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# FROM THE EDITORS

## Barry Tomalin and Ridha Mejri

We are delighted to welcome you to the autumn 2026 issue of our ICC Journal. – Once again, we are really pleased to present articles and practical ideas to support your in-class teaching and research.

First of all, in her EUROLTA Update, Tatjana Kovac reports on the first EUROLTA teacher training programme for German language teachers in Pakistan, delivered online by ICC and Flying Teachers. She shares participants' reflections on what they learned and outlines the next steps, including a second cohort and a programme for future EUROLTA trainers in Pakistan planned for 2027.

In the first of our four keynote articles, which cover a variety of teaching and assessment skills, Marcela Cecilia Danowski (Keynote Article 1) introduces hexagonal thinking and applies it to ELT at primary, secondary and tertiary level. Learners arrange hexagonal cards with words, concepts or images so that touching edges show connections between ideas, and then explain and justify these connections. The article also shows how the activity can be used for formative assessment and for assessing individual understanding fairly.

Sondes Gharbi follows up in Keynote Article 2 with a report on her IATEFL 2026 workshop, showing how AI can support speaking, argumentation and critical thinking. She uses AI in two ways: as a rehearsal partner when learners prepare their arguments and as a debate opponent. This is an important discussion of a technology whose use in language learning is likely to become more and more frequent.

One of the key reasons why languages are in such demand is migration. Adults who settle in a new country need to communicate in everyday life, at work and in their new community, and many countries now require evidence of language proficiency for residence or citizenship. But how can this be tested fairly? In Keynote Article 3, Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt uses the Swiss *fide* test as an example. The test assesses French, Italian or German for residence, permanent residence and naturalisation. She shows how test providers and language educators can make language tests accessible to all test takers, including people with limited literacy or little formal schooling.

In Keynote Article 4, Martin Cooke describes how he used video-recorded interviews with students to design an online course (MOOC) on cross-cultural communication at a university in Taiwan. The interviews were conducted with Taiwanese students who had studied or worked abroad and with international students living in Taiwan. They reveal the challenges these students met and how they adapted.

Once again, as in previous issues, we are delighted to welcome Nick Michelioudakis´ Teaching Tips, a series of activities (two per issue) that focus not just on teaching techniques but also on the attitudes of teachers and students that lead to better

results. The tips in this issue are (1) “Taking Teaching to New Heights”, which uses the difference between service and hospitality to show how teachers can engage with their students as individuals, and (2) “What Do You Value Most?”, an activity in which students say how they would like others to value them, which brings personal experience, emotions and values into the language classroom.

Finally, two book reviews. The first, Michael Carrier’s ‘*100 Latin words that Shaped English’,* is a valuable book that helps teachers understand the origin, use and meaning of words that came from Latin and were absorbed into English. This is a practical and especially useful reference for teachers working with business and other professional documents as well as general English. Remember that the meaning of a Latin word or phrase in English may be understood differently in another language.

Ken Wilson’s new novel, *King and Country,* is an entertaining and really interesting spy story set in 1938, just before the outbreak of the Second World War. Why read it? Ken, a leading ELT teacher and trainer, who also led the famous English Teaching Theatre, which taught English through brilliant dramatic sketches, has used his skills in retirement to become a novelist. As we get older and have to think about retirement, how can we adapt our experience to new fields? Ken’s novel is a great stimulus.

If you’ve read books you’d like to share, please feel free to review them and send them to us for publication. We are always delighted to hear from you, and if you have research or activities you would like to see published, please send them to Ridha and me. Your ideas and experiences are vital to our ICC Journal.

Remember that our focus is always on the practical experience of learning and teaching different languages and intercultural differences. Feel free to send your research articles or teaching practice experiences to Barry Tomalin at barrytomalin@aol.com or Ridha Mejri at mejri@hs-worms.de and we’ll be delighted to read them and consider them for publication.

Many thanks to all our contributors. We look forward to our next issue, and we hope you do too.

Till next time, our best wishes, Barry and Ridha

# EUROLTA UPDATE

**Tatjana Kovac**

**Director of Studies, St. Nicolas School, 11000 Belgrade**

# EUROLTA in Pakistan: Learning, Reflecting and Growing as Teachers

The first EUROLTA teacher training programme for German language teachers in Pakistan, delivered online over 12 weeks by ICC and Flying Teachers, has been successfully completed.

The programme was delivered as part of the **German Language Teacher Training initiative under the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, Centres for Migration and Development (ZME) / EU Multi-Donor Action Supporting a Talent Partnership with Pakistan**, co-financed by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the European Union (EU). The initiative is implemented in collaboration with relevant public and private sector stakeholders in Pakistan.

As part of ICC's commitment to quality in language teacher education, EUROLTA provides a framework for developing practical teaching skills, encouraging reflection and promoting learner-centred approaches. The programme represents an important step towards strengthening German language teacher development in Pakistan.

## Discovering new perspectives

For Alvina Fatima, the interactive nature of the course exceeded expectations:

*"I thought it would be challenging, but I was pleasantly surprised by how interactive and practical it was. I learned a lot and gained more confidence as a teacher."*

For experienced teacher and trainer Shehla Khan, the experience offered an opportunity to reconsider established practices:

*"EUROLTA encouraged me to question familiar routines and examine the purpose behind every classroom decision."*

Peer teaching, feedback and reflection helped participants reconsider the teacher's role. Memoona Amin captured this shift in perspective:

*"Teaching isn't just about 'transferring knowledge' – it's about creating an atmosphere where students WANT to participate."*

The programme also encouraged personal and professional growth. Ayesha Khan shared:

*“I was very shy but now I can teach and speak with confidence.”*

For Muhammad Ghazanfar Rehman, an important outcome was the ability to design *“more learner-centred, differentiated, communicative, and inclusive language-learning activities.”*

## Lessons to take forward

When asked to sum up their key takeaways, participants highlighted principles that reflect the EUROLTA approach.

Mahnoor Salleem emphasised that *“Planning saves time, Feedback drives growth, Mistakes are part of learning,”* while Afshan Rafique’s guiding principles were: *“Teach with Purpose, Reflect to Grow, Be authentic and learner-centred.”*

These reflections illustrate the value of EUROLTA beyond the acquisition of teaching techniques. By encouraging teachers to reflect on their practice, learn from feedback and respond to learners’ needs, the programme contributes to a culture of continuous professional development.

Building on the successful completion of the first cohort, a second group of German language teachers is currently undertaking EUROLTA training in Batch 2. Looking ahead, ICC and its partners are planning a training programme for future EUROLTA trainers in Pakistan in 2027. These next steps aim to support the continued development of local training capacity and contribute to the long-term quality and sustainability of German language teacher education in the country.

# KEYNOTE ARTICLE 1
## Hexagonal Thinking in ELT
## *Connecting Ideas and Assessing Understanding from Primary to Tertiary Education*

**Marcela Cecilia Danowski**

marceladanowski@gmail.com

### Making connections worth discussing

Imagine a group of learners placing “friendship” next to “listening”. Another learner moves “courage” alongside them and explains that listening sometimes means hearing something we would rather avoid. A fourth learner asks whether courage belongs closer to “speaking up”. The cards move, but it is the discussion that does the real work: learners are interpreting ideas, considering alternatives and finding language to explain their decisions.

Hexagonal thinking offers a practical structure for this kind of conversation. In ELT, it can bring together vocabulary, subject knowledge and purposeful language use. It can also help teachers assess understanding, provided that the arrangement is accompanied by explanations and that the evidence gathered informs feedback or subsequent teaching. This article proposes adaptable activities across educational levels and considers how to assess learners’ thinking without allowing limited English proficiency to obscure it.

### How hexagonal thinking works

Each hexagon contains a word, concept, image or question. Learners arrange the cards so that shared edges represent meaningful relationships. A hexagon can touch up to six others, allowing several relationships to be explored around one idea. Learners explain selected connections and can rearrange the cards as their interpretations develop. Potash (2020) describes this approach as a framework for classroom discussion, with explanations accompanying the visual network.

The teacher needs to establish what “touching” means. Cards should share an edge when learners can explain a relationship relevant to the task. Leaving a card apart is acceptable when no defensible connection has yet been found. A gap can prompt a useful question; filling every available space is unnecessary. If an arrangement creates additional, unintended shared edges, ask learners to check whether those connections also make sense.

Hexagonal thinking therefore differs from a word cloud. A word cloud brings words together visually and may emphasise frequency or prominence-, but it does not usually specify how one idea relates to another. In hexagonal thinking, placement carries a claim that learners must explain. A beautifully arranged network offers little evidence of understanding until we hear or read the reasoning behind it.

**Planning a manageable first activity**

Begin with a learning purpose: perhaps explaining relationships in a story, discussing a school problem or applying an educational concept to a classroom decision. Select six to eight familiar cards for a first attempt. Include terms that invite different kinds of relationship, such as cause and consequence, contrast, example or possible solution. Avoid introducing too many unfamiliar concepts while learners are still becoming familiar with the procedure.

Model two connections and explain why one is more useful for the question being explored. “These both appear in the story” identifies only a superficial relationship, whereas “The character hides the letter because she is afraid of losing her friend” reveals more about motive and consequence. Make it clear that learners can disagree with the model if they can justify an alternative.

A first lesson might take 25 minutes: three minutes to introduce the question and model the process, two minutes for individual thinking, eight minutes for group discussion, six minutes to compare and revise networks, and six minutes for individual explanations. These timings are starting points. Younger learners or groups unfamiliar with collaborative discussion may need a shorter deck and more time.

Groups of three or four allow several voices to be heard without making turn-taking too difficult. Before moving a card, learners can propose a connection and invite a response. Offer phrases such as “These connect because…”, “Can you explain that?”, “I see a different connection…” and “Could we move this next to…?” Each learner should have time to think before the group starts negotiating.

**Primary learners exploring a kinder classroom**

For primary learners, use the question “How can we make our classroom a kinder place?” Prepare six illustrated hexagons: “listening”, “sharing”, “helping”, “taking turns”, “feelings” and “friendship”. Check that children understand the pictures and vocabulary before beginning. Ask pairs or small groups to connect two cards, explain their choice and gradually add others.

