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The long road to UK higher education: Using Exploratory Practice as a tool to improve academic language and skills for lower level language learners

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Introduction

For our action research project, we decided to focus on the integration of Exploratory Practice (EP) into a low level (CEFR A2), English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. Defined as 'a form of practitioner research that aims to integrate research, learning and teaching' (Hanks 2015:612), EP has received positive feedback within a range of contexts (e.g. Hiratsuka 2016, Slimani-Rolls and Kiely 2014) and, in its original form, was devised as an approach for teachers to conduct classroom research. More recently however, EP has been recognised as a potential tool for learners (e.g. Chu 2012, Hanks 2014), and it is within this form that our study is focused on.

To conduct our action research, we concentrated on a course entitled English for University Studies (EfUS). Synonymous with many EFL programmes delivered in the UK, this full-time course provides a combination of General English and basic academic skills for at least one academic term. The shared goal for students during this course is to reach the entry requirements of a university pre-sessional programme (CEFR B2/B2+). To do this, the majority of the 21-hour study week focuses on General English, with the remaining time allocated for low level EAP study. It was during this EAP time when the integration of EP for this research was implemented.

Motivation for this action research initially stemmed from our own classroom observations. Due to the length and intensity of the course (21 hours of study per week over three 10-week terms), we noted that the motivation of several students appeared to wane in the second half of the first term. We also noticed an issue with the classroom's atmosphere. At times, students appeared frustrated with the course, claiming that they wanted academic language and skills rather than General English, despite their relatively low level. From the literature, our motivation also came from positive findings highlighted in earlier EP studies amongst higher level pre-sessional EAP programmes (e.g. Dawson 2014, Hanks 2015), suggesting EP could play a role in developing language learning and academic skills.

Literature review

Developed in the 1990s, EP has been refined in recent years to promote both teachers and students 'using normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools' (Allwright 2003:127). To do this, EP focuses on the creation and research of puzzles. These puzzles can be created by teachers and, in the case of this research, by students, and should be connected with a 'puzzling' aspect of classroom life. Examples of student-created puzzles could be 'Why do I feel nervous when the teacher asks me a question?' or 'Why do some of the students in my class prefer to work alone, whilst others prefer group work?'. Such puzzles, in theory, aim to align EP with its seven key principles, all of which encompass the notion of improving the quality of life in the classroom and working collaboratively in a spirit of mutual development (Allwright and Hanks 2009). Thus, aside from its goal of harmonising the classroom, EP could be perceived as language learning through the belief that learners will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources. This, in turn, can enhance their cultural capital, their conception of themselves and their classmates and their desires for the future (Ushioda 2009).

A study which draws parallels to the current research focused on the integration of EP into a summer pre-sessional EAP programme (Hanks 2014). These programmes are often cited as high-stakes, product-focused, and assessment-driven (e.g. Alexander, Argent and Spencer 2008, Hyland 2006). In recognition of this, the study aimed to identify whether EP could enhance language learning. Findings suggested that EP provided students with opportunities to 'practise the key language and academic skills that they needed' (Hanks 2015:630) as well as empower learners with a renewed sense of enthusiasm in the classroom. Such positive findings suggest similar outcomes for the current study. It should be noted, however, that only six students participated in the study, possessing a higher language level and studying for a shorter period of time than our context.

The study

Research question 1 (RQ1): What are the learners' perceptions of EP as an effective tool for learning?

Research question 2 (RQ2): How effective is EP as a tool for EFL teachers to develop lower level learners' academic language and/or skills?

Action research was conducted over a 10-week period to evaluate both the students' (RQ1) and teachers' experiences (RQ2). Our research focused on an EfUS class with a cohort of 17 language learners. The class was multilingual and multicultural with 11 Arab learners (seven from Saudi Arabia and four from Kuwait), two Korean learners, three Chinese, and one Taiwanese. The shared goal of all 17 students was to enrol onto a university pre-sessional programme. To do this, they had to pass in-house, summative assessments, taken at the end of a 3-term, 30-week course. Students studied 21 hours per week, with the majority of the schedule devoted to a General English coursebook (*Language Leader Pre-Intermediate*, Lebeau and Rees 2008). EP was timetabled for two classes per week (1 hour per class) for 10 weeks in the second term.

