Teaching outside the comfort zone: Self-reflective practice in the ESL classroom

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Abstract

This paper relates the background, methodology and results of an action research project undertaken on the South Hedland campus of Pilbara TAFE in Western Australia, as part of a Graduate Diploma in Adult Education (Tertiary and Adult). The aim was to improve outcomes in spoken English for small groups of language learners, specifically by examining teacher habits and attitudes. Parallel to this project runs a discussion of self-reflective practice, which is a conundrum for many language, literacy and numeracy practitioners, especially for those working alone or in an isolated region.

Researcher background

In a similar fashion to a great number of my peers, I came to English language teaching because of a genuine interest in the English language in general and in adult education in particular. Beginning with zero teaching experience, I graduated from the four-week teacher training 'boot camp' that is the Certificate of English Language Teaching for Adults (CELTA), before spending two years teaching English in Kyoto, Japan, and then a two further years in various ELICOS schools across Perth.

My teaching experience was very similar to many ELICOS teachers in metropolitan areas. I was responsible for classes of 10-15 full-time international students, who had been streamed according to level, and who learned according to a particular syllabus or textbook. I would teach alongside a sizeable group of fellow teachers, almost all extremely competent and knowledgeable, with whom I could bounce ideas around, compare notes and commiserate, all under the guidance of a Director of Studies who was a specialist in English language teaching. In-house professional development in my teaching area was frequent and highly relevant.

During this early period of my teaching career, I was observed regularly, as is normal in ELICOS colleges. This was a process I came to love and dread – love, because through the constructive criticism of a sympathetic and expert observer I was able to perceive deficiencies in my teaching practice that could be addressed, and to identify areas of strength that could be expanded and cultivated. Dread, because, as many a conscientious teacher can probably attest, the early years of my teaching were characterised by a feeling of not quite knowing what I was doing, doubting my skill as a practitioner, and feeling that it was only a matter of time before someone 'found me out'. Like most conscientious teachers, I almost certainly didn't give myself enough credit.

When I took up a position at Pilbara TAFE's South Hedland campus to teach the Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA), the professional paradigm described above shifted considerably. Carefully streamed classes of 10-15 students were replaced by smaller classes comprising learners across multiple levels and from a wide variety of backgrounds. As well as teaching English language learners, I taught Indigenous learners, those with mild and pronounced disabilities, and those who had been alienated from mainstream schooling. Instead of a staff room full of peers in my teaching field, I had a handful of peers at remote locations across the Pilbara region, who almost certainly had different learner groups to mine. Professional development relevant to my teaching area was relatively difficult access due to geographical challenges.

Under these conditions, the teaching methodology I had internalised and practiced in my teacher training and experience in metropolitan areas became less relevant, as I came to terms with teaching smaller, more challenging classes according to a more stringent, nationally accredited curriculum. As classes contained many levels and a large variation in student need, large group activities became difficult to execute and individual or 'tutorial' style classes became the norm. This may have been the best way to deliver to such a student cohort, but, in 2009, this teaching methodology again became less than ideal when the Certificates in Spoken and Written English were introduced on campus, catering primarily to ESL students and containing (albeit small) classes of learners that had been streamed according to level. I was therefore faced with a challenge, as I had to resurrect teaching skills that I had not used for several years, simultaneously adapting these skills to smaller classes with different learning

goals to those I had taught in metropolitan areas. The challenge became that of providing a level of learning to these students which was comparable to that which they would receive in a metropolitan area. In order to do this, I needed to face ingrained teacher attitudes and push myself 'outside of my comfort zone'.

