

Action Research in Action

Edited by

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RELC Portfolio Series 8

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Series Editors' Preface

The RELC Portfolio Series consists of short practical resource booklets for ESL/EFL teachers. Booklets in the series have the following characteristics:

- They are practical and techniques-oriented
- They are written in an accessible, non-academic style
- They focus on both principles and procedures

Titles in the series provide teachers with practical ways of applying new ideas in their own teaching. In addition, they could be used as the basis for workshops and in-service courses and can also be combined in different ways according to needs.

Action Research in Action is about classroom-oriented research conducted by classroom teachers. This booklet complements an earlier title in the Series by Sandra Lee McKay *The Reflective Teacher: A Guide to Classroom Research*. The eight action research reports in this booklet reflect the principles, methodology and philosophy for doing action research discussed in McKay's book. The booklet is a valuable resource for teachers, teacher trainers and other language professionals who wish to develop a better understanding of how classroom-based research can be successfully implemented in the classroom.

We are grateful to the contributors to the RELC Portfolios Series for sharing their expertise with other teachers and teachers in training. Their willingness to do so without compensation has made it possible to publish these booklets at a price that is affordable to language teachers in the SEAMEO countries.

Willy A Renandya
Jack C Richards

Introduction

Ten years ago, I was employed at a declining English language school in an obscure city on Japan's northwestern coast. Isolated both professionally and technologically, most of my colleagues were more concerned with surviving the murderous class loads imposed by management than with the niceties of any form of teacher development. Access to resource materials was either limited or expensive to the point of becoming prohibitive, and the Internet was still largely unavailable. Students and teachers alike were demotivated. I wanted to gain greater insight into ways to successfully reach my learners and deal proactively with the problems I regularly faced at school, but I was unsure about how and where to start my search. Soon afterwards, I heard about something known as action research.

The term action research first appeared almost 60 years ago when social psychologist Kurt Levin (Levin, 1946) proposed that it could be used to solve the problems that can surface in groups that rely on successful communication and positive social interaction in order to reach their goals. Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) began to take interest in action research in the late 1970s and since then, a number of books have been published to help language teachers understand its nature and purpose (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Nunan, 1991; Griffiee and Nunan, 1997, Wallace, 1998).

As it relates to TESOL, Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) describe action research as a systematic and collaborative effort aimed at solving classroom problems. This has been a surprisingly durable definition that has stood the test of time, even though some recently (Edge, 2000) prefer to downplay the element of problem solving in action research in order to emphasize the importance of teacher reflection for understanding their students' culture of learning. In my opinion, reflective teaching need not be seen as an alternative to problem-solving, and can only aid those teachers who are already deeply invested in finding answers to the issues affecting the quality of their learners' language education. Action

research is the reflective language teacher's organized and ongoing search for classroom solutions and professional insight. It is, as the title of this book implies, *research-in-action*.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) also understand action research as a collaborative practice. While not every institution and working environment will allow for language teachers to work together, by publishing their work they can still enter a larger community of shared professional concerns. In this book, *Action Research in Action*, you will discover the work of language teachers from around the world, who have joined together to share the experiences and new realizations gained from the action research projects conducted with their learners. In chapter one, Sabrina Almeida Ribeiro shows how her cycle of reflective practice helped to raise her learners' awareness of the weaknesses in their oral communication skills. Thomas Farrell and Lee Fong Ting (chapter two) make it possible for their colleagues to realize how the contradiction between their stated beliefs and their actual teaching practices was affecting the quality of their learners' language education. The findings of David Mayo's action research project (chapter three) lead him to completely reconsider groupwork in his classes, and discover alternative ways for classroom communication that better complemented the educational practices of his learners. Nicola Helen Green (chapter four) explores ways to improve the pragmatic competence of her learners. In chapter five, Matthew Warwick and David Jeffrey find out about their learners' perceptions of homework and draw upon their findings to develop future teaching strategies. Isabel Pefianco Martin (chapter six) learns to respect the needs of her learners and begins to see the effect of her instructional feedback in a new light. In a similar manner, Richard Watson Todd's action research project (chapter seven) caused a paradigm shift in the perception of his learners. In chapter eight, my work with a group of Asian students at a British university helped them to discover how the academic strategies they used to secure the opportunity for overseas study would ironically likely lead to failure in their graduate programs.

Action research is a systematic process of teacher inquiry. All of the contributors to this collection follow the same action research cycle. In the introduction of each chapter, there is a description of the teaching environment in which the action research takes place. The specific focus of the project, where the observation of a problem or the realization of a need for greater insight, is expanded upon. A description of how the investigation takes place, and is followed by the teachers' response to their findings. As the teachers consider the importance of their research to themselves and others, reflective tasks have been provided at the end of each chapter to suggest possible applications to interested readers. Because resources and time dedicated to action research will vary, none

of the contributors have used computers, complicated techniques or specialized materials. The goal is to make this volume accessible to language educators in a wide variety of teaching environments, and with the hope that their stories will inspire you to consider using action research the next time you encounter a challenge in your classroom.

In reading this book, I believe that you will have joined the community of collaboration that helped to create this volume, and even now is continuing its search for solutions and greater insight. On behalf of the contributing authors, it is my sincere hope that you will find *Action Research in Action* to be both informative and motivational as you consider the potential of Action Research for your classes.

~ Gregory Hadley



The Reflective Cycle¹⁾

Sabrina Almeida Ribeiro

SETTING

Most language teachers would agree that the communicative approach emphasizes fluency, and minor inaccuracies should be overlooked. This, however, is only the first step of an approach that is truly communicative: once students have reached a satisfactory level of fluency, what was once overlooked should be reconsidered so that communication can become even more effective. For this reason, not even the most ‘communicative’ teacher should neglect accuracy, or forget to raise their students’ awareness about their “growth edges” as language learners.

Having been a teacher for ten years in Brazil, I frequently encounter the problem of the “intermediate plateau” in many of my learners. It seems that even though students visibly improve their rate of delivery, mistakes keep recurring in the same basic structures. Furthermore, most of the new vocabulary presented at their level becomes passive, and learners continue using words of Latin origin that resemble Portuguese. I decided to investigate this problem, and reflect upon how my teaching could motivate my learners to improve their language skills.

FOCUS

A lot has been written on the topic of striking a balance between fluency and accuracy in second language learning. It is not difficult to find books or articles full of enlightened ideas and practical procedures to be carried out in the classroom. I decided to follow the hints given in a number of books at my disposal, and to monitor the performance of the students in an intermediate group at CEL-LEP, a

language school in São Paulo.

When I started teaching this group, my expectations about their English were quite high, as they were in the last stage of the intermediate course. What I found out, however, was that despite their openness and enthusiasm for learning, they were careless when speaking and unwilling to try new discussion topics that contained unlearned lexis. Once on task, most were blithely inaccurate in their communicative strategies, once they were able to figure out the aim and focus of the tasks in class. I did not want to tell them to feel ashamed about their level of English proficiency, but I wanted to find a way to encourage accuracy as well as fluency.

INVESTIGATION

The tools aiding my research were audio recordings of my classes and feedback questionnaires from students. The first issue to be investigated was my teaching. For that, the plan was to make an audio recording of one of my lessons. The aim was to look at my attitude towards error correction, teacher and students talking time, pace, rapport and to analyze the quality of the learners' language production, as well as their most frequent mistakes. After all the data was collected, the next step would be to establish action plans for any area that I felt needed improvement.

Listening to the recording, I found out that my error correction was not as effective as I hoped it to be. The reason for that was that many times students were so engaged in what they wanted to say that they either did not pay attention, or were unaware of my corrections. It became clear that I needed to prepare my class to be more open and receptive to correction, because no matter how much I could improve my methods for offering instruction to learners, if they were not open to it, intake would be minimal.

During the following class, I took the recorder again. This time, I told them the focus would be on their English. A new recording was made for each communicative activity in class. I listened to the recordings at home, and made a list of some of the mistakes they had made. In the beginning of the following class, I showed them the list, and asked them to correct it in pairs. After we had gone over all the utterances, I asked them to spot the mistakes on the list they thought they had made. Then I asked them to choose one error they did not want to make again in that week, circle it and return the list to me (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Learning Diary A

Name: _____	
In pairs, correct these mistakes. Then spot the ones you have made, and choose ONE mistake you don't want to make again.	
<p>Mistake</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is a lot of bizarre 2. I've got to take my grandmother to bingo 3. When I don't want do something I gave the person a lot of excuses, but not strange excuses. 4. You don't need to be on a diet. 5. I stopped to eat a lot. 6. I changed my mind to loose weight. 7. I have a strong hurt in my back. 8. I arrived to the doctor crying. 9. I never know say this word. 10. We bring to class with another ideas. 11. If I had started more serious in the past, study English, I would be in a better position. 12. A head Ferrari. 13. I know her since seven grade. Six years. 14. She has eyes of Japanese. 	<p>Correct Form</p>

That week, I paid a lot of attention to what the learners said. The following week, I gave each of them the sheets back, with a little feedback note that either offered praise or my observations of how many times the wrong form had come up.

