

EFFECTIVE  
TEACHING  
AND LEARNING:  
**DEVELOPMENT  
PROJECT REPORT**



Reflection and action  
in ESOL classrooms

**Melanie Cooke and Celia Roberts**



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### Reflection and action in ESOL classrooms Melanie Cooke and Celia Roberts

This is one of several linked publications arising from the five Effective Practice Studies carried out by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) from 2003 to 2007. The five studies explored effective teaching and learning in reading, writing, numeracy, ESOL and using ICT.

NRDC has produced three series of publications from the Effective Practice Studies: the research reports, published in February 2007; the practitioner guides, published in partnership with NIACE in Autumn 2007; and the development project reports, published in Autumn 2007. For titles in the first two series, please see the back cover.

These development project reports focus on specific elements of effective classroom practice in these areas:

- Oral reading fluency in adults
- Collaborative writing
- 'Bestimation': Using basic calculators in the numeracy classroom
- Using voting technology for assessment
- Reflection and action in ESOL

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## Introduction

In teaching, effective practice depends on reflective practice. This brief guide illustrates some ways in which ESOL teachers can reflect on their teaching and shows some stages they might go through if they want to carry out action research in their own classrooms. The report of the ESOL Effective Practice Study, *Effective Teaching and Learning: ESOL* (Baynham and Roberts et al. 2007) concluded that one of the most important factors in shaping ESOL practice is the 'professional vision' (Goodwin 1994) and expertise of teachers:

ESOL teachers with professional vision are reflective about their practices and work in a contingent and responsive way. They are self-critical, critical of demands that undermine their professional practice and confident in trying out potentially risky activities in the classroom. (Baynham and Roberts et al. 2007: 63)

Developing a professional vision of course requires time and experience. However, experience is not in itself a basis for development; in order to trigger a deeper understanding of teaching, practitioners need to expand their knowledge base and critically reflect on their practice. Reflective practice helps teachers to see aspects of their teaching that are not necessarily 'intuitively obvious' (Bailey 1997) and helps them make sense of the complex activity that takes place daily in their classrooms.

## Action research

Critical reflection on teaching and learning often leads to the identification of problems or 'puzzles' (Allwright and Bailey 1991) which teachers want to explore further. They often do this informally by consulting with colleagues, teacher trainers or their own learners. However they may also wish to explore their puzzle more formally in collaboration with other teachers by doing some form of action research. Action research has a long history in education and there are many definitions; see page 14 of this guide should you wish to explore this further. Some common, basic features of action research are as follows.

- Action research involves problem-posing, as well as problem-solving. It is motivated by a desire to improve and understand practice by changing it.
- Teachers explore and examine their own practice systematically and carefully using the techniques of research.
- Teachers need to collect evidence on which to base rigorous reflection.
- Action research goes through several stages of reflection, planning, action and analysis which are often cyclical, i.e. the findings of one action-research project can lead to another.

## The stages of action research

There are several important stages in action research (see Figure 1). These are represented here as rather clear-cut, but are not of course as fixed and predictable in the real life of the classroom.

### Stage 1: Explore and reflect

Reflect on your own practices. This will include discussion, reflection on your own practice, observation of your own teaching, and collection and analysis of some kind of data. At the end of this stage you should have identified some puzzles which you wish to explore further.

### Stage 2: Plan

Decide how you are going to explore the puzzle you identified in Stage 1. Plan the action you are going to take to examine ways of doing things

differently. This might mean planning whole lessons, doing some new activities, rearranging your classroom or any other action you want to try.

### Stage 3: Act

Start to carry out your plan from Stage 2, e.g. teach the first lesson or lessons. Observe what happens as a result of the changes you are making. Modify your plans as necessary. Collect some kind of data for the next stage.

### Stage 4: Analyse and reflect

Analyse and evaluate the changes that have happened as a result of your action. Reflect on new puzzles arising from your new data. Start the process again ...

