

LAMS in TESOL: sketching potential

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Abstract

This paper¹ aims to provide some initial ideas on how LAMS might be utilised in TESOL². Even though this research area requires significant development, it is held that there is growing potential and justification to use LAMS in TESOL. To this end an attempt will be made to illustrate how LAMS, with its increasing number of authoring tools, could be used (or might be developed to be used) to create sequences that addressed language learning skills in the following six key interrelated areas: vocabulary, grammar, reading, listening speaking and writing. It is maintained that a pre-while-post sequence could be one way of providing a foundation structure learning-design template on which teachers might draw on their experience to build sequences for the practice of these language skills. Although the creation of a more specialised TESOL authoring tool would assist in the construction of non-Internet dependent and LAMS-gradable sequences, it is held that TESOL sequences can still be authored with many of the existing tools.

1. Introduction

There appears to be significant potential for the utilisation of LAMS in three justifiably overlapping worldwide niche ESOL³ market areas today. One area of implementation could pertain to the use of LAMS as an additional complementary ESL/EFL⁴ textbook or independent 'stand-alone' English language learning resource. Another application concerns exploiting LAMS as a source of focussed supplementary exam-practice for well-known and internationally recognised ESOL exams such as the Cambridge ESOL exams, TOEFL or other exams. And a third possible enduring place for LAMS' use in TESOL could be its wide-scale provision in blended- or (part/full)-distance-learning university/college ESOL courses, especially in populous and technologically aspiring countries such as China, India. Xiao (2008: 172-3) for instance discusses the relevance of technology in The Chinese Central Radio and Television Universities, which have 1.9 million students taking English language courses as part of their programme of study. It is held that a move has been made from the once popular teaching of foreign languages by radio and television to a well structured mode of autonomous distance English language teaching in which technology plays an important innovatory role (Xiao 2008: 172-4). It should also be emphasised that the current uncertain back-drop of unpredictable swings in the pricing of key sources of energy may herald a new epoch in the strategic development of e-learning infrastructural provision in education. There is consequently a tangible and pragmatic rationale for describing ways of using LAMS in TESOL and this paper aims to concentrate on sketching some preliminary ideas on how LAMS might be used with respect to practising six language skill areas (vocabulary, grammar, listening, reading, writing and speaking).

Applied linguistics has a mature, complex and extended literature base of which a particularly well-developed branch is the teaching and learning of foreign/second⁵ languages. Even though comprehensive L2 learning research⁶, learning theory and linguistic theory have illustrated a plethora of micro contextual issues pertaining to how aspects of foreign languages can be acquired to different degrees of competence,

¹ New LAMS readers may find it useful (prior to reading this paper) to refer to: Alexander (2008a) [An overview of LAMS](#) and Alexander (2009a) [LAMS Revisited](#)

² Teaching English To Speakers of Other Languages

³ English for Speakers of Other Languages

⁴ In this paper the acronyms EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) will be used synonymously; however the author of this paper recognises a distinction is usually made in the literature e.g. in Hutchinson and Waters (2001:17)

⁵ In this paper the terms will be used interchangeably. Please note many such acronyms are now regularly used in TESOL as exemplified in Jordon (2000).

⁶ This is sometimes referred to as second language acquisition research. This growing area of study aims to give insights into how and why languages are learned.

the failure to present an unambiguous/clear-cut and effectual macro method of how all humans can proficiency acquire a foreign language suggests the process of learning an L2 is extremely complex/hazy and that there is no straightforward explanation for how this can be done. Moreover, the inability to address this fundamental macro issue may in part have fuelled a non-linear exploratory drive or quest that has led to immense and at times, competing methodological belief shifts in TESOL over the last 60 years or so.

Many of the new/novel, outwardly sturdy and often richly researched approaches (and corresponding syllabus designs) to second language education have been transient. Some of the approaches also reacted against structural approaches to language learning; a principal player in the move away from behaviourism was Chomsky (1964). Well-known approaches which may have had an enticing and pervasive hook for their respective followers in the vast TESOL community included: The Silent Way (Gattegno 1972); Total Physical Response (Asher 1969); Community Language Teaching (Curran 1976); Suggestopedia (Lozanov 1978); Communicative Approaches (Brumfit and Johnson 1979, Yalden 1983); The Natural Way (Krashen and Terrell 1983); Whole Language (Rigg 1991); Multiple Intelligences (MI) (Gardner 1993, Christison 1998); Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) (Grindler and Bandler 1970, Revell and Norman 1997); The Lexical Approach (Lewis 1993/1997); Competency-Based-Language Teaching (Mrowicki 1986); Cooperative Language Teaching (Rodgers 1988); Content Based Instruction (CBI) (Shih 1986); Task-Based-Teaching (TBLT) (Willis 1996). Also, TESOL has growing interdisciplinary exposure; for instance, developments in the field of educational psychology are becoming of particular interest to thinking in TESOL (Williams and Burden 2001).

It is felt however, that context-specific ESOL teaching knowledge/experience acquired at the front, and purportedly influenced by the academic generals on the hill so to speak, is an invaluable, utilisable, sharable, and adaptable resource when crystallised in a LAMS sequence. Therefore, a central tenet of LAMS use in TESOL should be the assumption that teachers striving to use LAMS to design lessons should do so in a way that they feel best facilitates learning with the tools that are available; this also suggests experimenting with one's own ideas or building on the ideas of others. It is held that LAMS offers a composing authoring ESOL teacher, magpie⁷ hands-on opportunities to experiment by picking and choosing language activities that are felt to be most appropriate for a particular student context.

LAMS research in TESOL and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is currently under-researched however. Moreover this assertion is still in line with Alexander (2008a) who states that LAMS ESOL-related research is an area requiring development. The following well-known journals/organisations presently still do not appear to present dedicated research in the area of LAMS use in TESOL: Educational Media International, CALICO Journal, ReCALL, The Journal of Educational Technology & Society, The JALT CALL Journal, Language Learning and Technology, TESOL Publications, AJET, ELT Journal; The Asian EFL Journal; The Internet TESL Journal; The Educational Technology Journal; English Teaching Professional; ESL; EUROCALL; BECTA.

Burns (2007) nevertheless has presented the findings of a small-scale questionnaire study carried out on thirty-four fulltime summer ESOL students and Burns (2008) has also examined the effects that the implementation of LAMS learning design had had on a pre-intermediate class of ESOL adult learners at a further education college in London⁸. Coverage on ESOL Internet sites is also sparse; however Gradel (2009) on Total ESL Internet site maintains that LAMS is “definitely worth investigating” and holds that it is a “powerful tool for today's educators and an easy way for teachers to share their ideas, lessons, and best practices”. Furthermore, LAMS does not appear to be covered in many modern CALL books, for instance in Egbert (2005), Warschauer and Kern (2005), Hubbard and Levy (2006), Schwienhorst (2007), or Blake (2008). Blake (2008: 72) interestingly in a discussion on forum use in course management systems mentions only mentions WebCT, Blackboard, and Moodle.

LAMS use is also at present under-represented on the multitude of separate and possibly competing online ESOL sites; these ever-increasing sites comprise a vast and often haphazard *medley* of interactive ESOL

⁷ Sim and Loon (2002, 6-7)

⁸ The variety of data collection methods in this small-scale action-research-type study included questionnaires and interviews.

materials which diverge extensively in terms of quality and accuracy. It is *surprising* (to this author) however that LAMS has not found a firm place on such sites, as LAMS could offer a badly needed means of structuring the utilisation of existing ESOL e-materials in a more dynamic, multi-dimensional, creative, *group-learning* environment. Moreover, this seems to find a generic echo with [Laurillard](#) (2009) who maintains that LAMS acts as a “great experimental tool for *teaching-as-design*”⁹.

