Improving the teaching of casual conversation through collaborative action research – a 'leap in the dark' or a 'shot in the arm'?

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There is, in recent TESOL literature, much encouragement for teachers to undertake Action Learning and Action Research in order to improve teaching and develop research skills. But how practical and beneficial is this in a New Zealand tertiary setting where teachers of EAL have high teaching and administrative workloads and large classes? This paper describes the process of setting up a collaborative action research/learning project in which a group of teachers of adult EAL migrants focused on investigating the teaching of casual conversation in English. It surveys the literature that informed the research both on teacher research and the teaching of casual conversation in English and examines the benefits for teaching and for research skill development, the challenges, and the constraints of such an undertaking. Two members of the group outline briefly their action research into the teaching of aspects of casual conversation and describe specific strategies that helped learners in their own classroom contexts.

Keywords: teaching casual conversation, collaborative action research, reflective practice, formulaic language.

Introduction

Recent literature in general and language teacher education notably Schon (1983; 1987) and Allwright and Bailey (1991), and more recently many writers including Richards and Lockhart (1994), Wajnryb (1992), Nunan and Lamb (1996), Head and Taylor (1997) and Wallace (1998), have promoted the benefits of empowering teachers to be in control of their professional development and curriculum development through reflection on practice, and researching their own classroom practice. The 'teacher as researcher' and 'teacher as reflective practitioner' movements have a history in the UK, USA and Australia and are strongly influential in teacher education practice at present (Zeichner, 2001).

Teachers have also been encouraged to take their reflection one step further and do action research. In addition to the typical reflective practice cycle of observe, reflect, plan, act, and observe there is, in action research, a requirement that the evaluation of interventions will be based on rigorous analysis of carefully collected data and that the results will be shared with those working in a similar context. The literature which exists to guide teachers who undertake action research includes Burns (1999), Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), Wallace (1998), and Mills (2003).

A number of researchers have also explored models of collaboration in action research. Two models which informed this project were the 'daisy model' of Melrose and Reid (2000) and the model of collaborative action research used with AMEP English language teachers with much success by Burns and others in Australia leading to the publication of the interesting Teachers' Voices series (Burns, 2000). In the 'daisy model' a group of action researchers undertake to research a particular area of interest or concern but each member (the petals in the daisy image) carries out research in their own sub-area, contributing to the central project but working independently. Members of the group include an experienced action researcher and a person who has expertise in the areas being researched. In the AMEP model, in which members of the group also undertake research in a common area of interest there are also 'experts' in the form of experienced researchers, but they remain outside the group, running workshops at strategic times to support the members.

Reflective practice has been the thrust behind much of the pre service and in-service professional education in the School of Languages at Auckland University of Technology, a publicly funded university which was until the year 2000 an Institute of Technology. This familiarity with and

expertise in the process of reflective practice, was a factor in the decision of a group of English language teachers to go a step further and undertake an action research project as a pilot. The change in the year 2000 to university status, with the concomitant encouragement for staff to develop research skills was also a factor. The members of the group were teachers of English and the common area of interest was the teaching of the language of casual conversation. In order to evaluate the project it was decided that the project itself would also be the subject of an action research project.

The design of the project reflected local conditions and constraints. There was no access to any researchers experienced in undertaking and publishing in action research in the language teaching area, nor resources (at least at first) to grant time release to teachers in order to carry out action research or the time, expertise or confidence to put together a full proposal for a Faculty or University research grant. The aim was to find what could be done with the existing shared expertise in the group within the resources available, since this is a situation typical of many language teaching institutions in New Zealand.

