



Horizontes 1

*ELT teacher-research
in Latin America*



Edited by
Darío Luis Banegas
Magdalena De Stefani
Paula Rebolledo
Carlos Rico Troncoso
and **Richard Smith**



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Overall introduction

Darío Luis Banegas

Ministerio de Educación del Chubut, Argentina

Richard Smith

University of Warwick, UK

THIS EDITED VOLUME is the product of a journey which started in 2014 with the introduction of the Action Research Award Scheme (ARAS), sponsored by British Council Aptis for Teachers. According to the [scheme website](#), ARAS

aims to support the development of teacher-research in English language education in Latin America via funding for teacher-research groups, individual teacher-research awards, and organization of an annual teacher-research conference, to be held in a different Latin American location each year. This conference will be a focal point for the promotion of teacher-research across Latin America.

In this scheme, teacher-research is defined simply as ‘research initiated and carried out by teachers into issues of importance to them in their own work’. Given the way that, throughout the 2010s, IATEFL Research SIG (ReSIG) has also been taking a lead in promoting interest in teacher-research, the British Council and ReSIG have agreed to join efforts to produce this e-book, bringing reports by teacher-researchers from South America to a wider audience.

The overall adviser to the programme was Richard Smith, preceded initially by Julian Edge. Richard led a group of mentors who were, in turn, in charge of working together with the teachers who had won the 2015–16 awards. The mentors, who all participated actively in the development of this initiative, were: Darío Luis Banegas (Argentina), Carlos Rico Troncoso (Colombia), Paula Rebolledo (Chile),

and Magdalena De Stefani (Uruguay). Before the scheme got going, Julian Edge contributed initially in leading the collaborative writing of what we called a 'basic action research guide' to help mentors and teachers have a unified conception based on the literature on action research in English language teaching. We have reproduced this guide as Chapter 1 here.

Following this, there are six chapters written by the 2015–16 award winners. A subsequent volume (*Horizontes II*) will contain seven chapters written by the 2016–17 award winners. These chapters provide a solid account of what each teacher or group of teachers did in their own context and how they enacted teacher-research based on their aims and research questions. Each chapter describes a different experience, yet they all convey teachers' passion for and commitment to examining their practices in order to enhance contextualized and situated learning for students as well as professional development opportunities for teachers themselves.

Chapter 1 is authored by Serrana Echenagusía, Laura Flores and Cecilia Prieto (Uruguay). In the authors' words, their action research project 'sought to observe improvement and boost meaningful learning by exploring students' written English in units of work which end in evaluations that, in turn, served as a starting point of coming units in the syllabus'.

Chapter 2 comes from Argentina. Through her action research project, Silvia Severino aimed at improving the English skills development in a course she taught by introducing blended learning. Her guiding research questions were: (1) Does it improve the teaching and learning process of the four skills in my course?; (2) Does it contribute to teaching this heterogeneous group?; and (3) Does it help students develop their individual skills and improve their marks?

Chapter 3 takes us to Chile, where Natacha Pardo Contreras was interested in developing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) materials which could become part of an ESP component in the current EFL curriculum in technical high schools. The aim of this ESP component was to respond to students' post-school needs. Through her project, Natacha designed and implemented ESP materials in two subject areas, and analysed the perceptions of EFL teachers and students regarding the materials designed.

Chapter 4 brings us back across the Andes to Argentina. Mariana Serra and Carina Mariel Grisolia together attempted to assess the ef-

fectiveness of formative teacher-written feedback on the rewrites of five seventeen-year-old EFL learners in the fifth year at a state school in the rural area of Rafael Obligado Province of Buenos Aires. While one of them actually taught the English lessons and was in charge of implementing the project in the classroom, the other teacher was a collaborator who cooperated in the different stages of the process and provided support.

In Chapter 5 we return to Uruguay, where Cecilia Berasain started to notice that teachers in the school she coordinated worked in a relatively routinised manner, and this seemed to have a negative effect on learners' English language development. Thus, she decided to examine teachers' practices and whether a shift in the model of the professional development programme at the school could help modify this situation.

Chapter 6 takes us up the Atlantic coast to Brazil. Fernanda Gonçalves engaged in a teacher training project with seven teachers in public school, simultaneously introducing them to communicative activities and to the principles of Action Research. She was surprised, indeed 'mesmerized', by the way the teachers strove to overcome some very difficult circumstances in their teaching and drew such obvious benefit from the experience.

The ARAS authors included here had the opportunity to present at the First Annual Latin American Conference for Teacher-research in ELT, organised by British Council Chile and supported by the IATEFL Research SIG, which was held in Santiago de Chile in March 2016. We end with reflections on the conference written by Richard Smith, Laura Aza and Débora Izé Balsemão Oss, which convey the innovative spirit of the event.

This volume, *Horizontes 1*, reflects the fact there is a new flourishing of teacher-research in ELT in Latin America. We hope that this volume will complement these efforts and help to open up new horizons for English teachers throughout Latin America. The publication of this volume also testifies to IATEFL ReSIG's continuing commitment to the promotion of teacher-research and research-informed, context-responsive language pedagogies, and to the closeness of IATEFL's relationship with the British Council in supporting English language teaching (ELT) worldwide.

A very short introduction to action research for teachers of English to speakers of other languages

Julian Edge

with

**Darío Luis Banegas, Bernardo Cruz Bello, Magdalena De Stefani,
Henrick Oprea, Paula Rebolledo & Carlos Rico Troncoso**

Editorial note: This guide was originally written especially for participants in the British Council Aptis for Teachers Action Research Award Scheme (2015–16), and it has informed the experiences reported in other chapters in this volume. We reproduce it here both as background for these reports and as a useful and accessible introduction, in its own right, for teachers interested in engaging in action research in their own contexts.

One kind of beginning

What is ‘action research’? It’s like this:

I teach.

I observe my teaching, my students and my teaching context.

I notice something that I want to change. It may be a problem that

I become aware of, or an opportunity that I see, or a resource that I realise I can exploit. Whatever I notice, it offers a chance to improve what is going on.

I think about what I want to change and I explore the possibilities. I ask my colleagues about it. I read about it.

I make a plan. I may discuss the plan with colleagues and/or with my students.

I put my plan into action.

I observe the results of my action. (I may discuss the results with colleagues and/or with my students.)

I ask myself, *'What have I learned from this experience?'*

I find a way to tell people what I did and what I have learned. Perhaps I give a workshop. Perhaps I write an article.

I continue teaching, observing, thinking, planning, putting new plans into action, observing, reflecting, telling people what I have learnt, listening to what they tell me.

Action research is *not* research separate from teaching, it is an exploration of teaching by teacher-research.

Action research is a way of being a teacher. The details are different for each person. To borrow a metaphor from Antonio Machado (1912):

Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar. Al andar se hace camino, y al volver la vista atrás se ve la senda que nunca se ha de volver a pisar.

Traveller, there is no path, the path is made by walking. Walking makes the path, and when you glance behind you, you see a track that will never be trod again.

Sharing details of the paths we have walked into being can help us all. Action research also builds communities. First, there is the community of teachers, students and others working together to improve things in their situation. Then there is the community of action researchers learning with and from each other across their different situations.

What is 'action research'? A longer answer:

Action research is a form of inquiry carried out by professionals into their own work. Teacher-researchers explore their own teaching, or their curriculums, or some other aspect of their professional context.

Action research sets out to change the world by acting on it. The aim is to make things better. So, a teacher might notice that his/her students do not seem very motivated in their writing class. S/he asks colleagues about their writing classes, s/he reads articles about teach-

ing writing and about motivation. S/he plans something new and tries it out. Then s/he asks, *'What did I learn from that?'*

Action research is done by insiders. It sets out to create practices from which we can also develop our own theories. A theory, in this sense, means a statement of our best understanding of what is happening and why. This theory arises from practice.

Because practice is always located somewhere, at a certain time, among certain people, we can expect that action research in different places will produce theories that have some overlap and some differences. By sharing our practices and our theories, we can learn from both the overlaps and the differences.

Action research can be an individual effort, but it is even stronger when it involves cooperation among colleagues and also, where appropriate, cooperation with students. Action research carries the message that we can learn and improve things through our own efforts, without waiting to be told what to do by so-called experts who may not properly understand our situation. Action research, in this view, is in the tradition of cooperative, problem-posing education, of which Paulo Freire (1998:65) writes:

... se identifique com eles como seres mais além de si mesmos – como 'projetos'–, como seres que caminham para frente, que olham para frente; como seres a quem o imobilismo ameaça de morte; para quem o olhar para trás não deve ser uma forma nostálgica de querer voltar, mas um modo de melhor conhecer o que está sendo, para melhor construir o futuro.

... it affirms women and men as beings who transcend themselves, who move forward and look ahead, for whom immobility represents a fatal threat, for whom looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future.

How do you do action research?

As in the brief descriptions above, action research can be seen as a continuing cycle, or spiral, of action, observation, reflection and planning, which leads to more action, observation, reflection, etc.

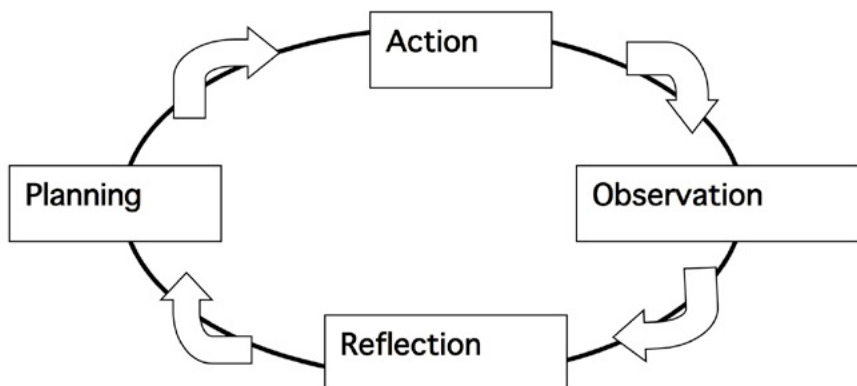


Figure 1 *The action research cycle (after Kemmis & McTaggart 1988)*

These four elements are not completely separate stages, but we hope you can see a meaningful progression through them. It goes something like this:

- We begin in a context of **action**. The importance of action research arises from the fact that it begins in the working situation of our on-going professional lives.
- In this action, we try to be open to our work environment. We want to learn from it, and to respond to it, with an overall purpose of making things better for all concerned. We take care to be **ob-servant** of what is going on and to be on the look-out for something worthy of further investigation. Sometimes, this might be a problem and we ask ourselves, *'How can I improve things there?'* On the other hand, we might notice a significant success and we ask ourselves, *'Why did that work so well, can I do something like that in another part of my teaching?'* Or it might be that we see a possibility to do something new and we ask ourselves, *'How could I make that happen?'* The fundamental issue is that the individual observes a possibility in that person's working context. To put this another way, the context offers the person a particular opportunity, one that it might not have afforded another person, because that other person might see things differently.
- The person concerned **reflects** on this issue and informs himself about it, drawing on personal experience, reading, conversations with

colleagues and also their own ability to analyse the issue concerned and to express their ideas. Talking about ideas helps them to grow.

- Then comes a **planning** stage, personal but informed by others, by local knowledge and by reading. Once again, planning is helped by talking about plans as they are being made.
- We then put the **plan** into **action**, we **observe** carefully what has changed and check whether things have improved or not. On **reflection**, we ask the key question, ‘*What have I learned from this?*’ The key meaning of reflection here is ‘*the kind of thinking that helps us turn experience into knowledge*’.
- As we carefully spell out our new understanding, we are developing our theory of teaching and learning. As we do this, we change ourselves a little. As we change ourselves, we change our teaching context, because we see it differently. It can offer us more opportunities.
- In this way, we also hope to discover new questions to explore that will continue our professional and personal development. And so the work becomes a continuing cycle of discovery and growth.
- When we share our new understandings with our colleagues, and perhaps with our students, they change, too, opening up new opportunities for cooperation.
- When we **talk** and **write** about our experience of action research, we contribute to our field as a whole, offering new understanding that arises from practice, and encouraging others to join in.
- Even though we can write only from our own contexts, we may have suggestions for others to try out in their own situations. Or they might learn something from our reports that is very different from what we set out to say. Both kinds of learning are useful and both arise from our willingness to cooperate and to share.

Can you give me an example?

Yes, at the end of this guide, we refer to an article that reports on an action research project carried out in Bogotá, Colombia. You could read that article now, or wait until you have read the rest of this guide.

Whenever you read the article, please keep these thoughts in mind:

An example is just that — one example. One example of a bird is an eagle, another is a duck, another is a penguin. Eagles, ducks and penguins have very good reasons for being the way they are — very different. The article that we include has been written in the way required by the journal that it appeared in. The action research that it reports grew out of its own context, which may be nothing like yours. The question for the reader is *not*, ‘*Would this work for me in my context?*’ The question is: ‘*What can I learn from this?*’

In the previous section, on the action research cycle, we wrote at one stage:

The person concerned **reflects** on this issue and informs themselves about it, drawing on personal experience, reading, conversations with colleagues and also their own ability to analyse the issue concerned and to express their ideas.

What we call ‘*reading*’ there is reported in the article under the heading, ‘Literature Review’. That sounds more formal, but don’t let that put you off. It is important that we inform ourselves as fully as we can about the area we are interested in, and reading ‘the literature’ is a central part of that process. Your mentor will help you with your reading and with your writing.

Your own action research cycle

We are going to look at the different phases of action research in more detail. At any point, remember that your mentor is there to advise you, so be sure to keep in touch with him or her. Keep your mentor informed about your thinking and your actions. If you are not sure about something, ask. However, remember that you are the expert on your teaching situation, so here is one piece of advice about *how* to ask.

If at all possible, do **not** ask ‘*What should I do?*’

Say, instead, ‘*I have thought about the possibilities and I think I should do **this for these reasons.***’

That gives your mentor a much better chance of understanding your situation and giving you advice that you can actually make use of.

Getting started

Some of this work should have been done before your project was accepted, but let us begin anyway at the beginning.

Permission and cooperation

Before you do any action research, you need to be as sure as possible that you are not going to upset anyone. So, ask yourself, '*Whose permission do I need?*'

The answers will differ in different situations, but there will be a list of people something like this:

- your school director
- your students
- the parents of your pupils, if they are children

You also need to talk to your colleagues about your intentions. Some of them may be interested enough to join in, or to discuss your work with you as you go along. Some of them may not be happy about the idea. They may feel that you are drawing attention to yourself, or suggesting that they are somehow inferior to you. You need to listen to their concerns and try to reassure them. Make them feel that you would be happy to share what you are doing with them, but you don't want to bother them with it.

People differ in how they take to new ideas; don't expect everyone to be pleased, but don't shut anyone out.

Finding your focus

Here are three possibilities:

Make recordings of some of your classes

Listen carefully to what happens, to what you say, to what the students say. You may be surprised, not always pleasantly! However, it is very likely that you will find something that interests you, or that you would like to change, or to learn from.

Complete as many of these sentences as you can:

- As a teacher, the kind of activity I most enjoy is . . .
- As a teacher, the kind of activity I least enjoy is . . .
- One type of activity I think students learn a lot from is . . .
- The kind of change I would like to make in my teaching is . . .
- One aspect of my teaching I'm really pleased about is . . .
- One thing I would like to do more of in my teaching is . . .
- One thing I don't like about my teaching is . . .
- One technique I would like to try out in class is . . .
- The kind of student I'm best with is . . .
- The sort of student I can't stand is . . .

Can you make up any more sentences like this that express something about you and your teaching? If you talk to a colleague about your sentences, might you find something in there worth investigating?

*Make a list of the **things that get in your way** at work*

Examples might be such things as:

- Some students always come late.
- There's too much external noise in some of the teaching rooms.
- My senior colleagues don't take the need for change seriously.

Before you read on, you have to stop and make your own list; otherwise you will disable the task.

No! Don't look ahead. Make your list. Do it now.

When you have made your list, re-phrase your statements to focus the problem on yourself, e.g.:

- I don't know what to do about late arrivals.
- I am unable to adapt my teaching to my environment or change my environment.
- I can't convince my senior colleagues that we should make some changes.

Maybe you'll find something to work on there.

Checking your focus

Before you get too involved, it's worth checking again the practicality of your focus against the following headings:

Scale

Don't try to take on a large-scale issue. Keep your focus small enough for you to be able to do something about it and find out what happens in the time available.

Collaboration

Will this topic encourage others to get involved? A group can give support to its members and help spread news about the work being done and its outcomes.

Relevance

Are you focusing on something that is a part of your everyday work? You do not want to create an extra burden on top of your teaching. Nor do you want to have to start reading about a topic that you know very little about. You want to be exploring your teaching and the context in which it takes place.

Authority

Have you got sufficient authority to make sure that the necessary work gets done? You do not want to rely on someone else who might lose interest.

Motivation

Does this topic really, truly motivate you? There will be times when your enthusiasm will fade, so you need to be asking questions that you definitely want the answers to!

Orientations and aspects of action research

Finally, here, it is worth remembering that action research can focus on all kinds of aspects of teaching and learning contexts. One way to divide them up is like this:

Orientation	<i>We want to focus on ...</i>
Means	... the ways that we use to reach agreed goals.
Ends	... the goals that we set ourselves.
Theory	... our understanding of our practice.
Institution	... how our institution works and its role in our society.
Society	... how our work supports values important to our society.
Personal	... how personal/professional development is supported for students and teachers.

However, it is also necessary to remember two points here:

First, the above divisions, like any kind of category analysis, should only be understood as ‘as-if’ categories. That is to say, we know that the real world cannot be divided up into separate boxes. Everything is connected to everything else. But sometimes it is helpful and useful to divide up ‘the whole thing’ *as if* the categories were real. How useful? Well, that depends on how successful we are at increasing our understanding of ‘the whole thing’.

Second, a single action research project may well touch on all of the above orientations. By the same token, it may focus almost exclusively on one of them. It is also true that the question you have in mind when you start your research project may change as your work goes forward, leading to a broader, or narrower, focus. Our general advice is to start with a narrow focus — see that point under *Scale*, above.

Collecting data

‘Data’ means relevant information. The important word is ‘relevant’. It is so *easy* to collect information about what goes on in a classroom or a school, but what information is *relevant* will depend on what you are trying to change and how you will evaluate your success.

You can take photographs, make recordings, observe classes, be observed in your own class, keep notes, write a diary, have students keep diaries, start discussions, hold interviews, set assignments, give out

questionnaires, draw diagrams, organise projects, set tasks, review materials. You will want to gather data from different perspectives because when something happens, different people will have different interpretations of it, different opinions, and different memories. The action researcher wants to collect them and bring them together. That way, we have a much fuller understanding of what is going on.

Wherever possible, your way of collecting data should be a part of your normal teaching routine or professional duties. Remember that as long as your students are using English to explore something that interests them, you are doing your job. The difference is that you are now more aware of the information that is available to you, because you are using it for research purposes.

Let us take one small example. In ‘Finding your focus’ above, we raised the possible issue:

I don't know what to do about late arrivals.

I might decide to intervene in this situation by starting a small project on punctuality and how the rest of the class feels about their classmates coming late. The aim is for the class to agree on a set of rules regarding time-keeping. My intention is that, by focusing on this issue, I will have a positive effect on student punctuality, which will make my teaching easier and more effective. I also hope to ‘teach’ the idea that the students have the authority to set the rules for their own behaviour out of a sense of mutual respect.

But what will I actually learn? I don't know, of course, until I do it. What we invite you to do is to think about how you might plan that intervention, what data you would collect, and how you would collect it. To our way of thinking, for example, diagrams of where students sit, which might be vital to answering another question, would not be useful or relevant here. On the other hand, a sentence completion task such as the following might be:

When other students arrive late, I feel ...

When I arrive late for class, I feel ...

The teacher is asking us about this because ...

If the teacher arrived late for class, he would feel ...

etc.

Whatever your topic, you have to be careful to choose ways of working and data-collection instruments that suit your situation and the time-frame that you have available.

Analysing data

As we said above, it is *so easy* to collect lots of information about what goes on in the classroom. Another way of usefully limiting the data you collect is to be sure what you want it for and how you intend to analyse it. In action research, we can be interested both in *quantitative* analysis, the kind of information that can be represented in numbers, and in a more *qualitative* approach that helps us find out about other people's experiences and perspectives. The latter is more usual.

Let us return to our above example. There are some quantitative elements to it. I will certainly want to know how many students are as annoyed as I am by those who come late, as I am hoping to change this tendency. If things work out that way, I hope to see the students work out a set of rules (and perhaps penalties) that will encourage greater punctuality. If punctuality does improve, which I can also check in a quantitative way, that would count as success.

On the other hand, I may discover a whole new perspective on the issue. What I see as '*coming late*' in terms of my carefully planned lesson, my students may see as an acceptable variation in the necessary comings and goings of everyday life. And I might receive a sentence-completion that says:

When I arrive late for class, I feel ... very tired, because I have to take my brothers to school and visit my mother in hospital before I come.

In these cases, perhaps I have to learn to see my class boundaries in a different way and adjust my teaching to allow for them. That is what I learn, and that would also count as success.

The important question for the teacher is not, '*Did it work?*' but '*What have I learned from this?*'

One way or another, analysis involves identifying pieces of information and putting them into different categories. If you have asked some direct questions, then this is quite easy. For example, imagine you observe that the students in one class do not seem very interested or motivated. You might set a task with a number of statements like this:

How much do you agree with the following statements?

1 *I know I have to learn English, but I don't like it.*

Strongly
Agree

Agree

No opinion

Disagree

Strongly
disagree

Here, you have provided the choices and you can see how many answers go into which category. This is a kind of *deductive* analysis, where you bring your categories to the data.

However, perhaps you arranged a class discussion on this same subject and you are now listening to a tape recording of what the students said. This gives people a much better opportunity to say what they actually think and feel, but it is more difficult to analyse. You will probably need to make a transcript (a written version) of what they said so that you can study it properly. Then, as you listen and listen and listen, you try to *create* categories that allow you to capture the important features of what you hear. For example, you hear one student say,

Liking it is not important. I don't like maths, but I need to learn it.

and you give this a code: '(motivated by *need*)'

Another student says,

For me, I learn better if I enjoy. I like to watch movies.

and you give this a different code: '(motivated by *enjoyment*)'

And another student says,

I want to work with tourists, I have to be good at English.

Can you use one of the previous codes? Or do you need a new one?

And so you continue. This is called an *inductive* approach to analysis, where you create the categories from the data.

When you have coded all the data, you see if you can combine some of the codes into larger themes.

Allow us to repeat ourselves: It is important to know *why* you are collecting data and *what* you want to do with it before you start collecting. Otherwise, you can just go on and on collecting information which piles up into a problem that does not help you at all. As with all things, your mentor will advise on these issues.

One final point: despite what we said in the last paragraph, it is OK to change your mind; it is OK to change your plan; it is OK to discover something more interesting than what you set out to find. In fact, this is another reason why it is so important to *have* a plan — so that if you change it, you know what it is that you are changing. Data collection and data analysis often interact with each other, so clarity of purpose and flexibility are both essential. Action research is not about fixed experiments that set out to discover the truth. Action research is about exploring our lives with other people and trying to make things better.

Outcomes

The aim of action research is not to come up with generalisations, but with a deeper understanding of a specific situation. The purpose of the work is:

1. to improve the quality of experience available for all participants in that situation;
2. to formulate what you have learned;
3. to pass that knowledge on;
4. to stay involved in that cycle of experience and learning;
5. to demonstrate to others the personal and professional effects of working in this way.

In this section, we are particularly concerned with points two and three above. As you start to put into words what you have learned from your action research experience, this will itself take your learning forward. As you develop those words in order to communicate what you have learned to someone else, this will take your learning forward again. Be prepared for this. The learning from action research is not simply in the experience itself, but in the noticing and the reflecting and the putting into words. These days, those words are not translated into a high academic style. It is more usual to express oneself in a

first-person, active voice, rather than a third-person passive. That is to say, I would write, for example:

'I told the students to ...'

rather than:

'The students were told to ...'

Your mentor will advise on the best way of passing on what you have learned. Let us look briefly at two main possibilities, writing an article or making a presentation. One thing that they have in common is that they need to organise the experience that you have had and the learning that you have done into a form that is easy for someone else to understand. The experience of actually *doing* action research can sometimes be messy and confusing and frustrating. The *reporting* of action research needs to be clear and well-organised. That organisation will include some version of the following:

A title

This should make clear the focus of your research in order to attract people likely to be interested. It is often good to include a gerund (an *-ing* form of a verb) in the title in order to remind yourself and the reader that your focus is on *action*. See the sample article.

Introduction

This gives a brief overview of the article/presentation, thus reinforcing the title.

Situation

Information about the setting in terms of students, institution, course, etc. This where you set out the *context of action* from which you began. You invite the reader/listener into your world and help them see it as an authentic teaching/learning space.

Focus

What is it that you decided to focus on and why did you choose this focus? This is where you report on the period of *observation*, perhaps including reading and discussion, that led you to identify what you wanted to change.

Intervention

This is where you talk about the plan that you made. You report on what you read and any other reasons for *planning* in that way. Then you tell what you actually *did* and what *happened* as a result. This is the longest part of your article/presentation and may be divided into sub-sections.

Learning

Here you tell the reader what you learned from *reflecting* on your intervention, explaining why you believe you are justified in making this claim. You may want to include feedback from your students and/or colleagues. You may also want to say what you learned about yourself and how this learning has changed you in some way. You may want to say what new questions have arisen for you because of this project. You may have some suggestions to make.

In a written article, or a formal spoken presentation, you can follow this framework quite straightforwardly (unless a journal editor wants something different). If you are offering a workshop for teachers, our experience is that colleagues like to work. That is, they like to get their hands on someone else's data and see what sense they can make of it. They are prepared to listen to your story, but they want to tell their own. So, leave time for workshop participants to look at some actual data and some of your analysis. Give them time to talk and time to say what they think. Then they are likely to enjoy themselves and remember your workshop. If people disagree with your analysis or your statement of learning, that is, they disagree with your theory, do not get defensive or upset. Show that you are more interested in learning than in being right and that you trust your fellow-teachers to feel the same way. It is much more impressive to say, *'Mmm, that's interesting. I have explained why I think the way I do. Perhaps you would like to explore your ideas practically, as I have, and offer another workshop?'*

We also hope that you experience a sense of empowerment as you join those who take the trouble to pass their knowledge on.

A sample article

Urrutia León, W. & Vega Cely, E. 2010. Encouraging Teenagers to Improve Speaking Skills through Games in a Colombian Public School. *PROFILE Issues in Teachers Professional Development* 12/1: 11–31.

<http://www.revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/profile/article/view/13831>

We have taken this article (Urrutia León & Vega Cély 2010) from an archive built up by the journal *Profile*, edited by the PROFILE Research Group at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá, led by Melba Libia Cárdenas Beltrán. Professor Cárdenas has provided exemplary leadership in the area of action research for many years and the journal is only one evidence of this. We give more details about *Profile* and other articles to be found there in our Resources section below.

Please remember what we said earlier about the role of examples. An example can be useful if it helps clarify what is *possible*. It is not helpful if you see it as a definition of what is *necessary*.

Before you read this article in detail, let us look briefly at how it is organised. The headings in the article are:

- Introduction
- Research questions
- Context
- Participants
- Methodology
- Techniques for collecting data
 - Video recording
 - Teacher's journal
 - Questionnaires
- Stages to develop the project
 - Literature review
 - Speaking skills
 - Games and motivation
- Pedagogical design
- Data analysis and results

- Games from different perspectives
 - o Students' perspectives
 - o Teachers' perspective

Conclusions

Further research

Recommendations

How do these headings relate to the very general advice that we gave above? Well, there is not a perfect match, but we can see those basic elements in this way:

Introduction

Introduction (In this case, the Focus is introduced immediately)

Research questions

Situation & Focus

Context

Participants

Intervention (planning)

Methodology

Techniques for collecting data

- Video recording
- Teacher's journal
- Questionnaires

Stages to develop the project

- Literature review
- Speaking skills
- Games and motivation

Intervention (action)

Pedagogical design

Data analysis and results

- Games from different perspectives
 - o Students' perspectives
 - o Teachers' perspective

Learning

Conclusions

Further research Recommendations

Each journal will have its own requirements for how you communicate your research, but the basics will always be there. Your mentor will help you design your communication to suit the audience that you are aiming for.

After reading this article, how do you feel? Excited? Worried? Confused? Motivated? These are all very reasonable reactions. Talk to your mentor about your own reaction.

Another kind of beginning

This introductory guide to action research has been written especially for the project that you are beginning.

It cannot answer all the questions that you already have, and certainly not the questions that you will create as this work goes forward. However, we hope that it will provide the basis for a common understanding among all members of the project. Starting from that common understanding, we hope that we can cooperate in producing better and better questions.

In the References section at the end of this guide, we have listed a number of articles that you could look at. If you have read something else that you have found useful, please do pass the reference on to the rest of the group.

The most important message to take away for the next stage is this:

Keep in touch with your mentor and with other group members.
Your individual development is a part of all our collegial development, and all our collegial development is a part of yours.

And finally, in terms broader than teaching practices or theories, and in our own small ways, we want to be a part of what Reason & Bradbury (2001:2) describe when they write that:

... the primary purpose of action research is not to produce academic theories based on action; nor is it to produce theories about action; nor is it to produce theoretical or empirical knowledge that can be applied in action; it is to liberate the human body, mind and spirit in the search for a better, freer world.

This is your invitation to join in.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Prof. Melba Libia Cárdenas Beltrán for her advice and for her comments on an earlier draft of this guide.

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Resource Articles

In our guide to action research, we suggested one sample article to read. In this resource, we give you access to more. They are divided into five sections.

We begin with articles from the journal, *Profile*, from which that initial sample article was taken. We then turn to the *ELT Journal*, an interna-

tional journal in which the British Council has some editorial involvement. In that section, we also suggest a reading strategy to help you make the best use of any articles that you find difficult to read. This may happen as you start to read articles in this area. Don't let that worry you. You will get used to the way in which such articles are written. Also, your mentor will be on hand to help when necessary.

Action research, of course, is not an English language phenomenon and the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Peru offers a catalogue of AR articles in Spanish. For some of you, that might be a very useful way of getting used to reading about the field. For an example of action research in Portuguese, please see the last section of this resource document.

The fourth resource we introduce you to is *Networks*, an international on-line journal of teacher research.

Finally, we have a mixed collection of articles, including one from one of the mentors on this project about his experience as an action-researcher in an Argentinian secondary school, and one from Prof. Cárdenas, the editor of *Profile*, on the subject of writing about your action research projects.

Profile

The archives of this journal contain a wonderful collection of action research articles that you can search and download. Here is a selection of articles written by colleagues teaching in Colombian schools. As you approach them, remember the advice on reading given in the AR guide above.

Adolescents' Awareness of Environmental Care: Experiences when Writing Short Descriptive Texts in English

Lorena Jaramillo Urrutia, Ana Stella Medina Gutiérrez

<http://www.revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/profile/article/view/20579>

The Role of Warming Up Activities in Adolescent Students' Involvement during the English Class

Rosalba Velandia

<http://www.revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/profile/article/view/10561>

The Role of Collaborative Work in the Development of Elementary Students' Writing Skills

Yuly Yinneth Yate González, Luis Fernando Saenz, Johanna Alejandra Bermeo, Andrés Fernando Castañeda Chaves

<http://www.revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/profile/article/view/37858>

An English Syllabus with Emphasis on Chemistry: A Proposal for 10th Graders of a Public School in Colombia

Sandra Juanita López Claujio

<http://www.revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/profile/article/view/10476>

Using Songs to Encourage Sixth Graders to Develop English Speaking Skills

Mónica Duarte Romero, Luz Mery Tinjacá Bernal, Marilú Carrero Olivares

<http://www.revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/profile/article/view/29053>

Encouraging Teenagers to Improve Speaking Skills through Games in a Colombian Public School

William Urrutia León, Esperanza Vega Cely

<http://www.revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/profile/article/view/13831>

Promoting Oral Production through the Task-Based Learning Approach: A Study in a Public Secondary School in Colombia

Mireya Peña, Amparo Onatra

<http://www.revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/profile/article/view/11438>

Using the Dictionary for Improving Adolescents' Reading Comprehension of Short Scientific Texts

Ximena Becerra Cortés

<http://www.revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/profile/article/view/36968>

ELT Journal

Here we have six articles reporting on action research projects in Argentina, Hungary, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand and the USA. As you can see, the articles refer to the teaching of grammar, conversation, reading and writing, as well as to the use of drama techniques and the learning of communication strategies.

Liu, J. 2000. The power of readers' theatre: From reading to writing. *ELT Journal* 54/4: 354-361.

- Porto, M. 2001. Cooperative writing response groups and self evaluation. *ELT Journal* 55/1: 38-46.
- Sayer, P. 2005. An intensive approach to building conversation skills. *ELT Journal* 59/1: 14-22.
- Schneider, J. 2005. Teaching grammar through community issues. *ELT Journal* 59/4: 298-305.
- Macalister, J. 2007. Implementing extensive reading in an EAP programme. *ELT Journal* 62/3: 248-256.
- Skinner, B. & Madden, M. 2009. Help seeking in English language learning. *ELT Journal* 64/1: 21-31.

Most of the above teacher-researchers are working with undergraduates, but Macalister (2007) is teaching non-university young adults and Skinner & Madden (2009) report on a secondary school in Hungary and immigrant workers in Ireland.

You may find these articles difficult to read at first. If so, remember what you perhaps say to your students: you don't have to understand everything the writer writes; what you have to do is to *use the text* for your own purposes.

So, as we have discussed in the AR guide above, there is some key information that you are looking for:

Teaching Situation:	Country, students' level, type of institution, etc.
Focus of the research:	Area of learning, teaching, language, management, etc.
Intervention:	What did the teacher-researcher do?
Learning:	What did the teacher-researcher learn?

