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

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**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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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

English Language Partners New Zealand (ELPNZ) offers a variety of English language services for refugees and migrants in different locations nationwide. In my position as an accredited teacher on the ESOL Literacy programme, I work mainly with learners from refugee backgrounds who have very low literacy skills. During my involvement with another research project a few years ago (Benseman, 2012), I was impressed by the insistence on the part of the learners and teachers being interviewed that the primary goal for every learner from a refugee background was to regain control over their own lives. For the purposes of that study interviews were conducted with learners and teachers in five different locations: three in Auckland, as well as one in Palmerston North and one in Feilding. All the interviewees saw the acquisition of English language and literacy skills as a vital step on the journey towards reaching this goal. My involvement as a teacher in the ESOL Literacy programme made me realize that this step may be very difficult for most former refugee learners to complete, as their progress is usually very slow because of their lack of print literacy skills and their lack of experience in an educational setting. The situation is also complicated by the ongoing effects of the traumatic experiences that led to the learners becoming refugees.

Learners from refugee backgrounds with no or very low levels of print literacy need special programmes designed for their needs (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010; Finn, 2010). One of the concerns for learners is the slow rate of progress resulting from their lack of experience with formal education situations. Research into the strategies used by learners with low literacy to obtain information from visual cues indicates that learning to read itself supports the organisational skills needed for learning (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010).

Learners in the ELPNZ ESOL Literacy programme are encouraged to develop very basic literacy skills at the same time as they are acquiring English as a second language to the extent needed for coping with their daily lives in their new community. At the conclusion of the programme, learners are expected to either enrol with other education providers for continued study of English or to seek and find a job that would enable them to provide for their families. This means that in the space of a few years they have to adapt to a new language, a new culture and, most of all, become autonomous learners who will be able to find and make the most of educational and job opportunities in the new country.

Informal discussions with other ESOL Literacy teachers in different centres in ELPNZ centred on the following question: What can a teacher do in the classroom to facilitate and possibly expedite this process for the learners? These discussions together with input from my supervisors at Massey University led me to decide to carry out a study project in my own class and a research question was thus formulated:

In what ways and to what extent is it possible for a teacher in the ESOL Literacy programme to adapt teaching techniques or task design to help learners develop or increase critical awareness of their own learning?

The current study will attempt to explore ways to answer this question. To do this, an action research project was carried out in my class, with input from teachers nationwide through the ELPNZ network. The ELPNZ organisation was already in existence at the time of the study and had been set up to encourage teachers' reflective practice; it presents most of the characteristics of an organisation where action research takes place, according to the working model described by the First Symposium on Action Research in Industry, Government and Higher Education that was held in Brisbane in 1989 (Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart, & Zuber-Skerrit, 2002).

In order to understand the background against which the study was conducted and the reasons why an action research project was deemed suitable the remainder of this chapter will take a closer look at the research context and the factors that influence teaching in this context. The following chapters will focus on the discussion of available research (Chapter 2); the methodology of the study (Chapter 3); and a chapter each on the findings from the focus on three teaching techniques and related tasks: dictation (Chapter 4); Cuisenaire rods (Chapter 5) and the use of computer-based tasks (Chapter 6). The thesis will be concluded with a chapter discussing the conclusions drawn from this study and implications for teaching adult refugee learners with low literacy levels.

## **1.1 The research context**

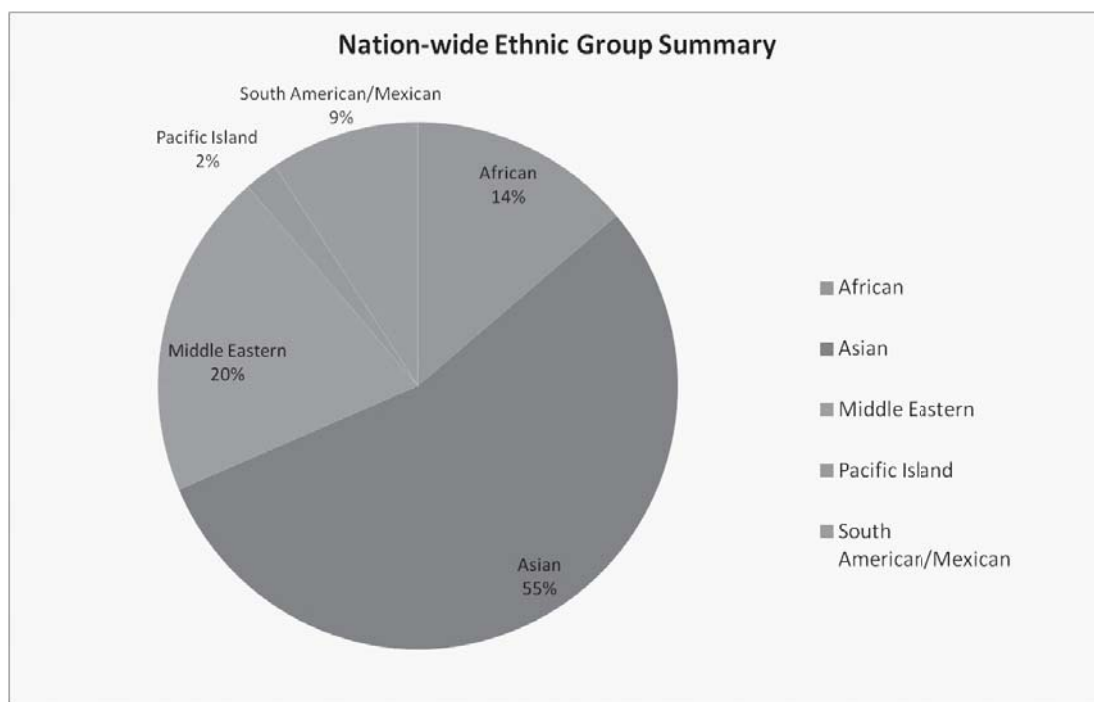
Every year New Zealand accepts up to 750 refugees from countries as diverse as Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bosnia, Burma, Cambodia, Colombia, Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, Vietnam and Zimbabwe. A refugee is generally defined as an involuntary immigrant, the casualty of major political or

environmental crises, usually resulting in civil war and a threat to the refugee because of their ethnicity, political or religious beliefs (Beaglehole, 2012, p. 11). Many of the refugees have not been to school in their own countries or have had their schooling interrupted by the political circumstances or environmental disaster that caused them to flee their homes. They usually have little or no English when they arrive in New Zealand. Quota refugees are inducted into New Zealand life during a six-week period at the Mangere Refugee Centre in Auckland. During this time they receive some basic English instruction as part of the resettlement education programme (Hayward, 2007). From here, the refugees are dispersed around the country to centres such as Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington, Nelson and previously also Christchurch, where community-based organisations such as English Language Partners New Zealand (ELPNZ) offer government-funded ESOL Literacy programmes for refugees with low-level literacy and language skills. Refugees with higher level skills may be incorporated into ESOL programmes run by other education providers.

In order to better understand the complexity of the situation it is necessary to take a closer look at the learners, teaching staff and teaching environment in the ELPNZ ESOL Literacy programme.

## **1.2 The learners**

In 2013 ELPNZ delivered ESOL Literacy classes to a wide variety of learners from refugee backgrounds. A general overview of the ethnicities present in the programme at that time is presented in Figure 1.1 below. The majority of the learners came from the Asian bloc (55%) that includes mainland Asia as well as the islands in the South Asian region. Learners in the Middle Eastern cluster came from countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan, Palestine and Syria. Since 2013 a large group of Colombian refugees have also been resettled in New Zealand.



**Fig. 1.1 A summary of ethnic groups receiving support through the ESOL Literacy programme run by ELPNZ during 2013.**

In my teaching setting during the period of this study I had up to 23 learners in the class at times, coming from 11 different countries, namely Afghanistan, Cambodia, Colombia, Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, India, Kurdistan, Pakistan, Syria and Somalia. Although the learners are sometimes called ‘refugee’ learners, they themselves prefer to be called ‘former refugees’ or ‘learners with a refugee background’. They spoke a total of twelve different first languages, although in the case of Dari and Farsi the two languages are very similar and sometimes seen as one language (Persian) by the Western world. Most of the learners in the class speak at least one other language apart from their own first language and basic English, with the notable exception of the learners from Cambodia and Colombia. The learners from Pakistan and India, who identified themselves as speaking three different first languages (Pashtu, Hindi and Punjabi) share a common language (Hindi) which makes it possible for them to communicate with each other. The learner from Eritrea speaks Afar and Arabic and can communicate with the learners from Djibouti (Afar) and Syria (Arabic).

This mixture of cultures and first languages is not uncommon in ESOL Literacy programmes. Benseman’s study (2012) surveyed 36 learners in four centres and found that a wide variety of first languages and countries of origin could be present in these classes. A summary of the situation detailed in Benseman’s report is presented in Table 1.1 below.

Languages		Countries of origin	
Nepali	Amharic	Bhutan	Pakistan
Burmese	Urdu	Burma	Iran
Tamil	Arabic	Sri Lanka	Iraq
Dari	Kurdish	Afghanistan	Kuwait
Pashtu	Farsi	Ethiopia	Palestine
		India	

*Table 1.1 Summary of first languages and countries of origin found in a survey of 36 learners in ELPNZ Literacy classes in Palmerston North/Feilding and Auckland in 2012 (adapted from Benseman, 2012, p. 13).*

The learners in my class during the period of the current study came to New Zealand from a variety of different backgrounds. Some came from refugee camps in various parts of the world or from settings where they were living as illegal immigrants without the necessary documents that would enable them to settle properly and participate in society as equals. Some of the other learners came to live with family members already in New Zealand as part of the government's family re-unification scheme.

The learners had also come to New Zealand at different times. The older learners from East Asia have already been in the country for up to fifteen years in some cases, but have not been able to participate in language and literacy learning programmes before, for a variety of reasons including family commitments and inability to access information regarding services available to them. The class also included learners from more recent intakes of refugees - some had only been in the country for six weeks when they enrolled in the programme. This meant that the learners were in various stages of acculturation which impacted on their needs and behaviours. A number of the learners were also dealing with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which made it difficult for them to attend class regularly or to concentrate for long periods at a time.

The enduring effects of the trauma experienced by former refugees have a considerable impact on their ability to form new relationships of trust and to re-build their self-esteem – qualities that are needed for successful language learning (Hrubes, 2000; Isserlis, 2000). This aspect of the research setting for the current study was one of the contributing factors in the decision to initiate an action research project, where the teacher (myself) is also the



researcher. The learners all know and accept me, they trust me and felt that they were engaged in the project from start to finish. Action research is not research carried out from an external perspective by an objective stranger, but a project carried out by partners in a learning situation to the benefit of all participants (Altrichter et al., 2002).

The ESOL Literacy class presents a setting rich in diversity, with learners at different levels of language acquisition and literacy development, from a range of different ethnic backgrounds with different experiences impacting on their resettlement and language learning processes. For the teacher this diversity presents its own challenges, for the researcher it complicates the process of data collection to an extent perhaps not fully understood at the beginning of the process. To understand the research background better, we need to take a brief look at the teachers, the organization, the teaching environment and the curriculum of the ESOL Literacy programme.

### **1.3 The teachers and the organisation**

Teachers in this programme are all highly qualified and experienced with a strong knowledge and skill base to draw on when teaching in this very specialised field (Benseman, 2012; Shameem, McDermott, Martin-Blaker, & Carryer, 2002). The organization has a strong focus on continued professional development to encourage best practice.

Within the ELPNZ organization regular professional development takes the form of local moderation meetings within the different centres, as well as live webinars on relevant topics. These webinars are recorded and made available on the ELPNZ website for teachers who did not have the opportunity to attend the live event. Regional or national conferences are held regularly in different centres across the country to give teachers and managers the opportunity to network, to discuss issues relevant to their teaching and to share new learning. Within the various centres teachers are encouraged to gather data on questions concerning their own teaching practice, to discuss and problem-solve with other teachers and coordinators and to reflect on their own practice. Each teacher also has to do a small research project as part of the initial training for this programme. These projects may include a literature study or a reflection on their teaching practice detailing interventions or changes made in their methods to solve learner issues. Finished projects are also made available on the website for other teachers to access and discuss. When compared to the working model of action research formulated by the participants in the Brisbane International Symposium on

Action Research in 1989 (Altrichter et al., 2002) ELPNZ displays a number of the characteristics of an organization where action research takes place. This climate of actively supporting research by classroom teachers was another factor influencing the decision to undertake an action research project.

Teaching staff in the ESOL Literacy class include a trained teacher, one or more bilingual assistants and a number of trained volunteers. Bilingual assistants are recruited from the former refugee communities to provide first language (L1) support for learners in the first two profile levels only. They undergo training specifically designed for their unique role in the classroom. In the first stages of acculturation the provision of L1 support is crucial (Collier, 2011). During the first phase of developing classroom and literacy skills learners also depend heavily on the support of the bilingual assistant. Field and Kim (2003) described the role of the bilingual assistant as a facilitator of communication between the teacher and the learner and as interpreter of classroom behaviours and expectations. They concluded that the use of bilingual instruction is necessary in this environment as a mediating artefact to ensure that communication occurs, with reference to Engeström's Activity System Model (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999). The bilingual assistant increases the zone of proximal development and even creates a zone in which learning may occur (J. Field & Kim, 2003). For the purpose of this study, one of the most influential aspects of the bilingual assistant's role will be their position as a role model – a successful language learner who is able to discuss learning strategies with learners who are at the beginning of the language acquisition journey. The support of the bilingual assistants will also make it possible for me to initiate and complete the data collection aspect of the action research project.

#### **1.4 The teaching setting**

ELPNZ is a community-based provider of English language programmes. In practical terms this means that classes are run in locations easily accessible by the learners in different areas. Rooms are rented on an hourly basis in centres that are not specifically designed for teaching. All educational resources and equipment have to be brought into the location by the teaching staff every day, unless the particular centre provides lockable storage space as part of their service. In some locations tables and chairs have to be set out before each lesson and everything packed up and put away at the end of the session – usually by the teaching staff and learners themselves. The classroom involved in the current study is located in one such community centre.

The learning community created can be seen as a bridge between the isolated former refugee and the wider community, lessening the individual's feeling of disempowerment and building the resilience needed to cope with settlement issues (Hayward, 2007). Informal discussions with other teachers in the ESOL Literacy programme seem to confirm my own observation that the practical experience of creating and dismantling the learning space also serves as a training ground for intercultural communication in multicultural classes.

Although these practical matters complicate the planning and delivery of lessons, the fact that everybody is involved in creating the learning space together generates a bond between learners and teaching staff. This bond was one of the reasons why an action research project was deemed suitable for this environment. We already have a culture of working together to enable learning and the participatory nature of action research seemed to fit that culture perfectly.

### **1.5 The curriculum, teaching resources and assessment**

The ELPNZ ESOL Literacy curriculum has been carefully developed over a number of years with input from practitioners and current research to provide the learners with the best opportunity to develop the language and literacy skills they need for successful resettlement (Blakely, Castles, Field, Ibrahim, & Walkerdine, 2009). On entry into the programme each learner is assessed and put into one of three profile levels according to their literacy skills. The profiles provide a description of a learner consolidating their skills at a particular level. Learners in profile 1 have the lowest literacy and language skills and learners in the profile 3 have the highest skills. Curriculum content is divided into topic areas covering the most urgent needs of a new resident. All lessons have a certain content load, but the programme is essentially skills based and focuses on the four areas of *code breaker*, *meaning maker*, *text user* and *text critic or analyst* (Freebody, 1999). These terms have been widely accepted in literacy practice since the early 1990s to indicate the four social roles of a learner beginning to learn to read. All four areas are taught, but assessment mainly focuses on the skill descriptors in the areas of code breaker and meaning maker, which are considered to indicate progress in literacy development at the most basic level (Blakely et al., 2009).

Learners with low levels of literacy and language skills need resources that are not text-dependent and include a variety of different types. The traditional whiteboard and worksheets of the ESL classroom are not used as extensively in the literacy class. A variety

of language games, board games, hands-on activities, pictures and discussion activities are used to introduce, repeat, review and recycle new language while giving the learners the maximum opportunity to practise their developing skills. Teachers in this programme commonly create their own resources or adapt existing resources to suit the needs of the various groups in the class. The multilevel nature of the classes and the small venues designed for general use influence the selection and adaptation of resources. Informal discussions with teachers in different parts of the country seem to indicate that teachers are more likely to recycle teaching techniques rather than resources such as worksheets.

Formal assessment using moderated assessment booklets is carried out every six months in the ESOL Literacy programme. Teachers may also create their own assessment tasks relevant to their particular groups, adapting context and content to include the learning objectives covered in the six month period under review. Regular moderation meetings and other professional development opportunities ensure that teachers are consistent in their evaluation of learner progress. A standardized rating scale is used nationally to report learner progress within the three profile levels to both the national office and the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC). Evidence of learner progress is kept in individual learner portfolios and all centres are audited regularly by representatives from the national office of ELPNZ to ensure that evidence of progress is adequately recorded.

The skills-based nature of the curriculum lends itself to performance-based assessment especially for the lower proficiency levels. Teacher observation is accepted as a valuable source of information on learner progress and replaces formal assessment during the first and third terms of the year. The practice of alternative assessment is well-established in ESOL teaching (Florez & Terrill, 2003) and particularly relevant for low-level literacy learners in this programme. It employs strategies that require learners to show what they can do and thus evaluates what learners “integrate and produce rather than [on] what they are able to recall and reproduce” (Huerta-Macias, 1995, p. 9). Tannenbaum (1996) also discusses a range of assessment strategies suitable for use with ESL learners. These include non-verbal strategies such as pictorial products or physical demonstration; the use of K-W-L charts (tracking what a learner knows, wants to know and has learned about a topic) to facilitate self-evaluation by learners a more traditional oral and written products. Florez and Terrill (2003) recommend the use of cloze exercises, drills and role plays for assessment purposes. They also recognize the value of teacher observation for ongoing assessment of learner

progress and state that learners can benefit from regular teacher-student meetings to discuss individual progress.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

The adult ESOL Literacy class for former refugees with low levels of literacy is a very complicated environment. The learner-centred curriculum and established practice of teacher observation and formative assessment techniques, coupled with the organizational culture of reflective practice influenced decisions about ways of enquiring into the research problem. The action research cycle seemed to fit the teaching environment perfectly.

## Chapter 2: Review of research

### 2.1 Adult refugee learners: The big picture

The focus of this study is on adult refugee learners with no or very low levels of literacy in their first language who are studying English while also acquiring literacy skills. The 1951 Refugee Convention spells out that a refugee is someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." (UNHCR, 2014, p. 1). According to Nicholl and Thompson (2004) studies indicate that between 30% and 86% of all refugees suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD).

The effects of trauma have been identified as impacting on the ability of adult refugee learners to learn a second language. Finn (2010) argues that the symptoms of PTSD in particular form a hidden barrier to learning that all practitioners in this field should take into account. According to Kerka (2002) past or current trauma symptoms may include difficulty beginning new tasks, blame, guilt, concern for safety, depression, inability to trust those in power, disturbed sleep, eroded self-confidence, and an inability to concentrate. This opinion is underpinned by reports from the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT). In a magazine published quarterly by the CCVT Hrubes (2000) discusses the low self-esteem that is one of the enduring effects of torture and the impact that has on a learner's participation in second language learning programmes. Isserlis (2000) refers to Herman's description of traumatic events that overwhelm the "systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (Herman, 1992, p. 33). She argues that since language learning requires control, connection and meaning adult refugee learners who suffer from PTSD face a huge challenge. The negative influence of stress, and particularly PTSD, on academic achievement has also been documented in a study by Söndergaard and Theorell (2004). The data from 49 participants in a longitudinal follow-up study shows that the speed of language acquisition is significantly inversely related to the cumulative symptom load over time of PTSD in refugees, but not related to the number of previous school years.

The traumatic circumstances that influence a refugee's language acquisition process also influence their print literacy. The term print literacy is used in Bigelow and Lovrien Schwarz' comprehensive review of research (2010) on adult refugee learners studying English as a

second language while at the same time acquiring basic literacy skills. Among the causes of low literacy levels in this group researchers count political circumstances such as civil war, genocide, internal displacement or forced immigration and famine resulting in the closing of schools. Poverty, gender in cultures where education is not readily available for one gender, or ethnic marginalization and natural disasters are also deemed to contribute to the lack of print literacy. In refugee camps education is often impossible or continually interrupted. Refugees in these camps may be subject to long processing delays before being relocated to a third country.

Based on their study of available research on adult refugee learners with low levels of print literacy in the United States of America, Bigelow and Lovrien Schwarz (2010) conclude that all available findings suggest that adult English language learners with low or no print literacy need programmes and classes separate from those of other beginning-level English language learners, particularly because of their lack of experience with formal education. Characteristics of these learners are described in the American National Reporting System in the discussion of the Educational Functional Level Descriptors (cited in Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010). At the beginning level they have no or minimal reading or writing skills in any language. Some of them may be able to recognize or copy letters and numbers and possibly a few words like their own names. They have little or no awareness of the relationship between print and spoken language. Some learners also have difficulty using a pen or pencil because of a lack of the fine motor skills that develop during the early years at school. They function minimally or not at all in English and communicate largely through gestures and a few isolated words.

In the current study the term ESOL literacy learner is used for learners in this category although the group is made up of diverse subcategories, first described by Haverson and Haynes (1982). They identified three types of learners:

- Pre-literate – Learners from a culture and language with no print literacy or where literacy is just being developed and not widely available;
- Non-literate – Learners from a culture and language with a print literacy but who have not become literate in their first language;
- Semi-literate – Learners who understand that print carries meaning but are unable to decode or encode print themselves. This group may include learners with interrupted formal schooling, or learners who were in the other categories at an earlier time.



These categories correspond to some extent with the types of first language (L1) literacy identified as having an influence on acquisition of literacy skills in a second language (L2). In their review of research on reading programmes for adult ESL learners Burt, Peyton and Adams (2003) cite studies by Huntly (1992), Birch (2002), Hilferty (1996) and Strucker (2002) that added non-Roman alphabet literate, non-alphabet literate and Roman alphabet literate to the categories mentioned above to complete the picture of first language literacy.