Description of the Project

The group was established at the end by 2002 by two senior lecturers who shared the initial tasks of undertaking literature reviews to find relevant readings in the areas of action research and the description of casual conversation in English and the teaching of this to EAL learners. One also undertook the task of applying for ethics approval. Other teachers were invited to join and initially there were eight participants although this shrank to four in the second year. Two members of the group were no longer teaching at AUT in the second year, one decided to undertake her own research project in another area and one left for health reasons. Participation in the group and attendance at meetings was entirely voluntary. The group met regularly, at least once every six or so weeks during the semester with a total of five meetings each year. The meetings were structured; they had an agenda and minutes were taken which were later distributed to the group members to check for accuracy. The meetings provided opportunities for members to talk freely about their challenges and successes and to be supported. In the second year, an effective 'buddy' system developed to provide support between meetings.

Each teacher chose a focus based on their reading of the literature, their observation of the students in their class and learner data such as self assessments. Classes ranged in level from Post-Beginner to a high level ESP class focusing on the English language needs of EAL medical professionals. Some teachers undertook one cycle of research lasting one semester of 15-16 weeks; this followed an earlier cycle of action learning (similar to action research but without the rigorous collection and analysis of data). This effectively acted as a 'pilot' for the action research cycle. Other teachers did two cycles of action research.

 The general focus chosen for the action research project was "improving the teaching of casual conversation." The words of de Silva Joyce and Slade (2000) resonated with our own experience as teachers of EAL learners at a variety of English language levels: "For learners of English, casual conversation is one of the most difficult areas to learn, and for teachers, one of the most difficult to teach" (p. XV). The members of the group were also aware that for learners of English, being able to participate effectively in casual conversation leads to greater opportunities to participate in the new society and to make new friends.

The literature in recent years has provided some valuable insights and offered some new strategies for the teaching of casual conversation; the group planned to reflect on their own strategies in light of this research and/or to trial new strategies to help learners and to improve teaching practice.

Themes in the literature which inspired this research included the following concepts: conversation as a 'highly structured activity' made up of a number of subskills (Eggins & Slade, 1997), the importance of using authentic texts (McCarthy & Carter, 2001; Riggenbach, 1999), the usefulness of semi-

scripted dialogues (Butterworth, 2000), a discourse-based approach to the teaching of speaking (Burns, 2001), the value of teaching formulaic language (de Silva Joyce & Slade, 2000; Wray, 1999), the importance of consciousness raising/language awareness (Burton, 2000; McCarthy, 1998), and the active involvement of learners in practice, what Eggins and Slade (1997) term: 'doing the task of casual talk" (p.315), (Carter, Hughes, & McCarthy, 1998).

The Elementary Class

Due to space constraints, only two of the projects are described here as examples of what was possible within the project. The first one focussed on an adult Elementary class in which most of the students had been in NZ for under two years. The teacher decided to focus on the teaching of formulaic language - also known as prefabricated chunks, lexical bundles and recurrent word combinations. Corpus-based research by Altenberg (1998) showed that these expressions actually account for about 40% and even up to 70% of the language used by an adult native speaker in conversation. It is believed by a number of researchers and linguists (Wray, 2002), that the explicit teaching of these expressions can considerably enhance fluency and learner confidence in being able to participate in casual conversation. Pawley and Syder (1983) argued that because formulaic expressions come 'ready made' they require little encoding effort thus providing the speaker with time to plan ahead and enhancing fluency, as well as making the language sound more natural. Bolinger (1976) describes it aptly in the following way "our language does not expect us to start building everything starting with lumber, nails, and blueprint but provides us with an incredibly large number of prefabs" (p.1).

The initial strategy used was to draw learners' attention to the existence of these expressions in their first languages and then to use a number of strategies to explicitly teach the English expressions. These included giving students opportunities to listen to real conversations involving 'expert users', specifically to formulaic expressions (in context), opportunities to repeat after a teacher model to develop automaticity, and practising short (semi-scripted but based on natural language) dialogues that contained these expressions. The teacher believes it is important that the dialogues are more than a statement and response and are contextualised since formulaic language is highly cultural and it is critical that learners understand the social and cultural aspects of these expressions so that they can use the language appropriately.

