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Understanding relevance in the language classroom

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This paper reports on a study into course relevance conducted using some of the principles of Exploratory Practice (EP). I wanted to gain an understanding about how relevant the students taking my English courses perceived them to be in terms of their own lives. I also hoped to resolve some of the tensions experienced due to the differences in student and teacher perspective on what is relevant. EP emphasizes working to gain situated understandings via normal teaching practices as a collegial process, involving everyone concerned. Therefore I collected data using natural ways, compatible with life in the classroom and the school, involving both students and colleagues as co-researchers. Analysis of the data enabled me to see course relevance as part of the wider context of motivation, and also to understand that students can themselves shape a course to serve their own needs.

I Introduction

One of my ongoing questions as a native-speaker EFL classroom teacher responsible for designing my own courses is whether what I am doing with my students in the context of the classroom has relevance for them in terms of their studies and their lives. The *Exploratory Practice* approach advocates that such questions be formulated as puzzles or questions rather than problems, and investigated within the context of the classroom through normal activities, using the active co-operation of the learners themselves:

> … Exploratory Practice, a form of practitioner research involving teachers and learners working together, during language lessons, to explore and develop their own understandings of their classroom lives.
>
> (Allwright, 2005a: 28)

I formulated my *puzzle* about relevance into the following questions which formed the basis for my MA research (Rose, 2006):

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1) **In what ways do my lessons motivate my students in their learning of English?**
2) **In what ways do my courses help my students to learn English:**
    a)   from my perspective as a teacher?
    b)   from their perspective as learners?
3) **What do my students get out of my courses?**

I designed the specific research questions to help me gain an understanding about the issue of *relevance* and the tension I have often felt between what I see as relevant and what my learners may perceive as relevant. The dilemma here may stem from the fact that as a teacher I am probably working in a different timescale from the students, focusing more on my predictions about the students' language needs in the future, whereas the students are usually concerned about the here and now. Relevance seems to be closely related to motivation, and I thought I might gain further understanding about the question of course relevance by looking at student motivation. Likewise I felt that the question of *how* the courses help the students learn English (from both the teacher's and the learners' perspective) may throw light on the issue of relevance. '[W]e know that in general, people are more likely to learn something that they perceive as relevant to them' (Allwright, 2005a: 18). Finally, I thought the question of what the students themselves take away from the courses could enhance my understanding of course relevance.

Relevance is both one of the elements and one of the stages in Keller's 'ARCS (Attention, Relevance, Confidence and Satisfaction) Model of Motivation' (1987). This model (which is presented and discussed in Section V/1.a) has proved useful in enabling me to place some of the understandings I have gained from my research into a wider and more holistic scheme, and in the process glean more personal understanding both about the needs of my students and about how my teaching may best approach meeting those needs.

II The context and the courses

1 The educational setting

The context for my work as a language teacher is a special educational institution in Finland (comprising several local bases located in north and south Finland) which provides vocational upper-secondary and adult education and training, as well as preparatory and rehabilitative training. This type of education is aimed at people who for reasons of poor health, disability, and/or social problems require special support, guidance and counselling in their studies and placement in jobs. The base where I work provides training for about 180 students. There are a variety of vocational courses taught, from gardening to logistics, and whereas the vocational and practical study programs differ widely depending on the focus, all students are required to take a core number of general (or theory) subjects, including English.

2 The students

Most (about 80%) of the students that I teach are male and in the age range of
16–22. They come from a wide variety of backgrounds and for various reasons
mainstream education is not considered appropriate for their needs. Some stu-
dents are slow learners, others have difficulty in concentrating for more than
short periods, many have reading and writing difficulties and a substantial
minority live in *family homes* locally. (A family home is a home consisting of
two house parents and a small number of young people, who, because of par-
ticular life circumstances are not currently able to live with their own famil-
ies.) Many of the non-family-home students also live at a distance from the
school and during the week they are accommodated locally in a 'student
hotel'. This may be the first time that some students have lived away from
home, and all sorts of difficulties can present themselves, from issues of per-
sonal hygiene to misuse of alcohol. These can have an effect inside as well as
outside the classroom.

As a consequence of their personal circumstances, many students can seem
to be outwardly unmotivated for further English studies, having already had
six years of compulsory English in primary and secondary school in which
they have either 'fallen though the net' or written themselves off as 'failures'.
Their personal life situation, coupled with any outside influences, often assumes
more importance than their studies. The classes I teach are small (3–8 stu-
dents) and heterogeneous, but a sizable majority of students could be con-
sidered as falling within the pre-intermediate range of English skills.

