Native speaker assistants in the foreign language classroom: a study of seven schools

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1 Introduction

The inclusion of a native speaker assistant as an additional teaching resource in a language classroom is not a new practice, dating at least from the 1960s in the US Peace Corps (Kraft & Kraft, 1966) but is a widespread one across TESOL and foreign language learning. It has been growing in popularity in recent years due to increased attention in the use of authentic resources and language models in the development of intercultural language skills in students (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino & Kohler, 2003). This has encouraged many schools to provide a native speaker assistant (NSA), in addition to the teacher, to extend learning outcomes. The addition of the native speaker to a language learning environment is seen to complement non-native teacher linguistic abilities, and to provide an authentic communicative context. It is also thought to reduce teacher/student ratio and to increase opportunities for more individual support for students and to provide the structure for students to speak and experience the essentially personal nature of the one-to-one communication that is language.

Limited research has been conducted, however, on the impact of this practice, if any, on student learning outcomes, and there is little guidance for teachers on what may represent best practice in the use of an NSA. The goal of this study was to analyse, in seven New South Wales Schools, the effectiveness of the inclusion of an NSA in language learning. Furthermore, the study’s aim was to extract principles of best practice which would be useful in the broader language education community. This article reports the findings of this study. Section Two presents an overview of the research literature which has highlighted the issues arising from NSA inclusion. Section Three presents the research design and procedures. The findings from the data analysis are discussed in Section Four. Section Five offers the assessment of effectiveness and recommendations for best practice, with concluding remarks.

2 Literature Review

The literature review constructs the background issues relevant to our analysis of practice in schools. These issues may be represented by the following questions:
What are the goals of Australian language learning?
What can an NSA add to the achievement of language learning goals?
What is best practice in the inclusion of an NSA?

2.1 What are the goals of Australian language learning?

A new socio-cultural orientation in Australian language teaching today reflects an intercultural approach. Teachers are encouraged to structure language learning that is both interpersonal and intrapersonal (within the self). Language learning is seen as developmental and it cannot
occur without also engaging the students’ own language and culture. Teachers are asked to become critically aware of what they do and why (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009). Intercultural language learning profiles the five principles of active construction: making connections, interaction, reflection, and the responsibility of the learner to understand oneself and others. A sample of typical learning outcomes taken from the NSW Board of Studies Languages K-10 Syllabus (2003) also highlights learning goals. In this syllabus, students will be able to

- maintain an interaction by responding to and asking questions and sharing information
- identify and analyse ways in which culture is reflected in language use in diverse contexts

The inclusion of an NSA in a language program illustrates learning being developed through social interaction with a person who is more proficient (Vygotsky, 1978), mediated and supported by a scaffold. The effective student-NSA interaction needs to be a purposeful and meaningful interaction, and its development depends on effective feedback. If the feedback and the interaction are ineffective, students do not begin to engage with language as a communicative reality, but simply as an intellectual exercise or as a work requiring memorisation (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009, p.16). There is limited research on how the nature of a student-NSA interaction can be scaffolded and structured to meet these contemporary learning outcomes.

2.2 What can an NSA add to the achievement of language learning goals?

In the research studies, the observed benefits of the inclusion of an NSA in language learning may be grouped into three key areas: language knowledge, authenticity and intercultural learning.

The most common of all considerations for the use of an NSA is the students’ observation and practice of the linguistic features of the language. Interaction with a NSA may provide modelling for students’ language production, and may help to acquire a linguistic knowledge and pronunciation (Shibata, 2009). This interaction needs to be authentic, moving away from exercises and simulation activities towards real situations with a speaker who sees the student as a genuine conversational partner. Conversation with a native speaker on diverse topics of mutual interest leads to productive rather than receptive learning of the language (Neustupny, 1992).

Where these relationships involve an exchange of cultural perspective, the student may explore intercultural learning outcomes. The Comenius Assistantships (2009) states that, through contact with an NSA, a student becomes aware of the diversity of cultures and language, knowledge of which could help break down prejudices.

