‘There isn’t one voice in this book; there isn’t a single tune.
What we hear are critical voices, contesting voices, supporting voices, experimental voices, voices of learners, voices of migrants, voices of women.’
PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER N. CANBLIN

*Teachers’ Voices* focuses on classroom research and curriculum renewal in action. It contains first-person accounts by a number of experienced ESL researchers and teachers of how the introduction of a new competency-based curriculum has had an impact on their own practices in learner-centred course design and on classroom processes and interaction.

This book is of interest to teachers concerned with the process of professional development and particularly to those involved in changing to competency-based curriculum and course design. It will also be useful for teacher educators and researchers interested in collaborative, classroom-based action research and professional development.

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY SYDNEY AUSTRALIA

There isn’t one voice in this book; there isn’t a single tune. What we hear are critical voices, contesting voices, supporting voices, experimental voices, voices of learners, voices of migrants, voices of women.’

PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER N. CANBLIN

*Teachers’ Voices* focuses on classroom research and curriculum renewal in action. It contains first-person accounts by a number of experienced ESL researchers and teachers of how the introduction of a new competency-based curriculum has had an impact on their own practices in learner-centred course design and on classroom processes and interaction.

This book is of interest to teachers concerned with the process of professional development and particularly to those involved in changing to competency-based curriculum and course design. It will also be useful for teacher educators and researchers interested in collaborative, classroom-based action research and professional development.

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY SYDNEY AUSTRALIA
Teachers’ Voices: Exploring course design in a changing curriculum

Editors:
Anne Burns and Susan Hood
## Contents

**Preface** iv  
**Introduction and acknowledgments** v  
**Framing the project** 1  
- **One**  
  Teacher researchers: Perspectives on teacher action research and curriculum renewal  
  - Anne Burns 3  
- **Two**  
  From curriculum to courses: Why do teachers do what they do?  
  - Susan Hood 21  

**Section A: Content selection and sequencing** 35  
- **One**  
  The dynamic and complex process of course construction  
  - Angela McKenna 37  
- **Two**  
  The special considerations in selecting and sequencing content in workplace courses  
  - Ann Beales 45  

**Section B: Grammar** 51  
- **One**  
  Functional grammar in the classroom  
  - Annabelle Lukin 53  
- **Two**  
  Topics, text-types and grammar: Making the links  
  - Susie Llewelyn 67  
- **Three**  
  What about grammar?  
  - Dora Troupiotis 75  

**Section C: Assessment** 85  
- **One**  
  Investigating with learners their perceptions of competency-based language  
  - Alison MacPhail 87  
- **Two**  
  Developing integrated approaches to assessment  
  - Michael Carroll 95  

**Section D: Learners** 107  
- **One**  
  The effects of educational background in the program of beginning learners: A case study  
  - Margaret Carew 109  
- **Two**  
  Competency-based vocational language learning: Exploring learners' views  
  - Vivienne Campbell 123  
- **Three**  
  Collaboration in action research: The role of the research coordinator  
  - Nan Dingle 131  

**Glossary** 137
Preface

This is a book where teachers speak. They speak about their work with their learners and their learners’ work with them. It is a book about research into teaching and how teaching can show us new ways to do research. It is a book about collaboration which shows how participation in classroom research and the taking of joint responsibility about plans, processes and outcomes can enhance the effectiveness of teaching and the relevance of learning. It is not a book about ventriloquism; those who speak do so with their own voices. They are not mimetically reproducing what they have been instructed to say. Good books engender dialogue between authors and readers, and in a similar way so does good teaching, only that dialogue is between teachers and learners, between learners and their families and peers, and between teachers and their colleagues. In that sense, this book is a conversation, not a homily.

There are many voices in this book: teachers, researchers, learners, curriculum organisers, writers of syllabuses, creators of frameworks for learning and teaching. Each of these voices is, however, more than one voice. All the characters speak as it were interdiscursively, tracing in what they write the voices of others’ experiences and others’ worlds of teaching and learning. They are giving voice to those who have silently contributed to their scripts. There isn’t one voice in this book; there isn’t a single tune. What we hear are critical voices, contesting voices, supporting voices, experimental voices, voices of learners, voices of migrants, voices of women. Voices from Vietnam, El Salvador, Palestine, Afghanistan, voices from Australia. In a way, this book is a chorus, participative and inclusive, not didactic and not transmissively informational.

Not that we don’t learn from these voices. We learn about classrooms and what exploratory learning uncovers for its beneficiaries, the teachers and the learners. We learn that teachers’ voices about their experiences both inform and clarify, working through self-speaking towards understanding — of grammar, of writing, of learning beyond language. We learn about training voices, developing their capacity to project experiences beyond particular classrooms to issues of social life and to new ways in which learning can take place. ‘I love to do the learning skills discussion’, says one voice and in so speaking revalues mere competency to encompass capacity.

Expression has its obverse in interpretation. As we voice, we reveal our understanding. If you want an example, listen here to what teachers have to say about relevance and hear how amid current pressures towards educational convergence learners’ voices can still encourage teachers to assert their individuality. Voices have to be recorded to have lasting effectiveness. If they are not, they get lost in the wind. Voices need mouthpieces, spokespersons to speak out and be heard. That’s the job of interpreters, of editors — here Anne Burns and Susan Hood. Not that they are actors only, they too have their voices, telling their experiences, but with different accents from teachers and from learners. Similar stories, told in harmony, collaboratively engaging research and practice so that these also speak with the same voice.

Professor Christopher N. Candlin
Executive Director
National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research
Introduction and acknowledgments

Action research is increasingly acknowledged in the literature on language teacher education as a significant means of linking teacher research and professional development. However it is not often the case that the action research carried out by teachers culminates in published accounts.

This publication arose from a national action research project and initiated by the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research at Macquarie University, Sydney. The project involving professional development workshops, cycles of action research, data collection and data analysis took place over a period of twelve months from July 1993 to July 1994. Its focus was on investigating the impact of the introduction of new competency-based curriculum frameworks, The Certificate in Spoken and Written English and the TAFE Queensland Certificate in Education for Adults from non-English Speaking Backgrounds, into a large-scale national educational organisation, the Australian Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). The central questions in the project related to the nature of the changes to course design processes arising from the implementation of these frameworks, as perceived by AMEP teachers.

The project was made possible only through the commitment and enthusiasm of the experienced teachers who participated across a number of different states. Their lively collaboration and thoughtful reflections, suggestions and comments as the project proceeded have provided the basis for developing innovative and creative models for competency-based course design. This publication was not originally conceived as one of the outcomes of the project, but many of their written accounts provided such readable and insightful interpretations, that they were felt to be a valuable resource both for teachers and for teacher educators wanting professional development support for competency-based course design and action research processes.

While it was not possible to include here every contribution to the project, we would like to thank all the teachers involved for their generous commitment of time and interest.

The participating teachers in the New South Wales Adult Migrant English Service were Erica Bisits, Lesley Kenneally, Susan Law, Joanna Lewis, Annabelle Lukin, Suze Llewelyn, Wendy Mrowka, Anne Williams and Maria Wylie. Eleanor Er is to be especially thanked for her great assistance as part-time project officer between July and December 1993. In Queensland TAFE, Nan Dingle ably undertook the role of providing ongoing local coordination and support to the teachers participating in that state: Vivienne Campbell, Judith Given, Alison MacPhail and Lynda Meyer.

Chris Corbel and Chris Howell from Adult Migrant Education Services, Victoria offered their time and support as well as their considerable experience in conducting action research to Ann Beales, Margaret Carew, Barbara Gamble, Angela McKenna and Dora Troupiotis. Ruth Clarkson, Barry Hussey, Mary Kerstjens and Jill Williams from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology were also enthusiastic participants from Victoria. At the Centre for Applied Linguistics of the University of South Australia (CALUSA), Michael Carroll not only offered to participate in the project
himself but also encouraged four other teachers to work with him. Thanks go to Michael as well as to Jill Kelton, Pat Hardy, Ruth McGee and Jacqui Moller.

Catherine du Peloux Menagé and Vanessa Byrne have provided us with unstinting assistance and a wealth of ideas in the final production of this collection.

Finally we would like to acknowledge the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (DIEA) without whose NC ELTR Special Project funding the research would never have taken place.

Anne Burns and Susan Hood
Project Coordinators
Framing the project
ONE

Teacher researchers: Perspectives on teacher action research and curriculum renewal

Anne Burns
The papers in this collection grew out of a major classroom-based action research project organised by the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. The overall conduct and support of the project was undertaken by myself as a professional development coordinator and researcher based at NCELTR and by Sue Hood, my co-researcher from the NSW Adult Migrant English Service. Our investigation focused on exploring with teachers how they were going about implementing in their classrooms new competency-based curriculum frameworks which had been widely adopted in the Australian Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP).

A key assumption in the project was the belief that to be educationally valuable as well as relevant to teachers, research needs to be undertaken hand in hand with classroom practice. When research occurs separately from practice, in a 'top-down' way, the task of effecting and supporting further change in the classroom becomes particularly problematic both for the teacher and for the educational organisation. It is for this reason that the perspectives and voices of the teachers in the project are given prominence in this publication. A major motif in these accounts of the teachers' research is its participatory nature — both in addressing the questions of immediate concern in the educational institution and the professional and personal development of the teachers and researchers who were involved.

Background

The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) is a large-scale nationally conducted program, funded by the Australian Government's Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. The program employs approximately 1,500 teachers nationally and services the settlement and English language learning needs of new migrants with relatively restricted levels of English. In recent years, the AMEP has undergone major policy and curriculum changes in response to reduced immigration intake, the broad focus by the Australian Government on national vocational and educational training reform and the widespread movement towards competency and outcomes-based curriculum development. Some commentators have suggested that these changes are the most sweeping and far reaching in their effects on classroom practice in the forty-five years of the AMEP's existence (Dalton and Bottomley 1994).

A major feature of this change has been the introduction of accredited competency-based certificates and curriculum frameworks into a large-scale program which in the 1980s had adopted a highly decentralised, learner-centred and needs-based curriculum planning philosophy (see Nunan 1988 for details). Teacher education and professional development in the 1980s had concentrated largely on developing the skills of ‘the teacher as curriculum developer' (Burton 1987, Nunan 1987) within this decentralised model. It had instituted the notion of the autonomy of the teacher, as the primary decision maker in relation to learner placement, curriculum objectives, content, task and resource selection, assessment and evaluation procedures.

At the same time, there was considerable emphasis on the critical importance of developing and professionalising teachers in order to enable these curriculum processes to occur effectively. During this time, the active involvement of teachers in
curriculum development and the adoption of action research orientations to identify the concepts, principles and assumptions upon which effective course design practice should be based became well established in the AMEP. Also, the forms of action research undertaken were not so much confined to individual and localised investigations as often appears to be advocated in the literature on teacher research, but was more generally collaborative and institutionally motivated (see Brindley 1990). This meant that the outcomes could be harnessed for larger-scale institutional change and curriculum renewal.

This then was the setting into which major educational changes were being introduced in the early 1990s. These changes involved:

- a shift from an autonomous and decentralised curriculum system to one increasingly driven by external accountability and reporting on learning outcomes;
- the introduction of certification reflecting learners' achievement at various defined stages;
- the introduction of competency-based curriculum frameworks which all teachers were expected to adopt;
- assessing learners on the language competencies identified in the frameworks rather than on their overall language proficiency;
- a move away from developing and designing courses which were primarily negotiated and contextualised within the individual classroom to ones which needed to exist within a 'learning pathway' identified by the organisation;
- the introduction of a restricted entitlement of hours of language instruction for new immigrants, placing pressure on teachers to ensure learners achieved certification as rapidly as possible.

Collaborative action research

The concept of teachers and researchers as collaborators in action research is gaining ground in the professional literature (Nunan 1992, Richards and Nunan 1991) as is the notion of an 'exploratory' approach to teaching and learning, as a way of integrating research and pedagogy (Allwright and Bailey 1991, Allwright 1993). The NCELTR project, focusing as it did on a particular form of curriculum renewal in action, drew on the principles and approaches of action research. In doing so, the researchers hoped to acknowledge the ownership by the teachers rather than by the curriculum developers of the practical implementation of the new theoretical concepts and frameworks. Viewing these applications through the eyes of those teachers who needed to put them into practice involved considerably more than simply advocating that teachers adopt new curriculum approaches.

At the same time working collaboratively with others in an action research process means that teachers can simultaneously draw on and distance themselves from their established approaches to classroom action which may often be undertaken implicitly or intuitively. This process helps to build, in a collective and usable way, generalisable and realistic models for wider use by other teachers.

Described briefly, action research is based on a number of steps which progress as a spiralling and evolving process (see Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, Nunan 1989, for
extensive discussions of action research approaches and methodologies). Kemmis and McTaggart refer to four basic steps or ‘moments’ of action research: planning, action, observation and reflection. Their action research spiral is represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The individual aspect in action research

Our experience of a collaborative form of action research, rather than the more individual form represented in this spiral, suggests that a wide range of processes can be considered and drawn upon in a flexible way within the nature and context of the research focus. They include:

- **exploration**: recording or documenting in a general and relatively unfocused way any issues, questions or concerns which arise in relation to the research area.

- **identification**: identifying or focusing on an area or issue from current classroom practice for closer and more systematic investigation.
• planning: selecting a range of appropriate research methods and developing a viable plan of action for gathering data

• data collection: developing and putting into action the procedures selected for collecting data

• reflection: reflecting on and carrying out a continuing analysis of the outcomes of the data collection

• hypothesising: forming hypotheses or evaluations based on the data analysis or reflections

• intervention: changing the approaches or practices in response to hypotheses or evaluations

• observation: observing the outcomes of the intervention and reflecting on their effectiveness

• reporting: articulating and problem-solving individual observations in project discussion groups

• writing: writing up the outcomes of individual research in a report or article for others

• presenting: presenting the processes and outcomes of individual research in staff development sessions for other teachers or researchers

These processes of conducting action research should be dynamic, unfolding and mutually reinforcing. In this particular project, they were used to enhance understanding of the demands of the curriculum changes being investigated, the validity of previous teaching practices within the new circumstances and the nature of the adaptations or amendments that needed to be made, as well as whether these were related to course design and teaching practices, the curriculum documents themselves or both.

The data collection methods commonly used in action research draw substantially on qualitative and ethnographic methods and techniques. Ethnographic approaches offer contextualised and participatory ways to interpret classroom process and practice, which by their very nature are inherently context specific (van Lier 1988). Qualitative methods are usually more appealing to teachers. They are naturalistic and they bypass the difficulties of setting up experimental studies, for example controlling variables which may affect results and identifying suitable subjects for random selection to control or experimental groups.

I have set out on page 8 some of the possible action research methods we considered with the teachers in our project.
### Table 1: Methods and techniques used in action research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>journals/diaries</td>
<td>regular dated accounts of teaching/learning plans, activities and classroom occurrences, including personal philosophies, feelings, reactions, reflections, observations, explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaching logs</td>
<td>more objective notes on teaching events, their objectives, participants, resources used, procedures, processes, outcomes (anticipated or unanticipated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>document collection</td>
<td>sets of documents relevant to the research context, e.g. course overviews, lesson plans, students' writing, classroom materials/texts, assessment tasks/texts, student profiles, student records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>observation</td>
<td>closely watching and noting classroom events, happenings or interactions, either as a participant in the classroom (participant observation) or as an observer of another teacher's classroom (non-participant observation). Observation can be combined with field notes, recordings and logs or journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>field notes</td>
<td>descriptions and accounts of observed events, including non-verbal information, physical settings, group structures, interactions between participants. Notes can be time-based (e.g. every 5 minutes) or unstructured according to the researcher's purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recording</td>
<td>audio or video recordings, providing objective records of what occurred, which can be re-examined. Photographs or slides can also be included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transcription</td>
<td>written representation of verbal recordings, using conventions for identifying speakers and indicating pauses, hesitation, overlaps or any necessary non-verbal information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>surveys/questionnaires</td>
<td>sets of written questions focusing on a particular topic or area, seeking responses to closed or ranked questions/options and/or open-ended personal opinions, judgements or beliefs. Used in non face-to-face situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interviews/discussions</td>
<td>face-to-face verbal sessions conducted by researcher as unplanned, planned or structured interactions. The researcher can use previously planned questions, structured interview schedules or allow the interview to unfold spontaneously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stimulated recall</td>
<td>use of previously recorded or transcribed data to prompt responses from participants on actions, feelings, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, following events or activities being researched</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The teachers selected from this range the techniques they felt they could incorporate readily into their usual classroom activities or that they thought were the most 'comfortable' to use from a personal point of view. The accounts in this collection demonstrate the variety of methods chosen by the teachers to collect data on their own individual classrooms and learners.

**Action research: Research process and research methodology**

We began the N CELTR project with a number of research questions in mind. We believed that finding some answers to these questions would help us to support teachers as they worked to find creative solutions to planning and teaching competency-based courses. We also hoped that by working with teachers collaboratively through action research, we could clarify some of the benefits of this approach for professional development:

Our questions for the project were:

1. What issues and concerns emerge for teachers as they plan and implement a competency-based curriculum?
2. How are the teachers' planning processes realised in the classroom?
3. What kinds of course design decisions do they make and what beliefs or philosophies underlie these decisions?
4. Can models and principles of competency-based course design be identified to help other teachers?

It has sometimes been suggested that action research is not really a research methodology so much as a process of facilitating teachers' professional development and, therefore, not to be equated with 'real' or basic research. However there are a number of reasons why action research should be regarded as an acceptable and viable alternative to experimental educational research.

1. It is a systematic form of investigation and, as Nunan (1993:42) points out, fulfils three essential research components: '(1) a question, problem or hypothesis, (2) data, (3) analysis or interpretation of data.' Experimental research in language education is often regarded as more reliable as it seeks to establish cause and effect relationships and to reach external 'truths'. However it also has a history of contradictory and inconclusive results. It is also less suited to research involving complex social situations, where it is extremely difficult to control for the many variables which exist and to identify random and control subjects.

2. The research is 'grounded', or in other words embedded within a real social context, in our case that of the language classroom within a large-scale organisation. This means that it can take account not only of the classroom as a 'real' social setting, but also of the institutional factors which have an impact on the work of the classroom teacher. Grounded research allows the researchers to adopt interpretations that are motivated by data rather than by theoretical constructs alone. As action research is a highly flexible research process, it can also respond quickly to emerging political, social and educational questions.
3. The data collection methods used are generally multidimensional, allowing for a variety of data collection tools and methods as well as the perspectives of different participants in the research context. This means that the data can be 'triangulated' or in other words, come from various sources which can be tested out against each other. This process increases the reliability and validity of the participants' reflections and the project's findings and outcomes. Through the use of these various methods, the data is also systematically collected and documented for the purpose of re-evaluation and change.

4. It is genuinely exploratory and interpretive and responds to real and pressing questions which are central to the success of the curriculum innovation. Rather than evaluating the outcomes of curriculum change after the event, when they may have been unsuccessful, it can feed into them, by responding actively to the changes as they occur. In the process, it can also document emerging models of good practice for use by other teachers in a new and unfamiliar curriculum situation.

5. It breaks down the traditional dichotomy between researcher and practitioner and theory and practice. While these dichotomies continue to exist, language teaching will suffer from a partial view of what constitutes valid pedagogical theory and effective classroom practice. Moreover many teachers are genuinely interested in opportunities to theorise their practice. The benefits of teacher-researcher collaboration include: partnerships for data collection and analysis, increased knowledge of the relationships between theory and practice, the development of teacher research skills and the greater integration of empirical research with the practical realities of the classroom.

A part from the research issues outlined above, we have found in this project that being involved in action research is extremely appealing to many teachers. Michael Carroll speaks for many of the teachers in the project when he refers to it in his paper as 'a powerful form of professional development'. This is because its major precepts are essentially participatory and inclusive, rather than didactic and informational. It allows for the issues and concerns of the teacher's own classroom situation to be the major focus of enquiry. Because of this it repays the teacher's investment of time and participation, making it personally and professionally immediate and empowering the teacher through a sense of involvement and ownership, as well as recognition. As Alison MacPhail states in her article in this collection:

*I felt that my views were appreciated and it was nice not to be taken for granted.*

In our opinion then, action research breaks down the relative isolation of most teachers' work, allowing them to affirm and reaffirm what they do as well as to critique it within a supported, problem sharing and solving atmosphere. Teachers in the project made numerous comments to this effect:

*(A major benefit personally was) discussing issues re course design in a competency based curriculum with peers and trainers. At (teaching) centres very limited opportunities especially as meetings often used to disseminate administrative info by assistant principal.*
It takes time, but you get a huge return of your investment (sorry about the financial terminology).

I think it is important to be involved in action research projects — for myself — I felt less isolated, more accountable (that felt good) and part of something happening.

The need to document and formally reflect and the process of collaboration at centre, college and state levels resulted I think in a more focused and more effective course.

A major value of collaborative action research for many teachers is that classroom expertise, knowledge and skills are valued, as it is usually the case that the teachers know much more about practical implications of the curriculum innovation than the researcher does. Moreover, the teachers are much more likely to be enthusiastic about implementing changes which they feel they are directly contributing towards.

A further benefit is that it structures in a more explicit way, the self-reflection which may more be a more incidental part of usual teaching practice (Burns 1993). This means that thinking and reflection become more systematic and consciously articulated and therefore potentially leads to more lasting changes in practice. Teachers can also more effectively build their own theories and principles about what motivates their practice as they articulate the implicit beliefs and assumptions which inevitably underlie classroom teaching. In the words of one of our project teachers:

It enabled me to clarify the principles which drive my course design process.

In case what I have argued above sounds too much like an uncritical endorsement for all teachers to get involved in action research, let me point out that there are also likely to be a number of difficulties experienced in carrying out it out. The teachers in our project identified several, including:

- having the time to carry out research in addition to their usual teaching;
- the logistics of documenting or collecting data during busy classroom time;
- being disciplined and systematic about writing up or documenting the data, when it was fresh in their minds;
- uncertainty about whether what they were doing was ‘right’ and whether they were going about the data collection accurately;
- needing to have some individual contact with coordinators or others in the project to reaffirm that they were on the right track;
- revealing your teaching ‘warts and all’ to researchers and other teachers;
- the additional practical arrangements to be organised, like finding equipment and remembering to tape their classroom interaction;
- the tedium of recording problems or issues regularly and of writing about something rather than just thinking about it!
- not wanting to exhaust their learners’ goodwill if they were the major focus of the data collection;
- writing up the research outcomes for public consumption.

When asked to identify the main problem, the teachers almost universally pointed to time constraints as a major impediment to involvement in action research. One solution we attempted was to offer teachers some paid release time to attend
meetings, as well as to write up the findings of their research. One teacher, while greatly appreciating the benefits to her teaching both personally and professionally clearly valued this additional incentive when she said:

A minor point: it was nice to be paid something for the time given to the project.

Supporting action research

A key assumption that we brought to the project was that action research should not be a solitary experience, but rather a collective undertaking aiming as far as possible for genuine collaboration between researchers and teachers. We therefore devised a number of strategies intended to ensure that teachers did not feel isolated as they conducted their research.

As the main researchers, Sue Hood and I conducted two workshops which brought us into direct contact with the teachers participating in the project in each state. The first workshop gave a major role to the researchers as we assisted teachers to familiarise themselves with the concepts, steps and data collection methods used in action research. Time was also set aside to discuss with them their initial experiences and impressions of working with competency based data and to select focus issues or areas for their classroom research.

