WHY SHOULD I DO ACTION RESEARCH?
WHAT TEACHERS SAY ...

‘I think it is important to be involved in action research projects — I felt less isolated, more accountable and part of something happening.’

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

This is the fourth volume of the Teachers’ Voices series which offers first-person accounts by teachers of their involvement in collaborative classroom-based action research. The research project in this volume focuses on exploring how teachers can stay centred on the needs and goals of their learners within the parameters of an outcomes-orientated curriculum. The book contains 22 first-person accounts of teachers from around the country.

The teachers’ accounts are prefaced by a comprehensive background paper on learner-centredness in the AMEP from the two research coordinators. The six sections of this volume look at a range of topics such as Evaluating program delivery modes, Analysing learner needs, Translating needs analysis into course design, Exploring learner-centred learning, Exploring learner-centred teaching, and Exploring achievement and assessment. Each section contains a number of teachers’ accounts on different aspects of the section topic.

This book will be directly relevant to teachers and trainee teachers interested in exploring how practices at different levels of the Adult Migrant English Program have changed since the introduction of an outcomes-based national curriculum.
Teachers’ voices 4: Staying learner-centred in a competency-based curriculum

Editors: Anne Burns and Helen de Silva Joyce
Teachers' voices 4:
Staying learner-centred in a competency-based curriculum

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AEMP</td>
<td>Advanced English for Migrants</td>
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<tr>
<td>AMEP</td>
<td>Adult Migrant English Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASLPR</td>
<td>Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating</td>
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<td>AUSLAN</td>
<td>Australian Sign Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>CALL</td>
<td>Computer-assisted language learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>CGEA</td>
<td>Certificate of General Education for Adults</td>
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<tr>
<td>CGEAHI</td>
<td>Certificate of General Education for Adults – Hearing Impaired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSWE</td>
<td>Certificates I, II and III in Spoken and Written English</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEETYA</td>
<td>Department of Education, Employment and Training and Youth Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIEA</td>
<td>Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIMA</td>
<td>Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>DL</td>
<td>Distance Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELLS</td>
<td>English Language and Literacy Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>English as a Second Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>GCIT</td>
<td>Gold Coast Institute of TAFE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILC</td>
<td>Independent Learning Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMP</td>
<td>Intermediate Modular Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOTY</td>
<td>It's Over to You</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCELTR</td>
<td>National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSWAMES</td>
<td>New South Wales Adult Migrant English Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLA</td>
<td>Second Language Acquisition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMH</td>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOS</td>
<td>Settlement and Orientation Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>Tertiary and Further Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>TESOL</td>
<td>Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages</td>
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Introduction and acknowledgments

The papers in this collection are the fourth in the series - Teachers' Voices. The accounts are the result of many Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) teachers around the country working together in collaborative action research groups to investigate an area of common interest. The teachers all submitted expressions of interest to be part of the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) Special Project - Staying learner-centred in a competency-based curriculum. They were interested in exploring how practice at different levels of the AMEP had changed since the introduction of the outcomes-based national curriculum - the Certificates I, II and III in Spoken and Written English (CSWE). To some extent, therefore, this volume is a complement to the first volume in the Teachers' Voices series: Exploring course design in a changing curriculum (1994), which charted some of the changes in classroom practice which were occurring at a time when the CSWE was first introduced into the AMEP.

The project was coordinated by the editors, Anne Burns and Helen de Silva Joyce. As project coordinators, we found it very refreshing to work closely with teachers in the various states who were committed to exploring and learning more about the curriculum, their own teaching practices and the needs of their learners. This was particularly encouraging at a time when many AMEP teachers were experiencing rapid structural changes within their organisations, different funding arrangements and changing work conditions.

When NCELTR called for Special Project proposals for 1997-98, a recurring theme in many of the content areas submitted was the need to look again at the role of the teacher in relation to course design, assessment and learners. Many of these proposals included a focus on what was termed the creative teacher. Although this concept was intriguing, it was difficult to define. However, it clearly raised questions about the teacher's role within an outcomes-oriented curriculum. These questions included:

- Were teachers no longer able to be creative?
- Are creative teaching and an outcomes-based curriculum mutually exclusive?

As the term creative was explored further, it became obvious that teachers had become concerned about their role as decision makers in the day-to-day practice of second language education. The main issues seemed to focus on the independence of the teacher to make decisions about course design, classroom practice and methodology within a curriculum framework which required assessment of outcomes.

The pressures and requirements of assessing AMEP learners seemed to have led to a perception that a competency-based curriculum was anti-creative. However this contradicted the original intention of the CSWE which was to operate as an open-ended framework at the level of curriculum rather than as a set of syllabus specifications. Teachers involved in the initial development of the curriculum were well versed in the AMEP philosophy of the learner-centred curriculum and had wanted to retain the flexibility to develop courses related to learner needs and to be creative about classroom practice.

The title of the Special Project was modified to incorporate the term learner-centred which has become part of the shared language of the AMEP. For AMEP teachers, learner-centredness highlights their important role in:

- getting to know their learners
- analysing language learning needs

...
• observing learners' daily progress
• seeking out suitable resources and materials
• thinking through and organising classroom activities
• swapping ideas with colleagues.

The project theme – Staying learner-centred in a competency-based curriculum – took the participating teachers back to the teaching principles they considered fundamental to AMEP classes. It also gave them opportunities to review explicitly how these principles impacted on classroom practice. However, this time the principles were reviewed in a curriculum context which was very different from that of the 1980s, when the learner-centred curriculum first emerged in the AMEP.

The papers in this collection illustrate a fundamental element of curriculum implementation which is that a living curriculum should always be a site of discussion, of examination, of experimentation and of change. As you will see, the teachers involved in the project explored many different aspects of the curriculum through action research. They went into their classrooms and into their teaching centres with questions and they came back to their collaborative groups to report, to enquire, to discuss, to offer solutions and to suggest changes.

As coordinators of the research and editors of this book it was our privilege to work with these teachers and to share their insights. Teachers' voices 4 offers you a collection of honest accounts of how this particular group of AMEP teachers perceive learner-centredness. Our thanks go to them and also to those who took responsibility for bringing the groups together in each state: Nita Johnson in Western Australia, Peter Banks in South Australia, Sandra McCarthy in Victoria, Linda Ross in New South Wales and Meg Quinn in Queensland. Our thanks also go to the AMEP Section of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) without whose support this research would not have been possible.

Anne Burns and Helen de Silva Joyce
Rediscovering learner-centredness in the AMEP
Why learner-centred?
Anne Burns and Helen de Silva Joyce

Background
In order to explain the curriculum context which frames the papers in this volume, it is necessary to provide some background for readers unfamiliar with the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) and with the development of the competency-based curriculum which has been adopted as the curriculum and reporting mechanism for this program.

The AMEP is a national program of adult immigrant second language provision, administered through the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA). The program has been in operation for over 50 years (Prospect 1998; Martin 1999). During its history it has been influenced by many movements in second language education and in the wider education and training fields (see Feez in press). It has also had to respond continually to government policy changes and to changing patterns of immigration.

The unique nature of the AMEP, as a nationally funded second language program, means that it has been the site of innovation and experimentation in language and settlement education. At the national level, for example, the development of Situational English in the 1960s was an innovative attempt to contextualise language learning within daily situations of language use. Locally in the different states and territories there have also been developments in curriculum, teaching methodologies, approaches, resources and materials which have influenced the broader program. Lifelines (Crawford and Clemens 1986) from New South Wales and Using the system (Corbel 1985) from Victoria are examples of such materials.

In the 1970s and early 1980s the Program followed general education trends towards a progressive pedagogy which moved away from centralised curriculum into local needs-based course development. The teacher, as a curriculum developer (Burton 1987; Nunan 1987), became the main focus for curriculum design and delivery. Teachers assumed responsibility for analysing the needs of learners, for developing learning and teaching objectives, for identifying and sequencing content and tasks and for developing appropriate classroom materials and activities. This move also reflected the growing interest elsewhere in the English language teaching field in communicative and learner-centred methodologies.

By the mid-1980s there was growing concern in the AMEP with what had essentially become an individualised curriculum. Each classroom seemed to have become, as some put it, ‘an island unto itself’ and it was difficult for learners, teachers and program administrators to identify the links between courses. As in other educational contexts, the demands on the teacher in terms of planning and meeting individual learner needs were considerable. The isolation of one classroom from another also meant that there was a great deal of ‘reinventing the wheel’.

Learner pathways and the introduction of a national AMEP curriculum
In the late 1980s and early 1990s all educational sectors in Australia moved away from a focus on curriculum inputs to a focus on outcomes, which were either stated as
competencies or as outcome statements. This move to outcomes was led by a desire from government funding bodies to have a way of monitoring the effectiveness of programs. However, what may have been forgotten in the AMEP at the end of the 1990s is that a further motivation for outcomes had come from learners themselves. Surveys throughout the AMEP in the 1980s, including the Campbell Review (1986), had demonstrated consistently that AMEP learners felt there was a lack of continuity in the curriculum. They stressed the need to have pathways through their language learning which would enable them to identify more clearly improvements in their English language skills.

In response to learner surveys and to the need to provide outcomes which could be reported to the funding body, various state AMEP organisations including NSW, Victoria and South Australia embarked on the development of learner pathways (see Lipa 1993).

In the New South Wales Adult Migrant English Service (NSW AMES), focus groups of teachers were established to define what content was generally covered at various levels of language teaching within the program, beginner, post-beginner and so on. From this teacher input an attempt was made to define learning outcomes for the program (Colman 1991). This in turn led to the accreditation of the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) (Hagan et al 1993). The thinking behind the curriculum was to develop general outcome statements which would leave the decision-making processes of syllabus design in the hands of the teacher. This preference had emerged from the focus group discussions and was seen as an important basis for the development of the curriculum framework.

Since 1993, a fundamental strategy for curriculum renewal has been to develop a cycle of gathering feedback from teachers which coincides with the official three to five-year cycle for curriculum reaccreditation. This feedback has been gathered through focus groups with the aim of modifying the curriculum in response to teachers’ experiences of working with it. In 1993–94 the CSWE, which had begun as a NSW state-based curriculum, was adopted as the AMEP national curriculum. As a result, the information gathering processes became a much larger exercise as teachers around Australia were consulted through the state and territory programs, with AMES Victoria being represented on the most recent reaccreditation committee. The input to the curriculum from the individual projects reported in this volume will also be considered at the time of the next reaccreditation in 2002.

Changes in educational contexts

The CSWE was not the only policy and educational change that affected the AMEP curriculum. Other changes, occurring throughout the 1990s, had an impact on program delivery at the classroom level.

The 1992 Commonwealth budget brought a change in departmental policy in the area of educational services for those of non-English speaking background. Although the AMEP had expanded over the years into non-settlement areas, such as workplace language and literacy provision, from 1992 the program was to refocus its services through the Department of Immigration on settlement instruction within the first three years of arrival in Australia. Other educational programs involving non-English speaking background learners were to be administered through the Department of Education, Employment and Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA).

Although the CSWE framework had envisaged three stages of learning covering approximately 300 hours of instruction each, government legislation in 1993 also
introduced an overall entitlement of 510 hours of instruction which was intended to bring students to a functional level of English. This level was considered equivalent to a rating of 2.0 in all four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening on the five point Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating (ASLPR), a level which was considered to equip learners with basic everyday English at what is sometimes called a survival level. In 1996, based on feedback from providers and others, a further 100 hours of orientation to learning was provided for learners with special needs.

Achieving outcomes and completing credentials within the 510 hour limit brought a new urgency for teachers in the way they should respond to language learning needs.

An Australian government policy, as in other countries, was also moving towards greater competition and open tendering for service provision. In 1996, competitive tendering for AMEP provision was introduced in Western Australia and Victoria, as a precursor to the tendering of AMEP services as a whole in 1997. The introduction of new players into the AMEP from 1998, when government contracts were signed, coincided with the timing of this project. As a result, the project teachers were developing and delivering their courses against a background of considerable change in working conditions, organisational structure and new contractual arrangements between government and providers for program delivery. The ground had shifted to an arrangement, involving the purchasing of services from competing organisations, from a previous one where the government had provided dedicated funding for service delivery through the state-based educational systems.

Educational programs in many countries, including Australia, which have experienced economic rationalist policies have also seen a marketisation of education (Fairclough 1996). For many educators the old relationships of teacher-learner have been overlaid with those of service provider/client. The AMEP has been no exception to these changes and learners within the program are now just as likely to be referred to as clients as students. In terms of curriculum thinking, there has been a paradigm shift from learner-centredness in the 1980s to client-focused in the 1990s. The tensions for teachers in balancing these two, often competing, pressures reveal themselves in this project as well as in other AMEP professional forums (eg Brindley and Burns 1998).

It is interesting to consider why a project such as this one emerged at this time. For many AMEP teachers in the 1990s, particularly those long-term teachers who have experienced them first-hand, the changes described here stand in stark contrast to the individualistic and laissez-faire curriculum environment in which they worked in the 1980s. The coming together of the many different factors described so far in this paper may help to explain why this theme emerged as a topic for action research.

The Certificates in Spoken and Written English

The teaching and learning areas investigated in the project are also motivated by the curriculum framework used nationally in the AMEP. A brief description of the framework will help to clarify references made in the teachers’ accounts.

The Certificates I, II, III and IV in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) provide a competency-based curriculum framework at four levels of language development – beginner, post-beginner, intermediate and advanced. However, only the first three levels are taught within the AMEP. At the first two levels the outcomes have a general English focus but at the third level the framework focuses on four optional language learning areas:

- vocational English
- English for further study
- English for work and career
- English for international travel
- English for communication
The curriculum framework provides a variety of entry and exit points for students. After initial assessment students are enrolled in a course at the relevant certificate level. Students who need remedial work in a particular skill area or students who have differential achievement across the skill areas can also enrol in specific modules within the framework. This provides them with the opportunity to focus on a particular skill area such as speaking and listening, reading and writing, learning skills or numeracy.

The curriculum framework also recognises differences in the characteristics and learning pace of AMEP learners by the specification of three bands within each level – Band A – slower paced, Band B – standard paced and Band C – fast paced.

The curriculum is based on a social theory of language which is concerned with the relationship between language and the cultural and social contexts in which it is used. It is a text-based curriculum which means that the learning outcomes represent a range of spoken and written text types such as recount, casual conversation, narratives, procedures and so on.

The aim of the curriculum is to specify a range of learning outcomes in broad terms as competency statements. For example CSWE I level competencies include:

- can tell a short recount
- can read a short information text
- can write a short recount.

The outcome statements within the curriculum are deliberately expressed in broad and uncontextualised terms. The purpose of this is to leave the responsibilities for syllabus design with the teachers:

> Within the curriculum framework of the Certificates syllabus design remains the task of the teacher and/or syllabus designers who are concerned with the delivery of English language programs at the local level. Teachers and/or syllabus designers play a key role in developing syllabus documents which contextualise the competencies for specific groups of learners.

(CSWE I and II 1998:26)

As outlined above, the curriculum was developed through the collaborative work of teachers and has been modified and realigned in response to feedback from teachers across Australia. It is a curriculum which deliberately seeks to leave the responsibility of syllabus design in the hands of the teacher. Therefore the NCELT R project provided an opportunity to explore why teachers felt that the introduction of the curriculum had diminished their role as creative and decision-making practitioners.

**Action research**

In order to investigate teachers' notions of creativity and learner-centredness and to look more closely at how these concepts were conceived of in practice, we adopted an action research approach. This approach is one that is well established in the AMEP through previous projects and it was felt to be an appropriate way to explore the extensive issues raised by the topic Staying learner-centred in a competency-based curriculum. As the project theme closely aligned to how the curriculum was actually implemented in the classroom and arose from perceptions about the nature and
impact of the curriculum, we believed it was preferable to conduct the research with
the direct involvement of teachers so that the outcomes would have greater credibility
with other AMEP teachers. The kinds of questions we had in mind to frame the
research were:

1. What do AMEP teachers mean by the term learner-centredness?
2. What kinds of tensions between learner-centredness and competency-based
outcomes seem to emerge in classroom practice?
3. What kinds of programming arrangements are put in place to address learner needs?
4. How does the concept of learner-centredness impact on various areas of course
design?
5. How do teachers go about addressing their principles of learner-centredness in
classroom practice?
6. How do teachers promote learner-centredness in their students?

Collaborative action research in the AMEP Teachers’ Voices projects have been
described at length elsewhere (Burns and Hood 1995, 1997, 1998; Roberts 1998;
Burns 1999), so only a brief outline of the action research processes will be presented
here. We will also highlight elements that emerged as further insights or potential
new directions in our thinking about action research as a medium for professional
renewal in the AMEP.

Teachers in the project came together in research groups in each of five
participating states – Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales
and Queensland. We received 28 expressions of interest for participation in the
project. However, six teachers, for various employment and personal reasons, decided
not to continue. This situation was unusual for NCELTR action research projects, as
previously no teachers had withdrawn once they had attended the first workshop. We
attributed this situation to the increased pace of change occurring in the program at
the time which caused us to reconsider the very real external and internal constraints,
such as time factors, casual working conditions, lack of support or recognition and
lack of confidence, for teachers undertaking action research (constraints in
conducting action research are discussed at greater length in Burns 1999).

As in previous projects, the teachers’ research occurred over a period of six
months. We have found this period of time to be appropriate as it places parameters
on the time teachers need to commit to research and yet allows a sufficient period for
the research to evolve. A series of five workshops interspersed with data collection
and analysis were planned with each group. Three of these were one-day workshops
which were led by us, while the other two were half-day workshops led by local
professional development staff. Each teacher selected a preferred area for research
within the overall theme of learner-centredness and each area was determined by
particular issues or problems within the teacher’s own workplace or classroom.

Two interesting features of conducting action research were highlighted for us in
this project. The first was the high level of tentativeness about the research process
experienced by almost all the teachers at the beginning of the project. We had
observed in other projects that finding a starting point was generally quite difficult for
the teachers. However, it was not just finding the topic or question for the research
that proved disconcerting for them, but feeling that in general they were somehow
not in control of the process.

This feeling was particularly strong at the time of the second workshop. Having
reportedly left the first workshop with feelings of great enthusiasm, they often
expressed the idea at the second that they ‘didn’t know what they were doing or were
in a complete mess'. It was the ongoing support they received at this point in terms of workshop time, discussion and input from peers, support from research coordinators and others within their organisations that seemed to be critical in determining whether they could refocus and continue their research. Most teachers reported that at the conclusion of the project the purpose and principles of action research were much clearer, in contrast with the concepts of experimental research with which they had begun the project. The initial phase, however, seems to be a barrier that has to be pushed through if the research is to continue.

In some of the current language teaching literature, action research seems to be the new vogue in professional development and reflective teaching. It is increasingly being presented as a preferred form of in-service. This seems to presuppose first, that teachers wish to conduct research; and second, that they will be in a position individually to provide their own resources of time and expertise. To us this seems to be both naive and presumptuous. Action research is essentially a collaborative process which requires organisational input and support, if teachers are not left to feel inadequate as researchers. It needs to be socially grounded within the structures and policies of the teaching organisation so that teacher time and effort in conducting research is affirmed and acted upon (for further discussion see Crookes 1993).

A second feature which emerged strongly in this project for the first time was an interest in computer-mediated contact with teachers in other states. Teachers greatly valued the interaction with peers in their own states, sometimes with teachers working for the same organisation whom they had not met before. Having discovered that the issues they grappled with were common ones, they were keen to broaden their contacts even further and link their interests with other AMEP teachers across Australia. This interest was a clear indication for us that there was now a readiness amongst AMEP teachers for on-line professional contact. This finding, added to other on-line initiatives already in progress in the AMEP (see Corbel 1998), led to a new NCELTR project in 1999 to develop an AMEP professional development website. Two on-line professional development courses, Teaching Speaking and Text-based Syllabus Design, which are designed with a collaborative action research element, were held for the first time in the second half of 1999.

A summary of research outcomes

The research into the teacher’s role in the curriculum revealed, as expected, a great diversity of program contexts and a great diversity of curriculum and teaching processes. Many questions which occupied teachers at the initial implementation of the CSWE (see Burns and Hood 1995), such as designing classroom tasks to match the elements of the competencies or completing assessments within time limits, still continued to occupy some teachers, while others had come to terms with the curriculum and saw it as a framework for their own teaching rather than a prescriptive constraint. Some teachers saw the curriculum as an improvement over the more open-ended approaches of the 1980s as it had given shape and structure to their teaching. They felt the time limitations had sharpened their teaching and made them more focused and learner-centred rather than less.

Others, usually those who had sought the views of colleagues, reported that some interpreted the framework as a strait-jacket and had adopted a ‘tick the box’ mentality. Other teachers believed that the curriculum had provided them with a common language for working with others in their organisation. What emerges from these different responses, and hopefully what the papers in this collection also show is
that there is much scope for creativity within the curriculum. It appears to be the individual teachers’ interpretation of learner-centredness, rather than the curriculum framework per se that is at issue.

In the rest of this paper, we will highlight briefly the major areas investigated and what emerged. The papers that follow take up the specific approaches and outcomes in more detail.

Program delivery

Some teachers chose to investigate the bigger picture of learner-centredness by researching different modes of program delivery in their organisations. Some of these investigations involved an evaluation of the state of play through their own perceptions and those of their colleagues and their learners about different types of programming arrangements. What comes through these accounts is a sense that while the arrival of competency-based training has ‘moulded the landscape’ (Gunn, this volume), teachers and program managers are well tuned to restraints to learning such as childcare demands, employment-seeking, class inaccessibility and personal goals and attitudes, and have developed numerous ways of addressing these factors.

Several different strategies are highlighted and evaluated including counselling and induction sessions, flexible class organisation times to fit personal needs, flexible modular programs, combinations of tutorial and distance arrangements, telephone contacts between teacher and learner, continuous enrolment for immediate entry and the flexible grouping and movement of students across classes. What also comes through the descriptions is the continual monitoring and evaluation of these arrangements to ensure that they continue to work effectively (eg Reade, this volume).

The papers that overview these initiatives (see Section 1) examine existing programs such as the NSW AMES Distance Learning Program (Koster) the ELLS South Australia Intermediate Modular Program and the Settlement and Orientation Service (Gunn) as well as new initiatives trialled in response to observation of student needs in the Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE in northern Queensland (Comte, Simpson). The specific changes brought about by a combination of a competency-based approach and the 510 hour entitlement for instruction relate less to a diminution of learner-centredness than to a greater urgency to ensure that learners maximise their learning opportunities. Although these accounts are a very small sample, they suggest that the more recent curriculum arrangements have increased rather than reduced learner-centredness in this sense.

Needs analysis and course design

A key to learner-centredness is the investigation of student needs. This was a major drive in the curriculum of the 1980s when needs analysis became the basis for devising a course. Many needs analysis instruments were developed during this time which aimed to investigate the objective and subjective needs of the students. However, these needs analysis processes placed enormous pressure on teachers who, once they had surveyed learner needs, often felt unable to meet the needs of all the students in their classes through the specification of course content. This was the result of an overemphasis on individual needs which often ignored the fact that the language learning needs which arise from the need to live in an English-speaking context are largely similar. It is learner goals which influence the choices which students make. It
is learner characteristics which influence decisions which teachers make in the
practices of the classroom.

The development of the CSWE recognised that language learning needs were not
necessarily unique to each individual. The years of experience which were brought to
the development of the CSWE recognised that the need to operate in an English-
speaking environment meant that all students had a range of similar needs which
could be expressed as outcomes. However, the curriculum also sought to recognise the
subjective needs of the learners through the identification of learner bands and the
fact that syllabus design decisions were left in the hands of the teachers.

With needs analysis seen as the basis of learner-centredness, it was not surprising
that it became a major area of investigation by a number of teachers in this project.
Some of these teachers were interested in exploring their own needs analysis processes
and those of their colleagues (Kuskow, Given and Russell). Other teachers (Martin,
Carr, Henenberg and Kozar) chose to examine how need analysis is transposed into
decision making about course design.

I have made the necessary mindshift from seeing need analysis as a number of
products or packages, to seeing it as a sophisticated ongoing process.

(Judith Given)

The accounts in this volume reveal a range of approaches to needs analysis which
continue to respond to the needs of learners within the broader context of the
curriculum. It seems obvious from the accounts of the teachers who investigated this
area that the needs analysis approaches of teachers are more varied and more
sophisticated than often assumed.

Learner-centred learning and learner-centred teaching

The classroom is the central concern of teaching and became the focus of action
research for several teachers involved in the project. Some chose to focus on the
learners and their learning (Air, Proudfoot and Head) and how to maximise learning
opportunities for their students. The concerns of teachers have always included how
to draw on the learning strategies which students bring to the classroom, how to
courage students to maximise opportunities outside the classroom to develop
language skills and how to develop opportunities in the classroom through which
students can focus on language as communication. The papers which focus on
learning reveal that these concerns within the classroom remain the same and that
teachers continue to experiment with approaches which address these teaching and
learning issues.

Action research is a process which makes obvious and formal those processes
which teachers engage in day-to-day as they reflect on their teaching and their
students. Reflection is a characteristic of the experienced professional teacher.
Therefore it is not surprising that teaching would become the focus for some of the
teachers involved in the project. Two of the teachers investigated features of teaching
which have always been of interest, that is, integrating a cultural content and
learning-to-learn focus into the classroom (Shnookal and Whitham).

Teaching is no different from other professions in having to come to terms with the
new. Technology and increased research into the nature of spoken and written
language bring new demands to the practice of teaching. Two of the teachers in the
project (Gleedman and Banks) outline how they came to terms with aspects of
language teaching that were new to them.
Achievement and assessment

The introduction of the CSWE increased the need for teachers to assess and report on learner achievement. In the initial stages of implementation it was assessment which seemed to preoccupy teachers and many felt that teaching time had been diminished by the need to assess (Burns and Hood 1995). Many teachers still feel that the classroom is centred more on the reporting requirements of the funding body than on the needs of the learner. Other teachers have integrated assessment into their teaching practices and classroom procedures and have come to see it as an aspect which can assist the learning process.

In the beginning workshops for this project assessment was a central topic of discussion. It seemed that it would become the focus for most of the individual action research projects. However, in the end only two of the teachers (Buzacott and Sangster) chose to reflect specifically on this aspect of the language learning process.

Conclusion

The papers in this volume reveal that many of the concerns which have occupied teachers in the past 50 years of the AMEP still continue to occupy them as they seek to provide optimal learning opportunities for their learners. At the same time teachers are dealing, through reflection and practice, with a range of new concerns.

In the overall literature on teaching and learning it is rare to hear voices from the classroom. However the papers in this volume provide an opportunity to look into the broader processes of AMEP organisations and into individual AMEP classrooms from the perspective of teachers, to hear from the people who are closest to the learners. They reveal a group of teachers who approach their work as reflective and innovative professionals, which has always been a hallmark of AMEP teaching. They also reveal that, despite the many changes which have occurred within the AMEP, teachers still perceive their work as learner-centred practice.

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SECTION ONE
Evaluating program delivery modes

1. Dealing with diversity: 39 teachers and 4500 learners later
   Helene Reade

2. Did we jump or were we pushed? Moving on in the brave new world
   Margaret Comte

3. All of us: A flexible learning approach
   Jo Simpson

4. What are we doing about the settlement needs of learners?
   Margaret Gunn

5. Meeting the needs of distance learners in the AMEP with a competency-based curriculum
   Pieter Koster
Evaluating program delivery modes

Introduction

The Distance Learning mode, because of its slower pace and individual attention to students, offers good opps to teach the competency-based curriculum in a learner-centred way ...

(Pieter Koster)

The five papers in this first section all examine, in one way or another, the question of how to organise and arrange learner-centred and flexible program delivery. Each account reflects the range and diversity of the situations where Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) teachers work and reinforces the contextualised nature of decisions which need to be made to provide effective delivery modes for different groups of learners.

It becomes clear through these accounts that even when teachers are working within the same large program, it is not the case that a 'one size fits all' approach can be adopted as a solution to local requirements and conditions. Indeed, what is important is to draw on and trial a range of strategies to investigate the most effective ways to deliver learner-centred programs. The overall sense from the accounts in this section is that an exploratory and critical stance is necessary from which we can consider how arrangements can be continually changed and improved. As Helene Reade in the first paper in this section suggests: 'ongoing delivery in a learner-centred program is one large action research project, as teachers face problems, propose solutions and evaluate the results'.

Helene Reade, an experienced AMEP teacher who works in the English Language and Literacy Services (ELLS) in South Australia, frames her project by recalling her experiences over a number of years in the Intermediate Modular Program. This is a program which was first initiated by ELLS in 1983 to meet the diverse needs of intermediate students through a modular arrangement where students can work at flexible times on different skills. Helene's paper points out the great importance of looking not only at the content of the curriculum but looking at the way the classes and other activities are organised at a time when students must maximise their learning entitlement and achieve a range of competencies.

Margaret Comte and Jo Simpson are two AMEP teachers who work together at the Barrier Reef Institute of Tertiary and Further Education (TAFE) in Northern Queensland. In their research they chose to work together on a common area in program delivery, but to focus on different aspects. Recent evaluation of student needs had led them to consider the question of barriers to class attendance and to rethink the modes of delivery that had typically operated at their college. They decided to trial a flexible delivery approach, where students could study out of class as well as have access to a teacher. The theme that emerges from their complementary accounts is that researching and trialling the advantages and disadvantages of a flexible approach was the beginning of a learning process for them as program organisers. Their 'challenge', as Margaret points out, is to continue to evaluate how students can best achieve competency outcomes through flexible delivery.

Margaret Gunn also works in ELLS South Australia. With many years of experience in early settlement programs, Margaret wanted to explore interpretations and features of a specific program set up to orient AMEP students to early learning
experiences, the Settlement and Orientation Service (SOS). Her research, in which she surveyed and interviewed SOS teachers, provides a snapshot of how settlement issues are currently being addressed through this delivery mode. She suggests that investigating the nature and the content of these early settlement programs should be an area of further research.

Pieter Koster was working in the AMEP Distance Learning (DL) program in NSW AMES at the time of the research. Pieter was interested in analysing his colleagues’ perceptions of the extent to which a competency-based approach fitted with the distance learning materials It’s Over to You which are used throughout Australia. He found that the teachers’ different perceptions and interpretations of learner-centredness were more significant than the fact that the outcomes are competency-based. Pieter’s research highlights the perennial tensions which arise for teachers between the use of a set textbook and the desire to focus on individual needs.
Dealing with diversity: 39 teachers and 4500 learners later

Helene Reade

Introduction

In 1983, four South Australian Adult Migrant English Service (AMES) teachers applied for special funding to carry out action research into the delivery of a program which was designed to meet the needs of learners at intermediate level. Over the last 15 years this AMES Program has had to adapt to new environments and has been modified by teachers committed to the principles of adult learning, the communicative approach and meeting learner needs.

The political and economic climate has changed during this decade and a half and the Program has responded. In fact those 15 years have been one large action research project, as teachers have faced problems, proposed solutions and evaluated the results. All teachers and all learners have been involved in this action research. Each term has seen innovations based on learner feedback and changing learner needs.

The research context

The Intermediate Modular Program (IMP) is offered through English Language and Literacy Services (ELLS) in South Australia. It is an intermediate level program and involves learners with Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR) levels of 1+ to 2+ in one or more skills. The program runs over ten weeks, with considerable changes in the student body at the end of each term. The program is resourced according to the number of students and their AMEP entitlement. Resources such as available teaching space impact on the structure of the program and all decisions relating to the use of resources are made by the teaching team.

The IMP began in 1983, when the philosophical push was for needs-based learning. The essential philosophy of IMP is based on the recognition that learners at this level have different needs in terms of language, life goals, family responsibilities, social and work commitments and different rates of learning. The needs of every learner cannot be effectively met within the traditional class of twenty students who all attend for the same number of hours per week, at the same time and participate in the same language learning program. The solution to meeting learner needs was not to look only at the content of the curriculum but to look at the way the classes and other activities were organised.

Potential learners are referred to IMP and are invited to attend two teaching sessions during which they meet other learners and the teachers. The IMP is explained and students are given the opportunity to choose their own learning objectives and the content of their study. In these teaching sessions diagnostic assessment enables teachers to assess student performance against other learners and to group them appropriately. Model lessons in reading, writing, speaking and listening are taught and the students are able to decide which modules are most likely to meet their language needs, in both content and methodological terms.

Core Classes are organised according to the writing level of the learners and different Core Classes focus on different genres. A full-time student normally chooses
four modules in addition to their Core Class. The Core Class time is not negotiable but module times are flexible. The learners indicate times when they are not available as well as the number of hours they want to study on a needs analysis form which they complete before they come to the first session. They have also been asked to focus on their language needs and so are somewhat prepared for the choices they have to make.