A possible explanation is “Helping connects to friendship because friends help each other.” The teacher can extend the thinking with “Can you give an example?” A child might describe helping someone find a pencil or inviting a classmate into a game. Another group may connect “feelings” and “listening” because listening helps us

understand how someone feels. These are possible responses, rather than answers that every group must reproduce.

Add a situation card: “Someone is left out of a game.” Ask learners where it belongs and what the class could do. This shifts the discussion from naming kind actions to applying them. To close, each child chooses one connection and completes “These connect because…” orally, in writing or through a short recorded explanation.

For beginners, accept a short phrase accompanied by pointing or drawing while helping the learner build an English sentence. Where appropriate, a brief explanation in a shared language can clarify the idea before it is expressed in English. Record separately what the learner understands and what language support is needed. A learner’s understanding should not be judged solely by the length of their English response.

**Secondary learners examining a school problem**

At secondary level, hexagonal thinking can support a sustainability task built around the question “How could our school reduce single-use plastic?” Offer cards such as “bottled water”, “refill stations”, “cost”, “access”, “school rules”, “habits”, “waste” and “responsibility”. Give learners a short information sheet or data from a class waste audit so that the discussion has evidence to draw on.

A group might connect “refill stations” and “waste”, arguing that refilling bottles could reduce discarded containers. Connecting “access” and “cost” may reveal a complication: an option that seems simple could be difficult for some students to use. Ask learners to distinguish information in the source from assumptions they would need to investigate. A plausible connection is not automatically an established fact.

Each group selects three connections to explain, including one that complicates its preferred solution. After comparing networks, learners revise a connection and write a short recommendation to the school, using the network to organise their argument. Useful language includes “This could reduce…”, “According to our data…” and “However, this would depend on…”. The final recommendation gives the earlier discussion a communicative purpose.

**Student teachers linking theory and decisions**

In tertiary education, particularly teacher education, use the question “What might help learners participate meaningfully in this lesson?” A deck could include “scaffolding”, “autonomy”, “formative assessment”, “feedback”, “cognitive challenge”, “interaction” and “participation”. Add a scenario: a class completes a discussion task, but two confident students make most of the decisions while others copy the final answers.

Ask student teachers to connect concepts to the scenario and propose a teaching response. Connecting “scaffolding” and “participation” might lead to individual planning

time or sentence starters. Connecting “autonomy” and “challenge” could prompt discussion of choices that remain intellectually demanding. Student teachers should explain how their proposed action addresses the scenario and refer to relevant course readings.

Then introduce a condition: “The teacher has only ten minutes remaining.” Ask groups to reconsider their response and explain a change. This makes it harder to rely on broad statements such as “feedback is important”. Groups need to specify who receives feedback, what it concerns and how it could be used within the available time. An individual commentary on two connections and one revision can provide evidence of each student teacher’s judgement.

**Using the discussion for formative assessment**

Black and Wiliam (2009) place the use of evidence to inform subsequent instructional decisions at the centre of formative assessment. Applied to hexagonal thinking, this means that observing a network is not enough: the explanations must help determine what happens next. A connection may reveal a misconception, an incomplete explanation or a need for language support.

During group work, note a small number of significant examples. If learners connect “recycling” and “reducing waste” as though they mean exactly the same thing, ask them to compare preventing waste with processing materials after use. Offer a concrete example, then invite them to revise their explanation. If the idea is sound but the learner lacks a suitable connector, model the relevant language and ask for another attempt.

Peer feedback can also focus on reasoning. Ask a visiting group, for example during a gallery walk, to identify one convincing connection and to pose one question about a connection that needs clarification. Learners then decide whether to keep, qualify or change it. A brief exit response, such as “One connection I changed was… because…”, lets the teacher check what the discussion has helped each learner reconsider.

**Assessing individual understanding fairly**

For an assessed task, share the criteria before learners begin and base judgements on evidence that can be attributed to individuals. A group network is a useful starting point, but it cannot establish that every member understands every connection. Ask each learner to explain two selected connections and respond to a follow-up question or a new card. Oral and written options can be offered when the intended learning outcome allows for this.

The three-level rubric in Table 1 is a starting point for assessing individual explanations. Adapt the expectations to learners’ age, English proficiency and the

content taught. The examples or evidence expected from a primary learner will differ from those expected in teacher education.

**Table 1. Rubric for assessing individual explanations**

| Criterion | Secure | Developing | Needs support |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Conceptual understanding** | Uses the selected concepts accurately. | Shows partial understanding with some imprecision. | Shows a misconception or cannot yet explain a concept. |
| **Relevance of connections** | Explains a clear relationship relevant to the task. | Identifies a plausible relationship but explains it only partly. | Gives an unclear or unsupported relationship. |
| **Examples and evidence** | Supports the explanation with a relevant example or source. | Offers an example or source but does not clearly link it to the claim. | Provides no relevant support yet. |
| **Language use** | Communicates the relationship clearly using language appropriate to the agreed level. | Meaning is generally clear, with gaps that require clarification. | Language gaps make the relationship difficult to understand without substantial support. |

Keep the language judgement separate from the content judgement, and make any weighting explicit. When the outcome is conceptual understanding, grammatical errors that do not obscure meaning should not outweigh evidence of sound reasoning. When accurate use of a particular language feature is also an outcome, state that expectation and assess it explicitly. Avoid rewarding the largest network, the neatest handwriting or the most confident speaker.

### Keeping the task accessible and purposeful

Manipulating small cards, reading many terms and negotiating several relationships at once can create barriers. Offer large cards, high-contrast text and a short initial deck. Provide pre-cut cards or allow a partner to move them at the learner’s direction. A digital version may suit some learners, while others may work more comfortably with paper. Neither format is inherently accessible to everyone.

Keep the key vocabulary visible and provide a simple sequence of instructions. Learners can first plan or rehearse an explanation privately and then contribute to the group. Avoid assigning one student the speaking role for the whole activity. Rotate responsibilities and allow contributions through questions, written notes and directed placement as well as speech.

## Conclusion

Hexagonal thinking offers teachers a structured way to invite relationships, explanations and revision. Its value depends on the question, the cards, the support provided and the response to learners' ideas. Start with a small deck and listen closely to one connection. That explanation can tell us where understanding is developing and what the learner needs next.

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## About the author

Marcela Cecilia Danowski is an English language teacher, teacher educator and English department coordinator based in Argentina. She has more than twenty years of experience across educational levels. Her work focuses on thinking skills, meaningful participation and inclusive classroom practices.

# KEYNOTE ARTICLE 2
# AI as a Debate Tool and Debater: Supporting Speaking, Argumentation, and Critical Thinking

**Sondes Gharbi**

*EDreframe – Education Consultancy* [www.edreframe.com](http://www.edreframe.com)

AI has rapidly become part of many language classrooms. Much of the discussion around AI focuses on writing tasks, plagiarism concerns, or the quality of AI-generated language. One question frequently raised by teachers is how to maintain meaningful communication, argumentation, and critical thinking when learners can generate ideas with AI. The activities described here were designed to address this issue.

In my IATEFL 2026 workshop, participants were invited to put themselves in the shoes of B1 learners while completing two speaking activities, before returning to their roles as teachers for the reflection stage. I explored two ways in which AI can be integrated into speaking lessons: as a rehearsal partner and as a debate opponent. The purpose was not to demonstrate a new tool, but to show how task design can influence the way learners interact with AI and with each other.

The workshop began by introducing a simple argument structure consisting of a thesis statement, a supporting idea, and an example. This structure provided a clear framework for learners to organise their thoughts and communicate more effectively. In speaking activities, learners often struggle not because they lack ideas, but because they find it difficult to organise and express them under time pressure. A simple structure may help learners manage the demands of organising their arguments while maintaining the communicative challenge.

One consideration behind the design was that teenagers often have limited *background knowledge* of unfamiliar topics. AI can help broaden the range of ideas available to learners, potentially strengthening the quality of their arguments. Another consideration was *digital literacy*: the prompts demonstrated during the workshop modelled ways in which learners could interact with AI independently, such as requesting language appropriate to their level or asking for explanations of unfamiliar vocabulary (e.g. “I’m a B1 student; use language appropriate to my level”, or “Please explain new words for a B1 learner”). During the debate, learners were expected not only to use selected vocabulary items but also to explain them to their partners when necessary. Participants were encouraged to consider how such prompts might support *learner autonomy* both inside and outside the classroom (Holec, 1981).

## AI as a rehearsal partner

Participants selected a debate topic and used an AI platform of their choice to help them prepare two short arguments. The prompt required the AI to provide simple language, a supporting reason, and an example. Participants then asked the AI to challenge their ideas through written questions. Rather than reading out the AI's responses, they rehearsed their arguments aloud. The goal was to use AI as a *scaffold* for preparation (Wood et al., 1976) while ensuring that speaking remained the responsibility of the learner.

Although AI supported preparation, participants were required to put their devices away during the debate and communicate independently. The task therefore required participants to process information, make decisions, and respond orally. In this sense, AI acted as a coach rather than a replacement for communication.

## AI as a debate opponent

Participants first brainstormed arguments on a controversial topic in pairs, without AI support. They then debated against an AI tool of their choice, using its voice-input function to deliver their arguments orally while receiving written responses. This design choice slowed down the interaction and provided learners with additional processing time. Instead of focusing on speed, participants were encouraged to focus on the quality of their reasoning and the clarity of their communication.

## Reflection stage

During this stage, participants discussed the communicative and cognitive demands of both activities. They considered what support the AI provided, what challenges it created, and how the tasks could be adapted for different proficiency levels. They also explored how similar activities could be integrated into their own teaching contexts.

While many participants valued AI's ability to generate ideas and challenge arguments, some expressed concern that learners might rely on AI-generated positions rather than develop their own. This discussion reinforced a key message of the workshop: AI does not automatically promote critical thinking. Task design plays a central role in determining whether learners evaluate AI-generated ideas, adapt them, or simply reproduce them.

## Conclusion

As AI becomes increasingly common in education, the challenge for teachers is not simply deciding whether learners should use AI. The more important question is how tasks can be designed so that learners continue to think, organise ideas, and communicate effectively. AI may support these processes, but it cannot replace them. Ultimately, the educational value of AI lies less in what the technology can do and more in what the task requires learners to do. **AI is part of the task, not the main aim of the activity**. The teacher's challenge may therefore shift from controlling AI use to designing tasks that make thinking, communication, and decision-making visible.

