

**Linguistic mindfulness<sup>1</sup> and being a collector of language:  
A strategy for teaching and a strategy for learning**

by Karen Slikas Barber

***Abstract***

*Being mindful of incidental language and then collecting, noticing and doing things with the language are strategies that can enhance our learning and opportunities to learn. Such an approach was trialled over a ten-week term with the students and teacher in a multi-level (elementary-intermediate) Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) class. Students and teacher alike practised being mindful of the texts they encountered in the course of their daily activities outside the classroom. They also collected texts by photographing them with their mobile phones or by copying them into their collection books. These short texts were then used as a basis for homework and group work activities modelled by the teacher. The careful reading, collecting, noticing and doing activities with language encountered in everyday life developed a continuing linguistic mindfulness in the teacher and students and provided a learning strategy that can be employed any time and anywhere.*

**Background**

In the often over-busy life of teaching, learning and living, it is sometimes difficult to make time to improve our own language learning and our learning about language. Family, friendships and financial commitments often take precedence over professional development, study and homework. However, as a strategy for teaching and learning, we can become linguistically mindful of the language we encounter in our everyday lives and then choose to explore this incidental language as a means to improving our own learning as teachers and students. This means giving our full attention to some of the short texts that are in front of us at any moment throughout our day. It also means collecting some of the texts and exploring them further in the classroom and at home.

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘linguistic mindfulness’ was coined by the teacher to describe a procedure for carefully thinking about a text at the moment that it is encountered during the course of every day life. Mindfulness is a concept that is used in both counseling and meditation and the interpretation being used for this strategy is that of ‘being present to or turning our attention to’ the present moment (Bastis, 2000: 17).

Working within the curriculum framework of the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) with its language competencies linked to the use of whole texts, teachers and students spend a significant amount of class time exploring texts. Effective implementation of the teaching and learning cycle with its five stages of building context, modelling and deconstructing, joint construction, independent construction and linking of related texts provides many opportunities for this to occur (Feez, 1998: 11, 28).

A mantra in my classroom has been to explore texts and to keep going back to a text we have enjoyed and comprehended to learn more. Within this framework I have encouraged students to be collectors of language. I have done this by sharing and devising language analysis activities using my own collection of spoken and written discourse and by modelling what can be done with a text we have used in class to explore its syntactic, semantic and graphophonic features (Gibbons, 1991: 71). Perhaps unsurprisingly, I have seen little evidence that a language collection strategy has ever been autonomously adopted by my students. In fact, insufficient training, guidance, time, tools and thought had been given to enable my students to use such approaches to improve their own learning. With this in mind, a more carefully-defined strategy including linguistic mindfulness as part of language collection was developed and trialled to address previous shortcomings and to give the students a real choice as to whether or not they took up such a strategy to learn autonomously. The aim was to give learners opportunities 'to think carefully about language for themselves to help to make them more independent learners' (Willis, 2003: 8).

### **Literature review**

One of three agreed-upon essential conditions for language learning is 'exposure to a rich but comprehensible input of real language in use' and making meaning of that language involving conscious and subconscious processes (Willis, 1996: 11). As part of this meaning-making process, noticing features of the language in a particular context is important. This means isolating small chunks of language to ascertain meaning and use:

It is only when features are noticed, processed in the learner's mind and understood that they are likely to become part of their internalised language system. (Willis, 1996: 11)

As another researcher suggests, noticing activities 'encourage a more introspective engagement with language, calling for quiet observation which is unhampered by the simultaneous need to manipulate language' (Batstone, 1994: 54). Additionally, language learning requires motivation to listen, read, speak and write. Finally, using the language to do things is a condition for language learning (Willis, 1996: 11).

