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# Competence and Performance in Language Teaching

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## *Introduction*

What is it that language teachers need to know and do to be effective classroom practitioners and language teaching professionals? How is this knowledge and practice acquired? And how does it change over time? The issue of language teachers' knowledge and skill base is fundamental to our understanding of effective teaching and to approaches to language teacher education. In this paper I want to explore the knowledge, beliefs, and skills that language teachers make use of in their practice. My focus is on the understandings and practices of those teachers who would generally be regarded by their peers as exemplary language teaching professionals. We all recognize those teachers when we work with them. But what distinguishes the way they understand and approach their work? In trying to answer this question, I will focus on ten core dimensions of language teaching expertise and practice. They are not in any hierarchical relationship, and there is some overlap among them, but they help lay out some of the basic territory and will hopefully help conceptualize the nature of competence, expertise, and professionalism in language teaching.

But first a word of caution. The nature of what we mean by effectiveness in teaching is not always easy to define because conceptions of good teaching differ from culture to culture (Tsui 2009). In some cultures a good teacher is one who controls and directs learners and who maintains a respectful distance between the teacher and the learners. Learners are the more or less passive recipients of the teacher's expertise. Teaching is viewed as a teacher-controlled and directed process. In other cultures the teacher may be viewed more as a facilitator. The ability to form close interpersonal relations with students is highly valued, and there is a strong emphasis on individual learner creativity and independent learning. Students may even be encouraged to question and challenge what the teacher says. These different understandings of good teaching are reflected in the following teacher comments.

*When I present a reading text to the class, the students expect me to go through it word by word and explain every point of vocabulary or grammar. They would be uncomfortable if I left it for them to work it out on their own or if I asked them just to try to understand the main ideas. – Egyptian EFL teacher*

*If a student doesn't succeed, it is my fault for not presenting the materials clearly enough. If a student doesn't understand something, I must find a way to present it more clearly. – Taiwanese EFL teacher*

*If I do group work or open-ended communicative activities, the students and other colleagues will feel that I'm not really teaching them. They will feel that I didn't have anything really planned for the lesson and that I'm just filling in time.* – Japanese EFL teacher

The way a person teaches and his or her view of what good teaching is will therefore reflect his or her cultural background and personal history, the context in which he or she is working, and the kind of students in the class. For this reason teaching is sometimes said to be “situated” and can only be understood within a particular context. This is reflected in a comment by an Australian student studying Chinese in China and reacting to the “Chinese approach” to teaching:

*The trouble with Chinese teachers is that they've never done any real teacher-training courses, so they don't know how to teach. All they do is follow the book. They never give us any opportunity to talk. How in the world do they expect us to learn?*

Compare this with the comments of a Chinese student studying in Australia:

*Australian teachers are very friendly, but they can't teach very well. I never know where they're going – there's no system and I just get lost. Also, they're often very badly trained and don't have a thorough grasp of their subject.* (Brick 1991, 153)

Notwithstanding the reality of culturally determined understandings of good teaching, I will focus in what follows on those dimensions of teacher knowledge and skill that seem to be at the core of expert teacher competence and performance in language teaching, at least from the perspective of a Western orientation and understanding of teaching.

# 1

## *The language proficiency factor*

Most of the world's English teachers are not native speakers of English, and it is not necessary to have a nativelike command of a language in order to teach it well (Canagarajah 1999). Some of the best language classes I have observed have been taught by teachers for whom English was a foreign or second language. Conversely some of the worst classes I have observed have been taught by native speakers. So the issue is, how much of a language does one need to know to be able to teach it effectively, and how does proficiency in a language interact with other aspects of teaching (Bailey 2006; Kamhi-Stein 2009)?

To answer the first question we need to start by considering the language-specific competencies that a language teacher needs in order to teach effectively. These include the ability to do the following kinds of things:

- To comprehend texts accurately
- To provide good language models
- To maintain use of the target language in the classroom
- To maintain fluent use of the target
- To give explanations and instructions in the target language
- To provide examples of words and grammatical structures and give accurate explanations (e.g., of vocabulary and language points)
- To use appropriate classroom language
- To select target-language resources (e.g., newspapers, magazines, the Internet)
- To monitor his or her own speech and writing for accuracy
- To give correct feedback on learner language
- To provide input at an appropriate level of difficulty
- To provide language-enrichment experiences for learners

Learning how to carry out these aspects of a lesson fluently and comprehensively in English is an important dimension of teacher learning for those whose mother tongue is not English. There is a threshold proficiency level the teacher needs to have reached in the target language in order to be able to teach effectively in English. A teacher who has not reached this level of proficiency will be more dependent on teaching resources (e.g., textbooks) and less likely to be able to engage in improvisational teaching (Medgyes 2001).



For teachers who *are* native speakers of English, other discourse skills will also need to be acquired – skills that enable the teacher to manage classroom discourse so that it provides maximum opportunities for language learning. These discourse skills relate to the following dimensions of teaching:

- To be able to monitor one's language use in order to provide suitable learning input
- To avoid unnecessary colloquialisms and idiomatic usage
- To provide a model of spoken English appropriate for students learning English as an international language
- To provide language input at an appropriate level for learners

However, apart from the contribution to teaching skills that language proficiency makes, research has also shown that a language teacher's confidence is also dependent upon his or her own level of language proficiency, so a teacher who perceives herself to be weak in the target language will have reduced confidence in her teaching ability and an inadequate sense of professional legitimacy (Seidlhofer 1999). This may be why research into what teachers' views of their needs for professional development generally identifies the need for further language training as a high priority (Lavender 2002).

