TO WHAT DEGREE ARE MY COURSES RELEVANT TO MY STUDENTS?

A Case-study Using the Principles of Exploratory Practice

by

JANE ROSE

A dissertation submitted to

The School of Humanities

of the University of Birmingham

in part fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Teaching English as a Foreign or Second Language (TEFL/TESL)

This dissertation consists of approximately 12,000 words

Supervisor: James Roy

Centre for English Language Studies

Department of English

University of Birmingham

Edgbaston

Birmingham B15 2TT

United Kingdom

September 2006

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted using the principles of Exploratory Practice (EP) to investigate my puzzle area of course relevance. I wanted to gain understanding about how relevant the students taking the English courses perceived them to be in terms of their own lives. I also hoped to resolve some of the tensions I experience due to the differences in student and teacher perspective on what is relevant. The puzzle was looked at from the perspective of student-motivation, student learning, and what the students perceived they had gained personally from taking the English courses. EP emphasises working to gain situated understandings via normal teaching practices as a collegial process, involving everyone concerned. Therefore data were collected using natural ways, compatible with life in the classroom and the school, involving both students and colleagues as co-researchers. Analysis of the data enabled me to see course relevance as part of the wider context of motivation, and also to understand that students can themselves shape a course to serve their own needs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Tables

Figures

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EFL   English as a Foreign Language

ELT   English Language Teaching

EP   Exploratory Practice

ProDait   Professional Development for Academics Involved in Teaching

C-zone   Zone of congruence

R-zone   Zone of resistance

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of my ongoing questions as an EFL classroom teacher responsible for designing my own courses is whether what I am doing with my students in the context of the classroom has relevance for them in terms of their studies and their lives. Millrood's observation (2001:406) that '[a] classroom context can be success-building or learner-failing' resonates with the questions I am asking about my own classroom contexts. As the students that I work with are within the special needs sector, and their apparently poor motivation for learning English in the classroom seems to me to be at least partly based on a history of poor results in the past, the question of relevance is a pertinent one. The *Exploratory Practice* approach advocates that such questions be formulated as puzzles or questions rather than problems (so that the focus is on gaining understanding of a situation rather than immediately trying to solve an apparent problem), and investigated within the context of the classroom through normal activities, using the active co-operation of the learners themselves.

> …Exploratory Practice, a form of practitioner research involving teachers and learners working together, during language lessons, to explore and develop their own understandings of their classroom lives (Allwright 2005a: 28).

I have formulated my *puzzle* into the following questions which form the basis for this research:

- **In what ways do my lessons motivate my students in their learning of English?**

- **In what ways do my courses help my students to learn English:**
  from my perspective as a teacher?
  from their perspective as learners?

- **What do my students get out of my courses?**

Within the context of this classroom-based research, guided by the principles of Exploratory Practice, I see myself as a '*reflexive practitioner* studying my own [teaching] (Miller 2003: 209 [original emphasis])' in order to develop understandings which may or may not necessitate changes in the context or practice of the courses I teach.

Relevance is both one of the elements and one of the stages in Keller's 'ARCS (Attention, Relevance, Confidence and Satisfaction) Model of Motivation (1987)'. This model (which is presented and discussed in *Chapters Five* and *Six*) has proved useful in enabling me to place some of the understandings I have gained from my research into a wider and more holistic scheme, and in the process glean more personal understanding both about the needs of my students and about how my teaching may best approach meeting those needs. Edge (1996: 11) comments that 'the most appropriate way for each one of us to work is exactly the way we do work- provided only that we are committed to ongoing investigation of just what it is that we do, with a view to enhancing the process and outcomes, for our students, for our colleagues, and for ourselves.' These words from Edge encapsulate much of the motivation behind this study.

The dissertation has seven chapters. Following the introductory chapter, *Chapter Two* looks at the research approach, and includes a presentation of Exploratory Practice. *Chapter Three* describes the students and the college in some detail as they provide the context and the reason for the research. *Chapter Four* explains how the research was set up and *Chapter Five* presents the data, which is then discussed in *Chapter Six* in terms of the insights obtained and in relation to Keller's (1987) ARCS Model of Motivation. *Chapter Seven* draws the study to its conclusion.

CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH APPROACH

This chapter looks in some detail at the concepts of: *case study*, *Exploratory Practice*, *relevance* and *reflexivity* and explains their significance for this piece of research.

2.1 Case Study

Because this research is described as a case study, it is useful to look briefly at what defines a case study. The difficulty of pinning down precisely what a case study is, due to the various ways it can be defined and the potential range in scale, is discussed by both Nunan (1992: 74-79) and McDonough and McDonough (1997: 203-207). A case study cannot be termed as a research method, but in this context Adelman *et al* (1977 in Bell, 1999: 10) write about case study 'as an umbrella term for a family of research methods' and Bell (1999: 10) states that in a case study 'no method is excluded'. However, despite its elusiveness, a case may be seen in the most general terms as a 'bounded system' (McDonough and McDonough 1997: 205), and by implication a case study is the study of a system which can be in some way bounded or delineated.

In terms of the validity of a case study approach there seems to be general agreement in the literature (for example: Nunan 1992: 88-89, McDonough and McDonough 1997: 203) that case studies are an appropriate way for teachers to research their own classrooms and carry out small-scale investigations. Nunan (1992: 89) highlights the suitability of case studies for practitioners investigating and enhancing their understanding of their own workplaces 'where the problem of external validity is less significant than in other types of research.' In this regard, Perpignan (2003: 265) chose to adopt the criterion 'valid enough' in her qualitative study, rather than discarding the concept of validity entirely. Bassey (1981, in Bell 1999: 12) refers to '[t]he relatability of a case study [being] more important than its generalizability.'

On the issue of relatability, McDonough and McDonough (1997: 212) highlight the necessity for a teacher to study the individuals and groups they are working with in order to promote their own understanding and perhaps to share that understanding with others. They also suggest (ibid: 215) that program design and development is another fruitful area for teacher case studies. Because my study is a small-scale qualitative investigation of my own courses, it fits into the paradigm of case study as 'bounded system'. From the perspective of classroom teacher I can embrace the flexibility such an approach offers where the choice of methodology and methods or techniques are decided by the researcher.

2.2   Exploratory Practice

This subsection gives an overview of Exploratory Practice (EP), considers EP both in terms of a methodology and a theoretical paradigm, and looks at the suitability of EP as a tool for classroom research.

2.2.1   Exploratory Practice: an Overview

A useful definition of EP is offered by Tajino and Smith (2005: 448):

> Exploratory Practice is a set of evolving guidelines of principles and practices which are intended to help teachers and learners make and carry out plans to deepen their understandings of their own lives in language classrooms.

On a practical level EP translates as a way of looking at how classroom research can be conducted by both teachers and learners working co-operatively, not by imposing something onto the classroom, but by using whatever 'tools' are already present in that environment. Tools, in this context refer to the usual ways of conducting classroom activities in a particular context; for example, discussion in small groups. EP emphasizes the potential mutual development of both teachers and learners, and 'encourages teachers to become learners and learners to become teachers, by providing a framework in which they are equal partners in researching their own classroom lives (Tajino and Smith 2005: 449).' The fundamental aim of EP is 'about trying to understand the *quality of life* in a given [teaching/learning] situation (Allwright: 2003: 120).' [Emphasis added].

Thus the focus of the investigation is placed on understanding what a situation is, before considering whether any change is necessary. Allwright (2003a: 121) suggests that through EP 'situated understandings' rather than generalised understandings are more likely to be the outcome, which makes it an attractive approach for classroom researchers seeking understanding about their own individual situations. EP does not prescribe any particular methods or techniques for generating data, and the ways data are gathered are as varied as the classrooms they reflect. Examples from the literature include: analysis of student performance and student reflection on their performances (Gunn, 2003: 240-258) and reflexive focus on professional development (Miller, 2003: 201-219). Allwright (2003b: 110) is at pains to stress that Exploratory Practice has 'largely [been] *discovered... in* teachers' current practices, rather then *invented … for* teachers.' [Original emphasis].

Another feature of the EP process is the sharing of the data with other people, 'going public', which can give a boost to a teacher's self-esteem. An example of this public sharing would be posters left on the classroom wall to be commented on by the school community.

2.2.2 Exploratory Practice: a Methodology and a Theoretical Paradigm

Exploratory Practice (EP) is a way for teachers to research their own classrooms. However, because EP has primarily been formulated as a set of principles rather than as a set of practices, it means that teachers are free to develop their own practices (derived from the principles) to suit their own particular circumstances. Miller (2003: 214) sees this as changing the perspective away from being simply 'a series of methodological steps to be followed' to 'a theoretical paradigm for practitioner work'.

On the practical side there are guidelines offered throughout the EP literature on how to get started 'doing' EP. One fundamental idea is that classroom research is about understanding puzzles or questions rather than solving problems. The term 'puzzle' is used in order to avoid the potential negative connotations of 'problem', and also 'to capture the important possibility that productive investigations may well start from poorly-understood successes

just as much as from poorly understood failures (Allwright 1993: 15).' Once a puzzle area has been identified, refining thinking about the puzzle, preferably with colleagues (here understood to mean anyone who may help to understand the puzzle, such as learners, teachers or a caretaker), is the next step, before finding or adapting appropriate classroom procedures (standard activities like discussion or group work) with which to explore the puzzle. In this way 'data,' or information, can be collected. Reflecting on the data in some way is seen as a central part of EP, and may lead to understanding, or it may lead to the need to collect more data for reflection in order to further aid understanding. 'Reflecting involves puzzling…to see how far you can go towards an adequate degree of understanding without actually taking any direct action (Allwright 2000: 10).'

One suggested way of reflecting is by 'monitoring'. Allwright (ibid.) explains that monitoring, in the EP sense, refers to 'paying special attention to the [puzzling] phenomenon…, to see if [it] can [be better understood] that way.' The 'monitoring sessions', although working through normal classroom activities (such as making notes while a class is engaged in group work), should be carefully prepared and planned. Allwright (ibid: 11) notes that the act of monitoring may itself be sufficient to bring enough understanding of a particular puzzle, thus relieving the need for any more active data collection. An example of this can be seen in Zhang's (2004: 331-345) study where she found, that by reflecting on the deeper needs of her class and their learning lives in the classroom, she was able to find a solution to what had previously only been perceived as a technical problem related to her teaching techniques.

The evolved and developing *principles* of Exploratory Practice represent general guidance about the fundamentals of what EP is. A recently published statement of the principles of EP can be seen in *Table 2.1*. There are six principles and two practical suggestions which fall into three groups. *Principles 1 and 2* are concerned with understanding what is going on in the classroom in relation to the quality of life in the classroom. The assumption here is that even in situations where the problem/puzzle seems to be a technical one, such as using the wrong method for teaching a particular aspect

of language, it is worth stepping back and trying to understand what is going on before making any changes. '…only a serious effort to understand life in a particular setting will enable you to decide if practical change is necessary, desirable, and/or possible (Allwright 2003a: 128).' *Principles 3, 4 and 5* are concerned with the social aspects of teaching and learning and reflect the idea that 'understandings are collective as well as individual (Allwright 2005b: 360).' They also enhance the idea that students and colleagues can be co-researchers working for each other's development, which can add to the concept of collegiality. *Principle 6* is very much concerned with looking at developing understandings as an ongoing part of (classroom) life, rather than being limited to a particular project or period of time. It also 'reflect[s] the perception that understanding will never be final and so will constantly need to be revisited (Allwright: ibid).' *Suggestions 1 and 2* are practical and provide a way of realising the sixth principle while also reassuring learners who become (co-) researchers that they will not lose out on classroom learning time.