Appendix 1 shows the syllabus design and lesson content for the 10-week course. It can be seen that many of the classes aimed to integrate academic language and skills. In Week 1, for instance, EP and the notion of a 'puzzle' was introduced via a lecture. In the subsequent two weeks, the students were asked to think of their own puzzles to research; with the only requirement that it had to relate to language learning. Appendix 2 illustrates the puzzles chosen by the 17 students. By Weeks 4, 5 and 6, students were refining research questions for their puzzles and collating data via questionnaires and/or interviews. After analysing their data in Weeks 7 through 9, the final week saw students exhibit their work to their peers and teachers via academic posters.

Data collection

Teaching journals
Teaching journals were kept by the course tutors throughout the 10-week course for three reasons. Firstly, to record the content of the lessons and to ensure classes reflected the principles of EP. Secondly, for the journal to act as a tool to 'collect evidence about teaching and students' learning in order to make more informed decisions about teaching' (Farrell 2007:466). This would provide a source of self-reflection for the teachers and a means of evaluating the level of emergent academic language and/or skills in the lessons. The third reason was to record any noticeable interaction and/or behaviour in class. The term 'noticeable' was defined as something different from the interaction or behaviour normally seen in the class by the two teachers during the non-EP classes.

Student questionnaire
A widely cited constraint for teachers conducting action research is time (e.g. Borg 2009). For this reason, student questionnaires were seen as a time-efficient way of collecting data on the students' perceptions and opinions on EP. To ensure students completed the questionnaires,

two classes were allocated for feedback: one in Week 5 (mid-course) and one in Week 10 (end-of-course). This allowed a comparative analysis of the learners' opinions as the course progressed. As many of the participants worked in pairs or groups, the questionnaires were also placed online, allowing students to complete them collaboratively (see Appendix 3 for the template).

Student interviews
To gain an insight into the learners' perceptions of EP (RQ1), five students were interviewed. All interviews took place upon completion of the EfUS programme and once the students were enrolled onto their pre-sessional EAP programme at the university. The rationale for this delay was to allow time for the students to reflect on their experiences of EP now they were on a higher level EAP programme. Did they feel, for instance, EP had provided them with academic language and/or skills which their peers on the pre-sessional did not possess? Interviews were semi-structured in that a set of questions was prepared for each interviewee but deviation was allowed. Interviews, with the authorised consent of the participants, were recorded and transcribed. Coding the results of the interviews involved categorising responses. This was done by reviewing the transcripts and identifying the 'keywords-in-context' (Ryan and Bernard 2003).

Findings

RQ1: What are the learners' perceptions of EP as an effective tool for learning?
According to the questionnaires, 15 of the 17 students viewed EP as a useful tool for improving their language ability. The questionnaire asked participants to explain their reasons, and Table 1 summarises their responses. The two most common reasons for the participants to recognise EP as beneficial for their language was the introduction of new vocabulary and speaking practice. During the follow-up interviews, the participants who cited these reasons were asked to explain further. In terms of vocabulary, one student said their puzzle had led them to different sources outside the classroom, such as library books, which had provided new vocabulary. With regard to speaking practice, students cited the Week 10 poster presentation as useful practice for their speaking and something different from the more familiar student–teacher interaction.

Table 1: Student responses from Question 3 on the questionnaire: Do you think Exploratory Practice has improved your English language? (Why/why not?)

Reasons why	Reasons why not
1. New vocabulary (7)	1. New vocabulary was too difficult (2)
2. More speaking practice (6)	
3. Improve confidence when speaking (2)	

Although the majority viewed EP as positive for their language learning, two participants viewed it negatively.

Their rationale was the level and challenge of the vocabulary. This, it was discovered via the interviews, was partly due to the choice of puzzle (the importance of grammar). Given the nature of the puzzle, and students' independent research which followed, much of the new vocabulary was too difficult. It was also identified in the teaching journals that these two learners frequently asked about the relevance of EP to passing the course. As EP was an unassessed element of the programme, and these two participants were relatively weak learners in the class, their motivation evidently waned.

Participants perceived EP as an effective tool for academic skills

End-of-course student feedback indicated that 12 of the 17 students believed EP improved their academic skills. In a similar fashion to the question on language improvement, the participants were asked to provide a reason for their answer. Table 2 shows the most common responses. In terms of reasons why students thought EP improved their academic skills, most believed their research skills had improved. This related to input sessions on making questionnaires, collating data, and interpreting results. During this part of the course, the teachers' journals noted a high level of engagement amongst the students, with many citing the need to do similar research (albeit on a larger scale) on their future university courses.

