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**THE USE OF AND RESPONSES TO
A LETTER WRITING PROCESS
TO INCREASE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE
IN ESL LEARNERS**

**A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Second Language Teaching at
Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of how a teacher can help learners to increase communicative competence through an interactive letter writing process. The study was triggered in response to a specific group of immigrants' apparent improvement in not only their written English, but also in their ability to communicate more confidently with native speakers after using the letter writing process as the consistent medium of instruction.

The research seeks to describe and ascertain the effectiveness of the letter writing process to enable the learners to become more communicatively competent. In order to do this, it explores some of the inherent underlying conditions to which improvement in communicative competence is attributed, and how these are incorporated into the letter writing process. The research identifies the areas to which the learners attribute their improvement in their communicative language ability. It also outlines the conditions needed to set up this process, the strategies used, and the ways in which the letter writing is extended into an oral activity.

The research is in the action research tradition with a qualitative orientation. The researcher focuses on letters written weekly by the teacher to the learners over a one-year language course. The following strategies were explored in relation to the learners' perception of their improvement in communicative competence and their actual improvement in their writing ability: the self disclosure of the teacher in the letter, the

introduction of language used in everyday conversation in New Zealand, and the interaction with native English speaking conversation assistants.

The results of the research suggest that the instructional material, the weekly letter, provided the authenticity, relevance, interest and enjoyment to enable learners to maintain high levels of motivation and increase the level of output and accuracy of their writing. Through analysis of the learners' letters, there is a significant increase in not only the length of the letters, but also an increase in sentence length, the use of idioms and colloquial language, and a decrease in tense error. Through an analysis of written questionnaires and taped interviews, learners clearly identify the letters as significantly contributing to not only an increase in their linguistic performance, but also to their increased cultural awareness and confidence with native English speakers.

The research highlights the potency of teacher/learner interaction and invites further research into the influence of the teacher's personality and teaching style, as well as the effectiveness of the letter writing process in the hands of other teachers.

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Letters Are Commonplace

Letters are commonplace enough, yet what splendid things they are! When someone is in a distant province and one is worried about him, and then a letter suddenly arrives, one feels as though one were seeing him face-to-face. Again, and it is a great comfort to have expressed one's feelings in a letter, even though one knows it cannot yet have arrived. If letters did not exist, what dark expressions would come over one! When one has been worrying about something and wants to tell a certain person about it, what a relief it is to put it all down in a letter! Still greater is one's joy when a reply arrives. At that moment a letter really seems like an elixir of life!

From the Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon, p.202

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This research is, in one sense, of a pioneering nature in that the researcher has not found a letter writing process used in a similar way by any other teacher. Similarly, there is a paucity of research on the role of social interaction in language learning, the underpinning component of this letter writing process. The personality of the teacher in this process also plays a major role, and yet this is a problematic area as research in this domain is so difficult to quantify.

This letter writing process typifies the communicative approach in that it incorporates exposure of authentic material in a natural way. The learning paradigm is that the greater the quality and quantity of appropriate input, the greater the chance of assimilating the language. The quantity of input is critical, and the consistent input provided by the weekly letter, ensures that the learners are constantly fed and motivated. Feedback is also important, and there is natural feedback as the learners' letters are answered by the teacher. There needs to be the development of a positive social relationship between teacher and learner to enhance the essential social character of the learning context (Glynn, 1985), and this develops through a constant exchange of letters. Close interaction between teacher and learner is the key, and the motivation to read and write is increased as learners want to know more about the teacher, and the society around them. Through the disclosure of personal thoughts by the teacher, and the introduction of different attitudes towards and in the society, the learners are given the opportunity to see through

a window otherwise inaccessible to them. Through interaction comes acquisition, and this letter writing process engenders a particular form of interaction.

In the letter writing process, the teacher is the initiator in the exchange with the learner, providing the catalyst to help increase communicative competence in the learners by allowing them to stand in the same garden as the teacher. In New Zealand, the concept of having a garden is an important one, and the analogy of the garden, used by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1911) to explain learning, fits into the New Zealand context. This analogy is a way of clarifying how positive attitudes and a strong motivation to acquire a language can unlock the door to a garden. The reality of learning is a spring which offers much hope, and is the place where people meet; the fertile ground to the outside world. The teacher is a facilitator in the opening of doors, which allows the learner to feel free not only to explore their own new garden, but also step outside into the wider community. The teacher becomes a mediator in the learning process, admitting part of this wider community into the classroom in the form of conversation assistants who help to make Kiwi culture accessible to the learners. The strict hierarchy within which the learners had been formally taught, where teachers are inaccessible and revered and learners are to obey only, is replaced by a mutual respect which fosters understanding of and respect for each other's situations. The teacher's enthusiasm is passed on to the learners whose continual interest sustains high motivation in learning. The personality of the teacher plays an enormous role in how this process is handled, and yet research into this area of teacher effectiveness based on personality, is difficult because of the multiplicity of variables. Although the researcher did not intend for teacher personality

to be a major component in this letter writing process, this study begs for further research on the influence of this factor.

The following questions were the foci of this study. Firstly, how can weekly letters, written to the learners by the teacher, help to achieve communicative competence, and what conditions are there in the letter writing dynamic which facilitate the development of communicative competence? Secondly, does there appear to be an improvement in the learner's ability to write? Thirdly, how do the learners perceive the letters, and how important do they consider them in contributing towards their increase in communicative competence?

1.1 The definition of communicative competence

Because a method of instruction to help learners increase their communicative competence is under scrutiny in this research, it is important that communicative competence be clearly defined. Communicating is making opinions, feelings, information etc known or understood by others, that is, by speech, writing or bodily movements, and competence is the ability to do what is needed (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English). Therefore, communicative competence is doing what is needed to make a person's opinions, feelings, information etc known or understood by others.

For Chomsky, 'competence' was defined as "the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language" (1965, p.4), although this definition related to linguistic competence and not communicative competence. Hymes (1972) is critical of a definition in which little is said of communication, but where the image is of an isolated individual, not, except

incidentally, a person in the social world. According to Hymes, communicative competence is what a person “needs in order to communicate effectively in culturally significant situations” (1972, p.75), and it is not enough to acquire knowledge of linguistic structure. Ellis (1985, p.294) defines the point of competence as being when the learner “internalises rules which are then organised into a system.” Hence, some scholars like Chomsky view competence as entirely linguistic, while others such as Hymes, see communicative competence as both the knowledge of the linguistic rules and the knowledge of how these rules are used to communicate meaning.

1.2 Interaction and acquisition in communicative language teaching

In order to posit the letter writing process into a communicative framework, it is helpful to understand the criterion for communicative success and the aim of communicative language teaching. Brown (1987, p.213) believes that the ultimate criterion for communicative success is the actual transmission and receiving of intended meaning, and hence conveying the message and doing so with fluency are more important than accuracy. In the communicative classroom, learners ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts. Ellis interprets this transmission and receiving of meaning as 'interaction', which he defines as the communication of one person with another. It is interpersonal, being either face to face through an oral medium, or involving the written medium (1999, p.1). “One of the main aims of communicative language teaching is to provide opportunities for learners to participate in interaction where the primary goal is to exchange meaning rather than to learn the second language” (1999, p.193). Therefore, there needs to be a process in which such opportunities for learners to interact are made available.

However, providing opportunities on their own is not enough for learners to be able to communicate. Learners are required to internalise some previously unlearned item or rule, or increase the control over the use of previously acquired items, evident through an increase in accuracy. Acquisition is viewed, therefore, as a process by which learners build their competence in the new language (Ellis, 1999, p.234). Therefore, although Brown (1987) views conveying the message as more important than accuracy, Ellis would argue that the level of a learner's accuracy is an important measure of their ability to build their competency. The researcher believes that learners can communicate communicatively without being grammatically accurate, but will need to increase in accuracy if they wish to advance in academic studies. However, for the purposes of communication, accuracy is only important in as much as there is sufficient accuracy for the recipient of the language to understand what is being said.

1.3 Trends

From a preoccupation with accuracy and an emphasis on the teaching of language through strict grammatical structures, where form dominated meaning within a communicative vacuum in the 1960's, there has been a move towards the language being seen as a more unified whole. From a historically teacher dominated classroom, the learning environment has gradually developed into one in which the learners' needs are paramount. From an emphasis on the oral and aural aspects of the language, there has recently been a swing back to appreciating the importance of reading and writing. From a situation in which language was taught in isolation using examples with no relevance to the learners' lives, there has been a reaching out and embracing of the wider community for input, which includes relevant, interesting, authentic material and natural, stress-free

contact with native speakers. The communicative approach has been the focus of much research and this has led to the current interest in the connection between interaction and acquisition. However, there has so far been a lack of qualitative research on interaction which explores how learners master the ability to perform particular language forms, and the effect different types of input/interaction have on the learning process (Ellis, 1999, p. 239).

Contrary to the dearth of research surrounding interaction in relation to learner mastery of language forms, there has been much written on the importance of appropriate input in the success of language learning. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985, 1994, 1998), in which effective progress by learners is attributed to modified, comprehensible input just beyond the learner's current stage of interlanguage development, is posited by Krashen as fundamental to a theory of L2 acquisition. The limitations of this theory are explored by Ellis (1999, p.240) by pointing out the failure of Krashen to specify the meaning of 'comprehension', and by asserting that the role of comprehension in second language acquisition (SLA) is in need of further research.

In the same way as Krashen focused on the importance of input, the significant role played by output in acquisition was introduced by Swain (1985), and hence there have developed opposing opinions as to whether input or output is more important. However, Ellis sees more profit in researching the relationship between input/social interaction and 'intrapyschological' interaction and learning outcomes. In other words, exploring how modified input and output jointly contribute to second language acquisition in a holistic approach which examines how learner participation shapes opportunities for learning

(1999, p.242). It is the researcher's view that, through the interaction of teacher and learners in the letter writing process, both input and output are holistically linked to provide learners with their own opportunities for learning.

1.4 The researcher's agenda and intuitions

The personal compelling purpose for this research stems from the researcher's belief that learning takes place most effectively in a holistically balanced environment where the prime importance is placed on the interaction between the teacher and the learners. As in life in general, a person needs motivation to achieve one's goals, so in language learning a learner needs to feel motivated to achieve their goal of communicating with others in a second language. For Gardner and MacIntyre, the motivated individual "is one who wants to achieve a particular goal, devotes considerable effort to achieve this goal, and experiences satisfaction in the activities associated with achieving this goal" (1993, p.2). Therefore, it could be argued that motivational intensity is related to language proficiency and hence it would seem to be important in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teaching that both the human interaction and motivational aspect are given a high priority. In simpler terms, learners' interaction with others is important, and their level of motivation is critical in increasing their ability to communicate well. If the interaction is successful, the ability to acquire new language will also lead to success in communicating competently.

Although a teacher can not be responsible for instilling the initial drive to reach the goal in the learner, the teacher plays a key role in facilitating activities which provide the motivation for the achievement of the set goals. The researcher has worked in the English

as a Foreign Language (EFL) and ESOL field for over twenty years, and during that time has developed programmes for a wide variety of learners. Although learners' life experiences, life goals, individual learning styles and reasons for learning English may be different, there is an underlying assumption that those learners who are motivated through appropriate language activities will be more successful in achieving their goals.

Within the teaching programme, it is important that the teacher determines the needs and wants of the learners (Alexander, 1993). In the classes in which the participants of this research studied, there was a formal needs analysis conducted at the beginning of each of the two semesters. In analysing learners' needs, learners consistently asked for communicative activities which increased their ability to communicate with native speakers living in New Zealand. They expressed frustration at having spent years of English study in their own countries, only to arrive in New Zealand and sink into a mire of garbled words. Even those, with adequate vocabulary and sentence structure, felt they failed to communicate when faced with the idioms and colloquialisms of everyday Kiwi speech. Not only was there a barrier to understanding the language, but they also felt there was an indefinable wall which separated them from being able to talk with Kiwis and thus be able to understand their lives. It is therefore obvious that language used in the everyday lives of ordinary New Zealanders needs to be made available in order for learners to communicate with accuracy and confidence. In accordance with this, a process needs to be in place so that learners can have the opportunity to talk with Kiwis in a natural way.

In learner evaluations of the language programmes at the end of each semester, the letter writing process ranked consistently highly, if not the highest. Learners spoke of the personal nature of the letters, their relevance to their lives, their ability to use the language in their daily lives, and their obvious enjoyment at receiving a weekly letter. The teacher's intuition was that this letter writing process contributed to the learner's progress in becoming communicatively competent.

1.5 The purpose of the inquiry

Taking into account the researcher's intuition (emanating from the teacher's experience), and the trends mentioned above, the purpose of the researcher's inquiry became more specific. As an ESOL teacher, the researcher wanted to understand more about why the process appeared to be so successful, how the learners used the process and how they thought it had helped them to become more communicatively competent.

This study seeks to demonstrate that the weekly letter, written by the teacher to the learners, can be incorporated into an interactive letter writing process which helps to empower learners to the point where they felt communicatively competent by:

1. sustaining motivation by providing relevance, interest, enjoyment and challenge;
2. helping learners to grasp everyday language such as idioms and colloquialisms hitherto inaccessible in their learning and living environment;
3. increasing the learners' awareness of the host culture and systems operating in the society around them.

As stated in the opening introduction, the researcher has yet to find a similar use of letters in an ESOL programme on which to compare findings. Because the teacher gave the learners an insight into not only the teacher's personal life and thoughts, but also challenged different ways of thinking, there seemed to evolve a psychological process within each learner which interacted closely with the teacher. Unfortunately, this inner process caused by such interaction is difficult to define.

1.6 The letter as an interactive, communicative medium

The letter is a written medium for communication which, the researcher believes, is undervalued in technologically advanced societies. However, the letter not only forms a link with another person, but also involves a great deal of thought and effort from its conception to fruition. It is a means of expressing inner thoughts, and often thoughts are disclosed which would otherwise remain locked in the mind of the writer. At the time of the recipient reading the letter, there is no pressure to think of an immediate reply to what has been written as there is in the speech context. In conversation, the pressure for learners to respond is enormous, as it is even for native speakers. Because the written medium has permanence, words are written with care. Not only does the writer have to think about what is to be written on the page, but the reader also takes time to search for the meaning of the words formed for their eyes. The learner can take time to 'intrapersonalise'¹ the material, enabling them to speak in their heads and enable them to try and take control of the new information. Having read the information, the reader then has the power to decide whether to respond or not. Learners, who feel so often powerless, are given the power of choice which is so rarely available to them. If they

¹ Ellis (1999, p.252) defines the expression 'intrapersonal interaction' as learners' 'talk' to themselves.

choose to reply to the letter, they do so in their own time, and in their own way. Having written the letter, they then await the teacher's reply, and this comes in the form of feedback about what has been said and how it has been said. The interaction is entirely positive, which increases the motivation to continue the experience.

Further interaction takes place with volunteer native English speakers who share in reading and discussing the letter, at a time when the learners have had a chance to be familiar with its contents. This process will be outlined in the following section.

1.7 The mechanisms of the teacher's letter writing process

As was previously stated, letter writing is a conduit through which the writer's thoughts can be expressed, and the effectiveness of this conduit depends on the way the letter writing process is handled. The letter writing process incorporates mechanisms for promoting learner communicative skills, and highlights the crucial role played by the teacher/learner concerning motivation, enjoyment, challenge, language appropriateness, and social awareness.

The focus of this research is on a professional immigrant group, those speakers of other languages, the ESOL learners, who have come to New Zealand to live as new members of the society. After ten years of writing weekly letters to learners as part of a one-year language learning course, the teacher found that the letters had developed into a letter writing process and had become an integral part of the teaching programme.

As part of the language learning programme, the teacher began writing a weekly letter to the learners with the objective of reaching the learners on a personal level, using the kind of language used by ordinary Kiwis on an ordinary day. This letter was initially to be read only by the learner, and to be answered as the learner felt able to do so. However, the letter developed into writing material which was not only read by the learners, but was shared with native English speakers who interacted with the learners in the class once a week as volunteer conversation assistants. Learners also commented that their spouses and home tutors² also read the letters, allowing for a widening of the interactive process. The letter was given to the learners the day before meeting the assistants as a homework activity, and the new words and structures were highlighted by learners at this time. Small groups of two or three learners and one conversation assistant discussed the content of the letter, the questions raised within it, and this often led to a digression to all manner of topics which allowed the learners and native speakers to understand each other better. The new words and expressions were identified again the following day in a brainstorming activity before being put into context by making sentences with the help of the teacher. Time was given for learners to formulate questions about those parts of the letter which were still not clearly understood, and in turn, they were asked to answer questions which arose in the letter and from the conversation assistants. This new language was then reinforced in a revision gap-fill exercise done for weekend homework. During the week, the learners were encouraged to write back to the teacher, answering questions which had arisen, expressing their own opinions, and sharing any personal information which they felt was appropriate. In return, the teacher wrote a personal answer at the bottom of the learner's letter, giving feedback on both writing skills and the content of the letter. Hence, the development of the letter into a complete teaching

² Volunteers who give informal English lessons to immigrants in their home at least once a week.

resource, using all four skills, became an integral part of the language learning programme, and it is this letter writing process which is the focus of this research.

1.8 The organisation of this study

Chapter Two and Chapter Three deal with the theoretical literature which substantiates the beginning of the inquiry and situates the study within its broader field. Chapter Four explains the rationale behind the letter writing process and explains it within an interactive cycle. Chapter Five illustrates the researcher's journey of locating the study within a qualitative research paradigm, and introduces the participants. Chapter Six draws on the literature from Chapter Three to link the conditions for communicative competence and interaction to the letter writing process, while Chapter Seven shows the transition from letter writing to speaking. Chapter Eight presents the findings of the study of the twenty five participants who answered a written questionnaire, an analysis of the learners' letters, as well as the findings of a representative sample of six of the participants who were interviewed and recorded on audio tape. Chapter Nine serves to draw the major insights of this study. It begins with the validity and limitations of the study and refers to the initial theoretical endeavour, which was established in Chapter Two, to discuss the findings within this theoretical framework. That is, how a teacher establishes a letter writing process which helps to meet the needs of the learners for communicative competence. The contributions of this study are declared in Chapter Ten, followed by the implications for further research in the teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

1.9 Conclusion

Knowledge is power and it is through the knowledge of their new world that the learners will be able not only to enjoy their own garden, but also walk out confidently and interact effectively with members of their new community. The letter writing process proffers a key, in the form of letters, which unlock some of the knowledge the learners need to have access to their new society.

CHAPTER TWO

THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH, INTERACTION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

2.0 Introduction

The first part of this chapter is divided into sections beginning with an overview of language teaching, a clarification of communicative competence and communicative teaching, and the connection between interaction and acquisition. This is followed by a focus on the facilitation of input, interaction and participation, and then the notion of the learner as a language processor is explored. Within the letter writing process, the importance of reading and writing is emphasised, and this will be shown to lead to the connections between written and oral language

2.1 The shift in the focus of language teaching

The rigidly programmed courses of the 1970's were challenged from the 1980's, as they ignored personality, needs, abilities and learning processes of the individual learner and also suppressed the creativity and spontaneity of the teacher in responding to the learning situation (Gibbons, 1989). Throughout the 1960's and 1970's, theorists of second language acquisition (SLA) and practitioners of English as a Second Language (ESL) tended to see language learning in terms of formal qualities of language (Corder, 1974). Theoretical discussion about the meanings of particular errors, the order in which learners acquire certain grammatical forms, and the phenomena of interlanguage, translated into a focus on grammar and pronunciation.

By the 1980's and 1990's, discussions shifted from language itself to learning strategies and learning styles (Oxford, 1990). Taxonomies of learning strategies were developed (Oxford, 1990) which helped teachers to individualise instruction, but that also held the danger of reducing learners to the style profile commonly associated with their ethnic group (McCarty, 1991).

The next development in the field was an emphasis on the social context of language learning. 'Interactionists' such as Hatch, Long, Pica and Gass, claim that it is through interaction that learners acquire the necessary language skills. The acquisition of language through interaction is seen as vital, as is ensuring that learners have an 'acquisition-rich experience' (Ellis, 1999, p.1).

As the decades have passed, it can be seen that the focus in language teaching has shifted from the direction steered by the teacher to the destination required by the learner, with an emphasis on the interaction between the teacher and learner. With this shift has come the realisation that each learner is an individual with distinct needs, learning styles, mental schemata and attitudes, but it is still important to acknowledge that the five basic steps written by Herbart (Finnocchiaro, 1982, p.3) in the 1800's are still used in some form by many teachers. Firstly, there is preparation with review of familiar and relevant material being very important. Secondly there is presentation with examples of language in use and the discovery of rules by learners. Thirdly, there is association of new and familiar material and fourthly there is systemisation and generalisation with the recapitulation of new material in a context. The final step is application which involves

relevant practice. All these basic steps are followed in the letter writing process as will be explained in Chapter Three.

2.2 The importance of teaching towards communicative competence

Possibly the most important principle of effective communication is that communication is a dynamic process which uses the thought processes and ideas of both the person producing the language and the person receiving the language (Brugman, 1995, p.27).

Communication, written and/or verbal, is the ultimate goal of adult language learners who are immigrants trying to integrate into a new society, and the aim of the teacher is to facilitate this process. “Studying communication involves not just a language, but also the way the language functions as a social instrument, and therefore the structure of the society itself” (Brugman, 1995).

2.3 The connection between interaction and acquisition

Naturally, for learners to be empowered, they must acquire the language they need to be communicatively competent. There is debate as to how much interaction is needed for a learner to acquire language, but consensus seems to point to the fact that interaction is beneficial to acquisition (Ellis, 1999).

Hatch (1978b) asserts that learners have the ability to learn a second language *through* the process of interacting rather than producing what they had learnt *in* interaction (Ellis, 1999, p.1). In Long’s updated version of the Interaction Hypothesis, learners are able to negotiate meaning through comprehensible input in the form of positive evidence, “models of what is grammatical and acceptable” (Long, 1996, p.413).

However, there have been many challenges to the Interaction Hypothesis theory which sees the learner as the black box with specific 'data needs' (Pica, 1996a). Lantolf (1996) attributes acquisition outside in the social world, not inside the head of the learner. This social view of language learning favours 'participation' with active involvement (Sfard, 1998), meaning that it is only by participating and using the language that learners can function effectively. Acquiring vocabulary and grammar is insufficient. The Sociocultural theory suggests that social interaction is the actual site where acquisition takes place, and views interaction as "a matrix in which participants can co-construct goals and scaffold each other's attempts to achieve them" (Ellis, 1999, p.246). The 'scaffolding' addresses not only cognitive help but affective help as well, and can only take place through interaction. Hence, interaction is viewed as contributing greatly to learners' acquisition of language. This stated sociocultural view is at odds with Ellis who concludes, from his research with Japanese high school students, that the learners gain no obvious advantage in either the acquisition of vocabulary or grammar by actively participating in interaction, referring to interaction as being conversation in the Japanese classroom (1999, p. 245). This conclusion is disputed by other studies, such as those by Mackey (1995), which found that participation in interaction led to higher levels of WH question acquisition than simply observing interaction. A more holistic approach to discourse involving learners and their settings is adopted when there is a focus on social and communicative aspects of interaction. However Donato (2000) is critical of an approach which is exclusively communicative and fails to acknowledge the cognitive function. In the socio-cultural paradigm, there is no clear distinction between 'use' and 'acquisition' (Frawley and Lantoff, 1985). How to prove that learners have acquired the language to enable a change in their long-term memory is difficult to ascertain. There

needs to be more adequate discussion on how 'use' and 'acquisition' can be distinguished both conceptually and operationally, and to do this, more longitudinal studies are needed (Ellis, 1999, 24-25).

Ellis considers the interaction, which occurs within the mind in 'private speech' (Vygotsky, 1978), as being a more fundamental way in which learners gather samples of language (1999, p.252). The mind interacts to decode print in reading, using its knowledge of the world to extrapolate information, and such interaction is seen as 'intrapersonal' by those who expound the sociocultural theory (Ellis, 1999, p.252). Hence, acquisition occurs interpsychologically in social exchanges and performance is considered to constitute acquisition.

As learners acquire more language, there is encouragement for them to externalise the mental processing. It is this externalising which involves intrapersonal interaction, and Ellis links this to the depth-of-processing model in which learners go beyond the input due to the way in which teachers present the mental activity (Ellis, 1999). This is achieved through training and appropriate social interaction. However, little is known about the connection between social and intrapsychological interaction, and even less about intrapsychological interaction and L2 learning (Ellis, 1999, p.253). There has been a paucity of research into how interaction actually affects language acquisition, and "a failure to acknowledge the importance of the intrapsychological interactions that occur as learners struggle to learn the second language" (Ellis, 1999, p.256).

As much as there is a need for more research on intrapsychological interaction, educators now appreciate that people learn to speak, read and write in contexts that are essentially social in character and hence learning relies on responsive social interaction (Glynn, 1985). However, in many classrooms, control over initiating, continuing and learning interactions rests almost entirely with the teacher. Reading and writing tasks are often not shared between teachers and learners but imposed by the teachers upon learners, resulting in minimal reciprocal gain in skill (Glynn, 1985, p.3). One ingredient for the success of educational programmes for adults with literacy problems is that mutual respect and understanding must flow between educators and learners (Elasser and John-Steiner, 1977). These authors cite Freire's claim that, for the act of communication to be successful, there must be accord between reciprocally communicating subjects. This political perspective clearly presents becoming literate as a reciprocal social process where the social relationship between teacher and learner is crucial (Glynn, 1985, p.8). This perspective can apply to individual performance in the classroom where reciprocity between the teacher and learners allows for the continuing development of shared meaning, or common sense (McDermott, 1977), and for widening the social contexts in which the two parties can communicate.

