'I'm surrounded by blokes and busy clerks – What can I say?'

A cooperative action research project with foreign ESL students studying in Australia

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This paper reports on 13 ESL students and a teacher who together participated in a seven-week cooperative action research project on looking at the ways in which the students could improve their English language learning through effecting changes in their interactions outside the classroom context. Participants began the process by working together and closely observing their own behaviours and discourse during these interactions, then reflecting on them. After identifying problem areas, the participants set goals and developed individual learning strategies to try to enhance their own communication skills and correct the problems they had noted. Their individual approaches were self-monitored through the use of diaries. Any adjustments or performance outcomes were reported as they occurred, either in written form or orally during twice-weekly focus groups. The participants concluded that, although what appeared to be insurmountable issues such as racism, language ability, cultural differences and accents were initially perceived to be barriers to the project, by working together they were able to effect positive changes in their interactions. Consequently a majority reported that not only had their outside-of-class interactions improved but that they were also more satisfied with their social dealings in Australia. Their various teachers within the context of the classroom also perceived positive changes. Perhaps the most significant benefit of this collaborative effort was the development of increased learner awareness and fostering of skills for the participant to construct their own learning environments. Additionally the paper reports that a closer analysis of the processes the participants followed in developing and monitoring their own learning strategies reveals a noteworthy pattern. The processes show strong similarities to the model on Self-Regulated Learning proposed by Schunk and Zimmerman (1998), and may lend empirical support to the social cognitive perspective of the self-regulatory process.

INTRODUCTION

The argument of this paper and the project itself was based on the elaboration of three concepts:

1. Interactions with others are an essential part of any learning process and are therefore a valid focus for research.

2. The cooperative framework of the project allows for discussions with peers. Feedback from this type of framework is essential for some learners in the development of their own learning strategies. Additionally, these peer interactions can be beneficial in assisting learners to clarify their own perceptions of the new social and cultural language community.

3. 'Self-access time' or systems have been provided at learning institutions to promote learner autonomy. A cooperative project that considers individual differences in learning styles, and where the aim is to assist learners to develop their own individual learning strategies, is an appropriate use of this time.

Learning and interactions

This paper follows Williams and Burden (1997) in that it adopts an essentially *constructivist* stance, which can be seen as operating within an *interactionist* perspective. In other words, as Williams and Burden claim, '… learners make their own sense of their world, but they do so within a *social context*, and through *social interactions*' (p.28). The first idea discussed is based on the concept that we learn through the interactions we have with others. These interactions are especially important to language learners in that the subject studied is the language used to communicate. In the view of social interactionists, from the time we are born we make sense of the world through our interactions with others. Learning language is different in many ways from learning other subjects because of its social and communicative nature. It involves communicating with other people and therefore requires not only suitable cognitive skills but certain social and communicative skills as well (Gardner 1985). Therefore it is reasonable to suggest that the interactions that go on outside of the classroom are a fundamental part of the language learning process and are a suitable focus of research.

Central to the psychology of social interactionists is the concept of 'mediation'. The role of the mediator, usually a parent or teacher, but often a peer, is to find ways of helping the other to learn. The acceptance of this concept can be evidenced in the shift that has taken place in the English language teaching practice from a teacher-centred to a more communicative, learner-centred approach. In the midst of this development, learner autonomy has been espoused as a promising pedagogical orientation, and has been the focus of a significant body of research. Wenden and Rubin (1987, p.8) claim that, 'One of the leading educational goals of research on learner strategies is an autonomous language learner'. This can be described as a learner who is equipped with the skills and strategies to learn language in a self-directed way. As the concept of learner autonomy develops, it has acquired a number of interpretations: 'self access learning', 'self-directed learning', 'self-instruction', 'individualised learning', 'independent learning' and 'autonomous learning' (Geddes and Stutridge 1987). The research reported in this paper was done in the students' own time outside of their regular lectures, and the focus groups were held during part of their allocated self–access time. Therefore, the project was titled 'self-time learning modification' or STLM.

Cooperative framework

The second concept arises from the view that the learning of a foreign language involves more than simply learning rules or grammar, it involves the adoption of new social and cultural behaviours. Gardner (1985) argues that success in learning a foreign language will be influenced particularly by the learners' attitudes towards the community of speakers of that language. A cooperative framework can then be seen as beneficial in that it provides the learner with new insights in to how their own perceptions of the community or culture may be affecting their language acquisition. Moreover, the feedback that is generated by this cooperative framework could be a critical element for some learners in the development of their own language-learning strategies. Vygotsky (1962, 1978) and Feuerstein, Klien and Tannenbaum (1991), coming from very different research interests, both emphasised the social contexts in which learning takes place. Vygotsky described the advantages of collaborative work set at a level just beyond the learner's current level of competence. Feuerstein stressed the ultimate goal of preparing learners to learn both independently and cooperatively (see William and Burden 1997 for an overview on both). This paper supports this view and suggests that one way to achieve this goal is to make available opportunities for individual reflection and peer interaction as discussed later in this article.

