

A New Apprenticeship in Language Teacher Education

This paper presents an innovative approach to addressing student teachers' preconceptions about teaching and learning in their discipline in an initial teacher education (ITE) programme for language teachers in Ireland. Student language teachers undertake a course in a language which they do not know and are required to reflect on their experience from the perspective of both learner and teacher. The rationale here is that through a forced return to their "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie 1975), student teachers with a new dual perspective of learner and teacher may question some of their beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning in general and in their discipline. A qualitative analysis of students' reflections suggest that the learning experience together with reflection on it heightens their awareness of factors that impact on learning in the classroom and this translates to a greater empathy with and greater accommodation of learners in their own classrooms.

Introduction

One of the most powerful factors which impact on teacher identity and cognition particularly in their early career is what Lortie termed their "apprenticeship of observation" (1975). This paper presents a study where student language teachers participate in and reflect on a beginners language course in a new language as part of their Initial Teacher Education (ITE). The rationale for introducing a discipline-specific learning experience into the ITE course was to allow students to address their "apprenticeship of observation", not from a distance of a number of years but in an immediate and emotive context and with their new dual perspective of teacher and learner. It is the unsettling experience of the novice language learner which we aimed to recreate for student teacher reflection in order to facilitate a possible transformative learning experience around what it means to be a learner and a teacher of language. This paper presents the theoretical framework for this approach, the study design and some key findings. Findings suggest that student teachers have a heightened awareness of some of the problematic concepts they encounter during their ITE course as a result of the learning experience. The students report some changes to their own practice as teachers as a direct result of the experience, however the type of change and the degree to which change is embedded or espoused varies from student to student.

Theoretical Framework

Reflection on and for learning is the golden thread that runs through all of this work both theoretically and operationally. The general context assumes a notion of the teacher as reflective practitioner (Schön 1983), which is part of the code of practice for teachers as a means of drawing together theory and practice and as a driver of professional growth. There is a large body of research on reflection in initial teacher education where student teachers learn through reflecting on their teaching (see Burton (2009) for an overview). Fundamental to the present paper is an exploration of how reflection on learning rather than teaching can inform student teachers' growing understanding of their impact on learners. Brookfield (1995) and Bailey et al. (1996) argue for the learner autobiography as a tool for professional development which allows teachers at any point in their careers to explore their preconceptions about teaching and learning. There is also a broad literature on

fostering reflection on learning experiences during ITE (Hatton and Smith 1995; Moon 1999; Martin 2005). This approach supports students in reflecting on different aspects of their learning about teaching and encourages them to develop insights that they can extrapolate to their own classes and which they can then adopt into their own practice. An extension of this approach focuses on students' learning in their own discipline during ITE. Devitt and Czak's (1981) work on student language teachers' developing understanding of language learning and teaching during a language learning experience on an ITE programme is a precursor of the present study. More recently, Finney and Philpott (2010) take a related approach to embedding informal music learning in an ITE programme for music teachers where they stress the need for reflexive action ("excavating the learning") to draw out the value of the learning experience.

Methodology

The project has been running for a number of years with student teachers of modern languages in an initial teacher education programme in Ireland. This paper reports the findings from the 2010-11 student teacher cohort which are consistent with those which have emerged consistently over the project duration. The methodological approach is a qualitative case study with a small set of participants each year. The study was intended to address the following research questions:

How does the experience of being a novice learner in their own discipline in a classroom setting impact on:

- Student teachers' beliefs about learning in general and in their discipline;
- Student teachers' beliefs about teaching in general and in their discipline;
- Student teachers' intentions as regards practice;
- Student teachers' actual practice (as observed or reported through examples)?

In order to address these questions, the participant student language teachers took part in a short Chinese language for beginners course as part of the modern language pedagogy module during the first semester of their initial teacher education programme. The number of participants was 15 in 2010-11. All participants were complete novice learners of Chinese at the start of the course. The course consisted of a two hour session each week for 7 weeks. The teacher was a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese and used the target language almost exclusively in the classroom.

