IN SEARCH OF A DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION STRUCTURE

FOR THE ADULT ESL CLASSROOM

by

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Abstract

This thesis describes an action research study into the viability of creating a democratic participation structure in an adult ESL classroom. While critical pedagogy has provided a framework for critiquing power relations within the classroom, more recent sociocultural perspectives on learning help to reconceptualize notions of participation, and feminist theories of democracy help to account for recognition of difference and inclusion. Working at this theoretical nexus, the teacher invited 14 advanced-level students to take increased responsibility for planning and carrying out classroom projects that made up a substantial part of their course. She also asked the students to act as co-researchers in an investigation of classroom processes, beginning with the question of whether increased student participation alone would strengthen democracy in the classroom. Data was collected from teacher's field notes, student journals and taped student-student interviews. The findings of the study indicate a wide variety of conceptions of both democracy and difference co-existing in the classroom. Based on these findings, the author concludes that a workable democratic participation structure for an adult classroom relies on three criteria: a model of inclusive communication that maximizes participation; a recognition of difference that does not assume consensus as its ultimate goal; and flexible roles for teacher and students. Though these factors may be present only in particular moments and interactions, striving for them not only creates more ethical classroom relationships but creates more learning opportunities for both students and teachers.

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Chapter One – Exploring Democratic Practices in the Adult ESL Classroom

> Democracy, basically democracy is important for anyone. Freedom to read,
> freedom to write, freedom to do anything without you punishing no one,
> but sometimes you need the punishment. Do you remember when you grow
> up from…your childhood, your mother pinch you or touch you by stick?
> It's good too. You learn from your mistake. (Joseph)
>
> I think everyone in this class, they shared their ideas and they respect each
> other and also I think when somebody talk about his idea, other people is
> still listening and we all participate in this activity in the class. And I think
> this really democratic class. (Linda)

These are some of the comments from English as a Second Language (ESL) learners

examining the possibilities of democracy in an adult ESL classroom. The range of responses

demonstrates some of the challenge and contradiction revealed when a teacher tries to tinker

with the structures of authority embedded in the classroom.

During the spring of 2004, I worked with a group of 14 Advanced-level, adult ESL

students in a community college classroom. With their agreement, I restructured classroom

processes in an attempt to increase learner involvement in decision making within the

course. I viewed this as democratization. When I set out to do this research, I initially had

two things in mind. One was to push the boundaries of my own understanding of

participation and democracy within classroom practice. The other was to document and

reflect upon the results of my tinkering. As one aspect of increased student participation, I

invited the students to collaborate as co-researchers in my endeavour.

To this end, I began with these research questions: In what ways does increased

student participation strengthen democracy in the classroom? How is the power differential

between students and teacher altered by involving students more in decision making? As the

students and I worked together, new questions arose. What did each of us mean by

'democracy'? And what type of classroom structure would support democratic participation?

In this thesis I will describe the processes and outcomes of my research project, as well as its foundation in the methods of action research. I will also explore a particular theoretical approach to democracy as it relates to participation, communication, difference and learning.

My initial conception of democracy in the classroom was that all participants would have equal voice and would have equal control over decision making. Participation by students in this setting consisted not only of taking part in lesson activities but in helping to shape those activities. During this research into my practice, two of my own hidden assumptions were revealed: that increased participation alone would strengthen democracy, and that democratic process would necessarily lead to consensus within a group. Later in the paper, I examine criteria that might be necessary for a workable democratic participation structure within an adult classroom. I find that the concept of participation has to be problematized to account for inclusive forms of communication and flexible roles for participants. With respect to the goal of consensus, I find that a more important aim is to develop a participation structure that makes room for difference while seeking respectful and productive ways to deal with conflict. Though none of the factors of inclusive communication, fluid roles or recognition of difference is constantly present in an adult classroom, I conclude that provisional forms of democracy are available in particular moments and interactions, and that striving for them not only creates a more just classroom but creates more learning opportunities for both students and teachers.

Background: A Critical Beginning

At the time of this project, I had worked in the field of ESL for most of the previous 17 years, 14 of those in a large community college in a program serving adult immigrants. For three years at the college, I worked in a teacher support role outside the classroom.

When I was beginning to teach, in the mid-1980's, the field of English language teaching was heavily influenced by three trends which all in one way or another had an impact on my teaching. These were the tenets of critical pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire (1970), the learner-centred approaches most clearly promoted within English language teaching in David Nunan's book *The Learner-Centred Curriculum* (1988), and the reflective practice brought to the field from the work of Donald Schön (e.g. 1983) by authors such as Julian Edge (e.g. 2001) and Jack Richards and Charles Lockhart (1994). I didn't meet up with this last stream of thinking until the early 1990's, but my own idealistic tendencies drew me immediately toward the other two.

As I became aware of the difficulties faced by immigrants in finding access points to social participation in Canada, I felt *called*, in an overtly ideological way, to see the classroom as a site of social and political dialogue, as a place to discuss issues of ostracism and citizenship. I operated within a model that accepted the almost synonymous nature of participation and democracy: equality of participation would lead to equality of voice for immigrants, and vice versa. I saw my role as that of facilitating greater participation both inside and outside the classroom.

I should make it clear that I didn't actually read any of Freire's work for a number of years, but his imprint was everywhere in my new profession, particularly in the practices of respecting learners' personal stories and in encouraging learner input into classroom

activities and curriculum. Many ESL instructors used techniques such as the language experience approach (e.g. Dixon & Nessel, 1983), pioneered in our sister profession of adult basic education, to write down student-dictated stories and create meaningful classroom texts. Breaking away from earlier grammar-based programs, textbooks of the time were frequently "situational," with emphasis on learning authentic English to use in daily life. Situational texts were not necessarily critical – I should not conflate these two trends – but those that were depicted immigrants (usually of colour) in crises such as insisting that a landlord repair the furnace, or that an employer provide safe working conditions. Popular reading materials from the United States at the time, when Canadian materials were just beginning to be developed, included books such as the *Impact* series, which featured readings on gun control and civil rights leader Rosa Parks (Motta & Riley, 1982).

I believed, fairly uncritically at the time, that learning English was a gateway to power for immigrants. I still see value in Freire's project of "naming the world" in order to change it (1970, p. 76). But it was easy to confuse this urge to provide ways for newcomers to express and ask about the new phenomena in their lives with the equally pervasive insistence of the time on providing "functional" language skills. It took me a while to feel the weight of what Maurice Taylor and Adrian Blunt (2001) have called the "technical-rational discourse" within language teaching, emphasizing job preparation and the training of future citizens, closely allied to that of creating autonomous learners. While Freire's promotion of class struggle in the classroom may have been evident, so was a more liberal notion that success in English would lead new immigrants to individual prosperity, and I was to represent the white, middle-class face of the true, English-speaking Canadian.

I am still stirred by the words of Paulo Freire (e.g. Freire & Macedo, 1987), and take heart from their admonition to clarify the fact that education is political and to constantly remind learners that this is the context of their learning. He challenges the authority and fixedness of official knowledges when he asks, "Who says that A, B and C must be known?" (in Bell, Gaventa & Peters, 1990, p.107). And he assures us that after the success of conscientization, the next step is action for change. Anything seems possible.

However, in the humdrum of daily practice, these encouragements have proven to be fraught with difficulties. For one thing, only a minority of ESL students fit the neat Freirian profile of the low-income worker with little or no formal education, struggling with literacy – that is, reading and writing in any language. Much of the literature on adult learning makes a frustrating collapse of the terms 'literacy' and 'ESL' (e.g. Taylor & Blunt, 2001). However, truly illiterate learners are often those who have had little access to the schooling system, or have failed in it or been failed by it. They have therefore been subjected to various types of marginalization. ESL students, in contrast, come from a wide range of educational and economic backgrounds. Some fight with landlords over the heat, but some are the landlords. Changes in Canadian immigration patterns since I began teaching have steadily increased the number of highly educated immigrants, as well as the number of those with financial capital to invest in Canadian businesses. While these individuals may be marginalized in some quarters of Canadian society for lack of language skills or for conspicuous cultural differences, they also carry a considerable amount of cultural capital in the form of education or of influence within increasingly powerful minority elites.

It became clear to me over the years that power relations within groups of randomly combined immigrants were often convoluted and perplexing. Power could be held on an

ongoing basis or for particular moments by those who had more money and resources, greater knowledge of Canada, superior study habits, or simply louder voices. I was occasionally involved directly in power struggles with individual students, particularly with men, and particularly older men whose professional or cultural backgrounds had trained them to be in charge. These incidents could be as apparently small as a momentary struggle over who got to hold a worksheet during a group activity, or as complex as managing competing discourses during discussions of welfare or the environment.

Perhaps the most complicated discourse to unsettle was the one concerning my role as the teacher. The new immigrants I met were on one hand eager to learn new "Canadian" ways, including the enjoyment of a more relaxed classroom atmosphere, and at the same time imbued with traditions of respect, or occasionally contempt, for the teacher's authority. In one group of Spanish speakers, I even realized they referred to me as *la maestra*, which translates more clearly as 'master' than 'mistress.' I had no difficulty with the idea that I knew more English than they did or that I might take leadership on organizational aspects of a class, but I was uncomfortable with the position this put me in of supposedly controlling people's learning.

The primary way in which I attempted to decentre this power in the classroom was by implementing what David Nunan (1988) calls the "negotiated curriculum." Although Nunan doesn't mention Freire or critical pedagogy in *The Learner-Centred Curriculum*, he does make a passing reference to "the 'banking principle'" and adult learners' distaste for it (p. 23). It's also easy to see a bridge between Nunan's work and Freire's (1970) contention that "the starting point for organizing the program...must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people" (p. 85).

Nunan (1988) outlines a theoretical convergence within language teaching of two streams of thought, one being the androgogical principles put forward by Malcolm Knowles (in Nunan, 1988, p. 22), emphasizing the respect desired by adult learners for their existing knowledge, and the second being the movement toward more communicative language teaching approaches. What Nunan (1988) calls the weaker version of communicative teaching has certainly prevailed during my career, as teachers attempt to create opportunities for language learners to use English as much as possible in the classroom. The strong version, which entails creating situations and tasks as closely resembling those outside the classroom as possible, is harder to maintain. I would argue that negotiating a curriculum creates a strong communicative task in that it provides an authentic decision-making situation in which to use English, while at the same time respecting adult learners' ability to make such decisions.

In sum, I saw asking for students' input into their courses as both participatory in a power-sharing sense and pedagogically sound for language teaching. I was lucky enough to teach in a community outreach program organized on principles of learner-centredness. Working at a variety of sites, I saw the huge differences in learners' needs and motives for learning English, and the limitations of implementing any one-size curriculum across these sites. I gradually refined various procedures for gathering information about the language skills and information about Canada on which students wished to focus. From the lists generated, I organized a class vote on favoured topics for discussion and reading. After gathering all this information and tallying the votes, I used a big, messy mapping process to connect the chosen topics with language points I felt needed covering (based on in-class diagnostics). I then came up with a plan for each course.

Despite these efforts at letting someone besides me decide if "A, B and C must be known" (Friere in Bell et al, 1990, p. 107), contradictions remained in the power structure of the classroom. For one thing, my imposition of student decision making sometimes had a coercive element, couched in my honestly-held beliefs in the superior learning environment created by learner engagement. For another thing, the system of decision making was not really transparent or subject to revision. Students made their final votes individually and fairly privately, rather than negotiating with each other or with me. If someone suggested a topic I truly abhorred teaching, or if ready-made materials were scarce on a particular topic, I might just leave it out. And once I'd made up a plan for the term, I usually followed it quite slavishly unless it became obvious that some aspect really wasn't working.

These attempts to devolve power sometimes led to other problems. This was most obvious in one particular class I taught in 1997, in which not a day went by that the content and activities of the course were not vocally criticized by someone, often in tones of complete disdain. One day I finally snapped and shouted that asking for their opinion did not give them the right to be disrespectful. This incident highlighted many aspects of power that I had been considering for years, including that of communication. After some reflection, I concluded that discussions about what it meant to implement democratic practices in a classroom had to be overt and not implicit in procedures, that the variety of attitudes and definitions had to be made clear if participants were going to interact in a productive and respectful way.

My awareness of the complexities of power relations in the classroom led to the current research. I wondered if I could more effectively challenge teacher-centred power by trying harder to include students in decision making, and if involving students more in

decision making would lead to a more truly democratic practice. I began to search for fruitful ways in which we could construct something together while sharing mutual responsibility, and arrived at the following scenario: What if students not only gave suggestions about the shaping of a course but also took responsibility for carrying out projects of their own design throughout the term? Visualizing it more concretely, I began to imagine students working in groups that would identify themes and ways to address them in any creative way they could devise, from finding readings or films, to inviting speakers, to organizing information or cultural events. Rather than terminating their participation in decision making after the first week of the course, a more democratic scenario would be one in which the students continued to shape these projects throughout the term. I saw myself potentially as a facilitator for these groups, and also, always, as the English language resource for the class.

All of this seemed like a very small way to stir the large cauldron of power issues that pour through a classroom. Even so, I could see that the logistics of such a process would be ambitious, and that students might reject so much responsibility. I recognized here one of the contradictions at the heart of critical pedagogy. What if you ask learners what they want and what they want is for you to stay in charge? I also recognized that the very diverse nature of the group would generate different understandings of democracy. I was eager to find out what these might be.

In retrospect, it is clear that I entered my research from a viewpoint almost identical to that put forward by Elsa Auerbach (2001), equating participation and democracy. And my underlying assumption, as I asked students to group themselves and carry out classroom projects, was that despite differences some sort of consensus was achievable in these groups.

In Chapter 2, I will consider a broader theoretical framework for a democratic participation structure that might provide room to overcome some of these limitations.

In Chapter 3, I will describe my research methodology, and how I attempted to use an action research method to mirror the democratic participation of the classroom. In Chapter 4, I will outline my own version of how events unfolded, and in Chapter 5 present the students' comments on issues of democracy, difference and learning. In Chapter 6, examining my findings in light of both sociocultural and feminist theories of participation and democracy, I will outline some of the elements that may be necessary within a democratic participation structure, including inclusive communication, the acceptance of conflicting views, and a problematized description of leadership roles. In Chapter 7, I will consider the implications of these findings for both research and teaching practice.

A Comment about Language

I have chosen to use the term 'ESL' throughout this paper even though it has become suspect. More appropriate terms such as ESOL (English as a second or other language) and EAL (English as an additional language) acknowledge the breadth of knowledge with which new English speakers come to learn it, as well as the complex cultural settings in which many of them grew up. However, ESL is still the term used in the program in which I teach, by both faculty and students, as well as in much of North American professional literature. Throughout the paper I use the term ESL to refer to programs and to the students registered in them. Wherever possible, I refer more generally to English language teaching and learning.

I have also struggled with ethical issues in my decisions about how to represent the ideas put forward by English language learners. On one hand, I do not want the importance of their ideas to be in any way diminished by responses to language that some might consider to be sub-standard. On the other hand, I do not feel it is my prerogative to tamper with their words any more than a writer already must when choosing to move them from one context to another. In the end I have decided to leave them as close to the original as possible, with the exception of occasionally adding or cutting a few words to avoid confusion, or cutting speakers' asides as they searched for particular words.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I use abbreviations throughout to refer to my data sources. 'FN' indicates my field notes. 'LP' indicates my original lesson plans. 'SI 1' and 'SI 2' refer to two sets of student-student interviews and 'SJ' refers to student journals.

Chapter Two – In Search of a Democratic Participation Structure

In Freire's (Freire & Macedo, 1987) words, "The more unquiet a pedagogy, the more critical it will become" (p. 54). In this hopeful spirit of disruption, I begin this chapter by exploring the limitations of critical pedagogy. I then go on to outline my conception of the elements of a democratic participation structure for the classroom, seeking a bridge between theories of critical pedagogy and sociocultural perspectives on learning as well as feminist theories of democracy.

The Limits of Critical Pedagogy

Within the supposedly democratic space of my classroom, I encountered two kinds of difficulties over the years – first, that I maintained a type of dominating power over students, and secondly, that despite this clear two-way imbalance, power relations could not be described as a simple see-saw between me and them. These issues have been addressed by feminist scholars Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) and Jennifer Gore (1998), and also by literacy and ESL educator Rachel Martin (2001).

Both Ellsworth (1989) and Martin (2001) question the foregrounding in Freirian pedagogy of teachers' knowledge, not their content expertise but their understanding of repressive social structures and their ability to pose problems that would lead currently uncritical learners to a critical stance and readiness for "intervention in reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 101) in unjustly structured social situations. This continued imposition of enlightened teacher authority overlooks the limits to teachers' critical awareness due to their own inevitably "partial, multiple and contradictory" voice (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 312), and the frequent impossibility of their knowing "about the experiences, oppressions, and

understandings of other participants in the class" (p. 310). At the same time, the assumption that learners' consciousness is "false" (Martin, 2001, p. 45) often correlates with an equally problematic assumption that their silence can be read as lack of knowledge rather than resistance to the teacher's interference (Ellsworth, 1989). Martin (2001) deconstructs frequent occurrences even within "radical" literacy programs of portrayals of the "illiterate" (p. 33) as dysfunctional and Other (a positioning Hirmani Bannerji, 1997, also ascribes to those labelled "immigrant" and "ESL"), and points out that her own students "very often did view reality with a critical consciousness" (p. 7).

Freirian pedagogy is based on a dialogic relationship between teacher and learners, a rational dialogue Ellsworth (1989, 1997) finds to be based on the assumption of an irrational Other. This Other is seen as the non-participant who has yet to be readied for participation, rather than someone whose voice we, as teachers, haven't yet learned to hear (Martin, 2001).

Although Martin (2001) analyzes particular passages from Freire's writings, she levels her critique as much at the practices within language teaching that have leaked down from Freirian precepts. For example, she examines a curriculum developed by Elsa Auerbach and Nina Wallenstein . While these authors caution that the teacher should maintain the role of problem poser without imposing their own answers, Martin counters, "If we really believe that students will come up with their own viable strategies – that we don't have all the answers – why wouldn't we put our own solutions on the table to be considered with the others?" (p. 71). She also notes the condescension with which Auerbach and Wallenstein suggest that "the problem posed [to ESL learners] 'shouldn't be too overwhelming'" (p. 71) and again parries, "…perhaps it's out of raising purposefully simplistic questions that simplistic pedagogy emerges" (p. 71).

Both Martin (2001) and Gore (1998) draw on Michel Foucault's notion of the pervasiveness of power in order to address the diffusion of power in the classroom, a contradiction I also saw in Freire's binary description of power imbalance. In Gore's research into the "micro-level functioning of power in pedagogy" (p. 277) at a number of learning sites, including several involving adults, she concludes that acts of dominance such as surveillance and examination continue even when teachers or students have tried to eradicate them, and are often unconsciously embodied by both. For example, she notes instances of self-regulation and the imposition of norms among members of a feminist book group, an example which resonates with my own experience of adult learners who have "internalis[ed]...school processes" (Gore, 1998, p. 284). Martin (2001) believes that teachers can "see our complicity with oppressive ideas and actions differently by seeing power as a web of relations rather than one deterministic force...that we must overcome" (p. 53).

Maurice Taylor and Adrian Blunt (2001) confirm my observation of two dominant discourses within literacy and, they extrapolate, English language teaching in Canada, one "technical-rational" and the other "social emancipatory." Within the latter stream, perhaps the most notable proponent is Auerbach (e.g. 2001). She dismisses much of the critique of critical pedagogy as "Freire tales" based on "myths and misconceptions" of the great man's work (2001, p. 271). It is also possible to see in her more recent work that critical pedagogies have evolved away from what Alistair Pennycook calls the "emancipatory assuredness of traditional leftist pedagogies ...aimed to enlighten the unenlightened and to empower the disempowered" (in Pavlenko, 2004, p. 55). Auerbach (2001) acknowledges

that to deny the teacher's power is "both irresponsible and disingenuous" (p. 278). She goes on to say,

> ...Part of having power is making space for students to exert their power and to participate in decision making. The dance of teachers and students as they negotiate their respective goals, expectations, and understanding is central to participatory ESL. (p. 278)

Instead of reading learners' resistance to her ideas or authority as lack of critical awareness, she looks for productive ways to work with it and refrains from offering any ready-made answers to the questions she poses (p. 294).

In problematizing critical pedagogy, I don't intend to discard its most useful aspect, its foundation in opposition to structural inequalities embedded in education. Also, my experience as both a teacher and learner is that transformational moments do exist in learning, and are sometimes catalyzed by a teacher who poses the right critical question at the right moment. Ellsworth, Gore and Martin all couch their analyses within the frameworks of poststructuralist thought. Ellsworth (1989) particularly emphasizes the point that classroom democracy based on rational dialogue is impossible once universal, rational narratives have been dismissed. Martin (2001), however, is less gloomy. She suggests that rather than declining to pose problems, teachers can add to the stock of critical questions ones which address teachers' own involvement in what's going on, including "Who has something to gain [or lose] from asking these very questions?" (p. 54).

To reiterate, it is not my intention to invalidate critical pedagogy, but to look for bridges between it and various sociocultural theories of learning and feminist theories of power in order to better understand the possibilities of a democratic participation structure within the classroom.