Table 2.1: Exploratory Practice in Six Principles and Two Practical Suggestions (adapted from Allwright 2005b: 360).

Quality of Life in the Classroom	
▪ Principle 1	Put Quality of Life First
▪ Principle 2	Work primarily to understand classroom life
Social Aspects of Teaching and Learning	
▪ Principle 3	Involve everybody
▪ Principle 5	Work to bring people together
▪ Principle 6	Work also for mutual development
Developing Ongoing Understanding	
▪ Principle 6	Make the work a continuous enterprise
▪ Suggestion 1	Minimize the extra effort for all concerned
▪ Suggestion 2	Integrate the 'work for understanding' into the existing working life of the classroom.

2.2.3 Exploratory Practice: a Tool for Classroom Research

Exploratory Practice is not only a way of doing research but also a way of being a practitioner (or classroom teacher). Two other closely related approaches to Practitioner Research are: *Reflective Practice* and *Action Research.* By looking at the differences between EP and these research practices the EP approach can be more clearly understood. The differences are summarised in *Figure 2.1.*
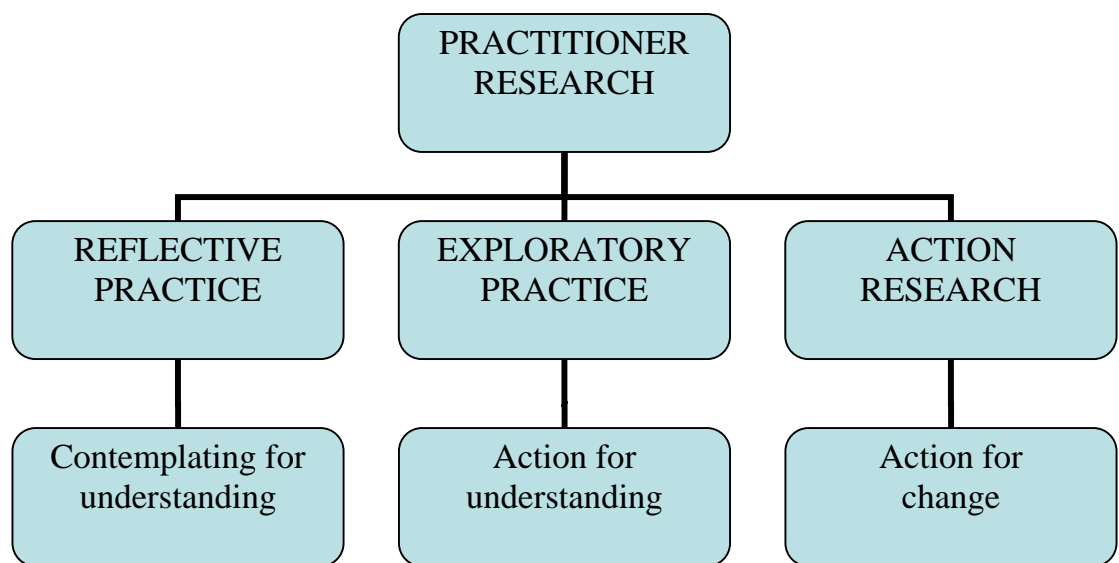
EP is about understanding like reflective practice, but understanding is promoted through action involving all the participants (i.e. learners as well as teachers). This involves thought and reflection, often stimulated through collaboration.

EP involves action, like action research, but the primary aim of the action is to promote understanding rather than to bring about change. Deep understanding is a precursor to meaningful change.

Figure 2.1: How EP Compares with Other Approaches to Practitioner Research (adapted from ProDAIT website 2005).

Commenting on the differences between Action Research and EP, Allwright (2005b: 355) expresses concern that Action Research takes up too much of a classroom teacher's time and is therefore 'heavily parasitic upon [teachers'] normal working lives, rather than supportive of them or integrated into them (ibid: 354).' By contrast, Exploratory Practice is seen as 'an infinitely sustainable way for classroom language teachers and learners, while getting

on with their own learning and teaching, to develop their own understandings of life in the language classroom (EP website).' Exploratory Practice emphasizes life and the quality of that life, and in this way rejects the idea of '*prioritizing* improvement (Allwright 2005b: 361).' [Emphasis added]. EP also rejects the idea of seeking greater *teacher efficiency* and *student success* through the continued development of 'better' teaching techniques.

As my research is primarily directed towards exploring and trying to understand how my courses are relevant to the lives and studies of the students I am working with, the framework offered by Exploratory Practice seems appropriate. Quality of life in the classroom is something I have been concerned about for a long time, without specifically identifying it as such. Learning to understand the students as individuals, and how best to work with them in groups, has been, and continues to be, an ongoing challenge in my professional life. Acknowledging students as co-workers also reflects the reality that in the classroom it is often a blurred line between who is teaching and who is learning at any given time. I therefore welcome the emphasis on mutual development espoused in Principle 5. Principle 6, coupled with the two following practical suggestions (see *Table 2.1*), puts a different light on classroom research, and rather than seen as an optional extra for the purposes of a particular project, research can be viewed 'as a way of serving the pedagogy (Allwright 1993: 6).'

2.3 Relevance

Relevance is included by Miller (2003: 209) as one of the defining characteristics of EP, and Allwright has emphasised this aspect from the beginning (both for the teacher conducting the research and for the students involved). 'The least to hope for…is that teachers bringing research into their own teaching will ensure that what they explore is relevant to themselves…and…that it is also relevant to their learners who may well have interesting puzzles of their own to explore (Allwright 1993: 8).'

Gunn (2003: 251) poses two questions with regard to relevance in her own research: 'Firstly, how relevant was this [research] to me…[s]econdly, how

relevant was this research to my students?' As the subject of my investigation is the relevance of my courses to the students taking them, and my interest as a teacher is in making what I do interesting and meaningful (and hopefully useful) for my students, my answer to Gunn's first question has to be 'extremely'. An answer to the second question is more difficult to formulate, as the 'puzzle' of relevance comes from me, and my students would not necessarily formulate their puzzles (assuming they have them) in the same terms. Perhaps they would see lessons in terms of 'boring' or 'not boring', 'fun', 'useful' or some other way, or not even necessarily be able to express in what way they experience my lessons. As Allwright (2005b: 361) suggests, 'U*nderstandings* does not necessarily mean anything expressible in words.' [Original emphasis].

Relevance features in Keller's ARCS model of motivation (see section 5.3.1 for a presentation of the model) as the second of four conditions that must be met if a learner is to be motivated to learn. Keller defines relevance as '[m]eeting the personal needs/goals of the learner to effect a positive attitude (1987: 2)', and maintains that '[b]efore [a student] can be motivated to learn, they will have to believe that the instruction is related to important personal goals or motives (ibid: 1).' I am interested, through this study, in trying to understand to what extent my courses do meet the personal needs of my learners.

2.4   Reflexivity

Reflexivity in the context of this study is about researching and reflecting on my own practice, in this case the courses and lessons I *make* together with my students and their response/s to them. 'The syllabus always emerges from the process of negotiation, no matter how carefully a teacher turns a planned syllabus into precise lesson plans (Allwright 2005a: 13).' Miller (2003: 215) finds that a reflexive approach heightens (a teacher's) understandings of the quality of their personal professional lives and helps them develop more 'intense professional maturity.' I find that due to the freedom I have for planning courses there is very often a tension between what I feel I 'should' be doing as a 'professional teacher' and what the students may like to be

doing in my classes. My study also addresses this dilemma. Miller (ibid) views these kinds of tensions as 'professional identity cris[es]', but finds that, if used to develop a 'professional reflexive curiosity', they can be experienced positively. She sees this as part of 'reflexive professional development.'

Having examined some of the key concepts connected with my research, the next chapter presents the context for the study.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONTEXT AND THE COURSES

This chapter describes the educational setting in which the study was carried out and the students who make up that setting. The chapter then briefly looks at different types of syllabus before examining the relationship between the educational context and the kind of English courses which are offered.

3.1 The Educational Setting

The context for my work as a language teacher is a special educational institution in Finland, *Merikoski Vocational Training Centre*, which provides vocational upper secondary and adult education and training, as well as preparatory and rehabilitative training. The Vocational Education Act in Finland states that: '[t]he objective of special education is to offer students vocational qualifications in accordance with their abilities…the basic knowledge and skills necessary for [being] a member of society, and the capabilities for managing their own lives (Ministry of Education 1999: 19).' Accordingly, the broad aims of Merikoski include: 'promot[ing] students' vocational competence, working and functional abilities, successful studies and placement in further education and employment (Merikoski Vocational Centre Prospectus, n.d.).' To try and achieve these goals the education provided by the centre is 'student focused and its activities emphasize instruction in small groups, stimulation towards lifelong learning, personal guidance and diverse provision of education and training (ibid).' This type of education is aimed at people who for reasons of poor health, disability, and/or social problems require special support, guidance and counselling in their studies and placement in jobs.

Merikoski Vocational Training Centre belies its name and consists of several centres in different locations in northern and southern Finland which function relatively independently. I work in Merikoski *Muhos* which provides training for about 180 students. There are a variety of vocational courses taught, from gardening to logistics, and whereas the vocational and practical study programs differ widely depending on the focus, all students are required to

take a core number of general (or theory) subjects, including English. Students should complete three study weeks (credits) in English, usually within the first two years of a three year course. In addition they can also choose English as a free choice subject. English is timetabled for two 45 minute periods a week throughout the academic year, and the groups are generally arranged according to vocational subjects. This means that, for example, all the first year students studying metalwork will have English at the same time.

3.2 The Students

Most (about 80%) of the students that I teach are male and in the age range 16-22. They come from a wide variety of backgrounds and for various reasons mainstream education is not considered appropriate for their needs. Some students are slow learners, others have difficulty in concentrating for longer than short periods, many have reading and writing difficulties and a substantial minority live in *family homes* locally. (A family home is a home consisting of two house parents and a small number of young people, who, because of particular life circumstances are not able to live with their own families for longer or shorter periods of time, although they are usually allowed to go home for visits.) Many of the non family-home students also live at a distance from the school and during the week they are accommodated locally in the 'student hotel'. This may be the first time some students have lived away from home, and all sorts of difficulties can present themselves, from issues of personal hygiene to misuse of alcohol. These can have an effect inside as well as outside the classroom.

