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Prioritizing practitioner research: an example from the field

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For many ESL teachers, finding time for research within the everyday activities of classroom teaching can be problematic. This is often the case with large classes and classes that have few contact hours, where it is difficult to include research activities, particularly those that centre upon gathering relevant information about individual students' perceptions of classroom life. Part of my ongoing practitioner research efforts have focused upon the value of written student feedback in various forms for both language teachers and language learners as a tool to help both the teacher and students work towards greater understanding of classroom life. In this paper, I provide an example of how a principled practitioner research perspective can be adopted productively by busy teachers in ordinary teaching situations to enhance the quality of life in their classrooms.

I Introduction

Supporters of the idea of gathering student feedback and supporters of Exploratory Practice research share the same basic belief that classroom practice can be enhanced by including the students' voices in the planning and evaluation of lessons and classroom activities. Indeed, as Tarone and Yule point out, 'the importance of the learner's perspective is recognized in virtually all modern approaches to the language-learning process' (1996: 133). I agree that the learner's perspective is important and I have found that feedback is a powerful and useful tool for language teachers to obtain the student's viewpoint. However, I realize that in some teaching situations, particularly when a teacher is working with a

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large number of students, it may be difficult to incorporate regular feedback sessions.

The study and use of feedback are not new. Some of the teaching methods introduced in the 1980s, for example, the Silent Way and Community Language Learning, include a feedback session to allow the students to share their viewpoints as one of their recommended teaching techniques. Although teachers may not subscribe to either of these methods in their pure form any more, the concept of gathering feedback from students has lived on and has been subsumed by other approaches (see, for example, Kumaravadivelu, 1994; 2001).

Essentially, gathering feedback is a student-centred research activity. According to Reid, the definition of a student-centred classroom is 'one in which students, as well as teachers, have responsibilities that function almost as a mutually agreed-upon contract' (2002: 94). She goes on further to say that although the teacher is expected to be well-versed in his or her subject area, the focus should be on the students and it is ultimately the students themselves who are responsible for their learning. Cumming (2002) echoes this in his discussion of the principles that he has developed over the years and wished he had known when he started teaching. He states, 'A fourth principle is to encourage students to develop control over their own learning processes. Learning to write in a second language is something that students have to take ownership of for themselves' (Cumming, 2002: 128). I believe that one way to encourage students to take ownership of their learning and possibly raise their level of awareness is through feedback. For the teacher, there are, of course, a number of other possible outcomes that student feedback can provide, for example, improved classroom practice, renewed interest in teaching and practitioner research.

The most obvious way to find out what the students think is to ask them (see Tarone and Yule, 1996). I have found, however, that this is more easily said than done. At one time in my teaching career, I was in, as I realize now, an enviable position of teaching relatively small classes of students for a large number of hours each week over an extended period of time. In one teaching

situation, I saw my students, a class of 20, for 20 hours per week over the school year, a total of 40 weeks. In another teaching situation, I saw my students, classes of five to 10 students, for 15 to 20 hours per week over the school year for again a total of 40 weeks. Working so closely for such long periods of time allowed me to get to know the students well and to become comfortable and confident enough to ask them to work with me to improve the quality of life in our classroom. I was able to integrate research into pedagogy and fully appreciate the students' participation in my ongoing small and large-scale Exploratory Practice research activities (see, for example, Gunn, 2000; 2003).

My situation has now changed. I still consider myself to be an Exploratory Practice teacher-researcher. I still want to adhere to the seven principles of Exploratory Practice, which are as follows: put 'quality of life' first; work primarily to understand language classroom life; involve everybody; work to bring people together; work also for mutual development; integrate the work for understanding into the classroom practice; make the work a continuous enterprise (Allwright, 2003: 129–30). However, I am now working with a larger number of students for a shorter number of hours each week. A regular course load is four writing classes of 20 to 22 undergraduate second language learning students, which meet for three 50-minute classes per week. I have found that for the first time my classroom research puzzle is not directly related to understanding how the activities and other student–teacher and student–student interactions are affecting what is happening in the classroom, but rather I now ponder over how I can find the time to incorporate the principles of Exploratory Practice into my new classroom situation.