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- **Conference details** IATEFL 2026 Annual Conference, Brighton, UK - April 2026


## Biography

Sondes Gharbi is the founder of EDreframe, an educational consultancy specialising in curriculum and assessment design, teacher development, and purposeful AI integration. With extensive international experience in English language education, she designs learning experiences that connect classroom learning with real-world challenges. Her work draws on task-based and project-based approaches to help learners develop communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and decision-making capabilities that extend beyond the classroom.

# KEYNOTE ARTICLE 3
# Making Language Tests for Integration and Naturalization Accessible:
# The Case of the Swiss *fide* Test

*Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Head of Test Development and Quality Assurance for the fide test, Secretariat fide, Bern, Switzerland*
*MA in German Studies, Sofia University, Sofia, Bulgaria*
*PhD in Applied Linguistics, University of Pécs, Pécs, Hungary*
*hrisztalina-hrisztova@fide-info.ch*

## Abstract

In language assessment, validity, reliability, and fairness are regarded as the key qualities of language tests. Fairness is understood as maximizing, for all individuals and groups of test takers, the opportunity to demonstrate their standing on the construct that a test is intended to measure. Fairness is particularly crucial for tests used for integration and naturalization purposes, as their outcomes can have far-reaching consequences for test takers' civil and human rights.

Antony John Kunnan's *Test Fairness Framework* (2004) conceptualizes fairness in terms of the entire testing system rather than the test alone. Within this framework, Kunnan identifies accessibility as one of several dimensions of fairness. This involves considering whether tests are accessible to test takers from various perspectives, including geographical location, socioeconomic status, educational background and literacy level, individual characteristics and special requirements, as well as familiarity with test procedures, conditions, and equipment.

Drawing on Kunnan's notion of accessibility, this paper outlines opportunities for test providers and language educators to make language assessments as accessible as possible for all test takers, ensuring that they are not hindered by external circumstances or by limitations in skills and abilities that are not the focus of the assessment. It illustrates possible approaches to accessibility and their practical implementation through the Swiss *fide* test, a high-stakes language test for migrants who must provide evidence of their proficiency in one of three of Switzerland's national languages (French, Italian, or German) for purposes of residence, permanent residence, or naturalization.

**Keywords:** test fairness, test accessibility, language tests for integration and naturalization, *fide* test, Switzerland

## Key Qualities of Language Tests

In the field of language assessment, validity, reliability, and fairness are widely regarded as the key qualities of language tests.

A language test is considered valid if it "measures what it is intended to measure" (ALTE 2026: 18). In other words, a test is valid if the scores achieved by test takers allow different groups of stakeholders and users to draw plausible conclusions about the abilities the test is intended to assess (see also ALTE 2020: 17). For instance, the scores achieved on a language test should allow plausible conclusions to be drawn about a test taker's language and communicative skills rather than about their knowledge of the history, culture, or geography of the target country.

Reliability refers to consistency. A test with reliable scores produces the same or similar results when administered repeatedly (ALTE 2026: 22). A reliable test ranks test takers in nearly the same order each time it is administered. For example, test takers with stronger listening skills should consistently be ranked higher than those with weaker listening skills on the same listening comprehension test.

Fairness, the quality with which this paper is concerned, is understood as maximizing, for all individuals and groups of test takers, the opportunity to demonstrate their level on the construct that a test is intended to measure (AERA, APA, and NCME 2014: 5). Applied to language tests, this means that test takers should be able to demonstrate their actual level of competence in the language skill being assessed (e.g., reading comprehension, listening comprehension, writing, or speaking) without their performance being influenced by factors that are not part of the construct, such as specific factual or world knowledge or extensive prior experience with the topics on which the test items are based.

## Accessibility as a Dimension of Test Fairness

In his *Test Fairness Framework*, Kunnan argues that fairness should be understood in relation to the entire testing system rather than the test alone. In doing so, he identifies several dimensions of fairness: validity, absence of bias, access, administration, and social consequences (see Kunnan 2004: 37). In line with its aim, this paper focuses primarily on the dimension of access.

Access, or accessibility, can best be understood by distinguishing between the knowledge, skills, and abilities that a test is intended to measure and those that are not part of the construct being assessed but are nevertheless required to complete the tasks or test items (AERA, APA, and NCME 2014: 52). For instance, when completing

a reading comprehension task, test takers not only need to understand the text and answer the questions related to it, but they must also be able to see the text clearly enough to read it and to write or type their answers. Visual or motor impairments should not prevent test takers from accessing a language test when these abilities are not part of the construct being assessed.

## Accessibility of Tests for Integration and Naturalization

Accessibility is particularly important for tests used for integration and naturalization purposes. Since the outcomes of such tests can have far-reaching consequences for test takers' human and civil rights, as well as for their private, professional, and educational futures, these tests should be made as fair and accessible as possible for all individuals and groups of test takers (ALTE 2016: 19). This helps ensure that test takers can demonstrate their level of competence on the construct being assessed – or, in this specific case, their level of language proficiency – without being hindered by external circumstances or by limited or lacking knowledge, skills, and abilities that are not part of the construct itself.

It can be argued that this principle applies to all types of tests, including those used in classroom assessment. Both test providers and language educators should strive to enable all test takers to perform to the best of their abilities.

The following sections examine how the notion of accessibility is implemented in the Swiss *fide* test.

## The Swiss *fide* Test

The Swiss *fide* test was commissioned by the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) following the introduction of formal language requirements for immigration, linguistic integration, and naturalization in Switzerland. In 2018, language proficiency requirements became part of Swiss citizenship legislation. As defined in Art. 12 (Criteria for Integration) of the *Federal Act on Swiss Citizenship*, "[s]uccessful integration is demonstrated in particular by: […] being able to communicate in a national language in everyday situations, orally and in writing […]". In addition, Art. 4 (Integration) of the *Federal Act on Foreign Nationals and Integration*, the revised version of which entered into force on 1 January 2019, states that "[f]oreign nationals are required to familiarize themselves with the social conditions and way of life in Switzerland and, in particular, to learn a national language".

In accordance with these legal provisions, SEM defined minimum language proficiency requirements for different groups of migrants and types of residence permits and set them out in a so-called phase model (see Figure 1).

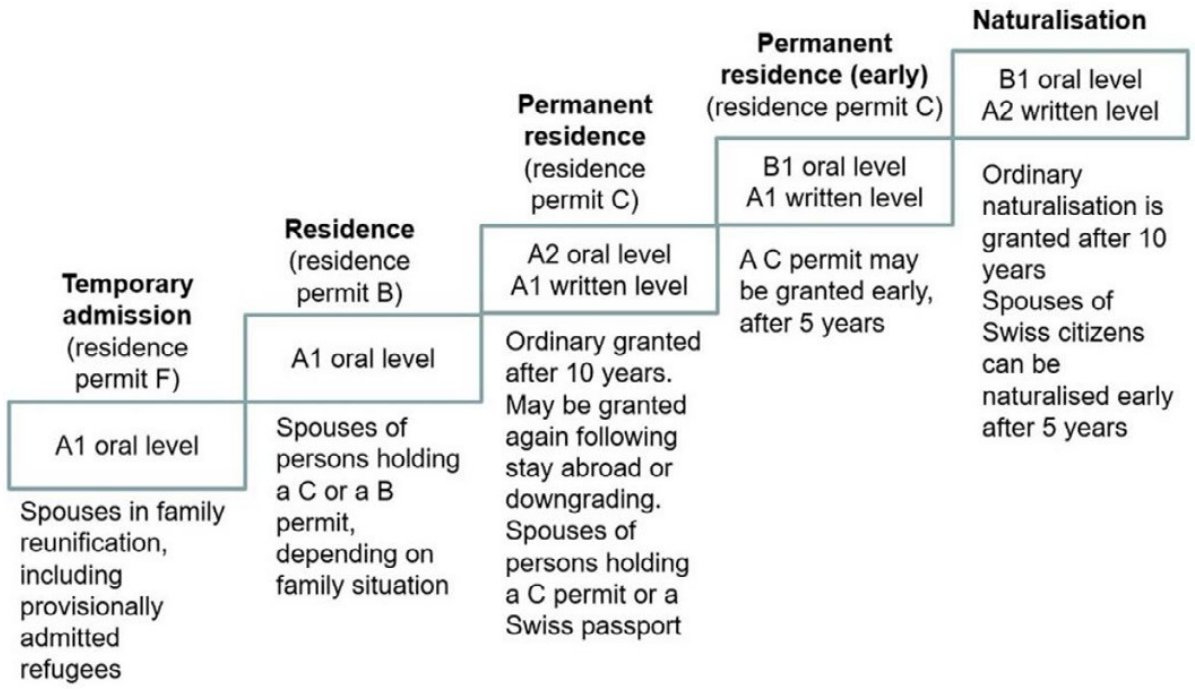



*Figure 1.* Minimum language requirements for residence permits and naturalization in Switzerland

**(source**: https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/en/home/integration-einbuergerung/mein-beitrag/zugewandert/sprache.html; accessed April 7, 2026)

On this basis, the *fide* test was developed as a high-stakes language test for migrants who need to provide evidence of their language skills in one of three of Switzerland's national languages – French, Italian, or German – for residence, permanent residence, or naturalization purposes.[1] When designing the *fide* test, two aspects were particularly important. First, the test had to reflect the communicative needs of the target group and therefore be based on authentic everyday-life situations in Switzerland. Second, it had to be accessible to vulnerable groups, such as candidates who are illiterate, have only limited literacy skills, or have little formal schooling (see SEM 2026: 4–5).

## Accessibility of the *fide* Test

Accessibility, however, is not limited to vulnerable groups; rather, it means that test developers, test providers, and language educators should aim to maximize access to the construct being measured for all test takers. According to Kunnan (2004: 28), various dimensions need to be considered when making a language test accessible. While his framework provides an important foundation, practical experience suggests that additional factors may also be relevant. The following subsections briefly discuss selected accessibility factors and examine how they have been implemented in the *fide* test.

