OK, so Where to now?: Reflections on Intuition and Action Research

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ABSTRACT

The role of intuition and the part it plays in effective pedagogical responses has barely been recognised in the field of English language teaching, or indeed in education more generally. This is likely to be because intuition is a slippery concept difficult to define, understand and investigate. With this challenge in mind, through narrative recounts this article aims to provide some initial explorations of interactions among a teacher's intuition, participation in classroom investigation through action research and the unprecedented changes in teaching circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic. The background for this exploration is a national action research program offered annually within their suite of professional development programs by English Australia, the peak advocacy body for the Australian English Language Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sector. The program is also sponsored by Cambridge Assessment English to encourage language teachers to undertake teacher-oriented classroom-based research. The two authors took different roles in the program, one as the facilitator and the other as a teacher researcher. Their narrative accounts and commentaries aim to uncover how intuition intersected with the facilitator and the teacher's facilitation/teaching and research. As the unanticipated circumstances of the pandemic unfolded, they needed to rely on their intuitions in order to make appropriate decisions, in a way that responded to the needs of their participants and learners, both psychologically and socially. Implications are drawn out for how action research may act as a catalyst for researchers and teachers and to recognise and value the role of intuition in teaching practices.

Keywords: action research, English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS), intuition, language teacher education, reflective practice, teacher research

INTRODUCTION

In this article, two proponents of action research, an experienced researcher and facilitator (the first author) and an experienced teacher and teacher action researcher (the second author) collaborate to explore the place of intuition in action research as it manifested itself in a particular context. From our different yet overlapping perspectives, we reflect on what processes and decisions, drawing on our experiences and intuitions, occurred during a national action research program undertaken during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. We intersperse our explorations with our various reflections on these experiences but, in particular, we draw upon how the teacher action researcher combined his professional expertise and experience with his 'gut-feelings' or 'hunches' about how he could most effectively pursue his action research goals.

CONTEXT

The 'bigger picture' framing our discussion is the Australian English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS). The ELICOS sector offers a range of programs for international students including General English, English for Academic and/or Specific Purposes, IELTS Preparation, and Direct Entry to University study. These courses are offered through university-based language centres, colleges attached to large educational chains and private providers. The peak body for ELICOS is English Australia (EA) which not only provides policy advocacy for the sector but also offers industry advice and professional development programs and networks to staff nationally. Among these professional development offerings are the annual English Australia Conference, the English Australia Journal and the Action Research in ELICOS Program, which has run in partnership with Cambridge Assessment English since 2010. Each year, the program offers an opportunity for teachers to volunteer to conduct action research (AR) in their centres. Six projects are selected with up to 12 teachers working individually or in pairs on topics of their choice within an overall theme deemed to be important to the priorities of the sector. The number of projects and teachers is kept small in order to foster a close and collaborative community of practice where teachers have ample time to reflect on their research, receive in-depth feedback from their colleagues and from the facilitator (Anne, the first author) and ultimately to

disseminate the outcomes of the research to others. To date, 123 teachers have participated, with many going on to pursue further AR, facilitate AR in their own teaching centres, or enrol in advanced studies up to PhD level.

Each year, the Program spans nine months, beginning in March near the commencement of the Australian academic year and concluding in December with the submission of each teacher's AR report, which is eventually published in Cambridge's *Research Notes* journal (see https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/english-research-group/published-research/research-notes/). During this time, one two-day workshop (in March, introducing teachers to concepts of action research and enabling them to present and refine their plans), and two one-day workshops (one in May, considering data analysis and further directions and one in September, focusing on rounding off the research and planning conference presentations) are offered. In the intervening periods the teacher researchers collaborate and are supported through a WhatsApp group, individual zoom calls, and emails with the facilitator and the English Australia Head of Professional Development (HOPD), who also helps to facilitate the management of the Program. The teachers then go on to present their action research at the annual English Australia conference in mid-September.

Paul (the second author) participated in the 2020 program, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, but because of uncertain and rapidly changing circumstances did not 'officially' join the program until the second workshop. In this year, the selected overarching theme of the program was blended learning, but the participating teachers had to rapidly reorient the issues they wished to research to accommodate the emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020) which they and their centres were forced to adopt. Under these circumstances Paul's expertise and intuition as an experienced teacher needed to come into play.

