Freire's problem-posing model: critical pedagogy and young learners

Nadine Nelson° and Julian Chen°

The instructional rationale behind critical pedagogy is to provide students the opportunity to voice their personal stories and opinions, and to reflect and act upon social concerns relevant to their daily lives. Students can then practice being agents of transformation in their own lives, starting in the classroom. This paper is based on the first author's experience of experimenting with critical pedagogy when she was teaching in the UAE. It justifies the suitability of implementing Paulo Freire's problem-posing model with younger EFL learners. Outlining the tenets of critical pedagogy developed by Freire, the authors support the practical nature of the model and its transference to a primary setting. The authors explicate Freire's problem-posing model as five phases, providing a background and case study application for each phase. The intention is to present a practical guide for teachers wishing to implement critical approaches in the EFL classroom.

Key words: Freire's model, problem-posing, young learners, critical language pedagogy, EFL materials

Introduction

Critical pedagogy has been presented as a curriculum philosophy for language education due to its transformative nature, which can empower students' critical thinking and lead to student agency and change (Cranton 2011; Jeyaraj and Harland 2014). Within a wider EFL context, critical pedagogy affirms the current TEFL discourse which holds that the end goal is not only a development in critical consciousness for the students, but language acquisition and meaningful use of a foreign language (Lopez-Gopar 2019). Graman's (1988: 485) account of teaching ESL to rural labourers in Colorado in the late 1970s advocated critical pedagogy as a means to encourage authentic dialogue with his students.

The farm worker ESL class illustrated to me the motivational importance of tying student experience to the process of language. Students are more able to develop linguistically and intellectually when they analyse their own experiences and build their own words to describe and better understand these experiences.

As an EFL teacher teaching in a government school in the UAE, I was motivated by Graman's (1988) words and was eager to investigate whether this approach could also be applied to my own classroom of young

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Emirati and Gulf students. I was aware of how little I really knew about my students, and the imbalance the classroom carried where the students were ingesting literacy material that had little connection to their reality. They were all young Muslim girls who were growing up in downtown Abu Dhabi. For my students, the prescribed English textbooks and guided reading materials often become the sole connection with the language and therefore they needed to be placed under scrutiny as to what was being presented (López-Gopar 2019).

I was drawn to critical pedagogy and its problem-posing orientation to pedagogy. The teacher's role is to establish a safe learning environment that promotes student-generated talk, where topics for discussion are always derived from the students' own lives and experiences. Hence, students are encouraged to think critically about their own perceptions and judgements, to reflect and gain new understandings about previously held worldviews (Akbari 2008).

So theoretically, it made perfect sense. The reality was that I did not know where to begin. I had all the theory at hand but needed a practical guide to lead me in the right direction. There is a scarcity of hands-on examples for implementing critical approaches in the classroom with younger EFL learners, and where there were case studies, they tended to focus on older students, such as adult learners or high school students (Norton and Toohey 2004; Baladi 2007; Crookes 2013). There are logical and acceptable reasons for this. Crookes (2013) rightly points out that any prescriptive lesson plan approach is contrary to looking at the unique situational context of the students and is totally against the traditions of critical pedagogy. He further argues that 'we have almost nothing for beginner levels and EFL contexts' (Crookes 2013: 13), indicating the primacy of developing critical materials for EFL teachers. I was inspired by Graman's experiences but required a methodology that was rooted in critical pedagogy—a critical approach that could be applied not only with older learners but with younger students as well. I needed a framework that could anchor me, as I was a beginner.

This paper describes how Freire's problem-posing model (1973) became the framework I needed, and how it could be applied to the classroom. It is a detailed account of the five phases that should be enacted sequentially. Specifically, it provides a practical guide for other teacher practitioners interested in taking a critical approach with younger language learners.

My teaching trajectory vis-à-vis critical pedagogy

I arrived in Abu Dhabi in August 2012 and began work at Fatima School (pseudonym applied) as an English-medium instruction (EMI) teacher. All students in my class spoke Gulf Arabic as their mother tongue at home, with English being a foreign language. Depending on the student's years of enrolment in a government school, all participants had been exposed to English through the public schooling system from Grade 1. The class comprised students from diverse family backgrounds within the Gulf region who had settled in the UAE. Not only did I teach Emiratis ($n = 12$), but students from Syria ($n = 6$), Saudi Arabia ($n = 2$), Yemen ($n = 1$), Jordan ($n = 1$), Egypt ($n = 1$), and Sudan ($n = 1$).

