AN INNOVATION IN TEACHER LEARNING: INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF TEACHING ESOL

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Abstract

Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching is a course in the MA in Language Teaching programme at The University of Auckland. The course aims to introduce participants to concepts and issues in sociolinguistics which are relevant to their lives as prospective or practising language teachers. One component of the assessment is an assignment which requires students to investigate in the form of a small-scale research project an aspect of language teaching in its social context. In this article we provide details of the course and the assignment, and we describe an attempt to make the planning, the conducting and the writing-up of the investigation a collaborative effort. The development of a collaborative approach in research and assignment writing is the focus of this article. The aim of the investigation was to explore, using a short, anonymous questionnaire, practising ESOL teachers' perspectives of the relationship between selected social context factors and their teaching. We include in this report a brief overview of the results of the study, and we end with a discussion of the successes and shortcomings of the innovation.

Introduction

The teaching of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) is a growing field in New Zealand, as in other parts of the world. This country has a long history of admitting refugees and other migrants for whom some ESOL provision is made both in state-funded institutions and in smaller community and church-based organizations. The last decade or so has also seen a dramatic increase in the numbers of international students coming to New Zealand (mostly to Auckland) to learn English and complete tertiary courses. Providing education for these international students is now a boom industry worth over $1.14 billion annually (Gamble & Reid, 2002).

This scenario provided the back-drop for a collaborative research project conducted as part of the assessment requirements for a Master's degree course in language teaching at The University of Auckland. The course, *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching*, makes links between aspects of sociolinguistics and language education, and the assignment aimed to introduce the ten students on the course to sociolinguistic research methods and to promote a better understanding of the relationship between language teaching and social context; an understanding which in recent years has been foregrounded in approaches to teacher education (Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Richards, 1998). In this article, we[1] provide details of the course and the assignment, describe the process of collaboratively carrying out the research project, report on some of the results of the study, and discuss the successes and shortcomings of the innovation.

The course

The *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching* course was an elective course in the Master's degree in language teaching, and was being offered for the second time[2]. The aims and outcomes of the course were as follows (see Table 1):

Course aim: to introduce participants to concepts and issues in sociolinguistics which are relevant to their lives as prospective or practising language teachers.

Course outcomes: By the end of the course students should:

1. have gained an understanding of basic sociolinguistic concepts.
2. be able to explore and critically evaluate sociolinguistic issues relevant to the lives of language teachers.
3. be aware of the connections between language and language teaching/learning, classroom life and the broader socio-political context.

Table 1: Aims and outcomes of the *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching* course.

Assessment requirements and aims

Students were required to complete two assignments: a review of a research-based article (30%) and a research project (70%). Our concern in this article is with the second of these. During the first running of the course, the students were also required to carry out a research project. Each student in the class was given the same research question (different from the one the following semester), but were required to collect and analyse data independently, and to write-up their own research reports. Although clear instructions were given for the assignment and plenty of guidance was given in class, many of the students struggled to engage with the research in a meaningful way, and the quality of their work reflected this: in some cases, the research designs were inappropriate, thin data were inadequately analysed, and the reports were poorly organized.

In order to counter these difficulties, the lecturer decided that the research assignment for the second running of the course would be a more collaborative process; in other words, the class would work together on some aspects of the project. Johnson (2002) proposes that embedded in any second language teacher education programme should be a set of tools which enables teachers to apply what they learn in one context to another. The set of tools she recommends is the

"recognition that the professional development of teachers is a collaborative effort, a reflective process, a situated experience and, a theorizing opportunity" (p. 1). Each of these tools was introduced into planning, conducting and writing-up the research project. Students were required to carry out a research project with the following title: *The social context of English teaching: ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teachers' perspectives*. This assignment topic was not presented to the students as a given. Instead, it was generated after much discussion among all class members. We wanted the research topic to be interesting, relevant to the lives of the students (most of whom were already practising teachers), and compatible with the course aims and outcomes. Even at the stage of topic selection, then, the work was collaborative. Knezevic and Scholl (1996, p. 79) state that "collaboration is a powerful vehicle for exposing and developing knowledge of teaching". Through the collaborative process students not only spread responsibilities for planning and conducting the research, they also learn about each others' teaching contexts and experiences. The locus of teacher learning, then, shifted from within the individual student to all contributing participants in the research assignment.

