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# **Penny McKay 1948-2009: A leader in English language education**

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*As many readers of TESOL in Context may now know, Penny McKay passed away at her Brisbane home on 22 August, 2009, after a long and bravely endured illness. This tribute celebrates Penny's legacy to the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) education in schools and mourns her loss as a much loved friend, colleague and scholar. The tribute outlines Penny's career, and then describes her early contribution to second language curriculum in schools, her subsequent groundbreaking work on charting ESL development, her case study research, and her later work on younger language learners. The descriptions include personal reflections on Penny's work. Some are drawn from interviews in the mid-1990s with Penny and her colleagues as part of her doctoral research (Moore, 2004); other comments were circulating at the time of Penny's death. Publication in this tribute of these expressions of admiration and respect places them in the public domain, as befits Penny's standing among her colleagues.*

Keywords: *Penny McKay; tribute*

## **Penny's career**

Penny qualified as a teacher with a Bachelor of Education from Adelaide CAE in 1979, and began her career as an ESL teacher in South Australian primary and secondary schools. In 1981, as a young mother with two small children, Penny won a Fulbright Scholarship to Arizona State University, where she obtained a Master of Arts in English. Following her return to South Australia, she was seconded to the Australian Language Levels project in 1985, in which capacity she initiated and developed the *ESL Framework of Stages* (McKay &

Scarino, 1992). In 1991, she moved Griffith University in Queensland to begin a project on ESL assessment under the auspices of the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia (NLLIA), described in more detail below.

In 1994, Penny completed a doctorate in Applied Linguistics at the University of Queensland and a year later joined the School of Language and Literacy Education at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). There she founded a comprehensive pre-service, in-service and postgraduate TESOL/Applied Linguistics program for local and overseas students, attracting students from around the world. One of her closest colleagues, Semmi Sin, wrote that, supported by the then Head of School, Bill Corcoran, Penny had a “strong vision of promoting TESOL both throughout Australia and internationally. ... [She] started something that (although in slightly altered form) continues to this day” (personal communication, August 23, 2009). Within QUT, Penny played an important mentoring role. Semmi, whose first encounter with Penny was as her research assistant, continued: “I owe Penny a big debt of gratitude ... she gave me an excellent head start in Australia and I’m certain that my life is much richer as a result”. Penny was rapidly promoted to senior lecturer in 1996 and associate professor in 1999, a position she held when she took early retirement as adjunct professor in 2006 because of her advancing illness.

Penny’s contribution was not confined to her formal employment duties. She provided inspiration and leadership to teachers and other researchers through informal professional development activities, numerous talks and presentations at workshops, seminars and conferences, and her practical and scholarly writing. She was an invited, keynote and plenary speaker in Australia, New Zealand, England, Canada, the USA, Japan, Dubai, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia and South Africa. Her curriculum vitae lists 18 various consultancies in Australian and overseas between 1991 and 2006.

Penny also played an outstanding and selfless leadership role in a number of professional associations—not least as President of the Queensland Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (1997-99), National President of the Australian Council of TESOL Associations (1999-2001), President of the South Australian ESL Teachers’ Association (1988-89) and Vice-President of the

Applied Linguistics Association of Australia. She was elected to and served on the Board of Directors of TESOL International from 2005-2008, in which capacity Anne Burns described Penny as working “tirelessly to support the research activities of TESOL” (personal communication, August 26, 2009). Penny was also active in various editorial roles, notably as Executive Editor for *TESOL in Context* (1995-1996), and on the editorial boards and reference panels for *Prospect* (1992-2008), *Babel* (1991-2008) and *Language Assessment Quarterly* (2003-2008).

We turn now to elaborate on Penny’s high impact research and writing—a lasting legacy to ESL and languages education.