Self-access and use

The third concept elaborated in this paper is that in using self-access to develop learner autonomy we must remember that learning occurs both independently and cooperatively. Working on an area of interest to others, such as out-of-classroom interactions, leads to both self-reflection and discussions with others. The relationship between language learning and language use can be viewed as bi-directional. As Little (1996) states, '... successful language learning depends in part on language use, but equally, successful language use depends in part on our capacity to update and extend our communicative repertoire by further learning' (p.94). It is important for researchers to avoid focusing solely on the development of the individual's cognitive or metacognitive skills (Boekaerts 1996; Garcia 1995; Järvelä and Niemivirta 1999). The purpose of promoting autonomy in language learning and use should be a) to both enable the learner to act independently as a user of the target language, and b) to learn how to learn. The findings from the STLM project suggest that these aims can be best achieved when opportunities for individual reflection and for working collaboratively with others are provided.

This paper supports Tang and Yang's (1999) position that the concept of learner autonomy can be perceived from both a learner internal and learner external perspective. From a learner internal perspective, this concept encompasses two crucial elements: 'autonomy' and 'self-direction'. According to Tang and Yang,

> 'autonomy' denotes a kind of awareness and ability to take charge of one's learning; and 'self direction' implies a set of procedures and strategies adopted by the learner to achieve the state to 'autonomous learning'. Viewed from a learner external perspective,

> the concept of learner autonomy takes its root in the form of self-access with adult learners as target. (1999, p.1)

The burgeoning of self-access systems at the tertiary level in recent years is evidence that the concept of 'learner autonomy' is widely accepted. However, the view that learning through a self-access system will automatically lead to self-direction or the development of learner autonomy is overly simplistic. In fact, the system or self-access time in itself is neutral to any learning process, and the use of self-access may vary between other direction and self-direction. As Riley (in Tang and Yang 1999) points out, self-access is just 'a necessary condition for most forms of self-directed and learner-centred work, it is by no means a sufficient one'. Tang and Yang further go on to argue that 'self access could act as a window to one's awareness of autonomous learning capacity'(p.1). This paper adds that differences in learning styles and the importance of interacting with others should be taken in to account in any learning process. It follows then that self-access systems should cater for both individual and cooperative learning processes involving peers and a mediator, if autonomous language learning and use are to occur.

THEORY

Currently there is much evidence that cooperative learning has positive effects on student learning, motivation and self-regulation. Examples are cooperative learning (Slavin 1992), reciprocal teaching (Brown and Palinscar 1989) and interactive learning groups (Boekaerts 1996). There would appear to be a consensus that students should be encouraged to actively construct their learning on the basis of activating prior knowledge. Zimmerman and Schunk (1989) define this self-regulated learning (SRL) as students' self-generated thoughts, feelings and actions, which are systematically oriented toward the attainment of their goals. Boekaerts (1996) states that this implies students should have a sense of direction and meaning, metacognitive awareness and the motivation and commitment to achieve one's goals. Most researchers appear to believe that these essential aspects of SRL can best be acquired in social environments in which, through a process of interacting in dialogue, negotiation and sharing, these students discover and construct knowledge.

This current research is criticised by some as being too narrow and overly focused on cognitive and metacognitive regulation (Garcia 1995). Boekaerts (1999) claims that current research does not take into consideration the social constraints and adjustments in problem-solving that a student might make in taking on a different social role within the group. She also asks if interdependent learning is more beneficial than sole learning and questions whether teachers are equipped to create these powerful learning environments. Järvelä and Niemivirta (1999) support these views, arguing that although current learning theories have given rise to some useful pedagogical models supporting students' cognitive practices, these models have not adequately allowed for the central preconditions within higher order learning: the students' motivational base, socio-emotional capabilities, and skills for self-regulation.