Learners with limited L1 literacy skills, especially in the pre-literate and non-literate categories as defined by Haverson and Haynes (1982, cited above) seem to acquire L2 literacy skills much more slowly than do learners with even slightly higher degrees of L1 literacy. Non-print-literate learners are significantly less able to recognize words as phonological entities (Kolinsky, Cary, & Morais, 1987). Bigelow and Lovrien Schwarz (2010) found that researchers agree that learning to read causes the brain to acquire different strategies for information processing. Significant differences have also been documented in the strategies used by literate and non-literate learners to process many kinds of language-based tasks such as repetition of digits, fluency in naming categories and following oral instructions. Other cognitive skills are also impacted by a learner's literacy skills. Nurss (1998) found that non-literate adults do not systematically scan visual fields in the same way as literate adults do: they ignored the focal point of the image and visually scanned the whole picture, responding to images that related to their personal experience. Kurvers (2007) agrees that adult learners who are learning English as a second language while also acquiring literacy for the first time do not exhibit systematic visual strategies but seek correspondance between visual or context clues and meaning and gradually learn to use sequential decoding strategies. Literacy levels have also been found to have an effect on how oral tasks designed to elicit question forms in English are carried out (Tarone & Bigelow, 2007).

Adults with limited literacy bring their own strengths and weaknesses to adult education programmes. Some researchers recognize that they have life experience, knowledge, skills and abilities that aid language learning (Espinoza-Herold, 2007; Klassen, 1991; Klassen & Burnaby, 1993). In their review of research in this field, Bigelow and Lovrien Schwarz discuss the so-called 'funds of knowledge' studies that looked at discovering what strengths immigrant families (many with limited formal schooling) in the United States of America have to draw on during their acculturation process. The learners in these studies were all deemed capable and competent to arrange their own lives and help their children achieve at



their own education, although their lack of print literacy limited their access to important information. Bigelow and Lovrien Schwarz (2010) quote a story published in the Star Tribune in Minneapolis, USA recounting the experiences of a young Somali woman with limited literacy who is struggling to achieve her ambitious learning goals (Miller, 2009, April 9) to illustrate the need for these learners to acquire basic literacy skills to reach their intermediate and long-range goals. Bigelow and Lovrien Schwarz note that: “They were capable and competent outside of their ESOL class and felt diminished and uncomfortable only in class, where their language was deemed deficient” (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010, p. 4). They argue that the strengths and unique skills that adult refugee learners bring to the classroom should be recognized and harnessed by the teacher to enable the learner to develop a better self-image and to begin to recover from the effects of their traumatic past. It has also been argued that learners should be encouraged to develop a greater sense of agency and control over their learning. For learners who have survived trauma Adkins, Sample and Birman (1999) recommend using a curriculum that makes it possible for teachers to track the progress of individual learners, allowing learners to gain awareness of their own learning and thereby to gain confidence.

Researchers have recognized the challenges faced by teachers in programmes for adult refugee learners with low literacy skills. Finn (2010) concludes her study with the acknowledgement that:

There is still much research to be done in the field of trauma and second language learning. [...]As evidenced by the research, there are clear cognitive and psychological challenges that result from trauma. Disorders like PTSD can result in memory impairment that affects language and literacy acquisition. Teachers will have to be flexible in their pedagogical methods and learn to incorporate repetitive lessons and prereading exercises to address cognitive challenges that have affected short- and long-term memory. Further, as a result of students' memory loss and heightened anxiety in the classroom, they may feel defeated. Teachers, then, must learn to motivate students by creating curriculum that values the students' needs and cultural identities. Moreover, teachers will have to be cognizant of how to foster a learner-centered classroom environment that helps to reinforce students' confidence and trust. By creating this community of practice, refugees who have experienced trauma will thrive. (p. 594)

## 2.2 The New Zealand context

New Zealand's first formal intake of refugees is generally accepted to be the group of about 800 Polish children and accompanying adults who entered the country in 1944 (Beaglehole, 2012). Then, as now, the ability to communicate in English was recognized as an important factor in the success of refugee resettlement (Altinkaya & Omundsen, 1999). In recent years a growing number of studies have been published in New Zealand dealing with the issue of education for adult refugee learners, notably Beaglehole (2012), Benseman (2012) and Hayward (2007).

Some studies have concentrated on provisions for young adult refugee learners in tertiary education (Horner, Khan, & Paton, 2006) recognizing the need for additional support for these learners. Other researchers have focused on the learning needs of adult refugee learners in ESOL and literacy programmes in both the formal and informal sector (Beaglehole, 2012; Benseman, 2012; Hayward, 2007; Hope, 2013; Kaur, 2011; TESOL Aotearoa New Zealand, 2003). These researchers all agree that progress for adult refugee learners is slow, especially for learners with low-level literacy skills in their own languages. For a variety of reasons ranging from health issues, lack of previous education and other constraints such as family circumstances (mothers with pre-school children in the survey by Hope in 2013) and accessibility of programmes they need more time in specialised programmes to achieve the learning goals that would enable them to fully integrate in New Zealand society. Shameem et al (2002) refer to "the minimal rate of progress that can be expected from refugees and migrants who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders and feelings of anomie" (p. 34). They recommend programmes that make provision for flexibility in attendance, as well as more hours resulting in a longer time over which to spread the learning.

Language and literacy providers commonly see adult refugee learners as traumatised and vulnerable and in need of special programmes catering for their specific needs. Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Aotearoa New Zealand (TESOLANZ) have criticised the distinct lack of programmes designed to suit the learning needs of refugees (TESOL Aotearoa New Zealand, 2003). In her thesis Hayward (2007) found programmes designed and influenced by the language method approach lacking in their recognition of the special needs presented by refugees. Her thesis developed a post-critical approach for a refugee-centred language and settlement programme for application in resettlement institutions such as the Mangere Centre. A report for TEC on ESOL gaps and priorities

(2008) acknowledges in particular that the slow learning progress for pre-literate learners challenges traditional assumptions about stair casing to higher level programmes. The report recognises that these learners' needs are complex and require specialist resources and teaching approaches that are culturally and socially appropriate. An Australian study of Sudanese refugees (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007) even suggests that teaching the four strands of speaking, listening, reading and writing simultaneously with numeracy and learning skills may be too big a burden for learners in this category. An ESOL teacher of refugees (Kaur, 2011) also confirms the slow rate of progress with former refugee learners when first starting their courses due to poor concentration and short-term memory lapses. Hope (2013, cited above) identifies environmental and logistical challenges that can only be overcome by adapting content and teaching approaches to reduce the disruptive impact. Informal discussions with literacy teachers as well as formal surveys (e.g. Benseman, 2012) suggest that teachers and learners alike find the overcrowded conditions resulting from large class sizes a challenge and sometimes a barrier to learning.

However, in an overview of services available for resettlement of older refugees in New Zealand in 1999, Altinkaya and Omundsen (1999) remind us that:

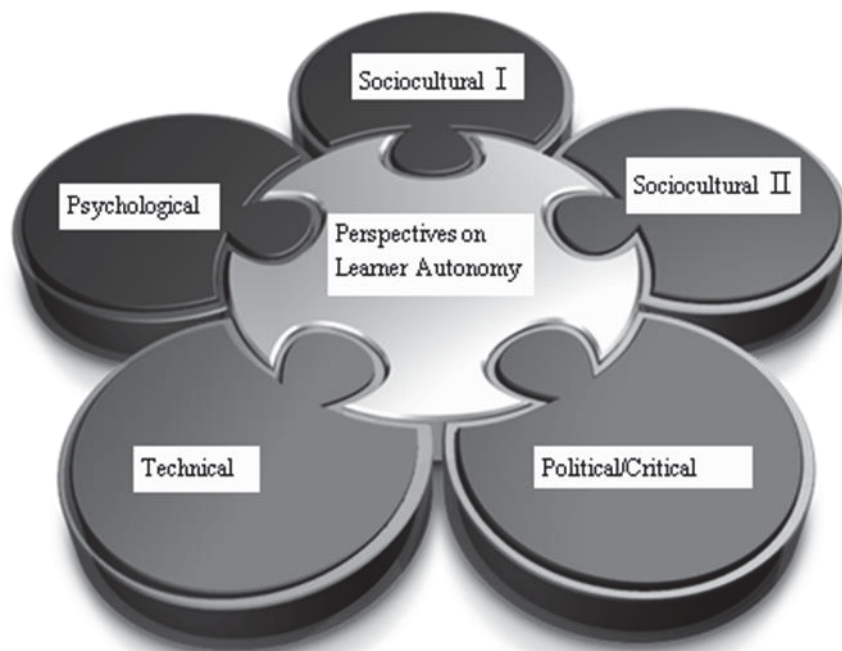
the common assumption that an older refugee is helpless, passive and dependent is often quite different from the reality. Emphasising the difficulties faced by older refugees can result in a skewed picture that does nothing to recognise the resilience and stamina of people who have experienced events that we are unlikely to face and cannot easily imagine. (p. 4)

They see proficiency in English as one of the most important factors that influences the success of refugee resettlement, as this determines the refugee's ability to participate in society and access services for this purpose. The learners themselves are highly motivated (1999, cited above) and conscious of the benefits of learning English. Benseman's (2012) report on the needs of adult refugee learners indicates that this opinion is shared by learners themselves. The learners interviewed in that study saw the time spent in language and literacy education programmes as the first step along the way to becoming fully autonomous and having control over their own lives. The beneficial effect of a language and literacy programme designed to cater for the needs of a particular group of learners is confirmed by the opinion of learners surveyed in the Hope study (2013). In that study the researcher used a combination of questionnaires, interviews with learners and their families, as well as teacher

observations to gather data. Participating learners were adult former refugee mothers with children at the primary school where the ESOL Literacy class was offered. These learners as well as other stakeholders in the programme acknowledged that all the members of a learner's family benefit from the mother's progress in acquiring language and literacy skills that enable her to become a participating member of the community.

### 2.3 Learner autonomy

A variety of approaches to the construct of learner autonomy have been described by researchers (P. Benson, 2010; P Benson, Chik, & Lim, 2003; S. Cotterall, 1995; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Holliday, 2003; Lewis, 2005; Oxford, 2003; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Van Lier, 2007), with sometimes confusing use of terminology and concepts. Researchers at times use the terms 'autonomy'; 'independent learning' and 'awareness' to denote the same quality in learners. Perhaps the most authoritative model of learner autonomy is to be found in Oxford's study (2003). She identifies five perspectives of autonomy: a technical, psychological, two sociocultural and a political-critical perspective (illustrated in Figure 2.1). These perspectives will be discussed in more detail below, with reference to other relevant research.



**Fig. 2.1 A visual representation of the five perspectives on Learner Autonomy, based on Oxford's model (2003).**

From Oxford's technical perspective, autonomy is defined as skills for independent learning situations. Palfreyman and Smith (2003) reviewed a collection of studies on autonomy and noted that autonomy is sometimes defined as independence from the teacher although some writers emphasise the value of interdependence - describing the ability of learners to work together and to take shared responsibility for their learning. These researchers also regard the collaboration resulting from working with a teacher as an important part of learner autonomy.

Independence as an aspect of autonomy has been widely researched. According to White (2008) the term 'independent language learning' is sometimes used to refer to a particular learning context, where the emphasis is on learner agency and there is no teacher present to mediate the learning process. She refers to self-access learning, distance learning and language advising contexts as examples of such settings. Independent language learning may also refer to a philosophy or approach to learning that is aimed at developing independence in learners regardless of the setting. Baynham (2006) analysed the discourse in an ESOL classroom for adult refugees in the United Kingdom and found that the discursive environment was characterized by high levels of student agency and teacher contingency. In some cases he observed "interesting and unexpected re-workings of the distribution of knowledge as well as disputes over what counts as knowledge, which provide opportunities for learning which must be grabbed in passing" (p. 25). It may be argued that the nature of the setting in the adult refugee literacy class creates its own opportunities for developing independence.

Boud (1988) argues that independence to some extent implies a manifest dependence on authorities for information and guidance whereas interdependence is a stage of development that transcends independence and is an essential component of autonomy. Anderson and Garrison (1998) see the goal not as learner independence, but as encouraging the learners to develop control of their learning experiences. They argue that this would require a combination of independence (exploring and making choices), proficiency (ability and competence to engage in learning experiences), and support to facilitate personally meaningful learning. Proficiency implies the use of appropriate learning strategies, which forms part of the third aspect of independent language learning discussed by White (2008).

From the psychological perspective (Oxford, 2003) autonomy is regarded as a combination of characteristics of the individual. In this view the individual learner attributes and skills are

taken into account, as well as the individual use of learning strategies. Cohen (1998) focuses on the aspect of conscious choice to distinguish learning strategies from language use strategies. He concludes that some strategies are behavioural and can be easily observed; some strategies, although also behavioural, cannot be easily observed; and some strategies are mentalistic and cannot be observed. Strategies in this last category need to be reported by the learner - either verbally or in the form of reflective writing. As discussed by White (2008) the learning context can create opportunities and experiences which encourage learners' choice and self-reliance, thereby promoting the development of metacognitive knowledge which is a prerequisite for increased critical awareness. Dam and Legenhausen see critical awareness as one of the precursors to autonomy (2010). Their discussion is based on a study of learners over a period of several years in autonomous EFL classes in a Danish comprehensive school. They identify three aspects of critical awareness, namely awareness of the variables involved in language learning, the capacity for control of procedures, and the capacity for assessing personal linguistic outcomes.

Oxford (2003) also identified two sociocultural perspectives of autonomy. In the first, autonomy is seen as self-regulation, gained through social interaction with a more capable, mediating person in a particular setting. This mediation can also occur through books, technology, and other means. In this view agency is equivalent to self-regulation and learners are encouraged to develop abilities that allow them to act intentionally and independently. The second perspective does not view autonomy as the primary goal, but instead focuses on participation in the community of practice where mediated learning occurs through cognitive partnerships. This interaction is made possible by participants sharing knowledge of the community and practices, as well as strategies and cultural understandings with each other (Oxford, 2003, p. 87).

The influence of culture on aspects of learner autonomy has been researched widely. The dangers of culturism are discussed thoroughly in Holliday's work (2003) on social autonomy. Holliday observes that culturism pervades all aspects of all societies and could lead to a teacher confining a learner to a culturist stereotype. Other researchers argue that culture influences all aspects of a person, and therefore also the learning process. Ho and Crookall (1995) conclude that respect for the authority of the teacher may in itself form a barrier to developing autonomy. They also recognize that autonomy tends to be associated with intrinsic motivation, but what is motivating for an individual is partly framed by what is



motivating for the culture of the individual. They discuss the example of Asian learners using memorization as a learning strategy that is not valued by Western language schools using the communicative approach. The perceived tension between what is valued by the learner's background culture and what is valued by the target culture or by the other cultures present in the classroom is acknowledged by researchers such as Benson, Chik and Lim (2003) who argue that cultural values interact within any given language learning context. Roebuck (2000) views the learner's culture as a resource for the teacher to use to empower the learners to develop the degree of autonomy needed in their own context to achieve their particular learning goals. She uses Swidler's toolkit metaphor to imply that the learner's access to cultural meanings is constrained by their background, but also that the individual can decide how they want to use these cultural resources in particular situations. Roebuck also maintains that individuals use or reject the opportunities offered by their learning context to negotiate their identity in relation to the real or imagined communities to which they belong or want to belong.

Finally, from the political-critical perspective (Oxford, 2003) autonomy involves gaining access to cultural alternatives and power structures, and developing an articulate voice amid competing ideologies. In this perspective, agency involves the power to control one's situation and to exercise choice. For adult refugee learners this is a strong motivational factor. Recent studies by New Zealand researchers in adult refugee classrooms have found that the learners without fail regard control over their own situations as one of the most highly desired outcomes of the ESOL Literacy programmes (Benseman, 2012; J Field & Sellars, 2008; Hayward, 2007; Hope, 2013; Kaur, 2011). To this end, researchers acknowledge that learners should be provided with opportunities to hone skills needed to negotiate the minefield of social and cultural interactions in the resettlement situation. The classroom needs to provide learners with an 'apprenticeship in speaking out' during those challenging encounters which may have the potential to rob them of their opportunities in the wider society (Baynham, 2006, p. 38).

## **2.4 Learning strategies and critical awareness**

The use of learning strategies, whether objectively observed or self-reported, may be a good indication of critical awareness and possibly autonomy. In her overview of independent language learning, White (2008) discusses learning strategies as operations or processes that the learner consciously chooses to facilitate a learning task. The learner must have knowledge

of herself as a learner, knowledge of the learning task and knowledge of appropriate strategies that may be used to accomplish the given task in order to negotiate the learning environment successfully. Cotterall (1995) reported on a study to develop an instrument to gauge learners' readiness for autonomy based on their beliefs about language learning. The study found that there is an indirect link between the learner's use of strategies and some aspects of autonomy. However, some of the factors discussed in the Cotterall study seem to indicate that it may be unreasonable to expect learners to operate independently in the early stages of language learning (Sara Cotterall, 1995, p. 201).

Chamot (2001) investigated research into language learning strategies and tried to establish whether it could be possible to teach less successful language learners to use strategies and thus become more successful language learners. She describes the good language learner as an active learner who monitors language production, uses prior linguistic knowledge, uses various memorization techniques, and asks questions for clarification. Learners' self-efficacy beliefs and the influence of learner strategies on the development of those beliefs was the focus of a study on the impact of strategy training on the listening proficiency of secondary school learners of French as a foreign language (Graham, 2007) In this study Graham defined self-efficacy belief as a learner's response to the question: "Can I do this task?" She found that learners' perception of the relationship between the strategies they employ on tasks and the learning outcomes they achieve has a direct impact on their motivation. Learners who believe that achievement can be explained by factors in their control are likely to try again if they fail in the first instance. Graham concluded that strategy training with feedback may improve the learner's performance beliefs. She argues that strategy training and feedback also require the learner to develop a reflective stance about their work, which in turn impacts on critical awareness in general.

From a sociocultural perspective, Donato and McCormick (1994) looked at language learning strategies. They argue that mediation and socialization into the community of language learning practice (the classroom) are the driving factors in the development of learning strategies. They regard strategies as situated in a particular context and continually developing. They argue that it makes no sense to think that language learning strategies can be directly exported from one context to another and implemented with unvarying success. Learners from different cultural backgrounds may also use different learning styles and strategies (Ho & Crookall, 1995) which may sometimes be misinterpreted by other cultures.



These preferred strategies may change when influenced by a different culture, as demonstrated by Gao's study (2003) on how living and studying in a foreign country can itself lead to changes in learning strategies. Carson and Longhini (2002) also showed how strategy use changed over time in an immersion setting. Their study based on the diary entries of an applied linguist living in the target language environment concluded that styles and strategies may be manipulated by learners once they become aware of them. Strategy training "is undoubtedly an important part of classroom language acquisition" (p. 434) however they caution that learning styles may have an overriding influence on the selection of learning strategies and this is more difficult to manipulate.

It is important to distinguish between learning strategies and learning skills. The latter refers to "the variety of skills that adults with no prior formal educational experience will need to develop as they acquire classroom experience" (Blakely et al., 2009, p. 15). In the context of the adult refugee ESOL literacy class it is always beneficial to be aware of Biggs' caveat: "Blaming students for processing at a low cognitive level and so providing them with high level strategy training when the teaching does not call for high-level processing is worse than a waste of time" (Biggs, 1993, p. 15). Pre-literate learners or learners with low levels of literacy at the beginning stages of language acquisition may need time in the community of practice to become aware of and/or copy strategies used by more capable learners. According to Chamot (2001), the difference between a good language learner and a less effective language learner is not the use of learning strategies, but the skill in selecting appropriate strategies for the tasks they are working on. This would seem to imply a level of critical awareness of learning that may only develop over time in a learner who is not used to the learning community in the classroom.

From the research reviewed above it seems clear that there is a gap between what is generally considered helpful for new language learners – knowledge of their own preferred learning styles, selection and implementation of learning strategies and their self-efficacy beliefs – and what adult former refugee learners with low literacy skills are deemed capable of. The effects of PTSD and having no or very little previous experience in educational settings may negatively influence learners in this category in their development of critical awareness. This study aims to investigate ways in which a teacher can help learners to bridge the gap between what is possible to do and what is required to do in order to become more efficient learners. The following chapter will explain the methodology of the study.

## 2.5 Action research

In this section a brief review of action research as described by literature will be given. The reasons for choosing this as the method for the current study will be discussed in Chapter 3.

The concept of action research has been widely discussed and refined since its inception in the 1940s when Kurt Lewin described the process of rational social management of intergroup relations as a “spiral of steps each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action” (Lewin, 1946, p. 38). Since then, various attempts have been made to define action research, without one clear widely accepted definition emerging. During the First International Symposium on “Action Research in Industry, Government and Higher Education” in Brisbane in 1989 participants sought to find a generally acceptable, open definition of action research. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) put forward their definition of action research as a type of “collective, self-reflective inquiry that participants in social situations undertake” with the two-part focus of improving the rationality and justice of their own practices, as well as improving their understanding of these practices and the situations in which they operate (p. 5). After many deliberations the participants in the Brisbane Symposium agreed on a working model of action research describing the typical action research setting with reference to aspects such as reflective practice, collaboration between participants and public discussion of the process and findings (Altrichter et al., 2002). They reviewed the discussion around a definition for action research and came to the conclusion that “action research is enquiry with people, rather than research on people” (p. 130).

In 2007 Hillon and Boje published a review of publications on the sociocultural aspect of action research and identified three fundamental tenets of action research, namely that it is in the first instance locally grounded criticality in reflection, tending of necessity to the small group and personal reflection of participants, as opposed to research in critical theory, where a grander scale leads to grander changes in social structures and actions. This viewpoint is similar to that of Altrichter et al. (2002) when they state that “action research aims to develop practical situations and competencies of the participants” (p. 127). Secondly, Hillon and Boje (2007) concur with other researchers such as Argyris (1999) and Dehler (2006) in the field of organisational theory and management education, also Altrichter et al. (2002, cited above) that action research is fundamentally grounded in democracy. The third tenet of action

research according to Hillon and Boje (2007) is that all participants should share the desire to understand and utilize the “untapped human potential” (p. 362) in their midst to effect change.

Hillon and Boje (cited above) looked at the social ecology aspect of action research to effect change not necessarily in the field of education, but their definition also fits the classroom situation. The action research process of identifying a need, reflecting on it, planning a change in the teaching practice or selection of resources, monitoring and recording the results of the change and then reflecting on the overall effect in collaboration with other teachers fits in well with the language teacher’s normal reflective practice (Mackey & Gass, 2005; Ur, 1996). In a presentation to the regional meeting of TESOL Waikato, Barnard (2014) distinguished classroom action research from other types of research in that it endeavours to solve practical problems in the classroom by practitioners intervening in a specific context with the aim to improve practice and empower practitioners. In this situation the teacher is the investigator of her own teaching context, while at the same time being a participant in the context (Burns, 2010).

