

**THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CONTEXT ON THE
DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHING SKILLS AND SELF-GROWTH:
TWO CASES**

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I. Introduction

One approach to teacher education which is still dominant in many Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes in English Language Teaching is the model-based form of teacher skill development. It is practical because it focusses on methods, strategies and techniques which are readily usable in the classroom. Usually imposed on teachers on a "top-down basis", such an approach has been viewed by Hunt (1987) as an "outside-in" rather than "inside out" form of teacher development which may not secure teachers' commitment but may generate resistance (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992). But for newly qualified teachers trying to cope with their first few months of teaching, such an approach can provide a bedrock of skilled expertise.

However, even if necessary and helpful for novice teachers, model based training does not, of itself, necessarily provide the ability to adapt productively to unpredictable situations. For this reason purely model-based training is sometimes seen as insufficient, and has led to a focus on "Classroom-based teacher development" (CBTD). This model situates the professional growth of teachers within the daily realities of classroom life, emphasizing self-directed development, and combining "personally meaningful, educationally defensible and socially justifiable practices" (Thiessen, 1992). In selecting these three points of reference Thiessen establishes a connection between teacher development, both educationally and morally, and the world of the classroom within society. "Meaningfulness" refers to the fact that teachers and students must discover why certain changes are personally worth the time and psychological energy to pursue; "educational defensibility" suggest that teachers and students (when possible) should be able to justify both conceptually and with empirical rigour classroom practices. "Social justifiability" means that any proposed development or change within the classroom should become part of a long-term agenda for improving the world outside it.

In a wider context, such constructivist models of human learning emphasise the way in which individuals construct a personal representation of reality; in the case of teacher learning this includes their representation of good teaching and of themselves as a teacher. A social constructivist framework argues that personal representations are a) based on inherited social traditions and past experiences of teaching; and also b) that these representations are either confirmed or challenged by social experiences (see Roberts, 1997). Such a model of teacher learning underpins the form of CBTE outlined above.

This article attempts to support a constructivist model of teacher learning and demonstrate through exemplifications that skills-based teacher training alone is incomplete. It needs to be complemented with an awareness of the social, cultural, and psychological environment (Zeichner, Tabachnick, and Densmore (1987), Calderhead (1991)) and recognise that individual reflection, experimentation, and personal theory development will help shape the individual's teaching behaviour.

2. Research design

2.1 Participants

To explore the above issues, we will contrast the way in which two Burkinabe (Burkina Faso, West Africa) student-teachers applied certain skills acquired on their Initial Teacher Education course whilst in the first year of probationary teaching in secondary schools. After six months' theory on language teaching at the "Institut des Sciences de l'Education" (INSE), the teacher training institute of the University of Ouagadougou, the capital city of Burkina Faso, the participants had undergone two and a half months' intensive teaching practice supervised by the college. This was followed by their first year of probationary teaching in secondary schools.

The student-teachers selected are Albert and Salaka who were drawn from a cohort of 8 novice teachers in their first year of teaching. The aim of this in-depth study is to see how they transferred performance skills from the training institute (time 1) to the workplace (time 2) and investigate the problems that arose in the process. These particular student teachers were selected because they respectively showed high and low levels of application of training as revealed in two sets of data: (a) high inference skills data obtained by using a rating scale

instrument, and (b) interviews. They thus formed a contrasting pair in terms of teaching skill acquisition.

2.2 Instrumentation

The instruments for data collection consisted of a seven point rating scale instrument and interview sessions conducted after each observed lesson.

i) The rating scale instrument was intended to measure nine pre-selected high inference skill categories, supported by operational definitions to guide observers. Two teacher-trainers agreed ratings for the whole cohort from which the two subjects Albert and Salaka were selected during teaching practice. However only one observer rated them in their first posting in rural secondary schools due to logistical constraints. Thus, a total of 85 hours of observation were obtained with the cohort of 8 sample subjects: 42 at time 1 and 43 at time 2. The rating scale instrument was filled out by each observer immediately after each observed lesson. It was from this cohort that Albert and Salaka were selected.