Learning is a fundamental human function that is influenced by many factors, including a person's degree of self-regulation. Pintrich (2000) defines self-regulation as an active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate and control their cognition, motivation and behaviour, guided by their goals and the contextual features in the environment. However, the views of Järvelä and Niemivirta (1999) that the students' motivational base, socio-emotional capabilities and skills for self-regulation have not been adequately addressed. The over-emphasis on the individual's cognitive practices has overshadowed the importance of interactions in the learning process. The paper supports Boekaerts (1996) in questioning whether teachers are adequately equipped to create these learning environments. However, the point is not whether sole or independent learning is better but rather how an environment that provides both opportunities for various learning styles in learner autonomy development and the development of teacher's learner training skills can be constructed.

RATIONALE

This discussion has shown some of the theoretical ideas on learning and the current trend of promoting learner autonomy in language teaching practices that underpin the STLM project. However, the paper would like to point out that the project itself was essentially a school-based practitioner research endeavour and that the focus for the project came directly from the needs expressed by students within a specific context. Therefore, while it can be argued that the areas discussed may be generalised to meet the needs of a variety of language learners from various contexts, it is recognised that the knowledge gained is not sufficient to inform or reform practice. Rather, I suggest that the areas discussed are of interest to the language-learning community in general and specifically to those learners who are studying abroad in a country in which the target language is readily spoken outside the classroom. There were two areas of concern articulated by the learners or practitioners involved in this project:

1. A majority expressed dissatisfaction with the interactions they were having outside of the classroom with speakers of the target language.

2. Many conveyed a desire to change their use of the self-access time designated by the institution which student visa holders were required to attend. All the participants communicated a willingness to work on an area of interest to the group, namely out-of-class social interactions.

Problem I: interactions

The particular focus for this project initially came about through comments received from students that they were unhappy with their interactions with Australian English speakers outside the classroom. Comments such as: 'Nobody wants to talk to me!', ' I can only talk to my teachers in school because outside of school, no one listens', 'Australians aren't friendly', 'I'm leaving soon and I haven't made one friend', were repeatedly made.

When these students were asked why they felt this way and what they felt the problem might be, a number of students made comments suggesting that both *student factors* and *Australian factors* might be contributing to the communication problems they were encountering (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Students' initial perceptions of factors contributing to interaction problems outside the classroom

Student factors
1. Accents (Australians had difficulty understanding the students' English because of their 'strange' accent).
2. Language ability (the students didn't possess the listening or speaking skills to communicate effectively outside of the classroom).
3. English usage (the English they had studied was different from that which was being used in the real world).
4. Vocabulary (students felt that they had insufficient vocabulary to communicate on a variety of topics, specifically when specialised terminology/slang words/abbreviations were frequently used).
5. Motivation (students felt it was unfair that they always seemed to have to initiate any conversation, and felt embarrassed to repeat their own statements and to ask Australians to repeat theirs. Being frustrated by unsuccessful attempts, they would give up).
Australian factors
1. Accents (students felt that Australians spoke too quickly and with heavy accents).
2. Motivation (Australians seemed too busy and not interested in making new friends).
3. Socialising (Australians tended to socialise in small groups and closed circles and so were difficult to approach).
4. Culture (Australians rarely approached the students or initiated conversation, and easily became impatient when asked to repeat something or when waiting for students' replies).
5. Racist (Most of the students felt that Australians didn't like foreigners and were uninterested in other cultures. The Asian students specifically remarked that they felt this was the general attitude towards them).

Racism, busy schedules and a prevalent use of slang were some of the Australian factors listed. The title for this paper was derived from one of these comments, where a student emphasised the barriers he felt were impeding his interactions outside the classroom by stating, 'I'm surrounded by blokes and busy clerks. What can I say?'

The number of complaints received, from a variety of students over a length of time (approximately one year), led to the belief that these communication/socialising problems existed throughout the school and therefore deserved some reflection. A literature

review on these topics indicated that these problems existed in surveys of students studying abroad in other countries as well as Australia.

Contrasting perceptions on interactions

These readings reported similar communication problems and included statements regarding the dissatisfaction felt by overseas students with both the quantity and quality of their interactions outside the classroom context (Nesdale et al 1995; O'Donaghue 1996). Interestingly, the teachers in these surveys seemed to feel that teaching methodologies and the students' lack of communication skills were the main contributors to the communication problems that students were having outside the classroom. In contrast, the majority of the overseas students, though agreeing that these factors did contribute to the problems, perceived discrimination and prejudice to be the main barriers in their interactions with Australians, as indicated by the students in the present study. The differences in perceptions of teachers and students on why problems communicating outside the classroom occurred are clearly evident in a study by Nesdale et al (1995) of alumni that had attended Australian universities. Fifty to 68 percent of the overseas students surveyed indicated no severe difficulty with language, teaching skills and methods. However a significant 60 percent indicated that their biggest problem was a great difficulty with prejudice and discrimination.

