



# RESEARCH

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Action Research: Rewards and Challenges

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## Editors' Foreword

This is a collection of papers given at the IATEFL Research Special Interest Group (RESIG) conference at the Grand Hotel in Opatija, Croatia on 1-2 September 2006. The title of the conference was 'Action Research: Rewards and Challenges'.

Action research (hereafter termed AR) is a subject of growing interest to ELT practitioners who are seeking to conduct empirical studies which may help to provide answers to local problems. Such teachers may sometimes feel that internationally published research does not always deal with issues that affect their professional lives in their own particular teaching-learning context.

We hope that these papers will stimulate as much interest amongst readers as they did at the conference itself, which was very positively evaluated by participants. On a Likert scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (very good), the venue, conference centre, plenary and other papers were all rated above 4, which is testimony that the conference was a very successful event. Participants' comments included the view that the best talks were those based on the speakers' own experiences of AR, and dealt with their own plans, actions, success and problems. We think that this collection is a representative sample of such talks. It represents both informed current views about what action research is and what it offers ELT professionals, and examples of its use for different purposes in a range of global contexts.

The three plenary papers included here serve to set the scene. Adrian Underhill looks at AR from an ethical perspective, and examines how its aims and outcomes can be aligned with the researcher's own value systems. Julian Edge reminds us that AR is more than a recipe, or set of established procedures; at least as important is the personal attitude of teachers, and the involvement and excitement created when they find the courage to take up the challenges posed by AR. Herbert Altrichter discusses important quality assurance issues involved in classroom AR, such as linking reflection and action, and looking at data from different perspectives. In common with Edge and Underhill, Altrichter also focuses in part on educational and individual values.

Two papers are overtly concerned with professional growth, but in different ways. Božana Knežević's theoretically-driven paper explores the 3 Rs (reflection, reflexivity and redescription) which, she argues, provide a model of how a teacher 'progressively grows' as a professional. Ana Franca Plastina is concerned with how the use of COLT, a framework for classroom observation, can act as a trigger for professional growth.

The rest of the papers are all case studies of AR projects in different parts of the world, several of which are concerned principally with the evaluation of an innovation. Jill Morris evaluates the management of a curricular innovation - the implementation of portfolio assessment in a UK tertiary institution. Two papers focus on ESP courses. Irena Milanič examines the implementation of an ESP course in a university Humanities department in Slovenia. The ESP course which Arijana Krišković and Ksenija Bazdaric evaluate is a medical English course introduced at a Croatian university in response to changes initiated by the Bologna Declaration of 1999. Mojca Belak examines the effects of turning two classes in a Slovenian HE institution into 'Learning Organisations', and how students took a more responsible attitude towards their work when they were given the opportunity to take 'an active part in creating the rules'. Finally, Sanae Tsuda's evaluation of an AP project, in which she introduced creative short story writing into her grammar classes, provides the only paper from a non-European context (Japan).

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all the contributors to this publication. We hope that it will stimulate further exciting discussions about AR, both privately amongst readers and contributors, and, better still, on our yahoogroup list.

Ana Falcao

Alan Fortune

## From the Co-ordinator

I am very grateful to everyone who made our event on Action Research such a success. In particular, Božana Knežević made everything happen on the ground, while the British Council Croatia supported both delegates and this publication. Thanks are due to all our contributors here, to Ana and Alan for their work as editors of this collection and to Shaida as always for making it look so good. I wish you all a very pleasant read.

Simon Borg

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# REFLECTIVE PRACTICE, ACTION, INQUIRY AND DEEP VALUES

**Adrian Underhill**

## Introduction

**My aim is to encourage inquiring conversations of the kind “How, in my work, do I follow or contradict the values that are deeply important to me?” and to hold this question as a rigorous reflective practice in the midst of professional action. I suggest that this question can provide rich starting points for worthwhile professional reflection and inquiry, as well as a source of ‘passionate energy’ for professional development. I shall say a little about where I am coming from, link that to reflective practice and action inquiry, and move on to the question of values as a starting point for inquiry.**

## My perspective

During my work as teacher, trainer, and school director, and in various leadership roles, I have undertaken a wide range of types of facilitation training myself, as well as developing facilitation skills courses for others. I sometimes see my facilitation work as a kind of *liberation of intelligence* that is already there in the system (or team, organisation, classroom, staffroom, etc) which is somehow locked up, but once it starts to flow is likely to increase the capacity of that system to change in worthwhile ways. As I reflect on patterns emerging from that experience, I see that part of what I call liberating intelligence is a matter of enabling a person’s deep values to connect with their actions. I can illustrate this with an example of what is a deep value for me. I value my own engagement in learning, the mental challenge, the physical sensation and emotional feeling of pushing my boundaries, working at the edge of what I know, and of experiencing my experience richly so that I learn from it. And this value is doubly enacted and experienced when I work alongside other people who are similarly engaged. It then seems as if another deep value is touched, that of connection and relationship, of being collectively engaged in actions that are jointly developmental and worthwhile.

## Reflection and learning from experience

For me, the act of reflecting means taking an attitude of inquiry and curiosity towards our practice in order to become more aware of it rather than just immersed in it. The aim is to be able to see, critique and develop our practice, which means relating together elements of our experience, seeing these elements in relation to one another, and letting the patterns in our experience emerge so that we can learn more fully, and not just think about things, but work to change things.

My experience of facilitating professional reflection suggests that not only do professionals have different ideas about reflection, but many also benefit from some scaffolding or framing discipline to help them engage with reflection, either because, like me, they find it an elusive activity or because reflection gets lost in the torrent of unreflective daily action. While reflection is in many ways a simple activity, we can quite easily get through our formal education without having much contact with reflective practice in action, either as a taught discipline or as a practice modelled by our tutors as they interrogate their experience both in the moment and after the event. Schon (1991) proposes somewhat provocatively that universities are institutions committed to a particular view of knowledge that fosters selective inattention to practical competence and professional artistry, while Torbert (2004) suggests that neither modern science nor the modern university is dedicated to the study of one’s own practice. As Varela (1992) says, we have a blind spot when it comes to seeing our own practice, as a result of which we are not as skilled as we think at learning from experience. He proposes that we need a special kind of training in learning from experience, which would require us to experience that experience more deeply in the first place. Such training he says might be akin to the discipline of learning a martial art. He invites us to reflect on what it might be like to become a black belt at learning from experience. The challenge of reflection provides us with both the need, and the opportunity, to learn the art of reflection *at the same time* as learning about our practice. But how can we choose a useful focus for inquiry in our practice?

## Choosing topics for inquiry

We need to examine our experience in order to learn from it, but where do we start? We can start with a view to solving what we perceive as a problem in our practice (e.g. “How do I get my level six students to speak more in the language class?”). Or we may approach an issue as something to be managed better or differently, something to be lived with more productively rather than solved, since for many life issues a solution is not the aim. The following question serves as an example - “How can I live and work more harmoniously and creatively within the diverse and conflicting personalities

and power structures that seem to disable worthwhile practices in my school?”

Another starting point, and the one I want to pursue here, begins with a question like “What is deeply important to me in my work?” While running a professional development workshop or conducting coaching I may ask “What draws you to your work? What really fires you up?” Responses to these questions cannot be given immediately or finally, they emerge and change, in fact the questions are themselves inquiries. But having arrived at a provisional response (e.g. “I deeply value fairness, .... or relationship ... or growth...” etc) I then ask participants to find an example in their work where they *enact* that value in their practice. To illustrate with my earlier example, I might find that I enact my value of learning in relationship with others when I have taken the trouble to listen attentively to what others are saying, feeling or doing, and to try to see things from their perspective, regardless of whether I am agreeing or disagreeing. After some conversation about their examples I then invite them to find examples where they *contradict* that same value in their practice. Again, to illustrate with my example, I may find that I contradict my value in my practice when I am judgmental of the other, unwilling to value them and dismissive of their experience, or when I frame learning activities in a way that does not give people space to speak from their perspective. Whitehead and McNiff (2005) suggest that we experience ourselves as a *living contradiction* when we recognise that we hold a value, such as fairness, yet deny it in our practice. I may also find as I rub my values alongside my reality that my values need to shift.

## Linking values to action to outcomes

Lewin (2001) suggests that when people are aligned to their purpose, when the gap between values and behaviours closes, what people experience is a “stream of ease”. I expect you have the experience that when what you do is consistent with what is deeply important to you, you can work with a great and almost inexhaustible energy, whereas when what you do conflicts with what you hold important, there is less energy available, and if such activity continues for too long it may lead to cynical practice or burnout. The interesting thing is that experiencing myself as a living contradiction alerts me to disconnections in the integrity of my practice that could be turned to advantage if used as a starting point for intentional inquiry and focussed reflection. Whitehead (2005) proposes that a strong basis for drawing up an inquiry plan is to come to understand the degree to which we may be experiencing ourselves as a living contradiction, in order to find ways of resolving the tension so that we can live in a way that does no violence to our own or others’ integrity, or indeed develop our values so that this become more possible.

Torbert (2004) proposes that our actions constitute *action inquiry* when we are paying simultaneous reflective attention across four areas of our experience, which he describes as:

- the *outcomes and impacts* of my actions on others, which are brought about by
- the qualities of my *behaviours and actions* in my practice, which is influenced by
- the congruence of my *plans, strategies and my ways of thinking* about what I do, which are affected by and can influence
- my deep *purposes, values and intentions*.

To rephrase this in reverse order, Torbert is suggesting that the act of attending to my values, and how they are represented in my planning and thinking, and how this in turn relates to what I actually do and the way I do it, and the impact of these actions on my total context, constitutes both action inquiry and a way of questioning the integrity of the relationship between personal values and outcomes.

## Action experiment

If you decide to develop a values-based inquiry, you might consider steps like the following:

- Focus on surfacing and articulating some of the values and purposes that are deeply important to you in your practice. This process of surfacing, interrogating and clarifying current values is itself a worthwhile inquiry.
- Find current examples in your practice both of where you enact, and where you contradict, those values. Each of these offers sites for inquiry into both the action and the value, though here I am focussing on the power of the *living contradiction* to drive inquiry.

If you identify such a personal *living contradiction* that seems important enough to merit further inquiry, the next question is how can you explore this, how can you get to know and understand it better, how can you develop it into simple action experiments that you can take into your daily practice? As I said, most people benefit from assistance in formulating an action experiment that is lean, clean and clear enough to try out in the midst of practice, and several people forming an inquiring community together can help each other in this respect. Only by disturbing the pattern of our practice are we likely to find out more about it, which can in turn help us to develop and refine the question itself, and so on.

In designing an action experiment it helps to remember that there are essentially only three types:

1. Do something different from what you usually do, and observe well;

2. Refrain from doing something you usually do, and observe well;

3. Do what you usually do, while observing it both differently and better than usual.

The designing and refining of action experiments is an iterative process; the question changes as we learn.

## Summary

I have suggested that looking for and experiencing contradictions between one's values, actions and outcomes can be a productive and rewarding activity that can provide a rich source of inspiration for worthwhile professional reflection and inquiry. Experiencing oneself as a living contradiction can also provide a source of energy to drive inquiry of this nature. I have offered a simple framework for those who would like to experiment with this in their practice, either to

change circumstances to align actions with values, or to develop the values themselves.

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# CLASSROOM OBSERVATION IN ACTION RESEARCH: THE CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF COLT

Anna Franca Plastina

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## Introduction

In Teacher Research, the opportunity to acquire skills in using classroom observation tools offers professional benefits which outweigh initial challenges. Since “classrooms, however, are complex arenas where many processes co-occur and overlap” (Wajnryb, 1992:5), it is important to use tools which support systematic observation, structured analysis and reflective interpretation of professional action.

This paper considers the challenges and benefits for the teacher researcher in using a documented recall tool such as the COLT (Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching) observation scheme (Allen, Fröhlich & Spada, 1984). Drawing from the experience of an action research project carried out in Italy (Plastina, 2006), the article first considers the functions and features of a COLT observation scheme and its role in action research. It then points out how a first-time approach to COLT triggered off reactions, reflections and actions from the teachers involved in the project. This first-time opportunity not only enhanced teacher research development, but also enabled me, as the teacher educator, to gain professional understanding from the experience.

## COLT: functions and features

The COLT observation scheme is employed to better understand the communicative nature of classrooms (Allen, Fröhlich & Spada, 1984). Its use supports “a nonjudgmental description of classroom events that can be analyzed and given interpretation” (Gebhard, 1999:35). In our routinised practice, we often tend to adhere to prescriptive models, jumping to superficial conclusions that things are either right or wrong. The

process of nonjudgmental descriptive observation can bring about a change in our rooted biased attitudes. Analysing and interpreting classroom events requires us, in fact, to reflect on what, how and why things are done. In this, COLT is a helpful documented recall of *primary data*, that is, of “the actual events of the professional action: what really happened” (Wallace, 1991:62). In the post-observation phase, COLT recordings can be analysed and interpreted, leading us from direct classroom research towards self-reflection.

