THE FACILITATION OF REACTIVE TEACHING DURING PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

Substantial arguments exist in TESOL literature that suggest current practice in some models of pre-service teacher education may be unhelpful to the development of novice teachers' perceptions of effective teaching. Principally, the emphasis on training learner teachers to plan for specific outcomes, such as a pre-selected language point, and basing post-teaching feedback discussions around the achievement, or otherwise, of those outcomes, can appear incongruous with many current views of good practice in managing learning. For contemporary, communicative based approaches to organising learning, such as task based learning and teaching (e.g. see Ellis 2003), teachers need to enact *reactive* and *spontaneous* decision making skills in their classroom. Amongst other abilities, such approaches require that a teacher's knowledge base includes an understanding and appreciation of organising *meaning-based* activities, in addition to a well-developed pedagogical language awareness. Nevertheless, an externally decided, pre-determined focus on a discrete aspect or function of language, as a lesson aim, still appears to be the principal unit around which most pre-service lesson planning literature is based (Tomlinson 2013). This may well, as Allwright (2005: 14) points out, "…hinder teachers and learners from making the most of opportunities to have really productive, though previously unplanned, episodes of teaching and learning".

There is little or no published research that explores the challenges inherent in including more reactive teaching approaches *during* pre-service preparation. The objectives of this paper, therefore, are firstly to draw attention to arguments that highlight the crucial role of reactive teaching and secondly, to examine research evidence that may help ascertain pre-service learner teachers' readiness to incorporate such approaches into their skill sets and thus better prepare them to carry out *informed* reflective practice as soon as their teaching career commences.

Setting

The observations presented here emerged from a broader study investigating dialogic interaction on a course of second language teacher education (SLTE) that is embedded in a three-year BA English with TESOL degree programme at a British university. For students on this degree award, approximately four to six input hours in each week of their three-year university study are concerned with developing knowledge and skills pertaining to TESOL. Over the course of their degree, the learner teachers (LTs) develop their pedagogical language awareness, learn about various methodological approaches and techniques and undertake both peer and live teaching practice. They also observe experienced practitioners and reflect on their experiences. In their final year, each LT is required to teach at least six classes to English language learners. In planning lessons for the practicum, the LTs are given the freedom to design lesson plans that they feel would be appropriate to their class of learners. They may base a class around one of the four skills, a language point, a study skill or whatever else they feel would be useful for the learners. The learner teachers produce standard lesson plans (e.g. as in Harmer 2006) but are well aware that they need not stick rigidly to these plans. They are also required to keep a reflective journal throughout their period of teaching practice. The LTs take part in group post-teaching discussions (3-4 participants), which play a key role in the teacher preparation course. During these dialogic reflections, they are given the space to talk over their growing understandings of classroom practice and how their experiences relate to the declarative knowledge encountered in their TESOL education. Evidence presented later in this paper stems from a thematic discourse analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) conducted on data collected from interviews with seven learner teachers, fourteen transcribed post-teaching discussions and journal entries that the learner teachers made during the academic year 2013/2014.

Support for reactive teaching

Classroom management

There is significant support in TESOL literature for the notion that an approach to teaching that foregrounds the importance of learner contributions, in a communicative classroom, far closer reflects contemporary understandings of good practice in language teaching and learning (Breen & Candlin 2001). As Breen and Candlin (ibid: 17) note, within a communicative methodology the role of a teacher, as guide, is largely unpredictable in a dynamic classroom environment and requires the teacher, and learners, to be able to "…offer and seek feedback at appropriate moments in learning-teaching activities". Being responsive to learner contributions means that language teachers need to be extremely flexible in their approach. For example, Senior (2006: 163) notes that teachers should be able to adapt their lessons to the "…wants and needs of individuals in an ongoing, iterative manner", and thus need to become adept at making decisions reactively. Wright (2006), in aiming to provide learner teachers with a more holistic account of a language class, places great importance on exploring the ways in which teachers and learners can be emotionally engaged in order to increase learner participation. He believes that focussing attention on these aspects of learner and teacher encounters provides novice teachers with ways to "…frame their growing understanding of classroom life as they think about what happens in their own and others' classrooms by way of providing learners with *opportunities to learn*" (Wright 2006: 73).