Before moving on to interrogate and reflect on how intuition motivated what occurred in this particular action research environment, we explore what theoretical dimensions of this concept may be relevant to the discussion.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

The concept of intuition is elusive and represents a considerable challenge for scientific research, as it is not

(yet) amenable to empirical analysis despite advances in brain imaging (Hogarth, 2010). Broadly speaking, however, intuition could be described as a 'gut feeling,' 'a hunch,' 'a sense of something right or wrong.' Intuition is not derived from logic or conscious thought but instead is drawn from patterns of experience that create a kind of deep-seated knowledge (Gladwell, 2005) or "learned responses that are not the outcomes of deliberate processes" (Hogarth, 2010, p. 350). Thus, it is not easily amenable to explanation.

In studies of intuition, it has been found to be present in the practices of experts or professionals who frequently draw on unconscious 'funds of experience' to make snap decisions, sometimes in the heat of contingent conditions surrounding their immediate activities. However, when asked to verbalise the rationale for their decisions, they may be unable to do so, or may refer to the naturalness or instinctual nature of their decision-making based on experience (Nalliah, 2016).

Psychological theories of thinking make reference to dual processes: thinking that is analytical (conscious, deliberate, rational) and thinking that is intuitive (unconscious, experiential, tacit). For example, Gladwell distinguishes between "blinking" and "thinking," arguing that there "can be as much value in the blink of an eye as in months of rational analysis" (2005, p. 17). He argues that overconcentration on analysis and scientific knowledge may lead to a surfeit of information, preventing practitioners from determining which aspects of knowledge are most relevant and drowning out their sense of their sound instincts, thus leading to bad decision-making. In contemporary contexts where professionals are increasingly admonished to ground practice only on 'evidence-based studies', he points to the value that contextualised experiences might also play, although they are typically downplayed in the face of scientific propensities. These are often based on measurement, controlled experiments, a focus on eliminating contaminating variables, and generalised outcomes far from the messiness of daily life where intuition is likely to play a part.

In relation specifically to teaching, Burke and Sadler-Smith (2006) refer to intuition as "a process in which instructors efficiently code, sort and access experientially conceived mental models for use in making instructional decisions" (p. 172). They argue that educators' intuition draws on such cognitive models or schema in order to provide timely responses to contingent pedagogical problems. Although intuition may seem to be a "mystical sixth sense or paranormal power" (Burke & Sadler-Smith, 2006, p. 172), in reality it is born of experience: "a skilled craftsman [sic] develops a wealth of readily available expertise so entrenched that it tends to be taken for granted" (Burke & Sadler-Smith, p. 172). Thus, the knowledge-base of intuition may never have been articulated so that even skilled and experienced teachers may be unable to explain exactly what and why they did something, which then calls into question how intuition can be operationalised in empirical studies of teaching. Burke and Sadler-Smith identify several factors that may motivate intuition in teaching: these relate to the absence of explicit guidelines about how to respond to a certain conglomeration of classroom circumstances, or a lack of precedents for action; unanticipated reactions to classroom activities which require a rapid response; and requirements to make a rational analysis of unexpected outcomes or results. They argue that intuitive knowledge is complex and requires further understanding on the part of researchers and reflection by teachers, both of practices that thrive as a result of intuition and those that do not. Their fundamental point is that a combination of "learned knowledge" and "distilled experience" is the most likely route to lead to productive educational practice.

It appears that intuition relies on an ability to read a situation and respond to it without proof or conscious reasoning. Burnham (2011) refers to intuition as a "subtle knowing" without knowing how one knows it. It creates the sense that it is the right thing to do in the surrounding circumstances. In the field of language teaching, research on teacher cognition (Borg, 2006, Burns et al., 2015) has not specifically included the construct of pedagogical intuition. It may be however that deeper attention to this area of research may help to untangle, or at least shed light on, the individualistic and complex networks of thought, assumptions, beliefs that underlie a teacher's practice.