2. Key (T)ESOL skills

In this section, an attempt will be made to illustrate how LAMS, with its growing number of authoring tools, could be used (or might be developed to be used) to create sequences that addressed language learning skills in the following six key interrelated areas: vocabulary, grammar, reading, listening speaking and writing. Examples of the kind of activities that typify study in these skill areas are drawn from some modern TESOL literature and well-known (T)ESOL Internet sites¹⁰.

2.1 Assessment in LAMS

Rea-Dickins (2008: 376) maintains that the term assessment is a more inclusive term than testing which pertains to “one kind of assessment”. Assessment is defined as referring “to the general process of monitoring or keeping track of the learners’ progress” (Rea-Dickins 2008: 376). Assessment is typically divided into formative and summative assessment. Rea-Dickins (2008: 376) defines formative assessment as being “where the teacher will use information gained from assessments about a learner’s progress as a basis for further classroom work” and summative assessment as being assessment used “to measure learner achievement”.

LAMS, with its developing monitoring capabilities and expanding authoring tool base, could arguably be used for both formative and summative assessment. For instance, a new summative assessment tool with grade book integration (for Version 2.3), applicable to TESOL and currently under development in LAMS, allows teachers to create a range of question types and to test (presently) in a summative way the user’s ability to answer the questions. The Branching, Tool Output function which includes intricate conditions and mappings, provides automatic streaming of learners into specific groups depending on how they have performed on previous tasks. This, justifiably, could be used as a kind of automated micro formative assessment, as learners who have not completed tasks as required/expected can be easily identified and given additional language study, whereas stronger learners can proceed through the LAMS sequence; an example of such types of assessment is presented in Figure 1.

⁹ A term also used in [Dalziel](#) (2008)

¹⁰ Reference will also be made to Andy Gillet’s UEfAP site (Using English for Academic Purposes) which is recommended for use by The British Association of Lecturers for Academic Purposes ([BALEAP](#)). Furthermore, Alexander (2008b), in his review of this site, states it is an immense and noteworthy repository of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) materials. Gillet on UEfAP also organises language study-exercise materials into similar such subsections i.e. Accuracy, Listening, Reading, Speaking, Vocabulary, Writing.

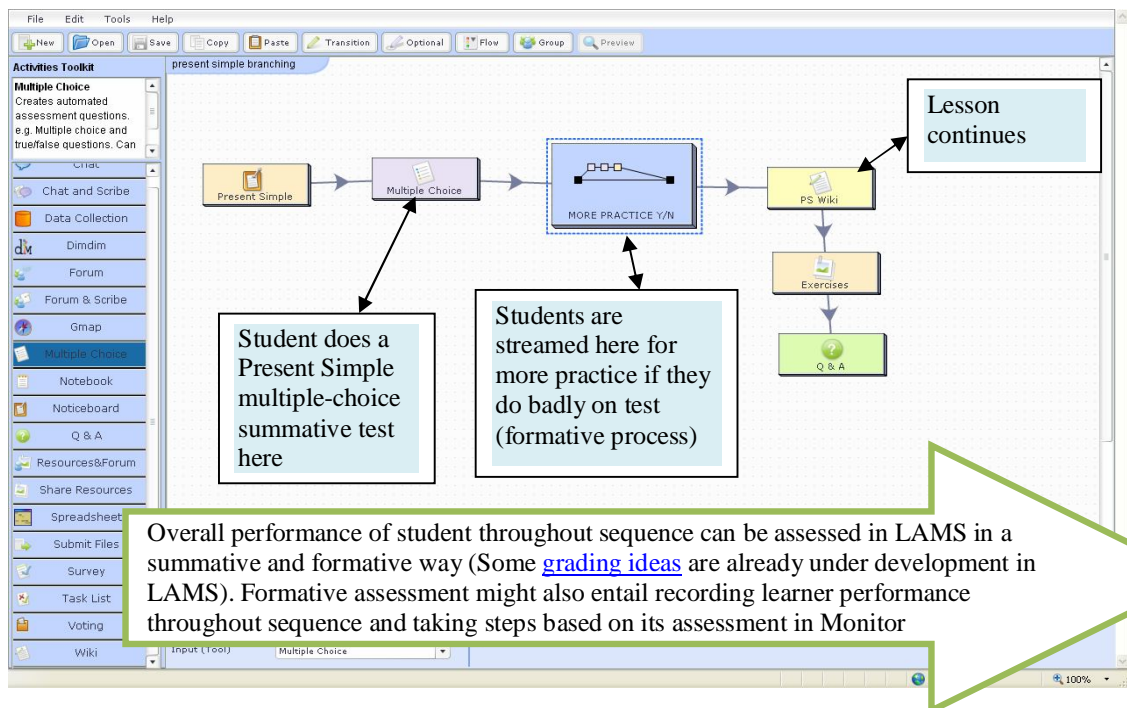


Figure 1 An example of how formative/summative assessment might be undertaken in LAMS

The range of question types and tool features currently being developed in the LAMS is described and updated on [new assessment tool](#) site; Figure 2 provides a screenshot of this new tool.

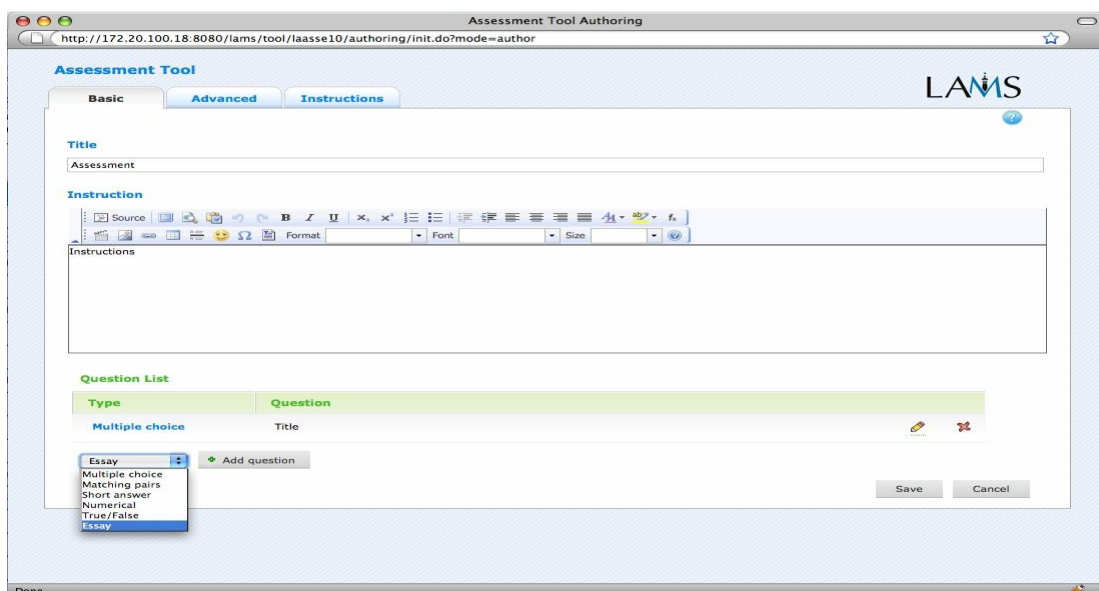


Figure 2 A screenshot of an assessment tool currently under development in LAMS

2.2 Vocabulary and LAMS

In this section, common vocabulary-learning methods will only be highlighted and some preliminary implications for LAMS will be discussed. The task of learning vocabulary is essential for effective communication and the emergence of innovative research in this complex area reflects the importance vocabulary learning has now gained in TESOL.