As a consequence of their personal circumstances, many students can seem to be outwardly unmotivated for further English studies, having already had six years of compulsory English in primary and secondary school in which they have either 'fallen though the net' or written themselves off as 'failures'. Brown (1994: 62) uses the term low 'language ego' which describes how I initially experience many of my students. Their current personal life situation, coupled with any outside influences, often assumes more importance than their studies. Bastos (2005: 21-24), in seeking to understand her adolescent

students, analyses her perception of their world in terms of the post-modern characteristics of speed, banalization, disposable culture, fragmentation, globalisation, the world of images, virtuality, imitation and territorialization. I find her analyses helpful when trying to understand my own 'post-modern' students. The classes I teach are small and heterogeneous, but a sizable majority of students could be considered as falling within the pre-intermediate range of English skills.

3.3   English Courses in Merikoski *Muhos*

The Ministry of Education in Finland does not regulate methods of organising instruction in vocational education but gives teachers the freedom to choose their own methods, with essential features including: 'flexible teaching arrangements [and] diverse working methods (Ministry of Education 1999: 16).' The Ministry also recognises the importance of '[t]he students' role as *active study planners and learners* (ibid: 17).' [Emphasis added]. In this context, Allwright's (2001: 4) concern about developing *quality of life* in the classroom where the focus is on understanding how to 'create and maintain a classroom environment that is conducive to learning', seems to tie in with the Finnish Education Ministry's guidelines. As a teacher I generally feel supported in planning courses which aim to offer 'learning opportunit[ies] (Allwright 2005a: 10)' rather than a series of particular teaching points. However, the realisation of any learning opportunity resides with the individual student themselves because, as Slimani (2001: 301) has shown, it is impossible to predict 'uptake' from any one lesson or series of lessons. Thus I perceive my challenge as trying to design courses which are relevant for my students and which offer them the possibility of integrating class-work meaningfully into their own individual lives. The following subsections look at elements of different types of syllabus, at where my own courses fit within this framework, and at the concept of authenticity.

3.3.1   Different Types of Syllabus

There would seem to be many different ways of defining and classifying language syllabuses, depending on which aspect of the syllabus is deemed to be most salient. To clarify the situation White (1988: 44) proposes a broad

framework for looking at the full range of syllabus types. Within this framework language syllabuses are divided into two groups which White calls 'Type A' and 'Type B'. Type A syllabuses focus on *what* is to be learned, and Type B syllabuses focus on *how* the language is to be learned, that is, the process of learning. White (ibid: 90) observes that there is '[a] conflict between language teaching as training for ordained outcomes on the one hand and education for unexpected outcomes on the other.' Stern's advocacy of multidimensional language courses which take into account four possible linked syllabuses: language, culture, communicative activities and general language education (Stern, 1992: 26-30) could be one way of approaching this conundrum, and this kind of structure would seem to make sense for language courses taught in schools where general education and language awareness may be as important as developing language proficiency. Another way of organising a course is by topic. White (1988: 65) suggests that although topic is an attractive concept, it is difficult to come to terms with in reality as it is defined by meaning rather than by form and a given topic can end up so loosely bounded as to be meaningless or so tightly defined as to encompass little more than vocabulary. He does, however (ibid: 67), admit 'the utility of given topics as a vehicle for language.' This idea is taken up in the next sub-section.

3.3.2 My Courses

To accommodate the range of needs and abilities in the students that I teach, it is vital that whatever syllabuses and courses are designed be both flexible and accessible at different levels. The limited amount of class time available per week is also a factor to be taken into consideration, as well as the reality that attendance may not be regular or continuous and group composition can change quite radically from week to week in terms of numbers and personalities, often with no prior notice.

In Merikoski *Muhos* the English language courses taught are: *Everyday English* and *English at Work* which give only the broadest idea of what might be offered within individual lessons. To anchor the courses somewhat and to provide a framework on which to draw, I have put together a loose topic-

based syllabus which incorporates the multidimensional approach proposed by Stern (see section 3.3.1). This provides both a structure and a fair amount of flexibility on a week to week basis, as well as giving the possibility for material to be adapted for different levels. Despite White's misgivings about a topic-based syllabus, (outlined above) he concludes:

> …though when material is organised by topic rather than by considerations of linguistic grading, the language exposure may be somewhat random and only 'roughly tuned' grammatically…such rough tuning may be less important than the fact the learners are being provided with the kind of language input which may stimulate successful language learning (White, 1988: 68).

I find in my situation that the importance of topic as a motivator and topic as a vehicle and context for language learning opportunities is of particular consideration. This is especially so because my students generally have fairly limited expectations of themselves language-wise, and many appear to be unable or unwilling to visualise where they would use English now or in the future. We are therefore, of necessity, very much grounded in the students' present.

3.3.3 Authenticity

The term 'authentic' is used fairly frequently in relation to English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly when discussing classroom materials. Authenticity in relation to materials is generally seen as positive because it offers a way of bridging the gap between the classroom and the 'real world'. Lee (1995: 323) makes a difference between what she calls 'text authenticity' and 'learner authenticity'; text authenticity being defined in terms of 'the origin of the materials' and learner authenticity referring to 'the learner's interaction with [the materials].' Lee also makes the point (ibid) that it is the learners' perception of the materials and the tasks which validate whether a given set of materials or tasks is authentic for a particular (classroom) setting: 'textually authentic materials are not inherently learner authentic (ibid: 325).' Guariento and Morely (2001: 350-351) express 'learner authenticity' in terms of learner engagement with a task, and affirm that it is the engagement which creates the authenticity, regardless of the materials themselves. It is this aspect of authenticity which especially interests me as a teacher and course

planner, but very often it is the serendipitous spontaneous moment in a lesson which brings about true authenticity; materials and tasks might facilitate such a moment, but they cannot guarantee it.

Another facet of the term 'authenticity' concerns how the teacher interacts with the learner or learners, and the effect of that interaction on the students. As Wu (2006: 9) points out, 'the revealing of the teacher's authentic self truly made the students open their own worlds.' Some of the students that I work with almost 'demand' this level of honesty from me; they will 'open their worlds', as Wu expresses it, when they perceive me as a teacher, 'being real' with them. This concept is quite difficult to express in words, but it is something which can be tangible in the classroom and it has to do with understanding and accepting the students and relating to them through the things that interest and involve them, but not just on a superficial level. This kind of authenticity should be present in a course, but it is easier to experience than to quantify.

After setting the context by looking at the educational framework, the college, the students and the background to the English courses, the next chapter describes how the study was set up.

CHAPTER FOUR

SETTING UP THE STUDY

This chapter describes how my working and teaching environment was able to provide suitable data for facilitating understanding of how my English courses are received and experienced by the students who take them. As Allwright (2005b: 356) puts it: 'trying to get the pedagogy done in a way that incorporate[s] a research perspective and which therefore foster[s] understanding.' Although I appreciate the value of developing courses, this study focuses on developing my understanding of classroom life in Merikoski, *Muhos* through activities that make up that classroom life.

4.1   Collecting Data

One of the ideas behind Exploratory Practice is to take 'the notion of research as a supportive rather than as a parasitic activity (Allwright 2005b: 358).' This means that any research is carried out via normal classroom activities, involving both students and colleagues as co-researchers. I therefore tried to find natural ways, compatible with life in the classroom and in the school, to generate data for reflection and ultimately for understanding. These ways were, as far as possible, following my normal interaction and communication patterns with students and colleagues, and a summary can be seen in *Tables 4.1a* and *4.1b*. For clarity, I have divided the collected data into two sections: what took place inside the classroom and what took place outside the classroom.

Table 4.1a: Ways of Generating Data for the Study: In the Classroom.

- **Monitoring lessons by using *reflective lesson plans***

- **Reflecting with the students on specific questions**

- **Reflecting on the students' reflections, both with the students and on my own**

- **Student designed and conducted course evaluations**

- **Pilot course evaluation questions**

Table 4.1b: Ways of Generating Data for the Study: Outside the Classroom.

- **Series of recorded discussions with a language teaching colleague**

- **Written reflections from vocational teachers**

4.2 Data Collection inside the Classroom

I work with about ten different student groups; and as this study is looking at the relevance of my courses generally, rather than for a specific group of students, it was considered appropriate to gather data from most of these groups at different times, depending on the class activity. Each group invariably has its own character, but individual groups could also be considered as representative of Merikoski *Muhos* students generally. This is feasible because the groups are heterogeneous, and each group, in theory at least, follows the same course framework. However, not all types of data were gathered from every group. The following sub-sections briefly describe how data was collected and/or generated inside the classroom.

4.2.1 Monitoring

One of the main means of gathering data (which enabled me to reflect at the same time) was by monitoring my classes. Monitoring has been described by Allwright (2000: 10) as a way of 'gathering naturally occurring data about whatever you are … puzzling about', and is more fully explained in section 2.2.2. I considered keeping a classroom journal for an academic year as a way of monitoring what was happening in my classes, but discounted this approach because of the amount of time needed for writing and analysis. Ho's (1995: 66-71) suggestion about using lesson plans as a means of reflection gave me the idea of using a similar framework for making in-class observations. These observations were a way of both recording my reflections and reflecting on what was happening in any particular lesson, and were easy to pick up and put together later. They also provided me with comments to use with my colleague and various student groups for further reflection.

Following Ho's (1995) model, I kept a blank page next to my lesson outline for writing down anything I felt was significant. The writing, which usually took the form of brief comments, was done during or just after the lesson and did not take very long. In this way I was also able to monitor the progress of my own reflections, which were, in their turn, reflecting on life in the classroom as it progressed during the year. I did not write something down in every lesson with every group, but I did leave a blank page by each lesson outline in preparation for possible comments. This also meant I could easily connect my entries to particular lessons. My observations, which had a different focus from the action research and reflective practice elements advocated by Ho (ibid: 68), were aimed at gaining understanding rather than problem solving or improving efficiency.

4.2.2   Reflecting with the Students

Reflecting with the students had three different dimensions: discussion in class, student responses to specific written questions and course evaluation (the latter is discussed separately in the next sub-section). Discussion in class was able to be informal as the groups were mostly very small, sometimes with as few as two students. The students did not want our discussions to be recorded, but did not object if I took notes. These I was able to integrate with my own reflections for the day. The topic of the discussions were to do with what the students would like to do in the class if they had a free choice, and whether the planned lessons that they currently have 'work' for them. I was also interested to know if they had any thoughts about the content of the lessons being planned by the teacher or by the students.

Two written questions ('*How do these lessons help you to learn English*?' and '*What do you get out of these English lessons*?') were given to most groups about two months before the end of the academic year. Depending on the students' level of English, the questions were either in English and/or Finnish, and responses were accepted in either language. For some of the groups I included two or three comments that had come from earlier student reflections as a way of introducing the questions. The students could also write their

responses to the comments if they wished. An example of the type of comments together with the questions can be seen in *Table 4.2*.

Table 4.2: An Example of Comments and Questions for Student Responses

We have fun here
We do nice things together
We don't find English lessons a problem
How do these lessons help you to learn English?
What do you get out of these English lessons?