Socialising problems

Problems in socialising and in developing friendships with Australians were also reported (Nesdale et al 1995). Similarly, in O'Donaghue's (1996) study, Malaysian Chinese stated, 'I don't mind mixing with anybody. But it seems that it is very hard to find Australian friends. It is very hard to mix around with them. I try to talk to them but after they don't remember us.' And 'I cannot really say if I am accepted by my Australian friends. I don't know what they have in mind when I talk to them. Some of them seem to be very friendly. They take an interest in you. But others I'm not sure whether they are shy racist or what'(p.73).

These two studies are particularly relevant to the STLM project in that the perceptions discussed indicated that communication outside the classroom context was perceived to be a major barrier in language acquisition. Additionally these students came from contexts similar to the students in the present study in that they were all overseas students, a majority coming from Asia, and had all reached a competency level of intermediate or advanced English language skills. This would indicate that underdeveloped communication skills or problems in teaching methodologies were insufficient in explaining why these problems in communicating or interacting outside of the classroom occurred.

Problem II: self-access time

The purpose of self-access time has been to provide the opportunity and support for students in developing learner autonomy or self-regulated learning. As mentioned previously, self-access time has been widely implemented in various ESL institutions for this

purpose. A review of readings on self-access suggested two findings important to the STLM project (Chun 1997; Martyn and Chan 1992):

1. A general dissatisfaction with self-access was reported by the students surveyed supporting the views expressed by some of my students.

2. An emphasis on the teacher's or monitor's role in self-access and the importance this has on the development of learner autonomy was discovered. It suggested that the practitioner would need to reflect on her role as a 'facilitator' and 'cooperative participant' in the project.

Contrasting perceptions on self-access

Differences in the perceptions of students and teachers on how successfully self-access time was utilised were evident in three studies (Chun 1997; Davis, Heller and Lawrence 1991; Martyn and Chan 1992). The teachers in these studies expressed an overall satisfaction with the way self-access was utilised, while the students surveyed indicated dissatisfaction. In the Australian context this is particularly pertinent in that as part of the NEAS (National English Accreditation Scheme) accreditation requirements, some institutions have allocated five out of 25 hours of tuition time to self-access (Bowyer 1995; Thurlow 1995). Research findings in this area report a lack of self-regulated learning skills and perhaps motivation on the part of the students, and the teachers' or monitors' lack of learner training as contributing to problems in the development of learner autonomy during self-access time.

The role of facilitator

The importance of the teacher's role during self-access and the need for more learner training have been emphasised both in Australia and abroad. Oxford (1990) explained that teachers might be threatened by a shift in their role from an authority figure to that of a facilitator, and thus would be disoriented in the self-access mode of learning. Despite these anxieties, teachers seem to find that the ultimate goal of equipping students to take responsibility for their own learning is worthwhile, and have indicated positive perceptions of self-study (Davis et al 1991; Martyn and Chan 1992). Tang and Yang (1999) in their Hong Kong study indicated that the '... successful development of learner autonomy is largely dependent on the teacher's understanding and perception of learner autonomy', and that, 'the teacher must accept the fact that the learner is not the sole explorer ...'

Use of self-access time

The move away from teacher-centred activities towards an idea that the learner is solely responsible for developing their own learner strategies may explain the differences in perceptions in these studies of self-access time. Chun (1997) reported that 84 percent of the students in her study indicated a negative perception of self-access time. She concluded that this might be a reflection of their frustration of not knowing what to do, an unease about self-directed learning, and their beliefs about the conventional role of the teacher and a lack of motivation. Chun's study also revealed that most of self-access time

was being used by students to do grammar exercises, finish homework and to speak with other students in English. Another explanation for these differences in perceptions might be that the teachers felt that these activities were worthwhile. Yet as Sheerin (1991) points out, 'a self-access centre could be used as a teacher-directed source of individual-ised homework activities, but this in no way constitutes self-directed learning'.

Informal discussions with my students and the teachers in the institution they attended seemed to indicate support for these findings. Many of the students expressed dissatisfaction with their current use of self-access. Conversely, the majority of the teach-ers indicated an overall satisfaction with the way the time was utilised, other than sug-gesting that more materials, technical equipment and technical support might be beneficial. Reflection on these findings and a belief that in action research the aim, form and content of the research must be defined in terms of the students' interests and under-standings, led to the question, 'What then do the students want to study during this time and how can we motivate them to utilise this time in a way that would promote self-directed learning?' The findings from the STLM project suggest that one method would be to find a topic of interest to a group of students therefore, promoting both individual-ised reflection and collaboration. Within the present context, the topic indicated was that a number of the students at the institution in which I work had declared their desire to improve their informal interactions outside of the classroom.