### **Language curriculum**

The Australian Language Levels (ALL) Project, which began in 1985, was the first of several large scale language education projects in which Penny played a key role. The project aimed to provide a common basis for planning, implementing, assessing and evaluating learning in the more than 40 languages other than English (LOTE) then taught in Australian schools (Scarino, Vale, McKay, & Clark, 1988; Vale, Scarino, & McKay, 1991). At Penny’s suggestion, the project was extended to incorporate an ESL dimension, which became the *ESL Framework of Stages* (McKay & Scarino, 1992).

The authors described the ALL project as concerned with “prochievement”: a combination of proficiency and achievement (McKay & Scarino, 1991). It described “stages” in a generic second/other language curriculum framework. The descriptions could be used to develop courses of LOTE and ESL studies and to document learner progress during, and at the completion of, each stage. The project was underpinned by sociolinguistic understandings of language as a resource for communication and an activities-focused approach to language teaching. Like most other communicative curricula, the framework offered a set of principles rather than a specific method, thereby requiring teachers to apply and interpret the framework in developing their own practices.

The project informed a variety of curriculum initiatives at national, state and territory levels in Aboriginal languages, other languages and ESL (for a summary, see McKay & Scarino, 1991). For Penny, it opened up questions about whether and how linguistic forms might merit an explicit teaching focus, questions which were and remain current in second language acquisition research (e.g.

Long, 1991; Long & Doughty, 2009; Seliger & Long, 1983). Her subsequent doctoral study explored the effects of meaning-focused and form-focused classroom interaction on language learning. Her thesis showed how the emphasis on meaning and form, and the nature of meaningful interaction, can differ markedly from one class to another (McKay, 1994). She concluded that, alongside communicative interaction, a place exists for focus on form.

### **Assessing learners' development in English as a second/other language**

In 1986, a 40% drop in the value of the Australian dollar led to a political and budgetary crisis, the effects of which included a 47% cut in federal funding for school ESL programs (Moore, 2004, p. 244). Policy makers countered protests from ethnic groups and educators with claims that proof was required of ESL needs and, further, that ESL programs made a difference. In 1989, the newly founded National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia (NLLIA) agreed to sponsor and fund an ESL proficiency assessment project that would document school-aged learners' ESL learning needs and development (McKay, 1995; Moore, 2004).

In 1990, after a difficult beginning for the project, Penny became its co-ordinator. The team's work was documented in the *ESL Development: Language and Literacy in Schools Project*, which consisted of an extensive explanatory introduction, the *ESL Bandscales*, exemplar assessment activities, reporting formats and guidelines for teachers, and a series of supporting papers (McKay, Hudson, Sappuppo, Lumley, Mincham, & Raso, 1994). The *ESL Bandscales*, in which Penny took the leading role—and is arguably the work for which she is most widely known—offered a set of elaborated descriptors, organised in Levels, for charting ESL development.

Because the *ESL Bandscales* are proficiency scales tied to English language development, as distinct from achievement scales tied to a particular curriculum, they can be applied in different schools and education systems where English is a medium of instruction. The original version was adopted in Australia by some education departments and individual teachers (McKay, 2007a). In Western Australia and Queensland, the Bandscales were adapted for Indigenous learners of English as a “foreign” language in remote contexts, thereby redressing one of the limitations of the original

version (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 1999, 2002). The Bandscales have also been applied internationally by individuals and groups of teachers in the UK, North America, and Asian and Pacific countries (McKay, 2007a). In 2007, a revised version of the ESL Bandscales (McKay, 2007c) was produced on the basis of more than a decade of use, together with further consultations with ESL experts and teachers and independent analyses of ESL students' work (Courtice, 2007). A significant addition was elaborated descriptors for learners with low literacy backgrounds.

At least three fundamental commitments underpin the *NLLIA ESL Development Project* in general, the *ESL Bandscales* in particular, and Penny's writings on assessment. First, Penny believed it is crucial that assessment frameworks are grounded in actual practice. That is, they must be designed from the outset to reflect and guide real classrooms. Catherine Hudson, a co-researcher in the NLLIA project, described Penny's insistence on this point as follows: "We'd get into the classroom and we'd say, '...this should happen and this should happen'. But she'd keep asking us, 'What does happen?' 'What is happening there?' 'What is development?'" (Moore, 2004, p. 385).