Synopsis of the project

This project was undertaken as part of a Graduate Diploma in Education (Tertiary and Adult) through Murdoch University. The learners in this project were undertaking a Certificate II in Spoken and Written English, part of a national curriculum for migrant language learners, the Certificates in Spoken and Written English. The training took place at a TAFE campus in South Hedland, part of a mining town in the north-west of Western Australia. This setting is significant in that it provides an additional challenge for migrants, whereby the social isolation experienced in not speaking the language is compounded by geographical isolation and lack of amenities. At the time of this project, I had been a teacher of English as a Second Language and adult basic education for almost nine years. Whilst this background represented a large amount of experience in a variety of contexts, such a long career in the field can lead to a fossilisation of teaching techniques, a key aspect of this project. The six learners in this class were at a post-beginner level, and generally had a good command of vocabulary and grammar, at least when it came to writing. Similarly they had few problems with listening comprehension at the Certificate II level; however, speaking, especially speaking accuracy, presented an issue for learners.

The overall aim of this project was to examine teaching behaviours which supported or sabotaged the development of second language speaking ability amongst these learners, and to examine the implications of these for their learning. I critically examined the way in which I conducted classroom speaking activities, particularly examining the attitudes which I held towards teaching and learning this skill, expanded the repertoire of activities being used for the development of speaking skills, and experimented with the use of techniques for minimising first language dependence amongst learners. The results of this project were surprising, and revealed that my assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of these learners was not especially accurate, and were based upon my own assumptions and learner background.

Action research methodology

This project was undertaken using action research methodology, a method which is centred around the practitioner and their classroom. As Kemmis and McTaggart argue, the three defining characteristics of action research "are that it is carried out by practitioners...rather than outside researchers; secondly, that it is collaborative; and thirdly, that it is aimed at changing things" (Nunan, 1992, p. 17). The value of such research is that it is highly relevant to the here and now of a teacher's classroom practice, as the classroom teacher is arguably the person most qualified to comment practically on challenges in their teaching environment, and it is therefore the most efficient way to reap highly relevant rewards for themselves and for their learners. As well as solving practical problems in the classroom, action research serves a necessary function of teacher professional development, as well as forming a groundwork for social change and a more participatory conception of curriculum and pedagogy (Borg, 2010, p. 6).

Action research is cyclical. The cycle begins with a teacher recognising a deficiency in their practice, either through coming to this realisation themselves or through having this identified for them by a colleague or supervisor. Grundy (1995), terms this process 'reconnaissance' (1995, p. 12). In this project, reconnaissance was performed according to be the four critically reflective lenses described by Brookfield (1995). They are:

1. Our autobiographies as learners and teachers
2. Our students' eyes
3. Our colleagues' experiences
4. Theoretical literature

(p. 29-30)

Initially, had I been asked to describe why I favoured certain teaching strategies above others, I would have answered along the lines of "this is more straightforward/makes more sense", "students respond to this approach better", or that "these other activities don't seem to go as well", or perhaps tellingly "this is how I would like to learn a language". Brookfield (1995) cites Denicolo and Pope, who found that "when teachers are asked to explain why they favour certain approaches, frequently they evidence their choice of method, for instance, by reference

to a formative experience of their own" (p. 31). I had never considered delving deeper into my underlying attitudes regarding classroom activities, why I would prefer to learn a language in a particular way, or why my preferred method should be imposed upon learners. Therefore, before beginning to examine student attitudes and behaviours, I examined my background as a learner, and attempted to make connections as to how it may inform my teaching practice.

I began by looking back upon my history as a student, particularly my years of compulsory schooling. I was a very shy student in class, and very reluctant to speak, especially in whole-class activities or large groups, and far preferred reading, writing or listening activities (in which my thoughts could remain relatively private). I could recall several instances of strong anxiety at being 'put on the spot' and being compelled to engage in speaking activities, and evocation of these memories was quite uncomfortable, even though the experiences were more than fifteen years old. I came to a realisation that these deep-seated memories of anxiety over speaking had perhaps been causing me to let my students 'off the hook' in the same way that I wished I had been let off the hook in my younger years. I would encourage speaking when I was confident learners could handle it, but would behave differently when interacting with a learner who is naturally shy or lacking confidence in their spoken ability, or who has come from a culture where speaking up is not encouraged in an educational setting.

