Exploring Strategies for Stimulating and Fostering English Language Use in Small Group Work in Monolingual Classes of Year 1 Science and Engineering Students

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A b s t r a c t

This paper first describes the evolution of the Action Learning Project group which focused on the use of English in small group discussions in classes of first year engineering and science students. In the first observation stage, the (ultimately) three group members explored their own teaching styles and expectations and the learning styles and backgrounds of the students. They did this through questionnaires to colleagues and students and through the relevant literature. Issues considered and reflected on were: the value of group work, the relative values of using L1 (mother tongue or first language) and L2 (second language) in the language classroom, students' attitudes towards the use of L2, teacher and learner expectations, factors influencing the use of English as the medium of instruction at The University of Hong Kong and the discussion tasks themselves. The paper then describes the action plan, observation and reflection of the author, thus completing one action learning cycle. The action plan involved 1) finding out in a first-hand way what the students felt about the use of English and making the teacher's and the course's expectations clear 2) an analysis of discussion tasks 3) increased awareness on the use of both L1 and L2 and 4) a change in teaching style to make it more explicitly demanding. The observation was recorded in an almost daily journal and student interviews with subsequent impressionistic journal reflections. The final reflection stage, of which this paper is a part, indicates that change did occur as a result of the action plan.

Introduction

All first year students at the University of Hong Kong take English enhancement courses conducted by the English Centre (EC). This is facilitated or reinforced, more or less, by the amount of English used and expected in different faculties. For example, certain departments have primarily expatriate staff, so students are obligated to function in an English medium. Some disciplines also require more intensive English use because of professional expectations, such as translation or law. Yet some faculties and departments provide little or no opportunity or expectation for the use of English in their curricula. Nevertheless, these students still take English enhancement courses since the University uses English as its medium and its graduates are expected to have a competent (if not sophisticated) level of proficiency.

Engineering and Science are two of the faculties which do not seem to place a high priority on English or language skills in general (not in terms of policy but in terms of practice). The EC enhancement courses are essentially the only intensive exposure to English such students have during their university career. Thus, the courses are designed to allow many communication opportunities for small group work in the form of discussions and meetings. Anecdotal evidence has indicated that many if not most students frequently do not use English in these discussions

unless the teacher is present. Students are perhaps either uncomfortable using English or feel that it is more practical to complete a task using Cantonese or L1 (first language). The unnaturalness of groups all having the same L1, yet using English or L2 (second language) has also perhaps been perceived by students as bothersome. Because of this situation, the group members of this Action Learning Project have felt that finding ways to optimise the use of English in the enhancement courses would be beneficial to students.

Although we have only 48 hours for English enhancement, we have taken the position that it can be 48 *focused quality* hours in addition to the years of English tuition which students have already had. We decided that it would be quite legitimate to concentrate on encouraging students to use the English they have acquired, particularly oral English, which they make relatively little use of outside of our classes. Thus, what the project team chose to do was to explore strategies for augmenting the use of English in small group work.

This paper outlines the evolution of my personal involvement in the project. It covers the general action learning cycle which our group followed and then focuses on my particular action plan, observations and reflections. While I cannot claim that it represents *the truth*, I can claim that it represents *a truth or truths* for me.

Project Chronology

Thirteen teachers were originally invited to participate in this project, all teaching on the Professional and Technical Communications course for first year engineering students. Teachers on the English for Science course were also invited to participate. Many teachers provided input to our initial observation stage but ultimately only four teachers joined the project and only three of those were actively involved.

The four teachers met to discuss the project on a monthly basis. The purpose of the discussions was to share our personal views on teaching and past teaching experiences both in Hong Kong and elsewhere. This was a valuable opportunity to investigate and reflect on NS (native speakers of English) and NNS (non-native speakers) approaches to teaching as we had both resources to draw on in our group. The discussions were audio recorded (and the transcripts make for rather insightful reading). We were also able to optimise our literature base through pooling references. As we made action plans and carried them out we were able to use the group as an encouraging yet critical sounding board. Succeeding or failing privately in one's own classroom is one thing. Sharing and discussing these efforts with others makes them far more focused, conscious and meaningful. It is a kind of proto publishing of your work for your peers.

Action plans were implemented by individual teachers according to the unique attributes of their teaching-learning context. Results of the plans were further shared in group discussions to help reformulate revised action plans. One or two cycles (depending on the teacher) have been completed and a new cycle commenced in the fall of 1996.

