APAC ELT JOURNAL

Proceedings II

... and other articles

2013 APAC ELT Convention

apac Associació de Professors i Professores d'Anglès de Catalunya

apac

ELT - Convention 2014

English in Action 24/7

February 20th, 21st & 22nd

Universitat Pompeu Fabra
Campus Ciutadella
Ramon Trias Fargas, 25-27
Barcelona

apac

Associació
de Professors i
Professores d'Anglès
de Catalunya

UPF

Contents

Becoming Little Scientists:
A Case Study of Technologically-Enhanced Project-Based Language Learning

By Melinda Dooly, Maria Mont and Dolors Masats

This article explains a ten-week language project that made use of video conferencing and 'machinima' (short video-clips featuring Virtual World avatars) to introduce young language learners (7 to 8 years old) to concepts of good and bad habits related to personal hygiene, physical activities, and eating. Within the project-based language learning approach (PBLL), the students gained new information about the topic under study, and this information was then used to communicate (in the target language of English) in order to resolve related problems with their peers. Their peers included both local classmates and Austrian partners, whom they were 'tele'-collaborating with.

Melinda Dooly is a teacher educator in the Education Faculty of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain). She teaches English as a Foreign Language Methodology (TEFL) and research methods courses, focusing on telecollaboration in education. Dr. Dooly is a member of GREIP (Research Group on Plurilingual Interaction and Teaching) and is actively involved in various national and international research projects. Her research addresses teacher preparation and the use of Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Dr. Dooly's current research interest is in project-based telecollaborative language learning and very young learners.

Maria Mont is an English teacher and a translator and interpreter. After studying English language courses in the UK, Australia and Canada, she has worked as an English teacher since 2005 in both state and private schools. She currently teaches primary and very young learners at Escola Sant Jordi in Mollet del Vallès, where she implements Artigal's method and experiments with the use of ICT in the foreign language class. She has co-coordinated and been actively involved in two government-funded projects at her school. She takes part in pre-service teacher education by mentoring local and Erasmus student-teachers and is also actively involved in in-service teacher training programs and in the development of joint ICT-mediated language innovation projects. At the moment she is also the director of Xperienceit, idiomes al estranger which organizes English immersion programs for both adults and teens in the USA.

Dolors Masats is a teacher trainer and researcher at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. She has got a B.A. in English Language and Literature and a Ph.D. in Educational Sciences from the same university. She is a full-time lecturer in the Department of Language Teaching Methodology in the Faculty of Education of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, where she tutors student-teachers and teaches Language Methodology courses at undergraduate and graduate levels. She is also involved in in-service teacher training workshops. Dr. Masats is a member of GREIP (Research Group on Plurilingual Interaction and Teaching) and is actively involved in various national and international research projects and is vice-president of the EDILIC (Education et DIversité Linguistique et Culturelle) International Association.

Introduction

As part of the wider research project entitled *Plurilingual, audiovisual and digital competences as means to construct knowledge in multilingual and multicultural communities of practice* (EDU2010-17859), financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, the project entitled **'Healthy Habits'** was telecollaborative for both the student participants and the researchers and teachers involved. Using computer-mediated communication (CMC) the primary education teachers and materials developers planned, designed and made necessary adjustments to the project during the entire period of implementation. And during the implementation, the students from both classes engaged in CMC to use the target language (English) for shared learning about healthy habits related to everyday activities such as eating, keeping clean, being active and avoiding vices.

As the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has emerged as a salient means of promoting language learning, telecollaboration in education has been on the rise; subsequently, several definitions of telecollaboration have been proposed. According to Helm, Guth and O'Dowd (2012), telecollaboration, also known as Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE), involves using online communication tools to engage classes of foreign language (FL) learners in online communication and collaboration with partner classes in distant locations. Dooly (2008) argues that in the educational arena, the focus should be on 'collaboration' at a distance (the prefix *tele-* signifies *distance*). In the last fifteen years, there has been a growing interest in research and practice of telecollaborative practices in language teaching and learning, especially as teachers and learners become more familiar with what Thorne (2012) calls "conventional Internet-mediated tools" (p. 19).