Perhaps as a result of this underlying attitude, I felt that I had fallen into a 'rut', in failing to exploit all of the opportunities within class for speaking practice. I therefore developed an interest in uncovering any disconnect between my ideals in the teaching of speaking, and ways in which I may conduct classes which could sabotage my learners' acquisition of skills. Much of my career, prior to my current position, had involved teaching large classes where such issues were not as prevalent. The sheer size of a class and the presence of several outgoing learners or stronger speakers allowed for shy speakers to join in with paired or small group work with minimal fear of embarrassment. It was possible, in the past, for me to pair up students and give them a speaking activity, and to then circulate amongst the class, monitoring their discussions. However, in my current class of just six learners, I had fallen into the habit of featuring much more prominently in speaking activities. When a student was absent or where there was an odd number of students, I would often pair up with a student, or would tend to conduct discussions as a whole group, where I worried about a tendency on my part to dominate a

discussion. It occurred to me that these habits were most likely hampering learners' ability to develop their speaking skills.

The second of Brookfield's critically reflective lenses involved examining the learning environment through my students' eyes (p. 31). Whilst the four macro skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking – are all important in the mastery of a language, learning how to speak effectively in English was arguably the most important skill my particular group of learners needed to master. As these learners had been undertaking English study for the purposes of successfully integrating into Australian society, issues relating to functional day-to-day speaking skills were those which had frequently been discussed by these learners as creating the most anxiety, particularly relating to accuracy of grammar and pronunciation. The learning strategies and goals of the learners in this group were already examined at the beginning of the year as part of the English language curriculum. All learners completed a personal learning plan, which included the setting of short, medium and long-term goals and an examination of their study strategies in and out of class. It involved a discussion of such topics as the amount of English they used in and out of class, how much time they spent doing private study activities, which activities they wanted to spend more time on in class, and which areas they felt needed improvement. I reflected upon their answers in these personal learning plans, and also conducted an informal discussion, with an easily understood questionnaire, on which abilities they felt were their weakest. Generally, learners felt that the productive skills (speaking and writing) were the most difficult for them, as opposed to the receptive skills of reading and listening. Grammar was cited as causing some concern for learners, both in the contexts of speaking and writing. Speaking thus emerged as a logical choice as the topic for this particular project. It provided an overlap between what I perceived as a weakness in my current teaching practice, and that of the learners in their language learning progress.

I believe that a reflective process for this rationale could have been enhance with the inclusion of an observation by a colleague (as per Brookefield's third lens); however, given that I was operating as the only ESL teacher on m particular campus, and that those colleagues from other disciplines were extremely limited in time, I was hampered in my ability to use a third party as part of the reflective process.

The second stage of action research then focuses upon the teacher's plan of action. In planning and designing this project, I posed and had the aim of answering the following focus questions:

- *How do I increase speaking participation by learners?*
- *How do I develop my confidence as a teacher when it comes to implementing new activities and strategies?*
- *What ideologies and principles underpin my approach to working with second language learners?*
- *What assumptions have I formed about these learners and their ability to learn and use English effectively?*
- *What are effective teaching strategies for developing accuracy in speaking amongst second language learners, whilst encouraging reluctant speakers to participate?*
- *What classroom activities really motivate second language learners to use the target language?*
- *What cultural differences inhibit a learner's willingness to speak?*

These questions provided an adequate starting point for the project; however, as the project progressed, it became apparent that some of the questions posed were either of too broad a scope for the bounds of this project (which took place over a period of 10 weeks), or emerged as being irrelevant or unimportant.

What methodology did I follow in the classroom?

As is one of the aims of action research, any modifications to my teaching practice were done in the context of the regular curriculum, textbook materials and assessment schedule. As Johnson (1993) states "teacher action research is…concerned with the everyday practical problems experienced by teachers, rather than the 'theoretical problems' defined by pure researchers within a discipline of knowledge" (p. 1). In keeping with this, I did not introduce a radically different set of learning outcomes, but modified my practice within the current teaching context.