Participants completed weekly semi-structured reflective journals after each session with a short unstructured reflection some days later and a final group report on the experience at the end of the semester. The semi-structured journal aimed to foster at least descriptive and perhaps dialogic reflection on the experience and its possible implications for the student teachers' practice through open questions which called to a certain extent for consideration of evidence and alternative perspectives. The importance of time and distance for reflection was respected by requiring that the reflection be completed in two phases, one immediately after class and a final unstructured reflection some days later. The final structured group synthesis reports were completed by groups of 3 students and were based on the groups' reading and discussion of group members' individual journals. The goal here was to encourage dialogic reflection between students in a non-competitive environment, and to foster some critical reflection by situating their learning and reflection within the broader context of the ITE course and through this the socio-political context of their chosen career. In addition, focus group interviews were conducted after the end of the ITE

course to discuss any lasting impacts of the reflective experience on the students' practice and learning. A thematic analysis of the data was conducted by two researchers to identify common themes across participant responses. The consistent themes identified were then categorised into technical and adaptive challenges (Linsky and Lawrence 2011). Technical challenges are those which although complex have known solutions, while adaptive challenges entail a change in beliefs or values and typically more problematic to resolve. It is the latter category which will be explored in more detail in the findings as these may be considered as more fundamental in effect.

Findings

The aim of this project was to create an environment in which student teachers were challenged to re-examine their own beliefs about teaching and learning and potentially incorporate insights into their own practice as teachers. The student teachers' reflections are undoubtedly rich sources of information about learning and teaching languages. Student teachers report a number of interesting insights into their own learning process and the strategies they used, some of which are novel to the learner themselves. Many of them reported a range of insights into the complex relationship between motivation (extrinsic and intrinsic) and learning which has been a focus of language learning research for decades (Ushioda 1996; Dörnyei 2001). Many of them discuss the relationship between interaction with and through the language and learning (Long 1996) and the role of productive and receptive skills in the language learning process. While interesting, these observations and insights are not the object of discussion here but rather the role and effectiveness of the language learning experience and their reflections thereon in their development as teachers of language. As noted above, the issues raised in student teachers' reflections were categorised as either technical or adaptive challenges for them as teachers. The technical challenges are those which are unproblematic as regards identifying a solution although they may require the development or consolidation of skills. The learning for student teachers here is not a shift in beliefs or values about language learning and teaching but rather a specification of the parameters or details of the language learning process as they understand it.

Examples of technical challenges identified by the student teachers were many and varied and ranged from the specific to the general, including:

- language learners need lots of repetition in the early stages;
- cultural awareness has a role to play in language learning;
- ICT is useful for language learning for a range of reasons (clarity, motivation, learner autonomy);
- interaction in group activities is valuable for language learning.

Often the challenges were identified in the context of their solution: activities or resources to use or broader changes to their overall approach to implement in order to achieve a given end. The solutions to these kinds of challenges were often identified as a result of student teachers realising their potential for language learners as a result of having experienced them during a Chinese class:

e.g. "use of easy songs with appealing melody is a great tool to imbed the new vocabulary learned in the student's memory" (STUDENT E)

or as a result of having noted their absence during a Chinese class:

e.g. the need for more repetition identified due to a perceived lack of opportunities for repetition in the Chinese class.

The solutions were often associated with a resolve to implement the solution in practice. There are of course varying levels of commitment to change among participants reflected in their choice of language (e.g. “should do”, “will do”, “have done”).

As regards adaptive challenges, two themes emerge very strongly from the data as a focus for a profound, or in some instances epiphanic, shift in perspective for student teachers which entail more far-reaching consequences for their teaching:

1. a profound realisation of the differences that exist between learners;
2. an acknowledgement of the complexity and emotional pressures of the language learning process.

The first of these is central to Initial Teacher Education in Ireland where inclusion and the need to differentiate teaching for different learners are core principles of the education system. The second is at the heart of research in the field of language learning and is accepted as almost a commonplace truth. However, the participants’ reactions to this learning experience illustrate that these two concepts are in fact very troublesome and unsettling learning for student teachers. As adaptive challenges, they entail a reconstitution of the role of the language teacher and a revised understanding of the language learner. Furthermore, the new knowledge is expressed by some student teachers as requiring a change to practice that cannot be denied. These characteristics would suggest that the above concepts may constitute threshold concepts for language teachers in the sense expressed by Land et al:

“a transformed way of understanding or interpreting or viewing something ... and results in a reformulation of the learners’ frame of meaning.”
(2010, p. ix)

The first theme emerged very clearly in the student teachers’ group reports. These reports constitute a unique opportunity to focus in particular on the concept of learner differences as student teachers shared their individual weekly reflections in writing a coordinated response to their learning on the Chinese course. Through this activity, all of the student groups noted how different learning can be for different individuals and how different individuals can experience the same classroom environment and activities to very different effect. One group summed this up as follows:

