

# INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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## INTRODUCTION

Ever since the days of the Colombo Plan, there have been professional exchanges between language teachers in New Zealand and other countries in the wider region. The assumption has been that overseas teachers can benefit from courses offered in this country, and that New Zealanders sent to institutions in other countries can contribute something there. The purpose of this article is to summarise recent thinking on the subject of transferring teacher education programmes from one context to another, with reference to one particular project, and to raise questions which could form the basis of further research.

When language educators go from New Zealand to other countries, they find themselves considering their role in educational change in other people's countries. It could be said that the teaching of languages is one of many educational decisions that belong within a country and that visitors have "little right to change the ways English is taught and used" (McKay, 1992, p. 18). On the other hand, we could assume that an invitation to work in a country implies a two-way exchange. The visiting "experts" are there to suggest new approaches to language teaching at the same time as informing themselves about the range of influences (educational, political, economic, religious and ethnic) in the society where they are working, for however short a time (Pennycook, 1994, p. 305).

## WHAT SHAPES METHODOLOGY?

The teacher educator in any country needs to keep well informed about the influences on language teaching - international, societal, educational and within the school community. Language teachers on courses are likely to have their careers divided between more than one context and country.

### **International influences**

Writers point to the virtual monopoly on published received language teaching methodology by Britain, North America and Australasia, the three sources of almost all that is being written about how to teach and learn another language (Holliday, 1992, p. 11; Kachru, 1986, p. 133). People who teach in more than one country, however, are very aware that what is written is not the same as what is practised.

Why might ideas that have proved worthwhile in the parts of the world that write most about the teaching of English not work elsewhere? Part of the answer lies in the influence of the context beyond the classroom. What determines the pedagogical strategies of any teacher in a classroom anywhere in the world on a particular day depends on far more than the

individual teacher. (McKay, 1992, p. 109 ff; Pennycook, 1994, p. 295; Phillipson, 1992, p. 243; Rea-Dickins and Germaine, 1992, p. 19)

### **The influence of society**

Rea-Dickins and Germaine identify the influence of the wider society, where political, economic, religious, cultural and social factors are at play, often subject to international influences. The decisions a given society makes about what languages to teach, for what purposes and under what conditions are determined by what is going on in the world at the moment and, of course, what has gone on in the past between their own country and others where the target language is spoken.

Once broad decisions have been made, there are still the unspoken influences which are often more apparent to outsiders. The status of teachers is an example of society's influence. From my observation, in Vietnam children mirror the respect their parents and others have for teachers, and that respect makes a big difference to classroom behaviour by comparison with some classrooms in this country where much of the teachers' energy may go into keeping discipline. A well-organised classroom can give greater freedom in teaching style.

Economic factors have an effect on class sizes, resources, and even teacher morale. Cost can determine whether or not students can buy their own text books and the amount of paper available for teacher-made materials. If a particular method depends on tape recorders, a photocopier or a video player, then it will not be transferable to contexts where money is short. On the other hand if methodology is explored at a deeper level than techniques, there are basic principles which can transfer across times and countries. West, in a 1960 book *Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances*, drew on his experiences in various countries dating back to the 1930s. His suggestions could still be considered relevant for overcoming obstacles such as the overcrowded classroom, the mixed ability class, the climate and even the teacher's own command of the new language.

### **Educational authorities**

Then there is the influence of the region, the people through whom the outside influences are filtered. Educational authorities determine the resources that will be put into the teaching of languages, including the pre-service and in-service education of teachers. Before the question of appropriate methodology is answered, decisions have already been made at national levels about which languages will be taught and about how pre-service and in-service training is to be organised. In some countries decisions about text books are also made nationally. These decisions are made at a higher level than the people involved in exchanges, involving questions of "whose knowledges and cultures are given credence" (Pennycook, 1994, p. 295).

Text books, if they are determined regionally or even nationally, will be monitored by inspectors, advisers or other outside authorities. Text books determine the subject matter of the lesson, the topics through which the language is learned and practised, and to a large degree they influence methodology. National examinations are another example of the influence of authorities, determining as they often do the way a subject is taught. If oral assessment is not included in an examination, why would teachers spend time in class giving their students a chance to hear and to speak?

### **Expectations of the local community**

The closest influences on the classroom are the expectations of heads of department and the school principal. One example of expectations that differ from place to place is the teacher's role in shaping lesson details. In some places teachers are expected to choose their own examples to illustrate points in the language class. Not only are they free to go beyond the text book, but teachers who limit themselves to the book may be considered lazy or lacking in confidence. As one New Zealand secondary school student said to me about his teacher, "I can tell she's just new because she keeps looking at the book". In other countries parents, heads of department and the school principal expect teachers to look at the book right through their careers. They may have selected a text book to guide teachers and to make sure that all students have a fair deal. In this case they do not believe that the job of a teacher is to try and improve on it.

