



# Don't let it get away!

## The issue

Last academic year I was having an issue with my classes, namely: I didn't know what topics or language points to cover in my syllabus-free classes. This meant it was necessary to do some research into emergent language and I want to share the results with you.

Imagine yourself in a situation where you have some year-long classes but lack a syllabus, now in this situation you might find yourself asking: what language should I actually teach in syllabus-free classes?

For most people the first solution that comes to mind would be some kind of needs analysis, wherein you identify student areas for development and topics that interest them, then use this to generate material.

This approach is certainly what I did and it worked; the classes had a small syllabus.

With the issue resolved, why was it necessary to do research?

The research was necessary because the results of the needs analysis, while providing a foundation, weren't substantial enough for an entire

## Stephen Tarbuck

reports on his research into capturing and exploiting emergent language in syllabus-free classes.

academic year and therefore it was necessary to find another source of language. What could that be?

I believe you know my proposed answer, after all you read the title of this article, and are hopefully interested in ways of recording and exploring emergent language and using it as a substitute syllabus in syllabus-free classes.

▮▮ The idea for feedback slips is that as you hear errors or chances for language upgrades in class, you note them on slips of paper which you then give to the students to correct. ▮▮

## Background information

Last academic year I taught two syllabus-free adult classes, one at A1+ and the other B2+/C1, with both classes being conversation based.

After the first lesson, I noticed I was responding to a lot of their language rather than the topics and I began recording this language in random places.

Sadly, all these notes were a mess, so I wanted to have a way to record and explore this language; I realised I had a gap in my teaching knowledge.

Essentially, it was time to do some research because I needed to find out how I could record and use this emergent language effectively.

Before getting into the details of the research I want to give credit to *Working with Emergent Language: Ideas and activities for developing your reactive skills in class*, (Chinn & Norrington-Davies, 2023), as this book was a massive influence on the research I undertook and its material and ideas helped guide it.

## Refining the question

My step in the research was to refine that original question (what language should I actually teach in syllabus-free classes?) into more specific and actionable questions.

To do this, I used the first two steps of the 'Prepare' stage of the framework for Action Research Competencies from TeachingEnglish.com's Classroom Research course, which goes something like this:

- The first step is to identify the research area and focus on it. (In my case I already knew my research area was emergent language in syllabus-free classes.)
- The next step then was to change the focus into a researchable question.

In doing so I found myself with an extensive list of ideas which I refined to three I felt addressed my issue the best.

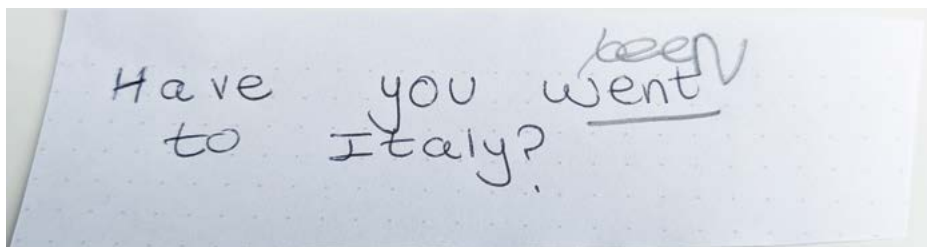


Figure 1: Sentence correction from a feedback slip

The questions were as follows:

1. What are students' opinions and feelings about using emergent language as opposed to a clear syllabus?
2. How can emergent language be captured in class?
3. How can emergent language be exploited in class?

With these actionable questions ready to go it was time to explore them.

## Students' opinions and feelings: emergent language versus a clear syllabus

I wanted to explore this question because it was an opportunity to do some in-class research that focused on the students and to do this I used a development task from Chinn and Norrington-Davies.

The task was a learner questionnaire which had statements connected to methods of error correction and required students to respond to these statements with how strongly they agreed or disagreed.

I tweaked many of the statements to focus on emergent language and learning without a syllabus, but kept the same idea of students' responses being how much they agreed or disagreed.

I gave the questionnaire to the two groups I mentioned earlier and the results showed a variety of student opinions, which could probably start a new article, but I'd like to focus on just a few, because I feel they answer the question we are tackling here.

One point of interest was that all the students felt positively about the idea of the teacher giving them different ways to upgrade their language, rather than focusing on errors, and that having a variety of ways to express themselves made them feel more confident.

The A2 class, who were experimenting with ways to introduce English into their everyday lives and were encountering a lot of language beyond their comprehension (for example from series or music), were more interested in the teacher clarifying language they heard outside class than the higher level students, who felt they already had strategies to clarify the majority of the language they encountered outside class.

The higher level students also felt it was unnecessary for them to have a strict syllabus.

For them, Young Learners and lower-level students need a syllabus because it gives direction to their learning, but for themselves, a syllabus doesn't add much. They said they were already, or at least believed they were, well grounded in the majority of grammar and vocabulary; they really needed conversational practice, rather than direct instruction.

Taking all this together, it seemed that the students were receptive to the idea of focusing on emergent language, and, while I didn't agree with the higher level group's reasons for not using a syllabus, there was enough encouragement from their responses to try using emergent language.

## How can this language be captured in class?

As soon as I generated this question, two tools came to mind: firstly, feedback slips from *Activities for Task-based Learning: Integrating a fluency first approach into the ELT Classroom*, (Anderson & McCutcheon, 2019).

