

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Type of Study

This was a qualitative emergent research study. It occurred in the natural setting of an English-medium international school with a diverse student body that included English as Second Language (ESL) learners. The development of this role for this institution allowed for divergence from the traditional teacher fronted ESL classroom or tutoring situation. Due to the process involved in developing a new ESL facilitator role, the study design needed to allow for flexibility and tolerance for adjustment as the research proceeded. Smith and Glass (1987)) refer to this as a “working design” (p. 259). Researchers, McMillan and Schumacher (1997) call it an “emergent design” (p.393). For the purpose of this study these two terms were used interchangeably.

According to Wiersma and Jurs (2009), “The working design is the preliminary plan that begins the research” (p. 234). This planning time considers decisions that define the study. Decision points include: who will be studied, what issues will be looked at, where the research will take place, and how long data will be collected. This plan is like a travel itinerary for a journey using a road map which provides a route for travel, to your destination, but also allows for adapting to unforeseen changes. Detours or stops at interesting places along the way may cause the need for adjustments and changes. With that in mind, the following was designed as a “working plan” for this research that allowed for adjustment and change as the research proceeded.

I assessed the validity and value of this new role for an ESL facilitator in this setting - based on the data that emerged - to form a grounded theory versus stating a theory first and then using hypothesis testing for verification. I chose this design because as Weirsma and Jurs (2009) posit, the working plan allows the researcher to “understand the situation, the actors, and the interpersonal dynamics” (p. 235). As this was a new role for this school - and for me as an ESL facilitator - I desired to establish through this research if the role with its emphasis on three-way collaboration and “as needed” support could:

1. Improve ESL learners’ academic English ability and autonomous learning in their content classes.
2. Impact content class teachers’ methods of interacting with their ESL students in their classrooms.
3. Promote professional growth in regard to self-efficacy and teacher autonomy in the ESL facilitator.

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3.2 Setting:

As discussed before this study took place at a 10 year old international school in Northern Thailand. The Student body is made up of over 550 students in Kindergarten through Grade 12. There are 27 nationalities represented in the school. The majority of students are Americans - about 45% - and the next largest population is Korean at about 16% of the school population. The third largest group is Thai students at 10% of the students enrolled. In addition, there is a smaller subset equaling less than 5% of the students with one parent of Thai nationality. Approximately 30% of the school population is non-native English speaking students. Of this subgroup, 14 middle and high school students were identified as needing ESL support to prosper in this academic setting.

The actual classroom setting of this study was a small room which was formerly used as an office. There is a large white board on one wall for activities such as brainstorming and sharing ideas. There is a large desk and computer that is used by the facilitator when the students are not in class. The computer is available to the students as needed for content class assignments during our time together. When the students are in class they are generally sitting at a table with the facilitator, or in comfortable "beanbag" chairs if they are reading or do not require the facilitators assistance. There is a bookcase with classic books that are adapted for easier reading. There are also reference materials such as a Thesaurus, dictionary and grammar reference guide. These are all available for in class use or borrowing as needed.

I considered Kumaravadivelu's (2006) three parameters as a backdrop for this classroom setting. As described previously, this study did present unique circumstances in regard particularly to the setting and the ESL facilitator's role. First, there was a need to consider the uniqueness of the teacher, learner, setting, goals, and institutional context as well as the socio-cultural milieu. The overall goal of helping students improve their academic English ability in conjunction with their content classes offered unique challenges. The ESL facilitator and the content teacher had to coordinate and communicate well for the sake of the learners in order to prevent key issues that needed support and scaffolding from being overlooked. There was also the particular issue of assisting learners to increase their sense of membership in this English medium community through their increased English ability. Secondly, in going beyond the typical conflict between pedagogical theory and classroom teachers' procedural knowledge, I needed to - as Kumaravadivelu suggests - develop and implement my own theories based on my specific context. Finally, in this setting I needed to consider the unique experiences the ESL students in this study bring to our class time. Some of these students had previously lived in difficult and even dangerous places. Many are currently living in dorms while their parents continue to live in possible danger. Some of these learners also brought previous experiences in learning multiple languages other than English. Their histories contributed to who each person was as they entered the ESL classroom.

One other factor relating to this setting is the issue of identity within the international English-medium school. Many students have a strong identification with their passport country. Others identify more with their Thai host country, or even a place

they had lived previously. Yet there is a desire to “fit” into this community known as school. The possibilities for these learners to develop their language skills and their own identity within the school, community and world were paramount to success for the learner, content teacher, ESL facilitator and the class itself.

3.3 Participants

The participants of the study were considered as 3 separate units. This was because of the focus on the triangulation of relationships in a cooperative, collaborative manner between the ESL students, English content teachers and the ESL facilitator. How the subjects related to each other were considered both individually and in groups. All was considered in light of the desired outcome of assessing whether this collaborative, “as needed” ESL support would prove beneficial to all the participants.