A variety of approaches have been proposed to address the language proficiency of non-native-speaking English teachers. Many link the language component to the methodology component, so that teachers practice the language skills needed to implement particular classroom teaching strategies (Cullen 1994; Snow, Kahmi-Stein, and Brinton 2006). In this way language proficiency is linked to classroom teaching and to carrying out specific instructional tasks. Cullen (2002) uses lesson transcripts to help teachers develop a command of classroom language. However, in general, insufficient attention has been given to the issue of language proficiency in many TESOL teacher-preparation programs.

# 2

## *The role of content knowledge*

A recurring issue in second language teacher education concerns what the content knowledge or subject matter of language teaching is, and consequently the question of what it is that we think teachers need to know in order to reach their full potential as language teachers. This is the “content knowledge dilemma,” and it has provided a ripe field for debate and discussion since SLTE emerged as a discipline. Here I am distinguishing “knowledge” from “skill,” since while there is little disagreement concerning the practical skills language teachers need to master, there is much less agreement concerning what the formal or academic subject matter of language teaching is. Content knowledge refers to what teachers need to know about what they teach (including what they know about language teaching itself), and constitutes knowledge that would not be shared by teachers of other subject areas.

Traditionally the content knowledge of language teaching has been drawn from the discipline of applied linguistics, which emerged in the 1960s – at about the same time that language teaching was being revitalized with the emergence of new methodologies, such as audiolingualism and situational language teaching (Richards and Rodgers 2001). Applied linguistics generated the body of specialized academic knowledge and theory that provided the foundation of new approaches to language teaching, and this knowledge base was represented in the curricula of MA programs that began to be offered from this time. Typically it consisted of courses in language analysis, learning theory, methodology, and sometimes a teaching practicum, but the practical skills of language teaching were often undervalued. The debate over the relation between theory and practice has been with us ever since.

Some of the confusion that often appears in debate over the theory-versus-practice issue is due to a failure to distinguish between *disciplinary knowledge* and *pedagogical content knowledge*. Disciplinary knowledge refers to a circumscribed body of knowledge that is considered by the language teaching profession to be essential to gaining membership to the profession. Such knowledge is acquired by special training, and possessing knowledge of this kind leads to professional recognition and status. It is important to stress here that disciplinary knowledge is part of professional education and does not translate into practical skills. When language teaching emerged as an academic discipline in the 1960s, this disciplinary knowledge was largely drawn from the field of linguistics, but today it encompasses a much broader range of content. For example, it could include the history of language teaching methods, second

language acquisition, sociolinguistics, phonology and syntax, discourse analysis, theories of language, critical applied linguistics, and so on.

Pedagogical content knowledge, on the other hand, refers to knowledge that provides a basis for language teaching. It is knowledge that is drawn from the study of language teaching and language learning itself and which can be applied in different ways to the resolution of practical issues in language teaching. It could include course work in areas such as curriculum planning, assessment, reflective teaching, classroom management, teaching children, teaching the four skills, and so on. The *Teacher Knowledge Test* developed by Cambridge ESOL is an example of a recent attempt to provide a basis in relevant pedagogical content knowledge for entry-level teachers.

The language teaching literature often divides clearly into texts addressing either disciplinary knowledge or pedagogical content knowledge. So, for example, we can compare a book such as Ortega's *Understanding Second Language Acquisition* (2008) with Lightbown and Spada's *How Languages Are Learned* (2006). Ortega's excellent book, like many tomes on second language acquisition, contributes to disciplinary knowledge, throwing valuable light on such issues as the critical period hypothesis, language transfer, cognition and language learning, aptitude, and so on but does not deal with practical application. Lightbown and Spada's book, on the other hand, contributes to pedagogical content knowledge since it is part of a series designed to resolve practical issues in language teaching. Although it covers some of the same topics that are included in Ortega's book, the focus is not so much on research issues involved in investigating a phenomenon but practical implications of research. Similarly a book such as Halliday's *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (2004), along with similar books dealing with models of language analysis, belongs to the domain of disciplinary knowledge, whereas Parrott's *Grammar for English Language Teachers* (2000) belongs to that of pedagogical content knowledge.

A sound grounding in relevant pedagogical content knowledge should prepare teachers to be able to do things such as the following:

- Understand learners' needs
- Diagnose learners' learning problems
- Plan suitable instructional goals for lessons
- Select and design learning tasks
- Evaluate students' learning
- Design and adapt tests
- Evaluate and choose published materials
- Adapt commercial materials
- Make use of authentic materials

- Make appropriate use of technology
- Evaluate their own lessons

The role of pedagogical content knowledge is demonstrated in a study by Angela Tang (cited in Richards 1998), in which she compared two groups of English teachers in Hong Kong – one with training in literature and one without such training – and how they would exploit literary texts in their teaching. Some of the differences between these two groups of teachers are seen in the following summary of the research findings.