For Penny, this principle meant that assessment frameworks must also address teachers' holistic understandings of their work with students. She rejected the disembodied checklists proliferating at that time, and argued strongly that assessment descriptors must be contextualised. She explained in interview:

How does it help a teacher to say that a student "can write an argumentative essay"? You can write an argumentative essay at each level. You've got to have all that other stuff that tells you the whole picture, what the child is doing. ... You have to see these case study pictures and immediately that sets up a framework in the teacher's mind, which might be enough to set them off for further understandings. (Moore, 2004, p. 384)

Reflecting this commitment to stimulating teachers' own dynamic professional insights, the descriptors in the *ESL Bandscales* offer a wealth of information about the particularities of ESL development in classrooms (Bachman, 1990; McKay, 2007b; Moore, 1996b).

Second, and equally importantly, Penny believed that research and theory must inform assessment frameworks. The *Bandscales* were developed through an iterative process that interrogated

researchers' and teachers' classroom observations in the light of second language acquisition (SLA) research, related assessment research and theorising, and vice versa. They sought to incorporate known SLA phenomena such as the silent period and learner plateaus, and drew in particular from Bachman and Palmer's model of language ability (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1993) and Cummins' work on social and academic language (Cummins, 1978, 1984).

Finally, Penny saw extensive consultation as essential, both in maximising input to research and ensuring its impact. A centrepiece of the initial *ESL Development Project*, and again with the revised *ESL Bandscales*, was discussion with and feedback from professional associations, ESL teachers and local and overseas language education scholars.

These commitments to practice, theory and consultation reflect Penny's concern for assessment validity from both design and impact perspectives. Thus, her publications deal not just with assessment technicalities but also with how assessment relates more broadly to learning and, beyond this, the broader policy context for education (e.g. Davison & McKay, 2002; McKay, 1999, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2007b; McKay & Brindley, 2007). As policies changed in Australia during the 1990s, Penny discussed the political rationale for the focus on standards in education, the ideological underpinnings of individualism, competition and educational commodification, and the consequences of these trends for educational equity and the educative process itself. Along with other Australian scholars (Clyne, 1991; Davison, 1999; Lo Bianco, 1998, 2001; Moore, 1996a; Ozolins, 1993), she depicted these trends as shifting from building a multicultural nation to positioning the national economy competitively in the global marketplace; from consultative to controlling relations between government and ESL professionals; and from a recognition of the distinctiveness of second language learning to redescribing "ESLness" as a "literacy deficit".

In early 2009, launching the ALAA-ACTA *Penny McKay Award for Promising Doctoral Research in School-Based Language Development, Curriculum and Assessment*, the ALAA President, Angela Scarino, spoke of Penny's preparedness to fight for what she believed in, including the rights of groups such as ESL students and minority language learners. Penny's writings are infused with this

passionate commitment. She powerfully and persistently argued that English mother tongue benchmarks are invalid for ESL learners, critiqued standards that fail to acknowledge the distinctiveness of ESL development, and warned of the consequences of high stakes literacy testing for ESL students and ESL programs (see references cited earlier). Her argument was not that ESL students should be excluded from testing and reporting, but that their progress should be reported against ESL standards that accurately describe second language development. She urged ESL educators to provide administrators with ongoing feedback on the consequences of mother tongue English literacy benchmarks for ESL learners and not to give up in this argument (McKay, 2001a). This message remains pertinent and urgent today.

### **Case studies in English language learning: A holistic approach**

Following the NLLIA ESL Development project, Penny engaged in and directed a number of commissioned and other major research projects. This work continued her commitment to holistic understandings of language learning. Such understandings include taking account of learners' knowledge of other language(s), exploring the dimensions of this knowledge, and using what learners know as stepping stones to further successful learning.