3 English courses

To accommodate the range of student needs and abilities it is vital that what-
ever syllabuses and courses are designed be both flexible and accessible at dif-
ferent levels. The limited amount of class time available per week is also a
factor to be taken into consideration, as well as the reality that attendance may
not be regular or continuous and group composition can change quite radically
from week to week in terms of numbers and personalities, often with no prior
notice.

The English language courses taught are *Everyday English* and *English at
Work*, the names of which give only the broadest idea of what might be offered
within individual lessons. To anchor the courses somewhat and to provide a
framework on which to draw, I have put together a loose, topic-based syllabus
which incorporates the multidimensional approach proposed by Stern (1992:
26–30). This provides both a structure and a fair amount of flexibility on a
week to week basis, as well as giving the possibility for material to be adapted
for different levels. I have found that the importance of topic as a motivator
and topic as a vehicle and context for language learning opportunities is of par-
ticular consideration. This is especially so because my students generally have
fairly limited expectations of themselves language-wise, and many appear to
be unable or unwilling to visualize where they would use English now or in

the future. We are therefore, of necessity, very much grounded in the students' present.

III Setting up the study

1 Collecting data

One of the ideas behind Exploratory Practice is to take 'the notion of research as a supportive rather than as a parasitic activity' (Allwright, 2005b: 358). This means that any research is carried out via normal classroom activities, involving both students and colleagues as co-researchers. I therefore tried to find natural ways, compatible with life in the classroom and in the school, to generate data for reflection and ultimately for understanding. These ways were, as far as possible, following my normal interaction and communication patterns with students and colleagues, and a summary can be seen in Tables 1a and 1b. For clarity, I have divided the collected data into two sections: what took place inside the classroom and what took place outside the classroom.

Table 1a   Ways of generating data for the study: In the classroom

a. Monitoring lessons by using *reflective lesson plans*
b. Reflecting with the students on specific questions
c. Reflecting on the students' reflections, both with the students and on my own
d. Student designed and conducted course evaluations
e. Pilot course evaluation questions

Table 1b   Ways of generating data for the study: Outside the classroom

a. Series of recorded discussions with a language teaching colleague
b. Written reflections from vocational teachers

2 Data collection inside the classroom

I work with about 10 different student groups; and as this study was looking at the relevance of my courses generally, rather than for a specific group of students, I considered it appropriate to gather data from most of these groups at different times, depending on the class activity. Each group invariably has its own character, but individual groups could also be considered as representative of the students as a whole. This is feasible because the groups are heterogeneous, and each group, in theory at least, follows the same course framework. However, I did not gather all types of data from every group. The following sub-sections briefly describe how I collected and/or generated the data inside the classroom.

a Monitoring: One of my main means of gathering data (which enabled me to reflect at the same time) was by monitoring my classes. Monitoring has been described by Allwright (2000: 10) as a way of 'gathering naturally occurring data about whatever you are … puzzling about'. I considered keeping a classroom journal for an academic year as a way of monitoring what was happening in my classes, but discounted this approach because of the amount of time needed for writing and analysis. Ho's (1995: 66–71) suggestion about using lesson plans as a means of reflection gave me the idea of using a similar framework for making in-class observations. These observations were a way of both recording my reflections and reflecting on what was happening in any particular lesson, and were easy to pick up and put together later. They also provided me with comments to use with my colleague and various student groups for further reflection.

Following Ho's (1995) model, I kept a blank page next to my lesson outline for writing down anything I felt was significant. The writing, which usually took the form of brief comments, was done during or just after the lesson and did not take very long. In this way I was also able to monitor the progress of my own reflections, which were, in turn, reflecting on life in the classroom as it progressed during the year. I did not write something down in every lesson with every group, but I did leave a blank page by each lesson outline in preparation for possible comments. This also meant I could easily connect my entries to particular lessons. My observations, which had a different focus from the action research and reflective practice elements advocated by Ho (1995: 68), were aimed at gaining understanding rather than problem solving or improving efficiency.

b Reflecting with the students: Reflecting with the students had three different dimensions: discussion in class, student responses to specific written questions and course evaluation (I discuss the latter separately in the next sub-section). Discussion in class was able to be informal as the groups were mostly very small, sometimes with as few as two students. The students did not want our discussions to be recorded, but did not object if I took notes. These I was able to integrate with my own reflections for the day. The topic of the discussions were to do with what the students would like to do in the class if they had a free choice, and whether the planned lessons that they currently have 'work' for them. I was also interested to know if they had any thoughts about the content of the lessons being planned by the teacher or by the students.

