly and didn't tend to get distracted or waste time chatting in lessons. However, when it came to speaking activities, such as describing pictures, expressing their views and discussing the questions, most students were reluctant to participate, limiting themselves to only a few words, and not extending any further. Consequently, my

speaking lessons were full of pauses and hesitation. Seeing them unenthusiastic made me feel disappointed and unsuccessful. Moreover, I believe that speaking is one of the most crucial communication skills to have in social interactions, problem-solving situations and other real-life scenarios, especially in today's globalised world. I felt that something needed to be changed, but first I had to discover what was happening and how, so I saw research as a potential solution to my issue. Applying the exploratory action research methodology and with the support of my mentors, I carried out the exploratory phase of my research.



In order to explore the reasons why my students didn't participate in speaking activities, I came up with four exploratory questions which guided me during the exploration:

1. What opportunities do I create for my students to engage in speaking activities?
2. What kind of activities do my learners prefer when speaking in English?
3. What do I do when I see that some students don't engage in speaking activities?
4. How do my students feel when they have to speak in English?

To answer these questions I needed to collect the data, for which I used both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. These included: a student questionnaire with closed-ended and some open-ended questions, which focused on the opportunities and support my students were provided with to participate in speaking activities, preferred activities and topics, and their emotional state when they had to speak; a classroom (peer) observation, during which I invited my colleague to observe two different lessons and asked them to make notes focusing on my reactions to my students' reluctance to

participate, activities and support I offered, and students' level of engagement in certain activities as well as their feelings; and a reflective journal, in which I noted my reflections on four lessons in relation to opportunities, support and activities I offered my students to the engage in speaking as well as students' preferences for activities.

Findings

Based on all three methods of exploration, I found out that my students' lack of involvement in speaking activities was caused by a variety of factors. About the opportunities provided to students, 11 out of 14 students reported the teacher utilised varied speaking activities and 12 stated that the teacher provided enough opportunities for them to participate in speaking activities. Additionally, the observer noted: 'Teacher provided students with vocabulary. Students worked in pairs to match words to definitions'. This indicates they were provided with vocabulary and clear instructions. However, students still appeared to look uninterested in the topics presented, and most notably, lacked feedback. The absence of feedback proved to be one of the primary issues since a significant number of the students (ten out of 14) believed I did not often offer them sufficient feedback.

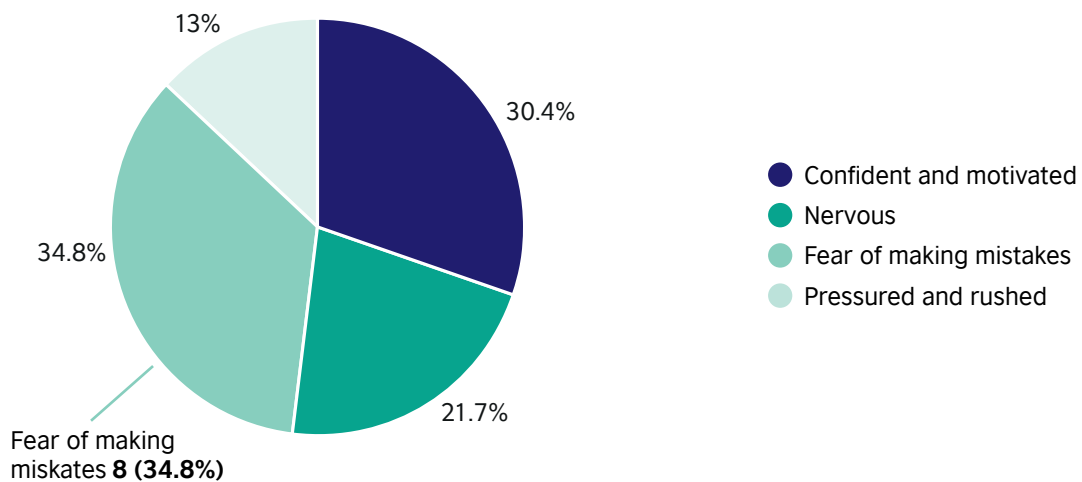
Regarding preferred activities, whole-class discussions appeared to be the most favoured (12 out of 14 indicated preferring it). Pair work was found to encourage longer speaking opportunities while answering questions individually resulted in shorter responses. In group discussions, certain students tended to dominate as identified by my colleague who wrote the following in her observation notes: ‘In some activities, some students dominated while speaking’; ‘Some students avoided taking part in speaking. When answering whole class questions, some students domineered.’

Concerning the ways I encouraged hesitant students to speak, I asked some follow-up questions to prompt students to extend their short answers, or I provided hints to help them contribute more comfortably. However, it turned out that I primarily relied on students who volunteered to speak themselves rather than forcing engagement on passive students and only occasionally directed questions specifically

to inactive learners. Notably, no nomination strategies were used to encourage participation. In this respect, my colleague noted, ‘In some activities the teacher just let some students be silent.’ In my journal, I wrote, ‘The student answered briefly and didn’t know what else to say, so I looked at another student and expected her to continue’; ‘I asked another student who was eager to participate.’

In terms of my students’ feelings, I discovered that they exhibited a mix of emotions when speaking English. While seven out of 14 were confident and motivated, five felt nervous. More than half, eight out of 14, of the group chose fear of making mistakes as a reason for not engaging actively in speaking activities. One student wrote, ‘I feel more confident when I know exactly that my answer is correct.’ It’s also worth noting that three students reported feeling pressured and rushed as reasons for their hesitation to speak.

Students' feelings



The factor contributing to their confidence and comfort while speaking appeared to be speaking in a familiar environment with people they know well: ‘I feel more confident when there are not many people or when I know everyone’. Some stated they felt confident when topics were interesting and when they knew the subject well: ‘I feel way more confident when talking about topics which I genuinely like and have information about.’

In summary, the findings suggest that the lack of sufficient feedback and targeted engagement

strategies hindered student participation. Confidence levels varied, with many students feeling nervous due to fear of making mistakes. Additionally, participation was uneven, with some students dominating discussions while others remained silent. Enhancing feedback mechanisms and employing nomination strategies could foster greater involvement and ensuring topics are engaging and relevant to students’ interests may boost their confidence and willingness to participate. Addressing these factors could lead to more active and enthusiastic participation in speaking activities.

Proposed changes

Based on these findings, I plan to implement several changes in my teaching. For instance, co-selecting topics with my students, and providing regular feedback through more praise, rubrics, reflection and peer feedback. Also, they need reassurance that making mistakes is part of the learning process. To accomplish this, if a student makes a mistake, I shouldn't say that the answer is wrong, but rather praise them for their contribution, which will motivate them to engage. In this respect, I will use a delayed error correction strategy. When needed, they will also be given more time to generate ideas while speaking.

The main immediate changes should be focused on passive students by nominating them personally and ensuring equal participation through round-robin discussions and peer interviews, where each participant has to contribute, and think-pair-share activities to gain confidence in smaller groups before speaking in a larger group. Additionally, although I respect my students' preferences to speak in a familiar environment, I intend to implement regrouping and the rearrangement of seats because this can help them get used to speaking with different peers thus benefiting them to boost their confidence in speaking.

Final reflections

Before learning about exploratory action research, I used to tackle classroom issues by making changes and taking action based on my assumptions, without thoroughly understanding the situation. Sometimes my interventions succeeded, but at other times they were ineffective or inconsistent. I never realised how crucial it is to investigate the root causes of problems in the classroom. It is like the method of a doctor who relies on blood tests, physical examinations and patient histories to assess health conditions and make diagnoses before prescribing treatment. I've learned that it's essential to dig deeper, closely examine the teaching process in our own classroom and identify the reasons behind the issues. So, what is most significant about exploratory action research is that it allows us to notice the issues and make informed decisions before we implement changes in our classroom. As a result of this experience, I expect my teaching to become more learner-centred. I will become more empathetic and will consider my students' feelings and reactions before making comments on their performance. I also think I will reflect more on my teaching to better understand what is happening in the classroom. Additionally, I will feel more confident because I believe that through EAR we can solve any problems in our classrooms.



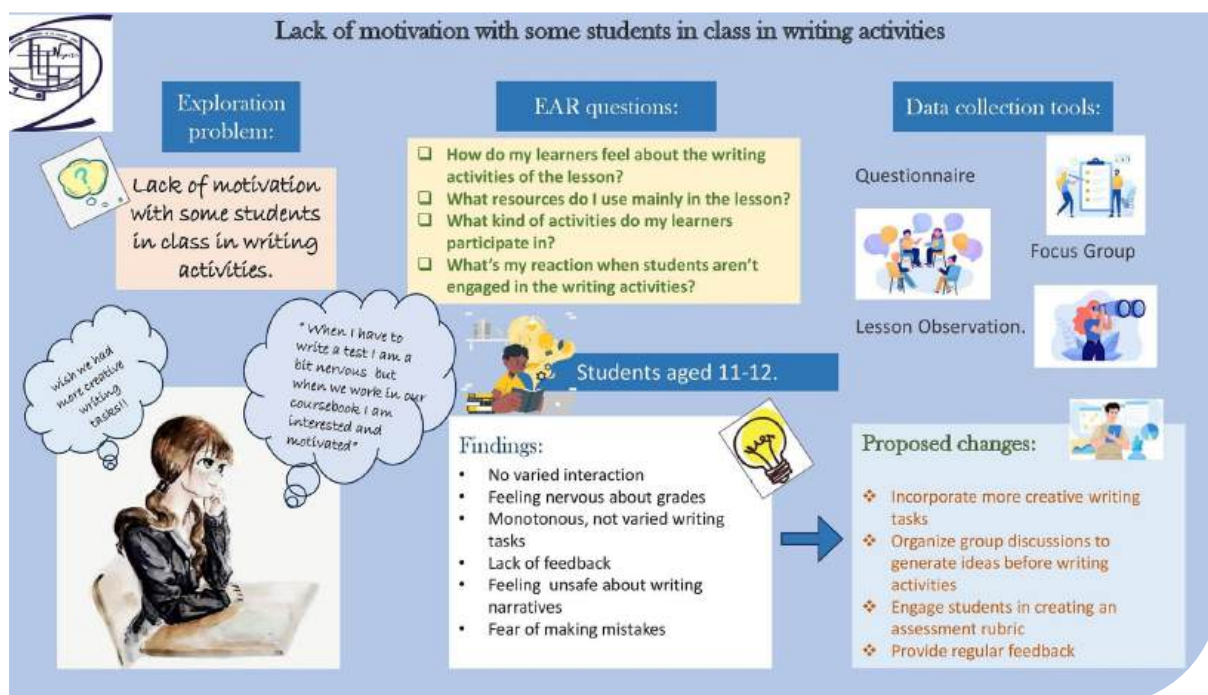
The author

'I've learned that it's essential to dig deeper, closely examine the teaching process in our own classroom and identify the reasons behind the issues.'

Inga Mdivani is an English teacher dedicated to employing creative approaches to equip students with 21st-century skills and prepare them for achievements in an ever-changing global society. In pursuit of this goal, she has maintained a special interest in activities centred on critical thinking, the Sustainable Development Goals, global citizenship, project-based learning and public speaking. In 2019, she completed her Cambridge CELTA. She has the qualification of Interpreter/Translator of the English Language and has a master's degree in teaching English, both degrees obtained from Tbilisi I, Chavchavadze State University of Language and Culture. For the past 11 years, she has been teaching English at a secondary school in Tbilisi, and presently she holds the position of overseeing the foreign languages department at the same school.

Lack of motivation in writing activities

Nino Gurgenzadze



Inga noticed that her tenth grade students were not participating in speaking activities as expected. After analysing the data collected, she was surprised to learn that her lack of feedback and encouragement strategies affected her students' involvement. In this report, she tells us how this discovery has allowed her to develop an improvement plan to address the situation.

Teaching context

I teach English at LEPL Rustavi Nikoloz Muskhelishvili Physics-Mathematical Public School No.26 located in the Kvemo Kartli region, Georgia. Primary and secondary level students attend our school. They generally come from middle socio-economic backgrounds. While English is introduced as a second language from the first grade onwards,

it is primarily used within classroom settings. Outside of the classroom students predominantly communicate in Georgian, their native language. I teach English to different age groups (from five to 17 years old). The number of students in each class varies from 17 to 29.



LEPL Rustavi Nikoloz Muskhelishvili Physics-Mathematical Public School No.26

Research focus

I have more than ten years of experience teaching English. Since writing skills are essential for academic achievement, career success, self-expression and other facets of life, in my practice, I prioritise the development of my students' writing skills.

After I noticed that some students lacked the motivation to participate in writing activities in my sixth-grade class, I decided to carry out exploratory research with them to uncover the reasons behind their reluctance to engage in the writing activities. I chose this area of focus because I believe inclusive participation in writing activities helps create a supportive and dynamic learning environment where all students have the opportunity to grow and succeed academically. Therefore, I decided to address my students' lack

of participation by finding out about their thoughts about writing tasks, the activities they participate in, and the resources I use in the classroom.

To understand this situation, I created the following exploratory research questions:

1. How do my learners feel about the writing activities of the lesson?
2. What resources do I use mainly in the lesson?
3. What kind of activities do my learners participate in?
4. What's my reaction when students aren't engaged in the writing activities?

To find answers to these questions I used three data collection tools: a questionnaire, focus groups and lesson observation. First, I administered a questionnaire to all 17 students in my class to gather insights into students' perceptions and experiences regarding writing tasks. The questionnaire questions were designed to elicit responses about students' emotions, preferences, challenges and frequency of participation in writing activities. Next, I carried out two focus groups with 14 of the learners (two sessions with seven students in each session) to acquire a more profound understanding of students' thoughts,

expectations, feelings, preferences and challenges regarding writing tasks. Lastly, I invited one of my colleagues to observe my lessons and assess various aspects of the implementation of writing activities, student engagement and support mechanisms during writing tasks. I wanted to see the big picture of my lesson from my colleague's perspective, especially the level of student participation and engagement during writing activities, including any signs of distraction and boredom, the teacher's response and interventions when students show disengagement. She observed two of my lessons.



My findings

From the data collected, I established the following: On the issue of how my learners feel about the writing activities of the lesson, students' answers in the questionnaire showed that the majority of students (13 out of 17) felt motivated and interested if they did their favourite writing activity. However, they felt nervous and stressed if their assignments were being graded. Only three students exhibited a lack of motivation, confusion and feelings of uncertainty about their ideas. This information was further confirmed by the students' answers in the focus group. One of the students said, 'When I have to write a test, I am a bit nervous but when we work in our coursebook I am interested and motivated because writing activities are interesting there.' According to the lesson observation, my colleague reported: 'Even though the teacher presented a model of the writing task to the whole class and taught the students

the relevant vocabulary, some students seemed unmotivated and distracted.

Students had to perform writing tasks individually.' Therefore, some students' lack of interest in getting involved in writing activities was caused on the one hand by the repetitive manner of the lesson when the materials and activities were not diverse, and on the other hand by the pressure of assessment, which made them nervous and limited their creative abilities. Furthermore, the necessity of some students to perform tasks individually was making them unable to concentrate and causing feelings of disengagement or distraction. On the second research question – what resources I use in the lesson – the data analysis revealed that I mainly relied on coursebooks and workbook activities, which my students liked and felt more secure about.

However, despite the great variety of writing tasks offered in the coursebook and workbook, some students mentioned that the writing tasks they did in the coursebook and workbook were a little bit monotonous, which could be one of the reasons for the lack of motivation. Students indicated they would like to do more projects, write comics, letters and other creative writing tasks, which were mostly lacking in the textbook. According to one of them: 'I wish we had more creative writing tasks, such as, comics and letters.' Also, a few students reported that tasks were too easy which made them uninterested.

Among my students' favourite writing tasks were: dialogue writing (six), letters (five), and narrative writing, such as storytelling and plot development (two). However, they struggled with these tasks because they rarely practised them in class.

Concerning research question four – What's my reaction when students aren't engaged in the writing activities? – after the lesson observation my colleague reported: 'Students are actively engaged in the writing activity. Many students embraced the challenge, showcasing their enthusiasm and understanding of the task. However, some students had lingering questions about the structure, prompting the teacher to offer additional clarification.' My colleague also reported that when it came to students who finished quickly and desired immediate evaluation and guidance, I didn't acknowledge them, which caused frustration. Furthermore, according to the focus group discussions, while I did ask follow-up questions to clarify understanding and provided explanations on the importance of developing writing skills, there seemed to be a lack of encouragement for passive students to become involved and I didn't offer feedback promptly to address students' needs effectively.

The findings above indicated that while a good number of students were motivated in writing activities, they felt bored and stressed during some tasks. Also while coursebook and workbook activities provided structure and familiarity for students, relying solely on them led to a lack of variety and engagement in class.

Proposed action plan

The absence of creative writing activities limited my students' ability to express themselves freely and hindered their oracy skills. To deal with this problem I also will incorporate more creative writing tasks in my lessons to raise their interest and develop their imaginative and creative skills. For instance, dialogue writing – creating dialogues between various characters or writing a story in dialogues and plot development – using story cards or prompts or image prompts to write a narrative or character development. In addition, organising writing tasks merely as individual work doesn't leave space for developing students' cooperation and collaboration skills, which are crucial for improving learners' writing. To tackle this I plan to include group discussions to generate ideas before writing tasks and incorporate collaborative writing activities into the lessons. Such an approach will promote interaction and engagement among students

Lack of timely feedback also causes students to stress and fear for grades since they are not aware of the ways to enhance their writing performance. To solve this issue, I will regularly engage my students in the process of creating assessment rubric criteria for their writing tasks, considering learning goals and students' needs, which will be aligned with the intended learning.

To reinforce this process, I will share a writing task sample and then ask students to collectively design an evaluation rubric. This will help students identify learning goals, and reduce their anxiety over grades by making the evaluation process transparent and participatory.

Final reflections

Conducting this exploratory research has been highly beneficial for my professional work for several reasons. First, I gained a deep insight into the factors contributing to my students' lack of motivation during writing activities. Next, I learned that the most effective way to handle challenges in the classroom is by exploring and understanding the problem instead of assuming its causes. And last, I gained the experience of carrying out research.



The author

'I learned that the most effective way to handle challenges in the classroom is by exploring and understanding the problem instead of assuming its causes.'

Nino Gurgenadze is an English mentor teacher at LEPL Rustavi Nikoloz Muskhelishvili Physics-Mathematical Public School No,26 with more than ten years of teaching experience in primary, secondary and post-secondary education. She holds a master's degree in English as a second language (ESL) and is a Cambridge TKT-certified teacher. She embraces every opportunity for professional development with boundless enthusiasm, eager to expand her skills and knowledge base to better serve her students and enhance her teaching practice.

Speaking issues with learners

Salome Zarkua

Speaking Issues with Learners

Exploration problem:
Lack of participation in speaking activities

Research questions:

- What do my learners think about speaking activities
- What kind of activities do I use with learners?
- What do my learners think of activities I use with them?

TOOLS:

- Questionnaire
- Reflective Journal
- lesson observation

Solutions:

- Introducing vocabulary before speaking
- leave specific vocabulary on the board during the speaking activities
- Create more opportunities to revise vocabulary before speaking

Data based on Research

- Students like the activities teacher uses in the class
- My learners' lack of participation in speaking classes is not due to a lack of motivation
- Students avoid speaking because lack of vocabulary

Students aged : 13-14

Salome’s research originated after she observed her students were not participating in speaking activities as actively as she would have liked. At first, she assumed students were not motivated to speak but later the data revealed her students’ issues had a different source. As a result, she learnt the importance of gathering evidence to better understand her classroom situations.