2.4 The facilitation of input, interaction and participation

'Input' is a provision of data, but there is no assumption that the learner is required to produce the language themselves. In 'interaction', however, there is the implication that learners not only listen to or read L2 texts, but also speak and write them. Learners are given data through an interaction in which they have actively participated (Ellis, 1999,

p.245). In the letter writing process, the letter is the input, but the interaction is the learner writing the letter, the discussion with the conversation assistants, and the reply from the teacher to the learner's letter.

Learners adopt strategies to facilitate the acquisition of language, and the teacher contributes to this acquisition by the input given (Ellis, 1999). Written communication is a shared task. When letters are exchanged, reciprocal influence occurs and social relationships develop. There is not one dominant or controlling party, but each party responds in writing with a personal communication of feelings, ideas or information to the other. Such letters give as much as they demand, and are replied to, even though people are busy (Glynn, 1985). When letters are exchanged between teacher and learner, there is a balance of control over initiations, and a genuine shared learning experience. The teacher now functions as a responsive audience for the learner, rather than being the controller of situations. These interactive social contexts imply a positive social relationship between the teacher and learner which intensifies as there is an increase in skill. With increased skill, there is the opportunity for further shared meaning and a common sense in their communication. Glynn (1985) advocates more learning contexts in which there is an opportunity for genuine social and intellectual interaction.

Because interaction implies that learners participate in communication through their use of input, the role of participation becomes obvious. However, some learners fail to process input through participation, and Ellis attributes a possible cause to the stress involved in producing the language in a public forum (1999, p.244). However, these same learners are able to 'let in' input produced by fellow learners. He therefore

questions the value of such participation, and there has been insufficient research done to show the real value of active participation. Ellis does concede that active participation might be beneficial for acquisition if the participation was not viewed as stressful (1999, p.246). In the letter writing process, learners are not put in stressful situations due to the small size of the groups and the learners' familiarity with the content of the letter.

Ellis also sees little value in studying modified input and modified input in isolation, and hence is critical of the atomistic approach to the study of interaction which has been done so far in SLA (1999, p.244). There is a need for authenticity in a natural setting, and this is a key component in the letter writing process.

2.5 Conclusion

The general interactionist perspective is that interaction, both interpersonal and intrapersonal, plays a major role in creating the conditions in which language acquisition can take place. Social interaction, although necessary in first language acquisition is certainly beneficial, but perhaps not necessary, in the acquisition of a second language. However, intrapersonal interaction is necessary in acquiring both a first and second language. It is hoped that there will be increased interest in the role of social interaction and in learners' intrapsychological talk which mediates between social interaction and language acquisition. The present research highlights the effectiveness of a process in which social interaction is encouraged along with much learner intrapersonal interaction.

CHAPTER THREE

INFLUENCES ON LANGUAGE LEARNING

3.0 Introduction

By identifying and describing the influences on the language learning of the learner, the researcher was able to discern if these influences were factors in the letter writing process and in the learners who were participants in this research.

3.1 Roles and expectations of learners and teachers

Firstly, it is important to look at the roles and expectations of the learners and teachers in relation to their language learning experience. In adult ESOL classes, learners and teachers alike bring years of life experience and cultural knowledge to the instructional setting. Learners may bring expectations regarding teacher relationships and behaviour that prevailed in their home countries. Learners from traditional education systems may expect teachers to behave in a formal way and feel offended if a teacher uses an informal instructional cycle (McCargar, 1993). Teachers, also, may have expectations of learners' goals which are different from the learners' perception of their future. The potential for conflicting expectations and evaluations of behaviour between teachers and learners is evident.

As well as conflicting expectations, many classroom studies of second language (L2) learning have noted the mismatch of power relationships between the teacher and learners, with teachers typically being seen as dominant figures who control the detail of

L2 classroom discourse (Chaudron, 1985, 50-53). In a mismatch of power, communication can break down through misunderstandings. To avoid the concept of the dominant figure, the teacher can be seen as a facilitator, providing ample opportunity for input from the learners. This is done through communicative activities which lend themselves to pair work and groups. To be successful and effective these activities have to be well planned, with specific tasks and a reasonable time has to be allocated for completing the task, giving time for feedback, for example correction, checking and reconciliation of various responses. A delicate matter is feedback and correction, and some researchers recommend that the teacher ask the learners how and when they want to be corrected.

The teacher must be aware of the social and cultural environment surrounding the language being taught as well as the social environment of the learner. The environment relates to society as a whole as well as the individual social environment: their reference groups. Psychological factors such as attitudes and self esteem are known to affect language learning, and are largely influenced by people closest to them (Burstall, 1972). Hence, learner needs are paramount and the teacher must help the learners reach their goals and show them what they realistically expect to achieve.

3.2 The language learner as a language processor

Linguists and psycholinguists have been concerned with analysing and modelling the inner mental mechanisms available to the individual learner, in order to process, learn and store new language knowledge. One of their aims is to document and explain the developmental route, to ascertain the sequence of linguistic stages through which learners

pass. They are less concerned with the rate of development and tend to minimise social and contextual differences between learners (Mitchell and Myles, 1998, p.17). Even if L2 learners can be shown to be following a common developmental route, they differ greatly in the degree of ultimate success they achieve.

In 1962, Carroll deduced that the success in language learning may vary according to the general intelligence, language aptitude, and motivation of the learner, as well as the two instructional variables of the opportunity the learner has for learning and the adequacy of presentation of language materials (Carroll, 1962). Culture, religion, sex, age, and ethnic origins also add to the diversity of the group, as well as varying learner expectations of appropriate classroom activities and attainment levels (Guglielmino and Burrichter, 1987). In concurrence with this line of thinking, Gardner and MacIntyre (1992) divide what they see as the most important learner traits into two groups, the cognitive and the affective. Cognitive learning styles are the different ways of perceiving and organising information based on a combination of cognition and personality. Affective factors are those emotional factors such as attitudes and self esteem which appear to be important factors in language learning. Researchers, such as Burstall, add socio economic factors to cognitive, affective factors which influence second language acquisition (Burstall, 1972). These must be taken into account when assessing learners' ability to progress and acquire competency in a language.

Within a classroom of immigrants, there is naturally a wide range of learner variables. However, the immigrants who have come into New Zealand under the points system do so with high academic records and proven professional expertise. There is evidence that

L2 students who are above average in the formal measures of intelligence do well in L2 learning (Pillai, 1991, p.9). Learners with wide background knowledge will be able to increase their vocabulary more quickly through their ability to infer meaning through context (Ellis, 1999, p.53), and most of the immigrants possess such wide background knowledge.

3.2.1 Learner motivation

Learner motivation and needs have always had a central place in theories of SLA and the attitudes of the learner towards the target language and the learning context may play some part in explaining success or lack of motivation. Motivation is a complex construct which can be defined by three components: desire to achieve a goal, effort extended in this direction, and satisfaction with the task. For Gardner and MacIntyre, (1993, p.2) the motivated individual “is one who wants to achieve a particular goal, devotes considerable effort to achieve this goal, and experiences satisfaction in the activities associated with achieving this goal”. Harmer (1984) also defines motivation as “ some kind of internal drive that encourages somebody to pursue a course of action. If we perceive a goal and that goal is sufficiently attractive, we will be strongly motivated to do whatever is necessary to reach that goal” (p.3). Teachers need to be able to elicit strong motivation from learners by creating a communicative activity which continues to appeal to the learners through the period of their study (Harmer, 1984, p.3).

Gardner and Lambert (1979) extensively studied the role of motivation in the context of bilingual education in Canada and elsewhere. They draw a distinction between an “integrative” and an “instrumental” orientation to L2 learning. Integrative orientation

occurs when the learner wishes to identify with the culture of the L2 group. Instrumental motivation occurs when the learner's goals for learning the language are functional, such as passing an examination or furthering a career. How motivation affects the learning process could be that the learner has a 'socioaffective filter' (Dulay and Burt, 1975) which governs how much input gets through to the language processing mechanisms. As a result of the conscious and unconscious motives and needs, attitudes or emotional states, the learner is "open" or "closed" to the L2. Therefore it can be argued that once learners believe they have acquired sufficient L2 knowledge to meet their communicative and emotional needs, they may stop learning. Fossilisation (Selinker, 1972) can occur at this time when the learner ceases to progress no matter how much and in what form the input takes. In this case, motivation has obviously ceased. However it is not known whether motivation produces successful learning or whether successful learning enhances motivation (Ellis, 1985, p.119).

MacNamara (1973) argues that "the really important part of motivation lies in the act of communication itself," rather than in any general orientation as implied by the integrative/instrumental distinction. If learners are interested in the social and cultural customs of native speakers of the language they are learning, they are likely to be more successful in acquiring the language (Ellis, 1985, p.11). Therefore, motivation that is dependent on the learner's learning goal is far less amenable to influence by the teacher than motivation that derives from a sense of academic or communicative success. In the case of the latter, motivation can be developed by careful selection of learning tasks both to achieve the right level of complexity to create opportunities for success and to foster

intrinsic interest (Ellis, 1984, p.119). Hence there is true value in creating learning tasks which are of intrinsic interest to the learners, such as the letters under research.

In the study of attitudes, motivation and language proficiency in Canada, Gardner and Lambert (1979) found that motivational intensity was related to language proficiency. Necessity, among other factors, seems to motivate learners to reach out to their limits and actively engage in the struggle for proficiency. They claim that learners' success is equal to the amount of effort they put in, often succeeding in spite of poor teaching. Hence, learning is largely in the hands of the learners and they should contribute as much as they gain to the learning process. This view minimises the influence the teacher has on the learners' motivation, and the researcher favours Burstall's (1975) conclusion that it is the motivation which is engendered by the learning process itself that seems to matter most.

Pillai (1991, p.9) asserts that motivation is a varying factor depending on the individual learner's perception of the learning task. Issues arise of the learners' internal motivation and motivation prompted by external stimuli. If this is the case, it becomes the responsibility of the teacher to provide stimuli which sustain motivation in the learners, and personal letters written by the teacher are seen as a source of such stimulation by the researcher.

3.2.2 Learner anxiety

Language anxiety is the learner characteristic which Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) consider affects the learner's success, and is seen as "a stable personality trait referring to the propensity for an individual to react in a nervous manner when speaking in a second language" (p.5). It is typified by self-belittling, feelings of apprehension and even

bodily responses such as a faster heartbeat. The anxious learner is also less willing to speak in class, or to engage target language speakers in informal interaction. Anxiety can be caused through the learner's fear of the unknown, the unpredictability of the programme being offered and the fear of making mistakes and being embarrassed. However, the letter writing process provides constant input in a predictable pattern which allows learners to feel comfortable among their peers and their teacher. This learning programme instills mutual respect and understanding, thus making it more likely that such feelings of apprehension disperse.

3.2.3 Learner social identity

The learner's social identity which "integrates the language learner and the language learning context" (Pierce, 1995, p.12), is an important perception in the learner's language learning process, and this social identity is not fixed, but dynamic. Language, identity and context mutually interact to give a person a sense of self worth. "It is through language that a person gains access to, or is denied access to, powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak" (Pierce, 1995, p.13). It is therefore important to attend to the learner's sense of self-esteem and how it may be jeopardised or enhanced by interaction. Social identity can therefore be seen as the various ways people understand themselves in relation to others, and how they view their past and their future. The act of immigrating to a new country can profoundly affect a person's social identity. The transformations in the learner are complex and continuing, redefining all aspects of self along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, religious affiliation, etc. Although recognised as important, this issue is not overtly addressed often in the classroom (Pierce, 1995).

Cultural differences are reflected through language and are in part perpetuated by language behaviour. Most communicative acts have symbolic value which is determined by the conventions of each society. It is impossible to list the myriad of ways in which the local use of language reflects cultural differences. Hence it is important that the learner is exposed to different kinds of social situations in which they can learn about the kinds of social situations which can be encountered and what is to be expected. It is possible and desirable to be fluent in the cultural practices, and if this is not possible, to at least know that differences exist and that they are an important part of cross-cultural linguistic interaction (Brugman, 1995). There are no rules for effective interpersonal interaction as all values of these practices differ between individuals and different groups in our society. However a need to be sensitive is imperative and an ability to recognise when things go wrong and why. Every individual's language is as a result of their history in acquiring the language and the experience within the society. Every language and every variety is as a result of the history of the society and the social forces operating which result in specific communicative needs (Brugman, 1995).

When speakers and hearers share different cultural experiences, inferences are made based on cultural knowledge which may lead to problems of understanding. Non native speakers may lack culturally specific scripts (Richards, 1983). Brown (1990, p.158) states, "a major problem for foreign learners is developing confidence to make constrained and relevant inferences in the interpretation of spoken (and written) discourse", and hence sufficient knowledge needs to be disseminated to the learners.

Moving outside the classroom, among the social factors which Schumann (1978) suggested are likely to influence the learner's degree of acculturation, are the power relationships between the two language groups. There is dominance and non dominance, the integration strategy of the L2 group, whether it be assimilation or preservation, and high/low enclosure³. Researchers such as McKay and Wong (1996) and Pierce (1995) have questioned the way in which SLA theorists have understood the language learner's relationship to the social world. Pierce (1995) asks why learners communicate successfully in some situations while in others they falter or remain silent. Pierce (1995) argues that a learner's ability to speak is affected by relations of power between speakers. Structural inequalities such as racism, sexism, and classism can limit learners' exposure to English as well as their opportunities to practise it. In order to better represent human complexity and account for the ambivalence that learners sometimes feel in the process of language learning, Pierce suggests that the concept of investment in the target language may be a useful complement to theories of motivation. Whereas motivation is understood as an aspect of the language learner, investment describes the complex dynamic relationship between the learner and the social world. Hesitation in speaking may come from the learner's resistance to the identities others create for them, not from a lack of motivation. An example of this is the perception of some immigrants as being considered as lesser people by others, and the ensuing connotations (Pierce, 1995, p.29). It is therefore important for the teacher to uncover the reasons for such learner resistance, and empower them to move on.

³ This is the extent to which work, church, schools etc are shared or not.

3.3 The teacher as a language facilitator

Teaching is an art as well as a science because of the varying nature of the classroom as a learning community. While the focus is on the learner, the teacher is still the person specially trained to guide and help learners, select appropriate learning materials and create positive classroom environment. In order to do this the teacher should have access to three main types of information about the learners: psychological factors, personal needs and social factors. This will enable the teacher to judge the level of each of the students and hence the average level of the class. Teachers 'read' and interpret the changing dynamics of the learning context from moment to moment, and take what seems to be appropriate actions in the light of largely implicit pedagogic knowledge. Teaching strategies are employed which take into account the factors which affect the learner's learning, as stated above, and these strategies should include patience and an allowance for error, while at the same time giving 'negative input' in a positive way. Learners are encouraged to work to the limit of their ability, whilst given interjecting easier periods of study when learners seem to need it (Ndomba, 1983).

Wallerstein (1983) emphasises that, in order for teachers to bridge the experiential gap which exists because of differences in cultural, linguistic and economic backgrounds, it is the responsibility of the teacher to learn the realities faced by learners in their personal lives and communities. She suggests visiting the learners' homes and neighbourhoods, and inviting learners to share objects of their culture with other members of the class. Although visits to learners' homes are both time consuming and may be seen as intrusive, the classroom for adult ESOL learners is a meeting place for learners of many and often disparate cultural backgrounds. It provides the crucial function of cultural as well as

linguistic orientation and yet intellectual recognition of such issues does not always provide specific pedagogical direction. This demands not only the teacher's sound judgment born of training and experience, but also understanding of the cultural factors that shape the actual processes of classroom instruction (McGroarty, 1993).

It can be seen therefore that, although much has been written about learner centred learning and the empowerment of the learner to be communicatively independent, the power of the teacher to engender such communicativeness must not be minimised. Through training, experience, and in many cases an 'x factor' the teacher provides a vital channel through which to impart the linguistic, pedagogical and sociological knowledge necessary for communicative competence (Champeau de Lopez, 1989).

3.4 The conditions for developing communicative competence

In distilling the literature related to the conditions which enable communicative competence to develop in learners, there are certain conditions which are present in the ideal teaching environment. Affective conditions, such as the classroom environment, motivation, and interaction are important, as well as the learning conditions in which practice leads to fluency. The third condition relates to the accessibility of input targeted at the learner, and the fourth condition relates to the psychological conditions, such as writing for an audience, and inner speech. Each condition will now be discussed in further detail and related to the letter writing process.

3.4.1 Creating an acquisition-rich classroom

By focusing on the classroom environment, Bailey and Celce-Murcia (1979) isolate four aspects of the classroom which enhance communication and to which the teacher should attend. These are social climate, a variety in learning activities, an opportunity for learner participation, and feedback and correction by the teacher. In classroom environments in which there is much formal teaching, learners do not use their interlanguage very often in the classroom for 'normal' or 'authentic' communicative purposes (Corder, 1976, p.68). Within the confines of a formal structure, the learner is offered limited opportunity for negotiation of meaning and exhibits little motivation to improvise and guess at other learners' and the teacher's meaning (MacNamara, 1973). To overcome these deficits and to enable learners to acquire more language, Ellis identifies four aspects which build an 'acquisition rich' classroom. This environment is created by providing acquisition-rich input, building acquisition-rich interaction, fostering intrapersonal interaction for acquisition, and by teaching grammar (Ellis, 1999, p.247). An implication of communicative language teaching is that learners should be engaged in as much interaction as is possible in the classroom. However, Ellis (1999, p.248) recommends that time should also be allocated to non-interactive activities that expose learners to appropriate input which ensures maximum acquisition of input. Non-reciprocal tasks can be set up outside the classroom, such as an extensive reading programme (Krashen, 1989), and this need not be seen as antithetical to the principles of communicative language teaching (Ellis, 1999, p.249). In the letter writing process, the initial reading of the letter is done in the learners' own time at home, as is the writing of the letter back to the teacher. Although this is seen as a reciprocal task, if the learner does not wish to respond in the form of a letter, there is no pressure to do so. The teacher

has still communicated with the learner. The interaction comes in the giving of the letter, and hence it becomes a communicative activity.

The nature of the input is critical, and learners need material which is modified to their level which they are able to process for both comprehension and acquisition. Ellis claims that there is no point in giving unmodified input just for the sake of 'authenticity'. His research with Japanese third year high school students supports the claims that premodified input aids comprehension, and in one study it also aided acquisition, although there is less evidence to support acquisition (1999, p.249). The modified input must have features not yet acquired by the learners with learners needing to experience a new item in a number of different contexts. Because learners have difficulty in processing input for both form and meaning, the teacher needs to engage learners in ways which alleviate this problem. Ellis suggests that this may be done by designing separate input activities for comprehension and acquisition, focusing first on processing the input to understand it, and returning to the input to notice specific formal features (p.250).

Providing rich input is obviously not as difficult for the teacher as it is for the learner, and therefore it falls on the teacher to provide the initial acquisition rich material based not only on their lives and thoughts, but also on those around them.

3.4.2 Building acquisition-rich interaction

To build acquisition-rich interaction out of classroom tasks requires the teacher to be a skilled interactor (Ellis, 1999). Teachers need to provide a scaffolding which enables the learners to use their linguistic resources, and hence it is important to choose topics over

which the learners feel they have control (Ellis, 1999, p.251). Although learner participation in discussion is to be encouraged, research has shown that learners' communication ability can be adversely affected if they feel pressured to participate (Krashen, 1982). When learners feel in control of the topic, even if it is a teacher-nominated topic, teachers are able to build on the learner's utterances by using devices which allow for repetition, expansion, extension and prompts (Ellis, 1999, p.251).

Ellis suggests giving learners the option of participating or adopting a listening role, and assumes, based on research, that there will always be learners who are prepared to participate (p.252).

As was stated earlier, the class atmosphere has to allow the learners to relate to the teacher and to each other in a positive and constructive way. To do this the teacher has to enjoy teaching and also like their learners, learning their names, and knowing their background information. As the letter writing exchange develops, so too does the rapport between learner and teacher as both share their thoughts through the weekly letter, be it a written reply to the teacher, a remark in the conversation hour, or a comment in the brainstorming of the letter.

Impinging on the class's social climate is the teacher's ability to be fair and make the class relaxed and enjoyable. This is done through smiling, laughing, and using jokes in the class. Enjoyment of learning through humour not only enhances the learning environment, but it also increases the chances for effective learning by facilitating language acquisition in the classroom (Maurice, 1988). Humour enhances the dynamics

of the classroom setting and, without enthusiasm in the classroom, learning becomes a chore (Barkhuizen, 1995). Improving the social dynamics in a language class will help encourage communication, and humour is an effective form of external motivation because the teacher motivates the students indirectly by promoting good feelings in the classroom. An old Chinese proverb, “Tell me and I forget; teach me and I remember; involve me and I learn” combines enthusiasm with increased involvement through interaction which leads to more effective learning. Consequently, to maximise the chances for optimum learning, it is important that humour is not underestimated for the power it has to encourage students to learn effectively.

Barkhuizen (1995) used the letters written by the learners to the teacher as a way of opening a communication channel between the learner and the teacher. It also provided fun for both the learner and the teacher, the learner enjoying the writing, the teacher enjoying the reading. However Barkhuizen relied on the learners to provide the writing, and it is stated that the enjoyment was generated by the learner’s writing and the teacher’s reading.

In the letter writing process under research, the teacher initiates and sustains the contact through recalling incidents of interest to the learners. Humour is expressed through the relating of amusing situations in the letter by the teacher, and there is cause for the learners to chuckle and share an amusing situation of their own. The letters always end on a positive note, encouraging the learners to make progress and feel good about themselves. This humour is extended into the classroom environment and hence the interaction between the teacher and the learner is strongly established and fostered.

3.4.3 Fostering intrapersonal interaction

In Wittrock's generative model of learning (Wittrock, 1974), learning is viewed as a function of abstract and concrete associations which learners generate between the stimulus and their prior experience. The negotiation of meaning provides more processing time, and enables the learners to make links between unfamiliar items in the input and the existing knowledge. Deeper cognitive processing results and hence effective learning is promoted when learners recall or summarise materials they have read, and formulate questions and answers to what has been read (Ellis, 1999, p.27). From the socio cultural perspective, those tasks which encourage private speech could also promote deep processing of the input (Ellis, 1999, p.29). The self-questioning strategy can encourage private speech, leading to discussion which can stimulate cognitive involvement and hence learning. Also within the socio cultural theory there lies the concept of private speech which occurs when learners are required to perform tasks which cause them cognitive stress. In an effort to gain control over language forms, learners spend as much time in private speech as they do in communicating (Ellis, 1999, p.23). Learners 'talk' to themselves as a means of achieving self-control in situations which appear cognitively challenging. This private speech is to be encouraged by teachers as it, potentially, is a mechanism by which learners can acquire increased language skills (Ellis, 1999, p.252).

Hence, it is important that learners are given time, within an activity, to be able to process information and formulate answers in ways which do not induce added stress. Reading the letter from the teacher at home allows learners the opportunity to read without pressure and to 'talk' to themselves at will. Ellis suggests that encouraging learners to

externalise their mental processing by interacting with the text, as in a case of asking and answering questions, enables learners to comprehend a text better (p.253). Teachers can, therefore stimulate the learning process by social interaction by stimulating the learners thought processes with questions they ask. Often language is acquired incidentally in this social interaction, but little is known about the relationship between social and intrapsychological interaction and L2 learning. What is recognised is that language learning is more than just processing input and output, and language teaching needs to be able to engage the learners in opportunities which enable them to operate at deeper psychological levels. This aspect is possibly the most neglected in current theories of task-based language teaching (Ellis, 1999, p.253).

3.4.4 Integrating grammar and meaning

Integrating both a focus on meaning-making which emphasises incidental language acquisition through interaction, and a focus on language as a system, such as teaching grammar, is a difficult task. One way suggested by Ellis (1999, p.254) involves a focused communication task which stimulates the use of a specific grammatical form in the context of a message-oriented communication. Another way is to use consciousness-raising tasks which are based on the assumption that learners benefit from explicit knowledge of grammatical structures. Requiring learners to think, query and discuss grammar involves greater thought processes than simply listening to the teacher's explanation, and this may facilitate both the process of acquiring the new language and analysing and restructuring existing knowledge (Ellis, 1999, p.255).

In the letter writing process, learners are exposed to new grammatical structures introduced through the letter, or introduced in class and reinforced in the letter. The information given to the learners in the letters contains grammatical structures which are natural, but often carefully crafted by the teacher. They learn these structures in context, and the learners are forced to think and query for themselves before asking the conversation assistants or teacher as required. Therefore, for learners to successfully acquire language, they must not only make links with those outside themselves, but also look within themselves for clarification and consolidation.