4.2.3   Course Evaluation

Ways of obtaining course evaluation evolved over the year as my ideas were modified by student responses. Initially I had planned to use a series of fairly detailed questions, which each group could choose to complete either as a semi-structured interview or as a written questionnaire at the end of a course. The pilot questionnaire was given to one group who completed their course early in the year. I also experimented with giving two questions to each group on the completion of a topic. (The questionnaire and topic evaluation questions can be seen in *Appendices I* and *II*.) Although I had given a lot of thought to the questions and their format, I felt I needed a tool for evaluation that would involve more student input at the 'design' stage, and could be seen as potentially part of a 'learning opportunity'. Therefore, in the end I gave the students themselves the responsibility for planning the form and content of their evaluation, my input being limited to helping them with suggestions as to what the format could be.

4.3   Data Collection Outside the Classroom

The data collected outside the classroom involved several colleagues with whom I work fairly closely. In the course of my normal work-life, discussion and e-mail are the main means of communication, and I regularly use these channels to clarify problems about particular students or groups, or to give or obtain feedback on particular issues concerning the students and the school. As the vocational teachers have more regular and consistent contact with their own students than I do, it seemed appropriate to offer them the opportunity to comment on anything the students might have said about their English lessons, which would throw light on my puzzle of relevance. The questions sent to the vocational teachers can be seen in *Appendix III.*

I am one of two language teachers in Merikoski *Muhos*, and my colleague (who is Finnish) and I quite often discuss the groups we are working with, and also the types of courses we are offering and the way we teach. This seems to function as a kind of informal professional development process for us both. As part of this study my colleague agreed to take part in a series of short recorded discussions which we were able to fit in between teaching commitments. The purpose of the discussions was to reflect on some of the observations and reflections I had made during the lessons to see if it was possible to gain any more understanding about how relevant our English courses are to the students who take them.

Chapter Five presents the data that I was able to obtain using the methods just described.

CHAPTER FIVE

DATA FOR REFLECTION AND UNDERSTANDING

This chapter presents the data obtained from the different sources outlined in chapter four. As the data is qualitative and based on observation, reflection and discussion, it will be presented in the form of underlying themes which emerged as the data was analysed. The first part of the chapter describes how the data was prepared for analysis in order to arrive at the underlying themes. The second part of the chapter gives a commentary on the themes and considers how they relate to the research questions.

5.1   Preparing the Data for Analysis

After the data had been collected, they had to be assembled into a suitable format so as to facilitate the process of analysis. My own observations on the different student groups were collated in chronological order for each group (an example of this can be seen in *Appendix IV*), and the tape-recorded discussions with my colleague were transcribed. I then went through the transcribed texts and highlighted sections which struck me as significant. The written comments from the vocational subject teachers and the student reflections, together with the additional reflections, were typed up as separate documents, and the comments roughly grouped according to areas of similarity. I also went through my own observations and the highlighted sections of the transcribed discussions assigning rough 'headers' according to what I felt the subject matter to be (these were done in the form of inserted comments; an example can be seen in *Appendix V*). I made similar annotations to the student-designed course evaluations and the pilot course evaluations. The data was then considered to be in a suitable form for a more detailed analysis to be carried out. I was interested to see what kind of themes would emerge following the pre-analysis when the data were considered (both as separate sections and as a whole), and whether these themes would help me gain any understanding as regards my research questions.

5.2 Emerging Themes

As I went through the prepared data it became apparent that the rough initial analyses had thrown up too many different categories to be useful. Several headings when looked at more deeply were seen to encompass different aspects of the same topic; for example 'fun' and 'good mood' could both be equated with 'enjoyment'. As I went through the data again I noticed that there were five or six recurring themes emerging from each set of data, and that the different sets of data had themes in common. A complete list of the ten recurring themes can be seen in *Table 5.1*, and the way the themes reflect specific data is shown in *Table 5.2*. The order of the themes reflects the order in which they emerged as the data was analysed, starting with my own observations and concluding with the reflections from the vocational teachers. It is interesting to look at which themes are specific to which data and which are common to all. For example, it is mainly the teachers who seem to be concerned with motivation, and just the students who refer to fellow students, but the theme of learning opportunities emerges from all data sources.

Table 5.1: *Recurring Themes which Emerged From all the Data.*

<u>*Recurring Themes*</u>
▪ **Motivation and Relevance**
▪ **Learning Opportunity**
▪ **Learner-Directed Learning**
▪ **Reflection and Understanding**
▪ **Confidence**
▪ **Fellow Students**
▪ **Enjoyment**
▪ **Evaluation**
▪ **The Teacher**
▪ **Classroom and Life**

Table 5.2: *Recurring Themes which Emerged from the Different Data Sources.*

SOURCES OF DATA AND ARISING THEMES							
	Teacher Reflections	**Student Reflections**	**Reflecting on the Reflections**	**Student-Designed Evaluations**	**Pilot Course Evaluations**	**Transcribed Discussions**	**Vocational Teachers' Reflections**
Motivation and Relevance	X			X		X	X
Learning Opportunity	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Learner-Directed Learning	X		X			X	
Reflection and Understanding	X					X	
Confidence	X		X		X	X	X
Fellow Students		X	X	X			
Enjoyment		X	X	X			X
Evaluation		X			X	X	
The Teacher		X		X	X	X	X
Classroom and life				X	X	X	X

5.3 Commentary on the Themes

This sub-section explores the individual themes and considers their significance for the research questions. Brief or more detailed comments are given on all the themes in approximately the same order as they appear in *Tables 5.1* and *5.2*.

5.3.1 Motivation and Relevance, Confidence, Enjoyment and Evaluation

In this section I outline Keller's ARCS Model of Motivation (1987) and look at how the four themes of *Motivation and Relevance, Confidence, Enjoyment* and *Evaluation* seem to have a connection with elements and stages in the model. Keller's model acknowledges the fact that learners must be drawn into a learning experience before learning can occur, but Keller (1999: 12) also suggests that an equally important goal for teachers may be making sure students 'retain and use their [existing] knowledge or skills and that they desire to continue learning.' His model addresses both these aspects of motivation and is specifically oriented towards learning (Crookes and Schmidt 1991: 504).

The four categories of the model are: Attention, Relevance, Confidence and Satisfaction (ARCS). For sustainable motivation to occur, ideally all four elements should be present in progressive sequence. Keller (1997: 2) makes the point that none of the elements are more important than any of the others: for example, if something is highly relevant to a learner, but the learner has no confidence then they will not be motivated by the particular activity, and conversely if a learner has lots of confidence in carrying out a particular activity, but the area has no value for that learner, then motivation for involvement will probably be low. Attention is seen as being related to relevance, but with some distinguishing properties which are to do with getting and sustaining the learner's attention in the first place. The satisfaction part of the model is concerned with outcomes, and is about the learner's evaluation of the consequences related to expectations in a given situation, which will then influence the continuing motivation. The consequences can also include reinforcements such as a certificate or personal feedback and, in addition, chance to use the newly acquired skill.

The theme of *Motivation and Relevance* clearly comes into the sphere of Keller's model, suggesting that relevance, although important, is only one aspect of motivation, but one which is not sufficient on its own to produce a motivated learner. *Confidence* is another aspect of motivation, according to the ARCS model, and I find the connection made between confidence and relevance revealing (as a teacher and as a learner) in that both are seen to be equally important aspects of motivation for learning. The themes of *Enjoyment* and *Evaluation* both seem to link up with the Satisfaction part of the ARCS model; with enjoyment making a contribution to satisfaction, and evaluation being an integral part of the process leading to a learner's satisfaction and continued motivation. All these themes are related to the research questions and will be discussed more fully in *Chapter Six*.

5.3.2   Learning Opportunity

Crabbe (2003: 10) defines a curriculum in terms of 'an organisation of learning opportunities', and uses this definition to cover both product and process orientated curricula. *Learning Opportunity* is seen by Crabbe as a means to achieving a goal (which could be tightly defined or left more open). By contrast, Allwright (2005a: 17) uses the term *Learning Opportunity* in an open-ended way to cover an *opportunity* for learning without assuming learning will necessarily take place. He deliberately makes no reference to agency, suggesting that an opportunity may equally well be created by a learner as by a teacher. The term is not limited in scope and could just as easily be a fleeting moment within a lesson, as a decision to take a particular language course or participate in an exchange. The open-endedness is important when the relationship between teaching and learning is considered, as it not possible to predict what learners get from a lesson merely by looking at what is taught (ibid: 14). Although having a different perspective, both Crabbe and Allwright see planning for learning opportunity as crucial in language teaching.

It is interesting that the theme of *Learning Opportunity* emerged from all sources of my data, suggesting this is an important area for everyone concerned, whether students or teachers. As this theme is so broad, and can

be looked at from different angles, it is quite possible to consider the three research questions from the point of view of learning opportunity. The main puzzle of course-relevance could also be looked at through the kinds of learning opportunities the English courses are seen to be offering the students. These threads will be taken up again in the next chapter.

5.3.3   Learner-Directed Learning

Learner-Directed Learning is a term created and used by Pinney (1983: 13). She explains what it means: '[i]n Learner-Directed Learning the learner decides what, when, how much and in what manner he wants to learn (ibid).' This is a radical position and is perhaps reminiscent of A.S. Neill's strong persuasions: '…children like adults learn what they want to learn (1992: 101).' Although at first glance these ideas could seem untenable when related to an EFL classroom, the essence I derive from them relates to learners being empowered by being allowed to determine their own course of learning. This has a strong bearing on the notion of learning opportunity, discussed above, and also relates to Breen's ideas of lessons being jointly constructed by the teacher together with the individual learners. 'The positive and explicit use of the…jointly constructed nature of lessons can be a *means* to uncovering and sharing what individual learners and teachers perceive as significant for them in learning a language together (2000: 137).' [Original emphasis].

The theme *Learner-Directed Learning* mainly emerged from data generated by the student groups who found it impossible to accommodate the kind of material and methods which I normally use in my teaching. Keller (1999: 10) addresses this when he writes: '[t]here are fundamental characteristics of motivation and processes for influencing them that can assist teachers in developing satisfactory levels of motivation providing that the students are not overwhelmed by non-school-related stress in their lives.' In many cases the students that I work with have other, more dominant concerns than learning English in school. Learner-Directed Learning has provided a way forward in some cases, and may have provided the means for me as a teacher-facilitator to gain more understanding of relevance and motivation and what can be done in certain cases to offer more authentic learning opportunities.