A non-essential but desirable condition for language learning is instruction (Willis, 1996: 11). As part of this instruction, learners also need to develop 'learning how to learn' skills. This often requires training, so students can make choices about how they learn how to learn and experiment with different strategies (Nunan, 1991: 188, 181). Therefore, learners need to be exposed to a variety of approaches in order to broaden their use and choice of learning styles and strategies (Willis, 1996: 10). Part of this instruction entails drawing learners' attention to particular language features to make them more noticeable and encouraging learners to look for these features in future input: 'Repeated noticing may then enable learners to incorporate acceptable forms into their spontaneous language' (Willis, 2003: 8). Through consciousness-raising activities designed to encourage learners to look carefully at language they have processed for meaning, learners can learn how they can explore and discover for themselves how language works and the relationship between meaning and form (Willis, 2003: 14-15). Learners can also be shown how to see the pattern in grammar and use of lexis through the teacher highlighting patterns in clause structure, tense, syntactic frames, word groupings (class), lexical phrases and frames, and collocation. As learners begin to recognise patterns, they can go on to see other structures and words that behave in the same way and then 'allocate these to categories of meaning' (Willis, 2003: 48-49).

Incidental language, that is, language noticed during the living of our daily lives, provides a rich and comprehensible input of real language in use as required for language learning. In addition, incidental language usually has the advantage of brevity and often pithiness, so that making meaning of a text and noticing features about such a text in a short space of time are achievable propositions. This could then enhance learners' motivation to use this incidental language to learn autonomously.

Many of the short texts encountered in our daily lives are not only rich and varied but also memorable. For example, there is the often seen public health notice on the back of toilet doors, 'If it's not on, it's not on.' Then there are the anti-drink driving posters with the quote, 'I had dinner with my wine. I should be OK.' These short texts are very noticeable and thus may make noticing an interesting and attainable activity. As one researcher notes, 'it's the quality of the exposure and not the quantity that matters in learning language' (Willis, 1996: 13). Another advocates using a sentence 'to lead the lesson' (Anderson, 2007: 28) and using the 'shortest possible mentor text' when exploring language use and production (Anderson, 2005: 12). These short texts that students notice in their daily lives can become scaffolds when learners read, think about, collect, notice, further notice, and explore and imitate these texts. In addition, these short texts can also be used by teachers for incidental and then more reflective professional development as well as for creating classroom activities. Being

mindful of incidental language and collecting language offer the teacher exploratory, creative and individualised methods of professional development that can inform day-to-day classroom practice. As Bob Marley proclaims, '[n]one but ourselves can free our minds' (quoted in Edge, 2000: 2).

### **The study**

To introduce the idea of becoming linguistically mindful and then collecting language as a strategy for autonomous learning, the students in a full-time CSWE class were given a language collection book in the first week of the class. As their teacher, I also kept a language collection book. In each book a flowchart was included outlining the steps to follow to adopt a mindfulness strategy (see Figure 1). I demonstrated how one could be mindful on a bus, at a doctor's surgery, and so forth, and explained how the students could then collect some of the texts they had read to be used for noticing and doing activities in class and at home. I also demonstrated how noticing could assist in further processing the language and showed the students a limited range of 'doing' activities. These activities were modelled each week using a text taken from my collection book.

As Figure 1 shows, the first step is to look at a text, read it carefully and then ask a set of five 'WH' questions about the text as a means of understanding the text and thinking about it. Through this process, students can develop a condition of linguistic mindfulness, that is, being 'present' to the texts that appear in their daily lives. The process can stop there. But there is also the choice of going on to the next step, which includes copying the text into the collection book and then noticing features of the text. Noticing includes looking at sentence patterns, tense, noun phrases, punctuation and spelling, capital letters and 'other patterns' including grammar, word order, word class, lexical phrases and frames and collocation (Willis, 2003: 48). Again, after this initial noticing and copying, the process can stop or the process can continue with further noticing, exploring and discovering as well as doing things with the language from the text. Doing activities include imitating the text or patterns within the text, grouping words, memorising new words or patterns, and deleting and then substituting word(s) or phrases to form a new sentence.

These processes are outlined in the flow chart provided on the following page. Students were encouraged to complete all the steps in the flow chart on their own text to gain a better understanding of the text and to internalise language features. Furthermore, by exploring, analysing and then discussing the purpose(s), worldview and structures of a text, the students were developing critical literacy skills (Freebody & Luke, 1990).