The classes themselves, 20 to 22 students, are not the problem. For me, it is the limited amount of time I have with them. In one 16-week semester, I see these students for approximately only 40 hours. I have become concerned that with such a relatively limited number of contact hours with the students it will be difficult to include the students' voices to help us all achieve a greater understanding of what is trying to be accomplished in the classroom and to maintain the quality of life for both myself and the students in

this new teaching environment that I had come to value so much in my previous teaching situations. I puzzle over whether asking the students for feedback on a regular basis will work in classes with such a limited amount of contact hours. I know it would be difficult (if not impossible) to ask all the students orally, so I have decided to ask them to give me ongoing written feedback throughout the semester.

II Using Exploratory Practice in practitioner research

In Zhang's recent article 'Using the principles of Exploratory Practice to guide group work in an extensive reading class in China' (2004), she shares with us the difficulties she experienced with her extensive reading classes in China and how she was able to solve some of these difficulties by adopting the principles of Exploratory Practice in her classroom. Zhang wanted to improve the quality of life for both herself and her students in the reading classes and was able to successfully do this by researching her classes utilizing Allwright's Exploratory Practice framework and responding to the feedback she received from the students in the surveys and questionnaires she distributed.

Like Zhang, and other EP teacher-researchers (see *Language Teaching Research* Volume 7, Number 2, for example), I believe that it is important 'to understand language classroom life instead of trying to directly solve problems' (Zhang, 2004). Exploratory Practice is committed to helping teachers and students achieve an enhanced understanding. As Allwright explains:

> Exploratory Practice involves:
>
> 1. Practitioners (e.g.: preferably teachers *and* learners together) working to understand:
> a) what *they* want to understand, following their own agendas;
> b) not necessarily *in order to* bring about change;
> c) not primarily *by* changing;
> d) but by *using* normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools, so that working for understanding is *part* of the teaching and learning, not extra to it;
> e) in a way that does not lead to 'burn-out', but that is *indefinitely sustainable*;
>
> 2. In order to contribute to:
>
> f) *teaching and learning themselves*;

g) *professional development, both individual and collective.*

(Allwright, 2003: 127–28; italics in original)

The importance of the students' role in Exploratory Practice research is evident in the description above. I believe that the students and the teacher learn together in the language classroom so it stands to reason that they should team up and work together when researching the classroom, especially when the purpose of the research is to ultimately improve the quality of life in the classroom for the teacher and the students. I am determined to explore my new puzzle, which has expanded beyond my initial pragmatic concern for simply finding time to gather feedback from the students to the underlying immediate pedagogic concern for seeing if the use of written feedback in my composition classes will help me to continue incorporating the principles of Exploratory Practice into my new teaching situation.

III The context

The American University of Sharjah (AUS) is co-educational and has a student body made up of over 40 different nationalities. The students are mostly from various parts of the Middle East, but there are also students from India, Pakistan, China, Japan, Russia, the USA and Canada. The language of instruction is English and the students must obtain a TOEFL score of 500 to enter directly into the university programmes. If a score of below 500 is obtained, the students must enrol in the Intensive English programme. The majority of the students, regardless of whether they are enrolled in the Intensive English programme or not, are second language learners and the first-year English Composition classes that all students must take, regardless of their major area of study, are influenced by the needs of second language learners. Many of the students have a high level of oral fluency, but their writing competency is low. The classes, although not given the amount of time required for intensive tuition, are very intensive in nature. The curriculum is challenging and demanding for both the students and the teacher.

The classes involved in this study were two courses entitled, *Introduction to academic writing* (Communications 101), and two courses labelled, *Introduction to academic reading and writing* (Communications 102). Although I had taught these courses before, this was the first time for me to teach these particular groups of students. All of them, a total of 85, were either first-year students who had scored over 500 on the TOEFL or who had matriculated from the Intensive English programme, and thus had been at AUS for at least a year. The course objectives for both of these courses can be found in Appendix A.

IV Exploring the puzzle

In my experience, feedback, both oral and written, can be incorporated at the beginning of the course, mid-semester, after an activity or class, at the end of the course, or basically at any time that the teacher feels is appropriate. For this research, I asked for written feedback at the beginning, after each major writing assignment, at the mid-semester point and at the end of the course.