EXPERIENCING INTUITION

In this section, which is the core of the article, we each reflect through personal narratives and commentary on how intuition played a role in our experiences of facilitating and conducting action research during this unprecedented time. However, the primary focus is on Paul's emic experiences

of how the progressions in his teaching practice and research were guided by his knowledge-base (his 'learned knowledge') combined with his intuitive responses (his 'distilled experience'). To frame his participation in broader detail, Anne first recounts some of the decisions she needed to make in order to adapt intuitively to the practical, emotional and psychological needs of the participating teachers as the AR program began and was continued. Often the decisions occurred as 'gut-feelings' in each case about how best to maintain their commitment and support their research.

Anne's Perspective

The onset of the pandemic in 2020 foreshadowed a dramatic change in the way the EA Program had unfolded in previous years (see Burns, 2021). Typically, the program ran through face-to-face workshops where teachers from across the country met in Sydney and shared their teaching experiences, dilemmas, and research plans. The opportunity for ELICOS teachers working in geographically dispersed locations across a large continent to meet and exchange ideas was regarded by previous participations as a major positive foundation for collaboration and formation of a community of practice. Although the first workshop was still held face-to-face in March (just), it was clear that this format would not continue as soon afterwards a national lockdown was declared across Australia. Shortly after the first workshop, I received an email from the EA HOPD:

> *I am writing to touch base with you about the AR program for this year. With the COVID crisis, most ELICOS colleges are planning on moving to online delivery from next week with teachers working from home. Many schools have drastically reduced numbers with students cancelling and heading home and with no student arrivals for the foreseeable future with the complete incoming travel ban.*

She went on to note that the teacher participants could be confused about how to continue their research, as well as anxious about continued employment in an industry of short-term contracts dependent on international student numbers (Edwards & Ellis, 2019). I needed to find a way to reconfigure not just the program to accommodate the teachers' changed and volatile teaching circumstances but

also their emotional responses. I sent what I described as an "off the top of my head" list of possibilities to my EA colleague, drawing I believe on a combination of the 'funds of experience' mentioned by Nalliah (2016), and the lack of precedents for action that required a rapid response and demands for some kind of rational analysis of unexpected situations noted by Burke and Sadler-Smith (2006). I responded:

> *Off the top of my head, here are some suggestions:*
>
> 1. *Have Skype calls with each individual project in the next week to see what changes might need to be made. I think it's possible to set up group Skypes so you'd be very welcome to join in with each one.*
> 2. *Hold a video conference as you suggest – but would it be good to talk to individuals first to give them sufficient time to go through their issues, and then do a group session to keep everyone collaborating?*
> 3. *Nearer the time of the next workshop, hold a virtual session for input and updates, as it may not be possible to hold the actual workshop. I'm a bit more hazy on how we would do this and with what technology. Any suggestions? Happy to try other things as long as the technology is not too complicated!*
> 4. *Yes, keep up the FB (Facebook) contact as much as possible too.*
> 5. *Other suggestions?*

In the meantime, both I and the HOPD were rapidly thinking 'on our feet' about how to support the participants but also ensure their continuing interaction and collaboration, drawing I would argue on our shared experiences of successfully facilitating the AR program over several years – the 'entrenched' expertise mentioned by Burke and Sadler-Smith (2006). We recognised that we had to radically restructure the program to help the teachers to continue. Further email and phone exchanges focused on encouraging them to join the Facebook Group set up after the first workshop and scheduling a Skype meeting to consult them about the changes and what they would mean for their particular project. We anticipated that initially individual online contact would work best to reassure them and should be done as soon as feasible. I commenced these

meetings with each individual or pair of teachers, reporting, as here, one such contact to the HOPD:

> *I've spoken to A and E individually so far. Although both their situations have changed a bit, they have been able to tweak their projects and have good plans in place for continuing. In fact, A's plan seems much clearer now and he has a good approach to collecting his data through surveys and journal entries. E is continuing with his plans, which were pretty clear in any case, except that everything will now be online and it depends to some extent what platform his centre uses in how he will record his data.*

Unfortunately, soon after these exchanges, we learned that two pairs of teachers had decided to withdraw because of the uncertainty at their centres, which presented a new challenge for continuing the program. However, three teachers (two working as partners) who had originally expressed interest were contacted and were eager to participate. Paul was one of these teachers.

