

## Weaving Intergenerational Engagement into ESL Instruction: Case Study of a University-Based Program in Hong Kong

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This article aims to address the practical question of whether there is educational value to embedding second-language (L2) learning experiences in intergenerational contexts. In particular, a case study was conducted of a novel, university-based ESL program in Hong Kong in which a group of older adult volunteers with a high level of English language proficiency skills engaged a group of college students with beginner to mid-level English language skills for an intensive three-month period of English language instruction, language practice, and intergenerational relationship building activities. The intergenerational context was reflected in the curricular activities designed to stimulate intergenerational (teacher-learner) sharing of real-life interests, stories, experiences, and perspectives. According to data from open-ended questions and IELTS-based English proficiency tests, the college students exhibited improved ESL skills and enhanced motivation to practice and extend their learning, while the older adult volunteers earned a valued teaching credential, improved their teaching abilities, and gained confidence and motivation for expanding their social linkages in the community. Implications for framing intergenerational encounters in ways that enhance meaningful ESL learning in real world contexts are considered.

This article describes a case study of a distinct model for enlisting older adult volunteers as instructors in a college-based ESL class and positioning their engagement with the students in ways that enrich the ESL learning milieu and generate successful and highly motivated English learners. The IG-ESL (“Intergenerational-English as a Second Language”) program was implemented during the summer of 2013 at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. There were two groups of participants: eight adult volunteers, all 55 years of age and older and recruited from the University’s Institute of Active Ageing (IAA) membership, and nine college students recruited from several universities in Hong Kong. They met for 12 weekly two-hour intergenerational language learning and practicing sessions.

For the college students, a group with English language skills ranging from beginner to intermediate level, the primary objective was to strengthen and expand their ESL skills. Under this objective was the goal of creating an ESL-oriented intergenerational learning environment that stimulates student interest and practice with regard to using English language in real world contexts.

For the older adult volunteers, all of whom had a high self-perceived level of English language proficiency, the primary objective was to help them develop professional skills in teaching English as a second language. A secondary objective was to provide them with opportunities to meet and share life experiences with the students, thereby expanding their interests and abilities for engaging youth in community settings.

The intergenerational component is conceptualized as introducing a qualitatively distinct set of

opportunities for enhancing ESL language learning motivation and creating a stimuli-rich second language learning milieu (Lai & Kaplan, 2013a). Throughout the program, the older adult participants shared their socio-historical knowledge gained from lifelong experience while at the same time encouraging the students to influence the course of these exchanges in ways that address real-life issues of interest to them. From an ecological perspective on second language development (van Lier, 2004) or one which emphasizes direct perception and affordances (Gibson, 1979), such intergenerational encounters make further semiotic (i.e., meaning-making) action more possible. To elaborate, meaningful information—in this case, real-life stories based on the older adults’ lifelong experience—could be (1) readily made available in the proximal environment, (2) directly perceived by the students, and (3) actively acted on for finding new meaning from language. Grounded in this theoretical framework of perception-in-action, the intergenerational approach to English instruction can be understood as a vehicle for transforming older adults’ lifelong experiences into “meaningful potential” in the environment that can be simultaneously woven into the students’ ESL learning potential or “ability” (see van Lier, 2004, p. 96).

This orientation is consistent with the way Cordella and colleagues (2012) described the role played by older adults proficient in Chinese, German, Spanish, and English who joined an Australian program that matched them with high school students interested in learning these languages. The adult volunteers functioned as “important catalysts for language maintenance” (p. 80). They did not have any previous training in second language instruction, yet they were

effective in getting students actively engaged for their language production, giving them ongoing feedback, and assisting them to talk further and more meaningfully (Cordella et al., 2012; Just, 2012).

These findings are consistent with research on intergenerational programs in other school and community settings which highlight the profound impact that older adult volunteers have on students' literacy skills. For example, Meyer and colleagues (2002) and Macdonald (2006) describe intergenerational senior-as-tutor programs that were found to have positive impacts on student expository reading (i.e., comprehension on textual instructions) and general literacy skills. Another theme in this stream of research emphasizes the importance of the emergent intergenerational relationships in the process of learning and gaining competence in a second language. In Dipardo and Schnack's (2004) study of an intergenerational reading and writing program which paired older adult volunteers with eighth-graders whose native language was not English, they emphasized how the trust and rapport established between the adult volunteers and the students helped set the stage for increasingly challenging English language conversations drawing upon shared experience and co-constructed meanings: "Their participation illustrates the interweaving of emotion and cognition in engaged literacy and underscores the need to create opportunities for literacy learning that are at once interpersonally warm and critically astute" (p. 15).