The teachers take into account the needs expressed by all the learners in the creation of the program timetable, which varies from term to term. Each learner has an individual timetable which takes into account their level of language, time constraints, the desired amount of time in class, the modules chosen, life goals, pace of learning, literacy, trauma and so on. The learning program is negotiated with the learner and adjustments made if necessary. Not all learners have a Core Class. Some learners, especially those with work commitments, elect to study only the modules that suit their learning needs. The following table demonstrates how the needs of individual students are catered for within the IMP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Language needs</th>
<th>Timetable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mohammad</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>Grammar, Listening skills</td>
<td>Listening to Australians - M on pm, Listening to Media - Tues pm, Grammar - Fri am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Civil engineer, Goal – to return to profession, qualifications recognised, Term 2 – studied 15 hrs per week, Term 3 – pregnant – wanted 2 mornings</td>
<td>Reading, Writing, Vocabulary, Speaking accuracy</td>
<td>Core A M on &amp; Wed am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>Mother of two young children, Wanted 15 hours</td>
<td>Speaking, Writing, Listening, Computing skills</td>
<td>Core A – Listening, CALL speaking, writing discussion genre, Reading Vocabulary – M on &amp; Wed am, Listening to Australians – M on pm, Computing &amp; Reading/Discussion – Thurs am, Grammar &amp; Australian Systems – Fri am</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I was a member of the team which was responsible for the development of the original IMP and I had just returned to work in the Program. In the years in between, I had been involved in a number of areas of teaching and curriculum development, including having the role of Project Officer for the introduction of the Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) into South Australia. In assisting teachers to integrate the
CSWE into the classroom, I was vitally concerned to ensure that they did not allow the curriculum to be driven by the need for competency outcomes. In this study I wanted to look at the IMP in the new political and educational climate of competency-based training, in order to see if the needs and interests of the learners were still being met, and if the structure of the program enables them to be met.

The research

Research question: In what way does the structure of IMP meet the needs of learners while meeting the demands of the competency-based curriculum?

One of the ways of ensuring that we remain learner-centred in times of national curriculum, accreditation and benchmarking is by providing a program which will meet the needs and interests of the learners. There are many needs that learners have apart from language needs and throughout the IMP program there are a number of ways in which these needs are identified. Needs are identified through an initial counselling session, induction sessions and through ongoing negotiations with Core Class teachers.

Throughout Term 3 a number of problems in the IMP were identified which required appropriate responses if the program was to remain learner-centred and also to meet the demands of the competency-based curriculum. These problems and responses are outlined below.

Formal assessment

Formal assessment takes place in the Core Class and in some of the modules which lend themselves to it, eg Telephone Skills. In none of these is the syllabus content driven by the assessment and it generally varies from term to term in response to learners. Since the majority of the learners spend at least two terms in the program, assessment is spread over this period of time. A s learners in the program are grouped in the same Core Classes in their first term, it is easy to allocate assessment of certain competencies such as orientation to learning, casual conversation, information texts and formal letter writing. More complex competencies are tackled when learners are at a higher level and are more skilled and confident. The broad range of assessment offered by the three syllabus strands of the CSWE III ensures that assessment is a natural outcome of learning.

Non-core students

One of the problems we identified last term was keeping in touch with the non-core students. We decided to allot two hours per week for one teacher to get in touch with these students by phone or to be available for them to contact her. We set up a session during Week 1 to which they were invited to organise their timetables and to talk about contact arrangements. In fact, only two students came but during the term they got in touch when the time suited them and they then negotiated their timetable. Some students who were non-core last term have become core students this term, as they find their life circumstances change. We will continue to monitor these processes in the future.
Continuous enrolment
There is a policy of continuous enrolment and learners are accepted at any time during the term. This obviously has implications for the curriculum and it also presents problems for group cohesion if new learners join a Core Class every week. In order to deal with this, we decided that the three modules with problematic student numbers would be converted into a Core Class for clients who enter the program from Week 5 onwards. We also decided to continue to run the Induction module to introduce new learners to the Program so that the core teacher could focus on language. The small number and subsequent individual attention has allowed these learners to settle into the Program and confidently access the full range of modules. Their curriculum content is needs-based.

Appropriate materials
A problem with gathering appropriate materials became apparent in the second term, when those of us who were involved in teaching skills and strategies, as well as the language involved in negotiating complex, problematic exchanges became aware that very little Australian material provided good models in a wide range of relevant topics. We decided to work collaboratively, meeting for an hour each week for three weeks, to discuss and plan how we might tackle this problem. Our efforts, made possible by our grouping of students and our team approach, has resulted in the compilation of a set of published, relevant materials from a range of sources as well as the production (albeit amateur) of three scripted dialogues which we believe will meet learner needs and interests.

Problems with levels
Some students expressed dissatisfaction with the level of their Core Class or module(s). As problems have arisen, the core teacher has talked to the learners about alternative modules or Core Classes and an alternative timetable has been negotiated. The grouping of learners allows for this process to occur with little disruption.

Change of circumstances
Some learners found that they were over-committed. They worked with their core teacher to re-negotiate their timetable as they could easily judge whether or not a particular module was going to meet their needs.

Learner pathways
Some learners were confused about their future and were anxious to know what they would be working on next. In response to this need, we set up individual interviews with the core teacher for everyone as the term unfolded. The teacher and learners meet to clarify goals, to look at appropriate ways of reaching those goals, to get information about courses and job opportunities and so on. By Week 8, everyone was clear about what they could be doing at the end of the term. Often from these interviews, learners get insights into ways in which the program can better meet their needs in terms of content, pace, materials and so on.

Completion of CSWE II
Some learners with a literacy lag are in the program. They need to be assessed at CSWE II in writing. Our response to this has been to work with the Curriculum
Officer, who has negotiated between us and the team at CSWE II level. It is now possible that we will offer a module to cope with completion of CSWE II in the future.

Modification of module length
Feedback from some learners indicates that the main reason for their choice of the Preparation for TAFE and University Module is their need to find out how, when and where to enrol. Having got this information, they feel that there is no longer any need for them to attend. This will be considered in our planning for next term, when we may decide that this module will become a five-week one or a drop-in one, or some other solution may be found.

A different module
Learners vary in their desire to study and deliver oral presentations. These are very valuable but very time-consuming. In the past, this has been the preserve of the Core Class, but we are considering the value of offering this as a module.

Conclusion
The IMP has been able to adapt itself to the demands of a competency-based curriculum while at the same time meeting the needs of the students. It has been able to do this through a team approach to teaching and planning and a continuing commitment to ensure that the program remains learner-centred. This has led to an ability to modify and innovate in response to changing learner needs and a changing curriculum environment.
2 Did we jump or were we pushed? Moving on in the brave new world
Margaret Comte

The research context
The aim of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) is to assist newly arrived immigrants to Australia to develop sufficient language skills to access the community, to enter the workplace or to enrol in further study. One of the AMEP classes at the Barrier Reef Institute of Tertiary and Further Education (TAFE), Queensland was a small Certificate III in Spoken and Written English (CSWE III) class of six students. These students were often absent due to work and other commitments and the class could not be continued with such a low attendance rate. The students wanted to complete the program they had begun in Term 1 but evening classes were not an option for them. A flexible mode of delivery had to be considered through which these students, and students in the future, could participate in English language training.

This group had already covered some of the CSWE III competencies in face-to-face mode but assessment of these competencies had not yet been attempted. Through discussions with the students a program was proposed whereby self-paced packages would be written to reinforce the competencies which had been covered in Term 1. The remaining competencies would be delivered face-to-face and assessment would be through an activities project. A timetable was negotiated which included:

- three hours face-to-face delivery
- three hours support in a dedicated classroom
- support by telephone.

The research
Research question: Is flexible delivery a tool for remaining learner-centred in a competency-based curriculum?

Learner-centred delivery requires consultation between teacher and students. In introducing flexible delivery into the AMEP program the negotiated curriculum needed to be discussed in light of the new delivery mode and the students needed to understand the reasons for the change of delivery. They needed to approve the flexible delivery process. The following steps were undertaken to help students understand the flexible delivery mode and to come to a decision about participation.

Step 1 Induction to flexible delivery was conducted as part of normal classroom delivery. Information was delivered to the students and they were asked to complete the worksheets. The worksheets aimed to provide practice for Competency 3 of the Certificate III in Spoken and Written English.
Step 2  

An interview was conducted with the students. The interview was based on the following questions.

Certificate III in Spoken and Written English
Learning outcome 3: Can demonstrate understanding of a spoken information report

Listen to the talk and answer the following questions:
What is the main idea of the talk?
What do you think flexible learning means?
Do you think flexible delivery would help you? Explain why or why not.

Do you like English?
Do you like studying?
What type of study have you done in the past?
Do you prefer to study in a group or by yourself?
Do you like to have a time plan for completing a task?
Do you think you need to learn more English?
What are your interests and hobbies? Would you participate in these activities in Townsville if you were more confident with your English?
What would you like to be doing: Next year In two years In five years?
Do you wish to gain employment in Australia?
Would you be interested in any of the following:
  • Volunteering for a non-profit organisation community group?
  • Participating in cultural activities, eg music, art?
  • Involving yourself in your child’s school/education?
  • Participating in sports/recreation?
  • Doing further study formally or informally?
If you are interested in further study after this course would you attend TAFE, or university or enrol in a course based on interests?
Would you study full-time or part-time?
Do you have a driver’s licence or would you like to get a driver’s licence?
In what areas would you like to improve your English?
To achieve your goals, what areas of English do you think you need to improve?
Describe your expectations of learning English at TAFE.
What do you think the classes will involve?
Some uncertainty was felt about the students being able to make the extra commitment for independent study and being able to cope with flexible delivery mode. A diary was begun as a research tool which also helped in working through the transition to flexible delivery. The diary noted uncertainties and later justifications as seen from the entries below.

Students expressed the need for a teacher. Do they feel a sense of abandonment?
We wanted the students to explore other modes of delivery to assist their future study. A mixed mode of delivery or a combination of face-to-face and self-paced plus support could be considered.

Are the students independent enough? Do they understand the greater need for self-discipline in their studies?
As the students were unable to attend classes, they needed to acquire more independent learning habits to continue study and work.

One student said they would miss the interaction with other students. This class interaction would not continue due to non-attendance. Encourage peer-tutoring for continued interaction.

Can the students identify their own particular needs for learning?
We wanted students to develop an awareness of the need for lifelong learning.

Are we expecting too much?
We needed to foster autonomous and committed learning practices. We wanted students to take an active role in their own learning and progress. However, the reality was that there were concerns about successful module completion. This led to the need to provide on-going access to teachers for this student group.

As the research proceeded we had discussions with other teachers who were delivering their courses through flexible delivery. Three more steps to support students to make the transition were added.

Step 3 The letter of acknowledgment (see page 12) was devised to accompany each flexible delivery package to ensure that the student had received the package and was committed to completing it. A self-addressed envelope was also enclosed. To ensure that the student had read and understood the package a short set of questions was added to be completed and returned.
Step 4  The student work record checklist was developed (see portion below). This was designed to keep a record of material sent out, returned and marked by the teacher. A checklist was devised and kept in each student file.

To be returned as soon as possible
Stamped addressed enveloped provided

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I have received the package Reading an Information Text (Part 2 Section A) and have read through and understand my commitment to completing this learning outcome.

Signature: ___________________________  Date: ___________________________

Please read through the following information and answer the questions. This must be returned as soon as possible to inform the teachers that you have received your package and understand the tasks you must complete.

1. How many tasks are you required to complete in this package?
2. How are you expected to complete the tasks?
3. Do you have to collect and include anything? If yes, what is it?

Checklist: Materials supplied for flexible delivery packages

Student name: ___________________________
Address: ___________________________  Phone: ___________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Outcome</th>
<th>Materials Sent</th>
<th>Date Sent</th>
<th>Confirmation received</th>
<th>Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Journal Booklet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LO 11</td>
<td>Flexible Package</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledgment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extra material</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LO 9</td>
<td>Pre-reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexible Package part 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledgment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexible Package part 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledgment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extra material</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Further collaboration with other teachers demonstrated the need to develop the following student contact register to record contact.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implement</th>
<th>Check</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Initial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Induction</td>
<td>1. Provide information on programs that meet the client's needs, including where this module fits into their course/program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Check learner's enrolment for correct module information and record details</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Provide learner with Flexible Learning Induction package</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Explain processes of RPL/credit transfer, provide advice to learner on gaining recognition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>5. Develop individual learning plan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Discuss preferences for learning styles and facilities available eg library, videos, web</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Contract</td>
<td>7. Allocate learning resources to learner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Clarify assessment requirements</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Set dates for assessment and completion of module</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Explain process of submitting assessment tasks and feedback activities to gauge student progress, eg Email, fax, phone, written</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial contract</td>
<td>11. Stress the need for learner to take control of own learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timetable and Access details</td>
<td>12. Determine times and methods for communication between learner and teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core Class</td>
<td>13. Begin instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14. Set up learner files and maintain record of progress and results</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15. Complete examiner return at completion of study period</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

We expected that there would be a collaborative approach to the competency-based outcomes. It was hoped that students would identify their own particular needs and identify what was important for them to learn. It was also hoped that students would discover other sources to assist self-directed learning and thus gain more independent study habits. It was important for the students to develop their own learning style within a self-paced learning program. The results in this area were varied.

• Although module completion did not take place some outcomes were achieved through completion of the self-paced packages.
• Independence was demonstrated through a project set in a real-life context.
• Not all students made use of other resources for learning such as the support class and the phone support. Communication was mostly initiated by the teacher.
• Negotiation between teacher and students who attended face-to-face sessions did take place and students were able to identify areas of need and/or interest in their language learning within the competency-based curriculum framework. Choices were also given in the self-paced packages.
• Study habits appeared to have been formed by some students, although feedback was that work commitments took priority.
• Students were still able to access learning.

Reflections

The shift to the flexible mode in full or part needs careful planning. This project revealed a number of areas which need to be considered when developing self-paced English as a Second Language (ESL) packages:

• Teachers need professional development in how to write effective flexible learning packages.
• Time is needed to prepare students for independent study and for taking responsibility for their own learning.
• An adequate time is needed to write self-paced packages. One thing that became evident in this flexible delivery program was the increased workload for the teacher. Time spent designing the packages, negotiating to meet learner needs, monitoring progress and readiness for assessment, giving feedback and keeping records all contribute to the teacher's workload in the short-term.
• There is a change in the relationship between teacher and student.

Preparing language students to achieve all outcomes in the macro skills through flexible delivery mode is a challenge. For those in ESL programs, flexible delivery presents difficulties because self-paced learning packages rely on the ability to read and write. The logistics of addressing speaking competencies through flexible delivery is a major consideration.

The effectiveness of self-paced ESL instruction needs more research and evaluation. In terms of this project we did not jump into flexible mode but we were given a gentle push. We realise that flexible delivery is here but are we ready?
Did we jump or were we pushed?

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3 All of us: A flexible learning approach

Jo Simpson

Research setting

The Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE is situated primarily along the north-eastern coast of Queensland encompassing eight campuses from the Whitsundays in the south, Charters Towers in the west, Ingham in the north and Palm Island in the east. This research was undertaken at the Townsville City Campus which has a small language unit primarily for AMEP, Advanced English for Migrants (AEMP) and JPS learners. The language unit works collaboratively with other units involved in integrated Language and Literacy in Vocational Education, Literacy and Workplace English Language and Literacy programs.

The students

The group of students involved in this research were at Level III of the CSWE curriculum. The research looked at introducing a flexible learning program into what was traditional classroom-based approach to delivery. The idea of a flexible learning program was born out of necessity. The students were often involved in part-time, casual and seasonal work and/or were mothers with young children or were pregnant women. This group was typical of many of the students who regularly enrolled and were eventually unable to continue face-to-face learning because of external demands.

Purpose of the research

The research was undertaken collaboratively by myself and Margaret Comte. A complementary account written by Margaret appears on page 9. Providing a more flexible approach to learning and shifting the emphasis from teacher-driven learning to autonomous learning was an obvious way to build up more accessible learning opportunities in our unit. The challenge was to remain as learner-centred as possible while moving towards this approach.

My first objective was to trial flexible learning approaches in the CSWE III program to meet the needs of the current students. We took as a starting point Peoples' (1997:6) definition: ‘Flexible learning is planning, developing and facilitating a range of learning strategies that meet the needs of individual learners.’

In considering what made for an ideal flexible learning environment we adopted the proposals that it:

1. is student centred and recognises diversity and the importance of equity and individualisation of learning in its curriculum and pedagogy
2. relies on a variety of learning resources and media for flexible delivery of content and interactions with learners
3. frees up the place, time, pace and modes of learning and teaching
4. fosters lifelong learning habits and skills in its learners and teachers/trainers.

(University of Southern Queensland 1997)

Flexible learning does not mean that students are required to do all the associated tasks.
and activities of the learning program alone. We adopted a ‘mixed mode’ approach whereby students were given print-based learning packages, a core class which required attendance and opportunities for individual teacher support either by phone, email, or on campus as outlined in the timetable in Table 1.

My particular focus in the research was on how flexible learning would work at an individual level and what role peer tutoring could play.

Steps taken

There were a number of steps in the research.

1. An induction to the program involving an oral presentation, a brochure and worksheets. This covered the timetable, the resources to be used, the role of the teacher, the role of the student, and brainstorming sessions on the changes from classroom based to flexible learning/teaching.

2. A meeting with each student to explain the individual focus of the course and the teacher and student contract that was to be completed. Conditions of the contract were outlined in a generic form and then negotiated to suit each individual.

3. A learning package was sent out with a letter of commitment. Students were expected to sign and return the letter on receipt of the package to show their intention of completing the work within the agreed timeframe.

4. Further learning packages were sent out upon receipt of each previous package. Feedback and assessment were undertaken as appropriate in response to each package.

Table 1: Timetable proposed to the students for their comment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.00–12.00 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Teacher support (individual teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>support – student initiated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>Core class (classroom based teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>directed learning)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students were able to contact us by phone or to come into the unit if they needed support at times not on the timetable. The self-access centre was also promoted as a learning resource for them to use independently.

Discoveries made

Did the approaches work at an individual level?

In the present climate, the concept of flexible learning is considered very current if centres are to remain viable learning centres. As Hall (1996:29) suggests, ‘the emerging learning paradigm is learner-centred and outcome-based, requiring new roles for faculty, students, administrators, college campuses, and many non-formal learning sites – and new roles for distance education’.
I monitored the students' responses to the flexible learning packages through informal interviews, analysis of students' written work, and direct observation. Students were given the opportunity to utilise resources from their own working or home environments or other interests to complete the competency requirements. All responses given by the students indicated that they felt the materials were aligned to their individual needs. They enjoyed developing increased awareness that the materials they used every day in their respective environments were valuable learning resources and they began to understand that the classroom is not the only environment which can foster learning.

One student made the interesting comment that while he knew that engaging in conversation with native English speakers was an opportunity to improve his ability in English, he thought that such a 'fun, enjoyable, non-stress' situation couldn't be classified as a real learning activity. The opportunity to utilise, in his own time, the texts and tasks from his various personal environments made him understand that everyday tasks are valuable learning resources.

If students are encouraged to direct their learning by focusing on their needs, using their environments and working at a pace that is comfortable, flexible learning can work well at an individual level.

**Is peer tutoring instrumental in remaining learner-centred?**

I attempted to foster peer tutoring as the students had developed a good rapport during the classroom-based program in the previous term. In the Core Class we developed a number of peer tutoring strategies to promote engagement between the students in the tasks they were required to complete. We focused on enabling the students to explain difficult concepts to each other, share resource materials and learn from each other's mistakes.

My expectation was that students would telephone each other to discuss learning outcomes and the associated tasks and activities and to encourage each other in completing the tasks. What I found exciting was that although they often rang each other it was to arrange social outings, rather than to talk about the program. Pair and group work activities did seem to encourage them to interact but it was difficult to monitor this because of the low attendance in the Core Class.

**Responses to the research process**

The research was an exciting challenge. For a long time I have wanted to introduce flexible learning into what was a more traditional classroom-based approach. This project gave me the opportunity to commit myself to investigating the pros and cons of the practicalities of flexible learning.

The biggest step for many teachers is to lose the security of directing learning from a classroom setting.

Most of us, from earliest childhood education have come to expect certain conditions of education – that the teacher and student can see each other, that learning is best achieved through close, visible interactions, and that the media or technologies used belong in the background.

(University of Southern Queensland 1997)
The changing nature of adult education means that the service we provide must change.

The new paradigm assumes that students are customers who are involved in an active and ongoing dialogue with their educational process and that dialogue will include many voices, one of which may be the experienced voice of the faculty. As they have been in the past, faculty will once again become developers of educational programs, gatherers of pertinent information for presentation, and mentors to students seeking an expanded dialogue on specific or specialised areas of knowledge. There are world-wide drivers of change that both reflect and propel the shift in its many facets, ensuring that the new paradigm will eventually redefine the way we teach and learn.

(Hall 1996:32)

I found that through this process of handing over more responsibility to the students the challenge was to respond to their individual needs while maintaining the focus on the outcomes to be achieved. It took some time for me and the students to accept our respective new roles. Although the research was limited in its scope, the potential was very evident.

Although the peer tutoring concept had limited success because of constraints of time and access, the many conversations I had with the students highlighted their frequent collaboration with workmates, partners and children in completing the learning materials. The students' ability to learn from their peers and to involve their family and friends points to their increasing awareness of the notion of lifelong learning through interaction with their environment.

Although our program was limited to print-based learning packages with some audio-tape support, I feel the concept of a 'mixed mode' of delivery is relevant to future developments for flexible learning. Students were provided with an opportunity to integrate English language development with work. Having to focus less on face-to-face classroom instruction was a benefit at a time when students were still establishing themselves in a new country.

The experience of doing this research was very much a positive one. Being challenged to respond to learners' needs and daily environments in a very practical and immediate way was very rewarding for both the learners and myself. Although preparation and feedback take a lot of time, I believe that, given a change in the infrastructure of organisations to support new flexible learning demands, the potential for quality lifelong learning is immense.

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I would like to thank Margaret Comte for her enthusiastic adoption and collaborative development of this project. Her professionalism, effort and support were greatly appreciated.
4 What are we doing about the settlement needs of learners?

Margaret Gunn

The issue

In 1995, the then Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (DIEA) funded several Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) projects aiming ‘to improve the initial settlement process at the same time as contributing to the achievement of English language skills’ (Bolkus quoted in Langille 1997:3). The projects served locally to allay teacher fears that the newly introduced competency-based curriculum would threaten their capacity to respond adequately to learner settlement needs.

The English Language and Literacy Services (ELLS) in Adelaide chose to allocate the extra 50 hours funded by the project to all students enrolling for the first time at both beginner and intermediate levels in the AMEP. These hours were allocated to the classroom, to an improved induction process for learners entering classes and to the newly established Settlement and Orientation Service (SOS) which developed regular bilingual information sessions and a full-time drop-in centre. The SOS has been in operation for over two years.

At no time has the SOS been seen as a substitute for addressing settlement issues in the classroom. Instead, its purpose is to complement and support the teaching program. The NCELTR Action Research project offered me the opportunity in my role as coordinator of the SOS to clarify for myself what teachers were doing about learner settlement needs in the classroom.

Learner needs and settlement needs

Learner needs and settlement needs are terms which slip easily off the tongue in the AMEP context. Behind each one is a sense of immediacy, originating either from the pressure of the 510 hours allocated to eligible learners or the fact that these learners are mostly within their first year of settlement in Australia.

While there is substantial literature about determining and meeting learner needs in the AMEP (Nunan 1998), it is only recently that the issue of settlement has found a voice in TESOL research (NCELTR 1997; Burnett 1997; 1998). Notions of settlement (Burnett 1998) typically refer to the existence of needs and concerns which are not language related. For example, a learner may be experiencing difficult living conditions or be preoccupied with relatives left behind in the country of origin.

AMEP teachers typically pride themselves in being able to squeeze anything and everything into their English language classes, but it is becoming harder to be cavalier about this. A part from the inherent challenge of a diverse group of ESL learners, teachers and support services face the demands of the competency-based curriculum and an implicitly competitive environment. The SOS is in a position to initiate activities which promote language use and provide informational services and to complement and support the work of classroom teachers and educational counsellors.
The background

Before the restrictions of 510 hours of tuition hours and introduction of the competency-based curriculum moulded the landscape, the perceived settlement needs of AMEP learners were addressed in quite a different way than seems possible now. Settlement needs were once met primarily by excursions to local haunts such as the local council offices, Parliament House, the city power station, Red Cross headquarters, botanic research institutes and organic farms. Teaching settlement appeared to mean exposing students to places, organisations and systems deemed representative of the new society. It meant offering students access to places or organisations they may or may not encounter in the future. It meant offering relevant vocabulary, the opportunity for interaction with native speakers and physical encounters with new environments. Destinations were determined either by student requests or opportunities identified by teachers.

It would seem that settlement has now become a much more serious pragmatic issue because:

- 45 percent of students have Special Humanitarian or Refugee visas
- program funding is contingent on language achievement outcomes and substantial time for assessment procedures must be found, probably at the expense of excursions
- welfare recipients must sign Activity Test agreements to attend approved training classes
- fee paying students are constantly calculating costs and benefits
- people who pay for English language classes off-shore find they are desperate for any kind of work.

In this climate group adventures beyond the classroom appear flippant and there is no surplus time or money for settlement-related information. In a society where the immigrant’s presence is questioned, classroom endeavours must produce linguistically functional individuals rather than cohesive groups.

The survey

Partly because I needed reassurance that settlement issues were being addressed in the classroom, and partly to restate the partnership I have always fostered between teachers and the SOS, I undertook a snapshot survey of AMEP classes being conducted in the ELLS city centre on two consecutive days.

I trialled a two-page survey which focused on teacher perceptions of settlement content in classroom tasks. I also interviewed three teachers personally when the survey was being trialled. I then distributed the survey more widely in the final week of Term 2, 1998 and relied on teachers to complete the survey independently. Of a possible 25 teachers, 22 responded to the survey. A summary of the survey questions is outlined below.

**Question 1** Teachers were asked to give a brief summary of each task that occurred in their class on the specified day.

**Question 2** Teachers were asked to indicate which tasks they felt related to settlement. I did not offer a definition of settlement, wanting instead to investigate what the term might mean in its common usage in an AMEP setting.
What are we doing about the settlement needs of learners?

The second part of the question also asked teachers to indicate if each task was pre-planned or student initiated. This gave an indication of two things:

- how flexible the teacher was willing to be in responding to student enquiries
- the extent to which students used the class as a source of settlement information.

Question 3

Teachers were asked to indicate:

- the macro-skill which was the main focus of the tasks which had settlement content
- what form the settlement content took
- what the implications for the SOS program were.

Questions 4 to 7

These questions probed:

- the source of materials used, eg Australian, US, UK or countries of origin
- teacher judgment about student capacity to identify with the content
- the extent to which the teachers considered the content was relevant to students.

Question 8

Teachers were asked about the general attitude of students when settlement issues were addressed in the class.

Observations and results

Given that most students were experiencing a period of transition, it was feasible to expect a high incidence of settlement-related content in the new arrivals program or the areas of the intermediate program which admitted newly arrived residents.

How much settlement content is offered and where is it offered?

I identified 85 tasks and these became the basis for the subsequent analysis. The average number of tasks per class was four. The first analysis of the survey results in Table 1 below determined two things:

1. the percentage of classroom tasks which were perceived by classroom teachers to have settlement content
2. the place in the AMEP program where settlement issues were being taught.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program area – CSWE level</th>
<th>Ratio of settlement tasks to other tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Arrivals Unit – CSWE I</td>
<td>15:32 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Focus – CSWE I</td>
<td>8:8 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary – CSWE I and II</td>
<td>26:33 (79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate Modular – CSWE II and III</td>
<td>8:12 (66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>57:85 (67%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The analysis of the tasks suggests the following results in the different Programs.

**New Arrivals Program** While students in this program might be regarded as most urgently in need of settlement content, teachers focused mainly on language acquisition. Settlement was relevant to less than half the tasks, i.e., 47%.

**Special Focus Program** These are usually low intensity, community focused classes for people in their second or third course. The teachers (2 of the 22) clearly interpreted 100% of tasks as being relevant to settlement.

**Elementary Program** Teachers indicated a surprisingly high percentage of tasks (79%) with settlement content.

**Intermediate Modular** Teachers also incorporated settlement content at a substantial rate, i.e., 66%. This was even when the class focus was on speaking or writing structures.

These percentages and their distribution beyond the NAU were both surprising and encouraging. At times I had wondered if the existence of the SOS was used to absolve teachers from addressing settlement issues in class. The results also confirmed my preference to offer a diverse range of SOS Information Sessions, not only those that might typically be relevant to students in the New Arrivals Program but also of interest to people whose immediate needs are largely satisfied.

### In what form is settlement content presented?

Ten different task modes were identified and correlated with the incidence of settlement content as perceived by teachers (see Table 2 below).

**Table 2: Task mode and percentage with settlement content**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task mode</th>
<th>Percentage of tasks with settlement content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher directed practice</td>
<td>19:31 (61%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole group discussion</td>
<td>10:14 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small group discussion</td>
<td>7:8 (88%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair work</td>
<td>4:5 (80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio cassette</td>
<td>3:5 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>2:2 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excursion</td>
<td>1:1 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text book exercise</td>
<td>3:4 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>3:7 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSWE assessment</td>
<td>5:8 (63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>57:85 (69%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These results suggest whole class, small group and pairwork tasks regularly refer to settlement, for example:

- In small group activities settlement issues were discussed 88% of the time. Some of the topics covered in small groups were the vocabulary for clothes and sharing stories.
- Teacher-directed practice was the most frequently adopted mode and was perceived in 61% of cases as focusing on settlement content, e.g., discussing the World Cup soccer results or inviting someone to a party.
- Only three of the eight CSWE assessment tasks were not considered relevant to settlement.

To what extent do students use their class as a source of settlement information?

English language learning is only a small, albeit significant, factor in the overall settlement experience of learners. However, both students and teachers operate under considerable pressure to maximise the time available. This has made consideration of learner needs even more of an imperative. One of the significant ways to maximise relevance is to allow students to initiate tasks or to share in setting the direction of classroom tasks. Question 2b of the survey identified which tasks were:

- student initiated
- teacher planned and modified by student initiative
- student initiated either exclusively or jointly
- planned by the teacher alone.

Table 3 below summarises the results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task Type</th>
<th>Percentage of Settlement-Related Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student initiated</td>
<td>5 out of 85 tasks (80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher planned and modified by students' initiative</td>
<td>25 out of 85 tasks (84%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student initiated either exclusively or jointly</td>
<td>30 tasks out of the 85 (83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned by the teacher alone</td>
<td>55 of the 85 tasks (38%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results indicate teachers have a firm grip on what goes on in classes, allowing student agendas to influence only one-third of tasks analysed. Teachers teach language, not settlement, although if they invite student initiative in task implementation, settlement issues are likely to have a marked effect on content.

The degree to which students express interest in settlement-related content is of interest to the SOS. Student questioning in the language classroom appears to relate more to the context of the new country than about language.
How are settlement issues presented?

Out of the 85 identified tasks, 57 (69%) were perceived as having settlement content. I decided to investigate in which macro-skill focus areas settlement issues were being raised. Table 4 below outlines the results and shows that settlement issues were raised 68% in speaking and listening tasks with literacy tasks having a much lower profile of 32%.

Table 4: Settlement issues and how they are presented

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaking &amp; Listening</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group discussion</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher directed practice</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td>39:57 (68%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading &amp; writing</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group work</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher directed practice</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td>19:57 (32%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tasks with a speaking and listening focus were twice as likely to relate to settlement than reading or writing tasks. This left me wondering if 68% of settlement content is transitory class talk, leaving minimal record in its passing.

So much induction in this society is through written texts such as brochures, maps, advertising and instructions. Were teachers incorporating realia - written or visual - into lessons, or were settlement issues addressed merely by talking about things or recounting recent experiences? Discussion certainly has a place, but the risk is that students are left with nothing substantial, neither information in a form they can review nor the language to access it.

In the SOS, we expend substantial effort collecting and maintaining realia for teacher as well as student use. Materials from government and non-government agencies, the Internet and public outlets are readily available in an information-laden society. We have prepared our own SOS Information Sheets, pitching the text no higher than ASLPR 1+, and simultaneously translating them into student first languages. These Information Sheets are procedural or information texts, summarising frequently asked questions, eg getting a driver's licence, sending money overseas, buying a secondhand car.

Material in community languages is a shrinking commodity but we locate and distribute as much as possible in other languages. Despite these SOS contributions, the classroom is a more effective context for ensuring students achieve access to written texts.

What do teachers expect from the settlement content?

The remaining questions on the survey revealed the following results:

- •
- •
- •
- •
While some reference was made to the student countries of origin as a source of task content, an overwhelming majority of tasks drew on locally relevant or Australian materials.

Teachers thought that the settlement content would be familiar or relevant to students in the vast majority of tasks, either immediately or in the near future.

In general, students in class expressed active interest in settlement content, though this varied according to the topic. For example:

- One teacher commented: ‘Health’ is of no interest to a young, single, healthy male
- Another teacher with a literacy class commented that it is very difficult to make any headway introducing settlement content when students have little of the target language. This confirmed the reality that without the bilingual tutors in the Information Sessions or translated material, the effort of providing a settlement service is wasted.

Conclusions

Burnett (1998) explores the problem of trying to define settlement. She asks in effect – Who wants to know? The answer would be different for politicians, psychiatrists, social researchers and the new residents themselves. The voice of the settler is rarely heard in the wider community. This is not only because of language or cultural barriers, but possibly because western society belittles the transition experience, in spite of it being surprisingly common.