You may find that the most direct way into the articles is this:

1. Check the Focus of the research from the title.
2. Look through the article for the part where the writers tell you what they actually *did*. Different writers use different sub-headings, such as: *methodology*, or *the study*, or they repeat the gerund of their title, such as *Introducing*, or they refer

to *Step 1*, *Step 2*, etc. as they describe what they did. You will also notice that the verbs shift into the past tense for these sections. That is where the action is.

If what you find seems interesting to you, you can go back and read more about the teaching situation and what the writers learned from their action research.

As ever, your mentor will be happy to help out with any difficulties you may have with these texts, and also to help you move forward from any ideas that you discover, as well as those that you create.

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Peru - Lima

http://blog.pucp.edu.pe/blog/wp-content/uploads/sites/184/2014/01/listado_de_articulos_sobre_ia.pdf

Here, you will find a bibliography of articles in Spanish reporting on action research projects, ranging from pre-school to postgraduate education, carried out in Latin America between 2000 and 2013. Only a minority of them relate to language teaching directly, but they all help show the diversity of the action research community flourishing across the continent.

You might enjoy reading about action research in other parts of the curriculum. As always, the appropriate question is, '*What can I learn from this?*'

You might also notice differences in the ways that action research reports are written, between articles written in this tradition, in the *ELT Journal* examples above, and again in the *Profile* articles that you have looked at.

And if you ask yourself then, '*What can I learn from this?*' the answer might be that there are indeed multiple ways in which we express ourselves, individually, culturally, and in the requirements of each journal. Again, do not let that put you off. Take it as an invitation to find the best way for you to express yourself, and ask your mentor for advice.

Networks: An On-line Journal for Teacher research

<http://journals.library.wisc.edu/index.php/networks>

The home page of this site begins with:

Networks offers a place for sharing reports of action research, in which teachers at all levels, kindergarten to postgraduate, are reflecting on classroom practice through research ventures. It also provides space for discussion of other ways in which educational practitioners, alone or in collaboration, use inquiry as a tool to learn more about their work with the hope of eventually improving its effectiveness.

Once again, there is no direct focus on teaching English, but the site is easy to search and there are examples of work relevant to our field. For example:

Breeze, R. 2002. Change in action: From reading to surfing. *Networks* 5/2. <http://journals.library.wisc.edu/index.php/networks/article/view/47/50>

Lehman, A. 2000. Student-generated discussion in the senior secondary English classroom. *Networks* 3/2. <http://journals.library.wisc.edu/index.php/networks/article/view/142/141>

Single Texts

From outside the above sources, we also want to provide access to the following single texts.

In Portuguese, an example of an action research project very much in our field is:

Lima Juniór, R. 2010. Uma investigação dos efeitos do ensino explícito da pronúncia na aula de inglês como língua estrangeira. *RBLA* 10/9: 747–771. <http://www.scielo.br/pdf/rbla/v10n3/a13v10n3.pdf>

An article that focuses on the professional development side of action research from the perspective of the teacher-researchers concerned

comes from one of the mentors on this project, Darío Banegas and his colleagues in Argentina:

Banegas, D., Pavese, A., Vealásquez, A. & Vélez, A. 2013. Teacher professional development through collaborative action research: Impact on foreign English-language teaching and learning. *Educational Action Research* 21/2: 185–201.

And, finally, an article to read when you are thinking about how to report on your research and share your discoveries with the wider field of the action research community:

Cárdenas, M. 2003. Teacher-researchers as writers: A way to sharing findings. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal* 5/5: 49–64.
<http://revistas.udistrital.edu.co/ojs/index.php/calj/article/view/181/299>

Endings and beginnings

We hope that these references help you find a way into the literature of action research. We also hope and trust that you will find different ways in yourselves.

Finally, for now, if you want to buy a book aimed at action-researchers in English language teaching, then many people speak well of this one:

Burns, A. 2010. *Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching. A Guide for Practitioners*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Boosting meaningful learning and achieving significant improvement in students with a basic level of English through a genre-based approach



Serrana Echenagusía
Plan Ceibal en Inglés,
Montevideo, Uruguay



Laura Flores
Departamento de
Lenguas Extranjeras,
Consejo de Formación en
Educación, Montevideo,
Uruguay



Cecilia Prieto
Consejo de Educación
Secundaria. Colegio J.F.
Kennedy, Montevideo,
Uruguay

As language teachers, we aim to enhance the potential of our syllabi, become effective mentors of our students, and build theory from our teaching experience. With a view to reaching these aims, we implemented an English language pilot programme in three Uruguayan schools. With ten other teachers we collectively built our syllabi from a genre-based perspective. This paper explores our action research approach, examining how and what a 'genre approach' can contribute to language achievements of students at A0–A1 Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels, as evaluated by instruments designed from the CEFR criteria.

About the authors

Laura Flores is a teacher of English language and literature at the National Teacher Education Institute in Uruguay. She has an MA in English, specializing in Anglo-American Literatures, from the National University of Córdoba, Argentina (2013) and a Diploma in Education from FLACSO (2002). She has recently been admitted as a doctoral student in Linguistics at the PUC, Chile. Her research interest centres on the pedagogical potential of genre theory based on systemic-functional linguistics.

Cecilia Prieto is a teacher of English as a Foreign Language who graduated from the *Instituto de Profesores Artigas*, Montevideo, Uruguay. Her language teaching experience includes work in both public and private institutions, where she taught English as a Foreign Language and supervised teachers in the collective design and implementation of syllabi that both met the National Educational Standards and conceived language from a genre based perspective. She is currently teaching EFL to adult learners in a state school, acting as a pedagogic consultant in a private school and working in syllabus design and implementation in three vocational schools in Montevideo.

Serrana Echenagusía has a bachelor degree in Humanities (*Universidad de Montevideo*) and a postgraduate qualification in Education (*Universidad ORT*, Montevideo). She also holds a diploma in TESOL (Institute of Education, University of London). She has worked as a language teacher in private institutions and in a public vocational school. She has been a teacher coordinator and is currently a pedagogic assistant for the English learning programme at *Plan Ceibal*.

Introduction

This action research project sought to observe improvement and boost meaningful learning by exploring students' written English in units of work ending in evaluations which, in turn, served as a starting point of coming units in the syllabus. The project took place in 2015 and focused on a group of students with an elementary level of English, enrolled at the *Instituto Tecnológico Superior (ITS)*, a vocational school in Montevideo where a pilot programme of English language teaching and learning (the English Improvement Program; in Spanish, *Fortalecimiento del inglés*) is being run.

The loops in the action research were the three units of work, which ended in written evaluations offering material, tangible evidence of what students could and could not do with the language at each particular point. It was on those evaluations that we concentrated, using them as data to explore the scope of the improvement and how this improvement was related to the course objectives. The final stage in each loop offered results and conclusions which informed the planning and objectives of the following loop.

The course was designed and improvement was measured from a genre pedagogy perspective which will be explained in the next section. Given that a few years ago Uruguayan authorities in education officially announced the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) not only for course design but also for evaluation of students' progress, the other aim of this AR project was to see how students' improvement could be measured according to the categories defined by the CEFR. In order to inform this point, two external advisors were consulted about the quality of the evaluations used here to measure improvement from the perspective of the CEFR.

Context of the study and literature review

History

For many years, professionals working in the teaching of English in state education in Uruguay have been concerned about students' command of this language. Since not much research had been done in Uruguay into English language education, this concern was apparently impressionistic. However, a few studies have analysed this situation (e.g. Comisión de Políticas Lingüísticas (2012)) and a general agreement has been reached among teachers that there is ample room for improvement in this area.

It was in this context that the three of us started to work and study. We realised that one of the areas that needed improvement was the approach to teaching the language. Our search led us to Australian pedagogic experiences and studies on genre and systemic functional linguistics (SFL). These theories inform the theoretical framework of the *Fortalecimiento de Inglés* [English Improvement] programme that this chapter deals with.

Fortalecimiento de Inglés started in 2013, due to the coincidence between our professional quest and the interest of the authorities of vocational education in expanding future graduates' command of English. Two institutions of State National Education are taking part in this project: the Teacher Education Institute [*Consejo de Formación en Educación*] and the Institute of Vocational Education [*Consejo de Edu-*

cación Técnico-Profesional]. It is being implemented in three vocational institutes with 20 separate groups of Senior Secondary students, who come to our programme with around 390 hours of English from the three previous years of curricular study.

The English courses in this programme are optional, and this fact is directly linked to the high dropout rate the programme has, even higher than the already worrying dropout rate in curricular, compulsory courses. To take part in the programme courses, students have to sit for Online Placement Tests purchased from Oxford University Press, which assess students against the CEFR criteria, as requested by the national authorities.

This action research (AR) project took place in a group which started with 20 Information Technology students at the end of April and finished with seven students (six boys and one girl) in mid-November. They had two 90-minute English lessons per week. All students had an entry level of A0–A1 according to the placement test.

Pedagogic and linguistic principles

The overall programme, *Fortalecimiento Inglés*, is based on pedagogic principles (Byrnes, 2006; Derewianka, 2001, 2012, 2013; Gibbons, 2004; Schleppegrell, 2004, 2010; Painter, 2001) developed in connection with genre theory (Martin and Rose, 2007, 2008, 2012) and systemic-functional linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). The starting point is the conception that language is a meaning making resource ingrained in a context and based on choices made by users according to their communicative purposes. As Halliday says, learning a language is learning how to mean. Students learn how to communicate a particular message to specific interlocutors. They also understand how the means of communication affects the message.

As developed by Derewianka in a three-day seminar in September 2013 in Montevideo (cf. Derewianka 2013), these principles promote:

1. Engaging students with:
 - a. substantial content and authentic texts – produced with real purposes, to real addressees in specific describable contexts of situation.

- b. rich tasks that involve analysis, synthesis, evaluation, decision-making.
2. Having high expectations and providing a high level of support.
 3. Offering explicit teaching in context.
 4. Varying the degree of difficulty by task choice, text selection and level of support.
 5. Integrating language modes (written, oral).

These principles are guiding concepts in our planning and teaching. This is seen in our choice of texts and task design. Instruction is ambitious but support is permanent, working with students while they produce in order to solve the problems they encounter. Grammatical and textual explanations are explicitly offered so that students understand how the language works and why one option or organisation is more suitable than another. Finally, every curriculum cycle involves all the modes, whereby we design tasks in which students read, write, speak and listen.

The curriculum cycle

The syllabus from this pilot programme is a text-based syllabus; and teaching and learning experiences are organised in learning cycles that feature relatively fixed stages, as shown in Figure 1.

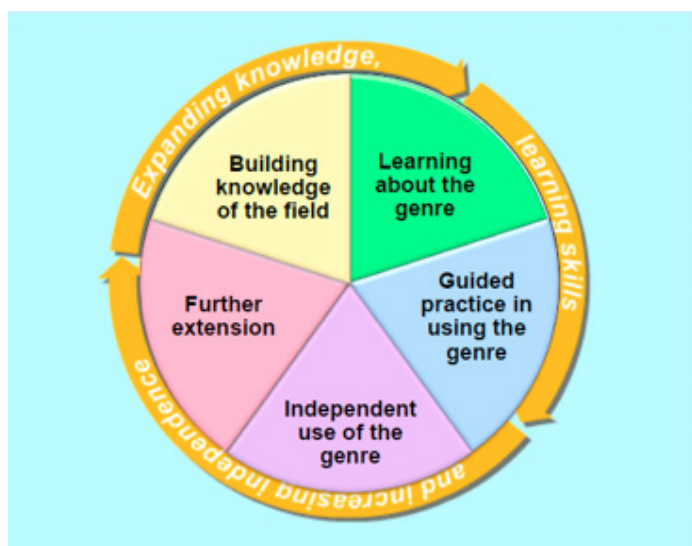


Figure 1. Curriculum cycle (taken from Derewianka, 2013)

In a text-based syllabus, according to Martin (2009:15):

The cycle features a deconstruction stage, where models of the target genre are presented, a joint construction stage, where teachers scribe another model text in the same genre based on suggestions from students, and an individual construction stage, where students write in a genre for the first time on their own. All stages involve setting context and building up field (shared knowledge about content) and a critical orientation to the genre (with respect to its function in the culture).

The concept of curriculum cycle draws from Vygotskian learning theory, and ‘pays close attention to the importance of shared understandings about content and the precise nature of teacher questions when interacting with students in relation to reading material’ (Martin, 2009: 15).

Research methodology

Since we sought to observe the effects of this genre-based approach on students’ motivation and learning, we chose one group (as described above) and studied the students’ responses to the tasks suggested. AR was chosen because it is:

a form of inquiry carried out by professionals into their own work. Teacher-researchers explore their own teaching, or their curriculums, or some other aspect of their professional context. [...] Action research sets out to change the world by acting on it. The aim is to make things better’ (Edge et al., this volume).

In order to evaluate improvement and to plan the units accordingly, we decided to focus on writing only. Since the course consisted of three units, we organised the AR in three loops, each ending in a written task used as starting point to design the following loop. The curriculum cycles were redesigned considering the teacher’s appreciation of students’ progress and needs. Since this is an AR model (Burns 2010), it was observations and reflections on class work and on the students’ independent production that helped us re-plan each unit.

In each loop we documented the students' learning opportunities and studied their writing through detailed analysis at the phrase, clause and textual levels. We used this data as input for the planning of the forthcoming AR loop.

One of the researchers was the teacher of this group. Her feedback about each lesson and the materials taken to document the lessons were systematically shared and discussed every fortnight among the three of us.

Finally, two experts in CEFR evaluation were consulted as external advisors about how far the tests designed in the course could evaluate the descriptors issued by the CEFR for an A2 level. They received copies of the syllabus and the tests and wrote a report whose main findings are summarised below.

Analysis and results

Unit 1, Loop 1: Who am I?

Since the students in this course obtained an A0–A1 mark in the on-line Oxford Placement Test, we assumed they had very limited English competence. Unit 1 of the programme, 'Who am I?', diagnosed students' command of English. It was built around a collage and a written text modelled by the teacher and then produced by the students. The teacher's communicative purpose was to introduce herself to her students; her pedagogic purpose was to use both visual and verbal texts as models for students' own productions and to teach them how to write this particular genre: expressive descriptions.

Building the field

The teacher shared her collage, which consisted of five different pictures about her own family, likes and values. The students were asked to describe these pictures in order to assess their ability to communicate ideas about everyday life. Faced with this task, students could barely name people or objects using hypernyms (e.g. they could produce *kids*, but not *boy and girl*) and they could not build up complete clauses (i.e., *The picture shows a girl swimming in a pool*). Therefore, instead of sharing her text, the teacher realised she had to review her

planning and share on the board the writing of brief and simple clauses that described the pictures offered.

The students provided the ideas and focused on the details, whereas the teacher provided the language needed. Students had to locate pictures in the collage, expressing existence and expanding the noun group to give details about the people and entities involved. These demands were made explicit to the students, and lexico-grammatical items that helped them fulfil them – prepositional phrases of location, existential verbs and adjectives – were offered, explained and categorised, with an explicit focus on the function they were performing.

Learning about the genre: deconstructing the text

Afterwards, the teacher could introduce her model text. The ideas on the board were compared to her text (Figure 2), which showed her the need to focus on complex clauses expressing reasons:

I'll start with the picture of my three kids, because –together with my husband- they are the most important people in my life. They are called Mateo, Clara and Pedro and, as you can see, they are 10, 7 and 2 years old. In this photograph we were having a walk in Jardín Botánico and we stopped to take a picture. We live around the corner of this public garden, so we usually go for long walks there. I love walking and spending time with my children.

Figure 2. Teacher's text

She guided students in the analysis of each paragraph with explicit focus on her intention when writing it and on how each paragraph contributed to the overall purpose of the text. Once the students understood the writer's intentions, the teacher made them focus on the linguistic items used to convey them.

Direct the person's attention to one of the pictures	I'll start with the picture of my three kids...
Give reasons/ explain why you put that picture there	because...
Give details of the people in the picture: names and ages.	They are called... and they are... years old.
Mention the activity the person was doing in the picture.	In this picture we were...
Give personal details (the place where I live) that are connected to the place where the photograph was taken and the activity I was doing.	I live around the corner of... so we usually...
Mention the activities I like doing and are illustrated in the picture.	I love walking and...

Figure 3. Chart paragraphing

Notes on the whiteboard collectively produced were organised and given to the students in a worksheet to help them write independently.

Guided practice in using the genre: joint construction

At this point, students were invited to jointly construct one text, with the teacher changing one picture in her collage. Students were invited to write a paragraph using this second picture.

Independent use of the genre

Once the schematic structure and the lexico-grammatical items in the text were analysed, and after the second text had been collectively written, students were well-equipped to attempt their own text.

I'll start with the picture of my favourite song.it's "so what" it's singer is pink.Pink singer rock and pop.

I listen to this song everyday

I selected "so what" because pink is it's my favourite singer.

The image on the top to the left hand corner is my favourite book "city of glass.of the saga the mortal instruments it is weitten by cassandra clare.

I love reading this book in my free time.

I chose it because i love this book.

I'll continue with the image the middle it's the a sketchbook.

I select a it's image because i enjoy drawing animes forever in my free time.

The next picture on the bottom the left they are anime naruto shippuden and fairy tail.

I like much because it's funny and entertaining.

When never i can watching the series,

I chose this picture because it my favourite series anime.

I finish with the picture of manga volume 26 of full metal alchemist.

I like to read sometime when i'm bored.

I chose this because is my only manga and my favorite.

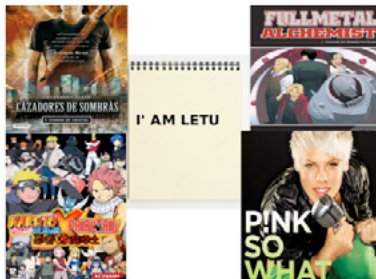


Figure 4. A student's 'Who am I?' text and collage

They were guided to design their own collage and write their text introducing themselves, using their notes and conferring with the teacher about what content to include and how to make the best use of their notes to make their own meanings clear. They wrote several drafts.

Written test for loop 1

The written test asked students to look at a new collage and write a sentence about each of the pictures there. Instructions also required mentioning where pictures were located.

WRITING: DESCRIBING PICTURES

5. **NOW**, have a look at this collage and write a sentence about each of the pictures. Remember to say where each picture is located.

15 MARKS

(1 for mentioning location of picture, 1 for use of lexis connected to the different fields, 1 for accuracy – pronouns and gerunds-)



Figure 5. Test for 'Who am I?'

To close the first AR loop, students' productions were analysed using five categories emerging from class work: location of picture, use of specific lexis, accuracy in the use of pronouns, accuracy in the use of gerunds and subject-verb agreement. These categories analysed language at the phrase and clause level. (Appendix 1).

It is relevant to point out that two students showed an attempt to write a cohesive text (though instructions only mentioned one sentence per picture), trying to use text connectives or whole clauses which had been highlighted in class to sequence ideas (Eg: *I'll start with the picture on the top to the left [...] I'll continue with the picture on the bottom to the right[...] Finally, [...]*).

Meeting CEFR expectations: external advisors' report Test 1

Worksheet 1 – Unit 2

ITS English Language Project

DEFINING TERMS 1

Please, answer the following questions:

1) These are all the careers taught at ITS. What's the one you are studying?

Information Technology	Electronics	Sports
General Mechanics	Electrotechnics	Automechanics
Aeronautics	Logistics	Health and Safety

Useful words: different branches in technology and engineering

Electronics	Technician
Information	
Computer Network	

Electrical	Engineer
Mechanical	
Chemical	
Systems	
Electronics	
Civil	

General	Mechanic
Motorcycle	
Refrigeration	
Air Conditioning	
Aircraft	

Assistant	Coach
Drama	
Voice	

2) Once you graduate, what will you become?

I will become a

3) Which of these professionals might graduate from I.T.S.?

.....

Figure 6. Worksheet 1, Unit 2: 'Professional ambitions'

As for the report written by the external advisors on test 1, they considered it valid and reliable and they said it followed topics and notions in the A2 CEFR level. This external feedback is relevant in that it shows the innovations of a course based on genre theory as compatible with evaluations produced from the perspective of the CEFR.

Closing Loop 1

In view of the improvement and significant learning shown in the texts at the end of this loop, considering how students only remembered loose words such as 'kids' at the beginning of the course, we decided

to focus, in the following loop, on less personal and more public texts, that would demand from students more technical lexis to produce a more rigorous genre. We also envisioned that students would continue polishing basic grammatical structures by means of revisiting and practicing them.

Unit 2, Loop 2: ‘Professional ambitions’

The texts analysed in Unit 2, on ‘Professional ambitions’, were definitions.

Building the field

To build the field we brainstormed the professional careers that can be studied for at *ITS*. Then, we thought of the professionals they would become when they graduated. We explored the different duties they would have as they started their working life. We organised all that information in a worksheet and focused on word formation and the suffixes used to modify nouns and talk about careers and professionals: *If you study electronics, you become an electrician.*

Learning about the genre: deconstructing the text

The first model texts analysed were definitions of different professionals, taken from *Wikipedia* and other web pages, as in the project we insist on the importance of dealing with texts written by native speakers of the language. These texts focused on what those professionals are, such as tradespeople or technicians, what they do and the tools/equipment they use to carry out those professional duties, for example medical monitoring devices and stationary machines.

In order to explore the schematic structure of definitions, the students were invited to read the texts and identify what professionals are, what they do and what they work with.

As stated by Jim Martin (reproduced in Boccia et al., 2013), the deconstruction stage in the cycle involves reflection and discussion about:

1. the social purpose of the text;
2. the stages or steps the text goes through in achieving its purpose – schematic structure;
3. the language – linguistic forms – realising the different stages.

As for the study of point three, the teacher explicitly focused on nouns representing professions and professionals by comparing and contrasting them. She also focused on the use of the indefinite articles 'a/an', existential processes (verb 'to be'), material processes associated with the different careers (e.g. design, develop, maintain), subject-verb agreement, and noun groups representing tools, machines or buildings.

Guided practice in using the genre: joint construction

The students and the teacher jointly constructed a definition of *IT technician*, after sorting out different content words into two groups, one with words associated with the definition of *IT technician*, the other associated with the definition of *assistant coach*. Again, using the lexico-grammatical items modelled before, and with the help of the teacher, the students wrote this definition. The task required a revision on the spelling of indefinite articles, subject verb agreement, and text connectives for adding information (e.g. 'also').

The students could organise the information in simple clauses, for example: '*Information technicians are computer technicians. They help design and develop computer systems and graphic content*'. Going back to the model texts, we tried to join these simple sentences into one complex sentence, studying the linguistic resources offered by the writer of the model text.

Independent use of the genre

As for independent writing, the students were asked to write the definition of *assistant coach* using the content words that had been sorted out under this headline. Although the task aimed at independent writing, the students wrote it in small groups of three, without the teacher's intervention. The task proved more challenging than planned. The texts showed that the students could understand and reproduce the schematic structure of the definition. Moreover, their use of the forms that had been studied was quite accurate. However, their texts lacked an accurate use of prepositions and connectors, which interfered with communication at times. Therefore, to close the loop, the teacher decided to change the genre while keeping the field of the unit, an alternative already considered in the literature on the curriculum cycle (Derewianka, 2013; Rose and Martin, 2012).

Written test for loop 2

The written task at the end of this second cycle asked students to have a look at two photographs of professionals carrying out their duties in their workplaces and describe them in as much detail as possible.

4. Have a look at these pictures and describe them in as much detail as you can.

8 MARKS



Figure 7. *Test, Loop 2*

This evaluation offered the students the opportunity to revisit the schematic structure of descriptions but adding the language needed to write about another field of study, again moving along the cline of familiarity from the most familiar (family and preferences) to the most public (careers and professional duties). The students benefited from both, the security of attempting a task and a type of text in which they had proved to be successful (picture description), and the challenge of using a whole set of linguistic resources that had been the focus of the latest analysis. It gave the teachers the chance to revisit the language items thought to have been internalised by students by the end of unit 1 and help them expand their ideas together with their English language.

Thu, when the genre was relatively specific and the field relatively technical, students were not asked to write independently. Instead, they wrote a type of text that makes use of visual aids. It is our belief that multimodal texts help students anchor their ideas and gradually build up and expand their skill to find clear organisations of ideas that grammatically fit into English clauses.

In order to observe progression in students' achievements, we kept the categories of analysis of the first test, although we decided to add two more: accurate word order in the phrase and accurate word order in the clause. This involved a movement in the teacher's expectation of students' written production. (See Appendix 2 for a table of findings).

When analysing students' work, we observed that:

1. all the students were consistent in the use of phrases of location and specific lexis connected to the fields of professional ambitions.
2. all the students were consistently accurate in the use of pronouns.
3. the accuracy in the use of gerunds offered difficulties (three students could not use them properly).
4. six students consistently used correct subject-verb agreement, while one of them did not.
5. as for the categories evaluating accurate word order in the phrase and in the clause, six of the students showed accuracy in their productions.

It seems relevant that, apart from being accurate, the texts of four students were very communicative, responsive and ambitious (they not only described what they could see, but they interpreted the situations in each picture).

Meeting CEFR expectations: external advisors' report Test 2

Regarding the report written by the external advisors on the writing test set for the second loop, they explained that they considered it valid and reliable, as expressed below:

The topic of this unit is [...] included in the inventory of topics in the language specifications of Cambridge English: Key English Test (CEFR Level A2) and in the 'Themes and specific notions' listed in the Council of Europe's *Waystage 1990* under the subheading 'Personal identification' (1990: 32, 33). Therefore, this writing task should elicit a sample of language at A2 level.

Closing Loop 2

The written evaluation in the second loop showed that students were more accurate than in the first loop at producing expressive descrip-

tions. In this evaluation, specific lexis was more likely to be controlled because the thematic choice was rather narrow, so, in order to offer a further challenge, we decided to return to more personal texts, but in a less familiar situation. We chose *job interviews*, thinking that this topic would put students in the situation of revising and polishing the basic sentence structure. It also aimed at widening their lexical range, revisiting lexical fields from both Unit 1 and Unit 2, and at offering students the opportunity to organise their messages effectively while addressing a less familiar audience: a prospective employer.

Unit 3, Loop 3: ‘Tell me about yourself’

In order to allow for this new loop, Unit 3 was about job interviews. The cycle was organised around a multimodal text which is a model answer to the question *Tell me about yourself*. It was taken from a web site that prepares job seekers to do well in interviews. The purpose of this cycle was for students to make an oral self-introduction for a job interview.

As we concluded in our experience in the second loop, and in order to offer students the opportunity to recycle what they had learned, this cycle drew on work done in Unit 1, *Who am I?* for self-descriptions. It implied the use of nouns pre-modified by adjectives; simple and complex sentence structure; and use of coordinating (*and, so, but*) and subordinating (*because*) conjunctions. It also drew on the theme in Unit 2 (*work*) and on the use of relational processes and focus on sentence structure.

Building the field 1: focus on situation and useful language

The teacher opened the work to be done during the unit by describing a picture that showed two situations at job interviews, one situation in which the candidate seemed to feel relaxed and successful, and another in which he looked defeated. This visual support offered students the opportunity to activate and introduce lexis connected to the field of job interviews (interviewer, interviewee, curriculum vitae, ask and answer questions) and discuss what is and is not expected in these situations.

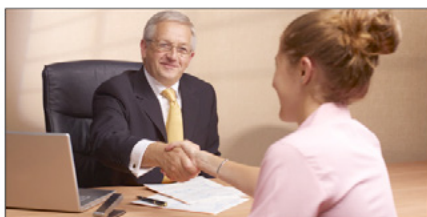
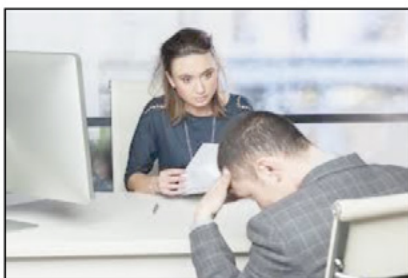


Figure 8. Visuals for oral work on interviews



Then, they read a text (a simple personal procedure) called *Tell me about yourself. Job Interview Questions* (by Joe Turner), taken from a web page (<http://jobsearch.about.com/od/interviewquestionsanswers/qt/yourself.htm>) which teaches people who are looking for a job how to get prepared for the interview. From this quite long and challenging text, we

meant to build the field; it was not a central text in the curriculum cycle, we only concentrated on one of the pieces of advice given to candidates: giving the interviewer what the writer calls ‘Your Unique Selling Proposition’ (USP). This brief paragraph explained what a USP consists of and offered an example.

Building the field 2: small loop of paragraph deconstruction and joint construction

The text was deconstructed in class, focusing on its schematic structure and on the grammatical structures used to name each stage. A USP likely to be used by any of the students in a job interview was jointly constructed. To do this, it was necessary to recover contents, ideas and lexico-grammatical items worked with in previous loops, such as nouns to name professions, and skills expected from any graduate from this group (e.g. programming, repairing computers, developing programmes).

Learning about the genre: deconstructing the text

We watched a video in which a woman models the answer to the question *Tell me about yourself* in a job interview. This was the central text in this loop. We watched the text once to try to answer the question ‘What is the position the woman is applying for?’. It is important

to mention that, apart from the woman's speech, the video showed captions that made explicit her intentions as she proceeded to give information about herself.

Once the students had answered that the woman was applying for a pharmaceutical sales position, we concentrated on the professional duties a pharmaceutical sales representative could have and the personal qualities that she needed for this job, to build the field for a deeper understanding of the woman's speech.

To deconstruct the text, the students were offered the script of the woman's speech with the more personal information removed.

Eg: I have *six and a half years of experience* to bring to this position.
I have to bring to this position.

By means of many listening opportunities, the students could complete the script. All the chunks removed contained ideas that had been prepared in the 'building the field' stage. Once they did this, they were asked to match each paragraph in the script with the name of a stage (Figure 9).

As they finished these tasks, the students had listened to the text so many times that they could easily reproduce the woman's words. Some parts were difficult to understand but the students would not accept the teacher's help to get to those meanings.

Independent use of the genre

To contextualise a task that could be set as an independent construction of the text studied, it became necessary to analyse some job ads, again building the field to prepare analysis and deconstruction. Three advertisements connected to the students' field of study were taken to class. This offered a brand new opportunity to revise careers, professions, and skills required, as well as personal qualities.

Unfortunately, since it was the end of the course (mid-November 2015), this cycle was not finished and the students did not have the time to independently construct a text, for the teacher's timing was not adequate and the school year came to an end. Nevertheless, stu-

TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF – independent Writing

GROUP WORK

ASK:

*Imagine you want to apply for the positions of **COMPUTER OPERATOR** offered in the advertisements we read in previous classes. Write the answer to the question: **TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF.***

MATERIALS:

1. Job Ads.
2. Tell me about yourself: model answer.
3. Tell me about yourself: schematic structure.
4. ITS brochure: career description.

1. A. PLANNING YOUR ANSWER

Take notes on the following questions:

WHAT POSITION ARE YOU APPLYING FOR?

How many **years of experience** do you have in this job?

What **have you learnt** during those years?

What **personal qualities** make you a good candidate?

What **skills** are valuable for this job?

2. WRITING YOUR ANSWER

*Now, write your answer. Use the worksheet: **Tell me about yourself: SCHEMATIC STRUCTURE** to help you organize your information.*

Figure 9. *Worksheet on text structure*

dents chose one job they might be interested in from those offered in the ads. Most of them were interested in the one seeking computer operators and wrote a personal statement answering the question: ‘Tell me about yourself’.

Written test for loop 3

There was time for a final test which evaluated the students’ improvement in writing as compared to the previous loops. The written test for Unit 3 consisted of two tasks:

Task A: This task was a problem solving activity (Figure 10). Students had to read a job ad and two candidate descriptions in order to decide who would be the best candidate for the company. They were expected to give reasons to support their answers.

READING AND WRITING: PROBLEM SOLVING

4. *Have a look at this job ad and answer the question:
In your opinion: Which of these two candidates should this company hire? Why?*

ELECTRICAL ENGINEER

A leading group of companies involved in education, construction & manufacturing requires the services of an Electrical Engineer for their Head Office at Lahore.

The ideal candidate should have:

- B.Sc Electrical Engineering
- at least 4-5 years in a reputable organization
- computer proficiency skills
- good communication skills

*Please send us your updated C.V. and a recent passport size photograph latest by 23rd November, 2012 to:
vacancies31@gmail.com*

Only short-listed candidates will be contacted

CANDIDATE 1: Christian Ford

30 years old. Has a degree in electrical engineering. Has seven and a half years of experience as an electrician at a local company. Has basic computer skills and good communication skills. Likes challenges and solving problems. Is married with two children. Hopes to earn about US\$ 4000.

CANDIDATE 2: Joseph Stevens

25 years old. Has a degree in electrical engineering. Has just graduated from University, so has no previous experience. Has good computer skills. Is perfectionist, and reliable. Prefers working alone to working in groups. Is single. Has no salary expectations.

.....

.....

.....

.....

6 MARKS (1 for organization, 3 for content and reference to ad and profiles, 2 for accuracy – modal verbs and complex clause of reason)

Figure 10. Final test. Written task 1

At word level, five out of the seven students were very successful in the use of specific lexis and four were consistent in their accurate use of pronouns. At clause level, also, four students showed accurate word order, though when focusing on details only two were consistent in

subject-verb agreement. Also, four used the clause complex to express reason (*because*) in a correct form. It is worth noticing that the feature that most students complied with was text organisation (see Appendix 3).

Task B

In the second task, students were asked to describe a picture (Figure 11), as they had previously done in tests for loops 1 and 2.

WRITING: DESCRIBING A PICTURE

5. Have a look at this picture and describe it in as much detail as possible. Remember to include information about the people in it, the place where they are, what they are doing and their feelings.

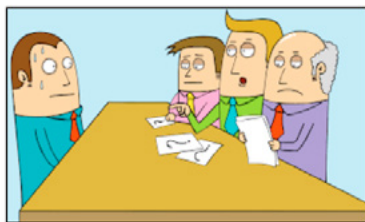


Figure 11. Picture description

In this task, students were asked to give information about the people there (what they were doing, how they were feeling) and the place where they were.

