Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research

Volume 5 | Issue 2 Article 2

4-1-2002

Change in Action: From Reading to Surfing

Ruth Breeze
digitalpublishing@library.wisc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://newprairiepress.org/networks

 Part of the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Recommended Citation

Breeze, Ruth (2002) "Change in Action: From Reading to Surfing," *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2. https://doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1180

This Full Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Change in Action: From Reading to Surfing

by Ruth Breeze

Ruth Breeze is Director of Studies at the Language Institute of the University of Navarra, Spain, and Editor of the *IATEFL English for Specific Purposes Newsletter*.

In the action research paradigm developed from Elliot and Stenhouse, the teacher can and should conduct research in the classroom without external "expert" participation. Indeed, it has sometimes been maintained that the insights and advances provided by research may only be truly empowering if they are not something imposed from above (Wallace, 1998). This process of action and analysis is defined as "reflective practice" in which classroom practice and curriculum design can be seen as an ongoing research project. By systematising the process of collecting information, and then formalising the outcomes of this by preparing new classroom action, which is in turn put into practice and evaluated, teachers can learn to improve their own practice through successive cycles of action and reflection.

This article describes the development of a course in English language for undergraduate students of journalism in Spain. The course was shaped by an initial cycle of action research, but it was subsequently remodelled through a further research cycle in order to cater for changing students in a changing world. It is envisaged that this course may undergo many further cycles of change, which is healthy for the institution, teachers, and students alike. The action research paradigm provides a useful framework within which change can be processed and growth fostered. The project described here is of interest in that it is paradigmatic for our professional practice as teachers in the twenty-first century.

The course "Inglés en Comunicación" is taught as a 4.5 credit course for the Licentiate in Journalism at the University of Navarra. Students are taught over one semester in groups of 35 to 40. The course was originally envisaged as an "English for Specific Purposes" programme, that is, a course in English language focusing in a highly restricted sense on the particular professional needs of future journalists. The scope of the course has now broadened as a result of the action research projects described below.

First Cycle of Action Research: 1996-1998

The course was originally planned in consultation with the School of Communication at the University of Navarra in the academic year 1995-96. An initial programme was drawn up on the basis of interviews with Professors at the School and practising journalists. This was conceptualised in terms of the "needs analysis" typical in the practice of English for Specific Purposes. English for Specific Purposes is an area of teaching in which highly specific linguistic needs are defined and a programme based entirely on these needs is designed in order to equip students with restricted competence in what is essentially conceptualised as an applied training

operation. It thus contrasts with general English courses that are "essentially an educational operation which seeks to provide learners with a general capacity to enable them to cope with undefined eventualities in the future" (Widdowson, 1984).

The original course design for "Inglés en Comunicación" was based on the findings of the needs analysis, which suggested that students need to learn to read English-language news and other media texts effectively and conduct simple interviews. To meet the first of these needs, the linguistic content, in the tradition of English for Specific Purposes courses, was framed in terms of genre analysis of media text types, specific lexis and reading skills. The approach in the first part of the course is reflected in textbooks such as Duff and Schindler (1984), Pilbeam (1982) and Mascull (1995). A more detailed account of my own course design can be found in the paper "Teaching journalists to read" (Breeze, 1997). The requirement that the students should learn to conduct simple interviews was addressed by offering practice in spoken language functions and listening skills, including note-taking.

The initial course design was framed as a working hypothesis, which would be tested in practice and then remodelled according to the students' response. For this purpose, I held informal interviews with students during and after the course. I also maintained contact with some of the professionals interviewed during the planning stage and was able to discuss with them student feedback and the difficulties that had arisen during the course. However, the most important instrument used for gathering and recording data about the course was my course diary. This diary was partly in the form of a semi-structured log in which I rated class activities in terms of whether they were linguistically appropriate or too difficult, whether the students' responses were positive and whether they "worked" in the classroom. This semi-structured log was useful, particularly for days in which I had little time. The second part of the diary took the form of free notes in which I recorded my impressions and ideas during or after class. As Wallace (1998, p. 62) says, the private nature of the diary makes it particularly useful for exploring affective data, and it enables the writer to be completely honest and forthright. On the other hand, the material in it is personal and usually cannot be shared directly with other professionals. My own feeling was that the diary offered the easiest form for recording what went on in the classroom, and that I wanted to be ruthlessly honest about classroom successes and failures in order to learn from these experiences.

The picture that emerged from student feedback and from my own course diary was mixed. The journalism students were less than enthusiastic about linguistic aspects of the course, which centred on reading media texts that emphasized genres and text types. For example, the reflections I recorded concerning this issue included the following: "Some students restless-why am I analyzing the dense structure of news briefs when they can understand them quite adequately without any analysis?" I also wrote, "A student said 'I am never going to be an English-language journalist so I will never need to know these things.' Am I letting my professional knowledge and interests run away with me and forgetting the reason why I am in the classroom?"