Believing that second-language students should have ample opportunity to use their target language, my teaching practice for the first two years was

mainly finding ways to encourage 'student talk'. But apart from this central belief, and other observations I had gathered, I had no formal training that prepared me for teaching young EFL learners. In this respect, I was typical of novice language teachers who teach 'without considering how it is introduced or promoted in certain ways depending on historical, political, socio-cultural and economic considerations in each country's particular context' (Sung and Pederson 2012: 153). This speaks for most EFL teachers who are trying to make their own overwhelming and often isolating adjustments to a new way of life, resulting in transferring *old-school* methods based on their prior teaching as a survival strategy. This was my experience, which translated in my initial attempts at creating systems that had served me well in primary schools in Australia. I began experimenting with a typical guided reading programme that had levelled texts on a variety of unfamiliar topics, such as making snowmen, firefighters in Australia, and other topics that presumed prior knowledge of Western culture.

Over time, it became apparent that despite the student's classroom routines, and my organization of materials, my EFL students struggled to engage fully with the lesson or the reading, and so discussion around themes fell flat. A lack of vocabulary to draw on was of course an issue for my students; however, the problem was much greater than this. Because the girls needed so much teacher input in introducing new concepts, the amount of *my talk* dominated the lesson, and the gap in the students' understanding was still apparent. Their reading of the text might be accurate, but robotic, and I could sense the disconnect. Truthfully, what place did a snowman have in the blistering heat of the UAE? Discussion was driven by my questioning, but my students struggled to contribute ideas beyond the standard comprehension expectations. The small-group guided reading discussion felt flat and was frustrating because it was the only time where I could sit with a smaller number of students and have that focused time in conversation. In May 2014, I discarded the guided reading programme and opted for a critical approach using Freire's problem-posing model (1973) that I believed would reinvigorate our discussion time, while improving my students' linguistic outcomes. I was eager to investigate the transferability of Freire's problem-posing model with my EFL learners, aware that Freire taught his students in their L1, while I would be teaching my students in their L2. This also piqued my research motivation to see if applying the same model could provide useful implications for future research and pedagogy.

The school administration was supportive of my endeavours, as were the parents of the students. My tenure at the school had lent itself to a relationship where I was trusted to explore alternative teaching pedagogies. The duration of the six-week case study was also within the boundaries of how long the school administration was willing to give for my research. Ethical considerations were taken into account at each stage, and encompassed permissions, informed consent, and confidentiality.

Freire's problem-posing model

Freire's problem-posing model (1973) offers a five-phase plan that offers an instructional guide for problem posing across disciplines. Table 1 provides an overview of the five distinct phases that the students move through. The

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	Current study task design specifications
Phase 1 Listen to student histories and language for generative words	Listen to student histories and language through conversations with the students and prior experiences as their classroom teacher.
Phase 2 Select generative words based on phonemic richness and pragmatic tone	Pragmatic tone was achieved in the final selection of the generative themes. This meant that there was some problem posing aspect to the theme, and that the theme was grounded in student experience of being in the English classroom.
Phase 3 Create codification or visual representations of situational problems to be decoded by culture circles.	A series of four codification photographs were made using older students from another class. Each scene depicted some identifiable problem that could be read and interpreted.
Phase 4 Create an agenda, not a rigid schedule for the discussion.	An agenda for the critical pedagogy lessons was adhered to (in keeping with my usual literacy programme). However, once the critical pedagogy lesson began, there was no prescribed goal or outcome for the lesson. Rather, that time was set aside for dialogue and sharing between all participants.
Phase 5 Post literacy circle learning incorporating L2 language learning at a phoneme or theme level.	Post-discussion, students would then move to journal writing time with a suitable list of vocabulary that was generated around the topics of the codification. This vocabulary would be supplied by the students themselves, and the expectation was that students would write a simple story based on the codification. Ideally, the story would contain a resolution that reflected the students own problem-posing skills.