The *Bilingual Interface Project* (McKay *et al.* 1997) took forward Cummins' (1984) proposition as to how school practices can support or disable the first language as a pathway to second/other language development. The project comprised a comprehensive literature review of the relationship between L1 and L2 learning, investigations of key issues in ESL learning (L1 and L2 instruction in bilingual programs; language distance and English literacy learning; and the relationship between English and home languages) and three case studies of Aboriginal, Cambodian and Vietnamese students in, respectively, a remote area bilingual school in North-East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory (Lowell & Garrutju, 1997), a transitional bilingual program in Perth (Oliver & Rochecoste, 1997) and a transitional bilingual/ESL program in Brisbane (McKay, 1997a). The project identified complex patterns of similarity and difference in the factors impacting on English learning and proposed a set of tentative recommendations for enhancing bilingual learners' success in school.

The subsequent *Four Queensland ESL Case Studies* (McKay, 1997b) investigated the experiences of Aboriginal, Chinese and Vietnamese students, respectively, from Elcho Island in the Northern Territory coming to an urban school on the Gold Coast Queensland (Ashton-Hay, 1997), in a mainstream secondary school in Brisbane (McKay & Walsh, 1997) and at a reception school that used bilingual approaches to prepare students for mainstream schools (Birch, 1997). Extending this work, Penny led a successful bid for an Australian Research Council linkage grant that followed students from Sudan, Eritrea, Rwanda and Burundi from an intensive English language school to mainstream high schools (see Dooley, 2009, for a report from this project). Sadly, Penny's illness prevented her from continuing with this project, and her leadership in it has been greatly missed.

In other research, Penny investigated the teaching of casual conversation to adult ESL learners (McKay, 2000) and the interface between ESL learners' L1 and English as they moved from primary to secondary schools (McKay, 1998a, 1998b). Her abiding respect for teachers' professionalism was reflected in a collection she edited (McKay, 2006b), which contained studies from different countries of teacher-initiated adaptations of mandated English or English-medium curricula to meet ESL learners' needs.

### **Young learners**

Penny's practical experience in both primary and post-primary schools made her acutely aware of the differences that age brings to language learning. This understanding had earlier led to the *ESL Bandscales* comprising separate sets of descriptors for the early, middle and post-primary years of schooling. In regard to languages other than English, Penny argued that age-appropriate assessment tasks and descriptors were essential and that, no matter whether younger learners are beginning or more advanced in a second/other language, they are cognitively and socially very different from older language learners (McKay, 1996).

In *Assessing young language learners* (McKay, 2006a), Penny explored and elaborated on these ideas. This major work integrates the Bachman and Palmer (1993) model of language ability with principles for assessment in elementary school, understandings of bilingual language development and task-based learning. It provides comprehensive and practical guidance for assessing both oral and

written development in a second/other or foreign language. Although concerned primarily with classroom assessment, some attention is also given to large scale testing, specifically the *Cambridge Young Learners' English Tests*, which are used to illustrate issues of validity, fairness and motivation. Reviewing the book in the premier journal on language assessment, *Language Testing*, Constant Leung concluded:

The organization of content and the breadth of the discussion in this book reflect a dedicated professional's concern for thoroughness and completeness of coverage; the practitioner-oriented perspective signals the concerns of a committed teacher educator. ...In a fundamental sense this book is as much about L2 language assessment as it is about L2 education. And it has more than succeeded in showing us the importance of embracing both. (Leung, 2009, p. 149)

The work undertaken for this book gave Penny great personal satisfaction. In his funeral oration, Penny's son, Paul, described how Penny had told him that "this was one thing that she was really happy she had done" (personal communication, August 28, 2009). In 2006, the Modern Languages Association of America recognised this achievement by awarding Penny the Kenneth W. Mildenberger Prize.