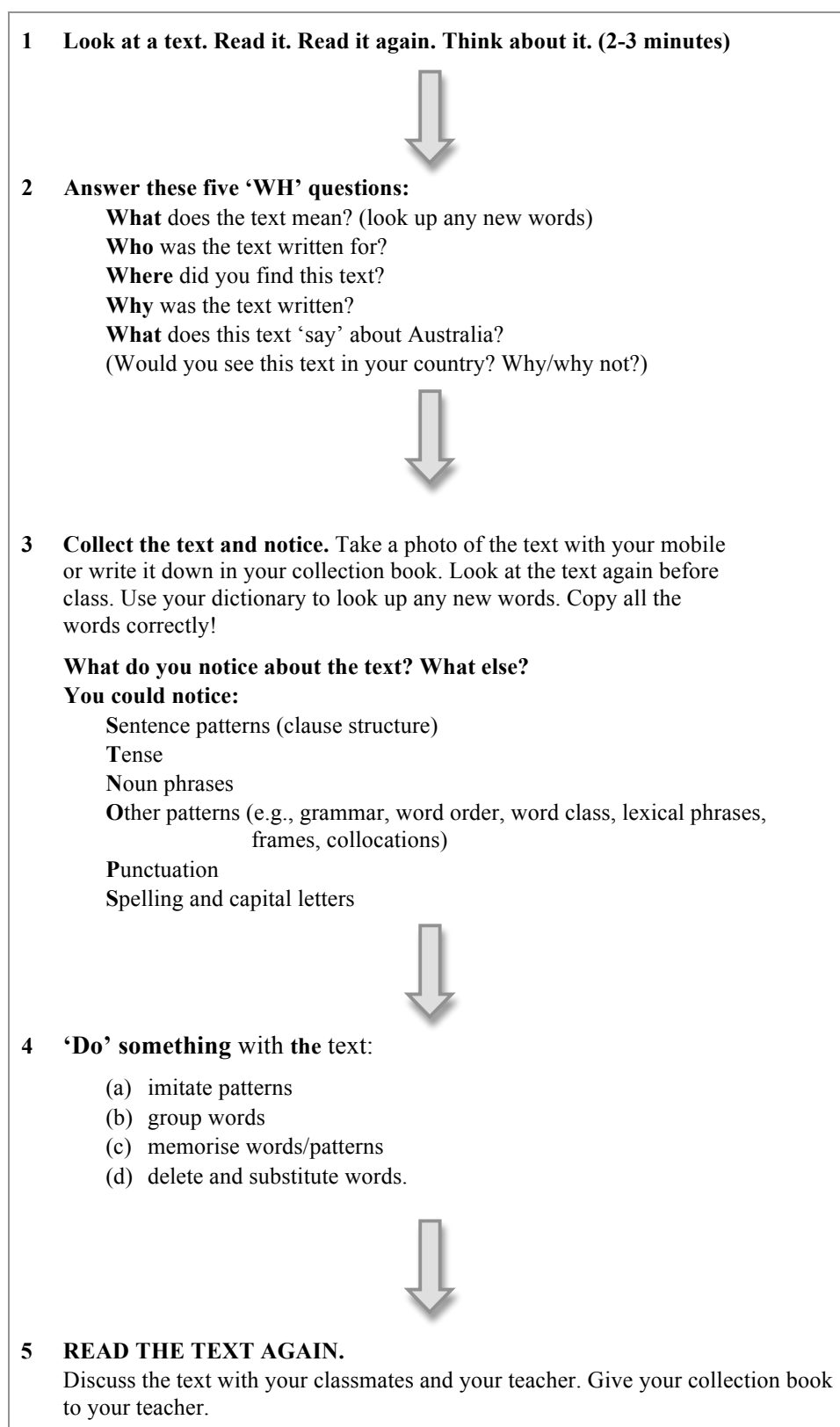


Figure 1 – Flow chart for developing linguistic mindfulness and collecting language

The strategy was modelled and practised in a one-hour lesson for ten consecutive Fridays all within the context of a 15-hours/week class with the lesson content described in Figure 2. I viewed the students' language collection books each week, added comments to their answering of the 'WH' questions and their noticing and their doing and, where practical, made reference to texts learners had collected when illustrating language and language use in the Monday-Thursday classes. In addition, when reviewing students' written work in their writing portfolios, when possible and relevant I asked the students to re-notice a text they had collected to help them edit their own writing.