[1]The acronym *fide* stands for "Français, Italiano, Deutsch in der Schweiz".

## 1. Financial Access

“Financial access” refers to whether a test is affordable for test takers. SEM has set the maximum test fee at a level that does not constitute a significant financial barrier for most candidates. As of June 2026, the fee for the full test, including both the oral and the written part, is CHF 250; the oral part alone costs CHF 170 and the written part alone CHF 120.

## 2. Geographical Access

“Geographical access” refers to whether a test site is accessible to test takers in terms of distance. Test sites for the *fide* test are located throughout the country, meaning that test takers generally do not need to travel far to take the test.

As of June 2026, there are 53 active test sites with 59 locations in French-speaking Switzerland, 8 active test sites with 10 locations in Italian-speaking Switzerland, and 61 active test sites with 70 locations in German-speaking Switzerland. As a result, most prospective test takers are likely to find a test site close to where they live.

## 3. Temporal Access

“Temporal access” refers to the availability of test dates. As part of immigration and naturalization procedures, test takers often need to meet specific deadlines. For this reason, the *fide* test is offered continuously rather than only during a limited number of examination periods, allowing candidates to take it at a time that best suits their individual circumstances.

## 4. Educational Access

“Educational access”, according to Kunnan’s framework (2004: 38), refers to whether a test is accessible to test takers in terms of (1) the opportunity to learn the relevant content and (2) the opportunity to become familiar with the task types and their cognitive demands.

Unlike summative classroom assessment, tests for integration and naturalization are not designed to evaluate learning outcomes at the end of a course or learning period. Instead, they assess the extent to which candidates can function effectively in real-life situations in the host country. They should therefore assess the ability to use the target language for authentic communication rather than specific content or strategies trained for the test.

In the *fide* test, each task is embedded in a communicative situation and represents a specific step in a real-life scenario in Switzerland, such as making a doctor’s appointment, buying a train ticket, or registering with the local authorities at the municipal office. The test assesses the extent to which candidates can manage such

situations linguistically without requiring any particular educational background or familiarity with test-taking strategies.

Nevertheless, a sample test is freely available online, allowing potential candidates and other stakeholder groups to become familiar with the task types used in the *fide* test (see https://fide-service.ch/de/sprachnachweise/fide-test).

## 5. Personal Access

“Personal access” refers to whether a test provides appropriate accommodations for test takers with physical and/or learning disabilities, or other specific needs. According to the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (AERA, APA, and NCME 2014: 56), tests should be designed so that they are “as usable as possible for all test takers”. This is known as the principle of universal design. However, universal design alone is not always sufficient to ensure fair testing practices for everyone. For this reason, certain adaptations to testing procedures may be necessary in order to maximize access to the construct being assessed for all test takers. These adaptations, known as accommodations, involve relatively minor changes that do not alter the construct being assessed, such as larger print for test takers with visual impairments or extra time for test takers diagnosed with dyslexia.

Where appropriate and feasible, the *fide* testing system provides accommodations for individual test takers with specific needs. In line with international expert recommendations, these measures are intended to improve access to the construct being assessed and to remove construct-irrelevant barriers, without giving candidates an unfair advantage. The standardized accommodations available in the *fide* testing system are described in a separate document on the *fide* website (see *Richtlinien zur Testdurchführung für Teilnehmende mit spezifischem Bedarf*).

## 6. Uneven Language Profiles

Experts in the field of language testing stress that the communicative competences of language learners and users are not evenly distributed across the four language skills. This may be particularly true for migrants, who may not need to develop all of these competences to the same extent. Accordingly, experts strongly recommend that test developers design tests in which candidates’ proficiency in the different skills can be assessed separately (ALTE 2016: 25–27).

In the *fide* test, candidates’ oral skills (speaking and listening comprehension) and written skills (writing and reading comprehension) are assessed separately. In addition, test takers can complete the oral and written parts at different levels.

Based on their performance in the first speaking task, test takers are advised to complete the oral part of the test at either the A1–A2 or the A2–B1 level combination.

For the written part, test takers are assigned to the A1–A2 or A2–B1 range following a separate short pre-test. The possibility of taking the two parts at different levels is particularly suitable for migrants with limited formal education or limited writing experience.

An important feature of the *fide* test is that examiners recommend the level range they consider most appropriate; however, candidates remain free not to follow this recommendation and to choose a different level combination.

## 7. Literacy and Schooling Issues

The *fide* test was designed to be low-threshold, that is, also accessible to illiterate test takers and those with very limited literacy skills. Accordingly, in the oral part, test takers do not need to demonstrate any reading or writing skills. Even illiterate candidates can therefore pass the oral part.

Both components of the oral part (speaking and listening comprehension) are conducted in an individual setting. The listening comprehension tasks include multiple-choice items based on visuals (see Figure 2).

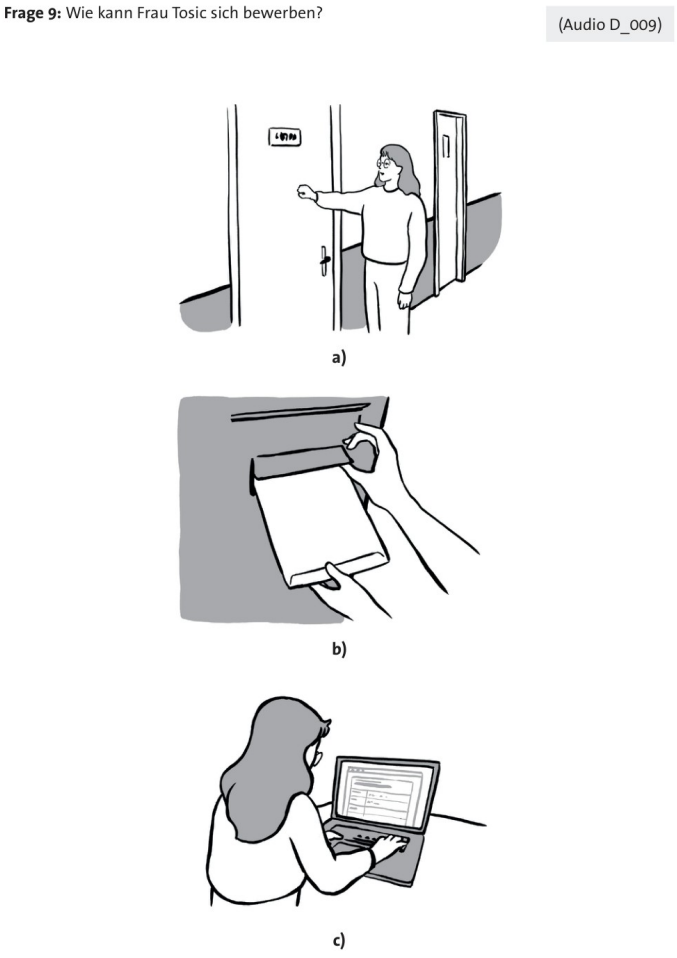



*Figure 2.* Item from a *fide* listening comprehension test

Source: SEM, fide-Test Verstehen A2–B1, Modellversion Juli 2023, p. 7.

While listening to a short audio sequence, candidates are asked to select an option to answer a question. For instance, in the item shown in Figure 2, the question to be answered is: *Wie kann Frau Tosic sich bewerben?* (How can Mrs Tosic apply for the job?).

Another feature of the *fide* test that allows candidates to demonstrate their communicative competence is that, in the German version, the speaking part can be taken in Swiss German. This means that candidates who have not had the opportunity to learn the language in a formal educational setting and who can therefore communicate only in Swiss German are not disadvantaged.

## 8. Equipment and Condition Access

This dimension refers to whether test takers are familiar with the test-taking equipment, such as computers, and with the conditions under which the test is administered.

As for equipment, an increasing number of test providers have moved from a paper-and-pencil format to digital testing since the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021). However, taking a digital test requires a certain level of digital literacy. Using a smartphone for everyday communication requires different skills from those needed to complete reading comprehension or writing tasks in a digital test format. If a test provider or an educational institution chooses to offer a test digitally, it should ensure that potential test takers have sufficient digital skills so that a lack of such skills does not prevent them from demonstrating their language ability.

The *fide* test is offered in a paper-and-pencil format. This means that test takers need only to demonstrate their language skills and do not require additional digital skills.

Regarding so-called condition access, all test takers, especially those with little or no formal schooling or with no prior experience of testing situations, should be familiarized with the test conditions and given the opportunity to demonstrate their level on the construct, regardless of whether this is their first test or one of many.

Appropriate support should therefore be provided with regard to the conditions under which the different parts of the test are administered. In the written part of the *fide* test, for example, the invigilator gives a short introduction before the test begins, explaining how the tasks are structured and what candidates are expected to do.

Moreover, the listening comprehension part is conducted in an individual setting, with one candidate and one examiner. There are no automatically running audio recordings. Instead, the examiner first introduces a short question related to a brief audio sequence, then plays the sequence, and finally repeats the question. Test takers can respond at their own pace: they have time to look at the illustrations or think about

their answers before selecting an option or responding orally. In this way, candidates are supported throughout the test, making it more accessible.

## Conclusion

As the Parliamentary Assembly's Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons pointed out in 2013, "there is no doubt that an ability to master a language can contribute to successful integration". However, language tests used for this purpose should not hinder integration or lead to exclusion by being inaccessible to people who may be illiterate, have a low level of education, have limited financial resources, or be unfamiliar with the test structure and the conditions under which it is administered.

In this sense, an important task for language testers and educators is to ensure that no construct-irrelevant obstacles prevent test takers from demonstrating their actual language and communicative skills. This can be achieved effectively by following and implementing the recommendations made by experts in this field (see AERA, APA, and NCME 2014; ALTE 2016, 2020; Kunnan 2004), on the one hand, and by drawing on the good practices of test providers and educational institutions, on the other.