> 28.04 – Students are engaged and eager to take notes; Group 3 more motivated than usual; the input part turned into a discussion about issues with data collection and how this could be tackled. 02.05 – Using specific examples from students, today's session was very lively and discursive. Groups 1, 4, 5 and 7 seemed very eager to share their experience and what they could do next time to improve their data collection.

Table 2: End-of-term feedback: Was EP an effective tool for developing academic skills?

Reasons why	Reasons why not
1. Research skills (7)	1. Just focus on making a poster (3)
2. Using the library (3)	2. Not enough time (2)
3. Finding sources (1)	
4. Making an academic poster (1)	

The table also highlights the reasons why five of the participants did not view EP as beneficial for improving their academic skills. The first reason can be interpreted as a focus on the product (the poster) rather than the process (solving the puzzle). The second reason is time, which relates to the relatively short number of hours given to EP (2 hours per week). In summary, although some students viewed EP negatively with regard to language/skills development, the majority believed it improved their language, and developed their academic skills.

EP can help to improve learner autonomy

Table 3: Positive comments from end-of-term feedback – summary

Positive comments	Number of occurrences
Research skills/practice	9
Speaking practice/confidence	8
Independent study	8
Group work	6
Learning something new	5
Other	4

A prominent finding to emerge from this project was the student-led identification that EP has helped to improve learner autonomy. Table 3 summarises the students' comments written in the end-of-course questionnaire. Aside from the language/academic skills comments, there were eight instances of learners recognising the development of learner independence without an explicit question mentioning this phenomenon. Comments such as 'I know how to look for books by myself now' and 'I am confident working without teacher' were indicative of the feedback received.

In addition to the end-of-course feedback, the student interviews supported the development, amongst some of the participants, of learner autonomy during EP. Of the five interviewees, four mentioned the importance of learner independence during their pre-sessional EAP programme, with three citing EP as a useful tool for helping them prepare for this. One student, for instance, said:

> I mean [EP] was good – teachers explaining and helping was enough – now I know we need to be more independent before our courses start or [before] pre-sessional.

Unlike the early weeks of EP, when tasks and activities were teacher-led, the later weeks allowed students much more independence. This was partly due to the nature of having different puzzles in the classroom, as well as witnessing the students' motivation to solve their puzzles. This, of course, might be challenged by assuming that a project-based activity could produce similar outcomes. We, however, believe that EP is heavily embedded within social constructionism, which implies that knowledge is constructed through discourse or conversation in a social context like a classroom (Crotty 1998). Moreover, the idea of class collaboration when working on 'solving' learners' individual puzzles related to the class environment is a unique approach that, from looking at the feedback, we believe strengthens motivation. In other words, each project was, at least implicitly, relevant for every group, whereas project-based activities might not have as much focus on social co-operation, hence these could be limited in terms of mutual interest and collaboration.

RQ2: How effective is EP as a tool for EFL teachers to develop lower level learners' academic language and/or skills?

EP possesses limitations for EFL teachers and language learning

Qualitative data from the student questionnaires and interviews shows that the vast majority of the participants enjoyed EP. Feedback in the end-of-course questionnaire for the question 'What did you enjoy/not enjoy about studying EP?' highlights the positive contribution EP can make to lower level learners (see Table 4), with the two negative comments citing the need for more time on EP rather than a dislike for the practice.

Table 4: What did you enjoy/not enjoy about studying Exploratory Practice?*

☺	☹
Working with groups and share our ideas. Enjoy a lot. We have now good experience with this skills, especially in term three. We enjoy the new idea because we gain new experience. Yes a lot. It motivate me. It was a new topic, that I have not done it before. I enjoyed the EP Practice, I've never seen this kind of learning style before. And also I learnt how to create a poster that is the most exciting part I got.	Short time sharing. Researching range is quite limited. Hopefully, the EP practice in next term can be more.

*Please note the comments are authentic and thus may contain errors.

Nonetheless, in their teaching journals the two teachers cited a number of occasions when some of the students evidently struggled with the lesson content, for example:

07.04 – Some students were unsure what the purpose is of all the new lexis e.g. EP, puzzle, data collection or research. Today's class seemed, at times, too difficult and as it is not linked with assessment, some students were struggling with paying attention.