Two written questions ('*How do these lessons help you to learn English*?' and '*What do you get out of these English lessons*?') were given to most groups about two months before the end of the academic year. Depending on the students' level of English, the questions were either in English and/or Finnish, and responses were accepted in either language. For some of the groups I included two or three comments that had come from earlier student reflections as a way of introducing the questions. The students could also write their responses to the comments if they wished.

c Course evaluation: Ways of obtaining course evaluation evolved over the year as my ideas were modified by student responses. Initially I had planned to use a series of fairly detailed questions, which each group could choose to complete either as a semi-structured interview or as a written questionnaire at the end of the course. Although I had given a lot of thought to the questions and their format, I felt I needed a tool for evaluation that would involve more student input at the 'design' stage, and could be seen as potentially part of a 'learning opportunity'. Therefore, in the end I gave the students themselves the responsibility for planning the form and content of their evaluation, my input being limited to helping them with suggestions as to what the format could be.

3 Data collection outside the classroom

I collected data outside the classroom by involving several colleagues with whom I work fairly closely. In the course of my normal work-life, discussion and e-mail are the main means of communication, and I regularly use these channels to clarify problems about particular students or groups, or to give or obtain feedback on particular issues concerning the students and the school. As the vocational teachers have more regular and consistent contact with their own students than I do, it seemed appropriate to offer them the opportunity to comment on anything the students might have said about their English lessons, which would throw light on my puzzle of relevance.

   I am one of two language teachers in the base where I work, and my colleague (who is Finnish) and I quite often discuss the groups we are working with, and also the types of courses we are offering and the way we teach. As part of this study my colleague agreed to take part in a series of short recorded discussions which we were able to fit in between teaching commitments. The purpose of the discussions was to reflect on some of the observations and reflections I had made during the lessons to see if it was possible to gain any more understanding about how relevant our English courses are to the students who take them.

IV Data for reflection and understanding

This section presents the data I obtained from the different sources outlined in Section III above. As the data is qualitative and based on observation, reflection and discussion, I present it in the form of underlying themes which emerged during the process of analysis.

1 Preparing the data for analysis

After I had collected the data, I had to assemble them into a suitable format so as to facilitate the process of analysis. My own observations on the different student groups were collated in chronological order for each group (an example of this can be seen in Appendix A), and the tape-recorded discussions with

my colleague were transcribed. I then went through the transcribed texts and highlighted sections which struck me as significant. The written comments from the vocational subject teachers and the student reflections, together with the additional reflections, were typed up as separate documents, and the comments roughly grouped according to areas of similarity. I also went through my own observations and the highlighted sections of the transcribed discussions assigning rough 'headers' according to what I felt the subject matter to be (these were done in the form of inserted comments; an example can be seen in Appendix B). I made similar annotations to the student-designed course evaluations and the pilot course evaluations. I was interested to see what kind of themes would emerge following the pre-analysis when I carried out a more detailed analysis, and whether these themes would help me gain any understanding as regards my research questions.

2 Emerging themes

As I went through the prepared data it became apparent that the rough initial analyses had thrown up too many different categories to be useful. When I looked at several headings more deeply they seemed to encompass different aspects of the same topic; for example 'fun' and 'good mood' could both be equated with 'enjoyment'. As I went through the data again I noticed that there were four to six recurring themes emerging from each set of data, and that the different sets of data had themes in common. A complete list of all the recurring themes can be seen in Table 2, and the way the themes reflect specific data is shown in Table 3. The order of the themes reflects the order in which I discuss them in relation to the research questions as set out in the next section.