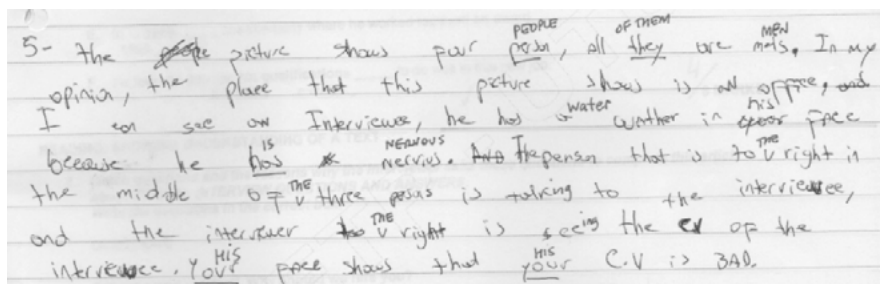
This time, students wrote more and had no verbal input. They were very successful in their use of specific lexis and in the organisation of the texts and also rather consistent in their use of pronouns, though they were not so accurate in word order at clause level, particularly in subject-verb agreement (see Appendix 4).

Meeting CEFR expectations: external advisors' report Test 3

The report states that 'in terms of language all the items described correspond to an A2 level'. Apart from that, the rest of the comments are clearly along the lines of the previous ones: that, apart from the test's appropriateness, the CEFR level would ultimately be ensured by the marker's standardisation with that level.

Closing loop 3

This loop was the last one in this action research process. The text below (Figure 12) clearly shows the improvement in the capacity of textual production in a student who had started a few months before barely able to produce a few isolated words. It shows how much is left for improvement in terms of accuracy and variety; but it also reveals the same student's ability to communicate in English without major problems. The direction taken in the successive loops and the help offered seem to have been effective in meeting expectations about a single English language course, in the context described.



The picture shows four person, all they are are mans. In my opinion, the place that this picture shows is an office. I can see an interviewee, he has a wather in his face because he has nervius. The person that is to right in the middle of three persons is talking to the interviewee, and the interviewer to right is see the cv of the interviewee. Your face shows that your cv is bad.

Figure 12. A student's final text, without teacher's intervention, and transcription

Last comments: KET

There was a fourth text that the students had to write independently. This text was not part of the AR loops, but it offers some relevant information.

The text was produced as response to the written part of a mock test of the Cambridge Key English Test used to determine whether the students were ready to sit for the evaluation or not. The task (Reading and Writing. Part 9, Question 56) asked the students to write an e-mail to a friend: 'Read the e-mail from your English friend Alex. Write an email to Alex answering the questions. Write 25 to 35 words'

All students but one attempted the task and were successful in achieving their communicative purpose: fixing a date and suggesting a movie and the food they wanted to eat. It is interesting to note that, although students had never studied friendly emails as genres, they managed to write clear and well-organised texts, beyond lexi-co-grammatical accuracy.

Final placement test

The same placement test that had been used in March was applied in November with erratic results: clear improvement in some cases but very poor in others. In fact, only two out of the seven students changed their levels as described by the CEFR (one moved from A1 to A2 and the other one from A0 to A1). The rest of the students had an A1 result in both the placement and the final tests (Figure 13).

	Placement Test (CEFR descriptors)	Final Test (CEFR descriptors)
Student 1	A1 - 4	A1 - 8,3
Student 2	A1 - 12	A2 - 22,1
Student 3	A0 - 1	A1 - 7,8
Student 4	A1 - 20	A1 - 12,4
Student 5	A1 - 8	A1 - 3,6
Student 6	A1 - 6	A1 - 10,7
Student 7	A1 - 2	A1 - 2,2

Figure 13. Students' test results according to CEFR

This information is very different from what can be inferred from the students' written texts and their general performance as evaluated by the teacher.

There are very different questions left when trying to explain this difference: Does this tell us about the differences between the genre approach and more traditional teaching methods? Does this question the efficiency of the placement test to measure students' use of English and reading in terms of the CEFR descriptors? At least, we found it worth including this information and the open questions it raised.

Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of the three loops, including the study of the written productions and the results obtained, allows us to draw the following conclusions.

Meaningful learning and significant improvement

The main conclusion of this AR project is that students with a basic level of English were able to produce texts, this is, purposeful, organised stretches of discourse. We also see that they learnt that texts have a social nature and that they take part in the ways that different communities make meanings (Derewianka, 2013). This understanding of the social nature of texts was seen when students showed that they had a clear communicative purpose, observed certain stages, used specific lexis and considered the relationship they had with the addressee. This could be increasingly seen in the texts produced, even in the email written for the KET mock.

In terms of the appropriate use of the language, students showed improvement as they moved from just naming with isolated nouns and expressing existence of different entities using existential verbs in simple clauses, such as 'There is a girl!', 'There is a beach'. They ended the course naming and describing with extended noun groups. They managed to use evaluative and factual describers/adjectives. They could also state what the different entities were doing and interpret their feelings and intentions with complex clauses of reason.

Together with the ability to write texts, we realised that the students' work showed a move from the mere description of pictures to the interpretation of visual texts, inferring from the image what the situation captured in the snapshot was about, and explaining it as a whole. In other words, a similar educational development as the one in writing was shown in the understanding of pictures. This is also connected to the genre approach, in the sense that students learned to say what they thought with confidence and taking risks, instead of just complying with tasks that request good use of English lexico-grammar. This was an unexpected outcome brought about by this AR research, since it was not our clear intention from the beginning.

Genre theory and the CEFR

The students' most relevant achievement was, from a genre perspective, their ability to write texts that understand and respond appropriately to the requested task's aim and audience. However, they still need to polish their lexical and grammatical accuracy, which is considered basic in Cambridge descriptors. This is the reason why, when dealing with writing and speaking, it is important to have teachers standardise their approaches, analysing and evaluating students' productions in the most similar way possible. Otherwise, the task or test itself cannot say much about students' complying with a particular level. This may be a foregone conclusion, considering the different approaches to language teaching and learning. Nonetheless, possibilities of constructing a dialogue between different approaches seem more promising than might have been predicted.

Strengths and limitations of the study

The fact that we were three researchers working in collaboration was particularly enriching. Reflection and analysis benefitted from this, as well as from the conclusions drawn at the end of each loop to plan for the following one. We might have preferred to end the course with more students; however, this did not affect the AR itself.

Emergent ideas and areas of further research

A similar AR project in all the groups involved in the Programme at Vocational Schools would be very promising to help all our colleagues to learn from this perspective. Also, since this AR project focused on writing, in the future we would like to do research about oral production. Finally, the unexpected emergent issue that came up in connection with visual texts and textualisation leaves us interested in doing AR on multimodal texts and how they can foster students' learning of English as a foreign language.

AR as a professional development tool

AR helped us change our teaching experience into professional knowledge, since it focuses on metacognitive reflection on issues that we have probably been seeing for many years without realising that they were there. During the AR process we also shared our thoughts and reflections with the other teachers in the programme who had groups with a similar level. This had a very positive impact, as they were open to implementing changes in their classrooms

as well. In this sense, AR seems to be an excellent tool that helps teachers better understand how their students learn and helps them gain a richer insight into themselves as professionals. It produces knowledge that goes with you wherever you teach, and that enables you to share it with other teachers in other contexts. This makes it even more beneficial, since it spreads among the different professional communities where one belongs. After this, we are better able to suggest to colleagues action to take when they find problems or have doubts about their teaching practice. Our insights also informed the syllabus for the elementary groups in the year following that reported on here. AR has a rewarding component also as a means to outgrow the traditional loneliness and isolation that has all too often characterised teachers' work.

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Appendix 1: Analysis of written test for Action Research loop 1

Students	Location of picture (consistent, often, seldom, never)	Use of Specific lexis (wide, many, a few, none)	Accuracy: pronouns (consistent, often, seldom, never)	Accuracy: gerunds (consistent, often, seldom, never)	Subject verb agreement (added by Laura and Serrana) (consistent, often, seldom, never)
Student 1- Comejo, Rafael	consistent	many	consistent	consistent	consistent
Student 2- Delgado, Ignacio	often	wide	see comment	never	consistent
Student 3- Falero, Adrián	consistent	wide	consistent	never	consistent
Student 4- Goudschaal, Alan	consistent	wide	see comment	consistent	consistent
Student 5- López, Martín	consistent	a few	see comment	seldom	consistent
Student 6- Méndez, Mathías	consistent	wide	consistent	seldom	consistent
Student 7- Saracho, Leticia	consistent	many	see comment	consistent	seldom

Appendix 2: Analysis of written test for Action Research loop 2

Students	Accurate use of location of picture (always, often, seldom, never)	Use of Specific texts (wide, many, a few, none)	Accuracy: pronouns (consistent, often, seldom, never)	Accuracy: gerunds (consistent, often, seldom, never)	Subject verb agreement (addid by Laura and Serrana) (consistent, often, seldom, never)	Other comments	accurate word order in the phrase (always, often, seldom, never)	accurate word order in the clause (always, often, seldom, never)
Student 1- Cornejo, Rafael	often	many	consistent	consistent	often	He uses the prepositional phrase but with the wrong preposition.	always	always
Student 2- Delgado, Ignacio	always	wide	consistent	consistent	consistent	He uses he instead of she, but we are not sure if it's because the picture is not clear. He uses full continuous form and when he needs to use the gerund he says "that repair" instead of "repairing".	always	always
Student 3- Falero, Adrian	always	many	often	often	consistent		always	always
Student 4- Goudschaal, Alan	never	wide	often	seldom	consistent		always	always
Student 5- López, Martin	always	many	consistent	consistent	consistent	He uses pronouns only once, but correctly.	always	always
Student 6- Méndez, Mathias	always	many	often	never	consistent	Only opportunity of using it is wrong (gerund).	always	always
Student 7- Saracho, Leticia	often	wide	consistent	seldom	seldom	Tries to convey meaning but is very inaccurate in general.	often	seldom

Appendix 3: Analysis of written test for Action Research loop 3 (Task A)

Students	Use of Specific lexis (wide, many, a few, none)	Accuracy: pronouns (consistent, often, seldom, never)	Accuracy: gerunds (consistent, often, seldom, never)	Subject verb agreement (consistent, often, seldom, never)	accurate word order in the clause (consistent, often, seldom, never)	use of modal verbs (consistent, often, seldom, never)	accurate use of complex clause of reason (consistent, often, seldom, never)	organization (consistent, often, seldom, never)	reference to input text (consistent, often, seldom, never)
Student 1- Cornejo, Rafael	wide	often	not applicable	often	consistent	seldom	seldom	consistent	often
Student 2- Delgado, Ignacio	wide	consistent	not applicable	often	often (mixes main verb in one case)	no explicit use of the structure though not necessary	no explicit use of the structure though not necessary	consistent	often
Student 3- Falero, Aurán	wide	consistent	not applicable	consistent	consistent	no explicit use of the structure though not necessary	consistent	consistent	consistent
Student 4- Goudschaal, Alan	wide	consistent	not applicable	often (he not have children)	consistent	consistent (though lifted from rubric)	consistent	consistent	often
Student 5- López, Martín	a few many	seldom	not applicable	seldom	seldom	not used	consistent	seldom	seldom
Student 6- Méndez, Matthias	taken from the moodle)	often	not applicable	seldom	seldom	not used	consistent	consistent	often
Student 7- Saracho, Leticia	wide (main)	consistent	not applicable	consistent	consistent	seldom (she tries to use it, but she does it inaccurately)	seldom	consistent	consistent

Appendix 4: Analysis of written test for Action Research loop 1 (Task B)

Students	Use of Specific lexis (verbs, many, a few, none)	Accuracy: pronouns (consistent, often, seldom, never)	Accuracy: gerunds (consistent, often, seldom, never)	Subject verb agreement (added by Laura and Serrana) (consistent, often, seldom, never)	accurate word order in the clause (consistent, often, seldom, never)	use of modal verbs (consistent, often, seldom, never)	accurate use of complex clause of reason (consistent, often, seldom, never)	organization (consistent, often, seldom, never)	reference to input text (consistent, often, seldom, never)
Student 1- Cornejo, Rafael	a few	consistent	not applicable	consistent	often	not applicable	not applicable	often	not applicable
Student 2- Delgado, Ignacio	ends	consistent	not applicable	often	consistent	not applicable	not applicable	consistent	not applicable
Student 3- Piñero, Adrián	ends	consistent	not applicable	consistent	consistent	not applicable	not applicable	consistent	not applicable
Student 4- Goudschal, Ais	ends	often	not applicable	consistent	consistent	not applicable	not applicable	consistent	not applicable
Student 5- López, Martín	ends	consistent	not applicable	often	often	not applicable	not applicable	consistent	not applicable
Student 6- Méndez, Matías	ends	often	not applicable	often	consistent	not applicable	not applicable	consistent	not applicable
Student 7- Sánchez, Lucía	ends	consistent	not applicable	often	seldom	not applicable	not applicable	consistent	not applicable

Blended learning in the English secondary school classroom: an Argentinian experience



Silvia Severino

*Ing. Eduardo Latzina
Technical School, City of
Buenos Aires, Argentina*

English and technology have become a must in 21st century education. In Argentina, both have been included in the curricula since preschool. In the case of the former, the purpose is that learners can be exposed to comprehensible input during their whole schooling in order to acquire and develop the four language skills. However, in state schools, these activities are on the whole a utopian goal and the main concern throughout this action research paper, given that the current context seriously affects the pedagogical classroom conditions. Therefore, blended learning appears to be an attractive and practical solution to current challenges.

About the author

Silvia María Severino, from Argentina, graduated from ISP Joaquín V. González as a teacher of English and holds a *Licenciada en Lengua Inglesa* degree from UTN (2011). In 2014 she finished her *Especialización Superior en TIC (Escuela de Maestros)*. She has just earned a double master's degree in TEFL from *Universidad Europea del Atlántico* (Spain) and *Universidad Internacional Iberoamericana* (UNINI, Puerto Rico). She was a speaker at the fifth *Jornada 'Buenos Aires y sus Idiomas'* organized by *Gerencia Operativa de Lenguas Extranjeras-Dirección General de Planeamiento Educativo del Ministerio de Educación de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires* in May 2016. She is currently working as a private tutor for post-colonial literature dissertations.

Introduction

The spread of English as a global language has become unstoppable due to the growing use of technology, and in the field of ELT ‘anyone concerned with second language teaching and learning in the 21st century needs to grasp the nature of the unique technology mediated tasks learners can engage in for language acquisition’ (Chapelle, 2001: 2). Accordingly, English and technology have been included in the curricula of state-run schools in Argentina since preschool so that learners can be exposed to comprehensible input during their whole schooling.

Thanks to the infusion of technology into the curriculum, blended learning (henceforth, BL) appears to be an attractive and practical solution to current difficulties since, as Sharma (2010) explains, it

involves combining a traditional course (face to face) with ‘online learning’. Ideally, the course combines the best elements of the classroom with the best elements of distance learning, such as being free to study anytime, anywhere.

Hence, there is a significant shift to learners’ responsibility as more work will depend on them using technology.

There are several reasons why the implementation of BL may be beneficial and practical. Osguthorpe and Graham (2003; also see Tomlinson and Whittaker, 2013: 13–14) identify six: ‘pedagogical richness [or effectiveness]; access to knowledge; social interaction; personal agency (i.e. learner control and choice); cost effectiveness; and ease of revision’. Sharma and Barrett (2007: 7) highlight that students have the advantage of being able to work ‘in their own time, at their own convenience and at their own pace’, and Tomlinson and Whittaker (2013) observe that learners nowadays expect technology to be integrated into their language classes.

Based on previous studies of BL, it seems to be able to provide opportunities for improving language skills and building learners’ autonomy. The technological resources at hand may enhance motivation and students can work at their own pace, which will probably help them get better school marks.

This action research (AR) study aimed at improving English skills development on a course I taught and, I hoped, at increasing wider awareness of the empowering experience that AR can be for anybody who tries to act upon a problem in search of a solution. Accordingly, I introduced BL in my course to find the answers to these questions:

1. Does BL improve the teaching and learning process of the four skills in my course?
2. Does it contribute to teaching this heterogeneous group?
3. Does it help students develop their individual skills and improve their marks?

A difficult background

The low marks many students usually obtain in English may arise from their apathy to study, the same as for any other compulsory subject. Among the main reasons for their negative attitude are likely to be the monolingual context; lack of expectations to study, work or travel abroad; and the government allowance that many students receive independently of any academic performance. Moreover, they have several opportunities in the period December–March to resit for the subjects they have failed during the school year.

To put it in plain words: present circumstances make it difficult to learn and teach English because of large-size classes (30 students average), heterogeneous levels of knowledge, discipline problems, lack of materials, motivation and few contact hours. As a result, teachers feel isolated and frustrated and most students do not learn.

Teaching context

The class where this AR was carried out belongs to *Escuela Técnica N° 35 DE 18 Ing. Eduardo Latzina de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires*, founded in 1951. Students study during six years to graduate as technicians. The first three they follow the usual academic curriculum (*ciclo básico común*). After that they have to choose one of the two technical tracks the school offers: Automotive or Computing. Three years later they graduate with a degree which enables them to

apply for a job and/or to continue into professional higher education at university.

Regarding technological resources, there is a web-enabled computer lab in the school, but no Internet connection in the classrooms. According to *Plan Conectar Igualdad*, the government gives beginner students a netbook towards the middle of the school year and they can do tasks on this in school which do not need Internet connection. The students who attend this school belong to all social strata –mainly to the middle and lower middle classes – since there are not many technical schools. In general, the students' English level ranges from absolute beginners to pre-intermediate.

As regards teachers, most of us work in several courses, generally in different schools, and our work day extends between 8 to 12 hours. Consequently, it is not easy to find further time to work on projects, do team work or update our teaching practice. Fortunately, a colleague of mine at this school, Mariana Farías Irazábal, was available to work with me in this AR project.

Every lesson students attended two segments in line with the above-mentioned features of BL:

- The face-to-face lesson to exploit speaking and get explanations and clarification of doubts, so that students could speak and interact with peers, instead of doing nothing of the sort because in the current context speaking has been usually almost impracticable.
- The segment with their netbooks in another classroom (computer lab, library, etc.) to expand reading, listening, writing and encourage further work at home. This segment was possible because of the assistant teacher's help, as the course was divided into two groups according to two general levels, learning styles, and attitudes.

After the break, the groups changed classrooms and worked with the other teacher. In this way, all the learners would deal with the four skills every class and the teachers would be able to address their language needs more effectively because of the smaller groups.

Literature review

Definitions of Blended Learning

Blended Learning (BL) 'has always been a major part of the landscape of training, learning and instruction' (Masie, 2006) since in fact teachers have employed diverse strategies according to the resources available at all times. Bartolomé (2004) asserts that the merely virtual mode has failed to meet expectations, arguing that 'blended learning [has appeared] like an answer to the problems that e-learning finds'. Similarly, Allan (2007: 8) summarises its benefits as a combination of 'the best of a number of worlds in constructing a program that fits the particular needs in terms of time, space and technologies of a particular group of students or end-users'.

BL was introduced in the corporate world and has been in use during the last two decades. Mendieta Aguilar (2012) has traced its origin to corporations but then it expanded in the educational field. However, she highlights that there were problems related to fully virtual environments, such as sense of isolation and low motivation. Thus, purely online learning started to be rejected and, instead, a blended approach emerged.

For this reason, the importance of balancing the two constituents is advocated, since for blended learning to be effective the two component parts should be integrated with the technology complementing and not replacing the efforts of the teacher. All in all, definitions of BL abound and undoubtedly it is difficult to select the most suitable, but the ones mentioned seem to clarify its salient aspects.

As regards learners, Tiberius and Tipping (1990) highlight their active and responsible role. They explain that students have to make connections between new input and previous knowledge, given that 'teaching without an accompanying experience is like filling a lamp with water. Something has been poured in, but the result is not illuminating'. Likewise, Motteram (2013) claims that the use of digital technologies is ideal to help teachers guide learners to work independently to develop the *language* they need to learn, that is to say, to do things with language and not just learn about it. Therefore, students will be able to develop the autonomy that allows them to take responsible decisions and reflect on their own learning.

Autonomy

This feature is one of the most salient when adopting BL. (Collentine, 2011: 50) suggests that through BL learners ‘take control of their own learning, in their own time, and for their own purposes’. This assertion implies they have ‘a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action [which allow them to] develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of [their] learning’ (Little, 1991: 4).

Put simply by Dam (1995: 45), ‘a learner qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation’. In the case of the participant students, autonomy was incipient as they were very young (13–14 years old) and still in the process of developing reading comprehension abilities in their L1. Therefore, they needed to be guided, monitored closely and reminded to employ technology to study and practice, not just to play games or use Facebook.

Methods

Getting started with AR

According to Burns (2010: 3), ‘AR involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching contexts; it means taking an area you feel could be done better, subjecting it to questioning, and then developing new ideas and alternatives’. Thus, the teacher becomes an ‘undercover investigator’ while teaching. This kind of investigation can be carried out by following four broad phases: planning, action, observation and reflection.

In addition to these cycles, the production of good results depends on four main features that Dörnyei (2007: 17) considers every good researcher should possess. They are: ‘genuine curiosity, a lot of common sense, good ideas, and something that can be best described as a combination of discipline, reliability and social responsibility’. I hope that all of these can be found in this report!

Research site and the participants

As mentioned above, the research site was *Escuela Técnica N.º 35 DE 18 'Ing. Eduardo Latzina' de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires*, and the class selected was 1ro 4ta. This was composed of 28 boys and 3 girls between 13 and 14 years of age whose English levels were heterogeneous. Apart from these participant students, in the second cycle the teachers of 1ro 4ta, some school authorities and staff were interviewed about the issues that were seen as the main obstacles during the first stage. Finally, Mariana, my assistant teacher, was another essential participant. She was enthusiastic from the start, even when I had some doubts.

Data collection

This small-scale project was divided into two cycles: pre- and post-the winter recess. I employed a mixed methodology combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The data collection instruments I used were questionnaires, interviews, tests results and my teaching journal.

1st cycle (March–July)

Questionnaires

1. *My profile* was the first questionnaire I used, to get to know my students. It consisted of two sections featuring closed-ended and open-ended questions. Section A inquired into the students' background and primary school experience. Section B consisted of nine questions, using a Likert scale, about their use of computers and the Internet.
2. *Learning Styles* was a survey included in the CD-ROM of the textbook *Next Move 1*.
3. Towards the end of the first cycle, students answered a questionnaire through Edmodo at home (on paper for the ones who did not have Internet access).
4. I also gave Mariana a questionnaire to find out her perceptions of this first cycle.

Interviews with participant students

1. During the first weeks in March I held short individual interviews in English to explore the students' oral performance by asking them general questions.
2. Towards the end of both cycles, I conducted semi-structured interviews. I recorded these interviews, which were in groups. Considering their English level, we talked in Spanish.

Tests

At the end of March, a diagnostic test revealed students' English level and enabled me to identify their language needs. Later on, there were tests on units 1, 2 and 3 which were the ones included in *Next Move 1* (teacher's book). A point to remark is that several students, during the interviews or in the questionnaires, praised the design of these tests.

My journal

Following Burns (2010), I wrote in my own journal during the whole AR process. I also included the issues discussed during the meetings with Mariana. We spent long hours – sometimes more than five – on Saturdays when she came to my home, since there was no time left at school. Her informed opinions really helped me make decisions and solve difficulties.

2nd cycle (August–November)*Final questionnaires*

Students filled in a questionnaire similar to that in the 1st cycle. The other subject teachers of 1ro 4ta were also consulted about the integration of technology in their lessons and the students' homework, because both issues were the main obstacles I found during the first stage. I wanted to compare their experiences in this course with mine.

Interviews in Spanish with more participants

I interviewed the participant students in order to get their final opinions. Moreover, some school authorities and staff were consulted about the use of netbooks as learning tools, and their viewpoints on the effectiveness of current moves towards more inclusive and democratic educational goals.

Tests

The tests on units 4, 5 and 6 were those included in the teacher’s book. For Blue group, comparison was excluded because there was not enough time for practice. Also, some students of both groups had to take a makeup test after extra practice in class and homework.

My journal

I continued capturing observations and the main events that occurred during AR as well as holding meetings with Mariana to reflect and plan further actions.

Results: first cycle

Profile and learning style questionnaires

My profile questionnaire was divided into Sections A and B:

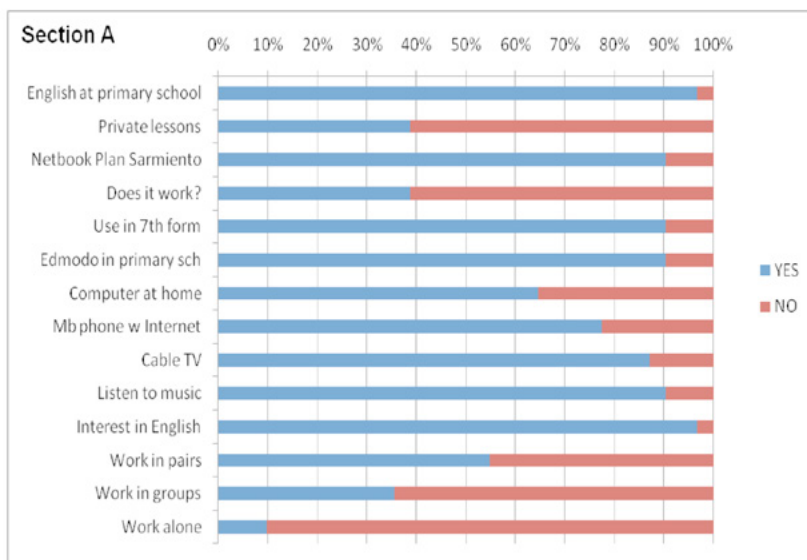


Figure 1. Learner’s background information

Figure 1 shows that all but one of the learners studied English at primary school (21 started in the 4th form). Almost 40% took private lessons, and 90% of the students (28) had the netbooks given

by the government, but more than half of these (16) did not work. 90% used Edmodo for Natural and Social Sciences, 37% for English, 15% for Spanish and 12% for Maths. Moreover, 90% listened to music – the most popular kinds were reggaeton (6), electronic (6), national rock (6), pop (3), cumbia (3), dubstep (2), bachata (2), hip hop (2) and rap (1). 30 students were interested in learning English because they thought it was necessary to get a better job, ten would like to travel and only four liked this language. As regards work patterns in class, 57% liked working in pairs, 34% in groups and 9% individually.

In terms of computers and the general use of the Internet, Figure 2 below indicates that 21 (68%) students always (in blue) participated in social networks, 16 (51%) in chats and 15 (48%) in multimedia games. Additionally, students expressed the desire to use the netbook in class mainly because lessons would be more interesting and also to avoid writing by hand.

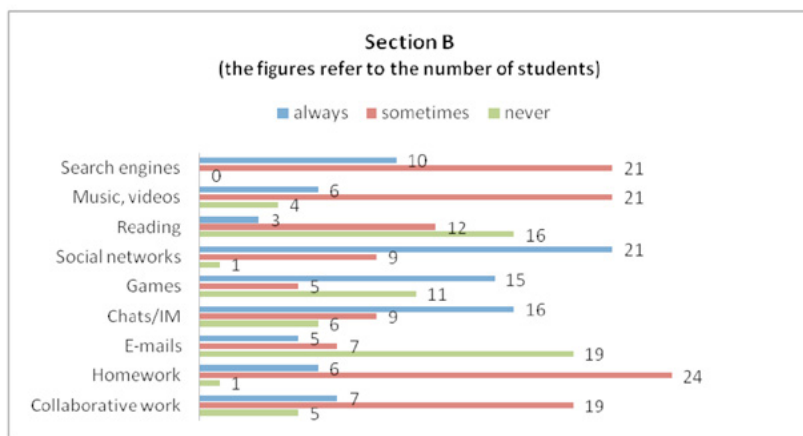


Figure 2. Learners' online practices

On the whole, Section B reveals that students used the netbook mostly for fun. In relation to homework (a central focus of this AR), only 15% answered they always used it, 45% sometimes and 40% never.

The results of the learning styles questionnaire were used, together with the diagnostic test, to stream the class into 'Green' and 'Blue' groups (Table 1).

Learning style	Visual	Auditory	Kinesthetic
# of students	21	19	23

Table 1. Learners' learning styles.

In general, most students shared two or even all three styles. Thus, this tool was not conclusive to decide who would join each group. However, there were two students who only ticked the visual style, so they joined Green group, although their marks in the diagnostic test were different. All the learners in this group shared this style, followed by the visual one. In Green group, instead, there were different combinations of styles.

Initial interviews with participant students, and diagnostic tests

During the first weeks in March I held an individual interview to explore the students' oral performance in English. I used the traditional scheme A, B, C for students who were able to use the language, D for those who could hardly say a little more than their names and E when they could say only their names or almost nothing in English. The results were as follows:

Level of performance	A	B	C	D	E
# of students	4	8	5	5	8

Table 2. Learners' grades.

In the diagnostic tests, also, we used A, B, C for passing marks and D, E for failing, E being for those students who could hardly give any correct answers. The written exam was the one in the teacher's CD-ROM, and the results were as follows:

Mark	A	B	C	D	E
# of students	5	3	4	12	2

Table 3. Diagnostic test results.

These results, together with the learning styles survey and the individual interviews, allowed me to stream the class into two big groups which we called Blue group and Green group. The less proficient (18) belonged to the former and the more advanced (13) to the latter, although at the start of the second cycle two students were ‘promoted’ to Green group from Blue group because of excellent performance and commitment.

My journal

After the initial joy of learning that my proposal had been selected as one of the six ARAS awards for 2015–16, I had to overcome a few obstacles.

Dirección de Educacion Técnica rejected my project on the grounds that, to put forward a project, a teacher must work ten periods at the school where s/he plans to carry it out (I work nine). Their authorisation was required for Mariana, as *pareja pedagógica* (co-teacher) to get her pay. However, it was absolutely in vain to explain the ‘detail’ of the award obtained, which in normal circumstances would have been granted as a well-deserving exception. For this reason, Mariana encouraged me to go ahead, saying that she would work for free (coming to school on her day off) just for the benefit of the students, her professional growth and in appreciation of the effort I was putting into this AR.

As the receipt of funds was delayed until May and lessons started in March, I had to buy the most necessary materials and pay for photocopies myself. Moreover, as the textbook *Next Move* (Pearson ELT) was new, I had to go to different bookshops because its components were not all available in the same shop. Accordingly, I bought the books, the class CDs and each of the teacher’s resource packs in four different places.

The issue of getting the funds was an odyssey. After they were deposited in my account, I had to go to my bank branch and its headquarters several times with different forms until I was authorized to get the funds – after diverse tax deductions – but as a donation (not an award). If not, current policies in Argentina did not allow me to obtain any funds from abroad.

The level of many students was lower than expected. For example, when I asked them to introduce themselves by saying just their name and age, nobody could pronounce 13, and a third of them did not remember the numbers. They said they never spoke in class (in primary school).

A great dilemma was how to adjust both segments, given that the original idea was that students would deal with speaking and grammar clarification with me, and the other three skills with Mariana, each learner using their headphones and old netbooks. But as there always were only a few netbooks, we were not able to work in this way. On top of that, most students did not take charge of their own learning. Accordingly, Mariana had to do the whole group activities. At the end of the first segment each week, when groups rotated, we quickly exchanged what we had done, so that if anything was pending we could finish it and then go on with the plan for the second segment.

Another issue was how to check homework because there was no time left in class. We had to make a selection to check the most representative exercises on the blackboard, and asked for books at random for us to mark at home. We noticed that few students did homework and all needed to be reminded to complete tasks.

On the whole, at the end of this first cycle I felt that the main achievements were the integration of students in both groups and the synchronization of our teaching work. In a word, streaming was very successful. The students' feedback on the project was very rewarding (see below). Green group had an excellent performance and Blue group was varied, with some remarkable cases. The four skills were developed mainly in class, through work together, rather than through homework.

Questionnaire to students through Edmodo at the end of the first cycle

Only 16 students responded to this questionnaire through Edmodo. The rest copied the questions and handed their answers in on paper because they could not manage to download the document or fill it in online.

The content analysis revealed that, regarding the project and the material, all students but one liked having two teachers and two periods. Everybody liked the material, although seven students did not like Edmodo because they had difficulties with the Internet at home. All of them expressed a high level of satisfaction with the division of the class into groups. They affirmed that they worked much better because everybody could participate and teachers paid attention to everybody and explained again when somebody needed this. What students liked best was working with the (Canon) multimedia projector because it allowed them to follow the lesson easily as we were pointing with the cursor at what we were doing, so that nobody could get lost. The most popular activities done so far were listening to Beatles songs and working in groups with mobile phones to record role-plays.

Concerning the lessons, students were satisfied and did not want any changes. They felt they were learning as we tried to address their language needs in detail. Three students suggested not working with Edmodo, six asked for more games and movie segments in class, and four wanted more speaking activities. Everybody expressed their interest in learning English, providing the following reasons (Figure 3):

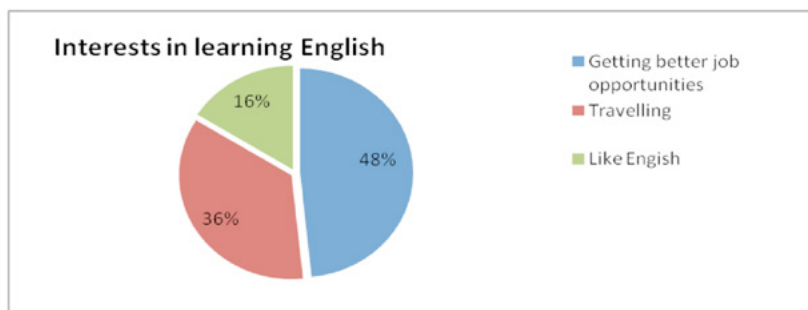


Figure 3. Learners' interests in studying English at the end of cycle 1

Taking into consideration the four skills, the most difficult for students were speaking and listening, as shown in the pie chart below (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Learners' perceptions of skill difficulty at the end of cycle 1

Although we tried to ensure that all the students could speak in every lesson, there was not enough time to practise this skill in depth. Conversely, they could do listening at home, but homework was not complied with as expected.