Parents also have expectations about how their children should behave in class. I was once reading a story to very young children in a New Zealand classroom when one of the parent helpers, who had newly arrived in the country leant over and hit a child over the head because he had joined in the story in a way she thought was not right. In her view the teacher should be listened to in silence, whereas I was wanting the children to join in for the chorus line of the story. In language classes with older students a similar conflict can arise if the teacher announces a discussion topic. They see the teacher as a highly respected person and certainly not one whose point of view is equal to theirs in a discussion.

Using text books and relating to the teacher are just two of many ways classroom behaviour is influenced by the immediate surroundings of school and families.

## **DECISIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATORS**

### **One context**

Vietnam is a country where once again teacher educators from Australia and New Zealand are being asked to share in the education of English language teachers. Some of the projects involve Vietnamese teachers leaving their country to study (Nixon, 1995), while others, like the one I was a part of, have teacher educators from these countries going to Vietnam for short or long periods.

In January 1993 and May 1994 I was asked to run an in-service course at the Qui Nhon Teachers' College in Quinhon, Binh Dinh Province in Central Vietnam. The two-week course was attended by school teachers of English in the Central Provinces, and by the staff of the Teachers' College. On my first visit decisions about course content and level had to be made ahead of time without a detailed knowledge of the situation, although experience lecturing at the university of Phnom Penh in the early 1970s gave me some insights, and the New Zealand VSA teacher already working there was able to make suggestions. From my two experiences, a number of ideas arose, which could be of use to others in similar situations.

### **Considerations about course design**

Any course designed before the lecturer has met the participants requires some adjustment. When the lecturer comes from another country, flexibility is even more important. Should

I present a range of ideas and leave it to the teachers to decide which were relevant to them? Another option is to decide, on the basis of whatever the lecturer knows about particular teaching situations, which ideas are certain to be used and keep the materials within those limits. The answer seemed to lie somewhere between these two points. The following account describes my attempts to make methodology transferable through shared responsibility between the visiting lecturer and local teachers.

### *Work within the existing situation*

Visiting lecturers come and go; teachers stay behind. Visitors need to keep in mind the English language teaching objectives of the local situation. During the first seminar in 1993 it became clear that, although officially the teachers fell into three categories: primary school, secondary school and the Teachers' College staff, in fact many of them went straight from these classrooms to evening classes where they taught adults who were learning English for a variety of study and business purposes. Whatever was said during the training course would be applied (or ignored) in both their teaching contexts.

The existing situation in any country or school will not be permanent. By showing teachers on the course how a modest self-access centre had been established at the Teachers' College, we showed what could be done with not much more than a spare room and a combination of donated and teacher-made resources. Although class time could not be timetabled there, the room was made available for students to go to in their own time to work individually. Senior students took turns at being on duty.

Taking the existing situation into account includes the previous language learning experience teachers bring to an in-service course. Teachers of English in Vietnam have often learned two or more languages already. Their first-hand experiences as adult language learners and teachers are a valuable resource in the training sessions.

### *Listen to course members*

The (Australian) Overseas Service Bureau (1992, p. 5) lists as the first criterion for curriculum development by visiting "experts", clarifying possible differences in expectations about the curriculum. Although they were referring to the language learning curriculum, the same principle applies to the content and format of a teachers' refresher course. In my experience negotiating the curriculum is more realistic on second visits, because the first time the lecturer is not familiar with the local situation and yet must arrive with enough materials to make the course worthwhile, and the course members do not know what the visitor has to offer. By my second visit it had been decided that the teachers' college staff would have three days on their own at the end of the course for school teachers, and we were able to set aside an hour on the first morning to negotiate a programme for the week from a "menu" suggested by them. The course content and methodology were reviewed each morning.

Listening to course members includes hearing their reservations about suggestions made by the lecturer. Concerns may be organisational, contextual, pedagogical, or even personal. When teachers hear about group work and say, "These ideas simply wouldn't work in my classroom", they may mean that with 40 children in a classroom where the furniture is fixed to the floor they cannot see how to organise it. West's "difficult circumstances" apply but, as he showed, need not be a total barrier to new ideas.



On the other hand they may think the ideas could be organised but would not fit the philosophy of the school or society, where children are supposed to learn from the teacher, not from one another. Pedagogically it may not seem sound to have students listening to one another's mistakes. There could be personal worries about how a teacher will be seen by colleagues. What if the students talk loudly? Will the teacher next door think there is no discipline? Unless there is an opportunity to talk about these reservations, then there will be no transfer from the training session to the classroom.

