

Newsletter 03/25

ELTA-Rhine



October 2025

From the editor

Dear members,



The winds of change... Such are the palpable times as we move closer to year's end. Golden October days invite us to take invigorating walks in nature, admiring her colourful attire, her beauty, and her bounty. The winds are now rapidly swirling her clothing.

It's also a season of harvest, whether gifted generously by nature, born from sowing the right seeds, or simply the reward of diligent labour. So too, is this edition a homage to what has been and a celebration of what is yet to come.

We, your Newsletter Team, are delighted to share some of our own "harvest" with you. Sandra Ling continues her engaging series of interviews with members, and this time we're excited to introduce the lovely and vivacious globetrotter Maria Elena Laufs. She shares her impressive journey from the world of fashion to teaching, blending people-savvy insight and business acumen into her unique teaching style. Also, don't miss Sandra's book club reviews and her open invitation to join the club.

Spontaneity is that special spice that often redirects expectations. Due to technical issues, the webinar on needs analysis transformed into a dynamic group exchange where 18 participants shared their perspectives and expertise. Laura managed the session with creativity and skill, and it has now inspired regular meet-ups for teachers in higher education. The first round is due in November — so contact Laura and stay tuned!

Further treasures include Tracey's thoughtful contribution on teacher trainer observations. This issue focuses on how to request feedback, correct students effectively, and involve them in assessing their own performance. This is part of an ongoing series and also the subject of her Master's thesis.

With this edition, we bring another fruitful chapter to a close as a team and teaching community. May we continue to build on our shared ideas, expertise, insights, and spontaneity, creating new opportunities for one another, growing as individuals, and drawing strength from the support of our professional body.

We wish you all a cosy and enjoyable read.

Johanna and team

News from the Chair...



Dear members,



Our newsletter's seasonal cover page is a perfect complement to the view from my window, trees turning golden yellow, burnt orange, and russet red. Autumn is often a busy time for many of us, whether it marks the start of a new academic year or the final quarter of the business year.

As a keen gardener, I'm also in the midst of harvest season. It's the time when I can enjoy the fruits of my labour (sometimes quite literally) and look back over the year's efforts: which seeds flourished and which failed to germinate. I find myself doing something similar in my teaching business, assessing the year in terms of both finances and professional satisfaction.

It's during this reflection that I'm reminded of how supportive our association is and of the value it brings to my teaching career, and I hope you all feel the same way. Thanks to our network and the generosity of our members in sharing their knowledge, I continue to develop my ELT skills and business acumen, not to mention everything I'm learning in my new role as Chair.

Our organisation flourishes when we all contribute and stay connected. Our Slack platform keeps us in touch, while our online and in-person events help us build stronger connections, and your ideas help us continuously improve the association. The seeds we plant and nurture together will surely produce a bumper harvest in seasons to come.

If you know a fellow teacher or colleague who might enjoy being part of this supportive community, please invite them to join us. Personal recommendations are often the best way to grow our network, and every new member brings fresh ideas, energy, and perspectives that enrich us all.

So, grab your favourite warm drink and settle in to enjoy reading the newsletter.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jane".

Introducing



Maria Elena Laufs

Maria has a background in international fashion retail and higher education. After many years in senior buying and merchandising roles across Europe, she moved into education to focus on language, communication and cross-cultural understanding. For over a decade, she has taught Business English and communication skills at university level. She is a Canfield Success Principles Trainer.

Footnote: If you want to learn more about Maria, take a look at this [spotlight on Maria](#) in the International Newcomers of Madrid. And if you want to learn more about 'ELTA-Rhine Business Builders' join the #businessbuilders channel in Slack or send Jane an email on chair@elta-rhine.de

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/maria-elena-laufs-b8b793195/>

ELTA-Rhine in conversation with...

Maria Elena



1. The recent lesson I am most proud of is...

... actually, a series of lessons. I was able to spend 4 weeks in Peru working for the Ministry of Education coaching local teachers on modern English language concepts such as project-based learning and performative assessment. My assumption that the student teachers would speak English was incorrect, so I had to go right back to basics. I was able to engage the students, make them feel confident and give them skills they didn't have before.

Resources are scarce in Peru – no tech nor internet, not even books. The lessons they gave at the end of the month showed me that they had understood. It felt great that I could make such a difference to their lives. I still send them videos with ideas for their classes.

2. What I like most about my current life is...

my work-life balance. I have found my niche, working with university students and young adults. I can relate to them, and they keep me young. There is time to work on pet projects, such as the book I am writing on 'successful presentations' with ELTA Rhine alumnus Erica Williams, and I have recently realised my dream of having a house in Spain. The covid pandemic gave me the opportunity to work online which means that my work is flexible. I am very fortunate.