Questionnaire to Mariana

At the end of the first cycle, Mariana confirmed from her perspective that working with two groups had been highly effective. It was much easier to focus on every skill and on individual pace. Also, the integration of learners in each group was excellent. Another advantage was that there were two teachers to combine the strategies which best met the learners' language needs. Mariana felt that in her role as an assistant teacher she could help me with classroom management, lesson planning and marks. She suggested that she was providing a second pair of eyes to observe and help solving problems, in order that I had the flexibility to deal with the needs of this AR.

Regarding the disadvantages, working in two classrooms was difficult. During the first months Mariana went to the multipurpose room, which had to be booked in advance. However, it was used by other teachers and authorities for meetings and then, more often than not, she had to move out and look for another available room, which had no Internet access, unlike the multipurpose room.

Interviews with participating students

At the end of the first cycle, and to confirm and explore the answers to the questionnaire, I recorded interviews with students in groups, addressing five areas:

- Edmodo: Yes/No – Why? Does it help?
- BL project: strengths/weaknesses
- What did you like best?
- How do you feel in the English class? Satisfied or not?
- What would you change/like to do?

These are the results:

Most of the students agreed on the usefulness of Edmodo, although two did not like it. Many said they usually forgot to do homework and others had problems opening files, or stated that the connection was lost while working. One said he had no Internet access so he handed in everything on paper.

Regarding strengths, everybody highlighted that they worked much better in smaller groups and mentioned the benefits of being divided into two levels, so that classmates whose knowledge was more basic did not feel discouraged or anxious among those who knew more and were more competent speakers. All of the participants loved working in groups for the speaking/recording activities with mobile phones. As regards weaknesses, one student complained about having English only once a week. The rest found nothing negative to mention.

As things they liked best, all the groups mentioned the multimedia projector in the classroom, the recordings of role plays, the Beatles songs and movie segments. Two in Green group mentioned the PowerPoint presentation on the main aspects of British and Argentine cultures, following the readings and activities in the coursebook. This activity was not done by Blue group because they needed to do extra practice of the topics given.

Everybody expressed overall satisfaction with the English classes, and four highlighted personal feelings of progress and achievement as they could start speaking in English. Students suggested nothing to change, and encouraged us to continue working this way. One men-

tioned making a video (we subsequently did this in November) and using the netbooks more in class. Surprisingly, nobody felt discriminated against when I split the groups. On the contrary, everybody was relieved to join a group which had a similar level to theirs. Regarding the 'new' netbooks, students received these only after the winter recess (in August). However, there were only three or four in class because the rest did not bring them (they gave different excuses, the main being that their netbooks were locked).

Tests

Figures 5–10 show the results of the three tests administered to each group of learners (organised by colours) during the first cycle. Each test was divided into grammar, vocabulary and written dialogues for both groups. 'T1' stands for Unit 1 test, 'T2' for Unit 2, and 'T3' for Unit 3. In general, Blue group did the simpler version offered in the teacher's CD-ROM, or we simplified some of the exercises according to the practice done in class. After each test, the students with lower marks did extra practice as homework.

Blue group (18 students)

Grammar: 12 students acquired the verb to be in its three forms and 'have/has' in the affirmative. 11 could discern between options ('has/have', the simple present). However, the majority were not able to produce sentences on their own. Most of them failed with 'there is/are' and the simple present.

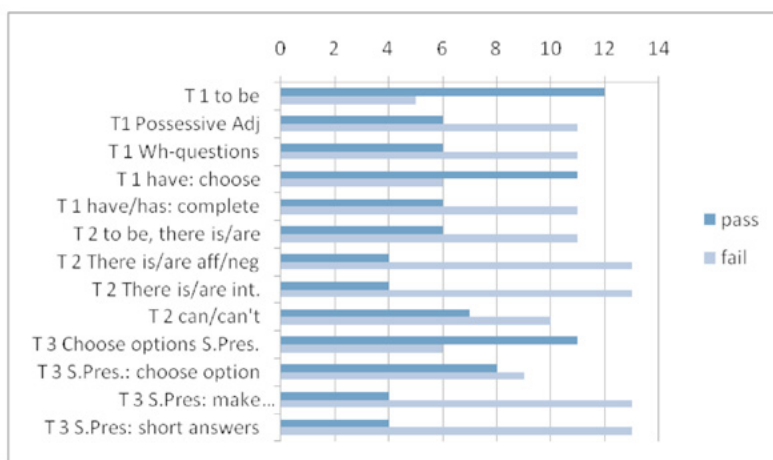


Figure 5. Grammar results.

Vocabulary: most of the students in this group did not study much for the first test (as they admitted when I gave individual feedback in class). This situation improved for the second test, and probably the use of the multimedia projector had a good effect given that many students had a visual learning style. By the last test in this cycle vocabulary retention had improved.

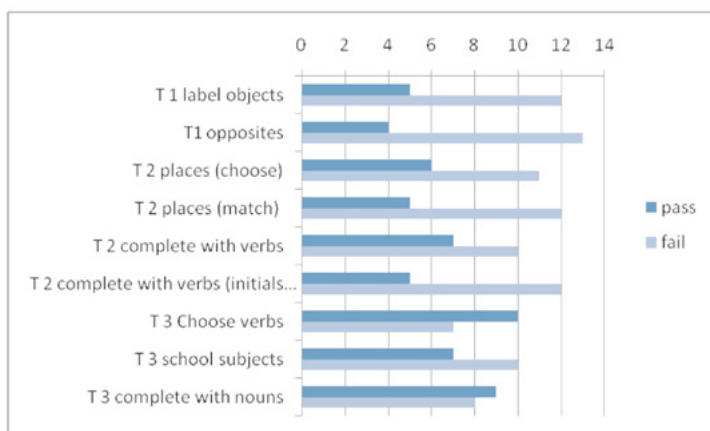


Figure 6. Vocabulary results.

Written dialogues: this was the hardest activity. Test 1 did not contain this component, while the other two tests introduced simple dialogue completion. It is important to mention that oral practice was not evaluated in tests. The number of students, lack of individual practice and discipline problems would have made it impossible to assess speaking abilities for all students.

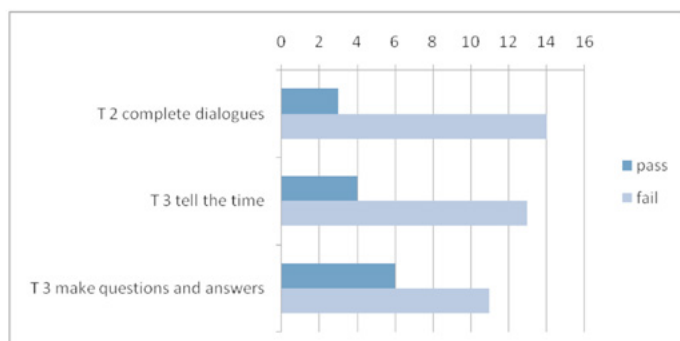


Figure 7. Written performance.

Green group (13 students)

Grammar: in this group everybody passed all the activities. The lowest marks were obtained by five students in Test 3 when they had to produce sentences on their own using the simple present.

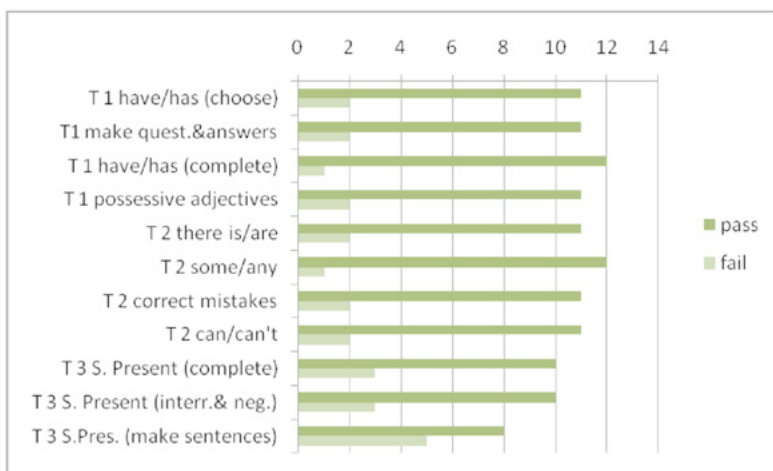


Figure 8. Grammar results.

Vocabulary: again, this group passed all the activities, except for three students, who failed some exercises.

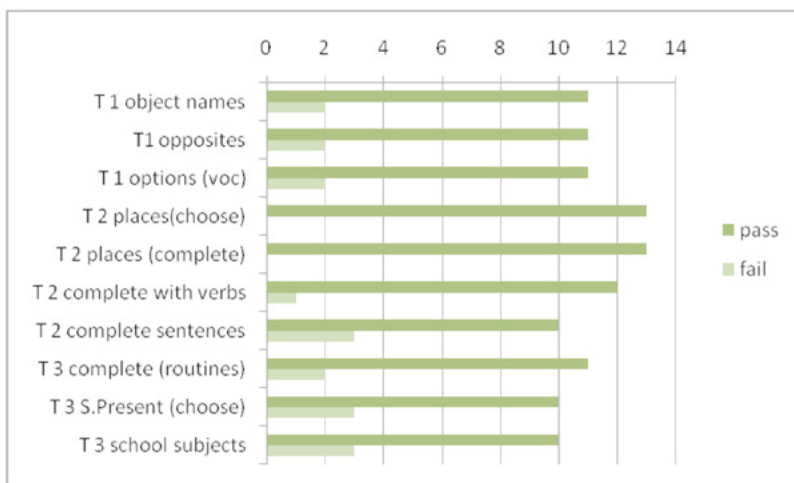


Figure 9. Vocabulary results.

Written dialogues: The pattern for these tasks is similar to the case for grammar and vocabulary.

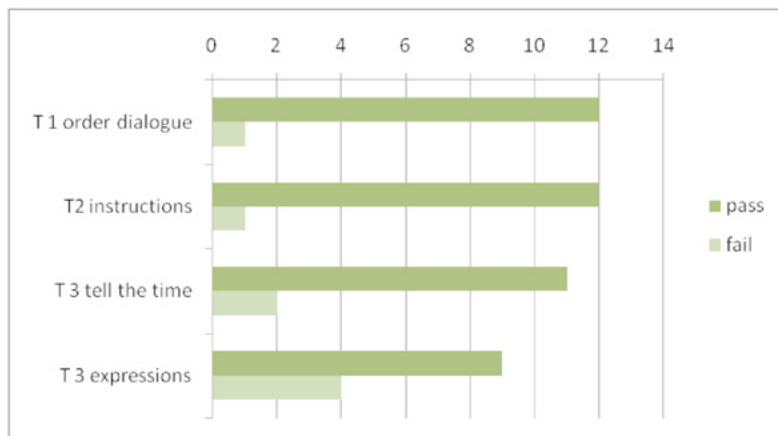


Figure 10. Written performance.

Here is a comparison of the overall final marks at the end of Cycle 1, for the two groups:

Marks	More than 6	Between 4 and 5	Failed (less than 3)	Total students in each group
Blue group	8	6	4	18
Green group	13	0	0	13
Total # of students	21	6	4	

Table 4. Cycle 1 final marks.

Results: second cycle

My journal

The first class after the winter recess, both groups were together with me because Mariana was absent. It was quite an experience after all those months in two groups, but really useful because I could reaffirm that dividing into levels and smaller groups is highly beneficial. Class management that day was very complicated, demanding and

exhausting. The lesson seemed ‘massive’: the same for everybody. I felt there were students who weren’t able to follow it.

Another matter of concern in my diary was how to make students aware of the importance of doing homework. In general, most teachers complained about this problem in the teachers’ room. Our students were no exception. We had noticed that they need constant guidance and support, so they seemed to be quite far from reaching autonomy for learning. Moreover, there were four students who had learning and/or personal problems which were out of our control. We helped them revise basic contents as indicated by the school regulations for these cases, called *curriculum adaptations*. However, in November we learnt that these students would change school the following year.

A very good point, on the other hand, was that some students seemed less afraid of speaking, thanks to the activities they did in class (practising and recording dialogues with their mobile phones).

Finally, in the last lesson, we were all together again. Several students asked if we would be together with them next year and were sorry to hear that we would not. However, we had a great time as several groups shared the final work that they were not able to upload to Edmodo (only one group did this, but the file could not be opened). They made a video as a follow-up task to the writing activity of recipes in Unit 6. Their videos were great, as they recorded themselves giving instructions for the recipe, and even incorporated some music. Finally, we took a picture of the whole group which was uploaded to Edmodo for us to share and remember this nice year learning together.

Questionnaires

Students were asked to complete a final questionnaire which was similar to the one they had had at the end of the first cycle. In their responses students focused on the obstacles I had already detected in the first cycle. In spite of having received their netbooks in August, most students did not bring these to school for various reasons (e.g. ‘It’s locked’, ‘I forget to bring it’). With netbooks and/or mobile phones in the English class, eight liked searching for information, three working with Edmodo and five with Word. The rest simply answered they

liked playing (any) games. All students had mobile phones (to work with the voice recorder/Google), but half of these were not internet-enabled.

43% of the students always or often did homework, and the rest (57%) forgot or said they had 'no time' (two students) because of sports training (football).

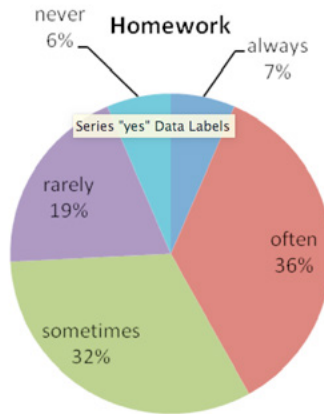


Figure 11. Learners' completion of homework

When asked about the language skills and language areas they felt they had learnt most or improved, most students chose more than one, and, in fact, there was not much difference among them.



Figure 12. Learners' perceptions of language improvement.

When asked why they thought they had improved, 26 replied that it was because of the work in class, and only four because they had themselves studied. 21 thought that to improve they would have to study more, and 10 that they needed more practice.

In general, students' perceptions of strengths in this second AR cycle were: the new content (mentioned by 12), the multimedia projector (11), having two teachers (4), the assignments (2), the teaching material (2), while all of them except one praised the streaming of the class. As for weaknesses, seven students complained about disruptive classmates, six about having few English periods, five about Edmodo and the rest had no observations to make. Thus, the overall view of the project was highly positive.

Interviews

I held this last interview with 24 learners in groups of six (there were seven absent). On the whole, my thematic analysis showed that students felt sure of their views and this helped me confirm my perceptions and draw the final conclusion. Table 5 shows the questions and the main results.

	Questions	Answers	Main reasons
1	How often do you do homework?	Always = 8.33% Sometimes = 66.67% Rarely = 25%	I forget, I have many other assignments (technical drawing, maths), <i>"No me lo tomo en serio"</i> (I don't take it seriously)
2	Did you use Edmodo? (Why not?)	Yes = 37.5% No = 62.5%	Problems with Internet connection, I forget, I don't like Edmodo (9 students), I prefer doing work in paper. The netbook gets locked.
3	Was streaming useful? Did it help you?	Yes = 100%	Less noisy classes, teachers have more time to address fewer students' needs.
4	Did you improve any skill/s?	Yes = 83.34% Not much = 16.66%	Because of practice in class and work in groups ('my partners help me when I don't know a word')
5	Was the project useful?	Yes = 100%	<i>"Te ayuda mucho que el professor te vaya señalando en donde estamos"</i> ('it helps a lot that the teacher is pointing at the words you are listening to').

Table 5. Learners' questionnaire responses. Cycle 2.

Main strengths included streaming of the course, less noise, the multi-media projector, the tests' design, and activities with netbooks and mobile phones: '*Grabarse fue divertido*' (recording our voice was great fun).

Regarding the skills covered, one group noticed they could understand more when they listen to English and said they have started to speak (mainly when they had to record their voice).

Weaknesses included Edmodo itself, distractions with netbooks, noise when they are all together, and homework. Regarding suggestions, in one of the groups they proposed having English on two different days. Overall, streaming seemed to be considered the best aspect of the approach, while the worst aspect was considered distraction with netbooks.

In order to gain another perspective regarding the use of the netbooks in class, I asked the following questions to the principal, deputy head, regent, multi-purpose room administrator, and the netbook technician:

- 1) Do netbooks contribute to effective learning in class?
- 2) If the answer is no, how can technology be integrated in the classroom to avoid distraction?
- 3) As a teacher, do you use the netbook in your lessons? If the answer is yes, for what activities and how often?
- 4) Has the 'modelo 1 a 1' been successful? (integration of ICT to public education by giving each student a netbook, in order to promote inclusion and equal opportunities) Why (not)?

Their answers to questions 1 and 2 were almost the same. Everybody considered that netbooks would contribute if the teacher had control of the work students are doing. Then, if the netbooks were connected to an intranet, the teacher could see what every student was doing and consequently technology would be integrated effectively. If not, they were elements of distraction because most of the students played games or were on Facebook. As regards question 3, only the principal and the regent were teaching, but neither of them used the netbooks for the reasons already stated. Moreover, they claimed that their subjects (Technical Drawing and Physics, respectively), can be taught without netbooks. The multi-pur-

pose room administrator observed that every time a teacher tries to make the students work with technology, Facebook wins. Therefore, the teacher has to ask students to search for information at home, not in class. Finally, all the interviewees agreed that the intention of the model 1-1 was wonderful but, for the time being, the objectives were far from being achieved.

Tests

Blue group (16 students)

Figures 12–17 below show the results of the three tests administered during the second cycle, similarly to those in the first cycle.

Grammar: In the fourth test (T4), on the simple present, frequency adverbs and must/mustn't, students got the lowest marks. They improved slightly because of extra practice in T5 (present continuous) and in the last test they got much better marks (C/U, some/any).

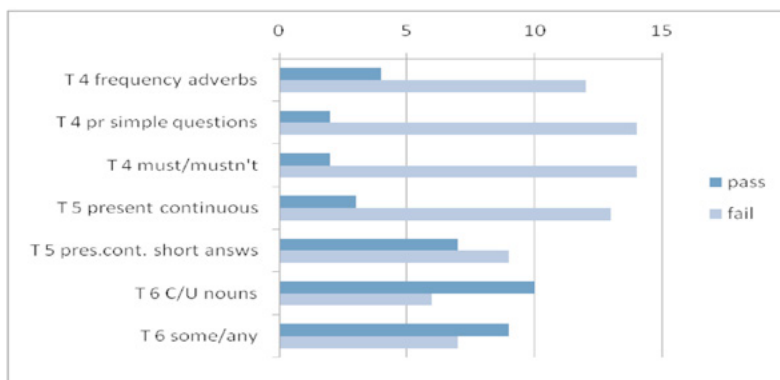


Figure 12. Cycle 2 grammar results.

Vocabulary: In this section most of the students obtained their best marks, probably because of the work with the multimedia projector. The vocabulary on activities, food and the weather were the best, while they performed worst on parts of the body and riddles with animals.

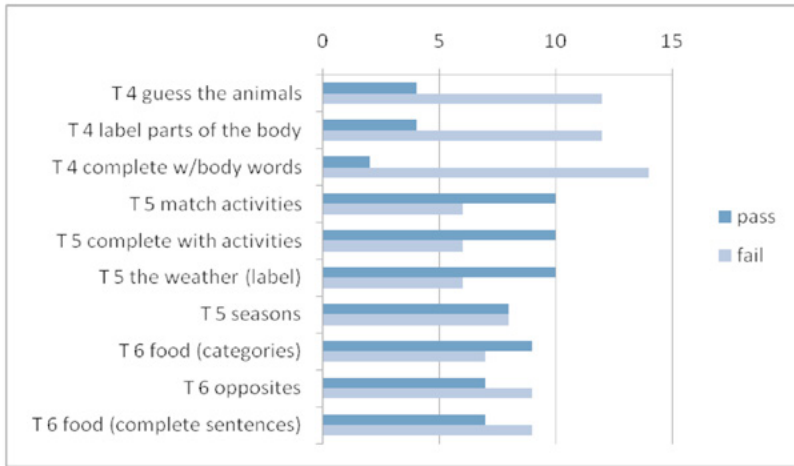


Figure 13. Cycle 2 vocabulary results.

Written dialogues: This continued to be the hardest activity. Only two students could manage to deal with this activity, and many left it blank.

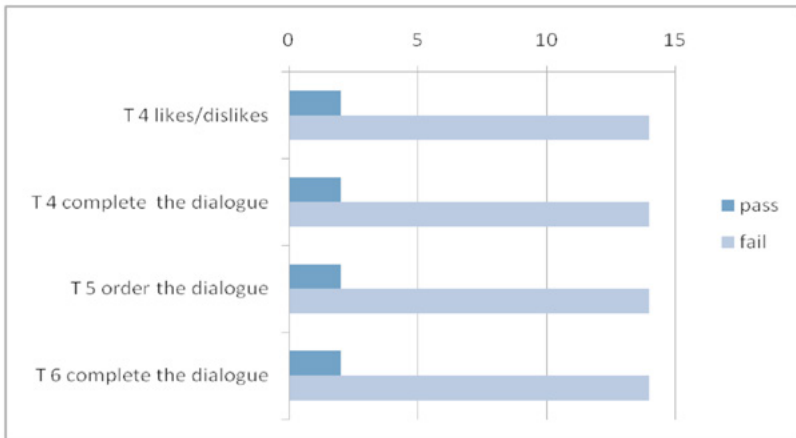


Figure 14. Cycle 2 written performance.

Green group (15 students)

Grammar: This group also obtained weak results in the simple present and frequency adverbs in Unit 4, the present continuous in Unit 5, and how much/many in Unit 6. However, their results continued to be better than those in Blue group.

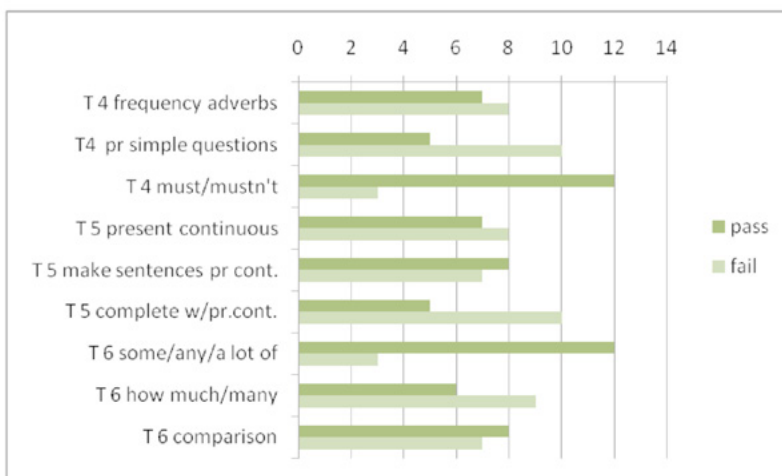


Figure 15. Cycle 2 grammar results

Vocabulary: Except for the parts of the body, most of the students in this group passed all the activities.

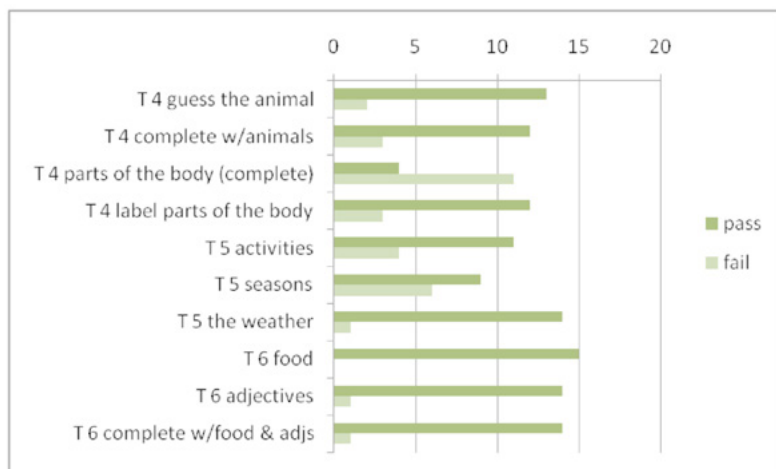


Figure 16. Cycle 2 vocabulary results

Written dialogues: These were better understood than in Cycle 1 and solved by more than half of the students in this group.

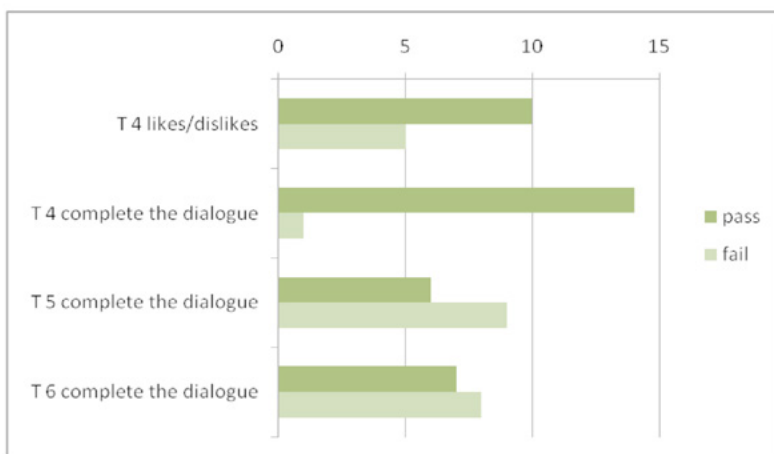


Figure 17. Cycle 2 written performance.

Final marks of the second cycle were as follows:

Marks	More than 6	Between 4 and 5	Failed (less than 3)	Total # of students in each group
Blue group	6	4	6	16
Green group	13	2	0	15
Total students	19	6	6	

Table 6. Cycle 2 final exam results.

It is important to mention that four out of the six students who failed in Blue group changed school the following year, as this school was found not to be suitable for them.

Discussion in relation to research questions

The first research question inquired if blended learning (BL) would be useful for improving the four skills in our context. In fact it was, but not to the extent originally expected due to the lack of commit-

ment of many students (20 out of 31), who did neither did homework (with or without technology) nor checked Edmodo regularly to see our postings. Most forgot even to bring their netbooks to school, so we had to learn to manage to work with only four or five in class. During the interviews these students admitted to giving little importance to English and to having not studied much. Mariana, who also works in a primary school, observed that, there, some learners are promoted in spite of having poor performance in English. Then, when they start secondary school, they are used to 'having a good time' in the English classes. Conversely, among the students in 1ro 4ta who had never attended private lessons, there were some who could profit from our classes and obtained very good marks as they worked really hard and gained from the blended approach. Some said in the interviews that they could start talking in English (which they had not done in primary school). Participants in Green group were able to enhance their knowledge, especially with new vocabulary.

To sum up, in spite of the lack of digital devices in the classroom and lack of Internet access, the integration of technology was successful in helping students learn English. In class we could use mobile phones to record role plays and netbooks to show power point presentations and videos, as well as a multimedia projects. If we consider that BL is not only an approach which combines a face-to-face lesson with technology at home but that 'the term can refer to the opposite: an online component is added to a face-to-face course' (Stanley, 2013: 10), then BL did help to improve skills (though in our case components were off-line).

The second question sought to find out if BL contributed to teaching heterogeneous groups. It certainly did. We uploaded different material for each group. For example, Blue group practised the simple present with a segment of the film *The Incredibles*, and Green group read the story *Mrs. Moody's hat* at home. In class, groups wrote the script of a role play based on that story and then they recorded their version with their mobile phones. Then, those students who did work at home with Edmodo made much better productions, such as the PowerPoint presentations. Not only did they enjoy the tasks but learned from them. Moreover, Edmodo let us give them material

which we could not deal with in class. Consequently, if everybody had worked with Edmodo as instructed, the majority would have developed the four skills much more extensively.

The last question referred to the development of individual skills and improvement of marks. As we have seen, this varied among students. The two students in Green group who failed said they had not studied much for English during the term, while in Blue group the homeroom teacher informed me that 5 out of the 9 students who failed would be changing school the following year.

The conclusions drawn above show that BL was achieved in spite of all the obstacles described. Most students worked with enthusiasm during the contact hours (it was fun to see how they looked for a quieter corner in the classroom to make their recordings and asked the other groups to move away to avoid sound interference), and their opinions elicited through the research tools indicated that we were on the right track. Nevertheless, the success of the teaching and learning process does not depend on how much technology may be infused into a lesson. We used all the available resources with our students, offered different and attractive material, and even the tests were appealing. Moreover, Mariana and I made the effort of rotating between both groups. However, maturity for autonomy and responsibility are factors which were out of our control and lack of these seemed to be the main impediments among the students who did not want to absorb knowledge and comply with homework during this AR. As the proverb says: *You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.*

Conclusion

I strongly believe that BL should be integrated into the teaching and learning process of any language. The plethora of sites that the Web offers is an indispensable tool for enhancing the receptive skills, in particular, and practising grammar. The productive skills require more work in the classroom and feedback from the teacher, but the use of technological devices (netbooks and mobile phones) can help to motivate our tech-savvy students and align with their own learning pace

so that students at heterogeneous levels may profit from every lesson. In this way students can be expected to learn English effectively by developing their individual skills and thus succeed in achieving better marks.

Unfortunately, in addition to the lack of Internet in the classroom, there were several other lacks, probably coming from little parental control (in relation to studying habits and active engagement in complying with homework), the lack of netbooks in class and lack of autonomy for learning. Nevertheless, the streaming of the course into two groups or levels and the technology at hand made this BL project possible. I hope it will offer an example and encourage other English teachers to set out to change classroom realities which are in need of improvement.

Final reflections

Doing AR is beyond the call of duty. Reflection and planning new actions must be done in our free time. Headteachers, educational administrators and our salaries do not encourage us, and most colleagues are not willing to embark on any projects under these conditions. Then, if you consider these difficulties, plus the energetic adolescents waiting for you in the classroom, you may wish to forget about AR. But if you feel passion for teaching and learning, trying AR is a unique, exciting and beneficial experience. It will let you grow and reinvigorate your daily practice, which will become even more rewarding if you have the possibility to share your findings with colleagues. Therefore, our 'extra' work should undoubtedly be fostered, encouraged and appreciated by school administrators.

As has been shown throughout this study, English instruction is being carried out in inappropriate conditions, basically because the development and exploitation of the four skills, quintessence of the language teaching and learning process, is not possible in large-size heterogeneous classes. However, I strongly believe that the use of technology through a blended approach offers a chance to bridge the gap between the work in class and at home mainly as regards the receptive skills.

From this experience, I learnt that BL really made a big difference as my students engaged in the lessons, profited from them and interacted with peers, with or without Internet access in the classroom. So, if teachers can implement this approach with the help of an assistant, they will have the satisfaction of working effectively with motivated students. On the other hand, in spite of having the tools, my students did not learn as much as expected. I found that technology alone does not work if students are not committed to learn. Components such as those described by Stanley (2013), plus autonomy and commitment, are the essential keys for success. Technology is not a magic solution. It can make a big difference, but human factors such as motivation and commitment are irreplaceable. BL was possible in my teaching context, but I discovered that the biggest obstacle in my intervention was dealing with the ingrained habit of not doing homework or studying seriously. After the class, most students did not open their folders until the next class. They needed constant guidance and support. Perhaps they lacked attention and affection at home, issues that were out of my control.

These obstacles were more serious than the scarcity of netbooks or the lack of Internet access in the classroom, and were issues beyond English teaching itself. They were also related to current policies of inclusion and equality which, although highly commendable, have pushed academic levels down in order to avoid students dropping out and hanging around. Unfortunately, the students who do want to learn cannot grasp opportunities for more effective learning. They are accustomed to receiving instruction that promotes them to the following level with the minimum effort by passing core contents. Obviously, these lenient schooling demands have decreased our formerly excellent academic level at state-run schools. Technology helps a lot, but students must do their share. Maybe, finding out *how* can be a topic for further AR in our teaching context.

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Curricular innovation in some technical high school 11th grade EFL classes in Chile



Natacha Pardo Contreras
Santiago, Chile

In 2013 I conducted an exploratory research study to discover the views of some key stakeholders in technical high schools in Chile regarding the introduction of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) into the EFL curriculum. Reactions were positive – indeed, most teachers consulted had already implemented ESP materials based on their intuitions and considering their students' post-school needs. On this basis, in my action research study I designed and implemented ESP materials in two subject areas in technical high schools, analysing the perceptions of EFL teachers and students regarding the relevance and interest of the materials designed.

About the author

Natacha Pardo Contreras (MSc TESOL, University of Bristol, UK) has been teaching in a technical high school since 2004. She also coordinates an English Teacher Network in Santiago and has been advising eleven schools in the metropolitan region in the area of English Language Teaching/Learning. She was a speaker at the 13th International Conference of IATEFL Chile in 2014.

Introduction

In Chilean secondary education, students have a standard curriculum during the first two years whereas in the last two years (11th and 12th grade) students are able to choose between general and vocational programmes regardless of their academic skills. Students can attend scientific/humanistic high schools if their main aim is to pursue higher education studies at universities and prepare for the examinations

required by them. On the other hand, if their main aim is to achieve short-term certification, they opt for technical high schools. All technical high schools in Chile encompass 34 subjects (e.g. Chemistry Lab, Electronics, Agriculture, Port Operation, Mining Operation) within fifteen economic sectors (e.g. Electricity, Chemistry, Agricultural, Marine)(MINEDUC 2013), which means each technical high school offers some of the subjects depending mainly on the region in which it is located (e.g. agriculture is likely to be taught in schools located in the south of Chile, whereas mining is likely to be taught in the north).

More than 40% of students attending high schools opt for the vocational program, which means they attend technical high schools. One of the characteristics of these students is that they come from households with lower levels of education and income and their entry educational attainment indicators are lower than students that choose to follow the general program (Sevilla 2011).

