

An Innovative Learning Environment for beginner ESOL adult learners: Possibility and collaboration combine in the transition stage

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- Literacy
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Abstract

Existing classrooms at Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre will soon be replaced with 3 large learning hubs. Teachers were asked to trial an ILE using two merged classrooms. Research on ILEs in an adult ESOL context could not be found, so teachers experimented with ideas which optimise the affordances of a larger space, new furniture and technology. The resulting curriculum is continuously evolving to provide richly rewarding learning experiences which enable low level learners to gain deeper understanding and increased opportunities to practise. This paper will outline methods and resources trialled in the transition stage including diverse methods of bilingual support, partnerships with other classes, whanau learning, iPad use, team and peer teaching. Initiatives trialled encourage 6Cs: communication, curiosity, collaboration, cooperation, creativity and caring within the community – viewed as useful strategies for meeting the challenges of life in New Zealand. Teachers will share their experience together with learners' feedback.

Introduction

Last year Man Hau Liev and Penny Hickey were asked to create and trial an Innovative Learning Environment (ILE) using innovative teaching methods which could be used in the new Centre for Refugee Education (CRE) school buildings which will be completed in 2017. In the past, the term "Modern Learning Environment" has been used to describe an "open, flexible learning environment" (Osborne, 2013). The Ministry of Education, however, is latterly moving towards the use of the term "Innovative Learning Environment" as a way of "remaining future focused" and assuring "greater international recognition" Ministry of Education (n.d.). The Ministry of Education describes an ILE as "capable of evolving and adapting as educational practices evolve and change".

Teachers visited ILEs in local secondary and primary schools (Stonefields Primary and Hobsonville Point Secondary) to provide preliminary insight into the possible uses of an ILE. These buildings were purpose built and the mobile technology was abundant. CRE teachers were inspired by the pedagogical opportunities in these learning environments and by the independence and eloquence with which learners expressed their learning goals and needs. In addition to personalised and differentiated learning which is connected to the real world, the pedagogy recommended by various educative researchers as suited to an ILE also includes both socially constructed learning and inquiry-based learning (Osborne, 2013).

Socially constructed learning and inquiry-based learning

Both socially constructed learning which requires the Communities of Practice to construct new meaning within social contexts, and inquiry-based learning which implies a critical ability to ask questions, debate ideas, analyse data appeared initially to pose challenges for the teachers of literacy level ESOL learners at CRE. The challenges are both environmental and pedagogical. The

Centre for Refugee Education Innovative Learning Environment differs significantly from the ILEs in the primary and secondary schools mentioned above. First, in lieu of a purpose built environment, dividers between two old classrooms were opened to provide a makeshift ILE. Secondly, mobile technology consisted of only 16 new iPads to be shared between 8 classes. Thirdly, many of the learners in the literacy level ESOL class at the Centre for Refugee Education have never been in a classroom before, and most have limited or no literacy at all and few or no academic learning skills as a foundation for such independent classroom learning.

Research Review

Teachers considered what could be afforded in an ILE to enhance learning and teaching for literacy level ESOL learners that is difficult to offer in a traditional single cell classroom. Incorporating best practice research findings while remaining innovative in approach was considered to be of primary importance. Benseman's review of research (Benseman, 2012) is particularly relevant because he focuses on adult refugee learners with low level literacy in New Zealand. Many of the research findings reported by Benseman were examples of best practice which were already implemented in CRE traditional classrooms. Teachers therefore focused on those aspects of pedagogy found to be effective elsewhere in the New Zealand literacy level learning context but not previously considered in CRE traditional classes. Adapting theories espoused for pedagogy in the context of Innovative Learning Environments combined with literacy level research findings provided the foundation of the new ILE. So the teachers started planning together, an essential component of team teaching.