The IG-ESL pilot project described in this article was conducted with the goal of gaining further insight into the pedagogical value of embedding second-language (L2) teaching and learning experiences in intergenerational contexts. The IG-ESL curriculum provided an ideal platform for such an investigation insofar as the activities were designed to stimulate rich intergenerational dialogue, touching on a wide range of conversation topics and using diverse media platforms. Program implications are explored for enhancing ESL education and providing older adults with additional opportunities for meaningful civic engagement.

This pilot project draws from theoretical notions and novel programming described in the intergenerational studies as well as the applied linguistics literatures. The reference to an "intergenerational studies" literature alludes to a broader body of scholarly inquiry focused on intergenerational research, practice methods, and policy initiatives. One hub for exploring this interdisciplinary body of literature is the *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, which was established by Haworth Press in 2003 and is now published by Taylor and Francis.

## The Hong Kong Context

The IG-ESL pilot program was located in Hong Kong, a metropolitan city situated in the South coast of China with a population of closely 7.5 million people. Hong Kong was colonized under British rule for 99 years before returning to China in 1997. Under the governance of the British Empire, English language has become an official language. Since the handover of Hong Kong to China, both English and Chinese have become the two languages that share the same official and statutory status. English language is the main medium of instruction in all eight of the major universities in Hong Kong.

The population of Hong Kong is unique in terms of long life expectancy (on average, women live until 86.7 and men till 80), high IQ (at 107, it ranks #1 in the world), and a relatively high level of educational achievement (Basten, Yip, & Chui, 2013; Lynn & Meisenberg, 2010). As a consequence, Hong Kong has a sizable population of older intellectuals from the retirement sector who are knowledgeable, well versed in English language and more flexible in availability than the working population. In seeing the advantages of working with this indigenous human resource, the program developers framed the IG-ESL program to be delivered via the intensive commitment and involvement of older adult volunteers.

## Program Planning and Implementation

### Positioning the Curriculum

The IG-ESL program is positioned as a non-traditional ESL program. Traditional programming of ESL at the higher education level operates on three tracks: remedial, academic and discipline-specific. Remedial ESL courses require students with limited English language proficiency (LEP) to take some English foundation programs on a non-credit basis before entering specific courses of study. The second type involves English instruction for academic purposes (EAP). These courses tend to be credit bearing and designed to prepare students linguistically to adapt to overall academic demands. In the third category, the emphasis is on providing students with the English language skills required for discipline-specific courses.

The IG-ESL program does not fit in any of the above categories. Rather, it is positioned to help fill some of the gaps in between these categories of ESL instruction. The general emphasis is on providing college students with a structured adjunct program with the general goal of helping them develop, practice, and improve their English language skills for their personal purposes, whether tied to academic, career development, or daily life pursuits.

There was no formal academic credit provided by the students' universities, though they did receive, as did the older adult volunteers: 4.5 continuing education unit (CEU) credits provided by Pennsylvania State University (as part of its intergenerational studies outreach program).

### Recruiting and Training Participants

To find older adults with good proficiency in English and an interest in volunteering and serving college youth, project team members (i.e., the authors plus one project assistant) met with several organizations that provide services for older adults. Eventually a partnership was established with Hong Kong Polytechnic University's Institute of Active Aging (IAA), a non-profit and self-financing organization which aims to promote active aging and well-being for older adults. An IG-ESL program recruitment flyer was sent to IAA's approximately 900 members. Twenty-one responded, and after follow-up phone conversations and meetings, the nine respondents deemed to have the highest levels of English language proficiency and interest in working with the students were invited to join the program. Eventually, eight of them signed up for the program; the ninth older adult did not sign up due to a change in availability.

College-aged students in several universities were informed about the program through flyers, newspaper adverts, and targeted messages sent via campus and student listserves. Eventually a group of nine students from three different universities – Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hang Seng Management College, and BNU/HKBU United International College – signed up for the program on a volunteer basis.