Literature majors	Non-literature majors
Saw ways of dealing with any difficulties the texts posed.	Worried about how to deal with the difficulties the texts posed
Saw a wide variety of teaching possibilities with the texts	Planned to use the texts mainly for reading comprehension
Addressed literary aspects of the texts	Did not address literary aspects of the texts
Used a variety of strategies to help students explore the meanings of the texts	Mainly used questions to check comprehension of the texts

So we see here that possessing relevant content knowledge made a substantial difference in how teachers planned their lessons. Teachers with relevant content knowledge should consequentially be able to make better and more appropriate decisions about teaching and learning and to arrive at more appropriate solutions to problems than a teacher without such knowledge. However, the central issue of what constitutes appropriate disciplinary knowledge and what is appropriate pedagogical content knowledge remains an unresolved issue, and studies that have sought to investigate the impact of content knowledge on teachers' practices have produced very mixed results (Bartels 2005).

A further important component of professional knowledge in today's classrooms has been termed "technological pedagogical content" knowledge, or TPACK (Mishra and Koehler 2006) – that is, the ability to incorporate and integrate technology into teaching. Reinders (2009, 231) points out that depending on the teacher's level of technological expertise, this could involve "being able to first, *use* a certain technology; second, being able to *create* materials and activities using that technology; and third, being able to *teach* with

technology.” The use of technology in teaching becomes more important in present times because teachers also have to be able to keep up with the technological knowledge of their students. Young learners today have more access to information and more tools available to them to manage their own learning. Reinders (2009, 236) suggests that “the challenge for teachers will be more one of helping learners develop the skills to deal successfully with the increased control and independence that technology demands.”

Becoming a language teacher also involves learning to “talk the talk,” that is, acquiring the specialized discourse that we use among ourselves and that helps define the subject matter of our profession. This means becoming familiar with several hundred specialized terms such as *learner centeredness*, *learner autonomy*, *self-access*, *alternative assessment*, *blended learning*, *task-based instruction*, *phoneme*, and *common European Framework* that we use on a daily basis in talking about our teaching. Being able to use the appropriate discourse (and, of course, understand what they mean) is one criteria for membership in the language teaching profession.

# 3

## *Teaching skills*

The initial challenge for novice teachers is to acquire the basic classroom skills needed to present and navigate their lessons. Teaching from this perspective is an act of performance, and for a teacher to be able to carry herself through the lesson, she has to have a repertoire of techniques and routines at her fingertips. These include routines and procedure for such things as:

- Opening the lesson
- Introducing and explaining tasks
- Setting up learning arrangements
- Checking students' understanding
- Guiding student practice
- Monitoring students' language use
- Making transitions from one task to another
- Ending the lesson

What we normally mean by the term *teacher training* refers to instruction in basic classroom skills such as these, often linked to a specific teaching context. Training involves the development of a repertoire of teaching skills, acquired through observing experienced teachers and often through practice teaching in a controlled setting using activities such as micro-teaching or peer teaching. Good teaching from a training perspective is viewed as the mastery of a set of skills or competencies. Experiencing teaching in a variety of different situations, with different kinds of learners and teaching different kinds of content, is how a repertoire of basic teaching skills is acquired. Over time, experience is said to lead to the development of routines that enable these kinds of skills to be performed fluently, automatically, and with less conscious thought and attention, enabling the teacher's attention to focus on other dimensions of the lesson (Tsui 2009; Borg 2006).

This view of the process of teaching has been extended through research on teacher cognition (Borg 2006, 2009). Concepts such as teacher decision making introduce a cognitive dimension to the notion of skills, since each "skill" involves the teacher's engaging in sophisticated processes of observation, reflection, and assessment and making online decisions about which course of action to take from a range of available alternatives. These interactive decisions often prompt teachers to change course during a lesson, based on critical incidents and other unanticipated aspects of the lesson.

As teachers accumulate experience and knowledge there is thus a move toward a degree of flexibility in teaching and the development of what is sometimes called “improvisational teaching.” Thus, research reviewed by Borg and others hence describes some of the following characteristics of expert teachers:

- They have a wide repertoire of routines and strategies that they can call upon.
- They are willing to depart from established procedures and use their own solutions and are more willing to improvise.
- They learn to automate the routines associated with managing the class; this skill leaves them free to focus on content.
- They improvise more than novice teachers – they make greater use of interactive decision making as a source of their improvisational performance.
- They have more carefully developed schemata of teaching on which to base their practical classroom decisions.
- They pay more attention to language issues than novice teachers (who worry more about classroom management).
- They are able to anticipate problems and have procedures available to deal with them.
- They carry out needed phases more efficiently, spending less time on them.
- They relate things that happen to the bigger picture, seeing them not in the context of a particular lesson.
- They distinguish between significant and unimportant issues that arise.

So while learning to teach from the perspective of skill development can be thought of as the mastery of specific teaching competencies, at the same time these reflect complex levels of thinking and decision making, and it is these cognitive processes that also need to be the focus of teacher training. From the perspective of teacher cognition, teaching is not simply the application of knowledge and of learned skills. It is viewed as a much more complex cognitively driven process affected by the classroom context, the teacher’s general and specific instructional goals, the teacher’s beliefs and values, the learners’ motivations and reactions to the lesson, and the teacher’s management of critical moments during a lesson.