Of the nineteen students, all but one stated they felt they had improved and eleven said they had improved significantly. In the third week and then again in the fifteenth and final week of the course, students were given an assessment which elicited their active knowledge of formulaic expressions. A number and variety of common situations were given and students were asked to write an appropriate response. Student responses were marked as acceptable, partially acceptable or not acceptable. Correct spelling was not a criterion. The results of pre- and post- knowledge of formulaic expressions showed a significant improvement with an increase from 41% to 64% in the 'acceptable' category and a decrease from 36% to 9% in the 'not acceptable' category. See Table 1 below.

Table 1: Knowledge of Formulaic Expressions: Pre and Post-Course.
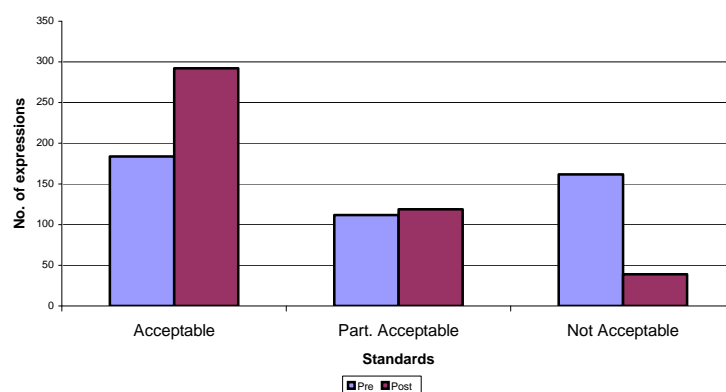
Furthermore, seventeen of the nineteen students passed the summative course assessment which tested their ability to carry out a casual conversation in English. Of the two who failed, one had poor attendance and the other was a weaker student who is now repeating the level as he had failed a number of assessments. Interestingly, the difference in the self assessment of their competence in the subskills of conversation pre- and post instruction, was not very significant. Perhaps the reason for this was because as they learned more, they became more aware of what they <u>didn't</u> know.

The teacher of this class believes this research has had a significant influence on her teaching practice; she believes that the explicit teaching of formulaic language is invaluable for learners. It is a linguistic resource that learners can make effective use of while conversing; it aids fluency, contributes to learner confidence in participating in conversation and helps with both conveying and understanding meaning accurately.

The Post Beginner Class

Another teacher also chose to work on formulaic language for two reasons: one, its importance in language acquisition, clearly illustrated in an analogy drawn by George Woolard and referred to by Hill, Lewis and Lewis (Lewis, 2000). Woolard, by drawing a parallel between instructions for a model aeroplane kit and producing language, demonstrates that "the most helpful [aid] of all is unquestionably having recognisable pre-assembled chunks." (Hill, Lewis, & Lewis, 2000). The second reason was that the teacher had recently changed from teaching upper level classes to teaching a Post-Beginner class. She had not taught this level for several years and she wished to explore a variety of methodology.

The learner group consisted of 20 adult migrant learners, mostly from China, who had been in NZ for 1 to 6 years.

This teacher, like the previous one, also drew the learners' attention to the fact that chunks (formulaic expressions - called 'expressions' with learners) are commonly used. There were two pretests; one asking learners if they thought they could use expressions, and another asking them for expressions for specific situations.   Several methods were then used to teach conversation which the learners were later asked to rank in terms of usefulness.

Results

1. **Pre and post self assessment: 'I can...'**
This self-assessment was designed for learners to consider their ability in areas that relate directly to formulaic language. It was re-administered at the end of the course and the table below shows there was significant movement from a perception of inability ('no') or intermittent ability ('sometimes') to

a perception of ability ('yes'). This is particularly noticeable in nos. 2-8, all of which deal with formulaic aspects of casual conversation.