Team teaching

Planning together and team teaching is a fundamental requirement in an ILE. There are many texts on team teaching. A good place to start is Chris Bradbeer's blogspot (Bradbeer, 2011). Schrage defines team teaching as having "complementary skills" and "interacting to create a shared understanding" that "no one...could have come to on their own" (as cited in Montiel-Overall, P. (2005). That is what makes working in an ILE so exciting: two teachers with two very different philosophies and ESOL teaching backgrounds have combined their skills and knowledge. The teachers have concluded that it is not necessary to have similar philosophies to work well together, but it is compulsory to have respect for each other's skills and knowledge.

Despite thoughtful planning, the first class relapsed into traditional teaching with the class divided into two levels, one teacher taught the perceived lower level at one end of the classroom using the computer and datashow, while the second teacher taught the learners assumed by initial assessment results to be at a higher level at the opposite end (without a datashow or computer). Recognising that team teaching had failed, the teachers prepared for more ambitious group work and asked a third teacher to video the class. By collaboratively critiquing the twenty short videos the two teachers were able to assess who was engaged, who was not and why. This was the first successful teacher collaboration. Since then, the two teachers have planned lessons together and reflected together after lessons to adapt the following day's lessons. When faced with challenges, collaborative problem solving has been the catalyst for "new ideas and methods".

Challenges of the ILE

An important goal of the ILE was to enhance learning and find out ways this new environment could support some of the strategies recommended for literacy teaching which teachers had previously been unable to implement. At the same time the ILE was causing new challenges. The much larger class made it difficult to get to know learners and their abilities quickly. However, the ILE both created the problem and provided the solution. Having two team teachers meant that one teacher could teach the whole class while the other gathered data on relevant skills individually. Conducting one-to-one formative assessments provided the teachers with a much clearer understanding of

individuals' skill levels than either teacher had recorded at the beginning of a course as the sole teacher in the classroom. This has enabled teachers to group and regroup learners for activities according to the skill being taught or practised. Other challenges created by the ILE included: How could our learners learn in a noisy classroom and with distractions from nearby groups engaging in something funny, musical or just interesting? How could learners with few academic learning skills and no English understand enough classroom instructions to work independently in groups? There were plenty of challenges and plenty of collaborative problem solving. We also had to deal with daily practical problems and personal physical and emotional issues – For that we would adapt activities for physical ability and make them safe and fun! Teachers have found largely that group tasks suit the majority of learners who come from collectivist cultures.

Peer Teaching (Kaiāwhina and Akonga)

Benseman's research review also suggested a desire from some learners for more independence and control. In response to this, teachers collaborated to include a peer teaching programme. The teacher of the intermediate level adult class agreed to train her learners (known as the kaiāwhina or peer teachers) to teach the literacy level learners (known as the akonga or learners) once a week. The majority of akonga (literacy level learners) were paired with a kaiāwhina (peer teacher) who shared their language and if possible, their culture. Bilingual teaching would enable akonga to ask kaiāwhina to explain difficult concepts and could help akonga feel more in control of their learning while also providing ethno-specific support in the classroom. Teachers have observed sustained high levels of engagement between the pairs and have been astounded by progress made by some of the literacy level learners after half an hour. Some learners have begun to read their name and to answer personal questions. Others spend time on writing their name, numbers or learning topic vocabulary. Kaiāwhina are asked to work on specific difficult concepts first and then do whatever the akonga want. As Auerbach stated "its (bi-lingual teaching) power comes from the fact that barriers between teacher and learner are broken down."

Teachers conducted a short survey on the peer teaching session with the literacy learners (akonga). The services of professional interpreters were employed to interpret the questions and answers. It was apparent from the answers that akonga thought they were learning during the session and they found it fun. Comments included "I can remember about 16 new words", "They speak our language" and "It is fun...We learn from the peer teachers."

The kaiāwhina (peer teachers) were surveyed separately and asked "Was it a worthwhile use of your time?" Kaiāwhina responses included "It was useful for me because the time repeated for me again", "give you great sense of helping and being useful to others" and "I want to help my learner in Hamilton too." Benefits for the kaiāwhina therefore include consolidation of learning, increased self esteem from feeling useful and formation of new relationships.

