

English-for-Teaching: rethinking teacher proficiency in the classroom

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The expansion of English teaching in state education systems places increasing demands on English language teachers and how they are trained. A major thrust of these efforts has focused on improving teachers' English language proficiency. This expectation is manifested in policy and pedagogical directives that teachers 'teach English in English'. We argue for a reconceptualization of teacher language proficiency, not as general English proficiency but as a specialized subset of language skills required to prepare and teach lessons. This concept of English-for-Teaching as a bounded form of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for the classroom builds on what teachers know about teaching, while introducing and confirming specific classroom language. This article describes how the construct was developed and then describes sample classroom tasks and the language needed to enact them in three major areas: managing the classroom, understanding and communicating lesson content, and assessing students and giving feedback.

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Introduction

In describing the state of ELT in 'developing' countries, Weddell offers the following synopsis:

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New English curriculum documents and teaching materials proliferate in state education systems worldwide. English has become a compulsory subject for ever more years of basic schooling. High stakes English tests are increasingly important gate-keepers for entry to higher levels of education. Although there has been massive human and financial investment in such initiatives, outcomes to date have often been disappointing. Reports suggest that there are relatively few state school classrooms anywhere in which most learners are developing a useable knowledge of English. (Weddell 2011: 3)

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Weddell's comments highlight the general sense of failure of efforts to reform and improve ELT around the world and point to the elusiveness of the central goal: that learners develop 'a useable knowledge of English'. As ELT teacher educators and researchers, we argue that any

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improvement that seeks to address this situation must focus on the classroom and has to reshape what happens in classroom teaching. We have approached this challenge through the question: How can we support classroom teachers so that, in Weddell's words, 'most learners are developing a useable knowledge of English'?

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This article makes the case that we need to think in new ways about the challenge and how to address it. While acknowledging the macro issues and influences that Weddell enumerates, our work has focused on what goes on in ELT classrooms, primarily in public-sector schools, to support what has become a widespread policy goal of teaching English *in* English.

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Our point of departure

We start from the well-established notion, argued by [Johnson \(1995\)](#) and others, that the language classroom represents a specific context in which teachers do work that draws on certain types of communicative abilities. The promulgation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methods has led to classroom situations in which teachers are usually expected to teach entirely in English. Yet many teachers may not do so for myriad reasons, for example lack of specific language knowledge or confidence in that knowledge, doubt that their students will understand, perceptions of pressure to meet curricular and assessment goals. In most public discourse and policy interventions, however, it is assumed these reasons stem primarily from teachers' lack of proficiency in the language.

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Therefore, the challenge of improving instructional quality in English classrooms has generally focused on improving teachers' 'command of English'. The argument is based on the generally held perception, embodied in CLT but rooted in the Direct Method, that if the teacher uses English in the classroom, students are more likely to see it as 'real'. The teacher's 'command of English' is typically defined in operational terms as increased general English proficiency, fostering the assumption that increasing the teacher's general capacity in the language will lead to improved classroom teaching, and thus to student learning. Such reasoning is reflected in policies in a cross section of countries from Korea and Vietnam to Chile ([English Opens Doors Program \[EOD\] 2012](#)) and Saudi Arabia (see also [Coleman 2011](#) for discussion).

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This goal, however, turns out to be considerably more complex than it appears on the surface. It requires connecting teachers' general language proficiency with their familiarity and knowledge of classroom practices. While a teacher may be well versed in the latter, she may not have command of the specific language to carry out what she knows how to do in the classroom *in English*. In the context of this analysis, we developed a different construct for ELT classroom language, which we refer to as 'English-for-Teaching'. This article explains the development of 'English-for-Teaching' as a construct for classroom language. We begin by outlining the background thinking that led to its development, and then offer an operational definition. We end by discussing briefly how the construct could influence practices of teacher education, assessment, and standards setting.

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The background thinking

Working with public-sector agencies and English teachers from around the world, as part of the *ELTeach* project,¹ we have explored the basic question of the relationship between general language proficiency and teacher classroom language. The connection between these two ideas highlights the numerous language demands inherent in the teacher's role in the ELT classroom, in which language is supposed to be simultaneously the medium and the object of instruction. Under the widespread influence of CLT, teachers are expected to provide models of the target language and at the same time to structure learning opportunities for their students to use that language. Most initiatives to improve teaching attempt to address these dual responsibilities through a single notion of language proficiency as 'command of English', yet this 'command of English' is rarely defined. Instead, policies and practices have tended to default to definitions drawn from general language proficiency frameworks, such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines. These general proficiency definitions have been very useful, particularly in distinguishing between knowledge and use of the language. However, the broad statements and frameworks do not address or specify the specific demands of language use in the classroom (nor, frankly, is it their intention to do so). In contrast, the analytic approach of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which focuses on analysing language use in specific situations, is more helpful. Through an ESP approach, we can recognize that situational differences in language use have implications for defining the language teachers need in the classroom.