# 4

## *Contextual knowledge*

A key factor in understanding any teaching situation is the social and physical context – the rules, facilities, values, expectations, and personal backgrounds, which act as resources, constraints, and direct influences on teaching and learning. (Posner 1985, 2)

Sociocultural perspectives on learning emphasize that learning is situated; that is, it takes place in specific settings or contexts that shape how learning takes place. Language teachers teach in many different contexts, and in order to function in those contexts they need to acquire the appropriate contextual knowledge that will enable, for example, an Australian teacher to learn how to be an effective teacher in China or vice versa, or a Singapore teacher how to be an effective EFL teacher in Japan. Different contexts for teaching create different potentials for learning that the teacher must come to understand. For example, a teacher might be teaching in a campus-based ESL program, in a local public school, in a community college, or in a private language institute. Depending on the context, the learners may be children, teenagers, or adults and may represent a variety of different social, economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Different teaching contexts hence present different notions of the process of language teaching (Zeichner and Grant, 1981). Teacher learning thus involves developing not only the skills of teaching but also the norms of practice expected of teachers in a school, both inside and outside the classroom. Teaching involves understanding the dynamics and relationships within the classroom and the rules and behaviors specific to a particular setting. Schools have their own ways of doing things. In some schools, textbooks are the core of the curriculum and teachers follow a prescribed curriculum. In others, teachers work from course guidelines and implement them as they see fit. In some institutions there is a strong sense of professional commitment, and teachers are encouraged to co-operate with each other. In others, teachers work in relative isolation. This is reflected in many different aspects of the way the school functions, as we see in the following comments of student teachers on the schools in which they are carrying out their practice teaching.

*I love the school where I am working. The teachers I have met seem real friendly and helpful, and my co-operating teacher goes out of her way to make me feel comfortable in her class. – Judy*



*The teachers in the school where I am teaching seem to have little contact with each other. There are a lot of part-time teachers who just teach their classes and disappear. I get a sense that there is not a strong feeling of collegiality among the teachers in the school. – Robert*

*The teacher I am working with is very strict about everything. Seems like the school has lots of procedures teachers have to follow and I have to do things exactly the way they like to do them. – Andrew*

*My first few weeks went really well, then I had to work in a different class and I found the students very difficult to work with. They didn't seem to be interested in learning. – Anna*

The notion of “context” here is hence a very broad one, since it includes issues such as the school’s goals and mission; its management style and “school culture;” its physical resources, including classroom facilities, media, and other technological resources; the curriculum and course offerings; the role of textbooks and tests; as well as the characteristics of teachers and learners in the school. Some of these factors have to do with “structural influences” (i.e., those to do with life in the classroom and the school in general), whereas others belong to the domain of “personal influences” (i.e., they come from other persons the teacher interacts with while at the school, including the learners, other teachers in the school, and in some cases the learners’ parents). As Miller (2009, 10) comments:

Knowing the school, the possibilities of the classroom space, the students, their neighbourhoods, the resources, the curriculum and policy, the supervising teacher – these are all critical elements that affect what teachers can do, and how they negotiate and construct identity moment to moment.

Teaching in a school thus involves understanding the specific values, norms of practice, and patterns of social participation of that school. This will include understanding such things as the role of the prescribed curricula, the school culture, the routines of the classroom, the school’s procedures for lesson planning, and learning how to interact with students, school authorities, and colleagues. It involves induction into a community of practice, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept for learning that takes place within organizational settings, which is socially constituted and which involves participants with a common interest collaborating to develop new knowledge and skills. In the school, teacher learning takes place through classroom experiences and is contingent upon relationships with mentors and fellow novice teachers, and interaction with experienced teachers in the school. The teacher’s teacher education course constitutes the start of the teacher’s professional development, subsequent learning taking

place in the particular context provided by the school. Learning to teach within a specific teaching context is therefore a process of socialization. Learning to teach involves becoming socialized into a professional culture with its own goals, shared values, and norms of conduct. This “hidden curriculum” is often more powerful than the school’s prescribed curriculum.

# 5

## *The language teacher's identity*

One of the things a person has to learn when he or she becomes a language teacher is what it *means* to be a language teacher. A sociocultural perspective on teacher learning posits a central aspect of this process as the reshaping of identity and identities within the social interaction of the classroom. Identity refers to the differing social and cultural roles teacher-learners enact through their interactions with their students during the process of learning. These roles are not static but emerge through the social processes of the classroom. Identity may be shaped by many factors, including personal biography, culture, working conditions, age, gender, and the school and classroom culture. The concept of identity thus reflects how individuals see themselves and how they enact their roles within different settings. In a teacher education program a teacher-learner's identity is remade through the acquisition of new modes of discourse and new roles in the course room. Teacher learning thus involves not only discovering more about the skills and knowledge of language teaching but also what it means to be a language teacher.

In a training course or campus-based teacher education program, the student teacher's identity emerges through the acquisition of new modes of discourse as well as new roles in the campus classroom. Once the student teacher starts teaching his or her identity is gradually reshaped into the role of teacher.

