

## THE "THEORETICAL PRACTICE" OF AN ENRICHING MULTILINGUALISM: WELL, DUH

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### **Introduction**

Public school teachers who teach English as a Second Language (ESL) in southern Illinois typically go from school to school pulling a couple low-English proficient (LEP) students out of their regular classrooms for a few hours of language instruction each week. A given school district can have LEP students with dozens of different native languages, making a truly bilingual program impossible. There may be only a few students at any one school in need of ESL services. The teachers who work with these students are isolated from each other, from the schools in which they teach irregularly, and from scholarship in the discipline of language teaching. Many do not even have degrees or certification in teaching ESL, again limiting them from developing a support network of language teaching professionals.

In this context, how do teachers develop a 'methodical' pedagogy? How do they make decisions regarding the relationship between theory and research in child language learning and their classroom practices? Would a support network change the way ESL teachers make their methodological decisions? These questions cannot be answered yet, but the ethnographic research project described below is beginning to produce hypotheses.

The problems of teaching English as a Second Language in this area are not unique – immigration patterns across the country lead to similar situations, where school districts have small numbers of LEP students at any one school. The research literature in this field (discussed below) is calling for solutions to these problems. If it can be shown that a collaborative support network can qualitatively affect these teachers' pedagogical decisions, then the significance would be even broader and deeper.

### **Related literature**

In the field of language teaching, the topic of teacher development through action research is 'hot.' The latest issue of *TESOL Quarterly* (Autumn 1998) is devoted almost entirely to this topic. This recent interest is aimed at answering a primary question, as Crookes (1998:6) asks it: "How can research in second language acquisition (SLA) become more relevant and accessible to practicing teachers?" An important concern is "whether the professional conditions of [second and foreign language] teachers limit the relevance and accessibility of research" (8). It is not the case simply that research needs to change to meet the demands of teachers – but that the education and professional development of teachers needs to change to make research and theory more relevant. How can this be done?

Crookes sees action research as both a mode of inquiry for investigating this question, and a partial answer to it. "The action research movement, with its concern for locally generated

solutions to problems, is, in my view, the ideal vehicle to bring together such terms as *professional growth, curriculum development, course evaluation, and program self-study...*" (8). Crooks argues for these action research projects to bridge universities and schools, to build partnerships which can "strengthen the relationship between the teachers and academics involved and aid in the uptake of research" (8). When teacher action research is qualitative and critical, "it can take teachers from solving immediate technical problems to jointly investigating and ameliorating the sociopolitical pressures that prevent them from having professional working conditions" (8-9).

Along similar lines, Dong (1998) describes how student teachers in ESL work in an isolating, disempowering environment. "This geographical isolation is exacerbated by the anxiety, confusion, and frustration beginning teachers often feel due to lack of adequate support and resources" (26). To address these concerns, Dong proposes support networks similar to the one being proposed here. Dong looked at evidence for peer help in these networks in dialogue journal writing and responding. The teachers kept journals related to their teaching experiences which their supervisor would read and write responses to. Other recent research has been interested in how teachers develop their own personal pedagogical principles (Borg 1998). Borg primarily used observations and interviews to collect data on a single teacher's practice. The ethnographic research project now being piloted will use dialogue journals, observations, and interviews to discover how teachers develop their pedagogical principles within and without collaborative networks.

Related to the work on 'personal pedagogical principles,' there has been a general debate in the field of language teaching regarding the traditional distinction between 'theory' and 'practice.' As a result of this debate there has been a re-orientation of the relationship between theory and practice which was most famously discussed in Clarke's (1994) paper suggesting the traditional distinction between the two be dismissed completely because of the power relations they imply between teacher and researchers. More recently, Schlessman (1997), responding to Johnson (1996), argues against seeing the two as oppositional: "One problem with these terms for our work as L2 [second language] teacher educators is that they reinforce problematic dualisms between what we think and what we do" (775). She avoids the dualism entirely by talking about "the intelligent experience of teacher education," the ways teachers create knowledge about their practice from experience in the classroom.