This new procedure served its purpose, not only of the correction itself, but also of showing to the students some strategies that they could use independent of the teacher.

RESPONSE

Geared to reach my goal of learner training, I prepared a form (Figure 2) where learners could keep weekly records of their mistakes and the correct forms. I encouraged them to choose only one form for each lesson. In that way, learning would be focused, personal and meaningful.

Figure 2. Learning Diary B

Date	What I said (or wrote)	Best Form

Some time later, I made the recordings again. This time, I asked the students to listen to the recordings and prepare a list of mistakes the class had made. They would then select the errors on which they wanted to focus. We recorded a fluency activity that was part of the planned lesson and listened to it during the last fifteen minutes of class. Students had to raise their hands every time they thought they had heard a mistake, and then discuss the most suitable correction. At the start, they were embarrassed to point out other students' errors, but by the end of the activity, students were pleased, as there was no atmosphere of criticism or judgment.

I used the audio recording once more, but later on during the course so that it did not become repetitive, and with a slightly different purpose. Students were recorded giving simple directions to each other, and then they participated in a vocabulary expansion activity. At the end of the activity, they were recorded giving directions again. Without focusing on correction, their final task was to listen for changes and for richer vocabulary.

At the end of this cycle of action research, I developed a feedback questionnaire to discover the students' impressions of the process (See Appendix 1). I was very happy to find out that they could notice progress in their learning.

REFLECTIONS

Hubbard et al (1985, p. 37) state that “every language teacher should begin by considering what the aims of his pupils are, both in the short and the long run, and judge the success by whether these are achieved.” The main advantage of what was accomplished in this reflective cycle was to equip students with the tools necessary for observing their performance. As I reflect personally upon this action research project, I believe that a teacher’s focused awareness of what is taking place in the classroom is the greatest contributing factor to raising students’ awareness. The more the teacher is driven to reflect upon and deal with what is happening in the classroom, the greater the chance of students noticing issues about their own learning.

Some might claim that teachers should not expose students to the wrong forms they have produced, that this could reinforce the storage and retrieval of that form. However, I strongly believe that learners should be able to recognize, notice and compare both correct and marked forms of the target language. Often as learners, understanding why something is wrong can aid us in making the right language decisions. This reflection helped me understand that, as language teacher, we should make more room in our instruction to the teaching of learning strategies. Doing so will empower students to learn independently from the teacher, and to make the most of their classroom experience.

TASK 1.1

Look at your teaching and reflect upon the following questions:

1. Which correction techniques do you use in your lessons? On the spot, delayed, showing a mistake was made, others. Are they varied? Effective? How do your students react when corrected?
2. What do you do about recurring mistakes?
3. Is there a balance between your focus on fluency and accuracy during language tasks?
4. Can you feel that your students are making progress? Can they sense they are improving? How do you know that?

TASK 1.2

Make an audio or video recording of one of your classes and look back at the questions above. Were you right or wrong? What evidence could you get? Do you think you need to make any changes in terms of correction in your lessons? Interview some of your students as to whether they feel they are learning and about their feelings towards being corrected, and plan some awareness raising activities according to their answers.

Note

1) An earlier version of this paper first appeared in *New Routes* (January 2002, Vol. 16, pp. 26-29). We are grateful to *New Routes* for permission to reproduce this article.

APPENDIX 1: FEEDBACK QUESTIONNAIRE

STUDENT FEEDBACK

NAME: _____

1. Think of something you can do now that you couldn't do in the beginning of the course. Then write or draw it.
2. How much has your English improved in each of these areas?

TICK THE APPROPRIATE BOX.

	A Lot Of Improvement	Some Improvement	Little Improvement
Speaking			
Listening			
Reading			
Writing			
Grammar			
Vocabulary			

3. Which area do you think you need to focus more on?

4. What can you do to improve your English in these areas:

Speaking	
Listening	
Reading	
Writing	
Grammar	
Vocabulary	

5. Have you been:

	Yes	Sometimes	No
Coming to classes regularly?			
Participating orally?			
Going to the lab regularly?			
Doing your written work?			
Doing anything extra?			

6. What class activities did you like best?

7. What suggestions would you like to make?

TEACHER'S FEEDBACK



Bridging the Gap between Words and Action

Thomas S. C. Farrell and Lee Fong Ting

SETTING

Although English is the main medium of instruction in our schools, it is not necessarily the native language of all Singaporean students. Singapore has a multi-ethnic population of more than three million people made up of 77% Chinese, 14% Malays, 7.6% Indians and 1.4% persons of other ethnic groups (Singapore Department of Statistics, 1999). Secondary schools are divided into neighborhood schools (government funded) and privately funded schools. The students' proficiency in English at these schools varies from native speaker level to English as a foreign language level.

It has been our observation that many English language teachers in Singapore will both correct every grammar mistake they find on their students' written assignments and profess firm adherence to a communicative method of teaching English composition. We wondered if Singaporean teachers' actual beliefs about teaching and correcting English grammar mistakes complemented their actual classroom practices. To those ends, we conducted the following action research (AR) project in a Singaporean secondary school.

FOCUS

Many studies have been carried out either on the effectiveness of grammar correction as a whole or on the usefulness of various grammar feedback techniques (e.g., Kepner, 1991;

Sheppard, 1992). However, very few studies in the area of grammar correction pedagogy have investigated the beliefs that underlie teachers' classroom practices. We believe it is important to examine teachers' beliefs and perceptions, as they provide psychological explanations for pedagogic decisions (Clark and Yinger, 1980). Teachers' behavior is influenced by the beliefs teachers hold, and their perceptions in turn have an impact on students' own behavior and ultimately, their achievement (Clark and Peterson, 1984).

However, because analyzing teachers' perceptions about grammar correction in isolation may not be helpful to generate constructive suggestions for improvements in their pedagogical practice, we feel that a comparison of teachers' beliefs to their actual practices about their methods of giving grammatical feedback would be of potential interest to other language teachers.

Consequently, this AR study is an attempt to fill some of the gaps in the literature of grammar correction, and adopts a qualitative, descriptive research approach that utilized classroom observations, and teacher interviews. By contrasting teachers' beliefs about grammar correction with their actual practices, we wanted to see whether there was a discrepancy between these teachers' beliefs and their actual classroom practices.

INVESTIGATION

Our investigation focused on two secondary English language teachers, both of whom were Chinese females. Teacher A was 31 years old with 7 years of teaching experience. Teacher B was 25 years old with 1 year of teaching experience. They were the only Secondary first year English teachers in that school. The class taught by Teacher A is labeled as Class A. The class taught by Teacher B is identified as Class B, which incidentally contained the most proficient group of learners in the school.

We sought answers to the following three issues:

1. What are the beliefs of these two Secondary One Express teachers (Teacher A and Teacher B) about grammar feedback techniques on students' compositions?
2. What are their actual classroom practices? How do these teachers identify and correct students' grammatical errors that occur in their compositions, inclusive of any other treatment given after the essays are returned to students? Do they use symbols when marking or do they write the correct answers on the composition?

3. Do their beliefs and classroom practices about correcting their students' English composition grammar mistakes complement or conflict with each other?

From our interviews and class observations, we discovered that both teachers corrected every grammatical error in their students' compositions. They showed an agreement between their perceptions and actual marking practices, in terms of types of grammatical focus. Both expressed during interviews their dislike of selective-marking (only focusing on specific mistakes), and mentioned their discomfort with correcting only certain types of grammatical errors. Teacher A explained that selective-marking was difficult to implement because different students would have different areas of weaknesses, and this implied that teachers would need to vary their marking focus for every essay they received. Remembering and correcting each student's most frequent errors demands enormous amounts of teachers' time and energy, especially for teachers with large numbers of students.

No definite conclusion about the alignment or discrepancy between Teacher A's perception and practice could be reached with regard to the use of symbols (see Appendix 2.1 & 2.2) instead of writing the correct grammatical forms on the learners' papers. However, we discovered that Teacher B adhered to her strong preference for self-correction in her actual marking of students' essays. The teachers' explanation of their actual practices can be found in Appendix 2.3 & 2.4. Teacher A displayed a consistency to her stated belief of using written grammatical explanations to guide specific groups of weak students to do grammar correction. In contrast, there appeared to be a wide gap between the functions of Teacher B's intended and actual instances of written grammatical explanations.

