Case study 1: Setting up a quality management system in a Spanish secondary school

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Summary of the case study

Very often knowledge of TQM does not filter down to the classroom teachers, but instead depends on the school management both for its initiation and continuous implementation. The aim of our case study was to observe the viability of using a continuous improvement framework within a secondary school language department. This involved eight in-service training sessions which, it was hoped, would allow schools to enhance their decision-making processes. The results, in this case, indicated that the application of such a framework was not only viable, but also had the potential to benefit both teachers and students.

Description of context

Our case study took place in the English department of a semi-private secondary school, Juan XXIII, Zaidín, in Granada, Spain. Of the five teachers in the department, four took part in the project.

What we needed to do and why we did it

The overall aim of our case study was to observe the viability of using a continuous improvement framework, this required facilitating teachers within a secondary school language department with the basic working concepts of quality management, which, it was hoped, would allow them to enhance their decision-making processes.

The theoretical model used in this study was that proposed by Hughes (2004), as seen below, employing decision-making tools mentioned by the same author. Essentially, it is a cyclical improvement process similar to those mentioned in TQM applied to general education and, indeed, in language education, but differs from these in the sense that the first concern of the model is to generate enough teacher support and motivation so as to overcome the initial difficulties involved in implementing continuous improvement.
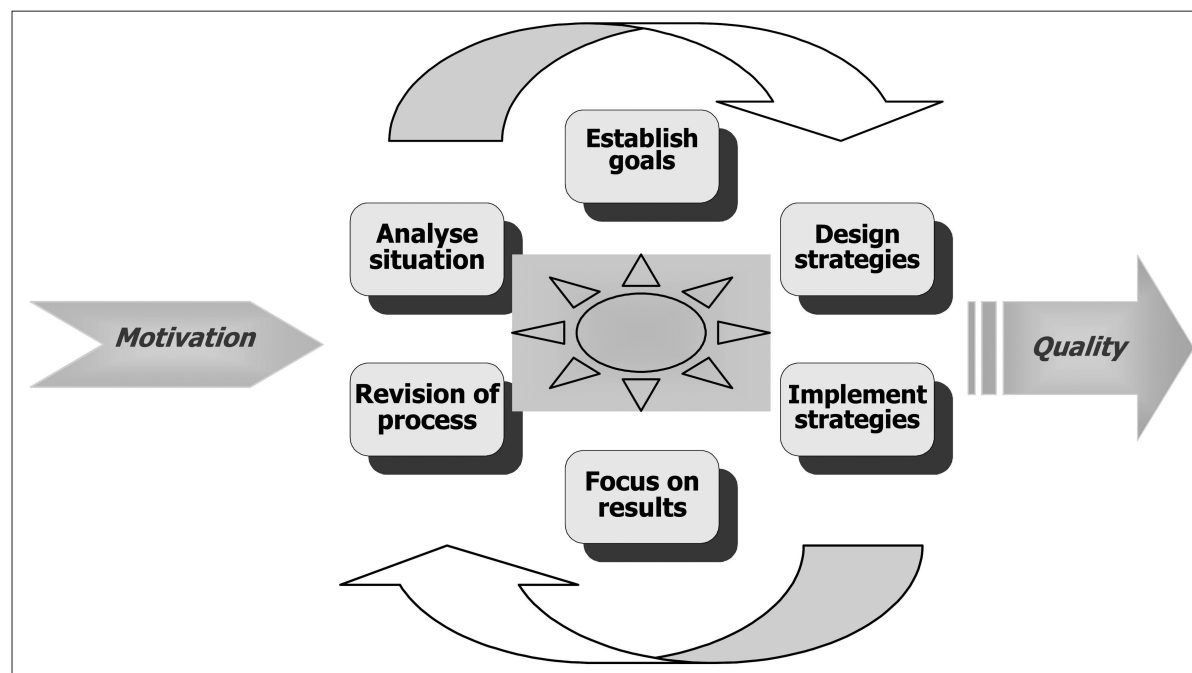
Continuous improvement framework (Hughes, 2004)

Main purpose (what we wanted to achieve)

There were four specific objectives in this project:

1. to present and design a continuous improvement model applied to ELT;

2. to pilot this model in a secondary school;

3. to see whether the model offered any benefits for teachers;

4. to see whether the proposed model offered any benefits for students.

Action taken (stages and procedures)

Motivation and the mission statement

After an initial explanation of the basic concepts of quality management, team members began to draw up their own objectives for the improvement of the department. These objectives were discussed by the team and formed the basis of an agreed departmental mission statement.