5.3.4 Reflection and Understanding

Reflection in Exploratory Practice is seen as an integral part of the puzzling process, and as a key to developing understanding. Most of the methods of data generation which I used (inside or outside the classroom with colleagues and students or on my own) involved reflection in some way. Stanley (1988: 584-591) proposes a framework for developing a reflective teaching practice 'grounded in the direct experience of classroom teachers', and suggests that reflection is a skill to be learned which can be developed with practice (ibid: 585). Allwright (2000: 10), in the context of EP, equates reflection with the process of puzzling to uncover 'an adequate degree of understanding', which can be done alone or with other 'practitioners' (students and colleagues are included here). While not offering specific guidelines, Allwright highlights the importance of reflection in the process of refining the initial puzzle (1993: 15) and of analysing and interpreting the data, and emphasizes the intellectual hard work usually involved (2000: 12). He also offers a note of caution against coming to premature conclusions and assuming all the data has been exhausted before it actually has been. I did not find the process of reflection easy, and I think that my students did not always find it easy to 'reflect' with me, especially when the puzzle was not of their choosing, or when there were other things on their minds. Nevertheless, there were certainly many moments of understanding for me during the process of gathering data and reflecting on it. This theme will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

5.3.5 Fellow Students

Breen (2001: 134) states that '[m]ost often the flow of classroom life is actually under the surface.' In this context he is referring to the 'culture of the classroom' where relationships can assume particular importance. The teacher may perceive a student as an individual, but each individual is in addition both a member of and a representative of a group. Breen (ibid: 130) points out that an individual learner in a classroom 'is engaged in both an individual learning process *and* a group teaching-learning process'. [Original emphasis]. Slimani-Rolls (2005: 212) highlights the effect that group dynamics and the peer group can have on what happens in the classroom, most of which would be impossible for the teacher to predict, especially if

lessons are only scheduled for a short time weekly. It has been interesting in this context to find *Fellow Students* emerging as a theme, and to have the opportunity to gain further understanding on the role individuals in a class can have for each other, positively or negatively, which in its turn can affect the response of learners to the courses offered.

5.3.6 The Teacher

The teacher is also part of the group dynamic and usually has a particular role, although Breen (2001: 131) sees this role slightly paradoxically: '[l]earners *give* the teacher the right to adopt a role and identity of teacher. And a teacher has to *earn* particular rights and duties in the eyes of the learning group.' [Original emphasis]. He suggests (ibid) that 'the precise degree of asymmetry [between teachers and learners]' is something which teachers and any learning group gradually establish in order to maintain a relatively harmonious working relationship. Slimani-Rolls (2003: 234) points out that it is collaboration between teacher and learners which enables the 'complex personal and social task of classroom language learning' to be navigated, and a teacher is therefore more of a facilitator. Although I have not asked the students any direct questions about whether or how my role as a teacher facilitates their perception of, and responses to, my courses, the theme of *Teacher* has spontaneously arisen from the data. Just as the students are of prime concern to the teacher, so presumably the teacher has a particular influence, positive or negative, on the students. This may be even more obvious when the teacher is from a different culture from the students in the class and is not fluent in their first language. These factors may help or hinder motivation and/or learning.

5.3.7 Classroom and Life

The theme of *Classroom and Life* is concerned with the connection between life inside the classroom and what happens outside in the students' lives, or alternatively, with what the students bring into the classroom. As has been discussed above, the classroom has its own dynamic which may or may not be reflective of 'life outside'. As a teacher, one of the ways I try to visualise my lessons is as a bridge to situations where the students may need to use English.

This is also bound up with the idea of authenticity as discussed in section 3.3.3, where, when the teacher is able to 'be real' the students can respond, and in that way bring their own concerns, and their own experiences into the classroom. If the English courses that are offered do not touch the students, and do not connect with their lives or are not able to be meaningful for them in some way, there can then only be a tenuous link between the classroom and life. As Exploratory Practice 'is fundamentally about trying to understand the quality of life in a given situation (Allwright 2003: 120)', the theme *Classroom and Life* is of considerable importance in helping to understand my underlying puzzle about the relevance of the courses offered.

In *Chapter Six* the focus is on analysing and interpreting the data for situated understandings.

CHAPTER SIX

SITUATED UNDERSTANDINGS

This chapter addresses the overall puzzle of how relevant the English courses are for those who take them, by looking at how far the data are able to provide answers to the research questions in the form of situated understandings. (A situated understanding is an understanding valid for its immediate situation.) In line with Naidu *et al* (1992: 254) I am interested in looking not at the 'spectacular' events in the classroom, but at 'the recurring patterns' which enable me 'to describe and comprehend [my] everyday reality.' The data are examined via the themes presented in *Chapter Five*, and although the reflections from the vocational teachers and the students were received in both Finnish and English, in this chapter they are only represented in English.

6.1   *Relevance* in Relation to the Research Questions

The overall puzzle for me, as an English teacher in Merikoski *Muhos,* is how relevant my courses are to the students who take them. Specific research questions were designed to help me gain understanding about the issue of *relevance* and the tension I have often felt between what I see as relevant and what my learners perceive as relevant. The dilemma here may stem from the fact that as a teacher I am probably working in a different time scale from the students, focusing more on my predictions about the students' language needs in the future, whereas the students are usually concerned about the here and now. I feel that relevance is closely related to motivation, and therefore by looking at student motivation I thought I might gain further understanding about the question of course relevance. My colleague affirmed this link:

> I think it essential that we think about relevance and that I see as part of motivating our students. If the material is relevant to them I assume they will be more motivated. (*J.L. Transcribed discussions: 20.2.06*)

Likewise, I felt that the question of *how* the courses help the students learn English (from both the teacher's and the learners' perspective) may throw light on the issue of relevance. '[W]e know that, in general, people are more likely to learn something that they perceive as relevant to them… (Allwright 2005a: 18).' Finally, I thought the question of what the students themselves

take away from the courses could enhance my understanding of course relevance.

I will now take each of the three research questions in turn to see how far the themes arising from the data provide understanding about the core puzzle of relevance.

6.2 In What Ways Do My Lessons Motivate My Students in their Learning of English?

Keller's clear definition of motivation in conjunction with his four-stage model of motivation, ARCS (described in section 5.3.1) has helped me to understand a lot about student responses to my courses.

> [Motivation] refers to the *choices* people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid, and the *degree of effort* they will exert in that respect (Keller, 1983: 389). [Original emphasis].

At the beginning of the academic year, as part of the process of getting to know the various class groups and the individuals within the groups, the students were asked for their responses to the following question: '*What do you think about the idea of studying English this year*?' The answers fell into roughly three categories which I classify as: negative, neutral and enthusiastic. Examples of these can be seen in *Table 6.1*.

Table 6.1: Student Attitudes to Studying English at the Beginning of the Year

Negative (8)	Neutral (15)	Enthusiastic (25)
I don't want to	I can't say	Great
Oh no	I don't know	I think this is a good idea. I really want to learn English.
Boring	Nothing really	

Interestingly, for the most part, the individual responses within each class group were similar, so it would be possible to 'characterize' each student group as negative, neutral or enthusiastic at the beginning of the year on the basis of their attitude to studying English. My colleague makes a distinction between the attitude to English and the attitude to studying:

> I think most of our students and most Finnish young [people] are in a way motivated to study English. They hear English around them in everyday life in films and music…they might have a negative attitude towards the classroom…not towards the English language itself. (*J.L. Transcribed Discussions: 20.2.06*)

This distinction is born out by the numbers of students in each of the three groups displayed in *Table 6.1*, with a much greater number of students having an enthusiastic or neutral attitude compared to those with a negative attitude. My colleague also comments on the wider issue of motivation:

> …If the student is motivated to study in his or her field in general, if it's a motivated student then it's easier to motivate him or her to study languages as well, but we do have many students who are not too motivated [for] studying in general. (*J.L.Transcribed Discussions: 20.2.06*)

A student in one of the groups clearly exemplifies this situation:

> One of the boys was talking about what was relevant for him in the course and he said the basic problem for him is that he *has* to be both in the school and in the class and that is a problem for him. It is not in any way free-choice and therefore he opts out or takes the line of least resistance. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 13.3.06*)

This kind of situation, which I realise is quite common in Merikoski *Muhos*, especially among the students from family homes, is one which I try to address. The ARCS model has enabled me to understand that however relevant my course material may appear to be, if the material or the way it is taught does not initially grab and sustain student attention, then there can be no learning opportunity as far as the students are concerned.

6.2.1 Zone of Congruence and Zone of Resistance

The terms *zone of congruence* (C-zone) and *learner resistance zone* (R-zone) were coined by Millrood (2004: 29) in the context of running Neuro-Linguistic Programming workshops for teachers. C-zone is a metaphor for effective teacher-learner interaction and R-zone is where the student is unable or unwilling to co-operate in a zone of congruence. I have found these metaphors helpful when monitoring my classes (in the EP sense, described in 2.2.2) in order to describe and understand student responses. An example of this difference was clearly observed in one double lesson:

> J. brought in photo albums which told very much about the kind of past he has had. Then they each made a [floor] plan of their room/apartment. It is like visiting them. This is authentic and real…Lesson 2 where we played Cluedo was very different. They complied, but it was almost passive resistance! 'My activity' versus 'their activity', this was something we did together, but with a totally different feel. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 28.3.06*)

One way of harnessing this R-zone has been to give some student groups more responsibility for the content of their lessons, and to try and encourage at least an element of *Learner-Directed Learning* (see section 5.3.3). Instead of feeling 'apologetic for what I am offering the students' (J.R: Teacher Reflections: 31.1.06), I have tried to respond to the students, and go with their flow.

> I have some materials, but it is quite scary to come to a lesson not knowing where we are going. You feel naked to interact with whatever they bring…Being real/authentic is important. Exploiting the difference in knowledge is a cue/clue. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 11.4.06*)

With some groups this works very well, and can markedly increase the percentage of lessons in the C-zone.

> The wood boys passed my classroom and asked what we are doing tomorrow. This is *significant*. Also [they] almost promised to bring something themselves. Like a date! Shows me they think about the lesson and could be interested in what we are doing. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 24.4.06*)

One student was able to reflect on both the difficulties and the benefits of the experience of *Learner-Directed Learning*:

> We are so used to the teacher planning the lessons [that] it's difficult to plan ourselves- to think of something to do.
>
> If you plan [your own] lessons, [you] can be more focused and concentrate. It is what you want to do. [You] can ask own questions and get [the] answers you need. (*Reflecting on the Reflections: 27.3.03*)

Not all students are able to express themselves in this way, and many students expect rather more structure to the lessons in the way of teacher initiated learning opportunities. Even when the teacher has got to know the group well over a period of many weeks, there can still be some surprise differences of perception about what is going on in the lessons. One group, who for the teacher appeared to be in R-zone much of the time, when asked about the

English lessons declared openly that they did not find the lessons a problem, and gave rather positive feedback. The following week they spontaneously used the lesson time to find out how to ask some visiting British students about themselves, diligently writing down the questions to take away with them. My reflections note:

> This is relevance. NEED to communicate. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 20.3.03*)

The teacher had in an earlier lesson offered them similar questions in preparation for the students' arrival, but the opportunity was declined. This experience illustrates for me how, if the structure is flexible enough, the students are able to shape the lessons themselves. It is something which I have also noticed with other groups:

> Students change/form the lessons to suit themselves-maybe so the lessons become relevant. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 19.5.06*)

> This is a good level group and it is clear that they want to learn, but in *their* way. Not through exercises. As soon as a 'boring-looking' paper comes their way so do the objections and the move into the R-zone. This is also a group which works as a team. The team factor seems to help and motivate. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 21.4.06*)

6.2.2 Enjoyment

Enjoyment is a theme which emerged from all the student data. One of the class groups chose to make a set of questions as their end-of-course evaluation which was answered by the whole group. One of the questions was: '*Do you like these lessons and why?'* The answers are a useful entrée into what motivates this group.