The importance of classroom-based research has been acknowledged by researchers such as Lightbown (2000) and Ur (1996). In the second language classroom action research is one form of teacher-initiated research (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Teachers typically initiate an action research project based on a particular question or perceived need arising from their own teaching practice (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). Numerous examples of such projects can be found in literature (Air, 2000; Blake, 2011; Calvert & Sheen, 2014; Henenberg, 2000; Kaur, 2011). A recent study (Hope, 2013) in a classroom for migrant mothers with low literacy levels in the Waikato investigated the effect of the ESOL Literacy programme on former refugee families through teacher observation supported by a series of interviews with learners and families, as well as involving other stakeholders in the programme (the school supplying the venue and education to the children of the mothers in the programme; the education provider delivering the programme; funding partners and the like).

Macquarie University in Australia has also published a series of edited books under the collective title of *Teachers’ Voices*, containing collections of papers from teachers in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) across Australia. These papers are the result of collaborative action research carried out in groups investigating an area of common interest (e.g. Air, 2000; Gleedman, 2000; Henenberg, 2000). The teachers investigated aspects of

their teaching practice in relation to the curriculum. They were guided by questions generated in the collaborative group and afterwards came back to the group to report, enquire, discuss and offer solutions or suggest changes. Another notable example of a collaborative study is an article published in the *Language Teaching Research* journal where the researchers worked with teachers in the AMEP programme in three states in four different centres in Australia to determine what scaffolding is needed to aid former refugee learners with low levels of literacy in reading web pages (Murray & McPherson, 2006). The research spanned a period of four school terms. The method included regular end-of-term meetings where the participating teachers came together to share their observations and reflections. They discussed possible alternatives for scaffolding and trialled new methods in their own classrooms before the next meeting.

It is worth noting at this stage, however, that researchers acknowledge the difficulty experienced by practitioners doing action research. Altrichter et al. (2002) comment that when teachers introduce such a project, it may be difficult for them to “meet rigorous requirements of ‘participation’ and ‘collaboration’ at the start.” (p. 127). They caution against limiting the definition of action research too closely, precisely because it may put teachers off from doing this type of research in their classrooms. Mackey and Gass (2005) agree with Nunan (1993, p. 46) that the complex and dynamic context of the classroom could result in action research projects being problematic and sometimes inconclusive. However, they conclude that action research could provide valuable insights to individual teachers as well as to the wider field of second language learning.



## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter will provide a closer look at the methods used to collect and analyse data for this research project. In particular the following sections will give details about the impetus for the study, including the research question and selection of a research method; and the ethical considerations. The preparation for the study and the instruments used for data collection will be discussed in detail.

### **3.1 Research question**

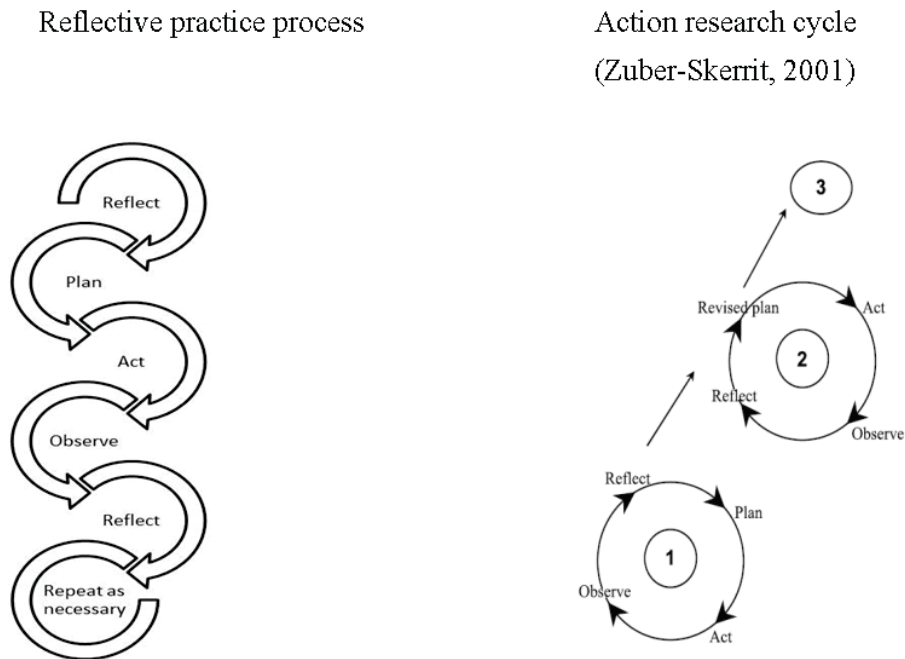
As explained in Chapter 2, this action research project started out with an observation resulting from interviews with various learners and teachers in the ESOL Literacy programme. The observation was that learners interviewed all regarded their learning of English and development of literacy skills as a vital step on their journey to regain control over their lives. However, learners from refugee backgrounds with low levels of literacy find it extremely difficult to develop their literacy skills and master the language at the same time. The characteristics of learners in the programme and the type of teaching environment are discussed in more detail in Chapters 1 and 2. The question that was formulated was:

In what ways and to what extent is it possible for a teacher in the ESOL Literacy programme to adapt teaching techniques or task design to help learners develop or increase critical awareness of their own learning?

### **3.2 Selecting the research method**

In his discussion on the paradigm, praxis and programs of action learning and action research Zuber-Skerritt (2001) explains action learning as “learning from action or concrete experience, as well as taking action as a result of this learning” (p. 1). From this perspective, the teacher’s reflective practice could be seen as action learning, in that it usually focuses on classroom or learner issues and seeks to find solutions for these issues, try them out in teaching sessions and reflect on the effect of the action and possibly resulting in a permanent change in practice. Action research could be described as a cycle of repeated actions and reflections on the actions resulting in more action and reflection. The similarities between

reflective practice and action research are illustrated in Figure 3.1 below. The main difference between action learning (reflective practice) and action research is that action research is “more systematic, rigorous, scrutinisable, verifiable, and is always made public” (Zuber-Skerrit, 2001, p. 1)



**Fig. 3.1: Continuous reflective practice procedure used by practising teachers to find solutions to classroom issues, illustrating the similarities with the steps in an action research project.**

Action research is regarded as a democratic process – “enquiry with people, rather than research on people” (Altrichter et al., 2002, p. 130). The people involved in an action research process are as important as the question being researched. This definition is especially important for the current study.

The decision to conduct an action research project in my own classroom was based on the following interrelated reasons. First, adult refugee learners have to deal with the effects of their traumatic experiences. Creating an environment where they feel safe and able to relax enough to be open to the learning experience is a very important part of teaching in this group. Strangers are usually met with caution and having a stranger in the room making notes or videotaping learners would not be feasible. Second, some learners suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder resulting in behaviours or barriers to learning that would make it

difficult for a researcher who is not familiar with the environment and the learners to evaluate responses to teaching techniques or participation in classroom activities and tasks. Third, the learner participants in the study have very low levels of English and also very little experience of learning. First language support would be necessary for the information and consent process, as well as for reflecting on learning. The bilingual assistants and I have been working together for a number of years and are a well-established team. Fourth and importantly, for the former refugees and for myself the democratic nature of action research is a central principle. The ELPNZ ESOL Literacy programme is learner centred in all aspects and working together to find new ways to evaluate our learning would be more suitable than having another 'objective' person involved in the process. Finally, as explained in Chapter 1, the ELPNZ organisation is already set up to accommodate action research. In this environment, people reflect on and improve their own work and their own situations by a process of reflecting and acting and reflecting on the consequence of the action, discussing their observations and proposed solutions with colleagues. There are regular moderation meetings where colleagues serve as a critical community to support and guide each other through sharing their learnings with each other and reflecting as a group on the teaching environment and ways to improve it.

### **3.3 Ethical considerations**

This research met with the requirements of the Human Ethics Committee of Massey University (HEC Southern B: Application 14/12). The letter of approval is included in Appendix A. The research was also given the full support of the English Language Partners New Zealand national co-ordinator for literacy programmes and the manager of the Waikato centre who oversees the Hamilton classroom where the research took place. Letters of support are included in Appendix B. Learners who were invited to participate in the data collection process were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to decline to take part without any consequences to their participation in classroom activities, and the steps taken to ensure that anonymity and confidentiality were respected. The process of getting their informed consent is discussed in more detail in section 3.4.2 below. Sample information and consent forms are included in Appendix C. Teachers who participated in informal discussions all gave verbal consent for their input to be used. In addition all participants were informed that they would have access to a summary of findings at the conclusion of the



study. Learners were also told that the learner logs will ultimately be returned to them for future use.

### **3.4 Preparation for the study**

This period included a detailed study of available literature on the main elements of the study, as well as discussions with other teachers and supervisors. The review of available research is discussed in section 3.4.1. A small pilot study using normal reflective teaching techniques and informal discussions with two other teachers in the organisation was carried out in the latter half of 2013 to discover if the study would be feasible and to identify practical issues that may influence the data collection process. The focus of this study was on the introduction of computer technology in my own classroom. It was a very necessary step in the process, as it established a base for the focus on computer technology during the main part of the study to follow. The pilot study is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

#### **3.4.1 Review of available research**

The focus of this study is on a particular group of adult ESOL learners from refugee backgrounds who also have interrupted formal education histories, or in some cases no formal education at all. The participants, and the process of getting informed consent for their participation are discussed in more detail in section 3.4.2 below. Focal points identified for the literature review included adult refugee learners in second language education programmes; learners with low literacy levels and their learning needs; best practice in ESOL Literacy programmes; learner autonomy and critical awareness of learning; the use of learning strategies; as well as the types of research that would fit the teaching environment. A full discussion of the literature reviewed has been provided in Chapter 2.

The literature review also provided valuable insights into learning at the focus level and ways in which a teacher/researcher can observe or evaluate the process. The decision to use learner logs to reflect on learning was made based on the experience of Dam and Legenhausen (2010) with EFL students in a Danish comprehensive school. The design of the study will be discussed in more detail in 3.4.3 below.

### 3.4.2 Participant recruitment and consent

The main participants in this study were the learners in my ESOL Literacy class. Data collection started in March 2014 and continued until the end of Term 2 in July of that year. At the start of the data collection period there were a total of 22 learners in the class. Consent was obtained from 19 of these learners. Only the data gathered from them was considered for the purposes of the study, although all learners participated in all of the activities.

The learners in this class are divided into groups according to their skills profiles. Profile 1 is made up of learners with the lowest literacy and language skills, Profile 2 is the middle group and Profile 3 is the highest level group. A description of the profile levels has been provided in Chapter 1. During the period of data collection some learners moved up into higher levels after achieving the learning outcomes in their starting level. This movement of participants is reflected in table 3.1 below.

Profile level	Number of learners at the start of period	Learners achieving outcomes and moving to the next level	Number of learners at the end of period
1	6	1	5
2	7	3	6
3	6	1*	7
*This learner achieved all the outcomes in this programme and enrolled at another education provider for further study.			

**Table 3.1** *Movement of participants into different profile levels during the period data collection for this study.*

Obtaining informed consent for participation in the study was a lengthy and somewhat complex process. We started by talking about the study, the reason for it and how it would proceed. With the help of the bilingual assistants for the Farsi/Dari and the Spanish speakers, and with L1 support by more fluent English speakers for the other language groups the discussions went on for two days (2 x 2½ hour sessions). The information sheets were also sent home with the learners, for the families to discuss. Most families have at least one other person with good English at home – sometimes a partner, usually a child. On the third day, I checked in with each individual learner to get their feedback on the idea. Some learners had

questions which I could answer during these sessions. One learner's husband phoned me at home to discuss the reasons and the procedure of the study. He needed reassurance that all material would be confidential and anonymous. On the fourth day (the last day of our week) all learners who wanted to take part in the study were given the opportunity to sign the consent forms. Learners who were absent on this day were given the same opportunity when they returned the following week.

The process of obtaining informed consent from the participants gave me the first indication of some of the constraints of the action research process, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

### **3.4.3 Designing the study**

From the beginning of the project it was clear that I would have to find a way to ascertain what the learners themselves think about their progress in class. The language barrier meant that all learner interviews would have to be conducted using L1 support. The intensity of the teaching environment meant that interviews could not be conducted during class time when some form of L1 support is available. Any interviews outside of normal class hours would involve the use of interpreters which would make the process very costly and difficult to manage. A decision was made not to use interviews as an instrument, other than unstructured discussions during classroom activities. Instead I decided to use logbooks or journals for the learners to reflect on their own learning, partly based on the experience of Dam and Legenhausen (2010), although their research was carried out in a very different context as explained below.

Learners' reflections on learning processes and procedures allow them to develop a high degree of awareness which is prerequisite for making principled decisions – taking control of their own learning. (p. 125)

In their discussion of the value of evaluation versus testing in an autonomous language classroom, Dam and Legenhausen focused on learners' awareness of the variables involved in learning, their capacity for control of learning procedures, and their capacity for assessing their personal linguistic outcomes. The data for their discussion was extracted from a study spanning 20 years in three autonomous classes in a Danish comprehensive school, grades 4 – 9. The learners' ages ranged from 10 to 16 years. One of the instruments discussed is the use

of a learner logbook where the learners recorded their self-evaluation of their learning. The reflections were initiated and guided by the teacher and a standard format was used. Logbook data were supported by occasional questionnaires and learners often used their reflections in the logbook to provide examples for their responses on the questionnaires.

At the beginning of the Danish project (after one year of studying English) the teacher's question for the logbook entry focused on awareness of the variables involved in learning in a very general format ("What do you feel you have learned this year?"). This elicited responses that varied from awareness of specific linguistic competence (counting from zero to one thousand) to general competence (many new words) and even included some evaluative responses that showed some awareness of progress ('better' pronunciation of words; 'not enough' progress).

For the purposes of my own study, I proposed to start off with a picture questionnaire that would enable the learners to start thinking about how they like to learn English. A sample of this questionnaire is attached in Appendix D. That would be followed up by regularly writing in the learner logbooks. The logbook entries were guided and scaffolded according to the needs of each level, as discussed in more detail in section 3.5 below. The logbook entries were used as a supplementary source of data to support my own observations and reflections during the data collection period. At the time of the study the teachers in the ELPNZ Waikato ESOL literacy classes held regular drop-in meetings where aspects of the study could also be discussed informally with colleagues. These discussions were very helpful during the data collection period.

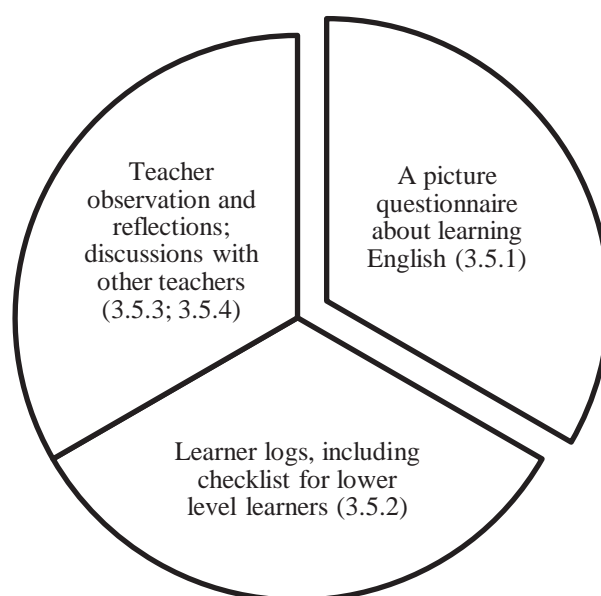
The original research question was centered on the adaptation of teaching techniques or task design to develop or increase the learners' awareness of their own learning. From the myriad of techniques and tasks available to the teacher three were selected for a particular focus during the study:

- Dictation
- Cuisinaire rods
- Computer-based tasks

These will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

### 3.5 Data collection

The data collection period was planned so as to stretch over a total of 14 weeks during terms 1 and 2 in 2014. However, the second term ended with the formal assessment period required for reporting on learner progress and very little data could be collected during these five weeks, other than my own observation and reflections. The assessment period concluded with feedback to learners on their progress, which provided opportunities for unstructured discussion with individual learners about learning strategies and personal learning outcomes. The instruments used for data collection are illustrated in Figure 3.2 below. These will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.



**Fig. 3.2 The instruments used for collecting data about learner awareness of learning.**

#### 3.5.1 Picture questionnaire

The data collection started with the picture questionnaire that required learners to think about how they learn English in class as well as outside class and what type of activities they prefer. The picture questionnaire was adapted from the worksheets used by Willing (1989). Changes included selecting pictures depicting situations that my learners may encounter in the classroom, as well as a few of the pictures about situations outside the classroom. The

pictures were enlarged and the task instruction simplified and printed using our preferred font (Comic Sans MS). The final questionnaire used in the study is included in Appendix D. Learners were prepared for the questionnaire on the day with a practical demonstration and discussion of ways to learn languages during the conversation circle time at the beginning of the session. This was followed by a PowerPoint presentation using the pictures on the questionnaire and discussing what they meant. Learners were then asked to complete the questionnaires working in small groups with the assistance of the bilingual tutor, volunteer tutor and myself.

My notes in the research reflective journal for this day included feedback from learners, assistants and my own observation commenting on the process as well as the questionnaire itself.

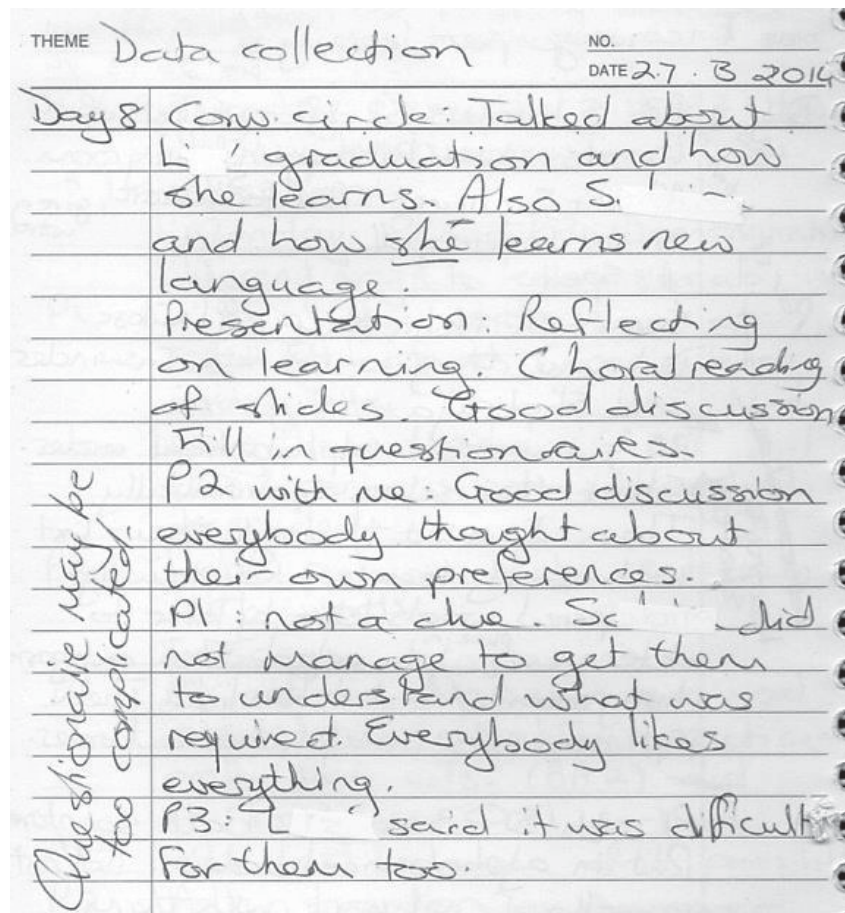


Fig. 3.3 Excerpt from research reflective journal on the use of the picture questionnaire.

### **3.5.2 Learner logs**

Learner log activities were included in the lesson plans on five days over the course of the data collection period. The use of this instrument met with mixed success, which will be discussed in relation to the profile groups in the class.

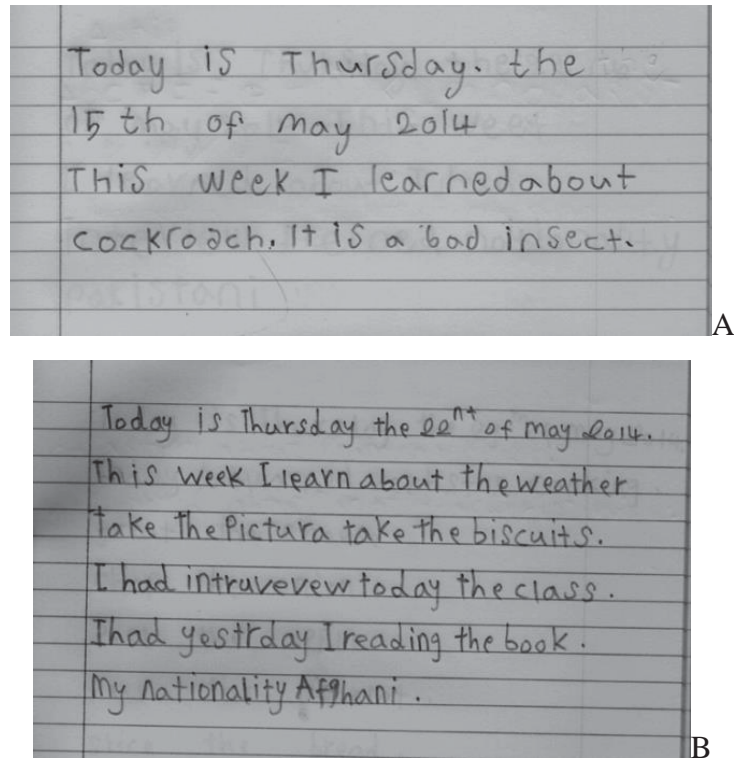
Profile 1: There were six learners in the profile 1 group who participated in this study. One learner left the group at the end of the first term (after two entries in her logbook) and moved to the profile 2 group. Learners in profile 1 only managed one or two entries each, depending on their attendance on the logbook days. It quickly became apparent that the activity was too difficult for this level, even with scaffolding. In the case of the profile 1 learners scaffolding was provided in the form of L1 support and a learning checklist where progress in the skills that they were developing could be ticked off. A sample of the complete checklist is provided in Appendix E. This checklist proved confusing for the learners, mainly because the instruction was not clear enough. Managing the process was very challenging and required a lot of time and involvement from me. Increased absences in this group also indicated that a change in approach was required. In discussions with my supervisors it was decided to discontinue the learner log for this profile level. Reflection on learning was accomplished in other, more practical ways, some of which will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Profile 2: In the profile 2 group there were seven learners who participated at the beginning of the study. Two learners moved into profile 3 at the end of term 1 and continued with their logbooks at that level. One learner joined the group from profile 1 at the beginning of term 2 and participated in the logbook entries on two occasions at this level. Learners in profile 2 made between two and five entries in their books, depending on their attendance on logbook days. They also received some scaffolding for the first entry in their learner logs, in the form of an orthographic text dictation activity which in this case served as a stimulus to recall some of the learning objectives earlier in the week. Orthographic text dictation was one of the aspects of dictation that was included in the task design focus of the study and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

After this first, structured activity learners were given the opportunity on other occasions to do free writing in their books in response to a general question (“What did you do/learn this week?”). They still had access to L1 support if needed and were observed to discuss the week’s work with each other. Some learners also referred to their workbooks. In some cases



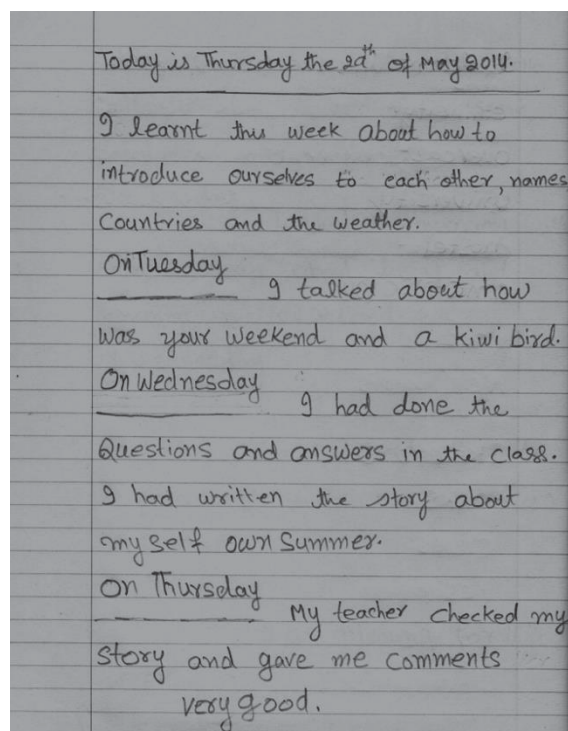
learners needed more support in the form of sentence starters. Two learners who started in this class as pre-literate learners needed to discuss what they wanted to say with me first, before being able to write down the sentences. Examples from two entries by different learners in this group are shown in Figure 3.4 below.