Teaching context

I work at LEPL Tsalenjikha Public School No.1 and LEPL Tsalenjikha Public School No.4 named after Vakhtang Kvaratskhelia, located in the western part of Georgia. At our schools, kids start learning English in the first grade but because they don't get to hear

or practise English much outside of school, their English level is still low. Some of their parents cannot read or write in English, so they can't help their kids with their learning. This makes it tough for the kids to get better at the language.



LEPL Tsalenjikha Public School No.4

Research focus

I have undertaken exploratory research to investigate my students' speaking skills during class activities, prompted by their consistent lack of participation in speaking tasks. Despite their efforts in learning vocabulary, word combinations, and practising reading and translation, I felt students had difficulties speaking. There was a noticeable reluctance among students to engage fully during speaking activities, often contributing only a few words when they did participate. This observation persuaded me to delve deeper into the underlying factors contributing to their hesitancy to speak and to explore potential strategies to address this issue effectively.

To understand the situation, I posed the following exploratory questions:

1. What do my students think about speaking in class?
2. What kind of activities do I use with learners?
3. What do my learners think of activities I use with them?

To answer these questions, I decided to make a questionnaire for my students. The questionnaire aimed to gather information on the speaking activities conducted in class. It sought to understand the types of activities used by the teacher, students' opinions on these activities, their preferences regarding speaking English in class, and the challenges they faced in speaking. Questions covered the range of activities employed, students' thoughts on them, their preferred activities, comfort levels with speaking English, and any difficulties encountered. I also asked a colleague to observe my teaching in class. Four lessons were observed by my colleague over a month, focusing on the implementation of activities, student engagement, and the effectiveness of these activities in promoting English speaking skills. My reflective journal, which I wrote twice a week for two months, focused on teaching strategies, student reactions, and personal development. This multi-faceted approach allowed for a thorough analysis of my speaking activities and their impact on students' learning experiences.

Findings

A thorough analysis of the gathered data from the three methods (questionnaire, lesson observation, and reflective journal) showed that most learners (18) held a favourable view toward speaking activities. They generally enjoyed speaking English in class and appreciated the various activities I incorporated. However, some of them (14 out of 22) felt nervous about speaking and tended to avoid it. Surprisingly, this lack of participation wasn't due to a lack of motivation, as I initially thought, since lack of motivation was only mentioned by six out of 22 students. Additionally, 14 students indicated that they struggled primarily because they lacked the vocabulary for speaking activities, followed by grammar and elaborating ideas. One of my students mentioned in the questionnaire: 'I struggle with speaking because I don't have enough vocabulary. Even though the teacher gives us examples, I need more help with words.' My journal data confirmed this since I noted that learners struggled with speaking activities due to their limited language skills, particularly vocabulary, 'During pair discussions, I noticed students hesitating over unfamiliar words, which disrupted the fluency of their conversations.'

The data also showed that the speaking activities I used with them were presentations, giving personal information, information gaps, debates, and pair work. 12 out of 22 students seemed to enjoy these activities; however, ten found it hard to express themselves fully. During the observations, it was noted that while students participated actively in pair work and debates, they often hesitated or stumbled when required to elaborate on their points or use specific vocabulary. My colleague also observed that students frequently relied on familiar phrases and avoided complex sentence structures, which indicated a struggle with vocabulary and grammar. Moreover, during reflective journaling, I recorded instances where students showed enthusiasm initially but became quiet and withdrawn when they encountered unfamiliar words. This suggests that while the activities themselves were engaging, a lack of language proficiency hindered full participation.

In conclusion, despite using various speaking activities offered to students, they still felt hindered by their lack of language knowledge. They seemed to require more support and resources, especially

in terms of vocabulary, to feel confident and participate actively in speaking classes. Therefore, despite my efforts to assist them with examples, they still required additional support, particularly in building their vocabulary. The findings suggest that future strategies should focus on vocabulary-building exercises, incorporating more visual aids, and providing continuous feedback to help students feel more prepared and confident in speaking activities.

Suggested action plan

To improve my students' speaking skills and address their concerns, I have designed an action plan that blends classroom practice and ideas from educational research. These strategies include; facilitating conversations in groups and pairs which encourage peer support and cooperative learning; putting students in role-play scenarios that are relevant to everyday life which increase motivation and help them develop practical language skills; and facilitating discussions on current events which encourage critical thinking and effective speaking. Furthermore, I have decided to improve vocabulary acquisition by giving students more opportunities to study and revise language before speaking assignments, presenting important terminology before speaking activities, and ensuring that particular vocabulary is always visible on the board. These procedures are predicated on the knowledge that having a solid vocabulary base is crucial.



Final reflections

Expanding upon my reflections and findings, I've realised the importance of carrying out research to understand the specific difficulties my students face when learning to speak English. Using data analysis, I can inform my practice better with evidence. I can suggest various pedagogical strategies for improving vocabulary acquisition and speaking skills while acknowledging the importance of differentiated instructions to accommodate different learning needs.

It makes me happy when I see my students' speaking abilities developing. The result was achieved by employing the right techniques and being mindful of each student's needs. Seeing how much better they can express themselves makes me proud. This gives me confidence that what I am doing is effective and motivates me to continue growing and learning in order to help all of my students reach their full potential.

I am currently continuing my professional development through workshops and collaborative learning communities, and I am focusing on the value of networking with colleagues. I now try to use evidence to support my recommendations. In addition, I provide my pupils with the tools they need to succeed, I interact with larger educational groups to share my knowledge and absorb what others have to teach me.



The author

'I've realised the importance of carrying out research to understand the specific difficulties my students face when learning to speak English.'

I am Salome Zarkua. I am an English language mentor teacher with a bachelor's and a master's degree in English philology. I am a Cambridge TKT and Cambridge CELTA certified teacher with extensive experience teaching English to students of all ages, ranging from primary school children to adults. I've worked with respected organisations like the US Embassy Georgia and the British Council Georgia. The British Council has been a huge support for me, opening up many opportunities for my career growth. This organisation allowed me to attend the IATEFL conference in Brighton, United Kingdom as a Georgian delegate. Being part of the Online Teaching Community platform is another source of pride for me. I currently serve as a local mentor for the Exploratory Action Research course, where I help and guide a group of Georgian teachers. I am passionate about sharing my experiences from this programme. My goal is to keep inspiring and supporting educators, contributing to the ongoing development of the English teaching community.

Improving students' listening skills

Nana Gelashvili

Improving my students' listening skills

School Context	EAR Qs	Findings	Proposed changes
<p>LEPL Khashuri Ilia Chavchavadze Public School N3 Grade 7</p> <p>Number of students: 17</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Context</p>  <p>I conducted research to improve listening skills in 7th graders who struggled with organization and participation during listening tasks. Many of them lacked strategies and structure, which led to their avoidance of participation.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do my learners feel about listening activities? 2. What challenges do my students face during listening activities? 3. What strategies do my students use to complete listening tasks? <p>Data Tools</p> <div style="display: flex; gap: 5px;"> <div style="background-color: #81c784; padding: 2px 5px; border-radius: 3px;">Questionnaire</div> <div style="background-color: #81c784; padding: 2px 5px; border-radius: 3px;">Lesson Observation</div> <div style="background-color: #546e7a; padding: 2px 5px; border-radius: 3px;">Focus Group</div> </div> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners avoid listening activities due to nervousness and limited vocabulary. • Challenges in vocabulary, grammar, and accents lead to avoidance of listening tasks. • Listening is difficult due to unfamiliar vocabulary, fast speech, and accents, causing confusion and frustration. • Students use strategies like passive listening and collaboration, but still struggle with comprehension. • Note-taking helps, but overall comprehension of listening tasks remains challenging. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase vocabulary support • Pre-teach vocabulary • Build confidence to reduce nervousness • Select and define essential vocabulary from transcripts • Illustrate words to aid understanding <div style="background-color: #ff8a65; padding: 5px; text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;"> EAR, British Council Georgia, 2024 Nana Gelashvili </div>

Nana works in a rural school where students face significant challenges learning English due to limited exposure and support. In this research, she explored students feelings, challenges and the listening strategies they employed. Findings revealed that pre-teaching vocabulary and a supportive environment were crucial for the improvement of their listening skills and overall engagement.

Teaching context

I work at LEPL Khashuri Ilia Chavchavadze Public School No.3 in the Shida Kartli region of Georgia. Despite conducting two lessons per week with my seventh graders (aged 12-13), persistent challenges

arise due to the limited English exposure within our rural community. Many students lack the necessary support at home to reinforce their language skills, exacerbating their struggles in mastering English.



LEPL Khashuri Ilia Chavchavadze Public School No. 3'

Research focus

My research delves deeply into the intricate difficulties students face during listening activities, especially regarding their anxiety levels and the challenges posed by their limited vocabulary, both of which significantly hinder comprehension. This research focus emerged from my observations of students consistently avoiding listening tasks and relying heavily on passive listening strategies. Therefore, I came up with the following exploratory research questions:

1. How do my learners feel about listening activities?
2. What challenges do my students face during listening activities?
3. What strategies do students use to complete listening tasks?

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of their challenges and coping strategies, I conducted

a thorough investigation using a combination of questionnaires, observations, and focus groups spanning three weeks.

I used a questionnaire to gather quantitative data on students' feelings, challenges, and strategies during English listening activities. This tool included questions about their feelings (nervous, motivated, confused), main difficulties (vocabulary, grammar, accents), and strategies used (taking notes, peer collaboration, among others).

I used focus groups to collect data to delve deeper into students' perspectives, feelings, and strategies regarding listening activities. I chose six students with different listening abilities. The focus group discussions revealed insights into students' experiences, challenges (vocabulary, fast speech, diverse accents), and strategies used (sitting and listening, taking notes, peer collaboration).

Findings

Regarding question one -How do my learners feel about listening activities? – when analysing the questionnaire responses, it became clear that a significant number of students, eight out of 17, felt nervous during English listening tasks. Conversely, six felt motivated, while two felt confused. These varied emotional responses highlight the complexity of students' experiences with listening comprehension. Clearly, their nervousness and lack of motivation in English listening activities led to their lack of participation.

In relation to question two – What challenges do my students face during listening activities? – students' responses revealed that they face various challenges during listening activities. 'I often feel lost when I encounter unfamiliar words,' remarked one student, highlighting the struggle with vocabulary. Another student expressed, 'Sometimes, I just can't catch what they're saying because of the fast speech,' reflecting on difficulties with rapid speech. Challenges in vocabulary, grammar, and accents contributed to the difficulties they have when listening, showing struggles with listening tasks due to inadequate language skills. 'Different accents can be tough to understand', noted a student, emphasising the challenge of diverse accents. Students also showed signs of confusion or frustration during challenging listening segments, 'I often find myself getting frustrated when I can't follow along,' shared one student. Additionally, external factors like noise or interruptions also hinder the ability to focus on listening tasks for some. However, students appreciated support in providing explanations, examples, and personal assistance, 'I think the teacher does a good job explaining things when we're stuck. It helps to have more examples and personal support,' commented one student, acknowledging my assistance.

Regarding question question three – 'What strategies do students use to complete listening tasks?' – students' responses, as well as observations, shed light on the strategies they employ during listening activities. Students employed various coping mechanisms mainly note-taking and pairwork. Some of them revealed that they took notes as a symbol, while others preferred to write notes as short sentences. Regarding pairwork, 'I think working in pairs is very useful, when something is unclear for me my

partner helps me to catch the word correctly', shared one student, emphasising the benefits of collaborative work. However, some students expressed hesitation in discussing their answers with their classmates due to differing knowledge levels. 'Yeah, sometimes I do take notes. But it's a bit tricky because I might not be on the same page intellectually,' shared one student. This highlights some of the challenges students faced when attempting to employ listening strategies effectively. What is more – according to observation data – students sometimes employed rather passive listening strategies, so they just sat and listened, resulting in limited understanding. Overall, while students attempted to use some listening strategies, they still faced difficulties comprehending.



In summary, my findings suggest that my learners had mixed feelings about listening activities. Nervousness and lack of motivation often led them to avoid listening tasks because of problems with words, accents and external factors like noise which made it hard for them to focus. Students use strategies like taking notes and pair work but the latter can be hard because of different knowledge levels. Overall, students find it difficult to complete their listening tasks effectively.

Proposed action plan

After reviewing my research findings, it is clear that more personalised assistance and instructional strategies are required to help students improve their listening skills and raise their confidence level. My students had trouble listening since they didn't have the knowledge level required. Thus, I can help them by giving them examples, teaching vocabulary – defining and illustrating newly introduced words – before each listening activity, selecting keywords from a listening transcript, and providing a preview of the content. These strategies will help students overcome the challenges they face during listening activities.

Final reflections

Thanks to this research I learned more about the difficulties my pupils have in improving their listening abilities as well as the practical solutions required to foster their development. The effect that grammatical errors, limited vocabulary, and trouble recognising accents have on students' interest in listening assignments is an important lesson to learn. These difficulties impair cognition and also cause avoidance and irritation. Support techniques and focused interventions are crucial to overcoming these challenges.

Furthermore, fostering a good and encouraging environment is critical to motivating and engaging students. Establishing safe spaces for making errors and offering opportunities for peer cooperation can help to create a more favourable learning environment.



The author


'Thanks to this research I learned more about the difficulties my pupils have in improving their listening abilities as well as the practical solutions required to foster their development.'

Nana Gelashvili is a distinguished educator in English language education and a Fulbright TEA programme Alumna of 2023. With 18 years of valuable teaching experience, she specialises in instructing English as a second language to students aged six to 18. Having participated in the programme at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro University in the United States, she enriched her teaching methodologies and expanded her global perspective, further enhancing her ability to navigate diverse educational landscapes. Furthermore, Nana has been recognised as an active member of the European School Educational Platform, she was nominated as an eTwinning awardee, a testament to her unwavering commitment to innovative teaching practices and collaboration in the field of education. Nana remains deeply committed to fostering a dynamic and enriching learning environment for her students.

Improving coherence and cohesion in writing among teenagers

Nato Kldiashvili

Improve Coherence And Cohesion Among Teenagers
ERA, British Council Georgia, 2023
Nato Kldiashvili

Plan To Explore	EQs	Answers to EQs Findings	Conclusion
 <p>The topic of my research was improving coherent writing skills among my 8th graders, I chose the topic due to the learners' difficulties to organize their writing properly. I observed this during writing assignments. They lacked a clear structure or strategies to give cohesion and coherence to support their ideas. Moreover, some of them avoided writing at all.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do my students feel when they are given a writing task? 2. How do my learners apply the writing strategies that they have learned in class? 3. How do I encourage and motivate my students to write more? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ The majority of 8th-grade students feel encouraged or motivated when given a writing task, but some feel scared or depressed due to the fear of low grades and mistakes. ❑ Some students prefer writing in pairs or groups to overcome their fear. ❑ Many students feel more focused when they complete the writing task at home in a quiet place. ❑ Some students avoid writing due to fear or lack of interest unless prompted by the teacher. ❑ The findings indicate that some learners may not be fully utilizing important writing strategies such as brainstorming, planning, and revising. Additionally, time management and noise level are crucial factors in providing an appropriate environment for writing. 	<p>The study identifies the need for more support for students, including promoting effective writing strategies and providing clear instructions and feedback. Time management is crucial to ensure adequate time for writing tasks, and incorporating collaborative writing activities can enhance learning. Students need a positive and supportive environment, including opportunities for peer collaboration and safe spaces to overcome the fear of mistakes.</p>
	<p>Data Tools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Questionnaire Lesson Observation Focus Group 		<p>Changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Teach a series of strategies to improve their writing skills. ➤ Use the text as a model. ➤ Write every day. ➤ Focus on linking words and useful phrases or vocabulary.

In this exploratory research, Nato reports her concern over her students' low performance in writing. Given the importance of writing for the national curriculum, she was determined to explore the causes of this problem and seek solutions. By collecting data from her students, Nato learnt about the role of support, feedback and encouragement in this process. Most interestingly, the importance of creating a quiet environment for students to write in.

Teaching context

This research was carried out at Khashuri Public School No.1 which is the oldest school in Khashuri, a city in the east part of Georgia. 600 students of different backgrounds and abilities study there.

They start learning English from the first grade and they have English classes twice or three times a week. Most of the students can practise their

language skills outside their classrooms since they attend various clubs, and language centres, meet foreign tourists face to face and use social media as well. Also, the school occasionally invites a Peace Corps volunteer to help the learners practise their speaking skills. Accordingly, their level of English is not particularly low. However, writing remains a challenge for most of them.



Khashuri Public School No1.

Research focus

To meet the national curriculum demands and improve my students' coherent writing skills, I decided to carry out an exploratory study to investigate students' writing skills to understand and subsequently improve my eighth grade students' coherence and cohesion in writing. By exploring students' deficiency in writing skills, particularly in the application of cohesive phrases and grammatical structures, this research aims to empower students to express themselves effectively and fluently in written form, thereby fostering their overall literacy development.

To understand the situation, I created three exploratory questions:

1. How do my students feel when they are given a writing task?
2. How do my learners apply the writing strategies that they have learned in class?
3. How do I encourage and motivate my students to write more?

To find the answers to these key questions I used a questionnaire, focus group and lesson observation. The questionnaire was created to gather data on students' perceptions, attitudes, and self-assessment of their writing skills. I provided 12 questions for my students to complete anonymously and get honest feedback from them.

By employing a questionnaire, I was able to gather insights into my students' perceived strengths and weaknesses in writing, their preferences for instructional approaches, and any challenges they may face.

A focus group was carried out to explore deeper into students' experiences, opinions, and attitudes regarding writing coherence and cohesion. I chose a group of eight students with different writing abilities and provided them with five questions regarding their concerns and difficulties. Unlike the questionnaire, the focus group offered a dynamic, interactive environment where learners were able to express their thoughts, engage in discussions, and provide rich qualitative data. I managed to find out nuanced aspects of students' writing experiences, uncover underlying issues, and identify potential solutions from their perspectives.

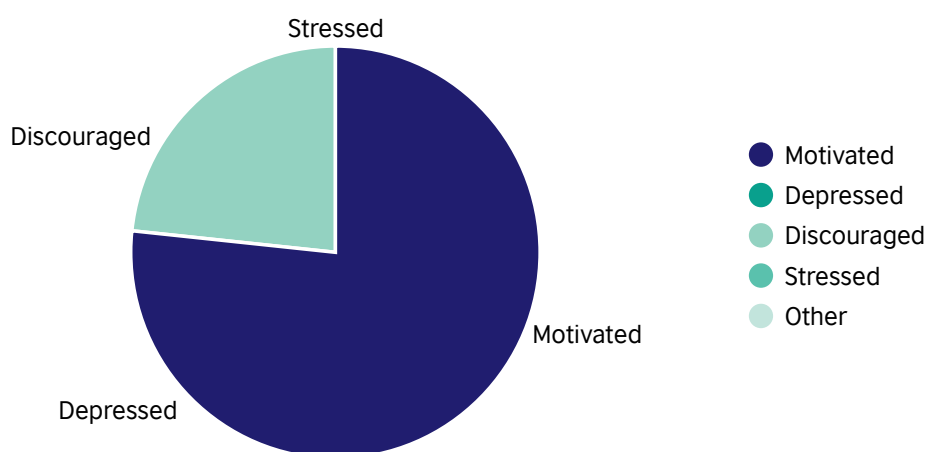
The lesson observations allowed me to ask my colleague to observe my writing lesson and my students' writing behaviours and interactions within the classroom setting. By observing writing activities and instructional practices in real-time, I gained valuable insights into how coherence

and cohesion are addressed in my lesson, how I clarify and provide useful language that learners may find useful for completing the writing task and overcoming difficulties; how I prepare my students for writing stage and what activities I offer them to make writing process effective and smooth for them. To carry out two lesson observations, I provided my colleague with appropriate questions and discussed the issue in detail beforehand. Her observations allowed me to assess the effectiveness of current teaching strategies, better identify areas for improvement, and inform the development of targeted interventions. Additionally, lesson observation enabled me to capture contextual factors that may influence students' writing performance, such as teacher-student interactions, classroom dynamics, and resource accessibility.