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# KEYNOTE ARTICLE 4
# Intercultural Experiences of Students at a Taiwanese University

Martin Cooke
National Kaohsiung University of Hospitality and Tourism
mcooke@mail.nkuht.edu.tw

## Abstract

This article examines how semi-structured interviews informed the design of a massive open online course (MOOC) on cross-cultural communication while generating valuable qualitative data on transcultural experience. The study draws primarily on interviews conducted with five university students: two Taiwanese students who had studied or worked abroad and three international postgraduate students living in Taiwan. Interview transcripts were analysed thematically and used to select narrative video clips supported by explanatory content, reflection activities, case studies, and quizzes. The findings indicate that participants often travelled with limited or superficial knowledge of their host cultures and subsequently encountered language barriers, as well as differences in food, social interaction norms, and workplace expectations. At the same time, the interviews reveal how students adapted to new environments. The article argues that intercultural education can be strengthened by connecting theoretical concepts – including culture shock – with significant real-life situations. It recommends that pre-departure and orientation programmes balance cultural theory with practical preparation, language support, reflection, and experiential learning. Although the small, self-selected sample limits generalisability, the project demonstrates the value of interview-led course design and identifies possibilities for more systematic future research.

**Subjects:** Intercultural Communication; Cross-Cultural Communication Skills; Online Course Design; Curriculum Design

**Keywords:** semi-structured interviews; communication; culture; overseas study; overseas internships.

## 1. Introduction

In late 2025, I was asked to create a four-hour video course on the topic of intercultural communication. The intended audience would be students, especially undergraduates

planning to travel overseas for internships and/or overseas study, and those whose institutions do not offer dedicated courses on the topic.

In the invitation message, it was implied that, in order to meet *key performance indicators* (commonly abbreviated as KPIs), I should produce four video lectures, each of which would be an hour long. These videos could then be made available via an external massive open online course (MOOC) platform used by various institutions across Taiwan.

I was initially sceptical about whether the task would be worth the effort, as it is rare for more than a small percentage of MOOC participants to meet the requirements for earning a certificate (Koller et al. 2013; Reich 2014; Jordan 2015). I was also aware that various authors have criticised the MOOC model, including training and development expert Nick Shackleton-Jones, who describes (in *How People Learn*, 2023) how video lectures often become a form of *content dumping* which, he insists, is best avoided.

However, after some consideration, I saw that the invitation represented an opportunity to negotiate, and I therefore suggested a way in which the KPI criteria could be met without producing a series of long video lectures. Instead, I proposed that I could arrange and coordinate a series of video-recorded semi-structured interviews with (1) Taiwanese students who had already spent time overseas on internships or overseas study programmes, (2) students from other countries who were attending courses at our university, and (3) staff members who were either originally from other countries or who had extensive experience of living and working in different cultural environments. The interview recordings would be analysed, with clips selected for use at various stages of the MOOC. These clips would be supported by “explainer” videos (featuring me), plus discussions, reflection tasks, analysis of short case studies, and quizzes to check understanding of key concepts.

The online course has since launched,[2] and (predictably enough) the number of participants who have successfully completed it is but a small fraction of “sign-ups”. However, my aim in this article is not to debate the merits and pitfalls of MOOCs – including mine – but to highlight how the stories and opinions shared in those interviews are themselves a valuable and rich resource from which educators and teachers with an interest in transcultural communication and intercultural intelligence may benefit.

The main focus in this article is on the reflections of five students: two female Taiwanese students and three male students from Vietnam, Tanzania, and Ethiopia. The two Taiwanese students had encountered transcultural situations while working

[2] *Welcoming the World: Transcultural Skills for University Students* (迎向世界：大學生跨文化溝通能力培養). Published via the ewant platform: https://www.ewant.org/admin/tool/mooccourse/mnetcourseinfo.php?hostid=35&id=17405

and studying abroad (one in Australia, the other in Florida, USA). The three international students, all enrolled on the university's master's programmes, were invited to talk about their experiences of living in Taiwan and how they had dealt with the differences between the culture of Taiwan and that of their 'home' nation. All participants signed full consent forms prior to the video recordings and were aware that their responses might be used for research purposes and in publications. While their names do appear in the MOOC videos, I have chosen to identify them here by their first initial.

## 2. Methodology

Two staff members from the university assisted with arranging the interviews and provided translation where required for the Taiwanese students. Two student assistants were also recruited, one of whom had extensive experience with video editing software.

An hour was allocated for each semi-structured interview, including an explanation of the procedure and, an opportunity to rehearse, make notes, and ask for clarification.

When preparing the camera and other video equipment, I felt that respondents would be more comfortable looking at and addressing the interviewer (me), rather than looking directly at the camera lens. Therefore, I stood behind the camera, slightly to the left from the respondent's perspective, while asking the questions. This allowed respondents to maintain eye contact, and made the dialogue seem more open and conversational.

While the questions asked of each respondent were generally similar, the open-ended nature of the questions and the backgrounds of the respondents led to rich, varied responses, as everyone's experiences – and interpretations of them – are unique. While this did mean that considerable time and effort would be needed to analyse the interview recordings – including transcribing the speech of respondents for whom English is not a first language and who often have 'strong' accents – the richness and diversity of responses helped to strengthen the pedagogical aspects of the course.

The transcriptions reproduced in this article were created manually (by me). For clarity, some minor edits to the original speech have been made, though in order to retain authenticity, most grammatical and other "errors" remain as originally uttered. I have presented transcription text in italics, with some commentary notes to aid the reader.

For the purposes of researching and developing the MOOC, the transcriptions enabled me to follow a thematic analysis process similar to the one described by Parrish and Shaikh (2023); they also facilitated the generation of subtitles for the video clips.

As Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009), Hurst (2023), and Parrish and Shaikh (2023) have stated, semi-structured interviewing (also known as in-depth interviewing) is a popular and useful means of obtaining qualitative data, especially as it encourages respondents to describe real experiences and share opinions. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009, pp. 260–261) note that such interviews have been used frequently by scholars and researchers to better understand the experiences and views of immigrants and those who plan to emigrate. Other researchers, including Evans and Suklun (2017), have used this interview method to investigate issues and phenomena relating to workplace diversity and whether workplace conflicts were due to the respective cultural preferences of the people involved.

As the students who volunteered for my own project could all be described as immigrants – albeit non-permanent ones – I felt that semi-structured interviewing represented the best method for what I wanted to achieve, as it would enable the MOOC participants to recognise that the anecdotes and descriptions they saw and heard were based on "real life" situations. According to Shackleton-Jones (2023), schemes of learning (including MOOCs) need to account for and include *push* approaches to learning, which centre on situations and phenomena that have *affective significance*. This means the learner is immediately concerned with them, or appreciates that learning about them is likely to be beneficial. *Push* methods include *designed experiences, storytelling and observation*, and *status-dense situations* (pp. 106–124). Shackleton-Jones goes on to state (p. 133) that "in the push context, video can be good for telling a story or communicating an emotion… [but] for heaven's sake *get people to tell stories* (rather than trying to tell people what they know)". With this in mind, interviewing represented a means of eliciting experiences relating to specific situations, thus 'pushing' the MOOC participants to recognise similar situations they may have faced and to write about them in the forums I had built into the course.

Intercultural communication is arguably a field of academic enquiry where researchers are more likely to, as Stengers (2018, cited in Ocriciano 2025) puts it, *"[learn] to be affected",* which means *"learning to be affected by what is not obvious, by what does not conform to our expectations, by what comes from elsewhere"*. This makes the process of interviewing for qualitative research, especially regarding questions concerning transcultural experiences and cultural intelligence (CQ), a form of what Ocriciano calls *slow science*, where, instead of being seen as "*objects to be studied"*, research subjects become "*agents capable of affecting researchers"* (p. 1219).

In this regard, I understood that, despite the aforementioned deadlines and KPIs, my objective could not be to record the interviews and then attempt to 'sort' them to fit a preordained framework. Instead, I needed to base the content and structure of the course on what was said in the interviews, which (of course) could not be predicted. This meant that the stories and anecdotes shared during the interviews *affected* every other aspect of the course, and also affected me, as they significantly influenced what

I included in the explainer videos (which linked aspects of the anecdotes to important models and theories such as *culture shock*, *uncertainty avoidance*, and *power distance*), and enabled me to benefit from insights that I could not otherwise have obtained.

## 2.1 Profile of Interviewees

The interviewees included two students (both female) who grew up in Taiwan and had completed overseas internships and study programmes. One of these students, henceforth referred to as *C*, had spent a year in Florida, USA; the other, *M*, had spent two years in Australia.

They also included three students – all male – who were overseas nationals studying in Taiwan: *L*, originally from Tanzania, *S*, from Ethiopia, and *H*, from Vietnam.

Additionally, two full-time members of teaching staff were interviewed;: *Professor L* (originally from Mexico), and *Professor D* (a US citizen who has been in Taiwan for over three decades). As the responses of *Professor L* and *Professor D*, focused more on general advice for university students than on personal narratives, they have not been used for the purposes of this particular article, although they are incorporated into the online course.

## 2.2 Questions Used in Semi-Structured Interviews: Students from Taiwan

The students were first asked to provide a short self-introduction, and then to respond to the questions, which they had seen in advance. The questions used in the interviews were:

(1) What did you know about [the other country] before you went there?

(2) Were you able to communicate in the local language when you arrived there?

(3) Were there any situations where you misunderstood or misinterpreted the meaning of what someone said? Can you tell us what happened?

(4) How well prepared were you for the culture of the workplace / place of study where you completed your internship / were an exchange student? What could have been done differently?

(5) Are there any other anecdotes or stories you would like to share? (These could be positive or negative ones.)

(6) Did you explore the local area beyond the places where you were living and working / studying?

- If so, what places did you explore?
- If not, why?

(7) Now that you have spent time living and working/studying in [name of country], what have you learned about it that cannot be taught in a classroom or read in a book?

(8) Would you say you are now an ‘expert’ on [name of country]?

*In the actual interviews, not all of the questions were used, and the questions were not always asked in the same order as above.*

## 2.3 Questions Used in Semi-Structured Interviews: Students from Other Countries

(1) What did you know about Taiwan before you arrived here?

(2) Were there any aspects of Taiwan and its culture that surprised you?

(3) Did you have any problems adapting to life in Taiwan?

(4) Did you find yourself making comparisons with your ‘home’ culture? Were those comparisons positive or negative?

(5) In social situations, do you normally interact with locals (people from Taiwan), with people from your ‘home’ culture, or another group? Has this changed since you first came here?

(6) What do you still find challenging about Taiwanese culture and life in Taiwan?

