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ABSTRACT

Considerations unique to classroom research and problem-solving where the teacher is English-dominant and many students speak English as a Second Language are examined, and advice is offered to teachers. The discussion reflects the specific concerns of a group of graduate students in teacher education. An approach is outlined, in a conversational format, for teachers planning their first effort at classroom research in this context. Suggestions are offered for recording instructional concerns and ideas, generating and selecting research questions, anticipating problems, and dealing with change that may result from research. The particular issues encountered by several of the graduate students, and their resolution, are described. Teacher projects discussed include research on: the value of writing collaboration in a linguistically diverse group; written vs. oral teacher response to student journal entries; obtaining assistance in maintenance of portfolios for a large group of students with four native languages represented; and providing students with personal, psychological support. Work from the portfolio of one student is appended. (MSE)

# Teacher Research in a Linguistically-diverse Classroom

by

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We began with a spirit of inquiry. What is a teacher researcher? What if the teacher is English-dominant and the students speak English as an additional language? Once again we were reminded of the complexity of educational questions in a rapidly changing world. For us, the words of Barbara Earle (1991) served as a cognitive coat hook upon which we could hang our two questions. She said that a teacher is:

Molding young minds,

Challenging,

Questioning,

Encouraging,

Sharing, laughing, loving, giving,

Influencing generations

Without end.

A teacher.

These were words we understood. We were challenged to expand this definition into the arena of teacher research in a multilingual context. A teacher researcher

is all of this and much more. If the teacher is English-dominant and teaching in a a classroom where the children speak languages other than English, the questions and answers become intertwined within the new social fabric of changing demographics. By asking these questions and seeking answers, we are extending our own teaching into the world of teacher researcher.

Teacher researchers examine their own teaching in the context of their own classroom through active inquiry for the purpose of improving their instructional practices. Active inquiry involves teachers as reflective practitioners, constantly asking themselves, "Why am I doing what I'm doing?" which is the key to effective teaching (Durkin, 1990). The beauty of classroom research through inquiry is that change occurs because of observation and experimentation rather than according to the latest fad or because others are changing (Avery, 1990).

Even though the importance, value, and benefits of classroom research have been ascertained in the literature (Goswani & Stillman, 1987; Mohr & Maclear, 1987; Olson, 1990; Patterson, Stansell, & Lee, 1990; Pinnell & Matlin, 1989), how many teachers feel capable of conducting studies in their classrooms to solve specific problems?

Becoming a teacher researcher is much easier than most people think and well worth the effort. In working with our graduate students, we have discovered a high degree of interest and enthusiasm for the process of teacher research.

In her journal Kathy wrote, "I am really interested in research in the classroom to improve my teaching. It's exciting to grow and develop while studying my own teaching practices!" Susan wrote: "Inquiry is the root of all critical thinking. The actual product of such inquiry varies widely in value but the process is the most important of all human endeavors." In this context of classroom research, *process* is emphasized over *product*. How learning occurs

is viewed as important as what is learned, if not more so. If research is to be truly valid, it must be relevant to the classroom, and who best to perform it but a teacher?

But, when that teacher is English-dominant and the students speak a variety of other languages, even the strongest among us will experience frustration. When we asked our graduate students: What frustrates you most in teaching ESL students in your classroom, their responses demonstrate their feelings: Finding time to help them understand; my inability to respond meaningfully to their language; I know that they are not getting a complete education; and, I know that I am taking away their primary language by pushing English so fast. Probably our most outstanding graduate student, who is also an ESL and sheltered content teacher, wrote quite simply: "With the knowledge I now have regarding effective second language teaching strategies, my frustrations are many." As with all good pedagogical practices which involve reflection and ultimately change, it takes courage and time and a high degree of patience with ourselves and others.

In what follows, we will outline a step by step procedure to assist you in your first effort. We encourage our readers to adapt these processes to fit into the context of your own educational environment and your own lived-experiences and knowledge base.

