

EFL teachers' instructional strategies A case study in Brazil

Ana Mommensohn Buzzo
Universidade Estadual de Maringá
Ana Maria Martins A. Vasconcelos
Universidade Estadual do Oeste do Paraná
Jussara Olivo Rosa Perin
Universidade Estadual de Maringá
Telma Gimenez
Universidade Estadual de Londrina

ABSTRACT: Using the theoretical framework of instructional strategies (Woods, 1996), this paper analyzes the relationship between the beliefs and practices of an EFL teacher in Brazil in relation to her lesson planning. This study was carried out bearing in mind Wood's suggested characteristics: a) the structure of teaching; b) the planning processes and c) the beliefs, assumptions and knowledge which give support to the actions. Based on interviews with a teacher about a successful and an unsuccessful experience, interviews with her students and classroom observation, it was possible to identify the interpretative and decision-making processes involved in the creation, structuring and development of classroom events.

RESUMO: Tendo como base o referencial teórico de estratégias instrucionais (Woods, 1996), este trabalho analisou a relação entre as práticas e crenças de uma professora de inglês como língua estrangeira no Brasil e as decisões de planejamento de suas aulas. O estudo foi desenvolvido a partir de três caracterís-

EFL TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

ticas salientadas por Woods: a) a estrutura de ensino, b) os processos de planejamento e c) as crenças e conhecimento através dos quais essas ações acontecem. Com base em entrevistas com uma professora sobre uma atividade bem-sucedida e uma atividade mal-sucedida por ela vivenciadas, entrevistas com seus alunos e observação de suas aulas, foi possível observar os processos interpretativos e de tomada de decisão envolvidos na criação, estrutura e desenvolvimento dos eventos em sala de aula.

KEYWORDS: beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, decision-making.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: crenças, pressupostos, conhecimento, tomada de decisão.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the work of EFL teachers has been reconceptualized in terms of instructional strategies and beliefs. Woods (1996) describes this process as encompassing three main areas: a) the structure of the actions and events which occur in the classroom and which, taken together, can be said to comprise the course, b) the planning process through which the teacher creates the course and which provides input into the actually occurring actions and events, c) the process of interpretation by which these actions and events are understood and evaluated, and then fed back into the planning process.

Regarding the structures of teaching, in his study of ESL teachers, Woods identified two types of structures: a conceptual one and a chronological one. Both types involved sequential and hierarchical relationships as he noticed that teachers perceive a course as being composed of sequences of units at different levels of generality, with more general higher level units, made up of more specific, lower level subunits. He concluded, however, that although the structures varied, the form of the overall structure and patterns of connection remained constant.

In relation to the planning processes, Woods adopted a decision-making model and concluded that teachers made decisions based on perceived goals of the course and the current structure which had evolved from prior decisions, i.e., there was an interactive movement between decisions that took into account goals and decisions which were concerned with the means to achieve the goals.

The interpretive processes were captured through a network of beliefs, assumptions and knowledge (BAK), which acted as filters with which teachers viewed the world. According to Woods, it was not as if teachers' networks of beliefs, assumptions and knowledge were surface structured activated in particular cases in order to resolve ambiguities or deal with conflicting situations. Rather, it seemed to underlie everything that the teachers did and said, as if it was through their individual BAK systems that the teachers structured their perceptions of the curriculum and their decisions as to how to implement that curriculum, from overall organization of the units down to specific classroom activities and verbalizations.

Having this model in mind, this study is based on the observation and analysis of an EFL teacher in Brazil and her procedures during class to determine her instructional strategies and beliefs and the processes she goes through when planning a lesson and/or language learning activities.

METHODOLOGY

The study followed a qualitative methodology. Data was gathered using three approaches: open-ended interview with a female university teacher (pseudonym Eva), observation of her classes and open-ended interview with her students, who were questioned after one of the lessons. They were 16 adult or young adult university students attending the last term of the course.

The observers asked both, Eva and the students, open-ended questions because as Krueger (1994) believes, "the answer

EFL TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

is not implied and the type or manner of response is not suggested". Eva was asked questions about her background as a learner and as a teacher.