As a direct observation tool, COLT requires us to act as non-participants in classroom events, making a record of what goes on in the classroom. It is an objective research tool as subjective unsystematic annotations are not allowed. In general, the COLT scheme is descriptive and its single items can record the global picture of what happens in the classroom. The scheme is structured as a time-based checklist, coded with a category system in macro-categories and relative sub-categories which are ticked off as snapshot instances of action. However, macro-categories and relative sub-categories are not standardised. It is possible to design our own COLT system, choosing macro-categories and sub-categories which are based on reliable language learning principles and on our research purpose, whether this includes investigation into general problematic issues or focus on detailed aspects of professional action.

Appendix 1 is a sample of COLT data collected on the action research project to investigate whether individual teaching processes are calibrated to attain the descriptive standards of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) (Council of Europe, 2001). The scheme is structured in eight pre-specified macro-categories and thirty sub-categories. The macro-category of *Time* records the length of the lesson and provides snapshot instances of action which occur every 5 minutes. *Activities* are recorded using acronyms, following a coded legend to avoid time consumption in data collection. The observer is, however, free to code and record activities which are not listed in the legend (e.g. CLA= classroom arrangement in Appendix 1). Sub-categories 3-7 provide information on who (teacher/student/tool) uses which *language* (L1/L2). Sub-categories 8-11 cover the range of *classroom dynamics* (class/groups/pairs/individual). *Language content* is recorded in sub-categories 12-18 (phonetics, grammar, lexis, functions, register, text-types, LSP). Sub-categories 19-23 (speaking, listening, reading, writing, other) describe the *learning modality* which takes place. The description of the *tools* employed is articulated in sub-categories 24-27 (video, audio, multimedia, boards), while the use of specific *materials* (paper, images, realia) is annotated in sub-categories 28-30.

For those who wish to attempt an analysis of data, the data in Appendix 1 can be analysed and interpreted following the sample guided questions in Appendix 2.

## COLT in Action Research

What potential role does COLT have in action research? Commonly, the steps in an action research process include: posing a problem, planning an action, implementing the action, observing the action, reflecting, and revising the plan. The COLT observation scheme mainly supports the last three of the above phases. Data is, in fact, collected while observing the action. Reflection occurs while analysing and interpreting COLT data which may impact on the revision phase. COLT data can also identify and pose a new problem in the cyclic action research process. In addition, the functional use of COLT in action research is twofold: diagnostic and therapeutic. In the diagnostic phase, COLT is employed to observe and interpret pedagogical praxis already in use. In the therapeutic phase, it is used to investigate revised actions. Moreover, effective action research ought to include the collection of comparative COLT data, that is, at least three recordings per class as well as recordings in both the diagnostic and therapeutic phases, with the dates when observations take place carefully noted.

In the present case, the COLT observation scheme was included in a set of action research tools used by a group of eleven in-service teachers involved in the project. Although the use of COLT was not compulsory, it was worth facing this first-time challenge to develop teachers' research skills in classroom observation. In addition, as their teacher educator, I could gain professional understanding from their reactions, actions and reflections.

## The Teacher Researchers: reactions, reflections and actions

In the phase of reflective interpretation when primary COLT data is elaborated, various factors such as the number of researchers interpreting the data, their professional status, their degree of training in classroom observation and their knowledge and skills in using COLT may strongly affect the process of interpretation. Although the eleven in-service teachers were all experienced, none of them had experience of pre-service training, classroom observation training or COLT. Since the project did not demand any institutionalised use of COLT, teachers were not willing to be observed as they were self-conscious and anxious about this first-time experience. Initially, they also believed the experience would have no real value for them as they claimed already to follow the national FL curriculum. It was, therefore, necessary to intervene on their affective barrier and on their *top-down prescriptive*

attitude. To this purpose, group discussions were held, leading them to reflect on the fact that no prescriptive test was required from them. As they gradually gained self-confidence, they decided to embark on the experience. Their reactions became professional as they realised that COLT observation would enable them to triangulate COLT data with other action research findings.

Further in-class discussions generated actions related to: a) seeking advice on the choice of observers; b) meeting their needs in acquiring COLT observation practice; c) making reflective decisions on the choice of observers; d) seeking suitable solutions autonomously.

In the post-observation phase, significant samples of reflection were evident during the data interpretation process. Some teachers claimed that analysing and interpreting COLT findings allowed them to *picture* classroom events. They were, thus, assuming a *bottom-up descriptive* approach to observation. Subsequently, they interpreted COLT feedback data regarding their own professional action. As a result, they were raising self-awareness (e.g. "I thought I was giving my students enough talking-time!") and developing self-inquiry (e.g. "Interpreting COLT means thinking about what I really do"). As interpretation proceeded, they also realised they were using suitable professional metalanguage to convey their reflections. In addition, they reflected on the importance of using COLT not just once in the diagnostic phase, but in a more systematic way. This was a clear sign of how they were developing their teacher researcher skills.

## The Teacher Educator's Professional Understanding

Teacher reactions develop professional understanding in the teacher educator. Initial reluctance in engaging in new forms of teacher research requires support. It is important that the teacher educator stresses the value of the underlying professional development deriving from the use of new systematic tools. It is also equally important to create a friendly action research atmosphere which fosters teachers' self-confidence. With these conditions in mind, the teacher educator can encourage teachers to assume a bottom-up descriptive approach to their investigation and lead them towards self-inquiry. Supporting, encouraging and leading teachers towards systematic research are key actions for the teacher educator.

Moreover, teacher actions summon the teacher educator to understand the multi-faceted aspects of her role. When teachers seek advice, it is fundamental to understand that "the role of the teacher educator is no longer simply that of a trainer" (Richards, 1990:15). More than acting as a supervisor, the teacher educator should

be an advisor who facilitates, collaborates and co-participates in teacher research. This requires introducing in-class activities such as COLT observation simulations to cover teachers' needs. It further requires interpreting decisions. When most teachers resorted to their action research peers as their observers, it appeared that they were recognising the value of a professionally qualified observer. Two teachers carried action research project at her school. Initial constraints had brought the teacher researcher to cascade her experience beyond the project.

When teacher researchers seek autonomy, the teacher educator ought to solicit autonomous actions. This was the case of the two teacher researchers who took the initiative and ran an in-class COLT session based on their videos, taking professional responsibility for their actions. Finally, reflections leading to self-awareness and self-inquiry need to be supported by the teacher educator who should stimulate discussions on professional identity, beliefs and practices. It is also important that the teacher educator encourages teacher researchers to develop and use professional metalanguage when conveying ideas and opinions during reflective group discussions.

## The Challenges of COLT

There are a number of challenges which need to be faced with COLT. These can be summarised as follows:

- overcoming observee self-consciousness;
- taking the time and effort to understand the coding system;
- developing a non-judgmental descriptive approach to observation;
- using the appropriate metalanguage in reflective group discussions;
- making decisions and taking responsibility for personalised actions;
- developing flexibility in identifying COLT patterns;
- speculating on data triangulation;
- activating reflective processes leading to self-awareness and self-inquiry.

## The Benefits of COLT

Nunan (1989:76) stated that "if we want to enrich our understanding of language learning and teaching, we need to spend time looking in classrooms". In a reflective approach, COLT offers teachers, who may have internalized routinised classroom practice, an opportunity for professional growth. Indeed "through describing, analyzing, and interpreting the teaching we

out self-observation to avoid non-participant interference. In video-recording their classroom events, they were demanding major objectivity from the experience and from the subsequent recording of COLT data. Practical constraints led one teacher to rely on an EFL teacher colleague at her workplace. The positive outcome was her involvement in setting up an (incomplete line, please have a look at the original file

observe, we can construct and reconstruct our own teaching and thereby learn about ourselves as teachers" (Gebhard, 1999:58).

Overall, COLT should help teachers develop the skills of observing classrooms objectively and collecting data for research purposes. They should also develop a deeper understanding of the pedagogical principles underlying the COLT categories, greater awareness of themselves as teachers, and a more reflective approach to their teaching.

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## Appendix 1 – A sample recording of COLT data

(The COLT scheme is adapted from Scheda COLT by C.M.Coonan, G.Pozzi, C. Rizzardi, 2002).

L2: English

Date: 21/05/2004

Lesson Objective: Asking and giving information about the weather

Observation Phase: Diagnostic

Time	Activity	Language					Classroom Dynamics				Language Contents							Learning Modality					Tools				Materials		
		L1		L2																									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
		Teacher	Student	Teacher	Student	Tools	Class	Groups	Pairs	Individual	Phonetics	Grammar	Lexis	Functions	Registers	Text	LSP	Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing	Other	Video	Audio	Multimedia	Boards	Paper	Images	Realia
5'	CA			✓	✓		✓							✓				✓										✓	
10'	RP			✓	✓		✓							✓				✓											
15'	CLA*	✓	✓																										
20'	CA			✓	✓			✓					✓					✓											✓
25'	RP	✓			✓			✓					✓					✓									✓		✓
30'	RP			✓	✓			✓						✓				✓										✓	✓
35'	CRA			✓	✓		✓							✓					✓							✓			
40'	CRA	✓			✓					✓				✓							✓	✓				✓			✓
45'																													
50'																													
55'																													
60'																													
TOT																													

\*CLA= classroom arrangement

### Legend on Activities

CA= communicative activity

DR= drama

QA= question-answer

SR= silent reading

CRA= creative activity

HC= homework correction

RA= reading aloud

SS= self-study

D= dictation

L= lexical presentation/consolidation

RP= role play

STE= structural exercises

DI= dialogue

NT= note-taking

SE= self-evaluation

T= testing

## Appendix 2 – A sample guide to interpretation of secondary COLT data

### 1. Time

- How long does the lesson last?

### 2. Activities

- How many different types of activities have been carried out during the lesson?
- Which ones are repeated? How can this be interpreted?
- Do some activities last longer than others?
- What is the balance between *formal* language activities and *functional* language ones?

- What is the relation between the proposed activities and the aim of the lesson?

### 3. Language

- What is the balance between L1 and L2 during the lesson?
- Who mostly uses L1? Who L2?
- How can this use be interpreted?
- Who has more "talking-time"? How can this be interpreted?

### 4. Classroom Dynamics

- Which type of classroom dynamics does the teacher appear to prefer?
- How many changes are there? How can this be interpreted?
- How do these changes affect learners' use of L2?
- What is the relation between classroom dynamics and the proposed activities?

### 5. Language Contents

- Which content is dealt with mostly?
- How much time is allotted to lexis?
- Is there a link between content and the type of corresponding activity?

### 6. Learning Modality

- In which type of language skill are learners mostly engaged?
- Which is less used?
- Which skill pattern appears to be introduced during the lesson?
- How can it be related to the main lesson objective?

### 7. Tools

- Which tools are preferred by the teacher?
- Are technological tools employed? How can this be interpreted?
- Which activities do the tools support?

### 8. Materials

- Which materials are mostly used?
- Who uses them?
- What type of activities are they used for?



# ESP FOR HISTORY STUDENTS:

## OBJECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

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### Introduction

**This paper deals with the implementation of an English for specific purposes (ESP) course for second year history students carried out in the winter semester 2005/2006 at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Primorska, Koper (Slovenia). While attempting to define ESP in humanities, this article reports of an action research project examining the influence of students' public speaking performances on their involvement in classroom activities and the quality of their written reports. It considers the course objectives, how and if were these achieved and by presenting the results of the students' feedback it suggests necessary improvements.**

The University of Primorska in Koper, Slovenia, is a state university formally established in 2003. It is a dynamic body made up of different faculties, institutes and colleges including the Faculty of Humanities which has existed since 2000.<sup>1</sup> As a new university, it advocates a modern, student-oriented approach and it is actively involved in the implementation of the Bologna process and the application of the Lisbon strategy. In this light, the teaching of languages and English in particular is emphasised and the English language is a compulsory subject, taught for three years out of a three or four year programme. At the Faculty of Humanities the students in the first year are divided according to their English proficiency levels, while in the second and third year there are ESP courses for every speciality.<sup>2</sup>

### The action research project

A way to define ESP in humanities is to understand where and when English will be needed by the students. Two moments can be identified: first during their studies and second in their future work places. Primarily, students should be able to read critical literature written in English and master the different techniques of reading. Secondly, they should learn how to write by studying other texts, and how to use the information gained from these texts in their own compositions by mastering the skills of summarising, paraphrasing and synthesis. Lastly, the students have to present their written assignments in front of the class and talk about visual material. They are encouraged to take part in discussions and give feedback on presentations. The students should be able to discuss the topics they are studying in the English language regardless of what other language their studies are in. Additionally, they should be able to listen to original materials such as historical speeches, documentaries and videos.