However, there is a danger of concluding that, as Edge and Richards (1998: 571) put it, "theory is somehow irrelevant to the day-to-day business of teaching." Such a conclusion would not benefit the professionalization of language teaching. An alternative is what Edge and Richards have termed "theorising practice," and has elsewhere been termed 'praxis' (see Carr and Kemmis 1986). Teacher education should perhaps be thought of as a process of knowledge-making, rather than transmission. Teachers develop theoretical knowledge related to their classroom experiences. This theoretical knowledge is in part 'their own' and in part a result of their informed consumption of the theories of 'experts.' The overall objective of this research project is to find out exactly how that process works – and how it can be facilitated.

Lastly, it is my desire that the collaborative focus on the question of how to build on the strengths which children bring into a multilingual ESL classroom. These strengths include first

language competence, cultural ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll and Greenberg 1990), and perhaps literacy. Reacting to the multilingual nature of ESL classrooms, Putney and Wink (1998) call for “teachers to work creatively to make their classroom content accessible for all students” (29). Putney and Wink, Faltis (1993) and Dixon and Nessel (1992) provide a rich source of possibilities for such a classroom. The questions I pose to teachers about their practice tend to relate to this issue.

### An On-Going Case Study

A few months ago I was meeting with a group of students/teachers discussing readings for our class on K-12 ESL methods. I made the comment that for people with experience in elementary schools, the readings should be familiar. One student, M., commented: “That’s what I’ve been thinking about all along – ‘well, duh.’” This comment has come to embody for me a certain view of the relationship between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ for developing teachers. For M., who I will be discussing here as a case study, what we were reading in class largely validated what she already knew from experience. The issues that we were addressing were already a part of her “theorizing practice,” or praxis. With M. and other practicing teachers, my goal is to uncover the mechanisms of this theorizing practice.

M. is working on her degree in elementary education and also working on Illinois state approval in ESL. Her practice teaching placements have been in a largely Hispanic pre-K program and a multilingual pullout elementary setting. As examples of the type of collaborative investigation I’m working on with her, below are some examples of our observation journal interaction, and M.’s observation of other teachers and how she’s learned from them.

I wrote the following notes after observing M. in the pre-K classroom, which was about 50% Hispanic:

#### Observation notes for M.

1:13 You go over to a girl, who begins crying, and speak Spanish with her. “Rojo? It’s red isn’t it?” You use a lot of Spanish to calm her, and to present English structures and give directions.

1:50 You are playing in the oatmeal, modeling appropriate oatmeal behavior. You speak mostly in English, but give praise to some children in Spanish.

2:05 During circle time, you ask questions about the book in English and in Spanish. You also give a lot of control directives in Spanish.

Why do you use so much Spanish? What do you see yourself using it for? What is your goal for L1 and L2 language proficiency?

My observations are intended to be as descriptively ‘neutral’ as possible, though M. is quite aware of my biases toward L1 use in the classroom. The questions are not

intended to have right or wrong answers, though M. sometimes interprets them in that way. I am as interested in how she comes to her formulate her answers as in the precise nature of their content.

**M.'s response**

As an educator, I believe I should use all available resources to reach and teach children. This is why I use so much Spanish. For me Spanish is an asset when trying to teach the children in this particular class.

In the case of the crying child, it makes more sense to me to comfort her and redirect her using words she can understand. This was not the time to teach an English lesson, but rather a time for her to learn school is a place with people who will help her and support her through new experiences.

In the case of the oatmeal, I was trying to accomplish three different things. By using English to describe what was happening at the oatmeal table, I was providing vocabulary for all of the children at the table. By praising the Spanish-speaking children in Spanish, I was attempting to keep them a part of the "discussion." It is easy to tune out what you don't understand. I was also working on getting the children from both languages to communicate with one another.