3.4.5 Integrating formulaic phrases and idiomatic expressions

The acquisition of language is the acquisition of words in combination or interaction with names of things existing in relation to other things (Ndomba, 1981, p.12). Formulaic phrases and idiomatic expressions are more than a collection of words found in a dictionary or text book, but are groups of words which come together to become like formulae which must be understood and learnt as a chunk of language. They have structures which can be easily imitated, and because they are short in length they can be easily remembered when learnt in context (Ndomba, 1981). This formulaic speech provides raw materials on which the learners' internal mechanisms can work. By introducing learners to formulaic phrases in the letter, the teacher guides learners to learn formulaic phrases and idiomatic expressions from context.

Teachers should encourage learners to develop a keen eye for such recurrent structures and learn to imitate rather than analyse these structures, using them in situations where they naturally occur. Although memorising expressions has lost much of its popularity of

late, learning specific formulae by heart allows for enjoyment of writing without fear of making mistakes. It is a safety zone from which the student can gradually emerge when the time feels right. Therefore, by providing learners with chunks of “unanalysed wholes” to be memorised, learners are able to engage in an immediate communicative exchange. Later, learners are able to break this ‘canned speech’ into its constituent parts and augment their interlanguage system (Hatch, 1983). Imitating rather than analysing, sensing situations in which expressions occur and thereby using them naturally, are the most effective ways of mastering authentic pieces of English language (Ndomba, 1981, p. 32).

Nattinger (1980) concluded from large scale computer studies, such as the Cobuild study of language corpora at Birmingham University, that for a great deal of the time, “language production consists of piecing together the ready made units appropriate for a particular situation, and that comprehension relies on knowing which of these patterns to predict in these situations. Teaching, therefore, should centre on learners knowing these patterns and the ways they can be pieced together, along with the ways they vary and the situations in which they occur.” (Nattinger, 1980, p.341). This conclusion is in line with the lexical phraseology view which holds that only “a minority of spoken clauses are entirely novel creations” and that “memorised clauses and clause-sequences form a high proportion of the fluent stretches of speech heard in everyday conversation. The number of memorised complete clauses and sentences known by the mature English speaker probably amounts, at least, to several hundreds of thousands” (Pawley and Syder, 1983). The practical implications for language teaching of these observations on the repetitive habits of native speakers in their speech and writing have only begun to be explored.

Lexical phraseology is an approach in search of a methodology, and this search will be one of the major enterprises of the coming decades (Rodgers, 2000, p.10).

In contrast to lexical phraseology is the alternative Chomskian premise which views sentence creation as being largely innovative. Any model of language must take into consideration the capacity of every human being to create and interpret sentences which learners have never produced or heard previously.

Words are also often remembered in connection with other words, and a word's meaning depends on the other words around it and the concepts that it evokes when uttered. Since effective materials contain passages in which words are remembered through connections made, and contain chunks of language which can be modelled, the letter written by the teacher must be carefully written bearing these considerations in mind. Although learners should be encouraged to use certain formulaic expressions per se, a lot of work needs to be done in ensuring they are used appropriately. The authentic language in the teacher's letter must contain new idioms and expressions carefully chosen to extend the learners' command of the language and to which the learners can relate. There is need for much work to be done on idiomatic expressions as these are also used in every day conversation and need to be seen and used in context with correct meaning and usage carefully teased out. Hence, the teacher also needs to guide learners to ascertain the context of language, situation and culture. The appropriateness of using a particular expression will depend on the context in which the language is used (Brugman, 1995, p.61). In effective communication, it is crucial to match the metamessage associated to the situational context in which the expression is used. A mismatch of the metamessage

with the situational or cultural context is a major source of problems in communication, and this needs to be highlighted for the learner.

Each language is a manifestation of the capacity to produce, understand and develop language, a skill which every human being shares with others (Brugman, p.64). How a person uses language, the stylistic choices which are made, sends a powerful metamessage about who the speaker is, more so than the content itself.

What is needed in communication will vary from situation to situation, culture to culture. The colloquialisms and idioms used in New Zealand are often peculiar to the Kiwi culture and therefore it is critical that learners understand the cultural matrix in which the language operates. It is through the ability to understand colloquialisms and idioms that the knowledge of everyday language is reflected. In the present day, the importance is realised of a language's function as well as its structure, and what a language does in order to enable people to communicate. It is important to possess also the culture of the language being learnt in order to understand the communication and be able to respond using the vocabulary and structure that correspond to a specific social situation. In acknowledgement of this, there is now a growing importance of sociology in language teaching (Brugman, 1995). Therefore, today's language teachers must manipulate much more information in several different areas of knowledge, incorporating their knowledge of linguistics, sociology and pedagogy to help their learners learn English. In conjunction with a knowledge of linguistic rules and how these rules are used, learners should be aware of how they may adapt their use of language to fit the situation taking place (Brugman, 1995). Because different varieties of language are associated with

different groups within our society, greater receptive knowledge is a valuable source (Brugman, 1995, p.16). Hence within New Zealand, a knowledge of a variety of colloquial expressions and slang allows for increased understanding and communicative competence within different groups in the society.

Those learners fortunate enough to have native English speaking friends can even “pick up the wrong end of the stick” in their use of language used in everyday life. The Russian accountant, involved in this study, talked in class about being called “a red bag” by her friend. When it was explained that the expression was “a rat bag,” the accountant laughingly said that she had replied at the time, “Then you’re a blue curtain!” In this situation the gist of the idiom was understood through the context but there had been communication failure nonetheless.

Understanding the context can still result in the misunderstanding of vocabulary as was demonstrated by the Egyptian Doctor of Nursing, one of the participants in the research, who talked about a particular tranquilliser gun which she described as being able “to shoot vets.” There were roars of laughter from the class as she vainly tried to explain that she had seen a sign for a ‘vet doctor’ and had assumed that ‘vet’ meant animal!

The above examples indicate that learners may arrive in the classroom with years of formal English language learning, but with an inability to participate fully in the everyday conversation of their Kiwi counterparts, an inability to interact accurately and communicate competently. Not only does their inadequacy in speaking and listening hinder their understanding, but the lack of exposure to and use of many idioms and colloquialisms used in English and particularly in Kiwi English, is a major obstacle to

being communicatively competent. Therefore, the idioms and other colloquial expressions which are introduced naturally in the letter as the teacher writes about daily life, other relevant topics and thoughts, provide the learners with a source of natural expressions that they find difficult, if not impossible to access, any other way.

3.4.6 Using authentic models

In the same way as learners benefit from effective materials chosen for their appropriate vocabulary, language patterns and expressions, learners also benefit from authentic materials. Any contrivance which introduces unnaturally modified language will be detrimental to the learners who will produce similarly artificial language.

McIver (1987) provided clear authentic models through autobiographical texts on which the learners were invited to model and hence improve the quality of their writing. This encouraged the writing of the learners' autobiographies in that it freed the learners from inhibitions created through ignorance of a subject and the learners had a source of language on which to base their thoughts. Through discussion with the teacher, they became aware of their writing and through their writing came a reflection of how they saw themselves. As mentioned earlier, self identity is an important factor in learners' ability to grasp a new language, and Munoz (1995) affirms this factor in guiding her learners into a study of self identity. "To study identity means to explore the story of identity-the narrative of identity-the way we tell ourselves and others who we are, where we came from, and where we are going" (p.46). Munoz suggests that teachers can attempt to support this complex process in a variety of ways, such as portfolio writing, dialogue journal writing, and group discussions. Although Munoz makes no mention of

letter writing, this method seems well suited to exploring learners' self identity through a variety of ways.

The rather subtle shifting of the classroom spotlight onto identity can help learners become more conscious of the process of change that is preeminent in many of their lives. It is a complex, changing self that learners bring to the classroom. The classroom can give them tools to find ways to be heard and help them learn how to participate more fully in the classroom and the world outside the classroom.

3.5 Conclusion

Letter writing is a form of interaction which enables a teacher to help free a learner from worry, provide comfort and relief. It is a means of communication, a conduit through which the writer's thoughts can be expressed. Letters encourage learners to read while providing language which will meet their needs in the new society. There are four major advantages to using letters in the classroom: availability, variety, relevance, and interest, giving them a definite advantage in motivational attraction (Daley, 1996).

This chapter has laid the groundwork on which the interactive letter writing process operates. The background, the variables, and expectations of individual learners are taken into account when teachers interact in the classroom. The conditions for enhancing the communicative competence of the learners have been discussed as it relates to the needs of the learners. The letter writing process has been discussed in relation to these conditions, and the following chapter will focus on the letter writing process as an interactive cycle of learning.

CHAPTER FOUR

RATIONALE FOR THE LETTER WRITING PROCESS

4.0 Introduction

Having discussed factors related to the acquisition of language, communicative competence, interaction, learner and teacher strategies, it is now important to focus on the letter writing process and see why it is effective in improving communicative competence. To be communicatively competent, it is important that all four skills are incorporated to enhance each of the skills, even though some skills may be stronger than others. In the letter writing process all four language skills are incorporated in a natural way, although reading and writing are brought into prominence.

As has been stated, letters are a means of communication in which channels are made through which thoughts flow. The letter⁴, therefore, becomes the vehicle by which the teacher and learners share intimate experiences, and it becomes a tool to enhance a social experience rich in the natural language of the community. Through the teacher's letters, the learners are encouraged to read through a personal interaction with the teacher. They read interesting material which draws them into the life experiences of the teacher and those around them, and are hence able to relate the letter to those around them. The teacher leads them through a cultural interchange which empowers them through identification of who they are. Grammatically, the learners learn sentence structures and idiomatic constructions that they can use to write about their own experiences and other

⁴ See Appendix I

topics which are of interest to them. Orally, they are able to discuss the letter with native English speakers in a conversation hour in class, which engenders confidence to talk about other topics.

The learners interact with the teacher on a personal level, having communication through reading the letter, and then interacting on an intrapersonal level as they interpret internally what has been written, and again interact with native speakers externally as they discuss the letter before writing back to the teacher. Although the teacher writes a letter and encourages the learners to reply, the writing of the letter is only one of the four skills that is incorporated in the process. The process incorporates particular contexts, methods and techniques that are capable of generating the conditions for productive language learning, and these will be discussed in this chapter.

This chapter will look at the rotating cycle from reading and writing, from writing to oral language, and round again. The chapter concludes by focusing on the letter writing process as a communicative activity. The design steps of the letter writing process will be explained in conjunction with the factors, described in the previous chapters, for enhancing communicative competence through interaction.

4.1 The importance of reading and writing

For the letter writing process to be taken seriously, it needs to fit into the current trends in second language teaching. Because the process focuses on reading and writing initially, it is important to examine the latest research to see if the process accommodates current perspectives.

In the 1980's there was a shift away from an emphasis on reading and writing to an oral/aural approach as the needs of adult learners, with limited time, were acknowledged. Oral communicative ability is still the primary goal of a lot of ESL instruction, although the pendulum is swinging back to giving reading and writing greater emphasis (Rabideau, 1993). Asher (1982) and Savignon (1983) demonstrated the value of oral communicative competence, but Tarvin and Al-Arishi (1991) suggest that the need for an instant response in oral activities makes reflection and contemplation difficult. Motivation can be limited when time is of the essence and there seems to be nothing concrete on to which to hold. Rodby (1987) found that learners only became motivated to learn English when they were given informal reading and writing which was language that "stood still" as one learner identified it as being. They were not so overwhelmed with the language because they were given time to look at it, take time with it and therefore manipulate it.

The ways reading and writing are used must be influenced by learners' various language proficiencies, backgrounds and needs. Reading and writing for language acquisition is used with learners who have a basic education in their first language. Learner interests and learner proficiency in English must be matched with reading text to provide comprehensible learning input, giving the opportunity to learn new vocabulary in context and to see the syntax of the language. Writing allows the learners the opportunity to experiment with the new language and make themselves understood (Rabideau, 1993).

4.1.1 The importance of the enjoyment in reading

Motivation was discussed in Chapter Three as a learner variable, although the teacher was also seen as having a responsibility to try and promote and sustain the motivation of

learners. However, in spite of teachers' best efforts, the majority of students find reading in a second language 'difficult' (Day and Bamford, 1998, p.25) and this 'difficult' or unpleasant experience can lead to an aversion to reading for life. It is a heavy toll to pay for reading tasks which overstretch the learners' linguistic ability or are inappropriate and/or irrelevant. Successful extensive reading programmes place great emphasis on the positive classroom environment and ongoing reading experience. Favourable feelings for and experiences with the teacher, classmates, materials, tasks and procedures, can forge positive attitudes toward reading in the second language (Day and Bamford, 1998, p.26). Teachers take the role of active participant and model reader, lending prestige, example and support to the activity. Fear of evaluation by teacher and peers is minimised because the emphasis is on the learners' personal reactions to the reading material. In the letter writing process, the letter is first read out by the learners in a small supportive group with a conversation assistant and then is read in class by the teacher the day after.

Motivation is seen as having two equal components of expectancy and value in which people do what they expect to accomplish successfully and tend to avoid what they expect they cannot accomplish (Feather, 1982, 1-5). In terms of expectation in relation to value in reading, learners need to have a reasonable understanding that they can understand what they are about to read or they will not undertake the exercise. A failure to have positive attitudes or the appropriate materials will result in a lack of the necessary motivation for a learner to decide to read in the second language. However this expectation of success or failure is only half the picture. In an ideal classroom, learners will place high value on learning to read and will consequently try to read because they value the result of the effort. In such cases, the value attached to the act of reading might

outweigh the expectation that they will have a hard time reading it (Day and Bamford, 1998, p.28).

It is well known that people spend a lot more time and effort doing things they enjoy, and so it follows that if language tasks are enjoyable, they will be undertaken with more time and effort expended. Hence, one of the underlying factors in the letter writing process is enjoyment, and the importance of the enjoyment of reading is born out in the research.

Reading for pleasure is to be encouraged and is eloquently expressed as “ an extraordinary activity. The black squiggles on the white page are still as the grave, colourless as the moonlit desert; but they give the skilled reader a pleasure as acute as the touch of a loved body, as rousing, colourful and transfiguring as anything out there in the real world” (Nell, 1988, p.1). The aim of the teacher is to provide opportunities for the learner to experience even a fraction of the pleasure described.

4.1.2 The importance of effective reading materials

It is difficult to place too much emphasis on the role interesting material plays in the desire to read. Williams (1986, p.42) makes interesting texts the first in his top ten principles for teaching foreign language reading. “In the absence of interesting texts, very little is possible. An obvious principle, but one which is often forgotten. Interest is vital, for it increases motivation, which in turn is a significant factor in the development of reading speed and fluency”. Vogel, Brassard, Parks, Thibaudeau and White (1983) found that successful materials are those that focus on topics of current interest, suggesting that material be drawn from authentic sources and that the input be intellectually stimulating,

interesting, and relevant to the learner. The language should neither be overly manipulated nor simplified, neither grammatically nor lexically. This is crucial because it ensures that the complexity of the classroom environment matches the complexity the learners face in encountering the challenge of language outside the classroom. This is supported by Krashen and Terrell (1983) who recommended the two criteria for determining whether reading materials are appropriate for ESL learners as being at a comprehensible level of complexity and interesting to the reader.

4.2 Cultural and personal experiences to encourage reading and writing

Being in touch with the lives of the learners is an important role of the teacher. Not only does the teacher share their own cultural and personal experiences in the letter, but this leads to the learners feeling empowered to share their cultural and life experiences. Freire approached adult literacy education based on the learners' cultural and personal experiences, using this as the content for the classroom. Chacoff (1989, p.49) called the Freirean approach "deeply contextual" because adult learners learnt to read and write through discussion of themes of importance drawn from the learners' real life experiences. Hence, formal language study plays a secondary role to learners' conceptual development. Individual reading and writing skills are acquired through a process of inquiry into real life problems facing the community of learners.

The Freirean approach can be seen as a variant of the whole language approach in which educators present a perspective on language learning and teaching in which language must be kept whole when it is learned. Written language is as natural as spoken language and thus needs to be integrated with it in learning (Edelsky, Altwerger, and Flores, 1991).

It must be recognised that language has diverse uses, reflecting different styles and voices, and that language is social and learned in interaction with other speakers, readers and writers. A main component of the learning experience is in extended reading and writing, with the learners' own text books becoming reading texts and sources for further writing.

Dialogue and problem solving are distinctive features in the Freirean approach in which dialogue is an "I-thou relationship between two subjects" in which both parties are knowledgeable equals in a situation of genuine two way communication (Freire, 1970). Teachers possess knowledge of reading and writing: students possess knowledge of the concrete reality of their culture. As with other humanistic approaches, Freire rejects the "banking concept of education" where the primary role of the teacher is to "deposit" information into learners as they would in a bank. The one way process is replaced by the "culture circle" where teachers and students face one another and discuss issues of concern in their own lives (Freire, 1970). In the problem posing approach, real life problems are presented and discussed. Ideally, the solutions evolving from the discussion will entail actions in which reading and writing skills are required, giving a concrete purpose for the literacy being developed.

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) is a whole language approach which promotes reading and writing through the use of personal experiences and oral language. Although diverse in practice, certain characteristics are consistent in that materials are learner generated. All four communication skills are integrated, difficulty of vocabulary

and grammar are determined by the learners' own language use, and learning and teaching are personalised, communicative and creative (Hall, 1970).

4.3 Reading through writing, and reading to write

Although there has been a great improvement in the amount of authentic reading materials to interest adult learners, these materials do not always meet the needs of the individual learners. To enhance the reading skills of these learners, there has been a movement to encourage them to write about their own experiences and for these to be published and made available for other learners to read. Learners can reflect on what has been written and relate to the experiences related by others in similar circumstances. This can motivate them to write their thoughts, manipulating the language and finding validation for their experiences (Crandall and Peyton, 1995).

Zamel (1991, p 12) believes that “while it is certainly true that language allows for the expression of ideas, it is also true that a search for and commitment to ideas can generate language”. By asking second language learners to be interactive readers during all stages of the writing process, Zamel (1992) encourages this generative use of language.

The combination of reading and writing is the essence of letter writing, and this combination is now seen as a powerful learning tool, the “combinatorial power of the two” (McGinley and Tierney, 1989, p.255). Although reading used to be considered a receptive skill, it is now viewed as an active skill in the same way as writing. Composing and writing from the sources the learner has read is successful in that knowledge is integrated into the creation of the learner's own writing (Spivey and King, 1989).

4.4 Writing for language acquisition

Expression in written form is “an abstract, mental, social physical and psychological process which is considered one of the highest forms of language and communication, as well as one of the most complex of human acts” (Hopman and Glynn, 1988, p.81). Arnold (1964) defined written expression as an arrangement in writing of that which is experienced, real or imagined, and is primarily intended for communication. Walmsley (1983) focussed on this communicative function of writing, calling the intellectual and emotional act of constructing a message. The act of writing (in the sense of free composition) is by its nature creative, its implicit purpose being the induction of a message by the intended audience (Holtzman, 1970).

The skills and abilities required in writing touch all the areas which comprise the language arts, including listening, speaking, and reading (Hopman and Glynn, 1988, p.82). Research claims that writing is both facilitative of, and enhanced by, reading (Clay, 1980), with the assumption that both skills are interrelated. Clay also suggested that in the same way as writing and reading are related, so too are oral and written language, and this interaction between the two has been established by Cioffi (1984) and Dyson (1981).

Written expression provides a means of self expression, a form of communication and medium for social interaction (Glynn, Jerram and Tuck, 1986), and a means of helping learners to clarify thoughts and make sense of the world (Douglass, 1984). It is a means of learners demonstrating knowledge, fulfilling emotional needs and a source of

entertainment and enjoyment, as well as providing a tangible measure for teachers to evaluate the learners (Graham, 1982).

Nobel Prize winning author Nadine Gordimer (1982) has said that all writing is deeply personal and heartfelt. Teachers need to provide learners with opportunities to write about topics that are relevant to their lives, to participate in various writing activities and to feel that their writing has value. By integrating writing with content at every level of instruction, teachers help learners find their own voice in their new language and develop the ability to communicate effectively in different contexts and with different audiences.

There is something in the humanistic background which rebels against equating composition with the mere reproduction of grammatically correct sentences (Wright, 1982). Research has likewise indicated that the ability to verbalise rules is not an effective monitor of production (Seliger, 1979, p.354). While few would disagree with the principle that upper level composition instruction should reinforce previously absorbed grammar rules, in reality even fewer have demonstrated effective means of consistently seeing that it does (Buckingham, 1979, p.24).

Freedman (1991) found three purposes for writing, the first being that it allows for the practice of the language by providing a great deal of repetition of simplified forms upon which learners can build a base. The second purpose is that writing allows learners to experiment with language by encouraging learners to attempt things they want to express which develops an experimental or exploratory approach to language and literacy learning in which the learner plays an active role. It also allows learners to set their own goals and focus on the language necessary for what they are trying to convey in writing,

and provides opportunities for learners to explore resources other than the teacher (their own knowledge, their own notes, other learners' knowledge etc). Freedman suggests that learners could communicate by way of interactive writing such as letter writing, electronic mail and dialogue journals. These kinds of writing are based on a preceding event, which has an impact on what happens next and is of concern to the writer, in the same way as an oral utterance is of relevance and concern to the speaker (Peyton and Staton, 1991).

Therefore, the needs of the learners to communicate orally are of importance, but their needs do not stop there. Writing is a continuous process of discovering how to find the most effective language for communicating one's thoughts and feelings. When adult ESOL learners put their thoughts on paper and share them with others, they find they develop a powerful voice in their new culture (Peyton, 1993). Writing also enhances language acquisition as learners experiment with words, sentences and larger chunks of writing to communicate their ideas effectively and to reinforce the grammar and vocabulary they are learning in class (Bello, 1997).

4.4.1 Connecting writing with reflection

Personal letters are, by their very nature, about oneself, and it is a safe starting point for writing. The advantage of an autobiographical approach to writing, as expounded by researchers such as McIver (1987), is that the learners know the subject well. They are free from inhibitions created by ignorance of the subject, the need for research or the lack of interest. They can isolate their audience quite easily and establish a consistent voice and harmonious rapport between themselves, the subjects and their audience. Through

the writing, learners learn something directly about the structure of literature which they cannot learn by writing essays about literature. They become aware, through discussing their writing with their teacher, through their own experiences, of the basic components of all literature: points of view, including voice and tone, subject matter, (incidents, events, feelings etc.), audience, (friends, relatives, peers etc). With authentic models, in this case autobiographical texts, the learners are invited to model the style and manner of the models to improve the quality of their original attempt (McIver, 1987).

Zamel (1987) warns that the flow of ideas of unskilled writers is often blocked when they pay too much attention to form. Free writing gives the opportunity to let their ideas flow. Clear vision constitutes revision and the teacher must encourage the students to rewrite, revise and polish their original efforts. In this phase of the writing process, the most important part of the process is how the learners see themselves. This is reflected in how they write about themselves. They gradually learn that words are instruments of power with which they can shape and reshape pleasing images of themselves. How they see themselves to a great extent reflects how they see the world (McIver, 1987).

The reading of letters allows time to reflect, and the writing of them allows similar time to be spent on expressing these inner thoughts. In investigating a possible connection between journal writing and reflection, Mlynarczyk (1994) consulted philosophers, cognitive psychologists, and scholars interested in composition eg. Dewey (1933), Higgins, Flower, and Petraglia (1992), Scardamalia, Bereiter, and Steinbach (1984), and found that journal writing encouraged reflection. Although none of the above has

investigated letter writing, given that letter writing is another form of personal writing, there does not seem to be a huge cognitive leap to make such a similar connection.

Mlynarczyk draws on Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and Britton (1970, 1982), Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger and Tarule (1986) who espouse linguistic theories which allow the understanding of the mental process involved in writing. Vygotsky and James Britton are useful in examining cognitive and linguistic theory for insights into the mental processes in reflection. Vygotsky's concept of inner speech (1986) helps to understand the freedom and power many experience in writing. Mlynarczyk identified this inner speech as a crucial step in the verbal thought process, and journal writing was seen as the capturing of inner speech in writing (1998, p.18). Mlynarczyk studied the journals of her learners which became a dialogue between the teacher and learner. The teacher-research study was conducted within the context of the researcher's own classroom, focusing not only on the learning experience of the learners but also of the teacher as well. However the learners' experiences of journal writing had to be considered against their educational background and their previous life experiences. Vygotsky (1986, p.183) was aware of the importance of writing for raising one's awareness or consciousness. Written speech is considerably more conscious, and it is produced more deliberately than oral speech, bringing an awareness to speech.

Britton (1982) viewed expressive language as "language close to the self" and he described expressive writing as being "primarily written-down speech" (1982, p.97). Characterised by its personal nature "we make sure the writer stays in the writing and doesn't disappear" (Britton, 1982, p.97). Britton pointed out the connection between

expressive language and reflection. Once mental representations using language are developed, it is possible to go back and refine those representations, making sense of those experiences. Britton sees this happening in the form of an inner dialogue in much the same way as Vygotsky envisioned inner speech developing out of one's experience with social speech.

Hence, expressive writing leads to reflection. Although people have a strong need to work things out using expressive language, this process is not always an orderly one. The value of expressive writing often lies in its spontaneity. "When we come to write, what is delivered to the pen is in part already shaped, stamped with the image of our own ways of perceiving. But the intention to share, inherent in spontaneous utterance, sets up a demand for further shaping" (Britton, 1982, p.141).