TABLE 1
Freire's problem-posing model and current study

column on the left describes the phases moving progressively, while the column on the right specifies the design of the task used in this case study, and how it correlates to the model.

Phase 1: listen to student histories and language for generative words

According to Freire (1973), the goal of this first phase of the problem-posing process is to encourage educators to understand the student's perspectives while 'forming rewarding relationships and discovering often unsuspected exuberance and beauty in the people's [students] language' (Freire 1973: 49). This first phase is very relational and is the daily interactions with the students and cannot be forced, insincere, or rushed. For the teacher who is in the position of already building rapport with the students, this phase occurs naturally and builds a foundation for phase 2.

In our case, phase 1 began organically and started at the beginning of the academic year in September 2014. It was the culmination of months of being with the students as their classroom teacher and building those relationships over time. This critical period propelled me to reposition

my teacher identity within the school—as a foreigner in Abu Dhabi and a Western-trained teacher with my own set of ideologies that I needed to unpack and come to terms with. In the daily struggle of classroom life that had students exerting their own dominance and power within the four walls of a classroom, and merely by being present alongside the students, future generative themes were directly drawn from the classroom interactions (or discourse) and the students' own histories. I also started to form a solid understanding of the language issues for the students and their proficiency of communicating in English. One significant aspect is that through spending a prolonged period with my student naturally as their teacher, I also had developed an ear for the speech rhythms and cadences of each individual, enabling my own understanding of their fledgling communication to a greater degree. In this sense, conducting my investigation as a teacher researcher was ecologically sound and context responsive.

Phase 2: selecting generative themes

From the informal interactions with the students during phase 1, generative words are selected from the students' own vocabulary. These words need to follow a set of criteria set by Freire's (1973) model. They must have phonemic richness, phonetic difficulty, a pragmatic tone, and an emotional appeal that provokes interest in the students towards the conversation generated by that word. For example, Freire might start with the Portuguese word *favela* (slum) broken into the syllables *fa-ve-la*. These syllables would then be used to introduce a family of syllables: *fa*, *fe*, *fi*, *fo*, and *fu*. Using these introduced syllables, the students would then construct other words by combining syllables taken from other generative words. In my case, this phase has been slightly adapted, and leans more towards the selection of the generative *theme* (or investigations of situations such as *bullying* or *language isolation*) rather than a single word, or words. Shor (1992) recommended this approach as particularly suitable for younger students, and others such as Rashidi and Safari (2011) took this further in their work with EFL learners.

In relation to the development of critical pedagogy materials, the themes of the materials should be derived from the learners 'life situations, needs and interests, and that student motivation to participate in communicative tasks can be increased by tying the content of the materials to the student [situations]' (Freire 1973, cited in Rashidi and Safari 2011: 255). Note that the word 'interests' in relation to critical pedagogy does not refer to the students' current hobbies or 'likes', but rather to problematic realities in their lives (e.g. injustices in the classroom, friendship issues, language and communication barriers during English lessons). In trying to determine problematic realities on behalf of the students, I did not try to stray into territory of which I did not have a full and complete understanding, nor did I attempt to portray experiences outside my students' own lives. Put differently, the generative themes did not come from my limited understanding of the student's home situations. Nor was I interested in selecting those themes that might include cultural and religious practices (weddings, religious worship, religious celebrations) beyond my understanding as an outsider. Any societal norms that might have superficially been

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thought of as 'oppressive' or 'unjust' were also not for consideration, as these were not generated by my direct observation of the students.

In terms of abiding by governing principles for critical pedagogy materials (Crookes 2021: 249), it was considered appropriate that the themes were derived purely from classroom interactions that I had witnessed as a teacher throughout the year. The scenarios mirrored aspects of student life experienced by me as a teacher, which had a problem-posing element that was recognisable and accessible by all students. For this reason, the themes identified during phases 1 and 2 were:

- Low-level bullying
- Student perceptions of good and bad behaviour
- Injustice, corruption of classroom systems
- Language barriers to learning.