Indeed, some researchers, in trying to better understand the multifaceted, social, idiosyncratic nature of language learning classrooms, call for a radical shift in how learning environments may be perceived and managed. They recommend that teachers should be encouraged to explore how all participants in the language classroom can not only be more involved in classroom dialogue and decision making but also in syllabus content and direction (Tarone & Allwright 2005; Allwright & Hanks 2009). Moreover, recent, humanistic perspectives on the language classroom such as teaching unplugged (Meddings & Thornbury 2009) inspire teachers to follow their own "sense of plausibility" (Prabhu 1987: 103) regarding the path a class (or syllabus) may take, with the itinerary of a lesson emerging from the learners' needs, interests, requests and so on.

Not only does the creation of these types of classroom environments result in an improved "richness of experience" for all participants involved (Allwright 2005: 24), but it can also facilitate increased occasions for teachers to better identify the needs of the individual learners. In contrast, it could be argued that teaching to pre-selected language points runs counter to what we know about second language acquisition and that it involves the creation of cultures quite different to the type of organic classrooms described here, as the following section outlines.

Second language acquisition

Findings from SLA research suggest that the learning of isolated grammatical forms, in a pre-determined order, no longer carries credibility since learners can only learn when they are developmentally ready to do so (Long 2011). Further to this, it is reasoned that learning is facilitated when teachers provide the type of reactive or incidental feedback that centres on the language and knowledge that the learners bring to the classroom (Spada & Lightbown 2008). From a sociocultural perspective of learning, it is precisely in the (often unpredictable) interaction amongst learners and between the teacher and learner where development takes place. This, of course, requires the type of teaching that facilitates meaningful interaction amongst all participants and involves dynamic assessment of learners' language use as well as on-the-spot decision making about the optimum level of mediation (Lantolf & Poehner 2011). In the contemporary approaches described here, language matters are often attended to as they arise, or subsequent lessons may be planned around issues that have emerged, been requested by the learners or been identified by the teacher during episodes of interaction. Such reactive attention to language is labelled *a focus on form*. A little confusingly perhaps, attention to language or a grammar point that is presented to learners in the form of a top-down syllabus, in a pre-determined manner, is commonly labelled *a focus on forms*. Nevertheless, the former, a focus on *form*, is claimed to better address a learner's internal syllabus, making it more accessible and also engaging for the learner as the language issue has come from their own interaction and *not* a prescribed syllabus or set of externally developed materials (for a fuller discussion of this see: Ellis 2012: 271-306).

From these introductory descriptions, it can be seen that there is support from both theoretical and evidence-based arguments for creating classroom cultures that allow for spontaneity from all participants as well as a need for teachers to possess the ability to be reactive in their approach.

The arguments are also deeply intertwined. For example, Wright's (2006) call to focus on the emotional engagement of the learners may be interwoven with Long's (2011) focus on form methodology since increased learner contributions, whilst communicating in meaningful interactions, allow the alert teacher to be better able to identify learning opportunities in individual zones of proximal development (Vygotsky 1986). Further support for focussing attention on these areas can also be found Czikszentmihalyi's (1990) theory of flow which stresses the crucial nature of engagement when learners are involved in a task.

The problem

The difficulty for teacher educators, at least those who adhere to the type of communicative, humanistic methodology of teaching envisaged here, lies in the dissonance between exposing learner teachers to the complexity and context-dependent nature of expert teaching and the risk of overwhelming them as they face the multifarious concerns of their first ever teaching experiences, on top of the demands of acquiring and interpreting the *declarative* knowledge that they encounter during their formal teacher education (Singh & Richards 2006). The challenge surrounds how best to go about the task of preparing learner teachers to *embark* on a path of continuing professional development. The task is important since, as Hedgcock (2002) notes, meaningful reflection "…cannot take place unless teachers possess structures of knowledge on which to base their reflection". What, therefore, should educators be doing, in order to effectively inculcate an ongoing process of informed reflective practice?

A motivated, experienced, teacher should be able to see the merit in the descriptions of communicative teaching presented here. However, a motivated, experienced teacher can operate on several levels simultaneously. He or she is able to monitor and judge the mood of the class while at the same time be linguistically sensitive to the needs of the learners, listen earnestly to the content of utterances, decide on the next course of action, notice behavioural clues, respond to requests for clarification and so on. These activities are often carried out seamlessly or automatically by expert teachers and it would be folly to expect novice teachers to be able to perform similarly, as Senior (2006: 45) reminds us, on that first practicum, "…there is just so much to remember". To what extent, then, should learner teachers be shielded from a view of good

teaching, as understood by experienced practitioners?