Therefore, although thinking, talking and writing are all ways of assimilating ideas, writing with its capability for being reread and revised, is for many people, characterised by a higher level of awareness (Mlynarczyk, 1994, p.19). The close relationship between writing and thinking makes writing a valuable part of any language course.

4.5 Connection between written and oral language

Adult learners, particularly the new immigrants who come to language classes, tend to stick to their cultural islands and are unable to find the bridge to access the wider community. The idea of meeting with a native speaker is terrifying and the learners cling even more closely to their inner sanctum. Cultural literacy is vital in breaking down this fear, and hence contact with native speakers in a safe environment is essential. Not only

do the letters written by the teacher allow a window into the lives of every day Kiwis, but within the letter writing process, English speaking conversation assistants are brought in to the classroom once a week to enable interaction with native speakers living in their community. The justification for the use of such input and interaction is obviously to help to improve the learners' communicative skills.

In the letter writing process, time is spent talking with native English speaking conversation assistants about not only the language in the letter, but also more importantly, the ideas which are raised in the letter. Although this seems a relatively free activity, it follows the outline of the letter and its structures very closely. Brugman (1995, p.20) maintains that there is no such thing as style free speaking or writing. Brugman states that the perspective one takes towards the communicative situation is what really determines style and the speaker's choice of language reflects that perspective. Speakers unconsciously or consciously select elements of their own varieties from among the options available within their productive language. Style results from the fact that the language user has a number of options from which they make choices as to how to express a given content. Reasons are socially based, and carry different metamesages⁵, the information that is transmitted to the addressee as a result of dialect and register properties of language use. Because all teachers have an individual style, it follows that learners will also adopt the style of the teacher when reading, discussing and copying passages from the teacher's letter. It is therefore important that the teacher bears this in mind so that the language is appropriate for the learners' needs.

Shuy (1988, p.77) criticises schools for teaching writing in a conversational vacuum

⁵ The metamesage is the message surrounding the message, the properties surrounding the speaker and the attitude of the speaker towards the addressee

where the learners fulfil the teacher's goals, not their own. Mlynarczyk (1998) claims that with the dialogue journals, learners entered a mode of writing which was truly interactive and self motivated and therefore much closer to oral language: "It is two people talking to each other in writing, exchanging hopes and fears, evaluating, assuring, questioning, and clarifying" (1988, p.81). Through a linguistic analysis of the journal exchanges between Reed and her sixth graders, it was concluded that learners, by drawing on their oral speech resources would eventually become more resourceful and more effective writers (Staton, Shuy, Peyton and Reed, 1988).

Oral language tends to reflect innovations in the community, such as new word meanings, while written language tends to be conservative, displaying properties considered standard by the linguistic community (Brugman, 1995, p.35). Although it is true that written language tends to be more conservative than oral language, in letters written to the learners, the teacher uses a conversational style so that the 'in' language of the day can be introduced to the learners. The letters are tailor-made for the learners, enabling them to access important, colloquial language through the written medium.

4.6 Letter writing as a communicative activity

Littlewood (1981, p.12) considers that writing letters by the learner is a real communicative activity in which the learner uses the linguistic repertoire they have in order to communicate specific meaning for specific purposes.

Barkhuizen (1995) encourages spontaneous letter writing as a form of free writing, a relief from structured writing which enabled blocks to be cleared from learners who were

paying too much attention to form. At first, learners find writing to the teacher strange, they feel awkward and often do not know what to write (Barkhuizen, 1995). The freewriting of letters, where no grade is given, means that learners do not feel anxious about grammar and spelling, organising or conforming to the conventional letter form. They are told to relax and concentrate on what they write. They can write as much or as little as they please and it is a relief from the more structured writing which is so often required of them. It is not a process, but a spontaneous writing in a non threatening, non structured manner in which some learners often produce their best writing. says, “there is a place for error free writing, but it does not have to be the main goal for writing classes” Leki (1991, p.11).

4.7 Conclusion

It is clear that learners respond positively to writing in a supportive, non threatening environment which allows the flow of thoughts and ideas. Although Barkhuizen (1995) perceived an awkwardness in learners writing to the teacher, this does not occur in the letter writing process under discussion because learners are provided with a scaffolding which supports their writing through structures, expressions, and a content on which to base their letters in reply. This they can choose to use if they wish, or they are free to write spontaneously if they so wish.

As has been discussed, through the letter writing process the learner moves from a focus on reading a letter from the teacher, to speaking with native speakers, to writing about issues raised in the letter, to receiving feedback, and thus to being motivated to read the next letter, and so the cycle of increased learning continues.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.0 Introduction

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the letter writing process for adults enrolled in a one year programme of English for Speakers of Other Languages. Twenty-five immigrants took part in the study and the letters written by the learners were part of the data collection. However, the major source of information was collected through two questionnaires, one which contained closed questions and the other containing open questions. An interview was also conducted with six of the participants, chosen randomly, to further ascertain the effectiveness of the letter writing process.

The present study sought to address the following questions initially raised in the Introduction of Chapter One, and were hence the foci of this study:

1. In what ways can weekly letters written by the teacher help to achieve communicative competence and what conditions in the letter writing dynamics facilitate the development of communicative competence?
2. Does there appear to be an improvement in the ability to write in natural English (as indicated through grammatical accuracy and the use of idioms and colloquialisms) through reading and writing of letters?

3. What are the learners' attitudes towards letters?
 - a) Do the learners consider that the letters are important in contributing towards communicative competence?
 - b) How do the learners relate the receiving of letters to their increase in their confidence in communicating with native English speakers?

In order to answer the research questions above, the researcher gathered evidence about the effectiveness of the weekly letters through a qualitative, action research approach. In this chapter, the researcher describes the procedure which was used to collect the data, introduces the participants, but firstly, the researcher will discuss why a qualitative approach was chosen.

5.1 Approach to the research

Studying the effects of input and interaction on L2 acquisition allows teaching to be seen from an internal perspective, viewing teaching as providing the opportunities for learning through the interactions that occur in the classroom (Ellis, 1999, p.247). Research that has actually taken place in the classroom is of special value, especially when so much research is based *on* the classroom rather than based *in* the classroom (Seliger and Long, 1983). Nunan (1991) found that out of fifty classroom oriented studies, only fifteen drew their data directly from the language classroom, the others being from controlled, laboratory type settings. Research findings which have not originated from the classroom, and have not been tested thoroughly by a practising teacher, should be treated as "hypotheses" about teaching and be subject to strict scrutiny through teaching, ideally followed by some action research (Ellis, 1999, p.248). The research carried out on the

letter writing process was all done within the classroom setting by the researcher as a teacher.

As a teacher taking part in this research process, the researcher/teacher becomes an active participant and this process of reflection is espoused in Schon (1983). Being a teacher/researcher provides many challenges, and Erikson (1993) upholds the value in this 'insider' position of teacher research because it "portrays the teacher as agent in a way that cannot be portrayed in research conducted by intermittent visitors to the classroom, however sensitive they may be as observers and reporters. The teacher comes to know teaching from within, and a fundamentally important aspect of this inside position is the teacher's own intentionality" (Erikson, 1993, p.8).

Although the inside knowledge gained by the teacher allows deciphering of the learners' thoughts, the data must be correctly interpreted with the suspension of the teacher's own judgement and the data must speak for itself (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Gardner, and Steinmetz, 1991; Lofland and Lofland, 1984, found in Mlynarczyk, 1998). By openly attempting to articulate preconceptions, interference is reduced. Mlynarczyk (1998), in attempting to understand the learners' journal writing within broader societal and educational contexts, considered qualitative research methods to be most appropriate. Tesch (1990) classified this methodology as educational ethnography. The human observer (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) is the primary "instrument" and the goal is to discern processes of close observation, description in a field log and ongoing analysis of data (Tesch, 1990, in Mlynarczyk, 1998, p.3). Like most ethnographic research, this study of

journal writing relied on multiple research techniques and a variety of data sources (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984).

The researcher, as teacher in this study, sought the reasons for the efficacy of the letter writing process, having observed the improvement in the communicative competency of the learners in the class. The teacher ascertained that the process worked, but needed to backtrack, using research techniques and a variety of data, to find the reasons for the apparent increase in communicative competence.

5.2 The contextual base

The characteristics of ethnographic research were identified by Nunan (1992, p.56), and the nature of this research into the letter writing process conforms to these characteristics. It was 'contextual' in that the research was conducted in a natural context and it was 'unobtrusive' because there was no attempt at manipulation. Acknowledging Nunan's criteria of contextuality, the natural context in which the research was set was at a language school within a large Polytechnic. The participants studied in a course which offered the most advanced level of language proficiency at that time. The teacher had been working on this course since its inception in the mid 1990's, and the letter writing process was incorporated naturally into that course at that time. The natural daily classroom setting and the weekly letters written by the teacher and learners were the unmodified setting and content for the research environment.

The study was 'longitudinal' as each learner was traced not only over one year of study, but also the study was conducted over three years. It was "collaborative" in needing the

involvement of those participating, and it was 'interpretative' in the manner in which the data was analysed (Easton, 1998).

It is important in such research that consideration be taken into account of the culturally based perspectives known as the 'emic approach' (Johnson, 1992). The cultural and linguistic constitution of the class was considered, as well as the individual behaviour of the participants (Easton, 1998, p.50).

5.3 Sequence of activities

The learners attended four three-hour classes each morning, Monday to Thursday, over the period of a one-year course. The letter writing process will be explained in relation to various factors in the following chapters, but a summary of the process is given here to give an overview of the process.

The teacher gave the learners a letter on Monday morning, and this letter was discussed with volunteer conversation assistants before being dealt with by the teacher. Learners were encouraged to write in reply to the letter within the week, as well as keep a daily motivation chart. The learner's letter to the teacher was read, checked and responded to by the teacher and was given back to the learner the following day. All letters were photocopied, with the agreement of the learners, and kept by the teacher in a secure filing cabinet.

The concept of letter writing was introduced subtly on the very first day by using the format of a letter to introduce the basic course, the teacher's philosophy of teaching and

to give housekeeping details etc. The letter was written in Times New Roman font on 12 type with 1.5 spacing, as requested by learners in the first year of the letter writing process. The language level of this first letter was at a totally comprehensible level to enable all learners to feel comfortable with receiving and reading a letter from the new teacher. The learners were only required to read this letter and ask any questions they may have had, and there was no pressure on the learners to write at this stage. The letter written the following week contained more information about the teacher and the theme for the week was also introduced, chosen from the interest areas of the learners.

A routine gives a sense of security and hence a weekly pattern was followed. Each Sunday night, the teacher wrote a letter to the class which was given at the end of the Monday session and learners were invited to read and underline new words and expressions for homework. The learners were given the week to reply to the letter and they chose to do this on the day which suited them best. The teacher's letter was read at home on the Monday night and was brought to class where it was discussed on Tuesday morning in a one hour conversation period with volunteer native English speaking conversation assistants. In a class of fifteen learners, five to seven native speakers from a variety of backgrounds in the community but with a common interest in learning about other cultures, gave of their time to read, listen and speak about the letter in small groups. Learners had a choice as to how they wanted to use the letter. Some groups chose to take turns at reading the letter out loud and stopping at parts they found difficult. Other groups read through the whole letter, and then returned to areas of difficulty and/or interest. Any syntactical problems were also discussed, although the learners and the assistants were aware that the assistants were not in the role of the teacher, and the

teacher was on hand to assist with any difficulties. The group also knew that any difficulties would be aired and clarified the following day, and therefore used the time to discuss the content of the letter, answering the questions which were posed.

The brainstorming of words and expressions of interest, from the letter and from the conversation assistants, took place on the following Wednesday morning. The learners were asked to pair up with someone not in their group from the previous day, and discussed what new expressions they had learnt from the letter. During this time of peer support, new words and expressions were explained. After ten minutes, the learners were asked to brainstorm all the new words and expressions by writing them on the board, and every learner was required to write at least one word. This collection of language was either a new word which they had understood, had found interesting, and wanted to use in other sentences, or were words which had not been sufficiently explained nor understood. The teacher made a note of these words and used them at the end of the week in a weekly Session Review gap fill exercise.

Once this task had been done, the teacher sat down and read out the letter to the learners, beginning the letter with "Dear Everyone". The learners were encouraged only to listen to the letter, but they were able to read along as well if they preferred. After the letter had been read, the teacher asked general questions to make sure the gist of the letter was understood and that the content had been dealt with sufficiently. The focus was then moved to the important points in the letter, establishing the context as the words written on the board were introduced. Those learners who could answer the questions were capable of explaining the new vocabulary. If there was vocabulary which was new to all

learners, the teacher posited questions to elicit meaning and created other contexts in which learners made sentences. In this way, the new language was clearly understood. Since the learners were expected to be able to use these words and expressions in their own letters, it was important that this task was done thoroughly. Through eliciting other sentences using these words and expressions from the learners, the teacher could gauge the level of comprehension and provide the learners with their own correct models to be used in their letters. The learners then turned to the board and the teacher quickly categorised the words so that they were dealt with in context. A group exercise followed in which the words were explained, identified in context and written down by the learners.

The learners learned the importance of writing down each new word or expression as the following day, Thursday, they were given their weekend homework which involved a Session Review gap-fill exercise with sentences based on the new words they had learnt that week. This homework exercise was usually about 30 sentences in which the new words were placed in different sentences, but in which the meaning was obvious from the context. This homework was to be completed for the following Monday. Therefore, the second activity done on the Monday was the revision of the former letter. This was done by the teacher numbering a class of eighteen learners from one to eighteen, and for the learners to write the missing words to the sentence, which corresponded to their number, on the board. This activity became a collaborative effort, as not all learners would have done their homework nor have known the answers to all the questions. Some learners met before class to confer on the answers, while other learners waited until this activity began. When all the learners had completed their sentences, the learners read out their

own sentence and it was discussed in the group as to whether it was correct or not. With the final sentence read, general questions were called for, and with this completed, so was the revision of the former week's letter. The cycle thus continued.

5.4 The nature of the evidence

A running, reflective diary was kept through out the period in which the learning took place, and procedures and any significant events were written down. These observations provided insights into the learners' development.

Copies of all letters written to and from the learners were kept by the teacher and the letters from the learners were analysed, in relation to the teacher written letter, for changes in language development. Comparisons were made between the first and last letters written by the learner. Objective criteria used were:

1. the number of words in each of the letters
2. the average length of the sentences in the letters
3. the number of times idiomatic and colloquial language, which had been introduced in the letters, was used
4. the correct use in the letters of tenses

A questionnaire using the Likert scale⁶ was given to all 25 participants in which the learners indicated how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements regarding the letters.

⁶ See Appendix II

A feedback questionnaire⁷ was also given with open-ended questions in order to gain understanding of how the learners received and perceived the letters. Interviews of six learners' impressions and use of the letters were taped and transcribed⁸. These interviews, except one, were done by an independent interviewer who was acquainted with, but not well known to the learners. The evidence of these tapes provided a record of the effect of the letters in action. Key events and responses were identified and analysed from the tapes.

5.5 The participants in the study

The study focused on three groups of post intermediate/advanced adult learners at a South Island Polytechnic in New Zealand. These learners were immigrants to New Zealand, having decided to work, continue further study at a tertiary institution, or continue to be caregivers of their families in New Zealand. The learners were chosen at random, one group of seven learners having studied in year one, five learners were still in contact from year two, and thirteen learners were approached who completed the course in year three. All learners who were sent questionnaires responded to the survey. Therefore, by the beginning of year three, twenty five learners agreed to be a part of the research, having read the Information Sheet and signed the consent form⁹. Former learners had agreed to have their letters copied so that their work was available for research purposes.

⁷ See Appendix III

⁸ See Appendix IV

⁹ See Appendix V

The nationalities of the learners were: one Egyptian, four Koreans, five Japanese, one Croatian, one Russian, four Taiwanese, seven Chinese, one Iraqi and one Syrian. This range of nationalities reflected the nature of the learners at the institution. The occupations were: two accountants, three teachers, three company employees, an assistant bank manager, three nurses (one with a Ph.D. in Nursing), a company director, a vocational educational adviser, a university lecturer, two architects, a dentist, two engineers, three medical doctors, a pharmacist, and a laboratory technician. There were 5 males and 20 females, which was the proportion of males to females which normally attended each ESOL class at the Polytechnic¹⁰.

5.6 Analysis

The findings of the questionnaire using the Likert scale will be presented in Chapter Eight along with some of the answers to the written questionnaire which featured open questions. The answers of the latter questionnaire were collated under individual headings and the findings of this will be presented in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight. The taped interviews were transcribed by the researcher, and will be presented in Chapter Seven, as further affirmation of the efficacy of the letter writing process. Other observations which are relevant to this study, as noted in the teacher's diary, will be reported as appropriate in Chapter Six and Chapter Seven. The findings of the learners' writing will be discussed in Chapter Eight.

¹⁰ See Appendix VI

CHAPTER SIX

COMBINING CONDITIONS FOR COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

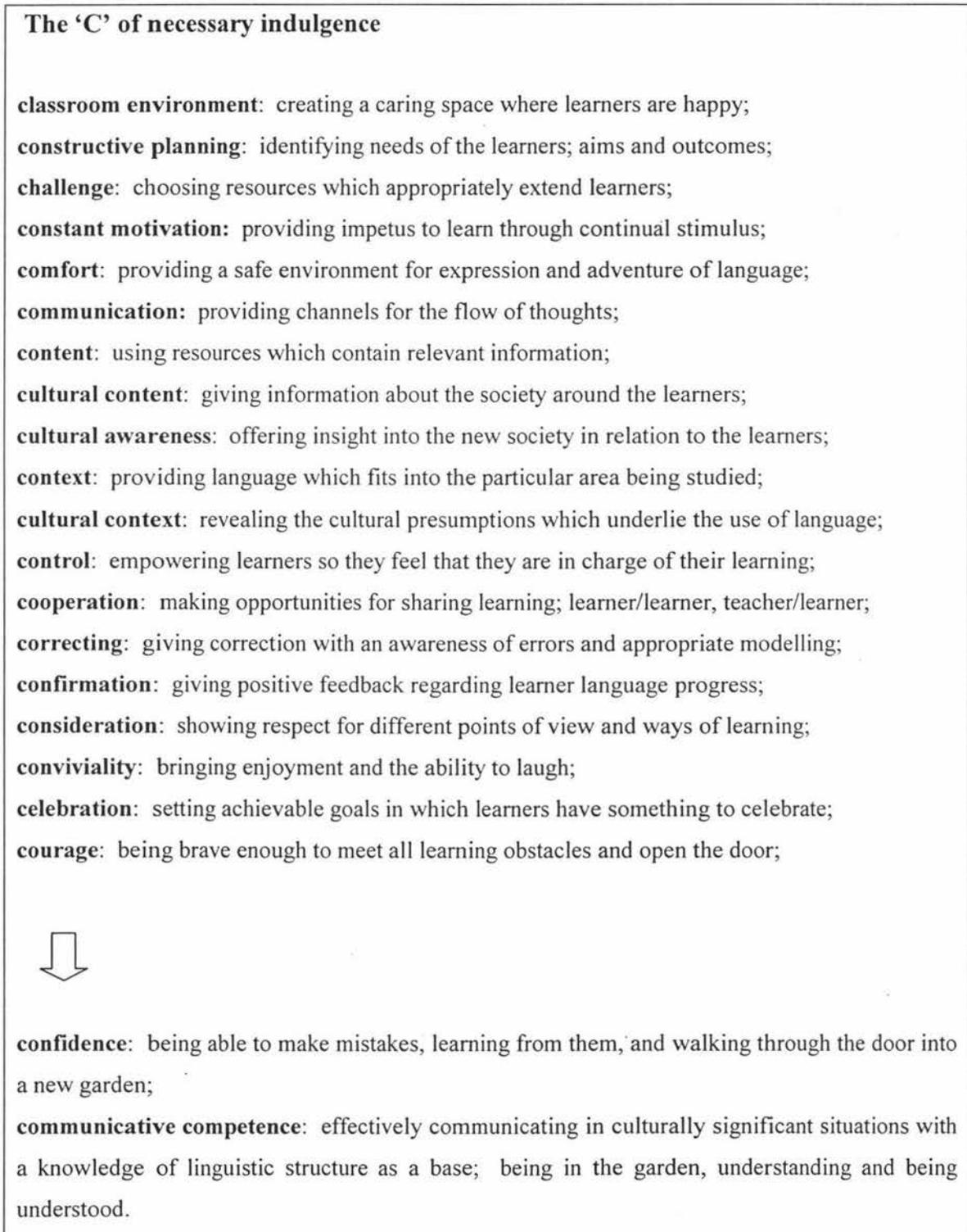
6.0 Introduction

This chapter will elaborate on the ideal conditions for communicative competence (as discussed in Chapter Three), and relate them to the implementation of the letter writing process to help learners improve their communicative competence. The mechanisms developed in the letter writing process will be discussed, highlighting factors from the ideal learning conditions as identified in a list compiled from the relevant literature. These conditions have been compiled in the following descriptive list for identification and clarification, and has been rather cryptically called “the ‘C’ of necessary indulgence” by the researcher. These conditions will be discussed as they relate to the learning environment surrounding the letter writing process. Having discussed these conditions, the reality of how these conditions are implemented into the language programme, and the ways the letter writing process incorporates these conditions will be examined. Following this, the effectiveness of this process for the learners will be discussed in relation to the results of the written questionnaires¹¹. A representative sample of the learners’ responses will be written in italics which gives an overall view of the learners’ perceptions of the letter writing process.

¹¹ Complete transcripts can be seen in *Questionnaire data on use and effectiveness*, unpublished raw data by Verberne Heazlewood, S. (2001).

The following “‘C’ of necessary indulgence” identifies the conditions present in a wish list of ideal conditions for learning which eventually lead learners to increased confidence and communicative competence.

Figure 1



6.1 Classroom environment

Learners come to class with their own attitudes and perceptions, and the moment they step into the classroom, they make a judgement about the environment, which will colour their learning experience. For the learners, who were part of the research, each day of class began with background music, and a personal greeting to each learner by the teacher. As one learner observed,

In some way I felt I lived together with a native speaker. This is a lovely and comfortable feeling.

6.2 Constructive planning

It is important that the objectives of the learners are clarified in the teacher's mind as well as the learners' minds. The objective for the teacher in letter writing was to increase the learners' linguistic competence and empower learners through an increased awareness of the society in which they are living. This was kept in mind at all times so that the letter did not become a psychological indulgence for the teacher.

It is also important that learners carve out achievable learning outcomes. The varied members of the ESOL class bring with them a host of previous experiences, influences and expectations, which will impact on the dynamics of the class, as mentioned in Chapter Three. Therefore, identifying the needs, interest areas and goals of the learners at the beginning of each course was a priority of the teacher to make sure that the teacher's letters satisfied the learners' expectations and needs. As has been stated, all learners in this study identified the need to communicate effectively as being of the utmost importance, wanting to attend university, find a job after the course, or have more contact

with native speakers. Hence, it was the task of the teacher to provide appropriate materials to satisfy these divergent needs.

6.3 Challenge

Krashen (1979) maintained that a learner's success is equal to the amount of effort they put in, with optimal learning taking place where input is at an appropriate level, just beyond the learner's current linguistic competence. As the letter was written by the teacher, the language level of the learners was always kept in the mind. Although there was a sense of challenge for all learners, the language level was pitched to cause no sense of despair for those of lesser ability. The letter written by the teacher was usually between 1,500 to 2,000 words, three to four pages, which provided a lot of meat but was digestible because it was seen as enjoyable. Learners unanimously (100%) said they enjoyed reading the letters.

"The longer the better." "I enjoyed reading them in my cosy bed."

About two hours were spent by the teacher on Sunday night writing the letter, which signalled to the learners that they were

appreciated. There is not all teachers who will write a so long letter every week to their students.

The time taken for the learners to read the letter varied between ten minutes and six hours, with fourteen of the nineteen learners, who specified a time, saying it took them under 1.5 hours. The learner, who took six hours, was the only learner to comment it was

too long and difficult, although this learner did persevere. All other learners approved of the length because they recognised that

the content is important, enjoyable and fun.

The process by which the learners read the letter was described by one learner, and this was typical of many.

Each time I got her letter, I glanced over it first to get what is in the letter. Then, the second time I would read it carefully and highlighted the new words, idioms and colloquialisms and some good sentences, and look for the dictionary or asked her (the teacher) or conversation assistants to get the meaning and the exact way to learn well. The process took me time, but the first reading only took a couple of minutes.

6.4 Constant Motivation

All learners in the research appeared to have external factors causing them to be motivated to improve their English, such as their desire to study further, find a job or communicate in the community. The internal factors were, naturally, more difficult to ascertain. Therefore, at the beginning of each week, the learners were given a motivation chart¹² on which they recorded their motivation for the week and wrote a daily short description of how they were finding the learning experience. Therefore, learners shared with the teacher the way they were feeling about their learning, as well as what they

¹² See Appendix VII

learnt. These jottings were often expanded in the letter to the teacher, and some learners used this chart to use expressions from the teacher's letters, hence reinforcing the new language. Most learners made comments about the letter in their jottings, although they were under no obligation to do so. There was a chuckle at the end of each week as learners were given a sticker for their achievement in completing a week's record of their learning process. This was also a good opportunity for the teacher to gauge the feeling of the individual learners and the mood of the class. The teacher had not introduced the chart as a way of measuring the effect of the letters, although it became a form of monitoring. Notes were recorded of the learner's observations by the teacher, and were used as a way of tracking the learners' attitudes towards learning.