2.3 What is best practice for the use of an NSA?

The values expressed in the idea of best practice reflect the shifting language pedagogies and the learning outcomes desired of the last thirty years. Neustupny’s list (1992) of suitable tasks for NSAs reflects the pedagogy of his time: modelling and correction of pronunciation, oral exercises, presentation of written script, comprehension exercises, drilling of structure patterns, marking of compositions and assignments, and in playing games with students. In more contemporary pedagogy, Shibata (2009) describes the NSA’s use in team-teaching, in preparation of teaching materials, and in participation in extra-curricular activities. The Comenius Assistantships (2009) proposes that NSAs with initiative and teaching skills could make suggestions as to activities and lesson design. In the modern Australian context, the notion of best practice must reflect the orientation of the local syllabus to intercultural language
learning principles as noted above, and to the development of critical reflection in students of both the target language and culture and of their own.

The most common use of the NSA is in conversation practice, as a simulation of the one-to-one student-examiner speaking test in the NSW Higher School Certificate language examination. Writers have commented on the development of a focus on conversation and its potential benefits. The nature of NSA interaction creates the possibility of a warmer, personal and different relationship to that of the teacher (Neustupny, 1992; Comenius, 2009). Cottenet-Hage, Joseph and Verdaguer (1992) and Lynch and Anderson (2001) believe that interaction with an NSA gives students the opportunity for a wider range of speech acts than with their teacher, finding also that formal sessions to practise new structures often develop into informal conversations. They believe that discussions in the target language provide opportunity for language practice which has a content that is appealing and more relevant because it makes connections with students’ lives. Lynch and Anderson (2001) believe that students view the NSA as more similar in age and as a less authoritative figure.

The NSA can also play a role in lesson planning and in the preparation of recorded and written comprehension exercises, model solutions, worksheets, tests and games, as well as recording comprehension exercises, all of which supplement and motivate language learning. The NSA’s benefit to the school often goes beyond their period of placement.

Best practice may also be identified through the use of different group configurations. Two of the seven schools used a whole-class model where the NSA worked alongside the teacher, in one school as an active team teacher and in the other as a silent inactive assistant. The use of pair work within the whole class can enable the native speaker to help the teacher monitor the students (Lynch & Anderson, 2001). The Comenius Assistantships (2009) suggests that the NSA can give extra help in small groups to students who are having trouble with learning the language, and also to advanced students. Small group work also enables conversation and discussion. The most popular configuration, as described above, is one-to-one interaction through withdrawal from class. Ellis (1986), cited in Lenguan (2008), believes that interaction between a native speaker and a learner on a one-to-one basis is superior to being a member of a whole-class group. The provision of one-to-one conversation is said to build turn-taking and student confidence, and familiarity with spontaneous language production (Polio & Gass, 1998). Best practice may also include the development of professional learning outcomes for the teacher whom the NSA can support by helping to maintain teacher proficiency in the target language (Colville-Hall, 1995).

The designation of separate roles for the NSA and the teacher would appear to be crucial for maximising effective learning. Neustupny (1992) and Comenius Assistantships (2009) believe that the work of the native speaker assistant is not of doing the same work as the teacher, but of doing what the teacher cannot perform as well or as easily. In terms of professional development, the NSA and the teacher can learn from each other’s role, the NSA becoming aware of and gaining experience in teaching practice, the classroom teacher improving lesson planning through the ideas of the NSA.

In team-teaching, both the NSA and the classroom teacher could perform dialogues and role-plays. Tajino (2002) suggests that team-teaching can develop students’ motivation and increase their understanding of other societies.

Scholars have noted that the effective integration of an NSA in teaching puts pressure on teachers and increases their workload. Flaherty and D’Espinosa (1982) found that the time needed for coordination and cooperation between the NSAs and the teachers is the most
difficult aspect of good NSA practice. The literature indicates that this area needs support to bring about rejuvenation of good practice and to increase learning outcomes (Nunan, 1992, cited in Carless, 2006; Fanselow, 1994, cited in Tajino, 2002). While teachers value the learning potential of the NSA, studies indicate that successful practice is not always the case and that NSAs may be utilised ineffectually. A need for best practice guidelines for teachers has been identified in studies by Tajino (2002), and Osumi (1997), cited in Tajino. This study’s research aim was to provide such a set of guidelines, drawn from its analysis of data from the practice in seven schools. This review of the literature will inform our analysis of the data of this study.

