

Negotiating the Curriculum: Giving Learners a Voice in EFL Course Design

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Declaration

I, Helen Konstantina Corelli-Pienaar, declare that this research report is my own original work. It has never been submitted before for any degree or examination at any university. I am submitting it for the degree of Master of Arts in English Language Education at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Signed: _____

November 27th, 2009

Dedication

This work is humbly dedicated:

To The Infinite Love of The Lord which permeates the Universe and sustains the whole of Creation.

To my mother who is the anchor that holds my boat steady in life's stormy waters.

To my loving husband who supports me in all my endeavours, and brings emotional balance to my life.

To my children, Thalia, Daphne, Lawrence, Roland, and Irene who have taught me the true meaning of Love. They are and will always be the greatest achievement of my life.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 General Introduction

Increasing numbers of people around the world are learning English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL)¹. For economic or political reasons, for immigration, study, trade and commerce, and many other purposes, it has become necessary for many people to be able to communicate in English, the *lingua franca* of the modern world (Graddol, 1997). Freeman sums up the many uses of English thus:

“English is the international language of business, computers, management, the professions, and popular music. Since the Second World War, it has been the language of science, medicine, and air traffic. Since 1986, it has been the official language of the sea”(1991: 184).

For more than a hundred years, linguists and educators have been researching, debating, and advocating many different methods of teaching English as a foreign or second language. Brown describes this period in English language teaching as follows:

In the century spanning the mid-1880s to the mid-1980s, the language teaching profession was involved in what many pedagogical experts would call a search. That search was for a single, ideal method, generalizable across widely varying audiences, that would successfully teach students a foreign language in the classroom (2002: 9).

During this period, many books were written on the subject of teaching methods. Besides the large number of books on the teaching and learning of English, academic journals such as *TESOL Quarterly*, *ELT Journal*, and magazines for teachers such as *Modern English Teacher* and *Forum* have focused exclusively on the teaching and learning of English and on its status in the world.

However, many teachers still rely to a certain extent on their own intuition when choosing teaching materials or deciding on suitable teaching methods. Some

¹ These and other terms, pertaining to English teaching, are discussed in Chapter Two of this research report.

research has shown that there can be significant differences between the perceptions of teachers and learners in regard to the importance and usefulness of materials and learning activities in language classes.

For example, Hawkey reports:

Impact study findings suggested interesting differences between the perceptions of learners and teachers on some of the activities in their foreign language classes. While both sides agreed in general on the virtues of communicative approaches to language teaching, there were interesting differences in the perceptions of learners and teachers on the prominence of grammar and pair work in their classes (2006: 242).

Similarly, Nunan (2000) found “many mismatches between the beliefs and attitudes of the learners and the practices of their teachers” (in Hawkey, 2006: 243). Stewart (2007) conducted research at an English-medium liberal arts university in Japan. His findings show that there were mismatches between the learners’ and the teachers’ evaluation of course tasks. Further reference to this study is made in Chapter Two.

Kumaravadivelu (1991) claims that there are ten possible sources of mismatch between teachers’ and learners’ interpretation of language-learning tasks (See 2.3, Chapter Two). He argues that “a knowledge of potential sources of mismatch between teacher intention and learner interpretation will help us sensitize ourselves to interpretive density of language-learning tasks and help us to facilitate desired learning outcomes in the classroom” (1991: 98).

Such findings suggest that it is important to find out directly from learners what *they* think about the materials and the learning activities designed for their courses. A selection from the relevant research literature on learners’ interests and needs will be discussed in Chapter Two.

1.2 Aim

This research project aims to:

- find out what the learners in selected EFL classes really want from their courses and what tasks or activities they perceive as most helpful and beneficial for the acquisition of the English language
- respond to this information by redesigning course content and/or course delivery.
- enhance the learning process, through cycles of research and teaching interventions
- investigate the effect of these changes on the learners' progress towards proficiency in English.
- draw some conclusions regarding the effectiveness and usefulness of responding to learners' perceptions of their learning needs and to their preferences for particular activity types.

The overall aim of this research project is to contribute to the improvement of the teaching/learning process in the EFL classroom.

An action research project does not always begin with a clear research question, but rather with an intention to address an issue of concern. Mayer et al. define action research as "an exploration of new territory frequently with a defined starting point, but an unknown destination" (2004: 559). Perhaps an overarching research question for this project is the following:

Is a form of negotiated curriculum productive for learning in an EFL classroom?
If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

1.3 Rationale

I have been interested in learning foreign languages since my childhood, and I have been involved in foreign language teaching for the better part of my adult life. In recent years my focus has been mainly on English language

teaching/learning pedagogy and particularly on teaching EFL classes. I have therefore chosen to conduct my research in this area.

As a reflective teacher I have often considered different approaches and methods that might help my students to acquire the target language more competently and effectively. I have at times thought about the usefulness for EFL learners of the approaches and methods recommended by the 'golden oldies': Richards & Rodgers (1986), Scrivener (1994), Harmer (1998), as well as those advocated more recently in the work of Kumaravadivelu (2001, 2006), Jenkins (2006), Canagarajah (2005b, 2007). I am aware that different learners have their own specific needs and different personal goals when learning a language. Therefore, learners in the same class may benefit from different teaching methods and materials.

In the past, I have tried to find out from my students what they expected from their language courses and to cater as much as possible to their particular needs. I have not, however, engaged previously in systematic research into my teaching practice nor have I tried to formally analyze the results of my teaching interventions. Kemmis & McTaggart indicate that, action research "is not the usual thing teachers do when they think about their teaching. Action research is more systematic and collaborative in nature" (1988: 45).

Therefore, I have chosen the present research project firstly, to find out in a more systematic way what the learners want from their English courses, and secondly to create the opportunity for my colleagues and myself to improve our teaching practices. Kemmis and McTaggart refer to action research as "an approach to *improving education by changing* it and learning from the consequences of changes", and as research "through which people work towards the improvement of *their own practices*" (1988: 45).

While the findings of this research project may not be directly relevant to other teaching situations, it is hoped that they may contribute in some small way to

the pool of knowledge that informs the pedagogy of additional or foreign language teaching and learning. In the words of Kemmis & McTaggart: “Action research *starts small* by working through changes which even a single person (myself) can try, and works towards extensive changes – even critiques of ideas or institutions which in turn might lead to more general reforms of classroom, school or system-wide policies and practices” (1988: 46, parenthesis in the original).

Research into ‘student voice’ has recently become quite popular internationally (McIntyre, Pedder & Rudduck 2005; Rudduck & McIntyre 2007; Sproston 2008;). However, research into EFL learners’ needs and preferences has been limited, especially in a Language School context. Given the widespread demand for English as a foreign language, the findings of this research may be of benefit to other EFL teachers and learners.

1.4 Overview of the report

Chapter one introduces the focus and context of the research. Chapter two reviews a selection of relevant literature. Chapter three outlines the research methodology. Chapter four is concerned with the presentation and the analysis of the data. Chapter five discusses the conclusions arising from the research findings and offers suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Overview

This research project is concerned with the pedagogy of teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL), in a private, language school setting. More particularly, it is concerned with the notion of 'learners' voice', and with a negotiated curriculum as a possible way of improving teaching and learning in the EFL classroom. Therefore, this chapter reviews literature in the following areas:

- The 'position' of English in the world – Contextualising EFL teaching and learning
- Recent trends in EFL pedagogy that relate to this research
- Research into possible matches and mismatches between learners' and teachers' perceptions of learning tasks
- Previous research into EFL learners' needs and preferences
- Negotiating the curriculum and the notion of learners' 'voice' – perceived advantages and disadvantages for the learning process

2.2 The 'position' of English in the world – Contextualising EFL teaching and learning

The teaching of English as a second or foreign language (TESL / TEFL), or to speakers of other languages (TESOL), is now a major international endeavour. In many countries around the world English is taught as a second or as a foreign language (Graddol, 1997). Teachers of ESL/EFL are sought after in many countries. The demand for learning English is so great that there are not enough suitably trained English teachers to satisfy it. For example, Graddol notes: "A key problem preventing the effective take-up of English in the world's schools is that of teacher supply" (1997: 44).

Some see this surge in demand for English as an inevitable result of its status as an international language: English just happened to be “in the right place at the right time” (Crystal, 2003: 78). Others see it as another way of the former British Empire colonising the world (Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1997; Kumaravadivelu, 2006c). Kumaravadivelu states that, “when the colonial masters are forced to leave the occupied land, their tongue lingers on” (2006c: 12). He argues that English is used to further the interests of the ‘Empire’ through “scholastic, linguistic, cultural” means which “are linked to a vitally important economic dimension that adds jobs and wealth to the economy of English-speaking countries through a worldwide ELT industry” (2006: 12).

Crystal (2003) estimated that in the last decade of the twentieth century, English was spoken as a mother tongue or first language by approximately 377 million speakers. Graddol distinguishes three kinds of English speakers: a) first-language (L1) speakers, or native speakers of English, for whom English is the first and often the only language; b) second language (L2) speakers, for whom English is a second or additional language and who might use a local form of English while also being fluent in international varieties; c) EFL speakers, who are learning English as a foreign language and who constitute by far the largest and fastest growing of the three groups: an estimated 700 million people (1997: 10). More than a decade later, these figures will have changed, with the numbers in categories two and three increasing substantially. This research project focuses mainly on the linguistic needs of learners who belong to this third group, but its findings may also be relevant to learners of English as a second or additional language.

Due to the unprecedented growth of the number of people using English, from around one hundred and fifty million at the beginning of the twentieth century to an estimated 1.500 million at present (Crystal, 2003), English has become an important medium of international communication. Crystal argues that a language becomes international “for one chief reason: the power of its people – especially their political and military power” (2003: 9). However, on account of

its dominance in numerous domains of our everyday life, English has also acquired *symbolic power*. According to Bourdieu (1994), a language acquires *symbolic power* if people perceive it as having some value for their lives. Similarly, in Phillipson's view, "the discourse accompanying and legitimating the export of English to the rest of the world has been so persuasive, that English has been equated with progress and prosperity" (1997: 8). The learners who took part in this research project perceived the knowledge of English language as an essential requirement for their future career prospects.

Therefore, it is the teachers' responsibility to provide access to this knowledge which is essential for their future success in life. Janks argues that by providing access to this dominant language we "contribute to perpetuating its dominance" (2003: 1), with undesirable consequences, such as the loss of minority languages and the erosion of local culture (Pennycook, 1994). However, Janks also argues that if we deny learners access to the English language, we also "deny them access to the extensive resources available in that language" (Janks, 2003: 1).

English language teachers face the complex task of motivating and supporting learners in their quest to learn this dominant and valuable language, while at the same time cultivating in them an awareness of the importance of all languages, and respect for all cultures. By shifting pedagogical practices to include critical literacy and discourse analysis for the purpose of raising the linguistic and socio-cultural awareness of EFL/ESL learners, we may be able to counteract some of the negative effects of the dominance of the English language (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000).

Warschauer suggests that the acquisition and use of English by EFL/ESL learners provides them with the advantage of *agency*:

As a result of changes in globalisation, employment, and technology, L2 speakers of English will use the language less as an object of foreign study, and more as an additional language of their own to have an impact on and change the world. They will use English together with

technology, to express their identity and make their voices heard (2000: 530).

By negotiating the curriculum with our learners, as the title of this project suggests, we may contribute to giving them agency and to enabling them to “make their voices heard”. Warschauer suggests, rather optimistically, that, “[I]f English is imposing the world on our students, we as TESOL professionals can enable them, through English, to impose their voices on the world” (2000: 530). As discussed in Chapter Five, Beginner Level learners of English have to acquire a ‘voice’ before they are able to make their voices heard.

Canagarajah warns against the loss of local knowledge and culture due to the global spread of English, and urges EFL/ESL teachers to celebrate the local by repositioning their teaching in the local context. He concludes that “[I]t is possible to develop a pluralistic mode of thinking where we celebrate different cultures and identities, and yet engage in projects common to our shared humanity” (2005b: 20).

As a result of the widespread use of English, different ‘varieties’ of it have developed and are in use in different areas of the world. In current applied linguistics literature (for example Bolton, 2004, cited in Jenkins, 2006) the term World Englishes is used to refer to all these different varieties of English. Jenkins, however, uses this term in a narrower sense to refer to “the so-called new Englishes in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean” (2006: 159).

Varieties of English are also widely used for communication between speakers of different linguistic backgrounds, who are not English mother-tongue speakers. These varieties are increasingly referred to as English Lingua Franca (ELF) or Lingua Franca English (LFE) (Jenkins, 2006; Canagarajah, 2007). “ELF interactions are defined as interactions between members of two or more different linguacultures in English, for none of whom English is the mother tongue” (House, 1999: 74, cited in Jenkins, 2006: 160). This is exactly

the case of the interactions amongst the learners who participated in this research project, for whom English is not the mother tongue.

ELF or LFE is the subject of controversy between two opposing camps of linguists: on the one hand, there are those who do not consider it as a legitimate variety of English, “despite the fact that those who use English primarily as a lingua franca are thought to constitute the world’s largest English group of speakers” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 164); and on the other hand, those who accept it and defend it as an effective tool of communication.

Canagarajah points out that, “English is used most often as a contact language by speakers of other languages in the new contexts of transnational communication” (2007: 923). Furthermore, he argues that research findings about lingua franca English (LFE) challenge the traditional SLA (Second Language Acquisition) constructs, and reveal that “language acquisition is based on performance strategies, purposive uses of the language, and interpersonal negotiations in fluid communicative contexts” (Canagarajah, 2007: 934).

Some of the EFL learners, who participated in this research project, find themselves daily in situations where they have to use LFE for communication with other LFE users. Therefore, we as teachers have to ask ourselves: What are their needs and preferences in learning to communicate in ‘real-life contexts’? Would lingua franca English serve their purpose? How could we introduce them to LFE and prepare them for communicating in international contexts? Canagarajah suggests that knowing a single variety of English “fails to equip our students for real-world needs” (2005b: xxv).

The status of English as a lingua franca has created further demands from people around the world to learn it. “English is currently the most widely studied foreign language in the European Union (EU)” (Graddol, 1997: 44). Moreover, the results of a foreign-language learning survey show “English to be

the most popular modern language studied worldwide” (Dickson and Cumming, 1996; cited in Graddol, 1997: 44).

Considering the current status of English as a lingua franca and the global demand for learning English, research into ways of improving EFL teaching and learning, by giving learners some agency in the curriculum design of their courses, is worth pursuing.

2.3. Recent trends in EFL pedagogy

In 1986 when Richards and Rodgers first published their *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*, *method* was a central focus in language teaching. “The history of language teaching has been characterized by a search for more effective ways of teaching second or foreign languages” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: viii). In their revised second edition of the same book they speak of “the post-methods era” and they look at “the major criticisms made of approaches and methods”. They state that these criticisms have led in modern times to talk of “the death of methods and approaches” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 247). In their closing remarks, however, they suggest that: “[D]espite changes in the status of approaches and methods, we can expect the field of second and foreign language teaching in the twenty-first century to be no less a ferment of theories, ideas, and practices than it has been in the past.” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 254).

Kumaravadivelu is a contributor to this ferment. In his view, “as a consequence of repeatedly articulated dissatisfaction with the limitations of the concept of *method* and the transmission model of teacher education, the L2 profession is faced with an imperative need to construct a postmethod pedagogy” (2001: 537).

In reviewing the major changes in TESOL methods during the past 15 years, Kumaravadivelu identifies three important shifts: firstly, the shift from

communicative language teaching (CLT) to task based language teaching (TBLT); secondly, the shift from method-based pedagogy to postmethod pedagogy, and thirdly, the shift from “systemic discovery to critical discourse” (2006a: 70-71).

When CLT (communicative language teaching) became popular in the 1980s, it was welcomed as an improvement on the Grammar-translation, and the Audio-lingual methods of teaching, which had proved largely unsuccessful in enabling learners to develop their communicative ability in the target language. Hymes (1972, in Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2000) argued for the central role of ‘communicative competence’ in language learning. He claimed that it is not sufficient for learners to know the vocabulary, the grammar, and the syntax, to be able to speak the target language. In order to use successfully the language they are learning, in various social situations, they need to practise using it in similar situations in the classroom.

The main features of CLT are: a) the use of language as part of a social interaction (Breen and Candlin, 1980, in Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2000); b) the use of language for negotiation of meaning, e.g., “Communication and learning how to communicate involve the participants in sharing and negotiating meaning” (Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2000: 150); c) the use of communicative classroom activities for learning the target language; these may include games, role-plays, and information gap tasks, which the learners perform in pairs, groups, or as a whole class (Savignon, 1991; Harmer, 1998; Halliday, 1973, in Inglis et al, 2000; Breen & Candlin, 1980, in Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2000).

According to Wildsmith-Cromarty certain key principles of CLT are:

- the importance of creating a genuine information gap for the meaningful exchange of information
- sustained discourse
- fluency as well as accuracy
- the use of pair and group work in interactive communicative situations
- task-based exploration and problem-solving and multiple interpretation and negotiation (2000: 150).

The communicative tasks which learners perform, aim at giving them the opportunity to practise the language they need for communicating in every-day situations. In CLT terminology some of these tasks are called 'functions' (Harmer, 1998; Halliday, 1973, in Inglis et al, 2000). For example, learning the function of apologising would mean learning the vocabulary and phrases people normally use for apologising in real-life situations. With CLT the teaching emphasis shifted away from form and structure to meaning making and communication.

Although in theory CLT would seem to be the answer to the learners' need for communicative competence, in practice it did not appear to satisfy the communicative demands of all classrooms. The practice of CLT has proved inappropriate in certain cultural contexts. Kumaravadivelu (2006a) argues that although Savignon (2001, in Kumaravadivelu, 2006a) had expressed optimism about the future of CLT, reports from teachers and educators in different countries of the world expressed dissatisfaction with CLT's appropriacy and its practical application in their classrooms. Some of these were: from India, Prabhu (1987); from South Africa, Chick (1996); from Pakistan, Shamim (1996); from South Korea, Li (1998); from China, Yu (2001); from Japan, Sato (2002); from Thailand, Jarvis and Atsilarat (2004). All of these examples are cited by Kumaravadivelu (2006a: 63).

It would seem that the *indirect* approach, advocated by communicative language teaching, which required learners to work out for themselves the language structures for communicative interactions, was not very successful in countries where the learners were accustomed to being taught explicitly what they had to learn ('traditional' language teaching approach). However, Celce-Murcia et al (1997) claim that the new trends in CLT do not necessarily exclude the possibility of a more direct approach to language teaching. They discuss the emergence of a *principled communicative approach*, a term suggested by Kumaravadivelu (1993, in Celce-Murcia et al, 1997), which "has the potential to synthesize direct, knowledge-oriented and indirect, skill-oriented teaching

approaches” (1997:148). Likewise, Wildsmith-Cromarty asserts that “recent trends in CLT are moving towards a more direct, systematic approach to language teaching, with the reintroduction of conscious attention to form, both in terms of linguistic structures, and in terms of the organizing principles of discourse” (2000: 152).

Despite the controversy that followed CLT’s initial popularity, its emphasis on communicative competence may still render it relevant to EFL teaching today. The primary goal of most foreign language learners is to be able to communicate in the target language. Celce-Murcia et al claim that, “CLT construed as a general approach rather than a specific teaching method might be useful in providing language practitioners with some important guidelines even at the time of the postmethod condition” (1997: 149). They paint a very clear picture of the main role of the CLT approach:

CLT highlights the primary goal of language instruction, namely to go beyond the teaching of the discrete elements, rules, and patterns of the target language and to develop the learner’s ability to take part in spontaneous and meaningful communication in different contexts, with different people, on different topics, for different purposes; that is, to develop the learner’s communicative competence (1997: 149).

It seems that the perceived failure of CLT has been more as a result of implementation than conceptualisation. Some research suggests that teachers who claimed to use the communicative approach to teaching, were in fact paying more attention to accuracy than communicative interaction and fluency (Nunan, 1987; Kumaravadivelu, 1993a; Thornbury, 1996; all the above are cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006a). Kumaravadivelu’s research confirmed that: “[E]ven teachers who are committed to CLT can fail to create opportunities for genuine interaction in their classroom” (1993a, in Kumaravadivelu, 2006a: 62).

It is important for the learners at the language school where the research project is located, to be able to communicate in English in various social situations. Therefore, we have to look at all the possible ways of helping them to achieve fluency in accordance with their communicative needs and

purposes. This may mean employing a principled communicative approach in our teaching interventions.

As the popularity of CLT waned, a new teaching approach came to the fore: task-based language teaching (TBLT). In fact, this teaching approach is not very different to CLT. As Celce-Murcia et al indicate, “the principled communicative approach is expected to incorporate a task-based methodology” (1997: 148). Kumaravadivelu points out that, some educators regarded the shift from CLT to TBLT as nothing more than a change of name: TBLT “according to some, is just CLT by another name” (2006a: 64). Furthermore, Kumaravadivelu (2006a) points out that educators themselves find it difficult to agree on a definition of *task*. Ellis (2003), however, composed a definition which comes close to including all the aspects of TBLT:

A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes (Ellis, 2003, in Kumaravadivelu, 2006a: 64).

Kumaravadivelu argues that TBLT is not a teaching method, nor is it part of any particular teaching method. It is “a curricular content rather than a methodological construct. In other words different methods can be employed to carry out language learning tasks that seek different learning outcomes” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006a: 65). He explains that because TBLT is not linked to any particular method, but can use different methods for different tasks, it paved the way for the shift from method to postmethod pedagogy.