The approach provided data to capture aspects of the teacher's decision making process, her instructional strategies and beliefs about teaching, as well her students' expectations and perceptions about the EFL course they had been attending and perceptions about their feelings as concerns learning a foreign language. The data were collected from March 11 to April 20, 2000.

Data collection involved four steps, with the following guiding questions:

1. In an interview Eva was asked questions related to her background as a learner/student (successful/unsuccessful learning experiences/best and worst teachers' practices). She was also asked to reflect upon her background as a teacher (best/worst courses/lessons/activities ever taught) and how and why they were considered so. The teacher's answers provided data which helped to analyze her beliefs concerning teaching and learning a foreign language as well as to reflect about her teaching strategies.
2. Interview about a current course and the description of two activities: a positive and a negative one (objectives, expectations concerning students' learning, ways in which it had been successful, and also problems, issues or challenges she might have had).
3. Observation of one of Eva's lessons
4. Defining Students' and the Teacher's expectations

RESULTS

Course Analysis

Regarding a current course she had been teaching, Eva referred to an ESP Dentistry course which does not belong to the regular levels or courses offered by the language Institute of Universidade Estadual de Maringá, as it has been taught as a project (*Figure 1- UEM/ILG English Course Program*). Her comments were analyzed in terms of how she herself learned new ways of teaching (Putnam & Borko, 2000) counting on two students' assistance during the planning of content of the course curriculum and specific vocabulary in an attempt to provide more students' involvement.

Considering that an ESP program is designed for adults who have a common professional or a job-related reason for learning English, Eva tried to focus on her learners and on task-based activities designed to reflect some real use of English outside the classroom.

Eva thinks that attending to students' needs and providing a relaxing atmosphere are important aspects to the successful learning process, since students can feel free to express their points of view, even if making mistakes. She uses the support of Archibald's idea (O'Grady, 1996) on language classroom as being 'sheltered environments' where students have the opportunity to learn and practice without being penalized for failure. In real contexts (or situations), errors in a message could cause a misunderstanding that could generate a problematic situation or even lead the listener to judge the speaker's attitudes or intentions wrongly.

