Article

Developing proactive communicators through short-term intensive recursive techniques

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Abstract

Study abroad preparation courses for EFL learners form an important part of the curriculum at many Japanese tertiary institutions. This article discusses one such constructivist-based preparation course developed at a private university in Japan in which learners were found to exhibit marked engagement and improvement throughout their participation. The students' initial positive responses compelled the designers of the course (the authors) to document in this article the course, activities and participants as a first step toward better understanding the mechanisms at work in this uniquely-structured learning environment.

Introduction

This article is a working paper in which we provide a description of a con-structivist-based, short-term study abroad preparation course developed for EFL learners at a private university in Japan who were bound for short-term study-abroad sessions in the U.K. We did not initially intend to make a study of the course, but after observing marked student engagement and improvement early on we were compelled to perform a basic documentation of the course as a first step toward investigating the mechanisms at work in what we believe is a promising learning environment.

We begin by describing the context in which the course took place. Next, we describe the concepts and principles around which the course was designed. We follow this with a description of the course participants, materials and procedures. We conclude with a discussion of hypotheses and implications that we have developed from our experiences, and identify elements that might benefit future versions of the course or inform other L2 course design. Examples of course materials are provided in the Appendices.

Context of the course

The students participating in the course discussed in this article had recently been accepted into a 3-month study abroad program at University of Manchester in the United Kingdom. One of the requirements of the Manchester program was for students to participate in a 2-week internship program arranged with various businesses located in the city of Manchester. As part of the internship placement procedure in the U.K., students are screened by means of a short interview conducted in English by a native English speaker who asks general questions about students' personal background, skills and work preferences. This initial interview is used by the University of Manchester staff to pair students with a potential internship position. Students then visit the internship location where they participate in an on-site interview. The previous year an accompanying guide from our institution had the opportunity to observe our students' interviews and was disappointed with their performance, noticing that our students, though well-mannered, bright and cheerful, exhibited excessive nervousness as well as generally short or passive responses during the interview. It was evident that our students, though possessing above-average English test scores and good classroom communication skills, were ill-prepared to interact proactively in real-world communication situations. A survey of these students upon their return to Japan further revealed that they, too, were dissatisfied with

their performance in the placement interviews, feeling that they lacked the abilities to interact actively and express themselves independently. They also expressed a number of disappointments about the internships in which they were eventually placed, and felt, again, that if they had been able to express themselves more forthrightly in the placement interviews they might have been able to obtain more suitable arrangements.

In the spring of 2008 three teachers in our department (the authors and one other instructor) were tasked with developing a short, intensive study abroad preparation program the goal of which was to help such students develop more proactive interactive communication skills before they set off to join their study abroad program in the U.K.

Course design and goals

We were faced with a number of constraints when developing and conducting the course. The foremost difficulty we faced in developing the course was that we possessed only a nominal amount of information about the interview process or internship sites in the U.K. and no actual records of the previous year's interviews (no recordings available). Another major constraint to both designing and conducting the course was time. Because of scheduling and staffing restrictions, it was necessary to conduct the course before the summer break began, which gave us only a few weeks to ready the program and then only 6 weeks to conduct the course. We were further concerned that the large gap of time between the final session of the study abroad preparation course (early July) and the students' arrival in the U.K. and actual interviews in September might impact on their level of preparedness. Because of these variables, we chose to develop a tightly recursive course premised on authentic principles (see for example, Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Cholewinski, 2008a; Newmann, 1995) and structured around a focused set of content topics and competencies (see Appendix 1 for a

graphical representation of the course outline). We believed that in keeping the amount of content to a minimum, choosing content that was practical as well as applicable to multiple situations, and by maintaining a high recursion rate in our activities that we might overcome some of the downside effects that the constraints imposed.