Previous research conducted on learner teachers, including data presented here, reports them as having insufficiently developed language awareness or procedural know-how, to be able to dynamically assess and deal with unplanned language attention (Tsui 2002; Ogilvie & Dunn 2010). Some may view this undeveloped knowledge base as justification for narrowing the linguistic focus of classes that take place during a pre-service practicum. In other words, the inexperience of learner teachers means that teacher educators can only expect the novices to be informed about an aspect of language that they have planned to present. Consequently, a major component of the practicum should be given to training learner teachers in ways to efficiently present such language. Yet two arguments can be put forward to counter this view. Firstly, as noted above, a presentation-practice-produce lesson design does not reflect what we know about how languages are best learnt and taught (e.g. see Skehan 1996; Allwright 2005) and secondly, it can be argued that a narrow PPP focus during initial training can limit a feedback discussion to a focus on the candidate's own observable performance and the achievement (or otherwise) of a lesson plan's aims (Brandt 2008). This means that educators may be missing opportunities to expose novice teachers to other contemporary models of good practice. This is unhelpful in fostering the type of informed reflective practice that Hedgcock (ibid.) was referring to. Indeed, it has long been argued that novice teachers need to move beyond the level of automatic or routinised responses to classroom situations (e.g. see: Richards 1992). That is, in order to develop learner teacher thinking, educators need to be wary of an over-emphasis, during initial teacher education, on the trainees' technical abilities.

Learner teachers' readiness

The arguments presented so far strongly suggest that the ability to manage a class of learners, to make lessons "vital, alive and authentic" (Senior, 2006: 187) and to perform unplanned classroom activities, such as an incidental focus on form, constitute important aspects of teaching expertise yet this ability may well be out of reach for most pre-service learner teachers (Tsui 2002). The areas discussed below constitute my attempt at better understanding this problematic dichotomy. In the first section, data will be presented that reveal novice (native speaking) teachers' apprehension about dealing with unplanned classroom events.

However, what will also be discussed is the potential that exists to inculcate a culture of more informed reflective practice, and which may well positively affect longer-term development.

> *"Can I do it? That's what I think of first.*
> *Do I even know how to do it?"*
> (TP Mon 5th November)

This quote, uttered during a post-teaching feedback discussion was part of an exchange about how and when we should address language issues that the teacher identifies as being problematic for a learner. It neatly encapsulates what I believe goes through most learner teachers' minds when they consider leaving their plan to talk about language, spontaneously, during a class. The LTs in this study often commented that their language awareness and pedagogical repertoires of skills were insufficiently developed to exploit situations that arose while they were teaching. Journal entries regularly recorded the unease the LTs felt at not being able to deal with queries the learners bring up during a class, as this reflection demonstrates:

> There were a few instances when students asked for grammar clarification when we were looking at alternative verbs to use, instead of like and dislike. This put me on the spot, and despite all the grammar preparation I'd done, I couldn't answer their questions. (SH RJ3)

Another LT (after providing a confusing and erroneous explanation of the differences between phrasal verbs and collocations to a class of learners) revealed her insecurity about providing unanticipated explanations of aspects of language use in reflecting that, "I think in future I could avoid these problems by preparing my examples before the lesson, rather than making them up on the spot". (MA RJ5)

One of the themes that emerged from the data was the way in which an avoidance of unplanned language work affected classroom management decisions, which in turn influenced the culture of a class. The LTs were often resistant, at this stage in their development, to move away from more conventional, teacher-centred approaches in which the teacher holds all the power. In other words, the LTs often reverted to the comfortable role of knowledge transmitter, even though, from their teacher education modules and during planning sessions, they had been exposed to alternative courses of action:

> It would have been more useful to the students to be working through the points together in groups as opposed to talking to me at the front of class. It would have been beneficial in my planning to look at different ways to change the lesson to make it more student-focussed. (KI RJ3)

The following reflection provides another example of how the teacher role in a communicative classroom may fail to chime with existing beliefs and tacit understandings of how learning should be organised:

> If you are doing a communication based lesson you feel like you really enjoyed it, they really enjoyed it, but you question whether or not they actually learnt anything, like they might have become more confident which is good for their fluency but you're not sure if you've actually helped them with their English that much. *(AN RJ3)*

The LT who uttered the sentiments above was reflecting on setting up and managing a communicative task. Her uncertainty regarding the teacher's role is revealed in her doubts as to "*whether they have actually learned anything*". This confusion may be understandable when we consider that the notion of facilitator or guide will clash with most LTs' conceptions of teaching, which have been formed from their own histories and experiences. While there is, of course, plenty of room and need in language teaching for input of new information, the fact that the LT feels that her fluency based classes may not be of much use for the learners suggests that her own beliefs about teaching and learning are very much based around a 'banking' model of knowledge. Copland (2008: 14) also noted this phenomenon and reports on communicative activities being described as a "*cop-out*" because the teacher "*isn't actually teaching anything*".