Our vision is:
- to have highly motivated students;
- to encourage our students to see that English is useful for them;
- to have students who work and make an effort;
- to have the necessary facilities (including a language laboratory) to carry out our work;
- to have a good atmosphere in class;
- to have students who are able to maintain basic communication in real situations;
- to ensure what is studied here enables students to continue studying and learning (lifelong learning);
- for our students to leave school living this subject.

Our mission is:
- to help students enjoy and like the subject;
- to help them learn values;
- to provide them with the instruments and techniques which allow them to grow personally and academically;
- to stimulate and motivate students so that they can overcome difficulties;
- to help them learn how to communicate in English.

The strategy that we follow is:
- a continuous and permanent improvement strategy which incorporates the vision and initiatives of all – teachers, students, parents and school management.

We value:
- integration and tolerance inside and outside our classrooms;
- real attention to diversity;
- English as a lingua franca in the world;
- the individual work of students and other teachers;
- the respect and personal dignity of each person.

Situation analysis

This session was used to decide upon areas of analysis. The areas to be analysed were student perceptions, parent perceptions and student achievement levels. During the following days, a number of decisions were taken with regard to designing new tools and the adoption or adaptation of existing tools. Once data were collected, they were processed and analysed by the team of teachers in preparation for the following session.

Prioritising objectives and implementing strategies

Participants were given the data from the questionnaires from their individual classes as well as a group score provided by all students. They were also given the results of the Quick Placement Test, vocabulary results and conclusions from the interview with a member of the Board of Governors. With this data in hand, teachers used a prioritisation tool to facilitate decision making (see Hughes, 2004). Some 25 areas were identified and the results from this procedure were used in a flexible manner to help team members decide upon a small number of improvements which were to be undertaken during the rest of the academic year.

Implementation and hypothesis testing

In order to improve various areas, measures were taken to train teachers in the use of new technologies, and planning for vocabulary instruction and acquisition of new materials.

The duration of the case study in the school which employed the whole model was not sufficient to gage specific results in all of the areas earmarked for improvement. One specific area which was documented was improving a process for teaching a grammar item. A revision of the teaching process was undertaken and a new process designed. The traditional form of teaching grammatical elements, such as the present simple, essentially followed the process shown below.
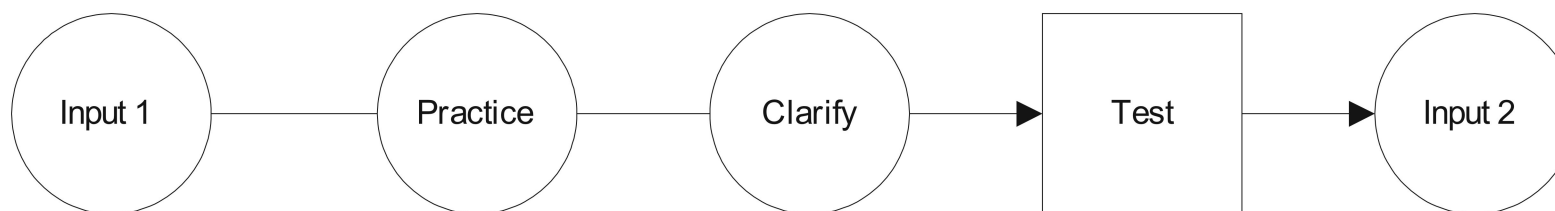
Traditional process map for grammar teaching

After gauging current related knowledge of an area or structure, a new (revised and/or developed) structure would be presented, students would practice and ask questions, they would then be tested, and would sometimes be given reinforcement exercises before being presented with the next area.