This transition is not always easy and can create stress and anxiety. For many ESL teachers their identity may partly reflect their wish to empower immigrants, refugees, and others for whom English is a way out of their current circumstances (Cooke and Simpson 2008), as these comments suggest:

*When I went into the class first to observe my cooperating teacher I was so shocked at the reality of the differences in ethnic backgrounds of all the students and wondered how I would manage this and what my role was as a teacher of English. When I started to teach the class and got to know them better I realized my role would not only be to teach them how to speak English but also how to navigate the culture outside the classroom because now they were in a new country (USA). I realized that I would take on another role as that of cultural ambassador as I explained more and more about the US to them during and even after class. Eventually, I had them all over to my house. – Eva*

*Since I have been in teaching practice and inside teaching a real class with real ESL students I no longer feel an outsider in this profession even though I am a non-native speaker of English. Now that I have had a chance to prove myself as a teacher in front of these students and shown them that I know many different techniques as well as my skills using English (yes, and even if I still have a bit of an accent), they have begun to accept me as their teacher and I am beginning to feel more like a teacher of English. – Momoko*

Native-speaker and non-native-speaker teacher learners may bring different identities to teacher learning and to teaching. Those untrained native speakers teaching EFL overseas face a different identity issue: They are sometimes credited with an identity they are not really entitled to (the “native speaker as expert” syndrome), finding that they have a status and credibility that they would not normally achieve in their own country. In language institutes, students may express a preference to study with native-speaker teachers, despite the fact that such teachers may be less qualified and less experienced than non-native-speaker teachers. For non-native-speaker teachers studying in SLTE programs, identity issues may lead some to feel disadvantaged compared to native-speaker teachers in the same course. Whereas in their own country they were perceived as experienced and highly competent professionals, they now find themselves at a disadvantage and may experience feelings of anxiety and inadequacy. They may have a sense of inadequate language proficiency, and their unfamiliarity with the learning styles found in British or North American university course rooms may hinder their participation in some classroom activities.

# 6

## *Learner-focused teaching*

Although teaching can be viewed as a type of teacher performance, the goal of teaching is to facilitate student learning. The extent to which the focus of a lesson is teacher- rather than learner-focused is reflected in the following aspects of the lesson:

- The amount of talking the teacher does during the lesson
- The extent to which input from learners directs the shape and direction of the lesson
- The extent to which the teacher's primary preoccupation during the lesson is with such things as classroom management, control, and order
- The extent to which the lesson reflects the teacher's lesson plan

Some teachers, however, achieve a more learner-focused approach to teaching in their lessons, and this is reflected in characteristics like these:

- The degree of engagement learners have with the lesson
- The extent to which learners' responses shape the lesson
- The quantity of student participation and interaction that occurs
- The learning outcomes the lesson produced
- The ability to present subject matter from a learner's perspective
- The teacher's ability to reshape the lesson based on learner feedback
- The extent to which the lesson reflects learners' needs and preferences
- The degree to which the lesson connects with the learners' life experiences
- The manner in which the teacher responds to learner's difficulties

We see these different perspectives on lessons in how two teachers responded to the question, "What constitutes an effective language lesson from your perspective?"

Teacher A:

*It's important to me that I achieve the goals I set for the lesson and don't skip things I planned to cover. I need to feel I did a good job on covering*

*the different stages of the lesson – the presentation phase, the practice stage, and the free production stage for example.*

Teacher B:

*To me the most important thing is that the students enjoyed themselves and had useful practice. And that the lesson was at the right level for them – not too easy or too difficult so that they felt it was really worthwhile coming to class today.*

Or in the two teachers' view of their teaching philosophy:

Teacher A:

*I believe the best lesson is a well-planned lesson. I find it much easier to teach when I have a detailed plan to follow. I find that I am more likely to use the time efficiently in the classroom if I know exactly what I will do and what I expect students to do during the lesson.*

Teacher B:

*I believe every child in my class has got the capacity to learn, even if he or she is not aware of it. Every learner is a winner. I try to encourage each student to discover what he or she is good at and to help them be successful at it.*

It is natural when one first starts teaching to be preoccupied with one's own performance as a teacher; to try to communicate a sense of confidence, competence, and skill; and to try to create lessons that reflect purpose, order, and planning. It is a period when things are being tried out and tested, when the teacher's role and identity is being developed, and when many new challenges have to be overcome. Hence studies of teachers in their first year of teaching have revealed a transition from a survival and mastery stage where the teacher's performance is a central concern, to a later stage where teachers become more focused on their students' learning and the impact of their teaching on learning (Farrell 2009). The challenge is to make sure that such a transition occurs and that one's initial teaching experiences do not lead to a style of teaching that sticks, one that provides a comfort zone for the teacher but which fails to provide learners with the opportunity to achieve their full potential as learners (Benson 2001).

Learner-centeredness as a characteristic of expert teachers is seen in some of the research Borg reviews (Borg 2006), where these are the characteristics of expert teachers:

- They are familiar with typical student behaviors.
- They use their knowledge of learners to make predictions about what might happen in the classroom.

- They build their lessons around students' difficulties.
- They maintain active student involvement.

Senior (2006) suggests that a central aspect of learner-focused teaching is creating a classroom that functions as a community of learners.

It is sometimes forgotten that language classes operate as communities, each with its own collection of shared understandings that have been built up over time. The overall character of each language class is created, developed, and maintained by everyone in the room. (p. 200)

Effective teachers use different strategies to develop a sense of community among their learners, including using group-based activities, by addressing common student interests and concerns, by regularly changing seating arrangements so that students experience working with different classmates, by using humor and other ways of creating a warm and friendly classroom atmosphere, and by recognizing that students have both social as well as learning needs in the classroom.