## HOW TO BECOME A TEACHER RESEARCHER IN A MULTILINGUAL CONTEXT

**WHO?** You.

**WHAT?** The object of research may be one, a few, or many students, some aspect of your own professional behavior, the curriculum, the educational processes of which you are a part, the physical arrangement of your classroom, etc. Teacher research begins when you wonder about something. Write and

date these questions in a spiral notebook which is always on your desk. This spiral notebook is your teacher research journal for your questions and data collection. Discuss these questions with your colleagues in the teachers' lounge. Learning is a social activity. As you visit, you will begin to create answers for your questions and generate new questions. Write and date these new questions in your journal. Often times, in the early phases of teacher research, the questions which seem important at first begin to change. Eventually, you will begin to focus on one or two questions which matter to you now.

Examples of possible research questions which our graduate students generated are :

1. Is writing in collaboration better than writing alone for my first graders? Who will help me assess the writing of the children who speak a language other than English? (Amy)

2. When my first graders write in their journals, will I get more writing from them if I respond orally or in writing to what they have written? Will the parents and older siblings volunteer to come to my room and respond meaningfully to the students' writing? (Betty)

3. How can I possibly maintain portfolios on my 30 students who represent 4 different languages? Are there people in the community who will join with me to maintain and to respond to the portfolios of my students? (Camilla)

4. I think that students who are harder to love, need more love. If I love *Jaime*, my five year old who has already been labeled as a "problem child" more, what will happen? (Dolores)

At this point in the process of teacher research, you are only asking questions and writing them in your journal. Eventually, one or two questions will emerge for you, and then you will begin the search for answers which are often discovered in the process of watching, observing, recording and interpreting carefully. Your search for answers (data and the analysis of data) may eventually take unexpected paths. Record in your journal all that you discover.

**WHEN?** Now. Whenever you are wondering about something. Anytime you are aware of dissonance: some conflict or uncertainty within your own classroom.

Begin with the widest possible range of questions and then look for recurring themes. Examine assumptions underlying themes, reformulate research questions until you can specify what is expected of teachers, students, and the context in which the action will take place.

**WHERE?** In your classroom.

**WHY?** Classroom research provides you with opportunities to develop and use inquiry strategies and will allow you to better understand your teaching practices and their outcomes. It can lead to an increased scholarly confidence, and feelings of dignity and self-worth, competence, and hope. Ultimately, it will lead you to the needs of the students and new ways of meeting the needs of students who represent a very different world than we have previously known.

**CAUTION AND COMMENTS:** Change is sometimes difficult and can be downright painful. Incorporating new knowledge about learning involves breaking traditions on a large or small basis. Challenging our long-held assumptions and seeing with new eyes requires courage and patience. Your first attempts at being a teacher researcher are better done in the company of caring colleagues rather than alone. Share your experiences with other teachers, administrators, parents, and the students themselves. Talk about the class with the class. Learn from students. If possible, exchange journal articles, research progress (or lack of it) and pedagogical evolutions with your peers on a regular or informal basis. Collaborate with a support group to gain focus and closure.

As our graduate students became teacher researchers, we found that the most difficult part was bringing a focus to their research questions. Once each student had conceptualized and articulated a question, the procedure of data collection was easy. The spiral notebooks which served to record observations were torn and tattered by the end of the process. In what follows, we would like

to share with you what our graduate students are learning as they become teacher researchers in a multilingual context.

**Amy: Is writing in collaboration better than writing alone for my first graders? Who will help me assess the writing of the children who speak a language other than English?**

Since research has suggested that learning to write is facilitated when children are allowed to collaborate with each other (Crouse & Davey, 1989; Freeman, 1992; Moll, 1990; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978), this study examined the effects of collaborative learning groups on children's confidence in their writing.

Amy discovered that her students were more eager to write during collaborative rather than independent periods, were less frustrated, depended less on the teacher for help, wrote more, and were able to write for longer periods of time. In another one of our graduate classes, the class collectively learned from various research projects in process that the same would be true with a kindergarten class, a fifth grade class, a ninth grade class, and a class of graduate students! Amy's teacher research brought the work of Vygotsky to life for all of our students. Our language is always socially and culturally-grounded. As we use language, we create cognition and reach higher levels of mental processes whether we are five years old or 45 years old.