3. The top tip I would give to other teachers is...

firstly, to put the students first. Put yourself in their shoes. We have all been learners ourselves and we know what works, what we find engaging. The students need to see the point of what they are doing, and the instruction needs to help them do better. It is not about you.

Secondly, get into the habit of self-reflection. Look back and ask yourself what worked? What didn't work? What can I do better? Time to reflect is a good investment in improving the quality of your teaching. And keep up to date. Teachers must stay relevant.

4. A mistake I once made was...

when I was starting out as a teacher. I was working as a contractor in schools in Hong Kong. I was delivering content – giving 'worksheet' classes. I was keeping the students busy and entertained rather than teaching them. It is an easy trap to fall into especially when you are given materials to use. I was not putting myself into the classes. Nowadays, there are so many options for students to learn, we need to offer more. And when I do, I feel the difference. The emotional connection is noticeable.

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5. The person who most inspired me is...

Jack Canfield. He is an American motivational speaker I came across through his '*Chicken Soup*' books. Since then, I have participated in training events and now teach his concepts. So in response to one of the challenges he poses: What brings me alive? What happens when I am motivating and engaging others? I am driven to continual learning. If you are not going forwards, you are going backwards - the world does not stand still.

I feel great if I can get better at something or if I get positive feedback from my students. I took 2 main things from Jack:

- E+R=O (Event + Response = Outcome)

This formula changed my life. We can choose our response to anything that happens to us. Stuck in traffic? Lost your internet? How you respond is up to you. I choose my emotions and feel in control of my life which means I am generally upbeat.

- Mastermind Groups

If you get 5 or 6 people with a common interest, who meet regularly, support each other, provide advice, ensure accountability you can create a powerful creative dynamic. And this is exactly what we are doing with ELTA-Rhine Business Builders.

6. In the last year I have learnt...

to use AI. It's a fantastic resource for teachers – it does the donkey work and I fine tune. It saves so much time.

7. I am known for...

my clothing sense. I used to work in retail fashion. Clothes are one of my passions and I am often called on to give advice to friends and family on their choice of outfits.

8. My best job was...

working for a European fashion chain helping to set up concept stores in the UK. I wrote merchandising guidelines, helped organise the stores and delivered in-store training. Teaching in groups gives me the dynamic I enjoy. It was a lovely mix: clothes, photos, store openings.

9. I feel most at home in...

the UK. I was brought up in the Midlands and although I have not lived there for over 20 years, it is still 'home'. However, I have lived and worked in several countries and am skilled at making my home wherever I am. I wrote about this in the '*Book on Joy*'. I need something to do which is worthwhile. When I first moved to Germany I did not work for a couple of years and I missed the fulfilment. I missed having a purpose. That – and yoga – provide my 'joy backbone'.

10. In another life I would have been...

a daytime TV presenter. I would take the mid-morning slot - chat to people about clothes, recipes and music, discuss light news items... I would love that.

Interviewer: Sandra Ling

Webinar review

The Needs Analysis Toolkit scheduled with Robert Potter, 6th September



Technical issues prevented the workshop from going ahead as planned on Saturday 6th September, but that didn't prevent the 18+ strong team of participants from staying on for an hour to exchange ideas and experiences on the topic. Laura, our host, cleverly put us into small break-out groups right at the start, which got the ball rolling and the ideas following and offered the chance to chat to members, both new and familiar.

The lively discussion that ensued when we returned as a group included queries relating to helping students better understand their learning needs and take ownership for their learning, and the value of chat-centred lessons. The participants spoke from a range of perspectives and included contexts that included tertiary education as well as business, 1:1 and small-groups, in-person and online and a range of ages. We also discussed needs analyses as a cyclical and fluid process as opposed to a one-off activity, suggesting it could also be referred to as a "learning journey". Emphasis was placed on the importance of follow-through and regular check-ins to ensure alignment with original outcomes, observe progress and establish new goals. We also shared the challenges posed when a student's wishes or expectations differ from the trainer's assessment of their requirements. The importance of explaining teaching decisions to help students understand the value of different learning activities was raised. This highlighted the need to make learning transparent and demonstrate progress to keep students motivated, especially in contract-based situations.