This initial workshop introduced the teachers to a wide range of techniques for collecting and analysing ethnographic data, and also encouraged them to select those they felt would be most feasible in their working situations. During the first workshop we conducted, an interesting debate occurred around the question of regularly documenting one's own reflections. We had suggested journals or diaries as one method which was widely used and frequently recommended in teacher research. However, the teachers raised a number of objections to this, as they felt it was:

- time-consuming;
- artificial, unless you were a regular journal writer and enjoyed this form of communicating with yourself;
- unfocused;
- an initially interesting, but ultimately tedious activity;
- difficult to analyse and interpret

An alternative ‘proforma’, which interestingly, mirrored the action research process itself, was devised by the first group that met. Given the teachers, concerns about the time and discipline involved in regular documentation, this proforma proved to be very ‘teacher-friendly’ and was readily adopted by groups in other locations, as it allowed them to quickly capture and record evolving issues, problems and concerns and their responses to them. One of the teachers in the project produced the following proforma record of her concerns and decisions in the early stages of her course design planning.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Action (People/Forums/Strategies/Outcomes)</th>
<th>Comment/Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23 &amp; 24/7/94 (Saturday)</td>
<td>Looking at the topic ‘transport’ and deciding what comes ‘under’ it</td>
<td>Thinking about the topic and looking through various books and real-life materials. I made a list of text-types, specific texts, tasks, grammar, vocabulary, conversational strategies etc which would need to be covered. I also listed resources which looked as though they would be helpful.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24/7/94</td>
<td>‘Division of labour’ between my co-teacher and me in a unit of work on ‘Transport and Orientation’</td>
<td>As my co-teacher was sick all week, we have not had the opportunity as yet to liaise face-to-face. We spoke on the telephone on 24/7/93 and I read out some of the texts etc. that I had listed (see above). We decided that she would deal with anything to do with trains and that I would deal with anything to do with buses and that I would also begin work on directions.</td>
<td>Dividing work up between two people is difficult to do if you don’t see each other and have to do it over the telephone. Fortunately for us, under normal circumstances we will be able to consult face-to-face and will have liaison time for this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–23/7/94</td>
<td>Gaining understanding of competencies to be assessed</td>
<td>I began to photocopy the assessment grids (with the elements etc.) and the sample assessment tasks from the Assessment Guidelines for the five competencies which will be assessed for this course. (By 27/7/93 I had photocopied the material for three competencies)</td>
<td>It is very time-consuming and expensive to photocopy all this.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Before the second workshop took place, the teachers then had several weeks in which to determine their own preferred methods of data collection, to systematically collect and begin to analyse their data and to reflect on what they were finding out. As a result, the second workshop dramatically shifted the roles and relationships between the researchers and the teachers, as it was the teachers with their heightened awareness and the evidence of their classroom data who provided the major input at this point.

The two workshops also brought ourselves and the teachers together with four locally based teacher development coordinators in the different states involved, who were well known to us and to them. These coordinators were then on hand to visit them at their teaching centres, organise additional local meetings and provide further input and support, as well as to liaise with us on the progress of the project in their locality. The local coordinators provided further advice to the teachers on selecting and using relevant data collection methods and writing up their reports, as well as individual collaboration where necessary. The formation of these teacher-researcher teams was an important aspect which maintained the teachers' sense of belonging to and being supported by the whole action research group. In her article in this collection, Vivienne touches on the benefits of being supported by this kind of collaborative approach when she writes:

the challenge and stimulation from sharing in the energy and professionalism of other teachers on the research team and particularly with another teacher researcher from my college was very enjoyable.

As the project proceeded, numerous collective and individual processes were set in place, which responded to emerging needs for collaboration or personal contact, complementary avenues for further data collection and analysis, new focus areas for investigation and the insights and input of the teachers. Table 3 identifies these various processes, which are set out sequentially here, but in fact were interwoven throughout the project:

Table 3: Research project processes and procedures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Introductory Workshop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- familiarisation with background and aims of project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- introduction to action research process, methods and procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- overview/discussion of shifts in AMEP curriculum approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- reflection and discussion of key concerns in competency-based approaches within teachers' own contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- development of proforma for systematic data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- clarification of agreed timeframes, additional sources of data, teacher-researcher teams</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2. Collaborative teacher-researcher teams</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- establishment of meeting times and action plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- interviews/discussions between teachers and researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- classroom observations and joint teaching/participation in classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- recording of discussions/observations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conditions for supporting teacher research

Currently, the teacher as researcher movement is strongly advocated in the professional literature, usually by those who are themselves academic researchers. However, the reality for most teachers is that unlike those in higher education institutions, they are not necessarily professionally acknowledged, supported or rewarded for doing research (Myers 1985). Even when they do conduct research there are many in the academic community who are readily inclined to discourage and undermine their efforts by comparing them unfavourably with their own ‘more proper’ research enterprises.

In my view it is simplistic to advocate classroom research as an additional professional obligation for teachers, without also considering how they can be sustained and
supported in the process. Based on our experiences of carrying out this project, I put forward a number of insights for teacher educators interested in conducting collaborative projects, on the conditions that enhance teachers' successful participation in classroom research. I provide examples from our project to support these ideas.

1. Provide input on appropriate action research processes and methods so that teachers can develop skills in carrying out research which can be carried over into everyday practice and to other contexts.

   Examples: Susan Law reported that she has continued since the project to document the various ‘follow-up’ activities she was devising for teaching writing.

   Vivienne Campbell suggests in her account that the research skills she has learned from her participation in the project can be used in further tertiary studies.

2. Stress that as far as possible the methods and procedures selected for data collection should be realistic or usable as part of usual teaching activities rather than posing an additional or unmanageable burden.

   Examples: The teachers in New South Wales developed the proforma as a more practical, user friendly and focused alternative to diary or journal entries.

   Judith Given developed an end of course evaluation which provided such useful feedback on the learners’ responses that it has been adapted for regular use by other teachers across her teaching program.

3. If possible provide institutional support including time or payment and integrate teacher research opportunities into other existing professional development programs.

   Example: Anne Burns and Susan Hood have brought the teachers from the project together on several occasions. They arranged for classroom release time and gave the teachers additional paid time to write up their research.

4. Set in place a variety of opportunities for sharing and collaboration with other teachers and researchers.

   Example: Chris Corbel and Chris Howell organised additional discussion meetings for the teachers in Victoria and visited them in their teaching centres on request.

   In Queensland, Nan Dingle paid a series of visits to the teachers’ classrooms and interviewed and recorded the views of a number of students.
5. Make participation in research voluntary but encourage suggestions for involving other teachers in the research.

Example: The teachers in the project responded voluntarily to a call for expressions of interest through their state programs.

Angela McKenna enlisted the support of several other teachers at her teaching centre, who responded to her questionnaire on the selection and sequencing of classroom content. This allowed her to compare her own responses with those of others in her centre and to raise their interest in classroom research.

6. Provide assistance and guidance to teachers in writing up their research, by discussing with them areas such as overall structures for writing, indications of length and relevant style.

Example: Anne Burns suggested guidelines for writing which included: 1) what I did in this project (background, context of my classroom, description of the learners; 2) my questions and the steps and methods I used in collecting the data; 3) what I discovered (major findings/insights that emerged; 4) practical models or insights I would pass on to other teachers; 5) the impact the project had on me personally and professionally; 6) attachments of materials developed for the project, e.g. surveys, interview transcripts.

7. Provide opportunities for teachers to report on their research to a wider audience.

Examples: Accounts by a number of the teachers are presented in this publication.

Lynda Meyer, Judith Given, Alison MacPhail and Vivienne Campbell presented sessions at a two day inservice for teachers in Queensland.

Michael Carroll took part in a national TESOL Teacher Education Conference colloquium in July.

Next year teachers from Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales will present their findings at an Australian TESOL Summer School session convened by Sue Hood.

In a recent article Somekh (1993: 37) suggests that:

to have an impact on institutional development, individuals at different levels in the formal and informal hierarchies need to carry out action research collaboratively. Although this is clearly much easier to establish in democratic institutions, the problems in establishing some form of collaborative action research in more hierarchical organisations need to be balanced against the difficulties in bringing about change by any other means.
I can suggest no more fitting endorsement of Somekh’s proposal than the presentation through the papers in this collection of the action research views and perspectives of teachers who are actively bringing about such change.

References


From curriculum to courses: Why do teachers do what they do?

Susan Hood
In order to contextualise the reflections, comments and conclusions of the teachers' contributions to this volume, I will begin with a brief overview of the curriculum framework, the implementation of which constituted a major curriculum change and the context for this research into teachers' course design practices. I will then draw from the research data, both that represented in this volume and from other contributions and participating teachers, to capture the diversity in teachers' practice and propose some reasons for such diversity.

An organisational perspective on the development and implementation of the curriculum

The Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) (Hagan et al 1993) was developed by the NSW Adult Migrant English Service (AMES) in 1992–1993. It is a competency-based curriculum framework structured around a social and functional theory of language, that is a theory which sees language as a meaning-making resource, and language choices as related to the social and cultural context, (Halliday 1978, 1985). The implementation of the CSWE constituted a deliberate and planned shift in curriculum model. It resulted in part from a critical awareness of the shortcomings of strongly process-oriented, individualised curriculum model of the 1980s.

The development of the CSWE was in fact the outcome of a process of change which began in the late 1980s with the publication of a series of guidelines on course design developed as part of a National Curriculum Project (Burton and Nunan 1988). By 1992, the process of developing a more systematic approach to curriculum was well underway with a national Learner Pathways initiative. This project established common language for describing students in terms of Stages (defined by a range of proficiency scale levels) and Bands (learning pace). These changes were then accelerated through policy developments and new demands for accountability in terms of reporting on learning outcomes of provision of ESL courses for new migrants. Other developments as part of the National Training Reform Agenda, opened up the opportunity for the AMES to offer students a nationally registered credential and to link English language education to the broader education and training sector through a national system of accreditation. Courses seeking national recognition had to meet agreed principles of Competency Based Training which were defined within the National Framework for the Recognition of Training (VEETAC 1992). The historical process of curriculum change in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) in Australia has been documented in several papers including those by Colman (1988a, 1988b, 1991) and Hagan (1994).

In designing a new CSWE curriculum framework, NSW AMES therefore looked to a competency-based curriculum model, not only because it provided the necessary links to other educational and training sectors, but also because it allowed the organisation to achieve the range of other policy and pedagogical goals.

In the process of curriculum renewal the organisation was looking to:

- meet diverse student needs;
- build on current practice;
- make learning outcomes explicit to students, teachers and funding providers;
- give equal importance to the development of spoken and written English;
- promote the application of a functional theory of language, with the notion of text as the fundamental unit of language;
- articulate NSW AMES curriculum with developments in the broader education and training sector;
- give recognition to student achievement through accreditation.

**An overview of the curriculum model**

The CSWE has three Stages, defined for entry purposes as a range of proficiency scores using the Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating Scale (ASLPR) (Ingram 1984). In terms of exit requirements, each Stage is described as a profile of competencies, across four domains of knowledge and learning, oral interaction, reading and writing. Each competency statement is elaborated as elements, performance criteria and condition statements. An example of a competency description from Stage 3 (English for Study) is provided on page 34 (Appendix 1).

An Advanced Certificate in Spoken and Written English (ACSWE) similarly describes a fourth Stage in the curriculum.

The CSWE has been adopted as the curriculum framework in most other state AMESs. Teachers in Queensland work within a different syllabus, which does however share a similar theoretical basis and relates to the same learner pathways model. All the contributions in this volume therefore describe course design practice with reference to the same or a very similar curriculum document. The course design action research project which has given rise to the papers in this volume, and which is described in more detail by Burns in the first paper of this volume, was initiated both as a support for and an investigation of the implementation of the new curriculum framework.

**Responses to policy-driven curriculum change**

Reactions to the new curriculum framework, from teachers and from other interested parties have varied enormously, as would be expected, reflecting the range of perspectives from which people have viewed both the product and the process. There are those who have been sharply critical of the change as indicative of an alignment of education in general with an economic agenda. Some assume that the narrow and reductionist realisations of competency-based training in some vocational contexts must necessarily be the model for all competency-based curricula. There is often an assumption that when such curriculum models are imposed from ‘above’ as a result of policy decisions, they inevitably have a negative impact and immediately change teachers’ practices for the worse and that they uniformly work to reduce, narrow and constrain course content and teachers’ best practice.

Quinn and McNamara (1993) look to the past in terms of major movements in TESOL methodology, in particular previous incarnations of competency-related approaches such as the audio-lingual movement and the ESP movement, and warn of the atomistic and reductionist features of such approaches. They dismiss these approaches as ‘distorting and trivialising’ and as failing to deal with creativity and capacity for innovation in language learning. The assumption is that current framing of ELT in
competency-based terms must inevitably follow suit and that those involved in such framing are naively unaware of the limitations of past practices.

Unfortunately they provide no critique of the more recent paradigm of communicative language teaching and appear unaware of the frustrations for both teachers and students arising from the promotion of implicit pedagogy and process at the expense of a sense of direction and of expected outcomes for teachers and learners.

Current interest in, and explorations of, the potential of competency-based training in language teaching cannot be adequately understood or critiqued without a recognition that in many ways this shift in orientation is occurring as a consequence of dissatisfaction with communicative language teaching methodologies and loosely-framed process curriculum models.

Shohamy (1993) describes several instances of deliberate and planned curriculum change, specifically through the introduction of tests. The findings she reports reflect many of the findings from this research, namely that the way the imposed curriculum change impacts on teachers' practice is affected by, for example, the newness of the change and by the teachers' participation in recent professional studies.

Given the debate surrounding competency-based models of education and training, and given the organisational aims in implementing the particular competency-based curriculum in question, it is clearly important to observe the enactment of the curriculum into course design and teaching practice, and to monitor what kinds of changes are taking place. Such research is vital in terms of evaluating the impact of the changes as well as in feeding back into a cyclical process of curriculum renewal.

A summary of research outcomes

Research into teachers' course design practices in the process of implementing the CSWE revealed a rich diversity in approaches, methods and content. This diversity can be attributed to a variety of factors and influences which appear to impact on the individual teacher's reading and interpretation of the curriculum framework within which the teacher is required to work. Documentation and discussion by teachers of their own course design practices in the course of this research suggests that these influences include at least the following:

1. The phase of implementation of the curriculum, that is whether it was a period of introduction and familiarisation, or a later phase of consolidation.
2. The teacher's skills and experience, reflected in, for example,
   - their ideological position or theoretical stance;
   - their preferred organisational principles or point of departure in course design;
   - their personality or personal orientation to the role of teacher.
3. Operational or contextual demands, including the profile of learners and the kind of provision or program.

The phase of implementation of the curriculum framework

The NCELTR research project was initiated in the early stages of implementation of the CSWE in NSW, that is within the first six months of system-wide adoption of the
framework. Some teachers participating in the project had been involved in an earlier trial or pilot implementation. Most teachers, however, were still becoming familiar with the nature and demands of the new curriculum at the time of their initial participation in the research project.

In the period of introduction and familiarisation, discussions with participating teachers, both in workshop groups and in one to one interviews, revealed a preoccupation with assessment. Teachers were concerned about the additional demands that assessment requirements made on their time; the appropriateness of formal assessment for their learners; the changing relationship between teacher and learners which resulted from more formal assessment practices and issues of validity and reliability in assessment practices.

The assessment of competencies required teachers to administer assessment tasks in accordance with a specified set of condition statements (statements of variables) and to assess against a specified set of performance criteria. For most teachers this constituted assessment practices which were much more formal than they were accustomed to. For many, it meant upgrading their knowledge and skills in formal assessment tools and procedures Many commented, during the early phases of implementation, that they were spending too much time assessing and felt this detracted from their teaching.

Some teachers questioned whether they should be using formal assessment procedures, especially for beginner level learners with minimal experience of formal education. Some were concerned about the consequences of ‘failing’ their learners.

Concerns about the changing relationship between teacher and learners resulting from more formal assessment practices, were reflected in the following comment:

I tended to (do) block assessment and I’m not sure about that any more because it flattens the class and it flattens me and I find it a bit of a...it changes our relationship... so maybe I should integrate it more across the term. I’m not sure about that because I also don’t like to keep channelling activities towards assessment all the time, so...

Given that the field of adult ESL in Australia was emerging from a period of almost total lack of formal assessment practices, it was somewhat surprising to observe in the early phases of implementation, that teachers were so immediately and seriously focused on issues of validity and reliability.

Issues of inter-rater reliability quickly came to the fore as teachers began to question the standards being applied by other teachers in the assessment of competencies. Students coming into their classes from a previous class may have been assessed as achieving a competency yet the subsequent teacher disagreed with this assessment. In other cases teachers recognised a problem in the potential to teach so closely to a competency description that students could be credited with achievement without any capacity to attend to even highly similar tasks.

You can sort of coach them up and get them through certain competencies sort of fairly easily... if (you) wanted to get them through the CSWE.
In states where there had been wide use of the A SLPR (Ingram 1984), some teachers were concerned with issues of concurrent validity and equivalences. Comments such as the following were recorded in discussion with teachers:

*A real problem with the competencies is what the CSWE actually means. I mean what's it describing about a student?*

Beyond the initial period of implementation, this same overriding concern with assessment was not evident. Once teachers had had time to become familiar with, and to adapt to the new curriculum context, there was a marked shift emphasis away from a preoccupation with assessment to a more balanced concern for other considerations. This is not to say that assessment issues did not remain important for teachers. However, teachers became more concerned with issues such how best to incorporate diverse learner needs into course design, how to respond to immediate learner needs which arise throughout a course, the integration of grammar into the syllabus in meaningful ways, and general issues of course content selection and sequencing. The papers in this volume reflect this range of concerns.

In some ways as teachers became more familiar with the new curriculum framework, there was a shift in orientation in course design from what might be described (Martin and Mathiesson 1990) as a typological view of the curriculum, that is as a taxonomy of discrete stages and tasks or competencies, which could be addressed as more or less distinct units of work, to a more topological perspective, where teachers were identifying commonalities and likenesses across tasks or competencies, and were concerned to exploit these likenesses in the development of linguistic resources which could be applied to a range of tasks. In other words, teachers were becoming more concerned for the underlying systems of language suggested (although not elaborated in detail) in the 'elements' of the different competencies as the following comment illustrates:

*I became increasingly aware of the need to ‘thread’ the elements of the competencies throughout the course.*

Initially, teachers' concerns were also focused on operational considerations. In implementing the CSWE in NSW AMES, for example, most regional program managers with the support of teaching staff, instituted a system of allocating groups of competencies to subsequent courses (or 'phases') within a Stage of the curriculum. If students were to progress through two or three consecutive 'phases' before completion of a Stage, they would be expected to be 'taught' and to 'pass' an allocated set of competencies in each class.

This practice evolved primarily in response to the pressures on some teachers (of classes expected to complete and therefore exit a stage) to assess all competencies perhaps within a ten week course. It also ensured that students merging from two different phase one classes to the same phase two class would not expect to repeat the same course content. However, by institutionalising the practice of allocating sets of competencies to subsequent courses within a stage there was the potential risk of encouraging teachers towards a narrow checklist approach to teaching within the
CSWE, and some evidence of this emerged in the early period of implementation in the discussions with teachers:

Well what's happened here is we just arbitrarily decided for Stage Two which competencies we'd assess, so that a teacher taking Stage Two phase Two could be sure that students coming from a couple of different classes, that that teacher could be assured that they had already been assessed on certain ones so that that teacher would only have to assess the other half of them.

(…)
So we just arbitrarily agreed that certain ones would be assessed in the first two weeks and certain ones in the second two weeks.

In time, however, as teachers became more familiar with the curriculum and more confident in their ability to design courses within the framework, they recognised the limitations of a narrow checklist approach to teaching and began to find more appropriate and creative ways to plan and document language learning towards competency-based outcomes. The following extract from a discussion between a researcher R) and two teachers (T1 and T2) illustrates this issue:

| T1: ‘We all know that you can’t teach everything (…) |
| Each text type does have language and whatever that has to be mastered to be able to handle…’ |
| R: ‘And hopefully it’s not exclusive to that text type either…” |
| T1: ‘but things are excluded though (…) In ten weeks (…) you can’t do everything to do with being able to speak English properly, so you are going to make choices and if you know that some things have to be assessed, that will influence your choices I suppose’ |
| R: ‘but at the same time you are developing resources that apply across text types. I mean it’s not a discrete set of language resources I mean these apply to this and these apply to this. (…) Would it be useful to have models, particularly focusing on grammatical resources and how… over various (…) and look at for say Stage One… focusing on how… focusing on past tense in oral recount might relate to recount aspects of casual conversation or might relate to other kinds of texts?’ |
| T2: ‘The point that should be discussed is about where does your grammar sit in the scheme of a competency-based (framework)’(…) |
| T1: ‘It does help you to make choices about what you are going to teach because if the performance criteria or elements (…) say that they want them to be using the past tense and they want them to be using conjunction and this and that, well you just make sure they are doing it all the time… I had a class and I made sure they said like “in the morning” and “after that” and “at ten o’clock”.
In a way if you go through all the performance criteria there is heaps to do you know(…) actually there is enough to build a course around. I suppose with the performance criteria it does give the teacher a guide of what to incorporate and do which I find quite helpful to make sure they can do this so if we haven’t done enough of clarifying or whatever we can do more, so I find it helpful.’ |

The teacher’s ideological position or theoretical stance

As indicated in the discussion above there is some evidence of an early interpretation of the curriculum framework as a checklist of performance outcomes which can be carved up and taught to in a fairly narrow and reductionist sense. Such an approach
may, as Quinn and McNamara (1993) suggest, reflect a behaviourist approach to language teaching on the part of some teachers.

The data from this research project suggests that if the teacher's theoretical stance towards language teaching and learning is a behaviourist one, then their interpretation of the curriculum framework and their course design and teaching within that framework is likely to reflect this. If a teacher's stance towards language teaching and learning is the imparting of sets of rules and is governed by notions of correctness of form, it is quite possible to continue to approach teaching from this perspective. It may be that the more explicit attention to grammar given in the CSWE curriculum framework, albeit from a functional perspective, gives greater legitimacy to the practices of teachers following a formal grammatical approach to course design based on a traditional model of grammar, than did the communicative language teaching methodologies of the 1980s.

Teachers oriented to a progressive pedagogy may well have felt constrained by the specificity of the CSWE and the requirements to attend to the achievement of particular outcomes. Nevertheless, there was evidence from the project, of teachers continuing to teach within this paradigm or to incorporate aspects of progressive methodology into their teaching. This was reflected in the value some teachers put on learner participation in course design and a preference for the course content to evolve in response to learner preferences and immediate needs:

*There are a lot of other issues that interrupt... or that you think are important or that the students bring in. And as far as materials went that I used, I also did a similar thing with that. There were materials that were satisfying the demands of the CSWE. There were things that the students were picking up while on excursions and stuff which I considered to be objectives too and there was stuff that the students were bringing into me that I either adapted or I used straight out as texts.*

It was also reflected in an orientation to particular methodologies favouring deductive, discovery learning and task-based methodologies and the promotion of engagement rather than explicit teaching of language features.

Other teachers have taken up the CSWE in ways that closely reflect the guidelines in the document itself, in what has been termed a 'post progressive' stance to pedagogy, incorporating explicit attention to 'understanding the choices available in the language and how particular choices relate to the situation and the culture' (Hagan et al 1993). The following comment was reported in Hood (1994):

*As the course progressed and as I learned more about functional grammar, I had a much clearer picture of what I was doing... Systemic functional grammar and genre... allows you to move beyond language at a sentence level, it takes account of the context, who the participants are, the power relationships, the differences between spoken and written language... (I am) more conscious of the power of language and how the traditional curriculum has favoured certain groups to the exclusion of others.*
For some teachers, the emergence of the CSWE curriculum framework corresponded to a period of change in their own teaching practices, growing out of a frustration with loosely-structured and largely implicit communicative approaches. For such teachers, the curriculum framework represented an explicit guide for themselves and their learners, framing syllabus content and expected outcomes in ways that allowed them to take a functional view of language and a socio-cultural perspective on language learning.

Evidence emerged in the project of teachers exploring ways to design courses to incorporate insights from systemic linguistics; courses where the emphasis was on developing learners’ linguistic resources and expanding their meaning potential to allow them to control specified kinds (and instances) of interactions but also to develop the resources for a critical awareness of how language was being used for particular purposes.

Differences in theoretical and ideological stance were also revealed in data on assessment practices. Some teachers, for example, interpreted the curriculum document as primarily about assessment. They read it as specifying what is to be assessed and how. Other teachers read the document as primarily about what is to be taught or learned; what it is that students should be enabled to do, and the kinds of resources they will need to control for those purposes.