While AMEP teachers are privileged to be among the first people in Australia to have a prolonged association with many new residents during their initial period of settlement, we participate in only a fraction of the settlement experience and rarely see the full picture. Burnett (ibid) explores notions of settlement as process and as a set of achievements but there can be no expectation that our learners will either complete the process or build up the definitive set of achievements in the limited time they are in the AMEP.

Burnett (ibid) disputes settlement as an event but learners are often asked to retell the story of their journey to Australia, as if the arrival were a conclusion, an experience in the past tense. Some students in my experience are able to write for some months about very little else.

The most obvious feature of the survey is that there is no definitive perception about settlement content amongst the teachers. For some, every communicative task has an ultimate settlement function because of the new environment in which students hope to operate or because a task calls directly for the learner to interact with a social situation.

Some contradictions were obvious within the survey results:

- One teacher saw a pronunciation class as relevant to settlement while another thought quite the opposite. When these same teachers engaged with their classes about learner pathways, neither perceived this as relevant to settlement, despite the discussion being a response to student questions.
- Some teachers saw grammar teaching as time where the content cannot relate to settlement while others see grammar tasks as providing tools for communicative survival.
- One teacher did not identify a local newspaper article nor the task of responding with a letter of complaint as settlement-related.

This survey has captured a brief picture of teacher attitudes and practices. Any
confusion in teacher perception of what settlement content is, is not of particular concern. Of more concern to the SOS is the substantive nature of the content that is being included in class and the mode in which it is presented. Better integration of materials for classroom use could well become a target for further action by the SOS.

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Meeting the needs of distance learners in the AMEP with a competency-based curriculum
Pieter Koster

Introduction
This piece of collaborative action research, conducted within NSW AMES, focuses on the possibilities of remaining learner-centred while using a competency-based curriculum in a distance learning environment. At the time the research was conducted I had been teaching in the Distance Learning (DL) program for about two years, after several years teaching in the English in the Workplace program and then in regular classes for newly arrived migrants.

I joined the action research team because it was clear to me that the distance learning environment offered an opportunity to view the debate about learner centredness and competency-based curricula from a different perspective. I also wanted to explore a hunch that distance learning, because of its unique relationship with the student, could provide some insight for the classroom teacher and the developer of materials, to the eventual benefit of the students. These goals were beyond the scope of the research I was eventually able to carry out, but may be worth taking up as the debate progresses.

I will begin with a brief overview of the DL processes and materials in use at the time, and the way in which they related to the competencies of the Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE). I will then describe a structured series of discussions with DL teachers, at which the research question was addressed, and finally draw some tentative conclusions from what is an admittedly small amount of data. The major finding is that the answer to the research question is very largely dependent on the definition of learner-centredness adopted by the respondent.

NSW AMES Distance Learning Program
Each teacher in the Distance Learning Program is responsible for teaching 50 students. They are allocated to teachers more or less randomly, except when there are special needs. The level of each student is initially assessed via a written test and a telephone interview. They then receive an appropriate student book and cassette. Students are expected to spend about five hours per week on the workbook, and they speak to their allocated teacher on the telephone for half an hour per fortnight. These calls can be initiated by the teacher or the student but occur at set appointment times, usually linked to returned and corrected homework. The regular telephone appointments overcome one of the recurring problems in distance learning by providing a context of timetabled progress combined with meaningful personal contact.

It's Over to You
The basic materials used are the books in the series It's Over to You (IOTY), which are by and large much appreciated by students and teachers alike. Each unit of work in the books has exercises for the students to complete and check against the answers at the
back of the book. Any problem areas can be addressed during the next telephone lesson. The course also requires students to record themselves speaking on tapes and to send in the tapes with their other homework. These tapes are checked by the teacher for pronunciation and other problems. The tapes are returned, with teacher comments, along with other corrected homework.

Other materials are selected or created by teachers in response to individual needs as noted in the returned homework and the telephone lessons.

A particularly valuable feature of the material is the 'action project' in each unit of work, where the students are required to put something into practice. For example, students are asked to go to the department store, read the store directory, write down any words they don't know and discuss them with their teacher during the next lesson. This gives both teacher and student scope for the 'practice' of language. Some students spend a great deal of time and effort on these projects, for example, even recording their telephone conversations with the council when they ask about library opening hours and so on.

IOTY comprises 15 books in three stages of five books each. Each book has a theme such as education or work. Almost all the students progress through the books in regular order, beginning at the level they were assigned on assessment and working their way through the books of that level before moving on to the next level. At the conclusion of each set of books a CSWE certificate is awarded.

Students are usually offered the opportunity to depart from the 'natural' order if they have a special interest in one theme or perhaps no interest in another. A single young man driving taxis at odd hours may choose to skip the book focusing on how to communicate with schools about the education of small children and move on to job-seeking skills in the book on work. A retired grandmother babysitting her grandchildren, on the other hand, may choose to skip the book on work and go on to socialising. Only a small percentage of students avail themselves of this offer. Some even insist that they begin at level one book one, regardless of whether the level or the subject is appropriate. They don't want to 'miss' anything.

The books function as a kind of syllabus, which is applied in varying degrees of looseness. Teachers and students are free to roam within and without the books according to perceived needs and preferences, but are at the same time kept in check by the requirements of the AMEP reporting system. I would venture to say that the vast majority of distance learning students receive a more structured course of study than classroom students because of their (sometimes loose) progression through one set of course books, usually with one teacher.

I should qualify the statement that IOTY functions as a kind of syllabus. This is true in the sense that IOTY is a series of course books which are used more or less sequentially throughout a student's course of study and that successful completion of them satisfies most of the demands of the CSWE. On the other hand, the five books within each stage do not constitute a progression of any sort. They are not graded and each stands alone and independent of the others. One result of this arrangement of material is that there are huge 'jumps' between each of the three stages. It's not always the case that an earlier stage prepares the way for a later stage.

A DL student uses five hours per week of their AMEP 510 hours entitlement to tuition. This allows for a maximum of ten terms, although few students stay that long. Most have already used some of their entitlement in classrooms, or experience changes in their circumstances that prevent them from continuing.
It's Over to You and CSWE

The three stages of IOTY correspond roughly with the three certificate levels in the CSWE. Most teachers have mapped the competencies as set out in the CSWE documents on to the exercises in IOTY and added extra exercises to fill the gaps. These are then used as assessments, so that the reporting requirements for CSWE certificates are satisfied. Even speaking and listening competencies are assessed, using the telephone conversations and the students' recorded responses to exercises in the books. Each lesson in the books concludes with a 'sendback' in which the material presented in the unit is assessed (the answers to sendback exercises are not given in the back of the book, so that the student has to rely on the teacher correcting him or her).

The IOTY materials were not informed by the competencies of CSWE when they were written, so that the 'fit' between the student exercises and the CSWE competencies is far from perfect. Some competencies are not covered at all, while others have exercises that are inadequate for assessment of the competencies because they do not specify the performance indicators set out in the CSWE curriculum.

Teachers have developed resources which adapt the current materials or add wholly new elements to them as a kind of appendix. Some extra units of work were written by the DL team to cover competencies not otherwise covered in the material. The motivation for this is the requirement that the competencies for CSWE must be achieved before the student can progress to the next stage.

The DL team also conducts moderation sessions at which benchmark texts (written and spoken) are assessed according to the requirements of the competencies. These sessions are a valuable source of information about how the materials used fit the competencies. This information is then used to adapt the exercises or to write new materials for particular competencies.

The research plan

It was from this background and with this specific teaching methodology in mind that I joined the collaborative action research team. After several discussions with the research team, at which I outlined the way in which the Distance Learning Program works, I decided that the most practical methodology to adopt was that of the in-depth interview. A major constraint on the research was the imminent downsizing of AMES and the consequent loss of morale, coupled with the range of other matters with which teachers now had to busy themselves.

I called for volunteers from the DL team to join a structured discussion group. Only one such meeting could be held, and only three teachers were present. The questions to be addressed were formulated with the assistance of the research team and distributed to prospective participants beforehand. These were:

- Is It's Over to You a learner-centred syllabus? Are there any generally accepted criteria as to what constitutes being learner-centred?
- What problems are created by the imposition of a competency-based curriculum on our (learner-centred?) program?
- How do these problems interfere with our learner-centred ideals and methodology? Do the students notice?

The research group considered that these questions were open-ended enough to allow for a wide-ranging discussion of the issues involved, and would also enable participants to express their views on the research questions in a meaningful way.
The discussion

**Question 1**

As soon as the discussion began it became clear that the notion of learner-centredness was problematic. Participants were operating with different ideas of what it meant.

I referred the group to David Nunan’s description:

> The subject-centred view sees learning a language as essentially the mastering of a body of knowledge. The learner-centred view, on the other hand, tends to view language acquisition as a process of acquiring skills rather than a body of language.  
> (Nunan 1988:21)

Nunan goes on to say that the two approaches are both valid and that most courses reflect elements of both.

The teachers in the discussion group agreed that the notion of acquiring skills was central to being learner-centred but suggested that there were several other factors involved. When we had explored some of the ideas around being learner-centred we were much closer to Brindley’s description (cited by Nunan 1988:21):

> ... instructional programs should be centred around learners’ needs and learners themselves should exercise their own responsibility in the choice of learning objectives, content and method as well as in determining the means used to assess their performance.

One teacher (teacher A) argued that the IOTY books were not and could not be learner-centred, but that her use of them in teaching could be and sometimes was. For her, learner-centred meant that the student’s individual needs and interests drove the course. Nothing would be imposed. The degree to which she could be learner-centred in her approach was determined by constraints of teacher time and student requirements. She felt that she could originate options occasionally, based on student needs and interests and on her own ability and time. She rarely offered the option of using the IOTY books out of sequence.

Another teacher (teacher B) disagreed with this, arguing that the IOTY books were learner-centred in that they focused on skills required by students to continue learning beyond the ‘classroom’. Her argument was that learner-centred did not mean that the learner provided all the input as to content and method, but that the teacher attempted to anticipate what skills the learner needed and then negotiated a way in which these skills would be taught. If the use of IOTY constituted a departure from being learner-centred then the use of any books or any curriculum, competency-based or not, would be inimical to learner-centredness.

The first teacher pointed out that IOTY contained certain biases, especially in terms of gender, class and occupation, and that certain omissions and changes had to be made to suit individual learners. Often she did not have enough time to do this adequately, with the result that she sometimes felt that she was teaching inappropriate language. She believed the classroom could be more learner-centred because there was more room for flexibility and teachers had more scope to prepare materials that suited the stated needs and interests of the class and to respond to needs as they arose. She admitted that students in a classroom were still at the mercy of teachers and their biases and preferences.
The third teacher in the group (teacher C) was relatively new to DL and had only just begun to use the IOTY materials. Her initial impression was that students found the materials very helpful and responded to them very positively, but she was uncertain as to whether there would be enough ‘room to move’ to enable her to be learner-centred in her teaching. It was certainly different from classroom teaching where there could be immediate responses to student needs, interests and demands.

She pointed out, however, that determining what the needs, interests and demands of the students in a classroom were was not always easy. Sometimes there were conflicting demands. Sometimes the students were unable to express their interests or demands, or perhaps were not aware of them. Many students seemed to feel uncomfortable with the notion that they were responsible for setting their own agenda, being more accustomed to a view of education where the teacher was in total control of the entire process. She thought that solutions to some of these problems might be easier to negotiate in the one-to-one teaching that occurs in Distance Learning.

Questions 2 and 3

All the teachers agreed that the major problem created by the ‘imposition’ of a competency-based curriculum in practical terms was the failure of current materials to properly match the competencies set out in CSWE. None of them would have considered this a major problem were it not for the requirement to report student progress in terms of the competencies and the link between the acquiring of competencies and the awarding of certificates.

Because students are required to achieve a certain number of competencies (with some of them compulsory) to achieve a certificate and move on to the next stage, teachers felt forced to teach and assess competencies that may have been irrelevant to the particular student they were teaching. Sometimes this involved a major effort on the part of the teacher, especially if the competency in question was not adequately covered in IOTY and new materials had to be created. Teachers were pooling these extra materials in an attempt to reduce the amount of reduplication that could occur in this scenario.

Teacher C argued that these practical problems were only scratching the surface of the ‘real’ problem, which she said was the fact that ‘competencies are the antithesis of learner-centred’. The competencies are extremely generalised, based on a particular philosophy of language and learning and don’t allow for any choice. They make assumptions about what all students need to do and know. She cited the competency ‘write a recount’ as an example. The sole reason for its inclusion, she claimed, was to teach the past tense, but writing recounts was not a useful competency because it was something that migrant learners of English never did in English.

Teacher A interposed that this was no better or worse than any curriculum. There were always going to be things that were irrelevant for some or even most students. Thus the problem was not the competencies as such, but the imposition of a curriculum at all.

Teacher B agreed with this point of view and also pointed out that the outcomes of a curriculum, if they were to have any currency at all, would need to be general and of course they were based on a particular view of language. Problems arose when teachers did not agree with that particular view. Since all curricula are – consciously or unconsciously – informed by one view or another, the problem was not whether competencies were antithetical to learner-centred teaching, but whether the teacher agreed with the linguistic ideology that lay behind the curriculum she was using.
She added that in terms of learner-centred as defined by Brindley the only way you could have a learner-centred curriculum was for each student to write their own. She argued that it was part of the teacher's professional task to anticipate student needs and equip students to meet them. If it was not possible to make generalisations from the anticipated needs then there was actually no point in having a curriculum at all.

Teacher A believed that it was possible to blend the competencies with the material from IOTY because they were stated in such general terms. She cited 'writing an opinion text' as an example. This competency could be tailored to incorporate the goals of an individual student by the choice of topic on which the text could be written. She found the competency-based curriculum helpful in that it offers more choices (than those offered in IOTY).

Teacher C admitted that she was speaking largely from her experience in the classroom, where students were forced to complete competencies in a discrete period of time, where teachers taught the competency, tested the competency and moved on. Students were taught in a lock-step fashion. In DL it appeared that the competencies were more embedded in the material, not as 'up-front' as in the classroom. This meant that they didn't dominate the teaching practice as much as they did in the classroom. She cited one DL student who has friends going to classes: 'this is the best possible way for all people, self paced and one-on-one tuition'. This student believes that she has learned far more than her friends in the classroom have.

Teacher A remarked that students were rarely affected by the competency-based curriculum if the teacher had the skill and the time to manipulate the competencies in order to make them relevant to the student and IOTY. Teacher C doubted there was any real room in which to manipulate. Teacher A's response was that the competencies could be treated as a minimum requirement in DL, which may not always be possible in the constraints of the classroom. The main constraint is finding the time to do more than the competencies require so that the individual needs of students are satisfied.

Conclusions

1. The DL mode, because of its slower pace and individual attention to students, offers good opportunities to teach the competency-based curriculum in a learner-centred way; that is, so that it meets the needs and preferences of individual students. The opportunities are limited, however, by the amount of work required to develop and deliver individual materials for about 50 students.

2. This small sample of teachers was operating with quite different notions of learner-centred. Before any reasonable debate on the subject of staying learner-centred in a competency-based curriculum can occur, there will need to be greater concurrence on the meaning of the terms. Some teachers have an idealistic and impractical idea of what it means and from one point of view could be accused of abdicating their responsibility as professional teachers by refusing to anticipate and generalise.

3. Most of the problems that DL teachers were experiencing with the competency-based curriculum would still be problems under any curriculum regime. The fact that they were competency-based was blamed for many ills, but all the criticism would be equally valid had it been another curriculum under discussion.

4. The students in DL seemed to be prospering in their chosen mode. Because of the individual contact and regular feedback, as well as a structured program of instruction, DL students generally express a much higher degree of satisfaction than those in classrooms.
The way forward must be for teachers to explore further the notion of what it means to be learner-centred, so that some consensus might be reached. Until this occurs the debate about staying learner-centred in a competency-based curriculum will miss the point. Much of the argument seems to stem from a negative view of any curriculum at all.

Bibliography

SECTION TWO
A nalysing learner needs

1 Investigating needs analysis: The written questionnaire
   Luda Kuskow

2 An old bone at the bottom of my teaching practice: Rethinking needs analysis in the late 1990s
   Judith Given

3 Needs analysis needs analysis
   Lee Russell
Introduction

Although teachers’ responses indicated that many feel constrained to some extent by the curriculum, I have been impressed with the ways in which teachers strive to cater for student needs. (Judith Given)

Needs analysis has long been recognised as a central pillar of learner-centred curriculum design and teaching. In the project, several teachers in different states saw needs analysis as a key issue when rethinking what is meant by staying learner-centred. For some, especially longer-term teachers who had worked in the AMEP before the introduction of competency-based curriculum, this was an opportunity to review their changing experiences of where and how needs analysis fitted into course design processes. For others, it was a chance to rethink their assumptions about the meaning of the term ‘needs analysis’. Others chose to investigate and critique current needs analysis practices, either alone or in collaboration with colleagues. For the majority of the teachers who chose this focus, the research gave them an opportunity to rediscover and articulate more clearly their own interpretation of the role of needs analysis in course design. During the project, several teachers also stated that having a more explicit personal definition of needs analysis was fundamental to negotiating the tensions between learner-centredness and learning outcomes.

This section and the one that follows both focus on needs analysis. However, they differ in that this section looks specifically at needs analysis practices. The following section takes up the issue of how needs analysis becomes the basis for course design.

The first paper is by Luda Kuskow, a teacher with the Adult Multicultural Education Services in Victoria. Luda’s interest was in the questionnaire as a needs analysis tool. Finding few guidelines to help her, she decided to investigate the steps and factors which need to be considered when developing needs analysis questionnaires. An interesting aspect of Luda’s research is the increased learner-centredness that emerged from involving learners in analysing their own needs. A result of her review of the literature and her own research, Luda suggests that her guidelines can be used as a framework for other classrooms.

Judith Given’s research was triggered by a colleague’s chance remark that the introduction of the CSWE meant ‘we did not need to do needs analysis’. Working at the Southbank Institute of TAFE in Brisbane, Queensland, Judith’s interest was in exploring the extent to which others shared this viewpoint. Judith’s research reveals that while her colleagues saw needs analysis as an ongoing process, addressing needs analysis procedures explicitly seemed to be less important to them than before competency-based approaches were introduced. Nevertheless, she concludes that great efforts are made to balance needs with outcomes.

From a somewhat different angle, Lee Russell investigated the language and learning factors motivating her colleagues’ needs analysis practices. She began her research by asking eight teachers to identify the learner profile items, such as language proficiency, age, literacy in first language and so on, that they felt to be the most significant in needs analysis. She then used this information to explore further their needs analysis practices. Like Judith Given, Lee concludes that competency-based approaches do not mean that learner needs are overlooked but that ‘teachers are striving to accommodate the needs of the learners and the requirements of the curriculum’.
Introduction

The Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) are intended to be a curriculum framework rather than a syllabus. A syllabus is a public document prepared by teachers and negotiated with learners (Feez 1998:2). Whatever form this negotiation takes, it is an important part of program development and delivery. Within the context of the CSWE teachers carry out needs analyses in order for the syllabus to meet learner needs.

Needs analysis still remains a neglected area and is frequently given limited attention on many training courses for language teachers (West 1997:78). Variables such as content selection and the time and context of administering needs analysis remain unexplored.

The research context

I was interested in investigating the written questionnaire as a needs analysis tool. This focus was chosen because:

• the written questionnaire appears to be the most frequently used needs analysis tool
• it is difficult to decide which type of questionnaire is the most appropriate in terms of selecting course content
• there are few guidelines for developing needs analysis questionnaires.

However, there are no guidelines for the development of effective needs analysis questionnaires and existing questionnaires do not seem to elicit full information about the needs of the learners. This is problematic if these questionnaires are to lead to the specification of language learning objectives.

The research

Research question: What factors contribute to the design of an effective needs analysis questionnaire?

I wanted to investigate factors involved in the development of the needs analysis questionnaire. I also wanted to develop guidelines for compiling effective questionnaires. The following steps were taken to carry out the research.

1 Studying the literature

There appears to be no agreed definition of the term needs analysis. There is also no consensus about how to approach the identification of course content through needs analysis. Some writers believe that a needs analysis should seek information about what learners can do and know, as well as what they want to learn (Santopietro 1997).
Others adopt a broader view of needs analysis, to include asking the needs of employers, service providers and the learners themselves (Broussard 1991). Brindley (1989) states that needs analysis is wider than simply identifying learners' current and future language use. He sees it as the identification and taking into account of a number of affective and cognitive variables which affect learning such as attitudes, motivation, awareness, personality, wants.

A more structured approach to grouping the content of needs analysis is proposed by Nunan (1990) who sees needs analysis as providing two types of information:

Objective: This is biographical information relating to age, education and language proficiency which can be obtained before a course begins.

Subjective: This is information relating to aspirations and attitudes, areas of need etc and can be obtained at the beginning of a course.

Subjective information can be obtained through a questionnaire.

Although there are differing views in relation to a definition of needs analysis, few would dispute its importance in course development and delivery.

2 Identifying the characteristics of effective needs analysis questionnaires

It was not an easy task to identify content areas due to a lack of consensus on this issue and due to the diversity of existing needs analysis questionnaires. Following guidelines set out by West (1997), information from the literature study and analysis of sample questionnaires the following content areas were identified:

- life goals – educational or vocational aspirations
- strengths and weaknesses
- language goals – target communication tasks and situations
- learning styles and preferred methodology
- preferred learning arrangement.

3 Developing a sample questionnaire

Based on the content areas, I compiled Questionnaire 1 (see next page). I thought this would provide more information than existing questionnaires and help sensitise students to their own preferences, strengths and weaknesses. I tried to make the responses as accessible as possible by:

- asking the students to tick a few open-ended questions
- making the instructions as clear as possible
- logically grouping the content
- developing a suitable layout with content fields boxed and evenly distributed so as not to appear cluttered.
**Needs analysis questionnaire 1**

Dear Student

In order to make this course more interesting for you, we want to find out what you need to learn and how you would like to learn. In the questions below please tick in the appropriate box or give a written answer. Thank you.

**Educational and work aspirations**

After you finish studying this English course what are you planning to do?

- [ ] Study more
  - What course? ____________________________________________
- [ ] Find a job
  - What kind? ______________________________________________

**Strengths and weaknesses**

Do you have any problems with:

- spelling words? [ ] Yes [ ] No
- writing sentences? [ ] Yes [ ] No
- writing letters in English? [ ] Yes [ ] No
- filling in forms? [ ] Yes [ ] No
- understanding other people? [ ] Yes [ ] No
- understanding instructions? [ ] Yes [ ] No
- understanding news? [ ] Yes [ ] No
- speaking to people? [ ] Yes [ ] No
- speaking on the telephone? [ ] Yes [ ] No
- reading letters? [ ] Yes [ ] No
- reading maps/street directories? [ ] Yes [ ] No
- reading newspapers [ ] Yes [ ] No

What can you do very well in English? ______________________________________

List 3 things you can’t do in English.

1. ________________________________________________________________
2. ________________________________________________________________
3. ________________________________________________________________

**Target communication tasks and situations (Language goals)**

Which skills are most important for you?

(Put numbers 1–4 in order of importance; 1 = most important, 4 = least important)

- [ ] Speaking
- [ ] Listening
- [ ] Writing
- [ ] Reading
What do you need English for?

- to talk to your doctor/estate agent? Yes No
- to understand radio/television? Yes No
- to fill in forms? Yes No
- to learn about the Australian way of life? Yes No
- to read newspapers/books/magazines? Yes No
- to write letters? Yes No
- to talk to English-speaking friends and neighbours? Yes No
- to study further (eg TAFE/University)? Yes No
- to use buses/trains? Yes No
- to do shopping? Yes No
- to speak on the telephone? Yes No
- to get information about courses? Yes No
- to find information about jobs? Yes No
- to understand signs and posters in the street? Yes No
- to apply for jobs and attend interviews? Yes No

What else do you need English for? __________________________________________

From the list above choose five which you think are the most important for you.

1 ________________________________________________________________
2 ________________________________________________________________
3 ________________________________________________________________
4 ________________________________________________________________
5 ________________________________________________________________

Learning styles and preferred methodology

Do you like learning
- by memory? Yes No
- by listening? Yes No
- by reading? Yes No
- by copying from the board? Yes No
- by listening and writing notes? Yes No
- by reading and writing notes? Yes No
- by solving problems? Yes No

When you speak, do you want to be corrected immediately? Yes No
after you finish speaking? Yes No
in private? Yes No
4 Administering an existing questionnaire

In order to verify that Questionnaire 1 would be more reliable, I decided to administer an existing questionnaire (see Questionnaire 2 on next page). I wanted to compare the information gathered as well as student reactions to the questionnaire. After discussing needs analysis and its purpose with the students, I explained that I wanted to compare two questionnaires and that their help would be greatly appreciated. The students were very enthusiastic to participate in the research.

While the students were working on Questionnaire 2 they asked numerous questions to clarify instructions, especially relating to Questions 3, 4, and 14. In Question 3 they were not sure whether they had to respond to all or just a few of the situations. Question 4 lacked instruction as to whether to tick, circle or rate and Question 14 was unclear as to whether it referred to school or out-of-school time.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Do you find these activities useful?</th>
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<td>language games</td>
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<th>Preferred learning arrangement</th>
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<td>How do you like to learn?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practising in small groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practising in pairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying alone</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Check to see that you have answered all the questions. When you finish give the paper to your teacher. Thank you.
Questionnaire 2 Student Needs Survey – Confidential

Name: ______________________________________

1. Have you studied English before?  Yes  No
2. Do you like studying English?  Yes  No
3. What do you need English for in your life NOW? (please tick)
   - to get a job
   - to stay in a job
   - to go shopping
   - to speak to the doctor or at the hospital
   - to speak to the dentist
   - to study at a TAFE college
   - to use the local library
   - to speak to children’s teachers
   - to use childcare
   - to understand at Centrelink
   - to use the telephone
   - to meet neighbours or friends
   - to use public transport
   - to speak to a student counsellor
   - in other places

4. Which skill is most important for you NOW?
   - speaking
   - listening
   - reading
   - writing

5. When you are not at school, do you use English?
   - every day
   - more than three times a week
   - more than six times a week

6. When you are not at school, when and where do you use English?

7. Do you like to speak English in a big group or in a small group?

8. Do you watch TV in English?
   - every day
   - more than three times a week
   - more than six times a week

9. What TV programs do you watch?

10. Do you listen to radio in English?
    - every day
    - more than three times a week
    - more than six times a week

11. What radio programs do you listen to?

12. Do you read in English?
    - every day
    - more than three times a week
    - less than three times a week

13. What do you read in English?

14. Do you write in English?
    - every day
    - more than three times a week
    - less than three times a week

15. What do you write in English?
5 Gathering student responses
I discussed the questionnaire with the students and conducted interviews with two volunteer students. In discussions with the students, about 70% felt that the questionnaire did help them to think about their learning. The remainder thought it did not really help due to the lack of choice regarding target language situations and due to the fact that it did not address their weaknesses. Similar points were reiterated in the interviews. After the discussions and interviews I added an open-ended question to Questionnaire 1 in the section Target communication tasks and situations.

6 Administering the new questionnaire
The responses elicited after the administration of Questionnaire 1 were more positive although clarification of some vocabulary items was still sought by the weaker students, eg by memory, in pairs, problem solving. Some of the comments this time were:

- it’s more interesting because there is more information
- more things to think about - better
- it’s easier to understand because the instructions are clearer.

About 80% of the students said that Questionnaire 1 helped them think about their learning. The students showed more enthusiasm with this questionnaire which was evident in the buzz of conversation that took place towards the end of the session. Students compared notes and there were exclamations of surprise when answers differed.

Findings
Questionnaire 1 proved to be the more favoured version and it also elicited more information. The information gathered by Questionnaire 2 lacks direction and the content areas are too general. The information gathered through Questionnaire 1 is more focused towards educational and vocational goals and is more helpful in course planning. Information regarding future goals can be utilised to contextualise teaching material and to make learning more relevant for the student. Questionnaire 1 reveals areas of need as prioritised by the students as well as preferred learning activities and arrangements.

The main factors which make Questionnaire 1 more useful for course planning are set out below.

- Goal setting gives a focus and helps students identify areas of need.
- The need to prioritise communication tasks and situations helps to sensitise students to their own learning.
- The yes/no answers force students to decide rather than take an easy option of remaining undecided. At times the students found it difficult to give a yes or a no answer but when asked whether they would have preferred to have a third choice the majority rejected this. They indicated that the choice made them really think and made the task of responding to the questionnaire more interesting.

Conclusions
This study has shown that an effective needs analysis tool should:
- be transparent
- be credible
be repeatable
- be learner-centred
- take account of weaknesses
- help in establishing a syllabus
- relate to target situations
- address relevant content fields.

The fields identified as being relevant to adult second language learning are:

- life goals – educational or vocational
- strengths and weaknesses
- language goals – target communication tasks and situations
- learning styles and preferred methodology
- preferred learning arrangement.

These fields can be used as a guide to identifying syllabus content but they are by no means set and may need to be adjusted to the type of course and the type of learner group.

The questionnaire designed as result of this research project provides a framework on which needs analysis questionnaires can be developed. Needs analysis must be appropriate for different learners. In practical terms, this means that the questionnaire may need to be adapted for particular groups of learners.

Needs analysis should be seen as a continuing cycle of negotiation. For best results the questionnaire should be revisited throughout the course and supplemented by informal analyses based on observation and discussions.

From the point of view of professional development, this project has been beneficial for me in a number of ways. It has provided me with more knowledge about needs analysis and its implementation. It has given me an opportunity to reflect on my teaching and to reassess the role of student input into course design. It has made me realise how important and complex the needs analysis process is, not only from the point of view of a teacher but from the point of view of students as well. It has highlighted the role of needs analysis in developing a course and in contributing to student ownership of their own learning. The project also provided me with an opportunity to discuss issues pertaining to teaching CSWE with other teachers, an opportunity to share and collaborate.

Bibliography


2 An old bone at the bottom of my teaching practice: Rethinking needs analysis in the late 1990s

Judith Given

The research context

I work at Southbank TAFE in Brisbane and teach Certificate III in Spoken and Written English (CSWE III) classes, usually the Further Study Strand. Most of the teachers I work with have been in the program for many years, many before the introduction of the CSWE.

My motivation for becoming involved in the NCELTR Special Project was an interest in investigating the degree to which teacher practice has changed over the years in relation to needs analysis. My interest had been triggered by a chance remark made by a colleague who mentioned that we did not need to do needs analysis since the introduction of CSWE. The implication seemed to be that the CSWE curriculum had made needs analysis redundant by prescribing the shape of our courses. This remark kept gnawing at me and when the NCELTR project presented itself, it seemed to be the perfect opportunity for exploring the issue in a more formal way. I was interested in the extent to which teachers perceive CSWE to be a document which restricts the content of their courses and the extent to which they stay centred on learner needs.

The research

Research question: Has CSWE changed teacher practice in relation to needs analysis?

The research question has to be viewed in the context of the 1980s when needs analysis was a strong component of Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) courses. The further back you go, the more we did it! was how one teacher summed up the practice of needs analysis in the AMEP. In the late 1980s when I came into the program, there appeared to be an almost bewildering array of needs analysis tools. These were designed to capture huge amounts of student data ranging from long-term goals to who they spoke to when they went shopping. I had always grappled with a number of questions in relation to needs analysis, such as:

• what kind of needs analysis formats should I use?
• how many formats should I use?
• when should I administer needs analysis?
• how often should I administer needs analysis?
• how irritating is it to students?
• is there a magic way, that I have yet to discover, of doing it economically?
Steps taken in the research

1. I decided to interview at least two teachers at each of the three Certificate levels. I discussed my intention to look at the issue with teachers in my centre because looking at teacher practice can be fairly threatening. I felt it was important not to place additional strains on an already stretched group of colleagues.

2. I designed a teacher questionnaire (see below) which was to support a face-to-face interview. I hoped the interview would capture more anecdotal data than the survey alone might do.

3. I interviewed the first group of four teachers. My findings corresponded fairly closely to what I had expected. On the whole the teachers felt that they did less needs analysis post CSWE than they had done prior to its introduction. I then had to decide whether to continue talking to teachers about the same issues or to refocus the research by talking to students about their reactions to needs analysis and whether they felt their needs were being met by AMEP courses.

4. After talking to the project leaders, I decided to interview a second group of four teachers.

5. I was still keen to explore whether students felt the competency-based curriculum was meeting their English language learning needs. Parallel to the research with the teachers, I administered a short survey (see next page) to my own group of students. The aim was to explore whether they felt their needs were being catered for and whether they felt CSWE, and the focus on competencies, restricted their course offerings. I did not feel that I could interview other students as I thought teachers would perceive this as intrusive. This survey did satisfy my curiosity about whether students perceived CSWE as restricting their course offerings. On the whole, the students did not have a negative impression of CSWE.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support questions for face-to-face interview with teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name: _________________________</td>
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<td>Date: ____________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSWE level: ______________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. What formal and informal tools do you use for needs analysis?</td>
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<td>2. When do you conduct needs analysis? At what stage of the course?</td>
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<td>3. How much time do you spend on it?</td>
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<td>4. How do students react to it?</td>
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<td>5. What do you do with the information?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. How are these practices the same/ different from what you used to do pre-CSWE?</td>
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Discoveries made about teacher practice

The majority of the teachers interviewed felt that they undertake less needs analysis since the introduction of CSWE. The formal responses to the questionnaire, supported by the face-to-face interviews revealed that:

- teachers at lower levels tend not to use any formal tools for needs analysis.
- teachers at Certificate II and III levels use some formal tools but fewer than pre-CSWE.
- most teachers concentrate on collecting data for needs analysis in Weeks 1 and 2 but all teachers stressed the on-going nature of needs analysis.
- teachers at higher levels who administer formal tools spend more time collating results than teachers at lower levels.
- teachers felt that students react positively to needs analysis, although there were...
some teachers who remarked that perhaps we had overdone needs analysis in the past to the extent that students had become impatient with the process.