Following Brown's (1975) "classroom teacher guided assessment rating scale" the high inference skills were rated as follows:

(Put a ring round the number which most closely indicates your view of the teacher's performance: (1) is a low score, (7) is a high score).

1. skill in gaining and retaining attention.... 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. skill in recognizing pupils' difficulty of understanding..... 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. skill in eliciting pupils' responses..... 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. skill in distributing questions among pupils.... 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. skill in motivating pupils..... 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
6. skill in giving instructions..... 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
7. skill in controlling language to level of class..... 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8. skill in lesson planning..... 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
9. skill in varying activities..... 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(Adapted from Brown, 1975)

The raw scores by the two observers for the above nine skills at time 1 and time 2 were added up separately and their means worked out (see Tables 1 and 2 below).

ii) Interview sessions were conducted with the two selected novices after each observed lesson, and took place after a term's teaching as full time teachers in their probationary workplaces. Other interview sessions were also held with their respective Headteachers. They were intended mainly to capture the novice teachers' feelings about the new profession they had embraced, their coping strategies, and how they translated potential into actuality in situations of relative isolation. Unstructured field notes were also taken during the observations.

3. Analysis of the data

3.1 Analysis of the quantitative data

3.1.1 Albert:

Albert's scores at time 1 (during teaching practice and whilst still in training) suggest an average performance across all nine skills. Table 1 below, which is a display of the averaged number of observed lessons, indicates a 3.73 mean score for all nine skills, which is slightly above (3.5) considered as the average score for the seven point rating scale. He appeared to have faced slight difficulties with two skills: skill 3 (eliciting pupils' responses) and skill 9 (varying activities).

However, the same participant has noticeably improved his scores across all skills at time 2 as displayed in Table 1 below with a means score for all nine skills reaching (4.75). The scores under Skill 3, i.e. (4.6) and Skill 9, i.e. (4.6) indicate a tendency toward increase.

Table 1: High Inference Skills Means Scores (Albert)

Albert	Sk1	Sk2	Sk3	Sk4	Sk5	Sk6	Sk7	Sk8	Sk9	Mns
Tm1	4.7	3.5	3.7	4.2	3.8	3.8	3.3	3.6	3.0	3.7
Tm2	5.2	4.6	4.6	4.4	5.2	5.0	4.2	5.0	4.6	4.7

Max. Score = 7

In Albert's performances, higher improved scores from time 1 to time 2 were obtained in four key skills which allowed a smooth conduct of his lessons:

skill 1: gaining and retaining attention

skill 5: motivating pupils

skill 6: giving instructions

skill 8: lesson planning

With Albert, the motivation of his class was maintained by the use of such strategies as varying voice pitch and speed of talk to sustain attention and, at times, stopping one activity to crack jokes and only returning to the lesson when he was sure that he had the pupils' attention. Unstructured field notes taken during classroom observations indicate that the novice's lessons were conducted through English even when many pupils showed lack of comprehension and became restless. Negative contextual factors such as large class sizes, lack of electricity and running water, different life styles and ethnicity (he was from a different ethnic group) did not deter him in his attempt to apply the skills he had learned and Albert seemed to be enjoying his profession.

3.1.2 Salaka:

Salaka's scores rather indicate a low performance at both time 1 and time 2 with a mean score levelling at 2.44 and 2.53 respectively with only a small tendency toward increase in skill application from time 1 to time 2. Indeed some skills, such as Skill 4 (distributing questions), Skill 7 (controlling language), and Skill 8 (lesson planning) show *decreased* scores at time 2. (See Table 2 below)

Table 2: High Inference Skills Means Scores (Salaka)

Salak a	Sk1	Sk2	Sk3	Sk4	Sk5	Sk6	Sk7	Sk8	Sk9	Mns
Tm1	2.1	2.1	2.4	3.1	2.2	2.2	3.0	2.8	2.1	2.4
Tm2	3.4	2.6	2.4	2.6	2.4	2.6	2.6	2.2	2.0	2.5

A tentative explanation for the decreased performance in Skills 4, 7, and 8 is that unstructured field notes taken during the lessons reveal that Salaka was concentrating on pupils who fared well in English, paying little attention if any to the poor performers. He explained the reason for his behaviour:

Some pupils are not interested in learning the language.