Before the program began, the older adults filled in a "Talent Bank Form" in which they provided information about their previous occupation(s) before retiring, educational level, hobbies, and perceived level of proficiency in English language (i.e., low, medium or high). All of the older adult volunteers were educated at university level with a perceived level of English proficiency at a high level (although none were native speakers). Their pre-retirement careers were as follows: social worker, nurse, government worker, teacher, and company director. From the pre-project questionnaires filled out by the students, it was determined that their English language skills ranged from beginner to intermediate level. The students' academic backgrounds spanned the fields of management, business administration, nursing, medicine, and international relations.

To prepare the older adults for the ESL educator/co-teacher role that they were expected to play in the program, they met with the program director for two-hour professional development sessions before

each of the 12 intergenerational program sessions. These training sessions were designed to provide them with ideas and strategies for engaging the students in English language conversation, introduce them to some of the theories that have influenced the ESL field as well as the development of the IG-ESL curriculum, and run through the details of the IG-ESL program activities. All of the teaching and learning materials were based on an instructional and curriculum guidebook devised by Lai and Kaplan (2013b).

### The Curriculum

The IG-ESL curriculum consists of six activities, with the program framed into 12 two-hour weekly sessions. Table 1 below provides the titles and brief outlines for each activity.

For each activity, the program director actively stimulated intergenerational (teacher-learner) sharing of real-life interests, stories, experiences, and perspectives. For example, he would encourage both generations to exchange views, to elaborate with examples, or to debate over a social issue. Sometimes, he would arrange all participants to sit in a circle to present, consolidate, or clarify what had been discussed. Such intergenerational encounters were viewed as providing useful contexts for promoting second-language development and practice.

As noted in Lai and Kaplan (2013b), the IG-ESL curriculum was designed to:

- provide students with opportunities to (further) develop and practice all four linguistic skills (i.e., listening, writing, reading and speaking),
- focus on themes or topics that have the potential to stimulate discovery about common needs and interests across generations,
- provide intergenerational engagement opportunities utilizing multiple media (video, websites, face-to-face conversations, etc.), and
- actively engage all participants in curriculum development; students and older adult volunteers provide input and work collaboratively to help determine the foci of readings, discussions, and activities.

### Methods

Several methods were used to determine IG-ESL program impact on: students' reading, writing, listening and oral skills development; student motivation to engage in real world ESL practice; and older adult volunteers' ESL teaching and intergenerational engagement skills and styles. This included pre- and post-program proficiency tests (used to assess program impact on students' English language skills), post

Table 1  
*Brief Layout of the IG-ESL Curriculum*

Activity Titles	Intended Outputs
1. Back to the Future	Role-playing Autobiographical presentation
2. Intergenerational Hunt	Oral presentation Reflective journal writing Subtitle-making
3. Intergenerational Power [Press]	A co-authored letter for publication in a newspaper
4. Intergenerational Advert I	An advert script
5. Intergenerational Advert II	A ready-to-shoot script
6. Intergenerational Advert III	A one minute long advert to promote an intergenerational idea

program questionnaires and periodic group interviews with students and senior volunteers (used to obtain participant feedback on individual activities as well as the overall program), and video recordings of program sessions and planning meetings with staff and senior volunteers (to track intergenerational patterns of discourse and language learning activity). Journals were kept by staff members and students as an additional source of information about program activities and participants' behaviors and perceptions of the program.

A small sample size of nine college students, including six who completed the entire program and three who dropped out before the halfway mark, took a series of IELTS-based English language tests to assess listening, speaking, reading, and writing before and after the program. IELTS has been widely used as an English language assessment tool for testing university-level students (Feast, 2002). The scope of the assessments, corresponding formats, and grading criteria are illustrated in Table 2, below.

Pre- and post- program English language test scores were determined for the participant and dropout groups. Considering the small sample size, only percentage differences in the pre- to post- program scores are reported for both groups (in Table 3).

To supplement the quantitative data, qualitative data was generated from video- and audio-taped observations of the training and program sessions and two detailed and reflective journals, one kept by an assistant researcher who was a non-participant and the other by the first author who also served as primary program facilitator for all sessions. At the end of the program, all participants were given an open-ended structured questionnaire with general questions

developed by the authors about their overall program experience as well as specific questions about the educational and perceived relationship-building value of individual activities.

The project research team employed Corbin and Strauss's (2008) coding procedures for naturalistic, ethnographic purposes of investigation. The project co-directors (authors) examined all collected data, established a coding system that reflected thematic content related to program objectives, independently coded portions of participants' quotes (obtained from the open-ended questions), resolved differences in coding decisions, and placed quotes in relevant response categories.

