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TEACHER DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

A case study in focused action research

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ABSTRACT

'Focused action research' was employed in a teacher inservice program which sought to develop a fusion between trainer-centred input and teacher-centred action research. The areas of input to teachers were learning strategies, thinking skills, questioning skills and the teaching of study skills. During the four months of this action research project of the teacher educators, teachers experienced two cycles of action research, one investigating their students' learning strategies and the second implementing a plan to improve some aspect of their students' learning - such as summary writing, remedial reading, hotseating, introducing group work, vocabulary-learning techniques - and wrote reports on their work. Although there was no evidence that the gains made transferred into the following school year the teachers both displayed and reported an increase in reflection during the project and immediately after it. Issues of sustaining transfer need to be addressed.

INTRODUCTION

Action research is a not uncommon part of master's and preservice courses in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). It is less commonly used in teacher inservice activities. This paper reports on an Australian ESL teacher inservice program which trailed a 'sandwich' model of teacher inservice. While a program spanning a number of weeks was an innovation for the participating teachers, combining familiar

lecture-discussion teaching with action research in their own classrooms between the meetings was an innovation for the teacher educators involved in the project.

Action research was popularized in Australia by Kemmis and McTaggart (1981) and promoted within TESOL most notably by Nunan (1989, 1990, 1996) and Burns (1996, 1997, 1999). If Nunan emphasises the teacher as researcher and Burns the collaborative aspects of teacher research, Wadsworth draws attention to the importance of vision, or 'imaginative leap':

Participatory action research is aware of its inevitable intervention in the social situations within which it operates and seeks to turn these to consciously-applied effect. Most participatory action research sets out to explicitly study something in order to change and improve it.... This involves an imaginative leap from a world of 'as it is' to a glimpse of a world 'as it could be'. (Wadsworth 1998, p.2)

This paper reports on a program that took place in the S.W. Metropolitan Region of Sydney, which region has the highest percentage of ESL students in the state of NSW. It maintains seven Intensive English Centres for newly arrived high school students and has numerous ESL teachers in the regular high schools. Twenty-five volunteer teachers from the area attended the program and half a dozen ESL consultants from other Sydney regions were invited as observers. The program organisers were three consultants associated with the Department of School Education and myself, a university lecturer in TESOL.

As organisers we expected the teachers to bring with them an account of the 'world as it is' and we hoped to offer both glimpses of the 'world as it could be' and a technology for achieving this change. The teachers would generate action research projects, going through the steps of planning, acting, observing and reflecting so that they could have some immediate impact on their own teaching contexts. Through this they would develop the ability to generate context-specific solutions to other problems in the future.

We chose to develop a form of 'focused action research'. We would provide input, using a mixture of transmission and constructivist techniques to stimulate some possible "visions" of increased student autonomy in learning and explain the procedures of action research. In addition we would generate our own action research project as other teacher educators (for example Crookes and Chandler 2001) have done. We too would go through the steps of planning, acting, observing and reflecting that we were about to recommend to the teachers.

ASSUMPTIONS AND THEORETICAL MODEL

We took as our initial focus three topical assumptions about language teaching and learning:

1. It is desirable for teachers, in their own search for better ways of meeting their students' needs, to become reflective practitioners of their professional practices (Wallace 1991).
2. Action research can play a role in promoting reflection among teachers and teacher educators alike; and thus in promoting change in educational settings (Nunan 1989, 1990, 1996; Burns 1996, 1997, 1999).
3. Language students need to develop autonomy, to take responsibility for

their own learning and, to this end, to develop effective learning strategies. Teachers therefore have a responsibility to show their students better ways of learning, to undertake 'learner training' (Oxford 1990, Nunan 1996).

These assumptions are consonant with constructivist approaches to teaching and teacher development, yet point beyond. Our overall aim was to promote autonomy in student learning and autonomy in teacher development such that both students and teachers would not only be able to learn through processes of discovery but be better able to plan future learning activities for themselves.