Phase 3: creating the codification

Codification is the visual representation (e.g. a photograph, slide, or poster) of a real-life situation in which students would normally engage, but which contains an underlying problem that has implications for the viewer. Freire (1973: 51) defines codification as 'visual representations as coded situation problems containing elements to be decoded by the groups with the collaboration of the teacher'. The teacher would then prompt and facilitate discussion around the codification. Once discussion was exhausted, the introduction of the generative word would then create a reality-based association for the students to be used later during phase 5 of the model.

With the help of some Grade 5 volunteers, we were able to stage and photograph four distinct scenarios ready for interpretation. The volunteers were my former students and already familiar with the classroom environment and behaviour systems. I directed the volunteers within each of the four scenes, including facial expressions and body language. The student's own classroom was used in each photograph, which was an important decision in terms of recognition and familiarity. My main goal in the process of codification was to remove anything non-relatable that could cause a feeling of 'not experiencing' for even one child. The choice of setting was therefore important in that it needed to be accessible and recognizable to everyone.

Through observing and learning about my students, I discovered that, for some, the majority of their childhood experiences were limited to going to school and being at home. Figures 1–4 are the four codification photographs used in this investigation. Provided here are brief descriptions of the four codification photographs to aid understanding.

The codification *Mean Girls* (Figure 1) depicts a scenario where one student is reading, oblivious to the others, while two students on the right are whispering about her with their body language staged in a way that suggests what they are saying is not kind. The girl in the middle of the photograph has observed the girls and is captured not knowing what to do. Often the discussion would look more closely at this girl and the choices she would have to make. Topics instigated by this codification included *bullying*, *friendship*, and *student responsibility*.

The codification *Work and Play* (Figure 2) depicts a maths lesson where the student actors had been asked to make a pattern with coloured blocks and

FIGURE 1
Codification 1: *Mean Girls.*

FIGURE 2
Codification 2: *Work and Play.*

draw it in their books. In this codification, three students are completing their workbook while one student has her book closed, and a pile of blocks on her desk, which she is connecting while the other students watch her. This codification enables multiple perspectives and interpretations of how student task completion and engagement are seen by the students. For example, was she 'playing' with the blocks or doing her own task set by the teacher? Discussion topics of *good girl* and *bad girl* were instigated by this codification.

The codification *Star Student* (Figure 3) was derived from our class behaviour system that had been in place for the year. Each week, I would elect two 'Star Students' who would have special responsibilities for that week. One of those responsibilities was to award student points, and they were given autonomy to select students carefully and make the awards, without needing to check with me constantly. The system worked best when grounded in honesty and transparency. It was a system that could be, and in fact was, exploited and corrupted, but it gave an opportunity for students to attempt self-autonomy in their classroom environment. In this codification, the Star Students in yellow caps are being whispered to by another student. The fourth student far left, observes this. Topics instigated by this codification included *power*, *friendships*, *exclusion*, and definitions of *fairness* and *injustice*.

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FIGURE 3
Codification 3: *Star Student.*

FIGURE 4
Codification 4: *Language Barrier.*

The codification *Language Barrier* (Figure 4) depicts a maths lesson familiar to the students. To the left, three students are busily cutting coupons out of a supermarket flyer. These students are on task, helping each other and contributing to the shared goal of completing their task. To the right, one student sits apart from the others, head down and silent. She is not doing anything observable, which sets her apart from the others. This codification instigates discussion around *friendship*, *communication*, *language barriers*, and *awareness of others*.

By taking great care with the codification itself, my investigation sought to follow the principles of Wallerstein's (1983) and her approach to 'good' codification. From her extensive research with EFL and ESL communities in the United States and Brazil, she was able to delineate the qualities that codification must exhibit. According to Wallerstein (1983: 20), codification should:

- Represent an everyday problem situation that is easily recognisable to students and to which they have emotional connections.

- Illustrate as many sides to the contradiction as possible yet be simple enough for students to project their own experience.

- Focus on one problem at a time while suggesting links to other themes in people's lives.

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- Not provide solutions to the problem but rather stimulate dialogue.

- Not present a problem which is overwhelming to the student, such as one where the actions required to solve it are out of reach for the students. There should be capacity for small actions that address the problem, even if they do not solve it.'