However, proponents of telecollaboration in language learning do not point to more facile means of communication between distanced learners as the only reason for integrating this approach into the learning process. Adherents of this approach underline the role of computer-mediated communication in shared knowledge construction, based on collaborative student interaction (Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-v. Ditfurth, 2008). Key to successful implementation of network-based shared knowledge construction is careful planning of the entire sequence.

[A] communicative-based environment does not guarantee that learning takes place. The task design and its implementation are key elements for efficient language learning to develop —a carefully designed task or activity that requires online co-construction of knowledge not only provides opportunities for target language practice, it also helps integrate language use as the means of the shared knowledge-building, thus further enhancing purposeful communication. (Dooly, 2011: 69)

This was the underlying rationale for the close collaboration, facilitated through "conventional Internet-mediated tools" (Thorne, 2012: 19), between partner teachers, based in Catalonia and Austria- and partner researchers, based in Catalonia and the USA. In short, teachers and researchers 'walked the walk' before requiring the students to participate in telecollaborative events of their own. Concretely, the participants involved in **'Healthy Habits'** were two EFL primary education teachers: Manuela Ebner (Austria) and Maria Mont (Spain); teacher educators and researchers Melinda Dooly, Dolors Masats (Spain) and Randall Sadler (USA). The materials were developed by Melinda Dooly and Randall Sadler, in close consultation with the EFL teachers and with some collaboration from student-teachers enrolled in Dooly and Sadler's university classes at the time.

Project Design

'Healthy Habits' was designed from the perspective that language practice and knowledge acquisition are part of the same process, thus the project endeavoured to create learning opportunities that allowed the students to become immersed in the use of the target language while learning to work in groups (face-to-face collaboration and online collaboration). The students also came to relate topics across subjects and to reflect on the relevance of the learnt concepts since, apart from direct subject knowledge (good habits, bad habits, specific lexicon), students were required to reflect on 'cause and effect' of the daily actions that were the focus of the project (e.g. brushing teeth, eating too many sweets, sleeping enough, etc.). Additionally, all participants (students, teachers and researchers) gained increased awareness of the importance of opening up the learning process in order to include others outside of the classroom. And of course, as is the basis of all communicatively based approaches to language learning, students could practice and improve their English for a real purpose.

It should also be noted that the students were also carrying out transdisciplinary activities in other subjects that corresponded with the knowledge being acquired in this project. For instance, students worked

on healthy food in Catalan and Spanish language courses (thus acquiring lexicon in three languages simultaneously) and the in-school collaboration culminated in a field trip to the local market to buy fruit for a 'healthy snack-time'.

In order to introduce the students to the main ideas of the project, different strategies and materials were combined into the ten-week project. Through weekly (and at times, daily) online meetings between the EFL teachers and the materials developers, activities were conceived, discussed, and designed (note that the initial planning of the overall project began several months before first implementation, these meetings were generally for 'fine-tuning'). In-class teaching strategies included role-playing and dialogic use of common resources such as flashcards, posters, and worksheets. For instance, in order to introduce specific vocabulary that would be needed to discuss healthy and unhealthy habits, special flashcards were made that could be used throughout the project. These were 'handmade' because of the very specific nature of the required lexicon ('lice', 'bad teeth' and 'spots' are not usually high on publishing houses' lists of 'need to know' words).

Through iterative use of the materials, the students had continued exposure to the target content (both linguistic and conceptual). For example, the flashcards had a recurrent role in the on-going activities – students used them to create posters, play games, and exchange information in videoconferences with their online partners. The images used in the flashcards also served as visual aids to facilitate students' comprehension of oral texts, as in the case studies (explained in more detail further on).