Since the 1970s second language learning has been regarded as involving internal processes of creative construction combined with reorganisation of earlier assumptions about how language is structured and functions (see for example Cook, 1996 or Ellis 1994). Because it is impossible to provide language learners with all the data needed to completely succeed within any given course, applied linguists have also turned their attention to external processes which learners can use in independent language study. Language learning strategies have been both studied by researchers and taught to language students at appropriate levels of development. While the term "constructivist" is not used in TESOL with the currency that is encountered in, for example, science education, language development has long been recognised as an internally constructivist mode of learning.

In TESOL teacher education Wallace (1991) drew on the work of Schön (1983) in introducing reflective practice. In extending his model from pre-service to in-service work we decided to replace his recursive cycle of *practice and reflection* with the well known recursive spiral of Kemmis and McTaggart's "four moments of action research" (1981, p.7). Action

research is, after all, one specific way of implementing the more general cycle of practice and reflection. In Wallace's model professional practice and reflection interact with the existing conceptual schemata that participants bring to the training course. Two types of knowledge are acquired during the course: received knowledge and experiential knowledge. "[Received knowledge] consists of facts, data and theories, often related to some kind of research" (Wallace, p.12). Experiential knowledge derives from Schön's "knowing-in-action" and "reflection" (Wallace, p.13). Comparing Wallace's model with statements such as "The key feature of [constructivist teacher education] programmes is that they helped teachers to reflect and take more responsibility and control over their own learning" (Fung, 2000, p.155) shows the congruence between these notions of reflective training and constructivist learning. In marrying action research with direct instruction we were able to reference Wallace and Schön as we sought to construct a "mix" that would both appeal to busy teachers as "useful" and challenge them professionally.

OBJECTIVES

In addition we had three specific practical objectives:

1. To trial a 'sandwich' model of teacher inservice education, in the hope those teachers who worked in different schools would have the opportunity to experience the advantage of collaborative discussion.
2. To introduce some specific new material on learning strategies, thinking skills, discussion skills and study skills. (These areas were chosen because of their potential for enabling learners to become autonomous and achieve success in high school.)
3. To trial a focused mode of action

research to see how useful the specific input would be in stimulating action research projects. (Attempting to focus the area of concern is a departure from normal practice in the use of action research in teacher development, which (in TESOL at least) generally takes as a starting point the immediate concerns the teachers bring to the inservice (Nunan, 1990).)

We hoped that participants would end the inservice program with an expanded range of options to help them help their students to be independent learners in a high school environment and better problem solvers in any environment.

THE COURSE

The inservice program took place during four full day meetings over a span of eight weeks (with one optional short meeting) and was organised according to the following schedule:

Day one

Background to learning strategies - lecture
Understanding learning strategies - workshop activities
Identifying learning strategies - workshop to prepare student questionnaires

Day two

Students' responses to the questionnaires - teachers' reports
Teaching thinking and discussion skills - workshop activities
Introduction to action research - lecture

Day three

Using teacher questions - workshop activities
Teaching study skills - workshop activities
Action research - short lecture leading into discussion groups centring on pedagogical problems and possible approaches to these

Afternoon meeting

Consultation for those teachers seeking clarification or extra support

Day four

Oral reports by teachers on their action research projects

Production of written versions of these reports for distribution

Specific content parts of the program took place through the lecture mode but most time was spent by participants in discussion and completing workshop tasks that extended on the material. A full description of the sessions follows below.

Day one

Teachers explored learning strategies

The first stage was to provide a brief historical background to the notion of learning strategies using as examples the work of Selinker (1972) and Wong-Fillmore (1979). These and additional examples were cited in relation to the two dominant views of language learning: the psycholinguistic and the functional.