The Elements of a Democratic Participation Structure

An equation of participatory practice with democratic practice is evident in the work of authors such as Auerbach (2001) and has carried over into the versions of critical pedagogy evident within language teaching practice, including my own. My chief research question in embarking on this project was whether increased participation alone would strengthen democracy in the classroom. However, I see now that this starting point was insufficient for ongoing analysis of events. For one thing, the concepts of participation and democracy don't relate in a simple input-output manner, and while it is arguable that democracy cannot exist without participation, I contend that various forms of participation can exist without democracy. Also, the troubling question arises of what types of procedural structure can be contrived to support either one of them.

I have borrowed the term "participation structure" from Barbara Rogoff and her colleagues Ruth Paradise, Rebeca Mejía Arauz, Maricela Correa-Chávez, and Cathy Angelillo (2003) because it best describes the social manner in which people engage in learning. I have further modified it with the adjective 'democratic'. It is my central aim in this paper is to explore the deeply entwined relationship between democracy and participation, and to consider whether a democratic participation structure is viable in the adult ESL classroom. While none of the elements of 'democracy', 'participation' or 'structure' can exist alone but remain deeply embedded within each other, it is necessary to theorize each concept more thoroughly in order to better understand these interconnections. Therefore, I will attempt to clarify the meanings of each element as they influenced my thinking on entering into my research and framed the way in which I made sense of my findings. I will consider each of them here in turn.

Democracy: Young's Communicative Model

Among the many theories of democracy, the one that appears to me most compatible with the pluralistic reality of life in an ESL classroom is that of communicative democracy put forward by Iris Marion Young (1996, 2000). Young is interested in overcoming the theoretical shortcomings in what she calls "interest-based" models of democracy, those in which citizens vote or otherwise compete for the ascendancy of their individual interests. However, she also differentiates her thinking from models of deliberative democracy more similar to her own.

In both the deliberative and communicative models, the concept of democracy rests on the ability of those affected by decisions to discuss their outcomes as equal partners. Seyla Benhabib (1996) describes a deliberative model in which different groups, such as those within civil society that want to influence government policy, discuss issues in the following manner:

> 1) participation in such deliberation is governed by the norms of equality and symmetry; all have the same chances to initiate speech acts, to question, to interrogate and to open debate; 2) all have the right to question the assigned topics of conversation; and 3) all have the right to initiate reflexive arguments about the very rules of the discourse procedure and the way in which they are applied or carried out. (p. 70)

According to Jürgen Habermas (1996), "deliberative politics...depends on a network of fairly regulated bargaining processes and of various forms of argumentation, including pragmatic, ethical and moral discourses..." (p. 25). Also, "within and outside the parliamentary complex,...subjectless forms of communication constitute arenas in which a more or less rational opinion- and will-formation can take place" (p. 28).

Benhabib and Habermas differ significantly from Young in their premise that the validity or legitimacy of democratic process resides in what Benhabib (1996) calls its "practical rationality." For Benhabib, this rationality is brought about through the increased generation of "information" during discussion, and the increase in individuals' critical reflection and ability to "articulat[e] good reasons in public" (p. 71). Further, "democratic institutions require the articulation of the bases of their actions and policies in discursive language that appeals to commonly shared and accepted public reasons" (p. 83). Young is not convinced that either Benhabib's or Habermas's model deals sufficiently with the cultural or other differences between people who are not part of a unified polity, but are "thrown together" (Young, 1996, p. 128) by their "geographical proximity and economic interdependence" (p. 126). She doubts that under these circumstances a common set of "public reasons" either pre-exists (Benhabib, 1996) or will be generated through deliberations (Habermas, 1996). The differences within a community are so great that the communication necessary for decision making will come about not only by discussing the content of interest to varied subgroups, but also by employing a variety of communication forms beyond that of rational deliberation. Young's (1996, 2000) model of communicative democracy includes debate as well as communication modes she refers to as greeting, rhetoric and storytelling.

Within the deliberative model, Young (1996, 2000) finds that rational forms of argument are usually privileged over all other forms of communication. For example, the opinion of a person who puts forward a proposal and defends it using an emotional appeal or using a style of language outside the (white, middle-class) norm of dispassionate, orderly public debate may be dismissed because their comments are heard as merely "rhetorical"

and therefore manipulative. However, "the ideal of disembodied and disembedded reason that [this premise] presupposes is a fiction," and all styles of address "carry the rhetoric of a particular social position," no matter how invisible that position is within dominant discourse (2000, p. 63). In this analysis she distances herself from Habermas's (1996) notion of "subjectless" communication. Young (2000) goes on to discuss the possibilities of accepting rhetoric as a productive factor in democratic discussion, because of the pragmatic importance of drawing listeners in with appeals to their emotions, but more importantly of speaking to a variety of groups in language that each can understand.

Young (1996, 2000) also describes narrative as a necessary form of democratic communication. This notion parallels Benhabib's (1996) of increasing the information available for decision making, but diverges from Benhabib in that Young's emphasis is on the social interaction necessary to work together, rather than on merely making more informed choices. According to Young's (2000) theory, by putting forward and listening to each other's stories, people from a variety of backgrounds, joining in deliberation, can create "shared premisses" [sic] with which to take up the necessary next step of rational debate (p. 70).

Young's emphasis on inclusion, on recognizing difference rather than assuming unity between participants of incredibly diverse backgrounds, leads me to take up her model of communicative democracy as a touch-point for considering the processes of interaction within an ESL classroom. While it is my intention throughout this paper to consider various forms of democracy and their viability in the classroom, I will use Young's framework to guide my examination of ways in which classroom decision-making and research activities took place throughout my study.

Participation: Learning and Democracy Intertwined

The second element of a democratic participation structure – participation – is deeply bonded to learning, both in traditional classroom activities and in democratic discussion. Young's (2000) thesis that communicative democracy flows from inclusive discussion in which participants learn from each other's very different perspectives resonates with sociocultural notions of learning put forward by authors such as Barbara Rogoff (1995; Rogoff et al., 2003) and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991).

Building on the earlier Vygotskian notion that knowledge is socially constructed (e.g.Wertsch, 1985), more recent sociocultural thinkers have extended understanding of how learning is culturally mediated, particularly through language. Rogoff (1995) uses the term "participative appropriation" to describe the process of learning as almost synonymous with that of participation. She doesn't just mean learners with access to educational resources – those who participate in the system – have more opportunity to learn, but that learning itself is a process of becoming someone who shares cultural knowledge. For Lave and Wenger (1991), a learner is a novice, or "legitimate peripheral participant," who is working toward expertise or mastery within a community of practice. Learning is situated in that it is specific to the context in which it takes place. Within a classroom, found knowledge is not simply transmitted, in the positivist sense, or uncovered through the artful problem-posing of a teacher, in the Freirian sense, but is mutually created through interaction in the classroom community.

Some educators have looked for a critical hook within sociocultural theory. For example, Jim Cummins (2003) hopes that the ability of teachers to approach learners across

difference within their Zone of Proximal Development will allow for recognition of learners' cultural identities and thus increase the availability of "collaborative power" for all participants, thwarting the win-lose distribution of "coercive power" prevalent within traditional classrooms. However, others have problematized the assumptions that all are equally able to participate in a community, or that participation in a community will naturally lead to equality. Kelleen Toohey (1998) finds in her study of non-English-speaking children in an elementary classroom, that differences in status and privilege obstructed the full participation of these children in the classroom community, and therefore impinged on their learning. Meanwhile, in the area of Early Childhood Education (ECE), Diana Hodges (1998) observes that even individual teachers who participate fully may resist the ECE community's specified identity and thus remain marginalized, if not peripheral.

In other words, it's possible to be inside a community but unable to participate, or to participate and not be inside. Rogoff and her associates (2003) introduce the concept of participation structures for learning, acknowledging that these vary in their degree of hierarchy. In order to consider what a *democratic* participation structure might look like, it is very helpful at this point to draw on Nancy Fraser's (2000) ideas about participatory parity and Young's (2000) about inclusion in order to examine the power relations that evolve out of different forms of participation, and how these relate to learning.

Young (2000) differentiates between "external" and "internal exclusion." By external exclusions, she means structural barriers that prohibit citizens from participating in democratic public deliberation. I have occasionally witnessed external exclusions of learners from the classroom, for example in cases where women have limited access to activities outside the home, or impoverished students can't afford bus fare to get to school. Fraser

(2000) would refer to this latter problem as an example of the "maldistribution" of resources.

By internal exclusion, Young (2000) means the more subtle ways in which those physically present in the discussion are disregarded and unattended to. Her alternative proposal of internal *in*clusion through publicly greeting all participants in a democratic discussion roughly parallels Fraser's (2000) idea of "recognition" of members of one identity group by members of another. In order to participate, those present must be acknowledged by others "in their particularity" (Young, 2000, p. 58). Concerned, like Ellsworth (1989), that individuals' multiple identities must be recognized and validated, not essentialized, Fraser (2000) puts forward a "status model" for understanding ways in which "misrecognition constitutes a form of institutionalized subordination" (p. 114). An ethical social system, including education, would function in a way that provided "participatory parity" for all. In order to achieve this goal, social processes and regulations would have to "[entrench] new value patterns" (p. 116) by taking into account the degree of distinctness with which particular identity groups are recognized. In the case of an adult ESL setting, this would include refraining from ascribing "excessive…or constructed distinctness" to some cultural groups while at the same time acknowledging the distinctiveness of others, including dominant groups. It is particularly important to acknowledge the whiteness or middle class position of the teacher (if either is the case) "which has been falsely parading as universal" (p. 115).

Both Fraser's model of participatory parity and Young's of internal inclusion resonate with Barbara Rogoff's (1995) sociocultural theory of participative appropriation. Within a classroom space, if all of these dynamics of participation exist simultaneously, then

both learning and democracy are dependent on full participation and are inseparably intertwined.

Structure: Problematizing Procedures

The third element of a democratic participation structure is structure itself. In the classroom, teachers, and sometimes students, confront the daily mechanics of organizing activity that allows for fruitful communication and full participation. By 'structure', I am referring here to the micro level of intentionally chosen classroom procedures and the way these draw participants into relationship with each other. I am not using the term 'structure' in the macro and more ambient sense of how larger institutions function or how social classes relate to one another.

To step into that larger arena for a moment though, I want to look at the way Habermas (1996) uses the term "proceduralist" interchangeably with "deliberative" in describing his model of democracy. Within the scope of state governance that he envisions, a web of decentralized civil society groups gain "communicative power" by deliberating on issues and contributing to the social understanding of political events and policies. He differentiates this type of power formation from the liberal assumption that discussion within civil society can only hope to influence a remote administrative power through lobbying and voting in elections. Benhabib (1996) elaborates on the institutionalizing of decentralized democratic procedures by suggesting that such a system would acknowledge "value pluralism" by including practices for "attaining and revising beliefs." These practices would include "procedural solutions of conflict adjudication...under conditions of social

cooperation mutually acceptable to all," and would be based not on mass assemblies but on "the interlocking net" of social groupings (p. 73).

Obviously, there are numerous differences between democratic structures put in place on the scale of wider society and those used in the classroom. However, some similarities exist, for example in the need to problematize the distinction between having direct participation in decision making and seeking influence on a distant, higher authority.

I've discussed educator Rachel Martin's (2001) critique of critical pedagogy earlier, and her comments that power within the classroom should be considered as a web of relations rather than a binary between teachers and students. This diffuse view of power also spurs an analysis of democracy by Chantal Mouffe (1999), who sees power not "as an external relation taking place between two pre-constituted identities, but rather as constituting the identities themselves" (p. 753). According to Mouffe, a structure that will work in a pluralist democracy will not be a deliberative one that assumes a rational, consensual result, but one that makes room for dissent, that accepts only a temporary consensus within a politics that is "in part collaborative and in part conflictual" (p. 756).

I find that the element of 'structure' within a democratic participation structure may not follow simply from a pre-existing commitment by all participants to a set of rational procedures. To begin with, everyone within the classroom setting has to grapple with how the structure will be developed. Just as civic polities have to decide whether to impose on members the legal obligation of voting in elections, classroom democracies have to take into account the different degrees of willingness with which people participate. Students and teachers have to work out how leadership and decision-making *roles* will be distributed. That is, it may be impossible to redistribute power itself as if it were a finite resource, but

role changes that reduce subordination may be possible. Participants may find no easy procedural solution for conflict adjudication, as Benhabib (1996) would like to see. And by accepting Benhabib's proposition that "the very rules of the discourse procedure" can be questioned at any time, the ways of organizing work and relations within a classroom may not only be messy but fraught with the ongoing, unresolvable contestation more easily recognizable in Young's (1996, 2000) or Mouffe's (1999) thinking than in Benhabib's.

The Three Elements Reunited

In outlining a theoretical framework within which to analyze the narrative of my research, I have attempted the somewhat artificial exercise of teasing apart the deeply interrelated concepts of democracy, participation and structure. My research is about seeking to understand, in an absolutely unquantifiable fashion, the influence of altered participation on the other two elements. The changes to my teaching are not merely a matter of introducing new teaching methods or procedures, but of troubling the complex social relationships that exist in the classroom. Whether or not a democratic participation structure is entirely feasible, the goal of creating space for communicative democracy, participatory parity and evolving procedures remains. In Chapter 6, I will re-examine these concepts in light of my research findings.

However, I turn first to my research itself, with an explanation in the next chapter of my action research methodology.

Chapter 3 – Action Research: To Improve and to Involve

In my classroom I set out to discover ways in which students might more fully participate in the decision-making processes of their course. By doing this I hoped to find out whether it was possible to strengthen a form of communicative democracy in the classroom as well as enhance learning.

An action research method seemed ideally suited to studying my classroom intervention for several reasons. First of all, action research is specifically oriented toward change. Secondly, its participatory nature disturbs traditional power relations among researchers and researched just as I hoped my new classroom arrangements would disturb those among teacher and students. Thirdly, and by extension, action research methods depend on the learning and sharing of research skills, including communication skills of particular relevance in a language classroom. And fourthly, in my classroom I sought an open-ended approach to incorporating student input into course design and execution, and this process was mirrored by the iterative nature of action research, in which new research questions continually arise from initial findings.

I set out on my journey with the following questions: In what ways does increased student participation strengthen democracy in the classroom? How is the power differential between students and teacher altered by involving students more in decision-making? As I began to work with students to change classroom procedures and to foreground issues of responsibility and leadership, additional questions arose. For example, what are the multiple meanings of democracy in use during our discussions? What are the various forms that participation can take? And, what kinds of "participation structures," to borrow the term from Barbara Rogoff and her colleagues (Rogoff et al, 2003), can be called democratic?

Our action research method itself required a participation structure, one which I hoped to democratize by involving students as co-researchers, creating what Nancy Fraser (2000) calls "participatory parity." I will discuss some of the promise and difficulties in achieving this goal later in this chapter. In the course of my inquiry, I discovered that collaborative research between learners and teachers has been largely undocumented, and I hope that in this regard my project will make a particular contribution to the literature of action research.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Action Research

In Chapter 2, I introduced Iris Marion Young's (1996, 2000) model of communicative democracy. As well as providing a guide for creating more ethical relations within regular classroom activities, Young's idea of inclusion through openness to difference in views and communication styles is relevant to my classroom research framework.

The model of action research that I engaged has two characteristics that resonate with Young's model of democracy. First, action researchers deliberately include the views of a variety of participants, at the community or school level seeking the opinions of those directly affected by policies or processes. Secondly, action research is usually a first step toward change. In order for this transformation to come about, though, those who have power to make change must have both the opportunity and the courage to listen to the stories of others and be open to responding to them. As Young (2000) puts it, within a communicative democratic setting, the telling of these stories is respected as one way " to create shared premisses" [sic] on which to act (p. 70).

The tradition of critical action research provides a sound basis for researching the nature of democracy and participation within a classroom. However, in the same way that principles of critical pedagogy have been questioned, the critical approaches to action research theorized by authors such as Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis (1986) have been challenged by feminist and postmodern scholars. In what follows, I outline some of this critique, examining how some of these issues are relevant to research positions within the field of language teaching. I then explore some of the ways in which collaborative research jointly conducted by learners and teachers can draw its validity from both its situated and its ethical nature.

The Limits of Critical Action Research

Just as teachers may perpetuate a hierarchical relationship with learners by assuming that as teachers they hold special knowledge about social relations, researchers, no matter how empancipatory their intent, may continue to create unequal relationships between themselves and their subjects.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) define action research as "a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out" (p. 162). Extremely relevant to my own project are what Carr and Kemmis call the "two essential aims of all action research: to *improve* and to *involve*" (p. 165, emphasis in the original). It was certainly my intention to improve practice by involving students in my research.

In later work, Kemmis (2001) provides at attractive case for truly critical teacher-driven research.

> This form of action research aims not only at improving outcomes, and improving the self-understandings of practitioners, but also at assisting practitioners to arrive at a critique of their social or educational work and work settings....Emancipatory action research aims towards helping practitioners to develop critical and self-critical understanding of their situation – which is to say, an understanding of the way both particular people and particular settings are shaped and re-shaped discursively, culturally, socially and historically. (p. 92)

It appears from this statement that Kemmis sees no difficulty in aligning action research with postmodern notions of situated understanding. Robin Usher and Ian Bryant (1989) – proponents of a postmodern rethinking of adult education, including educational research – agree that one of action research's benefits to adult education is its "strong theoretical warrant" in the situatedness of the researcher, who acts as an "active change agent" rather than a participant observer (p. 118). Overcoming the positivist assumption that research results are only as valid as they are generalizable, Kemmis's position opens the way to research that is valid exactly because it seeks out the difference and particularity of a site, recognizing that the structure framing the site "shapes" the actions of those within it.

Usher, Bryant and Rennie Johnston (1997) raise some concerns that within a critical framework researchers may assume they hold a greater critical consciousness than their subjects. "In the name of emancipation, researchers (explicitly or implicitly) impose their own meanings on situations rather than negotiate those meanings with research participants." (p. 196). They refer to Jennifer Gore's point that any research which universalises or totalises the experiences of its subjects runs the risk of imposing "yet another 'regime of truth'" on those subjects (p. 196).

Feminist authors have interrogated a number of aspects of emancipatory action research, including assumptions about voice or silence, rationality, and binary relationships between oppressors and oppressed. In her analysis of the relationship between "feminisms" and action research, Patricia Maguire (2001) concurs with Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997) that the issues of voice and silence have to be problematized within critical action research. Researchers, like teachers, can't assume they understand all the reasons that subjects speak or remain silent (Ellsworth, 1997; Martin, 2001). However, Maguire (2001) writes, "Feminist-grounded action research works to uncover and disrupt silencing mechanisms, subtle and overt, in knowledge creation and organizational change efforts" (p. 64). Paralleling Rachel Martin's (2001) comments about the need for teachers to be conscious of their own choices to speak or be silent, Cynthia Chataway points out that "withholding information such as one's own opinion does not just allow space for the other to speak, it can also be an act of power that forces the other to carry the burden of speaking or acting if any relationship is to be maintained" (in Maguire, 2001, p. 64). Maguire (2001) values the "supportive and challenging *relationships* [that] facilitate silence breaking. Action research draws from the relational processes inherent in many feminist methodologies" (p. 63, my emphasis).

Elizabeth Ellsworth's (1989, 1997) concerns about the rationality prescribed in critical pedagogies could also be applied to action research traditions. Carr and Kemmis (1986; Kemmis, 2001) ground their work in the thinking of Jürgen Habermas, whose criteria for successful "communicative action" include commitment to reaching mutual understanding and unforced consensus, and the creation of communicative public space (in Kemmis, 2001). Although Ellsworth (1997) is specifically addressing an over-emphasis on

rational dialogue in education, not in research, her thought cuts across Carr and Kemmis's in her questioning of the possibilities of reaching mutual understanding when individuals frequently speak and listen from shifting and often unrecognized social positions, and her concern that the learner (or research subject) could be positioned as an irrational Other.

Young's (1996, 2000) model of communicative democracy extends Kemmis' (2001) proposition that the creation of a communicative public space precedes any other learning that may take place there. To enter into research that specifically aims to build relationships across difference, researchers need to employ a variety of communication modes to hear stories and opinions that will not necessarily increase rationality or provide any consensus, but will illuminate the different realities that exist in practice.

Action Research and Language Teaching

Action research methods have gained ascendancy within the field of language teaching, with many influential proponents. As part of his definition of action research, David Nunan (1994) refers to Carr and Kemmis's (1986) condition of aiming "to enhance the rationality and justice of the educational system" (Nunan,1994, p. 3). I have already discussed some of the problematics of assumed rationality. I also find that attempts to improve "justice" are rarely visible within the actual workings of studies presented in the language teaching literature (e.g. Edge, 2001) or in the research how-to books for language teachers (e.g. Nunan, 1992; Wallace, 1998).

Bridget Somekh, writing for a language-teaching audience, calls action research "chameleon-like" in it adaptability to the context in which it takes place (1993, p. 29). She considers this to be one of its strengths in that other forms of educational research tend to be

carried out separately from teachers' everyday context, after which findings are presented to teachers in a "reified" form as a "given" (p. 31). Nunan (1993) expands on this rationale for promoting action research within the field of language teaching. Language instruction is often very method driven, with new research on second language acquisition, as opposed to teaching, leading to the introduction of new pedagogical directives every few years. He proposes that classroom research is one way in which teachers can develop their practices from the "inside out" rather than relying on "an outside 'expert' to bring the 'good news'," and that this research can have a more longitudinal timeline than many academic studies (p. 41).