There is a multitude of vocabulary exercises regularly used in TESOL at different language learning levels. Most of the common ones comprise: (1) matching (words to pictures, words to definitions, words to situations, word to word collocations); (2) sorting/categorising (e.g. sorting words that indicate something, ranking words in terms of something, labelling words, classifying words); (3) guessing vocabulary from context; (4) networking words (e.g. Hedge 2008: 127); (5) completing sentences/charts etc (e.g. Hedge 2008: 137); (6) other methods such as writing sentences that make the meaning of a word clear, dictation, translation as in Ur (2002: 70-73); (7) dictionary work (Ur 2002: 63).

Many of the above vocabulary learning methods are used on well-known Internet (T)ESOL sites. For instance the following sites have vast collections of Interactive vocabulary activities:

- i) [ESL Internet vocabulary site](#)
- ii) [Learning Vocabulary Fun](#) (wide choice of activities)
- iii) [ManyThings on this site](#) or [this site](#)
- iv) [Gillet's UefAP site Vocabulary](#)
- v) [English as a Second Language website on this site](#)
- vi) [ESL Bears on this site](#) (particular good for pictures)
- vii) [Ohio University ESL Student vocabulary Resources](#)
- viii) [ESL Independent Study Lab on this site](#)
- ix) [Centre for Independent Language Learning on this site](#)
- x) [BBC Skillswise on this vocabulary site](#)

The above vocabulary Internet resources could be utilised and managed in a structured way in LAMS by using the [share resources tool](#) and/or using for instance the advanced [FCK Editor](#) coding described in Alexander's (2009b) LAMS Community sequence. However, using external Internet resources is always risky, as the LAMS lesson sequence becomes reliant on those resources always being there. Moreover LAMS presently does not have the capability to create such a wide range of vocabulary question types and this clearly is an important area of potential development for foreign language vocabulary learning in LAMS. Figure 3 provides some screenshots of how LAMS¹¹ share resources tool might structure and manage the use of some describing graphs vocabulary sites.

¹¹ This sequence is available for viewing upon request; please contact the author of this article [here](#)

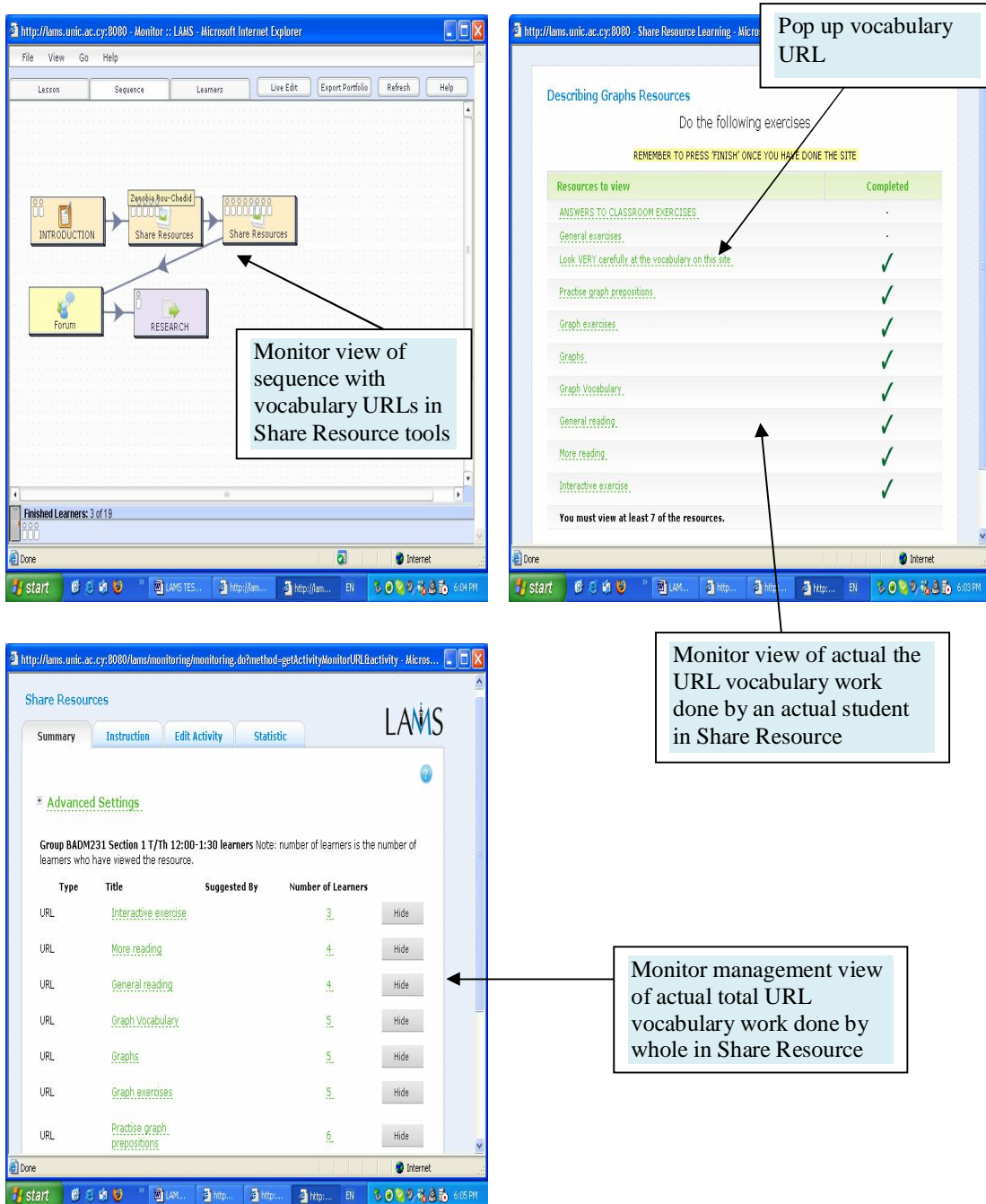


Figure 3 LAMS share resources tool structuring and managing the use of vocabulary URL sites

A possibly more creative way of using a wider range of LAMS tools to practise vocabulary is in pre and post vocabulary task exercises; Figure 4 presents how this might be done