In the year 2005-2006 ESP for second year history students was run for the first time ever, so in order to implement the general guidelines I completed a syllabus that aimed to be both specific and attractive, and to help the students develop their critical thinking. The course was geared towards enhancing the students' reading, listening, writing and speaking skills as well as broadening their specialist vocabulary while using a wide range of textual and multimedia resources. Since second (and third) year students have a total of 30 hours of English per semester, the students were encouraged to realise that work in class is just a small part of the process of improving their language, and that most of the work has to be done independently.

The research question I attempted to answer was how to increase the students' involvement in classroom activities and improve the quality of their homework assignments. So far, the established praxis had been to have students first write an essay and then have them present it in front of the class. As many of these essays were plagiarised, I decided to try it the other way around. The students were told first to study a series of recommended sources, then do their presentation and afterwards write a report about it. The supposition was that the pressure of having to perform in front of their fellow students would make them more concerned about the material they had to present in their presentation and written report. At the same time, through presenting articles to their classmates, students would help their peers to understand the material. The goal was to make the students feel that the course belonged to them and that by sharing and exchanging ideas all the members would benefit from it.

<sup>1</sup> Besides the Faculty of Humanities there are the Faculty of Management, the Faculty of Education, the College of Health Care, Turistica - College of Tourism, the Science and Research Centre and the Primorska Institute of Natural Sciences and Technology.

<sup>2</sup> In the academic year 2005-2006 these were history, cultural studies and anthropology, geography of bordering areas and Slovene studies, but being a new university more specialities are being introduced every year, so it is believed that soon also the first year students will be split according to their specialities. These are rather heterogeneous learner groups ranging from beginner to advanced language learners.

The semester was divided into three sessions with three main topics. These were: the EU, rhetoric and politics, and religious issues. For each session I supplied the critical literature which consisted for the most part of articles taken from the *Economist* magazine, but I strove to also include some original sources that I thought my historians-to-be should be familiar with: historical records, original audio recordings and video material. The chosen themes (namely politics and religion) were deliberately 'hot' themes as my primary intention was to provoke students' involvement or at least foster discussion. All the students were supposed to read all the texts according to a given schedule, and take turns presenting them in front of their fellow students. As this was a group of 27 students they had to split into groups of three or four.

Besides the mark gained on their writing and oral exam (60%), the final grade was also the result of the students' active participation (10%) in class which together with the research project (15% written report, 15% oral presentation) made a total of 40% of the final grade. The oral presentations were marked both by me and their fellow students: I chose three students at random to assist with the marking. Generally, the students took the assessment of their colleagues very seriously, and this is confirmed by the fact that there was usually just a slight difference between my marks and theirs. For instance my average mark for presentations was 7.7407 while the students' was 8.037 out of ten.

Furthermore, I expected the reports to be better written and that the students would find writing them easier. The students were invited not just to write a summary (they were informed that a summary would be given at best just a pass mark) but to explore a certain aspect of the given material in their own way, using their own knowledge. Out of a total of 27 reports (all submitted before the deadline!), just two students had problems with plagiarism (one managed to correct and improve the report, the other could not be made aware of the gravity of her wrong doing), while six students got just a passing mark. The average mark for the reports was 11 out of 15.

## Student feedback

To understand how my students felt about the course I gave them an anonymous questionnaire. It was submitted at the end of the academic year and 21 students out of 27 responded. It was divided into two parts. In the first part the students were given a series of statements about the course, about myself, about the assessment and about their attitude during the course and they were asked to mark whether they strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), are undecided (U), agree (A) or strongly agree (SA) along a Likert scale (Mills, 2003). The second part was a series of open-ended questions. The students were asked what they

liked/disliked about the course, to list the three most important things they had learned, what they would prefer to see done differently, if the course met their overall expectations, and finally to write their suggestions for improvement.

The questionnaire revealed that the majority (0SD,4D,6U,7A,4SA) of the students thought the course was specific enough, and that the readings were interesting (1SD,5D,4U,8A,3SA), although only 19% found the course enjoyable (2SD,7D,8U,3A,1SA) and 28% found it intellectually stimulating (3SD,4D,8U,6A,0SA). Almost half of the students (1SD,3D,8U,7A,2SA) agreed that the course belonged to the students and they felt as part of a community while in the classroom (1SD,6D,4U,4A,6SA). More than one third said the exercises were appropriate and useful (1SD,4D,8U,5A,3SA) and that the workload was not excessive (0SD,4D,9U,5A,3SA). However, none of the students strongly agreed that his or her effort in the semester had been to the best of their ability (4SD,5D,7U,5A,0SA). While no significant findings emerged from the students' evaluation of their improvement in reading (3SD,5D,6U,7A,0SA), and writing (4SD,4D,6U,7A,0SA), a pleasant surprise was to see that almost half of the students thought they had improved their listening skills (3SD,3D,5U,10A,0SA), while the question about speaking skills showed a stronger polarisation among the five rankings. (3SD,6D,5U,5A,2SA)

While just six students had occasional problems understanding the texts, for the majority of students the writing of the report did not represent a problem as only two students had difficulties writing the report (it would be interesting to know if these were the same students that committed plagiarism). More than half of the students (1SD,3D,6U,7A,4SA) said they worked hard on their oral presentations, while 38% (1SD,4D,8U,6A,2SA) found the preparation for it to be challenging. These results confirm my supposition that the students made more effort and placed greater importance on the presentation than on the writing of the essay. Performing in front of the class is perceived both as an important experience and as a formative opportunity. However, when we compare these answers to the following statement ("I understood better when the articles were presented by my fellow students"), we come to realise that for the majority of the students the presentations did not provide new insights into the articles (4SD,7D,4U,6A,0SA) even though for almost half of them it was not difficult to follow the presentations.

That the oral presentations represent an important part of the course is also revealed by the students' answers to the open-ended questions. The most common answers are that they liked the presentations, the topics and the reading/speaking activities. The students felt that not only have they improved their specialist vocabulary, but also developed new methods of critical

thinking. Moreover, some of them believed they had improved their listening skills by paying careful attention to what other people say.

## Conclusion

The research revealed that the objectives of the course have been only partly fulfilled. While the ESP course was on the whole specific enough, the overall results revealed that reading and writing activities need to be enhanced. Triangulation of the different sources (the students' questionnaire, the reports, the marks) revealed that the students in general were more concerned with their presentations than with the writing of the reports. There was a general improvement in the students' reports compared with the previous (first) year's, especially in terms of structure and cohesion, although a lack of originality and superficial research were still noticeable problems. If in their answers the students wrote that they have learned to be more critical, now a step further should be taken in order to help them to be not only critical listeners and readers but also writers. Students should be taught how to combine critical reading with critical writing. Skills like effective note-taking, reading for key words and core information, summarising and paraphrasing need to be given even greater emphasis so that the students may learn how to incorporate the information they gain from sources into their own writing without plagiarising. In other words, they should become able to produce new original writing by effectively evaluating the ideas expressed in other texts.

Nevertheless, the presentations and the way they are carried out can also be improved. The students' attention can be better focused if all the students are included in the assessment process by making everyone assess everyone else and then randomly choose three marks. Hopefully in this way, the occasional noise in the classroom will also be reduced. Additionally, more importance should be given when calculating the final mark to active participation in class in order to have a ratio of 50% (work during the year) to 50% (final written and oral exams). If the system of presentations proved to be an effective tool for practising public speaking and listening skills, the students had problems in organising their group work. If, on the one hand, student autonomy and decision-making have to be encouraged, on the other, teamwork could be enhanced by asking the students to provide minutes of their group meetings and to report on the different stages of their projects. On the whole, as I have already realised with the students' presentations and with their assessing their fellow students, if the students are given the freedom to decide what and how they want to do, they will do it with more

enthusiasm and involvement. This goes hand in hand with making the students aware of how they as autonomous learners should become active agents in the learning process.

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# ACTION RESEARCH AS ATTITUDE: WHY ACTION RESEARCH MATTERS, AND WHO IT MATTERS TO<sup>3</sup>

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I entitled my talk, *Action research as attitude*, for two reasons. First, I do think that attitude is fundamental to action research. Second, I wanted to draw attention away from the idea that action research is fundamentally a procedure, the well-known *action, observation, reflection planning* cycle, which is not to say that that is not important.

Attitude, then. Attitudes are personal things. So, this is personal. I am reasonably comfortable with that. I hate to see 'the teacher' reduced to a collection of technical functions. I think it is important to remember that when we talk about a teacher, we are talking about a whole person, who teaches. I feel the same way about a researcher, and also about a teacher-researcher, which is the kind of person I'm talking about here.

When I say 'attitude', I am thinking in part of how I felt when I was reading for my doctoral studies. I was reading about research into reading itself and reacting against the axioms that that research was built on. We know, for instance, that people understand a text better if they know something about the subject of the text. So, the argument ran, if you want to measure accurately how much different people understand of a text, it is necessary to select, or create, a text on a topic that they know nothing about, otherwise, their differentiated knowledge will interfere with your results. Similarly with people's interest in what they are reading. So, for the same reasons, it is necessary to select or create a text that will not engage the readers' interest. And underlying these scientific principles was the big assumption that if we can strip away all the unfortunate, distracting humanity that is tied up in issues such as previous knowledge and actual interest, we will be able to do proper research and get at the basics of what reading itself really *is*. And my response was, 'But once you have stripped away all that unfortunate humanity, what you are investigating is not *reading* at all. Reading is all *about* previous knowledge and present motivation,

about *wanting to know*, in one way or another. And I questioned the kind of theory that such research could produce, and was annoyed that so much of what I read as a teacher and as a researcher consisted of this kind of stripped-down theory, followed by usually brief, and all too frequently professionally uninformed, statements on 'implications' and 'applications' for teaching. (Please note that I am not here looking to build an attack on anyone's research, or style of research, or preferred form of contribution to human knowledge. Since those days, I hope I have managed to develop a broader respect for different forms of contribution. I am telling you about my attitudes to research and where they have led me.)

At the same time, I am also thinking of the way I have long felt about the 'recipes' approach to teaching and teacher development, according to which a guru figure produces an activity, a task, an exercise, or dozens of activities, tasks and exercises, perhaps even hundreds of activities, tasks and exercises, for 'tired teachers' to use. The underlying axiom here is that a return to the guru will always provide more activities, tasks and exercises, so that a deeper understanding of what is going on is not required. And anyway, that would just be 'theory', and we can all agree on how useless that is — see previous paragraph. Here, my feeling was that if these activities, tasks and exercises led to learning for real people in real contexts, I wanted to know why that was. My attitude was that it was foolish to demonise a word such as *theory* and leave it in the hands of people whose interests were at best adjacent to mine. I wanted the kind of theory that actually accounted for the data of my experience that helped me understand what was going on and what my role in it was. That kind of theory was not going to be found; it would have to be made. And made in terms that made sense to those who had to deal with the experience itself (e.g. Ilangoan & Hill 2002).

The space between these two extremes — trying to apply someone else's theories, or trying to use someone else's procedures — is what I take to be the terrain of educational action research. As I have argued at more length elsewhere (Edge 2001: 6), the thinking teacher is no longer perceived as someone who applies theories, but as someone who theorises practice. And arising from that theorisation is not only increased awareness that leads to improved practice, but also the development of new kinds of knowledge: at the very least, the kind of practical wisdom that arises from the actual experience of action and reflection on action; at the very least, the kind of procedural knowledge that allows a person to continue learning from changing situations; at the very least, the kind of developmental knowledge that arises from working to formulate what it

<sup>3</sup> In this edited version of my talk, I have kept to the core message of the title, leaving out more procedural discussion and examples from the field.

is that one has learned, and working to communicate it to other people.

The action researcher works with the specifics of a situation and draws relevant information from the established educational literature. The crucial point is that the discourse has changed direction, from one of theory/application to one of exploration/theorisation. In the discovery and articulation of local understandings, educational procedures can be improved (the contribution to practice) and theorised (the contribution to theory).