The aim of the study was to investigate, using a short, anonymous questionnaire, practising ESOL teachers' perspectives of the relationship between selected social context factors and their teaching. Specifically, the questions covered three broad areas (which we called themes):

1 New Zealand culture, including the history of New Zealand

2 New Zealand language-in-education planning, including policies in practice

3 Language learners and social identity, including migrant populations and their languages/cultures.

These three areas reflected most of what was covered in the course. Participants (the respondents) would be asked to reflect on these topics in relation to their own teaching practice, and it was hoped that the findings would provide insights into how and why they take account of social context in what they do in the language classroom. The research question, therefore, created the opportunity for the students to view teaching and teacher learning as situated experiences (see Johnson, 2002). In other words, by making connections between the focus themes, the contexts of their own teaching experiences and the teaching contexts of the research participants, the students were able to recognise some of the "constraints, resources, opportunities, and possibilities of the contexts" (Johnson, 2002, p. 8) where language teaching takes place.

In addition, doing the assignment would give the students the opportunity to engage in sociolinguistic research, research methodology being a central component of the course[3]. Freeman (1998) and Wright (1992) both stress the importance of teacher inquiry and research in language teacher education programmes. This view represents a move away from the traditional approaches to teacher education, which in a top-down fashion "present best practices for teachers to understand and imitate in their teaching" (Crandall, 2000, p. 35), towards more constructivist approaches which require teachers to initiate and be responsible for their own teacher learning. The research assignment, therefore, provided the students with a theorizing opportunity (Johnson, 2002, p. 8): "knowledge produced out of teachers' own lived realities as professionals".

Carrying out the project

Planning the assignment and carrying out the research involved a number of different, but related, activities:

The class members agreed that the research should consist of a relatively short questionnaire of ten items prefaced by a number of introductory questions of a demographic nature. Each item consisted of a statement which was responded to in two ways: (1) a quantitative response, where respondents ticked one of five boxes ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree; and (2) a qualitative response, where space was made available for respondents to write a comment (see Table 2 below for the 10 statements). In small groups, the class brainstormed possible items to include in the questionnaire, each group working with one of the three theme areas of the project outlined above. The lecturer then selected three items to address each of themes 1 and 3, and four items to address theme 2.

Each class member (including the lecturer) distributed two questionnaires to ESOL teachers in Auckland. There was some discussion relating to how respondents should be selected. Should they all be primary/secondary school teachers, or teachers of adults? And then within these categories, should they have similar levels of experience, be native or non-native English speakers, be male or female, or be randomly selected? Theoretical answers to these questions were easy enough to find, but logistically (e.g. all students doing equal amounts of work), solutions were harder to find. In the end we agreed simply to leave it up to individual class members to find two respondents from their own institution or otherwise, as long as they were ESOL teachers. A truly representative sample (in terms of, for example, age, gender, work experience, qualifications, work situation and so on),

therefore, was not selected. However, we felt that given the parameters of the research (a class assignment) the design was appropriate.

We agreed to encourage respondents to write a comment for each statement in order to make the data as rich as possible. Twenty-one questionnaires were completed and copies of the full data-set were distributed to each class member in order to write up a report. With regard to the demographic questions and the quantitative data, analysis consisted of straightforward tabulation of frequencies. The written comments, however, proved more difficult to analyse. For each item we looked for recurring themes, counted these and also searched for emerging patterns within and between these themes. In the summary discussion of the results below, therefore, the responses to two or more items are sometimes discussed jointly if the findings appear to signify a particular pattern.

Once the students received their own data set, they started the analysis. Some students chose to do this by themselves, but others decided to work together either to compare their independently conducted analyses or to share the workload. During each class we spent time asking and answering questions regarding the analysis and writing-up process.

While the data collection and analysis were underway, students were required to submit their first piece of writing: the literature review. The review covered the three topic themes mentioned above. Word limits were specified and guidance as to how to write a literature review was given in class. Students were also encouraged to visit the university's Student Learning Centre to obtain further support there. The lecturer supplied a list of suggested readings and discussed the merits and relevance of these. Further sharing of readings among class members was also suggested and did take place. Although the review submission counted 20%, it was considered to be a draft, which was to be revised before submitting it as part of the final research report (70%).