- teachers try to modify their course according to student needs but most teachers feel CSWE places constraints on the degree to which they can do this.

Individual teacher responses to the introduction of CSWE were interesting. They included positive views which saw CSWE as:

  ... more directed, a neater framework, taking away the burden to deliver and the expectation that we could do what they asked. It has enabled us to be up-front about the limits of a course.

  (CSWE I teacher)

They also included more negative views:

  I'm not anti-competencies but competencies subvert the process (of needs analysis). CSWE doesn't drive the course but drives certain aspects of it because students have to do certain competencies and the system is moving towards requiring a quota of competencies to be achieved in a certain number of hours so the problem becomes one of the management of priorities.

  (CSWE II teacher)

  Even though I don't allow assessment to drive my whole course calendar, it does determine some aspects of it.

  (CSWE III teacher)

They also demonstrated that some teachers had reached a workable compromise within the curriculum:

  I felt the system was binding us ... I'd go too deeply into a topic and then felt pressured to complete assessment ... I thought it was limiting but now I'm thinking 'I'll be blowed – you make it do what students need'.

  (CSWE II teacher)

**Extending the research**

After I had interviewed the first group of teachers, I refocused the research to elicit what teachers currently do within the constraints of CSWE to cater for learner needs. This was quite important because it broadened my research focus from the original fairly closed question of - has teacher practice changed? - to the more open question of - how do teachers manage to stay learner-centred and keep focusing on student needs within the framework of CSWE? I think in hindsight that I finally suspended my search for the holy format of formats and simply listened to the myriad ways in which teachers try to capture data about learner needs.

I discovered a rich collection of teacher practices. These practices certainly challenge what strikes me now as my eighties notion of a magic format. I now see needs analysis as a complex and ongoing process. The following are some of the activities teachers mentioned as useful formal and informal strategies for needs analysis:

- looking at folders of previous classwork
- liaising with previous teachers of students
- looking at the list of competencies achieved by students

...
• using formal tools to ask about preferred topics, skill focus, strand focus, preferred excursions
• administering diagnostic assessment items across the four skill areas plus a grammar test
• looking at the gaps between the macroskill levels
• using bilingual assistance
• using student diaries
• keeping a teacher diary
• exploring learning styles and student expectations
• spending coffee breaks with students.

The most effective form of needs analysis at Level I (CSWE I teacher):
• programming an excursion early in the course to gather informal data
• asking directly for feedback
• observing students informally.

Discoveries made about student expectations

The students who were surveyed felt that needs analysis had allowed the course to target their particular needs. Students to some extent perceived that competencies were dominant in the course, although they did not necessarily think this made the course boring. On the whole, they thought that the work on competencies was useful.

Responses to the research process

Overall, I felt very positive about being involved in the research process, even though I worried that the research did not seem very extensive. I have comforted myself with the thought that, at least before the 1990s end, I have made the necessary mindshift from seeing needs analysis as a number of products or packages, to seeing it as a sophisticated ongoing process.

Most importantly, the project gave me an opportunity to spend dedicated time with NCELTR professionals and colleagues outside my teaching location and provided me with a formal opportunity to reflect on my daily practice.

The greatest benefit for me was that my focus on what other teachers were doing forced me to reflect with some rigour on what I was doing myself. This meant that at each stage of my last course, I was more disciplined about my own approach to needs analysis. I undertook regular evaluations throughout the course to check the material was meeting student needs. A s a rule, I experience a crisis in Week 7 of a ten-week course about whether the course has worked or not. However, the course I taught during the project was crisis-free because I felt confident that student needs had indeed been catered for.

At the end of the research, I disagree wholeheartedly with the notion that we do not need to do needs analysis now that we have CSWE. A lthough teacher responses indicated that many feel constrained to some extent by the curriculum, I have been impressed with the ways in which teachers strive to cater for student needs. I am more than ever convinced that this process is vital as we keep refining the best of what we do. I hope student needs will always be at the centre of whatever curriculum documents we happen to be using.

Thanks to my colleagues at Southbank TAFE for sharing their ideas and time with me. It is a real pleasure, unfortunately a rare one in these days, to spend dedicated time talking to other teachers about classroom practice.

An old bone at the bottom of my teaching practice
Bibliography


3 Needs analysis needs analysis

Lee Russell

The research context

A group of eight English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers at the Gold Coast Institute of TAFE (GCIT), Queensland volunteered their time for the NCELTR Special Project. The ESL Department in the Faculty of Access Education caters for approximately five hundred English language learners including migrants and overseas students. GCIT offers a range of full-time, part-time and flexible access English language programs to cater for the diverse needs of this client group.

The teachers who provided the data were all qualified and experienced ESL teachers. They had taught a range of learner proficiency levels and specific purpose groups. They had experience with, and were currently teaching, the competency-based Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE). Because of their many years of experience, all the teachers had taught programs in the past which were not competency-based and where the curriculum was less formalised.

Prior to the introduction of the CSWE, there was a strong emphasis on the development and implementation of syllabuses which were needs-based and learner-centred. Essentially all planning and delivery was designed to meet identified learner needs. The needs analysis process was critical as the starting point for all programs and there was an abundance of learner questionnaires and surveys which reflected this.

As the well documented pendulum effect suggests, ESL theorists and practitioners have tended to be extreme in the rejection of prior ESL theories and practices when faced with new theories and practices. Given that, I thought it would be useful to ask teachers about their current practice with regard to needs analysis. I wanted to see if the introduction of competency-based training meant that teachers were no longer gathering information from their learners. I also wanted to focus on:

- what learner information was most significant for teachers in needs analysis and syllabus design and delivery
- when and why teachers collected learner data and how they applied this data in course design.

The research

Research question: Have teachers discarded the needs analysis process or is it still considered valid?

Initial data was collected using a questionnaire. This questionnaire included some brief background information on the research topic itself. It asked teachers to allocate a ranking of significance to a list of 39 learner profile items which could form the basis of a needs analysis. Teachers were asked to:

1. Consider which items were the most significant to them for building learner profiles and facilitating the process of planning and delivery.
2 Rank each item from one to five with five being very significant and one being the least significant.

3 Review their rankings and to select the five most significant items, ie the key information that they felt they needed to know about their learners.

4 Select the five items which they felt were significant to syllabus design, if these varied from their initial selection.

5 Select the five items which they felt were significant to syllabus delivery, if these varied from their original selection.

When the questionnaires were completed, the responses were collated and this information formed the basis of face-to-face interviews with five randomly selected teachers. These interviews focused on the choices the teachers had made when they completed the questionnaires and the how, when and why of the needs analysis process.

**Findings**

There was not a lot of consensus in the items chosen and a broad range of information was selected as significant. Of the 39 items, 17 were selected by at least one teacher. There were six items chosen once and five items chosen twice.

There was however a degree of agreement on the significance of English language proficiency. Five teachers selected this and ranked it first and one teacher ranked it fifth. This is distinct from competencies achieved which was listed but not selected by any teacher as significant.

Teacher 3 pointed out that she had a problem in trying to correlate English language proficiency and competencies. It seemed that certain programs use proficiency tests for entry and competencies for exiting and it was a problem to think in terms of both. She stated:

> ... so I’m talking about English proficiency rather than CSWE competencies – in fact, I’m not talking about that [CSWE competencies] at all because sometimes they – I don’t think – correlate very well at all – that’s just observation ...

It may be that, although we are teaching and assessing competencies, that teachers and, perhaps administrators, are continuing to focus on proficiency.

Burns and Hood (1994:86) noted the challenge for teachers in changing the focus to competencies:

> This ... [assessing using competencies] ... was new for all teachers, who were not accustomed to formally assessing learning and documenting learning outcomes in such detail. They had previously relied on more global language proficiency assessments, such as A SLPR, which were not based on specific tasks which had been taught or specific assessment procedures.

In 1998 this group of teachers was still clearly relying on language proficiency to view learners – English language proficiency has got to be a key determinant (Teacher 1). Since it was the one item which showed some consensus, it would seem that the significance of proficiency is probably a systemic issue related to course funding and placement or perhaps it is simply a case of ‘old habits die hard’.
There was also some degree of agreement on the significance of ambitions, goals and objectives which was selected by five teachers. Four teachers selected preferred modes of learning/learning style. However neither of these items was nominated as the most significant and there was no agreement on the ranking allocated to either.

The items that were selected once included qualifications, personal, emotional needs, length of time in Australia, learning strategies and ability to work as a group member.

These results could mean a number of things. It could simply mean that there were too many choices which made consensus difficult. It could also mean that everything or most things were significant. In the interviews several teachers noted the importance of knowing as much as possible about the learners:

... In adult language learning the more information you have about the clients the better ...

         (Teacher 2)

... it was quite difficult to bring it down to five ...

         (Teacher 1)

The results could also mean that teachers were viewing learners in different ways and were looking for different information for different purposes. For example, in one interview I discussed with the teacher the fact that all of her nominated items related to effective language learners, eg motivation, learner attitude, ability to work as a group member, degree of independence/self direction, educational background. She stated that she was not only looking to identify those learners who had these characteristics but to identify those learners who did not. She did this in order to build specific language learning skills and strategies into her course. Her experience had shown that certain characteristics were advantageous to the learner and she aimed to develop these in her learners.

Another teacher mentioned the use of needs analysis as a way of identifying specific themes and topics to contextualise CSWE. She saw who the learner needs/wants to interact with as being significant in enabling her to make the curriculum relevant to her learners.

In summary, there was some degree of agreement on three issues related to learners:

1. English language proficiency
2. ambitions/goals/objectives
3. preferred modes of learning/learning style.

The teachers wanted to know what the learner knew in general terms, what life goals they wanted to achieve and how they preferred to learn. In addition, and perhaps more clearly shown by the questionnaires, was an interest in a very broad range of learner information.

Teachers were asked to select the five most significant learner data items relevant first to syllabus design and second to syllabus delivery. Most teachers changed their choices because they felt that they focused on different learner issues when planning and delivering. However, two teachers did not vary their choices, as Teacher 2 explains:

... I decided that the items that were significant – significant enough to note as the five top most significant items would be just as important in the planning stage as in the delivery stage. I don't think the important items change from the time before the students start to learn and during the course ...
With regard to syllabus design, the broad range of choices was again obvious. However English language proficiency was the one item where, again, there was consensus. Six teachers ranked it as the most significant item and one teacher ranked it as the third most significant item. Four teachers nominated ambitions, goals and objectives. Three teachers selected competencies achieved but ranked it low in significance. So it seems, when teachers are planning programs, proficiency is a key issue again but a range of varying issues are also considered.

With regard to syllabus delivery there was once again a range of items selected but English language proficiency was relegated to second place behind preferred modes of learning/learning style. Seven out of eight teachers selected the latter as significant and four out of eight teachers selected English language proficiency and degree of independence/self direction. A slight move towards the affective domain was noted but proficiency once again surfaced as significant.

At the other end of the spectrum, the items which teachers agreed were not significant were, in particular, address, religion, marital status and sex.

The needs analysis process

Of the five teachers interviewed, all of them felt the needs analysis process was valid and useful and all continued to use it with all students. Teacher 2 explained its usefulness from a teaching perspective:

... it's very significant in that details of your day-to-day lesson planning still need to change and adapt to the individual needs of the students ... In CSWE there's an awful lot of room for interpretation and choice of topic and lesson themes ...

Most of the teachers explained their use of needs analysis from the perspective of the learners:

... they [the learners] expect us to provide them with some kind of activities which would be suitable for them ... they feel that their needs are valuable to us ...

(Teacher 5)

... we do give them the opportunity ... to have input into the learning ...

(Teacher 1)

Teacher 3 talked about the needs analysis process from both the teacher's and learner's perspectives:

... you feel that you're satisfying them and they feel that you're listening to them as well. That's providing that you try to do as they ask ...

These teachers clearly see the role of the learner in the language teaching and learning process as significant. It would appear that the teachers interviewed were looking to needs analysis to bring relevance to the learning process. However, it was the application of the needs analysis process to the planning and delivery of courses that caused the greatest concern for all of the teachers. They acknowledged the difficulty of meeting all of the needs of the learners once they were made aware of them. The dilemma was in trying to do what the learners had asked as the following comments illustrate:

... you may not be able to satisfy everybody's needs. That's the problem ...

(Teacher 3)
... [I] try but it's not easy ... try and cater for the majority of the class ...
(Teacher 4)

... well, there's a bit of compromise ...
(Teacher 1)

... you've got to look for the best fit ...
(Teacher 1)

... it's not always a 100% thorough sort of process ... please the majority wherever possible ... cater for individual needs as best as you can ... students are catered for at least some of the time if not all of the time ...
(Teacher 2)

One of the teachers solved this dilemma, to a certain extent, by asking her students to discuss their needs together and through negotiation with other students to reach a consensus. This process enabled the students to become aware of the diversity of needs and to understand the necessity for compromise. These students however were at CSWE III level and clearly lower level students would find this problematic.

The teachers undertook needs analysis at the beginning of the course and throughout the course. They used formal and informal methods. Although initial questionnaires were used, it seemed that there has been a move away from lengthy and dense questionnaires to a more open and informal approach. This may be because documents are no longer a critical element of the planning process. It may also be because teachers have become aware that learners are tired of completing very similar questionnaires each course.

I asked the teachers about their ability to predict the outcomes of the needs analysis process. They all agreed that this was definitely possible:

... I can say what they would want but that doesn't mean that I assume that because it can change ...
(Teacher 4)

... nearly always they say similar things ...
(Teacher 3)

... you can probably predict large general areas of need ... but there are always the personal details that will vary from student to student and no two classes in any language learning situation will ever be the same ...
(Teacher 2)

Experienced teachers accept that they can predict the outcomes of needs analysis to a degree. However, this does not discourage these teachers from using needs analysis with all students and aiming to ensure that needs are well understood and met, where possible.

Another key issue, which arose in the teacher interviews, was the balancing of learner needs with the needs of CSWE. Most teachers referred to this issue as problematic, as Teacher 4 explains:

... some of them [the learners] just like to get together ... they like the social part of it ... they're not really after the specific competencies ... and it's hard to marry them [the needs of the learner and the CSWE competencies] ...
As well as trying to accommodate all of the needs of the learners, teachers are trying to ensure learners progress through the appropriate competencies to achieve success within CSWE. Teachers made various comments about this issue:

... you try and cover their needs ... you can't actually modify the competencies when it comes to the testing process but certainly in the teaching process you can ... well it depends on how much we think we're governed by CSWE ... I suppose - how much are we looking at outcomes for the computer ...

(Teacher 1)

I think a lot depends on the outcomes ... they're [funding body] talking in terms of us being ... mmm ... our money going to be given to us depending on our outcomes ...

(Teacher 4)

Conclusion

The needs of the learners are not being overlooked with the introduction of competency-based training. On the contrary, it seems that teachers are striving to accommodate the needs of the learners and the needs of the curriculum. A range of issues relating to general teaching practice arose as a result of this research into the needs analysis process. A key issue, however, was that the teachers showed a strong commitment to the collection and collation of comprehensive learner information to enhance program planning and delivery.

Even though providing for all learner needs was problematic, teachers still saw needs analysis as critical to providing responsive and relevant English language training. Balancing the learning needs of a group of learners and teaching and assessing CSWE competencies also created a dilemma for all of the teachers. However, once again this did not deter them from continuing to use needs analysis.

For ESL teachers the aim of developing learner English language skills is essentially very clear. However the process itself is not as clear. One of the contributing factors to the complexities of the language learning process is the individuality of the learners. This is acknowledged, in a way, by the needs analysis process. When I looked at the process the individuality of the teachers also became apparent.

There was little agreement as to what learner data was significant but it seems English language proficiency is of importance. The wide range of teacher choices with regard to significant learner profile items could suggest that teachers are focusing on different information because they use it in different ways. It could also suggest that the individuality of the teachers is as much an issue as the individuality of the students. Perhaps needs analysis needs further analysis.

I gratefully acknowledge the contribution of time and expertise by my colleagues Cathie Alexander, Danuta Bass-Dolivan, Kay Hodges, Linda McDonagh, Ildi Molnar, Rose O'Connell, Kim Prince and Cathy Scanlon.

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SECTION THREE

Translating needs analysis into course design

1  Wag the dog: Needs analysis and course design in a competency-based curriculum
   Marion Martin

2  Meeting the needs and priorities of individual learners
   Noela Carr

3  Ticking the box for competency
   Susan Henenberg

4  Making connections: Giving value to the competencies by linking them to the learner’s experience
   Theresa Kozar
Introduction

I wanted to know whether my planning and teaching were responsive to learner expectations and if this impacted on learner outcomes.

(Susan Henenberg)

In the project, several teachers began with questions and issues about need analysis, but found their research moving into how needs analysis interacts with course planning and decision making. A learner-centred curriculum does not occur as a series of discrete teaching steps but as a complex and dynamic process. The linkages and interactions between the phases of the curriculum process became more obvious in a number of projects, as the papers in this section illustrate.

Marion Martin, working in ELLS South Australia, began by wanting to get a picture of her colleagues’ needs analysis practices. As her research moved forward she gained interesting insights into how four teachers, who had experienced AMEP teaching both before and after the introduction of competency-based approaches, go about gaining information from their students and then translating this information into course design and planning.

While Marion’s research focuses on the relationships between needs analysis and course planning amongst her colleagues, Noela Carr, a teacher at Logan TAFE in Brisbane, investigated how needs analysis interacted with decision making in her own classroom. Her research was motivated by the contradictions between the vocationally oriented course objectives dictated by funding requirements in her program and the learning needs expressed by her group of advanced students. She explored how she could frame her course within the core vocational requirements and yet at the same time attempt to meet the students’ expressed learning goals.

Like Noela, Susan Henenberg, a teacher of a beginner level class in the Adult Multicultural Education Services in Melbourne, conducted her research with her own students. Susan was concerned about her planning and teaching in relation to the learning competency at the beginner level of the curriculum. She wanted to look in depth at how responsive she was to learner expectations about learning and whether what she did to foster learning had an impact on competency achievement. Using a variety of strategies, including bilingual assistance, she concludes ‘that even learners with a rudimentary knowledge of English and the language learning process’ can evaluate their learning.

Theresa Kozar, also a teacher in the Adult Multicultural Education Services Victoria, takes us even further into the complexities of moving backwards and forwards between needs analysis and content and task development. She wanted to focus on raising student awareness of how they could relate their own needs to the competency statements. She saw this as a way of affirming student needs and bringing what she calls more ‘value’ to classroom learning. Theresa’s account is interesting in that it highlights the increased student involvement that resulted from focusing attention on involvement itself.
1 Wag the dog: Needs analysis and course design in a competency-based curriculum

Marion Martin

The research context

English Language and Literacy Services (ELLS) is part of the Adelaide Institute of TAFE. The Elementary Program at ELLS provides English language tuition to clients in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) after they have completed an initial course in the New Arrivals Program. The clients have a minimum of seven years education but more commonly have completed secondary education and often have tertiary qualifications. Their life goals vary. Some want to pursue further study, others want to look for work and others want to participate more effectively in the community. The students are grouped according to their Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating (A SLPR) which for the Elementary Program must be 0+ to 1.

This project investigated the needs analysis and course design practices of four experienced teachers in a ten week elementary course. The students in these classes had an Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating (A SLPR) range of 1- to 1 and were working towards Certificate II in Spoken and Written English (CSWE II). Each group had a Core Class of 12 hours per week with some clients choosing to attend additional modular courses as well. The modules were taught by other teachers.

Having been involved in the implementation of the CSWE at ELLS and having attended staff development in all aspects of its delivery over a number of years, I was interested to investigate the current practice of my colleagues. I wanted to see what effect, if any, the demands of the CSWE was having on course content. I was interested to see if the requirements of the CSWE allowed teachers to remain learner-centred or if the tail was wagging the dog.

The research

Research question: Are our needs analysis and course design practices enabling us to stay learner-centred in a competency-based curriculum?

The term ‘needs analysis’ is open to interpretation. However, needs analysis can be seen to serve three main purposes:

1. It provides a means of obtaining wider input into the content, design and implementation of a language program.
2. It can be used in developing goals, objectives and content.
3. It can provide data for reviewing and evaluating an existing program. (Richards 1984:5)

While acknowledging the role of diagnostic testing in assessing student language and the value of goal-setting activities, my research project focused on students’ ability to contribute directly to the content of their course. I was concerned with planning procedures carried out in the classroom once the students had been grouped.

I asked four colleagues to consider their practices in needs analysis and course design.
To gather this information I interviewed and tape recorded the teacher’s responses to the following questions and then analysed these responses. I asked the teachers to consider:

- what information do you gather from students?
- how do you use student information?
- are your needs analysis processes different since the introduction of the CSWE?
- what syllabus type do you use as a basis of course design?
- what do you incorporate into your course design without consulting the students?
- has the introduction of the CSWE helped or hindered your course design in terms of meeting student needs?

### Needs analysis

Three of the four teachers distributed handouts for students to complete. Teachers A and B used the following handout which focuses on macroskills and topics. This form was designed by teacher B and was being used by teacher A for the first time. Teachers A and B went through the sheet with their students, elaborating on the topics and answering questions where necessary.

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**English Language and Literacy Services**

**Class:** ______________________  **Date:** ____________

**Objective:** To find out the needs of the class this term

- Which of these skills is the most important to you in this class?
  Number them from 1 to 4 (1 is the most important).
  If they are all important, give them the same number.
  ___ Speaking ___ Reading
  ___ Listening ___ Writing

- Which of these topics are important for you?
  Not important ✔  Important ✔  Very important ✔✔
  ___ Learning about Australia
  ___ Health
  ___ My house
  ___ Getting around Adelaide
  ___ Talking to friends and neighbours
  ___ Shopping
  ___ Finding a job
  ___ My children’s school

- Is there anything you want to say about what you would like to do in this class?

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Teacher A: The students in Teacher A’s class added grammar as an additional topic. They also indicated that speaking and listening were priorities and conversation was overwhelmingly popular. Health was considered the most important topic and proved to be such a big area that it became the main focus of the whole course.
Teacher B: The students in Teacher B’s class added using the telephone as an additional topic. The most popular topics were learning about Australia, health and talking to friends and neighbours. The students wanted to cover all the macroskills but speaking was identified as the biggest need. Teacher B felt that the results were very useful as it was easy to see the topics that were important to many of her students.

Teacher D: Teacher D produced the following handout and asked the students to choose five topics out of a list of eleven. The most popular topics were using the media and health, followed by housing and socialising.

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<th>English Language and Literacy Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topics for learning English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Name: _______________________________
| 1 Socialising – talking about yourself and your family to friends and neighbours |
| 2 Housing – talking about your house/unit, buying, renting issues, bills problems and dealing with tradespeople |
| 3 Health – talking about illnesses, doctors, hospitals, dentists |
| 4 Shopping – buying, returning, complaining |
| 5 Using the post office and bank |
| 6 The Australian education system – for your children, for yourself |
| 7 Using the telephone |
| 8 Understanding Australians and Australian culture |
| 9 Using the media – TV, radio, newspapers, magazines |
| 10 Places of interest in Adelaide and SA, excursions |
| 11 Hobbies, social activities, sport |

For Teachers A, B and D the student preferences formed the content of the course. The assessment of CSWE competencies was mapped onto the topics as appropriate.

Teacher C: Teacher C’s approach to needs analysis was somewhat different. She often suggests the topic of learning about Australia to students as an appropriate one and feels this has always worked well. She feels that the students should know something of Australia’s history and makes fairly structured suggestions such as geography, early history or early explorers. She does not favour a topic-based syllabus and puts a greater emphasis on diagnostic grammatical exercises in order to design a structural syllabus.

**Course design**

The teachers were asked to reflect on the type of syllabus they preferred when designing their courses. They all read the eight different syllabus types described by Feez (1998):

1 structural
2 situational
Teachers A, B and D all favoured a mixed syllabus. This is a syllabus which integrates the elements of a range of syllabus types and in which course objectives are derived from a needs analysis (Feez 1998:18). In retrospect Teacher B was not happy with her syllabus. She felt it was too difficult and time-consuming to relate everything to a topic. She felt dissatisfied that she could not find supporting exercises to fit well into the topics. The topic on health did not present problems but learning about Australia became a huge area and did not fit well with the structures she wanted to work on.

Teacher C preferred to design a syllabus based on structures. A structural syllabus is based on lexical items and grammatical structures which are sequenced according to their perceived complexity (Feez 1998:14). This syllabus type is based on the idea that the learner accumulates all the building blocks of the language one by one thus eventually constructing the whole language (Feez 1998:14). Teacher C did incorporate some topics but her emphasis was on a structural approach.

**Teacher input**

The question of what was incorporated into the syllabus without consulting the students brought a variety of responses.

Teacher A: Having identified the macroskills and topics which the students wanted to focus on, Teacher A examined the listing of student achievements for CSWE II to locate gaps in student assessment. She then added new competencies to her syllabus, for example responding to and giving spoken instructions. She also used her professional judgment to include another - asking for and giving differing opinions, as she found many of her students could not tolerate disagreement. Grammatical items, eg phrasal verbs, were also added. She also admitted sneaking in reading and writing activities to ensure a more balanced syllabus and outcomes.

Teacher B: Teacher B added elements such as learning skills and strategies, settlement information, independent work, structures and pronunciation.

Teacher C: Teacher C aimed to incorporate her knowledge of the students’ grammatical requirements around their gaps in assessment for CSWE II. She responded to their grammatical needs by trying to put them into a practical context. She favoured a grammatical approach over a communicative one in the belief that students needed to be able to intellectualise why something was not right. Reading and writing genres were dictated by the competency requirements indicated for CSWE II and were underpinned by the grammar needs which were identified through diagnostic testing.

Teacher D: Teacher D did not consult students about the four macroskills as she believed it was important to teach all four to provide a balanced course. She added functions such as giving instructions and expressing opinions. She used her professional judgment to add grammatical structures and independent learning skills which were seen as valuable. The choice of genre-writing topics were influenced by those assessed in CSWE II.
Findings

In analysing the responses of the teachers to the research it is obvious that the influence of the CSWE on needs analysis varies according to the approaches which the teachers adopt. However, the introduction of the CSWE has had some impact on course design.

Teacher A: Teacher A continually changes and refines her methods of needs analysis and feels it does not relate to CSWE but to the needs of the learners. Her course content is driven by the students' topic choice, not assessment. Teacher A commented that the process of course design is now more complex and time-consuming and it can be difficult to cater for differing assessment needs within one group. She likes to leave her initial course outline fairly open to allow for spontaneous teaching and divides the timetable into different modules to provide a flexible framework. This was not influenced by CSWE requirements. Teacher A feels that the assessment tasks for writing did influence the genres taught, especially if writing is not a major focus of the course. For example, forms and recounts were taught rather than descriptive writing.

Teacher B: Teacher B felt that her approach to needs analysis had not been altered by the introduction of the CSWE. She felt that the CSWE had not changed the focus of her course design and only had some impact around the edges, not in essence. It hindered it in the sense of taking up thinking time and increased administration. But she felt that adjusting the edges of a course for assessment can be beneficial by not skipping over language items and teaching them more thoroughly.

Teacher C: Teacher C felt that her approach to needs analysis had not been altered by the introduction of the CSWE. She also felt that initially it did hinder her course design but now feels that it has the positive effect of making some aspects of her teaching more communicative. Reading and writing in her classroom has been guided by the requirements of the CSWE.

Teacher D: Teacher D felt that her earlier approaches to needs analysis were more ad hoc and were not always done formally at the beginning of the course. Previously she would sometimes ask the students about their preferences for macroskills but she no longer does this as she feels a balanced syllabus is preferable for both students and teacher and for outcomes. She now has a much clearer and more focused pathway in her courses. The assessment tasks for writing did influence the genres taught. Teacher D felt that her syllabus type had changed since the introduction of a competency-based curriculum, having previously favoured a process type, which was a retrospective record rather than a plan (Feez 1998:16). Now she is more organised and focused, especially on specific skills, earlier in the course and has clearer pathways.

All the teachers felt that CSWE has allowed them to remain learner-centred.

Teacher A: At one stage, Teacher A felt that she had remained learner-centred despite CSWE. However, as she becomes more experienced with the curriculum she can see that CSWE and learner-centredness can sit together quite comfortably. She acknowledges the need to think carefully and thoroughly about content right at the beginning of the course.
Teacher B: Teacher B felt that the introduction of a competency-based curriculum had not had much impact on the needs-based syllabus.

Teacher C: Teacher C felt the curriculum was time-consuming.

Teacher D: Teacher D felt it was possible to be even more learner-centred within the CSWE because of increased planning and consultation with students from the beginning of a course and more rigorous and thorough teaching of skills.

Conclusion

The educational philosophy of the AMEP has always placed great importance on identifying the needs of individuals and responding to them, on being learner-centred. Hence a collaboration between teachers and learners has evolved over the years to develop a curriculum that involves learners in the decision-making process.

Content selection is an important component of a learner-centred curriculum. In such a curriculum clear criteria for content selection give guidance on the selection of materials and learning activities and assist in assessment and evaluation (Nunan 1988:5).

The introduction of the CSWE and formal assessment made some teachers fear that a competency-based curriculum would dominate course content and the learner-centred focus of our teaching practice would be lost. This project has given a small group of teachers the opportunity to pause and reflect on their current practice in the classroom. Whilst teachers still have the freedom to choose their preferred syllabus type and methodologies, there is now a requirement to assess formally and record student outcomes. However despite these demands there is evidence to suggest that the dog is still very much in charge of its tail.

Bibliography


2 Meeting the needs and priorities of individual learners

Noela Carr

The research context

The current AEMP classes at Logan are externally funded and are required to have a vocational focus. The number of places in these courses is limited and students are not guaranteed more than 20 weeks of tuition (2 x 10-week terms). Students who have completed the Certificate III in Spoken and Written English and those who have not studied English before are given preference.

I have been concerned for some time that students in these courses have not been entirely satisfied with the program. In order to meet the assessment requirements, the course has been designed so that half the Certificate IV in Spoken and Written English competencies are covered in each term and the specifically work-related competencies in the course are grouped together to avoid repetition and overlap.

The particular class which was the focus of my action research consisted of 16 students. Eight of these students had already completed 50 percent or more of Certificate IV. They came from a wide variety of backgrounds but all had completed high school and/or tertiary education. Seven have been in the workforce in their own countries and/or in Australia. Three of these students were setting up their own businesses and one was from a professional background.

The research

Research question: Can I meet the needs and priorities of individual students within an externally funded course with a predetermined vocational focus?

The students bring a diverse range of goals and learning experiences to the classroom. For example, some students do not want to focus on vocational ends but want to move on to further study courses or to improve their general English competency. Some students may have already completed some or all of the competencies in other courses and some have undertaken specialised courses which have addressed similar skill areas such as writing job applications and preparing résumés.

For the research I decided to focus on the eight students in the group who had already achieved at least 50 percent of the Certificate IV competencies and to investigate ways of meeting their needs within the parameters of the course.

Analysing needs

In Week 1 of the course I used a needs analysis survey with the whole class to determine the students’ long-term goals and their immediate priorities for the course.

The results of this survey indicated that the class, including the focus students, was generally motivated and self-directed. Their immediate goals tended towards improving their general English rather than concentrating on specific job-related tasks.
I also presented an overview of the program and accompanying assessment items, which included specifically job-related tasks such as analysing job advertisements, preparing résumés and job interviews. Many of the students, especially those in the focus group, were very unhappy about the inclusion of these because they felt they already had résumés which they currently used, they had already completed at least two terms of a business-focused course or they wanted to focus on English for further study.

Student interviews

In response to the general dissatisfaction shown by the students, I decided to conduct individual interviews with the focus students. Two of the interview questions, the student responses and the teaching implications are outlined below:

Q Why don’t you like the program for this term?

When asked to comment on their unhappiness (in one case distress) with the program, the students gave a variety of responses:

I don’t like to do these subjects because I did many times in the past – I find it boring for me, and I find that I can’t learn something new.

I am going to learn from life all this stuff with interviews and preparing for the job, actually, you know. This is why I am here – to improve my English. My profession is working with people. If I don’t improve here – then where, where?

Actually, it’s useful, but in this case I think we can find other courses which are more related to find a job when we are ready – business courses, you know. But I think this course has to be just English course, because I think we can’t improve enough in these two months.

This is boring. I want to improve my English to study at uni, you know – not just play around with this stuff at this time. Maybe later it’s useful.

I don’t need to apply for a job now because at this – or – now – I set up my business. Maybe next week I have opportunity to be a partnership. I want to speak and learn English for my job opportunity.

Q Do you want or need to complete this certificate?

Response: All the students wanted to complete the certificate.

This meant that some students had to complete certain competencies which restricted their choices. It also meant they could not avoid some aspects of the course which they felt were less useful. Therefore I reviewed with each student:

- their progress to date
- what was necessary for them to complete the certificate
- what choices were available to them.