Some teachers placed great emphasis on reliability and consistency in assessment and had instituted quite rigorous assessment practices, conducting assessments under ‘test’ conditions, for example, and favouring the development of standardised sets of assessment tasks. Others quite strongly opposed such an approach and emphasised the importance of assessment tasks reflecting the diversity of syllabus content that could be developed within the curriculum framework.

The teacher’s preferred organisational principles or preferred point of departure in course design

There was considerable variation amongst teachers in terms of their preferred organisational principles for course design, as revealed in the following discussion.

S1: ‘In our program band one person goes straight to a text type or competency. So that person says they are going to “do” diagrammatic texts or whatever, and not under a topic, whereas I tend to do a topic, although occasionally a text type could be a unit of work. (...) So we had transport and orientation because some of them were new arrivals and…’
R: ‘Do some teachers in your program band use a grammatical syllabus around structures, or is that difficult to do now?’
S1: ‘No not at the moment or they wouldn’t say so anyway!’

Whatever the point of departure in course design, the issue of access to resources will influence course design decisions at some stage, as reflected in the following comments:

... so I feel like it’s a day to day struggle to get materials together and to make it hang together.

I'm just thinking about my next course. I'm going to have four of the same students
so I can’t use any of my materials. I’m going to have to start from scratch again which is a terrifying prospect.

The personality of the teacher, and their personal orientation to the role of teacher

Individual differences in teaching practice at times seem to relate as much to the teacher’s personality as to other contextual or theoretical influences. This was apparent, for example, in the contrast in styles between two teachers who worked in the same teaching centre, and hence were constrained by the same organisational demands. They also shared a common interest and willingness to engage with the theory underlying the curriculum. They differed considerably, however, in their personal orientation to planning and to the role of the teacher. While one followed rigorous planning procedures, preparing thorough programs and keeping daily records of teaching, the other approached her planning in a much more “dynamic” way. Her planning was on the whole undocumented. She was keen to be responsive to the emerging interests of the students and to maintain a degree of spontaneity in the course. She commented:

I think I get bored really easily and I assume they do too.

The operational or contextual demands

These demands might relate to the profile of learners, in terms of their stage or level of language learning and whether it was a first or subsequent course. They might also relate to the kinds of provision, for example whether the course was part of a labour market program with specified syllabus content.

One teacher described some of the different learner profiles she had to accommodate within her class. For the purposes of effective course design, she identified as significant the difference between newly-arrived migrants and longer-term residents.

They were a very assertive class (...) They really liked oral activities and stuff like that. They got along so well... They got along so well the class became very much a social thing, which is good. I’m happy with that. Some of the longer-term residents resist written activities a bit. I find that ones who have transferred from DIEA (newly-arrived settlement classes) (...) they tend to do a lot of homework and stuff like that, whereas the longer-term residents, it’s a bit... you know they just resist a lot of the written... and not I think because their proficiency is... I mean their proficiency is quite high and their reading skills are quite high but I guess they don’t feel the need or something.

Another teacher felt it was more an issue of whether the students had had recent experience in formal education.

Well I have found the experience that the ones who have been in classes recently, it doesn’t have to be DIEA (newly-arrived migrants), they may have been in a previous DEET (longer-term residents) class, they were the ones that were writing more (...) and they were the ones who were progressing better.

Several teachers commented on how their course design practices were affected by the particular Stage of the curriculum at which they were teaching. A number of
teachers discussed issues in teaching very low-level learners, especially those with minimal literacy in L1 or with little formal education.

T1: ‘Lower level, Band A (0 to 7 years education) people who feel that they just can’t plan according to the competencies with their classes... it’s just not appropriate to those literacy or pre-literacy classes and as far as content goes it looks like they are choosing topic areas and developing language through that. Most people seem to be working that sort of way.’

T2: ‘The lower levels just find the competencies themselves, you know the idea of learner outcomes at that stage is really difficult in terms of... the way the students progress at that level... you know whatever you plan it just doesn’t happen.’

R: ‘So at that level there is more of a need to be responsive in selecting and sequencing content and very responsive to needs that are emerging or re-emerging?’

T2: ‘Definitely, yeah. The teachers at those levels just said that planning goes out the window basically... Everyone has said that they find it really helpful to have a plan you know just to have reference points really important... it sort of helps you in terms of... just security I mean it’s a question of security.’

Other teachers commented on the Stage in terms of the level of guidance it provided:

T1: ‘I feel like Stage Two is particularly problematic because I think that it covers... like Stage One is nice and neat. It’s zero to something and you’ve got all those sort of orientation kind of topics. Stage Three is a bit more focused because people are exiting and that gives you more of an idea as a teacher about what you are doing (...) so you can work back from that and say “so where are you going?” (...) In terms of the whole design of the course I think that Stages One and Three are much neater and easier (...) and I feel like Stage Two is sort of sandwiched somewhere in between those two, not sort of really clearly defined.’

T2: ‘The role or function of topic as a syllabus aspect (...) does seem to vary as they go up through the stages, significantly. (...)’

Particular kinds of programs place particular constraints and demands on the teacher as course designer regardless of the curriculum framework in operation. The English in the Workplace program (EWP) is a case in point. One EWP teacher commented:

Education in the workplace is a little unique in that they try to base their courses on a tripartite approach. And this is the first year that they’ve delivered the CSWE in workplaces that don’t have a particular industry certificate. There are many workplaces that we work in that have a Vehicle Builders Certificate or a Health Certificate, but many workplaces don’t, so we decided to try to use the CSWE in those workplaces that have nothing at the moment. (...)

Our (...) funding demands that we use a tripartite approach, that we try to develop courses with work personnel and the unions, with student representatives and then with language specialists. So thinking about that I did three things...I should also say that our courses have to be developed over whatever the length of the course is...before you start you have an initial tripartite meeting where the company talks about their needs, the union might offer something, there is a student representative there and then there is us. We might offer something, they will change the content around, they may change sequencing around, then the course is written and we start to teach it, and then it is reviewed at various stages.
Conclusion

What are the implications from this research for professional development and in particular for professional development in the context of curriculum change? Is it simply a matter of teachers in resilient and resourceful ways, finding that they can continue to do what they have always done and in the same ways that they have always done it, regardless of the impositions of policy or of centralised decisions on curriculum? The data presented here in some ways suggests this. And yet there is also much evidence from this research project of teachers changing their practice.

Most commonly expressed by teachers were changes related to a greater sense of the pathways along which students would progress beyond their own immediate teaching context, and therefore a need to sharpen up their planning processes, to plan in more collaborative ways, and to be more focused in their teaching. For some this meant less freedom to react to immediate concerns and contexts. For most, however, it meant a clearer sense of direction for learners and the ability to give more explicit feedback on progress.

What has emerged from the research, in the writings and discussions of the participating teachers, is the importance they gave to their participation in this project. Many began with doubts and some with misgivings about the value the curriculum changes being implemented. All concluded with positive statements about their ability to make the curriculum change work for themselves and their students. Clearly this will involve practitioners maintaining practices that they consider to be sound, regardless of whether they mirror those of their colleagues or of support resources. At the same time the experience of deliberate and focused attention on their own course design practices as they were charged with implementing a new curriculum framework, brought one or more issues into sharper focus for them and influenced their planning and teaching practices in sometimes subtle and sometimes profound ways.

References


**Colman, J. 1988a.** Curriculum structures in adult language learning: Background studies and the AMEP context. Prospect, 3,3: 299–322.

**Colman, J. 1988b.** Curriculum structures in adult language learning: Implications for the AMEP. Prospect, 4,1: 25–37.

**Colman, J. 1991.** Towards a coherent curriculum frame: Learner pathways in the NSW Adult Migrant English Service. Prospect, 7,1.


### Appendix 1: Competency Ten, Stage Three

**Purpose**
- i. has knowledge of purpose of text and can write short report

**Discourse Structure**
- ii. can use appropriate staging
- iii. can compose coherent paragraph(s) based on factual information
- iv. can use appropriate cohesive links

**Grammar/Vocabulary**
- v. can use appropriate vocabulary and grammatical forms

**Graphology**
- vi. can use mostly accurate spelling and standard punctuation, legible script

---

**Elements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Performance Criteria</th>
<th>Range of Variables</th>
<th>Examples of Texts/Assessment Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i. has knowledge of purpose of text and can write short report</td>
<td>• demonstrates understanding of purpose and presents overall meaning clearly</td>
<td>• topic familiar/relevant</td>
<td>Texts: Reports on any factual topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. can use appropriate staging</td>
<td>• structures report with appropriate beginning, middle, and</td>
<td>• recourse to dictionary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. can compose coherent paragraph(s) based on factual information</td>
<td>• compose coherent paragraph(s) based on factual information</td>
<td>• 100-200 words in length</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv. can use appropriate cohesive links</td>
<td>• links ideas cohesively e.g. conjunctive links between the sequences of sentences and paragraphs to convey relationship between events and appropriate reference is used to identify participants and events</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. can use appropriate vocabulary and grammatical forms</td>
<td>• uses appropriate vocabulary for topic and grammatical forms e.g. simple present tense; grammatical errors do not interfere with meaning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi. can use mostly accurate spelling and standard punctuation, legible script</td>
<td>• mostly accurate spelling and standard punctuation, legible script</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

SECTION A

Content selection and sequencing
The dynamic and complex process
of course construction

Angela McKenna

• Exploring my course design process . . . highlighted for me
  the need to integrate learning and teaching outcomes
  with learning and teaching processes.
The **TEACHER**

Angela McKenna is a teacher at Footscray Centre, AMES Victoria. She has taught at all levels of the Certificate in Spoken and Written English, but in the course of her involvement in this research project was implementing the Advanced Certificate in Spoken and Written English (ACSWE). It was the first time this curriculum framework had been used in her teaching centre. Angela has since been involved in other curriculum-related projects in AMES Victoria.

The **ISSUE**

The specific nature of the course objectives, in conjunction with the particular needs of the learners, present a range of considerations for the teacher as course designer. These considerations must be responsive to the dynamic nature of both objectives and needs. In this paper, I describe some of the planning decisions I took throughout a course which was designed within a competency-based curriculum framework. It provides some insights into how the introduction of a fixed set of expected learning outcomes in the form of a competency-based curriculum framework, impacted on my planning decisions. The paper focuses in particular on the selection and sequencing of course content.

The **BACKGROUND**

The class was at an advanced level and was part of a labour market program, that is a government-funded program for long-term unemployed migrants. Some of the students in the class were long-term residents who had lived, worked and raised their families in Australia over many years. Others were more newly arrived and had never worked in Australia. They came from a variety of cultural and vocational backgrounds. Some had recently undertaken other language programs; some were returning to formal study for the first time in many years.
Introduction

The relationship between the theories of language and learning and the practicalities of course objectives constitutes what could be called ‘pedagogic praxis’. This relationship is instantiated in the teaching goals and processes and in the classroom as a social context. It is necessarily a dynamic relationship with the teacher, the learners and the classroom context, all influencing the implementation of curriculum.

The elements and relationships that construct my classroom practice are illustrated in the diagram below. Requirements for accountability and for the transfer of information as well as processes of diagnostic assessment, analysis, creative design, negotiation and feedback inform the interrelationships of elements in the teaching model.

Figure One: Teaching Model

In this complex and dynamic model, the specification of learning outcomes, in the form of competencies, constitutes one among many influences on classroom practice, and therefore on decision-making in relation to content selection and sequencing.

The account below details some of the decision-making processes and considerations made throughout a course, and illustrates some aspects of the model in practice.

*Widdowson (1993) uses these phrases when discussing ESP course design.*
Establishing broad content parameters and specific learning outcomes in negotiation with learners

The course was at the level of the Advanced Certificate in Spoken and Written English (NSW AMES 1993), a curriculum framework which contains two modules. Module one comprises nine compulsory competencies and focuses on job-seeking skills. Examples of competencies include:

- Can enquire about an employment opportunity;
- Can read and interpret advertisements for employment;
- Can prepare a job application letter.

Module Two focuses on the language of the workplace and eight of the twelve competencies are to be achieved. Examples of competencies include:

- Can follow and give oral instructions relevant to the workplace;
- Can read diagrammatic and graphic workplace texts;
- Can write formal letters relevant to a workplace context.

Working initially from the curriculum specifications and conscious of the immediate needs of the students, I chose to centralise the job-seeking module and to organise the competencies from the second module (workplace language) around this. For example, I linked the Module Two competency: Can write a formal letter relevant to the workplace to the Module One competency: Can prepare a job application letter. I then surveyed student preferences for inclusion of competencies where there was some choice to be made.

A number of issues arose at this general level of planning content. Firstly, it was not always possible to accommodate the diversity of needs and preferences of students. For example, some students who had already completed Stage Three of the CSWE had successfully completed job-seeking competencies, albeit at a lower stage. The varying work interests and vocational backgrounds of the students also made it difficult to select relevant content. Generic workplace texts were only relevant if encountered within a context that was meaningful to students.

There was also an issue of relevance. During class discussion, students often commented that they would be unlikely to obtain work in the formal manner suggested by the competencies. Rather they had more chance of getting jobs through informal contacts, cold canvassing or job schemes initiated by government agencies. There was also no guarantee that these students would ever participate in full-time work again, let alone in the vocation of their choice.

I attempted to address these issues by employing the following strategies:

- I emphasised that although some students had already achieved some of the competencies in a previous course, this was an opportunity to develop a higher level of competence and confidence in these tasks. I collected newspaper texts and brochures related to these competencies, (for example, articles on How to get a job, How to apply for a job by phone, How to organise your job search). These provided the basis for reading and summary writing skills as well as further input on the procedures themselves.
I discussed with the class that while formal procedures would not always be the most likely avenue to future employment, competence in these tasks would develop a capacity for creative responses to less predictable job-seeking processes. Both the career counsellor and myself worked on encouraging an appreciation of transferable skills. Several students commented to me that they were indeed able to apply the language they were learning in the context of competencies to other contexts. They expressed more confidence generally, in approaching employers and in going for interviews.

Beyond shaping the course at a general level around specified modules and competencies, there were a number of other considerations and strategies that were important in planning my course content:

- I was keen to exploit the classroom as a context of genuine social interaction. I tried to implement classroom activities that would require students to use the classroom in this way. Students had to decide on the organisation of the classroom and decide on roles for which they would take responsibility. This involved formal meetings and small group negotiations. I also instigated a newspaper project and students coordinated the editorial procedures.

- I surveyed the students regarding preferred topics and activities. They were asked to rank in order of preference the text types within module two (workplace texts) as well as kinds of classroom activities. Some decisions on inclusion or otherwise of content, and some changes of direction were made on this basis.

- I introduced materials which explored the relationship between texts and the nature of the workplace. For example, we looked at a text that discussed the relationship between the development of bureaucracy and the development of written workplace records. We were able to extend this activity as students undertook a work experience component. They gathered texts from their workplaces which could later become the basis for classroom activities.

- My centre introduced a work skills program in which students could choose four modules for elective study. These included: English for Small Business, Pronunciation, Developing Communicative Confidence, Study Skills, Listening, Writing, Extra Computer Studies, Office Skills, Basic Workplace Skills.

- I aimed to balance the emphasis on job-seeking skills, with attention to the knowledge and learning domains of both modules. The knowledge domain looked at workplace issues such as equal opportunity, labour market conditions, trade unions, organisational structures and industry change. The learning domain looked at strategies such as goal setting, self evaluation and identifying transferable skills. I developed materials using content from daily newspapers and radio programs. The issues are very topical and relevant articles appeared almost daily. A daily scrutiny of the papers became a compulsion!

- I also decided to introduce the study of a novel. This decision grew largely out of my own interest in practical stylistics and my view that literature is very much language in use (Widdowson 1978). I also thought it would encourage reading beyond the purely informational or transactional, and again provide a balance for the emphasis on employment.
Choosing materials and activities

One of the main considerations in the selection of content is the availability of materials which are relevant to the course objectives and to learners’ needs. Another consideration is accessibility, in terms of learners being able to cope with the demands they make linguistically, methodologically and culturally.

I used course books, although with modifications in most cases, video series around work issues, resources for job seekers from agencies and community organisations including brochures and booklets, and texts such as advertisements, job applications, letters of response, course information, notifications of interview, letters from government departments and agencies and other government notices and publications. Students often brought these texts to class or collected them on excursions. In some cases we worked with the original text. In other cases I modified the text in some way for the purposes of a lesson.

I also used materials developed by students in our classroom. We created our own texts through classroom projects such as excursions, student input into classroom planning, the organisation of social gatherings outside class, functions with other classes in the centre, and other extra-curricular activities. A newspaper project generated a noticeboard and various issues arose which required negotiation and group decision-making. Texts generated in this way were truly authentic, relating to students in terms of audience, purpose and topic.

Students were also encouraged to value as learning resources all their interactions outside the classroom. They were encouraged to keep a record of all the texts they encountered or participated in, indicating their perceived comprehension and enjoyment levels.

Decisions on the materials used as content for the course were therefore made on the basis of their relevance to particular needs, their value in encouraging learner participation in course design, as well as their relevance to the specified learning outcomes of the course.

Planning units of work

Once the general parameters of the course had been established, I planned the course on a week by week basis. My intentions at this level of planning were to balance variety with continuity, and to address the requirements of the specified course outcomes, in terms of competencies and performance criteria, while covering key workplace issues.

My intentions were clear. The daily account I was keeping of my course design decision-making soon revealed that the ideal is not always attainable! As all teachers know, a variety of unpredictable occurrences will disrupt the implementation of our workplans, causing interruptions or extensions. In my case these included student requests for particular activities, or preference for a particular topic, administrative requirements of the centre, visiting speakers, invitations from other classes to participate in an activity and my own research and interests.
At one point in the course, I introduced a pronunciation component on the basis of preferences identified in a student survey. We learnt the phonetic alphabet and practised pronunciation in a variety of ways. These activities generated much classroom discussion about the nature of language and about aspects of their emerging bilingualism. I allowed the class to deviate according to this interest because I felt that it would help them develop a capacity for coping with some of the unpredictable linguistic variations that confront them. (I also found it interesting!)

I referred earlier to my decision to include the study of a novel as an integral part of the course. I chose a classic abridged text, The Tale of Two Cities, by Charles Dickens. The novel was known to most of the students and they were interested in some of the issues the novel explored. As we proceeded, I was quite pleased with myself as the students seemed to be getting so much pleasure out of it. I envisaged the development of a new syllabus based on the pedagogic tenets of stylistics and the use of literature. Alas, reality made itself known in time!

Survey results indicated that students weren’t getting much out of the novel at all; in fact it ranked last of all the activities surveyed. When I questioned the class they said they only appeared to enjoy it because I seemed to like it so much! The study of the novel did not relate to either the course objectives nor apparently to the learners’ needs or interests, so I could no longer justify its inclusion in the course.

Other diversions were taken because of occurrences in the wider context of the community, for example, changes in employment or financial circumstances, or government policies that would impact on students. I think it is most important to be aware of the social and economic realities facing students and to keep up with changes in labour market conditions and to consider their impact on course content.

**Conclusion**

Exploring my course design process in the context of teaching a vocational English class within a competency-based curriculum certainly highlighted for me the need to integrate learning and teaching outcomes with learning and teaching processes. The demands of the workplace and labour market context impact directly on the development and implementation of course design. While in some respects there are predictable and generalisable needs that will guide course specifications, there is also a need to maintain a flexibility to allow for all the necessary and some unnecessary diversions, additions and changes of direction. While my personal style is more inclined towards an emphasis on process, and I might not always be concerned with a tangible product, in the context of a competency-based curriculum, I am obliged to work towards explicit outcomes with my students. My reflection on this tension has made me more aware of some of my strengths, as well as helping me to identify some aspects of my teaching and planning that need some further investigation.

**References**


The special considerations in selecting and sequencing content in workplace courses

Ann Beales

• There were times when workplace needs would arise unexpectedly or the students’ needs, abilities or responses would dictate a divergence, reteaching or a leap ahead.
The **TEACHER**

Ann Beales has a postgraduate Certificate in TESOL. After teaching humanities subjects in secondary schools for eight years, she joined AMES Victoria in June 1993 to work in the English in the Workplace program. She currently teaches part time in that program.

The **ISSUE**

My research for this project on course design focused on an English in the Workplace (EWP) course in a metals manufacturing company in Victoria. Unlike some other workplaces in which the EWP program operates, this company did not have an industry-specific certificate. The competency-based Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) was therefore used as the framework for course design.

I was interested to document the process of selection and sequencing of content in this teaching context, as there were particular requirements and constraints imposed beyond those of the curriculum framework. The process necessarily had to involve contributions from a number of participants, as I worked closely with a tripartite committee of employer representatives, union representatives and a student-elected representative. In this paper I describe the necessarily dynamic and responsive nature of the course design process in this context.

The **BACKGROUND**

The class I was teaching was held for two hours twice a week. It was scheduled around a shift changeover to allow both day and afternoon shifts to attend. One hour of the class was held in company time and one hour in the students’ own time. When the class began there were eleven students. They had all agreed to attend English classes, although some had requested to attend and others had been asked by the Personnel Manager because he thought they could well become supervisors or team leaders in the future. Most of the students had come to Australia from the former Yugoslavia over ten years ago. Their educational backgrounds varied considerably but in most cases their oral language skills in English (Stage Three, intermediate level) surpassed their literacy skills (Stage Two, post beginner).
Introduction

The selection and sequencing of content for delivery of courses within a workplace is a complex process with many factors affecting what is actually taught and when. Decisions are not just made at the beginning of a course, but are reviewed and revised constantly throughout a course.

I used the following proforma to record my own decision-making throughout the course:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Competency-based content</th>
<th>Comments relating to content</th>
<th>Critical incident/content change</th>
<th>New direction</th>
<th>Useful content but unrelated to CSWE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

I also devised a questionnaire to ask other relevant people, including the Personnel Manager, for reflections on their decisions relating to course content.

After initial discussions with company personnel responsible for the program at the worksite, and discussions with learners about their goals and needs, I developed a course outline which was submitted to a tripartite meeting for possible modification. There were three tripartite meetings for the semester; one in February to finalise the course outline, one in April to examine course progress, and one in June when a final course report was presented, including data related to assessment.

The students’ contributions to course planning

Student representation in the tripartite meetings was one way in which the students could participate in the decision-making process and help to shape the course. I found that student input through this process was not strong at the initial meeting in February, but was became stronger by the second meeting in April. By then, the students had gained in confidence, understood how the classes worked and were willing to participate more actively. At this second meeting, the student representative requested, for example, that the course include some more general reading material rather than only material relating to the workplace. This was accommodated in revisions to the course.

Of course, student input also occurred in the context of the class. The students would regularly bring material to class with requests for assistance and I was always looking for ways to incorporate this into the course. As far as possible, I wanted to cover these requests as soon as students asked, because I wanted to encourage their input into what was taught. I also thought that learning would be more likely to occur around an immediate need. Fortunately their immediate needs most often reinforced or extended the competencies set out in the course, although they often resulted in a reorganisation of the planned sequence.
I noted in week two, for example:

I was really keen to focus only on the language points of reporting an accident. However, in the introduction to the first lesson, it became apparent that there was confusion about who to report an accident to first, and general company policy regarding accidents. This led me to invite a Health and Safety Officer to talk to the students about reporting accidents and injuries.

In week three, I noted:

...However, all the best plans went astray when I was asked to work through a company letter “Notice To Shareholders” with the students, as many were shareholders in the company. They had seen it on the noticeboard, but couldn’t understand it.

In week six, I noted:

The students have asked to complete a medicare form for their private use, e.g., when a child is sick and the doctor does not bulk bill. This new direction will be tackled next week.

I also tried to take account of students’ preferred learning styles and speeds. Many of the students were in their forties and wanted to learn in ways that did not require them to be ‘active’ or to take great risks. Moreover they had not been in a formal classroom for many years. It was important to select course content which was achievable within the very limited class time available. I noted at one point:

I didn’t change... the language content... in these lessons. However, I did slow down the pace at which I had planned to cover the content because the students were very worried about participating in meetings.

At times I needed to extend the students beyond what I had planned. I noted at another point:

Many students had greater previous knowledge and experience of reading graphs than I expected, therefore the content involved became more complex than originally planned.