Table 2 Recurring themes which emerged from all the data

a.	Confidence
b.	Learning opportunity
c.	Enjoyment
d.	Motivation and relevance
e.	The teacher
f.	Evaluation
g.	Fellow students
h.	Learner-directed learning
i.	Classroom and life

V Situated understandings

In this section I address my overall puzzle of how relevant the English courses are for those who take them, by looking at how far the data are able to provide answers to the research questions in the form of situated understandings. In line

Table 3 Recurring themes which emerged from the different data sources

| | Sources of data and arising themes | | | | | | |
	Teacher reflections	Student reflections	Reflecting on the reflections	Student-designed evaluations	Pilot course evaluations	Transcribed discussions	Vocational teacher reflections
Confidence	X		X		X	X	X
Learning opportunity	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Enjoyment		X	X	X			X
Motivation and relevance	X			X		X	X
The teacher		X	X	X	X	X	X
Evaluation		X	X		X	X	
Fellow students		X	X	X			
Learner-directed learning	X					X	
Classroom and life				X	X	X	X

with Naidu *et al.* (1992: 254) I am interested in looking not at the 'spectacular' events in the classroom, but at 'the recurring patterns' which enable me 'to describe and comprehend [my] everyday reality'. I take each of the three research questions in turn and examine the data via the themes presented in Section IV. For reasons of space I only discuss the most salient themes under each research question.

1 Research Question 1: In what ways do my lessons motivate my students in their learning of English?

a Motivation and Relevance, Confidence, Enjoyment and Evaluation: Keller's clear definition of motivation in conjunction with his four-stage model of motivation, ARCS, has helped me to understand a lot about student responses to my courses:

> [Motivation] refers to the *choices* people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid, and the *degree of effort* they will exert in that respect.
>
> (Keller, 1983: 389; original emphasis)

The four categories of the model are: Attention, Relevance, Confidence and Satisfaction (ARCS). For sustainable motivation to occur, ideally all four elements should be present in progressive sequence. The theme from my data of *Motivation and Relevance* clearly comes into the sphere of Keller's model, suggesting that relevance, although important, is only one aspect of motivation, but one which is not sufficient on its own to produce a motivated learner. *Confidence* is another aspect of motivation, according to the ARCS model, and I find the connection made between confidence and relevance revealing (as a teacher and as a learner) in that both are seen to be equally important aspects of motivation for learning. The themes of *Enjoyment* (a theme which emerged from all the student data) and *Evaluation* both seem to link up with the Satisfaction part of the ARCS model; with enjoyment making a contribution to satisfaction, and evaluation being an integral part of the process leading to a learner's satisfaction and continued motivation.

My colleague comments on the wider issue of motivation:

> If the student is motivated to study in his or her field in general … it's easier to motivate him or her to study languages as well, but we do have many students who are not too motivated [for] studying in general.
>
> (*J.L. Transcribed Discussions: 20.2.06*)

A student in one of the groups clearly exemplifies this:

> One of the boys was talking about what was relevant for him in the course and he said the basic problem for him is that he *has* to be both in the school and in the class … It is not in any way free-choice and therefore he opts out or takes the line of least resistance.
>
> (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 13.3.06*)

This kind of situation, which I realize is quite common among the students I work with, especially with the students from family homes, is one that I try to address. The ARCS model has enabled me to understand that however relevant my course material may appear to be, if the material or the way it is taught does not initially grab and sustain student attention, then there can be no learning opportunity as far as the students are concerned.

b The teacher: Although I did not ask the students any direct questions about whether or how my role as a teacher facilitates their perception of, and responses to, my courses, the theme of *Teacher* spontaneously arose from the data. Just as the students are of prime concern to the teacher, so presumably the teacher has a particular influence, positive or negative, on the students. One of the vocational teachers expressed how she understands the role of the teacher in our context:

> The significance of the teacher for [our kind of] students cannot be underestimated. It is more to do with what kind of person the teacher is and how the teacher relates to the students, than what kind of information they are giving out, although that is also important.
> (*M.V. Vocational Teachers' Reflections: 8.5.06*)

Motivation for studying English in many cases is part of the wider picture of motivation for study in general, as alluded to earlier, and another vocational teacher provides a window on this:

> You have got many students interested in studying languages again … for example I spoke with S. in English for much of one day when we were doing repair work together.
> (*M.K. Vocational Teachers' Reflections: 24.5.06*)

Many students, while not commenting directly on the effect of having a native speaker teacher, refer to it indirectly:

> It's better [to have a native speaker] because you hear normal speech, not 'book language'.
> (*Student-Designed Evaluations: 10.4.06*)

Other students simply respond to the teacher:

> When the teacher is good, then it is easier to understand and try to speak.
> (*Student Reflections: 3.5.06*)

c Learner-Directed Learning: Learner-Directed Learning is a term created and used by Pinney (1983: 13): '[i]n Learner-Directed Learning the learner decides what, when, how much and in what manner he wants to learn'. This theme mainly emerged from data generated by student groups who found it impossible to accommodate the kind of material and methods which I normally use in my teaching, and it provided a way forward for some groups to assume more responsibility for the content of their lessons.