The following are the stages in our action learning cycles. The cycles formed the organisational framework of the project. While in reality the stages overlapped (re-cycled) to a certain extent, they are discussed here in a compartmentalised linear fashion for easier presentation.

Observation

In order to get an idea of our colleagues' views on the issues, and to confirm our own perceptions of students' views, we designed and distributed two questionnaires — one for teachers and one for students. 28 teachers in the English Centre and 40 students in engineering and science completed the questionnaires. Interestingly, the data revealed that most teachers felt that students used

English in group discussions most of the time, that they were motivated to use English instrumentally and that the teachers used moderate to very strong insistence regarding use of English in task performance. Teachers also listed a variety of theories as to why students are reluctant to use English in small groups. Among the more frequently listed were self-consciousness, insufficient proficiency to cope, task too complex and 'Why use the stairs when the escalator is running' that is, Cantonese is more natural, easier and efficient. Noteworthy is that although most teachers did not indicate that there was a problem with the students' use of English in small groups, they were very forthcoming as to why students did not use English and strategies they (the teachers) employed to overcome this.

In the students' questionnaire, the great majority said that they used English in class because the teacher expected it, it is helpful for their studies, it is beneficial in general and it would have future use. Less than half agreed that they used Cantonese because they were self-conscious when speaking English. 95 per cent said that they used Cantonese when they did not know a particular word in English, only 52.5 per cent said that they did so because the task was too complex or difficult, 80 per cent said they did so because it was easier and quicker and 95 per cent said they did so because they were accustomed to using Cantonese for discussion. Overall, there was a reasonable correlation between the teachers' and students' views.

Reflection

These results were the springboard for discussion. Interim conclusions from this stage were:

- language use is intensely personal

- there are unspoken social rules for the use of L1 and L2 and mixed codes of language, i.e., Chinglish

- teachers have varying degrees of insecurity about insisting on the use of L2

- students may be more willing to use English if the teacher releases them from the unspoken conventions by obviating the choice, in other words, being strict about the use of English

- students are not necessarily aware of the amount of L1 or L2 they use

- tasks can be analysed to determine which language is more appropriate so a distinction can be made for students

- students' instrumental motivation for using English is abstract and not clearly defined.

While we generally concentrated on our immediate context and personal past experiences, we did refer to the literature for ideas. (Some references have been added since our first reflection stage.) The key issues were:

The value of group work : This was never really in dispute. We felt that it allowed more students to practice the L2 more often, simulated a real world situation, was a less threatening context than whole-class discussions and cultivated a greater sense of learner-autonomy in the students. Long (1977), Long and Porter (1985), Bejarano (1987), Brown (1991) and Westgate and Corden (1993) provide further investigation and justification for the value of such language practice. Wantanabe (1993) offers an interesting look at the ways different cultures interact in group discussions.

The relative values of using L1 and L2 in the language classroom : We agreed that our students needed as much exposure to and practice with English as possible. Outside of our enhancement classes, there is essentially no demand to use English and the majority of students do not seek self-access opportunities to practice language skills. What was less clear was our respective tolerances to the use of L1 in the classroom. Fu (1987) lists the rules set out by Wong (p. 41) which govern language use in the schools in Hong Kong. They have to do with status and this is reflected along cultural

lines. Lin (in press) approaches the realities of alternating between the L1 and L2 in Hong Kong schools through three different research paradigms pointing out that classroom language alternation is a local pragmatic response of teachers and students to the imposition of the English language on the teaching-learning environment (p. 13). Auerbach (1993) and Valdes-Fallis (1977), Johnson and Lee (1987), Katchen (1990) and Atkinson (1993) all argue for the benefits of judicious use of L1. Our teacher questionnaire collected a number of strategies to maintain English only in the classroom or at least during specific tasks. Hung and Senf (1992) also conclude that the L2 atmosphere in the classroom should be strong. In our limited experience it appeared that NNS teachers were more demanding of L2 use overall than the NS teachers. (I can confirm, as an NS teacher, an underlying insecurity to demand the use of L2.)

