

CURRENT CONCERNS

Local and International

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A recent survey of teachers working with second language learners, mainly in the Auckland area, highlighted a number of concerns. These are summarised and linked with some current international talking-points in the profession.

What concerns our profession?

There is no shortage of writing on the topic of what concerns ESOL teachers internationally. The term 'the reflective teacher' was well chosen for a profession that enjoys words and is not averse to introspection. Amongst the many recent books and articles on the topic, four are from long-standing practitioners. Bin Lee (1992), a student of Daniel Jones in the mid-thirties, and Douglas Brown (1991), a previous editor of *Language Learning* both wrote on the 25th anniversary of TESOL. Wilga Rivers, whose teaching career spanned fifty years, starting in Australia and continuing in the United States was interviewed in *Language Teaching Forum*. H.H. Stern's views on Issues and Options in Language Teaching have been published posthumously because the notes he left were able to be read by two of his colleagues. Others whose opinions and research findings will be referred to in this article continue to reflect on the state of the profession.

The other source of information must be local. If sensible planning is to take place and if TESOL teachers are to be taken seriously within the wider educational community, then we need to know about the concerns of those who are currently working in New Zealand classrooms with new speakers of English.

LOCAL CONCERNS

Methodology :

In a recent assignment, teachers on the Diploma in English Language Teaching surveyed the concerns of about 100 teachers of ESOL students at the primary, tertiary and adult levels. Some responses were elicited via questionnaires; others through more informal questions. The respondents included qualified ESOL teachers and other teachers working with ESOL students in general classes. Since the methods of collecting the information were deliberately varied, a report of their findings does not claim to be a statistical representation of viewpoints. There is no separation between teachers at the various levels of schooling or between ESOL and other teachers. For the

purposes of readability, three categories have been chosen: concerns relating to the learners, teacher-related concerns and finally concerns to do with the wider situation, although as will become clear, many points are interwoven..

Concerns about the learners :

Informants were frank about the negative feelings of one ethnic group to another in schools. In particular they referred to unpleasantness if the teacher was seen as spending too much time explaining points to ESOL students during class or if there was only one student in the class from a particular country. Sports were mentioned as one way of combating divisions and therefore racial prejudice, as students mixed with one another in activities of common interest. There were one or two references to political and religious differences between ethnic groups themselves.

A second student-related concern was for the situation where learners of English have failed to retain the language of the home in spoken or written contexts, yet parents feel at a disadvantage in speaking to their children in English. Monolingual teachers were frank about their own feelings of helplessness in supporting the use of the first language although they felt it was important. Bilingual teachers on the other hand described ways in which they supported first language and cultural maintenance. Students' unwillingness to ask questions was mentioned and some particular points were made about motivation. Someone mentioned a drop in effort from fee-paying students once they had been accepted onto a tertiary course, while for refugees, who were seen as strongly motivated to study, other problems could intervene relating to health, dependants and lack of money even for the bus fare to come to class. Finally, some mentioned the worry about adolescents living in NZ without adult supervision.

Teacher-related concerns :

Teachers reported concerns about methodology, their perceived role, and their own professional development. Apart from specific reference to the difficulty of teaching vocabulary and the differences between spoken and written forms of English, the main conflict was between parents' wishes (or in the case of older learners the students' own wishes) and teachers preferred approaches to teaching. They also worried about catering for many learning differences within one class. With little time allotted to long-term curriculum development, the selection of content for the so-called "ESOL English" class or the one-to-one lesson is still often determined by the teachers themselves, with little reference to what is happening for the student the rest of the day. This was not a concern for most of the teachers interviewed although a few highlighted it. By and large the choice of content seems to be done on a day-to-day or week-to-week basis. Some thought they had to choose between teaching language and teaching content.

When it came to resources, teachers seemed to make their own, although there was reference to the number of resources available with a Pacific Island theme as opposed to the few relating to the various Asian cultures.

The role or status of the teacher was mentioned. Some referred to the social work" needed for adult refugees arriving without much understanding of the local situation. In the apparent absence of other support, teachers would often play this role themselves rather than leave their students in difficult situations. There were two mentions of the status of women teachers as perceived by particular groups of male students. A general comment by teachers was their own lack of awareness of current issues, although they expressed the wish to stay abreast of these, and the lack of training by those working with ESOL students, either in terms of language methodology or cultural awareness.

Situational concerns :

The final category of concerns went beyond individual classrooms. At the level of school policy, unclear division of responsibility for the students' language development between ESOL and subject teachers in high schools can lead to the dilemma of teachers not wanting students to be withdrawn from "their" subjects, but not wanting the extra teacher to come into the classroom to assist. When students were withdrawn there was a lack of follow-through.

While subject teachers put responsibility onto the teacher variously labelled 'ESOL' or 'language support' or 'reading assistance', the latter saw the attitude of subject teachers as being at the heart of the problem. What was perceived as a lack of value for TESOL in schools arose out of this concern. More than one teacher objected to having the students classified as "special needs". Points were made about class size, a concern not limited to the second language situation, in the context of various suggestions for rationalising the assistance available to non-English speaking students in secondary schools. Funding arrangements and the lack of a cohesive central policy received mention as did equity issues. The different arrangements for permanent residents, for those awaiting permanent residence status, for refugees and for business migrants were specific examples that helped to highlight a situation familiar throughout the country. Teachers mentioned the lack of support for learners at both ends of the economic scale: the absence of interpreting and translating facilities which hinders the integration of both business migrants and refugee groups for whom language, financial and general survival worries are interwoven.