I explained the reasons why the core program for the class would remain the same and negotiated with each student what they would work on. The core competencies for the class were:

- can understand an oral presentation
- can deliver an oral presentation
- can read and deliver advertisements for employment
• can prepare a curriculum vitae
• can write a formal letter (for employment)
• can participate in an interview for employment.

Through the negotiations the students made the following choices:

• Two of the younger students chose to complete the core course as outlined. They felt they needed to upgrade their résumés and have the experience of a job interview in Australia.
• Two students who had already covered these skill areas elected not to do any of the job-oriented work but worked on other aspects of language.
• One student elected to hand in previous work for assessment to complete his certificate. He did not participate in the classwork leading up to assessment but spent extra time working on his reading and writing skills.
• Three students had varying mixed responses which included the following options:
  - reading information texts
  - reading diagrammatic/graphic texts
  - writing formal letters – other than for employment
  - writing reports.

These students did not participate in interviews but joined the practice sessions. They also undertook self-paced tasks on idioms, reading comprehension, grammar, guided writing, vocabulary building and pronunciation.

Monitoring progress

During the first five weeks of the course I monitored the progress of the eight focus students by making observations and having informal chats, particularly in the Individual Learning Centre and occasionally over coffee. I found this strategy useful in that the students were much more relaxed and more willing to talk about what they were really feeling.

I was particularly interested in their attitudes as well as checking the progress of their work. The overwhelming response was that they were generally happy with the choices they had made once the system had been explained to them, and that they felt a sense of ownership of what they were studying.

Only one student changed from her original plan during the course. She had originally opted to write a report to improve her writing and extend her knowledge of her profession in Australia. Due to heavy home commitments, she found that she did not have the time and consequently opted to upgrade her résumé, which she could do in her computer class. This decision surprised me since she had been the most upset at having to work on this competency in the beginning. When queried, she said that she did not like it but it was now a matter of necessity. She felt that at least it had been her decision and she had not been pushed into it.

Evaluation

In Week 7 I conducted individual interviews again, which I recorded on cassette. My purpose was to find out how the students felt about working on their own at times instead of joining in the core work with the rest of the class. I was also interested in their attitudes towards the choices they had made.
The following are some responses to two key questions in the final interview:

Q Were you happy that you were given a choice?

Yes, but I had to choose subjects to finish my certificate. But I’m glad I didn’t have to do the interview – I’ve done that enough. I would prefer to have more grammar and general English. Better for me to do résumé instead of report too, because I don’t really know about résumé in Australia before now. I think I will need it in the future.

I’m very happy to have at least a little bit of choice to think about. At the first moment I didn’t like to do that work-oriented assignments. I think that application letter and that advertisement analysis – it was a pain in the neck. But now application letter and résumé is – now I found it very useful.

I’ve done it. I’m happy to not do the interview and all that stuff. I mean, I always read ads and go to interviews – and – I know my problems – and – I’ve done it enough, and I feel usually confident. I told you – I had an interview the other day and she was very impressed, yes.

I find that always if I have some choice it’s good to have the chance to choose something – it’s good because I can choose something that I need more. I have another duties at home – and I had good will to write the report, but I haven’t time. But I improved my résumé, so it was not a complete waste of time.

Q How did you feel about the self-paced work you did in class?

Good for me because I am a bit slowly, and when you gave us these exercises I can think and take my time – and you could come and check when I am ready.

Yes, and I also find that you are very good – you are not in a hurry. I don’t like just hurry to pass the program. I want to do something to know after that.

Very useful.

I am very happy to go at my own speed and try it myself first.

You were always available to help us in between the others’ work.

All this can never be enough. We have to repeat and learn in more detail to renew in our minds. I think it was very good.

Conclusion

When I first decided to be more flexible in my approach to assessment within the parameters of a fairly set framework, I was unsure how I was going to approach it. I would have done something to meet the students’ needs even if I had not been involved in the action research project. It was fortunate that I had the opportunity to work collaboratively with other teachers, including my co-teacher and Advanced English for Migrants (AEMP) co-ordinator, to share ideas and to gain support.

The students were very supportive of the fact that I was conducting research in the classroom and seemed proud of the fact that they were part of it. One of the most successful outcomes of this project was that the whole group of students took on more...
responsibility than I had previously noticed in other groups. The reasons for this are varied, but a significant contributing factor was that the students were all mature people with high levels of education and well developed study skills. As well as this, all but one of the focus group had had previous experience in the workforce. This meant that they knew what was important for them and were not afraid to take responsibility for making their own choices.

Overall, this has been a very valuable professional development exercise as I have had the chance to reflect on the individuality of students in a classroom situation. I have also been able to provide at least some measure of flexibility in assessment while maintaining a core program.

Initially, I was afraid that the task of providing extra assessment items would prove rather daunting. However, by being forced to organise my time better and plan well ahead, I found that it was not much extra effort to provide more than one assessment item based on the work being covered during class.

I have been inspired to continue this approach to assessment in the AEMP program and I look forward to trialling a similar approach with lower level students in the future.
3 Ticking the box for competency
Susan Henenberg

The research context

The students I worked with during this project were enrolled in a Certificate in Spoken and Written English I (CSWE I) class at the AMES Victoria Springvale centre. The course was funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. There was continuous enrolment up to Week 7 of the nine-week course. I taught the class for three days a week and my co-teacher taught for the other two days.

The profile of the group is outlined in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Group profile</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A SLPR levels:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Previous language classes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational background</td>
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Nunan (1988:141) identifies a gap between the planned curriculum and the reality of the classroom. He identifies the learner's hidden agendas as one of the major reasons for this gap. He suggests that ‘one way of bringing intention and reality into line would be to make the planned curriculum very explicit to the learners, using bilingual resources where necessary to get the message across’.

I wanted to know whether my planning and teaching were responsive to learner expectations and if this impacted on learner outcomes. Nunan (1988:180) also speaks about the importance of ‘sensitising learners to their role as learners alongside the development of language skills since this focus would be particularly important in systems which offer the learner only short-term courses’.

I had often uneasily ticked the box for Competency 1 of CSWE I – Can undertake the roles and responsibilities of a learner in a formal learning environment. Now I wanted to look at it more closely with the help of bilingual assistance.

The research

Research question: Is my planning and teaching responsive to learner expectations and does this impact on learner outcomes?

Student data

In order to investigate my research question I collected three types of data from the students:

1 In Week 2, I placed 21 students into language groups to discuss and complete two questionnaires from Willing (1989:11-13) which focused on preferred ways of
learning (see Figure 1). I explained the purpose of these activities through interpreters and told the students their comments would help me improve my teaching.

The surveys revealed two surprising results:

- 12 students preferred excursions as a way of learning English
- four students did not like working with a partner.

Following this questionnaire, I handed out the list of CSWE competencies in the students’ L. However, I did not have L1 for the five Farsi students, the seven Cambodian speakers or the Somali student.

In Weeks 5 and 6 my co-teacher and I conducted focus group interviews using Bosnian, Farsi and Cambodian interpreters. The students were questioned about issues affecting their learning, their future plans and their perceptions of the course, as well as their understanding of the CSWE curriculum (see Figure 2). Organising bilingual assistance was time-consuming and the quality varied. Nevertheless, accurate needs analysis would have been impossible without it.

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Figure 1: Learning styles worksheet (data from Willing questionnaire)
The students described the effects of post-war trauma and settlement issues on their learning. The Cambodian group asked for language relating to health and shopping and the Farsi group wanted to understand more about the structure of English. It was pleasing to note that all the groups could describe what they had been learning in class and that the Bosnian and the Cambodian groups were familiar with the CSWE competencies.

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### Interview sheet

1. How’s your English going?  
   Any problems?

2. How would you rate your language learning?  
   Very good = 1        Good = 2        Reasonable = 3        Poor = 4  
   Rate your:  
   _____ Listening  _____ Speaking  
   _____ Reading  _____ Writing

3. What are your future plans?  
   To stay at home  
   To study  
   To work at any job  
   To return to a profession

4. What are you learning in class at the moment?

5. What have you learned over the last _________ weeks?

6. Which topics have been useful and not useful?

7. What do you know about the CSWE competencies?

8. Have you read the bilingual sheet about the CSWE?  
   Do you understand it?

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**Figure 2: Students’ perceptions of CSWE course and understanding of curriculum**

3. In Weeks 8 and 9 I began encouraging the learners toward self-reflection and assessment. I wanted to make the course structure more explicit to the learners as well as facilitating evaluation. I would have liked to begin this process earlier but there was continuous enrolment up to this point which affected class dynamics. This meant recycling material already covered in class in order to make the newcomers feel comfortable.

I asked the students to rate their dialogue performances using happy and sad face diagrams and explained the concept of listening for gist to recorded material. At first learners had expected to be able to accurately reproduce a text rather than simply answering four short questions about a dialogue. I also showed learners how to devise their own clozes as a memorising strategy. At this point learners began to take more responsibility for their learning. They were more relaxed with the listening materials I brought to class and they were often talking about class work at the beginning of a teaching session.

I then showed students how specific worksheets and materials we had done in class were linked to the competencies. I displayed all the worksheets we had done in topic order and asked all the students to rearrange their papers. Some students had ring binders but had no idea of how to arrange their work systematically.
Meeting the old hands

During the last week of the course the Bosnian, Cambodian and Vietnamese speakers were matched with students from a CSWE IV group who spoke the same first languages. They were given the following self-assessment questionnaire (see Figure 3) to discuss and complete.

**CSWE I students**

**Self-assessment questionnaire**

1. These things were difficult in English at the beginning of the course:
2. I’m still having problems with these things in English:
3. I fixed these problems in English by ____________________
4. The best way to:
   - remember English words is by ____________________
   - improve pronunciation is by ____________________
   - learn grammar is by ____________________
   - understand the news is by ____________________
5. I use my English
   - where ____________________
   - what for ____________________
   - with whom ____________________
6. Think about your expectations at the beginning, middle and end of course. Have your ideas changed?
7. What did the teacher help you with most and least in the class?

**Figure 3: Students’ self-assessment questionnaire**

The CSWE IV students were asked to preread the questionnaire and also to discuss their language learning experiences using the following questionnaire (see Figure 4).

**CSWE IV questionnaire**

1. How many English classes have you done?
2. Did you have a clear language goal at the beginning?
3. Have your ideas changed?
4. How long did it take for you to be able to:
   - have short conversations with someone in English?
   - have a short conversation on the telephone?
   - understand the news headlines on TV?
   - ask questions reasonably in English?
   - write short letters and fill in forms without help?

**Figure 4: CSWE IV students’ language learning experiences questionnaire**
I wanted an informal setting for the discussion so I set it up as a morning tea. In bringing together the CSWE I and CSWE IV students, I wanted to give my students a perspective on learning a language over a longer period of time and the benefit of some advice from old hands. However, I felt this aim was not fully achieved even though there had been a friendly interactive atmosphere. It was difficult for the CSWE IV students to both interpret and give advice. I should have separated the processes. The idea had come from Hadfield (1992:169). She had asked longer-term students to write a letter to newer students. A written piece in conjunction with the questionnaire would have elicited a more focused discussion.

**Course evaluation**

During the course evaluation session the learners reported that they felt that their oracy had improved and they were generally more confident with their English. Some of the students reported that they had had stress headaches at the beginning of the course and had felt very nervous and confused because of the pace of the class. They had felt responsible for their lack of knowledge and there had been insufficient resources to allay their discomfort. However they were beginning to see that they could learn and they wanted to continue.

The feedback on learning strategies varied with:

- many learners using the traditional read-repeat-write down technique
- some learners using the TV extensively rather than the newspaper as a learning aid
- more outgoing students trying to use their English in shops and for everyday matters
- some students practising English with their children
- a few students using phonetic transcription.

None of these strategies were specific to age, nationality or educational background.

**Interviewing the interpreters**

Following the course evaluation session, I decided to interview the interpreters who were successful independent learners. I was looking for some insights into the language learning process:

- One Vietnamese interpreter preferred a grammar-based bilingual method. The other preferred to read short stories but also used audio cassettes and videos to learn English.
- The Cambodian interpreter used the International Phonetic Alphabet and traditional learning methods. However, he said he preferred the methods used in Australian classrooms.
- The Bosnian interpreter had learned English in about 12 months with only four classes. He was a highly motivated communicative learner and used a range of strategies to reach ASLPR 2 in order to undertake further study.

It appeared that the success of the interpreters in learning English was due to their motivations and personalities rather than one particular method. It became clear to me that they were successful because of their focused understanding of the language learning process. Perhaps they had gained this understanding with the help of a teacher but most likely they had done a lot of learning on their own.
Outcomes and responses to the research process

Working on the research project gave me the opportunity to confirm that my planning and teaching within the CSWE curriculum were consistent with a learner-centred approach. Given the chance, even learners with a rudimentary knowledge of English and the language learning process could comment on their progress and articulate their language goals.

Maintaining a learner-centred approach is challenging. Theoretically, learners can enter a competency-based framework at any point and be able to achieve something. However, continuous enrolment creates a disjointed and disparate group and is a planning headache. It particularly impacts on less educated learners who may also be recent refugees. As humanitarian clients they are usually given an extra 110 hours of English. Sometimes they are grouped together in a class but most of the time they enter an established class and feel confused and disoriented. They suffer unnecessary stress because they do not have the background worksheets, they have not done the orientation to learning activities that are done at the beginning of most courses and they disrupt the instructional flow for the rest of the class. Teachers feel they must repeat and recycle material to incorporate the newcomers into the class.

Having to complete assessments by the end of Week 6 in a nine or ten-week course is another challenge to the learner-centred approach. It would be preferable to include an end of course as well as a mid-course assessment.

Ongoing L1 feedback enabled me to focus on specific learners whose needs were not necessarily met through pair or group work. As a result I included more one-to-one classroom assistance. I feel that many students automatically see themselves as unsuccessful learners unless needs assessment, bilingual help in negotiating the curriculum and program continuity (Nunan 1988) are an integral part of the curriculum.

Where to from here

Matching the CSWE IV with the CSWE I learners led to a discussion at our centre about the possibility of a peer support mechanism which would alleviate some of the stress learners feel entering a classroom for the first time after many years. CSWE IV learners have much to offer the lower level students. They can discuss learning strategies, answer questions about vocabulary or grammar in L1 and they can also assist by giving learner feedback to CSWE I teachers.

Following discussions with my colleagues, I feel the need to know more about text-based syllabus design and the linguistic theory which underpins the CSWE. Most professional development activities in AMES Victoria have emphasised the grafting of the CSWE onto activities we already use in our classrooms, focusing on the content rather than the process. I feel we now need to look more closely at the cycle of teaching and learning activities involved in text construction and deconstruction.

Participating in the collaborative action research process was useful and stimulating, although time consuming. The project allowed for reflection and a discussion of issues across centres. If action research could be regularly conducted at the centre level it would enhance curriculum meetings and teaching practice.

I would like to continue gathering feedback from learners to track and assist them across courses. By the time the learners in the project and I really knew each other the course was over. Their linguistic confidence had begun to emerge, their worksheets were organised and they were ready to begin.
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4 Making connections: Giving value to the competencies by linking them to the learner’s experience

Theresa Kozar

The research context

The observation class for the research was an immigration class in the final phase of the Certificate III in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) at the Victoria AMES St Albans Centre. I taught the class for only two hours per week. The profile of the class which is outlined in Table 1 below influenced my research focus and the way I conducted the research.

Table 1: Class profile

| Purpose of the research | The terms learner-centred and competency-based curriculum in the title of the action research proposal struck an immediate chord when I read them. I had many issues |
| Age                     | The students were young with half under 25 and no-one older than 45 |
| Educational background  | The students were reasonably well educated with all but one having over 10 years education |
| Gender                  | Fairly equal balance of males and females |
| Language backgrounds    | There were 11 different language groups in the class |
| Previous language tuition | At least five had used English in their countries of origin: the Philippines, Pakistan, India, Egypt and the Sudan |
|                         | This meant they were confident in their spoken English |
| Attendance              | Although there were 16 students on the roll the actual attendance numbers were usually quite small |
|                         | There were often only about 8 or 9 left in class when I came in for my lesson, which took place after the coffee break and there were not always the same people from week to week |
| Learning styles         | The students ranged from very reflective, accurate learners to completely intuitive and fluent learners |
regarding both the learners and the CSWE curriculum. By taking part in this project I saw a welcome opportunity to step back from the immediacy of daily teaching demands and to bring shape and form to my concerns.

I wanted a focus that would raise awareness of the CSWE as a curriculum, while at the same time enabling me to investigate practices that demonstrated learner-centredness. As these learners were an articulate group who enjoyed discussions, I felt that I had an excellent opportunity to hear from learners themselves what their perceptions were of the CSWE as a curriculum. I could analyse how I was bringing the nature of the CSWE competencies into sharper focus as goals worth striving towards and how the learners were connecting the classroom practices with the needs they had in their daily lives. I was keen to explore ways of demonstrating the validity of using learner experiences as the source of language for the curriculum, instead of language found in textbooks.

Data collection

During the research period I did a lot of background reading which helped to give a clearer definition to my knowledge of the concepts surrounding the research topic. I was fortunate that there were some excellent recent publications (see references) on the very topics I was investigating.

My data collection methods included:

- field notes with comments on the classes
- diary keeping with personal responses to what had happened in the class
- document analysis of work programs, student responses from the blackboard, teaching materials, student tasks and records.

I found the meetings of the research group to be valuable opportunities for generating ideas concerning my research topic. The discussions, which often showed new perspectives, were very stimulating and were a significant demonstration of the value of collegiate cooperation. Each aspect that was being investigated took on an importance of its own, and there was great support and involvement from every member of the group. I left these sessions feeling invigorated and reinspired.

Strategies

In order to bring the nature of the curriculum into focus I adopted a range of four strategies in the classroom which are outlined below.

Strategy 1  From the first class I told the learners of my involvement with the action research project. I discussed with them the concepts of learner-centredness and curriculum. They were aware that the main thrust of my classes was to make explicit the curriculum and the rationale behind it, as well as stimulating their responses to it.

Strategy 2  An important strategy in raising awareness of the competencies and giving value to them was the sharing of thoughts and feelings through written and spoken text-types. The learners were very keen to do activities where they could talk as much as possible and they chose to do their written texts at home. I was very happy to go along with this, as it gave me the opportunity to engage them in discussion and the chance to recycle language in a variety of text-types.
Strategy 3  As a follow-up to the written tasks for homework, the learners read each other's texts and analysed them against performance criteria using formats such as the one below (Figure 1). This sharing of written texts created a special climate of trust and openness, since those who had not done homework recognised the risk the others were taking by exposing thoughts and mistakes to scrutiny.

Certificate in Spoken and Written English III (Further Study) Assessment

Competency 13: Can write a discussion

Task:  It is better to remain single rather than to marry. Discuss.
You may use your dictionary.
Write at least 100 words.
You have one hour to write this.

Checklist:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to ask yourself</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you used appropriate staging?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you introduce your topic in the first paragraph and list your arguments for and against?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you organised your information into paragraphs that have a controlling idea?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do your paragraphs have one main idea?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you used appropriate conjunctive links to develop your arguments?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• and, also, in addition (additive)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• however, while, on the other hand (comparative)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• because (causal)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you used appropriate vocabulary?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have many idea words about the topic?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: CSWE Assessment Competency 13 – written report

Strategy 4  The final strategy was to match events in the contexts of the learners' own lives to the CSWE competencies. We focused on particular contexts, such as children's school or going on a class excursion. We symbolised the context on the board as a large circle. The circle was then divided into four macroskill areas. Into these quadrants the learners brainstormed all the different text-types they would meet, specifying participants and purposes and the differences in the tone of the language, words used etc. A comparison to the language used in textbooks was touched on, in order to point out the advantages of using their own experiences as a key language learning resource. In hindsight, much more could have been made of this activity and I am grateful for the pointer it has given me for future classes.
Discoveries

Throughout the project I gave the students a range of tasks which provided me with a range of interesting discoveries.

Discovery 1 Giving value to learning tasks increases student involvement

Homework tasks were set as follow-up tasks to analysing texts together. The first task was an informal letter thanking someone who had helped in the learner’s immigration process. This was done by only three or four keen writers. However, as the written texts were given importance by becoming models that were shared around for everyone to read and respond to, more and more began to hand in homework. Giving detailed attention to these written pieces increased their value and as a result there was a much greater response to homework tasks. The increased participation was extremely gratifying. I was very moved by the amount of care and effort the learners put into expressing themselves and impressed by the way they did it.

Discovery 2 There is a correlation between activities done in class and the success of later tasks

I could see some interesting correlations between the activities done in class and the success or otherwise of the homework. Activities where there had been a group brainstorm of ideas recorded on the board allowed the learners to use connectives that showed more complex thinking skills. Ideas were then organised as cause and effect, problem and solution and compared and contrasted rather than simply listed as points. For example, a written discussion on whether it was better to be single or married was effectively constructed. Here, the connective types had been made explicit, and a large range of contrasting simple statements, pros and cons for both sides, had been elicited from classroom discussions and put on the board. Obviously the topic was engaging, which no doubt also contributed to its success. A text on the topic written by an intuitive language learner is reproduced below (Figure 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It is better to remain single rather than to marry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There are so many classification of people: good, bad, poor, rich, fat, skinny … and among the others we have married or not married people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are so many reasons to marry; but to stay single too; and everybody’s reason is good enough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So many times I’m asking myself: ‘Why?? It would be so nice to be single, a few hours only for myself.’ But, on the other hand I come so often tired and hungry from school home. And it is so nice and sweetly to see lunch and flowers on the table; OK flowers not every day, but lunch almost always.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe it doesn’t sound as the best reason to get married, besides there are so many fast-food restaurants, but we have to admit: it is not the same thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have advantages and imperfections on the both side, but from two bad things it is hard to recognise which is better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you are single you are often lonely, no shoulder to lean on, but on the other hand you are independent, with possibility to make your own decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you are married it is nice thing to share good and bad things, nice and less nice moments in life with somebody, to cry and laugh together; but in exchange you have to sacrifice your freedom. It is all well and good, but the most important thing is to organise your own life as you like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... Single or married, it is accessory of minor importance??!!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Student’s written discussion example
Discovery 3  Scaffolding of tasks supports vocabulary development and the organisation of information in texts.

The written discussion on the effectiveness of the CSWE as a curriculum did not always reflect the same depth of discussion as the discussion of marriage. Most of the pieces were descriptive and simply listed activities. The students did not mention many of the ideas that had been discussed in class such as the range of purposeful texts in any one context that linked directly to competencies, or the comparisons between coursebooks and the learners' own real life situations.

There had been no attempt in class to organise ideas in a formal way by writing statements on the board that could then be manipulated and made into more complex statements. It was clear that this type of scaffolding was useful for the learner in a number of ways. It gave adequate vocabulary support, structural support in the organisation of information into thinking patterns and affective support, since it enabled the learners to personalise the classroom language in ways that reflected their own thinking. Despite this some students made a very good attempt as can be seen from the text below (Figure 3).

---

**The CSWE provides an effective curriculum for learning English**

Adult Multicultural Education Services, institution which help us to inclusion into the social life in Australia. It is a very hard task, isn't it?

When I think about this I to wind up that is so difficult to offer a effective curriculum for the adult students who are from very different countries, cultures and social lifes. There are so different reasons, and interests for learning and, of course different level of education.

One way is CSWE. It is to important that my teacher and I know level of my knowledge of English. Teacher may to attend my learning if we have some tests. There are a lot of students, and to make heavy for teachers if we haven't any tests or examination.

But, on the other hand this way is difficult for me. Sometimes I have stage fright and can't to make my test to good.

Finally, I think that will be better if we haven't all tests in the same time. Will be better if we have a lot of homework, competition and short tests during the corse.

As well, many things dipend about teachers and their way to learning and students and their understanding.

---

**Figure 3: Further example of student’s written discussion**

**Discovery 4  Students identify a learning strategy as being part of themselves**

The final piece of writing I asked the students to produce was advice to new learners. This was very well done and it was interesting to identify the factors that contributed to this result. Beforehand we had discussed various aspects of learning, for example, discussing individual ways of learning vocabulary in pairs, then sharing these ideas as a group, writing down the different ways, then evaluating them.

This activity was particularly interesting to me because of the way it demonstrated fixed attitudes to ways of learning. The session had elicited an extensive array of learning strategies, some obviously more useful than others, but in spite of this, when I asked who would change their way of learning vocabulary as a result of seeing how others did it, no-one said they would change. While they could acknowledge the validity or effectiveness of different ways of approaching language...
learning, it was almost as though changing the way they were doing things was not something that could be accepted automatically.

At this point I began to realise just how deeply students identify a strategy as being part of themselves - I do it this way because that is the way I am. An alternative to this is to see a strategy as learned behaviour - I am doing it this way at the moment because this is how I have learnt how to do it, and if it is not working very well I can always unlearn it and learn a new way.

It is possible that there could have been a different response if I had phrased my question differently, or if I had focused more attention on the question by looking at the ramifications of their response. However, the question - Would you change? - is a useful question to ask but in the future I will put thought into how I ask it.

Since it was the last task before term break-up I decided to publish the advice about learning English as the three-columned broadsheet (see page 86–7). I planned to give it to the students as a memento. The ideas had been well expressed and it was a thrill for the contributors to see their English writing in print. I later realised that this was another way of showing that their thoughts had value, an important factor in motivating students to put in the enormous effort needed to learn a new language.

Alongside the significance of appropriate affective support in showing value for the individual as a thinker, it is clear that adequate language support (Helgeson 1996) is vital to the success or otherwise of the way learners construct their independent texts. All too often our learners are overwhelmed by the huge numbers of new words that they have to contend with. This was poignantly expressed in a discussion with another ESL class that I had picked up midway through the term. One of the students spoke of the despair she felt on getting home and spending hours trying to look up all the new words on the many pieces of paper she had been given. It was all too much for her and she often felt like giving up. Her passionate outburst will help me avoid overloading future classes with large numbers of wordy documents or lectures. These days I am working on my cartoons.

Responses to the research process

Taking part in this research has been a very powerful experience. In many ways it has been cathartic, as I have met barriers in my own beliefs, while trying to remove them in my learners. Their advice to each other, in the broadsheet mentioned above, not to be afraid and to have confidence in themselves made me look at areas where my own fears could perhaps be causing problems. It became clear to me that I needed to have faith in myself to be able to help their learning process. Having found a means I can use to help learners demonstrate their thinking, I now feel confident to address more than just their minds. I can see more clearly the value in my own teaching style and I can equally value and appreciate the different ways that others teach.

The simple element of value, that encourages inspiration and trust, and facilitates the means to touch the hearts of another, is a powerful tool that enhances learner-centredness in any curriculum and deserves a place of prominence in the teaching/learning process.

Since I had not written extensive field notes I borrowed the notebook of one of the learners and I was very interested to see how she had interpreted the class proceedings. All too often the intended outcomes were not explicitly recorded and I could see many ways in which I could have made it easier for the learners to organise the information and...
record the activities. This aspect of feedback and monitoring the recording of the daily outcomes was an important lesson that I have taken with me into subsequent classes.

Being part of this research project has helped me both professionally and personally and I would warmly recommend it as a means of refining teaching practice. Professionally, I have a much greater understanding of the curriculum, which has improved my attitude towards it and the value that I have for it. This means that the learners are more able to see the usefulness and worth of the curriculum. I have seen the effects of giving value to people, processes and products and how this contributes to learners making connections between classroom practice and personal needs, needs that address not only external contexts but also internal processes of thinking and feeling. In addition I can fully appreciate the degree to which collegiate support provides a means of generating new ideas and revitalising teaching practice.

Personally I have found it a challenging and intensely satisfying experience. The process of writing this has enabled me to cut through many layers of obscurity and has clarified my thinking significantly. It is a process which does not end with the final sentence.

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Farzana Shaffi

This is quite hard - to tell someone how I have improved my English. But I will try to convince you how you can do it. First I am going to tell you how I did it.

When I came to this school I could read, write and spell, but I could not understand or speak very well. I started watching TV, reading newspapers and coming to school regularly. Every day I picked up some new words in class and listened to the teachers - how they speak - and listened to TV, radio and also other people outside of the class. In this way I tried my hardest to improve my English. Another thing I did was to write down the new words in my notebook and find out their meanings in the dictionary, so this way I increased my vocabulary and learnt a lot of new words. In addition, I removed my hesitation and I spoke English with my class-mates and took part in the class activities.

I tried to talk to myself in English in front of the mirror and sometimes at night when I was in bed but I got more words from TV because I watched a lot of different programs like Play School, Home and Away etc. etc. and I also borrowed some books and conversation cassettes from the library.

My school teachers are very nice and polite. They did me a great favour and helped me to improve my English. I am very happy with my teachers because they have enabled me to speak English.

Now my English is better than it was before.

For new learners, this is my opinion - that they should come here to AMES and learn English because this is very important if they want to live here and to improve their English.

Miljenko Bogunovic

To learn a foreign language is difficult. If you are able to speak or write a language easily it can be said 'you speak fluently'. But, I am writing in this text about English language which should be good enough for everyday life. You should understand spoken and written English about familiar topics. In addition to understanding you must learn to communicate in everyday situations. As well you must learn to write English well enough that you can fill in many forms in everyday situations.

Firstly, and most importantly you should not be timid about having conversations. You must be talkative in every situation without being shy. For example, if you go shopping you can talk with shopkeepers. If you go to the bank you can talk with a bank clerk about a home loan and other kinds of bank assistance. In the beginning it is very important for us that you mustn't feel fear. In that way you can think that you are laughing.

The best way for studying English is to have someone to correct you. If you make a mistake repeat correct sentences after it. You should learn to listen to others and then you can hear correct language and improve your pronunciation. You need to listen to yourself all the time. If you have relatives or friends here please ask them to talk to you and to correct your language.

It's very important for you that you go to school every day and that you attend classes regularly.

It is good to take part in class activities. It doesn't matter if you make some mistakes. If you are unable to go to classes, you must know that it's very difficult to study English alone. You should do all the homework, which will help you a lot. It can be useful watching TV, sometimes reading the newspaper (local) and reading some books suitable for your level of English.

I can recommend to you Heinemann Guided Readers which provide a choice of enjoyable reading material for learners of English. Before you begin reading you must become a member of a library in the area where you live.

English grammar is very important. You must repeat at home exercises which you learn in your classes. It can be useful to put irregular verbs in one place at home as well as phrasal verbs. In my experience I suggest that you buy a radio cassette player so you can walk around and listen to whatever you like - in English of course. You can re-write class texts to improve your writing, which is very difficult in English. You can
Making connections

Some advice to new learners on how to learn English in Australia from some Certificate III students at St Albans AMES

Term 2 1998, Charles’ and Theresa’s class

Nada Bogunovic

The foreign language is a very important thing when you come to another country. In Australia English is the only way for us. We need it so much.

AMES offers an effective curriculum for adult students. It is a little bit harder for students who have not learnt English before, but after 510 hours I think that you won’t need any help when you find a job, go shopping or do some important things in your daily life.

I’ll tell you something about my learning. I’m nearly finished this course and I have some experience in learning. I know that everything depends on the students and their way of studying, but for everyone the first important thing is to go to class regularly. You have a chance to do a lot of different classroom activities everyday, also out of class activities are very important. But I will give you one piece of advice - don’t be shy about having conversations. Don’t worry about mistakes and it is important that you have someone to correct you. Read and speak always when you have the chance. I read everything: the newspaper, magazines, advertisements, my daughter’s schoolbooks and I rewrite some texts to improve my writing.

A very important thing is listening. When you have the time, watch television and listen to the radio. This will be very helpful for you; and look up some new words.

Of course, without grammar your English won’t be very good, and you have to learn it. In the class you will have a lot of grammar exercises. You can also borrow a grammar book and learn at home.

I found that it is very helpful to use an English dictionary as well.

Finally, many things depend on you and your teachers, but I hope that this will help you a little bit.

Oanh Tuong

I have only attended two terms at AMES, so I think it is a short time to say that I am experienced in learning English. I will just tell you about some problems that I had.

Before, I just learned a new word by its spelling and how I could write it, not how it was pronounced and spoken exactly, so when I talked to people they didn’t understand me and neither did I, so pronunciation is very important for me. I usually look up the phonetic symbols in my dictionary, read a new word many times by myself to help me remember, and after that write it down on paper to practice writing. Maybe I learn only one word a day, but I think it is enough for me because if I learn a lot of words in a day I will forget them in a few days. And when I learn a new word, I also learn a whole sentence with this word.

In the class, I always listen to my teachers very hard, instead of looking up new words in my dictionary, to practise my understanding. Sometimes I don’t understand exactly what a word means, but for me, this is the best way to improve your English skills. And you should join a table of people with a different language to yours to practice speaking English.

That’s all. I hope you will be happy learning English in AMES.

Earnest Faris Bebauri

The CSWE is a very good course which will be very useful to you in everyday life. To achieve good results you must consider these few pieces of advice:

Firstly, attendance is very important in order not to miss any information given by the teacher.

Secondly, put down any word you come across which you don’t know and look it up later.

Thirdly, read daily newspapers and magazines. It will improve your reading skills.

Fourthly, if you can talk to people in English, do so. It will improve your speaking skills.

Fifthly, don’t be shy and don’t worry about mistakes. It is important to correct them.