> Yes, I like these lessons because we do all kinds of interesting things. (*Student-Designed Course Evaluation: 10.4.06*)

> I like 'cause we talk different things every week. (*Student-Designed Course Evaluation: 10.4.06)*

> I like these lessons because I want to learn English better and we have fun here. (*Student-Designed Course Evaluation: 10.4.06*)

Students in other groups expressed their enjoyment in a somewhat different way:

> …have you noticed now I have more interest in English? In the lessons you don't notice so much, but when the last lesson comes you notice you are interested. (*Student-Designed Course Evaluation: 19.5.06*)

43

> Challenging, but nice (*Pilot Course Evaluations: 12.12.05*)

> [I get] a good mood and sometimes coffee (*Student Reflections: 3.5.06*)

It was surprising to me to discover how, for many students of all levels, one of the products of the lessons was a 'good mood', and that it was significant enough for them to offer it as feedback. In terms of the ARCS model of motivation, enjoyment could be seen as part of the confidence building process, (C), and certainly as part of lesson or course satisfaction (S), which the learners are able to express to me and/or their vocational teachers.

> [The students] like the lessons because of playing [games]. They do not have to struggle. (*P.M. Vocational Teachers' Reflections: 29.5.06*)

> The English lesson is one lesson that is eagerly anticipated during the week. (*M.V. Vocational Teachers' Reflections: 3.4.06*)

> My students like English lessons very much…They like your way of teaching and are happy…playing games etc. (*K.K. Vocational Teachers' Reflections: 3.4.06*)

One further indirect piece of evidence for student motivation, which could be connected with any of the following themes, *Enjoyment, Teacher* or *Classroom and Life,* comes from outside the school. I live in the same community as the school, and usually when I meet students locally in their free time they acknowledge me and very often we will talk in English. I think this reflects a certain level of confidence in and motivation for using spoken English outside the classroom.

> Students have started talking with me in English quite spontaneously and out of class. For example S. and R. in the [student] hotel…I didn't put them in a situation where they had to speak English, this was their own free choice. I think this is significant. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 11.4.06*)

6.2.3   The Teacher

The Teacher is a theme that comes up in most of the data, and from one point of view the teacher can be considered as an integral part of the course they are teaching. My colleague sums it up this way:

> …it's impossible to make it uniform in a way that another teacher could use the same material in the same way. For some reason it just doesn't work that way. We are all individual teachers and we have to work from that point where we feel comfortable. (*J.L. Transcribed Discussions: 20.2.06*)

One of the vocational teachers expresses how she understands the role of the teacher in Merikoski *Muhos*:

> The significance of the teacher for [our kind of] students cannot be underestimated. It is more to do with what kind of person the teacher is and how the teacher relates to the students, than what kind of information they are giving out, although that is also important. (*M.V. Vocational Teachers' Reflections: 8.5.06*)

In the context that I am working all teachers are part of a team and English lessons cannot be considered in isolation from the work done by other colleagues. Motivation for studying English in many cases is part of the wider picture of motivating for study in general, as alluded to earlier (see section 6.2.). Another vocational teacher provides a window on this:

> You have got many students interested in studying languages again…for example I spoke with S. in English for much of one day when we were doing repair work together. (*M.K. Vocational Teachers' Reflections: 24.5.06*)

When the teacher is a native English speaker working in another culture, it is inevitable that differences will be noticed:

> They [the students] feel English is like usual lessons, but English lessons are different [from normal lessons] because you are different. (*P.M. Vocational Teachers' Reflections: 29.5.06*)

A lot of students, while not commenting directly on the effect of having a native speaker teacher, refer to it indirectly:

> It's better [to have a native speaker] because you hear normal speech, not 'book language'. (*Student-Designed Evaluations: 10.4.06*)

> Yeah, 'cause we talk English very much and we listening English more than earlier. (*Student-Designed Evaluations: 10.4.06*)

> In my opinion it is a plus when there is a teacher who is English. (*Pilot Course Evaluations: 12.12.05*)

Other students simply respond to the teacher:

> When the teacher is good, then it is easier to understand and try to speak. (*Student Reflections: 3.5.06*)

It seems almost inevitable that if unsolicited comments are made about the teacher to that teacher, the comments will be positive. Being reflexively part of this study means I am also part of the phenomenon being studied (Maxwell 1996:67), and it is not possible to be totally objective or to expect the students, my co-researchers, to be so either.

6.3   Situated Understandings I

From the data so far presented and discussed, I have understood that relevance in course design (which includes the material and the way the course is structured) is only a part of motivating the students to take part in the learning process. It seems that students, both individuals and groups, are able to shape a course so that it becomes relevant for them. Part of the shaping is to do with the teacher and his or her attitude towards the students. As a native-speaker teacher teaching students who can appear to be rather unresponsive, it is important not to underestimate the value of offering the students opportunities for listening to spoken English, and for building up their confidence to speak in English.

> These guys are a puzzle to me- they do not want to be organised/programmed. But yet when there is something meaningful to them, like the guitar- then they can talk and interact in English…I must not underestimate the importance of listening in English. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 20.12.05*)

Enjoyment and fun, which may simply be expressed as being in a good mood after the lesson, also enhance motivation and can bring the learning opportunities nearer to the learners.

6.4   In What Ways Do My Courses Help My Students to Learn English?

The question of how my courses help the students to learn English is a broad one, and one which can probably never be answered definitively as there are too many variables. However, as stated earlier, I am looking for situated understandings to help me with future course planning. In order to do this, I first use the data to explore the question from my point of view as a teacher, and then go on to look at the same question from the learners' point of view.

6.4.1   The Teacher's Viewpoint

It is important as teachers to remind ourselves that learning a language is an on-going process, and therefore we can only be a *part* of any individual student's learning experience. Nevertheless, teacher doubts, even if privately expressed, can be quite strong:

> I always beg the question of myself- have the students learned anything? Am I doing my job if they haven't? How do I or they know they haven't [learned anything]. If they are listening and trying to understand what I am saying, even if all the replies are in Finnish, is this failure? I return again to the concept of learning opportunity. We can only offer learning opportunity- we cannot guarantee learning. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 10.1.06*)

However, if we are able to give the responsibility of learning to our learners we may be able to say:

> …you [the teacher] don't know if you are succeeding or not in the process …you cannot guarantee learning…but you can say that your way of teaching has led to good results with many students. (*J.L. Transcribed Discussions: 20.2.06*)

It has become clear in the process of reflecting on the courses as I am teaching them that no one course can suit every group, let alone every individual student. As suggested above (see section 6.2.1), the groups and the students adapt the course to their own needs:

> What seems to be happening quite naturally is that students in the most interactive classes or the classes where I put myself under less pressure of syllabus are creating their own activities on a week to week basis. Intuitively this feels like learner-directed learning. And it feels as if what I am doing- very low key- is working. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 20.3.06*)

The amount of English spontaneously spoken in class by the students between themselves as well as with the teacher is an informal way for the teacher to recognise that some kind of learning has occurred. The theme of *Learning Opportunity* links up here with the theme of *Confidence*.

> When meeting T. in the cloakroom [before the lesson] she spoke easily in English. It seemed very natural to her…I wonder what makes the difference- the push…Where does confidence come from? (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 5.2.06*)

> This group starts using English with each other [spontaneously]. That is some kind of evidence of what has happened [this year]. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 19.5.06*)

I generally use different kinds of materials and methods to those the students have experienced in their language classes in previous schools. This is intended to help students understand that communication in a second language can begin where they are, and it can also be fun. Crookes and Schmidt (1991: 488-89) equate interest with curiosity, and suggest that 'developing curiosity means using less orthodox teaching techniques and/or materials.' My colleague comments on how he perceives our role:

> And with our students I think one of our main key roles is to lure them back as to what language is about. It's about real life. And it has nothing to do about grades, or marking, tests…It's about people being able to communicate. (*J.L. Transcribed Discussions: 10.3.06*)

Just as the theme of *Enjoyment* emerges in connection with motivation so it can also be seen to be important when thinking about how language courses help students to learn English. One of the ways I have found to take the pressure off learning is through the use of different kinds of games, and not necessarily 'designated language games'. This can have a marked effect on learners' confidence and motivation, as the following comments show.

> Today we played Monsters, which M. requested. [He became a] totally different and focused young man. This brings up thoughts on appropriacy, relevance, enjoyment of material [with] no language overload and everything carried out with ease. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 19.12.05*)

> Games with this group make a total difference in mood/interest/active interest and liveliness. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 16.9.05*)

Games, however, are not the answer for every group as the next reflection observes:

> Interesting that for some students games are a release from their inhibitions and are a place where they can enjoy using language. [For] other students the games are a block- or cause a back-step. Less than authentic. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 28.3.06*)

6.4.2   The Students' Viewpoint

Students can have their own perspective on learning which may be rather different from the teacher's impressions. This is a good reason for involving learners in dialogue about their learning.

I was struck by their feedback. [It was] very positive, and I had felt them overall a rather hostile group! (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 13.12.05*)

One of the questions I asked the students to reflect on was: '*How do these lessons help you to learn English?*' Most students answered in fairly general terms, rather than with particular detail:

Little new words. (*Student Reflections: 24.4.06*)

I have learned how to pronounce words better. (*Student Reflections: 10.4.06*)

Pretty much I have learned quite a lot. (*Student Reflections: 21.4.06*)

Understand English. (*Student Reflections: 24.4.06*)

Due to the reflexive nature of the study it could be argued that the students might think that they should respond positively as they know that their teacher will be reading their reflections. However, all contributions were anonymous, and my understanding is that the learners are expressing as well as they can how they feel they are progressing in their learning of English and which aspects are important to them. My focus in the courses (whatever the specific topic for the lesson) is on oral skills, so it seems natural that the responses (as exemplified above) were to do with understanding, speaking and vocabulary. I see these reflections as coming within the themes of *Learning Opportunity* and *Confidence.* One of the questions posed in the student-designed evaluation referred to in section 6.2.2, although a similar question, gives a slightly more specific focus: '*What is the new thing that you have learned?*' The answers reflect individual areas of interest.

I learned new things about travel because I like travelling very much. (*Student-Designed Evaluation: 10.4.06*)

New thing I have learned is communication with different people. (*Student-Designed Evaluation: 10.4.06*)

Speak words better. (*Student-Designed Evaluation: 10.4.06*)

I've learned many new words. (*Student-Designed Evaluation: 10.4.06*)

I think the first response clearly shows how a learner can shape the course to their own area of need or interest, and thus make it relevant on a personal level. Although travelling has been mentioned during the lessons I was not

aware of especially highlighting the topic with the group. Yet this student seems to have used the lessons as a *Learning Opportunity* for developing her own area of interest. The second response is similar and shows me how this student has used the lessons to develop her speaking skills in English in order to be able to communicate with people in English. As it happens there was an opportunity during the spring term to have extended free time contact with a student group from Britain, and this student used it to the full. For the other students in the group the lessons may not have been so important in this regard. However, the last two examples, although less specific, may also be seen in this context as reflecting individual priorities in language learning; namely, pronunciation and vocabulary.