These examples from the data suggest that, at this pre-service stage of their career, and despite being exposed to a knowledge base that highlighted the positive aspects of reactive teaching, the LTs were often more comfortable in the role of knowledge transmitter. A role for which they could take comfort in knowing they could prepare and plan for. Nevertheless, the data also indicated that exposure to a declarative knowledge base, which was referred to and included in the feedback discussions, may have made them more open to the various alternatives that are available to language teachers.

The potential
The data suggested that the learner teachers were beginning to notice ways to develop their expertise in the long term. There was evidence that they were starting to see how good teaching may not always be inextricably linked to rigid adherence to a pre-planned sequence of events or to the technical control a learner teacher displays in their presentation of language. The LT reflections often demonstrated that they were able to appreciate

how relinquishing control of a lesson may lead to unanticipated opportunities for learning to occur. As the following extract records:

> I have come to reflect that, in order to progress from this, in my next lesson I will need to consider letting myself go with the flow of the lesson a little more…to allow the students to take advantage of any linguistic tangents they may wish to go on, and to actively encourage any specific area of language they want to delve into. (SH RJ2)

While the following reflection shows how, even at pre-service level, teachers *are* able to overcome the fear of going off script, as this LT recorded:

> I am pleased that I was aware and took the opportunity to go with a decision that followed the students' needs, as I felt that the lesson had become even more meaningful and valuable for all the students. (EP RJ2)

Another LT described how, during a task-based activity, she had made efforts to pay attention to the learners' use of language. She had noted areas where she could enact peer-peer corrective feedback as well as areas where she could possibly alert the learners to alternatives to their language use; in other words, ways in which she may help learners *notice* features of language while at the same time provide input at a point of need. She was, in effect, relating theoretical good practice, in this case 'analytic focus on form' (Long 2015), to her actual experience, yet was not yet confident enough to actually implement the process. As she recorded:

> I opted not to rush a language focus. This is an area I need to focus on in the future. If I had re-focused on language at the end, after the worksheet, it would have been a more satisfactory ending to the class. (AN RJ2)

The content of the reflection below provides an example of how the LT has resorted to modes of teaching that she herself, as a learner was familiar with. In conducting her class in this manner she avoided the opportunities for spontaneous language work or unpredictable learner input and was more comfortable controlling the direction and language aspect of the class. However, her reflection also records how, as a result of the practicum experience, she was becoming aware of alternative approaches to take:

> I also need to think about ways in which I can make the lessons more student focussed; reducing the TTT and putting the onus back on the students, maximising their opportunity for natural conversation. (KI RJ3)

During the post-teaching reflective discussions as well as in their journal writing, the LTs were helped, through dialogic mediation, to bring their developing declarative knowledge to bear down on the experiences in the classroom. In other words, they were encouraged to theorize their own practice. For instance, the extract below provides an example of how past learning experiences, theoretical suggestions (learner-centred learning) and classroom reality (the teacher is expected to have the answers) combine in affecting how an LT may interpret their experience. Learner teachers often have strong, unarticulated ideas regarding the roles of teachers and learners as a result of their "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie 1975: 61) and effecting changes to their perceptions of classroom roles can be challenging. The extract reveals how LTs may come to see and experience new ways of teaching and learning. Theory, practice, dialogue and reflection can all be seen to have central roles in bringing about such changing conceptions.

1. Educator: Can you see why student-centred teaching is useful?

2. LT 9: I think it's opened our eyes by doing different types of activities. It's making me think a lot more. It's going to help me in the future to think - "Is it (the activity) going to be all towards me or is it going to get them talking".