The use of technological resources was also backbone to the project. Students were introduced to the general concepts of what they would be doing during the ten weeks through an initial 'meeting' with two 'avatar scientists' (characters created for this context in the virtual world, Second Life). The 'avatar scientists' explained that they "studied boys' and girls' habits" and asked both classes (in Catalonia and Austria) if they would be willing to help, thereby emotionally engaging the students in the project and building up anticipation and motivation for learning. These avatars, along with other specially created personalities, were used to create *machinima* – short video clips filmed in a virtual world

Fig. 1. Examples of Flashcards
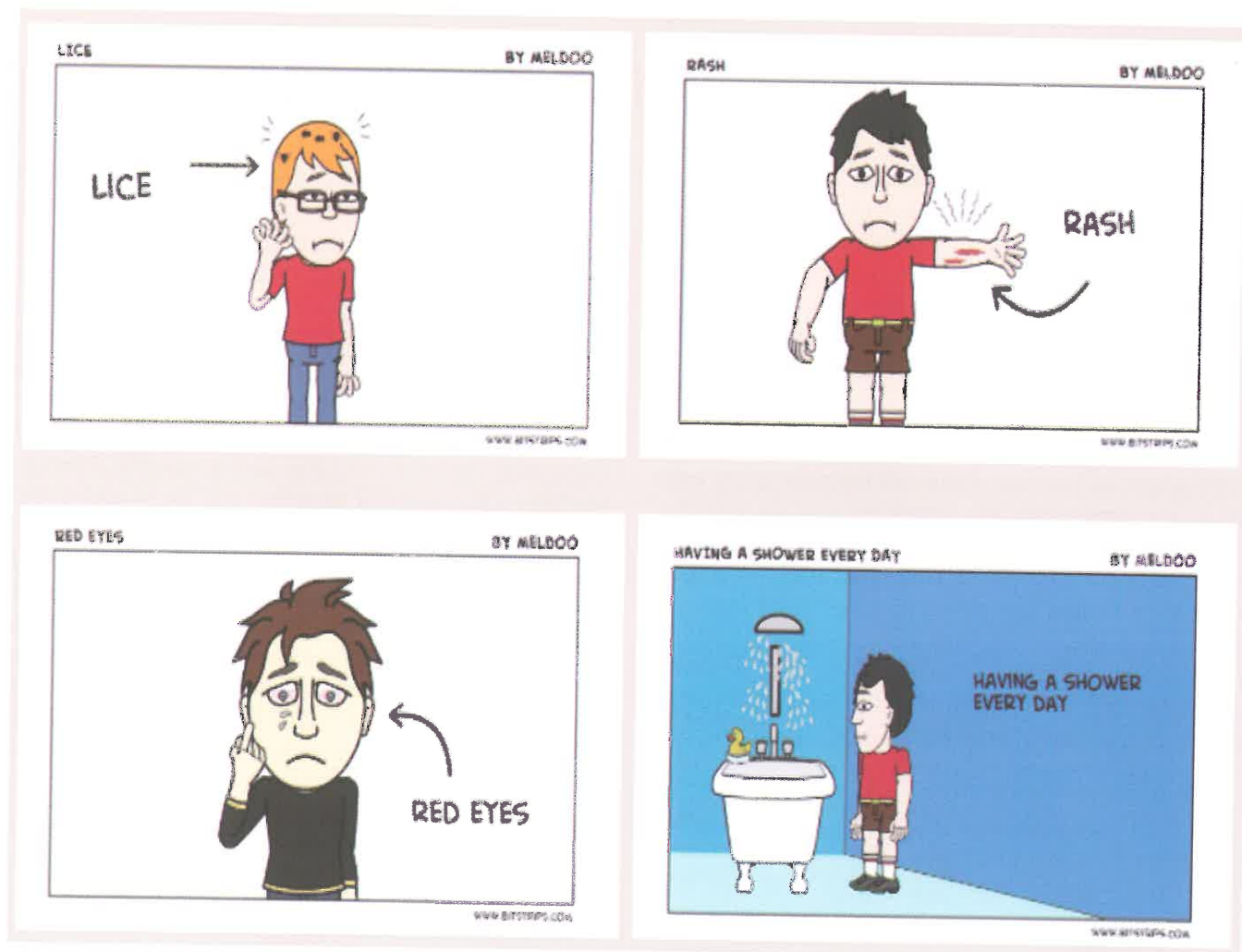
(in this case, Second Life) – which were then used for interactive listening activities that focused the students' attention on categorizing habits (e.g. smoking is *not* a healthy habit) and recognizing types of habits (good and bad) and the symptoms (problems) related to certain bad habits and (good consequences) of healthy habits.