Elsewhere Nunan concludes that despite many logistical shortcomings, action research is "an effective instrument for bringing about professional renewal and curriculum change" (1994, p. 11). Within the field of English language teaching, action research is clearly associated primarily with personal reflective practice (e.g. Richards & Lockhart, 1994) and with finding practical solutions to teaching problems rather than with any type of emancipatory practice. Even Kemmis (2001) concedes that where he once thought critical action research the only type worthy of the label, he has come to see that much valuable research is of a technical or practical nature. However, I believe that much can be done to strengthen the practice of action research within language teaching by drawing on its critical and communicative possibilities.

Nunan (1993, 1994) provides interesting evidence that the experience of participating in action research, even when carried out to meet instrumental ends such as implementing curriculum change, may unintentionally shift power relations in the classroom. In a study of ESL teachers who had participated in various action research

projects, Nunan (1994) found that a high percentage self-reported to have changed their practices as a result, for example by increasing student participation, incorporating more student ideas, and becoming more conscious of dominating teacher behaviours such as being "directive" and criticizing, even when these factors were not directly related to the research questions (p. 10).

Involving Learners as Collaborative Researchers

Different authors have made cases for the validity of action research, citing variously its reciprocity between the researcher and researched (Lather, 1992), its drawing together of multiple points of view (Reason, 1994), and its access to insider knowledge (Hart, 1998). Much of this reasoning about validity is grounded in the participatory nature of action research, but in most of the literature on educational action research the term 'collaboration' refers strictly to relationships between groups of teachers, or between teachers and outside academic researchers. Anne Burns' book *Collaborative Action Research for English Language Teachers* (1999) is typical of this trend. Little has been published on the subject of involving learners as researchers in collaboration with teachers.

In my search for models of previous research carried out by learners and teachers together, I found that the most comprehensive and inspiring examples were studies involving young school children (e.g. Hume, 2001; Smith, 1999). I concluded from these that if children as young as seven could take on active collaborative roles, then adults, even those working in a new language, could certainly have input into all stages of research. In fact, many adult ESL learners have previous formal experience as researchers. In several cases from the language teaching literature, research has been conducted by adult ESL

students in order to further their language learning, though none of it is identified as action research (Adams, 2001; Ilieva, 2001; Tanaka, 1997). A case described by Karen Adams (2001) demonstrates the fuzziness of the line dividing research roles. After asking her students to listen for and report on examples of authentic English speech from their urban environment, Adams' own reflections on the project are deemed to be action research, but the students' research is considered separately, with no collaborative framework, and serves as a data base for Adams' analysis.

Amidst this confusion over research roles, then, the question arises of how the different abilities and interests of those involved in research can be engaged. Peter Reason (1994) writes that in what he calls "cooperative inquiry"

> all those involved in the research are both co-researchers, whose thinking and decision making contribute to generating ideas, designing and managing the project, and drawing conclusions from the experience, and *also* co-subjects, participating in the activity being researched. Ideally, there is full reciprocity so that each person's agency is fundamentally honored in both the exchange of ideas and the action. (p. 326, emphasis in the original)

Renate Schulz (1997) has pinpointed reciprocity as one of the most difficult goals to achieve in collaboration. She finds that the interests of all people involved are rarely being served, and all collaborators rarely contribute to and gain from all stages of the research process.

In the case of my own study, I am quite aware that the initial research questions were not developed by a community in search of answers but were mine alone, as is the ultimate "product" – a Masters thesis. My students may never have the same level of commitment to the research process that I do, given their other concerns such as academic achievement, jobs or family. Their time in the classroom represents a very small portion of their lives, whereas for me the classroom represents my career. I am reminded of Franciso Ibáñez-

Carrasco's (2004) conundrum of collaborative community research, in which the outside professional researcher walks away from the community at the end of the study. In classroom research, it is the students who ultimately walk away from the teacher.

However, this is not to say that students can't benefit from taking on research roles. As Reason (1994) points out, "not all those involved in the inquiry enterprise contribute in identical ways" (p. 326), or, I would add, receive identical rewards. The teacher's learning may be more visible in its immediate impact on the classroom environment, but this does not negate the depth of students' learning, which may take many forms and be more diffuse. Also, as collaboration increases social knowledge, both the teacher's and students' understandings grow together.

Richard Winter (1989) refers to "collaborative resource," by which he means that within a group of participants *"everyone's* point of view will be taken as a contribution to resources for understanding; *no-one's* point of view will be taken as the final understanding as to what all the other points of view really mean" (p. 56, emphasis in the original). While only my view will shape the final written form of this research, within this writing I can heed Winter's comment that "to work collaboratively with these viewpoints does *not* mean that we begin by trying to synthesize them into a consensus, by counting or evaluating them. On the contrary it is the variety of differences between the viewpoints that makes them into a rich resource" (p. 56, emphasis in the original).

To return to the question of validity, it appears that collaboration with students contributes to the research's validity in several ways. First, reciprocity, even in its problematic form, contributes to what Patti Lather (1992) has called "ethical validity." Secondly, drawing on a multitude of viewpoints increases the validity of data, creating a

type of built-in triangulation. Both of these aspects are reinforced within an environment of communicative democracy in which differences in need and voice are honoured.

Susan Hart (1998) writes about a third type of validity which at first glance appears to contradict the benefits of collaboration. Since action research draws heavily on the reflective and reflexive abilities of the teacher, Hart argues that its validity stems from the expertise brought to the research by the teacher as an "insider." Like Nunan (1993), she refers here to the difference in status between the "inside" teacher researcher and the "outside" academic researcher. However, despite her compelling case for the respect deserved by teachers for their knowledge, Hart does not address the climate of "intimacy" between all research participants inside a community (Ibáñez-Carrasco, 2004, p. 38), in my case a classroom. Both teachers and adult learners are inside. Each brings considerable knowledge of that inside space into the research, each has a stake in its activities, and therefore each has an equally valid perspective on what is going on in the classroom.

In conclusion, I would like to argue that despite the tensions that exist within collaborative models of action research involving teachers and learners, at least two reasons exist to continue working with them, one ethical and the other pedagogical.

Adri Smaling (1998) writes,

> A perfectly dialogical relationship [between researcher and researched] is not possible, but this does not make the striving for it senseless. The striving itself is already of importance: it can promote the validity of the research results and it may be experienced as something which is intrinsically meaningful to life. (p. 6)

My research came about in part as result of this sense of striving, of wanting to find the most just way to structure not only a classroom but my research. I was concerned that my own vision of what was happening in the classroom could only provide part of the story,

and sought to increase the research's ethical validity by recognizing this partiality and leaving room open for other visions (Lather, 1992).

My second, pedagogical claim is connected to the assumptions about the social nature of learning which I introduced in Chapter 2. If learning is something that takes place through and because of participation in community (Rogoff, 1995; Rogoff et al., 2003), then it's important to recognize that the learning of the classroom researcher is also situated in that community. Researching in collaboration with learners may be one way to experience more interrelationship in the classroom community by aligning the learning interests of the teacher and students rather than seeing them as entirely separate events.

Research Procedures

The Study Group

Knowing that language ability would itself be a confounding variable in any attempt to change classroom practice, I asked to be assigned to an Advanced level class for the purpose of my research, and was given one designated Lower Advanced/Upper Advanced (LA/UA). These are the highest levels in our program. Students in these levels can generally write about and discuss a wide range of topics in English, including abstract ones. They may still have limited English vocabulary or idiomatic usage, and may continue to make grammatical errors, but these problems don't usually make their ideas unintelligible. Their reading level in English is somewhere around Grade 8 or 9, and they are increasingly comfortable with authentic, real-world texts as opposed to simplified ones written for the ESL classroom.

The class took place from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m., Monday to Thursday evenings for 12 weeks at a large urban campus of my college. Of the approximately 140 hours of class time, about 20 of these were designated within the program as "independent study" periods, and the rest were "regular" class periods.

At the beginning of the course, 13 students were registered. Two eventually dropped out, and one transferred in half-way through the term from a daytime class. Of the 12 students in the course at the end of the term, 10 gave consent to be participants in the study and have their written and spoken comments used in any documentation. Also, one student who dropped out signed a consent form before leaving.

Ethical Consent

The key ethical concern during this study was that throughout the research period I remained in a position of authority over the students' academic promotion or failure. In order to avoid any coercion or perception of coercion in requesting their participation in the research, I remained unaware of who had signed an ethical consent form (see Appendix 1) until after the course had ended. My college supervisor collected the signed forms early in the term, while I was out of the room. Although I don't believe students struggled with or misunderstood the form, the possibility always exists when working with language learners that confusion will be caused by language difficulties. Because of this, and also absenteeism, my supervisor returned once near the end of the term to ask if anyone wanted to either add or retract their approval. The forms were kept in her office without my seeing them until I had submitted all final marks.

In order to ensure confidentiality, the form assured the students that only pseudonyms would be used to refer to them in the final research report.

The Participants

I will describe each of the class members who consented to participate formally in the study, as a way of highlighting the diversity of backgrounds and interests within the group. All the names used here are pseudonyms. With the exception of one Quebecois student, all had been Canada less than five years.

Mei was a Chinese woman in her 30's. She had a high school education and worked part time in a community centre near her home as well as caring for her two young children. She was continuing in the Lower Advanced level after one term, and expressed concern early on about her reading ability and her previous difficulty with the final standardized reading test.

In her 20's, Yvonne sat next to Mei, and like her was from the Beijing area of China and had a high school level education. Yvonne had one small child. The two women became very friendly and worked together a lot. Until shortly before the course, Yvonne had worked as a chambermaid in a hotel. She missed about the middle third of the course because of medical problems, and when present was frequently distracted by these. She had taken Lower Advanced previously in another department, and, also like Mei, was intent on passing the final reading test to complete the level.

Qi, 19, was from the north of China. He had only been in Canada a few weeks when the course started, and was placed in LA. His writing and his passive understanding of English were higher than required even for UA, but he was placed lower because he was still

adjusting to listening and speaking in an English immersion environment. He had been an engineering student in China. During the length of our course, he was also studying six or seven days a week in a preparation course for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) in order to apply to Canadian university programs. Each evening, he came to our class directly from his other one, carrying a bag full of snacks, and usually spent the first few minutes during independent study time with his head down on the table.

Delores was Guatemalan, a former high school teacher in her 40's, now employed as a nanny in a private home. She was frequently late or missed class when her employer was late returning from her own job. She also missed one class to attend the high school graduation of one of her sons. Despite her obvious lack of physical energy, she often created heat in classroom discussions by vocalizing strong opinions. Before our course, she had been in Upper Intermediate, and she found some aspects of Lower Advanced work challenging.

Inez had also moved this term from Upper Intermediate into Lower Advanced, and struggled not with fluency but with linguistic accuracy. She was in her 20's and had been a university student in Peru when she met her Spanish- and English-speaking Canadian husband. Like Delores, she was chronically late or absent from class, and tired. For the first month or so of the term, she was working seven days a week – five in a factory and two in a restaurant.

Marc was a young Quebecois actor who had come to Vancouver to break into Hollywood movies. His fluent speaking style put him easily into Upper Advanced, though his ease sometimes masked errors that were clear in his written work. During the course he kept vacillating between a focus on improved speaking skill for his immediate needs and on

a more academic approach that would allow him into more advanced education later. He was absent from class fairly often because of shifting job schedules.

In his 40's, Francisco was already working full time in his field as a software engineer. He, his wife and two children had come to Canada as refugees from Colombia only a few months before. They had lived for several years in the United States. A new student to the program, he had been placed initially at Upper Intermediate, but asked to be put up a level to Lower Advanced to create more challenge, and he was able to complete LA by the end of the term. Although he only missed a couple of classes, he often looked tired, and admitted to me that he was struggling with some health problems.

Sergei was a Russian physicist in his 50's. Convinced to immigrate to Canada by an adult son who had already established himself here, Sergei seemed to be still in shock from the loss of his professional and cultural identity. He arrived early for our class every evening, completed all assignments and produced several drafts of written work. He had just passed into Lower Advanced and continued to make fairly basic errors. He often argued with me when I attempted to correct these. He, above all others, was interested in the subject of "research."

Marjan was an Iranian woman, around 50, with a job in an antique store, which she loved. She was an Upper Advanced level student and clearly wanted to progress. However, her husband, who had been working in Iran, arrived for an extended visit and this drew her away from the class after about a month.

Joseph was an Ethiopian man in his early 20's who had come to Canada with his father. Unemployed, he was struggling with the expectations of family members that he would complete his education and find professional work that would either bring him back

to Ethiopia or provide remittance from Canada. He had already spent one term in Lower Advanced before this one, and had dropped out of school for a period for health reasons.

Linda arrived in our class about six weeks into the term. Like Qi, her skills were mostly beyond the class's level, and her most immediate life goal was to score a high enough mark on the TOEFL test to be admitted to a Canadian university. She was in her 30's and had left her parents, husband and child in China while she pursued this dream. Her professional background was in business.

The Intervention

In most classes I had previously taught, I asked students to contribute ideas at the beginning of the term about their interests and English needs. After compiling a list of potential topics, individual students voted for their top choices. I combined this information with my own diagnosis of their English learning needs to create a course plan.

In the class under study, I changed the procedures for course planning. I invited students to brainstorm topics in an array of areas related to their interests and also to their life goals and concerns for the planet. These were then transformed into ideas for projects that could be carried out in 10 weeks by a small group of students. Class members wrote their names next to those projects that interested them the most, and through a process of elimination, four group projects were chosen.

Each group was responsible for creating a project plan that included some activities that would involve the whole class in language learning. I helped the groups by facilitating planning discussions and providing tools such as time-lines, and I continued to teach grammar, reading skills and other language points as closely related to the students' themes

as possible. It was also my intention to introduce language throughout the term related to

communication skills such as negotiation.

(For a more complete description, see Chapter 4.)

Data Collection

At the same time that project groups were formed, I discussed the prospect of

collaborative research with the class, pointing out that we would all be affected by the

changes in classroom procedures. During one discussion, I drew a diagram on the board in

which I attempted to clarify the levels of meta-awareness I was asking of them. At the centre

of the circle was the group of people engaged in language learning. One circle out from that

was the same group, thinking about their learning and planning activities for the class. In the

third circle was the same group again, this time engaged in research by observing the

processes within the first two circles (See Figure 1).
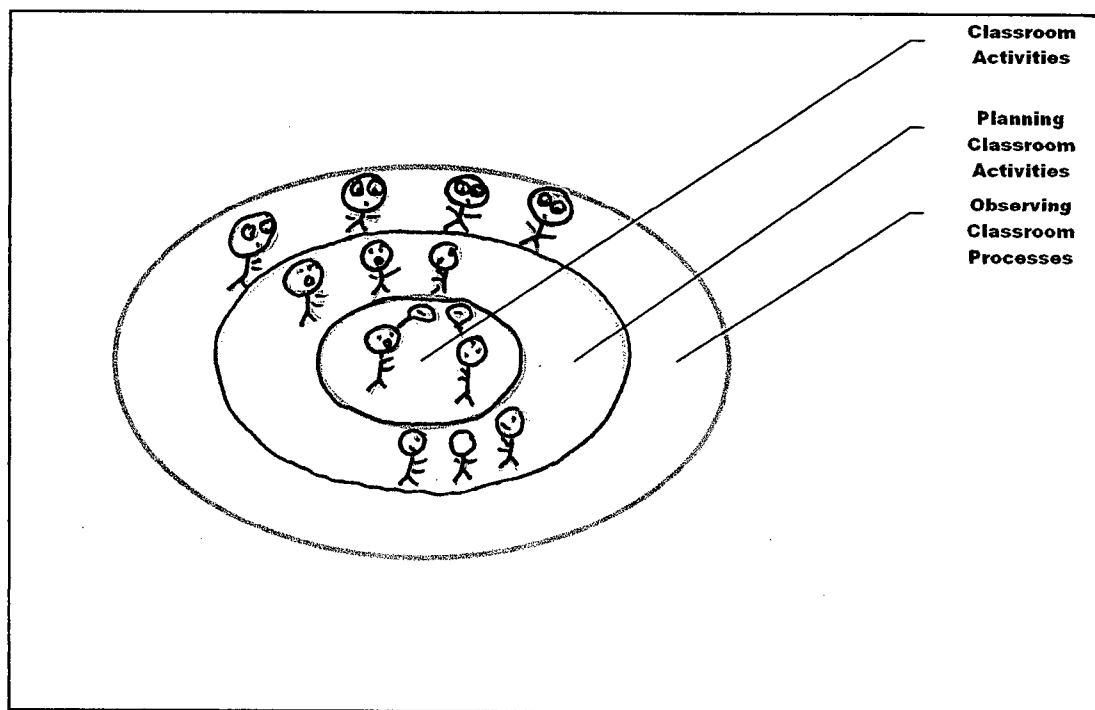
Figure 1: The Third Circle of Research

Throughout the course, I kept field notes, written in a narrative fashion as a record of what transpired during class periods. These were usually written immediately after class and sometimes during it. On a few occasions, I also made a few typed notes at home.

During the course, I asked students to respond to research questions both in oral interviews and written journals, concerning such topics as making decisions in groups or the role of a teacher in the classroom. (See Appendix 2 for the questions.) Although students were invited to suggest research themes or questions, ultimately I provided the questions for both interviews and journal-writing. Some of these were inspired by my original research questions, while others grew out of comments made by students in class or in their journals.

All students in the class conducted and audio-taped two sets of student-student interviews during class time, one about mid-way through the course, and the other during the last week. I later transcribed these eight conversations and used as data the oral comments of the 11 students who signed ethical consent forms. Transcriptions ran from one to five pages. All students were also invited to write journals, which were submitted to me during the course whenever individuals wanted. These were not read by other students. Journal entries were mostly responses to specific questions I posed every couple of weeks, but some students chose to write about their own topics. At the end of the course I collected six journals which were submitted as research data. These varied in length from three to ten pages. Although I read the journals regularly throughout the term as part of my teaching duties, I didn't listen to either set of interviews until after the course ended and I became more involved in data analysis.

Secondary sources of data for the study included my original lesson plans, and materials generated by both me and the students which were used in the class.

Coding and Data Analysis

As mentioned above, new research questions arose during the research. Because I expected this, and because I wanted to leave the research process open to input or surprises from the learners, I did not plan codes for my data ahead of time. It was my goal to listen to the data for as many multiple meanings or explanations of events as possible, rather than imposing any kind of premature closure in the search for a central finding (de Zeeuw, 1998; Lather, 1992).

I had hoped to begin reading or listening to the data with the students during the course, but time was not available because of course demands. Working alone, I perused my field notes after the course ended and uncovered four major thematic areas. "Power" and "classroom dynamics," although overlapping and neither creating a perfect fit for all data, seemed to be useful headings for encompassing the classroom stories into such sub-themes as "moments of negotiation or domination" and "team building." The third heading, "language teaching and learning," allowed me to pull out useful observations about the teaching of particular skills or language points. And fourth, within the "research" theme, I was able to identify both procedural trends and difficulties or obstructions to the research.

The data generated by the students was quite different from my own, perhaps because they were responding to specific questions (see Appendix 2) rather than documenting events. I initially attempted to replicate the codes I had used for my field notes, with minor alterations, but as I re-examined the student-generated data, I discovered quite a different shape. With very few comments about "research" to account for, the other categories became subsumed into the topic of "power," subdivided into conceptions of "democracy," "participation," and "difference." While I had intended to code a separate

category of data about "learning," I found that even this information was almost all related to experiences students had had while working together and so related to the first three themes.

The advantage I found to this *post hoc* process of data analysis was that details began to cluster around themes I would never have anticipated. For example, in the field notes I noticed numerous references to body language (smiling, nodding, looking frustrated), and arrived at a new question that might be interesting to follow up in later research: How often do I assume I understand what's going on in the classroom based on this elusive form of communication?

A final step of my original research plan was to reconvene a meeting of the students to analyze my initial findings within the data. This step was envisioned more as part of the process of co-research than as a member check between researcher and subjects. I approached the former class members by e-mail and telephone and found that only one was still enrolled in our program. Several, as I knew, had graduated to higher levels in other programs. Two had gone out of the country and several were working or studying at new locations and hours. Of 11 participants, five showed a real interest in being involved in the data analysis stage after the course ended.

Before our meeting, I prepared a written summary of the data, including clearly contradictory statements that I hoped to discuss. However, of the five who tried to agree on a collective meeting time with me, only the one still studying at the same centre found time to enter into discussion and offer comments.

Limitations of the Research Design: Issues Specific to the Setting

Overall, the method described here generated a rich body of data that illuminates if not answers my research questions. However, several problems arose during the research process, some of them specifically related to working with English language learners. These included confusion over roles, lack of time, misunderstandings due to language difficulties, and ethical dilemmas presented when attempting to represent second language speakers. I will discuss each of these issues here.

Uncertainties about Multiple Roles

There was occasional confusion for everyone over the multiple roles being played, for me as researcher and teacher and for students as researchers and learners.

