

The Effects of Portfolio Practice on English Language Learning

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Abstract

Research on the correlation between portfolio use and English as a second language (ESL) has attracted much interest. This article adopted a case study approach to generate qualitative data aimed at examining a learner's portfolio experiences with particular regard to ESL strategy application and learning at university. The findings of the study suggest that the learner utilized a range of ESL learning strategies spanning the cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective domain, developed an increased awareness of effective ESL strategies, and considered portfolios a productive means of developing ESL. The article concludes with suggestions for a profitable way forward.

Introduction

Researchers' interest in portfolios as a mechanism to support learning and assessment stems essentially from disillusionment with mass standardized testing which fails to capture the complexity and diversity of the learning process (Hamp-Lyons and Condon 2000). A portfolio has been variously referred to as 'a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievements' (Paulson, Paulson and Meyer 1991:60), 'a narrative that tells a coherent story', highlighting thoughtful reflection on and analysis of a learner's experiences (Darling 2001:111), or a 'learning journey', where a learner makes 'connections made between actions and beliefs, thinking and doing, and evidence and criteria' (Jones and Shelton 2006:18). While most of the definitions centre on the material form of a portfolio, Gee (2000) takes up this notion metaphorically. He (ibid.) somewhat wryly observes that successful people in contemporary times 'see and define themselves as a flexibly re-arrangeable portfolio of the skills, experiences, and achievements they have acquired' (p.61) through collaborative practices. As the above shows, portfolio compilation involves both cognitive and metacognitive skills development, suggesting there is more to a portfolio than a mere miscellany of materials in binders.

The use of portfolios to enhance and support English as a second language (ESL) learning has seen growing interest in the areas of classroom practice and research. A review of the published articles in this field suggests salutary effects of portfolio practice on language learning in Iran (Barootchi and Keshavarz 2002), Portugal (Nunes 2004), the United Arab Emirates (Coombe and Barlow 2004), Japan (Santos 1997), and Hong Kong (Lam and Lee 2010). Reported benefits include a sense of achievement, learner autonomy, language awareness and improvement, as well as accommodation of diverse learning styles. The positive findings provide an impetus for this study to investigate possible effects of portfolio use on ESL learners, offering further research data on the topic. Three research questions guide this study:

1. In what ways can portfolios impact on ESL learning strategies as reported by learners?
2. What are the effects of portfolios on progress in ESL learning as perceived by learners?
3. What are the learners' perceptions towards portfolios as a method of ESL learning?

The Study

Context

Changes in ESL policies in Hong Kong over the last decade have resulted in greater emphasis on learners' holistic development. Portfolios speak to this shift because of its potential as a tool to chronicle and showcase ESL learners' development and growth over time in a way that is difficult to achieve in traditional single-timed language proficiency examinations (Hamp-Lyons 2006). While a recent initiative recommends portfolio assessment in senior secondary school (Curriculum Development Council 2007), local educators raise three main concerns: first, whether portfolios can be assessed effectively and in a socially responsibility manner; second, whether Hong Kong students, being widely perceived as teacher-reliant and passive, would be capable of assuming a more active learner role required of them in portfolio-oriented pedagogic practices; third, whether employers or professional bodies would recognize portfolio assessment results as a complement to academic qualifications.

Participant

This study employed a qualitative case study methodology because the power of case study lies in its interest in the individual case without being unduly constrained by how it might be illustrative of other cases, giving it a unique perspective on specific learners and situations (Stake 2006). Ten students studying at a Hong Kong university were invited to participate through expedient selection. This article reports on the findings derived from one such participant, Ricci, a final-year male student, who expressed an interest in the portfolio as an extra language tool to improve English when the author taught him on an English course at university. The author was no longer Ricci's teacher at the time of the study, thereby mitigating to some extent concerns involving issues of a power asymmetry between teacher and student, and the possibility that Ricci might feel coerced to participate. It was made clear to Ricci that the portfolio would not be embedded into any language courses; nor would it be graded or assessed by the teacher. His use of the portfolio would be entirely voluntary, with no bearing on university academic results.