Currently, students leaving technical high schools in Chile are encouraged to enter technical employment positions in a varied range of contexts, since the aim of technical-professional education is: 'to promote successful transitions between the educational system and the labour market' (*ibid.* 2011: 30).

With increasing economic globalisation (marked, for example, by the increasing number of free trade agreements entered into by Chile (DIRECON 2013)), English has come to play a major role in the work field in Chile, as demonstrated by the emergence of multinational companies operating in Chile using English as a lingua franca to facilitate commerce. According to Matear (2008) this is one of the factors why EFL has been expanding in Latin American countries such as Chile or Brazil.

CORFO (Spanish acronym for Corporation to Promote Production) is an agency in charge of executing government policies in the field of business venture and innovation by promoting them with the aim to improve Chilean productivity and reach world leadership rankings of competitiveness (CORFO 2013). CORFO has been linking professionals with English language skills and private companies requiring a highly qualified workforce since 2004. It has also been providing

scholarships to professionals who need to learn English. This is done through English courses and international certification. As its executive vice-president claims, CORFO supports Chilean entrepreneurs as well as attracting companies to Chile that require bilingual professionals, and thus, is making Chile a developed country (CORFO, 2011).

Taking this situation into account, I previously carried out an exploratory research study (Pardo, 2013) in order to find out the views of some key stakeholders from some technical high schools in Chile regarding the implementation of ESP in the current EFL curriculum in Chile. This research showed that the majority of participants would like to include ESP in the current EFL curriculum and that in fact most of the EFL teachers involved in the research had already implemented ESP materials based on their intuitions and considering the students' post-school needs.

Based on these findings, the need for a new investigation arose with the purpose of exploring students and teachers' perceptions regarding the relevance of ESP materials designed for two subjects based on Needs Analysis, this being the aim of this Action Research (AR).

The application of the ESP materials and their relevance was explored through the following questions:

- a) What are students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the ESP materials?
- b) In what ways did students benefit from this approach?
- c) What difficulties (if any) did teachers face when applying these materials?

Teaching context

The current curricular framework for English as a Foreign Language establishes that the main focus of the overall objectives and mandatory minimum contents are the development of language skills (i.e. reading, writing, speaking, and listening). Through the development of these skills, a student is expected to be able to: succeed in varied communicative situations; get access to information; develop higher

order cognitive skills; as well as appreciate other lifestyles, customs, and visions. The Ministry of Education suggests teaching this subject using the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach but any school can propose and implement a new curriculum following the government's curricular framework.

I have myself been teaching English as a Foreign Language for the past ten years in a technical high school in the Metropolitan Region. After some time I started to notice some characteristics of the students attending this school. Among these characteristics, I realized most of them did not have the English proficiency expected at that point (CEFR A2–B1 according to the English Opens Doors Program), and did not seem to be motivated to learn a foreign language. Taking these factors into consideration along with other variables such as the limited amount of time to teach English per week (two timetable hours), I found myself unable to follow the current program of the school, which was related to the textbooks provided by the Ministry of Education.

By reflecting on that situation I realised I should focus on the students' post-school needs since most of them enter the labour market directly after they complete secondary education. Therefore, and considering the role of English in the work field, I started to develop ESP materials based on intuition and by asking teachers from the main subjects about their thoughts in relation to the needs the students might have when learning English as a foreign language. Over the years I also started to obtain feedback from the students who had finished high school and had started their professional practice. I did this in order to create, and/or improve material if necessary but I never performed proper needs analysis due to my lack of knowledge.

As part of my master's dissertation I decided to perform an investigation in relation to this topic in order to find out about the views of EFL teachers and students from other technical high schools regarding the implementation of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the current EFL curriculum. Findings showed that students and teachers indicated their main reasons for learning English were: to obtain a better job, to perform better in a job, and to communicate with people from abroad. Only 50% of students had experienced ESP in their EFL classes be-

fore; a high proportion of students agreed that they would like to be taught ESP in their English classes; students who had not had ESP in their EFL classes indicated that they felt disadvantaged; and all teachers said they would like to teach ESP and most of them agreed that although implementing ESP would imply some constraints it would benefit students.

After coming back to Chile I started to investigate with other EFL teachers from Chile who belong to the English Teachers Networks (see www.piap.cl), and I realized this is an issue that many other teachers experience. For that reason I decided to create a group on a social network with the aim of sharing materials and experiences with other teachers from high schools. Some teachers from tertiary education also joined, expressing a need to cover this topic in more depth. Hence, I considered further research had to be done in order to develop ESP materials. I imagined that this could be done by adding an ESP component to the current EFL curriculum in these schools according to the students' post-school needs and that I could then analyse the application of these materials in the classroom.

Literature review

In this section I will discuss the concepts of *English for Specific Purposes* and *needs analysis* in ESP. I will also make reference to materials development, as this was a relevant process in this investigation, as well as the concept of 'genre-based approach' which was used in the design of ESP materials.

English for Specific Purposes

As Paltridge and Starfield (2013: 2) point out, ESP is related to the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain. These domains could be divided into several categories such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Science and Technology (EST), English for Management, Finance and Economics (EMFE), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), English for Vocational Purposes (EVP), English for Medical Purposes (EMP), English for Business Purposes (EBP), English for Legal Purposes (ELP), and

English for Socio Cultural Purposes (ESCP) (Belcher 2009; Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998).

According to experts in this field (Basturkmen, 2010; Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998; Dudley-Evans, 2001; Robinson, 1991), ESP courses and, therefore, materials designed for these courses should involve a process of needs analysis which is why I will provide information in order to clarify this concept and explain how it was developed in this study.

As already stated above, Needs analysis (NA) is considered one of the key areas of ESP. As described by West (1994), this is a way to analyse what learners will be required to do with the language in a target situation and how they can master it during the period of training. A more thorough definition is provided by Brown (2009: 269), who says that NA has to do with ‘the systematic collection and analysis of all information necessary for defining a defensible curriculum’, that is, one that ‘satisfies the language learning and teaching requirements of the students and teachers within the context of particular institution(s) involved’ (*ibid.*).

In order to carry out NA, there are steps that need to be contemplated. For the purposes of this AR I took into consideration those adapted by Brown (2009), which are a combination of the steps given by Schutz and Derwing (1981), Jordan (1997), and Graves (2000). These steps are divided into three stages: (a) Get ready to do needs analysis, (b) Do the needs analysis research, and (c) Use the needs analysis results.

Materials development

Here I will clarify this concept, its advantages and disadvantages, and the characteristics for good materials development.

Tomlinson (2001) refers to materials development as the field of study of the principles and procedures of the production, use and evaluation of language teaching materials; and as a practical project involving the creation, evaluation and adjustment of language teaching materials. Richards (2001) states that there are advantages and disadvantages that should be considered when developing materials. As ad-

vantages he indicates that materials produced should be relevant to the specific needs of the intended audience; should develop expertise in the people that create the materials; enhance the reputation of the people/institution; and give more flexibility than a commercial course book. As for the disadvantages, time and resources needed might imply a high cost and the materials' design and production might not have the same standard as commercial materials. He also states that training should be provided to the people (teachers) that will develop the materials.

Tomlinson (2011) suggests the following characteristics to consider in order to develop good language teaching material: materials should (1) achieve impact, (2) help learners to feel at ease and develop confidence, (3) make learners perceive what is relevant and useful to learn, (4) require and facilitate learner self-investment, (5) make learners ready to acquire the points being taught, (6) expose learners to language in authentic use, (7) draw learners' attention to linguistic features of the input, (8) give learners opportunities to use the L2 to achieve communicative purposes, (9) take into account that positive effects of instruction are usually delayed, that learners have different learning styles and differ in affective attitudes, (10) permit a silent period at the beginning of instruction, (11) maximize the learners' potential by stimulating both sides of brain activities, (12) not rely much on controlled practice, and (13) give opportunities for outcome feedback.

As the development of materials in this investigation was related to a specific type of genre, and considering genre-based pedagogy has been promoted for ESP/EAP classes (Millar, 2011) I decided to use this approach for the development of the materials designed and applied in this study.

Genre-based approach for ESP materials development

Swales (1990) defines genre as a class of communicative events with some shared set of communicative purposes. This definition has been very influential in the ESP work of genre analysis, since these communicative events might refer to a seminar presentation, a university lecture or an academic essay (Paltridge, 2001). A genre-based approach has the advantage that the units are not too small as in a

functional or structural syllabus, nor too large as in a skills-based syllabus (*ibid.*). These units demonstrate typical patterns of textual and linguistic organization and focus on communicative purpose(s) (Swales, 1986).

The use of this approach helps teachers select useful points to focus on in texts in order to help learners enter their target discourse community as well as combining the best aspects of other syllabus models to provide the basis for a comprehensive framework for language teaching and learning (Feez, 1998).

I selected this approach for designing the materials involved in this research because, while genre analysis is the main focus of the syllabus, which means it considers the role and purpose of genres as well as the context in which they occur, it also includes other aspects of language such as grammar, vocabulary, skills and functions, which are relevant in our teaching context.

Methodology

Action research

AR is a broad movement in education involving focus on addressing a problematic situation by taking a self-reflective, critical and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching context (Burns, 2010: 2). Johnson and Christensen (2012) indicate that in order to perform this type of research you need to diagnose the specific problem, and carry out research in order to implement the changes needed to help solve your local problem(s). They also state that this is a never-ending process since most of the problems are not fully solved through a single research study.

In order to obtain the data I needed to answer my research questions (RQs) as well as to perform the NA, I employed a qualitative approach.

Participants

Participants involved in this AR included four EFL teachers from two technical high schools who are members of an English Teachers' Network (a face-to-face teachers group) supported by the Chilean Min-

istry of Education English Opens Doors Program. I have coordinated this particular Network since 2012. Their schools are located in the Santiago Metropolitan Region. Students from four different classes of 11th grade from the subjects of Chemistry Lab and Electronics (two classes each) were also involved.

In order to perform Needs Analysis, six professionals from both of these areas as well as twenty students from 12th grade and four teachers from the subject areas were involved.

1st cycle data collection (April to September)

This project involved two cycles. The aim of the first cycle was to find out the students' needs in order to develop appropriate ESP materials. The second cycle intended to find out whether students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the usefulness and relevance of the materials changed after they were brought into the classroom.

In order to carry out the NA as part of the first cycle the following instruments were used: questionnaires using open-ended questions, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups with students.

Questionnaires

A questionnaire for professionals was designed, including a Likert scale about the frequency with which they have to use the main skills in English (reading, writing, speaking, listening), and there were eight open-ended questions which intended to obtain data related to the use of English at work in more detail. In addition, a questionnaire for subject teachers was designed including multiple choice and four open-ended questions which aimed to collect data regarding their perceptions about ESP teaching and the needs of English language in their field of study.

Interviews

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed and conducted with professionals in order to collect more detailed information regarding the use of English at the workplace.

Focus groups

I selected this type of interview to collect data from students due to the lack of time available to perform individual interviews, and, as Johnson and Christensen (2012) claim, it can help to obtain general but in-depth information in a short period of time.

This interview was carried out with two groups of students from the curriculum subjects involved in the investigation. Each group was composed of 12 participants.

2nd cycle data collection (October to February)

With the data obtained during the first cycle, a group of three teachers worked on the selection of topics and activities in order to design ESP material and apply it in the classroom with the aim of discovering the impact in terms of relevance and interest of the material used. For the collection of the data which would answer the RQs, the selected instruments were semi-structured interviews and journals.

It is worth noting that, in order to reduce threats to reliability and validity of the investigation results, I piloted the questionnaires and presented the instruments in my participants' L1. Each participant interviewed also signed an informed consent form indicating his/her participation was voluntary and that they had agreed to take part.

Final interviews

Semi-structured interviews were developed for teachers involved in the design and application of the material as well as for students who participated in those classes. These interviews consisted of five open-ended questions intended to answer the RQs of the research.

Journals

The teachers involved in this investigation were asked to record discussions regarding the selection of topics, design of activities, lessons, and anything relevant that could be observed during the application of the material in the classroom and that could help to answer the RQs.

Findings

1st cycle results

The data collected through the NA showed the following perceived needs and wants among students, professionals, and subject teachers from the subject areas involved in this investigation:

PERCEIVED NEEDS		
PROFESSIONALS	SUBJECT TEACHERS	STUDENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · They have to read equipment manuals and instructions for maintenance and repair. · They have to attend training courses frequently (which are presented in English). · They have to understand the Operating System of equipment. · They have to provide customer service and assistance to foreign dealers and suppliers through e-mails or texting. · They have to attend seminars and talks performed in English. · They have to watch video tutorials and instructions. · They have to use specialized software. · They have to maintain regular contact with foreign technicians, and weekly online meetings with suppliers and dealers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · They have to read manuals and instructions for equipment used in the lab. · They have to use specialized equipment with their operating system (which is in English). · Set electrical equipment and industrial instruments containing software in English. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · They have to read manuals and instructions for equipment used in the lab in order to learn how to assemble and repair it. · Be able to understand specialized software.
PERCEIVED WANTS		
PROFESSIONALS	SUBJECT TEACHERS	STUDENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Not indicated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · To be able to understand specialized vocabulary in English related to the subject. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · They want to be able to communicate in English, not only to know about grammar structures but be able to understand and speak English. · They want to learn translation techniques, and be able to understand what they read easily.

Table 1. Needs and wants from Electronics

PERCEIVED NEEDS		
PROFESSIONALS	SUBJECT TEACHERS	STUDENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · They have to read equipment manuals and instructions for maintenance and repair. · They have to read and understand manufacturing instructions on chemical reagents as well as the content of their labels. · They have to read scientific reports. · They have to attend seminars performed in English and internships abroad. · They have to watch video tutorials and instructions. · They have to manage technical vocabulary related to the area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · They have to read manuals and instructions of equipment used in the lab. · Students have to write lab reports. · Advanced reading to access technical bibliography 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · They have to read manuals and instructions of equipment used in the lab in order to learn how to deal with products, calibrate equipment, and work with reagents. · They have to be able to understand labelling of reagents for their appropriate use. · They have to be able to search for information on raw materials in order to deal with products.
PERCEIVED WANTS		
PROFESSIONALS	SUBJECT TEACHERS	STUDENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · None. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · To be able to understand specialized vocabulary in English related to the subject. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · They want to be able to communicate in English, not only know about grammar structures but be able to understand and speak English. · They want to learn technical vocabulary, and be able to understand what they read easily.

Table 2. Needs and wants from Chemistry Lab.

Once this data was obtained, the next step had to do with the design and development of ESP material for each subject in order to apply it in 11th grade classrooms. For this, three EFL teachers met to work with this data, selecting the most relevant topics, possible units to be included in the curriculum, lessons, and tasks/activities for those lessons.

This was a challenging process since it took time to understand how to design a course that would cover the specific language needs shown above. We used this time in searching for suitable information in specialised books that could help us organise and develop the materials appropriately. Once we had a better understanding regarding materials development we started the process following an organising framework (Friedenberg et al., 2003), and steps suggested by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 145).

Teachers also considered that it was relevant to follow the following six principles proposed by Tomlinson (1998) which should drive ELT materials development: (1) Expose the learners to language in authentic use; (2) Help learners to pay attention to features of authentic input; (3) Provide the learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes; (4) Provide opportunities for outcome feedback; (5) Achieve impact in the sense that they arouse and sustain the learners' curiosity and attention; and (6) Stimulate intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional involvement (cf. Harwood 2010: 83).

After the discussions took place, these teachers decided to start working on the design of four lessons which would be included in one unit. The topic of the unit was selected by considering the coincidence of the relevance and frequency of tasks that professionals, subject teachers, and students had mentioned when asked about their perceived needs. Both participants also mentioned the same topic as relevant in their productivity at work and/or in their school life. The topic selected for unit 1 was: Reading Manuals. (It is worth noting other topics were also considered as units to be part of an annual syllabus such as: Going to Work (which could be used as an introductory unit), Meetings and Presentations, Attending a Seminar, Scientific Journals (for Chemistry Lab), Software (for Electronics), and Writing at Work (mails, texts, lab reports, etc.).)

As for the approach, I suggested the use of a genre-based approach as most appropriate (as was suggested on an ESP course I took online at the University of Oregon). This approach groups similar texts in terms of purpose, organisation and audience. It also provides students with knowledge of the organisation and linguistic features they need to

be aware of in order to perform properly in their academic disciplines and professions (Dudley-Evans 1989). The rest of the teachers agreed since other suggestions only covered review of grammar features, vocabulary, and translation of text.

It is worth noting that lessons and activities were designed following the model of genre analysis of technical manuals from Bhatian and Lassen (Lago and Lloret, 2012) since they follow Swales' genre analysis model which breaks down the text in order to identify the communicative purposes through *moves* and *steps*.

The expected outcome of the unit followed the curricular framework of 11th grade for EFL subject:

- Read and show comprehension of main ideas and relevant information from descriptive, informative, narrative and expository texts such as anecdotes, resumes, letters and e-mails, related to the working field. Learners need to:
 - Use reading strategies such as skimming and scanning
 - Recognise vocabulary of the unit, key words & phrases
 - Identify information from others
 - Identify intentions and purposes of the author
 - Discriminate main information
 - Recognise relationships between ideas through connectors like *although* and *therefore*.
 - Integrate oral and written expression.

This unit was broken down into four lessons of ninety minutes each:

Lesson 1	Introduction to Reading Manuals
Aim (s)	Understand the purpose of manuals and apply reading strategies to read manuals.
Lesson 2	Parts of a Manual & Features of Discourse
Aim (s)	Learn to recognise main features of discourse and recognize parts of a manual.
Lesson 3	Analysing a Manual (Part 1)
Aim (s)	Learn to recognise grammatical features in a technical manual and understand technical words/phrases in a manual.

Lesson 4	Analysing a Manual (Part 2)
Aim (s)	Learn to recognise communicative purposes of structures in technical manuals and be able to identify move-structures of a manual following Bhatian and Lassen models.

2nd cycle results

During the second cycle, data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and journals which aimed to answer the following RQs:

1. What are students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the ESP materials designed?

This question was answered by considering teachers' and students' perceptions and from what teachers could observe during the application of materials in the classroom (journals).

In relation to the (genre-based) approach suggested, teachers (T) indicated it was useful and appropriate to use with students. One of them claimed that this approach was 'appropriate and relevant especially because it includes linguistic and functional components [...]; identifying the students with their field of study makes them feel interested in applying taught content and knowledge' (T1). Here we can appreciate the importance this teacher gives to linguistic and functional components in her classes, and the relevance for her of identifying the students with their field of study and probable future work field.

In addition, another teacher stated that 'analysing a genre-based text can be useful for our students as long as it does not involve an in-depth analysis because according to my experience they do not have the necessary tools to analyse a text in the mother tongue' (T2). When asked about the lack of analysis of texts from students in their L1 she explained she had noticed most of her students are not able to perform an in-depth analysis of a text in their L1 because they have not been taught to do it. Teachers also agreed these lessons related to the possible working field of the students and stated they would be time-saving for students in the future since it would simplify their work when reading instructions and manuals as part of their jobs.

In terms of the activities, one of the teachers indicated she could observe during the lessons that students ‘showed to be interested in the activities and participated on them. [...] I found lessons contained playful activities which motivated students to develop the teaching-learning process’ (T1) I believe this could indicate methodology used for the design of activities vary from the activities the teacher is used to perform in the classroom.

In terms of time, every teacher indicated some of the lessons would take more time than expected due to the lack of prior knowledge and English proficiency of students. For example, ‘Time is a relevant factor when applying the activities because of constant explanations I must provide and low level of English proficiency from students and lack of general vocabulary’ (T3). This information highlights the relevance of General English (GE) in ESP courses. I agree with Holme (1996: 3-4), who claims that ‘the ESP process of specialisation should not result in the complete separation of one part of the language from another. One cannot simply hack off pieces of a language or of skills and then expect them to exist independently of anything else’, which leads me to think a diagnosis of English proficiency level of students participating in this research should have been considered for the materials design process. This needs to be addressed for future design if a second trial of materials is performed.

Every teacher agreed the activities designed related to the field of study. ‘Reading instructions and manuals is relevant for both subjects because it helps students to develop their job properly and effectively by reading and understanding the steps or stages they need to follow in order to perform an activity [such as using equipment or calibrating a pH meter]’ (T1).

As for students, they all agreed about the relevance of materials and activities used, since these related to their future work field as well as to the tasks they need to perform in their subject area. In relation to their experience of the activities, they described these as playful and said that they enabled them to engaged in the topic of the class. One of them stated that ‘activities were fun because they are not as the usual things we always see in English classes, which is mainly theory’ (S2). This data provides information regarding the methodology used

for the activities, which seems to be different from the methodology used previously. This also relates to the data provided by teachers (see above), and could lead to further research regarding methodology used inside the classroom.

Even more than this, one of the students suggested incorporating a final activity involving the creation of a small manual including the main features covered by the lessons since 'we always remember things that imply doing it ourselves, so I believe I would have added this activity at the end of the unit' (S3). This data clearly shows her sense of awareness regarding her learning process and confirms the relevance of using NA prior to material design as well as suggesting students could be more involved in the design process.

In terms of constraints, students indicated they needed extra time to review verbal tenses since this is something they have not yet mastered. 'The most complicated for us (students) is recognising grammar content because we still don't know which sentence is in the past tense' (S3). Finally, another issue that arose among students was the need for clarification on activities using L1 because they did not understand them, especially in lessons 3 and : 'There were many things I needed the teacher to use L1 for to understand properly because I was confused' (S1). I believe both quotes here provide information regarding the lack of GE knowledge from students that they were supposed to have mastered by this level. This confirms the need to include a diagnosis of proficiency level of students as part of the materials design process. This also might imply review of GE knowledge might be needed before starting the unit or including it as part of the lesson plan.

The second RQ sought to find out about how students benefited from this approach. In general, teachers stated this approach benefited students in varied ways and students also had a positive view regarding it.

2. In what ways did students benefit from this approach?

Teachers' perception was very positive regarding the approach implemented. They felt students benefited from this approach because it helps to raise awareness about the purpose of texts which are frequently used to perform tasks at work and at school, at the

same time as familiarising students with their target discourse community.

They also found this approach would help students with their jobs in the future since they would be aware the texts have typical patterns of organisation in terms of layout and language, and therefore, it would make it easier to read and comprehend such content in the future.

In addition, teachers considered as positive the fact that this approach has a communicative focus which relates to the current EFL curriculum in Chile, and all of them could observe that students were engaged with the topic since it related to their main subject of study: 'When moving into the development activities, it is important to mention that students become motivated at the moment of being presented with a manual of their technical field' (T3); 'this approach was appropriate and relevant, identifying the students with their field of study and making them feel interested in applying taught content and knowledge' (T1)

Students (S) also had a positive view regarding the approach used since it was different from what they are used to seeing in English classes. One of them said that 'learning English has always been hard for me but with these activities it was much easier to understand because it was more interactive and different' (S1). When asked to provide more information regarding his perception of 'interactive and different' the student said he was referring to the methodology used in the activities as well as the fact they were used to translating manuals using dictionaries but with this approach they would now be aware of the purpose of manuals, their main features, linguistic content, and so on, which would help them to identify these when reading future manuals. Furthermore, another student said 'I enjoyed what I saw in the lessons because we need to use equipment with manuals and we use our cell phones to translate them' (S2). In addition, another student expressed a liking for the activities 'because our field of study involves practice and [it is good] not to be writing one or two hours in class but doing things' (S4).

In relation to group work, only one of the students provided information indicating that 'These activities are not for all classmates

since some of them tease all the time and this affects the work of others' (S2) This data might lead me to think students are not used to working in groups and, therefore, this might be included as part of the training teachers might need before applying these materials in the classroom.

The third and final question explores the views of teachers regarding any difficulties they might have faced when applying the materials in the classroom. Time management and lack of prior knowledge arose as the most relevant difficulties.

3. What difficulties (if any) did teachers face when applying these materials?

First of all, teachers indicated one of the main difficulties they had to face was the lack of prior knowledge from students, which makes them need to use extra time to go over general grammar and vocabulary students are expected to have mastered in 11th grade: e.g. 'I didn't have the support of prior knowledge from my students, such as being aware of reading strategies used when reading in their L1' (T2).

A second relevant factor was the domain of prior knowledge of English each student had: 'there were students who only had basic knowledge and stole my work since I had to spend extra time reviewing previous contents they were supposed to master' (T1) When asked about this issue, the teacher added she had reviewed the grammar content involved in this unit at the beginning of the year and thought students would be able to recognise it. She also reflected that due to the little time available for English classes (2 hours per week) and the programme she needed to cover, she never stopped on content to make sure everyone had learned it but moved on to the next. This highlights other issues teachers have acknowledged as constraints they face in their teaching practice during network meetings but I believe they would need to be addressed in-depth as part of other investigations.

Another relevant difficulty faced by teachers which arose from the data provided when answering RQ1 was time management in order to accomplish the lessons in the time suggested. Group work organisation and review of prior content were the main factors:

‘From my point of view this lesson requires more time to be taught because there is a lack of management of verbal tenses [in students]’ (T2).

‘Things that influenced the application of materials were extra time required to organise group work, make sure each member of the group participated in the activities, and the low English proficiency level from students which required extra time to review contents’ (T3)

‘One of the main factors was the time for the organisation of work as there were groups where students did not know how to work cooperatively and were dispersed to develop the activities so it was necessary to pay more attention to these groups and explain what they were supposed to do and why’ (T1)

These quotes confirm once again the need for a thorough diagnosis of students’ English proficiency level in order to consider this information for the materials design process. They might also imply group work was not a usual part of the classroom management of the teachers involved in this investigation.

I did not expect group work to arise as an issue because the previous year all members of the teachers’ network worked on classroom management strategies from a book provided by the Ministry of Education and these included group work organisation, which was exactly why we included this when designing the activities. This could only lead me to believe teachers did not include this strategy as part of their teaching practice afterwards.

As for what I could observe during the meetings with the teachers when designing the material, I can add that when designing the lessons, teachers were a bit reluctant at first to implement these materials due to the amount of time it would require for them to do it. One of the reasons is that they indicated they would need to read a lot in order to update their knowledge in relation to the use of a genre-based approach. Another time-consuming aspect for teachers was the fact that they would need to learn specialised language related to the subjects involved in the investigation. Although they have learned technical words they have taught before in classes, they just knew isolated words such as those for the items and equipment used in the lab.

A clear example of what I could understand here was registered by one of the teachers as part of her reflections in her journal: '[In order to be able to apply the materials in the classroom] it requires that teachers handle the concept and structures of the Bhatian and Lassen's genre analysis model, so we need time to read and assimilate extra material to teach it in a right way' (T2)

Conclusion

In the first instance, this investigation showed that it is possible to enrich the current EFL curriculum in Chile by adding an ESP component addressing the needs of students attending technical high schools, which are currently neglected.

During the first cycle it was shown that needs analysis helped the teachers greatly in the process of design and development of ESP materials for the curriculum subjects involved in this investigation. However, other aspects were neglected in the process such as confirming the actual level of English proficiency of students as well as considering teaching style. The latter would have helped us to modify some activities and/or consider a planned teacher training process prior to the application of the unit. This data also showed the need for training for subject teachers since they need to know English (for specific purposes) in order to perform tasks with students properly (e.g. set up and use of equipment).

In addition, the process of design and development of ESP materials was shown to be very challenging and time-consuming for the teachers involved. Also shown, however was the relevance and the need for EFL teachers working in technical high schools to create ESP materials according to their teaching contexts. This might require training in order to provide them with the necessary tools to design ESP materials, such as the use of a different (e.g. genre-based) approaches; specialised language knowledge according to the subjects taught in their schools; and/or addressing other methodology issues such as classroom management strategies.

Students and teachers participating in this study had a positive view regarding the materials applied as well as the approach used, since

they found these relevant and related to their field of study, specifically in helping students to simplify their job in the future. It also seemed students felt engaged in the lessons because the methodology of the activities designed varied from what their teachers had previously used in the classroom. On this basis, a second trial of materials would be advisable, taking into account the feedback received from the participants. This feedback might require adapting, adding, and/or eliminating some activities in order to better match participants' expectations and requirements.

In relation to this AR project, I have to say it has helped us greatly (me and the other teachers involved) to make us aware how necessary it is for teachers to observe and reflect on our teaching as well as to learn how to plan actions in order to improve our teaching, and therefore, to successfully achieve learning in our students. As an example, during the reflection process we became aware that the current EFL curriculum flexibility enables us to adapt it in order to address the needs we have seen as a problematic situation in our teaching context. Therefore, taking the previous experiences and findings into account and realising there is still much to be done in education, I feel that AR should be included as part of our teaching practice, and time should be provided for that matter.

In addition, I would like to say that although the investigation did not aim to generalise, I am convinced the findings could be acted on and the materials could be taught by teachers from other technical high schools in Chile given that the characteristics of students attending these schools are very similar (Sevilla, 2011).

I also believe this investigation could help EFL/ESL teachers teaching in technical/vocational schools in other contexts, to reflect on their own teaching practice; to make them aware of their own perceived needs, and whether they could improve; and/or adapt their EFL curriculum in order to address those needs.

Finally, considering the findings of this and previous research, I strongly believe a new curriculum including ESP components related to the main subjects of technical education should be developed for the EFL subject in technical high schools in Chile.

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Effectiveness of Praise-Question-Encourage (P-Q-E) commenting guidelines during teacher-written feedback on EFL learners' rewrites: a case study



Mariana Serra
EES N°1, Rafael
Obligado, Argentina



Carina Mariel Grisolia
EES N°1, Rafael
Obligado, Argentina

This action research case study was designed to assess the effectiveness of formative teacher-written feedback on the rewrites of five seventeen-year-old EFL learners in the fifth year at a state secondary school in the rural area of Rafael Obligado, Argentina. Multi-draft writing was implemented and Praise-Question-Encourage commenting guidelines were used while formative feedback was conducted on the developing writers' early drafts. Content was prioritized in the early drafts to engage the subjects in deep-level revision of their rewrites. A questionnaire was administered to the learners before, during and after the study and journal entries were recorded by the students themselves. The results showed that the proper implementation of formative teacher-written feedback helped students to foster the skills and habits needed for draft revision at a deep level. It also helped teachers to adjust their conflicting roles as collaborators and evaluators.

About the authors

Mariana Serra is an Argentinian teacher of English and a licentiate in English (*Universidad Nacional del Litoral*). She holds a diploma in E-learning and distance learning (*Universidad de San Martín*) and she is attending an MA Program in Applied Linguistics. For professional development purposes, she has studied in the USA (San Diego State University) and won a scholarship to study in Spain (Rotary International). For over ten years she has worked in universities and secondary schools teaching English as a foreign language, and she has worked as a Head of Department coordinating and monitoring

secondary school teaching for several years. Her interests are in Applied Linguistics and Materials Development.

Carina Mariel Grisolia lives in the northwest of the province of Buenos Aires in Argentina. She holds a Masters in Teaching English as a Foreign Language and another Masters in Teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language. She has been a teacher and a teacher trainer of English as a Foreign Language for over 15 years, training teachers and trainers in Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America. Her passion is virtual education and she has been part of international cooperation projects based in Europe. She has worked for several universities and organizations around the world designing and implementing virtual courses and assessing elearning quality.

Introduction

While acknowledging the role of teacher-written feedback during writing skills development, in our daily practice we have always wondered about the kind of teacher feedback which effectively motivates EFL learners to revise their rewrites while engaged in multi-draft writing. Efforts to identify those types of teacher feedback have had varied results (McGarrell and Verbeem, 2007). Teachers are often ‘torn in their conflicting roles as *collaborators* in the writing process and *evaluators* of the final product’ (Leki, 1990 as cited in McGarrell and Verbeem, 2007: 228). This conflict is revealed in feedback which is often characterized by a focus on sentence-level errors (Hyland, 2003 as cited in McGarrell and Verbeem, 2007) and by being arbitrary and vague (Paulus, 1999; Sommers 1982, as cited in McGarrell and Verbeem, 2007). It also needs to be noted that learner writers are frequently more concerned with form than with content and organisation.

However, the literature is often ambiguous about the exact factors that have an effect on the formulation of teacher feedback in an instructional context (Ferris, 2003b, as cited in McGarrell and Verbeem, 2007: 228), making, as a consequence ‘the formulation of universal guidelines for teacher feedback extremely problematic’ (*ibid.*). Thus, teachers are required to adapt their feedback approach to learners’ writing performances depending on their own classroom reality.

The purpose of this professional development study is to assess the effectiveness of formative teacher-written feedback on the rewrites of five seventeen-year-old EFL learners in the fifth year at a state school in the rural area of Rafael Obligado Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The study was carried out by two EFL teachers: one of the teachers (Mariana Serra) actually taught the English lessons at the public secondary school and was in charge of implementing the project in the classroom; the other teacher (Carina Mariel Grisolia) was a collaborator who cooperated in the different stages of the process and provided support.

The present study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Are Praise-Question-Encourage (P-Q-E) commenting guidelines during teacher-written feedback effective on EFL learners' rewrites?
2. Does teacher feedback which emphasizes *content* over *form* help learners improve their rewrites?
3. Do learners apply teacher comments when rewriting their drafts?

Bearing these questions in mind, our hypothesis is that EFL learners whose teacher-written feedback follows Praise-Question-Encourage (P-Q-E) commenting guidelines and emphasizes content over form helps them revise effectively by clarifying meaning in their rewrites.

Theoretical background

Writing

Writing is an integral aspect of our everyday life and, as such, it lets individuals create 'social relationships' (Hyland, 2002: 69) which, together with speech, form a complex world of 'relationships between language forms and context of use' (McCarthy and Carter, 1994: 9). As no immediate feedback takes place in a piece of writing, a greater precision and care is required than in speech as 'it is a more formal activity producing a permanent record' (Hilton and Hyder 1992: 7). Whatever the act of writing, Hyland (2002: 69) recognizes that it 'is embedded in wider social and discursive practices which carry assumptions about participant relationships and how they should be structured and negotiated'.