There is another important element to this attitude, and this is quite difficult. The attitude is not (just) one of wanting to know, but of wanting to make things better. Classically, scientific research is thought of as the search for truth, absolute truth if possible, relative truth if necessary. Given the choice (if we can imagine it) between the True and the Good, I believe that science must choose the True. This is what gives us nuclear weapons, poison gases, cloned babies and other phenomena that we might not choose to have as such, but which arise from what we found ourselves able to discover. By the same token, of course, we also have untold breakthroughs in medical science, in human comfort, and in basic understanding of the world in which we live. That is the deal: we seek to establish the True and, having done so to the best of our ability, we use that knowledge for good and bad.

This relationship is not found in action research. I do not mean to say that action researchers deliberately turn away from the True, but it is important to realise that the kind of truth that action research seeks is already committed to the Good. The ruling attitude is *not*:

We must first find out what is true here so that we can then make things better.

It *is*, rather:

Here is our attempt to make things better. What can we learn from it?

As I said, I find this a difficult area, and a philosophically abstract one but, when one is invited to speak, or write, on occasions such as this, I thought it would have been churlish to avoid it. This is a part of the attitude, I suppose, arising from the same desire NOT to take large-scale theories and apply them to one's little experience, but to work to understand one's experience and to follow that effort onward and outward to where it leads, not being embarrassed by the bigger issues that may crop up.

With regard to my title, I have tried so far to deal with the attitude that I see as fundamental to action research, as well as with reasons why I find the approach important. I now need to say something about the people involved

and, with reference to our overall theme, what challenges I see us facing.

Who is action research important to? Well, it is important to people who get fired up by the idea of theorising practice, rather than formulating abstractions, or applying theories, or following recipes. In terms of challenges, it is worth noting that there is an affective side to this, in that one can end up feeling isolated from both the communities that one sees oneself as belonging to: neither 'theoretical enough' for the academics, nor 'practical enough' for the teachers. The reward is to be found in the company of a like-minded minority of colleagues who lived straddled across the same borderline. The challenge is not to mind the continuing sense of partial isolation from where you thought you might be at home, and not to believe that you can change long-standing arrangements in the scale of one working lifetime.

Other challenges for an overlapping set of people relate to teacher educators. One danger here is that action research becomes simply another topic to lecture on, to have teacher-trainees write essays about, or even to have teachers carry out and be assessed on. The challenge is not to let this happen. Teachers required by teacher educators to take part in action research into their practice should know that those teacher educators are actively engaged in action research into *their* own practice. The teacher educator only as voyeur *into*, rapporteur *on*, and beneficiary *of* the action research of others presents a real challenge, I find. The same goes for people who write articles and books on the subject, or give talks.

A second challenge for teacher educators, and especially those committed to involvement in action research, is not to over-emphasize the centrality of action research to teaching. In teacher education, we spend a lot of energy emphasizing that there are many different ways of learning, and that students will employ a variety of them in unpredictable mixtures. Because of this, there is no 'best way' of teaching that can be abstracted in the absence of particular students in specific contexts with specific teachers. Why then, should we now want to insist that there is a particular approach to being a teacher that floats free of these admonitions? Especially when the approach we are talking about will clearly involve extra effort over and above, for example, the careful preparation of lessons based on a good textbook and the sensitive provision of feedback and correction to one's students?

The majority of societies with which I am familiar do not pay teachers particularly well or, any longer, hold them in particularly high esteem. Governments tend to prioritise bureaucracy-laden, centralised control, and private sector schools tend to prioritise profitability. If we

insist on making an action-research orientation an integral part of what a teacher *is* and *does*, then we risk making rods for our own backs, as our masters demand increasing commitment to complement their increased control and enhanced bottom-lines. The challenge is to make an action research orientation accessible to those teachers who want to take it up, while simultaneously convincing politicians and business people that more autonomy and more investment in research and development are what they want to provide for the teachers under their control. Some challenge.

I do believe, however, that it needs to be that way round: action research thrives on the involvement and excitement that it can generate, but involvement and excitement cannot be mandated, and without them we risk only imposing extra burdens on an already strained workforce.

I see action research as a way to live in those times of our life when we are feeling strong enough to face the challenges, in those times of life when, sitting in a theatre, we feel a deep response to the impassioned character who calls out:

It's wanting to know that makes us matter;  
otherwise, we are going out the same way  
we came in. (Stoppard 1993)

Or when we nod to the resonance within ourselves as we hear Joni Mitchell (1976) sing:

People will tell you where they've gone,  
They'll tell you where to go,  
But till you get there yourself, you never  
really know.

Or when we smile ruefully at Wilson's reinterpretation of the Icarus myth, not as an exemplification of punishment for foolish pride, but as defining an important part of what makes us whole people: the desire to know how far and how high we can go 'before the sun melts the wax in our wings' (1999: 5).

You would, of course, need to choose your own examples. If you can, then you know what I mean.

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# QUALITY IN ACTION RESEARCH FOR CLASSROOM DEVELOPMENT

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## Action research is a mode of reflective professional action

Action research is no new invention, rather it is happening every day in good educational practice (Elliott, 1991; Somekh, 2000; Altrichter et al., 2007). It is another term for reflective practice. Many professional practitioners conduct action research without dubbing it so; they guide their work according to a personal view of what is of educational value, reflect on their everyday practices in the light of this background and try to develop them. And they use data and feedback, e.g. observations, conversations with clients and peers etc., to check the quality of their services.

At the heart of action research lies the question of how quality practice is achieved. The traditional concept of professional practice occurs in this sequence. First, scientists develop general knowledge in basic research. Then professional practitioners acquire this knowledge during their university education (the longer the better) and finally, if a problem should occur in their professional practice, they skilfully apply their general knowledge to solve the problem. This has been dubbed 'the model of technical rationality'. It presupposes undoubted aims and stable institutional contexts. These demands may be met by simple and repetitive tasks; the majority and the most relevant situations of professional practice are, on the contrary, complex, uncertain, ambiguous, and unique. Because of these complex situations (not because of the repetitive ones) professional expertise is called for (Schön 1983: 39).

What is the alternative? Schön (1983) analysed case studies of work from different professions to formulate an 'epistemology of practice'. He suggested that practical

action in complex situations is characterized by the following features:

- *Problem definition:* In complex situations practitioners cannot just apply knowledge for problem solving, because the 'problem' as such is not unambiguous. It has to be constituted through the non-technical process of 'problem definition'. Only in this manner are preconditions for the operation of technical expertise created.
- *Evaluation and development:* The first attempt at problem definition does not usually yield the perfect solution. Successful practitioners monitor their actions, their results and at the same time gauge the appropriateness of their initial problem definition. By analysing their action experiences they try to develop a more appropriate problem definition.
- *Development of 'situated knowledge':* Successful practitioners have the competence to extract 'situated knowledge' from their action experiences. They build a wealth of specialised knowledge which helps them cope with the challenges of their professional field in a competent, situation-specific way.

## Quality in action research

In the following sections I shall pinpoint what I consider the main quality features of action research which may be derived from the concept of reflective professional practice. I shall start by quoting data which is virtually 'archetypical' for the action research tradition:

*The Humanities Curriculum Project (HCP; see Humanities 1983, Stenhouse 1975) aimed to expose 14 - 16 year old students to controversial social topics (e.g. war, race relations etc.). The basic teaching strategy of the project included two central ideas: short provocative pieces of information (excerpts from literature, newspapers, graphs etc.) were provided as hand-outs to illustrate different points of view and to stimulate students' discussions. The teacher was to be relieved from the task of providing information but rather was to concentrate on facilitating the students' discussions as a 'neutral chairman'.*

*One day John Elliott, who was a member of the HCP-team, was asked to call on a school because of problems with the written material. Students would read the hand-outs but no discussion entailed. The teacher assumed that students did not understand the information because it was too difficult. To solve this problem the teacher started to abandon the HCP-teaching strategy and to explain the content of the hand-out by mini-lectures. When Elliott heard this story he suggested collecting some more information in order to improve the*

understanding of the situation. The teacher selected six students who had the following conversation with Elliott:

Interviewer (I): Well, what do you think of this new approach?

Student (S): I don't like it!

I: What don't you like about it?

S: We don't like these materials, these documents, we don't like them.

I: So, what don't you like about them? Are they too difficult to read?

S: Oh, no, oh, no, we can read them.

I: Can you all?

S: Of course, we can read them.

I: So, what's the problem?

S: The problem is we disagree with what they say.

I: Oh, good. You actually disagree with what they say?

S: Yes!

I: Well, then you can express your disagreement in the class.

S: Oh, no, you can't!

I: Why not?

S: The teacher would not like it.

I: Well, why wouldn't the teacher like it?

S: Because the teacher agrees with what these documents say.

I: How do you know that the teacher agrees with what these documents say?

S (looking very surprised at the interviewer because of this stupid question): The teacher wouldn't give you these documents in the first place if he didn't agree with them, would he?

I am using this vignette to exemplify and discuss our quality criteria and also to indicate by what strategies action research aims to enhance quality of practitioner research.

## Action Research is characterised by confronting data from different perspectives

What can we learn from this story? Practitioners are theorising anyway in problematic everyday situations. Confronted with a problem (with a discrepancy between expectations and reality), the teacher reacts with an 'explanation', a 'theory' – '*The teaching strategy does not work because the hand-out is too difficult*'. Secondly, this little story illustrates that practical theories which do not take into account the interpretations of all relevant social actors concerned in the situation are in danger of resulting in flawed 'problem-solving' actions. For example, the teacher's strategy of giving mini-lectures to explain the hand-outs wrongly assumed that the students' perception of the situation was identical with his teaching intentions. If he had put this action strategy into practice it most likely would have reinforced the students' perception that '*the teacher agrees with the hand-outs*'. That would not only have failed to enhance student discussion but also made it increasingly difficult for all parties to understand the situation.

Action research acknowledges that social reality is constituted by the contributions of different actors who all hold, sometimes differing, interpretations of what is happening. When a practitioner formulates a practical theory about an issue concerning their practice, it also has to be, implicitly or explicitly, a 'theory about theories', a theory about the different actors' views about the same social situation.

Practically, action researchers tackle this problem by the following strategies:

- *Collect views other than your own.* The views of all relevant parties concerned by the situation under research must be represented in the 'practical theory'. Interviewing the students in our example obviously improves the chance that some reasonable action strategy might be derived from the 'practical theory'.
- *Confront different perspectives and use 'discrepancies' as a starting point for the development of your practical theory.* For example, the discrepancy between students' and teacher's perceptions begs the development of some action to reconcile them. Otherwise it would be impossible to successfully teach the HCP strategy.
- *Make your research a collaborative project.* If social reality is constituted by the contributions of different actors, constructive development of social reality must not bypass (however benevolently) the participants' reasoning but must eventually be a collaborative task.

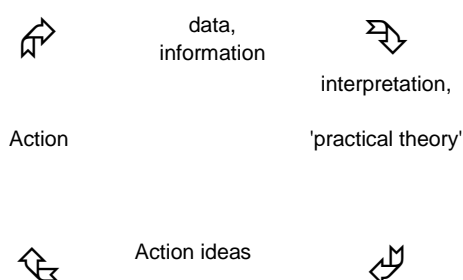
## Action Research is characterised by closely and iteratively linking reflection and action

Action research does not replace the practitioners' thinking by expert knowledge but rather aims to build on it and to support it. In our HCP example outsiders do not come in to tell the practitioner 'how it is done'. Rather they support the practitioners in their reflections on their own situation, e.g. by helping them view the situation from different perspectives. The students' perspectives were not 'new information' brought to the situation from outside; rather they were, in principle, available *in* the situation, but access was difficult or too little attention was being paid.

A characteristic of traditional empirical research is that research and development (reflection and action) are personally and institutionally separated. Action research rejects this methodological separation (Altrichter 1990). It follows that it has to build its strategy consistently on the advantages of the integration of action and reflection. Practically, this means that action researchers should:

- link action and reflection closely, and try to express the 'cycle of action and reflection' (see Fig. 1) in the research design. Researchers should looking back on their practice and try to develop an explanation for what happened, i.e. a 'practical theory' (in our example *students don't discuss because the hand-outs are too difficult*). From any practical theory ideas can be developed for subsequent action (e.g. *teach information via mini-lectures*).
- emphasise 'iterativity' of research: The cycle of action and reflection does not stop with the development of new ideas for action. Under pressure to act, practitioners have to put these ideas into practice and will experience the results of their action directly. This should be a good reason for continued reflection which may lead to further development of the 'practical theory'.

Fig. 1: The cycle of action and reflection



## Action Research incorporates reflection and development of values

The HCP teacher tried to develop his 'practical theory' in a way that allowed him to derive a more efficient teaching strategy. Even if he had been successful with his new teaching strategy, he would have had to ask himself what happened to his original educational intentions (those which made him adopt the HCP strategy), which educational values his new teaching strategy promoted, and whether he was happy with those values.