Sometimes they study another subject during my class, mainly when they have a test in another subject following my class.

He was probed further during the interview:

Probe: *Do the pupils behave in the same way with other teachers teaching different subjects?*

Salaka: *I don't know, but I think probably... err.. I'm not sure, in fact it is my first year of teaching, probably they do it, probably, yes, before their homework. When I was a pupil myself, it occurred to me. You know, in the village where there is no electricity, it is difficult to study at night.*

This explanation seems well founded as many pupils were often seen studying another subject-matter during the English class. They sometimes revised their English lessons during other classes and were very concerned with academic achievement; a preoccupation encouraged by the elitist school system. Yet another important reason for their behaviour is the fact that most rural villages lack electricity. There may only be one hurricane lamp for the whole family, the light of which often keeps flickering either because of age (hurricane lamps are often seen with broken glass kept together with sellotape) or as a result of the bad kerosene used (some traders often dilute their stocks). This problem is not confined to rural areas only; even in urban zones, many people cannot afford to get electricity. Thus numbers of pupils can be seen standing or strolling under street lamps at night studying their lessons or they are compelled to study in the day time or find ways to cope with tests for which they feel unprepared. They may, for example, study a Maths or Science subject during their English class, by keeping their copybooks on their laps and throwing glances at areas which need revision.

Asked what strategy he would use to cope with such a behaviour, Saluki cautiously answered:

I only scold the pupil I catch. It's better to not discourage him by telling to him to go out. They may complain about me to their parents.

This attitude is very revealing about the coping strategy the present novice uses to keep his pupils' attention and motivation. He is more concerned with the social implications of his behaviour rather than with the application of classroom management skills. Working in one's own village community may often be a challenging adventure for novice teachers (see Rouamba 1993). The weight of parental interventions in the school is very powerful. Giving bad marks to or hurting a kin's child for instance may have positive or negative consequences on teacher/parent relationships: they may either be strengthened (with those who would see low marks as necessary, fair and beneficial in respect of the child's education) or soured (mostly with semi-educated and illiterate kin, some of whom would consider any low marks at best as an act of ingratitude, and at worst a wilful desire on the part of their related teacher to stop the child from reaching a higher social position). The result of strained relationships may lead to a quest for a metaphysical solution such as witchcraft or charms to either protect the child or to 'bewitch' the teacher into giving more favours.

The present novice is very much aware of this cultural and social contingency and would rather behave cautiously so as to avoid conflict with pupils' parents and his own relatives.

3.2 Analysis of the novices' classroom management skills

Two distinct classroom behaviours characterize the two novices in their approaches to teaching: Albert seemed determined, high-principled, and extrovert; Salaka seemed introverted and rather unmotivated. In attempting to illustrate these characteristics, I shall examine some of the skills which seemed to have caused difficulty in their application.

3.2.1 The case of Albert

Albert's scores indicate a greater integration of learned performance skills (see Table 1) though his placement in a different ethnic culture seemed to be less favourable for his development than his peer teaching in his own native village. Interview data disclose that his most serious handicap in the socialising process within the school and the village community was the language spoken in that community which he could not speak. He was frustrated at not being able to understand what the pupils said when they shifted from French - the lingua franca - to their vernacular. He knew he was disliked in some classes because of his resistance to their requests to teach English through French, the method they were used to. Contrary to Salaka, Albert stuck to applying skills in the way he had acquired during his

initial training, convinced that this was the most appropriate method for language acquisition. His success in using learned skills seems to stem from his ability to gain and retain attention, and motivate his pupils (see Table 1): he was often heard encouraging them not to be put off by the new teaching method he was using, i.e. teaching English through English.