3 Research Design and Procedures

The methodology of this project was designed to collect data which would enable the examination of practice and of student perception of that practice. This involved the observation of actual practice, plus the collection of the learning perceptions of teachers, NSAs and students. A range of research methods used classroom observation and interview data collection instruments. Data was collected to investigate (1) teacher perceptions and practices, (2) NSA perceptions and experience and (3) student perceptions. Individual interviews with teachers and with native speaker assistants, and focus group interviews with students, were semi-structured. Student focus group questions explored student responses to NSA interaction and student perception of their benefit. All interviews were recorded and the texts transcribed and analysed using content analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Classroom observation was video-recorded. Video files were viewed and analysis conducted of language and behaviour in both NSA and students.

This methodology provided a variety of perspectives and enabled triangulation (Stake, 2005). Ethics approval was granted by the relevant University Ethics Committee in 2009. The project was conducted in cooperation with the NSW Association of Independent Schools.

3.1 Participants and site

The schools in this study consisted of single-sex, co-educational, urban, rural, secular and religious-affiliated schools. Seven schools participated in the one-day visit collection of observation and interview data at their schools. Table 1 displays the number of teachers, NSAs and student participants in each school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>NSAs</th>
<th>Students in focus groups</th>
<th>Class observation of NSA with students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Number of teachers, NSAs and student participants in seven schools

The NSAs represented a range of ages and backgrounds, and were asked to teach in a variety of contexts.
The profile of the NSAs in this study is displayed in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Teaching context</th>
<th>Training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>1 day per week</td>
<td>Individual work, Group work</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>1 day per week</td>
<td>Individual work</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 2</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>1 day per week</td>
<td>Individual work</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 3</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>1 day per fortnight</td>
<td>Individual work; yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 4</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>8 days per year</td>
<td>Team Teaching</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 5</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>Whole class</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 6</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>8 days per year</td>
<td>Small group work</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 7</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>1 day per week</td>
<td>Small group work, Team Teaching</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Demographic information re NSAs: language, gender, age, employment and context

4 Presentation of data and discussion
This study looked at NSA practices in the seven schools. Evidence is visible in examination of data from four sources: classroom observations and interviews with students, teachers and NSAs.

4.1 Classroom observation: description of practices.
Three models of practice were observed in the schools.
Model 1: The NSA with one or two senior secondary students, practising structured questions and answers.
This practice is a simulation of the ten-minute Speaking Skills (Continuers Course) section of the NSW Higher School Certificate Examination, the results of which determine university
entrance. Though it is termed a conversation, the actual format is of the student responding to a number of questions asked by an examiner.

For preparation of the conversation, the NSA is provided by the teacher with a sheet of typical questions, and students respond with answers that are either prepared or spontaneous. The NSA both prompts and corrects answers.

At one school, written answers which had been developed into longer passages were handed in by students to the NSA. At the same time as listening to the student’s oral answer, the NSA read through and corrected the written text.

All but one NSA used English when explaining corrections and there was some evidence of interruption of students’ answers and over-correction. There was little evidence of spontaneous or natural conversation.

Several students made no written notes of the NSA’s suggestions. The NSA involved remarked that, in these cases, recall of corrected material and the possibility of implementation of new material in subsequent sessions is poor.

Model 2: The NSA team-teaching with the teacher, where the design and preparation of the lesson have been completed in collaboration with the NSA, and the NSA has a special role in the lesson. No English is used by the NSA throughout the lesson.

In the Year 10 class of School 4, the teacher and NSA had collaborated to produce a series of vignettes in which a mystery person describes their day. After listening to the NSA, students had to ask questions to find out the mystery person’s identity. In the Year 8 class of School 4, the teacher and NSA had collaborated to write a passage about a robbery. The NSA recounted the clues after which the students had to identify the thief from a group of suspects. Both lessons were highly motivating to the students. Schools 2 and 3 reported that they infrequently had a special lesson with its focus a topic of interest from the NSA’s own life.

In one school, there was an appearance of team teaching, with the NSA positioned at the front of the room. The lesson however was run entirely by the classroom teacher, mostly in English, and the NSA was silent, not included in any activity. Resources had been prepared without input from the NSA and contained language errors.

Model 3: Small groups of students with the NSA practising common beginners’ questions and answers in withdrawal groups.