Some students appreciated variety in content and methodology while others felt more comfortable with very predictable patterns of teaching. In week three of my course, I decided to reorganise the planned sequence of material because I felt that they needed a change from company texts and wanted some more variety in the course content. I noted:

Just beginning to get a feeling that some students are getting slowed down by too much company text work, so I decided to try to reinforce similar language skills using general interest texts.
Taking account of the company’s needs

Of course, the company needs also had a high priority in my planning decisions, and workplace language was a fundamental part of the course content. I ascertained the workplace needs in two ways. Firstly, I asked relevant staff, including trainers, managers and supervisors, for their input. They also gave me access to texts and assisted in arranging observations of workplace communication. The personnel manager explained that he based his suggestions for course content on the documentation required in the job and on his assessment of individual’s needs to help their career paths.

Secondly, I watched the work done by the students, for example, their position on the line, how they ordered their lunch, what social activities were part of their work, and generally examined the spoken and written texts of the workplace. I then selected content which I thought would address relevant workplace language needs. I noted in week two in relation to the reporting of accidents:

*The company were keen for this area of work to be covered carefully and thoroughly so I was prepared to take quite a deal of time on each element of each relevant competency.*

The place of the curriculum framework in planning content

Finally, the competencies that describe the three Stages in the CSWE were also the basis for decisions on course content and sequencing. I chose the competencies that I intended to cover in the course in relation to the other factors and influences I have already outlined. The curriculum framework did however encourage me to include some language items and text types that I might not have otherwise included. For example, in relation to the competency: *Can participate in group discussions/meetings relevant to employment/workplace contexts*, I found that I was focusing on discourse structures for discussions and meetings in much greater detail and in a far more methodical way because I was making reference to the CSWE document.

Sequencing issues

The sequencing of course content is just as complex and dynamic a process as content selection. What the students can do is usually the starting point for sequencing, and content is then organised to recycle and reinforce what has been taught previously, or to extend students’ control of language resources. Such a spiral pattern was clearly evident in my own classroom practice. I noted in my records:

*Now the students are comfortable expressing their opinions and speaking amongst the group, it’s time to move on to more formal meetings.*

Another factor that is important in sequencing decisions is the interrelatedness of materials. This is particularly evident in a workplace program where there is a focus on a particular work theme, such as Occupational Health and Safety. Such a theme can act as an organising framework for a number of competencies. In my course I sequenced the writing of work injury reports with the completion of accident report...
forms and medicare forms, reflecting a potential ‘real world’ sequence of events. Within this sequence there was a secondary one of focusing on receptive skills before productive skills.

I also took into account how familiar a particular kind of text was to students or how frequently they might encounter it. For example, I decided to introduce the reading of pie graphs last in my sequence of work on diagrammatic texts as the students rarely encountered that particular type of diagram in the workplace.

Clearly with all these factors and influences playing a part in selection and sequencing of content, course design needed to be an on-going, dynamic process. There were times when workplace needs would arise unexpectedly, or the students’ needs, abilities or responses would dictate a divergence, reteaching or a leap ahead. In this fluctuating context, the curriculum framework provided a structure that could be a constant point of reference while allowing for the flexibility demanded by the context.

**Conclusion**

Being involved in this curriculum project has been beneficial to me professionally. It has given me the opportunity to analyse my course planning closely and systematically, which is something I don’t often make the time to do. I have thought in greater depth about why I am teaching particular things and what is the impact of my planning decisions. I hope that my course design and teaching will improve as a consequence of this.

I have valued the opportunities I have had through participation in the project to listen to how other teachers are implementing the CSWE and their thoughts on how students are progressing. I found it very interesting that so many teachers in different teaching circumstances are making adaptations to suit their own contexts and preferences, yet we are all working within the same framework and have a common language with regard to course design.

**Reference**

SECTION B
Grammar
The outcome for me has been a huge increase in my job satisfaction. The process of learning about a very rich theory of how we make meaning in language has been engaging in its own right.
The TEACHER

Annabelle Lukin is now a curriculum officer in the Program Support and Development Services of the AMES in New South Wales. At the time of her participation in the project she was a teacher at the Liverpool Region in Sydney. She had begun to study for a Postgraduate Certificate in TESOL at University of Technology, Sydney.

The ISSUE

When the opportunity presented itself in mid 1993 for me to be involved in a project on course design within a competency-based curriculum I jumped at the chance. I had been involved in the initial trialling of the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) in early 1993 and it raised a lot of issues for me. As a classroom teacher I was concerned about the practicalities of implementation, in particular the new demands on my time. There were theoretical implications, since the document is based on a theory of language which I was only beginning to understand. Politically, too, I was concerned about the implications for learners of the path AMES had taken in connecting language learning to the wider context of competency-based vocational education and training as part of the National Training Reform Agenda. I was also concerned about the impact on learners of choices of course content and methodology that remained my responsibility. I therefore welcomed the opportunity to clarify some of these issues and a closer investigation of my course design practices in collaboration with other practitioners and researchers seemed an interesting way to proceed.

I was amongst the first group of teachers to participate in the project. We began with a general observation and documentation of our course design practices, rather than with a specific focus issue in mind. The general objective was to consider any changes we experienced in the process of course design working within the context of a competency-based curriculum framework, and to document any issues which arose.

What emerged for me in the course of the project was a much clearer sense of the bases of my planning decisions. In many respects my practice remained unchanged. In some respects, especially in my approach to teaching grammar, there were some very important changes that occurred.

The BACKGROUND

The initial part of this account focuses on my teaching of a CSWE Stage Three class (intermediate level) with a focus on English for Study. It was a ten week course in which learners wanted to be assessed on the required competencies in order to be awarded the Certificate. Learners included professionals, students, and people with experience in semi-skilled or unskilled work. Most were interested in articulating into advanced ESL courses at a college of Technical and Further Education or into a vocational training course.
In the final part of this account, I describe some aspects of my course design with a subsequent Stage One class (beginner level). The contrast in levels gave me an opportunity to explore some of the issues that had become focal for me. In particular I was interested in considering the application of functional grammar with beginning learners of English. The learners in this class were tradespeople and people with experience in semi-skills or unskilled occupations, as well as a few professionals. Four of the students had literacy skills that were considerably less well developed than their oral language skills.
Introduction

From the beginning of my participation in the project, I had a strong sense there were basic elements or principles which were fundamental to the daily decisions I made about what to teach. However, when the project began, I could barely articulate them. In an interview with one of the project coordinators I made the following comment:

...when I stopped to think about it and thought about the reason I was doing every little thing in class, I could see that I had this concept of all these different things that are impacting on what I start to do, and I'm sort of keeping it all in my head. It all hang(s) together for me but it's a lot of work to be doing it like this, and [I don't know] how much it hangs together for the students.

This was thrown into sharp relief for me during discussions involving myself and the other teacher from my centre who was participating in the project. She was much more organised than I was, and came to our project meetings with lesson plans reflecting very neat units of work. My lesson plans, on the other hand, consisted of a series of often seemingly unrelated activities.

I began to document my daily decisions in relation to course design; to record how and why I chose activities each day. I was then able to discuss this process with one of the research coordinators who visited my class and interviewed me at various times during the project. In our discussions a number of organising strands and principles emerged. While generally this was a process of self-clarification rather than a conscious shift or change, I found that in the area of teaching grammar, my approach did change significantly.

In the following section I will describe a number of factors or principles fundamental to my course design process, principles of which I became more conscious through my participation in the research project. I will then focus specifically on the issue of teaching grammar, and describe through a detailed example how my teaching changed significantly in this regard.

Influences on course design

The major factors or considerations that emerged as influences on my course design, in relation to content, included:

1. Working from text types and addressing competency requirements

At my teaching centre, the competencies at each Stage, and hence the text types they represented, were divided across the sequence of courses (usually two) that made up a Stage in the curriculum. This decision on allocation of competencies to courses was arrived at through collegiate meetings of teachers and program managers. My students were in their second Stage Three course. I was responsible for teaching five text types namely:

- delivering an oral presentation;
- negotiating a complex spoken interaction;
- reading diagrammatic/graphic texts;
- ...
writing essays (discussions/arguments); 
participating in group discussions.

I was also teaching towards the achievement of Competencies One and Two:
- Can understand the context of further education/training in Australia;
- Can use a range of learning strategies relevant to further education/training contexts.

By the end of the course I was to have assessed three of the competencies for the Stage (one reading, one writing, one speaking).

I felt all of these text types were relevant to the students and that I could teach towards their successful achievement. As I preferred to use text types as a starting point for course design, since they provide a purposeful context for language learning, I found no conflict in working within this curriculum framework. I choose specific examples of texts with students’ needs, interests and goals in mind.

2. Incorporating what students say they need

I have heard some teachers say that the CSWE has obviated the necessity for needs analysis. I don’t agree. Competencies are generic statements which need to be contextualised, and students’ needs and interests can supply that context. Since students typically express their needs in fairly general terms (e.g. ‘I want to learn grammar’, ‘I want to learn about going to the doctor’), there is a lot of room for negotiation between teachers and students. At Stage Three, my students were able to say a lot about what they wanted. They expressed a strong preference for learning about Australian culture, politics, society, history, comedy, literature, etc.

3. Incorporating a critical literacy perspective

Students have a lot of critical reading skills in their first language and I find they are interested in a critical perspective in learning English. I have found this can start at the simple level of ‘defining’ words for students, and discussing how words can mean different things in different contexts, and can mean different things to different people. I looked for texts that would encourage critical readings. For example, I used two newspaper articles on the same topic but each written from a different perspective. Early in the course we looked at the film Evil Angels about Lindy Chamberlain and the events around the disappearance of her baby. The film deals explicitly with a range of readings of a particular event (namely Lindy Chamberlain’s version, the media versions, the Australian public’s perspective).

4. Covering the range of macroskills

I intended that each class should involve a range of different activities and a balance of attention to different macroskills. It is important to monitor what students are actually doing in the classroom as this doesn’t always correspond to our intentions in setting up activities.

5. Drawing on current affairs and using the media

Many of my texts came from newspapers and radio broadcasts. I chose articles about issues in which I thought students were interested. As the project progressed, I began to use the media articles to concentrate on a particular aspect of grammar.
6. Considering articulation and referral

As this was the final class for most students, sessions were arranged with the AMES educational counsellor to provide students with information about post-course options.

7. Attending to individual student needs

Within any class, there are always some students with specific needs which demand attention but which cannot feasibly be part of the program for the class as a whole. Specific literacy needs or significant pronunciation difficulties are two areas where some students generally need more individualised or small group assistance. I organised some support time to meet the needs of these students.

Teaching grammar

While overall my involvement in the research project led me to clarify what I was already doing, in the area of teaching grammar my approach changed significantly. As with other aspects of my course design, I was documenting, in a fairly detailed fashion, my decisions about what grammar to teach. I was selecting traditional (formal) items of grammar based on three criteria:

1. The students requested it;
2. It related to a text type I was teaching;
3. My impression of what students needed to learn, based on a traditional notion of language acquisition. This model, which is reflected in most language course books, determined a sequence of grammar teaching starting with present simple, and moving progressively through the different tenses, with other items of grammar taught discretely around this sequence.

Teaching grammar had always felt very ad hoc to me. Adopting a text-based approach gave a little more context to the teaching of particular features of language, and students responded positively to a methodology that incorporated the modelling of particular text types, and to discussions about the staging or schematic structure of texts. However, I recognise now that I lacked a framework for the development of linguistic resources and a sense of the developmental process in language learning. It was therefore the issue of teaching grammar that I particularly pursued in discussions with the research coordinator who worked with me.

Early in the course of the project the coordinator came to observe a lesson I was teaching. I was using a dictogloss technique with my students, drawing on a segment of a newspaper article which the students had read and discussed the previous day in class. I read the extract twice to the students who could make notes in the second reading. They then had to reconstruct the extract as closely as possible to the original.

I spoke with the research coordinator after the class about my frustration with the dictogloss technique, and with teaching grammar in general. I felt I was dealing with texts at a very superficial level. After our initial discussions, the coordinator suggested that she take the class and use the same technique with the same type of text (a text of my choosing). This would give me a better chance to observe what was happening. Our discussions after the class began to shape some ideas for change.
I was also at this time co-teaching in the evening on an ESP course of English for Welfare Workers with another teacher who was very knowledgeable about functional grammar and very experienced in applying it to the classroom. She provided me with models for incorporating functional grammar-based activities into my own classroom. With assistance from the research coordinator, and using materials introduced by the co-teacher in the ESP course, I began to understand more about functional grammar and to explore its application in my classroom.
Functional grammar in the classroom

A fundamental understanding from a functional model of language is that language makes multiple meanings simultaneously; ideational meanings related to explaining the events of the world, interpersonal meanings related to our relationships with others, and textual meanings related to structuring messages.

These meanings are realised through the choices made from systems of meaning across different strata of language, at the level of discourse, at the level of lexico-grammar, and at the level of phonology/graphology. The more I have learnt about systems of meanings in functional linguistics, the more windows into texts have been opened for me.

This process began for me with the development of a working knowledge of clause types and linking principles within and between clauses. From formal grammar I had the basic definition of a clause as the smallest meaningful unit of language which contains a verb. From functional grammar, I learnt that a text is the fundamental unit of language and a clause is the fundamental unit of grammar. I learnt about different types of clauses: simple clauses, clause complexes. I learnt about how clauses relate to each other: through embedding, enclosure, and through systems of interdependency and of logical relations (Halliday 1985: 192).

With a better understanding of clause structure and linking principles came a new way of understanding ‘conjunction’. In the teaching of grammar from a formal perspective, conjunction refers simply to a class of words. From a functional perspective, conjunction can be explained as a semantic term. It refers to the logical relations linking parts of the text and contributing to cohesion across a text. Conjunction can be expressed through different resources of grammar, including conjunctions (because), verbs (resulted in), nouns (the result of) or prepositional phrases (with the consequence). Some kinds of conjunctive relations (e.g. temporal, causal) and some grammatical resources for expressing conjunction are more typical of spoken or of written language.

Overall I found that my exploration of functional grammar provided a much more meaningful notion of conjunction. The next step was to locate this new understanding within a developmental framework that would best facilitate learning for my students; a realistic framework for sequential learning. The table below from the K-6 Handbook of Grammar (NSW Department of School Education, 1994). The stages relate to the primary school context. However, the sequence is relevant to teaching in adult ESL, although a direct correlation of the stages to the stages in the CSWE should not be read into this.
So how did my newly-acquired knowledge of clause types, linking principles and conjunction change my teaching practice? It gave me a new lens through which to read a text. I was much more aware of how a text was put together, and had a much richer sense of what makes a text complex for students. I was therefore better able to analyse both the demands of the texts I was choosing as input in the class and also of the texts students were producing.

To return now to the previous discussion about my use of the dictogloss technique to raise students awareness about grammar. As I developed my understanding of clause structure, I began to realise in what ways I had been choosing texts for use in this activity type which were too difficult for students. I began to choose texts much more consciously to reflect a level of clause complex that students could access. Then I started to explicitly teach students about clause complex. I designed activities for ‘putting pieces of information together’, and encouraged students to think about the logic that binds the pieces.

The shift beginning to occur in my approach to teaching is perhaps best illustrated by contrasting a before and after sequence of activities around reading a newspaper article in class. Previously I would typically have used the article with the following activities:

1. Working together with the whole class, we would read the article and discuss new vocabulary.
2. Students would discuss the article in groups using some focus questions.
3. Students would do a group of individual writing task on some aspect of the article.
4. The new vocabulary learnt would be recycled in a vocabulary matching activity.
Having developed a limited knowledge of functional grammar, I was able to incorporate additional activities which reflected a greater consciousness of language and language structure on my part.

In one example, we looked at a newspaper article entitled *Feminism increases divorce*. In the article, a leading American religious instructor, speaking at a conference in Australia, had drawn links between feminism and women's increasing economic independence, and the increasing divorce rate. What follows is the teaching sequence I adopted with this newspaper article:

1. We read the text together, and discussed the new vocabulary.
2. Students discussed the article in groups using questions that focused on the causes of the increased rate of divorce.
3. I asked the students to pick out the cause and effect relations established in the text. For example:
   - feminism causes divorce;
   - women's increasing economic independence had caused divorce rate so soar;
   - women's changing role in society had resulted in increasing divorce rates;
   - working wives and mothers have different expectations about who does the labour of household work and childcare, so new tensions are placed on families.

We made a list of causes and a list of effects on the board. We added the causes and effects that they had discussed in their groups.

4. We discussed the language used to bind the cause and effect ideas together. We added other examples from a list of conjunctions they had.
5. Students then individually practised creating clause complexes by bringing together a cause and an effect from the list on the board.
6. I wrote a dictogloss text based on our discussion of the causes of divorce. The grammar focus was the expression of cause/effect relations. In my text I kept the expression of conjunctive relations congruent by expressing it through the use of conjunctions. In this way I made the text more accessible for the students.
7. Students were asked to write a paragraph at home on their view of the causes of divorce.
8. We then looked at a text about the causes of juvenile delinquency and went through the same set of teaching activities.

Students responded well to the new activities. One student commented on my teaching of clause complex. I was giving her feedback about a text she had written which included a quite sophisticated clause complex. She commented that she had done it in response to my teaching, and that I had encouraged students to try to ‘make their sentences more complex’.

The shift I experienced was from dealing with a text at the level of vocabulary and ideas, to using it with a specific grammar focus. I also had a clearer sense of how the text and the activities I gave to students related to a framework for developing language resources.
Applications of functional grammar to Stage One teaching

The following term I had a Stage One class and was keen to explore the relevance of functional grammar for students at this level. I started with single clause sentences, but it became clear that most of the students were ready to start putting clauses together. Throughout the course I incorporated activities related to clause complex.

On one occasion we went on an excursion to the Blue Mountains as part of a unit of teaching on recounts. When we returned, we discussed the excursion to establish the sequence of events. The next day I gave the students the activity below, with instructions to put the information together in a logical way. Students did the task individually, and then as a class we discussed the different possibilities for linking the clauses together. An extract of a sample activity is included below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Put the information together into one sentence:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. We left Liverpool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was raining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. We went to Blackheath.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackheath is 20 minutes drive from Katoomba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.........</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. We finished lunch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We walked to the waterfall at Govett’s Leap</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from DSE K–6 Handbook of grammar (1994).

I also explored how I could apply my new understanding of the structure of the nominal group, and the functions of the various components. I presented the structure of the nominal group to students with the functional labels of components, and we discussed the idea of ‘building up a description around a noun’.

With a Stage One class I had to introduce the terminology carefully. I used the term ‘noun group’. I combined traditional and functional terminology with lots of examples to discuss the language choices available before the noun (pointer, number, describing adjectives, classifying adjectives) and those available after the noun (prepositional phrases and clauses which describe the noun).

This gave me a new framework in which to teach about a range of grammatical resources (e.g. articles, adjectives, prepositions, relative clauses, possessive adjectives) which I had previously taught quite discretely, relying on exercises in grammar books. Now we had a structure to work within, and a sense of using the structure to work towards building more complex nominal groups.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Determiner</th>
<th>Numerative</th>
<th>Describer</th>
<th>Classifier</th>
<th>Thing</th>
<th>Prepositions</th>
<th>Relative clauses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Those</td>
<td>two</td>
<td>large</td>
<td>science</td>
<td>books</td>
<td>with hard covers</td>
<td>which I lost yesterday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles — the, a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thing</td>
<td>Qualifier — Embedded phrase</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Adjective
  - size
  - colour
  - shape
  - quality
  (plus attitudinal meaning)

From DSE K-6 Handbook of grammar, traditional labels added by A. Lukin, May 1994.
Conclusion

When NSW Adult Migrant English Service introduced a curriculum document based on systemic functional linguistics, I felt compelled to engage with the theoretical basis of the document. The outcome for me has been a huge increase in my job satisfaction. The process of learning about a very rich theory of how we make meaning in language has been engaging in its own right. However, it is the challenge of exploring its practical application that I find endlessly stimulating.

References


Topics, text types and grammar: Making the links

Susie Llewelyn

My reflection on my course design practice, as it related to the implementation of the new curriculum framework, led me to learn more about the theory of language that underpinned the curriculum.
The TEACHER

Susie Llewelyn has been a teacher with NSW AMES since 1981. She has a graduate Diploma in TESOL from UTS (previously Sydney CAE, ITATE), and had recently completed an accredited course with NSW AMES, A Functional Approach to Language in Educational Contexts. Susie teaches at the Liverpool/Campbelltown Region of NSW AMES. She was co-teaching the courses described in this article with a colleague, Rachel Katz.

The ISSUE

In this account, I have attempted to situate my participation in the course design research project in a context of on-going reflection and change in my teaching. I have noted a number of key influences on my teaching practice, but have focused particularly on the introduction of the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) and on my own developing understanding of functional grammar. I have illustrated with extracts from course planning notes and resources, how I have continued to explore applications of functional grammar and genre theory to my teaching. A particular concern has been to avoid a narrow interpretation of competencies as ‘things’ that can be taught in a block and ticked off as it were, but rather to look at the elements or grammatical features that can be threaded across topics, and across competencies, throughout the course.

The BACKGROUND

During my initial participation in the research project in 1993, I was co-teaching a Stage Two (post-beginner level) course. The students were almost all newly-arrived migrants just beginning their entitlement to English language provision. Most had over ten years, education in L1.

I also draw data from a later course I was teaching in mid 1994. It was also a Stage Two course of 150 hours and was the first of two courses the students would participate in towards a Statement of Competency at the completion of the Stage. Students needed to demonstrate competence in handling three kinds of written texts, chosen from the following:

- Can write short recounts;
- Can write short reports;
- Can complete formatted texts;
- Can write short explanations or opinions.


**Introduction**

In the thirteen years since I started teaching with AMES, there has been a gradual movement away from a very loosely-framed individualised curriculum towards a curriculum where intended outcomes are much more explicitly stated. For me this has been a helpful development, giving greater focus to my teaching.

In my early years of teaching with AMES in the 1980s I tended to use a theme-based approach presented through communicative activities, incorporating the four macro-skills and giving some attention to linguistic features along the way.

While this approach was useful in so far as it attempted to place the learning of language in a meaningful context, it lacked a sense of purpose or direction for language learning. Teachers were not clear about what students should know or be able to do at the end of a unit of work. It was hard to teach without knowing what you were really aiming for. Another difficulty with teaching during this period was that teachers were given little guidance about how to help students to move from one language level to the next. There was no framework for progression in language learning, with the consequence that one did not know what types of language or texts to introduce at a particular point or how to intervene to best support students’ language development over a period of time. It was also difficult to facilitate articulation from one course to the next.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the issue of assessment gained considerable prominence in adult ESL in Australia. This interest in assessment was in part a consequence of the accountability concerns of funding providers, but was equally in response to requests from learners for more feedback on their learning. As was the case with many other teachers, I began to investigate applications of criterion-referenced assessment to language teaching, and found that it gave my teaching more of a focus. I began to devise assessment tasks for my students, listing performance criteria by which they were to be judged. Now, at least in the context of my own class, I had a clearer idea of what I wanted the students to achieve.

I was also particularly interested in helping students to become more involved in their own learning by being able to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and then addressing their language problems. Through an action research project carried out with a colleague, Sally Khoe, in 1991 (Khoe and Llewelyn 1991), and through my on-going experience in the classroom, I became increasingly convinced of the value of criterion-referenced assessment when it is used as an integral part of the teaching-learning process, with students being given feedback on their work.

By the time the CSWE was being trialled in AMES centres in late 1992, I had become familiar with a text-based approach to the study of English through inservice activities and through my own professional reading, and had integrated the use of criterion-referenced assessment into my teaching practice. I started to write model texts for my classes, helped students to deconstruct these texts and supported them in constructing their own texts. I could see how useful it was for the students to analyse and to practise gaining control of the staging or schematic structure and linguistic features of texts, and how helpful it was for students to understand the criteria by which their own texts, both spoken and written, were being judged.
The project

As the question of how to design a competency-based, text-based curriculum framework was of great interest to me, I decided to participate in a joint NCELTR AMES project on this topic.