Procedure

In this study, Ricci was allowed to decide what to include in his portfolio. A four-tier portfolio development loop was designed as a guide (Johnson, Mims-Cox and Doyle-Nichols 2006:22, Fig.1). The first tier invited Ricci to choose artefacts to be placed in the portfolio and to consider their connection with the identified purpose of the portfolio. The second and third tiers focused on action planning and implementation, while the fourth and final tier represented a reflective review of the artefacts in terms of their appropriateness in demonstrating learning progress. Ricci was asked to write about his decisions and reasons for making such decisions in the weekly learning diary.

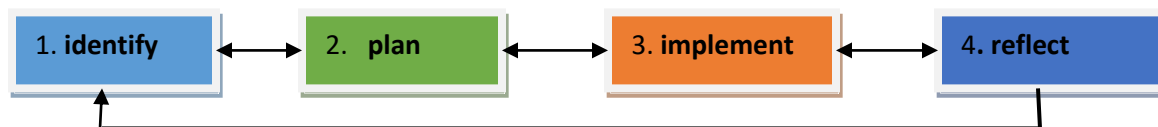


Figure 1: A Four-tier Portfolio Development Loop

The weekly diary, as part of the portfolio, comprised three parts (Appendix 1). In Part I, prompt 1 required Ricci to describe the completed activity and identify the progress made in a given area of language. Prompt 2 sought to engage Ricci affectively and/or cognitively – how he felt and why he had selected a given item. In the third set of prompts (No. 3-4), Ricci was alerted to the importance of reviewing his experience and of applying what had been learned in other contexts. This involved the use of his cognitive and metacognitive skills. Open-ended questions in Part II centred chiefly on the changes in terms of ESL strategy use as perceived by Ricci in the portfolio task. Ricci was asked to write about his ESL learning experiences, focusing particularly on strategy use and learning goal for the subsequent week. Part III aimed to guide Ricci through the reflection process as part of the weekly learning diary, by adopting a describe-analyse-understand-plan approach. Crucially, he was expected to write at least a page on his thoughts and feelings about his ESL learning experience, but he could structure the reflective piece in a way he felt confident, writing as much or as little he wished.

Data collection and analysis

Data was obtained from three sources over a full semester (14 weeks) at university: semi-structured interviews (in Weeks 1, 8 and 14), portfolio artefacts (e.g., DVD sleeve notes, magazine articles, company catalogues, brochures), and weekly learning diaries (both to be submitted in Weeks 7 and 14). The three interviews were conducted in English, taped and transcribed verbatim. These interview transcripts, together with Ricci's self-report data written in English from his diary entries and portfolio artefacts, were perused and classified according to ESL learning strategies, progress in the ESL and perceptions of portfolios. ESL learning strategies were categorized and operationally defined by drawing from the works of O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Chamot (1993), involving metacognitive, cognitive, social and affective strategies (Fig. 2). When Ricci referred to a strategy and described a relevant learning activity using it, the comment was counted as a mention of strategy use. However, if there was no description of any learning activity in relation to a strategy claim, the mention was not counted as a strategy application. Corresponding procedures were applied to Ricci's self-report progress in the ESL and perceptions of the portfolio.

Strategy Type	Strategy Name	Operational Definition
Metacognitive	Directed attention	Deciding in advance to pay attention to a task and to ignore distractions
	Selective attention	Deciding to pay attention to specific aspects of a task (e.g. listening to key words or focusing on new grammar)
	Problem identification	Identifying an aspect of the task needing resolution
	Self-evaluation	Checking the outcomes of one's own language performance against an internal benchmark (e.g. completeness, accuracy, fluency)
Cognitive	Contextualization	Using the language in a realistic situation
	Creative application	Creating opportunities or exploring avenues to use new

		material or language
	Rationalization	Applying learned or self-developed rules to handle a task in the target language
	Inferencing	Using available information to guess the meanings or usage of unfamiliar words
	Note-taking	Writing down key words or concepts in abbreviated verbal, graphic or numerical form
	Noticing	Alerting oneself to specific aspects of the target language in a situation
	Personalization	Making new material or language personally meaningful
	Repetition / Memorization	Repeating a word, phrase, or longer language sequence by saying it aloud or by playing it back in one's mind
	Resourcing	Using available reference sources of information about English (e.g. dictionaries, Internet, textbooks, prior work)
	Transfer	Using previously acquired knowledge (linguistic or real-life) to facilitate a language task
	Translation	Rendering words from one language to another in a relatively verbatim manner
Social and Affective	Cooperation	Working with others to solve a task; asking a classmate or friend for help
	Clarification	Asking for explanation and/or clarification; posing questions to the self
	Self-encouragement	Using rewards (symbolic or material) to provide personal motivation
	Self-talk	Using mental techniques to make one feel competent to handle a task

