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# Supporting experimenting in junior centres

by Laura O'Grady (Centre of English Studies)

Working in an institution that is a member of EAQUALS means that “all staff are given the opportunity to improve their skills in continuous professional development within and outside working hours” ([www.eaquals.org](http://www.eaquals.org)). Normally in a junior centre this would mean, monthly/bi-weekly workshops for both new teachers and current staff, focussing on ‘adapting the course book’, ‘how to plan effectively’ or ‘using authentic materials in the lesson’. Whilst these workshops are beneficial for initial professional development, I find that they are targeted towards newer language teachers versus more experienced teachers, and so as a result these teachers tend to absent themselves and limit their exposure to professional development.

Having participated in both action research and experimentation as part of the DELTA modules and as part of my institution, I find that it is an extremely rewarding way of developing my teaching methodologies and ideas. It was for this reason that I thought that including these approaches (experimenting and reflecting) in the junior centre would be extremely beneficial to both newer and more experienced teachers.

The aim of this article is to look at how, through supporting experiments in junior centres, both teachers and students can benefit from a reflective teaching approach by experimenting, reflecting and adapting their teaching methods and approaches.

## Why experiment?

It allows the teacher to study and reflect on his/her teaching practices on a personal level (Scrivener, 2011). Experimenting can be conducted on both large and small scales, which can provide teachers with the opportunity to develop and learn to be a more inspired teacher. It provides the opportunity for teachers to obtain a clearer awareness of their practices and to adapt where necessary to better suit different learner needs.

It is important to encourage teachers to think about their own teaching goals (professionally and personally) so that they can learn to manage their continuous professional development. This can be easily accomplished using the following model: Experimenting in the classroom is vital to ensure motivation is maintained. Something that works well for general English adult classes may not work for teenagers or young learners. Teachers who actively experiment and adapt their styles upon reflection benefit from this process, as do the learners.

## What did the teachers do?

Some teachers were provided with an article explaining how to incorporate a new approach (dictogloss, TBL etc.) into their teaching practices, while other teachers put forward their own suggestions and ideas for experimenting in the lesson. Each teacher took it upon themselves to try the new approaches, reflect on their teaching and on learner feedback and adapt it for future classes.

Teacher one focussed on having learners record part of an audio script so that errors relating to features of pronunciation could be highlighted and learners would be able to ‘notice’ them. Learners would then re-record the same audio while consciously focussing on the correct pronunciation.

Teacher two experimented using dictogloss activities focussing on introducing new grammar and new lexis as a more communicative way of ensuring learner motivation throughout the lesson.

Teacher three decided to experiment using task-based learning allowing learners to learn by “using the language” (Thornbury, 2006).

Teacher four experimented with teaching grammar through song as a way to motivate her learners, rather than relying on a ‘presentation-practice-production’ approach.

Teacher five experimented with an original idea focussing on helping learners acquire new lexis using applications (4 Pics 1 Word and Heads Up!) that are found on a smart phone/tablet which could be used outside the classroom.

**“we should never stop learning and developing”**

Using the course books or authentic materials, teachers implemented their experiment. Using questionnaires provided, the learners would answer the following questions so that the teachers could obtain feedback:

Did you enjoy the lesson?

Do you think the activity will help you to better remember the new language (vocabulary/grammar etc.)?

Would you like to do the activity again?

Would you use this activity in your free time to learn English?

Would you change anything about this activity?



Using 'Heads Up' to expand learner range of lexis.

Pic by Author

Teachers then reflected upon the lesson, taking into account the learner feedback whilst completing a reflection and evaluation worksheet. The worksheet focussed on identifying three key strengths and weaknesses of the lesson and identifying three things they would adapt/remove from the experiment in the future. Additionally, teachers were asked to complete a short questionnaire with the following questions:

- Did you enjoy the lesson?
- Do you think you would repeat this activity in the future?
- Do you think it's a good idea to experiment with new/different approaches in your lessons?
- Do you think experimenting helps you to develop as a teacher?

### What did the learners think?

Overall their reaction was very positive. Learners enjoyed the lesson and found it helpful for remembering the new language that was taught.

Learner feedback for teacher one was positive as all of the learners agreed that they enjoyed the lesson and it helped them to better remember features associated with pronunciation.

Feedback for teacher two was also very constructive with learners enjoying the more communicative grammar and lexis lessons. Negative aspects were that learners would have liked a little more time when completing the text-reconstruction stage of the dictogloss and a few suggested that a shorter text would be more practical.

Feedback for teacher three overall was not optimistic. Learners felt that it could have been more inclusive, not every learner was able to participate due to the task that was chosen by the teacher and so the general consensus was that they would not like to do the activity again.

Feedback for teacher four was extremely positive. All of the learners enjoyed the lessons and found them very motivating and thought that it was an interesting way to approach teaching grammar.

Feedback for teacher five was also very positive. Learners found it to be an interesting way to learn new lexis. Additionally, the learners thought that using mobile applications was an inspired idea which they were able to relate to more easily than a more traditional approach.



Range and accuracy of vocabulary development using the application '4 pics 1 word'.