3.3.1 Students

The first set of participants was the ESL students. There were 10 seventh-ninth graders that were directly involved with the ESL facilitator. There were four other ESL students, two high school students for whom ESL support was offered but not required and two seventh graders. These seven graders had study hall times that did not allow them to be part of the study. Therefore these four students were not included in this study. The students were given pseudonyms for this study to protect their privacy.

There were 5 returning students who attended this school in previous years without this current type of ESL support, and 5 new students who had not studied at this school previously. The returning students all took the IPT test in January of 2010. Their scores and teacher recommendations indicated a continuing need for ESL support. The second group all took the IPT test in March 2010 or later before being accepted to the school for the 2010-2011 school year beginning in August 2010. All ESL students are retested each January to assess their need for continued support. The ESL class groupings were mixed with returning and new students at various grade levels studying together. These groups were formed based on the availability of the students not according to ability or grade level.

3.3.2 Content Teachers

The second category of participants included in this study was the English/ Language arts teachers that taught these students in their content class. This included: two seventh grade core teachers, one seventh-eighth grade special needs teacher, two eighth grade core teachers, and two ninth grade English teachers and one 9-12 grade special needs teacher. The two special needs core teachers worked with 3 students who also had other special learning needs beyond ESL. The core teachers for middle school were responsible for teaching Language arts, Social studies and Religious

Studies to the same students. The ninth grade special needs teacher also taught English, social studies and math's to her student. Therefore these teachers had more extensive interaction (15 class periods per week) with their students as compared with the ninth grade English teachers who had their students for five class periods per week. The special needs teachers also assumed the role of "case manager" for the 3 ESL students they taught. At this school all special needs students are assigned to one case manager who is the point person for that student (Appendix B). For all the other ESL students I was assigned as their case manager. All the content teachers were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

3.3.3 ESL Facilitator

The third subject was me as a participant observer while developing the role of ESL facilitator. I looked at my own responses to the needs and challenges of the students, content teachers and myself as an ESL facilitator. I documented the decision making process as I developed the learning materials, the class-time emphasis and the facilitation of interactions with the ESL students. I considered how to best assist and support the content teachers in scaffolding techniques to help ESL learners in their content classrooms. I also focused on how to develop a partnership working in cooperation with the content teacher, in order to enhance the ESL content class learning process and not hinder or compete with the work being done by the content teacher. Finally I looked at the impact of this role on my views toward self-efficacy and autonomy in regard to myself in this role.

3.4 Anticipated Challenges

Due to the ethnographical nature of the study - which relies heavily on observation, description, and qualitative judgments - I outlined some of the areas that I anticipated to be issues I might encounter and wanted to observe, record data about, and analyze the implications of:

1. The ESL teacher's relationship building with:
 - The 10 ESL Students that I would be interacting with.
 - The English/ Language arts teachers that worked with the 10 ESL students.
2. Differences among the groups of ESL students:
 - Culturally there were 3 general cultures represented among the students, Thai, Finnish and Korean.
 - Proficiency levels: How would learning gaps impact the group dynamics and learning?
 - The variance in content courses taken by these students. How would this impact the use content material for the small group lessons.
3. Time constraints in secondary students' schedules.
 - 2-3 hours of content class homework per night
 - 7-8 required classes per semester

- After school events, family and/or dorm life
4. The promotion of autonomous learning.
- Determining where they were as independent learners
 - Facilitating their continued growth in autonomous learning
 - Development of lifelong learning skills.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments

As mentioned in this chapter's introduction, this study is dependent on observation, interaction, and processing of the events of the study as they unfold. This emergent study used the following instruments; Facilitator Reflective Journal (FRJ), (Appendix C), student input, content teacher input and IPT test results. This allowed me as the researcher and ESL Facilitator to develop an understanding the situation, the actors, and the interpersonal dynamics that were occurring in this natural school setting.

3.5.1 Facilitator Reflective Journal

As I developed this role I kept a self-learning journal to record the process in a reflective manner. I included my plans for classes, students' responses, things I observed in my interactions with students and content teachers as well as general impressions and assessments of the process. This allowed me to gain insights into the effectiveness of the encounters I had with the other subjects of this study and to determine possible changes needed or cause-effect relationships. I called this the facilitator reflective diary (FRJ). This method was chosen because of the ongoing process of developing the role over the course of the semester, as well as the emergent nature of the study. The FRJ allowed me to assess the effectiveness of the role and myself as I was growing and applying new methods, techniques and skills in the role. It also allowed me to record interactions that were relevant to the study for reassessing at a later date.

The following system was used to code the various entries in the FRJ; **bold letters**, *italicized letters* and underlined letters were used to differentiate whether the information was related to the students, the content teachers or my professional development as follows:

- **Students: all entries which primarily relate to the learners were in bold letters.**
- *Content teachers: all entries focused on the content teachers were in italicized letters.*
- ESL facilitator: all entries related to teacher self-efficacy and autonomy were underlined.

3.5.2 Students Work

I met with the ESL students for 45 minutes, two times per week over a 16 week semester. During this time we explored the challenges they faced in both the academic and social realms of school life. They had opportunity to share successes and challenges in the tasks related to their content classes, sports, dorm life and life experiences current and past.