As part of this project, I collected data through keeping a journal, reflecting on my course design processes and documenting the main steps involved in the planning of one particular course. I discussed the process periodically with one of the research coordinators who recorded our discussions. The focus of my reflections was on how I integrated the teaching of particular text types within a theme-based syllabus and how I revisited a given text type throughout a course within a variety of themes or topics. I also documented how the teaching of various linguistic features were integral to the teaching of particular text types.

The following chart is an example from my documented planning for a segment of that particular course and it illustrates my general approach. The writing of reports was one of the competencies I intended to assess by the end of the course. I planned to assist students to achieve this by revisiting this text type periodically throughout the course and relating the text type to a series of topics.

On the left of the chart are the topics covered in particular weeks of the course. Orientation and transport; Animals and the zoo (requested by the students); Education and goal clarification and Describing places. On the right of the chart, are described the kinds of activities I used to develop students’ awareness of and ability to write effective reports. By week eight or nine, I was ready to assess students formally. However, weeks nine and ten allowed for another opportunity to assess students if necessary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Activities related to reading and writing reports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Week 3  Topic: Orientation and transport | • dictogloss  
• clozes (verbs/generic participants deleted) |
| Weeks 6 & 7  Topic: Animals/ the zoo (topic requested by students) | • reading and note-taking under topic headings from informational texts  
• studying a model (staging and linguistic features)  
• note-taking at the zoo  
• independent construction of report with some guidance, followed by feedback  
• follow-up work on structure of paragraphs (theme and topic sentences), cohesion and sequencing of paragraphs, generic participants, through studying another model. |
By the end of my participation in the project, I felt I had developed a reasonable understanding of the texts taught in Stages One, Two and Three of the curriculum. However, as a functional perspective on grammar was foregrounded in the CSWE, and as my knowledge of functional grammar was rather rudimentary, I felt that I should develop my knowledge in this area. In the first half of 1994, I enrolled in a semester length inservice course in AMES, A Functional Approach to Language in Educational Contexts. The insights gained through doing this course are helping me in my analyses of texts, including students’ texts, and in my teaching.

The following extracts are from an account of a more recent class and detail how I am now able to apply a more thorough understanding of functional grammar to the analyses of students’ texts and in turn how this contributes to my course design and decisions about progression in language learning.

Students had been working on the text type of recounts. During the ten week course the purposes for which recounts are used had been discussed; texts had been modelled and deconstructed in terms of their staging and linguistic features and the writing of recounts had been practised in a variety of ways. Topics which incorporated work on recounts included: Letters to friends and Postcards (both involving recount sections in the middle of the texts); Absence notes (those explaining past absences; My diary (an on-going activity throughout the course); the movie Gallipoli (including a recount of the story line); Aboriginal culture (including recounts of a visit to see the Bangarra Dance Theatre; The zoo /Visits to interesting places; Education and goal clarification and The migrant experience.

In the unit of work on The zoo /Visits to interesting places, students did various activities in preparation for going to the zoo and for later writing a recount of the excursion. They read model recounts of another excursion and we jointly deconstructed the text. We discussed the purpose of the text and the fact that a modified version of it might well form the middle part of a letter to a friend. I then asked the students to write a recount of an excursion they had been on or a visit to somewhere interesting such that it could be part of a letter to a friend. The recount was rehearsed orally.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Activities related to reading and writing reports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Weeks 7, 8, 9**  
Topic: Education & goal clarification | • studying a model (staging, structure of paragraphs, linguistic features)  
• further work on linguistic features (all, most, some, no, not any, etc; plurals and uncountable nouns)  
• note-taking under topic headings  
• independent construction (as assessment of Stage Two competency) followed by feedback. |
| **Week 9, 10**  
Topic: Describing places (your country, your city) | • similar activities repeated  
• independent construction (as second assessment for those who did not pass on the first assessment) |
before they began writing. Most of the students understood the purpose of the text and wrote accordingly. One of the students, however, did not. She had chosen to write in a different genre, one that would not readily constitute part of a personal letter as it did not recount recent events.

The student, Rose, called her recount ‘My Anecdota’ and it is in fact closer to an anecdote or narrative in its functional purpose. It is intended to amuse and entertain. It was because I thought it was so entertaining that I decided to use the text as the basis for some follow-up lessons with the whole class, focusing on some specific systems of grammar. It would also allow us to compare features of different genres.

Rose’s text is presented below with some general comments that I derived from a range of functional grammar analyses:

1. When I was younger, about 12 years, I went to play waleball,
2. with my friends.
3. When we get bored we started to play with fire.
4. We were played and one little bush started to bum.
5. So we took of our jacket and started to extinguish fire.
6. So I burned my jacket.
7. When I came home my mother asked me for my jacket. I’m lied to her, that I left it at home,
8. that I didn’t bring with me.
9. But that night we had visitors, and they were parents from one of my friends, and they told my mother what I did with my jacket. After that I was in trouble with my mother.
10. After I needed long wite for new jacket.

- Rose’s story has generic coherence, using staging consistent with a narrative, that is: orientation (lines 1 to 9); complication; (lines 10 to 12); resolution (lines 12 to 13); coda (line 14).
- She appropriately uses mainly material processes (a feature common to recounts and narratives) to retell actions and events.
- She locates these events in time using circumstances of location (that night) and hypotactic clauses indicating time (When I came home, When we get bored).
- There are some problems in the structure of the verbal group in expressing past tense (we get bored, we were played, I’m lied to her).
- She uses a simple nominal group structure but this is appropriate as unnecessary descriptions would have detracted from the drama in this context.
- Her handling of lexical cohesion is quite good with effective strings around ‘jacket’, relationships (friends, mother, visitors, parents, etc) and fire (fire, burn, extinguish, fire, burned).
- An analysis of conjunction and reference show some strengths and weaknesses.
In her use of reference, for example, she omits the necessary anaphoric reference in line 5 ‘(the) fire’, the pronominal reference to the jacket (it) is missing in line 9, and the introducing referencing ‘(a) new jacket’ in line 14.

Rose relies heavily on explicit conjunction foregrounded in thematic position, a feature that typifies an oral retelling of events. There are some inappropriacies in her use of both causal and temporal conjunction.

Although Rose had not in fact written a recount of an excursion (as the class had been asked to) I decided to use it as the basis for some follow-up activities, with a particular focus on reference and lexical cohesion. I first edited her original text to strengthen these aspects of the text in order to present it as a model text to the class. The edited version is presented below.

---

One day when I was younger (about 12 years old), I went out to play volleyball with my friends. When we got bored with the game we started to play with fire.

Suddenly a little bush caught fire, so we took off our jackets and tried to extinguish the flames. In the process, my jacket got burned.

When I got home my mother asked me for my jacket. I lied to her saying that I hadn’t taken it with me, that I had left it at home.

But that night we had visitors. They were the parents of my friends and they told my mother what I had done to my jacket. After hearing that, my mother was angry and I was in trouble.

As a result of all that, I had to wait a long time for a new jacket.

---

I read out this edited version to the class, then asked students in groups to sequence strip-sentences (or in some cases clauses), so that they had to rely on various cohesive devises used in the text. Where necessary I drew students’ attention to parts of their sequenced texts that were not cohesive. Then to highlight the use of reference I put the whole text on an overhead transparency. I circled various words and asked students what they referred to, then drew an arrow to that word or section of the text. We discussed their need to read over any writing they did to check for agreement between their use of pronouns and the nouns to which they refer. I then showed the students a lexical string analysis of the edited version.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>day</th>
<th>volleyball</th>
<th>friends</th>
<th>fire</th>
<th>jackets</th>
<th>mother</th>
<th>home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>night</td>
<td>game</td>
<td>friends</td>
<td>fire</td>
<td>jacket</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>extinguish</td>
<td>flames</td>
<td></td>
<td>jacket</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>burned</td>
<td>jacket</td>
<td></td>
<td>jacket</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over the ten week course the students had a good deal of practice in writing recounts and other story genres and were given regular and frequent feedback on their work. Rose successfully fulfilled the performance criteria for assessment of the competency related to recount. She improved her writing in a number of aspects including a much better control of past tense, a more confident use of multi-clause sentences and better use of causal/consequential conjunctions and nominal group structure.
Conclusion

Reflecting on my course design practice, as it related to the implementation of the new curriculum framework, led me to learn more about the theory of language that underpinned the curriculum. The extracts from my courses included in this account relate to small segments of programs but serve to illustrate some of the ways in which I was exploring applications of functional grammar and genre theory. They also indicate how, over time, I was able to apply my developing knowledge of functional grammar in more extensive ways. I still consider this to be a new area for me, and I will be continuing to experiment with ways of applying functional grammar to my teaching.

For me the major benefit of being involved in the project was that it provided me with a reason to focus very consciously on my course design process and to document it in a variety of ways. I became increasingly aware of the need to ‘thread’ the elements of the competencies throughout the course (not to try to teach a text-type or a competency in a block of say two weeks) and to keep on practising elements that students had not mastered.

It is good to reflect on various aspects of one’s teaching and it is very helpful to be able to do this in collaboration with other teachers. I think this collaboration works best on activities with a clear focus, as was the case in this project with its focus on analysing course design processes.

References


In reflecting closely on my teaching of grammar and in recording the process of course planning in this regard I have a better understanding of what I am doing and increased confidence that I can accommodate what is required of me in relation to the curriculum demands.
The TEACHER

Dora Troupiotis has worked for Adult Migrant Education Services, Victoria for three and a half years. Prior to that she taught EFL in Greece for nine years. She has a Certificate in TESOL from Melbourne State College and is currently enrolled in a Masters in TESOL.

The ISSUE

Grammar has been somewhat marginalised in the last decade of adult ESL in Australia. This was in part a consequence of the widespread adoption of a process-oriented curriculum model which espoused a needs-based, learner-centred approach to teaching and course design. This curriculum model served to discourage explicit course planning and the direct teaching of language, and to favour a fluid response to emerging learner needs together with a methodology of engagement and task-based learning. The teaching of grammar was also discouraged through its omission in course materials and through a lack of attention to the study of grammar in teacher-training programs.

However, the introduction of the competency-based curriculum framework, the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE), meant that grammatical features were now specified as elements in all language competencies. As such they were an intrinsic part of the teaching and assessment of the kinds of interactions that constituted the competencies.

I was concerned that the integration of grammar into course design had received little attention in the implementation of the new curriculum framework. I was interested in investigating the selection and sequencing of grammatical features in my own syllabus and to ascertain learners' views on the teaching of grammar.

Although the CSWE curriculum framework draws on a functional model of language (based on the work of Michael Halliday and others), I was not familiar with this theoretical model, so my approach was from a traditional notion of grammar.

The particular questions that concerned me were:

- Should learners have a grammar book?
- What terminology should be used?
- What grammatical items were selected; how and why were they selected?
- How were they incorporated into the course and the lesson?
- How much time should I devote to the teaching of grammar?
The BACKGROUND

The class was a Stage Three (intermediate level) class of fifteen hours a week over twenty weeks. The class was in a labour market program for long-term unemployed immigrants. Some of the learners had just completed classes as part of their English language learning entitlement following settlement in Australia. Others were long-term unemployed who had not been in classes in the previous two years, if not longer. The length of residence in Australia varied from one year to fourteen years. Their years of education varied from four to eighteen years.

Some of the learners were professionals in their country of origin, but none had worked in their field in Australia. All the learners, except one, wanted to continue learning English to improve their employment prospects in their profession or to gain access to other vocational training courses. The course content addressed learning outcomes related to community access, further study and training, and employment.
**Introduction**

I began my involvement with the project in the eleventh week of the course. To monitor and record my own decision-making around the teaching of grammar, I decided to use the proforma below.

Wherever possible I completed the proforma immediately after the class. When this was not possible, I made brief notes and wrote up a fuller account later. On some occasions where class activities had clearly related to the project, I made extensive notes. At other times there did not seem to be anything significant to record and I wrote very little.

Towards the end of the course, I also decided to get some feedback from the students about their attitude to the learning of grammar. I asked them to fill in the simple questionnaire included below.

**Please answer the following questions**

1. How much class time should be spent on the following? (Use % of class time; e.g. 30%)
   
   Reading _____ Writing _____ Grammar _____ Speaking _____ Listening _____

2. How do you think grammar should be taught? (Tick the ones you agree with)

   - Students have a grammar book, and grammar is a separate part of the lesson  
   - The teacher explains rules and then students do exercises  
   - Students read rules and do exercises at home. Then exercises are corrected in class and rules are explained  
   - Teacher explains when students don’t understand a rule or make mistakes  
   - Other ways: ____________________________

3. Would you like to have had a grammar book during this course?

   Yes  
   No  
   I’m not sure

4. Who should decide what grammar should be taught?

   The teacher  
   The students  
   Both the teacher and the students
The following comments on the questions posed at the beginning of the project are made on the basis of my own documentation and reflection as well as the data collected from student questionnaires.

**Should learners have a grammar book?**

At the beginning of the course I had decided that I would not require all students to have a grammar book. I felt that this could lead to a preoccupation with grammar and might encourage us to address grammar in a decontextualised way. By the end of the course, however, I had changed my views on this.

In the end of course survey, 70 percent of the students said that they would have liked to have had a grammar text. In retrospect, I believe that a grammar book (in the style of *English Grammar In Use* (Murphy 1985) would have served as a valuable reference for these Stage Three learners. It would have provided students with a resource for extending their understanding of grammatical features covered in the course and for investigating other aspects of grammar that arose.

**What terminology should be used?**

In talking about language with students I used traditional (formal) grammatical terminology, although I tried to keep the use of linguistic terms to a minimum. When grammatical terms were introduced I always illustrated what I meant by writing an example on the board. Some of the students were already familiar with a lot of grammatical terminology and felt confident in using it. The use of terminology will of course depend on the teacher's knowledge as well as the level of the class they are teaching. In most cases the use of linguistic terminology is not, in my opinion, a critical one in course design.

**How much time should I devote to the teaching of grammar and how should it be taught?**

The teaching of grammar occurred as the need emerged rather than as a specified segment of the program. By the teaching of grammar I mean explicit discussion of some grammatical feature. Generally, the introduction of a new grammatical feature was done through looking at its use in the context of a text. The discussion might then take the form of the introduction and explanation of a general rule, or a discussion of the appropriate context of use of such a feature. The discussion might be accompanied by grammatical exercises to reinforce their understanding of a rule. We would also discuss exceptions to rules and examples of usage of language that students had come across.

Students were often given handouts of grammatical explanations and exercises to take home. We would then correct them in class later. If there were areas they had not understood we discussed these further as we corrected exercises. Where there were mistakes common to a number of students, I would take note and make mention of it again as the feature occurred in the context of future lessons, or when correcting their written texts.

My estimate is that the explicit teaching of grammar took up about 10 percent to 20 percent of class time. The responses of students to the question of the amount of time that should be devoted to grammar teaching in class are indicated in Table 1 below.
Table 1: Results of survey question: ‘How much class time (%) should be spent on the following…’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Grammar (%)</th>
<th>Reading (%)</th>
<th>Writing (%)</th>
<th>Speaking (%)</th>
<th>Listening (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows students’ responses to the question: ‘How should grammar be taught?’. The table indicates that there was considerable disagreement about how grammar should best be taught, suggesting that as teachers we should be prepared to introduce the teaching of grammar in a variety of ways.

Table 2: Results of survey question: ‘How do you think grammar should be taught?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Students have a grammar book and grammar is a separate part of the lesson.</th>
<th>Teacher explains rules, then students do exercises.</th>
<th>Students read rules and do exercises at home. Exercises are collected in class and rules explained.</th>
<th>Teacher explains when students don’t understand.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What grammatical items were selected? How were they incorporated into the course and the lesson?

In designing a course based on the CSWE, the competencies identified as expected outcomes for the course are elaborated as elements and performance criteria. These elements and performance criteria are categorised under Purpose, Discourse Structure, Grammar/Vocabulary, Phonology/Graphology. As grammatical features are part of the performance criteria for the assessment of the competency, they are likely to receive particular attention.

The choice of competencies relevant to a course will also influence the choice of materials used in the course, and from the choice of materials some grammatical features will emerge as key or critical features. It is important, however, that teachers are not locked into a narrow notion of language development through structuring their courses around competency statements. They need to keep in mind a broad notion of language development that is concerned with the application of newly-acquired resources across contexts and text types.

They also need to be flexible enough to respond to learners’ perceived needs as they arise, while at the same time aware that a purely responsive approach to the teaching of grammar is likely to be give rise to disconnected and atomistic treatment. Teachers will need to determine whether a particular feature is relevant or of interest to all learners, whether it is best dealt with at the time it occurs or whether it should be followed up with one or more students at a later time. If so this should be signalled to the students concerned.

Interestingly, when asked who should determine what grammar is to be taught, three students suggested the teacher, one student felt that students should and ten felt it should be decided both by the teacher and by students.

In Figure 1 on page 82 I have attempted a diagrammatic representation of how grammatical features come to be incorporated into my course design. The diagram represents a complexity of paths and connections arising primarily from three kinds of ‘needs’:

- the features of a chosen text that demand comprehension or production;
- teacher-perceived needs in terms of progression in general language development;
- learner-perceived needs.

How did my involvement in the project change my teaching?

Before my involvement in the project, I was concerned that there were conflicts between what I perceived were my learners’ needs and the requirements for outcomes specified as competencies in the curriculum framework. This applied to all aspects of content, but I was especially concerned about the grammar content of courses.

I understood that the CSWE was a curriculum framework and not a syllabus, but I was also concerned that I was not consulting the curriculum document closely enough and that I should perhaps be linking my teaching more directly to it.
Figure I: A model for the teaching of grammar

Teacher chooses text

Features of text (Teacher identifies linguistic features of text)

Learner perceived needs (Learners identify problem areas)

Teacher perceived needs (Teacher identifies learner needs, independent of text, required for general language development)

Explicit exploration of linguistic items/grammatical items (rules)

Exploration through text and examples in text

Activities

Exercises

Produce text

Deal with it immediately

Deal with it later
My involvement in the project was valuable in this respect. Although I wouldn’t say that my thinking has changed fundamentally, it has helped me clarify certain aspects of my teaching. In reflecting closely on my teaching of grammar and in recording the process of course planning in this regard, I have a better understanding of what I am doing and increased confidence that I can accommodate what is required of me in relation to the curriculum demands.

During the course of the project, I also found that I was focusing more on whole texts and this allowed for a more contextualised introduction of grammar features, making grammar more relevant to learners.

I realised that it wasn’t always possible to directly link every lesson to the CSWE, nor was it necessary to do so. The CSWE contains general information about course content and assessment requirements which the teacher must be conscious of in course design. However, the actual selection and sequencing of the content of courses will continue to be the responsibility of the teacher, and will be informed by the teacher’s theories of language learning and by the perceived and stated needs of the students.

References


SECTION C

Assessment
Investigating with learners their perceptions of competency-based language

Alison MacPhail

• It’s all too easy while adapting to working in a competency-based curriculum to allow oneself to think more of the assessment than of the teaching process.
The **TEACHER**

Alison MacPhail teaches at Southbank Institute of TAFE, Annerley, Queensland. She has many years’ experience of teaching in adult migrant programs and has been involved in a number of curriculum-related projects. Although she has taught at all levels of AMEP programs, at the time of the project she was teaching a higher level class at Level Four of the TAFE Queensland syllabus.

The **ISSUE**

I was interested in investigating my students’ perceptions of competency-based language courses and particularly their responses to assessment processes and tasks. Assessment has always been one of the areas in which I feel least confident, so I wanted to focus both my teaching and my various assessment instruments more by getting feedback from my students.

The **BACKGROUND**

The class I taught together with a co-teacher during the project was oriented towards further study and was at Level Four of the competency-based TAFE syllabus CN277 used in Queensland. This is comparable to Stage Three (intermediate level) of the Certificate in Spoken and Written English. The class met for ten weeks and I conducted the research over this period of time. There were seventeen students in the class, of whom eleven were professionals or paraprofessionals, four past or future further studies candidates and three office workers.
The action research context

The emphasis of my course was on reading and writing for further studies or professional work. However, since this class would be leaving their AMEP course at the end of the ten weeks, integrated language and learning skills development and immigration settlement information were also important course components. One specific aim was to increase the students’ awareness of language learning and of their own responsibility in learning and to help them towards a realistic appraisal of their achievements and immediate options.

To gather data for my research, I decided to survey the students regularly over the course, as a way of getting systematic feedback from them. As the students were fairly advanced learners, I devised written questionnaires, which I administered for different purposes at different stages of the course. Another form of data-collection was through case studies of individual students in the class. These were conducted through interviews carried out by the Queensland coordinator of the project, Nan Dingle. Nan interviewed four of the students who were chosen to reflect a range of language groups and time spent in the AMEP program.

The steps taken in carrying out the research

I have set out my activities during the project across a numbers of weeks. The first week was taken up with initial needs analysis and familiarisation of the class and the students, so the data collection did not really get going until the second week.

Week Two
1. A course calendar, documenting course activities and including assessment items and the appropriate Learning Outcomes, was handed out and discussed with the students. At the same time I pinned a copy of the module’s assessment requirements on the classroom wall for ongoing reference.

2. Nan Dingle spoke to the class, explaining the research and the part they were asked to play. A questionnaire was administered to find out the students’ previous experience of different types of assessment and their preferences.

A second questionnaire was given out for evaluation of the week’s work. The aim of this exercise was to encourage the students to monitor the usefulness of class activities, their own learning in and out of the classroom and the reasons for both of these. They were therefore asked to comment on work done both with my co-teacher and myself.

Week Three
An evaluation of the first unit and assessment task was conducted. The theme of the unit was Australian history, chosen after consultation with the students as part of the AMEP settlement program

My concern in the third week was to consolidate and extend the previous work on past tense narrative and the appropriate sequencing and causal cohesive devices used in such texts. These aims, the nature of the final assessment task (construction of a historical recount from a given time line) and the criteria, were all presented at the start of the unit and referred to during the unit, as was the extension of this genre for
other purposes (e.g. in report writing, work histories and so on.) The main stages of this unit of work were: presentation of a model text, analysis of its generic form, specific teaching of grammatical and syntactic features, guided note-taking, group text construction and individual student text construction.

This was not an ideal unit to assess, since it was interrupted by two public holidays with a consequent loss of continuity. Moreover, the class dynamics were still fluid; four students left and seven joined the course during this unit and as a result group work was not particularly effective. I felt that the students were under-prepared, and their feedback showed that approximately a third of the class confirmed this feeling.

**Week Five**

Four students, chosen to reflect a range of language groups, professions and time in the AMEP were interviewed by Nan Dingle.

The students were questioned about various aspects of assessment in their course (see the following section for some of their responses). I felt that this more anonymous form of interviewing by an outsider to the class might result in franker responses, although in fact the comments made by the students were similar to those produced in class.

**Week Six**

A questionnaire on the students' perceptions of the notion of competency was administered in class.

Here, the students were asked to consider assessment from a more abstract point of view and to decide which skills were easiest and hardest for teacher and learner to assess. In their responses, there seemed to be little general agreement. In the second part of the questionnaire, the students considered their own strengths and weaknesses, and again there was a wide spread of responses. I would have liked to probe the reasons for this further, but was unable to spend more time on the research at this stage of the course. However, after the discussion which emerged at the project workshop with the other teachers and with the NCELTR researchers, I decided to ask whether the students wished to be informed when they were being assessed. An overwhelming majority felt that it was essential.

**Week Ten**

A final course evaluation was conducted.

The students were asked to complete a self-evaluation. As part of the general course evaluation, students were asked to comment specifically on the following aspects of assessment in their course: preparation, clarity of criteria, tasks and feedback. The result was overwhelmingly positive. I attributed this to the generally high level of study skills and self-awareness of these particular learners.