EFL TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

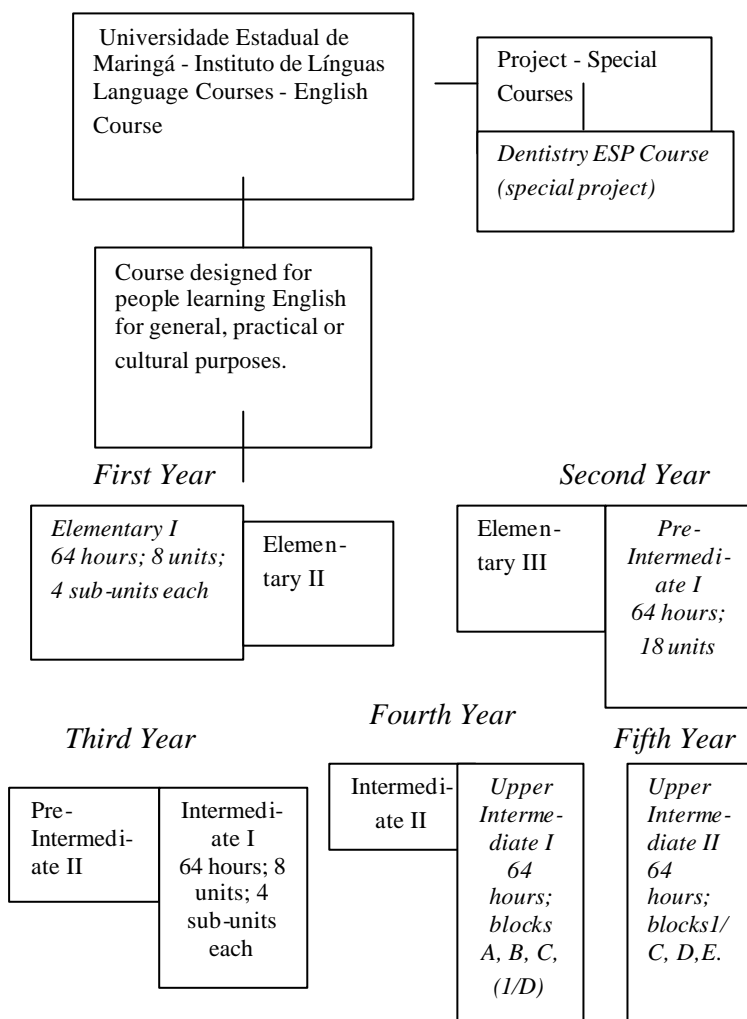


Figure 1 – ILG English Course Program Structure – Universidade Estadual de Maringá (WOODS, D. *Seminário Avançado - Research Issues in Second Language Teaching and Teacher Education: Instructional Strategies*, UEL, 2000)

The main goals of the course for dentistry students were memorizing structures and learning dentistry vocabulary through different strategies. The Chronological Structure (organization of the course and order of events), as well as the conceptual structure (conceptual units being taught) were planned according to the students' needs, which played a crucial role in the teacher's decision-making process. The assistance from the students on the dentistry area, who were aware of the group reality, helped the process of negotiation of the Course Profile. The students needed English a lot, as most of their academic books were published in English. By the end of the course, Eva was feeling 'rewarded' by their ability to adapt some lessons from medical books to the dentistry area and their musical parodies developed from lexical terms. A movie on dentistry procedures was also produced by the group. Eva stated that the process of decision making was a natural one, as it happened gradually with the assistants' help along the whole course. Eva believes that the nature of the activities (everyday procedures at a dentistry clinic) and the way they were carried out (through interviews: student A x student B simulating conversation between parents and the professional), using appropriate vocabulary and realia (dentistry equipment), may also have made the course more attractive to the students.

A Successful Activity Analysis

In step 2 (the development of a successful activity), Eva referred to a lesson on human characteristics (physical and personality, an activity developed with pre-intermediate level students) taught on the second year (*see figure 1*).

The teacher placed some pictures of men and women facing the board – so that students could not see the people's faces – and under the pictures she wrote some personal characteristics – good and bad ones – following the students' suggestions. The students had to choose the one/ones which best applied to them. The teacher would turn the pictures so that the students could see

EFL TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

the faces. It was a funny and interesting activity: all students got involved. Eva believes she succeeded in making the students use their cognitive process, using their foreign language knowledge in a natural way. Although it was not mentioned whether students learned or not with the activity, it was observed that Eva considers a positive activity one in which the students get really involved and talk a lot (her expectation). Eva quotes Krashen (1988) when she remembers the activity: at that moment, their monitor was not on, or it would be 'minor', being used only to correct deviations from 'normal' speech and to give the speech a more 'polished' appearance.

After finishing the oral part of the 'appearance' activity, Eva gave students her so called 'more serious' activities: written activities, which were started in class and then assigned as homework. Eva stated that she found support on what Christison (1999), says about the human brain, which can sustain 'concentrated focused activity' only for a short period of time. She tries to follow what Christison suggests: teachers should work to create language learning activities that allow students time for reflection on and processing of the information".

An Unsuccessful Activity Analysis

Eva remembers a negative experience when teaching the time, using round clocks with movable hands, carried out during the first year (see figure 1, 'Elementary I'). After going through oral practice (whole class and group work), she thought the students had understood the content, but when she evaluated them, she was amazed to see that some of the students had not been able to tell the time correctly. Later on, she reflected about the results and interpreted the facts (what happened during the activity) and concluded that some students had failed because they were not even able to tell the time in Portuguese, as they were only able to see the time in digital watches! It was a mixture of astonishment and a feeling of failure!

It was concluded that Eva, as Woods (1996) would affirm, had expectations and made plans, had gone through the action (had done the activity with the clocks), and had evaluated the students through oral practice (group work), and written exercises in a test. Such a failure, noticed when interpreting the results of the test, made Eva decide to reformulate her plans, and in the next classes she compared the time in a digital clock to the time in a hand-clock.

Eva believes that the reformulation of the previous plan brought good results: the students could then learn the time in English in a natural approach (in both sorts of watches) and the experience helped other groups, because the process of teaching, the instructional strategy, according to Eva's beliefs, changed for better. Although the round clocks with hands to move are attractive to be used in classes, as well as in tests, nowadays 'Eva' uses both types of clocks, because she believes that it is the best way of teaching time. In tests, she only uses drawings of digital watches, in order not to have any misunderstandings on the position of the hands of the clock.