When reflecting with the students on their reflections, some students are able to say why a particular activity or topic has been of use. This can also lead the teacher to a new understanding of relevance:

> Watching movies helps with saying words and gives some new words. (*Reflecting on the Reflections: 27.3.03*)

6.5   Situated Understandings II

It seems that many of my students can use a course to learn something relevant for themselves. That relevance can be related to a specific situation, such as talking to non-Finns in English, or it can be more general, such as the feeling of being able to understand and speak English better, or simply having learned something which is not possible to commit to expressing in words.

> I have learned a lot of new things, and the old things have come back to me. (*Student Reflections: 3.5.06*)

It is also true that some students may not feel the course in question holds much for them. One student reflected:

> I have not learned many new words as I learned so many in my last school. (*Student Reflections: 24.4.06*)

Bastos (2005: 33), when writing about post-modern students, comments that '[o]ur contemporary teenagers cannot spend much time analyzing feelings or actions- everything has to be lived as fast as possible.' I have found that

reflecting is not easy for many students (particularly teenage boys), and a single word may be as much as they are prepared or able to say.

> Speaking [in answer to 'How have these lessons helped you learn English?']. (*Student Reflections: 21.4.06*)

Nevertheless, that single word can have resonance for me as a teacher, especially when I know who it 'belongs to'. I also have to accept that some understandings may be 'beyond words', as Allwright (2003: 120) suggests.

6.6   What Do My Students Get Out of My Courses?

The students were asked directly what they get out of the courses. The question was phrased as follows: '*What do you get out of these English lessons?*' The majority of the learners included one or both of: *good mood* and *language skills* in their response. For example:

> A good mood when you always get something from the English lesson (*Student Reflections: 3.5.06*)

> [I get] more skills in English (*Student Reflections: 3.5.06*)

Since reading these responses I have been wondering about the place of 'a good mood' in the language classroom. 'A good mood' does not say anything directly about the relevance of what is offered in a course and how it is taught, but it does suggest that for many students the feelings they go away with may directly affect their perception of what happens in the language classroom. It also suggests that the atmosphere in the classroom generated by 'the culture of the classroom', using Breen's terms (2001: 128), can have a direct effect on what is perceived to have been learned there.

An aspect of classroom life, which seems to me to be related to 'good mood' and may partly explain it, appeared in student responses and evaluations elsewhere in the data. It concerns the importance of co-learners in the learning process:

> Relaxing people. Learn more easily when you are with people you can relax with. (*Student Reflections: 21.4.06*)

> It goes so well because we are a team and we work well together. We have fun here… helping each other. (*Student Reflections: 20.3.06*)

51

The relationship between the co-learners and their teacher is closely bound up with the culture of the classroom: '[i]t is precisely this interplay between the individual, the individual as group member, and the group which represents and generates the social and psychological *nexus* which [Breen has] proposed as the culture of the classroom (Breen 2001: 134).' [Original emphasis]. Although most of the groups I teach are used to working together, and for the most part seem to enjoy each others' company, the value of 'individuals as part of a *team*' is something which is easy to take for granted or overlook, so it is useful to have been reminded of this aspect of classroom life.

Language Skills can be seen as a rather general response to the question '*What do you get out of these English lessons?*' The answer could well reflect what students believe they have gained, without committing themselves to anything more specific. However, other learners were able to indicate areas where they now feel more confident:

> I understand much better and I speak much more. (*Student Reflections: 24.4.06*)

> Before these lessons my talking was very bad. I think it's [a] little better now. (*Student Reflections: 21.4.06*)

The response, *language skills*, may equally well just be what the student thinks they are supposed to 'report' or what they imagine the teacher wants to hear. However, a few students left this question with no answer at all, and there were some negative answers as well, which tends to suggest that the students felt free to answer honestly. The negative answers all took the same form:

> Nothing. (*Student Reflections: 24.4.06*)

There was not time within the study to gain any further understanding on this particular comment and the underlying reasons for it, but another puzzle has been created which could be explored in the future using the EP framework. This illustrates how EP Principle 6 (see section 2.2.2) works, where seeking for understanding in order to influence the quality of life in the classroom becomes an ongoing process.

6.7   Situated Understandings III

The answers the students gave to the question of what they get out of the courses have made me aware of how important a learner's emotional response (in the form of a good mood, for example) can be for their attitude towards any learning opportunity. This ties in with Schleppegrell and Bowman's observation (1995: 303) that '[f]or students to engage with their learning, they also need to connect emotionally with a topic.' *Good mood* could also be considered reflective of the 'quality of life in the classroom' as the students are experiencing it in Merikoski *Muhos.*

Allwright and Hanks (2006: 2) maintain that learners are 'crucially important to their own learning.' Part of this importance may be the relevance of the learners' own belief that they are learning, even if they are not able to specify exactly what it is that is being learned. It may not be realistic in any case for me to expect my learners to have a clear idea of exactly what they are learning, especially as the courses are geared to be open-ended rather than focusing on particular teaching points. Another factor to remember is that learning another language is a process, rather than a one-off event, and any one course can only ever be a part of that process.

> It's a very gradual process learning a language. And we [language teachers in Merikoski *Muhos*] are only a small part of it, but a very important part…A facilitator or something like that. (*J.L. Transcribed Discussions: 10.3.06*)

6.8 Understanding For Further Planning

This study set out to try and gain understanding about my puzzle of the extent to which my courses are relevant for the students who take them. Behind the puzzle was the idea that the situated understandings gained could help in decisions about possible course development. Allwright (2003: 128) highlights the importance of situated understandings when contemplating change; '…only a serious effort to understand life in a particular setting will enable you to decide if practical change is necessary, desirable and/or possible.'

The issue of relevance with regard to my courses and my students has occupied my mind a lot, especially the tension between the teacher and the learner perspective on 'relevance'. Through this study I have come to understand that *relevance*, although important, is only a part of the picture. The ARCS model of motivation has helped me to see 'relevance' in a wider perspective, as an *element* of motivation, not any more important than the other elements of the model. The model has been useful for looking at my courses as a whole, but more importantly, lesson by lesson, as my reflections show:

> If we look at the ARCS model, with this group I am working at AR level, but not often in the C or even the S level. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 18.4.06*)

> This lesson was a gift! Is it ARCS? (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 28.3.06*)

> I find the ARCS model very helpful as a basis rather than a luxury in my work. And one goes right back to the beginning with each lesson. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 21.4.06*)

The data has also shown me how students are able (both as individuals and as groups), to shape the English lessons (and by implication, the courses) to give them the learning opportunities that they need.

> They decided to draw and write something about cars and then discuss as a group. Do we learn better doing what we want? J asked S for the words he needed. S has the answer. This class is rolling. …the whole of learning is a process. As can be seen with 10th class, people talk because they have something to talk about. (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 20.3.06*)

This is an insight which has resonance for me, because through it I can recognise the role of learners as co-teachers as well as co-researchers: '…all learn from all (Pinney 1983: 15),' and it leads me to consider the place of the structure or framework in a course. Naidu *et al* (1992: 260), when researching heterogeneity recognised 'that learning is personally meaningful only when individual frames of reference are involved in the learning.' They also realised the equal necessity for the support of 'a common framework within which to nurture learner individuality (ibid).' Similar insights also came out in discussion with my colleague:

> JL: [I]t might be a good idea to give them a framework, a structure and then we can move inside the framework to which direction we choose to go.
> JR: Give them a choice within the structure?
> JL: Yes. And even break the frames if necessary. But first in order to orient their minds, [the students] need to have the idea of what we are doing, what is the goal and aim of this course. Structure in that sense.
> (*Transcribed Discussions: 20.2.06*)

Individual teachers may provide structure in different ways, but the need for the structure to allow for flexibility is of particular importance. 'We need to be flexible and sensitive to the characteristics of learners if we want our materials [and courses] to be learner authentic (Lee: 1994: 328).' It may not be possible to specifically plan for *Learner-Directed Learning*, but providing a structure which can be used for guidance and support seems to be of help for both the teacher and the learners. Within this flexible structure the students may then both create and avail themselves of different kinds of learning opportunity.

In the conclusion which follows, the strengths and limitations of this kind of approach are briefly discussed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

This study has used the principles of Exploratory Practice (EP) to try and understand how relevant the English courses are for the students who take them in Merikoski *Muhos*. EP offers the teacher the chance to research puzzles of the classroom in a way that creates minimal disturbance to normal procedures and activities. Students and colleagues can be involved as co-researchers, thus creating the opportunity to gather a wider perspective on whatever the puzzle is. Breen (2001: 137) observes: '[t]he culture of the class has the potential to reveal to the teacher the language learning process as it is actually experienced. In this way teaching language and investigating language learning may be seen to be synonymous.' It can be argued that the results of qualitative research, such as in this case study, are of limited use as they are unlikely to be generalizable. However, in Schofield's view (1990: 226), the emphasis on generalizability in qualitative research is now giving way to the idea of 'fit' between 'the situation studied' and other situations to which the findings may be applied. EP does not claim to offer 'generalized understandings (Allwright 203: 121)' but rather 'situated understandings', of significance to the participant researchers. Allwright suggests (ibid) that in EP it is the investigative procedures that may be of interest to others rather than any particular findings.

Using the principles of EP has enabled me as a teacher to 'open up the fabric' of my lessons and my courses to discover and examine some of the individual strands more closely. This has led to some findings which are 'necessarily situated and unfinished, not generalizable (Miller, 2003: 210).' The study has shown me that the teacher can only go so far in offering 'relevant courses' to the students, as course (or lesson) relevance is part of the wider issue of motivation. I have observed that students are able to shape lessons to serve their own needs, providing the course structure is sufficiently flexible. Lessons which facilitate a good mood in the students may also facilitate learning, though what that learning is may not be able to be clearly expressed in words. Through this study I have been able to gain more confidence about

the way I structure my courses for the students, which supports Allwright and Hanks' (2001: 1) observation that 'understanding is good for teachers… helping them be more confident about what they are doing.' I have again been able to recognise the importance of the classroom dynamic and of having a continuous dialogue between the students and the teacher.

I recognise that the understandings gained in this study are subjective and that there could well be other ways of interpreting my data. However, Exploratory Practice offers a valid framework for continuous reflection and redefining of classroom puzzles which gives allowance for the possibility of gaining further understandings. Breen (2001: 134) expresses it this way: '[w]e will never understand classroom language learning unless we explore its lesson-by-lesson significance for those who undertake it.' I would add the proviso that we should be doing the exploration *with* those who are undertaking the learning, involving them both in the investigations and in the understandings gained from those investigations.

APPENDIX I

PILOT COURSE EVALUATION QUESTIONS

1. **How useful have you found this English course?**

2. **Can you say in what ways you have found it useful?**

3. **Is it possible to say why it was not very useful?**

4. **Can you say if anything about the way this course has been arranged and taught has helped, or not helped, your learning of English?**

5. **Do you have any comments about the material used, text books, hand-outs, exercises?**

6. **Was there anything you particularly liked/disliked?**

7. **If a friend of yours had the chance of taking the course you have had, would you suggest she took it? Why/Why not?**

The original questions were written in both Finnish and English and students could choose either language for their responses.

PILOT TOPIC EVALUATION QUESTIONS

Would studying this module be of any use to someone travelling to an English speaking country?

Why/Why not?

What have *you* learned from this module? (Please be honest!)

