

From EFL Checklist to ESL Learning Tool: Co-constructing Success Criteria to Support Learner Agency

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Problems

The Vietnamese Context

- English is being repositioned from a foreign language to a more functional second language.
- Learners need to use English as a tool for learning, participation, feedback, and self-regulation.
- In many classrooms, criteria are given as checklists or rubrics without adaptation.

The Importance of Success Criteria

- Help teachers and learners judge the quality of learning in both summative and formative assessment.
- Make expectations more transparent, helping learners identify gaps and choose strategies for improvement.

Lacking Learner Agency

- TOKENISTIC** Students see criteria but don't understand what quality looks like.
- COMPLIANCE-DRIVEN** Fixed checklists encourage ticking boxes, not deeper understanding.
- ACCESS BARRIERS** Standardised wording creates language and attention demands.

Co-Constructing Criteria as a Solution

"How will I know I have learned it?"

Stage 1 — Transparency

Learning goals + success criteria
↓
Students understand what quality looks like
Berry, 2008; Solution Tree, 2018

Stage 2 — Participation

Exemplars + discussion + negotiation
↓
Students help define and interpret quality
Davies & Herbst, 2013; McMillan, 2013

Stage 3 — Agency

Peer assessment + self-assessment + revision
↓
Students monitor progress and make decisions about improvement
Eagan, 2023; McMillan, 2013

Success criteria are useful, but they are not automatically meaningful.

To become a learning tool, they need to become part of classroom dialogue.

Research Design

Type of Research Action Research
Participants 18 Secondary 4 learners, ages 13-14, B1.1 level
Task Create a language fact file
Time 2 hours
Data Classroom observations, student work, peer-assessment responses, self-assessment responses

Research questions

- How does the exemplar → discussion → student-generated criteria framework influence students' final products?
- How does it influence the quality of peer- and self-assessment?
- What adjustments and/or teacher support are needed?

Exemplar-based approach to co-constructing criteria

Andrade and colleagues, as reported in McMillan (2013)

1. ANALYZE

Four high-quality exemplars

2. NOTICE

Identify recurring features of quality

3. PROPOSE

Generate possible success criteria

4. NEGOTIATE

Discuss, compare and refine ideas

5. AGREE

Create one shared criteria list

6. APPLY

Complete the task using the criteria

7. ASSESS & REFLECT

Peer → teacher → self-assessment using the agreed criteria

Results of the Intervention

Products - Agreed Success Criteria

- Organize information clearly
- Include 2-3 interesting and relevant facts
- Use short, clear sentences and bullet points
- Use relevant pictures to support meaning

Perception change

GREATER PURPOSEFULNESS

Students approached the task with clearer expectations and greater awareness of what they were trying to achieve.

MORE MEANINGFUL PEER & SELF-ASSESSMENT

Comments became more specific and were more often linked to the agreed criteria rather than vague praise or correction.

MORE FOCUSED TEACHER FEEDBACK

The criteria helped structure feedback before, during and after the task.

Classroom Implementation

Caveats

⚠ TIME

Students needed sufficient time to examine exemplars, negotiate quality and reach agreement.

⚠ RELEVANCE

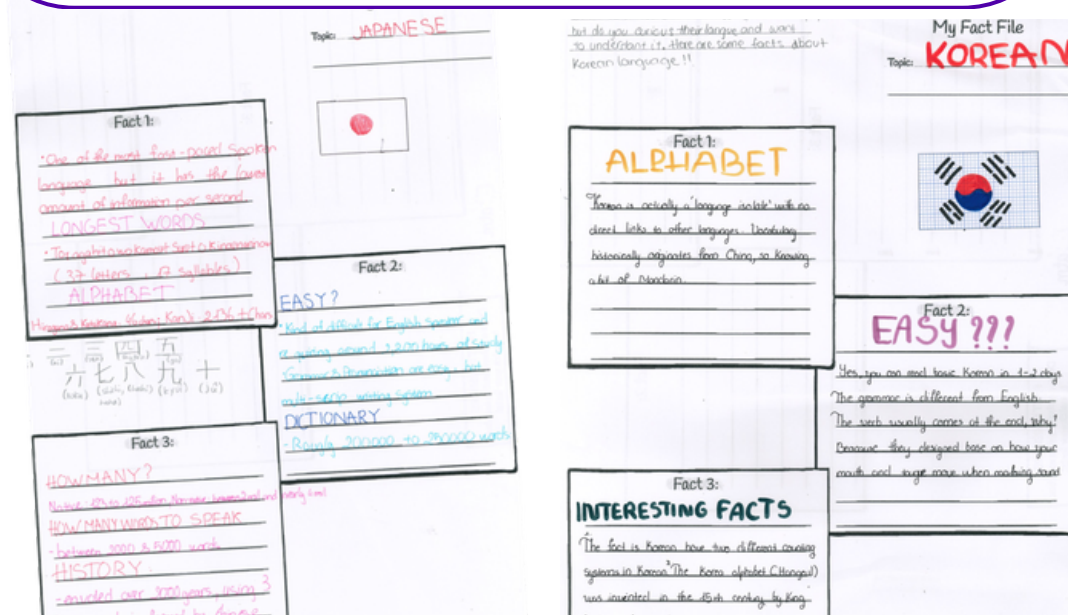
Some student-generated criteria were less important or too focused on surface features.

⚠ OVERLOAD

Too many criteria made the list harder to remember and use.

Tips

- ✓ **1. Build in time**
Do not rush exemplar analysis and negotiation.
- ✓ **2. Start small, then share**
Small-group discussion → whole-class agreement.
- ✓ **3. Keep it concise**
Aim for about 4-5 high-value criteria.
- ✓ **4. Make quality visible**
Use exemplars, visuals and student-friendly language.
- ✓ **5. Keep criteria alive**
Return to them during: planning → drafting → peer feedback → teacher feedback → self-reflection



Language fact files created by students

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