How do I increase speaking participation by learners?

My first approach, therefore, was the modification of some of the everyday behaviours I was engaging in within the classroom, in relation to the development of learner speaking skills. The

first issue I addressed was that of minimising my Teacher Talk Time (TTT) and increasing Student Talk Time (STT). Harmer (1998) asserts that "getting students to speak – to use the language they are learning – is a vital part of a teacher's job. Students are the people who need to practice, in other words, not the teacher" (p. 4).

For the most part, this involved an attitude whereby I took a 'step back' in the classroom, conducting activities precisely as I would have, had the class been larger. I explained and set up activities with learners, and then minimised my involvement with the learners for the duration of the activity – I walked around the classroom, or busied myself with 'teacher' activities at the front of the class, such as notetaking, writing information on the whiteboard or cueing a CD for the next activity. I also began turning the radio on low during speaking activities, thus avoiding awkward silences which may increase reluctance to speak. I left learners to engage in speaking by themselves for an appropriate length of time, without cutting activities short, even if there were only two learners in the classroom. Before the implementation of this project, I was very indulgent of first language use in the classroom and did not intend to do away with this altogether, understanding that it could be a useful tool where a learner is totally unable to comprehend a word or phrase in English. Rather, I planned to trial an 'English-only' policy, with a small amount of discretion available; however, this would be closely monitored.

How do I develop my confidence as a teacher when it comes to implementing new activities and strategies?

My second approach was to increase, or in some cases reintegrate, my repertoire of activities and confidence in using them with learners. Within the regular context of the language learning classroom, there were several activities which I planned to use, exploit and reflect upon during this project, which Harmer (1998), recommends for reluctant speakers. The first of these was the increased use of pairwork, with minimal teacher involvement. As mentioned above, this would involve my withdrawal from the speaking activity, except for possibly the purposes of error correction. I wanted to be mindful of the extent and nature of error correction, however, as excessive feedback may affect motivation and impact upon speaking fluency (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 192).

The controlled speaking stage was thoroughly exploited, given that learners were experiencing difficulties with grammar. By focusing on this stage of the language learning process, it was to be expected that learners would be more comfortable at later, fluency-based stages. Harmer (1998) states that this approach "does not demand the risk-taking fluency which spontaneous conversation does" (p. 132). Secondly, the use of 'acting out', reading aloud and roleplay were expanded, the rationale being that a quiet student would be more willing to speak when playing a role, as opposed to expressing their own ideas, and that the taking on of a role could be quite liberating for the student (Harmer, 1998, p. 132). Fourthly, the use of information gaps and surveys would be appropriate for the level and complexity of the language required at this level, and would enable learners to build confidence. Overall, however, any and all speaking portions in the learning materials were expanded upon exploited and speaking skills work brought to the fore throughout the period of this action research cycle.

What ideologies and principles underpin my approach to working with second language learners?/What assumptions have I formed about these learners and their ability to learn and use English effectively?

I combined these two focus questions as there is a large amount of overlap in their intent. As stated above, in examining my biography as a learner, I identifies that I had been a reluctant speaker as a young learner and as a consequence, I felt similarly reluctant to subject learners to embarrassment when it came to speaking in front of others. During the course of the project, therefore, I made it my goal to simply *notice* how my attitudes affected my relation with students in regard to speaking activities. I did not realise just how evident this attitude was, however, until I examined its manifestation in my teaching behaviour. I initially found that minimising my involvement in speaking activities caused me a great deal of anxiety, as would be experienced in any situation whereby one critically examines and makes themselves aware of ingrained behaviour. I found myself at a 'loose end' when my involvement was not required, and felt a need to jump in immediately to assist learners if they seemed to be having even a slight difficulty. After several sessions of implementing this approach, I noticed learner behaviour beginning to change slightly, in that they looked to me less and less for input. With easier activities or those which involved controlled practice (ones which had a more apparent step-by-step approach), learners sometimes did not need my input at all, except to explain the

occasional difficult item of vocabulary or to have an occasional error corrected. With more fluency-based activities, learners initially looked to me for input, presumably because seeking my involvement had become somewhat ingrained in their behaviour also.