Finally, don’t be too busy. Take time to relax and enjoy learning English.
Some advice to new learners on how to learn English in Australia from some Certificate III students at St Albans AMES

Term 2 1998, Charles' and Theresa's class

you don't know and ask for its meaning and try to make sentences with it.

Thirdly you can listen to tapes and try to repeat after it or ask questions.

It is very important to go home and revise what you have taken in class so it sticks in your mind and the next day you will have confidence in yourself and can negotiate things in class.

One more piece of advice is: don't feel shame when you speak or ask any questions, then you will gain a lot and can cope with anyone around you. Achievement is your goal if you concentrate on it.

Davor Sepatavc

In fact, this is my first course in the centre and I think that I haven't got enough experience to advise somebody who wants to learn English.

I arrived in Australia a few months ago and it was my first meeting with a country where the inhabitants speak English as their mother tongue. It was also my first term in the Centre and, in my opinion, I need a bit more time for improving my English level before giving advice to somebody on how to learn English.

I lived in Germany from 1995, and in the meantime I learned German. Now I have a problem when I want to say something in English. A few sentences I start to speak a mixture of English and German.

Many people from my former country are coming now, and for people who spent some time in Germany I can give some advice.

In the beginning they must learn English for a few hours every day and try to put in their mind ten words every day. Also they have to read English newspapers and other books.

They must not be afraid when they want to speak English. A better way for learning English is conversation again and again. I think that would be a good way of improving your level of English.

Emira Margetic

Now when I've nearly finished my course here at AMES I can say I've fully achieved my goal while I've been here. I would like to give some advice to new learners who have just arrived in the country and who will be attending courses in our school.

It was most important for me to go to class regularly. I always took part in the class activities. Don't be timid about having conversations in your classroom and try to speak English all the time without being afraid. I did all my homework and that helped me a lot. Sometimes I rewrite class texts to improve my writing. Also I found an English dictionary very helpful to me. I made spelling worksheets and sometimes I used this for learning new words. I borrowed a grammar book Grammar in Use which helped me a lot, because I could look up grammar points. I always read the advertisements in my mailbox. Sometimes I read the newspaper and of course I watched a lot of TV, because then I could hear correct language.

Learning a language is like a battle and my advice is never give up. If you fight enough you will have success. I wish you good luck.
SECTION FOUR
Exploring learner-centred learning

1 Lots of learning but is it learner-centred?
   Suzanne Air

2 Emerging from the cocoon
   Bev Proudfoot

3 The switch factor
   Lyn Head
Introduction

‘... adult ESL is about accepting adult ESL students as intelligent, thinking people who often, as a result of past experiences, are in possession of a storehouse of strategies.’

(Susanne Air)

Learner autonomy and independent learning are themes that have continued to emerge from the literature on communicative and learner-centred language teaching. These themes were taken up by three teachers in the project as a focus for their research. The papers in this section form a common theme in that they explore learner-centredness from the learner perspective.

For her research in her multilevel class at the Sunshine Coast TAFE Queensland, Susanne Air decided to pursue her continuing interest in the strategies her learners brought to the classroom. Using a combination of observation and interviews with students, she identifies a rich diversity of learning strategies used by the students. Susanne suggests that the fine balance between the strategies preferred by the students and those that the classroom facilitates is one that merits more attention from teachers.

While Susanne observes and documents learning strategies, Bev Proudfoot, teaching a class of beginner learners in AMES Western Australia, decided on a deliberate teaching intervention to encourage her learners towards greater independence in using English outside the classroom. Her research was motivated by a former student who had viewed English as a language he used only in the classroom. Bev's research will strike a chord with many teachers of adult immigrants who often grapple with the question of how they can motivate their students to use opportunities outside the classroom for learning.

Lyn Head’s interest was in the processes which occur ‘when the students focus on using the second language as a tool for communication, rather than on learning language’. Lyn's teaching at ELLS in South Australia, had led her to observe the improved fluency in English that occurred when her students were enthused and engaged by certain activities and topics. She decided to explore what features made ‘a productive language environment’ in her classroom. She also consulted colleagues at her teaching centre about their own perceptions of how and why the ‘switch’ into spontaneous communication takes place.
1 Lots of learning but is it learner-centred?
Susanne Air

The research context
The class which became the focus of my research was a multilevelled regional ESL class. Like other regional adult second language classes it had to be all things to all learners. The students were enrolled on a continual basis which meant that the numbers ranged over the course from 18 to 25. The students within the class were very diverse as can be seen in Table 1 which provides a snapshot of the diversity within the class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Diversity of students in multilevelled ESL class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Countries of origin</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language levels</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Script backgrounds</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language needs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning styles</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although my agenda is to teach the competency-based curriculum which has certain outcomes and demands, I am aware that a majority of adult students do not always have the same agenda. I believe students should feel comfortable in learning not just the language, but how to embrace a new culture with confidence and participate in community life. I strongly support and assist all adult students to gain self-confidence and personal power which, I believe, can be achieved through free and active encouragement of communication, thoughts and ideas within the classroom.

The research

Research question: What strategies do adult second language learners use when they are in a multilevel, multi-focus class?

In regional classrooms student ratios are increasing and funding restraints are being introduced. Student groups are becoming more disparate and beginner and lower level...
students are often left to undertake classroom activities with no direct teacher supervision.

I am interested in learning more about the processes of adult learning, particularly learning which involves adult second language learners. For my research into the strategies employed by lower level students in a multilevel class, I focused on four students for the learner-centred observations which I undertook. The profiles of these students are set out in Table 2.

Table 2: Student profiles

| Student A | a refugee from war-torn former Yugoslavia  
| total beginner  
| introverted nature  
| sound grammar knowledge  
| previously a writer of books and plays  
| strong innate character  
| hard task master  
| concerned outlook on life  
| comfortable with others who have a happy nature |
| Student B | also a refugee from former Yugoslavia  
| total beginner  
| only a basic school education  
| mistakes not a problem – would correct and carry on  
| quiet but spoke clearly and confidently when required  
| worked in retail  
| optimistic outlook on life – sunny disposition |
| Student C | had been in Australia for some time but this class was first English class  
| high oracy but no literacy  
| very low L1 literacy  
| very low self-esteem – often joked at own expense  
| fossilisation  
| liked to repeat learning content  
| rushed all activities and therefore always made mistakes  
| often disruptive to other students in group or class – very demanding |
| Student D | newly arrived to marry an Australian  
| low oracy  
| communicative risk-taker  
| culturally very different  
| husband would not speak English at home – preferred to keep practising wife’s L1 for his own benefit |

Data collection

I decided to video the selected students within the class. I felt that videos would record natural classroom behaviour and allow for more detailed analysis. I videoed two five-hour sessions of the entire class with a focus on the selected students. I then reviewed the videos with the students and interviewed them about their classroom behaviour.
The findings

The initial findings from the video revealed that:

1. All the students who were observed checked progressively with different students throughout the lesson.
2. Student C and D often checked their progress by speaking out loud.
3. The students frequently used dictionaries.
4. Students requested for groups to be formed according to interests not only language levels.
5. All students left their seats, at some point, to check the translation of English or to reconfirm a vocabulary item.
6. Student D and Student C asked questions on specific grammar or vocabulary points when initial teacher modelling or explanations were given.
7. Student A and Student B asked questions later during the lesson.
8. In all cases students attempted activities prior to asking for assistance.

Student confirmation of findings

To achieve a more concrete understanding of the actions noted on the video I interviewed the students. We went through my notes and matched them with the scenes on the video. The students offered the following explanations of their classroom behaviour:

1. All four students commented that they preferred to ask or confer with students they valued as people. These students were not necessarily those who sat next to them or those of the same nationality.
2. Student C, who had high oracy, felt comfortable in speaking and comfortable in voicing her progress or lack of it amongst her peers.
3. Student D, although only new to the country, was a communicator and felt very comfortable within the given environment.
4. Student A and Student B did not speak quite so openly but did not hesitate to speak up when asked to, when they had a specific query or when they did not understand a word or comment.
5. All the students suggested that they welcomed the pronunciation feedback that was given by the other students.
6. The students used dictionaries for different reasons:
   - Student A and Student B suggested that the dictionary allowed them to go from the known to the unknown.
   - Student C used the dictionary to check that the letters in the words which she wrote were in the correct sequence.
   - Student D used the dictionary to confirm that her understanding was correct.

Collectively the class suggested that the dictionary acted as a bridge, a reinforcer or an extension tool depending on the language level of the user. All felt that dictionaries were vital in the classroom. Interestingly, most of the higher level
students felt that all ESL classrooms should have Australian dictionaries on hand. They found that their personal dictionaries often gave definitions which were too literal or gave incorrect information. They felt that Australian dictionaries allowed them to see the explanation in English, which meant they started to recognise words that belong together.

7 Efforts are usually made within the classroom to group students according to language levels to allow some uniformity of progress. However, the students suggested that when dealing with some activities such as comprehension activities, they learnt better when everyone in the group had similar interests as this provided a better opportunity to express ideas.

8 All the students commented on the practice of reading everything in class aloud. They commented that this practice allowed for peer correction and teacher assistance in pronunciation. They also commented that as reading aloud was commonplace in the classroom, they did not feel silly or strange when someone overemphasised a vowel, consonant or word or when the whole class joined in pronunciation correction. Reading out loud was not considered threatening, as everyone participated, and they could hear the different accents and the general progress of other students.

9 All the students commented on the openness of the class and the ability to contribute to the lesson. The processes of open discussion, moving around the classroom and no conversation barriers added to an atmosphere that allowed one student to approach another with confidence. The open communication allowed for an increase in speaking practice.

10 Student C and Student D felt a little more comfortable with their language learning and where it might be going. As risk takers, they asked questions during explanation and modelling phases of lessons.

11 Student A and Student B explained that, although they had questions, they had to wait until the lesson had started to unfold or they would have too many things to remember.

12 All the students, and the class in general, agreed that handouts were vital. They appeared to serve several purposes:
   • for the beginner or low level students they worked as visual references which they used for developing vocabulary
   • for the more advanced learners they acted as reference points to which extended notes or vocabulary could be added

13 The four students commented on the variation of lesson presentation, the ability to interact with different tutors and the ability to interact with different types of people at different levels. They felt this flexibility prepared them for different accents outside the classroom and assisted them in accepting people who were different in approach and style.

14 By changing the lesson to incorporate different learning styles many of the students felt they were being individually catered for. If the lesson style was not to their choice, there was an appreciation that overall there was acknowledgment of different learning experiences and preferences.
Reflections on the project

Perhaps the findings will not be new to some. However, for me, the research has reinforced several aspects of adult learning. Foremost, is the notion that each adult brings to class a lifetime of strategies that have been acquired and refined throughout their lives. For this reason, a notion of ‘andragogy’ not pedagogy should be foremost in assumptions of curricula design. The concept of learner-centredness is one way in which adults can exercise some control over their learning, but only if the classroom environment is constantly in tune with the adults therein. Unfortunately learner-centredness is, in many aspects, juxtaposed to the criterion-referenced modularised aspects of competency-based curriculum frameworks.

I became frustrated after viewing the video and talking to the students, for it became obvious to me that adult ESL education is not about conformity, getting all the boxes ticked, nor is it about standardisation of outcomes. It is about accepting adult ESL students as intelligent, thinking people who often, as a result of past experiences, are in possession of a storehouse of strategies. We as educators have only just, I think, scratched the surface of understanding how learning is facilitated when dealing with adults.

My involvement in this project has provided an opportunity for me to reflect on my practice and to look further into theories that will enable me to better understand adult learning. It is projects such as this that allow classroom practitioners to inform designers of curricula of what is current at a grassroots level. Understanding why and how adults learn has come a long way, but equally it still has a long way to go!
Emerging from the cocoon
Bev Proudfoot

Research context
My classroom was one of six classes in an Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) centre in Western Australia. I was fortunate enough to be able to work with the same group of students for two terms, approximately 20 weeks. The class began as an on-arrival group studying Certificate I in Spoken and Written English. The student ASLPR ratings varied across the four macro skills from 0+ to 1+. The students were a wonderful mixture of nationalities including Thai, Indonesian, Turkish, Venezuelan, El Salvadoran, Portuguese, Somali, Chinese, Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian. Many of these students were refugees and some had been victims of war and torture and trauma. The ages of the students ranged from 22 to 62 and there were 13 women and 10 men. They attended class five days a week for three hours per day. Many of them also worked in the Independent Learning Centre (ILC) for two to three hours each day after class. These hours were voluntary and therefore it was the more conscientious and motivated students who undertook these extra hours of study.

The research
My research was motivated by an incident when I had once offered a student a job opportunity in my husband’s business. Although he was certainly skilled and qualified for the position, he refused because ‘I speak English only at school’. Over the years my experience as an ESL teacher has shown me that this is a very common problem. Inside the classroom the students must speak and use English but once they walk out of those classroom doors English is not used again until the next lesson. I decided to examine the students’ inclination to use English outside the classroom. My interest was in motivating students, building their confidence and encouraging them to examine their own abilities through reflection on their personal achievements and failures.

I informed the class that I was intending to research this common problem among second language learners and that I would be very grateful if they would assist me. To do this I used the higher level students as interpreters, I used very uncomplicated language and I used the blackboard to note down key words. I explained that I was hoping that the research would help them to learn English more quickly. They were beginner learners and not jaded and weary as longer-term learners often become. This made my task easier as the students were very receptive and motivated towards anything I suggested.

I decided that I would set my students a series of out-of-class tasks which would encourage the students to use all the four macro skills. I attempted to rank these tasks from a relatively easy task to a very difficult conversation. All the tasks were directly related to class activities and had a direct relationship to the CSWE competencies. I wanted my students to recognise that what is learnt in class has a purpose outside the classroom. Language features, essential vocabulary and possible good and bad scenarios were all covered in class. This meant that the students were primed and prepared for each of the tasks. I was hoping that this would arm the students with extra confidence before they endeavoured to perform outside the classroom. After each task the students were required to report back by completing a worksheet and discussing with the class what had happened.
The tasks

Task 1  The first task was relatively simple but it did involve the students using English language outside the cocoon of the classroom. After some preparation (see Figure 1) we ventured into the classroom next door to talk to other students. The students were very nervous and I must admit it took a great deal of reassurance and cajoling to get some of them to go into the room. However, leaving was a different story. They enjoyed themselves so much that they did not want to leave.

Task 1  Talking to other students
1. Write down five things that you do every day. Remember to use simple present tense.
2. Write down five things that you do once a month. Remember to use simple present tense.
3. Write down five things that you do once a year. Remember to use simple present tense.
4. Talk to someone in the other class and compare your answers.
   Are any the same?
   Is there anyone with special things they do?

Figure 1: Task 1 preparation sheet

Task 2  The next task was more difficult (Figure 2). The students had to read the opening and closing times of a store close to their home.

Task 2  Shop hours
Please visit a store near your house. It can be a big shop or a small shop. Look for a sign on the door that tells you when the shop is open and what time it closes. Record this information below.

Name of shop: ________________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Time open</th>
<th>Time closed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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</table>

Reflections
- Did you have any problems?
- Was the information easy to read?
- Did you understand the words?
- Did anyone help you?
- Write a few words about the task. Was it easy or difficult?

Figure 2: Task 2 preparation sheet
Task 3  This task (Figure 3) required the students to exchange a greeting with an Australian outside the classroom. This task was preceded by the students practising greetings.

**Task 3 Greetings**

Think of an Australian you could greet. This could be a neighbour, a shopkeeper or someone you see at the bus stop in the morning. Practise your conversation first. Check your conversation with the teacher.

Exchange a greeting with this person.

Fill in the report below.

1. Who did you greet?
2. Where did you greet them?
3. What did you say?
4. What body language did you notice?
5. Did you have any problems?
6. How did you feel?

Figure 3: Task 3 preparation sheet

Task 4  The last task involved using the telephone (see Figures 4a and b).

**Task 4 Telephoning Task Sheet**

Telephone an electrical shop and ask:

- what the size of the smallest colour television set is
- what brand it is
- how much it costs

Things to do before you telephone:

- Decide who you are going to ring and look up the number in the white pages telephone book. Examples of electrical shops are Retravision, Doug and Barry, Archie Martin Vox.
- Rehearse what you are going to say.
- Prepare your opening. Some possible openings are:
  - Hello I was wondering if you could help me.
  - Hello I would like to make an enquiry about a colour TV set.

Things to remember:

- Say please and thank you in the right places.
- Ask the speaker to repeat the answers, especially if you don’t understand what they say.
- Don’t feel worried. Remember they can’t see you.
- If you don’t succeed the first time, try it again with another store.
- Record the answers on the worksheet.

Good luck

Figure 4a: Task 4 preparation sheet
Task 4 Telephoning worksheet

Telephone an electrical shop and ask:
• what the size of the smallest colour television set is
• what brand it is
• how much it costs

Record the answers below.
1. What was the name of the electrical store?
2. What is the smallest TV in centimetres?
3. What brand is the smallest TV?
4. What is the price of the smallest TV?
5. How did the conversation go?
6. How did you feel?
7. Would you like to try it again?

Figure 4b: Task 4 worksheet

After each task I encouraged the students to record their thoughts, feelings and any problems they encountered. Between tasks, in small monitored groups, the students compared outcomes and scenarios. They brainstormed problems and possible solutions to using more English. The students found these sessions particularly useful and we compiled their findings into a class chart.

Outcomes

The outcomes were almost predictable, although there were a few surprises. The stronger, more motivated and vocal students took to the tasks with great enthusiasm. The quieter students found all the tasks very difficult and challenging but they did complete them all. Most students said that nervousness was the major problem:

• my heart goes boom boom boom and I cannot say
• I am small nervous but I am happy that I speak English
• I not speak English very fine.

It was obvious that using English outside of the class was not only challenging and frightening but quite definitely a rare occurrence. The students reported that their low confidence, nerves and lack of vocabulary, combined with an inability to understand native Australian speakers, were the main reasons they did not use English outside the classroom.

Although the tasks were difficult, the students enjoyed doing them. Several of the students from Serbian and Croatian backgrounds connected to the word satisfied to describe their post-task feelings and evaluations:

• I am feeling good … I am feeling satisfied

All students agreed that the telephone task was by far the most involved and complex because there were no visual stimuli and they could not observe gestures. They said it was difficult to complete this task without making several mistakes. Many students were unable to gain all the required information due to nerves and an inability to follow the conversation.

Emerging from the cocoon
Reflections

I prepared the students on Fridays to undertake these tasks over the weekend and we discussed the outcomes on Mondays. The class seemed to feel secure with the routine - Friday was task setting day and Monday was evaluation day. It was the Monday feedback that interested me the most. As each task became more difficult, and the students’ English improved, I found myself looking forward to hearing what had happened. When I came into the classroom on Monday mornings, the students were invariably comparing their worksheets and discussing the outcomes. The differences in language backgrounds meant that they were communicating in English about their experiences, which was an additional benefit.

My research did not really tell me anything new but it did remind me how extremely difficult it can be for second language learners, particularly adults, to use their classroom knowledge in, sometimes unsympathetic, social situations. Fear of ridicule, nerves and lowered self-esteem play vital roles in reducing the confidence required to use language outside the classroom.

I did push and bully some students into undertaking the tasks but ‘you have to be cruel to be kind’. The research project demonstrated that the tasks, combined with positive feedback, made a difference to the way the students felt about using language. They became just that little bit more confident and maybe, just maybe, they went out of the classroom and tried to use language again for a communicative purpose of their own.
3 The switch factor

Lyn Head

The research context

For this project three classes were observed over a period of two months and a number of teachers interviewed. Two of the classes were studying core courses and one was studying a module. The diversity of the classes was important because the group dynamics were different in each classroom. The students within the classes had ASLPR ratings of 1- and above.

I think that an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect in the classroom allows a psychological change to take place within the learner which is empowering. The change between focusing on language learning and using language as a tool is what I have called the Switch Factor because it is like a switch being flipped. The learner is so engaged and absorbed in using language that it happens almost without conscious thought.

The research

Research question: What happens when the students focus on using the second language as a tool for communication, rather than on learning language?

For me this has been a recurring question which has never been satisfactorily answered. Therefore, when I had the opportunity to be part of an action-based research project I was excited that I would be able to explore this issue further. I was particularly interested in researching an observation which I had made that people learning a second language appear to relax and show more knowledge of the second language when acquisition of the language is not the explicit goal.

This interest had begun in my student teaching days in a high school. A boy who was illiterate came into my drama classes. He had a lot to say and wanted desperately to express himself. We had a group-devised project running and he had some good ideas, so through the improvisation process, we produced a scene from one of his ideas. He quickly discovered that he needed to be able to write down his ideas and some of the dialogue, otherwise the others in his group would forget the scene. I was amazed at how quickly he learned to read and write because of this. From this incident I learnt a valuable lesson about the effectiveness of using language as a tool.

Creating a productive language environment

Groundwater-Smith, Cusworth and Dobbins (1998) suggest that the creation of a positive, safe environment is an integral component in any success-oriented classroom. Brown (1987) states that risk-taking is one of the most important characteristics of Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

Many of the people we teach come from traditional societies and tend to learn by rote. They often equate language acquisition with being grammatically correct.
We need to counter this within the classroom by asking questions such as: What is language for?

One way of achieving a productive language environment is through drama methodology. It is a way to set up an energetic, positive classroom atmosphere and to establish trust in the teacher and trust amongst students. Drama methodology includes roleplays, script-writing, small group work, show and tell when one group shows other students their roleplay or group devised story. Another aspect of this approach is music.

**Taking up the opportunities**

During the project a number of interesting events took place in the classrooms. These events supported my belief that focusing on language as a tool led to more language being generated in the classroom. These events are summarised below:

**Event 1** I asked the class about what kind of weekend they had had. One person had been to a huge party and could not wait to talk about it. With encouragement, she told us about a Polish gathering she had attended in the Adelaide Hills. As she talked and became more involved in her memory, she stopped stumbling over her words and began to flow. She was not worrying about getting it right because she wanted to communicate her happiness at having had such a good time. She created vivid pictures of many happy people around a huge fire, singing folk-songs and groaning tables of beautiful, intricately made dishes to tempt the hungry on a cold winter’s night. As a consequence of this student's enthusiasm, I put my planned lesson aside and asked everyone to think about the best party that they had ever been to. There were some unusual stories including one about a three-day birthday party in Germany. Everyone was absorbed in communicating and asking each other questions. They had become interested in communicating. There was a lot of laughter because they were sharing positive experiences. They had choice and control over what was said. If a student could not find a word, other students would help. The group dynamics were good and they obviously enjoyed talking together.

The follow-up written work was better than usual, because they worked in pairs to write their stories and helped each other. They had been told not to worry about making mistakes, which could be corrected later. Meaning was more important. The following text is an example of one of the student texts:

Elzbieta went to a farm for a Polish party on Saturday night. Somebody was playing the violin and another played the piano. Many people ate sausages and potatoes in alfoil, cooked in the fire. There were five horses on the farm for children to ride. People were singing but they weren’t dancing. They drank fresh apple juice and ate lots of different salads with the food cooked in the fire. They sat at long tables to have dinner. Everyone enjoyed the party. It sounded like a lot of fun.

**Event 2** We had been looking at a video about environmental issues from Troubled Waters (Cornish 1994). The students found the video and the language activities of great interest, partly because the theme was topical and Australian, but also because there were connections with their own beliefs about looking after the world. They related to it and learnt new information, especially about water conservation in a dry country.

The students wanted to express themselves and their views on the subject. Vocabulary extension and key words were used frequently. These were put
up on the board and were referred to when people were wanting to tell each other about what conservation and environment meant in their own country.

They became quite passionate and the occasional disagreements between them were strongly felt. They quite literally forgot about the language they did not have and used the language they did. Sometimes an L1 word would be used and someone would spontaneously throw in the translation. The important issue was that the students were looking for meaning and communicating it.

Students were interrupting each other in their haste to get their opinion across and everyone wanted to say how clean and comfortable Adelaide was as a place to live. A part from the safety issues, they liked the idea of the parklands being the lungs of the city as lots of trees and fresh air were seen as a high priority, as was keeping the streets clean. Once the students realised the importance of water conservation, they became concerned about hosing down concrete driveways and paths.

Yet again, the body and face language told its own story. The involvement was total. They were expressing their own opinions and being treated with respect because they had their own adult knowledge of the issues. People who felt disempowered and had suffered dents to their self-esteem were making choices and taking responsibility for their own learning and they were teaching each other.

We were all involved in the discussion although I tried to keep my involvement down to asking a few questions to encourage conversation. Almost without exception the intensity and involvement was obvious. They all said how quickly the time flew and how much they had enjoyed the class. It seemed that the energy levels, enjoyment and absorption were directly related to people feeling in control of the process.

Event 3 One class only met for two hours a week for ten weeks. This made it more difficult to kick-start the group dynamics in this situation, particularly because the room was not very big and there were 24 students in the class. It was obvious that we needed to do a session or two on sentence word order. The home tutor, who supported language practice in the class, started a Round Robin exercise. We split the group in half and went to opposite ends of the room. We started with the theme of a visit to the Antarctic and made it quite ridiculous so that the students would be amused, catch the mood and hopefully go with the flow. I had already taught the structure and we sang SVO several times. This was a quick and simple technique and the students still had not forgotten the structure one term later.

It became a very funny exercise because their senses of humour were engaged and the pace became fast and furious. At one stage, a 69-year-old Russian student, who spoke hesitantly, if at all, came out with white bear. He was so pleased with himself that I did not have the heart to tell him that there were not any bears at the South Pole. It was the first time I had seen him engaged in this way. He was slower, but everyone was patient and the story became absolutely ridiculous. It was a real breakthrough, with people correcting each other's word order and for the first time, having fun with English. They were seeing English positively as a tool, not as a barrier to cross.
Other teachers

I canvassed several colleagues and found that most teachers felt that it was always appropriate to deviate from lesson plans and follow student needs. However, some teachers did not feel so comfortable with this kind of teaching, and with good reason, as they had classes of ASLPR 0 to 0+. They felt that these lower level students needed very ordered, scaffolded lessons and that the students were not ready for a freer approach.

Overall the teachers felt that when control was given over to the students with the teacher acting as a side-coach or facilitator, the switch was made. The comments and experiences of some of these teachers are summarised below:

Teacher 1: This teacher felt that teaching matter needs to be topical, realistic, of use for everyday life and physical which means not having students sitting in the same seat for three or four hours. She uses a lot of newspapers and TV guides because they are topical and universal. The texts from the TV guides are short and useful for stimulating discussion both before and after the film is seen. The switch factor happens for her when the students are engaged in an interest area, are in control of the agenda and dialogue drives them. When they are engaged and deeply focused in the expression and reception of each other’s ideas and opinions they are not concentrating on the language itself, or their lack of it. They are using language to express themselves, building on what they already know and using guessing and lateral thinking to get to their goal.

Teacher 2: This teacher felt that when the students had to come up with a solution to a problem on the spot was a real learning experience and impacted more because it was owned by the student. Some questions she suggested could be asked at the debriefing point of a lesson are:

- How did you come to this solution?
- What did you think about?
- What were the decisions you made when you were thinking through things?
- Did someone else help you?

For her the bottom line is to hand over the learning to the learners with the teacher being a resource person.

Teacher 3: This teacher felt that spontaneous class discussions were important. One example of a successful discussion was when she asked a group: Who were the most important historical figures in your history? The group then discussed this question in small groups. This was successful because it respected their own knowledge and gave them a familiar topic over which they had knowledge and which they could teach to other people. The students felt empowered by being able to impart knowledge and this enabled the switch factor to happen.

Teacher 4: This teacher had a class over 20 weeks because the students requested a second ten weeks together. She felt that this was because they had worked hard to create a good dynamic class atmosphere. They always chose to be in mixed language groups because this extended their experience and knowledge of the world in general. One day they were focusing on politeness markers, when out of the blue came the question: What happens if you die without a will, who gets the money? From there the sparks flew. They started to talk about who controls the money in their countries.
When the teacher asked the question: Where's the best place to have a husband? – there was immense curiosity from the class about having more than one wife. It became humorous and started to flow. You could feel the energy. One student was not amused and asserted himself strongly. He said that his father had had four wives but that you needed money to have such a luxury. He added that his father had been rich at the time but was not now. The class had some very strong differences of opinion but came to the conclusion after much discussion and thought that it was fair for women to be treated fairly, to own property and so on. People were very interested in other opinions and customs and the teacher was very much in the back seat. The class drove the discussion. The switch happened when they felt empowered and respected. They were using language to get their strongly felt opinions across, rather than language learning being the goal.

Conclusions

I wonder how much confidence there is within the teaching community to allow this freer approach to occur. We have all experienced the glazed look on students' faces when they are expected to sit at their desks for long periods of time in a formal class environment. I suspect that they do not actually learn much because they are not fully engaged. There is obviously a need for formal learning but I am convinced that these aspects of classroom practice need to be incorporated within a dynamic classroom situation, where people are taking responsibility for their own learning.

Over the past few months my teaching practice has changed quite markedly. In fact it has become reinvigorated by my involvement with the action-based research project. I have thought through how I teach and what I teach. I have analysed how to create a dynamic language learning atmosphere which gives more responsibility to my students. The students have flourished and so have I. I certainly have learnt a lot and I realise the importance of continual learning and self-appraisal within my teaching practice.

After reflection on both my own and other teachers' practices, I believe that success in acquiring a second language requires the switch factor to happen on a regular basis. For this to happen the adult ESL learner needs:

1 A classroom in which there is:
   • an atmosphere of trust, humour and energy
   • a holistic mental, emotional and physical approach
   • a culture of tolerance and mutual respect
   • the opportunity to take risks and to make mistakes without fear
   • a high level of interaction.

2 A teacher who:
   • adopts a methodology which incorporates roleplay, small group work and music
   • allows for spontaneity
   • is able to let go of control
   • builds students' self-esteem and confidence
   • views students as equals with relevant, adult histories and experiences
   • believes in less teacher talk and more student talk
   • is restrained and allows uncomfortable silences to occur
   • allows people to think and resolve problems for themselves.
3 Willingness to:

- be self-directed in their learning
- take responsibility for their own learning
- respond to an energetic and positive environment
- join in group dynamics and mix with other language groups
- share universals and commonalities in order to break down barriers and fears
- join an atmosphere of total involvement and absorption.

This has been a complex area to research and document. The student groups being observed, the interviews with other teachers and the anecdotal nature of the information gathering, strongly suggested that facilitating the use of the second language as a tool is a very successful approach to enable learners to use English confidently. It involves risk-taking on the part of the teacher and the learners because it is not as easy to control the process. It requires a high level of trust, interaction and deep involvement from all concerned. I believe that it is our duty as teachers to come out of our comfort zones and ensure that this switch happens as often as possible.

I would like to thank Joan McGuire, Marie McClanahan, Helen O’Flaherty and Mollie Braybrook, my colleagues and guineapigs who were more than happy to share their teaching practices and observations with me. My fellow co-researchers, Helene Reade, Marion Martin, Margaret Gunn and Peter Banks were wonderful to work with. We had our moments of doubt, changed our minds, were constructively critical of each other’s work, learnt a lot from each other and most of all were encouraged by each other’s professional individuality. Thank you everyone for encouraging the new kid on the block. Finally, thank you to Anne Burns and Helen Joyce who flew to Adelaide regularly to encourage, challenge and stimulate the research process.

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Dedication

To Carole Badcock, who listened to and encouraged the creative thought processes in me, which led to my involvement in this project. Vale Carole.
SECTION FIVE
Exploring learner-centred teaching

1  The best-laid plans of mice and teachers
   Shan Shnookal

2  First bytes: An initial attempt to integrate computer-based activities into a learner-centred classroom
   Ruth G leedman

3  Learning language through contemporary cultural issues
   Sue Whitham

4  Improving conversational skills within a competency-based curriculum
   Peter Banks

5  Come ‘n’ meet Vygotsky
   Cherie Lewis
Introduction

My current students and all those in the future will benefit from the learning I have gained... (Cherie Lewis)

The papers in this section provide a continuity with Section 4. However, in contrast with the previous section, it is teacher methodologies for enhancing learner-centredness, rather than the learners’ practices for learning, that are highlighted. Action research is a process that inevitably produces reflection, closer scrutiny of taken-for-granted habits and new insights. The accounts which follow show that staying learner-centred is not a one-way street. It is bound up with the ability to analyse and reflect critically on teaching.

Shan Shnookal, from the Adult Multicultural Education Services Victoria, began her research by wanting to revisit her teaching of learning-to-learn activities. She felt that in the shift to competency-based approaches this area had been abandoned because of lack of time and greater demands for outcomes. Shan found her research changing from an initial focus on the learners to one where the focus became her own strategies for handling what she terms ‘a difficult class’. Her reflections on the idiosyncrasies and unpredictability of class dynamics will be familiar to many teachers.

While Shan’s learning-to-learn focus complements the topics of the previous section, other teachers took their own learning in other directions. These involved exploring new ways of using teaching resources, of teaching specific skills or of conceptualising one’s teaching approaches.

Ruth Gleedman, who taught a CSWE III class in Perth, Western Australia at the time of the research confronted what, for her, was the ‘huge challenge’ of integrating computer assisted language learning into her course design. One thing that was clear in Ruth’s mind was that using technology should be, foremost, an integral aspect of language learning and not computer skills development. Her paper recounts how she ‘came to terms with technology’ not only as an aspect of her own practice, but also in response to learner needs and interests.