students to engage with their online mates in authentic communication – whether introducing themselves or co-constructing knowledge through shared information about the target content between the two classes. The design of the project ensured that there was a real purpose for the students to use the target language

Fig. 2. Images taken from *machinima* clips
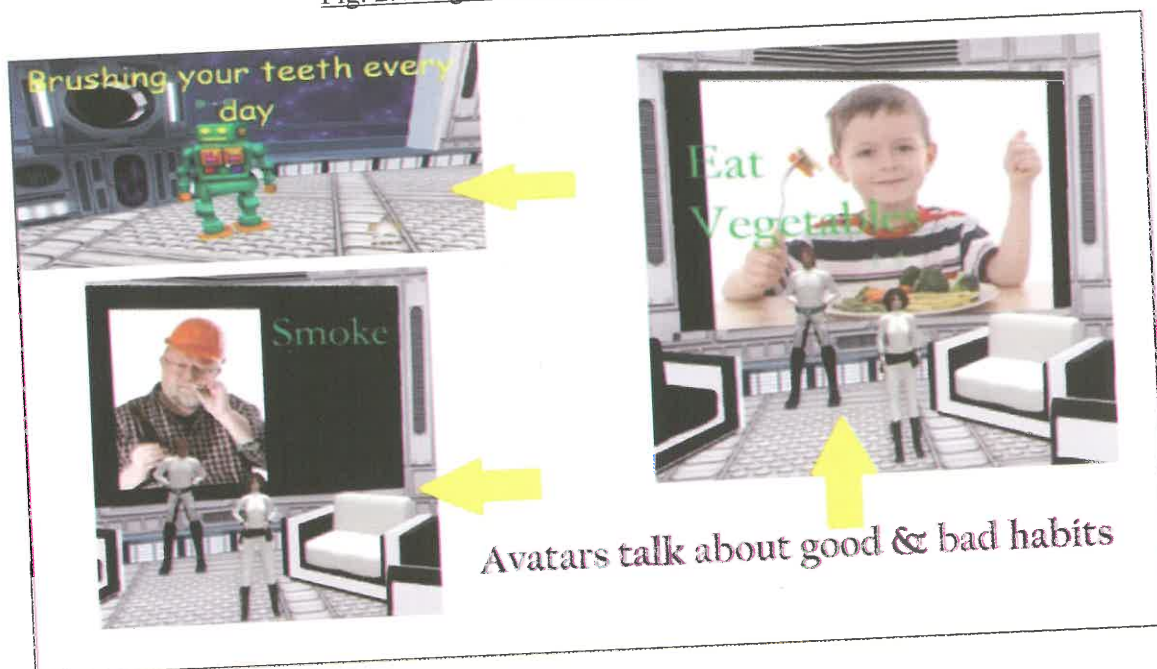
Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) was another technology that was integrated into the learning process and which was especially important for promoting oral production by the students. In this case, free Skype software was employed for videoconferencing – allowing the teachers to create periodic events that obliged

(communicating real ideas) and also reinforced the use of English as a means of authentic communication with others who do not share the same language. The students soon came to realize that they had to use English, as it was the only way to converse with their online peers.

Fig. 3. Image from the first videoconference

Project Implementation

The project was carried out during ten weeks in the 2011-2012 academic year. In a nutshell, students were asked to become 'little scientists' in order to help out Dr. Albert and Dr. Stella (the avatar scientists) in their observations of three case studies (other 'teen' avatars created for the project). In order to do so, the crucial information that they would need to understand was introduced gradually through the aforementioned flashcard images, along with worksheets to provide a framework for required language structures. A general outline of the activities is as follows (it should be noted, however, that some activities overlapped and/or were repeated).

Students were first introduced to the project through a short 'machinima'. In this first clip, the two scientist avatars (Dr. Stella and Dr. Albert) purposefully greeted the participating teachers by name, in order to engage the students on a personal level and to personalize the learning context. In this same clip, the two avatars explained: who they were (their names), what they were (scientists who study good and bad habits) and what they did in order to study these habits (observation of boys' and girls' different habits, both healthy and unhealthy).