One participant introduced the concept of using a digital white board ([Miro](#) has one) and a Kanban tool that tracks progress and goals (e.g. [Trello](#)). A Kanban board aids learners to define tasks, learning processes and progress. Many learners might be familiar with it as it is often used in agile teamwork and programming. Also suggested was the idea of using AI tools to customize needs analyses, though with the use of carefully worded prompts to yield better results. If the [CEFR descriptors](#) are specified in the AI command this improves the quality of the needs analysis worksheet.

And so ...

Sharing our experiences and ideas as a group served as a reminder of how valuable, helpful and inspiring these exchanges with peers in the ELT community can be. It was unsurprising that Laura's suggestion of regular meetings for tertiary level teachers was met with great interest. What Laura is proposing is an hour of professional dialogue around a topic of interest to those working in higher education (HE). The sessions would start with a short presentation on the topic or discussion questions prepared in advance and suggested topics include assessment, AI in the HE classroom, digital tools for teaching and trends such as project/task-based learning. The sessions will run mid-week for an hour on Zoom, starting in November (12.11.25 at 19:30 on Zoom) and will be open to all members, though the specific focus will remain on how the topics relate to or are managed in higher education settings since these contexts present their own particular challenges.

Invites will be sent out via email to all members, though if a member would like to present a topic during a session or if anyone has suggestions or requests, they can email Laura at events@elta-rhine.de

Have your say

In our last edition, we asked for your take on AI and how you use it in your teaching context. The question we posed to members was:

Have you joined the AI revolution or are you more wary than won over? How have you been using AI to support your teaching and cut down on work, either from a pedagogical or administrative standpoint, and what are your top AI tips for other teachers?

Here are some responses:

"I use AI all the time when working on my PhD, especially for help with understanding concepts. When reading something new about linguistics or something, I often get AI to simplify it for me. But I find it has more value for me when I use it as a conversation partner. When I get feedback from my supervisor on something I wrote, I can 'discuss' it with Claude, the service I tend to use for study work, to make sure I really understood the comment and to get quick feedback on my solutions for how to fix, etc. It is like having a study pal or a tutor on call. However, for it to be useful in this case, the input, the critical analysis or synthesis needs to be mine. I wouldn't trust it to produce anything."

I don't use it so much when it comes to teaching, unless it is for simple tasks like 'find me 5 synonyms for this word', which is essentially what a search engine would do for me, just a bit faster. I have tried getting it to write texts on various topics, but found them to be very general overviews of the topic or vague on details, without real depth, so not really anything I could utilise when teaching at university level.

I don't think AI will 'take over' from teachers and make us all redundant, though as with any tool, it will take over a lot of lower-order tasks (grammar practice, drilling, vocab testing) and potentially free us up for the more creative, rewarding parts of teaching."

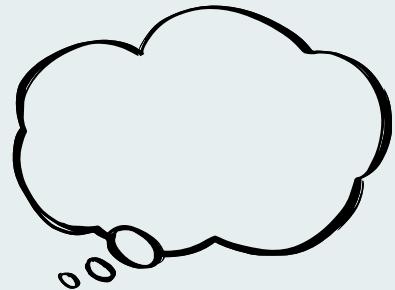
- Laura



"I am having an ongoing relationship with Google AI Studio. For example, using the packaging tips from DPD, I (co-?) created a conversation exercise. It suggested setting up 'Specialist Solutions Teams comprising of Product Specialists, Logistics Gurus and Creative Directors whose mission is to create a clear, concise, and visually appealing one-page 'Ultimate Packaging Guide' that shows customers how to pack three specific items safely.' It included detailed briefings for each role and a timed lesson structure. GAS is slowly seeping into every nook and cranny of my life. I need to start using other tools but cannot tear myself away." - Sandra

In our next issue ...

In keeping with the themes of connection and professional development that have cropped up in places this issue, the question for our next edition is:



“What professional development experience — such as a course, workshop, book or simply something you tried in class — has had the greatest impact on you, and why would you recommend it to other English teachers? How do you keep yourself motivated to keep learning and growing as a teacher, and what would you recommend to others who want to stay inspired and continue evolving in their practice?”

To participate and have your say, look out for me on Slack or email me (traceysalahovic@gmail.com) to let me know your response.

We'll share all your responses in our next edition.



ELTA-Rhine Online Book Club – *The Green Road* by Anne Enright

As with all great conversations, ours had a mix of lovers and haters of the book or at least, those who enjoyed the credible characters, the universal themes of relationships, the search for identity, the authentic use of local dialogue and those who found, particularly for a novel published in 2015, the deployment of anecdotes about Irish suffering, African aid, the New York aids epidemic, alcoholic or negligent mothering and altruistic daughters both outdated and over-used.