> J. brought in photo albums which told very much about the kind of past he has had. Then they each made a [floor] plan of their room/apartment. It is like visiting them. This is authentic and real … Lesson 2 where we played Cluedo was very different. They complied, but it was almost passive resistance! 'My activity' versus 'their activity', this was something we did together, but with a totally different feel.
>
> (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 28.3.06*)

One student was able to reflect on both the difficulties and the benefits of the experience of *Learner-Directed Learning*:

> We are so used to the teacher planning the lessons [that] it's difficult to plan ourselves-to think of something to do.
> If you plan [your own] lessons, [you] can be more focused and concentrate. It is what you want to do. [You] can ask own questions and get [the] answers you need.
>
> (*Reflecting on the Reflections: 27.3.03*)

Not all students were able to express themselves in this way, and many students expect rather more structure to the lessons in the way of teacher initiated learning opportunities.

d Situated understandings for Research Question 1:   From the data so far presented and discussed, I have understood that relevance in course design (which includes the material and the way the course is structured) is only a part of motivating the students to take part in the learning process.

   As a native-speaker teacher teaching students who can appear to be rather unresponsive, it is important not to underestimate the value of offering the students opportunities for listening to spoken English, and for building up their confidence to speak in English.

> These guys are a puzzle to me – they do not want to be organized/programmed. But yet when there is something meaningful to them, like the guitar – then they can talk and interact in English … I must not underestimate the importance of listening in English.
>
> (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 20.12.05*)

   Enjoyment and fun, which may simply be expressed as being in a good mood after the lesson, also enhance motivation and can bring the learning opportunities nearer to the learners.

2 Research Question 2: In what ways do my courses help my students to learn English?

The question of how my courses help the students to learn English is a broad one, and one which can probably never be answered definitively as there are too many variables. However, I am looking for situated understandings to help me with future course planning. In order to do this, I first use the data to explore the question from my point of view as a teacher, and then go on to look at the same question from the learners' point of view.

a The teacher's viewpoint: It is important as teachers to remind ourselves that learning a language is an on-going process, and therefore we can only be a *part* of any individual student's learning experience. The amount of English spontaneously spoken in class by the students between themselves as well as with the teacher is an informal way for the teacher to recognize that some kind of learning has occurred. The theme of *Learning Opportunity* links up here with the theme of *Confidence*.

> When meeting T. in the cloakroom [before the lesson] she spoke easily in English. It seemed very natural to her … I wonder what makes the difference – the push … Where does confidence come from?
>
> (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 5.2.06*)

> This group starts using English with each other [spontaneously]. That is some kind of evidence of what has happened [this year].
>
> (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 19.5.06*)

I generally use different kinds of materials and methods to those the students have experi- enced in their language classes in previous schools. This is intended to help students understand that communication in a second language can begin where they are, and it can also be fun. Crookes and Schmidt (1991: 488–89) equate interest with curiosity, and suggest that 'developing curiosity means using less orthodox teaching techniques and/or materials'. My colleague comments on how he perceives our role:

> And with our students I think one of our main key roles is to lure them back as to what language is about. It's about real life. And it has nothing to do about grades, or marking, tests … It's about people being able to communicate.
>
> (*J.L. Transcribed Discussions: 10.3.06*)

Just as the theme of *Enjoyment* emerges in connection with motivation so it can also be seen to be important when thinking about how language courses help students to learn English. One of the ways I have found to take the pressure off learning is through using different kinds of games, and not necessarily 'designated language games'. This can have a marked effect on learners' confidence and motivation, as the following comments show.

> Today we played Monsters, which M. requested. [He became a] totally different and focused young man. This brings up thoughts on appropriacy, relevance, enjoyment of material [with] no language overload and everything carried out with ease.
>
> (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 19.12.05*)

Games, however, are not the answer for every group as the next reflection observes:

> Interesting that for some students games are a release from their inhibitions and are a place where they can enjoy using language. [For] other students the games are a block- or cause a back-step.
>
> (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 28.3.06*)

b The students' viewpoint: Students can have their own perspective on learning which may be rather different from the teacher's impressions. This is a good reason for involving learners in dialogue about their learning.

