

Opening doors: Teachers learning through collaborative research

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars have noted the lack of uptake of traditional professional development activities such as conferences, workshops and even pre-service education, especially when an information transmission model of training is used. For more than a decade, research has demonstrated the value of teachers becoming reflective practitioners, with a number of models for such professional growth having been proposed. A model that has been widely accepted in English Language Teaching (ELT) has been teacher research, whether action research or other models where teachers are actively engaged in investigating their own practice. This article reports on a study of the impact on teachers of participating in an Adult Migrant English Programme (AMEP) research project. These teachers grew professionally because they were able to learn from each other and reflect on and change their own practice through collaboration as peers, rather than through experts trying to change them.

Introduction

There has been considerable rethinking of the nature and purpose of professional development in language teacher education by people such as Freeman (1998) and an acknowledgment that training approaches focusing on transmission of knowledge and skills are inadequate. Freeman (1998), Richards (1998) and Richards and Lockhart (1994), among others, have argued that the best way for teachers to grow professionally is to become reflective practitioners. That is, they need to study their own practice and use the data from such study to evaluate and change their practice as appropriate. As Yates and Brindley (2000: 1) note, 'One insight that emerges consistently from these studies of language teachers at work is that teachers learn by doing, by reflecting and solving problems, and by working together in a supportive environment'.

Much has been written about the professional development opportunities that are provided through action research. This paper looks at teacher 'doing', in addition to action research, that can provide opportunities for reflection on practice and evaluation of practice that has led to change. This

paper reports on the reflections of three teachers, two of whom were involved in a research project with us. The third, who began in the project as a research assistant, interviewing and observing a bilingual Russian/English class, eventually became the teacher of the class. We draw also on her reflections as she moved from research assistant to teacher.

Historically, within the Adult Migrant English Programme (AMEP), where this study took place, it has been claimed that research studies, as well as answering research questions, provide professional development for teacher participants (see, for example, Burns 1999). In this study, we set out to determine the impact of participating in an AMEP research project on teachers' knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and practices (Freeman 1998).

The literature on teacher professional development is vast. In the next section, therefore, we provide a broad review of the different approaches to professional development that have been reported.

Teacher professional development

Much has been written about the lack of uptake of traditional professional development activities such as conferences, workshops and even pre-service education (Bartels 2005). These activities fall under what Wallace (1991) calls the applied science model in his framework, that is, the linking of research with teaching practice by providing research-based training to develop teachers' skills. This lack of uptake is because 'knowledge and skill cannot be transmitted' (Burton 1998: 24); rather, teachers learn from their practice of teaching by trying to make sense of it and developing their own principled understandings of their own practice.

A number of alternatives have been suggested, including action research, teacher-as-researcher, mentoring, cooperative development and reflective teaching, which fall under two of the models Wallace (1991) proposes in his framework for foreign language teacher development: the craft or mentoring model, and the inquiry or reflective teaching model. The craft or mentoring model, as its name implies, brings together a more experienced, knowledgeable colleague and a less experienced colleague. Many institutions and even governments (for example, California's teacher induction programme for beginning teachers [California Department of Education 2005]) use a mentoring approach that is structured and institutionalised. The inquiry or reflective teaching model involves teachers becoming active researchers as they read, observe, critically analyse, reflect and share.

Action research, the best-known exemplar of teacher inquiry, has often been recommended as a professional development and as a research activity (Wells and Chang-Wells 1992; Edge and Richards 1993). In particular,

collaborative action research has been found to support teacher learning (Burns 1993; Bottomley, Dalton and Corbel 1994; Wells 1994; Burton 1997). Burns (2000: 32), for example, notes that:

Such evidence as exists in the ESL [English as a Second Language] teaching field seems to point to the capacity for collaborative action research to reduce teachers' isolation and to help them generate rich insights about classroom practices and to enhance their own theories about teaching and learning.

