



English Language Partners
New Zealand
Formerly ESOL Home Tutors

Tutors and learners: partners in innovation

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Good practice happens inside and outside the classroom. Sometimes it is about bringing the outside in. Our good practice story is really about a process which adds value to the tutor/learner partnership right along the teaching/learning continuum.

In 2008 the Association of ESOL Home Tutor Schemes [now English Language Partners] embarked on a programme of innovation pilots to investigate ways of improving services to learners. Pilots were carried out in 17 of our 22 centres with one of two objectives: to find improved ways of gathering learner feedback or to find improved ways of measuring learner progress.

This practice of including innovative research into current teaching services successfully included Association members at all levels of the research, many of whom had not taken part in practical research before. It proved a positive way of encouraging improved teaching, reflective practice and significant learner involvement in the teaching and learning process.

In 2009 the most successful projects have been taken up by other centres and are becoming part of our Good Practice Framework.

An example of Good Practice

English Language partners is a national organisation. Our role is to promote settlement of refugees and migrants through English language and social support, from our centres on 23 sites throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. In each centre there are learners, trained volunteer tutors, paid teachers, office staff and a whole range of volunteer advisors, committee members and liaison people who link our services with the local communities.

This example of good practice is a system for supporting centres to carry out innovation pilots linking our teaching, Association philosophy and strategic plan. The system promotes individual and collective learning and promotes sharing between teams of practitioners; it also allows participation from groups of people who might not otherwise be involved in research-type activities, together with shared decision-making at various levels.

Structure

1. From a number of shortlisted project topics, Association members chose two. To maximise participation, the choice took place at our annual conference in May 2007. Members attending the conference include learners, managers, committee, volunteer tutors and paid teachers.
2. All 22 schemes were invited to choose one of the topics and devise an innovative project to explore, create, develop or critique current practice, working with their own learners and local knowledge.

The topics were

- improved ways of gathering meaningful learner feedback
- improved ways of measuring learner progress.

3. 17 projects got under way. Teams decided for themselves what was appropriate and achievable; they also decided on the size and formality of the project. Most projects were small and quite informal. Project teams included ESOLHT volunteers, paid teachers, managers, learners, community members, contract researchers and various combinations of these.
4. Funding from the ACE Innovation and Development Fund provided resources. Centres worked out their own budgets with the help of national office staff. Most of the funding was spent on time to develop and implement projects.
5. Progress reports to the national coordinator were flexible and informal, but regular. Project teams contacted one another for shortcuts and advice. A "question and answer" session at our annual gathering of centre managers provided an opportunity for sharing highlights and lowlights.
6. Final reporting happened in various forms: workshops at the annual conference, written reports, presentations. So far these have been shared on our website and at workshops.
7. We are now in the second cycle of innovation pilots: teams are refining and trialling selected tools developed in round one. In 2010, funding permitting, we will begin the process again from the beginning.

Rationale

Our 2005-09 Strategic Plan contains the following

Key Result: ESOL Home Tutors meets learner needs through innovative English language services.

We wanted to turn this into good practice aligned with our Philosophy and Code of Practice. This would include:

- A practice which encouraged members (especially learners) to participate
- A process which entailed Professional Development for scheme members in project management or action research skills
- A climate which promoted sharing and dissemination of learning
- Projects which could be incorporated into our Good Practice Framework rather than remaining one-off innovations.

Successes

- This process has proved to be inclusive. It involved members throughout New Zealand, recognising their practice-based knowledge and skills in the field of adult education. All centres were encouraged to take part including volunteers, paid staff and learners.
- The projects provided a forum for learners to share in the development, creation and evaluation of the projects.
- It is practical. Practitioners are developing methods for improving service to learners, with the active participation of the learners themselves. Research and reflection on language learning happened in new ways and for people new to the experience.
- For the most part, it is sustainable. The most successful projects are becoming business as usual, and the culture of enquiry is developing with a second round of innovations.

Barriers and challenges

All educators agree that learner feedback is essential to a quality programme, for all sorts of reasons. Our particular learners are very often unaware of the concept of giving feedback and the way we do it in New Zealand: of the fact that it is a normal part of many processes, from customer satisfaction surveys onwards; that it is not compulsory and attracts no negative repercussions.

There are difficulties, too, in giving meaningful feedback in a language of which little is known. The majority of our learners do not have enough English to say what they really think: giving opinions can be an exercise in frustration for everyone.

Measuring learner progress is challenging because our programmes are so flexible. We start where the learner is at, and we finish when the learner is ready to move on.

There is also the significant challenge of learning and teaching a language (English) through the medium of the target language (English again). The cognitive demands, never mind the cultural implications, are enormous.

Making a difference to learners

1. The most significant difference is the increase in strength of the learners' voices. The pilots were successful in providing ways for learners to overcome cultural barriers to giving feedback and to overcome cultural barriers to effective self-assessment.

