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Towards learner autonomy: raising critical awareness of learning in an adult refugee ESOL Literacy class

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Philosophy in Second Language Teaching**

Debora Elsie Potgieter

Massey University

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Abstract

An action research project was undertaken in an adult refugee ESOL Literacy class to determine whether a teacher could change tasks or teaching methods to help learners develop critical awareness of learning. After an initial review of available research regarding refugee learners with low levels of literacy, learner autonomy and critical awareness, action research processes were reviewed and the teaching context of the particular class that would be involved in the research project was investigated. The research project was designed to be carried out in two stages. Firstly, three teaching techniques were selected and tasks designed that would suit learners with a range of different skills in the class. Secondly, the tasks were implemented and refined during the process of data collection over a period of two terms. Three types of tasks were used during the data collection period: dictation, the use of Cuisenaire rods, and the use of computer-based tasks.

Data was collected from participating learners in the class by means of learner logs where learners wrote reflections on their learning. Data was also gathered through teacher observation and reflections. Informal discussions with other teachers in the programme formed an important source of data of the study. Teacher reflections used three maxims to focus the observations, looking at connections to prior learning, peer learning and constraints that influenced the research.

The unique challenges of the teaching context and learners in the programme necessitated some changes to the design of the study. Methods typically used in alternative assessment for ESL learners were employed to observe some learners' awareness of linguistic competence, involving the Cuisenaire rods. Different forms of dictation tasks were found to be useful for different skills level groups. It was not possible to fully investigate the use of computer-based tasks owing to the constraints of the particular teaching context.

This study was carried out over a very short period, with a relatively small number of participants. The findings are not conclusive but seem to indicate that changes to teaching methods can help learners to develop increased critical awareness of learning. A greater emphasis on peer learning, limited teacher involvement in the higher skills level groups and the use of alternative assessment methods for ongoing self-evaluation in the lowest skill level group all contributed to raising critical awareness of learning.

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