The scientist avatars then told the students that they needed assistance and asked the students in the two schools if they would be willing to help (videotapes of the students' reactions show a resoundingly enthusiastic affirmation). The scientist avatars went on to outline the type of help they would need; basically the students were to help in 'collecting data' through case study observation.

At the same time, the collaborative element of the project was brought into play by introducing the two classes. This was done both asynchronously through individually produced online, voice-animated presentations (the online platform Voicethread was used) along with photo 'ID cards' with text descriptions; and synchronously through a whole-class videoconference. The impetus for oral production of the target language was reinforced by the need to think of 'unique' features about themselves to be included in the Voicethreads (no matter how short the oral texts,

seventy slides that all repeat name, age and where they are from can become tedious, so students were asked to briefly explain something special about themselves). Once the students were more familiar with each other, the project moved on to focus on more content.

Through new machinima (produced in teacher education courses by student-teachers learning to become EFL teachers), students learnt to recognize, name and classify different habits (e.g. smoking, eating lots of vegetables, etc.). This was complemented by activities that used the flashcards, and, at the same time, students began making associations between different types of habits and possible consequences (through the use of worksheets and general classroom discussion).

Next, working in small groups, students were given three cases to observe as 'scientists' in order to gather data about the subjects' good and bad habits. The case studies (again, using machinima) consisted of Dr. Stella and Dr. Albert 'interviewing' three 'teen avatars' about their habits. The 'interviews' took place over three consecutive times. In each case, the 'subjects' had a few healthy habits and a predominant 'bad habit'. To give an example, Gameboy Gary was addicted to videogames and subsequently did not sleep enough, had a backache, red eyes and so forth. His problems grew worse over each interview.

Fig. 4. Dr. Stella interviews Gameboy Gary
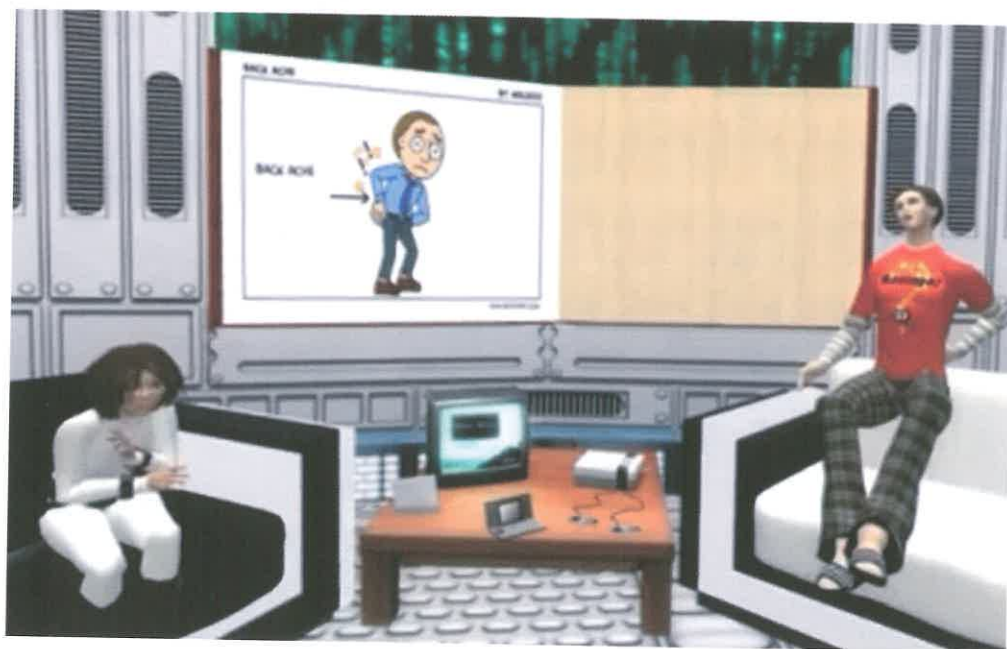
Because each group was watching a different case, the information gathered was different for each group (although in larger groups, the cases were repeated). Also, in the two schools (Catalonia and Austria) the cases were slightly different for each school. Thus, in the end, each group had gathered

different information (although language use in all the cases was similar and the dialogues were written in such a way that they would be familiar to the production and use the students had already been exposed to in previous sessions).