Depending on the class, the students and NSA sat in a circle either in the open area outside the classroom or in a corner of the busy library. No whiteboard was available and no notes were possible. Over-correction was evident. The NSA spoke in English to include content about cultural topics and to explain grammar and pronunciation. The NSA was frequently used by the teacher as a second teacher, going over what had been previously taught in class.

School 4 is the only school to include the work that students do with the NSA as part of their documented teaching / learning program. In three of the seven schools, the NSA was involved in making new resources such as written texts and audio recordings.

4.2 Interview data

Interviews took place with three groups of participants: NSAs, teachers and students.

The data were thematically coded and the results are presented below in Tables 3, 4 and 5.

4.2.1 Interviews with Native Speaker Assistants

Eight (8) NSAs were interviewed in seven (7) schools (S 1-7). Two NSAs were interviewed in School 1.

A number of recurring themes emerged from the NSA data, as displayed in Table 3. While the sample is small, some observations can be made, as discussed below.
I am a recent arrival

I supply new culture/language

I feel frustrated

I have the opportunity to prepare a lesson

I am language-aware

I am used as a reference tool

I see the potential for intercultural learning

I use some/ lots of English

I enjoy my work

I want students to understand the big picture

I am trained as a teacher

I see an improvement in students’ language

I am asked to drill class work

My work with students is assessed

I have an informal relationship with students

I think my work motivates students

Table 3. Thematic coding of interviews with Native Speaker Assistants.

It will be noted from Table 3 that, with one exception, the NSAs had been living in Australia for many years, the recruitment of the NSAs from the parent body of the school or through personal contacts. With one exception, the NSAs’ language is still considered native-like but, through having been in Australia for many years, their language may not contemporary. Similarly, their
knowledge of modern youth culture may not be contemporary. Out of the eight NSAs, only two were below 35 years of age. Only one NSA had received prior notification of what work was to be done. The pattern seen in the other schools was of the NSA being told the lesson aims in the first moments of the teacher’s lesson and students picked at random to participate in a withdrawal group. The NSAs reported that they would prefer to have prior knowledge in order to prepare a variety of creative activities, and that they were willing to have more involvement in the teacher’s preparation. The NSAs appear not to understand the negative effect of using English for translation purposes, breaking the flow of the target language.

4.2.2 Interviews with teachers

Seven (7) teachers were interviewed in seven (7) schools. A number of recurring themes emerged from the teacher data, as displayed in Table 4. While the sample is small, some observations can be made, as discussed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The teacher says:</th>
<th>T S1</th>
<th>T S2</th>
<th>T S3</th>
<th>T S4</th>
<th>T S5</th>
<th>T S6</th>
<th>T S7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I see NSA as source of contemporary knowledge</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see NSA as authentic, expert</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe NSA boosts student confidence</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not sure about any benefit in HSC marks</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think NSA provides different approach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think NSA is for students’ enjoyment</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a vision of broader benefit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I use the NSA to reinforce</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I give priority to university entrance preparation</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I give time for the NSA to prepare</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am comfortable with the NSA</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I focus on student memory work</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see the NSA as reference for language</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see the NSA as benefit to myself</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


I believe my TL is adequate for speaking TL with NSA
I see the NSA as increasing my workload

Table 4. Thematic coding of Teacher interview data.

The teachers were unanimous in understanding the NSA’s role and of the value of the NSA as a representative of authentic and expert language use. Four of the seven teachers do not perceive the apparent contradiction in allowing the NSA to use some, or a large amount of, English. Teachers in Schools 1, 2, 3, and 5 invest use of their NSA in public examination speaking practice for senior students. Despite this, the teachers in Schools 1 and 3 are not sure about any concrete benefit of the NSA’s role for improvement in HSC marks. It appeared that practice with the NSA in these schools had fossilized, and that some teachers believed that no NSA pedagogy other than one-to-one conversation with senior students could be possible. It is noted that, although teachers believe that having an NSA increases their workload, the majority thought that the NSA could be of potential benefit to teachers, to develop target language proficiency or for contemporary culture.

4.2.3 Interviews with Students

In Schools 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7, focus group interviews were held with groups of students from the classes who had worked with an NSA. This was not possible in School 5.