Self-Assessment – I can (Pre and Post Teaching)

QUESTIONS I can	YES PRE POST		SOMETIMES	NO
1.Use English to meet new people	8	8		
2. Start a conversation	5	9		
3. Ask questions in conversation	2	9		
4. Answer questions in conversation	0	11		
5. Be polite in conversation	4	12		
6. Say if I don't understand	6	10		
7. Use some expressions to help me	4	9		
8. Finish a conversation	5	13		

2.   Pre and post test - Expressions

Early in the course the learners were given 15 situations and asked to write a suitable response. The question was what do you say when..? in such situations as ...you meet someone, you want to make an appointment. The responses the teacher was looking for were fixed expressions which had to be exactly correct to rate as acceptable. Any error meant the response was rated as partially acceptable. The same exercise was given to the learners at the end of the course and the results show a significant difference.

Assessment: Expressions (pre- and post-teaching)

The number of responses in the acceptable category went from 86 to 146 and in the not acceptable category from 118 to 42. It should be noted that the graph doesn't show the number of near correct

responses. Many were almost correct but only absolutely correct responses were accepted in the interests of rigour.

Ways of learning conversation

During the semester a range of methods was used to teach conversation and late in the course the learners were asked to rank 14 of them. The results show the four most preferred methods were the following, in order.

1. learning sentences or expressions

2. learning the steps in a conversation

3. listening to conversations

4. reading worksheets made by the teacher about how to use the language.

Again the learning of formulaic aspects of casual conversation dominated.

Sentences and expressions were taught as lexical chunks and the teacher started with listening and reading exercises focussing on three-part exchanges using fixed expressions. The teacher used mainly scripted conversations and asked learners to notice target language and other features such as openers, closers and small talk. Other methods were then used to provide opportunities for input and output.

The teacher found this research useful in several ways. Firstly, it allowed her to focus on teaching and the learning in a structured way. Teaching involves a lot of beliefs about what teachers think is good for students and they tend to select from reading the ideas which appeal to their own philosophies. Having concrete data to reflect upon provided support for the teaching choices made.
Secondly, collecting data about the learners' own assessments of their achievement and how they learn, and feeding that information back to the learners made the teaching and learning relationship more symbiotic. Finally, the teacher had a result which showed the value of teaching formulaic language and that it did impact on the performance of learners in conversation. The addendum to that is the importance the learners placed on getting the input in listening and reading and so the effect on teaching was not only the what but the how.

A similar project was also carried out in a High Intermediate class and the preliminary findings indicated that the deliberate teaching of formulaic language and discourse markers in authentic and semi authentic samples of casual conversation helped learners in the development of fluency and elicitation skills. It is interesting to note that all three projects found that the teaching of formulaic language facilitated the development of conversation skills and this is likely to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

Evaluating the project

Research to evaluate the project was carried out concurrently with the individual projects focusing on the teaching of conversation. The data used in this project consisted of:

1.   Detailed minutes from the six meetings held from February 2003 to June 2004.

2.   A questionnaire administered at the end of the first semester 2004.

3.   Reflections from the journal of one of the action researchers over the same period.

Broad themes were identified in the minutes and the reflections. These were then coded for theme. There is not space within the scope of this paper to give a detailed account of this research, but some of the more significant findings based on the above data are outlined below.

Group members reported major benefits for both teaching and research skills development in this type of group action research activity. For teachers there was faster professional development, through basing teaching changes and decisions not only on reflection but also on reliable data collection and analysis. In addition teachers mentioned incentives for deeper and wider reading, an increased awareness of the link between theory and practice, the development of confidence in articulating and discussing methodology and the development of more critical analytical faculties. There was also more effective and focused teaching materials development, and the generation and propagation of relevant and useful theory.

Research skills were learned in this project through individuals 'learning by doing' and also through the sharing of expertise and experience. The areas of research skill in which there was development included the handling of ethics and consent, finding a focus and planning, data gathering and analysis, the principles of triangulation and the issues and principles of validity or trustworthiness in action research.