SETTING UP THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

The project was located in a private Sydney English language college containing adult students – a majority from Asia, with the rest a mixture of East European and Central and South American students. Self-access time seemed a suitable time in which to carry out the project. The next step was to develop a research question as a starting point. As in any action research the question would need to be modified as the project progressed. The question must also have been flexible enough to determine simultaneously an understanding of the social system and the best opportunities for change. To choose an option, Altrichter's *M4 Individual Brainstorming: Finding Starting Points (3rd Starter)* was used as a guide (see Alrichter, Posch and Somekh 1993, p.38, for an overview). After reflection on the positive and negative points of various options, and consideration of the scope, relevance, manageability and compatibility for action, the following option was chosen as the starting point for the project:

> My students would like to either increase or improve their interactions with native speakers outside the classroom. By working together inside the class-room, is it possible to directly help the students enact positive change in their interactions outside the classroom? If so, can it be done in a manner that can be perceived?

As Bob Dick (1995) described, for research to be called an action research project it must consider the needs of the participants. The needs of the students were directly ascer-tained from comments they made concerning problems with their interactions. Reflec-

tion on these needs can be clearly evidenced in the option chosen. Upon selection of a starting point it was then necessary to set up a meeting schedule and frame the research project in a way that would benefit all of the participants. In this case the needs of the school, faculty, students, myself and time factors (schedule of school, variable arrival and departure dates of students, etc) had to be considered. The need to increase or enhance outside interactions had been commented on in a number of classes. It was desirable, then, to provide the opportunity to anyone who was interested in participating. As the students would be participating during their self-access time and free time, participation could only be on a voluntary basis.

METHODOLOGY AND COOPERATIVE ACTION RESEARCH FORMAT

The methodology used was a cyclic qualitative and participative approach following a design advocated by Dick (1995, p.3). The action research cycle (see Figure 1) consisted of intention or planning before action and a review or critique afterwards.

Figure 1: Action research cycle (adapted from Dick 1995, p.3)
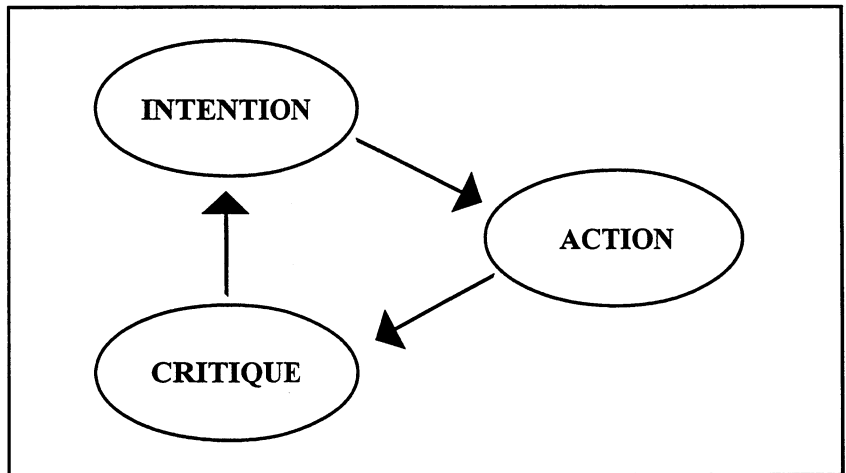
This framework allowed for responsiveness to the situation. This responsiveness was crucial in that the individuals' perceptions of their interactions, and their goals to enhance those interactions, were set within a social context that was constantly changing. The cyclic process of the approach allowed for reflection and modifications needed to produce answers which in turn helped to redefine the questions asked.

In line with the concept that the students actively participate in the design of the research, its implementation, the data collection and the analysis of the final results, they became full participants in the project and will be referred to as such through the remainder of this paper. The initial option was based on the participants' goal of enhancing their out-of-class interactions. Therefore, as change was the desired outcome, and as it is

more easily achieved if people are committed to change, some participative form of action research was indicated: 'Participation can generate greater commitment and hence action' (Dick 1995, p.4).

