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# Creating an environment for collaborative language learning

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**Abstract:** *This paper describes the development and implementation of a project to encourage collaborative teaching practices and reciprocal peer learning in the area of tertiary-level language education. Preliminary analysis of student need in the form of survey research revealed a strong level of support for the project, which was subsequently conducted over a period of three years. The project illustrates the nexus between the professional development of academic staff and the value of the learning experience of students.*

**Keywords:** *Collaborative learning, language education, communicative language teaching*

## Background to the project

At the beginning of the year 2000 a restructuring of the Schools within the Division of Humanities at Curtin University brought into being the new School of Languages and Intercultural Education. For the first time, academics working in the area of Asian Studies were co-located with colleagues providing programs in English language development for students from non-English speaking backgrounds, most of whom come from South-East Asia. This newly created School presented staff with the opportunity to develop a collaborative approach to language education that would bring together international and local students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds into a shared learning environment, and would provide an impetus to develop a project that had the potential to instigate lasting and systemic change in the way languages were taught and learnt at the University.

Underpinning the desire to initiate change was the premise that 'interactions among students make positive contributions to students' learning' (Curtis, 1999:2). The importance of social interaction in generating positive learning outcomes has long been argued in the field of cognitive development (e.g. Vygotsky 1978, 1986). Collaborative learning, in particular, has been advocated by its proponents as a means by which students can develop critical thinking and achieve learning at higher levels of thought (Gokhale, 1995). In language teaching, too, the communicative approach, which prioritises the conveying of meaning over form, offers 'a view of the language learner as a partner in learning; [encouraging] learner participation in communicative

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events and self-assessment of progress' (Savignon, 1993), and incorporates the notion that the 'development of language control proceeds through creativity, which is nurtured by interactive, participatory activities' (Rivers, 1992).

Collaborative learning, cooperative learning and peer learning have been integrated into tertiary education programs for some time, and align with the high value placed by employers on teamwork (Sampson et al, 1999). While the constructs to which these terms refer differ with regard to the specific strategies they utilise, they are united by their emphasis on group rather than individual learning, and by their stress on student focused and generated learning rather than teacher dominated instruction. This approach emanates from a constructivist epistemology, which holds that knowledge is discovered and reconstructed by the learners themselves. In the field of language teaching in particular, the prevailing pedagogy described above has long encouraged the techniques of collaborative and/or cooperative learning in the form of small group work, pair-work and projects. Proficiency levels among students learning the same language within a single class are always likely to vary in some way and language students across Australia routinely engage in reciprocal peer learning. What is at a far more formational stage is the use of students as a mutual linguistic and cultural resource in a program of peer language *exchange*. Examples do exist, particularly where technology has transformed the possibilities for intercultural communication, as in, for example, a project developed by Pennsylvania State University and the Pedagogical University of Heidelberg ('In a language class', 2001); but they are still comparatively experimental. With the assistance of funding through the University, the School of Languages and Intercultural Education was able to launch a project that would integrate this concept of language exchange into each of its language programs: Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean and English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Central to the project was the perception that international students from non-English speaking backgrounds are too often seen at university level as the passive recipients of a 'Western' educational experience rather than active contributors to the learning experience of their Australian peers. This observation has been made in a number of descriptions of the experience of overseas students at Australian universities (e.g. Samuelowicz 1987, Ballard & Clanchy, 1997, Brackley 1999). In addition, anecdotal reports from student advisors and English language teaching staff at Curtin University indicated that some overseas students were beginning to experience a sense that their value to the University was primarily economic; for this reason it was considered important that this group should be encouraged to believe that they were an educational asset, that they had something valuable to contribute to the overall undergraduate experience.

The second major premise underpinning the design of the project was that belief that 'sources of authority for leadership are embedded in shared ideas' (Sergiovanni, 1993:17). From the outset it was intended that the project would be a collective and collaborative enterprise among academic staff members; this informed the way in which it developed. The cascade model adopted by the original project team members for the first year (2000) meant that they acted as mentors to an expanded group in 2001, who in turn inducted new members in 2002. In terms of process, much of the

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more recent literature which describes or develops procedures for managing educational change (e.g. Fullan 1991; Owens 1995; Wallace 1996) argues that change should be implemented in a series of stages which in the broadest terms can be distilled into three: the formulation of goals, the implementation of means and the evaluation of results. In line with this overarching framework, it was decided that innovations to the teaching program would be made according to the precepts of action research, creating a spiral of planning, implementation, reflection and reaction (Lewin, 1948; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Elliot, 1991; Stringer, 1996). Thus change within the School would be wrought in small steps, each of which would contribute incrementally to broader change leading ultimately to a paradigm shift in the School's language teaching and learning culture.