Researcher and Teacher. For my own part, I found myself in a kind of cultural rift between my dual role as an academic researcher and as a language instructor. The types of concerns I had entered the research with were partly based on theories about educational and social relationships that were difficult to focus on inside the teaching setting. Although the theoretical conceptions of democracy or learning weren't any less credible within the daily tumble of the actual learning site, I felt as if I was trying to live in two distinct and separate cultures of community college and university. Also, the logistics of planning, teaching, marking, gathering data and maintaining relationships with students and colleagues left me exhausted, with little time for quiet reflection. I found the combined responsibility of teaching and conducting research to be emotionally stressful.

Another difficulty I found in juggling these roles, was the impossibility of shedding my ultimate authority over students' end-of-term placements. Although ethical consent

procedures ensured that I couldn't pressure students into letting me use their materials after the course, I could still, hypothetically, have given low marks or even failed anyone who criticised my project during the term, for example, in their journals. As it was, I was delighted to read or hear thoughtful comments of any kind because they enriched my understanding. However, an ethical concern about students' vulnerability in this situation remains.

Researcher and Learner. Just as teachers must be aware of possible ethical conflicts between their own research and pedagogical interests (Hammack, 1997), they and their student collaborators need to recognize when the research may interfere with students' primary role as learners. For example, I tried initially to separate student journal writing, as data, from other classroom writing projects by suggesting that I would offer only substantive comments – engage in a research dialogue – on the former, but would offer language suggestions and help correct the latter. Some students demanded that I correct any English errors I found in the journals. After some debate, we settled on a dialogue journal method similar to one I have used in other classes. I would answer their substantive journal comments with my own and add comments about English communication problems such as incorrectly used words, but not correct every error.

Lack of Time

Time was always against us. Again because I could not short-change the learning goals of the students, time for a research focus – to sit in the third circle and discuss what was going on inside the other two – was very limited. My lesson plans show numerous examples of research-related discussion topics I planned for the end of class during the extra

fifteen minutes that never materialized, and my field notes are littered with such comments as, "It's hard to find enough time to cover language issues, let alone special group project administration, let alone reflective time to be a 'research group.'" (FN p. 20).

As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 7, some of this pressure might have been alleviated if I had found more ways to integrate research discussions with other activities. The research itself has endless potential for language learning (creating survey questions, reading about each other's experiences and so on) but it is difficult to know which other activities to cut short in order to accommodate others.

Language Difficulties

There were definitely times when research was slowed or obstructed by misunderstandings caused by language. To start with I recorded instances where in-class communication about the research process broke down, when it seemed a couple of people were unsure what to do next.

I also had problems understanding small sections of the research tapes and journals produced by the students. Some of the errors were ones I'd heard frequently and I could make confident extrapolations of meaning from these. For instance, when Qi says, "even they can't get a conclusion...," I am quite sure he means "even if...." In other cases I had to make riskier analyses. Yvonne says, "Keep your thinking," and it is through a combination of intuition and my sense of the whole conversation (for which I was luckily present) that I deduce she means something like, "Keep your thoughts to yourself."

Difficulties with Ethical Representation

I found an ethical dilemma in the question of how to represent the words of new English speakers and writers in my research report. On one hand, I wanted to use the original words of the participants, to let them speak for themselves as much as possible. On the other hand, when English errors were present, I wanted to be sure the meaning the reader would derive was as close as possible to that of the speaker, and also that the speaker wouldn't be embarrassed to find out later that mistakes were made public. In the end, I decided to trust the former inclination, and only removed or corrected language that I felt would cause too much confusion for the reader.

The Limits of Collaborative Action Research

In any research setting different participants have different interests, and it is one goal of action research to honour these. My goal was to find a democratic participation structure within which a group of students and I could collaboratively research the classroom environment from our different perspectives. It is possible that little reciprocity was achieved between us because of my greater stake in the research outcome. In the end, it is hard to say that the research was fully collaborative, because the students only really took part at the data collection stage, and even then declined to create research questions. However, the data they added to mine was invaluable. And, as will be evident in student comments presented in Chapter 5, the greater awareness of learning they experienced may have been partly related to overt inquiry into the nature of our relationships as well as to changes in classroom practice.

I see this project as a first cycle in my ongoing inquiry into the nature of power relations in the classroom. In Chapter 7, I will describe ways in which I could better integrate research and language learning needs in future research. Although it may be impossible to eradicate status differentials in classroom relationships (teacher-student, researcher-subject and, more subtly, those such as male-female, oldtimer-newcomer), the democratic communication structures introduced through the action research process can increase opportunities for everyone present to speak and be listened to, and create greater knowledge on which teachers can act.

I will now go on to present the findings from my research. In Chapter 4, I tell my own version of the story of our class. In Chapter 5, I present some of the comments made by students about democracy, difference and learning.

Chapter 4 – My Story of the Project

I set out in the first week of the course to engage the class in a process of identifying

interests and potential projects, and in forming groups to work on these. Almost immediately

it became clear that I faced various dilemmas in facilitating greater student control of the

class. From my experience in numerous activities involving brainstorming, I knew that

groups frequently shut down their scope of thinking to fit what seems immediately possible.

As I wanted this group to think big and not reject big ideas, I planned a series of steps to

elicit ideas with as few limitations as possible. But in my notes I wrote, "I'm wondering if

this is a bit of a cheat – hoodwinkery – to get them to brainstorm without explaining [the]

project first but I don't want them to limit their ideas." I also noted that I introduced the

expression "think outside the box" (FN[1], p. 4).

On the first evening of the procedure, five days into the course, I asked individuals to

complete the following sentences with as many ideas as they could come up with:

> *I've always wanted to _____ .*
> *I've always wanted to find out _____ .*
> *Since coming to Canada, I've wanted to _____ .*
> *_____ would make my life easier.*
> *A problem I'd like to solve is _____ .*
> *Something fun or interesting is _____ . (LP,[2] Apr. 20)*

I then asked small groups to compare their lists and look for any commonalities or

ideas they found particularly interesting. After some discussion, the groups wrote a list of

their ideas on chart paper to share with the class, and read each other's.

On the following evening, I handed out a typed version of the lists (see Appendix 3)

and we discussed some vocabulary and concepts that were unclear and that, oddly, no one

had asked about during the previous class. (I wondered whether typed text held some power

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[1] FN indicates my field notes throughout the text.
[2] LP indicates my original lesson plans throughout the text.

that written scrawl didn't.) I asked if anyone wanted to modify or add ideas, and only one

was added. Then I introduced the idea of taking some of these goals from people's wildest

dreams – traveling to Europe, finding a wife – and rethinking them as projects that could

actually be carried out in the class by a small group of people within about 10 weeks.

As an example, we chose Marjan's contribution of "scuba diving," and I wrote a map

of people's suggestions on the board as they called them out. Some of the ideas included

learning how to dive, learning about scuba diving in general, planning a trip to a diving

hotspot, raising money to go on the trip and investigating scuba diving culture. "It felt like a

good flow, not like I was guiding or pulling. People seemed very enthusiastic and could

certainly see the language possibilities" (FN p. 7). Some of the language learning ideas were

watching a video about diving, interviewing an instructor, visiting a diving club and

searching the internet for background information.

We didn't have time until the following evening for the brainstorming groups to re-

form and carry out this process of transforming broad themes into manageable project ideas.

In my notes I wrote,

> Breaktime on the big brainstorm day. Feel like blowing a gasket – not a
> good idea.... Some brilliant ideas coming down the pipe – a cooking
> school project, organizing an entertainment event, studying ESL learning
> strategies [by surveying students in our program and others], Canadian
> cultural history (hockey?), financial planning, wildlife. Interesting dispute
> between Marc and Delores over whether to touch 'downsizing U.S.
> power' [from] the original list. I think Delores finds it too emotional or
> button-pushing. This looks better on paper. In the classroom, confusion
> reigns. (FN p. 8)
> [Then, later:] I walked in after break and called a meeting at an
> empty table at the back of the room. I laid out the chart paper and
> suggested we write down the ideas that had come up so far. I was the
> scribe but encouraged their input – interesting editing/framing process. 'Is
> it okay with you if I use the word strategy for your project?' 'Oh, sure –
> that sounds good.' – then I tried to add/combine it with their wording.
> Anyway, as each one [idea] came up, some were enthusiastically

defended by their proponents with supporting details, some were vague and I had to guide a little fleshing out....A couple of people started negotiating with each other, or said they had already, about forming a group. (FN p. 10)

On the fourth evening, each student wrote their name next to their first and second choices on the chart papers. On the fifth evening, those who'd been absent chose their topics. On the board, I wrote the topics around which names had clustered, and we went through a "dickering" process (FN p. 13) of some people relinquishing their first choices in order to gather enough people in each group. We ended up with four groups of three people. Their project topics were cooking, world hunger (we all saw the irony of this combination), wildlife and nature, and Canadian history. While this whole process had taken five sessions rather than the three I'd originally planned, it's clear in my lesson plans that other activities such as a writing workshop and grammar lessons were also going on during each class period.

On the first evening that the new project groups met, I introduced some negotiation gambits such as "I'm wondering if we could..." and "Would it work (better) if we..." (LP Apr. 27, 2004). We carried out a short exercise to practice these expressions, and I later heard some of them in use. This was the type of meta-language skill training I had envisioned scattering throughout the course, but later occurrences were rare.

As with the first night of brainstorming, I temporarily withheld something from the new groups in fear that it might limit thinking. I had prepared a chart on which to write ideas for action and for sources of information, including some suggestions. On the reverse side was a project timeline to fill in. Earlier in my notes I had written, "How do we develop rules for unruly brainstorming?" (FN p. 11), and I continued to struggle with this question of how

much structure was needed for project participants to feel comfortable and productive while at the same time giving them maximum opportunity to "think outside the box."

At this point, the groups each had their own momentum and quite different conceptions of their projects.

> The cooking group – Joseph, Yvonne and Mei – seemed to think they were figuring out how to go to cooking school; the hunger group (Delores, Inez and Marc) were preparing a table of contents for some major essay; the Canadian history group was having inner rebellion because two (Marjan and Qi) had chosen aboriginal history and Francisco was jealous – I pointed out they could all do the same thing and define their own topic and they seemed shocked; the wildlife and nature group ([including] Sergei) was creating a big enough mind map to keep the class busy for months. (FN p. 14)

By the next class, Sergei had downloaded some information pages about national parks off the internet and presented them to his group. Perhaps the pattern for the rest of the term was set right here. I sat down with this group and looked at the readings with them. I suggested that since there were three group members, each could take one reading and prepare it for the class, including some vocabulary explanation and some comprehension questions. I explained the idea of a jigsaw reading[3] to them, and we agreed the class could undertake the readings a few days later using this procedure. The mode was strictly oriented to content transmission with, I hoped, some reading skill work alongside. With the exception of the cooking group and its food-tasting events, the grand plans for organizing cultural events, making videos, carrying out surveys and any other ambitious ideas that had been floated, pretty much sank right here without a ripple.

From this point until almost the last week of the term, we continued to work with materials provided by the students. We read about national parks, endangered species, bird migration, world hunger, school lunch programs and Canadian aboriginal history, and

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[3] In this procedure, several groups each read a different text and then members from the various groups meet to orally share what they've learned.

looked at recipes for *injera* (Ethiopian flat bread) and sushi. We watched a video of interviews with aboriginal leaders, and the feature film *Fly Away Home*, the story of a Canadian inventor's efforts to lead migrating Canada geese to safe winter haven. (The student who suggested this film said he had first visited Canada because of watching it.) We listened to a couple of Canadian pop songs and read the lyrics, as well as discussing the singers. And, to everyone's delight, we ate *injera* dipped in a thick, savoury sauce that Joseph had cooked, and ate sushi after watching Mei and Yvonne prepare it.

I tried to help facilitate these events in a number of ways. We visited the central branch of the public library, where I gave a short workshop on using the computer catalogue and worked with those students (especially Mei and Joseph) who were not familiar with library research. (Mei later mentioned in one of her interviews that this was a particularly useful learning event for her, and a couple of other people mentioned a desire to return to the library [Mei SI 1[4]; Francisco SI 2; Sergei SJ p. 2[5]]). One evening in class, I used a sample text to elicit ideas for preparing useful questions to accompany a reading. This seemed to be engaging at the time, but most students, when their turn came, prepared only a scant number of very general questions, despite various reminders from me. Perhaps this signalled their belief that it was only useful or necessary to "get the main idea" (Francisco, SI 1). On some topics, such as Canadian aboriginal history, I was able to provide materials from my own files from which groups could choose.

Two general trends emerged during the course, one concerning course materials and the other concerning the workings of the original project groups.

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[4] SI 1 and SI 2 indicate student interviews throughout the text. Students interviewed each other, all working simultaneously on the same days. The first set (SI 1) took place on May 13, 2004 – about half way through the course – and the second set (SI 2) on June 24, 2004, during the last week of classes.
[5] SJ indicates student journals throughout the text.

Almost all of the reading materials provided for the class by its members were downloaded off the internet. This led to some unforeseen challenges. In some cases, individual seekers were overwhelmed with the quantity of material available, or couldn't find readings they thought were at a suitable reading level for the class. In other words, they were confronted with the type of research problems faced by most new researchers, but there was little time or resource to deal with them in class. Only one student, Francisco, told me he'd returned to the library to look for materials, and only a couple took me up on the offer of using my materials. Another issue was that the internet often provides a genre of reading different from the magazine article or essay format usually used in ESL classes, with some of the readings containing short, choppy items – perhaps designed to be linked rather than read in a linear fashion – instead of a contained body of text exemplifying a beginning, middle and end. I began to wonder if this was an area of reading instruction ESL teachers needed to pay more attention to. To some extent, my lack of control over vocabulary level led to some interesting reading skill work on finding context clues and on collocations[6], and in the end I only rejected one proposed reading because it was too difficult.

The second and more critical trend for our project was that the topic groups that had started with such enthusiasm gradually became non-functional. After their initial choices of topics, two groups simply split the work between them and went their separate ways, one subdivided into two topic areas when agreement couldn't be reached (so that Canadian pop music was now added to our list of themes), and one suffered from lack of participation, resulting in one student representing that topic alone. In both of the last two cases, chronic absence of one or more members of the group contributed to the problems.

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[6] Collocations (co-locations) are word pairs or phrases that English speakers tend to commonly use. One current trend in language teaching is an emphasis on presenting new vocabulary in the context of these frequent groupings.

When it became clear that it was no longer fruitful to convene meetings of whole groups, a pattern evolved in which I worked with students individually or in pairs when they were ready to present their work to the class. I evaluated the material for the suitability of the reading level, discussed how the student wanted to present it (for example, providing an introduction or follow-up questions), and what they wanted me to do during the class. From the beginning, I tried to connect language points to the topics at hand, but as it became clear that the student contributions were going to remain text-heavy, I took the liberty of using their topics to create other types of language learning events. For example, I wrote in my notes during the ninth week of the course,

> After stewing for an hour or so at home today about how to deal with
> [someone's] material, I concluded that the issue was how bored people would
> be of...reading the evening after a reading test. So I turned the information
> from one of the articles he'd given me (which I found somewhat obscure
> myself) into a dictogloss [a type of listening activity done in groups], had him
> make an oral intro, and ended the evening with an oral grammar activity. And
> the pacing was better. (FN p. 40)

The student's introduction involved some map reading, and he provided an article that we read in depth the following evening.

Throughout the term I added several thematic units or pieces I thought would expand the discussion on issues of power and democracy. On the first night of class, I presented a reading on 'community' and invited both discussion and later writing. Two events concerning public democratic process happened to coincide serendipitously with our term, first the hearings of British Columbia's Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform – one of which we visited – and secondly, a federal general election, which we discussed at length. And when a series of articles appeared in a local newspaper about the diversity of

Vancouver's population, I brought in some of this material, which led to a "fairly wild discussion" about definitions of race (FN p. 35).

Two of my ongoing concerns were whether we were engaging in enough language learning activity, and how learning was being assessed. It's evident from the tone of my notes that I found the latter issue particularly stressful, with comments such as "Worried about lack of assessment," (FN p. 26) and "...My assessment program is a shambles" (FN p. 33). Although I didn't write about it, I know I somewhat mitigated the lack of verbal feedback to students by writing individual comments for those with whom I hadn't had time to hold an oral conference. (Sergei wrote a response to my written comments in his journal, which seemed to provide a forum for more open discussion than I've usually experienced in oral conferences [SJ p. 15]).

About three weeks before the end of the term, I attempted one last effort at involving the class in a major decision-making process. I put together a calendar of the final weeks with items marked on it over which none of us would have any control. These included the dates of the final tests given at these levels in reading, writing and listening. (While these tests carry a lot of symbolic weight for students, they only account for part of the evidence used in final placement.) I explained several measures for in-class assessment I was contemplating, as well as the possibility for further involvement of student-generated content, and time for final research discussions. I then invited the class to work in groups and suggest how they would like these events to be ordered. For example, one issue was whether students would rather have longer to prepare for one of the tests, but have several assessments close together, or have less time to prepare but have the assessments spread out.

This process of deliberation turned out to less straight-forward than I had thought it would be. In my notes I wrote, "Everyone got a bit frantic about the testing," to the point where other concerns lost any attention. One student "kept saying things like, 'You choose' to me – a reasonable request, but she would be the first to complain if the schedule didn't suit her" (FN p. 46). This last comment seems to suggest that I'd planned the process as much for my own satisfaction as for theirs, as a kind of public consultation to protect myself from complaints. We did manage to arrive at some agreement on some of the issues, and I later gave them a final version of the calendar feeling that their input had given my decisions some validity.

In some of their later journal entries, several students commented that they had found the materials introduced by other class members to be useful or interesting. Curious as to how they differentiated the quality of material generated by peers from those I introduced (or might introduce in another class), I asked them to address this specific question when they interviewed each other on tape.

I finished the term with feelings similar to those I've experienced at the end of many other courses, feeling that some students had progressed in their learning while others hadn't, and that bonds I'd formed were stronger with some students than with others. I was able to produce a quite conventional-looking end of term report for my department, outlining language points covered and materials used. I wondered if my intervention had made a difference. Had I widened participatory practice? Had participation led to a shift in power? Had it influenced anyone's learning?

To shed light on these questions, I now turn to the data generated by the students' oral interviews and written journals, as well as reviewing my own field notes. In the next

chapter I will look at the themes of democracy, difference and learning which I detected

throughout the students' comments.

Chapter 5 – Contested Meanings of Democracy: The Students' Story

So Morna's idea about not only elements of democracy but also almost full democracy in the class was very unexpected for me. Maybe it's very productive idea for disciplines like foreign languages. (Sergei, SJ p. 6)

As the students and I worked our way through various processes to learn from each other and to find useful structures within which we could work, we also engaged in discussions about the meaning of what we were doing. Although my own interest lay in finding ways for students to join in decision making – in creating a form of communicative democracy – other people clearly had their own goals and their own preconceptions of notions such as democracy and leadership. In this chapter, I will draw mostly on the students' own words, taken from their journals and interviews with each other, to illuminate their ideas about democracy and how it relates to both difference and learning.

Early in the course, I asked the students to discuss the questions "What is democracy?" and "Is there such a thing as democracy in education?" Some of their conceptions of democracy included freedom to express opinions and to "do things, to not just talk," freedom of choice, and rights. Yvonne said that not just one person decides. Marc said "they" give you a set of choices and you vote. Democracy in education was associated by one group with freedom of access to schools (not available in some countries) and freedom to choose schools, courses and teachers (FN p. 6).

Throughout the course I tried to probe these concepts further and to listen for ideas as they arose. One thing that became clear was that people's opinions about democracy in the classroom were partially informed by their previous experience with governance systems in different countries. For example, a number of students made comparisons between the Canadian political system and those in other countries. Yvonne wrote, "…In China,…if you

want to be a good girl, good person, you must obey parent at home; obey Communist Party outside. When I come to Canada, I know what democratic is" (SJ, p. 2).

Several commented on their interest in the processes of the Canadian general election, and the British Columbia assembly on electoral reform. Linda wrote, "…Learning some general election topics is beneficial to me…. I have common sense about Canadian election, democratic system and the platforms of different parties, which makes me familiar with the society." (SJ, p. 2). One thing that interested Delores in the public process on electoral reform was that the Citizens' Assembly was non-partisan. "If it had preferences for some political [party], it isn't democracy" (SJ, p. 6). These comments and the lessons that preceded them remind me of the type of citizenship education traditionally considered to take an important role in the ESL classroom. When discussion shifted from processes inside the classroom to those outside, I honestly don't know how successful I was in refraining from taking an uncritical didactic stance about the positive aspects of democracy. Up close, inside the classroom, we learned how messy the processes of democracy could become.

Francisco made a direct parallel between outside and inside forms of democracy when he wrote, "In my first week in this class, the decisions we made in class made the class more interesting and the group feel more motivated. As in democratic countries, participation make people happier and responsible" (SJ, p. 1). However, Marjan's comment that "democracy itself is very useful, very good, but in English class you need order, some routine," (SI 1) suggests to me that she felt democracy was better suited to other venues.

Despite anyone's misgivings, we continued to pursue both the processes I hoped would "make people happier and responsible" and their examination. I put a number of

questions to students regarding theses processes, and in the following section I will discuss some of the elements of democracy that they identified.