Figure 2: Learning Strategies and Operational Definitions

The findings are organized under three headings, beginning with effects of portfolios on ESL learning strategies (Research Question 1), followed by progress (Research Question 2) and perceptions (Research Question 3).

Effects of portfolios on ESL learning strategies

When asked to establish the purpose of his portfolio, Ricci problematized two aspects of English learning he considered crucial for language improvement: grammar and vocabulary. Such focus was reflected in his weekly learning goals focusing on elevated proficiency in these two areas. Ricci's portfolio artefacts, diaries and interview transcripts revealed a varied pattern of strategy

use spanning the metacognitive, cognitive and social and affective domains, including, inter alia, contextualization, note-taking, personalization, resourcing, co-operation, and self-encouragement.

Inter-connecting the wide-ranging strategies reported by Ricci can be discerned two main strands which resonated with Ricci's core beliefs about language learning – that language learning can and should be creative and fun and that one should 'observe' English in the environment (diary, week 7; portfolio artefact). By 'creative learning', Ricci referred principally to the use of resources ('resourcing') other than textbooks to learn English. He noted how his interest in 'funny videos' on YouTube was triggered by a friend who sent him a video clip on foul language. He thought the video 'awesome because after I watched it, I know that my vocabulary of dirty words is limited' (diary, week 7). This imbued him ('clarification') with the notion that

besides the traditional, formal language, we can explore alternative forms of language...in the same way foreigners like to know 'dirty' words in Cantonese (diary, week 7).

While working part-time in a boutique catered to both local and overseas clients, Ricci reported taking positive advantage of the workplace to practise and use new English expression ('creative application'). One example involved browsing the company's website for catalogues showing both the pictures and English-language descriptions of the products. He skimmed through the list ('noticing') and jotted down key words ('note-taking') associated with some of the popular items such as 'trench coat', 'bi-fold wallet', 'retractable handle', which he considered useful for better communication with his clients ('contextualization'). By 'visualizing the descriptions' ('personalization') and applying them in the workplace, Ricci made a pertinent point about language learning being an integral part of life ('transfer'; 'personalization'):

It's quite useful to learn English vocabulary in the workplace, because I see they are related to my daily life (diary, week 8).

Ricci also chronicled in his portfolio how he exploited learning opportunities by 'observing others'. An illustration of this concerned two different occasions – one formal (a mock interview) and the other social (a night-out with friends from different ethnic backgrounds) where he wrote about differences in accent and culture ('noticing'):

The first one was an interview with the directors from Gurkha International... The whole interview was conducted in English. The Managing Director is English, the Business Manager is Chinese and the rest are Nepalese... it's really difficult to listen to South-east Asian's English accent.

Another was a social gathering with 30 international exchange students...we drank, danced in the club... I learnt that Westerners really like to drink and go clubbing...my course-mate, Tom, drank 13 bottles of beer (diary, week 2).

Upon reflection, Ricci concluded that 'both situations gave him exposure to another culture, which is fabulous' and that 'it's good to keep on hanging out with the exchange students' ('co-operation') as this was analogous to 'living in an English-speaking environment'.

Among his portfolio artefacts, Ricci included a brochure from a recent museum visit to link what he saw at the museum to learning English. While admiring the art works there, he spotted 'a

woman jotting down notes and making her own comment on the artefacts', prompting him to remark that this could 'help people to record the details about the exhibition, such as vocabulary, facts, feeling' (diary, week 6). Such note-taking practice in fact mirrored Ricci's – when, for example, he was watching TV in order to 'reflect on the information and learn new vocabulary related to daily life' (diary, week 1) and listening to the lyrics in a song – 'the notes help me to trace back what I think and understand better the song' (diary, week 9), and 'to learn new vocabularies' (diary, week 10).