This final goal for the project, cultural change, was broken down into a number of discrete, but ultimately linked, smaller aims. In the first place, in line with the University's teaching and learning plan, it sought to encourage academic staff gradually to become more reflective practitioners. This, it was hoped, would be achieved to a certain extent by the very nature of the project with its requirement for collaboration and creativity. Nevertheless, alternative and complementary strategies parallel to the main project were organised: an associated series of seminars and workshops were held within the School; reflective personal journals were maintained by participants; staff were assisted with the development of professional portfolios. Second, overseas students enrolled in preparatory EFL programs would be given an orientation to Australian university life and the opportunity to integrate with locally resident peers in a mutually beneficial context. Third, and most importantly, the project aimed to provide for students an enriched and enriching learning experience which would lead to improved academic outcomes.

### **The project design**

Prior to the commencement of the School project, it was necessary to identify the teaching staff who would participate in the pilot program to be run in the first year. The need for a group of students from non-English speaking backgrounds meant that staff from the EFL programs offered by the School were by default to be involved. These programs are run at pre-tertiary level and take the form mainly of intensive courses in academic English. The languages other than English (LOTE) involved in the project are taught at undergraduate level over three or four years. Initially it was decided to focus on students in their second year of study, as it was considered that they would have gained a sufficient foundation in their target language to facilitate peer activities. The decision to commence with Japanese and Bahasa Indonesia was made for two reasons, both of which were essentially pragmatic. First, the number of on-campus EFL students from Japan and Indonesia was sufficiently high to permit group activities. Second, the staff on these programs demonstrated a high level of enthusiasm and willingness to engage in the project. Once the initial four participants had been identified, the first step of the project was implemented in line with the proposed framework. This involved the development of an instrument that would ascertain students' perceived language needs and existing opportunities for language interaction. The results could then be used to identify goals for the pilot program in the first year. This instrument took the form of a survey distributed to students in the

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classes that would be affected by the project. The survey questions fell into three categories: those eliciting personal information such as gender, nationality, age and interests; closed questions to generate data about existing practices and opportunities for interaction; and open-ended questions which would help determine the types of activity students would prefer and the benefits, if any, that they were able to identify in a language exchange program. In the first year the survey itself was considered a trial instrument to be revised and adapted before distribution to the second cohort of students in the following year.

In 2000 there were 78 respondents: 30 studying EFL, 22 studying Indonesian and 26 studying Japanese. Most respondents were female (69%) and ranged in age from 17 to 55. The main findings indicated that there was overwhelming student support for increased opportunities for practice with peers who were native speakers of the target language. A mean of 86% of all respondents across language groups indicated that they believed that they did not have enough contact with native speakers of the target language, and 96% stated that they wished to interact with native speakers as part of their academic program. The most frequently cited reasons for desiring a greater level of peer interaction were that it would improve cultural knowledge (50%) and assist with the development of listening and speaking skills (46%). A smaller number (28%) felt that it would increase confidence levels and that it would lead to increased social contact with native speakers (27%). The revised version of the survey, administered in the following year to a new group of 122 students, obtained very similar answers.

These results were considered sufficiently encouraging to proceed to the next step. The Indonesian and Japanese staff were paired with teachers of English, and both sets of pairs engaged in classroom peer observation sessions in order to gain a greater understanding of their partner's teaching methods, techniques and types of materials used. This step was of great importance because the School had only recently been formed, and there was no explicitly articulated or recognised infrastructure for language teaching in terms of theories of teaching and learning styles. In broad terms, informal discussions among the participants indicated that across languages staff concurred with the view that there is no best method of language teaching, since teaching is not 'a set of procedures that can themselves carry a guarantee of learning outcomes' (Prabhu, 1990); and that an eclectic approach is the one most likely to appeal to a range of learning styles (Felder & Henriques, 1995). Besides, the EFL and LOTE staff were operating in rather different teaching environments, since English is taught in full-time intensive mode on-campus, whereas the undergraduate LOTE units consist of only five contact hours per week, so similarity of teaching approaches might not in any case have resulted in similar outcomes.

Once the classroom observations had been undertaken, each pair collaborated in designing group activities that would permit their students to engage in authentic language exchange, using each other as a learning resource. The participants were not restricted with regard to the type of activities they designed, bearing in mind that they needed to provide students with a supportive, non-threatening environment in which to learn, expose them to a wide range of models of language usage, engage them at an affective level (thereby enhancing learning), and encourage the use of peer feedback and monitoring to build confidence. The activities were also to take place during

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normal class contact hours, and so had to be suitable for the classroom. At a later stage, if the classroom based structured activities proved to be successful, they could then be used as a springboard for students to develop unsupervised intercultural linguistic and social relationships independently. Participant and project team meetings were held at regular intervals to provide mutual feedback and discussion on the ideas which had been generated by the teachers, and the plans for the activities were collected and bound in a single volume as a resource for future participants. Their content ranged from the simple to the complex, from contact between individuals to the involvement of the whole group. The activities, which were organised over a period of six weeks of one semester, were staged to become increasing complex, both linguistically and conceptually. For instance, the Japanese/English groups began by designing a questionnaire in the target language that would elicit some personal and cultural information from a language partner, and then conducted their surveys in the native language of the respondent. In a later session, the groups were required to find out more about each other's countries and traditions by discussing coming of age celebrations. The final activity involved the whole group in planning a class party, with the help of a teacher-developed worksheet. To promote authenticity, the party was actually held at the end of semester.