Some occurrences of this were in Weeks 2 and 3 when research skills were first discussed. One of the problems cited in the journals was the mixed ability of the group. Whilst some students knew terms such as 'quantitative', others did not. And, as the group were lower level, large amounts of time were spent clarifying meaning and checking understanding.

18.04 – Some students wanted clearer instructions about "what" they need to do and "how" to do it when thinking about data collections. They are not used to experimenting and making own decisions in case these are "incorrect".

In later weeks it was evident that, although the majority of students seemed to be enjoying the practice, students were working at very different paces, and developing their language accordingly. Some students, for instance, had managed to understand an abstract taken from an academic journal and used it in their poster, whereas other groups had little idea about which journal they should read or the meaning of an abstract.

09.05 – Group 2 indicated that their topic turned out to be very heavy on jargon and that they don't have enough time to translate these words. Similarly, they struggled with new lexis introduced in today's class in relation to describing and interpreting data. They suggested more teacher input and less independent work.

As EP did not carry any grades, the language development of the learners was considered low stakes by the institution and, arguably by the participants. It was noted by the teachers, however, that language progression was inconsistent amongst the cohort and, through the nature of exploring different puzzles, the opportunities for structured, teacher-led activities decreased as the course progressed.

Discussion

This AR project has thrown up a number of findings. The first relates to the students' perceptions of language and academic skills improvement. In this study, it is evident that most of the participants viewed EP as a useful tool for their language/skills progression. This aligns with positive findings from earlier research with higher level students (Hanks 2015). In light of the intensive nature of the course, a possible reason for such high levels of engagement may be the different nature of EP from the normal study timetable and, as previously mentioned, social co-operation. Comments from students also indicated their interest in learning academic vocabulary and conducting small-scale academic research. This also implies that, even with lower level learners, students perceive EP as being beneficial for their language and/or academic skills. On the issue of lower level learners, findings also implied that more scaffolding is required for some students to remain motivated throughout the practice. This may involve more teacher-led instruction or the narrowing of research, for instance the inclusion of a set number of secondary sources, or graded resources.

Another key implication from the findings relates to EP and learner autonomy. It was evident that EP brought in elements of academic study; namely, research methods, data collection, secondary sources, and academic posters. Given the nature of exploring individual/group puzzles, students appeared to mirror the continuum of learner dependence to independence as noted in earlier research (e.g. Greenbank and Penketh 2009), particularly towards the second part of the project. In other words, students were presented with various opportunities to become more autonomous, and although these chances were included in every class, the vast majority of students used these more in Weeks 6–10. This suggests EP, for lower level learners, can provide opportunities for independent, academic study. In this context, as the practice was unassessed, it

could be argued to be a useful dress rehearsal for higher stakes research, i.e. during pre-sessional and/or higher education study.

Although this research suggests many positive elements of the integration of EP into a lower level course, the findings also suggest some limitations. Stemming from the second research question, it was found that language progress, from the teachers' perspective, was both inconsistent and opaque. Advocates of EP (Allwright 2003, Hanks 2014, Hiratsuka 2016) may argue that the successful outcome of the practice should not be solely based on language development. Sceptics however, would argue that, within a student fee-paying, results-driven EFL industry, institutions, and perhaps even more so students, are more interested in the learners' language progression than solving puzzles. The findings from this action research suggest a middle ground might be best suited to ensure the development of language while 'solving' puzzles. By allocating 2 hours per week to EP, the majority of the students' week was still devoted to the assessed element of their programme. It was evident however that some of the participants recognised the connection between EP and their future studies and decided to exploit the opportunity for learning academic language and/or skills; both in class, in groups, and independently. Therefore, motivation should be highlighted here as another principal outcome of EP when working with lower level learners.

Before moving to the conclusion of the study, it should be noted that the primary limitation of this research concerns the method of data collection regarding the participants' language progress. In this study, students were asked qualitative questions about their perceived progress and teachers were asked to record journals of any linguistic improvements. A more reliable method of data collection would be quantitative testing. This could be done by testing the group at the start and end of the course, and/ or with a control group which does not study EP. The latter might possibly be the most significant limitation as this could be paramount in demonstrating if EP has a tangible effect on learners' development and performance, hence informing us of its efficacy when compared with other project-based activities.