Kumaravadivelu goes on to describe the three parameters of what he terms postmethod pedagogy: *particularity*, *practicality*, and *possibility*. *Particularity* means a language pedagogy that is “sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a

particular institutional context embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu” (Kumaravadivelu, 2001: 538). By conducting research into the needs and preferences of our learners we are aiming to find *particular* information that will assist language learning in their *particular* situation.

A pedagogy of *practicality* pertains to the relationship between theory and practice. Kumaravadivelu argues that it is the *teacher’s* theory that informs the *teacher’s* practice, and not that of some theorist who is far removed from the classroom situation. This distinction has “influenced the emphasis on reflective teaching and action research” (Kumaravadivelu, 2001: 540).

Practicality is concerned with actual teaching practice in a particular classroom. It does not seek to generate general teaching theories. It enables and encourages teachers “to theorize from their practice and to practise what they theorize” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006a: 69). This action research project is based on this reflective approach to teaching. As will be explained in Chapter Three, action research aims to empower teachers and encourages them to institute changes in their teaching based on the findings of their own research in the classroom.

Kumaravadivelu points out that it is through teachers’ own research which is motivated by their “own desire to self-explore and self-improve” that teachers develop the ability to construct their own theories for their particular context, and put them into practice in their particular classroom (2001: 550). Thus the pedagogy of practicality leads to the pedagogy of *possibility*.

A pedagogy of *possibility* seeks to empower the learners by taking into consideration their sociocultural background, and their past experiences. Simply put, it is sensitive to what is possible and what ‘can work’ in a particular classroom with a particular mix of learners and their ethnic/linguistic backgrounds. Benesch (2001, in Kumaravadivelu, 2001: 543) argues that, “there are numerous instances when race, gender, class, and other variables

directly or indirectly influence the content and character of classroom input and interaction”.

Following a pedagogy of possibility, this research project seeks to empower the learners by considering their linguistic needs which are based on their past learning experiences, and their learning preferences, which are shaped in part by their sociocultural background. According to Kumaravadivelu, “a pedagogy of possibility is also concerned with individual identity”. By showing respect and consideration for the learners’ individual identities, this project hopes to improve their learning experience by researching their needs and preferences and aiming to cater for them.

The importance of catering for particular teaching and learning contexts in the postmethod era coincides with the third important shift in TESOL pedagogy: the shift from systemic discovery to critical pedagogy. Kumaravadivelu explains this shift as follows:

Simply put, the critical turn is about connecting the word with the world. It is about recognizing language as ideology, not just as system. It is about extending the educational space to the social, cultural, and political dynamics of language use, not just limiting it to the phonological, syntactic, and pragmatic domains of language usage. It is about realizing that language learning and teaching is more than learning and teaching language. It is about creating the cultural forms and interested knowledge that give meaning to the lived experiences of teachers and learners.

(2006a: 70)

Kumaravadivelu does not advocate the exclusion of phonology, syntax and pragmatics, but rather, the inclusion of meaningful language experiences and opportunities to engage critically with the spoken and written word. According to him, the positive effects of critical discourse in the language classroom, have been verified by educators reporting from different parts of the world (Lin, 1999; Benesch, 2001; Kubota, 2004; all cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006a).

The shift from a focus on system to a focus on critical discourse foregrounds the human element in teaching and learning. Both postmethod pedagogy and

critical discourse place the emphasis on the learning *context*, and aim to give teachers and learners agency over the choice of teaching and learning strategies and curriculum design, specific to the learners' linguistic needs and socio-cultural milieu. With this research project, by paying attention to the learners' needs and preferences, we are opening up the educational space to include what is important for the learners, based on their own socio-cultural backgrounds.

Kumaravadivelu argues that it is not yet certain how these new approaches to language teaching have changed, or will change, the everyday practices in the EFL classroom. He concludes that, "[A]dmirable intentions need to be translated into attainable goals, which, in turn, need to be supported by actionable plans" (2006a: 76). This action research project, embracing the principles underpinning postmethod and critical pedagogy, aims to investigate the learners' needs and wants, and respond to the findings by translating admirable intentions into actionable teaching interventions.

Another recent development in EFL teaching is the recognition of the importance of informal learning. McLean Orlando reports that, "[T]he Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio recognizes the role of formal and informal learning" (2006: 46). McLean Orlando (2006) explains that learning a language is not necessarily confined to a classroom. Learning also takes place at home, in the workplace, or in everyday social interactions. Livingstone defines informal learning as: "all those individual learning activities that we do beyond the authority of requirements of any educational institution (2002, cited in McLean Orlando, 2006: 45).

For this research project, these major shifts in the theories underpinning EFL teaching, may inform the way changes are implemented to the course design when responding to the research findings. It is, therefore, important to consider the significance of these shifts for EFL pedagogy in general, and their relevance to this research project in particular.

2.4. Research into possible matches and mismatches between learners' and teachers' perceptions of learning tasks

Despite the fact that many language-teaching textbooks are commercially available, language teachers often feel the need to construct their own learning tasks from different sources. One reason for this is that even a very good textbook cannot fully cater for the particular needs of every EFL class (Tarone & Yule, 1989). Furthermore, research into the processes of English language course planning has shown that teachers often rely on their intuition, rather than researching learners' actual needs and wishes, when choosing suitable materials for their class (Barkhuizen, 1998; Spratt 1999, cited in Davies, 2006).

However, no matter how good the teachers' intuition is, there may be discrepancies between the teacher's intentions and the learners' expectations and perceptions of the classroom activities. Spratt (1999) claims that there can be considerable differences of opinion between learners and their teachers. His study "examined the degree of correspondence between learners' preferred activities and the activities teachers believed the learners liked" (1999: 142). The research, which was conducted with a large number of English language learners at a Hong Kong university, showed that 46% of the time, there was disagreement between learners' and teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of classroom activities.

In describing an action research project carried out at an English-medium university in Japan, Stewart refers to it as a "multi-layered reflection process" (2007: 256-266). Through a process of task evaluation by teachers and learners, the researchers gained an understanding of the differences in their perceptions of the learning tasks. Stewart refers to the work of a range of researchers in arguing that

"[T]eachers often talk about what worked in lessons, but most do not know much about what their learners think about the tasks they use. Much of what teachers do know is either through summative evaluations, or intuitive reflection" (Genesee & Upshur, 1996; Burns, 1999; cited in Stewart, 2007).

Kumaravadivelu points out that as a result of possible mismatches between the teacher's intention and the learners' interpretation there is an element of unpredictability in the learning outcomes of classroom tasks. In his study of two intermediate ESL classes, he identified "potential sources of mismatch by exploring the learner's and teacher's perceptions of the nature, the goals, and the demands of selected language-learning tasks" (1991: 98). He discovered ten sources of possible mismatch: "cognitive, communicative, linguistic, pedagogic, strategic, cultural, evaluative, procedural, instructional and attitudinal" (1991: 98). One of the examples of mismatches showed that the learners misunderstood simple instructions during a classroom task. Kumaravadivelu concludes that successful teaching/learning in the classroom depends on narrowing the gap between teacher's intention and learners' interpretation: "The narrower the gap between teacher intention and learner interpretation, the greater are the chances of achieving desired learning outcomes" (1991: 98).

Kumaravadivelu's study (1991) is significant for this research project. By researching the learners' preferences and getting feedback from them on their learning tasks, we are aiming to minimise the mismatch between teacher intention and learner interpretation, and achieve better learning outcomes in the classroom.

In a recent, large-scale study conducted in Italy, Hawkey (2006) found that students' perceptions of some of their classroom language-learning activities were significantly different to those of their teachers. Specifically, there were significant differences concerning the learners' and teachers' perceptions of the importance of grammar, and pair-work activities (labelled as 'pair-discussion' in the student questionnaire). The learners placed more importance on grammar, and less importance on pair work, than their teachers. Hawkey concludes that although the students "focus on improved communicative skills performance", they were also interested in more explicit grammar tasks (2006: 247).

Through this action research project, we are hoping to get a better idea of what the learners really want, and what tasks they perceive as most beneficial for their language learning process. We anticipate that our research findings will help us minimise the mismatches between teachers' intentions and learners' interpretation of classroom tasks.

2.5 Previous research into EFL learners' needs and preferences

Research findings which have highlighted the mismatches of teachers' and learners' perceptions of the usefulness of learning tasks, have inspired certain educators to conduct research into the needs and wants of their learners. Some examples of such research follow.

Davies conducted research on "what learners really want from their EFL course" at a university in Japan (2006: 3). He argues that it is not sufficient to rely on intuition when designing the curriculum for a course. According to Davis (2006), designing a curriculum based on intuition can lead to an ever-widening gap "between teacher and learner beliefs and expectations" and "can spell trouble for language courses" (2006: 3). He proposes "a more principled alternative to the intuitive approach, based on the use of teacher-designed class-specific questionnaires intended to obtain context-relevant data from learners as an aid to better course provision" (2006: 3). He concludes that this type of research can provide - "a greater and more uniquely personal understanding of our learners, and an additional and reliable means of assessing and effecting change where it is needed most" (2006: 3). This research project aims to understand our learners' needs and to effect changes in the course design and delivery in the hope of assisting them in their learning process.

Boomer argues that what is needed in designing the curriculum for a course, is a process of negotiation mainly between the teacher and the learners. He notes that: “[I]f teachers set out to teach according to a planned curriculum, without engaging the interests of the students, the quality of learning will suffer” (1992: 14). He explains, that negotiating the curriculum means: “deliberately planning to invite students to contribute to, and to modify, the educational program, so that they will have a real investment both in the learning journey and in the outcomes” (1992: 14). In designing this research project, my colleagues and I have “deliberately planned” to involve our learners in negotiating the curriculum for optimal learning.

Cook states that the process of negotiation is completed only when the unit of work, or learning course is finished. That is when learners and teacher together can reflect on the learning process and “ask themselves at the unit’s conclusion: ‘what have we learned?’ ‘What is it worth?’ ‘Where have we got to?’ and ‘where do we go next?’...The growth and consolidation this process causes is one of the things negotiation is all about.” (1992: 26). The process of finding out from the learners what they really want from their EFL courses, is a process of negotiation. Acting on the research findings and reflecting on the outcomes of these actions, as this research project proposes, is in itself a valuable part of the learning process for the participating learners and teachers.

2.6 Negotiating the Curriculum, and the notion of learners’ ‘voice’– perceived advantages and disadvantages of consulting learners

Planning and designing the curriculum for a class of language learners is a very important aspect of language teaching. *What* is taught and *how* is likely to influence the learning outcomes. Traditionally the decisions for planning and designing the curriculum are made by the teacher and/or the learning institution. In the case of public schools they may even be determined by the

educational policy of the country concerned. (This however is not the case for this research as it is carried out in a private language school.) This research project proposes that giving a 'say' or a 'voice' to the learners may enhance the learning process.

The idea of involving the learners in the curriculum planning process is certainly not new. "The presence and engagement of student voice has been seen as essential in the educational process since at least the time of John Dewey, if not long before" (Wikipedia, 2009). Dewey wrote about the necessity of considering the "students' interests and developmental needs" (1916: 164) when planning a curriculum. In the 1980s and early 1990s several educators and linguists who were concerned with the design and implementation of the curriculum, suggested consulting with the learners on the content of their courses and their preferred method of being taught. Breen (1987) and Candlin (1987), proponents of the process or negotiated curriculum, discussed the benefits of consulting the learners. Others, such as Clarke (1991) argued that negotiating the curriculum may sound good in theory but there is not enough evidence that it works in practice.

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the negotiated curriculum. Several books² and articles³ have been written on the subject. However, most attempts to negotiate curricula have been made in school classrooms in which English is taught as a home language, and not in foreign language teaching 'schools'.

Many schools in Europe and the U.K. are now creating opportunities for pupils to give their views on the planning and implementation of their education. For instance, McIntyre et al. (2005) reported on student-voice research conducted with Year 8 pupils in three different secondary schools in the U.K.

² For example: Rudduck & Flutter, 2004; Bragg, 2007a; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Thiessen & Cook-Sather (eds), 2007.

³ For example: Arnot & Reay, 2007; Bragg, 2007b; Cook-Sather, 2007a & b; Fielding, 2007; Hopkins, 2008; Sproston, 2008.

with varying degrees of success. The teachers involved in that project felt that consulting the learners helped improve their motivation and gave them a sense of responsibility for their own learning. They found the pupils' comments "thoughtful and constructive". Hopkins, describing a student-voice study, reports that previously disaffected students became "re-engaged in learning through accessing a different curriculum" (2008: 213-214). Davies (2001) reported how European countries such as Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, and Sweden were involving pupils in educational decision making (cited in Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007).

Although our research project was conducted in a different setting, there were similarities between our findings and those from other student-voice research. The learners who participated in the research project described in this report were also capable of providing thoughtful and constructive feedback to their teachers when consulted on the teaching/learning process (as discussed in Chapter Four).

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the context of this research project: the research site and the research participants. It also explains the research design and the methods employed for collecting and analysing the research data.

3.2 Research design

The research is a case study of an action research project in a Johannesburg language school. Writers on research have not always agreed as to what constitutes a case study. Adelman et al. (1980) argue that “the term *case study* remains a slippery one”(cited in Bassey, 1999: 111). Gillham suggests that “[T]he word ‘case’ (like ‘intelligence’ and ‘neurosis’) is one we all use, and feel we understand, but is rather challenging to define” (2000: 79).

In attempting to define what a case study is, Gillham outlines four main characteristics:

- a unit of human activity embedded in the real world;
 - which can only be studied and understood in context;
 - which exists in the here and now;
 - that merges in with its context so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw
- (2000: 79).

Gillham’s description of case study seems appropriate for the project described and discussed in this report, in that it explores a unit of human activity (teaching/learning English as a foreign language), which exists in the present time, within the context of a language school.

Knobel & Lankshear define case study as “the intensive (in depth and detailed) study of a bounded, contemporary phenomenon such as a classroom, a school, a literacy inservice program, a literacy pedagogical approach, a social group, and so on” (1999: 95).

Similarly, Wallace states that “[C]ase studies concentrate on what is *unique* (i.e. with individual units: an individual student; an individual event; a particular group; a particular class; a particular school, etc.)” (1998: 161). He suggests that case studies tend to suit small-scale research projects and that the findings are usually not generalisable.

Bassey recognises that there are two kinds of generalisations: “the statistical generalization and the fuzzy generalization” (1999: 12). He claims that in educational research, fuzzy generalisation can sometimes be made from findings of case study research. He explains that the fuzzy generalisation does not assert that certain research findings constitute universal laws, but that “it (the fuzzy generalisation) arises from studies of singularities and typically claims that *it is possible, or likely, or unlikely that* what was found in the singularity will be found in similar situations elsewhere: it is a qualitative measure” (1999: 12, parenthesis added).

Bassey argues that not all small-scale studies are case studies, and suggests ‘a conceptual reconstruction of educational case study’ (1999: 57). He argues that “there are at least three categories of educational case study: theory-seeking and theory- testing case study; story-telling and picture-drawing case study; and evaluative case study” (1999: 12). According to Bassey’s definitions of these different types of case study research, this research project is a story-telling and picture-drawing case study. He explains story-telling and picture-drawing case study as follows:

Story-telling and picture-drawing case studies are both analytical accounts of educational events, projects, programmes or systems aimed at illuminating theory. Story-telling is predominantly a narrative account of the exploration and analysis of the case with a strong sense of a time line. Picture-drawing is predominantly a descriptive account drawing

together the results of the exploration and analysis of the case (1999: 62).

Bassey claims that educational case study is “a prime strategy for developing educational theory which illuminates educational policy and enhances educational practice” (1999: 57).

Wallace considers case study as

an approach which fits very comfortably into the action research framework. This is because it tends to be tightly focused and personalised and therefore is a highly appropriate tool for teachers wishing to promote their own professional development within their own context (1998: 170).

Furthermore, Wallace (1998) states that since educational action researchers usually conduct research with their own learners within their own unique situations, the case study approach with its focus on the individual case is best suited to their purpose. Therefore he suggests “that action researchers might want to use the case study approach because it may lead to studies that are more focused or specific, more accessible (especially to inexperienced researchers) and possibly also more interesting in human terms” (1998: 164).

As stated previously, this project is a case study of an action research project in a small language school. Kemmis defines action research as “a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social or educational practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situations in which the practices are carried out” (1993:177). In the case of this action research project the teachers sought to improve their educational practices through gaining an understanding of the learners’ linguistic needs.

Davidoff & Van den Berg describe action research as a “*systematic* way of planning an action, ‘doing’ the action, observing the action, reflecting on the action, and then planning a revised action” (1990: 32). They define action research as a cycle of action and reflection. “It is the very nature of Action

Research to repeat this cycle or spiral of action and reflection over and over, always refining and amending one's activities in the classroom." (1990: 46).

Similarly Kemmis and McTaggart note that "Action research develops through *the self-reflective spiral*: a spiral of cycles of *planning*, *acting*, (implementing plans), *observing* (systematically), *reflecting* ... and then re-planning, further implementation, observing and reflecting" (1988: 22). This project has involved a similar spiral of planning, acting and reflecting, through a reconnaissance phase followed by two research cycles.

Educational action research is a process which enables teachers to research their own practice in order to improve it. Kemmis and McTaggart refer to action research as "research by particular people on their own work, to help them improve what they do, including how they work with and for others" (1988: 22). Furthermore, Kemmis claims that action research is "most rationally empowering when undertaken by participants collaboratively" (1993: 177). The research discussed in this report is collaborative in that it has involved three teaching colleagues working together to understand and improve our practices.

Kemmis points out that educational action research "has been employed in school-based curriculum development, professional development, school improvement programmes, and systems planning and policy development" (1993: 178). Similarly, Knobel & Lankshear note that a main characteristic of action research is its commitment to change. "Action research is committed to bringing about change for the better in a situation" (1999: 99-100). By negotiating a curriculum for our EFL learners through action research, my colleagues and I have been committed to bringing about change for the better in our own teaching situation.

3.3 The research site

The research was undertaken at a small private language school in a Johannesburg suburb. The school is not yet widely known, and for that reason it has only a few students at present. The positive side of the small size of the school is a warm and friendly atmosphere, which makes learners and teachers feel like a family⁴. This is enhanced by the caring and generous nature of the school principal who has in the past organised for the learners, at the school's expense, a 'braai', picnic lunches, pizza take-aways, etc. This 'family' atmosphere contributes to the *affective factor* which is considered to play a crucial role in the language learning process (Krashen, 1981; Davies, 2006).

Findings from research conducted by Davies into the language learning preferences of university-level learners in Japan, highlighted the importance of establishing a good relationship with the learners, especially at the beginning of a course:

The data showed me that more important for my learners (than focusing on course content) was the building of a good relationship with their teacher and classmates. As a result, I began to regard early classes with a more affective eye and throughout the course attempted to balance the need to achieve educational outcomes with the need to actively promote affective factors such as good classroom participant relations (Davies, 2006: 8, parenthesis added).

Furthermore, the small size of the school makes it a suitable site for conducting action research. A characteristic of action research is its commitment to change, and change is easier to effect if it involves smaller numbers of people. Knobel and Lankshear state that, "because of [this] real commitment to change, action research projects are not large-scale" (1999: 100).

⁴The sharing of food is one of the main 'family activities'. When we held an international culture and food day, everyone participated with enthusiasm, bringing their country's traditional food, and dressing in their traditional clothes. The Ethiopian girls even brought to school all the utensils, including a small coal stove, for their customary coffee making ceremony. Everyone went out of their way to share their cultural practices, even teaching each other their way of dancing during the party that followed. Not only on special occasions but also everyday, learners and teachers have meals together around a big table in the school kitchen or in the TV room, next to a roaring fire in the fireplace in winter, or around the pool in summer; activities that can only happen in a very small school.

Another advantage of working with a small number of learners is that the teachers have been able as far as possible to respond to individual needs and interests.

3.4 The research subjects

The school started operating with a group of male and female Angolan adults, between the ages of 25 and 55, who came to South Africa for the specific purpose of learning the English language. On arrival at the school, they were given placement tests to determine their level of knowledge of English.

Subsequently they were placed in three classes: Beginner, Elementary, and Pre-Intermediate. The Beginner class is for learners who do not have any knowledge of the English language, or may know a very little English, but not sufficient even for everyday communication. According to the *ESU*

*Framework*⁵ the Elementary Level class is for learners who use:

a basic range of language sufficient for familiar and non-pressuring situations. Frequent problems restrict prolonged communication but message communicated with repetition and/or assistance (West and Walsh, 1998, cited in Davies, 1999: 12).

The Pre-Intermediate or Lower-Intermediate Level learners use:

a limited range of language adequate for short communication and practical needs. Problems cause frequent breakdown of communication, but message usually recovered with repetition and/or assistance (West and Walsh, 1998, cited in Davies, 1999: 12).