One aspect of collaborative learning that has been the subject of some debate is that of assessment (Cramer, 1994). There were a number of issues involved. It was important that students should receive the message that their experience was formally recognised within their programs, but at the same time 'assessment can challenge the principles of peer learning by creating an inappropriately competitive environment' (Sampson et al, 1999: 8). In addition, language learning is a slow and unpredictable process; progress in terms of proficiency over one semester would be difficult to measure objectively, given the fact that each new intake of students varies in terms of mean performance. Furthermore, the cultural benefits of the project could not be assessed at all in units focusing on language development unless the overall aims were amended and submitted to the relevant committees for approval. Finally, for staff initially unfamiliar with group assessment, the complexities of dealing with unequal contributions by students might have discouraged participation. In the light of these considerations, it was eventually decided that student assessment would take the form of a mark of 10% for participation and attendance. The project description and assessment details were then written into the undergraduate unit outlines as part of the formalisation process.

## **Project evaluation**

The project is now in its third year and is still in the process of being evaluated by both students and staff. Evaluation of its effectiveness has been conducted in relation to the three major aims as outlined above: the active participation of students in mutual learning processes; the development of staff as reflective practitioners and the enriching of the learning experience for students. With regard to the first aim, evaluation took the form in the first year of student questionnaires and focus groups. In the second year the focus groups were not included in the evaluation process because it was felt that they had not contributed any substantially new information to

the overall picture. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. In the first section, students completed a Likert Scale in answer to twelve questions that focused on their feelings and their views on the value of the project. The second section consisted of three open-ended questions requesting students to comment on the most and least useful aspects of their experience. Over 90% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the exchange experience had been enjoyable (70% in the second year), and over 50% in both years agreed or strongly agreed that they had improved their cultural knowledge. In both years over 40% agreed that they had developed a greater level of confidence as a result of the experience. Although in the first year most respondents valued the activities themselves, 35% of one sub-group in the first year (students of Indonesian) agreed that the activities had been disappointing, and opinions were quite varied about how well the activities had fitted into the existing program. Feedback from the focus group and from discussions with teaching staff revealed that there had been a mismatch in terms of aims: the Indonesian nationals had been enrolled in an academic preparation program and were not keen to attend Indonesian language sessions in which the main emphasis was interpersonal communication. Conversely, the native English speakers were frustrated when a debate on a 'serious' issue held in English was stultified because the language required for it lay beyond the proficiency levels of the non-native speakers. In the second year, there was greater consensus about the value of the specific activities and their integration into the overall program, indicating that the changes implemented by staff had been successful. The focus group data reinforced at a more qualitative level the information produced from the questionnaires. In line with the action research principles outlined above, the feedback received through the evaluation processes in the first year led to changes in the program for 2001. In addition, the Korean language program became involved, followed by the Chinese language program in 2002.

With regard to the second aim, the development of staff as reflective practitioners, the project has been less conclusively evaluated. The number of academic participants has not yet reached even 50% of the LOTE staff, so it would be difficult to argue that cultural change has yet taken place at School level in terms of awareness of and interest in the project. Those who have participated, however, unanimously agree in team meetings that the project has been a valuable experience from the point of view of peer collaboration and because, particularly in view of the need to maintain journals, they have become more reflective practitioners. In order to obtain more formal data on the value of the project, in this third year an evaluation survey is in the process of being designed for distribution to all staff, participants and non-participants alike. There are other indicators of cultural change. In the first year, many staff members were unaware of the purpose of the project, even though regular reports were presented to full School meetings. This was evident from the type of questions that arose when reports were being presented. In the second year this occurred less frequently. In this third year there has been an exciting spin-off that has involved the wider University community. Adhering to the same principles of collaborative learning and shared leadership, one member of the project team, with financial support from the School, has set up a 'speakers' corner', which involves gathering together in small groups staff and students from across the campus at a given time each week to engage in conversation in a language either that they speak fluently or

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that they wish to practise. The activity has been widely publicised and well attended, and has drawn praise from the Student Guild in a Divisional Board meeting.

The evaluation of formal learning outcomes has not yet taken place. From the student point of view, evaluations clearly revealed that the overseas students appreciated the opportunity to interact with their Australian peers and vice versa. The focus groups and feedback from staff indicated that there is now a higher level of social contact between different language groups; for example a social club for students of Korean and students from Korea has been established. These are important outcomes, but do not indicate specifically whether academic learning outcomes have improved. Staff have reported that there has been no difference in the level of marks awarded, but this seems an inadequate measure of such an experience. A number of proposals have been put forward: a longitudinal study on student motivation, since motivation is recognised as a key factor in determining learning outcomes; a tracer study to determine whether the number of students continuing to study the target language at a more advanced level in subsequent years increases; and regular evaluations of student attitudes towards the target language and culture to determine whether the proportion of positive descriptors rises. Since none of these has yet been initiated, this presents the major evaluation challenge for the project this year.

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