All learners but one said in the questionnaire that the letters helped to keep their motivation high.

I found myself keen to attend Monday class, even if I was busy, only to receive the letter.

One reason for this was that

the letters were unique and the content unexpected.

Another learner added,

Keeping motivation was very easy.

All five learners in 1998 said they replied to the letters, and all but one learner replied to the letters in 1999.

She let us share her stories...each time when we wrote back to Sharron, she also gave us her thoughts and opinions which made us feel closer.

By the teacher giving personal feedback at the bottom of each letter written by the learner, an exchange is set up which promotes forward motion and encouragement to maintain the interaction.

All learners in 2000 stated that they wanted to write, but the three learners who had differing reasons why they didn't write, were motivated to read and discuss the letters.

6.5 Comfort

All good relationships are built on trust, and trust is the foundation on which an interactive learning experience is best based. In order for learners to trust teachers, teachers have to prove themselves worthy of such trust. Learners need to see a real person, not just "the teacher" who stands before them each day, but a person who cares for them and shares of themselves in their desire to have the learners share in return. As one learner said,

I felt she was one of our friends rather than a teacher because all we (classmates) knew her family life, recent state, friends, relationships with workmates. I admire her openness and warmth.

The wealth of knowledge, and experience which teachers bring to the class is significant and confident teachers have faith in their teaching methods while being flexible to the needs of learners. The "x" factor in teachers (as mentioned in Chapter Three), that ability

to relate effectively and in harmony with learners, is a gift not to be minimised. In the learners' feedback, there were many references to the relationship developed with the teacher and the feeling invoked by this.

Her letters make me feel happy. She is generous in sharing her life, even privacy with us. That's why all learners feel able to relate well to her too after reading the letters.

Checking the mail is one of the first rituals done on one's return home, and the first letters opened are those addressed to the addressee by name. Those opened first are the personal letters which are those letters which connect them with others and validate them in the world in which they live. For many learners, receiving no personal mail from those in the society around them makes them feel neither connected nor acknowledged in their new community, thus extenuating the feelings of being socially distanced and isolated. Hence, receiving a letter from the teacher each week allows learners to have a sense of belonging.

It was nice to read how Sharron spent her weekend with her family. It's really nice when you come into a new country to be involved in someone's private life. You just feel more familiar with this person.

Because the need for all learners to feel personally recognised is important, the letter was headed with the teacher's own address, and a space was left for writing in each learner's name after the required number of letters had been photocopied. The final signing off was also written by hand which, depending on the relationship with the learner, would be

“Love”, “Kind regards,” etc, followed by the distinctive flower signature of this particular teacher.

In your letter we can feel you and see you. One thing that you did, (and only you did it) however it has made a significant difference, is that you write our names and sign your signature on every letter.

6.6 Content of the letter

Because successful materials are those which focus on topics of current interest, with material drawn from authentic sources and the input being intellectually stimulating and relevant to the learner (Vogel et al., 1983), the weekly letter must be equally interesting, authentic, stimulating and relevant to the learner. Each Sunday night, the teacher sat down at the computer and shared personal information, the activities of the weekend, seasonal customs, local, national or international news which were of interest to both the teacher and the learner.

We were more like friends chatting about all sorts of topics.

Ten learners identified an understanding of the teacher, her family, daily activities, and life experiences as reasons for looking forward to the letter.

Every letter was just like a story book- read it and have fun. Sometimes it needed a little bit of thinking.

6.7 Cultural content

The letter was written from the teacher's cultural perspective of pakeha South Island New Zealander, and the transparent, openly discussed parochialism was noticeable in some of the learners' comments, for example,

I learned how Southerners and Northerners think of each other, the way Dunedin people think and behave, the Kiwi attitude and thoughts toward English or Australian people.

Twenty-one learners said they had learnt about NZ culture in terms of

its history,

Kiwi customs like

"bring a plate," "It's my shout", "festivals," "social problems," etc.

The number of topics, which can be discussed in a weekly letter over a year of study, was wide ranging. One learner summed up the Kiwi topics with:

Every walk of life, from Captain Cook to the Treaty of Waitangi, from cricket to rugby, from buzzy bees to pavlova (although there is some dispute over who got them first), from gumboots to L&P and lots more.

6.8 Cultural awareness

One Chinese learner remarked that

Sharron's letters are the window of looking NZ culture, history and customs, communication and also the door of entering NZ society for foreign people.

The window into a New Zealander's life had been mentioned in the questionnaire based on the Likert method but not the analogy of the door. This analogy of the door is an important one as it portrays the power of the letters to allow learners to move out of the classroom and into their new society.

Revelations of personal news and personal feelings can create much discussion on a variety of different levels, such as the disclosure of a close relative's terminal illness and the implications for the family. This can elicit appropriate ways of expressing sympathy and lead to discussions on different cultural outlooks on diagnosis, disclosure and death. Learners were aware of the need to know more about the cultures in which they were living, and hence understood the need to be aware of the varying protocol.

I learnt about Sharron's life but I feel I know more about New Zealanders and understand their daily life.

All learners felt they had learnt something about the teacher's life and twenty three learners felt they knew more about other New Zealanders through reading the teacher's letters.

Talking with neighbours and other Kiwis it is impossible to understand so deeply in a Kiwi's life.

Twelve learners felt they had learnt about relationships with family, friends, colleagues and neighbours and how to treat friends with meals, attend parties etc.

However, as much as the learners were able to learn more about New Zealanders through the letters, they were also realistically aware that they had to move out and make contact with others living in society.

I can feel Sharron's personality and character is very close to me. However every person is different and I cannot accept that all NZ is like Sharron.

Making learners aware and proud of their own culture was also an integral part of the reasons for writing the letter, and some learners acknowledged that.

Sharron's letters taught me what the similarity and differences between me (Japanese) and New Zealanders and helped me to understand them better.

Sharron's letter let me feel that me and Kiwis also have something in common.

By asking questions in the letter, learners were keen to reply and share their knowledge of their own culture.

Replying to Sharron's (letter) was natural as I wanted to show my opinions and customs about my country.

6.9 Control

Learners need to feel safe and in control of their environment. Fear is born out of the unknown, and therefore it is important that learners are aware of the expectations of the teacher, and have knowledge of the course programme. As with going to the box for the mail, waiting for the teacher to 'deliver' their letter every Monday morning became part of the learners' weekly ritual, an expectation for many of those with little predictable in their lives as recently arrived immigrants. The letter was handed to each learner in turn and each learner was acknowledged by name as the letter was given.

I expected to receive Sharron's letter each week. Then we reply to questions or recount our personal opinions.

The novel experience for some learners of relating to a native English speaker through a written medium was recognised by both teacher and learner, and was captured by one learner who said,

I have never read letters from native speakers so I found out how native speakers wrote.

In the new learning environment in which the participants found themselves at the beginning of the ESOL course, a predictable pattern emerged as the letter writing process followed a daily routine. The topic for the week was introduced in the letter which prepared the learners.

Through the letter, I understand what we are going to focus on each week.

Therefore, through the predictability, which evolved through the weekly letter, there evolved a sense of empowerment which produced a stronger motivation to reply to the letter.

I wanted to reply and also regarded replying to Sharron as my homework.

6.10 Correcting

In conversations with the learners about their preferred learning styles, unanimously they were of the opinion that correction was vital and would write in their letters that they wanted their letters corrected. Consequently, depending on the learners' ability and personality, mistakes were highlighted, corrected above the word, or written down the left side of the page by the teacher. This enabled the learners to copy corrections out in their own time, and they were able to see where they needed to adjust their language patterns. Learners were encouraged to write back, even if they knew mistakes were present, because the teacher also made inadvertent mistakes in writing on occasion. This was seen as a positive thing to allow the learners the appreciation that even native speakers make "slips" in their writing.

I felt I didn't need to worry about any mistakes in writing common letters while I was taught by Sharron because she would correct for me.

Another learner reiterated this by saying,

In spite of my mistakes, I feel I can write endless numbers of letters.

Learners were made aware that informal letters have a higher level of tolerance for mistakes than formal letters. However, it was a steep learning curve for one learner who confessed,

I never knew how bad my writing was until I received my first letter with corrections from Sharron. I was very surprised and realised my level of writing.

After writing for a year he felt

more confidence of writing.

6.11 Confirmation and feedback

Learners were constantly invited, through the letter, to write back to the teacher. Because of the personal nature of the letters, learners felt able to write of their experiences and how they were feeling.

It is difficult to write a personal letter without disclosing how you really feel.

All letters written by the learner were personally read by the teacher and then answered at the end of the learner's letter. Personal comments about what had been expressed in the letter were made, validating the feelings of the learner, affirming the learner's linguistic ability, and giving words of encouragement. This feedback played a major part in forming the close relationship between the learner and the teacher. The personal message at the end of each letter had more of an impact on the learner than the teacher had realised, and the research identified the importance of this individual attention.

I feel special when she replies and shows me that she reads my letters and responds in a very kind and sympathetic way.

“The most expectation is to read Sharron’s replies.”

6.12 Consideration

Coping in another culture is more than just learning the language. Learners need to feel positive about themselves and the lives they are leading. This ability to empathise with the learners is an important factor in helping the learners to rebuild any sense of lost identity. This sense of identity loss needs to be addressed by both teacher and learners (as discussed in Chapter Three, p.42), in order for the immigrant learners to move forward. Hence, within the teacher’s letters, the topic of immigrating to a new country was raised through the teacher’s own personal experiences of living and working abroad for many years. The issues faced by the teacher were openly discussed and the teacher’s emotions were laid open. In consideration of the feelings of the learners, thoughts and words were chosen carefully, and the letters always remained positive, even if some of the topics dealt with were emotionally challenging.

Her letters were full of energy and wisdom. The contents of her letters are very positive, optimistic and bright.

In the same vein, another learner focused on the ability to leave the stresses in her own life and commented,

Sharron’s letters were always full of nature and comfort that I could escape from my stressed life.

As good friends do, learners become affected by what is written in the letter.

I am excited if nice things happen to Sharron, and sad if bad things happen.

Through the weekly interaction, learners felt closer to the teacher, and the open communication lead to increased trust and understanding in both a linguistic and social sense. Learners described it in many ways, such as feeling

“I was a part of her life too.” “...close friends” “....a member of her family...” “ We got to know Sharron well, and exchanged our views, shared our happiness and unpleasant experience,” and so on.

Knowing that there had been a reaching out by the teacher, the learner also felt the desire to do the same.

I want to reply in the same way which she has done for me.

Access to the teacher’s life experiences, therefore, gave the learners a sense of empowerment.

“Knowledge is power”

“Sharron’s life experience is precious to me.”

Only one Korean male, who was in the class for six months, commented that

sometimes the letter deals with women’s issues rather than common in man and woman. However I learnt a lot in her letters.

An awareness of gender issues and gender language is important, although more importantly is treating the class as a set of individuals.

6.13 Conviviality

The power of laughter to maximise the chances for optimum learning must never be underestimated, as stated in Chapter Three. The teacher enjoyed writing funny stories related to characters with whom the learners had become familiar through the letters. Further bonding resulted when, in a secure environment, the learners and the teacher could laugh at an incident or at themselves. A comment in a letter about a husband's failure to put the toilet seat down prompted an interesting discussion, mainly defined by gender, which proved the international sense of humour! The understanding of such humour is an important sign that the acquisition of another language is taking place, since it has required a comprehensive knowledge of all the systems operating at both a linguistic and social level.

6.14 Celebration

Receiving letters validates peoples' presence in the world and the keeping of letters acknowledges this presence. Learners kept the teacher's letters as a useful reference for model sentences and expressions, as reminders of topics and discussions, as a memory of time spent in a particular time in their lives. Some learners had a special place in which they kept the letters, one learner describing this place as

a special blue box

and another learner leaving the letters in a pile on the dining room table for easy access.

Learners were encouraged to keep their own letters and were asked if the teacher could also take a copy (of some if not all) of their letters to be kept throughout the year. The reason for this was that it provided an excellent measure of a learner's progress, both linguistically and socially. Such progress is difficult to perceive by those who feel powerless to effect change in their present lives. In the same way as writing allows learners to express their feelings and release them to move on, so too does the reading of these letters allow them to record the changes in their language development and thought processes, and to plot their progress. Over a year's course, the teacher can evaluate the progress in the learners' written language skills, perceiving marked changes in their written ability through their newly acquired knowledge. Discussing the letters with the learners at the end of the course clarifies for the learners the progress made and affirms them as reaching a new stage in their language development and their integration into the society. In the same way as learners used authentic autobiographical texts to increase their ability in their own self expression in writing, as mentioned in Chapter Four (McIver, 1987), a Taiwanese learner 'published' all her letters at the end of the year, and had a special lunch with her classmates at which she handed over her 'book' to the teacher. Her sense of self worth at what she had achieved was enormous.

6.15 Conclusion

The ideal conditions for communicative competence, 'the "C" of necessary of indulgence', were all found to be present in the letter writing process. Learners were able to articulate their affirmation for the process through the positive comments they made. It is now necessary to look at how the reading, discussing and writing of letters were able to enhance the learners' ability to communicate orally.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FROM LETTER WRITING TO SPEAKING

7.0 Introduction

Letter writing is a form of interaction which enables the reader to understand a message from the writer. In a letter, the teacher is given the time to write down what message and language needs to be taught, and the learner is provided with a similar amount of time to assimilate the information. This provides an important teaching tool. Idioms and colloquialisms make up an increasing amount of New Zealand every day language, and without a knowledge of such expressions, non native speakers can flounder. By introducing a limited number of these sentence patterns in each letter, the learners are able to have access to a form of language they can use in every day speech. In this chapter, the way in which the letter was used to incorporate speech, and its effect on the learners' language skills will be discussed in conjunction with the learners' responses to the process.

7.1 Using the letter to increase speaking skills

Through careful crafting of the letter by the teacher, the learners were able to access the language needed to communicate more effectively in everyday conversation. The following sections discuss the strategies employed by the learners in accessing that language.

7.1.1 Copying the model and constructing new sentences

As discussed in Chapter Three, the acquisition of language depends on learners relating words to meaningful situations and combining them in appropriate interaction. Before a learner can write fluently using natural flair, these words, idioms and groups of words which have been enveloped into formulaic expressions, need to be learnt as meaningful structures (Ndomba, 1982, p.32). Because of the conversational tone of the teacher's letter, the learners were able to adopt many of the phrases used, not only for writing but also for speaking. Clear models were given which provided a framework around which the learner could work. Ready made chunks of language were produced in the letter, in clear contexts, which enabled the learners to lift them and insert them confidently into their own writing, making them feel free to write without fear of making mistakes. Whether learners take advantage of formulaic expressions or are able to create their own sentences from the new chunks of language, it would seem to follow that learners will extend their ability to communicate if they feel in control of this new language. Freedom from fear brings empowerment to express themselves as they really are.

Although never instructed, four learners said they

copied Sharron's structure and remembered them."

An additional learner said she

memorised important words and phrases. I think it helped me to input new sentences as well.

One learner commented that copying made her feel

more confident to use different sentence structures.

Seven learners said they

used new sentence structures from Sharron's letters after working on the letter.

The Iraqi learner explained he

spent hours to read each simple detail in Sharron's letter. Most of the students used to highlight the difficult and new things in Sharron's letter and try to use them in replying in the letters. Isn't that incredible?

The Croatian learner spent most of a three week break writing out every letter written by the teacher again in her own hand writing, proudly showing the results of her labours on her return to class the following semester.

7.1.2 Communicating through colloquialisms and idioms

Each week, the learners were introduced to new vocabulary and appropriate syntax as the need arose, with idioms and colloquialisms added naturally in the letter. A visitor who arrived "out of the blue," or unexpected news which sent someone "over the moon," were examples of the language the learner read about weekly. The fact that the learner knew the writer and was introduced to the new language through an established context seemed to make the learning process more effective. The letters were effectively being used as a textbook, an 'alive dictionary', as one learner described the letters, an authentic, relevant and a cheap resource.

“The letters were like a textbook for us ...with lots of new words phrases and idioms.” “I was anxious to study more things from her letters...they were an alive dictionary.”

Learners felt satisfied that the language included in the letter was relevant.

When I heard (from others) expressions and idioms and understood them, I was satisfied to study her letters.

Some of the learners already had many friends out in the community and the learners tested their new language out on their friends.

That's another beauty of the letters. Had not for the letters I would never have had the chance to learn some of the idioms and colloquialisms, which are so important in my daily life.

While all learners acknowledged that they had understood the idioms and colloquialisms used in the letters and helped them

to understand Kiwis in everyday conversation and TV programmes,

Only two out of five learners in 1998 actually use the expressions in daily life. The reason given consistently was because

I am afraid that people cannot understand because of my accent.

However in 1999, all learners were affirmative in seeing the letters as a way of having access to idioms and colloquialisms, understanding the idioms that had been presented. Only two out of the sixteen learners said they felt afraid they would

Present the not appropriate idiom so always use the simplest words.

This feeling of fear of unknown language is an understandable, natural reaction, and in the case of idioms, the learners were told in class that they needed only passively to understand the colloquial language. The learners could produce simpler language to get the same meaning across. Although it was acknowledged that acquiring the use of idioms and colloquialisms was difficult, learners said they felt much more positive about their general speaking ability, having gained access to this new language.

After I had learned lots of new idioms and colloquialisms from her letter, I felt my speaking is more accurate and I was confident that I speak the right sentences as I had learned them from Sharron's letter. I also felt I could describe things better by using them. Actually, I encountered those idioms and colloquialism quite often in my daily life, so it was really a good way to learn through reading Sharron's letters.

7.2 Connecting writing and speaking

“When we come to write, what is delivered to the pen is in part already shaped, stamped with the image of our own ways of perceiving. But the intention to share, inherent in spontaneous utterance, sets up a demand for further shaping.” (Britton, 1982, p.141).

As writers struggle with what they want to say, they stumble upon new ways of expressing themselves. The risk-takers throw out new ways of expressing themselves, which are responded to by the teacher, and the learning continues. Those more reticent follow the patterns set down, but still create their tapestry through constant weaving. Because the letters were written informally as one would speak, they were more like a running 'inner dialogue' which was easily accessed for speaking as well as for writing. The words ran freely and skipped from one topic to another as one would in a conversation. As in a conversation, the writer asked questions in the letter to elicit replies.

I follow Sharron's letters to complete by own letters and reply to the letters between each other.

In the letter writing process, because learners were given a weekly letter, there was ample opportunity for the repetition, expansion of key phrases and ideas, and daily encouragement to use the words learnt in the letters. Making the new language so accessible allows for more effective language acquisition, as discussed in Chapter Three, and such opportunities were made available in this process.

As part of empowering the learners, it is important that learners are introduced to positive contacts with native English speakers in New Zealand so that they develop a realistic perception of themselves and increased feelings of self-esteem. Although some learners were fortunate to have contact with New Zealanders outside the classroom, many of the learners had little opportunity to talk with native speakers for an extended period of time. The letter set the scene for this experience. As learners interacted with the letter, they discovered new vocabulary and expressions, answered questions raised in the letter, and

formed questions for the conversation assistants and for the teacher, related to the content of the letter. A structure was, therefore, set in place which encouraged learners to externalise the mental processing. As was discussed in Chapter Five, the letter writing process encompassed meeting with native English speaking conversation assistants, who worked alongside the learners for an hour a week to read through the letters, discuss the questions posed by the teacher, and answer questions about any new vocabulary.

I feel more comfortable now as I know more about native English people through Sharron's letters, eg customs, popular activities.

Therefore, asking questions of the conversation assistants after the learners have 'talked' with themselves, encourages this externalising of their mental processes, (as expounded by Ellis and discussed in Chapter Three). This intrapersonal interaction can enhance learning by enabling the learners to process material more deeply, enabling them to engage in mental activity which causes them to go beyond the input. It is this externalised mental process which is so important for learners to develop, and results after the positive interaction between the teacher and the learner. This interaction, through the weekly letter and follow-up activities, enabled a building up of respect and mutual understanding. The letter provided

common topics of conversation,

and these topics were used with the native speakers with whom they had contact,

I can find any of the topics from Sharron's letters to talk with native English speakers.

This positive interaction, as stated in Chapter Three, is so needed to address any imbalance the learner may feel, and allow the learner to walk confidently with other members of the community. In the letter writing process, the weekly meeting with conversation assistants went some way to meeting this goal.

I learn more about NZ culture and English....they (the conversation assistants) know a lot about the society.”

Identifying with the teacher through the sharing of experiences, and then being able to use the teacher’s language to communicate, gives the learner a sense of self worth through this connection with the teacher, and makes for a pleasant learning experience.

As I read I feel I am experiencing Sharron’s experiences. For learning, I enjoy how to put the words together.

For many of the learners, their first contact with New Zealanders is with the teacher, and naturally the views of this teacher do not reflect all the views of society as a whole. Hence, the classroom, in which a wide variety of members of the community come together as conversation assistants, is an important venue for the sharing of different viewpoints.

The conversation assistants have different opinions or points of view to Sharron and know more about Kiwi lives.

Learners thought this one hour with the conversation assistants was helpful because they had an opportunity to

hear the words many times and ask again for the difficult words, helped to understand more of the letter, correct pronunciation and answer the questions (contained in the letter) and explain our opinions and make comments.

I gain knowledge of common, everyday language...a guideline.

All but two learners used the letter with conversation assistants every week, with two learners saying they used the letters sometimes but preferred to talk about general topics.

One learner felt that they could get help sometimes from the conversation assistants but that they

couldn't explain well and I had to ask Sharron again.

It was explained to both learners and conversation assistants that the conversation assistants were in class to be of assistance, but that any teaching points would be dealt with by the teacher the following day.

Having been given access to relevant language, learners felt able to take the next step on their road to feeling part of the new society. They were given tools, as well as hope, that their goals could be reached.

By adding new words, idioms and expressions to my own dictionary which means extra skills which gives me the ability to plan for the future and start dreaming again.

For learners to be able to feel able to dream again is a very positive sign, and relates back to the analogy of the garden and the desire for learning to be the season of spring in the learners' lives.

7.3 Conclusion

By reading informal, colloquial language in the letter written by the teacher, the learners were given access to a form of language which was used in their interaction with native speakers. The content of the letter provided the learners with topics which were naturally brought up in conversation because they were authentic, relevant, interesting, and current.

Learners were given access not only to the language and views of the teacher, but also of the members of the wider community, with their varying ways of expressing themselves.

One Chinese learner expressed how he was feeling by saying,

I learnt something about Sharron's life. It was a gate for me. But it was Sharron's life and not other Kiwis' lives. I should contact other Kiwi people.

The self initiated use of the analogy of the gate is reassuring as the learner recognised that the letter brought them to a point from which they could venture out on their own.

The following chapter will now tie the four communication skills together, firstly measuring the learners' increase in writing skills in areas which can be quantified: the length of the letters, the length of sentences, the frequency of idiomatic and colloquial

language, and the accuracy of verbs. Secondly, the learners' perception of their increase in confidence in these four competency areas will be discussed using the learners' feedback.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DISCUSSION

8.0 Introduction

In this chapter, the discussion will consist of observations from the findings in the research, and the interpretation of these observations which will validate the letter writing process. The questions, raised in Chapter One, will be reintroduced to ensure that answers have been adequately given. The limitations of the present study will be outlined, and it is appropriate and necessary to look to the future and discuss the implications for further research.

The very nature of qualitative research means that the results are holistically analysed, and this chapter will bring together the various strands of the learners' responses into a unified whole. These responses are a clear indicator of the positive effect the learners perceive of the letter writing process on their increase in communicative competence. However, unlike this qualitative analysis, it was possible to quantify the learners' letters in certain respects. An indication of not only the learners' accuracy in writing, but also their ability to write longer letters, as well as longer sentences, and to use more colloquial and idiomatic language is evident from the analysis. Certain aspects of the learners' writing ability will be analysed in the first part of this chapter, followed by the analysis of the learners' perceptions of the letter writing process, and their communicative progress. Learners interacted with the letter, the teacher and conversation assistants, and a summary of the interaction from the conversation assistants' perspective will be given. This summary will be followed by a general validation of the whole process through the

eyes of six learners who expressed their opinions in an interview with an independent interviewer.

8.1 Assessment of learners' writing skills

As stated in Chapter Five, the first and last letters of the twenty five learners written to the teacher were analysed in relation to length of the letters; the average length of the sentences; the occurrence of idiomatic and colloquial expressions; and the accuracy of tense forms. The length of the letters was obviously calculated by counting the number of words in the first and last letter. The average length of the sentences was calculated by taking the average number of words in the third sentence, the middle sentence and the third last sentence, of both the first and last of the learners' letters.

As can be seen in Table 1 (page 111), where last letters are expressed as a percentage of the first letters, the overwhelming majority of learners increased not only the length of their letters over the period of their course, but also increased the length of their sentences, and their use of colloquial and idiomatic language learnt in the teacher's letters. The marked increase would seem to be evidence of the learners' desire to communicate, and to become increasingly confident to use not only their existing language, but also to incorporate the new structures they have learnt into longer passages of communication. The writing of longer, more complex sentences, is evidence of an increase in competence, and the inclusion of more idiomatic and colloquial language indicates a desire to express thoughts and ideas in the language of every day Kiwis, and an ability to do so.