The action research cycle can also be regarded as a learning cycle (see Kolb 1984). The educator Schön (1983, 1987) argued strongly that systematic reflection was an effective way for practitioners to learn. This approach was suited to meet the learning goals indicated in Problem II: a) providing me with the opportunity to develop and improve their skills in learner training, and b) assisting the participants in the development of their own individual learning strategies. Current research indicates that appropriate use of language learning strategies, which include dozens or even hundreds of possible behaviours (such as seeking out conversation partners, grouping words to be memorised, or giving oneself encouragement) results in improved second language or 'L2' proficiency overall, or at least in specific language skill areas (Oxford 1992). Therefore, if the participants were able to initiate positive change in their interactions outside of the classroom this could in turn be reflected in an improvement of their L2 proficiency within the classroom.

DATA COLLECTION

Following a practitioner action research approach, data analysis occurred simultaneously with the data collection. A multi-method approach of questionnaires, interaction maps, personal diaries, focus groups, interviews with the facilitator/participants, and individual recordings of each participant's reflections of the learning process that occurred in the STLM project, were used to collect the data. All data collected was analysed using the cyclical process (see Figure 1).

The questionnaire and interaction maps were found to be particularly useful in assisting the students to focus more clearly on what was occurring in their own interactions. The questions in the questionnaire were concerned with both the participants' perceptions of the quality and quantity of their interactions and their perceptions of the language and new community in which they were interacting. Responses were correlated according to age, gender, nationality and majority responses using Altritcher's ladder of inference (Altrichter et al 1996, p.73). Participants noted that differences existed in the group on how their interactions were perceived. This provided the participants with new insights on how their own perceptions of the language and community were affecting their interactions, supporting the views of Gardner (1985), as discussed earlier.

The 'personal maps' were useful in that after reflecting on their own actual recorded interactions, the participants discovered that the problems occurring were often different from what they had perceived at the start of the project. The participants began reflecting on the quality of the interactions they were having instead of the quantity that they thought they had initially lacked. By analysing the discourse that they were having outside the classroom, members were able to identify patterns of communicative problems within the discourse, reflect on reasons for their occurrence, and focus on correcting those problems through developing learning strategies or STLM plans to effect change.

The participants' perceptions on the benefits of the focus groups and the personal diaries varied. Some indicated that the diaries were extremely important in helping them reflect on what was occurring in their interactions each week, and allowed them to reflect and modify their strategies when needed. Others indicated that the discussions in the focus groups were motivational and encouraged them to continue developing their strategies. This supports the idea that both individual and cooperative learning styles need to be catered for if this type of project is to succeed. Understandably, the individual goals of the participants, being based on their own interactions and needs, varied greatly. Notes of each participant's reflections of the project were taken during the last focus group. Three participants' records of their reflections on the project and their own learning strategies were summarised as follows.

Participant A

Participant A noted that he was interacting with his home-stay mother approximately two hours a day. However, on reflection he realised that what he was doing was *listening* to his home-stay mother's complaints about her physical ailments and wasn't saying much at all. Two reasons he gave for this were that, being relatively healthy, he did not have much to input and the topic of health wasn't very interesting to him. Having identified problems with his outside interactions he began to develop an STLM plan.

He began by setting a series of weekly goals to enhance the interactions that he was already having. The first week he added to the conversation by retelling stories of ailments that his friends or family members had had and discussed their medical treatment. As this topic was of interest to his home-stay mother she asked him numerous questions, therefore allowing for more of the two-sided interaction he was seeking. The following week his goal was to initiate the topic of conversation and he began by asking her about topics he felt would be of interest to her.

At the end of his project he reported that although they hadn't developed a close 'friendship', due to differences in age and interests, they were discussing topics that were of interest to both parties and had even had a series of discussions on dating! Consequently he reported that once he had identified his habit of being a 'good listener', he began realising that he was frequently listening too much in his outside interactions, especially when discussing topics he found difficult to follow or boring. He then decided to use similar strategies of topic control or STLM in other interactions and had noticed that he was enjoying the interactions he was having both inside and outside of the classroom more.

Participant B

Possibly the most dramatic change in outside interactions occurred for Participant B. Her goal was to increase and enhance her interactions by volunteering at her friend's electronic shop for five hours every evening and talking with customers. While the other participants felt a goal of this magnitude would be difficult to sustain, she confidently argued that it wasn't a problem for her and stuck with her goal. Although she frequently

reported various problems and successes with her goal during the meetings, it wasn't until she had given her final evaluation of the project that we were able to fully appreciate her achievements.

In her evaluation she commented that focusing on her interactions had broadened her knowledge of people, and that the meetings had proved to be a good stimulus in helping to achieve her goal. She had gained self-confidence and felt that her skills in initiating conversations had improved. Most importantly, though, she had appreciated the psychological benefits that participating in the group had given her.

