This is the second volume of the Teachers' Voices series which offers first-person accounts by teachers of their involvement in classroom-based action research. The research project in this book focused on teaching learner groups with disparate needs and the book contains 25 first-person accounts by researchers and teachers on a range of different issues within this wide area.

There are eight sections: Investigating diversity; Profiles of diversity; Students' perceptions of learning in disparate groups; Groups and group dynamics; Exploiting resources and techniques; Developing learning skills and strategies for diverse needs; Making decisions and changing directions and Coordinating action research and exploring professional development. Each section contains a number of accounts on different aspects of the section topic. Each account speaks directly to the reader and gives an immediate sense of the personal and professional development that the teachers went through.

The book will be directly relevant for teachers who face the challenges of teaching mixed ability groups of learners with disparate needs and are looking for practical solutions. It is also relevant for teacher educators and researchers interested in collaborative, classroom-based action research and professional development.
Teachers’ Voices 2: Teaching disparate learner groups

Editors:
Anne Burns and Susan Hood

National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research
Macquarie University
Teachers’ Voices 2:
Teaching disparate learner groups

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Introduction and acknowledgments

This volume of papers written by teacher researchers from the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) continues the series initiated with the volume, Teachers’ Voices: Exploring course design in a changing curriculum. Like the first volume, Teachers’ Voices 2: Teaching disparate learner groups is the outcome of a national research project, conducted by the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research at Macquarie University, in which collaborative action research was the primary means of investigation.

As in the first volume, we see the publication of reports of the teachers’ experiences of conducting action research as a necessary and significant outcome of the project. Not only does this provide a means for the participating teachers to share their findings with a wider audience. It also means that other teachers can become part of the ‘teacher as researcher’ dialogue through reading realistic and practical accounts of what it means to carry out classroom research.

However, the first volume presented only selected papers, and, with our own growing experience of facilitating action research, we looked for ways to include the voices of all the teachers in the Teaching disparate learner groups project. While this has meant some reduction of the original reports, we hope that the papers in this collection give readers a sense of the rich diversity of interests and concerns, research topics and approaches, and discoveries and changes that occurred in the course of teaching and investigating disparate groups.

 Needless to say, the motivation and commitment of the teachers who worked with us have been a major source of inspiration throughout the project. Their willingness to take time to do the research beyond what was required by the project itself has provided a rich source of ideas and insights.

We would like to thank all the teachers whose reports you are about to read — from TAFE Queensland; the Adult Migrant Education Services, Victoria; the Northern Metropolitan Institute of TAFE, Melbourne; the Adult Migrant English Service, Western Australia; and the New South Wales Adult Migrant English Service.

Jo Eady from Queensland, Youle Bottomley and Jane Hamilton from Victoria and Cathy Domahidy and Nellie Crawford from Western Australia, each of whom had special responsibilities for professional development in these institutions, provided the essential local support and coordination that kept the research going in each state. Without their enthusiasm, it would have been much harder to sustain the national perspectives and collaborative networks of the project.

Geoff Brindley of the NCELTR Research Section and Catherine du Peloux Menagé of the Publications Development Section have both been unfailingly supportive and have offered sound advice about the project and this publication whenever asked.

Finally, we are grateful to the AMEP Section of the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA, formerly DIEA) for their funding of a further national action research project in the Teachers’ Voices series.

Anne Burns and Susan Hood
Project Coordinators
SECTION ONE

Investigating diversity

1 Disparate groups: Exploring diversity in practice through collaborative action research
Anne Burns and Susan Hood

• Collaboration involves setting in place a range of flexible and interrelated group processes through which individuals cooperating in the research play complementary roles.
Introduction

In this paper, we outline the educational and policy context within the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) which led to the *Teaching disparate learners* project and discuss the processes of collaborative action research through which it was conducted. In particular, we explore the notion of collaboration itself and the processes and networks through which it was put into operation during the development and conduct of the research. We also set out the characteristics and features of disparate learner groups as they were perceived by the project participants. Finally, we report the major findings and themes which emerged from the data collection.

Background to the project

Each year, the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) receives research funding from the Australian Commonwealth Government's Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA). The NCELTR Special Project process involves three stages through which priority areas for research are identified from across the AMEP (for a brief description of this program see Burns and Hood 1995). This process allows for input from all AMEP providers and their teaching and program support staff. An initial list of possible research areas is drafted and disseminated for comment. Concept proposals are then sought from all providers and full project briefs are later developed in identified priority areas.

In 1995, one of the major priority areas to emerge for Special Project funding was the teaching of disparate learner groups. It is interesting to speculate about why this was considered to be a priority area at this time. After all, adult education classes, like those in other sectors no doubt, are generally characterised by considerable diversity in the profiles of learners. What had changed in the context of adult ESL programs in Australia that had made this into an issue of concern for many teachers?

In terms of the broader socio-political context, policy decisions such as the reduction in immigrant numbers resulted in the AMEP becoming smaller. In smaller teaching centres, this reduced the possibility of more specialised placement and resulted in a wider diversity of learners accommodated in the same class. The introduction of more competition into the education and training market through tendering of provision for programs funded under the Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET, now DEETYA), meant also that providers were encouraged to look for ways to maximise their client base. For some institutions, this meant diversifying from the more traditional AMEP settlement programs into the teaching of labour market-funded literacy/numeracy courses to immigrant and to native speaker students. Many labour market programs were administered by the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) and linked to unemployment benefits.
They included students who, in some cases, had major social and personal problems associated with long-term unemployment and poverty, which added to the overall diversity of needs in classes.

AMEP teachers were also working within a curriculum context which had recently undergone a major shift towards an outcomes-based framework (see Prospect 1994; Burns and Hood 1995). This meant that assessment and reporting had taken on a greater significance, demanding new skills and time commitments from teachers. At the same time, the program maintained an emphasis on meeting individual learner needs and on flexibility of provision through expanding options in program types and pathways of articulation and referral. Teachers were, therefore, confronting disparate learner groups to a degree that they had not experienced before and in a context of other major changes in education.

**Why collaborative action research?**

The action research approach proposed for the project was designed to emphasise illuminating the kinds of problems and issues in teaching disparate groups which teachers were dealing with on a daily basis. It sought to involve the perspectives of teachers and learners themselves and to explore the kinds of strategies and solutions they brought to bear on the problems they encountered. It also aimed to trace the thinking and perceptions of the participants and to draw out some general principles for teaching disparate groups from these collective accounts.

Action research places emphasis on ‘insider’ accounts rather than on observations of teaching by external researchers (for a description of action research procedures and methodologies, see Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Burns and Hood 1995). It is process-oriented and contextualises the research knowledge it generates within practical changes which are incorporated into teachers’ daily activities in the classroom. These changes are initiated through a deliberate process of intervention on the part of the researcher and are monitored through various steps which include data-collection, reflection, action, problem-posing and solving, exploration and interpretation.

Action researchers recognise that the knowledge that is generated about practice is context-based. It derives from personal and social experiences created in the course of introducing innovations and it uses these experiences to interpret and construct new insights about teaching and learning. Considering its broad characteristics, McKernan (1991:30) suggests that:

> ...action research has implications of three kinds. First, it can serve to improve problematic social situations. Second, it can enhance the personal understanding of the researcher. Third, it can serve to illuminate the researcher's social surroundings, or the environment and conditions in which he or she works.

Our involvement in a previous action research project, *Investigating course design in a competency-based curriculum* (Burns and Hood 1994; Burns and Hood 1995), had led us to the conclusion that collaborative forums were a very valuable part of the research process, and that we should aim to maximise these opportunities within the scope and budget of the current project. One of our specific goals, therefore, was to develop further an institutional framework for action research that was collaborative rather than individualised.
The notion of ‘collaboration’ is one that is advocated in a number of theoretical models of action research (e.g., Carr and Kemmis 1986; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). We needed to reflect, however, on what is meant by collaboration, and how we could characterise and operationalise it through the research processes of the NCELTR project.

In broad terms, we would suggest that collaborative processes within action research share common features which include the following:

- collectivism: this involves working jointly with others on issues of common concern or having a critical group with whom one shares research-in-progress accounts;
- reciprocity: there is equity in access to information and mutual sharing of data;
- mutuality: there is shared ownership of and investment in the research issues;
- affirmation: individuals within the group receive external evaluation and validation of practices from other members;
- maintenance: the impetus for the research is sustained through group interaction which encourages members to keep on task;
- equality: not everyone takes the same roles but participation is considered equal for all;
- sociality: problem-posing and solving is shaped by recognition of the broader social, educational and institutional contexts beyond the individual;
- generation: dialogue within the group is a source for the creative reconstruction of classroom practices.

At a more concrete level, these abstract features of collaboration were formulated in the NCELTR project in a number of ways. We will discuss these various modes of collaboration and include illustrations and references from the project data under three categories:

- collaborative identification of a researchable topic area;
- collective processes for undertaking the research;
- collaborative data interpretation.

**Collaborative identification of research area**

Collaboration emerged in the identification of research topics in two ways:

- National collaboration: The research area, *Teaching disparate learner groups*, was arrived at through the national process coordinated by NCELTR, which called for the identification of priorities for research through concept proposals. Five of the nine AMEP providers submitting concept proposals nominated this area as one of their high priorities. These priorities had been reached through a further process of consultation with program managers and teachers within each provider organisation. (See Brindley et al. 1996 for a fuller account of the NCELTR special research project procedures.)
- Local collaboration: Each research group was composed of self-selected teacher researchers who had identified this research area as a priority issue for his or her own practice. Within this common area, individuals arrived at a focus for research through collaborative discussions of individual concerns. These concerns were generated within a common understanding of AMEP curriculum, organisational and policy orientations. (This volume provides accounts of the topics selected.)
These two forms of collaboration should not be seen as mutually exclusive. They represented a desire to integrate 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' professional needs. The ultimate aim was for research generated by individual practitioners to inform institutional concerns and perspectives on the research area and vice versa.

The invitation to join a collaborative action research group project focusing on teaching disparate learner groups seemed to open a door to a new way of investigating my immediate personal concerns. I realised its potential to provide practical and moral support to me from teachers who had acknowledged similar difficulties in similar teaching situations. Pam McPherson

Collective processes for undertaking research

The collaborative processes for facilitating the project included the following features:

- National network: A network of connections among state-based research groups was maintained through the NCELTR research coordinators who:
  - facilitated a similar, but flexible, series of group workshops in all the participating states;
  - exchanged resources on research methods and professional reading among groups;
  - updated all participants on issues emerging from other groups;
  - raised and discussed research issues and questions from other groups;
  - provided access to materials used by researchers in other groups;
  - organised presentations by representatives of different groups in national forums.

- Local support: Group support structures were provided through the NCELTR researchers as well as through a system of local coordinators from each program who:
  - made regular contact with individual researchers between meetings;
  - facilitated some of the group meetings;
  - provided advice and practical support with data collection methods;
  - maintained regular contact with the NCELTR researchers;
  - kept program managers and administrative officers within their own programs informed about the project. (For accounts of these structures and activities, see Hamilton pages 146–50; and Eady pages 151–7.)

- Teacher teams: Within a team-based structure, each group created a series of individual projects selected by the teachers who:
  - shared accounts of individual classroom contexts, learner situations and problems;
  - supported and informed each other's identification of a focus area;
  - made suggestions for new directions, methods or materials for other team members' research;
  - suggested practical approaches to data collection or intervention;
  - worked together, in some cases, with other participating teachers in their centres;
  - involved and informed other interested teachers in their centres. (For examples of teacher-teacher collaboration see Brooksbank and Carroll pages 70–2; Hambling pages 77–80; and Hatcher-Friel pages 81–4.)
• Learner-teacher teams: Team-based structures were also sometimes set up with more advanced learners who:
  - became co-participants in the research;
  - suggested new strategies for teaching and learning;
  - provided accounts and interpretations of the research issues. (For comments on learners’ involvement in research see Valeri pages 37–9; Kohn pages 98–107; de Leon pages 108–14; and Ross pages 133–7.)

On-going support is critical so that those involved have access to work-in-progress discussions on a regular and frequent basis, as well as coordination support where necessary. While teachers may be individually in the classroom, action research is a collaborative venture and other people are important for bouncing ideas off. Jane Hamilton

This classroom-based action research was carried out with the involvement of students in my...course. My...class also participated in the research. I shall refer to my students as co-participants in the research because they have actively provided me with data. Lenn de Leon

As these features aim to illustrate, collaboration involves setting in place a range of flexible and inter-related group processes through which individuals cooperating in the research play complementary roles. These roles imply activities which recognise the different perspectives and types of expertise of those involved in the processes.

Collaborative data interpretation

Collaboration through a wide variety of group processes also provided a way of strengthening the validity of individual research studies which might otherwise remain ‘localised, private and unimportant’ (Somekh 1993). The group structures created the means for:

• Checking personal interpretations. Individual assumptions and beliefs could be counterbalanced and challenged by the perceptions, descriptions and interpretations of other participants, including learners. This provided a check to personal subjectivity and a critical dimension to research processes.

• Identifying relationships between individual accounts. A range of accounts provided the basis for drawing out similarities, common issues and possible solutions across a number of different sites. This provided a fuller account of the issues researched and related the research outcomes to wider organisational and theoretical issues.

• Triangulating data. Data was collected through a range of methods within individual projects as a way of cross-checking interpretations. This data was further triangulated by cross-checking with data from other participants. This increased the validity of the broad findings of the research and provided a composite picture of the research issues.

• Linking practice and theory. While practical proposals arose from individual settings, they provided suggestions which could be further tested by other practitioners in similar contexts. This allowed possible teaching strategies which may have wider application to be further theorised. (See Winter 1986; Somekh 1993 for elaboration of these points).
Collaborative data collection structures and interpretations have the advantage of creating a greater impact on organisational and curriculum change. Collaborative and connected group processes also mean that data interpretation is occurring simultaneously at different levels and from different viewpoints within the institutional framework.

**Steps in the project**

The final brief for the project was developed by NCELTR in partnership with five institutions in four states:

- the New South Wales Adult Migrant English Service (NSW AMES);
- Adult Migrant Education Services, Victoria (AMES Vic);
- the Northern Metropolitan Institute of TAFE, Victoria;
- the Adult Migrant English Service, Western Australia (AMES WA);
- English Language Training Programs, Technical and Further Education, Queensland (TAFE Queensland).

Teacher-researchers from each institution were identified through a process of self-selection. A call for ‘expressions of interest’ resulted in groups of six to eight teachers in each state (the two institutions in Victoria combined into one team of participating teachers). The call for expressions of interest specified the focus of the project, the nature of the methodology and the conditions for participation, including attendance at all workshops and the contribution of a report on the research undertaken.

In our previous national project, we had developed a process which had involved teachers conducting action research in collaborative groups in four AMEP programs. However, the previous project had allowed for only two (or at most three) meetings of each group. In our evaluation of the project, we had come to realise that more frequent contact and support from the whole group would be valuable.

The model adopted for the 1995 project increased the number of group workshops to five. The teachers in each state would, therefore, move back and forth from collaborative group discussions and the sharing of ideas to investigation and reflection in the context of their own classroom. With some minor adaptations in each location the overall research timetable followed the structure outlined in Figure 1 (see Eady, pages 151–7 for an account of workshop processes in Queensland).

The initial workshop was a full-day program. The first part focused on the background to the project, the nature of collaborative action research, the roles and responsibilities of participating teachers and research coordinators, an overview of a variety of data collection techniques, the proposed timeframe and the expected outcomes in terms of reports from all teachers for a publication. The time spent on these practical issues was important. It allowed the group to clarify issues, allay concerns and establish a common set of understandings and expectations.

The second part of the workshop was devoted to a review of the issues in teaching disparate learner groups, and to the formulation of a research focus or question by each participating teacher. It was important for all teachers to be clear about an initial course of action. In some cases, this was a plan to investigate a specific aspect of their classroom practice, with a method of data collection in mind. In other cases teachers undertook to begin with a period of open reflection in order to see what questions or issues emerged as significant for them. These teachers most often used an open-ended pro-forma or journal to record reflections.
The second workshop (a half-day) followed three to four weeks later. Teachers reported on their progress, shared their early reflections and discussed and sharpened the focus of each other’s research. The subsequent period of research, generally from four to six weeks, tended to be the main period of systematic data collection, reflection and interpretation. When teachers returned to the third full-day collaborative workshop, they were prepared to present an interim report to the group. The discussions at this third workshop sometimes generated ideas for revised actions or directions, or led teachers to supplement their data with other sources. The group interactions by this stage in the projects were rich and stimulating and were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. Copies were then made available to all the teachers as an additional source of data in preparing their final reports.

The fourth half-day workshop was planned to provide guidance and support on preparing a written report, and the final workshop involved the presentation of reports. Wherever possible this was an occasion where presentations were made to a wider audience. In Western Australia, Queensland and Victoria the final workshop coincided with conferences at which the groups collaborated in a presentation of their research. In NSW, program managers and senior personnel from the NSW AMES as well as NCELTR research staff and students were invited to attend a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event/process</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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| Workshop 1    | 1 day     | • Introducing research context and model  
               |           | • Discussing issues  
               |           | • Focusing research and data collection techniques |
| Research      | Approximately 3 weeks | • Reflecting  
               |           | • Collecting and documenting data  
               |           | • Clarifying focus  
               |           | • Discussing with colleagues |
| Workshop 2    | 1/2 day   | • Reviewing focus for research and data collection methods  
               |           | • Discussing early reflections |
| Research      | Approximately 4 to 6 weeks | • Collecting data  
               |           | • Reflecting and interpreting  
               |           | • Intervening and collecting more data  
               |           | • Discussing with colleagues |
| Workshop 3    | 1 day     | • Presenting interim report (verbal)  
               |           | • Discussing each other’s research  
               |           | • Interpreting, problematising findings |
| Research      | Approximately 3 weeks | • Collecting additional data, to confirm interpretations or identify other issues |
| Workshop 4    | 1/2 day   | • Planning final written report |
| Report writing| Approximately 3 weeks | • Drafting final report  
               |           | • Discussing with colleagues |
| Workshop 5    | 1/2 day seminar | • Presenting written reports  
               |           | • Presenting short informal seminar on research |

**Figure 1: The timeframe and structure of the project**

The second workshop (a half-day) followed three to four weeks later. Teachers reported on their progress, shared their early reflections and discussed and sharpened the focus of each other's research. The subsequent period of research, generally from four to six weeks, tended to be the main period of systematic data collection, reflection and interpretation. When teachers returned to the third full-day collaborative workshop, they were prepared to present an interim report to the group. The discussions at this third workshop sometimes generated ideas for revised actions or directions, or led teachers to supplement their data with other sources. The group interactions by this stage in the projects were rich and stimulating and were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. Copies were then made available to all the teachers as an additional source of data in preparing their final reports.

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presentation seminar. Subsequently, participating teachers have also had opportunities to present their work to colleagues, program management and policy personnel, at a local, state and national level.

**Towards a ‘definition’ of disparate learner groups**

Before their participation in the first workshop, the teachers had undertaken a pre-workshop task in which they were asked to record their views (and in some cases those of their colleagues) in relation to a series of questions. These thoughts became the basis for a discussion towards a ‘definition’ of disparate learner groups.

The first question asked teachers to record the characteristic features of such groups. It was clear from the discussion that teachers were concerned with more than disparities in levels of proficiency in language skills. They noted the following features of difference as significant:

- Proficiency levels in spoken and/or written English, or learning outcomes already achieved;
- Levels of education and varied experiences in formal learning;
- Literacy in first language;
- Preferred learning pace;
- Length of residency in Australia; knowledge of social systems, etc;
- Expectations about the course;
- Goals and interests for language learning;
- Contact with English outside the classroom;
- Cultural values and attitudes;
- Preferred learning styles;
- Confidence, personality, motivation;
- Health factors and personal circumstances;
- Age;
- Gender.

**Identifying teaching issues**

The second question in the preparation task asked the teachers to list the difficulties they encountered in teaching disparate learner groups. For some teachers, certain features of disparity presented more or less of a challenge. For most, the teaching difficulties they experienced related to the time and energy required to meet individual learner needs in circumstances of such diversity. The problems they experienced fell into three broad categories and are elaborated below.

- **Time factors:**
  - planning to accommodate different needs;
  - developing and adapting activities so that the same core materials can be used across different levels;
  - encouraging group rapport and mutual support;
  - liaising with work colleagues or a support teacher.

- **Materials and support resources:**
  - finding appropriate materials for the diverse needs;
  - identifying content, topics, or themes which appeal to all learners;
  - needing more support in the classroom (team-teachers or aides).
Classroom management issues:
- deciding how best to group students;
- teaching in physical environments which limit flexibility in learning arrangements and methodologies;
- balancing the attention given to one group or another; ensuring that no students feel they are missing out; ensuring that higher level students are not frustrated;
- monitoring and record-keeping especially where multiple activities or group work are going on;
- avoiding cultural clashes or value clashes;
- resolving conflicts that arise.

Teachers were also asked what they thought could be done to address these difficulties, or to facilitate the teaching of disparate groups at a classroom level, at a teaching centre level, or at an organisation or system level. They suggested the following strategies:

- Preparing students for learning in disparate groups, eg:
  - discussions with students;
  - ‘getting to know you’ activities;
  - activities to encourage the sharing of resources and mutual support.
- Organising group work, either according to level or mixed ability;
- Developing and/or exploiting materials in different ways, eg:
  - materials with activities at different levels of difficulty;
  - open-ended activities which allow students to work at their own pace.
- Using support teacher or team-teacher:
  - to give assistance to groups in class;
  - to enable withdrawal groups for specialised work.
- Exploring other modes of learning:
  - using computer-assisted learning;
  - using an independent learning centre for additional learning support;
  - using volunteers for maximising contact with English beyond the classroom.
- Extending students’ resources for independent learning:
  - helping students become more aware of different learning styles;
  - introducing contract learning for at least a proportion of the course.
- Training students in peer tutoring roles so that better students can assist weaker students;
- Re-evaluating classroom management strategies, eg:
  - letting go of control;
  - exploring models for monitoring learning in groups.
- Talking to other teachers at the centre or teachers in other sectors, including primary schools, about how they cope;
- Having equipment storage and library facilities in the classroom for easy access;
- Reviewing placement of learners;
- Reviewing class sizes for disparate learner groups;
- Providing access to professional development on teaching disparate learner groups;
- Using counselling to assist particular students.

When asked whether there were any potential advantages in teaching disparate groups, the teachers suggested that:
Students benefit from the sharing of diverse knowledge and experiences;
There are opportunities to develop tolerance and mutual support in class;
Students are encouraged to take more responsibility for their own learning;
Teachers are kept on their toes!

Developing research questions

Having drawn on their previous teaching experiences and those of their colleagues to explore, in general terms, the nature and characteristics of disparate groups, the teachers then decided on areas to investigate further, according to individual interests and needs. These areas included the following:

- What social, psychological or affective factors seem to affect learning amongst individuals in the group?
- What teaching strategies can I develop which will cater for different learning needs and skills?
- How can I encourage my learners to develop independent learning strategies?
- What are my learners' perceptions and opinions about being in a disparate group?
- What grouping strategies will assist me to cater for learners' needs?
- What strategies will assist learners to develop specific skills (eg writing, grammar skills)?

Findings of the project

The broad findings from these research areas are discussed in the next sections. More specific data and discussion is provided in the accounts that follow this first paper.

Perceptions and beliefs

For all participants, the project began with the premise that most adult ESL classes are inherently disparate. However, as we have seen, the concept of disparateness was heightened in this project because of the impact of immigration, funding, policy, institutional and teaching centre factors. At the beginning of the project, there was an underlying consensus amongst the teachers that disparate groups were 'problematic', 'difficult to teach', 'a disadvantage'. Several teachers indicated that they had joined the project because of this.

However, one of the first themes to emerge from the data was that the teachers' concepts of disparateness were not matched by their learners' beliefs and perceptions. The teachers who decided to explore their own assumptions about disparateness through interviews, discussions and activities with their learners discovered that many learners were more interested in developing and maintaining good relations with others and feeling that they were accepted in the group (see Prescott pages 60–3; Ross pages 133–7; Shaw pages 54–9; Grayson pages 40–2). When asked, learner groups expressed bewilderment at the idea that they could be seen as 'disparate' or alternatively viewed the wide variety of different personalities, skills and levels in the class as a positive aspect of the class (see Goodman pages 64–9; Whitham pages 33–6; Ross pages 133–7).

As the project proceeded, teachers in all research groups began to challenge the 'deficit' notion of disparity which had been assumed at the beginning. They shifted their perceptions to seeing class members as offering a rich and diverse resource of different skills and abilities. This shift in perceptions did not deny the fact of
'disparateness', but difference came to be more accepted as a classroom reality and was seen as a challenge to be addressed and solved rather than as a problem which created a barrier to teaching and learning.

**Cultural, social and affective factors**

In disparate groups, cultural, social and affective factors may have a greater than usual impact on learning. These factors often involve experiences which are unrelated to educational issues such as previous levels of education or other language learning. In some classes, these factors included: motivation and attitudes towards learning in general; experiences of retrenchment and unemployment; medical, family relationship and legal problems; political influences including experiences of torture and trauma; conflicts arising from ethnic and cultural divisions.

For some teachers in the project, a knowledge of these factors and the impact they were having on language learning became central to understanding the kinds of teaching strategies and approaches that would lead to increased motivation and achievement. In such situations, teachers found that it was worthwhile spending time in discussion with their learners to uncover their attitudes and feelings about being in class and how they saw their capacity to learn (see Muldoon pages 18–33; Air pages 24–5).

For many learners, non-language outcomes became more achievable in the short term than language outcomes and were identified as the affective areas which would eventually lead to more successful language learning. These included increased confidence, motivation, and the building of self-esteem through a sense of being part of a learning community. In some classroom situations, it became obvious that appropriate referral practices for learners needed to be further supported institutionally and that this might also imply greater stability in learning arrangements and opportunities for longer term progress to be made (see de Leon pages 108–14; McPherson pages 26–30; Muldoon pages 18–23, for further discussion of these issues).

**Course design and planning**

In a learner-centred curriculum, there is wide acceptance that programs will be based on learners’ needs. However, many teachers in the project heightened their appreciation of the importance of gaining a detailed identification and articulation of learners’ needs in disparate learner groups.

It became apparent that where there is great diversity within the group, it is very easy to overlook or simplify the complexity of individual needs. This is not to suggest that course design and planning will need to occur at an individual level, but that a clearer understanding of the nature of individual needs provides a more effective basis for program planning and decision-making. In some cases, teachers also realised that they often made assumptions about learners’ needs, or discussed them only during the initial stages of the course (see Valeri pages 37–9). In other situations, teachers explored the impact of changing needs on their learner’s progress (see Air pages 24–5; Quinn pages 43–9).

Teachers also found that it became important to engage with their learners in more explicit discussions and explanations of their own pedagogy. For example, what kinds of activities they would be asking learners to undertake and why; what responsibilities they believed their learners had for learning; why they were making changes in the approaches they were taking. These strategies involved the teachers in explicitly revealing, negotiating and renegotiating their own pedagogy with their
learners (see Fowler pages 115–23; Hannon pages 73–4; McPherson pages 26–30; Prescott pages 60–3) as well as in some cases reassessing their own roles as teachers (see de Leon pages 108–114).

Methodology

The decisions teachers made about methodology were interconnected with the issues that arose in overall course planning. One of the strongest themes to emerge was the need for great flexibility in the kinds of methodologies adopted. At the same time, many teachers reported that flexibility and the necessity to adopt new directions and approaches needed to be based on a clear rationale for change—one that had emerged from their explorations of needs, learning abilities and strategies.

A related theme was an increasing confirmation and acceptance of the decision-making nature of teaching. Teachers began to discuss the fact that it not realistic to adopt a ‘one method fits all’ approach in language teaching and that the kinds of methods and approaches used are necessarily context-based and mediated according to the particular classroom circumstances. At the same time, many teachers felt it was necessary to know and understand the underlying principles of a range of possible methods so that they could integrate these in a considered way into their own repertoire of teaching strategies. In this respect, some teachers indicated a desire to research particular approaches further (see Quinn pages 43–9; Thai pages 124–30).

In some cases, aspects of methodology were related to a greater emphasis on teaching about the nature of learning (see Kohn pages 98–107); providing learner training in managing and using classroom materials (see Hambling pages 77–80); maximising the use of available human and other resources (see Mulvaney pages 92–3); and exploiting materials for their relevance to learners (see Clarkson pages 89–91; Hanrahan pages 85–8).

Other aspects of methodology focused on the relative emphases that needed to be placed on the development of specific language skills and methods which would enhance learner’s progress in these skills (see Brooksbank and Carroll pages 70–2; Hannon pages 73–4).

Finally, some teachers found that they needed to be prepared to negotiate not only their methodological approaches, but on occasions their own principles and values about course design and teaching methods, tasks and materials, as for some learners a highly structured and predictable learning environment produced a more positive response (see Hambling pages 77–80; McPherson pages 26–30).

Classroom management and grouping

Positive classroom dynamics are important in any class. However, they emerged as particularly significant in the teaching and management of disparate groups. In some cases, positive relations were influenced and improved—or the contrary—by the kinds of physical classroom arrangements and learner groupings that were organised by the teacher. Learners, too, saw positive relations with other students and with their teacher as a central factor in their attitudes towards learning.

For teachers who chose to explore these issues in their research, it became clear that assumptions that learners should be ‘streamed’ or grouped according to language ability levels were simplistic. These studies illustrate that classroom groupings need to be flexible and diverse, but to have a principled base which involves deliberate and conscious choices on the part of teachers and learners for particular learning purposes.

For some disparate groups, the concept of developing classroom dynamics and membership of a group provided a basis for language learning content which also
solved the issue of teaching a disparate learning group (Goodman pages 64–9; Shaw pages 54–9). Similarly, some learners expressed their enthusiasm for working with others with different skills and abilities and this became an important part of their own learning (see de Leon pages 108–14; Muldoon pages 18–23).

**Collaborative teaching**

A final issue to emerge from the project, was the heightened wish of most teachers to continue to work collaboratively on the teaching of disparate groups (see Brooksbank and Carroll pages 70–2; Hambling pages 77–80; Hatcher-Friel pages 81–4). Participation in the project led some teachers to comment that while they had initially seen the problems they had in teaching disparate groups as their own 'deficiencies', they had come to see them as an inherent part of the problem-solving nature of teaching. They had recast these 'problems' as continuing issues connected to the professional nature of their work.

Teachers suggested that more team-based approaches to developing flexible methodologies and materials would enhance practices in catering for diverse needs. These opportunities could include:

- sustained institutional opportunities to work collaboratively;
- the development of shared banks of teaching materials and resources;
- discussion of classroom and institutional solutions for specific classroom problems or issues;
- professional development in identifying research areas and conducting action research on disparate groups.

**Conclusion**

The findings from this research project have suggested a range of key areas for consideration in the planning of courses for disparate learner groups and in the teaching and learning processes. Specific strategies, techniques, resources and approaches are amply illustrated in the papers which the teachers in the project have contributed to this volume.

Above all, the findings highlight the need for great flexibility in the way that courses are designed, monitored and delivered and for the use of a wide range of learning resources and modes. Teachers needed to take into account to a high degree the demands of the specific institutional, curriculum and learner profile contexts and to negotiate continually the most effective methodological and interactional processes within these contexts.

The notion of a ‘multiple practices’ approach to teaching and learning in such groups became widely discussed and demonstrated in the course of the project.

The teachers’ research stresses the fact that methods in teaching such groups cannot be pre-specified but need to be continually evaluated and modified as understanding of learners' skills, abilities and learning processes increases. These skills and abilities are further framed by cultural and social factors which often have a significant impact on learning, but which are not always immediately obvious without more concentrated investigation.

The teaching and learning issues investigated during the course of the project are testimony to the willingness and commitment of many teachers to research and problematise their own classrooms and to reflect creativity and critically on their own practices.

We hope that *Teachers’ Voices 2* provides other teachers not only with ideas and strategies for teaching disparate learner groups, but also with the inspiration to join other colleagues in investigating issues in their own classrooms.
SECTION TWO
Profiles of diversity

1 A profile of group diversity
Marie Muldoon

2 Individual differences in two language learners
Susanne Air

3 Social and cultural difference in the classroom
Pam McPherson

...these students were not only from diverse backgrounds, but were dealing with very stressful physical and emotional problems which affected their ability to learn and interact positively. I needed to recognise these ‘affective’ issues and find ways of limiting their influence on the learning process.

Marie Muldoon
Introduction

Disparateness is a fact of life in most language classrooms. Differences in gender, age, cultural and educational background, previous learning experiences, levels of spoken and written language proficiency, motivation and confidence are factors which language teachers will instantly recognise as common in their classrooms. As Pam McPherson, a teacher in the project, expressed it:

Disparate learner groups are not unknown in AMES. The diversity of learner backgrounds, ages and educational experiences are part of every day teaching life.