*Again, not all of these questions were used in the actual interviews.*

The interviews were carried out in March and April 2026.

# 3. Findings

Despite the relatively small number of interviews, a wealth of highly informative and authentic data was obtained. I have outlined the most relevant information from the transcripts of the two Taiwanese students first (in *italic* type), with commentary notes to guide the reader. Findings from the interviews with students from other countries are presented in Section 3.2.

## 3.1 Key Findings from Interviews with Taiwanese Students Who Had Worked or Studied in Other Countries

Some of the most interesting and relevant findings emerged when the respondents were asked about their prior understanding of the country in which they were to spend up to two years of their lives. M indicated that she had received very little meaningful preparation regarding Australia and Australian culture before she travelled there:

> ***Interviewer****: What did you know about Australia before you went there?*
>
> ***M****: Actually, to be honest, before I went there, I didn’t know anything about Australia. I only [knew] about the Opera House, and the famous animal koala... and kangaroo.*

Although she travelled to a different destination, C's response to the same question, while much more detailed, indicates a similar lack of prior knowledge:

> *So, I'd never been to the states before... I know it's a big country, so my first [impression] came from movies and Netflix, such as Stranger Things, Gossip Girl, or High School Musical. I like to watch those a lot when I have free time. And I know they love to eat burgers or fries, and other fast food, and I know their food is kind of big portions, so as an Asian, I [was] afraid to, um, I just worried about can I handle it or not, as we [don't] eat too much. And lastly, I thought people there might be hospitable or kind. So that's what I thought before I went to the states.*

### 3.1.1 Existing Ability to Communicate in English

When asked, "Were you able to communicate in English when you arrived [in Australia]?", M stated that she and the other Taiwanese students did encounter some problems:

> *At the beginning, we were too shy to [speak] in English, even though we have studied English in Taiwan for fifteen years, but when we arrived in the locals, we were afraid to say out loud... we have ability but cannot say anything.*

### 3.1.2 Instances of Misunderstanding

C, when asked if she had any examples of having misunderstood the meaning of what someone had said while communicating with Americans, stated that this had happened on more than one occasion:

> *English is kind of a tricky language, so when I was talking with my friend or other people, they used, like, idioms or slang a lot. For example, when you are in a restaurant, and the waiter might come over and ask you, 'are you still working on that?'. If you don't know what it actually means, you might think, 'why is he asking me [if I am] working when I'm just eating my dinner?', but it actually means, 'are you finished with your meal, and can I help you to clean up?'.*

M also experienced situations where she misunderstood another person's intended meaning:

> *After we arrived, the professor asked us, 'how's it going?', but I was misunderstanding the meaning. They were just greeting us, as in 'how are you?', but we think it's asking us how we came here... it's really embarrassing, but we learned it's the Australian way for greeting.*

### 3.1.3 Aspects That Cannot Be Covered in ‘Classroom’ Learning

C provided some detailed responses when asked to describe factors that could not have been learned in a classroom or from books:

> *There were things I could only learn through real life experiences. One thing is work-life boundaries. In the United States, I noticed people really respect personal time. I think most European countries have the same culture. So, after work or on a weekend, if you text a message to your boss, maybe they don’t reply, maybe the next day instead. And the other one is communication. As I mentioned before, they use a lot of slang or idioms, so at first, I had no idea what they [were] talking about and I was so afraid to ask, because I worry about my English not being good enough, so honestly, I lost a lot of chances to make new friends. But after that, I realized you don’t need perfect English.*

C also stated that there were some cultural differences in the workplace where she completed her internship:

> *My friend and I watched the forecast, and it said a hurricane might hit our city directly, and the school also made an announcement that we were to evacuate to another campus. However, we cannot [evacuate] because we had a job in Sarasota, which means during the hurricane we still [had] to work. Within a week, the hurricane hit our city directly, the wind was so strong, it blew away one of the A/C units... and we didn’t have proper food or electricity for two days.*

## 3.2 Findings from Interviews with Students from Other Countries

### 3.2.1 Knowledge of Taiwan Prior to Travelling

When asked what he knew about Taiwan before travelling there to study, H stated that he knew about Taiwan through movies, while L had learned about Taiwan and its culture from a Taiwanese visitor to Tanzania. S, meanwhile, learned about Taiwan as a possible destination for study through a word-of-mouth recommendation:

> *Before I came here, I was trying to find out where is Taiwan located and what types of things are provided by Taiwan, and just try to explore about Taiwan... but my friend has recommended me to come here and to study in my major, so after I get the information from him, I tried to browse about Taiwan, er, so, I get good things about Taiwan. Good weather, good people, good study, so I intended to choose Taiwan as my study place.*

### 3.2.2 Surprising Aspects of Taiwan’s Culture

When asked if there was anything about Taiwan and its culture that surprised them, the three students from overseas all gave generally positive responses. H said:

*I'm really into the people here, they're really quite friendly. They really belong to the hospitality field. That makes me feel so happy when I hang outside and have a conversation with them. It really helps me a lot.*

S spoke about differences regarding food and dining:

*When I came here, for the first month... two months, I was surprised about Taiwan's culture, especially the food culture, because it's a big difference from my country's food culture, so I was a little confused about food, because [in] my country most of the people are vegetarians, but here, there is no food restriction that I observed, so it was surprising to me.*

L was more specific:

*I found many things were different to my country, especially wearing attire, the way they interacted, the way they are eating... everything is different to me. For example, when I came here, I tried to shake people's hand. It was like, [people were] wondering why I tried to shake their hand, but to my country, it's like respect, a sense of respecting. And also, about food, I found the food was too dry, so I was drinking more when I was eating. And also, about the wearing style, I found people here are wearing short clothes. That was strange to me, to look at a lady wearing short clothes, compared to my country, it's like you are breaking the law and you can be committed to the jail.*

### 3.2.3 Problems Adapting to Life in Taiwan

All three respondents stated that they had encountered problems adapting to life in Taiwan, though for different reasons. H's main challenge, from his perspective, was the language barrier:

*I feel it's quite hard for me because I cannot read Mandarin, so it's really hard to see the menu. I want to eat more good food, especially just go to the restaurant, but the menu is really long and quite hard to translate. Even with translation, it's still hard, because it's not that appropriate, it's not that correct.*

S stated that younger Taiwanese people did not seem keen to interact and socialise with him, whereas older people did not seem to show the same reticence:

*It's not like a problem, but it is an experience, to adapt with Taiwanese... especially for the people who are interacting with me, they are mostly the younger generation who are not that much to interact with strangers, but the older ones, they are very positive to help and to assist the strangers of the foreigners, so that's a good thing for me to learn the culture, and the people and places as well.*

L described some difficulties similar to those described by H and S, though his appearance as a Black African also seems to have affected some people's immediate perceptions of him:

> *Yeah, since the culture was different, it was so hard for me to adapt to the culture and to interact with people to make friends, and since the language was a problem for me, I found it difficult to adopt the culture, especially the food. The taste was difficult for me to eat, to experience the food. Also, the way to interact with, to make friends, since the language was different, and not only about that, but also, there was like, people were scared [of] me, some people they had never seen black people physically. So it was strange for me to adopt the culture or the lifestyle here in Taiwan.*

### 3.2.4 Comparisons with 'Home' Culture

Despite having earlier stated that some Taiwanese people seemed afraid of him at first, perhaps because they had never met someone from East Africa in person, L had a positive story to share when asked to describe any comparisons he had made with his 'home' culture:

> *One day, I got lost here. I was... it was difficult to reach my school. When I go outside for vocation, and my phone was turning off. So, I can't speak the language, but I tried to find my way to the school. I met with one old person, and I tried to make like, imagination and visual, and she understood me, and she was ready to help me. So, I found that Taiwanese people are helping people, interactive, not like before. So I changed my imagination. This could be dissimilar with my country, when I say people are interactive and try to help with a stranger. So it was like, a wonder for me, so it was a big comparison between Taiwan and Tanzania.*

H and S also avoided critical or negative responses. H stated:

> *I think it's mostly positive, because, I think the culture here is different, people [are] more silent, but they still be helpful... it's quite interesting. Each culture has its own merits and beauty and I preserve that, and I want to explore more, more than just around Kaohsiung, Taipei and Tainan. I want to see it by my own eyes.*

S's response to the same question was:

> *There is good things here, and there is good things in my hometown. So yeah, it's obvious, when you go out from your residence, it's expected to find new cultures and new adaptations... so that is an experience, it's a good thing to adopt the new culture, how you live with that community, what things are behind [people's behaviour]... what good things to adopt within that new destination.*

### 3.2.5 Long-Term Challenges

Having earlier been positive – or perhaps pragmatic – when asked about differences between their 'home' culture and that of Taiwan, all three respondents gave detailed responses when asked what had been challenging for them on a personal level.

H*: Well, I think it's mainly about Mandarin, and it's really hard, and I want to learn more about that, learn more about reading... and about, er, I'm really into nightlife, right? People here, they sleep really early, about 11PM I think, so there will be not many restaurants, I want to eat food at that time, I really feel hungry in the night time.*

L*: You know, culture is a broad area, you can't say you know everything. I found myself, sometimes people may not respond positively for some things that I can ask... which is part of my culture. For example, I tried to say, 'thank you, ma'am', and the lady said, 'don't call me mam, I'm not your mam', but to my culture, to call a lady ma'am is a sign of respect, but it's contradicting when I'm speaking... people can think differently from me, people can behave different. That is too strange. Also, I found it difficult to be aware that some things is different, like clothes, when I can't [make eye contact] with a lady who is, like, wearing shorts. This is not my culture. I can't look, I feel guilty to look [at] a lady, but, for them it's normal. So there is some things that are different to my country, but I try to cope. I think there's many things still challenging me. Food is still challenging me, language is still challenging me, wearing style is a challenge for me. But I try to cope with everything. Also, the weather is too hot compared to my hometown!*

S*: Some of the community... they like to isolate [themselves], I think that. Isolate means, especially the youngsters, that's my problem, this is my barrier. When I meet with someone, I try to interact with him easily, but someone may be ignoring my invitations or my interactions. That is a little bit of a challenge for me. But, especially in the schools, when I go to the office, they intend to interact, they intend to help you, assist you, that's a good thing for me. But when you go to the outside, people suffer to talk with you. I think it's a language problem or a language barrier, something like that.*

## 4. Analysis and Discussion of Responses

Scholars such as Gibson (2021) and Rings and Rasinger (2023) note that people travelling abroad for purposes other than short holidays may encounter problems adjusting to the new culture. This process can cause strong and sometimes extreme emotional reactions, especially when one is experiencing a culture very different from one's 'home' culture and/or has had limited preparation. The commonly used

term for such experiences is *culture shock*, though Shaules and Ray (2026) also describe them as *Oz moments*, which represent “feelings of disorientation or surprise when encountering novel surroundings or hard-to-interpret phenomena” (similar to the feelings of the character Dorothy when she arrives in the Technicolor world of Oz, in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*).