As can be seen, the first column indicates the increase in the number of words written, on average, in the learners' letters, and this increase in output by the learners. This is an indication of the learners' increase in motivation to write, and their increased confidence in writing. Overall, there was an average 214% increase in the length of the last letter compared with the first letter. Of the learners, 64%, sixteen out of twenty five learners, gained in the number of words used in the last letter compared with the first letter. The highest comparison was 920%, and the lowest comparison was 42%. Where the last letter represented 920% of the first letter, there was a significant increase in the number of words used. Where the lowest comparison represented 42% of the first letter, there was a decrease of 58% in the number of words used.

The learner who made the spectacular gains was a Syrian woman who arrived in class with a desire to communicate, but an inability to communicate accurately. She expressed her dislike of writing, and it was her lack of confidence in writing which prevented her from submitting her first letter immediately. However, her motivation and confidence increased during the course of the year, and once the first letter¹³ had been written, this learner wrote regularly. By the last letter, there was a sense of increasing competency which was lacking in her first letter¹⁴. The learner who displayed the most significant decrease in length was a learner who was reasonably confident on her arrival in class and was very keen to seek out her options for her future. In her first and subsequent letters, she wrote of her situation and requested advice. This was given by the teacher so that by the time she wrote her last letter, she had resolved her situation, and was keen to just share news of her daily interactions with her New Zealand friends whom she had recently

¹³ See Appendix VIII

¹⁴ See Appendix IX

met.

The second column indicates the increase in the number of words in the sentences within the first and last letters. This is one indication of the learners' increase in competence in their writing ability. The average number of words per sentence in the last letter, was a 185% increase of the first. The highest gain was 417% and the highest reduction was 44%. Twenty-three out of the twenty-five learners, 92% of the learners, gained in the number of words used in the sentences in the letters.

The third column indicates the increase in use of idiomatic and colloquial language, and such increases are one measure of the learners' enculturation process. The desire to be part of the community is reflected in the learners' use of such new language, as learners take into their own language systems the expressions so common in every day life.

There was a 240% gain in the use of colloquialisms and idioms, that is, the number of idioms used in the last letter was 240% more than the first. Nineteen out of the twenty-five learners, 76% of the learners, increased their use of colloquialisms and idioms. Of the five learners who decreased their use, three of the learners had picked up an average of five idioms in their first letter, and dropped by only one idiom. The other two learners decreased by only one, having only used one idiom or colloquialism in the first letter.

The most dramatic increase from using no idioms nor colloquialisms, to having thirteen instances of such every day language, was by a Taiwanese women who had problems with the health system. She was determined to have her views expressed in a way which would be clearly understood, and hence chose to use the language most commonly used by ordinary Kiwis.

Therefore, the overall significant increase in the learners' output, indicated by the increased length of the letters; the increased complexity of the sentences, indicated by the increased length of the sentences within the letters; and the increase use of everyday expression, indicated by the used of colloquialisms and idioms, give a clear message that the learners have increased in confidence, competence and inculturation. The added increase in accuracy in tense use, as will be shown in the following Table 2, reflects a desire, whether conscious or unconscious, to produce a piece of correct writing, and hence display increased competence in writing.

Table 1: Letter and sentence length and the frequency of idiomatic and colloquial language

Name		No. of words in letter: % increase		No. of words in sentence: % increase		No. of idioms and colloquialisms	
L.L.	1 st letter	343		7		0	
	Last letter	289	84%	16	229%	4	+4
M.L.	1 st letter	494		6		1	
	Last letter	404	82%	20	333%	5	+4
J.Q.	1 st letter	265		6		5	
	Last letter	135	51%	25	417%	4	-1
H.A.	1 st letter	45		14		0	
	Last letter	414	920%	27	193%	5	+5
H.K.	1 st letter	270		7		2	
	Last letter	760	281%	11	157%	1	-1
L.E.	1 st letter	149		10		1	
	Last letter	369	248%	17	170%	3	+2
V.L.	1 st letter	523		12		1	
	Last letter	375	72%	27	225%	3	+2
V.C.	1 st letter	281		18		6	
	Last letter	203	72%	21	117%	4	-2
S.O.	1 st letter	157		8		0	
	Last letter	459	292%	20	250%	5	+5
S.S.	1 st letter	267		17		1	
	Last letter	236	88%	14	82%	1	0
M.A.	1 st letter	327		13		4	
	Last letter	507	155%	17	131%	5	+1
L.I.	1 st letter	493		14		1	
	Last letter	286	58%	16	114%	0	-1
T.T.	1 st letter	200		11		0	
	Last letter	568	284%	30	273%	8	+8
M.M.	1 st letter	147		7		0	
	Last letter	667	454%	16	229%	4	+4
S.O.	1 st letter	203		10		0	
	Last letter	588	290%	18	180%	2	+2
M.Y.	1 st letter	85		18		0	
	Last letter	184	216%	19	106%	2	+2
A.M.	1 st letter	161		9		0	
	Last letter	347	216%	10	111%	1	+1
H.T.	1 st letter	220		9		0	
	Last letter	535	243%	13	144%	1	+1
S.W.	1 st letter	329		13		5	
	Last letter	352	107%	25	192%	4	+1
Q.Y.	1 st letter	155		18		2	
	Last letter	447	288%	10	56%	7	+5
G.W.	1 st letter	135		8		1	
	Last letter	572	424%	28	350%	2	+1
S.C.	1 st letter	361		8		1	
	Last letter	425	118%	16	200%	2	+1
Y.B.	1 st letter	259		9		0	
	Last letter	221	85%	11	122%	2	+2
A.C.	1 st letter	626		12		0	
	Last letter	668	107%	17	142%	13	+13
E.C.	1 st letter	238		10		0	
	Last letter	433	182%	10	100%	3	+3

For the purposes of this study, the accurate use of tense was used as one measure of improvement in grammatical accuracy, and hence one measure of increased competence in the language. This chart indicates the number of mistakes, made in a particular tense, in the first and the last letter by the learner. As can be seen, fourteen learners increased their accuracy of tense forms, and ten learners stayed the same at only one mistake per letter or none at all. The one learner, who increased from making two mistakes in her first letter to four mistakes in her second letter, had also increased the length of her letters from forty five words to four hundred and fourteen words in her last letter. This was a 920% increase in length from the first to the last letter, and a 193% increase in the number of words used. Seen in this context, her actual number of mistakes in tense was very small after making such significant gains in the length of her letter writing.

Table 2: Learner mistakes in tenses

Tense	First Letter			Mistakes Total No.	Last Letter			Mistakes Total no.
	Present	Past/present perfect	Future		Present	Past/Present Perfect	Future	
L.L.	2	5	1	8	2	1		1
M.L.		1		1				0
J.Q.	1			1		1		1
H.A.	1	1		2	1	3		4
H.K.		1		1			1	1
L.E.	3			3		2		2
V.L.		1	1	2	1			1
V.C.		1		1				0
S.O.	1			1				0
S.S.	1	3		4				0
M.A.				0				0
L.I.	1	2		3				0
T.T.				0				0
M.M.	1			1		1		1
S.O.		2		2		1		1
M.L.				0				0
A.M.		1		1			1	1
H.T.		1		1			1	1
S.W.		4		4				0
G.W.	0			0				0
S.C.		1		1				0
Q.Y.		1		1				0
Y.B.	1			1				0
A.C.		1		1				0
E.C.				0				0

As the teacher's letters were read, discussed, and answered by the learners throughout the year, the learners developed a more natural writing style. This style reflected not only the desire to model their letters on the teacher's in terms of length, vocabulary and syntax, but it also reflected the continuing motivation and increasing confidence with which the learners approached their language study. It is also a reflection of the learners' increasing understanding of the host language and its culture, and their willingness to be active, interactive participants.

8.2 Learner assessment of increase in confidence in communicating

Confidence is critical before learners can communicate competently. The following are the learners' assessment of their confidence levels after working through the letter writing process.

The Iraqi engineer summed up the influence of the letters on him by saying,

The more I learn, the more confident I am. The letters helped me greatly with my speaking, reading, writing and even listening because the four aspects of language study just can't be totally separated. They affect each other.

8.2.1 Confidence in writing

All learners felt negatively before coming to the class with descriptions such as,

"I seldom wrote." "I didn't like writing." "I felt nervous writing"

(Writing was)

"a burden," "a bit hard."

I was

“less confident and reluctant”, “hesitating”, “I hated writing”.

All these feelings were summed up by one learner with the declaration

I told Sharron on the first day that I hate writing letters even in my own language, but after writing more than 10 letters to Sharron, I think I became more confident now and I can write.

Therefore, all learners, except one, felt they had increased in their confidence in writing and the one exception stated that she was already confident before starting the course.

I could get the feeling of the language from reading Sharron’s letter when I wrote, and I can write quicker, more accurately and more naturally now.” “I hated it before and now I feel free and I know I can do it!

8.2.2 Confidence in reading

All but one learner thought their reading ability had improved through reading the letters.

The letter helped to

recognise the whole concept of an article, gain the meaning of special terms and colloquial language and gain confidence.

8.2.3 Confidence in speaking and conversing with native English speakers

All but two learners believed that Sharron’s letter had in some way helped them in their increased confidence in speaking. One learner felt more confident in,

remembering and then understanding vocabulary, expressions and colloquial language used by native speakers.

Others felt it was

quite easy to involve (myself) into conversations with Kiwi speakers. I think Sharron's letters related to this because she used very New Zealand style English.

I always encounter some words and expressions I have got from her letter when I talk with native speakers.

It makes me easier to be understood and I am also confident to use them in my speaking.

My confidence is still the same but I notice that when I tried to use some expressions in Sharron's letters, they told me my English is good.

One learner felt confident, but didn't attribute this to the letter, having arrived in class already confident.

With reference to the list of "The 'C' of necessary indulgence" (Figure 1), the learners' responses to the letters were categorised. Table 3 below shows the perception of the learners towards the letters.

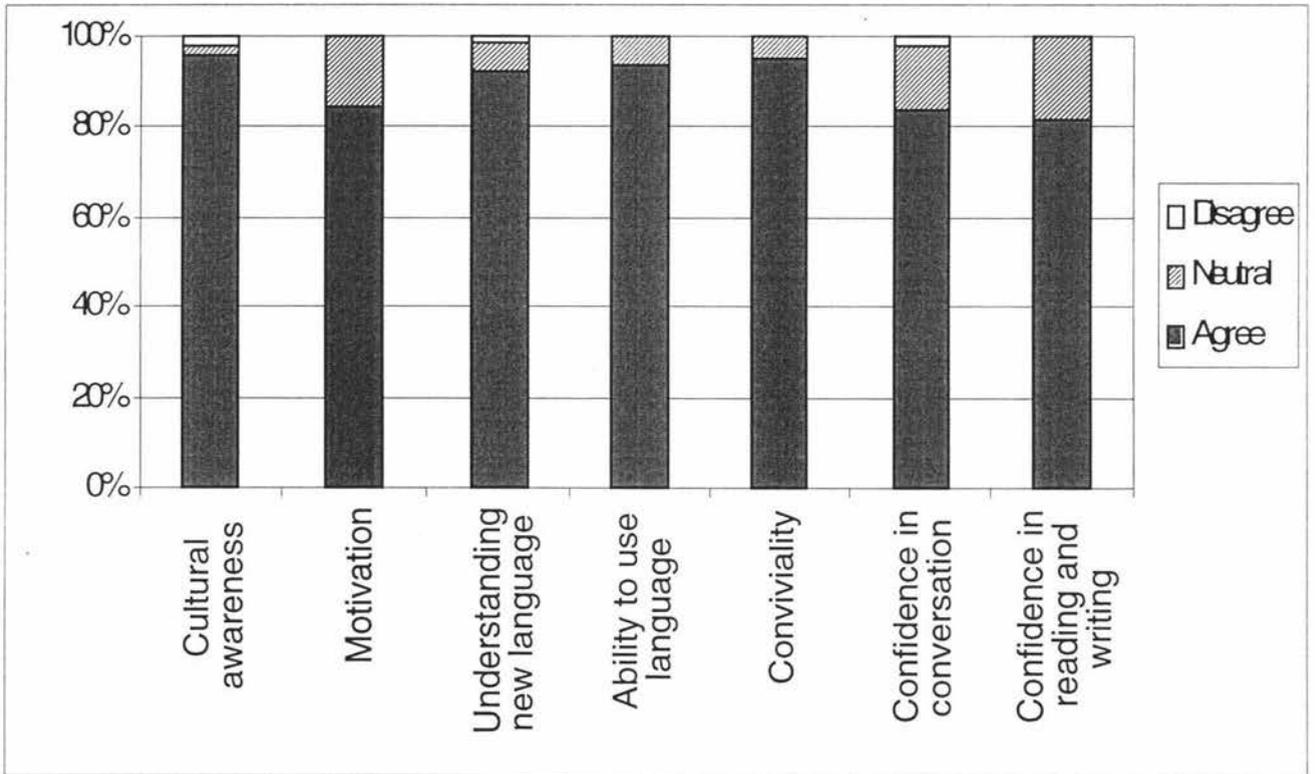
The numbers in the top row in each section indicate the number of learners who answered the particular question, and expressed how they felt. The number underneath is the converted percentage to give a clearer indication of how the class as a whole perceived the particular parts of the letter writing process.

Table 3: Learner responses to the weekly letter

	Sharron's letter has given you:	1	2	3	4	5
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Cultural awareness	Increased knowledge of NZ society	13 54.17%	10 41.67%		1 4.16%	
	A window into a New Zealander's life	16 66.66%	7 29.16%	1 4.16%		
Motivation	Increased motivation to study	9 34.61%	14 53.84%	2 11.53%		
	Increased motivation to write	10 38.46%	11 42.30%	4 15.38%		
Understanding new language	An increased knowledge of grammar	10 40.00%	10 40.00%	4 16.00%	1 4.16%	
	Increased understanding of colloquial language	18 69.23%	7 30.76%			
	Increased knowledge of everyday language	18 75.00%	5 20.84%	1 4.16%		
Ability to use language	An ability to use new Colloquial language	8 32.00%	16 64.00%	1 4.00%		
	An ability to use new sentence structures	10 43.47%	11 47.82%	2 8.69%		
Conviviality	A feeling you are special to Sharron	16 64.00%	8 34.00%	1 4.00%		
	A closer relationship with Sharron	16 64.00%	7 28.00%	2 8.00%		
Confidence in conversation	Increased confidence in speaking with Sharron	13 50.00%	8 34.61%	3 11.53%	1 3.8%	
	Increased confidence in talking with Kiwis	8 33.33%	12 50.00%	4 16.66%		
Confidence in reading and writing	Increased confidence in writing generally	7 28.00%	13 52.00%	5 20.00%		
	Increased confidence in reading	6 24.00%	15 60.00%	4 16.00%		

The above table, interpreted in the following graph, clearly indicates the vast majority of learners' feelings in acknowledging that the weekly letter was helpful in increasing the learners' cultural awareness, motivation, language competency, confidence, and feelings of well being in their language learning process.

Figure 2



8.3 The conversation assistants

Although the learners were the focus of this research, the conversation assistants were also an important interactive component of the learning programme, enabling the learners to access the language and the culture of the surrounding community. For this interaction to be successful, it was necessary for both parties to be happy with the interaction. Therefore, the conversation assistants were asked to comment on how they perceived their interaction with the learners¹⁵. All the assistants commented on the mutual benefit which resulted from what they perceived as an intercultural exchange, considering their participation as being not only the role of a disperser of information, but also the receiver of much new knowledge from the wide cross section of immigrants with whom they discussed a wide range of topics each week. The mutual respect between both learner and conversation assistants no doubt contributed to the positive interaction.

The following is an opinion of a conversation assistant about the letter writing process, and although it is only one view, it sums up a general view which was apparent in talking with the conversation assistants.

I always look forward to reading Sharron's letters as they are so interesting and busy and invite "forward motion" as to what she is going to tell you next!

A lot of thought is put into local language and how it could be bandied about and used.

¹⁵ See Appendix X

The attractions of being a conversation assistant, particularly an elderly person who is retired, is that in one hour a week, others (hopefully) respect us for our maturity and experience, and we recapture, however briefly, a little of the man which we lose when retire from paid employment. We feel we are repaying some of the benefits we have reaped through living in New Zealand, and the beauty of it is we can return home an hour later without setting exams or tests, or having to mark work.

I have the feeling that Sharron's letters may not be successful in the hands of any or all teachers: that is it best in the hands of a lively, attractive, interesting extrovert like Sharron, who has the personality to enthuse her students-in effect to use acting skills without losing sincerity. However, I may be wrong.

This conversation assistant brought up some important points about the content of the letter, how it is used, the reasons why people volunteer to participate in this exchange, and possible reasons why the letter writing process is successful. These areas will be consolidated in the following chapter.

8.4 Learner validation of the letter writing process

As well as the written evaluations, six learners were interviewed by an impartial interviewer to ascertain whether there was any variance in what had been said in the written replies. It must be kept in mind that the learners are aware that what their views are to be read by their teacher, and indeed, that their views on tape will also be heard by

their teacher. However, the interviewing was seen as an attempt to introduce impartiality and to provide a form of validity measure. The following are the transcripts of the learners' interviews and clearly support what had been written in the learners' questionnaires. The learners' responses have been categorised into sections to correspond as closely as possible to the sections in Table 3 above.

8.4.1 Learner profiles

S.S. was a high school teacher in Taiwan, and studied in the researcher's class in 1996/1997, for one and a half years in the morning class, and returned to study again in 2001.

V.C. was an accountant in Croatia, and was in the class in 1998. She is now successfully studying towards a Diploma in Business at the Otago Polytechnic.

T.T. and **S.W.** are a married couple from China whom the interviewer chose to interview together. The researcher would have preferred them to have been interviewed separately to get more detailed information, but their answers are consistent with what they said in their written answers. **T.T.**, an oncologist in China, was in the researcher's class for two and half years, from 1997-1999, choosing to continue in 1999, even though he had a solid grasp of the language in order to consolidate all his learning. His wife, **S.W.**, a lecturer in Computer Science in China, studied in the class in 1999. Both graduated with degrees in Information Science from Otago University on finishing their studies with the teacher.

M.A. was a careers advisor in Japan, and was in the class in 1999. She is now studying fulltime at Otago University, achieving high marks in all her subjects, particularly psychology.

S.C. is a Taiwanese doctor and plans in the future to return to Taiwan. Because the interviewer was unavailable, the researcher interviewed this learner, and because of this, her answers were in the second person. Her verbal responses were, however, consistent with her written answers which she had written one year previously.

8.4.2 Class environment

The things the learners remembered most about the class, and looked forward to were:

S.S. *I like Sharron's personality. I enjoy studying every day in Sharron's class because in her class I feel more comfortable, and I have learnt lots of things from Sharron's teaching. Sharron's letter, all of my classmates, like reading Sharron's letter. Then Tuesday, we talked about Sharron's letter with volunteer assistants. Then Sharron had some questions for us to thinking about and to write a letter to her. To reply our own opinion, we responded to Sharron's letter every week.*

V.C. *Sharron's class was different. She makes all the time nice things and you never feel bored. It's all the time, she's full of energy, and I just look forward to coming here. Active. You never know what will be next.*

T.T. & S.W. *Lots of things.*

T.T. *Activities, language, jokes.*

S.W. *Laughing, friends.*

T.T. *Lots of friends.*

M.A. *I remember I learnt a lot of kinds of phrases, idioms.*

S.C. *In the early morning, I always come just on time. You just write some things the headlines of today's topic. I like to meet teachers and classmates and also want to catch up some news and people and about New Zealand society. Because you arrange different topics on a different day such as Tuesday we'll talk to the volunteers, and we'll have free communication. I think Wednesday, maybe, you'll give us your letters. We will know what happens during your last week. I liked that. Actually, maybe my personality. Something maybe it happens out of the way is O.K. but I like them to be arranged in advance.*

S.S. and V.C. touched on the previously dubbed "x factor" in the teacher, that indefinable, yet critically important quality. The fact that the lessons were created as the learners' needs arose created an air of expectation as to what would happen next. Although lessons were planned in accordance with the needs and often immediate wishes of the learners, the learners liked the completion of objectives and learning outcomes which instilled predictability in the weekly lessons. As stated in Chapter Two, this routine in their daily life was vital for learners who had had the familiar taken away from them.

T.T. and S.W. looked forward to the classroom environment and the ability to laugh with friends made in the class.

M.A. looked forward to learning new idioms and colloquialisms, expressions which were difficult to access and use.

Therefore the learners acknowledged that classroom strategies were important with variety

“never boring”,

a dynamic approach

“ active”,

humour

“jokes,” “laughter”,

and relationship building

“lots of friends”,

foremost in the learners’ minds. Although there was the learners’ expectation that there could be something new and unpredictable each day, there was also the knowledge that the classes were carefully planned, and that they were exposed to language which was relevant and useful in their lives.

8.4.3 Cultural awareness

The reasons the learners thought Sharron wrote the letters were:

S.S. *She always wants to share her lifestyle, and sometimes she writes a letter about New Zealand culture, about her weekend. So I think through this way we close to New Zealand family. Closer to understanding more about New Zealand culture, New Zealand family, their lifestyle, to know more about New Zealand.*

V.C. *I think this is Sharron's way to express her individuality, and how special we are for her, that even we can share private things with her. Because Sharron spent a lot of time in another country she can feel how foreign people feel in New Zealand, a new country and she wanted to give us opportunity to be closer with her.*

T.T. *As part of her Masters, maybe, and it is her way of her teaching as a means by which she can convey her ideas to her students. It is her style.*

S.W. *Her letters are very helpful for our learning English. Also it can improve our relationship, make our relationship closer.*

T.T. *We still read her letters, even last week's letter.*

S.W. *We catch up on her news.*

T.T. *Last week we read it. We get letters from Peter, a conversation assistant.*

S.W. *He comes to our house every Wednesday and goes to Sharron's class on Tuesday, so we can have it.*

M.A. *Because of course she wants to teach a lot of vocabulary and phrases and idioms. So I think it's because of her personality. Her personality is very open minded and all the time she in the class talks about her family, her friends, her private life. And then students' letters, they are totally linked with her talk in the class. And for students we are familiar with her private life from her letters.*

S.C. *I think it is one kind of communication between people. Because another reason maybe the time is not enough for us to communicate in the class, so it's easy. We just have to look over the letters and we know something and also you also wrote down something happened about New Zealand*

society, not just your family. So we can learn something from the letters. Maybe you also want to give us some information so we can do that daily.

It is apparent there was open communication between teacher and learner, and that there was an acquiring of cultural awareness through information in the letters. There was a feeling that the learners were a part of the teacher's life, and through that contact, they were able to learn about the society around them. Not only that, but they realised that the teacher had also lived abroad and was, hence, able to empathise with them. As an old friend, they wanted to keep up this contact and those learners, who had finished the course, still wanted to read the letters and were able to access them, either through conversation assistants or through the teacher directly.

All six learners felt the letters helped them understand New Zealand society better:

S.S. *Because when I read Sharron's letter, she always explained her life, and Sharron's lifestyle. She touched into the community, I think it's deeply. She attend several clubs, clubs, then we read her letter we can know different community or social activities from her letter.*

V.C. *This question I answered in writing. Yeah. I think so, but because Sharron's personality is it, how can I explain. She's a little bit special person. I don't know if I can put New Zealanders in the same basket, but through her letters I can understand much better New Zealand culture even for example she us about her family. Even her family is different from her personality. Her sister is opposite character of Sharron. It's Sharron give us clear view of New Zealand customs and habits and*

culture. But not just through her personality because she's a little bit special.

T.T. *Hugely. In all respects.*

S.W. *Her activities, New Zealand culture and stuff. Her social life, with friends and family life.*

T.T. *Her thoughts, what she is happy with, she is happy about, and what she is angry about and why. That's through her we can know the thoughts, the way of New Zealanders are thinking. For some things, we're not happy about with that, and for new Zealanders it's okay. For some things, they are very angry about that and we're unaware of, which is cultural difference.*

M.A. *Because Sharron is a New Zealander and she is, her life and story, is one of sample of New Zealanders for us.*

S.C. *Actually, sometimes, I'll listen to the news, but I'm not 100% understand what it talk about. I take your letter and something coincide you also mention in your letter and I'll understand more. I like to know for the real one, maybe it's my personality. I want to know if it's right or not. Such kind of thing and also such as divorce, the family, and holiday programme in New Zealand. Because we are overseas, we are foreigners, we are not familiar with that, but through your letter we know something about them.*

Bringing current affairs into the letters allows the learners easy access to news which is not often clearly explained. To understand the news, learners need to know how society operates, and to learn this in clearly intelligible way. Talk of the social involvement of

the teacher in various community organisations gives the learners a window into possible activities for them to participate in when they feel confident enough to make that transition. The teacher's personal views on issues give learners one insider's perspective which enable further understanding of different facets of the society, and with the safe exposure to the outside world through interaction with the conversation assistants, it is a small step to entering the community and continuing the discussion outside.

