

# Questionnaires as a Tool for Teaching English Language through Learner-Created Knowledge

**T**he method of learner-created knowledge—where students engage with others in order to connect what they know with new knowledge to construct new meaning—ties into a broader support for learner autonomy in English language teaching (ELT) and learning (for a review, see Palfreyman and Benson 2019). According to advocates of learner-centered pedagogies in ELT, learner-created knowledge and learner-centered learning contribute to improved educational outcomes (Benson and Huang 2008; Schweisfurth 2013).

Many ELT contexts, however, pose significant challenges to learner-centered pedagogies. Sonaiya (2005), for example, argues that learner autonomy is not relevant in African ELT contexts. In countries like Cameroon—where our work with students, teachers, and trainees inspired the activities in this article—the social power orientation is mirrored in classroom practices, and teacher-centered pedagogies are the norm from primary to tertiary education. Thus, autonomous learning and learner-created knowledge are unfamiliar concepts for many African students, educators, and policymakers. The cultural impediments to learner-centered pedagogies will be familiar to ELT practitioners in low-resource and developing contexts around the world.

Since learner-centered pedagogies enhance educational outcomes, it is tragic that ELT classrooms in Africa and elsewhere are

denied these strategies. Indeed, learner-created knowledge is arguably more important in low-resource ELT contexts than in areas with greater resources and stronger traditions of learner autonomy. Because learner-created knowledge depends only on the commitment of good teachers and students and is adaptable to local circumstances, it offers pathways to build robust, locally suitable teaching and learning resources that relieve ELT classrooms of the constraints of top-down resourcing.

As such, developing tools to foster knowledge creation by learners in ELT contexts like those of Africa is potentially transformational. Such tools counter Sonaiya's (2005) rejection of learner autonomy in African ELT by offering alternatives for learners to take control and participate more fully in their learning through creative classroom activities.

In this article, we present classroom-generated questionnaires as one tool for incorporating learner-created knowledge in ELT classrooms. We describe a four-step method to suit a range of learners that are readily transferable to ELT classrooms in Africa and beyond. We demonstrate that learner-generated, -administered, and -analyzed questionnaires offer a viable approach for ELT practitioners to increase learner autonomy in low-resource contexts and achieve highly productive outcomes.

### LEARNER-CENTERED PEDAGOGIES IN LOW-RESOURCE CONTEXTS

In Cameroon, where we have developed learner-centered materials and techniques, teaching and learning English is generally characterized by a teacher-centered approach that suppresses learner autonomy. Therefore, ELT practitioners must find solutions to the practical and cultural impediments to building learner autonomy. Benson (2007, 30) notes that “the extent to which sociocultural approaches involve attention to learner individuality is often underplayed” in learner-autonomy literature. In other words, teachers’ efforts to foster learner autonomy must account for the extent to which local teaching contexts recognize and value learners as individuals. According to Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen (2003, 157), learners’ sociocultural environments should be part of our strategies for building learner autonomy in ELT, and they argue for a language-learning approach that takes into consideration “activities in which children participate with adults and other children (whether in the family, community, or classroom),” which “are by definition socially organized and embedded in cultural meaning systems.”

Contexts that devalue learner autonomy create several challenges for teachers. At a macro level, in teacher-centered contexts, learners, teachers, and other educational stakeholders have all been enculturated by a lifetime of classroom experiences to expect authority and individuality to be the exclusive domain of teachers. Because the students

who grow up in these contexts eventually become teachers, education administrators, policymakers, and parents of a new generation of students, the norm of teacher-centeredness is self-perpetuating. Shifting pedagogical paradigms from such cycles is likely to meet resistance at all levels.

The challenge created by this resistance is increased at the micro level of teaching, as learner-centered pedagogies require substantial planning time, creativity, and adaptivity based on learning circumstances (Benson 2007). In contexts where learner-centeredness and learner autonomy run counter to prevailing pedagogical models, the increased practical effort that may be required from teachers to challenge norms is unlikely to be valued. Indeed, in low-resource environments, efforts that run against the grain of enculturated practice may jeopardize teachers’ immediate survival needs.

While learner autonomy is not a defining characteristic of language learning around the world, there have nevertheless been efforts to introduce learner-centered pedagogy into contexts that resist it. Schweisfurth (2013, 2015), for example, reviews efforts to reform pedagogy in sub-Saharan Africa in the direction of learner-centeredness. Admittedly, there are more stories of failure than success, with blame being cast on paucity of resources, teachers’ inability to implement innovative reforms, and ineffective operationalization of policy into practice. Despite these difficulties, the potential benefits of learner-centered pedagogies in low-resource contexts—from making learning more interesting to developing locally suitable materials as a way to increase learner autonomy and thereby foster the democratization of educational settings—justify efforts to introduce innovative pedagogies into resistant settings. Our challenge is to do so in ways that are sensitive to local pedagogical contexts and supportive of teachers in terms of the effort required of them and the learning outcomes that activities achieve.