Albert's teaching behaviour illustrates further dimensions to teachers' socializing processes which Zeichner, Tabachnick, and Densmore (1987) describe in the following way: "individual teacher characteristics, dispositions, and capabilities are more influential in determining the course of teacher socialization than are the various institutional characteristics associated with teacher education and schooling". It appears clearly that classroom ecology, institutional characteristics, colleagues' influence, and pupils' behaviours are not the only determinants in shaping teachers' behaviours, other powerful determinants could also be the teacher's own character and inner disposition.

With Albert, contextual factors such as his different ethnicity did not deter him from applying learned skills nor drive him into insulating himself. Contrary to what could be expected, ethnicity which "can also be powerful in influencing pedagogy" (Thomas, 1997) did not play any important role nor have any negative impact on skills development with this particular novice teacher. He knew above all that he was going to work within a community different from his own ethnic group. Though he seemed well prepared to face the fact, he did feel out of tune with the social environment because he was unable to communicate with the village community. This 'handicap' could be detrimental to the teacher's feeling of being part of his social context and hence to his self-growth but, in the present case, it seemed to have no significant influence on skills development. It appears that teachers' ability to use skills effectively and to develop expertise in them is linked more to the classroom context than to societal factors. In contrast, teacher self-growth seems to be considerably dependent on positive or negative attitudes within the parent society, either on the part of the teacher or on the part of the parent community. Delineating teacher *skill*-growth versus teacher *self*-growth is a sensitive area because they necessarily overlap to some extent. As the present writer views it, skills-growth can take place notwithstanding negative social contingencies - and this appears to be the case of Albert; skill-growth is much more "personalistic", that is, it refers to the level of the teacher's motivation to improve teaching and learning (Thomas,

1997); it is very much affected by the process dimension of pedagogy which includes activities such as management, planning, evaluation, instruction, gradation, and selection; conversely, self-growth is powerfully influenced by contextual factors such as ethnicity, culture, tradition, and economic and political factors. These points are confirmed by the following response to the probe in Albert's interview:

Probe: *"Is ethnicity a barrier to skill application?"*

Albert: *"I don't think it is important for me because I have to teach English as, err... the Inspector has taught us to do without using French or the mother tongue of the pupils; I can't speak Mooré (language spoken by the Mossi, the largest ethnic group in the country) but when I go to the market to buy for instance vegetables, I show the market woman many coins and she takes the price, ha ha ha. I am sure that I lose because I cannot do bargaining. People can cheat me in the market. Sometime, yes sometimes...err, it frustrates*

3.2.2 The case of Salaka

Low scores were observed with the following skills:

- Sk3: eliciting pupils' responses
- Sk4: distributing questions
- Sk7: controlling language
- Sk8: lesson planning
- Sk9: varying activities

I propose to examine only "Skill 7" (controlling language to pupils' level) which can significantly throw light on the process of learning to teach.

Unstructured notes taken during the observations show that Salaka used difficult language in his classes. He did not select appropriate vocabulary for the level he was teaching, and as a result, the pupils kept asking for explanations or became demotivated. This inability to use language appropriate to the pupils' level may be a result of poor language proficiency on the part of the teacher (see Rouamba, 1993). Moreover, as most practising teachers have not had any real experience of English in an English environment, their tendency when speaking is to use strong forms where weak ones would be appropriate.

Another characteristic of Salaka's verbal behaviour was his tendency to monopolise classroom talk - the ratio of Teacher:Pupil Talk was 72:15%. This tendency was a result of overexplanation to compensate for feelings of inadequacy as the pupils showed little

participation in interaction. He did not appear to try to find alternative ways of motivating his class as he kept doing the same activity (teaching vocabulary) for almost 40 minutes. He explained the reasons:

Salaka: *Their vocabulary is very poor that is why I give them a lot of words to learn.*

Probe: *But you were told not to exceed 7 or 8 new vocabulary items when teaching a new text!*

Salaka: *In theory yes, but not in practice. Here, these children don't have the level. When I speak they don't understand. They say: what's the meaning of this, what's the meaning of that? Even the simple words of the syllabus of the first year...err... they don't know.*