**Fig. 3.4 Entries from learner logbooks. Learner A wrote from memory, asking for help with spelling and grammar. Learner B wrote independently using her workbook for reference.**

Profile 3: The profile 3 group started with six learners participating at the beginning of the data collection period. Two learners from the profile 2 group joined them at the beginning of term 2 and continued with the logbook entries at this level. One of the original profile 3 members left the programme at the beginning of term 2 for further study at one of the other education providers in Hamilton. Learners at this level needed the least scaffolding. They understood quickly what was needed and responded in their individual ways reflecting their own abilities and personalities. Some learners used their workbooks to aid recall; some used formulaic sentences (On Monday we ....; On Tuesday we ...; etc.). One learner (at the top of this level) listed all the new words that she learnt during the week as a separate entry each week. This learner has since achieved all the learning outcomes of the programme and left at the end of 2014. An example from one of the logbook entries in this group is shown in Figure 3.5.





**Fig. 3.5 Sample entry from logbook of a profile 3 learner, showing some awareness of the process of learning (getting feedback on writing) in the note for Thursday.**

From the analysis of learner logbook entries in their study Dam and Legenhausen (2010) identified the following three aspects of critical awareness:

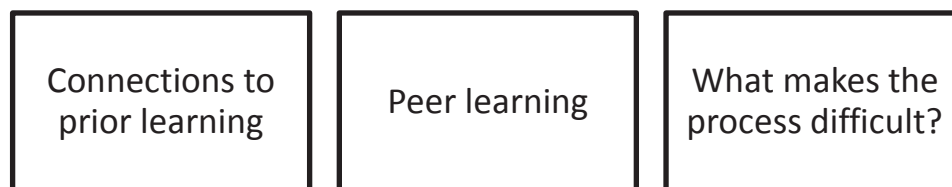
1. Awareness of variables involved in learning, which include awareness of linguistic competence; awareness of how to proceed; and awareness of preferred activities and ways of working.
2. Capacity for control of procedures which includes setting learning goals; forming groups; evaluating the effectiveness of working procedures; and for peer evaluation.
3. Capacity for assessing personal linguistic outcome (evaluated at the end of five years of English instruction in school).

In the current study learners' reflections in their learner logs in profiles 2 and 3 showed some awareness of linguistic competence, mainly new words and concepts. Activities and processes are mentioned in some cases (I talked to ...; I had picture of ...) but no indication is given of preferred activities. One learner (see Fig. 3.4 above) showed some awareness of the value of corrective feedback. No instances of goal setting or assessing personal linguistic outcomes could be found, possibly because the duration of the data collection period was too

short to afford a proper build-up to this level of critical awareness. Learners in these two groups enjoyed the activity and the profile 3 learners coped very well. I noted in my reflective journal that, with appropriate scaffolding and regular use, the learner log to reflect on learning could become a very useful tool for this group.

### 3.5.3 Observation: the three maxims

From the beginning it was clear that the complexity of the teaching environment would make teaching and observing to the level required by the research focus challenging. Discussions with my supervisors led to the decision to identify three maxims to guide and anchor observation and reflection (see Figure 3.6 below). These maxims would thus provide three lenses or perspectives on the data and would facilitate the process considerably.



**Fig. 3.6 Three maxims that were used in the data collection period.**

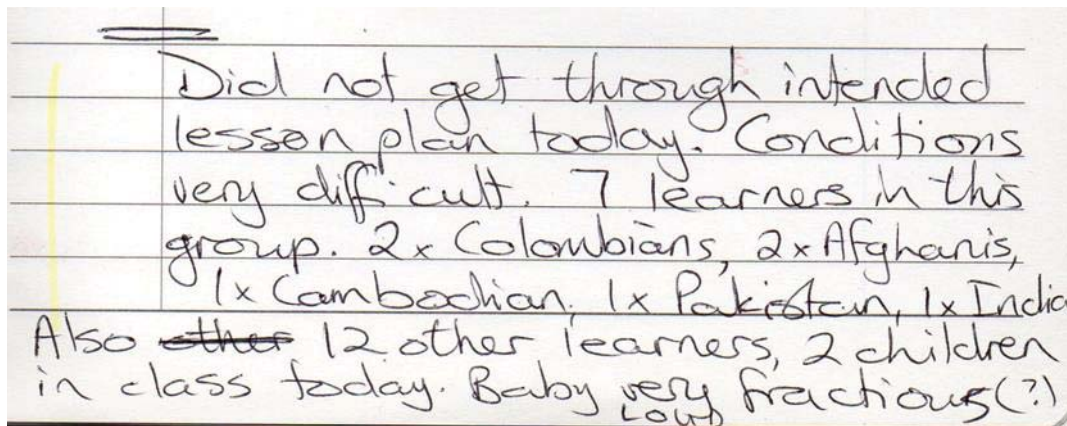
In the first instance, I would look at the issue of connections to prior learning. Adult learners have reservoirs of experience that help them to learn new things and they want to see how what they are learning is applicable to their lives (Knowles, 1973). Using their background knowledge to activate the schema for new language being introduced is one of the techniques recommended by Florez and Terrill (2003). During the data collection period I also deliberately made connections between sessions on different days (see figure 3.7 below). In my lesson plans I noted these instances and reflected on the effectiveness of this technique with the different levels. I also noted in my reflections instances where I observed learners either looking back through their books to find solutions or to help them recall previous learning outcomes.

***Maxims:** Connections to prior learning: P2 responded well to recycling dialogue and time work. Need to follow up time with different worksheets or writing tomorrow. Dialogue should transfer into role play. Will use photos for that. I don't know if the other two groups 'got' the covert reference to yesterday's learning. (Use of same resource, I didn't hear any of the two tutors asking them to recount or show what they did yesterday.) Volunteer linked fire safety to their own circumstances.*

**Fig. 3.7 Excerpt from lesson plan reflection on 4 Feb. 2014**

Secondly I determined to trial different ways to encourage peer learning. One of the aspects of awareness of learning discussed by Dam and Legenhausen (2010) is the capacity for control of learning procedures which include forming groups. In the literacy class environment this capacity is somewhat limited by cultural and gender constraints (some learners do not work well with learners of the other gender or some other cultures) but observing learners in controlled pair or small group work and free association tasks would give me an insight in the learners' development in this regard. I could also reflect on ways to make the transition to the New Zealand culture of free association easier for these learners.

For the third maxim or lens, I would try to identify elements that either facilitate or hamper the research process. From an early stage in the development of this study it was recognized that the teaching environment and particular needs of the learners in this group would make an action research project challenging. This maxim allowed me to identify elements that hindered the process, try to change them and then observe the effects of the change. There were some aspects that could not be changed, such as the learners' attendance over time, or conditions caused by the number of learners and babies in the class (see figure 3.8 below) but I used these observations to reflect on the impact on the teaching process and on the learners' development.



Did not get through intended lesson plan today. Conditions very difficult. 7 learners in this group. 2x Colombians, 2x Afghans, 1x Cambodian, 1x Pakistan, 1x India. Also ~~other~~ 12 other learners, 2 children in class today. Baby very fractious(?)  
low

**Fig. 3.8: Excerpt from research log, dated 18 March 2014. The group in question is the profile 1 group for learners with the highest learning needs.**

Lesson plans for the data collection period included a reflective section that was updated as soon as possible after each session. I also indicated each change to the lesson plan and the reason for the changes. At the time of the data collection there were usually three teachers (myself, one bilingual assistant and one trained volunteer) present in the class. Each teacher was responsible for a different profile group during the main part of the lesson. The need for L1 support is the highest in the profile 1 group and the bilingual assistant therefore usually worked with this group. At times they were also requested to help out with the profile 2 group if needed. Some of the trained volunteers could only work with the profile 3 group as their training did not include a specific focus on low-level literacy learners and their involvement with these learners could be confusing for the learners. One of the reasons for lesson plan changes recorded during this period included late notice of absence from volunteers or assistants. Sometimes the effect of such a change was that it was not possible to obtain much data during the session as I had to be involved with two different groups doing different activities. This was the main reason why only five learner log activities could be included in the research period.

Volunteers and assistants are also expected to be at the class 15 minutes before the start of class to allow time for me to brief them on what their groups have been doing or aspects they should focus on. Some of the lesson plan changes noted during the data collection period came about because volunteers did not arrive in time for this briefing. However, these changes sometimes had a positive effect in that they created another opportunity for peer learning (see figure 3.9 below).

*Conversation circle: Introductions. 2 new tutors, one new learner. Drill names; left; this is my friend, her name is ... then learners meet and mingle while I talked to tutors about their groups and the work they did yesterday. Changed original plan to include this info session because tutors did not arrive on time to do it before class.*

**Fig. 3.9 Excerpt from reflection on teaching showing a positive effect to the lesson plan change for 4 February 2014**

### 3.5.4 Reflection and discussions with other teachers

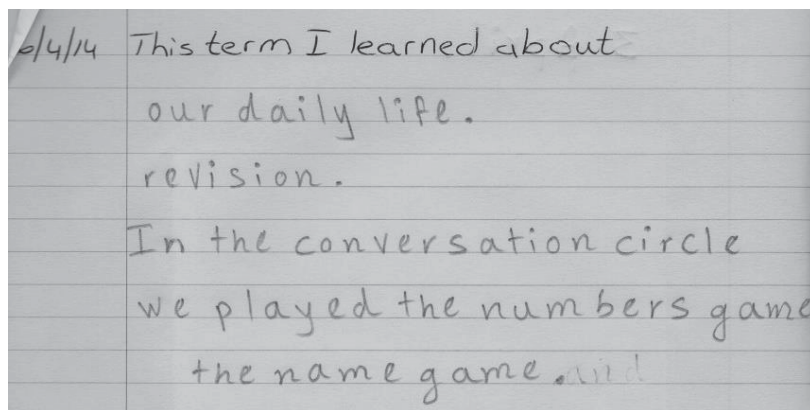
As expected, this proved to be a rich source of data for the study. Detailed records of the research process, reading logs and a research journal complemented the reflective journal I kept during the two years of the study. The reflections present an interesting picture of the class during the period of the study. I used a variety of language games (board games, card games, flashcards and ‘hangman’ on the whiteboard) to recycle vocabulary and stimulate recall of target language. The usefulness of the conversation circle at the beginning of each session is frequently noted. For instance, the conversation circle became the place where we talked about aspects of our learning and strategies for learning, as illustrated in figure 3.10 below.

THEME *Learning strategies.* NO. \_\_\_\_\_  
DATE *31/3/14*

*Day 9 Conversation circle: S brought the books that she works in at home. Counting; Vocab building; Basic Grammar. Showed them around. Talked about it. Some higher level learners looked like they understood and may use. Demonstrated first 2 steps of the strategy for learning words. @Write word on paper. Write own lang. on back. Read both sides 5 times. Put in plastic bag. Tomorrow look at words again. Do I remember my lang. for English word? Yes - in 2nd bag. No - back in bag. Read 5 times again. While S translated for A, I talked to K. She can't write in own language. For her, it would be better to put word on item (sticky note) and everyday read the word. When discussed with bigger group, lots of noises indicating agreement.*

**Fig. 3.10 Excerpt from research reflective journal detailing a discussion on learning strategies that took place during the conversation circle at the beginning of a session.**

The focus on connections to prior learning and encouraging peer learning confirmed the importance of using the learners' own lives as the context for learning. During the first part of the data collection period a major focus was on the learners themselves – their names, countries of origin, languages they speak and activities they enjoy. Using the conversation circle to play name games not only helped learners to learn other people's names but also to relax and get ready for the 'hard' learning to follow. Conversation activities were conducted using random groupings, which helped the learners to get to know learners outside their immediate profile group. Knowing the names of the people that they talked to during the week also made the learning log entries easier for the profile 2 and 3 groups. One learner referred to the games in this part of the session during her first learner log entry, as illustrated in figure 3.11 below.



**Fig. 3.11 Excerpt from a learner log entry by a learner in the P2 group at the end of the first term in 2014.**

Regular informal discussion with the other teachers in the Waikato centre was facilitated by the weekly voluntary 'drop-in' meetings at the centre, where teachers met at the end of the working week to discuss issues relevant to our teaching. These meetings provided opportunities to get input from the other teachers on refinements to the tasks I was investigating, to get feedback on my reflections and emerging findings and in general, provided me with support and encouragement at times when the constraints of the teaching environment and the tension between the research goals and the teaching objectives became overwhelming. Email discussions with other teachers in the country enriched the process.

This study was designed to look at three techniques or tasks in the ESOL Literacy classroom and investigate how these could be adapted to increase critical awareness of learning among the learners. The use of dictation activities as learning devices, Cuisenaire rods and



computer-based tasks were chosen for this focus and will be discussed in more detail in chapters 4, 5 and 6, respectively. Discussions with other teachers played a significant role in this part of the study. The research journal, lesson plans with reflections and the reflective journal were also useful tools in this part of the investigation.

### **3.6 Analysis of data**

At the end of the data collection period the contents of the research log, reflective journals and learner logs were collated and scanned into the computer as required. This information was studied to find general trends in reflection comments, as well as supportive evidence from the learner logs or the term 2 formal assessment results. These preliminary findings were discussed with other teachers or my supervisors, as appropriate. Changes to activity procedures recorded during the data collection period were continued in the class room during terms 3 and 4 of 2014, and the effects observed to provide a slightly longer term view, albeit not officially part of the study. In this way action learning (Zuber-Skerrit, 2001) on the original research question continued after the end of the data collection period.

## **Chapter 4: Findings: Dictation**

One of the techniques that were selected for this study was the use of dictation as a learning device. In this chapter the background to the selection of this technique, the development of tasks for the different skills levels present in the class and the trial and adaptation of various types of dictation activities will be discussed. Learners with the highest learning needs in the profile 1 group presented particular challenges in this part of the study, which will be discussed in more detail below.

### **4.1 Background to the task**

In the ELPNZ ESOL Literacy programme an orthographic dictation task forms part of the assessment in the middle (P2) and higher (P3) level groups and measures learners' progress in developing writing skills as well as listening skills. Tutors can use prescribed texts or choose their own texts for this task using guidelines provided in the assessment tool kit. For example, for the P2 group the text should consist of 40 – 50 words and about 5–10 sentences. The only punctuation should be full stops, capital letters and possibly a comma or two. For the P3 group the text should be slightly longer (up to 100 words) and include more punctuation (question marks, speech marks, commas, etc.). It should also include a few compound sentences. Skills descriptors for this task include the correct use of capital letters and full stops or other punctuation, knowing that a full stop is followed by a capital letter, writing on the line and spacing words conventionally, as well as decoding the sounds and spelling the words.

Some of the experienced teachers in the ESOL Literacy programme use regular dictation as a class activity and report that learners prefer this as an activity that engages their interest and that they feel is useful for learning (Blake, 2011). Their view that dictation can be used as a whole group activity that accommodates all the skills levels in the group is supported by research findings that list the benefits of using dictation in the classroom (Davis & Rinvoluceri, 1988). The authors of that study indicated that dictation is a technique that copes with large, mixed-level groups. In an article published in the Internet TESL Journal Alkire (2002) identifies orthographic text dictation as the type of dictation with the broadest learning possibilities. Learners transcribe a unified passage, thereby reinforcing the sound/spelling correlations of English as well as uncovering comprehension and grammatical weaknesses in learners which the teacher can analyze and use in planning future lessons. Alkire then



discusses the selection and delivery of dictation texts for students from the high-beginning level upwards.

During the preparation period for the current study, informal discussions with experienced teachers in the ESOL Literacy programme indicated that the range of abilities existing in the ESOL Literacy classrooms presents unique challenges that different teachers endeavour to overcome in different ways. They noted for example that some learners at the beginning of the programme are still learning to form letters on the paper using lines conventionally, other learners may be up to reading and writing sight words, some would be capable of writing sentences with correct punctuation, while the highest level learners should be capable of writing down short, simple paragraphs typically with speech marks, exclamation marks or question marks. To further complicate matters pre-literate learners, even in the higher level groups, are much slower in writing down any type of text, which could turn classroom dictation into one long struggle for teacher and learners alike.

During these discussions it became clear that some experienced teachers find ways to turn an orthographic text for dictation into a cloze worksheet, with varying numbers of gaps and varying lengths of gaps to scaffold learners with low reading or writing skills. Other teachers indicated that they prefer using orthographic item dictation, especially for the lowest level learners in the class. In some classes dictation is not a whole class activity - rather it is a small group activity led by a tutor assistant or volunteer. One teacher mentioned using a tape recording of the dictation text to allow learners with very low skills in listening and writing to stop and replay parts of the texts that they were having difficulty in understanding. One teacher mentioned using orthographic item dictation as opposed to orthographic text dictation as a tool to help learners distinguish between the meanings of the words “list” and “sentence”.

## **4.2 Task development and trial**

For the purposes of this study I focused on different types of dictation activities for the different skill level groups in my class. I will discuss these activities in relation to the groups, starting with the P2 and P3 groups and ending with a separate section focusing on the P1 group where dictation activities presented particular challenges.

#### **4.2.1 Dictation tasks in the P2 and P3 groups**

At the start of the data collection period when the dictation focus was initiated, all the learners in the P2 and P3 groups had had some experience with dictation as a classroom activity and as an assessment task. This experience had not always been positive. In the P2 group the seven learners participating in the study had very different skill profiles, ranging from just beginning to develop the skills needed for this profile to consolidating and almost achieving the skills required. Learners with low decoding and re-coding skills needed much longer time to complete dictation tasks, whereas learners at the other end of the scale finished writing words or sentences much more quickly. The range of skills present in this group is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

In the P3 group the range of writing skills was less significant. Learners in this group had all been in the ESOL literacy programme for a number of years and were concentrating on building and consolidating higher level skills.

#### **4.2.2 Dictation as a cloze worksheet**

As a result of an informal discussion with another teacher in the Waikato centre of ELPNZ, I decided to concentrate on orthographic text dictation using a cloze worksheet for these two groups during the data collection period. An example of the generic cloze worksheet is shown in Fig. 4.1 below. This worksheet used a text that was developed during a shared whole-group writing activity after a language experience workshop on seed planting the day before the dictation activity. The language and context were familiar to all the learners although some of the words were not in their recommended range. However, the gap words were all known vocabulary items in both the P2 and P3 groups. Learners in the P2 group were provided with worksheets prepared to suit their individual needs in order to accommodate the spiky profiles in the group. The number of gaps or the length of gaps was changed for each learner. For some learners the target words were included in a box at the bottom of the page for extra support. In the case of the P3 group the worksheets had whole sentences missing and the learners had to write down all the words they heard.

Date:	Name:
<b>Seed planting</b>	
Yesterday Clare came to our _____.	
She showed us how to sow _____, cos _____ and calendula flowers.	
First Clare showed us how to make seed mix.	
We use one cup of pumice and _____ cups of compost.	
Next Clare put the seed mix into a small tray and put _____ pea seeds on top.	
Then she sprinkled a little more seed mix on top and put the tray in some _____.	
We all put on gloves and planted seeds for our gardens.	

**Fig.4.1: Cloze worksheet for orthographic text dictation used in P2 and P3 groups.**

The actual delivery of the task was the same for both P2 and P3 groups. Extra support was provided by following a linked-skills procedure that culminated in the dictation task. Linking skills create ample opportunity for learning through retrieval, repetition and creative use (Nation, 2013, p. 74). In this case we linked speaking, reading and listening in the opening sequence, followed by listening, writing and reading in the second sequence. First we talked about the language experience workshop that had taken place the previous day. Then we read together the shared writing text that we produced after the workshop. The learners were then asked to work in pairs and read the text aloud to their partner. After that, the adapted dictation worksheets were distributed to the learners according to their needs. At this stage I read the original text twice while the learners were reading their worksheets. Then I read the text again, slowly and pausing where required at the gaps. This was of necessity a very slow process. During this part of the procedure I observed some of the more capable learners using the waiting time to read ahead and try to guess the correct words to complete the gaps. At the end of the activity the learners were instructed to work in pairs to read their texts and correct mistakes.

