

CROSSING THE PEDAGOGICAL BORDER: LANGUAGE LEARNING BY LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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Introduction

There are number of pretty sound reasons why good language teachers should also be good language learners. This paper briefly presents some of these reasons, and then explains how and why foreign language learning is provided in one particular course of initial training available in New Zealand, and what some of the trainees thought of the experience. It is then argued in more detail that language learning should also be included in professional development programmes for more experienced language teachers. It is concluded that this would not only increase their professional competence but would also enhance their professional status.

Language teachers should be language learners

Firstly, to adapt Kipling's sentiment: what should they know of English who only English know?¹ With over 25 years of ELT experience in England and Europe, as well as the Middle East and more recently New Zealand, I have found that many native-speaking ELT teachers are monolingual, and where this is so it can be argued that their view of English is both partial and ethnocentric. Learning another language - any other language - should not only open a window on the nature of language in general but also give depth and breadth to their understanding of their own. Furthermore, many teachers of English (and not only the monoglots) tend, probably unwittingly, to display a somewhat patronising attitude of 'I expect you to learn my language, but I don't need to learn yours'. This may have derived from the shibboleth - whose days are surely numbered - that only target language should be used in the ELT classroom. The origins and implications of this monolingual fallacy are cogently presented by Phillipson (1992:185-193). The prohibition on the use of the first language in the classroom - by learners or by teachers - is not only a neglect of a valuable language-learning resource, but also an implicit denigration of the learners' first languages, and consequently a potential or actual denial of their linguistic rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson and Rannut: 1994).

¹ *The English Flag*, the original lines of which run:

Winds of the World, give answer! They are whimpering to and fro -
And what should they know of England who only England know?

Secondly, it may actually be useful for teachers of English to know the language of at least some of their learners, and apply this knowledge for pedagogical purposes. Knowledge of the linguistic systems used by learners may help in both the planning and execution of lessons - by avoiding over-teaching some items, and under-teaching or inappropriately teaching, others. Books which provide information about learners' first languages such as Swan and Smith (1987) or Comrie (1987; 1990) are extremely useful, but the sort of consciousness-raising activities for learners suggested, for example, by Rutherford (1987) can only be effectively prepared by teachers who have a closer knowledge of how their learners' formal system compares and contrasts with English. Clearly, the practical value of knowledge of specific languages is limited where the teacher is working with multilingual classes - a common enough situation in New Zealand - but those who seek employment overseas, or work with monolingual groups of learners are well-advised to learn the language of their students.

Thirdly, and I think most importantly, there is the need for teachers to realise that, while language teaching is not necessarily easy, language *learning* is far more difficult. The cognitive difficulties of understanding a foreign language, the physiological strain of language production, the psychological and social stresses of the classroom, and the need to be aware of differences in learners' perceptions, styles and strategies, are all stressed again and again in most teacher training courses - and I would argue that teachers need to experience these matters directly for themselves. If, therefore, teachers were encouraged to cross the pedagogical border from time to time and become language learners, I feel they would have a deeper appreciation of how it feels to learn a language; they would more easily identify with their learners.

Second Language Learning in the Trinity College Cert TESOL

Two of the most widely-recognised initial ELT training courses are the Cert TESOL of Trinity College London, and the Cambridge CELTA (formerly CTEFLA). Both courses require the trainees to experience some foreign language learning as part of their programme.

For example, among the requirements for the Trinity College course is "a course of practical instruction, with an oral-aural bias, in a natural language which is unknown to the candidates, (a) to give first-hand experience of a beginner's difficulties in coping with a new language, and (b) to exemplify some of the language teaching procedures discussed and demonstrated in other parts of the course" (Trinity College, 1995). The trainees are required to maintain a journal of this language tuition, and work done on this aspect of the course is included in the external moderation.

The instruction required for the Cert TESOL comprises a minimum of six hours tuition in an unknown language, and trainees are expected to maintain a personal journal in which to reflect on what they have learned about:

- a the unknown language
- b English as a language system
- c how to teach a language
- d how it felt to be a language learner
- e learning styles and expectations of fellow learners.

After completing the Cert TESOL recently in New Zealand, twenty four teachers were asked to consider these five points and rank them in order of importance, making any additional comments they wished. Three-quarters of the respondents said (d) was the most important; the other 25% cited (c); of the latter, all considered (d) to be the second most important point. More than four-fifths of the respondents placed (e) in third position.

The near-unanimity of their views is, I think, highly significant; their comments were also very interesting. In response to item (d) the words 'frustrating', 'humiliating', 'overwhelming', and 'vulnerable' frequently occurred; a sense of achievement and satisfaction was also commonly noted. With regard to item (e) there was general and acute awareness of important differences among learners such as speed of uptake, output and switch-off, as well as for different preferences for choral repetition, pairwork, games etc. Asked in what ways the keeping of a journal assisted their professional development, a number of respondents indicated that it enabled them to empathise with their learners. Several of the trainees felt that these six hours were among the most valuable elements in the course.