3. LT 10: I think it's good and is helpful but it will be the thing I'll struggle with most.

The learner teachers in this study had studied modules of language awareness, teaching methodology and second language acquisition. Such a declarative knowledge base is, as Hedgcock (2002: 300) notes, "…necessary for and complementary to, the growth of procedural and classroom skills". Despite this, it is possible to see, from the brief snapshots presented here, that they encountered numerous difficulties both in shifting their perceptions of alternative teacher and student roles to those they had themselves experienced, and in dealing with the unexpected moments that real classroom life consists of. Such doubts or internal reservations need to be addressed and articulated if the teacher educator wishes to engage participants and increase the possibility of alternative ways of thinking about classroom organisation being, at the very least, considered by learner teachers.

Discussion

From the preceding pages, it can be seen that a fundamental problem for pre-service language teacher educators is making learner teachers aware of the options available to them, without

overwhelming them at this initial point in their education. The arguments presented suggest that teachers' pedagogical awareness of interactions amongst and between all participants, their ability to manage learning opportunities and *see* potential, constitutes an important knowledge base. Without doubt, these are skills that are demanding for novice and expert teachers alike; skills which call for keen social awareness, an inquisitive attitude toward the possibilities of a classroom and a great sensitivity to language. Nevertheless, in failing to present such a realistic, and complex, picture of classroom life, at this crucial stage of development and transition, and instead obliging LTs to account beforehand for everything that will transpire during a lesson, there is a risk that teacher educators may be socialising LTs into a simplified, outcomes-based understanding of teaching and learning (Tasker et al. 2010). Evaluating or assessing a lesson on the extent to which it has met its pre-determined aims, requires that educators disregard, or at least downplay, the reactive, spontaneous aspects of expert teaching that have been discussed in this paper. In other words, by ignoring current understandings of teaching expertise, of what really goes on in classrooms, educators may have missed an opportunity to challenge the tacit beliefs that influence learner teachers' understandings of managing a classroom.

The theoretical arguments outlined above, together with the data provided from learner teachers' accounts of their experiences, point to the conclusion that, despite the inherent challenges, LTs should be presented with a more complex, holistic view of language teaching. Exposing LTs to contemporary approaches that take a more process-based view of language learning, such as TBLT or Dogme, and providing them with the space to articulate their understandings, is key to this undertaking. Well calibrated dialogue plays a key role here and the need to create space for open discussion in the feedback sessions is, once again, crucial (Chick 2015). Good practice in ELT, in which both planned and spontaneous teacher interventions are enacted, is a target that teachers on a practicum, understandably, are often unable to hit. Given that, and with regard to nurturing the learner teacher's developing confidence and identity, dialogic mediation during feedback discussions must be carried out with the utmost awareness and sensitivity. In doing so, educators may then help their LTs to see the value of communicative approaches, to notice the learners' emerging language abilities and needs, to read the moods of

a class at different points and so on. Even on an extended course of SLTE, the data presented here found that learner teachers have not yet developed appropriate teaching strategies that they can employ to cope with unexpected classroom events. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that learner teachers are able to identify unplanned opportunities for language learning. In addition, their declarative knowledge base provides them with the professional discourse, the pedagogic metalanguage, to enable them to articulate their growing understandings of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

There is a paucity of literature that addresses the challenge of how teacher education can prepare learner teachers to become aware of a view of language classrooms as complex, context-dependent cultures that are replete with unanticipated moments for generating authentic interactions and learning opportunities. One suggestion put forward by Anderson (2015) draws attention to the importance of teachers being able to be both *proactive* and *reactive*. As a number of other educators have done recently, (Copland & Mann 2010; Johnson & Golombek 2011; Engin 2013), he calls for an elevation in the importance of the feedback discussion. He argues that a focus on learning opportunities encourages both exploratory and reflective practice and suggests the inclusion of space in lesson plans for the description of *learning opportunities*, which he defines as "potential acts of explicit or implicit learning that *may* occur during or as a consequence of the lesson" (Anderson 2015: 4).

Using the lesson plan pro-forma as a tool in reflecting on opportunities that emerged during a class, presents an obvious course of action for teacher educators. For example, it could be beneficial in preparing teachers to be alert to "those aspects of learner agendas that may be revealed during classroom work" (Breen & Littlejohn 2000: 9). While it would be folly to *oblige* LTs to act on these until they feel confident to do so, facilitating discussion on these issues can, nonetheless, "…trigger awareness and act as a springboard for them to explore their own beliefs and teaching in greater depth" (Phipps 2007: 15).

I believe that future research into the notion of learning opportunities, with regards to pre-service language teacher education, can make a useful contribution to recent calls for teacher educators to share tools that may be effective in facilitating engaged, dialogic practice (Golombek 2015; Walsh & Mann 2015).

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