Sue Whitham, a teacher working in NSW AMES with advanced level learners, reflects on the strategies she adopted to introduce her students to Australian contexts and systems. She reports on the use she made of the media and the Internet as a source of classroom materials and activities.

Peter Banks works at ELLS South Australia. Peter’s research focused on his own learning about teaching speaking, particularly conversation skills. He had taught this area for some years, but was still not satisfied that his approach met student needs as effectively as it could. As he says, ‘the pieces had not fitted together and solved the problem’. Peter’s exploration of this area sets out what he discovered about the recent literature on teaching conversational skills as well as the strategies he put into place in the classroom.

The last paper in this section is by Cherie Lewis, who taught a combined CSWE I and II class at the Adult Multicultural Education Services Victoria. Cherie’s recent postgraduate studies had introduced her to the sociocultural learning theories of Vygotsky. Her linking of these concepts to the genre theory underpinning the CSWE provided her with a theoretical framework for exploring new teaching approaches. Cherie’s paper invites readers to Come ‘n’ meet Vygotsky through the activities she set up in her classroom.
1 The best-laid plans of mice and teachers

Shan Shnookal

The research context

The class I monitored for this project was a beginners class in Adult Multicultural Education Services in Victoria. The class was working towards the competencies of the Certificate I in Spoken and Written English (CSWE I). The students were enrolled in a nine-week course and I taught the class for three sessions per week. Most students had been in Australia for less than six months. Five nationalities were represented in the class. Half the students had six to nine years of education and the other half had completed secondary school. The numbers of men and women were approximately equal and the age range was from 20 to 37 years. The students brought a mixture of motivations and learning strategies to the classroom.

All the students, except two, had completed at least one English course in Australia. The ASLPR language proficiency ratings in the class ranged from 0+ to 1-

The class was categorised as fast-paced.

The research

After more than 17 years teaching adult ESL, I am convinced of the importance of various affective and cognitive factors that influence student learning. I have developed a range of teaching strategies which acknowledge the students' cultural backgrounds, prior knowledge, personalities and feelings as much as possible. I generally use activities that raise student awareness of their own learning styles and strategies, with the aim of strengthening and developing these.

In the last few years, the introduction of competency-based training in the form of the CSWE, tendering and quality assurance procedures, has also introduced pressure to achieve maximum competency outcomes for each student. In Certificates I and II in Spoken and Written English, Competencies 1 and 2 specify that a student should be able to undertake the roles and responsibilities of a learner in a formal learning environment. These competencies outline a range of learning strategies and resources. At Certificate III level students should also be able to evaluate their own progress and demonstrate autonomy. These competencies are not formally assessed and therefore it appeared to me that most effort should be directed to teaching and assessing the other competencies. Consequently the explicit learning-to-learn activities that had formerly been part of my regular classroom activities fell by the wayside because of other demands.

As part of my research for the NCELTR Special Project I planned to reintroduce some of these learning-to-learn activities on a weekly basis. I hoped that this would bring an important learner-centred dimension back into my teaching, while also facilitating the teaching and assessment of CSWE I competencies.

Approaching the research

With these particular students, I had anticipated that discussion of the competencies they had already achieved would motivate them to complete CSWE I and they would
choose to focus on the competencies not yet achieved. I hoped that by developing their independence and awareness of their preferred learning strategies, we could eventually negotiate some aspects of content, timing and methodology.

In the first two weeks of the course I focused on creating a positive learning environment, helping students to get to know one another and to learn the expectations and procedures I had for the class. I spent two weeks on this process partly because there were new students joining the class every day and they had to be integrated into the group. For this beginner-level class, the competencies of asking for and giving personal information were a natural starting point for these getting-to-know-you activities.

As the research proceeded

My first learning-to-learn activity did not go very well, although I had done it successfully with other comparable groups. Two fairly dominant students seemed unable to give an answer to what I considered a relatively simple yes/no question and this appeared to make other students in the group very anxious and confused.

As a consequence I revised my plan and decided that rather than follow up the activity the next day, I would teach fairly conservatively for a few days, using more teacher-centred techniques and presenting relatively controlled language. I hoped this would meet the students' traditional expectations of the classroom and restore their confidence in me and in themselves as successful learners.

As any experienced teacher knows, each class has its own feel. This results from such things as friendship groupings, the influence of more advanced students and the enthusiasm, motivation, and personality of individual students. It became clear to me that this particular class was a difficult class. There were three dominant individuals who were pulling in different directions and a small group who were distracted because they were more interested in pregnancy and family concerns than in studying English. The learning pace of the class was not fast but in fact quite slow due to some students coming from a non-Roman script background and having poor learning strategies. One student repeatedly failed to bring a pen or pencil to class. Perhaps I had assumed too much about the abilities of the class and this contributed to the sense that the class was not running smoothly.

As I taught the class for only three days each week it took a week before I felt that the students were settled and confident with the classroom routines and activities. To accommodate the different individuals in the class, I had to vary my teaching strategies. I moved between being strict and friendly and being serious and humorous. I mixed communicative activities and structural activities. Sometimes I ignored demanding students and at other times gave them special attention. I ranged from being helpful to leaving students to solve their own problems.

In this class one little incident could easily disrupt the class equilibrium. For example, to vary requests for attention I started to say ‘Hush, please’. All concentration and discipline was lost as the students were certain I had said something very rude. They were not inclined to believe me when I said I was being polite, and it took a long and detailed explanation to convince them.

By Week 5 of the term, I retackled the first learning-to-learn activity and this time it was successful. I combined it with the assessment of two competencies and I was pleased, not only with the achievements of the students, but also with their own assessment of their ability to complete the tasks.
In Week 6 I planned to include another learning-to-learn activity which called on the students to reflect on their own learning strategies, as well as continuing some assessments. People in the class were now working happily and confidently together, but the pace of the class remained slow. Each day I took in my assessment tasks and the learning activity, and each day we never got past the preparatory work. I felt satisfied that this work was developing the English skills which would enable the students to eventually achieve the competencies, but I was frustrated that we were taking too long to complete the external demands of the course.

The plan for Week 7 was to finish all assessments, which had to be completed by the end of the week. The pressure was now on the students to achieve the competencies and for the teacher to complete the paperwork. Some students thrive in such an environment but I often feel that in this examination atmosphere, learning is suspended as the focus of the class is narrowed. However, yet again, things did not go as expected. A public holiday and my absence due to an accident meant that a relief teacher and my co-teacher had to complete the assessment tasks.

In Week 8 the assessment paperwork had been completed for the data to be entered into the computer. After this some students felt that the course was over and their attendance became spasmodic. I had planned to do one last learning-to-learn activity but as we were beginning the activity the class was called to an information session.

**Conclusion**

Despite the fact that I did not achieve my initial aim in this project, the analysis of what was happening in the classroom underlined for me some of the difficulties that occur when trying to stay learner-centred in a competency-based curriculum. Different issues arise in the classroom every day. These can range from something as seemingly trivial as the weather through interpersonal problems to specific questions about different aspects of language. Being learner-centred means that all these issues must be addressed as they arise.

As the teacher strives to achieve measurable outcomes, these other factors must be addressed. Non-competency outcomes in the classroom are difficult to quantify, and yet increases in student confidence, the development of new friendships or gains in cultural knowledge and adjustment are of immeasurable benefit. Their importance in successful learning must be acknowledged.

Even a seemingly trivial incident can have quite large repercussions in the learning environment and the consequent motivation and achievements of students. Most teachers can recall lesson plans that were hijacked by an issue of immediate, burning concern to the students but which led to an electric atmosphere of communication and learning. Achieving a competency is not always the result of the best-laid plans. Time, funding and energy must be considered by teachers at the same time as dealing with language, learning, individual concerns and group dynamics in the classroom.

One of the best things about teaching is the excitement that there is always something new for the teacher to learn but it also brings its own peculiar frustration in that we often feel that a lesson could have been better. Taking part in this project gave me the luxury of a little time to reflect on the multitude of factors at play in a classroom. Discussing the research with colleagues was stimulating to my own professional development. As an experienced teacher, I am sometimes frustrated that it is not getting any easier and that with every new class I must do it all afresh each time. However, the project has rekindled my enjoyment in the infinite variety of people, learning and teaching.
2 First bytes: An initial attempt to integrate computer-based activities into a learner-centred classroom
Ruth Gleedman

Introduction

I chose the title – First bytes – for my paper because it accurately describes my first attempts at using computers to promote English language skills. First bytes represents the huge challenge which faced me and my students as we attempted to incorporate the latest technology into the English language classroom.

It was a challenge that I was more or less coerced into taking, as the program co-ordinator was keenly interested in computer-assisted language learning (CALL). She was studying a CALL course and was very enthusiastic about teachers using the computer lab. She was very willing to show us what she was doing in her classroom and to help us with any problems. She invited her university lecturer to give the staff some instruction in Wida’s Authoring Suite. This is a more up-to-date version of Storyboard, a program which enables students to reproduce a particular text, in whole or in part.

The research context

I was teaching a CSWE III class which ran for three hours per day for five days a week. The program had recently been established at Central TAFE in Perth. The students in this program had exclusive use of a well equipped computer lab with twelve computers and access to the Internet. This lab was situated directly opposite my classroom and I could take my students there at any time.

The profile of the students in the class is outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Student profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>20 to 35 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time in Australia</td>
<td>a few months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countries of origin</td>
<td>from a variety of countries in Africa and Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational background</td>
<td>the majority had completed secondary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>about half had been to a university, although not all had completed degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>the majority wanted to obtain a TAFE or university qualification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language level</td>
<td>A SLPR 1+ writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>many were stronger at speaking and listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pace</td>
<td>slower pace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a few more capable students chose the class as it was in the afternoon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A number of the students had used computers in their countries of origin. However the majority did not have frequent access to them nor had they used such advanced machines. All, with the exception of two students over the age of 40, were extremely keen to use the computers as they felt computer skills were essential for work in Australia.

**Background to the research**

Initially, the idea of using computers in language learning was not of great interest to me. My computer skills were quite basic and I did not feel that I had the time to acquire new skills or to learn how to deal with any technical problems that might arise. A few colleagues were willing to assist me but I was not sure that they would have the time available. I was also not convinced that computers would benefit my students, either in terms of their language development or the requirements of the CSWE III.

I was apprehensive and sceptical but colleagues in the project team pointed out that most adult ESL teachers felt as I did. Regardless of age, attitudes to CALL, computer skills or access to computers, all teachers would have to come to terms with new technology. Students wanted to use computers and increasing numbers of language programs were providing access. I certainly touched a responsive chord with the members of the research group and I was encouraged by the idea that teachers, who felt as I did about computers, might be interested in how I came to terms with technology in the language classroom.

**The research**

**Research question:** To what extent can computers be integrated into a communicative language environment which focuses on the learner?

As the first step in my research, I reviewed the syllabus to see where it might be possible to use computers. One of the CSWE III competencies I was working towards was: Can write a short formal letter. I believed students would benefit from practising this task on the computer as formal letters are typed and corrections would be easier to make.

The competency of the formal letter is broken down into components such as discourse structures, correct layout, paragraphing, expressing objective information, using linking devices and using appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures. In addition to these my students needed considerable practice in basic sentence structure and paragraph organisation. I felt there would be opportunities to use the computer to practise these components.

I recorded each lab session in a diary. Entries were made immediately after a visit when I noted down details of the lesson, relevant observations, thoughts and feelings.

In spite of planning, the first lesson did not proceed as I had anticipated:

*First visit to lab. Students were taken by another teacher for their first lesson (I was absent). Teacher used a Storyboard section on finding directions for half an hour which stretched to three-quarters of an hour – students worked in pairs. Not related to my classwork. They liked doing exercises on computers – novelty probably – quite a lot of talking in pairs. Some pressed view button frequently so became a memory test. They were very pleased – felt they were getting some computer skills. I felt it was a bit of a waste of time.*
I observed a computer lesson which was conducted by another teacher. This lesson influenced my subsequent teaching. This lesson was on report writing and was leading to students writing a report on an Australian animal.

*Saw an excellent lesson in the lab today. It was a listening exercise. Students had been given a vocab sheet prior to the lesson. During the lesson students watched a 15-minute video once on the echidna – its features and characteristics etc. Students then looked at six questions on what they had viewed. Working in groups of two or three they were required to discuss then write answers to these questions. One person did the writing which the others dictated. Answers were printed off. (I would need some assistance with copying questions from teacher’s disk to students’ computers).*

This lesson had an impact on me for a variety of reasons. The students had obviously enjoyed it, they were actively involved in the discussions and the writing process and it showed me how computers could be utilised as part of a lesson which focused on the learner. The technical difficulties now did not seem so daunting. I was impressed and challenged.

I then proceeded to utilise computers for a variety of purposes but the focus was always on a particular aspect of my English program. For example, in a grammar lesson involving discrimination between determinate and indeterminate clauses, students worked in pairs to discuss a set of incomplete clauses which required completion. They took turns to type in a suitable ending and their answers were printed off and later corrected in class.

My confidence quickly increased and I began to believe that it did not require a great deal of technical expertise to introduce computers into a lesson.

The students then began writing formal letters. The student texts could not be stored on the computers so it seemed practical to have students store their work on their own floppy disks. This would save time and effort, allow them to correct their work more easily and provide them with a convenient record of their writing at the end of the course. Furthermore I thought it would be more motivating for them. However, this did not proceed as planned and the diary entries reflected the difficulties we encountered:

... took a lot longer than I had planned ...

Unfortunately I hadn’t told them the correct way to store their writing – everyone had to start again.

For a few of the older students, and one student with no prior computer experience, even simple word processing procedures proved confusing and actually interfered with their writing.

Other problems occurred at this time to add to my feelings of frustration. I was informed that some of the programs would be removed. An updated version of Storyboard was to be installed and students would be required to learn how to work with the new program. I had arranged for my class to attend a talk on introducing the Internet but unfortunately this it was delivered by someone who was unaware of the needs and abilities of my learners. They found it impossible to understand.

The final step in my research was to interview the students. Despite the fact that one competent student had commented that he thought learning to write formal letters on a computer was really useful, I felt despondent about the interviews.

Initially I had planned to ask the students to write down their thoughts about using computers in English classes. By this stage they knew about the research and I explained
that their honest comments would help me. However, I decided that the spontaneity of an interview might produce more accurate insights. In the end I provided the students with a choice.

The written responses were rather predictable and tended to be positive. The students were all quite emphatic about the importance of using computers in English classes. However, some could not, at first, differentiate between the acquisition of computer skills and the acquisition of English with the aid of computers. The following comment was quite typical.

I like to learn English course with computer. Because it important for student. Computer do so many things that ordinary people cannot do. It is hard to imagine life without computer.

Once pressed to comment on how computers could actually help them to learn English, many of the students were not sure.

A few negative comments emerged about the time spent in the lab - ‘it's taking too much time for the lessons’. The student, who made this comment, had studied a computer course for eight months prior to emigrating. He also stated that he preferred not to spend class time assisting others. Another student said that the lessons would have been more effective if I had presented the students with a sheet of instructions prior to the lesson, rather than writing these on the board.

Overwhelmingly, students found computers highly motivational and more enjoyable than more traditional methods of learning. Many made comments such as ‘enjoyable, wider choice and more interesting’. However, I was quite disappointed that, after all the time spent on writing letters, the students had not mentioned the advantages of doing so.

**Discoveries**

Through observations, analysing my diary entries and discussions with students and colleagues a number of insights emerged.

- Lessons in the computer lab require careful planning.
- Some students can feel that too much time is spent in the lab, especially if lessons exceed 40 minutes. I now schedule computer lessons before a break or at the end of a lesson. If some students need extra time, it does not inconvenience the others.
- Some students will request more time in the lab in order to practise word processing skills or to familiarise themselves with a particular program.
- If students spend an average of 30 to 40 minutes in the lab once a week for approximately 10 weeks, the majority will acquire the necessary skills to operate the computers for the purposes they require.
- There is the potential for a considerable amount of language to be generated when students shared computers. My diary notes reveal that I soon realised the necessity of pairing students to promote a communicative approach to learning.
- The majority of students learn to operate programs such as Storyboard and Issues in English.
- The majority of students learn to access the Internet with virtually no instruction.
- It is possible to focus on English at all times and keep computer instruction to a minimum. Initially I used only two or three computer terms such as mouse and click on. This was done in an incidental manner. This reinforced the notion that we were using computers as an aid to furthering second language acquisition.
Problems

Although my initial fears of coping with major technical problems were soon dispelled, some other problems did emerge:

- Students storing their texts on floppy disks
  
  As I was not very familiar with the operating system or the word processing package, it would have been simpler to encourage students to print off their final drafts. Alternatively, I could have saved their files on individual disks for them. A colleague who instructed me in this simple process stated that many students had learned this skill by watching her do it. She felt that at CSWE III, few students revised as they wrote and preferred to have their work corrected by the teacher. Undoubtedly I had attempted too much too soon.

  By the end of the following term, my students could write their final drafts on the computers. I was surprised to see how much their computer skills had improved. This time I modelled the procedure for saving work on disks and many picked this up fairly quickly, without a list of written instructions. Judging by their willingness to do so, it seemed that the class was beginning to appreciate the advantages of writing on the computer.

- Enlisting the help of more capable students to help other students
  
  This proved to be a mistake. It was more effective to arrange groups according to computer skills. This alleviated feelings of time-wasting, gave less able students further practice and boosted confidence.

- Conducting two different activities in the lab at the same time
  
  I had wanted to interview the students individually and planned to have the others working while this was taking place. However, it soon became clear that students required teacher assistance at all times.

- Some students not wanting to work with computers
  
  Two older students in my class preferred to write longer pieces by hand. I encouraged them to do so as I kept reminding the students they were in an English class not a computer class. Desks were available for this purpose but, interestingly, as time passed both of these students were happy to do all their writing on the computer.

Recommendations to other teachers

My experience of introducing computers into the language classroom occurred in four sequential stages. Based on my discussions and observations, I consider these stages are typical of teachers learning to use computers in English language classrooms.

Stage 1  I was sceptical and rather daunted by all that I was about to undertake.

Stage 2  After a comparatively short time, I gained a few skills and my confidence increased and this in turn encouraged a degree of experimentation. However, substantial progress was slow.

Stage 3  Towards the end of the first term I reached a point when I felt frustrated. This was due to factors beyond my control. I also felt disillusioned and I began to doubt the worth of using computers at all.
Stage 4 By the end of the second term, as I learnt more, I became less pessimistic and eventually became convinced that computers could be more than a tool for motivation. I believed they also had the potential to develop language skills.

My recommendations to teachers who are introducing computers into language learning are:

• Start where you’re at
  Do not be intimidated by the technical experts. Remember most programs are user friendly for both teachers and students.

• Understand that students relish seeing their writing published
  Publishing with computers is easy to do and can be very motivating for students.

• Focus on English at all times
  Lists of written instructions and lots of computer jargon are unnecessary and tend to interfere with lessons. A few computer terms may be introduced incidentally as the need arises. Students will readily grasp what to do after seeing it continually modelled for them.

• Use computers as a tool to further communication in the classroom
  This is best achieved when students share computers and when speakers, rather than headphones, are used for listening activities.

• Be well prepared
  Plan visits to the computer lab before a coffee break and have the students visit the lab on a regular basis. Students will not remember what to do if only one or two visits are planned per term. Ideally students should be taken to the lab where your program indicates they would benefit from doing a particular exercise there. This in turn necessitates careful planning of work over a term, as well as weekly and daily lessons.

• Be patient and practical
  My situation was a fairly ideal one, particularly having a lab at my disposal and a number of people who were so willing to help. Even so, it has taken me nearly two terms to feeling confident and convinced that computers benefit students. This may take longer if computers or assistance are not readily available. If this is the case, persevere even if you have to modify your approach.

• Keep an open mind
  If you persevere beyond the frustrations and disenchantments which inevitably occur, I am sure you will be convinced of the potential of computers.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined my experiences with introducing computers into teaching English as a second language. I feel the process has been worthwhile for myself, as well as my students. The ability of the computer to model texts, to foster enthusiasm for writing at length, to encourage editing of written texts and to encourage active participation in the production of language must surely benefit student writing. Computers can assist in meeting the needs of individual students and this can make lessons involving computers, within the broader framework of the CSWE, truly learner-centred.
Through the project I was able to give more thought to the teaching and planning of my course. I enjoyed watching my students practise speaking, listening, reading and writing as they engaged in various activities in the computer lab. They completed tasks with a degree of enthusiasm which provided them with a positive learning experience. Although it is too early to claim that computers have improved their English skills, I am firmly convinced that they have the potential to do so.

Teachers of English as a second language can no longer avoid using computers in their lessons. I hope my paper will encourage those who have not yet done so, for whatever reasons, that it is well worth making a start.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my colleagues Judith Parkin, Jan Bond and Noel Whiteford for their encouragement and generous assistance throughout this project.
3 Learning language through contemporary cultural issues
Sue Witham

The research context
During the period of the N CELT R Action Research Project I had two, high stage three classes:

Class 1 This was a full-time class of 20 hours a week. Most of the students were professional women with university degrees or technical college diplomas in a wide variety of fields. They had been in Australia for between one and five years. They were studying the Further Study strand of Certificate III in Spoken and Written English. Their goals were to go on to TAFE or university in order to gain Australian qualifications prior to gaining employment.

Class 2 This was an evening class. Two-thirds of the students were men, nearly all of whom were working. This meant that they were often tired after a long day at work. Therefore it was important to provide useful and relevant materials for these students to keep their attention and make it worth their while coming to class.

The research
In the course of the discussions, which were part of the N CELT R Action Learning Project, two questions arose about learner-centredness which interested me:

1 Can we remain purely learner-centred in a competency-based curriculum, with its parameters of concepts to be covered?

2 Which learners in the classroom do we refer to when talking about learner-centredness?

We learn about staying learner-centred when doing our training, when we attend in-services and when we discuss our class informally in the staffroom. A class of 15 to 25 students has many different needs. In the formal language learning environment students are streamed into levels, language aptitude and educational credentials. Yet each individual has their own background, culture, language, home life, job and goals. Of course they all want to learn English, but what English varies with each student. When planning lessons with student needs in mind, it is often the student with the most to say, with the strongest opinions, who sets the agenda, even if the teacher is unaware of this bias.

Deciding on a course focus
These classes presented a great opportunity to provide the keen and intelligent people in my classes with significant and interesting information about Australian society while they learnt more about the English language and its grammar. There was an opportunity for them to gain contemporary knowledge through radio news broadcasts, current affairs programs, texts from the daily papers and Internet sites. In this way they
could gain skills in information gathering and research which would be useful in their future studies and working life, as well as enabling them to support the educational progress of their children.

**Learner expectations**

Most of the students in my classes came from traditional educational systems which placed great value on memory and learning by rote. They were used to being given grammar and vocabulary and learning formulaic utterances with little reference to real life. However, despite their rote learning they still could not speak or understand English as they wanted and needed to.

Coming to the open communicative classroom of the Australian system, with very different classroom dynamics, was quite a culture shock for these students. They were unused to being expected to talk freely in English and some lacked confidence in this unfamiliar setting. Consequently those who were more confident tended to set the agenda.

**Teaching approach**

My philosophy of teaching emphasises whole language learning and introducing students to cultural issues. This means that I taught grammar and vocabulary in the context of the newspaper articles and radio broadcasts. Problems in grammar and vocabulary were addressed in the context of the text being studied. Problems of language usage I addressed as soon as they arose. For example if a student said – Give me a paper, I focused on how to ask politely.

The key to staying learner-centred is to find out what is interesting and to whom. When one language group predominates in a class, it is easy to find texts to interest that group, but then the minority groups may feel left out. Perhaps a text of interest to an individual is irrelevant to the rest of the class. There can also be problems when addressing contemporary international issues if the students in the class represent warring sides in their country of origin. Neutral subjects, or those from an Australian context, are easier to handle.

**Using the media**

Newspapers provide a useful way to learn about contemporary Australian culture, which students need if they are to succeed in this society. Most classes at a high stage three level are ready to read selected parts of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH). The SMH is written at a higher level of English than the tabloid papers. This means that it uses fewer colloquialisms and idioms and is easier for second language learners to understand.

The Internet is also a wonderful source for all sorts of interesting ideas and bits and pieces from everywhere. At the beginning of the term, I brought to class an Internet text on Anzac Day. Later I introduced texts about disasters such as the Italian floods, the Afghan earthquake and the German railcrash. I linked Internet news, maps and photos with material from the SMH, and some radio news. I used cloze texts, comprehension questions, listening tasks and discussions about the topic to help the class get used to me and each other.

Later we looked at the furore about the building at East Circular Quay (the Toaster), and the place of the Opera House in Australian iconography. We then moved on to
politics, at the request of the class, and had an interesting time discussing Queensland and national politics and political events and personalities.

Early in the term we had a detailed look at the weather page in the SMH. It helped the students gain a basic knowledge of NSW and Australian geography, and weather conditions. Later we practised listening to the ABC weather every day. This also provided excellent cultural background such as the coldest, hottest and wettest places, flood and storm warnings and fire bans.

Most of the time I chose the topics from the ABC 7.45am news broadcast. I chose items that had interesting news value and were also covered in the SMH. I wasn’t sure how the East Circular Quay controversy would go, but it proved very popular, because many students said they had heard about it and did not know what the fuss was about. This indicated the need they have to unlock the gate into the society, to become insiders.

**Student response**

I asked the students what they thought about the fact that I chose the topics they studied. They said that they preferred it, because they felt that I knew what was important and relevant. They liked the fact that having talked about a topic in class, they could go home and watch the TV news and understand it much better. They feel better about themselves in understanding more about their surroundings.

Continual small successes in all four skills greatly increased their confidence and gave them a solid foundation for further progress in their language learning. They also gained valuable local knowledge and were able to put their language skills into the context of Australian society.
Improving conversation skills within a competency-based curriculum

Peter Banks

The research context

This research took place within the English Language and Literacy Service (ELLS) in South Australia. My class was in the Elementary Program which is for students who have completed one term in a new arrivals class. The class was a mixture of medium-paced Asian and European students. The language level of the class was ASLPR 1. The students were an ideal group for this research because they had a number of the basic building blocks of English but they lacked basic conversation skills and the confidence to use them with either native speakers of English or their fellow classmates.

The stimulus for the research

I have taught conversation skills for a number of years and have been very interested in this aspect of language development. However, I could not find any textbooks which described exactly what conversation is. In the past, to fill this void I drew teaching resources from many different books. I found many interesting and useful activities which students enjoyed and used to improve their communicative skills, yet the pieces had not fitted together and solved the puzzle of conversation.

Two aspects of teaching led directly to my undertaking this research. The first was the genre approach to teaching reading and writing which had provided me with an effective teaching methodology. The students also found it very useful because the analysis of written texts enabled them to understand new texts and provided them with a map when creating their own texts. It was clear that a similar approach to teaching casual conversation was urgently needed.

The second impetus to undertake the research was the Certificate III in Spoken and Written English (CSWE). Within this framework I had to teach and then assess student skills in casual conversation. The CSWE provides benchmark texts for most of the competencies but not for casual conversation. Possibly the casual conversation competency is the most problematic. At moderation sessions at ELLS, casual conversation causes the most discussion, questions, requests for resources and least agreement among teachers.

The research

Research question: What is casual conversation and how do I teach it?

In February 1998, teachers at ELLS were invited to participate in the NC ELT R Special Project – Staying learner centred in a competency-based curriculum. After the first workshop in the project which introduced the participants to the processes of action research, I started to fill in the picture of what casual conversation is.

The following is a descriptive account of the questions I asked along the way, the answers that I found and the materials that I produced.

- 
- 
- 
- 
-
What is casual conversation?

Finding the answer to this question took the most time. After reading on the topic I produced a diagram which outlined categories of spoken interactions (see Figure 1). I decided I could use this diagram with higher level students but certainly not with the class I had at the time.

**Figure 1: Spoken language interactions**

Source: Joyce and Slade 1997, page 10
After producing this figure I wrote in my journal – ‘It’s amazing, presumptuous and ignorant that I ever taught casual conversation without this tool’.

Finally I had the big picture of spoken language interactions and knew what to teach and what not to teach. I could now focus on informal, casual conversations and exclude formal conversations and encounters.

2 What are the genres of casual conversation?

I read the systemic analyses of spoken genres by Eggins and Slade (1997) which identified segments within casual conversation of chat and chunk. I consequently developed the following framework which is a map of a simple casual conversation (Figure 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Map of casual conversation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Begin</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Greetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Talking about shared experiences or situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Introducing self</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Continue**

- **Chat**
  - Topic changes

- **Chunks**
  - Stories of personal experience eg narrative, anecdote, recount, exemplum
  - Opinion
  - Observation/comment

- **End**
  - State need to go
  - Give reason why
  - State when will meet again
  - Say goodbye

Figure 2: Casual conversation map

In the past I had used teaching materials which described formulaic ways to begin and finish a conversation but presented no systematic analysis of how a conversation is sustained. The analyses of stories of personal experience, opinion and observation/comment were very useful. I now knew which genres were the most frequently used in conversation and could therefore teach them in order of frequency of use. I also knew their generic structures.

3 How would I know my students’ conversation needs?

In Week 2 of the course I gave the students the following survey (Figure 3) and asked them to describe their casual conversation experiences and the areas they wanted to work on in class.
Conversation Skills
Objective: To describe the language skills you need to have a simple conversation with a stranger

Start
• Introduce yourself
• Talk about a shared experience or situation e.g. the weather, something around you or ask for information or for a small favour

Continue
• Ask each other questions
• Change topics
• Ask for and give each other clarification
• Give each other feedback

Finish
• Say you have to go
• Give a reason why
• Say when you will meet again
• Say goodbye

Student Survey
Objective: For you to describe your casual conversation needs outside class when you are speaking English.

1. Who do you have conversations with in English outside class?
2. What topics do you talk about?
3. How long do you usually talk for?
4. Are your conversations successful? Yes No Sometimes
5. What difficulties do you have with your conversations when you are speaking English?
6. What difficulties do you want to work on in your English classes?
7. Who do you need to talk to now that you find difficult to talk to?
8. What topics do you need to talk about now that are very difficult for you to talk about?

Figure 3: Casual conversation student survey
I then collated the results. The responses informed me about what to teach in casual conversation:

Questions 2 and 8: revealed what topics to address
Questions 1 and 7: revealed the situations to use to contextualise spoken interactions
Question 3: revealed the degree of student confidence and therefore the amount of effort I would have to put into ground building activities.

What teaching/learning methodology can I use?
I wanted to know whether the methodology for teaching written genres could be applied to the teaching of spoken genres or whether it would need to be adapted. The pace and level of my class required that I introduce a fairly simple structure of casual conversation before I could deal with the idea of the spoken genres. I produced the following worksheet (Figure 4) for the class to introduce conversation skills.

Figure 4: Introduction to conversation skills worksheet

Improving conversational skills
I then tried to adapt the genre teaching/learning cycle for written genres to the teaching of spoken interactions as set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Teaching spoken interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dealing with a conversation text containing mainly C hat with short C hunk segments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resources: tape &amp; text transcript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building the context - an introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Play the audio or videotape and discuss:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- social purpose of text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- what questions are acceptable in L1 and in English Use questionnaires, surveys and prediction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Develop student understanding of:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- register ie field, tenor, mode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- schematic structure of genre type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- language used in the conversation – grammatical structures, vocabulary, participants, places, language functions etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modelling a specific text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Explain stages and how these enable the text to achieve its social purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Play tape and ask the students to identify stages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Give students transcript to identify each stage, its grammatical features and vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ask students to listen to each stage for specific information using worksheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Give students separate stages of the text for sequencing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Give students a range of oral and written activities designed to improve control over grammar and vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint production of text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Students practise communicative activities to improve control over:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- greetings and closures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- grammatical structures eg Yes/No questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- clarification and feedback strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- changing topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- In pairs students perform partial or full roleplay and then model a specific text in front of whole class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent construction of text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Set up roleplays which students perform in pairs or groups in front of class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Set up peer assessment of live or recorded performances using worksheets</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What conversation texts can I use in class?

There are many textbooks which contain many examples of written genres but at the time I began this research I did not know of any texts for teaching spoken conversation genres. I had hoped to find audio and video tapes of authentic conversations accompanied by transcripts to avoid technically demanding and time-consuming recording, transcribing and analysis.
I tried Economou (1985) and Slade (1986) but found these were unsuitable for use in class as they were not clear enough. I found one in Clements and Crawford (1994) which was suitable for the students in my class and matched the stages of the simple conversation outlined in Figure 4.

6 How do I analyse spoken texts?
Having discovered suitable dialogues, I needed to use genre and register analysis to explain to students the structure of the texts, how they reflect the Australian culture and how their grammar and vocabulary choices are affected by the social context of the conversation. This enabled the students to predict the things they were likely to hear and anticipate the structures that they would have to use when speaking themselves. I found a format for such an analysis in Burns, Joyce and Gollin (1996:100). From this I prepared the following proforma for the analysis of spoken texts (Figure 5).