In terms of highlighting common grammatical errors in class grammatical feedback sessions, both teachers followed the same procedures as they had described during the interviews. Hence, there was a close match between perceptions and actual practices in giving grammatical feedback for both teachers. In addition, we noted that Teacher B gave specific comments to students during feedback sessions. Except for minor discrepancies, Teacher B's quality and quantity of grammatical explanations generally matched her stated goal of counseling individual students about specific grammatical problems.

RESPONSE

When considering how forgetful people tend to be in trying to remember things they may be reluctant to recognize, the fact that both teachers in

this study corrected every grammatical error is a bit worrying. Some have suggested attempting to identify all the mistakes in students' compositions may, in actuality, be a total waste of time and effort. Ur (1996) commented that it is not possible for students to learn from their errors thoroughly in oral or written work when they cannot cope with the sheer quantity of information they are required to deal with. Hence, she suggested selective-correction. We feel that Ur's arguments may also be applied to grammar correction in compositions.

In response to this research, we suggested that both teachers take time to reflect upon their current practices, and to consider selective grammar correction as possibly more in tune with their stated desire to teach composition communicatively. However, both teachers stated their discomfort with leaving grammatical errors uncorrected, and admitted that it would take time to be truly convinced of the difficulties endemic with correcting every grammatical error, even when faced with the potential of selective grammar correction in reducing students' grammatical errors.

The usual way to prepare for selective grammar correction is to compile a list of students' frequently-made errors from their written work, which will serve as the teacher's focus in marking the students' essays. Ur (1996) suggested that teachers can better utilize this information by prioritizing levels of importance to grammatical errors, and make this known to the students in a form of a standardized handout. Another method would be to set aside class time to show students of the effectiveness of selective error correction, and the futility of correcting every grammatical error. By communicating to learners the significance of various grammatical mistakes, teachers may experience a higher level of success with selective grammar correction, as it would be targeted to their students' specific learning needs.

REFLECTIONS

The beliefs and pedagogic practices of many language teachers are not only contradictory, but also are often axiomatic, meaning that it will take more than one study to stimulate a reconsideration of their classroom practices. As with other deeply held beliefs, many language teachers will have invested a considerable part of their professional identity, not to mention months, if not years, to crafting beliefs into practical pedagogic procedures. Even if teachers do successfully alter their beliefs and teaching practices, they will still need to persuade their students (and their parents) about the new stance they have taken, by showing their learners what they are doing and why they are doing

this. Changes such as these may need a long time to take effect.

Nevertheless, we conclude from this action research that attempting to correct every grammatical error in students' compositions is neither communicative nor practical: It succeeds only in deceiving students into thinking they are learning, and burning out the teacher. Selective and informed decisions are needed in order to better facilitate our learner's acquisition of English.

TASK 2.1

Look at the list of symbols that you use for correcting compositions. If you do not use a list, consider creating one that is easy for you and your learners to understand. For what sorts of errors have you created your symbols – for errors of form, or of meaning?

TASK 2.2

Form two groups of learners. Give both groups selected readings, from which they should write short compositions in response to what they have read. For one group, correct every error on their compositions, and for the other, use a selective method of correction, as described in this paper. After a period of time, evaluate both groups of learners with a test based upon the earlier readings. Is there a significant difference in the scores of the two groups?

Appendix 2.1: List of symbols used in Teacher A's grammar correction of compositions

Symbols	Meaning
T	Tense
SV	Subject-verb agreement
wf	Wrong form, i.e. all types of morphological errors, except for errors in number
q	Quantity, i.e. errors in number
P.P.	Preposition

Appendix 2.2: List of symbols used in Teacher B's grammar correction of compositions

Symbols	Meaning
T	Tense and wrong verb form
SVA	Subject-verb agreement
Prep	Preposition
c	Sentence connector/ conjunction
w	Words of the wrong lexical category
V	Missing verb
Adj	Wrong adjective form

Appendix 2.3: Grammatical explanations written by Teacher A

1. "Furniture" is never plural/ is an uncountable noun.
Write 3x: a piece of furniture two pieces of furniture
2. When you use "although", you do not have "but".
e.g.
Although I was ill, but I went to school. X
Although I was ill, I went to school. ✓
I was ill but I went to school. ✓
3. "Food" should be without the "s". A lot of food. Some food. Many kinds of food.
4. Write 3x: one fish, two fish, three fish.
5. Words like "food", "sheep", "furniture" and "clothing" should not have "s" at the back.
6. When you talk about something imaginary and is not likely to happen, use "would" instead of "will".
e.g.
If I were you, I would go. ✓
If I were you, I will go. X
7. "Paper" is an uncountable noun.
Write 3x: a piece of paper, two pieces of paper

Appendix 2.4: Grammatical explanations and remarks written by Teacher B

1. Note the use of 'had'. It is quite redundant.
2. Do take more care with tenses.
3. Also, when you use 'although', you should not use 'but' in the same sentence.
E.g. Although Jane was mischievous, she hand in all her assignments on time.
Note that there is no 'but' after the comma. Do not make this mistake again.
4. ... but you have to be careful with the tenses.
5. Also, be careful when you are making connections between two clauses. The links are missing.
6. You need punctuation and connectors to help arrange long sentences.
7. Please be careful of spelling and tenses.



Discovering the Classroom Community

David Mayo

SETTING

I teach at a private college in Japan; my students are young women studying English for its general value in international communication. I have long admired the hard-won accomplishments of people striving to learn the language without, in most cases, experiencing life in the environment where it is widely used. My students' needs are in many ways similar to learners in other Asian EFL settings, where an enduring cultural dynamic influences the quality of interaction in language classrooms.

In Japan, as in other rice-based Asian societies, close cooperation among neighbors was indispensable. Heavy dependence on others, while mutually beneficial, tended to inhibit people from pursuing their personal goals for fear of the disapproval or ridicule of their community. With industrialization, it soon became necessary for many Japanese to adapt to an educational system in which, from secondary school onward, they must function as individuals competing for coveted careers. They lost the benefits of neighborly cooperation, yet remained haunted by the vulnerability to "people's eyes": now, the eyes of rivals rather than protectors.

FOCUS

The implicit view of students as solitary runners in a race pervades even women's colleges, where competitive pressure is relatively light and social relations thrive. Like other teachers, I have tried to relieve the academic isolation

of students in my own classes by reviving the principle of cooperation.

I had often adopted two forms of student cooperation that are common in EFL classes: small groups (typically, four students) and pairs. I had found each form good in its way, at least for tasks that were product-oriented. I felt the need to re-think cooperation while planning a new course that valued more student initiative in the process of learning. Learners in the new course were organized into groups of four for discussion, writing, and oral reporting.

INVESTIGATION

To evaluate the small-group arrangement as a basis for student-centered learning, I decided to keep a classroom diary: a research instrument that necessitates simultaneously supervising class activities and recording detailed observations of them for later analysis (Nunan, 1989, p. 55-60). Though difficult, I could do this while observing students as they worked in groups.

Keeping the diary began before the first class, with a long entry on the preparation of the course. Here, I attempted to establish certain objectives for the research project that roughly corresponded to those of the course. This “early reflection” served to maximize the usefulness of the classroom observations, while giving me a chance to avoid errors in the course design. Since the course rewarded highly motivated students with satisfying and productive opportunities to use English, I wanted to be alert to the factors affecting the active participation of individual students. I devised the following framework for my classroom diary entries:

1. Aims

Each day’s record begins with a statement of aims for that day.

2. Attendance

As the success of groupwork may depend on regular participation, each record will note the absence of group members.

3. Events

The main section of each record will report the events of the day’s class, consistently noting the attainment of specific aims and apparent student satisfaction.

It was important to report classroom events as they unfolded, thereby capturing my own immediate impressions and responses. As a secondary

measure to ensure accuracy and to compensate for unavoidable lapses in real-time reporting, all classes were recorded on audiotape cassettes. Repeated listening to portions of these recordings also enriched my analysis of the diary.

The value of data obtained from this kind of research is something akin to the psychoanalytic process of bringing buried knowledge to light. The observations set down in the Events section of my diary soon began to show a progressively incisive narrative pattern. Some excerpts:

Day 2: ... students finish reading but do not start talking. I realize that I have made a mistake in failing to give them a discussion mechanism. I suggest that they should first choose their representative. Then she will solicit the impressions of the others and jot them down as a basis for the report.

Day 3: They tend to write their remarks for the representative to consolidate, instead of having a discussion. The representative of Group 2 is a very capable student, but when I prompt her to get something started, she just gives me a knowing look.

Day 12: Group 2 still has trouble getting underway, although the members seem well enough acquainted now. They tend to sit and stare at the papers till I sit down and work with them. ... I think I know the cause of the awkwardness here. Unlike the other groups, each of which includes one student who can serve as “big sister” to the rest, this one includes three such students. They recognize each other’s ability, respect it, and endlessly defer to it.