In Section One we highlighted the range of features the teachers in this project collectively considered to constitute differences within disparate learner groups which have a bearing on classroom activities. While it is true that few language classes will be homogeneous, for various reasons the disparities in the classes in this project proved to be particularly marked.

In some instances, disparity was the result of programming constraints within the teaching institution, which made it imperative for larger than usual numbers of learners with very different educational backgrounds or learning needs to be grouped together. In other cases referrals of learners to classes had been made by external bodies such as the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES). Where these referrals had proved to be inconsistent or where learners' needs had not been fully explored, they resulted in groupings which were diverse. Other factors had also contributed, such as delays between placement interviews and enrolment so that language and literacy levels had changed in the interim.

The three teachers featured in this chapter highlight in different ways the nature of the diversity existing in their classrooms. Their accounts provide a rich ethnographic picture of the variations in learner backgrounds and needs, and the kinds of cultural, social and psychological factors that impact on classroom learning.

Marie Muldoon is a teacher at the NSW AMES Burwood Centre, who, after four years as a Distance Learning Program teacher, found herself teaching literacy and numeracy classes in the Special Intervention Program (SIP). Her paper outlines the widely differing needs, backgrounds and expectations she found within her group. She profiles five students from this class who ‘seem to me to be representative of the problems found in this type of grouping’.

In the second report, Susanne Air profiles in detail two of the eleven students in her class in order to identify some of the specific factors affecting their individual learning. Susanne teaches in the Language Centre at the Cooloola Institute of TAFE, Sunshine Coast, Queensland, a centre which caters for a wide range of beginning to advanced students with very diverse learning needs. As she puts it, ‘the concept of multilevel classes often represents the norm in regional areas’.

In the final account in this chapter, Pam McPherson, a teacher at the NSW AMES Blacktown Centre, describes the dilemmas she encountered in classroom management and course planning. These dilemmas arose from ethnic and cultural differences within her group, which consisted mainly of refugees from a war zone. The particular learner profile of her class made it imperative for her ‘to seriously consider issues such as expertise and authority, adult learners and the status of students’ self-identified needs... and my beliefs and values about second-language learning for adults’.
The profiles of disparateness portrayed in these papers represent a backdrop to the project as a whole. They detail in different ways the range of personal, social and situational factors which may exist in many disparate learning groups in Australian language and literacy classrooms.
1 A profile of group diversity

Marie Muldoon

The topic of ‘disparate groups’ was particularly relevant for me. The group I worked with comprised ten students, who had been resident in Australia from five to 41 years. They were from Italian, Greek, Lebanese, Vietnamese, Chinese, Dutch and Argentinian backgrounds. They had had four to ten years of formal education and had been unemployed for between six months and ten years. Four of the students were female and ages ranged from 33 to 54.

This was a Special Intervention Program (SIP) course for the long-term unemployed to develop literacy and numeracy skills at the Stage 1 level. Usually AMES literacy classes have fewer students, so class size was one intimidating factor. The others were the range of oral proficiency and the knowledge that the students were attending, not by choice, but to satisfy conditions for social security benefits. Unfortunately, in the present climate of workplace restructuring and technological change, the attributes which made these workers valuable as new immigrants 20 or 30 years ago are now seen as deficiencies. At that time, lack of reading and writing was not considered to be a problem. As one of my students recalled:

In those days it was easier to get a job, if you speak or if you don’t speak English… I remember when I was 18, I was getting top wages but you can’t do that now. Now you ring up for a job, they say… ‘Forget it’.

When the project began, my students and I were past the ‘getting to know you’ stage. We had shared the personal dramas of a few of the students and had dealt with interpersonal tensions by rearranging the tables and seating. We had also had ‘open discussion’ sessions where the students told me very honestly how they felt about the course and about their expectations and mine. This had given me a very clear picture that these students were not only from diverse backgrounds, but were dealing with very stressful physical and emotional problems which affected their ability to learn and interact positively.

I needed to recognise these ‘affective’ issues and to find ways of limiting their influence on the learning process. So my research task was to prepare an ethnographic profile of the group and to record their progress. With the students’ permission, I recorded them discussing with Anne Burns, one of the project coordinators, the difficulties in their lives, in their learning and in the course. I also wrote my own regular observations and prepared a detailed profile of five of the students. I don’t usually intrude into students’ personal lives, but these students saw these issues as affecting their learning ability and wanted me to understand them. In the profiles which follow I have changed the students’ names to preserve anonymity.
Lucas

Lucas, aged 53, came to Australia from Italy when he was 27. He had had four years of education and had worked on labouring jobs in Italy when they were available. On arrival he quickly found work on oil rigs, in construction work or in laying power lines.

These were physically demanding jobs, undertaken in all weather, at a time when workplace health and safety issues were given scant attention. He continued doing this kind of work for some 20 years and about six years ago was involved in an accident which required extensive shoulder surgery. He had also developed osteoarthritis and was awaiting knee replacement surgery. He was often in pain in class. He could write in upper case, but spelled as he spoke and his English was very fractured. In the tenth week of the course he told me he couldn’t continue. My course coordinator arranged for an educational counsellor who spoke Italian to interview Lucas. Arrangements were made for the medical assessments needed to get him a disability pension.

Prior to this class, Lucas had never had individual attention given to his special needs. My role was to recognise these urgent and complex needs as outside the scope of a literacy course. The network provided by my centre found a more appropriate pathway for Lucas. One of my teaching regrets was that I didn’t introduce phonic work at the beginning of the course as I think this would have helped Lucas overcome spelling problems.

Mahoud

Mahoud from Lebanon was 44 and had been in Australia for 25 years. With nine years of education including learning French, he had no script problems and his spelling was adequate. His main problems were the omission of capital letters and full stops and a limited grasp of sentence structure. He had worked for 22 years as the foreman of a carpet manufacturing firm. When the firm went bankrupt during the recession, Mahoud was retrenched without redundancy payment. He was angry about what had happened and not optimistic about his future:

The class is helping me for sure but I don’t believe myself if I come in here I’m going to find a job after because the way thing is going for me to get writing proper English I’m gonna be 50 before I finish this. If nobody wants me at 45, how are they gonna take me at 50?

Mahoud had enjoyed his work and the status and responsibility of his position as a foreman, and despite his unfortunate position he was very positive in his attitude to the course. He had four school-age children—three boys and a girl—and they kept him busy. As he said:

For me learning and keeping everything in my mind, I’d have to be single, I don’t have to have a wife and kids, I don’t have to have finance problems. I put
something in my mind here and then I go home. She wants something, he wants something, the other one wants something. That in trouble at school, that in trouble in the street. See, everything interrupts you.

The class thought that the ‘literacy-numeracy’ label denigrated the skills with which they had survived some twenty years in Australia. I responded by focusing on my role as a teacher helping them develop skills that would be useful to their future life, rather than as an extension of the CES. I always referred to the course as ‘English Expression and Maths’. Mahoud seemed to respond to this approach and his frustrations in class were to do with his inability to make progress as quickly as he wished. He said, at the end of the course, that a part of his brain that had been frozen had thawed and he hoped he wouldn’t be left for so long without a course that it would freeze up again. Mahoud was one of the strengths in my class, both intellectually and emotionally, and became one of the three linchpins in the class. At the end of the course, we recommended that he be offered appropriate employment or retraining.

Hans

Born in the Netherlands, Hans emigrated with his parents 41 years ago when he was six. He left school after eight years, gratefully and as soon as he could. His handwriting and printing were good and his main problems were sentence structure and the use of capital letters. He had been a freight truck driver until, during an accident three years ago, the truck had rolled onto him and caused a serious neck injury. Hans needed surgery, but his surgeon was waiting for the workers’ compensation payment to be made before he would perform the operation. His case was still before the courts and Hans was often in pain and had been so for three years, so his frustration was understandable.

Hans was also going through his second divorce and was worried about the future of his eighteen-year-old son who has motor neurone disease. These medical and legal concerns affected his concentration and, at times, made him hypersensitive when relating to other students. However, he enjoyed his status as the only English speaking background student and was happiest when helping another student. I learned to accept that Hans had ‘good’ and ‘bad’ days which were reflected in the quality of his work. However, his oral proficiency was an asset, he worked well with the Italian students and became my second linchpin in the class groups. At the end of the course, we recommended that Hans be offered no more courses until his legal and medical issues had been resolved.

Sheena

Sheena was 43 years of age and was born in Turkey where she’d had ten years of formal education. She had been in Australia for 21 years. Her description of her early years here illustrates some of our omissions in caring for migrants at that time. She was also restricted in her opportunities to learn English by her husband’s cultural attitudes to the role of a wife. She said:
The time when I first came I was not learn English. I had my first baby. My husband had to have operation... no child care. We didn’t know about Social Security, or nothing. I left my daughter. I gave her to some organisation (?). She was only three months old... I went, started in the morning at 5 o'clock and sometimes (when) I got home, it was going after six o'clock.

Sheena had three children, one of whom, her sixteen-year-old daughter, had only 30 per cent vision which was deteriorating, so she wanted to retrain for a job in order to pay for the extra care her daughter would need. Her handwriting and use of upper and lower case script were good and she was helped in her studies by her eldest daughter who was at university. Sheena was intelligent, with a gentle manner, and she quickly became the third linchpin in the class structure. We recommended, when she completed the course, that she be given training as an assistant in a Child Care Centre, her preferred area of interest.

Li

A 50-year-old Chinese woman from Vietnam, Li had six years of formal education and had been in Australia for 16 years. She was a dressmaker in Vietnam but worked as a packer for a Chinese firm when she arrived. She had been unemployed for two years. She was extremely shy and had the cultural role of ‘carer’ for elderly parents. She never missed a class and joined in every activity. I think that the class was her first opportunity to hear and speak English and enjoy social activities. She told Anne that she liked coming to class.

Li's spelling was adequate and her handwriting was neat but her listening and speaking skills were at beginner level. In the early weeks of the course, she communicated by body language. I gave Li very basic supplementary work (Beginners’ dialogues) followed by a self-study course in pronunciation designed for Chinese students in the AMEP Distance Learning program. Her listening and speaking skills improved and I was pleased with her ability to answer Anne’s questions about her background and work. It seemed to me that her pronunciation problems could be caused by a physiological problem. When she completed the course, we recommended that she be referred to a speech therapist for assessment.

How did I teach this very disparate group?

In spite of the students’ personal stresses, there were factors working in my favour. Firstly, Mahoud, Hans and Sheena progressed more rapidly than the others and also attracted different class members to work with them. Three groups formed: the Argentinian and the other Lebanese student worked with Mahoud; the Italian students worked with Hans; Li and the Greek student preferred to work with Sheena.

The second positive factor was the insight I gained from participating in the action research workshops. As I began to research the problems of individual students, my own approach changed. I began to feel less pressurised about the students having to achieve their Stage 1 competencies and to focus more on what would be enjoyable as well as productive learning experiences for them.
Each student used a basic grammar book, and a dictionary to develop referencing skills (alphabetising, using a table of contents and an index). AMES daily diaries were used to write one or two sentences each morning, as well as self-paced Writing for the workplace booklets produced by the AMES Distance Learning Unit. The students liked listening to stories, so we followed the adventures of Mario and Sylvia and The man who escaped. After they had also listened to the cassettes and completed worksheets, I asked individuals to read aloud—and they were very pleased with their skill!

Our classroom was an inner room with no outside windows and the students appreciated getting out of the enclosed atmosphere. They wanted to write ‘real sentences’ and excursions became our focal points for reading, numeracy activities and writing. We always did reading activities prior to an excursion. These included the materials from the organisations we visited, others gathered from the library or from newspapers and I bought illustrated books at every excursion venue. Following the excursion, we built up models of writing together. The students were free to cut up the booklets and to use pictures and texts as they wished. The three groups seemed happy to work as units and arranged collages of their pictures and writing around the walls of the classroom. They were very proud of these displays and always pointed them out to classroom visitors.

Although the weaker students leaned on the stronger for the actual writing, they all contributed to the final products. This seemed to be a necessary compromise, given the range of literacy skills and personal sensitivities within the group. When a group had completed a second draft, I would make an OHT of their writing and, as a class, we would look for the ‘action’ words, the ‘subjects’, the ‘joining words’ and other ways of saying the same thing. The students enjoyed this activity. As their work was in second draft, it was presentable and the whole class found the discussions a valuable learning experience. This also gave me an opportunity to deal, indirectly, with structural weaknesses I had noticed in other students’ work.

It was interesting that sometimes a weaker student became the narrator, relying on the writing skills of a partner. For example, this is an account of an excursion to the Sydney Aquarium. The speaker had limited literacy skills but had been functioning in spoken English for more than 20 years.

Yesterday Hans and I went to Darling Harbour to meet the class. We went to the Aquarium as a group. We went our own way. We saw some beautiful fish in the tanks. We saw the seals lazing about. Then we went to the Ocean tank. There were some big Barramundi in the tanks. Then we proceeded to the shark and stingray tank. I thought it was very stunning and beautiful. Then we and had a cup of coffee and went our own separate ways.

One of the delights of having English Speaking Background students and long-term residents in a class is the enriched vocabulary that they bring to a writing task. The challenge is to teach them to write these words and use them appropriately. This is Li’s response to a worksheet of questions about The Endeavour. We used her answers to develop a short report. This was her third draft which still had mistakes.
The Endeavour was built in 1776. The Ship was at sea from 1768-1771 on Captain Cook’s First Voyage. There were about 97 people on the Endeavour Aboard. The crew slept in hammocks on the lowerdeck sleeping flat. The overall length was 100 Ft and and 397 tonnage. The soldiers had 3 barrels to store food in. They had water to drink. They also had 2 women on the ship to cook for them.

**Student and teacher outcomes**

Of the five students I have discussed here, at the time of writing only Sheena has heard from the CES. She is delighted to be starting a six-month training course for Child Care Assistants. This will overcome some of the family stresses which are worrying her. I have yet to hear the outcome of our recommendations regarding Lucas’ pension, Mahoud’s work opportunities, Hans’ litigation and Li’s pronunciation problems. No doubt all outcomes will be dependent on budget priorities at government level and the teaching providers have no influence there. Nonetheless, the Centre has provided an environment where students are recognised as individuals and where their backgrounds and skills are acknowledged and respected. It is also recognised in course design and implementation that, for these very special students, it is the non-language outcomes that underpin any behavioural competencies.

When I began teaching SIP courses last year, I felt challenged but also apprehensive. I had worked conscientiously with two groups of these students but I had worked in isolation. The project allowed me to identify and to state my uncertainties in teaching this type of class and to draw on the experience and expertise of others to find appropriate solutions to my problems.

The action research group members not only listened attentively to my ‘discourses’ but were also most constructive in their advice. I found our discussions very extending—they gave me a broader perspective on my teaching role with this type of group. Being in a ‘neutral’ environment away from my teaching centre helped me to reflect on my classroom practice in a much more objective way and I found it stimulating to work with teachers from other centres. The project gave me a better understanding of AMES as an organisation endeavouring to adjust to changing educational demands.

I think that the ‘observable outcomes’ of my participation in this project are a much gentler approach to these types of students—more concern with developing their confidence in their learning skills, and a less obsessive concern with their achievement of competencies. I am now more aware that measuring tools are for the use of humankind and that the opposite is not true.
2 Individual differences in two language learners

Susanne Air

In rural regional centres, factors such as child care, transport, population and suitability of days tend to dictate the size and structure of classes. My class was a multi-level group of 11 students between the ages of 18 and 60 years, from seven different language backgrounds and with language proficiency from ASLPR 0–2.

I chose to profile two of these learners, Petro and Gerald, through observation, field notes and interviews. Given the differences in the students’ levels of comprehension, my selection of these students was influenced by their language ability as well as their attendance and personality. The two men had a reasonable level of first language education and both had worked at a trade or profession prior to settling in Australia. Their life and learning circumstances were quite different. Petro was a very recent arrival from war-torn Bosnia and was strongly supported by an extended family. In contrast, Gerald had arrived earlier in the year from El Salvador as a sponsored political refugee. Although he received support from a refugee committee, he missed his friends and family and had to rely on himself.

Petro

A devout Muslim and a native of Bosnia, 35-year-old Petro was working in Germany at the time the Bosnian conflict broke. Before this Petro had enjoyed a very stable life with little uncertainty surrounding his daily existence. His wife and family were situated in the centre of the war zone and by networking, money and manipulation, he managed to rescue them and then resettle in Australia. A sheet metal worker by trade, Petro had spent most of this working life travelling through Europe, which had made him a born communicator.

It was interesting to watch Petro’s body language as he strove to make himself understood and he used pen and paper when words failed him. Knowing no English when he arrived, after nine weeks he was beginning to speak confidently. He was a highly-motivated fast learner who self-corrected independently and experimented with words and phrases. He thought logically and was an attentive listener and his 12 years of schooling and trade background had given him the ability to cope with the unknown. The continuous practice sessions given to him by his previously settled extended family were evident. Petro’s ability and the encouragement of his family had already moved him ahead of many of his classmates who had resided in Australia longer.

Gerald

At 46, Gerald was Catholic and had lived all his life in El Salvador before his resettlement in Australia as a refugee. He was an educated man who had completed 14 years of schooling and two years of an uncompleted law degree and was able to speak a little English on arrival. Gerald was a chemist dispenser in El Salvador and brought with him a careful and meticulous consideration of facts which showed in his language learning. He was an ‘in-depth’ learner who studied and questioned each concept, making sure that he had it right.
An exercise book proved to be Gerald’s friend. Grammar and grammatical points were written down, rubbed out and rewritten until correct. His strong accent created obstacles for him and informal conversations where he could exchange ideas, question concepts of grammar and seek explanations suited him. Lack of close family support was noticeable, in contrast with Petro’s situation. Nevertheless, Gerald was a highly motivated man who achieved results through sheer determination. With the arrival of a new family member he gathered new strength and purpose.

**Interpretations**

For Petro education was for future employment; for Gerald it was for daily survival and community living. Furthermore, Gerald suggested that it was only then, twelve months after arrival, that he was starting to come to terms with the new culture thrust upon him. He suggested that the period of adjustment and mourning for familiar surroundings took longer than expected. He felt ‘just like a baby’ and ‘not the head of the family’ and experienced the loss of his ‘wife’s respect’. Decisions had been taken from him and he was no longer ‘master of his life’.

Gerald indicated that he was constantly being reminded that in this new culture, ‘age is not always respected’. In contrast, the younger Petro was highly confident he would be back working at his trade soon and was already embracing his new culture as his manner and clothing suggested.

Current trends in government policy now favour the concept that education must be tied to industry and students are directed towards learning that prepares them for the workforce. However, my observations showed that to achieve this a sound qualitative base must be prepared and learners need:

- time to adjust to a new and often strange culture;
- time to regain their self-esteem;
- time to feel in control again;
- time to see the relevance of what they are learning.

Conversations with Petro, Gerald and other students indicated to me that, in the initial stages particularly, placing these kinds of learning needs at the centre of migrant education is paramount.
3 Social and cultural difference in the classroom

Pam McPherson

Background

Disparate learner groups are not unknown in AMES. The diversity of learner backgrounds, ages and educational experiences are part of everyday teaching life.

Although the concept of learner pathways (Hagan 1992) has increasingly grouped learners of similar characteristics, dissimilar groups still emerge. This was the case with the class I taught at the beginning of 1995. The learners had been assessed on registration but for various reasons (such as lack of childcare) they had deferred for up to six months. During this period, levels of English had increased markedly from their initial assessment. This meant there was a wide range in the class, of which I was not fully aware until after the beginning of the course. I became concerned that I would not be able to provide the range of learning experiences required by the group.

At a time when I was searching for solutions, the invitation to join an action research project seemed to open a door to a new way of problem-solving. I was not unfamiliar with action research, but the attraction of this particular project for me was its collaborative nature. I saw it as an opportunity to explore my difficulties and to discuss strategies for dealing with these issues with peers who were experiencing similar concerns.

The class

My group was diverse in all the ways that make AMES classes so interesting to teach. Ages ranged from 22 to 58 with equal numbers of males and females. They came from 15 different countries and spoke 17 different languages.

There were also similarities; they were all new arrivals, most having been in Australia less than 12 months, and this was their first AMES class. They had all had more than ten years of schooling, and most had had some minimal exposure to the English language. Most had come to Australia because their country of origin was now unsafe for them.

My concern was the wide variation in the levels of spoken and written English. I estimated that they ranged from ASLPR 0 to 1+. I was uncertain how to manage the class and felt that my planning was becoming very 'hit and miss' with no-one's needs being adequately addressed.

Planning the research

In the first action research workshop, I listened to the other teachers as they described their classes and realised that their concerns were similar to mine. I was immensely encouraged by the range of strategies suggested, including the collection and documentation of data from our classes. I felt that I had somewhere to start and that I was taking some concerted action.
Realising that disparate classes are the norm in some areas of education, I decided to talk to other teachers both inside and outside AMES in community organisations and school education, about the strategies they used. I learned about different types of student groupings, resource management and cooperative learning models. As a result I decided to focus on developing materials and activities which could be used at different levels.

**From planning to action**

Most of the teachers I spoke to recommended that students should not be placed into ability groups and this advice was also strongly supported in the literature I read. Although mixed ability groupings were seen to offer many advantages, when I tried them out I had little success. In fact, students seemed reluctant to work together in groups on any basis. My greatest success was when I described how the tasks could be carried out at different levels and students then chose their own level at which to work.

One example of a multi-level activity is outlined below:

- **Level 1** Students pair with students from level 2 and answer their questions about weekend activities (oral recount).

- **Level 2** Students pair with students from level 1, ask questions about weekend activities and complete information on a grid. They then write a short recount about their partner's weekend (past tense questions, written recount).

- **Level 3** Students work cooperatively to design a survey of the weekend activities of the whole class. They complete the survey, draw up a bar graph of findings and present them to the whole class.

**Reflections: Challenging my teaching values**

I found the students' responses very interesting as they tended to choose quite different levels from those I would have chosen for them. Some of the more advanced students preferred to start with lower level activities before attempting higher levels. Some of these students also chose lower levels for reasons such as tiredness or lowered concentration stemming from the pressures of settlement. Some of the less advanced students attempted the higher level tasks immediately because they enjoyed the challenge. Almost invariably the students were interested in what their classmates were working on.

Observing the students interacting with the materials and each other, I began to realise how much I had previously 'controlled' their learning by dispersing materials and activities at 'appropriate' levels. I noticed the variety of approaches to using the materials which emerged when the students were given the chance to take control and work in a way they found personally effective. However, I also realised that providing multi-level materials for each lesson could be time-consuming and difficult, a point that was also noted in the literature.

When I asked the students about being in a class with such a wide range of levels, they expressed surprise. Most were happy to work with friends at a different level. Others realised, by end of their first semester, that they would benefit from
working in a higher or lower level class and as far as possible their requests were accommodated.

At this point, I started to notice the learners’ increasing reluctance to participate in group-based and pair-work tasks. They listened attentively during whole-class and teacher-centred writing activities, but would not cooperate to undertake joint text construction or write individually in class. They informed me politely that they would do these tasks for homework, but most students rarely brought me their work for correction.

This presented me with a dilemma. I felt strongly that student interaction would have positive effects on oral development and I was confused by their attitude as interaction with other students is usually popular. I was also concerned about their apparent lack of interest in writing skills development.

The students were also starting to express exasperation, boredom, irritation and once, near hostility, as I brought to the classroom lessons and activities I thought were interesting and relevant to their needs but which they were not prepared to participate in. The few students who did not behave this way were being disadvantaged as it was difficult for them to find partners who were willing to cooperate.

This situation caused me to question seriously the role of my professional judgment and to consider issues such as expertise and authority, adult learners and the status of students’ self-identified needs. I began to question my understanding of the curriculum and my beliefs and values about adult second language learning. I delved into the literature again, this time revisiting adult learning theories, theories of language and learning, and systemic linguistics and genre theory.

The need for further action

The turning point came when I tried to get feedback from the students about their intentions to participate in assessment. I had explained the assessment requirements of the curriculum to the class several times, but had received either no feedback or else negative comments. I realised that I was allowing the majority to dominate and in order to get individual views I drew up a simple survey asking: if they wished to be assessed; if they wished to be assessed by: (i) a teacher; (ii) peers in group-based assessment; (iii) self-assessment; if they wished to be assessed: (i) at a time nominated by themselves; (ii) at a time nominated by me.

Although responses were mixed, the majority chose to be assessed by me. I was encouraged because I felt I had also documented information about their individual learning needs and could now legitimately expect cooperation in activities related to the assessment strands of the curriculum.

I decided to continue the strategy of individual consultation. On the pretext of oral assessment, I spoke to each student about what they were learning, how they were learning and how they felt they could develop their skills. I documented their comments and followed with activities designed to enhance their requested learning areas. I also documented comments on their reactions to my classroom activities and I soon discovered that not every lesson was a ‘total disaster’ as I had begun to believe. I started to see emerging patterns and the individuals I interviewed began to respond favourably to some activities they had previously rejected.
Reflections: Understanding cultural and social factors affecting my students’ learning

I began to uncover some of the reasons for the rejected activities. The students’ comments and their reactions in class indicated that discussions that revolved around cultural or social differences were not acceptable. This included references to the languages they spoke, weekend activities or work and education histories prior to their arrival in Australia. Also not acceptable were activities that had a competitive element.

I had known from the beginning of the course that the majority of students were from a region experiencing civil war and that they represented different ethnic and religious backgrounds in that region. On an excursion designed to build up positive and shared group experiences as a class (see Ellsworth 1989), I learned that the students were aware of their very deep ethnic, religious and political differences. However, they acknowledged that they had all left that part of the world with the objective of creating a more secure future for themselves and their children. They had no desire to re-enact the racial tensions and had made a concerted effort to be seen to be cooperating with civility and tolerance.

My observations began to fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. I suddenly realised how difficult it had been for the students to maintain the veneer of courtesy and civility when I was introducing activities which demanded that they expose and discuss the differences they were attempting to ignore! I remembered one competitive game which had become quite hostile and realised that the composition of the teams had been based on their ethnic groups and that they had been pitted against each other. I became aware how difficult it must have been for them to speak with their limited English about sensitive issues which may have caused offence. Collectively they had ‘clammed up’ and decided to remain silent rather than risk conflict. (See Stone 1995; News from the forum 1996 for a discussion of issues in teaching survivors of trauma.)

I also realised that they had lost trust in me and my teaching methods. Through the learning experiences I had been trying to create I had unknowingly increased tension and insecurity. I set about redressing the situation. Fortunately I was able to change it quickly, because I now understood the constraints under which the students were working. I tried to choose activities and materials that would not threaten their security so much, and to provide speaking and writing opportunities that would not lead to misunderstanding or a fear of causing offence.

I abandoned the ‘official’ Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) curriculum and concentrated on games. I scoured every EFL book in my teaching region and picked the brains of my colleagues. Often the games had little rationale beyond developing a particular grammatical concept or cooperative skill, but they worked! One day was totally devoted to performing magic tricks with cards or matchsticks; on another day we spent the last hour and a half telling jokes and all laughed uproariously (even when we hadn’t understood the punchlines).

I was amazed at how quickly the class responded and the atmosphere lightened. In the early part of my research I had drawn up a sociogram of the students’ interaction patterns (see Nunan 1989) and had found them quite limited. Now interaction was varied and wide-ranging across the class. Students came out from behind their desks and one particularly affected student who had remained barricaded by desks in the corner of the room for 15 weeks, now wandered freely about and was reluctant to sit down at the beginning of class.
After four weeks of jokes and parties, a student tentatively asked me if they would receive a certificate of attainment at the end of the course. I discussed the assessment requirements with them again and told them that assessment was their choice. Several of them decided to be assessed mid-way through the course. At the end of the course all the students successfully passed the requirements for Stage 2 of the CSWE in both spoken and written English.

Conclusion

I believe that action research is something that many teachers do in an informal way on a daily basis. We identify problems, collect information, talk about our observations in collegiate discussions and read the literature. We trial different methods and observe the results.

For me collaborative action research formalised a teaching process I was familiar with. The course became one of the most interesting and challenging I have ever taught. It brought into question all the teaching values I held and forced me to justify, to myself and my students, the theoretical principles underlying my teaching practice.

I am deeply indebted to the members of the action research group who encouraged, advised and supported me at all my ‘crisis points’ and who inspired me by their own dedication and integrity to be proud of the professional standards upheld by AMES teachers.
SECTION THREE

Students’ perceptions of learning in disparate groups

1 How do you feel about this class?
Sue Whitham

2 What do students think about group work?
Lucy Valeri

3 Incorporating students’ views into the planning process
Kaye Grayson

4 Ah… writing… it’s ok now: perceptions of literacy learning
Meg Quinn

* This study has emphasised to me the importance of listening to the students to determine how they feel about learning and the strategies they use to learn. To teach effectively in a disparate classroom may require identifying learning strategies first and then incorporating that knowledge into classroom activities.*

Meg Quinn
Introduction

In this section, the teachers focus on the attitudes and reactions of their students to aspects of the teaching and learning environment of their classrooms. Thus the voices of students are added to those of teachers and research coordinators. An interesting consensus emerged from this attempt to gain a students’ eye view of what was going on in the disparate learner groups. It became apparent that the learners themselves did not see the inherent problems in disparateness often felt by the teachers. In fact it often emerged that the students felt diversity in the classroom was a positive factor, both in terms of assisting them to learn language and in contributing to a positive classroom dynamic.

The learners in these research projects were informed about the nature of the research and were very willing to participate, expressing interest in the issues and a sense of privilege in being able to be involved. In some cases, the teachers commented that the kinds of activities generated as part of their data collection techniques themselves helped to enhance significantly a sense of group unity and so contributed to the students’ positive feedback. The boundaries between research and teaching thus became blurred.

Sue Whitham, a teacher in the Liverpool Region of NSW AMES, was teaching a literacy/numeracy class which included both students who were native English speakers and students from non-English speaking backgrounds. There were considerable differences in skill levels in spoken English, literacy and numeracy in the group. Most had been compelled to attend the class on threat of losing their unemployment benefits and most came with very negative experiences of previous formal learning. Sue engaged the students in a series of discussions about their feelings and reactions to being in the class and about learning in a class with disparate levels. The students provided valuable insights into the possibilities for turning ‘difference’ into a positive resource.

Lucy Valeri, a teacher from Southbank Institute of TAFE in Queensland, focused on students’ attitudes to group work and their preferences in group formations. Although she had long used group work in her classes, Lucy realised that she had never systematically sought students’ views on this approach. She explains that she relinquished control of decisions on group composition to her students with some very positive consequences.

Kaye Grayson, also from the Southbank Institute of TAFE in Queensland, set about systematically collecting feedback from her students on various aspects of the teaching/learning process, from topic choice to learning styles to task types. She continued this process throughout her course and the feedback provided a valuable source of information to assist her in on-going planning, enabling her to meet the diverse needs of her learners better.

Meg Quinn was also a teacher from Southbank Institute of TAFE. She focused on a case study of two students in an ESL literacy class. Although the profiles of the two students appear quite similar on many criteria, they reflect different attitudes to and expectations about learning. The detailed data Meg was able to obtain through one-to-one interviews with the students gave her valuable insights into this area of ‘difference’. It prompted her to adapt her approach to teaching writing to include attention to metacognitive awareness and learning strategies.
1 How do you feel about this class?

Sue Whitham

The focus of my research was to look at the perceptions of the students with regard to their learning, and see whether they differed from my own perceptions.

The class

It was a 15-week literacy and numeracy class of eight students at a post-beginner level. Five students were from a non-English speaking background (NESB) and three were from an English speaking background (ESB).

The five NESB students had been resident in Australia for between five and fifteen years, and had good levels of spoken proficiency. Four of those students had worked in Australia, but had lost their jobs mainly as a result of industry restructuring and economic recession. One of the students had never worked before and had never been to school, but had achieved a basic level of literacy in a previous English class. The students had been referred from the Commonwealth Employment Service to improve their literacy skills. The students were nervous at the start of the class because they weren’t sure how a literacy and numeracy class was going to help them. They had spent years struggling with a new language and sometimes a different script.

The three ESB students had passed through the school system in Australia, but for various reasons their literacy skills were not well developed. Contributing factors included disrupted schooling because of illness, family breakdown or a transient lifestyle. One had trouble reading very simple texts and doing simple arithmetic operations, while another’s reading was relatively fluent. For all of them school had been a negative experience, and they were nervous about returning to class lest that bad experience be repeated.

Another similar level class ran parallel to this one. It was composed of seven NESB students, and one ESB student who also had a diversity of backgrounds, needs and abilities. The ESB student had no interest in doing anything except maths problems using her calculator. One of the NESB students had a low level of education and few reading skills while another had a high level of education albeit using a non-Roman script. I looked to this class to provide a comparison or contrast with my class, to see whether they felt similarly about their class.