Amy is new to second language acquisition; she was educated to teach in an English-only environment and has only had experiences in classroom where all of the children are native speakers of English. However, recently, her school community has changed. Now there are many children who speak English as an additional language.

From her teacher research project, Amy learned (1) children need to write in a language which they speak; (2) when children write in their own language, the literacy and the knowledge transfer to English; and (3) there are many people

at the local state university who will read and respond to writing in many other languages. Amy has also learned that when she visits with her classmates in her graduate classes, that they generate new knowledge which is meaningful for them.

*Footnote*: Amy has concluded that the use of collaborative writing in the classroom may be beneficial to a beginning writer's confidence and future success in writing. In the future, she will be incorporating more collaboration into her planning, especially prior to writing activities.

**Betty: When my first graders write in their journals, will I get more writing from them if I respond orally or in writing to what they have written? Will the parents and older siblings volunteer to come to my room and respond meaningfully to the students' writing?**

Betty learned in the context of this project that oral responses are just as effective as written responses for encouraging journal writing with her first grade students. The quantity of their writing remained the same whether she discussed their entries with them orally or provided written comments and questions in the form of a dialogue journal. What matters is that Betty makes the effort to respond, demonstrating her interest in their work. Betty's students know that she cares about their individual life stories portrayed through their personal journal writing and it shows.

Betty is also new to ESL. She had never planned to work with children who spoke languages other than English. From this teacher research project, Betty has learned that (1) students from the fifth grade ESL class were thrilled to come and work with the first graders who spoke their own language; (2) students speaking in a two-way interactive process learn words and ideas; and (3) as

students learned in their primary language, they were more motivated in their ESL classes, too.

*Footnote.* Betty has concluded that responding to her students' journal writing is important to encourage them to write more. Oral responses appear to be just as effective as written responses. She also has decided to expand the cross-age tutoring in the primary language . She has begun working with the fourth and fifth grade teachers to create a plan for the children to learn social studies concept in their primary language with an older student. She hopes the first graders will learn the core curriculum and that the older students will increase their self-esteem because of the usefulness of their bilingualism.

**Camilla: How can I possibly maintain portfolios on my 30 students who represent 4 different languages? Are there people in the community who will join with me to maintain and to respond to the portfolios of my students?**

As Camilla discussed her questions with her colleagues in her school and in her university classes, she discovered that there was an active senior citizens group where many languages were spoken. She eventually connected with three bilingual seniors who came to her class one day per week. These people, not only helped to maintain the process of portfolios, but they also visited with the children who were not yet able to speak English. Together they would discuss what would go into the portfolio and why it was important. They would also help prepare the students for the next week's writing assignments. From her teacher research project, Camilla has learned that (1) there are senior citizens in her community who speak English as an additional language, and (2) with their help she can maintain portfolios in a multilingual context, and (3) the portfolios inform her instruction and lead her to the needs of the students.

*Footnote.* Camilla has decided to continue the portfolios of all of her students. The seniors who were involved with continue to work with individual children and will expand their hours to help maintain the portfolios.

**Dolores: I think that students who are harder to love, need more love. If I love *Jaime*, my five year old who has already been labeled a "problem child" more, what will happen? (Dolores)**

Dolores is a credentialed bilingual teacher and speaks the primary language of *Jaime*. In this bilingual classroom, Dolores is the teacher of ESL and literacy activities in the primary language. In September, Jaime could not write the letters of the alphabet; he was rude to other students; he did not want to be touched; and, he could not sit still. On his self-portrait, he did not have a nose, legs, hair, and arms. He hated it when Dolores would read to the class. Dolores considered him to be her greatest challenged and decided to try to love him more.

Everyday Dolores told *Jaime* she loved him. She tried to demonstrate her love throughout the day. When he would be absent, she would tell him that she missed him. By October she could see changes. "He slowly allowed me to hug him and touch him." His writing changed from large scribbles to something which resemble backwards N's which he said was his name. He began to ask her to read to the class. By November his self portrait began to resemble was much more complete with arms, legs, face, nose, and hair. In December his name was legible. Dolores wrote: "I love *Jaime* and children like him are the reason to be a TEACHER. (See enclosed work from the portfolio of *Jaime*.)