Findings

The data regarding my students' feelings when given writing tasks revealed that ten out of 14 students felt encouraged and motivated when they were asked to write but four students need more feedback and encouragement from the teacher.

Q. How do you feel when your teacher asks you to complete the writing task in English?



Thus, the majority of eighth grade students indicated feeling encouraged or motivated when given a writing task, but some felt scared or depressed due to the fear of low grades and mistakes. As my colleague observed, 'Many students prefer writing in pairs or groups to overcome their fear.' The questionnaire data showed that the majority of the learners (11) preferred to complete writing tasks

at home where they have more time and a quieter atmosphere to think. Therefore, they preferred to write in pairs or groups during the lessons to overcome their fear and challenges. In the focus group, one of the students echoed: 'I feel more confident when I have someone to bounce the ideas off'. Given this, I was reassured that pair and group work should be used more frequently to support them.

Additionally, time management and noise level emerged as crucial factors in providing an appropriate environment for writing. One student emphasised, 'I need enough time to think and write. If it's too noisy, I get distracted easily.' In the focus group discussions, students also expressed feeling more focused when they complete the writing task at home in a quiet place. One student remarked, 'I can concentrate better at home without distractions.' Conversely, some students admitted to avoiding writing due to fear or lack of interest unless prompted by the teacher. One student confessed, 'I only write when I have to. It's not something I enjoy.'

The findings also indicated that some learners may not fully use important writing strategies such as brainstorming, planning, and revising. A student shared, 'I usually just start writing without thinking too much about it. Maybe I should plan more beforehand.' Another student added, 'I forget to check my work for mistakes sometimes. I know I should, but I'm always in a hurry.' Besides, during the observation, my colleague observed that the time provided for students to use all the strategies taught, sufficient time needed to be allocated. She wrote, 'Students had only 15 minutes to accomplish the task and some of them couldn't use appropriate writing strategies.'

The data also indicated that some students needed more help understanding how to properly complete writing tasks, such as clear instructions, vocabulary teaching, and positive feedback. As my colleague noted, 'The teacher creates a positive atmosphere but could benefit from using elicitation techniques, teaching useful phrases and new vocabulary, and providing more support to weaker students to improve their writing.' At the focus group meeting one of the students mentioned that to get more engaged or motivated in class she needed a more stress-free and supportive atmosphere saying, 'When I feel relaxed and not pressured, I'm able to focus better and write more effectively.'

My colleague observed I had a good rapport with students and created a positive atmosphere in class but 'She needs to use more elicitation, drill useful phrases and new vocabulary, and support and encourage weaker students to complete the writing task using proper language and grammar.' This would raise students' involvement and engagement in completing writing tasks.

In summary, the data revealed that the majority of students feel encouraged and motivated when given writing tasks, but some required more feedback and encouragement. Time management and noise levels were critical, with students emphasising the need for sufficient time and a distraction-free environment. Some students struggled with brainstorming, planning, and revising, and required clearer instructions, vocabulary teaching, and positive feedback.

Proposed action plan

To make things easier for my students and allow them to write coherently and effectively, I plan to teach them to brainstorm ideas before writing, emphasising the importance of generating and organising thoughts effectively, for instance, by encouraging the use of graphic organisers or mind maps to facilitate idea development. Additionally, I will provide instruction on the use of linking words, transitional phrases and vocabulary appropriate for different writing tasks. Finally, providing personalised, constructive feedback to students that highlights areas for improvement while also acknowledging strengths.

By implementing these strategies and creating a supportive learning environment, my students will be equipped with the necessary tools and skills to improve their writing proficiency effectively.

Final reflections

Through this research, I found some insights into my students' difficulties in developing their coherent writing skills and some effective strategies to support their growth. One crucial takeaway is the importance of providing comprehensive support, including promoting effective writing strategies, delivering clear instructions, and offering constructive feedback.

Moreover, creating a positive and supportive classroom environment is essential for student engagement and motivation. Providing opportunities for peer collaboration and establishing safe spaces for making mistakes can facilitate a more productive learning and teaching environment.

Overall, this research has enhanced my understanding of the challenges of teaching writing and reinforced the importance of implementing various and inclusive strategies to meet my students' needs.



The author

'This research has enhanced my understanding of the challenges of teaching writing and reinforced the importance of implementing various and inclusive strategies to meet my students' needs.'

I am Nato Kldiashvili. I have been an English teacher for more than 15 years now. In 2022, the Ministry of Education and Science granted me a mentor teacher status. I work in Tbilisi Kobakhidze Public School N77 and the private school Shavnabada. I hold a Cambridge CELTA certificate and am a Fulbright TEA (Teacher Excellence and Achievement) 2021 fellow. I am also an online instructor for adults for the British Council Georgia. I am proud to be a member of the British Council Online Teaching Community (OTC) platform and a local mentor of one of the greatest courses offered to teachers in Georgia – Exploratory Action Research. I have an endless desire to inspire fellow educators and colleagues and contribute to the ongoing development of the English teachers' community.

Speaking issues in primary classes

Tinatin Gabunia

Speaking issues in primary classes



Exploratory problem:

Lack of participation in debates and discussions

Tools:

Questionnaire

Focus group

Lesson observation

Research Questions:

1. What do my learners think about speaking activities?
2. What kind of speaking activities do I use with my learners?
3. What kind of activities do my learners like?



Findings:

- Students like activities the teacher uses in class.
- Students feel unmotivated to participate in debates/discussions
- Students lack debating skills.

Solution:

- Select relevant and interesting debate topics
- Highlight the real-life applications of debating skills
- Integrate video clips of debates as a learning tool.



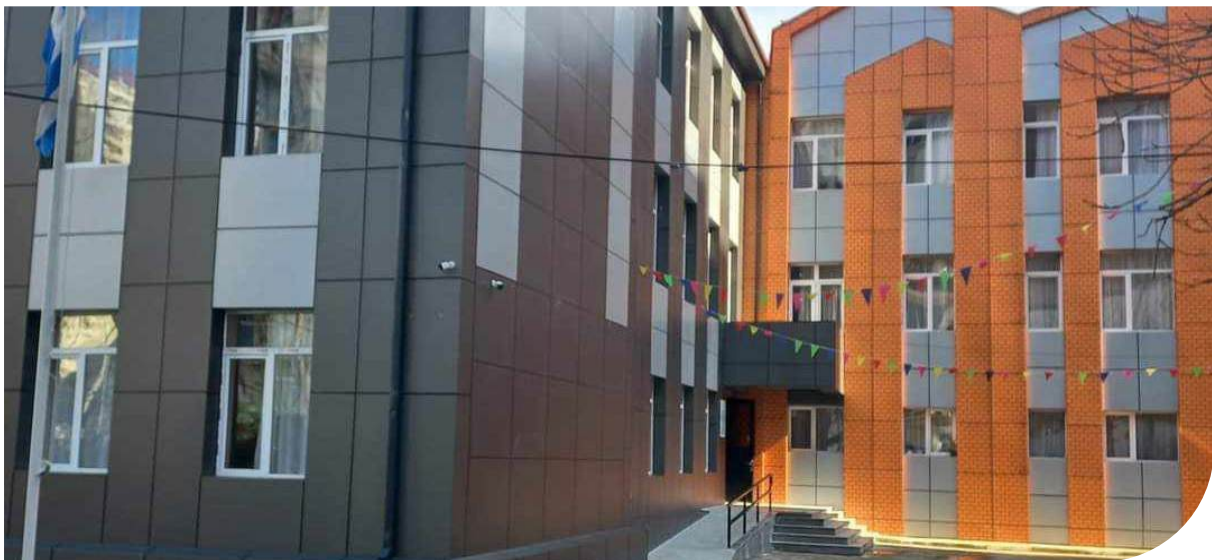
Tinatin started her research resolved to understand why her primary students were reluctant to speak in English. After collecting data, she determined that while enjoying and demonstrating confidence in certain speaking tasks, they struggled in others. This new knowledge allowed her to design lessons which rather than avoid those tasks, provide more support to students to carry them out.

Teaching context

I am an English language teacher at Batumi Public School No.15 which is located in the centre of the city. The school has approximately 1,000 students from elementary to secondary levels who belong to middle-class families. In each class, there are mixed-level students. English is taught as a second language at school and their English language level varies from A1 to B1. I am a manager of the English club in the school where they do extracurricular activities such as; watching English films, doing tests, reading English literature and doing additional work.

That helps them to master the language and win different contests.

The research I conducted pertains to the fifth grade class, comprising 28 students. These students attend English classes three times a week and in the English club once a week where they consistently engage with the language since their early schooling years. While some exhibit commendable skills in writing, or listening, there is a noticeable reluctance among many to participate in speaking activities actively.



LEPL Batumi Public School No.15

Research focus

In light of my observation, I selected a research topic stemming from my students' apparent reluctance to express themselves freely in English. Despite their ongoing learning of vocabulary and grammar, there persists a noticeable deficiency in their speaking abilities. I noticed that they were confident when making presentations, role-plays, and dialogues, but lacked confidence to participate in discussions or engage in debates. Consequently, I have undertaken this research to delve into the root causes of this issue. To initiate my research, I formulated exploratory questions aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of their situation at hand:

1. What do my learners think about speaking activities?

2. What kind of speaking activities do I use with my learners?

3. What kind of activities do my learners like?

In order to answer the questions, I decided to apply a questionnaire to my students. It aimed at gathering information on the speaking activities conducted in the class. The questionnaire contained multiple-choice and open-ended questions, 28 students answered the nine questions which sought to understand the types of activities used by the teacher, students' opinions on these activities, their preferences regarding speaking, the challenges they encounter in class, and the impact of the teacher's feedback.

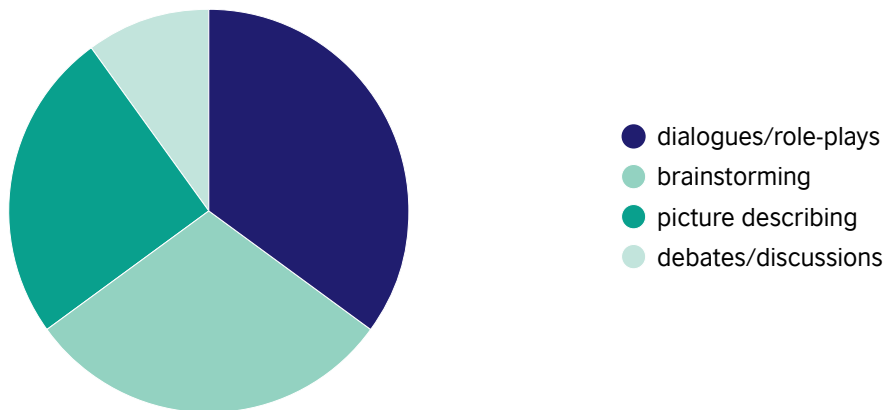
I also carried out a focus group to gather more in-depth information about their favourite activities, their expectations, strengths and weaknesses, teacher’s reactions and feedback. As for the lesson observation, five lessons were observed by my colleague during four weeks focusing on the implementation of activities, students’ involvement and the effectiveness of these activities in promoting English speaking skills.

Findings

A thorough analysis of the gathered data showed that most students (22 out of 28) often liked speaking activities in class, and four liked them sometimes. 24 students thought speaking activities were fun, and only six thought they were difficult. In terms of feelings, 20 out of 28 felt confident when participating in speaking activities, four felt confused and four were demotivated. Most of them thought that the teacher’s feedback was always useful (26) and only two thought that the teacher’s feedback was not. Also, all of them thought that their teacher always encouraged them to be more actively involved in different speaking activities. 20 students reported that they felt motivated by interesting topics and a positive classroom environment, and eight said that they were motivated when they were given praise.

Therefore, students had an overall positive view of speaking activities. Most of them enjoyed them and thought that they were fun. Yet, a small number of students seemed demotivated and confused. Thus, the questionnaire results highlighted the diverse preferences of my students, emphasising the importance of offering different activities.

Thanks to the classroom observations, I was able to determine that the speaking activities I used with my learners were; dialogues, role-play, brainstorming, interviews, debates, discussions, describing, storytelling, and discussions. In the focus group discussion, 22 (out of 28) students enthusiastically expressed their enjoyment of dialogues specifically citing scenarios like dialogues at the doctors’ and dialogues at school (involving a teacher and students). Among the participants, 20 students expressed feeling motivated due to the timely feedback and support provided by their teacher. Additionally, all of the students conveyed a sense of clarity and purpose in their learning experiences. One student mentioned, ‘I appreciate the feedback the teacher provides during speaking activities; it encourages us to be more motivated and fulfil the tasks properly.’ Another student added, ‘We particularly enjoy dialogues, especially acting out role-plays in real-life conversations.’



According to students, positive feedback during speaking activities served as a motivating factor, inspiring them to excel in their tasks since they conveyed a sense of clarity and purpose in their learning experiences. One student mentioned; ‘I appreciate the feedback the teacher provides during speaking activities, it encourages us to be more motivated and fulfil the tasks properly.’

Another student said; ‘We particularly enjoy the dialogue, especially acting out role-plays in real-life conversations.’ However, it’s important to note that relying solely on dialogues and role-plays may not be sufficient for developing their speaking skills. Students expressed the need for activities beyond their favourites, emphasising the importance of engaging in discussions and debates.

Conforming questionnaire data, during the lesson observation, (five lessons total) students exhibited active engagement and interest in various speaking activities, such as role-plays and dialogues. While challenges were noted, particularly in group discussions where some students hesitated to defend their ideas, the overall atmosphere was positive. The teacher's support strategies, including grouping students by abilities, pairing shy students with more active peers, and offering topic choices, contributed to a conducive learning environment. Students responded positively to the teacher's support and feedback, expressing appreciation for the encouragement provided during speaking tasks.

Students particularly liked dialogues, and the observer wrote that students found them dynamic and helpful for improving speaking skills. But interestingly, group discussions and debates were not used as much and students were less interested in them showing demotivation or confusion.

Upon thorough analysis of the data collected, it was found that students were less willing to take part in debates and discussions rather than in dialogues, role plays and presentations. Following a meticulous examination of the data, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The teacher used a range of different speaking activities in class being role-plays and dialogues the most common ones.
- My learners liked the activities the teacher used in class and the feedback provided motivated them to participate.
- My learners felt unmotivated to participate in debates/discussions, and they lacked debating skills.

Proposed action plan

From the analysis carried out, it is clear that overall students enjoy presenting their thoughts about the topic they know or are interested in, and do role plays and dialogues, but they feel unmotivated to participate in debates or discussions as they don't have sufficient knowledge of the subject or consider it to be unimportant to them.

Therefore, students do not seem to understand the practical value of using debates. To address this problem, I have drawn up an action plan. According to it, the lessons will be more productive by using a variety of activities, as well as using debates and discussions, considering the topics of their interests. For that, I can do a survey or brainstorming to gather the important issues they would like to discuss and then organise discussions based on that. To this end, the first step will be an introduction to the basics of debating, followed by a presentation of ways to research and contrast arguments when conducting debates.

In order to assist students, I will show some videos about debates and ask them to evaluate them. This sequence will be carried out at the beginning of each debate-based lesson. Furthermore, providing personalised assistance and encouragement will be crucial in fostering their progress in this area.

Final reflections

This research process helped me to realise the kind of difficulties and challenges my students have during the speaking tasks, shedding light on the factors contributing to their reluctance to debate. Moreover, I have identified that the mixed-ability nature of the class necessitates an individualised approach and increased support to bolster students' speaking skills.

Through this research, students have been empowered to identify their strengths and weaknesses in speaking activities, enabling them to make informed judgements about their learning and take proactive steps to enhance their performance, knowledge and skills.

I have started implementing my action plan this year and it has yielded significant progress in my students' fluency skills, especially in debates and discussions. Their heightened engagement during speaking lessons correlates with improvements in their academic performance. While some students still exhibit reluctance, I am committed to continuing the implementation of my action plan, given the favourable outcomes observed thus far.



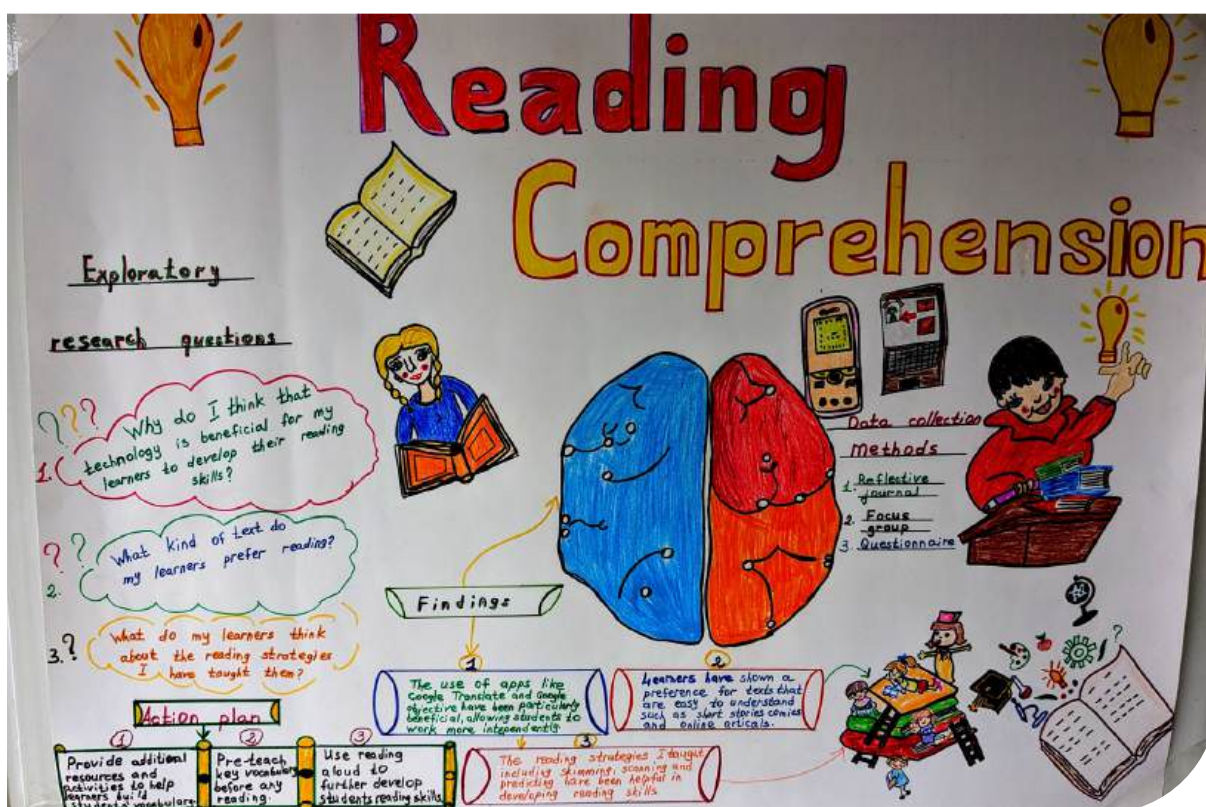
The author

'This research process helped me to realise the kind of difficulties and challenges my students have during the speaking tasks, shedding light on the factors contributing to their reluctance to debate.'