Students attitudes towards the use of L2: The more recent study by Pennington and Yue (1994) indicated that Hong Kong students do not necessarily feel threatened by using English and are motivated to study English for pragmatic reasons. Canagarajah (1993) describes the dilemma of conflicting attitudes in his Sri Lankan students thus:

> grammar learning enabled the students to be detached from the language and the course, avoid active use of the language which could involve internalization of its discourses, and thereby continue their opposition to the reproductive tendencies of the course. At the same time, this strategy enabled them to maintain the minimal contact necessary with the language in order to acquire the rules of grammar — which in their view was the most efficient preparation for getting through the examination. This strategy while enabling them to preserve their cultural integrity (however tenuously) also enabled them to accommodate the institutional requirement of having to pass English and thus bid for the socioeconomic advantages associated with the language.

Our students questionnaire showed that students felt equally comfortable (or uncomfortable) with both NS and NNS teachers, over 80 per cent of the students used English because it was expected, it helped with studies, was beneficial in general and would be useful in the future. Few (22.5 per cent) said they use L1 to avoid showing off. While we agreed that language is fundamentally personal, we eventually considered the position of the teacher, as discussed by Allwright (1989) and Katchen (1990), to be legitimately sanctioned to determine the language use in the classroom, and that students can learn 'that learning languages and cultures is not subtractive but additive' (Katchen, 1990:103).

Teacher and learner expectations : Sweeney and Farmer (1994) surveyed students and teachers at Hong Kong Polytechnic University to see if there were differences in their perceptions regarding students' use of English. Differences were not great though they were revealed in the areas of perceptions of student attitudes towards the use of English and the extent to which English is used. Brick (1991) gives an interesting overview of (Mainland) Chinese approaches to teaching and learning in contrast to those of Australia noting the contrast in expectations of the two cultures. Richards, Tung and Ng (1992) looked at the beliefs and practices of English language teachers in Hong Kong via a survey. It is interesting that the teachers thought one of the least helpful strategies to use was to study the rules of the language, but more than half said that they used a grammar–based approach and the second most frequently employed classroom activity was doing written grammar exercises. In spite of good intentions, it may be that students are conditioned to expect a methodology in the language classroom in which they need be merely reactive. Clearly the logistics of Hong Kong's classrooms as described by Richards et al. (1992) and others provide great obstacles to more communicative tasks. Littlewood (1989) makes a claim for teacher flexibility in the classroom so as to make adjustments according to the vagaries of student learning styles. (See also Westgate and Corden, 1993)

Members of our project group held various views about what students expected and what the teacher's role should be. The humanist view is that students should be allowed to choose to use

English in group discussion when and if they feel ready and willing. At the other end is the view that students expect the teacher to dictate the language choice and that they (the students) are duty–bound to obey. Amongst our colleagues, the NS teachers seemed generally more reluctant to impose the use of English and the NNS teachers felt more confident in stating precisely the demand for the use of English (and getting it). There was in the end, a belief that students would rise to the level of challenge established. Informing students of our intentions and expectations was also considered to be an important strategy, at the least as a basis for negotiating between the expectations of all concerned.

Factors influencing the use of English as the medium of instruction at HKU: Most students have assumed a passive role in language classes in secondary school and have been motivated to learn because examination results determine access to university. Aside from that purely instrumental motivation, my interviews with students revealed that most secondary schools and colleges offered little else in the way of motivation or opportunity to practice functioning in English. Lin (1996) presents a quite revealing overview of the historic and socio-economic factors contributing to this situation in schools. Barnes (1996) makes the point that while a great deal has been achieved in terms of English language enhancement in the universities, 'the English language competence of the average student remains no more than, at best, adequate' (p. 4). At HKU, the NNS lecturers in engineering and other departments far outnumber the NS lecturers. Lectures and textbooks are in English, but all other communication is in the L1. As one colleague put it, students study in English but they learn in Cantonese. There is simply little real demand for students to use English. Sweeney and Farmer (1994) found that both teachers and students felt that using L1 'is more effective and efficient in conveying factual information' (p. 10). While Lin (1996) argues that Hong Kong's dependence on English for success is unfounded, Barnes (1996) outlines the increasing demands for English proficiency in Hong Kong's tertiary institutions:

- the dominance of English in the fields of science and technology

- the spread of this technology and its applications world wide

- the importance of communications and electronic mass-media

- the shift in Hong Kong from manufacturing to service industries

- the internationalisation of business and commerce in Hong Kong and the need for English as a lingua franca

- the widening of access to further and higher education, the majority of which requires a certain proficiency in English.

So, there remains considerable justification to pursue a campaign to engage students in oral English tasks which give them exposure to and practice in the skills they will need upon graduation.