Reflective teaching is often considered as a separate activity to these other non-traditional orientations (for example, Bartlett 1990). It has been defined from different points of view, for example, from a cognitive perspective, as in classroom-based processes of thinking (Cruickshank *et al* 1984), and also from perspectives that highlight the potential for sociocultural empowerment, as teachers 'reflect on the origins, purposes and consequences of their actions, as well as the material and ideological constraints and encouragements embedded in the classroom, school, and societal contexts in which they live' (Zeichner 1981–82: 4).

Yet reflective teaching can also be an aspect of action research, teacher-as-researcher, mentoring or critical pedagogy. Indeed, most of the proponents of these professional development activities would assume that reflective practice was both a part of the process and a product of the process. Many other strategies in addition to action research have been used as tools for teacher reflection – diary studies (K M Bailey and Ochsner 1983; Allwright and K M Bailey 1990), learning logs (Porter *et al* 1990), teaching portfolios (Lyons 1998; McLaughlin *et al* 1998; Bullock and Hawk 2001), peer coaching, where teachers observe each other's classrooms – and provide feedback and develop new insights (Nunan 1989).

A number of teacher educators have suggested frameworks that attempt to bring together these various approaches to professional development (for example, Murphy 1994; F Bailey 1996; Clarke and Hollingsworth 2002; Edge 2002). Murphy (1994: 7) posits six principles for the processes of teacher 'acquisition of language teacher abilities' and the 'development of ... [their] conceptual understandings, knowledge and beliefs', namely:

becoming well informed, investing in one's own teaching, collaborating with other classroom teachers, exploring promising strategies of *effective* L2 [second language] teaching, recognising processes, strategies and styles of L2 learning and language use, and participating in continuing professional development opportunities. (Murphy 1994: 10)

Taking a different approach, Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002: 948) ground professional development within the notion of teacher change. They

therefore draw on the literature on managing change to present a framework of six perspectives on teacher change as training, adaptation, personal development, local reform, systemic restructuring and growth or learning.

Edge (2002) has worked for over a decade in refining his concept of cooperative development (see article this issue), which, while a reflective teaching approach, focuses on the interaction among colleagues who, through listening and responding in a non-judgmental way, learn more about themselves and their practice. Edge's model is in sharp contrast to the mentoring model because of the focus of the latter on a more experienced other trying to change a colleague's practice. He does not preclude class visits, discussion groups and so on; rather, he sees cooperative development as adding:

to our possibilities by offering a voluntary discipline which deliberately excludes the exchange of everyday conversation and the strengths of adversarial discussion in order to emphasize and develop our abilities to draw upon ourselves. (Edge 1992: 70)

F Bailey (1996: 261) differentiates between cooperation and collaboration, with the latter focusing on 'learners working and learning together'. What is common among all these approaches is that:

if we want to improve our teaching through reflective inquiry, we must accept that it does not involve some modification of behaviour by externally imposed directions or requirements, but that it requires deliberation and analysis of our ideas about teaching as a form of action based on our changed understandings. (Bartlett 1990: 203)

Additionally, collaboration is seen by many teacher educators and researchers as facilitating professional growth. As noted above, Burns has identified that collaborative action research is effective, not only because of the opportunities for personal reflection and action, but also because of the collaboration. Similarly, Gore (1987) notes that sharing among pre-service teachers helps them view their own understandings as valid, rather than inferior to published research, and results in strong collegiality, while Murphy (1994: 15) asserts that 'L2 teachers benefit from focused collaborations with peers who share similar interests'. Such collaboration provides opportunities for teachers to break down the isolation of teaching behind closed doors and to develop communities of practice in which teachers learn from and support each other.

Others have viewed professional growth as 'professionalism' (Crandall 1993; Hargreaves 1997; Burton 1998) in an attempt to focus on professional development as lifelong learning, not something that can be developed in one-off workshops or conference attendance. Despite this constant theme

in the literature, in many publications and much research, professional development is narrowly interpreted as participation in workshops and conferences, with no explicit focus on reflection and change in practice (see, for example, Beale 2003, who surveyed a professional association concerning its professional development needs).