Elements of Democracy

It is impossible to put forward a simple framework for listing the aspects of democracy discussed by students in the data. For some, the words 'freedom' and 'choice' are almost synonymous with 'democracy'. Communication and participation are described by some of them as necessary activities, as the engines for creating democracy. Access to leadership roles and access to the resources of time and skill-learning are more like prerequisites for the structure or context in which democracy can grow. All of these elements, though, make up threads that intertwine throughout the data to create a variety of descriptions of democracy.

Freedom

During my career I have frequently heard new immigrants say they moved to Canada because it's a "freedom country." Probably the chief element identified with democracy in my current data is freedom, but the notion is problematized when discussed in the pragmatic reality of the classroom. Questions arise such as whether too much freedom becomes unproductive, and whether people are really free to speak or are constrained by fear of reprisal against unpopular ideas.

Choice versus Lack of Constraint. Within the comments about freedom, it's possible to differentiate a conception of democracy as a kind of access to consumer choice from a more subtle freedom from constraint. In the former category I would put comments such as

Yvonne's that the class was democratic because students "can choose which topics you like, which person you like in your group" (SI 2) and Qi's that when given homework, "we can decide whether we should do it or refuse it" (SI 2). It is perhaps this latter attitude that Francisco found troubling enough to comment that "maybe Morna try to give us too much freedom...." (SI 1). A room full of students with infinite choices to do what they want is not necessarily productive because, as he put it, left to make their own choices, students will choose the easiest route (SJ p. 6).

Comments such as Francisco's characterize democracy as an absence: a lack of structure (Francisco, SI 1; Marjan, SI 1) and a lack of discipline (Marjan, SI 1; Joseph SI 1). Delores countered these worries by pointing out that democracy entails taking on both rights and responsibilities (SJ p. 11; SI 2)

For many students, democracy also implied a lack of coercion. As detailed in the sections below, most of the students valued the freedom to make decisions, have input into directions for the class, and express ideas.

Communication

Some of the students pinpointed criteria for a type of communicative democracy in which participants in decision making need to be able to speak, and equally, to be heard. Delores brings to mind the trust this type of communication can create when she wrote, "This way to work in class has made the relationships between classmates more stronger with each other" (SJ, p. 11). Perhaps one question about the achievability of communicative democracy is the degree to which trust is needed *before* communication can take place.

Freedom of Expression. In one discussion, Sergei, after initially agreeing with Marjan that democracy is problematic in a classroom, suddenly changed tack and said, "Maybe point is that it's very, very, very good. Because if we have a democracy in class we can have a free discussion, any questions…. Suggest interesting things" (SI 1). Beyond the freedom to offer opinions and ask questions, "suggesting" things might include disagreeing or putting forward ideas for action. It opens room for negotiation.

On the other hand, Yvonne raised a point that no one else did:

> You can say what…you like, your idea, but you can say something like other person agrees with you. But if some people don't like it, just keep the thinking. [Laughs.] (SI 2)

In other words, keep your disagreements to yourself. This self-editing or silencing could potentially be very damaging to inclusive communication if it is carried out with any fear of intimidation, or at least of discomfort when others disagree, rather than as a mode of respect for others' opportunities to assert their views. Democratic communication may inevitably open room for conflict.

Respectful Listening. Linda broadened the idea of freedom of expression to include the need to be listened to. The "foundation of [a] democratic class" is the presence of classmates who are "open-minded, flexible and receptive to new ideas" (SJ, p. 1). "I think everyone in this class, they shared their ideas and they respect each other and also I think when somebody talk about his idea, other people is still listening…." (SI 2).

Francisco contrasted this ideal situation with a real one in which students don't take the group's work seriously (SJ p. 5), and Mei noted that one of the "bad things" in group decision making process is when people "are chatting" and "do not pay attention in the group" (SJ, p. 1).

Participation

While I make the case elsewhere in this paper that participation within a classroom has many facets besides speaking or expressing views, within my data most references to participation refer to collaboration, with its positive aspects of sharing ideas, co-learning and engaging in common projects. At times when groups didn't function, these factors may have been absent, and may partially account for failure. Qi said, "People here [in Canada] are like to talk with, to change the ideas of others, so even [if] they can't get a conclusion in the group, they can get some ideas from others." Later he also said, "…If all of us can tell our ideas, then that is democracy, and we can choose the best one. Even [though] that may also failure, we have nothing to say" (SI 1).

Collaboration. One of the questions I asked students to consider was what they knew or had learned about group decision making. Within the data, almost everyone in the class referred to the greater generation of ideas when people work together, the two-heads-are-better-than-one phenomenon. "The more people work together, the more ideas we will make." (Qi, SI 1). Delores referred to the synergistic effect of the combined ideas creating a "fantastic" idea that no one had considered solo (SI 2). Francisco and Linda talked about the need for negotiation and compromise in these situations, and Francisco pointed out that ideas then have to be developed and acted upon (SI 2).

On the flip side, a significant hindrance to group functioning is the lack of compromise. "…Everybody has their own idea," said Linda (SI 2). "…They want use their own decision, their idea," said Mei (SJ, p. 1). "Some people close their mind," said Delores (SI 2). The tendency of some people to be "stubborn" (Mei, SJ, p. 1) not only slows down group decision making, but impedes participation in two significant ways. At the process

level, those who have closed their minds have ceased to listen and their partners no longer feel listened to, and at the product level, action is blocked and there is no project to participate in. Inez, whose group split in two, expressed particular frustration (SI 1).

Inez and Francisco agreed in their discussion that "different cultures" play a significant role in causing difficulty for group interaction (SI 1). These and other aspects of difference will be discussed in greater detail below, but I think it's important to note here that not all the students shared this concern. Some said that they learned from each other's different perspectives and Mei put out the idea that their learning is enhanced by the similarity of their perspective as immigrants (SI 2).

Collaboration not only took place within the space designated for it in group projects, but also occurred between me and different students throughout the term and to some extent replaced collaboration within groups. Mostly these relations were quite productive, and I noted instances of my own learning. For example, I wrote, "I've been getting quite proficient with these readings selected by others" at working with the vocabulary and reading skills and creating "on-the-spot" exercises (FN p. 53). One incident that demonstrates a possible power differential in these teacher-student negotiations involved Mei. I wrote, "Met with Mei about having her prepare some sushi and had just made it clear she didn't have to when she changed her mind and said she would" (FN p. 33). On one hand, I would like to think our direct communication helped increase her confidence to act, but on the other it could be interpreted that she succumbed to pressure from the teacher.

Creation of "Buy-in". Participation was the main element of democracy that I set out to study, wondering how increased participation in decision making would influence democracy in the classroom. Nine weeks into the course, I panicked about the possibility that

it was undemocratic for individual students or small groups to choose topics for the rest of the group to study without input from the others. I wrote,

> ...I can't believe it's taken me this long to think of [this].... Unlike my usual vote-and-tally process, in which a topic usually needs at least a third or half of the class to show interest before it goes, these groups could represent the only three (or in one case two) people in the class who are interested. Is this somehow less democratic than my old system? I'm not sure yet, but I do have some sense that topics get more buy-in from the class because they're introduced by a peer. (FN p. 50)

I was afraid that I had replaced an imperfect majority-rule democracy with an even less perfect structure in which each person had intensive control over a small area of course content but very little over the rest of the course. However, my hunch about "buy-in" was apparently right. Several comments indicate that direct participation in choosing the task increased interest and engagement, which in turn increased learning. Sergei demonstrated a particular attachment to the topic he introduced into the class when he grilled Mei:

> Sergei: And you learned interesting things about national park.
> Mei: Yeah.
> Sergei: What's national park you like more?
> Mei: I'm interested more Banff.
> Sergei: Banff?
> Mei: Banff. Yeah. Maybe this year I will go there.
> Sergei: Why? Why? [and so on] (SI 1)

Everyone expressed pleasure or interest or stimulation in learning from topics introduced by other students, with Francisco's proviso that some "people could prepare better and bring to class more and differents helps to capture the other classmate interest" (SJ p. 7). Somehow the more intense involvement within a narrower area (each student's chosen topic) created a more satisfying participation process. Only Francisco, unwittingly, in his critique of the participation system under trial suggested a return to exactly the old vote-and-tally system I had always used (SI 2).

Learning from Collaboration. As several of the earlier comments have indicated, the enhancement of learning appears to be a significant aspect of collaboration. Several students refer specifically to their language learning in terms of their interaction with classmates. For example, "We sit together, we watch the movie and we talk, discuss the movie.... Everybody share their own ideas, their own philosophy and we can learn not only...from the textbook" (Linda, SI 2). "And we discussing and communicating with others about the articles, I both get the [reading] practice and the exercise of my thinking. So I think the reading part worked really well within the groups" (Qi, SI 2). I can't help noticing how typical these group activities are to any ESL class, and not specific to my intervention, but I think that awareness of learning process was heightened during our research, perhaps a useful outcome in itself.

Both Mei and Delores seemed to attribute new learning specifically to working together. Delores said, "I learned a lot from the group because sometimes they teach me and sometimes I taught them...[It] is a fun time, and...sometimes you learn more than you expect" (SI 2). Mei spoke of sharing leadership as a way to "get more confident, and get more knowledge" (SI 2).

Given that the groups did not always function, I have to look at the evidence that learning continued for some people without collaboration. During the term, the class carried on teacher-generated language learning activities that all students could participate in regardless of what their classmates were doing, and the materials that were introduced by individual students and groups were available for everyone to learn from. Besides these learning opportunities, there appear to be some instances where the students continued to learn specifically from the project despite problems in their groups. Francisco, for instance, while frustrated by his group experience, audibly brightened during one taped discussion

when he switched from the topic of problems to a positive outcome. "This exercise about...

develop the topics made me think different things. Yeah? Made me go to the library, try to

investigate about the topic, so I learned...and it was good" (SI 2). In a later discussion with

me, Francisco also said that the class was more "active" than others he's taken. He seems to

have thrived on the increased responsibility (FN p. 62), perhaps experiencing democracy as

choice rather than necessarily as something dependent on successful communication. The

evidence suggests, then, that increased student participation may take other forms besides

group collaboration, and these other forms can also enhance learning.

Access to Leadership Roles

Leadership was a frequent underlying theme in class discussions, so I asked students

to address it specifically in both their journals and taped interviews. The degree to which

leadership structures in the classroom are flat or hierarchical relates directly to how power is

experienced, and what roles the teacher and students take.

Varied Leadership Models. At one point in my own notes, I wrote that I wished an

outside facilitator could step in and ease my dual roles as teacher and research participant

(typed notes, April 21). I might now dismiss this as a bit of whining on my part if Linda

hadn't twice, to my surprise, made suggestions that the teacher "*or someone else*" could step

in and help groups who are unable to come to decisions to "reorganize this group" or

"supervise the development" of their projects (SI 2, my emphasis). The conundrum of who is

ultimately responsible or in charge within a group can reach an almost metaphysical level of

questioning. Are we responsible for our own actions? Is it childish or merely humble to wish

for some outside force to intervene?

The students expressed a wide range of views on the subject of leadership and structure. At the authoritarian extreme, Marjan said that students of any age are inherently lazy and need pressure from a strict teacher in order to succeed. "Democracy itself is very useful, very good, but in English class you need order, some routine" (SI 1). Francisco felt that his group fell apart partly because there was no "boss" to say "you have to do this, this and this." (SI 1). Like Marjan he thought that students may take the easiest route available to them if not pressured, but he also felt it's the student's own responsibility to be "open mind and honest with themselves working harder to learn English" (SJ, p. 3). He didn't want to have to "convince" his partners to follow his plan, and clearly thought that I, as the teacher, "give us too much freedom" (SI 1). Both of these pictures to some extent equate democratic practice with chaos or total structurelessness.

On the other end of the spectrum, Mei said that experiencing flat or shared leadership was one of her greatest learnings during the project. "I think everybody can...join the leadership and then they can get more confident, and get more knowledge" (SI 2).

Mei did acknowledge the difficulties within a group of people "wanting to use their own decision" (SJ p. 1). Sergei responded to this with a comment about group size, that reaching agreement in a group of three or four people is "easier" than a larger group (SI 2). In his journal he also wrote:

> I read about people behaviour in group from American journals....When I taught students in the university [outside Canada], I...noticed that American psychologists was right very often....The student group was divided on few small group with 6-8 students in each. These groups had little different interests [or] visible leaders...[and had] stability. If the group has more 8-10 people...it'll have problems...because the group will has more than one leader who will wish to be...master. This situation will be destructive for the group and members won't have a partnership. (SJ p. 12)

Sergei was the only class member to speak of the function of the group being to divide problems rather than multiply ideas. Although I documented an instance when members of his group seemed to be refusing help from each other because of loyalty to their own individual plans, he wrote, "...In our group we've a flat leadership which depend of part [on] common work. It means each from us become the leader...during time when he was preparing own part of a theme" (SJ p. 8).

Perhaps because of her own background as a teacher, Delores identified a pedagogical role in leadership. A good leader is someone who teaches, and says "'Let's go do something'" (SI 2). A good leader also "teaches...the meaning of true leadership so that it can be passed through them to others" (SJ). This ideal of devolving leadership was something I strove for during the course by attempting to teach process skills and decentre responsibility.

Linda said I was not only the teacher but "a participant" in the class (SI 2), although she also said the teacher has to make final decisions, especially when there is disagreement (SI 2). Sergei wrote that the teacher in a democratic classroom needs "strength, knowledge and self-control" (SJ p. 7). Mei touched me when she said "We can get inspiration from Morna....She maybe give a little bit idea and then people can make more idea come out" (SI 2). Mei and others expressed comfort with this motivator role for the teacher and with the loose structure of responsibility and accountability within the class. Francisco not only expressed discomfort with the lack of structure, but noted that "maybe she [Morna] changed a little bit and tried to take the control, because no everyone developed very well the topics" (SI 2).

It's clear from my notes that I struggled with the issue of how much structure to provide and what my role should be in it, and that I did make changes as the project evolved. My ideal of facilitating maximum participation may have sometimes been ironically thwarted by opening too loose a structure, by decentering responsibility to the point of creating uncertainty and discomfort. However, the evidence in the data also suggests to me that different students responded differently to the situation.

Recognition of the Teacher's Normative Role. The worried comments in my notes about not doing enough to assess students' progress in English suggest that I was aware of my role as an evaluator of their work. This judgmental role is just one that troubles the possibility of any democratic sharing of leadership. It relates to the wider authority often bestowed on teachers to maintain both academic and disciplinary standards. The range of opinion in the data indicates that I was not the only one struggling with the effect of shifting power relations on these roles.

Marjan's vociferous defence of traditional discipline and routine, for example, was partly related to a desire for a clear standard of achievement. Not only did she think students need pressure from the teacher to do homework, but also to "do conversation, to make sentence and correct grammars" (SI 1). This hints that in Marjan's opinion a traditional classroom power structure will also lead to meeting standards of competence in English.

Shifting this power structure can lead to uncertainty. Francisco once came to me with a text he'd downloaded from the internet which we agreed was too difficult for the class and never used. This struggle to figure out what level of material would be acceptable to the class, and to me as the teacher, was one of the challenges faced by all the students in their efforts to facilitate each others' learning. To participate fully in the class, especially as co-

facilitators with me, required knowledge – knowledge of the standards for Lower or Upper Advanced and of how to meet them, as well as knowledge of how to present a new piece of writing to the class and how a group should operate. Some of the debate between students about group decision-making process could even be seen as a search for a new classroom cultural norm, with its attendant problems of potential coercion for all group members to meet it.

Besides my role in creating standards of English, I also confronted my policing role. One evening I recorded an incident where I became "snippy" with one of the younger members of the class whose behaviour I considered to be obnoxious. He wanted to work alone while everyone else was involved in group discussions about something else. Periodically he would interrupt our group work to ask questions about the exact matters we were discussing. Eventually I (and others, I think) became exasperated and I spoke to him quite sharply (FN p. 46). Clearly his expectations of behaviour in an adult classroom differed from mine. This could be interpreted as a normal classroom event, one in which the teacher's expectations of compliance would ascend. However, in a space where the expectations for some behaviour are shifting, then all may shift. After an earlier run-in with the same student, I wrote,

> I'm wondering if part of this de-centering power process is having that effect I so dreaded from my previous bad experience of making people feel as if they can behave however they want with no consideration for the group or me. If I want respect is it necessarily for my authority or just for my position as the one holding the floor…? (FN p. 29)

Some students expressed the desire for the teacher to be the boss, but I recorded several embarrassing incidents where my actions as a very bossy boss clearly hindered learner participation. In one, attempting to save Delores from what looked like excessive

effort, I said, "You don't need to do that," and she immediately began erasing a page full of ideas she had recorded for her group (FN p. 11). The group had been brainstorming, and once again I was imposing my sense of how spontaneity should not be dulled by too much structure. In another incident, I literally monopolized the material resources of learning, holding onto a library book provided for the class by one student for his project, instead of letting him decide how he wanted to present the material (FN p. 48). In this case, my gaff was totally unconscious, a result of years of teacherly management habits, and I struggled to undo the damage as soon as I noticed I was doing it.

Some of the difficulties groups faced in carrying out our project may have been related to a feeling that some kind of standard that they couldn't grasp was being imposed or to the uncertainties of negotiating new roles. Francisco and Inez's comments that collaborators need to know each other hint at the factor of trust involved in creating a communicative democratic structure. In order to work together, participants need to understand each others' wishes and expectations.

Access to Resources

In my data, no one raised any concerns about a lack of material resources that might in any way impinge on democratic process. Several people did raise lack of time and lack of required skills as prospective or real problems.

Both Francisco and Inez complained about not having enough time within the class schedule to meet with their partners (SI 1; Francisco SJ p. 3). Mei pointed out that lack of consensus within a group means "people spend long time to make a decision" (SJ p. 1). After commenting on a lesson that I felt was better-paced than some others, I wrote, "Perhaps in

the name of 'democracy' I have occasionally let class discussions run on a bit longer than was strictly productive." (FN p. 40). All of these comments highlight the tensions within participatory structures between the value placed on democratic process for its own sake – on creating a democratic "atmosphere" (Linda, SJ p. 1) – and the "productive" use of democracy, whether in reaching an agreement or creating a visible outcome.

One other factor of successful participation in democratic processes is access to specific skills or abilities. This relates directly to the issues discussed above concerning how standards or norms are perceived. Mei suggested that democracy will be fine "when English [is] good enough" (SI 1). After we visited a public hearing on electoral reform, she wrote of getting a headache because she couldn't follow the debate (SJ, p. 2). These comments imply that equality of language ability, or the willingness of other participants to accommodate English language learners, is necessary for newcomers to participate in public deliberation. Only when difference is recognized can communicative democracy be fully realized.

The data does not provide a singular answer to the question of what democracy is. Different students expressed different priorities and visions. While some evinced pessimism about the possibility of creating democracy within the classroom – because of the teacher's normative role or their own lack of skills – others expressed more positive feelings that skills could be shared, communication opened and roles modified.

These differences in viewpoint are themselves indicative of the challenge faced when trying to create a functional classroom democracy. In the following section I explore many more aspects of democracy and difference.

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Democracy and Difference

At the beginning of the course, the class engaged in a discussion about the concept of 'community' and its possible meanings. One conundrum we couldn't solve was whether a community was necessarily made up of people with the same characteristics, implying exclusion of those without them, or made up of those with different characteristics who "help each other" (Delores, SI 2) or who use community as "a bridge to connect to others" (Mei, SJ p. 7). In an ESL class, all sorts of people are definitely "thrown together" (Young, 2000, p. 126), yet within this particular classroom we created a positive environment, perhaps a sense of community or what Linda referred to as "family" (SI 2). We also grappled with many aspects of difference. Sometimes differences in identity highlighted unequal status, such as in the case of an outright anti-Semitic remark. At times, the students and I saw differences to be of minimal importance. In one discussion, about race, uncertainty was expressed about how people should be labelled and categorized. And sometimes differences were seen as a source of learning.

Within my data, the students discuss difference in culture, language, religion, age, general disposition, and ideas for their projects. They also, implicitly, talk about the difference in expertise between themselves and the teacher. Although I also touch on these differences in my field notes, only I, perhaps not surprisingly, mention difference in

academic ability. In this section I will look at our commentary, which raises positive possibilities for working with difference to create communicative democracy, and also examine ways in which difference or our interpretation of it might obstruct action and participation.

Elements of Difference

Difference in Expertise

One of the original purposes of my intervention was to challenge the centrality of expertise in the classroom. Authority based only on professional expertise troubled me, because it seemed as if my knowledge of English language shouldn't give me any coercive power over other people in the room. I squirmed a little when confronted with Marjan and Joseph's respective notions of the teacher's need to "discipline" and "punish" (both SI 1). I notice in the data that expertise in the teacher is perceived by the students to be located not just in knowledge of language but in teaching ability, leadership ability, and understanding of others, all of which could be attached to other roles than mine.

When other professional educators are in the room, in this case Sergei and Delores, it is hard for me to feel I have any monopoly on teaching expertise. It was instructive for me to read Sergei's very humbly presented observations from his own teaching experience. On the other hand, I was the only one with experience as a language educator. It was clear that during the course the students sometimes wanted more support in their efforts to take on a teaching role. For example, although I did teach a lesson on preparing questions for a reading, I wrote that I wasn't really sure how to demonstrate the skills "it took me years to learn" (FN p. 15). At another point I wrote, "When I said I could be the 'administrator' and

make a draft schedule/agenda for the coming weeks they all agreed immediately – they looked relieved I think" (FN p. 25).