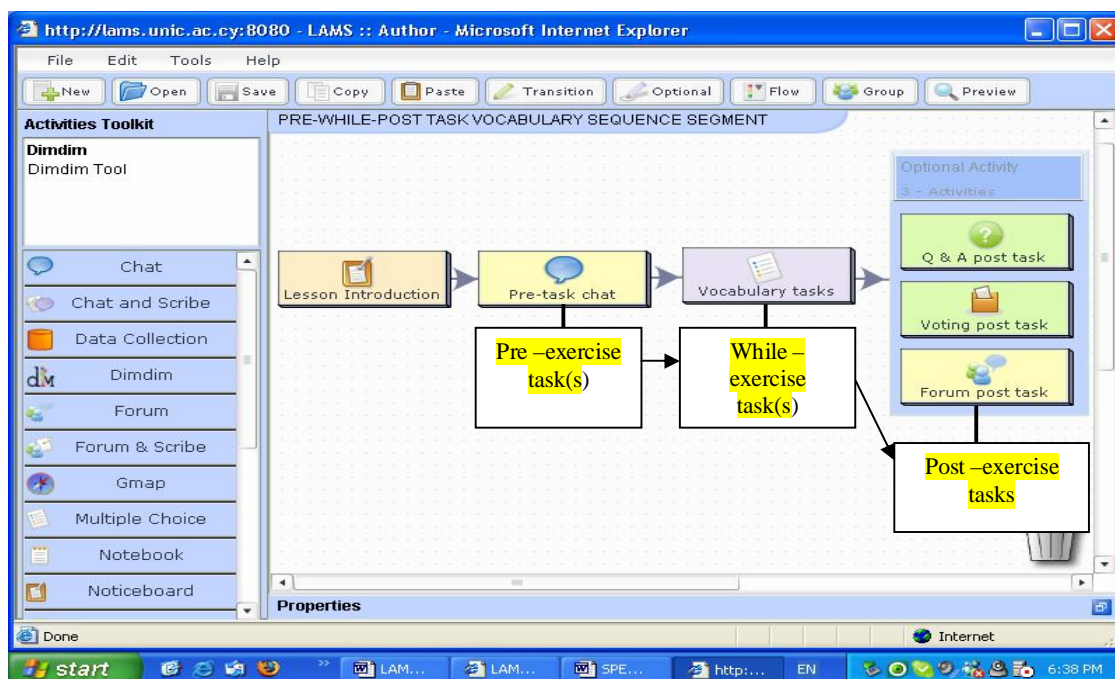


Figure 4 An example of how other LAMS tools might be used to support pre/post vocabulary tasks

2.3 Grammar and LAMS

The evolution of grammar-learning and teaching methods has been a controversial and intense episode in the history of language learning; Thornbury (1999: 23) maintains approaches have differed on a cline from zero grammar (Natural Approach) to heavy grammar emphasis (Grammar Translation). However, grammar acquisition appears to be an organic and non-linear process where possibly interacting structures need to be regularly recycled.

Modern textbooks often approach grammar fluency (automaticity) or accuracy (form) in different ways, and arguably grammar could also be practised in the context of speaking, reading, writing, and (even) listening. Thus, it is suggested that teachers authoring LAMS grammar (sequence) segments should draw on and try to apply the grammar activities/methods which they feel have been most effective in their particular context. In sections 2.4 to 2.7 an introduction to reading, writing, listening and speaking in LAMS will be presented.

As is the case with vocabulary, there are also a mass of grammar-specific exercises/methods regularly used in (T)ESOL at different language learning levels. However, many of the highly varied interactive grammar exercises available on well-known Internet (T)ESOL sites appear to be narrowing the focus to structural accuracy practice where grammatical competence is thought to be acquired through the practice of a previously identified grammar *pattern*; examples of such sites include:

- i) [ManyThings](#) on this site
- ii) [Gillet's UEFAP site](#) accuracy
- iii) [English as a Second Language website](#) on this site
- iv) [ESL Bears](#) on this site
- v) [Ohio University ESL Student grammar Resources](#)
- vi) [ESL Independent Study Lab](#) on this site
- vii) [BBC Skillswise](#) on this grammar site

The above grammar Internet resources could be utilised and managed in a structured way in LAMS by using the [share resources tool](#) and/or using for instance the advanced [FCK Editor](#) coding (i.e. as in Figure 3). Moreover the variety of exercises on such Internet grammar sites suggests LAMS presently also needs to develop a wider variety of interactive grammar-creation authoring exercises. A more extensive choice of LAMS tools can also be used to practise grammar by having pre and post grammar task exercises as presented for example in Figure 4.

However, such a pre-while-post activity segment within a sequence in the case of grammar practice might also provide an authoring teacher with opportunities to experiment (depending on learner age, motivation and ability) with deductive- and inductive¹²-style grammar approaches. An example of a deductive style LAMS sequence segment is presented in Figure 5. Here a Present-Practise-Produce paradigm (Thornbury 1999: 128) is presented, it is suggested that the fluency part of this paradigm (i.e. Produce) be done offline in a language lab; blended learning using LAMS [online and offline](#) tools in a language lab¹³ might provide opportunities to practise spoken English fluency.

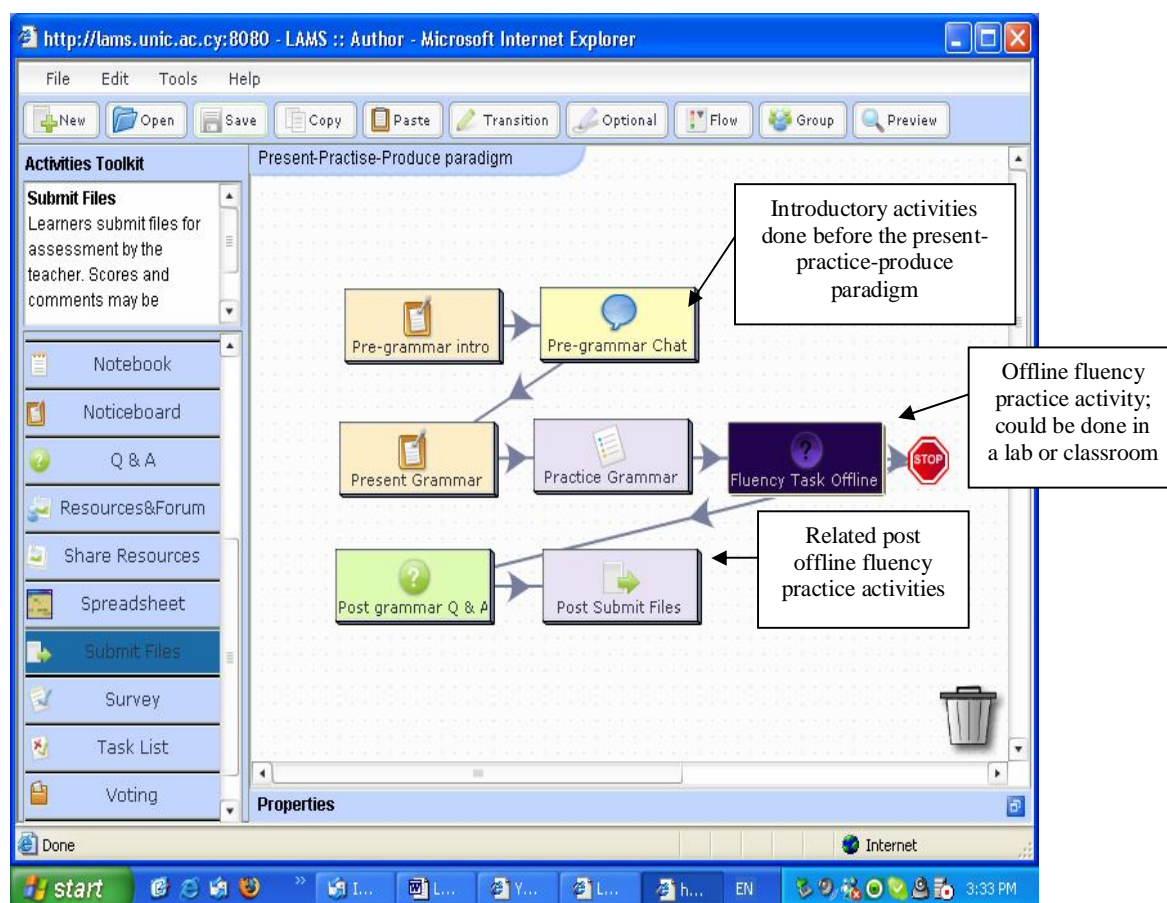


Figure 5 An example of how LAMS tools might be used to support a Present-Practise-Produce paradigm

¹² Or other related methods such as Harmer's (1987) covert/overt grammar presentation;

¹³ Alexander (2008c, 2007) discusses Language Lab usage in TESOL in detail.

