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**NEGOTIATING CURRICULUM CONSTRAINTS IN ESOL
THROUGH TEACHER RESEARCH**

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum is at the centre of the debate between educators and planners about appropriate models of teaching and learning. In vocational teaching contexts such as NZ Polytechnics competency-based assessment is the dominant curriculum and assessment paradigm. Curriculum policy and accreditation processes through the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) reflect this vocational, outcomes oriented approach to learning and teaching. Despite the fact that curriculum policy claims that educators have freedom to employ all methodologies that achieve curriculum assessment goals, from the perspective of educators, teaching methodologies and the beliefs underpinning them cannot be separated from curriculum policy. Teaching methodologies must be seen as an integral part of curriculum production and so the interaction and negotiation between policy and process still needs to be clarified. This clarification is especially important in fields where the vocational paradigm is contested by practitioners as a valid model for teaching, learning and assessment; transitional tertiary and vocational ESOL is one of these fields. Teacher research promises to deliver this clarification and negotiation by engaging practitioners in reflecting on syllabus and curriculum issues from the classroom environment. This paper looks at the development of a teacher research culture in a NZ Polytechnic as an example of the policy-methodology dialogue.

NEGOTIATING CURRICULUM CONSTRAINTS IN ESOL THROUGH TEACHER RESEARCH

COMPETENCIES AND CURRICULUM: POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND EDUCATIONAL QUESTIONS

Definitions of curriculum in education embody political and economic contexts, ontologies and epistemologies, attention to process or product, and views on the relationship of curriculum teaching intentions and reality (Smith & Lovat, 1991, pp. 1-20). An obvious example of economic moment is the standards and competency-based training (CBT) and assessment in Australasian post-compulsory and vocational education sectors. As curriculum policy, CBT was strongly fueled by the economic and political uncertainties and changes of the 1970s and 1980s (Borthwick, 1993; Foley & Morris, 1995; O'Connor, 1993; Stevenson, 1993). The business cum industrial language of government competency documentation referring to providers, clients, stakeholders, and curriculum package delivery, reinforces commercial orientation of education in this environment, and this is apparent in government policy statements on vocational tertiary education which adopt this perspective (Education, 1997; Education, 1998). Notwithstanding the fact that standards and competencies have become the key terms in the 'official' discourse of tertiary vocational and post-compulsory education in Australasia, they are still the subject of much critical debate within educational institutions and professional organizations (Chappell, 1996; Chappell, Gonzci, & Hager, 1995). For New Zealand, the Australian comparison is important as this juncture as there are historical lessons to be learned. I refer to some of these below.

Discrete performance objectives and standards appear as the mainstay of workplace assessment (Stevenson, 1993) and dominate in certain tertiary vocational sectors such as the Australian TAFE centres (Beevers, 1993). This 'behaviouristic' technical approach to curriculum training and assessment is insufficient to deal with the complexities of knowledge-in-practice (Schon, 1991) constraints of professional and higher education contexts, such as management and teaching (Field, 1995; Ling, 1999). To meet this challenge, broader conceptions of competency-based training that adopt a more holistic, integrated task approach to assessment, e.g. portfolio, have been proposed as an ideal compromise between behaviorism and humanism (Hager, 1993; Kerka, 1998). "A holistic approach is very different from a behaviourist approach. It is consistent with current learning theory based on cognitive psychology (rather than behaviourist psychology), it incorporates an understanding of competencies as complex and structured, and constituted by personal attributes (such as knowledge) which have coherence and structure" (Preston & Walker, 1993, p.118).

However, in recent discussions of this holistic approach is still discussed as a *potential* framework for professional training and higher education (Ling, 1999; Preston & Walker, 1993, p.122), and it is difficult to judge what impact competencies have actually had in this area. Whatever the proposals, the technicist verbose approach to the specification of individual performance skills required in workplace contexts is still apparent in NZQA approved courses on the National Qualifications Framework in professional areas. Approved courses, themselves composed of a collection of unit standards, subdivided into elements and performance assessed through activities attempt to deconstruct complex training and teaching constraints into observable checklists of competency met/not met. One example from my institution is the National Certificate in Employment Skills elements and performance criteria accompany each of 23 unit standards. The documentation appears to attempt to cover all contingencies through intercultural communication, keyboarding skills, writing across genres, etc., reducing these to assessment and performance elements (Authority, 1998).