> I was struck by their feedback. [It was] very positive, and I had felt them overall a rather hostile group!
>
> (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 13.12.05*)

One of the questions I asked the students to reflect on was: '*How do these lessons help you to learn English?*' Most students answered in fairly general terms, rather than with particular detail:

> Little new words. (*Student Reflections: 24.4.06*)
>
> I have learned how to pronounce words better. (*Student Reflections: 10.4.06*)
>
> Understand English. (*Student Reflections: 24.4.06*)

My understanding here is that the learners are expressing as well as they can how they feel they are progressing in their learning of English and which aspects are important to them. My focus in the courses (whatever the specific topic for the lesson) is on oral skills, so it seems natural that the responses (as exemplified above) were to do with understanding, speaking and vocabulary. I see these reflections as coming within the themes of *Learning Opportunity* and *Confidence.* One of the questions posed in one of the student-designed evaluations, although a similar question, gives a slightly more specific focus: '*What is the new thing that you have learned?*' The answers reflect individual areas of interest.

> I learned new things about travel because I like travelling very much. (*Student-Designed Evaluation: 10.4.06*)
>
> New thing I have learned is communication with different people. (*Student-Designed Evaluation: 10.4.06*)
>
> Speak words better. (*Student-Designed Evaluation: 10.4.06*)
>
> I've learned many new words. (*Student-Designed Evaluation: 10.4.06*)

I think the first response clearly shows how a learner can shape the course to their own area of need or interest, and thus make it relevant on a personal level. Although travelling has been mentioned during the lessons I was not aware of especially highlighting the topic with the group. Yet this student seems to have used the lessons as a *Learning Opportunity* for developing her own area of interest. The second response is similar and shows me how this student has used the lessons to develop her speaking skills in English in order to be able to communicate with people in English. For the other students in the group the lessons may not have been so important in this regard. However, the last two examples, although less specific, may also be seen in this context as reflecting individual priorities in language learning; namely, pronunciation and vocabulary.

When reflecting with the students on their reflections, some students are able to say why a particular activity or topic has been of use. This can also lead the teacher to a new understanding of relevance:

> Watching movies helps with saying words and gives some new words. (*Reflecting on the Reflections: 27.3.03*)

c Situated understandings for Research Question 2: When looking at the question of how my courses help the students that take them to learn English, it seems that many students can use a course to learn something relevant for themselves. That relevance can be related to a specific situation, such as talking to non-Finns in English, or it can be more general, such as the feeling of being able to understand and speak English better, or simply having learned something which it is not possible to express in words.

> I have learned a lot of new things, and the old things have come back to me. (*Student Reflections: 3.5.06*)

It is also true that some students may not feel the course in question holds much for them. One student reflected:

> I have not learned many new words as I learned so many in my last school. (*Student Reflections: 24.4.06*)

3 Research Question 3: What do my students get out of my courses?

a Enjoyment, fellow students and evaluation: When asked directly what they had got out of the courses the majority of the learners included one or both of: *good mood* and *language skills* in their response. It was surprising to me to discover how, for many students of all levels, one of the products of the lessons was a 'good mood', and that it was significant enough for them to offer it as feedback.

> I like these lessons because I want to learn English better and we have fun here. (*Student-Designed Course Evaluation: 10.4.06*)

> [I get] a good mood and sometimes coffee (*Student Reflections*: *3.5.06*)

An aspect of classroom life, which seems to me to be related to 'good mood' and may partly explain it, appeared in student responses and evaluations elsewhere in the data. It concerns the importance of co-learners (*fellow students*) in the learning process:

> Relaxing people. Learn more easily when you are with people you can relax with. (*Student Reflections: 21.4.06*)

> It goes so well because we are a team and we work well together. We have fun here … helping each other. (*Student Reflections: 20.3.06*)

Although most of the groups I teach are used to working together, and for the most part seem to enjoy each others' company, the value of 'individuals as

part of a *team*' is something which is easy to take for granted or overlook, so it is useful to have been reminded of this aspect of classroom life.