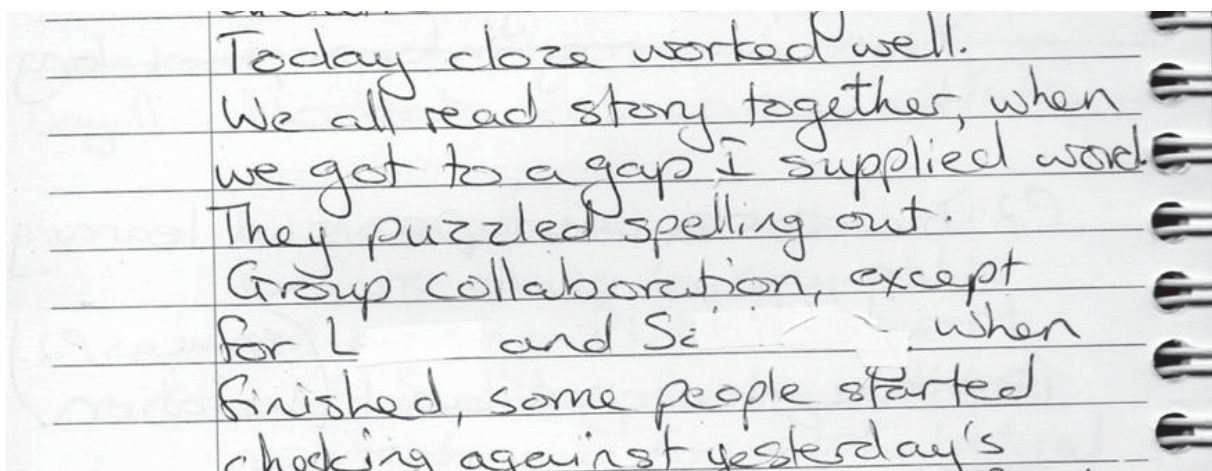
### 4.2.3 Reflection and follow up

This procedure embedded the dictation as a multi-purpose learning tool in the linked-skills activity. Checking the text with a partner afterwards created an opportunity for self-assessment. Learners in the P3 group spontaneously used the classroom dictionaries to look up the correct spellings of words, but the learners in the P2 group were dependent on the teacher or a peer to provide the correct spelling. For subsequent dictation activities, I changed the delivery slightly to include a feedback focus on how to learn the correct forms. Learners in the P2 group especially were encouraged to use a five-step procedure based on a technique recommended by Literacy Aotearoa in their training for volunteer tutors: they were given a worksheet (see Table 4.1) and encouraged to actively learn their most difficult words.

Write the word	Copy the word	Copy the word again, looking at each letter. Check the word.	Write the word, then check the word, looking at each letter.	Cover the word and write the word. Did you get it right?

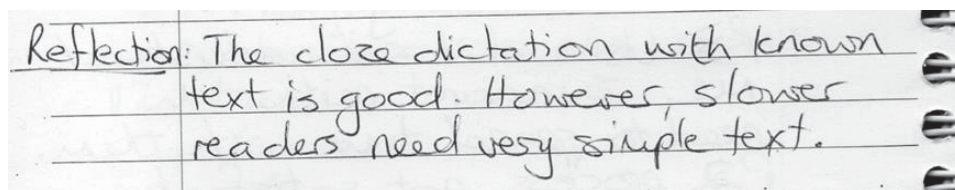
**Table 4.1 Procedure for learning the spelling of new words. The teacher writes the new word in column 1 and the learner then follows the steps in columns 2 – 4 over a period of 4 days.**

In the weeks following this trial lesson, dictation tasks were repeated regularly. They were usually concluded with the peer learning task where learners checked each other's work in pairs or small groups. I also observed some learners referring back to the shared writing stories in their workbooks to check their own work. These observations were noted in my research reflective journal, as illustrated in figure 4.2 below.



**Fig. 4.2 Excerpt from research reflective journal on 8 April 2014.**

Different types of text were trialled. Learners favoured the picture dictation task. During this task learners were given a set of pictures that together tell a story. The pictures were jumbled up and learners were asked to listen to the story read out by the volunteer tutor, while trying to identify the pictures that go with particular sentences. During subsequent readings they were tasked with ordering the pictures. When the stories were in the correct order, learners retold the story using the pictures. This is a technique commonly used in ESOL Literacy classes and the learners were familiar with it. At times learners were given the written text afterwards, but sometimes this task was followed up with a shared writing activity, together writing the story in learners' own words. This known text was then used for a written dictation task later in the week. Notes in my reflections on the teaching during this period (see figure 4.3 below) allowed me to keep refining the technique.



Reflection: The cloze dictation with known text is good. However, slower readers need very simple text.

**Fig. 4.3 Excerpt from research reflective journal on Day 14 of the data collection period, illustrating a step in the continuous process of refining the dictation task for the P2 and P3 groups.**

In the P2 and P3 groups cloze worksheets for dictation activities became a regular feature of their learning. In our unit on houses, maintenance and DIY (Do It Yourself) for instance, I used a video clip as the source for a dictation and comprehension activity later on. At the same time the dictation became the prompt for reflecting on learning that week, see Figure 4.4 for an example of such a worksheet.

Complete the sentences and answer the question at the end.

This week we watched a video about four flatmates.  
Helen didn't like her bedroom. She asked her  
friends to paint the room. Helen went to lunch and her  
friends went to the DIY store.

They asked for directions from a man in the street. He  
said to go left at the roundabout and the DIY store is  
on the right.

At the store they bought orange paint because they liked  
the colour. They painted Helen's bedroom.

1. Why did Helen not paint her own bedroom?  
She is busy.

2. Was Helen happy with the new colour of the bedroom?  
She didn't like it.

**Fig. 4.4: Orthographic item dictation using a cloze worksheet, followed by comprehension questions to check learners' understanding of the visual material used earlier in the week.**

### 4.3 Focus group: Profile 1

None of the learners in the lowest skills level group would have been capable of completing the worksheet in Figure 4.1 above. The linked-skills procedure used in P2 and P3 would also have been too difficult to manage in this group. For them I had to design a different procedure using item dictation activities to build the skills they needed.

The preparation for the first orthographic item dictation took three days. Abbreviated versions of the lesson plans for these three days are shown in Table 4.2. The procedure will be discussed in more detail below.

Dictation week Profile 1	Steps in lesson plan	Resources used
Day 1: Phonemic item dictation 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Revise alphabet</li> <li>2. Alphabet maze</li> <li>3. Handwriting (trace letters)</li> <li>4. Phonics game</li> <li>5. Phonemic item dictation 1</li> </ol>	Picture cards and three worksheets. (Dictation w/s in Figure 5.2)
Day 2: Phonemic item dictation 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Continue with alphabet work: letters, then first sounds of sight words.</li> <li>2. Phonemic item dictation 2 New procedure</li> </ol>	Pictures of fruit and vegetables; flashcards with sight words for bedroom, bathroom and kitchen; whiteboard (Planned, but not used).
Day 3: Language experience	Workshop and then whole group shared writing	Workshop presented by a community group. Whiteboard
Day 4: Orthographic item dictation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recount of LE activity in conversation circle</li> <li>2. Orthographic item dictation</li> </ol>	Worksheet in Figure 5.5

**Table 4.2: Planned progression of lessons during the dictation focus week in group 1. Shaded sections indicate a change to the original lesson plan.**

### 4.3.1 First phonemic item dictation

On Day 1 we concentrated on the letters and sounds of the alphabet. We started off with picture cards to revise the alphabet. This part of the lesson was very familiar to the learners, recycling techniques that worked well in the past. The learners were engaged and encouraged each other to read the picture cards. After a short demonstration and discussion of some letter/sound relationships (e.g. a = /æ/, following on from something that occurred during the whole group conversation circle at the beginning of the session), the learners completed the first worksheet: an alphabet maze where they had to draw a line from the letter A to the letter Z. Two of the learners found this very difficult, four had no problem and one made a few mistakes and needed L1 support from a peer. The maze was followed by a handwriting task where learners had to trace letters of the alphabet.



4.3.1.1 Change to lesson plan: The tracing activity was surprisingly difficult, in part because learners did not understand the instruction word ‘Trace’. At this stage I changed the lesson plan slightly to include a game that worked almost like an oral cloze exercise. I said the alphabet in order and paused at times to get the learners to fill in the missing letter. I used hand gestures to indicate whose turn it was to talk. Learners enjoyed the activity and it relieved some of the tension created by the effort to write the letters correctly on the lines. The activity morphed into a phonics game where I said a letter and the learners had to say the sound associated with it.

The lesson concluded with the phonemic item dictation. The worksheet used for this purpose is illustrated in Figure 4.5 below.

Circle the letters for the sounds that you hear:

a	b	c	d	e
f	g	h	i	j
k	l	m	n	o
p	q	r	s	t
u	v	w	x	y
z				

How many sounds did you hear?

**Fig. 4.5: Phonemic item dictation worksheet used for the first dictation task in Profile 1.**

The dictation was a group activity with the learners being able to support each other to identify and circle the correct letters for the sounds they heard. We only used five letters for this first time. The phonemic item dictation concluded with a short reflection on the difficulty of the activity and turned into a discussion on the different needs in the group

e.g. Learner 1: “This one is hard” (pointing to ‘a’);

Learner 2: “No, me, this one” (pointing to ‘s’) and so on.

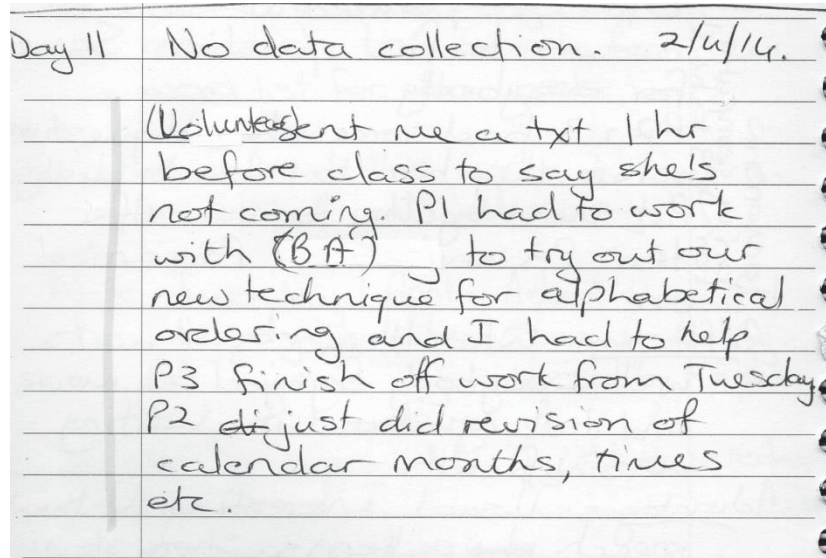
### **4.3.2 Second phonemic item dictation**

The alphabet focus was continued in the next session on day 2, using picture cards of fruit and vegetables. These cards had the picture of the item with the name of the item written



below it, so learners could use the picture to identify the item then look at the written word to identify letters in the words. They were then asked to identify the initial sounds of the words.

4.3.2.1 Constraint: On this day the volunteer assistant in the class was absent, giving me very short notice. The effect of this late notice was recorded in my research reflective journal inscription for the day, see figure 4.6 below.



**Fig. 4.6: Excerpt from research reflective journal illustrating effect of late notice of absence from a volunteer tutor.**

In this instance the revised scaffolding technique for the lowest level learners could not be implemented and observed properly and had to be repeated the next week.

4.3.2.2 Changes to lesson plan: Originally I had planned to include some sight words in preparation for an orthographic item dictation that was planned for the next week. I wanted to use a technique that we had used the week before, where learners had flashcards with simple sight words and I wrote the alphabet on the whiteboard. They would then have to copy their word under the correct letter on the whiteboard. Because of the absence of the volunteer tutor on this day, I could not implement and observe this myself and the technique had to be repeated at a later stage.

The time that was lost while I was working with the P3 group meant that I also had to change the procedure for the phonemic item dictation. Instead of giving learners a worksheet and asking them to circle letters, I gave them the flashcards and asked them to indicate the words

starting with a particular sound. This was a group activity and learners helped each other to find the words.

4.3.2.3 Reflection on changes: During the dictation activity I observed that a couple of learners seemed to begin to understand the meaning of the word ‘sound’. When helping other learners, they sometimes repeated the *sound* while pointing to the letter. This was the first time I had observed this behaviour – up to this point learners usually said the *letter* when pointing to a letter. Another learner also noted the fact that there was a difference between the way we say the letter in isolation (/eɪ/ for ‘a’ as opposed to /æ/ for the ‘a’ in apple, for instance). This represented real progress in the development of the particular skill we were focusing on. I made a note in my reflections for the day to include follow-up activities that would enable the learners to consolidate this skill.

Although this day did not exactly go to plan, it was useful for the data collection process in that I unintentionally trialled a different technique for the dictation and as a result could compare two techniques. I repeated the worksheet technique on Day 4 to confirm my observations.

### **4.3.3 Language experience**

On Day 3 of this week the whole session was devoted to a language experience workshop on seed planting designed to introduce language items that would be used in activities in all the groups during the weeks to come. At the time our class had a special interest in gardening – we had an ongoing vegetable garden project on a plot in the nearby community garden – and everybody enjoyed the workshop. The research log entry for the day is reproduced in figure 4.7 below.

THEME <i>Data collection</i>		NO. _____
		DATE <i>.19. (3) 14</i>
<i>Day 3</i>	<i>Seed planting demonstration.</i>	
	<i>Language experience. <del>to</del></i>	
	<i>Provided background for shared writing which will provide text for dictation.</i>	
	<i>New student in profile 1.</i>	
	<i>No data collection today.</i>	

**Fig. 4.7: Entry in research log for 19 March 2014.**

The shared writing activity resulted in learners creating the text for the next day's dictation activities themselves.

#### **4.3.4 Orthographic item dictation**

On Day 4 the learners in the P1 group did an orthographic item dictation using a specially prepared worksheet shown in Fig. 4.8 below. Although we were using words from the seed planting experience (peas, one, six, three, cup) they were all sight words and familiar to the learners.

Date: _____	Name: _____						
<b>Seed planting</b>							
Write down the words that you hear:							
1.	_____						
2.	_____						
3.	_____						
4.	_____						
5.	_____						
The words are all in the box below:							
<table border="1"> <tr> <td>peas</td> <td>one</td> <td>six</td> </tr> <tr> <td>three</td> <td>cup</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>		peas	one	six	three	cup	
peas	one	six					
three	cup						

**Fig. 4.8: Example of orthographic item dictation worksheet used in P1.**

We started the lesson on Day 4 during the conversation circle with a whole group recount of the workshop the previous day. This included eliciting from the group some new words that they learnt. The procedure for the P1 dictation activity followed on from the phonemic item dictations trialled earlier in the week. I read through the worksheet with the learners to ensure that they all knew what they were being asked to do, then said each word and waited for the learners to write the word in the space provided. When learners hesitated to write, I repeated the word stressing the initial sound. Learners were encouraged to support one another with writing the words.

4.3.4.1 Reflection on orthographic item dictation: This process worked well. It was slow but provided me with ample opportunity to observe what progress individual learners had made. I observed one learner pointing to the first letter of 'six' and sounding the /s/ to help a friend. This was the same learner who reported on Day 1 that this sound was difficult for her. However, some learners were confused by the different worksheet and for some learners writing on the lines provided was still too difficult to manage properly. The dictation task took a long time to complete. This confirmed for me the need to design a dictation approach specifically for this group which could be used in future.

#### **4.4 Review of dictation task**

One of the aims of this research project was to identify ways in which a teacher can support learners in raising critical awareness of their own learning. Each dictation activity was planned to include a follow-up where learners were required to self-assess their progress. Higher level learners were capable of checking their work in pairs and correcting their mistakes. Their dictation activities concluded with a discussion on what mistakes they made and how to learn the correct forms. The learners in the P3 group were capable of using the classroom dictionary to look up the spelling of difficult words. Learners in the P2 group were encouraged to use a particular learning strategy to learn the correct spelling of difficult words.

Carrying out the dictation focus in the P1 group was challenging. The very low level of English language skills meant that verbal explanations and instructions were not very effective. The learners were unfamiliar with dictation as an activity and had to be prepared for it. At this level self-evaluation simply involved counting their successes and reporting verbally to the tutor or bilingual assistant. Some awareness of linguistic competence was

observed during the feedback discussion on Day 1 when learners talked about the letter/sound combinations that they found difficult. The low literacy skills in the group meant that using formal worksheets and asking them to write words on lines would not be very effective as a learning device. Less stressful alternative methods would have to be used to help the learners to ‘see’ their progress on a day-to-day basis.

## **4.5 Changes to task procedures**

As a result of the lessons learned from this focus on dictation in all the groups I changed the classroom procedures slightly in the weeks that followed. The effect of these changes to the teaching methods will be discussed in more detail in chapter 7. For the purposes of this chapter on dictation, I will just list them briefly.

In the first instance, learners in the P2 group were asked to compare their answers in pairs and also to ask and give spelling help in the group. The teacher only got involved if nobody could give the correct spelling. Secondly, the P3 group was given free access to the classroom dictionaries and encouraged to look up all difficult words. I made a note in my reflection for this group to extend this independent learning activity to include making new sentences with the words. Lastly but equally importantly, regular dictation tasks using alternative methods (such as identifying a picture or a flashcard word starting with a particular letter or sound) were included in lesson plans for the P1 group. Using the bilingual assistants’ L1 support learners were encouraged to talk to the teacher or other learners about letters or sounds that they found easy or difficult.

### **4.5.1 Daily dictation embedded in classroom procedures**

There was also a slight change in the overall structure of lessons to include simple daily dictation activities utilizing the alphabet to support the lowest level group. The conversation circle at the beginning of each session was used as the source for the dictation. Learners were encouraged to talk to each other in pairs, at first practising to introduce themselves and then to talk about the weather or their families. When conversation time finished learners had to write two simple sentences in their workbooks. The first sentence starter given was: *Today I talked to ..... (name)*. Learners had to ask their conversation partners for their names and how to spell that. Nobody was allowed to write down their own names for another person – they all had to spell the name. Learners loved the freedom of being able to get up and talk to

learners in other groups. Everybody became more used to asking for help with spelling and to spell their own names.

## **4.6 Conclusion**

The focus on dictation during the data collection period confirmed the information gleaned from research literature and other teachers that dictation is a useful device for learning, suitable for mixed level groups. However, in the case of the ESOL Literacy classroom, the teacher has to select dictation types and grade activities to accommodate the different skill levels present. In my own teaching situation splitting the groups up according to profile levels and grading the activities accordingly worked best, but this may not be effective in all situations for all teachers.



## **Chapter 5: Findings: Cuisenaire rods**

The second technique selected for this study is the use of Cuisenaire rods. Originally forming part of the Silent Way approach (Gattegno, 1963), these rods were used in the research project with a very low level focus group to determine if tasks involving this technique would have an observable effect on learners' development of critical awareness of their learning.

### **5.1 Background to the task**

Informal discussions with other teachers in the ESOL Literacy programme led me to conclude that Cuisenaire rods are seen as a specialist tool (called 'rākau' and commonly used in New Zealand in the teaching of te reo Māori). The teachers I spoke to did not feel comfortable using the rods in their classes, largely because they were unsure of the system attached to their use. At the time of designing the current study, my experience with the rods was limited to an experience as a learner of te reo Māori a few years before, when we had a few sessions with them during a year-long course; and one session in the ESOL Literacy class - a focus on phonics. At that time I was working with a small group of three learners in the middle skills level group (P2) who needed help with discriminating the different sounds in words. I used different rods to indicate the different sounds in sight words. Rods indicating consonant sounds were placed in a vertical position and rods indicating vowel sounds were placed horizontally. Short rods indicated short vowel sounds and longer rods indicated long vowel sounds. This 'system' evolved spontaneously and randomly. The technique seemed to work with the learners concerned, but because of a lack of confidence I did not repeat it.

During the preparation for the action research project my readings (see Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion) on the particular learning needs of adult ESL learners with low levels of literacy – especially their struggle to retain new vocabulary while learning to write using the Roman alphabet system – led me to take a fresh look at the Silent Way approach and the use of the rods in modern foreign language classrooms. The coordinator of the ESOL Literacy programme at the Waikato Centre also arranged for an ELP volunteer with a special interest in the use of the rods to present a workshop on the topic during one of the regular teacher meetings. Once I started thinking about the rods countless possible opportunities for their use came to mind, some of which included word order in P2 or basic numeracy (subtraction/division) in P3. However, discussions with the workshop presenter, other teachers and my supervisors led to the decision to include in the action research project a



focus on the use of Cuisenaire rods in the group with the lowest skills level (P1) only. The main reasons for this decision were the short time frame planned for the data collection period (six weeks during term 2), the challenging teaching environment and the fact that the presenter of the workshop agreed to come in to the class to help me with presenting lessons using the rods. To start with, she could only come one day a week and we felt that that time would be best spent with one group only. As the language learning needs in the P1 group is the highest in the class, this was the group that we decided to focus on.

## **5.2 Task development and trial**

The purpose of using Cuisenaire rods in the P1 group was to strip instruction down to the minimum. In the Silent Way approach as originally intended teacher input is limited to single words or short phrases only and the teacher is silent for most of the session. One of the constraints of the ESOL Literacy classroom at present is the fact that large groups of learners with a wide range of skills share a relatively small space. Learners with low listening skills find it extremely difficult to distinguish the sounds produced by the teacher during instruction from the background of equally incomprehensible sounds generated in other parts of the classroom. To further complicate matters the class may at times also include some very noisy babies and toddlers.

### **5.2.1 Anticipated constraint**

In the P1 group a strong culture had been established before the commencement of the research project, which would have made using the Silent Way approach as developed by Gattegno very difficult. Learners in this group had become accustomed to a high degree of teacher input from volunteers and bilingual assistants and the use of their various first languages was one of the positive influences in the group. Leading the sessions would require a good knowledge of the process involved and experience to judge the right amount of teacher input to give. I was therefore very fortunate that the volunteer tutor who presented the workshop at ELPNZ Waikato centre was a trained teacher with experience in using the rods both as a learner and as a teacher in various settings and that she was available to lead the sessions. Originally my own role was to observe as much of the lessons as I could during the session and provide specialist literacy feedback to the tutor after each session. The bilingual assistants were also available during the initial sessions if the tutor needed first language support. These structures were put into place to support the tutor who had had no previous

experience in an adult refugee literacy class, but also to provide the regular teaching staff with the opportunity to observe the lesson and develop a new teaching skill.

This anticipation was validated during the first lesson with the Cuisenaire rods. In my observation of the lesson I noted a slight feeling of awkwardness between tutor and learners, which was confirmed by her when we had a feedback discussion after class. The feeling was most probably caused by the introduction of the new tutor into the group as much as by the new teaching method being used. During my contact times with the group the following week we discussed the Cuisenaire rod session and they seemed to have enjoyed it. At the second session a week later, the learners were all engaged and seemed more open to the process.

### **5.2.2 Anticipated outcomes**

At the time of the data collection the P1 group was working on vocabulary for the rooms in a house. In consultation with the volunteer tutor we decided to start the sessions with a focus on shapes. We chose four basic shapes that are present in everyday life: square, triangle, circle and rectangle. At the same time learners would recycle vocabulary previously learnt for colours and numbers. The adjectives long and short and two prepositions of place (above and below) would also be included. This could naturally lead to ‘building’ a plan of a house using the rods (see Figure 5.1) and would prepare learners for reading two-dimensional floor plans at a later stage in the programme.