Rebecca Oxford's chapter (1990) containing her taxonomy of learning strategies had been given to participants as part of their prereading package [the other reading was Wenden and Rubin (1987, chapter one)]. Participants took part in several workshop activities in which they matched Oxford's descriptions of some learning strategies with their notes on the taxonomy and judged which learning strategies would be most applicable to various classroom tasks and social situations. By the end of this second session they had sorted out any difficulties in identifying what Oxford means by the different strategies, and had realised that good language learners combine different strategies in different ways in different situations.

Teachers investigated their students'

learning strategies

Participants took part in a session where they critiqued the questionnaire Oxford has developed for this purpose, and saw examples of some other instruments designed to find out about how learners help themselves (for example, Willing 1989). Working in groups they adapted, simplified, translated or designed from scratch an instrument to give to their own students to find out what learning strategies they use.

Back at their schools they administered their instruments, and in the first session of the next meeting the groups collated their findings and presented them to their colleagues.

Day Two

Teachers reported their findings

In some cases reports confirmed previous teacher observations of their students. They all agreed that the most successful learners reported themselves as using a wider range of different learning strategies than learners whom teachers rated as less successful. In other cases there were surprises. For example, one group found that what was most obviously lacking at each level differed: beginners were seen as needing to develop social skills, intermediate learners as needing to be less hard on themselves, advanced learners as needing to develop skills of self-correction and self-organization. Another group compared mature age year 11 students with 17 year olds and found the older age group relied more exclusively on memory and coped with their feelings less successfully than the younger group: they had poor affective strategies. 'Their compensation strategies were very low, they didn't like guessing and they didn't like to take risks and they even felt threatened by the survey,' one teacher reported. The younger learners, in contrast, were reported not to feel threatened by the survey.

Teachers reported that newly arrived students found it difficult to focus on issues of how they learned. This prompted some teachers to reflect on the importance of the work they do to show students how Australian teachers want them to learn; but prompted other teachers to reflect on the need for themselves to accommodate to the preferred learning styles and expectations of the students. Other young learners not only enjoyed responding to the survey but were keen to question their teachers about the meaning of their results and to ask what they could do to improve their learning strategies.

Teachers thought about how people think

Next participants heard a lecture called 'Thinking about thinking and discussing' in which approaches to teaching problem is a spiral of activity with no logical beginning or necessary end. It was also pointed out to participants - who found this a point of great relief - that they had already been through one complete cycle. While this remark was included to reassure the less confident, it was also hoped that it would position participants where they had been when they had finished reporting their findings from their school survey earlier in the day.

Day 3

Teachers discussed the effects of different types of questions

They took part in a workshop in which participants were helped to identify the different types of questions teachers can ask (particularly open and closed questions) and to see the effect that each type of question has on the answers given by students. Participants also had the opportunity to practise various classroom techniques for helping students to ask questions, which ranged from different types of modelling activities to a variety of questioning games and activities such as hot-seating, a technique where one student

solving techniques were surveyed. They were invited to examine some of the assumptions that underlie the terms 'thinking skills' and to examine what is involved in problem solving for ESL learners.

Teachers were introduced to action research

After this the principles of action research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988) were introduced to the participants through a brief lecture and through the distribution of Gow and Kember's booklet (n.d.). Three points were emphasised: that action research at its best effects change in its own environment, that it does not seek the 'watertight' results of more familiar research paradigms and that the sequence of:

assumes a role and has to respond to a battery of questions about their motivations, actions and responses from the rest of the class (Morgan and Saxton, 1991). There were also two workshops on teaching study skills.

Teachers returned to the notion of action research

It was suggested to them:

You now know which students you are focusing on, the language learning strategies they do and do not use. You need to identify just one language learning activity where your students might do better and think about what learning strategies are

5. likely to be helpful
6. appropriate for the learners' proficiency level.

Firstly you should record how they are achieving on this activity now and then devise ways of teaching the strategies. You need to decide how

and how often the student should practise them, *and you need to make time in the timetable to carry these out. Finally, you need to plan to record how they are performing the activity after a certain period of time.*

Teachers initially considered individually (although they were offered the opportunity to work in groups) what sort of project they wished to embark on. They then tried out their suggestions with teachers who taught similar classes. After that they got more rigorous feedback by meeting in new groups with different teachers. They then went to their schools to carry out their plans, phoning the area ESL consultant if they needed support, and some came to an afternoon tea meeting to discuss their work with the three lecturers.