Content: social
• being able to provide an appropriate handshake
• knowing and maintaining appropriate posture
• knowing and maintaining professional manners

Content: topic & linguistic
• being able to provide personal background information proactively
• being able to discuss work placement preferences and concerns proactively
• being able to utilize strategies to maintain communication flow
• being able to sign their name in English cursive script without hesitation

The primary goal of the course was to empower students to be more proactive communicators during their internship interview. We define *proactive communicators* as those individuals who are generally capable of maintaining a conversation independent of a language facilitator (e.g., teachers or other language professionals). Such individuals, in our view, are also capable of a full range of conversational styles, not being wholly consigned to short-answer "tennis-match" exchange styles often focused on in ordinary classroom practice. Though the "situated" aspect of the lessons was an "interview format," much if not all of the content and the competencies adopted for the course were chosen specifically for their applicability to an extended range of communicative situations outside of interviews, a point made to the students repetitively throughout the course. We furthermore decided that the program would not be given for credit and that performances would not be scored. We believed that because the students had already passed through a lengthy vetting process to gain acceptance into this study abroad program, and that they were privy to previous students' interview results as well as possessing doubts about their own com-

munication abilities, their engagement and motivation would be high without having to resort to extrinsic motivators such as grades to coerce participation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Instead, we chose to give students a chance to exhibit how well they had developed the target competencies of the course in a final videotaped mock interview exit activity.

The three of us met several times prior to the start of the course in order to collaborate on a set of goals, expectations and procedures, believing that one of our strengths was the ability to draw upon the wide range of cultural, educational and teaching experiences that each us possessed. As we planned to use the same materials with students who would be shared repeatedly throughout the duration of the course, we wanted to have a mechanism in place to maintain program consistency and quality. As a base, we settled upon the use of matching binders, each containing a copy of the agreed upon course goals, a card paradigm, relevant information about the individual members organized into the 5 groups (with separate sign-in sheets), the course schedule and copies of student internship occupation preference forms and a list of business and education sites in Manchester offering internship sites in cooperation with the University of Manchester. In addition, we agreed to use email as the primary form of communication, and face-to-face meetings whenever possible or necessary, and agreed upon an outline of the kind of information we thought would be most helpful to keep each other informed of (e.g., student special needs, ongoing feedback on content and procedural techniques, emerging Eureka ideas, and so on) as the course progressed. Moreover, in an effort to help maintain the situated (interview) practice environment and also wean students from the comfortable assumption that other people in Japan are as familiar with Japan as they are, teachers agreed to display a plausible level of ignorance about the students' backgrounds and about Japan itself.

The layout of each of the classrooms was simple (see Figure 2). In each

room an instructor and one group of students were situated around a small round table — within easy reach of a whiteboard. The purpose for this layout was to maintain tightly focused student attention as well as to promote near-peer collaboration and sharing (Boekaerts & Minnaert, 2006; Cholewinski, 2008a; Murphey, 1998).
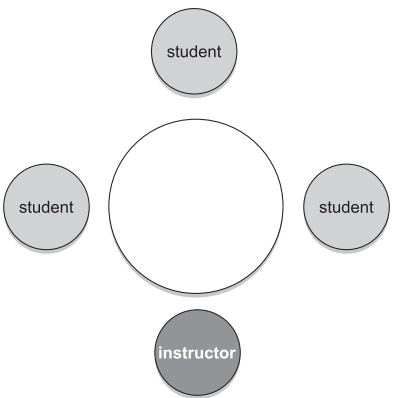

Figure 2

Participants

Instructors

The instructors for the course consisted of 3 native English-speakers, 2 full-time North American males and a part-time female instructor from Australia. Furthermore, a native Japanese office-staff member assisted with the logistics of the program and liaised with the students in their native Japanese throughout the course

Students

Fifteen students participated in the course, 5 males and 10 females. Among these members were 1 fourth-year, 3 third-year and 11 second-year students. The participant TOEFL scores, which ranged from 547 to 483, were the sole

criteria the Japanese administration used to stream students into 5 groups of 3 students each, which were labeled A through E.

Materials

Students and instructors were each outfitted with a set of 8 pre-formatted 5 X 7 index cards, which contained the topic focus points of the course. Card 1, the **Professionalism Checklist Card** (see Appendix 2), referred to general self-appearance points students should try to maintain in their communication situations. Cards 2~5 were **Personal Background Cards** (see Appendix 3), which contained simple prompts for which students were required to prepare written explanations. Topics included "where you are from," "your family,' "your interests" and "your school life." Cards 6~8 were **Work Placement Cards** (see Appendix 4), which contained prompts about internship-related occupation preferences for which students had to prepare written explanations (the students had previously completed a form on which they had ticked off their occupation preferences). Students were required to develop and write their own brief personalized responses for each of the 8 cards. Draft cards were then reviewed and refined by each of the three instructors during the ensuing practice interview sessions. Students were also afforded the opportunity to visit the full-time instructors in their offices for supplementary help.

