

Editorial: Special issue on individual consultations and academic language and learning practice

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This special issue of the *Journal of Academic Language and Learning* (JALL) focuses on Individual Consultations. Often referred to across the sector by ALL practitioners as ‘ICs’, these sessions typically involve thirty- to fifty-minute appointments where a student receives one-to-one assistance or advice from a study support specialist. ICs have formed a core component of academic language and learning (ALL) practice since the inception of ALL in Australian universities from the 1970s onwards. Despite this, ICs have been subjected to limited scholarly attention and have remained somewhat elusive as an object of inquiry. This can partly be attributed to the fact that most study support teams have only limited capacity for research with available resources generally reserved for the study of new and innovative programs and approaches. Indeed, the very immediacy of ICs as a regular part of the workload for most ALL practitioners could be seen as having mitigated against their status as objects of research interest. They have likely also assumed ‘taken-for-granted’ status simply because attention has needed to be elsewhere in the context of ever-shifting challenges faced by ALL practitioners. ALL practitioners likely share, however, a sense that ICs are important to what we do and why we do it – or to put it another way, a sense that ICs are at the heart of what we do. After all, it is through individual sessions with students that we gain the most direct glimpse into the challenges that students are experiencing at any given moment.

This is not to say ICs have been absent from scholarly inquiry entirely. Scholars such as Kate Chanock (2007) have highlighted the potential of ICs to inform curriculum-level responses, highlighting the opportunity for scalable benefits derived from these individual interactions. In terms of evaluative research, it is widely acknowledged that separating out the impact of ICs from the range of variables at play presents a particular challenge. Despite this complexity, studies such as that by Campitelli et al. (2019) have captured the positive effects that individual interventions can have on student performance, particularly when integrated into a broader program of support. This outcome validates the understanding commonly held by ALL practitioners that creative collaborative approaches to the provision of study support mediated through relationships built with key stakeholders leads to positive results for students.

Against that background, the inspiration for this special issue stemmed from our experience as ALL specialists. Despite over thirty years of combined practice, we still found ourselves frequently reflecting on and discussing our IC practice. This ongoing dialogue underscored the need for a more extended, collective research focus. Our conviction was reinforced by our involvement in a research project conducted by a group of staff members in the study support unit at Deakin University (Bak et al., 2023). This project took a deliberately reflective approach, prioritising understanding over efficiency and evaluative metrics. It sought to create space for deeper consideration, exploration, and appreciation of ICs as a unique educational form central to our work. We believed that gaining a better understanding of ICs would lead to a deeper understanding of our overall practice. While ALL best practice is undeniably evidence-based, much of the work we do is also driven by profound motivations: to make meaningful impacts on students, institutions, communities, and even ourselves, as we are shaped and transformed through this process. To reflect and capture this complexity, we sought to encourage use of a range of research methodologies and theoretical perspectives.

For example, as Sarah O’Shea (2024) found, tertiary students from equity backgrounds often define success as ‘mattering’. Yes, ICs are spaces where pragmatic questions are answered, but they are also spaces wherein educational exchanges occur, often mediated through relational connectivity. These exchanges provide opportunities for students to express their concerns and have their voices heard – critical moments where ‘mattering’ can occur.

We envisioned this special issue as an ideal platform to share insights from our project while also building on its momentum. We could not be more pleased with the papers collated in this issue. We feel the collection contributes to the evolving understanding of ICs within the ALL practice landscape in Australia and internationally. The issue also offers a stimulus and, we hope, inspiration for further research.

We are particularly pleased that the issue begins with the voice of some students themselves, introduced by Kate Chanock. In October of 2024, students from five universities shared at an Association for Academic Language and Learning (2024) session titled, Connect. Inspire. Share., their experiences in ICs at their respective universities, as well as some of the challenges they faced studying. The invited piece by Kate Chanock et al. opens the collection by bringing together three of those student reflections. All ‘non-traditional’ students, their reflections present a positive perspective that normalises challenge in HE study and indicates the positive impact ICs can have in helping students overcome their challenges and achieve academic success.

In addition to the invited piece, the collection includes two commentaries and six academic research papers, each offering unique insights into IC practice.