### *Move between general points and examples*

Another dilemma for teacher trainers is how general or how specific to be. The more general (or theoretical) our points, the less some teachers can see how to apply them, and yet the more specific the example, the less transferable it is from one classroom to another. A course needs both generalisations and examples, but the lecturer does not have to supply them all.

There will be sessions that start with a generalisation. "Students need to know that different types of writing are put together in different ways." Moving on to expand on this generalisation, the lecturer could say, "Show your class examples of different kinds of writing (a science report, a narrative, a letter) and let them learn the discourse patterns of a particular genre by working out the "rules" through your clever questioning". In this case there has been one generalisation and one example.

On another occasion the example could come first. I showed a video of a secondary school class in Australia learning to write scientific reports. From this very detailed example of one lesson I asked them to generalise about the teaching of genre writing and then return to specific examples of how they could do it in their own teaching contexts.

A third solution is for the lecturer to stay with a general point and let everyone work out examples for themselves. I found this was effective when the teachers worked in small groups discussing and illustrating points to one another. Their discussion and application showed me how relevant the message has been. If teachers cannot picture how to do something new with the support of all their colleagues, then they will find it very difficult when they are at their own schools later.

### *Include demonstration/ experiential learning*

The next step from picturing what to do is seeing it done and actually doing it. The teachers were anxious to see me giving a demonstration. Of course there are pitfalls here. One can often do a brilliant one-off lesson where the novelty makes students more involved than usual. Conversely, knowing too little about the students' level of English can make the lesson a disaster. I took up the challenge to teach one class at night and realised how carefully developed one's basic teaching skills need to be when the only equipment is a stick of chalk. Even that was no use when the power failed and the lesson continued on the balcony by the light of the moon.

In some cases I demonstrated the technique using the "fishbowl" form of organisation, where a small group of teachers came to the front and the others observed. In the following discussion we were able to have two perspectives - the observers' and the participants' - using the principle of discovery learning through these questions:

What was new about the methods?  
As a student, what did you enjoy / dislike about the lesson?  
What exactly did the teacher do?  
As a teacher, which of the methods could you imitate?  
How could you adapt that lesson for your class?

### ***Have peer teaching***

This led on to peer teaching, where course members formed groups to teach one another. Although this is time-consuming, it can be better to leave teachers with a smaller number of new ideas to try than to swamp them with information which they have to work out ways of applying later. A book of language teaching techniques could do that just as well.

### ***Use varied examples***

One general principle for introducing new ideas is to show many examples of classrooms from all over the world, and invite teachers to discuss which of the ideas would be workable in their own classes. These can be videoed or they could be printed case studies. In this case, the videotaped examples were not as well received because the world of the New Zealand and Australian classrooms was so different.

Examples from countries where teaching conditions are close to those in Vietnam, would show the teachers how to transfer the ideas. It would be helpful to have more training material available showing teachers in Vietnam trying out new ideas.

### ***Link suggestions with the local text book***

One of the reasons teachers frequently give for not being able to teach in innovative ways is the textbook. Textbooks certainly guide teaching methods but they do not necessarily have the last word. A highly communicative text book can be used in a very traditional, transmission mode of teaching, just as a traditional textbook, used by the right teacher, can lend itself to communicative language teaching.

In preparing handouts for the class and in doing demonstration lessons, I made sure that examples from the current text books were included, taking into account the fact that most school teachers would not have access to photocopiers and a supply of paper.

## **FINAL COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS**

Given the problems in transporting methodology, would it not be better to leave the status quo? In practice, this is not what happens. Educational beliefs, like practices in medicine, in science and other fields do not remain static. They develop through contact beyond the borders and through the ideas of innovative educators from within a country.

In my opinion, there is such a thing as hesitating too long, being too modest or too much of a perfectionist. For the project I have described, I accepted the opportunity to run the workshops, and to prepare material for teacher training as asked, while acknowledging that it could probably be done better by others. The next stage of the project is to work, as

cooperatively as possible, to produce materials for language teacher education which can either be used in their present form or modified locally.

The Overseas Service Bureau speaks of the "need to codify and to share available resources, practices and experiences in ELT curriculum and methodology within and between countries". Codifying and sharing could include asking further questions of teachers attending courses. How do overseas teachers of English apply the learning they have done during courses in this country? What sort of teacher training materials could be developed by people in the country where they will be used? Finally, how can lecturers from both countries cooperate in developing resources for teacher education programmes?

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