The book, divided into 2 parts: 'Leaving' and 'Coming Home', also continually alternates perspectives between the 4 Madigan siblings, which some of the group found irritating. We were, however, united in the view that we were left with a rather sad feeling; it is a tale of individuals who are struggling with life. The story is amusing in parts but does lack humour. Its strength is the deep insight into the complexities of family.

We delved into several interesting questions, some of which I list here for you to consider:

1. Do you revert to childhood behaviours when you 'go home'? If so, do you find this to be helpful or limiting?
2. Have you accepted the hierarchies in your close personal relationships? If not, why not?
3. How do you react to the statement 'Profound literature must criticise and challenge'? Have you ever read a great book exclusively filled with joy and laughter?
4. How do you regard the balance of accountability for your own life? Have you ever tried to quantify the role played by your family and surroundings?
5. Has your definition of a 'Good Life' changed over time?

We have finished our series of books set in Ireland. The next set are all Booker prize winners. If you want to come to the party, the reading list and meeting dates are below.

01

18 November
The Remains of the Day
Kazuo Ishiguro

02

27 January
The English Patient
Michael Ondaatje

03

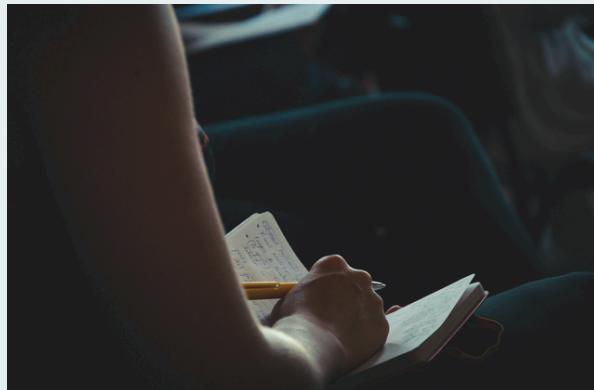
17 March
The Inheritance of Loss
Kieran Desai

04

12 May
The Testaments
Margaret Atwood

Teacher Trainer Notes

Lessons learnt through observation



Until I stepped into my current teacher trainer role, I could remember just 3 occasions when I was the observer and not the observed. Within the first 6 months months of regularly observing lessons (about six lessons a week then), my mind was made up: all teachers should also be teacher trainers!

Though my role was to encourage and offer feedback, I couldn't help but put my own teaching skills into question as I tuned in more closely to how strategies and decisions made about the lesson impacted the learner, sometimes in positive and helpful ways, but not always. The insights gained inspired me to rethink certain approaches, trial something new, and sometimes also reinforced how I felt about aspects of my current practice.

Since it's not always possible for teachers, especially freelancers, to observe another teacher and their student(s) in action, I'd like to share some of the more common events and practices from the many lessons I've had the privilege of observing. Before I do, let me add a brief but important disclaimer. Ruth Wajnryb (1992, p.105) explains how "*Much, if not all, of what a teacher says and does in the classroom is a reflection of that teacher's belief (conscious or otherwise) about how people learn languages.*" I feel this is also true of what we look for when conducting observations.

The practices described are influenced by my own personal beliefs regarding teaching and learning as well as past experiences. Whether or not each item is worthy of examination is for the reader to decide and any suggestions included won't always work in every context. Some additional background: the lessons observed are all online with adult learners, mostly in a business context and either 1:1 or small groups (2 - 5 students).

Read to the end for tips on getting involved in observations.

Photo by Vlad Hilitanu on Unsplash

1. "Do you understand?"

Until you've built the rapport and familiarity to expect a genuine answer to this question, eliciting demonstrations of comprehension are a safer bet. I hear the question above used frequently and students often confirm they've understood when moments later it becomes clear they hadn't. Perhaps some students feel they should have understood and are afraid to say otherwise, or maybe they understand the gist and are happy with that level of comprehension unaware that the teacher requires a more thorough comprehension for the next stage of the lesson. A student once told me that she always said 'no' when asked if she had any questions because she didn't know what kind of questions she should have! I recently observed a teacher use the question but then immediately follow up with some concept checking, which she presented to the student as a pop quiz, eliciting synonyms and definitions from the student. Asking students to identify whether words are positive or negative, and eliciting situations in which they might be used works well too for vocabulary items.