**The students’ perceptions of competency-based courses**

I found that the students’ reactions to competency-based assessment were generally favourable. The interviews and their responses to the questionnaires showed that they wanted to be assessed and to know that they were going to be assessed beforehand, as the following examples indicate:
Generally, however, students commented that they preferred to be graded rather than given a pass or fail, which they felt was inappropriate for language learning. They found the combination of teacher, peer and self-assessment used in the course very useful:

The students felt that the assessment process was fair and successful and that formal assessment heightened their awareness of their own learning strategies. They were also aware that they had the prime responsibility for their own learning and competency-based training itself was seen as clearly linked to the modern workplace. Given the nature of the group, these findings were not necessarily a surprise to me. In general the educational background and personal ambitions of the students meant that they were very achievement-oriented. Many of the informal comments they had made suggested that the detailed articulation of criteria and of student performance was particularly helpful, enabling the students to help themselves more. These informal comments were confirmed through the interviews:

---

**Interview 1**

Q: ‘[This is… about familiarity with the Learning Outcomes of the course.’
A: ‘Yes I know, we have the sheet.’
Q: ‘Do you want to be assessed?’
A: ‘Yes. Why not?’
Q: ‘Do you like pass/fail marking?’
A: ‘It depends what you want. If you go to university, they want to know your level. In my opinion pass/fail is not important but you have to know your mark, where you need to improve, where you are already enough, like A B C D, like some comment. I think they are competent to assess us.’

**Interview 2**

Q: ‘Do you prefer to know when it’s an assessment task?’
A: ‘Half half. I don’t mind really, I think it’s not important. (If) they don’t tell you it’s a task you show yourself in another way. I think all three months are assessment. I think assessment in the end of the course is not valuable, better all during the three months. Perhaps we can have every week writing test, topic. In my opinion I prefer the task through the course and some exam at the end, together. Different ways to see how you are going.’

**Interview 3**

Q: ‘Whose responsibility is it to pass you?’
A: ‘Is my business, yes how much I learn is my, not my teacher’s. If teacher teach you very hard and you just sleep at course and not pay attention that’s useless. Yes, I have to study hard to pass the course.’

**Interview 4**

Q: ‘Can you do your own assessment?’
A: ‘Yes, why not? But not official. No, I think not because many things I don’t know. I need somebody to ask something. But when you compare yourself and your teacher’s (assessment).’

**Interview 5**

Q: ‘General opinion.’
A: ‘When I started my first course it was a little bit difficult and I didn’t know how I was going, but now that I know the structure of the course, how we are assessed, I found it very useful, but I think as many other aspects of study, one part is the study in TAFE or with the teacher and the main part, the principal part is the student I think.’
However, the students also commented informally that the short ten week duration of the course put undue pressure on both teachers and students, although in the final evaluation of the course, surprisingly this issue was not raised again by many students.

**Suggestions for other teachers**

There are a number of things that I would now do and suggest to other teachers about competency-based courses as a result of doing this research. Many if not most of the points may seem obvious to an experienced teacher, but it is easier to skim over the familiar than to come up with recommendations outside one’s own experience, so I have simply put all my ideas together.

**Explain competency-based courses to the students**

Whenever possible and if the students’ level of English allows it, I believe it is vital to explain fully what one is doing and why, from course planning to task and activity level. Similarly I always provided my classes, again depending on their level of English (from about ASLPR 1 upwards) with a copy of the course outline with the timing and nature of assessment tasks clearly indicated. In this course as the students had a reasonably high level of English (ASLPR 1+ - 2), students also had a copy of the specific learning outcomes they were expected to achieve.

**Give the students feedback**

I believe that detailed feedback, especially on assessment tasks is highly motivating to students. I use a sheet containing the criteria for the learning outcomes with an overall rating on a 1–5 scale. Each criterion is marked as Good, OK, Needs more work and with specific comments as necessary for each student.

**Conduct regular evaluations of the course with the students**

A long-standing practice of mine, which I revived during the project, was a regular student evaluation of the week’s work. I used to do this weekly for the first five to six weeks of the course, by which time we all knew each other well enough, so that I was reasonably sure of honest informal reactions. On a similar piece of action research as well as in class, I would try to institute this habit both to keep myself up to scratch and to help the student articulate their feelings about both the teaching and their own learning.

Clearly to do this one must be reasonably confident of one’s own performance, but in my experience students are seldom as critical of us as we are of ourselves. Occasionally they can give us an entirely different perspective of the program. In addition, this sort of open response is an increasingly expected part of the Australian workplace, so that the students need to learn both the practice and the acceptable way to convey their opinions.
In addition to these suggestions, I would follow in general the pattern of steps I undertook in the project, with the addition of a second unit of work evaluation, probably at about week six or seven of a ten week course. This should give the teacher some indication of how he or she has responded to the students' feedback and also of how the students are progressing in their ability to self-monitor their learning and assessment.

The professional and personal impact of the project on my teaching

I feel I have gained in three major ways from being part of this project: the discipline involved in having to be systematic, the reinforcement of many of my current beliefs about teaching and the collaboration with other colleagues.

Discipline

Student assessment has always been one of the areas in which I have felt least confident. From the point of view of a more disciplined approach, I believe I have gained a lot through having to focus both my teaching and my various assessment instruments. I believe I have become more methodical in the way I approach student assessment and in the explanations I give to the class, that is, not in what I do (which is much the same) but in how I carry out the assessments.

At the same time, the evaluation exercises I asked the students to do brought actual assessment tasks and procedures into a clearer perspective within the overall purposes of course design. It has been all too easy while adapting to working in a CBT curriculum to allow oneself to think more of the assessment than of the teaching process.

Reinforcement

The responses I collected from the students throughout the project have reinforced my already well-established belief in the importance of articulating my course aims and expectations, the assessment processes I plan and the students' progress (both formally and informally). The project emphasised for me that it is equally important for the students to articulate their expectations and perceptions. In the project I had to articulate and develop my ideas rather than operating on 'gut feeling' or a more instinctive level. This was taken even further when I was involved in a professional development session at which I had to report on my research to other teachers. The need to articulate my own and the students' responses made me see the teaching implications more clearly, while documenting and formally reflecting, as well as the process of collaborating with others at Centre, College and State level resulted in more focused and effective course planning.

Collaboration

One of the main advantages of working in a large teaching centre like mine is the opportunity for ongoing collaboration with colleagues. This provides a general stimulus as we bounce ideas and materials off each other and usually helps to sharpen the focus of both the teaching and assessment materials used in the centre. As a result of both these forms of input, I think one's overall teaching performance is strengthened. However, working on an action research project such as this provided additional stimulation, as the
classes of the teachers involved were very varied in type, level and teaching location and enabled me to broaden out from my own teaching centre. The project interactions were thus very valuable professionally to us all.

This piece of action research was, as is often the case for busy teachers, carried out under the pressure of time constraints. These affected the actual time spent on the evaluation sessions and the care with which the surveys were chosen, composed, adapted and administered. However, granted these constraints, I feel that the project made clearer to both me and my students the close links between teaching and assessing and led to our being more methodical and self-aware in our respective roles. I have also followed on from the project in my teaching by using a similar pattern of explicit and detailed linking of the course units to the Learning Outcomes of the various modules and to the formal assessment. Next term I plan to adapt the project format to the Level Three course I will teach and to compare the results.

Another major benefit of being involved was that it was fun! As part of the project, I felt that my views were appreciated and it was nice not to be taken for granted. When you’re feeling pretty jaded by constant changes in college and state bureaucracies, it was good to ‘stretch the brain a bit’ and it gave me much needed opportunities and reasons to collaborate with fellow teachers involved in the project and with other teachers at my teaching centre. My feelings now are that teachers should be encouraged to undertake the type of action research involved in this project. Here in Queensland we have been somewhat ‘hung up’ on the changes to the TAFE system, the introduction of competency-based training and administrative changes. As a result, one can easily stick to the same old ways of doing things as a way of keeping sane! Projects like this give a framework for discipline and guidance within which to stand back a bit and consider both the real syllabus demands of competency-based curricula and how we can tackle them.
TWO

Developing integrated approaches to assessment

Michael Carroll

- Students… appreciated the opportunity to be assessed as they went along, and to try the assessment for a particular competency again if they did not achieve it at the first attempt. But they were also looking for a definite statement on their ‘final’ level of English….
The TEACHER

Michael Carroll has been a teacher in the English Language Programs Section of the Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of South Australia (CALUSA), Adelaide for the past four years. He has been interested for some time in research on the use of reflective journal writing for speakers of languages other than English. In addition to participating directly as a classroom teacher in the project, he generated interest amongst four other teachers at his centre and together they formed a collaborative action research group.

The ISSUE

For the first time, I was basing my course design on a new competency-based program, the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE). I was interested in investigating and documenting my learners’ perceptions of the CSWE as exemplified in the program I had developed as well as articulating my own responses and reactions to using it. I conducted the research over a ten week period in the second half of a twenty week course.

The BACKGROUND

The learners were enrolled in an Introductory Vocational Education Certificate for Learners of English as a Second Language (IVEC). The IVEC course includes modules in English, Maths, Science, Basic Computing, Career Planning, Occupational Health and Safety and Adult Learning. The course was an experimental program run from February to July 1994, at the Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of South Australia (CALUSA), Adelaide.

It was aimed at assisting immigrants intending to study at colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE), but who had insufficient formal qualifications for entry. The students were at Stage Three of the CSWE (intermediate level English) and were enrolled in three classes of approximately twelve to sixteen students.
The course

In designing the IVEC course, it was decided to base the first ten weeks of a twenty week course on Stage Three of the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE), on the grounds that this would fulfil the English requirements of the IVEC, and would in addition improve the students’ competence in English to a level at which they would be better able to cope with the demands of the other components of the course.

The students had a wide range of linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, vocational fields, qualifications, and future goals. All the students began the course with a post-beginner level of English (ASLPR rating of 1+ and below) and the student profiles varied from one group to another. In the sections that follow, I will focus on my own teaching situation, indicating the way in which I carried out the classroom research and what my findings were.

The students

There were sixteen students who fell into three categories, in my class. Eight of them had some plans to go on to study at TAFE but stated that they would accept work if it were offered; three were looking for work immediately but felt they might have something to be gained from TAFE study at some point, and for the remaining five the goal of TAFE study was not felt to be appropriate at that stage of their learning.

Of the final group, three were long-term immigrants — two Italian men and one Chilean man. All three were in their late 50s, had come to Australia in the 1960s or 1970s and had worked in a variety of manual jobs before becoming unemployed quite recently. They were content to be in the class, perhaps because of the congenial atmosphere and the implicit pressure from the Commonwealth Employment Service. Had they not been in this class, they might have been required to do some other training course not of their choosing. The two Italians spoke fluent English but had very limited literacy skills, while the Chilean student’s English was limited in all but listening. There were in addition an Iranian man and a Chinese man of the same age as these others, although they were more recent migrants. None of these five had any plans for future study, and in the current Australian economic and employment climate were battling long odds in the job-search stakes.

Carrying out the data collection

An important element of the course both from the point of view of the learning domain in the CSWE Competency Two and the students’ completion of the IVEC, was aimed at building effective independent learning strategies. In order to do this and collect part of the data for our research, the students were involved in regular discussions, both in and out of the classroom, about the usefulness of various activities and situations for language learning. Their responses to these discussions were then documented. In addition, I carried out a feedback session with the students after each competency assessment which, although focusing mainly on the text used for the assessment, also included some discussion of the assessment task. Again I documented the students’ responses.
Some of the students also wrote learning journals during the course and there were occasional references to competencies and assessments in these. At the end of the course students were asked to complete a final course evaluation questionnaire which asked them to comment on each of the competencies they had been assessed on.

The findings from my class

There were a number of findings which emerged from the project. I have set these out as various themes or issues which I believe have implications for teaching competency-based programs.

Continuous assessment

The most commented-upon aspect of the competency-base of the program in the final questionnaire was that the students almost unanimously favoured the fact that assessment was continuous and formative throughout the course, rather than a summative procedure at the end of the course. They reflected this view in a variety of different comments such as:

- It would be check students that they understand or can’t understand each part.
- Because I needn’t more time to think the tests and teacher would check each part.
- This method is very useful because have lots of chance correct yourself.
- Teacher’s comment is very important for me; he help me correct myself.

It was interesting that one student, who ticked both boxes in answer to the question:

Which would you prefer,

a. Six short tests during the course, and an interview with the teacher, or
b. a single test at the end of the course?

gave as his answer:

a. Because I need learn and understand bit at a time.
b. Because I want to know about my improvement.

Several students echoed this sentiment in the discussions that took place throughout the course. They appreciated the opportunity to be assessed as they went along and to try the assessment task for a particular competency again if they did not achieve it at the first attempt. But they were also perhaps looking for a definitive statement on their ‘final’ level of English; an answer to the question, ‘Where am I?’ rather than a series of competency achievement statements.

Learning Strategies

A second finding was that the learning strategies and skills discussions which had formed part of the methods for collecting data in the project were seen as a useful or
very useful aspect of the course by all the students. As one student stated:

*I love to do the learning skills discussion. It has a lot of ideas in writing, reading, speaking and listening.*

This suggests that by deliberately structuring regular discussions of this type into the course design as part of the selection of learning activities, teachers could help many students to become more aware of how they learn. It would also introduce them to new approaches and skills for learning in general, which they could transfer to other courses in which they might enrol.

My own approach in response to teaching towards the competencies was to provide the students with an information sheet setting out the competencies and indicating the tasks and criteria they would need to complete. This provided the basis for the learning strategies discussions. The information sheet I used is set out below:

**Competencies One and Two**

1. Can understand the context of work in Australia
2. Can use a range of learning strategies relevant to employment contexts.

You need to keep a folder of information related to your English learning and your future work plans. Your folder should contain:

1. All the handouts from the course.
2. All the written work you have done in the course
3. Information about work in Australia (Work Awareness)
4. A career plan

You need to show that you have a career plan

- Is your plan realistic?
- Do you need to do more English courses in order to get the job you want?
- Do you need to upgrade your qualifications?
- Is your work folder organised?
- Where have you found information about jobs, qualifications, pay, English?

5. Language learning evaluation

You need to show that you know how you learn best

- What learning aids and resources have you used?
  For instance, have you used books? tape recordings? videos? television and radio? other people?
  How did you use them?
  How useful was each one?
- What can you do to evaluate your English skills?
  What changes have you seen in your level of English?
  What have other people told you about your English?
  What can you do to get this kind of feedback?
The students’ perceptions of the level of difficulty of the competencies

There were big differences between students in how they perceived the level of difficulty of the various competencies. It would seem, perhaps not surprisingly, that the crucial factor was not the nature of the task itself, so much as the student’s prior language profile. If the student was weakest in speaking and listening then those competencies were perceived as the most difficult; and if the students was weakest in writing, then the writing tasks presented the biggest problems.

Of the speaking and listening competencies more students found difficulty with Competency Three (Can understand an oral presentation) than with Competency Four (Can negotiate a complex/problematic social exchange). I found this rather surprising. It might have been supposed that a task involving both speaking and listening, and requiring a considerable level of accuracy of communication, might be considered more rather than less difficult than listening alone, particularly when the assessment task chosen was a telephone conversation.

It also meant that I had to review how I was assessing the competency. It may be that the students’ response was a reflection on the nature and appropriacy of the listening task chosen (it was longer than the suggested five minutes), the adequacy of the preparation, or the validity of the assessment medium. A different explanation might be that the particular social situation of the oral presentation on which the students were assessed, a talk which was given by someone not familiar to the students and focused on a distinctly industry-related topic, might have inhibited them.

I also realised that the validity of the assessment process for this competency may also be undermined if students are prevented from demonstrating their listening ability because of a lack of speaking or writing skill. In my own case, students were asked to write a short account of the talk given, or to present a set of notes. Most were able to do this quite skilfully, but those whose written submissions did not demonstrate understanding could also opt to explain them to the assessor face-to-face. After two assessment tasks and with the allowance of demonstrating their understanding by responding verbally to the assessor, the whole class were successful in this competency. There were thus considerable attempts made to facilitate students’ success in this task.

One student thought that the two assessment tasks used for one of the competencies were both the easiest and the most difficult of the entire course. The first, where a tape recording was used, was considered the most difficult, and the second, live, but of longer duration, was easiest,

... because 1) face to face, 2) second time to listen.

The second task was easiest because it was face to face and because it was the second time the students had listened to a talk on the same topic.

Another student made a suggestion about the assessment methods which seemed to be related to my comments above about the validity of assessment methods:

*It is good if the assessment is printed out not only many writing. Because in this course a lot of the students could not write an efficiency language of English.*
I took this to mean that the student was suggesting a question and answer format for the listening competency, similar to the one used for the reading competencies, rather than the unstructured note-taking which I had asked for.

**Perceptions of time and planning in the course**

The same student commented on the amount of time taken up by assessment during the course:

*Times are quite limited on assessment weeks.*

From the discussions I had with others in the project, this was certainly also the general perception of many of the teachers in our teaching centres who taught competency-based courses over the year and who were still getting used to the increased focus on assessment in such courses. It was certainly considered to be a problem when the course was driven by the need to complete the assessments as was partly the case in this course. However, as teachers worked with the competency framework, they began to look for ways to circumvent this problem such as integrating the assessment tasks with the planning of sequences of learning activities, so that one unit of work is used to assess several competencies. The student referred to above also suggested:

*It is better if the assessment information can print out as early as it can.*

She elaborated on this in our discussions, saying that she would have preferred a clear schedule of assessment dates to have been given out at the beginning of the course. From a teacher's point of view this, of course, could take away the flexibility which is one of the major strengths of competency-based programs. It is nevertheless a valid criticism, and a major issue for the planning of all learner-centred programs. What the teacher sees as flexibility and responsiveness can also sometimes be seen by the students as lack of planning or woolly-headedness. A possible response to this issue would be to give an anticipated schedule, emphasising that it is changeable according to student and teacher perceptions of readiness.

**The need for explicitness**

The need for the explanation and justification of the teaching approach to the students, important to all learner-centred teaching, is especially so at the current time when competency-based programs are still in a period of trial and evaluation. Clearly I had not succeeded in justifying the assessment process to the student who made the above comments. A key aspect of the presentation of a competency-based course is that assessment and curriculum activities should be closely linked and the objectives and assessment criteria should be explicit. Students need to be informed of precisely what language features they are expected to demonstrate and what behaviours they are expected to perform. In my view, this is one of the most attractive features of competency-based programs from the point of view of teaching. However, for all the teachers in the IVEC ESL program it also posed a problem. It was not at all easy to explain the performance criteria in the CSWE in the terms in which they are set out, to students with a less sophisticated understanding of language. I attempted to overcome this difficulty by re-writing, in more accessible language, each of the competencies addressed. For example, I set out Competency Eleven as follows:
I had varied rates of success with this strategy. I found that the most successful, and the easiest competency to explain to students, was Competency Four, Can negotiate a complex/problematic spoken exchange. For instance the performance indicator given in the CSWE, Uses appropriate staging for text: e.g. opening and closing strategies, I made more direct:

- Did you begin the conversation with a greeting, and by saying who you were and what you wanted?
  For instance, Good morning… /Hello… /My name is… I’d like to enquire about…

- Did you end the conversation naturally?
  For instance, Goodbye… /Thank you… /See you later…

For this competency, it was relatively straightforward to give an example of how each of the performance indicators might be realised because of the restricted nature of the suggested tasks — telephoning for information about a job or role-playing a customer complaint in a shop.

**Cooperation**

An interesting comment, from a student who joined the course late, was the following:

> What I suggestion about English courses is to students: have confidence working together to help each other, cooperation, share the work in the classroom or else for the homework, and that the teacher will tell (this), in the beginning of the course, for all students.

This is good advice for learning in any kind of course, not just a competency-based one. It may also be an indication however that this student perceived that the idea

---

Competency Eleven: Write a procedural text

You need to:
- begin by making it clear what procedure you are describing
- use a clear layout
- make the sequence of steps clear

For instance by numbering them, or by using linking words, first…, second…, next…, then…, finally…
- use the main vocabulary correctly
- use the correct grammar for a procedure (imperatives) — so that there is no misunderstanding.
- use mostly accurate spelling and punctuation, and readable handwriting

For this competency, it was relatively straightforward to give an example of how each of the performance indicators might be realised because of the restricted nature of the suggested tasks — telephoning for information about a job or role-playing a customer complaint in a shop.

**Cooperation**

An interesting comment, from a student who joined the course late, was the following:

> What I suggestion about English courses is to students: have confidence working together to help each other, cooperation, share the work in the classroom or else for the homework, and that the teacher will tell (this), in the beginning of the course, for all students.

This is good advice for learning in any kind of course, not just a competency-based one. It may also be an indication however that this student perceived that the idea
of cooperation and the sharing of course work, not encouraged by traditional, more competitive assessment processes, was not only possible, but desirable in this new context. This has further implications for teaching as it implies that group work and collaborative learning activities may be particularly appropriate in competency-based programs.

Relevance
The assessment task variable, ‘relevant to the workplace/further education context’ in the competency descriptions caused some confusion and dissatisfaction from the students’ point of view. A major reason for this was that the vocationally-oriented content of the course may not have been perceived as directly relevant for students who were not actually in the workplace. Relevance is a highly individual concept and if this variable is interpreted strictly by the teacher as is implied in the assessment guidelines, the students may not have had the necessary workplace experience. In the case of professional students particularly, a wide range of content areas may be relevant to their various forms of work. This is equally so for tertiary students. It may be simplistic to assume that because students are in programs directed towards job-seeking, as these students were, workplace communication tasks are of greatest relevance to them as they are learning. Work-related texts, when introduced into the classroom may often be quite decontextualised from the point of view of the students’ experience, and students cannot always be expected to ‘come to grips’ with them in an authentic way. Although the job search is of great importance, it may be less real in their inner thoughts than a wealth of other interests and needs which assail immigrants who are new to Australia and its culture.

A possible solution to this issue could be to adopt a liberal definition of what constitutes relevance. If situations which are not at first glance directly relevant to the workplace, but which are personally relevant to the students, are used in assessment, students are more likely to feel at ease and therefore to perform to the best of their abilities. For example, a student who has not yet worked in Australia, but who has school-age children may find that a task involving communicating with the children’s schoolteachers enables them to perform with a genuine communicative purpose, whilst if they are asked to role-play a casual workplace conversation with which they have no actual experience, they may be able to perform only in a stilted, inauthentic way. Nevertheless the kind of language skills used in the first situation may be precisely the ones needed in the workplace.

Overall, the vocational focus of the courses was felt by many teachers and a majority of students, to be too intensely work-oriented and consequently rather tedious at times. An alternative solution to the one noted above would be to use the mixed focus of the CSWE.

Recommendations and insights for competency-based course design
One of the major challenges in adopting a competency-based approach has related to organising assessment tasks and procedures to cover all the competencies and working out how to fit them into the course. As a result of doing this project and working with a competency-based program, I would advocate an integrated rather
than a discrete approach to course tasks and assessment. For instance, a unit of work
designed around a survey project which involves students in arranging to interview
subjects, doing background reading, writing a report and giving an oral presentation
of findings, could cover all or part of a number of the competencies at Stage Three of
the CSWE (e.g. 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10 and 11). This approach was tried by several teachers
in the early stages of using the CSWE and turned out to be an engaging and successful
way of fitting assessment into the course. For the course described here, however, two
factors led to a different approach. First, the design of the program placed the CSWE
in the first ten weeks of the course, as a pre-requisite for the remainder of IVEC.
Second, the IVEC curriculum stipulates clearly that its own components should be
taught and assessed separately. This also appeared to be the approach taken in the
CSWE assessment guidelines. It was decided therefore to follow more closely the
model suggested by these two documents.

In retrospect, from my point of view, the integrated approach appeared to make far
more sense to both students and teachers. It also serves to overcome a further problem
of using a sequential, non-integrated model, namely that a much greater emphasis
than is necessary is being placed on assessment itself as a major focus of teaching.

A further issue is the need to consider ‘backgrounder’ assessment in the overall
design of the course. A cornerstone of the competency-based approach is that
students must be fully informed about precisely when assessments are taking place.
This is one of its most attractive features. However a strict adherence to this can
create a problem, especially if a sequential assessment model is being used. A series of
‘testing’ sessions can cause as much pressure for students as a traditional final
examination. On the occasions when an integrated approach is used this appears
to be less of a problem since the assessments are seen to be subordinated to a more
‘real’ task.