An example of how other LAMS authoring tools might support an inductive approach e.g. the Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment cycle, Lewis (1993) as described in [Westfall and Weber \(2005\)](#) is presented in Figure 6.

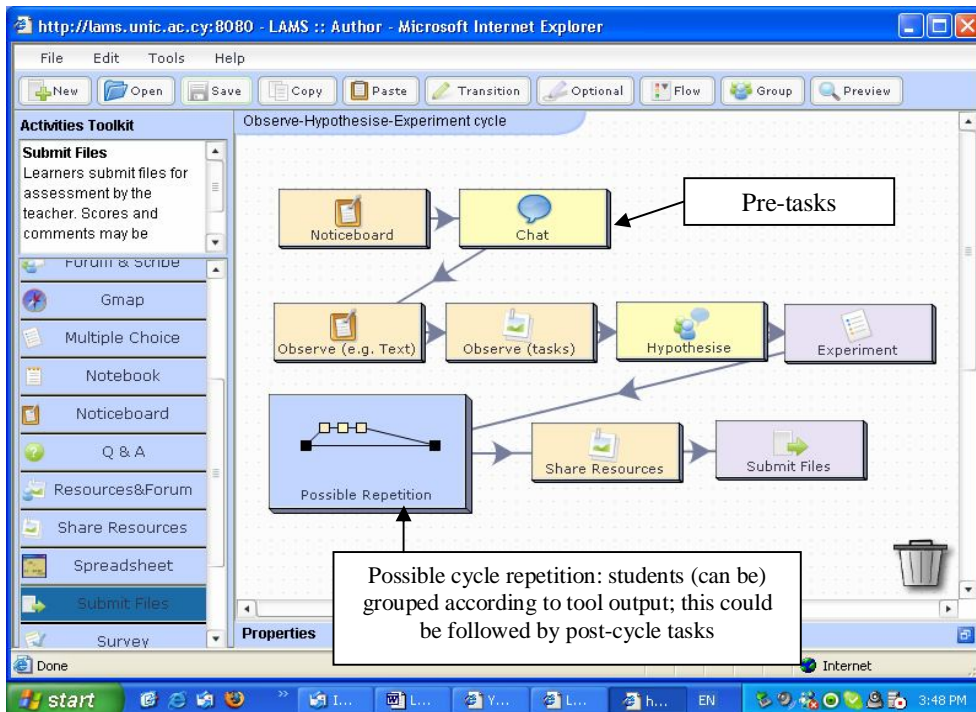


Figure 6 An example of how LAMS tools might be used to support an Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment cycle

2.4 Reading and LAMS

Reading has nearly always been considered a central skill in language learning and LAMS appears to hold the potential to test skimming (i.e. reading to get overall gist), scanning (i.e. to look for specific information), intensive reading (reading shorter texts carefully to extract information); moreover LAMS could also provide opportunities to develop extensive reading (i.e. reading longer texts mainly for pleasure). The traditional reading lesson divisions of (pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading) allow a wide selection of LAMS authoring tools to be incorporated within a reading sequence segment; Figure 7 provides a screenshot example segment of how this might be done.

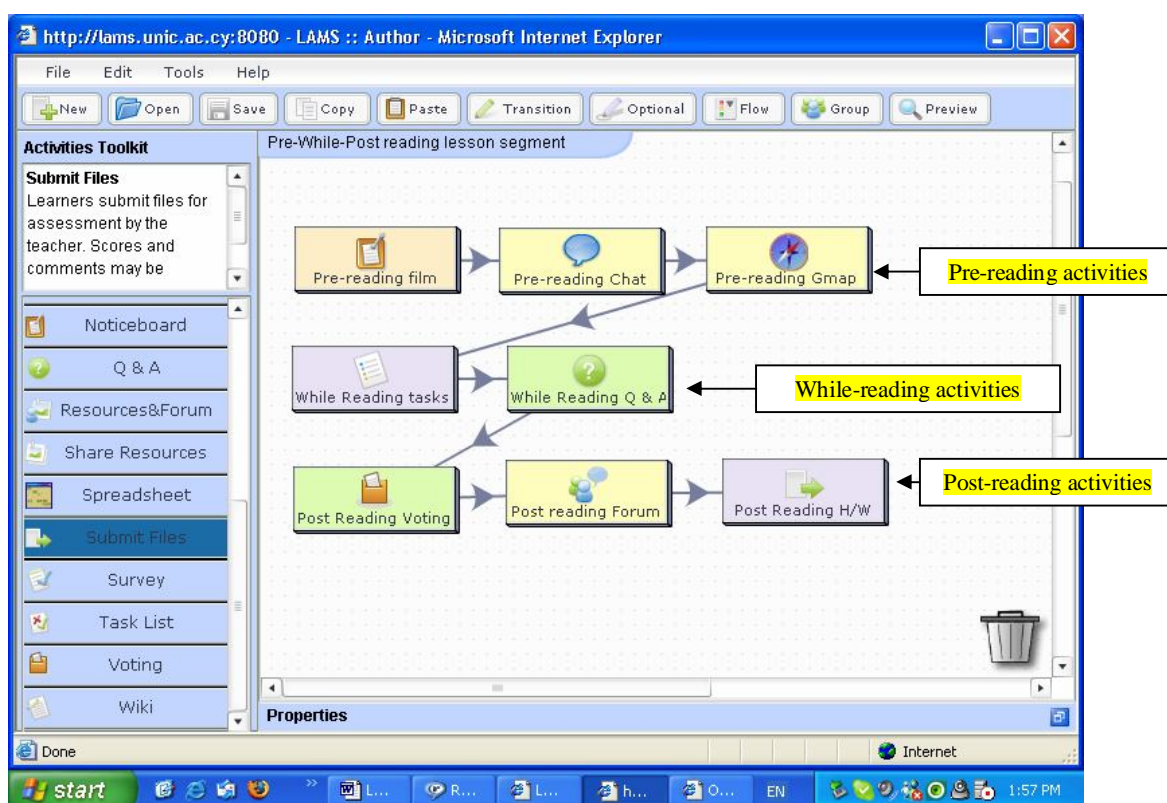


Figure 7 An example of how LAMS tools might be used to support pre-while-post reading activities.

Even though reading (T)ESOL activities online appear to vary diversely according to quality/interactivity, the range of reading activities on the following example sites suggest further development (possibly in the guise of a specialised TESOL tool) is required in LAMS: Gillet's UEfAP on this [site](#); ESL Bears on this [site](#); Ohio University ESL Student reading [Resources](#); BBC Skillswise on this reading [site](#).

2.5 Listening and LAMS

A common paradigm in listening comprehension activities is the use of three stages: pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening. Typical pre-listening activities could be vocabulary prediction, brainstorming topic, predicting what will happen by listening to opening, look at picture related to listening and predicting something). While-listening activities are characterised by listening and doing. Post-listening activities mainly tend to comprise follow-up tasks such as discussion, writing task).

