

ENGLISH ONLY? - TESTING THE WATERS OF CLASSROOM BASED RESEARCH

BY ELLEN SMITH, CONTRA COSTA COLLEGE⁷

I had never thought of myself as a researcher. When I used to think of research, I always thought of Research with a capital "R", in other words, traditional research - starting with a hypothesis, using large numbers of subjects including control groups, conducting experiments, and analyzing statistics. Also, I had always thought that the researcher had to be an objective observer who is personally removed from her research subjects. Since I am a classroom teacher, I spend virtually all of my work time planning lessons, teaching classes, designing tests and other classroom handouts, correcting and responding to students' written work, and conferencing with individual students. This has left me no time for conducting research using a separate group of language learners who are not already in my classes.

A few years ago, I started hearing the words "action research", "classroom based research" and "teacher research" being bandied about at professional ESL conferences. My cursory reading about the subject sparked my interest. Apparently, there was a type of research that a practicing teacher could conduct in her own class that resulted in valid conclusions to share with others in her field.

This was the type of research that I conducted while I was on sabbatical at the Universidad de las Américas-Puebla (UDLA-P) in Cholula, Puebla, Mexico. What I learned was twofold. First, I learned about the process of conducting classroom based research. I learned how to formulate a valid research question, how to collect data, how to analyze the data, and how to present my findings. Secondly, I discovered the answers to what became my research questions.

What is Classroom Based Research?:-

Before I left for Mexico, I was fortunate to find out about a book by Ruth Shagoury Hubbard and Brenda Miller Power called The Art of Classroom Inquiry (Heinemann, 1993). This book became my guide to conducting a classroom based research project.

In the introduction to their book, Hubbard and Power quote a classroom teacher who notes that her classroom based research began with:

'wonderings' I had regarding my students and my teaching. I pondered ways of pursuing these wonderings, feeling that I was capable of doing some groundwork studies.

⁷ Ellen Smith can be located in the ESL Department at Contra Costa College, San Pablo, California. E-mail: Smithellen@aol.com

I could look at my own initial research, related to my own very familiar environment. I didn't need to read for hours about studies conducted by Researchers (sic) elsewhere and then connect the findings to my room. My students and I could participate together, learning about our own classroom. (p. xiv)

Classroom based research is, therefore, a process in which a teacher uses her own classroom as a laboratory, closely observes her own classroom activities, reflects on these activities in writing, comes up with a question, collects data, involves her students in her research, and answers her own questions.

Formulating the Research Questions

As noted above, classroom based research begins with a "wondering to pursue" rather than a hypothesis to test as in traditional research. I had no clear idea what "wondering" I was going to pursue when the semester in Mexico started. In my sabbatical proposal, I stated that I would "collaborate on a research project at the UDLA-P concerning the difficulties that Spanish speakers have when learning English". As I read Hubbard and Power's book, I realized that the way to find and frame a research question was to start writing every day after class about what had gone on in class that day. This process was invaluable in helping me hone in on what Hubbard and Power call "specific instances of tension" in my classroom. What wasn't going right? What kinds of problems were students having as they struggled to express themselves in English? What teaching techniques and activities did I feel like I needed to change as I worked with my students at the UDLA-P?

Before I left for Mexico, I thought that my research would focus on some specific features of the English language that Spanish speakers had an especially difficult time learning. However, once I met my students, started teaching, and started writing about what I was observing in class, it became apparent to me that any one linguistic feature was not my main "wondering". Instead, I was faced with a situation that I had never faced in my teaching career - an advanced oral communication skills class full of students who all spoke the same native language and therefore very frequently resorted to speaking Spanish rather than English in class.

At Contra Costa, it had always been relatively easy to motivate students to speak English in an oral communications skills class. Merely assigning students who didn't speak the same native language to a small group and asking them to complete a communicative task together went a long way to motivating students to use English for real communication. However, this obviously wasn't going to work in Mexico. After the first day of class, I realized that many of the students preferred using Spanish rather than English in small group tasks. I also knew that if my students were going to improve their English during the semester, they were going to have to start speaking English a lot more frequently than they were doing in class.