Day 4

Teachers reported their findings

At this point the teachers had gone through two cycles of the action research project: They had planned, acted, observed and reflected during the stage where they administered and reported the results of their learning strategy questionnaires. They had then, in a less structured, less supervised way, conducted a second cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting on their individual projects. On the final day the teacher reports were various. For example:

1. One intensive English centre teacher, working with students about to exit the centre, aimed to prepare students for high school by teaching them the skill of summary writing. She devised a series of structured exercises which focused on the learning strategies she felt were required. About half of the class were observed to make dramatic improvement.
2. Another intensive English centre teacher worked one-to-one on reading with a brain-damaged girl, giving her strategies for decoding simple sentences they had composed together and the teacher had written down. Her next goal was to help her recognise names on station indicator boards so that she would be able to travel to her new high school independently. The next term the girl was able to guide herself successfully to the right suburban train.
3. One junior high school teacher applied the 'hot-seating' questioning technique she had learnt to the novel Year Nine were studying. Students took it in turn to be a character from the novel and answer questions. She felt overwhelmed by the response of the normally less enthusiastic students, as the technique enabled them to empathise readily with characters in the novel and so respond to the plot and the issues it raised. It also gave her students practice in asking questions.
4. A junior high school teacher, in her first year of teaching, taking over a Year Ten class which had been used to very traditional modes of instruction, had the aim of accustoming her students to group work. In groups they were completing activities associated with reading the advice pages of a weekly magazine. During the completion of the unit she taught them the metalanguage for describing group processes and relationships within the group. She included activities, which forced the students to think about how and why they were learning. Then, with her help they wrote

reports on 'how our group worked'. She was able to report much improved attitudes to group work by her students.

5. One senior high school teacher taught a vocabulary-building technique with her year 11 class. She had observed that two students whom she regarded as highly successful learners wrote down new words while the others did not. So she distributed index books, showed them how to make useful entries, and required them to record five new words a day for four weeks. Her hope was that they would continue to use this useful habit after the project finished.

The second cycle of action research concluded, the teachers turned to writing brief research reports. A research report schema was suggested and those who had not written in this genre before were able to receive on the spot advice. By the end of the day a pile of short documents was ready for collation and distribution.

EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

While the teachers were moving through two complete cycles of action research the teacher educators had only moved through three stages of one cycle. We had planned the program, we had presented all the sessions, we had heard the teachers' reports and now it was time for us to complete our first cycle by reflecting on what had happened. This reflection is based on the following data sources:

1. the preformulated objectives
2. summative evaluation questionnaires completed by the teachers
3. evaluation of the teachers' written project reports
4. interaction with teachers around a subsequent TESOL conference

5. subsequent experience presenting the same material to other teachers.

Their written comments showed that overall the teachers clearly felt that they benefited from their experience: 'New information,' 'Invigorating, interesting,' 'New enthusiasm,' were some comments made. Most negative responses centred on practical suggestions which could be easily redressed in subsequent sessions: suggestions such as conducting such projects earlier in the school year and introducing the model of action research earlier in the sessions.

Our first two objectives were to assess the impact of introducing the 'sandwich' mode inservice program and to introduce the teachers to some new ideas about learning strategies, thinking skills and other areas of teaching. In their evaluations teachers responded directly and positively to these two areas; some mentioned the positive aspects of having time to interact with colleagues and to share ideas and to digest new concepts. Other teachers made comments that led us to believe that our goal of encouraging reflection had been reached: comments such as 'Made me more aware of learning strategies', 'Provided me with ideas for the future. It has made me think about the way my students learn,' 'My understanding of action research has broadened,' were common.