Language Skills can be seen as a rather general response to the question 'What do you Get out of these English Lessons*?*' The answer could well reflect what students believe they have gained, without committing themselves to anything more specific. However, other learners were able to indicate areas where they now feel more confident:

> I understand much better and I speak much more. (*Student Reflections: 24.4.06*)

> Before these lessons my talking was very bad. I think it's [a] little better now. (*Student Reflections: 21.4.06*)

The response, *language skills*, may equally well just be what the student thinks they are supposed to 'report' or what they imagine the teacher wants to hear, or indeed what they can most easily refer to. However, a few students left this question with no answer at all, and there were some negative answers as well, which tends to suggest that the students felt free to answer honestly. The negative answers all took the same form:

> Nothing. (*Student Reflections: 24.4.06*)

There was not time within the study to gain any further understanding on this particular comment and the underlying reasons for it, but another puzzle has been created which could be explored in the future using the Exploratory Practice framework. This illustrates how EP works, where seeking for understanding in order to influence the quality of life in the classroom becomes an ongoing process.

b Situated understandings for Research Question 3: The answers the students gave to the question of what they get out of the courses have made me aware of how important a learner's emotional response (in the form of a good mood, for example) can be for their attitude towards any learning opportunity. This ties in with Schleppegrell and Bowman's observation (1995: 303) that '[f]or students to engage with their learning, they also need to connect emotionally with a topic'. *Good mood* could also be considered reflective of the 'quality of life in the classroom' as the students are experiencing it.

Allwright and Hanks (2006: 2) maintain that learners are 'crucially important to their own learning'. Part of this importance may be the relevance of the learners' own belief that they are learning, even if they are not able to specify exactly what it is that is being learned. It may not be realistic in any case for me to expect my learners to have a clear idea of exactly what they are learning, especially as the courses are geared to be open-ended rather than focusing on particular teaching points. Another factor to remember is that learning another language is a process, rather than a one-off event, and any one course can only ever be a part of that process.

4 Beyond the puzzle: Understanding for further planning

This study set out to try and gain understanding about my puzzle of the extent to which my courses are relevant for the students who take them. Behind the puzzle was the idea that the situated understandings gained could help in decisions about possible course development. Allwright (2003: 128) highlights the importance of situated understandings when contemplating change: 'only a serious effort to understand life in a particular setting will enable you to decide if practical change is necessary, desirable and/or possible'.

The issue of relevance with regard to my courses and my students has occupied my mind a lot, especially the tension between the teacher and the learner perspective on 'relevance'. Through this study I have come to understand that *relevance*, although important, is only a part of the picture. The ARCS model of motivation has helped me to see 'relevance' in a wider perspective, as an *element* of motivation, not any more important than the other elements of the model.

The data has also shown me how students are able (both as individuals and as groups), to shape the English lessons (and by implication, the courses) to give them the learning opportunities that they need.

> They decided to draw and write something about cars and then discuss as a group. Do we learn better doing what we want? J asked S for the words he needed. S has the answer. This class is rolling … the whole of learning is a process. As can be seen with 10th class, people talk because they have something to talk about.
>
> (*J.R. Teacher Reflections: 20.3.06*)

This is an insight which has resonance for me, because through it I can recognize the role of learners as co-teachers as well as co-researchers, and it leads me to consider the place of the structure or framework in a course. Naidu *et al.* (1992: 260), when researching heterogeneity recognized 'that learning is personally meaningful only when individual frames of reference are involved in the learning'. They also realized the equal necessity for the support of 'a common framework within which to nurture learner individuality' (1992: 260). Similar insights also came out in discussion with my colleague:

> JL: [I]t might be a good idea to give them a framework, a structure and then we can move inside the framework to which direction we choose to go.
> JR: Give them a choice within the structure?
> JL: Yes. And even break the frames if necessary. But first in order to orient their minds, [the students] need to have the idea of what we are doing, what is the goal and aim of this course. Structure in that sense.
>
> (*Transcribed Discussions: 20.2.06*)

Individual teachers may provide structure in different ways, but the need for the structure to allow for flexibility is of particular importance. 'We need to be flexible and sensitive to the characteristics of learners if we want our materials [and courses] to be learner authentic' (Lee: 1995: 328). Providing a structure which

can be used for guidance and support seems to be of help for both the teacher and the learners. Within this flexible structure the students may then both create and avail themselves of different kinds of learning opportunity.

VI Conclusion

I used some of the ideas of Exploratory Practice (EP) in this study to try and understand how relevant my English courses are for the students who take them. EP offers the teacher the chance to research puzzles of the classroom in a way that creates minimal disturbance to normal procedures and activities. Students and colleagues can be involved as co-researchers, thus creating the opportunity to gather a wider perspective on whatever the puzzle is. Breen (2001: 137) observes: '[t]he culture of the class has the potential to reveal to the teacher the language learning process as it is actually experienced. In this way teaching language and investigating language learning may be seen to be synonymous.'