Another major part of the preparation consisted of oral presentations (10%). Each student was responsible for one of the items on the questionnaire (fortunately, there were 10 students and 10 items), and was required to give a 10-12 minute presentation on the following: what the question was actually asking; possible responses and reasons for these; and, what was said (if anything) about the topic relating to that item in the literature. The presentations activity achieved its aims extremely well: (1) Students prepared their own topic in depth by reading the relevant literature, analysing the meaning of the actual item, and reflecting on possible answers. (2) The audience benefited by obtaining information related to the other 9 items, especially in the form of well-

documented and referenced hand-outs which were distributed at each presentation. (3) Question time followed each presentation during which further discussion clarified issues for both presenter and audience.

Findings of the research project

The following sections provide a summary of some of the findings of the project. The purpose of the summary is to demonstrate the interesting and suggestive nature of some of the findings (notwithstanding the noted shortcomings of the actual research design). Such findings certainly helped to inform the students in the class about the social context of ESOL teaching, and to provide them with further data to stimulate professional reflection (see Kleinfield, 1992).

Demographic and quantitative findings

Respondents had been teachers of English from 4-32 years, with the average length being 9.4 years. They taught in primary schools (1 respondent), secondary school (3), university (6), and private language schools (11). 14 were female and 7 were male. The following are the languages they first learned as a child: English (14), Spanish (1), Mandarin (2), Samoan (1), Tongan (2), Telugu, Hindi and English (1). 7 respondents were born in New Zealand and 14 were born outside the country. The latter were born in: USA (2), South Africa (3), India (1), Mexico (1), Malaysia (2), China (1), Samoa (1), Australia (1) and Tonga (2). On average the respondents had lived in New Zealand for 6.9 years, and 10 of the 21 have lived here for 3 years or less.

The quantitative responses to the 10 statements are given in Table 2. An analysis of this data in conjunction with the more qualitative comments suggested that in some instances the hard statistics alone did not give a wholly accurate picture. As just one example, some respondents ticked *Strongly Disagree* to indicate that they were not aware of national planning activities (see Question 5), while others ticked *Neither Agree nor Disagree* to make exactly the same point. Thus, the quantitative data alone should be treated with an element of caution, while still being indicative of many of the trends produced by the research. A brief discussion of the qualitative comments relating to each item follows.

Question	SA[a]	A	NAD	D	SD
In my ESOL classes I teach NZ English (e.g. vocabulary, idiom, pronunciation)	5	7	6	3	0
ESOL teaching in my institution is governed by an institutional language-in-education policy	1	6	9	4	1
In my ESOL classes, I give learners the opportunity to talk about their own cultures and countries	15	6	0	0	0
International students who come to NZ to learn English should be taught the same ESOL content as NESB students who live in NZ	2	6	4	6	3
I am aware of language-in-education planning activities that are taking place at national (governmental) level.	3	5	4	5	4
One aim of ESOL classes for migrants is to teach them how to assimilate easily into NZ society	6	10	1	1	2
Aspects of Maori culture and history are specifically taught in my ESOL classes	2	7	5	5	2
In my classes, I have a personal policy concerning the use of languages other than English	8	11	0	2	0
During speaking tasks in my classes, learners of the same ethnic background are separated as much as possible	5	8	3	1	2
Not having a national languages policy in NZ is detrimental to ESOL provision in NZ	6	6	6	3	0

Table 2: Quantitative data.
[a.] SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neither Agree nor Disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree.

Qualitative findings and discussion

It is possible to make the following very general statements about the 21 respondents based on their answers to the introductory questions. On average they have a little over 9 year's ESOL teaching experience, most work in private language schools and universities and only 4 in primary or secondary state schools. The majority are women and were not born in New Zealand. Over half the respondents learned English as their first language, and those who were not born in New Zealand tended to come from countries where English was the dominant or a significant second language. A number of these points appear to be significant and will be returned to when discussing the respondents' answers to specific items.

New Zealand culture, including the history of New Zealand

In general, the responses to questions 1, 4 and 7 drew a wide range of comments from respondents. Here, and in the following two sections, representative themes relating to each statement will be given with comments and an indication of how many times the theme was mentioned.

1 (*In my ESOL classes I teach NZ English (e.g. vocabulary, idiom, pronunciation)*):
- Language is inseparable from culture (x6).
- NZE as a variety is not so distinct that it requires a highly focussed syllabus (x5).

- Depends on needs of the students; International students need less NZ content; migrants are different (x2).