Our third objective, which was not only the most important to ourselves but also subsumed the first two, was to marry the input of information with action research. Although none of the teachers addressed this directly in their evaluations of the program, it became the principle focus of our own reflection. We commenced by critiquing the outcomes we observed.

These outcomes were the projects the teachers completed and the reports they wrote up. The teacher evaluations showed that they felt pleased with what they had done, and of course this pleased us.

However, we felt that in some ways these outcomes were disappointing: a lot of teachers reported on teaching projects, which we felt they would have taught anyway (although it is possible that here we were unable to gauge an increase in reflectivity). Few of the teachers integrated learner strategy training firmly into their own practice even though at the end of cycle one it had been clear there was understanding, interest and many ideas for further applications. The teachers' written reports, even though we had developed a common schematic structure and allowed several hours of in-session time for writing, consulting and editing, were of a disappointingly low quality. At the time we concluded that more time was needed to have been offered for developing professional writing skills; retrospectively we might have learnt from Sachs' warning:

Within school-based contexts the reporting of action research often belongs to relatively ephemeral types of communication represented in talk and dialogue. The reporting of academic research, on the other hand, is likely to take the form of formal talks or conference presentations, written publications and academic publications.
(1999, p.45)

Sachs's remark is made in the context of exploring the clash that occurs between the culture of the school and the culture of the university when teachers and academics cooperate for research purposes. For the teachers our expectation of an academic presentation may simply have appeared not relevant to their work.

It seems that we had assumed that the teachers would be able to make many more links between strategy development, action research and their own classrooms than they actually were able to. We had also assumed that they would be able to try out

new ideas with feelings of confidence. These assumptions proved to be unfounded and so we had to consider where, with hindsight, we would have varied the amounts of guidance and intervention. Perhaps an even longer project was needed to build confidence and reflection and to bed down the connections made between the inservice course and teachers' awareness of their professional practice.

Our hope that learning through the action-research mode would promote reflective teaching practice was obviously borne out for the duration of the project. However, when we encouraged some of the most autonomous and innovative teacher-researchers to present their projects at a Sydney conference held a few months later we found that many of them had difficulty recalling and relating to their projects after the summer break. It seems that we had made assumptions about the likelihood of longterm transfer which may not have been warranted. This question obviously demands further investigation if Wadsworth's 'imaginative leap' is to become a permanency.

CONCLUSION

Our decision to marry some content input into the action research cycle was sufficiently successful for us to continue working with the model, although it seemed that we might have offered too much input. The next time the program was presented we reduced the amount of input. Learning strategies and action research were introduced, then time was allocated for some teachers to present examples of the units of work they were currently teaching. A workshop followed where ways of integrating strategy training into some of these units could be worked out. This seemed to focus attention better but with this second group we encountered considerable resistance to spending time on the action research project in their teaching time. The teaching assistants that Crookes and Chandler (2001) worked with had similar reservations about the viability of

allocating time from their already busy teaching schedules. It seems that if we wish teachers to become serious teacher-researchers then administrators need to take seriously the notion of release time from teaching.

In this project, because the action research projects of the teachers became the action research of the teacher developers, three levels of learning took. The school students developed their English and their understanding of how to learn English, their teachers developed new ways of thinking about supporting their students' learning and the teacher educators worked with a new model of teacher inservice. Running the inservice session as a series of meetings over a number of weeks was an undoubted success. The results suggest that there is real scope for continuing to develop ways of marrying the input and action research models of inservice teacher development. Teachers appreciate being introduced to new ideas in their inservice experiences and we believe they are most likely to integrate the insights they gain from these experiences if they are encouraged to do so in a structured or semistructured way. However it seems that considerable amounts of time need to be made available to teachers if projects of this sort are to be fully beneficial.

Whilst the Wallace model points to improvement in professional competence, this appears to encompass teaching competence rather than the development of research competence. The teachers in this study appreciated all the techniques, understandings and challenges that stimulated improved learning in their students, but were less receptive to what they may have perceived as attempts to turn them into researchers.

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