The NZQA suggests that local institutions are free to teach courses leading to assessment through standards through a student-centred methodology; this implies that curriculum policy and methodology can be separated. It is apparent, however, that the minutiae of the assessment framework elements is having a washback effect on teaching (Viskovic, 1999). To meet the assessment of the performance criteria adumbrated in NQF documentation little room is left for student centered

approaches and a number of reports in this area document ways in which practitioners see standards driving curriculum and teaching in undesirable ways (Sundar, 1999). This quite apart from the fact that learner-centredness as teaching philosophy seems contradictory to the expert 'other' defined curriculum of NZQA approved models.

The issue seems to be not whether workplace competency *can* be comprehensively broken down into performance criteria (this is plainly possible given certain assumptions), but whether this hidden curriculum is useful as a de facto curriculum, a measure of the actual experience of current and future employment contexts. In addition, there is also some doubt that all humanist or 'lifeworld-oriented' educational goals such as the capacity for independent, original and critical thinking are relatable to the workplace or 'systems goals' because they "extend beyond the technical problem solving skills in a typical industrial environment" (Soucek, 1993, p.166). The critical question is what view of education and social reality does CBT represent. Finally, all the examples cited from Australasia still dichotomize competency in terms of competent/not yet competent, with a strenuous efforts to break performance down into elements amenable to checklist ticking. "This raises the suspicion that the concept of competency is being contained and the associated education and training approaches are being driven by a desire to keep assessment and assessment tools simple . . . This ignores the complexity of workplace requirements. Workplace competency often requires managing multiple tasks in series or simultaneously, in complex and changing environments and in conjunction with subordinates, peers, and supervisors" (Ling, 1999, p.3).

The competency debate has been extended into the post-compulsory schooling arena through reference to key competencies as employment related skills for participation in workplace environments in New Zealand and Australia. Key competencies are broad in scope and include: collecting, analysing and organising information; communicating ideas and information, planning and organising information, working with others and in teams, using mathematical ideas and techniques, solving problems, and using technology. While intended to bridge the gap between general and vocational education by proposing generic skills commensurate with both humanist education and economic concerns, they do explicitly acknowledge workplace needs (Carmichael, 1993, p.16; Randall, 1993; Stanton, 1993). Attempts to implement a convergent vocational-general education model has been problematic. Reasons cited include the fact that terminology is ambiguous among stakeholders, trial-and-error approaches are used for school-industry links, there is short term funding for long-term commitment, and schools and communities have not the organizational structures to develop programs properly (Porter, 1998).

Key competencies have also become part of the discourse of some Australian universities who have attempted to define the generic attributes of its graduates and incorporate them into strategic planning and assessment. Where these have been strongly encouraged by university administration as curriculum directives they may hinder critical debate about the nature of professional practice and knowledge essential in higher education (and arguably vocational training). "A course team and the curriculum as experienced by students (the 'hidden curriculum') is unlikely ever to be a cohesive whole devoted to one interpretation of the profession . . . accepting a range of views of professional practice would be consistent with the diversity of views and role models afforded by teachers and the range of emerging interests and capabilities of students" (Milton, 1999, p.7). It remains to be seen whether such global graduate 'attributes' will become part of higher education discourse; they are as yet absent from vocational and academic strategy statements in New Zealand and not universally acknowledged in the Australian tertiary sector. They are clearly a far remove from the task based assessment criteria used to 'perform' curriculum in the VET sector.