A number of recurring themes emerged from the student data. Table 5 displays the number of students who, in the transcribed texts of the focus groups, mentioned items which were considered to fall in the thematic code area. The themes which emerged in student data for Schools 2-5 were not entirely relevant to Schools 1, 6, and 7, due to the different ages represented and the students’ facility in communicating self-reflective critical thinking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students say:</th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>S6</th>
<th>S7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I dislike working with NSA; I feel anxious</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(25%)</td>
<td>(19%)</td>
<td>(62%)</td>
<td>(25%)</td>
<td>(12%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like the authentic language and accent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(25%)</td>
<td>(66%)</td>
<td>(75%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(50%)</td>
<td>(50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It boosts my confidence</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(23%)</td>
<td>(50%)</td>
<td>(20%)</td>
<td>(50%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The class is personal, intimate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(43%)</td>
<td>(25%)</td>
<td>(50%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The NSA is a role model for target culture</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(66%)</td>
<td>(25%)</td>
<td>(40%)</td>
<td>(50%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like listening to NSA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(14%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(40%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(25%)</td>
<td>(25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s motivating</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(50%)</td>
<td>(43%)</td>
<td>(13%)</td>
<td>(70%)</td>
<td>(25%)</td>
<td>(25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like NSA in an alternative role to teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(25%)</td>
<td>(38%)</td>
<td>(25%)</td>
<td>(60%)</td>
<td>(16%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer different activities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(50%)</td>
<td>(14%)</td>
<td>(87%)</td>
<td>(20%)</td>
<td>(8%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It improves my writing | 0 | 5 (23%) | 2 | 3 (30%) | NA | NA
---|---|---|---|---|---|---
I like speaking | 1 (25%) | 5 (23%) | 1 (13%) | 4 (40%) | 0 | 0
---|---|---|---|---|---|---
It enables a different perspective, mindset | 0 | 8 (38%) | 0 | 4 (40%) | 3 | 3 (37%)
---|---|---|---|---|---|---
I can analyse the change in my language | 1 (25%) | 9 (43%) | 2 (25%) | 7 (70%) | 0 | 0
---|---|---|---|---|---|---

Table 5. Number of students who mentioned items in thematic code areas.

Despite the differences in age groups represented and the small samples in some schools, a number of positive outcomes of NSA practices can be seen in the student interview data. It can be seen that students largely understand and appreciate the role of the NSA in providing authentic language and in hearing good pronunciation. This was especially evident in students at two rural schools, who appeared aware that their classroom teacher’s target language may not be authentic or fluent.

In Schools 2 and 4, an alignment can be seen between students’ enjoyment of their interaction with the NSA and with their motivation, appreciation of having an alternative to the teacher model, sense of personal engagement with the NSA, and ability to analyse improvement in their own language production. As with all effective learning, students express enjoyment and have more learning benefit if they are working in a positive relationship with the educator (Ayres, Sawyer & Dinham, 2004).

Students enjoy the fact that with the NSA they can extend their language in a different way to that in the classroom situation, and that they can share personal information. Students in Schools 2 and 4 were able to identify that through working with the NSA their pronunciation had improved, they knew more idiom and they could think in the target language more quickly. They also identified that the addition of idiom and better expression in speaking also benefited their writing skills. While some expressed anxiety about the NSA interaction, they admitted that practice over time increased their confidence. In schools where practice focused on one-to-one conversation, students expressed the desire for a greater variety of activities. In schools where the NSA was being used to reinforce grammar largely through English, students themselves commented that this was a waste of the potential of the NSA. Junior students in Schools 6 and 7 liked interacting with NSA, were interested in the target language culture and enjoyed activities conducted in the target language.

5. Discussion

5.1 Assessing Effectiveness

This study identified in seven schools a variety of practices in the use of an NSA as an additional resource in language learning and it identified student perception of those practices and of their own learning outcomes.

Effectiveness can be assessed against current language learning goals and against syllabus outcomes. With only a single one-day visit to each school, in-depth exploration and formal assessment of learning outcomes were limited. The findings highlight the fact that most students value and enjoy the opportunity to interact with a native speaker and appreciate the authentic context, the authentic language and the role modeling of the culture. Where they have a good relationship with the NSA and the learning is positive, they are motivated to participate.