Reflection on one's professional teaching practice can therefore be seen as involving a relationship between the individual teacher's thought and action, a relationship between the teacher and his or her colleagues, and a relationship between the teacher and the wider sociocultural environment. In the research study reported here, the teachers involved reflected on their practice through data collection and reports, shared their experiences with each other and the university-based researchers, and also viewed their practice in the broader environment of the value of immigrants' home language, both in the classroom and outside. While the latter was not an explicit focus of the study, the teachers themselves noticed how their attitudes to the use of the first language (L1) in the classroom (and those of others) changed and how they valued what the language learners brought with them (see Murray 1992 for a discussion on the power of learners' L1).

The initial research project

The initial project involved 14 teachers from several different English language centres in two states in Australia which deliver the AMEP. The initial research project and the follow-up study reported here were conducted as part of the research programme of the AMEP Research Centre, which provides research, professional development and resources for the programme.

The initial project used a mixed research methodology over a period of two terms – collaborative action research, together with classroom observations, interviews with teachers, focus group interviews with learners and learner questionnaires. The goal of the project was to document uses of L1 support in the adult English language classroom that facilitated English language acquisition. As teachers reflected on their practice and shared these reflections in joint supportive meetings, we became aware that they were developing professional expertise in the management of L1 in their classrooms. At the same time, one of the teachers (Ludmilla) left the centre where she was teaching her bilingual Russian/English class and the research assistant (Natasha) we had hired to conduct interviews and class observations, also a native speaker of Russian and a trained teacher, was invited by the centre to take over teaching the class. We were therefore aware that both Ludmilla and Natasha had stories to tell about their reflections on the teacher/research assistant nexus. We therefore interviewed one teacher from

each of the providers (Shirley and Zena) and Ludmilla and Natasha to explore the ways in which their perceptions and practices changed as a result of the project.

The follow-up study

The follow-up study focused on how involvement in the project had contributed to the teachers' professional development. They were interviewed in depth some three months after the study. In the period immediately preceding the interviews, all the teachers (with the exception of Natasha) had written a chapter for publication on their approaches to the use of the L1 in the classroom, focusing on good practice (see Murray and Wigglesworth 2005). Each teacher was able to incorporate a different approach to their use of the L1 in the classroom – Ludmilla was a bilingual teacher with a bilingual class, which was learning citizenship content; Zena had bilingual assistants in her classroom who assisted the major language groups for two one-hour periods per week; and Shirley used bilingual input sessions and could access limited bilingual assistance for some of the learners from higher-level learners training for a certificate in education. The interviews were semi-structured around a set of guiding questions, as outlined in Figure 1.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Have you ever had any formal training or professional development in the use of L1 in the classroom? If yes, what, when, where, how? 2 What were your reasons for being in the project? Was your own personal or professional development a component of your reasons for participating? What did you hope to get out of it? 3 What specifically did you learn from the project regarding language learning strategies, language learning itself, content, including settlement, and classroom management? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) from your own practice b) from group meetings you attended 4 How did you incorporate what you learned into your classroom? Please give specific examples. 5 What didn't you incorporate and why? 6 What do you still not know and would like to know about the use of L1 with your particular learners? |
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Figure 1: Interview schedule

Each participant was interviewed individually by one of the researchers using the interview schedule in Figure 1, but the participants were encouraged to expand upon particular issues they found important and to discuss these in greater depth. For Natasha, the questions were slightly varied to make them relevant to her different circumstances. Being self-report data,

we do not have objective measures of how teachers' behaviours changed as a result of the initial project, but we do have insights into how teachers' attitudes to L1 use and perceptions of their own practice changed.