Attention should also be paid to the fact that the traditional university sector (including professional training fields) continue to ignore competencies as the largely irrelevant focus of the vocational technical sector. Attempts at specifying graduate attributes (in Australia) while linked to competencies are not really contradictory evidence (Milton, 1999), while NZQA accredited teacher education programs, such as the Bachelor of Education at Massey University, seem to operate best where they simply ignore standards (Viskovic, 1999). While it is easy to tag this as conservatism, academic

elitism or some other form of entrenchment (Stanton, 1993), there are also principled objections to the notions of reality, education, and knowledge proffered by the ideal liberal vocationalism suggested through key competencies and policy documents. This is so because “If it is to be more than a slogan, liberal vocationalism must amount to a curriculum aimed at both self-enlightenment and societal enlightenment . . . Competences and outcomes cannot provide guidelines for a higher education curriculum. It is the business of higher education to develop critical capacities, which must include the evaluation and possible repudiation of contemporary competences” (Barnett, 1994, p.81). The absence of universities from NQF accredited providers of unit standards and qualifications, even in areas like teacher education and business where the notion has some history in the literature, is a clear reflection of their rejection of the notion of competency-based training and assessment as a useful format.

Vocational policy statements in their selection of skills, values, and practices, create a reality (ontology) for students constituting and constituted by the view of knowledge (epistemology) that is represented in these texts. In some cases the reality created by policy texts is quite familiar to the target learners and, therefore, easily assimilated. This familiarity, however, may disguise dangers of social reproduction and control especially where policy documents are created with existing rather than future workplace practices in mind. Alongside this obvious danger, for the socially and culturally marginalised, policy texts can be quite alienating and conflicting in its demands, ignoring such issues as gender-specific views and cultural morae in ethnically diverse societies. This sense of estrangement is further reinforced by the way knowledge is presented as either objective and impersonal or subjectively constructed. Where specific behaviors in the workplace are being assessed these behaviors and skills become a set of objectives in a Tylerian sense, which are specified and assessed in the interests of those in control, i.e. management and policy makers, and this is especially true for CBT (Beavers, 1993, p.95; Stevenson, 1993, p.75).

More democratic forms of policy writing consistent with constructivism or learner-centredness, both implying ‘local’ teacher-student curriculum development, seem to have little place in vocational education while they are very predominant in the literature. Social constructivism favors the personal construction of knowledge through social experience (Burr, 1995). As a theory of knowledge, cognitive constructivism is based on three (interdependent) principles: Knowledge is actively constructed by the learner, not passively received from the environment, coming to know is a process of adaptation based on and constantly modified by a learner’s experience of the world, i.e. there is no independent, pre-existing mind outside of the mind of the knower (Janowski, 1993, p.1). There are strong links between this social science paradigm and the learner-centredness philosophy of current language teaching (see below).

The discourse of social construction and reconstruction would seem in principle anathema to the narrow behaviourist competency-based standards movement. It may be compatible with more holistic forms mentioned but it appears these have not yet been sufficiently ‘actualized’ to make a judgement.

If we step for a moment outside of the discourse of objectives, curriculum packages and clients, and reinstate the notion that in the construction of curriculum the teacher has some role other than deliverer and assessor of existing workplace practices developed by expert interested parties (industry and business), then we can see the way in which teaching intentions and curriculum policy do not relate in any one-to-one fashion. (Smith & Lovat, 1991, p.10). The ‘experienced’ or hidden curriculum is the one created through the interaction of human agents (teacher, students) over time partly through the medium of planning intentions and policy. “Our view of the curriculum process is that it is a series of decisions and judgements. These decisions are based upon the planners beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, and biases and upon the ways in which teachers, and others make meaning of the teaching reality in which they are located. The curriculum process then is seen as a problem-solving process, in which the teacher processes a complex variety of stimuli and information and uses this to make decisions and solve problems: the teacher’s key roles in this area are those of information processor, manager, decision-maker and problem-solver” (Smith & Lovat, 1991, p. xiv).