I am Tinatin Gabunia from Batumi, Georgia. I am an English teacher and an English club manager/ founder at the school where I work. I have been teaching English to all ages from primary to adult for 23 years. I hold a Bachelor's and Master's degree in English Philology. I am a TESOL/TEFL certified teacher. I have been a facilitator for the British Council Online Teachers Community (OTC) for three years. I am always ready to improve in my field. Accordingly, I regularly attend international and national online and offline trainings, conferences, webinars and seminars. I attended intensive teacher training at the Edinburgh Language Academy in Scotland (2016). I also participated in the International Conference for Teachers held in Hanover, Germany in 2023. I am an enthusiastic, dedicated and determined teacher. Now I am trying to use exploratory research in my teaching. My favourite quotation is: 'Who dares to teach must never cease to learn'.

Exploring the role of technology in reading comprehension

Armenui Bijoyan



Armenui's research was carried out with a small group of 15-year-old learners. She noticed her students struggled with reading so she decided to encourage them by implementing the use of apps during reading activities. Thanks to the evidence collected, Armenui confirmed her beliefs about the positive value of using technology in the classroom and learned about her students' preferences and their biggest challenges.

Teaching context

The school where I work is the Armenian department of the Tsereteli Public School. It is located in a village named Tsereteli in the Marneuli city in Georgia. The resources at school are limited since I can only use textbooks, my mobile phone

and my learners' mobiles. School is the only place where learners can use English to communicate. They learn English as a foreign language two times a week. Their level of English is A1.

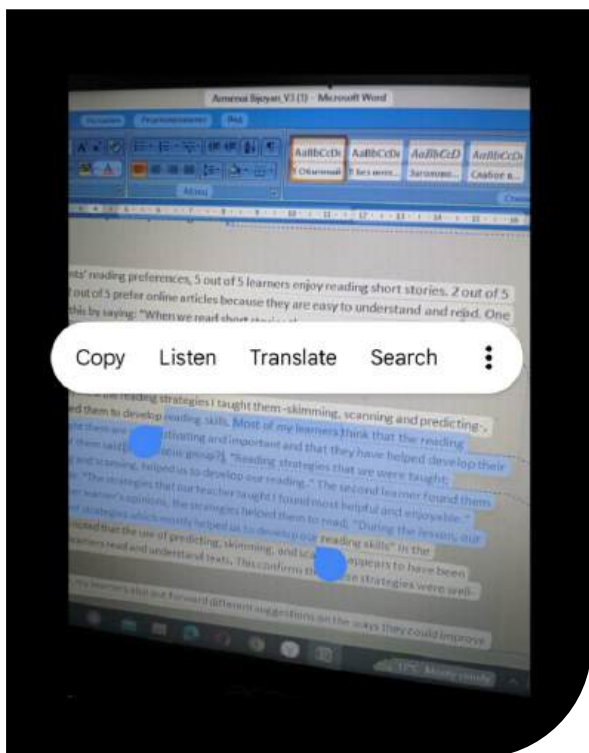


Village Tsereteli Public School Armenian department in Marneuli City, Georgia.

Research focus

I decided to do the research with my ninth form students. There are five students in this class and they are 15 years old. I chose this group of learners after noticing their poor reading performance at the beginning of the school year in September. They couldn't read and pronounce the words correctly and they couldn't read and understand complex sentences. After noticing these problems, I began to think about how

I could help my learners to overcome them.. Then I felt using apps such as Google Lens and Google Translate would help with their reading skills. Google Lens allows learners to copy, listen, search and translate words and big texts easily. Google Translate enable learners to translate and listen to the pronunciation of words and find their translation even when there is no internet connection.



Google Lens app

Therefore, in order to explore their reading difficulties, the effect of the apps and the reading strategies used, I came up with the following exploratory research questions:

1. Why do I think that technology is beneficial for my learners to develop their reading skills?
2. What kind of text do my learners prefer reading?
3. What do my learners think about the reading strategies I have taught them?

As methods for collecting data, I used a questionnaire, a focus group and a reflective journal. The questionnaire had 11 questions and it collected data about learners' opinions to understand their feelings about reading and about the apps that I used. I also carried out one focus group in which five students participated voluntarily. I asked them about the types of text they enjoyed and preferred reading, their thoughts about the use of technology during the lesson and their views about the most useful reading strategies taught in class. I also kept a reflective journal where I took notes about the use of technology, where this idea originated, what my expectations of using technology were, whether I achieved them, and how my learners responded.

Findings

My first exploratory questions sought to explore my own beliefs regarding the benefits of technology for the development of reading skills. The data collected in the reflective journal suggested that for me, using technology during the lesson was very important in the 21st century which is why I decided to use two different apps: Google Translate and Google Lens. I had been using these apps in different classes for two years and I noticed they were of great help to my learners to develop different learning skills, especially reading. In my reflections, I noted, 'This idea came to my mind when I was doing some translation with the help of Google Translate and I thought; why can't I use it during the lesson?'. Also, by using these apps, I didn't have to give my learners the translation of the new words, they could translate them with the help of these two apps themselves and then check their guesses. Last year, when I faced reading problems in ninth form I tried these apps with them too. I taught them different reading strategies such as also skimming, scanning and predicting which helped my learners develop vocabulary and reading skills. At the time, I noticed it had helped them so this is what made me view the use of technology so positively.

Moreover, my beliefs were confirmed by the views of my learners. All five of them said they enjoyed using their mobile phones and translating the new words independently with the help of Google Translate. They liked it because they could translate the text when looking for specific information. They used Google Lens to listen to the text and the pronunciation of the new words. Therefore, the apps helped them with listening and reading. One of my students said that using technology was beneficial for them since they enjoyed using the apps and they allowed them to work more independently. One student stated, 'The apps that showed us the teacher are great, they will help me to understand the text and improve my reading skills'.

Regarding my students' reading preferences, all my learners indicated they enjoy reading short stories. One student highlighted this by saying: 'When we read short stories they are easy to read and understand.' The second highest preference were comics and online articles because they are easy to understand and read. Students also enjoyed reading fantasy fiction, science and technology.

However, three learners indicated that the main difficulty in reading different types of reading materials is a lack of vocabulary and that long and complex sentences were hard to follow.

All of my learners (five) liked the reading strategies I taught them – skimming, scanning and predicting – , and said that they helped them to develop reading skills. They expressed that the reading strategies that I taught them were motivating and important and that they have helped them read better. One of them said in the focus group, ‘The reading strategies that we were taught helped us to develop our reading.’ A second learner found them helpful and enjoyable: ‘The strategies that our teacher taught I found most helpful and enjoyable.’ In the observations, it was noted that the use of predicting, skimming, and scanning appeared to have been effective in helping learners read and understand texts. This confirmed that these strategies were well received.

These findings have confirmed my initial belief that using technology was beneficial for my learners since they enjoyed using the apps and they allowed them to work more independently. Learners have shown a preference for texts that are easy to understand, such as short stories, comics, and online articles. However, they face challenges with vocabulary and complex sentences. According to

students, the reading strategies taught, including skimming, scanning, and predicting, have helped develop their reading skills.

Proposed action plan

According to what I have learned I will use more online resources and activities which will help my learners better learn the new vocabulary they meet when reading complex texts. I will use reading aloud, and pre-teach key vocabulary using gap-fill activities and the jigsaw strategy so that students divide big texts into small chunks and collaboratively understand and explain the text to their classmates. Finally, I will support them in using technological tools during the lesson for independent learning.

Final reflections

This exploratory research helped me reflect on my teaching, beliefs and values. All of these play a crucial role in improving my professional development. It has also helped me expand and deepen my knowledge in this area as well as improving my teaching abilities. In the ever-changing area of education, staying effective and relevant requires constant learning and adaptation to new insights and best practices.



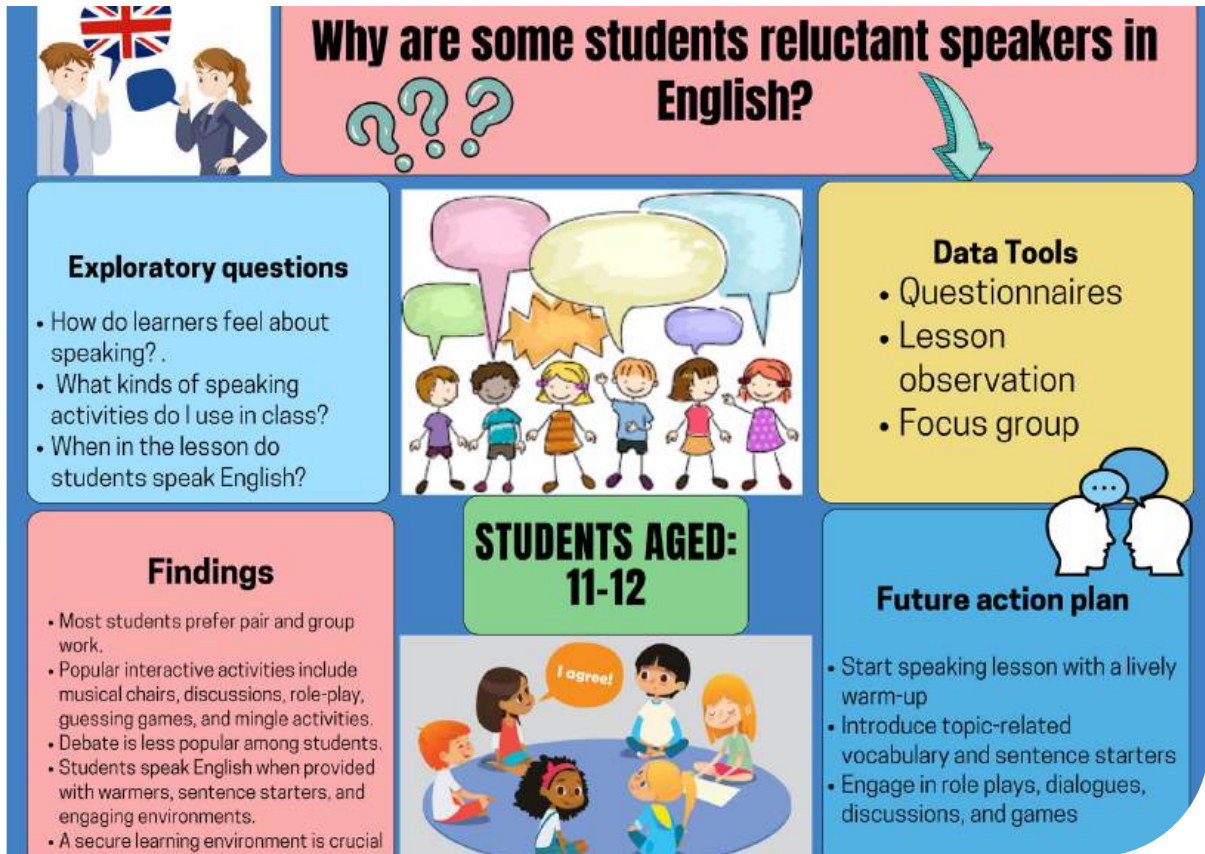
The author

'This exploratory research helped me reflect on my teaching, beliefs and values. All of these play a crucial role in improving my professional development.'

I am Armenui Bijoyan and I am a certified senior English teacher based in Georgia. I have 28 years of teaching experience and I teach students from first grade to 12th grade. I am a member of the Online Teacher Community for English Language teachers supported by the British Council, and the eTwinning projects. I am a novice teacher-researcher. I know five languages: Armenian, Georgian, Russian, English and Azerbaijani. I am a translator in the Mercy Corps Georgia Alliances Caucasus Program two. My motto in life is *live and learn*.

Why are some students reluctant speakers of English?

Ketevan Gogaladze



In this report, Ketevan describes her research journey to understand her students' reluctance to speak English in class. By investigating her students' emotions, preferred activities, and participation, she discovered effective strategies for boosting their confidence and engagement which included dynamic warm-ups, pre-teaching of vocabulary introduction and interactive tasks.

Teaching context

I work at LEPL Khashuri Municipality Davit Kakiashvili Public School No.2. My school is situated in the heart of the town. Our school serves 363 students ranging from elementary to secondary levels. We take pride in being pioneers of inclusive education within our curriculum. We have a dedicated team of specialists who provide additional support to students with special needs, and this service comes at no cost to the students. The school's priority is to establish a safe and equitable learning environment for all individuals.

Currently, the school is undergoing renovation, and we are excited to soon have a building that meets European standards. Our school creates great conditions for teachers' professional development and supports their innovative ideas. Teachers attend each other's lessons and share their experiences to enhance the quality of education for our students. Collaboration and cooperation make our school unique, where every individual feels happy and goal-oriented.



LEPL Khashuri Municipality Davit Kakiashvili Public School No.2

Research focus

I chose to explore the reluctance to speak English by my learners because I noticed that some of my sixth graders showed no interest in participating in speaking activities. After analysing the issue, I decided to explore this problem and find out a way that motivated them to take part in speaking activities and become more confident. In most cases, those students were sitting quietly, and even if I was using differentiation in my teaching contexts, they did not show interest in speaking.

To understand the situation, I started designing my research project and I created three exploratory questions:

1. How do learners feel about speaking?
2. What kinds of speaking activities do I use in class?
3. When in the lesson do students speak English?

In order to collect the data, I created a questionnaire for my students. The questionnaire contained multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The questions focused on how they felt during speaking, whether they had any favourite fun speaking activities, and what aspects of the current speaking activities they enjoyed the most.

Another method I used was observation. I invited two of my colleagues and the school principal to observe the dynamics of the lessons and the students, especially during speaking activities. The main focus was to discover the activities my students engaged in during speaking tasks and the strategies I used to support them. Based on the criteria, my colleagues compared two observed lessons and provided me with feedback afterwards.

Lastly, I conducted two focus groups in Georgian to encourage my students' active participation. Twelve students expressed a desire to take part in the focus groups. Students expressed their thoughts and reported on what hindered them from being active in speaking activities.

Findings

The findings from my research revealed several key insights:

My learners exhibited varied emotions towards speaking. Most students (ten out of 21) experienced insecurity, shyness, and nervousness, while only five students felt confident and motivated. Six students feared being laughed at for pronunciation errors or lack of vocabulary.

Observations and focus group feedback indicated that activities like picture descriptions, dialogue practice, and interviews, particularly in pairs, enhanced comfort, enjoyment, and motivation, allowing students to express their thoughts and feelings more freely. The observation notes mentioned that, 'Students are eagerly participating in warm-up activities, and no one showed any shyness because the working environment was stress-free.' Student number one said: 'I love pair work because if I do not remember any words in English, my partner reminds me. We help each other and are not shy while speaking.'

According to the observation, students engaged in a variety of interactive learning activities, including whole-class sessions, group discussions, and responding to individual questions from the teacher. One of the teachers mentioned, 'Students speak English more when they work in small group activities or in pairs [...] Students actively participated throughout the lesson, with a warm-up activity boosting interest and ready-made sentence starters building their confidence to speak English during the lesson'.

The data also suggested that each student actively participated in paired tasks; however, when directly questioned, some offered brief 'yes or no' responses. Interestingly, during group work, there was a tendency for students to revert to using their native language. Student number two mentioned, 'When the questions refer to expressing our emotions, I prefer to use our mother tongue to express myself in a better way'. Additionally, I used a wide range of interactive activities, such as musical chairs, discussions, role-playing, guessing games, mingling activities, interviews, and the 'hot seat' activity. I also used debates but they were not preferred as they were perceived as demanding in terms of critical thinking skills, leading to frustration and resorting to the use of their native language (L1). I also used pair work and classroom observations that showed active participation in interactive tasks.



With regards to the moments in the lesson when students spoke English, they did it more when they worked in small group activities or pairs; when they had engaging activities and when they felt secure. Class observations confirmed active participation throughout the lesson, with a warm-up activity boosting interest and ready-made sentence starters building their confidence to speak English during the lesson. One girl mentioned, 'I prefer speaking face to face and conducting interviews. However, I feel uncomfortable when the teacher observes me and takes notes, which leads me to stop talking.'

To sum up, I can say that the majority of my students expressed enjoyment in activities in pairs and small groups. Engaging activities like musical chairs, discussions, role-play, guessing games and mingling activities were also among their favourites, while debates were less popular due to their difficulty. Students spoke English mostly during interactive tasks when supported by warmers and sentence starters.

Proposed action plan

Based on these findings, I plan to implement the following changes in my teaching approach:

- Starting every speaking lesson with a lively warm-up.
- Introducing topic-related vocabulary and sentence starters.
- Engaging in role plays, dialogues, discussions, and games.
- Using different interaction patterns, such as solo, pair work, and group work, in which students will engage in various tasks and practice language.

I hope that this approach will reduce their levels of stress, making them feel more comfortable and supported during speaking tasks.

Final reflections

After the research, I will change the concept of my teaching. In every speaking lesson, I'll start with a lively warm-up like the 'word association game', either in pairs or with the whole class. Then, I'll introduce vocabulary with an activity connected to the lesson topic. Next, I will start using different kinds of warm-up, role play, discussion, and language practice techniques. Also, I will encourage my students to give each other constructive feedback.

The research helped me greatly. During the research, I gained a lot of knowledge and experience, and besides, my teaching effectiveness has improved. And what is more, I saw my students' needs and the reason why each of them struggled while speaking.