Apparently prior to joining the group she had suffered from extreme shyness and a fear of meeting strangers, and had relied completely on friends from her home country. Joining the group had prompted her to start interacting with others and consequently she now had friends, could comfortably do her own shopping, and was much happier with her life here in Australia. In her transcript regarding the project she claimed it was a success and attributed this to the motivation gained from the cooperative action research format and the use of STLM or the encouragement of developing learning strategies through self-reflection and questioning in one's own time. While stating that the concept of STLM was easy to understand, she recognised that she would have never started if she hadn't been a participant in the project.

Participant C

Participant C reported that he had plenty of opportunities to interact in his home-stay situation, as his home-stay family was quite friendly, and usually asked him how his day had gone and so on. They also were very sociable and frequently invited guests over for dinner. His problem was that he felt uncomfortable participating in group discussions. While he felt that he could communicate quite effectively in a one-on-one situation, when in groups he felt that the conversations were harder to follow. He complained that even though he understood the topic of discussion, by the time he had formulated a response, the conversation had gone in another direction and he was too late to comment. Therefore, at home he was constantly frustrated by his inability to speak and had begun to avoid his home-stay family and their friends.

His goal then, was to enhance his current interactions. He began his first week by preparing answers to the standard question, ' How was your day?' He reflected on the day's events while commuting from school, and set a goal to explain what he had found interesting, discuss what he had learned, or comment on why he had found it boring. Anything was preferable to the one-word answer, 'Fine', which he usually gave.

His second week he decided to set the same goal for himself in an extended version. He would answer every question he was asked in a complete sentence and would not use any one-word answers. Therefore, even when greeting people that week he would not stop at the standard reply of 'Good morning', but would use each opportunity to pose a question or give an explanation.

In his third week his goal was to join in again with his host family and their friends and comment on the gist of the conversation, rather than trying to understand every

word and formulate the perfect reply. His goals continued in a similar fashion and at the end of the project he noted that he felt his goal had been successful and he had enjoyed participating in the meetings, but felt that he still needed to work on his interactions.

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS

Other classroom teachers were not participants of or officially informed of the STLM project. However, it is interesting to note that a number of the teachers volunteered comments of increased participation and improved language acquisition of the participants that were students in their classes. For example, while Participant C's goal had seemed moderately successful in comparison to some of the reports given by other participants, it was surprising to hear a very different view from his classroom teacher.

After taking the time to seek the researcher out, she commented that Participant C had formerly almost never joined in on group discussions and had invariably responded to questions directed to him in one-word answers. She had felt frustrated with his participation and had thought that he didn't enjoy her class. 'Suddenly one day', she said, 'I noticed that he was actually volunteering information, giving opinions and explanations in class! So I asked him what had caused the change. He told me of your project, his problem with communicating in groups, and his goal to give longer answers. I was impressed and have since begun asking him more open-ended questions, and have asked him to explain his answers in more detail.' She said that he realised that she was trying to help him with his goal, and was consequently much more active in her class.

REFLECTION ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

In their final evaluations, 11 of the 13 participants reported improvements in their interactions outside the classroom. Interestingly, all of them reported that the greatest benefits occurred indirectly. By practising STLM and focusing on something that was within their ability to change, and developing strategies to do so, all of them reported that unplanned interactions had occurred, possibly due to the confidence they had built up in achieving their goals. Many also noted improvements in their overall language proficiency and in the classroom as well. This perceived increase in ability was also supported by their teachers' evaluations of their participation in class discussions. This perception of an increase in communication skills is supported by a study carried out by Stoneberg (1995) on older adult learners of Spanish at the level of basic beginner, in Central America. Stoneberg, a participant in the class herself, concluded that those who had focused on their out-of-class interactions had, on the whole, a much higher language proficiency at the end of the course than those who didn't.

The social benefits reported by the participants seem to be supported by a related study that was carried out by David Nunan (1996) in Hong Kong. Nunan conducted his study on an ESL class, over a 12-week period, in which he had requested that the students keep a diary of their outside interactions. He reported that the act of simply posing a question such as 'With whom did you speak English this week?' seemed to have a consciousness-raising function. The students seemed more aware of their initial limitations

in this area, and over the term of the course extended the communicative networks in which they used English, and seemed to be more prepared to speak with strangers. While neither Nunan's nor Stoneberg's studies report directly on the psychological benefits, or on the increase in satisfaction with their social lives that my participants observed, these findings clearly fit in with the current idea of successful learner training promoted by Gremmo and Riley (1995). They suggest that learner training should consist of both methodological and psychological components. The purpose of methodological training would be to develop the learner's ability to select appropriate techniques, activities and materials. Psychological training would then aim at helping learners to change their conventional views of language and language learning, and to provide counseling.