While writing has been described by some writers as a lonely task during which the writer appears to be a solitary person being cut off from encouragement and feedback from listeners (Rosen, 1981 as cited in Hedge, 1988), it is viewed by others as 'a social practice' (Hyland, 2002: 48). As Hyland (*ibid.*) has pointed out, writing is 'both personal and individual' but also 'interactional and social' in the sense that it is 'embedded in the cultural and institutional contexts in which it is produced and the particular uses that are made of it' (p. 48).

Writing in a foreign language

Silva (1993, as cited in Weigle, 2002: 36) points out that writing in a second language has a tendency to be 'more constrained, more difficult, and less effective' than writing in a first language as second-language writers plan and revise for content less and do not write as fluently and accurately as first language writers. However, Kroll (1990: 140) claims that 'writing is frequently a difficult skill for *any* language user', resulting in consequence in a 'fairly challenging task for both native and non-native speakers'; it is due to 'the multiplicity of skills involved' that writing is a difficult task. According to Nunan (1999, as cited in Forquera, 2006: 283), the production of 'a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing' in a second language constitutes a challenge that is very difficult to meet. Without doubt, *writing* is one of the most difficult skills for language learners to learn (Tribble, 1996). The difficulty lies 'not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these ideas into readable texts' (Richards and Renandya, 2002: 303).

Approaches to writing instruction

During the late 1980s and the early 1990s, second language writing started to evolve into an interdisciplinary field with its own disciplinary infrastructure. However, the dynamics of the field have not stabilized yet, the intellectual currents are still fluctuating, and there is considerable lack of agreement on the main issues in this field (Matsuda et al., 2003). Consequently, there has been a succession of orientations to L2 writing instruction in which different approaches dominate at times and then fade, but never really disappear (Silva, 1990). Each of them represents a different conception of the nature of writing (Matsuda, 2003). These approaches to the teaching of writing have been presented by Raimes (1983: 6) as follows:

- The Controlled-to-Free Approach
- The Free-Writing Approach
- The Paragraph-Pattern Approach
- The Grammar-Syntax-Organisation Approach
- The Communicative Approach
- The Process Approach

In addition, Hyland (2003) mentions the emergence of the Genre Approach in the 1980s. It is important to notice that developments in the teaching of writing to native speakers of English have had an effect on and, to a certain degree, have coexisted with ESL writing instruction. However, the context of ESL composition has required 'distinct perspectives, models and practices' (Silva, 1990: 11).

The process approach

As the purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of formative teacher-written feedback on the rewrites of a small number of learners attending 5th year at a public secondary school, a *process approach* was followed. The process approach focuses on a writing cycle of activities during which writers move from generating ideas through to evaluating, reviewing and editing the text (Tribble, 1996). White and Arndt (1991: 3) view the act of writing as a 'highly intricate, dynamic and constantly fluctuating interplay of activities'. According to their model, the different processes are:

- generating: initiating process; the writer's imagination is stimulated.
- focusing: the writer centres on a main unifying idea, viewpoint or attitude; considers purpose, audience and form.
- structuring: the writer goes over organization of the information.
- drafting: choices regarding organization of ideas and most effective ways to attract the reader's attention and interest are actually put into words.
- evaluating: the writer becomes the reader and critic of his own text, assessing whether the text he is producing fulfills its intended goal, if the information is clearly expressed and coherently organised.
- reviewing: entails not only editing (correction of layout, spelling, punctuation, syntax) but also and once again an overall assessment of the text. (White and Arndt, 1991:4).

Seen as a creative act, writing requires time, relaxation and positive feedback to achieve good results. As opposed to the product approaches, this approach gives meaningfulness to the whole process, and allows writers to create a personal connection with the pieces of writing (Forquera, 2006). According to Badger and White (2000, as cited in Forquera, 2006), the process approach to writing fosters a better understanding of the steps involved in writing and values that students bring into the classroom, thus contributing to the development of the language skill.

In order to respond to the learners' needs alongside the process of learning to write (writing cycle), the teacher takes on four main roles: as audience, as an assistant, as an evaluator and as an examiner (Tribble, 1996). From this perspective, the writer is the center of attention and the text is a product, a derivative concern whose form is a function of its content and purpose (Silva, 1990). Teachers and learners have profited from the emphasis on the writer which is fundamental to this approach. Teaching and learning materials based on this approach aim to match the writing tasks to the learners' needs and to promote creativity in practical ways (Tribble, 1996).

Teacher-written feedback on learners' writing performance

In the ESL context, feedback from readers is considered essential in encouraging and consolidating learners' second language writing skills (Hyland, 2003). Teacher feedback, where teachers read drafts of their learners' compositions so as to make suggestions and comments for revision fosters the idea that writing is a process of communicating to an authentic audience. This is especially true if the approach to writing emphasizes process.

The literature is often imprecise as to the factors that influence the formulation of teacher feedback and which make its nature vary widely among teachers and institutional settings. However, two approaches to teacher feedback on L2 writing that are worth mentioning are: evaluative feedback and formative feedback.

Types of teacher feedback: evaluative and formative feedback

McGarrell and Verbeem (2007: 229) refer to evaluative feedback as the kind of feedback practice which 'passes judgement on the draft in

terms of some abstract, undefined notion of an ideal paper' and assumes the form of traditional pedagogical directives for improvement on present or future assignments. Evaluative feedback does not address the meaning of the draft but puts special emphasis on grammar and lexical errors, an emphasis that suggests that a learner's draft is 'simply a display tool for the developing writer's linguistic knowledge' (*ibid.*: 231). A teacher who implements evaluative feedback is more preoccupied with error-free writing than with the notion of progress and their desire to evaluate subverts the ability to see the learner's piece of writing as an effort to communicate (*ibid.*).

By contrast, formative feedback (also called facilitative or intermediate feedback) is rooted in the notion that developing writers will be motivated to revise when they are confident that the reader is interested in what the writers have to say and respects their authority as writers to take decisions (McGarrell and Verbeem, 2007). One of the features of this feedback approach is that it favors an inquiring stance. Thus, as a means to motivate the developing writer to make meaningful revision, it poses questions the reader may have about the meaning of the ideas expressed in the text. By asking questions on content, the teacher shows the learner where and what type of information the audience might require (McGarrell and Verbeem, 2007).

Formative feedback prioritizes content over form. As well as questions, formative feedback provides suggestions about the way the writer can clarify the meaning in the text (McGarrell and Verbeem, 2007). Prudently implemented, the inquiring stance used in this feedback approach puts the responsibility of making decisions about the direction of revision directly on the writer's shoulders, i.e., formative feedback leaves it to the writer to take the final decisions about content (*ibid.*).

It also needs to be mentioned that an important feature of formative feedback is the clear avoidance of evaluative statements. Instead, teachers who use formative feedback motivate developing writers by giving them the reason why they are praising or criticizing (McGarrell & Verbeem, 2007). Another important feature of formative feedback is that it is extremely personalized, that is, it addresses the

individual needs of each developing writer and it considers particular writers' confidence levels, progress and reasons for attending the course (*ibid.*).

According to McGarrell and Verbeem (2007: 234), the difference between evaluative and formative feedback 'is one of instructional stance and attitude rather than specific approach'. The teacher's attitude that implements evaluative feedback implies 'Do not do it that way but *my way*'. Conversely, the teacher who uses formative feedback seems to support an inquiring attitude by means of questions and suggestions rather than directives (*ibid.*).

Feedback that motivates revision

In classrooms where process-oriented writing instruction is an important part of the curriculum, teachers and developing writers make progress from an initial emphasis on fluency to one on clarity and finally on accuracy, with feedback priorities evolving in step. McGarrell and Verbeem (2007) claim that focus on content should be the priority with regard to early drafts, due to the fact that during this stage learners consider the ideas that they want to convey. By showing interest in the ideas expressed in the first drafts, the teacher gives strength to learner writers' resolution to go on struggling to find a consistent thread of ideas. As soon as this thread is found, the focus moves to further features of the composition, which include its adherence to the rules and conventions of English writing. It is important to note that it is the relative emphasis on organization, content or grammar that shifts at each stage during the writing process, which does not mean that at any given stage in the writing process they are ignored (McGarrell and Verbeem, 2007).

Process-oriented writing is not only linked to formative feedback in theory but also in practice. The way learners can use formative written feedback requires modeling through different examples that suit the learners' ability levels. Class time must be spent on student/teacher conferences which motivate class members and teachers to clear up their comprehension of the draft, therefore continuing the negotiation of meaning started in formative feedback (McGarrell and Verbeem, 2007).

Commentaries as a form of teacher-written feedback

The most common forms of teacher-written feedback on learners' writing are commentaries, cover sheets, minimal marking, taped comments and electronic feedback. Handwritten commentaries in learners' drafts are likely to be the most frequently used type of teacher feedback, and may show themselves as marginal and end comments (Hyland, 2003). While end comments let the teacher 'summarise and prioritize key points to make general observations on the paper', marginal comments are 'immediate and proximate, operating at the exact point in the text where the issue occurs' (p.180).

Praise and positive remarks as a way of motivating developing writers

Due to the fact that the goal of teacher feedback on learners' drafts is to reply, to have an effect on and to lead to improvement in their rewrites, it is crucial that it be positive in its global sense so as to encourage the writer to make progress. Thus teachers' positive remarks on learners' good points in their writing enhance confidence during the writing cycle (Hedge, 1988). Hyland and Hyland (2001, as cited in Hyland, 2003) make reference to the function of *praise* among others for teachers to take into account when providing feedback. Instead, negative teacher feedback could be discouraging and cause effects which are opposite to the ones teachers wish to bring about through feedback (Bartram & Walton, 1991).

Praise-Question-Encourage (P-Q-E) commenting guidelines

In the process of learning to write, feedback plays an important role both in providing information and as a reinforcer for revision (Li, 1992). Formative feedback gives the teacher the possibility of interacting with the students and of modifying his/her methods of instruction to facilitate better learning (*ibid.*). Hence, the meaning-centered teacher's comments give confidence to students and urge them to think of themselves less as students and more as writers (Sommers 1989, as cited in Li, 1992). This type of feedback requires the teacher to gather information on the progress of the learners during a period of time, to intervene, to introduce changes as a tutor facilitating learning and to collect new information to analyze the impact of such feedback on learners' writing performance (Li, 1992).

Lipp and Davis-Ockey (1997) designed some *Praise-Question-Encourage commenting guidelines (P-Q-E)* to be used with L2 developing writers to help them revise between drafts. As their name suggests, the *P-Q-E commenting guidelines* encourage teachers to make comments between drafts, to ask their learners questions about their writing and to include comments of praise and encouragement. These guidelines include ideas from other authors' work with L1 students. Lipp (1995, as cited in Lipp and Davis-Ockey, 1997) found that after having trained ESL teachers to use commenting guidelines, they succeeded in providing comments which helped students improve their rewrites. In the P-Q-E guidelines, Lipp (*ibid.*) discourages teachers from giving feedback primarily about errors as she has found that feedback which emphasizes form between drafts leads to subsequent rewrites where the focus is on surface mistakes, with learners making only a few or no changes at all connected with content, thus becoming grammar exercises. In the guidelines, she also includes additional research on teacher-written feedback such as Sperling and Freedman's (1987, as cited in Lipp & Davis-Ockey, 1997) suggestion that a learner is more likely to implement teacher feedback effectively when the written comments refer to concepts discussed in class. In addition, taking into account the idea that student motivation is related to language acquisition, Lipp (*ibid.*) has designed guidelines to let writing teachers encourage their learners by including comments of praise and encouragement in their written feedback. Furthermore, she claims that teachers' use of referential or open questions may result in further meaning negotiation as well as in more complex learner output.

Having identified a problematic issue in a fifth year course at the public school in a rural area where the present study was carried out, we decided to apply Action Research due to the fact that 'the central idea of the *action* part of AR is to intervene in a deliberate way in the problematic situation in order to bring about changes and, even better, improvements in practice' (Burns 2010: 2). Nunan (1993: 41) refers to action research as an 'inside out' approach centred in the concerns and interests of teachers, which actively involves them in the process of Professional Development. Due to its practical, problem-solving aspect, its on-going nature and its connection with the notion of effectiveness, we decided to apply Collaborative Action Research as the research methodology for the present study.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were five EFL learners (two seventeen-year-old girls and three seventeen-year-old boys) in the fifth year at a state school in the rural area of Rafael Obligado in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, who had been learning English as a school activity for four years at the same school with a previous teacher. For the sake of privacy, the real names and identities of the participants will not be revealed. They will be referred to as S1, S2, S3, S4 and S5. With reference to the *Canadian Language Benchmarks*, the learners belong to Level 3. It is worth mentioning that the writing samples which have been included in the present study belong to S1, S2 and S3, who were the learners who presented more difficulties while attending the lessons.

Context

The state rural high school where the present study took place is located in Rafael Obligado, a town of only nine hundred and thirty-five inhabitants where the school is the most important public institution in the community in educational, social and cultural ways. The Fifth Year consisted of fifteen students who loved their previous teacher of English but disliked her lessons because the emphasis had been on *form* rather than on *content*, and on *product* rather than on *process*. They thought they knew nothing as regards English and they were afraid of making mistakes, especially related to grammar and tenses.

The small class size favored the teacher's identification of the problematic issue described above, the design of materials according to student needs and keeping track of learners' progress. As regards students, it fostered student participation and involvement in the present project, this being the first time learners had taken part in a research study. Although this rural town did not have high-speed Internet connections, most of the learners had access to a state netbook, a home computer and a slow Internet connection at home or at school.

Data collection techniques

Written production tasks

To provide pre-, while- and post-writing samples, learners had to accomplish three writing tasks:

- Beginning of term task (April-July) *before* implementation of the approach.
- Mid term task (August-September-October) *while* the plan was in action.
- End of term task (November) *after* the plan of action had been carried out.

Journal writing and questionnaires

The learners were asked to record entries in journals which were especially designed for this study. Some of their entries were related to the way they had written their first drafts and others to their reaction to the teacher's feedback between drafts. The participants were also asked to answer a questionnaire adapted for the study. They answered the same questionnaire *before*, *during* and *after* the implementation of the plan of action. Both the journals and the questionnaires were carried out in the L1.

Procedure

In order to foster the writing skills of the learners in our study, we implemented an action research plan during which we:

- encouraged real writing tasks in the classroom.
- promoted awareness of the steps, procedures and importance of the process of writing.
- helped learners generate content and discover purpose.
- provided learners with a writing context in which they were able to see clearly what the audience and the communicative function of the text were. Being aware of who the reader is gives learners a context without which it is hard to know what or how to write (Hedge, 1988). In other words, we created audiences and developed awareness of the reader (Hedge, 2000).

In order to explore the learners' reaction to teacher constructive feedback between drafts as well as the effects of the application of *P-Q-E commenting guidelines* during teacher-written feedback on the development of learners' writing skills, we used the guidelines designed by Lipp and Davis-Ockey (1997) (see Appendix 1 at <http://bit.ly/1SZFX-Qs>)

Apart from using the above-mentioned guidelines when conducting formative feedback on our students' drafts, we applied Checklist A, adapted from White and McGovern (1994). While responding to early drafts we first focused on Sections 1 to 3, which consist of questions related to content, purpose and organization. Once the student writers found a consistent thread of ideas, we focused on Sections 4 to 9 of the checklist, which deal with cohesion, vocabulary, mechanical accuracy and design.

The present study is supported by 'the principle of best possible quality of data, obtained as economically as possible and, where possible, integrated with the normal work processes of the part-timer' (Weir and Roberts, 1994:31). Thus, taking into account the limited time English lessons took (two lessons a week, sixty minutes each), the data was obtained during normal classroom work.

The data was collected from multiple sources to ensure the reliability and validity of this study, which enabled us to be more confident in the claims we made. Therefore, we performed triangulation of data collection (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995). This was done by gathering data from different perspectives: learners and teacher researchers, and from different sources as explained in the data collection techniques section above.

The types of tasks and instruments used in the study were first piloted to ensure that they fulfilled the intended goals. Other students with a proficiency level similar to that of the learners involved in this study were randomly selected to pilot the tasks, questions, and other instruments to ensure they were short, clear, and direct and that the participants had enough knowledge to respond to them (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995).

Careful consideration was given to questions of access and ethics. Access refers to acceptance and cooperation from the parties involved and ethics relates to the criteria which enable the teacher researchers to do what is right and correct (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995). Thus, the learners and their parents were informed of the project plan. They were informed of what exactly was going to be done, how they were expected to collaborate and what use would be made of the information they would provide. Anonymity and confidentiality regarding the learners' production and interviews were guaranteed.

The study

Below is a brief description of the steps followed during the study. From April to July (*before* the implementation of our plan of action), the five participants dealt with a text on ASIMO, the robot designed and developed by Honda. Students also surfed the net for information on ASIMO, focusing especially on its description, characteristics and jobs it can carry out. Learners were asked to imagine they were the inventors who developed the cell phone Samsung Galaxy Young 2 and were asked to design a sales leaflet each. Those leaflets were read by the teachers, who assigned a mark to each of them according to a set of descriptors.

From August to October (*during* the implementation of the plan of action), the participants worked in class and at home writing a sales leaflet. In each case, the procedure followed was the same: The learners wrote their *plans* either at home or in class. Then they wrote their *first drafts*, which were handed in after having been revised using post writing questions. After writing their first drafts, the five participants wrote their *first journal entries* based on a list of suggestions on how to do it. The teacher researcher in charge of implementing the project in the classroom read her learners' first drafts and wrote comments on them using Checklist A, Sections 1–3, paying attention to content and not form, since these drafts were not considered end products. Teachers used constructive feedback in this first step to correction, according to the P-Q-E procedure:

- Praise. Learners were praised for what they had done.
- Questions. By means of questions, learners were helped to revise their writings.
- Encouragement. Learners were given encouragement.

The teacher also wrote comments on the learners' first journal entries. The five participants then wrote their *second journal entries* reacting to their teacher's feedback to their first drafts. They made use of further suggestions on how to do it. The teacher researcher gave feedback on these journal entries too.

After that, the participants wrote their *second drafts*, which were read by their teacher. While reading, the teacher researcher focused on Checklist A Sections 4-9 and on a Correction Code to write comments. At this stage the focus was on *form* and correction of grammatical mistakes using the same sequence: praise, questions, encouragement. Still, however, the second drafts were not considered end products. The five learners then wrote *journal entries* reacting to their teacher's comments on their second drafts. Their teacher read them and wrote feedback on these too.

After writing the last version of their sales leaflets, each learner wrote a *journal entry* on this final product (in most cases participants wrote on how they felt about the teacher's previous feedback, on the way they had made progress from the first till the final copy and their feelings about the product and about writing the third draft). The teacher researcher read those drafts and journals and wrote feedback on them.

Finally, the participants typed their *last versions* of their sales leaflets. The teacher researcher gave her five fifth year learners' last versions to other fifth year students and asked them to read those sales leaflets. The latter were asked to write comments on the sales leaflets they had read after reading Checklist A Section 9. The teacher researcher returned the sales leaflets to her five fifth year students and told them what she had asked their fifth year partners to do. The five fifth year learners read the comments they got from their partners (the audience) and were asked to write in their *journals* about their reactions to their peers' comments. The teacher researcher read those journals.

It is important to point out that during the months of September and October, the learners were also asked to work in groups in order to design and construct a robot. In order to do this, they were advised to re-read the information they had surfed about ASIMO (see *before* the implementation of the plan of action, above) and re-

flect on a certain need they had identified at home or at school and the reasons for constructing a robot to respond to that necessity. Students were asked to give each robot a name related to the robot's main use(s). Learners wrote entries in their *journals* about their robot, including its description, its use(s), the materials used in its construction, the price and the target. At the end of October, learners were asked to introduce their robots to their partners, teachers and headmistress at school. They described their robots in L2 and showed them in action. They were recorded and photos were taken.

After the implementation of the plan, the researchers told the students that each of them was a member of the Marketing Department at Honda. As such, each of them was asked to design a sales leaflet for the campaign to launch the robot they had built. The five learners were asked to do this for homework individually. Those sales leaflets were checked by the researchers, who gave each of them a mark after having used the same set of *descriptors* used at the beginning of the study. Finally, the learners completed the same *questionnaire* they had answered *before* and *during* the implementation of the plan of action (Appendix 2: <http://bit.ly/1SZFXQs>).

Types of analysis for evaluation of results

Different data were considered for the evaluation of results, namely, learners' writing samples, learners' journal writings, the teacher's written feedback, learners' reactions to their teacher's feedback and questionnaires.

Analysing learners' writing

Throughout this professional development project, teacher roles were those of *reader*, *assistant* and *evaluator* facilitating, monitoring, helping when necessary and providing constructive feedback between drafts in order to engage the learners in the process of learning to write (Tribble, 1996). Following White and Arndt (1991:3), 'it is through attention to meaning, and not just form, that language – and writing – improve'. However, at the end of the process, in order to evaluate the effect of the implementation of the plan of action, it was necessary to play the role of examiner. Therefore, a mark was assigned to each individual learner to reflect individual performance by means of a marking scheme consisting of descriptors designed to assess writing.

Analysing journal writing and questionnaire data

Learners' perceptions and insights were recorded in written form and analyzed through interpretative procedures by looking into frequencies of mention or salience with the purpose of grouping and summarizing them. In order to compare and contrast the findings, the data were transferred to transfer charts organized into categories through coding (Hyland, 2003). Finally, graphs and tables were used to summarize data.

Results

Analysing learners' writing

Before the implementation of the study

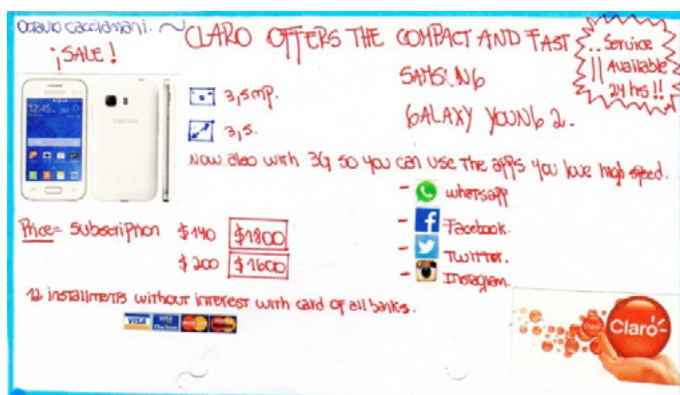
Most of the students experienced difficulties in writing before the implementation of the plan of action. The most important problems were related to the content of the selling message the learners wanted to convey in their sales leaflets and the appropriate use of language for the target audience; also, the inclusion and organization of essential information: company name, slogan, logo, image(s) and contact information. Spelling mistakes and grammatical errors were also frequent. Figures 1–3 are S1, S2 and S3 sample sales leaflets before the implementation of the study:



S1



S2

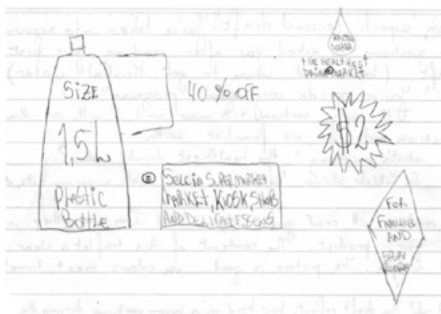


S3

Figures 1–3. Students' first samples

During the implementation of the study: Early drafts

Learners experienced difficulties related to the writer's purpose and content, and additional information was required in their early drafts. As regards the writer's purpose, it was not so clearly stated in some of the early drafts that the students wrote, i.e. their sales leaflets did not have strong selling messages. In most cases, content was not strong enough to help readers make a decision in the writer's favour. Also, additional information was required. Finally, taking into account structure, it was seen that many times the sequence of ideas needed rearrangement (Figures 4–6).



Alan, superb second draft!! You've taken into account the questions I asked you after reading your first draft (logo and where to get Kristal water). You've made very good progress!!

I'll apply sections 4-8 now and I will use the correction code you are familiar with.

- ⓪ v what's missing? ... the healthiest drink ... what?
- ⓪ w/ Is Kristal Water 'sell' or 'sold' at supermarkets, etc?

The readers will read your slogan and I'm sure they will buy your product. The content of this leaflet is clear and simple. The picture is good ... use colours next time!

Great job! This draft reflects how hard you've been working during the implementation of our plan of action. Time to make a clean copy!! ☺
P.S. before editing it, include contact info (@, www)

S2

Octavio, 'perfect second draft!!

You've taken into account the questions I asked you after reading your first draft (esp. price, places where to get Kristal water and slogan).

You've made very good progress!! The readers will read the headline and I'm sure they will be motivated to read the rest of the leaflet and buy your product. They will make a decision in your favor as the content is clear and answers the question... 'What is in this leaflet for me??' You've also included a nice picture of your product.

Excellent job!! This draft reflects how hard you've been working all this time during the implementation of our plan of action.

Hope to get your clean copy next class!! (before editing you f... call your teacher include your info?) ☺
@, www, etc. could you use superlatives here??



S3

Figures 7-9. Revised drafts and teacher's feedback

After the implementation of the study: Final productions

Finally, students were able to produce *adequate* sales leaflets (Figures 10–12) after a thorough process of planning, writing, reading, rereading, rewriting.




S1



S2

Regabot
"Everything you need for a better life"

U\$S
30



100% Profitable

It contains four wheels

Target: adult people

Keeps your garden with joy

A tank containing 20 litres

Contact Information:
Tel.: 02334-5948589
Fb: Facebook/*Regabot*
Instagram: *Regabot.GoodLife*

S3

Figures 10-12. Learners' final productions

Writing assessment

A mark was assigned to each individual learner to reflect individual performance by means of a marking scheme consisting of descriptors designed to assess writing (Appendix 3: <http://bit.ly/1SZFXQs>). The results obtained are shown in Table 1.

Student	Before the implementation of the study	After the implementation of the study
S1	7	8
S2	7	9
S3	8	9
S4	7	8
S5	7	9

Table 1. Marks assigned to learners' writings before and after the implementation of the plan of action.

Analysing journal writing

After each writing task, learners were asked to record an entry in their journals. As stated before, some of those entries related to the way they wrote their first drafts and others to their reaction to the teacher's feedback between drafts. The information gathered was qualitatively interpreted into key points. It is important to point out that the journals were written in L1.

Thus, learners' perceptions and insights were recorded in written form and analysed through interpretative procedures by looking into frequencies of mention or salience, with the purpose of grouping and summarising them. In order to compare and contrast the findings, the data was organised into three categories: experience, sensation and ideas. The same three categories were taken into account after the participants wrote their first, second and third drafts during the implementation of our plan of action.

Journal results after the first draft

Once learners finished writing their first drafts, they were asked to complete the journal in L1. As a result, the three salient features mentioned above could be identified:

- Experience: They wrote about the experience they had had while producing their first draft. It was apparent that *reflection* became a key word to the learners.
- Sensation: As regards their feelings, it was evident that they felt confident about their writing at this stage. Students indicated they were having no problems when designing their first draft.
- Ideas: Learners took into account the instructions given by the teacher-researcher as regards planning, writing, reading, rereading and revising the materials dealt with in class when designing a sales leaflet. Examples given, dictionaries, translators and peer help were among the most salient resources students used at this stage.

Journal results after the second draft

Students were asked to write a second entry in their journals after their first drafts were corrected and commented on by the teacher. They were also given written feedback on their first journal entries.

- Experience: Learners considered the process of writing a second draft after receiving positive teacher feedback. The teacher's first feedback was considered very useful as a way of improving the leaflet in order to write the second draft.
- Sensation: As regards learners' feelings, it was clear that confidence and happiness were among the most salient aspects at this stage. Students found teacher comments interesting and important and realized that their first drafts needed improvement. Some doubts appeared and the necessity of their teacher's comments and suggestions was evident.
- Ideas: The process of draft writing proved to be a challenging activity and it was considered by the participants themselves as highly positive, as it reflected progress in their own writing.

According to students' comments, draft writing was seen as a good idea because they considered that it was a way of learning to write in English. Moreover, they affirmed that writing many drafts would let them create very good leaflets.

Journal results after the third draft

Students were asked to write a third entry in their journals after their second drafts were assessed and commented on by the teacher. They

wrote mostly about their reactions to the teacher's comments on their previous drafts and about the experience they had had when writing their third drafts.

- **Experience:** As with the previous drafts, learners regarded the experience as really valuable. Students felt happy with their end product. They assured their teacher that they had learned many new things. Having an audience in mind (society in general, in this case) was seen as a positive aspect.
- **Sensation:** Without doubt, at this stage, learners felt more confident. Effort and teacher help were much appreciated at this stage. They felt they could write in English after having worked so hard. They all believed that the sales of Kristal water would improve due to the new design of the leaflet.
- **Ideas:** The idea of progress was reported by them. Students identified draft writing, teacher feedback and self-reflection as key components of the process of writing. All of them used a netbook or a home computer to present the final version of the leaflet.

Analysing students' reactions to teacher's feedback

Students' reactions to the teacher's feedback can be summarised according to three very important aspects: helpfulness, improvement and confidence

- **Helpfulness:** Learners considered the teacher's comments as very useful. Teacher positive feedback was seen as motivating and helpful.
- **Improvement:** Learners believed that the teacher's feedback let them improve their writings. Students believed that their final versions showed what they had learned step by step, from the first draft to the last one. They also believed that they could better understand English while reading now.
- **Confidence:** All learners agreed on the fact that the teacher's feedback and comments helped them feel more confident about their writings.

The final version of the sales leaflets was read by fifth year peers. The five participants who designed them felt really happy because they could convey their message correctly. They feel they had achieved something they had never done before, that they had become more professional as editors and that they could improve the sales of their product.

Analysing questionnaires

As regards the teacher's comments and corrections, it can be observed that all five students thought about them carefully and felt they had helped them improve their writing *before*, *during* and *after* the implementation of the plan of action. They considered that the teacher's comments helped them to realize where their mistakes were, think clearly while writing and detect what to avoid/improve next time. They also challenged the learners to try new things, built their confidence and let them see the progress they had made.

Finally, all students reported having understood the teacher's comments and suggestions, with all of them answering negatively to the question: Are there ever any comments or corrections that you do not understand?

Discussion

As teachers of English, we felt the need to design a plan of action to help our students improve their writings. We admit that a drawback of this study is the small sample size. However, in our particular case, the results of this action research study provided us with clear evidence that the teacher's feedback during the process of writing is crucial when students are learning to write. Moreover, this study, due to its practical, problem-solving aspect, its on-going nature and its connection with the notion of effectiveness helped us and our students gain some insights regarding the usefulness of teacher feedback. In the paragraphs below, we discuss the different results.

About language performance

Considering organizational knowledge (Bachman & Palmer, 1996), the students demonstrated a gradual improvement from first to later drafts to final production. Undoubtedly, too, they experienced writing as a process of planning, organizing, composing, drafting, reviewing, revising and editing. It is important to note the students' perceived need to keep on working hard on this aspect since it proved to be challenging and enriching. We agree with Akinwamide (2012: 23), who states that a process-oriented approach to writing could be 'pedagogically rewarding, revealing and reliable in the deve-

lopment of the writing skill'. Furthermore, focusing on content first let them feel more confident and organize their writings as a coherent whole. Once they had their ideas and content organized they moved on to the next step, improving the grammatical aspect. Regarding grammatical knowledge, learners showed evident progress from early drafts. Overall, it can be positively pointed out that teacher feedback which emphasises content over form helped learners improve their rewrites, becoming more successful individual writers by the end of the intervention.

About learners' perceptions

Not only did the study reveal that the students really enjoyed working under this methodological approach, but it also disclosed that they applied their teacher's comments when rewriting their drafts. Moreover, we noticed that in the process of writing there was a decrease in their level of anxiety (Bayat, 2014). Fortunately, the learners expressed a positive attitude towards this sort of work and a strong desire to continue working with this approach. Apparently, they were able to grasp the process-based view of writing and the interconnectedness of writing and learning skills. Evidently, process-based instruction in writing showed itself to be a suitable methodological strategy for this group of students.

About teacher feedback

Finally, our analysis has shown that the *Praise-Question-Encourage* (P-Q-E) commenting guidelines during formative teacher-written feedback on EFL learners' rewrites proved to be successful in this case. The several drafts done by the students showed genuine improvement not only in language performance, but also in the new insights, perceptions and skills gained during the guidelines cycle (Figure 13).

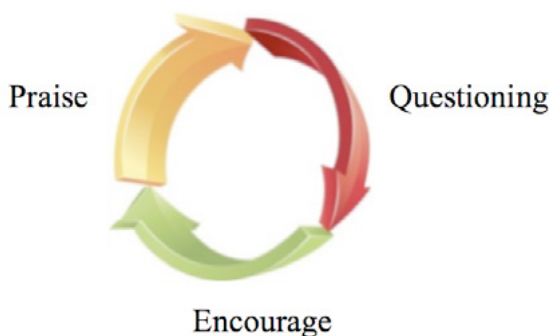


Figure 13. *Guidelines cycle*

Moreover, the dynamics surrounding each piece of writing, in which participants had a kind of dialogue with the teacher, seemed to be useful and helpful. First, they were praised for what they had done well, which let them feel more confident. After that, they were questioned and some tips were offered. Finally, they were invited to solve the problem. Definitely, the usefulness of incorporating the P-Q-E commenting guidelines can be highlighted as a powerful strategy to help students learn to write. Furthermore, these guidelines clearly promoted the improvement of writing skills and fostered a better understanding of all the steps involved in writing.

Finally, we infer that this plan of action was important in contributing to language scaffolding, assisting learners' progressive movement from dependent to independent performance in writing, enabling learners to work at a higher level of performance than they would be able to do on their own (Bruner, 1978; Vygotsky, 1986).

To sum up, the questions the study focused on were answered positively:

- Teacher feedback which emphasizes content over form helped learners improve their rewrites.
- P-Q-E commenting guidelines during teacher-written feedback were effective in contributing to these EFL learners' rewrites.
- Learners applied the teacher's comments when rewriting their drafts.
- Learners became more successful as individual writers.