Most respondents seem to have generally positive views regarding the teaching of NZE (only three *Disagree*), and support this by claiming that language cannot be divorced from the culture in which it is used. Therefore in New Zealand, NZE should be taught. However, the respondents do seem to have a number of reservations about NZE. Five of them echo the findings of Bayard (1999) that NZE is not sufficiently distinct as a dialect to require a heavy focus in class.

4 *International students who come to NZ to learn English should be taught the same ESOL content as NESB students who live in NZ*):

- They have (some) different needs (x11).
- All English is basically the same, so ESOL content should be the same (x7).

A similar divergence of views is noticeable with regard to the needs of different language learners. Eleven respondents recognised that learners have different needs while seven of them argued that all English is basically the same so ESOL content should not vary.

7 *Aspects of Maori culture and history are specifically taught in my ESOL classes*:

- It is taught in special classes, not general English, or it is taught incidentally (x7).
- It helps learners understand NZ society and/or we have a strong commitment to the Treaty (x4).

A range of views (see the spread of responses in Table 1) was expressed regarding the teaching of Maori history and culture. Four respondents strongly agreed with the statement, citing their belief that Maori culture would help learners understand New Zealand society and/or their strong commitment to the Treaty. A number of others, however, wanted to qualify their answers by saying that it was taught in specific classes only, or incidentally, or that they taught aspects of many cultures, including Maori, Pacific Island, Asian and European.

New Zealand language-in-education planning, including policies in practice

In general, the respondents' answers to questions 2, 5 and 10 reinforce many of the themes highlighted in the literature relating to language planning in New Zealand, namely, that it is poorly organised (see Benton, 1996; Kaplan, 1994; Paulston & McLaughlin, 1993; Peddie, 1997). These three questions will therefore be discussed together. Question 8 has a slightly different focus and will be discussed individually.

2. *ESOL teaching in my institution is governed by an institutional language-in-education policy*:

- There is no such (explicit) policy in my institution (x8).

- Teaching should be designed with students and community needs in mind, not a prescribed institutional policy (x5).
- No, but many of my colleagues have a shared understanding of what we are trying to do (x2).

5 *I am aware of language-in-education planning activities that are taking place at national (governmental) level*:

- I'm not aware of policy and/or I'm unclear about this question (x13).
- Better teacher training would be as beneficial as a national plan (x1).

10 *Not having a national languages policy in NZ is detrimental to ESOL provision in NZ*:

- It would ensure consistency of coverage/methodology and/or recognise the status of minority languages (x8).
- Don't know much about it (x7).
- Well-trained teachers are more important than national policy (x2).
- It doesn't seem to have hindered the ESOL industry (x1).

Few respondents held strong views on institutional language-in-education policy, most claiming that their institution had no such policy. Similarly, 13 respondents replied that they were not aware of national level language-in-education planning in New Zealand and 7 admitted they knew little about a national languages policy. However, a number of respondents expressed reservations about the role that external policy should play in the classroom.

8 *In my classes, I have a personal policy concerning the use of languages other than English*:

- English only, but occasional translation is OK (x9).
- English only, this is a personal and/or institutional policy (x4).
- Students are free to use the language of their choice (x1).

In contrast, support for a personal policy concerning use of languages other than English in the classroom was overwhelming. As many as 19 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with an English-only policy, although 9 respondents qualified their answers by stating that they recognised their learners' rights to speak their own languages and merely *encouraged* the use of 'English only'.

Language learners and social identity

In general, the answers to questions 3 and 9 are characterised by high levels of agreement among the 21 respondents. Question 6 also met with strong support.

 # 3. *In my ESOL classes, I give learners the opportunity to talk about their own cultures and countries*:

- This topic is good for generating interesting conversation between students and/or it empowers the learners (x14).
- It provides a genuine communication gap so an opportunity for real communication (x2).

 # 9. *During speaking tasks in my classes, learners of the same ethnic background are separated as much as possible*:

- It allows a better exchange of ideas and students are less likely to speak their L1 (x7).
- I want students to value each other as individuals and/or they should be free to sit where like (x2).