Conclusion

This report has focused on the integration of EP into a lower level EAP course. Findings firstly suggest EP can be used as a means of enhancing language learning. Although the teachers in this study were not convinced of its effectiveness, the majority of the participants believed it to be useful in enhancing their language. Findings also suggest EP can develop learner autonomy and motivation. Both have been cited as useful for both higher level EAP courses and higher education study. A longitudinal study on these participants as they study within higher education could help to identify if any of the language/skills to emerge during EP are of benefit in their studies. To conclude, this research has provided further insight into the potential

benefits and limitations of using EP as a tool for lower level language learners.

Reflection

When discussing our personal reflections on this action research, we both noticed that we had gradually become more interested in the outcome of our project, and that each step would bring more questions than answers. Nonetheless, with support from the action research mentors, we were able to focus on our research and reflect after each small step/experience. Our ability to reflect upon our own practice, which can be linked with 'Kant's idea of self-reflective examination of the limits and validity of our own knowledge and understandings' (McLean 2006:9), which led to constant questioning of our methods and findings, can be highlighted as the main skill that we gained during this project. At the same time, bearing in mind that EP can be treated as an alternative to action research (hence the lack of a second cycle within our project), we realised that our teaching journals, student feedback and informal conversations acted as tools to constantly improve proceeding steps and future re-runs of this project. This inventiveness, of course, was often quite frustrating, when we realised our project will never be perfect or fully finished, but this, in our opinion, encourages creativity even further – another aspect that is worth pointing out when reflecting on this action research. Dant (2003:19) illustrates this aspect using the term *an argument parallel*, something that can never be finalised or definitively resolved: 'an argument against the possibility of a final solution.' We also noticed that the students became more responsible for their own work and started to treat us more like mentors than figures of authority. This was particularly refreshing bearing in mind their level and their previous educational experience.

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Appendix 1: Syllabus and lesson content

Lesson	Lesson overview	Student tasks
1.1 (Tim) 07.04	**Introducing Exploratory Practice (1 of 2).** The teacher makes an interactive presentation about the practice.	Note taking. Understanding EP.
1.2 (Seb) 11.04	**Introducing Exploratory Practice (2 of 2).** The teacher reviews the 7 principles of EP and outlines the course aims – ***to explore a puzzle and produce/present an academic poster.***	Review task (summary writing – what is EP?). Brainstorm: What puzzles them? (Homework: think of a puzzle).
1.3 (Tim) 14.04	**Choosing a puzzle to explore and how to explore (1 of 3).** Students present their puzzle topics to peers. The teacher helps students define their puzzles. Also shows some example 'puzzles'.	Writing their puzzle as a research question (RQ). Grouping questions/forming groups (where appropriate).
1.4 (Seb) 18.04	**Exploring the puzzle (2 of 3).** The teacher gives details on key issues when creating questionnaires/interviews/observations.	Students draft their instrument for data collection.
1.5 (Tim) 21.04	**Exploring the puzzle (3 of 3).** Students are given time to review their method of data collection and to proofread/improve.	Students create data collection tools (e.g. creating a questionnaire/ interview questions).
1.6 (Seb) 25.04	**Collecting data (1 of 2).** Students collate data using their chosen method of data collection.	Students collate data via their data collection methods.
1.7 (Tim) 28.04	**Collecting data (2 of 2).** Students collate data using their chosen method of data collection.	Students collect data via their data collection methods.
1.8 (Seb) 02.05	**Analysing the data (1 of 2).** The teacher shows the students how to analyse the data to make key findings.	Students analyse their data to make key findings for their research question.
1.9 (Tim) 05.05	**Analysing the data (2 of 2).** The teacher looks at how to transfer their data into visual aids (e.g. table/chart/graph).	Students transfer their data to visual aids.
1.10 (Seb) 09.05	**Writing up findings (1 of 2).** The teacher looks at useful language for describing/interpreting data/visual aids.	Students write up their first key finding.
1.11 (Tim) 12.05	**Library tour and Induction (for secondary evidence).**	Students find a relevant source.
1.12 (Seb) 16.05	**Analysing data (1 of 2).** Students use the online library search to find one relevant source.	Students write up more of their findings.
1.13 (Tim) 19.05	**Analysing data (2 of 2).** Students analyse their questionnaires and their relevant source. Check if search completed – found relevant sources?	Students write up findings and read/ analyse their relevant source.
1.14 (Seb) 23.05	**Academic posters (1 of 2).** The teacher shows a range of academic posters done by previous classes.	Students critique posters from previous courses.
1.15 (Tim) 26.05	**Academic posters (2 of 2).** The teacher shows useful language when writing an academic poster and how to deal with questions.	Students practise using the useful language when presenting posters.
1.16 (Seb) 30.05	**Final review and proofreading.** The teacher and students review the final draft posters.	Students peer review final drafts of posters.
1.17 (Tim) 02.06	**Poster presentation.** The teacher asks students to exhibit their posters.	Students exhibit their posters to classmates and teachers.
1.18 (Tim) 03.06	**Feedback and reflection.** The teacher asks students to complete a reflection task and collates students' feedback on EP as a practice.	Students receive feedback on their poster exhibition and write a reflection task on their experiences with EP.