“all language learners learn differently... In our group we discussed some of the classes we felt we learned well or not well in and they often differed from each other. We decided that this meant there were not necessarily any bad teaching methods in our classes, only methods which suited some of us more than others... a class must contain a mixture of things to suit all if each student is going to learn something in class and so that no one is left behind.” (Group AEE)

This realisation was noted in the focus group interviews, 7 months after the Chinese course ended, as an enduring impact of the PDE experience as a whole:

“I used to plan my lessons with me as a student but it made me realise I’m not representative of the entire experience of my class because just chatting to people they had an entirely different experience to what I had... stuff that I responded to, my friends didn’t respond in the same way ... made me really

aware that you need to be aware of other people and how they learn.” (Student N)

The transformative nature of this realisation is indicated in the changes to student teachers’ practice resulting from greater empathy towards and accommodation of students needs in the classroom. This is most deeply expressed by the group cited below who report having fully integrated this concept into their teaching as a result:

“The most salient finding was that every student learns in a very different and distinctive way... We had never before been so aware of all the different needs that must be catered for... This is something we have ... brought into our own classroom and consider on a daily basis when planning classes and devising creative approaches. In our group of three alone, we all have different learning strategies.” (Group AKM)

The second theme of the complexity and difficulty of language learning emerges from participants weekly journals but the implications of this for their teaching is expressed more fully in the group synthesis reports for some students. A sample of some of the vocabulary used around this theme in the group report illustrate the intense emotional response the student teachers had to the language learning experience: “apprehension”; “frustration”; “overwhelming”; “embarrassed”; “frightening”. One group summarised their experience in a way that has resonance for anyone who has ever struggled with language learning:

“the feeling of finding Chinese overwhelming. At the beginning it was enjoyable ... became progressively more difficult... we each found that we shut off if we couldn’t engage in or relate to what was going on in class. Our motivation wavered. We became frustrated.” (Group AKM)

They go on to talk about the experience of being asked to respond in the target language in the classroom:

“When asked to exercise the target language orally, we froze. We felt embarrassed to speak aloud in front of our peers.” (Group AKM)

Each group to a greater or lesser extent explored the theme of fear and frustration and how that had resulted in them feeling greater empathy for their students:

“our own frustration and apprehension around learning a new language have provided us with a very worthwhile insight into how our students feel. ... we must try to reduce apprehension... We can now empathise with our students , as we understand their fears and concerns when it comes to learning a new language.” (Group BNH)

“It is an aspect we are much more conscious of now that we have experienced those feelings at firsthand.” (Group AKM)

In the focus group interviews, this was expressed as an on-going need for teachers to re-engage with their learners at their level:

“I think it should be part of inservice training for teachers who have been teaching for 10+ years to kick them out of the comfort zone because it’s this eye-opener effect of me humble learner not knowing anything starting up that improves my relationships with my students because I am on the same level as them.” (Student L)

It is the emotive aspect of the Chinese learning experience as well as the reflection on this for individuals and groups that drives the learning for student teachers involved. One focus group participant expressed this as “learning by doing” or living the learning. Another focus group participant teased out how it is not the experience alone but the structured and collaborative reflection upon this which generates learning for the student teachers:

“it [the weekly reflections] didn’t always make sense... they were boring... repetitive yes .. but when we did our group work and we got quite deep into it then it made perfect sense and that was the actual moment where I actually learnt.”

Conclusions

The project presented here was intended to allow student language teachers on an ITE programme to explore some of their beliefs about teaching and learning in their discipline through the direct and emotional experience of participating in and reflecting on a beginners Chinese language course. If one of the most difficult aspects of teacher development is changing practice (Joyce and Showers 2002), then the present study is intended to facilitate such change. The course aims to orchestrate conditions for a transformative learning experience for student teachers which can impact on beliefs and values and lead to real changes to practice through a highly charged and emotional learning context that includes a strong reflective component. The students report a number of insights and adaptations to their practice following from this course which endured beyond the end of the ITE programme. In particular, they report great empathy with their own students stemming from an integration of the concepts of learner difference and the complexity of learning into their understanding of what it means to be a learner of language. This leads to reported increased efforts to accommodate the different learners in their classrooms

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