The research method used

The data collection was done over a period of about three weeks, and involved guided discussions with both classes. When considering the affective aspects of a classroom environment, qualitative research methods seem to be appropriate. Given the small size of the class and therefore of the sample, quantitative methods would not have provided the type of information sought. Written questionnaires were beyond the reading ability of the class members. Individual interviews would have been revealing, but since the students were interested in my involvement in the project, it seemed a good idea to include them in the classroom discussions and provide the sort of group dynamics needed to gain more interesting and useful information.
During the last half hour of some class sessions we discussed how the students felt about the class, their participation in it, their fellow students, and their feelings about having students of various levels and language and literacy needs and abilities in the same class. The classes had been going for about seven weeks, so the students felt comfortable working and talking together. Both classes were invited to discuss their reactions in the same way, using the same questions. The students participated readily in the discussions. Right from the beginning there had been a spirit of cooperation in both classes which made them good to teach. The students remarked that they liked being asked about their class. It helped them think it was their class, not just the teacher’s, or the institution’s.

The students were asked what they thought about being in a class with people of varying levels. They were asked about their feelings at the beginning of the class compared to now, and their expectations of the class then and now. They were asked how they felt:

• when they got things wrong;
• when they finished quickly;
• when they couldn’t understand;
• when something was really easy;
• when someone else asked them for help;
• when there was no-one to ask for help;
• about having a diverse class;
• about having ESB and NESB students in the same class.

Results of the research

All the students liked being in classes of varying levels. They saw no problems in this at all. The ESB students in particular thought this was normal, because they were used to being at the lower end of a class of disparate levels. They were actually better at some things—for example speaking English—than other students in their class and this gave them a sense of self-esteem because they could help others instead of always being on the receiving end of help and coming ‘last’.

The ESB students sometimes finished assigned work earlier than the NESB students. Given the ideal that students should always be occupied on a task, teachers are sometimes concerned that students have nothing to do and could become bored and distracted. However, one ESB student, who had finished the task, said that he was just worried that he had got it wrong and could only relax when told it was right. Then he would feel confident enough to help his fellow students who may have been having trouble.

Some of the NESB students felt frustrated at being so slow, although everyone was given the time they needed to complete a task. All the students said they were glad to have other students to ask for help, so that they did not always have to ask the teacher and wait for help.
NESB and ESB students expressed different reactions to getting things wrong. The native speaker students expressed feelings of embarrassment and nervousness because it reminded them of bad times from their experience of school. One student who acted rather tough and aggressive out of class was shy and nervous when submitting work for that reason. The NESB students said they felt frustrated rather than embarrassed, but like most students had a sense of achievement when they began to understand something and could apply that knowledge to other contexts.

Asking for or being asked for help produced a varied reaction. One student in the class was not used to learning in a formal setting and was unfamiliar with techniques for book learning. He tended to copy the other students’ work. They did not like to help him in this way because they sensed he wasn’t learning anything. They felt it was better to help each other understand, rather than just giving the answers.

This cooperation reduced the load on the teacher. In addition, with a bit of encouragement from each other, and the teacher, they also learned to use their own resources, like dictionaries and calculators, to become more independent learners. This requires that the teacher has the confidence to keep a ‘hands off’ approach and let the students take charge of their own learning. It seems that a cooperative model for learning suits adult students much better than a competitive one. Certainly in the environment of my teaching centre, mixing native and non-native speakers of English in the one class was a positive step.

**Discussion of the issues raised**

One of the givens in adult education is that more able students are likely to be unhappy in a slower class. However, with a literacy/numeracy class such as the one described here, more able students are actually happier in an easier class. A more challenging class could lead to failure, damaging further their self-esteem. All students seemed to appreciate the slower pace of the class with plenty of time for reinforcement and repetition. Interestingly, the students said they liked tests best of all, so I included daily spelling tests, although this went somewhat against my preferred style of teaching. They said they liked them because they could try to improve on their previous score. There was no competition between students.
The nervousness of the early weeks wore off as attention was given to helping them reorient to learning, to achieve small successes and to learn useful things. School learning for many of the native speaker students had gone too quickly and they had got lost and left behind. They soon felt they were wasting everybody’s time so left school as soon as they could. For the non-native speakers their schooling had also been disrupted and an unsatisfying experience. This had led in many cases to alienation from formal learning and a fear of the formal classroom.

Weaker students in one area of learning, perhaps numeracy, were often stronger in another, such as spelling, so the role of helper shifted with the task. Encouraging students from diverse backgrounds and cultures to work and learn together and to understand and respect each other made the course a very worthwhile experience. Social cooperation and teamwork are valued attributes in the workplace.

Reflections

To ask your students what they think of the class may be a risky thing to do. It can threaten the teacher’s own self-esteem. My students had attended because they had to, or they would have lost their unemployment benefits. Despite this, the students had come to have a very positive attitude to the class and to the other members of the group. The discussions in the class which were generated because of the focus of my research actually helped to unify the group and to help the students to work cooperatively. By saying out loud, rather than leaving unspoken, that they liked to work together, made them want to work together more. When one of the students said that he liked to work things out slowly, everyone agreed. When another said his time at school had been bad, others said the same. When one said that she had trouble with numeracy, another offered to help her. Considering the great diversity of backgrounds, experiences and skill levels, this positive cooperation achieved in the class was the most valuable outcome of the project.
2 What do students think of group work?

Lucy Valeri

I like working in a group because I find it easier to concentrate when we talk to one another. Many people have many different ideas. Ara.

I don’t like working with others unless they’ve all had 12 years of education. Anon.

I don’t want to be in a group of all men. I would be more comfortable if they were all women. Yuki.

It’s easier in a group to find a solution to a problem. We also speak more and so practise language and listen more carefully in a group. Cristina.

Background

I have been an advocate of group work for many years and this collaborative action research project provided a good opportunity to explore issues in group work in a disparate level class. My usual practice had been to establish groups subjectively on the basis of what I thought would be the best combinations for student learning. I had at times allowed students to form groups of their choice, but at no stage had I surveyed them to discover how they wanted to be grouped and why. I decided to investigate a little more systematically what kind of groupings worked best in my class, both from the learners’ points of views and from my own.

The profiles of the students in the class varied in all the usual ways: language and cultural background; length of time in Australia; previous English language learning experience; age; health factors (the class included survivors of war trauma); employment backgrounds and future aspirations; educational background in L1; and contact with English outside the classroom.

In the first two weeks of the course some difficulties had arisen related to differences amongst the students, for example:

- some of the women wanted to work only with other women;
- some students only wanted to be in a group with students of a similar language background;
- some students had not undertaken any previous language courses and needed some additional help to fill gaps in their knowledge and understanding;
- the students had varied goals and interests and this presented some difficulties in selecting content relevant to all.

In my investigation of groupings I decided to focus initially on mixed or same sex preferences for groups, on mixed or same language background preferences, and on grouping by employment or further study goals. These seemed to be potentially the most problematic issues for this class.
Research process

Both my co-teacher and the learners themselves were collaborators in my research. All were informed about the project and happy to participate. One student suggested ‘We must be special to be chosen!’ I took some time to explain what action research was and how it was not unlike what they did in the classroom when they undertook a task, and then evaluated it and tried to improve on it next time by changing the way they did it. I also discussed the kind of data I would be collecting.

Learners were grouped differently each time group work occurred. On some occasions they stayed in the same group to do two different kinds of tasks. Sometimes the students were grouped to maximise the degree of disparateness and at other times they were organised to be as homogeneous as possible. At other times students themselves selected their group. For the last three weeks of the course all group work was on the basis of self-selection.

Data collection methods included:

• an initial survey to ascertain students’ views about group work—some had never worked in groups before;
• teacher and student observation sheets for anecdotal records or reflections to be recorded immediately after a particular group work activity;
• group work surveys on specific tasks, where students recorded their role in the group, eg group leader, note taker, etc;
• class discussions and some individual interviews to clarify points from the observation sheets;
• a final survey in the last week of the course to get students’ views on the course as a whole.

The data collection soon became a part of the teaching/learning process whenever group work was done, rather than simply for the purposes of the research project.

Findings from the research

Outcomes from the initial survey at the beginning of the course indicated that:

• 40 per cent of the students said they did not like to work in groups; most of the others preferred to choose who they would work with;
• 60 per cent of those who liked to work in groups felt they learnt from others and work was done quickly because of different ideas;
• a minority of students wanted to work with others from different countries so they wouldn’t speak their own language, and some wanted to be grouped with people whose English was better than theirs. One student felt that the personality of the group members was important.

Outcomes from later surveys, after students had worked in groups for several weeks showed that:

• the majority did not want to work in all male or all female groups;
• nearly all students wanted to work with students from other countries;
• all students except two made reference to the importance of tolerance, politeness and ‘personality’ as qualities needed for group work to be successful;
• several students expressed their desire to select their group after knowledge of the task.
The final survey at the end of the course revealed the following:

- all learners preferred group work as a means of learning, except for two students who preferred to work on their own;
- the majority wished to work in groups with people from different backgrounds, ages and gender, to stimulate discussion and ideas;
- about 80 per cent of the students believed it was important to have a ‘good’ or ‘nice’ personality for group work to be successful;
- all learners were happy to work in mixed gender groups.

In my own observation I noted that the female students who had initially wanted to work only together with other women came to prefer mixed gender groups and grew in confidence in dealing with their male colleagues. In general, there had been a marked shift from a considerable number not liking group work to almost all the students demanding it, the majority wanting to work in disparate groups with regard to gender, language, employment or educational background. In self-selecting groups, students with outgoing personalities were sought-after members.

The learners were themselves astounded at how their perceptions of group work had changed over the course. They felt they had taken charge of their own learning and had become more independent both in thinking and in classroom management. My co-teacher also commented on this change. As the learners had grouped themselves in the last three weeks of the course, I was forced to consider whether my past practice of grouping learners according to my own criteria was in their best interests. The preference for mixed groups clearly gave students more scope for language use and they gained in confidence. As Barnes and Todd (1977:24) suggest, ‘by talking one may clarify one’s own understanding as well as communicating with others’.

Reflections on my participation in the project

As an experienced teacher I recognised that there was still room for improvement and it felt good. At no time can we feel that we ‘know it all’ and just sit back. This is where action research projects can be so valuable. The collaborative action research project gave me the opportunity to work very closely with the learners and with fellow teachers who were very supportive. It also provided me with an opportunity to work with colleagues from very different teaching situations and to experience their problems and triumphs too. Because of time pressures in undertaking a project such as this, the support from research coordinators was also appreciated.

Postscript

I decided to trial self-selection in group work in my next class which was at the same level. It has again worked well. My experience suggests that disparities need not be looked upon as a disadvantage, but on the contrary may in fact enhance the benefits from group work.
Incorporating students’ views into the planning process

Kaye Grayson

General aims of my research

My research ranged across a number of areas in relation to teaching disparate learner groups. The one on which I will focus in this paper is how the learners’ perceptions about the class could be systematically incorporated into the planning and teaching process. My aim was to use a range of data collection techniques throughout the course to ascertain whether students felt their needs were being met and how they felt about being in the class. By doing this, I hoped to be able to monitor the effectiveness of my teaching, to enhance the learning opportunities for all students and to create a positive climate and a social cohesion within the class.

The class

The class I monitored for this research was a low-intermediate class with the usual profile of disparity. There was a spread of ages from 20 to 40. There were seven men and thirteen women. Most had arrived in Australia in the previous three years. All the students had more than ten years of education in their country. While over half the class had attended two previous language courses, three students were experiencing their first English language class. They had worked in a wide range of industries and occupations before coming to Australia. The class included speakers of many different languages, and, as in any migrant group, there was a mixture of motivations for migration, from those who had made reluctant or forced decisions to leave their home country, to those who had chosen to migrate.

Research methods

I informed the class about the research, explaining it simply and non-specifically as ‘a way of trying to work out how to teach better’. All class members gave permission for the use of their data, save one student who excepted only the use of extracts from her personal written diary. The research methods involving students were fitted into class time and were designed to complement my normal classroom practice. Some activities served simultaneously for research and teaching purposes. Four main types of data collection methods were used.

A topic survey was used early in the course to determine preferred topic areas. Students were asked to rate options as (1) not much interest; (2) moderate interest; or (3) high interest. Even more than its results, the value of the topic questionnaire lay in the ‘doing’ of it; in developing an awareness of the need for negotiation, and for sharing in and ownership of the course.

Student diaries were introduced in Week 5 of the course, as a result of concerns I had about three students who were strikingly unresponsive to working in pair or group work for oral language activities (a format I relied on heavily). The diaries gave the students an unstructured opportunity to write in any way they chose to on issues.
of interest or concern. This method of ascertaining students' views enabled me to negotiate with the class about the fit between the needs of particular individuals or groups and the general learning objectives of the course. Extracts from the diaries were occasionally circulated in class (with permission) to encourage discussion and to validate a range of responses. The diary entries highlighted a need for teaching and discussing the language to express a range of emotional responses, a significant need in relation to coming to terms with the experience of migration for many of our students. This was aptly put by one student in a diary entry:

In which language?
Some things about feelings -
They are sharp screechings from a crashing depth through a silent mouth. All the letters and words from any language are not able to write them - so I can't find the words in any language. But I believe that tears are the beginnings of the letters in this missing language.

The diaries became an indirect method for finding out about student needs on an on-going basis and a reminder to me as a teacher of the outside influences on what happens for students in the classroom.

A learning styles questionnaire was administered in Week 2. Results from this were not formally collated. Rather it was used as a quick source of information on the range of learning styles in the class and a starting point for developing students’ awareness of their individual learning style. A few students indicated a very marked preference for working alone.

The questionnaire also stimulated a discussion early in the course on the question of which students spoke English outside the class. A student from Africa told us of a chain reaction he had started in his search for someone to talk to. He first invited the 'Aussie' in his neighbouring flat to come over for a cup of tea; next he extended the invitation to another neighbour who had never before spoken to the first. The student had a support worker (because he was a United Nations refugee). She joined the group around the teapot on the next occasion. Soon down the whole verandah of the flats there was talk instead of silence! Naturally the student's oral fluency was also rocketing.

This story initiated an on-going sub-theme of discussion in class about 'how to be a good neighbour who'll do more than just say “hello” ', and 'taking responsibility for making opportunities for yourself'.

A survey of task usefulness was given to students well into the course. It aimed to get students to evaluate and give their perceptions of particular tasks. Before completing the survey, it was important that students were aware of the intentions of the task. They were therefore given descriptions of learning objectives or expected outcomes and performance criteria. These were taken from the curriculum document and 'translated' into more accessible language. In completing the survey, students gave a rating to specific tasks and added comments. Through this process they gained an appreciation that tasks were designed to address more than just grammatical accuracy.
Some reflections on course design and class management

• The high proportion of students in the class with 12 or more years of education contributed to their ability to discuss their preferred learning styles and strategies and to evaluate the usefulness of tasks. Previous learning experiences seemed to frame the way students evaluated tasks.
• The fact that thirteen of the students had arrived in the previous year meant that culture shock and emotional issues were foregrounded in the group. This related to irregularity in attendance rates for some students and to a disengagement with some tasks. There appeared to be a far greater likelihood of dissatisfaction with aspects of the learning context for students whose migration was forced. This reinforced the need to discuss the activities and approaches with students as well as a need for counsellor support.
• The range of language backgrounds in the group meant that no one language group or culture dominated, making classroom management easier in this respect.
• The range of work experiences and aspirations had far less influence on the class than I had predicted. They were all interested in ‘general’ English.

Some useful feedback from the students

• Students practised for task assessments in ways different from those they were taught.
• Work on the language for making complaints was very successful, because as one student said, ‘life is full of mistakes’. Many of the students liked learning to write a letter of complaint. It provided an outlet for expressing their concerns beyond casual conversations in class or writing in their diaries.
• The use of a learning style questionnaire proved useful in this course in helping students to develop a more comprehensive view of language learning. A conscious awareness of the theoretical base of classroom activities enabled me to negotiate the continuing tension between students’ language learning needs and their perceptions of classroom tasks, teaching styles and curriculum demands.
• The more specific the information given to students about the requirements and expectations of tasks, the more useful the feedback obtained from them.
• Some students didn’t want to join in group activities. Individual learning is better suited to some students than pair or group work. It is necessary to establish both a positive group cohesion and unity without making individuals with a strong individual style of learning feel uncomfortable.
‘Ah… writing… it’s ok now’: Perceptions of literacy learning

Meg Quinn

Background

At the time of my participation in this project, I was teaching 18 newly-arrived adult immigrants in a literacy focus class. Most of the students had spoken language skills that were higher than their literacy skills and perceived themselves as poor writers. As with most adult ESL classes, there were marked differences in age and language backgrounds. Other features of ‘disparateness’ affecting the learning/teaching processes within the class included:

• varied levels of confidence and independence as language learners;
• varied speeds at which they worked through tasks;
• different expectations in terms of accuracy of performance on tasks;
• different degrees of frustration expressed about the gap between their speaking and literacy skills.

The focus of this paper is on student perceptions of the process of developing their literacy skills in English. In particular I focus on two students with otherwise similar profiles who varied in their perceptions, awareness of and attitudes to learning.

The students

All students in the class were literate in their L1 and most had had between 9 and 12 years of schooling in their country of origin. The work history of the students indicated that most were involved in trade or retail positions, while a few were students and university graduates. As it was not practical within the time constraints to make a full study of the whole class, two students were chosen to be the focus of the research. Their writing skills and needs on the whole reflected those of the rest of the class.

Student A was literate in L1 (non-Roman script—Amharic). She had 12 years of education in her own country, with two years as a refugee before coming to Australia. She had not worked except for a UN group as a refugee. She was single, with no family in Australia. She wanted to study in Australia but had not yet decided on the field of study. She had been given ASLPR ratings of S 1+, L 1+, R 1+, W 1. She was young and eager to learn. She had had one previous course at the centre before this class. However, the quality of her writing was the reason why she had not moved on to a higher level class.

Student B was literate in L1 (non-Roman script—Persian). She had 14 years of education and was a teacher in her own country. She was married with seven children. Her husband and children spoke English. She wanted to teach in Australia in the future, but was not sure what this would entail. She had been given ASLPR ratings of S 1, L 1, R 1, W 1. Student B was older than Student A, and although keen to learn found the learning more difficult. Student B joined this class with the proviso that she received literacy support.
As the two students were not confident about writing, I decided I would not single them out as the stated focus for the research. Therefore, all students were told of the research project before data collection began and asked for their agreement to collect samples of their oral and written language until the end of the course.

Data collection

The time period for data collection was quite short, constrained by both the schedule of the research project and the fact that the students were in a ten-week course, after which it was unlikely that I would continue to be their teacher. In fact only seven weeks were available to set up the research and collect data.

The teaching of writing in my course took a genre-based approach. Three genre types were chosen: a biography about a famous Australian, a formal letter of complaint, and a descriptive report. This approach was used because it enabled a focus on writing for a variety of social purposes and within these contexts attended to the relevant knowledge and skills.

During the teaching sequence for each genre, I used a number of data collection methods as outlined in Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Timing</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diary keeping (by teacher) — personal accounts of occurrences, including feelings, reactions, reflections, observations hypotheses, interpretations etc</td>
<td>On-going throughout the course of the data collection period</td>
<td>To reflect on teaching practice, the effect of the research on teaching practice and to compare expectations and perceptions with students’ performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anecdotal records— recorded responses from students regarding their readiness for writing and perceptions of the writing task</td>
<td>Immediately before each writing task and then after the students were given back their work</td>
<td>To determine how the students felt about the writing task and whether they could articulate the strategies and processes they would use to undertake a task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collection of work samples for document analysis</td>
<td>After each unit of work</td>
<td>To analyse any progress students were making and relate this to their self-perception of their achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student interviews— structured interviews transcribed and data analysed</td>
<td>In the 6th week of the data collecting period</td>
<td>To gain a deeper insight into how the students thought about learning and the methods and strategies they used—how this may have affected their progress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Data collection methods
I developed a very simple question format to obtain student perceptions of tasks. I made sure that during the class time I talked to all students about this, recording the information from the two targeted students on a proforma and including other general comments in a diary. Discussing the writing task with the class encouraged all the students to think about and articulate how they felt about writing and what they would do when they wrote. The disadvantage was that it made the data collection very time-consuming.

**Student interviews**

By Week 6, I had gained some information about how the students were progressing with their writing and decided to conduct two longer interviews. The interviews were an attempt to investigate why Student A appeared to be making quite substantial gains in her understanding about the writing process while Student B was making much slower progress. As the teaching method was the same, what else was influencing the learning?

The interviews were designed to gain some insights into the students’ approaches to language learning. Throughout the course they had been talking to me about the tasks and how they approached them, but I had not gained any real sense of how they thought about learning and what strategies and understandings they brought to the learning situation. The students were asked if they would be willing to talk about learning English with me, and informed that all information would be confidential.

A very loose schedule of questions was drawn up, but not adhered to strictly in the interview. My intention was to provide a gentle push but not force the students to talk about the questions exclusively.

The interview questions moved from the more general to the specific. The interview time was about 45 minutes and it took place an hour or so before class started so that the students were not having to come into the centre unnecessarily or stay late after class.

**Generalisations/comparisons from interviews**

Student A was a keen participant in the interview and required very little direction from me. Her enthusiasm and confidence were quite self-evident. She went straight into talking about learning on the way to the interview room and required very little prompting. Her first recorded words on the tape are a continuation of her conversation as we came up the stairs. My setting up the recording equipment didn’t upset her at all.

> I do myself everywhere. Sometimes it is difficult but they will understand me.

By contrast Student B was nervous about the interview, far more passive and required a lot of prompting to obtain data, too much so at times. Her first statement was about her sense of not having enough English to be able to do the interview.

> I don’t know English too much.
Student A was able to articulate an understanding of the behaviours and attitudes she believed characterised a good language learner. For example:

- they must not be afraid to take risks

  Someone he learn a new language must he's er... not afraid anyone.

- they must be independent

  You give idea for me, must I try in my home.

- they must be interested in what they are doing

  Interesting is very necessary.

- they must be a good student generally, not just in the language area

  If you have a good mind, anywhere, everywhere you learn that language you will pick up.

In contrast, Student B did not articulate the characteristics she believed were typical of a good language learner. She was more task-focused when she discussed how to learn. For example, she listed a range of actual activities rather than mentioned learning strategies:

- asking other students for help

  No it’s good because if have some problem it’s... together is OK, talking, watching TV news I like to watch TV news.

- reading children’s books

  Sometime I read at home, I have small book. Something I read from my children.

- and learning from her family

  Learn from your child.

Student A mentioned picking up strategies for learning from other students rather than using them to help with answers to specific questions or work:

  You know I saw they write like this... I saw them now I try myself.

She emphasised the importance of learning a language by interacting with others outside the classroom and was emphatic about the need to review what was learnt in class, believing that without this the class time was wasted.
Interesting is very necessary. Sometimes I learn something. I go my house, I will try again you know that that... how she... what she say today?

She also articulated understandings about sound/symbol correspondences, differences in language structures, concept transference and so on.

Even English that’s the same, science is science, biology is biology... the problem is language.

This metacognitive awareness of language as a system was never articulated by Student B and raises the question whether she had such an awareness. Student B had family support for her language learning. She used her husband and daughters as translators of language and tasks.

If I don’t know some words I ask my husband or daughter. I want ask what is this? My daughter told me like this. OK how is spell it?

Student A had no family support which may account for her more overtly independent approach to the learning situation.

Everywhere I’ll try. Nobody help me now in the moment.

Student B also talked about barriers to her learning in terms of family commitments:

I hope my English is very well, but too much problem.

Both felt that they were making progress, but while Student B still saw the learning as difficult Student A now felt that it was less so, and more readily achievable.

I say oh no it’s too difficult for me (to previous teacher)... But it’s not difficult.

In terms of the important learning strategies for language learning outlined in Willing (1988:92-93), Student A appears to exhibit all of the 15 strategies listed: valuing, planning, evaluating, monitoring, internalising, hypothesising, rehearsing, communicating, persisting, risk taking, practising, inferencing, attending to meaning, attending to form, absorbing.

Student B, by contrast, exhibited few of the learning strategies. Whether this lack of articulation of learning strategies was a problem with finding the language in which to articulate them or whether it meant that she did not have them is not clear from the data. She was motivated to communicate but appeared less of a risk-taker than Student A. She relied far more heavily on family or others to assist her in communicating.
Discussion of findings

When assessing the students’ writing it was apparent that some progress had been made. The approach to writing used in this project did appear to assist both students. Moreover, they both perceived themselves as having made progress and felt that writing was not quite so much of a problem as had originally seemed. This self-perception of improvement made quite a lot of difference to the confidence with which they approached writing tasks.

It also appeared that learning strategies and metacognitive awareness about language were reflected in the rate of learning and the degree of autonomy with which the student approached tasks. In this small-scale case study of two students, it did appear that the student who had a greater metacognitive awareness of how language is structured and who displayed a variety of strategies for learning made faster progress than the one who did not have such well developed understandings and strategies.

The data collected in the interview suggested that my approach to teaching writing should not only assist students to develop an awareness of how language is structured, but should also help them develop an awareness of the types of learning strategies they are using and how to extend those strategies. Willing (1988:96) has stated that the development of learning strategies should be based on whatever resources the learner brings to the learning situation. He says that:

…virtually any class activity can be used to encourage the development of learning strategies. All that is necessary is to focus attention upon the learning process aspect of an experience, which always exists side by side with the content.

This study has emphasised to me the importance of listening to the students to determine how they feel about learning and the strategies they use to learn. To teach effectively in a disparate classroom may require identifying learning strategies first and then incorporating that knowledge into the classroom activities. I had the sense that I had taken weeks to see what should have been obvious, and thus wasted valuable learning time for the students by my lack of awareness. I could have continued to use a genre approach to the teaching of writing but also focused on making explicit the strategies that the students were using, or could use, to assist their language learning.

Reflection on my involvement in the research project

On reflection I believe that ‘disparateness’ should not be assumed to be a problem in a classroom. The knowledge and experiences that a student brings to the classroom are resources for learning, not barriers to learning.

The conclusions reached in this small project are neither new, nor I suspect particularly useful for many teachers. However, from a personal perspective the opportunity to reflect on and investigate my teaching practice has been a valuable one. I suspect that it should not have taken a research project to make me realise that even if I come up with the perfect teaching methodology, not all students will achieve the same results. The key feature of disparate learner groups is that they all bring something different to the learning situation, and that expecting conformity to arise out of those differences because of a teaching method is to expect more than is
reasonable. However, what I will expect from my classroom practice is a greater sensitivity to how difference manifests itself in differing understandings of the learning task, and awareness of how language is structured. These are things that I will be trying to make more explicit in my teaching practice.

Taking time out to focus on two students only is a luxury usually denied a classroom teacher. I learnt much from the close observation of the students and recording the comments they made both in the classroom and in the interview. I also learnt much from being able to share my reflections with other teachers. In particular, I was fortunate to have another teacher from my centre in the research project, who was also teaching at the same level. As we became more involved in the research we used each other to reflect on what was happening and to develop ideas. This shared reflection became part of the project and contributed to the decisions I made and the conclusions I came to.

However, there is a conflict between the dual roles of classroom teacher and researcher. Often the demands of one seem to get in the way of the demands of the other. It is often hard to maintain the role of both observer and participant in the classroom situation and the time required to write observations and keep a journal, so essential to an ethnographic study, can be difficult to fit into a teaching day. Another factor that I found personally frustrating was the time constraint on the project. I felt that just as I knew what I was doing and starting to see some results, the project was finished. This was also partly due to the fact that it was a ten-week class. Students usually change classes after those ten weeks so it would be very difficult to follow a longer study through. However, a longer study is required to properly investigate this subject.

My involvement in this project has provided an opportunity for reflection on both practice and the theory of practice. Even though I feel that the results may be of limited value for a wider audience, the personal and professional benefits have been great and will hopefully have an ongoing impact on my teaching.
SECTION FOUR

Groups and group dynamics

1 Taking a whole group approach
   Sue Shaw

2 Grouping for levels
   Patricia Prescott

3 At home in the workplace
   Judy Goodman

4 Groups for grammar support (1)
   Penny Brooksbank and Helen Carroll

5 Groups for grammar support (2)
   Carmen Hannon

I think the biggest advantage of a disparate group of students is that it allows people to appreciate differences rather than sameness. It helps them to think and reflect on their own responses to people with different strengths and weaknesses to themselves.

Judy Goodman
Introduction

Before the initial workshop in each state, participating teachers were asked to consider a series of questions probing their experiences and thoughts about teaching classes characterised by disparities in learner profiles. These were then discussed by the group. A summary of the issues and ideas discussed is included in Section One.

One of the strategies which was frequently suggested for the effective teaching of disparate learner groups was to form sub-groupings within, or as an extension to, the class.

If we are operating on the assumption that ‘disparateness’ is a problem, one obvious strategy is to attempt to reduce the disparities. The organisation of more homogeneous sub-groupings within the class would appear to be one way to do this. These groupings might be made on the basis of similarities in language proficiency, in areas of specific need, in specific goals for language learning, in first language background, or according to any variable that constitutes a factor of difference or similarity between students. The assumption behind such groupings may be that the teacher can then provide varied, perhaps graded, activities most suitable to particular groups, or to vary the expectations made in terms of pace, scope or depth of learning. In some situations, teachers group students of similar profiles because they feel that this encourages students to participate more confidently or to establish friendships more readily.

At other times teachers may deliberately group students according to differences with the expectation that this will encourage sharing of resources or information. This may also be motivated by negative reactions from students to groups established according to levels of language or learning skills.

Establishing smaller groupings within a disparate class (whether these are formally or informally organised) may assist teachers in coping with diverse learner needs by allowing them to give more personalised attention to individuals or small groups while other students are occupied with group tasks.

Several teachers in the project took up the challenge of investigating the effectiveness of a range of different approaches to grouping students. They went beyond the idea of establishing sub-groups within the class, to explore extra tutorial groups, as well as the notion of establishing a whole group approach; that is, creating one cohesive group for the class. Their experiences and findings are presented in this chapter.

In a number of the research projects, the intended direction for the research was diverted in response to early data collection and unforeseen issues which emerged for exploration. In the first paper, Sue Shaw from AMES WA explains how she intended initially to explore ‘how a student’s interactive performance is influenced by his or her placement within a group’. However, she was soon influenced by a key text she discovered in her readings for the project which led her to focus instead on how to establish and maintain a cohesive and interactive atmosphere across the whole class, despite the many differences that characterise classes of adult language learners.

Patricia Prescott from AMES WA chose to investigate the function of groups within her class. As the project proceeded, she experimented with a dynamic approach to grouping which depended on tasks and available resources. She carefully monitored her students’ reactions and her own allocation of time and attention.

Judy Goodman was teaching in a workplace-based program in AMES Victoria. Workplace classes are typically characterised by a diversity of learner language levels and backgrounds, as students are often released for language classes according to
criteria other than common language levels. Judy recognised the link between the kind of diversity which characterised her class and that found in other workplace contexts, especially with the new emphasis on team work. She decided to make the class a positive learning experience for all members and she made the most of the common workplace experiences and concerns her students brought to the class. She provides a rich account of reactions and responses on the part of her students and of herself.

Contributions by Penny Broosbank and Helen Carroll and by Carmen Hannon, all teachers with AMES WA, focus on extra-class groupings, that is where small groups of students are provided with additional support outside the context of the main class. In both cases the groups were to provide grammar support and to reinforce work undertaken in the class. The teachers evaluated this support strategy in terms of improvements in grammar, as well as students’ confidence in participating in the disparate level class.
1 Taking a whole group approach
Sue Shaw

My class consisted of 23 intermediate level learners, who were all new arrivals except for one student. They all had at least eight years of education, but they came from a number of different language backgrounds and they exhibited many of the features of a disparate learner group discussed in Section One.

One of the exciting aspects of participating in an action research project is that it can lead you in new, unforeseen directions. I set out to investigate how my students’ performances might be influenced by their placement in different kinds of sub-groups within the class. However, in the early stages of the project, while undertaking a literature review, I came across Classroom dynamics, a teachers’ resource book by Jill Hadfield (1992) which promotes a whole group approach to teaching disparate learner groups. I was attracted by Hadfield’s assertion that it is possible to minimise disparateness and to enhance the individual student’s learning opportunities through focusing on the dynamics of the class as a whole. This became the new focus for research in my own classroom. How might I take a whole group approach with a disparate learner group?

Hadfield suggests that classes will always be disparate to some degree, and that although this is often perceived as a major problem by educators, it need not be. This approach to thinking about disparateness reflected some of the early discussions amongst my colleagues in the action research project. At our initial workshop we had begun to consider strategies for facilitating the teaching of disparate learner groups and to look for positives in such a class profile.