Having been in contact individually with all the teachers, we then felt it was important to move ahead quickly, first to organise a two-hour online group conference where the new teachers could be introduced into the group and each teacher could explain their changed circumstances and receive support for reorienting their plans. We also needed to get their views of what would be a feasible way to manage the second whole-day workshop online, since at this stage engaging in long interactions through technology was a new and unusual experience, not only for us but for the field in general. Also, because the teachers were beginning to teach wholly online, we were mindful of different schedules and additional demands on their teaching. As I wrote to the HOPD:

> *(…) adjusting deadlines to match everyone's new situation. I think we need to look again at the deadlines we set [for the program] and if we have a Zoom meeting soon so we can discuss this with the whole group.*

We both felt anxious and uncertain about the toll on physical comfort and concentration that would arise from long online workshop sessions. This phenomenon and its psychological impact on learning and engagement is now recognised as 'Zoom fatigue' (e.g., Shoshan & Wehrt, 2022)

but at this time there was little general advice on how to effectively moderate extended emergency remote meetings. In the event, mainly drawing on our experience and intuition, we experimented with two four-hour sessions held a week apart which proved to be manageable and received very positive feedback from the teachers, as in the following comment:

> *Breaking the workshop across 2 mornings was really good for the online format. Part 2 was a bit more valuable, since we had some time to discuss our projects with other participants and with Anne and [the HOPD].*

However, we were alert to the possibility that each workshop might need further adjustments in timing and duration, given the teachers' uneven and unpredictable working situations. Paul's first set of recollections below illustrate the volatility and unpredictability that he and other teachers were experiencing at this time.

Since the two four-hour online workshop sessions seemed to have worked well for the second workshop, we decided to repeat this format for the third workshop. However, in the past this workshop had been held the day before the English Australia conference. Typically, teachers would share findings as they moved towards finishing their research and rehearse the presentations they would do the next day at a joint conference colloquium. In 2020, however, the conference itself moved online in a reduced format, so instead we opted for a separate timing of the third workshop a few weeks later and organised the presentations as a series of sessions of 90 minutes spread over two days. On each day three sets of teachers presented their research for 30 minutes at a time. This new format proved to work in our favour as there turned out to be a larger national, and even international, audience and the teachers could take more time than usual to describe their research and answer questions. Their presentations can be accessed at https://www.englishaustralia.com.au/professional-development/webinars.

Overall, the changes I have described, born of our intuitive decisions, seemed to align with Burke and Sadler-Smith's (2006, p. 172) notion of "a process in which instructors efficiently code, sort and access experientially conceived mental models for use in making instructional decisions." As a result, it was gratifying to find that the teachers' felt their experience to be positive and had even

provided them with a sense of purpose, two of them commenting that: 'I'm glad I didn't drop out of the Program as it has provided a sense of continuity and I can feel like I am still accomplishing something during this time,' and 'It has been a very intense period for me over the last five weeks, but I have always looked forward to the sessions and workshops.'

In the next section, Paul supplements my reflections on the backdrop to the program during this time, by documenting his own experiences as a participating teacher. I intersperse his narrative with brief comments on our interactions about his research and teaching at this time from my own perspective.

Paul's Perspective

I joined the AR program after the first workshop, eager to make up for lost time and keen to catch up with the other participants. My entry into the program coincided with the start of emergency remote teaching across the ELICOS sector. I had originally based my proposal, as had the other participants, on implementing a blended learning approach, in my case using a Learning Management System (LMS) for students to learn more independently. However, as I began to experience online teaching and observed how our students were adapting to a new medium, I recall making the decision quite quickly to abandon my original proposal in favour of a skills-based approach to presentation skills. The course I was scheduled to teach required me to focus on speaking skills, and I was aware of some of the difficulties students typically have in preparing for an oral presentation when studying in a face-to-face context. I was particularly interested in exploring the scaffolding of this speaking task when delivered online.