The original questions were written in both Finnish and English and students could choose either language for their responses.

APPENDIX III

QUESTIONS FOR VOCATIONAL TEACHERS

Please could you help me!

As part of my studies from Birmingham University I am looking at what students get out of their lessons with me in Merikoski. I am particularly interested in whether what we do in class and the way we do it has meaning for the students in terms of their life and studies.

As you undoubtedly know the students better than I do, and they probably talk with you more, I would be very pleased if you could send me **any comments** (positive and/or negative) you have relating to:

1. Your students' attitude to my English lessons.

2. Your student/s' comments on anything done in the English classes.

3. Your student/s' use of or interest in the English language inside or outside school.

All letters were sent in English and in Finnish, and responses were accepted in both languages.

AN EXAMPLE OF MY OWN COLLATED OBSERVATIONS

<div style="border:1px solid black; padding:10px;">

<u>Metalwork Group</u>

9th January: Just noticed how hard it is with just one student. You get through the material quicker and with a quiet chap like K. it feels quite pressurised on both sides.

23rd January: Maybe ask students to save stuff or throw it out at the end of each module. That way they develop process of selection, deciding for themselves what they want and what is useful to them. Started today with this group. Concept of relevance. Can they choose what is relevant for them?

30th January: Give enough time for doing assessment tasks. They tried quite hard on these tests today. The reading test went quite well.

6th February: Quite hard work for just one student to be with the teacher. No 'space' and he's not a chatty chap. English not so easy. But he is compliant on his own and I think he works to the best of his ability and energy level. But when paired with J. a very different persona emerged.

*27th February: R*emember to wait and not to pressure.

27th March: These boys are working today and seem absorbed in what they are doing. Making something alone takes the pressure off producing something verbally.

Expressions of concentration.

Very nice to see these boys working together with a dictionary to produce something for the other to do. This feels balanced somehow. A small group working for itself and interacting with itself.

</div>

APPENDIX V

AN EXAMPLE OF DATA PREPARED FOR FURTHER ANALYSIS

A Page of Transcribed Discussion (between myself and my colleague) Showing the First Annotations.

JR: I've written down some observations during my lessons, and I[JR1] wondered if we could reflect on some of the things. I thought these were significant. The first one: I don't know if you find the same thing? [reading]

It's the process rather than the content. They get the handouts, but in the end for our students it is what stays in the mind. They have no use for the papers at the end of the lesson. They either know or don't know the words and have no interest in looking at them again later.

JL: It's a frustrating feeling when you realise that you prepare a nice handout and you get this feeling did they actually learn anything. But[JR2] there you see the nature of learning language as I see it, it's a sort of long process. Sometimes you learn a phrase or word and you learn it for good and it will stick in your mind because you feel so motivated to learn but sometimes you have to drop feed language and something stays in and something is not relevant. So we cannot judge at the end of each lesson that if we really don't know what stayed in their mind and what they actually learned. That's[JR3] of course the difficulty being a teacher, you don't know if you are succeeding or not in the process.

JR: Do you think you can guarantee learning? I think you can guarantee teaching but I don't know that you can guarantee learning.

JL: There are always at least two factors; the teacher and the student how they interact and you[JR4] cannot guarantee learning in that sense but you can say that your way of teaching has led to good results with many students.

JR: It's[JR5] a moot point how we evaluate the results whether you evaluate them through the test or whether you evaluate them by attitude or whether you evaluate them by them simply being more awake in your class.

JL: Yeah, everything is relative, but at some point we[JR6] must simply stop and say that this is what we try. The system that we use now. You can come back to that decision and make changes but it drives you crazy if you constantly think about if I am doing the right thing. That's what you do automatically and you get from the student attitude and the student behaviour and you try to adjust your teaching. I[JR7] strongly feel they need a secure teacher who knows what he is doing who is safe to protest against. It's also important to listen and make them feel you actually listen and take them seriously. So you make changes if you feel that's necessary. But as for this comment, I think it is a little bit too pessimistic in a way. But[JR8] I agree it's the process rather than the content.

REFERENCES

Allwright, D., 1993. Integrating 'Research' and 'Pedagogy': Appropriate Criteria and Practical Possibilities. *CRILE Working Paper 13*, available from the Linguistics Department, University of Lancaster, UK.

Allwright, D., 2000. Exploratory Practice: an 'appropriate methodology' for language teacher development?
http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/groups/crile/epcentre/readings/ials%20p...
[Accessed 11.8.2005].

Allwright, D., 2001. Putting ''Quality of Life'' First: Towards a New View of Exploratory Practice.
http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/groups/crile/epcentre/readings/puttingqualityoflife first%5b.htm [Accessed 10.9.2005].

Allwright, D. and Hanks, J., 2001. Exploratory Practice as a Contribution to Classroom Method.
http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/groups/crile/epcentre/readings/contributions_to_cl assroom... [Accessed 10.9.2005].

Allwright, D., 2003a. Exploratory Practice: Rethinking Practitioner Research in Language Teaching. *Language Teaching Research,* 7 (2), 113-141.

Allwright, D., 2003b. A Brief Guide to 'Exploratory Practice: Rethinking Practitioner Research in Language Teaching'. *Language Teaching Research,* 7 (2), 109-110.

Allwright, D., 2005a. From Teaching Points to Learning Opportunities and Beyond. *TESOL Quarterly,* 39 (1), 9-31.

Allwright, D., 2005b. Developing Principles for Practitioner Research: The Case of Exploratory Practice. *The Modern Language Journal,* 89 (iii), 353-366.

Allwright, D. and Hanks, J., 2006. *General Introduction: Learners and What We Think of Them.* Unpublished draft chapter for a forthcoming book about 'The Developing Language Learner'.

Bastos, C. B., 2005. There is Something Out of Order: Understanding my Post-modern Students. Monograph presented to the English Language Post-Graduate Program of the Language Department of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio).

Bell, J., 1999. *Doing Your Research Project.* 3rd ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Breen, M., 2001. The Social Context for Language Learning: A Neglected Situation. *In:* C. Candlin and N. Mercer, eds. *English Language Teaching in its Social Context.* London: Routledge, 122-144.

Brown, H. D., 1994. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching.* 3rd ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Crabbe, D., 2003. The Quality of Language Learning Opportunities. *TESOL Quarterly,* 37 (1), 9-34.

Crookes, G. and Schmidt, R.W., 1991. Motivation: Re-opening the Research Agenda. *Language Learning,* 41 (4), 469-512.

Edge, J., 1996. Crossing Borders: the development parameter. *The Language Teacher,* 20 (10), 10-13.

EP Website: http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/groups/epcentre/epcentre.htm [Accessed: 11.8.05]

Guariento, W. and Morely, J., 2001. Task and Text Authenticity in the EFL Classroom. *ELT Journal,* 55 (4), 347-53.

Gunn, C.L., 2003. Exploring Second Language Communicative Competence. *Language Teaching Research,* 7 (2), 240-258.

Ho, B., 1995. Using Lesson Plans as a Means of Reflection. *ELT Journal,* 49 (1), 66-71.

Keller, J.M., 1983. Motivational Design of Instruction. *In* C.M. Reigeluth, ed. *Instructional-Design Theories and Models: An Overview of their Current Status.* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Keller, J.M., 1987. Strategies for Stimulating the Motivation to Learn. *Performance and Instruction,* 26 (8), 1-7.

Keller, J.M., 1997. Open letter in *Instructional Technology Forum.* http://itech1.coe.uga.edu/itforum/extra6/ex6-34.html [Accessed: 23.3.2006]

Keller, J.M., 1999. Motivation in Cyber Learning Environments. *Educational Journal International,* 1 (1), 7-30.

Lee, W.Y., 1995 Authenticity Revisited: Text Authenticity and Learner Authenticity. *ELT Journal,* 49 (4), 323-327.

Maxwell J.A., 1996. *Qualitative Research Design.* London: Sage.

McDonough, J. and McDonough, S., 1997. *Research Methods for English Language Teachers.* London: Arnold.

Merikoski Vocational Centre Prospectus (n.d.). Pamphlet obtainable from Merikoski Vocational Training Centre, Oulu, Finland.

Miller, I.K., 2003. Researching Teacher Consultancy via Exploratory Practice. *Language Teaching Research,* 7 (2), 201-219.

Millrood, R., 2001. Unsuccessful Learners: In Search of a Neglected Cornerstone. *ELT Journal,* 55 (4), 405-407.

Millrood, R., 2004. The Role of NLP in Teachers' Classroom Discourse. *ELT Journal,* 58 (1), 28-37.

Ministry of Education, 1999. *Education in Finland*. Sävypaino Oy.

Naidu, B. Neeraja, K. Ramani, E. Jayagowri, S. and Viswanatha, V., 1992. Researching Heterogeneity: An Account of Teacher-initiated Research into Large Classes. *ELT Journal,* 46 (3), 252-263.

Neill, A.S., 1992. *The New Summerhill.* London: Penguin Books.

Nunan, D., 1992. *Research Methods in Language Learning.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Perpignon, H., 2003. Exploring the Written Feedback Dialogue: A Research, Learning and Teaching Practice. *Language Teaching Research,* 7 (2), 259-278.

Pinney,R., 1983. *Creative Listening.* London: "A to Z" Printers and Publishers.

ProDait Website (Professional Development for Academics Involved in Teaching) http://prodait.westmancott.net/approaches/exploratory/principles.php (EP & other approaches). [Accessed 30.8.2005].

Schleppegrell, M.J. and Bowman, B., 1995. Problem-Posing: A Tool for Curriculum Renewal. *ELT Journal,* 49 (4), 297-305.

Schofield, J.W., 1990. Increasing the Generalizability of Qualitative Research. *In* E.W.Eisner, and A. Peshkin, eds. *Qualitative Inquiry in Education: The Continuing Debate*. New York: Teacher's College Press, Columbia University, 201-232.

Slimani, A., 2001. Evaluation of Classroom Interaction. *In* C.N. Candlin and N. Mercer, eds. *English Language Teaching in its Social Context.* London: Routledge, 287-303.

Slimani-Rolls, A., 2003 Exploring a World of Paradoxes: An Investigation of Group Work. *Language Teaching Research,* 7 (2), 221-239.

Slimani-Rolls, A., 2005. Rethinking Task-Based Language Learning: What we can Learn from the Learners. *Language Teaching Research,* 9 (2), 195-218.

Stanley, C., 1998. A Framework for Teacher Reflectivity. *TESOL Quarterly,* 32 (3), 584-591.

Stern, H.H., 1992. *Issues and Options in Language Teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tajino, A. and Smith, C., 2005. Exploratory Practice and Soft Systems Methodology. *Language Teaching Research,* 9 (4), 448-469.

White, R.V., 1988. *The ELT Curriculum*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Wu, Z., 2006. Understanding Practitioner Research as a Form of Life: An Eastern Interpretation of Exploratory Practice. *Language Teaching Research,* 10 (3), 1-20.

Zhang, R., 2004. Using the Principles of Exploratory Practice to Guide Group Work in an Extensive Reading Class in China. *Language Teaching Research,* 8 (3), 331-345.