I was interested in Hadfield’s claim that:

…a positive group atmosphere can have a beneficial effect on the morale, motivation and self image of its members, and thus significantly affect their learning, by developing in them a positive attitude to the language being learned, to the learning process and to themselves as learners. (1992:10)

Hadfield’s approach to whole group learning was to focus on both affective and cognitive activities in the course program:

The affective activities aim to create a positive and supportive group atmosphere in a non-explicit way; the cognitive activities seek to make certain demands on the group learning process more explicit to the learner. (1992:15)

My intention was to establish a dual focus for the class by deliberate attention both to language development and to effective group dynamics. In particular, I formulated the following research questions:

• How could I best develop the classroom ‘atmosphere’ to which Hadfield refers?
• How could I integrate activities aimed at developing positive whole group dynamics with an essential focus on developing language knowledge and skills?
Data collection

As I proceeded to select activities, to plan their incorporation into my program and to put them into practice in the classroom, I systematically monitored and documented the process and the consequences. In monitoring classroom interactions, I employed techniques of observing and making field notes, diary keeping and collecting students’ work. The diary notes were reflections made immediately after the lesson.

At times, I also had the support of colleagues to assist me in observing classroom interactions and to get feedback from students on their attitudes to particular activities. The collection of student responses to some activities such as a Learning Styles Questionnaire and letters written to new students about to begin the course, allowed me to gather feedback on my approach as well as data on their language learning.

As I reflected on my approach to teaching the group, on my selection and integration of particular activities, and on the effectiveness of those activities, I considered the influence of the following factors suggested by Hadfield (1992:18):

- my personality and teaching style;
- the composition of my group;
- the rhythm of the lesson, the week and the term;
- the constraints of my syllabus.

Samples from the data

I have included a few examples of activities used in the course together with student responses and my own reflections on the success or otherwise of the activity.

The first activity was intended to encourage students to think about groups in general in terms of what they offer and of what an individual can contribute to the group. They were also asked to think further about their immediate situation as a member of a group in the classroom. The discussion questions and some student responses are provided in Figure 1.

My reflective comments after this activity related to the fact that I found this a very difficult lesson. I couldn’t help thinking it was a waste of valuable teaching time and I felt uncomfortable with what I considered the ‘warm, fuzzy’ aspects of the activity. The students also had considerable difficulty. They seemed to be confused about my purpose and were either shy to talk about their experiences or simply lacked the language to express their thoughts.

A second example (Hadfield 1992) was an activity which related more closely to the issues of language learning. The students undertook a questionnaire about individual learning strategies which then provided data for considering group strategies. In its original form the students were asked to rate the choices offered. I chose to simplify the task by requiring students to limit their choices to a specified number, or to select those relevant to them. The numbers indicate how many students selected each item (see Figure 2).

The purpose of the activity was to help students become aware of the different learning styles and attitudes to learning within the group. An interesting discussion emerged around the third section related to speaking a foreign language. Some students wanted to make a distinction between speaking English inside and outside the classroom. Most students expressed reluctance to speak in the community, saying they felt shy or tongue-tied. Yet they were very confident and happy speaking within the classroom. The activity generated considerable discussion and supported my goals for the course in terms of both language development and group dynamics.
Thinking about groups

1. In your life up to now, what groups have you been a member of (for example, family, church, colleagues at work)? Try to list all the groups.
   Student responses: soccer, church, tenpin bowling, climbing club, family.

2. Did you have a good, bad or mixed experience as a member of these groups?
   Student responses: Can have accident which causes sadness; family—very good experience, very friendly together—travelled together; karate club—sometimes good / bad—sometimes when training my body hurts.

3. Think about the good groups. Did they have anything in common? What do you think these groups gave to you?
   Student responses: friendship, everybody looks nice, sometimes get a strike, sometimes not able to understand others, learn from experience of others, when we need help we can accept it.

4. What did you give back?
   Student responses: The students did not really understand this question and I found it difficult to explain.

5. What did you have to give up?
   Student responses: Time, freedom.

6. Think about the group you are in now. What do you think they will be able to give you? What can you offer them? What might you have to give up?
   Student responses: Lost friends in own country so can make new friends; experience in listening/speaking; friendly knowledge about customs in another country.

What kind of language learner are you?

Tick the three activities you think are most similar to language learning, and say what you think learning a language is like.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Ticks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>learning to ride a bike</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning to play the piano</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning to play chess</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning to walk</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning words in a play</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning mathematical formulae</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning to swim</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning dates for a history exam</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning to play cards</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning in a play</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learning a language:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Ticks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>involves hard work</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is interesting</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is difficult</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is frustrating</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can be a lot of fun</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is painful</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is confusing</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is boring</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>requires a lot</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comes naturally</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of memorisation</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When I am speaking in a foreign language, I:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling</th>
<th>Ticks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>feel shy</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feel confident</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feel embarrassed</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feel frustrated</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feel challenged</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feel tongue-tied</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feel stupid</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feel happy</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feel as if I am a different person</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A third activity was one initiated early in the course and repeated as an on-going strategy throughout. It was designed to ensure that students didn’t always work with the same partner. Hadfield suggests that this:

…will place limits on the amount of language used—pairs may develop their own ‘restricted code’. They may also get to know each other too well, and have too few information gaps. (1992:52)

Every Monday at fortnightly intervals I changed the seating arrangements for the class. On that day I greeted the students at the door with a written set of instructions which they had to follow to find their new group or partner. This activity also provided a context for practising vocabulary or grammatical features relevant to that section of the program. Two examples are provided below:

**Describing people**

Find your partner. She/he has blue eyes and straight black hair. She/he has two children who are teenagers.

**Present perfect**

Find your partner. He/she has flown in a plane many times and has visited Sydney.

I found this activity extremely useful. It was time-consuming because I had to prepare by finding out relevant information about all the students, but well worth the effort. The students became very flexible, were happy to sit with any other students, were more prepared to interact with each other and enjoyed the challenge of finding new partners each time.

The final activity I have included was the culminating one, in which students were asked to write an ‘old lag’s’ letter (Hadfield 1992). This is a letter from the experienced student to the new student about to begin the course in the next term. I have included an example of one student’s letter.

27 June 1995

I hope that you still feel well in this class. I attended this class last term and maybe I can help you with some advice.

The first think what can I tell you: I found surprising a method of learning English. It’s an outstanding method with many different and interesting activities. It’s seems you play with language and not study hard. So you can learn English easy, step by step, without an exertion.
I enjoyed learning in this method, because when I started to be tired of one activity we already started another. For this reason you will always be fresh and ready to learn.

Sometimes I thought that was too difficult for me. But this was for psychological reasons. Sometimes I cost my self confidence. I lost my patience. And it’s one of the most important thing when you would like learning a language.

Finally, I think you should have much patience. Learning language like learning to walk, You should walk step by step and you will sure succeed. Don’t hurry! Don’t lose your self confidence.

Good luck!

The students participated willingly in this activity. They were keen to pass on their experiences. All but one student wrote positively about their experiences. The activity provided them with a sense of handing over and moving on and enabled me to evaluate their language progress.

Student evaluation of the approach

At the end of the course, I asked the students to think about the activities they had done in the course to learn English and to say how they thought being in this group had helped them to learn. These are some of their responses:

I think this course is outstanding, because we learn without great exertion.

Helped to each other.

To be in a group give me a motivate.

I think I got more confident.

Teacher evaluation of the approach

The ten-week duration of this course was not long enough to explore more than a handful of activities and strategies for taking a whole group approach. It was apparent, however, that a dual focus on language and group dynamics was entirely feasible. Once I was familiar with activities, I found it a simple matter to integrate them with a particular linguistic focus. I had no difficulty in assisting students to achieve the required language learning outcomes for the course.
At several stages throughout the course, I wondered whether the reason I felt this whole group approach was so successful was because the activities were new and therefore stimulating for me—a somewhat jaded teacher. Moreover, in terms of my research, I was unsure how and whether I could attribute the success of the course directly to the inclusion of the affective and cognitive activities I had incorporated into the program.

However there was something different about this group. There was a sense of 'openness' which I had not experienced before. I also felt that by Week 8 the students were prepared to take far more risks with their language learning, inside and outside the classroom.

**Conclusion**

Schecter and Ramirez (1992), in their article ‘A teacher research group in action’, were interested in the effects of becoming a researcher on teachers’ views of classroom practice and of themselves as professionals. The findings were that participants reported many positive effects in both areas.

My experiences strongly support the findings of Schecter and Ramirez. I believe I have become a better teacher for having been involved in this action research project for two main reasons. Firstly, without my participation I would not have encountered Jill Hadfield's *Classroom dynamics*, or had the motivation to try out her approach and activities. The whole group approach she advocates will remain an important part of my teaching program in future classes. Secondly, I greatly valued the opportunity to reflect on my teaching and to share my concerns and ideas with colleagues involved in the project. Teachers too rarely have time to engage in any form of collaborative reflection, yet it is an invaluable aspect of their professional practice.

Hadfield (1992:23) quotes a poem by Miroslav Holub to express the feelings of the teacher as she opens the classroom door on the first morning of the term and goes in to face a completely unfamiliar class. Holub’s poem closely reflected my feelings of going into the unknown as I embarked on the action research project. I have included the last stanza and suggest you read the rest when you read Hadfield’s book—as you must!

Go and open the door
Even if there’s only the darkness ticking,
even if there’s only the hollow wind,
even if nothing is there, go and open the door.
At least there’ll be a draught.
2 Grouping for levels

Patricia Prescott

The research issues and description of the class

Although learner diversity has always been a feature of adult language classrooms, current economic constraints have resulted in larger classes and often a more heterogeneous profile. I was interested to investigate strategies for effective teaching in such disparate learner groups, through my participation in an action research project.

My main areas of concern were:

- How could students be effectively grouped in class?
- How did students feel about being grouped in this way?
- Did the pace and pitch of my teaching (including my choice of material and methodology) disadvantage any group?

I was teaching at the time in a writing consolidation program. It was a 20 hour per week course over ten weeks. There were 23 students in the group from 19 countries. Educational backgrounds ranged from eight years of schooling to post-graduate qualifications. Students' broad goals for learning English included both further study and employment. Most students were in their first English class in Australia. Five students had completed a previous course and one was exiting the program having completed her entitlement to tuition. There was also disparity in terms of language resources, with learners spanning a considerable range of proficiencies in speaking, reading and writing skills. This mix of students presented a challenge for course design and methodology.

As the focus of the class was to be on writing skills, I decided to group the students on the basis of outcomes from a set of assessment tasks, including a discrete point grammar test and a free writing sample. There was an apparent correlation between performances on both tasks and with previous formal study of English. I created five groups of four students and one group of three students according to level on the assessment tasks. I informed the students about my participation in the action research project and my reasons for assigning them into groups. I assured them that I could easily make adjustments if asked. They were happy to comply and none requested a change.

At the beginning of the project, I recorded detailed observations two or three times a week. This was important to allow me to monitor student responses. I documented pertinent events and reactions for later consideration. I was unable to maintain this detailed recording throughout the term, but my on-going observations indicated that the patterns developed in the first few weeks became fairly regular and predictable. In the last week of the course students were surveyed for their opinions on the grouping arrangements. I also collected letters they had written to students about to begin the next course (see also Shaw pages 54-9).
**Strategies and findings**

I have summarised my action research strategies and findings under several broad headings which are discussed below.

**Classroom organisation**

The first decisions were of a practical kind. All teachers are familiar with the difficulties of arranging desks for group work in a limited space. Straight rows require less space and are sometimes preferred by students. Some negotiation and experimentation was required to achieve a satisfactory arrangement.

Adjustments to class placements in the first two weeks, and several students leaving for jobs later in the course meant some changes in the groups, but these were minimal. With one exception, initial groupings appeared to be suitable. I wanted to shift one student to a slower-paced group more suitable to her level. This was somewhat complicated by the fact that she had quickly become reliant on the intrusive assistance of another student, and was not confident about working in another group. I therefore made the move gradually over several days, as she joined her target group for some activities only.

**Collaboration**

A number of students accustomed to more formal classrooms did not know how, or did not want, to work collaboratively. In some instances they simply sat together in clusters but worked independently. To encourage a more collaborative approach, I spent time with particular groups, suggesting strategies for tasks and assigning roles. I also found that giving students only one copy of a worksheet meant that they had to work collaboratively.

**Matching activities to groups**

Early in the course students wrote group compositions. These were written on butcher’s paper then stuck on the board for whole group editing. The students responded well to this task; they were not embarrassed by error correction since the text was from a group not an individual. There were also many errors in common which provided contexts for whole class teaching. These group compositions were seen as first drafts. Students then selected what they saw as the best aspects of the compositions and wrote second drafts individually.

As the higher-level students increased their vocabulary and grammatical resources, this approach was less relevant to their needs. The more advanced students wanted to write independently, although I observed that they still consulted each other quite regularly when writing, so the notion of group collaboration still played a part. The less advanced students negotiated within their groups whether to write as a group or individually. This varied with task, topic and time. The group approach was more likely with tasks which were perceived as more difficult. For some activities such as word games, crosswords and quizzes, groups were randomly formulated (by dealing out cards).

**Dependence/independence**

Once the more advanced groups were working well as units, I noticed a shift towards independence from the teacher. The less advanced groups, however, continued to need a high degree of teacher input and assistance with tasks. These students also preferred the desks closer to the teacher, which made giving assistance easier. The students were aware of my pattern of getting the higher level groups on task first and then spending time clarifying the task and assisting the other groups where necessary. This seemed to work well.
Extension/revision

The different groups worked at varying paces. For several weeks, I provided extension material for the higher-level groups. I later observed that these students were also creating their own extensions by taking the tasks beyond their original parameters. They also made good use of self-access material available in the classroom. In a programmed hour of ‘independent learning’ each week, the higher-level groups chose a wide range of extension activities. The lower-level students tended to use the time for revision of work done previously in the class. The time was also useful for individual conferencing and small group revision tutorials where necessary.

Achievement of language learning outcomes

I was concerned that the disparate levels might present operational difficulties in the formal assessment of learning outcomes, with some students not requiring assessment of certain outcomes which had previously been achieved. I was surprised to find that those students wanted to go through the formal assessment process again. As I was focusing on written language in my course, and as I assessed all their written work anyway, this was not an undue burden in terms of time, although it required careful record-keeping.

Support out of class

Some out-of-class support was available through the Independent Learning Centre and three students attended an extra grammar tutorial (see Brooksbank and Carroll pages 70–2). Their participation in these tutorials had a positive effect on their class participation and performance.

Support in class

For one hour each week, I invited community volunteers into the class for informal conversation with the students. The groups were mixed during these sessions so that students also got to interact with different classmates. Students found the sessions valuable on social and cultural grounds and as a break from more formal learning. Some guidance given to the volunteers meant that the conversations also allowed for reinforcement or review of topics or language from the course. The time was also an opportunity for some one-to-one conferencing as necessary.

Trainee TESOL teachers also came into the class on occasion as part of their courses. I used group-based activities at these times and the trainees joined the groups as helpers. The students appreciated the extra assistance and the trainees appreciated the hands-on involvement.

Survey responses

A brief survey of student responses to working in groups according to level revealed positive responses on the whole, although all students expressed some desire to change groupings during the course.

I think we should have changed the groups halfway through the term:
Yes (4) no (0) maybe (12)

I should have changed groups halfway through the term because the level of the students can change.

Responses to whether they liked the regrouping created for conversation sessions with volunteers were very mixed. In following up this issue in class, it emerged that they disliked having a different volunteer each time, as it meant going over the same
kind of ‘getting to know you’ exchanges each time. The students would have preferred the same tutor so that they could have covered more interesting topics.

If we don’t keep the same groups for conversation we’ll hear all the time the same questions... what country are you from? and so on.

Conclusion

In regard to my question of how to group students and the effectiveness of groups, my observations as well as explicit feedback from students have led me to conclude that the groups were effective in promoting learning and the arrangements had the support of the students. However, some adjustments should have been made to groups in the second half of the course, particularly for the higher-level students.

In relation to my concerns about where I should pitch my teaching and how I should monitor pace, the conclusions are less clear. I feel that in the past I have had a tendency to be guided more by the level of the higher-proficiency students. The grouping of students according to level made me more conscious of the needs of students at the middle and lower ends of the proficiency range.

I realised at the end of the course that it would have been most useful to have had another teacher come in to observe occasional lessons. This would have provided further insights on questions of pace and pitch.

Although my research was primarily focused on grouping students by proficiency level, I also placed considerable value on the development of whole-class cohesion. Perhaps because of the emphasis on groupings for such a substantial amount of class time, I found I had to put more work into this than had been the case in some previous classes. It is difficult to say, of course, how much this is a consequence of the variation in personalities within classes.

Some of what teachers do in the classroom is done intuitively and some is a result of considerable reflection. One of the values of collaborative action research is in providing a framework for both intuitive and reflective practices to be examined and shared. In this way our classroom practices can be continually informed, revitalised and improved.
3 At home in the workplace

Judy Goodman

Background to the research

As a teacher in an English in the Workplace Program (EWP), most of my work has been with disparate groups of learners. I have found this challenging and rewarding, and at times frustrating and tiring. I have also realised that it is impossible to be ‘all things to all people’, and that feelings of guilt can hinder a teacher's creativity.

With the restructuring of the workplace, team-work is the accepted way of operating. Employees are now expected to work in teams. This means employees with different languages and skills are working together. This change in workplace structures, together with my experience of teaching disparate groups in an EWP program, led me to focus my research on the advantages of such groups in the classroom.

At the time of the project, I was teaching two workplace classes. Each class met for two hours twice a week. The classes were scheduled to allow workers from both day and evening shifts to attend. There were ten students in one group and 12 in another. Their oral and written language skills varied considerably. The classes consisted of students from a variety of language backgrounds including Chinese, Portuguese, Croatian, Vietnamese, Greek, Italian, Hungarian, Polish, Laotian and Serbian. Educational levels ranged from four years of schooling to university graduates. The length of residency in Australia ranged from four years to 15 years.

When faced with such diversity in a class, it is sometimes difficult to see the advantages. However, it was on the advantages rather than the disadvantages that I wanted to focus my research. I found the following comment from Bell (1991:18) inspirational:

…a multilevel class can encourage students to grow in much more than just English. A wide range of talents and interests is likely to be displayed in the class, and students can bring stories, insights, and skills from all sorts of different backgrounds. All these differences contribute to a lively, fascinating classroom.

From my previous teaching experience, I considered the following to be potential advantages in teaching learners in disparate groups:

- Better students can help weaker students.
- Social cohesion can arise out of difference.
- Competition can be turned towards sense of personal accomplishment.
- Students have to take more responsibility.
- The teacher is kept alert.

My intention in this action research project was to investigate how far I could achieve these goals in my classes. One of the important positive factors in this respect was that the learners came from the same work environment. This was an effective leveller in the face of all other differences. The classes gave students the opportunity to make new friends in their workplace. An understanding of each other's difficulties and concerns helped to create a more relaxed class atmosphere and presented a great
opportunity for conversation practice. In addition, using events from the factory floor helped to create meaningful lessons, as documented in the following example from observational notes made during the course:

I used the second draft of the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement as a teaching exercise; the content stimulated conversation and debate. The manager came to speak to the group which enabled students to ask questions and express grievances. It was encouraging to see the quieter students speaking out. Mira, my quiet student, voiced her opinion quite firmly:

I just had to tell him (the manager). I was so upset.

Workplace issues such as these could be slotted into the course and related to the relevant competencies in the curriculum framework.

The noting down of my observations of the students and of my own teaching was my main method of data collection. I would evaluate these notes after each lesson. This usually took 15 to 20 minutes and I continued this practice over a period of 12 weeks. I made use of a simple proforma, specifying 'date', 'issue', 'action', 'comments/evaluation', to record my findings. This was a very convenient way to document my observations. I also surveyed other colleagues in workplace programs to see whether their experiences in teaching disparate learner groups reflected my own.

Research findings

I have related my research findings to the potential advantages I perceived as I began my participation in the action research project.

Better students help weaker students

In teaching these multi-level classes, I used both small mixed-ability groups and similar-ability groups. In small mixed-ability groups the students were given roles to play which allowed them to make use of their strengths. In this supportive atmosphere the students gained a positive self-image which was reinforced by the group. I noted:

Hanan (an illiterate student with good listening and speaking skills) has gained great respect from the group for his valued contribution to listening activities.

As students gained self-confidence, I found I could mix them together effectively in groups of varying sizes, with all members co-operating in performing the given task. My observations indicated that these small groups provided students with many more opportunities to practise their oral language as risk-taking was minimised. As Ramm (1992:12), drawing on the work of Badenhorst (1989), comments:

Students needed non-threatening situations such as pair work, groups or games to encourage them to experiment with language without being afraid of making mistakes.

Similar-ability groups can be an advantage as they save the teacher time in organisation. As my classes met for only four hours per week, similar-ability groups were a necessary part of each lesson, freeing me to help individual students or to focus on specific language outcomes for the course. These groups got to know each other
well and established a sense of group identity. However, at times I needed to remind the students to ensure that all members were included, as patterns of dominance and leadership tended to develop within the groups. I noted:

John not joining in the conversation today. Joanna and Maria dominating the group.
I need to remind students to work as a group.

I discussed with the class the necessity for all students to participate and the problem gradually corrected itself. I noted that one of my groups was unavoidably too small. This inhibited conversation activities particularly for the lower-level students. My research showed that groups needed to be of a reasonable size to generate effective conversation.

Social cohesion can arise out of difference

For the first month with a new class, my energies went into developing a sense of group identity. As Bell (1991:15) states:

Students who learn to trust each other and have each other’s approval will gain confidence in learning.

Socially disparate groups can be very friendly, relaxed classes. The variety of age, race and background can bring different viewpoints and experience to the group. I noted:

I think the biggest advantage of a disparate group of learners is that it allows people to appreciate differences rather than sameness. It helps them to think and reflect on their own responses to people with different strengths and weaknesses to themselves.

Classroom activities which allowed the entire class to work together helped foster feelings of group unity and overcome group divisions. Such activities were included for at least part of each lesson. The students enjoyed these learning activities. As they got to know each other and felt more comfortable, more meaningful interaction took place. These activities were intended to be both for fun and for reinforcing learning. My notes indicated that in these activities, the better students often helped the weaker ones. It did, however, take time for the weaker students to feel confident, and at first they hung back. I noted:

At the beginning of the semester some language activities made the less fluent students feel self-conscious of their linguistic abilities.

Until the students felt more comfortable with each other, I used more controlled communicative activities. As confidence grew with a sense of group identity, I slowly introduced more open-ended activities.

Students were encouraged to sit next to someone different each lesson. This helped build friendships and an awareness and acceptance of each other’s strengths and weaknesses. I noted:

Tina likes to sit next to Len as he helps her with her writing. She has gained confidence from this friendship.
I believe it was important for the class to discuss the limitations of a mixed-ability group and the benefits of accepting each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Coffee breaks were a special time for generating conversation between stronger and weaker students. For the first couple of weeks I would bring something special to eat and the ‘goodies’ stimulated conversation. The students themselves then organised a roster and we had many interesting foods. This was also a time to discuss news items, workplace events and celebrate birthdays. In one of the coffee breaks I noted:

*Good conversation generated from Ting’s promotion from casual to permanent. We discussed the meaning of these words and what they meant in the workplace... The usefulness of having a social chat could not be underestimated. This exposed students to everyday language.*

I documented that the students mixed well and that this type of unstructured language situation promoted much needed practice in casual conversation. Bell (1991:15) suggests that:

*Having students from a variety of language backgrounds is an unqualified plus, as they must fall back on English as a medium of communication.*

From my observations I noted:

*Sira bought his Amway catalogue. Good conversation generated from discussion of the products at coffee break.*

*George and Nelson discussed problems in their respective workplaces.*

*Thong asked Milan to explain something on his pay slip.*

I also noted that students benefited from ‘a good laugh’. We all learned to laugh with each other and not at each other.

**Competition can be turned towards sense of personal accomplishment**

Being part of a disparate group brought out the competitive nature of some students. I countered this by trying to instil in the group a sense of competing against oneself. The importance of acknowledging each other’s achievements was always emphasised. The class did a lot of clapping and hand shaking during the lesson. It was important that each student finished the day feeling he/she had achieved something. I noted:

*Sheila working well. Always trying to better herself. Today she said, ‘I want to get THAT certificate’.*

**Students have to take more responsibility**

One of the advantages I noted in teaching disparate learner groups was that students took more responsibility for their own and for others’ learning. Students took it upon themselves to help their fellow learners without being asked. Students learned to go on with their work while I was teaching another group or individual.

Advanced students adopted the role of tutor to the weaker students. Sometimes I asked for their help with other students. At other times I noticed they helped their fellow students voluntarily. This was one of the most positive advantages that I
observed during my research. The weaker students were helped, and the more advanced students had to be clear about what they were imparting to other students. I noted:

*Muris assisted Teresa with the ‘leave form’ today. Teresa was happy as she understands the ‘leave form’ vocabulary better now.*

*Boun, a Vietnamese student with good literacy skills, sat next to Luda, a Croatian, with good oracy skills. He helped her with her sentence structure. She was able to help him with his pronunciation.*

**Teacher is kept alert**

Disparate groups of learners certainly keep teachers ‘on their toes’ in terms of attempting to meet the varied needs. In response to my questionnaire, many teachers said they felt exhausted by the experience. However, as a result of working in this context and of reflecting systematically on what I have been doing, I have become a better adviser and facilitator. Instead of always being leader of the class, I now see myself as being part of a team. As one of my students stated, ‘we are now a team’.

My research revealed that by careful planning, attending to the group dynamics and creating a sense of belonging in the group, a teacher can feel a sense of achievement from teaching a disparate group of learners. As Hadfield (1992:13) states:

> Since we [teachers] are in such a responsible position, I think that it is only fair that we should be aware of our actions and the possible effects they might be having, and should choose to do those things that are more likely to have a positive effect on the individuals we are dealing with.

**Feedback from a survey of colleagues**

The results of my survey showed that in all but one area my colleagues generally agreed with my beliefs on the advantages of teaching disparate learner groups. The one area in which many were not in agreement was the issue of competition. As one of my colleagues stated:

*In the workplace context, weaker students are not prepared to feel inadequate or humiliated in front of co-workers with whom they may have a daily and on-going relationship.*

Most colleagues felt the weaker students became intimidated and embarrassed and retreated rather than competed. As this can be the case, teachers need to take care how competition operates in the classroom. Despite this, my own observations showed that some students—depending on personality and attitude—benefited from internal class competition.

Concern was also expressed about the workload which teaching disparate groups placed on teachers. The following are some of the comments made by colleagues:

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I believe that rather than keep the teacher alert, disparate classes tire teachers more.

Sometimes exhausts teacher!

Perhaps too often overloaded.

I've done it with a large group of three levels. It was awful. I felt each group was missing out as 'zero levels' really needed help.

Teachers are required to be alert in all kinds of teaching situations, but my own observations indicated that with careful planning the workload can be minimised when working with disparate groups.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research project has helped me professionally. The process of observation and analysis has made me consider more carefully the many possibilities of structuring my classroom environment to maximise learning. I valued the opportunity to listen to and talk with other teachers working with disparate learners. This has been a valued experience for me to learn and to think in greater depth when planning class lessons for my disparate group of learners.
In our centre, teachers had expressed concerns about disparities in the control of grammar amongst students in their classes. They were particularly concerned to help the weaker students keep up, especially in written language tasks, but felt they did not have sufficient time to devote to specific grammar support for those students.

We decided to work together as part of the collaborative action research project. Our chosen area for investigation was the strategy of providing extra tutorial groups for teaching grammar to weaker students. We were interested to determine whether such groups: helped weaker students to cope with course content; made the class teacher’s job easier; met with student approval.

Accommodation constraints meant the size of the group was limited to ten, but this seemed an appropriate size to ensure adequate support. The tutorial group was provided in additional time so that class time was not reduced and students did not feel singled out. The groups were planned for twice a week for one hour after classes. Interruptions to the program meant that, in fact, only twelve one-hour sessions were held over a ten-week period. We had intended to share the roles of teaching the group and observing and documenting the teaching and learning processes. However, even though there were only ten students in the group, their needs in terms of grammar support were quite diverse so we split the group into two.

The teachers from whose classes the students were drawn wanted us to revise the grammar work from their lessons (and in one case to pre-teach for their lesson). They also provided us with profiles of student needs. At an introductory session we explained to the students the way the group would operate and stressed that they could ask questions about any aspect of grammar, or discuss any area they found difficult. We were interested in finding out whether the weaker students took advantage of being in a small group to ask for clarification and revision of problem areas. Bell (1991) considers that a major pedagogical advantage of small groups is that they provide just such opportunities.

We intended to collect data through a variety of techniques including keeping field notes of observations in the classroom; collecting students’ work and course programming documents; making notes from feedback discussions with students; recording discussions between ourselves as tutors; and interviewing class teachers at the beginning and end of term. At the end of the sessions we decided also to give two brief questionnaires to the students.

At times it was difficult to coordinate with the class teaching program, which caused some confusion for students. Sometimes there was insufficient time to consolidate thoroughly what had been introduced in class. Despite these difficulties it was decided to continue to complement the class teachers’ programs.

Student feedback

At the end of the course, the students were questioned about whether they thought they had benefited from the extra sessions, whether there had been enough tutorial sessions, how they felt about learning grammar rules rather than learning to use language, whether they preferred revising work from their class or doing new work.
The feedback from this discussion was positive in respect of the perceived benefits, and predictably the students were in favour of more sessions, and wanted to continue the following term. They preferred revising work done in class. Although they still experienced problems in class, they felt more confident about asking questions to clarify points of grammar.

**Class teacher comments**

The class teachers also reported positive outcomes. They commented on some specific areas in which they noted improvement eg ‘the correct positions of adverbs in expressions using “usually”, “sometimes” ’; ‘ability to use conditionals’; ‘mastery of passive voice’. There were also comments reflecting a general sense of improvement, eg ‘noticeable improvement in written work’. The teachers also commented that they felt the small groups had helped the students feel more comfortable and confident in asking questions and had contributed to a more positive attitude to learning. It was also noted that the students were now more willing to access the Independent Learning Centre in their own time. The class teachers commented that they felt less pressure to provide remedial support for the weaker students in class because of the extra tutorial support available in the group.

**Our reflections**

As experienced teachers, we were faced with some difficult decisions in conducting these tutorials. The class teachers’ expectations were that we would provide remedial support through explicit teaching and revision of discrete grammatical features. This conflicted somewhat with our preference for teaching grammar through ‘use in context’. We were reassured, however, that the contextual focus was provided in students’ class work.

The constraints on tutorial time meant that it was difficult both to keep up with a teacher’s program and to provide adequate revision of specific grammatical features. A two-hour rather than one-hour session would have been preferable from our point of view. Feedback from students, however, did not indicate that they saw the frequent change of focus as a problem.

The disparity in levels, even within the tutorial group, made it necessary to split the group into two, which gave us less chance to observe and document practice in each group. We felt the groups should be chosen to match student needs more carefully in future.

Our observations supported the opinions of the teachers that there had been a noticeable increase in student confidence. We were interested to observe students’ willingness to ask questions in the group, to get clarification. In the earlier sessions there was reluctance, but with encouragement and the realisation that other students also had queries they began to put questions both orally and in writing. Teachers responded on a one-to-one basis. Of interest to us, too, was the wide variation amongst the group in their preferred learning styles—some students were extremely teacher-dependent while others initiated their own extension work. We also noted the varying degrees to which students made the link between a grammar rule and its application.

This was an interesting research project which allowed us both to improve our understanding of action research and to gain valuable insights into the problems of
weaker students in disparate level classes. We would agree with Nunan (1990) that all teachers need to be skilled in action research.

We learned from each other and were able to observe different teaching styles. Working together encouraged on-going discussions on the operation of the project and on the planning and selection of materials. It was valuable for clarifying our ideas and interpreting our data. Although it was difficult finding mutually suitable times and there were time pressures, these difficulties were outweighed by the positive aspects of collaborating on the research project. It was a rewarding alternative to working in isolation.
5 Groups for grammar support (2)
Carmen Hannon

Context
The context for my research project was very similar to that of the previous paper by Penny Brooksbank and Helen Carroll. The teachers at my centre were also concerned with discrepancies in grammatical knowledge amongst the students in their classes and a lack of time to address adequately the range of needs in this regard. As one teacher commented:

... there's a huge disparity on the students' abilities; some of the students are very very weak in grammar and I just haven't got the class time to devote to them and lots of it would bore the other students even if I had, because the other students don't need it...

The groups were set up along similar lines to Penny and Helen's, that is with one hour of support group time in addition to class time, and with the focus of the group work on grammar and a reinforcement of work undertaken in the class.

Two separate groups were established, but only one will be the focus of this study. The class teacher selected the students on the basis of their results in a grammar test. The eight students selected were from the lower range of performers on the test and were willing and able to attend the extra group time. Some of the weaker students were prevented from attending by childcare and other commitments. The teacher provided a profile of the selected students, noting their particular strengths and weaknesses. She noted that some, especially those with low levels of education in L1, seemed to have no concept of grammar.