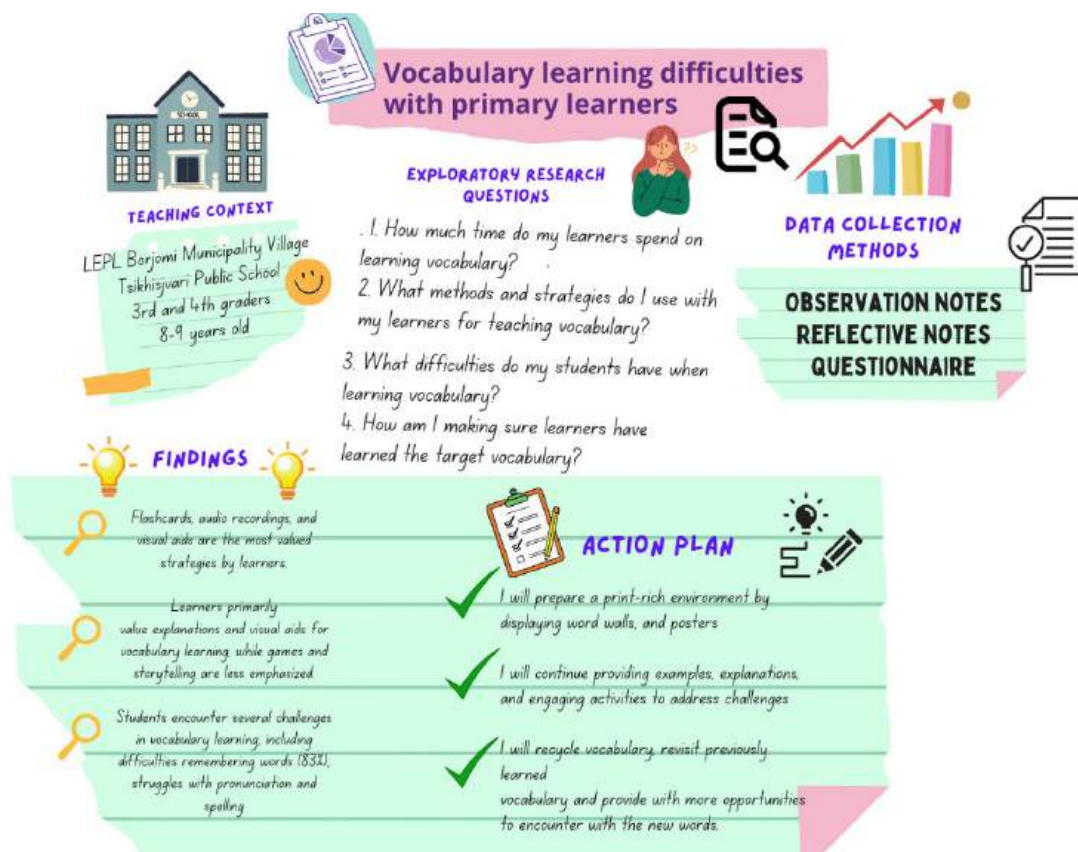
The author

'The research helped me greatly. During the research, I gained a lot of knowledge and experience, and besides, my teaching effectiveness has improved.'

Ketevan Gogaladze has 16 years of experience as an ESL teacher and five years of experience as an Access Program English language teacher in Georgia, specifically in Khashuri. She teaches at Khashuri Public School No.2. Ketevan is also a teacher trainer and a board member of Gori ETAG (English Teachers' Association in Georgia). She conducts training sessions and workshops for English teachers and serves as an Online Teacher Community project assistant. Since 2018, she has been recognised as a Microsoft Innovative Educator Expert (MIE Expert) and has been an active member of eTwinning (European School Education Platform) since 2017. Additionally, she is an alumna of the Access Exchange programme in the USA.

Vocabulary learning difficulties with primary learners

Lika Khurtsilava



Lika was puzzled by her primary school students' challenges when learning vocabulary. Therefore, she decided to examine how they learned it, their main difficulties, and the strategies she used to support them. Among her discoveries, she learnt that students needed various opportunities to revisit old words and practice new ones.

Teaching context

I work at LEPL Borjomi Municipality Village Tsikhisjvari Public School located in Samtskhe-Javakheti which is a high mountainous region in East Georgia. The population of the village is less than 200 people and the school itself is quite small with

37 students in primary and secondary levels. I teach students from different age groups, from six through 15 years. The student's backgrounds and levels in English are varied.



Tsikhisjvari Public School

Research focus

The focus of my research pertained to primary learners, specifically those in the third and fourth grades, aged between eight and nine years old. At the beginning of the academic year, I detected certain challenges among my students in grasping vocabulary, prompting me to delve deeper into this subject matter. This topic was relevant to my teaching as vocabulary is essential for acquiring a new language.

If children possess a limited vocabulary, they are unlikely to find pleasure in initial stories or texts, leading to decreased motivation to participate in language and reading endeavours as they progress. As I was concerned about the current challenges in vocabulary learning, I began questioning the methods and strategies I employed with my young learners and their efficacy.



Therefore, to explore the problem, I came up with the following exploratory research question:

1. How much time do my learners spend on learning vocabulary?
2. What methods and strategies do I use with my learners for teaching vocabulary?
3. What difficulties do my students have when learning vocabulary?
4. How am I making sure learners have learned the target vocabulary?

To find answers to these questions, I used three methods of data collection: a questionnaire, lesson observations and a reflective journal. The questionnaire administered to six students aimed to discover their feelings about learning vocabulary and the challenges they had during the process. I also enlisted a colleague to observe my classroom

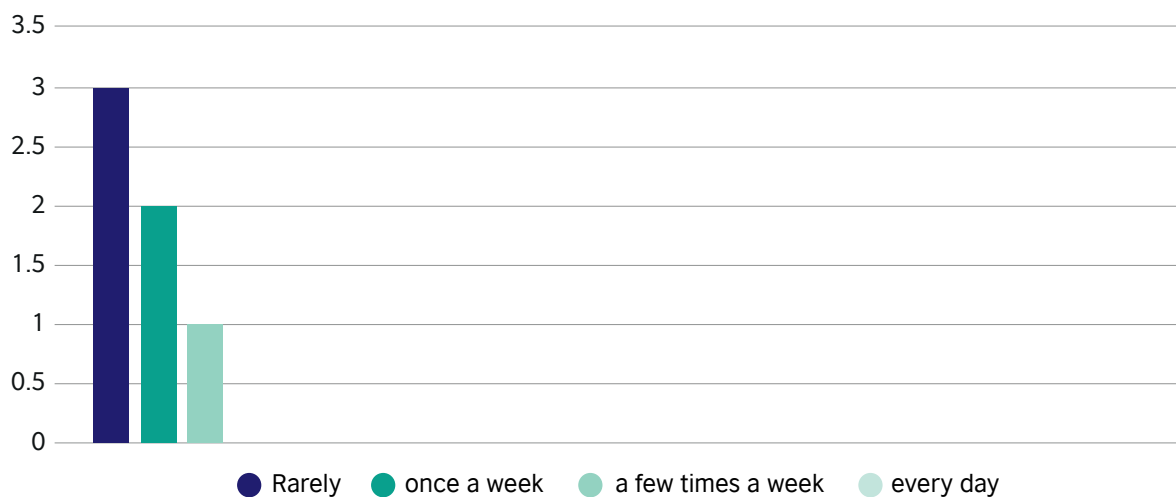
teaching and respond to ten specific questions aimed at addressing my exploratory inquiries. The focus of the observation was to discover and identify the challenges faced by students, describe the techniques used for introducing new vocabulary and observe methods used for reinforcing vocabulary learning. Lastly, I kept a reflective journal over a two-week period gathering information about events in my classroom.

Findings

Based on the data gathered from the exploratory tools, I identified the following:

In relation to research question one – How much time do my learners spend on learning vocabulary? – I was able to establish from students' questionnaires that half (three) of them rarely studied new words. Two learners mentioned that they studied new words once a week while one student did it a few times a week.

Question: How often do you study new words?



On the question 'How much time in the lesson is devoted to the teaching and learning of vocabulary?', data from my reflective journals showed that the total time I devoted to teaching the vocabulary and activities connected to the vocabulary was 30 minutes. The report from the classroom observation confirmed this by revealing that the designated time for learning vocabulary was 30 minutes per lesson. The observer added:

'The lesson was interesting, learners were actively involved in the vocabulary activities and learners have learned the target vocabulary.'

In terms of the strategies and methods used for teaching new vocabulary, the report from the classroom observations by my colleague indicated that I introduced the words by using audio recording and visual aids, flashcards and the coursebook.

Data from my reflective journals confirmed these strategies were used and added the use of modelling, TPR (Total Physical Response) method and choral drilling with the support of an audio recording. Then, I used the coursebook to reinforce individual reading to make sure they pronounced and read the words correctly. Students' questionnaires indicated that the most useful strategy for learning new words used by their teacher was flashcards, according to four learners. Three learners mentioned audio recordings and two suggested providing visual aids as well as explaining the meaning of the words by the teacher. None of them mentioned videos and songs. Here it is important to note that they were not often used in the classroom therefore students could not assess their usefulness.

In relation to research question three – What difficulties do my students have when learning vocabulary? – the data collected from students' questionnaires revealed that five of my learners' main difficulty when learning vocabulary was remembering how to say the word (as some of the words are long or difficult to pronounce) while for four students the main difficulty was how to write the words. Three learners felt unsure when learning new words, two felt confident and one felt excited. Most of my learners (five) found it hard to spell new words correctly while one thought it was not hard. Data from reflective journals revealed that the difficulty some of my learners faced in one particular lesson while introducing time vocabulary was not knowing the meaning of time words in their first language as they do not recognise time. In my reflective journal, I wrote: 'So, in order to teach them time vocabulary and generally how to tell the time, I have to teach them in the native language in the first place and then in the target language.' The report from classroom observation revealed that some of the learners had difficulties pronouncing the words correctly. I supported them by providing additional help (drilling). Also, when learning vocabulary a few learners struggled with recalling words and using them in context so I provided examples and explained the meaning engaging them in a fun activity. One of my colleagues wrote:

'Ms Lika provided additional help when needed. For instance, when learner X struggled with recalling and using vocabulary in context, Ms Lika explained the meaning, gave an example, and engaged him in the vocabulary game to reinforce learning.'

To verify whether learners have acquired the target vocabulary, findings from observation notes indicated that I checked for understanding of the meaning by asking questions and making sure the learners pronounced the words correctly. Also, I provided gap-filling exercises with new words to fill in and gave feedback. According to my colleague, 'When the teacher observes a learner misreading or mispronouncing a word, she addresses the issue until the learner pronounces the word correctly'. The data uncovered by the students' questionnaire were as follows: most learners (five out of six) said that when learning new words, the teacher helped them by explaining meanings and drawing or colouring new words. Almost no learners mentioned playing games with new words or making up stories with new words. Findings from the reflective journal indicated that to ensure my learners learnt the target vocabulary I provided printed materials as well as e-materials after introducing the vocabulary. My learners used these handouts to identify the words and match them to the picture. I asked students to write sentences using the target vocabulary.

In conclusion, the findings from this exploratory research suggest that most learners spent minimal time on vocabulary outside class, with only a few studying new words regularly. Each lesson dedicated 30 minutes to vocabulary teaching, using strategies like flashcards, audio recordings, visual aids, and the coursebook. Flashcards were the most used and favoured by students, while videos and songs were not being used. Common challenges included difficulties with pronunciation, spelling, and memory, with some learners needing explanations in their native language. To ensure comprehension, I used questions, pronunciation checks, and gap-filling exercises, while providing printed and e-materials for reinforcement.

Action plan

The findings above indicated that flashcards, audio recordings, and visual aids were the most valued strategies by learners. However, challenges in remembering, pronouncing, and spelling words persisted so I need to adjust teaching strategies for improved support, particularly for those who rarely studied new words. I also need to provide learners with opportunities to revisit old words and practice and recycle new words.

As a result, I plan to prepare a print-rich environment by displaying word walls, and posters. I will continue providing examples, explanations, and engaging activities to address challenges. Also, I will recycle vocabulary, revisit previously learned vocabulary and provide more opportunities to encounter new words.

Reflections and learning

Reflecting on this experience, participating in the exploratory action research course has deepened my understanding of classroom research and has improved my grasp of my classroom's dynamics and needs. Engaging in exploratory research has proven invaluable to my professional growth and teaching approach. It enables me to monitor and evaluate each stage of the process, facilitating effective adjustments in my classroom environment.



The author

'Reflecting on this experience, participating in the exploratory action research course has deepened my understanding of classroom research and has improved my grasp of my classroom's dynamics and needs.'

Lika Khurtsilava is an English language lead teacher at LEPL Borjomi Municipality Village Tsikhisvari Public School and consultant-teacher at the National Center for Teacher Professional Development. She graduated from Ilia State University and got a master's degree in English Language Philology. With 13 years of teaching experience across public and private institutions, she is dedicated to ongoing professional growth. She actively participates in enhancing her school community through diverse endeavours, including facilitating teacher development, implementing eTwinning projects, and informal education initiatives. She also serves as a member of the school quality management group.

Why do students find speaking activities challenging?

Nino Tsereteli

WHY DO STUDENTS FIND SPEAKING ACTIVITIES CHALLENGING

1. What do my students think/feel about speaking activities?
2. What kind of language do students use when they speak English?
3. What strategies/activities do I do in class in relation to improving students' speaking skills?

FINDINGS

The reason why my students don't participate as much in speaking events is not a lack of motivation, as I had anticipated. Because they are worried about making mistakes while speaking and because they require more assistance when fixing errors, they have trouble communicating. The speaking topics are not selected based on their level and interest, and they get bored doing the same things.

CHANGE

- Use different error correction techniques –traffic lights, note-taking ...
- Make a survey about the topic they are interested more.
- Use a variety of speaking activities- Role Plays, Hot Chair, Simulations, Story Completion...

RESEARCH METHODS

Questionnaire
Peer Observation
Reflective Journal

LEPL Khashuri Public School N1
Target Group-VI garde
Nino Tsereteli

In her research, Nino studies the challenges identified among a group of sixth grade students to speak in the English language classroom. Findings revealed students were afraid of making mistakes, struggled with fluency, and needed speaking topics to be of interest to them. Thus, she proposes strategies to create a more supportive, engaging and communication-rich learning environment.

Teaching context

I work as a teacher at a government-run urban school located in Khashuri, Georgia, where we serve approximately 600 students from various backgrounds. Our school offers free education to ensure that every student has equal access to learning. The age group of our students ranges from early to late teens, covering grades one through 12. We encourage academic excellence and reward

students who achieve maximum grades in grades seven to nine with laptops and those in grades ten to 12 with a golden medal. This recognition motivates students to strive for excellence and pursue higher education opportunities, often leading them to continue to university after completing secondary school.



LEPL Khashuri Public School No.1

Research focus

In my research, I chose to explore the challenges that sixth grade students encounter during speaking activities in the language-learning classroom. Speaking skills are a fundamental aspect of language acquisition, yet many students struggle with fluency, pronunciation, and confidence when engaging in speaking tasks. This study aims to identify the specific difficulties students face and to understand the underlying factors contributing to these challenges.

I chose this topic because it directly impacts my teaching practice and my students' learning outcomes. As a language teacher, facilitating effective communication skills is one of my

primary objectives. However, I have noticed that despite investing time and effort into speaking activities, some students still struggle to express themselves confidently and fluently. Understanding the root causes of these difficulties is crucial for tailoring my teaching methods to better support student needs. Additionally, improving students' speaking proficiency not only enhances their overall language competence but also fosters their ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations. Therefore, addressing the challenges associated with speaking activities is essential for equipping students with the linguistic and communicative competence they need to succeed in various domains.

To comprehensively investigate the identified challenge, I formulated the following exploratory research questions:

1. Why do students think/feel about speaking activities?
2. What kind of language do students use when they speak English?
3. What strategies/activities do I use in class in relation to improving students' speaking skills?

The research process lasted for 15 weeks and I applied a combination of methods to gather data for my exploratory research. These methods included questionnaires, peer observation, and a reflective journal.

Regarding questionnaires, I distributed them to students to gather their perspectives on speaking activities. The questions were designed to probe their thoughts, feelings, and challenges regarding speaking tasks. I conducted two peer observations during speaking activities to gain insights into students' language use, interactions, and engagement levels. These observations were conducted by two of my colleagues who are experienced language teachers at our school. This allowed me to observe first-hand the dynamics of student participation and identify any recurring patterns or issues.

Finally, I maintained a reflective journal to document my observations, reflections, and experiences related to teaching speaking skills. This provided me with a platform to analyse my teaching practices and consider potential areas for improvement.

Findings

The data collected through questionnaires, peer observation, and reflective journaling has revealed the following:

My error correction strategy involves correcting errors immediately, which has not been effective for most students. This approach often interrupts their flow of speech and can make them more self-conscious about making mistakes, further inhibiting their willingness to participate. In the survey, half of them (eight

out of 15) expressed anxiety about making mistakes while speaking English.

They felt apprehensive about errors and desired more support in correcting them. This fear of making mistakes hindered their confidence and inhibited their willingness to engage in speaking activities. One student mentioned in the questionnaire, 'I always feel nervous that I might say something wrong, and my classmates will laugh at me.' During a role-play activity, it was observed that several students hesitated to speak and frequently looked to the teacher for reassurance before continuing. Also, four students reported experiencing difficulty in effectively communicating their thoughts and ideas during speaking tasks. They struggled with expressing themselves clearly and coherently, which affected their overall proficiency in spoken English. One student expressed, 'I know the words, but when I try to speak, it feels like they all up in my head.' In group discussions, some students remained silent or spoke very briefly, often requiring prompts to expand on their points. Furthermore, speaking topics were often not tailored to students' language proficiency levels or interests. As a result, three students expressed boredom and disengagement during repetitive or irrelevant speaking activities. This lack of engagement impeded their motivation to participate actively and inhibited their language development. One student commented, 'The topics we discuss in class are sometimes boring and unrelated to what we are interested in.' It was also observed that student participation and enthusiasm significantly increased when discussing topics of personal interest.

In terms of fluency, the data suggests that students often struggled with fluency and coherence, mixing up words and needing prompts to elaborate on their points during speaking tasks. Observations indicated that students frequently used simple sentence structures and a limited vocabulary, which restricted their ability to express complex ideas. For example, during group discussions, students tended to rely on basic phrases and repeated common words rather than exploring more varied or sophisticated language. It was observed that many students tended to revert to their native language when they had trouble expressing themselves in English, indicating their difficulty in finding the right words.

To address some of the difficulties my students have when speaking, it was observed that I taught vocabulary before speaking tasks and provided necessary words when asked. I also encouraged the use of interaction patterns such as pair work and group work to encourage more dynamic and supportive communication among students.

In terms of activities, in class I primarily followed the book content and used the topics provided. However, some of these topics may not have been interesting to the students, often not tailored to students' language proficiency levels or interests which could be why they did not actively participate in speaking activities. The speaking activities I used were role plays and presentations. While these activities can be effective, their repeated use has led to boredom among the students, reducing their engagement and enthusiasm. As a result, three students expressed boredom and disengagement during repetitive or irrelevant speaking activities. This lack of engagement impeded their motivation to participate actively and inhibited their language development. One student commented, 'The topics we discuss in class are sometimes boring and unrelated to what we are interested in.' It was also observed that student participation and enthusiasm significantly increased when discussing topics of personal interest.

In short, my students have difficulties speaking because they are afraid of making mistakes while speaking, and they need more support while correcting mistakes. The speaking topics were not chosen according to their interest and level and they were bored of doing the same activities.

Proposed action plan

Considering the findings of my research, I decided to implement a variety of strategies to address the challenges identified and improve students' speaking skills in the language learning classroom. These actions will address the challenges identified and promote my students' learning.

1. Error correction strategies: These will provide immediate constructive feedback offering a safe and supportive environment where errors are viewed as opportunities for learning improvement rather than as failures.
2. Communication-focused activities: These will include debates, role-plays, discussions, problem-solving activities, and tasks that encourage fluency and authentic language use.
3. Topic according to student interests: I will tailor speaking topics to align with students' interests, experiences, and proficiency levels. By selecting relevant and culturally diverse topics, based on the survey results, I aim to capture students' attention and encourage active participation in speaking tasks.





The author

'This research experience turned out to be enlightening and transformative for my teaching practice.'