No formal assessment is being carried out by the seven schools as to any enhancement of students' learning outcomes through the NSA. In four schools where some effective pedagogy is used, the data suggests that, in some participants’ perception, language learning is being supplemented and extended through
structured interaction with native speaker assistants. In terms of the syllabus goals of intercultural language learning around which teachers construct their programs, there is limited awareness in all seven schools of how student interaction with the NSA may contribute to student achievement of learning outcomes. The study further identified current practices in a number of schools which had very limited effectiveness in enhancing either language learning or student motivation, and in some cases were negative factors in student experience.

5.2 Recommendations

In the light of the current goals of Australian language learning (as described in Section 2.1), this study believes the analysis of data of this study indicates that an intensive revision of pedagogy relating to NSA inclusion would be valuable. From the findings of this study we have synthesized a number of principles whereby better practice can be initiated in different school contexts. These principles address pedagogy, and the professional development of both the teacher and the NSA.

5.2.1 Pedagogy

The one-to-one model of the individual student with the NSA has evident strengths, in that student responsibility, close modeling of authentic language in immersion, and the personal relationship which can develop all become part of the interaction. It is questionable whether senior students enjoy or benefit from the repetitive practice of speaking examination responses. Learning outcomes from the one-to-one practice can be improved with better pedagogy. The teacher and NSA should develop a variety of engaging topics, perhaps making use of stimulus online material, students must record any new learning, and the NSA should conduct a simple evaluation of each session.

As an element of the students’ linguistic development, the learning activities with the NSA should be put into the teaching and learning program, to recognise the NSA’s role and value in student learning. Formative assessment of the learning outcomes achieved must be included and made visible to students and parents.

Teachers must understand that the employment of an NSA necessarily involves time for both collaboration and for the preparation of activities for better learning outcomes. There are many possibilities for team teaching, such as that conducted in School 4. Demonstrations of role plays, dialogues and quizzes can involve both the teacher and the NSA. Models of possible lesson types have been devised and are available as a professional development resource at http://www.aisnsw.edu.au (Moloney, 2011)

Teachers and NSAs should be made aware of the benefit of immersion-style NSA interaction in which the use of English is eliminated or minimized (Taylor, 1990). Students can be guided to develop guesswork strategies to recognise and use familiar language. NSAs can be trained in the use of facial expressions, gestures and visual resources to aid comprehension.

The intercultural learning that is possible with an NSA has been little explored. Students would like the chance to ask the NSA about their lives and background. No school in this study had thought of the potential for the students (rather than the NSA) to ask the questions, or for the interaction with the NSA to involve reflection on Australian culture and identity. The NSA is a resource for whole class intercultural learning which has not been explored.

Student comments reflected that, in interaction with the NSA, they are attaining syllabus outcomes in two areas, that is, in making linguistic connections and in moving between cultures. However, teachers appear to be unaware of this. These intercultural learning outcomes should
also be acknowledged in the school’s teaching and learning program as part of student achievement through the NSA.

5.2.2 Teacher and NSA professional development

Only three schools appeared to realise the potential for teacher language development and language practice through help from the NSA. One school suggested including in the role description the NSA’s use in regular professional development classes to maintain teachers’ target language proficiency. This practice should be profiled and valued by schools as a standard professional development for language faculties.

NSAs frequently work in the same school for several years on a continuing casual basis. They enjoy their work but feel frustrated and capable of contributing more. Currently no attempt is made by teachers to develop NSA skills.

It is also important to note that the NSA fulfils a valuable role in rural communities which have limited access to urban resources. Apart from the language teacher, the NSA may be the only role model for the language in the area. In this situation, the support and training of the NSA and their inclusion in wider school life are even more important for the nurture of social and professional relationships.

Conclusion

The teachers in this study, as committed language educators, employ an NSA for the provision of authentic language and as a positive role model of language and culture for their students. However, this vision of desired learning outcomes is not consistently being achieved. The principles for better practice outlined in this paper will enable them to improve language learning outcomes for their students. Future research is required for a closer examination of the intercultural learning outcomes which students attain when working with an NSA.

Biographies

Dr Robyn Moloney is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, Macquarie University. She teaches Methodology in Languages and in ESL to preservice teachers. Her research interests include intercultural development through language learning, pedagogy and heritage language learners. She has been an experienced teacher of languages in schools.

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