The class teacher anticipated that the extra group support would provide an opportunity both for improving grammatical knowledge and for boosting their self-esteem and confidence:

... I think it gives them a real boost knowing that somebody cares and that they're not alone with their problems...

Throughout the course I kept observation notes and records of student performances from classwork, homework and tests. Initially, the content of my teaching corresponded to the grammar being taught in their class. However, I felt that the students needed more time on some aspects of grammar, so I decided to spend the time on fewer grammatical concepts. I decided to devote the sessions primarily to a focus on tenses, in particular simple present and past perfect.

Findings
In evaluating the overall success or otherwise of the grammar groups, I took three sources of information into consideration. Firstly, on the basis of my own observations and assessments of students' work, I considered identifiable improvements in students' use of grammar. I found that the group support seemed to help about half of
the students, with a substantial improvement for some. Those for whom the strategy was less successful were those with little formal education in L1. One of the students, who had 12 years of education in L1, appeared to understand the concepts readily but continued to be greatly confused in applying them. The student felt that his multilingualism sometimes led to confusion and interference. I also noted that one hour of group time was insufficient to provide adequate support and recommended at least a two-hour session in future. This observation was further confirmed through feedback from my students.

Secondly, on the basis of feedback from the class teacher, it was clear that the group participation was well received by the selected students. In terms of improvements she, too, saw that the results were mixed, but considered that at least some of the improvements were due to the extra tuition. The group support was much appreciated by her, and she was keen to continue with such support the following term.

The final source of feedback was from the students themselves, through a class discussion and a brief questionnaire. Most students felt that the grammar groups helped them to improve, some more than others. The weakest student said it only helped a little. The improvement perceived by the students was greater than that revealed by their performances, which perhaps is an indication of a more positive attitude and greater confidence.

They all thought the groups were important as they needed more time to understand grammatical explanations. All students felt the groups should continue and that there needed to be more time in the groups, perhaps two or three times a week. Interestingly, one student who said there should be three sessions a week was often absent from the one session!

Conclusion

Conducting the grammar groups to support these students was very rewarding for me. The students also received them very positively. In fact, the groups were so well-received that the problem emerged of restricting the numbers, as many students who were not selected for group support came knocking on the door trying to get a place in the group. The allocation of extra time contributed to many students improving their control of grammar, and helped all students to improve their confidence in participating in a disparate level class.

My involvement in this research has given me insights into the place of grammar in the curriculum, disparities in students’ grammatical resources and the demands made on weaker learners in disparate level groups.
SECTION FIVE

Exploiting resources and techniques

1 Customising worksheets and activities
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* By writing down and analysing the things I was doing on a daily basis, I was uncovering the hidden principles and complex patterns of beliefs which motivated the multi-layered and multi-dimensional process of my teaching. The way I made and used materials was influenced and informed by these theories and beliefs.*

Vicki Hambling
Introduction

In this section, teachers explore ways to exploit available resources to manage teaching and learning effectively in disparate learner groups. These resources may be human or may involve materials and techniques.

Whilst in other sections of this publication teachers have looked at ways to enable learners across disparate levels to work together on the same tasks, this is not always possible or preferable. At times teachers will consider it necessary to have students working on different activities or on different versions of the same activity. The problem that then arises is how to find the time to prepare and adapt materials or to grade tasks.

The teachers writing here found no profound or generalisable solutions, but rather they document the kinds of activities and ideas that helped in their circumstances (and some that didn’t work). They also document the difficulties and demands of meeting the diverse resource needs of diverse learners.

Teachers commented that the process of systematically reflecting on and documenting the selection, design, evaluation and adaptation of materials had several important positive consequences, including a heightened awareness of their decision-making processes of course design, a greater awareness and sensitivity to the needs of learners in disparate learner groups, and the fostering of positive professional relationships with colleagues.

Vicki Hambling and Lorraine Hatcher-Friel were both teaching at the Northern Metropolitan Institute of TAFE, Melbourne. They decided to work as a team on the project. Vicki provides a description of what she was able to do to meet the varied needs of her learners through developing graded materials and activities around the core resource of a course book. Lorraine, from one step removed, provides an account of the demands on Vicki in terms of developing materials, and of the day-to-day strategies she employed to maintain a positive learning environment in the class.

Helen Hanrahan from Noble Park, AMES Victoria, discusses her approach to exploiting a common core of simple teacher-produced dialogues as the basis for a variety of integrated activities which allow students to work at their own level and pace. Her close analysis of the process of teaching enabled her to consider better her learners’ need for a secure base of predictably structured activities which enabled all learners to succeed. This, together with the explicit teaching of study skills, enabled her students to begin to take risks and develop independence as learners.

Margaret Clarkson, a teacher at the Bankstown Region of NSW AMES, focuses specifically on the teaching of writing, and documents her search for approaches and techniques by which she could address the wide range of needs and interests in her class. Margaret reported that she gained insights and awareness from the close scrutiny of her teaching which she engaged in as part of the research, but expressed a degree of frustration in the fact that ‘there were no dramatic changes in either the learners’ work or their attitudes to learning overall’.

Helen Mulvaney from Footscray Centre, AMES Victoria, was fortunate to have the support of a teacher’s aide in her computer literacy skills class. Her discussion raises issues about the role(s) of such aides. Helen is aware that such support is becoming less likely as education budgets shrink, and she looks for what she can learn from the experience to carry over into classes where such support is no longer available.
1 Customising worksheets and activities
Vicki Hambling

Focus
My research focused on the development of multi-level resources for teaching 20 beginner-level ESL students with educational backgrounds ranging from no schooling to 12 years of schooling, who came from language backgrounds representing five different scripts, and whose literacy levels in English consequently varied enormously. Their ages ranged from 20 to 63 and the length of time they had been in the country ranged from two months to eleven years.

The action research involved a process of teaching, observing, developing materials, evaluating the materials, adapting and improving the materials, teaching and so on in an on-going cycle.

Samples and comments from the process of materials development
The core resource I used was a course book called Lifelines (Crawford and Clemens 1986). Additional materials were developed around this. I observed how the materials were used by different students and I evaluated their effectiveness. On-the-spot reflections and ideas were attached to the materials with stickers. I also took 15 minutes at the end of each lesson to write down the reactions of students. I found making the materials and researching and documenting their effectiveness to be quite time-consuming.

I include here some samples of the kinds of activities that were developed around a unit on personal information. The descriptions include some notes on their effectiveness. The text used as the basis for these activities was a set of descriptions of characters from the textbook, giving personal information such as name, nationality, age, marital status, address, occupation and so on. Similar kinds of activities could be applied to many different types of texts including those jointly developed by the class.

• I introduced the text by reading it aloud to the students. Then I cut it up for them to sequence. Five students finished, while six had no more than the first line in place. I had to adapt this activity type into graded levels of difficulty for it to be of further use. I produced several versions of the activity. One had complete sentences to be re-ordered, others had partial sentences or with phrases, and one had two and three words only. In this way I re-used the material over a number of days, making it a step more difficult for each student as necessary. I also varied the difficulty by controlling whether they worked in pairs or alone. Some students never moved beyond the first level of difficulty.

• I developed a cloze activity removing simple lexical items. Feeling that the students were by now quite familiar with the text, I thought this would be easy. However, after the task was explained to them, only a quarter of the students proceeded to do it. Some students looked at their neighbours to see what they were doing. Others just sat and stared at the text, others started to talk in L1
across the room to find out what was expected. For some, it was a problem of not understanding the instructions, but for others the task itself was too difficult. I graded the cloze activity into three levels. I omitted the same lexical terms but provided graded levels of support for replacing the missing words. Each student was given the answers separately. Where possible they were encouraged to complete the cloze without referring to the answers. The students with literacy problems were encouraged to copy. All students were then taught to check their work against the answer sheet for spelling mistakes.

• I didn’t have time both to circulate around the room helping students and to check thoroughly everybody’s work. I had to establish some means for them to do this themselves. I gave each student a copy of the text to use as a reference for correcting their work in class. Under the text were two columns, one for new words and the other for the meanings. This was to be used for homework where dictionaries, family or friends could help them write down the meanings of new words from the text. I used the work of students who had completed the activity as a model for the others. This proved to be very successful and by week three of the course all students were doing homework.

• To recycle work effectively, the students had to be able to find previous work to refer to. I therefore spent considerable time teaching students how to organise and use folders. (One elderly couple who were both in class bought a folder and dividers for the husband only. I had to provide a folder and dividers for the wife as her education was obviously not seen as important enough to warrant the expenditure of meagre resources.)

• One activity required the students to join the beginning of a sentence to an ending. This activity required the students to complete a worksheet rather than to physically manipulate cardboard strips. For some of the literacy students this step was too big and they had to join the sentences manually.

• I used word games where the students played in groups of three. I was careful that each group had one strong student in it.

• For activities requiring the students to use their own personal information I gave each a sheet with their personal details which could be used as a reference.

• When using worksheets which asked questions about the text, I began by asking the questions orally. I put the answers at the bottom of the sheet. The better students had to fold over the bottom. The weaker students could copy the answers. They were all responsible for checking their own spelling. The stronger students had to learn to spell some of the words and test each other while the others had time to finish.

• I wrote the text on the board and we all read it out loud together. I then rubbed out several words and put dashes in their place. We read it again putting in the missing words. I completed this bit by bit until the text was totally erased. The weaker readers were supported by memory and by the whole class reading together.

• I designed a worksheet where students had to correct misinformation. The better students had to rewrite the sentences correctly and the weaker students had to write the correct word. All students could do this.

• I adapted a kind of Bingo game from the textbook which used a grid labelled with letters. The spaces on the grid were filled with words from the text we had been using. I called out two letters and the students had to tick the word at the vertex. As soon as a student recognised that they had all the words for a sentence they called out. This worked well as it gave the weaker students practice with their letters and the stronger students practice in making sentences.
• In order to assess whether the students had understood the personal lexical items being taught in this unit, I made a cloze where I omitted the lexical item and put in the personal information of the characters from the *Lifelines* book. The answers were put at the bottom of the sheet and the stronger students had to fold over this section so that it was out of view. I made one of these for each of the three characters. Students who had difficulty with the activity had to follow up with the other two characters for homework.

• I designed a crossword puzzle for students to complete as homework. The crossword had to be put on an overhead and modelled first as many students had no familiarity with the notion of crosswords.

• Every morning as a warm-up activity, I got the students to give me sentences about the characters from the text. I used cue cards to help them. I put the story up on the board. It recycled the language they had learned.

• The students wrote about one of the characters. I gave them the first sentence and a few words of the second, eg 'Kate came from Greece. She is __________'. While the better students worked independently, I helped the weaker students if they needed it. Some would tell me the story and I would write down what they said.

**Reflections**

I used the same activity types for different texts. The students came to recognise the pattern and understand what was expected, and thus became more independent. Repetition seemed to be important in helping students to feel secure and at ease with what for many of them were new and unfamiliar circumstances. The methodology used enabled students to feel a sense of achievement and success and this was reflected in an extremely good record of attendance in the course.

There was clearly a need to teach study skills explicitly. This involved learning how to organise a folder and file worksheets, how to do homework, learn spelling, and correct and check their own work. As the students developed these skills, they could make much more effective use of materials I developed. For example, if students could not locate materials from the previous lesson, much time and effort was wasted. Many students initially saw no value in keeping their folders organised, but because I kept stressing its importance and value, they eventually all accepted this.

Teaching a mixed-ability class is very time-consuming in terms of materials development. However, there can be considerable advantages for the students. By pairing strong and weak students, the weak students get one-to-one help and the strong students improve their communication skills. It was necessary, however, to teach the stronger students how to help their classmates so that they didn’t simply give them the answer needed.

I realised that at times I was asking a lot from the stronger students and the weaker students were initially put in a position of dependence. The importance of good group dynamics and a supportive environment became clear early on. To take risks, the students needed to feel comfortable and confident with me and with the class as a whole. I spent a lot of time organising, 'getting to know you' activities, including excursions and morning teas as an important part of this process. Students had to move around in pair work so that they met new people.

I normally evaluate my lessons on a daily basis, but this process of formalising what I was doing and discussing with other staff took me a lot further into the process. It gave me a renewed interest in the everyday routine of teaching and encouraged me to extend myself. Although the process was very time-consuming, I found it a valuable exercise personally and I learned a lot about action research.
By writing down and analysing the things I was doing on a daily basis, I was uncovering the hidden principles and complex patterns of beliefs which motivated the multi-layered and multi-dimensional process of my teaching. The way I made and used materials was influenced and informed by these theories and beliefs.

As a teacher, one often wonders if all the work is worth it, and then something happens to give you the impetus to continue. The following is a diary entry from one of my beginner students, written with great difficulty and obviously with help from someone at home. It is the impetus to continue.

As I started writing on this paper my thoughts landed on you. Oh my dear teacher, within you there is the teacher that every student needs. The way you explain, the patience you have, it’s all that a student needs. My hope is that teachers become just like you.
2 Collegiate reflections on methodology
Lorraine Hatcher-Friel

The context

When we began the project, the Adult Migrant English Program at Northern Metropolitan College of TAFE had six staff, four of whom were studying at Masters level. In different ways, for each of us, this was a personal and private sort of professional development without a public forum for sharing findings or focused reflections. ‘How’s the essay going?’ would usually be met with a few minutes of informal exchange, related to time management, stress management and coping strategies. The weightier issues—for example results of data analysis, literature reviews and current debate—were never approached due to the constraints of time. A coffee break and the time waiting at the photocopier is not sufficient to engage in conversations of a substantial nature. So, when the opportunity arose for three of us (Vicki Hambling, Jane Hamilton and myself) to work together on this project, I was excited at the prospect of a shared focus, and I was keen to study (in a ‘public’ way) something that was directly related to our context, our learners and our teaching.

Selecting the focus: The disparate class

Vicki’s class became the focus for the project. A brief description of the class is included in her paper in this section. I became an observer and a consultant, so that together we could discuss the day-to-day issues that arose for her. My observations and reflections would add another perspective to her own.

After the first lesson with this disparate class, Vicki was surprised at the differing responses to the activities she had prepared. In particular, she was concerned with the inability of many learners to understand the tasks and it appeared that some were unable to recognise or manipulate the materials.

_They were just sitting there doing nothing. They didn’t know what to do. It was too hard. Looking at the paper. Looking at one another to see what the others were doing. Looking at this side and that side, then, eventually talking across the room in L1…_

We talked about her experience of learning Portuguese in Portugal. She related her learners’ responses to her own experience at this time.

,…boredom and not knowing what’s going on… that’s the worst thing.

We agreed that the focus for our joint research would be to look at using common content in this classroom rather than teaching different lessons to the different learner types. The resource Lifelines (Clemens and Crawford 1986) would provide the core classroom materials. This gave us a clear question for our research, while focusing on common content in what ways can materials be adapted to engage all learners in the lesson?

Low (1989:153) suggests that ‘designing appropriate materials is not a science; it is a strange mixture of imagination, insight and analytical reasoning’. As I observed
Vicki intently involved in the creation of the graded support materials, I could not help but agree. The added dimension of different levels of materials being used simultaneously in the classroom also lent itself to the image of teacher as juggler—a balancing act of timed tasks. Would the fast track learners finish their task too soon? What back-up material would be needed to fill this time slot? How long would the explanation of the activity take for the learners with a concrete learning style? Should a task be dropped because the explanation would take longer than the task itself? How could she make sure that all learners would be actively involved at all times?

The findings of the research

Using the notes and recordings from the meeting times and my own observations of Vicki in class, a number of issues which I will refer to in this paper became thematic. These include the preparation time, delivery style of the teacher and the use of the learners’ first language in the classroom.

Preparation time

Clearly, the teacher of disparate learners may require much more preparation time than other classroom teachers. The demands of developing, in this case, three levels of support material for each class meant the teacher coming in, often on weekends, to use the office equipment to produce the materials. The time in the working week was not sufficient. While many of these materials may be used again in subsequent courses, many will not. Those are the personalised materials, the texts produced in the classroom context involving these particular learners at this particular time and place. These are the texts that result from what Ramm (1992:35) refers to as ‘people wanting to learn particular knowledge from particular people’, and what Cummins (1980, cited in Hood 1990:56) refers to as ‘context-embedded’ with ‘interpersonal involvement in a shared reality’. These are what the teacher might describe as using an excursion report to raise consciousness about past tense construction or using a student questionnaire to produce an information gap where students may find out more about each other using the lexical field of ‘the family’.

Again, in relation to teacher preparation time, the excursion reports with photos were organised by the teacher. In her own time, she typed the twenty reports, organised layout, took them to the print room and had them ‘published’. The bound, multiple copies became a class text which were as much a trophy as they were a language resource used to model and recycle the target language and to involve and connect the learners with the texts.

In order to cater for all learners, different worksheets had to be developed to accommodate the different learning styles and literacy needs of the learners. For example, at least three cloze exercises were developed from the same text. The learner could choose a cloze depending on their confidence. Preparing for different activities to run simultaneously in the classroom was not only time-consuming, but impacted significantly on the presentation and delivery style of the teacher.

The presentation of the teacher

The organisation of the classroom was of critical concern in a class such as this where there was a need for three and more levels of prepared materials and where there was little learner understanding of the language of instructions. Clearly, the teacher of
this disparate beginner class was a driving force. Her voice was clear and high in volume and her body language very exaggerated, animated and energetic. The confidence with which instructions were delivered was resolute. This is not necessarily a personality thing. Vicki identified this as an explicit teaching strategy. She told me that there could be absolutely no doubt in her presentation that the learners would understand the instructions and follow them. At times it was obvious that the energy and persistence with which the teacher tackled the classroom management left her physically exhausted. One of the most interesting strategies the teacher drew upon to assist with the successful management of learning activities was the planned incorporation of learners’ first languages.

Using the learner’s first language in the classroom

Two features of the use of L1 in the classroom were observed: firstly, its use in the acquisition process; and secondly, its use as a tool to assist classroom management.

In cases where a learner’s English was insufficient to talk about strengths and weaknesses, the teacher relied on observation to estimate success. Identifying learner behaviour as a response to activities or materials became a major topic of our discussions. In particular a 63-year-old Bosnian woman with six years of formal education featured strongly in our discussions. She was completely withdrawn. Why was she not engaging in the classroom activities? Were they too cognitively demanding? Did she have any formal learning strategies? Was it that she was linguistically overwhelmed? Or was she a survivor of war-related trauma and, at this stage, unready for language classes? Was it possible to engage her in the learning process?

Vicki commented:

I could see she’d drop out. It's very difficult for her… the whole thing’s difficult. I just couldn’t see she’d make any progress at all… and I wasn’t even sure of her skills in L1… and then I wasn’t sure of this personality shift, you know, where if they’re very quiet in the classroom and don’t say boo at all and can hardly look you in the eye, are they like that normally? Or is it the fear of English that's doing it to them? Or the fear of being strange? So to be able to make an assessment on that, I decided to get her at various opportunities to use L1, and see if her behaviour was the same, and it was totally different.

The first instance of this was in naming parts of the body, when the learner was asked to give the word in Bosnian. Her response was remarkable. Her posture changed markedly. She made eye contact, her back straightened and the volume of her voice increased. When new language was being introduced, this learner was encouraged to vocalise the translation into her L1. While the oral use of the target language by this learner did not increase dramatically, her participation and involvement in the classroom did. Using L1 has been documented as a successful strategy adopted by teachers who speak the learner’s home language (Cazden, Carrasco, Maldonado-Guzman and Erickson 1980; Tikunoff 1985; Richards and Hurley 1990). However, this is a powerful example of the success of the teacher in involving a learner through the learner audibly translating back into L1.

The teacher, in reflecting on the advantages of this translation activity, also added that it produced a number of energetic debates within language groups as learners came to agreement on the most accurate translation. The notion that the first offered meaning in the bilingual dictionary is not necessarily the best one, is very important.
Further, within the debate itself, more powerful learning of new vocabulary seemed to occur. For those learners outside the language group, the lesson became one of observing that often, there is no one-to-one correspondence, word and meaning in different languages.

The use of L1 as an instructional device also became a feature of the classroom. Where appropriate, the linguistic resources of learners were used to translate instructions to other learners and learners were encouraged to clarify tasks in L1. This highlighted the need for cooperation and group solidarity. Once a core of learners came to understand the task, for example, a crossword activity or a board game, they would help others come to grips with the task. Some learners were called on to take on the role of tutors and to assist in classroom management. Not only was this strategy time-efficient, at times it offered a bridging between home culture and school.

In the disparate classroom then, the use of first language became a valuable resource for learning.

**Reflections on participation**

One of the greatest benefits I received as a result of my participation in the project was a heightened professional relationship with my two colleagues. I believe that this shared experience enabled us to gain greater insight into our individual roles, our responsibilities and our expertise. The importance of the involvement of the program manager in this classroom-based project cannot be overlooked (see Hamilton pages 146–50). In the current political climate, where there is little tenure, occasional peer competition for work, short-term funding, greater demands on the classroom teacher’s expertise in syllabus design, assessment and reporting, it is a brave thing to open your classroom to public scrutiny and offer up your classroom practice to public debate. It makes a statement about the workplace itself and the conviction of the teacher that it is by such means that we can improve our practice and therefore do more for our learners.

On another level, we also had an opportunity to address all the language studies staff at a professional development day which did much for the image of the department itself. By providing a forum which looked internally as well as externally for innovation and change, the administration of the institution demonstrated that it valued the expertise of its own classroom teachers and thereby provided a source of motivation towards best practice.

The effort which Vicki put in to providing sufficient and appropriate materials for the class was extremely successful. However, this expenditure of time and energy is not always possible or realistic. This project is able to draw attention to the increased demands on the teacher in teaching a disparate learner group and the need for support and resources in teaching such a class. In an environment where economic policy impacts on classroom practice, projects of this nature are extremely useful. The documentation and publication of rich descriptions of classroom practice can give weight to pedagogy in the pedagogy versus pocket debate.
3 Dialogues as a starting point

Helen Hanrahan

The focus

At the time of my involvement in this research project I was teaching a class in which the majority of learners had limited formal education and low levels of literacy in L1. Some, with more years of education, came from non-Roman script language backgrounds. I was concerned about the lack of suitable published material for this profile of learners and the difficulties this presented for teachers. While these students needed a lot of repetition, they could also get bored like any other group. The range of learning styles and pace within the class meant that worksheets needed to be flexible or multi-layered. Yet the production and adaptation of materials was a time-consuming process. The general question for my research, therefore, was how best to exploit materials for effective language learning in this context.

I decided to document my teaching of a series of lessons using my own teacher-developed materials and to look at the ways students responded to the activities. I made notes on each stage in the teaching process. Several students stood out for their speed and initiative, others for their slowness. I observed the students closely and recorded their responses.

My teaching experiences had led me to the conclusion that learners of this profile commonly pick up oral language more quickly than written language so I intended to introduce language first through spoken texts in the form of scripted dialogues. These would then become the bases for a variety of activity types that integrated other language skills and built in much opportunity for repetition.

The dialogues were face-to-face conversations relating to immediate personal experiences. They were recorded interactions by and about people whom the students knew. The students themselves and classroom experiences were used as the ‘raw material’ for the conversations. Dialogues could be constructed around any topic that was current and relevant, eg excursions, housing, daily routines. They were generally made up of simple question-answer sequences.

Examples:
Topic: Personal appearances
Title: ‘Aldo’s girlfriend’

Helen: Tell me about your girlfriend, Aldo. How old is she?
Aldo: She's 26.
H: Is she tall?
A: No, she isn't. She's short.
H: Has she got curly hair?
A: Yes she has. She's got long curly hair and blue eyes. She's very slim.
H: Oh! That’s nice. Where does she live?
A: She lives in Glen Waverley.
H: What’s her name?
A: Her name's Jacqueline and she’s beautiful.
The initial activities using the dialogues allowed students to listen to language which was immediately and personally relevant to them. The students could pick up language in ‘memorised chunks’—ready-made segments of speech which can be memorised as unanalysed wholes (Ellis 1986; see also Thai pages 124–30). In this way they could use the model to begin talking to each other almost immediately.

The sequence of activities flowing from this dialogue included reading activities, controlled and (later) open-ended speaking activities, and writing activities. There was an emphasis on rotating pair work to maximise repetition and give a variety of interactants. My detailed records of activities, my field notes on what happened and how different students responded, and records of how particular students developed their language skills allowed me to shape and reshape the types and sequence of activities throughout the course on an on-going basis. An extract from my field notes is included below:

Lesson 3: Introducing the dialogue.
The students listen to the tape several times. I ask them about it.
‘Who is talking?’, ‘What about?’
Then I elicit the dialogue from the students and write it on the board with contrasting colours and stick figures for each speaker. Their interest in this person (A’s girlfriend) strengthens their learning. Esad draws her on the board. She looks rather sassy. Then they listen again and read. I drill them (not too much emphasis on pronunciation at this stage) but repeat each phrase three times. Then I break them up into pairs and they read to each other, swapping roles. Some swap partners and repeat. It’s very interactive yet still very controlled.

The following samples are just some of the activities generated from one dialogue on describing people:

- The students dictate the dialogue to me. They have to say it as clearly as possible to communicate it to me.
- They read aloud to the class in pairs. They are happy to do this.
- They write questions about A’s girlfriend.
  ‘Is she fat?’ ‘Yes she is.’
  ‘Has she got short hair?’ ‘Yes she has.’
  ‘Is she beautiful?’
- They are given a picture of a group of people at a bus-stop: thin, fat, tall, short, long hair, short hair, etc. The students are given a scatter sheet containing the vocabulary. They have to cut out the figures and match to the words. The slower students cut out the figures and paste them with the relevant vocabulary. Students in the middle range make simple sentences: ‘He’s thin. She’s fat’.
- I ask them questions about the pictures and we focus on statements and questions. ‘She’s tall’, ‘Is she tall?’, ‘Yes she is’, ‘No she isn’t’.
- They complete a survey: ‘Have you got a _________? Yes I have / No I haven’t’.
- Students rewrite the dialogue and substitute a new person (eg wife/husband/mother). We discuss possible alternatives and I write them up and they practise in pairs. They choose their partners. They can keep changing partners.
- I ask them two or three questions from the dialogue. It’s not on the board. They must listen and give an appropriate answer. Then they choose partners and ask each other.
We write up the dialogue up again and I reconstruct it into a short paragraph (descriptive report structure). This is a model for their own paragraph writing. This reinforces the vocabulary, and provides an extension for faster students in their own writing. They write their own paragraph and draw a picture: ‘My mother is 88. She's short. She’s got ____________.’

They write a paragraph about their partner.

The students have extended listening time. They listen to questions and answers with new language. They talk to new partners and listen to new information. They read a sheet with relevant vocabulary and some extension. They now have some choice in language. The control is loosening up. It’s becoming communicative. The emphasis is now more on the content than the form.

Today they do writing in pairs. They each have a coloured pencil and a piece of butcher's paper per pair. They rewrite the dialogue from both sides. They must talk to each other and ask the questions to do this. They get very noisy. They are asking the questions almost without realising. I listen to them.

‘Where does she live?
Is she tall?
Tall?... tall?... short?
Vietnam... no...
How... old... is... she?
Tell me about... your daughter?
He... he... she... she... (struggling with pronouns)
That nice... that nice...
Black eyes... slim... Noble Park... ’

The students use the substituted language to write up a new dialogue with their partners. They must listen to the new language and then write it. This is still controlled practice, but they are getting more confident.

They write an extended paragraph about their mother/father, or several short paragraphs. Hui writes about his mother. He is obviously pleased and proud to write about her. He draws a lovely picture of her on the board. They’re all interested. He is very happy as he writes up his story:

My mother is 88. She's short. She's got straight short hair and black eyes. Her name is Mun and she's beautiful. She lives in China.

Other descriptions included the following:

Cam (65 years old, Vietnamese, four years of education):

He short, got straight hair and black eyes. She lives in Noble Park. What is his name. His name Cuong and he’s handsome. What’s her name... my children...
Ping (53 years old, Chinese, nine years of education):

My husband is 56. He's short. He's got straight hair and black eyes. I've got two daughters Mei and Ling. Mei is twenty-eight and Ling is twenty-three. Mei's got short, curly hair and Ling's got short straight hair. Mei is short and very slim and Ling is tall. They both are black eyes and hair. Mei likes dogs. They both lives in Noble Park and from China come to Australia.

My Lan (24 years old, Chinese, 12 years of education):

My mother have got four children, two daughters and two sons. She is fifty. She's short. She's got short curly hair and black eyes. She lives in China. She likes do cook and T.V. Her names Shen and she's beautiful. My Husband is 27. He's short. He's got short straight hair and black eyes. He likes cars. He lives in Noble Park. His names Chin and he's handsome. My sister has got two daughters. They are four and three. They have got short straight hair. They are short. They have got black eyes. They like television and playing. They live in China. They are beautiful.

- The students now have the opportunity to write what they can and to speak freely. It is open-ended practice in all skills. They can use language from the extended reading sheet to write their stories, and can speak to a range of new partners in an authentic conversation about real people.

**Conclusion**

Scripted dialogues provided a valuable resource in teaching this profile of students. They provided a structured base from which to work towards more communicative activities. Weaker students could rely more on the structured support and a lot of repetition. Stronger students could move more quickly to more open-ended tasks. The dialogues provided a basis for integrating the teaching of other language skills.

In the process of formally documenting each step in my course design and—most important—recording student responses to the activities, I was more effectively guided in the design process.
4 Teaching writing in a disparate learner group

Margaret Clarkson

The group

In this group of 14 students, four had less than two years of schooling and one had eleven years of education. Their writing and reading skills reflected this variation, as well as a difficulty in changing script from Chinese or Arabic to English. The age range was from 19 to 51, and the length of residency in Australia varied from 3 months to more than 10 years. The common link was that they had all been referred for an English course by the Commonwealth Employment Service.

My dilemma was how to design a writing program which would provide a common focus and motivate students to write. Were there any tasks of common interest to a 40-year-old, long-term unemployed man who had one year of schooling and who was once a fisherman in Vietnam; a 30-year-old Lebanese car salesman; a middle-aged Chinese woman still coming to terms with letter formation; or a newly arrived 19-year-old Macedonian student who had been studying for eleven years and had planned to become an architect? Was it possible to apply the principle of ‘starting where the students are at’? The number of students in the group meant that it was not possible to create individualised programs and tasks on a day-to-day basis.

I was fortunate that the class got on extremely well together. They worked cooperatively in pairs or small groups, were tolerant, patient and helpful, recognising each other’s strengths and weaknesses. They appeared to enjoy coming to class and their overall strategy was to help each other to learn. I joined the action research project in the hope that it would help me to be more systematic in planning my approach to the class and give me some fresh ideas. Participating in the project certainly meant that I focused more closely on the students’ writing. I kept a journal, made notes during class and used a loosely structured proforma to document issues that arose.

Strategies, techniques and activities

My intention was to integrate work on writing development into a program that also addressed reading, speaking and listening. The course required that a range of text-based language outcomes be assessed (eg writing a short description) and I integrated these into a topic-based approach. I recognised also the importance of emphasising organisational skills for study and of establishing a routine for the classroom.

I spent a segment of each day on a variety of short writing tasks some of which are described here.

• I would start each session with some fundamental work around letters and the alphabet, often presented within the context of a game. I found that getting students to write on the white board was useful. They could easily erase any mistakes and the whole class could join in.
• In the first few weeks we also spent 15 to 30 minutes each day discussing some events outside the classroom. This might be what had happened the previous evening, or the weather, or what they had worn to class. I would write requested
vocabulary and some sentences on the board. Everyone had to write or copy a minimum of one sentence from the board. Those who wished to could write more. This was extended to journal writing where the students chose to write daily or just once a week.

- We spent a short time each day talking about spelling and practising the technique of 'look, cover, write, check'.

From the outset, I emphasised the importance of some basic study skills.

- Any worksheets or other materials used in class had to be appropriately organised and filed (see also Hambling pages 77–80). This procedure worked well with those who had more schooling. It seemed to have no meaning at all to those without a background in formal education. I did not spend enough time building this study skill into the course on a daily basis.

- I also worked to develop strategies for using a course book independently. Three days a week we worked from course books for 45 minutes to an hour. The students worked at their own pace with the books in the class and gave individual assistance as required. The students were also encouraged to use each other for help and to use the books at home as well. Just using the books regularly in class seemed to be an impetus for use at home, often with the help of family members.

- I made much use of photos and pictures as a stimulus for writing tasks which allowed students to work at their own level. These different levels are reflected in the following descriptions provided by students on photos they had brought to class.

This photo is in Australia. This is my family. Left from me is my cousin with I leave. His name is Dragan.
Right from me is my cousin his name is Deni and to my cousin again my cousin her name is Ana.

This is my son was 3 months.

This is my wife, 24 years old.

This photo in Australia.

