Using Reflect ESOL visualisation approaches in ESOL teacher training

Resource description

This resource is a report of a project which incorporated Reflect ESOL approaches to teaching on ESOL teacher training courses. It was conducted by Tower Hamlets ESOL teacher trainers during 2009-2010.

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A   Background to the project

As ESOL tutors and tutors on formal and informal teacher education (ITT) and continuing professional development (CPD) programmes at Tower Hamlets College, we have been actively involved in developing a tradition of ESOL teaching which supports student-centred learning, giving students opportunities to share and get validation for their identities in classes; this promotes the belief in the importance of using students' funds of knowledge as a starting point for planning and developing learning, and the development of a critical approach to language development. Our point of departure for this research was how using Reflect approaches could help us build on this.

B   Introduction to Reflect ESOL

"Reflect, or *Reflect-Action* as it is also known, is an innovative approach to adult learning and social change, which fuses the theories of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire with participatory methodologies. It was developed in the 1990s through pilot projects in Bangladesh, Uganda and El Salvador and is now used by over 500 organisations in over 70 countries worldwide."

(Reflect home page www.reflect-action.org.uk)

This project tried to capture and draw from successful action research using Reflect approaches in teaching ESOL. Actionaid supported a pilot and action research project 'Reflect ESOL' on using Reflect approaches in the UK ESOL context, in which Tower Hamlets College participated. Reflect ESOL incorporates the ideas of Paolo Freire – in particular, using students' own words for teaching materials rather than the prescribed language of curricula and course books, with other participatory approaches to teaching – into good practice in ESOL. Resources developed for Reflect ESOL and the evaluation of the pilot are available at http://www.reflect-action.org/?q=node/41. The resources include visualisation approaches and participatory tools such as the tree, the river, and chapatti diagrams.

C   The project approach

The experience of Reflect ESOL created the following underlying fundamentals, many of which emphasise and build on good practice in ESOL teaching already established at THC.

Fundamental principles

1. Building a classroom community
2. Creating a space that allows students to bring their true identities into the classroom
3. Challenging our own assumptions – not disempowering students by making an assumption of powerlessness
4. Encouraging critical discussion of themes that affect ESOL students, such as immigration, cuts in provision and racism
5. Giving opportunities for genuine dialogue in the classroom
6. Using students' ideas and language to create teaching and learning materials
7. Using the student-created teaching materials to develop language – at discourse/text, sentence and word levels, e.g. using visuals to support and structure longer stretches of speech
8. Not pre-determining language, but developing emerging grammar and vocabulary
9. An understanding that this open dialogue with students develops their language but can also be politically transformational for students and teachers

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With this project we hoped to transfer some of these principles to teacher education courses, both by sharing the approach to ESOL with course participants and by using Reflect Approaches to develop new ways of delivering the teacher education curricula. We identified the following areas for exploration.

Areas for exploration

- Dialogic teaching
- Critical pedagogy – confronting historical events (ILPs – understanding where they came from, understanding and analysing key issues for ESOL teachers)
- Empowering the course participants as teachers – exploring connections between critical learning and political transformation; questioning, challenging oppressive policies; not carrying out government directives in an uncritical way
- Using exploratory rather than transmission methods in input sessions
- Actively validating trainees' experiences
- Stepping back
- Conveying the importance of the human side of teaching
- Encouraging equal participation
- Understanding which Reflect ESOL tools lend themselves to support exploration of particular areas. For example, for exploration of problematic areas such as exams – the Reflect tree was used; for theories of Second Language Acquisition – the body, for the course handbooks – the river.

We identified three areas for research:

1   Delivering the curricula in a more exploratory way, drawing on participants and other sources using visualisation techniques.
2   Providing guidance on teaching approaches using Reflect, including session input, joint planning with course participants in order to support them to incorporate Reflect methods into their teaching, feedback, and observation and evaluation of teaching.
3   Using Reflect methods to support participants to evaluate and describe their teacher training courses.