What are effective teaching strategies for developing accuracy in speaking amongst second language learners, whilst encouraging reluctant speakers to participate?

In the initial stages of the project, I realised that my initial conjecture was inaccurate, and that not all the learners lacked confidence – the majority (four out of six learners) were more than happy to participate in speaking activities; indeed, one or two learners were quite confident (though accuracy was a concern), another two had medium speaking accuracy and confidence, whilst only two could be said to be 'shy' or 'lacking in confidence'. My focus in this regard therefore changed so that it more accurately reflected the true state of these learners, and the question became how to redress this balance in speaking participation, rather than how to bring all learners out of their shell. As the project progressed, therefore, I rethought my approach and began to implement the technique of pairing different combinations of speakers together – placing the stronger speakers together so that the weaker speakers would be compelled to speak, as well as placing learners of different abilities together, such that the stronger learner would be able to assist the less confident one.

What classroom activities really motivate second language learners to use the target language?

Many of the techniques described below would be familiar to many English language teachers, even those with limited classroom experience. This project, however, involved relearning and reintegrating techniques which had fallen out of my repertoire. In addressing this focus question, I ensured that I implemented a range of speaking activities, including:

- Allowing learners to speak in a controlled way at first; Using 'acting out', reading aloud and role-play

I ensured that I allowed learners to complete other related activities prior to speaking, in order to both give them confidence and to allow for increased accuracy and opportunities for error

correction in speaking. For example, if students were learning a particular grammar point, I allowed them to write sentences practicing this grammar, before reading out these sentences. Previously, I would merely come around and check on their writing, thus failing to exploit a speaking opportunity. This created another issue in that it tended to be slightly time-consuming; this will be discussed in the next section.

- Information gap activities and controlled pair activities such as surveys

An information gap is an activity where two learners have different pictures or worksheets, and must ask each other questions to find out missing information. The aim of an information gap activity is to allow learners to practice the language in a controlled way; it also provides motivation for learners, in that they must use the target language for a specific goal. Information gap activities had been a regular element in my classroom; however, in this project, I rethought the implementation of these activities. Often, I would give out the information gap activity, explain what was to happen, and allow learners to complete the activity as a purely spoken one. Given the lack of confidence of some learners in relation to grammar, I exploited all stages of the activities, ensuring that learners had time to think about what they wanted to say, or to write down the questions relating to the target grammar. Although this was similarly time-consuming, it had a very valuable flow-on effect to other areas of language competence, such as reading and writing.

- The exploitation of any and all speaking activities included in the textbook

The textbook which was used had ample opportunity for fluency-based and controlled practice activities. My approach previously had been to treat such activities as whole-class activities where, as previously discussed, I would tend to dominate. For instance, in a chapter regarding describing physical appearance, an opening discussion asked "Who do you think is the most attractive man/woman in the world? Why? Which people in the pictures do you think are attractive? Why?". Rather than broadly posing these questions to learners as a group discussion, I made a point of asking learners to discuss this in pairs or groups, then asked for feedback from the whole class, and asking less confident speakers for their opinions. In so doing, I observed that learners were more confident in speaking, as they had more time to consider their opinions and had an opportunity to practice their speaking first with their

partners. In short, I was replicating the techniques I would use with a large class, thus consciously distancing myself from techniques that I had drifted into with small classes. Similarly, I made a point of not 'glossing over' elements which would support learners' speaking development, such as pronunciation activities and drilling of new vocabulary.

What cultural differences inhibit a learner's willingness to speak?