Recollections of *Oz moments*, according to Shaules and Ray, “stick with us even years after the experience, and include not just what happened, *but a range of feelings, thoughts, and reactions*” (italics added for emphasis).

This may help to explain why all of the interview participants were able to relay interesting and – for the purposes of the MOOC – valid and useful responses with relative ease. While this justified the inclusion of a section based on *culture shock* in the MOOC, from a wider perspective it is arguable that such anecdotes and stories serve an instructive and at times cautionary function, as they (1) can help educational institutions to better formulate policy, curriculum design, and intervention strategies, and (2) can enable those planning to travel abroad to make decisions based on meaningful knowledge and intercultural intelligence.

M’s responses suggest that she had limited, mostly superficial knowledge of Australia before she went there. While Australia does have a world-famous Opera House (in Sydney), and is indeed home to koalas and kangaroos, M would probably have been more comfortable during her first few weeks and months in Australia if she had been taught about, for example, how to navigate the city she would be living in, local expressions, and differences in communication styles.

Those who, like M, travel to ‘western’ countries for study purposes may also benefit from being trained to understand and anticipate the norms and expectations of a lecture hall or seminar where students may be expected to actively participate in discussions and answer direct questions. Those learning environments may be less hierarchical than those at ‘home’, with professors greeting students in a friendly manner, just as M’s professor did in one of the stories she told. The confusion she felt in this situation indicates a lack of familiarity with the norms of an Australian lecture hall; future students could be taught in advance about how norms relating to such contexts vary across the world, especially in the specific location they are likely to travel to.

At the same time, those who – like M – worry about their English proficiency, lack confidence, or show a low willingness to communicate in English can be reassured through intercultural awareness training that they do not need “perfect” English to communicate in many instances, as they will often be using English as a lingua franca (communicating with people for whom English is not a first language either). Students on a cross-cultural communication skills course could be shown examples of how people with “imperfect” English have been able to succeed, or could be invited to

participate in role plays and simulation tasks to prepare them for the real situations they will encounter in the not-too-distant future. This would need to be balanced with the requirement to obtain a minimum score in an internationally recognised test of English such as IELTS or TOEIC, which is often needed for visa purposes. However, such tests do not always equip young people with the communication skills they will actually need in order to adapt to another culture. This is probably what M was alluding to when she said, “we have ability, but cannot say anything”; she and her fellow Taiwanese students had passed a test of English to be eligible to travel to Australia but still lacked the confidence to interact freely once there.

Young people preparing to travel abroad for internships or working holidays may also benefit from understanding how cultural factors affect the workplace, and how each workplace can have its own culture. For example, if C had been more aware of American working culture, particularly regarding ‘work-life balance’, she might not have needed to learn from experience that messages to her supervisor during the evenings or weekends would not be immediately answered. She might also have known better what to expect during the events she outlined in her anecdote about the hurricane.

It is also apparent that all three of the overseas students had limited knowledge of Taiwan and its culture prior to arriving, leading to experiences that arguably fit the description of *culture shock*. This may help to justify the creation of intercultural communication and CQ training for overseas students coming to Taiwan. For example, L’s experience of meeting women in Taiwan who dressed in a much less conservative fashion than he was used to, and L and S’s descriptions of how local cuisine differs from that of their home countries, could be anticipated by an experienced teacher or trainer and addressed through direct instruction, tasks, and discussions as part of an introductory course.

It is arguable that any course on cross-cultural communication skills (or similar topics) should incorporate theoretical aspects (such as *culture shock* and the *cultural dimensions* of authors such as Geert Hofstede), but should not unduly prioritise these over more immediate, practical aspects. One example of a *practical aspect* is navigating a foreign city. As several of the interviewees described situations where they had become lost, the MOOC includes a task in which course participants find a location – preferably one they will actually travel to – on, for example, Google Maps and ‘pin’ the positions of local amenities, and places of interest, such as hospitals and clinics, MRT stations and bus stops, supermarkets, libraries, and parks. This may enable travellers to become more familiar with their new surroundings and may give them greater confidence, which in turn increases opportunities for communication and the application and learning of intercultural skills. According to Verghese (2016), many expatriate travellers fail to do this, instead relying on locals to perform important tasks for them and remaining reluctant to move beyond their personal comfort zone until

they leave. This, Verghese argues, explains why overseas experience does not automatically make someone culturally intelligent.

The content of the interviews also helped to raise awareness of *intermediate-level* aspects of culture, such as verbal and nonverbal communication cues (Ting-Toomey and Dorjee 2019, pp. 14–15). For example, L describes above how some people in Taiwan seemed confused when he attempted to shake hands with them; after viewing the video that features this particular anecdote, participants in the online course see an explainer video that explains that shaking hands when greeting someone is a norm in some cultures – including L's home culture – but not everywhere. Course participants are then invited to consider which norms for greeting others are common in their own culture.

Universities in Taiwan – as well as in other locations – that welcome students from other countries can also make an effort to ensure that those students have at least a basic understanding of both local and national-level culture *and* the main local language before and/or immediately after arriving. While H, L, and S are postgraduate students on a programme that is taught entirely in English (with classes in Chinese as a foreign language offered as part of the 'package'), students who do not have the ability to speak and understand basic Mandarin are likely to encounter a *language barrier* (as all three of them have done).

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Although the MOOC has not attracted large numbers of participants, I feel that the process of generating qualitative data through semi-structured interviews and using the outcome of those interviews to inform the course structure has been highly rewarding. I could have chosen to record four hours of scripted lecture-type videos, but while this would have met the KPI requirements, it would have created exactly the type of *content dumping* that Shackleton-Jones criticises at length in *How People Learn* (2023).

## 5.1 Limitations

There are, of course, several limitations to the data obtained, especially with regard to the small sample size. A future study, in order to meet the requirements of academic research, would need a larger number of interview participants, with more deliberate piloting, coding, and thematic analysis of the type described by Parrish and Shaikh (2023). It would certainly require the assistance of others; I am extremely grateful to the staff members and student assistants who helped with recruiting volunteers, scheduling the interviews, editing the videos, adding subtitles, and so much more, and I recognise that some aspects of the project resulted in more work than they were perhaps expecting.

## 5.2 Suggestions for Future Studies

A future investigation may wish to take a broad scope, considering practical aspects (such as navigating a foreign city without getting lost), intermediate-level aspects (such as nonverbal communication), and theoretical aspects (such as *culture shock* and the *cultural dimensions* of Geert Hofstede). However, like some other authors and scholars, I feel that the teaching of intercultural skills has become over-reliant on models such as Hofstede's, as well as on exclusively national-level culture and cultural norms. I would therefore be curious to know whether future research and development in this field can facilitate a decoupling of CQ studies from the notion that a person's behaviours and practices are correlated with or determined by nationality.

A future investigation may also wish to consider some of the more challenging aspects of culture, including the evaluative judgements we make of others – and the culture of others – based on appearance. It is possible that race and skin colour played a part in the challenges faced by S and L, who are both of East African appearance. While H – a Vietnamese national whose appearance can be described as *East Asian* – was able to say that he was "really into the people here, they're really quite friendly... That makes me feel so happy when I hang outside and have a conversation with them. It really helps me a lot", it is notable that both S and L encountered situations where Taiwanese locals were unwilling to communicate and interact with them or even – in L's case – seemed afraid of them. It is also interesting that both S and L indicate that older members of the community in Taiwan are more comfortable and willing to speak with them than some younger ones are).

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## AI Use Statement

The entire article was written without the use of AI, with the exception of the abstract, which is based on an edited version produced by Microsoft Copilot after the whole article had been completed. Any errors or discrepancies remain the responsibility of the author.

# TEACHING TIPS

## by Nick Michelioudakis

### 1. TAKING TEACHING TO NEW HEIGHTS

[Psychology for Educators]

Some time ago, I found myself reading Will Guidara's amazing book 'Unreasonable Hospitality'. As a restaurant manager, Will often had to interview people for various posts and he would often ask them the following question: 'What is the difference between service and hospitality?'

According to the writer, the best answer he ever got came from a woman. Here is the quote (p. 5): 'She said, 'Service is black and white; hospitality is colour. […] Getting the right plate to the right person at the right table is service. But genuinely engaging with the person you are serving, so you can make an authentic connection - that's hospitality.''



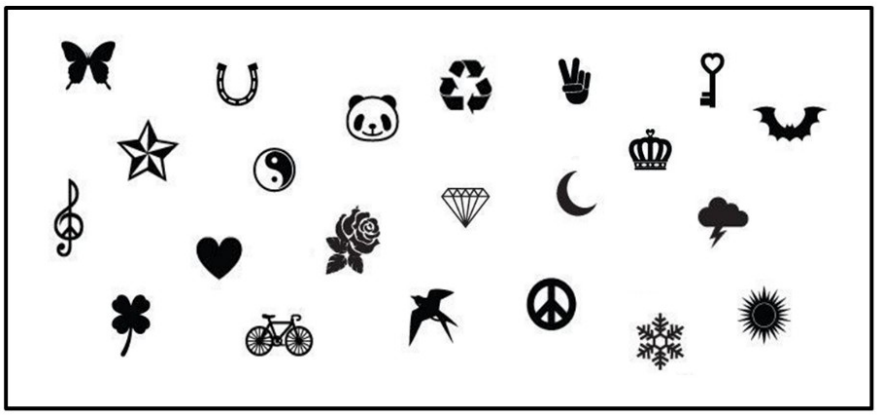
What an amazing idea! OK – now forget everything about 'service' and 'hospitality' and let us think about education: 'Black and White' is doing your job competently and efficiently. 'Colour' is something else entirely. As I see it, colour is engaging with the person you have in front of you, really engaging with them, not only as students but also as individuals. How often do we do this? And if we don't – why don't we?