This conscious accumulation and refinement of observations revealed students’ needs that might have escaped my notice if I had been present only as a teacher and not as a teacher-researcher. In some groups, the students apparently needed freedom from the necessity of performing before the “eyes” of certain peers, because they either lacked self-confidence or felt that displaying their superior ability would be alienating. In Group 2, three proficient students simply needed to seek cooperation unselfconsciously. They ultimately became good friends who enjoyed combining their strengths. It seemed that I had obstructed that development by throwing them together with the implicit command to “cooperate.”

RESPONSE

This new insight led me to look for an alternative to small groups as a way of promoting cooperation in the learning process. With the ultimate aim of realizing differentiated classes in which “both what is learned and the learning environment are shaped to the learner” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 2), I designed a flexible collaborative learning arrangement that balances mutual support with individual initiative more dynamically than the small-group model. There are no established groups. Instead, students working on individual learning tasks are free to move about the room and consult one another as neighbors or co-workers do, to form *ad hoc* groups or work alone. Though encouraged to seek each other’s help in the learning process, they are responsible for demonstrating effective engagement in their own tasks. I have subsequently adopted a modified form of this arrangement in other classes. By allowing mutual assistance to take place spontaneously, free collaboration opens the way for wholehearted support between classmates who might not be grouped together otherwise.

REFLECTION

Many writers have advocated the organization of students in small groups as an alternative to teacher-fronted classes. Since the mid-1990s, the status of groupwork in communicative language-teaching methodology has been so secure that a list of its advantages might be juxtaposed with “excuses for avoiding groupwork,” every one of which was disallowed (Brown, 1994, p. 173–8). Nevertheless, the insight gained from this action research project has prompted me to move beyond classroom procedures based on workgroups. As I reflect on my findings, I believe there are two weaknesses in the groupwork principle.

First, it has an authoritarian aspect that may go unnoticed by teachers intent on promoting learner autonomy. If one accepts that the teacher decides the form and composition of groups, then one should also accept that some students would be obliged to cooperate unwillingly. The problem is unsolved by letting the students form their own groups, because it remains understood that all must do so.

Second, adding a grouping ritual to more traditional classroom rituals achieves only a minor relaxation of form. The prearranged group of four, with its facing desks and its imposed relationships, is hardly less rigid a concept than the teacher-fronted class. These reasons lead me to believe that the small-group model was a fundamentally flawed expression of the teacher’s will in promoting learner autonomy.

This action research helped me to become more attentive to the principle of collaboration, which stresses mutuality among responsible individuals rather than mere labor-sharing (Roschelle and Teasley, 1995). I was able to bring this principle to bear on the larger task of meeting the different needs of individual students in my classes.

Like throwing new light on an old scene, this action research project illuminated the possibility of enabling students to collaborate in a more natural way. As classroom neighbors sharing insights, and new ideas, my learners were able to enjoy the fruits of language learning in a way that complemented their cultural values.

TASK 3.1

Prepare a questionnaire for your learners, and investigate their learning preferences. How many would prefer to work in groups? Do they want to choose their own groups, or do they prefer that the teacher decide?

TASK 3.2

What “cultural values” do you bring to the classroom, which might differ from that of your learners? Are there any educational beliefs that you and your learners have in common? Devise three activities that can build upon the commonality that you share with your learners.



Enhancing Pragmatic Awareness

Nicola Helen Green

SETTING

The Japanese Secondary School in Singapore is essentially a small part of Japan transplanted in Singapore. All the students are Japanese, and most of the teachers are Japanese with the exception of a small group of native speakers of English. The Japanese Ministry of Education dictates the curriculum, but in order to take advantage of the fact that English is widely spoken in Singapore, the curriculum also includes two periods of English Conversation per week, as well as non-academic subjects such as Art and Music, which are taught partly in English by native speaker teachers. I teach in the English Conversation Department.

Students in English Conversation classes are taught in small groups of about 14 learners that have been streamed by proficiency level. A different textbook is used for each year level, but the same textbook is used regardless of proficiency level within one grade. A Secondary 2 student recently arriving from Japan with a low proficiency level in English will use the same book as a high proficiency level learner who may have spent several years in an international school. Approximately 40% of my higher proficiency learners have been in mainstream English medium schools in countries such as England or the USA. Another 30% have lived in Singapore their entire lives, and have attended local English medium kindergartens and/or international schools. The remaining 30% have only studied in Japanese schools and have never lived outside Japan before recently coming to Singapore. Teachers must adapt the textbook according to the mixed proficiency levels within the class. English Conversation is a non-examined

subject, however, and the teacher has a degree of freedom regarding lesson content, thus providing an environment conducive for action research.

FOCUS

I became aware while teaching a class of higher proficiency learners that they made frequent pragmatic errors. In my readings on the pragmatic area of communicative competence, I was particularly struck by the idea that while a grammatical error merely reflects badly upon a learner's ability to learn a language, a pragmatic error reflects badly upon a learner as a person (Thomas, 1983; Kachru, 1994). I saw pragmatic competence as an area where my students could improve. However, the lack of available resources was frustrating.

The area of speech acts is well documented in Pragmatics, so I decided to focus on this. I decided that requests were probably the most useful speech acts to look at. Fukushima (1996) noted that because requests involve politeness strategies, they are potentially face threatening, and involve relational, situational and power roles. Most importantly, with living in Singapore's ESL environment, requests were perhaps my learners' most frequently used English speech act. All this made the domain of requests ideal for my research.

INVESTIGATION

I needed to know in which situations and in what way my learners lacked pragmatic awareness when making requests. I chose to focus on pragmatic awareness, that is, the awareness of what is socially acceptable in the target language, rather than production. I felt that this was a fairer measure of pragmatic competence, because although learners are often aware of pragmatic implications in a dialogue, their actual production does not reflect this awareness due to many factors, including lexical avoidance, oversimplification and the overuse of familiar formulas (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983).

To collect data on requests, I adapted a questionnaire designed by Olshtain and Cohen (1990) to collect data on apologies (see Figure 1). It consisted of two parts, a discourse completion task (DCT) and an acceptability judgment test. I changed the focus to requests, and altered some of the situations to suit my junior high school students. Although some of the items, such as number five in Figure 1 still seem to focus on apologies, I interpreted situations such as this as a pragmatic request for forgiveness.

Figure 1. Sample Questionnaire

Discourse Completion Task

NAME: _____

PART 1

INSTRUCTIONS

Please put yourself in the following situations and assume that in each instance the speaker will, in fact, say something. Write down what you think would be said (in English), in the space provided. Make sure you read the whole situation carefully before you respond.

- 1) Akiko was absent from school the day before and would like to borrow Judith's notes.
Akiko: _____
- 2) You are running to catch a bus. You accidentally bump into an older woman causing her to drop some packages.
You: _____
- 3) You are preparing a dish during Home Economics class. You realise that you have no salt but your classmate has extra salt.
You: _____
- 4) You are studying in the library and the person sitting next to you is playing his/her walkman very loudly. You cannot concentrate on your studies and you have an exam tomorrow. You would like the person sitting next to you to turn the music down.
You: _____
- 5) You promised to give your notes to a classmate who needs them to study for an exam. You made an arrangement to meet your classmate the next day to give him/her the notes. Your classmate waited for one hour but you didn't show up. Your classmate calls you.
Classmate: You know, I waited for you for an hour yesterday.
You: _____
- 6) Ryo had to stay behind after school for an unscheduled club activity. His bus has just left and the next one will not be along for another hour. Another student in his club lives in the next condominium and the student's parents are waiting in a car. Ryo sees the student coming out and would like to get a ride with his/her family.
Ryo: _____

I also added two more situations from Fukushima (1996) to include the role-based, relational and situational factors important for Japanese students learning English.

The results revealed that my students used complete request formulas both infrequently and inappropriately. The most common type of request used was a single component request, for example, "May I borrow your notes?" or "Can I get a ride with your family, please?" This meant that the students did not complete one of the recognized multi-component request patterns, as described by Fukushima and Iwata (1987), and therefore failed pragmatically. The questionnaire also showed that my

students' request language vocabulary was limited. While possessing the vocabulary to make simple "May I", "Could you" type requests, they rarely used more complex request language such as "I'd appreciate it if..." and "Could you do me a favor and..." However, my students were aware and able to use speaker-dominated request forms for low imposition requests and hearer-dominated request forms for higher imposition requests with relative accuracy (Fukushima, 1995). Although, again, the request language they used showed little variation.

RESPONSE

It seemed that the pragmatic failings of my students resulted from a lack of awareness of the pragmatic conventions surrounding requests. By raising their awareness, I would give my students the necessary tools for improving their pragmatic competence and their overall proficiency in the target language. To those ends, I devised a series of lessons aimed at raising my students' pragmatic awareness.