Yesterday went to the my family my daughter my son my wife my husband I went to the Canberra do you have your family in Austrlia to the 1990 yes

This photo is of Bondi. It was taken six years ago. My brother Osifa and my niece Diana (my other brother's daughter) are standing in the water.

[as dictated to me]
To help students gain a sense of sentence structure in written English and to scaffold their development of a written recount, I used a series of five photos showing a sequence of activities (e.g., from a class excursion). The students were asked to write a description of what happened in each photo. They were given a framework within which to compose their sentences, for example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When/where</th>
<th>Who/what</th>
<th>Action/doing</th>
<th>Who/what</th>
<th>When/where</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yesterday</td>
<td>we</td>
<td>went to the city</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we</td>
<td>caught the train</td>
<td>at 9:30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we</td>
<td>got off</td>
<td>at Town Hall</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This was a successful technique and I was sorry I had not used it earlier in the course. Not surprisingly it generated most language from the more capable students.

**Reflections on the project**

I have to report that there were no dramatic changes in either the learners’ work or attitudes to learning overall, although there were many changes in their lives outside the class with marriages, separations, illness, and moving having an effect on the performances of individual students at particular times. In terms of teaching disparate learner groups, I do not have any definitive answers; I do not feel I have found a way to create an optimum learning environment in this situation. It is a matter of working within the limitations and minimising the frustrations.

In the course of the project, I felt pressured for time both during the process of data collection and in writing the report, but any professional development project would make such demands. It has been a valuable experience to share ideas and expertise with others, both teachers and researchers. Involvement in the project will have, I’m sure, long-term effects in that it has made me and other colleagues at my centre more aware of and sensitive to issues in teaching disparate learner groups.

There is a certain degree of vulnerability in sharing classroom practices, but I think it is one of the most important aspects of professional development. By allowing others to observe our activities and by discussing what we are doing with our colleagues, we are better able to evaluate our courses and lessons ourselves.
5 Making the most of support resources

Helen Mulvaney

At the time of my participation in the project I was teaching a computer literacy class for 17 post-beginner ESL students. To the usual demands of teaching beginner language learners with disparate literacy levels was added the complication of enormous variations in computer awareness and skills. The scenario is, I'm sure, familiar to many teachers. Some students would push the right buttons at the right time, some the wrong buttons at the wrong time, and some would just sit patiently staring at a blank screen, waiting for me to help.

Focus

I was fortunate to have available for this class the support of a bilingual teacher aide. She spoke Vietnamese and Cantonese (two thirds of the class were Vietnamese speakers) and was highly skilled in computers and word processing skills. I decided to focus my research on whether having a bilingual aide as support in the teaching of a language and computer skills course made a difference to developing skills in using computers.

The aide was present in the class for almost all the lessons. The class was for one hour a week. My intention was that she would translate into Vietnamese my instructions on how to carry out various functions to do with the computer. This would overcome many of the practical problems of how to use a computer and would help a considerable proportion of the class. In the early weeks she was in high demand, but I observed that as the course progressed the students became more confident and required less bilingual support. At various times she worked with individual students with low levels of literacy. I wanted to structure the class so that the students would see us as co-workers. I felt uncomfortable about directing someone else in the class. I preferred the aide to adopt her own style and pace and to feel at ease with the students and myself.

Data collection

My data collection techniques included field notes of what I did in class. These were valuable in the earlier phase of the project in helping me decide on a specific focus for the research. I also kept other documents relevant to the course, such as lesson plans and a checklist of the skills acquired by individual students. These helped me keep track of the needs and accomplishments of the group. I also used a book developed for teaching computers by co-teachers at my centre.

Data were also gathered from other sources to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. I gave all the students a questionnaire at the end of the course to ask them how they had felt about the class. And finally I interviewed the bilingual teacher aide to get some insights into her perceptions of the course and suggestions on how it might be improved. It was the latter that proved most interesting and enlightening.
Results

In my own notes it was encouraging to observe that progress was being made, whether it was in being able to open Microsoft Word or to use the spell-check to go over a finished text. I also noted ways in which I benefited from having the aide in the class. I had become more confident about what I could do, and what I could expect to do and achieve with the students. I persisted with activities which I might otherwise have abandoned and I could work with more students on an individual basis. My confidence and enjoyment in teaching the class was attributable in a significant way to the assistance of the aide.

The student questionnaire suggested that it had been a positive experience for them all. However, my inexperience in structuring questionnaires meant I had reservations about the feedback provided by this form of data collection.

I did not tape the interview with the aide as she felt uncomfortable about that, so notes were made after the interview. The perspective she offered was most interesting and valuable and contrasted in some important ways with my own perceptions. While I thought I was focusing on the impact of bilingual support, the aide who, from my point of view, was the key resource (I thought) in offering that support did not perceive her role in those terms at all. Although she acknowledged that the students had benefited from her ability to translate for them, she was adamant that her primary role in the class was as an aide in computer skills, not as a bilingual aide. This she felt was an incidental adjunct. In her words, ‘I see myself first as a teacher’s aide not just as a bilingual aide. I was there to help all the students. The bilingual aspect was an added extra’.

This fundamental difference in perception may have remained hidden if not for the process of interviewing the aide. It made me aware I did not hold total control over the project, the class direction or the students themselves. It was an important lesson to me as it highlighted the dilemma of needing open communication between the two parties, be they co-teacher, aide or students, while also realising this is not always possible. In this instance there was no issue of conflict or impediment to the project; rather it provided a valuable insight into the realities of the business we are all in.

In terms of my original focus, that is, the impact of having a bilingual aide as support in the class, I considered the outcomes to have been positive. However, it is not possible to say whether the positive outcomes of the course were a consequence of the bilingual support, the computer skills support or simply having another set of hands in the classroom. In any event the practical reality is that such support is a luxury and one that is now even less likely to be available.

After completing the project, other issues came to mind. Did the presence of the aide in fact hinder rather than help students achieve independence? Did the very focus of my project in fact work against it?

With that practical reality in mind, I followed up my formal involvement in the project with a less structured reflection in a subsequent class. That class was similar except that no aide was available for support. I considered ways in which I could apply some of what I had learned previously to my changed context. The most significant aspect that I could transfer was the sense of confidence I had developed through my experience in teaching with the support of an aide.
SECTION SIX

Developing learning skills and strategies for diverse needs

1 Using English outside the classroom
   Janette Kohn

2 Strategies for non-language outcomes
   Lenn de Leon

3 Developing independent learning
   Anne Fowler

4 Memorised chunks as a strategy used by adult learners
   Minh Duc Thai

* By reflecting on classroom processes and tasks, I realised that non-language strategies could be integrated into literacy and numeracy tasks—or any language activity for that matter. I also observed that it is beneficial for teachers to set objectives consciously for the achievement of non-language outcomes in course design and to make these strategies explicit to the learners.*

Lenn de Leon
Introduction

This section highlights the importance of addressing the development of independent learning strategies. Whilst this is a valuable activity in any learning situation, it becomes even more critical in the case of disparate groups. These groups are frequently characterised by a great diversity amongst learners—of previous learning experiences, learning skills and learning strategies. While some aspects of this diversity may be culturally based, it can also arise from the nature of the learners' previous formal learning experiences and the attitudes they bring to learning as the result of these experiences. These are not always positive, as some of the papers in this section reveal.

Through their initial observations, a number of the teachers in the project found that, for various reasons, learning strategies were poorly developed within their groups. In some cases, this related primarily to affective and attitudinal factors which were preventing positive approaches to learning. Other students simply lacked awareness of their own learning strategies or were unfamiliar with the kinds of strategies which would enable them to improve their English. Yet others had not considered that learning could be something invested in themselves rather than in the teacher, while others associated using English only with the classroom, rather than seeing it as a practice connected with their daily lives. Some students were assisted to develop effective strategies by being encouraged to take on a teaching role and thus to recognise their own skills and abilities.

The teachers who chose to explore this area recognised the importance of developing language competence. However, given their particular classroom circumstances, they also quickly realised that progress in language learning was unlikely to occur easily or rapidly without improved skills for learning. Some of their research suggests that seeking 'non-language outcomes' may be equally important—if not more so—for some types of learners, as these outcomes may be the trigger that increases their self-confidence and provides them with the motivation to go on learning.

The research also points to the need for teachers to reflect on assumptions which may be made about learners' existing strategies for learning and to discuss these explicitly with their learners. By carefully analysing the nature of these existing strategies and deliberately integrating activities for teaching positive learning strategies, learners' progress may be considerably enhanced.

The first paper is by Janette Kohn, a teacher with more than twenty years of ESL experience. Jan teaches at Yeronga Institute of TAFE in Brisbane, Queensland, and has taught students at all levels of AMEP programs. In her own words, 'I still find the work interesting, challenging and rewarding'. Jan's longstanding concern about second language learners' willingness and confidence to use English beyond classroom activities led her to investigate her learners' actual language practices outside the classroom. She broadened this research by making comparisons between her own learners and other learner groups and devised classroom strategies and tasks which would raise her learners' consciousness about the importance of seeking further opportunities for English language practice. Her research outcomes provide useful suggestions for other teachers wishing to address these issues.

At Campbelltown Centre in NSW AMES, Lenn de Leon's disparate learner class took her in a completely new teaching direction. Not only was she dealing for the first time with a group predominantly composed of English speakers, but the learning focus for the class was on literacy and numeracy, the latter in particular a skill area
with which she was less familiar. Lenn’s—sometime humourous—description of her efforts to involve her students as co-researchers in her action research is coupled with her more serious account of the independent learning contracts she developed with them and the importance she came to place on sharing the teacher-learner roles.

Anne Fowler is a TAFE Queensland teacher from Bremer Institute. Anne felt that many of the students in her class had ‘plateaued’ and that a lack of self-confidence was affecting their learning. She decided to investigate whether developing independent learning plans would promote students’ motivation. Having developed strategies which included portfolio development and self-study tapes, Anne evaluated the effectiveness of her strategies from her students’ as well as from her own perspectives.

Minh Duc Thai, from the Fairfield Region of NSW AMES, chose to research the incidence of formulaic expressions, or ‘memorised chunks’, in the speech of two of his learners, who differed in terms of their formal learning experiences. Minh Duc recorded his learners’ performances on a picture description task and used the data he obtained to draw out teaching suggestions for encouraging learners to develop their knowledge of formulaic expressions as a useful early learning strategy.
1 Using English outside the classroom

Janette Kohn

Even I speak not completely right but people they do understand the meaning what I say.

Vanja

The classroom context

I work in a small AMEP Centre with seven classes, in Brisbane. The main group of learners I focused on was a class of 20 at ASLPR 1 (Speaking). The average age was 36 and there were 12 women and eight men whose nationalities included Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Bosnian, Iranian and Thai. The students were attending class three hours per day, five days a week. For the majority of them it was their third AMEP course, the first two courses having been completed in 300 hours.

The focus of my research

Language learners differ in a number of ways which affect their second language acquisition, their rate of development and in particular, their ultimate level of achievement. The aspect of disparateness I wanted to look at within my class was the learners’ confidence, willingness and ability to use English outside the classroom. Three weeks into a ten-week course, it became obvious that those learners who had opportunities or who made opportunities to use English were more confident, more fluent and appeared to be making faster progress. The class, which started as being relatively homogeneous, quickly became quite disparate.

I decided to investigate the learners’ use of English outside the classroom and to compare it with that of learners in another class at the centre with a higher level of proficiency, who had been in Australia for a longer period of time. I also decided to devise and implement a series of specific tasks to ensure that the learners had opportunities to use English outside the classroom.

The research process

I started by discussing the purpose of the project with the class and by giving each learner a survey sheet to record their use of English outside the classroom every day for a week. This survey was refined in the second week for easier and quicker use (see Appendix 1). It was collected the following Monday and briefly discussed with the class as a whole. At this stage I also decided to survey the higher level AMEP class (ASLPR 1+/2 Speaking), believing that those with higher proficiency might use English more often outside the classroom. The ages and nationalities of these learners were similar to those of the first class.

My other decision was to survey a small group of learners (10) who had exited the AMEP six months previously. I contacted them by phone and sent them survey sheets...
to complete. These learners had had an ASLPR of 1+/2 (Speaking) on exiting the AMEP and their ages and nationalities were similar to those of the other two groups. They were happy to be included. The surveys were completed and collected over a four-week period. Brief discussions and feedback from the learners took place when the surveys were collected.

From the beginning, I also involved other teachers at my centre who were participating in the project, asking for suggestions and input.

The second part of the research involved devising a set of tasks for students to undertake to ensure that they used English outside the classroom. These were based on learners’ needs. Some of these tasks I collected from colleagues and learners’ suggestions and others I devised myself. The tasks were introduced in the third week of the project and about two tasks per week were set and accomplished over the following seven weeks.

In order for learners to be prepared for the tasks, each task and its purpose was explained and specific language features, vocabulary and possible scenarios were discussed (see Appendix 2 for task formats). The tasks included the following and they involved both finding information and reporting back to the class (see Appendix 3):

- inter-class information-gap tasks (eg Special Events: the Royal Easter Show, Warana Festival, Melbourne Cup)
- phoning friends, fellow students (social chit-chat)
- phoning for specific information (eg City Council, shop times)
- phoning and organising a guest speaker
- organising the class end-of-term party
- finding out more about the Language Centre and Independent Learning Centre
- finding out about the local community (eg library, Police Station, Post Office, shopping centre, City Council aldermen, Member of Parliament)
- finding out about travel and holiday activities (eg costs, dates, times, places of interest)
- finding out how to join a sports club or special course (eg photography, pottery, Tai Kwon Do)
- excursions to the local childcare centre and school, retirement village

Some students suggested completing the tasks in pairs or small groups. Others were happy to work independently.

Outcomes

The surveys: Class 1 (ASLPR 1 Speaking)

From the students’ survey sheets it was obvious that many learners used little English outside class time. Learners in this class used English most at their children’s schools or kindergartens. Next, they used English most at coffee break time during English lessons, talking to other students, teachers or volunteer tutors. The variety and number of different language groups in this small centre would have ensured this. Table 1 illustrates the percentage of learners in Class 1 who used English in a number of different situations over the four-week period.
In this class, three of the learners used no English at all outside the classroom over the four-week period.

The surveys: Class 2 (ASLPR 1+/2)

Learners from Class 2 had similar needs and used English only a little more frequently outside the classroom as Table 2 indicates. However, according to comments on their survey sheets, they felt more confident and took more risks. Table 2 summarises their responses.

**Table 1: Class 1 learners’ use of English outside the classroom**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At children’s school, kindergarten</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to other students at coffee break</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching TV</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading school notices</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With neighbours</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the CES or Social Security</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the shops</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the doctor’s/dentist’s</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real estate (paying rent)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the phone</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For business</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this class, three of the learners used no English at all outside the classroom over the four-week period.

**Table 2: Class 2 learners’ use of English outside the classroom**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talking at children’s schools, kindergarten</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to other students at coffee break</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading school notices</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching TV</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to neighbours</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessing Government Departments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(CES, DSS, Housing Commission, City Council)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the shops</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoning and talking to tradesmen</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At church</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For business</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the factors reported as hindering the students’ use of English outside the classroom included nerves, lack of vocabulary and lack of confidence. Comments from student surveys included:

I think people laugh at my poor English.

I feel very bad when I irregularly speak.

I had most difficulties because I do not understand words and I find it difficult to express myself.
I have difficulties because I don’t have a big vocabulary.
Some words I can’t explain and I don’t know.
I think that is much difficult to start conversation
with unknown people, but I use every moment for that.
I feel uncomfortable when I don’t understand others and
must ask for clarification.

Past learners
Like Class 2 learners, the learners who had exited from the AMEP also indicated that
they felt more confident and were prepared to take risks. None had found work yet
and nine of the ten were undertaking further ESL studies. One woman had
volunteered to work at a nursing home
to use my English and meet people
while one single man had moved into a flat, sharing with two Australians.
This, I think, is the best way for me to make my
English better. What do you think?
Using the phone was still difficult for learners at this level.
I have most difficulties on the telephone, because my
understanding is worse without eye contact.
Following the TV news also continued to prove difficult for these learners:
They are reading too fast!
On a more positive note, one learner said:
When the conversation starts well I can continue
without problem.

Tasks outside the classroom
Learners completed the tasks with varying degrees of success. One of the benefits was
that learners gained confidence by actually doing them. Questions like ‘how did you
go? and ‘how was it?’ became quite common amongst learners. Perhaps one of the
greatest benefits came from the reporting sessions which provided learners with
opportunities to discuss the tasks and their success or otherwise with the class and for
fellow learners, as well as the teacher, to offer suggestions on how to be more
successful next time. Lots of sharing, discussing and learning went on at this time.
My reactions to the outcomes

From the students’ comments, I was reminded how nerve-racking learning and using a second language can be for some adult learners. I was also reminded of the importance of including specific, guided tasks that take learners outside the classroom in each course and of providing learners with opportunities to interact in English with a number of different people in a variety of situations. Discussions of these shared experiences were very beneficial for all learners. They provided important and interesting language learning opportunities in themselves. It was essential to provide the learners with this back-up support instead of simply throwing them into the deep end and saying ‘Speak English!’ As one learner said:

I was successful when I had time to prepare myself.
I could say what I wanted to say.

By the second week of the research, learners were beginning to see the importance of practising English in situations outside the classroom. By listening to the brief comments on fellow learners’ experiences when the survey sheets were collected, they also saw the variety of opportunities there were to do so. The research seemed to supplement the lessons and was not seen as an interruption to the course at all.

The learners certainly became aware of the need for them to become active language users. For some learners, three in particular, it came as a shock to see blank or almost blank survey sheets week after week, indicating that they never or rarely used English outside class time.

I found it interesting to note that the same learners who had not used any English outside the classroom also did not do their homework regularly and were not particularly active or motivated learners. They didn’t need to use English at all, living in an area with significant numbers of the same language group. They used their first language for shopping, banking, medical, legal and real estate needs as well as socialising. They were not job seekers, and in fact planned to return to live in their homelands eventually.

A communal class chart of situations for using English outside the classroom was drawn up and displayed in the classroom. This made learners aware of the possibilities and opportunities they could take for further English language use. It ‘belonged’ to the learners as they added their experiences each week and discussed them with fellow classmates.

Reflections

The research project gave me an opportunity to focus on one aspect of language learning that I have been interested in for some time. Fellow teachers were supportive and interested in the results of the project as were all the learners involved. Because they were actively involved, the learners became aware of the need and benefits of practising/using English outside the classroom, in order to gain confidence, make progress and to be more independent. Hopefully, they will continue to acquire behaviours and strategies that will make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable for them.

I discovered action research carried out and experienced in a collaborative way, to be a valuable tool for enhancing teaching practice. I found the collaboration with Anne Burns and Sue Hood from NCELTR, as well as my TAFE Queensland colleagues, to be professionally enriching and rewarding. The co-ordination of the
project in Queensland, by Jo Eady, the Senior Consultant of Staff Training and Professional Development, TAFE English Language Training Program, provided valuable support to all participants. Through a series of well-spaced workshops we were able to focus on different aspects of our projects, keep on task and benefit from discussing each other’s projects (see Eady pages 151–58). I would certainly recommend to any teacher to participate in such a project in the future. I may even volunteer again, myself!
### Using English Outside the Classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day/Date</th>
<th>At Home</th>
<th>With Family</th>
<th>At CES</th>
<th>At Child’s School</th>
<th>At School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Wednesday</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How did you feel?**

**How successful were you?**

**In what situations could you say what you wanted to say and why?**

**In what situations did you have most difficulties and why?**
Appendix 2

FORMAT FOR TASKS

TASK:

English you may need:

Find out:

•

•

•

•

•

Report back to your teacher and class.

How did you go?
Appendix 3

INDEPENDENT LEARNING CENTRE (ILC)

Name............................................... Date.................................

TASK: Ask the ILC tutor for information about the ILC

English you may need:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>times</th>
<th>borrow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>books</td>
<td>tapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>materials</td>
<td>computers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Can you tell me..........?
I'd like to find out about........

Find out:

1. The tutor's name.
2. The days and times the ILC is open.
3. The cost of using the ILC.
4. What books and materials you can borrow.
5. If you can take books and tapes home.
6. Some materials suitable for you.
7. Anything else you’d like to know.

Report back to your teacher and class.

How did you go?
YOUR LOCAL AREA

Name............................... Date..............................

TASK: Ask your neighbour for information about your local area.

English you may need:
local
council
City Council
Alderman
Can you tell me ...............?
Do you know who is.......................?

Find out:
1. Which local council area you live in.
2. Who your local alderman is.
3. His/her phone number and address.
4. His/her office hours.
5. Anything else you want to know.

Report back to your teacher and class.

How did you go?
2 Strategies for non-language outcomes

Lenn de Leon

Defining the context

This classroom-based action research was carried out with the involvement of students in my Strand 2 literacy/numeracy course. My Strand 3 class also participated in the research. I shall refer to my students as co-participants in the research because they actively provided me with data.

All the students were of English speaking background (ESB) except for Steve who had been in Australia for 25 years. The students’ ages ranged from 19-54 and their education ranged from four to nine years. All the ESB students were products of the school system where they failed (or did the school system fail them?). They came to our courses with traumatic experiences as kids in school and carried that baggage with them as adults.

The majority of the students were in class because the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) had determined that they required literacy/numeracy training to find employment or as a prerequisite to vocational training. Although all of them had signed a CES contract, that did not necessarily reflect their willingness to be in class and this feeling was strong at the start of the course. The students were unable to find work because of a number of variables, such as age, lack of vocational training, low literacy and numeracy skills and generally because they did not possess the required qualifications for the jobs they were seeking.

The course was a 15-week full-time training course with classes for four hours a day, five days a week. Although of high intensity, a 15-week course was not enough for most students to develop their literacy or numeracy skills. Most of them would require more training hours to articulate to the next strand.

The class as a disparate group

Having an NESB learner in a class of native speakers naturally gives way to differences in expectations. Steve’s previous schooling experience overseas did not prepare him for his new back-to-class experience. Despite having lived in Australia for a long time, he had never really had much opportunity for personal interaction with native speakers. He found it difficult to cope with the behaviour of some students and the language used in class, especially in the first week. He stayed back on the third day and asked me:

How can you put up with all the swearing in class?

It took Steve a long time to feel part of the class and the process was an interesting one. At the end of the course, he was ‘one of the blokes’.

A common need for all the learners was literacy and numeracy training. However, the commonality stopped there, because they had a range of different reading, writing and numeracy abilities. It was not uncommon to hear the students say:
When will we do more maths?
It's better to do more reading.
I hate writing. I'd rather do maths.

As a teacher, the balancing act was a struggle until I came to terms with the fact that one cannot really separate literacy from numeracy. As Dave Tout (1994:37) points out:

There are two aspects to the relationship between mathematics and language. First, that mathematics is an important part of language and second, that language plays a vital role in mathematics... Language and literacy skills also play an important role in the learning and therefore teaching of mathematics.

It takes time for students to see that literacy and numeracy are integrated in the tasks and texts taken up in class. It becomes a collaborative experience for the learners and the teacher to develop an awareness of this.

Learners also have different personal and emotional problems that affect their participation in class and their commitment to the course. One morning, Barnes was in a foul mood. It turned out that he had had 'a fight with me old man'. On another occasion, he turned up in need of emergency accommodation after being kicked out of his father's house. At 19, his concern for his young family of four took priority over his training and he eventually left the class.

Another feature of this disparate group was their lack of self-confidence. Their long-term unemployment, failure in school, and the awareness that they were lacking in skills all contributed to their low self-esteem. One day I called on Barnes in class and at the mention of his name, his instant response was:

Now what'd I do?

All I wanted to say was that he had done a good job. Apparently the only time his name was called in class at school was when he was reprimanded. It becomes crucial that a supportive learning environment is fostered in class where students get many opportunities for developing successful learning.

The challenge

Working with disparate groups of learners is not something new in my teaching experience with AMES. Classes have always been of mixed abilities, the degree of disparity depending on the focus of the course. Teaching these groups has been a form of on-the-job training to develop effective teaching strategies. Unfortunately, the process for most teachers is usually personal and the issues seldom acknowledged, so that the teaching of disparate groups has remained one of great concern for many AMEP teachers.

It is interesting that as teachers we recognise difficulties in teaching disparate learner groups. But, as I discovered, disparities does not seem to be considered a problem by the learners. As co-participants in my research, the learners were asked their thoughts about being in a class where students had different reading, writing and numeracy skills. Robert summed up the general perception of the other learners in class when he said:
Don’t worry me. I just work at my own pace.

Is the concern about disparate learner groupings over-rated? Or do learners like Robert confirm that teachers, in their constant search for effective teaching strategies, do a good job?

It was in this context that I expressed interest in participating in the research project. I wanted to find out what other teachers were doing to address the needs and respond to the demands of disparate learner groupings. The collaborative aspect of the action research appealed to me, particularly as I was fortunate that one of the co-participants, Linda Ross, was a colleague from the same centre. Linda and I both taught literacy and numeracy classes of a similar profile (see Ross pages 133–7). Our action research could, therefore, be the collaborative outcome of our shared reflections, consultations with our learners, and support from the research coordinators.

Non-language outcomes as an emerging issue

After a brief period of settling in, each student became actively involved in classroom tasks. Many struggled with their reading, the majority had difficulty with the writing tasks, but most of them seemed to enjoy rediscovering the world of numeracy. They were even keen to take home work for the night. It was an exciting time; there was something new for each one to learn (or re-learn).

However, as I reflected on the positive outcomes of the class, I realised that I could not say much about the learners’ achievement of language competencies, despite the fact that they were making progress. They were developing enabling skills in literacy and numeracy but the reality was that most of them would need more than the 15-week training period to achieve all the Strand 2 literacy/numeracy competencies.

As a result of this reflection, I saw the importance of making learners aware of non-language gains within the context of literacy and numeracy development. The issue of non-language outcomes became the focus of my research and a number of questions emerged:

• Is it possible for learners with limited literacy and numeracy to develop the skills to be independent learners?
• Could contract learning be an effective learning strategy?
• Would giving homework to students be an effective strategy in developing independent learning?
• How did the learners feel about being in class? Would this perception change at the end of the course?
• Could the learners take on a teacher role? Could I share the teacher role?

Strategies for achieving non-language outcomes

By reflecting on classroom processes and tasks, I realised that non-language strategies could be integrated into literacy and numeracy tasks, or into any language activity for that matter. I also observed that it is beneficial for teachers to set objectives consciously for the achievement of non-language outcomes in course design and to make these strategies explicit to the learners. Outlined below are some of the strategies I introduced into my class.

Out-of-class tasks

This term became an active part of the learners’ vocabulary. I had decided that
homework should be tried out as part of the learning routine but when I introduced this idea, practically the whole class protested. I realised that the word 'homework' elicited this negative response because it brought back unpleasant memories of school experiences.

I introduced the word ‘task’ and we renegotiated the term ‘homework’ to mean any task not done in the classroom. An ‘out-of-class task’ was a more acceptable term to the learners. Out-of-class tasks became an integral part of the students' learning. They found their way into learning contracts and the majority of students invested considerable time at home completing their tasks.

**Contract learning**

Learners in a disparate group have different levels of abilities and, therefore, different needs and can be very demanding of the teacher's time, especially when some learners require individualised support. What could be done so that the learners could pursue work appropriate to their needs and so that I would also have the opportunity to work with individual learners in an effective way?

Contract learning was introduced as a strategy for classroom management. Each student was given a learning contract and this was where learning started to be individualised. Students made decisions about what they wanted to focus on by using the range of available resources in class. They also identified what they needed to learn and this was different for each one. For example, Rob needed to work on his reading, so he might select a text from our reading book, while Bruce worked on his Maths book. Daz could be working on his recount, while Sam listed going to the library to follow up his membership card as one of his tasks.

Usually, the last segment of class was devoted to contract learning. This gave me time to work with individual students while the rest of the class made productive use of their time. Contract learning proved to be an effective strategy for supplementing lessons taught in class, as students were able to select the appropriate text they wanted to work on. Contract learning also gave the students the opportunity to make decisions about their own learning, which was empowering.

One incident gave me insights into the extent to which contract learning had helped the learners on their way towards becoming more independent. One day I had to be away from class but no relief teacher could be organised. In the absence of a teacher, the learners took control and each one worked on his or her learning contract.

But the success of contract learning also depended on the student's commitment. Sam thought that the whole idea of contract learning was:

So you can bloody catch me if I don't do the work.

Sam did not see the value of contract learning beyond record-keeping. He had poor time management and unsatisfactory attendance. His learning contract was a reflection of his poor participation in the task. On the other hand, Bruce kept an up-to-date record of tasks he chose to do and did extra work in his own time outside class. By the end of the course, contract learning had become a systematic part of his learning routine. It had ceased to be a task. In his feedback he said:

I would've done the work even without the learning contract.
The process of becoming independent learners is an on-going one and every well-thought-out literacy or numeracy task can provide an opportunity for the development of this non-language outcome.

A game of darts at the local club
One of the best non-classroom activities was our trip to the local club to play darts. In preparation, we studied the dart board as a diagrammatic text, asking: how many points correspond to each circle? Then we looked at a procedural text and did some problem-solving exercises in class. We were then ready to practise applying the basic maths operations.

The excursion activity was initiated by one of the students who played at local darts competitions. As he was well in control of this topic (or field), he began to take on the role of the teacher. It took some time for me to act on his suggestion because firstly, I was not sure about taking the class to the club; secondly, I had never played darts before; and thirdly, I had to feel comfortable with the student taking control of the task. As it turned out, I did not have to worry because the students took me to the club, they taught me to play darts and I learned that it was OK for students to take control of a task.

Bruce and Warren had made arrangements with the club, so that our class had access to the darts room on a Friday morning when it was fairly quiet. Attendance on the day was perfect and we all had fun while getting plenty of mental maths practice. The game of darts added a new dimension: it was no longer just a social event—it had become a numeracy event as well. The students’ feedback was that it was excellent.

Bruce assumed the teacher role seriously. He made sure that each one calculated his own score by multiplying, adding, and then subtracting from the target score. Later, I asked the class what they had thought of that and Sam replied as follows:

| Sam:       | He already done it. And he goes, what’s the answer? |
| Lenn:      | Why did you think he did that?                      |
| Sam:       | To make you do it. So you learn.                    |
| Bruce:     | Well that was the whole idea of going there, wasn’t it? To learn. |

There was a lot to learn from the reversal of roles. As I was not contributing much to my team, Bruce and Robert started to coach me by showing me some strategies. As teachers they were very supportive and encouraging—I even won the game! Afterwards in one of our collaborative discussions, I asked Bruce his thoughts on the teacher role that he had played and he said:

| Bruce:   | I thought I was very good.                           |
| Sam:     | He was, actually.                                    |
| Lenn:    | Yeah, I thought you were.                            |
| Bruce:   | Never got agro [aggressive]. When they got stuck, I helped out. |
| Sam:     | He was placid about it.                              |
| Lenn:    | You were very encouraging as a teacher should be, right, and you were very supportive. |
| Bruce:   | Yeah, I should try it at home.                       |
As I reflected on the task, I realised that the teaching-learning cycle involves a constant reversal of roles. It is a matter of being open to and recognising students as teachers and allowing them to take control and feel successful about it. As Jackson (1994:30) points out:

Understanding that the process of teaching and learning in adult learning is co-operative and interdependent is an important step in moving learners away from the teacher-centred curriculum. It provides the basis from which further steps in the direction of autonomous learning may be taken. Ultimately it is hoped that learners will acquire the skills with which to identify and satisfy their learning needs using teachers as only one part of a wide variety of learning resources.

My students’ willingness to be seen with their teacher in their own territory, where they knew practically everyone, is significant considering their negative feelings about being in class at the start of the course. To me, it was a statement that they had come to terms with their role as students and that, as their teacher, I had been accepted.

How do learners feel about being in class?
One of my research concerns was to observe the learners’ responses to being in a literacy/numeracy class. If non-language content was to be integrated into the language activities, then it seemed to me that genuine collaboration was required. At the start of the course, one worthwhile activity was discussing with students their reasons for being in class. It gave me insights into the students’ perceived roles as learners, their expectations of the teacher and the course in general.

I found it valuable to document through field notes or short recounts what the students expressed in that initial discussion in the first week. I realised that most of them felt embarrassed about being in class. They were concerned about what their ‘mates’ would think. In the middle of a lesson, Barnes asked:

I know this has nothing to do with the lesson, but how did CES know I’m—you know—

It was embarrassing for him to even refer to his literacy or numeracy skills. Brenda, on the other hand did not know what to expect. She wrote:

on the fast week of class I felt in imboris a felt like a five yars old ked I didnot no want to exspack I like going to class Because I got out of the house

Brian was quite vocal about not being comfortable in class because of his age. He was 54 and recently retrenched from his job of 17 years. He wrote:

On the FIRST day of class. I flet like I did not want to be here. Because I was embesst about my Reeding and writeing also I flet I was to old to be here.