Eva went through the sets of events idealized by Woods (1999, p. 134): she had plans and expectations, she went into action (when working with the clocks), considered the bad results (evaluation and interpretation of results) and finally, Eva implemented the activity, used again successfully.

Lesson Observation

Figure 3 reveals the structure of a lesson observed (March 20, 2000). The level of the group is "Upper Intermediate II", the last level of the English course offered by the school where Eva works. The course follows a 60-hour program divided in 32 sessions. The book is divided in four blocks of eight units each. The group had already had 6 sessions, and the lesson observed was the fifth one of a block of eight units.

EFL TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

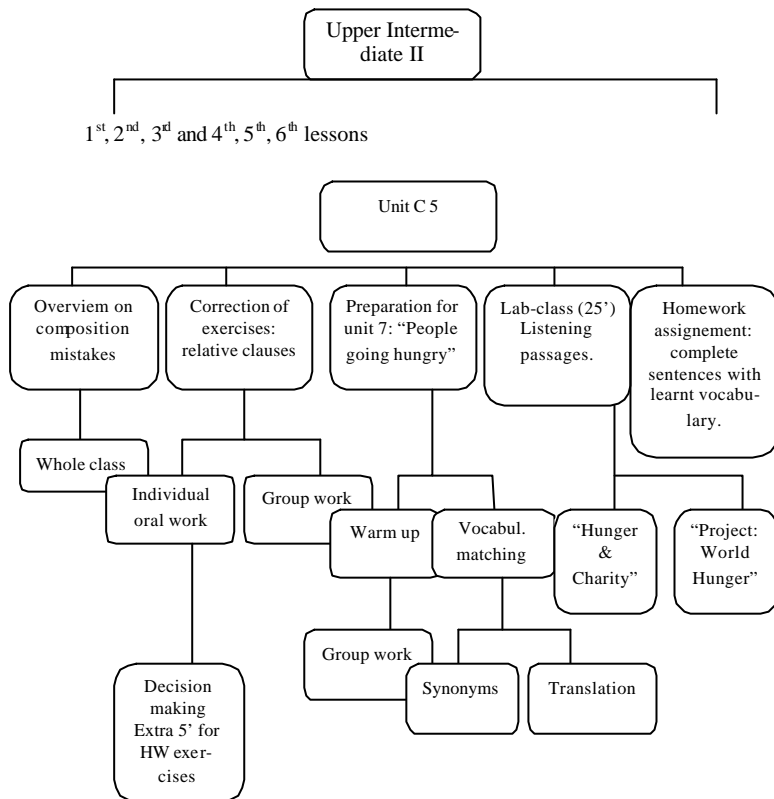


Figure 3 – ILG English Course- Lesson Structure (WOODS, D. Seminário Avançado – Research Issues in Second Language Teaching and Teacher Education: Instructional Strategies, UEL, 2000)

Activity 1

At the very beginning of her class, Eva gave students' compositions back, which had been set as homework. (*See figure 3, Lesson Structure – overview on compositions*).

She mentioned some of their mistakes on the board and considered their suggestions for correction. She also asked for their cooperation in the process of finding the correct way of expressing themselves (negotiation of meaning). Eva probably believes that students can correct themselves when they recall a learnt grammar structure. There was some interaction/cooperation among students, since they helped in the correction of each other's mistakes. This was probably another strategy used to let them learn the previously given grammar point and vocabulary. She assumes that when calling attention to students' mistakes aloud before giving the compositions back, they really pay attention and even recognize the mistakes as being their own. Eva believes that most of the students will not make those mistakes again.

Her own experience as a student has taught her that sometimes it is useless to mark the compositions in red, without discussing at least the most important mistakes on them. Eva believes discussion helps students memorize structure and make them understand how they should think – according to the English language structure, not the Portuguese one, she reinforces. In both cases (red marks/ discussion), it was possible to see that the background of the teacher, who has undergone different experiences (good and bad ones), has caused the implementation of the bad plans and the repetition of the successfully evaluated ones.