Effects of portfolios on progress in ESL

In the second interview, Ricci admitted that it took him almost four weeks to become acquainted with the portfolio format to begin to attend to language problems. The main problem he identified pertained to limitations in grammar and vocabulary due to laziness in primary and secondary school. Since the portfolio required that he plan the activity, set goals, collect evidence, apply and record learning strategies, he recognized the need for a more disciplined and diverse approach. One outcome with which Ricci expressed satisfaction pointed to his ability to differentiate between American and British accent when conversing with native speakers while working as a part-time sales assistant:

I can distinguish which one is from Britain, and which are is from Canada or America. Because I simply ask them: where are you guys from? And then the family, or the husband would say: we are from Britain, and then I say, 'I can hear your British accent' (Interview 2).

Not only did Ricci demonstrate insight into British and American accent, he further theorized about their difference in terms of language use and behaviour:

British people are more elegant, more gentleman and lady ...they will say, 'could you give me this wallet to have a look?' ...maybe in the American way is 'Can I see that?' (Interview 2).

In the third and final interview, Ricci revealed that the portfolio had sensitized him to several aspects of English, leading to improvement. The first related to better listening skills through lyrics of songs on CD or DVD (Appendix 2), noticing the 'strange accent' of individual singers (interview 2; portfolio artefact). Another area was Ricci's expanded vocabulary which emboldened him to communicate with native speakers, corroborating his belief about the intimate relationship between language learning and everyday life, be it personal, social or professional.

Ricci noted that reflective practice in the portfolio helped him to review what he had learned in a week and, more importantly, to examine 'the progress you've made in a week, and also the effort you put in learning English' (Interview 3).

Perceptions of portfolios to support ESL learning

Ricci understood that the portfolio had been used by people in the design field for job application and promotion, and surmised that it might be adopted by other professionals as an emerging 'new trend' in the future. Regarding the usefulness of the portfolio as a language learning tool, Ricci conceded that 'lazy' students would be less likely to benefit from the experience, given the heavy time commitment in terms of collecting, selecting evidence and chronicling the experience.

Ricci's portfolio and weekly diaries yielded a well-founded description of the variety of artefacts and learning strategies, demonstrating not only linguistic but also affective engagement:

In the article from *Time* magazine, I learn new vocabularies while getting some up-to-date information about human relationship in the fast-growing 21st century. (diary, week 8)...I highlighted this because I think it is a new phenomenon in the 21st century ... because traditionally we don't have distance love or relationship, but with advances in airplane or computer, it becomes a new style (Interview 3).

The article referred to in the excerpt examined 'commuter marriages', where expressions singled out by Ricci such as 'woman's career that drives the separation', 'retard the relationship the development of the relationship', 'extending the honeymoon period' mirrored Ricci's view on and concern about his friend's 'distance love' in real life. While on the one hand Ricci described the strategies to decode meaning ('inferencing'; 'translation'; 'resourcing'), on the other he analysed some potential problems his friend might encounter in maintaining such a relationship over distance ('clarification'):

since you can only reach each other by email or phone...the relationship is quite weak... he or she may hang out others and lie to you (Interview 3).

Such was the depth of his engagement with real-life issues, triggered by the inclusion of a magazine article of his choice in the portfolio from which he learned new words and posed questions about himself and others. Ricci's portfolio artefacts, diary entries and interview responses suggested that the portfolio had elicited both linguistic and emotional dispositions from him who construed the portfolio as a vehicle for recording, reviewing and contextualizing an experience.

Concluding remarks in Ricci's last diary entry revealed a positive appraisal of the portfolio experience:

After 14 weeks, I have found many interesting ways to study English. I hope the discovery will never stop ☺ Thanks to this pleasurable and valuable experience (diary, week 14). The implication tells me that learning a language can be fun, easy and full of flexibility. Textbooks and lessons are not the only route in the learning journey (diary, week 14).

Conclusion and further research

This study adopted a case study approach to generate qualitative data to investigate a learner's portfolio experiences over a full semester in a Hong Kong university. The findings indicate that the learner – Ricci – utilized a range of ESL learning strategies in the cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective domain, developed an increased awareness of effective ESL strategies, and considered portfolio practice productive of ESL learning.