Next, using the information gathered from their observations, the classes exchanged information about the cases, filling each other in about missing information, and then putting forth ideas for the 'subjects' to improve detected bad habits. Following this, the students combined the information to make suggestions on how the 'subject' avatars might improve their habits (e.g. He should sleep eight hours a day) and these suggestions were 'communicated' to Dr. Stella and Dr. Albert.

Fig. 5. Worksheet for suggestions for Smelly Susan

Fig. 6. Examples of Individual Assessment

The results of their suggestions were made evident by the avatar scientists (again through *machinima*) to ensure that the learners were aware of the impact of their communicative efforts. The final step, and as a means of assessing the learning that took place, Dr. Stella and Dr. Albert invited the two schools to participate in an 'online talk show' in which, as experts, the students were asked increasingly difficult questions about the language and content that they had been exploring throughout the project. A final individual evaluation was also given to the students, based on the vocabulary and concepts learnt during the project.

In summary, the project was divided into four main domains or phases, although, as in any learning process, the implementation cannot be considered as linear as there is always iteration, and circular take-up of the input and communicative use of the input.

Phase 1: Introductions (first videoconference to get to know online peers and first machinima to meet the avatar scientists and learn about the project expectations).

Phase 2: Learning of specific vocabulary about healthy and unhealthy habits through the use of different resources such as avatars, flashcards, posters, and games.

Phase 3: Conceptualizing healthy and unhealthy habits (making links between language and content) through case observations, revision, and exchange of information with online partners.

Phase 4: Connecting results with healthy and unhealthy habits, ending up in recommendations, final results, and assimilation of what the students had learnt.

Conclusions

While it has almost become a cliché to emphasize the necessity of integrating technology into language teaching in today's society, it still remains a pending issue. Even as interest and enthusiasm for the use of computer-mediated communication and social networking has grown, there is still concern that there is not enough research and practice on how to systematically and effectively integrate technology into language teaching (Hubbard, 2009).

That is why our project has been articulated through technologies such as Second Life and Skype and has been designed as a transdisciplinary project that engages students, not only in authentic communicative events, but also in challenging cognitive reflection about 'real-life' issues and motivating them to explore future activities. By encouraging students to 'act' as scientists, they could explore cause-and-effect relationships of different habits while learning to learn, that is, while fomenting research habits for life-long learning.

REFERENCES

Dooly, M. (2008). Understanding the many steps for effective collaborative language learning. *Language Learning Journal*, 36(1): 95-78.

Dooly, M. (2011). Divergent perceptions of telecollaborative language learning tasks: Tasks-as-workplan vs. task-as-process. *Language Learning & Technology*, 15(2): 69–91.

Helm, F., Guth, S., & O'Dowd, R. (2012). University language classes collaborating online: A report on the integration of telecollaborative networks in European universities. [Online report]. http://intent-project.eu/sites/default/files/Telecollaboration_report_Executive_summary-July 2012.pdf.

Hubbard, P. (2008) CALL and the future of language teacher education. *Calico Journal*, 25 (2): 175–188.

Lamy, M-N. & Hampel, R. (2007). Online communication in language learning and teaching. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.

Müller-Hartmann, A. & Schocker-v. Ditfurth, M. (Eds.) (2008). Research on the use of technology in task-based language teaching. In A.Müller-Hartmann & M. Schocker-v. Ditfurth (Eds.) *Aufgabenorientiertes Lernen und Lehren mit Medien: Ansätze, Erfahrungen, Perspektiven in der Fremdsprachendidaktik* (pp. 12-64). Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

Thorne, S. (2012). Massively semiotic ecologies and L2 development: Gaming cases and issues. In S. De Wannemacker, S. Vandercruysse, & G. Clarebout (Eds.). Serious games: The challenge. Vol. CCIS 280 (pp. 18-31). Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag.

apac ELT - Convention 2014
February 20th, 21st & 22nd
English in Action 24/7