The learners' extensive use of their first language (Thai) was an area of some concern for me at the commencement of the project. I did not object per se to the existence of a first language in the classroom, because I understood that this can be a comfort to learners, and that the ability to have a native speaker succinctly explain to another the meaning of a word or phrase was sometimes preferable to their confusion, or to my spending significant periods of time explaining a difficult or abstract word. However, I wanted to make sure that Thai did not dominate (particularly considering that one student was Pakistani) and that it was not being used as a crux for learners during speaking activities. I therefore addressed learners at the beginning of the project, asking that they attempt to reduce their use of Thai, especially during speaking, but that this would not be strictly enforced if they felt it would be required. Therefore, rather than having a hard and fast rule regarding first language use, I instead utilised gentle teasing as a technique, chiming in with 'In English!!', or writing 'Please use English!' in giant letters on the whiteboard. My goal changed to that of simply making learners aware when they were using their first language, as their learner questionnaires seemed to indicate that it happened almost unconsciously.

Given that five of the six learners in the class are Thai, I initially speculated that additional cultural issues may play a role in reluctance to speak; however, as with the previous focus question, there was too much of a variance in learner confidence to truly draw any inferences in regards to culture. I also rethought the actual value of this question in terms of what I was attempting to achieve in the classroom; it would have been possible for me to research Thai and Pakistani cultural issues – but would this help or hinder the project? That is, would finding out such information merely cloud my view of these learners and cause me to stereotype their learning behaviours? In trying to find common threads amongst learners, I did not want to ignore the fact that adult learners have different personalities and learning styles, come from

different speaking positions and are motivated by different factors. Added to this was the inherent complexity in analysing cultural issues in the classroom and accurately gathering unbiased data, given both the subtlety of such cultural issues and the fact that myself, as researcher, was coming from my own cultural background which could cloud my judgement of such issues.

Gathering of evidence

Evidence gathered in the course of the action research cycle was largely in the form of my own reflections; that is, as a lesson was progressing, I would note how the lesson went, whether there were any successes, problems or difficulties with the techniques I was trialling, either from my point of view or that of the learners, then I would add any general reflections at the end of the lesson plan. To this was added two sets of learner reflection and feedback – one session was held at the commencement of the project and consisted of a fairly structured questionnaire with informal verbal feedback given at the same time, whilst another was held in the form of a discussion at the end of the project. Of course, learners were also encouraged to give ongoing verbal feedback during the project. Since action research is cyclical in nature, it was to be anticipated that this feedback would provide the basis for additional reflection and modification of my teaching practice in the future. My reasoning for utilising these methods of evidence gathering was that it appeared problematic to do otherwise. As I was teaching in an isolated town, where I was indeed the only ESL teacher in the locality, having another practitioner observe my teaching was difficult to arrange. As the focus of the action research was on speaking, I did not want to introduce the 'observer paradox' so frequently experienced by researchers, whereby the presence of an observer, or of a video or tape recorder, which may have caused learners to become self-conscious and produce unnatural reactions which could skew any observations. Specific actions taken in relation to the focus questions are detailed as follows.

Results of the project

I believe that my planning for this project was relatively sound, although it included a breadth of scope which, due to my inexperience in the field of action research was, on reflection, unnecessarily broad and complex. I raised several focus questions which, on face value, seemed relatively easy to implement which in reality were quite multifaceted and difficult to observe, particularly within the limited scope and time frame of this project. I posed two focus questions which were either discarded or relegated to the background in the action research process. The first, regarding learner culture and background, is discussed above. The second, regarding methods as to how to develop my confidence as a teacher in implementing new techniques and strategies in the classroom lessened in significance for two reasons. Firstly, there was a certain degree of overlap with this and another element of the action research; I would be experimenting with different techniques would involve my getting out of my comfort zone to a certain extent. Therefore, I felt that my confidence would probably be boosted as a result of focusing on this element of the research, and would not necessitate its own focus. Secondly, as the research progressed, it became too difficult to work on factors relating to improving learner confidence, improving my own confidence (which may carry its own complexity), implementing a range of new learning activities, and reflecting upon all of the above. Again, whilst I can see this being a valuable topic for future action research, it became too unwieldy to focus upon all these factors in this action research cycle.