I observed that students had little interest in the linguistic and generic features of the texts: for these students, the texts were a means to an end, not a subject of study. Moreover, it also became apparent that by far the greatest obstacle to the students' understanding of the media texts was

their lack of background knowledge. In my diary I wrote, "Took in text on election-not much interest at first-students unable to name British political parties-had to spend most of the class explaining electoral system, parties, government positions, etc.-students interested and asked plenty of questions but in the end there was no time to talk about the text." Texts such as newspaper articles presume a large body of general knowledge about the culture of the country in which they were written and the previous history of the issue they report or discuss.

The evaluation of the first year of the course led to several modifications of the course design. First, brief information sessions in a variety of media were incorporated into the programme to give the students the opportunity to learn about different aspects of British and American culture and public life. Constraints of time meant that these focused on issues frequently discussed in the media, including politics, economics, and social questions. It was also evident that in order to read effectively, students needed to know more about the origins of the texts they were reading, and so information was also included about the newspapers and magazines, their political leanings and the type of readership. Second, the issue of students' lack of enthusiasm about the texts seen as linguistic phenomena was interpreted as their desire to handle texts that were more stimulating. This problem has been noted by other English for Specific Purposes practitioners, who have found that the perfectly designed course, which meets all the students' pragmatic language needs may fail utterly. Tomlinson (1999) commented that when courses are tied so tightly to linguistic needs, "many ESP learners, despite their instrumental motivation, become negative about their course and do not achieve the positive engagement with the input which is required for deep processing and durable language acquisition" (np). With this in mind, I began to reshape the course around "generative topics" (Wiske, 1999), which in this case included issues such as monarchy and ecology, to make a space for debate and intercultural discussion in the classroom, and to introduce the students to critical reading and interpretation of media texts (see Fairclough, 1993; Fowler, 1991; van Dijk, 1988).

These changes were incorporated into the course for the academic year 1997-98. The overall evaluation of this course, on the basis of my own observations and student feedback, was positive. The only factor that required modification in subsequent years was the extent to which critical reading skills could be fostered. The difficulties of reading critically in a foreign language are considerable, particularly when students are not used to reading critically in their own language. As Bourdieu (1999) says in the context of the French educational system, "critical reading is a skill which is supposed to be taught by everyone and yet may never be taught by anyone" (np). Much Spanish education, even at tertiary level, centres upon close reading and even memorisation of short texts, and Spanish students may even lack practice in the basic skills of analysis and synthesis, which are generally taught in the English-speaking world. Subsequent versions of the course "Inglés en Comunicación" contained a basic introduction to critical reading, followed by structured practice of critical skills.

Second Cycle of Action Research: 1999-2001

The second cycle of action research was prompted by technological change. During the years of the first cycle (1996-98), one of the main problems besetting the course was the difficulty of obtaining up-to-date English language newspapers and magazines. At that time, newspapers used to arrive in Pamplona several days, or even weeks, after their date of publication, and they were

expensive. By 1999 this situation had changed. Major newspapers developed websites, and all students in the School of Journalism were expected to possess laptop computers; and university's new buildings had Internet connections in many of the lecture rooms. It was reasonable to suppose that coming generations of students would already be accomplished surfers by the time they entered the university. The whole notion of basing a class around a photocopied text from last week's newspaper now seemed outdated. Moreover, it was also obvious that the profession of journalism had changed. The journalists of the future would be able to research, communicate, and publish entirely on Internet.

This change in media technology had obvious implications for the course design for "Inglés en Comunicación." To meet this challenge, after consultation with professors in the School of Journalism, a new working hypothesis was drawn up. The first and simplest point was that newspaper websites should be used as a source of up-to-date texts for class work. Second, it was envisaged that students might find the avalanche of information available somewhat daunting, either because they would find it hard to navigate, or because by its diversity would make greater demands on their command of English. The teacher would have to find ways of designing guided surfing activities to help them become familiar with valuable sources of information in English, and students would be encouraged to use Internet widely for research purposes.

The second cycle of action research began in the academic year 1999-2000. During this year, I again kept a class diary that focused particularly on the ways in which technology featured part of the course. One leitmotiv of this diary is the extent to which technological failure was an issue. The notion that students would bring their own laptops, which could be connected to the Internet proved to be wishful thinking, and the availability of computer rooms became a major issue in timetabling. Classes based on websites had to have "paper backup" in case the Internet was not functioning (or accessible), or the connections to North America were particularly slow. Moreover, the transient nature of website material meant that pages that looked promising when the teacher was preparing the class had vanished by the time the class was actually given.

As far as teaching was concerned, one of the main issues that figures in the class diary was the way the nature of reading seemed to be changing. There were moments when the students seemed to be skipping from hyperlink to hyperlink, leaping from page to page, in such a way that their activity could scarcely be described as reading. Wilkinson (2001) points out that the activity of reading itself has been transformed, as now "it involves coping at high speed with mass information, demanding rapid overview, identifying key points, or finding a single item of interest" (np). In other words, the reading skills of scanning and skimming seemed to be acquiring more importance than ever, whereas the intensive reading enshrined in generations of English language tests was being sidelined.