As in many other English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses, in my institution the skills-based approach adopted matched the syllabus and assessment. Also, linked with my interest in skills-based scaffolding was the fact that I had experimented with task-based learning many times before and I believed it would be an appropriate approach for my students. However, in the syllabus, there were clear assessment indicators that necessitated explicit teaching of some oral presentation skills, and I was concerned that a task-based approach might not ensure sufficient practice and exposure to key areas of performance expected of

students by the end of the course. Also, I had limited experience of teaching task-based lessons in an online course. Nevertheless, there was a sense of excitement in that I was genuinely curious about the possibilities, but also unsure about how successful the lessons would be in improving the students' skills and language use.

However, I was becoming concerned that the online medium could complicate and disrupt the way students went about preparing content and developing the language skills and confidence to present to their peers online. Also, early on in the pandemic when engaging them online I was conscious that my students, like many around the world, were socially and physically isolated, creating a unique and unanticipated context which I had not previously experienced as a teacher. In the absence of the face-to-face classes, they had originally expected to be enrolled in before the restrictions enforced in their regions and by the Australian government, the students were seeking out opportunities to socialise with their classmates. Depending on the software being used and the controls afforded to teachers that are not accessible to students, the online space poses obvious limitations on student-to-student interaction. For example, teachers can create an environment of student engagement using Teams or Zoom video chat rooms, but depending on the settings, students are not always able to choose who they are partnered with or who they chat to when they have group or one-to-one conversations. In contrast, in a physical classroom, students often decide who they sit next to, whisper to their friends while in class, or socialise in their breaks outside of the classroom.

Initially, too, I was concerned about how I would conduct my research, gather and analyse the data with a level of confidence, and find insightful outcomes that I could share with other teachers. I thought at the time that if the research was to be useful to others, I would need to start in a 'traditional' way with a literature review and then apply a particular methodology in order to prove the statistical significance of my findings. My preconceived notion of research, as an empirically tested scientific investigation, was challenged when I first took part in the workshop and learned more about the AR process. Although I thought I knew what AR was, I found that I had been getting tied up in the philosophy of science rather than observing my own context and the teacher-student interactions that should have been my focus. Through participating in the program,

I started to appreciate the benefits of conceptualising AR as a cyclical rather than a linear process.

Anne's Perspective

I recall that during this early phase of his research, Paul's thinking, expressed during our Zoom calls, was caught up unsurprisingly with the rapid changes he was having to make in teaching online and the modifications that were being made more generally at his centre. At the same time, since he was also pursuing a master's program at university where such perspectives tend to be emphasised, he was concerned about having a strong theoretical base for his research, specifically in relation to theories of scaffolding in language learning (e.g., Gibbons, 2014). These seemed at that point to be driving his thinking more than the praxis orientation of AR. He worried too about whether he was doing research "properly" and "scientifically," a possible reflection again of what he was learning during his masters, reflecting Borg's (2009) findings that teachers tend to hold conceptions of research aligned with conventional scientific notions of inquiry. At these early stages, Paul's intuitive responses were beginning to be challenged through participation in the program.

Paul's Perspective

In these initial stages of my research, I thought it would be best to spend time scaffolding the students' learning experience in a very structured and sequential manner. Students, I imagined, would be able to build on each lesson with a corresponding increase in confidence and language skills as they progressed throughout the course. However, what I was about to learn was that the dynamic nature of AR itself was transferable to how students could prepare for their presentations – with cyclical revisions and improvements throughout the process, rather than a sequence of activities based on course objectives set out by the syllabus as a structured one-size-fits-all approach.

In the first task I tried out, students were asked to construct a 'bridge' using materials that were available to them in the room or house where they were studying and present their ideas individually to other students. They found this task engaging and it elicited academic language to describe their structures. However, after this first task-

based lesson I felt disappointed. When I analysed the video-recordings I had collected as part of the research, I noticed that the students had not produced as much spoken language as I hoped or used language relevant to preparing an academic style presentation.