Competency-based assessment paints another picture of this relationship, one in which an externally formulated checklist of behaviors is delivered to a certain socio-economic sector of society with a

view to maintaining existing industrial and business frameworks; this is an “impoverished version of instructional interaction” (Jackson, 1993, p.109). Thus despite rhetoric to the contrary the nature, implementation and effectiveness of competency based training and assessment in Australasia is hardly solid ground on which to build teaching and learning strategies. It is even less so in the New Zealand vocational context since the history of discussion and policy concerning vocational English requirements is far less developed than in Australia, the US, or the UK. There are clear documented concerns that it affects the development of curriculum through the teacher-student relationship and that, therefore, policy and methodology are unjustifiably disconnected. This is especially the case in an environment, second language teaching, where learner-centredness is a core philosophy. This discussion is especially important in vocational ESL in New Zealand since no consistent assessment framework is yet in place in tertiary ESL units in NZ

COMPETENCY AND LEARNER-CENTREDNESS IN ESL AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

Tertiary ESL teaching centres offer general, some vocational and academic preparation programs as well as preparation for international ‘gateway’ exams like the IELTS; none link their courses to competency-based frameworks. This impression is confirmed by the almost total absence of ESL ‘providers’ and accredited programs in the NQF. There are nonetheless projects and discussions afoot within the national organization (TESOLANZ) to debate issues such as national certification of tertiary preparation courses, ESL standards (Busch, 1998), and teacher competencies (Haddock, 1998). Thus, this discussion about the role of competencies and curriculum with respect to the New Zealand vocational sector comes in a climate of transition and contestation as governments, practitioners, and institutions attempt to set agendas that have a history in Australia and the UK. Few attempts have been made to unpack the discourse of vocational ESL at government, institutional, and practitioner levels to see whether some kind of coherent educationally informed curriculum is possible (Wette, 1998). In this respect the Australian literature is vital since it appears to predict some of the likely developments currently underway in New Zealand.

The introduction of competency-based assessment in Australasia in the 1990s has been one of the most sweeping changes documented in the field including both teaching and learning competencies (Burns, 1996; Fitzsimons & Fenwick, 1997; Strong & Hogan, 1994). In the Australian Migrant Education Sector, the Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA) have been one practical result of competency based training and assessment aimed at new immigrants (Australia, 1996). There is no comparable certification in New Zealand. Learners are required to demonstrate competency in the learning outcomes for each module within a stream, for example, reading and writing, with careful attention given to linguistic requirements (CGEA Information Sheet No.3: The Reading and Writing Stream ©The Adult, Community and Further Education Board, Victoria, 1997).

In Australia, whether competency based assessment in ESL can deliver the economic, equity, and educational goals claimed for it is doubted while it seems clear that it served political and management objectives. Although there have been gains in the visibility of migrants through the accreditation process, in practice, problems concerning its implementation have been noted, such as inadequate funding for required moderation and professional development, encouragement of “creaming” because of funding by outcomes, confusion regarding CGEA pathways, inadequate understanding of the CGEA by providers of industrial and vocational training, inadequate guidance on curriculum development, increased levels of pressure on teachers and students (Sanguinetti, 1995). Some of these problems have been noted above in other contexts.

It is particularly interesting then to reflect on the literature documenting the learner-centered curriculum under AMEP prior to the development of competency-based assessment and training in the early 1990s because this reflects to a large extent the current status of learner-centred approaches in NZ. Prior to the introduction of competency-based ESL qualifications within AMEP, learner-centered curriculum was the prevailing paradigm (Brindley, 1989; Burton, 1991b; Nunan, 1988a, pp.151-180). The notion of learner-centredness here focused on the local design and teaching of the ESL migrant

curriculum by teachers on the basis of a local needs assessment of students. Thus, in fact, programs were in fact teacher-based and learning-centered (Hutchinson, 1987) rather than learner-centered per se (Richards, 1991).