The original study by Olshtain and Cohen (1990), on which my questionnaire had been modeled, also included a brief outline of three lessons designed to raise pragmatic awareness of apologies. Using these as a starting point, and looking closely at the responses of my students to the questionnaire, I came up with a series of six 30-minute lessons, which I hoped would raise my student's pragmatic awareness of requests (Figure 2).

The lessons included a variety of tasks such as listening, pair work and role-play. The lessons began by looking at the three standard semantic formulas for requests, and when and where these could be used appropriately. This introduction to semantic formulas and their appropriacy also considered the perceived distance between speaker and hearer, the potential for loss of face for the hearer by the use of inappropriate requests, and the relationship between directness and face. The lessons then moved on to raising the students' awareness of the reasons influencing the selection of a particular strategy or formula and how one could convey his or her intention more effectively. The final two lessons were intended to illustrate the importance of using appropriate requests in English by contrasting two forms that were misused by the students in the original DCT and appropriacy judgment test, and culminating in several role play situations in the form of mini scenarios (Di Pietro, 1987). For example, one mini scenario involved making a request at a bus station. The requestee was a bus driver on a break and who was tired of being asked the same question. The requester was unaware of this and would not therefore be expecting the response

received because of his or her original request. The request would then have to be modified to suit the requester’s evolving perception of the situation.

The students enjoyed the lessons which, as well as providing information designed to raise their pragmatic awareness, provided opportunities to use their existing and newly acquired knowledge in the form of communicative activities. All too often, students who have achieved a high level of proficiency in English are assumed to need practice rather than instruction. I think my students appreciated the chance to learn something new and apply this insight during class.

Figure 2. Sample of Lessons Used in Class

Part A
 Listen to the 3 conversations and answer the questions in the table below:

	Conversation 1	Conversation 2	Conversation 3
Where does the Conversation take place?			
What is the problem?			

Discuss these questions with your partner.

1. How well does Saori know Mr Ono?
2. How well does Hiro know the man who is smoking?
3. How well does Mai know Yuri?

Listen again. Which conversation uses which request formula?

conversation _____	address term	reason	request
conversation _____	address term	reason	
conversation _____	apology	reason	request

I readministered the DCT and appropriacy judgment test when the series of lessons were complete. I anticipated some objections from the students, but they completed the questionnaire without a fuss. The results showed that their awareness of request formulas had greatly increased. They used multi-component requests and they used these in appropriate situations. They had also acquired a wider variety of request language and were able to use this new vocabulary appropriately.

REFLECTIONS

The lessons designed were intended to be teachable; the rules and vocabulary items were learnable, and this made teaching the lessons relatively simple. The challenge lay in providing communicative activities that would allow the students to apply their newly acquired knowledge effectively. I think that the lessons succeeded in their aim to enhance their pragmatic awareness. In the future, I could perhaps use the same ideas to develop other aspects of communicative competence that are seldom addressed in the language classroom.

TASK 4.1

Keep a record of instances when individual students fail pragmatically, rather than grammatically or lexically, during communicative activities. After some time review this record in order to see if you can identify an area in which your particular class needs help in the form of awareness raising.

TASK 4.2

Once you have identified an area in which your students fail pragmatically, devise your own discourse completion tasks as a basis for your own questionnaire. Change the focus and situations to suit your own needs.



The Missing Link: Homework

Matthew Warwick and David Jeffrey

SETTING

The Communicative English Program (CEP) at the Niigata University of International and Information Studies (NUIS) in Japan was established in 2000 to give students opportunities to learn and practice the communicative use of International English. Our objective is to motivate learners to share their interests, concerns and viewpoints confidently and meaningfully in English with non-Japanese speakers of English, mainly those coming from Asia's Pacific Rim. However, the average CEP student has studied English for about 6 years in a grammar-translation context. Many have some knowledge of English grammar rules and vocabulary, but most have had few opportunities to practice English extensively in communicative contexts.

Students are streamed into three levels in six classes of 23 students which correspond to the three textbook levels in the New Interchange series (Richards, 1998b; 1998c; 1998d). Each sixteen-week semester is divided into four cycles. In each cycle, students study two units from the textbook and take evaluative reading, listening and speaking exams. CEP students attend speaking and listening lessons four days a week and one 90-minute reading lesson once a week. Homework is assigned daily and checked the following day.

FOCUS

Homework was one aspect of the program we needed to consider. It is the foundation upon which all other activities in CEP hinge, as it draws the students' attention to the new language items that will be used in class. We also feel regular

homework assignments are important for reaping the full benefits of the conversation activities.

We had decided with the program coordinator that homework would amount to 30% of the students' final grade in the speaking and listening classes, but we struggled to find a "home" for homework. We attempted several plans during the first year of CEP, but each strategy took up considerable amounts of time. It also seemed that the students were only cramming to pass this requirement. Additionally, while the workbook we used to assign homework provided extra practice, we did not utilize the existing practice opportunities from the textbook. Thus, we felt the workbook was a waste of money for the students.

During the first year of CEP, we devised a survey to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the program from the perspective of the learners. Homework ranked as one of the least enjoyable aspects of the program. While we did not anticipate homework to receive high marks, we did not expect it to be held with such contempt. The following year, we decided to assign a little homework everyday. We wanted to ensure homework had a direct relationship with the planned activities of the class, so we scrapped the workbook, and asked students to complete textbook exercises, hoping that students would stop viewing homework simply as busywork. However, we knew that we still had a problem when, during the first semester, we noticed that about five percent of the students were not doing any homework, and another five to ten percent were seen regularly copying homework in the moments preceding class.

INVESTIGATION

Based on this situation, we wanted to investigate our students' perceptions about homework, and discover how closely their views were related to ours as teachers. We started with a brainstorming session where we listed our perceived benefits of doing regular homework. After completing the list, we devised a survey in English (See Figure 1) containing questions designed to elicit students' views on homework.

Figure 1. Homework Attitude Survey

Homework Attitudes Survey						
Circle your Class:	A	B	C	D	E	F
Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree	
It is important to do homework in CEP.	1	2	3	4	5	
Doing homework for CEP is fun.	1	2	3	4	5	
It is OK for me to copy homework from a friend.	1	2	3	4	5	
I always do my homework.	1	2	3	4	5	
Doing homework is a waste of time.	1	2	3	4	5	
Doing homework helps me participate in CEP class.	1	2	3	4	5	
Doing homework helps me with grammar.	1	2	3	4	5	
Doing homework helps me with vocabulary.	1	2	3	4	5	
Doing homework helps me in the CEP speaking tests.	1	2	3	4	5	
Doing homework helps me in the CEP listening tests.	1	2	3	4	5	
Doing homework helps me in the CEP reading tests.	1	2	3	4	5	
Complete the sentence:						
I don't do my homework because _____						

The survey questions employed a 5-point Likert scale for the responses, except for one open-ended question with prompt “I don’t do my homework because...” Towards the end of the first semester, we delivered the survey to all classes at the end of a lesson, and received 119 responses. We totaled all the responses, and then compared the students’ expectations with ours. Table 1 displays these responses. We considered responses differing from our expectations by more than one point to be areas where we need to address those issues.

The responses bear some interesting ideas about our students’ attitudes

about homework and our own expectations about homework. First, despite the similarity of questions 1 and 5, the Difference Between Expectation and Reality numbers varied by 0.57 points for the two questions. We interpret this disparity in the following way. The students, in a general sense, know that doing homework is expected of them, but to their way of thinking, it is not a good use of time. For example, several students mentioned in the open-ended response section that because they held part-time jobs, they were tired after working or lacked the time to finish their homework.

Table 1. Survey Results

No	Question	Students' Response (Average)	Teachers' Expected Response (Average)	Difference Between Expectations and Reality
1	It is important to do homework in CEP.	4.06	5.00	1.00
2	Doing homework for CEP is fun.	3.13	3.00	0.13
3	It is OK for me to copy homework from a friend.	1.95	1.00	0.95
4	I always do my homework.	4.07	5.00	0.93
5	Doing homework is a waste of time.	2.57	1.00	1.57
6	Doing homework helps me participate in CEP class.	3.64	5.00	1.36
7	Doing homework helps me with grammar.	3.53	5.00	1.47
8	Doing homework helps me with vocabulary.	3.57	5.00	1.43
9	Doing homework helps me in the CEP speaking tests.	3.33	5.00	1.67
10	Doing homework helps me in the CEP listening tests.	3.73	5.00	1.27
11	Doing homework helps me in the CEP reading tests.	3.79	5.00	1.21

Question 3 contains another interesting response. Differing from our expectation by 0.95 points, we concluded that the students agree that copying was not right, however it could be expedient. We had hoped to receive a more solid score indicating they thought copying to be an improper learning activity.

The responses that leaped up from the page at us were the ones from questions 6 through 11. The students did not indicate an association between homework and in-class or test performance. We, of course, thought that such a relationship would be readily apparent, and thus took it for granted that the students would see and appreciate the link. The students were unsure of the relationship between doing homework and using any of the language skills practiced in class.