Regarding these other submissions, Iranmanesh and Taouk employ autobiographical approaches and critical emotional theories to explore their work in the Clemente Australia program, which aims to disrupt cycles of inequity and social injustice through education supported by a critical literacies program. Observing that Clemente program students lacked access to ICs, they designed brief academic literacy workshops (BWSs) to encourage IC uptake and foster deeper critical engagement. One notable outcome was the development of ‘critical hope’ among participants, highlighting the transformative potential of these initiatives.

Hamilton and Bak’s paper serves as a timely reminder that an IC is far more than just a space for a ‘grammar fix’. Their analysis of interviews with students highlights the importance of the affective domain in IC interactions. They argue a focus on how affective dimensions can impact students’ success is something well worth keeping in mind when student success is measured in our universities.

Goodale addresses an underrepresented area in the literature by examining the critical role ICs play in supporting spoken language. The study focuses on how IC activities can enhance language awareness, defined as ‘explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use’ (Association of Language Awareness, 2023). Using data from recorded consultations and observations, the paper sheds light on how ICs contribute to developing students’ spoken language skills.

Two papers centre on supporting postgraduate and research students. Firstly, Fernando et al.’s commentary outlines the value of creating triadic ICs involving students, supervisors, and Research Committee representatives at a Polytechnic institute in New Zealand. These inclusive and collaborative meetings for Masters students, conducted as *kanohi-ki-te-kanohi* (face-to-face meetings), also provide an innovative solution to time constraints associated with ethics clearance. Similarly, Song and Lum examine the evolving role of ICs in supporting research students amidst changes to doctoral programs, which now extend beyond traditional supervisory spaces. Their study investigates students’ perceptions of a 12-week coaching program, which participants highly valued, likening it to the personalised and holistic support of ‘a mentor, counsellor, tutor or sibling’.

A further two papers focus on the experiences of ALL practitioners and their identity construction within IC interactions. Schmidt and Schneider's commentary outlines how their work with medical students shapes their adviser identity as they navigate careful boundary crossing to support their students. Situated within medical teaching spaces and clinical settings, ALL practitioners are often perceived as peripheral to clinicians. Their reflection highlights the unique value IC dialogues bring to supporting students in these specialised settings. In contrast, Nosrati et al.'s study begins by affirming that ICs are a core component of ALL practice. After outlining previous research addressing this practice, the study deepens our understanding of ICs through the lens of politeness theory (Linguistics) and examines the interdiscursivity that occurs when Language and Learning Advisors (LLAs) engage in the complex speech act of 'advice-giving'. An analysis of semi-structured interviews with LLAs reveals much about LLA identity construction within ICs, distinguishing it from their identity in other professional contexts.

The final article by Bak presents a reflective practitioner self-study, applying a contemplative lens to his IC practice. Bak argues that professional reflection and self-study are powerful tools for enhancing practitioner awareness, understanding and growth. He demonstrates this through an exploration of how orientations gleaned from his own background experiences in a contemplative knowledge community – a Steiner School community – can be seen to be showing up in his ALL practice.

While we hope this collection expands scholarly understanding of ICs, we acknowledge that it only begins to uncover what might be explored. For instance, it does not include work on the emerging implications of Generative AI or the potential impacts of the Australian University Accord (Department of Education, 2024) on ICs, both of which might be fruitful topics for Special Issues in their own right. Nonetheless, we believe this special issue provides a meaningful space for readers to reflect on their own IC practices. One guiding image for us in putting this collection together has been the act of walking along a river-bed, picking up a rock, holding it up for examination, and then putting it back down. If this resonates, we invite you to engage with the articles in this collection in a similar manner, either to survey the terrain collectively covered, or to pick up any article that captures your interest for closer reflection. We hope doing so prompts reflection on your own IC practice. To borrow an expression from one of the papers in this collection – we hope as you read that you might experience 'fleeting moments', and that these may offer lines of flight into more systemic thoughts and understandings. Ultimately, we hope this collection helps keep ICs alive in our collective professional thinking and practice.

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Declarations

Submissions labelled *Commentaries*, and the *Invited Article*, were reviewed by the two guest editors, Tao Bak and Vittoria Grossi. Submissions labelled as *Articles* underwent the normal, double blind peer review process of the journal. The peer review processes for the submissions by the guest editors were supervised by independent members of the JALL editorial team, and double-blind reviewing meant that reviewers could not be influenced by knowledge that they were reviewing submissions by the guest editors.

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