Data coding decisions were subsequently reviewed in light of observational field notes and after-class journals kept by the principal investigator and a research assistant. The response categories were modified to include relevant observation-based excerpts that fit into major response categories. In this procedure, triangulation of codes and themes was verified in multiple data sources.

Throughout this article, quotes are presented which are illustrative of the major response themes and reflective of the degree to which the program achieved its primary objectives.

## Results

### Program Impact on Students

**Students' English language skills development.** As noted in Table 3 below, the six students who completed the entire program demonstrated pre- to

Table 2  
*Battery of English Proficiency Tests Given to College Students Before and After the IG-ESL Program*

Proficiency Test	Testing Domains	Format	Grading Criteria
Test 1	Reading	Read a passage and answer 13 multiple choice (MC) questions in 20 minutes	Percentage of questions answered correctly
Test 2	Writing	Choose one of two topics (e.g., “For a better quality of life, all shops in Hong Kong should close at 6.30pm. Do you agree?”), and write an essay (approx. 250 words) within 30 minutes.	Content, organization and grammar
Test 3	Outline Writing	Based on the essay topic chosen, write an outline including purpose, thesis statement, and topic sentences.	Appropriateness and logics
Test 4	Listening	Listen to a conversation and answer 10 MC questions in 30 minutes.	Percentage of questions answered correctly
Test 5	Speaking	Speak for three minutes on one of the following six topics: 1. Climate change 2. E-commerce 3. Gun control in America 4. Hong Kong’s air pollution 5. Hong Kong’s property pricing 6. H5N1	Coherence, content, grammar, lexis and delivery

Table 3  
*Program Impact on Students’ ESL Test Scores*

Testing Domains	Performance of Students in the Project Group (N=6)	Performance of Students in the Drop-Out Group (N=3)
Reading	Positive difference by 6%	Negative difference by 20.8%
Listening	Positive difference by 26%	Negative difference by 0.1%
Oral	Positive difference by 31%	Negative difference by 12%
Outline writing	Positive difference by 40%	Negative difference by 35%
Essay writing	Positive difference by 28%	Negative difference by 8%

post-program improvements in their scores for all five language skills, whereas the three students who dropped out demonstrated declines in their scores.

Considering the small sample sizes for both groups as well as the exploratory nature (non-experimental design) of this program evaluation study, this difference in test scores for the participant and non-participant groups should be considered suggestive (rather than as

providing definitive evidence) of program impact on student ESL skills. However, when viewed in conjunction with the qualitative data presented below, a more complete picture of program impact on students’ English language skills emerges.

The students made numerous comments during the program sessions and in their post-project questionnaires that support and provide context to the

quantitative findings indicating improvements in their English language skills. Such comments fit into the following five thematic categories, with total number of responses and examples provided for each category:

- 1) General comments alluding to perceived self-improvement (8 responses):

I can feel that this program has improved my English language skills. I did not expect my English can really improve in such a short program. It is only for 12 weeks and we only meet once a week for 2 hours. But the truth is, it really works!

- 2) Improved speaking skills (which several students attributed to having less fear and increased confidence to speak English) (7 responses):

Not only did we have many opportunities to read, write and listen in English, we were given the chance to speak in English ... in front of the whole class. This program not only made me more confident to communicate in English with others but also boosted my speak-on-the-stage confidence.

- 3) Benefits of non-traditional ESL learning context (students alluded to less pressure and more encouragement to practice outside of the classroom) (7 responses):

My regular school English teachers, [sic] aimed at improving our English standard so that we can get a good result in the exam. But IG-ESL, [sic] improving English skills [for test] is not the only focus. My English is improved through doing different tasks. It is not boring and I can improve my English without any pressure.

- 4) Enhanced listening skills (6 responses):

My listening skills are indeed improved due to frequently [sic] use of English in conversation with the elderly and others.

- 5) Increased awareness and use of English language learning resources (such as English language newspapers, movies, and TV news programs) (4 responses):

This program has influenced me to read more English language news in South China Morning Post and watch Pearl News.”

The older adult participants also emphasized the value of English language learning resources, as evident in the following comments made at one of the professional development sessions:

Almond: “Every day, they [i.e., youth] can watch English language news on English Channel. They can also watch how legislators [i.e., law-making senates] argue in the legislative council. They can watch on the government’s website. It is quite interesting to see how they argue with each other in the council. And they [the students] will learn a lot. There are a lot of hot topics.”