By using Spanish and English with the Spanish speakers, I am able to teach content (yes, there is content at the pre-K level) and provide English vocabulary for that content area. I completely disagree with [a well-known ESL expert]'s statement that we are cheating children by using a child's native language to give explanations and directions. We try many approaches to help native speakers understand. Why wouldn't we do the same for ESL children?

M.'s response reveals a couple important aspects of how she theorizes her practice. For one, it is clear how a personal belief system controls her decision-making. She doesn't use Spanish in the classroom merely because some authority tells her it's right, but because she deeply believes it is right. A second point to be made about her response is that she displays an oppositional relationship to 'expertise.' The one time when she does refer to an ESL authority it is to criticize them.

Following a second observation in the same classroom, I again give M. written responses and asked her some questions. One question related to how she conducted a circle-time activity related to fire safety. I asked her why she wrote down some safety rules the children called out, and why she wrote them in English. Her response follows:

**M.'s response:** Allowing the children to see their words in print helps to make the connection of spoken language with written language. It also places value on their words and the words of others. This is a pre-literacy activity. Ideally I would have written the Spanish speakers' words in Spanish as well as English. Unfortunately, they were getting wiggly. When I did the individual activity, I did write their words in both languages.

Her response reveals decision making guided by the complex interplay of personal beliefs and the exigencies of the present moment.

M. wrote a paper for our K-12 methods class in which she described a classroom she had observed. She concludes:

I was extremely impressed with this class. There is a predictable routine that moves quickly enough to keep the students interested. The teacher focuses on skills which will help the students be successful in their regular classroom. The content studied may be different but it is relevant and it is used to teach necessary learning skills. She previews materials to prepare them for their regular class. She presents literature that they can handle and presents reading as an interesting and valuable thing. She also supports the home language, reminding them to practice reading in Spanish. I think this teacher's instincts are excellent. She is serving this group's needs quite well.

This description demonstrates how she relates to other teachers' practices: they are models to the extent that they match with her personal belief system. Below is another example of how she views another teacher's practice.

I observed M. in a different classroom where she didn't speak the children's native languages, and asked her the question: How do you feel now about working with children whose native languages you do not know? Do you do anything to incorporate the children's L1s? She responded:

**M's response:** I have found because there are so many languages represented that it is just a necessity to speak English. I find myself explaining things more in English to get my point across where at [the earlier school], I would have just said it in Spanish. I am learning from [the cooperating teacher] to ask the children questions that allow them to talk about their culture. "Are there frogs in Egypt?" etc.

The example above demonstrates how M. reforms her practice through experience, confronting a new situation that challenges her existing practice. She is able to create, with the help of a cooperating teacher, new practices and beliefs in support of those practices.

## Conclusions

Based on the preceding description of the work M. and I are doing together, some tentative conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between theory and practice in language teaching, and about collaborative ESL teacher networks.

- Theory is a common language for explaining what we (teachers) do. Without the language of theory, it is impossible to talk about what we do.
- For teachers, theoretical knowledge is circumscribed by practice, not the other way around. As Schlessman (1997) argues, the two are not oppositional. However, nor are the terms irrelevant to a critical discussion of teaching.
- A 'theoretical practice' in language teaching should be the goal of teacher education, not 'theory, then practice.' As Edge and Richards (1998) point out, this orientation doesn't make theory irrelevant; it actually takes on a new relevance.
- Collaborative ESL teacher networks can bring a teacher's theories to conscious awareness and examination. Following the research methods of Dong (1998) and Borg (1998), I am discovering how observation and dialogue journals between teachers provide an opportunity to critically address teacher belief systems.
- Such networks can provide a new way of 'consuming' theory and research, as Crooks (1998) argues. For example, the action research that M. and I are engaged in is a perfect context for our discussion and use of theory and research related to child bilingual development.

I hope to build on this project with M. and others not discussed here to uncover more specific processes related to a 'theorizing practice' that can inform teacher education programs, teaching praxis, and research.

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