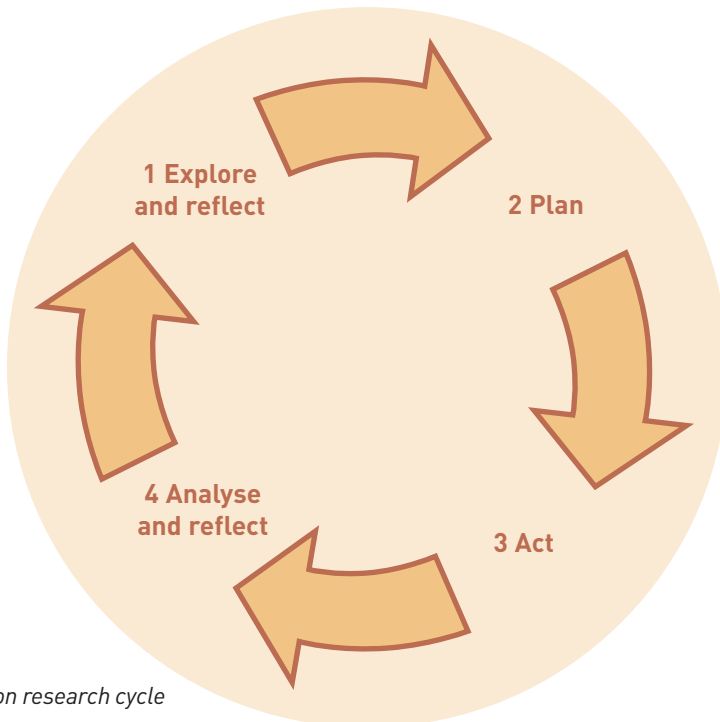


Figure 1: The action research cycle

## An example of ESOL teachers doing action research: The Turning Talk into Learning Project

To illustrate one way that action research might be done, this guide draws upon the Turning Talk into Learning Project (TTLP). TTLP evolved from the ESOL Effective Practice Project (EEPP) and was carried out by five teachers who had taken part in the original project. The full findings of TTLP are described in a guide for ESOL practitioners jointly published by NIACE and NRDC (Cooke and Roberts et al. 2007).

There are many areas of ESOL teaching which are ideal for action research. Choosing a focus will depend very much on teachers' own interests and the contexts in which they work. The starting point for the action research described here were the findings from the EEPP, most particularly those which related to the teaching of speaking. The EEPP had seen little work in classrooms which focused on speaking at the

level of discourse; by discourse we mean language beyond the level of word or clause which is 'used to do something and mean something and which is produced and interpreted in a real life context' (Cameron 2001). This provided the team with the first, overarching puzzle:

**How could ESOL teachers focus on learners' talk and best help learners become more effective at producing longer utterances and at participating in conversations and other interactions?**

A further, and more challenging question then followed:

**Once learners start producing longer utterances, what can teachers do to help learners become more effective at communicating what they are struggling to say, i.e. how to turn their talk into learning?**

**Stage 1: Explore and reflect***Discussion*

The team began their action research by reflecting generally on what happens in ESOL speaking lessons. They did this through email discussions and in groups in London and Leeds. Initial reflections centred around the following questions.

- 1 In our experience as teacher trainers/managers /observers/colleagues, what kind of work do teachers do in class to get learners to talk?
- 2 How do teachers get learners to expand their turns at talk/produce longer utterances (i.e. produce more talk through questions, elicitation, scaffolding and so on)?
- 3 What about our own practice?  
Can we reflect on this?
- 4 What did we learn about oracy and learner talk in our teacher training?
- 5 If we are teacher trainers, what do our courses teach us with regards to learner talk and oracy development?
- 6 What kind of guides/training/textbooks/pedagogic materials are we and other teachers exposed to with regards to speaking and learner talk?
- 7 What kind of topics do we and other teachers talk about with learners?
- 8 How are learners challenged?
- 9 How can learners be better prepared in the classroom for the communication challenges they face outside of it?
- 10 How can talk be turned into learning opportunities? (I.e. what is important about what learners are trying to communicate? What would make them sound more understandable? When is the right time for the teacher to turn talk into learning? On the spot? Later? What linguistic knowledge and pedagogic know-how comes into play when these decisions are being made?)

Discussion and reflection served as an opportunity to explore teachers' knowledge, experience and intuition about ESOL practice. The initial discussions of the TTLP team covered many issues. Among these were:

- The many materials, approaches and strategies we have used/use to encourage learners to talk such as dialogue building, role play, debates, presentations, and what seems to work and what doesn't:

**Planned dialogues, such as market stall holder/customer never seem to work well in my experience. Not sure why, perhaps because they are false and unnatural, perhaps because what happens in the real world is always messier and unpredictable and the students know this.**

- What we think helps foster the right conditions for learners:

**Confidence building and a relationship of trust within the group are important for encouraging students to talk more.**

- Strategies which seem to improve learner performance:

**An important technique that I use to encourage learners to offer longer utterances is to give them 'rehearsal time'. Talk about the topic in pairs, before getting into bigger groups or together as a whole class.**

- Which topics seem to produce the most learner talk:

**I told my advanced class that I was starting a diet (again!). This turned into a discussion where I was receiving lots of advice and then developed into a deeper debate around weight loss.**

- The challenge of responding to learner initiated talk when you have a lesson plan which you feel you need to stick to:

**Some tutors miss golden opportunities to extend discussions. As an observer it can be easier to see how you can exploit this but as a tutor you may be worrying about getting through the content, finishing on time and making sure it fits in.**



### *Observation of own practice*

From these general discussion questions the team moved to analysing data from their own classrooms. As part of Stage 1, the TTLP team set up speaking activities in their ESOL lessons for a period of two or three weeks and reflected upon what happened. The reflections were guided by the following set of questions which clearly draw on both the initial reflections and the subsequent discussions summarised above. Here the observation moves from general questions and stories to specific practices in the classroom.