Nino Tsereteli is an English language mentor teacher at Khashuri Public School No.1. She is a highly qualified and enthusiastic education professional with 23 years of hands-on experience as a teacher and more than five years as a teacher trainer. She has a talent for bringing the classroom to life with real-world examples and innovative technology while creating a supportive learning environment central to the needs and learning styles of students. She is dedicated to promoting the philosophy of the school through collaboration and engagement of the school community.

How to engage high school students to learn English by using Web 2.0 tools

Rusudan Karkadze

The graphic is a slide titled "Exploratory Action Research-EAR" by Rusudan Karkadze. It details a research project on engaging high school students with Web 2.0 tools. The research topic is "How to engage high school students to learn English by using web 2.0 tools". The exploratory research questions are: "What 2.0 tools do I use in my lessons?", "What is the purpose of my use of web 2.0 tools at the lesson?", and "What do my students think of using different web 2.0 tools in the class?". The findings, viewed through a magnifying glass, state: "According to data I regularly use a variety of web 2.0 tools that engage my students. They don't find using technology difficult. But they have their preferences. They easily get involved in the teaching and learning process while using tech tools. 80% of learners say that they use tools outside the classroom." The research process is shown as a cycle of three tools: "tool1" (Reflective journal), "tool2" (Questionnaire), and "tool3" (Observation). The background features a photo of "LEPL Avtandil Dekanoidze Kutaisi N32 Public School" and a bar chart labeled "EXPLORATORY ACTION RESEARCH".

Exploratory Action Research-EAR

Research topic:
How to engage high school students to learn English by using web 2.0 tools

Exploratory research questions

- What 2.0 tools do I use in my lessons?
- What is the purpose of my use of web 2.0 tools at the lesson?
- What do my students think of using different web 2.0 tools in the class?

Answers to EQs/Findings

According to data I regularly use a variety of web 2.0 tools that engage my students. They don't find using technology difficult. But they have their preferences. They easily get involved in the teaching and learning process while using tech tools. 80% of learners say that they use tools outside the classroom.

Conclusions

My learners:

- engage in activities when using tech tools
- engage in individual, peer and group work activities
- interest is increased when using technology

Changes

I will continue using technology in the classroom for communication and collaboration.
Such as:
nearpod
powtoon
pixlr.com

I will teach strategies of using technology

- For students to record new vocabulary
- To motivate self-study (more autonomous students)

Rusudan Karkadze

LEPL Avtandil Dekanoidze Kutaisi N32 Public School

After realising her students were lacking interest in traditional methods and after noticing their interest in gadgets, Rusudan decided to use Web 2.0 tools to increase their motivation. In this report, she describes how she explored the impact of this approach and discovered that certainly, her students expressed a preference for technology-enhanced learning, finding it easier and more engaging than textbook-based activities.

Teaching context

I work at LEPL Avtandil Dekanoidze Kutaisi Public School No.32, located in Kutaisi. I teach English to different age groups, primary, secondary and high school students. My students live in a community where very little English is spoken and most of the students' parents are abroad to support their families. Therefore, students don't get help in their learning process. Most of the students have gadgets and they use phones regularly.



Avtandil Dekanoidze Kutaisi Public School No.32

Research focus

I chose to explore the motivation of high school students since I observed that they lacked interest towards school subjects, they were more focused on private lessons, and most important of all, they loved gadgets and used them a lot. I am an information technology and English language specialist and observing the students' learning process prompted me to implement Web 2.0 tools in my teaching to meet their interests and motivate them. Therefore, I decided to explore the effects that these tools have had on my students. To understand the situation, I created some exploratory questions:

1. What web 2.0 tools do I use in my lesson?
2. What is the purpose of my use of web 2.0 tools in my lessons?
3. What do my students think of using different web 2.0 tools in the class?

To answer these questions, I decided to keep a reflective journal to regularly monitor the process and keep recordings for future analysis. I also asked my colleague to observe my teaching in class.

I did four classroom observations to get my colleague's feedback on the way I used digital tools in class. Lastly, I created a student questionnaire that enabled me to explore my students' needs and understand their thoughts about how they felt when using technology in the classroom and how they benefited from it.

Findings

In relation to the first question asking what web 2.0 tools I used in the lesson, the data from the questionnaire indicated that most students (19 out of 20), listed the following tools: *Padlet*, *Mentimeter*, *Quizzes*, *Kahoot*, *Prezi*, *Videomaker*, *Wordclouds*, and *Jamboard*. The observations confirmed that these were the Web 2.0 tools used in the classroom and that all students were actively involved when they were in use. The observation also indicated that the collaborative tools *Padlet*, *Jamboard*, and *Kahoot* seemed to work best in the classroom. Students were motivated and interested in the process more than before and their participation increased even more when using collaborative tools during whole-class activities. In addition, learners considered *Padlet*, *Mentimeter* and *Kahoot* the easiest tools to use while *Prezi* and *Jamboard* were deemed as the most difficult.



With regards to the second question focused on the purpose of the use of Web 2.0 in my lesson, and according to the classroom observation, the Web 2.0 tools were being used according to the aim of each lesson and the activity carried out, mainly depending on the skill being developed. For example, we used *Kahoot* for reading comprehension and *Padlet* for collaborative writing tasks. I also noted in my journal that I mainly used technology to engage all students, especially the most passive ones.

I also used them to generate collaboration and motivation when doing classroom work. Students agreed with this observation and in the questionnaire 12 learners said tools were used to develop their language skills, four thought they were used for engagement and another four mentioned they were used to make difficult tasks easier.

Regarding students' perceptions of the Web 2.0 used in class, most learners had a positive perception of the use of technology in class. One of the students mentioned: 'I love when I am allowed to use my mobile in class. My attitude towards the learning process totally changes. I get active and volunteer to take part in various fun activities'. I also observed that students seemed to understand the material presented better as they were more actively involved. Conversely, the notes from the classroom observation revealed that students were not very enthusiastic about their textbooks and they mostly didn't participate in classroom activities. On the contrary, according to my colleague, almost all the students seemed to volunteer to participate in different activities when using the Web 2.0 tools. She commented, 'Students help each other while using tech tools in class, they collaborate.' This was confirmed by my journal data where I wrote: 'Learners don't show their interest towards textbooks and mostly do not get engaged in activities if they aren't digital. Students immediately start exploring and collaborating as soon as they are presented with some tech tools'.

In summary, according to the research findings, I regularly used a variety of Web 2.0 tools which included Padlet, Mentimeter and Kahoot, among others, to engage my students. I used these tools in class according to the objective of the lesson and the skill to be developed. Students had a positive perception of the use of technology in class since they participated actively and voluntarily and preferred their use over working with their textbook and doing paper-based activities. In general, students didn't find using technology difficult.

Action plan

Based on the above, I decided to include a variety of digital tools for individual, peer and group work practice since according to the observation students communicated more with each other when using the technology and it had a good impact on understanding new material. I also plan to create an electronic resource, like an e-book for my 12th graders that will be based on their curriculum and cover all their textbook materials and use it as an additional resource.

Therefore, I propose to continue using technology in the classroom for more student involvement in the teaching and learning process. I will use the technology in different ways, for example; to help students record new vocabulary and to motivate self-study to further their autonomy. To improve students' interest and engagement I will add new tools such as Nearpod, Powtoon, and Pixlr, among others.

Final reflections

This research helped me to understand how best to improve my students' motivation and get them engaged in the teaching and learning process. It helped me to value the effect of using technology in the classroom rather than just the textbook. I observed that my students spent most of their time using mobiles. So, I had tried to modify activities and made them tech-based but I wasn't fully aware of their impact. Thanks to this research, I learned that a good way to engage high school students in learning English is to use Web 2.0 tools. Students participated more when they had tech-based activities, they communicated with their classmates for help and guidance, and they understood the material better.



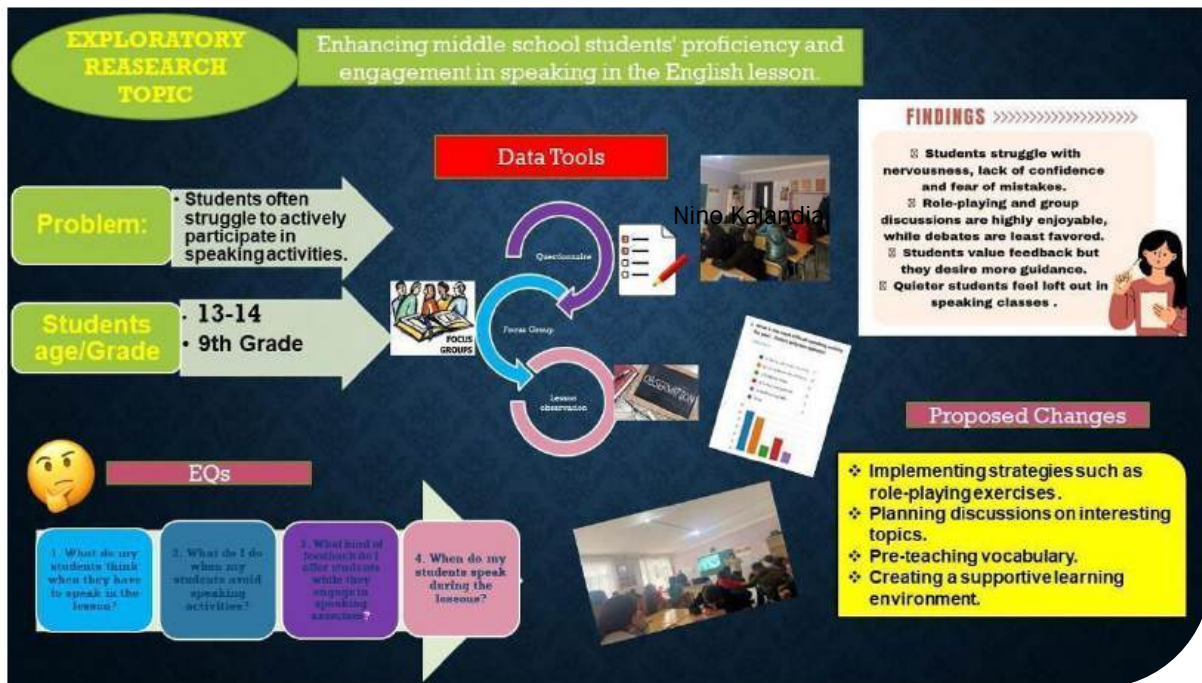
The author

'This research helped me to understand how best to improve my students' motivation and get them engaged in the teaching and learning process.'

I am Rusudan Karkadze, an English language mentor teacher. I hold a bachelor's degree in information technology and English and a master's degree in applied linguistics. Besides English as a second language, I teach media literacy, and business English to adults and deliver training sessions on media literacy and disinformation. I am an eTwinning ambassador, which is an organisation for teachers and students to carry out international joint projects. My projects have gained national and European quality labels and one of my projects the *Disconnect* won the European First prize. I am a facilitator for the British Council Online Teacher Community.

Enhancing middle school students' proficiency and engagement in speaking

Nino Kalandia



As a result of her students' low participation and struggles during speaking activities, Nino chose to gather evidence of her students' feelings, their participation levels, her reactions and feedback during speaking lessons. Based on her findings, she proposed an action plan including role-playing exercises, engaging discussion topics, pre-teaching vocabulary, and fostering a psychologically safe classroom.

Teaching context

I work at Tsalenjikha Public School No.2, situated in the western part of Georgia, in a small town. The school hosts approximately 350 students, aged six to 17. Each class typically comprises 25 to 30 students, with diverse backgrounds and language levels, primarily from middle socio-economic backgrounds.



LEPL Tsalenjikha Public School No.2

Research focus

While thinking about my research topic, I observed my students during lessons to identify what they struggled with the most. It turned out that speaking was their biggest challenge. I noticed that many middle school students didn't participate much when we did speaking activities. Even though speaking is really important for learning a language, they found it hard to talk in class, which made it tough for them to improve their English. I realised then that I needed to identify the root causes of these challenges so that I could improve my teaching methods and better meet the needs of my students. To guide my research, I formulated four main exploratory questions for my 9th-grade students:

1. What do my students feel when they have to speak in the lesson?

This question aims to delve into the emotional aspect of speaking in class. It seeks to understand how students perceived and experienced speaking activities, including their feelings of confidence, anxiety, or discomfort.

2. What actions do I take when my students avoid speaking activities?

This question focuses on the strategies and interventions employed by me in response to students' reluctance or avoidance of speaking tasks. It explores my role in addressing student apprehensions and encouraging participation.

3. What type of feedback do I offer students during speaking exercises?

This question centres on the feedback I provided during speaking activities. It seeks to examine the nature and effectiveness of the feedback given to students to help them improve their oral communication skills.

4. When do my students actively engage in speaking during the lesson?

This question aims to identify the factors or conditions that promote active student engagement in speaking activities. It explores the timing, context, and dynamics that facilitate student participation and interaction during speaking tasks.

In order to collect the right data, I decided to use three different methods: a focus group, questionnaires and lesson observation. The focus group discussion centred on seven key questions aimed at gaining insights into students' feelings and experiences. Six students, comprising four girls and two boys, participated in the focus group discussion. The student selection criteria included performance levels in English classes, with three high performers and three low performers chosen.

I used questionnaires to gather quantitative data on students' perceptions and preferences. 18 students took part in the questionnaires and they answered 12 questions which focused on their experiences, feelings, and challenges with speaking activities in the English lessons.

To assess classroom dynamics and teacher-student interactions during speaking activities, I carried out two lesson observations. To this end, a colleague was invited to observe and respond to four predetermined questions which sought to identify student activities during speaking tasks and the strategies employed to support students during these activities

Findings

Regarding students' feelings when they have to speak in class, it was found that seven learners (out of 18) felt comfortable speaking during lessons, indicating enjoyment. Slightly fewer felt nervous (five), three felt confident, while only two students felt uncomfortable. Data from the focus group provided reasons for their reluctance to speak, such as fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence. One of the students mentioned: 'I sometimes avoid speaking English in class because I'm not confident with my English.' Observations from my colleague highlighted varying levels of student engagement and confidence. While some students participated actively and enthusiastically, others showed signs of hesitation or fear, impacting their participation in class activities.

In terms of the support provided by the teacher when students avoided speaking, the questionnaire results showed that most students (11 out of 18) appreciated when I offered guided questions for speaking activities, seven valued my approach of welcoming mistakes to focus on fluency, and six of them acknowledged additional support. However, fewer students perceived encouragement to express their ideas (four). Also, four of them indicated they could speak about topics based on their interests. Insights from the focus group revealed that the teacher encouraged participation in various speaking activities, such as discussions, group work, role-playing, and storytelling. One student mentioned, 'The teacher encourages us to participate in various speaking activities.' Another noted that the teacher created a supportive environment where they felt comfortable sharing. Additionally, a third student confirmed that aligning activities with their interests motivated and engaged them, enhancing their speaking abilities.

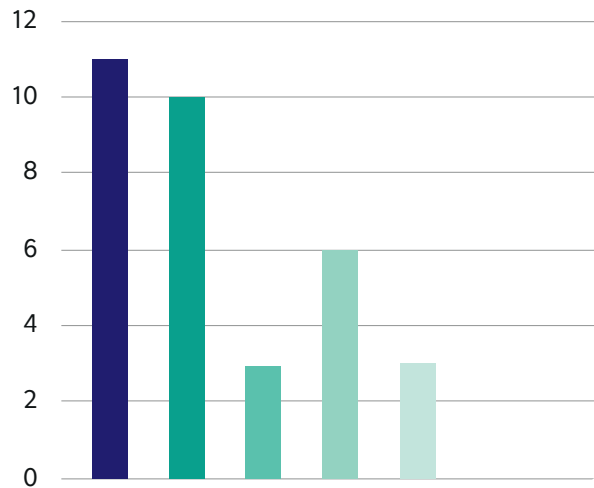
In terms of the feedback provided, students valued the input they received with one of them

mentioning: 'My teacher gives us feedback on our speaking tasks. It's really useful because she points out where we can improve.' However, some desired more detailed guidance, as one student expressed, 'Um, well, the teacher just says 'good job' or 'try harder' sometimes. It's okay, but I wish they would tell us exactly what we need to fix.' According to my colleague's observation, the feedback given during speaking exercises was generally constructive and supportive but lacked clarity and specificity.

In terms of engagement, frequency varied: six students spoke sometimes, five frequently, four rarely, and two always. Most (ten out of 18) spent 25–50 per cent of class time speaking, while six spent 50–75 per cent. Public speaking was the most challenging activity for 11 students, followed by unprepared discussions for ten of them. Less challenging activities included explaining things, leading group talks and giving timed speeches. Focus groups revealed a spectrum of student engagement: some eagerly participated in discussions, expressing, 'I really enjoy group discussions the most. It's great to exchange ideas with classmates and being in a group makes me feel more comfortable about speaking, even if I'm afraid of making mistakes.' Others found speaking in English class challenging and preferred to stay silent, with one student noting, 'I speak only when absolutely necessary, like when presenting or answering the teacher's questions. Otherwise, I stay silent throughout the lesson.' One student used creative methods, imagining a YouTube channel to practise speaking regularly. According to the observations, students' confidence levels varied during speaking activities. Some actively participated, while others remained quiet due to shyness or uncertainty. Although the teacher encouraged participation, the focus tended to be more on the active students.

8. What is the most difficult speaking activity for you? (Select only two options)

● a) Talking in front of a big group,	11
● b) Having discussions without p...	10
● c) Explaining things.	3
● d) Giving timed speeches.	6
● e) Leading group talks.	3
● Other	0



To sum up, findings from questionnaires, focus groups, and lesson observations revealed a diverse range of attitudes and experiences among students regarding speaking English in class. While many students appreciated my efforts to engage them through guided questions and welcoming mistakes, others felt a lack of encouragement to express their ideas and perceived a disconnect between topics and their interests. Additionally, while I provided support to students with limited vocabulary and fear of speaking, some students still struggled with confidence and participation.

Proposed action plan

Based on these findings, I have proposed some changes to increase students' knowledge and engagement in English;

- One strategy is the implementation of role-playing exercises, which will allow students to participate in different conversation scenarios. Using this method will boost their confidence and improve their practical and real-world language skills.
- I also plan to generate discussions on interesting topics. Since interesting content is important for dialogue, I will choose a variety of topics that are of interest to students and make discussions interesting and active.
- I will pre-teach vocabulary by introducing keywords and phrases before requesting students to speak.

- I will create a supportive learning environment where students can feel valued, respected and supported so that they can express their ideas openly and engage in genuine communication without fear of judgement.

Reflections and learning

While working on this research, I came to the conclusion that my classroom activities should be adjusted according to my students' needs and interests, and it would be better to create an inclusive environment in the classroom, which will promote students' active participation and development. To sum up, this research motivated me to further deepen my knowledge in this area and improve my teaching methods for the benefit of my students.



