

RESPONSIVE APPROACHES TO TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades two broad but distinguishable approaches to language teacher development have predominated: an informing approach based largely on the transmission of principles of new theory and method; and a responsive approach centering on teachers' understanding of their own practice. This paper offers the notion of the Idea, as an element of input that can inspire teachers and be appropriated for their own practice, as a means of synthesising the two traditions. Evidence that teacher learning operates at the level of the Idea is presented on the basis of literature.

Keywords: teaching training; idea; responsive approach; understanding of practice

INTRODUCTION

We can discern two broad approaches to language teacher development over recent decades. One is essentially an informing strategy, presenting teachers with new theoretical perspectives, methods and techniques, and the other is primarily responsive, seeking to engage teachers in analysing and reflecting on their own practice and devising practices which provide for more effective learning. This paper develops a synthesis of the two approaches, based on the *Idea* as an innovative mechanism in teacher learning, and presents two empirical studies illustrating its impact in two different teacher development programme contexts.

The informing strategy draws largely on the notion that the way teachers should teach is determined by developments in theory in language learning, particularly SLA. Jack Richards summarises this theoretical approach to teacher training and development.

Knowledge and information from such disciplines as linguistics and second language acquisition provide the theoretical basis for the practical components of teacher education programmes (Richards, 1990, p.3)

This account of how teacher education and development occur has prevailed, despite evidence that input based on language learning theory has limited impact on teacher learning and performance (for example, Breen et al,

2001; Peacock, 2009; Ogilvie & Dunn, 2010; Hiver and Dörnyei, forthcoming). In fact, the mechanisms through which teachers come to make use of theory in their own practice are by no means clear. Teacher cognition research findings, (for example, Freeman, 2002; Borg, 2006; Johnson, 2009) suggest that classroom practice derives from teachers' "BAK" (Beliefs, Assumptions and Knowledge; Woods, 1996), which are shaped by experience and context factors rather than theories and research findings.

The responsive approach to teacher learning has its origins in mainstream education, such as the views of Dewey (1933) and Stenhouse (1975), and in theories of work-based learning such as the reflective practice of Schön (1983) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). An important ancillary strand in English Language Teaching (ELT) has been engagement with the role of context in the tasks of teacher development. Context, in terms of the set curriculum, class size and educational traditions and values (Bax, 1997, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Ur, 2013;), determines what teachers view as possible, and therefore should shape teacher education and development strategies.

Rod Ellis's recent (2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2013) comments regarding the role of new theory in pedagogic and curriculum enhancement reflect a shift from a theory-centred, to a teacher-centred process for development. While knowledge of SLA can be useful to teachers, "it can feed only indirectly into the practical knowledge that informs actual acts of teaching" (Ellis, 2009b, p.141-142 emphasis added). Ellis here not only acknowledges the limitations of training that assumes practices can be derived directly from academic theory, but also (implicitly) concerns that practitioners' development must proceed subtly and personally, in alignment with their identities, beliefs and understanding of local conditions (see 1.1.2 below). Ellis also suggests that the "topics covered in an SLA course should consist of 'ideas' rather than 'models'" (2010, p. 196). "Models" in this description are instances of academic theory (such as Krashen's monitor model, or the Interlanguage hypothesis) held to provide pedagogically useful descriptions of language and language learning phenomena. He suggests that rather than focusing teachers' attention on such abstract constructs, educators should instead help them to develop plausible personal positions on language learning issues. "Theoretical positions", in other words, "should emerge out of the 'ideas' discussed in the course" (2010: p. 196). The "ideas" in Ellis' description are the topics or inputs provided to teachers as potential starting points for transformative new thinking. From such ideas, personal explanations of practice and new personal professional directions can be formulated.

We perceive Ellis' notion of an 'idea' as one which offers a powerful starting point for a reassessment of the role of, and orientation to input for teacher learning. We seek to extend and operationalise the Idea (capitalised hereafter to show our particular use of the term¹) as a concept in this paper: we extend the work of Ellis, and link it to perspectives on management of change in ELT (for example Li & Edwards, 2013). The Idea is posited not as something which works in theory, but rather, something which can be made to work, which through teacher engagement and investment, can be appropriated. As such, it constitutes a fundamental unit of teacher learning and change.

II. RESPONSIVE APPROACHES TO TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

This approach to the development of ELT through teacher development has diverse origins: the action research paradigm of Lewin (1946) and Burns (2009); the reflective practice school of Dewey (1933), Schön (1983), Richards & Farrell (2007); the classroom evaluation approach of Stenhouse (1975) and Kiely & Rea-Dickins

(2005). The key feature of these approaches is the focus on practice and on the teacher. Thus, the language learning curriculum is to a large extent what happens in classrooms as managed by a given teacher, rather than what is planned at a macro-level. To enhance the curriculum, it is important to work with each teacher, so that change is managed through teacher analysis and learning about their own pedagogic values and beliefs, about the possibilities for their students and classrooms, and in terms of the narratives which shape their teacher identities (Allwright, 2005; Walsh and Li 2013; Hiver and Dornyei, forthcoming). In post-method terms, the teacher has to engage in an analysis of particularities, practicalities, and possibilities (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) of their classroom contexts. Participation in such analyses enables teachers to understand the factors which shape practice (Breen et al, 2001; Kiely & Davis, 2010; Butler, 2011), and also to conceptualise what is possible for them at a personal level, for their students as increasingly active and agentive learners, and for the school context in

terms of norms, values and expectations (Kiely, 2013). An active strategy of research engagement which facilitates investigation and analysis of classrooms by teachers can benefit such a process (Borg, 2010; Breen et al, 2001; Kiely & Davis, 2010; Burns, 2009; Allwright & Hanks, 2008).