For the final taped interview, I asked the students to comment on the role of the teacher in the class. While some said I was the leader of the class, some also commented on my role as a participant or a friend. Delores said, "…When she had to use the role for teacher, she did. And when she had to use the role for friend, she did, too," (SI 2) indicating that these roles were flexible.

In the next two sections, I would like to look in turn at two types of difference that often challenge democratic communication, differences in language and culture.

Language Difference

As I have mentioned above, English is one of the resources identified as useful or necessary for language learners to participate in a democracy. In an ESL classroom, language difference appears to me, the teacher, as the most obvious cultural difference between students, yet it is hardly mentioned by the students within the data. One striking exception was Mei's comment that when "people work together…I can…learn some different ac- , different pronunciations?" (SI 1). I assume she was searching for the word 'accents.' This comment was remarkable because I have so many times heard students in other classes complain about the difficulty of understanding each other's pronunciation, and even using their complaints as a veiled way to communicate a wish to exclude one specific group within the class.

Within the class under study, however, difficulty communicating was attributed to difference of ideas and philosophy or inability to "get the same point," but only Inez blamed

language. "Is difficult for us – my case, is difficult for me – communicate to the other people when your language, your English no is good for talking. Yes, for explain your ideas" (SI 1).

To me, listening in on the classroom conversations, it was often clear that misunderstanding was caused by language difficulty. On one tape, I heard Sergei and Mei working at cross-purposes.

> Sergei: …I think she [Morna] was organizer in our class for our groups.
> She was real leader in class.
> Mei: Yeah… [She agrees twice.] We can combine to leadership.
> Everybody…is a leader. (SJ 2)

They continued on without sorting out or apparently even noticing this dissonance. In my notes I also recorded a couple of nonsensical conversations between me and individual students, and the fact that Marc, a French speaker, only joined the 'hunger' project group because he thought it was the 'anger' group (interested in discussing world conflict) (FN p. 15).

I was also occasionally aware of different speaking styles related to both culture and personality. These were most noticeable in the differences in volume and in the degree of forcefulness with which different speakers put forward arguments.

Perhaps this is a useful place to revisit Mei's comment about the similarity of immigrant experience. In her journal she said that her life is hard and learning English is difficult (SJ, p. 7). She also made the comment about getting a headache while attending the hearing on electoral reform (SJ, p. 2). Perhaps the relevant difference in ability that language learners perceive is not among themselves but between themselves and the demanding English speakers they confront outside the classroom. It is this difference that, in Mei's case literally, blocks participation in public deliberation.

Cultural Difference

In their discussion, Delores and Joseph talked about "multicultural" community, which Joseph described as a positive environment because it's "good for friendship." Delores went on to call the classroom a "multicultural place" within which it's the responsibility of the teacher to be friendly and open-minded in order to facilitate working relations between people with "different minds" (SI 2).

Most of the students spoke positively about this experience of exposure to other cultures and attribute any problems with group process to personality issues such as stubbornness (Mei, SJ p. 1) or the will of some to impose opinions (Francisco, SJ p. 1). Only Inez and Francisco discussed the possibility that cultural difference is the main barrier to groups collaborating successfully. Francisco said, "Sometimes the cultures...are different, so we couldn't get some central point, we couldn't get the same concept so finally...I have to work by myself" (SI 1). He raised the prospect of lack of understanding, perhaps the impossibility of understanding. Later, again about group dysfunction, he said, "But...we never met before," which sounds to me like "We are strangers." Inez replied, "Yeah, when you were in your school, in university, in your job, you know how is the [work?] another people." (SI 1). The extension of their logic might be that time and opportunity to know each other increase understanding and therefore the possibility of inclusive communication.

Taking quite a different stance, Sergei minimized the existence of difference as he sought commonality between people. When Yvonne made a comment about exposure to other cultures broadening thinking, Sergei expressed doubt both in tone and words. "People around the world can't thinking different way much. [Laughs.] It's very, very close, I think" (SI 2).

Mei expressed the opinion that the students share an identity as immigrants, and that they are best suited to provide learning materials for each other because of this similarity. I, the teacher, am the one who is different. "…We…all want to know about Canada, I think, the same. The teacher…was born here. Maybe she provide something we don't really, really want to know" (SI 2).

In the following sections I will consider differences in age, gender and religion, and look at particular instances when these differences were related to oppressive actions.

Age Difference

In the data, several people referred to differences in age, for example, Mei commenting about learning from people of different ages (SI 1).

Qi, comparing his youthful age to older members of the class, said, "Maybe some of our ideas a little raw, you know. Immature" (SI 1). Francisco didn't mention age, but did refer to the tendency of some students to "play" rather than take their work seriously (SJ p. 10). Age difference was sometimes a source of teasing, which could sometimes mask an imposition of power by any of us on the younger group members. For example, I recorded the following fairly light incident:

> Marjan boldly asked [someone] how old he was on the first night – when he said he was 19 she said, "You're like my son" [in a laughing voice]. I declared that it was a mother-free zone [meaning that we mothers would abandon that role here, but] five minutes later Yvonne walked in with her 15-month old daughter because her husband hadn't gotten home in time to take over. So much for that dictate. (typed notes, Apr. 21)

Sergei spoke positively about the ability of adult learners, especially older ones, to be self-directed. He also said that getting knowledge is

very difficult and so very boring process for students.... But, adult people know about it enough well.... I see in our class all students understand their tasks very well and they make their work with responsible. (SJ p. 10)

Gender Difference

None of the students said anything about gender issues in the data. I have no recollection of it ever coming up as a topic of conversation in class, and I wasn't aware of any conflict between men and women working together in the class.

Early on in the course, I felt a sense of helplessness when one of the men made several comments that I found quite sexist, some of them directed at me. I know it was partly the intimidation I experienced, as the recipient, that made me hesitant to step more assertively into some of the later conflicts between students over other differences.

There is a small amount of evidence that the women in the class worked more collaboratively on their projects rather than dividing their tasks between them. Of the six women present in the class, four worked in pairs to finish and present a topic, while the other two didn't work in groups because one dropped out and the other arrived late in the term. Among the seven men, six made individual presentations to the class and one didn't participate in group work.

There may also have been more social interaction among the women. For instance, one of them spoke freely about a personal problem she was having and the other women tended to physically gather around her to discuss it during free moments, as any men within earshot tended to move away.

Religious Difference

Perhaps the most volatile situations that occurred during the course involved remarks made about religious difference. After the first evening that students brainstormed ideas about things they'd like to learn or do, I wrote,

> Disturbed by reaction to Marjan's suggestion 'learn about Jewish culture' – [someone] said 'who would want to know that[?]' – [while I was] trying to get word 'Jewish' across to [one student], several said 'they're very rich' or at least 'they're very rich and smart' – *then* turns out Joseph...is *half* Jewish and one of the interests he expressed in the exercise was going to Israel. I made a point of publicizing this – he seemed happy to talk about it. Perhaps being 'African Jewish' ([one student's] summary comment) has a different status. (FN p. 4)

However, a few nights later the same person who had dismissed Jewish culture as a topic "astonished me by suggesting 'history of religions'" as a potential topic for one of the group projects (FN p. 10).

On the other occasion, I recorded only that a discussion on race had led to "an argument about the Bible's validity." I recall that one woman addressed the question of the original race by referring to Adam and Eve. In response, another woman said something like, "But how do you know who wrote the Bible? It's only their opinion," to which the first woman took exception. I wrote that when the argument "looked like it might get ugly, I steered us back to the nuts-and-bolts language lesson I'd prepared but a few minutes later they were off again. Mostly it was invigorating" (FN p. 35). The Biblical references did not come up again and no one appeared to hold offence.

Both of these incidents remind me of the difficulty I find in the role of facilitating a response – either my own or the class's – to overt expressions of misrecognition, here in the forms of stereotyping ("They're very rich.") and lack of validation ("Who would want to know that?" and "But how do you know?"). I'm not sure that either "publicizing" someone's

membership in an identity group or merely trying to redirect the conversation are adequate responses.

Learning from Difference

Many comments in the data point specifically to learning from differences among us. Even the notion that a teacher or outside agent is needed to facilitate learning implies that learners (and possibly the teacher) rely on other points of view than their own within the learning process.

As I've discussed above, several students pinpointed the differences in ideas or opinions as both a source of idea generation and of group breakdown. Broadening this, Delores said, "...My classmates...teach me about their interests, too. I think we worked well and fun and interested" (SI 2). Mei, referring to the desirability of democracy in the classroom, said, "It's good because people can find the most information....From different age, maybe different [point of view?] we can get some interesting things" (SI 1).

Several people referred directly to learning from and about other cultures. Linda begins a discussion with Francisco about sushi-making by commenting on culture-learning in general:

> Linda: ...We can learn from others' experience, their ideas, and their philosophy, I think. And some culture.
> Francisco: Yeah, sure. For example, about the sushi was –
> Linda: Oh, it's tasty!
> Francisco: Fun. [Laughs.]
> Linda: Oh, yeah. [Laughs.] I can still remember the sushi is tasty....But also it's the process of making sushi, it's very interesting....Everybody opened their eyes and...[tone of wonder] "Oh, I want to eat it now." (SI 2)

The learning goes beyond learning *about* other cultures to learning *from* the situation. I am reminded of a comment I once heard that language teachers are in danger of

reducing culture learning to "pizza and polka," or in my case to sushi and Canadian pop. My sense is that the students in this class moved beyond these superficial notions. Several people commented on how working together creates the impetus to learn both listening and cooperation skills (Linda SI 2; Yvonne SJ p. 1). Yvonne said, "Sometime you thinking just one way…your thinking is too narrow. So if you talking with other person who came from other country, maybe change your mind" (SI 2).

In this section I have examined differences within our group and attitudes towards them that varied from oppressive to open-minded to indifferent. The open and respectful communication described earlier as a necessary element of democracy was sometimes challenged by differences in culture and language. All sorts of difference contributed to conflict that occasionally thwarted participation or highlighted the tension between my normative role and a more facilitative one. All of these prospects are apparent in the data, but so is the presence of learning enhanced by the same differences that cause so much trouble.

Conclusion: The Pedagogical Power of Democracy

> I think the friendly atmosphere was being due to your conception 'democracy' in the class….I saw the experiment was interesting and sometimes a little difficult for you. In fact, it's working and students get…much pleasure. (Sergei, SJ p. 17)

I think Sergei is right, that attempting to create a democratic structure in the classroom is fraught with difficulties, but if my job as a teacher is to create the most opportunities for learning, this may be one of the best ways to do so. Throughout our comments, there is ample evidence that the students and I learned a lot because of the processes through which we were working. We carried on with familiar language learning

activities but we also explored new leadership skills and new teaching skills, and in many ways became more aware of our learning because of the overt meta-analysis that our research provoked.

Learning is not always fun. Certainly I have found it uncomfortable, if instructive, to review some of the anecdotes about my own misjudgments in the classroom. Mei expressed some of the most positive feelings toward learning about everything from using the library catalogue to new leadership styles, yet during the class I recall her frequent moments of bewilderment and frustration.

I have tried in this chapter to exercise my own respectful listening and to reveal the multiplicity of ideas put forward by the students, even those who do not agree with me. Their understanding of democracy is of something that does not necessarily take place in a classroom and does not always involve the specific aspects of inclusive communication and decision making that I sought. By drawing together their ideas, I have been able to see both the positive experiences of deep learning and leadership which took place, as well as the anxieties that need to be addressed in any further intervention into student involvement in decision making. Of particular concern is the sense of displacement some students had as standards seemed elusive to some of them and structures nonexistent.

In the next chapter I will return to my concept of a democratic participation structure for the classroom and the criteria I now see as necessary to its success. These include inclusive communication, an acceptance of difference that does not assume consensus as its ultimate goal, and fluid roles for teachers and students.

Chapter 6 – Three Criteria for a Democratic Participation Structure

I started my project with the assumption that a more participatory classroom structure would be inherently more democratic. I carefully planned a series of steps and group configurations to involve students in planning a course and taking responsibility for much of its content, in the hope that this would decentre some of my authority as well as provide authentic and creative learning opportunities for students. My observations along the way as well as comments from students show me various ways in which parity of participation were impeded by differences and poor communication. At the same time, students' comments indicate that while some of them thrived in their new roles, others were disturbed by forms of activity that appeared to them as structureless or even chaotic.

In light of these findings, I have looked for a way to strengthen democratic practice by theorizing a more visible and functional democratic participation structure for the classroom. I have identified three criteria that I think would contribute to its success: a model of inclusive communication that maximizes participation; a recognition of difference that does not assume consensus as its ultimate goal; and a flexibility that includes fluid roles for teacher and students. In this chapter, I will deal with each of these three criteria in turn.

Before I start, however, I would like to emphasize that I am caught between the ideal and the pragmatic. I recognize that a communicative democracy based on equal participation and shared leadership may only be available provisionally in the classroom, because of institutional pressures, because of lack of commitment to group processes by students or teachers, or because of ingrained hierarchical roles we all perpetuate. Nonetheless, my discussion here is still rooted in the belief that it is my ethical responsibility as a teacher to seek democratic structures of participation, not only in theory but in practice. To borrow Jim

Cummin's (2003) terms, it may be possible to use my power as a teacher collaboratively rather than coercively.

Inclusive Communication

In order to create a democratic participation structure within a classroom, both students and teachers must have opportunities to participate. Initially, participants have to be physically present, and issues of absenteeism in my class highlight the difficulties groups face when some members are unavailable or excluded. For those present, classroom participation does not only mean speaking up or taking leadership, but also listening attentively and creating space for others to speak.

In this section I will argue that two factors must be considered within a model of inclusive communication necessary to a democratic participation structure. First, a variety of communication forms must be recognized and encouraged if parity of participation is to be achieved and learning optimized. Secondly, I argue that listening as a communication skill needs special attention within a democracy.

Participation as Learning as Communication

In Chapter 2, I outlined the genesis of my project in the misgivings about aspects of both critical pedagogy and the sociocultural model of collaborative learning. In critical pedagogy, I see a welcome recognition of the inequitable social relations in which education is embedded, but also a troubling tendency to characterize learners as a deficient, homogeneous group placed in opposition both to more powerful forces in society and to the already enlightened teacher with whom they engage in "dialogue." In sociocultural

perspectives, I see a welcome recognition of the learning that takes place through interaction *within* heterogeneous groups, but (in some cases) a lack of attention to the power dynamics at work within these groups that may prevent equality of participation. Missing from most accounts of sociocultural theory is any optimism about the transformative possibilities of learning, and yet it seems to me that the whole proposition of situated learning rests on constant change, as individuals learn from and then inform their own cultural setting.

I have searched for a bridge between these two strands of theory, and start with some attempts that have been made in the literature on sociocultural theory to explore power dynamics within sites of learning. Literacy educator Erin Irish (2003), for example, points out that the social nature of learning inherently presents ethical implications because "issues of privilege and hegemony pervade all social activity" (p. 23). Barbara Rogoff and her colleagues (Rogoff et al, 2003) compare two models of children's learning. In the sociocultural model of "intent participation," learning takes place through attentive and intentional listening and observation of authentic activity in which the listener expects to participate. They contrast this with the "assembly-line" model more prevalent in children's schooling, in which "schools…would not be fulfilling their functions of supporting social differentiation and division of labor if all children were equally successful….[However], in intent participation within families and communities worldwide, the aim may be (although it is not invariably) to support the learning of all members of the community, and learning is organized in ways that allow this aim to be accomplished" (p. 196).

Rogoff (1995) has earlier proposed in her notion of participative appropriation that participation and learning cannot be separated. To further explore the relationship between participation and inclusive communication, I would like to return here to Iris Marion

Young's (1996, 2000) model of communicative democracy. According to Young, participation within a group is strengthened by the inclusion of many different voices and styles through the use of multiple forms of communication. She describes the limitations of a notion of democratic deliberation in which rational argument is privileged over all other forms of communication as she lays out three alternative communications modes of greeting, rhetoric and narrative. Similarly, part of Elizabeth Ellsworth's (1989, 1997) critique of critical pedagogy centres on the "hegemonic status" it grants rational dialogue between teacher and student as "*the one* process that will lead to democracy and the virtues it requires" (1997, p. 102, emphasis in the original).

Recognizing through Greeting. Young (2000) suggests that the first step toward internal inclusion in democratic communication is recognition, or what she calls "greeting" those whose inclusion in the deliberation may not have been previously acknowledged. Her term "greeting" reminds me of the countless getting-to-know-you activities to which ESL students are subjected, partly to increase their understanding of English small talk, and partly to facilitate bonding within a new class. As a teacher, among the choices I make when a new group of students embarks on these interactions are how much I will disclose about myself – to what extent I will create a parity of risk – and how much I will disclose about my decision-making process within the course. I don't have to disclose anything. As Young points out, it is easy to offer greetings that imply friendship without giving up any substantive control of the interaction.

Fraser (2000) suggests that recognition of difference only leads to justice if it is accompanied by parity of status between those involved in public communication. The greeting is perhaps Young's way of implying acknowledgment of that status, but in Fraser's

scheme, parity also includes equal access to material and discursive resources. Applying this notion of parity to a democratic classroom structure, I see that each participant must be acknowledged as a group member and so must their ability to contribute to discussion.

Understanding through Rhetoric. Once participants have entered into deliberation and recognized each other, they still have to open themselves to the new learning that's available. They have to be ready to widen their self-regarding position (Young, 2000) to include others' viewpoints. This may be possible through speaking, breaking silences despite fear of what the response might be, or through creative listening that is open to the possibility of adopting new ideas (Bickford, 1996; Martin, 2001).

Ellsworth (1997), however, points out that every participant in classroom communication is speaking and receiving information from a social position that is always skewed from how others perceive it. She cautions against oversimplifying the notion of what understanding might entail. Drawing an analogy to the realist conventions of filmmaking, Ellsworth says that the search for dialogic understanding is related to our "desire for 'seamless and coherent narrative space and time'" (Kuhn, 1982 in Ellsworth, 1997, p. 86). As a teacher, it is important to be reminded that what I teach is not necessarily what anyone learns. It's a bit daunting to consider that this challenge to communication might be multiplied exponentially within group deliberation involving diverse cultural backgrounds.

From Young's (2000) point of view, understanding, and therefore successful democratic negotiation, is possible only when participants recognize the varied rhetorical styles with which people address each other. Language teachers are fully aware of the ways in which meaning is not just carried by the individual words within an utterance, but also by the rhetorical package within which they are placed. One of the most difficult cultural

minefields that language learners navigate is the subtle cultural differences between styles or registers of speech, and it is inevitable that they sometimes fail to understand the cultural expectations of a particular setting. Thinking of the particular group of students in my study, I can see ways in which their involvement in public processes outside the classroom might be difficult or even made impossible by the lack of space available for their discomfort, hesitancy, or nonstandard pronunciation or rhetorical style.

Inside the classroom, where we have more control, everyone involved needs to monitor the success of communication across differences in cultural norms of address, such as volume or degrees of formality. It is also important as an English language teacher that I help learners communicate with each other and with those outside the classroom by providing models of a variety of rhetorical styles and engaging students in discussion of which carry power in different settings.

Creating Knowledge through Narrative. Young (2000) also makes a case for promoting narrative as a necessary form of democratic communication. By putting forward and listening to each other's stories, people from a variety of backgrounds, joining in deliberation, can create "shared premisses" [sic] with which to take up the necessary next step of rational debate (p. 70). I can see now that Young's (2000) concept of narrative as a kind of social glue within a decision-making group is very relevant to my own project. I expressed surprise when Delores wrote in her journal that we had spent less time in our class "discussing and exchanging opinions" than in other classes, and again when I heard some personal stories from Sergei and Linda near the end of the term that helped me better understand their situations. Hadn't I spent a career engaging learners' stories? At the time I realized I may have been too caught up in creating self-sufficient project groups to carry out

my usual getting-to-know-you activities, but Young's comments make me think more deeply about the democratic necessity of maintaining these types of exchanges. Without hearing stories to gain a clear sense of who their partners are and where their ideas are coming from, individuals may not be able to listen as well within group decision-making processes and may be unable to achieve at least provisional common understandings. At the same time, as Sherene Razack (1993) has pointed out, it is important that an environment be created in which stories are offered freely and without coercion.

All modes of communication, including greeting, rhetoric, narrative and rational debate, increase the learning of participants and create opportunities for them to take part in decision making. Collaboration in decision making itself increases learning, and so the processes of communication and decision making can continue in a cycle of increasing opportunity – that is, if those involved are able to truly listen to each other and act on what they hear.

Participation as Listening

Within my data, Linda points out that respectful listening is the "foundation of [a] democratic class" (SJ, p. 1). Unfortunately, listening is the skill that Susan Bickford (1996) finds to be missing from most models of democratic deliberation. It is also often the most neglected skill in language instruction, what Rebecca Oxford (1998) has referred to as the "neglected stepchild" of the profession, although "the most fundamental language skill" (p. 243). For language learners, listening problems include the difficulties of literally failing to understand a speaker, and their vigilance as listeners is often very demanding. Bickford (1996) writes that "taking responsibility for listening, as an active and creative process,

might serve to undermine certain hierarchies of language and voice" (p. 129). However, true listening also "requires courage and persistence" because of the risk listeners face of being challenged to seriously change their ways of thinking or acting (p. 148).