LAMS tools presently could support the pre and post listening task stages; however, a dedicated TESOL tool is required to create the extensive range of user-friendly listening activities that are available on these example online sites: [www.ManyThings.org](#) on this [site](#); Gillet's UEfAP [site](#); ESL Independent Study Lab on this [site](#); BBC Skillswise on this vocabulary [site](#). Figure 8 shows a screenshot of how LAMS might provide a broad range of support activities for the pre/post listening stages.

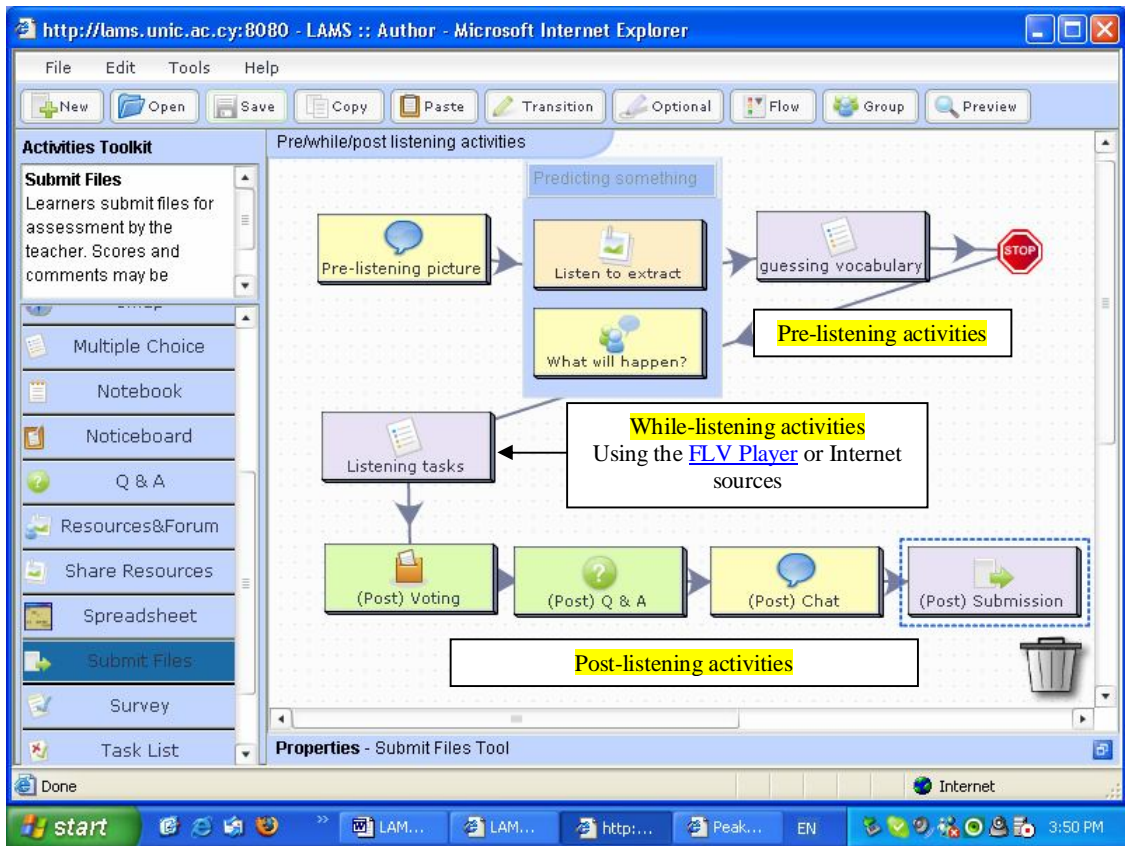


Figure 8 An example of how LAMS tools might be used to support pre-post listening activities

2.6 Writing and LAMS

There appear to be a lot of freely available online second-language writing materials; many of these materials seem to provide informative instruction/advice on specific features in writing. However, some online sites also test aspects of writing awareness through a range of interactive activities. Well-known writing sites include: ESL Internet writing [resources](#); Gillet's UefAP [writing](#); English as a Second Language website [writing](#); ESL Bears on this [site](#); Ohio University ESL Student writing [Resources](#); ESL Independent Study Lab on this [site](#); BBC Skillswise on this [site](#). Such specialised writing materials could be utilised: (1) in LAMS sequences as a general writing resource; (2) within the context of creating a sequence that applied a popular method of teaching second language writing (e.g. the product and process writing approaches). [Steele](#) (2009) distinguishes between the two approaches as in Table 1.

Table 1 A summary of key differences between product and process writing

Process writing	Product writing
Text as a resource for comparison	Imitate model text
Ideas as starting point	Organisation of ideas more important than ideas themselves
More than one draft	One draft
More global, focus on purpose theme, text type, i.e., reader is emphasised	Features highlighted including controlled practice of those features
Emphasis on creative process	Emphasis on end product

Screenshots of how LAMS tools might be used to support the creation of a product and process type approach to writing are presented in Figure 9 and 10 respectively. Product-focussed approaches arguably are still widely used in second language teaching; it is held that the focusing on explicit forms may help bring tangible purpose to a task and so could provide a basis for the development of writing skills.

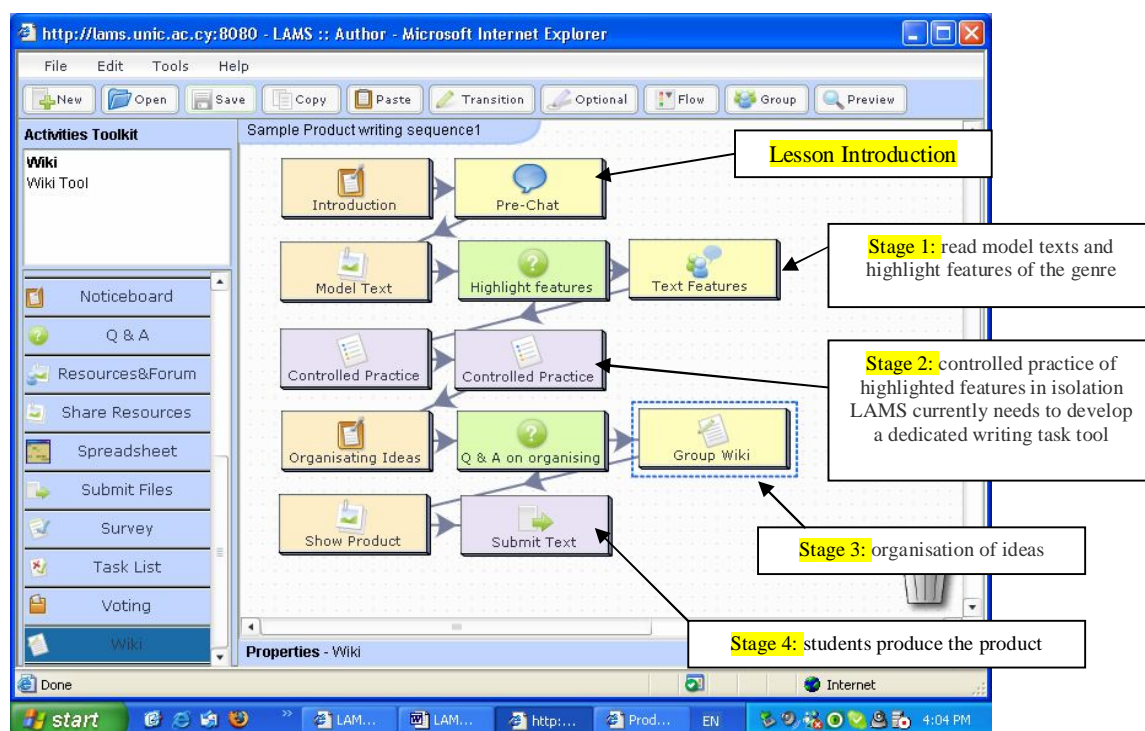


Figure 9 An example of how LAMS tools might be used to support a product-focussed writing approach (the 4 stages are based on Steele 2009)

Process-orientated approaches were synchronous with the arrival of communicative approaches and (so) highlighted the need for fluent expression and learner-centeredness. A shift was made from language-focussed activities which were believed to lead to a prescribed product, to learner-centred tasks which were thought to allow freer expression and greater creativity.