In this study, EFL learners whose teacher's written feedback followed *P-Q-E commenting guidelines* and emphasised content over form, were able to revise their work effectively through clarification of meaning in their rewrites.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, writing is one of the most difficult skills for EFL students to develop. That difficulty is related to two aspects, at least: generating and organizing ideas and turning these ideas into readable texts. Thus, learners have to activate two types of skills: 'higher level skills of planning and organizing' and 'lower level skills of spelling, punctuation, word choice, and so on' (Richards and Renandya, 2002: 303). In this professional development study we embraced a formative approach to teacher-written feedback which prioritized content in early drafts and followed *Praise-Question-Encourage (P-Q-E) commenting guidelines* during multi-draft writing as a means to foster/encourage learner writers to revise their intermediate drafts and improve their writing skills. Such a goal seems realistic at this stage of the writing process as developing writers have little invested in their texts, being probably relatively prepared to revise and if necessary, to alter their basic shape (McGarrell and Verbeem, 2007).

After having carried out this case study we have come to the following conclusions: in the first place, *P-Q-E* commenting guidelines provide teachers with a useful strategy in order to help learners improve the types of writing skills mentioned in the previous paragraph. In the second place, the proper implementation of formative teacher-written feedback in developing writers helps to encourage the skills and habits needed for draft revision at a deep level. In the third place, we agree with McGarrell and Verbeem (2007), who claim that a formative approach to teacher feedback helps teachers to adjust their conflicting roles as collaborators and evaluators in the L2 writing context. In this learner centered approach, 'Content appropriateness could be ensured, Organization of ideas in logical sequential order could be sustained, grammaticality in Expression could be perfected, and mastering the use and usage of Writing-Mechanics could be ascertained' (Akinwamide, 2012: 23). However, we

are not suggesting that engaging learners in the process of writing means that composition teachers are not supposed to upgrade the developing writers' linguistic competences. Syntax, vocabulary and rhetorical form are features of writing that require teaching not as ends in themselves but as a means with which to express their meaning in a better way (Zamel, 1982). Last but not least, we agree with Peñaflorida (2002: 350) when she points out that 'responding to student writing improves written work and may make writing interesting, challenging and enjoyable'.

We are aware that the results cannot be generalized, due to having been conducted with a limited number of students. Secondly, feedback was studied during a limited period of time and not over the course of a whole writing program. In the third place, more research needs to be conducted in EFL settings taking into account that not only are the factors involved in teaching in ESL and EFLs context different but there is also a big difference in the *purposes* for writing.

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How far can introducing a CPD programme for schoolteachers that incorporates reflection and collaboration affect their practices and students' achievement levels?



Maria Ines Berasain
Montevideo, Uruguay

After a number of years as Head of the Primary School English Department in a bilingual school in Uruguay, the performance of Form 6 students seemed to have reached its peak. I was under the impression that teachers were working very hard but in a relatively routinised manner. After three periods of satisfactory but unimproved exam results, some of the teachers in this group voiced the same concerns: they were doing a lot of work but children's learning (and results) were not improving – consequently, some aspect of the teaching-learning experience needed a change. Bearing in mind that this situation could be the consequence of a number of conditions under which both teaching and learning took place (class sizes, resources available, teacher-student contact hours, teachers' working hours at school, etc.) I decided to look into teachers' practices and whether a shift in the model of the CPD programme at school could help modify this situation.

About the author

Maria Ines Berasain holds a Diploma in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (2000) and is a Masters candidate for the MSc in Educational Leadership at the University of Leicester (DL). She started working as a teacher of English in 2000, and since then has mostly been dedicated to teaching in school contexts, recently being appointed Academic Deputy Head of English at Colegio Seminario (Montevideo). She is also a teacher trainer at Instituto Cultural Anglo Uruguayo and a Cambridge English examiner.

Introduction

The main aim of this action research project is to explore the extent to which a change in the continuous professional development scheme some teachers took part in could help improve their students' learning process and, consequently, performance standards at a certain level of primary school.

As Head of the English Department in a bilingual Jesuit school in Montevideo, I am responsible for fostering achievement of the best possible results in standardised international language exams, which students take in their final year of primary school, i.e., in Form 6. With little improvement since 2011, achievement standards consistently reached 75% in the period 2011 to 2013, a figure that, according to directors, myself and a few teachers, should be improved. In the Uruguayan educational context, the prestige of an educational institution is assessed by the general public in terms of its results in standardised tests or exams. Being such a referent of high academic status, the fact that results in international exams had not seen as much improvement as expected in the period mentioned above caused the school authorities to ask those of us more directly involved to take some action that might improve this situation.

After I was appointed Head of the Department in December 2011, Form 6 teachers received expert input (by attending congresses, workshops and talks by both Uruguayan and foreign experts) on a number of occasions in which they were given suggestions about an array of new techniques they could use in class to improve student learning and, consequently, achievement levels. However, these achievement levels varied only slightly.

During that period I was under the impression that teachers in Form 6 were working very hard but in a relatively routinised manner. They seemed to be reproducing the teaching practices they had been implementing so far as well as those that had been suggested to them, without considering the extent to which they were enriching students' learning at school. After three periods of satisfactory but almost unimproved exam results, some of the teachers in this group voiced the same concerns: they were doing a lot of work but children's learning

(and results) were not improving – consequently, some aspect of the teaching–learning experience needed a change.

Bearing in mind that this situation could be the consequence of a number of conditions under which both teaching and learning took place (class sizes, resources available, teacher–student contact hours, teachers’ working hours at school), I decided to look into teachers’ practices and whether a shift in the model of the CPD (Continuous Professional Development) programme at school could help modify this situation.

The teachers who were invited to take part in this action research project are three experienced Form 6 teachers. They have been working at this level for a period of about five years. Each of them graduated as a teacher of English and their language is at C2 level (CEFR). They are also three of the best-graded teachers in the English Department at school, regarded as leaders at their level. They meet their students for ten 40-minute periods each week, six of which are dedicated to the teaching of English as a Second Language and four to the teaching of British History with a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach. As the school is making every effort to be regarded as a bilingual school, some content areas have been included in the curriculum in the second language. One of these has been History. However, as students are taught History in Spanish, it was agreed and established – together with the Head of Social Sciences – that students in Form 6 were to work on British History and study the same period in History that they would cover in their History classes in Spanish. This decision was taken as a way to favour students having a wider picture of the world at the time.

They work in groups of about 25 students aged between 11 and 12 years old, most of whom have been attending the same school for at least three years and who have an A2+ level of English (CEFR). In most cases, if not all, these students have not had any of these professionals as their teachers the previous year.

Teachers at school share a once-a-week coordination meeting. All teachers of English in the Department take part in this meeting, which

lasts 60 minutes and is dedicated mostly to administrative issues and occasionally some academic discussions. On some occasions, during these meetings, experienced Form 6 teachers voiced their concern about a need for their practices to change. Until then, changes had been simply introduced by implementing what outside experts suggested, without reflecting much on how relevant and/or viable these suggestions were for the context of this particular school and course. This kind of CPD programme that I had implemented in my school department for the last few years clearly lacked the element of reflection, as well as that of collaboration.

During 2014, teachers had been invited to join a course that was going to be taught at school, the Certificate for Teachers in Bilingual Education, in an effort to bring most teachers to a similar level of instruction regarding the teaching of content through a CLIL approach. Most teachers in the department joined the course (including me) and the three teachers invited to take part in this research also took part in the course and passed the corresponding international exam to obtain the certification.

At the beginning of the year 2015, as part of a change in the school policy, a second coordination meeting was introduced. These recently introduced meetings are shared by teachers of English working in the same level, e.g., only Form 6 teachers, allowing for more academic discussions and the exchange of teaching experiences, but only for a very limited period of time.

If a more systematic and larger space for collaborative reflection was to be introduced, it was necessary to be aware of what involving teachers in this process would require of them in terms of availability, disposition and knowledge, and to be ready to cater for these needs. This also involved the school, and the authorities being disposed to give teachers the flexibility to use some of their working hours at school to take part in the new CPD scheme based on reflection and collaboration. It is also relevant to note that these teachers have been working together for some years and have consequently developed a trusting relationship that facilitates collaboration among them.

Literature review

As mentioned before, a need for change in some aspect of the teaching and learning process at school was needed. This was acknowledged both by a group of teachers as well as by me as Head of English. As previous CPD actions taken had not brought the desired effect, I informed myself about the potential benefits and challenges of a CPD scheme based on reflection and collaboration, according to a review of relevant literature.

Substantial research has been carried out on the effectiveness of adopting CPD schemes that integrate the recurrent practice of reflection in collaboration with colleagues. There are many advantages to CPD schemes incorporating these features that will no doubt have a positive impact on teacher learning and, most probably on their practice. However, some particular features and practices fostered in these programmes, such as the promotion of PLCs ('Professional Learning Communities'), seem to show special usefulness. At the same time, there are challenges that this kind of CPD will definitely bring not only to the institution but also to individual staff members.

Reflection is likely to first encourage teachers to look at the possible gap between what they believe they should do in the classroom and what they actually do. In their report of the results of a survey applied in the schools taking part in the Learning How to Learn Project in England, Pedder and MacBeath (2008) explain how Senge (1990, quoted in Pedder and MacBeath, 2008) warns about what he terms 'organisational learning disabilities'. This idea draws on the concepts worked on by Argyris and Schön (1996: 13), those of 'espoused theories', the theories used to justify what teachers do, and 'theories in use', the implicit knowledge that determines practice. It further connects these concepts to the idea of how an institution will be capable of change only after having faced these discrepancies occurring within it. Supporting this view, James and MacBeath (2008:213) suggest a reflective approach to identify discrepancies between the espoused theories of members of staff and their theories in use.

Jenny Harnet (2012: 379) also comments on the impact of reflection on practice. She refers to Bransford's idea that reflection requires the

teacher to focus on ‘routinized unthinking aspects of their practice’ (Bransford et al. 2005 quoted in Harnet *ibid.*) and, by so doing, bringing inconsistencies to the surface. According to Pedder and Opfer (2012: 545), these inconsistencies arising from reflection may bring what they call ‘a change-provoking disequilibrium’, that is, the exposed gap will call for some kind of action to restore the equilibrium.

One of the challenges that reflection poses for teachers is the need to acquire the concepts and vocabulary necessary to express their ideas and assessment of their learning (Harnet, 2012: 380). Being in contact with journals, research papers and taking part in workshops, seminars and courses can certainly provide them with a valuable opportunity to achieve a reasonable command of the jargon and be able to use it accurately. Warford (2011: 255) also agrees that as internalization (as defined by Vygotsky) grows, teachers are better able to use their pedagogical knowledge skills in alignment with specific programs, and suggests that the use of narrative in writing is the most favourable technique to achieve this, since reflection about professional practice requires a specialised form of thinking (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983 in De Vries et al., 2013: 80).

Above all, reflection is part of the essence of the Jesuit philosophy and, therefore, fostering it in all areas of teachers’ lives, their teaching practice included, would be aligned not only with the pedagogical values of the school such as ‘change through discernment’ (Características de la Educacion de la Compañía de Jesus, 1987: 44) but also with the more philosophical conceptions that define the institution, the educational paradigms that rule it and the congregation that runs it.

Harnet proposes a relevant challenge to the use of reflection as a main tool to help bridge the gap between teachers’ values and their practice. She claims that many experts in the field of professional development consider that as long as teachers remain unable to monitor and reflect on their behaviour and practice in the classroom, their ‘routinised and uneffective practice will be unlikely to change’ (Harnet, 2012: 382). This can be considered to be one of the potential reasons why, although achievement levels at my school were satisfactory, they had remained unchanged and still distant from the level aimed at.

Although reflection can be put into practice in relatively individualistic or collective fashions, the literature reviewed almost exclusively supports the latter form. Collaboration, in its varied forms, seems to bring the most positive impact into teachers' practices.

Incorporating the element of collaboration into teachers' learning can be done in a variety of ways: informal talks in staffrooms to discuss with colleagues the effect of newly implemented activities, peer observation with the subsequent feedback session, team-teaching, or team-planning.

One of the approaches to collaborative teacher learning is that of PLCs – professional learning communities (Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007:2) – in which groups of teachers embark on ongoing reflective and collaborative activities to develop their practice. The essence of these communities, then, is closely related to the concept of 'knowledge of practice', as defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001: 48), allowing for the understanding of the relationship between knowledge and practice. As expressed by Vescio et al. (2008: 82), the concept of PLC is based on the aim of improving student learning by working to improve teacher practice. This is further supported by the idea of ZPTD (Zone of Proximal Teacher Development) inspired by Vygotsky's theory, in which teachers can reach their proximal level by mediating their learning with the assistance of a more capable other, such as a colleague, an instructor, or a supervisor (Warford, 2011: 253).

Stoll and Seashore Louis claim this approach to teacher development has made 'a significant difference to measurable student achievement' (Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007: 3). Also, according to Fullan (1999: 28), shared knowledge and organisational connectedness are the long-term assets of high performing organizations. This idea might challenge the institution in different ways. First of all, there is the idea of providing members of staff with a safe environment in which they can feel protected enough to be ready to expose what they had until then kept private, namely, what happens inside their classrooms, referred to as 'deprivatization of practice' by Vescio et al, (2008: 84). This group of authors also suggest that, as teachers are encouraged to reflect on their practice collaboratively to implement changes in their practice,

they should therefore be allowed to have a say in school decisions that affect their teaching. Schools then, need to be ready to accept this kind of teacher authority and be open to their new findings. Another challenge to consider is the fact that if teacher-led collaborative groups fail to extend their scope beyond the reality of their classroom, they run the risk of failing to critique and reflect on all aspects of their teaching (Little, 2003 quoted in Vescio et al., 2008: 89). This is one of the main reasons why external orientation, especially from sources outside the educational institution could become an asset to the work of the PLC.

The introduction of a CPD programme involving reflection and collaboration as the main tools seems to be supported by the literature as a possible way to impact positively in order to generate conscious change in teachers' practice in such a way that they improve teacher learning.

Both reflection and collaboration create opportunities for teachers to make their implicit knowledge explicit by interacting with colleagues or external sources to inform their practice and critically examine it. However, as some authors have explained, taking part in these communities of learning but not being able to transfer this reflective approach into the classroom will limit the impact of teacher reflection on student learning and outcomes.

Methodology

AR (Action Research) was chosen as the research methodology for this project because of its participatory nature, involving practitioners directly in the research itself in order to change an aspect of their professional lives and hopefully starting an ongoing process of permanent reflection and the search for continuous improvement. On designing this practical AR project, as defined by Denscombe (2010: 131), two clear AR cycles can be identified. One springs from teachers' concern about the limited effect on students' progress their practices seemed to be having; the other, from my concern regarding how to promote the necessary change in teachers' practices by modifying their CPD scheme.

As will be further explained, the initial data collection methods had to be adapted to the particular conditions presented by the context at the time of the project. Initially, a number of data collection tools had been considered as key to helping discover the possible answers to the question proposed in this paper. These tools were:

- *Class observations* In order to identify teachers' practices as well as to record visible changes in teachers' performance, a series of class observations were to be carried out.
- *Interviews* Semi-structured interviews where respondents were asked a series of open questions were carried out with the teachers. The aim of using these interviews was to collect data in the form of discourse that would illuminate the reflective processes of the teachers involved.
- *Assessment scores* Students' test results were another way of providing evidence of their performance during this project.
- *Teachers' reflective journals* Teachers taking part in this project were asked to keep a diary of post-lesson reflections not only to record work patterns in the different classes but also their assessment of how successful those practices had been.

Results and discussion

As mentioned before, teachers were worried about the slight (if any) improvement in exam results and felt something in their practices was not working as it should have.

Early in 2015 we conducted a meeting to discuss their practices during 2014, and share their feelings about what had worked or not. Having explored practices and feelings, we then looked at the corresponding exam results with the aim of interpreting a relationship between the former and the latter. This was the point at which we set out to define the changes to be implemented in the teachers' practice during 2015.

When sharing their reflections on their practice the previous year, the three teachers agreed on the fact that when they implemented a complete CLIL approach to their teaching of History – which was

part of an assignment for the course they had taken that year – they had seen a notable increase in student active engagement and participation. They added this could have been due mainly to new techniques used for student participation. Also, one of the teachers (teacher A) pointed out that when she first thought of implementing this kind of lesson, she had the feeling students ‘were not going to learn anything’. She shared that, at that moment, she had spontaneously talked about this feeling with her colleagues who were more willing to try this new methodology.

The other two teachers were better able to articulate the reasons why they considered this incorporation into their teaching to be of particular value. Teacher B mentioned that she felt that ‘Cognitive Theory was very much at the heart of this CLIL thing and that is something I believe should be central in our teaching’, while teacher C said on the few occasions she had tried CLIL with her group in 2014 ‘children were fascinated by the kind of questions and tasks I gave them, they were much more interested and using English much more frequently’.

As a school policy, there had been a shift in the number of hours dedicated to the teaching of content areas in English (History, for example) after it had been identified (in earlier research) that this area of English instruction resulted in more motivated students when working in the second language. As was evident from teachers’ reflections, they justified their intention to fully implement this approach when teaching content – now a more extensive learning opportunity – in order to improve the learning experience of students and consequently, the level of their language.

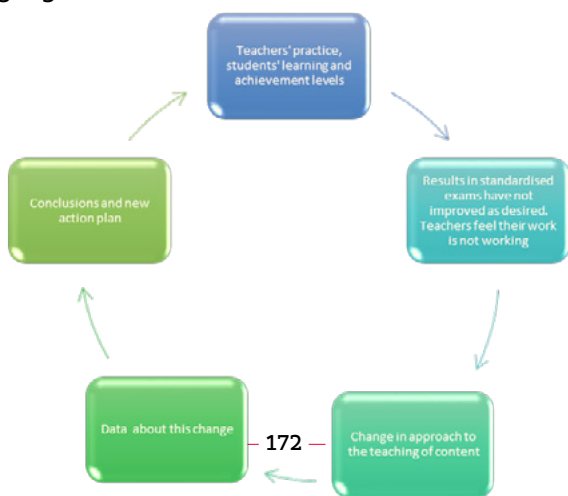


Figure 1. *Action research cycle 1: teachers*

It was then agreed that teachers were going to implement a full CLIL approach to the teaching of History, for which they were going to be planning together, implementing the corresponding lessons over the same week, eventually observing each other's classes and later reflecting together on the effects of this approach on their students' learning and performance. This decision caused teachers to plan classes anew and produce materials to match this kind of lesson. In further meetings, they agreed that it was essential for them all to have embarked on this change at the same time, since they could discuss and work together on what to do and thus avoid making some key mistakes when planning, such as 'forcing language into the context, when in fact the context needed to call for a certain kind of language, this or that structure'.

There was, among these three teachers, the recurrent comment on how 'they use much more English in class now' and that they thought some language functions and structures were beyond the children's ability, but once they were introduced in the CLIL lesson, 'they seemed to absorb them naturally, as if they immediately acquired them'.

For recording their individual reflections, teachers were provided with a tablet computer, to foster the new habit of keeping a reflective journal, both for further analysis on their part and for sharing in the weekly meetings. This data was to be analysed also in the light of the results in the standardised exams that those students were going to sit in December 2015. However, the teachers hardly ever wrote in their journals. According to what they reported, as they usually have one class after the other the time was not enough to record information there and then ('our 10-minute breaks were always too short for that', 'it was impossible to write a reflection in a crowded lounge', 'sometimes I never even got to the staff room and went directly into the next class'. What is more, they felt, if they were not recording it immediately after the lesson, it was as valid to keep their impressions for the following Friday meeting, as teacher A mentioned:

'I couldn't see the difference between the writing or just commenting at the following coordination meeting. So I just kept the ideas in

my mind to comment later’.

Although I insisted on their trying to record impressions in writing, teacher A also voiced she did not feel comfortable with writing:

I felt I had to think hard about the words I was going to write...not to make mistakes...to use sophisticated language. So, I was more worried about the language, it was stressful, I don't know. I didn't enjoy it when I did it.

Throughout the academic year, the three teachers visited each other with varying frequency. Teachers B and C got to visit each other's classes a minimum of once a month, with, in one month, managing to observe each other a maximum of three times. In general, their feedback took the shape of an informal conversation in the teachers' lounge but the main strength and weakness of each lesson was recorded in a very simple word-processed chart for later sharing in our weekly meeting, and for the observed teacher to keep as information for the later re-assessment of her lesson. During the different meetings, reference was made to these aspects and to their colleagues' suggestions.

Halfway through this cycle, teachers felt there was some overlapping between what they did in the Language class and in the History sessions. Therefore, with the information they had included in their daily lesson plans, we redesigned the areas of language to be dealt with in each class in the second language, and this was taken into consideration when re-planning the second semester of the History course. This drew them closer to implementing a full CLIL approach, since, as from then, this was to be an unavoidable teaching area in their History class.

In the final meeting, teachers said that this shift in their planning and teaching had definitely brought about a change of attitude in the students and had improved their level of English. As proof of this, they explained that the candidature of students at B1 level preparing to sit for the exam had notably improved, not just in numbers but in terms of the pass grade these students were expected to achieve.

However, when the exam results were published, no improvement in the level of achievement was seen. In fact, there was a decrease not

only in the number of candidates who had passed the exam, but also in the grade they got when passing it. Some questions arose from this unexpected finding, which will be commented on at the end of this section.

December 2014			
Teacher	Candidates	Passed	%
Teacher A	27	27	100%
Teacher B	25	24	96%
Teacher C	25	25	100%

December 2015 (post AR project)			
Teacher	Candidates	Passed	%
Teacher A	25	24	96%
Teacher B	27	23	85%
Teacher C	26	22	85%

Table 1. *International exam results per teacher: December 2014 and December 2015*

At the same time, another AR cycle was developing: that led by me as Head of Department. As stated before, apart from the situation to be improved on at classroom level, I identified a need to help teachers' practice to continue developing but in a different way from the one applied until then, and this one was at school level, through their professional development. It was after doing the literature review that the new features to be brought into the new CPD scheme were definitely chosen: reflection and collaboration as part of their CPD. Clearly, the previous CPD programmes implemented at school had followed the traditional model of professional development whose main aim is to provide teachers with 'knowledge-for-practice' as defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999). We now needed to look into our own practice and, by still resorting to professionals outside school, reflect on the value and impact of suggested practices when implemented in the classroom.

The starting point of this second cycle was the same as the teachers': the need to improve – first the teachers' practice and consequently the learners' performance, and this was to be done by working reflectively and collaboratively. As previously mentioned, the school agreed to give teachers another 40-minute period of their working hours to devote to weekly meetings in which we discussed the effectiveness or otherwise of the changes in their teaching. The two cycles worked in parallel, each providing the other with information to feed each AR cycle.

As the start of the project was delayed by a few months, that extra period the school had provided for teachers to meet started to be used for other purposes, mainly to supply for other teachers when they were absent. This largely disrupted the original purpose of that hour once the project did start. Teachers let me know, in everyday conversations, that they felt it was more valuable or necessary to use that period to help with the smooth running of the school as a whole rather than to talk about their own teaching. As teacher A pointed out, 'when a colleague is absent, that's what you have to do – go and teach in her class, that's what we are paid for'.

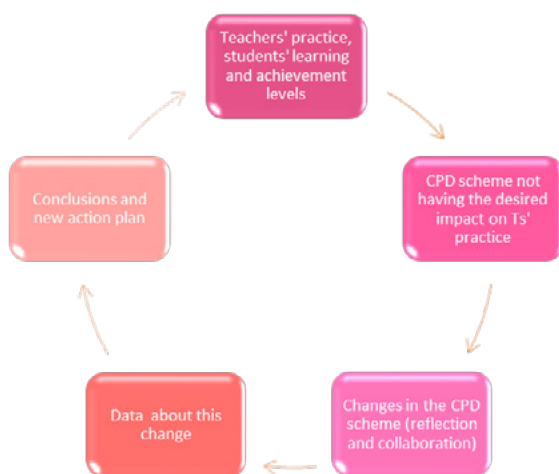


Figure 2. *Action Research Cycle2: Head of Department*

Our meetings on Fridays were, then, quite intermittent. However, what teachers never missed was the Monday coordination meeting with the other two teachers in the Form 6 level. So, on those Fridays, especially in the winter months, when any of the teachers involved in the project could not attend the meeting, we would take a few minutes in the Monday coordination meeting to discuss a few issues related to the project. This meant there was some inconsistency in the systematic work on reflection and the recording of data in the reflection meetings. Still, we managed to safeguard one or other of the pre-arranged moments for this kind of work.

Teachers expressed the importance of being able to plan together. When asked about what they meant when saying ‘plan together’, they mentioned the different tasks they carried out during these meetings: ‘we look for sources to use when planning’, ‘we discuss what worked well in the classroom when we try something new’, ‘I told teacher B some things about her class that I observed’, ‘we discuss with you changes to the syllabus’. These actions described by the teachers ranged from the very operational to the most reflective ones.

Regarding the reflective activities, the use of a digital reflective journal was not as successful as expected. At the beginning, teachers seemed to be very enthusiastic about using the tablet for this purpose and about trying this new idea of the journal, which they had never worked with before. However, they did not manage to work with this tool as expected, or at least this tool did not provide the amount of data it was expected to bring into this research. Teachers explained their relative unwillingness to work with the journal by giving a number of reasons. For example, as mentioned before, teacher A felt it was a bit ‘threatening’ to put things in writing, referring to the potential inaccuracy of her work:

I felt I had to think hard about the words I was going to write...not to make mistakes...to use sophisticated language. So, I was more worried about the language, it was stressful, I don't know. I didn't enjoy it when I did it.

In general, they all agreed they had little time between one lesson or the other to stop to make notes and so they felt it was just the same to keep their ideas in mind for the following reflective meeting. One of them, teacher A, made a few notes on her lesson plan as things developed well – or not so – in her class, but these notes had more to do with management than with other aspects of her teaching. Another general comment was that they found in writing they had to be more formal or specific with the language they used, and that somehow stopped them from being spontaneous regarding their impressions and feelings. A comment by a teacher supports this idea:

It helped to make you think things over and over...maybe searching for the words...but that took too long and was hard at times – it was much easier and faster just to comment.

As a consequence, oral, spontaneous reflective comments were the main feature of the reflection sessions. Teachers managed to tell each other, very nicely and clearly, their ideas on the work they had been doing, little by little (especially after some guidance with this) using more specific language to refer to the ideas behind each of the activities. This was a surprising feature, since they had earlier mentioned that this fact – i.e. the perceived need to be relatively specific when referring to learning theories, skills to be developed, etc. – was one of the reasons that had stopped them from writing in their journals. It may be indicative of the associations a user of English as a second language makes with writing as something required to be relatively accurate and elaborate. Teacher B pointed this out very clearly by saying:

When we commented the following meeting we probably didn't remember everything that we thought about after finishing a lesson, but then, when we discussed some aspects of the teaching more details came to mind and very clearly. I think it worked anyway.

So, our reflective sessions had to be adapted not only in time and space, but also in the kind of data to be collected for later analysis. Note-taking became a key element in recording these exchanges of ideas.

As the project, and the academic year, came to an end, teachers were asked about the effect they thought the space for reflection and collaboration had had on their teaching and how they valued it. In general, all of them valued the intention but felt it was difficult to associate any changes in their teaching with these changes. In fact, all of them mentioned that the most highly appreciated opportunity for professional development through reflection was not any of the reflective sessions introduced during 2015, but the whole -year CLIL course they had taken in 2014. When they mentioned this opportunity for professional development they described it as 'a changing moment', 'an opportunity to be a student again', 'it felt as if they were shaking your teaching brain to re-organise it in a better way'. This course introduced the element of reflection, asking teachers to work in pairs (called 'professional partners') in order to give each other feedback or to share their experiences in class. There were two main differences between the kind of reflection proposed in that course and what was implemented in 2015. On the one hand, during the course, teachers were expected to work together no more than once a fortnight or sometimes even once a month. Also, after conferencing or observing each other's lesson, teachers had to write a reflective essay, which they later on had to submit to Cambridge as part of their assessed work. It was still hard for them to see systematic reflection as part of their CPD when it did not come together with something more explicitly instructional or operational, such as a course.

These ideas bring up two other topics to bear in mind for further implementation of a CPD scheme incorporating reflection and collaboration. First, it is essential to be realistic regarding how much and what other kind of work the project can ask teachers to do. This calls for a reflection on the real need for teachers to meet every week during 2015. In fact, reality came to show this was hardly ever possible. At the same time, it exposes the relevance teachers give to the external validation of their reflections or when these are part of a formally assessed course.

Above all, it should be highlighted that teachers did value the opportunity to reflect on their practice, even if it was not directly associated with the 2015 project. What was highly valued from the project was

the chance to work together, to think of what to do during the lessons, and to discuss what kind of planning was the most appropriate. Apparently, then, collaboration is more associated with planning and operational aspects of the teachers' practice, and until now, this is the kind of space teachers value the most. All of them mentioned that 'thinking much more before and after lessons' and doing so 'with colleagues' made them feel 'ready', 'more confident' and also see 'colleagues as friends'.

Conclusions

After the analysis, a series of questions may be raised relating to the ways in which this Action Research project was planned to be implemented and the way it was finally carried out. It is the aim of these questions to make readers aware of potential difficulties that might have an impact not only on the development of a similar project but also on the kind – and amount – of the data collected. Although some of these challenges might depend on specific features of the context in which this project was carried out, others might be part of a worldwide reality for teachers.

Did the teachers value reflection and collaboration?

Yes, they did, but not necessarily in the context of this research project. Both reflection and collaboration seemed to be highly valued and associated with some practical gain: planning a class, designing a new activity, having the reflections assessed for later certification.

Apparently, it is still unnatural for (these) teachers to see reflection mainly, as part of their professional development scheme. It is a challenge for authorities to think of ways in which the value of collective and individual reflection becomes more evident to practitioners.

The workload implied

When asking teachers at this particular school to take part in the project, not enough thought was apparently given to their real availability in order to complete work systematically in the way they were expected to. School schedules and dynamics interfered with some aspects of the design, somehow forcing teachers to make decisions as to whe-

ther to help with the smooth-running of the school or working on the project.

For future projects, it is also paramount to assess how far the dynamics of the school allow for teachers to devote some time outside teaching hours, to write, for example, a reflective journal.

These two reflections also combine to show how teachers still see this kind of work as additional to their role at school instead of treating it as an integral part of their job. Again, this calls for a reflection on whether this kind of scheme could become part of their teaching lives if introduced for a whole academic year – or probably for a longer period of time, or if all teachers in the same level were involved in it.

How far can the effects of the new scheme be assessed; are we likely to be drawing the wrong conclusions?

When exam results showed no improvement after the implementation of the project, the first impulsive conclusion was to assess the impact of reflection and collaboration as negative to the final aim of helping students' learning and achievement levels to improve. However, is it realistic to expect to see the results in such a short period?

In education, the effects of a change in practices are likely to be seen years after the change has taken place, and, even then, it would be hard to associate the difference in performance exclusively with that change. A further and major challenge then, would be to re-assess the period during which this kind of research should be conducted in order to draw more reliable conclusions.

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Enriching brazilian public school teachers' practice through form-focused communicative activities for fifth-graders



Fernanda Gonçalves

Instituto Federal de Pernambuco (IFPE), City of Garanhuns, Brazil

This teacher training project aimed at demonstrating to teachers how to put communicative language teaching into practice by helping seven fifth grade teachers to plan and implement form-focused communicative activities. It also aimed at finding out whether guiding the teachers to reflect on what can be improved helps their practice and whether the teachers and students participating in the training become more motivated towards the English teaching and learning process. Therefore, during the six months of the project, besides planning and applying the communicative activities in their classrooms, the participants also engaged in cycles of Action Research. They planned, acted, observed and reflected on (a) what constraints they were facing, (b) what they wanted to do to overcome them, (c) what was actually changing or not changing, and (d) what they had to do to start the process all over again in order to try and get better results. By the end of the project, all seven teachers reported that, although the activities themselves did help them to plan better classes, what really made a difference and had a huge impact on how these activities motivated them and their students was the fact that they were also reflecting on their own practice through the four stages of Action Research.

About the author

Fernanda Gonçalves is a teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) who graduated from the Universidade de Pernambuco (UPE) Garanhuns, Brazil (2005). She has a postgraduate qualification in English from the same university (2006) and an MA degree in English from the University of Oregon,

USA (2013). Her language teaching experience includes working in both public and private institutions, where she has taught English for more than ten years. She is currently teaching EFL at Instituto Federal de Pernambuco (IFPE), which is a technical high school.

Background / Context

Schools in Brazil follow a set of guidelines called *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais: Língua Estrangeira* (National Curriculum Parameters: Foreign Languages) – ‘PCNs’ for short – that were introduced by the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC) in 1997 (Brasil 1998; Bohn 2003). National and international consultants produced these, and they took 18 months to complete. Although the PCNs do not have the status of an official document, their aim was to lead to reform in the national curriculum and provide guidance for Brazilian foreign language education (Bohn 2003).

Whereas communicative language teaching (CLT) had already been in use for twenty or more years in other areas of the world as the main approach to teaching second or foreign languages, the PCNs stated that communicative competence was unnecessary for Brazilian students because they would not require it in their own social contexts. The PCNs added that reading comprehension should be the skill to be emphasized because this is what university entrance examinations test and this is the main skill that students need for their higher education (Brasil 1998). This justification according to how the students will use the FL in their social context or immediate future is based more on existing social factors than on developing new possibilities. The PCNs ignored the fact that these students may have an opportunity for upward social mobility and international exchange through education.

The PCNs also stated that schools are not equipped and lack the appropriate conditions to implement communicative activities because ‘the conditions of the classrooms in the majority of Brazilian schools (shortage of school hours, overcrowded classes, poor oral proficiency level of the majority of the teachers, available materials reduced to chalk and book, etc.) may invalidate the teaching of the four commu-

nicative skills' (Brasil 1998: 21; my translation).