The idea for feedback slips is that as you hear errors or chances for language upgrades in class, you note them on slips of paper which you then give to the students to correct.

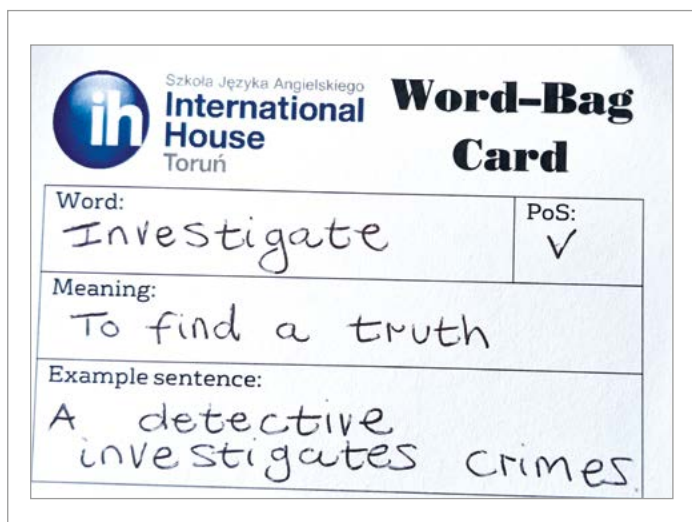


Figure 2: Examples of new language on a Word-bag card

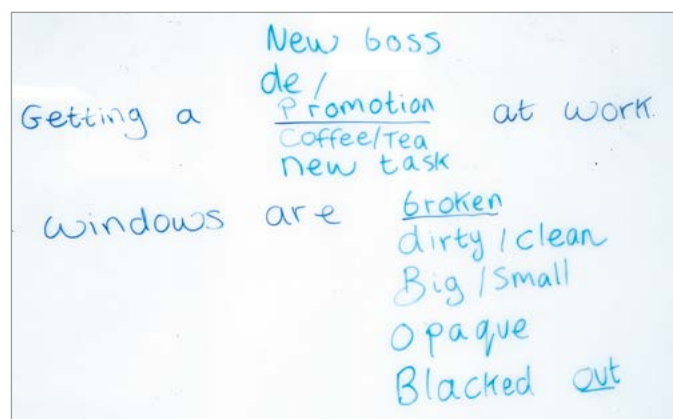


Figure 3: Examples of language produced by B2+/C1 learners

The example in Figure 1 shows when I overheard a mistake with the third form and made a note of it as a question. Then, during a feedback stage, I gave the paper to a fast finisher to correct and to ask their partner.

The next resource comes from my school, International House Toruń, called 'Word-Bagging' and is presented here with permission in Figure 2.

Word-Bagging is a similar concept to feedback slips, as new language is recorded on a Word-bag card and can be done by students or the teacher. And, like feedback slips, the card can be kept for immediate or future reference.

The new language, the verb *investigate*, has been noted and the other details of the word filled in, including its part of speech, and so the Word-bag card is ready.

I now had two methods for recording emergent language and was able to use these to collect emergent language examples.

### How can this language be exploited in class?

The priority for an activity for emergent language is that it has to be available, in class and on the spot, so no preparation involved.

Luckily, *Working with Emergent Language: Ideas and activities for developing your reactive skills in class* offers a variety of

such activities, many of which are classics, such as disappearing dialogues, but one in particular I found especially useful was called 'vertical extension'.

Vertical extension, as used for emergent language, is essentially extending the vocabulary options of a finished sentence by eliciting alternative vocabulary options for parts of it and substituting the original word choice with synonyms or other word choices.

In the past I have found it hard to explain vertical extension so I have included an example of it in Figure 3.

Here you can see examples of language produced by that B2+/C1 class during an open discussion about working conditions.

The original language examples are the underlined options, but after the discussion, I elicited and clarified different possible vocabulary choices, which as you can see, extended the vocabulary vertically, while maintaining the original sentence.

### Final thoughts

After this research and reflection I don't know if I found a concrete solution to my question and issue. Extending a syllabus with emergent language, I found, isn't extensive enough to provide material for an entire semester.

This does sound like a negative end to the research but the experience of

doing the research was worthwhile. It added some new tools to my teaching practice and gave me an opportunity to try new things, especially the classroom questionnaire.

Based on this experience I encourage you to try classroom research, not only because of the benefits to your own teaching practice, but because if you decide to share the results, like I am here, who knows what new ideas or opportunities might emerge?

### References

Anderson, N. & McCutcheon, N. (2019). *Activities for Task-Based Learning: Integrating a fluency first approach into the ELT classroom*. Delta Publishing.

Chinn, R. & Norrington-Davies, D. (2023). *Working with Emergent Language: Ideas and activities for developing your reactive skills in class*. Pavilion Publishing and Media Ltd.

British Council. (2025). *TeachingEnglish*. 'Classroom research'. Available from <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/training/teachingenglish-classroom-research> (Last accessed 15 September 2025).



**Stephen Tarbuck** is a senior EFL teacher and teacher trainer at International House Toruń in Poland. He also writes articles on a variety of TEFL topics which have been published in *Modern English Teacher*, *International House Journal* and more.