Surprisingly, questions 7 and 8 regarding grammar and vocabulary received some of the most puzzling responses, despite the fact that all homework assignments are grammar and/or vocabulary exercises. We felt that students would be aware of the connection that exists and respond accordingly. Open-ended responses indicate that some exercises are “too difficult.” One interesting finding is the students’ responses for passive skills and active skills tests as seen in questions 9 through 11. Students seemed to have a greater sense of connectivity between doing homework and performing well on the passive skills tests, such as reading and listening, but considering the homework is more active than passive, and that none of the homework assignments contain listening tasks, this attitude is puzzling. Perhaps they are more used to passive skills tests, they may think homework will aid in their performance on these tests. Conversely, students were somewhat unsure about homework helping them to perform well on oral proficiency. As one student succinctly wrote on the open-ended response, “Homework isn’t help(ing) me in the CEP speaking test.”

The key result of this study is that our learners seemed unsure about several issues related to homework, which in turn raises the concern of student-teacher communication.

RESPONSE

Once the cycles have started in CEP, it is difficult to make drastic changes without disrupting the flow of instruction and testing. However, by the beginning of the next academic year, we will start implementing strategies to raise our learners’ awareness to CEP’s objectives, and highlight how these ideals relate to both homework and tests. A specific way to address this issue will be the use of visual aids both in the class and on CEP’s website that emphasize the link between homework and success on all exams. However, we foresee this to be a continuous task. It will take time for a significant number of learners to begin sharing our attitudes about homework and the benefits it can bring to them in the program.

REFLECTIONS

Because of this action research project, we now understand the importance of explaining to students how homework will benefit them as language learners. We have spent the last year and a half creating what we feel is a solid academic English language program, and we now need to spend some time effectively communicating that to our students. At the same time, we also now recognize the need to explore our own beliefs about homework. Is the homework that we assign actually aiding our learners' language acquisition and contributing to their success in CEP? Are there alternatives to homework that we have not yet considered? Questions such as these suggest rich opportunities for action research. As teachers and participants in CEP's development, we have our own homework to do.

TASK 5.1

Make a list of the reasons why you assign homework. If you do not assign homework, make a list of reasons why you justify your decision. Create a questionnaire similar to the one in this study. How close do your learners agree with your reasoning?

TASK 5.2

How does the homework you assign contribute to your learners' acquisition of the language? How closely does the homework complement what is done in the classroom? Outside the classroom? Are there any practical alternatives to your present practice which would better complement your learners' needs?



Teacher-led or Teacher-fed: Students' Perceptions of the First Draft

Isabel Pefianco Martin

SETTING

For four years now, I have been teaching at Ateneo de Manila University, a Jesuit university in Manila. The student population of the college is not more than 6,000 undergraduate and graduate students. In the Philippines, students of Ateneo de Manila are recognized as having a higher level of English language proficiency than students from most Philippine universities. However, the course which I have been teaching, *Communication Across the Curriculum*, also known as CAC, is a radical departure from the typical approach to college freshman English in the Philippines.

As a freshman in the same school, I wrote essays focussing on the rhetorical modes of narration, description, and exposition. I remember writing short stories for my college composition class, as well as definition essays, process analysis essays, and research reports. It was only when I began to teach college composition did the English Department realize that these writing tasks were not relevant to the freshman student's writing experience. Thus, the 6-unit course *Communication Across the Curriculum* was developed to respond to the so-called "real" reading and writing needs of freshmen.

This investigation covers the first semester classes of CAC, which require students to produce three major tasks: (1) memoir/autobiographical essay, (2) eyewitness report, and (3) research paper. The English Department came up with these tasks after asking other academic departments what writing assignments they usually gave to their students. CAC is an attempt to develop the students' reading and writing skills so that they can better cope with the demands of academic life.

FOCUS

When designing CAC, we argued at length about the meaning of the “task-based approach.” Is “task” synonymous to “product”? If so, is a task-based writing course concerned more with output than input? In effect, would a task-based approach suppress the writing process?

The composition teachers were passionate about helping students value the process in producing a written task. Thus, CAC required students to write at least one draft (considered as a “pre-task”) before working on the final tasks. Of course, this meant that teachers had to provide feedback about the drafts.

My experience of reviewing drafts for CAC had not always been pleasant. I often felt frustrated because of what I thought were careless and often blatant written errors, which sometimes translated into nasty and sarcastic comments about the drafts.

I wondered about the real value of requiring written drafts. Were students turning in horrible drafts because they knew I would review these? Was the draft only encouraging laziness? Was I, in effect, forcing my students to depend on me whenever they work on a task?

INVESTIGATION

These questions led me to “experiment” on one task: The memoir. Instead of requiring a draft for the memoir, I told the students to write the memoir without my help. In addition, I asked my students to complete the following survey (see Table 1). Because of the context-specific nature of the survey, I administered this form in place of the university's Course Evaluation Form.

Table 1 The survey

PART ONE. Recall the following preparatory writing tasks (pre-tasks). To what extent were these pre-tasks helpful to you in performing the major writing tasks? Encircle the number that best describes your perception of these pre-tasks.				
Pre-tasks	Not helpful	Slightly helpful	Helpful	Very helpful
1. Writing a first draft for the eyewitness report	1	2	3	4
2. Participating in the required student-teacher conference for the eyewitness report	1	2	3	4
3. Writing a first draft for the research paper	1	2	3	4
4. Participating in the required student-teacher conference for the research paper	1	2	3	4
PART TWO. In what specific ways were the following preparatory tasks (pre-tasks) helpful or not helpful to you in performing the major writing tasks? Please write your answers in the blanks provided below.				
1. First draft of the eyewitness report (with written feedback from the teacher)				
2. First draft of the research paper (with written feedback from the teacher)				
3. Required teacher-student conferences				
4. The absence of a required first draft or teacher-student conference in writing the memoir.				

In the survey, the respondents rated the pre-tasks and completed an open-ended section in which respondents listed concrete ways the pre-tasks were helpful (or not). The following tables present the results of the survey. Table 2, which represents Part One of the survey, summarizes the students' evaluation of the pre-tasks. I found that most of the students ($n = 38$) perceived the pre-tasks to be very helpful, and no one found the

Table 2 Pretask

Pre-tasks	Not helpful	Slightly helpful	Helpful	Very helpful
Eyewitness report draft	0	1	4	33
Eyewitness report S-T conference	0	1	0	37
Research paper draft	0	0	2	36
Research paper S-T conference	0	0	5	33

pre-tasks to be unhelpful. In Part Two of the survey, I noted the comments with the highest frequencies. The results in this section were consistent with the results of the first part of the survey. The students identified

specific ways in which the pre-tasks were helpful to them. Table 3 revealed that students found the first draft of the eyewitness report helpful because they became aware of their writing weaknesses. Some believed that the draft gave them a chance to improve their work. One student, however, thought that the draft affected her self-esteem; another confessed that she did not take the draft seriously, knowing that it was only a draft.

Table 3 First Draft (eye witness report)

Realized/ discovered mistakes/ weaknesses in writing	25
Had the chance to rewrite and improve their work	13
Draft served as a guide for the final work	3
Got a higher grade in the final work	2
Final eyewitness report became more accurate and vivid	1
Final eyewitness report became more objective	1
Got a clearer view of what the eyewitness report should be	1
Got to use what was learned in EN 10	1
Developed own writing style	1
Aimed for perfection in the final work	1
Lowered self-esteem	1
Knowing it was only a draft, took it for granted	1

Table 4 shows that students generally believed that the first draft of the research paper was helpful because it “showed mistakes overlooked.”

Table 4 First Draft (research paper)

Showed mistakes (grammar, wordiness, format in citing sources)	23
Improved the final work	15
The research paper became organized and clear	6
Made students recall the research writing process	4
Developed/ clarified the thesis statement and outline	2
Higher grade in the final work	1
Enhanced writing style and clarified ideas	1
Lowered self-esteem	1
Took the draft for granted	1
Needed the teacher to explain the written comments	1

Several students reported that the research paper draft helped them “improve the final work.” However, three students presented negative perceptions of the research paper draft because the draft was taken for granted; the student became less confident about her writing skills, and one became overly dependent on the teacher’s comments. Table 5 reveals positive perception students had of student-teacher conferences. The students noted that conferences were helpful because the teacher was able to provide further feedback on the comments made earlier about the drafts.