Eva believes that corrections aloud can help students reach a high level of writing skill, not repeating the same mistakes. So, she uses to comment mistakes on compositions aloud, emphasizing the most important ones on the board, asking for students' cooperation in order to correct them. Only after doing that, she hands the compositions back to the students. That was seen in the

EFL TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

first step of the Lesson Observation part 'Eva' gets happy when students recognize their mistakes and say, "that was my mistake!", and she believes this instructional strategy "may help students understand the mistake, never repeating it again". She also believes that this may help them change their attitude when receiving their compositions back: from a passive behavior (when students simply observe their marks and put the paper inside their books) to an active role (policing themselves in their next writing attempt).

When Eva asks for cooperation and the students participate, she feels she needs to reinforce through repetition what the students have just said, in an attempt to be sure that they have really learnt: "I use to repeat what students say in order to help them, sometimes they can't even listen to the classmates, let alone understanding". Some teachers need to repeat what a student has just said maybe as an attempt to be sure the other students have also understood, or as she admits, "to give them another chance to understand or even memorize things".

Activity 2

Although the method provides a natural sequence of activities, Eva decided to modify this sequence, doing a pre-activity as a warm-up for the listening, "in order to enable students to understand the listening exercise well, considering the many difficult words they would listen for the first time".

The new vocabulary was presented through a 'matching cards exercise' type in which students were supposed to put the new words side by side and their corresponding synonyms. Eva carried out such a pre-listening activity because she believes that if students see the new vocabulary before, they will have more chances to understand it within the context. Eva thinks that by facilitating comprehension, she is trying to avoid students' frustration. She again shows her concern about her students' ability to understand and their previous knowledge.

Students' and the Teacher's expectations

Eva's students were interviewed after class. They expressed their expectations about the whole course, as they are about to graduate. Their responses were used to compare to Eva's expectations and it was observed that they have different points of view on how to use their linguistic knowledge successfully. The contrasts in the expectations are the following: the teacher wants the students to develop all the linguistic abilities (reading, writing, listening and speaking), while some students are satisfied with their performance, even being aware that what they have acquired is not the ideal situation. Some students said that they felt insecure or not prepared enough to face situations in which they would have to use the language in a natural way (talking to a foreigner, answering questions in a job interview).

Eva thinks there might have been a teaching failure somewhere, or the method has not been good enough during the whole course or that it might have been the students' fault, as most of them do not take responsibility for their learning process. As she points out, "There must be an interaction among student-teacher-methodology in the teaching-learning process, as in a triangle":

Methodology (material, content...)



Teacher

Student

Figure 4 – Interaction student-teacher-methodology

According to the teacher, the Methodology would be influenced by teachers and students, following what Holliday (1994) says, "There is thus a complex network of influences and interests" within the education environment, not forgetting the

EFL TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

influences of the social context. Eva assumes that the ideal in the educational context would be the three parts of the triangle in harmony: teacher enjoying working with students and vice-versa and both enjoying using the methodology previously selected.

Some other students feel '*well enough*' about their English level: according to their expectations. They have mentioned that they are satisfied with being able to read for academic purposes, for instance.

One of Eva's beliefs (and the school expectation) is that graduating students should be able to write, read, listen and understand well, as well as to express themselves successfully. Eva believes that some students did not develop all the abilities successfully. According to her point of view, they got stuck on their learning process, as she could see with one of her graduating students who had already been her student before. She wishes they could improve their linguistic level, but she knows they can present their excuses for having a low level of performance, as learning English is not one of their main priorities.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In relation to the Planning Process, Interpretation of Results (through Evaluation) and Implementation of plans aiming a new action, it could be observed that Eva somewhat followed the cycle described by Woods (1999) in a natural way. Although she had interpreted favorably the oral results when teaching the time using clocks with movable hands (*an unsuccessful activity*), when assessing students' learning the time she felt she needed to implement the activity, and went through replanning. In fact, this analysis (interpretation of results) brought a change in the teacher's strategy, as she changed the way of teaching and evaluating the teaching of time in English, what caused a change in the teacher's planning process.