Bickford (1996) points out the difficulty of assessing when people are really listening. Silence may be construed as either respect, or lack of comprehension, or willful resistance to the speaker. Questioning by the listener may either demonstrate careful attention to the speaker's intended meaning or a desire to reroute the conversation. Again, all of these issues are more complex for language learners. Language teachers often refer to a passive stage of learning that takes place as new English speakers take in all that goes on around them but are unready to speak. However, Rogoff (1995; Rogoff et al, 2003) and Bickford (1996), from their very different perspectives, would call this "intent" listening anything but passive. It seems possible to me that one reason students in my study group minimize the differences in their language ability is that within the classroom they sense the honest attempt of others to listen to them, no matter how successfully or unsuccessfully their messages are received.

When Bickford asks "...How can listening itself be made audible or visible?" (p. 153), I am reminded of the difficulties language teachers face when attempting to infer whether learners have successfully understood something or improved in their overall ability to comprehend. In these cases we ask them to respond orally, write something or draw. With varying degrees of success, language teachers attempt to make listening audible or visible. In the instances in my classroom when participants fail to recognize each other or have difficulty "reaching a central point" (Francisco, SI 1), perhaps poor listening is a factor,

and one solution would be to elicit evidence that stories are heard and engage speakers and listeners in an overt negotiation of their meaning.

When Rogoff and her associates (2003) talk about "intent participation," they refer to the process of observation and "listening-in" through which children's learning takes place within many cultural communities. The listening is "active" (p. 178). The listener-observer "expects to be involved" in the process they are witnessing (p. 178), and their learning is dependent on their inclusion by their community "in a wide range of community settings...as *legitimate peripheral participants* (Lave & Wenger 1991)" (p. 179, emphasis in the original). The intensity of listening (and thus the learning) are connected to the listener's assurance of participation now or in the future. Within a democratic participation structure, the question may be whether this inclusion in communal activity will be external, involving their presence, or internal, involving their true ability to speak and be listened to as they feel ready to offer suggestions for the group's actions.

In the data, students talk about the benefits of participation through collaboration, including enhanced learning through the greater generation of ideas, increased engagement with the material, and opportunities to teach as well as learn. These findings corroborate the notions of social cognition, or what Young (2000) refers to as the generation of social knowledge through an exchange of information. Young recognizes that the dynamic of the exchange is not necessarily an effortless one, that letting go of old understanding in order to create the new involves challenge and risk, as well as the possibility of giving up a dominant position of power.

Drawing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bickford (1996) points out that working collaboratively requires its own kind of courage, as participants feel "responsible

and yet not in charge.... This kind of fear can lead to not-listening as well, the reluctance to admit another as a 'co-builder of a common world'" (p. 153).

Recognition of Difference and Provisional Consensus

Within my data, there is no agreement about the importance or meaning of difference. Some of the students minimize its importance, some see it as a source of learning and others see it as an at least partially insurmountable obstacle. In my own notes, I record moments within the classroom of intense communication across difference and a few moments of bigotry.

In the previous section I described the facets of inclusive communication necessary for a democratic participation structure. Respecting multiple forms of communication is one avenue toward accounting for difference, but it doesn't negate the realities of conflict between people and the difficulties of reaching consensus.

Both educational and political theorists have tried to envision ways to account for difference within group interactions by drawing on the resources available there to generate knowledge. Mary Alfred (2002) writes about the democratizing role of sociocultural perspectives in the field of adult education.

> Of particular concern to adult education is the context of difference and how diversity constructs (race, class, gender, nationality, sexual preferences, and so on) manifest themselves in the classroom. Practices of racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism, for example, have been found to be overt and covert in the practice of adult education. Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2000) note that the literature of adult education has placed value on Eurocentric knowledge and thought and has ignored knowledge constructed outside the discourse of whiteness. (p. 8)

An antidote to this, suggests Alfred, may be the acknowledgement of "multiple realities and the social construction of knowledge.... The sociocultural perspective holds

promise for challenging the Eurocentric ideals that dominate the practice of adult education"
(p. 11).

Young (2000) refers to social difference as a political resource. By this she means
that true inclusion in decision making of all those affected by the outcome of a decision has
three benefits. It demonstrates "respect" for all parties, "increases the chances that those who
make proposals will transform their positions from an initial self-regarding stance to a more
objective appeal to justice," (p. 52) and "maximizes the social knowledge available to a
democratic public" in decision making (p. 115).

Social knowledge is situated exactly because of the iterative process through which
each person involved in the interaction is a learner, who in turn has an impact on the
understanding created through communication. Many of the students in my study express
satisfaction that they were able to both learn specifically from their differences and increase
their collective resources by sharing knowledge. The "self-regarding stance" may be one
way to consider people's "stubborn" natures (Mei, SJ p. 1), the insistence of some on
obstructing group decision making by maintaining their own perspectives without
willingness to listen to others. As a negotiating stance it can be seen, in light of Bickford's
(1996) comments about risk, as self-protective. In terms of learning, Ellsworth (1997)
reminds us of Jacques Lacan's supposition that learning is not so much about humans'
boundless capacity for curiosity as about our boundless capacity for "ignore-ance," for
remaining ignorant of that which might hurt us (p. 55).

Drawing these pieces together, I see various tensions within the project of creating a
democratic participation structure in the pluralistic setting of the classroom. For one thing,
when teachers invite participation in decision making, the cultures of those involved can't be

seen as homogeneous or stable, and the decisions that are reached can't be seen as final answers. Also, teachers need to accept that communication and learning may take place even when conflict continues without resolution, and perhaps sometimes because of it. I will consider the factors of cultural instability and conflict in turn.

Avoiding the Reification of Cultures

Language learning textbooks abound with culture quizzes that provide actual right or wrong answers about such matters as the correct way to interrupt a conversation politely, or what to bring to a dinner party. ESL teachers as well as these books are often seen as the conduits of fixed cultural knowledge. This may be symptomatic of the liberal project of citizenship within the field of language teaching, where ESL classes are seen as a space in which to transmit the "facts" needed by future Canadian citizens. But in critical pedagogy, too, the monolithic and fixed labelling of learner groups as "illiterate" or "immigrant" assumes there exists little difference within those groups or possibility for negotiations of identity.

Lev Vygotsky (e.g. John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996), working in the relatively closed setting of Soviet Russia, put forward the idea that children don't learn language in order to express ideas of culture but actually learn culture through language. Teaching English to adults in contemporary Canada presents a Vygotskian challenge. Learners are taking in layers of cultural meaning along with their nouns and verbs, but it is important that the teacher not assume these meanings to be fixed, or forget that adult learners are capable of critically analyzing them as they learn.

Young (2000) finds it problematic to essentialize group identities by assuming that people with similar affinities can be separated into "substantial" groups with easily defined attributes rather than distinguished by their position in "structural relations of power, resource allocation, and discursive hegemony" (p. 82). Fraser (2000) refers to this phenomenon of essentializing as the reification of group identities. In her model of participatory parity within a community, she emphasizes that "what requires recognition is not group-specific identity but the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction" (p. 113).

Within the classroom, a danger exists that participants, including the teacher, will view each other as stereotypical representatives of reified ethnic or cultural groups, or persist in acting out unjust relations between, for example, genders or cultural or age groups. Once a class has developed its own group identity, its own culture, there is also a temptation, especially by the teacher, to minimize some of the differences within it. While participants may enjoy a sense of belonging, even of "family" (Linda, SI 2), the notion of collaboration within a community of practice can falsely emphasize the wholeness or even homogeneity of a community.

The students in my study identified leadership skills that the teacher must exhibit in facilitating communication across difference, but I think that one of the ways in which power must be shared in a democratic environment is in the sharing of responsibility for vigilance against what Fraser (2000) calls misrecogniton. The point of creating "social knowledge" in the classroom is that the teacher's knowledge of social relations is not enough to act on. Or to flip it back to Rachel Martin's (2001) point about the reciprocal nature of equality, not only the learners' understanding is incomplete.

When working with new immigrants to Canada, I am sometimes aware that I do bring greater experience of working in multicultural groups to the learning situation. For some, the hours they spend in an ESL classroom may provide their first exposure to members of many different cultural groups. When I had a chance to discuss my research findings with one student, Francisco, after the project was over, we talked about the possibilities of learning from difference. He said,

> It happened to me. I totally changed my way of thinking [after coming to Canada].... I don't feel terrified when I hear something I never hear before.... Before, I was shocked.... I learned not to criticize, to respect other people's ideas. (FN p. 63)

Such experiences highlight the ways in which cultures meet and possibly even change through the interactions of individuals. Therefore, a democratic participation structure needs to account for the shifting nature of both cultures and individuals' identity with them.

Accepting Conflict: Democracy Without Consensus

In looking back at my progression of thought as I conceptualized and carried out this project, I see that one underlying assumption I made was that a group of people working together to make decisions about how to run an ESL course would eventually reach consensus on what was to be done. I see this in the structure I chose for the working groups, and in the surprise I expressed when some of those groups didn't cohere. It wasn't that I didn't expect the need for negotiation, but I did expect groups to bridge their differences and create some unity of purpose.

I still don't know if I agree with Francisco's summation that the lack of agreement, where it existed, was due to cultural differences. I see difference in age as a more frequent

factor in some students' disregard for the input of others, as well as ongoing procedural problems caused by our differences in expertise. Where I do agree with Francisco, and with Young (2000), is that "knowing" each other, through shared stories and personal exchange, is a necessary precondition of democratic communication, and it may have been shortchanged in this particular classroom, ironically because we were too busy collaborating on the project.

As I've discussed above, though, even the best goodwill and respectful communication may not necessarily lead to agreement. My own tendency in situations of classroom conflict is to shut down conversation on a topic if no site of shared understanding is immediately obvious. A lot of emphasis is placed in teachers' development on conflict resolution, but none is placed on working productively *with* conflict. As Ellsworth (1997) says, the teachers' job "is to make diverse narratives of the world coexist," and yet "some narratives of the world cannot coexist" (p. 113). She cites Toni Morrison's example of the impossible fit between a European narrative of U.S. history based on prosperity and success and an African one based on poverty and slavery. My own recent experience with such a dissonance took place in a conversation with a Chinese student about whether the Second World War spread from Europe to Asia (my North American view) or from Asia to Europe (his Asian one). I'm not sure I agree with Ellsworth that these stories can't co-exist – they are both present in the room – but they certainly can't be cobbled together into some neat Hollywood entertainment.

Returning to Ellsworth's (1997) critique of dialogue as a pedagogical practice, she makes the point that within the model of communicative dialogue even disagreement is based on mutual "neutral, innocent understanding," rather than misunderstanding (p. 93).

> Obviously, if the two participants in the dual structure of communicative dialogue are to achieve more than a simple mirroring or repetition of what they already know – something else has to enter the picture. Something besides each other's already achieved conscious knowings has to interrupt what they think they already know, who they think they already are. (p. 99)

Like Young (2000), Ellsworth (1997) refers to difference as a "resource," a "space" in which teachers escape their need, or their ability, to regulate and control (p. 37). Adriana Hernandez (1997) describes a democracy in which difference negates the possibility of consensus. Drawing on the work of Chantal Mouffe, she writes

> …We must accept the inevitability of conflict and antagonism as fundamental and constitutive of political life. Therefore, instead of perceiving those traits as problematic, as an obstacle to a moment of total stability and homogeneity, they should be perceived as the healthy traits that allow for a constant transformation and prevent that moment of stability as a menace to the liberties of the members of society that do not coincide with…the 'general will'…. (p. 31)

Probably the greatest shift in my own thinking as a result of this project is an opening toward the acceptance that consensus may only be achievable in the classroom for brief moments or to facilitate certain transactions, and yet democracy can exist there. My role may not be so much to orchestrate agreement between all parties, as to ensure that all opinions, even the least popular, are heard and that those found oppressive even by a minority are interrogated and challenged. If my goal as a teacher is to create optimal conditions for both democracy *and* learning, then I have to watch for moments when silences can be broken, when a keep-it-to-yourself attitude does not block democratic communication. I also have to acknowledge that my own ability to listen may sometimes be challenged, and allow space for other members of the classroom group to take the lead in recognizing each other's differences.

Flexibility of Roles

According to Hernández (1997), the

> process of group deliberation and group generation of policy proposals is a fundamentally pedagogical one in the sense that it constitutes a space in which people come to consciousness, deliberately transforming not only knowledge about themselves and their reality, but also transforming their own subjectivities. (p. 58)

I believe, and my data supports the supposition, that striving to create democratic structures within a classroom has a pedagogical purpose. Part of the learning takes place through the simple sharing of stories. However, the greater understanding of self comes about also by taking part in a process that requires awareness of and responsibility for the process itself.

I have argued so far that a democratic participation structure requires a model of inclusive communication and a recognition of difference that does not assume the availability of more than provisional consensus. In order for either of these criteria to become a reality, the participation structure – that is, the procedures and division of roles in a classroom – needs to be flexible and open to multiple interpretations. This structure needs to allow for fluid roles for participants.

Although no agreement was reached among the class participants in my study as to the meanings of democracy, one element that everyone agreed on was lack of coercion by a higher authority, whether interpreted as the availability of choice, or as a deeper type of personal or social freedom. Many expressed satisfaction with what they termed a "flat" leadership structure within the class. However, while this shared leadership may have been possible in relation to decision making about course content, it was clear to me that ultimately I had to maintain some of my duties of "surveillance" and "evaluation" (Gore,

1998). Our roles may have been less flexible than would be ideal in any true democracy. I will consider here the possibilities, and limitations, of altering our roles.

Redistributing Roles

Jennifer Gore (1998) refers to the "micro-level functioning of power in pedagogy," (p. 277) and it was evident in the classroom under study that all of us at times exercised power and at others succumbed to the habits of institutionalized power we had all been schooled in. Learners alternately taught the class in content areas and required help with their English language needs. As the teacher, I was variously referred to as a friend, co-participant, leader and boss. Power was experienced in different ways at different times as part of our complex relationships rather than as a commodity for distribution. However, roles within those relationships were for some purposes redistributed.

I have said that I was interested in sharing collaborative power within my classroom (Cummins, 2003) and sociocultural theories of learning provide some guidance here. Within the model of learning that Rogoff (1995) has called "cognitive apprenticeship" the role of the teacher remains central but perhaps less coercive that in traditional North American schooling. Learners are given full opportunities to participate in the meaningful activities of a community and learn by observation and listening. Although they do not make any claims about ethics or justice, Rogoff and her later associates (2003) refer to "a collaborative, horizontal participation structure with flexible, complementary roles" as the hallmark of intent participation (p. 184). However, it is not clear within this model that learners are included in decision making. Their status remains that of apprentice within the learning

setting, no matter what other skills or wisdom they possess, or how adversely they may be affected by decisions made in the centre of the community.

I would like to argue that within a democratic participation structure, learners, especially adults, must have some access to power through leadership opportunities and participation in decision making. This power may only be available provisionally, because the reality of institutional structures requires teachers to inspect students' work and pass judgment on it. In order for access to leadership to be maximized, the teacher must take advantage of the fluidity of roles, and look for strategic moments to draw away from the controlling centre. It is also necessary that these roles be flexible enough to allow students to step back into a more dependent role when they want to, and that those who choose not to take leadership still receive respect for their views.

One place where my research appears to support this possibility is in the positive response of some students to shared responsibility for teaching and learning. When Delores says, "I learned a lot from the group because sometimes they teach me and sometimes I taught them," (SI 2) she is describing the possibility for a shift in relationships that provides an opportunity for both collaborative learning and collaborative power. I could certainly facilitate this shift better by more consciously and systematically sharing teaching skills with students. But more than helping learners become teachers, we teachers have to rethink our role as learners. Rachel Martin (2001) comments on the pervasive view among literacy and ESL teachers that our learning is limited to learning about students' lives. She writes, "There's something we as teachers can be learning about our own lives and freedom, about our role as teachers within a movement for social change, and about what we really are and aren't accomplishing in that role" (p. 8). While critical pedagogy may define our leadership

role as sparking others' transformation, a more collaborative model leaves room for the possibility that we need a little transforming ourselves.

Working with the Teacher's Role as Inspector

Since final evaluation of students' learning posed the greatest obstacle for me to relinquishing an authoritarian role in the classroom, I would like to pause for a moment to examine its impact. It throws a number of issues into relief: the distinction between consultation and authority in decision making; the place of social knowledge and collaboration in hierarchical institutions; and the students' own preoccupation with process versus product.

Elana Shohamy (2001, 2004) uses the term "democratic assessment" in language teaching to refer to such practices as using portfolios to involve students in collaborative assessment with the teacher. I have used various forms of student self-assessment in the past, and have attempted to integrate or align classroom assessment as much as possible, so that operations are transparent and as much involved in helping learners learn as in helping me understand their abilities. For example, at one point during the course under study, I asked students to work in groups to create questions for a grammar test that I later administered. (I thought each one of them would find at least one "free" question on the test – the one they'd written – but it proved surprisingly difficult for them.)

However, no matter how involved students are in their own assessment, within a hierarchical educational institution, the teacher has ultimate authority over its outcome if the student has further ambitions within that structure. In Chapter 4, I analyzed my experience during the study of involving students in the task of choosing dates for final assessments and

other activities. This effort appeared to involve them meaningfully in decision making, but remained at some level a process of consultation designed to validate my ultimate decisions. Similarly, procedures such as involving students in self-assessment may have a valid pedagogical goal of increasing learner awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, but may not really afford them any power over what happens to them. In what ways are these processes democratic? Certainly, if Susan Bickford (1996) is right about the primacy of listening in establishing democratic communication, a teacher who really tries to listen to students' input with a mind open to change can create a democratic moment of negotiation. And if students are only concerned with language learning – as many adult ESL learners are – the teacher's substantive feedback may be all that they require from the exchange. However, for those learners who need the teacher's approval to advance within the education system toward some form of credential, the power still rests with the teacher.

There is an apparent contradiction between large-scale, hierarchically organized education and a model of situated learning. Irish (2003) points out that if we really believe that knowledge is socially generated within a specific context, then it makes no sense to impose individual achievement testing through externally-generated, standardized exams. Her point raises the whole issue of how most tests are administered in classrooms, with a culturally particular, individualistic interpretation of what constitutes "cheating." In the model of intent participation described by Rogoff and her associates (2003), assessment occurs "during shared endeavors to aid learning," whereas in "assembly-line instruction" assessment is "separate from learning, to test receipt" of knowledge (p. 185). At times, in attempting to change the landscape of my ESL course, I increased this split between the

relaxed learning through "shared endeavours" and the regulative function of institutionally-driven assessment.

Within my field notes taken during the study, I noticed a recurring theme of confusion over process and product. Some students automatically turned their group's attention to producing a final artifact, such as an essay or speech, whereas some debated what type of presentation of information would most interest their classmates. Some spoke about the inherent virtue in participatory process, no matter what the outcome. In my analysis of what is possible within classroom interaction, I have concluded that some opening for democratic structure is available in the aspects of classroom *process* that allow the teacher to share leadership. However, little leeway may be available when product – or "outcome" – is involved, when teachers' judgmental role ultimately catches them in a hierarchy of relations with those outside the classroom.

Conclusion: Provisional Possibilities for Democracy

In my data, the students identified qualities of democracy that included lack of coercion, respectful listening and sharing of leadership. While none of these was present at all times in our classroom, all were present some of the time and often to a large degree. Also, and perhaps more importantly, the transparent operation of overt processes that were named as democratic created a new forum for learning.

In this chapter I have theorized criteria I feel are necessary to create a democratic participation structure, in response to the findings of this study. These criteria are a model of inclusive communication, a willingness to accept difference while recognizing that consensus is provisional, and a structure that allows for flexible roles among participants. In

the next chapter I will discuss how I might endeavour to meet these criteria in future, ideal classroom situations. This ideal will, of course, continue to elude me, and yet what I've learned from this project is that some type of democracy appears to be possible, if only for specific moments.

Chapter 7 – It's Never Over...

I embarked on this research with the question of whether increased student participation in decision making would disturb unequal power relations in an adult ESL classroom and create a more democratic learning space. To do this, I attempted to embrace participatory processes in both my classroom intervention and my action research method. My data revealed a number of meanings attributed to democracy and to difference, and that not all students involved in the project were comfortable with the removal of authority from the teacher while others enjoyed the opportunity to explore new roles. It also showed that a great deal of learning took place under the altered circumstances. Based on these findings, I have theorized that a democratic participation structure for the classroom must take into account a model of inclusive communication, a recognition of difference that includes respectful and productive ways to work with conflict, and flexible roles for all participants. Now I must ask myself what these factors mean for language teaching practice and for action research in the classroom. Is a democratic participation structure viable in either case?

Action research and teaching practice have one striking similarity. In neither is the process of reflection ever finished, as one question or adjustment always leads to another. By carrying out research into my own practice, I was able to highlight a particular set of classroom power issues that had interested me for a number of years, and to interact with students in a new way. Some of the changes brought about classroom activity that appeared extremely familiar, while at other times I felt we had entered new and confusing territory. As we tried on new roles, my students and I were unable to define the exact nature of our relationship as co-factilitators and co-researchers.

With this sense of unfinishedness, I attempt to draw together some implications from my study for conducting classroom action research, particularly in collaboration with learners, for teaching English to immigrants, and for strengthening democracy in the adult ESL classroom.