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In 2010, the authors began to develop an alternative way of thinking about teachers' classroom language. Working with a consensus panel² of language teaching experts from 12 countries, we looked to improve teachers' skills with classroom English by focusing on the actual language they use to carry out classroom instruction and manage predictable interactions on a daily basis. This was, in essence, an ESP-derived approach to the problem ([Hutchinson and Waters 1987](#)).

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Focusing the target domain of language use on the classroom work teachers are doing has several advantages. It makes that target more relevant and attainable to teachers as learners. It simultaneously affirms clear, consistent communicative language that students are likely to understand in the context of the classroom. In this way, this focused approach converts the problem of language improvement from one of general proficiency to one of specialized contextual language use, which is likely to be more efficient in bringing about practical impacts on teacher classroom efficacy and student learning outcomes.

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As a starting point, the consensus panel developed a working definition of the classroom teacher who is expected to teach English *in* English. The definition, which intentionally reflected a global profile of public-sector ELT, was built on the following premises. This is a teacher who:

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- [u]ses English partially or completely as the medium of instruction, although he or she is familiar with the [target language] curricular content;

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- 4.5 ■ is familiar with classroom routines, including basic classroom management and teaching strategies, and can carry out these classroom tasks and routines that are predictable;
- is expected to use a defined (often nationally prescribed) curriculum;
- draws English language support from instructional materials;
- is teaching students who are at the beginning or intermediate levels of general English proficiency; and
- 4.10 ■ is expected to use English to interact with students [in the classroom] in simple and predictable ways. (Young, Freeman, Hauck, Garcia Gomez, and Papageorgiou 2014)

4.15 We refer to the classroom language that such teachers need to be able to use as ‘English-for-Teaching’. In hyphenating the term, we anchored the construct in current research on ‘knowledge-for-teaching’, which examines how teachers use domain- and subject-specific knowledge in classroom teaching (for example in elementary mathematics see [Ball, Thames, and Phelps 2008](#)). In this sense, English-for-Teaching is both a language and a knowledge construct, which serves to reassemble the dual roles of English—as both the medium and the object of instruction—referred to earlier.

4.20 **English-for-Teaching as an alternative construct**

English-for-Teaching, derived as it is from a language-for-specific purposes approach, details the specific command of classroom English that is required. We define this specific command as:

4.25 The essential English language skills a teacher needs to be able to prepare and enact the lesson in a standardized (usually national) curriculum in English in a way that is recognizable and understandable to other speakers of the language. (Young *et al. ibid.*)

4.30 There are several key elements in this definition that serve in operationalizing it. First, we distinguish between ‘preparing lessons’ and ‘enacting them’, a categorization which is anchored in the distinction between pre-active and interactive decisions first discussed in the teacher cognition literature, and later in ELT research, by [Woods \(1996\)](#) and others. We then identify specific skills associated with each category. For example in preparing lessons, teachers may read lesson guides or listen to aural materials to prepare class activities. In enacting lessons, teachers may listen to students while engaged in class activities and then provide feedback on their output.

4.40 Second, we establish that the language, along with the pedagogical reasoning that underlies its use, is bounded by what we call a ‘standardized curriculum’. Since the focus is primarily on public-sector classrooms, that curriculum is generally a national one, often using nationally produced student materials to achieve nationally specified learning outcomes. Through an analysis of such student materials collected from regions around the world, the consensus panel was able to identify a set of common instructional routines. These routines create a context of language use, with a particular set of tools (for example student texts and teacher guides) that scaffold the English used by teachers and students. By ‘common’, we mean that they are

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a regular, predictable part of instruction across a variety of forms of instruction and classroom contexts. For example a common classroom routine is that the teacher needs to be able to understand and to read aloud clearly the English instructions for activities provided in the student textbook. The teacher's guide and the direction lines in the student books are tools that support this context of language use for the teacher. In this instance, the context of language use can be further subdivided into two particular tasks: reading the activity directions in the teacher's guide in order to understand them (which falls under 'preparing lessons') and then reading those same directions orally in order to carry out that part of the lesson.

Third, the definition of English-for-Teaching argues that the standard for this classroom English use should be comprehensibility. English-for-Teaching needs to be understandable to other English language users in similar contexts. We thus do not enter into the debates over the validity or practicality of so-called 'native-speaker' standards. Rather, we adopt a language-for-specific purposes position, that the language standard should be determined by others who are working in comparable contexts of use.