It is valuable to know how students feel about being in class as this can affect their attitudes towards learning, their behaviour in class, the way they relate to other
learners and even the way they relate to the teacher. I asked Adam to try and spell a word for me one day and he said:

You should know, you’re the brainy one. You’re the teacher.

The teacher-learner role was constantly being defined until both the learners and I could feel comfortable about the duality of the role. At the start of the course, I asked the class if they could see themselves sharing the teacher role. Jeremy’s instant response was: ‘Far out!’ But Bruce, who had experience from a previous course said: ‘Just wait until the end of the course, mate’. Steve, the NESB learner, found it difficult to make his own learning decisions because in his previous schooling experience the teacher was expected to do so. He would often say: ‘It’s up to you; you’re the teacher’. It took Steve a long time to feel comfortable but when he did the outcome was fantastic. He drove the community bus for us on our field visits and he even initiated out-of-class tasks. This change was the result of the gradual but systematic transferring of responsibility for aspects of the classroom context to the learners (Jackson 1994:30).

Conclusion

I had taken up the challenge of teaching literacy/numeracy classes, as well as the challenge of teaching ESB students for the first time. My research confirmed for me the importance of considering non-language content as part of my course design.

My latest challenge is to continue with the process of collaborative action research. Thinking and reflecting in a systematic way has become part of my teaching-learning cycle. Getting together with other teachers to reflect on issues that emerged has been a rich source of insights and a catalyst for implementing changes. As Burns (1995:11) points out:

Thinking and reflection become more systematic and consciously articulated and, therefore, potentially lead to more lasting changes in practice.

This collaborative action research has been the most powerful and meaningful form of staff development I have participated in this year. Because of its participatory and collaborative nature, the outcome for me has been meaningful and relevant.

Change has always characterised the AMEP’s growth and the collaborative implementation of curriculum changes can become a rich source of personal and professional development. It seems to me that the challenge to the service is to develop and integrate collaborative action research as a staff development focus at the regional level.
Developing independent learning
Anne Fowler

The research context

My class consisted of seven men and six women aged from 21 to 60 years, who had been in Australia for between four months and three years. Eleven were Vietnamese, one Kampuchean, and one Chilean. Their educational experience ranged from nine to 18 years. They were all literate and educated and had varied work histories including professional, skilled and unskilled work as a soldier, fisherman, agricultural technician, school teacher, business operator, manager, airline clerk, secretary, dressmaker. All but four had suffered from war or political persecution. Their concept of self and their self-confidence were closely related to their personal histories. Of the Vietnamese those born after 1975, who had suffered least, had the strongest and most positive self-image. Confidence about their likely success in Australia varied from cautious optimism to near desperation.

The group was in an AMEP Level 4 class, with ASLPR range 1 to 2 in all four skills. For five of them it was their last AMEP class. The remainder had one more course before completing the allocated 510 hours of AMEP provision. During the study, one student found work early in the term, and one student attended spasmodically due to poor health. Thus, the class numbers varied between 11 and 13.

The reasons for the research

Although the students were motivated to learn and willing to work hard, they were beginning to express frustration and pessimism because they perceived that their learning was not progressing. They expressed lack of confidence in their ability to learn independently outside the classroom. From my initial observations, I perceived that their learning had ‘plateaued’. A further practical problem was that the chaotic organisation of their class materials was, in all but four cases, creating a barrier to progress. There was a common need to develop self-confidence in using English and to improve learning and organisational skills.

In my tertiary studies in literacy, I had become interested in the benefits of keeping and managing a portfolio of written work. During the previous term, I had introduced portfolios in a modified form, hoping that students would be able to see progress and take control of their own learning.

Most students had listed speaking as their highest priority at the end of the previous term and again at the beginning of this term. While continuing with the portfolio approach, I wanted to develop strategies to encourage learner responsibility and self-management for the development of speaking skills. Because I was aiming to foster greater independence in learning, I began a program of optional self-study audio-tapes.

At about this time (Week 3 of term), I became involved in the NCELTR project. A project colleague, Lucy Valeri, suggested asking students to frame their own action to promote their learning. I developed a strategy I called the independent learning plan.
The research process

I decided to implement and assess the usefulness of three strategies to foster the development of the students’ independent learning practices.

The three strategies were portfolios, self-study tapes and independent learning plans.

- Portfolios consisted of collections of written texts completed by students which were added to every week. Each week's work was labelled according to its 'focus' (theme) and students regularly updated the list of contents at the front of the folder. Assessment and feedback sheets were kept at the back of the folder. At mid-term, students sorted their texts into different text types or genres, and at the end of term, selected examples of work for assessment.

- Self-study tapes were optional. Students provided a blank tape and once a week I taped individualised work for each student. This consisted of a selection from the week's class work with a simple analysis, advice, and recommendations for practice.

- An independent learning plan took the form of an individual contract. Having discussed ways of extending English learning beyond the classroom early in the term, I asked the students to commit themselves to a 'contract with themselves' and to keep a record in a simple format which I supplied for them.

In order to evaluate these strategies I used the data collection outlined below.

Portfolios: written evaluation

Students used a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) to discuss with another student the advantages and disadvantages of keeping texts in the folio. They then wrote a report.

Self-study audio tape: anecdotal grid

I kept two grids, one recording what I’d taped for each student each week and the other recording any comments made by the students, who also completed questionnaires (see Appendices 2 and 3).

Independent learning plan: student record

Students recorded their involvement in their chosen activity using a simple proforma indicating: date, action, comment. They also completed a questionnaire (see Appendix 4).

In addition, I included in my data collection a learning analysis (see Appendix 5) which students had completed in Week 1 before I had introduced the self-study tapes and independent learning plan.

There were three phases of data collection:

- beginning of term: first learning analysis.
- mid-term: portfolio discussion session and written evaluations of the portfolio; second learning analysis.
- end of term: questionnaire about all three strategies; third learning analysis; independent learning plan record.

Throughout the project, I also kept my own anecdotal records about the self-study tapes.
Outcomes and reflections

Portfolios

All but two of the written evaluations of portfolios were positive. Students cited the advantages of revision, recall, organisation, self-management and monitoring development. Three students referred to the one disadvantage that was noted, namely, the class time taken to organise the portfolios. They felt that this time would be better spent on speaking and listening tasks, while reading and writing could be practised at home. Generally, the results showed progress in organisational skills and self-management and increased student satisfaction and confidence. After my own review at mid-term and the student comments, I reduced the class time allotted to the portfolios.

This strategy did seem to address the original objectives of building self-awareness of learning and promoting self-management. The most positive results came from the most poorly organised students. All of those students reported finding value in the way the process facilitated recall and revision.

Self-study tapes

Both the anecdotal records and the questionnaire yielded the same information. After Week 5, no student brought a tape. Before Week 5, the pattern of bringing tapes was erratic. Reasons included: ‘forgot’ and ‘because the teacher didn’t make me’, and ‘model tapes more helpful’. Students who had used the tapes listed the benefits as helping them to focus on weak points, providing pronunciation correction, and improving pronunciation and listening. Only one reported a problem: ‘listening is difficult to practise’.

Those who chose not to use a self-study tape said either that they preferred another way of learning, or that there was lack of teacher insistence. One pointed out he did not have a cassette player. Nevertheless, four of the seven students who used tapes said they did so on a regular basis.

The objectives of this strategy had been to provide speaking practice beyond the classroom and to develop student independence, but students’ comments indicated that the tapes had been used mostly for listening. Questionnaire responses indicated a general preference for strong teacher control and for modelled materials over individualised materials. For greater success, this strategy would have needed increased teacher monitoring, whole class involvement, a long period of habit development, and strong structuring within class time. I have dropped this strategy and I’m still wondering how to facilitate speaking practice outside the classroom.

Independent learning plans

Students chose very varied activities, ranging from ‘listening to English music and TV’ and ‘reviewing my day’s learning before going to sleep at night’ to ‘buying a white board for my kitchen to display what I’m learning’ and ‘thinking in English’. All students participated in this learning strategy, although only six kept a record. Of these, two wrote a timetable rather than recording their activities. Three kept their record for the two weeks when class time was allocated to discussing the activity. Only one student continued independently with the plan and the record. Nevertheless, six students claimed to have kept the contract with themselves ‘a lot’ and eight felt it helped practise a new skill ‘a lot’. Opinion was most divided on the issue, ‘I can find ways to continue learning English outside the classroom’ with six saying ‘a lot’ and five saying ‘a little’.
In general, there was a positive response from the students: the plan did help them practise new learning strategies. Their ideas were fascinating in their originality and their comments were interesting in the light of my original objectives. Even though there was still a strong dependence on the teacher, the comments reflected growing self-confidence and the perception that trying out independent strategies was a positive experience. I think the record-keeping would have continued had I continued to spend time on it. I believe that this strategy is worth repeating.

**Learning analysis**

At mid-term, all students noted an improvement in self-confidence and five students noted improvement in ‘listening to and understanding English’. Pronunciation was the only area where no improvement was perceived. In relation to independent learning skills only a third of the students perceived improvement. At the end of term, again the greatest improvement noted was in confidence, with all but one student recording improvement. More students recorded improvement in all areas except monitoring their development. Five students perceived improvement in pronunciation. This was interesting given the lack of success of the self-study tapes and may have related to the amount of speaking and taping work done in class. In future, I would simplify all the strategies to reduce time taken from class work.

**The research process**

A comment made by David Nunan at the NCELTR Short Course on Classroom-based Research (28 August 1995) reflects well the findings of my research project. He said that ‘movement forward is metamorphic, not linear’, so that measuring ‘improvement’ is difficult as there will be inevitable stops, starts, twists and turns along the way. He also discussed the term ‘outcomes’, saying that ‘impact’ may be a better way of looking at results with learner groups as diverse as those in the AMEP. The impact of independent learning strategies on the future learning of my students will be important.

In terms of conducting the research, mid-term data collection on the portfolios was a valuable part of the process. It helped to develop the students’ awareness of this strategy and gave me early feedback for making adjustments to the method. Also the mid-term discussion produced more insightful answers at the end of term as students had been considering independent learning issues.

The early advice of other project members was invaluable—namely, to narrow my area of enquiry. The main disadvantage of doing action research is the time it takes to document, collate and report. Nevertheless, this has made me focus more clearly on what I do in the classroom and on the results of my actions.
Appendix 1

These statements are about keeping your written texts in portfolios. Do you agree or disagree with these statements? Put an X in the column that shows your response:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Using the folio helps me keep my texts together.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Using the folio helps me organise my texts in a logical way.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Using the folio helps me to see my progress.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Using the folio helps me to see my strengths.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Using the folio helps me to see what I can do to improve.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I would prefer to organise my texts in a different way.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I would prefer not to organise my texts.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I think my organisation has improved.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I think using the folio has helped my learning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I would use this method again, or similar method, on my own.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2

These statements are about the individual homework tapes. Put an X in the column that shows your response. If you didn’t use a tape, just answer statement 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I chose to use an individual homework tape this term.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I used the tape in a regular way (eg daily/weekly).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I used the tape for listening practice.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I used the tape for speaking practice.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I think it was a helpful way of learning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I would use this way of learning again.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3

These questions are also about the tapes. If you didn’t use a tape, just answer question 6. If you did use a tape, please answer questions 1-5, by writing sentences.

1. How many times did you bring your tape for updating? (There were 8 possible weeks.)

________________________________________________________________

2. Why didn’t you bring it on the other weeks?

________________________________________________________________

3. What could have made the system more attractive or helpful for you?

________________________________________________________________

4. What benefits did you find? (If none, write ‘none’.)

________________________________________________________________

5. What problems did you find?

________________________________________________________________

6. If you didn’t choose to use an individual homework tape, why didn’t you?

________________________________________________________________
Appendix 4

These statements are about your independent learning plan. Do you agree with these statements? Put an X in the column that shows your response.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a lot</th>
<th>a little</th>
<th>not at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I kept my ‘contract’ with myself.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I think keeping to my individual learning plan has helped me practise a new skill.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I can find ways to continue learning outside the English classroom.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I have the commitment to continue learning outside the English classroom.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I liked setting my own goal.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I now use the English language more often without the help of the teacher, YES / NO, because:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 5

Learning analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>no good</th>
<th>OK</th>
<th>very good</th>
<th>fantastic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How good are you at:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— reading English?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— speaking English?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— listening to and understanding English?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— writing English?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— pronunciation?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— understanding Australian idiom?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How confident are you at using English?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How good are you at active participation in all class activities?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eg speaking, reporting, discussing; and extended activities like field trips, survey, socialising?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How good are you at learning English without teacher direction and at monitoring your own English development?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How good are you at using a lot of resources to improve your English language learning?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well do you work:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— alone?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— in pairs?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— in groups?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(extended from Young:1991)
4 Memorised chunks as a strategy used by adult learners

Minh Duc Thai

Overview

In this project I conducted a study using an interactive picture-recognition task to gather data on two learners. Disparateness in these learners was defined in terms of their previous formal language learning experience. The task investigated memorised chunks as a feature of the students’ oral performance and the results were compared to try to identify whether this feature was frequently used as a special strategy by these learners, who were in the early stages of language acquisition.

A memorised chunk is a segment of language made up of several words (or morphemes) which are learned together and used as if they were a single item. Examples are: ‘how are you?’; ‘with best wishes’; ‘no problem’. Ellis (1986) suggests that memorised chunks (or formulaic speech) can provide the learner with ready-made segments of speech which can be memorised as unanalysed wholes. Hatch (1983) refers to this type of utterances as ‘canned speech’. Formulaic speech has been found to be very common in the early stages of language acquisition and to occur in both adult and child learners.

Krashen and Scarcella (1978) argue that learners develop formulae as a response to communicative pressure. They memorise a number of ready-made expressions to compensate for the lack of sufficient L2 knowledge to construct creative speech. Krashen and Scarcella further suggest that formulaic speech is closely tied to the performance of specific meanings and reduces the learning burden while maximising communicative ability. Formulaic speech has two characteristics: it is highly frequent, and it is linked to a communicative purpose. Defined as a learner strategy and as raw materials for the learner’s internal processing mechanisms to work on, formulaic speech is assumed to have indirect contribution to the route of second language acquisition.

The subjects

The students were enrolled in a literacy/numeracy Class at Fairfield AMES Region. The class hours were from 1pm to 5pm and the recordings for the task were made on one occasion during this time. Bo was from Vietnam. He had been in Australia for seven years. He had already attended English for Work I and II, and had therefore experienced a formal learning environment. Amanouil was Syrian and had also been in Australia for seven years, but had never studied English in a formal class before. He had worked in factories for a number of years and learned English from friends and from whomever he met at work.

Details of these two students are summarised in the following table:
Method of collecting the data

A cassette-recorder was placed in the classroom and turned on for two minutes before a friendly conversation with the informants began. The learners were well acquainted with the kind of description task used and recording was a familiar practice to the class.

In a picture-description task, the students are given a set of pictures in sequence and are then asked to describe the pictures. The pictures in this research were taken from Streamline English: Connections (Hartley and Viney 1985), Unit 54: A Mugging. The pictures show Mrs Riley who knocks down the two robbers trying to snatch her bag. A warm-up exercise picturing a rabbit on a deserted island was given to the learners half an hour before. They all laughed because the picture was funny and seemed to forget about the recording. I used simple requests like ‘please tell me something about this picture…’ to elicit data from the learners.

The research questions and hypothesis

This study was conducted to examine the following:

1. Do the learners produce examples of memorised chunks?
2. If so, comparing the two sets of data, are there any differences in the number of memorised chunks found?
3. What are the implications for teaching?

My hypothesis was that learners would produce samples of memorised chunks.

Results

The recording was transcribed for the purpose of analysis. Each transcript was closely examined to identify the use of memorised chunks and the data was analysed in T-units. A T-unit is defined as the shortest unit to which a sentence can be reduced, consisting of one independent clause together with whatever dependent clauses are attached to it. For example, the sentence: ‘After Helen finished her homework, she went out for a walk’ contains one T-unit. The tokens (or instances of memorised chunks) within these T-units were calculated. A data set was produced for each student (see Appendix 1) together with a coding sheet for each of the two data sets. The types of memorised chunks and their location in the transcript are set out in Appendix 2.

My main research question was whether the learners produced examples of memorised chunks. The following table shows the tokens, the total T-units of each data set, and the percentage of the tokens over T-units.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>L2 learning environment</th>
<th>L2 learning duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanoul</td>
<td>30–40</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Syrian</td>
<td>Lit/num</td>
<td>Informal strand 3</td>
<td>7 years (Australia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data set A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bo</td>
<td>30–40</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Lit/num strand 3</td>
<td>Informal and formal (Australia)</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data set B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Informants’ biodata
The figures shown for each of the data sets strongly support the hypothesis that the learners will produce examples of memorised chunks.

**Discussion**

Data set A for Amanouil shows 65 per cent formulaic utterances over his total T-units. Expressions such as ‘somethink wrong’, ‘you know’, ‘that’s it’, ‘which one’, ‘I don’t know’, ‘no problem’ were used in situations where the informant had nothing more to say or where he had difficulties in expressing his ideas about the pictures. This student appeared to have picked up a wide range of formulaic utterances while living in Australia and working in a factory. He had never been to formal English classes before and it is easy to understand why some of his utterances were inappropriate and non-native like. The tags, ‘was it’, ‘is it’, were used to indicate interrogation regardless of what was going on in the preceding statements. However, Amanouil was able to describe the sequences of action in the story and he was quick to employ ‘canned utterance’ to fill the gaps in his speech and to respond to pressure.

Bo, in data set B, produced 42 per cent formulaic utterances over his total T-units. Bo had been in Australia for the same period of nearly seven years. He had also worked in a factory, but had been back to formal English classes. Most of his formulaic utterances were native-like and quite appropriate. The appropriateness may be accounted for by his recent formal language training, and more specifically, by his awareness of how relevantly those utterances were put to use. Although Bo produced a lower percentage of formulaic utterances than Amanouil, the difference appears to lie in the appropriateness of use rather than the amount.

One suggestion for dealing with the inappropriateness of memorised chunks is to provide learners with an opportunity to correct themselves. Teachers could repeat the inappropriate chunks to indicate a request for clarification by the learners or a cue for self-correction. Examples are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Learner</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Expected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>somethink won</td>
<td>somethink won or something wrong?</td>
<td>something wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>he’s a policeman is it?</td>
<td>is it or isn’t he?</td>
<td>isn’t he?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Repetition of the chunks may raise awareness of the inaccuracies in the learners’ speech, which they can then try to ‘fix’ themselves. However, not all learners can self-correct in this way and we need to take into account the learners’ level when carrying out this technique.

---

Table 2: Analysis of data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Data set A</th>
<th>Data set B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informant’s T-units</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tokens</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage (over T-units)</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

Formulaic utterances were found in both learners regardless of formal learning. Formulaic utterances are an appropriate learner strategy and are indispensable in second language acquisition. Formulaic speech can be seen as raw material for learners to work on. If formulaic utterances are considered as positive features of learners’ acquisition by teachers, learners can be helped to adjust their use of inappropriate utterances.

Learners without previous formal learning experience who have been exposed to English through daily contacts or at the workplace may employ more ‘memorised chunks’ to facilitate their fluency than those who have had previous formal learning experience. This may be viewed as an advantage, as these learners already know how to arm themselves with ready-made, ‘canned speech’ to achieve what they want in social oral interactions.

This study considered only two learners but further research with more informants could clarify what contribution memorised chunks make to the route and rate of second language acquisition. The question of whether the memorisation of utterances is a necessary step before creative rules are established is an interesting area for other classroom-based research studies.

I benefited a great deal from conducting collaborative action research. It was an opportunity for me to carry out research using data collected in the classroom and to share and collaborate with other experienced teachers and researchers in the TESOL field.
Appendix 1

Data set A: Amanouil (approximately 2 minutes 50 seconds of transcribed speech)
R: Researcher
A: Amanouil

1 R: yes please tell me about this picture
2 A: this person this person in the street you know the lady walking
3 R: yeah
4 A: very close to the car
5 R: hmm
6 A: the they touch the lady
7 R: hmm
8 A: to do somethink
9 R: hmm
10 A: and hit her
11 R: yes
12 A: and and this picture they they catch her and
13 R: yeah
14 A: he another person they hit her
15 R: yeah
16 A: to punch her bag
17 R: yeah
18 A: wallet is it ?
19 R: yes
20 A: and after she picture number 3 the lady stronger they hate the two
21 two men
22 R: yeah
23 A: and the the two men move toward this lady they take everythink
24 back
25 R: hmm who?
26 A: the lady
27 R: hmm yeah
28 A: yes they make her hard you know they push her on the ground
29 R: yeah
30 A: and make her hard then
31 R: is she old or young ?
32 A: she's yes she is older
33 R: hmm
34 A: yeah and the that's it
35 R: hmm yes good and what about this one?
36 A: which one ?
37 R: this one
38 A: the the two person the the man old man walking on the road
39 R: yeah
40 A: two person touch him
41 R: yeah
42 A: they catch him and push her bag you know
43 R: hmm hmm
44 A: and he give he push two people he push push them
45 R: hmm
A: and he was a teacher he was a teacher
R: why why
A: because they make a teacher his his bag vela bagger
R: hmm
A: was a teacher was it?
R: hmm how do you know he's a teacher?
A: and because he was here um board you think for teaching teachs
R: yeah but how can he defeat the two young men?
A: he hit by by umbrella a and he push her...on the ground
R: hmm
A: they another they cane
R: yeah yeah
A: they cane picture number 8 and I don know they feel that's it
somethink wrong
R: yeah yeah thank you very much
A: O.K. no problem

Data set B: Bo (approximately 1 minute 55 seconds of transcribed speech)
R: Researcher
B: Bo

R: yes Bo tell me something about the four pictures
B: the first two peoples saw one young one young lady walk on the
road so one people come to catch a her and one people come to take
her bag but they didn't take her bag because she 's very strong and
she knows a kung fu so he fights two peoples lie down on the road
R: hmm
B: and she went to the the she go to the sweet club
R: yeah go to what?
B: XX
R: What do you think?
B: the the kung fu
R: hmm yeah O.K. so this picture please number 5
B: number 5 two the peoples were follow a old man old man walk
on the road when a man come to catch the old man and one man
take his bag
R: hmm
B: his bag he's strong and he fight to to the peoples lie on the road 18
after after he went to club karate club
R: hmm
B: karate plub
### Appendix 2

Coding sheet A: Amanouil  
Coding sheet type: Memorised chunks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Token</th>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>you know</td>
<td>2,42</td>
<td>native-like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very close to the car</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>native-like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do somethink</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>native-like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is it</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>non-native like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>take everythink back</td>
<td>23-24</td>
<td>non-native like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make her hard</td>
<td>28,30</td>
<td>non-native like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that's it</td>
<td>34,68</td>
<td>native-like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>which one</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>native-like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>push her on the ground</td>
<td>28,64</td>
<td>non-native like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>walking on the road</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>native-like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was it</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>native-like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for teaching</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>native-like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't know</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>native-like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somethink wrong</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>native-like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no problem</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>native-like</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coding sheet B: Bo  
Coding sheet type: Memorised chunks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Token</th>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>walk on the road</td>
<td>2,3,14</td>
<td>native-like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lie (down) on the road</td>
<td>5,17</td>
<td>native-like</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SECTION SEVEN

Making decisions and changing directions

1 Changes in practice: Steps in action research
   Linda Ross

2 Finding common goals
   Chris Pierson

* It was apparent from the outset of the term that working with this group was going to present problems that I had not encountered before. I often felt that I was driving a big bus down a particularly bumpy road with a group of passengers who did not seem to know what stop they wanted or why they had got on in the first place. As a consequence, passengers continually got off at the wrong stop or attempted to jump off while the bus was still moving. This meant we were constantly stopping to check for missing people and to encourage stragglers to get back on.*

   Chris Pierson
Introduction

One of the key issues highlighted by the studies in the NCELTR project was the dynamic, decision-making and problem-solving nature of teaching. The teachers' search for effective ways of teaching their disparate learner groups contradicted the idea that classroom methodology implies a fixed teaching approach or prescribed method. It was much more the case that the teachers drew on their knowledge of a repertoire of approaches and used these to trial and evaluate strategies which they hoped would lead to more effective learning. In this sense, teaching methodology became an exploratory and flexible process which went considerably beyond methods (Richards 1990; Kumaravadivelu 1994).

The need for flexible teaching approaches also highlighted the need for flexibility in questioning one's own assumptions about language, language learning, teacher and learner roles and learning tasks as well as instructional approaches. Importantly also, many of the teachers ended up questioning the assumptions they had initially made about the learners they were teaching.

If we adopt a perspective which takes effective teaching as a starting point for effective learning, critical reflection on one's own beliefs and theories and close observation of one's own classroom practices and the learners' reactions to them becomes central. The two papers in this section show how the teachers reflected critically on their own practices in order to respond to practical classroom concerns.

The decision-making processes in these studies related to a number of questions the teachers found themselves asking:

- Who are the learners and what are their characteristics?
- What are the learners' specific strengths and weaknesses in language and learning?
- How can I manage my classroom more effectively?
- What kinds of groupings can I set up that will work effectively for my learners?
- What changes do I have to make to classroom materials and activities?
- What changes do I have to make to my teaching approaches?
- How can I find out more about my learners' perceptions of themselves as learners?

Although there were personal risks in posing such questions, the teachers' responses to their research emphasise the need to monitor and adapt teaching approaches in the light of changing assumptions. They also highlight the value of close consultation with learners.

The author of the first paper, Linda Ross, has taught for a number of years at the NSW AMES Centre at Campbelltown. She describes her feelings of uncertainty when faced with teaching 'a boisterous, enthusiastic group of ten students' in a DEET-funded literacy and numeracy class. Although she was confident in teaching literacy, she felt less so in meeting the numeracy needs of her students. She charts the cycles of action and reflection that underpinned her classroom decision-making processes and reveals how the steps she took led her to change direction in her efforts to find the most effective teaching and learning strategies for her group. This process led her to 'reconsider a number of issues which had concerned me'.

Chris Pierson, a teacher from the Footscray Centre, AMES Victoria, was also teaching a literacy and numeracy class when he joined the NCELTR project. He decided to explore the 'methodological response' he adopted to the widely differing needs of his students. Like Linda Ross, he examines the reasons for the various changes of direction which resulted from his close observations and reflections on his class and the individuals within it.
1 Changes in practice: Steps in action research

Linda Ross

When I joined the NCELTR project, I had very little knowledge of how action research works but the focus intrigued me. Teachers have all struggled with groups that are disparate to varying degrees. Could there be any answers?

Of immediate concern was the class I had at that time, a boisterous, enthusiastic group of ten students, nine ESB and one NESB, in a Strand 3 literacy/numeracy class funded by DEET. These classes were for 20 hours a week, for 15 weeks, and were provided for the long-term unemployed to assist their entry or re-entry into the workplace. On the basis of their writing skills, these students had been placed at -1 on the ASLPR scale and were considered to have skills adequate to achieve, successfully or partially, written recounts and reports by the end of the course.

The students ranged in age from 17 to 42 and many had a somewhat chequered educational history. Of the eight Australian-born students, most had not completed past Year 9 at school and some had only completed primary school. One student was born in Western Samoa but I considered him to be ESB because he went to New Zealand as a young child and completed his primary education there and his high school education in Sydney. The NESB student had been in Australia only six years. His spoken English was adequate but he found it difficult to follow the rapid colloquial speech of the other class members.

On the whole I felt adequate in the area of literacy. However, I felt quite inadequate in the area of numeracy. It was a new field for me and I was aware that the students’ abilities varied widely. While some had strong numeracy skills—one had completed his first year in a plumbing course at TAFE—others were still struggling with the basics of place value, the decimal point, addition, subtraction and so on (for example, some saw 10.5 and 105 as having the same value).

I had found that the lesson worked best when the students had tasks to do, as they had little time for ‘teacher talk’. In the numeracy sessions I handed out worksheets or selected areas from the textbook and then gave assistance as required. These sessions felt hectic, chaotic and generally unsatisfactory.

Steps in my action research process

Step 1

In the first workshop for the project we were encouraged to begin noting what we saw in order to start focusing on the issue. On a simple proforma I began jotting rough notes immediately after lessons. On 22/3/95 I noted:

In a half hour session the stronger students only got a few minutes attention... and how can I be sure that the weaker ones are in fact gaining the skills and concepts that they lack?
On 27/3/95 my notes recorded:

A typical numeracy lesson—hectic! ... we revised fractions. The stronger ones know immediately that 1/4 is half of 1/2—the weaker ones look completely mystified. I need to go much further back for the weak students. How will I find time?

A few days later I added:

A support teacher would help—and more graded materials—and more expertise!

Through these rough jottings it began to become clear to me why it was I felt so dissatisfied with these sessions. Despite expending considerable energy, my efforts were piecemeal and I needed a far clearer picture of the strengths, weaknesses and progress of each student. I also needed to develop the basic skills of the weak students but at the same time extend the strong students. This had become both a time management and course design issue.

**Step 2**

I developed a detailed checklist of skills so that I could monitor the progress of each student. This checklist covered three pages but I include a small section below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lillian</th>
<th>Warren</th>
<th>Chris</th>
<th>Kerin</th>
<th>Michael</th>
<th>George</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Barry</th>
<th>Peter</th>
<th>Kelly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place value up to 5 places</td>
<td>✔✔✔✔✔</td>
<td>✔✔✔✔</td>
<td>✔✔✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses decimal point appropriately</td>
<td>✔✔✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can read numbers from calculator</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can ‘round up’</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I did not share the checklist with the students as I thought it might challenge the easy, co-operative atmosphere of the classroom. With subsequent events I was relieved that I had made this decision. This checklist proved extremely useful and the numeracy sessions felt far more focused. The checklist became the basis of my lesson planning.

**Step 3**

I began to discuss some of my concerns with the students. On an excursion, I mentioned to some of the stronger students that I felt that I was neglecting them in the numeracy sessions. They were surprised and assured me that they liked the present system. One of them told me, in her usual direct manner:

*We don’t want a teacher breathing down our necks. We don’t like to be treated like kids. We like it when you give us the sheet and we can just get on with it. Don’t worry—we’ll yell if we need you.*

I felt an incredible sense of relief! Why hadn’t I spoken to them earlier?
Step 4

In the action research workshops, we had discussed the possibility of coping with disparate classes by dividing the students into groups according to their ability and providing graded material to each group. Most of us had reservations about this method, mainly because of student morale. I decided to try a modified version of this method. I prepared worksheets at two levels and gave them out—as discreetly as possible—according to the ability of the student. The students did not actually move into groups. The aim was to allow the weaker students to develop skills at a much slower pace while extending and challenging the stronger students.

The result of trying this was that I abandoned this approach very shortly after introducing it as I felt that it was more destructive than constructive. Despite my efforts the students immediately compared their sheets and there was a subtle change in the group dynamics. Two of the weaker students began to come late, did not bring pens, had not done their homework and so on. The class members had, on the whole, been extremely supportive of one another, preferring to work collaboratively. I felt that the method I had introduced could well destroy the harmony of the group. (There was one student who challenged this harmony, but more of him later.)

I had made the mistake of ‘labelling’ some students as under-achievers and realised that I had undermined their morale. This was interesting since they had always found it quite acceptable to label themselves, saying, for example, ‘I’m hopeless at maths’, or ‘I’d say I’m the worst speller in the class’, and openly and cheerfully acknowledged the strengths of others with such comments as ‘OK, Warren, since you’re such a brain how did you do number 6?’ and so on. It seemed that it was quite different if the teacher did the labelling.

Step 5

I realised that in my enthusiasm for greater efficiency, I had undermined the self-esteem of the students who required the greatest support. I needed a method which would maintain self-esteem but at the same time tackle the reality, which was that the weakest students could not make progress until they had mastered basic numerical concepts. I decided on a new strategy but before I could introduce it I needed to deal with a potential problem. There was one student who had very strong numeracy skills and unfortunately this same student was the abrasive element in the group—a master at one-up-manship. If I gave basic work to the whole class he was likely to announce:

This is so easy! This is kindergarten stuff.

Fortunately he was not strong in all areas, as his written skills were weak. A few days before introducing the new method, I initiated a discussion along the following lines:

It was interesting that the class members had different strengths. As their teacher I appreciated how much these different strengths contributed to the group. How did they feel about areas where they perceived themselves as weaker? How did they feel if one of the group called out that something was easy when they were finding it difficult?
This discussion raised some interesting issues and at the end I said that if someone found something easy they should be grateful for the fact, find something else to do when they had finished and give help to their colleagues if it was called for. The word easy was banned from the classroom.

After a few days I introduced the new method. I took graded material into the classroom and explained that the first worksheet was to be done by everyone and was compulsory. After that it was up to students how much more they completed. This first worksheet aimed to build fundamental skills in specific numeracy areas and to be manageable for even the weakest students. The extra worksheets or exercises from the textbook aimed to extend the stronger students in areas where I felt they still needed practice. I used the checklist as a basis for task design.