The ability to personalize one's teaching is also an important aspect of learner-focused teaching. By personalizing teaching I mean centering one's teaching wherever possible on one's students and their lives, concerns, goals, and interests. This can be achieved by linking the content of lessons to the students' lives and by involving students in developing or choosing the content of lessons (Dornyei 2001). Take, for example, teaching narratives. Whereas the textbook might provide examples of what narratives are and describe their linguistic and textual features, having students share personal stories among themselves can be a powerful way of promoting genuine communication among students. In sharing accounts of their childhoods and discussing significant events or experiences in their lives, students will be prompted to practice and develop their communicative resources by asking questions, asking for clarification, responding with their experiences, and so on.

Students can also be involved in generating lesson content. For example, they can work in groups to choose suitable topics for essay writing. Instead of using examples from the textbook to present a lesson on idioms, students might compile lists of idioms they have encountered out of class and bring these to class for discussion. Learner-centeredness in teaching thus reflects the view that "language teaching is an educational endeavour which should seek to empower learners by enabling them to assume an informed and self-directive role in the pursuance of their language-related life goals" (Tudor 1996, xii).

# 7

## *Pedagogical reasoning skills*

An important component of current conceptualizations of SLTE is a focus on teacher cognition. This encompasses the mental lives of teachers, how these are formed, what they consist of, and how teachers' beliefs, thoughts, and thinking processes shape their understanding of teaching and their classroom practices. Borg (2006) comments:

A key factor driving the increase in research in teacher cognition, not just in language education, but in education more generally, has been the recognition that teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who play a central role in shaping classroom event. Couple with insights from the field of psychology which have shown how knowledge and beliefs exert a strong influence on teacher action, this recognition has suggested that understanding teacher cognition is central to the process of understanding teaching. (p. 1)

An interest in teacher cognition entered SLTE from the field of general education, and brought with it a similar focus on teacher decision making, on teachers' theories of teaching, teachers' representations of subject matter, and the problem-solving and improvisational skills employed by teachers with different levels of teaching experience during teaching. Constructs such as teachers' practical knowledge, pedagogic content knowledge, and personal theories of teaching are now established components of our understanding of teacher cognition (Golombek 2009).

A central aspect of teacher cognition is the role of the teacher's pedagogical reasoning skills, the specialized kind of thinking that teachers possess and make use of in planning and conducting their lessons. Here is an example of how teachers use these skills. I recently gave an expert teacher the following challenge. "A teacher has just called in sick. You are going to teach her 50-minute spoken English class, lower-intermediate level, in five minutes. Your only teaching aid is an empty glass. What will your lesson look like?"

The teacher thought about it for less than a minute and then elaborated her idea for the lesson.

1. I would start by showing the glass and asking students to form groups and brainstorm for five minutes to come up with the names of as many different kinds of containers as possible. They would then group them according to their functions. For



example, things that contain food, things that are used to carry things, things that are used to store things in, and so on. I would model how they should do this and suggest the kind of language they could use. (10 minutes)

2. Students would present their findings to the class to see who had come up with the longest list. (10 minutes)
3. For a change of pace and to practice functional language I would do some dialog work, practicing asking to borrow a container from a neighbor. First I would model the kind of exchange I want them to practice. Then students would plan their dialog following this outline:
  - a) Apologize for bothering your neighbor.
  - b) Explain what you want and why you need it.
  - c) Your neighbor offers to lend you what you want.
  - d) Thank your neighbor and promise to return it over the weekend.

Students would then perform their dialogs.

This is a good example of a teacher's pedagogical reasoning skills. These are the special skills that enable English teachers to do the following:

- Analyze potential lesson content (e.g., a piece of realia, as in the preceding example, a text, an advertisement, a poem, a photo, etc.) and identify ways in which it could be used as a teaching resource
- Identify specific linguistic goals (e.g., in the area of speaking, vocabulary, reading, writing, etc.) that could be developed from the chosen content
- Anticipate any problems that might occur and ways of resolving them
- Make appropriate decisions about time, sequencing, and grouping arrangements

Shulman (1987) described this ability as a process of transformation in which the teacher turns the subject matter of instruction into forms that are pedagogically powerful and that are appropriate to the level and ability of the students. Experienced teachers use these skills every day when they plan their lessons, when they decide how to adapt lessons from their course book, and when they search the Internet and other sources for materials and content that they can use in their classes. It is one of the most fundamental dimensions of teaching, one that is acquired through experience, through accessing content knowledge, and through knowing what learners need to know and how to help them acquire

it. While experience is crucial in developing pedagogical reasoning skills, working with more experienced teachers through shared planning, team teaching, observation, and other forms of collaboration can also play an important role in helping less experienced teachers understand the thinking processes employed by other more experienced teachers.

# 8

## *Theorizing from practice*

Mastery of teaching skills and the specialized thinking skills expert teachers make use of are essential aspects of teacher development. But teacher learning also involves developing a deeper understanding of what teaching is, of developing ideas, concepts, theories, and principles based on our experience of teaching (Borg 2006). The development of a personal system of knowledge, beliefs, and understandings drawn from our practical experience of teaching is known as the *theorizing of practice*. The belief system and understanding we build up in this way helps us make sense of our experience and also serves as the source of the practical actions we take in the classroom. To better understand the concept of theorizing of practice it will be useful to contrast two ways of thinking about the relationship between theory and practice. The first is the *application of theory*. This involves making connections between the concepts, information, and theories from our teacher education courses and our classroom practices; it involves putting theories into practice. So after studying the principles of task-based instruction or collaborative learning, for example, we might try to find ways of applying these principles in our teaching.