Research suggests that one major objective of portfolio use is to enable learners to reflect on their process of learning, and to identify metacognitive strategies, including their personal learning strategies. Through portfolio compilation, learners become aware of what they are studying and begin to develop opinions about how they are studying in language classes. Developing a full picture of learners' strategy application is important because strategy use not

only informs the rate and route of ESL learning, but also guides pedagogic decisions regarding strategy training for effective ESL learning.

Ricci's portfolio experience in this study corroborates findings elsewhere that strategy application is the result of how learners construct the activity they are engaged in. This is a continually revised process. Although evidence regarding the causal link between learner proficiency and strategy use is inconclusive, this study reinforces the concept that strategy deployment correlates with contextual factors. Over the course of the semester, Ricci's perceptions of portfolio practice changed. Early in the semester he reported anxiety about having to identify a new ESL strategy every week; thus, he relied on 'safe', but unspecific applications such as 'doing grammar exercise'. As time passed, he showed evidence of an ability to justify and match strategy use with an identified purpose, indicating a more focused approach than before. It was at this point that Ricci began to report events, emphasizing more the communicative aspect of the activity than discrete language items. Concurrently, discernible in his portfolio was the way he wrote about how others acted and interacted in English. He showed evidence of 'noticing' and attending to both form and meaning of communication. He also made reference to previously recorded events in the portfolio to interpret the events. This marked a significant milestone in ESL learning, not only because Ricci applied the strategies, but also because he was aware of the implications for developing ESL. In turn, this lay the groundwork for future strategy selection and application to suit the context.

Further research needs to be undertaken for a more comprehensive portrait of the broad sociocultural context within which portfolios take place. This could and should include the examination of electronic portfolios in an online environment. Additional information should also be sought regarding the successes and limitations of using portfolios, print or digital, for ESL learning. Further investigation into the perceptions of portfolios involving main stakeholders – teachers, students, employers – in Confucian societies should enrich research on portfolio practice for Chinese-speaking ESL learners. How new technological tools can be integrated with other cultural artefacts to support ESL learning or how artefacts in the setting mediate the construction of these portfolios should be worthy of further scrutiny.

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Appendix 1: Weekly learning diary

Your name: _____

Week: _____

Part I:

1. _____ (item #) shows that I have some further practice in
- | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> pronunciation | <input type="checkbox"/> speaking | <input type="checkbox"/> listening | <input type="checkbox"/> reading |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sentence structure | <input type="checkbox"/> grammar | <input type="checkbox"/> vocabulary | <input type="checkbox"/> writing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> others: _____ | | | |

Areas in which I have made progress. Give examples.

2. _____ (item #) shows that I have identified reason(s) for including this in the portfolio. Explain.
3. _____ (item #) shows that I am aware of my strengths and weaknesses and the need for further improvement. Give details.
4. _____ (item #) shows that I have developed the ability to use this new experience in other ways. Give details.

Part II:

5. In your view, which item in Part I is the best/worst and why?

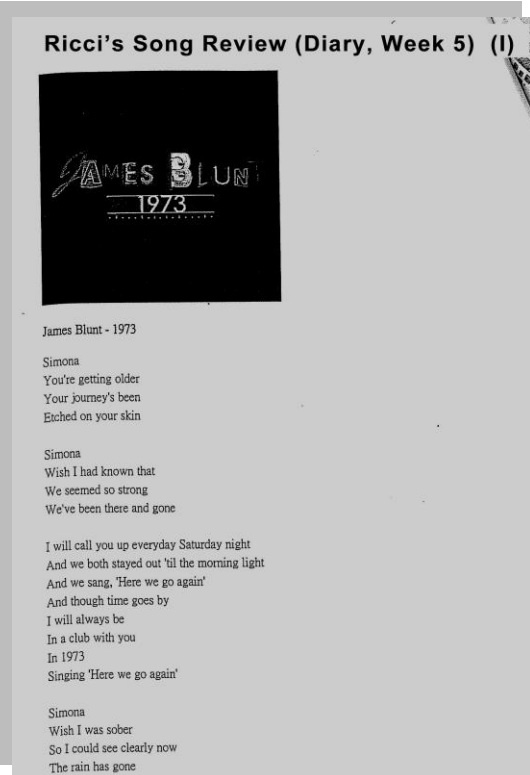
6. Can you think of ways in which the best/ worst item can be (further) improved?
7. What was one useful strategy you learned in the past week which helped to improve your English?
8. What was one thing that you did in the past week that you had not done before?
9. What is your goal for next week?