Case studies

The research question at this stage was: if the process were improved, would the results also improve? For this reason a new process was designed. This broke the larger process (in this case, the process of teaching the present simple) into smaller and more manageable sub-processes, whereby students had to gradually master each individual element involved in the unit of learning at their own pace.
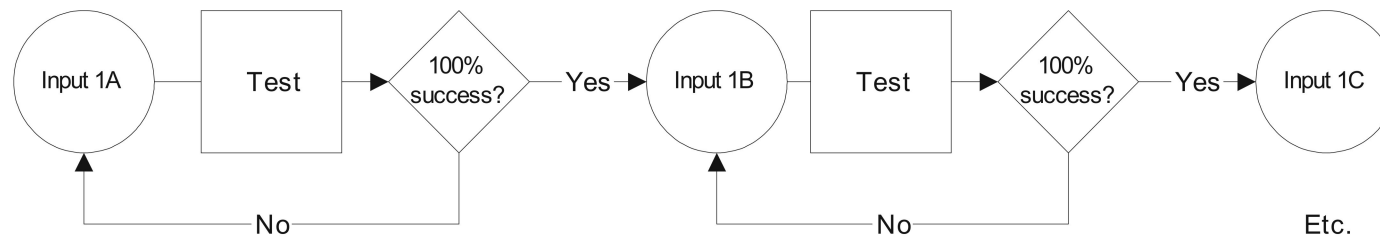
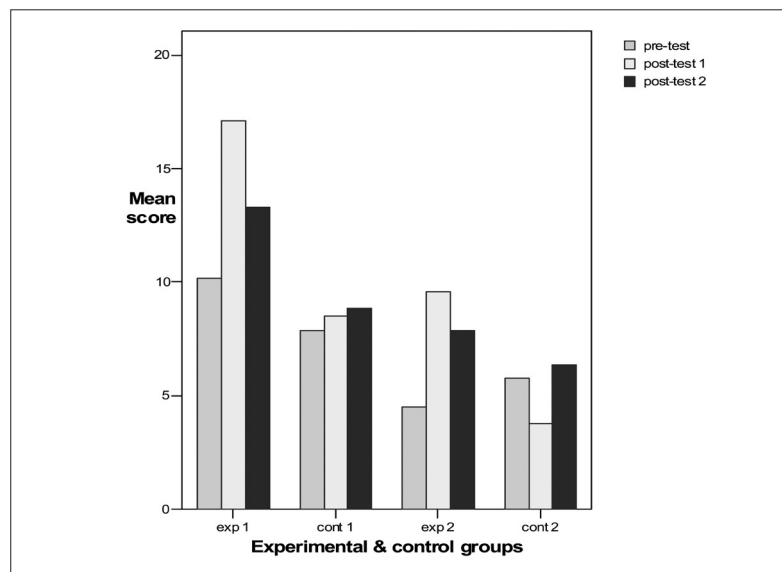*Modified process map for grammar teaching*

In order to see if the modified process would have any effects on student performance, a booklet was designed, whereby students would read instructions, learn the input and test themselves before moving on to a new stage. The treatment consisted in the two teachers giving the experimental group thirty minutes to read and complete the previously mentioned booklet. At the end of this session, students were asked to rate both the perceived level of difficulty of the intervention and perceived level of learning. Two post-tests were later given to the control and experimental groups by two teachers; the first of these took place the day after the intervention and the second (which was identical to the pre-test) took place six months later.

Main outcomes

Teacher results
Among the benefits identified by the team members in an externally conducted semi-structured interview, the following areas stood out:

- the enhancement of teamwork
- learning
- communication between team members
- reflective teaching
- the focus on practical elements
- planning aspects
- achievable goals

Performance on pre and post-tests in the grammar experiment

For all participants, teamwork appeared to have been one characteristic of the project which was most beneficial. Teamwork seems to be linked with at least two other areas: the supportive aspect and participation. The area which was directly related to teamwork and the supportive aspect of the team itself was that of communication. This was perceived by one of the interviewees as being a differentiating element in teacher development since team members had the opportunity to participate in discussions about teaching rather than being passively lectured about it.

Student results
In terms of student achievement, the results obtained in our grammar experiment showed that there was a greater degree of improvement among students who underwent the treatment (experimental groups) in both post-tests compared to the performance of students from the control groups. This was important in the sense that it demonstrated to the team that by implementing strategies, outcomes could be improved.
Furthermore, all team members agreed that the overall framework could prove to have beneficial effects on student learning.

Main conclusions

The combined results of this project led us to the conclusion that it was possible, under the right conditions, to achieve improvements through co-operative action research based upon group work in the language department. Among the benefits produced for teachers in the piloted model project are a number of key concerns. Apart from the general and specific results of learning, the project also entailed a realistic vision resulting from the reflection with regards to what may be achieved in the short and long term. It also seems that the use of the model has encouraged the team to reflect on the effects of their teaching upon student levels and needs; it has helped participants to establish indicators and prioritise areas of improvement and, indeed, to agree upon and implement strategies.

Bibliography
Hughes, S.P. (2004), "Searching for effectiveness in ELT", *Porta Linguarum: Revista Internacional de Didáctica de las Lenguas Extranjeras*, 1 (1), pp. 61-84.

Case studies