As I proceeded with this action research project, I found that a simple focus on my underlying attitudes as a practitioner opened my eyes to a variety of possibilities in my teaching practice. The implementation of these changes in my attitude towards my teaching practice, coupled with awareness that the learners wanted to embrace opportunities to experience new learner tasks, created some very good outcomes for learners and for my teaching practice. In expanding my repertoire of teaching activities and trialling new classroom techniques, I found that learners were not thrown into a tailspin if something new was introduced; conversely, they were very game to trial new activities and were welcoming of opportunities to speak, provided that an activity was not impossibly difficult or vastly removed from their areas of interest. In short, I was not giving learners enough credit and had developed a slight attitude that they

needed to be protected from 'feeling bad'; an attitude which I believe was most certainly hindering their progression in English competence.

Related to this, a key area which I aimed to change in my teaching practice was taking a step back from speaking activities; setting up and explaining an activity and then letting learners 'get on with it'. To a certain extent, this was something that was necessary and needed to be done; it was important both that I learned not to be overly-eager and to leave students alone in certain speaking activities, and that students learn that they needn't depend on me for all the answers. Conversely, I also learned that to completely remove myself from speaking activities was not precisely the correct approach either. I wanted to prevent becoming too involved in the speaking process, but did not want to vacillate too far in the opposite direction, and ignore learners when they were in need of guidance. It is often very necessary for a teacher to give input in certain situations – to correct errors in pronunciation, for example, or to encourage a very reluctant learner. Whilst this stage of action research was vital for highlighting this issue in my teaching practice, in future action research projects, I would perhaps examine the balance between these two techniques, that is, the *extent* to which I should inject myself into class discussions, and the extent to which I should minimise involvement, depending upon the situation. Having reflected on this thorny issue, I believe that a very valuable topic for future action research would be to examine when such an approach is hampering learners and making them too dependent upon my input, and when it is making them feel that they are not given the support they need.

This project has also highlighted to me that the classroom is an organic place, where one change to the classroom environment has a flow-on effect to other elements of the teaching and learning process. As an example, my plan to exploit all of the speaking elements of the lesson resulted in a situation whereby speaking activities were taking up rather too much time. This was acceptable for the short period of this action research cycle, but it did cause me to question whether such an approach would be sustainable in the long-term in a language classroom; I suspected that it wouldn't, especially if such a focus on speaking skills leads to the neglect of other necessary skill building. Along with the question of how much I should interject in speaking activities, it may be similarly valuable to examine in a future action research project, how much is too much when it comes to a certain activity, or how to monitor the timing of

activities in order to maximise outcomes for learners. In addition to this timing issue, the project was quite serendipitous in that it uncovered other aspects of the teaching and learning process which were difficult for some learners. The most notable of these was revealed by the inclusion of reading aloud activities as a technique to improve speaking ability. When this technique was implemented, it uncovered the fact that there was a wide variety in reading ability amongst learners – some read very fluently, whilst others had extreme difficulty, although on face value, all learners appeared to be of more or less equal ability.