Participants also recorded more general, but equally valuable learning about the research process including time management issues, the need for mutual support between researchers, and the benefits of doing research in a group. These benefits included the enthusiasm, stimulation, confidence which are generated and support available in a non threatening group environment, the clarification and deepening of thinking through articulating plans, challenges and results to a group and the opportunity to share readings, ideas and one ethics approval process.

'It also helped me tremendously to have to articulate what I was doing and learning and planning. This helped me to sort out some difficulties more quickly...'' (Questionnaire data p2). 'Being supported by feedback and also challenged'(Questionnaire data p2) 'the fact that we reported back and, that you could run an idea past someone else in a non-threatening environment' (Mins Dec 03 P1)

The voluntary nature of group membership was an asset, as was the fact that members of the group all saw the area of the focus as being of interest in their teaching.

However there were constraints. The tension between teaching and other professional roles and research was a common and dominant theme in the data. The biggest and most pervading issue here, comprising more than 50% (28 out of 59) of the comments about the relationships between teaching and research in the minutes of the meetings and prominent in the responses to the questionnaire, was that research takes time and 'head space' and teachers found they could not do even seemingly simple research projects to a standard acceptable for presentation without a time allocation or a willingness to spend large amounts of their own time on the project.

'Research conflicts with time for teaching/curriculum development – much bigger project than expected' 'Time on top of teaching' ' [not]having the time to plan the research properly. Lack of time to do the research as thoroughly as I would like once planned' (Questionnaire data P 2-3).

Members of this group also found they needed to develop skills in time management to manage the small amount of time that was allocated in the second year. If time release is not available for teachers projects need to be very limited in scope and be able to be spread over a long period of time.

The timing of some research processes (such as getting consent) sometimes conflicted with the optimum timing of some of the teaching processes.

'Problem of delay in consent coming through. …………….. This overlapped with the beginnings of teaching about conversation and distorted the teaching process as had to be careful not to intervene until ethics approval through and consent gained……….Not possible to do conversation teaching as it came up naturally as a result in the early stages'. (Reflective Journal 03 P1)

There was also an inevitable conflict between the role of teacher, researcher and assessor in some of the testing.

Many teachers felt keenly a lack of research experience. However this was not an insuperable barrier as one of the most inexperienced had, with support, managed to carry a project to presentation stage after 20 months in the group.

The peer support model had strengths and empowered teachers but also had weaknesses. The chief one of these arose from the fact that research skill development, though real and powerful, is often slow, random and inefficient if it only happens through contact with group members. Some, though not all, members of the group believed that some research skills might have best been developed before the research started in a focused workshop environment preferably lead by an experienced action researcher. Teachers less experienced in research might also have benefited from being given guidance on basic background reading in research methodology before the project started.

The issue of the number of and timing of meetings was problematical. It was difficult to ensure that there were enough group meetings to provide necessary support but not so many for group members to fit in with their other roles. To address this problem a buddy system in which people, as far as possible doing research with a similar focus and methodology, met to share and give support at least once a month between meetings was set up in the second year and found to be very effective and desirable. This worked better where pairs had the same or a similar focus and were teaching a class at a similar level. Meetings were more effective and useful when agendas were tight and focused on the needs of the group.

Overall this project was a positive one for the participants as these extracts from the data show:

'The reality is that you have to be prepared to in a considerable amount of time yourself, but to my mind, the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages'(Questionnaire data p2 – 3)

'……..we have, as a result of being involved, developed our awareness of this area and shared some innovative ideas about teaching in this area, it has directly informed our practice in the classroom………………………' (Mins October 03 P5)

The findings of this project are remarkably similar to those in other reports on collaborative action research projects carried out with groups of language teachers (Burns, 2003; Nunan, 2001). It was the original hope that the organisation and the project could be simpler and less demanding of resources than this, but the reality proved that for optimum results and benefits it cannot.

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