Nationally coordinated competency-based assessment and teaching was viewed as a retrograde or debatable future step in terms of this model of AMEP (Brindley, 1989; Nunan, 1991b). While it was acknowledged that curriculum power given to teachers was often done without providing resources to properly implement and manage the learner-centered curriculum (Burton, 1991a; Corbel, 1991), the dangers of a government sponsored objectives models such as the competency-based models proposed a few years later under AMEP was seen as contrary to the 'spirit' of the AMEP program. "The pressure for developing an assessment instrument to demonstrate outcomes to government is one example . . . I am saying that the utilitarian, 'objective' mode of big government and its administrators contrasts with the mode of thinking of communities in AMES centres" (Bartlett, 1991, p.152). Clearly government and economic imperatives become sufficiently important shortly afterwards, to force the development of objectives-oriented programs contrary to this spirit of locally negotiated curriculum. More recently, Anne Burns has been investigating the implementation of competency-based vocational ESL sector through teacher research designs (Burns, 1994; Burns, 1995; Burns, 1996; Burns, 1999). Burns work is especially important in this context because the AMEP framework addresses an audience that is as diverse as that of the NZ Polytechnic sector, focusing on new immigrants, international fee-paying students, and longer term unemployed immigrants. Burns also adopts a teacher research focus to documenting curriculum change that has yet to be fully explored for New Zealand.

Second language teaching and ESL in particular which has its own tradition of teaching and learning frameworks (Alexander, 1990) with communicative language teaching (Brumfit & Johnson, 1979; Johnson, 1982; Yalden, 1987) and learner-centredness the prevailing metaphors in teacher training, syllabus and curriculum at this time (Nunan, 1988b; Tudor, 1996). These paradigms (which have changed over time) are less compatible with the competency paradigm in adult education and vocational training, tending to be more humanistic, linguistically, and teacher or learner-focused than CBT models (Auerbach, 1986; Burns, 1994). They are directed at situations where local development of curriculum by teachers in negotiation with learners is the central curriculum process. Policy documentation in the form of curriculum documents do not seem to play a strong role in dictating the way teachers make decisions about lessons and the syllabus they construct. Teacher decision-making and beliefs is far more dictated by on-going decisions about individual learner concerns (Bailey, 1996; Borg, 1998; Burns, 1992; Gutierrez, 1996; Nunan, 1993; Smith, 1996).

There is then currently a prevailing notion of teacher as self-directed course developer of local curriculum based on student perceived or real needs outside of policy documentation (Graves, 1996; Nunan, 1996; Richards, 1998); methodology and curriculum are not separate issues (Nunan, 1991a). Teachers who have tried to manage workplace competencies and learner-centredness in their role as curriculum and methodology specialist have found this difficult (Uvin, 1996). Irrespective of whether there is principled agreement that a set of objectives in competency format should be formulated with learner-needs in mind as part of the planning process (Nunan, 1996, p.33), this role falls to the teacher in consultation with institutions and learners. This on-going negotiation and evaluation leads to a dynamic negotiated syllabus (Boomer, 1992; Clarke, 1991).

As I noted above, learner-centredness and local curriculum development was the prevailing paradigm in AMEP prior to the instigation of competency-based assessment. In a very real sense learner-centredness has been the teaching paradigm shift beyond communicative language teaching (CLT). CLT focused attention on the real world 'communicative' needs of learners and attempted to use this recognition as the guiding line for curriculum development (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). While CLT remains a key term in the discourse of language teaching, and in that sense can be said to remain the 'dominant paradigm' (Tudor, 1996, p.10), it has been incorporated into other paradigms, and in the Australasian second language context this has been learner-centredness.

Alongside development in language teaching paradigms have been shifts in research approaches to the nature of teaching and learning with a much stronger focus on ethnographic and other models of research within the classroom (Allwright, 1983; Allwright, 1992; Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Bailey, 1990; Bailey & Nunan, 1996; Freeman, 1999). Some of this work has been encouraged by an increased emphasis on developing critical reflection in practitioners, with teacher research acting the role of professional development (Chen, 1992; Ho, 1998; Nunan, 1992). This has come partly as a result of debate within the ESL profession of a need to develop teaching competency through holistic non-behaviourist reflective models (Richards, 1990). Particularly powerful among the new instruments of teacher change has been the role of action research (Crookes, 1999)[Richards, 1993 #26].