It is necessary to emphasise that short initial courses such as the Cert TESOL and CELTA are essentially introductory. A total of hours of language tuition, valuable as it clearly is, is merely an 'aperitif' and has to be balanced against the other essential needs of preparatory training for language teaching. It is worth noting that there are a few ESL preparation programmes in New Zealand which offer much more language tuition than the Cambridge and Trinity courses; for example, the course offered by Waikato Polytechnic provides 60 hours of Mandarin as an integral part of its NZQA-validated Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Language learning by experienced ELT teachers

I believe that the experiential element of being 'on the other side' in a language classroom, while time consuming, is as valuable to the mid-career professional as it is to the newcomer. Yet, unlike initial courses such as the Cert TESOL, very few programmes for qualified ESL teachers make specific provision for concurrent experiential language learning. For example, several tertiary institutions in New Zealand run postgraduate diplomas in language teaching (TESOLANZ Directory 1996); most consider it desirable for candidates to know a second language, but none - so far as I know - actually require participants to learn a new language as an integral part of their programme of studies. What

follows are some thoughts about why language learning should be incorporated into the professional development of experienced ELT teachers in New Zealand.

First, the unknown language to be learnt might well be that spoken by the increasing numbers of Asian language learners in New Zealand. A fortunate few ELT teachers in New Zealand have enjoyed the experience of living and working in the home countries of these students: some have acquired elements of the language and culture, but most have not had this opportunity. Clearly, direct knowledge of at least one Asian language would put teachers in closer contact with their learners to mutual benefit, thus bridging the inevitable linguistic and cultural gap between teacher and learner. This gap could further be closed if, as Erickson (1996) suggests, teachers were to discuss their own language learning experiences with the students. By sharing commonly-faced challenges in language learning, reciprocal trust and confidence may be enhanced - not least if the learners were able to demonstrate their own linguistic and even pedagogic expertise.

Secondly, although it may be assumed that the mid-career teacher has a more comprehensive grasp of the formal features of English than the beginner, this knowledge may be rusty, obsolete or possibly even inaccurate. There is a need in all in-service courses to re-examine key elements of phonology, morphology, syntax and discourse; such review could be facilitated by specific comparison and contrast with a second language being studied alongside the linguistics course. Comparative treatment of issues such as modality, or tense time and aspect, should enable ELT teachers to reflect upon the peculiarities and difficulties that such notions in English present to our learners. Furthermore, learning a new (Asian) language in mid-career would certainly assist teachers to understand better how language learners *feel*. There is usually very little direct interlingual transfer between Asian languages and English, and even something as basic as getting one's speech organs around unfamiliar consonants or, equally essential, grappling with tonal implications in Thai or Mandarin should make teachers realise the difficulties faced by learners in English phonology, and more deeply appreciate the linguistic competence of even elementary students. Teachers might also come to re-evaluate the importance of using the first language as a learning resource in second language teaching.

Thirdly, in preparatory courses, the teacher of the unknown language is expected to demonstrate good language teaching practices; this usually means operating within pedagogical paradigms such as the now conventional 'facilitative' and 'participatory' (Breen and Candlin, 1980) teaching roles of communicative language teaching. However, it would be extremely helpful for experienced language teachers to be taught the unknown language through methods which are considered to be exemplary in the target language and culture. They would find it probably as difficult to adjust to these conventions as many of our students do to ours - as illustrated, for example, by Clarke (1996). Almost inevitably, as teachers grow in the profession, their ideas about the best ways to learn a language become clearer - and often this clarification reflects how they themselves teach. Rather than rejoice in the diversity of learning styles and expectations in the classroom, some teachers

may consider that those learners who do not conform to their way of teaching are poor learners. ESL teachers often expect students to interact in what may seem to them very inappropriate ways; this matter has recently been discussed by Nunan (1995), Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) and Ellis (1996). Learning a new language within the socio-cultural norms of the target language community should make even very experienced teachers re-evaluate their understanding of the range of highly individual learning strategies, preferences and expectations of their own learners. One only has to think, for example, of the interactional implications of gender in many Moslem countries, or the formal and paralinguistic niceties attached to relative age and status in Japan, to grasp the point that not only is communicative ELT methodology very culturally-loaded - even "arrogant" (Widdowson 1995:8) but that many of our students may have no desire or need to interact in what may be considered an ethnocentric fashion. This is especially the case where learners wish eventually to interact - whether for occupational, academic or social purposes - with non-native users of English as an International Language rather than with native speakers.

Conclusion

I hope I have made it clear why I think that learning a new language will enhance the work of ELT teachers in the classroom, both directly and indirectly: not only will teachers thereby increase their professional knowledge base, but those who have periodically subjected themselves to the rigorous discipline of language learning should be more sensitive to the needs, expectations and resources of their learners. It might be worth considering a code of professional practice similar to the New Zealand Association of Counsellors, by which practising counsellors must periodically undertake counselling themselves. If so, it would be useful for those concerned with the professional development of language teachers in New Zealand to discuss matters such as how much tuition would be appropriate and how providers of language tuition could be identified and recognised, as well as the means by which competence could be measured, and by whom.

I feel confident, too, that recognised competence in second languages would help to enhance the professional status of ESL teachers in this country and elsewhere, which for a variety of reasons is undeniably low. Tollefson (1991:209) has itemised this lack of status in terms of inadequate funding for ESL programmes, low salaries and benefits, job insecurity and heavy staff turnover, and suggests that this is often a reflection of the low status accorded to the learners themselves. Indeed, the very concept of the 'ESL' learner is itself a deficit model - it highlights the lack of English, rather than the positive linguistic, cultural and cognitive resources that accrue to bilinguality, which more accurately describes many language learners. Perhaps the 'secondary' nature of ESL, the foreignness of EFL, and the 'otherness' of ESOL would be redressed if the bilingual competence of both teachers and learners were emphasised.

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