

Editorial: Introducing the special issue on collected conference proceedings from 1982–2005

Volume 20, Number 1, 2026

What we were thinking

For most readers of the JALL, the nineteen-eighties and nineties, when our field was taking shape in Australia, may seem like a very long time ago. So much has changed, in terms of the numbers and demographics of the students we work with. Our focus has moved from English proficiency to an understanding of disciplinary discourses, and from generic study skills to learning. Our learning and teaching are now also heavily reliant on the rapidly changing affordances of Artificial Intelligence. What was a classroom is now a screen, and we have grown used to it.

It may seem that all these changes must render what we learned and shared in our early days irrelevant, and even quaint. Indeed, some of it is. But much of it speaks to the same concerns and questions that occupy us still. In looking back through the conference Proceedings collected here, we can trace the foundational ideas of our field, and read Academic Language and Learning (ALL) practitioners' accounts of how they and their students, and (sometimes) their discipline teachers, have gained a better understanding of the project they were all engaged in. In her introduction to the 1982 conference Proceedings, Hanne Bock (p. III) noted that,

If these papers have anything in common, it is the conviction that, in order to overcome the learning and language problems of students, the nature of those problems must first be understood. Far too much work in the remedial area relies on ad hoc measures and is based on assumptions rather than analyses.

Among those assumptions was the idea that difficulties with the language required by university subjects inhered in the student, rather than the context of study; and that they could be addressed outside of that context and separately from the nature of the questions students were trying to answer, and the cultures of enquiry to which they would submit their work. With universities increasingly outsourcing our work to “study support” services on the internet, we may be interested in revisiting our predecessors' arguments that, contrary to those assumptions, “Language ... is interwoven with culture, structure with content and study skills with modes of reasoning” (Bock, 1982, p. II).

Our growth as a professional community, too, can be traced through these Proceedings. As Bock (1982) went on to note,

This understanding makes work with the students far more effective; it also makes it far more complex; and there is therefore a great need for people working in this field to exchange views and experiences, not least because the number of people in each institution is so small that each of us is virtually working on his own, isolated from the push towards the development of new ideas that discussion with colleagues can bring. (p. II)

Thirteen years later, when Chanock convened the first LAS (now AALL) conference in 1994, that was largely still the case, and participants were surprised and heartened to learn of one another's existence.

Quickly, however, the nineties became a time of ferment in our field, with three LAS conferences and a number of others whose Proceedings are collected here. 1996, for example, saw three different conferences hosted by various institutions; one of these, the First National Conference on Tertiary Literacy, at Victoria University of Technology, was attended by 270 participants and produced 56 papers in two volumes (Golebiowski, 1997a, p. ix), a considerable increase on the 12 papers presented at La Trobe's conference in 1981 (published in 1982). Its four themes – again,

ones with relevance for us today – were “policy and practice of tertiary literacy; inter-cultural variation of academic communication; discipline specific discourses; and research English”. The priorities of building community and sharing ideas were served by inclusive programs of papers and a swift production of Proceedings without refereeing for most of the eighties and nineties. Towards the end of that time, however, we can trace the development of scholarly practices while maintaining a supportive, constructive approach to editing that has, we hope, persisted as the JALL took on responsibility for publishing our conference Proceedings in this century.

From 1982 to 2005, various relevant conference proceedings were published as separate volumes by the conference organisers. Some were refereed, some not. The Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) was established in 2005 and launched the same year at the ANU conference. The publication of JALL started in 2007 and included the (refereed) proceedings of the biennial AALL conference from that year onwards (Barthel et al., 2026).

We are greatly – and gratefully – indebted to our colleague Annie Bartlett who, while leading the ALL team at the Australian National University, spent considerable time and effort on collecting the Proceedings from whoever had a copy still, having them scanned, and making them available to interested readers on the website of the Association. In the course of renovations to the site, however, the Proceedings were removed until time could be found to restore them, and it has now been decided to lodge them with the JALL. Here, too, we include a link to an account of the context within which these Proceedings can be appreciated – the development of our field from the eighties until now – which was written for the Association in 2021 and has been updated for this special issue of JALL (Barthel et al., 2026).

A more detailed history of the period to which these Proceedings belong can be found in Chanock (2011a, 2011b).

We hope you both enjoy exploring the thinking of practitioners from the formative decades of the academic language and learning profession encapsulated in this collection of proceedings and pick up new insights that might inform your practice and lead to further thinking in the field.

Structure of the special issue

Each proceedings has been incorporated as a single “article”, with the “abstract” providing the table of contents of that proceedings so that interested readers can more easily find articles of potential interest to them. To aid navigation around each proceedings, titles in each proceeding’s table of contents can be clicked on to go straight to that article. The bookmarks pane in pdf readers also provides a list of all the articles in the proceedings which can also be used to quickly navigate around the file, especially back to the table of contents.

Alex Barthel

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References

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