

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *The TKT Course*, by Mary Spratt, Alan Pulverness and Melanie Williams (2005). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press in collaboration with Cambridge ESOL. 188 pp. ISBN-13 978-0-521-60992-0 (paperback); ISBN-10 0-521-60992-5

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What do teachers need to know to be teachers? What is the knowledge base of language teacher education? These questions have been the springboard of countless books, articles, and research projects concerned with language teacher education in a world in which teachers aspire to be socially considered as professional as doctors or psychologists. We have come a long way since Shulman's (1986, 1987) knowledge base in which initial teacher education could be structurally divided into three macro strands: content knowledge (the subject matter of our profession), general pedagogical knowledge (general pedagogy), and pedagogical content knowledge (the specific didactics to teach English as a foreign/second language).

More recently, there have been efforts to broaden the scope of teacher education, whether it is pre- or in- service, to include essential aspects which consider teachers' expectations and reflections (Kyriacou and Kunk, 2007), their developing professional identities (Hong, 2010; Timošćuk, 2010), context-responsive programmes (Hayes, 2009) and teacher cognition (Borg, 2006; Johnson, 2006) in terms of their experiences as students and personal theories of language teaching and learning. Nonetheless, a large number of teacher education programmes still maintain, with minor cosmetic changes, a rather encyclopaedic view in which language is shown as the main object of study through modules on grammar, phonetics and linguistics among others (Lantolf, 2009; Tedick, 2009).

Those programmes may not be feasible in contexts in which teacher educators are scarce, or the population which enrol in teacher education programmes are busy teachers seeking to obtain a degree which qualifies them in a more and more competitive market. In this sense, Bott Van Houten (2009) suggests alternative programmes in which the number of hours covered by each module should be replaced by more flexible schemes of work.

Despite different attempts to encourage the development of pre-service and experienced teachers at state education in particular, there is still an urgent call for solutions which equip teachers with the basics behind teaching a foreign language. According to Cambridge ESOL, *The Cambridge ESOL Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT)* is an attempt to offer prospective teachers an introduction to the core teaching knowledge about teaching English to speakers of other languages¹. TKT consists of three separate modules which candidates can take altogether or separately in any order. One important feature of this test is that there are no pass or fail results. Every candidate receives a certificate for each module taken.

The book *The TKT Course* by Spratt, Pulverness, and Williams (2005) prepares candidates to sit for the TKT. In their introductory words, the authors explain that the coursebook aims at initiating readers in the central concepts of TKT, ELT theories, resources, materials and activities for professional development. In so doing, I believe, they do not claim that teachers should be trained or educated following the contents of this book. Yet, governments around the world do not use it accordingly. The book simply follows the three modules of the test as a quick solution for teachers or governments desperately seeking to meet educational demands. In any case, my concerns about the 'knowledge' side of TKT should be in relation to the exam itself and not with the book reviewed here.

The TKT Course is divided into three modules. Each module is respectively divided into parts and each part into units. All units feature a starter question and answer, the definition of key concepts through simple explanations, synonyms or examples, and how these concepts interact with the language teaching classroom. In

¹ For an overview of the exam, see: <http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/teaching-awards/tkt.html> (Date accessed 31 October 2010).

addition, the authors offer follow-up activities and a reflection section as an attempt to help readers contextualise these concepts to their own situations. Last, there are discovery activities which suggest references and websites for further explorations and a TKT practice task in order to review the concepts addressed under the format of the test. At the end of each module, readers will find a practice test. The book also features sample answer sheets, answer keys, exam tips, a list of terms and phonemic symbols in order to familiarise prospective candidates with all aspects of TKT.

Module 1 features three parts which aim at overviewing *Language and background to language learning and teaching*. Part 1 briefly introduces readers to the very surface of English as a system. It presents grammar from a descriptive view, lexis, phonology, functions and the four macro skills. Readers will learn that “context” is equivalent to “situation”, or that coherence and cohesion are key concepts in understanding what reading as a receptive skill involves. Also, in the unit devoted to speaking for instance, readers are told that a speaking lesson usually follows a three-step pattern which goes from introducing the topic to its free discussion. Part 2, in turn, concerns the background to language learning by touching on motivation, the difference between exposure to focus and form, the role of error in interlanguage, L1 and L2 learning, and learner characteristics and their needs. All these core themes, which are constantly under investigation, are covered in twenty-three pages. For example, the different characteristics among children, teenage and adult learners appear summarised in a table in which we can read that adults “learn in more abstract ways”. Part 3, on the other hand, looks at language teaching through listing presentation techniques, practice activities and tasks for language and skills development and assessment types and tasks.