All six learners used the letters with the conversation assistants, considering it to be useful to varying degrees:

S.S. *We can have more practice for our speaking English. They always explain some new word we didn't learn before. Then we should, before the conversation assistant help us to understand the letter, before we should check the dictionary to find some new vocabulary.*

V.C. *Almost every Monday when we received the letter we had conversation. We went through the letter again with conversation assistants. You need to hear to remember.*

S.W. *Yes (giggle).*

T.T. *Yes, we just read through and sometimes some topics just come off from the letter, just a bit off the track, not strictly to the letter, but most of the time we just went through the letter.*

M.A. *Sometimes useful. I much prefer to use some topic with conversation assistants and then we can talk with them about something. If we follow the letter with the conversation assistant again, we have the same session, same class with another teacher. This is not so useful.*

S.C. *Sometimes it's useful. I like to listen to their opinions too.*

The conversation assistants were seen as providing a sounding board for ideas, and another source of information and confirmation, enabling the learners to discuss different topics with native speakers living in the same community.

8.4.4 Motivation and challenge

All six learners said they were encouraged to write through the letters:

S.S *I write a letter every week. I write letter every week.*

V.C. *My letters were very small but that was my capacity at the time.*

T.T. *I write, not as many as she does. I wrote a few letters to her when I was in her class. But when I left, I wrote a few letters. Very few. People tend not to write, that's the problem.*

S.W. *Sometimes, when we read her letters, I really want to write something to her, to tell her my stories, as long as I can find time. I really want to write to her.*

The teacher's letters created a desire in the learners to write, and whether they wrote every week, a little or seldom, they still maintained that motivation to do so.

The way the letters made the learners feel:

S.S. *When I read Sharron's letter, I always want to read her letter quickly. She gave us higher motivation to read her letter.*

V.C. *At the beginning, because the letters were longer and because my English wasn't so good, so in the beginning I couldn't understand all the letter during the class. But every time I went home, I read again and again, and I just thought that these letters were just for me.*

S.W. *I really want to read it first.*

T.T. *Catch up on friend's news. Just like she's talking to us, to tell us her story.*

SW. & T.T. *Felt like talking to us.*

M.A. *It's nice, like you just receive a letter from a friend or from your family. She gave us letters every week, every Monday.*

S.C. *I was exciting and I want to know what is contain in the letters*

High motivation was maintained by the learners through the content of the letters. Because the letters were written every week, there was constant exposure to reading material which not only provided a challenge for the learners, but also gave them the feeling that someone cared enough to take the time to write to them. A feeling of friendship was created through the conversational style and personal tone of the letters, and hence, all six learners felt that Sharron was talking to them directly.

The frequency with which the learners wrote back:

S.S. *Once a week. I always write to her, never stop. I am a good student. Even I am very busy, I think I should write a letter to her because she is a very good teacher. I don't want her disappointment.*

V.C. *Every time we received the letter we can write back. I'm not sure but I think I not every single time, almost every single time. Two times not. I remember that I tried to manage. If something happened I didn't write.*

T.T. *People tend to be lazy about writing. I really do want to write. I do sometimes here, so sometimes there...but when I was in her class, I did write a letter a lot to her. I did write a lot to her, short letter, not very long.*

M.A. *Once a week. Just busy.*

S.C. *I wrote average once a week. Maybe I'm on holiday, go away from Dunedin. I'm not sure. If I had time, I'll try.*

The regular output of letter writing by the learners is testimony to the ability of the letters to maintain high motivation. Naturally, the teacher, as writer, is responsible for the content of the letter, and the selection of relevant, interesting topics and style of writing is critical to the continued interest of the learners.

8.4.5 Understanding new language

The reasons why all six learners believed the letters helped in their study of English were:

S.S. *I learned, I have learned a lot about slang and special words I didn't learn before. Phrases and sentence. Like, for example, out of the blue.*

V.C. *Vocab, idioms, and lots of expression that you can't hear on radio and TV.*

T.T. *English expression that normally we can't learn from text books or whatever books. If you go to a language school, maybe, you can't learn. It is very specific style that makes this happen. If we hadn't gone to her*

class, we wouldn't have known all these expressions which we are used so common in the work. Like in my office, when you talk to people, they just use it.

S.W. *Because her letters come from their daily life, so we can use these words in our daily life.*

T.T. *Yes.*

M.A. *For me, I wanted to increase my vocabulary. In Sharron's letters, it is easy to remember how to use them.*

S.C. *There was, I think, grammar is one. You will know the pattern of sentences. Vocabularies. Phrases. I can use them in my letter and other articles.*

The learners all mentioned the introduction of idiomatic and colloquial language as being an important component of the letters which allowed them to access the language of everyday life to communicate, both verbally and in writing. The learners were able to learn through context and hence they found it easier to remember the new expressions.

All six learners said they read the letters at least two or three times:

S.S. *I think always should read three times, or four times. If just one time, it is not enough to understand all of her letter.*

V.C. *To be honest, when I began this account technician course, I don't have much time but before, when listen to radio, TV, or something and I heard some words, and I remember that it was exactly the word Sharron told us or write in her letter and I can go back and see.*

S.C. *Actually, to realise much, you have to read them maybe 3 times more. And sometimes then we'll have new vocabulary so I will look up my dictionary and see if the meaning. Maybe I'm not familiar with that word I'll get different meaning about other sentence. Sometimes you'll use some old saying or colloquial words but I'll forget them so I'll have to look back and see.*

Repetition and referring back to past letters enabled language to be constantly reinforced. When V.C. said that she didn't have much time, she was referring to her new course of study. She did, however, comment on the connection between hearing new language in the community and relating it to language learned in the letter. This ability to use the letter as a source of reference was also mentioned by S.C.

The things the learners did with the letters:

S.S. *I review her letter again, and then also I write my feeling to her. Sometimes I answer Sharron's question, replied...I put them (the letters) in a special box. The box is blue colour, blue is my favourite colour. I collect her every letter in this box. Then, sometimes, I will read her letter and I feel Sharron is a very special teacher.*

V.C. *What I did, every time I received the letter I tried to copy exactly word by word and improve my spelling because I've never learnt English before, and my spelling and writing it was difficult for me. So, at that time, I help myself to understand a little bit more because when you write, rewrite, it's not just improving your writing but improving your understanding. And if*

you don't know some words, you go to dictionary and after I did rewriting, I can understand much better then. I have all Sharron's letters still here.

S.W. *Normally, when I get her letter, I'll glance over quickly, see what stories are in it, and then read word by word and see what words I can learn and some phrases. That's the way I'm learning.*

T.T. *But for me, first, I went to her class first it was basically to learn English. Now, gradually, I focus more on the thoughts she's writing than on the pure English. So I can know something from her letter that what other New Zealanders think beyond words. Cultural stuff.*

M.A. *In my case, I read them two or three times, checked vocab. In class, once she read them by herself and sometimes students did. And then, we pick up vocab which didn't know exactly, we can ask questions about the letter. After new learnt vocab and phrases, we make some sentences with that new vocab. Then the last day of the week, so every Thursday, she gave us a sheet which is a kind of homework and she reviewed.*

S.C. *I'll have a quick look over the letter and see what's happening in the letters. I'll try to answer some of the questions in the letter and reply a letter. I'll talk about something in your letter to my family.*

All the learners developed a set way of using the letter, and the strategy of modelling their writing on the teacher's writing was a common strand in the learners' strategies. From an understanding of the language there developed a desire to understand the teacher's thoughts, which is evidence of a progression to a higher layer of sophistication

in learning. By using the letter in their interaction with family and friends, the learners took their learning outside the classroom and optimised their learning experiences.

The importance of the letters to the learners is evidenced by the fact that S.S. kept her letters in a special blue box and that V.C. continued to have the teacher's letters at hand, four years after the course had finished.

8.4.6 Conviviality

The way in which Sharron was able to make the letters feel personal:

S.S. *Because we couldn't have this kind of letter from the text book. I don't know how to explain, feel very close to our mind, to our heart. Very friendly, I feel very friendly. Not just a teacher, also is a friend for me. Sharron not just a teacher, she also like my close friend, this is my feeling. Because I think some people, they don't want to say too much their private life, but Sharron always share her true feeling. And all of the classmates are mother, not young student, most of the student at the classroom, so we can from her teaching also to learn what is NZ mother, and how to take care of children and how to make friends with other families, and with husband. Because our classmates all are women so we can talk lots about our secrets. So we feel happy.*

V.C. *Because of some private things. You just feel that other people maybe don't like to share with students so you just think maybe is different culture. I felt that something that we are special people that she has.*

M.A. *Very friendly. She like our close friend. On of our close friends. She talks about everything. Maybe not everything, but for us, it seems like everything about her life.*

T.T. *You mean personal to students? She actually doesn't mention too much of specific students but she usually puts things that happened to students in the letter but she doesn't name them.*

S.W. *Also, she tells her own life, personal life to students. Normally, if not close friends, people won't tell you about her personal life. So we think it's personal.*

T.T. *It's difficult. I don't think many New Zealanders or even us can write that kind of personal letter.*

S.W. *She's very open to us.*

T.T. *She's open. It's her personality.*

S.C. *Actually, the tile is Dear _____, (the learner said her name), and so I think the letter is belong to me. No matter this letter is open to all the classmates. I think different people have different feeling when they are reading the letters.*

The open disclosure by the teacher of her feelings enabled the learners to believe that the teacher had become a very close friend, and that they were, therefore, very special people. Receiving a letter addressed specifically to the learner was mentioned on more than one occasion as making the learner feel that this was a personal interaction, although in fact they knew the letter was for all the class members. This feeling of being special is a feeling seldom felt by immigrants arriving into a new country, and feelings of

alienation can make learning difficult, especially learning how to communicate effectively.

The letters' effect on the way the learners felt towards Sharron:

S.S. (The interviewer paraphrased what S.S. had said at this point, and so the validity of what she said is unfortunately questionable.)

Being a friend, not just a teacher-almost a role model.

V.C. *Even now, I'm not any more a student here at T. Street, but I just feel that Sharron is my friend because I know even for example it if it's not everything what Sharron wanted us to know, maybe you can write whatever you want, maybe it's something I'm not telling that it not true. But if I put in quotation marks, it's something that is not true, I am not interested in this. I just feel that she is my friend, that she shares something with us very important even.*

T.T. & S.W. *More close to her. More like a friend rather than teachers and students.*

M.A. *As if she one of my close friends.*

S.C. *In terms of our relationship I think we got closer because of something talking about your family, it's very intimate. If you're not close friend, you won't talk about this such kind of thing.*

The identification of the learner with the teacher as a close friend has become an important factor in the letter writing process. This personal interaction allows for increased intimacy and the sharing of personal thoughts.

8.4.7 Confidence

All six learners said they gained in confidence in writing letters by reading and then writing back to Sharron:

S.S. *Now I think I am getting confident. I always copy some of Sharron's letter, for example, some sentence I copy from Sharron. I take a whole sentence and use that. Then when I write to my other Kiwi friend I feel easier than before, because I know how to write a letter in the first sentence.*

V.C. *What I did, I translate from my language into English and doesn't work because the structure of sentence is never the same when you translate from one language to another. So with Sharron's letter, I copy her structure and not just structure of sentences, structure of words. Where she put the words in the sentence. Because when I translate what Sharron put in first place, I put, maybe, in last one. I tried just copy.*

T.T. *You just copy and no worry whether or not it's going to be correct or wrong. If you copy, that's right, that's correct.*

S.W. *Yes, I just tried to use the words in her letters in my letters. Yeah.*

M.A. *Yes, I used her phrases quite often in my letters and I knew exactly how to use those phrases because she used them before. It's like a copy, copy something. But not my letters were totally copying. Just some vocab and phrases and I can confirm my knowledge to write a letter to her.*

S.C. *Maybe I enjoy your teaching, and so you encourage us to write. So, writing a letter is not a problem for me, and just maybe I wrote a letter once or twice a week.*

Copying was the overwhelmingly most common way in which the learners gained confidence in writing. The scaffolding was always carefully put in place and sufficiently strong for them to use constantly. However, as M.A. commented, the learners' letters were not just a copy of the teacher's letter as this would have been a nonsense. However, through using the correct structures as written by the teacher, the learners felt bold enough to venture out on their own and experiment with their own language at a time which felt right.

Learners had different impression as to whether they had gained in confidence in speaking through the letters:

V.C. *I'm not confident in speaking. I don't know why. It's understanding it's much easier reading than speaking. Maybe because I learnt Italian 4 years before I came to New Zealand and 4 years English now. It's 8 years that I just all the time under stress. It's a long time I can say the right words. That you're confident in yourself. Maybe because, I don't know.*

T.T. *Yes, absolutely.*

S.W. *Yes. Sometimes, we just use the sentences.*

T.T. *Yes, because the speaking is if you write it out and if you read it out, that's your speaking. Because her letters are very much a style of talking, rather than writing. When you read her letter, it's like talking to you. It's not the formal writing. I love that. You read it out, that 's speaking.*

M.A. *I don't know. Yes, because reading and writing the letter are different from speaking.*

S.C. *Yes, compared with the time I arrived. At that time, English is our second language and we didn't speak English very often. I was afraid of making mistakes, but after the class that don't matter. I think the letters helped. I think some colloquial words, I can learn from them. I can't learn from books.*

All but one learner felt they had increased in confidence and V.C.'s lack of confidence was not evident in the way she came across to others in English. The learners identified that the writing style of the letters was conversational, and that by reading the language, they could incorporate it into their speech.

The feedback Sharron gave:

S.S. *She always gave us very good feedback, for example, excellent and tell you her feeling. Not just well done, excellent. She replied my feeling, by writing something to reply from Sharron's letter.*

V.C. *Very encouraging feedback, and I was sure that many mistakes I made. Even grammar mistakes, Sharron always encouraged me I did a very good job. I realise now I see what I did. It's far away. Just nice and encouraged and confident. Confident now, even after four years.*

S.W. *She wrote something.*

T.T. *She corrected the mistakes, and wrote a comment about the letters, mostly encouraging you to write more.*

M.A. *She corrected my mistakes and at the end she made some her comment.*

S.C. You write some comments at the end of my reply letters. Actually, sometimes we might have different view or opinion. I can understand all western people have a different thinking process. It broadened my view of things and I can accept people always have different kind of view. You can accept them and realise why they will do that such kind of thing. It's good for me to be in New Zealand by learning some thinking process about western people. Actually, I hope I will get some feedback from you. If not, the impulse will decrease.

The teacher was unaware, at the time, of how much the feedback affected the learners, although the belief in the power of positive thought pervaded the lessons and the letters. What began as a few words of encouragement developed into a sensitive answering of learners' letters at the bottom of their letter. This personal acknowledgement was another sign to the learners that they were important enough for the teacher to take the time to write, and again signalled to them that they were special. The desire to continue this personal interaction ensured that motivation remained high and "the impulse did not decrease", as stated by S.C. above. Motivation was not only maintained, but also the confidence of the learners increased.

8.4.8 Celebration

Additional comments from the learners:

S.S. We suggest Sharron to publish her letters. One of my classmates maybe will try to do this, and to the letter we can use for foreign students to study. Some are very good. This is a different type of letters. You couldn't

buy this kind of book from any shop. Maybe if Sharron's letter published, maybe the first one. Very good for foreign students to understand about New Zealand. Very good.

V.C. *I will remember always Sharron's letters. I think this is my personal view. She has ability for writing not just letters. I think her ability for writing is far more than writing letters. I expect one day that Sharron will use all these letters and write some books or something. My opinion, it was Monday and you did your own stuff during the week. And on Monday you are refreshed and you are just hungry to know what happened to Sharron because every time it's something else happened. The letters were never the same, never boring.*

T.T. *Keep sending the letters.*

S.W. *We really enjoy reading Sharron's letters each week.*

T.T. *Where is her last week's letter?*

S.W. *In my office.*

T.T. *Send the letter through the email system and we can copy it off.*

M.A. *I've got a kick out of receiving the letters from Sharron every week. And also I felt Sharron as a teacher she is very close to us, to students, very open, so we can be open too. And she indicate a lot of examples as a New Zealander without being conscious. Yeah, it helped us a lot to understand English and also understand New Zealand culture and also understand Sharron herself.*

The advice to publish the letters could be seen as flattering to the teacher, but it also indicates the need for such material to be published, which meets the needs of the learners in their desire to communicate in their daily lives.

8.5 Answers to the questions raised

The following is a summary of the findings along with succinct answers to the questions raised in Chapter One. The validity and limitations of the findings will then be discussed.

The first question raised in this research, focused on how weekly letters, written to the learners by the teacher, helped to achieve communicative competence, and what conditions were present in the letter writing dynamic which facilitated the development of communicative competence.

As was discussed in Chapter Two, through interaction comes acquisition, and for acquisition to occur there need to be opportunities for learners to interact. The letter writing process followed the holistic approach, espoused by Ellis (1999), in which learner participation shapes opportunities for learning. The first obvious factor in the letter writing process was the close interaction between the teacher and learners which enabled the imparting not only of new language, but of knowledge and ideas about New Zealand society. New language was reinforced, and further cultural awareness acquired the weekly meetings with conversation assistants, a time when a part of the wider community interacted with the learners in the classroom. The learners considered this interaction as having a positive effect on their progress towards being more effective communicators.

The so-called “‘C’ of necessary indulgence,” listed in Chapter Two, which identified those conditions which facilitated the learners’ progress towards communicative competence, were all found to be present in the letter writing process, as discussed in

detail in Chapter Six.

As learners interacted with the letter, they not only internally asked questions about new vocabulary and expressions, but also answered questions raised in the letter and formed questions for the teacher and conversation assistants related to the content of the letter. Time was set aside for this “intrapersonalising”, as Ellis called it, which enabled the learners to process material more deeply, to engage in mental activity which caused them to go beyond the input. Because the learners were allotted such an allowance of time to digest the content of the letter, a structure was set in place which encouraged the learners to ask questions of the conversation assistants and then of the teacher, after the learners had ‘talked’ with themselves. Through this positive interaction with native English speakers, the learners were encouraged to externalise their mental processes, and thereby enhance the learning process. Within this positive framework, a reciprocity of spirit between learner and conversation assistant, and learner and teacher, produced respect and mutual understanding. Learners were able to develop a realistic perception of themselves and increase their feelings of self esteem through the forming of positive relationships. The personal disclosure by the teacher invited learners to become peers of the teacher, being included in discussions in which personal views and experiences were taken seriously. Although this relationship developed in the classroom, this feeling of empowerment was again reinforced in the weekly meetings with the conversation assistants. The reciprocity of the interaction with both teacher and conversation assistants enabled the learners to build up confidence which had hitherto been lacking and hence had prevented or curbed interaction with other members of the community.

The focus of the second question was whether there was any significant improvement in the learners' ability to write in natural English (as indicated through letter and sentence length, grammatical accuracy, and the use of idiomatic and colloquial language) through reading and writing of letters. Through the analysis of the learner's letter, there is evidence of a significant improvement in the learners' ability to express themselves with not only increased accuracy, but also with increasingly longer and more complex sentence structures which were often modelled on, or at least influenced by, the teacher's letters. The increased length of most of the learners' letters indicated a desire to communicate more fully with the teacher, sharing more information and expressing their thoughts in more detail.

Ellis (1999) stressed the importance of "acquisition rich experiences", as discussed in Chapter Three, and naturally the quality of input is critical in any language acquisition. In the weekly letter, because learners were given a comparatively long letter, there was a constantly source of new vocabulary and expressions; repetition of previously used language; expansion of key phrases and ideas; and daily encouragement to use the words learnt in the letter through questions which prompted the learners to reply.

Because of the conversational tone of the letter, the learners are able to adopt many of the phrases used by the teacher, not only for writing and but also for speaking. Clear models were given which provided a framework around which the learners could work. Ready made chunks of language are produced in the letter in clear contexts which enable the learners to confidently lift them and insert them into their own writing, making them feel free to write, without fear of making mistakes. Whether learners took advantage of

formulaic expressions or were able to create their own sentences, the learners had access to large chunks of natural language which was available to extend their ability to communicate if they utilised this new language. Freedom from fear brings empowerment, and in this case, the freedom of fear from making mistakes, enabled them to freely express themselves as they really were.

The attitudes of the learners towards the letters was the focus of the third question. All the learners overwhelmingly agreed that the letters were important in contributing towards their increase in communicative competence. As had already been discussed, the vast majority of learners accredited the receiving, reading, discussing and writing of letters, to their increase in their confidence in communicating with not only the teacher, but also native English speakers.

8.6 Validity and limitations of this study

In any study which involves participant feedback, there is always the possibility that answers are not necessarily a true reflection of real opinion. The desire for learners, especially those from an Asian culture, to please the teacher and save face, is extremely high. Hence, it is impossible to guarantee that any collection of data contains genuine answers. It would seem, therefore that the gathering of 'honest' responses to be daunting prospect for researchers, as so much research is based on receiving the 'truth' from participants. In this particular study, the researcher cum teacher was obviously well known to the learners, and hence, learner unwillingness to disappoint the teacher was a strong possibility. Although an independent interviewer taped the six, randomly chosen learner interviews, the learners knew that the researcher would hear their responses.

However, there was such enthusiasm in their voices that the researcher believes that their positive endorsement of the letter writing process was genuine. This assertion is based, also, on the four years in which the researcher kept a diary of the letter writing process, and the development of a very open dialogue between teacher and learner which had resulted from continual close interaction. Learners were encouraged to take control of their learning, to feel the teacher was their friend, and as a consequence, they felt free to discuss their honest perception of the components of the language course.

The letter writing process was devised and developed by the teacher, and because no other teacher is known by the researcher to use letters in a similar way, it is not possible to cross-validate the findings. The personality of the teacher, and the ability of the teacher to write letters which sustained the motivation of the learners, seem to have had a significant impact on the learner's receptiveness to the letters. This factor will be discussed further in the implications for further research in Chapter Nine.

Over a one year course of study, there are obviously other factors which positively affect the learners' acquisition of language, increase their confidence, and enhance their communicative effectiveness. Learners were not in the classroom twenty four hours a day, and they naturally had other stimuli which triggered their linguistic progress. To what extent these external factors affected the learners in this study is difficult to assess, but must be acknowledged nevertheless.

The participants of this study were highly qualified professionals who had come to New Zealand as immigrants. Although from different cultures, the subject group, therefore,

was homogeneous in the sense that they wanted to make New Zealand their home, and had a reasonable level of English on entering the class. The letter writing process, so relevant to that particular group of learners, may be received very differently by international students who are younger, and not planning to live in the New Zealand.

In this research, the main focus was on the responses of the learners to the letter writing process, and their perception of their increase in communicative competence. In further research, it would be beneficial to pretest the learners' speaking ability at the beginning of a course, and test again at the end of the course. Therein lies the next challenge.

8.7 Conclusion

Having analysed the learners' letters in terms of letter and sentence length; the correct use of every day language; and tenses, it is clear that learners were able to extend their writing skills to incorporate new language, and more accurate usage of tenses, within a more complex, longer letter. The responses of the six learners, interviewed on tape, corresponded to the written answers of the twenty five participants who perceived the letter, written by the teacher, as assisting in increasing their understanding of cultural issues, new language, and assisting an increase in confidence in not only reading and writing, but also in speaking.

The letter writing process was part of the normal language learning programme and no modifications were made to the material itself. It could be said, therefore, that the research took place in the normal learning environment of the learners.

The letter writing process has been successfully utilised by immigrants who have wanted

to make New Zealand their home. Although there are limitations to the study, as have been discussed above, the overriding consideration is that the interactive letter writing process enabled the learners to feel more communicatively competent in their newly adopted country.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION

9.0 Introduction

The learning paradigm used in the letter writing process is the greater the quality and quantity of appropriate input, the greater the chance of assimilating the language. The quality of input is the critical factor, and the input studied in this research was in the form of the teacher-generated letters. These were assessed as being a very effective medium in assisting learners to become more communicatively competent. Various strands will now be woven together in the form of the materials, the “what”; in the form of the method, the “how”; and in the form of the teacher, the “who”. This will be followed by how these strands provide benefits to both learners and teacher. The implications for further research will then be discussed, and this chapter will close with a conclusion which ties the strands together.

9.1 The materials

This research has shown that the letter, which contained the self disclosure of the teacher in regard to her personal life and thoughts, as well as her views on current events, sustained motivation by providing relevance, interest, enjoyment and challenge. The introduction of language used in everyday conversation in New Zealand helped learners to grasp everyday language, such as new vocabulary, set sentence patterns, idioms, and colloquialisms hitherto inaccessible in their learning and living environment.

9.2 The method

In letter writing, a reciprocal social exchange is established in which two people share their thoughts in a letter. In this letter writing process under research, there was mutual respect and understanding, with a desire to continue the interaction by both the teacher and the learner. Proof of this was evident by the fact that letters were exchanged through the period of the year long course, with the teacher consistently writing every week, and the learners seldom failing to respond to the teacher's letter without good reason.

The holistic approach of the letter writing process which incorporated reading, writing, speaking, and listening, served to give learners the positive drive they needed to communicate effectively in the wider community. Interaction was the key, and the interaction with the teacher and conversation assistants, bringing part of the community into the classroom, enabled further acquisition of communicative skills. The meeting with native English speaking conversation assistants helped to increase the learners' awareness of the host culture and systems operating in the society around them, as well as reinforcing the ideas, and everyday language, used in the letters.