Of course a colleague might argue: 'How feasible is this? Can teachers really focus on this too on top of everything else they have to do?' My answer is 'Yes'. Think about it: restaurant staff engage with their customers only once over a couple of hours – perhaps a few more times if the customers are regulars. But what about us? And what about the lessons we deliver one-to-one?

But let us leave this question for now and address another one. How can we try to engage with our students as individuals? Here are some tips:

- Try to discover some basic details about your students. Things like their family, their pets, their birthdays, their interests. Write these things down somewhere. And make sure you bring them up from time to time; people love it when you remember things about them.

- Start the lesson with a few questions about their life, what they have been doing recently, or anything interesting they have read or (more likely) watched. You may find that students who are rather reticent in class are prepared to talk for ever about their favourite video game or TV series. [Watch this amazing clip: https://tinyurl.com/y7sfwyse ].
- From time to time, ask them some slightly personal questions. You have to be a little careful with this technique, so you are not seen to be prying, but if your students trust you they may open up to you and research shows that disclosure can work wonders in bringing people closer (Aron et al., 1997). It helps if you share a few things about yourself too. [Watch this clip: https://tinyurl.com/y3bd7nmc ].
- In one-to-one teaching situation, you can actually set yourself the goal of learning one new thing about your student each time. Weird though it may sound, I often ask my students direct questions: ‘What is one thing you like about yourself?’; ‘Is there something you regret?’; ‘What one thing would you like to be really good at?’
- Use humanistic activities – that is, activities which require students to talk about themselves, especially if in the process they discover similarities between themselves and their classmates or themselves and the teacher. One of my favourite activities (pinched from an old Resource Pack [‘Inside Out – Intermediate’]) is called ‘You in Pictures’. You give students a collection of pictures like the one below and they share which of them represent them in some way and why (‘I would choose the moon, because I am a night owl’ etc.)



I would like to close by going back to Will Guidara (p. 7): 'We are in the middle of a digital transformation. That transformation has enhanced many aspects of our lives, but too many companies have left the human behind. They've been so focused on products, they've forgotten about people.' …Just replace the word ‘products’ with the words ‘technology’ and ‘AI’…

Guidara, W. (2022). *Unreasonable hospitality: The remarkable power of giving people more than they expect*. Optimism Press.

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## 2. ‘WHAT DO YOU VALUE MOST?’ – AN ACTIVITY

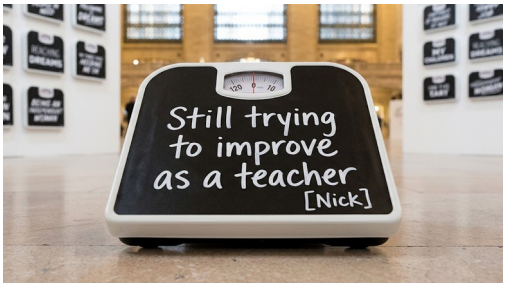
[Psychology for Educators]

How do you feel when you stand in front of a pair of scales? If you are like most of us, the answer is often ‘A bit apprehensive’ (particularly after, say, the Christmas holidays). But is a bit of extra weight such a serious issue, really? Could it be that we have a distorted view of what really matters?

In a brilliant campaign (described in Johnson & Ghuman, 2020 – p. 67), ‘Lean Cuisine’ (a frozen prepared meals company) had women approach a pair of column scales but in an interesting twist, they didn’t ask them to step on them; instead, they asked them how they would like to be ‘weighed’; what it was that they would like others to know and value about them. For many of the participants, this simple question led to quite an emotional experience. Watch this 80-second clip: https://tinyurl.com/zhmc9za9

When I first watched this video, I thought to myself ‘What a great idea! Why not use it in class? Why not ask our students how they would like others to value them?’ Think about it:

i) To answer this question, people will have to reveal something personal about themselves; something they might never reveal otherwise. People wouldn’t normally go around telling others ‘Oh, and by the way, I also volunteer at a dog shelter…’




ii) One of the hardest things to do in our field is to introduce emotions in our lessons. This activity has great potential in this respect. For instance, someone might say ‘My father was always distant, but I managed to get closer to him before he passed away…’

iii) What people choose to focus on shows something about their values, and this can be a great springboard for a discussion about the latter. What is it that we have a right to be proud of? Is it the way we support our family? Is it fighting for social justice? Is it simply doing random acts of kindness for ordinary people around us?

NB 1: Look at all the messages on the wall in the clip (0:24). Each student could ask AI to generate a picture of a pair of scales with their own message written on it (like the one you can see here).

NB 2: I have found that in most activities, simply giving instructions is not enough; it helps if you show students a model of what you expect them to produce. Fortunately, there is another 2-min video which is simply perfect for this purpose. Here it is: https://tinyurl.com/ytmdypme . Feel free to use it.

Read: Johnson, M. A., & Ghuman, P. (2020). *Blindsight: The (mostly) hidden ways marketing reshapes our brains*. BenBella Books.

YouTube: Weigh This – The Campaign: https://tinyurl.com/zhmc9za9

YouTube: Weigh This – What some Women said: https://tinyurl.com/ytmdypme

# REVIEWS

## Barry Tomalin

### Introduction

Here are two fascinating books by eminent British ELT experts, Michael Carrier and Ken Wilson, now both retired from active ELT teaching but showing how the educational and practical skills developed and administered throughout their working lives can be continued in ‘retirement’.

### *100 Latin words that shaped English*

### Michael Carrier

### Publisher: (2026) Highdale Press, London

Michael Carrier graduated from Cambridge University in the UK, specialising in languages and historical linguistics. He ran an English Language school in Cambridge before ‘emigrating’ to the USA to set up a new Eurocentres school. He then returned to London to become the Executive Director of International House World, London, working with the network of IH schools around the world. From there he joined the British Council in the new role of Director of English Language Innovation.

Michael Carrier’s book is the first in his Word Histories Series. (Note, NOT World Histories). This volume analyses how Latin, the language of the Roman invaders who governed Britain until around AD 410 and a common European language long after the fall of the Roman Empire, still lives on in English today.

“‘100 Latin words…’ is the first in a developing series on ‘loan words’ from other languages, soon to be followed by the second, ‘*100 Persian Words that shaped English’* and the third discussing Greek words and their use in English. Examples from both are included at the end of the ‘Latin words’ book. Other languages to be covered include Hindi/Urdu and Arabic.

This book examines 100 Latin words and phrases that we use today, many of which are common in business documents. This makes the book especially useful for teachers of business English who help their students understand Latin words and phrases in international business documentation.

Here’s a relatively simple example, *a priori*. Michael Carrier begins with a simple description, ‘*an assumption of knowledge’* and says it is a common expression in the academic world and for lawyers, meaning ‘*prior knowledge of a subject under discussion’*. However, the use of the phrase may also indicate the person referred to may have made a wrong assumption, not just a correct one.

He gives examples of the use of *a priori* in a context and with quotations mainly from literature (in this case, Immanuel Kant) which make understanding much clearer.

For those of you who do not work with legal and business documents, a large number of words and phrases occurring in everyday English publications are explained through their origin in Latin. Imagine today I'm feeling *lugubrious*, an adjective defined by Michael Carrier as looking or sounding sad or dismal and feeling sad or mournful. *Lugubrious* comes from the Latin *lugubris*, meaning mournful and adopted into the English language in the 17th century.

Each of the hundred entries in the 'Latin words' book tells the story of its Latin roots, its modern meaning, its backstory and examples of how it is used. Fundamentally, the book is about the ancient roots of the words and phrases discussed and how they entered the English language.

One of the strengths of the book is Michael Carrier's method of explaining the usage and context of each word or phrase and giving examples of how it is used in English. This can help readers recognise differences in meaning in other European languages. All in all, it is an exceptionally practical and useful way of understanding Latin-derived words and phrases in English and a very useful reference book to keep on your bookshelf next to your English dictionary!

## *King and Country*

## Ken Wilson

## Publisher: (2026) Grosvenor House Publishing, London

Another ELT 'giant' is Ken Wilson, former ELT teacher and teacher trainer at International House and author of educational materials for ELT teachers and students worldwide.

He is best remembered as co-founder and leader of the English Teaching Theatre, a wonderful celebration of English as an international language. Together with other teachers of English as a foreign language, the company toured the world with variety shows based on the English language.

After retiring in 2016, Ken completed a master's degree at Birkbeck College, University of London, which led to his two novels, *The Duke's Portrait* published in 2022 and, most recently, *King and Country*-.

*King and Country* is a follow-up to *The Duke's Portrait*, but is also an independent story while featuring the same core characters;: three English characters, Charles Goodgame, his step-sister, Polly Capstan, and Helena Codrington-Smythe.

The novel is set in London and Berlin in 1938, just before the outbreak of the Second World War. Charles visits his step-sister who is living in Berlin and manages to antagonise members of the German government secret service who have asked him

to spy on the British for them. The story follows how Charles and Polly escape from Germany across the border and get back to London. The novel examines the difficulties Charles faces in Berlin as well as when he gets back to London and is a fascinating and enjoyable read for us and our advanced students.

## Conclusion

Ken Wilson's brilliant imagination as a teacher, and ELT writer is highlighted in his publication of the two novels. But why are we introducing a novel by a new novelist in a teaching journal? Because it shows how an EFL teacher can use his or her skills to build a new and successful career after retirement from teaching. All of us have to retire at some point and this may be the time to review our experience and interests as teachers and find new ways to use our talents in the future. I look forward to the next volume in Charles Goodgame's adventures and offer advice to all our ELT colleagues worldwide who are on the verge of retirement or who have already retired to ask themselves, '*What are the skills I have shown in my teaching career and how might I develop and use them in retirement?'*

Perhaps a motto would be useful for some of us, '*Read, research and write!'* Anyway, enjoy and learn from Michael Carrier's and Ken Wilson's books.


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