The *theorizing of practice* on the other hand involves reflecting on our practices in order to better understand the nature of language teaching and learning and to arrive at explanations or hypotheses about them. The information we make use of is the experience of teaching, observations of how our learners learn or fail to learn, and our reflections on things that happen during our lessons. The theorizing that results from these reflections may take several different forms. It may lead to explanations as to why things happen in the way they do, to generalizations about the nature of things, to principles that can form the basis of subsequent actions, and to the development of a personal teaching philosophy (Richards 1998). The following examples taken from teachers' narratives and journals illustrate teachers beginning to theorize from practice.

### *Arriving at explanations and generalizations*

*Children are much better language learners than adults because they are not worried about making mistakes and are much more prepared to take risks.*

*When we begin learning a language it's better to follow the natural way, using imitation. But when you are more advanced, then you need to know more about the grammar.*

*The essential thing in language learning is knowing how to say what you want to say but not why you have to say it in a particular way.*

*Learners learn more when they work in groups because they can learn from each other and they get more opportunities to talk than when the teacher is conducting the class.*

*Error correction works best when you ask students to monitor their own language, rather than having them depend on the teacher all the time.*

### ***Developing principles and a teaching philosophy***

A further stage in theorizing from practice is when teachers formulate principles that they refer to when planning and evaluating their teaching and to the personal philosophy which guides their decision making (Bailey 1996). Here is an example of a teacher describing some of the beliefs and principles she brings to her teaching:

I think it's important to be positive as a personality. I think the teacher has to be a positive person. I think you have to show a tremendous amount of patience. And I think if you have a good attitude you can project this to the students and hopefully establish a relaxed atmosphere in your classroom so that the students won't dread to come to class but have a good class. I feel that it's important to have a lesson plan of some sort. Because you need to know what you want to teach and how you are going to go from the beginning to the end. And also taking into consideration the students, what their ability is, what their background is and so on. I have been in situations where I did not understand what was being taught or what was being said, and how frustrating it is and so when I approach it I say: how can I make it the easiest way for them to understand what they need to learn?

This teacher's philosophy emphasizes the teacher's attitude and the need to create a supportive environment for learning in the classroom. She stresses the need for lesson planning, but her justification for lesson planning is based on helping the students rather than helping the teacher. Other examples of principles which teachers have described in journals and conversations include:

- Follow the learners' interest to maintain students involvement.
- Always teach to the whole class - not just to the best students.

- Seek ways to encourage independent student learning.
- Make learning fun.
- Build take-away value in every lesson.
- Address learners' mental processing capacities.
- Facilitate learner responsibility or autonomy.

Activities in which teachers articulate their theories, beliefs and principles are an important component of professional development and journal-writing, narratives, discussion and critical reflection can all be used for this purpose. The theorizing that results from these procedures often provides the basis for interpreting and evaluating one's own teaching as well as the teaching of others.

# 9

## *Membership of a community of practice*

Language teaching is sometimes considered a solitary and private activity, something we do within the confines of our own classrooms. But this is a narrow and self-centered view of teaching that fails to capitalize on the potential for learning and growth that comes from participating in a community of teachers having shared goals, values, and interests. The school or the teaching context becomes a learning community, and its members constitute a community of practice. A community of practice has two characteristics:

1. It involves a group of people who have common interests and who relate and interact to achieve shared goals.
2. It focuses on exploring and resolving issues related to the workplace practices that members of the community take part in.

In our work as language teachers this often takes the form of collaboration with other teachers in order to better understand the nature of the teaching and learning that goes on in our classrooms, to share knowledge and skills, to bring about changes in practice when necessary, and to capitalize on the potentials that team work and group collaboration can bring about. Membership in a community of practice in a school provides opportunities for teachers to work and learn together through participation in group-oriented activities with shared goals and responsibilities, involving joint problem solving. Collegiality creates new roles for the teacher, such as team leader, teacher trainer, mentor, or critical friend (Richards and Farrell 2005).

This collaboration can take a number of different forms (Johnston 2009). For example:

*Collaboration with fellow teachers.* This often involves a focus on teaching issues and concerns, such as use of the textbook, development of tests, and course planning.

*Collaboration with university colleagues.* This may involve collaborative research or inquiry into issues of shared interest, such as exploring aspects of second language acquisition or learning strategies.

*Collaboration with others in the school.* This may involve working with administrators or supervisors on issues of concern to the school.

An example of how this kind of collaboration can happen is with the *Lesson Study Approach* that has been widely implemented in Japan (Lewis and Tsuchida 2003). As reported by Johnson (2009), teams of teachers co-plan a lesson that focuses on a particular piece of content of unit of study. Throughout the planning process, they draw on outside resources, including textbooks, research, and teaching theories, and engage in extended conversations while focusing on student learning and the development of specific outcomes. Once the plan has been developed, one member of the team volunteers to teach it, while the others observe. (Sometimes outsiders are also invited to observe). After the lesson, the group discuss their findings in a colloquium or panel discussion. Typically the teachers who planned the lesson focus on their rationale for how they planned the lesson and their evaluation of how it went, particularly focusing on student learning. The planning group then reconvene to review the lesson and revise it, and a different teacher then teaches it to a different class.