Implications for Action Research

In my attempt to explain our research process to my students, I used a diagram with three concentric circles, indicating that as researchers we were in the outside circle observing our activities as planners and participants in the two inner circles (See Figure 1, p. 43). Many language learners have already been exposed to teachers' ideas about meta-analysis, as trends in "learner training" and "learning how to learn" have been prevalent in the profession since the early 1990's (e.g. Ellis & Sinclair, 1989). The need to step outside the content of a communication starts for them as soon as they have to pause and examine the language used in it. By asking learners to engage in a discussion about democracy in the classroom, I was asking them to step back a little further than they might have before, to consider the environment in which their learning takes place. Even though the content and procedures of our class were ultimately not entirely different from other classes, some of the students involved say they learned more or differently than they had experienced in other classes.

Some of the difficulties we faced in endeavouring to carry out structured research included the challenges of creating reciprocal relationships in which all of us gained equally from research processes, and the lack of time available to add research to our classroom

agenda. In future research I would like to explore ways in which both of these problems might be mitigated by better integrating research and language learning activities.

Integrating Teacher and Learner Research

In many ways I was unsuccessful in creating reciprocal relationships within the classroom that would have made our research fully collaborative. To some degree this study resembles others in which students have generated data through interviews or writing but are still considered to be subjects of research rather than co-researchers (e.g. Adams, 2001; Kebir, 1994). In considering how I, or students, could increase the stake they have in future research, it's important to look first at who shapes research questions.

It's abundantly clear in the data that students had a deep interest in the questions I raised about power relations, but they were still my questions. When I invited students to generate their own questions, they declined. If my goal in future research is to explore research relationships as such, then the solution might be to wait for a project suggested by one or more students. Karen Hume (2001) provides an example of this in her study of classroom process conducted collaboratively with a group of Grade 6 students. It originated with a complaint one of them made about class discussions. Although she was as interested in the research topic as the students were, Hume also documented and reflected on the collaborative processes used throughout the project.

I began my project by posing questions to my students about what would make their lives or the world better. Perhaps the needs of future students would be better met if I asked them up front whether they would like to conduct action research with me about one of these issues – research aimed at solving or understanding some problem they feel attached to –

rather than treating these topics as classroom lesson content separate from research concerns. At the same time, I would have to discuss with them that one of my own interests in the process was in observing and reflecting on how we interact. This negotiation of interests might lessen the possibility of my coercing them into following me towards my goals only.

I can see now that my attempts to involve students in post-course analysis of data were minimally successful because I was not flexible enough, and thought only of working with them as a group. A more realistic approach, given their school and work situations, would have been to approach each individually at that stage. In order to more actively engage students at different stages of the research, it's necessary to develop very flexible procedures. For example, one way to engage them lightly in the pre-research stage might be through journal writing or discussions to explore potential research questions. As another example, I could encourage representation of the research findings through student writing, displays or discussion that would be of interest to the class or other students. These would necessarily take different forms from results I present to other teachers or within scholarly texts. By developing research questions and procedures that meet different needs, students and teacher might enter into a more reciprocal relationship, although clearly this would always be under pressure from institutional structures outside the classroom.

Integrating Research and Classroom Activities

As language learners, students want every moment of their classroom time to count. I think I made a mistake in attempting to separate classroom content work from the tasks of recording research data in the form of conversations and journals. I see this in the debate we

had about whether I would mark journals, and also in a couple of segments of the journals that were revised by students and provided me with more clearly-expressed data. My original intention was to achieve parity in our relationship as co-researchers by not undertaking to inspect their work as data gatherers. I see now, though, that my help in creating survey questions, analyzing research texts or reworking and improving their research journals would serve the multiple purposes of increasing their confidence, integrating this work more fully with valued language learning activities, and creating more coherent data for later analysis.

By sharing written texts as peer editors, for example, the process would not only resemble other classroom learning procedures more closely, but would engage groups of students with the data as co-researchers. I can see one dilemma in this strategy, which is the issue of confidentiality. I am quite sure that some writers are more candid in journals that only I will read. However, group review of data might break up my control of it, and my role as language teacher would include continuing the introduction of language needed for negotiation of meaning and action.

One further benefit from the integration of research with classroom work would be its relative efficiency, since lack of time for separate research activities such as discussions or in-class journal writing proved to be an ongoing problem for my research group.

Implications for ESL Teaching Practice

As I noted earlier, the joy and the tragedy of teaching is that nothing is ever final. A teacher has the opportunity to repeat successes and to confront the same problems, or intervene in them, day after day. The particular intervention I undertook during this study

sought to involve students more directly in choosing and carrying out projects of their own devising. In reflecting on its successes and failures, I need to consider whether such a project would be worth pursuing with future classes, and if so, what I would do differently.

Increasing Learning through Participation

Running through the data are numerous indications that both students and I felt that our learning was increased by their increased participation in running the course. Some of it was practical learning, for example when students used the library catalogue for the first time, or when I created instant reading activities from texts that students had chosen. Some of it was process learning, as students improved leadership skills or I found new ways to facilitate group discussions. And some of it involved learning about and across differences. For example, all of us had to grapple with the task of making decisions with each other rather than only exchanging information or opinions.

During the project work and throughout the course, English language learning did not appear to be slowed down by the distractions of other responsibilities. If anything, more opportunities than usual were presented for authentic communication, as students negotiated with each other and me about their projects and presented their topics to the class.

What can I learn from these successes for future practice? Perhaps the key finding is that I can take on a new facilitation role as I help students with group processes needed to work out their own objectives and solutions. In this class, none of the groups divided up work or collaborated in the same way, and the frustrations expressed about one group's interactions were not necessarily reflected in the experiences of another group. Rather than

looking for a single group structure or process, I have to be flexible and open as groups develop their own ways.

Another possibility I might deduce from the project's success, is that one type of learning encourages another. Learners who feel challenged and activated by increased responsibility or by taking on new roles, may improve their language learning as well.

Meeting Challenges to Participation

Two particular challenges to participation are apparent from the data. One relates to the ways in which communication between participants in the class was impeded, and the other to the students' feelings of insecurity or uncertainty when structures were perceived to be too loose or non-existent. I also found that my duty to evaluate students' work sometimes conflicted with my role as a co-participant in the class.

Increasing Democratic Communication. Breakdowns in communication between group members in our class were variously attributed to personality conflicts, language difficulties and cultural difference. Whatever the reasons, it is sometimes my role to mediate misunderstandings or conflict between individuals or groups, and as a language teacher some of my skills include exploring the meanings of controversial statements and introducing language that's useful for particular types of interactions.

To increase the likelihood that authentic *and* inclusive communication takes place in the classroom, instruction in the area of conversation management skills needs to be expanded. Language learners need explicit exposure to conversational gambits such as those used to ask for clarification and confirmation or to check that listeners are following, and I already frequently teach these. I could certainly present more expressions used when

negotiating decisions or suggesting changes. Stretching further, though, I also need to pay attention to the challenge of Susan Bickford's (1996) comments about the ways in which listeners' responses during conversation might obstruct communication – for example, by using apparently polite follow-up questions to change the subject. If I take her warning seriously, then I not only have to introduce conversational gambits and provide opportunities for practice, but I also have to facilitate a discussion about what constitutes "good listening." I don't think this is an impossible task. I once asked a class to brainstorm a list of qualities they valued in a good listener, and we were all surprised at how easily the list of social skills they generated translated into corresponding language skills.

Another classroom activity that could be reinvigorated to improve the generation of social knowledge is the very Freirian practice of learners sharing personal stories. People engaged in collaborative decision making need to hear each other's stories to create understanding of both commonality and difference. It has occurred to me that the focus in classroom storytelling activities has to be diverted slightly from the teller and onto the listener. Follow-up activities in which listeners answer questions, summarize, or write out a classmate's story can expand the elements of confirmation or negotiation of meaning. After many years of listening to students share their stories about everything from parenting to war, often receiving very empathic responses, it is hard to define this subtle shift in focus precisely. Part of the point is that second language listening instruction and assessment rarely focus on authentic communications such as these. The teacher has an opportunity to help listeners become more accountable for active listening, and also to make room for some productive negotiation between participants in the interaction when meaning isn't clear.

Scaffolding uncertainty. "Scaffolding" is the Vygotskian term for the process through which a teacher or more knowledgeable peer assists a learner to move from their current understanding about a subject toward a deeper one. One type of learning with which a teacher can assist is that of coping with the ambiguity or uncertainty of unfamiliar situations, partly by bringing to light the learner's existing abilities or conceptions.

It appears from my data that some students found it difficult to take on new roles such as teaching or leading others partly because they felt unsure about what was expected of them. As the teacher, I constantly struggled with the question of when and to what extent I should provide structure within the classroom in order to alleviate some of these anxieties, and when it was possible for us to create this structure together. Although I have certainly not devised a blueprint for how this scaffold should appear, I do see that I can't ignore students' distress, and that part of my pedagogical role is to help students extract learning *from* their uncertainty, from those moments when old assumptions are unbalanced. Some preliminary ideas about smoother classroom process include introducing student-led group projects more gradually, using my own research skills to help focus student research, and providing opportunities for anyone in the room with particular skills such as teaching or meeting facilitation to give mini-lessons in these areas.

One specific area where groups in my class struggled was in pushing their initial conceptions of a project through to fruition. This is another area where many students have workplace or academic skills to share. However, this may also be one place where I have to take a more decisive leadership role, for example in requiring timelines for completing tasks, or facilitating group deliberation. In cases where groups couldn't reach consensus or

complete their project, it would probably fall to me to help them reach a more or less cheerful resolution if they needed to split up the group or configure work in a different way.

Mitigating the Teacher's Inspection Role. As I discussed in Chapter 6, a tension exists between my co-participant role in facilitating learning through creative group collaboration, and my more authoritarian role in evaluating learning through prepackaged and individualized assessment. Learners will continue to want individual feedback on their progress and I will continue to provide it. However, I will also continue to experiment with methods of authentic assessment, in which learning activities are aligned with testing activities, democratic assessment, in which learners have input into their own evaluation, and collaborative assessment, in which the collective generation of knowledge is recognized. This last area is relatively new in the field of language teaching, and might include activities such as paired discussion or writing activities in which the assistance or scaffolding of a partner is considered to be helpful for learning rather than cheating.

Topics for Future Research

Numerous topics for future research have come to light during this project. Some are specifically related to improving language teaching practice, such as my new curiosity about the reading skills needed to approach internet texts. Others might apply more broadly to working with adults from a variety of cultures, such as the need to examine when we teachers make assumptions about the meanings of body language we observe in class. The research that probably interests me most is a continuation of what I have started here, particularly with respect to the areas of listening skills and procedures for student input into decision making.

As I have mentioned above, I believe that new twists are needed on old oral activities to put more emphasis on listening. Since doing this project I have already attempted some forms of personal information exchange in which the listeners have to report back on what they've heard. Further research is definitely needed into a number of questions. What methods or instruments work best to help the listener convey their understanding? What role does the speaker play in confirming the listener's understanding? How can the two negotiate misunderstandings? How do these activities influence working relationships in the classroom? How do they affect overall listening comprehension?

I have also made further attempts at tinkering with decision-making procedures, though none as structured as during the study. Several new questions have occurred to me. How can student involvement be modified to suit the level of commitment or interest in each learner group? How can it be adapted for different language learning levels? What configurations of individual, small group and whole-class input work best? What are the limits of flexibility for everyone involved? All of these questions require repeated cycles of inquiry involving different groups, and ideally other teachers. The possibilities for new learning in these areas never end.

Implications for classroom democracy

In reviewing my reflections on this project, I would now argue that democracy is present in an adult ESL setting in particular moments, in particular interactions or relationships. If I impose or enforce a specific participatory structure, this process hardly seems democratic, and yet students rely on my leadership to facilitate such a structure, to allow it to exist. It is exactly this tension between the need for structure and the need to just

let things happen that makes a fixed method or procedure impossible. I am also aware that whatever we choose to do in our class is constrained by the pressures of the larger educational institution around us. I can't ignore the power that exists in my ultimate control over whether students pass or fail, and I shouldn't, because I have to work within this power structure as democratically as I can.

Linda referred to the "democratic atmosphere" in our class (SJ p. 1), an ephemeral quality. In many settings besides the classroom, procedures such as consultation meetings between employers and employees or governments and local citizens appear to be democratic but really mask an unwillingness from those with authority to listen and change their thinking. It is just as possible for a teacher to fall into this trap.

Creative and open-minded listening is just one of the skills needed by the teacher – by me – in a democratic classroom. A second is effectively letting go of control by finding ways to assist in deliberations, make suggestions and scaffold learning in respectful ways that encourage learners' creativity. It is often difficult for me to give up my own preconceptions about how things should happen. Thirdly, it is important to find ways to facilitate respectful interaction between all members of the group. Working creatively with conflict involves challenging my own discomfort, as I, like most teachers, have frequently been admonished to either erase or essentialize difference, and therefore to resolve rather than open up conflicts. When consensus is not possible, I need to have a plan for acknowledging this reality without causing irreparable damage to classroom relationships. And fourthly, reflexivity is always needed, the ability to notice my own responses and actions, including my own contribution to moments of oppression. As I have stated earlier, I

will not always be able to do this, and inviting students to join in my vigilance is itself an act of democracy.

This study has convinced me that creating a communicative democracy in the classroom inspires new and varied types of learning for everyone present, including the teacher. I have also seen the difficulties of this undertaking, of working with what Chantal Mouffe (1999) calls "a politics that is in part collaborative and in part conflictual" (p. 756). As I give up my ideal of creating unity and prepare to confront difference more consistently, I see that I will require persistence and some measure of courage. Hopefully, by opening up communication with students, I will not be alone in this endeavour.

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Appendix 1 – Ethical Consent Letter and Form

Research Project:
Exploring Democratic Practices in an Adult ESL Classroom

Instructor/Researcher: Morna McLeod
Telephone: (number)

My Research: What Does a Democratic Classroom Look Like?

In this class I want to try some new approaches to my teaching. I think I can improve my teaching and also make the class more meaningful for you. I would like us, as a group, to think about and discuss what "democracy" means and what it means to live in a democratic society. I would like our classroom to be a more democratic place, where students participate in decision-making.

Here is one idea I have: We could organize the class into groups that would carry out large projects for a lot of the term. Each group would be responsible for its own project and for helping the rest of the class learn about their topic. Besides talking about your work with other students, you might write about it or prepare reading and vocabulary activities.

Some ideas I have for projects include researching resources in the community, planning a workshop or cultural event, or teaching the rest of the class about some aspects of your professions or hobbies. These are just some ideas. I am relying on the class to think of many more. When we have a good list, each of you can decide which project you would like to work on.

I will help each group to plan their activities and to find materials. I will also continue to teach lessons that focus on English language (like grammar!). I will be responsible for marking your work and giving you feedback on your progress in English.

My Research Plan

I am also going to school. I am finishing a Masters of Education (M.Ed.) degree in Adult Education at the University of British Columbia (UBC). I would like to document the activities we do in class for my Masters work and write about them. To do this, I will take a lot of notes during and after each class.

But I would also like you to be researchers with me. This is called participatory research. I will ask you to write notes, too, and to interview each other on tape about your experiences in the class. Later on, we can all compare our notes and listen to some of the tapes together.

We can talk about what we learned from our investigation, and what could make this type of course better.

YOUR PERMISSION

During the class, we will write and talk about our experiences and our research. This will be regular classroom work. However, you do not have to allow me to use your ideas in my school work. For example, you do not have to give me your writing to use in my final report.

When I write about the class or use your words, I will not use any of your names.

Before I use your work, I need your consent (permission) in writing. I will ask you to sign a consent form in a few days. These will be collected in class by [name of Department Head] or [name of Assistant Department Head]. I won't see which students have signed forms until after the course is finished. You will be able to withdraw your consent at any time by contacting [name]. **Your choice to participate or not participate in my research will not influence your marks or your final level placement.**

This research will help me a lot to understand my teaching. I hope it will also help you to learn some new skills and to understand more about living in Canada.

Consent Form
Advanced ESL – Action Research Project
"Exploring Democratic Practices in an Adult ESL Classroom"

Researcher: Morna McLeod
                Adult and Higher Education Program   [name of college department]
                Department of Educational Studies   [name of institution]
                University of British Columbia   [phone number]

Principal investigator: Dr. David Coulter (faculty advisor to Morna McLeod)
                Adult and Higher Education Program
                Department of Educational Studies
                University of British Columbia

Project purpose and procedures

During the course (Advanced ESL), Morna and the class will share ideas about "democracy", and investigate ways in which we can share decision-making in this class. She will work with the class to organize some student-led projects. She will keep a record of some of the class activities and write down her ideas about this work. She will also invite you and other students to share your ideas about these activities in written journals and recorded audiotapes. This research will continue for the whole term (12 weeks). Writing and talking about your ideas will take about 10% of classroom time.

Your participation during class discussions will be very helpful to Morna and the rest of the group, but you do not have to give consent (permission) for your words to be used for the final report. If you sign the consent form now, you can change your mind later.

At the end of the term Morna will decide if you are ready to pass to the next level (Upper Advanced or 059). Her decision will be based on your progress in English and not on your participation in this research. She will not see who has signed consent forms until after the course ends.

If you have any questions about this research, or about what it means to give consent, please ask Morna for help. If at any time during the course, you feel that the research project is taking too much class time and stopping you from learning English, please speak to Morna immediately. You can also talk to Morna's supervisor, [name and phone number], if you have concerns or wish to withdraw consent.

If you have any concerns about the way in which the research is being conducted, you can call the Office of Research Services at UBC, at 604-822-8598.

Giving Consent

If you sign this form, it means you understand all of these conditions:

- You have participated in research with Morna McLeod and a group of adult ESL students at [name of institution].

- Morna McLeod may use your written or spoken words to complete a graduating project for her Masters of Education (M.Ed.) degree at the University of British Columbia.

- Morna may use your words in any of the forms you check off here:

    a) _____ your written journals or other samples of written class work;

    b) _____ audiotapes of conversations in class;

    c) _____ verbal comments you make to her or to others during the course;

- <u>Morna may use your words in presentations to other teachers in writing or at professional workshops.</u>

- Morna will not use your name in any of her writing or presentations.

- Morna will store any notes or records with your name in locked storage at UBC, and they will not be available for public view. The only other people with access to the original records will be Dr. David Coulter and Dr. Gale Smith, Morna's advisors.

- You have received your own copy of this paper to keep.

Date: Name: (please print)   Signature:

_____   _____   _____

<u>PLEASE GIVE THIS FORM TO [NAME] OR [NAME], NOT TO MORNA.</u> Either [name] or [name] will come to our class to collect these forms.

Received by [name] (Department Head) or [name] (Assistant Department Head)

Date: Signature:

_____   _____

Appendix 2 – Research Questions Posed to Students

Interview questions

Interview 1 (May 13, 2004)

The following questions were written on the board (Lesson Plan, May 11, 2003).

1. What have you learned so far by working in the project group?

2. Is democracy possible in an adult ESL class?

Interview 2 (June 24, 2004)

Students were given a handout of the following questions.

1) Here are some of the topics we discussed or wrote about during the term: community / leadership / making decisions in groups / democratic classrooms. Has your thinking developed or changed on any of these topics since the beginning of the term?

2) Think about the way we organized the course, with groups forming around certain topics and then choosing materials to present to the class.
   a. What worked well for you within this process?
   b. If we could do it all over again (or if another class could do this) how could it work better? What are some different or better things a class could do?

3) What was Morna's role in the class throughout the term? Do you think it changed at different times? (For example, do you think it was any different near the end of the term during testing?)

4) Listen to your old discussion on the tape. Are you surprised by anything you said? Has your thinking changed at all since then?

5) _____?

Journal Questions

What is 'community'?

What are some good and bad things about making decisions in groups?

What did you learn from reading about and attending the hearing of the Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform?

What have you learned so far from working in your group?

What does 'leadership' mean to you?

Has it made a difference to have topics in class initiated by students rather than the teacher? Why?

Has the class been democratic?

Appendix 3 List of Themes Generated by Students in their First Brainstorming Session

Something I've wanted to do is
- make movies
- travel (to Antarctica, to Israel, to Egypt...)
- go to university
- enjoy freedom
- go around the world
- begin a new life
- make money
- lose weight
- get a girlfriend

A problem I would like to solve is
- how to downsize U.S. power
- hunger in the world
- illiteracy
- poverty
- crime
- how to find a good husband
- the oppression of women
- how to worry less about money

Something I've always wanted to learn is
- as much as possible
- another language
- how to sing
- how to ride a bicycle
- computer skills
- which profession to study
- how to read palms
- how to access social services
- how to cook well
- Canadian history

Something I think is fun or interesting is
- making travel plans
- dancing
- finding out about new places and new people
- knowing about Jewish culture
- travelling around the world
- flying a plane
- some people and their behaviour
- going out with my friends and watching hockey
- sky-diving with a parachute

Something that would make my life easier is
- being bilingual
- overcoming stress
- education
- wisdom
- finding great bars and restaurants
- not being too sensitive
- money
- having good health
- staying single

Some repeated themes
- travelling
- learning about different kinds of people and cultures
- solving world poverty problems
- making money
- singing/dancing/acting
- being healthy
- learning new skills
- finding or not finding a mate