What about the tasks requiring small group discussion? The group tasks in our engineering courses are usually of the 'procedural' type described by Brown (1991) as the group having to organise their own management of the job, 'making their own decisions about what to include and leave out and about relative priorities' (p. 6), e.g., providing an agenda to follow for a team meeting. Brown suggested that such task types engage students in language that is already comfortable for them, but offer less use of novel language, or, learning new competencies. For our purposes, in the 48 hours we have to work with students, providing opportunities for confidence-building practice with the language students already have is realistic.

Westgate and Corden (1993) conclude that it is not so much the task itself which fosters or inhibits the production of language but how it is presented to students. In parallel to our students, the authors say 'that pupils' consistent experience with many teachers over their school lives leads them to find difficulty in behaving in new ways when these come to be required of them' and that

there are 'strategies required of teachers if they wish to initiate contexts free from pupils' normally perceived obligation to produce examinable artifacts' (p. 119).

The presentation of the task does appear to be a key so that students are clear about what exactly is expected of them. This seems particularly true in our experience when students would *not* use English in small groups discussions and then indicate on course evaluations that they did not have sufficient opportunity to practice. The expectation was obviously not made clear to them.

Our ALP group also discussed dividing the task into 1) an L1 section, the purely procedural part of getting started 2) the 'formal' discussion which was to be in L2 and then 3) a choice of language after the 'formal' part was completed. Another technique put forward was setting a specific time limit for L2 use as an almost physical discipline to be increased over the year as students gained confidence and skill in group discussions.

Further issues on tasks are dealt with in Long (1977), Abbot (1981) Brophy et al. (1983), Bejarano (1987), Hung and Senf (1992) and Atkinson (1993).

Plan

A number of possible strategies to enhance English use were put forward by the group. Individual teaching style and the logistics of classroom management caused group members to combine or adapt several of the strategies for their own action learning approach.

- Clarifying tasks which require the use of English and which do not.

- Increasing the amount of L2 required by the teacher.

- Raising students awareness of the linguistic rationale for using English in small group work.

- Increasing the amount of understanding between the teacher and the students about why the use of English is or is not important.

- Raising students awareness of the issues by reflecting to them the amount of L1 and L2 they use in their discussions.

- Asking students to suggest strategies that they would be willing to follow to increase the use of oral English in group work.

- Establishing contracts with students in which they indicate how much English they are willing to use.

- Having students self-reporting on the % of L2 they use in group work.

- Devising a group work log book so that each student records the topic discussed, the time spent in discussion, the % of L1 spoken and the % of L2 spoken.

- Getting students to agree to a contract–penalty system which they help to devise for the use of L1 and L2 in the classroom. The contract might state which classroom activities allow the use of L1 and which allow only the use of L2 and what are the consequences of breaking the contract.

- Establishing a warning signal to remind students when they unconsciously switch from L2 to L1.

- Using a tape recorder to record all small group discussions. The tape recorder replaces the teacher as a significant audience.

- Placing a video camera with a wide-open focus to record all groups in a classroom. The teacher

randomly moves a flat mike from group to group to record each group's language use. Again video becomes the significant audience.

- Students are assigned to role play different nationalities for each piece of group work (simulating business contexts) so that within a group the only 'common' language will be English.

To consolidate my personal action plan I used a format developed by Elaine Martyn, Figure 1. It provides a useful framework for focusing on a problem and the strategies with which to tackle it.

Action Plan for Increasing the Use of English in Small Group Work

Figure 1

Protech and Science Classes

Teacher:		Classes:	
Context and rationale:			
ALP Objective: Exploring strategies for stimulating and fostering English language use in small group work in monolingual Cantonese classes of Year I Science and Technology students. **Specific objective(s):**			
Action: *strategies, plans, etc.*			
Observe: *monitoring of students and self*			
Comments: *add pages as necessary*			

During 1995-1996, my plan involved four things:

1   engaging students in a discussion of what my expectations are, what their perceptions are, what the consequences of language choice might be, what attitudes prevail towards language use (reveal codes)

2   an analysis of tasks to determine whether or not use of English should be expected as part of the task - more clearly delineate the oral English objectives

3   maintaining a more conscious awareness in the class dynamic as a whole about the use of L1 and L2

4   a firmer position on my part which I believe releases students from social/cultural inhibitions to display English language skills