Designing the construct

We can represent the construct of Language-for-Teaching diagrammatically as follows (see Figure 1), which helps in operationalizing it.

Using English to teach English entails using the language to accomplish particular curricular and interactional ends within the classroom context. In this way, the language knowledge is firmly anchored in—or drives—particular uses of specific content, which are situated both interactionally and contextually in the classroom. The English-for-Teaching construct identifies relevant language skills the teacher can draw on to carry out instructional routines. For example, in giving homework, a teacher may write the assignment on the board, copying the information from her instructional materials. To introduce an activity, she may describe the activity and offer examples for carrying it out. To provide feedback to students, she listens to what students produce and then may ask questions or model a desired response. However, the focus on general language proficiency, which is

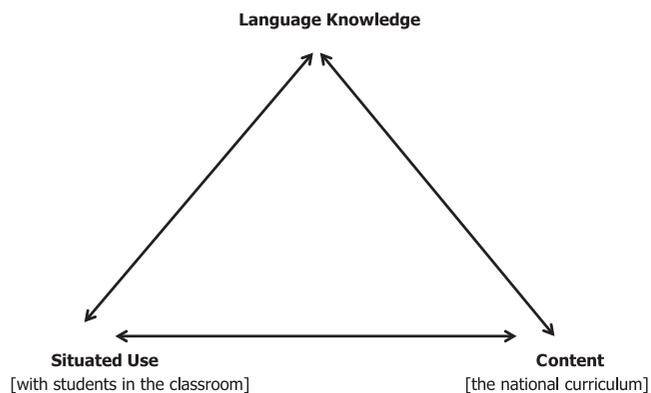


FIGURE 1
Language-for-Teaching

common in most ELT teacher education (Sešek 2007), does not address the specific language needed to carry out these teaching tasks. With English-for-Teaching, we argue that it is more useful and efficient to focus directly on the particular language skills related to the specific classroom work to be done in English.

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The English-for-Teaching construct repositions English as a practical communicative tool to carry out certain defined responsibilities within a professional or work context, the language classroom. In this sense, the construct addresses, and integrates, the tension inherent between this essential language, common across instructional settings and in this sense 'global', and the particular teacher's use of that language in classroom instruction which has to be, by definition, 'local'. Teachers know the tasks and responsibilities of their teaching situations, and they know the social and interactional contexts of their classrooms. When teachers draw on this local knowledge to scaffold the English needed to implement it, their sense of authority and expertise in their classrooms is enhanced. Because the language is organized according to what the teacher knows and does regularly, it supports her in using language understandably in these often complex instructional situations.

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Illustrating the construct

In English-for-Teaching, specific language exemplars illustrate the intersection of teaching knowledge and relevant language knowledge as applied in everyday classroom routines. To identify a set of these exemplars, we used processes generally accepted in developing ESP materials: identifying teachers' specific tasks and routines, based on the teacher profile presented earlier; analysing performances; and defining specific language use involved (Hutchinson and Waters op.cit.). These classroom routines had to account for the English language that both appears in the curriculum content and is used as the medium through which that content is taught in the language classroom. To this end, we analysed ten national ELT curricula to gather common instructional tasks and routines, and the language to enact them. We also drew on classroom research and classroom language data from several countries. The consensus panel then confirmed common tasks and routines and the language to implement them (see Freeman, Katz, LeDréan, Burns, and Hauck 2013). This process identified essential language used across instructional settings, defining a set of language resources that individual teachers can draw on in their particular contexts.

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We grouped the tasks and routines from the analysis into three functional areas:

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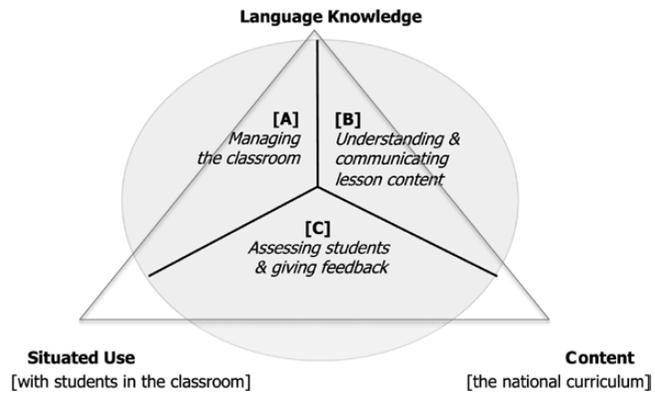
- managing the classroom
- understanding and communicating lesson content
- assessing students and giving them feedback.