A teaching strategy is an attempt to realise an educational idea in a concrete interactional form. As educational ideas always incorporate educational values, it does not make sense to separate instrumental questions ('how can I promote learning?') from intentional ones ('what kind of learning am I promoting thereby?'). Thus, by researching an issue of our practice we reflect on both the effectiveness and the educational value of the teaching strategies employed.

## Action Research is characterised by holistic, inclusive reflection

Reflective practitioners cannot content themselves with checking whether their actions were instrumental in achieving the objectives they were aware of from the start. Rather, they also have to examine whether or not unexpected side-effects result from their actions, e.g. if the HCP teacher had gone ahead with giving mini-lectures, unwanted student perceptions could have been reinforced as an unintended, unwanted side-effect.

Reflective practitioners do not evaluate their practical experiments just by asking 'did we achieve the ends we set ourselves?' Rather they ask 'do we like what we got?' (Argyris et al. 1985: 218). This seemingly vaguer question accounts for the fact that practitioners hold professional responsibility for the whole situation and cannot ignore any side-effects they did not happen to anticipate.

## Action Research implies research and development of one's own self-concept and competency

In our HCP story, the teacher finds that he had misjudged the situation. Maybe, his new practical theory (*students understand the hand-outs but they don't want to dispute them*) calls for teaching strategies which are not readily available in his routine repertoire. Action researchers do not research the practice of people other than themselves. It follows that, by investigating a situation they themselves are deeply implicated in, they also scrutinise their own

contribution to this situation and, consequently, their own competency and self-esteem. This is one reason for the fact that some action researchers undergo phases of anxiety, uneasiness and feelings of being 'de-skilled'.

Practically, action research aims to counter such feelings via the following strategies:

- *Peer collaboration and consultation by 'critical friends;'*
- *'Control of research' by the persons directly affected by it* Stenhouse (1985) argued that responsibility for and control of the course of practice-oriented research should rest with those persons who are directly concerned with it and who have to live with its effects in their daily practice, and not e.g. with 'external consultants' (p.57);
- *Starting small and developing the research gradually:* It is reasonable to start small but to 'think big' (in the sense of being aware of more complex connections and repercussions of one's selected issue) will help to gradually develop the research.

## Action Research is characterised by inserting individual findings into a critical professional discussion

Action and reflection gained a new quality in the initial HCP example because the teacher was prepared to discuss his experience outside the walls of his classroom. Action research encourages practitioners to formulate their experiences and practical knowledge in order to share them with fellow professionals, clients and an interested public. Participating in a professional discussion is a means of validating and developing the insights of individuals. It makes them accessible to other professionals and broadens the knowledge base of the profession.

Practically, opportunities can be presented for the cross-reading and critical examination of individual case studies, and for relating findings and examining them for overlaps and contradictions in order to establish the range and the conditions of their validity. Also, attempts can be made to provide opportunities to publish practitioners' case studies and to organise peer in-service training in which action researchers share their experiences.

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# A CASE STUDY OF MANAGING CHANGE AND INNOVATION IN THE ELT CLASSROOM

## AN EVALUATION OF THE PROCESS AND A REFLECTION ON LEARNING TO CHANGE.

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### Introduction

This case study concerns the introduction of a new syllabus on the Intensive English programme at Nottingham Trent University, during which time I was both a teacher on and leader of the programme.

### Context

#### The Course

The course was a full-time English language programme consisting of twenty-one hours of contact time per week.

#### The Reasons for the Change

In 2001, a newly devised topic-based syllabus had been commissioned. This move was influenced by several factors, not least of which were a British Council inspection and the academic team leader's vision of a less classroom-based, more learner-centred syllabus

using authentic materials and providing greater contact with the 'real world'. The syllabus had not been received enthusiastically by the staff and though, initially, a few had made some attempt to integrate it into their practice, they had soon reverted to their old familiar methods and materials.

The following year, with a move to a larger, better equipped language centre, an intake of new teachers and a core of staff on contracts, there was a renewed attempt to implement the syllabus. The team, however, were not committed to the change and uncertain of how to proceed. It was at this point that one teacher 'took the idea and ran with it', transforming the topic-based syllabus into one that was project-based. The use of projects then led to a further change in evaluation from formal class progress tests to portfolio-based assessment.

### Motivation

In 2003 I became programme leader, line managed by the academic team leader, and I felt strongly that the attitudes of the teachers and students towards the new syllabus had become more positive. I set out to test this hypothesis and if it were true, to discover what factors had influenced this change.

As my research developed, the objectives evolved. It became clear that widening the focus of the research would add another dimension to the study and better inform my practice. Therefore, my research came to include the teachers' attitudes, the management of the change, the evolving syllabus, and its implementation.

### Literature Review

#### Change vs. Innovation

Innovation is regarded by some as something planned and desired (Nicholls, 1983; Stoller, 1997). Change, on the other hand, is seen as a natural and predictable response to evolving needs (Stoller, 1997). Figure 1 illustrates the innovation and change involved in this study.

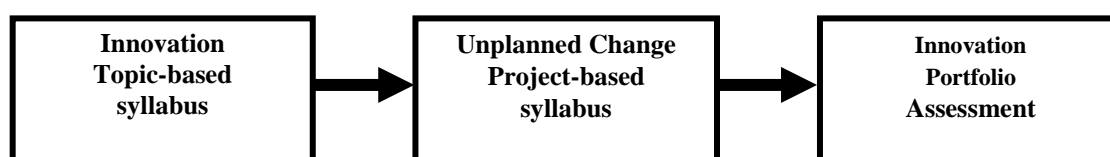


Figure 1. Change and Innovation

The types of change can be placed on a continuum from discontinuous through incremental to continuous. Discontinuous change involves a radical departure from past practice and, often imposed from outside, tends to be traumatic (Kennedy and Edwards 1996), while continuous change implies a commitment to doing things differently. Incremental change, as defined by Kennedy and Edwards (1996), suggests doing something better rather than differently. The move from a topic-based to a project-based syllabus could be viewed as incremental, as a step towards continuous change, or simply as an

unexpected outcome in the 'uncontrollably complex' process of change (Fullan 1993:19).

In this study, the teachers made little contribution to the initial innovation, but in the introduction of portfolios teachers were very much in control and more actively involved. This might be seen as an example of how discontinuous change can be transformed into continuous change through teacher participation (Kennedy and Edwards 1996) and action research. Figure 2 illustrates the evolution of change and the types of change involved in this study as I have understood and applied these notions.

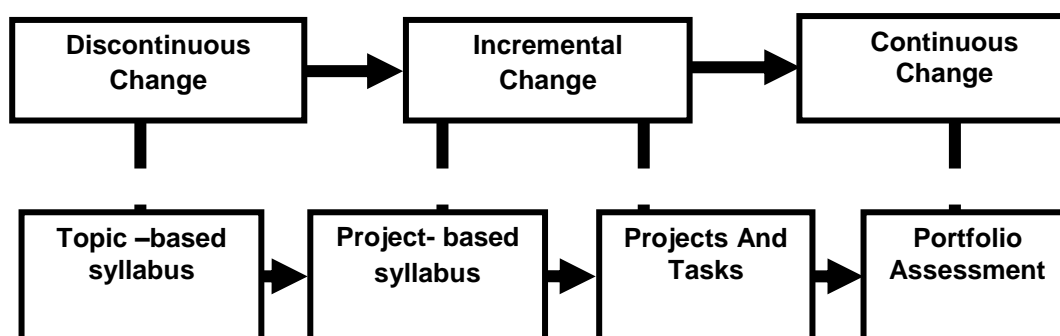


Figure 2 Types of Change and their correspondence with this study

## Attributes of a successful innovation

Among the recognised attributes are dissatisfaction with current practice (Kelly, 1980; Rogers, 1983; Hutchinson, 1991; Stoller, 1997); trialability, the opportunity for experimentation (Rogers, 1983); feasibility, the practicalities of the innovation and acceptability, the degree to which teachers' existing beliefs are consistent with the change (Kelly, 1980).

Much of the literature also highlights the importance of ownership and gains and losses. Gains might include more money and professional or academic development while losses could be anxiety, heavier workload or loss of self-esteem (Kennedy 1988). Ownership, the degree to which participants feel that the change belongs to them or feel engaged with the ideas, is widely acknowledged as crucial to the likelihood of an innovation establishing itself, and the answer to resistance. (Kennedy 1988; Young and Lee 1984).

## Research Tools and Methodology

My informants were teachers on the Intensive English programme and I set out to investigate their reaction to the change. Research tools included questionnaires, interviews and stimulated recalls. First, the questionnaires were piloted with a small number of

participants and on the basis of informal feedback; questions were modified or deleted as appropriate. The revised questionnaires were sent to twelve teachers, seven of whom participated in the interviews and stimulated recalls.

Semi-structured interviews seemed to be the most appropriate format for this case study, providing me with a degree of control without limiting the range of responses. Stimulated recall is a methodology where support for the informant is provided in the form of an audio tape, video recording or paper copy. In this instance, the teachers were invited to select a project that they had completed and reflect on the experience. Reference to the actual lesson plan facilitated their powers of recall, enabling me to probe their feelings and thought processes in more detail and pick out recurrent themes or anomalies with the information gathered from the interview and questionnaire.

It was impossible to be sure that responses to my questions were unaffected by the informants' view of me in one role rather than another. Overall, however, I feel that my position as a researcher was ultimately advantaged by the fact that I had the diverse roles of teacher, participant in the change, and programme leader - manager of the change.

## Findings

The findings from the various sources were collated into the following themes: 'reflections on change'; 'positive attributes of the change' (few teachers found any); 'negative attributes of the change', which included work related issues; and 'managing the change', where the key concerns were lack of control, collaboration, and materials and resources.

I would not claim that the findings are generalisable because they are particular to these individuals and circumstances. However, they may serve as an illustration of potential problems faced by stakeholders in any change and so the recommendations may have relevance to other sociocultural contexts in which change is implemented.

A major challenge of this research was to separate the issues regarding the new syllabus from the management of the change itself; factors relating to the actual change from those relating to the process of change. There is a degree of overlap between the findings and the topics that emerged from my reading.

## Discussion

The five themes which emerged for discussion were 'change and the stakeholders' role in the change', the 'attributes of a successful innovation', the 'concepts of "ownership" and 'gains and losses', and the 'management of the change'. I have included some quotes from the teachers, identified by colours, (Miss Red, Mr. Orange etc) to illustrate the points.

### Change and the stakeholders' role in the change

The teachers did not see themselves as change agents at the beginning nor did they recognize the necessity of the change. Their role in the initial change was insignificant and even the change agent was not committed to the implementation of the new syllabus.

#### Miss Red

As an ideal it was an interesting programme. I didn't have enough enthusiasm or belief that the students would accept it. I certainly wasn't leading from the front – someone took it and ran with it. It was a great relief.

### Attributes of a successful innovation

The change possessed few of the attributes recognized in the literature as necessary for a successful change. However, there was a sufficient degree of openness to different innovative practices and procedures to make the change acceptable to the majority of teachers.

### Concepts of 'ownership' and 'gains and losses'

There was no shared vision and no sense of ownership. Only one teacher saw the change as a benefit.

#### Mr. Orange:

I responded so positively. It was an opportunity to have a totally eclectic approach to learning

For most of the teachers the losses far outweighed the gains. Apart from the increased workload, many spoke of psychological strains: anxiety, stress, feelings of fear about losing their job, apprehension in the face of student negativity and resentment towards colleagues.

#### Miss Violet

Although I thought it was beneficial and useful, it was a lot more work. I just honestly thought I'm going to get the sack.

#### Miss Green

You were watching your back. I felt I'd do it badly, it would reflect on my teaching and I might mess it up and be branded.

#### Miss Red

When I have so much to do, why do I have to spend so much time on this? I felt sick; I was generally negative, unsure, and resentful.

### The Management of the Change

The teachers indicated that it was only after exchanging ideas and employing rational or reflective strategies that they began to feel confident. The lack of support, both material and psychological, was mentioned by many teachers and the initial period was very much trial and error, resulting in some disastrous experiments and consequent loss of confidence and self-esteem.

#### Mr. Brown

A lot of the time I didn't feel capable – how do we do this? We were thrown in – just because I've been teaching for x number of years doesn't mean I can teach this...

#### Miss Violet

Well .. the first ever task that I did was absolutely awful...