The learners were supposed to stay in South Africa until the end of the year and to complete three levels of courses in English. Each course lasts approximately three months. At the end of each course the learners sit examinations which are sent from England by an internationally recognised certificate awarding institute. Their papers are sent back to England for

⁵ “The English-Speaking Union (ESU) is an international charity founded by journalist Sir Evelyn Wrench in 1918” (Wikipedia, 2009-10-10). According to its website mission statement, it aims to create “international understanding through English at a time when English has become the working language of the global village” (<http://www.esu.org/>). In 1985 the ESU set up the “Framework” project to devise a comprehensive frame of description to compare the various examinations of the main English Language Boards, and to provide a point of reference for course design and materials description (Carroll & West, 1989).

marking. Those who are successful in these exams receive certificates sent from London.

The Angolan students were all professionals. Some of them had been working as journalists, while others had been working for the Angolan government as foreign office consultants or in secretarial positions. It was necessary for them to know English for aspects of their work in which they need to use it for lingua franca purposes. They communicated amongst themselves in Portuguese, which was their language of learning, and in some cases the language they spoke at home.

3.5 The data collection

The method of collecting the research data, in the reconnaissance phase of the research, was through a questionnaire which was administered at the end of the learners' initial course, as a form of feedback to the teachers. The use of a questionnaire for collecting data has its advantages and disadvantages. According to Bell "[Q]uestionnaires are a good way of collecting certain types of information quickly and relatively cheaply as long as subjects are sufficiently literate and as long as the researcher is sufficiently disciplined to abandon questions that are superfluous to the main task" (1987: 58). Bell maintains that it is "harder to produce a good questionnaire than might be imagined" (1987: 12). McNiff also states that questionnaires are "notoriously difficult to create in order to get the information desired, and they are liable to misuse" (1988: 78).

Reconnaissance questionnaires have been used by researchers in the past to explore a given situation before deciding how to proceed with further research. McNiff suggests that in "an action research enquiry, questionnaires will probably be used in an exploratory fashion to get an idea of trends" (1988: 78). The reconnaissance phase questionnaire was used to explore the learners' thoughts and ideas before the teachers planned and implemented the first cycle of teaching interventions.

Further reconnaissance phase data were collected in the form of teachers' notes taken during discussions with the learners, shortly after they had completed the first questionnaire. Fontana and Fray (2000) suggest that the purpose of a group interview may be 'exploratory'. They also state that "[G]roup interviews can also be used for triangulation purposes or can be used in conjunction with other data gathering techniques" (2000: 651). The purpose of the group discussions was to clarify and triangulate the findings from the questionnaires. The questionnaire and discussions aimed to provide the teachers with information on which subsequent teaching interventions could be based.

Once the teaching interventions had been implemented for the duration of one course (roughly a period of three months), further data collection was undertaken in the form of a second questionnaire aimed at establishing the responses of the learners to the teaching interventions. In addition, my colleagues and I considered the evidence of the learners' progress by analyzing the field notes we had taken during and after classes, examples of learners' work on tasks, and their results from the oral and written examinations taken at the end of their second course at the school⁶.

A second cycle of teaching interventions (during the learners' third course) was to follow based on the information gathered from the second questionnaire. As it happened, the learners left after they wrote their examinations for the second course. The reasons for and consequences of their departure will be discussed in Chapter 4.

After some delay, a second cycle of research was undertaken but with a new cohort of students. The new group of learners consisted of young female and

⁶ The learners wrote examinations after the completion of each course of lessons. Their examinations were set by The City & Guilds Institute of London, and were sent back to London for marking. The examination papers assessed the learners' reading, and writing ability, and included CDs for testing the learners' listening comprehension. In order to ascertain the learners' speaking progress, oral examinations were set by the teachers. These took place at the school before the written examinations.

male adults between the ages of 20 and 35. These were from six different countries: Angola (not from the original group), China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Germany (originally from Ethiopia), and Turkey. According to the results of their placement tests these students were placed in three classes: Beginner class (six students), Pre-Intermediate class (six students), and Upper-Intermediate class (three students). According to West and Walsh, the Upper-Intermediate Level learner

uses the language competently in a variety of situations but with noticeable problems. Communication is usually effective. When difficulties arise, communication is recovered with ease (cited in Davies, 1999: 12).

Upper-Intermediate is quite a high level, and it is the minimum requirement for acceptance in most universities. One of the Upper-Intermediate learners, after completion of the course, sat the IELTS examination and achieved the minimum requirement for university entry.

Unlike the first Angolan group who stayed at the school for two courses, the new groups of learners were much more transitory. Students came and went, and the learners in the three classes were not exactly the same right through the second cycle of the project. This was a definite disadvantage for the research project. Another serious disadvantage, in terms of the project, was that the teachers could not be sure that the needs and interests of this group were being addressed as the teaching interventions of the second cycle of the research were based on information provided by the previous group of learners.

3.5.1 The questionnaires

For the first phase of the research, the 'reconnaissance' phase, a questionnaire was administered, as a means of gaining a general understanding of the direction the research should take, and as a guide towards the first teaching intervention. While it is recognised that a questionnaire may yield responses that are both general and/or contradictory (Cooper, 2008, personal communication), it was decided to follow Davies (2006) in using a questionnaire

as a starting point for the research. Davies gathered useful information from university students in Japan, who were learning English, and the questionnaire that was used in this research is an adaptation of his design. In designing it every effort was made to use simple and clear language in order to facilitate understanding, especially for the beginner and elementary class learners.

In addition, the researchers explained the nature of the research before the questionnaire was administered, and where necessary, one of the teachers who is fluent in Portuguese used the learners' home language to clarify the questions before learners wrote their responses. The learners were given the option of responding in their home language. However, none of the learners used this option; they all tried their best to respond in English.

Furthermore, the teachers discussed with individual learners certain of their responses when these were not clear or seemed contradictory. All of this was done in order to optimize communication with the learners, and to minimize misunderstandings concerning the questions or the responses. A copy of the reconnaissance questionnaire is included in Appendix IV, and was approved by the University of the Witwatersrand's School of Education Ethics Committee.

After the first cycle of the research, another questionnaire was administered. This one was designed with more open-ended questions (See Appendix V). Davies, whose research inspired our project, argues that questionnaires are effective in obtaining "context-relevant data from learners as an aid to better course provision" (2006: 3). "The focus is firmly on the local level, on individual teachers and their classes, rather than on institution-wide surveys, since this is where success or failure of courses is ultimately determined, and where plans for action derived from questionnaire data will be acted upon" (Davies, 2006: 3). Although our questionnaires were administered to all three classes, the small number of learners ensured that the focus was still on the 'local' and individual teachers were still involved in the decision making process for their individual classes.

The second questionnaire sought feedback on the classroom activities and teaching interventions of the first research cycle. It aimed to provide the teachers with information on the effects of the first teaching intervention which was developed from the data collected from the reconnaissance questionnaire.

3.5.2 The unstructured discussions

An unstructured discussion was conducted with each class, after the administration of the first questionnaire, in order to give the learners the opportunity to speak openly about their course and about any issues which may not have been addressed in the questionnaire. This discussion also acted as a means of triangulating the information collected through the first questionnaire. As a result of the learners' unexpected departure after their second course, it was not possible to hold the discussions which had been planned to take place after the completion of the second questionnaire.

3.5.3 The journals

As explained in 3.5, the second cycle of interventions was undertaken with a new group of students. Prompted by some of the learners' spontaneous requests for specific tasks/activities in the classroom, and after reading about the possible value of journal logs as a source of data (Stewart, 2007), the teachers decided to ask the new group of learners to keep journal logs in which they recorded what they thought of certain classroom tasks. The teachers asked learners to give their opinions on different types of tasks, such as listening, reading, writing, and grammar tasks, at the time when these tasks were completed. It was thought that commenting immediately after the completion of tasks, while they were still 'fresh' in their minds, would provide us with more reliable information about the learners' reaction to specific classroom tasks, than getting feedback from them after the completion of their course (Stewart, 2007). The possibility of also using a questionnaire at the end of the

course was not excluded at this stage of the project. However, as time went by, we became aware that due to the shifting population of our classes this would not be feasible.

3.5.4 Research ethics

Ethics clearance was obtained from the School of Education's Ethics Committee (Protocol No: 2008ECE21).

3.5.5 Data analysis

In an action research project, analysis is used to inform each stage of the intervention from the initial reconnaissance to the completion of the project. With a small number of learners, it can be difficult to find patterns in the data (Freeman, 1999); nevertheless, a grounded analysis was attempted. As this is a case study of an action research project, the data have to be considered in context. Therefore, the data are grounded in the information which arises from the given situation. According to Gillham: "[T]he case study researcher, working *inductively* from what's there in the research setting, develops *grounded theory*: theory that is grounded in the evidence that is turned up" (2000: 12). Data from each phase of the project are presented and analysed in Chapter Four.

Chapter 4: Presentation and Analysis of the data – The Story of the Action Research Project

4.1 Introduction

The data presented and discussed in this chapter were collected during the reconnaissance phase and two subsequent action research cycles.

4.2 Data from the reconnaissance phase

The reconnaissance phase data consist of the data from the first questionnaire and the data from the informal discussions with the learners, which took place shortly after they responded to the questionnaire.

4.2.1 Data from the first questionnaire

The questionnaire was given at the end of the first course the learners attended at this language school. Its purpose was to inform the planning of actions and teaching interventions during the learners' next course.

The learners were from three different classes (Beginner/Level One, Elementary/Level Two and Pre-Intermediate/Level Three) but, due to their small numbers, their answers are all grouped together. In all, nine learners answered the questionnaire. The data are presented question by question.

Question 1: What did you like **most** about the English course?

Five learners replied they liked most the methods/ system/ way of teaching.

Some of their comments were: "...I enjoyed everything...I learned a lot and I like the methods of teaching." "...the teacher (teacher's name)." "I enjoyed the first phase of the course, system of teaching, is very important including the

teachers” “...and the new words for me.” “The way the teacher gave the course and the attention she gave us.”

One learner did not really answer the question. Maybe she did not understand. She was the weakest student in the beginners’ class⁷. She replied: “I loved the course the English was very interesting. Permitted learning. It’s the most used language in the world.”

One learner replied: “I enjoyed the practicals and theory”

Another learner replied: “I liked most the course book”

And another: “I’d like most about my English course talking in class”

Question 2: Is there anything you did **not** like about this English course? If yes, please tell us about this.

Four learners replied they did not like the lack of audio-visual equipment and computer lab in the school. Some of their comments were: “The absence of audio and visual equipment.” “I think the school need a computers support teach.” “Yes, not existence of the material informatic. Not existence of the material for listening⁸.”

Three learners replied: “There was nothing I didn’t enjoy.”

One learner from the beginners’ class wrote: “I like, I would have enjoyed, it is there were more student in the school, and classroom.” She explained that she would like the opportunity to interact with more students in class.

Another learner, also from the beginners’ class said he did not like the listening. The same learner also said he would like more listening. When questioned about the apparent contradiction he explained that he found the listening texts too difficult, but he would like more listening practice, possibly with easier texts and with films because the visual aspect would help him understand what was said.

⁷ Although we told the learners that they did not need to write their names on the questionnaire, some of them did.

⁸ The textbooks that were used included listening tasks from CDs; what this learner is probably asking for is a language lab where the learners can do listening tasks by themselves, after school.

Question 3: Is there anything that you would have liked **more of**? If yes, please tell us about this.

One learner replied: "I liked all of the 1st course."

Seven learners wanted more audio-visual lessons.

Seven learners wanted more oral practice/conversation: "...more contact with people, may be journalist or another persons to practice more the language."

Four learners would like more outings: "...activities out of the classroom..."

Two learners would like more reading.

Two learners would like more grammar.

Two learners would like more vocabulary building.

One learner would like more writing.

Question 4: Is there anything you would have liked **less of**? If yes, please tell us about this.

One learner did not reply to this question.

Two learners would like less writing. One of them, from the beginners' class wrote: "I'd like to have less write because many people write, but can't speak..."

Two learners would like less attention to the course book: "Not to much concentration on the course book. We should have another types of lesson like discussing a social problem." "Sometimes we have so much course book."

Interestingly, the learner who wrote the latter is the same learner who wrote what he liked most about the course is the course book. When asked to clarify, he said he liked the course book very much but he wanted more variety of lessons and not to be in the school all the time (It should be kept in mind that these are adult learners who are used to active working lives in their country).

One learner wrote: "I would have liked one conversation lessons for week."

When it was pointed out to him that he was asked what he would have liked *less of*, he replied: "Less reading".

Another learner suggested having less individual homework: "Homework could be improved. We should not only do solitary homework but group homework where we could work as a team."

Two learners instead of saying what they would like *less of*, said what they would like *more of*. They wrote: "I believe we should talk more and have more time with vocabulary and grammar" and "I would like more practice in languages and reading listening and vocabulary." Other suggestions were: "We must go out more. We need more contact with people, sometimes is bored stay all time at school." As was mentioned previously, these are adult learners used to leading an active working life. They are not used to sitting at a school desk every morning.

Question 5: How would you describe the course book? Circle one of the following:

boring sometimes interesting usually interesting always interesting

All nine learners replied: "always interesting"

Question 6: What did you think of the other learning materials that your teacher gave you - extra work sheets, cards, pictures, games, etc. Circle one of the following:

boring sometimes interesting usually interesting always interesting

Five learners replied: "usually interesting"

Four learners replied: "always interesting"

Question 7: Which of the following best describes the classroom tasks? Circle one of the following:

too easy challenging, but good too difficult

Eight learners replied: "challenging, but good"

One learner did not reply.

Question 8: How interesting did you find the classroom tasks? Circle one of the following:

not at all interesting sometimes interesting very interesting

Eight learners replied: "very interesting".

One learner replied: "sometimes interesting".

Question 9: If you could choose to spend more time on any of the following, which three would you choose? Write 1 next to your first choice, 2 next to your second choice and 3 next to your third choice.

Listening

Speaking

Reading

Writing

Vocabulary

Grammar

The learners' choices are shown in table 1 (below). Three learners indicated their three preferences without distinguishing which came first, second, or third. Their choices have been marked with an **X**. For the other learners, **1** indicates first choice, **2** indicates second choice, and **3** indicates third choice. In table 2 (overleaf) the total number of learners for each choice is shown, as well as the total number of learners who chose each activity.

Table 1: Question 9 - Learners' choices:

	Speaking	Writing	Grammar	Listening	Vocabulary	Reading
Learner 1	X		X		X	
Learner 2	X		X	X		
Learner 3	X	X	X			
Learner 4	2			1	3	
Learner 5	1	2		3		
Learner 6	1				3	2
Learner 7		1		2		3
Learner 8	2	3	1			
Learner 9	3	2	1			

Table 2: Question 9 - Total number of learners for each choice:

	1st choice	2nd choice	3rd choice	No order of choice indicated	Total
Speaking	2	2	1	3	8
Writing	1	2	1	1	5
Grammar	2			3	5
Listening	1	1	1	1	4
Vocabulary			2	1	3
Reading		1	1		2

From the above we can draw the conclusion that the learners' most popular choice, almost unanimously, is **speaking**, followed by **writing** and **grammar**, which had equal 'votes'. According to the above data, **reading** is the least chosen activity. The learners may feel that sufficient time is spent on this activity already, or they may not perceive reading as a very beneficial or necessary activity in learning English, or as their personal need. These probabilities are discussed in 4.2.2, as part of the reflections on the reconnaissance data.

Question 10: Suggest topics, tasks or classroom activities that your teacher could include in the course in order to help you to improve your English.

In responding to this question the learners made many interesting suggestions: **Five** learners suggested more outings and activities/lessons/games ("including football") outside the classroom.

Four learners asked for opportunities to interact with learners from other language schools, and/or to talk to other people in general.

Some of the learners' comments referring to the above suggestions were:

I would like to have to have more activities out side of class and tasks. To make the course more interesting we should interact with another students from another school. we can exchange our experience and we can learn from their experience.

A female learner from the Beginners' class wrote:

I would of liked to do an outing every Friday out of the school and in this way we would practise the English language more we should play games including a game of football.

Two learners suggested more conversation: "We need more conversation lesson..." "More lessons of conversation." The same two learners suggested the school should have computers for the learners to use: "We need computers with internet to investigate more information about the course."

Two learners suggested the use of audio-visual equipment. One of them said:

The course was fine, but my Problem was the Listening and audio visuals, because If I see The image and Listen it's clear and easier.

Two learners suggested listening to music (They meant English songs. Their course books, which come with CDs, include a few songs).

One learner suggested they should put on a play:

We should be doing more theatrical activities acting and doing research and performing together. We should be playing more games word games.

"We should be doing more theatrical activities acting and doing research and performing together. We should be playing more games, word games."

One learner suggested regular writing on different topics, and another learner suggested more reading.

A learner from the Beginners' class made all of the following suggestions:
practise with another class of learners, b) listen to music(English songs?),
c) read more English texts, d) talk more with other people

I would more to improve my English +
practise with another class
is very important to learn English
because is universal languages.
I like to listening music,
reading English more,
talk with another people more and that how I am
going to develop my English

In summary, the main categories emerging from the findings of the reconnaissance questionnaire are presented below.

Learners would like:

language lab and/or computer lab: **9/9** (nine out of nine learners)

more conversation/speaking tasks: **9/9**

more outings/informal learning: **7/9**

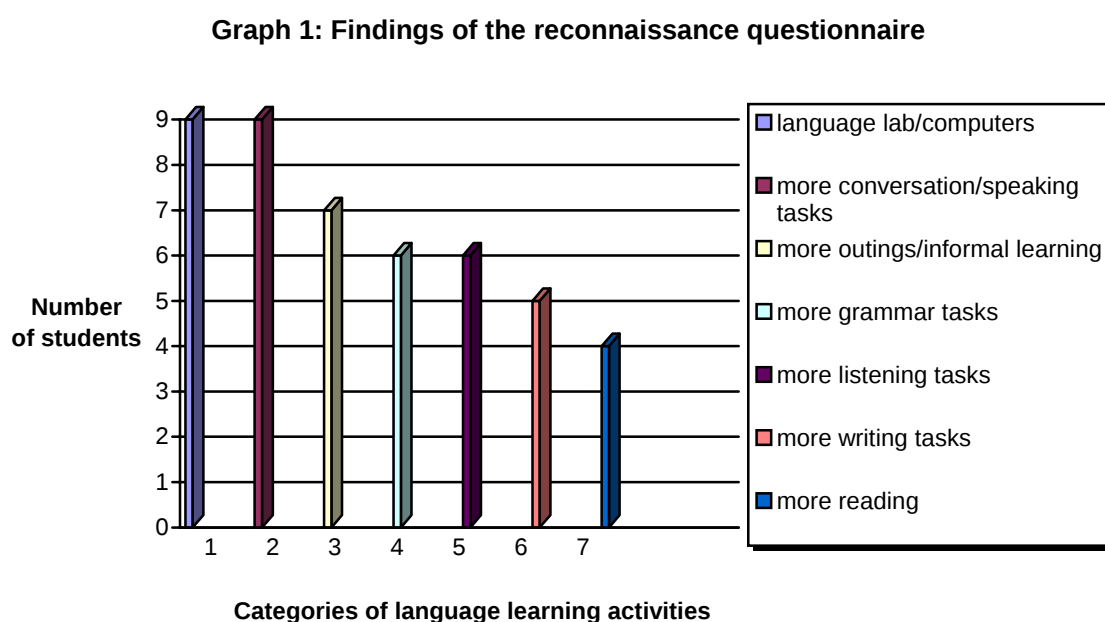
more grammar tasks: **6/9**

more listening tasks (including songs): **6/9**

more writing tasks: **5/9**

more reading tasks: **4/9**

(See Graph 1)



In addition to the above, **9/9** learners indicated that they liked the course book. Furthermore, although there was no specific question about the teachers, or the teaching methods, **6/9** learners indicated that they were happy with both.

4.2.1.1 Reflections on the data from the first questionnaire

The results from the reconnaissance phase questionnaire indicated that the learners were essentially asking for additional learning opportunities both in the classroom, and after school. A language laboratory, or a computer centre with Internet access, would enable them to become autonomous learners and to

have additional learning hours in the afternoon. These periods of self-study could consolidate their classroom learning, and accelerate their progress with the English language.

All the learners wanted more speaking practice and conversation in order to achieve communicative competence in the target language. Due to their occupations as journalists and public relations officers, it is important for them to be able to use English as a lingua franca to communicate with other LFE speakers in various work related as well as social situations. For LFE users, fluency is more important than accuracy (Jenkins, 2006; Canagarajah, 2007).

Therefore, the teachers' responsibility would be to provide the learners with the kind of speaking tasks that mimic real-life situations, and to concentrate on meaning and content rather than correcting grammatical mistakes during fluency practice (Harmer, 1998). Classroom learning tasks based on certain features of CLT may prove useful in this situation. As discussed in 2.3, a feature of CLT is the use of communicative classroom activities for learning the target language; these may include games, role-plays, and information gap tasks, which the learners perform in pairs, groups, or as a whole class (Harmer, 1998; Halliday, 1973, in Inglis et al, 2000; Breen & Candlin, 1980, in Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2000; Savignon, 1983, in Kumaravadivelu, 2006a).

Another feature of CLT is the use of language for negotiation of meaning (Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2000), and as part of a social interaction (Breen and Candlin, 1980, in Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2000). Classroom activities which include these features could be helpful for improving the learners' communicative competence in English. Kumaravadivelu's (2006a) postmethod pedagogy encourages teachers to make their own decisions on what works best in their specific teaching context. Therefore, the teachers should choose those tasks which they feel are best for their classes.