Phase 4: the critical pedagogy lesson

In our classroom, the literacy session comprised reading, writing, and grammar activities, and students would form into their groups and move to the activity based on the class schedule. These scheduled activities were familiar to the students, so I was able to work with each small student group without interruption. This routine also allowed me to have a daily 25-minute session of uninterrupted time for implementing the critical pedagogy lesson. The schedule in Table 2 details the groups and the codification focus for that lesson during phase 4.

Once the scheduled small group was seated with me, the critical pedagogy lesson would begin. Following Freire (1973), this is described as phase 4 where an agenda for the discussion (dialoguing) is encouraged rather than a rigid format. Ideally, there should be a flow of dialogue and sharing as a community of learners, with the teacher as a facilitator for the discussion. Rashidi and Safari (2011) referred to this phase as *decodification* where there is an exploration and interpretation of the learner's ideas about the problem being posed, or more specifically, an 'analysis of the day to day experiences to unmask the previously unperceived realities' (Heaney, cited in Rashidi and Safari 2011: 251). Not to be confused with rigid lesson plans and predetermined questions, this *agenda* was intended to be a post-lesson reflection on the points emerging from the dialogue. Freire's intentions were that it be a co-investigation, representing the voices of all participants.

Students were each given identical codification photographs to study and could retain the photograph during the session if needed. To open discussion, I would ask display questions that placed less demand on

Week		Codification used during the critical pedagogy lesson
Week 1	L1A	*Mean Girls* Codification
	L1B	*Star Student* Codification
	L2	*Work and Play* Codification
	L3	*Star Student* Codification
Week 2	L1A	*Language Barrier* Codification
	L1B	*Work and Play* Codification
	L2	*Language Barrier* Codification
	L3	*Work and Play* Codification
Week 3	L1A	*Work and Play* Codification
	L1B	*Language Barrier* Codification
	L2	*Star Student* Codification
	L3	*Language Barrier* Codification
Week 4	L1A	*Star Student* Codification and Interviews
	L1B	*Mean Girls* Codification and Interviews
	L2	*Mean Girls* Codification and Interviews
	L3	*Mean Girls* Codification and Interviews

TABLE 2
Critical pedagogy lesson schedule

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the students. The following sample questions follow Wallerstein's (1983: 79) 'tools for dialogue':

- *What do you see in the photograph (e.g. setting, objects, position of students in the setting)?*
- *What is the problem?*

Once this level of orientation had taken place, motives, behaviour, feelings, and the rights and wrongs of a real-life problematic situation could be examined. The student's perception of an event was discussed, and, in some instances, students were prompted to see the situation from various viewpoints. The next level of questioning would always be around likening a situation to the student's own experience, or whether this had occurred to them personally, and how it affected the student.

- *How do you feel about it?*
- *Why is there a problem?*
- *What can you do?*

This is where decodification exited, and where *recodification* began. Recodification is the process where learners 'expand their perceptions of the phenomena to examine the former perception and to recodify the themes more critically' (Rashidi and Safari 2011: 251). Because we had spent so much time unpacking experiences and feelings connected to the situation, the students were ready to offer solutions that had been previously unvoiced. It was also a chance to look at a situation through a variety of perspectives and to question previously held judgements.

Phase 5: discovery

This phase consolidates the linguistic aspect of the programme. Once a visual association has been made with the generative word, the teacher uses this word as the basis for more in-depth lesson such as phonetic makeup and word families, chunking the word into syllables, and re-forming the word to make new words. Freire found that this phase was rapidly mastered by his adult literacy students due to the problem posing and dialogic teaching occurring earlier in his model. As such, phase 5 incorporated a language-learning aspect.

In this study, students used the discussion and codification as a stimulus to then write a short story or retell of events. Students were provided with the codification from their recent discussion and a list of topic words that had been generated from the discussion (e.g. bully, friend, help, fair, playing). Beyond this initial support, students treated sustained writing as an independent activity. And because we kept with Wallerstein's recommendations of what good codification was, the students only wrote about situations that they had experienced in the class. Introducing difficult or painful topics for 'discussion's sake' is problematic ethically from a student welfare perspective, and I desired to avoid this. Therefore, the topic, while having emotional connection for the students, was never traumatic or overwhelming. Provided in Figure 5 are two sets of separate writing samples. Both students were emergent writers. The first sample ('Camels') is taken from journalling about a text used in their guided reading lesson. The second sample ('Critical Pedagogy Lesson') shows their writing development during phase 5 after the codification has been discussed in phase 4. The writing productions

in terms of length, and diverse use of English vocabulary mark the difference between the two samples for both student A and student B.