1   Delivering the curricula in a more exploratory way, drawing on participants and other sources using visualisation techniques.

We devised sessions to explore areas of the curriculum from a more critical perspective. The sessions we explored were:

- using ILPs with ESOL learners (pictured below)
- differentiation
- learning theory and second language acquisition
- writing schemes of work (SoW).

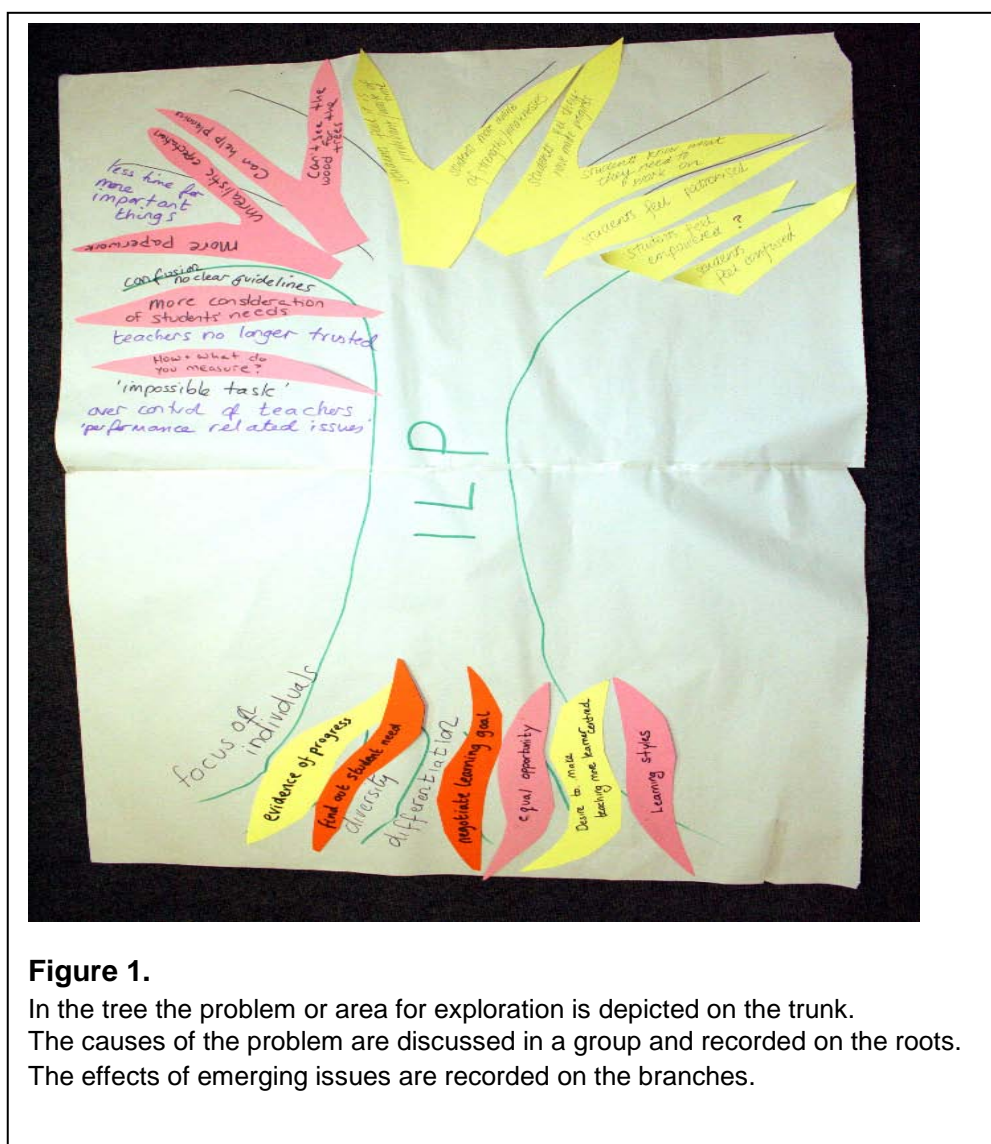Figure 1 shows the visualisation used in exploring ILPs.