I chose to get to know the students first in the classroom by engaging in introductory oral activities that would help and the students learn each other's names. Some of the students knew each other from other classes but in many cases the students were in different majors and different classes so did not have much interaction. I stressed that throughout the writing course we would be a team and that we would be sharing our writing and reflections about articles and stories I would be bringing in with each other. I stressed that it was, therefore, important that we knew each other's names.

Gathering written feedback from the students started in the first week. I gave the students a two-part assignment outlined below:

- Part One: Please write a paragraph to introduce yourself to me.
- Part Two: Please write about you like and do not like about reading and writing and tell me what you expect from this course.

I responded to the introductory paragraphs and returned them to the students so they could read my comments. I asked them to hand the sheets back in so I could keep them until the end of the semester. Some of the students responded to my comments. Not all of the students wrote about what they expected from the course, but for those who did, the main theme was to see improvement in their reading and writing skills. Given the course objectives, these comments were not surprising to me.

Getting written feedback from the students continued throughout the semester in a variety of forms. When the students handed in their first draft of their essays for grading, after going through the peer-editing process with one of their classmates, I asked them to answer the following questions:

- What do you feel you have done well in this essay?
- What was the hardest thing for you about writing this essay?
- Did you find your reviewers' comments helpful? Why or why not?
- Is there anything else you want me to know?

The answer to the last question was often related to the number of other assignments the students had to do for their other courses. Sometimes the students would let me know if they had been feeling unwell, or if there were other things going on in their lives that distracted them from giving their full attention to my assignment.

V Mid-semester feedback

The semesters at AUS are 16 weeks long. In addition to the on-going feedback from the students about their essays, I also asked the students to give me some reflective feedback halfway through the semester in week eight. I explained to the students the purpose of the activity and asked the following questions:

Name: _____ Date: _____

Mid-semester reflective feedback

We are more than half-way through this semester now. I would like you to give me some feedback regarding this course. Please answer as many of the following questions as you want to as they apply to you. I am NOT looking for compliments – I am looking for honest feedback to help ensure that the rest of this course will help you achieve your educational goals.

- What is helping you learn in this course? Think about, for example, what you do both inside and outside of class, the textbook, my teaching approach, etc.
- What is NOT helping you learn? Think about, for example, what you do both inside and outside of class, the textbook, my teaching approach, etc.
- Is there anything that you would like to see changed in this course?
- What can I do to help you?
- What can you do to help yourself?
- Do you have any other comments?

This form, completed by 85 students, generated a large amount of feedback to read and process. Of course some wrote more than others but there were some common themes running through the feedback. For example, the students responded favourably regarding peer evaluation, working in groups, and to my teaching approach. Some sample comments are listed below:[1]

- Peer evaluation helps me learn. This is because my paper is looked through by different people which gives me many opinions.
- I think when you divide us into groups using the cards[2] to discuss our homework that make us know our mistakes and know each other more.
- I love the reshuffling (name cards). I don't enjoy sitting with the same people all the time, not that I don't like anyone.

I like sitting with different people no matter where they are from but I can't do that by myself.
- Your approach helps me. You ask me and I tell you and you help me.

The main things that seemed not to help the students learn were the textbook and the workload in other classes. A few students also commented on their dissatisfaction with group work. There were more students in favour of group work than not, so the students and I talked about the value of group work and ways to make it work for all members of the group. Some examples from the students are below:

- The textbook is the only thing that I think is not helpful. It does not provide a structure to follow or clear rules. However, the examples in it are good.
- I do not open the textbook. It's terrible. Get rid of it.
- The group work because we are student and all of us are not sure of their answer.
- Nothing is not helping me, but the number of subjects I'm taking and the amount of work I have everyday decreases my attention to this course, but I love that you try to help me anyway even though you know I am not working.

I asked the students to put their names on this mid-semester feedback form and I was able to respond to the students' concerns individually. One student wrote:

- I think my skills are still the same and does not change, that I feel except one thing which is the types of essays and to organize them. You spend too much time on nothing.

The fact that this student felt she was learning nothing was a concern to me and I asked her to come and see me in my office. We were able to work out some of the problems she was having together, but not all of them. She eventually stopped coming to the class.

The students offered suggestions and comments to improve the class as shown below:

- Having more exercises and examples in class.
- I think have 1 essay each week for practising would be good.