Clearly, Salaka is questioning one of the learned techniques he acquired on initial training and seems to be evolving his own approach to the teaching of vocabulary; loading his pupils with many words which he often translated. According to him, the pupils lacked most of the vocabulary they were supposed to have been taught the previous year and so limiting oneself to 7 or 8 words as prescribed during initial training was not the right strategy for the remedial work he was involved in. However, attempts were made at times to have the pupils use the new items in their own sentences which often failed. As a result, the novice often showed impatience for not being able to manipulate his class for his own purposes. His way of adjusting to contextual situations seemed to override any theory and principles he might have been exposed to during training. He was very explicit about it:

The problem is that, err...here, at Pouytenga, almost everybody has a business in the market. Today, it is the market day. You have seen that some children were absent. Today I teach some new vocabulary, some are absent. The next day, they will say: "We don't know this word, we have not seen this word"... that's why their level is very low.

It is very important to notice that Pouytenga is one of the largest and most famous international market places in the country where many traders thrive operating many different businesses. Though the village is not provided with electricity, a great deal of electric appliances such as TV sets and video recorders can be seen on display in many stalls.

Unsurprisingly some school children try to make money by occasionally playing truant to go to the market place on market days for petty trade. Such brief periods of respite from the school is an irresistible pull to numbers of pupils especially since academic qualifications longer guarantee immediate success in life.

The interview disclosed further dimensions:

Probe: *Is it only the English classes that they do not attend?*

Salaka: *No, other classes also. Some do not come to school the whole day!*

Probe: *What sanctions do the school authorities administer to children playing truant?*

Salaka: *You think of temporary exclusion? No, never! Ha! Ha! Not here! The parents... err, rather, the traders are too powerful.*

Elements of this interview were confirmed by the Headteacher. He expressed the view that some children in the school could not be punished, least of all, be expelled from school on the ground of truancy or indiscipline. There would undoubtedly be outside intervention to reverse the decision either from parents or from senior educational officials. Such outside interventions are often commonplace and greatly affect the teachers' perspectives towards teaching, their character at work and "play a significant role in the socialization of teachers" (Zeichner, Tabachnick and Densmore, 1987).

In general terms Salaka's classroom management skill, as demonstrated in the way he dealt with control of language, was marked by three dominant features: preoccupation with authority, avoidance of risk - he did not seem to be innovative - and a sense of helplessness. He seemed to be feel out of tune with the social context though he worked in his own native village. Contextual contingencies such as pupils deserting school for business had a negative impact on the novice's psychology, motivation, and self-growth.

As a whole, Salaka's first term's teaching experience was hard, raising cognitive contradictions and psychological issues. His teaching behaviour seemed to contradict many of the principles and models presented during his training. However, the experiential knowledge he has acquired in the interplay of contextual realities has triggered off some critical thinking and the development of strategies which could be viewed, in Thiessen (1992) terms, as "educationally defensible" (he was using a different strategy for teaching

vocabulary) and "socially justifiable" (he did not want to be in contradiction with his village community).

Conclusion

I have suggested in this article that one major problem with the skill-oriented training model is that it tends to neglect the influence of contextual factors which affect interaction within and outside the school. Any training institute needs to reconceptualize their training programme to encompass the social life that will be experienced by the novice teacher and the fast changing pupil culture. What is most needed is no longer performance skill application only - necessary for survival at the early stages of teaching - but a programme which integrates teaching skills and skills on how to perform in a multi-faceted community. Social relations both in the classroom and in the village community play a crucial role in the novice teachers' induction and in teacher/pupil classroom behaviour. It would seem that success in performance skills application is context-specific in that it depends not only on the training for their acquisition and internalization but also on one's understanding of the context and the participants. Roberts (1997) thus illuminates the same views: "The teacher's social world is the reality, the base from which each teacher will develop". We fully endorse his point that simplistic models of behavioural training should be revised in order to address personal, conceptual and contextual dimensions of skill acquisition.

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