In addition to this, there is a strong case to be made for allowing students to cooperate
with teachers in assessing their own performance. In order to do so, they need to have
a clear idea of the performance criteria, but they do not have to feel under the stress
of a formal testing situation. A variety of assessment modes is possible. Students can
assess themselves; they can discuss their behaviour with the teacher in order to arrive
at a mutually agreed assessment following a formal test, or they can initiate a
retrospective assessment in consultation with the teacher. This last approach which
is a form of recognition of prior learning (RPL), is an important option for students
and teachers. For instance, at the time when a particular competency description is
being explained to students, it is quite conceivable that a student may say, ‘I have
done that,’ and to remind the teacher of an instance when he or she has fulfilled the
performance criteria in a situation which was not a formal assessment.

The impact of the classroom-based research
on teachers professionally

The adoption of competency-based curriculum approaches suggests a radically
different kind of English language teaching to that with which most Australian ESL
teachers are familiar. This is a considerable challenge for teachers who are pressed for
time even in normal circumstances. Curriculum development is not something which
should be done in isolation. Rather like the action research spiral, ideas must be
proposed, tried out, amended, tried again and so on. This places great demands on teachers implementing new programs. A great deal of trialing, problem-solving and refinement is needed throughout such programs. Working with a competency-based approach resulted in criticising it as well as supporting it. Being part of the project led the teachers involved to focus on assessment, in this case competency-based, and its reliability or otherwise, as a way of measuring student performance. It emphasised the difficulties as well as the advantages of measuring language using competencies. The question, ‘What is the relationship between achieving a competency and demonstrating language proficiency?’, was asked frequently, if not answered.

Teachers were also confronted with considering different ways of structuring their courses. We needed to consider whether the competencies should be taught and assessed in order of their perceived linguistic difficulty for the students or whether they should follow a random order. A further consideration was how the course could be structured so that students were prepared for the assessment task but not actually ‘coached’ for it specifically. We felt that if students were coached for very narrowly defined tasks there was the danger that the competency achieved, for example, writing an accident report, might not be transferable to other situations. A further impact of doing our own research, perhaps the most important, was that involvement in the project, carefully considering curriculum decisions, monitoring and evaluating teaching practices was a powerful means of professional development. Although these activities are part and parcel of good teaching practice, the project placed them in the foreground, requiring us not only to consider, monitor and evaluate our work, but to do so in the public arena. This need to justify what we were doing was a useful motivating force, and the sharing of ideas brought new understandings of the program we were implementing, and the curriculum development process itself.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the contribution to this account of my co-teachers Jill Kelton and Jacqui Moller. Together with Pat Hardy, Ruth McGee and myself, they were part of a collaborative teacher group involved in the NCELTR research project, Investigating course design in a competency-based curriculum.

Reference

SECTION D

Learners
The effects of educational background in the program of beginning learners: A case study

Margaret Carew

There is perhaps a tendency for teachers to regard all students with literacy difficulties as being the same, and likely to need the same remedies for the same problems. I discovered that this need not be the case.
The TEACHER

Margaret Carew is a teacher at the Dandenong Centre, AMES Victoria. She has taught adult ESL for the past seven years and has also undertaken a number of curriculum and professional development projects. When the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) was first introduced in Victoria, she taught more advanced classes but during the course of the project was teaching beginning learners at Stage One.

The ISSUE

Since the beginning of 1994, I have worked with beginning learners at Stage One of the CSWE. In ‘beginner’ classes we have always had learners who fail to make progress in the development of all four macroskills, but most particularly in reading and writing. It seems to be the case with these so-called ‘slow’ learners that their lack of literacy skills also affects their achievements in oracy, as well as in the domain of learning knowledge. I wanted to investigate in detail the impact of competency-based language curricula on learners in this category, in particular the roles they saw themselves playing in their learning and their experiences.

The BACKGROUND

The two learners selected for this study were in a Stage One ‘literacy focus’ class of twenty students. They had already undertaken one beginning course at this stage, but were not yet ready to move on to Stage Two. I observed the learners over an eleven-week course. The students attended fifteen hours a week; thirteen hours in the classroom, one hour in the computer room for Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and one hour in the Independent Learning Centre (ILC).
Introduction

At Dandenong Centre, we have always had a large number of students entering as beginning learners of English. Since the introduction of the CSWE these Stage One learners have usually spent a term in a Phase One class for beginners, with few or none of the competencies being assessed. They then proceed to a Phase Two class for a term, by the end of which time they will in most cases have been assessed for all the Stage One competencies to see if they are able to undertake Stage Two.

I selected two learners for this case study who were at Stage One, in a Phase Two class with a literacy focus. A ‘literacy focus’ class consists of students who have achieved a minimal level of proficiency in reading and writing but, as far as the Certificate is concerned, are making significantly less progress in the domains of reading and writing than in oracy. In their case, an attempt is made to teach the reading and writing competencies, and to assess some of them. For this reason they are frequently described, not officially, but conventionally, as ‘slow learners’. The epithet is an unfortunate one, which very few deserve.

For the learners in this class, there were a number of reasons for the lack of progress or ‘slowness’, particularly in reading and writing. The first of these was a limited experience of formal education, with a consequent lack of formal learning skills and strategies. This however did not apply in all cases. Many of the learners had had several years of formal schooling in their own countries, including tertiary education, in some cases. Factors other than education levels affected them. One of the more obvious was a different script background. For these students the challenges of learning English were heavily compounded by the need to master an entirely new script. In two cases this was combined with low levels of formal education. Most of the non-Roman script background students, however, had had more than ten years’ schooling.

Another factor affecting the capacity of the learners to make effective progress was recent and current trauma and upheaval. In many cases, the recent experiences of learners from countries such as Bosnia and Afghanistan were so traumatic as to make effective participation in learning activities very difficult, and progress very slow. The implications of this for satisfactory achievement of the competencies at Stage One are obvious.

As far as the teaching and assessment of competencies were concerned, this class presented me and my co-teacher with many problems, both in content and methodology. The most important was the students’ very low level of confidence and consequently of motivation to learn. Jackson (1993: 9) maintains that these factors relate to ‘trauma and upheaval’ and lack of ‘competence in formal learning skills and strategies.’ To them I would add unfamiliarity with the Roman script. Different factors affected different learners, however. Not all had undergone severe recent trauma, just under half had a non-Roman script background and nine had fewer than eight years formal schooling. Of those only four had fewer than six years. Four learners had received ten to twelve years formal schooling, and three, all from non-Roman script backgrounds, had tertiary qualifications, with fourteen, sixteen and seventeen years of education respectively.
Overall, a mixture of factors influenced the ability of the learners in this class to learn effectively, and though the class were all categorised as 'slow' learners with literacy problems, they were certainly not at all homogeneous in terms of these factors. It was this that influenced me in my selection of learners for the case study.

**Selection of the learners**

The two learners who were the focus of my research were different in terms of the factors I have outlined. I hoped to document their progress to see how these differences impacted on their achievement of the competencies. The following is a profile of the learners, whom I will refer to as Ricarda and Abdullah.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Ricarda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country:</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrival date:</td>
<td>September 1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation:</td>
<td>Assistant in a bakery shop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Education:</td>
<td>Five</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Script:</td>
<td>Roman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English learning:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**(pre-AMES)**

**Courses so far and competencies achieved**

By the commencement of this course, she had done one semester (two courses) in Stage One, fifteen hours a week in a Phase One class and seventeen hours in a Phase Two class. By the end of this time, she had been assessed in all the competencies and had achieved four, partially achieved three and failed to achieve a further four.

**Present and recent life**

'Mail-order bride' — lives with her new husband, a naturalised Australian of British origin, who is twenty-five years her senior. No members of her own family live here and her husband does not speak her language. She has complained already that her husband is abusive and has a 'girlfriend'.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Abdullah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country:</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td>Fifty-five</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrival date:</td>
<td>October '92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation:</td>
<td>Professional soldier — high-ranking officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Education:</td>
<td>Seventeen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Script:</td>
<td>Farsi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English learning:</td>
<td>(pre-AMES)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learnt English at secondary school, two hours a week for a year. Maintains this entailed mainly learning the alphabet, which he said he had completely forgotten by the time he arrived here.
From their records I could see at the beginning of the course that both of these learners had had difficulties in achieving competencies in Stage One. Each student was disadvantaged in terms of either educational or script background and I was interested to find out how what particular effects this had on their efforts to achieve the competencies.

As I got to know them better, I discovered other issues which were affecting their learning. Ricarda had achieved all but one of the oracy competencies and the gap between her progress in this domain and in the domains of reading and writing was growing daily wider. Her lack of formal education could explain her ‘slowness’ in reading and writing, but her rapid development of oracy skills could perhaps be explained in part by her circumstances. Her husband and his family spoke only English, and as a result she was ‘picking up’ the spoken language very quickly. Abdullah, by contrast, was as slow in his achievement of the oracy competencies as the reading and writing. He told me that he did not speak English very much outside the classroom; his pronunciation was a problem, he said, and he felt that people did not understand him. It also seemed that he had taken much longer, a semester and a half, to achieve fewer competencies than Ricarda.

I soon realised, however, that there was not much difference between these learners in terms of the hours of instruction they had already received. Abdullah had had more courses, but over a much smaller number of hours per week in an evening centre. Also, the first time that Abdullah had been assessed in any of the competencies was at the end of his fifth course. Difference in script background also affected him. On his arrival in English classes, he had been unable to do much more than recognise the letters of the alphabet and copy them. In the light of this, I felt he could hardly be described as ‘slow’. In class, his achievements with the Roman script were, in fact, remarkable even if he had not yet achieved any of the reading and writing competencies.

At the beginning of the course, therefore, these two very different learners, each differently disadvantaged, had one thing in common — in almost the same numbers of hours of tuition neither had achieved much progress in the reading and writing competencies. As part of the NCELTR project, it would be interesting to chart their achievement overall, but particularly in reading and writing, and to see which disadvantage would prove greater — a different script or a low level of formal education.
Observation of the learners

At the beginning of the project, I spent some time getting to know the class, which was new to me, and deciding which learners to select for the case-study. By the beginning of the second week I had finally chosen Ricarda and Abdullah. I decided to make regular notes of my observations. Generally these covered two or three lessons a week as I co-taught the class, and did not see much of the students during the early part of the week. My co-teacher, however, was aware of what I was doing and we had some fruitful discussions. I also enlisted the aid of of the teacher in the Independent Learning Centre where the class spent an hour each week.

The data I collected during the eleven weeks of this case study consisted of:

- notes made while observing the students, including my reflections on these observations;
- two audio recordings, one of a class in progress, one of a small-group activity in which both students were involved;
- samples of the students’ work, on which I recorded my own reflections and comments;
- an end of course interview with the learners, using a brief questionnaire which I recorded and transcribed with the questions and the students’ responses.

As far as the notes were concerned, I found it best to record small details as they happened in class, if they struck me as somehow significant and then to reflect on them later. My notes on 20 May 1994, for example, recorded these observations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the CSWE?</th>
<th>Class very quiet. Some copied the competencies down, including Abdullah and Ricarda. Explained that some had already passed some competencies. Did not say anything about having to pass all competencies to get to Stage Two. I just said that if they didn’t pass them this term they would be able to finish next term.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explained it and told them what the competencies were at Stage One. I expressed these in simple terms. Now have them written up on butcher paper and displayed on wall. Emphasised that competencies involve tasks, so we can see what the students can do with the language. Talked a bit about assessment</td>
<td>I felt quite uncomfortable during this. The students had not been told about the Certificate prior to this. Most of the teachers at the lower levels prefer not to, especially with classes such as this where achievement of the competencies can be so slow and some will never achieve more than one or two. I feel that they should know, but that it should be presented to them in as non-threatening a way as possible. Assessment should be as informal as possible within the requirements of the Certificate. Could not be sure what Abdullah and Ricarda made of it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Through these regular observations, I slowly built up a picture of the learners, how they operated within the classroom culture, their learning styles, the particular problems they were having.

Before conducting the final interviews with Ricarda and Abdullah I briefly discussed the Stage One competencies with them, to see how well they understood them. Ricarda informed me that she had ‘no problems’ with understanding any of them. I was less sure that Abdullah, who did not have the same level of comprehension of spoken English, had understood. However, he surprised me by giving me some specific examples, taken from the work we had done in class. The map of Dandenong, he said, was ‘a graphic text’.

The questions I asked were very simple, given their level of English. I wanted their feelings about the course as a whole, their perceptions of what competencies were difficult for them, and their responses to the assessment process. Appendix 1 sets out extracts from the tapescripts I made of the interviews with each learner.

**The nature of the learning problems**

Observation of the learners on a day-to-day basis and examination of their responses to my interview questions clarified for me the nature of their learning problems and the strategies they used to cope with them.

Because of the number of competencies she had already achieved, it seemed likely at the beginning of the course that Ricarda would progress more quickly than Abdullah on to Stage Two. Abdullah had achieved very few competencies and I found it hard to imagine more daunting a task than mastering the skills of reading and writing in a new language while having to master the script of that language at the same time. Despite the obvious progress he had already made, I did not expect him to fully achieve any of the specified reading or writing competencies, except perhaps one of them. As the weeks went by, however, his literacy skills improved and he showed himself more and more able to satisfy the performance criteria for the literacy competencies. Ricarda, on the other hand, could satisfy very few and her progress was far slower. I found it particularly interesting that when I interviewed them, their perceptions of their problems coincided with this reality. Ricarda felt reading and writing were especially difficult for her, whereas Abdullah said that ‘writing not bad… reading not bad, good’, though spelling he said was ‘very difficult’. He was more concerned about his speaking than his reading and writing.

From an examination of my data, it seemed that this could be explained by the learning strategies employed by the two. Ricarda lacked the formal learning skills and strategies which Abdullah could call upon as a result of his long years of formal education. What strategies she did employ, related to the needs of her personal circumstances, to learn to speak and understand others when they spoke to her as quickly as possible. Her lack of formal education made it reasonable to assume that she did not have good literacy levels in her own language and it was equally reasonable to assume that Abdullah did. According to Jackson (1993: 13), the common experience of teachers suggests that ‘high levels of literacy in L1 correlate positively with a control of formal learning skills’, and it would seem that it is this control which is crucial to the achievement of satisfactory literacy levels in L2. Lack of knowledge of the relevant script, was not nearly as serious a disadvantage to Abdullah as lack of formal education was to Ricarda.
The learners’ perceptions of the competencies

What I could ascertain about Ricarda and Abdullah’s perceptions of the competencies must be seen in the context of the way in which they had been presented to them. I found at the beginning of the course that neither they nor any of the other learners in the class seemed to have any knowledge of the competencies they were expected to achieve, let alone any perceptions of them, nor of the CSWE and how it is structured.

I presented information to the class, very simply, in the context of a lesson on the provision of English language services to immigrants (AMES, TAFE etc.) and their entitlements to English language programs. I gave them a simplified list of the competencies at Stage One with lots of examples, and a strong emphasis on the fact that in achieving a competency you are showing what you can do in English, for example: I can fill in a form; I can have a short conversation in English. I put this list up on the classroom wall in large letters, and would refer to it occasionally during class. I also explained the notion of assessment, emphasising that it would be ongoing and they would have opportunities to do many tasks, until they achieved the competencies.

However, I laid little emphasis on the Certificate as a whole or its structure, with the successive stages to be achieved. I felt that there could be an implication of failure as most of the students had already had more than two courses in Stage 1. Quite a few were already at the end of the 510 hours of English language tuition allotted to them though the Australian Government’s immigrant settlement program arrangements.

In the interviews with Ricarda and Abdullah (see Appendix 1) I wanted to find out whether they understood what competencies were and that they were divided into the areas of knowledge, oracy, and reading and writing. I felt reasonably confident on interviewing them that they both did. Their level of English, however, was not sufficient for them to indicate their opinion of a competency-based program. The most I could ascertain was that they were happy with the course. Their perceptions of competencies appeared to be limited to whether or not they, personally, found them difficult to achieve. As I have already indicated, Ricarda stated that all the reading and writing competencies were difficult for her. Abdullah thought that they were ‘not bad’, although he found the speaking competencies hard.

The learners’ achievement of the competencies

1. Knowledge competencies

In the knowledge domain (see Carroll, Section C, Part Two), both learners were able to satisfy the performance criteria of the first of the two competencies by the end of the course. Abdullah had also satisfied the criteria of Competency Two, though only minimally with regard to the first of the criteria, which requires some formulation of learning goals and plans. He was very tentative about this as saw his age as a problem. It was my feeling that the trauma he had experienced in the previous few years had robbed him of the confidence he needed to participate fully in a process of goal formulation. Ricarda was much more certain of where she was heading. However, she only partially achieved Competency Two, because she had problems with the
performance criteria related to the control of formal learning strategies, such as organisation of materials, participation in learner groupings, and use of the context to extract meaning. This was particularly so with regard to written texts.

2. Oracy

By the end of the course, Ricarda had achieved all five competencies in this domain, although it must be remembered that at the beginning of the course, she had already achieved all except one of the competencies. Abdullah achieved three of the competencies and partially achieved another. I believe that he needed more time to achieve the oral competencies, as he was withdrawn and tentative and had problems with pronunciation. It is probable that during 1993, when he was studying in the evenings at another AMES centre, his whole learning effort was directed towards mastering what for him was a new script.

3. Reading

Ricarda partially achieved one of the three competencies in this domain. Abdullah achieved two and the third was not assessed. I believed that Ricarda’s problems with reading were related to her lack of formal education, which would have furnished her with the skills needed to satisfy such performance criteria as understanding of abstract diagrammatic perspective, using the context to deduce meaning, scanning for information. Her lack of these skills and Abdullah’s confident possession of them was demonstrated to me over and over as I observed them during the term.

4. Writing

Both students achieved the first of the two competencies in this domain. Ricarda partially at first, then fully after re-assessment. Abdullah achieved the second and Ricarda partially achieved it. Ricarda had considerable problems with spelling and punctuation, as well as with linking ideas and achieving some sort of cohesion and continuity. She expressed her frustrations in the interview: ‘For what the next… next… next like that, I can’t.’ Abdullah seemed able to structure his writing much more logically than she did.

My conclusions and what I would suggest to other teachers

The conclusions I drew from my study of the two learners applied to the whole class. The requirements of the case study meant that I had to understand the learners’ problems thoroughly; not only what they had difficulty with but why, what factors in their background influenced them, and how these would impact on their achievement of the competencies. What I learned applied to most of the other learners and I feel that professionally I have benefited a lot from the project.

There is perhaps a tendency for teachers to regard all students with literacy difficulties as being the same and likely to need the same remedies for their problems. I discovered that this need not be the case. The group was considered to be homogeneous. They were referred to as ‘the slow learners’ or the ‘literacy focus’ class. It would be ‘difficult’ to teach them the competencies I was told, but at least they were ‘homogeneous, all in the same boat’. This was comforting, as I was new to a Stage One class.
I soon found however that the learners were far from homogeneous, and in my efforts to cope I had to draw on my experiences, when as a new teacher in AMES in 1987, I was given a beginner’s class as mixed as this one in terms of educational background. I had tried then to deal with the problem by organising learner groupings within the class. This I tried again with the assistance of several community volunteers from the Dandenong Centre. However, this is time-consuming and can almost double the workload of an already hard-pressed teacher.

Perhaps the most important thing I learned was that learners, no matter what their perceived literacy levels, should preferably be grouped according to educational background. Abdullah, would have benefited from being in a ‘faster’ class which did not include learners of very limited formal educational background. Well on the way to mastering the technicalities of the new script, he and others like him did not need the same kind of teaching as students such as Ricarda, who need help with basic formal learning skills and strategies in order to handle the literacy competencies, especially. This question of learner placement is an organisational issue, not a teaching one; nevertheless, it is teachers who often place or recommend student placement and I would suggest that when making their decisions they should base them on more than just the perceived ‘slowness’ of students in achieving literacy competencies. In fact, I am now inclined to wonder whether the introduction of a competency curriculum with its emphasis on achievement, based on a set of external criteria has not caused some teachers to be a little less perceptive about the needs of individual students than they were before.

Another important issue has to do with the way a class like this understood the syllabus they were being taught, and particularly the attitude they developed to the assessment process. Since the introduction of the CSWE in 1993, it has been my experience that teachers of so-called ‘slow’ classes are reluctant to focus students’ attention on the competencies they will need to achieve, or even to mention them at all. Assessment is informal and every effort is made to make sure that the learners do not develop an ‘examination’ mentality. Although not one was newly enrolled, this was probably why none of my students knew about the CSWE, the Stages, and the concept of achieving competencies through assessment tasks, at the beginning of the course. I have already given an outline of my approach to explaining the competencies, in which I tried to avoid giving them the impression that somehow they were failing to progress because they were still in Stage One.

When, at the end of the course, only two students had achieved all the competencies, I recommended that, apart from those who still needed considerable support, the majority should be placed in a joint Stage One/Two class. This has been done and the learners have been made aware of this description of their next class. They will still not be homogeneous and the majority of them will have completed more oral than reading and writing competencies. Techniques such as learner groupings will still have to be used. However, for highly-educated learners such as Abdullah, there is the possibility that they can be transferred more quickly to a Stage Two class as soon as they have completed all the Stage One competencies. For learners such as Ricarda, so much more time is needed; in her own words ‘just only you give me time.’

There seems to me to be good reason for greater organisational flexibility so that students can complete the competencies of one Stage, while starting work on the
next. Above all, for these students, it seems crucial to adopt a procedure of placement and assessment which minimises their feeling that their progress is to be defined solely in terms of passing, or failing, a Stage in the Certificate.

I have always tried to be as involved as possible with my students’ learning needs. My experience of conducting a case-study, however, has made me aware just how much can pass a busy teacher by and just how tempting it can be to lump learners together in convenient categories such as ‘slow’. These terms are meaningless when the students are seen in the light of the experiential factors which influence their learning. The close observation and analysis that the project required of me has made me much more careful, much more aware. All I had read and learned about the language learning problems of learners with low education, all I had surmised about the difficulties of coping with a new script took on a new reality in the persons of Ricarda and Abdullah. It is to be hoped that both of them, in their new Stage One class, will continue to progress at their own pace and in their own way, without having to worry that they are 'still in Stage One'.

Reference


Appendix One: The interviews with Ricarda and Abdullah

(Q = my questions; A = learner’s responses)

Ricarda
Ricarda was confident about talking on tape, and responded well.

Q: ‘Are you happy with this English course?’
A: ‘Yes, I’m happy for English because just you know I’m learning English…’
Q: ‘Any particular reason — is anything especially good or helpful?’
A: ‘Yeh… it help for me — help for me for speak and for writing. I’m very happy this one.’
Q: ‘What competencies are hardest for you?’
A: ‘Um, for writing, for spelling, I can’t… and a little bit for reading because just er — if you just read me and I read er too difficult and I can’t. Must just I must do easy – slowly. I can’t just very fast like that — yeh, that’s my problem.’
Q: ‘Is the reading in class sometimes too fast for you?’
A: ‘No, easy and I’m really happy this…. class because you know before I just start I can’t understand… anything. I can’t but now just um a little bit… before I don’t know for reading or for writing for spelling, no I don’t know how before I’m start this one this year — and now I’m just a little bit for writing, for spelling a little bit only… but before no I don’t know.
Q: ‘What is specially difficult about writing?’
A: ‘Um… long words and spelling.’
Q: ‘Anything else?’

(At this point Ricarda talked a bit about her problems in writing in her own language. She said she can write a little bit in Warai, her mother tongue, but not in Tagalog. We discussed this, and then I repeated my question about her problems in writing in English.)