As can be noted from Figure 2, one text from my language collection was used for mindfulness, noticing and doing activities for each of the first five lessons. In the sixth lesson, my text was used for the mindfulness part of the strategy and then students chose, with the help of their group members, what to notice and do with the text. For all six lessons, I used texts that were met in my daily life and not with any specific language teaching in mind. This was done to mirror students' experiences in the community, that is, just using whatever text was conveniently in front of them.

The weekly in-class group work activities were designed to enable learners to learn how and what to notice about grammatical patterns and how they could learn from and imitate the language of the incidental text. In the first four lessons, the purpose was to involve the students in interactive group work with set activities using one teacher-collected language sample per week, in order to allow the students to learn the processes of linguistic mindfulness and language collection as a strategy. As the lessons progressed the focus shifted from a 'for the learner' to a 'by the learner' approach (Batstone, 1994: 61) where students were progressively given more and more choice and responsibility for employing the strategy. Therefore, in the first five lessons, I chose the text and determined what was to be noticed and done with the text. In the later lessons, students' texts were used for the activities and students chose what to notice and what to do with their texts. So, for example, in the beginning lessons, I designed activities that allowed students to notice grammatical patterns including verbs followed by the 'to ...' (infinitive) and noun phrases with one and two noun modifiers (Willis, 2003: 59, 85). Then, in later lessons, students could re-notice these features in the texts they collected as well as noticing other aspects of language in use. A mindfulness/language collection excursion to the local shopping centre was included in the seventh lesson, to confirm that all students fully understood how to go about being mindful and collecting language.

An overview of the ten-lesson sequence is presented in Figure 2 on the following page.

Week	Objectives	Noticing activities	Doing activities	Text
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to introduce and demonstrate linguistic mindfulness, noticing and what can be done with a text as a source of learning</li> <li>to distribute and show how to use a language collection book for weekly homework</li> <li>to explain learning strategy flowchart</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>new vocabulary</li> <li>spelling</li> <li>noun phrases with noun modifiers</li> <li>tense</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>collocate (two nouns)</li> <li>imitate verb pattern</li> <li>spelling game</li> </ul>	‘This area under 24-hour surveillance ...’
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to practise linguistic mindfulness (‘WH’ questions) and noticing</li> <li>to further demonstrate what noticing is, what to notice and what to do with a text</li> <li>to show how texts can be used as models for imitation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>sentence patterns</li> <li>noun phrases with noun modifiers</li> <li>other patterns</li> <li>punctuation/spelling</li> <li>word order</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>imitate instruction</li> <li>Collocate (adjective/noun and noun/noun noun phrases)</li> </ul>	‘Dad, Dad, Dad ...’  ‘Improve your baby’s vocabulary and literacy ...’
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>as per week two</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>sentence pattern</li> <li>noun phrases</li> <li>adverbs of manner</li> <li>new vocabulary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>delete and substitute</li> <li>change noun phrase</li> <li>add to instructions</li> </ul>	‘Please use our water wisely.’
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to memorise the linguistic mindfulness mantra (the 5 WH?s) and language features that can be noticed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>sentence pattern</li> <li>‘if’ clause</li> <li>tense</li> <li>verbs followed by ‘to ...’ (infinitive)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>imitate sentence pattern</li> <li>use verb followed by ‘to ...’ (infinitive)</li> <li>spelling game</li> </ul>	‘If you read kids great books, they’ll want to read them again and again.’
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to further demonstrate noticing (what and how)</li> <li>to do linguistic mindfulness, noticing and doing activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>sentence pattern</li> <li>noun phrases</li> <li>new vocabulary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>delete and substitute</li> <li>discuss</li> </ul>	‘I had dinner with my wine. I should be OK.’
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to simulate a linguistic mindfulness exercise (on a bus) and have students do all mindfulness ?s in their groups</li> <li>to have students do their own noticing and doing activities with the text</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>students’ choice in their groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>students’ choice in their groups</li> </ul>	‘Little Miss Joan, answered her phone and spoke so that we could all hear ...’
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to go on a linguistic mindfulness/language collection excursion (scavenger hunt) to practise mindfulness and language collection using mobile phones and collection books</li> </ul>	---	---	A variety of texts as per collection activity

