

Enlightening Writing Journey: An Interview with Professor Icy Lee

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Abstract

This interview with Professor Icy Lee explores her extensive career in education, focusing on second language writing and teacher education. It covers her academic journey, highlighting her international experiences that have shaped her perspectives on language teaching and assessment. The discussion delves into her key research areas, particularly classroom writing assessment and feedback, revealing her contributions to the field through over 150 publications. Professor Lee shares insights into the challenges of implementing innovative practices in traditional educational contexts and the significance of her award-winning research. Additionally, the interview addresses the integration of her Christian faith into her teaching philosophy and her vision for the future of language education amidst globalization and technological advancements.

Keywords

Second language writing, teacher education, classroom assessment, feedback practices, educational innovation, professional development

Introduction

Before joining the National Institute of Education, Icy Lee was a Professor at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), where she chaired the Department of Curriculum and Instruction (2015–2021) and served as Associate Dean of Education (2020–2023). She also led the Postgraduate Diploma in Education and MA in English Language Teaching programs.

Icy is an internationally recognized expert in second language writing, focusing on classroom writing assessment, feedback, and teacher development. She has given over 200 presentations worldwide, including invited talks and plenaries, and published more than 150 works in prominent journals like *Assessing Writing*, *Journal of Second Language Writing*, and *TESOL Quarterly*. Her accolades include multiple awards, such as the Journal of Second Language Writing Best Paper Award (2008, 2022) and TESOL Outstanding Paper on NNEST Issues (2013).

Her teaching experience spans secondary schools, teacher education, and ESL courses in Canada. She has been a Visiting Professor at institutions like the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and Thammasat University. Icy's dedication to teaching earned her several awards, including CUHK's Faculty Exemplary Teaching Award and the TESOL Excellence in Teaching Award (2010).

Icy integrates her Christian faith into her teaching and research. She organized the Christians in English Language Teaching (CELT) Conference at CUHK in 2012 and delivered a keynote at the 2014 CELT Conference in Taiwan, emphasizing Christian values in the writing classroom.

Section 1: Academic and Professional Journey

Can you share your journey into the field of education and what inspired you to focus on second language writing and teacher education?

I began my teaching career as a secondary school teacher in Hong Kong. After five years of teaching, I transitioned to the Institute of Language Education, which was then run by the Hong Kong government, as a teacher trainer. During that time, I continued to upgrade myself professionally, pursuing an MA and PhD on a part-time basis. My PhD research focused on coherence in writing, and since then, I have continued to explore different aspects of second language writing, such as error correction, feedback, teachers' beliefs and practices, writing teacher expertise, and writing teacher education. Given that writing is often considered one of the most formidable language skills to learn and master, I find it meaningful and fulfilling to conduct research that can help teachers and students improve the teaching and learning of writing. As an educator, my heart always remains in the classroom, and my vision is to support teachers in improving their classroom practice. This commitment has fuelled my passion and sustained me throughout my career.

How did your experiences as Chair of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and Associate Dean at CUHK shape your research and teaching approach?

My experience as Chair of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and Associate Dean of the Faculty of Education of CUHK strengthened my conviction about the importance of practicing what I preach, both in teaching and research. As an academic leader, I have remained committed to evidence-based practice, using research findings to inform my own practice and to bridge the research-practice nexus.

You've delivered over 200 talks worldwide. How have these international experiences influenced your perspectives on language teaching and assessment?

My international experience has broadened my perspective on global issues that concern teachers and researchers across diverse contexts. I have come to realize that some issues of interest to teachers in my local context may hold less relevance in other contexts. Conversely, topics like feedback and assessment, teacher professional development, and teacher education, are of shared interest within the international community.

What differences and similarities have you observed in language education across the countries you've visited?

Based on my observation, language education across different contexts shares many similarities. For example, the competencies that underline language teaching - such as subject matter knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, contextual knowledge, and learner-focused teaching - are very similar whether one is teaching in Hong Kong, Singapore, or Canada. However, contextual differences have a significant influence on perceptions of effective practice. In Western countries, there is an expectation of active classroom interaction, not only between teachers and students but also among students. In contrast, in Asian contexts, students may expect more input from the teachers, especially in the form of teacher-fronted explanations, explicit guidance, and detailed handouts.