I decided to try a range of approaches to gather data that I hoped would provide more direction for subsequent tasks. This included writing short research diary entries, conducting student surveys and using activities that elicited reflections from the students on their sense of their progress in developing their presentation skills, strategies and techniques. While the survey was useful and could offer a snapshot of the students' perspectives on their confidence in various skill areas, their reflections offered far more insight into their thoughts and feelings about engaging in the online classroom. At the time I wrote in my diary:

> I realised that I was relying on my own intuitions rather than reflecting on feedback from students about how they perceived their abilities or confidence in speaking.

There are times where a teacher's intuition can be useful to predict areas students are likely to find challenging; it can scaffold tasks and help target skills required to perform them. However, it is also fallible, and in this case, I was overlooking the students' feelings, thoughts, and perspectives on what they needed to overcome language barriers and perform at a higher level.

However, combining the feedback from the students with my own intuitions brought about opportunities to adjust my lessons to the needs of the students and engage them in ways I had not previously considered. This is where the process of doing research enables a teacher to become more sensitive to the emerging situation. Listening to the students, discussing their learning progress and observing the way they interacted with each other and with me, not only built rapport but helped identify areas for improving my approach. For example, listening to a student explain why she preferred to work on tasks in groups in Zoom breakout rooms, rather than alone, helped me to change my teaching focus and identify an opportunity to engage students more actively. I realised that this student wanted to connect with her peers socially and develop closer personal relationships as well as to build her English language skills. Ultimately this led me to more creative approaches adapted to the online classroom.

I began to reflect on my career prior to teaching when I was a youth worker who viewed learning as part of the process of human growth and development. I revisited my beliefs that what happens in a classroom is part of the wider experience of a student's life, and vice-versa, and that a students' personality, character, thoughts, feelings and emotions will always influence the process of learning. This perspective began to have a stronger impact on my approach to online teaching, choice of activities and prioritisation of tasks based on what I observed happening during the lessons. Rather than pursuing a set teaching method or prescribed set of syllabus objectives, I began to adapt to the emerging needs of the individuals and the group that made up my students, aiming to personalise the lesson content and allow them to direct or diverge from the syllabus plan. I was beginning to move towards enabling students' greater autonomy and agency in deciding what and how they should learn.

Anne's Perspective

For Paul, this stage in his research had become a period of destabilisation. He expressed to me in our Zoom calls his occasional sense of confusion and lack of direction about where his research was going and he felt perplexed about how to take the next steps (see Burns, 2020, on the role of confusion in learning in AR). Following his initial orientation to more theoretically driven scientific concepts of research and his sense that these would give him a clear pathway, his close observations and experiences with his students, as well as his willingness to experiment more intuitively and pragmatically, began to lead him towards a more organic and intuitive approach both to his teaching and his research. He became more confident in interrogating his own pre-conceived models of research and considered how theoretical ideas he adhered to were being challenged to meet the circumstances. His experiences reflect how practitioners may adapt intuitively to the psychological needs of their students, often in an ad hoc way, as they make choices to fit the moment. They also reflect the vital role played by the destabilisation of assumptions for transforming practices (Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2018) in which practitioner research can have a strong impact.

Paul's Perspective

One of the key tenets of a task-based approach is that the students are encouraged to draw on all of their linguistic capabilities as they focus on the task, rather than the teacher pre-teaching a prescribed set of target language that students should apply to a controlled activity. This requires the teacher to observe the use of student language in action and the language focus, feedback and analysis should then occur after the task. While there are many different ways of designing a task-based lesson, the unpredictable nature of how students will interact and the language or strategies they choose to use means that the outcomes of the lesson can often only be recognised retrospectively. The AR process encouraged me to experiment with each task-based lesson, and I began noticing much more carefully which activities would draw out more of the kind of interactions I hoped students would experience when completing the tasks I had designed.