- 1 When did learner talk happen in the lesson? What kind of talk was it (i.e. planned, unplanned, as part of another exercise)? What was the talk about?
- 2 What opportunities did I provide to my students to produce talk, especially extended utterances? Did learners make their own opportunities?
- 3 What were the learners trying to communicate?
- 4 What would make them more 'understandable'?
- 5 How did I respond to the learner talk?
- 6 Did I do anything to turn talk into learning?
- 7 Did I note anything that I might do later?
- 8 With hindsight, how might I have done it differently?

In addition to written reflections on lessons, the team recorded and transcribed their lessons, or the parts of their lessons in which speaking took place. These were then analysed and used to help the team decide which classes to work with and which puzzles to focus on. The chance to work in a group was very important at this stage, as even short stretches of learner talk produced many possible directions for lesson planning.

### **Stages 2, 3 and 4: Planning, action, analysis**

The puzzles identified in Stage 1 formed the basis for the planning in Stage 2, and at this point the teachers went back into their classrooms, carried out their plans and recorded and transcribed their lessons to analyse later with the team. The processes and findings of these two stages are described in full in *Developing adult teaching and learning: Practitioner guides – ESOL* (Cook and Roberts et al. 2007). By way of illustration, a summary of one of the teacher's projects follows.

**Teaching western narratives: Patrick's class***Stage 1: Explore and reflect*

Patrick was teaching a Level 1 class called Speaking Clearly. During Stage 1 of the action research cycle he set up several activities in which learners were invited to tell each other about certain experiences, i.e. the kind of interaction which produces anecdotes and stories. He recorded and transcribed several of

these interactions and brought them to the group to analyse and discuss. The main puzzle that emerged from Patrick's data was that when the learners told narratives, such as stories and anecdotes, they had a lot of trouble making themselves understood, as in this example in which Victor, a student, is explaining why he has difficulty writing.

**V** = Victor, student

**P** = Patrick, teacher

**V: Already is difficult to writing and ... my finger is ... (unclear).**

**P: Pardon?**

**V: Is already I got a problem in my writing and I have to use my finger it is more difficult to write. (Shows hand to teacher.)**

**P: Oh, oh really?**

**V: Yeah.**

**P: Oh dear, so that makes it difficult for writing?**

**V: Yeah, some ... is er hard writing, la ... last year ... I tried to ... light it ... er ... a firework but it ... used to explode in my hand.**

**P: Last year?**

**V: Yeah.**

**P: Oh God.**

**V: I lost my finger. Also I got some happening for my little child, child.**

**P: How is your child?**

**V: He's just burning his back.**

**P: Oh dear that's a terrible story.**

**V: Yeah. I used to hospital for one week and I got er, operation.**

**P: Oh.**

There were obviously grammatical features of Victor's talk which Patrick could work on with him, but there was also a more important aspect of his talk, and that of the others in the group, that needed attention: how to structure

and sequence a narrative more effectively. Victor had some structure to his story but Patrick needed to build on it with a systematic introduction to structuring narrative.

**Stage 2: Plan**

Patrick therefore planned a series of lessons with the intention of raising learners' awareness of and explicitly teaching the structure and features of narratives. Before he could plan his

lessons he needed to look at some of the theoretical work on the standard western narrative from the field of sociolinguistics, most notably from the work of William Labov (1972) (see below).

**Features of the standard western narrative (after Labov 1972)**

<b>Abstract</b>	What is this to be about? This may summarise the point of the story, and is sometimes used as a way of taking the floor in conversation (this stage is optional).
<b>Orientation</b>	When? What? Where?
<b>Complication</b>	What happened? This stage shows the sequence of main events and shows a crisis, or turning point.
<b>Evaluation</b>	So what? This stage highlights the point of the story, and shows the speakers attitude to her/his story (evaluation is sometimes not a fixed stage, but happens throughout the narrative).
<b>Result</b>	What finally happened?
<b>Coda</b>	This stage is optional and might return listeners to the present (optional).