ESL teaching finds itself somewhat in the position of the AMEP framework prior to 1992 and the development of competency-based training and assessment as a national imperative. Learner-centredness, communicative language teaching, teacher research, and local curriculum development based on learner-needs continue to dominate outside of policy demands. Curriculum research has begun to be adopted by teachers as part of an emergent professionalism that reinforces the local student-teacher relationship in the broad context of society and institution. Policy makers should take note of these findings and uphold the 'agency' of teachers and learners in a negotiated curriculum. Some illustration of how this can work in a vocational setting follow, where I refer to three years of teacher research development in a New Zealand Polytechnic.

LOCAL FOCUS ON CURRICULUM AND TEACHER RESEARCH

In an earlier study, I spent some time trying to identify the nature of teacher thinking on curriculum through a six-month ethnographic study with six self-selected teacher participants. (Melles, 1998; Melles, 1999). Part of the rationale behind this study was to develop some notion of existing views and practices within the broad constraints of communicative language teaching. Teacher participants answered a survey questionnaire on their beliefs and practices and also contributed a short statement of their overall teaching philosophy. Throughout the responses from this initial questionnaire that broadly analyzed classroom thinking and practice as a preliminary to observation and recall, notions of the role of teacher and student, curriculum, and learning outcomes and objectives were noted.

The notion of teacher-student negotiation through cultural differences in expectations was a critical notion as was the importance of the relationship developed between teachers and students. In terms of curriculum, many teachers adopted a task-based approach to teaching, where this was possible, at lower levels language structures took precedence over content. Learning outcomes, as behavioral objectives, did not feature much in this survey and lesson aims included in planning sheets for observation sessions, were an eclectic mix of teacher centered, textbook-centered, and student-centered notions. Lessons, as human interaction, have their own discrete goals, which are only distantly related to curriculum policy notions. In recall interviews of their teaching sessions, teachers constantly remarked on individual behaviors of students in class and on their own appearance and teaching behaviors. All courses took an eclectic approach to assessment in terms of proficiency tests, quizzes, and independent task-based assignments. Much of this study then confirmed at a local level what has already been noted elsewhere concerning teacher beliefs and practices, e.g. (Woods, 1996). Is this eclecticism a product of deeply held beliefs about learner-centredness or are there other factors contributing to the beliefs and practices of ESL teachers. I believe there are 'internal' and 'external' factors which contribute to the 'marginalised' experience of ESL teachers. These principally include gender, institutional, and research factors

ESOL teaching in NZ is strongly gendered and aged in a direction which reinforces the potential for control and vulnerability and this is reflected in this context and nationally. For example, among the thirty full-time and part-time staff in the ESOL and languages section reported on here there are two male teachers; in senior management the gender balance is reversed; the issue of gender balance, which is elsewhere salient in the educational literature, warrants further investigation. That this local setting is representative of the national picture is confirmed and recapitulated in a recent national survey of secondary and tertiary ESOL teachers (Haddock, 1998), with a gender balance strikingly similar to the primary sector (87% F: 13% M), and a mean age of 47.3 years; full-time or permanent contracts include 45% of the target audience.

The salient characteristics for this discussion are the age, gender, experience and job nature characteristics; these features are also reflected in the teacher profiles of the ESOL section discussed here. Vulnerability translates into a group with a similar gender balance as in the primary teaching sector, loose job security, long experience and relatively high age compared to other sectors. Haddock (1998) also reports on qualifications and attitudes regarding core competencies teachers should have. In relation to this discussion, research training in terms of significance for the profession and as a feature of training backgrounds, features minimally. So to professional vulnerability is added a distinctive lack of experience and knowledge regarding research.