The most challenging part of the plan for me was to learn better how to assert myself as the authority figure in insisting on the use of English at certain times, to avoid what Allwright refers to as a '...covert conspiracy, between teacher and learners, so that social distress is minimized and each side can persuade itself that all is well because of the evidence coming from the other side' (1989:275). The result of this conspiracy is clearly pedagogically unproductive. Through the literature and supportive discussion with the project group, I gained a certain amount of confidence in my role of authority through greater understanding of the expectations our students have for the teacher to take charge. Katchen (1990) concludes that

> Students realise that the classroom is a special discourse situation and that the teacher makes the rules. They expect it. They should know that they are asked to act in an uncommon way – to speak English with other Chinese – for the purposes of learning. (p.105)

Act

In two of my engineering classes, I asked students to discuss a short list of questions about their feelings towards the use of L1 and L2 in small groups and to give me an anonymous summary of their responses. In one class (17 students), all groups (4) said that they use English because they are required, though an individual student said because he/she wanted to. All groups were positive about using English in my class. In another class (17 students) all groups (4) said that they thought it was reasonable to have to use English in our class and two groups said they would not use English unless they were required to, one group said 'maybe' and one group said 'sometimes'. These groups essentially described the language classroom as a place where they did not mind using English. In another class (13 students), I asked students via email if I should tell them to use English or should I let them decide for themselves. Eight students responded that use of English should not be compulsory and that they should decide for themselves. This particular class did take the initiative to use English frequently. Four students believed that English should be compulsory. One student said 'You better force us to use English' and another said 'You should help us to decide'. As a result of this, I felt far more justified in placing a stricter expectation on students to use English in specific contexts in the classroom.

Having had the students discuss these issues amongst themselves, I asked students to come talk to me in small group tutorials. Altogether 55 students spoke to me in groups of three to four in sessions from 20 minutes to an hour. In most cases I recorded my impressions of these discussions immediately afterwards in a journal. Of the wide ranging topics discussed, those which painted a fairly consistent picture were:

• in school, there was little opportunity to speak English except in preparation for the Use of English (U of E) exam

• that the U of E exam was the formative principle of all oral English work they did in school

• that the training and practice they received for the oral component the U of E was insufficient

- that they do what they are told and that I should be more strict with them in regards to language choice

- HKU should remain an English-medium institution.

Observe

I further kept a journal in which I entered my impressions immediately after almost every class. While I intended to record only my impressions of how the class and I handled the use of English in small group work, I found that I was compelled to record a myriad of other impressions from the class. As features of the language classroom are rarely if ever due to single isolated causes, it was valuable to reflect on many things which took place. Furthermore, clarifying results, ideas, speculations and theories in print is an effective discipline, as Graham Wallas wrote in 1926, 'How can I know what I think till I see what I say?' (p.75).

It has been interesting for me to review my own journal entries. Each class and group of students becomes a personal challenge. Of the many pages of reflection some of the more salient entries are:

Civil and Structural Engineering students 6/10/95 I had a revelation, thinking about all this in the middle of class. It is a foreign language class, and as such, I shouldn't get too worked up about times when students don't use English. 20/10/95 I felt good about my understanding of what was going on when they were using the L1. I think as a result of all our discussion in the group (ALP group). I valued what they (students) were doing, rather than was merely anxious about it. 26/1/96 This whole action learning thing has stirred me up a bit which is good. Complacency is not really good for anyone in the long run.

Electrical and Electronic Engineering students 15/9/95...I think it is right for me to be a bit insistent in the use of English. A little pressure is a good thing. Touchy feely, humanist yes, but students have paid good money for some kind of change in themselves, I suppose, and I think it behooves me to do what I think they need. Kindly, of course. 29/9/95 I will need to assert myself in my own schedule and syllabus to free time for this. If I leave it for some free time, I will always leave it out, like planning to save what is left every month and spending it all anyway. Time budgeting. Giving the time is like giving value to something...I need to discover or rediscover (probably discover) my teacher ethos. 19/1/96 Cynthia has the right idea of starting small and then building up the time frame and the students will keep raising to the challenge. 8/3/96 I sort of blew my plan today to have a warmer. I guess I'm just like them (students) and get into the content stuff and forget the language.

Industrial and Manufacturing Systems Engineering students 25/9/95 I go steadily from group to group and they will revert to using English, if they are using L1, except for the one group... and I think they didn't care. And if they don't care, should I make them care for my sake? This is the original quandary that we discussed last year. Do we assume the responsibility of caring for the students and make them comply? 22/1/96 (regarding 5 minute practice discussion task) This sort of task is safe, I guess and there is clear closure.