I found this method successful. Even though I had feared that the stronger students would complete the compulsory sheet in a few minutes and then simply chat, this was not the case and they were keen to go on with the extra work. The weaker students seemed to gain satisfaction from the fact that they were able to complete the compulsory work successfully. They did not appear to be concerned that other students were moving on to further work since this work was not 'compulsory'.

Using the checklist as the basis of my on-going assessment, I felt that I was far better able to monitor progress. At the end of the course, it was apparent that all the students had made good progress. All students passed the competency requirements of the course, while the stronger students had progressed far beyond the competency demands.

**Step 6**

This last step should have come much earlier in the process as it gave me so much insight into the students’ perceptions and needs. One of the research coordinators, Sue Hood, visited the class and asked the students questions concerning their preferred learning styles and past learning experiences. The students responded very positively to the fact that their views were being sought and valued. This discussion was taped and extracts are included below:

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**Sue:** Is that a problem in the class... that you have different things you want to do? (General agreement from students that this is not a problem).

**Chris:** The one thing is we're all learning. That's the main factor...

**Sue:** Do you prefer to all do the same work... so that you're doing the same activity? (General agreement from students that they prefer this.)

**Stephen:** I reckon it makes it easier for everyone to learn that way and that's the best way to learn instead of teaching say three one thing and three another and somebody else different...

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A little later a discussion develops about what had made learning difficult at school.

**Lillian:** You weren't allowed to share like now... at school you couldn't do that or you'd get into trouble, or you'd get the cane...

**Chris:** And if you couldn't read they didn't want to know about you—just shoved you aside.

**Neil:** Yeah. Same with your maths.

**Steven:** Yeah. If you couldn't do it the teacher used to say, 'Get out on the board and do it in front of the class' and the kids'd say, 'Oh, he must be dumb because he's gotta do it on the board'.

**Tim:** Yeah. They didn't give you time.

---

During this discussion the word ‘dumb’ came up four times.
Conclusion

When faced with disparate levels in a class, it would seem practical to divide the class into groups according to their ability. However, in a class where the development of self-esteem is crucial to learning, this arrangement may serve to undermine the confidence of the weakest members. The students in this particular class clearly favoured a system where they participated as equal members of the group, supporting one another as necessary. Both the stronger and the weaker students said that they preferred to do the same activities and that they liked to work co-operatively. Their past learning experiences may well have formed the basis for these preferences.

I found the approach described in Step 5 an effective compromise. The students felt that they were still working as one group since they were all given the same initial task, and yet it allowed the development of basic skills for the weakest students while still providing extension work for the more able class members.

As a result of this project, I realised that I needed to reconsider a number of issues which had concerned me. I had viewed the class as a teacher and educationalist and I had focused on the negative aspects of this being a group of disparate learners. I had been worried that I was not giving the students equal attention and that I would not be able to assist all of them to achieve the competencies. I discovered that the students did not expect to get equal attention, but that they only wanted help when they had a problem and, while they were keen to progress, they gave equal importance to factors such as belonging to the group. In fact, the students were very positive about the class. They did not see themselves as a ‘disparate group’ but as a cooperative group who supported one another in achieving their learning goals.

I would strongly recommend action research to all teachers. The process is rewarding because it validates classroom observation and encourages you to value your own judgments. The sessions with other teachers help to shape your ideas and challenge you to re-think many issues. In my case, it reminded me of the value of asking the opinions of the students. Finally, while the traditional forms of professional development can be very stimulating it is sometimes difficult to relate the theory with which teachers are presented to the reality of the classroom. Action research is refreshing as it is concerned with the classroom as it really is.
2 Finding common goals

Chris Pierson

Prelude

It was apparent from the outset of the term that working with this group was going to present problems that I had not encountered before. I often felt that I was driving a big bus down a particularly bumpy road with a group of passengers who did not seem to know what stop they wanted or why they had got on in the first place. As a consequence, passengers continually got off at the wrong stop or attempted to jump off while the bus was still moving. This meant we were constantly stopping to check for missing people and to encourage stragglers to get back on.

The focus

My primary aim was to examine possible methodological responses to working with a group of learners who had relatively high oral skills and low proficiency in the area of literacy. The class was a Stage 2-3 (in the Certificate in Written and Spoken English) literacy class funded by DEET. The data I collected consisted primarily of writing samples completed by the students, field notes and observations. The writing samples were collected on a regular basis and analysed on a proforma (see below) that was devised in the first instance to chart an individual student’s progress. This type of data collection enabled me to compare results and changes in the students’ writing with what I had been doing in the classroom and to attempt to adjust my strategies appropriately.

The writing samples were produced without the aid of models and consisted of topics that were either very personally familiar or that the group as a whole had been

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student name: Writing sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change of tenses used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conjunctives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pronouns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prepositions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The proforma
made familiar with in previous lessons. The aim here was to obtain pieces composed solely by the students while also trying to minimise the negative effects of unfamiliar subject matter that could inhibit the students’ confidence and ability.

At later stages this proforma was extended and applied to more formal pieces of writing required for the Certificate in Written and Spoken English.

Table 2: The extended proforma

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uses appropriate staging</th>
<th>Uses appropriate structures ie paragraphs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The benefits of this data collection were to become almost immediately obvious and I found that my strategies for developing a syllabus that addressed the learners’ underlying literacy needs were to undergo three distinct changes in a relatively short period of time. It is these three changes that form the core of this report.

The learners

The learners made it known from the outset that reading and writing were areas that they did not see the need to emphasise. Regardless of reading and writing skills, they saw the reality of their employment prospects as factory work or work of a similar type. As one student said:

**Reading and writing, bloody hell, what I’m needing reading and writing for working in a factory? I’m reading and writing well enough already!**

However, as the focus of the class was literacy the challenge lay in attempting to engage the group in a program that involved working across the literacy domain.

The participants in the class shared many common characteristics that contributed to the literacy difficulties experienced. They were all relatively long-term residents, most came from limited formal educational backgrounds, a large proportion had an L1 that was not based on Roman script and they all found writing to be a particularly draining and uncomfortable chore. They also had a negative perception of literacy-based work (writing in particular) that was compounded by their genuine lack of belief that enhancing their writing skills would put them in a better position to gain the kind of work that they felt was unavailable to them.

However, the group was also very diverse in other aspects. Half of the class had never studied English in a formal setting in Australia, while the other half had accessed the 510 hours of English language tuition provided by DIEA and were now in their first or second DEET-funded English language program. The ages of the learners ranged from early 20s to late 50s and expectations for work and the future were divided along these lines. The ethnic composition of the group was varied, with seven Vietnamese learners making up the largest single nationality group. There were also six learners from the Horn of Africa, two Chinese, one Filipino, one Polish and one Roumanian learner.
The one factor that drew this group together was their hesitancy and general lack of interest and enthusiasm about literacy as a course priority. This was well demonstrated by the low murmur of approval that emitted from the entire group as the learner's comment above was articulated during the first lesson. It was not without a certain sense of irony that I began work both on this project and on the literacy-based curriculum.

**An initial strategy**

My initial classroom strategy centred around a fairly traditional approach. This involved an accumulative approach to writing skills, working on basic structures and applying them in a range of contexts. Despite the learners' general lack of interest in writing, this was never demonstrated by hostile or obstructionist attitudes towards undertaking writing tasks in the classroom. What quickly became clear, however, was that the majority of the learners did not seem to be showing an increased awareness or ability to use the structures taught, outside highly controlled classroom practice. As writing samples collected in the first weeks were compared with subsequent samples, there was very little evidence of improvements in the learners' writing.

What became apparent during the first weeks was that while the teaching approach taken had produced positive results for structured responses, there was no indication that the students had been able to internalise the new structures presented. The classroom activities and the structures that were examined in the class had been drawn from problem areas identified in the writing samples collected. This data had performed two invaluable services. In the first instance it had indicated common problem areas being experienced by the group as a whole. Secondly, it had indicated that the approach currently being implemented needed to be modified to facilitate changes that were currently not visible in terms of writing outcomes.

**A change in direction**

The first change in direction took the form of integrating written outcomes with oral tasks. This was chosen as a strategy because of the group's obvious preference for oral learning activities and it was undertaken through a variety of means. The most prolonged and detailed activity was getting the class involved in a debate with another class. A debate seemed to lend itself to an integrated program as it involved the learners in reading about the topic and taking notes which needed to be focused. At the end of the activity (which ran for about two weeks) we had focused comprehensively on the language and structures of opinion-giving. The learners were able to use these structures in their spoken form very well and they could also use them in structured writing practice. However, subsequent writing tasks in the form of more self-generated pieces again did not indicate that they had internalised the material in a way that allowed them to use the structures competently. What had become clear was that this new approach had not facilitated as comprehensive a transfer of the target skills as had been hoped.

**The final approach**

The data that I continued to collect in the form of writing samples showed that the level of writing in the group had improved. However, it also indicated that most of
the learners were still having difficulty with basic structures. It was clear that they
could be successful on a writing task that was structured within tight parameters
(writing a letter of application, for example). However, when the parameters of the
task were broadened, problems that I did not expect to see reappeared.

The final approach I took centred around integrating strategies for learning into
the program. These strategies focused on helping the learners to be more conscious of
what was involved in tackling a writing task. This involved discussing and working
towards a more comprehensive recognition of what it was that we were doing when
working with English and especially writing in English.

In the first instance, we discussed the fact that everyone in the group continued
to translate from L1 into L2 when working on a writing task, that operating in L1 was
‘natural’—it was what you did most of the time, and that writing, reading, speaking
and listening in English were ‘unnatural tasks’. Having agreed this a ‘given’, it was
easier for everyone to see that to be more successful in writing, they could approach
writing in a more mechanical and conscious sense. This point became the subtle
difference in a common method that could be adopted by all the learners.

What evolved was a ‘stop, think, write, stop and think again’ approach to all
writing tasks completed by the group. This was a very mechanical approach, but one
that proved to be almost immediately effective. A writing task completed in groups
could be self-corrected on the board and people from each group could point out
errors that were made as a result of a lack of review, as well as those that were made
as a result of attempting an unfamiliar structure. The unfamiliar structures that were
made apparent in this way then formed the basis for teaching points in which the
learners had a vested interest.

The samples I continued to collect showed a reduction in the number of errors and
for the first time the writing produced by most of the learners began to show real and
positive changes. A framework for producing clearer and more sophisticated writing
had evolved and it appeared to have been accepted by the group.

Conclusion

While the bus has become more oriented towards a common goal than it was at the
onset of this particular journey, there will no doubt be more flat tyres and blown head
gaskets to come. It is easy to get a group of individuals to a position where they can
perform a task within expected boundaries. The biggest issue that remains for me at
the end of this project is knowing when an individual learner has learnt an aspect of
language and can demonstrate this by successfully using it in a range of contexts. There
is also the problem of maintaining the interest and enthusiasm of learners who
remain as yet unconvinced of the personal benefits or positive outcomes of the
program in which they find themselves.

Using action research as a way to plan, act, observe and reflect on what is
happening in the classroom is, I think, an invaluable tool. It has also provided a
vehicle for the sharing of information with other colleagues and the impetus to
explore new avenues regardless, and in spite of, the restraints imposed by the daily
routine of teaching.
SECTION EIGHT

Coordinating action research and exploring professional development

1 Action research as professional development
   Jane Hamilton

2 Supporting the action research process
   Jo Eady

- The opportunity for teachers to work collaboratively on a project is a rich professional development experience. (But), project coordination and support on a state as well as a national level is essential in guiding the research process and ultimately achieving project outcomes for all.

   Jo Eady
Introduction

As we pointed out in Section One, the NCELTR project involved a network of teacher-researchers from five AMEP programs across Australia. Several of the project teachers worked within the same AMEP centres. Others, however, were not in daily contact, but found themselves working individually on their research between project meetings. One of the challenges for the project was to develop a model of participation which would provide support to all the teachers as they undertook their research.

The approach we developed could be described as ‘devolved participation’. While one form of support and coordination was available through NCELTR, a further level of support was established through locally based coordinators who, because of their roles and locations in the local programs, were able to give more immediate day-to-day help or advice to the teachers who participated. At the same time, because of their roles in the local organisation, the local coordinators could monitor the implications of the research for their own institutional programs. They could also gain direct insights into professional development needs emerging from the research which could feed back into the inservice programs for which they had local responsibility.

The coordinators took on multiple roles. They maintained regular contact with the NCELTR researchers and were able to access the research outcomes from other states. This contact also helped to shape the project further and to sustain its progress. Local networks were therefore important in maintaining the collaborative nature of the research. The coordinators also provided accessible and readily available resources for the research being undertaken by the individual teachers. They provided relevant sources of literature on the research topic, gave further input on research methodology, gave individual support with data collection such as interviewing students or observing classes, organised project meetings and group discussions and offered advice and support in writing up the research findings.

The two papers in this section are written by two of the local project coordinators, Jane Hamilton and Jo Eady. Their papers trace the processes of their involvement in the research and present their reflections on the difficulties and benefits encountered by themselves and by the teachers they supported. While both present a positive perspective on their experiences of action research, they also argue for a realistic assessment of the time required and commitment from the institutions in which teachers work. They maintain that if action research is to be more than individually based, it needs to have system-level support. Their papers offer suggestions on what this institutional support might entail.

The first writer, Jane Hamilton, coordinates the Curriculum and Staff Development Unit in the Language Studies Department of the Northern Metropolitan College of TAFE, Victoria. Her role in the project was one of both local coordination and research. She not only liaised in her professional development capacity with two other teachers from her teaching centre, Vicki Hambling and Lorraine Hatcher-Friel, but also decided to document her own observations of the dynamics of their research.

Jane suggests a number of considerations which she found to be necessary conditions for teachers’ positive involvement in a collaborative action research process and ‘for action research to work’. She has continued to extend her reflections on the role of action research in professional development programs beyond the life of the NCELTR project.
Jo Eady works as a senior consultant in Staff Training and Professional Development (Language) in TAFE Queensland Language Services. Her role as local coordinator for the NCELTR project in Queensland meant that she worked closely with the six project teachers in that state. She describes the various stages of the Queensland project and highlights the nature of the support she found it necessary to offer the teachers during the course of the project. Like Jane Hamilton, she has continued to explore the potential of action research for educational change and professional development within the requirements and constraints of her own state context.
1 Action research as professional development

Jane Hamilton

Background

At the time of the NCELTR project, the AMEP Centre at the Northern Metropolitan College of TAFE (NMCOT) was running five classes, from ASLPR 0-2. A small centre can feel isolated from the bigger AMEP picture and our involvement was partly a way of linking with other providers and having the opportunity to discuss common issues with other AMEP teachers. A more specific concern was our beginners’ class which, in terms of levels of formal education, has always been a more disparate group than the other classes.

Two teachers, Vicki Hambling and Lorraine Hatcher-Friel, expressed interest in being involved and I was interested in participating in action research as well as coordinating the NMCOT part of the project. As I am the coordinator of the Curriculum and Staff Development Unit in the Language Studies Department, I decided to document the process of coordination and to use the project as a case study to reflect on the possibility of incorporating action research into the staff development plan for teachers’ professional development.

The process

None of us had had any experience of action research and we went along to the first workshop not knowing quite what to expect. It was not until the third workshop that I felt I was able to focus on my own research as distinct from meeting with Vicki and Lorraine to discuss their project. On reflection this seems logical and necessary. It was only by observing, monitoring and reflecting on what the teachers were doing that the implications for wider application within the Department slowly became clearer.

Over the course of the project from May to September 1995, there were four workshops involving NMCOT and AMES Victoria participants. The first workshop, with the NCELTR researchers, introduced the research area and model of action research. We shared our ideas for research and talked about methods of data collection. The second workshop, three weeks later, was an opportunity to discuss our focus areas in more detail and to shape up specific questions. This was followed by an eight-week period for data collection—a longer period than originally intended because of a term break. In the third workshop, the NCELTR researchers reported on the project from other states. This was also a final opportunity to talk about the progress of our research and to make any adjustments or changes in direction. The last workshop gave us an opportunity to report finally on our research and to prepare for a presentation at the Victorian Association of Teachers of Multicultural Education (VATME) conference. It was also at this workshop that written reports on the project were presented.

Between workshops Vicki, Lorraine and I planned to meet weekly, which often proved difficult as other commitments took precedence. During the course of the project, the focus changed several times as we discussed what was happening in the classroom and explored what action research really meant. Although Vicki finally came back to her original idea of materials development for beginner learners (see
Hambling pages 77–80), the ‘digressions’ proved to be a useful and integral part of the project in terms of focusing and clarifying the real issues. The collaborative workshops also played an important part in this process.

**Applications to professional development**

Currently professional development for teachers in the Language Studies Department consists of up to five days of in-service training per year which all teachers attend, as well as external conferences and seminars which teachers can nominate to attend. There is often little time for sharing ideas in a systematic way between these activities. Each in-service day is a major organisational feat. In our department, there are approximately 80 ESL teachers working across three campuses on very diverse programs, ranging from ESL literacy programs for retrenched workers, to beginners’ classes for newly-arrived migrants, to advanced ESL courses for specific needs such as business and computers. There are also special courses for women and for migrant youth with disrupted schooling.

It has become clear that it is not possible to satisfy everyone’s needs at such events, both in terms of focus areas and the varying levels of teacher experience. While there is an advantage in all teachers having the opportunity to come together to discuss common issues, it is questionable what lasting educational impact a one-day event has and how much can be translated into classroom practice. In addition, the focus has necessarily been on the bigger picture of the enormous changes in the field of vocational education and training in TAFE, many of which impact directly on ESL teaching. Such information-based professional development does not always value what teachers have to offer.

To have longer-term effects, it seems to me that professional development needs to involve teachers in generating their ideas about classroom practice and to be involved in the process rather than to have externally imposed professional development activities. Action research provides the potential for teachers’ involvement at varying levels. While the very nature of action research entails a degree of fluidity, I believe there are several guidelines that need to be followed if it is to be effective. These are suggested from the point of view of my experience of setting up this action research project and they aim to give a sense of what I needed to consider. They can be grouped under the following headings: self-selection, time-lines, on-going support, pay-offs and outcomes.

**Self-selection**

According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988:5) action research is:

> …a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out.

Thus, in any action research project it is critical that the teachers choose to be actively involved. The parameters of the project should also be made clear at the beginning so that participants have some idea of the time and input required. For those wishing to upgrade their qualifications, participation in an action research project could form part of a formal study course and thus provide even greater incentive for involvement.
Time-lines

Specifying the time-line for the research at the outset ensures that everyone knows when the project should be completed. Teachers need enough time to collect data and go through the action research cycle of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and replanning, but at the same time it is important that the project does not continue for so long that the momentum is lost. Our courses are ten weeks in length, which provided a realistic time frame for data collection with initial discussions beforehand and time for writing up after the end of term. It is easy to underestimate the time involved.

On-going support

On-going support is critical so that those involved have access to work-in-progress discussions on a regular and frequent basis, as well as coordination support where necessary. While teachers work individually in the classroom, action research is a collaborative venture and other people are important for bouncing off ideas. Collaboration is most valuable when those other people are also committed to the project. Establishing working rules for the collaborating group is also useful. This might involve keeping minutes, taping the discussions and making joint decisions. Support needs to come from program managers as well as from other teachers.

Outcomes

Recognised outcomes also add to the incentives for teachers to become involved in action research. The NCELTR project culminated for us in presentations at the VATME conference, as well as a presentation to staff in the Language Studies Department. This was an important way of validating the work done and also of sharing some of the findings with other teachers. Other outcomes could include publications of findings in professional journals or books. An important outcome is also the validation of oneself as a teacher by reflecting on one’s practice and realising that practice is informed by personal theories developed through teaching. Action research formalises what teachers normally do and makes it more rigorous so that the way forward becomes more obvious.

There are potential benefits for the department as well as for individual teachers. The data collected could be used to argue for extra resources, as a basis for further professional development and to feed back information to funding bodies. Also, the enthusiasm of the teachers involved can help to raise the morale of staff and to develop a rich and stimulating work environment.

Pay-offs

When teachers participate because they have chosen to do so, that in itself may be reward enough. However, involvement means a considerable amount of extra time and it is important to acknowledge this commitment. In the NCELTR project this acknowledgment took the form of paid time-release to attend workshops with lunches provided, copies of the teachers’ publications from a previous project (Burns and Hood 1995), three hours’ paid time to write up the findings of the project, the knowledge that the work would be incorporated into the publication of this volume, and conference fees to the VATME Conference in order to present a workshop on the project outcomes. Participants in the project have also had the opportunity to present their research at NCELTR National Forums in 1996. The collaboration and personal satisfaction of having participated were also important, together with the knowledge that this was part of a nation AMEP action research network.
Reflections

In reflecting on action research as a model of professional development in TAFE, I asked myself a series of questions which helped me to work through the process.

What aspect of present professional development practice do I want to change?

I would like to see more professional development activities generated by teachers working on collaborative research projects. In this way action research can become another layer in the professional development program.

What could change in terms of what people do and the resources being used?

Currently there is a budget for staff development activities. A proportion of this budget could be spent on setting up a process for action research. This might include two or three projects a year. Teachers could be asked to submit proposals and the Staff Development Unit could then make decisions, perhaps based on departmental priorities or on predetermined themes, about which to accept. A staff member experienced in action research would need to manage the projects and ensure timelines were met and outcomes achieved. The ‘pay-offs’ for teachers would need to be clearly specified.

What kind of problems can I foresee?

• Despite timetabling and attendance issues, it is important that participants have time off teaching to attend the series of project workshops.
• Action research is hard work, time-consuming and often frustrating. There needs to be a commitment on the part of teachers and managers and the involvement of someone with experience in action research to coordinate the project and support the participants.
• Time constraints and logistical problems can be major issues in conducting action research.
• Effecting change is a long-term process. There may be little objective evidence that change has occurred and managers may need to be convinced that it is worthwhile.
• Not everyone will adopt the idea or see its value and dealing with criticism or lack of interest may be an issue.

What needs to be done to ensure the success of the process?

The guidelines above need to be implemented in terms of infrastructure, accountability and evaluation. Key ingredients for success include support, relevance, facilitation and responsiveness.

Conclusion

Educational reform consists in opening up, challenging and changing the institutionalised forms of language, activity and social relationships which constitute education, and restructuring the relationships between them. (Kemmis and McTaggert 1988:40)
I believe that action research has a valuable contribution to make by breaking down the relative isolation of most teachers' work. It allows them to reflect on and critique their practice in a supportive environment and to work together to improve their teaching. Experienced teachers need ways to keep their interest alive and to challenge themselves. Action research offers an opportunity for teachers to look at what they do in a different way. It can also document evidence to argue for more resources or provide data on the impact of policy decisions at the classroom level which can then be fed back to policy-makers and funding bodies. While it involves a considerable rethinking of professional development, I believe that the rewards and the long-term benefits are worth the effort.

One of the major reasons for disparateness in our classes is the current policy climate. Previously, regional pathways existed for students with different providers specialising in different areas of ESL provision. Now, competition, funding through tenders, and the emergence of many small private providers have meant duplication of provision, so that students are often placed inappropriately, rather than being referred to another provider. Our involvement in a collaborative project with another AMEP provider, AMES Victoria, has helped to break down these barriers and has given us opportunities to start sharing ideas again. From this perspective alone the project has been very valuable.

My own participation has allowed me to reflect on the nature of professional development, to experience action research and to be involved in a valuable national project. I hope to continue exploring the potential of action research as professional development throughout 1996.
2 Supporting the action research process
Jo Eady

Background

TAFE Queensland was involved in the NCELTR action research project from July to December 1995. Being the last of the four states involved to enter the project, it was hoped that we would benefit from the participation and findings of the others. Investigation of the teaching of disparate groups was particularly relevant to Queensland. AMEP provision is offered in 17 locations across the state and the notion of ‘disparity’ and ‘disparate groups’ is far from new.

Project coordination

A model for the Queensland project participation was developed during initial discussions with Anne Burns from NCELTR. This model is set out below.

The project requirements were also outlined. These included project timelines, the possible numbers of teacher-researchers, the level of support from NCELTR, the roles of the teachers, project coordinator and researchers, funding for the project and the project outcomes. Expressions of interest from AMEP teachers from metropolitan and near-metropolitan institutes resulted in the establishment of a team of six teachers who wished to participate in the research. The teachers, whose research is reported in this volume, were:

- Susanne Air  Cooloola Sunshine Institute of TAFE
- Anne Fowler  Bremer Institute of TAFE—Inala Centre
- Kaye Grayson  Southbank Institute of TAFE—Annerley Centre
- Janette Kohn  Yeronga Institute of TAFE—Salisbury Centre
- Meg Quinn  Southbank Institute of TAFE—Annerley Centre
- Lucy Valeri  Southbank Institute of TAFE—Annerley Centre
These teachers represented a range of large, small as well as metropolitan and near-metropolitan institutes. In my role as Senior Consultant of Staff Training and Professional Development in TAFE Queensland Language Services, I undertook the local coordination of the research.

**Project organisation and support**

From the outset of the project it was obvious that as a group we all had varying ideas and interest areas in relation to teaching disparate learner groups. The notion of ‘disparate’ meant different things to us and each teacher wanted to embark on investigation of an area of relevance to themselves. As one teacher commented later in the process:

> The research project gave me an opportunity to focus on one aspect of language learning that I have been interested in for some time. (Kohn page 102)

From the first workshop, six different focus areas emerged:

- Factors affecting learning
- Developing independent learning
- Task choice for disparate groups
- Using English outside the classroom
- Enhancing literacy skills
- Perceptions of group work

The diversity of areas around the common theme meant that the role of project coordination became integral to the success of the project. One way in which continuity was provided was through the development of an activities timeline. Negotiation with all the members of the team, including the NCELTR researchers, at the outset led to the various phases intended to support the research being mapped out as shown in Table 1.

This activities timeline proved important in guiding the action research process as short-term goals could be determined and achieved along the way. I also devised pre- and post-workshop tasks to assist teachers in this process (see Appendices 1 and 2). My reflections on different phases of this timeline are discussed below.

**Project coordination**

The first workshop, conducted by Anne Burns, familiarised teachers with elements of the action research process. As a group the teachers had varying experiences to bring to the project. Some, for example, had been involved in action research before while for others it was new. In terms of the area for research, we had little trouble brainstorming the features of disparate learner groups and the difficulties involved in teaching them. Deciding on preferred general focus areas was a relatively simple process because of the emphasis action research places on linking practice with theory and on fostering this link.

**Focusing and reflection of ideas**

This phase proved to be one of the most important. Over the weeks between the first and second workshops, we digested ideas from the first workshop and focused on the areas selected for the research. The teachers talked with each other, with colleagues at their centres, as well as with me in order to refine their areas or determine their questions. Each teacher developed a vision of the direction her research would take and what support was required. Many changes occurred during this ‘digestive’ phase.

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<tr>
<th>Project phase</th>
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<th>Focus</th>
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| Project orientation | Workshop 1* | • Introducing the research context and model.  
• Discussing issues, sharing experiences.  
• Designing mechanisms for data collection.  
• Deciding on preferred focus area. |
| Focusing and reflection of ideas |  | • Reflecting generally on issues raised.  
• Gathering and documenting information.  
• Discussing with colleagues. |
| Discussion and determination of focus areas | Workshop 2 | • Discussing and refining focus areas.  
• Shaping up specific questions.  
• Reviewing methods of data collection and deciding on appropriate methods for next phase. |
| Initial data collection |  | • Collection of data around focus question. |
| Discussion of initial findings | Workshop 3* | • Presenting data samples.  
• Interpreting, drawing implications, problematising through discussion.  
• Considering implications for other teachers. |
| Further data collection/collation |  | • Further data collection and analysis, to confirm interpretations or identify other issues.  
• Drafting report. |
| Research documentation | Workshop 4 | • Discussing draft report  
— focus of research  
— research process  
— outcomes/issues/findings of research  
— interpretation/reactions to research outcomes. |
| Compilation of research report |  | • Finalising report on project.  
• Submitting report. |
| Presentation/sharing of research findings | Workshop 5* | • Presenting short workshop summary on action research. |

*Anne Burns and Sue Hood facilitated Workshops 1, 3 and 5
Discussion and determination of focus areas and data collection methods

Workshop 2, which I conducted, allowed teachers the opportunity to share their focus areas and questions with the whole research team. The result of this was that many teachers narrowed their focus even further to a point where the collection of the data could be managed within regular teaching duties. Anne Fowler highlights the importance of the support given at this phase when she comments:

*The early advice of other project members was invaluable—namely, to narrow my area of enquiry.* (Fowler page 118)

We also reviewed the possibilities for data collection methods (see Burns and Hood 1995 for a range of methods used in NCELTR action research projects). The teachers felt comfortable with the notion of using qualitative methods, but also recognised that they required a clear framework for making decisions. Over the following weeks until the next workshop, the teachers continued to collect data using the methods they had chosen.

Data collection and discussion of initial findings

The third workshop, which was facilitated by Anne Burns and Sue Hood, drew together initial findings from the data collection stage. The data collection methods were reviewed through a discussion of the outcomes and guidance was given to the teachers to assist them in interpreting data and drawing out implications for themselves and other teachers. This workshop gave teachers an opportunity to verbalise their initial reactions to their findings. The post-workshop task (Appendix 2) which had been used previously clarified the teachers' reactions further and identified: common themes; issues or considerations of the initial findings; and personal reflections on their involvement in the project.

Research documentation and compiling a report

Guidelines offered by Burns and Hood (1995) gave teachers a framework to draw together the elements of the research report, while the previous phases of the research provided the details. During the fourth workshop, time was spent on discussing how best to change or add to the report in order to document individual research outcomes clearly.

Table 1 shows how phases in the process gave the project focus within a relatively short timeframe. As a project coordinator, one of the greatest difficulties for me was that although the process was clear and was the same for all the participants, disparity of content existed among teachers. Because of my lack of intimate knowledge of each participant's project, it was not possible for me to be as helpful on an individual basis as I would have liked, particularly in giving advice about data collection and collation and analysing and drawing out the implications of the data.

Working together

The opportunity for teachers from different centres to undertake action research collaboratively is a rich professional development experience. Project coordination and support on a state as well as a national level is essential in guiding the research process and ultimately in achieving outcomes for all the stakeholders in the project.

The support that teachers gave each other was highlighted on two levels. The first was the support, guidance and advice amongst members of the team:
Fellow teachers were supportive and interested in the results of the project...

I found the collaboration with my TAFE Queensland colleagues to be professionally enriching and rewarding.

In particular I was fortunate to have a teacher who was involved in the project and teaching at the same level. As we became more involved in the project we used each other to reflect on what was happening and to develop ideas. This shared reflection became part of the project and influenced the decisions I made and the conclusions I came to.

The second was the support of colleagues not involved in the project in teaching centres, who were willing to discuss, assist in data collection and generally support the process and the logistics at a centre level. From a project coordination perspective, there was support on an ongoing basis in three main forms: a series of five workshops (Table 1), individual consultations with teachers and regular telephone contact.

The teachers offered a number of personal reflections on their involvement in this research:

This project has provided an opportunity for reflection on both practice and the theory of practice.

The opportunity to reflect on my teaching practice and investigate what is impacting on the classroom has been a valuable one.

The personal and professional benefits have been great and will hopefully have an on-going impact on my teaching.

Professional development areas such as this NCELTR project is (sic) a definite step in addressing best teacher practices.

I found the collaboration with Anne Burns and Sue Hood from NCELTR, as well as my TAFE Queensland colleagues, to be professionally enriching and rewarding.

... doing so has made me focus more clearly on what I'm doing in the classroom and what results my actions are having.

**Conclusion**

Participation in this project has been an enriching and professionally rewarding activity. The collaborative nature of this type of action research has linked teachers from different centres to work together on a common theme. Knowledge, experience and expertise have been brought together and shared openly for the development of us all. Our learners have remained central to the process and, I believe, we have all developed a greater understanding and deeper sense of the role that disparity plays in our ESL classrooms.
Appendix 1

NCELTR/TAFE Queensland
COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT
TEACHING DISPARATE GROUPS
Pre-Workshop (2) Task

1. In point form, list areas of disparity in your current class.
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2. In point form, list any difficulties in teaching your current class because of the above disparities.
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3. After discussions in Workshop 1 and subsequent reflection, can you now briefly describe the focus area for your research?

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4. What data collection methods are you using and/or thinking of using in your research?

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Appendix 2

COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT
INVESTIGATING THE TEACHING OF DISPARATE GROUPS

POST-WORKSHOP 3 TASK

After the group discussions and input from Anne and Sue at Workshop 3 it may be beneficial to try and focus your thoughts regarding the current phase of your project.

Common themes and/or initial findings from your data collection to date.

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Issues/considerations/reactions based on your initial findings.

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Personal reflections based on your involvement in the project to date.

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References


Prospect, 9.2. 1994. Special issue on competency-based training in ESL.


Further reading and resources for teaching disparate learner groups