In the section below we examine, first, what the experienced teachers gained from the project in terms of their own professional development, and then Natasha's insights both as research assistant and subsequently classroom teacher. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of such a project with respect to teacher professional development.

Findings

THE EXPERIENCED TEACHERS

Choosing to use L1 to support English language learning

Traditionally, the use of L1 in the adult language classroom has been viewed rather negatively (see Wigglesworth 2005 for a discussion of the issues). Probably as a consequence, ESL teacher professional development has not focused on the use of L1, and three of the four participants in this study reported that they had received no training at all in the use of the L1 in the classroom, either as part of their teacher training or as a component of their professional development, and that there has been a strong focus on using the second language as widely as possible, as Ludmilla reports.

EXTRACT 1: LUDMILLA

As I say we try to minimise the usage of first language as much as possible, using demonstrations, role-plays, build your language as much as possible instead of using first language ...

The fourth participant, Zena, however, had attended a conference a couple of years prior to this study in which one of the focuses had been the use of the L1 in the classroom. She had found this particularly stimulating and exciting.

EXTRACT 2: ZENA

Zena: ... I think it was a TESOL conference in Adelaide and that was the first time where I listened to really, really thought-provoking presentations by J and M and Gillian. They all talked about some research projects they have finished and E.

Interviewer: Oh yes, yes.

Zena: She talked about the Chinese L1 support in particular. So, I found it really interesting and because this notion got such a great importance during the conference, I just felt something is going

to happen eventually in this field. But I always felt a need for ... so I was pretty excited about it. And I was very happy when a few years later [this project] came along and I could join in ... And I got all the handouts from the presenters and interesting readings. So, I really found it fascinating what sort of things can be done.

For all the participants, their interest in the use of L1 in the classroom had been, in part, a result of the changing nature of the immigrant classes they were teaching. Patterns of immigration in Australia have changed considerably over the last five years (Murray 2003), with more learners arriving with minimal previous schooling and many with no literacy in their home language. This has meant that teachers have been required to reassess their teaching practices to some extent, and, for some, this has involved consideration of the ways in which the first language could be incorporated into the classroom, especially trying to make instruction accessible to beginning, pre-literate learners. This was clearly the case for these teachers, as Ludmilla explains.

EXTRACT 3: LUDMILLA

I was teaching the same class with basically the same students for much longer than normally you would be teaching any ESL class, because that, that class was low intensity and the students were only ... using four hours a week so I was sort of stuck at the end. I couldn't think of any new ideas or any new approaches or anything that was my really personal reason to be interested to put something, you know, relate it to the class but different at the same time ...

Teachers learning from each other

This type of project, in which there is the dual purpose of involving teachers in research and using this involvement as a mechanism to enhance the professional skills of teachers, has been used extensively in the Australian AMEP. The structure of this project, in particular, which included teachers from both states coming together for joint sessions, meant that teachers were able to discuss relevant issues and learn from each other.

EXTRACT 4: SHIRLEY

Shirley: I feel that any group meeting of teachers working within a similar parameter, you do learn quite a lot, because just being able to have cross-referencing of ideas and strategies and issues and what works, what doesn't work. I think that's always very helpful anyway, as an opportunity to knuckle down or particularly when you've got a very specific topic, you're not going to be going off on lots of different tangents. To be able to actually nut out some,

you know, what does work and how we can make more things work etcetera, etcetera. And I think it's just good meeting other colleagues on a ... who do have a specific interest ... is very helpful ...

EXTRACT 5: LUDMILLA

Ludmilla: ... well, the language learning strategies, I would say when we were discussing these things, at our meetings, we [talked] to other teachers using L1 in their classroom, was extremely, extremely useful for me and the first, let's say, I would try to modify the content, the techniques they were using to my content and, you know, just, I was doing a bit of modelling, I should say ...

Interviewer: Sure.

Ludmilla: ... and I was learning because I wasn't aware of those techniques at all to start with.