Mechanical Engineering students 31/10/95 Another thing about this class, I feel that I am dragging them along, some heavy inertia. They are really waiting to be led. It may then be that directing them in the language to use is the way to go. But there is this urgency, because we lost the day due to typhoon Sybil and things are rushed. Is it a language class or a content class? A language class takes more time. Content has more urgency. Can there be a balance? Only if we back off from the syllabus and make it looser. I think that is not a good political move, but maybe a better pedagogical move. 21/11/95 What has been happening for me is that I am analysing tasks for the actual language objective and that is making me more relaxed about the times when they are not using English. Now, is that a good thing or not? Shouldn't I maximise the use of English? It goes back to our discussion earlier. And it

also boils down to what sells to a certain extent. I mean what the students and the Faculty expect is also part of the context and students expect to be *taught* not *do* and the Faculty expects to be examined in some measurable skill — writing, I guess. Maybe the course need to be reworked.

Reflect

What did emerge from these ruminations? Certainly, a critical issue, the course itself needs looking into, that is, expectations of students' abilities are perhaps overestimated in the design of the syllabus and materials (at least in relation to small group discussions). Since there are nearly 500 students and approximately 16 teachers involved on this credit-bearing course, fundamental changes will not be quickly or easily implemented. In my personal teaching purview however, a series of changes in my teaching approach has emerged which I think will make a difference in students' willingness, confidence and skill in small group discussions. I have reaffirmed my conviction that the students need to struggle with the L2 and without that struggle, there is little change and learning. Consequently, I have come to believe that I can be demanding in my expectation for the use of English for clearly delineated learning purposes, without the threat of linguistics politics. I have also reoriented my stance on the use of L1 in the classroom. By paying more conscious attention to the practical, not to mention affective benefits of L1 use, I now see the practice as a productive rather than counter–productive light.

A final change in approach, is best introduced by a quote from my journal on 4/3/96.

> They (students) are hung up on LEARNING and KNOWING the content and the language is not the issue that it is with us. Understanding the concepts is what is important to them, of course because they will be tested on that. If proficiency made a difference it would come to the forefront of things too, and they would do something about it. (The students) agreed that the practice with past papers for U of E was simply boring and there was a bad attitude toward it amongst their classmates. The topics were boring. It seems to me that there isn't much motivating on the part of the teachers re: this use of English thing. There must be a way to put it to 17, 18-year olds about why they are doing it. Oh yes, they also said that they felt that they weren't able to discus topics easily, they didn't really have the vocab. So it goes way back to early years, not use U of E. Of course. Yes, they said, there was a gap between school and university, that in school the teachers were there for them helping and given feedback but here they are on their own.

I realised that I need to approach the use of oral English in small groups as a developmental process. These students have not had much instruction or practice in the language skills required for discussion. They are in a sense, not yet ready to close the gap between a purely artificial language practice task   la Use of English practice, and using the L2 for a realistic (if simulated) discussion which is open–ended, yet requires, ultimately, resolution and then further action as a consequence.

Toward resolving this discrepancy, I introduced a series of short focused oral practice L2 discussion tasks so that students could 'warm up' in a way familiar to them before asking them to apply those same skills in more demanding discussions. By introducing these small tasks even when small group discussions are not planned for a particular session, the awareness of these language skills is maintained, and giving time to them adds value to the skill.

Conclusion

I can quite honestly say that I would not have explored my teaching and students to such a depth were it not for the framework of the action learning project. While focusing on the one particular

aspect of small group discussion in my classes, I have discovered a number of issues which interrelate and have impact on all aspects of my teaching. Among these are, facing up to my cultural and political inhibitions in the classroom, coming to a greater understanding of my students' learning backgrounds, and reconciling myself as an expatriate NS teacher in the Hong Kong context. These have led to a greater confidence in my role and, I hope, positive change in the classroom.

It is unfortunate that our project group ended up being so small, though such a small group benefits from easier management and possibly an increased amount of constructive criticism and trust. Nevertheless, the project group members may now be in a better position to initiate change in the courses and classroom practices of others in our particular context.

Writing this paper has been a significant part of the reflection stage. It represents a final step in consolidating myriad ideas and impressions into a coherent picture. Certainly it is a help to me and I hope it may be useful to others as well.