Compared to the informing tradition, the limitations of the responsive tradition in relation to language teacher education have not been expounded as rigorously in the literature. Two factors contribute to somewhat uncritical acceptance. First, the responsive approach is teacher-centred and teacher-empowering, and as such, is difficult to argue against in the context of developing practice, and developing the profession. Second, it has not been implemented widely: studies (for example, Breen et al, 2001; Kiely and Davis, 2010; Farrell, 2015) suggest it is successful in teacher by teacher development initiatives, rather than in large-scale, organised teacher development programmes such as those described in the case studies below. Nevertheless, Wallace's (1991) observation, noted above, that teachers' practice can stagnate in the absence of exposure to fresh professional theory, cannot be dismissed. A reflective and research-oriented process to analysis that is limited to the experience of each teacher is unlikely to promote change on its own. Reflective practice is difficult for new teachers to achieve (Berliner, 1994; Hobbs, 2007; Akbari, 2007) and the assumption that all teachers become reflective practitioners is absent from Dewey's original (1933) formulation of the concept. Studies of teacher learning in initial teacher education programmes show that teachers do learn from input-based programmes (Richards, Ho & Giblin, 1996; Andrews, 2007; Farrell, 2007; Kiely & Askham, 2012). Professional development does not automatically continue in practice: organised programmes are necessary, and increasingly are provided for as part of quality management policies and initiatives. Such programmes are typically accredited programmes at masters level (as in Case Study One below), or professionally-oriented courses, (as in Case Study Two below). It is our contention that such learning experiences, in the informing tradition, stimulate teacher development and change in practice.

We propose that they achieve this, not through application of theory, or transfer of established techniques, but rather through the proffer of concepts, models, demonstrations and explanations which have the potential to be appropriated by teachers, transforming thinking and practice. We focus on input as a resource from which Ideas can be selected and adapted by teachers to guide the development of their personal theory. In the specific context of the role of SLA in teacher education programmes, Ellis states that; The key question has become not: What do teachers need to know about SLA?, but 'How can SLA contribute to teacher learning?' (2010, p.194).

We see this as indicative of a more general shift in understanding how teachers learn and change. The emphasis is not just on a transmission mode of training, directed at aligning teachers' practices so as to accord with attested theory, but rather teacher engagement with suggestions ('ideas' rather than 'models'; Ellis, 2010, p. 196) that teachers can appropriate for use in the context of their own teaching. Ellis provides an example of such an 'idea' later in the same paper when he outlines a series of principles or points of awareness that teachers can take from the findings of SLA research. Principle 3 (of 10) suggests that:

For example, it would be preferable to tackle an idea such as 'learners inevitably and naturally commit errors' and 'learners sometimes make errors and sometimes don't' than to examine models such as Krashen's Monitor Model or N. Ellis' emergentist theory of learning.

The 'ideas' here are propositions which might be derived from summaries of research studies, which can serve as a starting point for teacher exploration of their own thinking and practices. As teachers explore the proposition, and its capacity to contribute to their own learning as teachers, there is potential for transformation in their thinking, and subsequently in their practice.

A starting conceptualisation of the Idea, consistent with the concepts that have explored in this review of contemporary literature is that it is a concept which is:

- i. an element of input within a programme of teacher education, identified as valuable by a participant and stored for potential future use;
- ii. personally appropriated by the teacher to form part of their own knowledge;
- iii. a resource for the transformation of practice.

This description is consistent both with Ellis' view that the transformation of input into personal theory is dependent on the agency of the teacher, as well as Richards, Ho & Giblin's (1996) practical observations that individual teachers will interpret and act on course content very differently. The aim of our study is to attempt to progress from this theoretical, hypothesised description to one nuanced by, and consistent with the observed experience of teachers. By tracking the responses and insights of teachers undergoing programmes of pedagogic development we will derive a fuller characterisation of the Idea as a useful unit of educational input, presented during a programme of formal training, which can transform teachers' practice. Finally, by developing the Idea into a workable concept for practitioner development, we aim to provide a means of synthesising the informed and reflective traditions; combining the former's capacity to offer teachers' fresh perspectives and challenge routine practices, with the latter's harnessing of their ability to identify locally appropriate solutions.