Table 5 Teacher-Student Conference

Student mistakes, teacher feedback/ comments are explained further	14
Tasks/ writing requirements are improved	11
Lessons and tasks are better understood	8
Questions/ concerns are addressed/ clarified	8
The teacher focuses more on the student	4

Among all the questions in the second part of the survey, I was most interested in the question concerning the absence of a draft. What I found was that most students did not believe the absence of a draft would be helpful for several reasons. The main reasons were that they felt they would be unable to remember how to improve their writing without the draft writing process, and would feel lost as to how to identify any future errors or weaknesses in writing. Several students, however, did note that the absence of a draft for the memoir would force them to become less dependent on the teacher.

RESPONSE

This study has motivated a reconsideration of my current teaching practices. I have decided not to eliminate the pre-task from the writing process. I also realized that I must pay more attention to the quality of the comments I make about the drafts. My feedback needs to be more descriptive, rather than judgmental, of the writing weaknesses of my students. I had to acknowledge the fact that I need to be more sensitive to the feelings of my students – especially those who take my feedback seriously.

There is also a need for me to vary the pre-tasks I give. For example, next year I might consider peer reviews of drafts. This practice would hopefully make the students less dependent on my comments and encourage collaborative learning. Students who give feedback to fellow students would not only help their peers, they also could learn how to improve their own writing skills, and make the learning experience a shared activity.

REFLECTION

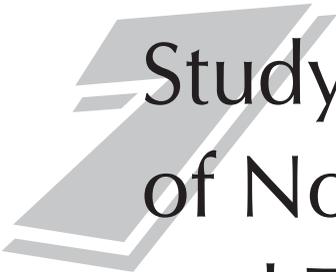
Traditional data analysis tends to stress behaviors or phenomena which occur most frequently. Such analysis only highlights the perspective of the majority. As a result of this action research project, I learned that the voice of the minority is equally important. In a classroom setting, each person's feelings are valuable. When a student's self-confidence is threatened by the comments I make about her writing, there must surely be something wrong with the feedback I am giving.

TASK 6.1

What type of feedback do you normally give when evaluating your learner's writing? Design a survey to find out how effective your learners find your feedback. In what areas are they satisfied with the feedback? Are there any areas of discovery where you could improve the quality of care and guidance?

TASK 6.2

What time of the day do you normally evaluate your learners' writing tasks? Experiment with evaluation at different times. Are there any times when you have the energy to be positive and supportive in your feedback? Are there times of emotional "low tides" which you should avoid? Share your findings with a trusted colleague.



Studying the Beliefs of Novice Teachers and Teacher Trainers

Richard Watson Todd

SETTING

My students are teacher trainees taking a Masters degree in Applied Linguistics at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi in Bangkok. They comprise both experienced and novice teachers, with nine of the group of thirteen trainees having no teaching experience. This research was conducted during their first-semester course called Principles of Teaching. Although I have been teaching on the programme for several years, this course had been designed as part of a new curriculum. In designing the objectives and outline of the course, I decided to place an emphasis on teachers' beliefs and philosophies of teaching, following recent trends in the teacher education literature (e.g. Guillaume, 2000; Richards, 1998e).

Raising trainees' awareness of one's beliefs about teaching has become one of the main goals of teacher training. Irrespective of the content of the training, many novice teachers are deeply influenced by their existing pedagogic beliefs. These beliefs act as a filter when considering the value of various classroom-teaching techniques

Discovering one's pedagogic beliefs as a goal in teacher training creates a potential problem. Most of the literature on teachers' beliefs has looked only at the beliefs of experienced teachers (see Borg, 1999 for a review) suggesting perhaps that novice teachers' beliefs are either less worthy

of attention or more difficult to elicit. Standard texts for use in initial teacher training (e.g. Doff, 1988; Harmer, 1998) conspicuously ignore the issue of teacher beliefs. Of the few studies into novice teachers' beliefs that are available (e.g. Almarza, 1996; Bailey et al., 1996), the indications are that inexperienced teacher trainees can hold strong beliefs about teaching, mostly deriving from their "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975), in other words, from their own experiences as learners.

FOCUS

Without teaching experience, would the beliefs of my teacher trainees be clear enough to make awareness raising a worthwhile pursuit? At the start of the course, I was uncertain whether my emphasis on teaching beliefs would 'work'. I was unaware of other initial training courses that so heavily stressed beliefs, and unsure whether the inexperienced trainees would be able to articulate their beliefs. To evaluate the effectiveness of the course, and discover if focusing on inexperienced trainees' teaching beliefs was appropriate, I investigated the conceptions of teaching of the nine inexperienced trainees in my class.

INVESTIGATION

The trainees, one male and eight female, were all Thai with good levels of English. As part of the course, the trainees were required to complete some assignments, some of which were used for evaluation, and others as input into classroom activities. Four of these assignments led the trainees to express their beliefs about teaching. Rather than create more work for the trainees by asking them to write about their beliefs for the sole purpose of satisfying my curiosity, I decided to use these four assignments, which were integral to their training and evaluation, as the data for my investigation.

The four assignments are as follows:

Assignment 1: Near the start of the course, the trainees were asked to write down three reasons why they wanted to become an English teacher.

Assignment 2: As lesson input, the trainees were asked to write a paragraph explaining their personal teaching philosophy.

Assignment 3: The paragraphs concerning their personal philosophy (Assignment 2) were passed around in class so that all of the other

trainees could write comments or questions on them. These comments make up Assignment 3.

Assignment 4: As part of their evaluation for the course, the trainees were asked to write around 1000 words on one of two topics: discussing a potential metaphor for teaching and its implications, or discussing one key characteristic of effective teachers.

Each assignment was open-ended and provided qualitative data for my investigation. Usually qualitative data is studied by identifying frequent and salient word patterns or themes. In this paper, however, I would like to focus on my own reactions to the data.

RESPONSE

The first of the assignments on the course was the trainees' reasons for wanting to become a teacher (Assignment 1). A fairly typical sample of these is given below.

“Almost all of my cousins are teachers.”

“I want to improve my English language.”

“It is a stable job because it is governmental work.”

“I naturally love to teach, I am always very happy to see what I taught is what my student learnt.”

Although I was happy to see the trainees being so truthful in their reasons, I was somewhat disappointed by the lack of understanding about the responsibilities of teachers and their roles in society. I felt my data collection had started poorly.

The next assignment was the trainees' personal philosophies of teaching (Assignment 2). These showed completely different levels of understanding as compared to Assignment 1, as is clear from the following extracts:

“The teacher should not be conservative, but he or she should have [an] open mind. To guide the students to get through their difficulties by themselves is better than to dominate them or to do everything for them. Learning by doing or learning from mistakes still works!”

“I think that people should learn what they are really interested in. I believe that good teaching is the teaching where students and teacher are happy together. Students gain what they want and [the] teacher gives what they want to teach. Both side[s] should be happy in their teaching and learning.”

“The most important thing is to make students happy with learning because I believe that everybody can learn or absorb anything quickly when he or she is pleased to do it.”

The third assignment required peers to comment on each other’s personal philosophies. I also participated in writing my remarks. The last of the extracts above received the following comments from other trainees:

“Do you mean that teachers should emphasize making students have positive attitude[s] toward their subject?”

“Don’t forget that to encourage them to be able to think and cope with difficulties is also important.”

“If you teach in a big class, how do you know that all of your students are happy with your teaching style?”

Although I had not expected much depth when giving these assignments, both the philosophies and the comments impressed me greatly. Many would fit well in textbooks on teaching, and it was difficult to see much qualitative difference between the trainees’ comments and my own. These two assignments prompted me to change my view of the trainees simply as receptacles of my knowledge. I began to regard them more as colleagues, with whom it was possible to have fruitful discussions.

Reading the trainees’ assignments concerning metaphors for teaching and effective teaching reinforced these positive perceptions. Seven of the nine inexperienced trainees decided to do assignments on metaphors. Ignoring some language and organisational problems, which are to be expected early in the Masters programme, the assignments were impressive. A short example from an assignment discussing teaching as cooking will give a flavor of this.

“I don’t believe that a good food is only the one that only has good taste or good looking. But it must contain enough nutrients too. Similarly, what the teachers have to be careful [of] is [that] a good lesson doesn’t mean only an enjoyable class but also teachers must provide enough knowledge and information for students to understand and be able to apply them ... In addition, let [us] think about a delicious food. Every ingredient must be in correct proportions that is not too much sugar, salt, or others. So for teaching, the teacher has to organise the class and lesson to be balanced. That means only a lecture given without any activities or chances for students to think. Or do activities all the time for students to be fun without any reasons to support.”

REFLECTIONS

I had attained my initial goal of both evaluating the usefulness of the course and answering my concerns about whether raising the awareness of inexperienced trainees’ to their teaching beliefs would be feasible. From the depth of insight shown in assignments 2, 3 and 4, the novice trainees clearly held valuable beliefs and were eminently capable of articulating them. My views about the importance of emphasizing teacher beliefs in initial training courses were also validated.