Most learners expressed the wish to have more opportunities for informal learning in the form of outings, interacting with other people, and lessons outside the classroom. The importance of informal learning in second language acquisition is discussed in Chapter Two, and in 4.4.9.

Another finding from the reconnaissance questionnaire was the importance most of the learners placed on grammar, and listening activities. Their requests for more such activities were addressed by the first cycle of teaching interventions as discussed in 4.4.2, and 4.4.6.

The majority of the learners wanted more writing practice, and as became also evident from the data from the second questionnaire, they considered writing as a way of improving their knowledge of grammar. The learners were given additional writing tasks during their second course, as discussed in 4.4.5.

The issue of reading practice came up again during the informal discussions. The data from the informal discussions (4.2.3) showed that the only class that did not mention 'reading' as one of their preferred activities was the Beginners' class. They wanted more practical/hands on activities as is apparent from the data presented in the next section.

However, during their second course (the first cycle of teaching interventions), all learners were encouraged to increase their reading, especially after school hours. They were given reading texts from newspapers, as well as short books suitable for their level, to read and speak about in class or to write short reports on.

Another finding from the learners' responses to the first questionnaire was that they all liked the course book. This is an important finding as the textbooks play a significant role in the English course. The teachers also feel that the textbooks they chose to use for the learners' first course are among the best

teaching materials for EFL learners⁹. Consequently, it was decided to continue using the same series of textbooks for the learners' next course.

Furthermore, the majority of learners indicated that they were very happy with the teachers and the teaching methods. Rudduck and McIntyre report that when learners are asked their views on their teachers' 'performance' they often make "serious and constructive comments" which the teachers find "quite reassuring, because pupils' comments are usually positive, both praising their teachers for what they normally do and formulating many of their suggestions as requests that their teachers should more frequently do things that they currently do sometimes" (2007: 83). The above observation, although it refers to young learners, was equally true for the adult learners who participated in this research project. Although we had not asked a specific question about the teachers, the learners did not hesitate to write positive and complementary comments about them, which were very reassuring.

An interesting point about the learners' responses is that although their command of the English language is not sophisticated, all of them were able to communicate their ideas. They were not intimidated by any of the questions or the format of the questionnaire, although some used the **less of** answer space to tell us what they wanted **more of** or to make other suggestions. They felt free to express their ideas and views in any way that they could and they were not particularly concerned in which section of the questionnaire they wrote their thoughts. In retrospect we realised that being successful in getting meaningful feedback from these Beginner and Elementary level learners, had been

possible largely due to the assistance of the teacher who is fluent in Portuguese, which is the language all the Angolan learners spoke.

⁹ Besides the communicative approach to teaching/learning, and the listening and extra writing tasks, the topics are based on many different ethnic backgrounds and cultures. Therefore, these textbooks are not entirely eurocentric, but show respect for other cultures and customs.

4.2.2 Data from the informal discussions

After the learners had responded to the reconnaissance questionnaire, my colleagues and I conducted informal discussions with the learners in our class and made notes on these discussions. This was done to triangulate the learners' responses and to make sure that we understood exactly what they were asking for. When there was an apparent contradiction in their questionnaire responses, we discussed it and found out the reason. Our notes from the discussions are in point form. These notes are presented class-by-class, just as the teacher in each class wrote them down, at the time of the discussions. They have been edited only slightly to enhance clarity.

4.2.2.1 Notes from the discussion with the Beginners' class

The learners in this class confirmed that they would like:

- Audio-visual tasks designed especially for beginners – see, hear, read at the same time to encourage and aid understanding or comprehension.
- Computer programs where students get corrected on their own.
- (self-study)
- More conversation as a big group. Debating – sport, current news, anything that is current, and various topics – variety. Debating – where people are placed in groups and have to do research and preparation for the debate.
- More oral interaction with students from other schools – exposure to different accents and cultures.
- Have more oral tests - have more prepared orals.
- Engage in theatrical activities – group interaction in relaxed and informal environment – the preparation would be good practice and problem solving would be beneficial.

- More games – informal again: trivial pursuit or scrabble – word games e.g. hangman, and general knowledge games that use the letters of the alphabet.
- More physical games, e.g. football and basketball where only English is permitted to be used and in conjunction with other students (from other schools).

4.2.2.2 Notes from the discussion with the Elementary class

The learners in this class confirmed that they would like:

- Audio-visuals – more movies, documentaries, news.
- Listening lab (language lab).
- More reading of newspaper articles: sports, politics, South African news and culture.
- More conversation in class (serious – no joking). Speaking / debate about news: politics, Zuma, corruption, crime, social matters, South African versus Angolan culture.
- Especially listening: mp3, take home activities.
- More contact and interaction with South Africans and native English speakers / work experience (in related areas of 'home work') / outings and excursions with English speaking guides / outside people coming in and giving a talk on a topic.
- More practical, 'hands-on' approach to learning, e.g. cooking practicals. (This suggestion comes from an all-male class!)
- Be placed in homes or host-family houses where they speak English all the time.
- Extra practice books and reading material: fiction / non-fiction / wider variety / investigation / EFL reference / extra lessons to take home.
- Alternatives to lessons in a classroom: pottery, book club.
- More activities in class on: listening, pictures, different games – computer games with English stories, crosswords, etc.

- Computers at school: internet connection / wireless internet / 3G cards / internet activities on-line.
- Change of place: have lessons in different settings.

The learners' responses indicate that they wanted more opportunities for informal acquisition as discussed by Krashen (1981). Krashen claims that in adult second language learning both the formal environment of the classroom and the informal environment of activities outside the classroom can contribute to the acquisition of the target language. He argues that, "formal and informal environments make contributions to different aspects of second language competence"¹⁰ (1981: 41). Furthermore, as mentioned in Chapter 2, Canagarajah states that "interactions that are not framed as pedagogical (i.e., off-task, off-site activities can be utilized for learning" (2007: 927).

4.2.2.3 Notes from the discussion with the Pre-Intermediate class

The learners in this class confirmed that they would like:

- Audio-visual equipment – computer center
- Interaction with people out of the school and learners from other schools.
- Reading of articles from newspapers and magazines, and discussion of the news and social problems.
- More outings with their class only (not the whole school): visits to museums and art galleries with English-speaking guide.
- More writing practice about the things they saw and did at the outings – hand in a half page response every Monday, and discuss in class what they have written, every Friday.

¹⁰ Educators and researchers have shown renewed interest on the issues of formal and informal learning in SLA. For example, a conference titled: Language Immersion as Formal and Informal Learning: New Perspectives for Research and Public Policy, was held on April 30 and May 1, 2009, at the University of Ottawa.

- Extra grammar tasks, and more speaking and listening tasks (oral communication).
- Discussions and debates (where different learners have to argue for and against a topic). Possible topics: politics, what the US is doing to the world, abortion, homosexuality, etc.
- School exchange – interaction / debate with learners from other language schools.
- Lessons outside in the garden (weather permitting), or conversation practice at a park, e.g. Gillooly's farm, instead of the school lounge, where we held conversation practice in the past. The routine of being in the classroom or at school can be boring.

The learners of the Pre-Intermediate class asked for more reading of authentic texts from the media, and more writing practice. Being a more advanced class they would be more likely to cope with such tasks.

In conclusion, these discussions confirmed that what the learners had written in the questionnaires was what they really wanted. During these discussions the learners were able to express in more detail what activities they felt were most beneficial for learning the English language. Knowing what each group wanted, the teachers felt they would be able to plan activities and tasks designed specifically for their class. However, some of the learners' preferences were the same for all three classes and would be addressed for the school as a whole.

The overall impression was that their questionnaire responses did not differ much from the views they expressed during the informal discussions. Besides the benefit of triangulation for validating the questionnaire data, the informal discussions gave the learners the opportunity to express ideas which had not come up in the questionnaire. Their responses revealed a fertile imagination and an abundance of original ideas. Our challenge as teachers was to fulfill as many as possible of the learners' expectations, and to see how we could

benefit the learners most by using some of their ideas in the design of their next course.

4.3 Data from the teachers' meeting – Actions planned

After collecting and analysing the reconnaissance data my colleagues and I held a meeting during which we reflected on the research findings, and discussed possible avenues of action. On account of the learners' needs and preferences expressed in the above data, we decided to implement certain changes.

It became quite obvious from the learners requests that the school was in urgent need of a language lab and a computer lab. We were aware of this fact before the learners had requested it, but due to the lack of funds, the school had not been able to acquire this equipment. It was decided to make some alternative arrangements until such time as we would be able to purchase this equipment. Some suggestions for temporary solutions to this problem and ideas for teaching interventions were:

- Obtain special films for learners of different levels of difficulty, which could be viewed by the learners of each class separately. These have been ordered through Oxford University Press which is also the supplier of the textbooks we are using. It was also decided to get an mp3 player for voice recording and play back so that the learners can use it to correct their pronunciation, until such time as the school can afford to purchase a language lab.
- Some learners had suggested reading newspaper articles. During the learners' first course, we had bought newspapers and magazines for them to read, and also used them occasionally for activities and discussion in class. We decided to use them more regularly and to include them in our classroom activities and for homework tasks.

- Since the majority of the learners wanted more activities outside the classroom, we planned to have more outings including visits to Museums, and a safari at a game reserve, with a guide/game ranger. We could make this a regular event with something happening out of the school every Friday, as was suggested by one of the learners. The Origins Centre at Wits University, the Planetarium, the Johannesburg Art Gallery, The Star newspaper, were some of the venues we considered for future outings. McLean Orlando stresses that “teachers have a responsibility to develop informal learning opportunities as part of supporting students to be successful second language learners” (2006: 48)
- All the learners had indicated that they were very happy with the course books; so, we planned to continue using them but to also include more teacher-designed materials, to add interest and variety to our lessons. The learners had indicated in their responses to the questionnaire that they found the teacher-generated learning materials interesting and useful.
- Our learners had expressed the desire to interact with learners from other language schools. To this effect we planned to negotiate with two other schools in order to arrange for our learners to visit their schools and their learners to visit us. We thought of organising debating competitions and games with them, or even some informal social events.
- We discussed inviting speakers to our school to talk to our learners on various topics. Our external examiner for the International English Exams, who is an English teacher, has offered to give a talk to our learners with tips and ideas on how to improve their grammar. Our principal has contacts in the world of journalism, having worked for many years as a journalist for The Star newspaper. As most of our learners are journalists, we decided that it might be interesting for them to listen to a talk by a journalist.

- Our learners clearly wanted to have more conversation and speaking practice. We took note of that and we decided to include more discussions in class about the current news, social issues, and cultural norms. We considered, for example, starting every Monday morning with a discussion of the latest news and also news from our learners' lives and their families back home. We thought of asking the learners themselves to prepare a topic they would like to talk about in class.
- According to our learners' wishes we planned to have more oral tests, so that they would have the opportunity of being assessed orally more regularly and not only at exam times. This would also help them become more familiar with the oral testing procedure and would give them more self-confidence when we have the final oral exam at the end of the course.
- As the majority of our learners have asked for more grammar practice, it was decided to include in our lessons grammar exercises from other books to supplement those from our textbooks.
- Another thing most of our learners asked for was more practice in listening. All the learners found the listening texts from our course books too difficult to understand. The speakers have different accents to the accents that our learners are used to, and speak rather fast. Although it is very beneficial for them to get used to different accents and to the normal speed at which people speak, it can be somewhat discouraging. With this in mind, we decided to find easier listening texts to use in addition to the course book listening texts. We also decided to use other 'real-life' listening texts, news from the radio, advertisements, easy to understand songs (as requested by some learners), and films with English subtitles.
- Finally we tackled the issue of more/less reading. Some of our learners may not realise the benefit of reading in learning a foreign language. With this research project we have sought to give the learners agency as regards their English courses. However the

teacher still remains the knower. It is therefore our responsibility as teachers to guide and advise our learners if we think that they may have the wrong idea about something. We therefore decided to find ways to convince our learners of the benefits of reading for learning a foreign language. During their first English course at our school none of the learners read any books other than their text-books. The reading books, which had been ordered for the different levels, had not arrived. This problem had not yet been solved, but we were aware that we must encourage our learners to read at least one book during their next course, to write a short summary, and to answer a few questions about the book they read. In the absence of suitable reading books, the learners could read newspaper and magazine articles. It was suggested that we take our learners to the local library and let them choose from the easy-reader books for adults. This could prove to be very beneficial for our learners' progress.

These were the decisions my colleagues and I made for teaching interventions based on the research findings from the reconnaissance phase of this action research project. At the end of this long meeting we came to the realisation that by responding to our learners' needs and preferences we would be improving many aspects of our teaching practice.

Although not all of our good intentions translated into actions, quite a lot of them did. In the next section of the report I describe some of the teaching interventions that took place as a result of the teachers' discussion, and reflection on the reconnaissance findings.

4.4 Data from the first cycle of teaching interventions, informed by the reconnaissance phase of the research project: What really happened

4.4.1 Introduction

As each class at our school had different textbooks and different learning materials, each group of learners was given different activities to complement their textbooks and enhance learning, while keeping in mind the learners' preferences as expressed in the questionnaires and the informal class discussions. However, for the purpose of analysing the data, the class activities are grouped under their naturally emerging categories. In addition to class-specific activities there were some whole school activities which are discussed at the end of this section.

4.4.2 Audio-visual activities

In an effort to provide audio-visual activities, as the learners had wanted, film viewing was organised in the school's common room. Different films were chosen for each class, to suit the learners' interest and the topic, or grammar item they were studying at the time. Some examples of such activities which were based on films, are described below.

One series of activities was based on the book and film *Frankenstein*. As an introduction to the activity the learners were given several tasks. For the first task they had to discuss a recent film they had seen, and say who acted in it, what it was about, and whether they enjoyed it or not. Then the learners had to read a short review of the novel *Frankenstein* from their textbook and answer some comprehension questions. The review had some missing words, which were given to the learners to place in the correct spaces. These words were all past participles (made, written, terrified, etc.), which the learners had been

working with as part of their learning of the passive voice. They also had to find in the review the title and author, what type of film it is, the characters and the plot. This led to a writing task: each learner had to write a short paragraph about a book that they had read or a film they had seen recently and to read it aloud to the class. Finally, after that preparation the class watched the film *Frankenstein*, which in addition to the English soundtrack had English subtitles, so that they could find it easier to understand. Afterwards they discussed the film.

This activity about *Frankenstein* and book/film reviews gave the learners the opportunity to practise speaking, reading, listening, writing, and grammar skills. Afterwards the learners and their teacher discussed the usefulness of the activity. Some of the learners' comments as noted by their teacher were: "I found it easier to understand the film because we had discussed the story before we saw it." "I liked the subtitles because I cannot always understand what the people say." "Seeing the picture and at the same time listening made it easier for me to understand" (not the learners' exact words, but reconstructed from the teacher's field notes).

A similar activity was done based on a James Bond film, which was also a topic from their textbook. Before watching the film the learners were given certain preparatory tasks. They wrote down what they knew about James Bond and shared their ideas with the rest of the class. They were shown some James Bond film posters and discussed which James Bond films they had seen. Then they listened to an extract from a James Bond film: *The Man with the Golden Gun*¹¹, while at the same time looking at a series of cartoon pictures depicting the story. The learners had to answer some questions about the story they had listened to before reading the transcript of the listening text and deciding which lines of the text matched each picture. They then took turns telling the story to a partner, in their own words, while referring to the cartoon pictures.

¹¹ This listening text is from the Class Audio CDs which complement the New Headway Student's book.

Finally, they watched a James Bond film, *Casino Royale*, once again with the addition of English subtitles. A discussion about the film and its similarity with the James Bond film from the listening text followed.

As in the previous audio-visually based activity, the learners had the opportunity to practise all four skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. Furthermore, they discussed their views on the whole activity, and whether they thought it was helpful in improving their knowledge of the English language. They all spoke positively about the activity, and expressed the desire to have more such activities as part of their course.

Another film some of the learners watched was a National Geographic documentary on tsunamis, prompted by an article they read in the newspaper. This inspired an animated discussion on natural disasters, global warming and the future of our planet.

In addition to the above, the Upper-Intermediate class learners watched an Oxford University Press film especially for learners, which had been given to the school as a sample. The film was about some young people moving into a new flat, and interacting with their new neighbours. The film had subtitles in English, and was followed by comprehension exercises. The learners found this film challenging due to the actors' very pronounced British accents. They also did not enjoy it as much as the other films, as it was not very exciting. It was decided not to purchase any of these films for the school.

Although it is desirable for the learners to be exposed to different English accents, Harmer (1998) warns against discouraging the learners with listening texts that are too difficult to understand:

Despite the desirability of exposing students to many varieties of English, however, common sense is called for. The number of different varieties (and the degree to which they are different from the one students are learning) will be a matter for the teacher to judge, based on the students' level, where the classes are taking place etc." (1998: 97, parenthesis in the original).

Discussing the use of videos for EFL learners, Harmer advises:

We have to choose video material according to the level and *interests* of our students. If we make it too difficult or too easy, the students will not be motivated. If the content is irrelevant to the students' interest, it may fail to engage them (1998: 108, italics added).

Despite the fact that a film is also a listening task, some teachers think that "video is less useful for teaching listening than audio tape precisely because, with the visual senses engaged as well as the audio senses, students pay less attention to what they are actually hearing" (Harmer, 1998: 108). For this reason, as well as for the purpose of extra listening practice, learners also did listening tasks which were just based on recordings.

4.4.3 Listening tasks

As mentioned earlier, the textbooks used at the school where the research took place, are supplied with CDs for listening tasks. Every unit in these textbooks has several listening tasks. Furthermore, as part of their first course, all the learners had listened to some English songs, read their lyrics, and done certain tasks based on these songs. However, some of the learners wrote in the reconnaissance questionnaire that they would like to listen to more songs as part of learning English. It was therefore decided to have more activities involving English songs.

The learners listened to each song at least twice to try and get the gist of the lyrics. They often found these lyrics very difficult to understand, when they listened to a song for the first time. To assist the learners, some of the words they might have difficulty understanding, were taught prior to the listening activity. After listening to a song a couple of times, the learners were asked to describe in their own words what the song was about, and to predict the title of the song. Sometimes, after listening for gist, the learners were given a copy of the song's lyrics with some missing words or phrases which they had to complete while listening to the song again. With other songs the learners were

given the task of putting in the correct order the lines of the lyrics, which had been cut into strips and mixed up. This was done as a group activity which involved speaking and cooperating with their peers in order to work out the song's lyrics logically.

Usually, a short discussion followed about the theme of the song. The learners also tried to identify the band or the singer, and they answered questions, such as: "Who wrote it?" "Do you agree with what the song is saying?" etc. This would usually lead to a discussion about social problems, culture etc. Most of our learners loved singing, and they would often sing along with the CD as soon as they were able to understand and pronounce the lyrics.

4.4.4 Multimodal learning activities

In an effort to optimise learning as well as make the lessons lively and involve the learners, several multimodal, interactive learning activities were organised. The theory of multimodal learning hypothesises that, when both visual and verbal/textual materials are viewed together, learning is enhanced (Mayer, 2005). Findings from quantitative studies show that multimodal learning is more effective than traditional unimodal learning (Metiri Group, 2008). Metiri Group's review of these studies states that "[A]dding visuals to verbal (text and/or auditory) learning can result in significant gains in basic and higher-order learning"(2008: 14).

The Pre-Intermediate class (consisting only of male learners) had a lesson on fish and fishing. Posters of fish with name-labels, fishing rods, bait and other such realia were brought in, as well as a fish, which the learners and their teacher cooked and ate. Before cooking the fish, they learned the vocabulary about fish and fishing. The learners were very interested and participated with enthusiasm in the whole activity, including the cooking of the fish. It was a learner from this class who had suggested *cooking lessons* as an activity in one of his responses to the reconnaissance questionnaire. This type of activity,

apart from the interest and fun factor, gave learners an opportunity to practise the target language in an authentic situation, and encouraged them to make an effort to communicate in the target language.

The topic of a lesson in one of the textbooks was about a homeless person selling *The Street News*, an American newspaper for homeless people. After listening to an interview¹² with a homeless person in New York, and discussing it in class, the learners read an article from The Star newspaper about a local homeless man: *Residents paying homeless man to do the city's job*.

Afterwards the learners and their teacher went out to speak to a person who was selling *Homeless Talk*, (the local newspaper for the homeless), at a street intersection. The learners made an effort to communicate with the homeless person and asked her several questions. They also bought a couple of copies of the newspaper. Then they visited the offices of the newspaper *Homeless Talk*, and spoke to the people who put together the newspaper. When they returned to the school they discussed the plight of the homeless and what should be/could be done about it. New vocabulary was explained and written on the board. Each learner was given the task to read for homework a short article from *The Homeless Talk* and to speak about it the next day in class. This was done very successfully and generated further discussion amongst the learners. In evaluating this activity, the learners felt that it had been beneficial for learning the target language, and expressed the desire for more such activities as part of their course.

This type of lesson, which combines classroom tasks with activities outside the classroom makes learning a more realistic experience and provides learners with a real-life context for their communicating efforts in the target language. As Canagarajah points out: "Because participants have to adopt communicative strategies relevant to each situation ... learning is more meaningful in actual contexts of language use and practice" (2007: 931).

¹² This listening text was from the Class Audio CD which is supplied with the Oxford New Headway textbooks.