Students were also asked to provide their signature during each session of the course as a form of attendance. As many of the students had little or no experience writing their names in cursive script, sample guides (see Appendix 5) and lined paper were provided to allow them to practice signing their names (outside of the class sessions) until they could do so with ease and in a timely fashion.

Procedures

Students were streamed into 5 groups of 3 students each (A~E) (see Figure 2) based on their TOEFL scores. Students remained in the same group for the duration of the course. Sessions were held Monday through Friday for 45 minutes, with each group in principle meeting once per week. Groups were rotated to a different instructor for each session.

Classrooms were reserved for the lessons and "Class in Session" memos were affixed to classroom doors so as to limit class disruption. Because this was not a formally required course, instructors tried to promote a relaxing though responsible participatory atmosphere. In principle, the six week course was divided into four "Weekly Focus" subsections: Building Student Information (weeks 1 & 2), Direct Questions (3 & 4), Indirect Questions (week 5) and an Exit Activity (week 6) (see Appendix 1).

Because of the limited amount of time available in each session and in the course overall, we realized that it was essential to coordinate the kind of information we needed the students to know and develop in the very early stages of the course. Prior to the first day of the course, students received a general course orientation in their native language from the Japanese office staff member liais-

	Monday		Tuesday		Wednesday			Thursday		Friday
	K109		K109		K109	K502		K109		K109
	12:30-13:15		12:30-13:15		12:30-13:15			12:30-13:15		12:30-13:15
2ndJune	Michael A	3	Delgrego B	4	Delgrego C	Grace D	5	Michael E	6	
9	Michael B	10	Delgrego C	11	Delgrego D	Grace E	12	Grace A	13	
16	Michael C	17	Delgrego D	18	Delgrego E	Grace A	19	Grace B	20	
23	Michael D	24	Delgrego A	25	Delgrego D	Grace E	26	Michael A	27	Grace C
30	Michael B	1stJuly	Delgrego E	2	Delgrego A	Grace B	3	Grace D	4	Grace C
7	Michael C	8	Delgrego D	9	Delgrego E		10		11	

Figure 2

ing with the instructors. In this briefing, students were given the purpose for the course, expectations for preparedness and participation, and the schedule of the course, which consisted of times, dates, instructors and room locations. Students were also informed that the course would be conducted exclusively in English. This allowed the students to begin the course understanding many "whys" and "whats" about the course, but was unfortunately somewhat short on details about "how" the course would transpire.

The first session of the course was given over to briefly paraphrasing in English the "why" information about the course that students had received in the orientation. They were then each given their set of index cards, and told that it was essential that they complete the cards to their best ability — in pencil to allow for changes — before their next session, which would be with a different teacher. The rest of the first session was given to the instructor helping students complete their cards through discussion and modeling. Through this modeling, students could begin to grasp the procedure of the course more fully. Because of the time constraint, a portion of the card information had to be developed on the students' own time. As it was expected that card information that students developed on their own would contain various inaccuracies, the second weekly session was designed to help refine the fundamental information students had developed. By the end of the second session, students had a largely accurate working set of cards with which to participate in the conversation activities of the course. The slight differences between teacher styles and content (a carefully managed benefit to reduce student confusion) allowed students to make ongoing refinements to their card information throughout the course. Furthermore, the physical arrangement that the small table provided encouraged active near-peer sharing (oral and written) during all phases of the course.

In keeping with authentic course design principles (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Cholewinski, 2008a; Newmann, 1995), instructors endeavored to create

a credible simulated situated environment during the sessions by consistently maintaining the role of place, interviewer, and the informational and social expectations that went with this communication situation. In addition, the weekly rotation of the groups served to best imitate the variety of problems or situations that could occur during an actual interview.