It was also observed that this possibility of change in the planning process (replanning) can enable the teacher to predict

new results when going through a new evaluation process (formal or informal) with another group. It plays an important role, as it provides basis to assess new results. The same was observed in the lesson-observation part, the pre-teaching vocabulary for the listening (*fig.3*). During the ‘card-to-card’ matching exercise, Eva tried to facilitate the carrying on of the main activity (listening), in an attempt to avoid students’ frustration for not understanding key words, which would hinder the comprehension of the listening plot. It was observed that individual teachers vary the way that they cover each lesson, based on personalized experience and practice. This supports what Woods (1996, p. 251) says:

It is through the cycles of interpretation of events, assessment of what is good or bad about those events according to the interpretations, and input of those assessments in the planning and carrying out of subsequent action, that change – both in a teacher’s teaching and in a course’s instantiation – occurs. The concepts of teacher change and curricular evolution are actually intertwined: teachers’ BAK influences their interpretation of a curriculum and the curriculum (and the experience of carrying it out) influences the evolution of BAK.

The choice of strategies and activities depends on the teacher’s goals related to aspects to be emphasized, the teacher’s beliefs about the teaching/learning process and on the students’ expectations (the way they get involved and responsiveness). But many times an involuntary outcome (students’ interruption, not enough time) can cause changes in the previous plan, as well as in the carrying on of the activity, which many times is simplified to satisfy the demands of the moment.

The reconstruction of Eva’s background as a student and as a teacher revealed that the experiences undergone as a student helped her develop new strategies to promote a relaxing atmosphere between herself and the students. It was observed that the teacher’s interpretative framework consists of experiences as a

EFL TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

learner and as a teacher and also of personality factors. Teachers are also influenced by personal concerns, so the instructional decisions are based on personal practical knowledge and experience. When calling attention to students' mistakes in the correction of compositions (*fig.3*), Eva tries to promote cooperation and interaction in class. The adoption of this procedure is a result of the development of a personalized strategy based on empirical observation in daily practice.

Examining the structure of the course, the lesson and the activities, as well as Eva's beliefs, assumptions and knowledge, this paper considers teachers' planning practices and the importance they have on the decision-making process they usually go through.

Although their impressions and expectations are different from the teacher's and the school's, the students have shown that they have not been so passive in their learning process. Eva believes that learners' *needs and expectations* must be fulfilled, since taking into account the students' needs can lead to successful learning.

As a participant in this research, Eva believes that the analysis of one's own situation and attitude in relation to investigations like this one may promote future studies in other fields linking theory to practice.

The result of the present research, following the reflexive approach, is significant so that the teacher can be aware of the process which she/he goes through (what happens when she/he describes experiences and activities) enabling the teacher to be more coherent in her/his classroom practice. Thus, the teacher will be able to face and deal with external factors (expectancies of others: directors, colleagues and so on), which in any way can go against her/his teaching approach.

REFERENCES

- ARCHIBALD, J. Second Language Acquisition. In: O'GRADY, W. *Contemporary Linguistics: an Introduction*. London: Longman, 1996.
- CHRISTISON, M. A *Applications of Brain-Based Research to Second Language Teaching and Learning*. Tesol Matters [on line] Disponível na Internet. URL: <http://www.tesol.edu/assoc/articles/news990401.html>. mar-maio 2000.
- HOLLIDAY, A. *Appropriate Methodology and Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- HUTCHINSON, T. & WATERS, A. *English for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- KRASHEN, S.D. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Prentice-Hall International, 1988.
- KRASHEN, S.D. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1988.
- KRUEGER, Richard A. *Focus Groups – A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Sage Publications, 1994.
- PUTNAM, R & BORKO, H. What Do New Views of Knowledge and Thinking Have To Say About Research on Teacher Learning? In: *Educational Researcher*, v.29, n.1, p. 4 -15, 2000.
- WOODS, D. *Teacher Cognition in Language Teaching – Beliefs, Decision-making and Classroom Practice*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- WOODS, D. Decision-Making in Language Learning: A Lens for Examining Learner Strategies. Carleton Papers. In: *Applied Language Studies*, p. 67-75, Oct., 1997.