III. IDEAS CAN BE SYNTHESIZED FROM A VARIETY OF TYPES OF INPUT

It was not easily possible to characterize input that seemed most likely to stimulate teachers' synthesis of generative Ideas. Teachers seemed capable of deriving inspiration from apparently abstract theory (Immaculata's "sociocultural theory"); training in methodology (Michael's "TBLT") or from demonstrations and models of a more concrete practice-oriented nature. Teachers on both programmes were eclectic, all selecting as highly useful items from the inventories such topics as reflective practice, scaffolding, creative drills, and activities with texts, valuing a wide range of kinds of input. However, an obvious and easily-observable tendency in the summary of inventory evaluations is that teachers found it easier to appropriate Ideas whose applications to their professional life seemed most plausible and imaginable. For teachers in the first case

study, the concepts of “cooperative principle” and “speech act theory” from philosophy and linguistics were evaluated least favourably. For the case study two teachers, however, the data implied that teachers’ preferences for Ideas correlated with their proximity to local pedagogic norms. Teachers’ strongest preference was for innovations related to reading skills and strategies. Skills teaching, even in the demonstrations delivered during UK-based training, can be conducted in a fairly ‘traditional’ teacher-centred manner. The unfavourable response gathered for “delaying focus on form”, conversely, seems clearly related to its distance from the presentation/practice procedures observed in the region. Another of the techniques rated most commonly as ‘not useful’ was for learner autonomy, a notion that also diverged from the teacher-fronted norms observed in local practice. This suggests that concepts likely to prove useful were not only those whose applications for practice were most easily perceived, but also those that seemed desirable or possible (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Kiely, 2013). Overall, the observation that teachers were most likely to derive inspiration from suggestions that they deemed personally likely to succeed aligns strongly with the central insight of Prabhu’s (1990) article, ‘There Is No Best Method-Why?’. In this, Prabhu suggests that it is teachers’ sense of *plausibility* that must be engaged in order for particular teaching practices to achieve positive impact. Effective teaching, in his view, “depends centrally on whether it is informed or uninformed by the teacher’s subjective sense of plausibility”; the goal of teacher education should therefore be to “develop teachers’ varied senses of plausibility” (175).

IV. IDEAS ARE TRANSFORMED IN THE PROCESS OF THEIR APPROPRIATION FROM INPUT

Teachers’ descriptions of Ideas also confirmed our starting assumption that they are appropriations individually synthesised from input, rather than concepts transferred in an unmediated way to form a part of the teachers’ own inventory. It became clear in particular that teachers selected, modified and reorganised elements of input so as to reframe them in ways that differed considerably from their organisation in presentation. A clear example was that while two teachers spoke extensively about Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as a source of inspiration, neither showed particular interest in the package of TBLT in its unified ‘method’ (theory and practice) form. Michael, for example, referred extensively to individual principles for practice that he captured using the label of “TBLT”, but which he seemed to have detached from the methodology as more generaliseably useful Ideas. He valued for example the TBLT principle of “priming”, as the need to “stimulate students’ curiosity and challenge them to grope for target language points by establishing a real context/purpose”. Rachel, also referring to “TBLT” as an approach label, extracted the notion of the “lesson task sequence” itself, rather than the whole ethos or approach of TBLT in general, as a key Idea that had the potential to transform local practices. In her opinion, the principle of linking facilitating tasks so that they led to the achievement of ambitious target tasks was immensely valuable, and would in future support her own assessment and training of teachers.

Highly supportive of the sense of teacher’s agency in selecting and modifying content from input potential Ideas was the widespread practice in the second case study of selecting and trialling Ideas. Teachers in the second case study were willing to eliminate, or trial but drop concepts which they did not perceive as appropriate to local conditions. Lucy described an approach which was explicitly pragmatic and empirical. “In my teaching, I like to compare which way is better, if it’s ok, I take it, if not, I give it up.”

V.CONCLUSION

Teacher education and development initiatives will benefit from a better understanding of how teacher learn and change through organised academic and professional development programmes. Programmes conforming to the informing tradition, based on policies for educational change and improved language learning on the one hand, and the expertise of teacher educators on the other, are likely to continue to be largely input-focussed. Such input is often learner-centred, and learning-centred, with limited attention to teaching and to the teacher. This can lead to a marginalising of the expertise of participating teachers, and to a diminution of the teacher agency which is means by which innovative practices are developed in classrooms. What is needed to support a process supporting teacher change is a bridging the input-classroom implementation divide. This involves engagement in a dialogic process, where analysis of new concepts and putative practices leads to a transformation of BAK, and gradual change of lesson plans and classroom activities. A principle which can be seen to underpin our data-derived characterisation is that it positions teachers as meaning makers. They have an expertise in the requirements of their work situation, and in what is possible for them personally as teachers, and for their students in the classroom. Educators' support for and involvement and tracking of teacher initiative during and crucially after training may play an important role in itself: in the studies reported in this paper, there is a possibility that the impact on teacher learning was supported as much by the research process as by the teacher development activity. A key issue for the management of such programmes is the creation of such opportunities where a formal research process is not engaged. This calls for a teacher development curriculum, where the new can be seen as already existing, and where the rationale for doing things differently is complemented by a focus on the transition to a different set of practices. This approach is not a choice between analysis of context and personal practices on the one hand, and the transmission of new theories and techniques on the other: rather it is achievement of the former through engagement with the latter.

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