When these functional areas are mapped on to the basic construct, the specific purposes for teacher's language use are more evident (see Figure 2).

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FIGURE 2
Functional areas of
classroom language use



For example to manage the classroom, the teacher uses particular classroom management language skills, with which the teacher connects her English language knowledge to its situated use with students in her classroom (A in Figure 2). To understand and communicate lesson content, the teacher uses English language knowledge to communicate content (in this instance the national curricula) (B in Figure 2), and to assess students and give them feedback, the teacher connects that content to how it is situated in the classroom (C in Figure 2).

Interestingly, pedagogical knowledge is infused throughout the construct as language to enact teaching. It is evident in how the teacher uses English to manage the classroom, to present and have students practise the content, and how she corrects students. In this way, using the classroom language binds the task with a particular purpose; it is language used to teach. This approach makes English-for-Teaching parallel in useful ways to knowledge-for-teaching constructs in other subject matters (see, for example, Ball *et al.* op.cit.).

Table 1 details several examples of the ESP-based type of analyses used to circumscribe the classroom language. The analysis starts with defining the teacher task, then categorizing it in a functional area (see Figure 2), then defining the type of language and the language skill the task involves.

The analysis then takes each task and identifies specific language that can be used to carry it out. Table 2 shows three of the classroom tasks from Table 1, selected from across the three functional areas, with accompanying English language exemplars.

As with any ESP approach that organizes language use based on situations and tasks, it is important to acknowledge that these language exemplars are not exclusive or even finite. They may even give the impression of a 'reduced' variety of classroom language (cf. Walsh 2013). They are, however, functional exemplars that get the work done. In characterizing the form of English in English-for-Teaching as language that can be used to teach the lesson in English, we recognize that a teacher may use this or different language to accomplish the same task. In giving the instructions for a pair-work activity, for example, the teacher might say, 'Work with a partner', which is the exemplar given

	Classroom routine/ teacher task	Functional area	Nature of language involved	Language skill
	Greeting students	Managing the classroom	Greetings and salutations	Speaking and listening
8.5	Organizing students to start an activity	Managing the classroom	Directions to students to settle down and begin work	Speaking
	Giving instructions and explanations	Understanding and communicating lesson content	Activity instructions and explanations	Speaking/writing
8.10	Introducing new vocabulary	Understanding and communicating lesson content	Definitions and explanations of new words; examples	Speaking
	Understanding student oral output during a reading activity	Assessing students and providing feedback	Texts of various types as presented in students' instructional materials	Listening and reading
8.15	Responding to student oral output during a role play activity	Assessing students and providing feedback	Feedback on target language, e.g. grammar, vocabulary, register	Listening and speaking

8.20 TABLE 1
Moving from tasks and routines to classroom language

8.25 above. Or she could say 'Talk to your neighbour' or 'Work with the person next to you', each of which language exemplar accomplishes the task. One exemplar is not inherently better or more appropriate than the other; any one could work in the situation. Settling on one exemplar, however, focuses the task and offers the teacher confidence that the language is appropriate to get the task done using English. This focusing or limiting through exemplars, when it is done appropriately, helps to address the inherently diverse nature of language use, so that the classroom language can reasonably be taught and assessed.

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8.35 **Summary and implications**

8.40 We have argued that the language defined as English-for-Teaching is a specified subset of the language that might be used to enact lessons. Circumscribed by a predictable group of common classroom interactions, and scaffolded by common tasks and routines that delineate these interactions, this language permits the teacher to prepare for and enact a lesson, based on a given, usually national, curriculum in the classroom setting. This way of creating boundaries for language content is critically important on three levels. First, it allows for a refined ESP-based focus in functional terms that are directly applicable to the classroom in place of the broader notion of general language proficiency. Second, this redefinition assumes and encourages teachers to use what they already know about teaching and about their classrooms as a basis for developing this targeted classroom language. Third, the limiting of the language construct can facilitate development of learning materials, training programmes, and assessments that focus on teachers' language proficiency used in the work of classroom ELT.

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Functional area	Classroom routine	Language exemplars	
Managing the classroom	Organizing students to start an activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please go to your seat • Copy the words from the board • Use the words to write a summary of the story 	9.5
Understanding and communicating lesson content	Giving instructions and explanations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with a partner • Match the questions and answers • Take turns to read the paragraph. Then underline the words you don't know. 	
Assessing students and providing feedback	Responding to student oral output during a role play activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That's right • Nice work • Look at the example in the chart again • Those are great ideas 	9.10

TABLE 2
Functional areas, sample classroom routines, and language exemplars

In closing, we briefly sketch out some possible applications of English-for-Teaching in three areas: designing teacher education programmes, creating assessments of teacher language proficiency, and articulating criteria to support teacher development and classroom performance. We consider each area in turn below.