*Footnote.* Dolores has affirmed her hunch that children who are harder to love, need more love. She hope that this will be the cornerstone of her educational philosophy for next year.

Good luck with your endeavors as a teacher researcher! Remember that you are not alone. Don't expect to be a fluent researcher the first time you try. Remember that we learn to read by reading, we learn to write by reading and writing, and we learn to research by researching (Patterson, Stansell, & Lee, 1990).

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Jaime

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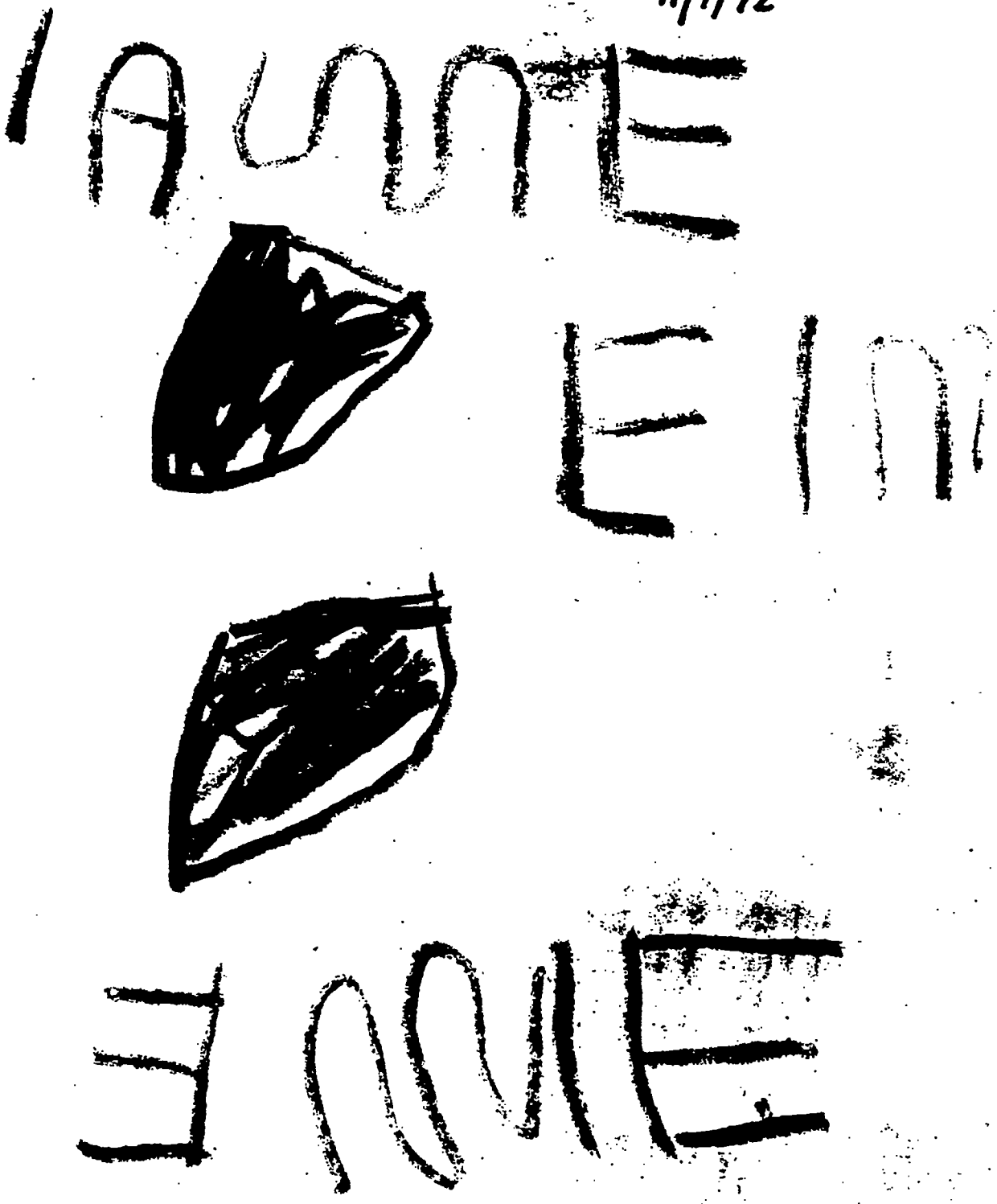