Figure 1.
In the tree the problem or area for exploration is depicted on the trunk.
The causes of the problem are discussed in a group and recorded on the roots.
The effects of emerging issues are recorded on the branches.

2   Providing guidance on teaching approaches using Reflect, including session input, joint planning with course participants in order to support them to incorporate Reflect methods into their teaching, feedback, and observation and evaluation of teaching.

We showed by means of a demo lesson and analysis of a lesson the way that Reflect approaches can be used with ESOL students. We followed these up with joint planning and observation of ESOL sessions with participants. We then interviewed the trainees on their experiences.

Figure 2. Trainees in PGCE ESOL year 1 work with ESOL students on the issue of climate change, using the tree tool.

Figure 3. ESOL students using the tree to develop language for discussion and debate

When interviewed about their experience of using Reflect approaches in their ESOL classrooms, trainees' feedback was very positive:

Amazingly effective for language development. How? – "something different". The language students produced was 'above' the level expected.

Gives the learners more space.
Good for assessment.
Gives time to listen.
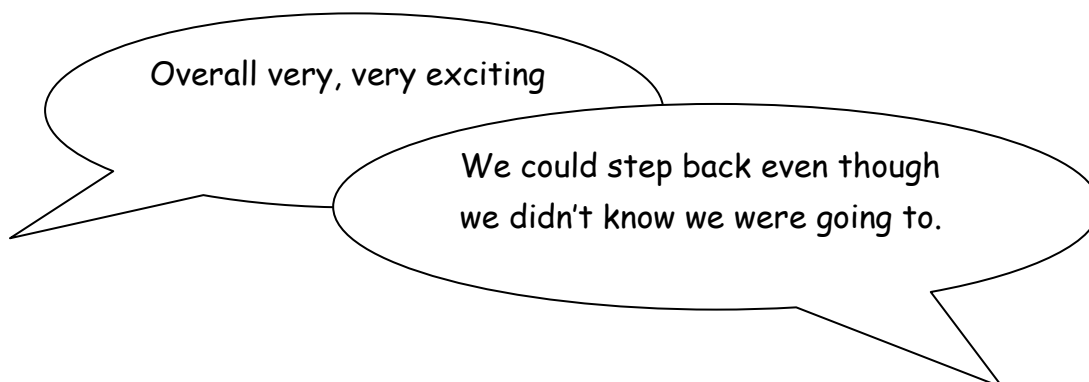
Overall very, very exciting

We could step back even though we didn't know we were going to.

3   Using Reflect methods to support participants to evaluate and describe their teacher training courses

We used visualisation to evaluate year 1 of the DTE(E)LLS and to describe year 2.

Figure 4. Trainee teachers on DTE(E)LLS evaluate year 1 of their programme.