Conclusion

As evidenced in this study, the use of the problem-posing model promoted critical thinking due to the problematized nature of the codification. Because the photographs depicted 'life as it was' within the classroom, having the visual stimuli was an important component. Students orally rehearsed their writing by talking about their characters and character intentions, informed by what they were seeing from the codification. Rather than accept the group consensus, students became adept at looking at each scenario differently, which then informed their writing and added interesting twists and turns in the outcome of the stories. The talk that was generated around the codification allowed the teacher to orally rehearse their story development, to follow a plot line, and to decide the suitable outcome. New vocabulary was also rehearsed in context. Findings from this study evidenced a majority preference for the critical pedagogy lessons, with students responding to carefully selected codification that came not

Student A

Sample 1: Guided Reading Prompt (Camels)

One day I go to the zoo and I see all the animals after I go to eat. After my daddy said 'let's go to see the camel' and the day after go to the camel and my dad said 'Sit up the camel'. After I sit.

Sample 2: Critical Pedagogy Lesson ('Mean Girls' codification)

One day there was some girls there four girl and that girl is sometimes love girls and sometime not love the girl. The two girl talk about that girl. The two girl said that girl 'This girl she cant read because she is crazy' and the girl back sad. I like this girl because I see her read good and after the Aisha girl she said come read with me.

Student B

Sample 1: Guided Reading Prompt (Camels)

Animal is camel and he lives and is camel is drink water and is eat food plant and is camel is ran.

Sample 2: Critical Pedagogy Lesson (Language Barrier' codification)

One day I see Aisha she cutting the paper and Hind is cutting the paper and Fatima she look at the paper and aid Fatima in the Aisha cutting this and cutting Tasneem she do nothing and is not finish and the three girls is finish and Tasneem is not listening the teacher and Aisha and Hind and Fatima is listening the teacher.

FIGURE 5
Excerpts of two student writing samples in guided reading versus critical pedagogy lessons.

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only from the source culture, as is recommended ([Rashidi and Safari 2011](#)), but on a micro level, from their own classroom experience. Students were able to describe the lessons in terms of 'thinking big' and 'doing a big work', which had a positive impact on their confidence with their writing. Students were able to link the discussion aspects directly to their writing and acknowledge the ways in which the codification helped to stimulate ideas, thus enabling them to write stories of which they were proud.

This paper serves to offer a clear description of the critical pedagogy project undertaken with my Grade 4 students in the UAE. It illustrates the materials used and the learner's responses to the materials. The initial trepidation that I felt has been replaced with a confidence that such approaches are appropriate for language learning and have since been replicated in my EFL classroom teaching in other parts of the world. Freire's problem-posing model remains sensitive to the learner's unique reality, without being overly formulaic and prescriptive in its methods. It is hoped that this paper could inspire other EFL teachers, especially those working with young learners, to incorporate critical pedagogy to empower students' worldviews and critical thinking while enhancing their language productions.

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The authors

Nadine Nelson is a seasoned primary teacher with over a decade of international experience working in public education in Australia, the UAE, and now as a certified English language teacher in Brunei Darussalam. Her main research focuses on critical pedagogy and how teachers can create talk-rich environments to better support and empower learners of English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D).
Email: Nadine.Nelson06@gmail.com

Julian Chen is an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics/TESOL and the Course Coordinator of Asian Languages at the School of Education, Curtin University, Australia. His research intersects technology-enhanced language learning, task-based language teaching, netnography, and action research. His work has appeared in multiple flagship journals such as *Modern Language Journal*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Language Teaching Research*, *System*, *Computers & Education*, *ReCALL*, and *Computer-assisted Language Learning*. He is currently the book review editor of the *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics Journal*, and editor of the timely volume, *Emergency Remote Teaching and Beyond: Voices from World Language Teachers and Researchers* (Springer).
Email: Julian.Chen@curtin.edu.au