**Fig. 5.1** Learners using the Cuisenaire rods to ‘build’ a floor plan of a house and other rods to represent furniture. The photo has been cropped to preserve learners’ anonymity.

### **5.2.3 Progression of lessons**

The first lesson with the Cuisenaire rods focused on the target language only and learners and tutor worked together in one group. During the second lesson the tutor used the first 30 minutes for a group activity and then split the learners into pairs to support each other, with minimal verbal input by the tutor. This became the norm for the sessions to follow as learners became more accustomed to the method. At first the tutor allowed learners to choose their own partners, but after one or two sessions she started to control the pairings when possible to ensure that learners with different first languages were working together. Irregular attendance of learners played a role in the pair work activities. It was not always possible to put learners together with speakers of different first languages and sometimes learners had to work together in small groups of three because there were not enough learners present to do the activities in pairs. The tutor also started to introduce new resources to recycle or review target language. After three sessions the volunteer tutor started to come in twice a week as we both felt that learners were building a momentum that would be best maintained if there could be a shorter interval between sessions.

### **5.2.4 Reflections on task development over time**

After the initial lesson focusing on the target language, learners started adding their own words to the list, introducing a new shape (star) and starting to add vocabulary for furniture into the rooms they were constructing with the rods. This opened the opportunity for more adjectives (big, small) and more prepositions of place (in, out, next to, in front of). My reflection on 9 June 2014 after the first three lessons with the rods commented on this (see Figure 5.2 below).

Lesson 1: Learners like this approach. Not everybody present, but they found it interesting. Some awkwardness between tutor and group, because first time.

Lesson 2: Good progress. After about 30 mins. K. had them working in pairs & supporting each other to learn.

General: The lessons are morphing into very rich language lessons. Great.

Figure 5.2 Comment in excerpt from research reflective journal after three sessions with the Cuisenaire rods.

At this time also I noted that the tutor was starting to introduce new resources into the sessions. On one occasion (see Figure 5.3) I noted in my research log that she was using the rods as just one of a variety of resources during the same lesson. I observed that different groupings of learners were using different resources during the same session, focusing on various aspects of the language they were working on.

TIME Cuisenaire rods. NO. \_\_\_\_\_ DATE 10/6/2014.

I think (Volunteer) is getting bored with the rods. Today she introduced new ways to do numbers.

Intro she had sticker numbers that learners stuck on paper + got other learners to say them.

Then also used flashcards with nr's and words, as well as the rods.

This way the rods became just one of a range of resources. Could be good to develop this idea into workstations based lesson.

Fig. 5.3 Excerpt from research reflective journal regarding the use of Cuisenaire rods as one of many resources.

### **5.2.5 Changes to lesson plans**

During the first session when learners were focusing on four new words only, the lesson concluded with learners copying the new words in their writing books. As usual in this group with differing writing skills this part of the lesson took a long time and the anxiety levels seemed to rise considerably. It seemed to me that the writing of the words was undoing the progress made with learning the words. During my research on best practice in the ESOL Literacy classroom, I had come across an article by Joe Barcroft (2006) that suggested that copying target words may negatively influence productive L2 vocabulary learning. After discussing this article with one of the other ESOL Literacy teachers at our centre, I decided to change this aspect of the Cuisenaire rods lessons. New learning would be introduced focusing on listening and speaking skills first, followed by reading and lastly by writing the new words. The progression would have to be timed and managed by the tutor, because learners have been accustomed to copying everything every day and would need time to adjust to the change.

My observations and reflections for the rest of the data collection period suggested that this change worked well. This observation seemed to be supported by the results of the summative assessment at the end of term 2 (also the end of the data collection period) when all the learners recorded increases on their profile levels.

### **5.3 Review of Cuisenaire rods task**

The main focus of this inquiry is into the ways in which teachers could encourage critical awareness of learning among adult ESOL learners from refugee backgrounds with very low literacy skills. One of the instruments that was proposed to track this aspect of the research was learners reflecting on their own learning through writing in their learner logs. As discussed earlier (see Chapter 3) this instrument did not really work well in the Profile 1 group where learners have minimal writing skills. The Cuisenaire rods seemed to offer a way for this aspect to become more observable to the teacher/researcher.

During the course of the data collection period, I noted two instances where it seemed as if learners were aware of their own linguistic competence and their learning needs. The first instance was when I noticed them using a new shape (star) and the volunteer tutor confirmed that learners themselves requested the inclusion of this shape in the list of shapes being



studied. Without being able to interview learners in their first languages about this, it may not be appropriate to conclude that this is evidence of awareness of linguistic competence, but it seems to indicate some desire to learn the English word for a shape that learners may like or have noticed in their environment.

The second instance occurred during the sessions after I noticed that the volunteer tutor had introduced a variety of resources for recycling vocabulary. Different pairs of learners were working with different types of resources. Discussions with the volunteer tutor indicated that learners were choosing the resources they wanted to use without input from her. This would seem to indicate awareness either of linguistic needs or of learning style preferences. Again, without following up this observation with an L1 supported interview, it would not be appropriate to make any definite conclusions.

I found these observations encouraging, as I had never before observed learners in this group exercising any initiative in either requesting or selecting specific learning material.

### **5.3.1 Constraints**

Two constraints were noted – one regarding the Cuisenaire rods as a resource and one regarding the teaching environment.

Firstly, the observations and reflections during this period seemed to confirm comments in available literature on the limitations of Cuisenaire rods (notably Brown, 2000). After only a few sessions both learners and tutor seemed to be overfamiliar with the rods and new resources were needed to support the learning momentum. The rods seemed to work well as an initial step or even as a bridge to new learning.

Secondly, irregular attendance of learners in this group formed one of the major constraints during this focus on Cuisenaire rods. There was only one occasion during the seven sessions when all seven learners were present, as illustrated in Table 5.1 below. (Only six learners in this group had given consent for their data to be used in this study, but the volunteer tutor had to deliver the same lesson to all seven learners in the P1 group. Attendance figures for all seven learners are therefore included in the table below, to indicate the impact on all the learners in the group.)

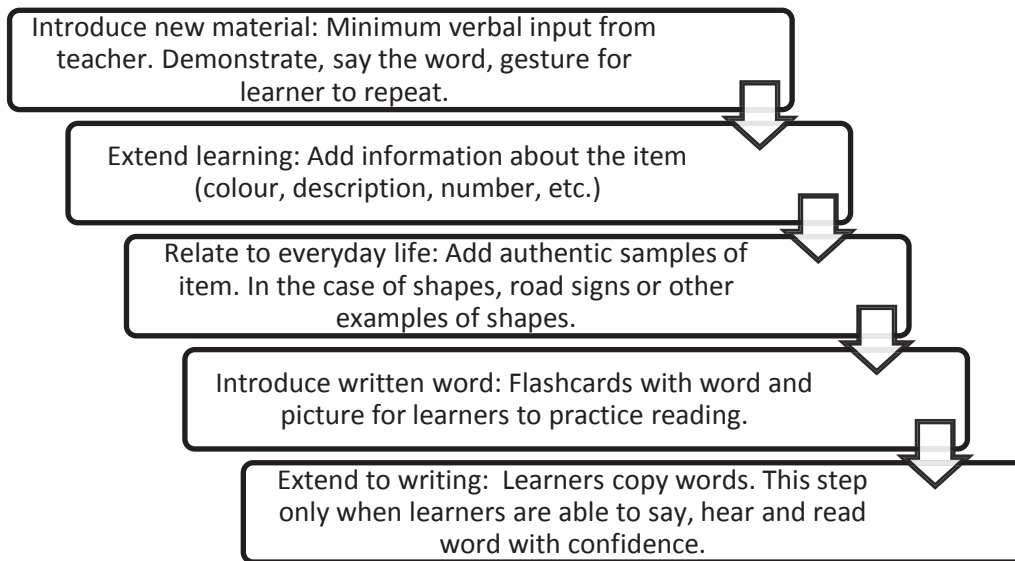
Learner	Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3	Lesson 4	Lesson 5	Lesson 6	Lesson 7
A	√	√	√	√	0	√	0
B	0	√	√	√	0	√	0
C	√	√	0	0	0	√	0
D	√	0	√	√	√	√	0
E	√	√	√	0	√	√	√
F	√	0	√	0	√	√	√
G	0	√	√	√	√	√	√

*Table 5.1: Attendance figures for the seven learners in Profile 1 during the Cuisenaire rod sessions.*

The attendance figures for the period show that one learner only attended three sessions, one learner attended four sessions, three learners attended five sessions and two learners attended six sessions. Learners all had valid reasons for their absences. During feedback sessions after the lessons the volunteer tutor leading the sessions expressed her frustration with this aspect and noted that this made lesson planning very difficult, necessitating continuous changes to planned pair work activities. However, in my reflections for this period I noted that the tutor's use of new resources and creative use of pair work or sometimes small group work seemed to offer a way to deal with the fact that learners were constantly at different stages in their learning because they had missed some sessions.

#### **5.4 Changes to task procedures**

By the end of the data collection period I made a note in my research reflective journal that set out a typical progression for lessons using the Cuisenaire rods, to be followed in future lessons using this resource. (The progression is given in Figure 5.4 below.) In this progression the rods would be used in the initial stages only, or to review learning during other stages. The progression would span several sessions, as many as required.



**Fig. 5.4 Diagram showing the new progression for lessons using Cuisenaire rods in the initial stages.**

The rods would become a part of the basic classroom equipment brought to class every day and would be available at any stage in the session according to learners' needs and teaching points. They would also be available to learners who may wish independently to review earlier learning. For this profile group the written text is not yet as important as for the other higher-skilled groups and learners would need the same tools that helped them to acquire learning also for reviewing the learning.

## 5.5 Conclusion

Using the Cuisenaire rods as a resource to introduce new vocabulary or language structures, to encourage the production of language chunks and to enable learners to self-evaluate their learning worked in this particular context and with this particular group. Other groups may have different needs and different opportunities, but in general it seems that Cuisenaire rods could be a very useful tool in the literacy teacher's toolbox for use with learners with very low levels of literacy and language skills.





## **Chapter 6: Findings: Computer-based tasks**

The third type of technique included in the research project was the use of computer-based tasks. This chapter will discuss the background to the selection of this technique, the pilot project carried out in 2013 and the development of tasks for the ESOL Literacy classroom under investigation. Constraints and lessons learned for possible future use of this technology will also be discussed.

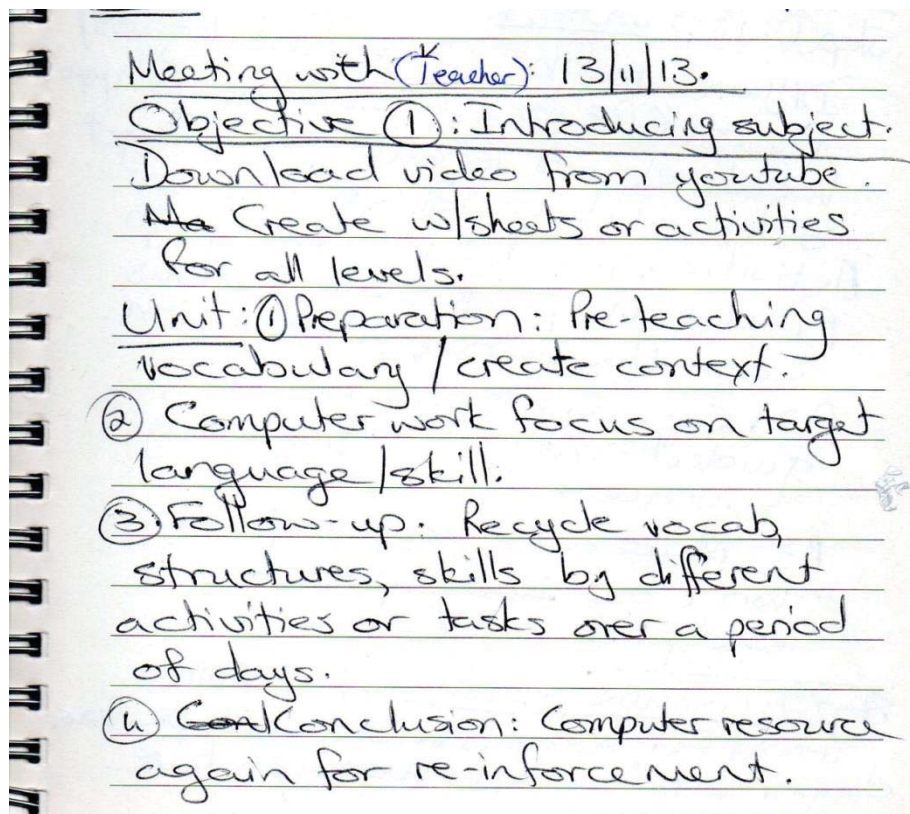
### **6.1 Background to the activity**

Computer-assisted language learning is well established in higher level ESL classrooms, particularly at secondary school and university level, as a quick search of available literature showed. Many aspects of language learning and autonomy using computers have been researched: from the language learning strategies used by students in distance-learning situations (White, 2008) to providing scaffolding for reading web pages (Murray & McPherson, 2006) and even software programs to provide instant feedback to students using the computer to write their own texts (Sullivan & Lindgren, 2002). Teachers have also been urged and supported to incorporate computer-assisted tasks in their mainstream classrooms for decades already. An early guide for using computers in the whole language classroom provided teachers in Canada with practical ideas for the use of computers to promote group interaction and cooperative learning (Willing & Girard, 1990).

Of particular interest to my own teaching situation was a project that formed part of an Australian action research project carried out in different AMEP classes across the country. This project focused on the process of integrating computers into a communicative language environment which focuses on the learner (Gleedman, 2000). The learners in the Australian study differed from my own learners in that the majority had completed secondary education and about half had been to a university, although not all had completed degrees. They ranged in age from 20 to 35 years and came from a variety of countries in Africa and Asia, but had only been in Australia for a few months at the time of the research project. However, the teacher in this case had the same doubts and apprehensions about her own abilities and technical expertise that I experienced at the beginning of my research project. In particular I found her list of discoveries that she made during the process useful when designing the tasks for my own research project. I also took to heart her recommendation to “focus on English at all times” taking care not to confuse learners by avoiding a lot of computer jargon (p. 117)

## 6.2 Task design and trial

Before attempting a research project on the use of computer technology in my own classroom, I informally discussed the issue with other teachers in the ELPNZ programme. At the Waikato centre of ELPNZ in 2013 we had the privilege of having a colleague with experience in using computers in her literacy classroom. Her class was held at a community centre that also offered computer classes to refugee children and she was able to use the computer room on a regular basis. An informal meeting with her in November 2013 provided me with ideas about possible structures of lessons using computer-based tasks (see figure 6.1). In addition I was able to draw on the experience of teachers in other centres across New Zealand with regular access to computers.



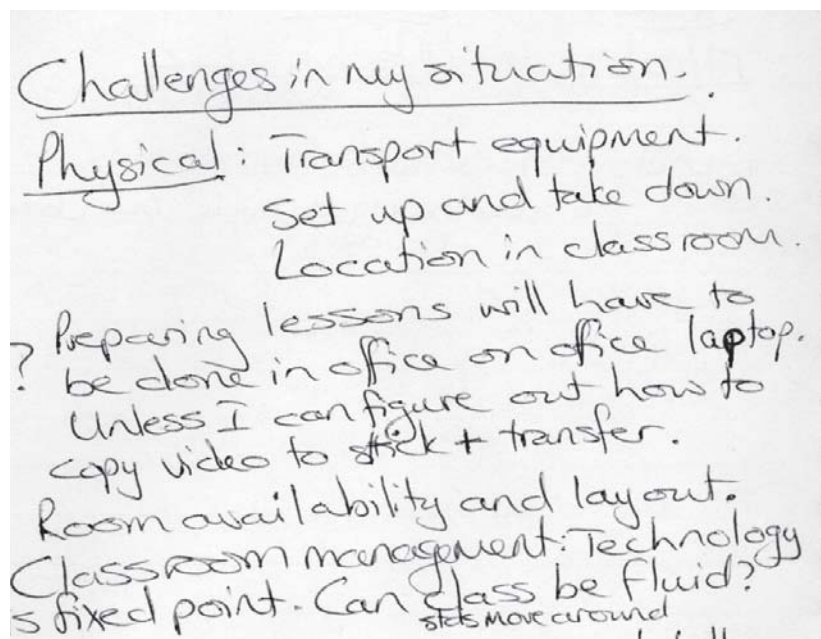
**Fig. 6.1** Excerpt from notes taken at the informal meeting with a colleague at Waikato centre on using computers in the ESOL Literacy classroom.

Consensus among these teachers was that this technology should not replace paper text based tasks but that it could provide scaffolding in a sequence of tasks using a variety of resources. One of the distinct advantages mentioned by one teacher was the ability to enlarge the text on the screen to accommodate learners with poor vision. Changing the colour of text or

background to make letters more visible was also seen as a possibility. Most of the teachers indicated that they use a combination of computer and data projector to introduce new material, or guide whole group activities. Only two teachers (with access to fully equipped computer rooms) used the computers for individual learners to complete tasks independently.

### 6.2.1 Anticipated constraints

Notes in my research log during November 2013 listed the physical constraints that would influence the introduction of computer-based tasks in our classroom (see figure 6.2 below). Some of these constraints included the fact that there were no computers available for the learners to use: we were renting a room in a community centre where the management also rents out the space to other community groups which may necessitate my class moving to a smaller room at times; sometimes assistants were not available at short notice; and some learners did not attend class regularly for reasons that were not in their control.



**Fig. 6.2** Excerpt from research log listing some of the physical constraints to the process in my own classroom.

Equipment available at the ELPNZ Waikato centre at the time included a laptop and data projector that I could book in advance and take to my classroom. There were no extra laptops available to use and there was no internet connection in my classroom. I would have to keep these constraints in mind when planning a lesson using computer technology and would have to be very flexible in the execution. I planned to use the computer and data projector combination at first, to engage the whole class and to minimise the effect if some learners did

not attend class on the day. I would follow up this whole group activity with one task for use by individual learners in the P3 group, as extension for learners who finish their regular task first.

### 6.2.2 Pilot study

The complexity of my teaching environment and the lack of access to any computer technology at the centre where the class is being held led me to decide to carry out a pilot study in October and November 2013 to determine what would be involved in using computers regularly in the classroom. At the same time the pilot study would enable me to identify and address any difficulties in the proposed method of discussions with other teachers, observations and reflections for the data collection period. The lesson plan for the pilot lesson is shown in Table 6.1 and will be discussed in more detail below.

Step	Description	Resources	Group	Area
1	Shared reading and discussion	Laptop, data projector, PowerPoint presentation	Whole class	Conversation area
2	Discussion to check comprehension; reading	Text cut into paragraphs	Profile 1	Workstation 1
		Cloze worksheet	Profile 2	Workstation 2
		Whole text and FLAX task; laptop	Profile 3	Workstation 3

*Table 6.1: Simple two step lesson plan for pilot lesson using laptop and data projector combination. Shaded text indicates a change to the lesson plan.*

For the first lesson in the pilot project in 2013 I used a PowerPoint presentation with pictures and simplified text from a graded reader sourced from the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) and other pictures from the internet. The topic was the story of a former refugee and his journey to adapt to the new culture and find a job in New Zealand. The presentation included maps of Africa and New Zealand. The TEC readers also include audio text, but I

could not use that at this time because I did not have portable loudspeakers that would amplify the sound to the level required when used in the big group.

I had planned to first present the material to the whole class and allow time for shared reading and discussion. After that I had planned for the group to break into their profile level groups and have different tasks to complete, using the text from the presentation. For the profile 1 group I had prepared and cut up the text into paragraphs which they had to put in order with the support of a bilingual assistant. The profile 2 group had a cloze worksheet to complete and the profile 3 group had the whole text to work with. I had also prepared a computer-based task using FLAX – a web-based software program developed by the University of Waikato to generate simple tasks using text input by the teacher. At the time some of the tasks could be downloaded and stored for use without internet access.

After the whole group shared reading activity the bilingual assistant worked with the P1 group and the volunteer assistant worked with the P3 group at their respective workstations. I supported the P2 group completing the cloze worksheet. We projected the worksheet on the whiteboard using the data projector and discussed the task as a group before learners wrote the answers on their worksheets. Learners at this level need scaffolding in the form of strategy training for completing cloze activities. The shared activity reinforced the strategy for this task – tick the words you use in the box and write in the gap; the last gap then has only one possible answer, the last word left in the box.

### **6.2.3 Observed Constraints**

Firstly, and as mentioned above, it was not possible to use the audio text provided with the TEC resource. In future I would need to include an external loudspeaker with the kit for lessons using this technology. Secondly, I did not have a power cable long enough to reach the wall plug in the area where the show was set up. Fortunately the receptionist at the community centre was able to lend me one to use. Thirdly, I was not used to the equipment and setting up and getting the PowerPoint presentation working took much longer than I thought. Initially I had planned to use the FLAX tasks with the P3 group, but we ran out of time.

#### **6.2.4 Reflection**

The whole group activity provided me with additional opportunities to observe learners' reading skills. I noted in my journal that one very low level learner seemed to be able to read more than I thought. She showed good word attack skills but needed to work on pronunciation. Two other learners were observed to not participate in the shared reading activity at all. I made a note to investigate this further by talking with them when a bilingual assistant sharing their first language could be available, because I was not sure if the type of activity perhaps did not suit their learning styles.

I also reflected on the amount of discussion generated by the inclusion of the two maps in the presentation. Learners from Africa enjoyed being able to show other learners where they come from and learners who had been in New Zealand for a longer time also enjoyed showing off their knowledge of the North Island in particular. This part of the lesson took longer than I had planned, largely because I allowed the discussion to run its course. I noted in my reflective journal that from a communicative teaching perspective there is perhaps more value in such spontaneous conversations than in the planned shared reading activity.

From this pilot lesson I learned that it is possible to use a laptop and data projector combination in the classroom, but that I need to double check that I have all the necessary parts of the equipment when I leave our office to go to the community centre where I teach. I would also need to find a loudspeaker to connect to the laptop for using audio texts. Lessons have to be carefully planned and preparation takes longer than usual. It is important to be flexible in executing the lesson plan and to allow learners all the time they need to read/share their own experiences/discuss, especially in the big group. The technology appeared to provide opportunity for learners to use the language rather than use the computer to complete a task.

#### **6.3 Using a computer during the data collection period**

When designing the study and the tasks to be trialled during the data collection period, I had planned to use the computer for both individual activities and whole group activities. These two types of tasks will be discussed separately.