## QUESTIONNAIRES IN ELT

We view learner-generated, -administered, and -analyzed questionnaires as a simple, suitable, and flexible tool to introduce learner-centered knowledge into ELT classrooms (and, indeed, into teaching practice more generally). Creating and using a questionnaire to support ELT is an approach that is inherently adaptable to local contexts and learner interests, and which balances teachers' labor against the volume of teaching and learning activities that are generated. The culmination of these activities empowers learners as active creators of knowledge to contribute to their language learning.

Our use of questionnaires to teach English-language research writing is based on a workshop in Cameroon with advanced English language students and novice English teachers. As such, some of our examples reflect our students' particular interest in English grammar and structure. However, because questionnaires can be developed to explore any topic, they are highly flexible resources that teachers can instrumentalize for ELT according to their learners' interests and situations. Indeed, Griffiee (1999) suggests that questionnaires can be used for any aspect of teaching and learning.

The core of our approach consists of four steps:

1. Learners create a list of topics they find interesting.
2. The teacher supports learners to build a questionnaire to examine these topics.
3. Learners administer the questionnaire locally.
4. Learners make meaning from the data and share results from the questionnaire.

For each step, we describe our experiences and suggest activities that teachers might use in their own ELT classrooms. We also

highlight the autonomy fostered among language learners through participation in these activities.

### **Step 1: Learners create a list of topics they find interesting**

The development of a questionnaire begins with learners identifying topics that interest them. As such, from the outset, the approach allows learners the independence to select topics for the activity. For learners whose abilities have been routinely constrained by teacher-centered classrooms, this first step of building knowledge has transformational implications.

When we used the questionnaire in our workshop, we began our activities by organizing learners into small groups and asking each group to identify and discuss features of Cameroon English. This prompt revealed learners' deep and wide-ranging interest in the different types of English used in Cameroon, and the resulting presentations were rich and insightful. Learners not only matched published research on Cameroon English, but also identified new features not yet noticed by academic researchers. This was a testament to the expertise learners brought to their own learning; the act of learners collaborating to build knowledge from their collective expertise established the dynamic of learners actively creating knowledge rather than being passive recipients of a teacher's explanations.

In the context of ELT, we wholly believe in the value of discussing English grammar and structure (or language more generally) to build a body of learner-generated knowledge for a questionnaire. Topics emerging from such discussion lead to survey items that can easily be converted into lessons relevant to ELT learning outcomes. Teachers could prompt the discussion around questions like these:

- How is the English you hear people using outside different from the English you are learning in class?

- How is the English you read different from the English you hear?
- How is the English you hear different from English that is spoken in other countries?
- When do you think it is “good” to speak English?
- When do you think it is “bad” to speak English?
- What are some English slang words?

For basic learners of English, a vocabulary unit provides a natural starting point for learners’ sharing of knowledge and nomination of topics. For instance, during a unit on animal names, younger learners might propose characteristics of animals in the unit’s vocabulary list. During a unit on vocabulary connected with occupations, learners could discuss the types of activities that workers in these professions engage in. And a unit on food names could lead to complex discussions of favorite foods or recipes from home. Ultimately, as we will describe in the next section, the point of these conversations is to turn learner discussions into items to be researched by a questionnaire.

**Step 2: The teacher supports learners to build a questionnaire to examine these topics**

The facts, claims, ideas, observations, and questions that learners raised during Step 1 are now turned into questionnaire items. In our workshop, after we heard learners’ fascinating insights into Cameroon English, we asked them to return to their groups and nominate a topic they wanted to explore further. After they did so, each group presented its topic to the whole workshop.

Then we processed how one of the topics might be turned into a questionnaire item. A group had nominated a pronunciation feature of Cameroon English in which the sound represented orthographically as <th> is pronounced as [t]. This topic was chosen to survey whether people used this pronunciation by presenting them with the words *thank* and *tank*, and asking whether the words sounded the same, close, or different. Following this illustration, learners returned to their groups once more to convert their topics into questionnaire items. Each group presented its questionnaire item to the workshop. We recorded these items as groups were presenting, giving us a collection of several dozen learner-generated items for the questionnaire.

Food	Animals	Occupations
Do you eat breakfast before or after 6:30?	Do you keep pet animals?	Does your mother/father work for a company?
Do you have jam on the table at breakfast?	Is your pet animal male or female?	Does s/he work a full day or half day?
Is tea part of your breakfast?	Is your pet animal friendly or wild to strangers?	Does s/he work as a permanent or fixed employee?
Is breakfast served by dad or mum?	Does your pet animal sleep inside or outside your house?	Does s/he go to work by public transport/personal means?
Agree/disagree: Ndole is the best food.	Agree/disagree: Dogs are too dirty to be pets.	Agree/disagree: I enjoy working inside.