The cycle culminates in the team publishing a report that includes lesson plans, observed student behavior, teacher reflections, and a summary of the group discussions. These are then made available to others.

Many forms of professional development can help foster the sense of a community of practice, such as reading groups, action research, team teaching, peer observation, and peer coaching. However, this may require a change in mind-set for some teachers who do not see themselves as members of a team. For others, collaboration can be seen as a source of strength that can have valuable personal as well as practical benefits. Making the transition from seeing oneself as a self-contained independent individual to seeing oneself as a member of a community of practice is an important component of the shaping of teacher identity and an important milestone in professional development.

# 10

## *Professionalism*

English language teaching is not something that anyone who can speak English can do. It is a profession, which means that English teaching is seen as a career in a field of educational specialization, it requires a specialized knowledge base obtained through both academic study and practical experience, and it is a field of work where membership is based on entry requirements and standards. The professionalism of English teaching is seen in the growth industry devoted to providing language teachers with professional training and qualifications; in continuous attempts to develop standards for English language teaching and for English language teachers; to the proliferation of professional journals and teacher magazines, conferences, and professional organizations; to requirements for English teachers to demonstrate their level of proficiency in English as a component of certification; to the demand for professional qualifications for native-speaker teachers; and to the greater level of sophisticated knowledge of language teaching required of English teachers. Becoming an English language teacher means becoming part of a worldwide community of professionals with shared goals, values, discourse, and practices but one with a self-critical view of its own practices and a commitment to a transformative approach to its own role.

There are two different dimensions to professionalism (Leung 2009). The first can be called institutionally prescribed professionalism – a managerial approach to professionalism that represents the views of ministries of education, teaching organizations, regulatory bodies, school principals, and so on that specify what teachers are expected to know and what constitutes quality teaching practices. There are likely to be procedures for achieving accountability and processes in place to maintain quality teaching. Such specifications are likely to differ from country to country. This aspect of professionalism involves becoming familiar with the standards the profession sets for membership and a desire to attain those standards. Such standards involve acquiring the qualifications the profession recognizes as evidence of professional competence, as well as demonstrating a commitment to attaining high standards in our work, whether it be as classroom teachers, supervisors, administrators, or teacher trainers.

The second dimension to professionalism is what Leung calls independent professionalism, which refers to teachers' own views of teaching and the processes by which teachers engage in reflection on their own values, beliefs, and practices. A key to long-term professional development is the ability to be



able to reflect consciously and systematically on one's teaching experiences. Reflection means asking questions like these about one's teaching:

1. What kind of teacher am I?
2. What am I trying to achieve for myself and for my learners?
3. What are my strengths and limitations as a language teacher?
4. How do my students and colleagues view me?
5. How and why do I teach the way I do?
6. How have I developed as a teacher since I started teaching?
7. What are the gaps in my knowledge?
8. What role do I play in my school, and is my role fulfilling?
9. What is my philosophy of teaching, and how does it influence my teaching?
10. What is my relationship with my colleagues, and how productive is it?
11. How can I mentor less experienced teachers?

There are many ways in which teachers can engage in critical and reflective review of their own practices throughout their teaching career (see Richards and Lockhart 1994; Richards and Farrell 2005), for example, through the analysis of critical incidents, teacher support groups, journal writing, discussion groups, action research, and portfolios. Reflection involves both looking back at teaching experiences as well as looking forward and setting goals for new or changed directions. Dewey (1933) suggested three attributes that can facilitate the processes of reflective thinking: *open-mindedness*, *responsibility*, and *wholeheartedness*. Open-mindedness is a desire to listen to more than one side of an issue and to give attention to alternative views. Responsibility means careful consideration of the consequences to which an action leads. And wholeheartedness implies overcoming fears and uncertainties to allow critical evaluation of one's practice in order to make meaningful change.

## *Conclusions*

In this paper, in trying to describe the nature of competence and performance in language teaching, I have attempted to realize a somewhat ambitious agenda. And any attempt to characterize the nature of quality, expertise, professionalism, or effectiveness in language teaching is liable to the charge of different kinds of bias, since such an attempt is bound to reflect understandings that are shaped by culture, by context, by individual belief and preference, as well as by limitations in our present state of knowledge. These limitations, however, should not prevent us from reflecting on the beliefs and assumptions that shape the way we understand the nature of teacher knowledge and teacher development for language teachers. For when we do so we are in a better position to assess the goals of language teacher education, as well as the means by which we seek to achieve them.

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In *Competence and Performing in Language Teaching*, Jack C. Richards discusses what language teachers need to know and do to be effective classroom practitioners and language teaching professionals. By exploring the knowledge, beliefs, and skills that exemplary language teachers consistently make use of – focussing on ten core dimensions of language teaching expertise and practice – Jack C. Richards helps conceptualize the nature of competence, expertise, and professionalism in language teaching.

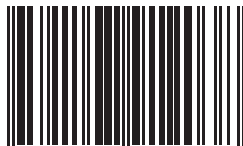


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