Due to the main theme of *ELTED* in this volume, I would like to review Unit 17, as it deals with assessment. Assessment is defined as “judging learners’ performance by collecting information about it”. Readers are introduced to concepts such as informal, formal, self-, and peer- assessment, diagnostic, placement and progress tests among others. As regards assessment tasks, a bullet-point list mentions multiple-choice questions, role-plays and portfolio and how their use will measure accuracy, fluency or interaction. In the follow-up activity, readers are asked to match the key concepts of this unit to sentences which describe

assessment types. For instance, one sentence reads: “Learners repeat words after the teacher”. The answer key states that the right answer is “repetition: pronunciation”. What if this same reader observes a learner repeating a sentence? Will that still be for pronunciation? In the reflection section one question asks to choose between tests focusing on communication and tests on accuracy to assess a learner’s English. I wonder whether this question implies that accuracy should be disregarded or that teachers are supposed to use subjective tests at all times.

Although the authors have made efforts to address the concepts mentioned above as in constant revision, most of the definitions and implications are treated as given without a serious stance which helps readers become critical. In other words, readers are provided with one line definitions, quick activities, and reflection questions. However these questions do not invite candidates to challenge the framework given. Instead, the questions appear to let readers operate *within* the limited input found. As I see it, readers are supposed to memorise these concepts for the exam without further attempts to intimately relate them to their practice. After all, the exam promotes the identification of general ELT vocabulary, so to speak. In other words, “knowledge” is reduced to naming using the current ELT terminology.

Module 2 moves away from background knowledge to lesson planning in Part 1, and use of resources for language teaching in Part 2. What I find comforting is that candidates who believe that *The TKT Course* and test will enable them to be teachers are advised that the first step of a lesson is the identification and selection of aims. Once again, the planning of a sequence of lessons, units of work and assessment activities is presented in a recipe-like format. Even though the authors encourage coherence in lesson planning, many aspects are overlooked or mentioned in passing. On the other hand, the units devoted to materials, Part 2, appear under a more conscientious light. Readers are thoroughly guided through the selection, adaptation and use of different sources, resources, and teaching aids. Although I find these guides clear and well-intentioned, I fear that the assumption that teachers will heavily depend on marketed materials runs deeply. My suspicion is reinforced by the fact that there is no unit devoted to teachers developing their own materials. In this sense, teachers appear to be trained as good shoppers, not creators.

Last, Module 3 looks at classroom language and management. Part 1 introduces different classroom functions such as instruction, explanation, narration, and elicitation among others. Readers are advised that good teachers need to grade their language and sequence it by previously thinking about the language they will use in class. Also, teachers are provided with useful expressions that they can teach their learners to use English in the classroom. Part 1 finishes by analysing learners' mistakes and how they can be categorised so as to encourage self-correction, especially in relation to written work. Conversely, Part 2 deals with another aspect within the classroom: management. Teachers, according to the contents presented, will be effective classroom managers if they adopt different roles, group learners by means of diverse interaction patterns, and apply an assortment of oral correction and feedback tips as learners solve varied activities and tasks.

In conclusion, the book achieves its aims in relation to the TKT. In addition, it is written in a friendly, semi-formal style which helps those readers who approach the teaching of a foreign language for the very first time or whose English proficiency is developing. As I mentioned above, the discovery activities section in each unit is a plus as it invites teachers to carry on exploring the concepts covered through different learning modes. Nonetheless, I need to point out that those who read this book may not necessarily sit for the exam as it can be used separately. In my opinion, being a teacher is not a prerequisite to approach the contents *The TKT Course* addresses. According to what the book features, the Teaching Knowledge Test tests good memory and reading skills. Anyone who can understand English will be able to understand the contents of *The TKT Course*, thus being in a position to sit for the exam and most likely to be successful. Anyone who is not a teacher interested in reading about ELT can use this book to get a

flavour of the profession. Teachers or teachers-to-be interested in *learning* about what the teaching profession entails need to look at it as a basic introduction which offers the description of key concepts in a de-contextualised manner. In other words, if interested in passing the exam, this book is a must. If interested in becoming a responsible teacher, this book should be read only if found by chance, for my opening questions remain unanswered.

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