A: ‘Just um writing for what the next next next like that — I can’t — just my problem for me straightaway like that.’
Q: ‘Putting your ideas in writing — is that a problem?’
A: ‘I can’t — just a problem.’
Q: ‘Do you like to do assessment tasks — tests — for the competencies?’
A: ‘Just um — if if just um I’m hurry — my teacher said that… example you just um hurry on like that just only you give me time how many minutes like that — I’m going quickly and then just I can’t because I don’t know…’
Q: ‘You don’t like the tasks — tests — because there isn’t enough time?’
A: ‘I like the tests — I like that but just um I don’t like the…. quickly.’
Q: ‘You need more time?’
A: ‘Yeh.’
Q: ‘Do you like to know if you are having an assessment? (explained this further and gave her an example of a task they had done without knowing it was an assessment.)
A: ‘Yeh I like — if I don’t know.’
Q: ‘Why?’
A: ‘Because just um…. thinking… I’m thinking… slowly… feel just um you tell me and just test like that — the day like that… I’m very I’m thinking and then I’m just — no, I just forgot it.’
Q: ‘Do you get worried?’
A: ‘Yeh.’
Q: ‘So it’s better if you don’t know?’
A: ‘Yeh.’
Abdullah was extremely nervous and did not like talking on the tape. It was difficult to transcribe his responses. Also, his spoken English was not nearly as good as Ricarda’s.

Q: ‘Are you happy with this English course?’
A: ‘Yes… I’m er English course… yeh, I’m go when I’m go… very… sad when I go.’
Q: ‘How does it help you?’
A: (inaudible on tape)
Q: ‘What competencies are hardest for you?’
A: ‘Hardest is er spelling very difficult. Writing yes. Speaking is problem, difficult. Writing not bad, spelling… reading not bad, good… spelling problem… is er my age, 55, very problem the age.’
Q: ‘Do you like to do assessment tasks — tests?’
A: ‘Yes — yes, I like…’
Q: ‘Why do you like to do tests?’
A: ‘I think tests help me — tests — English… reading, writing… I like tests.’
Q: ‘Do you like to know if you’re having an assessment?’
A: ‘Good test for me good tests. Tests help my English, reading, writing, speaking.’
Q: ‘You like assessment?’
A: ‘Yes, for me help my English.’
Participating in this project gave the learners a sense of being valued and listened to by someone outside their classroom. They were treated as respected adults with important contributions to make.
The TEACHER

Vivienne Campbell teaches at Ipswich TAFE, Queensland. She has had sixteen years’ teaching experience and on completion of a Graduate Diploma in ESL in 1987, she moved from school and business studies teaching into adult ESL. She has taught at all levels of AMEP programs, in the private language school sector and on programs of language support for high school Asian students.

The ISSUE

During the six weeks that I was involved in this project, I was concerned with the students’ evaluation of their own learning within a competency-based system, especially their thinking about competency-based assessment. I wanted to know about their perceptions of the efficacy and relevance of the Learning Outcomes on which they were being assessed. With the shift from the decentralised, learner-centred curriculum planning of the 1980s to the competency and learning outcomes-based curricula of the 1990s, the issue of how the teacher can involve students in the negotiating and planning of the course is a challenging one.

The BACKGROUND

My students were enrolled in a class funded by the Federal Government’s Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) under the Special Intervention Program (SIP). This program is designed to provide language and literacy skills for job seekers. The group consisted of twenty students in a Level Three class of the Queensland TAFE syllabus. This is roughly comparable with Stage Two (post beginner level) of the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE).
The classroom context

The group of students I taught during my research were undertaking three different modules of the Queensland TAFE syllabus for second language learners. There were three teachers involved in teaching the different components of the course, including myself as the teacher of one of the modules, ESL 033, which focused on reading and writing. The students were from varied educational and language backgrounds. One student had received tertiary education in his country of origin. The majority had completed lower secondary education and there were five who had attended primary school only and had very limited literacy skills. There were eight female and twelve male students in the group. Most were in their thirties or forties although there were three female students in their early twenties and one older man. The ethnic composition of the class was fourteen Vietnamese, three El Salvadorians, a Palestinian, an Iranian and a Frenchman.

I collected data on the students each week in a variety of ways, which were agreed upon by the group of teachers working in Queensland together with the state project coordinator Nan Dingle. These included asking the students to complete questionnaires, setting up journal writing sessions with the students and asking the students to provide regular evaluations of units of work and the assessment procedures I used in the course.

The students were given simplified versions of the Learning Outcomes (LOs) for the module they were studying. I also outlined the LOs from one of the other modules of the TAFE syllabus, ESL 003 (Speaking and Listening), even though they were not officially enrolled in this course. This was so that the students would get an idea of the expectations of those other vital components of their language course and be able to answer the ensuing evaluation sheets more effectively.

Carrying out the research

In the first week of the project, I discussed my research with the students, explained the purposes for it and asked them for their involvement. I also handed out simplified written summaries of the project for their information and so that they could ask me for further explanations of it if they needed to. A further activity was to write simplified versions of the LOs on the board and to ask the learners to complete a questionnaire containing the following questions:

1. Which of these (LOs) do you feel are not relevant to your life in general or your life as a worker. Why?
2. Which of these do you feel are not possible to achieve?
3. Do you think they are good aims for the course?
4. Are there any other aspects of speaking, listening, reading or writing that you feel should be included in this section? Which aspects?

The final activity of the first week was to introduce students to the concept of the journal which was to be written in about fifteen minutes, set aside at the end of each day to evaluate the day’s lessons. In the journal, I asked them to express their feelings about learning, what they thought about it and what they had learned. I decided to use this method of data collection as a way of helping them to monitor their learning.
I have set out below the written information I provided for the students to explain the purpose of this activity:

For the next six weeks, I want you to think about yourself as a learner. Some teachers have been asked to find out how students feel about the things they are learning and the ways they are learning. This is so that the information can be taken back to people who write the courses. From this information, TAFE will know how to improve English courses and students’ opportunities for learning.

I need your help. Each week in class we will be spending some time thinking, talking and writing about the work we have covered. I need your honest opinion. Each day we will write in a special booklet called a ‘journal’ for about fifteen minutes at the end of the lesson. Once a week on Thursday, we will talk about what we have learned for fifteen minutes. Please speak up. Sometimes you will be given evaluation handouts to fill in.

At first we used the journals daily and then weekly. Although after a short time, I realised that it was becoming repetitive for the students and perhaps had limited usefulness, initially it proved helpful as it served the purpose of stimulating them to think critically about their learning experiences. For example, Christian’s entries provide some of his reflections on what he had learned and on his progress:

14/4/94

I feel happy to look new teacher. I think English is more easy. I learnt new verbs in the past tense. Example: tear——tore.

18/4/94

I feel unhappy because Thuan didn’t say, good morning Christian. How are you? I think she was a bad weekend. I learnt contraction.

19/4/94

I feel happy because it was a day very interesting. I think I progress everyday. I learnt to apply an accident form.

21/4/94

I feel very well because I was encouraged. I think to teach soon if possible. I learnt to apply an accident form but it was a little bit difficult.

2/5/94

I feel happy because I learnt some new words about money and it is important because you can apply for yourself. I learnt to answer for an interview.
During the second week of the project, I asked the students to fill in the first evaluation questionnaire which asked the students to reflect on their previous experiences of assessment. This was supplied as agreed by the Queensland project coordinator. I found this rather time-consuming as the learners needed a lot of explanation and help to fill it out. Nevertheless, it was useful for getting students to focus on the specific areas of the research and for me to understand their preferences for assessment. During the project the learners were asked to fill in a number of different evaluation sheets such as these. I now feel in hindsight, that I used too many considering the level of their skills in English, and that by the end of the project some of the learners were overloaded by this process.

At this stage of the project, the students were still continuing with their journal writing and I also involved them in informal discussion. I continued with these discussions once a week throughout the project. Time was given at the end of a final lesson for discussion of the week's activities including assessment items, learning preferences and suggestions. These discussions gave me fresh ideas and input, although I was concerned that after a short time they may have become a repetitive exercise for the students.

The Queensland project coordinator, Nan Dingle, paid her first visit to the class in the third week and was able to meet the students, discuss and clarify the project with them and give the students further information about competency-based courses and assessment. At this stage, I also surveyed the students again to find out what they thought about the learning activities during the week. They were asked to respond to a number of questions:

1. What activities were most useful to you this week and why?
2. What activities or exercises did you find the hardest and the most challenging?
3. What exercises would you like to practice more of?
4. Were there any activities or lessons you disliked? Why?
5. In what ways do you find that your course is helping you to use and understand the English you need outside the classroom?

During the fourth, fifth and sixth week of the research, I conducted further evaluations of the units of the syllabus, focusing on what listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks the learners had found relatively easily or extremely challenging and of the students' perceptions of the assessment procedures in a competency-based course. In the fifth week, Nan attended the class to interview the students.
conducting recorded discussions with them on their responses to the assessment procedures undertaken. Nan was already familiar to the students from her previous visit and having her conduct the interviews as a more impartial participant meant that the students would be less likely to provide responses that they felt would please me as the teacher. Nan’s visits were useful in two ways: Firstly, they added a necessary dimension to the project so that learners could associate what we were doing in class on a regular basis with a wider picture of the project and of competency-based training. Secondly, learners were able to add fresh detail to the project because of Nan’s skillful interviewing techniques. Through these interviews the students expressed their overall support for regular assessment, for example:

**Interview excerpt 1**
Q: ‘Satisfied with (the) course?’
A: ‘I liked the test because if we are finished a unit, teacher must test for us because it helps us to try to remember good.’

**Interview excerpt 2**
(Three responses to this question are set out)
Q: ‘Do you want to be assessed?’
A: ‘Assessed.’
A: ‘Yes, it’s OK.’
A: ‘I like teacher to assess in this course very good.’

The final activities of the project in the sixth and seventh week involved the last entries in the students’ journals and informal class discussions. I also held a ‘celebratory lunch’ to thank them for their participation and interest and to mark the end of the project. Each of the students was also presented with thank you letters from Anne Burns, who had been organising the research project through NCELTR.

As an overall conclusion to the course, I asked the students to complete an end-of-course evaluation using these questions:

1. What skill has improved most during this course?
2. Is there a skill you think hasn’t improved during this course?
3. What have you liked about the course?
4. What have you not liked about the course?
5. What would you have liked to do more of?
6. What would you have liked to do less of?
7. How did you feel about being involved in the special project with Nan Dingle about CBT programs? Did you gain anything from this involvement?
8. Any other comments about the teacher or the course?

**What I discovered about students’ perceptions of competency-based programs**

Prior to this project, I felt that students did not really understand the notion of competency-based programs, despite the fact that all except two had completed previous SIP courses. Even after the project with its continuous emphasis on LOs, assessment and monitoring, there may be some students who because of their limited English may have found it difficult to understand what it was all about. For the
majority of students, the project served to provide them with much more information about the way TAFE courses are assessed. Once they understood, there was a surprising lack of criticism of either the content or the assessment methods and a general level of satisfaction with the specified LOs. Students saw their relevance to life and their own personal goals for entering the workforce.

For some students with more limited English, verbal and written explanations about assessment may have added more (unnecessary?) explanations with which they had to cope in the classroom. For others, knowing they were being assessed increased nervousness and made the task unnecessarily stressful. There are still issues here which the teacher will need to examine according to the particular students he or she is teaching. My current thinking is that if clients wish to know whether a task is for assessment, the teacher should make them aware that they have the right to ask. However with the greater frequency of testing and number of LOs to be tested in competency-based modules, it will also be up to the teacher to decide whether students should be informed each time they are being assessed.

Most students stated that the responsibility for achieving the LOs lay with themselves, though a few said that it was the teacher's responsibility. No students appeared to think they were being overtested and many expressed a desire for more frequent testing. Some also said they wanted to know when a task was intended for assessment.

There was a divergence of opinion about which language skills areas were most difficult, with listening rating the highest. Likewise, there were differences when it came to the content areas where students wanted more input. More grammar was a frequent request, but others wanted more speaking and some wanted more listening. Only one student wanted more writing instruction.

In relation to the affective domain, participating in this project gave the learners a sense of being valued and listened to by someone outside their classroom. They were treated as respected adults with important contributions to make. In addition, it served to raise their own awareness of their preferred learning styles and assessment procedures. Interestingly enough, feedback from the end-of-course evaluation indicated that participation in the project did not feature highly in their impressions of the course, perhaps revealing that they had not perceived involvement in a research project to be burdensome. However, seeking the students’ views had a much greater impact on me as I found myself really listening to their opinions and preferences and, where possible, I tried to adapt my own teaching.

**My recommendations to others teaching competency-based curricula**

As a result of participating in this project, I would recommend teachers begin their courses with an explanation of competency-based programs and a (simplified, if necessary) explanation of the LOs the learners are aiming to achieve. Some students may have had a number of courses, but still be unaware about competency-based assessment.
Previously, in addition to formal assessment procedures, I used on-going verbal evaluations to gauge how learners felt about the course content, my teaching, the level at which I was pitching the lessons (especially in the first couple of weeks until I felt I had got it right). I now think it is preferable to do this with a questionnaire that the students can answer in writing about mid-course. This helps to keep teacher and learner on track. At the end of the course, there should also be an evaluation to allow learners to reflect on what they have achieved overall.

The impact of the research project on me professionally

I found the project, though time-consuming and at times a little tedious, a great challenge to tighten up my own teaching. I gained greater realisation of my responsibilities to teach to the stated LOs and to evaluate the content and delivery of my own lessons more critically. I also realised that in the past I had not often made the students aware that they were being assessed for particular LOs. During the project, I adopted the procedure of telling them each time a task was for assessment and which LO was being assessed.

One of the difficulties I experienced in the project was grappling with the problem of balancing teaching and collecting data. The project itself seemed to eat into teaching time. Sometimes it seemed to me, though obviously not to the students, that there was more evaluating than learning. However, the overall benefits to my teaching were worth this minor problem. An interesting flow-on from the project was that a few weeks after it was completed, the Accommodations Officer at Ipswich TAFE asked the students to answer a long and detailed survey on housing needs for students of the college. This proved a relatively easy task for them and they needed very little explanation, as a result of their experience in completing surveys as part of the project.

Other benefits for me included building up a rapport and gaining mutual respect for the students rather more quickly than usual. Also, the challenge and stimulation from sharing in the energy and professionalism of other teachers on the research team, and particularly collaborating with another teacher researcher from my college, was very enjoyable. Finally, I am sure that the experience of collecting this data, developing action research skills and being involved in this project will be of benefit in the further studies I am hoping to complete.
THREE

Collaboration on action research:
The role of the research coordinator

Nan Dingle

*Collaboration with (the NCELTR researchers) has been professionally enriching, and the chance to work with four enthusiastic teachers and talk with their learners has been rewarding in every way.*
The TEACHER

Nan Dingle is a Senior Consultant in Staff Training and Professional Development in the English Language Training Program of TAFE Queensland. She has many years' experience as a teacher, curriculum writer, teacher educator and materials writer. At the time of the project she was actively engaged in developing numerous staff development and training programs for AMEP and TAFE teachers across the state of Queensland and was interested in investigating action research for its potential in professional development.

The ISSUE

In the first phase of the project I worked collaboratively with two Queensland teachers who were prepared to document their course design planning and decision-making processes and the issues that arose. In the second phase of the project two more teachers participated and we opted as a group to focus on investigating our learners' responses to a competency-based approach. As a coordinator for the participating teachers in Queensland, the issues in the project had a dual focus: the role of generating and sustaining a collaborative approach to action research, and the findings for competency-based curriculum development that could emerge from an investigation of learners' perceptions.

The BACKGROUND

In Queensland, as in other states of Australia a competency-based curriculum has been introduced into second language programs. From 1993 AMEP programs in this state have operated within the CN277 Syllabus developed by TAFE Queensland, The Certificate in Education for Adult Immigrants from non-English Speaking Backgrounds. This Certificate involves teachers working towards a number of Learning Outcomes (LOs) specified for the various profiles of learners taught. Although it encompasses a broader range of learners than the Certificate in Spoken and Written English, its LOs at Levels One to Four are comparable with the various competencies of the CSWE.
Project participation in Queensland

In the first phase of the project, the Queensland group worked independently of the New South Wales teachers to complement the more wide-scale research which was being carried out in that state. Unlike New South Wales, we were working to our own state-based syllabus, which differed in format, criteria for assessment and performance indicators from the CSWE. However, from my point of view, the advantages of being part of the project were that many of the course design issues were parallel and essentially teachers in Queensland were grappling with similar pressures of widespread and rapid curriculum change. Thus, linking with a project focusing on models and processes for course design was of major value as we could share our insights and compare effective classroom practice more broadly. There were also benefits to be gained from developing our knowledge and skills in action research and in gaining a better understanding of how it could both enhance processes of curriculum change and provide findings which potentially could assist TAFE curriculum writers.

Throughout this first phase, I was in regular telephone contact with Anne Burns, the NCELTR project coordinator, who consulted with me on the procedures being used by the teachers in that state and the various ways in which those teachers were being supported as they carried out their research (see Burns, Framing the project, Part One). I was also able to discuss with her our progress in collecting data and the findings emerging from our research.

As we were only a small group, it was not possible to obtain the same level of problem sharing and discussion generated by the meeting of larger groups as in other states. To compensate for this, I provided the teachers with as much one-to-one contact as possible and we had regular discussions on problems or issues coming up in the course of their program planning. The two teachers were also able to consult with each other.

To begin the process of collecting data, we decided to use the proforma which had been drawn up by the New South Wales teachers (see Hood, Framing the project, Part Two). The teachers agreed enthusiastically to use this regularly to document their course design questions or issues, and the solutions they adopted. As in New South Wales, this proforma worked well in canvassing the broad and very complex range of considerations facing the teachers in changing to competency-based programming.

A second phase of the project began in early 1994. Judith Given and Vivienne Campbell, also volunteered to participate at this point. The findings from the first part of the project in New South Wales and Queensland had clustered around a number of key themes or areas critical to course design and classroom planning processes which were felt to merit further more detailed investigation. These were:

- the selection and sequencing of content;
- assessment issues, tasks and procedures;
- the perceptions and reactions of learners to competency-based learning;
- the integration of the teaching of grammar into course design.
We decided that in Queensland, we would concentrate our research on the area of the learners' perceptions. We felt that incorporation of their responses to competency-based training would widen and complement our perspectives on the effectiveness of our course design procedures.

**Procedures and data collection in the second phase of the Queensland research**

A number of strategies for obtaining data from learners were discussed and agreed upon with the teachers in the second phase of the project in Queensland. These included:

- Discussions with the learners, focusing attention explicitly on the competency-based nature of the course. This served the purpose of making learners aware of a major premise of the course as well as orienting them to the units and content which would make up their classes;
- Surveys of learners' prior experiences of assessment in any previous training or study;
- Questionnaires on learners' own views of and preferences for assessment;
- Planned intervention in the form of learner training in lesson and materials evaluation and self-assessment;
- Surveys of learners' views on the specified LOs for their courses, including their understanding of what was required, the ease or difficulty of achievement, relevance of tasks used and so on.

The four teachers embarked on these procedures from the first week of their courses and continued for a period of approximately ten weeks (see Section C Chapter One and Section D, Chapter Two by MacPhail and Campbell respectively for examples of specific procedures). In my coordinating role, I undertook to visit each of the four classes and in discussions with the students reinforced the teachers' explanations of learning outcomes and the way competency-based assessment applied in their syllabus.

I also conducted and audio-taped interviews or discussions with groups of learners from each of the four classes. I attempted to make these sessions as non-threatening as possible and their recorder shyness wore off quickly as those in the groups were volunteers who seemed enthusiastic about talking about their learning experiences.

These learners were asked to respond to the following questions:

1. Are you familiar with the Learning Outcomes of your course?
2. Do you want to know when you are being given an assessment task?
3. Whose responsibility is it to pass you?
4. Could you assess yourself?
5. How often would you like to be tested over the course?
6. Which assessment tasks have you found hardest?
7. Are you always aware of the criteria for assessment?

A further step in the process of conducting our research was a group discussion with Anne Burns on the progress of the project and our findings. This was felt to be a profitable meeting for all six participants. The teachers expressed positive feelings...
and appreciation of their involvement in action research, valuing particularly the professional interaction, collaboration and support. They also reported enhanced awareness amongst their learners of the competency-based nature of their courses which had resulted from the deliberate focus on discussion and information giving. Anne Burns also gave helpful guidance about continuing the research and useful forms of reporting.

**Research findings**

Through the use of these surveys, interviews and questionnaires we gathered the learners’ views on the issue of competency-based learning. The format of the questionnaire required the learners to separate their opinions of the assessment tasks from whether the tasks enabled them to show their competence in language. Some learners indicated that they felt certain tasks were a fair assessment and allowed them to show their skills, even though they did not like this type of testing. Interestingly they all felt that all tasks allowed them to demonstrate their language skills.

From the interviews I had conducted (see Section C, Chapter One and Section D, Chapter Two by MacPhail and Campbell respectively for examples of learners’ responses), we learned that most of the learners were conversant with the particular LOs for their course and their implications, but could not always recall the exact details. However, explicit assessment criteria and detailed feedback were highly valued especially at the more advanced levels. Responses to whether they should know when they were undertaking assessment tasks were mixed — some learners wanted to be prepared while others indicated that it would increase their nervousness. There was a strong sense amongst the learners that it was their own responsibility to achieve the LOs, only a few indicating that the responsibility for their achievement lay with the teacher alone. Several felt they could undertake self-assessment, but the overall preference was for a combination of teacher and learner assessment, including peer assessment, as they needed the teacher to correct errors and their own assessment was not felt to be ‘official’.

Frequent and ongoing assessment was a definite preference, responses ranging from two to three times a course to every week. No students favoured large-scale assessment at the end of the course. There were a number of assessment tasks which they considered particularly difficult, including listening tasks where they were asked to complete cloze exercises directly from tape; and summary writing. Not surprisingly, responses to this question varied according to personal needs in language development. The learners indicated that the teaching approach whereby teachers explicitly modelled through their classroom activities the types of responses expected was particularly appreciated.

Early on in the courses, in response to questions about their previous assessment experiences, learners had claimed a preference for graded marking such as percentages. However as the courses proceeded, and they became more familiar with criterion-based competency assessment, they evidenced widespread acceptance and approval of it, believing it be be fairer than graded marks. Those who had also experienced courses which were not competency-based felt that teachers’ planning for competency-based courses was more organised and clearly directed. The teachers believed that the learners had derived positive gains from the much more explicit focus on information about the LOs, which they had provided from the very
beginning of the course. They had also ensured that the learners were given systematic and planned opportunities for practice in self-monitoring and evaluating their progress. These strategies were felt to have positive benefits for future language learning and for future workplace participation. All the teachers valued the deliberate strategies which had built evaluation, both for themselves and their learners, into their teaching practice in a planned way. They recommended that as a teaching strategy it should be viewed as essential and not as an adjunct to classroom activities and that it should be adopted by all teachers. They added that for it to be an effective diagnostic tool however, learners need explicit training and practice in evaluation.

When competency-based course programming was first introduced, many practitioners had felt that it would turn out to be reductionist and prescriptive and that the role of the teacher in developing programs based on learners’ needs would disappear. However, the four teachers in this project agreed that good teaching can include the more specific substance of the competency-based curriculum, as well as incorporating learners’ needs, if the course is carefully planned and there is continuous negotiation with the learners. They felt also that professional support to assist teachers to implement the curriculum changes was vital.

**Conclusion**

Action research carried out and experienced in the collaborative way I have described here, is a powerful tool for enhancing teaching practice and raising awareness of significant issues in teaching practice and curriculum renewal. In my view, it provides the greatest benefits when it is undertaken not as a solitary pursuit but by groups of practitioners working towards enhancing their understanding of issues and problems common to them all. On a personal level I have found participation in the project an enjoyable experience. The collaboration with Anne Burns and Susan Hood and other interstate participants has been professionally enriching and the chance to work with four enthusiastic teachers and talk with their learners has been rewarding in every way.
Glossary

ACSWE  Advanced Certificate in Spoken and Written English
AMEP   Adult Migrant\(^1\) English Program
AMES   Adult Migrant\(^1\) English Service
ASLPR  Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating
CSWE   Certificate in Spoken and Written English
DEET   Department of Employment, Education and Training
DIEA   Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs
ELICOS English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students
ESL    English as a Second Language
EWP    English in the Workplace
L2     Second Language
NESP   Non-English Speaking Background
NCELTR National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research
TAFE   Technical and Further Education
TESL   Teaching/Teachers of English as a Second Language
TESOL  Teaching/Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

\(^1\)The use of ‘migrant’ in Australia is generally equivalent to ‘immigrant’.