The gathering of evidence was a phase of the action research cycle which I found to be quite problematic. Whilst I was comfortable with planning the action research myself and conducting the activities, the collecting of evidence was also in the form of my reflections. Whilst I can be reasonably sure that my observations would be unbiased and valuable reflections, I could never be totally sure of this. After all, Grundy (1995) states "we do not assume that just because we have carefully planned an action and carried it out that the desired improvement will occur. But nor is it sufficient to judge what happened on the basis of *reaction or perception*" (my italics) (p. 16). Prior to the commencement of this project, I would have had little doubt that I could react objectively to occurrences within my classroom; however, having grasped the effect my biography as a learner has had on my teaching to date, I could not be so certain any more that this background would not come into play in the collecting of evidence. This led me to become uneasy with my primary method of evidence collection – that of my own reflections. As I mentioned in the project rationale, I selected reflective methods as other methods struck me as being problematic; the presence of a third party observer in the classroom, or of a video or tape recorder, could hamper learners in their spoken fluency and this may have affected data collection. At the time of deciding upon my method of data collection, I was at a loss as to what other methods could be implemented, but if I could repeat this action research cycle, I would reconsider other methods such as tape recording, which I believe would be the least intrusive method, or attempting to find someone to observe my teaching, even if they taught outside of my subject area. Even my own reflections on a tape recording, whilst it would ultimately incorporate my own subjectivity, may provide me with a sufficient 'distance' from my teaching practice, by allowing me to fulfil the role of a secondary observer as opposed to attempting to reflect whilst actually conducting a class. Doing this

would not completely result in objectivity, but may allow me to notice some elements of my teaching practice which are not evident to me during the teaching process.

Conclusion

A first foray from teacher to researcher is a remarkable journey. Hewson (2007) describes the experience by intimating that "much teacher research is exploratory and intuitive, at times traversing well-worn paths before venturing off into uncharted territory" (p. 25). This was largely my experience, for as any teacher may attest, the expectation that things will go one way is inevitably answered by things going in a completely different direction. In order to progress in a meaningful way I was required to 'feel my way' through the process. Indeed, when I embarked upon this action research project, on some level I believed that the procedure would be fairly linear and that I would be able to predict its outcomes, in spite of Grundy's assertion that "action in the real world of social practice is risky and unpredictable" (1995, p. 16). I would change some aspect of my teaching practice, this change could not help but have a clearly positive or negative outcome, I could incorporate change into my regular teaching practice, and the outcomes would be beneficial for all. Naturally, in hindsight, I can appreciate that this was quite a one-dimensional view to have, not only of the teaching and learning process, but of the input learners have in constructing meaning-making and shaping their own learning experiences. I was, without realising it, interpreting the term 'experiment' in a very scientific way. Whilst action research can be seen as having a dimension of scientific endeavour, on some level, I was viewing learners as beings with similar backgrounds, who would behave in similar ways, as scientific subjects would. This was quite a humbling realisation for someone who has always prided herself in believing the opposite, though self-growth is perhaps predicated upon looking backwards and asking oneself "How could I *possibly* have thought *that*?"

My relationship towards learners has shifted immeasurably. As a practitioner, I have learned to fight against the conception that learners need to be protected from embarrassment, ill-feeling and disappointment; indeed, it should be the opposite, in that a teacher should give them the skills and the structure to take classroom experiences and use them to navigate language independently, in all its messiness, in the world outside the classroom. I am now acutely aware of manifesting an attitude of 'needing to be needed', and attempt wherever possible to transfer

this into an approach whereby I support and scaffold learning, rather than unconsciously encouraging learner dependence.

Perhaps ironically, much of the growth I experienced during the project came not from learning radically new techniques, but from relearning that which I had learned at the beginning of my career, reintegrating it and 'reappreciating' its value. Truly growing as a practitioner has been addressing the disconnect which had existed between understanding and practice, and in 'pushing through' the self-imposed barriers I had created of what I believed was good teaching practice, what I believed my students could handle, and what I felt comfortable in implementing. Merely knowing that a particular technique or approach would be beneficial is of no use unless a practitioner can objectively judge its value for their learners, and push themselves to embrace it and integrate it into classroom practice, without fear.

But, perhaps most significantly, the most valuable result of this project is that I am no longer reticent to embrace the process of change, even if this process involves uncomfortable self-analysis. Teaching truly is a procedure of constant reinvention and re-examination, where a practitioner must constantly ask themselves: *Do I want to live in the comfort zone, or do I want to improve my practice, and empower learners?*

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