**Table 1. Vocabulary-based questionnaire items**

The process of generating questionnaire items remains the same regardless of topic. Unit vocabulary-based interests could yield items like those in Table 1.

The teacher will naturally need to be sensitive to the sociocultural norms of people who are likely to answer the learners' questionnaire. This need for items to be socioculturally appropriate presents an opportunity for teachers to engage learners in cultural conversations about the items—for example, learners can be asked, “Is it OK to ask an auntie this question?”

After learners nominate items, a questionnaire is developed. In our workshop, we used the free program Google Forms to build the questionnaire (a version of our questionnaire is freely available for ELT practitioners to view and copy from <https://forms.gle/iGdRyjDxVpLMmtbC6>). Google Forms was an excellent medium in our situation. Learners had Internet access through cell phones and easily shared links to the survey with friends and family via WhatsApp to quickly collect responses. The format will be similarly suitable in many ELT contexts. However, in other circumstances, the questionnaire could also be drafted and disseminated on paper. Or—requiring even fewer resources—learners could orally administer the questionnaire to respondents so that they would only need a list of questions to ask and a place to write responses. One of this article's authors (Strelluf) uses “rapid and anonymous surveys” (Labov 2006) in teaching, with students asking many respondents a single question. The broader observation here is that the questionnaire is a beneficial teaching and learning tool because it can be disseminated flexibly according to locally available media and technologies.

We took a relatively heavy hand in revising the questionnaire items that learners nominated for consistency, and we added in several items based on topics that learners had raised, but that had not been included among the items they nominated. However, with guidance on how to key items into Google Forms,

the construction of the survey itself can be handed over to learners. The classroom could also conduct a pilot study where learners complete the questionnaire, then identify redundant questions and modify poorly constructed ones. These activities represent robust opportunities for learners to work collaboratively and, from an ELT perspective, develop their English language skills through the act of receiving and providing peer feedback.

In fact, the potential of language-teaching activities based on the construction of questionnaire items is limited only by a teacher's creativity. Basic ELT classrooms could use the act of writing questions as opportunities for learners to write sentences containing target content from a vocabulary unit, or to work out the grammatical construction of declaratives versus interrogatives. Higher-proficiency classrooms could consider relationships between research questions and the answers that different types of questions will elicit—e.g., learners could discuss whether a true/false item or an open-ended response item would provide better data for the research question they are trying to answer. (That said, for teaching purposes, we recommend that questionnaire items be constructed as multiple-choice or other forced-choice questions, rather than open-ended questions. This facilitates analytic activities. Case [2009] also warns that open-ended questions may overwhelm learners with information so that they lose track of the focus of the task.)

The task of constructing questionnaire items facilitates multiple layers of language-learning activities. It provides practical activities that mirror the traditional exercises of language textbooks, but does so using topics that learners have expressed interest in. It facilitates opportunities for discussion and collaboration. And, at the broadest level, it re-centers the focus of classroom activities onto the knowledge and interests of learners and guides them to create a research instrument so that they themselves become creators of knowledge.

### **Step 3: Learners administer the questionnaire locally**

In our workshop, we distributed a link to the questionnaire via WhatsApp and asked each learner to administer the questionnaire to two people. They shared the survey with classmates, friends, and family via WhatsApp or SMS. Of course, any locally appropriate medium is suitable. As we noted in Step 2, questionnaires could be administered by learners in writing or orally.

Whatever form this step takes, the critical feature is that learners are engaging in a real process of primary data collection and, in doing so, are becoming knowledge-creators. They are building the foundations to be autonomous learners, rather than passive followers of a teacher's directives. Moreover, given the variety of topics learners may be investigating, the process enables them to develop a culture of interrogating social structures around them in out-of-school contexts. Disseminating the questionnaire to seek responses to issues they are investigating develops intrinsic motivation, as their desire to accomplish specific tasks shifts from meeting classroom deadlines to accomplishing personal projects.

### **Step 4: Learners make meaning from the data and share results from the questionnaire**

The final step synthesizes the data that learners have collected into findings and observations. When it is complete, learners have created knowledge.

For us, a benefit to using Google Forms and multiple-choice questions is that the program automatically reports responses as pie charts, allowing us to simply share the figure for each questionnaire item. We did not have Internet access in our workshop space, so we saved the Google Forms results as a PDF and distributed it to learners via WhatsApp. In other circumstances, we might have simply reported results and sketched rough figures on a blackboard or read out results and demonstrated ways to represent these in learners' notes. In situations where learners administer questionnaires on paper

or orally, learners could achieve the same end by compiling their individual results into a classroom-level dataset. For instance, learners could go back to their small groups and compile responses. Then these small groups could be combined into larger groups to compile responses, with the process repeating until there is a single set of results for the classroom.