Linked to this was the way in which the benefits of tight control had to be weighed against the benefits of freedom. Even in a room with twenty computers, it proved impossible to keep a track of what all students were looking at, and the teacher had to devise ways in which free Internet use would at least culminate in some concrete outcome. It was increasingly clear that free surfing had no guaranteed measurable educational value, and that if I wanted students to learn a particular vocabulary, research a topic of cultural interest, or investigate the features of a newspaper or magazine website, then students' activities would need to be guided. The best way

to do this was to make the web-based activities the central pivot of the class, with preparation sessions beforehand and feedback sessions afterwards. I also reached the conclusion that certain aspects of reading are better taught systematically in the classroom than with large numbers of students surfing the Internet in different directions in a computer room. For language learning purposes, intensive reading is still a central importance, as it is the only way of focusing on points of detail in reading comprehension that can cause considerable difficulty to non-natives.

A further aspect of the freedom/control dilemma was the question of class community and the joint construction of knowledge. Some students felt that the changed dynamics of the computer room made it hard to focus on the task. Others required a lot of help or redirection. Teacher time was taken up by sorting out technological problems or by attending to one student's particular language needs, which had little to do with the theme of the class. Computer rooms proved a difficult environment for group sessions, and the natural dynamics of group teaching seemed to call for classroom activities, discussions and the sharing of knowledge between more than two people.

The process of practice and reflection carried out over the academic year 1999-2000 resulted in a more conservative reshaping of the course for the year 2000-2001. The new working hypothesis emphasised balance. The Internet should be used for guided surfing, extensive skimming and scanning activities, and for mini-research projects designed to initiate students to the use of Internet resources on British and North American culture and current affairs. But a substantial part of the course should still be given in the classroom, working on paper, even when the Internet was the original source of the materials used.

However, in order to capitalise on the advantages of new technologies, it was decided that for the academic year 2000-2001, guided project work should form an important part of the later stages of the course. In this way, the freedom of the Internet could be used constructively, but would not disrupt unduly the course programme. The students were given the task of finding articles (i.e., factual reporting or opinion) from different newspaper websites that focused on the same issue or event. They then had to compare the articles in terms of point of view and underlying assumptions, framing, style, and language, taking into account the perspective of the country of origin, of the particular newspaper or periodical, and of the writer.

The students' diaries included the following comments regarding this issue: "When I started to look around the web for articles, I realised just how much I needed English," and "Doing the project [web-based activity] helped me to put everything I had learnt on the course into perspective." Another student wrote about a sense of empowerment: "When you start to surf around in English to do something real, you begin to get ideas about where you can go from there, things you can write for the student magazine, things that can help you with other projects."

Future Perspectives: Research in Action

In the introduction to this article, I assert that classroom practice and curriculum design can be seen as an ongoing action research project. In the case of the course "Inglés en Comunicación," this is certainly the case. Technology is moving forward, and both students and teachers are

increasingly computer-literate. It is likely that the next action research cycle on this course will involve the design of web-based activities within a Web CT framework to provide a controlled environment for students to hone their abilities to use the Internet productively. Within this framework, students' diverse linguistic needs will be met by the inclusion of interactive independent learning material of the kind exemplified in the University of Navarra's English for Medical Purposes website (http://unav.es/emp/emp.html). However, it is important to emphasise that this project is also envisaged as part of the action research cycle of practice and reflection. Many such projects flounder when the initial impetus dies away, or fail to be renewed because feedback is taken as criticism. Ultimately, the lesson of action research is one of humility. We must learn to look at ourselves, at our own teaching and course design. We must be honest and try to reflect on what goes well and what goes badly, learning from our mistakes. Then we must plough this experience back into the classroom the next time around. This cycle of action and reflection is the lifecycle of professional development.

References

1. Bourdieu, P. (1999). "Principles for reflecting on the curriculum in France," in Moon, B and Murphy, P. (eds.) *Curriculum in Context*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
2. Breeze, R. (1997). "Teaching journalists to read: course design for Spanish media professionals," in Sebbage, T. (ed.) *Languages through Culture, Culture through Languages*. Proceedings of the NELLE Conference, reprinted in *IATEFL ESP SIG Newsletter* 12.
3. Dijk, T. van (1988). *News Analysis*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
4. Duff, B. and Shindler, R. (1984). *Language and Style in the Press*. London: Collins.
5. Fairclough, N. (1993). *Language and Power*. Harlow: Longman.
6. Fowler, R. (1991). *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press*. London: Routledge.
7. Mascull, B. (1995). *Keywords in the Media*. London: Harper Collins.
8. Pilbeam, A. (1982). *The Economist, an English Language Guide*. London: Collins.
9. Tomlinson, B. (1999). "Adding affect to ESP," *IATEFL ESP SIG Newsletter* 15.
10. Wallace, M. (1998). *Action Research for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
11. Widdowson, H. (1984). *Learning Purpose and Language Use*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
12. Wiske, M. (1999). "What is teaching for understanding?" in Leach, J. and Moon, B. (eds) *Learners and Pedagogy*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.