Institutional factors refer to the status of ESL units within the polytechnic. ESL sections in the polytechnic sector tend to be external to the mainstream campus courses. In my institution, certificates awarded have little or no value to the institution and give way to international gateway exams like the IELTS proficiency exam as entry criteria for courses. Student linguistic, educational and cultural backgrounds are extremely diverse and not complemented by clear vocational or academic goals; the student body include recent immigrants, long-term and short-term international students, and longer-term immigrants. Long-term international students often bring unsuccessful educational backgrounds with them from their home country and recent and longer-term immigrants are keen to get general survival skills in English rather than specific work or academic-related qualifications. One of the areas where ESL could serve and develop mainstream 'respect', as is the case in some Australian universities, is taken over by study skills support centres and foundation courses which cater to NESB students who have been judged able to mainstream.

Gateway exams to university and polytechnics continue to be international proficiency exams, e.g. IELTS, which bear no relationship to competency-related curriculum. These exams are taught by ESL departments in academic preparatory departments and have a clear influence on maintaining other forms of assessment at bay. Vocational certification and competency-based assessment, e.g. National Certificate in Employment Skills, is taught under mainstream programs and ESL departments have no input here despite the fact that standards incorporate language issues. From my own personal experience, it appears that NESB students are accepted into tertiary programs at all levels (certificate, diploma, and bachelor degree) and even manage to graduate at postgraduate levels while still not advancing beyond post-intermediate English levels. Economics and a proliferation of tertiary 'providers' must play a

major role here. There is little or no research on the experience of NESB students in tertiary settings and there subsequent successes or failures.

In tertiary settings where research culture is still emerging the search for and challenge of alternative research paradigms takes on a different perspective. This is true in the context I discuss here: transitional tertiary and vocational ESOL teaching in a New Zealand Polytechnic. Here research has a short history and is still largely associated with traditional empiricist designs conducted by academic 'experts'. The expert image is reinforced in the literature on research methods and approaches in second language teaching and learning that assume that the projects discussed in methods textbooks are carried out by researchers or researchers in training largely on subjects and within qualitative or quantitative paradigms. Breaking out of this framework involves developing an 'insider' understanding of the beliefs and practices that articulate teacher thinking and promoting research networks and projects that help strengthen weak professional identities.

The ESOL section began developing a culture of collaborative teacher research in 1996 through two practical action research projects (Musgrave, 1996; Musgrave & al., 1997). The overall aims of both projects included induction into research methods for teachers and resolution of practical classroom problems related to mismatched student and teacher perceptions about what constitutes desirable ESOL classroom speaking practice, and perceptions of the value of group speaking tasks in the classroom. Both projects were very much in the tradition of practical action research. Practical action research is generally facilitated, adopts a reflective and interpretive stance to action cycles, focuses on practical classroom teaching concerns, tends to adopt a problem-solution approach to change, and is largely collaborative rather than individualistic. Two further teacher research projects have followed this year (1999) on issues of classroom concern. These concern the use of technology in language syllabus and the development of learner independence through the use of self access centres. One of the effects of these projects has been to develop cohesion among teachers whose professional identities, given the above, are constantly challenged. Another tangible effect has been the contribution of teacher research to legitimating the local knowledge teachers have developed as valid research knowledge.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Until ESL teaching is incorporated from the margins into the center of vocational institutions there can, in my view, be little progress. Teacher research, such as it is, is a step in the direction of empowering ESL but it is not enough. I don't believe that adherence to standards currently under review on the NQF will solve this problem since it is patently clear that the notion of holistic versus behavioristic competency-based assessment is still being hotly debated and these standards have no immediately foreseeable role in tertiary teaching. Irrespective of whether standards are validated in some sense or not by practitioners, it remains to be seen how they would play a role in existing vocational certification given their poor reception by some tertiary bodies. Meanwhile, teachers work with notions of curriculum and methodology that seem in stark contrast to some of the central notions of competency-based training and assessment and learning outcomes seem to play a very small role in teacher beliefs and practices. In the light of current political contingencies, the Australian experience

is worth following especially with regard to competency-based language teaching and migrant teaching.

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