More importantly, the insights shown in the assignments changed my perceptions of the trainees. Rather than treating them as students who needed to be given lots of knowledge, I now viewed them as co-workers in constructing new understandings of teaching. This change in attitude has led to a paradigm shift in the way I teach. Instead of transmitting information, I now aim at transforming understanding, both my own and the trainees’. This action research project has resulted not only in changes in how the course is taught, but it has also benefited my trainees and aided my own development as a teacher.

TASK 7.1

Have you ever thought about your own beliefs as a teacher? Which of the four assignments in the article do you think would be most useful to you in raising awareness of your own beliefs? Try to complete the assignment (with a couple of colleagues for assignment 3). How do the beliefs you expressed compare to those of the teacher trainees in this article? What did you learn about your beliefs from completing the assignment?

TASK 7.2

This article focuses on the beliefs of teacher trainees. The beliefs of language learners about how to learn may also be important. How can you raise learners' awareness of their own beliefs about language learning? Can the four assignments used to raise awareness of teaching beliefs in this article be applied to language learners? If so, how would you adapt the assignments to make them useful for language learners?



Asian Learners Abroad: A Reconsideration of “the Good Student”

Gregory Hadley

SETTING

Every year, hundreds of EFL learners from countries along Asia's Pacific Rim attend summer preessional courses at British colleges and universities as a prerequisite for their graduate level studies. Language teachers from around the world also participate as temporary teachers in these programs to prepare learners for life and study in England.

I took a break from my regular teaching post in Japan to teach in the English for International Students Unit (EISU) Summer Preessional Course at the University of Birmingham (UK). It is a five to ten week program designed to help students shore up their linguistic and academic skills before entering graduate school. I taught two courses. One focused on general academic preparation during the morning, and the other was an afternoon course in Computer Science. EISU's morning program was well prepared, with an excellent curriculum and plentiful supporting materials. The afternoon courses, however, were mixed in terms of materials and support. This was partially due to the fact that while EISU had a rapport with some departments, their links with other schools on campus were not as strong, as I quickly discovered when I dropped by the Computer Science Department a week before the

afternoon course in search of professional support and teaching ideas.

Although I had taught for two years at a Japanese college specializing in Engineering and Computer Science, I had been relegated to the teaching of “general English”. Now, faced with the prospect of teaching a Computer Science class in less than a week with no teaching materials, little practical experience and no support from the Computer Science Department, I was in big trouble.

FOCUS

My experience of teaching in Japan suggested that I should not reveal my lack of knowledge to the learners. However, all four students in the class (two from Taiwan, one from Korea, and one from China) stated that they had considerable undergraduate experience in Computer Science. With little left to lose, I asked what they anticipated would be important as they prepared to enter the Computer Science Department. They felt that the best course was to study specialist vocabulary that would help them to understand future readings, lessons and lectures.

In response to this, I set up a regimen of academic reading tasks and research trips to the library. Nevertheless, I could not shake the feeling that something was missing in this approach. In the short time that we had together, I felt it was important not only to find out what to teach, but also discover important academic skills that could give them a head start in their studies. I decided to explore the assumptions that were guiding my learners, and, if possible, some of the educational values of the teachers with whom they would soon be working.

INVESTIGATION

I gave the learners an open-ended survey (Figure 1), asking them to think about both good and bad students they had known in their past, and to write at least four distinct practices for each.

Figure 1. Survey**Understanding Expectations**

Think for a few minutes about good students that you have known. What sort of things did they do that made them good students? Write four good student practices below:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Now think for a moment about students who were not so good. What sorts of things did they do that caused them to become poor students? Write four different bad student practices below:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

The students threw themselves into the task, and wrote more than four qualities. After collecting the surveys, I spoke with the class to make sure I understood their responses. They revealed that, for them, a good student is engaged in preparation before the lecture, and faithfully completes assigned tasks in a timely manner. When in class, the good student is attentive, inquiring and analytical. Out of class, the student is reading, reviewing and applying what has been received from the teacher. The learners construed the good student in terms of the domain of the lecture, with the main elements being the Teacher, Student, Diligence, Task Completion and the Readings/Lecture notes (Table 1).

Next, I pressed hard for an interview with one of the teachers in the Computer Science Department. Thanks to a fortuitous connection within EISU's temporary summer support staff, I was finally able to administer a survey to one of the department's ranking senior lecturers, whose views, I believe, were representative of others in his department. After giving the survey, I discussed the results with him for further clarification. Table 2 contains the top academic skills that the teacher believed would contribute to a computer science student's success or failure in the graduate program. During my interview, I discovered how important it was for

the computer science students to become team players. According to the teacher, what was learned outside class in projects with other students was considered more important than the material provided during lectures (which were infrequent). This emulated today's Information Technology work environment, where teams cooperate in creating complex software packages. Also important was that students showed initiative by studying additional materials and then apply this knowledge to the group project. A good student is not dependent upon the teacher, but, while maintaining a good professional rapport with teachers, asks questions only after trying to find a solution on one's own, or after consulting with the course tutor.

Table 1. Student Responses

Good Student Practices	Frequency	Bad Student Practices	Frequency
Reads books before class and reviews after class	4	Likes to play	2
Attends classes	2	Doesn't have an opinion	2
Hands in homework on time	2	Often absent from class	2
Takes notes in class	1	Doesn't ask questions	2
Asks the teacher questions	1	Makes the teacher angry	1
Doesn't simply accept what the teacher says	1	Cannot apply what they have learned	1
Has the ability to do research	1	Just writes down references	1
Practices things related to one's major	1	Doesn't work hard on homework	1
When in front of the computer, always seeks academic or useful information	1	Uninterested in other things – except studying	1
Gets up early in the morning	1	Gets up late in the morning	1
Likes Sports	1	Drinks lots of alcohol	1
		Studies just before the exam	1
		Cheats on the exam	1

If possible, she should contribute to the field even before graduating. The teacher construed the good computer science student in terms of the group project, with the main elements being Student Proactivity, Interpersonal Skills and Ingenuity.

Table 2. Teacher Responses

Good Student Practices	Bad Student Practices
Knows when to ask for help	Doesn't maintain rapport with teachers
Makes a contribution to the field	Tries to get by with the least amount of effort
Knows his/her weaknesses while working on a team	Doesn't respect the seriousness of plagiarism
Studies more than what is expected.	Unable to integrate information

I showed the teacher the qualities of good and bad students as expressed by the learners. While agreeing with the learners on qualities of bad students, he was unimpressed with their profile of a good student, saying that such a student appeared to be too much of a loner. One who studied only the assignments, and who was dependent upon the teacher for information and direction would probably fail the course. He suggested that greater training in interpersonal skills and cooperative academic development would be helpful.

RESPONSE

With this data in hand, I discussed my findings with the class. They were shocked when faced with the expectations of the teacher, but because they all wanted to succeed in their program, were willing to adjust to these culturally foreign academic requirements. However, instead of starting from scratch, I added group projects to their existing program of reading and vocabulary enrichment. This was in order to maintain the momentum started, and also because I felt they would still benefit from the study of specialist vocabulary.

I also assigned projects, such as presentations that required a group effort, or simple computer programming tasks that necessitated the different skills within the class. While one student with extensive knowledge of computer programming languages worked on one part of the project, another would do research in the library, one organized the different presentation parts, while another served as a project coordinator. The students gave three such presentations before the end of the course, and all felt they had benefited from the experience.

REFLECTIONS

I have since lost contact with the group of learners who participated in this action research, but I am confident that this experience helped them in their graduate studies. The opportunity to examine these learners' beliefs about good students was beneficial for everyone involved. The students learned that the strategies they used to succeed academically in Korea, China or Taiwan would not work in the British context. The teacher at the Computer Science Department gained a greater understanding of the constructs of his upcoming overseas students, and I received insight that has since helped me in my present teaching post.

I feel that native speakers of English who are language teachers in Asia should certainly devote time to understanding the academic cultures of our respective countries. However, when their learners prepare for

overseas study, they are responsible to help them become aware of the different expectations that await them at their new schools. By encouraging their learners to reexamine their cultural beliefs about good students, they can enable them to both survive and thrive in two academic cultures.

TASK 8.1

If you are teaching abroad, apply the questionnaire in this study to yourself by changing the words for “student” into “teacher”. Share your results with a trusted colleague who is a native of the country in which you presently reside. In what ways do your beliefs about good and bad teachers complement or conflict with the culture in which you teach?

TASK 8.2

If you teach international students within your own country, consider the following issues:

1. To what extent should you encourage international students to express their academic values at your institution?
2. How far should you go in teaching international students to follow the cultural beliefs inherent in your school’s pedagogic approach?
3. What are the consequences of international students who choose to deviate from the norms set at your school? What are the consequences for those learners who conform to your school’s standards? If appropriate, discuss these issues with your learners to discover their expectations.

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