### **6.3.1 Individual tasks**

Although I had intended to use the computer for individual tasks, this did not work very well during the data collection period. I prepared several tasks using the FLAX program mentioned in 6.2.2 above to use as extension material in the profile 3 group. One activity that I thought would work well is based on a cloze exercise. This type of activity is familiar to learners and requires only very basic typing and mouse handling skills. The teacher inputs the text to be used and may select parameters for the cloze, including number of gaps, types of word to be erased (nouns, verbs, adverbs, etc). The computer then generates an interactive exercise that has various help options for learners, including a word bank or giving the initial letter on request. Learners get instant feedback on their answers and may go back and change their answers until they have selected the correct word to fill the gap. Other activities, such as the scrambled sentences, require a higher level of skill in manipulating a mouse or mousepad.

### **6.3.2 Constraints**

Learners working with the laptop needed ongoing support to get used to the computer and the activity itself. Execution was time-consuming and with only one laptop available in a group with up to 10 learners at times, it was not always practical to include this in a lesson plan. Some of the activities required internet access, which was not available in my classroom at the time of the current study.

These constraints meant that the individual computer-based tasks could not be implemented during the data collection period. I noted one instance in my research log where the planned individual task was turned into a small group task for the P3 group. (See figure 6.3). A different result was achieved, but it was still useful as a shared reading and discussion activity.



	Profile 3: Flax exercise on screen
	Read through story, demonstrate
	use of punctuation. Discuss
	'feeling' words. Discuss new
19/5/14	vocabs. link to assessment
	(look up word; write down
	def.; make sentence) Then
	identify verbs. Write down
	all the -ed verbs in the story.

**Fig. 6.3** Excerpt from research log recording the change of an individual computer-based task into a shared small group reading and discussion task.

### 6.3.3 Whole group activities

The laptop and data projector combination was used regularly in the class from the beginning of term 1 in 2014. During the summer holiday in January 2014 I had obtained a Bluetooth capable loudspeaker for my own use at home. Although the ELPNZ laptop was not Bluetooth capable it was possible to connect the loudspeaker by wire to the laptop. For the data collection period I used this when we watched DVDs or video clips. At least once a week we started the session with a show of some kind, thereby embedding the technology into our normal classroom routine.

Topics chosen for this part of the lesson included segments from a popular gardening programme on TV (Get Growing) to support our ESOL World Garden project, clips from YouTube on parent/teacher interviews, or sometimes a slide show prepared by me on a topic relevant to our classroom work at the time. I also found it very useful during the initial phases of this research project to use the show time to generate discussion on how we learn. The picture questionnaire used in the first week especially made a very good PowerPoint presentation which allowed us to discuss all aspects of the worksheet before the learners had to complete the questionnaire.

### 6.3.4 A typical lesson

Typically whole group lessons using the laptop and data projector combination followed the same procedure as the pilot lesson. Towards the end of our housing unit in the first term of

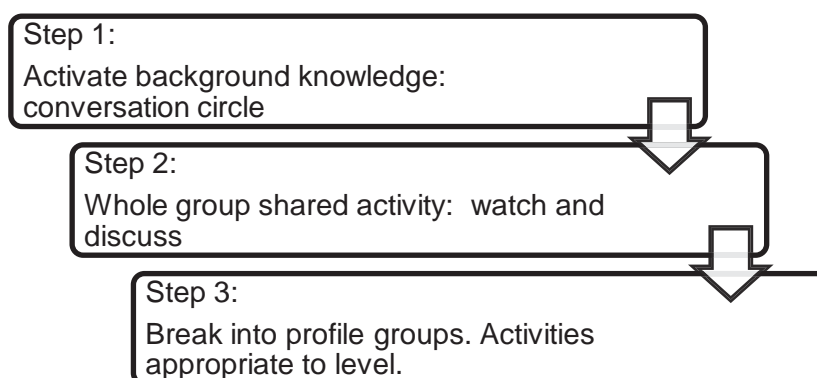
2014 for instance, we watched a video clip from the New Headway Beginner series. The topic was a DIY project to paint a bedroom. The original inspiration for this lesson came from one of the informal discussions I had with another teacher who had used the resource before and made her worksheets available to me. I adapted the worksheets and lesson plan slightly to make provision for the learners in my particular class.

For this lesson we started with a short conversation circle time preceding the showing of the clip to create time for activating background knowledge and pre-teaching some of the vocabulary used in the clip. Next we watched the clip, pausing frequently to discuss what we were seeing and what we understood to be happening. In order to elicit as much language from the learners as possible, I used questions such as: “What can you see in this room?” To help lower level learners in the group to make a connection to prior learning there were also a number of questions regarding colours and number of objects. After this shared watching and discussing activity, learners again worked in their own profile groups to complete paper-text based activities suited to their levels. For this stage I left the computer paused at a picture of the room to support lower level learners who had to answer questions about colours and items of furniture in the room. Learners in P2 and P3 had some exercises on their worksheets where they had to listen to the dialogue on the video, so after P1 had finished their questions these two groups worked together to complete their worksheets.

In my reflection on this lesson I noted that the time it took to set up the technology was the major disadvantage of this type of task.

### 6.3.5 Subsequent lessons

The progression (see Figure 6.4 below) trialled during the pilot lesson and the DIY lesson worked well and I did not change it for subsequent lessons.



**Fig. 6.4 Progression for lessons using laptop and data projector for whole group activities.**

### **6.3.6 Overall reflections**

Working with all the learners in one big group while watching a presentation, DVD or video clip as described above offers new opportunities for observing learners while waiting for them to react to questions while the computer is paused. Learners may ask for material to be replayed or paused to give them time to look properly. With a good loudspeaker the resource may also be used to good effect to help learners get used to discriminating word units in linked speech. For instance, on one occasion during the data collection period we used three video clips from YouTube about parent-teacher interviews at a primary school. Again we started with a conversation circle time before watching the videos, during which learners had to practice asking questions about their children's progress at school. I noted in my reflective journal on this day that I observed learners repeating the questions to practise their pronunciation while we watched the videos afterwards.

### **6.4 Review of activity**

Although individual tasks using interactive software may offer learners the best opportunities for self-evaluation and for raising awareness of learning, the constraints of the teaching environment meant that using the computer for individual tasks was not effective. Without regular access to multiple computer stations it is very difficult in this teaching environment to design and execute individual computer-based tasks. Small group or whole group tasks are more efficient and deliver better results in comparison to the amount of time and effort spent in preparing and setting up the equipment.

There are good resources available for use with computers in the classroom. The resources I used during the data collection period included DVDs from TEC, other DVDs commercially sourced from TV programmes, video clips from YouTube and PowerPoint presentations created for specific purposes. Using these at the very least enriches the learning environment and offers opportunities for learners with different learning styles to engage with the material in ways that suit them.

## 6.5 Changes to activity procedures

The most important change in the classroom procedure after this focus on using computers in the classroom was the regular inclusion once a week of some kind of show: either a DVD, or a video clip or a PowerPoint presentation. Learners told me that they looked forward to ‘movie day’ and they seemed to remember the videos afterwards. One learner wrote down the word “orange” as a new word learnt during the week we watched the DIY video. (In the video clip the flatmates paint the bedroom bright orange.) In the learner log reflections at the end of Term 1, three learners mentioned the parent teacher interviews in their entries. Two learners just used the phrase ‘parent teacher interviews’ but one learner (see Figure 6.5 below) wrote in her own words:

“How to meet class teacher of my grand son”

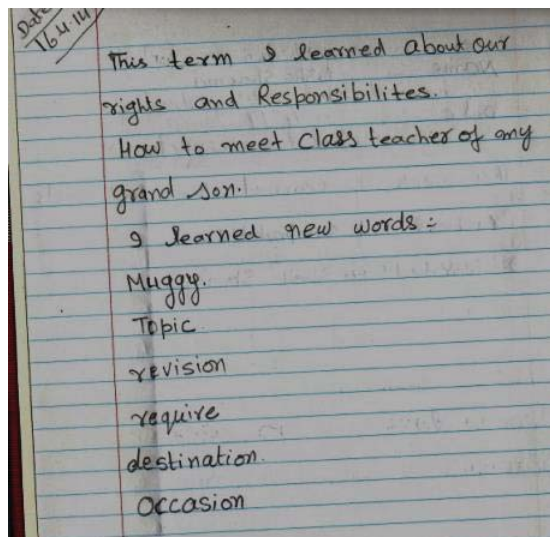


Fig. 6.5 Excerpt from learner log at the end of Term 1.

## 6.6 Conclusion

The findings relating to the use of computer technology in the whole group are encouraging. In the classroom being investigated and at the time of the current study, using computer technology for individual tasks did not work very well. However, other teachers in the Waikato and elsewhere in the country have different teaching situations with varying degrees of access to technology. They report using individual computer-based tasks to good effect in this environment. This aspect could be explored more fully if other options for regular computer access could be arranged.



## **Chapter 7: Discussion and conclusion**

This chapter will provide a discussion of the findings resulting from the focus on the three teaching techniques, as well as a response to the original research question. A discussion of action research in the context of an ESOL Literacy class room for adult learners from a refugee background and a closer look at the three instruments used in the research process will be followed by a general discussion of the conclusions and implications for further research.

### **7.1 Discussion of findings**

In this section the findings relating to use of dictation as a learning device, the use of Cuisenaire rods and the use of computer-based tasks will be discussed.

#### **7.1.1 Dictation**

While dictation is a classic language teaching technique, it is not without a history of controversy. A number of influential linguists and methodologists have made various claims for its pedagogical value since Leonard Bloomfield (1942) stressed the value of dictation as a learning device. In a discussion on dictation as a tool to improve efficiency in the ESL classroom, Kavaliauskienė and Darginavičienė (2009) acknowledge that some language practitioners value dictation as a testing device only and do not believe that it teaches anything. They also note that practitioners currently once again favour the use of dictation. “It is thought that dictation can help develop all language skills, that is, grammar, oral communication, pronunciation, and listening comprehension” (Kavaliauskienė & Darginavičienė, 2009, p. 1). Of special interest to the ESOL Literacy environment are the opinions expressed by Davis and Rinvolucris (1988) who regard dictation as a tool to develop the important language acquisition skills of decoding and recoding in writing. In his handbook for ESL teachers Nation (2013) describes the use of dictation for a variety of language proficiency levels ranging from beginner learners to learners in English for academic purposes classes. He recommends dictation as a tool for needs analyses and assessment, as a learning device to help build alphabet skills, as well as a learning device for building content vocabulary.

The focus on dictation in this study confirmed the information gleaned from research and other teachers (see Chapter 4) that dictation as a learning device is suitable for mixed level

groups, but may need to be adjusted to accommodate different skill levels in the ESOL Literacy classroom. The participants in the current study presented a very wide range of skills, which I needed to take into account when making decisions about types of dictation and creating resources. For instance, in the P2 group the seven learners participating in the study had skill profiles ranging from just beginning to develop the skills needed for this profile to consolidating and almost achieving all the skills required. Two of the learners were in the middle range for this group. Two other learners who started in the class a few years ago as pre-literate learners had speaking and listening skills at the top of the range in the group but their writing skills were in the bottom range. Their lack of confidence in decoding and recoding meant that they always needed more time to complete dictation tasks than other learners in the same group. In the same group there were also two younger learners with some experience of school education in their home countries, as well as one learner with significant health issues that prevented her from attending class regularly. Although this learner seemed to be at the top of the skills range in the group, her irregular attendance meant that there were 'hidden' gaps in her learning that had become very noticeable during dictation activities in the past.

In the P3 group the differences in writing skills were less significant as they had all been in the literacy class for a number of years already and were working on consolidating higher level skills.

The main focus in the P2 and P3 groups was the use of orthographic dictation using a cloze worksheet. Different sources for the dictation texts were trialled, including language experience workshops, picture stories or video clips, followed by a shared writing activity where the text for the dictation was generated. During the dictation task the cloze worksheets were adapted to suit each learner's individual learning needs. Some learners only had one word gaps, others had longer gaps or more gaps and learners in the P3 group had to write whole sentences. In the case of these two groups concluding the task with a self-evaluation activity either in pairs or individually and following it up with a task intent on discovering or using learning strategies that suit individual learners may have the effect of raising learners' awareness of their own linguistic competence. Over time this may also increase their awareness of learning as they notice their own improvement.

The P1 group presented unique challenges and these have been discussed separately in Chapter 4. Sawyer and Silver (1961) identify phonemic item dictation as useful for increasing



a learner's ability to identify the sounds of a language and its contrasts, supporting them in not imposing the sound system of their first language on the target language. They also describe the orthographic item text (similar to the traditional spelling test) as a useful way to increase the learner's understanding of the correlation between the sound system and the spelling system of the target language. I focused on phonemic item and orthographic item texts, using familiar vocabulary only. Alkire (2002) expresses the opinion that, "[i]n all cases, dictations must be selected according to the students' abilities, and the usage and style should be similar to what the students are expected to produce on their own in the course, both verbally and in writing" (p. 2). The literacy assessment for this level measures a learner's skill in recognizing and writing the letters of the alphabet; as well as recognizing and writing some sight words. The phonemic items used for dictation activities in this group therefore focused on alphabet letters and the orthographic items were taken from the sight word list recommended in the ELPNZ curriculum for this group related to the topic that we were working on.

The most important finding in the P1 group was that the anxiety caused by the lack of skills in writing made the traditional dictation task too difficult for learners. For learners in this group phonemic and orthographic item dictation tasks may encourage the development of alphabet and decoding skills provided that writing words on lines is not the main objective of the task. Methods based on alternative assessment procedures for ESL learners (Tannenbaum, 1996) that use pictures and flashcards and require learners to indicate physically the letters or sounds they hear seemed to be more suitable for this group.

### **7.1.2 Cuisenaire rods**

The coloured rods known today as Cuisenaire rods were introduced into foreign language teaching in the 1960s by Caleb Gattegno as part of the teaching approach called the 'Silent Way' (Gattegno, 1963). Gattegno believed that learning is facilitated if learners discover or create rather than remember and repeat; that learning is facilitated by mediating physical objects and that learners learn by solving problems involving the material to be learned (Brown, 2000).

The Silent Way typically uses a set of Cuisenaire rods and a series of colourful wall charts. In his summary of the Silent Way approach to learn and teach languages, Brown (2000) describes the use of the rods for introducing vocabulary, verbs and syntax. The teacher should



provide single-word stimuli or short phrases once or twice, staying silent for most of the teaching period. Learners should work together to solve language problems, even pronunciation, with minimal feedback from the teacher. Gattegno himself expressed the opinion that the rods create awareness of the natural way of using the ‘melody’ of the target language. Although vocabulary is restricted in the initial stages learners are enabled to create or produce a large number of sentences. The rods are used in the initial stages of the Silent Way approach, quickly supported by coloured wall charts and worksheets to increase awareness (Gattegno, 1963). The limitations of the rods are also mentioned by Brown (2000) who criticises the use of the rods because they may become overfamiliar after a few lessons and may need to be replaced by different teaching methods.

Young (2000) describes Gattegno’s approach as based on producing awareness rather than providing knowledge. The rods, it is claimed, are used to create unambiguous and instantly apprehensible situations, and enable the teacher to give learners instant, responsive input as required by the learning situation. She refers to the rods being used in programmes for refugees with no prior literacy where the speed of acquisition or accuracy is important. Iturain (2010) - a teacher who uses the rods in her own foreign language classrooms for adults and for young learners - lists ways in which the rods can be used but also discusses some classroom management considerations to be taken into account when planning a lesson using this technique. Some of these include the physical layout of the learning space (all learners need to be able to see the rods); as well as possible disciplinary issues because the rods generate energy among learners who spontaneously call out answers. This may result in learners who are risk takers by nature dominating the lesson if the teacher is not careful to give everybody an equal opportunity to participate. Among the advantages discussed by Iturain in this article are the changes observed in the classroom dynamic, better rapport between teacher and learners and the strong focus on speaking. Iturain sees the rods as a good resource in a variety of resources available to the foreign language teacher to keep learners with different learning style preferences engaged and motivated (2010, cited above).

The constraints of the large number of learners with differing skill levels all working in one room; having to accommodate young babies and toddlers in the learning space; and the culture already established in the P1 group (as discussed in Chapter 5) meant that the Silent Way in its original form may not be an appropriate teaching method for this group. However, the use of the Cuisenaire rods as a resource and the resulting decrease of verbal input from

the teacher may provide an effective way to introduce new language or recycle language items.

The irregular attendance of learners in this group owing to health and family issues had an impact on the effectiveness of the Cuisenaire rod method. The tutor had to repeat lessons for learners who missed some sessions, while helping other learners to progress to new material. This constraint was alleviated in some ways by the introduction of new resources and the use of pair or small group work.

Advantages of the Cuisenaire rod method included the fact that the rods made it easier for the tutor to create connections to prior learning in follow-up lessons. Lessons usually started out with a recap of the previous session, using the rods in the same way as in the previous session before moving on to new content or new resources. Used in pair work or small groups by learners without input from the teacher the rods also created opportunities for peer learning. Learners responded well to the Cuisenaire rods after getting used to the new method, as evidenced by the fact that they initiated some of the learning opportunities (requests for the words for new shapes or putting rods representing furniture into the rooms of their houses). This may also indicate some awareness of learning, but the observation would need to be supported with L1 interviews before any conclusion is drawn.

The progression put into place after the focus on Cuisenaire rods resulted in the rods being used mostly for improving listening and speaking skills, helping learners to acquire the ‘natural melody’ of the new language, as envisaged by Gattegno (1963). In some ways this study seems to confirm the findings noted by Iturain (2010) who sees the rods as one resource to be used in conjunction with other resources. In the changed teaching approach (as discussed in Chapter 4) for this group of learners who face the challenging task of learning to read and write for the first time in a new language the Cuisenaire rods became a resource to introduce new language; to provide a bridge between prior learning and new material and to provide opportunities for peer learning with reduced input from the tutor.

### **7.1.3 Computer-based tasks**

Learners in the same class may range in age from early twenties to late sixties and have very different abilities and background knowledge related to the use of technology such as computers and smart phones. At the beginning of the research period for this current study

there were only two people in my classroom who had smart phones and used the dictionary application when required. Since then, new intakes of refugees brought more smart phones and even tablets into the classroom. Learners were observed using these for the dictionary applications, to take photos during language experience activities or to talk to family members in their own languages at break times.

Two types of computer-based tasks were trialled, with varied results as discussed in Chapter 6. For instance, including computer-based activities for individual learners in a lesson requires strict time management and may result in a loss of spontaneity within the group. However, such activities where learners get instant feedback on their answers could possibly help them to become more aware of their learning progress.

Using a computer and data projector combination for whole class activities offers a way of linking learning to the everyday lives of the learners, regardless of their profile levels. In the case of the parent-teacher interview lesson mentioned in Chapter 6, for instance, all the learners had the opportunity to become familiar with the context of such an interview. Some learners in the class at that time were practising asking questions, whereas some other, lower level learners were only practising formulaic language for opening and closing conversations. Yet many learners in the class had children at school and would need to be able to talk to the teachers. Feedback from some of the learners after this session indicated that they were feeling more confident about these interviews.

For the purposes of this study I used a particular program (FLAX, mentioned in Chapter 6) that I had access to, but there are other such programs available. With internet access, learners may also use a variety of websites offering interactive language games, such as the British Council LearnEnglish site (<http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org>). Some of these games may be too complex for learners in the ESOL Literacy programme, however. In my reflections on this part of the study I noted that as a teacher I would have to be very careful in selecting activities for computer-based tasks, especially for the lowest level learners. It might be more meaningful to use this method with the higher level learners only. Language games would also have to be assessed for cultural and age appropriateness before being used in an adult refugee class for learners of various ages and a mixture of cultures.

## 7.2 The research question: a response

The research question for the current study focused on ways that a teacher in the adult refugee ESOL Literacy class could possibly change teaching techniques or tasks to help learners develop critical awareness of learning, which is a step on the way to becoming autonomous learners.

During the course of the study class room procedures were changed to encourage peer learning as much as possible. Learners in the P2 group were encouraged to support each other with the spelling of words without the teacher becoming involved. From a superficial perspective the pace of learning seemed to slow down. It can take quite a while for a group of learners at this level to puzzle out the correct spelling for the sounds they hear. Teachers had to be more patient and wait longer before helping learners, supplying the correct spelling only if nobody in the group could spell the word. A daily peer dictation activity for the whole group was also introduced to support the lowest level learners with the development of their alphabet skills. This took some time to get used to, especially for the teaching assistants. Writing down the formulaic sentences after the conversation circle meant that it took longer before the profile level groups could get started on the other planned activities for the day. However, this slight change in procedure had the result that most of the learners in the class knew the names of most of the other learners and the teaching team at the end of the data collection period. Everybody understood the question “Can you spell that?” and everybody could spell their own names with confidence. These skills are vitally important for new residents with low language and literacy levels in their everyday dealings with authority and service providers.

The teaching approach for the lowest level learners was changed to include the use of alternative assessment techniques for everyday language learning tasks. Instead of being required to write words or letters during dictation activities, learners were required to physically indicate words or pictures, or to produce three-dimensional diagrams and shapes using the Cuisenaire rods. Learners at this level seemed able to indicate their evaluation of their own linguistic competence verbally, as discussed in Chapter 4. They also seemed able to make choices regarding activities that may indicate an awareness of their learning needs. This finding was inconclusive, however, because it needed to be followed up with an interview using L1 interpreters, which did not fall within the scope of this study.

### **7.3 Methodological implications**

The steps of action research as delineated by Zuber-Skerrit (2001) and discussed in Chapter 3 are clearly demonstrated in the current study. The research question stems from an involvement in another research project including the observations from a number of ESOL Literacy teachers. The teachers in that research project mentioned learners' observed need for control and the various ways in which they (the teachers) tried to accommodate that need in their teaching. One teacher discussed topic options with her class at the start of each term, allowing learners to dictate what they wanted to learn during the term. Other teachers mentioned regularly including learners' preferred activities on request. These teachers had all identified a need, reflected on it, acted on it by changing an aspect of their practice and, upon reflection on the change, decided to implement the change as a permanent feature of their practice. Their action learning provided the first step for my action research process.

The cycle of action learning was repeated multiple times in the current study, always including input from other teachers as needed. The second step in the process was the pilot study carried out in 2013 to investigate the use of computer technology in the class room being investigated. This project served to uncover and reflect on physical constraints of providing computer-based tasks for learners, as well as to trial the process of reflection, action and reflection with the co-operation of colleagues in the Waikato centre and elsewhere in New Zealand. In the pilot study the input from one particular teacher in the Waikato centre was sought and the reasons for using computers in a literacy class, the type of resources and possible methods to implement the resource were discussed in detail. After the initial trial lesson in 2013, discussions with other teachers early in 2014 helped to refine and focus the design of the next lesson using computer technology. As discussed in chapter 7, the use of computer-based tasks was trialled in the class and the process refined through observation, reflection and changes in action until an effective method was identified.