Extending these explorations, Penny and Jenni Guse produced a practical text for teachers, *Five-minute activities for young learners* (2007). This contains suggestions for promoting engagement and meaningful language use in younger learners, including children preparing for the *Cambridge* examinations and other tests. With Lynne Cameron, Penny also worked on a further teacher text, to be called *Bringing Creative Teaching into the Young Learner Classroom* and due for publication by Oxford University Press in early 2010. Lynne described the genesis of this book:

The idea for this book developed about five years ago when Penny came to the UK and we were driving from Yorkshire to Cambridgeshire. Wouldn't it be fun, we thought, to bring together teaching ideas that we had seen in action or that we had come up with in our work in classrooms? We shared a background of teaching young learners of English as a second language, followed by teacher training/development. On that drive together, the ideas flowed and took shape, as they so often did with Penny, because she was such a good listener and had such an inventive spirit. Putting this book together took several

years, during which Penny wrote her magnificent book [*Assessing young language learners*] and dealt in her special way with her illness. Despite these distractions, the book remained special to both of us because, I think, it reminded us of the creative spark that we have experienced happening in classrooms and that made us happy in our career choices. The new book will be dedicated "For Penny whose creativity brightened and inspired many lives". (personal communication, September 22, 2009)

### **Looking to the future: An award and some ideas**

In February 2009, to honour Penny's achievements, the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (ALAA) and the Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) jointly instituted an appeal to support the *Penny McKay Award for Promising Research in School-based Language Development, Curriculum and Assessment*. Once sufficient donations are received to support the award, it will be given annually to a doctoral candidate in an Australian university whose research will benefit the teaching, learning and/or assessment in Australian schools of English as an additional language or variety, English as a foreign language and languages other than English, including Indigenous languages.<sup>1</sup>

Angela Scarino, Penny's close colleague in the ALL project as well as current ALAA President, explained at the launch that these professional associations took this initiative in order to acknowledge, not just Penny's "many accomplishments and the impact of her work on so many people" but also to "recognise Penny the person, her way of working with others, and the values she stands for—it is this way of being and working that we honour in Penny".

Penny was delighted with this acknowledgement and, although by now very ill, she played a major role in formulating the award's description and details. Characteristically selfless, she wrote that she was "honoured and very pleased, and hope the award will draw attention to the need for second language research in Australian schools" (personal communication, January 26, 2001). Then, unable to contain her pleasure, she added "OF COURSE! IT'S MARVELLOUS!" [*upper case in original*]. She continued with the following proposals, which we reproduce in full, both to illustrate her abiding professional commitment and to commend them for serious consideration by the Australian language education profession:

### **Three ideas**

1. Energy needs to go into the coordination of past and planned PhD studies in this area. We need some kind of site in a university library or resource centre where prospective PhD students can find out what's been done in Australia and overseas and, more critically, what needs to be done. This may just be a website.

2. I'm really keen that prospective students follow on from others' good postgraduate studies. They may, for example, pursue the same question using the same research design in an Australian context; or they may follow up new questions in a similar context with similar groups of students from before. The tendency has been for PhD students to think they should carry out a completely new study without any empirical connections to other studies. A database/website would help supervisors and students to select a topic and context that would build on what we know. (My own PhD, for example, built on the use of the COLT Scheme developed in Canada and asked the same questions they were asking in Canada, but in an Australian classroom.)

3. I'd also be very pleased if PhD studies in school language learning incorporated a good second language acquisition perspective. Even if it were not the major focus, SLA research should be acknowledged and included. A sociocultural basis is inevitably part of this perspective, and I'm glad when both are acknowledged (see Chapter 2 of *Assessing Young Language Learners*). I'm always concerned when a sociocultural base is taken as the only theoretical base in a school second language study.

### **A well loved colleague and friend**

Penny was more than a significant scholar and professional leader. She was also a friend and colleague of language educators nationally and internationally. We conclude with some tributes from these colleagues.

In announcing the appeal for the Penny McKay award, Angela Scarino listed the qualities she saw as sustaining all Penny's endeavours:

a passion for her work—for teaching, researching, writing and always continuing to study and learn, to understand the detail and nuance of

what's going on, particularly in children's language development; a concern for scholarship—Penny's teaching and research has a firm scholarly base; determination—Penny is prepared to fight for what she believes and particularly for the rights of particular groups, notably, ESL students, minority language learners and women; a sense of calm; a sense of humour—at times restrained but always there; a collaborative approach; loyalty—to all people in her circle; ethicality—in all that she does, Penny is driven by a sense of fairness and justice, maintaining the highest ethical standards, deep care and compassion for students, fellow teachers, family and friends.