Pic by author

### What did the teachers think?

Having received both written and oral feedback it was clear that all of the teachers were extremely happy with having participated in the CPD experiment. They found the process to be quite rewarding and informative, enabling them to focus more on developing their teaching practices and creating a more productive classroom environment. Teacher three, in particular having reflected on the lesson, has a better understanding of how to implement TBL to ensure that all students can participate and benefit from this approach.

Even though some were hesitant to participate, the general feeling was that they would have little hesitation participating in action research and CPD workshops in the future. On the whole, they felt that experimenting in future lessons would be easily undertaken having now established a more reflective teaching practice.

**“all staff are given the opportunity to improve their skills in continuous professional development within and outside working hours”**

### What are the benefits for teachers?

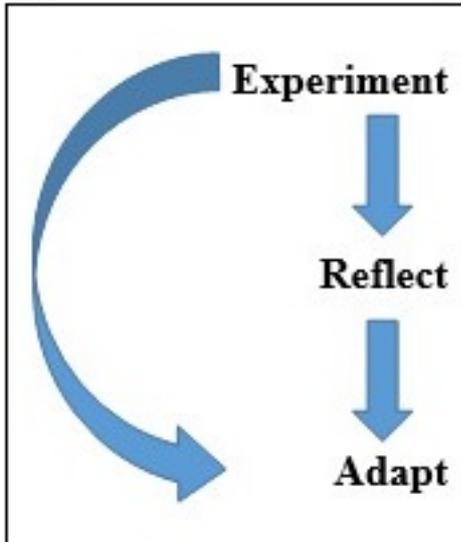
I completely agree with Sue Leather when she states that as teachers “we should never stop learning and developing” (Leather, 2011 p.59). It is important for teachers to try out new methods and approaches in class. It provides the teacher with information about their own teaching styles where they can reflect and evaluate them and subsequently change things that don't fit their style. This cycle ensures that teachers are continuously developing both personally and professionally.

Why is continuous development important? It ensures that we as teachers keep up-to-date with new methodologies, ideas, skills and techniques that are constantly emerging within the ELT industry. It allows teachers to respond to the ever changing needs within English language teaching.

It raises awareness of our strengths and weaknesses as teachers and allows us to adapt our teaching practices so that they better suit the needs of our learners, e.g. teaching exam classes, general English classes, young learners, etc.

As teachers we are committed to lifelong learning, so taking part in CPD is vital if we want to ensure that we can teach our learners to the best of our abilities. It is interesting and dynamic and it allows for development using a variety of resources (workshops, peer

## Experiment – Reflect – Adapt



Continuous learning starts with the teacher

Pic by author

observations etc.) and it is suitable for novice and more experienced teachers.

What are the benefits for learners?

For the learners, one clear point that kept arising was how they felt the lessons were more dynamic and interactive. I often find this to be the case as teachers feel more confident in their teaching and this new-found confidence lends itself to increased motivation levels for everyone in the class. Learners benefit from the experiments as they are asked for their feedback and their input is valued; consequently, they actively participate more in lessons and are more motivated during meaningful communication stages of the lessons. They can see the reward of their feedback and feel more appreciated as they are now part of the teacher-learner team.

Learners can see when teachers are up-to-date on new approaches and ideas and they can see that their needs and wants are being taken into account when lessons are being planned. This makes for a more receptive learner and progress is easily identified by both the teacher and the learner.

This is especially true for teenagers and young learners: if teachers fail to stay up-to-date, learners will be reluctant to participate in a class that in their view is 'boring'. The more relevant the experiment,

the more the learners will react to it in a positive way, ensuring continued participation and motivation throughout the lesson.

### What are the benefits for Directors of Studies?

As a newly appointed director for a junior centre I can clearly see the benefit of supporting experimenting during the summer period. I highly recommend promoting autonomous learning for teacher development during the summer months. It allows you as the director to focus on your day-to-day responsibilities and be there for support when necessary, providing feedback, advice, etc. Once it becomes an established process, it is easy to repeat from year to year ensuring that all teachers both new and experienced are able to continue developing. Additionally, it's a self-sufficient way of incorporating CPD during the summer months and it functions as an information exchange platform in the staff room.

On a more administrative note, it ensures that as a member of EAQUALS we are fulfilling our obligation to provide ongoing professional development for our teachers.

### Top three ideas that emerged from the experiment:

1. Having learners use their mobile phones in class to record part of an audio text so that they can actively see their progress during the lesson. It also allows them to hear different people with different accents speaking in English.
2. Teaching grammar and lexis through song. There are so many contemporary songs that are easily adaptable for this purpose. Learners relate well to music and find it a stimulating way of learning new language points.
3. Using mobile phone applications (4 Pics 1 Word and Heads Up!) is a great way of helping learners develop their knowledge and understanding of lexis. It can be graded for different levels (4 Pics 1 Word), it can be used to consolidate previously learned lexis, and it can be used to focus on a particular topic (Heads Up!).

### References

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Scrivener, J, 2011 Learning Teaching, Macmillan  
Thornbury, S, 2006 An A to Z of ELT: A Dictionary of Terms and Concepts, Macmillan  
[www.equals.org](http://www.equals.org)