All the teachers found that they adapted their practice as a result of their involvement in the project. They learned strategies for using the L1, and their participation in the project, the data collection and their meetings with other teachers allowed them to reflect positively on the ways in which the L1 could be used in the classroom.

EXTRACT 6: ZENA

Interviewer: What specifically did you learn from the project, from the group meetings and from hearing from what some of the other teachers were doing?

Zena: It was really interesting to see how the people who teach other type of classes, like citizenship classes, this Russian woman who is a bilingual teacher and she told a Russian-speaking group how they use the first language in those classes. And it was really interesting to see what happens. And somebody talked about out of classes activities, or how they combine L1 activities or guest speakers out of the class time or before classes or after classes.

The teachers gained insights and ideas from the group meetings, which they were able to incorporate into their classrooms.

EXTRACT 7: LUDMILLA

Interviewer: ... just examples of things that you incorporated into your classroom that you learned during the project ...

Ludmilla: Yes, yes, yes, let's say I do remember the, one of the examples.

I can't remember the name of that ... [teacher whose] first language was Vietnamese, and she was talking about the, some of the vocabulary she was teaching and she was trying again, she was trying not to use the students' first language, when she was offering pictures and words and she wanted them to match pictures of the word and the picture and the student confused, you know, the pictures and the meanings and she said that her first language was the only way for her to clarify these misunderstanding and she said that she's seen the same mistake many, many times and she could not understand why, but when she did it in her first language, she could even bring this thing to the classroom, because she knew the reason of this misunderstanding of this. And I started using again a lot of the stuff she mentioned there, in my classroom ...

Applying the new learning in different contexts

The skills the teachers learned during the project were ones they found able to continue to use with further classes. This was the case despite the fact that they might be teaching different class levels and different groups of students. Shirley's response to a question about the ways in which she incorporated what she had learned from the project into her subsequent classes illustrates this point.

EXTRACT 8: SHIRLEY

Shirley: Well, I'm still using some of the strategies I used, where encouraging students to share their ideas, sometimes even at the beginning of a class I'll say, 'okay, talk about the vocabulary in your own language, translate it into your own language', then ... it will assist understanding ... I suppose one of the other strategies I'm using, I'm really encouraging the students to use their dictionaries far more and also encouraging them using English-only dictionaries, whereas last year with the certificate ones, a lot of our vocabulary work, new vocabulary work was just encouraging students to use their L1 dictionary ...

Issues

As a result of being involved with the project, the teachers became aware that there were a number of areas where there could be some improvements. For example, all the teachers felt that there was a need for more access to materials. When asked about what she had learned from her involvement in the project, for example, Zena mentioned this specifically.

EXTRACT 9: ZENA

Zena: I really would like to have more L1 materials for that kind of thing. We have some and I have used the literacy workbook which has been translated but not into enough languages, unfortunately we have only limited translations. That is a very good resource for low level. And we would like to get more like that. And we have some computer software translated into different languages but not enough, really, for this lower level. So, I think for the settlement issue, we should get more translated materials in two languages – one sheet in their language, the other side in English – so we could use ...

The importance of providing training for the bilingual assistants was also widely recognised. Bilingual assistants play an important role in the classroom, but the teachers felt that it was crucial that, in order to be most effective, they needed to be trained in the most appropriate methodologies and approaches to the use of the first language.

EXTRACT 10: ZENA

Zena: ... they were low-level classes and I just had my feelings confirmed that we really, really need bilingual support for low-level classes. It is such a great help for them, it is so beneficial to them in so many ways, but there are some traps we have to be aware of when we use them. The conclusion I drew to myself was that it is necessary, absolutely essential in a low-level class. But it has to be planned very carefully how to use them and how to use the first language in different strategies, teaching methods. And it has to be controlled. So, I really have to sort of train the bilingual support, what I would like them to do, how much help I would like them to provide to the students, when not to say anything because students tend to rely on the bilingual support towards the end of the class. And it was a complaint from other teachers who got students from classes where the teacher was bilingual, for example Chinese–English. And students got used to it so much that it was so difficult for the monolingual English–English teacher to take that class on because they got used to that.