Sessions began with the instructors welcoming the students and inviting them to be seated (one of the lesson social points: wait to be offered a seat). Students would then be asked to "sign in" with a cursive signature. Instructors would then offer help for any student query about their card information (e.g., changes, pronunciation, and so on). Once settled, the instructor would begin practicing the interview routine by working through the card material. The technique used during such practice sessions borrows from both the Audio Lingual Method (see Richards & Rodgers, 1986) and cognitive modeling techniques (see for example, Bandura, 1977; Cole, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). With this technique, the instructor models (teacher- or student-generated) target information, and then coaches, notices, and refines student production until the student shows adequate proficiency with the material (as other students watch). The teacher then uses the newly proficient student as the model as he or she works with the next student. As the instructor moves through the material, the student model changes owing to various content or student linguistic abilities or improvements. The instructor usually practices the information "in order," and once students become proficient begins to skip randomly through various parts of the communication task in an effort to wean students from a "script mindset." It is a quick-moving, intensively demanding recursive practice routine that keeps individuals tightly focused on the short structural elements under study. Students spoke about making marked progress during these short lessons, which they reported increased their motivation to stay engaged. While students were allowed to use their cards as reference during the early parts of the course, they

were steadily encouraged to challenge their participation without the use of them.

In the final activity, which was videotaped, students were randomly scheduled (within their group) to participate in individual mock interviews without the use of cards. The interviews began by the students being invited into the room where they waited to be asked to be seated. The instructor played the role of an interviewer "in Manchester," conducting the interview as though a complete stranger to the individual or Japan. Video results were subsequently transferred to an online site (Cholewinski, 2008b) where students could review their performances.

Conclusion

Helping students become more proactive communicators is admittedly a common goal in second language education programs. However, it is a much harder goal to accomplish than many think. Success isn't simply dependent on the student's desire or reason to learn, or on the material, the setting or the activities. Or for that matter, the teacher. The truth is, learning how to be a proactive communicator is dependent on a changeable mixture of all of those elements. There is no one recipe or method that gets it right all the time for everybody. However, what can be reasonably assured is that if all parties in a learning and teaching situation know the goals, sincerely and diligently aspire to the goals, and understand and are agreeable to the methods of attaining them, a good measure of success can be expected.

Perhaps that is what happened in this course. It is evident to all involved in this program that each of the participants exhibited significant improvement with the target goals (competencies) and felt an inspiring sense of accomplishment and increased confidence throughout the course. While no hard data to support these observations was gathered, the experiences and observed results

were certainly compelling grounds for a more formal inquiry, which the authors are planning for the future.

We came away from the development and implementation of the course with a number of valuable insights. First and foremost, we believe that the situated sense of the course coupled with the limited scope of the material and target competencies, as well as their clear and systematic organization, allowed for a constructive calibration of expectations between learners and instructors. We feel that this type of learning environment structure reduces the guesswork and affective stress that learners often have to wade through in less organized or differently-motivated learning situations (particularly when dealing with multiple teachers for the same course material).

Unfortunately, with an intensive program that has a strong focus on a single situated task (in this case an interview), there is the risk for some students to fixate on the situation, and when faced with a comparable language task outside the practice situation have difficulty transferring the practiced or learned skill, knowledge or information and freeze. As the course progressed, we realized that this might pose a problem, but there was little we could do about it at the time. We thought that in the future perhaps offering two similarly demanding situations rather just one might lessen this possibility.

In addition, though the target topics and competencies were agreed upon prior to this course, simple indirect conflicts about content or method developed nonetheless, causing confusion for some of the students. For example, when modeling a particular point. We found that if a teacher expressed a strong bias or preference for an expression or strategy (*This is the best way to do this*, or, *You should never do this*) students became conflicted if after rotating to another teacher they received different information for this point. Students *can* learn from preferential differences such as these, and they should be expected as a natural part of any learning environment (one of the benefits of having multiple

teachers for each group of students). However, in a program with clearly delin-eated competencies, we agreed that it would be more constructive for students if we phrased preferences differently (e.g., *another* good way of saying or doing this is…).

Having not conducted a course like this before, there were many things that we thought about (during and after the course) that we felt might have improved it. For example, given the brevity of the course, should the students be asked to begin filling out the cards before the first meeting with the instruc-tors? Also, should we teach the course again (which is likely), will students benefit from watching this year's student videos, or will that take away from their own creative energies? Furthermore, should we videotape students from the outset and compare that footage with the final recording as a way of making more explicit the types of progress attained? We also wondered if conducting the course closer to the students' departure date would have any impact on their performance in the U.K., or if the lengthy gap actually acts as a compelling pressure to remember the practiced or learned information. Furthermore, we considered whether lengthening the program, so as to add more situations or to allow for more practice with the one situation, would be beneficial for students. And finally, we contemplated which would be more beneficial or practical, the school creating a separate curriculum for study abroad preparation, or the incor-poration of salient elements of this program into the main curriculum?