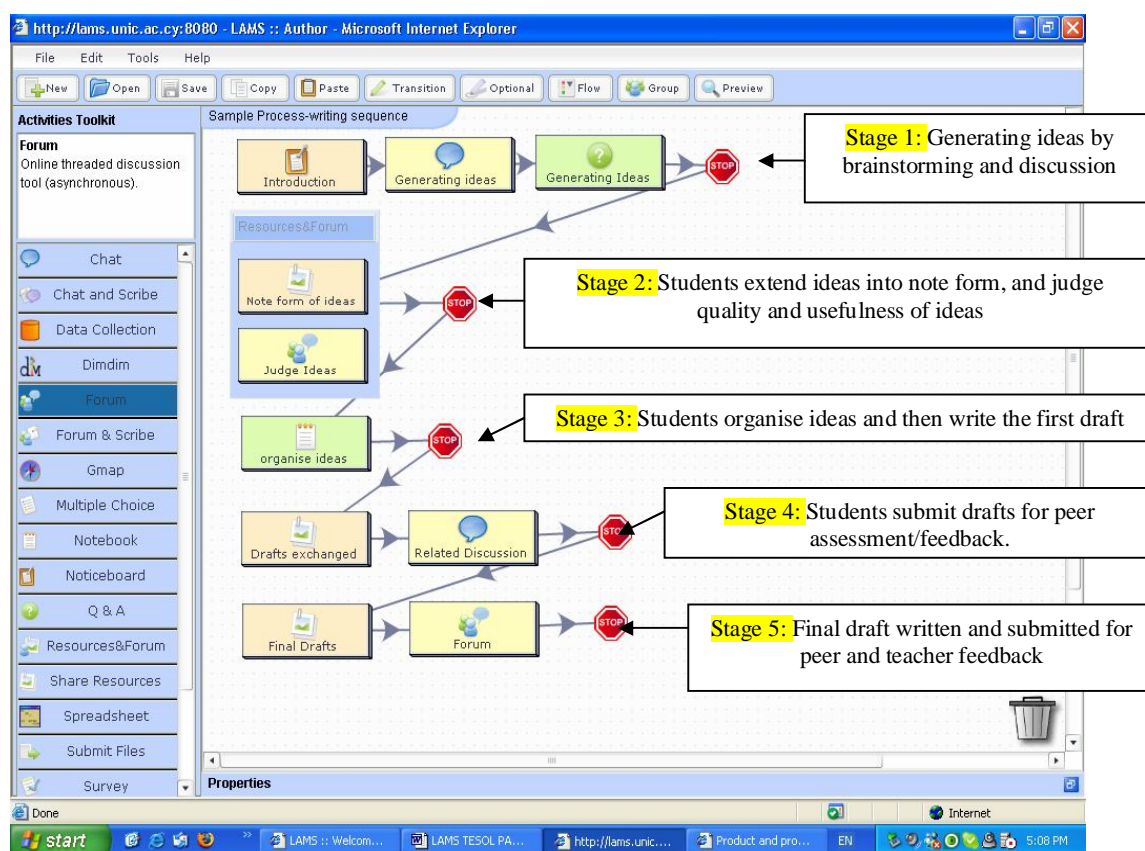


Figure 10 An example of how LAMS tools might be used to support a process-focussed writing approach (the stages are based on [Steele 2009a](#))

2.7 Speaking and LAMS

Well-known classroom exercises used for speaking practice include: (1) role-play and simulation tasks; (2) information gap pair/group work tasks; (3) problem solving and discussion (e.g. Ur 1981); (4) games (using target language). Ur (2002: 120) maintains that a successful speaking activity should lead to a lot of evenly distributed and motivated learner talk pegged at the appropriate level. However, currently, online language speaking resources appear to be limited by what is practicable from a technological point of view; therefore they either provide information on 'how' to approach aspects of speaking or attempt to provide a platform for the practising of features of pronunciation. Examples of such sites might be: (i) the pronunciation (ManyThings) exercises on this [site](#); (ii) Gillet's UEfAP Pronunciation [site](#); (iii) Ohio University ESL Student speaking [Resources](#). Figure 11 provides a screenshot of how a variety of LAMS tools might be used to support speaking