Calvin [In discussing the activity with the program facilitator]: “(We can) ask the students to read an English language newspaper every day, and focus on those issues they are going to write... And from there they can learn what ideas [about the issue] have been given out, and then they need to put in their own ideas to the current ones. And they can have the chance to learn some terminology, some good sentences or whatever and what people have talked about the issues.”

**Students’ conceptions about older adults.** As noted in the Introduction section, one of the goals of the program was to establish an intergenerational communication dynamic in which the adult volunteers would stimulate student interest and practice with regard to using English language in real world contexts. One indication that this objective was achieved comes from student comments (in the post-project questionnaires) about how they viewed older adults as conversation partners who are fun, interesting, effective, and excited about helping youth to practice using English language in various real world situations. Students also articulated many other positive views about older adults beyond their project-related roles as educators and communicators, and this likely contributed to student interest and willingness to converse actively with them.

Students’ comments about their views about older adults fit into the following five major categories, with the total number of responses and examples provided for each category:

- 1) Distinctive ESL teaching/motivating qualities of older adults: older adults were seen as being more interesting, more compelling (as English speaking models), and in some ways more knowledgeable and supportive than previously thought (5 responses):

Frankly there are things that the youth cannot do without the guidance or advances by the

senior adults. For instance, we do not know the meaning of the idioms which was using [sic] in the ads since it refers to some traditional habit of Chinese and I never knew that before.

- 2) Multiple roles played by the older adults (beyond English language instructor): Students noted 12 distinct supporting roles – parent, grandparent, educator, supporter, leader, friend, listener, cooperater, guide, helper, reminder, and life instructor (5 responses):

The older adult volunteers in the program played the role of instructor within the classroom and the role of life instructor outside the classroom.

- 3) Specific contributions to students' strategies for living, learning, and solving real-life problems: Students gave examples of how they benefited from information and advice provided by the older adults (5 responses):

[My senior partner] has also told me many things about the medical field in HK like what the working environment will be like, and we talked about my career plans in the future.

- 4) Older adults as experienced, knowledgeable, and insightful about life (includes awareness of social issues) (5 responses):

Through the Intergenerational Letter activity I have realized from the seniors some of the hidden problems in HK, such as clinical wastes treatment problems and that the three landfill sites in HK are going to fill up very soon in a few years.

- 5) Older adults are fun. Students alluded to positive feelings towards older adults as being more fun than previously thought (3 responses):

Before working with the seniors, I think the seniors were very troublesome and annoying... After this IG-ESL program, I found that they are full of talents and ideas. They are creative and funny.

### Program Impact on Older Adult Participants

**Developing professional skills and goals.** As reflected in the following quotes, the older adult participants noted gaining motivation, skills, a sense of empowerment, and a valuable teaching credential to

support their growing interests in extending their career- and volunteer-related pursuits as ESL educators in the community:

I will use [such] program experiences to influence the youngsters and help those who are weak in English Language, for example, the new immigrants or those organizations that need English volunteering teachers to help their minority group.

I learned how to teach and how to make them [the students] more aggressive in learning ESL without shyness in the public."

Career-wise, I now have a qualification with which to find meaningful volunteering work and pursuit of happiness that I enjoy, both with students themselves and myself. After completing the course of IG-ESL, it brings me chances to teach. I was asked by a charity body to help youngsters with their spoken English.

### Program characteristics contributing to older adult participants' capacity to help ESL learners.

The senior adult participants noted several characteristics of the overall IG-ESL program model as well as specific activities which enhanced their capacity to help the students develop and practice their English language skills:

The program activities were innovative and interactive. The overall designs of program activities were significant with diversification. [The] Back to the Future activity promoted personal life review of senior group [sic]. [The] Intergenerational Hunt and Letter to the Editor encouraged the mutual contribution among co-partners. Intergenerational Advert enlightened teamwork and creativity. [The entire program] enabled intergenerational participation and sharing."

It provides many opportunities to the senior adults and younger adults working together to complete the assignments. The assignments – video advert, letter to the press, and etc. – are hardly found in other educational programs nowadays."