Another multimodal learning activity was a lesson based on computer vocabulary and 'Google Earth'. The learners had been learning vocabulary relating to computers. A computer was brought and placed in the middle of the classroom. The monitor, keyboard, mouse, etc. were labeled with name cards. The learners practised saying these words. Then they played a game with the new words¹³. The class was divided into two groups, which had to compete against each other in demonstrating their knowledge of the new vocabulary they had learned. The cards were placed face down on a table and each group took turns in picking up a card and attaching it to the correct item. This game was played with enthusiasm and a lot of laughter by both groups. The group that got the most correct placements won a chocolate which they had to share.

Finally, the teacher connected to the internet and to Google Earth. A couple of learners gave their home addresses, and after some searching they were looking at the suburbs of Luanda, Angola. This had an amazing effect on the learners, (who had been away from home for some months, and were feeling homesick) and led to an animated discussion. Amongst other things, they discussed the many uses of computers, and the progress in computer technology. Reflecting on this activity, the learners commented that it was very useful to them, as they have to use computers for their work.

In describing language acquisition in an LFE context, Canagarajah argues that it is "multimodal, multisensory, and, therefore, multidimensional" (2007: 931-932). The activities described above focus on learning through practice in a range of modes. The learners' linguistic competence develops through opportunities for using the target language in various communication contexts.

¹³ Multimodal learning often involves 'scaffolding' in the form of support to learners in order to achieve levels of cognition which would otherwise be beyond their capabilities (Metiri Group, 2008). Scaffolding could be in the form of pre-teaching difficult vocabulary, or doing a preparatory exercise, like playing a game, before listening to a song or an auditory text, or being required to produce an oral or a written text.

4.4.5 Extra reading and speaking activities

Some of our learners had requested during the informal discussions that we read newspaper or magazine articles, and talk about them in class. Two of these extra reading and speaking activities, which were based on articles from The Star newspaper, are described below.

The learners of the upper-intermediate class read an article about women in Somalia: *Women setting the pace of social change in a land beset by hardships*. Before reading the article they discussed the meaning of certain words used in the article that might present a challenge for them. These words were written on the board. For example: textile, teeming, subservient, overwhelmingly, prompting, etc. Afterwards, the learners found Somalia on the world map, which is hanging on the wall in the classroom. Then, they read the article and took turns talking about it in their own words. Finally, the class had a discussion on the role of women in society, firstly in general, and then specifically in the learners' country of origin. As a result of this discussion one of the learners related two incidents in Angola which demonstrated the power of women in that country.

The first incident concerned a statue of a naked woman which was placed at the entrance of Luanda's international airport. The Angolan women felt that it was insulting and they demanded that it should be removed. They were successful in convincing the authorities, and that statue is no longer there. The second incident concerned a song written by a well known and successful Angolan singer and song-writer. The lyrics of the song were insulting to women, who demanded that the song be withdrawn and the singer apologise publicly, which was done. Furthermore, they demanded that he should write a song which shows respect for women. He was given a very short deadline for this task, which was completed without delay! The teacher was amazed at hearing these stories. The learner who related these stories did so in a very graphic and enthusiastic manner. Although the learner made grammatical and

syntactic mistakes, she managed to relate her stories successfully. Being interested in the topic of her talk, and not being obliged to produce a talk merely as a classroom task, she achieved a higher level of fluency than usual.

These examples support the view that performance is enhanced when learners are engaged with the topic of the learning task, and have a genuine interest in communicating the information. Canagarajah suggests that learners “have to understand communication as performative, not just constitutive” (2007: 934). He explains that learners “going beyond the notion of just constructing prefabricated meanings through words, will consider shaping meaning in actual interactions and even reconstructing the rules and conventions to represent their interests, values, and identities” (2007: 934).

4.4.6 Extra writing tasks

One of the Upper-Intermediate textbook tasks involved listening to four people describing their childhoods. After listening to the tapescript several times and discussing the new vocabulary the learners were given the task of writing about their parents and their childhoods. After completion, each learner read his/her writing in class. Then the teacher collected their writing for corrections. This was one of several extra writing activities of this class, whose learners had expressed the wish to have more writing practice. The writing topics reflected their interests and were based on their socio-cultural backgrounds. Their writing showed a marked improvement, which was also reflected in their written examination results. This was the only class with a hundred per cent pass rate in the second examination. Being the most advanced class of the whole group of Angolan learners, they already had a sufficient amount of fluency for oral communication, and were therefore more interested in improving their writing skills.

4.4.7 Grammar tasks

Some of the learners had requested more grammar tasks. Research into teachers' and learners' perceptions of the usefulness of classroom tasks has shown that many learners prefer explicit grammar tasks, whereas teachers value communicative tasks more. Research shows "that learners prefer pronunciation practice and error correction to more communicatively-intended activities such as pair work and the self discovery of errors, which teachers value more highly (Nunan, 1989, cited in Hawkey, 2006: 242).

Similarly the learners participating in this research project responded positively to explicit grammar teaching. They were given grammar exercises from a 'traditional' grammar book to complement the more communicative grammar tasks from their textbook. They repeatedly indicated that they wanted more of these explicit grammar exercises. Peacock, however, cautions that certain learner-held beliefs may be detrimental to language learning. According to Peacock, research has shown that learners who believe that learning a lot of grammar rules is beneficial to language learning, did not make as much progress in the target language as learners who did not hold the same belief (1998, cited in Hawkey, 2006: 242). Therefore, the 'enlightened' postmethod teachers assess their classes and make an informed decision on the suitable combination of implicit/explicit grammar tasks that would most benefit *those* particular learners in *that* particular teaching context.

Cullen, while arguing in favour of a process rather than a product¹⁴ approach to teaching grammar, nevertheless, admits that there are "many circumstances where it may be necessary and desirable to pre-select language items for attention prior to setting learners loose on a task, particularly for lower-level students, and as a general policy a balanced combination of the two

¹⁴ Cullen's process versus product approach to teaching grammar is based on Widdowson's (1990) idea of grammar as a 'liberating force': an approach to grammar "as a resource which liberates the language user from an over-dependency on lexis and context for the expression of meaning" (Cullen, 2008: 221)

approaches is likely to be the most effective teaching strategy to adopt” (2008: 228).

4.4.8 Games, competitions, and informal social events

As our learners obviously enjoyed music and singing, we decided to organise a singing contest for the whole school. Each learner chose a song with English lyrics that she/he liked. They had one week to rehearse their songs. The singing contest was a great success. The learners were very good at organising the whole show. They had a microphone, and in most cases they had the background music to the song. Some were a little shy or found the lyrics difficult to pronounce, but most of them sang well and performed almost like professionals. There was a lot of humour and laughter and even some dancing. One learner who did not want to sing, recited a poem instead. Both the learners and the teachers voted for the winner. The prize was a bottle of wine, which they all shared at the guesthouse.

4.4.9 Assessment – More oral tests

In accordance with our learners' wishes we introduced an extra oral test, in addition to the one we normally had at the end of the course. This oral test differed from the one they had had before as part of their end-of-course assessment, in that the learners could choose their own topic and text. It could be a newspaper article, a story, a film, a poem, a song, or a text that they wrote themselves. After presenting their topic we asked them questions on it, but also on other related topics if these came up in the conversation.

Many of our learners chose to speak on a topic relating to their country. Some of them spoke about politics in Angola, or a specific politician, which led to a discussion about South African politics and politicians as well. Others spoke about the Angolan countryside, and what places we should visit if we went to Angola. This led to a discussion on places they have visited in South Africa,

and what they would recommend to their friends to see when they visit South Africa.

4.4.10 Outings

Discussing 'outings' last does not mean that these are considered in any way a less important pedagogical tool. On the contrary, at our school it is considered just as important as any of the other learning activities. MacLean Orlando states that learning outside the classroom "is often regarded as less valuable, less important or even not consciously regarded as learning at all!" (2006: 46). She refutes this notion, and argues that teachers have a responsibility to create opportunities for informal learning, such as "organize visits to companies or invite representatives from organizations or English speakers to interact with [our] students" (2006: 47, square brackets added). MacLean Orlando points out that The Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio has recently recognised informal learning as equally important to formal learning. Two major aims of the European Language Portfolio are to promote a) autonomous and b) lifelong learning. Informal learning is likely to contribute to the achievement of each of these aims. MacLean Orlando concludes: "[N]ow that informal learning is accorded the same value as formal learning in this document, teachers have a responsibility to develop informal learning opportunities as part of supporting students to be successful second language learners" (2006: 48).

Canagarajah supports the value of informal learning and states that, "interactions that are not framed as pedagogical (i.e., off-task, off-site activities) can be utilised for learning" (2007: 927). The learners who participated in this research project, valued opportunities for informal learning, and requested more outings. In responding to the reconnaissance questionnaire, seven out of the nine learners had indicated that they would like more outings, interaction with other schools and other people, and lessons outside the classroom.

Therefore, many 'off-site' activities were organised. Some of these activities were: a visit to the Star newspaper¹⁵; a trip to a game reserve and a guided tour; a visit to the Wits University Origins Centre; a tour of S.A. Breweries, and the Coca-Cola factory; a visit to the Union Buildings in Pretoria; a shopping trip to the Oriental Plaza followed by lunch at an Indian restaurant; a tour of the Mandela Museum; a visit and guided tour of the S.A.B.C. etc. Feedback from the learners at the time of the outings was positive. Their responses to the question on outings in the second questionnaire were also mostly positive (See 4.6.2).

4.5 The effects of the first cycle of interventions - assessment results and reflections

4.5.1 Assessment results after the first English course at the school

At the end of their first English course at the school, the learners had written the City & Guilds examinations for their level, which were sent from London, as mentioned in Chapter Three. These examinations were for the Beginner, Elementary, and Pre-Intermediate level. The examinations were marked by examiners in London. The results were very pleasing: all the learners obtained a pass mark, and six out of the nine learners were awarded a first class pass.

These examinations, as explained previously, assess the learners' listening, reading, and writing skills. They do not assess the learners' oral competency. Therefore the teachers organised oral tests to assess the learners' speaking skills in the English language. Each learner was assessed individually. The learners were given a text according to their level. These texts had been

¹⁵ Most of the learners from the first group are journalists. Therefore this outing was of particular interest to them.

chosen by their class teacher. In an effort to make it easier for the learners from the Beginners' class, their texts were chosen out of their textbook. They were asked to read the text aloud; then they were asked questions on the text by all three teachers present. The questions assessed their comprehension as well as their ability to express their opinion in English. Finally, each learner was asked a few general questions to assess their ability to understand and communicate in informal situations.

The results of the oral test were not as pleasing as the results from the written examinations. Some of the learners' pronunciation during reading, rendered the text incomprehensible. Some of the learners did not understand the questions or had difficulty replying. Two learners from the Beginners' class did not pass the oral test. Most of the learners had difficulty expressing themselves in English. These results may explain why the learners placed such importance on acquiring speaking and listening skills, as evidenced from their responses to the reconnaissance questionnaire which was given to them at the end of their first course, after their oral test.

It was decided that all the learners would proceed to the next level. The learners from the Pre-Intermediate class requested to skip the Intermediate level, in order to go straight to the Upper-Intermediate. They were two diligent learners, one of whom had obtained a first class pass in the first written examination. It was decided to allow them to proceed to Upper-Intermediate, provided they passed the first few tests from their new course book. The results of the second examination proved that this was the right decision: both learners passed the Upper-Intermediate written examination, while one of them achieved a first class pass.

4.5.2. Assessment results after the learners' second course

During the first cycle of teaching interventions, which was the learners' second course at the school, the teachers responded to the learners' suggestions from

the reconnaissance questionnaire. As previously mentioned, the learners' priority had been to improve their oral proficiency in English. They had asked for more listening and speaking practice both in the classroom and in informal situations during outings, and school functions.

As described in 4.4, the teachers made every effort to respond to the learners' requests: there were many listening and speaking tasks, films, games, a singing competition, outings, and parties. In addition to those activities, each Friday afternoon a general discussion was held with all three classes, in the school's common room. Teachers and learners chose the discussion topics together: favourite leisure activities, sport, traveling, cooking and favourite foods, current events, news items of interest, romance, dreams and plans for the future, etc.

Some of the learners who had difficulty speaking English in the beginning, started to express themselves and take part more and more in the general discussions. The teachers tried to make sure that everyone had a chance to speak. Gradually we started to see a general improvement in the learners' fluency, especially those who could hardly say a word when they first arrived at the school. Everyone was having great fun and enjoying the learning process; levels of confidence in communicating in English rose steeply; the teachers had excellent rapport with the learners, and the weeks allocated to the second course passed very quickly.

At the end of the second course, we had two oral exams: the one was the same as at the end of the first course, while the other, as explained in 4.4.8, gave more agency to the learners, as they could choose their own topic and bring their own text, which could be a piece of prose from a book/magazine/newspaper, or a poem, a song or even something they wrote themselves. (Some learners had requested more oral tests in the reconnaissance questionnaire). The results from both oral tests were very pleasing. All the teachers were happy to note the learners' improvement. The topics the

learners chose have already been discussed in 4.4.8. All learners passed the oral test, and some attained a first class mark.

Subsequently, the learners wrote their international examinations and left for Angola as mentioned previously. They wrote the Elementary, the Pre-Intermediate, and the Upper-Intermediate level examinations. The results from the written examinations take a long time to arrive from the United Kingdom: usually six to eight weeks. Therefore, it was a long time after the learners had left that we received the results and the certificates. The results of the written examinations were not as pleasing as the orals. Only six out of the nine learners passed, and only one of them achieved a first class pass, whereas in the first examination all nine learners had passed and six of them achieved a first class pass. One of the learners who failed, had obtained a first class pass in the previous examination. A request for a re-mark was sent to City & Guilds, at an extra expense to the school, but when returned the result was the same. Teachers and learners found these results very surprising. The learners were in Angola when we received their results, and we had been waiting in vain for their return. We had to advise them of their results by phone. Their certificates were taken to Angola by the three learners of their group who had managed to obtain their visas and had returned to the school for a short period of lessons in December of 2008.

4.5.3 Reflections on the assessment results

The learners' responses to the reconnaissance questionnaire had indicated their wish for more speaking/listening practice, and more opportunities for informal learning. By responding to the learners' wishes, the teachers helped them achieve a higher level of fluency, as was evident from the results of their oral tests. However, not all of the learners were very successful at the second written examination. Some of the learners had maintained their standard, while others had failed. There are several factors which could have contributed to these results:

- The teachers and learners (especially at the Beginner, and Elementary Level classes) had concentrated on improving fluency, while other areas of learning were given less attention
- The second round of examinations were obviously at a more challenging level than the first
- Some of the learners may have felt overconfident after the results from the first examination, and did not put enough effort into preparing for the second examination.

There is no way of knowing which of the above contributed to some of the learners' poor performance in the second written examination. Perhaps it was a combination of factors. While we may not be sure of the exact reasons behind the poor results, we may surmise that the first teaching interventions, with their emphasis on oral practice, would have contributed to the learners' improved results in the oral test.

As in other areas of human endeavour, in deciding on specific approaches to teaching, one has losses and gains. The oral proficiency was important for the learners. However, obtaining a certificate could also make a difference to their careers. Reflecting on the above considerations, one becomes aware of the need for greater balance in teaching the necessary linguistic knowledge and skills.

4.6 Data from the second questionnaire

4.6.1 Conditions under which the second questionnaire data were gathered

The gathering of the data from the second questionnaire took place under less than optimal conditions. It had been decided to give the learners the questionnaire after their oral and written exams. A farewell party was to be held at the school straight after the completion of the second questionnaire as

the learners were leaving for Angola to visit their families and to vote in the country's elections. However, this is not what happened.

The learners were anxious to finish their exams so that they would have enough time afterwards to do their shopping and make preparations for the journey. One has to keep in mind that these students are all adults, and almost all are married with children. It was very important to them to shop for presents for their families. The final exam was set for Monday 18th August. The students requested to write it on the previous Saturday, and our principal agreed. Furthermore the farewell party was cancelled, as the students preferred to use the Saturday afternoon for shopping. Some of the students were leaving earlier than the others and they would not have much time for shopping and packing.

I had suggested during the previous week that I give the questionnaires before the oral exam which took place on the Friday. The principal did not agree. She insisted that I give the questionnaire to the students only after the final exam. In an effort to encourage the students to stay after the exam to answer the questionnaire, I ordered some pizzas. The pizzas took a long time to arrive, and the students were eager to leave. All the other teachers had left except one who stayed to give me moral support. The teacher who is fluent in Portuguese and had helped the Beginner Level students (her class) to answer the first questionnaire was sorely missed. The students wanted to take the pizzas to the guesthouse and answer the questionnaires later in the evening. I had a hard time convincing them otherwise. It was in this climate of conflict of interests and in a hurried way that the second questionnaire was answered. This was very different to the warm and cooperative atmosphere we had at the time when learners responded to the first questionnaire.

The second questionnaire was more detailed than the first, with more specific questions about each item, and was five pages long. This might not have been a big problem under ideal circumstances, but in the situation described above,

it was another aggravating factor which impacted negatively on the quality of the students' responses. They did not answer all the questions, and they did not write in detail. Two learners left straight after the exam (they were catching an earlier flight than the rest of the group), and did not respond to the second questionnaire. Only seven learners participated. It was clear that the students, who had previously been eager to participate in the research project, did not really engage with this phase of the research. I felt very disappointed and despondent, but at the same time I knew that I was learning an important (if painful) lesson about collecting research data.

When reviewing the second questionnaire data it is important to keep in mind the conditions under which these data were gathered.

4.6.2. Data from the learners' responses to the second questionnaire

A. Reading texts

A1. Reading texts from the textbook

Five learners indicated that they liked the reading texts in their textbook. They gave the following reasons:

They said that these reading texts

- helped them improve their pronunciation
- helped them acquire vocabulary
- helped them discuss certain topics with their teacher

Six learners found the topics of the reading texts 'sometimes interesting'

One learner found the topics of the reading texts 'always interesting'

All **seven** learners agreed that the texts were 'very helpful' for improving their knowledge of the English language.

A2. Reading texts that the teacher provided

Six learners indicated that they liked the reading texts that the teacher provided. They said that these reading texts helped them

- improve their reading and speaking skills
- increase their English vocabulary
- learn something about the world

and

- provided a variety of topics from other sources (not the textbook)

Two learners said that changing books could be confusing

Two learners said they found prepositions difficult

One learner did not answer this question

Five learners found the topics of these texts 'always interesting'

One learner found them 'inspiring'

One learner found them 'sometimes interesting'

Six learners found the reading texts provided by the teacher 'very helpful' for improving their English

One learner found them 'a little helpful'

When asked to suggest reading topics that interested them, and that could be included in their next course, some of the suggestions were:

- global issues
- what people are doing to solve problems around the world
- humanity ... (illegible), society and politics

Three learners from the elementary class misunderstood the question and they may have copied the answer from each other. They replied about a topic for writing: "writing about a friend"

One learner, also from the elementary class, replied he would like to read, study and talk English every day

One learner did not answer this question

B. Grammar tasks

B1. Grammar tasks from the textbook

Six learners stated that they liked the grammar tasks from the textbook. They all agreed that grammar exercises would help them to improve their English.

One of the learners wrote that she liked the grammar exercises because they helped her “in writing and forming correct phrases”.

Three learners said they would like more grammar exercises.

One learner (who had been very creative with his answers to the reconnaissance questionnaire) did not reply to this question, or the question that follows. The conditions under which these data were collected may be the reason behind the lack of responses.

B2. Grammar tasks that your teacher gave you

Six learners liked the grammar tasks that the teachers provided.

One learner said that the grammar tasks that the teacher gave complimented those from the textbook¹⁶.

One learner said the grammar tasks were enough.

One learner did not reply to this question.

When asked their opinion about what helps them most in improving their knowledge and use of grammar, they responded as follows:

Two learners said more practice helped them improve their grammar.

One learner said “writing, reading and conversation in class”¹⁷.

One learner from the elementary class misunderstood the question, and replied “I want to improve my English”.

Three learners did not reply.

¹⁶The teachers’ grammar tasks were explicit grammar exercises from a ‘traditional’ grammar book. It is interesting that this learner seems to think that it is useful to have explicit as well as communicative grammar tasks.

¹⁷It is interesting that this learner, in contrast with learners in previous research (Nunan, 1989, Peacock, 1998, in Hawkey, 2006), perceives reading, writing, and conversation, rather than explicit grammar tasks, as being helpful in improving one’s knowledge of grammar.