Evidence from the interviews made it clear that being able to share ideas and planning productively was a key element in strengthening the adoption of the change. Some respondents commented on the 'top down nature of the change', and the lack of discussion in the early stages, but this appears to have been counterbalanced by the possibilities to liaise and exchange ideas with colleagues.

### Miss Green

Things changed when I linked with another group and we would bounce ideas off each other. I could be honest, we trusted each other.

Employing coercive strategies or ignoring the resistance may have promoted compliance rather than commitment, which manifested itself in a lack of enthusiasm and confidence as observed by both teachers and students.

### Miss Pink

I can remember feeling a little bit forced into a corner.

## Recommendations

My recommendations were:

For the team leader:

- Maintain contact with the team in both formal and informal contexts.
- Foster a socially and psychologically sensitive approach to the group and individuals. Ideally, as Doyle (1999) suggests, work in physical proximity to the team.

For the team:

- Encourage an environment of continuous change and teacher participation to promote long term commitment rather than 'lip service' to an innovation.
- Create an atmosphere of trust in the team so that observations of each other's classes can take place without fear of criticism.
- Allow time for the change to be absorbed by the teachers and learners.
- Involve all teachers as change agents.
- Remember how complex change is (Curtis 2000) and the effects of change on the stakeholders or other parts of the system. I found the emotional and personal consequences of change, what Curtis (2000:7) calls 'the human cost of change', can be high.

The research conducted for this study has been invaluable to me as a teacher and as leader of the Intensive English Programme. What I have learnt has made me reflect on my roles as change agent, teacher and team member and successfully informed the management of change in this programme: the implementation of portfolio assessment.

Ironically, shortly after this research was completed, the English programme was cut.

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# REFLECTION - REFLEXIVITY – REDESCRIPTION

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## Introduction

The article has three purposes: first, to navigate the reader through the three Rs in action research: *reflection*, *reflexivity* and *redescription*, representing the three stages in the personal and professional development of a teacher; second, to encourage the reader to embark on an action research project; and third, to leave the reader with rather more questions than answers.

I do not wish to demarcate strictly between the three. Rather I see them as shading into one another at the boundaries. Why is action research important for a teacher? Because it does not bring about changes in professional practice only, but equally or more importantly it also causes changes in personal lives. Action research triggers changes in the system of values and beliefs inside and outside classrooms. This article is hence primarily about the key elements in action research for personal and professional development.

There are many definitions of reflection and reflexivity. The meaning I am referring to here is reflection as an ability to reflect upon actions and beliefs that influence teaching and change practice as a result of reflection, and reflexivity as an ability to perceive the effect of reflection on one's self. My understanding of reflection and reflexivity is going in the direction of recognising a pedagogical, but not only pedagogical, transformation or reinterpretation of our selves. It may help us authenticate who we as individuals are. At the risk of oversimplifying concepts, I have taken over the term *redescription* from Rorty, who writes (1980) that redescribing ourselves is the most important thing we can do. This article is written in the hope that it may trigger further reflection on the impact of the key elements in action research on teachers.

## Reflection

Reflection is certainly not a new concept. It is a way of thinking, an inner dialogue about teaching which looks backwards and forwards. Reflection helps us understand why we do things. It helps us question our actions and decisions. New understanding and knowledge is then exposed to continuous questioning and change. A reflective teacher is committed to change, improvement and educational values 'that are infinitely open to reinterpretation through reflective practice.' (Elliott, 1991: 50). My understanding of reflection complements Dreyfus's concept of reflection. He (1991: 79) argues:

Once our work is permanently interrupted, we can either stare helplessly at the remaining objects or take a new detached theoretical stance towards things and try to explain their underlying causal properties. Only when absorbed, ongoing activity is interrupted is there room for such theoretical reflection.

My reading of reflection would also be in line with Fay (1987: 49) who writes about 'a creature which frequently made assessments of its own assessments, which in other words, examined its own desires and beliefs and the bases on which these desires and beliefs were formed.' He goes on to say that a reflective creature must be one that is able to step back from itself. This ability is often termed the 'capacity to be self-conscious, and is often linked with the capacity to speak' (1987: 50). Fay also says that a reflective creature's assessment may remain passive if the wish to be other than it is would have no impact on one's identity.

As much as we may support reflection as an individual activity, we cannot neglect the influence of the context. Particularly important are the 'others' because we have to remind ourselves that our actions may be perceived and validated in more than one way, from more than one perspective. Reflection is not simply thinking about practice. It is deliberate, conscious, regular, systematic, critical reflection which includes *others* and involves making judgements about the credibility of our and other people's ideas and actions. Being deliberate and critical helps us understand and learn. Reflection means *responsibility* to ourselves and others to change what is not good. I thus see reflection as a process of self-awareness through reflective inquiry, but also a social process of learning that involves 'critical friends' who stand on the same 'want to learn and change' positions (Knežević, 2005: 9). In my understanding of reflection, genuine reflection can only exist when critically examined in dialogue with someone who does not see reflection, or going public about problems in teaching, as

threatening or damaging to their reputation. This dialogue brings both individuals beyond the evident, and initiates change. Each partner in the dialogue can be challenged and supported by the other. I will conclude this part with Elliott (1991: 54) who enunciates 'Action research does not empower teachers as a collection of autonomously functioning individuals reflecting in isolation from each other.' This brings us to the effect of reflection on the self.

## Reflexivity

Reflexivity is represented in theory as a process of self-examination that is informed primarily by the thoughts and actions of the practitioner. It is about turning back on oneself and involves a process of verbalisation of our thoughts as a way of examining and knowing the self. Altrichter et al. (1995) and Elliott (1991) write that reflection implies reflexivity, i.e. self-awareness. Through reflexivity, the reflective practitioner's actions gain quality and rigour. Teachers evaluate their effectiveness; they evaluate their own personal qualities as they are manifested in actions. Teachers evaluate themselves and try to improve themselves, not just for themselves as individuals, but for the betterment of themselves as professionals and for the betterment of the community. From this perspective such actions are conceived as moral practices rather than mere techniques. Consequently Elliott (1991: 52) writes about reflective practice as a 'moral science'.

Action research and the three Rs this article is addressing are embedded in social theory and philosophy. Foucault for example claims (in Kritzman, 1988: 30) that reflexivity is 'a relation of self to self – and, hence, of relations between forms of reflexivity and the discourse of truth, forms of rationality and effects of knowledge.' The subject is its own object: the subject intentionally observes itself, analyses itself and recognises itself as a domain of new knowledge. The subject experiences itself in a truth game in which it has a relation to itself. In action research therefore, the subject can be involved as an object in what Foucault calls truth games. In the process the aim is to bring to light the process and the experience in which the subject and the object influence and transform themselves. Giddens (1991: 52) also describes reflexivity as 'self-awareness' but only when grounded 'in the *continuous* monitoring of action' (1984: 3), when it is 'reflection upon the nature of reflection itself' (Giddens, 1990: 39). He goes on to say (ibid: 53) that:

The 'identity' of the self, in contrast to the self as a generic phenomenon, presumes reflexive awareness. It is what the individual is conscious 'of' in the term 'self-consciousness'. Self-identity, in other words, is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the

individual's action-system, but something that has to be routinely *created and sustained in the reflexive activities* of the individual. (italics added)

Reflection focuses on the practice, on the object being investigated. Reflexivity, at least the way it is presented here, focuses on teachers - how reflection changes teachers, where it takes them and how they see themselves in the data. Do we then engage in reflection and reflexivity for the sake of our teaching or us? Is reflexivity a form of rewriting the self? Having found the truth about ourselves and our practice, how do we now redescribe, re-interpret ourselves? Whatever the answer is, reflection and reflexivity should go beyond personal. Reflective teachers have to remind themselves that actions may be perceived and validated *in more than one way*. New understanding of the self leads to re-interpretation of new selves.

## Redescription

Rorty (1991) discusses two types of people, or rather two types of points of view, regarding the subject of 'vocabularies'. For the purpose of the article I will replace the linguistic expression *vocabularies* with *everyday activities*. The 'common sense' position is convinced that everyday activities are final and stable. The 'ironist' position is constantly doubting, revising and questioning everyday activities. Redescription as a concept is central to the ironist. To the ironist there is no 'real' description of the world; there are only *different* descriptions of the world. Redescription thus means speaking differently. It means the different possible ways a topic could be redescribed or interpreted. This notion of multiple interpretations is important. Following Rorty, I would suggest that it is important for teachers to react for, or against, their existing beliefs because this presents an opportunity to be engaged in self-creation rather than merely copying inherited beliefs. Having reached the stage of redescription, teachers are given the chance to recreate and reinterpret themselves as people and professionals alike. Not all of us however achieve self-creation. Some are merely socialised, becoming people who unselfconsciously accept the given discourse and describe themselves in words that reflect the conventions of the community. We, however, need to distinguish between redescription for private and for public purposes. Redescription for public purposes may cause pain and humiliation.

Rorty (1991: 89-90) says:

... most people do not want to be redescribed. They want to be taken on their own terms – taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk. ... For the best way to cause people long-

lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete and powerless.

The point is to let everyone have the chance of being involved in self-creation to the best of their abilities. Everyone should have a chance to 'regroup' conflicting forces within themselves. A person should reach the stage of redescription by growing through what I see as the three Rs developmental scheme. Otherwise the humiliation and pain Rorty writes about may indeed occur.

## Conclusion

I started this article by distinguishing between different definitions of reflection and reflexivity, and I then introduced redescription as a way of reinterpreting oneself. My argument is that the three Rs developmental scheme that I have addressed here accounts for the way in which a teacher progressively grows. The three Rs operate throughout the process which occurs consciously and deliberately as part of an internal and external drive toward personal and professional development. The central role of dialogue with 'significant others' in the process deepens and broadens our understanding and adds to the multiplicity of perspectives.

To conclude in a simple way: we all want to be a good teacher. New curricula, new teaching methods and new coursebooks, however, do not make a new or better teacher. What makes a good teacher is openness to learn and change, and a rejection of an 'I know it all' attitude. Action research and the three Rs are an appropriate means to become a good teacher.

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# MY CLASS AS A LEARNING ORGANISATION

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## Introduction

Despite various foreign methodologies present in modern teaching, Slovenian learners still remain passive recipients of knowledge. After twelve years spent in primary and then grammar school university students of English find this teaching situation not only acceptable but also comfortable. However, successful learning needs to be based on motivation which can thrive only when the learner is more involved in the teaching process and this way becomes more responsible for their own learning.

I teach Practical English Classes at the Department of English and my students are motivated and mostly proficient in English. However, during the year they tend to come to classes rather unprepared and many study only to pass the exam. In order to remedy the situation I decided to turn two out of four groups I teach into "learning organisations" in the 2005/6 academic year. What I expected from my students was high-quality work and readiness to change while I treated them as my equals, led and not ruled them and supported experimentation and individuality. On a very practical level that meant that all our rules were agreed upon by every member of the group, and we had regular process meetings where we discussed questions such as how far students had got with their English and where we were as a group.

After giving some theoretical background on the Learning Organisation and Quality School, I will explain in this paper how the experiment was carried out, what its strengths and weaknesses were and what results it brought in the end.

## The Learning Organisation

The concept of the Learning Organisation originated in the world of business and it got a lot of media attention in the 1990s. A Learning Organisation facilitates the

learning of its members, encourages continuous professional development, and is focused on systematic learning from experience. In order to achieve that, all members of an organisation (school, class) have to be included while the managers (head teachers, teachers) need to be personally committed to the change. "A spirit of inquiry is THE work tool, and the workplace becomes a huge adventure play-park in which you learn your way into and out of tasks and challenges." (Underhill, 2004)

## The Quality School

The founder of Quality School projects is Dr. William Glasser, an American psychologist, who is also the father of Choice theory and Reality Therapy. According to Choice Theory, every human being has four basic psychological needs: love and belonging, power, freedom and fun. According to Glasser (1998), sharing power is one of the main principles of the 'quality school'. Once the learner takes part in creating rules and becomes more active in the part of teaching that has traditionally been only meant for the teacher, they also become more interested in learning and engaging in high-quality work. This point of view is diametrically opposed to the traditional Slovenian attitude to teaching. Sabec and Limon (2001: 143) say that while the British educational system "encourages more risk-taking ... the Slovenian system promotes a more cautious and possibly less self-reliant approach to learning, accompanied by a greater fear of failure." In my research I wanted to check if it was at all possible to transfer the model of a more independent teaching and learning model into the Slovenian cultural frame.

I am also convinced that teaching and learning are enhanced if the class atmosphere is good, which goes hand in hand with satisfying students' need for love and belonging, the first of Glasser's four basic needs and another very important ingredient of a quality school'. By turning my classes into more closely-knit groups I hoped to increase the students' feeling of belonging and thereby create a more learning-friendly environment.