The rivers created by trainees were very thoughtful, with humour and beautiful images. The image carried so much more information than a word.
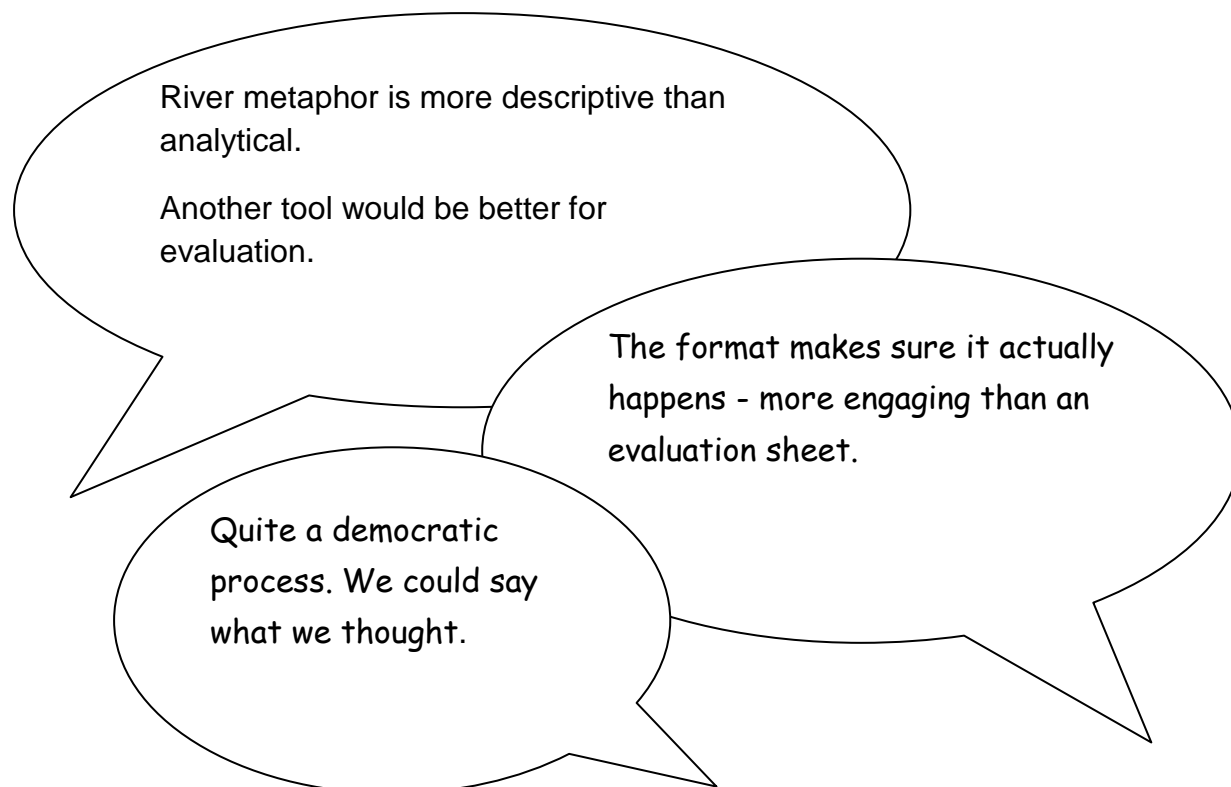
Examples of metaphors used included:

- people fishing on the bank representing the participants' experience and need to 'take a risk'; 'dipping their foot in' and 'fishing for ideas' as they developed understanding on the course
- bottles to represent the knowledge they were developing: "we go down the river quickly – take things from the surface – need to take time to take in more..."
- the tutorials as support boats – carries a lot of meaning
- the numeracy sessions as canoes – different from the other sessions, a lot of fun
- the image of 'rain' – information, learning, feeding the imagination
- the participants as ducks on the river – starting out separately; coming together.

Figure 5. Evaluation – rivers

In the interviews, trainees said that they felt the river was not the right tool for evaluation as it lent itself to description rather than analysis.

Trainees commented:

> River metaphor is more descriptive than analytical.
>
> Another tool would be better for evaluation.

> The format makes sure it actually happens - more engaging than an evaluation sheet.

> Quite a democratic process. We could say what we thought.

D   Outcomes from the project

This was an important project for the teachers as we had been working with Reflect in our ESOL classrooms for some time and felt that we wanted to bring it into the teacher education classroom. This project allowed us to work together doing this, and this joint approach has been very beneficial.

Using Reflect has given us the opportunity to provide a more open training classroom where teacher education course participants can work together discussing issues and gaining a deeper understanding of the curriculum.