C. Conversation

C1. Conversation topics from your textbook

Four learners found the conversation topics from the textbook “always interesting”

Three learners found them “sometimes interesting”

C2. Conversation topics generated by the teacher

Four learners found the teacher generated conversation topics “sometimes interesting”

Three learners found them “always interesting”

Four learners said that they would have liked more conversation in the classroom

Three learners said they had enough conversation in class

D. Pronunciation classes

Four learners found the special pronunciation classes “very helpful”

Three learners said the pronunciation classes were “a little helpful”

Four learners said the pronunciation classes were enough

Three learners said they would have liked more pronunciation classes

E. Puzzles and games

Five learners found the puzzles and games “very helpful” for learning English

Two learners found the puzzles and games “a little helpful”

F. Outings

Three learners said the outings were “sometimes enjoyable”

Two learners said the outings were “very enjoyable”

Two learners did not respond to this question

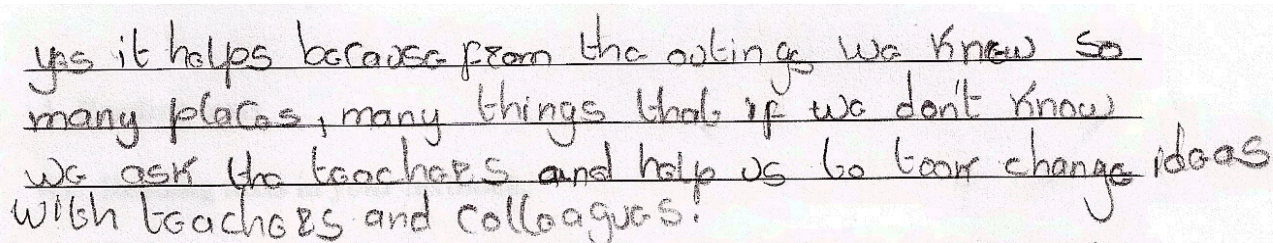
Three learners felt that they had enough outings

Three learners would have liked more outings

One learner did not respond to this question

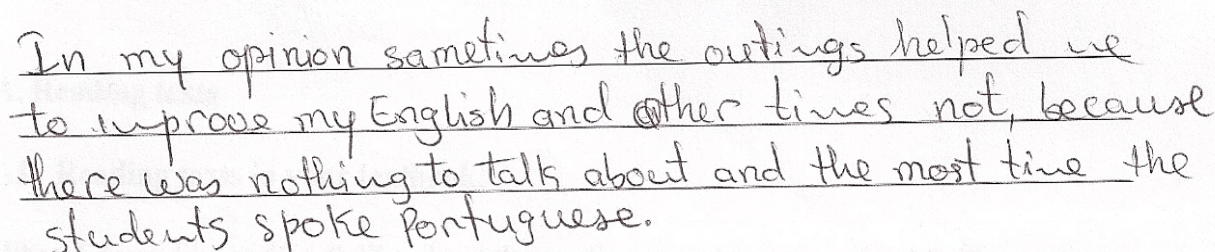
In responding to the question, “Did the outings help you/not help you in improving your English? Please explain”

one learner from the Elementary class wrote:



yes it helps because from the outings we knew so many places, many things that if we don't know we ask the teachers and help us to learn change ideas with teachers and colleagues!

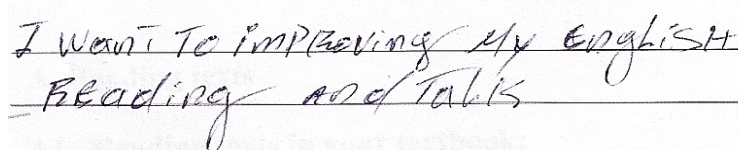
Another learner, from the Upper-Intermediate class, wrote:



In my opinion sometimes the outings helped me to improve my English and other times not, because there was nothing to talk about and the most time the students spoke Portuguese.

This was the main problem with this particular group of learners: they all shared the same L1, and used it when speaking to each other in preference to speaking English (discussed in section 4.5.2.3, Reflections on the data from the second questionnaire).

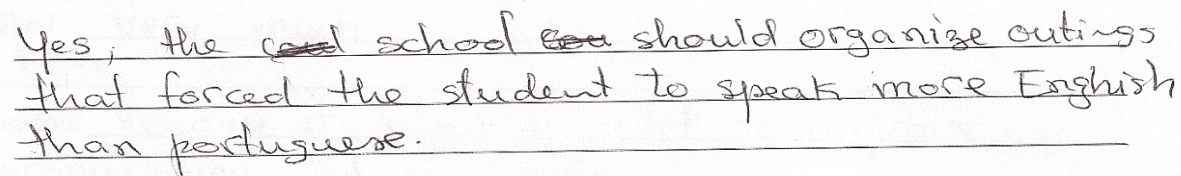
One learner from the Elementary class, probably had a problem understanding the question, and he wrote:



I want to improving my English
Reading and talking

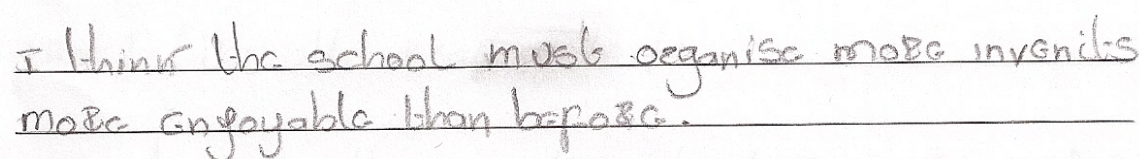
Four learners did not respond to this question.

When asked to make suggestions about outings that the school could organise for them during their next English course, one learner wrote:



Yes, the school should organize outings that forced the student to speak more English than portuguese.

Another learner wrote:



I think the school must organise more invenits more enjoyable than before.

"I think the school must organise more invenits (events?) more enjoyable than before".

One learner wanted audio-visual lessons and conversation

Four learners did not reply

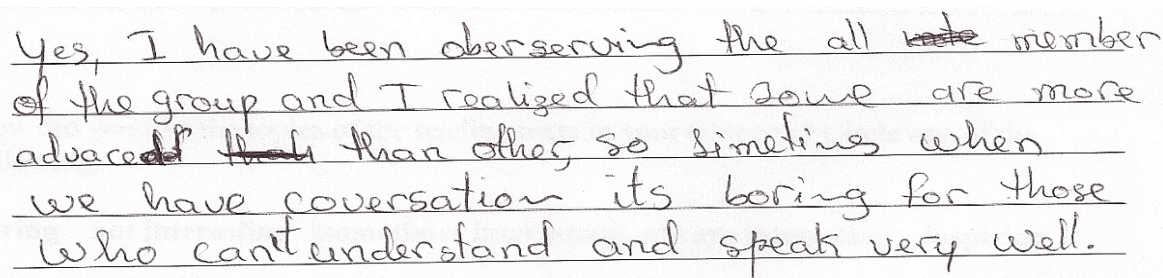
G. Any other comments?

Is there anything else you would like to suggest that your teachers could do to improve your learning experience in your next course?

Five learners did not respond to this question.

One learner from the elementary class suggested talking to learners from other schools. This was something that had been mentioned in the first questionnaire as well, but we had not been successful in organising.

One learner from the Upper-Intermediate class commented on the whole-school conversation classes held on Friday afternoons:



Yes, I have been observing the all ~~note~~ member of the group and I realized that some are more advanced ~~than~~ than others so sometimes when we have conversation its boring for those who can't understand and speak very well.

While the teachers were aware of the difficulty certain learners had in participating in the general discussions we held every Friday afternoon, they still felt that these learners benefited from listening, even though they could not contribute to the discussion. This is another example of mismatches between teachers' and learners' perceptions of learning tasks.

4.6.2.1. Summary of responses to the second questionnaire

In summary, the main categories emerging from the second questionnaire responses were as follows:

- Most learners liked the reading texts from the textbook as well as those provided by the teacher, and suggested global issues, solutions to global problems, social issues, and politics as future topics.
- Most learners liked the grammar tasks from their textbook as well as those provided by the teacher.
- All learners liked the conversation topics from their textbook as well as those generated by the teacher
- **4/7** learners would have liked more conversation in class
- **3/7** learners said they had enough conversation in class
- Most learners found the pronunciation classes **very helpful**, and felt that they had enough pronunciation classes
- Most learners found the puzzles and games **very helpful** for learning English

- Most learners enjoyed the outings, but were divided equally in their opinions about whether they had enough outings or would have liked more.

4.6.2.2 Reflections on the data from the second questionnaire

It was evident from their responses to the second questionnaire that the learners claimed to be generally quite happy with their courses. They enjoyed the textbook¹⁸, as well as the teacher's learning tasks, and found value in both. They were happy with the way they had been taught grammar, both from their textbooks and from the exercises the teachers gave them. They were quite insightful in their comments of what improves their knowledge of grammar: They realised that actual practice of the language in the form of writing, reading and speaking, helped their knowledge of grammar, rather than just learning the rules and doing grammar exercises. They enjoyed the conversation sessions and most of them would have liked to have even more conversation in class. They found the special pronunciation classes very helpful¹⁹. They enjoyed informal learning, games, and outings, and realised the value of informal learning for second language acquisition. This topic has been discussed in 4.4.9. One learner's comment on outings, in 4.6.2.2, highlights one of the disadvantages of the Angolan group: they had a common language, Portuguese, which they used to communicate amongst themselves. Therefore, they did not practise speaking English amongst themselves at break or after school hours.

The overall impression from the data of the second questionnaire was a positive one. The teaching interventions of the first cycle of the project were successful in satisfying the learners' needs and wants. It was quite heartening for the teachers to have such a positive feedback notwithstanding the

¹⁸ The New Oxford Headway textbooks are in my opinion excellent teaching materials. They include a teacher's book, students' workbook, class audio CDs, students' workbook CD, and progress tests.

¹⁹ Once a week each class had a pronunciation lesson with an English teacher who has majored in Linguistics, specialising in Phonology.

circumstances under which the second questionnaire data were gathered, as was described in 4.6.1. The teachers had made every effort to accommodate the learners' needs and preferences, and it seemed that they had been quite successful in pleasing the learners. The learners' oral fluency improved as was evident from their oral tests. However, the written examination results, as discussed in 4.5.2 were not all as pleasing as had been expected.

4.7 Data from the second cycle of the research

4.7.1 Challenges encountered during the second cycle of the research project - attempts at solutions

After the data collection, at the end of the first cycle of teaching interventions, the research project came to a halt when all the students went back to Angola at the end of August 2008. The main reason for their departure was to participate in the Angolan elections which were held at the beginning of September 2008. Our learners were also very keen to see their families, having been away from home for nearly six months. During that time two of our students celebrated the birth of their babies, whom they had only seen through the Internet. In addition to the above, their visas were coming to the end of their period of validity and had to be renewed. We bid them a very emotional farewell, having become quite fond of them and they of us, since we were their only 'family' while in South Africa.

For the teachers it was a welcome break at first, as we had been working intensely during the weeks prior to their departure, preparing them for their written exams, conducting the oral exams, and collecting the end of course research data. They were supposed to return, at the very latest, by the end of September. That is when the waiting game started. Their visas were delayed and we were asked to provide the Angolan authorities with a number of letters and documents, which we did, repeatedly. Our students were getting impatient to return to complete their English language studies. We had a number of

phone calls and text messages from them expressing their desire to be back at the school, and also voicing their frustration with the immigration authorities.

Finally, in November, three of the original group of students returned and stayed until the middle of December. It was not sufficient time for completing their course, and very little could be achieved towards the data collection for the research project. In education there are two indispensable elements: time and access. Learners need the time to attend to their studies, and access to the learning process. Our learners were keen to continue their studies but they were effectively denied the time and the access.

However, the school had to continue without them, and we struggled on with a few students coming and going, and with endless promises about the imminent arrival of our Angolan students, until the end of 2008. With the start of the New Year all our efforts were directed to extending our services to locally available learners. The school was now teaching a completely different group of learners, and growing by the day, as more and more people got to know about it. There was again a wonderfully vibrant atmosphere of enthusiastic learners and teachers enjoying the teaching/learning process.

The new learners who registered in the final months of 2008, were not a homogenous group like the Angolan group before them. As already mentioned in Chapter Three, there were learners from several different countries, such as Ethiopia, Congo, Mozambique, Turkey, China, and two students from Angola (not from the original group). This situation had a disadvantage, but also some very definite advantages. First the disadvantage: all the learners of the original group spoke Portuguese. Since one of our teachers is fluent in Portuguese, it was easy to get feedback from those who spoke and understood very little English. However, none of the teachers is fluent in Chinese, Amharic, or Turkish, and although I can understand and converse in French, I am not really fluent in that language. This presented a real challenge when it came to

collecting feedback especially from the Beginners' class, and it has led to realizing one of the limitations of this research project (Discussed in Chapter 5).

One of the advantages (the most important one) was that the new group of learners needed to speak English in order to communicate with each other²⁰. Therefore, during break and at the outings and school social events they had the opportunity to practise the target language. When we had our conversation classes, on Friday afternoons, everyone had to make a great effort to participate and make themselves understood. English was their only common language and they used it as a lingua franca. As discussed in Chapter Two, Canagarajah points out that, "English is used most often as a contact language by speakers of other languages in the new contexts of transnational communication" (2007: 923).

Another advantage of the new group of learners was that they had a lot more opportunities to learn about other languages and cultures, which increases one's linguistic and cultural awareness. Kalantzis and Cope discuss "the possibility of an equitable, critical multiculturalism, in which cultural difference is effectively employed as a resource for securing social access" (1999, 248). As discussed in Chapter Two (2.2), awareness and respect for other languages and cultures could contribute significantly in avoiding the ill effects of globalisation (Canagarajah, 2005b). Canagarajah (2005b) urges EFL teachers to celebrate the diverse cultures and identities of their learners. At the school where this research project took place teachers and learners often celebrated their ethnic and cultural backgrounds not only during special cultural events, but also daily by enthusiastically finding out about each other's cultural practices.

As it is often the case when conducting research, conditions for this project have not always been optimal. The ideal situation would have been to complete the research project with the same learners with whom it started.

²⁰ The Angolan group had spoken to each other in Portuguese, during break and at the outings, despite the teachers' efforts to encourage them to speak English.

However, this was not possible. It was decided, therefore, to plan lessons for and teach the new students, according to the findings of the reconnaissance and the first intervention cycles.

As mentioned above, having Beginner and Elementary Level learners whose home languages none of the teachers understand, made us aware of the difficulty of 'giving them a voice' in their course design. The question arose as to whether a research project of this kind is only possible with learners at a higher level of English, and whether the beginners would have to be content with their teacher's choice of curriculum design. It was then, just as I despaired about the future of this project, that some of the learners in the Beginner Level class started to make an effort to tell us what they wanted 'more of' in their English course. With great difficulty and the help of an electronic dictionary, a Chinese beginner learner communicated her desire to have more speaking practice in class.

This, according to the reconnaissance and first cycle findings, had been one of the top priorities of our first group of Angolan students as well. Other learners in the same class and some learners from the other classes also asked for more speaking practice. Some learners asked for more listening practice, and one asked for more tests.

Even without being asked, some of the learners were beginning to express their preferences as to the content and method of their courses, and we were more than happy to listen. Perhaps it was the open-minded attitude to curriculum design, which we had adopted as a result of the earlier cycles of the research project that encouraged our learners to express themselves and make their wishes known.

It was subsequently felt that some kind of new structure was needed in order to collect more systematically the new information that was forthcoming, while at the same time we could continue with the teaching interventions that were

decided upon after reflection on the findings of the reconnaissance and first research cycle. True to the spirit of action research, small adjustments, in the form of additions and adaptations, could be made to the curriculum as we progressed.

On reflection, it was decided that instead of waiting until the end of the course to get feedback from the learners on the validity and usefulness of their courses, we could be asking them to respond to various learning tasks immediately after their completion. By collecting data in this way we could make changes to the course curriculum as it seemed necessary instead of changes being implemented only in later courses. This would mean analysing the data and reflecting on it after each learning task. Collecting some data during the course would not exclude the possibility of collecting further data with a questionnaire at the end of the course.

Stewart describes a similar approach to data collection for a research project conducted at a university in Japan. The researchers created a process for evaluating classroom tasks. Learners were given learning log journals where they wrote their perceptions of “the learning acquired as a result of doing specific tasks”. As all entries were written during lessons immediately after the completion of tasks, the learners’ impressions were still ‘fresh’ in their minds. (2007: 256-266).

Emulating Stewart’s (2007) research project, our learners were given numbered A5 exercise books to use as learning log journals. It was explained that their participation was optional and their views would remain anonymous. The teacher of each class asked the learners to evaluate certain of their learning tasks as soon as they had completed them. They were given a simple model for recording their task evaluations (see appendix iv). This model sheet was kept inside the journals for easy reference.

Given the Beginner level status of some of our students, the log prompts had to be very simple. Learners only had to answer three questions, and write a comment if they chose to do so. To respond to questions A and B they only had to write the correct number corresponding to their choice of response: 1=not at all, 2=very little, 3=it was okay, 4=very much. For question C they had to write 'Yes' or 'No'.

The four questions on the model sheet were:

- A. Did you enjoy this (speaking/listening/writing/grammar/ etc.) task?
- B. Did this task help you with your learning of English?
- C. Would you like to do more of this type of task?
- D. If you want to write something about this task, please use this space.

The idea behind this design was to have simplicity, clarity, and to save valuable classroom time.

4.7.2 Journal data

At the time that we started using the log journals, there were fifteen learners at the school: six in the Beginner class, six in the Pre-Intermediate class, and three in the Upper-Intermediate class. All of these learners participated in the journal writing activity which took place over a period of one and a half months. The journals were kept by the teachers and were given out after the completion of certain classroom tasks. The learners did not write their names on their journals. Each learner remembered the number of her/his journal, and asked for that number when the journals were given out. Therefore, no names are mentioned anywhere in the data. Where the learners' comments are quoted, the original spelling and grammar is preserved to safeguard the authenticity of their responses.

A total of nineteen tasks were selected for learner-response. It was difficult to categorise these tasks into grammar, listening, reading, speaking, vocabulary-learning, writing, or game-playing, as most of them encompassed more than

one of these areas of focus. However, for the purpose of presenting the data, the main purpose of each task was considered.

The majority of tasks the learners responded to, were speaking tasks. This was in line with the preferences expressed by the previous group of learners, as well as informal requests from the learners present during the second cycle of the project. It was also what the new learners were asking for in their journal responses. Usually, one of the main concerns and wishes of EFL learners is to improve their ability to communicate in the new language.

Some learners were absent on the days that certain tasks were performed; therefore, there were no responses to those tasks in their journals. The tasks are presented class by class, but summarised afterwards under their categories.

4.7.2.1 Speaking tasks:

Nine out of nineteen tasks were primarily speaking tasks. The learners of the Beginners' class responded to these tasks as follows:

Beginners' class

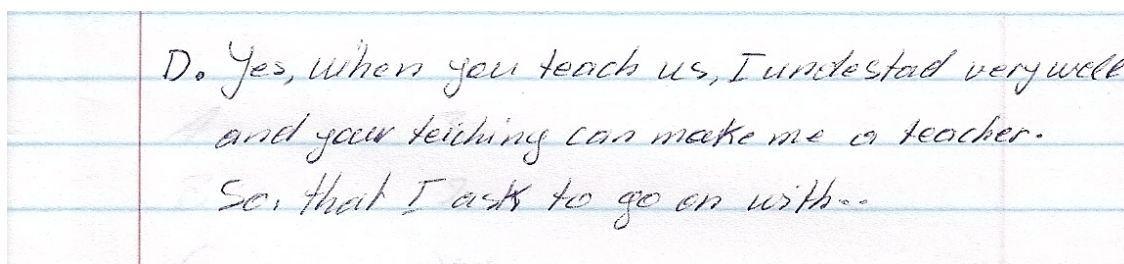
Six out of the thirteen tasks, that the Beginners' class responded to, were speaking tasks.

Table 3: Journal data - Speaking task 1: (9 March)

	Enjoyed the task very much	Task was very helpful for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 4 learners present)	4	4	4

3/4 learners wrote short comments:

"I like it. Because I will learn to speak English".



"Because, I like to speak well English everyday".