These and other questions will likely form the background of our future attempts to prepare students for their study abroad experiences. Each group of students presents a different set of variables to the learning situation. Our goal is to develop a learning situation that is robust enough to provide a coordinated set of topics and competencies as well as flexible enough to meet the needs and strengths of a range of learners. Only through active inquiry can we come up with such solutions.

Appendix 1: Course Outline

Professionalism Checklist

• Hygiene

• Handshake

• Eye contact

• Posture

• Respect

• Signature

	Weekly Focus
1	Building Student Info
2	Building Student Info
3	Direct Questions
4	Direct Questions
5	Indirect Questions
6	Exit Activity

Personal Background

• Talk a little about where you're from.

• Talk a little about your family.

• Talk a little about your interests.

• Talk a little about your school life.

• **Direct Qs**

• **Indirect Qs**

• **Hypothetical Qs**

Work Placement Content

• What kind of job *were you expecting?*

       did you want?

       did you choose?

       were you looking for?

[Students should be aware of the meaning of and how to respond to questions about field-specific vocabulary and concepts]

1st Choice

2nd Choice

3rd Choice

• **Recovery Techniques**

• **Clarification Techniques**

• **Interjections**

Appendix 2: Professional Checklist Card

Professionalism Checklist Card

○ *This is a list of important points that show others who you are. Keep these points in mind before and during your interaction with others.*

☐ Hygiene (teeth, hair, clothes, shoes, bathroom first)

☐ Handshake (firm with eye-contact)

☐ Eye contact (maintain general eye contact or interest)

☐ Posture (head up, no slouching, no fidgeting with hair)

○ ☐ Respect (ask to be seated, no bags on the table, no gum)

☐ Signature (be able to sign your full name in English)

Appendix 3: Personal Background Cards (4)

Personal Background Card (1)

○ *Use a pencil to prepare English answers for the following question. Include* <u>*specific details*</u>.

• Talk a little about where you're from.

○

Personal Background Card (2)

○ *Use a pencil to prepare English answers for the following question. Include* <u>*specific details*</u>.

• Talk a little about your family.

○

Personal Background Card (3)

Use a pencil to prepare English answers for the following question. Include <u>*specific details*</u>.

• Talk a little about your interests.

Personal Background Card (4)

Use a pencil to prepare English answers for the following question. Include <u>*specific details*</u>.

• Talk a little about your school life.

Appendix 4: Work Placement Content Cards (3)