Part III

At the end of each day, if possible, write at least a page on your thoughts and feelings about your English language learning experience. The following serves as a guide.

- i) **Describe** (What happened? What did you do?)
- ii) **Analyse** (What was your feeling or response? Why did you react the way you did?)
- iii) **Understand its meaning** (What has become clearer for you? What can you learn from it?)
- iv) **Plan** (How will this understanding be useful to you? In what ways might this experience serve you in other situations or your future?)

Appendix 2: Examples of Ricci's portfolio artefact



Ricci's Song Review (Diary, Week 5) (I)

JAMES BLUNT
1973

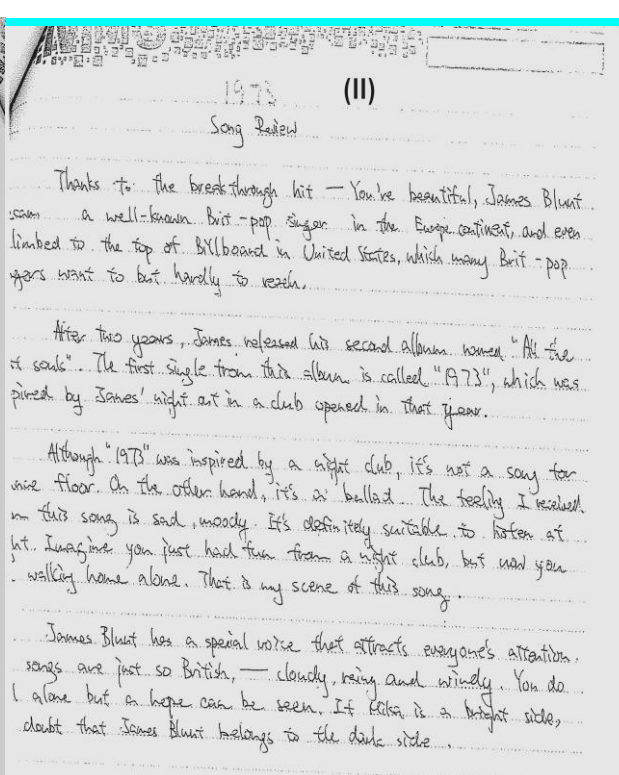
James Blunt - 1973

Simona
You're getting older
Your journey's been
Etched on your skin

Simona
Wish I had known that
We seemed so strong
We've been there and gone

I will call you up everyday Saturday night
And we both stayed out 'til the morning light
And we sang, 'Here we go again'
And though time goes by
I will always be
In a club with you
In 1973
Singing 'Here we go again'

Simona
Wish I was sober
So I could see clearly now
The rain has gone



1973 (II)
Song Review

Thanks to the breakthrough hit — You're beautiful, James Blunt soon a well-known Brit-pop singer in the Europe continent, and even climbed to the top of Billboard in United States, which many Brit-pop fans want to but hardly to reach.

After two years, James released his second album named "At the end of the road". The first single from this album is called "1973", which was inspired by James' night out in a club opened in that year.

Although "1973" was inspired by a night club, it's not a song for dance floor. On the other hand, it's a ballad. The feeling I received in this song is sad, moody. It's definitely suitable to listen at night. Imagine you just had fun from a night club, but now you're walking home alone. That is my scene of this song.

James Blunt has a special voice that attracts everyone's attention. Songs are just so British, — cloudy, rainy and windy. You don't alone but a hope can be seen. If there is a bright side, doubt that James Blunt belongs to the dark side.



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Dr. Chau is the recipient of five major awards: two President's Awards for excellence in teaching and services, two Faculty Awards for outstanding teaching and services, and one DARE Award for outstanding research. Her main research interests comprise second language learning and technology-enhanced learning. She has a strong research record, with publications in international peer-reviewed journals, including the *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, and *English Language Teaching Journal*. She has played an active role in leading and co-ordinating research projects that have made a significant impact on many aspects of teaching and learning at the English Language Centre of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and in the wide academic community.