Three tasks were selected to form the next three steps in the action research process for the current study, namely the use of dictation as a learning device, the use of Cuisenaire rods with the lowest level learners, and the use of computer-based tasks. For the purposes of this study, the objective in each of these three steps was to determine if the teacher could modify teaching techniques or the design of the tasks to raise learners' critical awareness of their learning. As such, they were three repetitions focusing on the research question. However, the three steps were action learning cycles in their own right as well, as the process of action,

reflection, action and reflection in each case resulted in permanent changes to the teaching practice.

The five steps mentioned above shaped the formal action research process for the current study. In each of these steps the observations and reflections of the researcher, who was also the teacher in the class room, were complemented by input from other teachers in the ESOL Literacy programme, as well as some input from learners during conversation circle activities and informal feedback segments after each of the focus tasks.

The final step in the action research process – the publication of results – has started with a short presentation on awareness of learning among former refugee learners with low levels of literacy during the final meeting of the Waikato branch of TESOL in 2014. The step will be concluded with the acceptance and publication of this thesis.

### **7.3.1 Advantages**

The reasons for choosing to do an action research study in my own class room were discussed in chapter 3. They included the unique characteristics of learners in this class, as well as the democratic aspect of action research which is an important consideration for myself and for the learners in this class. The participatory nature of the research became one of the biggest advantages during this process. Learners felt that their opinions were being valued, that their needs were being addressed and that they were involved in every step of the process.

Another more practical advantage was the fact that the research environment was also my everyday working environment. I already knew the physical constraints of the environment and could plan and adjust plans accordingly. The third major advantage was that I had ready access to other teachers in the ESOL Literacy programme and could discuss my observations with them on a regular basis.

Outside of my teaching environment, the support from my supervisors at Massey University was a significant advantage. Their expertise in leading post-graduate study meant that they could guide me through the process of application for ethical approval and other administrative requirements. Our regular Skype meetings helped to focus my study of available research and plan the steps of the action research process. Their guidance during the last phase of the project helped me to structure the information in a meaningful way.

### 7.3.2 Constraints

Some significant constraints to the action research process resulted from the actual teaching situation itself. The physical constraint of accommodating a large group of learners at various stages of language acquisition and of literacy skills development in one room with at least one baby or sometimes more babies and toddlers demanding attention had a major impact on the study. For instance, the background noise level in the class was one of the reasons why the use of Cuisenaire rods was selected as a focus technique. The constraint of not having any computer technology available in the class room played a role in the focus on computer-based tasks. Equipment that was required for the study had to be booked in advance and brought into the class room every time. The data projector and laptop were only available one day a week, which significantly limited the implementation of individual computer-based tasks.

Another constraint arising from the teaching environment that was noted during this study involved the use of volunteer tutors. The contribution of these tutors to the process of learning in the class room is invaluable. However, on some occasions volunteers were unable to come to class and thereby influenced the data collection process.

Former refugee learners suffer from a variety of health issues that influence their class attendance at times. Irregular attendance had a significant impact on the investigation into the use of Cuisenaire rods in the profile 1 group, as explained in more detail in Chapter 5. In that instance it was possible to turn the constraint into an advantage by making use of pair work and small group work, which in turn encouraged peer learning in the group. Irregular attendance in other groups also influenced the research process. One learner in particular attended one of the discussion days before the consent forms were handed out, but missed the actual day of the signing. She returned a week later and after talking to a friend in their own language, asked to sign the consent form. She then missed all the days when the learner logs were used, so no data was gathered from her own reflection on learning. Her information was therefore not included in the study.

A significant constraint to the research process was the lack of English language skills among learners participating in the study. This and the lack of experience with learning environments meant that the pace had to be very slow. Learners who do not understand what's happening are slow to react: they need a long time for thinking about and discussing what's required. All activities requiring them to reflect on their learning had to be carefully



designed to allow them to discuss with each other in their own languages, giving them enough time. It also meant that I had to be very careful in leading the activity not to influence the process unduly. This constraint was overcome by carefully preparing learners for the first reflection by a process of discussion, during the conversation circle times and at other times, in the weeks preceding the first learning log reflection. The focus on learning was started off with a picture questionnaire (discussed in Chapter 3) and resources and activities were chosen to prompt reflection during the rest of the data collection period (for instance the worksheet for the dictation task at the end of the DIY unit, as explained in Chapter 4). On days when learners were required to write their reflections in their learner logs, I only helped them by providing sentence starters where appropriate, or spelling help on request. Towards the end of the data collection period the profile 3 group in particular was able to discuss their learning with each other and write their reflections with the minimum involvement from me.

These advantages and constraints were noticed with regard to the action research process in this environment. Constraints noted with regard to the various teaching tasks and techniques have been discussed separately in section 7.1.

### **7.3.3 Overall reflections on individual instruments**

The study was designed to use three instruments for data collection, namely the picture questionnaire, learner logs and teacher observation/reflection. This section will provide a closer look at these three instruments, including their advantages and constraints.

#### **7.3.3.1 *The picture questionnaire***

The picture questionnaire was employed to support learners during the initial reflection on learning styles and preferred activities at the start of the data collection period. Reflection on learning is a very difficult concept to grasp if one has no or very little experience of studying in a school environment. Learners also had to be prepared for the picture questionnaire itself. This was accomplished by including a range of different activities in the seven sessions preceding the questionnaire task. I also used different pairings and small groups alternating with whole group work. During conversation circle activities at the beginning of each session I asked the successful language learners in the class (the bilingual assistants and one volunteer who studied Korean as part of her own language teacher training) to talk to the learners about their strategies for learning languages. I could also draw on my own



experience as a language learner and a person who is living in a second-language environment in this regard.

The actual session where the picture questionnaire activity was used started with a practical demonstration using a woven basket and items that represented learning: a graded reader, a dictionary, a music CD, a language game from our classroom supply and pictures of people talking. The basket represented the mind of a person learning a language. Each item was shown around the group, identified and discussed in terms of its usefulness for learning. Then the item was placed in the basket, to represent the act of learning. This was followed by a PowerPoint presentation using the pictures from the questionnaire and discussing each in detail with the whole group. Learners then worked together in small groups to complete the questionnaire, with the aid of bilingual assistants, volunteers and myself.

Even with this amount of preparation the use of the picture questionnaire was not entirely successful. Although the method was appropriate, the questionnaire was too difficult for some learners. The profile 1 group had difficulty understanding the word “sometimes” and did not understand how to rank activities in order of preference (p. 3 of the questionnaire, see Appendix D). Some of the assistants did not fully understand the purpose of the questionnaire and may have influenced the answers in some of the groups. The questionnaire was also too long and the process took up most of one session.

### **7.3.3.2 Learner logs**

Learner logs to reflect on learning was selected as an instrument for this study based on the experience of researchers in a Danish comprehensive school (Dam & Legenhausen, 2010) during a period spanning several years. It was anticipated that the results obtained during that study would not be repeatable in the current situation. However, it was deemed suitable as an instrument because the learners in both cases had similar ranges of language learning experience (from less than one year of tuition to more than five years of tuition). It was anticipated that the lack of previous school experience of the adult learners in the current study would have some impact on the research findings.

The challenges of the current teaching environment also influenced the use of learner logs as an instrument to observe increased critical awareness of learning. In the case of the profile 1

group, the study design had to be adapted during the data collection period to allow for these challenges.

Profile 1 learners have too much difficulty with writing in general to benefit from the use of learner logs. The stress of formal reflective activities like this led to increased levels of anxiety in this group which could be observed in the increased reporting of 'headaches' and learners staying away from class on days when they knew that the logs would be used. Alternative ways of observing awareness of linguistic competence were incorporated into the design of tasks for this group. Teaching methods were also changed slightly to include optional activities that would encourage learners to make choices that may indicate awareness of learning needs.

Learners in profiles 2 and 3 seemed capable of using the learner logs to reflect on awareness of their own linguistic competence, but not yet for assessing their personal linguistic outcomes or setting learning goals. This may possibly be accomplished over time as the activity becomes more embedded in the class room procedures.

The duration of this data collection period was too short and the sample size of the participants in each group too small to make any conclusive findings, but further regular use of learner logs in profiles 2 and 3 may deliver more significant results.

#### ***7.3.3.3 Teacher observation and reflections***

This part of the study also included informal discussions with other teachers in ESOL Literacy classes. The combined reflective practice experience of many teachers thus enriched the research process.

Three maxims were used to focus observations in the class room, which helped to make the distinction between teacher and researcher clearer and easier to maintain. As mentioned in Chapter 4 one of the maxims allowed me to reflect on and change elements that made the research process difficult. Another maxim investigated the use of connections to prior learning that included activating learners' background knowledge as well as deliberate connections between sessions on different days. Some instances were also recorded where learners seemed to make such connections themselves during learning log activities.

The maxim of peer learning delivered surprising results and will be discussed in more detail here.

At the start of the process, it was anticipated that observations of peer learning may provide clues as to learners' capacity for control of procedures of learning, which includes the formation of groups. To this end, peer learning was encouraged in many different ways in the various profile groups. It is common practice in an ESOL class to ask learners to work in pairs or small groups to accomplish tasks. In the ESOL Literacy class, cultural constraints mean that some learners may only work with other learners with the same gender or from the same culture. In the current study, however, learners were at times asked to work with learners from different cultural backgrounds to avoid the use of first language in tasks where co-operation is required (see the discussion on the use of Cuisenaire rods in Chapter 5). Peer learning through free association was encouraged by the change in teaching methods during the focus on dictation, when the tutor was instructed to avoid becoming involved in the evaluation of competence segment of tasks in the P2 and P3 groups (see Chapter 4). To support the lower level learners in their unit on learning the alphabet, daily orthographic item dictation activities were embedded in the class room procedure (Chapter 4). The P3 group was also encouraged to complete their activity of reflecting on their own learning without the support of a tutor using their peers as a discussion group for the task.

Towards the end of the data collection period, peer learning had become embedded in the class room culture to an extent where it may be considered a teaching technique of its own right. As such, it seems to have an empowering effect on learners and would bear further investigating. It may provide a way to encourage learner autonomy by decreasing the dependence on teaching staff.

## **7.4 Conclusion**

This study set out to determine in what ways and to what extent it is possible for a teacher in the ESOL Literacy programme to adapt teaching techniques or task design to help learners develop or increase critical awareness of their own learning.

The participatory nature of action research, specifically the involvement of learners in the process, is in itself a factor that may strengthen learners' feeling of being in control of their lives. Increased learner involvement in class room procedures and selection of content is also

used in some classes elsewhere in the country to encourage learners to take control of their learning.

The impact of the split levels influenced the selection of focus techniques in the current study, as well as changes to teaching methods. It was possible to employ peer learning as a teaching technique of its own right only because there was such a great variety of skills present in the class. Learners working in groups according to their profile levels in some ways served to minimise the impact of not having enough tutors, particularly in the case of the profile 3 group. Here peer learning was encouraged and the group at times worked independently, only requesting teacher involvement when required.

The organisational culture of ELPNZ supports and actively encourages teaching staff to undertake action learning projects. However the physical constraints of the teaching environment, as well as constraints pertaining to the people involved in the process, both learners and teaching staff, made the implementation of an action research study very difficult. The workload of the teacher, who was also the researcher, was increased significantly. The variety of language and literacy skills levels present in the class meant that tasks had to be designed separately for each group and adjustments made accordingly. In the case of the dictation task using a cloze worksheet (see chapter 4) adjustments were made for each learner individually.

The current study was limited by the small sample size and short data collection period. The lack of L1 interviews contributed to make the findings inconclusive. However, it would seem that the use of peer learning and ongoing self-assessment activities may have an influence on raising learners' critical awareness of learning at this level. Other studies in similar teaching environments would be needed to confirm these findings, however. Further study could also include a focus on the influence of teaching learning strategies in context. This aspect was only introduced briefly as a result of the changes to the dictation activities, but may provide interesting results if studied in more depth.

Many of the learners participating in this study are again enrolled in the same class in 2015. The changes to the teaching approach mentioned in this study are now established procedures and learners are helping newcomers to get accustomed to our practices. A donation of computers to the community centre where the class is being held means that there are two desktop computers available to our learners on a regular basis. We have started to teach basic

computer skills to learners who want to participate. This is not compulsory and at least one learner has indicated that she would prefer to concentrate on learning the alphabet first, before learning to use a computer. This may indicate some awareness of her learning needs and setting her own learning goals, which I find very encouraging.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Letter of ethical approval



**MASSEY UNIVERSITY**  
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA

4 March 2014

Debora Potgieter  
13 Tanekaha Place  
Pukete  
**HAMILTON 3200**

Dear Debora

**Re: HEC: Southern B Application – 14/12  
Towards learner autonomy: Raising critical awareness of learning in the adult  
refugee ESOL literacy class**

---

Thank you for your letter dated 28 February 2014.

On behalf of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are now approved. Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "J. O'Neill".

Prof John O'Neill, Acting Chair  
**Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B**

cc Prof Cynthia White  
School of Humanities  
**PN242**

Dr Arianna Berardi-Wiltshire  
School of Humanities  
**PN242**

Dr Kerry Taylor, HoS  
School of Humanities  
**PN242**

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**Massey University Human Ethics Committee**  
**Accredited by the Health Research Council**  
Research Ethics Office

Massey University, Private Bag 11222, Palmerston North 4442, New Zealand T +64 6 350 5573 +64 6 350 5575 F +64 6 350 5622  
E humanethics@massey.ac.nz animaethics@massey.ac.nz gtc@massey.ac.nz [www.massey.ac.nz](http://www.massey.ac.nz)

## Appendix B1: Letter of support from ESOL Programmes Manager, ELPNZ



15 August 2013

PO Box 12 114, Wellington 6144  
Aotearoa New Zealand  
192 Tinakori Road  
Thorndon, Wellington  
P 04 471 2382 F 04 471 2383  
E [natoffice@englishlanguage.org.nz](mailto:natoffice@englishlanguage.org.nz)  
[www.englishlanguage.org.nz](http://www.englishlanguage.org.nz)

### TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

#### RESEARCH PROPOSAL: DEBORA POTGIETER

Debora has submitted to ELPNZ a research proposal to investigate way of supporting refugee learners in autonomous learning. The participants include ELP teachers and learners.

This proposal has approval and endorsement from ELPNZ. The proposal meets the requirements of our Research Policy, including alignment with strategic objectives and compliance with ethical principles.

The project promises to provide relevant information in an area which is under-researched. We will offer support if required and look forward to the results of this important project.

*Dorothy Thwaite*

Dorothy Thwaite  
ESOL Programmes Manager  
English Language Partners New Zealand



## Appendix B2: Letter of support from ELPNZ Waikato manager

ENGLISH LANGUAGE PARTNERS WAIKATO  
PO Box 4340, Hamilton East 3247  
Migrant Resource Centre, Boundary Road, Caledonics, Hamilton  
P 07 854 7198 F 07 854 8978 E waikato@englishlanguage.org.nz  
www.englishlanguage.org.nz



27<sup>th</sup> February 2014

Dear Debora,

I was delighted to read about your proposed Action Research Project in the literacy class at Western Community Centre. Learner autonomy is a very important issue and it would be extremely helpful to have more understanding of how to raise critical awareness among refugee background ESOL literacy learners in order to encourage them to feel more in control of their own learning which would enable them to make more progress.

Your methods and processes seem very carefully thought through and well planned. I have every confidence in your ability to manage this project effectively and with sensitivity for the learners involved. I am very happy to give my approval for this project to be carried out.

I am happy to give approval for this project and to offer any support you may require. I wish you every success with this research project and with your study in general.

Yours sincerely

Jo

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jo de Lisle".

Jo de Lisle

Manager

Formerly ESOL Home Tutors



## **Appendix C1: Research information sheet**

### **Research Project: Raising Critical Awareness of Learning**

#### *Information for Participants*

#### **What is the project about?**

This study will look at ways to raise critical awareness of learning under learners in the ESOL Literacy class. We think that people who are aware of how they learn best and use learning strategies will learn English quicker and more easily.

#### **Who are the researchers?**

My name is Debora Potgieter. I am currently doing post-graduate study in second-language teaching at Massey University. My work is being supervised by Professor Cynthia J. White and Dr Arianna Berardi-Wiltshire.

#### **Why are you being asked to participate?**

You are being asked because you are a learner in the ESOL Literacy class at the Western Community Centre, Nawton, Hamilton.

#### **What will you be asked to do?**

You will be asked to answer questions about how you learn English, the activities you like best in the classroom and every week, to fill in a learner log. This is part of our normal classroom activities and will be used in Debora's research project.

#### **What will you have to write in the learner log?**

You will write about the things you learned during the week.



**What will happen to my information?**

At the end of the project Debora will take the learner logs away and discuss the things you wrote in her thesis.

**Will other people know who I am?**

No. In the thesis you will only be called a "learner" and your name and/or contact details will not be in there. I also will not be giving your details to any other people directly, to make sure that information stays confidential.

**What if I agree to participate and then change my mind?**

You may withdraw from the study at any time during the project. Any information recorded about you will be removed from the records. You may still have to take part in the classroom activities, but your information will not be counted for the study.

**How can I find out about the results from the study?**

Debora will discuss your information and the results with you individually if you prefer, or in the class at the end of the project.

**Who can I speak to about participation in this project?**

You can speak to Debora directly about activities and participation. If you do not feel comfortable speaking to her, you could also contact either of her supervisors - Prof. Cynthia White or Dr Arianna Berardi-Wiltshire. Their contact details are listed below.

**Will I be asked to sign anything?**

Yes. The consent form is attached.

**What do I need to do now?**

If you would like to participate in this study, please tell me now or before 11 March. We will discuss the research in detail in class this week and you can take time to decide if you want to be part of it.

**Contact Information:**

**Debora Potgieter** : Ph. 07 849 3334 or speak to me in class;

**Prof. Cynthia White** : Ph. 06 356 9099 ext 81141;

email: [cjwhite@massey.ac.nz](mailto:cjwhite@massey.ac.nz);

**Dr Arianna Berardi-Wiltshire** : Ph. 06 356 9099 ext 81144;

email: [A.Berardi-Wiltshire@massey.ac.nz](mailto:A.Berardi-Wiltshire@massey.ac.nz)

\*\*\*\*\*

**Appendix C2: Consent form.**

***Raising Critical Awareness of Learning***

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL**

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I understand that all the activities will be part of our normal classroom activities and I give consent that this may be used in the research project.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

.....

**Full Name -**

**printed**

.....

*This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 14/12. If you have any concerns about the conduct of the research, please contact Prof John O'Neill, Acting Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 350 5799 x 81090, email [humanethicsouth@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsouth@massey.ac.nz).*

## Appendix D: Picture questionnaire

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### I like to learn English

(Circle your answer)

1.

YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



With the whole class

2.

YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



Go out and learn

3.

YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



In groups

4.

YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



In pairs

5.

YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



Alone

6.

YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



See words

7.

YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



Hear words

8.

YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



Do something then talk about it

# Learning English in the classroom

## I like

9.

YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



To listen

10.

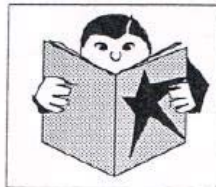
YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



To speak

11.

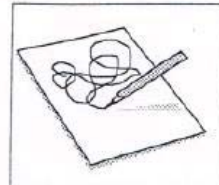
YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



To read

12.

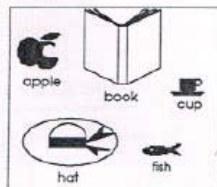
YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



To write

13.

YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



To learn a lot of new words

14.

YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



To learn grammar

15.

YES  
NO  
SOMETIMES



To learn sounds and pronunciation

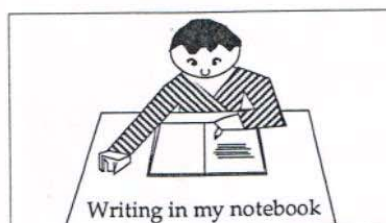
# In English class I like

A



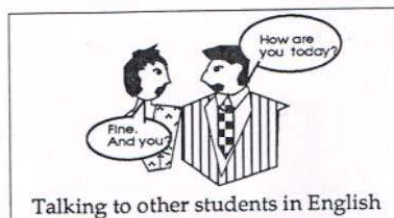
Playing games with English words

B



Writing in my notebook

C



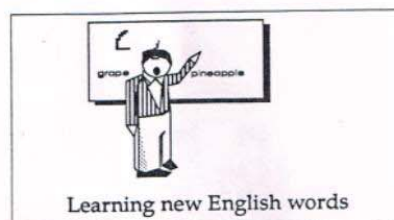
Talking to other students in English

D



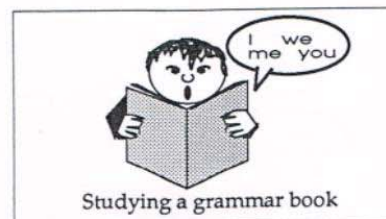
Reading stories in English

E



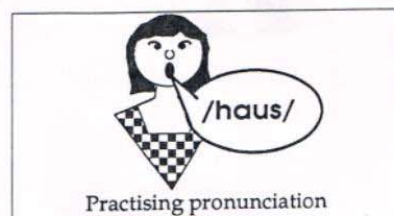
Learning new English words

F



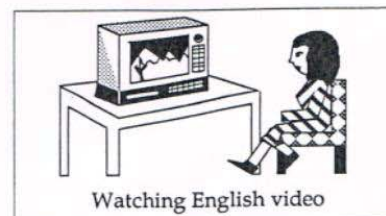
Studying a grammar book

G



Practising pronunciation

H



Watching English video

I



Listening to English cassettes

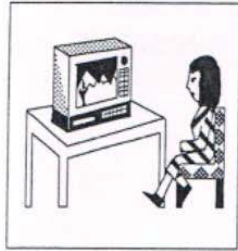
I like (1) ..... best  
 then (2) .....  
 and (3) .....

# Learning English outside the classroom

At home, do you

YES

NO



Watch TV

YES

NO



Read newspaper

YES

NO



Talking to friends in English

YES

NO



Study a grammar book in your language and English

YES

NO



Listen to the radio

YES

NO



Listen to people speaking in English

YES

NO



Listen to English songs

YES

NO



Read English signs



Appendix E: Learning progress checklist used in profile 1.

**PROFILE 1: I CAN USE ENGLISH**

I can	Date
I can count in English from one to _____.	
I can write the numbers from 1 to _____.	
I can match the numbers and words from one to _____.	
I can say my name.	
I can write my name.	
I can say my address.	
I can write my address.	
I can say my telephone number.	
I can write my telephone number.	
I can speak to my teacher.  I can say:	
I can understand my teacher.  She says:	