---

Analysis of spoken texts

Social Purpose:

Genre:

Schematic Structure:

Register:
- Field
- Tenor
- Mode

Language Features:
- Verbs
- Vocabulary
- Specific people and places
- Functions

Figure 5: Proforma for analysis of spoken texts

7 What is the difference between spoken and written language?
This was the first time my students had read transcripts of spoken language. In previous classes the spoken language they had read were dialogues written in formal sentence grammar with no hesitations, interruptions, backchannelling or idiomatic language. Their view of correct spoken language was in fact written language. It became clear that I needed to show that spoken language was different to written language, that it was dynamic, context-dependent and highly interactive. Knowledge of these differences would enable students to better negotiate their meaning across the mode continuum from spoken to written depending on their situation. Once again, I could find plenty of suitable material for teachers but none for my students. Consequently I prepared the following mode continuum table for use in class (Table 2).
How do I assess my students’ mastery of spoken language?

Over several weeks I taught conversation skills using the materials I had prepared. I believe that the assessment that really counts is the students’ own ability to monitor their progress. I gave them the conversation skills worksheet (Figure 6) and they prepared dialogues with their partners after which they read them aloud to the class. This joint construction gave students time to produce and edit their conversations. They really appreciated this time which enabled them to consolidate the new language they had been practising. It also showed me that a number of students who appeared, through their initial spoken dialogues, to have understood the language functions, in fact did not. This worksheet enabled me to assist individual students.

Table 2: Spoken and written English mode continuum table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Spoken</th>
<th>Most Written</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eg: having a casual conversation or making an appointment.</td>
<td>eg: the TV news is spoken like written English. A personal letter is written like spoken English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You speak with someone else, ie a dialogue, and you do some action with them.</td>
<td>* Spoken and written language both use English but use some vocabulary and grammar differently. *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You speak spontaneously, ie with no preplanning and little self-correction.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When you speak you say it and they because you both understand what each other means.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Both speakers use informal language, eg idiom and slang.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eg: Text A</td>
<td>eg: Text B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue: Can I come and show you?</td>
<td>Sue and Jenny wrote the article together. Sue wrote the introduction, Jenny wrote the rest of the article and then they edited it together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny: Yes, OK.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue: I’ve finished this bit. Do you think that it should go here?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny: Yeah, that’s fine.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Objective: To explain the similarities and differences between spoken and written English so that you can choose the best language for your situation.
When I felt that the class could reproduce simple conversations fairly confidently I prepared them for assessment of the casual conversation competency. In pairs the students would stand in front of the class and have a short conversation of a couple of minutes and their classmates would use the following conversation assessment sheet (Figure 7) to assess their performance. I did not set the students up to fail and they would only undertake this assessment when I was satisfied that they could achieve it. Satisfactory completion of the activity let the students know that they had begun to develop their conversation skills.

Where to now?

The materials described in this report were produced and trialled on the run during Term 3 1998. With later classes I hope to:

• trial these materials over a longer period
• assess how much the genre/register approach has improved student conversation skills

Figure 6: Conversation skills worksheet

Conversation Skills Worksheet

Objective: For you to practise your conversation skills by writing a dialogue between strangers.

You can write this conversation with the help of your partner

Situation: At the sixth floor restaurant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Start</th>
<th>A:</th>
<th>B:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continue</th>
<th>A:</th>
<th>B:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finish</th>
<th>A:</th>
<th>B:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: Conversation skills worksheet
# Peer Assessment

Objective: For you to practise the language skills needed to have a simple conversation by evaluating each pair of speakers using this worksheet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did the two speakers:</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Start</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- introduce themselves?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- talk about a shared experience or situation?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Continue</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ask each other questions?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ask for and give each other feedback?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ask for and give each other clarification?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finish</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- say they have to go?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- give a reason why?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- say when they will meet again?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- say goodbye?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• improve the materials
• provide staff development sessions at ELLS
• design a teaching package for teachers to use for teaching casual conversation.

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5 Come ’n’ meet Vygotsky
Cherie Lewis

The research context

I was teaching in an outreach AMES Victoria centre in Frankston where 25 ESL students were participating in a combined Certificate in Spoken and Written English Level I and II class, funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. The profile of the class is outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Class profile

| Age                      | • 14 to 80 years  
|                         | • the 14-year-old was a private Chilean student studying in Australia for a year  
|                         | • the 80-year-old was a retired Chinese doctor  
| Educational background  | • ranged from 8 years to 17 years  
| Previous language learning | • all the students had had minimal English language tuition and hence were all placed in a beginner class  
|                         | • some students had been granted extra hours on humanitarian grounds  
| Time in Australia       | • from 5 days to 2 years  
| Nationalities           | • Bosnians, Serbians, Croatians, Hong Kong Chinese, mainland Chinese, Afghans, Poles, Austrians, Ukrainians, Samoans and Chileans  
| Learners’ characteristics | • some students were from non-Roman script backgrounds  
|                         | • some students were identified as suffering from torture and trauma  

Recent studies at Deakin University involved me in analysing the language, literacy and learning concepts, including systemic functional linguistics, that inform the curriculum document used in my teaching institution, i.e., the Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE). My studies had also introduced me to a Russian psychologist called Vygotsky (1934–1978) who was concerned with learner progress and the ways to maximise potential performance for all learners.

As a consequence I became interested in the teaching/learning cycle developed as part of the genre approach to teaching literacy and its effect on learner progress.

The research

Research question: Does text-based teaching, using the genre approach, facilitate the learning process?
Vygotsky proposed that each learner has two levels of development:

1. A level of independent performance, i.e., existing independent functioning; and
2. A level of potential performance which is made possible through social interaction and joint construction with more capable others such as parents or teachers.

Figure 1 represents the nature of the collaboration between teacher and student in response to learning. It is based on the concept of scaffolding through which the student and teacher collaborate to provide the student with the opportunity to move from dependent to independent performance. As the student learns, they pass from existing learning through a zone of proximal development to reach their potential performance level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCAFFOLDING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent learner performance with no contribution from teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diminishing contribution from teacher as learner’s independent contribution increases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant contribution by teacher to support dependent contribution from learner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner’s entry level to learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existing independent functioning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1

Taking a Vygotskian perspective, language learning is seen as a social process whereby teachers and students develop texts together through joint construction. Teachers explicitly contribute or scaffold where necessary and adjust their contribution as the students develop the knowledge and skills necessary for independent text construction. In this way teachers support students in reaching their potential performance.

This social approach to learning informs the genre-based approach to teaching literacy and is reflected in the teaching/learning cycle (Figure 2) (see Figure 2 from Hammond, Burns, Joyce, Gerot and Brosnan, 1992:17) which was the focus of my action-research project. The cycle consists of a number of stages through which the students gradually gain independent control of a particular text-type. The cycle supports the idea of the teacher collaborating with the student in the learning process and represents a way of staying learner-centred within the competency-based curriculum of the C SW E.
When reading about Vygotsky I began to think that beginner students should not be limited in exposure to language and that more capable students can be frustrated in progression to their level of potential performance.

**Focusing at different text levels**

I decided to undertake five separate trials within the classroom to test the genre method and the teaching/learning cycle with my very disparate class. All texts chosen for the research trials were aligned to competencies in CSWE I and II. These trials involved different approaches:

**Trials 1, 2 and 3** These involved a whole text approach.

**Trial 4** This involved focusing on a language feature rather than a whole text to test if the genre method was the most effective method in facilitating learner progress.

**Trial 5** This involved starting at the joint construction stage of the teaching learning cycle. Feez (1998) states that when a text-type and its context are being introduced for the first time, students work through all the stages of the teaching/learning cycle. I wanted to introduce a familiar context to test whether the same learner progress would be the outcome if we started at another stage.
To gather data about student responses to the genre approach I used a teaching log where I recorded information, gathered my lesson plans, made observations and wrote field notes. I also gave the students a questionnaire, interviewed them and discussed the results.

**Observations**

The class was alive with students constructing texts in context. The slowest and lowest educated Chinese student had had trouble learning with every other approach I had introduced. However, he now tuned into the context and used his dictionary to point to the words he wanted to write in his dialogue. With teacher collaboration he wrote:

A: **Careful! Don't touch the electricity wires.**
B: **I'm sorry. What did you say?**
A: **Put on your helmet! You might hurt your head.**
B: **Oh. Thanks for the warning.**

Every student produced a dialogue, proudly wrote it on the board and read it to the class. The genre approach through the teaching/learning cycle was proving effective in maximising the learning of all students.
Trial 2 – Map
On the morning of this particular trial I was informed that I had five new students coming into class. I altered my plan slightly to accommodate these students into both the culture and the context of the learning environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text:</th>
<th>A map of Australia including additional information about population, size, geography and products</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language/learning focus:</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSWE competencies:</td>
<td>Can read a short information text, Can write a report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building context:</td>
<td>To build the context I copied a map onto the board</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Modelling the text | Teacher:  
• identified the context and wrote Australia on the board  
• drew in the states and capital cities and labelled them appropriately  
• explicitly taught the pronunciation of all states and capital cities  
• distributed map with its key and other visual cues re information about population, weather, geography, main products and animals  
Students identified all the above information and shared knowledge about Australia |
| Joint construction of the text: | Teacher structured student information on board using structures has got, there is and there are into a report  
An introductory sentence and the conclusion were constructed in collaboration with the students |
| Independent construction of text: | Students worked in nationality groups using the model to write a report about their own countries |

Figure 4: Trial 2 – Map

Observations
The class was alive with text construction. Students called for teaching of explicit grammatical features, spelling and pronunciation. The five new students were actively engaged, as was all the class, in learning but this was learning as social practice geared to a goal-oriented activity of writing a report about their countries.
## Trial 3 – World Cup Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Texts:</th>
<th>1 The World Cup program (<em>Herald/Sun</em>)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Information about all participating countries (<em>Herald/Sun</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 World Cup results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language/learning focus:</strong></td>
<td>• The language of sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CSWE competencies:</strong></td>
<td>• Can read a short information text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Can write a recount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comprehension of Text 1</strong></td>
<td>• The following questions were asked to elicit information from the text to promote discourse about the World Cup:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- When does it begin?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Which countries play in the first match?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- When does it finish?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Which countries play in the final?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How many different countries play in the World Cup?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The students were easily able to answer the questions and thereby achieve the competency.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Comprehension of Text 2 | • Information cards about all countries were handed to students                                        |
|                        | • Students read or asked each other information about all the countries participating in the World Cup |
|                        | • Coffee-time was signalled by the students using the time-out gesture, such was the involvement in the culture of the context |

| Text 3                 | • Students built a joint text on countries which had won matches in the past week eg: |
|                        | Brazil defeated Nigeria 3 goals to 1, ______ was the best player.                               |
|                        | It was an interesting match.                                                                  |

### Observations

All students were able to participate in text construction, including the newer students. The more capable and motivated students were able to write much more complex texts. Explicit teaching of structure and pronunciation was given as requested by individual students. The class was alive with social discourse. Students were progressing towards individual potential performance in a particular context but geared to the competency of writing a recount.
Trial 4 – Language feature
In this trial I started with a language feature rather than a text. I wanted to confirm my theory that text-based learning, using the genre approach, does in fact facilitate the learning process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context:</th>
<th>• Holidays</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language/learning focus:</td>
<td>• Past tense: did, didn’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSWE competency:</td>
<td>• Can write a recount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities:</td>
<td>• Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cloze passage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1:</td>
<td>• Discussion about what teacher and students did over the holidays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2:</td>
<td>• Student surveyed classmates using worksheet (see below)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3:</td>
<td>• Student completed cloze passage: In the holidays, I ________ up the house and _____ a little. I also _____ out to dinner and _____ friends. However I didn’t _____ any clothes because I didn’t _____ any money. I didn’t _____ to aerobics because I _____ tired and I didn’t _____ any movies. I _____ a boring two weeks holiday.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6a: Trial 4 – language feature

Worksheet – THE HOLIDAYS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>What did you do?</th>
<th>What didn’t you do?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>What did you do?</th>
<th>What didn’t you do?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6b: Trial 4 – language feature worksheet
Observations
The language feature of past tense using *did* and *didn’t* presented out of context in the form of a survey gave no clues as to how to construct the relevant sentences. As anticipated, the survey caused a few problems for students, as there was no model for the students to use to construct their sentences. Therefore, sentences were produced such as:

- I didn’t come to school.
- I did stay at home and I visited friends.

In this instance, students remained at their independent level of functioning and did not move through the zone of proximal development to potential performance. Students who did construct correct sentences through prior learning also stayed at their independent level of functioning and no real learning occurred.

Even though the survey encouraged social practice there was only student to student interaction with no input from more capable others to promote learner progress.

The cloze passage presented a text which did model how to make sentences in past tense using *did* and *didn’t* and how to use cohesive devices. Confusion and frustration disappeared as students verbalised their learning, then visibly demonstrated it through writing further sentences with teacher to student collaboration (where necessary) about the holidays and the weekend.

**Trial 5 – At the doctor’s**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language/learning focus:</th>
<th>At the doctor’s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CSWE competencies:</td>
<td>Can provide personally relevant information using spoken language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can negotiate an oral transaction to obtain information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint construction</td>
<td>Teacher placed three cards around the room which read: RECEPTION WAITING ROOM DR LEWIS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students chose to roleplay understanding of the three contexts. This was accompanied by some text construction written on board.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explicit teaching was done where necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent construction</td>
<td>Through role-play</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 7: Trial 5 – At the doctor’s**

Observations
Beginning at the joint construction stage of the teaching/learning cycle challenged the students to recollect and construct appropriate language in context. The class was alive with the doctor to patient interactions. Students verbalised knowledge of various ailments and complaints. This encouraged both student to student collaboration and teacher to student collaboration when necessary.

The three goals of learner progress, independent text construction and learning of stated competencies could be achieved when using a familiar context and starting at the joint construction stage of the teaching/learning cycle.
Conclusions

Through the trials I conducted with various approaches and texts it appeared that:

- beginner students should not be limited in terms of language and the genre approach exposes beginner students to more language
- the joint construction stage of the teaching/learning cycle provides explicit teaching
- explicit teaching allows each student to progress from their level of independent functioning to their potential performance which means being able to read, write or speak independently using correct linguistic features, pronunciation and spelling appropriate to the context.

The questionnaire and interviews explored the students’ reaction to the use of the teaching/learning cycle. They revealed that the students:

- understood and were satisfied with the method
- were content with their progress
- were satisfied with course content, except for one gentleman (recently widowed) who suggested more conversation in social settings, such as tea-parties and restaurant outings, would be more suitable for his needs.

Teacher understanding of the language, literary and learning principles underpinning the CSWE led to students developing:

- an awareness of language as a resource for making meaning
- an awareness of language as a tool for interpreting and organising reality
- knowledge about language
- an awareness of learning as a social practice, geared to goal-oriented activities, ie development of competencies.

The genre-based approach conforms to the guidelines of a competency-based curriculum but more importantly, it meets the need of facilitating learner progress in every student and thereby achieves the aim of staying learner-centred in a competency-based curriculum.

As with the students, teachers cannot progress unless there is input from more capable others through professional development. It is important that teachers have an understanding of the language, literacy and learning principles which underpin the curriculum and opportunity to relate these to their classroom practice.

Studies at Deakin University this year have enabled me to understand these linguistic theories and principles, while this project has inspired me to demonstrate my findings through my teaching practice. My current students and all those in the future will benefit from the learning that I have gained by participating in the action-research project.

I am testimony to Delia Bradshaw (1996) when she states – ‘This sort of comprehensive, soul-searching and analysis can only be done over time: no one workshop can ever achieve the breadth and intensity of study, the sort of in-depth scrutiny that is usually a precursor to lasting voluntary change’.

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SECTION SIX

Exploring achievement and assessment

1. English as a second language for the deaf via AUSLAN
   Jenni Buzacott

2. Teacher strategies for remaining learner-centred
   Shirley Sangster
Introduction

The rewards [of the project] are real achievements in English for students which have been achieved, in part, because of the modification of strategies and assessment tasks …

(Jenny Buzacott)

The final section in this volume rounds off our explorations into learner-centredness by looking at classroom practices that enhance progress and considering how this progress is assessed. One of the tensions of competency-based approaches for many teachers is the greater focus that is given to learning outcomes. Many see this as a product-oriented pressure on their teaching which is in contrast to the process-oriented nature of learning. A challenge in remaining learner-centred is to balance the two. While several teachers highlighted this issue in workshop discussions, two in particular focused their research directly on this area.

Jenny Buzacott is a teacher of the Deaf. She works in Perth, Western Australia and her students learn within the competency-based curriculum framework of the Certificate of General Education for Adults (CGEA). However, as she stresses, ‘for these students English is a second language’, their first languages being a range of sign languages including Australian Sign Language (AUSLAN). Jenny’s long-term concern was related to the assessment procedures for these students, which she felt disadvantaged them in relation to oral skills. She decided to look more closely at the strategies currently used to teach her students and whether these could be further developed to enhance student achievement. Using detailed video observation techniques in her own classroom she gained many insights into how classroom interaction could be improved. She describes these in her paper and also makes several recommendations for modifying assessment tasks.

The final paper of the volume, by Shirley Sangster, also a teacher from Western Australia, examines what strategies teachers adopt when assessing their students and how learner-centredness is reflected in these strategies. Shirley used a questionnaire to interview three of her colleagues. One area she was interested in was how strategies varied when the teachers assessed students at different curriculum levels. Although only three teachers were involved, her account provides some interesting insights into how the teachers perceive their assessment procedures and how student needs and feelings are taken into account. The tension between reporting outcomes and facilitating learning mentioned throughout this project surfaces again in Shirley’s statement: ‘All the Certificate I teachers wanted to de-emphasise formal testing’.

Shirley’s concluding statement perhaps also provides a fitting summary to what was observed in the project as a whole:

I found the results very interesting and informative about individual teaching practices which attempted to prioritise student need while still following a competency-based curriculum. Teachers addressed the issue of learner-centredness in different ways, but always with a common goal of placing student needs as their most important consideration.
1 English as a second language for the deaf via AUSLAN

Jenni Buzacott

Introduction

Deaf and hearing impaired students, who are enrolled in the Certificate of General Education for Adults – Hearing Impaired (CGEAHI), require a purely visual mode of learning via an AUSLAN interpreter. These students consider themselves to have a difference in learning need, not a disability. For these students English is a second language and the teaching within the CGEAHI focuses on written English.

Hearing impaired students cannot achieve a full CGEA because they cannot achieve the oral language outcomes. An area of contention within the curriculum context relates to accepting deaf students’ oral presentations in AUSLAN as assessment performances. Existing course competencies within the CGEA are designed for native speakers of English and do not recognise deaf students’ oral presentations. This has meant that while students have pursued their English studies for many years, they have only been able to receive partial Statements of Attainment.

AUSLAN has only been recognised as a living language within the last ten years and educational instruction in schools is still conducted in Signed English not in true AUSLAN. When students are taught in Signed English, especially if they are from a hearing family, their resulting social communications are restricted, resulting in isolation and further communication difficulties within both the hearing and deaf communities. These students do not have full communication in either language as their social experiences have been severely limited.

The research context

During the project I was teaching a class of 15 male and female students. They had been enrolled for up to seven years, with many changes in venues, teachers and interpreters. These students came from a diverse range of educational, cultural, social and signing backgrounds. The literacy levels within the class were varied and ranged from students with emerging literacy skills and fingerspelling skills to students who were experienced in AUSLAN communication and were ready to move to the next CGEA level.

A student survey conducted as part of this project revealed the majority of the students were profoundly deaf. Over the years they had literally been taught sitting on their hands, as they were not allowed to sign. They had received oral instruction only in segregated settings and as English is based on sounds, achievement in English rarely occurred. Schooling was a repetition of frustrating and meaningless tasks which students could not hear or understand.

The CGEA hearing impaired students attend in a flexible pattern. They attend four English classes of three hours and two numeracy classes of two hours per week. Constant collaboration between teachers, students and interpreters aims to provide continuity between the theory and complementary practice in written English and numeracy.
The research

Research question: What factors inhibit deaf and hearing impaired students' achievement in literacy within a competency-based curriculum?

My research project focused on the development of appropriate visual teaching strategies and resources to enhance achievement in English for adult deaf and hearing impaired students. The term visual refers to the total visual and physical format used in deaf communication.

The project identified existing problem learning areas in English for the hearing impaired students. The research focused on:

- the attention which students paid to visual instruction whether via the teacher, the AUSLAN interpreter or other visual teaching strategies and resources
- how the students demonstrated their understanding of instructions, in either signed or written English formats
- student responses in English to instruction in English.

These areas relate directly to existing competencies within the Certificates in Spoken and Written English which were subsequently modified to allow for appropriate visual AUSLAN teaching strategies and outcomes for the deaf.

Data collection

Data was collected through a range of methods which included:

- in-class observations of existing instruction strategies
- observations of student interactions with other students, interpreter and teacher
- liaison with teachers of the deaf in other areas
- student and teacher interviews which asked for general feedback on perceived problem areas
- individual surveys of deaf students in relation to classroom interaction, preferred in-class activities and self-identified problem areas
- video documentation of student involvement in a variety of classroom learning contexts.

The surveys allowed for individual student feedback on educational, social, cultural and family background experiences which influenced their participation and success in English. Responses were explored with individual students and the interpreter to gather more detailed information to assist with course modification.

As the research progressed, observation reinforced the need for change in teaching strategies within the classroom. The video was particularly valuable in providing visual evidence and documentation of student involvement and interaction with other students, teacher and interpreter and the different styles of signed communication used to ensure understanding and learning.

Findings

An initial review of available teaching materials reinforced the belief that they had been design for hearing ESL and native English speakers. This applied to both CGEA and CSWE materials, texts and assessment tasks. Much of the content makes reference
to spoken information and responses. Classroom activities for the hearing impaired students not only need to be visual but must be specifically designed to exclude references to spoken responses or hearing experiences which are unknown to the deaf community. Examples of inappropriate teaching resources for deaf students include:

- songs
- audio tapes
- computer programs which use sound cards to assist instruction
- film or video without captions or instruction from an interpreter.

Effective strategies for working with deaf or hearing impaired students within the classroom need to be adopted. Teachers should have some AUSLAN signing skills to assist with communication and should adopt the following strategies:

- ensuring the faces of the teacher and interpreter are clearly visible to all students
- using OHTs with large script in combination with a whiteboard with board overhead lights off
- not talking while turned away, eg when writing on the board, as this makes it impossible for students to gain information
- not obstructing the interpreter while they are signing instructions concurrently with teacher verbal instruction
- standing side by side with the interpreter to allow easier dual focus for the students
- talking loudly for those students who rely on their hearing aids and the interpreter
- articulating clearly with lip patterns and movements sometimes exaggerated to assist understanding of new words
- ensuring student visual attention is focused before speaking
- speaking directly to the students not the interpreter
- constantly checking for student understanding
- rephrasing not simply paraphrasing instructions, even if this requires reverting to AUSLAN grammar, fingerspelling or students' primary signed language, to ensure understanding, and then reverting to written English
- clearly articulating to students whether instruction is being presented in AUSLAN or written English
- providing students with copies of the overheads or notes, wherever possible
- presenting each step of an instruction as a single visual step
- not delivering text and AUSLAN instruction simultaneously
- giving the interpreter prior access to text content to avoid confusion in signed vocabulary.

Assessment tasks should be modified to ensure appropriacy by:

- making content familiar to the educational, cultural and life experiences of students
- using interpreters and familiarising them with task materials prior to assessment to ensure accuracy of signed communication
- giving additional time for students to understand instructions and to write responses.

Observation of classroom arrangements revealed that the students actively resisted placement of desks in a U-shape because they could not clearly see what other students were signing. Through a process of self-selection the students consistently seated themselves in every classroom in the following manner, if the interpreter stood on the left:

- profoundly deaf students who rely completely on AUSLAN sit on the left, the same side as the interpreter
- students who can use hearing aids sit on the right where they can hear part of what the teacher is saying as well as view the interpreter.
Observation of the students’ oral presentations for assessment showed a variety of signed communication which needs to be acknowledged if assessment is to be fair to all students. These included the students:

- using A USL A N and the interpreter voice
- verbalising from their text and the interpreter using A USL A N
- simultaneously using voice and A USL A N with back-up from interpreter and teacher
- using erratic sign which means that the interpreter and teacher are required to stop the presentation for a constant check of vocabulary or to request the student to back-up and clarify
- using colloquial signs which confuse teacher, interpreter and other students.

For the CGEAHI students to succeed it is essential teachers be supported by experienced interpreters. Interpreters need the opportunity to give students instructions in sign which they will understand, using their primary sign first. This gives the interpreter an opportunity to break down teacher instruction into language which is understandable to the student, not just straight A USL A N interpreting.

Teachers and interpreters have to be very careful when signing A USL A N for English. When the interpreter communicates the teacher’s verbal English instruction into A USL A N the grammar changes and the interpreter can unwittingly provide the students with answers before they have even begun an activity. It is important for teachers to be aware of this, as one of the primary aims is to encourage students’ independent learning. For example, in A USL A N many proper nouns are actually fingerspelt and this may give the students the answer before they begin the task.

Interpreters are trained in pure A USL A N, not the variety of diverse signing within the CGEAHI classroom. It is important to train interpreters within this very difficult context of teaching English to the deaf. This assists interpreters to gain experience and proficiency in accurately interpreting a variety of signing and ensuring accurate communication within the classroom. Time should also be taken to check that the students understand A USL A N.

Conclusion

My involvement in this project has reinforced the need to overcome obstacles in providing quality English instruction and learning for hearing impaired students. The rewards are real achievements in English for students which have been achieved, in part, because of the modification of strategies and assessment tasks to a purely visual and A USL A N mode of learning.

The project has reinforced the need for continuity of teachers and interpreters in the CGEAHI course. This allows for consistency in signing and should assist in avoiding the dangers of communicating incorrect information.

The project has increased awareness of the need for more teachers to be in-serviced in teaching English to deaf students. Trained adult literacy and ESL teachers have a wealth of English language and literacy knowledge which could be used in the education of the deaf.

Teaching English via A USL A N requires an awareness of student differences in signed communication styles. As students have very little spoken English, a totally visual focus is required for transmission of knowledge and application of skills in written English. Oral students combine, simultaneously, hand signs and oral. The result is that the oral is formatted in A USL A N. It is understandable but formatted in
A U S L A N grammar. This retains effective communication but does not practise English.

Although the N C E L T R research project has been completed the research will continue into the needs of the hearing impaired students. The aim of this continued research is to replace the C G E A certificate with a qualification specifically designed for the visual learning style of deaf and hearing impaired students.

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2 Teacher strategies for remaining learner-centred
Shirley Sangster

The research context
I work as a lecturer in Adult Migrant Education Services (AMES) in Perth Western Australia. This program became part of West Coast College of TAFE in 1997. Within the AMES we teach the Certificates I, II and III in Spoken and Written English (CSWE). Classes run for ten weeks and are organised into two phases within each certificate level - Phase 1 and Phase 2. Students are promoted to higher levels of the Certificates according to their achievements in moderated assessment tasks and, in some special cases, students can be promoted on their ASLPR levels.

The research

Research question: What strategies do teachers develop at different certificate levels to remain learner-centred in a competency-based curriculum?

Assessment is an area that has always been debated by teachers. The focus of such debate within the competency-based framework of the Certificates in Spoken and Written English is on the more prescribed assessment procedures associated with the curriculum. Teachers feel that individual student needs may be compromised or even ignored because there is pressure to assess students in a short timeframe.

I am aware of my own teaching practices which aim to individualise assessment and to give my students the optimum chance of achievement. However, I was interested to talk to my colleagues about their strategies for remaining learner-centred within the competency-based curriculum. I was particularly interested in finding out if teachers used different strategies according to different certificate levels.

The questionnaire
I designed a questionnaire to survey teachers in the teaching centre where I work. This was designed to explore how they felt about assessment and how it fitted into their course planning.

I distributed the questionnaire to three teachers at each of the three certificate levels and then conducted a short interview to gather their responses. To give the teachers adequate time to think about their responses I distributed the questionnaire at least a day before the interviews.

Areas which were highlighted in the questionnaire were:
1 the scheduling of assessment
2 explicitness about the assessment criteria
3 strategies to promote learner-centredness.

...
Outcomes

In analysing the teacher responses, it was interesting to see how both the certificate level and the teacher's ideology influenced their answers. These responses are outlined below.

1 The scheduling of assessment

CSWE I All the Certificate I teachers wanted to de-emphasise formal testing. One teacher said that some competencies would not be assessed if the students were not ready. He focused on informal assessment because he wanted to play down the ‘assessment syndrome’. He felt that it was important to show students that they could progress in language learning apart from passing competency assessments. Students could be promoted to the next level without passing all of the appropriate assessments if teachers, using their professional judgment and the ASLPR levels as a guide, felt that the students could handle the next level.

The second teacher at this level did not test if only a few students were ready. The third teacher tested in class when some students felt ready and allowed the less capable students to watch, listen and gain confidence by becoming familiar with the assessment procedure.

CSWE II CSWE II teachers varied in their assessment approach. Two of the three teachers always tested at the end of the course. The reasons stated for this were:
- to de-emphasise formal assessment and emphasise skill building and language acquisition - ‘Test what is taught not teach what is tested’
- to provide a longer time without testing which improved student self-esteem and made it more likely that they would be ready and able to pass assessments later in the course.

The other teacher tested competencies throughout the course when they were relevant and when the students were ready. The teacher followed a thematic approach and certain assessment tasks were integrated with particular language skills. The teacher felt this approach meant that if a student failed to achieve a competency they would have another chance in another related theme later in the course.

CSWE III All three CSWE III teachers indicated that they assessed at the end of the course. This was done to allow students the maximum time for learning and to give all students a better chance of passing the assessments. They did not want to teach just for assessments but felt that language proficiency was their aim. These teachers believed that if the students were proficient at ASLPR level 2, then they would have no trouble achieving the assessment tasks.

2 Explicitness about the assessment criteria

CSWE I One teacher was explicit about the assessment criteria but they were only used in terms of what was taught. She rephrased the criteria so that her students could understand what they needed to demonstrate to her. For example, when testing a recount, she would remind students about using past tense verbs and using and to join sentences. This was explicitly presented but only in terms of what the students had learnt.
One teacher varied her approach to explicitness with each class. Usually she did not explain the criteria unless she was teaching a very academic class or a Certificate III class. The other two teachers said that they were explicit but only in relation to what they expected the students to demonstrate, e.g., using past tense verbs. They gave the criteria orally as an reminder. One teacher also wrote the criteria on the blackboard and explained them before the assessments.

At this level the teacher’s ideas on explicitness varied. Two of the three teachers commented that they were very explicit in their explanation of the assessment criteria. Copies of each competency and the assessment criteria were put on the wall early in the course and a great amount of discussion followed. Reasons given for this approach included giving students more control over their learning. Describing the standard to be met, allowed the students to be more responsible for their own learning. Students at this level have a greater understanding of how and what they learn and demand to know why they have not passed an assessment. Teachers felt it was very necessary to share assessment knowledge with students to allow for improvement in particular areas.

In contrast, the third teacher was not explicit with assessment tasks at all. She felt that she was teaching language proficiency and not test preparation. She followed a grammatical approach and felt that if students followed the course then they would easily pass the assessments at the end. Her belief was that any students who were not able to pass the assessment tasks would not have been able to, even if they knew the assessment criteria. It would simply be a matter that their language proficiency was not good enough.

### 3 Strategies to promote learner-centredness

At first some teachers said that they did not have any special strategies for supporting learner-centredness. However, after we discussed the issue in the interviews they were surprised by the tactics which they did employ to balance learner-centredness in their classrooms. Some of these strategies, which are described below, are very interesting and may be of value to other teachers.

When testing oral competencies, one teacher explained that she tries to manage the assessment experience so that all students gain confidence. She programmed ten minutes at the beginning of each lesson for assessment and asked if any students felt ready to be assessed. Any volunteers were assessed while the others listened. If students did not achieve the competency being assessed, she would point out why and encourage them to try again the next day. If any students were reluctant to be assessed in class, she would withdraw them and assess them in isolation. This system catered for the problem of not all students being ready for assessment at the same time. It also helped students to experience the assessment procedure and better understand what criteria were required.

One teacher programmed 40 minutes once a week for a writing task. Assessment conditions were set, e.g., writing in class with the aid of a dictionary only. Each week a different topic was set, these topics followed the different genres which were being studied in class at the time. If any
students met all of the criteria, then they passed that particular competency, eg writing a report or writing a recount. Problem areas were highlighted to students, addressing the specific criteria and all students would write the text again the following week regardless of their attaining that particular competency. Students gradually became more able to write quickly and writing proficiency was built up over the term in relation to the different genres. In this way the writing competencies were being assessed throughout the term rather than on one special day at the end. Students were familiar with the assessment experience and conditions and approached the assessment tasks without fear.

Reflections

I have been involved in several research projects and so I was reasonably prepared for what was in store for me when I undertook this particular NCELTR Special Project. However, unlike the other projects, this particular research project gave me the opportunity to look at what other teachers were doing in their classrooms. My teaching colleagues were very cooperative and gave me their time whenever I asked. This was sometimes just before class or even in their lunch break. They also took the time to read and reflect on my questionnaire.

I found the results very interesting and informative about individual teaching practices which attempted to prioritise student needs while still following a competency-based curriculum. Teachers addressed the issue of learner-centredness in different ways but always with a common goal of placing student needs as their most important consideration.