However, because I was moving away from attempting to adhere to fixed concepts and syllabus frameworks, the approach I was taking to developing lesson content and scaffolding activities began to be characterised by greater innovation and creativity. I had already learned that the students wanted to interact more with each other and form deeper relationships. Therefore, in the second iteration of my research, I decided to ask the students to form groups where they would construct an advertisement together, and again I video-recorded the presentation. This was a move away from the individual presentations I had started with. Their online collaboration and interaction in this task showed much more complexity and spontaneity. They were co-constructing the exchanges used to undertake the task more instinctively and supporting each other in both the completion of the task and their language choices. They provided feedback to others in the group and refined their contributions through ongoing self- and peer-correction, rephrasing and reconstructing their utterances. My students were also curious about the surveys they responded to, my observations of their interactions and conclusions I was drawing when analysing the data I had collated and were eager to share in the research process.

I remember reflecting on the lessons I had taught while having a shower after teaching my class, going for a run at the end of the day and even once when I woke up in the morning and realised I had been dreaming about an activity

my students could do online. Looking back on this stage in my thinking about the decisions I made and directions I took when preparing a task, some ideas seemed to arise from seemingly random thoughts, but converged into a clearer plan as I considered the aims and objectives of the task as part of a broader process of learning to prepare a presentation about an academic topic. I found that inspiration for an activity could come from numerous sources: ideas shared by a colleague, a website, course materials, or a webinar delivered through an online community of practice, for example. However, sometimes ideas were more original and innovative concepts, that arose through my own spontaneous decisions when planning or teaching. Increasingly I was striving to personalise the lesson to the unique personalities of the students in the class. At times I drew on various theoretical principles to guide my approach to teaching and these were deliberate, cognitive choices, but often I realise I made decisions without deeply considering the rationale that underpinned the design of the lesson. Anticipating the ways in which students were likely to engage with a task became easier through more experimentation and practice. Consistency in the ways that different individuals and groups of students responded and interacted online improved my own confidence that what I had noticed was not simply a matter of luck or the result of a unique dynamic that had formed between these students but in fact a more universal experience that affects many learners when engaging with the tasks designed for their learning experiences. Moreover, I benefited enormously by sharing with other teachers in the ELICOS AR program what I had learnt and the challenges I was experiencing in refining research questions, selecting appropriate data collection tools, analysing the data and communicating those insights with the wider group.

In the process of conducting my research, I was beginning to discover new dimensions that I had not originally intended investigating. I had been aiming to help students achieve specific language goals in presenting information and meeting certain assessment criteria in the performance of their oral presentations and at first, I believed this was the focus of my research. However, when I analysed the recordings applying a discourse analysis perspective, their engagement and interactions as they prepared their presentations began to interest me much more than their acquisition of fixed phrases, expressions, or discourse markers to communicate about an academic topic.

In other words, my perspectives had shifted from the products of learning (their performance) to the processes (their interactions). I felt I had discovered new insights into how students learned from each other and why they enjoyed tasks that enabled them to interact online with their peers. As I reflected on my experiences of researching and the changes and insights that my discoveries had brought about, I began to question my beliefs about learning and teaching and the underlying assumptions I was making about my learners in the online classroom. By writing down my thoughts and deliberating on the principles that were influencing my decision-making, I became more self-aware and confident in my ability to consider how each lesson would successfully meet the students' learning goals and my own teaching.

What I learned to accept is that teaching and learning are intrinsically chaotic, as were some of my responses to what unfolded in my classroom. This was particularly so in the circumstances of pandemic I experienced – the idealism of expecting that a set of rigid processes and procedures would result in improved outcomes for students proved false in practice. The more structured the approach, the more likely it is that the teacher will fail to adapt to the needs of their students. The cyclical nature of the AR process allowed for challenging the assumptions that underlay the decisions I was making and for comparing the experiences of different students, considering their similarities and differences and using intuitions drawn from my experiences as a teacher to attempt to meet their needs.