Designing teacher education programmes

The approach proposed in English-for-Teaching can potentially reshape the design of teacher education and professional development programmes to address teachers' language development in terms of tangible, classroom-based outcomes. The approach thus moves away from general language proficiency to focus on the specific English skills that teachers need for the work they do in their classrooms. There is great face validity in basing language training on clearly identified tasks and routines that teachers face in preparing and teaching lessons. Structured in this way, teacher education programmes allow teachers to develop or refine the language skills they need to perform these identified tasks and routines in English. Thus, they connect what they are learning directly to the work they are doing with their students in their classrooms. This approach uses teachers' local knowledge and experience as an immediate basis for professional learning. Consequently, it can respond to often heard comments that general language training takes too long to make a difference in the classroom. By focusing on the work itself, English-for-Teaching can help teachers make more efficient and effective use of their time, energy, and experience.

Creating assessments linked to teachers' classroom proficiency

We argue that the concept of English-for-Teaching has the potential to shift the focus in teacher language assessment to designing tests centred on classroom performance rather than on general language knowledge. Adopting the ESP approach can support development of a set of assessment claims based on the actual classroom work of teaching. The assessment structure and actual tasks can then reflect

what teachers need to do when they prepare for and teach lessons. The performance results can be reported in these terms as well. Creating assessments that actually look like the work teachers do in the classroom can help build stronger validity arguments. Unfortunately, much teacher language testing rarely adopts such an approach, often leaving teachers to question its value.

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Articulating criteria for teacher development and classroom performance

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Bridging an increasingly global knowledge base with national expectations and local classroom practices is a central challenge in developing criteria for teacher knowledge and classroom performance. In attempting to promulgate a single global standard, the process can often ignore local educational needs and realities (Katz and Snow 2009). Interlinking the **global**, **national**, and **local** levels of criteria is part of the ‘glo-na-cal’ dilemma of setting standards. By focusing on the actual day-to-day work of classroom English language teaching, our approach responds to this ‘glonacal’ challenge of setting criteria for teachers’ language development and professional knowledge use. The teacher task-language exemplar approach, which is the basis of English-for-Teaching, grounds criteria for teacher performance in a framework of classroom teaching tasks, which are globally referenced. The approach of ‘globally benchmarked–locally valued’ performance allows for distinguishing between descriptive information (from the task-exemplar framework) and how that information is valued by national or local policies. In this way, the approach can provide information on how performance aligns with globally set benchmarks. However, it maintains the possibility that judgments about appropriate levels of that performance are locally determined, thus acknowledging the fundamentally ‘glonacal’ nature of standards.

Conclusions

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There are, by current estimates, some 15 million teachers of English around the world. They generally work in public-sector classrooms, teach different (often large) numbers of students in their classes, and follow a nationally set curriculum, with varying levels of professional training and support. Within these local teaching conditions, these teachers face escalating expectations from the local community as well as educational administrations and policymakers. Command of English is one of the most visible of these expectations. How best to improve it is a principal concern of professional training and educational improvement. We argue that a different way of thinking can productively address the demand and scale of this challenge. We have outlined one conceptual approach for addressing this situation and how it can be operationalized. Some may see these proposals as repackaging previously tried strategies, though we would differ with this view. Some may raise concerns about other factors that can impact teachers’ classroom use of English: how they perceive their students’ capacity to understand lessons, how they use the first language to complement English in their classrooms, or how local cultural and historical notions may shape their views of effective teaching. These issues would require more extended discussion. However, we believe that any proposal that looks to support classroom teachers in their work, irrespective of whatever critique, has to account for the actual classroom work that teachers do and how they do it.

Final version received October 2014

Notes

- 1 The *ELTeach* project is a collaboration of National Geographic Learning and Educational Testing Services.
- 2 Prevalent in various types of policy development (including health and education), a consensus panel is a group of people chosen based on expertise, and perhaps for other characteristics relevant to the task (in this case, also institutional affiliation—Ministry of Education, university, school sectors—and geographical diversity). The panel is asked to examine an issue about which there is a range of views within the parent knowledge domain, to see if a consensus view can be reached. See [Freeman, Katz, LeDréan, Burns, and Hauck \(2013\)](#) for membership of the English-for-Teaching Consensus Panel.

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