- Changing the textbook is a good idea.
- Can we have more conferences with you?
- Some concepts are being taught on the board or using transparencies, but there are no hard copies of the lesson from which we can refer to later.
- This class is more like a high school class than a university class. You are the only one who asks us how we feel. My high school teacher always did that, but my other professors do not. Can you tell them to do that?
- Communication in the class is good. This helps me to improve my communication skills.

The problem of the students not getting copies of my overheads was one that was easily solved. I had told the students at the beginning of the semester that I had a folder on the University intranet where they could access all my handouts and class materials, but until the mid-semester feedback I had not realized that few students actually knew about or used the folder. The issue of the textbook was not something I could resolve with this class as the textbook is common to all classes. I did, however, bring the students' dissatisfaction with the book to the attention of the course co-ordinator. Each issue that came up we talked about in class and, where possible, revised the class to reflect the needs and concerns of all the students. I had hoped that the students would see that by acting on their suggestions their feedback was not just valuable and useful for me as their teacher, but also helpful for them to enhance their understandings of what they need in the classroom to meet their educational goals.

VI End-of-semester feedback

At the end of the course I asked for feedback on two occasions. First, I returned the sheet the students had given me outlining their expectations for the course. I asked them to review what they had written and to let me know by email if their expectations had been met. Again, not all of the students did this but for those who did, they mentioned that they felt their writing had improved, not always dramatically, but they could see improvement. Some of the

comments also talked about how different the class was from what they were expecting. For example:

- To tell the truth, I was dreading taking COM. I heard how boring it is and what a waste of time it is. I was really surprised by our class. Playing games and laughing during our class time was fun, but also childish, but you showed us we can't be serious all the time and we can learn while laughing. Also, playing and laughing in class helps build a good teacher–student relation. I wasn't expecting this and I liked it.
- At the beginning I thought you were not going to teach us anything because you kept telling us we had to get to know each other, and trust each other and even like each other! I wanted to drop the class because I thought you didn't care about learning or writing, only talking about being a team and learning from other students. I had to stay in the class though and guess what, I came to like it. I still don't know if my writing has improved, but I learned other things and I can see now that your 'team' idea worked and that some of the shyer students really benefited. I guess maybe I did too.

These two students had come into the class with preconceived ideas of what the class was going to entail and were reluctant to stay in the class at the beginning. The above quotes demonstrate how these learners made sense of their situation, and then were able to express their own developing understandings of classroom life. These two examples, and others like them, have intensified my belief in the power of feedback and strengthened my resolve to adhere to the principles of Exploratory Practice.

I also asked the students to anonymously comment on the course and our experience together by asking them to fill in the following form:

End of Semester Reflective Feedback

Dear Students,

I would appreciate it if you help me evaluate this course. Please answer the following questions. This survey is anonymous and as I

have already submitted your final grades it will in no way have any effect on your grade. I may use some of the information you give me in a presentation or future article. If you do not want your comments taken into consideration when I write about or present this information, please put an 'X' at the top of this paper. Please answer the questions below and use the back of this paper as needed.

Thank you very much for your input. You are helping me to live by something I truly believe in which is: 'Those who dare to teach should never cease to learn'.

1. In your opinion, what are the strengths of this course, regardless of who teaches it?
2. In your opinion, what improvements can be made to this course, regardless of who teaches it?
3. What have you learned in this course that you can see yourself using in the future?
4. How did I help you learn?
5. What could I have done to help you more in this course?
6. Do you have any other comments?

The end-of-term feedback was anonymous and given to me after the students' final grades had been submitted although the students still did not know their final grades at this point. The purpose was twofold. First, I wanted to give the students the opportunity to make suggestions to help me improve the courses for the next semester. Secondly, I wanted to give the students the chance to reflect and write about the course one more time without worrying about possibly having to justify what they said. I tried to make it clear to them that in every feedback session, which was also optional for the students, they were free to say what they wanted and I would not take any disagreement with me into consideration when grading them. These were, however, first-year students, and I was worried that many of them felt they had to emphasize the positive rather than both the negative and positive when answering. Although I cannot prove that the students were

honest in their mid-term and other feedback responses, they were certainly consistent in their feedback throughout the term and I consider it most unlikely that they would have been able to remember their previous responses.