9.3 The teacher

The teacher, the writer of the letters, had a knowledge of other cultures, and was culturally sensitive to, and had a real interest in, the learners to whom she was writing. The letter took time to write every Sunday evening, but it did not become a millstone or the learners would have sensed the obligatory nature of the writing. It was done positively and therefore positive results flowed. As one conversation assistant commented, it would be interesting to see how the process worked in the hands of

another teacher, and this area will be discussed in implications for further research in Section 9.6.

9.4 The benefits for the learners

On a linguistic level, the learners increased in confidence in using all four language skills which further empowered the learners to venture outside their safety zone. Learners, in a natural exchange, received an important input of language for communicating effectively in every day life through the weekly letter, allowing learners to clearly understand meaning and usage through a range of activities. The facilitation of language learning opportunities was offered by giving input which was often slightly beyond the learners' linguistic proficiency, but contained many chunks of language which were able to be used by the learner in their letters back to the teacher. The content of the teacher's letters was challenging but mainly comprehensible. Where language or ideas were too difficult for some learners to understand on their own, conversation assistants, the learners' peers and/or the teacher worked with them together to find the meaning. There was constant exposure to the thought, style and manner of a proficient English writer and an encouragement, that with constant support, the learners would feel confident in reaching the goals they had set for themselves.

On a practical level, the letter writing process provided extended contact time for the learners with the teacher by making possible the sharing of ideas and having them recognised and discussed by the teacher through the letter. Time was given for learners to process new language and ideas outside the classroom, and to formulate questions and

answers in a personal reply to the teacher. This motivation to reply allowed for increased output and resulted in increased writing skills.

Being able to reply to the teacher's letter, both in written form and verbally, gave the learner validation as a person with something to say in a culture in which they now felt they understood better. This led to benefits for the learners on a social level, where they were given some access into the new society by being permitted into the life of the teacher. This access increased their understanding of the cultural ideas and values, structures and systems of their adopted society in which they had previously felt alien. The learners' belief that they were able to be a part of this society was reinforced by the contact with the native English speaking conversation assistants who assisted in widening cultural horizons at the same time as helping to increase reading, listening and speaking skills. This weekly contact, in a safe environment in which experimentation of new language was encouraged, allowed risks to be taken, and both confidence and competence to develop.

9.5 The benefits for the teacher

On a practical level for the teacher, there was extended contact time with learners by reading and replying to the learner's individual letters, answering any questions and addressing any problems which may have arisen. Individual grammar problems were either dealt with at the time, or saved to be taught as a class exercise if it was deemed warranted.

The letter writing process allowed for effective management of a class with varying levels and differing age groups and racial backgrounds. From the first day, learners were able to participate in the letter writing process, and the teacher could ascertain levels from the first week and tailor instruction for learners. Ongoing assessment of learner needs and progress was possible, and although all learners may not have written every week, there was sufficient writing to assess the progress of learners.

Increased interpersonal relationship with individual learners was made possible through the reciprocal sharing of personal information, initiated by the honest disclosure by the teacher of events in daily life and personal points of view.

9.6 Implications for further research

The focus of this research was on interaction, and as was discussed in Chapter Two, there is a lack of qualitative research in this area of learner interaction. The researcher believes that learner factors, such as nationality and age, need to be taken into account with any further research. Culture and age would seem to have an important bearing on any human interaction, and Ellis's studies in a Japanese high school context (Chapter Two), where conversation was used as reference for interaction, would appear to be very limiting. Making assumptions from such a group would seem to have little in common with the group being studied in this research, and therefore begs for further research to be undertaken.

The researcher assessed the learner's measure of increase in confidence from the perception of the learner, asking for their judgement of their increase in ability. In further

studies, it would be beneficial to have a pretest and post test of the learner's ability to comprehend the systems operating in the society, to assess their understanding of cultural matters and colloquial language, and their confidence levels at the beginning of the course, as well as at the end. How this would actually be assessed is a challenging part of any future research.

Questions that need to be answered in future research also relate to the teacher and the writing of the letter. How would the letters differ if in the hands of another teacher? How motivated would learners be if there was not as much self disclosure on the part of the teacher? Would other teachers feel comfortable following the same letter writing process and what effect would there be if they did, or indeed if they did not, follow the same process? This area is of particular interest given how important the teacher's input was considered in this study.

An area not discussed in detail, nor researched in this study, was the importance and effect of the follow up activities to the letter on the learners' progress: the brainstorming of words, the daily Motivation Chart and the subsequent session review. These activities were obviously important in the reinforcement of new language, and need further attention.

Although learners and conversation assistants were asked to comment on their interaction with each other, further research would be beneficial to ascertain what kind of learners benefit most from such interaction.

In these days of rapid technological advances, the use of email is common place. Research into the use of email, instead of the letter, is another area which could be explored.

9.7 Summary

Learners of different cultures bring with them preconceived idea of acceptable learning and teaching methods. The rigid teaching of Asian cultures, which makes conformity a thing to be revered and memorisation and rules an accepted part of learning, can sit uncomfortably with some learners when faced with a more open teaching style in which personal disclosure is encouraged. Confronted with this different teaching approach one could assume that the strict teaching of the Asian and some Eastern European cultures would make for the biggest challenge. However, this research has shown how roundly the Asian learners in this research have embraced the letter writing process, and have become the greatest advocates of the method to other learners. This may be because the process is very structured and the ability to copy the letter has great appeal for the Asian students. Asian learners seem able to disclose personal details if the person receiving the information is from another culture, and has shown themselves to be sensitive and receptive to their needs.

When the teacher began writing the letters, this written communication was seen as a means of imparting information about New Zealand language and lifestyle, and plugging the gaps which weren't being filled by conventional texts. To make language easily assimilated, stories were shared in a personal context. From a humble letter developed a letter writing process which is now able to assist learners to increase their communicative

competence. In reiterating the answers to the original questions posed in Chapter One (page 13), it is clear that the letter writing process was able to help learners achieve their goal of increased communicative competence by providing an authentic medium, created with limited resources, which enabled exposure to everyday language within a seemingly ideal learning environment.

Reiterating the answers to the other two questions raised in Chapter One, there was an overall improvement in learners' ability to write, and the learners certainly considered the letters as having a major contributing factor in their perceived ability to communicate better. As has been discussed, interaction is critical between learner and teacher, as is appropriate modelling, to enable the empowerment of the learners through increased knowledge of the society in which they live. Returning to the original analogy of the garden, appropriate modelling can be viewed in terms of a garden. The better the quality of the plants, the richer the colour, and the more beautiful the garden. The letter must be of the highest quality possible so that the language can be copied by the learners, the ideas germinated, and then used in their writing and daily conversation. The letter is therefore carefully crafted linguistically, weaving into the lines a storyline in which the learners develop a deep awareness of the scene and the characters contextually. With such knowledge, the learners feel confident go out through the door, and not only stand in the garden, but one day create gardens of their own, so much a part of the New Zealand lifestyle.

In conclusion, the researcher would like to end with the words of a learner, the learners being the reason for which the letters were written, and whose responses make up so much of this research.

I come from Croatia and I have had a very difficult last 8 years, but fortunately I meet wonderful people here in New Zealand who give me support and make me feel I am at home. One of them is Sharron. Sharron's letters (not only in class) she wrote to me, personally short letters to reply to my letters, were just right thing for my self esteem. Through the letters I began to trust people again, and I really feel that Sharron is my friend.

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APPENDIX I

AN EXAMPLE OF SHARRON'S LETTER

■■■■■
■■■■■

27th August 2000

Dear

I am sitting at Han's big desk in his office, and Han has just poured me a glass of water as he heads off to do the vacuuming of his offices. We were up really early this morning as we had to be in town at eight o'clock to say goodbye to our Japanese house guest. There wasn't a dry eye to be seen as the students said their farewells to their host families, and they dragged their feet as they headed for the bus which was taking them to the airport. It is always the same with students on these short language exchanges. They arrive bright eyed and excited but after two or three days, culture shock sets in, they feel homesick and they want to go home. After two weeks, all they want to do is stay in Dunedin and continue their lives here! It is such a short experience but a very powerful one. Have you experienced culture shock? If so, what happened? What things did you find different when you first arrived here? What things did you have to get used to? Are there any things you are still not used to? Many years ago, I brought a Japanese friend's daughter out to New Zealand to stay with me and our first two weeks together were totally relaxed and on the surface, little seemed different from Japan. We ate Japanese food, spoke Japanese, and since we were on holiday, Shizuko hadn't started school. However, one day, Shizuko wasn't at our designated meeting spot and I searched everywhere for her. After much searching I finally found her aimlessly walking along Princes Street. She got into the car with a glazed look on her face and then burst into tears. When I asked her what was wrong, she said she didn't have a clue, but I quickly realised this was how she had responded to living in a totally different environment, away from her home and friends. She was experiencing culture shock. Of course, everyone reacts differently to living in another culture and some people don't experience culture shock at all. One of the Japanese students who studied with me last year was a case in

point. She sailed through her year here, with no desire to return to Japan during her entire stay in Dunedin and spent her whole year enjoying each and every day.

Talking of living in another culture reminds me of the time I was living in Egypt. It was my first teaching job, having been chosen as a teacher for a new school in Alexandria. Thirteen teachers were chosen by the New Zealand director, and we were nearly all first year teachers, ranging in age from twenty two to forty. We had been interviewed in London, and all flew out to Cairo on the same plane. We were met at Cairo airport and travelled through a sand storm to Alexandria. I'll never forget the swirling sand, the dust, the long desert road. We were taken to our apartments which had been especially chosen for us and walked into the marbled foyer of my apartment and gazed at the beautiful chandelier which hung from the high ceiling. This was to be my home for one of the most amazing years of my life. In the very first week in the old coastal city of Alexandria, I had an experience in the culture which shocked me and others, but couldn't be described as "culture shock"! It all began with a party at which all the teachers were getting to know each other, held by one of the teachers in another beautiful old apartment which had a view of the sea. As the evening wore on, a considerable amount of the local "zibib", a kind of aniseed flavoured spirit, was drunk by all of us. In the small hours of the morning I collapsed into a deep sleep, but awoke to see a shimmering sea through the open shutters of the window. I had a sudden urge to find the sea and to take an early swim. Although the apartment was not right on the sea, I envisaged the sea being only a stone's throw away. I headed out of the apartment confidently and started to walk along the narrow streets. However, suddenly it dawned on me that I had not only left the apartment with no idea of the address nor its exact location, but of more concern was the fact that I was wearing only a short, white Tee shirt with a bee on the front and a little pair of knickers! There I was, in an Arab country which encourages all its women to be covered from head to foot, walking lost down a maze of streets, semi naked! I, who was so concerned about adhering to the rules of the all the societies in which I live, was suddenly breaking one of the fundamental rules. I suddenly panicked and rushed up the stairs of the first apartment block I could find. I knocked on the door of an apartment which had a light on, and when the owner came to the door, I explained to him that I had been looking for the sea and had become lost. Without batting an eyelid, he called his

wife who brought me some trousers and a top, and they then invited me in for breakfast. It was as if I was the invited guest whom they had been expecting for a meal. I explained that I didn't know which apartment I had come from, and they didn't seem to see this as an unusual predicament either! When they opened the shutters of their windows, I looked out to find the apartment I had left was directly opposite the flat in which I had found refuge! After a large breakfast and a promise to return to see the couple, I left their company, and this family continued to stay friends throughout my time in Egypt. When I returned to my friends and told them of my exploits as if it was the most normal thing in the world, their mouths dropped open in amazement. Later that day, I had to tell the director of the school what I had done and I feared he would deport me for my irresponsible behaviour. He listened to my account of the morning with the utmost sobriety, and reminded me of my responsibilities as a teacher at the newly established school. I left feeling appropriately reprimanded, and relieved that I was able to continue my contract. The rest of the year I conducted myself with the utmost of decorum, well for most of the time (although there are other stories I may tell you at a later date!). However, this particular story became well known through out the teaching community, not only in Alexandria but also in London where I later taught. My reputation preceded me as my hard case director delighted in telling this story in vivid and embellished detail at my expense! Luckily, the story had a happy ending and I still chuckle and shudder at the same time! It was a "culture shock" of a different kind! Do you have any stories which you like to tell about any of your exploits? I have dozens, and one day I hope to write about them all. My dream is to write when I have the time as I love words and the effect they have on your emotions. Do you enjoy writing? Do you have a novel you would like to write? If so, what would it be about? Unfortunately, my diaries recording my time in Egypt were stolen when I was in India, but that is another story!.....

*You've got to accentuate the positive,
Eliminate the negative,
Latch on to the affirmative,
Don't mess with Mister Inbetween.*

This was the chorus of a song made popular in the 1960's and I really love it. We'll look at another song I love when we meet. Let's have a positive week together. Please try and write if you find the time. I would appreciate hearing from you and I also know it is good for your improvement in English.

APPENDIX II

Likert Questionnaire

THE USAGE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF SHARRON'S WEEKLY LETTER

It is important that your views on the weekly letter are recorded. Please indicate your opinion concerning the effectiveness of Sharron's letter. 1 indicates that you strongly agree and 5 indicates that you strongly disagree.

Sharron's letter has given you:	1	2	3	4	5
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Increased knowledge of NZ society					
A window into a New Zealander's life					
Increased motivation to study					
Increased motivation to write					
An increased knowledge of grammar					
Increased understanding of colloquial language					
Increased knowledge of everyday language					
An ability to use new Colloquial language					
An ability to use new sentence structures					
A feeling you are special to Sharron					
A closer relationship with Sharron					
Increased confidence in speaking with Sharron					
Increased confidence in talking with Kiwis					
Increased confidence in writing generally					
Increased confidence in reading					

APPENDIX III

Questionnaire - Open Ended Questions

1. Enjoyment

- Did you look forward to receiving Sharron's letters each week? If so, why? If not, why not?

2. NZ Society

- What did you learn about New Zealand society from Sharron's letters?

3. A window into a New Zealander's life

- Did you learn anything about Sharron's life? Do you feel you know more about other New Zealander's lives through reading Sharron's letters?

4. Motivation

- Did the letter help to keep your motivation high? If so, how did the letters do this? Did you want to reply to the letters? Did you reply?

5. Understanding of idioms and colloquialism

- Do you use any of the language you learnt in the letters in your every day spoken English? What kind of language do you use?

6. An ability to use new sentence structures

- How did you use Sharron's letter in your study of English? Did you feel more able to use new sentence structures after working on the letter?

7. A feeling that you are special and closer to Sharron

- How did Sharron's letter make you feel? Why? Did you feel able to relate well to Sharron after reading the letters?

8. Increased confidence in speaking

- How do you feel when you meet native English speakers? Is the reading of Sharron's letters related to this? If so, in what ways?

9. Increased confidence in writing

- How did you use to feel about writing letters? How do you feel about writing letters now?

10. Increased confidence in reading

- How do you feel about your reading ability? How has reading Sharron's letters helped you with your reading?
- Sharron's letters are usually three or four pages, about 1,500 words. How do you find this length? Is it too long, too short or just right? How long does it take you to read at home?
- How do you feel when you have read through the pages?

11. Working with the conversation assistants.

Did you use the letter with the conversation assistants? Was it of help? If so, why? If not, why not?

APPENDIX IV

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE LETTER WRITING PROCESS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I would like you to think of the time you spent in Sharron's class and share with me some of your views on that experience.

1. When were you in Sharron's class?
2. What things do you remember most about that class? What things did you look forward to?
3. Why do you think Sharron wrote letters to you?
4. How did you feel when you received a letter? Did you feel she was talking to you? How did she make the letter feel personal?
5. What things did you do with the letter?
6. Where did you keep the letters? Did you read over them again? How often?
7. Did the letters help you in your study of English? How? What did you learn from the letters?
8. Were you encouraged to write by reading the letters?
9. Did you gain in your confidence in writing letters by reading and then writing to Sharron?
10. Did you gain in your confidence in speaking? How did this happen? What did you learn in the letters which helped you?
11. How often were you able to write back to Sharron? If you couldn't write, why was this?
12. How did the letters affect how you felt towards Sharron?
13. Did the letters help you understand New Zealand society better? How?
14. Did you use the letters with the conversation assistants? Was this useful?
15. What other comments do you have about Sharron's letters?

APPENDIX V

**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LETTER WRITING AS A
COMMUNICATIVE TOOL IN ESOL LEARNING**

INFORMATION SHEET

As part of my professional development I have chosen to look closely at the way I teach and to use my observations to write my Masters thesis in the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages. I am doing my Masters degree through Massey University and will ask students who have been in my classes over the last two years to help in my research.

I have been writing letters to students for many years and now want to share that experience with other teachers of ESOL. I will therefore focus on the use of my letters in the classroom. I hope that you are able to help me by filling in a Language learning profile, ticking boxes in a questionnaire, writing some answers to a questionnaire, and being interviewed and recorded by a person, other than me, regarding the letter writing process.

I am very aware that this is time consuming and will understand fully if you prefer not to take part in this task. I will not judge you nor discriminate in any way if you decline to help. You don't need to write your name on any of the questionnaires. All letters and answers to the questionnaires will be treated in the strictest confidentiality. All letters and questionnaires will be stored in a secure cabinet in the office at the School of Languages, Otago Polytechnic.

When my thesis is completed you are welcome to a copy if you would like one.

Sharron Verberne Heazlewood

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:

1. my participation in the project is entirely voluntary.
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage.
3. the information collected will be stored in a secure place for five years after which it will be destroyed.
4. taking part in this project will involve me in having my letters and where appropriate motivation chart photocopied, being interviewed and answering three questionnaires
5. I understand that there will be no payment involved in taking part in this project.
6. I understand that my anonymity will be preserved throughout the project and in future publications, should these be an outcome of the project.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....
(participant's signature)

.....
(date)

This project has been reviewed and approved by Dr Margaret Franken,
Massey University

APPENDIX VI

Table 4: Learner Profiles

Identification	Nationality	Age	Gender	Occupation	Length of time learning English
L.L.	Japanese	40	F	NZ registered nurse	11 years
M.L.	Egyptian	50	F	Nurse	Since high school
J.K.	Korean	34	F	Piano teacher	8 years
H.A.	Syrian	25	F	Laboratory technician	8 years
A.M	Japanese	26	F	Secretary	7 years
H.K.	Japanese	33	F	Nurse	5 years
S.L.	Korean	36	M	Bank manager	10 years
M.Y	Russian	39	F	Accountant	4 years (NZ)
M.A.	Japanese	27	F	Vocational advisor	9 years
V.L.	Chinese	32	F	University lecturer	10 years
Y.B	Chinese	26	F	Architect	8 years
G.W.	Korean	34	F	Dentist	5 years
S.C.	Taiwanese	35	F	Paediatrician	22 years
S.W.	Chinese	34	F	Computer Engineer	More than 10 years
T.T.	Chinese	33	M	Medical doctor	Over 10 years
L.I.	Chinese	34	F	Medical doctor	More than 8 years
S.O.	Korean	54	M	Architect	6 years
L.E.	Chinese	38	F	Pharmacist	2 years
S.S.	Taiwanese	50	F	Teacher	5 years
V.C.	Croatian	39	F	Accountant	4 years 3 months (New Zealand)
Q.Y.	Chinese	35	F	Chemist	10 years
H.T.	Taiwanese	49	M	Company director	26 years
R.F.	Japanese	27	F	Officer	8 years
E.C.	Iraqi	42	M	Mechanical engineer	8 years
A.C.	Taiwanese	47	F	Teacher	More than 3 years

APPENDIX VII

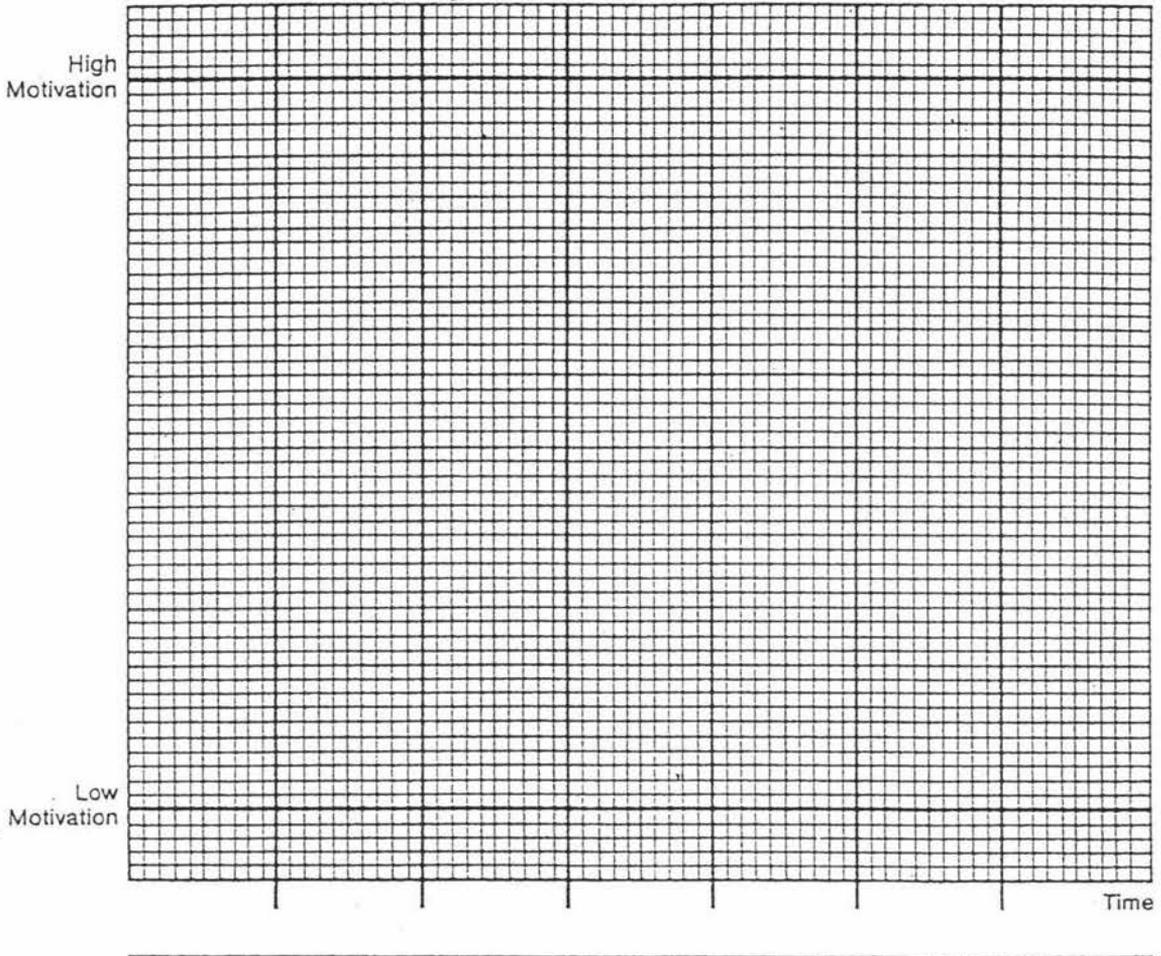
MOTIVATION CHART

Motivation graph (1.5)



Name:

Date:



Day	Comments
Mon	lovely day to start the last week for ... semester one
Tue	talking with ^{the} conversation assistant about marriage and divorce was very useful and I know a little bit about N.Z. rules.
wed	It's the most special day I've had since I came ^{to} N.Z. I ranked this day on the top.

APPENDIX VIII

H.A.'S FIRST LETTER

Dear sharon

At the first, I want to tell you some-
thing, when I came to the languages
unit and ^{met} meet you I wished you
^{would} will be my teacher. So I am
very happy now because I got
a nice teacher and nice group
to study together this year
Thank you

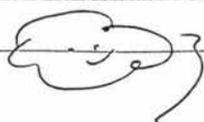
H.

Dear H.

I really enjoy having you in our class
and hope that you develop your language
skills to reach your dreams.

I, too, felt drawn to you when we
met and hope we continue to share many
happy times

Love



to pack

and I stoped working even though I ^{haven't} didn't finish yet . However I am not good ^{at} ^{be good at -ing} packing that way I took long to packed a few bags and it just as well one of my friends came out of the blue and helped me to do the rest of the bags.

It is 10:00 o'clock as I am writing to you and I need to make a call phone so I hope you ^{no} ^{have} good dreams and am looking forward to see ^{ing} you tomorrow.

With love Hz :

A great letter ! (just watch your tenses & spelling - but a huge improvement !)



Please write to me during Syria & I will write back . Have a wonderful time and get in touch on your return - love and stay



APPENDIX X

CONVERSATION ASSISTANT QUESTIONNAIRE

The usage and effectiveness of letters in assisting speakers of other languages acquire communicative competence

I am at present doing research into the effectiveness of the letter writing process which will be used for a paper I will deliver in Auckland in September, and will culminate in the writing of my Masters thesis through Massey University. I appreciate the time it will take you to answer the following questions. All answers will be confidential. When my research is finished you are welcome to a copy of my findings if you so wish.

1. What do you look forward to in your contact with students in General English 4?
2. How do you use the letter written by Sharron?
3. What things do you enjoy about the letter?
4. What parts of the letter do you discuss with the students?
5. What do you think you are able to teach the students?
6. What do you think the students learn through the letter?
7. How do you think the letter is useful to the students?
8. Please feel free to add any other comments about Sharron's letter.