For some students on teacher education courses there is the understandable concern about meeting assessment criteria and about fulfilling the requirements of the job. Whilst we recognise the absolute importance of these, we also feel that to have this as the only expectation of a teacher training course reflects a narrow view of education. We feel that as teacher educators we need to be able to offer something more, and that it is important for the participants to get a broader experience of education than one which is to solely to pass exams or fulfil criteria. For example on the DTE(E)LLS, the aim of the session on using ILPs was to create some critical discussions in an area of ESOL which is often disputed. This allowed trainees to air their own concerns about the use of ILPs. It also sends a message to trainees that critical analysis is an important part of the course.

Another area used for critical analysis was the scheme of work. Normally schemes of work sessions are practical and give help and guidance on how to write an effective scheme of work. Using Reflect allowed us to do this but also to explore the various issues with scheme of work writing. We feel that this level of analysis underpins the practical skills that the trainees need for their assignments and for teaching with the wider educational issues we feel should be an integral part of a training course. Things that are not set in stone are often presented as being so and Reflect approaches give us the opportunity to explore and question this.

Participants/trainees were very positive about using the approach, particularly in the session that looked at using the approach with students to develop their skills. I think this was partly due to the general thirst for teaching ideas that student teachers have and partly due to the fact that the teacher educators have more experience in this area. One participant said after using a tree to explore differentiation,

> "This is the first time that I have been able to talk about how difficult differentiation is and talk about my worries."

Using the approach in teacher training has benefited the organisation by further developing the critical/analytical ethos that characterises teacher education courses in Tower Hamlets College. It has also allowed for a framework to develop our practice and to share approaches with other teacher education centres. Tower Hamlets College has long been a centre for innovative practice and this approach adds to this.

E   Key findings

1   Reflect approaches to teaching ESOL can be used effectively by experienced and non-experienced teachers alike.

Some practitioners have voiced concerns that Reflect ESOL cannot be used by newer ESOL teachers. This project allowed us to research whether this is true or not. We think new ESOL teachers need guidance in all approaches to teaching ESOL, but no more in using Reflect than other approaches. It is no more difficult than other approaches, and does offer particularly effective teaching strategies to teachers who are interested in developing a 'top down' approach to teaching and learning, one that recognises the importance of developing discourse and text level understanding, and has participation in meaningful discussion as a starting point for developing students' language and literacy understanding and use.

2   Visualisation helps many teacher education students conceptualise and understand more difficult areas of the curriculum.

This understanding allows them to bring more critical evaluations and questions to the discussion and therefore get more out of it. It allows the group to think more globally about the underlying concepts such as theories of second language acquisition.

3   Visualisation allows us to have a more equal discussion on teacher education courses of issues in teaching.

This was evident in the session where the tree was used to explore the underlying causes and effects of problematic aspects of differentiation.

4   Different tools lend themselves to different areas of exploration.

As an example of this, we used a river for the evaluation of the course. The feedback from the trainees was that the river lent itself more to description than evaluation and that evaluation needed a tool that was more analytical. The river however, lends itself perfectly to the description of a course and works much more effectively than a traditional course outline/grid as it can help participants to process a lot of information at once, and visualise the way the strands of the course overlap and develop. It also means that it can be displayed in the classroom and can be referred to at points, to question and evaluate sessions, using the metaphors of the river.

F   Next steps

We intend to develop and extend our use of Reflect ESOL approaches to reach more and different groups of teachers and teacher educators.

We aim to:

- design CPD sessions
- develop sessions for literacy and numeracy teacher educators
- develop a session in using the approach for teacher educators
- develop a manual for using the approach for teacher educators
- embed more formally into the teacher education courses
- develop more tools for different parts of the curriculum, especially more diverse tools
- produce visuals for the DTE(E)LLS and PGCE ESOL and Literacy courses to complement the course handbooks.

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Tower Hamlets College is a medium-size Further Education College with an established Teacher Education department. It runs a range of generic and subject-specific courses including PTE(E)LLS, CELTA, DTE(E)LLS, and PGCE Literacy and ESOL (with the Institute of Education), and a generic PGCE. It also runs a CPD programme for ESOL, Literacy and Numeracy tutors teaching on pre-entry/Foundation level programmes.