### Sharing Life Experience

The program also met the objective of providing the older adult participants with varied and valued opportunities to meet, get to know, and share their life experiences with today's youth. However, as noted in the example quotes provided below, the sharing of experience extended beyond the older adult participants

merely telling their life experiences to a passive group of youth. Rather, these comments suggest an element of reciprocity in the way both generations mutually framed, engaged, and benefited from their intergenerational exchanges:

I have shared my success, vision, and experiences with the students. I have introduced the basic knowledge and techniques of video editing in the class. One student told me that my life story interested him and gave him encouragement to study. Another student, under my influence, has started to read English newspapers, watch English TV news, write short essays, and write a diary. He believed me that these habits were factors of success in improving English. It is a great reward to me.

[The program] is not only interactive but also lets two generations share their strength, knowledge, ideas, and experiences. This program enlightens me that senior and young adults can learn together in a team with both able to benefit in the learning process. There is a Win-Win result to the seniors and the younger adults as well.

### **Program Impact on Participants' Personal Development**

Several of the older adult and youth participants noted that the program experience expanded their social linkages in the community. The following comments from older adult participants convey the themes of networking and staying active:

[The program] enhances and provides opportunities to expand my social network in the community. This program has enriched my life in many ways, most importantly the people I have met and the friendship I had made."

I am excited, because I worked with people who share the same beliefs and proactive teenagers. Now we become friends. They are beyond your expectation. I also learn new ideas from them. It makes me feel energetic."

Additionally, several of the youth emphasized how the program expanded their social connections outside of school:

Even [sic] the program cannot help you to improve your English, it can still give you a chance to know more people that you would not meet in your daily life."

This program had broadened my social network

outside of school. I have become friends with other seniors and youths."

Several of the participants (older adults and youth) also made comments alluding to how the program contributed to their enhanced self-confidence for being able to effectively communicate with others. In the following two comments noting the self-confidence theme, the first one is from an older adult participant and the second one is from a youth participant:

Both seniors and young adults were encouraged to speak and present. It helped to strengthen self-confidence and self-esteem."

Not only did we have many opportunities to read, write and listen in English, we were given the chance to speak in English ... in front of the whole class. This program not only made me more confident to communicate in English with others but also boosted my speak-on-the-stage confidence.

### **Participant Recommendations for Program Revision**

The participants provided several recommendations for improving the program, particularly in terms of the selection and organization of activities.

Suggestions from the students:

- "I think we can play a game and learn more words. For example, *Scrabble*."
- "Better to have ice-breaking activities to let us know each other first. It could reduce the embarrassing atmosphere."
- "Add a professional teaching session and invite some professional to teach us for editing and promoting a video."

Suggestions from the older adult participants:

- "More program activities such as movie entertainment or tour around the world."
- "Suggest some other activities that may arouse interests and fun for all participants, such as karaoke, film show/review, and puzzles."

### **Conclusions**

#### **Is IG-ESL a Successful Program?**

The basic IG-ESL program objectives were achieved. The college students exhibited improved ESL skills and enhanced motivation to practice and extend their learning. A major contributing factor to this



outcome was the positioning of the older adults—in formal curricular activities and informal conversations—in ways that stimulated student interest and practice with regard to using English language in real world contexts. This improvement in students' literacy skills is consistent with the findings from some other intergenerational literacy programs in which older adults have a positive impact on children's and youths' linguistic skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, mediating, and writing), e.g., as noted in Macdonald (2006) and Meyer and colleagues (2002).

As for program impact on the older adult volunteers, most expressed satisfaction with the progress they made in terms of developing professional skills in teaching English as a second language, achieving enhanced intergenerational understanding, and exhibiting greater confidence and ability to engage and motivate youth in varied English language learning contexts. Several adult volunteers further noted feeling a sense of purpose and accomplishment upon learning that the students were valuing their contributions to the students' academic (ESL-related) skills and personal life decisions (e.g., new realms of knowledge and reflection about career choices).

### **The ESL Teaching and Learning Value of the Intergenerational Component**

This case study provides support for the general contention that there is educational value to embedding second-language (L2) learning experiences in intergenerational contexts. The precise question at hand is how we should seek to operationalize “intergenerational contexts” to achieve desired educational outcomes. In the current study, results point to the significance of emergent intergenerational relationships for fueling students' language learning motivation and providing them with authentic language learning opportunities.

For instance, as the students established more positive views toward older adults (or at least recognized the inaccuracies of misconceptions that several of them held), they became more open to listening to, learning from, and actively engaging the older adults in English language conversations. As the students learned that older adults are “full of talents and ideas” and that they could be “creative and funny,” they also became more open and excited about listening to their stories and sharing life experiences.