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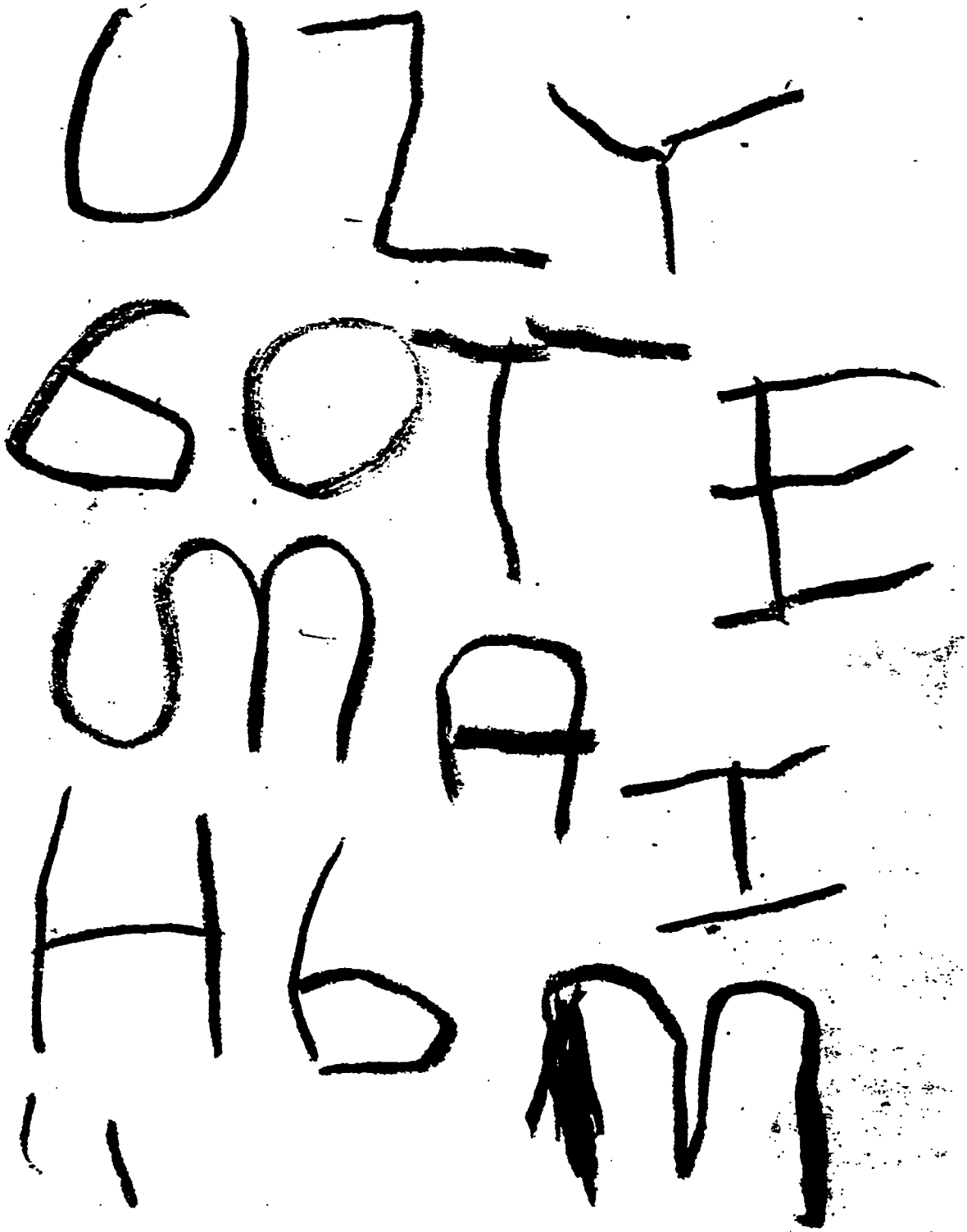

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