The fact that I was teaching in a monolingual classroom for the first time brought up another issue which became apparent as I wrote about what I was observing in my class. My written observations helped me see my English language learning students in a new way. Maybe there were times when it was "OK" for students to speak Spanish in class. This "wondering" was a truly radical idea for me since the idea of translation and native language use in the classroom had been very much downplayed during my teacher training. Moreover, in all my

years of teaching ESL in the United States, I hardly ever translated anything since there were always anywhere from five to ten different native languages spoken by my students in one class, and I could only speak one of them, Spanish. Also, I had always believed that providing opportunities for students to speak their native language in an ESL classroom was a waste of precious classroom time.

My Research Questions

These "wonderings" and observations led me to formulate these three related questions:

- Why do students use their native language when they work together in an EFL classroom?
- When should I not try to squelch native language use?
- In an oral communications skills class where all the students speak the same native language, what type of tasks and activities will encourage students to use English when they are working in small groups? In other words, how can I modify my teaching strategies to promote more target language use?

Data Collection

I used data from five sources:

- my detailed classroom observation journal (included in my sabbatical report)
- my detailed journal of my experiences working in the language lab (included in my sabbatical report)
- my own language learning journal (included in my sabbatical report) in which I wrote about my own language learning process as it unfolded while I was taking two university classes - an advanced Spanish class for foreigners and a class for "regular" university students about the history of women in Mexico.
- students' language learning journals in which they wrote about their experiences in the language lab (pertinent excerpts are part of items #1 and #2 above)
- three student surveys which I conducted in my oral communication skills class (included in my sabbatical report). I asked students to answer the survey questions after their oral presentations.

Findings

By closely reflecting on the data, I arrived at these answers to my question:

1. *Why do students use their native language in class?*

In the answer to this question, I divided my findings into two categories:

- what I believe are legitimate, acceptable reasons for using Spanish, in other words, reasons that are a natural and positive part of the students' learning process
- what I believe are reasons that impede the learning process

Acceptable reasons

- Because the cognitive task is too difficult for the students to use English to express their ideas.
- Because students have difficulty thinking in English and organizing their ideas in English.
- In order to ask for help from others to supply a lack of vocabulary.
- In order to ask for insights into grammar or vocabulary.
- Because students can't understand each other's English.
- In order to socialize and bond with each other.

Impediments to the learning process:

- Expediency - when students don't have time to make the effort to speak in English.
- Because students believe that direct translation is an effective strategy for them.
- Lack of discipline (laziness?)

II. *What can I do as a teacher to foster more target language use in class?*

- Be aware of the nature and purpose of the communicative task.
- Be aware of the students' oral communication abilities. Don't assign tasks that are too difficult for them to accomplish by using only English.
- Raise students' awareness of when and why they are using their native language rather than English.
- Ask students to fill out a questionnaire in which they have to write down how much time they spent using English versus using their native language as they prepared certain classroom activities and assignments AND to write down why they used their native language instead of English.
- Are there times when the students are speaking in the native language simply because it is easier? Is it due to a lack of discipline (or even laziness)?
- Tell students that at the end of the group discussion, each group will tell the class what percent of the time the group spent speaking English.

- Discuss the pitfalls of using direct translation and teach alternative strategies.
- Create a real purpose for students to speak and listen to each other in English
- students have to hand in their notes from group discussions written in English
- students have to write and/or perform a dialog in English. I found that when students had to write down in English what they were discussing, they spent a lot of their time discussing the topic in English.
- Use role plays in which I tell the students to imagine that they are communicating with people who don't speak Spanish.
- Anticipate problems that cause students to use their native language
- Introduce necessary vocabulary to the students before the activity begins. By giving students a lot of "language help" before the activity begins, students will have less of a need to speak their native language.
- Teach and continuously stress the use of strategies for how to ask for clarification in English. This helps to keep the conversation going in English instead of students needing to resort to Spanish in order to understand each other.