Students were given one card for each of their 3 choices. Because students had the same task for each card, only one representative card is shown below.
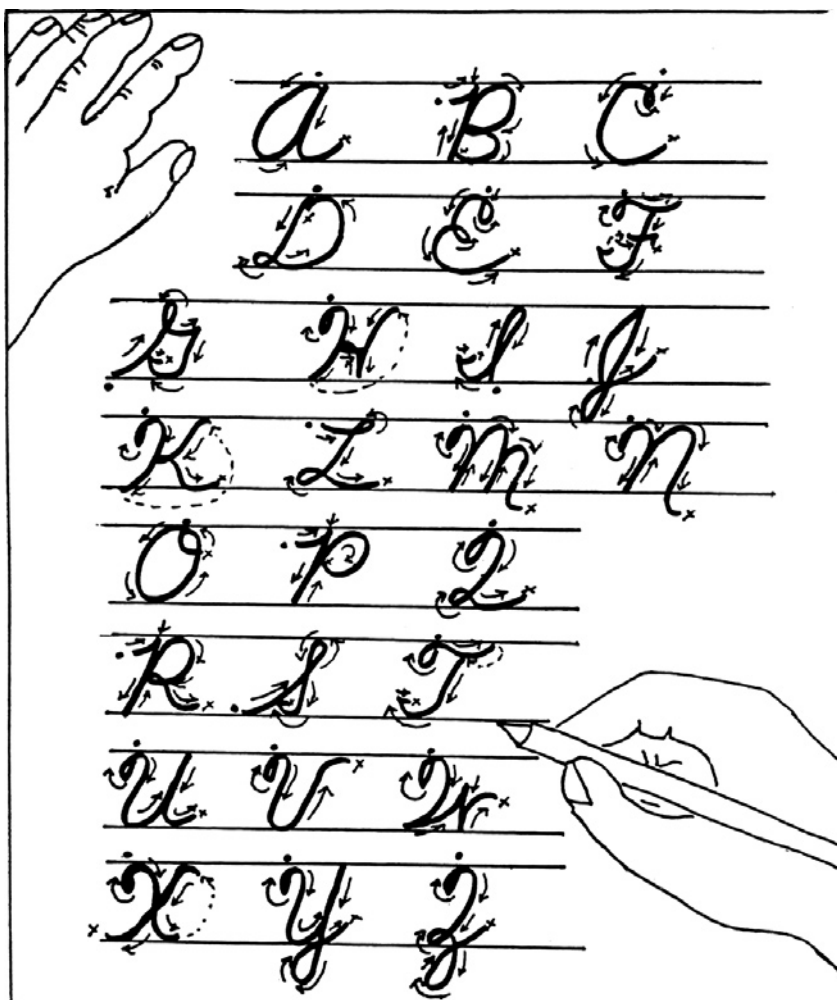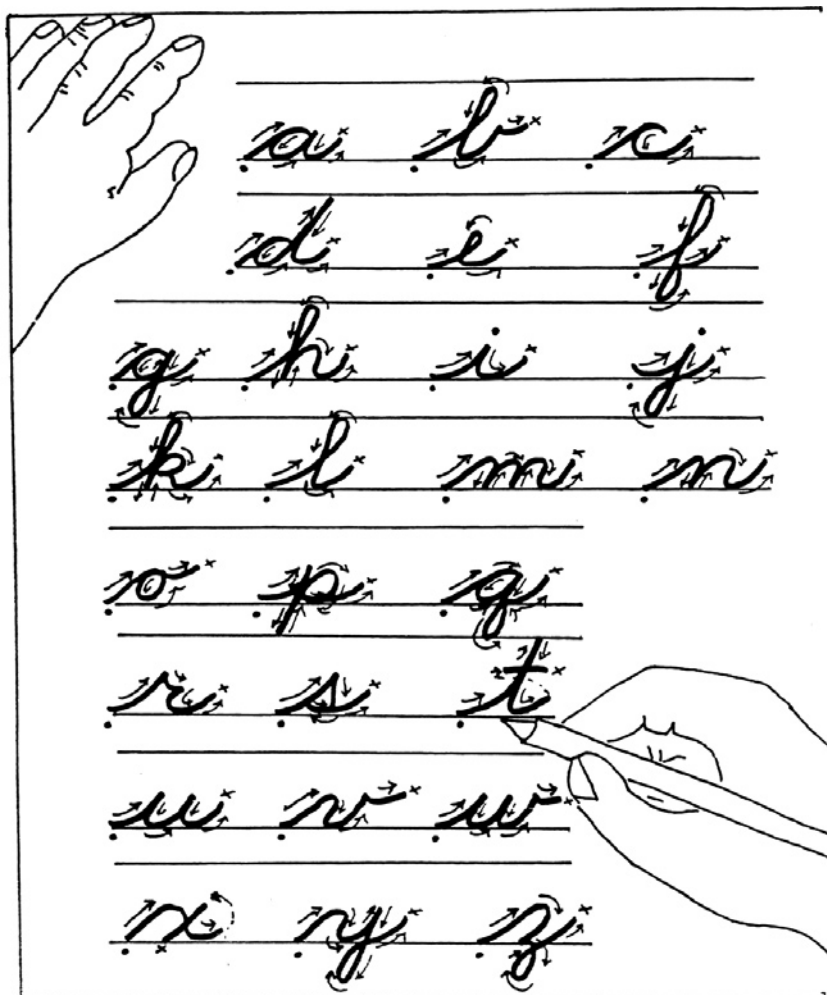
Work Placement Content Card (1)

◯ *Use a pencil to prepare English explanations for the following job-placement choice you made. It is very important to familiarize yourself with the vocabulary associated with this work area.*

Choice 1:

◯

Appendix 5: Cursive Writing Guides

a   b   c

d   e   f

g   h   i   j

k   l   m   n

o   p   q

r   s   t

u   v   w

x   y   z

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