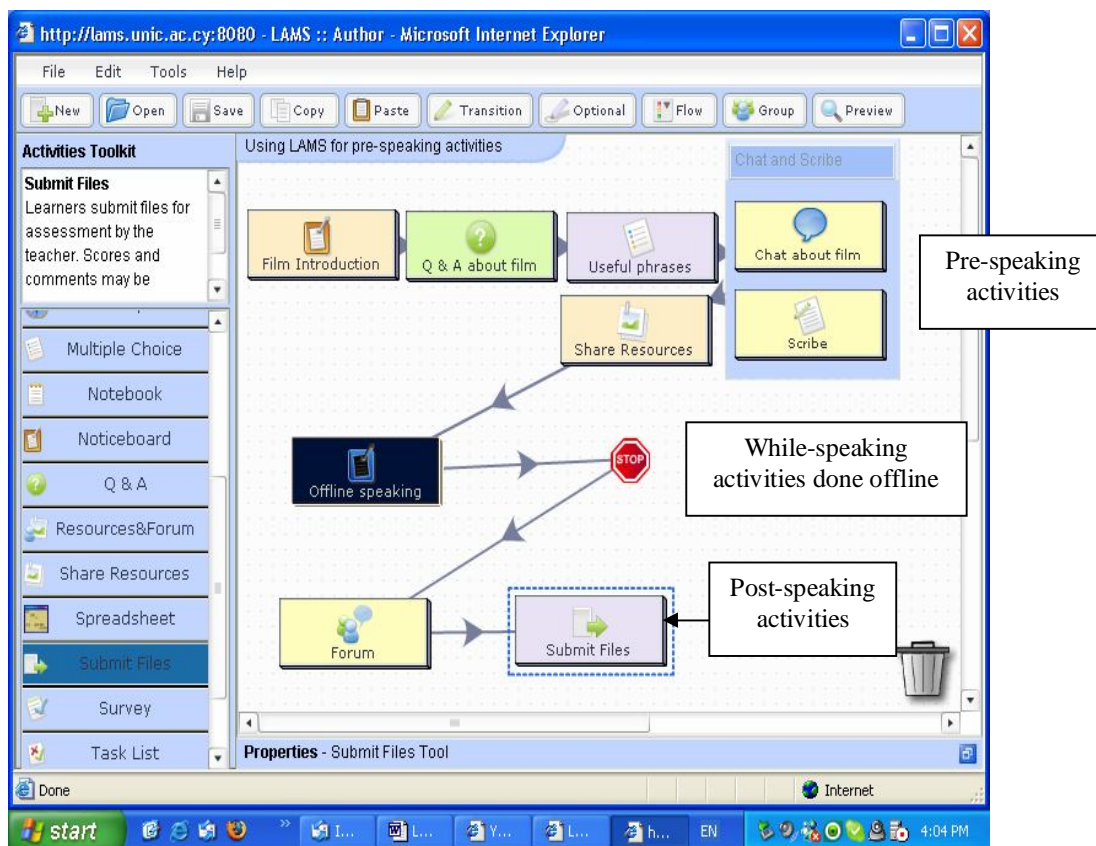


Figure 11 An example of how LAMS tools might be used to support a speaking task

New tools are continually being added to the existing selection of LAMS tools and some of these tools could also be useful in such speaking-focussed sequences. For instance a new LAMS video recorder, currently being developed, will allow learners to upload their own videos and optionally comment and rate each other's recordings. Figure 10 however suggests that actual speaking practice should be done 'offline', but, as Skype or Skype-like technologies improve, this may change.

3. Conclusions

Alexander (2009a) maintains that two important TESOL-germane broad-spectrum issues often presented in the findings of mainstream LAMS literature pertain to (1) the need for a supportive environment (Burns 2007, McDonald and Star 2006, Laurillard 2006, Walker and Masterman 2006); (2) mainstream LAMS studies reporting lower than expected numbers of sequences created (Russell *et al.* 2005, Masterman and Lee 2005a, Levy *et al.* 2008, Jameson *et al.* 2007). Alexander (2009a) thus asserts that this may suggest time-saving simplification of the advanced features of LAMS authoring environment may now be a priority for more wide-scale use. The two points above may also be in line with Glenn (2008:6) who holds "for all of its benefits, technology remains a disruptive innovation—and an expensive one".

Thus there is a real risk that the sheer pace of advancement of technical features and expansion of authoring tools, as highlighted in the LAMS roadmap, may paradoxically become an obstacle to addressing the above fundamental practical macro issues; however it is also held that such an obstacle does not apply singularly to LAMS, it could be the catch-22 of all modern and aspiring learner management systems. Alexander (2009a) thus states that the risk of a fissure appearing in the teacher and LAMS teacher-trainer relationship might necessitate the creation of a skilled LAMS teacher-representative materials up-loader. Namely, it is

maintained that it may be quicker to discuss desirable content, learning outcomes and format with the teacher, rather than train teachers fully to use the increasingly sophisticated Author environment tools (Alexander 2009a). In addition, the creation of such an intermediary expert LAMS Author may be an unavoidable outcome of a rift that could appear between technological innovation and practicable in-service teacher training; using such a LAMS expert would however have administrative and management implications for an institution trying to implement LAMS usage.

Alexander (2009a) also suggests another possible solution to the above issue pertaining to the galloping pace of change in technological advancement could be to propose options whereby teachers can just upload the content (which could be quite varied) and choose the kind of empty and possibly subject-specific learning design template they would like to use. However, even though such a degree of sequence-creation automation may be an idealised target for which to aim, a move has already been made to simplify the sequence creation process with *Activity Planner*, which is soon to be released. Cameron (2007) in describing a number of planning tools (*Phoebe*, *LearningMapR*, *Compendium*, *QUT's Learning Design Templates*, *LAMS Activity Planner*) argues that “a number of projects have emerged with an interest in developing a tool to guide lecturers through the learning design process”. Nevertheless, even though systems that guide lecturers through the learning design process are important, such systems also need to address the unquestionably thorny task of automating the presentation of lesson materials in a graphically cutting-edge way.

This paper has provided examples of how LAMS might be used to practise six interrelated language skills. A pre-while-post sequence segment paradigm could be one way of providing a foundation structure template on which creative teachers might draw on their experience to build sequences for the practice of speaking, listening, reading, vocabulary, grammar and even arguably writing. Figure 11 attempts to sketch such a process in four stages. Even though each of the four stages has important specific issues, it is maintained that in light of the literature findings mentioned earlier, stage 3 might be the problematic stage; here teachers appear to need increasing institutional and technical support.

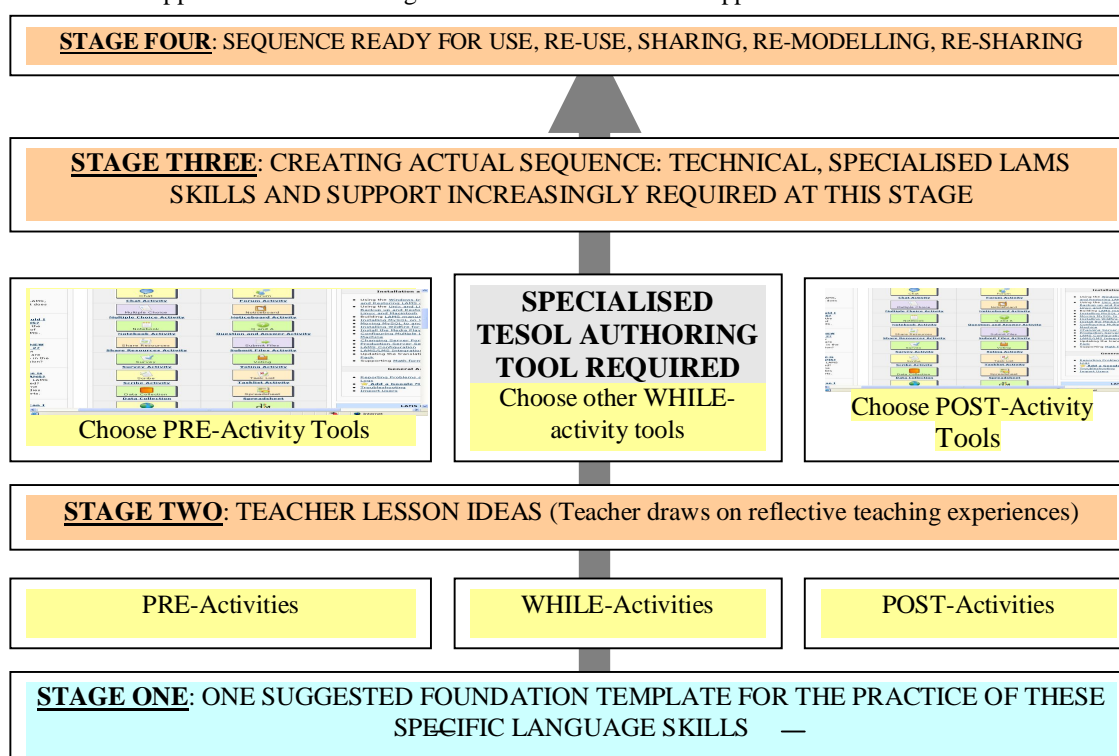


Figure 11 Four stage implementation of TESOL sequence (segments)

In conclusion, even though there may be many legitimate points to discuss/research at both the theoretical and implementation levels of LAMS use in TESOL, more dissemination (e.g. on [LAMS Community](#)) of sequences is now urgently required. Furthermore, although it is recommended that the creation of a more specialised TESOL authoring tool would assist in the construction of non-Internet dependent and LAMS-gradable sequences, it is held that TESOL sequences can still be authored with many of the existing tools.

The author of this article would welcome any comments or questions regarding the ideas presented in this paper.

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