Section 2: Research Contributions and Impact

Your research spans various areas, including classroom writing assessment and feedback. Can you discuss the key findings from your research in these areas?

I have been researching classroom writing assessment and feedback in second language writing for over two decades. My research has shown that teacher education holds significant potential for enhancing teachers' classroom writing assessment and feedback literacy, which can

positively impact student learning. For changes to take effect, teachers should not undertake classroom writing assessment and innovation in isolation. Instead, it is crucial to engage in communities in practice, involving colleagues and other key stakeholders in the process of change. There are contextual issues and constraints to consider, and without addressing these in their innovative attempts to enhance classroom writing assessment and feedback practices, sustaining success becomes a challenge.

How do you see the role of feedback evolving in the context of second language writing?

As part of formative assessment, feedback has a central role to play in supporting and promoting student learning. In the context of second language writing, effective feedback can move students along in their writing development, equip them with self-evaluation abilities, and turn them into autonomous writers.

You have over 150 refereed publications. Which of your works do you consider most impactful, and why?

I think I am best known for my work on feedback in second language writing. My most cited papers explore various aspects of feedback, such as error correction, teachers' beliefs and practices regarding feedback, and classroom writing assessment and feedback. Since feedback is relevant to both researchers and practitioners, and my research is always classroom-based with clear pedagogical implications, I think my readers can connect with my work easily. This may explain why my research impact is strongest in the area of feedback.

Could you elaborate on the significance of your award-winning papers, such as those recognized by the Journal of Second Language Writing?

My 2008 paper, "Understanding teachers' written feedback practices in Hong Kong secondary classrooms", won the Journal of Second Language Writing Best Article Award. This study sheds light on why teachers provide feedback in the ways they do, as well as the reasons for disjunctures between teachers' feedback practices and recommended principles in the literature. The study is considered ground-breaking since previous feedback research has not paid sufficient attention to the sociocultural dimensions of teachers' written feedback practices. Since then, more research has adopted the sociocultural lens to investigate issues about feedback. Additionally, while the study was conducted in Hong Kong, it holds international significance and has been cited over 650 times to date.

My co-authored paper with Xuchuan Winnie Chen, "Conflicts in peer interaction of collaborative writing: A case study of an EFL context" won the 2022 Journal of Second Language Writing Best Article Award. The study, grounded in Chen's PhD research, for which I served as the supervisor, explores a novel and relatively uncharted territory in collaborative writing research - conflicts in peer interaction. Anchored in complexity theory, the findings uncover the different kinds of conflict and their potential impact on students' writing outcome. Another co-authored paper (Lee & Yuan, 2021), "Understanding L2 writing teacher expertise", received the Honorable Mention of the Journal of Second Language Writing Best Article Award. The study is referred to as the "first substantial published study of L2 writing teacher expertise" (Hirvela & Belcher, 2022, p. 2).

How do you integrate your research into your teaching practices at CUHK and other institutions where you have served as a visiting professor?

As a feedback researcher, I incorporate my feedback beliefs into my practice by offering focused feedback without overwhelming students with excessive detail. I ensure that my

feedback is constructive and thought-provoking. To this end, I provide actionable comments and, where appropriate, pose questions to promote cognitive engagement with feedback.

Can you share some success stories of your PhD students or mentees and how your guidance has shaped their academic careers?

I have graduated 15 doctoral students, two of whom are listed among the top 2% of scholars by Stanford University. I began to provide mentoring in scholarly publishing when they were studying with me, offering timely and constructive feedback on their writing. I also ran a study group with my doctoral students, giving them opportunities to review each other's work as critical friends. One strategy used in the early stages of their academic writing journey was modeling their writing after mine. They found this approach very useful, but gradually with more practice, they developed their own voice in their writing.