2. Tricky instructions

I remember a very supportive observer once gave me some direct feedback on my unnecessarily long and potentially confusing instructions and it stayed with me. Unplanned instructions can be the undoing of an activity at times. Confusion on the student's part can result in lengthy follow-up instructions that might subsume some of the allocated practice material, or an activity being completed in an unanticipated way. I've regularly noticed students taking the 4 - 5 minutes allocated to silently prepare an activity to later admit that they didn't know what they were supposed to do.

When I started preparing my instructions, literally preparing what I would say, I noticed it wasn't so easy to spontaneously provide clear, concise instructions. The advice I received back then is what I frequently pass on now too: limit the steps to 3, any more than that and the activity might need to be broken down into stages (I hold up my fingers as I go to remind myself when I've reached the limit!). Imagine the instructions were written, how long would it take to write them? Walking the student through an example (modelling) is usually an effective substitute for instructions, too.

3. Corrections going unnoticed

This one got my attention through a lot of student feedback concerning corrective feedback. Despite what some teachers I've spoken to appear to believe, correction doesn't demotivate students and, in fact, many students believe that they don't get enough of it (Lethaby et al., 2021, p.201).

Sometimes teachers are surprised to learn of students' requests for more feedback. They *have* been correcting the student. So what's going on? I have a hunch that the correction isn't registering with the student. Teachers sometimes use vague language or avoid confirming a mistake, perhaps to avoid making the student lose face. "*What I would say is ...*" is often how corrections are prefaced, but what message does this convey to the student? Is the student's version wrong or is this simply an alternative? If it's an alternative, can the student just stick with their (inaccurate) version? We all know mistakes aren't bad, we tell students this over and over, but are we sending mixed messages if we avoid clear corrections?

4. Involving students

Instead of telling students what they did well, I sometimes observe teachers encouraging the learner to reflect on their own performance and their learning. Questions such as '*what words from today can you use in your professional life this week?*', '*what do you still need to work on?*', '*what did you find useful?*' provoke self-reflection and can lead to greater ownership of learning goals and strategies. Teachers can also find out what the student took away from the lesson (and it might not be what was intended!) and what might need revision in the future.

As I mentioned earlier, opportunities to observe can be thin on the ground for freelancers, but I know from teachers' comments that many would welcome the chance to participate in and learn from **peer observation**, whether as a reflective activity or to offer or receive feedback. The **ELTA-Rhine** community might very well be the answer. Try a shout out on slack or get in touch and, provided there are more willing participants, we could help pair you up and offer some tips for your observation and feedback process. Observing your own teaching is also an option and you could decide on a teaching technique or classroom strategy to examine by keeping notes or getting the learners' permission to record a short segment of the lesson for review. With the academic year back in full swing, it's a great moment to invest in some inspiring professional development!

Lethaby, C., Harries, P. and Mayne, R. (2021) An introduction to evidence-based teaching in the English language classroom: Theory and practice. Brighton: Pavilion Publishing.

Wajnryb, R. (1992) Classroom observation tasks for teachers: A resource book for language teachers and trainers, Cambridge University Press

Author: Tracey Salahović

Weaving the threads...2025

Save the date:

**Canva for Teachers (part 2)
online with Clare Hayward
2-4 p.m on 29th November**

**HE (Higher Education) Hangout
(online)
7.30 p.m.on 12th November
Digital Tools for Teaching in HE**

Some questions or prompts will be sent to participants in advance and breakout rooms will be used to make sure everyone gets to discuss and share options and suggestions.

We will use the KWL method (What I know, What I want to know, What I learnt) to guide our talks. This ensures participants come in with something to share, some question they would like answered, and then finally, we reflect on the discussion.. .

Invite sent by email on 28th Oct, including the [Zoom registration link](#)

Weaving the threads...2026

Save this date too:

Practical AI for EL Teachers - workshop with Mariana Ramírez Düsseldorf Bürgerhaus Bilk 2-4.30 pm 24 Jan 2026

This hands-on workshop is designed to help English language teachers explore and integrate AI tools into their teaching practices. Participants will experiment with different AI tools for lesson planning and activity creation, evaluate their strengths and limitations, and design personalized, AI-enhanced activities tailored to their teaching contexts. The workshop also includes collaborative discussions to address challenges and share strategies for effective AI integration in language teaching.

Key Takeaways:

- Discover practical applications of AI tools for lesson planning and activity design.
- Create personalised, AI-driven materials aligned with your teaching objectives.
- Collaborate with peers to discuss challenges and develop actionable strategies for using AI effectively in the classroom.

Please contribute an article or workshop review to a future ELTA-Rhine newsletter!

We would love to hear from you.

Contact newsletter@elta-rhine.de

OR

[post on Slack and tag @Johanna.](#)