There were two participants who did not complete the project. The first stated that she was too busy to put in the time required and that she didn't feel motivated to increase her current social circle. The second participant also reported that she was happy with her current interactions, had a part-time job that gave her the opportunity to practise her English, and had joined the project for 'something to do during her self-study time'. The fact that the two participants lacked significant motivation indicates that in a collaborative project such as this success is based not only on identifying problems, and developing strategies to overcome them, but also on strength of motivation. The participants must feel a real need to achieve their goals, or will not be motivated to learn skills that will be of benefit to them throughout their future studies.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Theoretically there are a number of reasons why a project of this type would be successful. The cognitive benefits of processing new knowledge by linking it to past experiences, as was done in the discussions and through the use of diaries, has been supported (Nastasi, Clements and Battista 1990). In their paper on social-cognitive interactions, motivation and cognitive growth, Nastasi, Clements and Battista discuss the need for peer learning in cognitive development. The arrangement of discussions in both small groups and within the larger group, as was done in the discussions that occurred as part of the study here described, has been termed 'peer learning'. Peer learning has been proven in numerous studies to be beneficial in improving the learners' overall comprehension (see Meloth and Deering 1994; Simpson et al 1997). In their review of the instructional methods of peer learning, Simpson et al (1997) focused on methods containing three distinct characteristics. The first method consisted of two or more students studying together for a particular purpose or task. In the second method no teacher-student or expert relationship existed between or among the students so that each had equivalent roles in terms of knowledge, expertise and control. Thirdly, in the last method dialogue among or between the students was considered essential for success.

Perhaps the most prominent theory supporting cooperative research is that of raising learner awareness. In order to comply with the aim of the study the participants had become responsible for reporting and evaluating their outside interactions. In effect the participants themselves, by developing and reworking strategies to discover which strat-

egy best suited their learning needs, became their own 'learner trainers'. They also reported that increased levels of self-regulation led to self-motivation. Zimmerman and Kitsantas (1999) add that this in turn leads to more positive self-efficacy beliefs and greater intrinsic interest. If self-efficacy can be described as a learner's perceived capability (beliefs) to perform at designated levels, then Participant B's report would clearly seem to support those views. Interestingly, though Zimmerman's (1998, 2000) model was not followed in the project, reflection on the processes that occurred seem to give support for it. According to Zimmerman from a social cognitive perspective, self-processes fall into three cyclical phases titled 'forethought', 'performance' or 'volitional control', and 'self-regulatory' processes. Forethought refers to processes which precede learning efforts, such as goal orientation and self-efficacy beliefs. Performance involves affective processes which occur during learning, such as self-monitoring. The self-reflection phase involves the metacognitive processes which occur after performance efforts and which shape the learner's response to that experience, in turn influencing the forethought phase, thus completing the cycle.

CONCLUSION: POTENTIAL FUTURE ACTION

Let us look at the option again: 'My students would like to either increase or improve their interactions with native speakers outside of the classroom. By working together inside the classroom, is it possible to directly help the students enact positive change in their interactions outside the classroom? If so, can it be done in a manner that can be perceived?' The answer to both questions would seem to be 'Yes'. The positive changes in outside interactions were perceived by the participants themselves and through the evaluations of their teachers within their classrooms. The most noted benefit of this collaborative effort would be the development of increased learner awareness and the skills necessary for the students to construct their own learning environments.

Areas of future consideration could be the inclusion of this collaborative effort with a focus on increased learner awareness in a regular classroom or as an individual self project study undertaken by students within the self-access time that is now being promoted in English as a second language (ESL) schools. It would also be interesting to introduce an additional means of assessing the students' interactions prior to and after the project to see if progress is retained. However, this could be difficult in that, as Joyce Hutchings (1999) stated, '... even within the classroom context very little research has been done on providing the tools to assess interactive speaking and listening skills'. There are two points that must be considered. First, a facilitator or support group with skill in learner training or an environment in which these skills can develop with active participation is needed. Second, the student must reflect on their own learning situation and perceive a *real need* for change, or they will lack the necessary motivation to complete their goal. A successful collaborative action research project of this type, then, requires thoughtful planning and a commitment of time and effort from all its participants. The benefits however, reported by the participants, the class room teachers and

myself as research practitioner indicate that a project of this type is eminently worth-while.

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