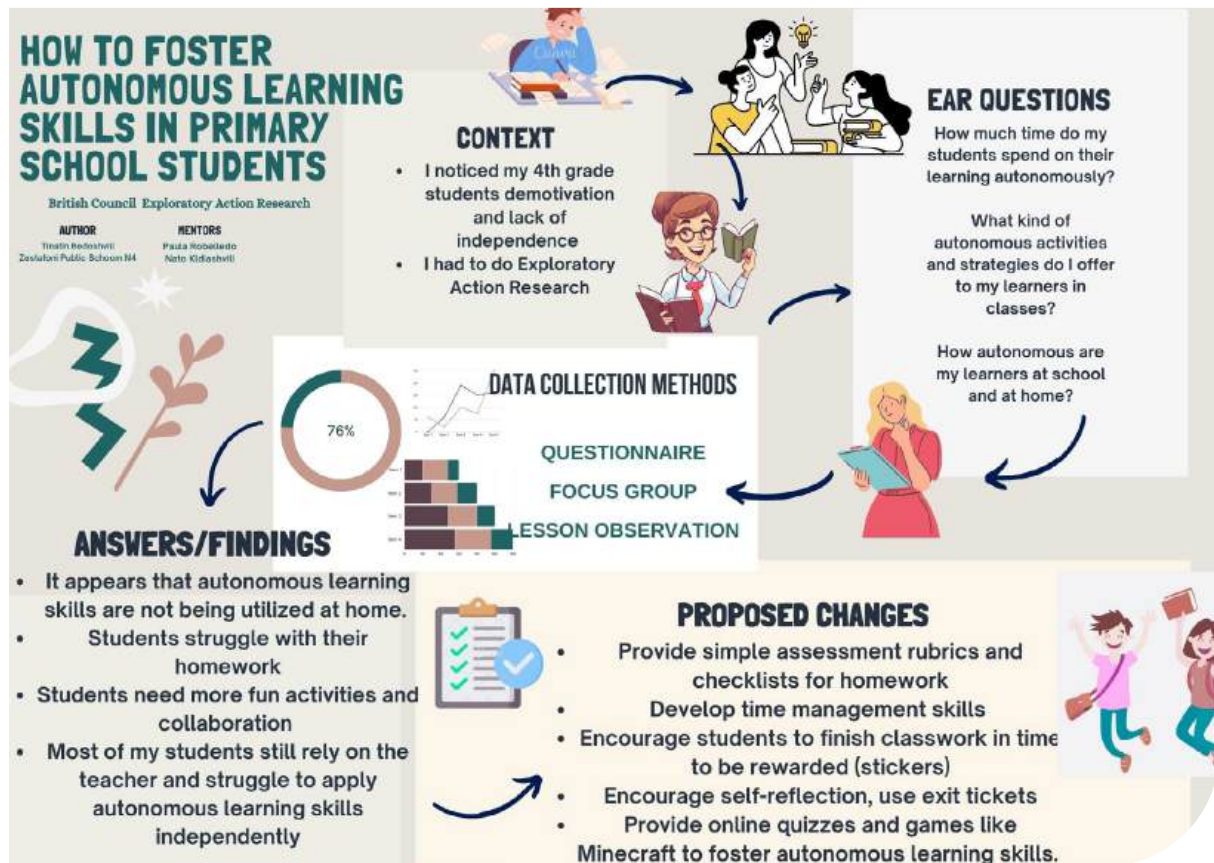
The author

'This research motivated me to further deepen my knowledge in this area and improve my teaching methods for the benefit of my students.'

Nino Kalandia works as an English language mentor teacher at LEPL Tsalenjikha Public School No.2. She holds a TESOL certification, demonstrating her expertise in teaching English as a second language. Nino is deeply passionate about teaching and is dedicated to inspiring, encouraging, and supporting her students to reach their fullest potential. As a progressive educator, she continually seeks opportunities for professional development and growth. Nino has actively participated in various trainings, workshops, and conferences, all of which have significantly contributed to her professional advancement.

How to foster autonomous learning skills in primary school students

Tinatin Bedoshvili



After the Covid-19 pandemic, Tinatin felt her students' autonomy skills had declined. She chose to look into this situation further by collecting data from a questionnaire, a focus group and lesson observations. Her findings confirmed her initial observations and informed her of ways to address the matter, this time, with input from her students.

Teaching context

I work at Zestafoni Public School No.4 in the Imereti region of Georgia. The school serves over 600 students across three educational levels: primary (grades one to six), basic (compulsory) (grades seven to nine), and secondary (grades ten-12). It is also adapted for students with special needs. The school

has a rich history and culture spanning approximately 50 years. My research focuses on fourth grade students, aged nine, who began studying English in the first grade. These students have notable difficulties in social and study skills, particularly in autonomous learning, due to the Covid-19 pandemic.



Zestafoni Public School No.4 (the school is currently under renovation)

Research focus

This academic year, I am working with primary-level students, and I have chosen to focus my research on my fourth grade class which has 29 students. In this group, I noticed certain demotivation and a lack of independence when completing their tasks. Discussions with my colleagues made me realise the importance of this issue, prompting me to embark on a research process aimed at exploring my students' autonomous learning skills. I decided to spread my research in three main directions:

1. How much time do my students spend on their learning autonomously?
2. What kind of autonomous activities and strategies do I offer to my learners in classes?
3. How autonomous are my learners at school and at home?

To gather data, I employed a combination of questionnaires for quantitative data, focus group interviews for deeper insights, and colleague-conducted lesson observation to gain diverse perspectives on my teaching methods. For the questionnaire, I formulated nine questions aimed at understanding students' participation in class activities, home learning habits, motivations for learning, and independence in learning.

I held one focus group interview with 15 students and each of them had the opportunity to participate in the discussion based around five questions. The answers were recorded in audio format and used for data analysis. The focus group interview questions for students were designed to understand students' feelings and experiences regarding autonomous learning.

Findings

In relation to the first question, the data suggests that most students (ten out of 15) devoted between one and two hours to homework, and only two students needed six to eight hours to work independently. One student coped with tasks in less than one hour, and four students devoted three to five hours to the learning process. As a result of the data analysis, some students spent six to eight hours learning autonomously at home, though more than half of the respondents dealt with the tasks easily.

Regarding the autonomous activities and strategies offered in class, nine students (out of 15) stated that the teacher showed different ways. Also, nine students thought that the teacher guided them to find a solution by themselves. Six students thought that the teacher supported them when they wanted to learn interesting topics, and five students thought that the teacher encouraged them to ask questions and find the answers themselves. Also, five students chose extra resources or books for autonomous study and the teacher provided these resources. Only four students received formative feedback from the teacher. The data showed that the teacher offered students different autonomous activities in class but not all the students got formative feedback from the teacher and not always. The findings also indicated that I provided various autonomous learning opportunities. Activities included reading dialogues, asking questions, writing dialogues in pairs and making presentations. Students were offered well-designed activities to think about and use both individually and in pairs. However, these activities were not stable, permanent or sufficient to help students develop a habit of autonomous learning skills that they could use at home. As noted in a lesson observation, 'The work of the teacher in the direction of independent learning of the students is seen well, although the activities are not always adapted to the needs of all students. More differentiation would be better so that all students, including SEN students, can freely master the material and feel comfortable in the closest developmental zone.'



In relation to the autonomous skills evidenced by my students at school and home, the exploration revealed that only four students (out of 15) searched for resources autonomously; five students preferred the teacher to guide them on what to do and how to do it, five of them preferred to work independently but while getting their teacher's advice. Seven students preferred to work autonomously with minimal guidance from the teacher. Additionally, focus group data showed the high dependence of students on the teacher: 'If the teacher writes a task in the chat and I am not at school, I will call a classmate for help.' However, some students coped with challenges by using online resources when help was unavailable at home: 'If I don't know the words and there is no one at home to help me with the unknown text, I write it down on the internet for translation.' During the classroom observation, my colleague noted: 'The engagement and motivation of the students was really noticeable, especially in the process of working independently'; 'Proper pairing of students is important for effective collaboration, but overall, students displayed a greater willingness to work independently than in pairs.'

Therefore, the findings suggested that while individual autonomous learning was supported in class, students still relied heavily on the teacher's guidance. Effective strategies used by the teacher to encourage autonomous work included asking questions, problem-solving tasks, and using additional resources, though formative feedback was limited. Activities such as reading dialogues and making presentations were well-received but needed consistency and differentiation to meet all student needs.

High engagement was observed in independent tasks, though challenges persisted due to inattentiveness and noise. Overall, fostering stronger, consistent autonomous learning habits remained essential.

Proposed changes

With these findings, I have realised that my learners' lack of autonomous learning skills is due to a lack of effective study strategies. I have found that in order to develop autonomous learning skills, I need to offer my students topics that address their interests, activities that are fun and collaborative, and clear instructions/rubrics for homework. From analysing the gathered information, it is clear that generally students love working on the tasks they know or are interested in with the teacher's guidance. However, they feel demotivated to utilise their autonomous learning skills not only in class but also at home. Therefore, it may be productive to provide them with simple assessment rubrics and checklists for their homework. Besides, to develop time management skills I will teach my students how to manage their time effectively by setting realistic

deadlines. I will encourage them to finish classwork in time to be rewarded (stickers). To encourage self-reflection, I will use exit tickets regularly. As for games and fun activities which my students named as their favorites, using online quizzes and games like Minecraft would be effective and foster their autonomous learning skills.

Final reflections

I am confident that the changes I proposed will help my students develop autonomous learning skills. I also think that sharing my findings with my colleagues can help them overcome similar challenges more easily.

For me, being part of this team of teacher-researchers means cooperation, professionalism and collegiality. It is necessary to share our experiences and learn from each other. In the process of working on this research, I have learned that despite the risks and challenges, we need to take steps forward to help future generations cope with problems, while at the same time refining our principles and values.



The author

'For me, being part of this team of teacher-researchers means cooperation, professionalism and collegiality.'

Tinatin Bedoshvili is an English language mentor teacher at Zestafoni Public School No.4. She holds a master's degree in English Language Teaching and has over 20 years of teaching experience. In 2021-2022, she served as a facilitator for the British Council Online Teaching Community (OTC) platform in Georgia. Tinatin is a dedicated teacher committed to professional development and eager to share her experiences with students and colleagues.

Teaching writing in large classes

Natia Katamadze

TEACHING WRITING AT LARGE CLASSES
ERA, British Council Georgia, 2023
Natia Katamadze

IDEA
The topic of my research was improving writing skills among 9th graders, I chose this topic since they had difficulties during the writing task. They lacked a clear structure. Moreover, some of them avoided writing at all.

EQ
1. What do my learners find hard about writing?
2. How do I provide my learners with writing structures and relevant feedback about their writing?
3. What do I do to engage all the students during a writing activity?

Data collection

A. Questionnaire for students ✓
B. Reflective journal ✓
C. Observation notes ✓

Key findings

- Most learners feel motivated, but have difficulties while doing writing task, because of lack of grammar, organization thoughts and getting started on writing assignments.
- For some students the feedback is not enough and some even don't get feedback at all, particularly those who are not writing.
 - Some students lack encouragement and support during the writing activity.

Conclusion
My learner's lack of participation during the writing task is not due to lack of motivation as I expected. They have difficulties while writing since they lack the knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and skills for this. they lack further feedback, practice a

Proposed changes

- I will teach a series of strategies to improve their writing skills.
- I will focus on grammar, vocabulary and writing skills.
- I will provide more feedback and support especially those who are not involved

In this research, Natia explains how she started her research wanting to know the reasons for her students' lack of motivation and low performance in writing. Thanks to her findings she discovered that her students lacked knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, and that she supported their writing effectively but did not provide enough encouragement. Therefore, she learned that the origin of the problem was more complex than originally presumed.

Teaching context

I teach at Batumi Public School No.14 in Batumi, Georgia. It's an urban school but lots of students come from the countryside and nearby villages; therefore, it's one of the biggest schools in the city with about 2,000 students ranging from elementary to secondary levels. Most parents work full-time, and some of them are immigrants living in different countries so they are rarely involved in the school life of their children.

I teach students of different levels. This particular research was conducted in the ninth class which has 27 students who are 14-15 years of age. They have English classes twice a week and have been learning English as a second language from first grade. Their level of English proficiency can be placed at an intermediate level. The class is mixed-ability and while most of them are good at reading and listening, they struggle with speaking and writing.



Batumi Public School No.14

Research focus

After a long observation, I found out that students lacked motivation in writing and had difficulties during writing tasks. They had problems with accuracy and fluency, lacked a clear structure, had poor vocabulary and half of them avoided writing at all.

This topic is relevant to my teaching because writing skills are essential for composing diaries, essays, formal and informal emails, research papers and other texts that demonstrate students' understanding of a subject. Good writing skills allow

students to record and communicate their thoughts, emotions and experiences which is essential for communicating effectively.

To understand this situation I created three exploratory questions:

1. What do my learners find hard about writing?
2. How do I provide my learners with writing structures and relevant feedback about their writing?
3. What do I do to engage all the students during the writing activity?

To answer these questions, I used and collected data from the following tools: questionnaires for students, a reflective journal and observation notes from my colleague. For students' questionnaires, I created different kinds of questions to explore their perceptions about writing lessons, explain their feelings about writing and ask for their suggestions about improving writing classes. Besides, for classroom observation, I asked one of my colleagues to observe three of my writing lessons. Finally, I kept a reflective journal for myself for 4 weeks to reflect on my writing lessons. The focus of the reflection was on how I supported and engaged my students during the writing tasks and how I provided my students with writing structures and gave them relevant feedback.

Findings

After analysing all the data obtained, in terms of students' feelings regarding writing and their difficulties, the questionnaire revealed that most students (17 out of 26) felt motivated while doing writing tasks, but had difficulties because of lack of grammar, organising thoughts, and getting started on writing assignments. Six students mentioned a lack of vocabulary. Six respondents mentioned getting distracted. 18 learners indicated that the most difficult writing activity for them was argument essays. Half of the students tended to avoid doing writing activities. In my journal, I wrote that some of them started writing but it seemed that they didn't know how to continue, 'They either don't know what and how to write or just don't want to write.'



From the observation notes, I found out that, although the teacher indicated target vocabulary in the student textbook and wrote grammar structures on the board, only half of the learners did the task. Also, according to my colleague's observation notes, written feedback and support were given to some students, who managed to finish writing in time. The feedback was not given to students who didn't manage to finish writing. My colleague wrote, 'The teacher looks and assists at some students' work, but doesn't try to encourage those students who are not writing'.

Most students (22 out of 26) indicated they enjoyed the 'fill in the story' writing activity. As for writing strategies, most students (21) found the following strategies useful: seeing modelling text, writing topic sentences, showing the text to somebody and asking for opinions. During the observation, my colleague wrote, 'The teacher walks around the class, looks at some students' work, and assists them in case of necessity. She doesn't try to encourage those students who are not writing.' This evidenced a lack of encouragement on my part to get students to work on their writing tasks. However, I did support them by providing writing structures and examples, and indicating relevant vocabulary before any writing activity.

In summary, my colleague's comments and the analysis of other data persuaded me that despite using and offering different writing strategies, students had difficulties writing because they lacked knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Some students struggled with starting to write and they needed further feedback, practice and encouragement.

Proposed action plan

The findings above indicated that my learners' reluctance to participate in writing tasks is due to their lack of knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Therefore, they need further feedback, practice and support.

To address the issues identified, I plan to include different writing strategies to develop their writing skills, focus on grammar and vocabulary, and give students more opportunities to practice. Besides, I will provide them with more tips and constructive feedback to inspire them to write more skillfully.

Final reflections

This research process helped me gain a better understanding of my classroom dynamics, teaching methods and strategies. It helped me to realise the kind of difficulties and challenges that can be a trigger for their reluctance to write. Also, I concluded that since the class is heterogeneous with mixed-ability students, they need individual attention and more support to enhance their writing skills. Besides, through this research, learners were able to identify their own weaknesses and strengths during writing lessons and made judgments about their learning in order to improve their performance, knowledge and skills.

This year, I have started carrying out my action plan and as a result, my learners have made great progress with their writing skills. Although few of them are still reluctant, their involvement during the writing lesson has increased. Consequently, I am going to continue the implementation of my action plan in light of the positive results I have observed so far.



The author

'This research process helped me gain a better understanding of my classroom dynamics, teaching methods and strategies.'

I am Natia Katamadze, a high school English language teacher, mentor and teacher trainer. I hold a master's degree in English Language Teaching and Literature and a doctoral degree (PhD) in Slavic Philology. I have been teaching English for 24 years and I have experience teaching English to all ages, from primary learners to adults. I am an enthusiastic, dedicated and determined teacher. I am inspired to further my continuous professional development, explore various perspectives of teaching and contribute to the development of the local community.

How to improve speaking skills in learners

Nino Sturua

How to improve speaking skills in learners

Exploration problem:
Lack of participation in speaking activities

Exploratory Research questions

1. what kind of fluency activities do my students prefer?
2. How do my students prefer to practice this new vocabulary?
3. what kind of fluency activities do my colleagues use in the classroom and what do they think about personalisation of a target language?

Methods and tools

1. Reflective journal
2. Questionnaire-directed to students
3. Interview with teachers

Relevant data lead to the conclusion
my students: like role-play, feel shy in front of the whole class, have difficulties in debates and they prefer to use new vocabulary in writing

Conclusions

1. My learners like to be involved in role-plays
2. My students find it difficult to take part in debates
3. My students feel shy to speak English in front of the whole class
4. My students prefer to use new vocabulary in writing

For The Future

Future plans
Doing more fluency activities in the classroom such as presentations, debates, discussions, dialogues

In this report, Nino describes how her research originated after observing her students' reluctance to participate in speaking activities, especially discussions and debates. From the data collected she found that to boost their confidence and improve their participation, her support and encouragement were as important as planning the right fluency activities.

Teaching context

I work at Samtredia Public School No.1 in the Imereti region of Georgia. Our school is one of the largest schools in Samtredia, accommodating approximately 900 students from elementary to secondary levels. I cater to learners across various proficiency levels within this diverse student body.

The research I conducted pertains to the tenth grade class, comprising 22 students.

These students attend English classes twice a week, consistently engaging with the language since their early schooling years. Their collective proficiency in English is at an intermediate level. While some exhibit commendable skills in writing, or listening, there is a noticeable reluctance among many to participate in speaking activities actively.



Samtredia Public School No.1

Research focus

In light of my observation, I have chosen to focus on my students' apparent reluctance to express themselves freely in English. They exhibited a notable lack of confidence when making presentations, participating in discussions or engaging in dialogues. Consequently, I have undertaken this research to delve into the root causes of this issue since despite their ongoing learning of vocabulary and grammar, a deficiency in their speaking abilities persists.

To initiate my research, I formulated exploratory questions aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of this situation:

1. What kind of fluency activities do my students prefer?
2. How do my students prefer to practice this new vocabulary?
3. What kind of fluency activities do my colleagues use in the classroom and what do they think about personalisation of a target language?

For answering questions and for collecting data I used the following methods and tools:

- Reflective journal
- Student questionnaire
- Interview with colleagues

I maintained a reflective journal throughout the process (four weeks), diligently documenting my observations of my students' behaviour and their interactions. The central focus of my reflections centred on my strategies to actively engage and support students during various speaking activities as well as my approach to providing pertinent feedback.

In crafting the student questionnaires, I devised a diverse array of inquiries, totalling ten questions in all. These questions were thoughtfully constructed to elicit insights into the underlying reasons behind the students' reluctance to participate in speaking activities. Given the target demographic of students, the questions were designed to be clear, straightforward, concise and well-organised, ensuring ease of comprehension and response.

I also conducted two interviews with my colleagues to ask about their own experiences and perspectives on the topic. Additionally, I seized the opportunity to observe one of my colleague's lessons, specifically focusing on activities geared towards fostering students' courage and confidence in speaking. This firsthand observation provided valuable insights into effective instructional approaches that promote student engagement and participation in speaking activities.