The teacher of the intermediate level class (peer teachers) stated that her experience of the peer teaching was "overwhelmingly positive" and "a very useful language exercise" and that kaiāwhina (peer teachers) "feel useful where...they have felt disempowered." The only negative expressed by learners or teachers is that it is not always possible to have every akonga matched with someone who speaks their own language.

Whanau literacy

The next big challenge was to incorporate further development of family and community networks into the programme. To achieve this, teachers collaborated with the primary classes. A cake baking task has been incorporated into week 5 of the adult literacy level class. The task is scaffolded throughout the course, but more intensely for the first two days of week 5. On the third day the task of asking for ingredients and baking a cake to share in the afternoon with the children is eagerly anticipated by the adults, most of whom have never baked a cake or used an electric oven. In the afternoon the primary classes are invited to share songs, videos of the children's learning, and of course the adult learners' cakes. Gains from this activity are manifold. Adult learners stated that "We learnt that playing is learning." Consequently we have built community and whanau literacy into our programme with positive results facilitated by the larger environment and teacher collaboration in an ILE. Comparison can be made with the Hagley Community College family programme in 2004 which was purported to "enhance their (parents') understanding of the school system." In addition, the Manukau Family Literacy Project was reported by UNESCO to have "helped them (parents) in their parenting skills and improved relationships with their children".

Other bi-lingual support

Another way to reduce anxiety levels in the classroom is to group learners according to common language for some activities so that the more knowledgeable learner can translate and teach the others. Teachers also try to learn some important words and phrases. Picture sheets with 6 or 8 pictures captioned with a formulaic phrase have been produced in English and learner L1 for some important abstract concepts. The corresponding teacher sheet has a phonetic transcript of the phrases in all the classroom languages so that the teacher can iterate the phrase in each L1 represented in the classroom and pre-literate learners can also understand, not just those who can read in their own language.

Technology

The ILE is not complete without the blending of technology into the programme. The iPads have helped with individualised learning. "A struggling reader may use text-to-speech (TTS) support" for English language learners and struggling readers according to Grisham (2004). Immediate access to word and phrase pronunciation is akin to having teacher aides in the classroom. Learners can use apps appropriate to their individual skill levels; one learner can work on the first consonant sound, the person next to them can use an app which allows them to click on individual scattered words and re-order them into a sentence, while the next person can listen to short greetings and introductions in a listening app. App users can listen and repeat as many times as they wish and move at their own individual pace. This is an example of highly individualised learning in action.

ILE versus single cell classroom

What has the ILE afforded our literacy level ESOL programme? A recent article in the NZ Herald by Derek McCormack (2015) of AUT University reported that job candidates will be "passed over if an employer thinks they don't have the "C-skills". This paper has shown that the 6 "C-skills" stated as being necessary for access to employment are evident in the socially constructed learning now practised in the CRE Innovative Learning Environment:

- Collaboration is occurring more regularly as a result of the grouping and regrouping of learners for task oriented purposes. It is also occurring between classes and generations for some activities such as the cake baking and peer teaching.
- Communication has increased in both L1 and English in this group and task oriented classroom. There is much more socially constructed learning and hands-on activities where learners can observe, model and manipulate resources and discussion around the learners' roles in the activities and the language required has increased.

- Cooperation has been encouraged to the point where people from different cultures are no longer as wary of each other as they were previously.
- Curiosity in activities happening nearby stimulates vicarious learning.
- Caring within the community has been initiated by the peer teaching programme and the whanau literacy programme.
- Creativity is enhanced by group collaboration and evident in the creative ways learners use new language to achieve task-based activities.

In summary, the Innovative Learning Environment trialled at the Centre for Refugee Education has been stimulating and productive for both the learners and the teachers. Staff at the CRE are in no doubt that the ILE will continue to evolve and will continue to empower learners so that they will help to decide on its future direction.

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