The intergenerational dimension also contributed to authentic learning (or real world relevance) of ESL. Even when interactions were intentionally framed with the intent of emphasizing specific ESL-related content, e.g., correct verb usage, the older adults liberally wove in information about their perspectives, life experiences, and discipline-specific expertise, thereby

demonstrating real world applications of language use in multiple contexts.

This way of framing intergenerational engagement accentuates the importance of fluid, multidirectional, meaningful exchanges, which is consistent with and reinforces the contention made by some literacy educators that environments that provide positive emotional climates as well as intellectual support are conducive for enhancing a learner's capacity for intensive participation and higher mental processes in second language learning contexts (Bujarski, Hildebrand-Nilshon, & Kordt, 1999; Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2013; Swain & Kinneer, 2010; & van Lier, 2004).

IG-ESL program evaluation results also confirm the conclusion drawn by Cordella et al. (2012) that it is not necessary to provide older adult volunteers with formal instruction in second language education for them to be effective in influencing students' ESL learning motivation and skills development. As we have argued elsewhere (Lai & Kaplan, 2013a), equally important is the older adults' capacity to function as “community context connectors.” Older adults who are highly engaged in civic life can readily introduce real-life contexts and community-based opportunities for English language skills practice. As we repeatedly witnessed during the IG-ESL program, the senior volunteers were quite masterful in sharing and opening up new lines of conversation related to their work- and post-work activities and insights. This particular dynamic, when harnessed into an intentional educational strategy, is a way to address the line of criticism often leveled at mainstream ESL curricula, i.e., that insufficient attention is paid to promoting language use in meaningful contexts that happen outside of the instructional context (Liou, 2005, p. 188).

Learning from the demonstrated value of integrating an intergenerational component into ESL program contexts, a broader scope may need to be taken. For example, it may be worth exploring the potential of intergenerational models in other educational contexts. From a linguistics theory perspective, it is the potential of adding meaning and additional student encouragement to learning environments, thereby providing students with more affordances (i.e., information students could perceive or other content being learned) they could pick up directly and use actively. By practice, recruiting older adults from the retirement sector is a sustainable resource that could enrich and strengthen a wide range of college activities.

### **Limitations**

The analysis of this study was based on a small number of participants. Thus, the results found are not readily generalizable to any other populations. Furthermore, the results were based solely on data collected in a Hong Kong-based program. To acquire a

better understanding of the value of the IG-ESL approach to embedding second language learning in intergenerational contexts, one would need to replicate this case study in other geographical areas with a bigger sample size. It might also be useful to compare the IG-ESL program model with a similar program minus the intergenerational component.

### Implications for ESL Education

In contrast to concerns about the loss of meaningfulness in traditional ESL classrooms (van Lier, 2004), the infusion of an intergenerational component introduces a much-needed pathway to “meaningful learning.” As noted by van Lier, an important aspect of language learning is the degree to which this learning enterprise is perceived as having lifelong value. The IG-ESL program was seen as having such value, as is reflected in the following quote from one of the students: “I would recommend this program to my friends because ample thing [sic] I learnt from this program might be useful for my whole life.”

This perceived lifelong relevance is particularly pertinent in the Hong Kong context, where the education system has long been criticized for being too exam-oriented and for inadequately preparing students to use English to communicate in real world situations (Gil, 2010). Our experience with IG-ESL also suggests that activities are best programmed to allow both generations to own an action-based role, with freedom to contribute proactively to conversations and share responsibility for creating a stimulating and engaging language learning milieu. The students were able to influence the nature of their conversations with the older adults. Older adults’ contributions of their life experiences and skills to the program were to a large extent structured by the curiosity and active engagement of the youth, e.g., in the way they asked questions, re-told the older adults’ old stories, sought advice, and co-authored letters. Both groups of participants were empowered.

This is consistent with what van Lier (2008) described as “the essential human attitude of agency, which in ecological terms means that an organism learns and grows so long as it actively engages in and with its environment” (p. 6). Ownership of agency is thus the focal point since both ESL learners and older adult volunteers can become active agents. The communication dynamic that was established throughout the program was one of active engagement, mutual stimulation, and, as noted in the following quote from one of the older adults, empowerment: “I think empowerment is very important. We can empower them, and they can empower us as well.”

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