## The Study

Students in the first and fourth (last) grade took part in the experiment. I chose first-graders because I wanted students who had not yet been influenced by the assessment methods at our department. My fourth-graders, however, were invited to join because of the good rapport we had built over the three years I had already taught them. I counted on their support.

At the core of the experiment lay my own values. Firstly, I expect students and myself to grow as individuals during the learning process. Secondly, in order to "ground" my vision I decided to blend the elements of the

Learning Organisation with elements of the Quality School.

Since the Learning Organisation encourages learning and teamwork, we organised group process meetings (we called them pow-wows) once a month. Any disagreements or problems among group members were discussed on this level. Diaries and half-term interviews were also part of the Learning Organisation approach. To learn from personal experience, every group member wrote their own progress diary noting down their feelings, achievements and anxieties. Furthermore, during the interviews, which I carried out with each student separately, we assessed their progress and they discussed where they were at that stage.

Following Glasser's recommendations (Glasser, 1998), I decided to share power with my students; instead of my grading them, I handed that job over to them. I encouraged the students at the beginning of the course to think about what grade each wanted to have

in the end, so that they could work towards their goal throughout the year. To be able to do this, they first had to create their own criteria, which proved to be quite a challenging task. During the process of creating the assessment criteria, both first and fourth grade students initially focused on punishing mistakes instead of rewarding good points and they needed a lot of guidance to change.

## Findings

Pow-wows turned to be extremely good for the group. We sat in a circle. Students and I suggested topics we discussed at each meeting by writing questions or comments on a piece of paper and leaving them in the specially made suggestions box. Every meeting was lead by a different student, and we talked about problems one by one, deciding on certain topics by voting. My vote was worth the same as any other member's, and sometimes my suggestions were overridden by the majority vote.

All this made the students feel more united. It soon became obvious that the system allowed them to have a say in certain issues concerning my running of the course and we sometimes changed the rules or I adapted to the wishes or needs of the group. Interestingly, the newly acquired freedom in decision-making often resulted in the students being more and not less strict and demanding on themselves.

What bothered some of the students was my shot-in-the-dark approach – I had told them at the beginning of the course that even I did not know where exactly we were going in this project. When everything ran smoothly, which was most often the case in the fourth-grade group, we were all happy, while working with the first-graders I often felt as if I was getting lost. Sometimes I even

regretted having started the project. Doing something without knowing where it was going was totally new to me, but I learned a lot from the experience: no project runs smoothly all the time, the only question is whether I would have enough courage and enough trust in myself as well as in the project to openly admit the less successful sides of the experiment, too.

## The Silent First-graders

The sixteen first-grade students were a mixture of ultra-high achievers, diligent but not very successful learners, and a handful of too self-confident students who thought they could not possibly improve their English any further. The students in this group were very quiet most of the time, some of them because they were afraid to make mistakes; others were worried that they might appear as if they were boasting with their good English, while some were simply uninterested. I had a feeling that many of them felt insecure and did not really trust me as if they half-expected me to turn vengeful and punish them for their language mistakes. The feeling of anxiety came out clearly in their diaries: "In our group we talk a lot. I am not used to this kind of work, because in secondary school we talked only when we were asked. Our teacher was great. I cannot say he was not. But we did not talk at all." The atmosphere eased after six pow-wows with me constantly reminding the students that they were very quiet and that the main purpose of my subject was to give students a chance to speak. In the end they gradually started taking part in what I could then call debates.

All the students in this group had problems deciding about the final grade. They felt shy and came up with excuses such as "I'm going to have the grade I deserve" or "We were supposed to determine the grade that we wanted to have. I found it hard at first because I don't really trust my judgement when it comes to me." By the end of the course most had agreed that self-grading was a good idea.

While most students more or less readily embarked on the new project, some remained very sceptical about it. One of them remained detached from the whole group and instead of stating his doubts and views in front of everybody during pow-wows, he was more often than not absent when process meetings were on. Halfway through the course and only when explicitly challenged by me, he finally gave his feedback on the learning organisation project: "In practice this looks like a lot of talking, deciding what the rules of the group will be, activities that are not strictly helping to accomplish better understanding of the English language."

However, by the end of the year most students finally started taking a more active part in class and developed

into a friendly group. At the final pow-wow they even suggested we continued our project the following year (2006/07) because they thought they had learned a lot and that the new approach was “good for them”. They also stressed that instead of being afraid of it they themselves should have done more with the freedom they had been given.

## The Chatterboxes in the Fourth Grade

There were eighteen powerful individuals in the group who all had views of absolutely everything. Their English had always been extremely good, so they expressed themselves with ease. I was therefore surprised to learn that the group accepted the project with mixed feelings - they were particularly unhappy about creating the assessment criteria themselves. One of the students wrote the following in her diary: “I was not too happy to accept something new because we are at the end of our studies and to adjust to any new system simply takes time.” But there were also those who liked the project from the start (“I think it was about time someone realised that there was something wrong with the old ways of teaching and I really hope the project will be successful.”) or they accepted it later (“I was not very enthusiastic about the project at the beginning but now I can say that it is a positive change. It gave me a chance to see teaching from a different perspective. I also find it very useful since I shall become a teacher after I graduate.”).

This group had always been very good at debates, but the problem was that the daring ones dominated while their quieter colleagues shied away. One of my goals was to help them all learn to respect others and their opinions and to communicate in a more civilised way. By the end of the course most students had achieved their goals – they became better listeners and more careful debaters. Besides, almost all achieved the grades they had set for themselves at the beginning of the course. The strict criteria they had created made them participate in class work even more, which made this group particularly lively and successful.

## Extra work for the teacher

According to the students’ criteria, taking an active part during classes was paramount for a good grade, so I had to closely follow their progress in this area. I also kept a separate diary for each class, noting down my observations and feelings about the group and about the project itself. Later on that helped me remember the details and get an overall picture of what was happening in class. Admittedly, writing a diary regularly proved rather time-consuming although it also provided me with a chance to have a good moan when things were not going the way I had expected.

## Conclusion

Although the scope of this study would not allow for generalisations, introducing the principles of the Learning Organisation into practical English classes showed that students developed a more responsible attitude towards the subject when they took an active part in creating the rules. So far I have finished the experiment in two groups, so it is too early to claim what long-term results the change can bring. I also do not know if the Learning Organisation model could successfully be applied to classes at the primary and secondary levels.

Young Slovenians, including the students in this study, have accepted many features of western, mostly American culture, such as the Cartoon network animation, films, McDonalds with their so-called food, hi-five as a form of greeting, and so on. But all this lies on the surface of Slovenian cultural awareness. Respect for the teacher and traditional classroom behaviour reach deeper in the subconscious mind and are not so easily touched and changed. The idea of the Learning Organisation is still very new for the Slovenian culture, and is therefore approached with distrust even by young generations. In this study, it was not rejected, but it took time for the students to realise its advantages and real potential.

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# CREATIVE WRITING IN A GRAMMAR CLASS:

## AN ACTION RESEARCH REPORT

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### Introduction

This study aimed to find out if students in my grammar class would be more motivated to study English by learning how to write a very short essay. This action research project involved my class, my institution and an academic society to which I belong. In the spring semester of 2006, I introduced the writing of a 50 word essay, which is the format used in the ESSC (Extremely Short Story Competition), into “Structures of English,” a lecture class in English syntax. My aim was to give students an opportunity to express their thoughts in writing and examine if it could motivate them to use English creatively on their own. I employed an action research methodology because it would enable me to analyze my students’ essays, collect their feedback via questionnaires, and find out how the essay writing affected my students’ motivation within my weekly teaching. For ease of exposition, this paper is organized into four sections. The background of the study where a few key words are introduced; the study itself; then the findings are discussed in detail; and finally suggestions for further directions are included in the conclusion.

### Background

#### An Action Research Project

As action research is sometimes called classroom research, its principal purpose is to help the teachers to improve their teaching. In the process of teaching, they reflect on their method of teaching, observe their students in class, and revise the lesson plans for the next stage. The teachers develop themselves professionally by repeating this process of action, observation, reflection and planning while they are

engaged in teaching (Edge, 2001; Wallace, 1998). It is true that the result of an action research project cannot be directly applicable to other classes because it is obtained from a study in a specific context. However, it can be used as a tool for faculty development if the members of an institution employ this methodology systematically to improve their own teaching (Sano, 2005).

#### What is ESSC?

The Extremely Short Story Competition was proposed by Peter Hassall at Zayed University of United Arab Emirates. He has presided over annual national contests of 50 word English essays for the past few years in his country. He also encourages EFL educators of other countries to participate in the ESSC to give their own learners an opportunity to express their thoughts in English. In Japan, Nobuyuki Honna, the president of the Japanese Association for Asian Englishes (JAF AE) made a proposal to the association members to set up a Japanese version of ESSC, which started accepting on-line contributions of 50 word essays on October 1, 2006.

#### What is Structures of English?

“Structures of English” is a lecture course in the English communication course of the Faculty of Humanities. It is offered to third year students, who are supposed to be more proficient and have a good command of basic English grammar. The textbook used was Diane Larsen-Freeman et al’s *Grammar Dimensions* adapted and published in Japan. As this textbook was found to be too difficult for the students, Raymond Murphy’s *English Grammar in Use* was also used as a supplementary textbook.

### The Study

#### Participants

The participants were 73 students who were registered in “Structures of English” in the 2006 spring semester: 58 third year students, 14 fourth year students and 1 retake student.

In their first and second years, all the students are required to take eight credits of basic foreign language credits either in English or Chinese, consisting of two ninety minute weekly classes each semester. Prior to commencing their studies, students take a standardized English proficiency test sponsored by the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) in Japan. They are then divided into basic, pre-intermediate and intermediate levels according to their scores.

## Method

In the fourteen ninety minute weekly lessons in “Structures of English” lectures on the content of *Grammar Dimensions* were given and exercises from *English Grammar in Use* were provided to the students. The students were asked about their attitudes towards English in the first week of the class (Questionnaire 1). The idea of ESSC was also explained to the students and they were asked to submit their 50 word essay by the seventh week. The students’ essays were given back to them on the eleventh week with brief comments on the content. The parts that needed revision and editing were underlined to attract students’ attention. They turned in their final essays on the last lecture day. On the same day, they were asked to write what they thought about the course. After taking the final written examination on the fifteenth week, they were asked to comment on the task of writing 50 word essays (Questionnaire 2).

## Findings

### Questionnaire 1

The following questions and criteria for the answers were used in Questionnaire 1.

- Q1. Do you think you are good at English?  
 Q2. Do you like English?  
 Q3. Do you want to become proficient in English?  
 Q4. Do you think grammar is useful for communication in English?  
 Q5. Do you think speaking is more important than reading or writing?

1. Definitely No  
 2. No  
 3. Undecided  
 4. Yes  
 5. Definitely Yes

Level	no.	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
Basic	7	1.4	3.3	4.6	3.9	2.4
Pre-	13	2.2	4.0	4.8	3.9	2.6
Intermediate	18	2.7	4.4	4.8	4.2	1.9
Chinese class*	3	2.0	3.3	5.0	3.7	3.0
Total	41	2.1	3.7	4.8	3.9	2.5

Table 1 Result of Questionnaire 1 (numbers indicate the mean scores on the 5 point scale)

(\*Students who chose Chinese rather than English for the foreign language requirement)

The results show that the students in all the levels are not confident about their English (Q1). The students are moderately interested in English (Q2), very eager to become proficient in English (Q3), regard English grammar as being useful (Q4) and do not agree with the idea that speaking is more important than reading or writing (Q5).

### ESSC Essays

The following essays are samples of students’ writing. Although these essays are not free from errors, they illustrate students’ thoughts and feelings.

#### Cell Phone

Cell phone. This is everything to me. I send some e-mail, call my friends and listen to music by it everyday. When I lose it, I get withdrawal symptoms.

Yes. I am a cell phone addict. Once when I was a pupil, I didn't need a cell phone. What changed me?

#### Happening in Train

I go school by train everyday. So I play game on my cell phone to pass my time in the train. One day, I am absorbed in the game. I didn't notice arrive the station. I go past long way. I decided to do not play game in the train.

As for grammatical errors in the students’ essays as a whole, the most common errors were found in predicates. As examples 1 and 2 show, students often use modal auxiliaries independently without the main verbs.

- 1) I am happy that I can precious experience.  
 2) But I can't reality affection.

They do not often differentiate adjectives and verbs, and use *be* with regular verbs as shown in 3.