Table 4: Journal data - Speaking task 2: (13 March – Speaking about the family)

	Enjoyed the task very much	The task was okay as far as being enjoyable	Task was very helpful for learning English	Task was okay for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 4 learners present)	2	2	1	3	4

4/4 wrote short comments

One comment was: "I like it, to know the Family" (The task was speaking about their family, using the new vocabulary words they had just learned)

Another learner wrote:

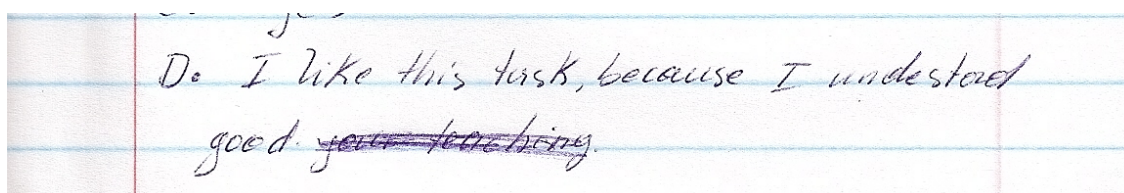
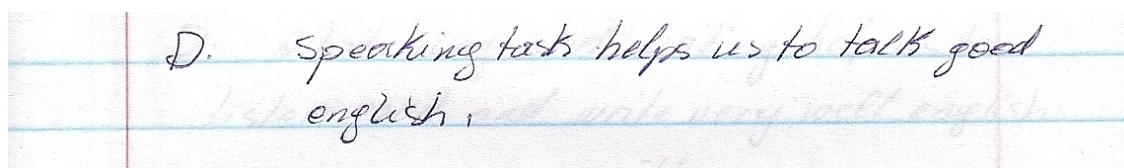


Table 5: Journal data - Speaking task 3: (16 March)

	Enjoyed the task very much	Task was very helpful for learning English	Task was okay for learning English	Task helped very little for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 5 learners present)	5	3	1	1	5

5/5 learners wrote short comments. Some of them were:

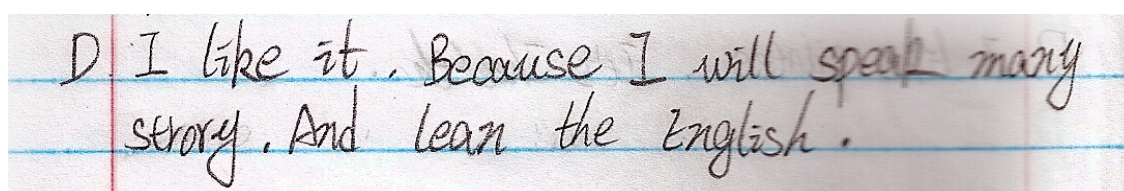


"I like speaking task (task?) help me to talk good English"

Table 6: Journal data - Speaking task 4: (18 March – Story-telling)

	Enjoyed the task very much	The task was okay as far as being enjoyable	Task was very helpful for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 3 learners present)	1	2	3	3

3/3 learners wrote short comments. Two of them were:



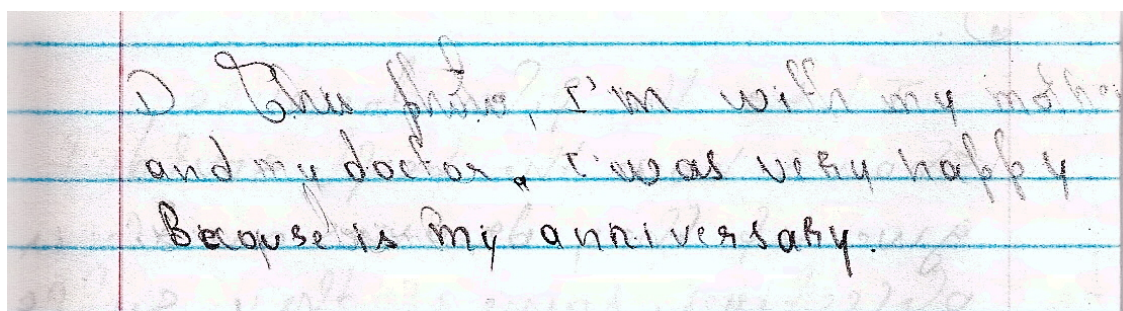
"I like speaking story help me to talk good English"

Table 7: Journal data - Speaking task 5: (16 April – Speaking about a photo) (Some learners brought whole albums of photos to school)

	Enjoyed the task very much	The task was okay as far as being enjoyable	Enjoyed the task very little	Task was very helpful for learning English	Task was okay for learning English	Task helped very little for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 5 learners)	2	2	1	2	2	1	4

One learner instead of 'yes' or 'no' wrote 3, which in the other answers means okay.

5/5 learners wrote short comments. Some of their comments were:



(He meant to say 'birthday'. The English word 'anniversary' is similar to the word birthday in Portuguese).

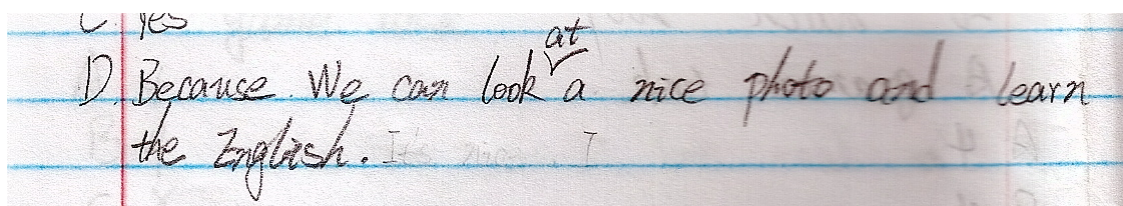
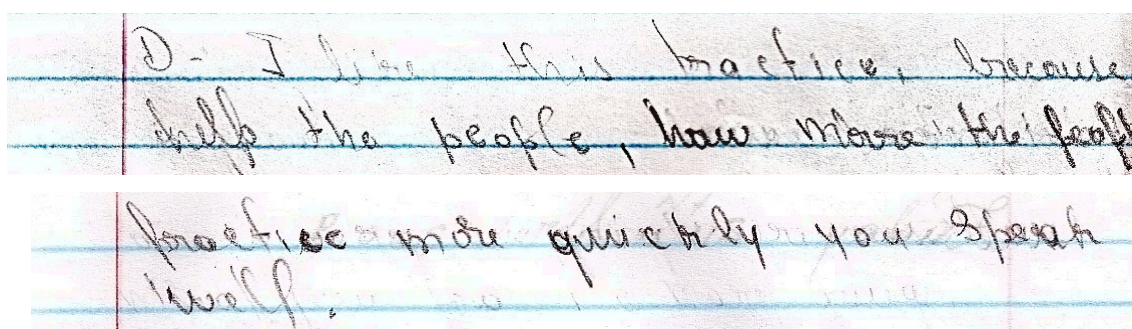


Table 8: Journal data - Speaking task 6: (16 April – speaking practice in pairs)

	Enjoyed the task very much	The task was okay as far as being enjoyable	Task was very helpful for learning English	Task was okay for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 5 learners present)	2	3	4	3	4

One learner instead of 'yes' or 'no' wrote '3', which in the other answers means 'okay'. This was the same learner who wrote '3' as an answer to the same question in the previous task, probably as a result of confusion.

5/5 learners wrote short comments. Some of the comments were:



"I like this practice, because help the people, how more the people practice more quickly you speak well"

“That’s a good idea to practice talking”

“It was good practice to talk more English”

“good idea”

Pre-Intermediate class

Both tasks that the Pre-Intermediate class responded to were speaking tasks.

Table 9: Journal data - Speaking task 1: (13 March – Speaking about a newspaper article)

	Enjoyed the task very much	Task was very helpful for learning English	Task was okay for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 4 learners present)	4	3	1	3

One learner replied ‘**no**’ to having more of this task.

There was only one comment: “I like the task very much”

Table 10: Speaking task 2: (18 March – Bank vocabulary lesson)

	Enjoyed the task very much	The task was okay as far as being enjoyable	Task was very helpful for learning English	Task was okay for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 5 learners present)	2	3	4	1	4

One learner replied ‘**no**’ to having more of this task. (It was interesting to note that the learner who said s/he did not want more of this task was the same learner who said s/he found it very helpful for learning English. The question was ‘would you like to do more of this *type* of task?’ S/he may have understood: more tasks on Bank vocabulary)

4/5 learners did not write any comments

1/5 learners wrote ‘yes’ instead of a comment

Upper-Intermediate class

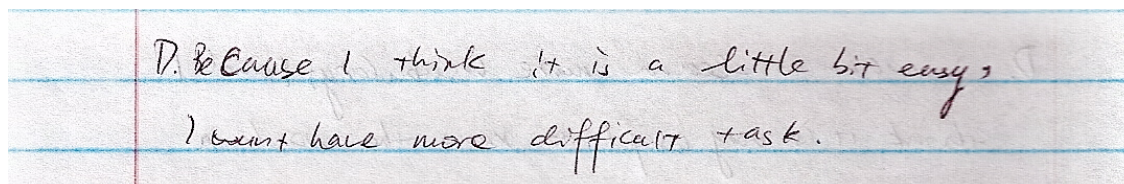
Two out of the four tasks that the Upper-Intermediate class responded to were speaking tasks. However, although the purpose of both of these tasks was to encourage the learners to speak English, one of these tasks was a game and will be considered under a separate category for game tasks.

Table 11: Journal data - Speaking task: (23 March – Speaking and listening task on auctions)

	Enjoyed the task very much	The task was okay as far as being enjoyable	Task was very helpful for learning English	Task was okay for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 3 learners present)	2	1	2	1	2

One learner replied '**no**' to having more of this task.

This learner wrote a comment explaining why s/he did not want more of this task: "Because I think it is a little bit easy. I want have more difficult task".



Another learner wrote "exelent".

The third learner wrote: "No comments!"

4.7.2.2 Grammar tasks

Beginners' class only

Three out of the thirteen tasks that the Beginners' class learners responded to were grammar tasks. The Pre-Intermediate class and the Upper-Intermediate class did not respond to any grammar tasks in their logbooks.

Table 12: Journal data – Grammar task 1: (26 March)

	Enjoyed the task very much	The task was okay as far as being enjoyable	Enjoyed the task very little	Task was very helpful for learning English	Task was okay for learning English	Task helped very little for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 5 learners present)	1	2	2	3	1	1	3

Two learners instead of writing 'yes' or 'no' to the question if they wanted more of this task, they wrote numbers. One wrote the number 4 (elsewhere in the reply sheet it meant 'very much') and the other wrote 3 (elsewhere in the reply sheet it meant 'it was okay'). It seems that the majority of the learners in this class saw the benefit of this grammar task and wanted more of it although they did not enjoy it much.

Table 13: Journal data – Grammar task 2: (21 April – Correct your own test task)

	Enjoyed the task very much	Enjoyed the task very little	Task was very helpful for learning English	Task was okay for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 5 learners present)	4	1	4	1	4

One learner wrote the number 4 instead of 'yes' or 'no' as a reply to the question "Do you want more of this task?" (elsewhere in the reply sheet '4' meant 'very much') It is possible that the learner was a little confused about how to reply, but wanted more of this task. Some comments were:

D. Correct our own test task is very enjoy and very nice.

"Correct our own test task is very enjoy and very nice"

"It was very nice"

Table 14: Journal data - Grammar task 3: (24 April – Marking workbook exercises in class)

	Enjoyed the task very much	The task was okay as far as being enjoyable	Task was very helpful for learning English	Task was okay for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 5 learners present)	3	2	3	2	4

One learner wrote the number 4 (elsewhere in the reply sheet it meant 'very much') – the same learner who wrote a number instead of 'yes' or 'no' before.

All five learners wrote short comments. Some of them were:

D. I like this task, because we learn many words and practice to correct the lesson

"I like the task, we practice and revise the lessons"

These were revision exercises in preparation for the external examinations.

D. I like it. I rectify my mistakes. But it's slow.

This learner felt that the task was too time-consuming. Perhaps s/he would have preferred the teacher to take all the exercises home and give them back ready corrected. However, the teacher feels that sometimes learners do not go over the corrections and consequently they do not learn from their mistakes.

Another advantage of doing the corrections in class is that the teacher has the opportunity to explain any items that are not understood.

4.7.2.3 Game tasks

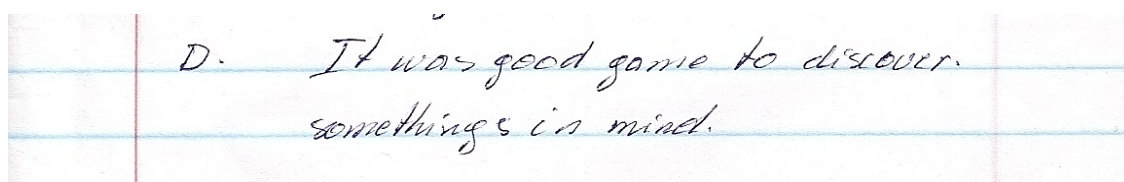
Two out of the nineteen tasks the learners responded to were games. Although these tasks involved mainly speaking, they had the special fun factor of a game and of problem solving. Therefore they are considered separately from the other speaking tasks.

Table 15: Journal data - Beginners' class: (20 March – 'Starting a restaurant' game)

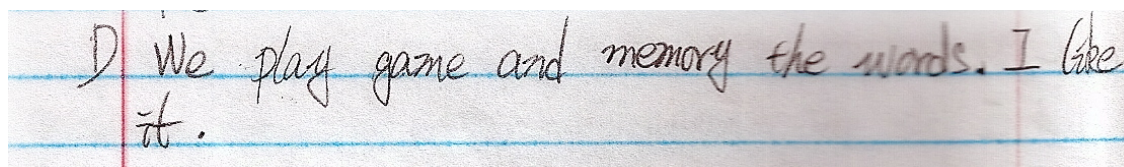
	Enjoyed the task very much	The task was okay as far as being enjoyable	Enjoyed the task very little	Task was very helpful for learning English	Task was okay for learning English	Task helped very little for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 4 learners present)	2	1	1	2	1	1	3

One learner's response was unintelligible.

Some comments were:



D. It was good game to discover something in mind.

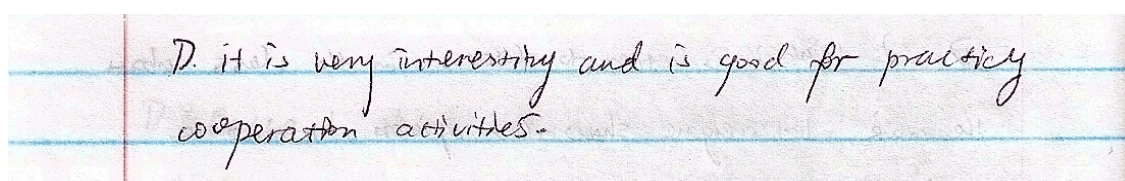


D We play game and memory the words. I like it.

Table 16: Journal data - Upper-Intermediate class (9 April – The murder game – Speaking and co-operation activity)

	Enjoyed the task very much	Task was very helpful for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 2 learners present)	2	2	2

One learner wrote: “it is very interesting and it is good for practicing cooperation activities”. The other learner wrote: “No comments!”



4.7.2.4 Listening to CD, and writing task

Beginners' class only: (24 March)

One of the thirteen tasks that the beginners' class responded to was a combination listening and writing task.

Table 17: Journal data – Beginners' class (24 March – The 'murder' game)

	Enjoyed the task very much	The task was okay as far as being enjoyable	Task was very helpful for learning English	Task was okay for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 4 learners present)	2	2	2	2	3

One learner replied 'no' to having more of this task.

Some of the learners' comments were:

“I like it. Because I like speake and write English. We will improve.”

“Listening and writing help us to learn very good English.”

“A listening and writing help us to listen good and write very well

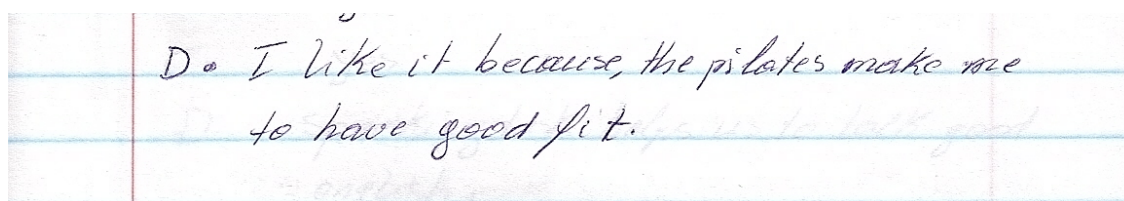
4.7.2.5 A Pilates task

Some mornings a Pilates instructor came to the school. She gave the whole school a Pilates class in the common room, or when the weather was good, in the garden. All teachers and learners participated. A lot of the words she used about parts of the body or actions to be performed were unknown to the Beginner learners, and were taught as new vocabulary in class. Only the Beginners' class responded to this activity.

Table 18: Journal data – Beginners' class: (16 March)

	Enjoyed the task very much	The task was okay as far as being enjoyable	Enjoyed the task very little	Task was very helpful for learning English	Task was okay for learning English	Task helped very little for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 5 learners present)	3	1	1	1	2	2	5

Although there is an apparent contradiction in the above responses, it can be easily explained by the learners' comments:



"I like it to make me and have good health."

"I like pilates. It's health."

"good body"

While all the learners saw the value of Pilates for their health, they were less convinced of the value of the exercise class for improving their knowledge of

English (See table 18). The teacher, however, felt that they were learning useful vocabulary as well. This is an example of a mismatch of teachers' and learners' perceptions of the usefulness of learning tasks (Kumaravadivelu, 1991).

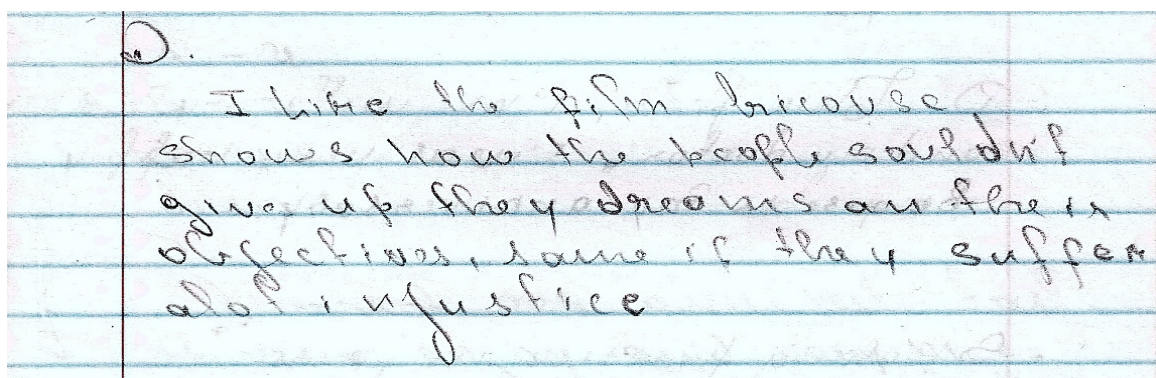
4.7.2.6 A film

Learners from all three classes participated in this outing, but only the Beginners' and the Upper-Intermediate class wrote about it in their logbooks.

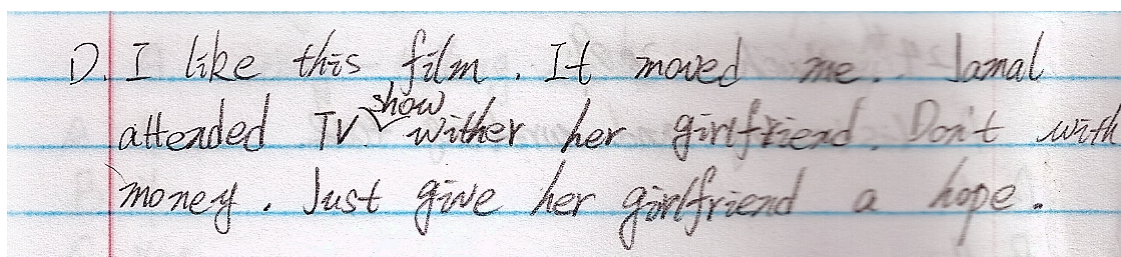
Table 19: Journal data - Beginners' class: (27 March – Slumdog Millionaire)

	Enjoyed the task very much	The task was okay as far as being enjoyable	Task was very helpful for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 3 learners)	2	1	3	3

Some comments were:



"I like the film because shows how the people couldn't give up they dreams an their objectives, same if they suffer alot injustice"



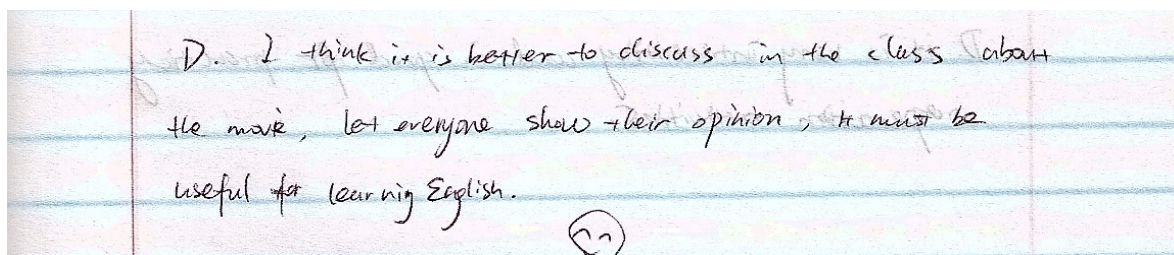
"I like this film. It moved me. Jamal attended TV show wither her girlfriend. Don't money. Just give her girlfriend a hope."

The learners of this class did preparatory tasks before watching the film to make it easier to understand the plot. They looked at a magazine article with photos from the film and discussed it. The teacher explained some of the vocabulary associated with the film. A discussion followed about slums in this and other countries, and about society in general.

Table 20: Journal data - Upper-Intermediate class: (30 March – Slumdog Millionaire)

	Enjoyed the task very much	The task was okay as far as being enjoyable	Task was okay for learning English	Would like more of this type of task
Number of learners (out of 2 learners present)	1	1	2	2

An interesting comment was:



"I think it is better to discuss in the class about the movie. Let everyone show their opinion, it must be useful for learning English."

The other learner wrote: "No comments!"

4.7.2.7 Summary of the main categories of the log-journal responses

Table 21: Journal data - Percentages of learners' responses to the learning tasks

	Speaking	Grammar	Film	Games	Listening and writing
Classes that responded to these tasks	Beginner, Pre-Intermediate, Upper-Intermediate	Beginner	Beginner and Upper - Intermediate	Beginner and Upper-Intermediate	Beginner
Enjoyment					
Enjoyed very much	62.50%	53.33%	60.00%	66.66%	50.00%
Was OK	32.50%	26.66%	40.00%	16.66%	50.00%
Enjoyed very little	5.00%	20.00%	0.00%	16.66%	0.00%
Learning English					
Helped very much	70.00%	66.66%	60.00%	66.66%	50.00%
Was OK	25.00%	26.66%	40.00%	16.66%	50.00%
Helped very little	5.00%	6.66%	0.00%	16.66%	0.00%
Would like more	87.50%	73.33%	100.00%	83.33%	75.00%
Would not like more	7.50%	26.66%	0.00%	0.00%	25.00%
Unintelligible responses	5.00%	0.00%	0.00%	16.66%	0.00%

4.7.2.8 Reflections on the journal responses

Responses to speaking tasks

(Beginners' class, Pre-Intermediate class, Upper-Intermediate class)

From Table 21 above we see that the majority of responses (more than two thirds) indicate that the learners felt the speaking tasks helped them **very much** for learning English. However, a smaller percentage of the responses indicate that the learners enjoyed the tasks **very much**, and a bigger percentage of responses indicate that they **would like more** of this type of tasks. These percentages do not necessarily constitute a contradiction. The learners may

perceive the usefulness of tasks, and therefore, would like more of them, although they may not always enjoy them very much.