Section 3: Challenges and Innovations in Language Education

What are the biggest challenges you have encountered in the field of second language writing, particularly in classroom assessment and feedback?

One of the biggest challenges is conducting research on classroom writing assessment and feedback in traditional, exam-oriented contexts, where teachers have entrenched beliefs about "good" practices. It is very hard to change their beliefs and persuade them to experiment with alternative strategies.

How do you address these challenges in your own teaching and research?

To address these challenges, I gather like-minded colleagues in professional learning communities, encourage them to undertake innovation and document the outcomes, and involve other colleagues in the change process.

You've been recognized for excellence in teaching and material development. Can you discuss some innovative practices or materials you've developed that have had a significant impact on your students?

In 1999, I received the TESOL Award for Excellence in the Development of Pedagogical Materials. The materials I submitted were grounded in my PhD study, which involved designing a set of pedagogical materials to teach the fuzzy concept of coherence explicitly. My work was published in the TESL Canada Journal, which offers guidelines on how teachers can enhance students' awareness of coherence-creating mechanisms in writing. I believe it is one of the first pedagogical endeavors to teach coherence in writing based on a set of principles, which were proposed in my PhD study.

In 2010, I received the TESOL Award for Excellence in Teaching. Some of the innovative practices that I included in the portfolio I submitted were dialogue journaling with my pre-service teachers, blogging with my in-service teachers, and digital storytelling to teach writing.

Section 4: Integration of Faith and Education

You've mentioned that your Christian faith plays a role in your teaching philosophy. How do you integrate your faith into your professional life, particularly in a secular educational setting?

As a Christian educator, my values have been shaped by biblical teachings. My vision is to express and live out my faith through virtues exemplified by Jesus, such as love, kindness, patience, humility, and respect. I believe that when my teaching is guided by these principles, I can bring out the best in my students.

Can you share insights from your involvement with the Christians in English Language Teaching (CELT) Conference and how it has influenced your work?

My involvement in the Christians in English Language Teaching (CELT) Conferences has broadened my perspective on the impact of Christian faith in my practice and enhanced my awareness of the importance of faith-based practice.

Section 5: Future Directions

What are the next steps for your research? Are there any emerging areas in second language writing or teacher education that you are particularly excited about?

As far as feedback is concerned, I remain interested in issues that have a direct impact on teaching and learning. One of my current research projects aims to explore assessment as learning and feedback in technology- and AI-enhanced writing classrooms.

I am excited about the implications of Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT) for feedback in writing, especially written corrective feedback. I believe in the need to shift teachers' attention from a narrow focus on written accuracy according to native norms to a broader emphasis on feedback that promotes meaning-making.

How do you envision the future of second language education, especially in the context of the challenges posed by globalization and technological advancements?

In the globalized, technological, and AI era, I believe that second language educators must develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and values to guide them in providing inclusive, equitable, and ethical practices. As such, they need to engage in ongoing professional development to keep abreast of recent and emerging trends.

What advice would you give to young educators and researchers entering the field of language education today?

We are living in an increasingly challenging world. My advice to young educators and researchers is to be certain of their passion, motivation, and vision before committing to the language education field. Without these essential core values, it is hard to remain dedicated and continue producing quality work.

How can they contribute to advancing the field while addressing the challenges faced by contemporary education systems?

As long as their work is driven by a genuine love and passion for what they do, they will develop the emotional resilience needed to navigate the myriad challenges that arise in an unpredictable world.

Is there anything else you would like to share about your journey, research, or teaching philosophy?

With the ubiquity of generative AI (GAI), I believe it is essential to educate students and novice scholars on the ethical and meaningful use of GAI. The last thing I want to see is humanity being overpowered and replaced by GAI, leading to a loss of our capacity to think and write.

How can educators and institutions better support second language learners in achieving their academic and professional goals?

In addition to the provision of educational resources to support learning, I believe in the importance of humanizing pedagogy, positive psychology, and spirituality education. These elements foster learners that are guided by humanism, positivity, and profound life values.