Anne's Perspective

These later cycles in Paul's research highlight how he began to value ambiguity and experimentation in applying the theoretical orientations he wished to adopt in his teaching. He began to take a more relaxed approach, using his 'gut-feelings' or 'hunches' about how the tasks he prepared might work and drawing more creatively on what the findings of his own investigations were telling him. These insights led him to more productive tasks and better outcomes for his students, both socially and linguistically. At the same time, he experienced some of his more creative ideas and reflections when his cognitions were in a 'resting state.' Psychologists Kvavilashvili and Rummel (2020) refer to the notion of 'mind-pops,' ideas that pop seemingly randomly into people's minds. They argue that these not

truly random but associated with experiences and knowledge of the world, although the threads of these connections to the ideas that pop may be hidden. They also contend that frequent mind-popping supports problem-solving and creativity. These 'mind-wandering' occurrences seem to align with the concept of 'blinking' described by Gladwell (2005). The processes of action research interleaved with the practical demands of teaching were a catalyst in Paul's growing self-awareness and confidence in responding to the surrounding circumstances.

DISCUSSION

Within the wider context of an unanticipated pandemic era, our narratives and commentaries trace the changes encountered in Paul's understanding of teaching and learning brought about by the interaction of his teaching practices with the processes of AR. They show how experiencing AR created dissonances in his concepts of research and his own professional beliefs and destabilised the kind of decisions he had typically made as a teacher under different circumstances. However, his experience and expertise as a teacher enabled him to make responsive decisions to adapt intuitively to the differing social and psychological needs of his students. He gained the confidence to sometimes make these decisions in an ad hoc way that he believed would fit the moment. In the complex and unpredictable circumstances surrounding his specific classroom and the wider ELICOS community, he needed to draw substantially on 'pedagogical tact' (Sipman et al, 2020) or 'enactment of teachers' intuition' (Vagle, 2011).

Sipman et al. (2019) argue that tactful teaching aims to lead learners towards growth, but guidelines for helping teachers navigate unpredictable eventualities in the process are non-existent. They posit that this situation relates to the preponderance of behaviouristic, instrumentalist or foundationalist approaches to research as the basis for practice in educational sciences, as reflected in the ascendancy of evidence-based and measurement-oriented teaching. This leads at best to the downplaying of teachers' intuition and at worst to its dismissal as too fanciful and intangible to have any role in informing practice. They argue, however, that intuition or 'colloquial wisdom' should be recognised alongside technical pedagogical knowledge and competence and opportunities to understand and nurture it should be a part of teachers' education and

development. In contrast to the teaching profession, intuition has been recognised as vital in disciplines such as medicine, aviation, defence, management, and law enforcement (Langan-Fox & Vranic, 2011). While teaching is not typically about life-threatening situations, the evidence from these other professions is that it can engender relevant ideas, responses or solutions and serves decision-making, problem-solving and creativity (Dane & Pratt, 2009). Intuition would therefore seem to be a fruitful avenue for researching pedagogical practice and understanding its role in effective teaching, too.

We would argue that practitioner research, in this case AR, can act as a developmental catalyst for probing more systematically the kind of instinctive knowing that comes from an experienced teacher's learned behaviour. It enables that behaviour to be tested out and critically interrogated in practice and provides a foundation for productive and creative change (Piirto, 2014). Paul's experience of AR enabled him to gather data and record his observations progressively and organically, not with the intention of investigating a specific issue merely to produce empirical evidence, but instead to generate genuine exploration and re-evaluation of his classroom and deeper interaction between himself as the teacher researcher and his students to better understand and support their relationships. The opportunity to network and dialogue with other action researchers in the ELICOS AR program and with the facilitators also supported the processes of discovering and giving recognition to his most valuable and important insights and confirming the relevance of his intuitions.

CONCLUSION

Intuition and its role in professional practice is a slippery concept to which very little attention has been paid in the language teaching world. As the title of our chapter aims to reflect, however, there appears to be value in not always knowing where one is going (cf. Atkinson & Claxton, 2000). While there is no disputing that theoretical and technical know-how are indispensable to good teaching practice, there is much room for further debate in the field on the role played by intuitive pedagogical responses based on teachers' accumulated funds of knowledge about practice and the colloquial wisdom they acquire over periods of time. In this scenario, we have argued for the role that could be played by teachers' own research. To the extent that this chapter

has been able to draw out some preliminary insights, we trust that it makes a contribution to the opening up and examination of this important area.

Authors' Contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the research, the data collection and analysis, and the final approval of the article.

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