Findings

In relation to the fluency activities they prefer, the data suggested that 13 learners (out of 22) preferred role plays; one student articulated this preference by stating 'I like taking part in role-plays because I feel more confident'. Six students enjoyed giving personal information and only two preferred making presentations. However, reflective notes indicated that making presentations was the most challenging for learners due to shyness while speaking in front of a large audience. In my journal, I wrote, 'I have noticed that my students are somewhat tense and apprehensive while making presentations in front of the class'. One student confirmed this by saying, 'I feel a little bit shy when I stand in front of my class and make a presentation, as I am not confident about whether I use my words correctly'.

The student questionnaires also revealed a predominant sentiment of shyness among the majority of students when faced with speaking in front of the entire class. Furthermore, it emerged that many students encountered challenges, particularly in engaging in debates, preferring instead to utilise newly acquired vocabulary in written form. Debates were also challenging due to vocabulary limitations, as learners found it difficult to generate arguments in English.

Regarding the practice of new vocabulary, 13 learners (out of 22) preferred using target vocabulary in writing, five used it in speaking, and five used it when giving personal information, as indicated by the questionnaire and reflective notes. My journal data confirmed this since I noted that learners used new words in writing without any hesitation, 'During writing tasks, I noticed my students use new vocabulary as they do not feel shy'. Despite being comfortable with using target vocabulary in writing, learners found it challenging to incorporate new words into spoken language. While some used new words when speaking or giving personal information, the majority still preferred to utilise the target language in writing. Additionally, most learners used target vocabulary while communicating with foreign friends, primarily in written forms and incorporating it into spoken language.

During interviews, most of my colleagues reported using role-play as a fluency activity, believing it engaged learners more effectively. One colleague mentioned, 'I noticed that they find role-play more entertaining'. A few of them used story-telling, as they thought students could create stories that helped them use new vocabulary. One noted: 'Pictures give them more motivation, and they use words without any hesitation'. Additionally, one of them used personalisation as a fluency activity. She said: 'My students feel free when they speak about themselves.'

To sum up my findings, I can conclude that despite using various speaking activities in my classroom, my students lacked self-confidence, which stemmed from their shyness. They appeared to need more support and resources to build their courage when speaking in front of the class.

Action Plans

Based on the findings, it appears that the students' hesitance to engage in speaking activities isn't primarily due to a lack of vocabulary, as initially presumed, given their proficiency in written tasks. Rather, it seems to be related to difficulties when attempting fluency exercises, as well as their shyness and insecurity, indicating a need for more practice and support. They can also benefit from a wider variety of speaking activities.

To address these issues, I will diversify the classroom activities I implement in the classroom with fluency exercises such as presentations, debates, discussions, and dialogues. By offering a wide range of speaking tasks, I aim to build their confidence and improve their oral communication skills. Furthermore, providing personalised assistance and encouragement will foster their progress in this area.



Final reflections

Thanks to this exploratory research I have gained valuable knowledge about my teaching practice and my students' learning. I have learned about my students' difficulties and understood the reasons for their challenges during oral tasks. Moreover, I have recognised that the heterogeneous nature of the class, with students of varying abilities, necessitates an individualised approach and increased support to bolster their speaking skills.

Through this research, students have been empowered to identify their own strengths and weaknesses in speaking activities, enabling them to make informed judgments about their learning and take proactive steps to enhance their performance, knowledge and skills.

Additionally, I had the opportunity to implement my action plan this year. It has had good results. I yielded significant progress in my students' fluency skills. Most of them are willing to engage in fluency activities during the lesson. So, their progress is visible due to my timely reaction to their difficulties. Yet, there are still some students who show reluctance but I am considering to keep on working with them to solve this problem.

To sum up, this experience taught me how significant it is to learn about learners' problems, how to react to them and how to find solutions. Therefore, I am planning to use the research process in my teaching to make my students' learning process more effective.



The author

'This experience taught me how significant it is to learn about learners' problems, how to react to them and how to find solutions.'

I am Nino Sturua, an English mentor teacher. I hold a bachelor's and a master's degree in English philology, and a doctoral degree (PhD) in Philology. I am a Cambridge TKT and Cambridge CELTA certified teacher. I have experience teaching English to all ages, from primary to adult levels. I am an enthusiastic, dedicated, and determined teacher, always ready to improve in my field. My favourite quote 'If you hear a voice within you say you cannot paint, then by all means paint, and that voice will be silenced' by Vincent van Gogh, has become the motto of my life.

Exploring listening skills in pre-intermediate students

Lela Tsagareishvili

EAR, British Council Georgia

Research topic: What are some ways to improve the listening skills among the pre-intermediate level students, using visuals (multimedia) together with the auditory resources?

Why?	My EQs	Answers	Conclusion
<p>The main reason why I chose this topic was the fact that the vast majority of my 9 grade students were experiencing difficulties when doing listening tasks at school, or when listening to a native, fluent speaker. Sometimes it was very hard for me to make them interested or engaged.</p>	<p>1. What strategies do I use when my students fail in understanding listening?</p> <p>2. How do my learners feel when they face difficulties while doing a listening task?</p> <p>3. How do my learners feel about listening to a fluent speaker?</p> <p>My data tools: Questionnaire Focus group Reflective journal</p>	<p>I use a variety of strategies to help the students understand listening better</p> <p>Learners feel nervous when facing difficulties in a listening tasks, due to lack of vocabulary and fast speed of the recording</p> <p>Learners have mixed feelings when listening to fluent speakers, mostly feeling nervous. The main difficulty reported by learners is the speed and vocabulary</p>	<p>My learners experience problems with listening tasks because they need to feel less nervous when they fail in a listening task</p> <p>CHANGE: I need to find audio content that matches my learners' interests and strengths, discuss listening task options and create engaging listening task</p>

Lela works with students from diverse backgrounds in southwest Georgia. Since she identified her learners were experiencing challenges during listening tasks, she decided to investigate this matter further. From her findings, she realised the importance of providing supporting mechanisms to avoid students' frustration when doing listening tasks and boost their confidence.

Teaching context

I have been working at Akhaltsikhe Public School No.5 as an English teacher since 1999. This school is in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region in Georgia, and it is one of the biggest schools in the region with more than 1,500 students from grade one to grade 12. Students in this school come from different origins, social, religious and cultural backgrounds.



Akhaltsikhe Public School No.5

Research focus

There were several reasons why I decided to focus on listening skills. First, listening was one of the most challenging skills for my students, due to lack of communication with native speakers. Second, most of my learners tended to catch the main idea of the listening task better than listening for specific information, which was problematic. Third, most of the learners lost interest in listening to audio when they failed to understand. Finally, learners often felt nervous and embarrassed when doing a listening task.

This is why, from the beginning, I identified what I wanted to learn more about it. So, I came up with my exploratory questions.

1. What strategies do I use when my students fail to understand listening?
2. How do my learners feel when they face difficulties while doing a listening task?
3. How do my learners feel about listening to a fluent speaker?

To answer these questions, I decided to conduct a focus group, keep a reflective journal, and apply a questionnaire.

I created a questionnaire and asked all my eighth-grade students to fill it in anonymously so that they could feel free to state any opinion without fear of being embarrassed or judged by anybody. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions in English, but the students were explained the questions in advance, and in case of any difficulties they could use their native language to answer them.

My colleagues carried out the focus group because I wanted to allow my students to speak freely without my presence so they would not be limited to expressing their ideas for fear of 'upsetting the teacher'. 12 students (five boys and seven girls) participated in the focus group. They volunteered to participate and were chosen according to their level of English to have a representative from different levels (four high-level students, four middle and four low-level students). The focus group was carried out in Georgian to make students feel more comfortable and safer. The 11 questions were designed to address the exploratory questions. They focused on the students' perceptions of how the English class activities were planned and how they felt while participating in listening activities.

Additionally, I kept a reflective journal where I asked myself questions about my actions in case of my students' failure when doing listening tasks, about the quality and complexity of the listening materials I provided to my students, and the background knowledge and interests of my students.

Findings

In relation to the strategies I use when my students fail to understand listening, the data suggests that I used a variety of strategies to help students listen better, for example in the focus group students said that I provided them with pre-, while and post-listening activities to make the listening task easier to understand. In the questionnaire, half of the students (ten) mentioned that the teacher did pre-teaching of vocabulary and prediction activities to make the task easier to understand.

One of the students stated: 'I can understand the task better when I know the context and general idea of it beforehand.' I noted in the journal that I also 'use a lot of strategies to check the strengths and/or the weaknesses of a listening task; 'two stars and a wish' activity, exit tickets, assessment rubrics, etc.' Additionally, I encouraged the students to make notes while listening, though not all of them made notes during each listening task; 'It is hard to take notes while also keeping up with the listening task,' mentioned one learner. Furthermore, data from the reflective journal suggested that I did not always consider my learners' interests when choosing a recording which may have hindered their desire to engage in listening activities.

According to the questionnaire, 12 out of 20 learners felt nervous and embarrassed when doing a listening task, due to a lack of appropriate vocabulary and fast speed of the recording. Four mentioned difficulties with pronunciation, as there was a difference between the textbook audios and authentic audios. The school textbook audios tended to be easier to understand due to their slower pace and easier vocabulary, but authentic audio materials were more advanced and did not contain familiar words or phrases. Also, eight learners identified filling the gaps as the most challenging task, while four mentioned multiple choice, two mentioned ordering the sequence and three pairing words and phrases, 'Sometimes multiple-choice answers are very similar and confusing' reported one of the students. However, students reported on ways their challenges when listening could be addressed. A few learners suggested using the transcript of the audio material, especially when listening for the first time. During the focus group, one of the students stated: 'Reading and listening at the same time would make it easier'. Students also mentioned that they preferred doing listening tasks at home where they could stop and pause the recording as many times as they wanted, to understand better and not to feel embarrassed when they were not as quick as others.

Finally, the findings suggested that learners have mixed feelings when listening to fluent speakers, with half of them (ten) feeling nervous, eight motivated and two confused. I noted that my learners were more motivated when they listened to a speaker they knew (a famous singer, actor, or celebrity). The main difficulty reported by learners

was coping with the speed and vocabulary of native speakers. Most learners (13) indicated the main difficulty they had when listening to a native speaker was rapid speech and lack of vocabulary. Four mentioned difficulties with pronunciation and two mentioned the differences between British English and American English: 'Sometimes it is hard to understand the British accent because they might use different words or stress for the same things or words in English than Americans do,' stated one of my students. In many cases, my students preferred to rely on some external features - like images, or existing knowledge about the person/people or images they were listening to or about, to connect their background knowledge with the new learning material. Among the strategies they employed to understand the audios, 15 said they paid attention to the words previously taught by the teacher before the listening task, 12 admitted that they used some tips to help themselves understand the main idea of the audio (such as relying on familiar words and expressions), ten tried to guess from the context, six of them paid attention to the intonation and pace, and four took notes when listening.



In conclusion, the findings suggest that students lost interest in listening to audio when they failed to understand. The pace and pronunciation played a big role in their frustration, thus students reported that the transcript of the listening activity would be helpful. Findings also showed that learners liked it when the teacher provided them with pre-, during- and post-listening activities to make the listening task easier to understand.

Proposed action plan

According to the results, I propose an action plan that includes using different strategies to help my students feel less nervous and embarrassed when failing a listening task. For instance, we can watch educational movies showing the same problems with students from different countries so that my students realise they are not an exception. Also, I will let my students listen to audios at a more comfortable pace and speed for them. Also, doing various simple short listening activities daily will help my learners train their ears in a safe environment, where errors are a part of their daily routine.

Final reflections

I had always believed that conducting research was an auxiliary practice for higher education institutions and universities and doing anything like that at school would be too challenging and less valuable. Research is often seen as an academic activity conducted by managers and/or policymakers and is not a concept respected by practitioners. Now, I believe that educators who are involved or conduct research themselves, are learning, exploring, analysing information, adapting their practice based on their research findings, and looking for improvement.

I plan to continue researching the needs of my students and my school, to develop new knowledge that is both of high quality and reliable to foster the innovation of services that meet existing needs.



The author

'I had always believed that conducting research was an auxiliary practice for higher education institutions and universities [...] Now I believe that educators who are involved or conduct the research themselves are learning, exploring, analysing information, adapting their practice based on their research findings and looking for improvement.'

My name is Lela Tsagareishvili. I am from the Samtskhe-Javakheti region in Georgia, from the city of Akhaltsikhe. As an English teacher, I often teach students from first to 12th grade, which gives me an opportunity to watch their growth and personal development and makes me not only a teacher for my students, but also their companion and friend, and I love this aspect of my profession. In 2022 I obtained the status of a mentoring teacher, which was the result of my challenging work as a teacher, as a colleague and as a person seeking new endeavours. I have participated in many national and international conferences, study visits and training opportunities, such as the TEA programme (Fulbright Teaching Excellence and Achievement Program at George Mason University, organised by the US Embassy in Georgia) and a teachers' refreshment course in London. I worked as a teacher trainer and trainers' trainer for different programmes for the British Council and the American Embassy in Georgia. I believe that teachers can make a change and therefore I consider my profession as one of the most important to change the world.

Improving writing skills in English through formal and informal letters

Khatuna Kharkheli

IMPROVING WRITING SKILLS IN ENGLISH THROUGH FORMAL AND INFORMAL LETTER

Research Questions

1. How much time do I spend practicing writing in class?
2. What difficulties do my students face when writing letters in English?
3. What kind of letters do my students prefer writing, formal or informal?

Methods:

- Questionnaire
- Focus group
- Observation

Findings

- The time my learners spend practicing writing skills appears to be insufficient for them.
- Students need extra activities to improve their writing skills.
- Spelling and vocabulary are the main challenges, while some struggle with grammar and idea generation.

Action plan

- Spend more time on practicing writing skills; Independent Writing, Peer Review and Teacher Feedback
- Give mini-Lessons, i.e. differences between formal and informal letters
- Guided Practice with group activity of writing a letter.

Concerned about her students' diminished letter-writing skills, Khatuna decided to know and analyse their preferences and the challenges they faced. She found the main difficulties to be spelling, grammar and idea generation; and learnt that enhanced practice time, focused grammar and vocabulary lessons, and collaborative writing activities could significantly improve her students' writing skills.

Teaching context

I work at the Gori Municipality Village Sveneti Vasil Ganjelashvili Public School as a school principal and English language teacher. There are about 200 students at school and I teach 14-17 years old students. Students have been learning English as a second language since first grade. My students are

smart, hard-working and have different abilities in the English language. Some of them are good in all four skills but some of them struggle with comprehension and their productive skills. Writing in English is complicated for my students since they have difficulties expressing their ideas in English.



Gori Municipality Village Sveneti Vasil Ganjelashvili Public School

Research focus

This research is about improving writing skills in formal and informal letters. Writing is one of the most important skills English as a second language learners must master, particularly for students and working professionals. It is also an important channel of communication between people who are geographically distant from one another. Besides this, practising letter writing can improve general writing skills and language awareness.

I noticed in my almost decade-long experience as an English language teacher that students make mistakes in spelling, grammar and expressing ideas in English in both kinds of letters: formal and informal. To explore this issue further, I came up with the following exploratory research questions:

- How much time do I spend practising writing in class?
- What difficulties do my students face when writing letters in English?
- What kind of letters do my students prefer writing, formal or informal?

To collect the data, I used a questionnaire, focus group and observation. For students' questionnaires, I designed 13 questions to learn about their feelings and motivation about writing and get their suggestions on how to improve their writing skills in classes. The pupils were very open about answering the questions and put forward different suggestions on ways they could improve their writing and ways I could support them.

Four focus groups were conducted with about 30 students to know their feelings about writing in general and about the difficulties they encounter when writing formal and informal letters. I also asked students about the writing activities that they engage in and the supportive strategies provided during writing activities. Finally, I carried out lesson observations. My colleagues observed my writing lessons three times to give me feedback

about my writing tasks. During the observation, I asked questions about why students encounter issues during writing, if their teacher assists students during writing activities and what kind of support materials are provided. Moreover, the questions were about the activities implemented in preparation for the writing stage and the type of feedback provided.



Findings

Results from all the data collected were analysed the following key findings:

Class time spent on writing practice was 15–20 minutes twice a week. As for the students, 21 out of 30 said they spent about 15 minutes each lesson practising writing. A significant majority of students (25) believed the time allocated was insufficient for mastering writing in a foreign language, emphasising the need for more extensive practice, especially with vocabulary for letter writing. One of my colleagues observing the lesson considered that students needed more time to practise the vocabulary needed for writing letters. She thought more time was needed for general writing practice as well, because of its difficulty in developing.

The difficulties students faced in writing English letters included spelling and vocabulary issues, as noted by both teachers and students. One observer wrote, 'The main difficulty they face when writing letters in English is spelling.' This was confirmed by students since in the focus group, almost all of them revealed spelling was challenging for them. Teachers also observed challenges in vocabulary, expressing ideas and grammar, as well as struggles with identifying formal/informal language and generating ideas as noted by one observer. 23 students (out of 30) indicated they couldn't identify which vocabulary was formal and which was for informal writing while five of them expressed they didn't know what ideas to write in the letters. Additionally, in the focus group, students said they were motivated to know more about letters but added that they needed more practice.

Based on the questionnaire, 18 students (out of 30) preferred writing informal letters because they used them to communicate with their foreign friends in English. Another group of students valued formal letters for professional contexts. Still, students acknowledged the importance of both styles. In the focus group, they argued that they liked to learn informal letter writing because it was useful to read and write on social media while another group indicated formal letters were critical to apply for jobs.

Proposed action plan

The findings above indicated that learners can do better in writing tasks when they practise often. The time my learners spent on practising writing skills appeared to be insufficient for them. As a result, I found out that they need extra activities to improve their writing skills. Spelling and vocabulary are the main challenges, while some struggle with grammar and idea generation. Furthermore, my students could not identify formal and informal letters, vocabulary and the phrases used in each type.

Therefore, I proposed an action plan that included different writing strategies, to develop writing skills, focus on grammar and vocabulary, and give students more opportunities to practise. Furthermore, I will conduct mini lessons on how to teach writing formal and informal letters. Additionally, practising in groups will be beneficial as well as using templates. Finally, I will encourage students to peer check and peer review what they write.

Final reflections

Engaging in this research helped me gain a better understanding of my classroom needs, dynamics, teaching methods and strategies. It helped me to identify the kind of difficulties and challenges my students have during the writing task.

I intend to continue putting into practice my action plan due to its desired outcomes. Overall, learning about exploratory action research has been beneficial for my professional growth and development as an English teacher and school principal.



The author

'Learning about exploratory action research has been beneficial for my professional growth and development as an English teacher and school principal.'

I am a school principal and also teach English as a second language at Gori Municipality Village Sveneti Vasil Ganjelashvili Public School. I also give lectures at Gori State University. I have an MA degree in Philology (English Language and Literature) and a PhD in English Language Teaching Methodology. I have been working as a facilitator in the British Council Online Teaching Community (OTC) since 2022. I have recently finished the online teachers' qualification programme OPEN by the American Embassy. I have conducted local and international projects implemented by the Georgian National Teacher Professional Development Center on the eTwinning-European School Education platform. This project is an initiative of the European Commission that aims to encourage European schools to collaborate using information and communication technology in a meaningful way. I have also participated in local and International conferences.