There were a few students who were dissatisfied with the course itself, and felt that I was too strict in my grading and on my late-work policy, but the overall feeling I got from my analysis of the end-of-semester feedback was a sense of the students' appreciation for a class community.[3] A few examples to illustrate this are below:

- You helped us every step of the way and gave us confidence to help each other.
- You made writing a group thing. I never thought it would work, but it did.
- I felt bad if I did not do my homework. I did not want to let the group down. I never felt that way before about homework.
- You made us take it seriously and work hard in a fun way.
- I really liked and learned from the class interaction, your being there all the time to answer questions. The best thing though is your use of the word 'we' – you always say 'we will do this', etc. because that made me relax and know you are us too.
- You made me not afraid to ask my problem about. You showed me that other students can help me too.

The students' comments all through the semester show that the students and I in these classes were working together, productively, for mutual understanding of what was happening in our classes and thus for an enhanced quality of classroom life. Although at first glance it appears the students were only providing me with questionnaire data, a closer, analytical look reveals that the students were actually directly involved in trying to understand their own classroom lives as second language writers. Applying the philosophy of Exploratory Practice and the use of written feedback with these particular students worked well by revealing their voices concerning the importance of improving the quality of life in the classroom.

VII Continuing the exploration

I am very fortunate to know and to have shared a working environment with a number of talented teachers and teacher-researchers in a variety of contexts, my current teaching situation included. Most teachers I know have a wealth of experience to learn from, but the busy nature of our careers do not allow for us to meet regularly to share our insights about teaching and learning, or to collaborate on practitioner research. I find myself, and see many of my colleagues, battling the time factor every day to get everything done as outlined in the course expectations. I believe, however, that this paper has demonstrated the practicality of practitioner research in what could be seen as a less than favourable practitioner research situation. Exploratory Practice practitioner research is an on-going endeavour that is meant to be as unobtrusive as possible for both teachers and learners while at the same time allowing both to work towards greater understanding of classroom life. In this context, with a relatively large number of students and limited contact hours per week, the use of written feedback did not take much time and did not distract from the goals of the course. The students responded well to the feedback questionnaires and through my analysis I could see that working towards mutual development and understanding were important concepts to the students as well, even in this limited class setting of three hours per week.

I will continue to include my students' voices in my ongoing explorations of classroom life and I realize that the findings from these classes may not be the same as the findings from my classes next year. Whatever the findings, by adhering to the principles of Exploratory Practice, the students and I will have the opportunity to work together for an improved quality of classroom life.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] The comments have not been edited. They appear here as they were written by the students.

[2] I ask the students at the beginning of the semester to write their names on index cards. I use these cards to put the students into groups so that the students are constantly having the opportunity to work in different groups throughout the semester.

[3] Space precludes further treatment here of my analysis of the questionnaire data. This is perhaps unusual in a report of research, but I would like to remind any disappointed readers that my aim here is not so much to report the substantive results of a classroom research project, as to explore my puzzle both about the feasibility of such an investigative procedure, and about its probable contribution to teaching and learning in my classrooms.

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Appendix A

Course objectives for Communications 101: academic writing

1) To improve students' understanding of the fundamentals of effective written communication, especially grammatical usage, sentence construction, paragraphing and essay development.
2) To familiarize students with some of the standard rhetorical modes commonly used in academic writing.
3) To help students learn from others through such activities as peer review, team work and group discussions.
4) To teach students to become aware of how writers write.
5) To enable students to competently read a passage and absorb and understand the thesis and main ideas, to transfer ideas from a text and to apply them to related situations.

Course objectives for Communications 102: writing and reading across the curriculum

1) Improve the students' reading comprehension and vocabulary skills so that they can understand, summarize, analyse and criticize complex arguments.
2) Identify and avoid major grammatical errors in their own writing.
3) Be familiar with skimming and scanning techniques.
4) Understand and apply the concept of using data and facts to support opinions.
5) Organize a 3–5-page argumentative essay supported by appropriately used primary and secondary sources.
6) Document sources using proper citation form.
7) Improve the students' reading comprehension and vocabulary skills so that they can understand, summarize, analyse and criticize complex arguments.