Discussion of Findings

When I teach ESL at Contra Costa, I already use most of the techniques above. However, when I was teaching at the UDLA-P, I had to be especially vigilant about using these techniques much more often than I do at Contra Costa. At Contra Costa, I can often successfully facilitate an oral communications activity by putting students in groups where none of them speak the same native language and asking them to discuss a set of questions about a stimulating topic and then orally report the highlights of their discussion to the class. This never worked successfully at the UDLA-P. It was exactly in this type of situation where the students would spend most of their time talking about the topic in Spanish.

Raising students' awareness of when and why they spoke Spanish during class activities was among the most effective ways of stimulating the students to use English instead of Spanish. Interestingly, my survey, which was a principal data collection instrument, became the main way I was able to raise students' consciousness. In this way, the students and I were partners in research, which is a fundamental tenet of the classroom based research model.

As the semester progressed, I could see from the students' entries in their language learning journals that their use of Spanish rather than English was becoming less a matter of a lack of discipline and more of a perceived need on their part in order to accomplish the communicative task. Students were writing about how they were no longer simply lapsing into Spanish because it was the easiest thing to do. Instead, they had much more "legitimate" reasons for choosing Spanish over English.

As I documented my own language learning process, I realized that I too had legitimate reasons for resorting to English. In my own language learning journal, I began to document the times when I thought that using English aided my comprehension of Spanish. For example, in the articles that I was reading for my History of Women in Mexico class, I would highlight the main points as well as often write brief marginal comments in English which summarized important points I was reading in Spanish. This helped me remember what I was reading. Also, there was one time when I got together with another North American woman from the class and we discussed in English the main ideas of a rather difficult article. This short discussion in English definitely helped me better express my ideas about the article in Spanish in class.

My own language learning experience in Mexico and my students' responses has helped me realize that there are times when using one's native language is a very important, natural and helpful part of the second language learning process. This is especially true when students who are not yet able to completely think in English are given a cognitively difficult task to complete. For this reason, it is especially important for me to think about exactly what I am asking my students to do and why I want them to do it.

For example, as I compiled the results of the first student questionnaire, it became obvious to me that the students were saying that they had used Spanish to plan and organize their panel discussion. This discussion was their first major oral presentation, and they knew they were going to be graded on it. They knew that it would be 55% of their 1st month evaluation grade, so in order for it to come off well, they knew that it had to be well planned and organized. Using Spanish was a very expedient and efficient way to get this part done. Why use English and risk messing up? In fact, the nature of the task was that almost everything could be done in Spanish - the brainstorming of the questions, the planning of who was going to be responsible for what, even the answers to the questions. The only thing that couldn't be done in Spanish was the final step of practicing the answers and then presenting them in English.

Therefore, if I want my intermediate-to-advanced students to have the experience of presenting a panel discussion in English, then I have to expect and accept the fact that sometimes students are going to be talking about these ideas in Spanish before they are ready to present their ideas in English. At the same time, I must caution them about the pitfalls of writing out their speech in Spanish and then directly translating it into English. However, if I want the students to spend a solid block of time speaking in English, then I have to ask them to do a much easier communicative task.

Conclusion

Although my classroom based research did not directly address the issue of specific linguistic problems that *Spanish* speakers have while learning English, it did force me to rethink my beliefs about the role of all of my students' native languages in my second language learning classes. In the year that I have been back in my classes since I returned from Mexico, I can already see how my recent classroom based research experience is influencing me to change some of my teaching techniques. In my writing class, for example, when I ask students to work in small groups and brainstorm ideas for an upcoming composition, I have begun to experiment with the idea of assigning students who speak the same native language to the same group. In my

reading class, when I ask students to find a partner and go over the homework exercises together, I no longer insist that they find a partner who speaks a different native language than they do.

My first experience with classroom based research has resulted in a new need of mine to continue to keep a teacher journal and to intensively explore questions that arise from this process of writing about my teaching. I enjoyed this process so much that I returned to Contra Costa determined to find the time to continue to do this type of writing and research. Consequently, I have started a teacher research group on our campus. Two other colleagues will be joining me this semester in this exciting process of discovering more about our students and ourselves as teachers.