THE INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Any one of the concerns listed could be the basis of a separate article. In making some links between local concerns and what is being said by second language teachers and researchers in other countries, I have chosen three headings: the relationship between students and teachers, the demands on teachers, and concerns that go beyond the classroom or institution, since these, rather than social and political concerns dominate in the articles.

The learner-teacher relationship :

One local concern was the conflict between "how they want to be taught and how I want teach". This tug-of-war is at the heart of the learner-centredness discussion. Breen (1991:216) summarises the conflict like this. "When teacher and learners work together in order to make the situation manageable, they seek an equilibrium between what may be quite diverse implicit theories about the teaching-learning process. Although at least the teacher's set of justifications for what is done in the class might be explicitly shared, the learners will make sense of classroom activity through their own theories." What seems important about this statement is the acknowledgement that second language learners do have a theory of language learning in their minds even though it may be implicit. This is particularly the case when the learners are working at a third or fourth language. Not all teachers, on the other hand, have beliefs about language learning that are based on personal experience in childhood and adulthood. Breen continues, "What all parties undertake, however, is the gradual establishment of a structure within which cooperative endeavour can take place."

The topic of learner-centredness is approached from different viewpoints. Philosophically, it is a concept that nobody would like to attack. As Rivers suggests, "It is the student him- or herself who is going to do the learning. All you can do as a teacher is to attend to the conditions of learning and

try to channel the inner motivation of the students.. It is in discussions about how learner-centredness is worked out that differences arise. Does it mean that students choose the methodology and the learning materials and that they cooperate with the teacher in designing a course? The sort of one-to-one teaching that is done by home tutors with adults probably comes closest to this model. Tudor (1992:31) mentions "a variety of means of catering for an active and participatory role for learners within the teaching-learning continuum. The four trends he lists are the use of personal learning strategies, forms of study such as individualisation or self-direction, learner autonomy and the learner-centred curriculum. How these are interpreted varies enormously according to the teachers' understanding of the concept as much as the learners' readiness for it.

The demands on teachers :

A learner-centred approach does not make the teacher's task easier. Tudor considers that it demands three categories of skills beyond what all teachers require. First there are the specialist skills associated with needs analysis, course design and familiarity with many methods and materials. For example, one outcome of the learner-centred emphasis has been the move towards learner training. The idea that this was just one more task for teachers to fit into the curriculum has faded as teachers see that learner training happens in the context of regular language learning, not as an add-on topic. Stern (1992:260) defines learner training as "focusing attention on the reasons for learning" and "giving learners the chance to discuss what they expect to achieve".

Then there are educational skills such as an awareness of cultural, psychological and cognitive variables. It is these skills the local teachers felt they and their colleagues needed more of. Thirdly there are the personal qualities such as resilience and "openness to a shift in role-relationships. Lee (1992:9) expresses the personal qualities in this way: "... teachers do not have to pose as the only source of the language in use, but can find a less 'authoritarian' role as guides and helpers".

Some teachers in our survey were concerned about the lack of time available for curriculum development and the related, but not identical situation whereby ESOL teachers seem quite free to design their own curriculum and materials.

This lack of direction may be attended to before long in ways teachers had not foreseen when they said they felt rudderless. Silcock 1992:167, speaking of teachers' time in the National Curriculum in Britain has this to say. "It is ironic that primary-school 'child-centredness' has been attacked by the Secretary of State for Education as diverting teachers from their main role, while, at the same time, the administering of the government-devised Standard Attainment Tasks (SATs) assumes that classes of children can cope for considerable lengths of time independently of their teachers." New Zealand teachers too could soon be finding time to assess units of learning set out by others.

Wider concerns :

The Teaching of English as a Second Language in New Zealand is part of the context of everything else that is happening in this country. The teachers' references to policy and planning, to racism, to bilingualism and to families' financial problems are a mirror image of the concerns that receive daily coverage in the media. Brown (p.250) points out the need for English language programmes to keep up. Increasingly, curricula must cater to the immediate and practical needs of learners: English for numerous occupational purposes, for specific academic fields of pursuit, and English in the

workplace.” It is ironical that while many students in an EFL context are learning English for “economic and educational betterment” (McKay 1992: 31), many pre-employment courses in English-medium countries are struggling to place students at the end of a course.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Any reactions to the assorted responses provided by the local teachers is bound to be subjective. My own are summarised in the form of two questions. Why are teachers in the largest city in the country unaware of the many resources available to support language learners and language teachers? How can the gap be bridged between collective professional knowledge on the one hand and school practice on the other? Both seem to depend on access to information. Specifically, they depend on the extent to which the following are happening.

Teachers who have professional qualifications in TESOL take opportunities to contribute at general and specific teaching forums.

Local and overseas publications in the field are available in staffrooms and professional libraries.

Teachers contribute articles to publications for subject teachers as well as to ESOL journals.

Courses in TESOL are offered at many different levels and formats throughout the country to suit particular ways of studying.

University and other bookshops stock recent reading for teachers and for students.

Teachers talk about their professional reading as well as about their current practice.

Practising teachers continue to update themselves professionally by attending and contributing to conferences.

It seems appropriate to give the final word to the one who has probably been in the profession longest (Lee, p.10). “...within the language-teaching profession, it is the teachers’ own understanding and enthusiasm, and ability to establish rapport with the learners, which is the master-key to success. Outside the profession, much is liable to depend, for good or ill, on the attitudes of administrative authorities and the dicta of politicians, not always well-informed about current theory and practice.” The challenge then is to make sure first that the profession itself is well informed about theory and practice, and then to spread that information.

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