Zena also argued that teaching organisations should provide training not only for the bilingual assistants, but also for the teachers working with bilingual assistants – most teachers do not have the opportunity to work in a project such as this one and thus to learn from each other in the same kind of way.

There was also a concern for how to teach a class where some learners

have access to a bilingual assistant and others do not (see Extract 11). This was a relatively widespread concern, which had been raised by the teachers in their written reports at the end of the project (see Murray and Wigglesworth 2005). Given the nature of many AMEP classes with learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds, this is likely to be an ongoing issue that will need to be addressed. It is important to make sure that learners who do not have access to L1 support do not feel disadvantaged or that they are being treated unfairly.

EXTRACT 11: ZENA

Zena: The problem areas – what I realised during my own practice and my own experience during the project – was that it's a major problem for those groups who don't have bilingual support. So, I think that has come up a lot during the whole project and other people talked about it as well. It is a big problem and I really don't know how to get around it. I tried my best to think about seating arrangements, providing some other kind of extra help to these people who feel they are treated unfairly. It is a bit of a problem.

A final concern raised was whether some of the strategies that learners themselves spontaneously use are appropriate.

EXTRACT 12: SHIRLEY

Shirley: I do have a few students who I do use in the translation method at the moment, where they're writing an essay, for instance, if they write in their L1 and then translate it ...

Interviewer: Right ...

Shirley: ... and whether that's a strategy that they've used or developed and decided in the previous class, I'm not quite sure but I'm trying to discourage that and maybe I'm not doing ... maybe there's no reason to discourage, I'm not quite sure, so perhaps to find out more about that would be interesting ...

Interviewer: So finding out more about the types of strategies that the students themselves use and why they use them?

The role of the project

Overall, the teachers found the project to be advantageous to them in terms of professional development, allowing them to develop skills and consider alternative points of view that they had not previously had the time to contemplate in any serious manner.

EXTRACT 13: SHIRLEY

Interviewer: Do you feel that you learned, in terms of yourself as a teacher and your profession, that the project was a learning experience for you?

Shirley: Definitely.

Interviewer: And what did you learn from it?

Shirley: Well, I think, reinforcing the fact that we all know that different students are going to want support, we know that anyway but that was reinforced in a very practical way. And even now that I've got a higher-level class, realising the importance for allowing some students to be able to get that L1 support from another student in the class, or to encourage students to explain something that they've actually learned to another student. That gives them a sense of achievement ...

Interviewer: So actually encouraging if they've actually learned something, to explain that to other ...

Shirley: ... somebody else, and it also reinforced for me that they actually understood, because if the second student understood what they had explained, they were obviously on task and had understood the content. So even though I have a certificate two I still use L1 occasionally, but not as much as I would have certificate one ...

The project for these experienced teachers was valuable (although perhaps a bit long, taking place over two ten-week terms – Shirley: 'I found it interesting, the only other thing I found it a bit long') and enabled them to reflect on their practice, at the same time as learning new ways of using the L1 in the classroom.

EXTRACT 14: SHIRLEY

Interviewer: And can you just summarise the positive things for me?

Shirley: Well, learning new strategies; thinking about things in a different way or opening doors I suppose; having opportunities to discuss issues with other teachers and [discuss] them with yourself as well ...

THE RESEARCH ASSISTANT/TEACHER PERCEPTIONS

Natasha was a trained ESL teacher working towards a higher degree in applied linguistics when the opportunity arose for her to work with Ludmilla as the research assistant in the data collection phase of the project. As a Russian/English bilingual herself, Natasha was perfectly placed for the

role. Unexpectedly, this turned into a professional opportunity when Ludmilla took a position elsewhere and Natasha was offered the position teaching the bilingual class. Natasha's perceptions are briefly discussed below.