He then planned a series of lessons for which he referred to various sources e.g. the internet, where he found a wealth of material, and

commercial English language teaching textbooks. He also made his own recording of himself telling an anecdote.

**Stage 3: Action**

The lessons went through a cycle of awareness raising of narrative structures in which students listened to recordings of people telling narratives, discussed explicitly the narrative form using Labov's model (see above) and labelled the parts of a narrative on the tape script. They were given a framework to use when

planning their own narratives and given time to think of and tell their own stories. By the end of the three sessions Patrick's learners were producing long, coherent and engaging narratives which followed the standard pattern.

**Stage 4: Analyse and reflect**

Patrick saw that by encouraging learners to notice language at the level of discourse rather than just at word and sentence level, and by giving them a framework to follow when planning their own stories, he was able to help them improve their narratives dramatically in three lessons. When his learners were asked for feedback on the lessons one of them commented:

**Before, our tongues were heavy and we didn't know what to say. Now they are light and I feel my tongue can fly.**

Patrick noticed also that the talk produced in these three lessons gave him more material to work with for future lessons; for example how to transfer the basic narrative structure to other settings such as job interviews. And so the cycle continued...

**Teachers' reflections on action research**

The teachers on the team all had many reflections on the action research project.

Some came to conclusions about the value of letting go of the lesson plan and letting students control the topic:

**'I ... let the learners develop the conversation and participate in some "real" opinion giving – allowing them "interactional space" to develop the talk and take control or turn taking. The learners were all speaking quickly and relatively loudly throughout this exchange indicating engagement and a real need to share opinion. There was also some jostling for "floor-holding". I had previously put a lot of effort into thinking of tasks which would encourage learners to have these kinds of discussions, which often ended up feeling false and contrived.'**

Some noticed things about their interactional style which they had been less aware of before:

**'On one level it has been interesting to see just how much I talk during lessons (having listened**

**to four lessons in some detail). I can't help but get involved in conversations between learners unless I make a concerted effort not to! I can see that by doing so I take a "learner's turn" and therefore could be depriving them of a speaking opportunity. Listening to the lessons has taught me something about teacher talk: it can stimulate, motivate and provide a model. However, it can easily dominate, although intending to encourage. This is certainly something I will take away from the action research.'**

Most important though was the value of working with other teachers as a team:

**'This opportunity to bounce ideas off fellow practitioners when analysing learner language was ... absolutely vital to the subsequent success of my lessons and to the success of this project ... the task of analysing learner language is easier and has more meaning when it is done with colleagues.'**

## Action research: Concluding thoughts

The following are points to bear in mind when teachers wish to carry out action research in ESOL classrooms.

- Action research requires the support and involvement of peers with whom to discuss your practice and think of ways to explore and change it. If you work in an isolated situation, consider joining an online group and holding your discussions via email.
- Action research works best if it evolves from practitioners' own reflections of their practice. If institutions such as colleges intend to use action research as part of professional development, their role should be to support teachers' own explorations in their own contexts rather than lead it from the top down.
- Many ideas for action research can be found in existing research on ESOL, second language learning and second language acquisition. Reading current research reports and articles can be the starting point for teachers' own investigations. Interesting sources are: NRDC research (available at [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk)), academic journals such as *TESOL Quarterly* and the *ELT Journal*.
- The exploratory stage in which you review your practice is a very important one which enables you to identify a puzzle area and a topic to focus on. Do not choose something which is too difficult to research, but beware of choosing something which is too obvious and easy. Try to choose something which is specific and 'researchable' and which might effect long-lasting change in your classrooms.
- It is also useful to consider your practice in the current context in which you are working, i.e. what are the institutional constraints within which you work and how far can you be creative within them? How much has your teaching changed throughout your career, and across different institutions? And so on.
- Action research requires the collection of some form of data. Audio-recording and transcribing lessons are essential for analysing talk, but other inquiries may require a different method or type of data. These might be peer observation, gathering the opinions of students, field notes, charting learning behaviour such as turns at talk, collecting learner writings, diaries, video recordings or a combination of these.
- Do not over-claim or over-generalise the results of your findings. Research must always be sensitive to the specific classroom or institution in which it was carried out.
- If possible, the findings of action research should be disseminated within (and even beyond) your institutions.

## References and further reading

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## Other sources of information on ESOL research

*ELT Journal*. Published quarterly by Oxford University Press; see <http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org>

NRDC website. [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk)

*TESOL Quarterly*. Published by TESOL; see [www.tesol.org/s\\_tesol](http://www.tesol.org/s_tesol)

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