<b>8, 9 and 10</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to allow students to be mindful, notice and do with their own texts with limited teacher input</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>students' choice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>students' choice</li> </ul>	Students' texts
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**Figure 2 – Ten lessons on the strategy of linguistic mindfulness and being a collector of language**

### Outcomes

Students were able to be mindful of, collect, notice and do things with the language from an incidental text by the end of the ten lessons. In the first three or four weeks, students had difficulty answering the mindfulness question, 'Who was this text written for?' Often their answers were simply 'everyone' or 'the public'. Some students misunderstood the question to be 'Who was the text written by?' But with practise and teacher input in their collection books, the students became better able to refine their answers to this question in subsequent lessons. Another question that was often not answered as I anticipated in the first four weeks of class was, 'What do you notice?' The answers to this question were usually a further explanation of the meaning of the text. Three students did note down some language features including noun phrases, tense, sentence patterns, spelling and capital letters. Only one student of nineteen 'did' something with the language in the text. He used the new words in his own sentences and imitated a verb followed by a 'to ...' (infinitive) usage in his own sentences.

While all of the lessons included noticing and doing activities, noticing seemed to require more explicit explanation and repeated practising. Thus, in the fifth lesson, I illustrated and further demonstrated what noticing was, what to notice and how to notice language features in our collected texts and the texts we encountered in our Monday-Thursday lessons. Lessons six to ten gave students opportunities to select what to notice and what to do in their groups and the students became better able to notice and do with less teacher input. However, deciding what to notice about the texts they collected for homework was still difficult for some students and these students benefitted from making noticing decisions with the help of their group members and practising noticing as a whole class activity. The aspects of language that seemed most likely to be noticed included tense, noun groups and sentence patterns for instructions and 'if' clauses. The doing activities that were most readily done included imitating sentence patterns, deleting and then substituting a word or words to write a new sentence and using new vocabulary in sentences.

The mindfulness/language collection strategy lessons using teacher and student collected texts and noticing and doing activities were quite interactive and animated. Students spent a considerable amount of time discussing in their groups of four students the answers to the five 'WH' questions. For



example, in one group, two students thought the text on using water wisely (Week 3), showing a frog holding a tap, meant the water was unclean and not safe to drink. Another student explained, ‘No, look, it’s stopping the water in the tap. It means about wasting water.’ After more discussion, the group finally decided the text was in fact about encouraging people to save water but they also concluded that it was strange that a frog was used to illustrate this: ‘Frogs are poisonous in my country.’ ‘And dirty!’

Monitoring the group activities, I assisted the students to tease out the answer to the question, ‘What does this say about Australia?’ by asking, ‘Would you see this text in your country?’ The different responses to this question also stimulated much interaction. When talking about the text on the use of mobile phones on the bus (Week 6), one student commented that in her country, ‘We never have a sign like this. We want to listen! It’s interesting.’ Another student commented, ‘No, in my country buses more noisy.’

The group discussion activities often helped students to clarify the meaning of the text. For example, in Week 5, it was only after doing a noticing activity and discussing the text that students understood the meaning of, ‘I had dinner with my wine. I should be OK’. As a student explained to others in her group, ‘that’s mean a lot of wine!’ Therefore, noticing can help with the comprehension of a text (Batstone, 1994: 40). Students were able to talk about language and language features quite readily and enjoyed noticing activities as well as discussing the cultural and other issues the text raised.

Discussion also continued regarding the ‘doing’ activities. Students discussed what sentences to write for the delete and substitute and imitating exercises before writing them down. They also discussed each other’s sentences. For example, when replacing the adverb of manner ‘wisely’ with other adverbs, two students commented on a student’s new sentence. ‘Please save our water *slowly* sounds strange.’ ‘What do you mean *slowly*?’