Learning from observation

Since Natasha's relationship with the project itself was as a research assistant, there was no expectation that her role as a teacher would necessarily be enhanced through participation in the project and, of course, it had not been anticipated that she would subsequently become the teacher of the bilingual class. However, as it turned out, she was able to both learn from the project and put what she learned into practice in the classroom.

EXTRACT 15: NATASHA

Natasha: Well, I would say L1 was very useful. Probably one of the observations was using while teaching grammar, that would be one of the key points, because they're elderly speakers and they have a lot of problems with understanding it and they couldn't understand it in English at all. And regarding the content, yes it's very important, it always depends on what the topic of the lesson is, what is it about? So if you're dealing with something that you cannot really relate to in your own culture or you know regarding your own country, you need to give explanation in L1. Yeah and it probably, it is one of the strategies, so using L1 but you need to find the balance, you need to find the balance how to use L1 in the class ...

Interviewer: And what do you think the balance, I mean from your observations, what would you think would be a good balance? Do you think it changes over time?

Natasha: It can vary, yes, it can vary from class to class, that's right, but the right balance would probably be using 25 to 30 per cent. Like, as for that group, 25 to 30 per cent of L1 would be really good ...

It was clear that Natasha learned a great deal from her observations of Ludmilla.

EXTRACT 16: NATASHA

Interviewer: How do you think the L1 worked with [the citizenship course]?

Natasha: I think it worked very, very well because vocabulary was very difficult, there was so much terminology. So I think the structure of the whole lesson, what she did was really great, because they understood everything and then the following class they could answer everything. It was really good ...

Interviewer: And she always followed it up in English?

Natasha: Yes.

Interviewer: In the following class?

Natasha: Yes, yes, she followed it up in English. It was really good. But I think I borrowed a lot of things from her, yeah, that's right ...

Interviewer: Can you give me some examples of things that you borrowed from her?

Natasha: Well, giving explanation ... when I see that the class is stuck, like I'm saying something and they really don't understand that, and I like the way she did it. She writes it on the board, she always writes it on the board, that's what I'm trying to do as well, and she tries to work around it, she still tries to explain it in English. If they don't understand you can put some Russian words, try to give explanation and when they don't understand it at all, that's when you use Russian ...

Issues

Like the teachers involved in the project, Natasha was concerned about learners becoming too reliant on their L1.

EXTRACT 17: NATASHA

Interviewer: So the danger is it's very easy to fall into a situation where they just use Russian all the time ...

Natasha: Yeah.

Interviewer: And think they learn in English?

Natasha: Yeah, that's right.

Interviewer: Do you find that you have to be really aware of that all the time?

Natasha: Yes, yes. I have to be aware, because it's so easy to switch to Russian as well, so I have to be aware all the time that it's not happening ...

This is always a concern, and is related to the important issue discussed above of training – both for teachers and bilingual assistants. One way to reduce the likelihood of reliance on the first language is to ensure that teachers and bilingual assistants who work with learners using the first language have strategies and methods available to them to allow them to withdraw L1 support slowly and appropriately as the learner's second language improves.

Conclusions and implications

A number of aspects of professional development reported in the literature were present for these teachers during this project. The three teachers had numerous opportunities for reflection on their practice through inquiry into their own classrooms, and through engagement in discourse that built on current knowledge to construct new ideas about practice. Over the period of the project, these teachers were able to develop a community of practice with the others involved in the project, and with institutional support for their participation. Such institutional support has been considered vital to sustain ongoing reflective practice. Ludmilla, on the other hand, had opportunities for non-judgmental peer observation and reflection on her own practice, again with institutional support. These teachers all agreed that they learned from their participation in the project because they were able to learn from each other and reflect on and change their own practice through collaboration as peers, rather than through experts trying to change them. The challenge for such projects, and for these particular teachers, will be how to sustain this way of thinking and doing teaching now that the project has concluded.

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