Appendix 2: The participants' puzzles

Group 1: (Two female students) – Do students prefer working in groups or individually?

Group 2: (Three male students) – Why are Asian students better at spelling than Arabic students?

Group 3: (Two male students) – Why is grammar important in learning English?

Group 4: (One female student) – Why do some students use English slang?

Group 5: (Three female students) – How important is speaking English?

Group 6: (Two female and one male student) – What are the differences in writing between Arab and Asian students?

Group 7: (One female student) – Why do different nationalities view speaking differently?

Group 8: (Two male students) – How important is reading outside of class?

Appendix 3: Questions asked on the questionnaire

1. What have you enjoyed/not enjoyed about studying Exploratory Practice so far?

2. What are the positives and negatives for EfUS students of studying Exploratory Practice?

3. Do you think Exploratory Practice has improved your English language? (Why/why not?)

4. Do you think Exploratory Practice has improved your academic skills? (Why/why not?)

5. Would you recommend Exploratory Practice for next year's EfUS course (2016–2017)?

6. Would you like to write anything else about Exploratory Practice?

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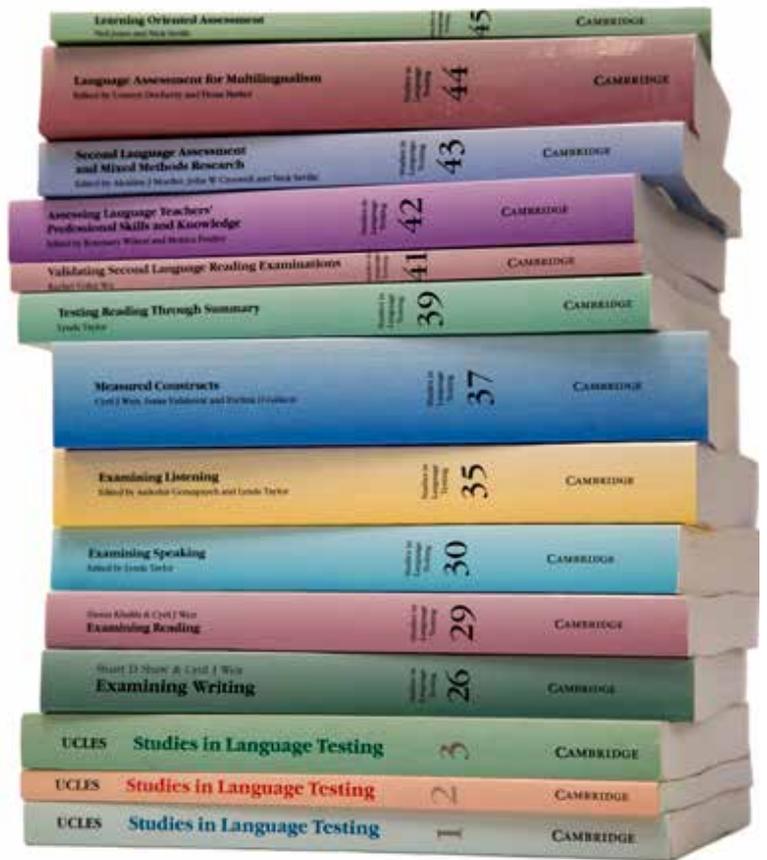
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