Activities around incidental texts had the added benefit of often being about settlement issues, important for this particular group of Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) students. Teacher-collected and student-collected texts were concerned with topics including the law, road rules, banking, energy usage, education, transport and health. In addition, as these students were studying in a multi-level class, noticing and doing activities could readily accommodate the differing language abilities of the students. For example, in the group work activities, the higher level students were sometimes able to explain usage to the lower level students. Also, higher level students were able to do more noticing and doing activities with their own texts. For example, they could identify and

imitate the use of the passive voice. As an extension activity, higher level students were also encouraged to write sentences with more pre and post-modification when imitating grammatical and sentence patterns in the group work activities. Choice and open-endedness are ‘a boon’ in multilevel classes, and the strategy allows for these to happen (Hess, 2001: 13).

The actual texts the students collected for their weekly homework were quite varied and not altogether what I had anticipated. Students included washing instruction texts cut from garments, small advertisements from local newspapers and texts with just one or two words such as ‘Pedestrian Crossing’, ‘Fire Exit’ and ‘Prepare to Stop’. Because student choice was considered an important aspect of the strategy, I offered no suggestions about the kinds of texts to collect, particularly since even the very short texts generated a lot of language from the students. Students copied their text from their mobile phone image into their collection books or copied the text directly into their collection book and some drew the accompanying graphic or illustration. Labels and small advertisements were pasted into their books.

The five students who consistently completed the weekly language collection homework became quite proficient at using the strategy with little teacher input. They were able to collect a text, answer the five mindfulness questions about their text, notice a language aspect or aspects of their text and use their text to produce their own sentences. The weekly language collection homework also gave me insights into students’ comprehension of texts and words used in a particular context. For example, one student collected and wrote about a text found in a park on how to use a ‘Doggy Dumpage Disposal Unit’. While the student was able to write that the text was written to ‘keep environment beauty’ and ‘they want to let people know to throw our rubbish into the bin’, the student had not understood that ‘doggy dumpage’ was dog faeces. When I asked the student about what she had understood, she said that the word ‘doggy’ wasn’t in her dictionary, so she thought doggy dumpage was rubbish. When I showed her the word ‘dog’ in ‘doggy’ she did not understand the two-noun usage to mean dog faeces. Other students also had difficulty understanding how to interpret noun modifiers in a noun clause. This was a useful insight for me, as such usage is a very common and productive feature of English and not so common in other languages (Willis, 2003: 85). When there were new words in the texts students collected, the students were often unable to choose the definition for the word that fit the context, a strategy I thus discovered needs further practice.

By also practising linguistic mindfulness and language collection, I found the strategy enhanced my understanding and appreciation of language in use. It was also an essential activity to create useful

noticing and doing activities for the weekly lessons on this learning strategy. For my mindfulness exercise I answered a different set of questions, which included:

- What can I notice about this text (e.g., clause structure, orientation, pattern grammar, word class, lexical phrases and frames, and collocation)? (Willis, 2003: Chapter 2)
- What else can I notice (as above)?
- What can I learn more about and explore through this text?
- Could I use this text in my class as a ‘mentor’ text’ (i.e., a text that can be imitated and learned from)? (Anderson, 2005: 16)
- Could I use this text in my class to ‘lead the lesson’ (i.e., is it comprehensible, relevant, appropriate and likely to promote discussion about language, language use and cultural issues)? (Anderson, 2007: 28)

For example, one text I reflected on while waiting at a traffic light was a text from a Jockey underwear advertisement, ‘Built to Move’. As well as noticing the buff male, I noticed the tense, the use of the passive, and the use of the verb ‘to build’ as a pun and advertising strategy in referring both to the making of the underwear and the physique of the male model. When I got home, I added the text to my collection book and later decided to use it to lead a lesson on the passive and as a mentor text for a lesson on the use of participle phrases to increase language choice and sentence variety.

## **Conclusion**

As this trial program has demonstrated, being mindful of and collecting incidental language are far more than incidental activities. Properly constructed, these types of activities afford students and teachers an excellent opportunity to explore language any time and anywhere. Learning about and then practising a strategy of being mindful of, collecting, noticing and doing things with language in the learners’ environment over a ten-week term of study gave the students the understanding and skills necessary to use this strategy to enhance their own learning and to become more equal partners in language learning.

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