Therefore, as parents do not expect their children to learn English as a communication tool at school, those who can afford it tend to enroll their children in private English institutions (Bohn 2003; Rajagopalan & Rajagopalan 2005). Indeed, according to Rajagopalan and Rajagopalan (2005: 6), 'for some years now, Brazil has been second only to Greece in the number of candidates annually taking Cambridge examinations in EFL (English as a Foreign Language)'. The students who are taking these exams and other EFL exams like TOEFL and IELTS are those who can afford to be enrolled in a private English course, i.e., middle-class and upper-class Brazilians. The drawback is that the Brazilian working-class cannot afford to learn English because, as Rajagopalan and Rajagopalan (*ibid.*) state, these courses are 'at a price beyond the reach of the vast majority of the [Brazilian] population'. Therefore, as a consequence of not being able to develop the four skills in regular schools and not being able to pay for private English lessons, the majority of the Brazilian population is excluded from the best and most competitive local, national and international jobs due to their lack of proficiency in English (Bohn 2003; Rajagopalan & Rajagopalan 2005).

In the Northeast part of Brazil, where in 2006 I started working as an English teacher in a state and a private high school, all the national constraints cited above also hold true. Moreover, unfortunately, due to the fact that the teachers in the State of Pernambuco are among the most underpaid in the country, the situation may be even a little bit worse. Having to work at least between 30 and 50 contact hours per week turns the task of working on planning better lessons into an almost insurmountable one. Besides teaching this number of hours per week, the number of students in public school classrooms in Garanhuns, where I work, range from 30 to 40 in fifth grade, approximately. This is a very challenging setting due to the large number of students in every classroom.

Such factors help to explain why, as Rajagopalan and Rajagopalan (2005: 4) point out, in Brazil English is not only taught with a focus on reading, but 'mostly through old-fashioned methods such as grammar translation' and these 'methods are used by mostly unprepared,

grossly underpaid, and understandably unmotivated teachers'. The difficulties faced by English teachers mean that they face problems not only with class size and discipline, but also (mainly, in fact) with unmotivated students – one of the biggest challenges in the current EFL context in Garanhuns and in Brazil as whole.

Despite these difficulties, I believe that motivated teachers and students are able to change Brazilian EFL education and help elevate its literacy ranking indices, currently among the lowest in the world (Gadotti 1997). In this belief and because I started having fewer contact teaching hours due to having become a Federal English teacher at Instituto Federal de Pernambuco (IFPE) since 2014, I decided to initiate a project to enrich fifth-grade public school teachers' practice through form-focused communicative activities in the first semester of 2016. To write the application for the project, I had the support of Magda Gniadek, who used to be my co-worker on a private English course. Since she had to go back to Poland and could not carry on the project with me, I invited Roberto França, who is my co-worker at IFPE, to join me in the teacher training. Eight public school teachers applied to participate in this project by sending in a lesson plan and a letter from their schools stating that they would be working in 2016 as English teachers. Together with Roberto, we selected seven of the eight who applied. Once selected, the teachers had to sign a document stating that they would not quit the project before its end. None of the teachers in fact quit the project and all of them showed a huge interest in continuing to participate in teacher training after it ended.

What we hoped to achieve and find out

The project aimed to guide teachers to put CLT into practice by giving them the tools to properly plan and implement communicative activities in their classrooms via an action research approach. At the same time, we aimed to research our practice, to establish the success or otherwise of this intervention with a view to improvement in future teacher training experiences.

The intended teacher training aimed at emphasizing that English

should be taught meaningfully, and that teachers should prepare their lessons and materials based on their students' needs. Thus, since it is known that grammatical competence is not demonstrated by knowing a set of rules, but rather by being able to use these rules to interpret, express, or negotiate meaning (Savignon 2001), in order to have a balanced teaching of grammar and functions, the teachers were shown how Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) can be integrated into the CLT approach. FFI is an approach which is intended to draw language learners' attention to form, meaning, and use (Doughty & Williams 1998; Ellis 2001).

Ellis (2001) clarifies that there can be two types of FFI: (a) *planned focus-on-form* and (b) *incidental focus-on-form*. Planned focus-on-form was considered the better approach for this project because teachers are able to control the selection of the grammatical structures: they would therefore be able to focus on the grammatical structures they have to work with according to the syllabus proposed by the National Curriculum Parameters for foreign languages.

Thus, helping teachers to integrate a more communicative approach with planned focus-on-form instruction seemed to be the most effective way of helping them plan relevant communicative tasks to maximize students' language use and of helping them to reach their fullest potential, inside or outside the classroom. In order to achieve this, we aimed to:

- motivate teachers to reflect on their own practices by bringing together research, concepts and theories with (mainly) practical ideas on how to apply CLT in their classrooms;
- help teachers to prepare their lessons and materials based more on their students' needs;
- design adapted and/or supplementary activities that would help teachers to maximize language use efficiently in all four skill areas but with the emphasis on listening and speaking;
- introduce techniques that would help teachers implement form-focused communicative activities in large classrooms, for example by pairing and grouping students;
- motivate teachers and students to interact more through 'real-life' communication and 'meaningful tasks' (Brown 2007);
- assist the participants in helping their students to interact and

participate more effectively through English.

This project also aimed at finding out if:

- the teachers and students participating in the training would be more motivated in the English teaching and learning process due to a switch from the traditional grammar/reading-based syllabus to a more functional/communicative syllabus;
- helping the teachers to reflect, through the trainers' feedback, on what can be improved in the activities that were put into practice would also help their practice and improve how English was taught and learned in their classrooms.

Thus, the research questions which informed our study overall were:

- (a) Do the teachers and students participating in the training become more motivated in the English teaching and learning process?, and
- (b) Does helping the teachers to reflect on what can be improved contribute to developing their practice?

To help us answer these questions, as well as to enhance reflection, we encouraged participants to keep both a teaching journal and learning journal (see below), and we recorded interviews with participants at the end of the project.

What we did together

The lack of focus on communicative competence in Brazilian English education (Mompean 1997: 7), and its overall poor quality (Bohn 2003: 160), may be due to three main constraints: teachers' lack of appropriate training in CLT, large class sizes and teachers' lack of time and expertise to plan and apply communicative activities in their classrooms. Although communicative activities are essential in order for students to develop their communication skills, due to these difficulties teachers rarely have the appropriate knowledge, training and/or time to develop such activities.

Li (1998), Burnaby & Sun (1989) and Gorsuch (2000) emphasize that

when teachers do get trained, CLT is often taught more as knowledge and theory than practice. Consequently, teachers can lack the *practical* training needed to correctly implement a more communicative approach in their teaching. Therefore, we undertook to design an eleven-session teacher training course that focused more on practice than on theory.

Since we wanted to give the participants, from the very beginning of the course, some practical activities to be applied in their classrooms, we started the teacher training course by showing them and planning with them some 'getting to know you/warm up' activities. These activities were actually engaged in by the participants during the first meeting on February 13, 2016, as if they were students. Then, teachers were put into pairs or triads and asked to reflect on the activities. The questions proposed for reflection were: a) Are the activities suitable for your students? If not, what adaptations are needed? b) What will your students learn to communicate by means of the activities? c) Are the activities meaningful for your students? Why or why not? d) Will your students enjoy them? Finally, teachers shared their reflections with the group and, as homework, they were asked to write a teaching journal narrating and reflecting on the application of the same activities with their own students.

We started our second meeting, two weeks later, by asking the teachers to share a summary of what they had written in their teaching journals. They talked about what had worked and what had not worked and then we discussed what could be done in order for the activities to be fully successful the next time they were to be applied. At this meeting, we also talked about the concept of Action Research (AR) and read a short article about it. The participants were then asked to apply the four stages of AR in their own classrooms, starting by thinking about a problem they were facing there. All of them said that the biggest problem was how to teach English communicatively in the face of constraints including the large numbers of students in class and their lack of time to plan communicative activities.

Having identified this problem area, the teachers were asked to think how the course might help them solve the problems they faced. They answered that they expected it was going to help them to: (a) plan

communicative activities, (b) put the activities into practice in their classrooms, (c) take notes while the activities were being applied and finally (d) help them reflect on their notes and start the cycle of AR all over again. We then confirmed to the teachers that they were going to be encouraged to actually implement AR in their own classrooms and, in order for this process to be successful, they would be expected to keep two kinds of journal: a teaching journal and a learning journal. The teachers were given short articles from a British Council website to help them with this.

At our third meeting, on March 19, 2016, we started by having the teachers describe and reflect on what had happened in their classrooms during the application of the activities presented to them in the previous session. Then the concept of Form-Focused Instruction was introduced along with an activity entitled ‘My favorite color is... – true or false?’. As homework, the teachers were asked to apply the activity in their own classrooms and write in their teaching journal following one of the possible templates we provided. They were also told that they were free to write their teaching journals in the way they felt most comfortable with, for example in Portuguese if they wished. They were also asked to write in a learning journal, reflecting on what they had learned during our third meeting.

Before we started to introduce the concepts of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) at our fourth meeting, two weeks later, the teachers socialized and shared reflections on their teaching journals. Then the essential concepts of CLT were presented to them. A new activity was also presented – ‘Counting on me like 1, 2, 3’. To finish the meeting, they were assigned their usual homework, to write in both a teaching and a learning journal. The fifth meeting, on April 16, 2016, again started with the teachers narrating how the application of the activity had gone, and reflecting on it. We discussed how teachers can release control in the classroom and then a new activity, ‘Counting the reasons’, was presented.

On May 7, 2016, we had our sixth session and the participants as usual presented and reflected on their teaching journals. Concepts of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language were presented to the teachers and the activity ‘To be or not to be...that’s the

question' was presented. The teachers were asked to describe which aspects of the communicative approaches they had been introduced to so far were present in the activity shown to them, and to finish the meeting, they had their homework assigned. At the seventh meeting, two weeks later, the teachers, besides narrating their teaching journals and reflecting on them, also summed up what they had learned in the teacher training course so far and how what they learned had or had not changed their practices in their classrooms. The teaching techniques numbered 6, 7 and 8 from the book *Aula Nota 10* (Lemov 2011) were presented to the teachers and they were asked to reflect on how they could apply them in their classroom and how that would change their practices. Afterwards, the activity 'My favorite quote is...' was taught to the teachers and they were assigned their homework.

At the eighth meeting, on June 4, 2016, the teachers talked about and reflected on their teaching journals, the presentation of the teaching techniques numbers 6 to 8 from the book *Aula Nota 10* were covered, and the activity 'A bee sound or a snake sound?' was presented to them. To end the session, a model of a lesson plan was given to the teachers and they were asked to plan one as part of their homework. Therefore, besides their usual homework, they also had to hand in a lesson plan at the next meeting. The ninth meeting, one month later, started as usual with teachers narrating what had happened in their classrooms, then they summarized their lesson plans, and techniques numbers 9–11 from *Aula Nota* were presented to them. Subsequently, the teachers were asked to design a communicative activity of their own in which they had to try to apply all the theories and practices they had experienced so far. A second model of a lesson was also shown to the teachers and they were asked to draw up a lesson plan following this model.

One week later, on July 9, 2016, in the tenth meeting, teachers talked about and reflected on their learning journals and summarized their second lesson plans. They also planned another communicative activity and were told that during our next and final meeting, they would write a lesson plan on their own and then we would have a certificate ceremony. Thus, two months later, on September 9, 2016, we had our last meeting. The teachers were given the chance to choose which of two lesson plan models they would like to follow for their lesson plans.

They were also told that these lesson plans would be useful for seeing how they had improved as English teachers since they wrote their first lesson as part of the application process for the teacher training course. After the teachers finished writing their lesson plans, we had a certificate ceremony and all of them were very happy and excited at having finished the program with outstanding results.

Findings – the outcomes of the project

To better understand what the outcomes of the teacher training project were and what we found, we must start by re-stating the two main research questions that were the foundation of this project: (a) Do the teachers and students participating in the training become more motivated in the English teaching and learning process? (b) Does helping the teachers to reflect on what can be improved contribute to developing their practice?

We found that teachers and students did, indeed, become more motivated, according to the evidence of their journals and of interviews, and that helping the teachers to reflect on their own practice along with introducing them to new activity types had been what influenced them the most. We can affirm that this increase in motivation was due, then, to the confluence of the introduction of an action research approach with the communicative techniques that were presented to the participants. Once introduced to these techniques, they avoided spending the whole lesson lecturing and began to act more as ‘catalysts’ of teaching of English, focused more on developing their students’ communicative competence (Fang 2010). Every one of the project participants wrote about this kind of change in their teaching journals. One of the participants stated that, ‘Even with the classes that are difficult to manage, I realize that when we teach English through only reading, grammar and filling out the blackboard with exercises, it does not make sense. Everything needs to be dynamic and [...] it has to be relevant to [students’] daily lives’ (my translation).

Due to the fact that participant teachers started reflecting on their own pedagogical practices and started applying more relevant communicative tasks, although they encountered some dif-

difficulties along the way, more effective and contextualized learning occurred. All of the participants wrote in their teaching journals about how their students started to develop a willingness to use English and communicate through it during the classes. They said that this change occurred because the activities that they were applying in their classrooms were more meaningful to their students and therefore their students' language learning and use were being maximized by the communicative tasks. For example, one of the teachers wrote in his teaching journal that, when implementing the activity about colors, he gave the pupils the following three possible answers: (a) My favorite color is... (b) It's... or (c) the color itself. He noted that, whereas his students had previously been really afraid of using English in the classroom, he succeeded in motivating them to reply to his question using the full form answer. To his surprise, they also started asking each other what their favorite colors were without his intervention.

Another example was the way a different participant implemented the number activity, asking students to say numbers that were meaningful to them such as their cell phone numbers, their house numbers and so on. She said that although they were usually very reluctant to use English in class, they enjoyed this activity so much because it was not difficult and it was something that related to part of their daily lives. Meaningful interaction began to occur because the teachers decided that instead of giving only 'fill in the blanks' exercises, they would motivate their students to use the language through communicative activities that were simple but that also made sense to their students.

Of course, during the project, we tried to introduce activities that were less reading-and writing-oriented, and more listening- and speaking-oriented. Although these activities, on their own, certainly helped the teachers to implement a more communicative approach in their classrooms, what they said really motivated them and consequently motivated their students was reflecting on their own practice. When the teachers started to adopt an Action Research approach, this not only helped them to improve their practice, but it also had a huge impact on how they would come to perceive their roles in the process of teaching and learning English.

In relation to the second research question, then, that is, whether

helping the teachers to reflect on what can be improved contributed to developing their practice, it is clear that introducing them to what Action Research (AR) is, and helping them to put the four stages of AR (plan, act, observe and reflect) into practice, did help the participants to become more aware of: (a) what constraints they were really facing, (b) what they had to do or wanted to do to overcome them, (c) what was actually changing or not and (d) what they had to do to start the process all over again in order to try and get better results.

Regarding (a), all the teachers had reported at the beginning of the project that they faced problems with class size and with the lack of time and knowledge to plan communicative activities. Although these constraints were shared by the participants, what astonished all of us, trainers as well as participants, was the fact that a constraint caused from within the educational administration itself was the worst one, that is, the way that classes due to be taught kept being cancelled for different reasons during the semester of the project.

Before being aware of the AR process and before being introduced to the communicative activities, the teachers had got used to having their classes cancelled although it did bother them to some extent. However, once they started adopting AR and communicative activities in their classrooms, the participants realized that the fact of not having regular classes was an important barrier. It would demotivate them and their students because they would be always behind on their lesson plans and on the proper flow of the four AR stages.

One of the participants reported that, 'One problem that ended by bringing up a lot of difficulties in properly teaching the classes was the following: the school was going through a change in the school board. We had several meetings to get acquainted and adapted to the rules of the new board and because of that the students were hindered for all the meetings that happened in the school during my class times'. (teaching journal; my translation from the original Portuguese). Many other teachers reported the same shortage of school hours due to different reasons such as school meetings, lack of electricity, lack of water, etc. Another reason cited by the teachers was that if they had classes on Mondays or Fridays and then there was a holiday on Tuesdays or Thursdays, the school would cancel their classes or the stu-

dents would simply miss the class.

To overcome this constraint, we agreed that the best solution would be to follow the techniques numbered 6 and 7 presented by Lemov (2011) in which instead of first thinking about the activities for each class, we define the goal first, then this goal determines the activities to be presented to the students. We also agreed that each lesson plan had to have a goal or a few goals with certain characteristics, such as: they had to be simple, achievable and measurable and they had to be planned for every class the participants taught. These goals also had to be presented to the students so they would know what the objective(s) of the class was/were. Therefore, as stated in technique number 8, before starting the class, the teachers would write the objective(s) on the board and make sure the students understood it/them. Consequently, the students would know exactly what they were supposed to learn in that class. The last thing we agreed on was that at the end of every class, the participants had to assess their students, in simple and quick ways such as with questions or asking some students to summarize what they had learned, to know if the objective(s) was/were achieved or not.

These lesson plan techniques may seem obvious or simplistic, but once they were introduced to the participants, the techniques helped not only them, but also their students to become more motivated in the process of teaching and learning English. These techniques also helped the participants to become better action researchers because they understood that through daily reflections on their practice, they could always try to fix what was not working in their classes. One of the participants stated in her teaching journal: 'Sometimes we make mistakes, but the good thing is that we still have time to fix them. I learned that a good teacher is not the one that only plans his/her lesson, but that also plans the objective of that lesson and whether the objective is achieved by the students' (my translation).

Something else that the participants realized is that if they could not rely on having all their classes due to the lack of commitment of their school administrators or the other factors cited by them, they had to try and make the most of the classes that were left.

Gadotti (1997) points out that ‘education is a right to all, and obligation of the State’ (p. 127), but sometimes these obligations are not fulfilled by the State. Although teachers alone do not have the power to change the whole educational system, they still have the power to change their own pedagogical practices and that is what the participants in this project decided to do because they were motivated to do so. They started this change when they decided to apply to this teaching training course and, once they started participating, they learned what action research was and they decided that this was what they would be doing in their classes from that moment on.

What we learned – personal reflections / conclusions

Spending a semester with the seven participants in this project made me realize that some teachers not only lack the knowledge to plan more meaningful lessons but also lack the oral skills needed to be confident to teach in the target language. I also learned that although these teachers lack some oral skills, they are intrinsically motivated to learn these skills and to learn how to plan better lessons and therefore become better teachers. I also found that when teachers want to make a difference in the process of teaching and learning English, it does not matter if the educational system helps them or not, for the real changes happen from their own wills and within their own pedagogical practices.

Regarding the first of the above lessons, I still remember the very first meeting I had with the participants and their shocked expressions when I started talking about the project in English and told them that all the meetings were going to be conducted in English. Only three out of the seven teachers were happy about this and were able to interact in English with me. The other four teachers told me that they would prefer to have the meetings in Portuguese because they were afraid that their oral skills were not good enough to fully understand and participate in the sessions. Although the participants did need training to apply form-focused communicative activities in their own classrooms, now I believe that their first and most

important need is to learn how to use the language themselves, and I will seek to offer courses for development of teachers' English skills and communicative competence in future.

Regarding the second and third lessons, I learned something that still mesmerizes me, that is, the great willingness to improve themselves that the teachers showed during the whole training simply because they wanted to be the best teachers that their students can have. The teachers taught me that it does not matter if the Brazilian educational system does not help them to make the difference they want to make in their students' lives because real change can happen from their own motivation not only to teach English, but also to learn it. The teachers demonstrated that, if somehow the educational system does not provide the conditions for them to be more qualified teachers and deliver better lessons, they can work with the conditions they have and support each other to bring about bottom-up change by themselves. Once the participants learned how to do action research in their classrooms, they seemed better able to support each other and thereby become stronger to bring about changes they want to see in their classrooms.

In conclusion, I believe that improvement in the teaching of EFL in public schools in Brazil is possible, whether the national curriculum supports the teaching of the four skills or not. Real changes in education do not occur just because top-down decisions and/or educational reforms are made, but also and mainly because of a teacher's own beliefs in the possibility of better teaching, which can lead to more meaningful teaching and learning. After all, as Gorsuch (2000: 678) points out, 'Regardless of successive educational reforms and curriculum changes [or not], teachers' attitudes and beliefs remain the single strongest guiding influence on instruction'.

Thus, as can be seen from participants' journals, they realized that when they teach less through lectures, reading and/or grammar exercises and more via communicative activities, their students become more motivated not only to learn English, but also to use it. This provides evidence to counteract the argument of the National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs) that the teaching of reading should be prioritized and that communicative competence is unnecessary

for Brazilian students (see Introduction). What really underlies this emphasis is less the real needs or motivations of students and more ‘the fact that the conditions of the classrooms in the majority of Brazilian schools (shortage of school hours, overcrowded classes, poor oral proficiency level of the majority of the teachers, available materials reduced to chalk and book, etc.) may invalidate the teaching of the four communicative skills”, as is acknowledged in the Revised National Curriculum (Brasil 1998: 21; my translation).

Although all the constraints mentioned in this extract still hold true in Brazil, the seven teachers participating in this project believed that English is an important communicative tool for, as El-Dash & Busnardo (2001) emphasize, ‘English as an international language opens access to information, and Brazil would be even more fragile without it’ (p. 59). None of the participants wanted to see their students or their country undermined because they do not master English, the international language. On the contrary, they came to realize that by intertwining action research with focus-on-form communicative activities, they could help their students develop their language use abilities while also helping them to reach their fullest potential, inside and outside the classroom.

The teachers participating in this project demonstrated that the best educators are not those who dictate how students will use English in their future social context, but those who ‘educate people so that they can become subjects of their history and act in society as participants in constructing their [own] destiny’ (Gadotti 1997, p. 145). After having spent a semester working with seven of the bravest teachers I have ever known, I am sure that the best pedagogical practices are those that help students [and teachers] accomplish upward social mobility through one of the greatest forces one can use to transform the world and make it a better place: education (Mandela 2003).

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Reflections on ‘Teachers Research! Chile 2016’



**Richard Smith, Laura Aza
and Débora Izé Balsemão Oss**

The projects described in the preceding chapters were presented by their authors in a plenary session at the ‘Teachers Research! Chile 2016’ conference held in Chile on 18 March 2016. We close this book by describing this event, which was sponsored by British Council Aptis for Teachers and co-organized with British Council Chile and the Red de Investigadores Chilenos en ELT (RICELT), in the hope that more teachers across Latin America might become inspired to engage in teacher-research in their own contexts and will apply to present at future conferences. This is an adapted version of a report first published in ELT Research 32: 26–29.

About the authors

Laura Aza (on the right above) and **Débora Oss** (on the left), who were both awarded scholarships from IATEFL Research SIG to attend the Teachers Research! conference, are teachers of English in Argentina and Brazil, respectively. Their reflections are introduced by **Richard Smith** (University of Warwick, UK), who provided academic coordination for the British Council Aptis for Teachers Action Research Award Scheme and who, with Paula Rebolledo, was the main convenor of the conference.

Introduction (Richard Smith)

Teacher-research – that is, research initiated and carried out by teachers into issues of importance to them in their own work – is increasingly seen as a powerful means of continuing professional development (CPD) for English language teachers.

British Council Aptis for Teachers began to support teacher-research via its Action Research Award Scheme in 2014. In 2016 Aptis also sponsored the First Annual Latin American Conference for Teacher-research in ELT in Santiago, Chile.

The ‘Teachers Research! Chile 2016’ event, held at the Universidad San Sebastian in Santiago on 19 March 2016, was co-organized by the British Council Chile and the Red de Investigadores Chilenos en ELT (RICELT), an emerging network of Chilean ELT researchers.

IATEFL Research SIG showed its support by publicising the call for papers via social media, organising an online pre-conference discussion, and offering two scholarships to help teachers from outside Chile to attend. British Council Aptis for Teachers was the main sponsor of the event, enabling participation by two special guests (see below) and six teachers under the Latin American Action Research Award Scheme (ARAS).

Under the slogan, ‘Presentations of research *by* teachers across Latin America *for* other teachers’ the conference attracted around 120 participants, with presenters coming from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Uruguay. The event was remarkable for placing teachers at centre-stage from the beginning to the last (see the book *Teachers Research!* edited by Bullock and Smith in 2015 for more on the concept, and spirit, underlying the design of the event).

The first plenary session was by four teachers on the British Council Chile / Ministry of Education Chile Champion Teachers project, two of whom were represented in the book *Champion Teachers: stories of exploratory action research* published just the previous day, when a workshop was held to launch the fourth year of the programme.



The second plenary session, after lunch, showcased the five Aptis Action Research Award projects in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay which constitute Chapters 2 to 6 in the present book, ranging in topic from blended learning in secondary schools to curriculum redesign at tertiary level.



Between plenary sessions there were two sets of parallel sessions in four rooms, featuring four to five projects in each room. Each presenter talked in front of their poster for up to five minutes and this was followed by interaction around posters ('gallery-style') and a round-up discussion.

The day was rounded off by a general discussion which saw teachers invited to the front to share their impressions and visions, following brief comments by two special guests: Melba Libia Cárdenas, well-known for her work editing the *Profile* journal in Colombia and Inés K. Miller, equally well-known for her work with *Exploratory Practice* in Brazil. Feedback was extremely positive overall – participants reported finding the event friendly, stimulating and an excellent learning opportunity.

Hopes were expressed that a similar conference could be held every year, in a different Latin American country each time. The next conference was to be held in Buenos Aires in May 2017, again to be organized primarily by the British Council, sponsored by Aptis for Teachers, and supported by IATEFL Research SIG, this time in cooperation with two teacher associations – APIBA and FAAPI. Further details appeared on the ARAS website (<http://bit.ly/2dgvVgR>), along with photographs and video of the Santiago conference. Many thanks are due to British Council Chile, especially Deborah Sepulveda, and RICELT, in particular Paula Rebolledo, for their work co-organizing Teachers Research! Chile 2016 (!)



Reflective report (Laura Aza)

When I first heard about *Teachers Research!* I was immediately drawn to it because I felt it was somehow different to other conferences I had attended. To begin with, its seemingly oxymoronic name (yes, in some places, the concept of teaching runs contrary to the idea of doing research) suggested innovation. I saw this as a great opportunity to learn more about Action Research in the hope that I could share this knowledge with my colleagues on my return. The fact that the conference was being held in a Latin American country and that I would have the chance to meet colleagues from other countries also appealed to me. Needless to say, when I learnt I had been granted a scholarship by the IATEFL Research SIG to share my work and learn more about teacher-research, I was absolutely thrilled.

On the evening before the event, I met some of the other presenters coming from abroad outside the conference venue and we went for dinner together. While we received recommendations to try some of the delicious local food, the friendly small talk slowly flowed into a more stimulating discussion about teacher-research. I had the honour to sit near well-known professionals in the field like Melba Cárdenas, Richard Smith and Inés Miller. We explored a wide range of topics, such as the relevance of teacher research, the reasons why teachers do not carry out action research in many Latin American countries, what can be done to encourage action research among teachers, and so on.

These topics were further developed the following day in an equally friendly and relaxed fashion. While in more traditional conferences the keynote speakers clearly stand out from the rest, in this case, speakers mingled freely with the audience, because, after all, in most cases, speakers *were* the audience and vice versa. There was no doubt that the conference was '*by teachers for teachers*'. This was further emphasized in the plenaries, delivered by Chilean Champion Teachers and Ap-tis Action Research Award recipients, where teachers played the leading role. These teachers were highly *motivated* because they had done research on issues that were of direct concern to them and that they thought were worth researching. Their talks were *inspirational* because they showed fellow teachers that research is not only limited to aca-

demia. Their research decisions were *informed* because they were not based on stories but on information that had been systematically collected and analysed in a professional way, and which therefore had a direct impact on their teaching and on their professional development.



As a presenter, I felt relaxed and at ease with my co-presenters and audience. We were expected to explain briefly what our action research project was about, standing in front of our posters. My presentation, titled 'Implementing a Recreational Reading Project in the Secondary School Classroom' was about a project I carried out in a multi-cultural secondary school in Buenos Aires. I encouraged students to select their own books and gave them some guidance, as well as introducing discussion activities relating to the books, to help them acquire the habit of reading for pleasure. On the basis of students' journals, a small-scale survey, and my field notes, it was apparent that motivation to read and greater autonomy were developed.

I felt confident talking about my project – was it because I was comfortable with a topic which had been self-selected? Was it because I had conducted the research myself, in my own classroom, with my own students? Was it the informal structure of the presentation? Once our five minute account was over, our colleagues approached us and asked us questions, which was, to my mind, the most enriching part. It was at this point that you learnt that your project

was interesting to other colleagues too, that you had inspired other teachers to try your project out with their own students, or that your research could be improved on, for example by incorporating peer observation into the project. By the end of the presentation, the poster seemed to be too small for all the ideas that had come up during the presentation.

The discussion panel at the end revealed the hard work behind the organization of the event and the effort of those who had travelled long distances to attend the conference without any type of financial help. Some of the ideas highlighted at this closing session were the importance of viewing teachers as agents of change, and teacher research as the engine of a change coming from within rather than imposed on teachers. Finally, there was general agreement that there should be follow-up work done to keep encouraging teacher research. Teacher Associations, research journals, research networks and certainly conferences like this one play a key role in this respect.

The conference came to an end, but it was only the beginning for new connections – exchanging of contact details with colleagues, sharing the findings of our projects via e-mail, future arrangements to meet in our home towns, and the hope that the conference could be held yearly in other Latin American countries.

It was now time to go back home and as my plane flew across the Andes mountains, my thoughts were somewhere up in the clouds. I was thinking about the endless topics that could be researched in the classroom and the boundless potential for teacher-research. I was still miles away from Buenos Aires, but, at that point, I felt the sky was the limit.

Reflective report (Débora Izé Balsemão Oss)

Teachers Research! Chile 2016 first caught my attention with its exclamation mark as part of the title of the conference. Exclamation marks usually convey strong feelings and enthusiasm – and I am fond of that. As I learned about the Red de Investigadores Chilenos en ELT (RICELT), joint organizers of the conference, I became curious about

the concept behind the name – ‘*What’s in a name?*’. A network of Chilean English language teachers researching their practices was definitely a venture I would like to learn more about.

Believing I might have missed the deadline for registering made most of my hopes vanish and the chance of perhaps sharing what my students had been guiding me through fade away. Nonetheless, as strong feelings and enthusiasm are not that feeble, it turned out that my work was granted with one of the IATEFL Research SIG scholarships.

Once I was selected as the only Brazilian English language teacher to present a paper, I felt the responsibility had become even greater. Although there are some (like the teachers working with Inés Miller in Rio de Janeiro), not many practitioners are ready to take on all the challenges that ELT in Brazil imposes, and that includes sharing findings we practitioners unveil by investigating our classrooms.

There are many aspects of the conference that could be mentioned. Particularly impressive for me were the four Chilean Champion Teachers who gave the first plenary, Daniela Gajardo, María Elena Gutiérrez, Leyla Nuñez and Rosa Rodríguez, faithful as they were to the voices of many English language teachers in Latin America who struggle to find ways of prioritising their students, every day. Paula Rebolledo not only introduced these practitioners’ research stories, she also presented us with her own genuine personal practical knowledge. And that was how our day started.

Right after a fruitful coffee break, when participants were still eager to learn more about the reports we had just applauded, the first presentation session started. I was a participant in the room where Tom Connelly introduced research on ICT, citizenship and literacy in secondary education. We heard from and interacted around posters by July Rincon Ortega on Community Based Pedagogy in Colombia, by Yanilis Romero and Milton Pájaro on Citizenship Competence and English Language Learning, also from Colombia, as well as by my new Argentinian friend Laura Giacomini on ‘A creative writing lesson which combines art, social network and fun!’ (with an exclamation mark). After we came back from lunch, Richard Smith chaired a plenary of research stories from ARAS teachers. Argentina was represented by

Mariana Serra and Silvia Maria Severino, while Chile brought Natacha Pardo Contreras. Maria Ines Barasain (by video), Cecilia Prieto Outere-lo, Laura Flores and Serrana Echenagusia also shared their research, conducted in Uruguay.

Right after that, in the room of parallel sessions moderated by Tom Connelly there were presentations from Argentina, Brazil and Chile which covered reading, vocabulary and curriculum at secondary levels. Laura Aza, my fellow IATEFL Research SIG scholarship winner reported on her work in Argentina (see her own report above), while Gabriel Morales and Erick Aravena's 'Second Language Acquisition Theory and Analysis of the English Curriculum' and Aydelina Medina Gajardo's 'Encouraging Knowledge and Uses of Everyday Classroom Commands and Everyday Language' represented the quality of research that is being developed in Chile these days. Finally, this was the session where I also presented my poster, on 'Learning to Read: a Collaborative Endeavour'. For this teacher-research project I instructed learners in reading strategies and encouraged them to take an active part in deciding on what we would learn in class, helping weaker learners, and contributing to the research report, among other collaborative tasks. As I reported at the conference, the outcomes were very positive, both for English language learning as well as collaboration among and with my students.



Needless to say, Inés K. Miller's and Melba Libia Cárdenas's closing words touched our hearts. Inés praised the way teachers had been the 'stars of the event', due to the way it was organised, and in our presentations we had come across as the real agents of what we were doing (she noted that 'bigger authors' weren't really present in most of what we were saying, and also that we had learned to listen to our learners more). Melba called it a 'wonderful and inspiring day' and highlighted what we could gain through continued networking and development of a culture of sharing. Melba's and Inés' own commitment and achievements in Latin America are the proof that research *by* teachers *for* teachers is a way to develop and to eventually reach recognition of practitioners' knowledge.



Horizontes 1 collects together accounts of the teacher-research journeys of a number of teachers of English as a foreign language in Latin America. The volume includes a brief introduction to action research, six chapters authored by Latin American teachers, and a reflective account of an innovative teacher-research conference held in Santiago de Chile in 2016.

The six chapters address key topics such as supporting learners' language development through a genre-based approach, blended learning, curricular innovation in technical schools, written feedback, teacher reflection and collaboration, and form-focused communicative activities for primary school learners.

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Edited by
Darío Luis Banegas
Magdalena De Stefani
Paula Rebolledo
Carlos Rico Troncoso
and **Richard Smith**