Using some of the ideas of EP has enabled me as a teacher to 'open up the fabric' of my lessons and my courses to discover and examine some of the individual strands more closely. This has led to some findings which are 'necessarily situated and unfinished, not generalizable' (Miller, 2003: 210). The study has shown me that the teacher can only go so far in offering 'relevant courses' to the students, as course (or lesson) relevance is part of the wider issue of motivation. I have observed that students are able to shape lessons to serve their own needs, providing the course structure is sufficiently flexible. Lessons which facilitate a good mood in the students may also facilitate learning, though what that learning is may not be able to be clearly expressed in words. Through this study I have also been able to gain more confidence about the way I structure my courses for the students, which supports Allwright and Hanks's (2001: 1) observation that 'understanding is good for teachers … helping them be more confident about what they are doing'. I have again been able to recognise the importance of the classroom dynamic and of having a continuous dialogue between the students and the teacher. Breen (2001: 134) expresses it this way: '[w]e will never understand classroom language learning unless we explore its lesson-by-lesson significance for those who undertake it'. I would add the proviso that we should be doing the exploration *with* those who are undertaking the learning, involving them both in the investigations and in the understandings gained from those investigations.

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Appendix A: An example of my own collated observations

Metalwork Group

9th January: Just noticed how hard it is with just one student. You get through the material quicker and with a quiet chap like K. it feels quite pressurized on both sides.

23rd January: Maybe ask students to save stuff or throw it out at the end of each module. That way they develop process of selection, deciding for themselves what they want and what is useful to them. Started today with this group. Concept of relevance. Can they choose what is relevant for them?

30th January: Give enough time for doing assessment tasks. They tried quite hard on these tests today. The reading test went quite well.

6th February: Quite hard work for just one student to be with the teacher. No 'space' and he's not a chatty chap. English not so easy. But he is compliant on his own and I think he works to the best of his ability and energy level. But when paired with J. a very different persona emerged.

Appendix B: An example of data prepared for further analysis

A Page of Transcribed Discussion (between myself and my colleague) Showing the First Annotations.

JR: I've written down some observations during my lessons, and *I wondered if we could reflect on some of the things. I thought these were significant.* The first one: I don't know if you find the same thing? [reading]

> *'It's the process rather than the content. They get the handouts, but in the end for our students it is what stays in the mind. They have no use for the papers at the end of the lesson. They either know or don't know the words and have no interest in looking at them again later.'*

	Comment [JR1]: reflection

JL: It's a frustrating feeling when you realise that you prepare a nice handout and you get this feeling did they actually learn anything. *But there you see the nature of learning language as I see it, it's a sort of long process. Sometimes you learn a phrase or word and you learn it for good and it will stick in your mind because you feel so motivated to learn but sometimes you have to drop feed language and somet hing stays in and something is not relevant.* So we cannot judge at the end of each lesson that if we really don't know what stayed in their mind and what they actually learned. *That's of course the difficulty being a teacher, you don't know if you are succeeding or not in the process.*

	Comment [JR2]: process of language learning
	Comment [JR3]: success in teaching for learning

JR: Do you think you can guarantee learning? I think you can guarantee teach ing but I don't know that you can guarantee learning.

JL: There are always at least two factors; the teacher and the student how they interact and *you cannot guarantee learning in that sense but you can say that your way of teaching has led to good results with many students.*

	Comment [JR4]: results of teaching

JR: *It's a moot point how we evaluate the results whether you evaluate them through the test or whether you evaluate them by attitude or whether you evaluate them by them simply being more awake in your class.*

	Comment [JR5]: evaluating results of teaching

JL: *Yeah, everything is relative, but at some point we must simply stop and say that this is what we try. The system that we use now.* You can come back to that decision and make changes but it drives you crazy if you constantly think about if I am doing the right thing. That's what you do automatically and you get from the student attitude and the student behaviour and you try to adjust your teaching. *I strongly feel they need a secure teacher who knows what he is doing who is safe to protest against. It's also important to listen and make them feel you actually listen and take them seriously. So you make changes if you feel that's necessary.* But as for this comment, I think it is a little bit too pessimistic in a way. *But I agree it's the process rather than the content.*

	Comment [JR6]: sticking to or creating a structure for the classroom
	Comment [JR7]: security of the teacher
	Comment [JR8]: process over content