Projects also removed some of the language barriers (for example by using translated survey forms).

2. Projects provided safe ways for learners to critique the services provided by ESOL Home Tutors (for example by using surveyors from the learner's own community).

Amongst learners we have seen an enhanced sense of ownership, belonging and dignity that their views were being sought.

3. Some of the projects gave a voice, not only to learners registered with ESOL Home Tutors, but to their families and to members of communities. (For example, one manager approached members of the main local learner communities and engaged them in gathering feedback from their own communities – in languages other than English – about our services.)

Inclusion is a powerful promoter of social settlement, integration and independence. Learners were able to participate in the mainstream activity of evaluating a service and to flow through the results. Perhaps on another occasion they will feel confident to give feedback on their telephone service or to return faulty goods.

We now have ethnic contact people for speakers of Cantonese, Mandarin, Dutch, Russian and Korean... We had a wealth of quite detailed comment from our learners who seemed to relish the chance of speaking to someone in their own language and who was not an official part of our organisation.

In some projects a teaching unit was developed on evaluation. Learners had the opportunity to engage with the concept of giving feedback New Zealand-style with examples and discussion before completing the survey on satisfaction. This made an enormous difference to the learners, who used their new knowledge to give detailed and robust feedback.

4. Comments from learners and tutors bore out the assertion that learners who can see and accept their progress have increased motivation and receptivity to continue learning, as do their tutors.

I rang the plumber to check my leaking hot water by myself and I am proud of it

Gains were most commonly expressed in terms of increased independence and/or confidence in carrying out everyday tasks – the sorts of tasks which an adult can normally do without thinking.

I can do the same things as before but I am better, stronger and more confident

5. And finally, the fact that this was a team effort between teachers and learners (and managers and families) was of enormous importance to many learners. It is not easy to contribute when the environment and language are different and invitations to participate as a 'normal' adult are few and far between.

Learning from the practice

- Practitioner-led research and development extended the strengths of our teaching staff, paid and voluntary, as specialist adult educators. In every project multiple teachers and learners were involved and feedback indicates that they benefited from the experience. Feedback came not only in terms of satisfaction (and the odd disaster) but as recommendations for further projects and improvements.
- Planning, implementation and data gathering was well done. The team approach allowed for much cooperative learning and built on the strengths of members. In virtually every project team there was at least one person who had knowledge and/or experience and at least one who had never done this sort of thing before.
- The inevitable issues in people-based research had to be dealt with: learners moved away halfway through a project; tutors ran out of time, people were ill, went on holiday...

The research culture proved such that failures as well as triumphs were shared – and used as learning experiences.

- The inclusive and non-competitive nature of the practice may have contributed to the positive uptake. It was quite a significant undertaking for some groups of people to become researchers even in a small way. Some projects had quite significant flaws but these were discovered by 'having a go', and in many cases problems were solved as well as encountered. Because everyone worked in teams individual 'failure' was not a risk.
- Numbers of people stepped out of their comfort zones: teachers who had not seen themselves as researchers;

Applications

- The system for initiating, monitoring, and rolling out these pilots could be used or adapted, by other tertiary educators with multiple teaching staff/programmes/sites.
- We found the project successful in building capacity as an association, particularly at scheme (centre) level. People previously uninvolved in materials development or research of any kind became involved, enjoyed it, and did a good job. The key factors here seemed to be:
 - Shared decision making in the development phase (more than just 'consultation') which engaged members at all levels
 - Practical topics central to good teaching and learning.
 - Carefully staged presentation of the roll out so that the opportunity to participate was accessible, achievable, inclusive, had a sensible time frame and was well resourced



coordinators whose job descriptions did not include project management, committee members who had not been required to consider whether this sort of project was part of core business – and the national manager, who was responsible for the final success or disaster.

- One of the secondary learnings for some project groups was setting and managing a budget. It is easy to underestimate the amount of time needed for a project which has not been carried out before, and easy for a novice to underestimate the real costs of a project (such as communications, supervision). National office staff were able to provide help with estimates of costs.
- As project managers we were reminded that an inclusive project does not necessarily bring results of a consistently high standard – at least not the first time round. Some of our most valuable learning nationally came from the things that didn't work. For example, although we found strengths in research skills there were weaknesses in the area of report writing.

In response to requests and suggestions, we are offering a workshop at our 2009 conference on ways of writing up data.

- The close link between the innovation projects and the day-to-day business of providing tuition. This promoted the notion of classroom research as an interesting and normal part of teaching.
- A balance between guidelines and support at national level and autonomy at local level. This required a good knowledge of (and some research into) our collective strengths and weaknesses, plus tactful support.
- Flexibility about the reporting requirements for progress reports. In most cases the tutors built on their practical experience rather than academic knowledge, and paperwork was at a minimum.

The innovations become part of our Good Practice Framework, while plans are under way for another round of projects centred on partners in innovation.

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