Responses to grammar tasks (Beginners' class only)

From the above responses (Table 21) it is again evident that the learners may perceive tasks as useful, and may want more of those tasks, even if they do not particularly enjoy them. This may be the result of mature learners' motivation and a positive attitude towards learning. It may also indicate that the teachers should try to make tasks more enjoyable for the learners.

Responses to a film (Beginners' class and Upper-Intermediate class)

Not every student came to this outing, therefore, we had fewer responses.

Some of the Pre-Intermediate class learners watched the film but they did not write their responses in their logbooks.

The film outing was obviously very popular, and all the learners would like more of this task. Some of the learners may not have enjoyed that particular film very much, but the majority enjoyed it and felt that it was useful for learning English.

The majority of learners in all three classes responded positively to the learning tasks. They indicated that:

- they enjoyed the tasks
- found them helpful for learning English
- would like more of these types of tasks.

The most popular of the activities was the film, while the most popular of the classroom tasks were the speaking tasks, followed closely by the games which also give the learners the opportunity to practise speaking. For these learners who participated in the second cycle of the research, fluency in the target language was as important as for the first group of learners.

While most learners wrote comments in their logbooks, with one or two exceptions, these did not really tell us why they liked or did not like a certain task. A possible explanation is that they did not understand what we were

asking, or most learners could not express themselves in English well enough to make appropriate comments. This is another example of the limitations of conducting research with lower-level EFL learners.

However, despite the language handicap we did learn a number of interesting things from the journals:

- Learners are capable of giving some constructive feedback, and suggesting useful changes to learning tasks.
- Learners are able to perceive the usefulness of learning tasks even when the tasks may not be very enjoyable.
- Attaining fluency in the target language was as important for this group of learners as for the Angolan group.

When learners are asked to give feedback on everything that happens in the classroom, and subsequently perceive that their feedback is taken seriously and acted upon, they begin to realise that their opinions are respected, and that they themselves have a key role to play in their own learning process.

Consequently, learners are no longer passive objects just receiving the teacher's input; instead they begin to think critically, and to feel free to express their ideas and concerns. As a result, they may become more motivated and engage with the learning tasks, as active participants in their own learning process.

Chapter 5: Reflections on the Overall Project

5.1 Introduction

A piece of wisdom from a song by John Lennon states that: “Life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans”²¹. Reflecting on this research project I could say: “Sometimes an action research project is what happens, despite your other plans”.

When this project was started the research design seemed straightforward. The Angolan learners were sent by their employers, the Angolan Ministry of Social Communication, to spend a year at a language school in South Africa in order to learn English. During that time the learners aimed to complete at least three levels of English language courses. Some of them were Beginners, while others already had some knowledge of English. They all gave their consent to participating in the research. We seemed to have our ‘captive audience’. My colleagues, the only two other teachers at the school at that time, were enthusiastic about participating in the research process. We were willing to learn and improve our teaching. The project was started with the best intentions. What could possibly go wrong?

5.2 Action research at a language school

Actually, as was discussed in Chapter Four, a lot of things ‘went wrong’. When our learners departed to vote in the Angolan elections, and they did not return, it seemed as if it was the end of the project. An action research project should have at least two cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting with the same research participants (as discussed in Chapter Three). We only had one cycle of teaching interventions with the learners who had responded to the

²¹ This is a line from a song John Lennon (former Beatles’ member) wrote for his son. Its title is: “Beautiful Boy”.

reconnaissance questionnaire. This was a serious handicap for the research project. The teaching interventions applied to the second group of learners who participated in the research, were based on reflections on the feedback received from the first group of learners.

What became increasingly evident during this research project is that a language school by its very nature may not be the ideal environment in which to conduct educational action research. Unlike conventional primary and secondary schools, in a language school there are seldom the same learners for three or more consecutive levels of short intensive courses, so that at least two cycles of data can be gathered while working with the same participants.

5.3 Collaborative action research and a school's micropolitics

Doing collaborative research with other teachers can be very rewarding, but it can also be problematic at times. During this research project relationships amongst the collaborating teachers were not always ideal. Some of the teachers, who had originally seemed enthusiastic to collaborate in this research project, seemed less interested as time went by. They seemed to lose sight of the benefits the project might have for the learners and for their own professional development, and continued unenthusiastically, viewing the project more as an obligation than an interesting and enjoyable activity. Before starting to gather the journal data, the teachers had agreed to ask the learners to write their responses to a variety of learning tasks. This did not actually happen. As was seen earlier, the Pre-Intermediate class learners only responded to two tasks, while the Upper-Intermediate learners only responded to four. It is difficult to monitor what is happening in the other classes without appearing to interfere. Therefore, it was not until all the journals were collected that it became evident that the learners in some classes had not responded to such a variety of learning tasks.

Factors that might have contributed to the apparent loss of interest by some of the teachers were: the 'teething problems' of a new school, the stress caused by the first group of learners not returning from Angola, and having to adjust to a continuously shifting learner population. An underlying cause of teachers' reluctance to continue with the research project may have been the difficulty of negotiation, and their anxiety over their teaching being 'put on the line'.

Rudduck and McIntyre state that, "[M]any teachers have acknowledged concerns about being on the receiving end of personal criticism and about what happens if the familiar hierarchical structure of the classroom is challenged by the principle of partnership" (2007: 165).

Moreover, the principal had some concerns with the whole project, as some of the things the learners were suggesting, such as acquiring a language lab, required expensive purchases that the school could not afford at the time. Furthermore, my efforts to orchestrate the research project, and my requests for cooperation were misunderstood at some point as trying to draw attention to myself and to dominate the proceedings. It was as if I had unwittingly usurped the principal's power and made myself central in the school's micropolitics.

According to Eilertsen et al. "[A]ction research is political by its very nature" (2008: 295). They claim that when action research takes place in a school environment it inevitably changes the balance of power and affects the relationships of all involved, whether they are participating in the research or not. The researchers, whether they are teachers at the school or 'outsiders', may find themselves in the middle of a power struggle.

However, the research continued with a new group of learners, (as explained in Chapter Four), and the temporary storm blew over. The information that was obtained from the first group of learners was put to use and tested with the new group. Furthermore, we obtained feedback from these learners in the form of responses to some learning tasks, written in logbook journals.

5.4 Negotiating the curriculum with lower-level EFL learners

Our biggest challenge, in attempting to negotiate the curriculum with the Beginner and Elementary level EFL learners, was the difficulty of communicating with them due to language barriers. A certain level of language competence is required in order for the learners to understand what teachers are trying to do and to be able to express their ideas and opinions. EFL learners who do not know English well enough to communicate their ideas and preferences, cannot really have a 'voice'. The teachers have to first 'give them a voice' by teaching them the basic language they need in order to express themselves, before they can be consulted on their choice of curriculum. Therefore, the amount of negotiation possible with these learners was of necessity limited as a result of the fundamental language constraints. A question that should have been asked from the start is: "Is it possible to negotiate the curriculum with lower-level EFL learners?" The research findings indicate that negotiation is difficult when communication is limited.

If teachers cannot depend entirely on learners' feedback for designing the curriculum, they may have to rely to a certain extent on their intuition; despite the fact that, as research has shown, teachers' intuition may sometimes be wrong (as discussed in 2.3). Kumaravadivelu (1991) warns against possible mismatches between learners' and teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of learning tasks; nevertheless, he values teacher intuition. In referring to the parameter of *practicality*, (discussed in Chapter Three), Kumaravadivelu explains that it "focuses on teachers' reflection and action, which are also based on their insights and intuition". He explains further that, "[T]hrough prior and ongoing experience with learning and teaching, teachers gather an unexplained and sometimes unexplainable awareness of what constitutes good teaching" (2006b: 173).

Teachers who have the right democratic attitude which is required for critical pedagogy, an open-mindedness towards the learners' wants, and a sensitivity

to their needs, are likely to be able to work out in an educated, intuitive way what curriculum is best for their lower-level EFL classes; and by gradually introducing critical thinking to their learners, they could prepare them for greater learning autonomy. Such teachers would not hesitate to deviate from their planned curriculum to accommodate the learners' perceived or expressed linguistic needs, even within the possible constraints of imposed teaching materials, school or institution policy, and assessment requirements. Consequently, the learners would gradually take more responsibility for their own learning, and display an active interest in *what* and *how* they are taught. This practice would promote the learners' empowerment and a real engagement with their own learning, leading to a sense of excitement and discovery. As the learners' communicative ability in the target language would increase, so, gradually their 'voices' would be heard more and more.

5.5 Learners' teaching/learning misconceptions

As was seen in Chapter Four, the first question of the reconnaissance questionnaire was: "What did you enjoy most about the English course?" One of the Angolan learners replied: "I enjoyed everything seeing it was a challenge for everybody teachers and students." During the informal discussions that followed, the learner was questioned about what she meant by that comment. The learner said that she thought the teachers were inexperienced and that was why they were consulting the learners. This was the most advanced of the learners, who could express herself better than the others. It is quite possible that some of the other learners held the same opinion about the research project but could not say it in so many words. Our effort to consult the learners could have been mistaken for a sign of teachers' inexperience. This misconception may have been the result of previous learning experiences, during which the learners were not used to being consulted about their needs and preferences; instead, their teachers had made all the important decisions about the curriculum. Rudduck and McIntyre affirm that learners' comments and suggestions "are generally very firmly grounded in their own experience of

classrooms” (2007: 82). Therefore, learners may hold the misconception that teachers know/should know everything and should not ask the learners about what and how to teach.

This type of misconception may be problematic when doing action research with EFL learners. The learners may lose confidence in their teacher resulting in disaffection and disinterest. It is, therefore, the teacher’s duty to make sure learners understand the rationale and aims of the research.

5.6 The positive outcomes for teachers of a negotiated curriculum

Negotiation is never an easy process. It is not easy for most teachers to surrender their ‘traditional’ whole class delivery in favour of reflective discussions with the learners. To use Rudduck and McIntyre’s words: “teachers may be nervous about relinquishing the security of their traditional authority by putting their teaching on the line (as they sometimes see it) for pupils to discuss” (2007: 14). When consulting learners, it is understandable that teachers may experience a certain amount of anxiety. In retrospect this could have been the reason for a certain amount of reluctance experienced by some of the participating teachers.

However, nothing worthwhile is ever gained without a considerable effort. The participating teachers felt that the greatest gain from the negotiation process was the relationship of mutual respect and trust which developed between them and their learners. From a personal point of view, I felt that consulting with learners on designing their curriculum, and attempting to respond to their needs and preferences, has contributed to my understanding of the didactic process, and has accelerated my professional development.

5.7 Was it in the learners' best interests? – possible gains and losses resulting from a negotiated curriculum

As discussed previously, the assessment results after the first cycle of teaching interventions were not all very pleasing. The learners had wanted to improve their fluency and the oral test results indicated that they had achieved that. However, the learners were not as successful in the written exams of their second course. So many factors can influence the results of an examination, that it is not possible to be sure whether the curriculum changes were responsible for these results.

The teachers felt that the learners were making progress, but for some of them their progress was not enough for success in the external examination. If their assessment results were unsuccessful due to the negotiating of the curriculum, and as a result of focusing more on oral rather than writing skills, then perhaps negotiating the curriculum was not in the learners' best interests. As discussed earlier, in many human endeavours there are gains and losses. The learners had gained confidence and had become more competent in speaking English; but for the three who did not pass the examination it was not very helpful not to have that level's certificates.

As a result of negotiating the curriculum with these learners, there was a continuous open dialogue between teachers and learners in the classroom which improved their rapport and seems to have contributed to more successful learning. The friendly, relaxed atmosphere that ensued was conducive not only to learning the language but also to creating friendships and relationships that were capable of changing everyone's outlook on life. This is the kind of result that one would expect from taking a critical pedagogic approach. Critical pedagogy is based on democratic principles: every person has the right to have a say, and everyone's opinion counts. Cook defines negotiation as follows: "[A]ll the parties in an operation come together, bringing with them their own points of view, needs and wants, and together they work for the outcomes most

satisfactory to all concerned” (1992: 15). When teachers negotiate the curriculum with their learners they are in effect practising a form of critical pedagogy.

5.8 Recommendations

The aim of this research project was to find out from the learners what they really want from their English courses and to attempt as far as possible to cater for their needs and preferences. Furthermore we wanted to investigate the effect that negotiating the curriculum would have on their learning process. As has been discussed in literature (Nunan, 1989; Peacock, 1998, cited in Hawkey, 2006)) sometimes what the learners want may not be to their best interests. Therefore, while being open to changes for improvement, the teacher still has his or her own views on the didactic method and content that is best for those particular learners. Thus, I would suggest that in negotiating the curriculum there should be a greater balance between what the learners are asking for and what the teachers regard as pedagogically useful. Indeed, that is the true meaning of negotiation: everyone’s voice (including the teacher’s) should be heard and acted upon.

Furthermore, since action research did not seem to be very appropriate for a language school milieu, I would suggest that for further research it would be preferable to employ a different approach that does not require participation from the same group of learners for a long period of time.

In conclusion I would like to suggest that negotiating the curriculum is a worthwhile practice for EFL teachers, despite the communication challenges that they are sure to encounter, especially with lower-level EFL learners. At the very least, this research project prompted the teachers to reflect critically on our established practices. While the findings of this small-scale project may not be generalisable, certain aspects of the research process and its findings may be useful to other teachers undertaking similar projects.

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APPENDIX I: Letter to the Principal

Letter of request for permission to conduct research at a private language school

Dear Principal,

As you are aware, I am currently studying for a Master's degree in English Language Education at Wits University. To fulfill part of the requirements for the degree, I am undertaking research in the field of foreign language acquisition.

I would like to conduct this research at our school. I have already spoken to two of my colleagues, who are also teaching at our school, and they are keen to be my co-researchers. I am therefore asking permission on their behalf as well to conduct research at our school.

The research will involve administering questionnaires to the learners (to acquire information about their perceived needs and preferences for their EFL courses), observing the learner's progress, taking field notes, having discussions with the learners, tape-recording the discussions, and effecting changes in the learning materials and delivery of their courses according to their requirements.

The field notes and the recordings will be used solely for the purpose of the research. The learners will remain anonymous, and if they so wish, they may read the final draft of the report to ensure that their views are presented accurately.

Although I cannot promise this, I do hope that the results of my research will be useful to the teachers involved for improving our practice, and will benefit the learners. I would therefore be most grateful if you would allow me to conduct this research at our school.

Thank you for your attention and your time.

Kind regards,

Lenna
(Full name: Helen Corelli-Pienaar)

APPENDIX II: Letter to the Students

Dear student,

I am studying for a Master's degree in English Language Education at Wits University. For my degree I am doing some research in language learning.

For my research, I would like you to give me feedback on the course that you have completed, and to tell me what kinds of learning materials and activities you think are most helpful for your learning. I would like to observe your progress and take field notes. I would also like to have an informal discussion with you in class, and tape-record this discussion.

The feedback questionnaire will be used only to inform changes in teaching to benefit you, in your future courses. I will also use the questionnaires, the field notes, and the tape-recording for my research, but will not use your real name. I will not mind if you do not want to answer some of my questions, and you may decide to stop taking part in this research at any time. If you like, you may read what I have written and suggest any changes, before I print the final report.

Although I cannot promise you this, I believe that my research may help you to learn English more effectively.

If you would like to participate in this research, please complete the consent forms.

Thank you,
Best wishes for your studies,

Lenna
(Mrs. H. Corelli-Pienaar)

APPENDIX III: Students' consent form

I have read the information about this research, and I agree to take part as a research subject. I understand that I will be asked to give feedback to my teacher about the course, completing questionnaires. I also understand that my teacher will observe my progress and take field notes, and that I will take part in informal group discussions.

I also understand that my real name will not be revealed in the final report.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX IV
The Reconnaissance Questionnaire

FEEDBACK TO YOUR TEACHERS ON THE COURSE
YOU HAVE JUST COMPLETED

In order to offer you the course that best meets your needs, we would like you to tell us about the course you have just completed. *(You may write in English or Portuguese or a combination of the two.)*

1. What did you like **most** about the English course?

2. Is there anything that you did **not** like about this English course? If yes, please tell us about this.

3. Is there anything that you would have liked **more of**? If yes, please tell us about this.

4. Is there anything that you would have liked **less of**? If yes, please tell us about this.

5. How would you describe the course book? Circle one of the following:

boring sometimes interesting usually interesting always interesting

6. What did you think of the other learning materials that your teacher gave you – extra work sheets, cards, pictures, games, etc.? Circle one of the following:

boring sometimes interesting usually interesting always interesting

7. Which of the following best describes the classroom tasks? Circle one of the following:

too easy challenging, but good too difficult

8. How interesting did you find the classroom tasks? Circle one of the following:

not at all interesting sometimes interesting very interesting

9. If you could choose to spend more time on any of the following, which three would you choose? Write 1 next to your first choice, 2 next to your second choice and 3 next to your third choice.

**Listening
Speaking
Reading
Writing
Vocabulary
Grammar**

10. Suggest topics, tasks or classroom activities that your teacher could include in the course in order to help you to improve your English.

Thank you!

APPENDIX V: Second Questionnaire

At the end of your previous English language course you told us about some of the changes you would like us to make to your next course in order to help you to improve your English. We would now like you to give us your opinion on the learning materials and the teaching methods used in your second course. *(You may write in English or Portuguese or a combination of the two.)*

During your course you performed a variety of tasks. We would like you to tell us which of these tasks you considered most helpful in improving your English.

A. Reading texts

A1. Reading texts in your textbook:

What did you like and/or dislike about the reading texts in your textbook? Please give reasons.

Liked: _____

Reason: _____

Disliked: _____

Reason: _____

How did you like the topics of the reading texts in your textbook? Circle one of the following:

boring not interesting sometimes interesting always interesting inspiring

How helpful/unhelpful did you find the reading texts in your textbook for improving your English?

not helpful

a little helpful

very helpful

A2. Reading texts that your teacher provided:

What did you like and/or dislike about the reading texts that your teacher gave you which were not from the textbook? Please give reasons.

Liked: _____

Reason: _____

Disliked: _____

Reason: _____

How did you like the topics of the reading texts that your teacher gave you? Please circle one of the following:

boring not interesting sometimes interesting always interesting inspiring

How helpful/unhelpful did you find the reading texts that your teacher gave you for improving your English?

not helpful

a little helpful

very helpful

Suggest text topics that interest you, and you would like to read as part of your next course.

B. Grammar tasks

B1. Grammar tasks from your textbook:

What did you like and/or dislike about the grammar tasks from your textbook? Please give reasons.

Liked: _____

Reason: _____

Disliked: _____

Reason: _____

B2. Grammar tasks that your teacher gave you:

What did you like and/or dislike about the grammar tasks that your teacher gave you? Please give reasons.

Liked: _____

Reason: _____

Disliked: _____

Reason: _____

In your opinion, what helps you the most in improving your knowledge and use of grammar?

C. Conversation

C1. Conversation topics from your textbook

How did you like the conversation topics from your textbook? Please circle one of the following:

boring not interesting sometimes interesting always interesting inspiring

C2. Conversation topics generated by your teacher

How did you like the conversation topics generated by your teacher? Please circle one of the following:

boring not interesting sometimes interesting always interesting inspiring

Do you feel that enough time was spent in conversation in the classroom? Please tick one of the following:

Yes, we had enough conversation in the classroom ☐

No, I would have liked more conversation in the classroom ☐

D. Pronunciation classes

How helpful/unhelpful did you find the pronunciation classes for improving your English?

not helpful

a little helpful

very helpful

Do you feel that you had enough pronunciation classes? Please tick one of the following:

Yes, we had enough pronunciation classes ☐

No, I would have liked more pronunciation classes ☐

E. Puzzles and games

How helpful/unhelpful did you find the classroom puzzles and games for improving your English?

not helpful

a little helpful

very helpful

F. Outings

How did you like the outings that were organised by the school?

not enjoyable **sometimes enjoyable** **very enjoyable**

Do you feel that you had enough outings? Please tick one of the following:

Yes, we had enough outings ☐

No, I would have liked more outings ☐

Did the outings help you/ not help you in improving your English? Please explain.

Would you like to make any suggestions about outings that the school could organise for you during your next English course?

G. Any other comments?

Is there anything else you would like to suggest that your teachers could do to improve your learning experience in your next course?

Thank you!

APPENDIX VI: Journal Questions

1. Did you enjoy this (speaking/listening/writing/grammar/ etc.) task?

Circle your choice (1= not at all, 2= very little, 3= it was okay, 4= very much)

1 2 3 4

2. Did this task help you with your learning English?

Circle your choice (1= not at all, 2= very little, 3=it was okay, 4= very much)

1 2 3 4

3. Would you like to do more of this type of task?

yes no

4. Do you have any comments/suggestions about this task? (Optional)