At this point, the classroom has a tremendous resource, generated entirely by learners, to use for language learning. This resource provides learners with a foundation to practice basic English language skills and to engage with higher-level cognitive activities.

More-basic ELT classrooms could make use of activities centered on describing results. For instance, learners could write a one-sentence summary of a single result they found interesting. This would inherently require them to use vocabulary connected with the questionnaire item and to practice writing a declarative sentence; it would very likely require some use of numerals, tenses, comparative or superlative adjectives, and singular or plural nouns (e.g., "Sixty percent of people liked dogs most.").

Activities could also rapidly be scaled to foster higher-level language skills, including reasoning and argumentation. We suggest using prompts like the following to get learners to logically construct meaning from the data:

- *What is the most important result?* This prompt requires learners to process multiple data points and then establish evidence to position some data points as more important than others. It can lead to intensive oral production in the classroom as learners read meaning from the data to argue their positions.
- *Which result surprises you the most?* This prompt requires learners to process multiple results and compare them to their own thinking.

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## There is also an opportunity to achieve expanded learning outcomes through teaching activities that follow from learners building knowledge from questionnaire responses.

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- *How can answers be grouped?* If a questionnaire focused on food items, learners might group respondents' favorite dishes into breakfast or dinner. This prompt requires learners to tease apart multiple data points and identify connections among them. Lower-proficiency learners may be allowed more time to make connections and think in flexible ways.
- *Summarize all results in a single sentence.* This prompt requires learners to process multiple data points and combine them into a single observation.

Of note, learners could engage with any of these prompts either in writing or orally. Many lower-confidence learners would likely benefit from writing their responses and then saying them aloud to the teacher, their small group, or the classroom.

Moreover, these prompts can be provided as individual tasks or small-group projects. Small-group strategies, of course, create opportunities for conversational peer interaction, cooperation, and scaffolding to foster language learning. Furthermore, as learners discover differences in their interpretations, opportunities arise for them to determine the sources of the differences and resolve them. This corresponds to high-level cognitive engagement with data as learners dramatically increase their ownership over the process of creating knowledge.

Learners can create fascinating results that, depending on the questionnaire topic, may genuinely interact with findings by established researchers in publications. For instance, in our workshop, learners interpreted results to conclude that respondents did indeed pronounce the sound of the letters <th> as [t],

confirming findings in seminal descriptions of Cameroon English like Simo Bobda (2004).

There is also an opportunity to achieve expanded learning outcomes through teaching activities that follow from learners building knowledge from questionnaire responses. In our workshop, for instance, we mentored learners through the process of turning their findings into an academic research paper. In terms of knowledge creation among advanced English language learners, proficiency in academic research writing is a threshold skill for learners “to understand their disciplines, to establish their careers or to successfully navigate their learning” (Hyland 2013, 55). During our activities, we introduced the conventional structure for the research paper, directed learners to find three secondary sources relevant to the questionnaire that they summarized into a literature review, and then supported them to write up results and interpretations. By the end of the sequence, everyone had written an entire research paper, following a model appropriate to academic scholarship. The project could have been further extended by having learners give oral presentations or work with peers to discuss and revise papers. We know from continued connections with workshop participants that several have gone on to conduct their own research projects, reflecting the highest level of autonomy as knowledge-creators.

In our experience, the language questionnaire designed and administered by learners provided a highly effective anchor for teaching English-language research writing narrowly and language skills more generally. Voluntary feedback on the workshop showed that learners explicitly recognized their own learning about academic research and writing. Comments included:

- “I have taken note about the different components of these research instruments.”
- “The more specific my research questions are, the better my dissertation. ... I learnt how the questions need to be structured and a possible order I could adopt.”
- “I will use this knowledge of data analysis to interpret and analyse my findings.”

While these comments reflect higher-order English skills, we believe learners at all levels will achieve similar learning outcomes through activities built around questionnaires that they create in ELT contexts.

## CONCLUSION

Teaching and learning English is widely understood to be context-bound, and there is increased discussion about ways practitioners can develop and implement contextualized pedagogies. Questionnaires offer a robust, flexible tool to use within the contextual spaces of ELT classrooms to increase the learner-centeredness of ELT activities. The process of building, administering, and analyzing a questionnaire based on learner knowledge and interests creates a rich, complex, and locally situated learning experience. It gives students control over their learning in ELT classrooms irrespective of learning contexts, fostering self-regulation and autonomy, and does so effectively even in traditionally top-down pedagogical contexts.

We hope that our work encourages ELT practitioners to consider adding questionnaires to their pedagogical tool kit as a strategy for incorporating learner-created knowledge into their teaching. We believe that doing so will prove transformational in ELT classrooms.

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