Appropriately, a special issue of *TESOL Quarterly* (43, 1, 2009) on teacher-based English language assessment was dedicated to Penny. The editors, Chris Davison and Constant Leung, wrote that the issue:

is dedicated to one of the pioneers in the field—our much loved and respected TESOL friend and colleague Penny McKay. ...Working collaboratively with educators and researchers in schools, Penny pioneered an approach to assessing learners' development in English as an additional language. ...[She] set a national and an international benchmark for the assessment of second/other language learning by children and adults ...[that] can be applied to educational assessment more generally. (pp. 391-392)

Lyle Bachman, a leader internationally in the field of language assessment and Penny's editor for *Assessing Young Language Learners*, wrote:

Penny's work in the area of assessing young language learners was pioneering, and a major contribution to the field. ...She was one of those rare persons who immediately grasps the point, and is a joy to work with. When I was working with her as editor for her book, largely through email correspondence, she always replied to my suggestions quickly and to the point. We didn't always agree, but she was always open to discussing issues, and had a way of making her point in a manner that was both convincing and diplomatic. I also have lots of fond memories of interacting with her at many conferences over the years. She clearly loved her work and had a *joie de vivre* that was infectious. (personal communications, August 25, 2009 and September 9, 2009)

Another leading assessment researcher, Tim McNamara, wrote:

Penny was a colleague you could absolutely trust, both personally and in her professional judgement. Her commitment to assessment issues in classroom contexts at primary and secondary school level gave her work an international distinctiveness and value, and her volume on this area in the *Cambridge University Press* assessment series edited by the leaders of the assessment field, Lyle Bachman and Charles Alderson, is a testament to this. When standards-based assessment became a central issue in school-based education in the United States, many researchers there turned to Penny to draw on her invaluable experience and understanding. (personal communication, September 22, 2009)

These same qualities inspired Lynne Cameron to write that Penny “inspired me in my work and in how I live my life. I will miss her brightness and her thoughtfulness” (personal communication, September 22, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

Nothing we offer in this tribute to Penny can provide a complete picture of what she gave to the world, her colleagues and friends. Nor can it compensate for the sorrow we feel at losing her. We hope that, for those who did not know Penny and her work, it inspires them to seek out her publications and project reports. For the colleagues and friends who did know her, we hope our tribute is true to their appreciation of her. For her family—her husband Andy, her sons Paul and Chris, her sister Marguerite, her brother Geoff, her daughters-in-law Donna and Alyson, and her beloved grandchildren Lauren and Dana—we hope it conveys something of what she meant to many others, and that this knowledge is helpful and consoling.

What is certainly true is that Penny’s contribution is ongoing, just as she would want it to be.

### **Acknowledgements**

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<sup>1</sup> ALAA is managing the account for the award. Bank transfer details are: National Australia Bank BSB number—084-502; account name “Applied Linguistics Association of Australia—Penny McKay Award”; account number—831816721. To support the award, Penny’s husband, Andy, catalogued her extensive library, books from which can be purchased from [www.crossroadbooks.com.au](http://www.crossroadbooks.com.au)

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***Karen Dooley*** was mentored as an early career researcher by Penny, supervised doctoral students with her, and continues to build on Penny’s work in contributing ESL content to undergraduate literacy units in the B.Ed. at QUT. She treasures the all-too-brief friendship she enjoyed with Penny.

***Helen Moore*** first met Penny during her consultations on the ESL Framework of Stages and has regarded her as a close friend and colleague ever since. She has written about Penny’s work (Moore, 1996b, 2001), and a chapter in her PhD thesis analysed the political and educational arguments generated by the *ESL Bandscales* (Moore, 2004).

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