- 3) I am belong to a band.

The subject of a sentence also causes problems for students. They often use a subject which cannot be used with a particular predicate verb they choose as shown in examples 4 and 5.

- 4) The work yet never gets used. (= I never get used to my work.)

Shigoto niwa nakanaka nare nai.  
Work (topic) yet get used to not

- 5) College life is get tired, and morning is sleepy, but always happy. (=Although the college life makes me tired and I am sleepy in the morning, I am always happy.)  
*Daigakuseikatsu wa taihen de asa wa nemui kedo, itsumo tanoshii*  
college life (topic) tiring and morning (topic) sleepy though always enjoyable

The students who wrote these sentences presumably mistook “wa,” a Japanese topic marker particle for a subject marker and treated the phrases as subjects.

## Students' Written Comments and Questionnaire 2

On the last day of the course, the students were asked to write about the following; 1) the textbook, 2) handouts, 3) class procedure, 4) comments or requests to the instructor. As the reaction sheets were also used to take attendance, it was possible to identify the students. Most of the students commented that the textbook was too difficult, which could be observed in students' essays and weekly exercises. Many of them said that the exercises from *English Grammar in Use* were useful and appropriate, but some students commented that the English directions in the handouts were difficult to understand.

On the final examination day, the second questionnaire with the following questions with five-point Likert scale responses (5. Strongly Agree; 4. Agree; 3. Undecided; 2. Disagree; 1. Strongly Disagree) were given to the students. The students were asked to write their comments about ESSC or the course if they wished in question 9.

1. It was enjoyable to write an ESSC essay.
2. I was able to have more communication with the instructor because of ESSC.
3. I was stimulated by other students' ESSC essays.
4. I was given a chance to express my thoughts in English because of ESSC.
5. I became more interested in English grammar because of ESSC.
6. ESSC was too difficult for me.
7. The idea of using ESSC was good but the method of introducing it was not good.
8. I did not understand why ESSC is included in a grammar course.
9. Please write any comments on ESSC or the course.

Level	No	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8
Basic	10	3.4	3.4	3.2	3.7	3.3	4.0	2.2	2.0
PI	13	4.0	3.5	3.8	3.8	3.1	3.3	2.5	1.5
I	23	3.9	3.0	3.5	4.1	3.3	3.0	2.1	1.4
Total	46	3.8	3.3	3.5	3.9	3.2	3.3	2.2	1.5

Table 2 Results of Questionnaire 2 (numbers indicate the mean scores on the 5 point scale)

PI = Pre-intermediate, I =intermediate

Table 2 shows that pre-intermediate and intermediate students enjoyed writing ESSC essays and most of the students thought that it gave them a chance to express their thoughts in English. Basic level students thought the task was challenging for them. There was little negative response to the introduction of ESSC in my grammar course or the way it was introduced.

In spite of using anonymous questionnaires, the feedback from the students was mostly positive and there was little harsh criticism. This is probably because the students who found the class unsuitable to them dropped out during the fourteen weeks. Among the 73 registered students, 46 took the final examination, which is 63 % of the class.

## Conclusion

By looking at the questionnaire results and students' comments, many students seem to have found ESSC interesting and stimulating. By writing short essays in a grammar class, students became more interested in studying English. Although ESSC did not enhance the students' interest in studying English grammar, it made the lessons more enjoyable for them. ESSC was useful for the class because the students of different levels were able to choose topics that suited their English proficiency levels. By employing an action research method in the grammar class, the instructor was able to see her teaching more objectively and to find ways to make her class more attractive and suitable for the level of each student. In this sense, ESSC was particularly useful.

The result of this research project was reported at a staff meeting at the instructor's university, so as to introduce the idea of action research as a tool to exchange ideas among the staff and to improve the overall teaching in the faculty. JAF AE sponsors ESSC to encourage Japanese speakers to use English creatively and also uses it as a part of an international co-operative research to collect written data of Englishes used by non-native English speakers. This classroom research project is one of the preliminary experiments made by several members of this society. As for future directions, it

will be possible to broaden the scope of this action research project, as JAF AE has started sponsoring ESSC as of October 1, 2006. This experiment will not only encourage Japanese learners of English to use English but also help JAF AE members to collect a learner corpus in Japan, which will be used in making teaching materials, taking into account features characteristic of the English of Japanese learners.

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# AN ESP COURSE IN THE LIGHT OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

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## Introduction

The major changes in higher education that have occurred in recent years in Croatia are connected with the Bologna process. As a result, new educational systems and curricula were introduced. This article presents students' evaluation of a course in Medical English based on the Bologna principles. In the first part of the article the main events in the Bologna process in Europe and Croatia are presented. Then, the earlier conception of the course Medical English and the new conception introduced in the academic year 2005/2006 are described. The main aim is to show the results of action research about students' attitudes towards the new conception of the ESP course.

## The Bologna Process

The Bologna process was initiated in 1999 when the education ministers from 30 European countries signed [the Bologna Declaration](#) to establish a European area of higher education by 2010. In Berlin in 2003, it was decided that all signatory countries should introduce by 2005: two-cycle system, [diploma supplement](#) and a quality assurance system (European Commission, 2006). In Bergen in 2005, 45 European countries set directions for further development towards the European Higher Education Area to be realised by 2010 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2005). Croatia joined the Declaration in 2001 in Prague. In 2004, Croatia established the national working group for the implementation of the Bologna process in the institutions of higher education (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports in Croatia, 2006). The University of Rijeka additionally devised an "action plan for the evaluation of the quality of education in the academic year 2005/2006" (Sveučilište u Rijeci, 2005). The School of Medicine at the University of Rijeka adopted a new curriculum with

the aim to converge to a common framework designed by all four medical schools in Croatia in 2004. Major changes occurred also in the conception of the English course for medical students.

## The previous Medical English course

English was an elective course offered in the second, third and fourth semester of study in previous years. It included thirty hours of seminars each semester, ninety in total. Teaching methods were varied. The aim was to develop the skills of reading and understanding professional texts, listening, writing abstracts and reports, engaging in discussions, revising grammar units, and preparing and presenting orally a seminar paper. The course ended with a written and an oral exam.

## Medical English in the new curriculum

In the core curriculum adopted by all four medical schools in Croatia, a course of ESP is a required course named Medical English. It includes 20 hours of seminars each year in all six years of the study program. Each year students prepare a written seminar paper and present it orally to their group. A presentation prepared in PowerPoint is also possible. The topics of the seminars are linked with their professional courses. Students get the teacher's signature and 1 ECTS credit<sup>4</sup> each year after a successful presentation. Students are obliged to attend seminars regularly. The aim of the course is to promote individual work, student research and skills of public oral presentation and discussion, as well as the acquisition of medical terminology.

## Action research

In order to measure the students' attitudes towards the new conception of the course we conducted action research at the end of the semester. Action research can inform teachers about their practice and enable them to take leadership roles in their teaching contexts. Mills (2003: 4) gives a broad definition of action research – 'Action research is a systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers to gather information about the ways that their particular school operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn.' Action research is often conducted to discover a plan for innovation or intervention and is collaborative. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988: 5) in their definition of action

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<sup>4</sup> The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System is a student-centred system based on the student workload required to achieve the objectives of a programme, objectives preferably specified in terms of the learning outcomes and competences to be acquired (European Commission, 2006).

research emphasize the nature of action research as a form of *collective self-reflective enquiry*. The authors state: "To do action research is to plan, act and observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically and more rigorously than one usually chooses in everyday life" (ibid: 10). We would add that action research should not be distinguished methodologically from other forms of scientific research. It is not easy and simple but it is an objective and measurable way of enhancing awareness of the true nature of the teaching process. It may involve other teachers, principals and colleagues working collaboratively. Another aspect which can give insight into formal instruction is to introduce research on teacher cognition (Borg, 1999). It includes investigations of teacher beliefs, decisions, attitudes, as they influence their work as teachers. Borg (1999) says that in recent years educational research has focused on describing what teachers actually do in classrooms and on understanding the cognitions which underlie these practices. We also agree that teacher cognition, their "world" knowledge, can have a significant impact on the outcome of their practice.

On these principles we designed a questionnaire as a part of our action research project conducted to study attitudes towards the changes in the approach to the course of Medical English at the University of Rijeka, School of Medicine. We believe that in evaluating students' attitudes we included the conception of both the teacher and students as active cognitive participants in the teaching process.

## Materials and methods

Our study included 158 (75% female) first year medical students at the School of Medicine, University of Rijeka, Croatia. Participants filled in an anonymous twenty four item questionnaire at the end of the Medical English course in the new curriculum. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of five items regarding sex, education, previous learning of English language and self-estimated knowledge of English language. The second part was composed of nineteen questions about the new Medical English course and the teacher. The students were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with the offered statements using a 5 point Likert scale.

## Results and discussion

Regarding the first part of the questionnaire, results showed that most of the students learned English in continuation during primary and secondary education (62%). Interestingly, one third had additional classes of English or some other learning experience out of the school. Only 5% never learned English in any form. The majority of the students had learned English for five and more years (84%), probably as their first foreign

language, and 11% learned 2 to 4 years, probably as their second foreign language.

Student self-assessment can tell us about their confidence in using English and readiness to face new challenges. 52% of students estimated their knowledge of English to be excellent or very good. 35% estimated it was good and 13% thought their level of knowledge was low. The answers to the second part of the questionnaire were regrouped into eight statements and are presented here.

### English is necessary for my further study and professional work

A very high percentage of the students (83%) believed that English was necessary for their further study and work. 52% were absolutely sure and 31% were mostly sure. Negative attitude towards English was found in the 7% and 10 % who were not sure. 17% of those who were not sure, and thought that English was not necessary for their future work, evaluated their knowledge of English as good or bad.

### Presentation of a seminar paper is a useful method of learning a language

Since this course included the application of a new method in their learning experience, we wanted them to evaluate its usefulness. The results showed that only 12% of the students were absolutely sure it was useful, while 29% were mostly sure. Altogether 41% found seminar papers useful. One third (33%) of the students did not know. It was probably too early for them to form a clear attitude towards this topic. But we must not neglect 11% of the students who did not find seminars useful at all and 15% for whom it was mostly unuseful. Thus, a quarter (26 %) of the students thought that they would have benefited more from another type of course.

### Topics of seminar papers were known from professional courses

23% of the students were already familiar with the topic they chose for their seminar. A very high percentage of 51% had some professional knowledge about the topic. For 10% the topics were completely or mostly unknown. 16% of the students were unsure about it.

### Materials for the seminar paper were available

Materials for seminar papers included books, textbooks, articles, web pages, and other sources if available. All

materials had to be originally in English. For the majority of students (85%) materials were available. This result was expected since medical texts in English are widely available in written and e-form. There was again 7% of the students who had problems to find the literature.

## I prepared my seminar paper individually

We were very satisfied with the answers to this question because it told us that 89% of the students prepared the seminar absolutely or mostly by themselves. There were 7% who needed help. They were mostly students who had not learned English, or learned it for only 2-4 years, and encountered problems when preparing the seminar.

## Course requirements were too high

A positive answer to this statement was found in 8% of the students. 35% believed that the course did not require too much effort and for another 32% it was mostly not too demanding. It is interesting that 25% were unsure.

## Work with texts and grammar is a more useful method than presentation of a seminar paper

9% of the students were absolutely sure that the classical method using texts and studying grammar units was more useful than seminar papers. 23% were mostly sure of it. So, altogether a third of the students (32%) preferred the classical method of teaching. 28% estimated that work with texts and grammar was not more useful than seminar papers and 16% thought it was mostly not more useful. Therefore, 44% preferred a new conception of their course. Again, about a quarter (24%) of the students were unsure.

We surveyed the first generation of the students who had a Medical English course based on the Bologna process. Our aim is to follow up through surveying future generations, and to provide more detailed, precise results (e.g. attitudes) towards the course.

The results might have been more valid if the course had ended with an exam in the form of a test as an objective measure of students' knowledge. We could then have correlated the obtained grades with the students' attitudes.

## Conclusion

There was a very positive attitude towards the English language and awareness of its usefulness since the

majority of students (83%) thought that English was necessary for their further study and work. Another positive achievement was the promotion of students' individual work and research because most of them (89%) were able to prepare the seminar paper on their own.

We found the conception of the course appropriate to the students' abilities because the course requirements were not too high for 67% of the students. However, only 41% believed that this method was useful and they would have probably preferred some modifications in the teaching process.

It seems that higher education students also need gradual acquisition of knowledge through more varied teaching methods because 44% found seminar papers more useful than the classical method which includes text analysis, grammar units, tests and some other methods.

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