Assignments

I assessed writing assignments that they wrote in their personal writing notebook that I supplied, such as descriptive paragraphs, creative stories, and persuasive paragraphs throughout the semester. I looked to see whether the learning in our sessions was being applied. I looked for improved ability in rough drafts for content class assignments and their follow-up corrections. I talked with content teachers to find out if they were seeing changes in the students writing skills.

Idea Proficiency Test (IPT)

I utilized 2010 IPT (Idea Proficiency Test) scores and those taken in January 2011 to assess a possible improvement after a semester of interaction with me in the role under study. This proficiency test - that was used yearly at this international school - was first developed 30 years ago by Ballard and Tighe. "The original IPT is a series of standardized, nationally normed testing instruments for students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12" (Ballard & Tighe.com). According to the developers the tests are designed for quick and accurate evaluation of students' oral language, reading, and writing proficiency levels in English. Ballard and Tighe also recommend that these tests can be used for identification, placement and re-designation of English language learners. The results of the 2010, 2011 IPT tests of the students in this study were used as one source of input of the possible impact of the ESL Facilitator on students' academic English improvement. This input was chosen because it was a method of evaluation already in place and utilized by the school.

Students

I sought input from the students about challenges and successes they felt in their overall process of language learning both in writing and verbally. Because one goal of this study was to encourage students toward more autonomous learning skills, I encouraged them to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses, and I helped them identify and respond to the challenges - as well as build on their strengths. (Appendix D) Due to the ongoing and emergent nature of this study, I tried to implement support "as needed" by the students based on their input and my observations in this academic setting.

3.5.3 Content Teachers Reports

E-mail contact

A letter of introduction was sent to the Content teachers at the beginning of the school year (Appendix E). In this letter I informed them which of their students I would be

working with. I emphasized my desire to support and build on the work they were doing in their content class. I offered my assistance to them in developing scaffolding action plans they could implement in their own classroom to enhance the success of their ESL learners. I also provided some “tips” to help the ESL students succeed in their classroom.

Before the end of the first quarter the content teachers were asked to fill out a questionnaire (Appendix F). This timing allowed the teacher opportunity to get to know her students and to gain some insights into some of their strengths and challenges as they related to her subject area. The questionnaire sought input into how the teacher felt the ESL student could benefit from assistance, as well as strengths the student had demonstrated in class. The focus was on the four main language-learning skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. I also offered again to help in formulating a plan to enhance the ESL student’s learning experience.

At the end of the 16 week semester these same teachers were sent a letter explaining the need for them to complete a required teachers’ input form (Appendix G). A hard copy of this form, called the English Language Learners (ELL) Teacher Evaluation Form (G7-12) (Appendix H) placed in each of the teachers’ on campus mailboxes.

Due to the very busy schedules of these teachers I chose the survey questionnaire method to be filled out at the mid-term and end of the semester. These were both periods when the teachers were required to set aside time to evaluate all their students for grading and parent teacher conferences. With that in mind it seemed more likely that thoughts of the ESL students would be fresher in their minds and the questionnaire could possibly help them take a more reflective look at their ESL students.

Meetings

With each letter and informal conversation with these content teachers, I emphasized my willingness to meet with them and discuss our shared students. There were no required meetings between the content teachers and ESL facilitator.

3.6 Analysis

As the data was collected, I placed the information in a coding system to analyze the events that related to the issues I identified above. I also looked for unexpected issues or patterns in the data. I separated the information as follows:

- I. All information related to the ESL teacher’s relationship building with:
 - A. The ESL Students, such as the efforts made, students’ responses, and impact.
 - B. The content teachers such as efforts made, content teachers’ responses, and impact.

Was there a cooperative three-way relationship developed? Was a collaborative partnership forged between the content teacher and ESL teacher that promoted the concept of “our” student?

II. ESL students’ response to this p.r.n. pedagogical intervention:

A. How the contact, content and intervention impacted:

1. Writing skills as evidenced by decreased errors in the ESL class writing assignments and assignments for content class.
2. IPT test scores:
 - Any changes noted from the ESL student’s previous score with the Jan. 2011 score. Did their scores reflect improvement in their English language skills particularly the area of writing?
 - How did this type of ESL intervention impact the ITP results of: Returning students who received intervention from the ESL facilitator and new students who received intervention from the ESL facilitator.

B. Content teachers’ perception and reports of students’ progress as reported in interviews and questionnaires as well as other conversations related to the ESL students throughout the semester.

C. Students’ own perception of their progress as reported in casual conversations, interviews and end of semester questionnaire.

III. Time constraints in secondary students’ schedules:

- A. Time for class
- B. Best use of class time

IV. The role of developing into autonomous learners

- A. Did the students seek help as needed?
- B. Were they using learning strategies appropriately in our class times?
- C. Were they reporting instances when they were applying strategies in content classes?
- D. Were content teachers observing students’ attempts to be more autonomous?

V. Myself in the ESL facilitator role:

- A. How were my beliefs about self-efficacy impacted?
- B. How were my beliefs about teaching ESL in regard to teacher autonomy impacted?