The respondents were unanimous in their support for giving learners the opportunity to talk about their own cultures. Indeed, the findings for this item are the most one-sided of those returned by the questionnaire, and this should be no surprise. This practice is the foundation stone of the RSA/Cambridge CTEFLA (the core qualification that most private language schools require of their staff). Similarly, the questionnaire returned generally strong support for the principle of separating learners from the same ethnic background during class, though the rationale for doing so varied. Some thought it helped prevent the use of languages other than English while others preferred the notion that it created a genuine communication gap in the classroom and thus the need for real communication.

 # 6 *One aim of ESOL classes for migrants is to teach them how to assimilate easily into NZ society*:

- Yes, because basic English will help them to survive in NZ (x12).
- An assimilation programme is detrimental to the self-esteem of any person and/or assimilation should occur naturally if at all (x4).

The respondents seem to be almost as unanimous in their support for the idea that ESOL classes should seek to assimilate immigrants into New Zealand society. Only 4 respondents challenged this assumption, on the grounds, for example, that assimilation turned teachers into agents of the state and was detrimental to the self-esteem of any individual.

Conclusion: Successes and limitations

The research described in this paper was conducted as a class assignment and was thus obviously limited in scope. Nevertheless, a number of the themes apparent in the literature on the social context of ESOL provision in New Zealand were reflected in the findings. For example, the lack of coordinated language planning in this country at national level is repeated at institutional level and that, not surprisingly, teachers are generally not well informed on issues relating to planning.

Likewise, perhaps reflecting this same point, there is little consensus regarding the extent to which New Zealand English and Maori culture should feature in ESOL programmes.

The findings also indicate that teachers do not regularly and systematically reflect on the social context of their teaching and their students' learning. Respondents' comments such as "Haven't thought about it", "No knowledge of this", "Not sure", "I have no idea" and "What is NZ English?", peppered throughout the data, are evidence of this. There is perhaps too much emphasis, in their training and their practice, on delivery, methodology and skills, at the expense of the broader picture - the social lives of their students both inside and outside the ESOL classroom.

The findings of the study, however, should be treated with caution. A number of limitations in research design and scope are easily noticeable, mainly due to constraints such as assignment deadlines, limited contact time in class and outside, access to ESOL institutions and their teachers, research experience of students, and no time for piloting the questionnaire:

- The three topic themes which make up the 10 items cover too many aspects of the social context, and perhaps seem disconnected. We aimed to cover most of the topics covered in the course, but with hindsight this was perhaps too ambitious.
- Some of the vocabulary and concepts used in the items may have been ambiguous or may have meant different things to different respondents; e.g. 'ESOL content' (Question 4), 'assimilate' (Question 6) and 'specifically taught' (Question 7).
- The respondents came mainly from private language schools. This led to the invisibility of the views of teachers in primary/secondary schools and university contexts. A replication of the study would need to take these concerns into consideration.

The major achievement of the study, despite the research design limitations, is the role it played in stimulating reflection and discussion of the topic under investigation among the students in the *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching* course. The time spent in class planning the project, the oral presentations and the related question-answer sessions, and the dialogue between the lecturer and students in producing the review of the literature all resulted in a considerable amount of time being spent on the assignment. The process also contributed to the sharing of ideas and the spreading of responsibilities among all class members. Furthermore, because it was a collaborative research project/assignment, it increased the amount of data that could be collected (Wallace, 1998). This too gave the students the chance to 'hear more teacher voices' than if they had carried out their own smaller-scale projects.

Finally, as a course assignment we believe that this piece of research was successful because students had the opportunity to examine a number of questions which were central to the course; that is, not just to read about them, but to hear what actual teachers in real schools had to say about them. The research design may have been somewhat constrained to fit the scope and requirements of a course assignment, but it nevertheless gave students a taste of and practice in sociolinguistic-educational research, and also produced some findings which are not only interesting in their own right, but which, in the New Zealand context, certainly call for further investigation.

Notes:

1. Gary Barkhuizen was the lecturer on the course and Miles Horden was one of the students.
2. The course has since become a core course, offered as an alternative to *Discourse Analysis*.
3. We call the assignment a *research* project despite the fact that the scope of the investigation was somewhat small-scale and that there were limitations to both research design and implementation. More appropriate terms might be an *inquiry* or an *investigation*, but we feel that they do not sufficiently capture the spirit and challenge of the endeavour, which was to participate in a collaborative project which involved collecting a data-set, analysing it and interpreting it in order to experience first-hand, however limited, the difficulties and successes of answering selected sociolinguistic research questions.

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