What They Need to Know and Know They Need

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This paper investigates the perceptions of a group of second/foreign language teacher education students in terms of the following: what they need to know about the language they teach and what from their own language learning experiences can they utilize in their teaching in order to improve their students’ learning. Data were gathered from eight teacher education students at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia through a semi structured interview. The participants in this project called for a more prominent position of grammar within language teacher education and identified their need to acquire knowledge in the domains of language acquisition, linguistics and intercultural communication. In addition, they reflected on their language learning experiences and identified those strategies that they would recommend to their learners. Insights gained through this project are presented with a view to contributing to the design of teacher education programs based on students’ perceived needs.

Introduction

With globalisation and social, economic and political changes, the demographic picture of the world and the understanding of the role of language are changing. More precisely, languages are gaining an increased importance in intercultural communication and trade. As a consequence, language teachers are facing a pressure to rethink and re-evaluate their thinking about their educational practice in order to enhance the learning outcomes of their students (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). Tertiary institutions are in the process of restructuring their teacher education programs. Recently, Griffith University has reshaped its Bachelor of Education (Primary) program and the Secondary program that educates second/foreign language teachers is in the process of changing this year. In Europe, in most of the countries that have already joined or intend to join the Common European Market, a large scale reform of tertiary education (the so called Bologna reform) is in the process. These countries are attempting to unify the structure and the quality of their tertiary education in order to improve the employability of their students. In the light of the current global market demands, it is worthwhile to explore the perceptions, opinions and the experiences of the students and use their input for the improvement of university offerings.

Literature review

According to Wong Filmore and Snow (2002) the following seven areas should be constitutive parts of teacher education: Languages and linguistics, Language and cultural diversity, Language development, Second language learning and teaching, Sociolinguistics for educators, The language of academic discourse, Text analysis and language understanding in educational settings. This proposal initiated lively discussions among linguists, applied linguists and teacher educators (e.g. Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Richardson, 2002) about the scope of what language teachers need to know about language. This paper contributes to the ongoing discussion from a different point of view by investigating the perceptions of curriculum users. The students involved in this study have already experienced classroom practice during their teaching practicum. Clandinin (1986) argues that the role of experience on teacher thinking and beliefs is essential. Beliefs act as filters of reality (Arnold, 1999) and they are self-constructed representational systems (Rust, 1994) that guide the teachers’ pedagogic decisions. Jenkins and Murray (1998) see teachers as mediators of ideas that are dependent on the context in which they emerge and teacher trainees are required to move from theory to practice, and in the process of reflecting on practice from practice to theories. Leinhardt et al (1995) and Jenkins and Murray (1998), claim that the theory of practice has an equally important role in teacher education as the practice of theory. Tsui (2003) rightly noted that few studies on novice and expert teachers have focused on the subject-content knowledge of teachers (some of the exceptions are Elbaz, 1983; and Brophy 1991). Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) elaborated further on this issue claiming that understanding how expert teachers develop their content knowledge base is of primary importance for beginning teachers. Good pedagogical practice implies a skilled management of ideas. Shulman (1987) believes that the management of ideas is as important as classroom management.

Besides the pedagogical content knowledge, second or Languages Other Than English (LOTE) teachers need to display a good proficiency level of the language they teach. Language acquisition research (Brown, 2000; Gardner & Macintyre, 1991) suggests that language teachers tend to draw on their own language learning experiences and beliefs in shaping their pedagogic philosophy.
Learner beliefs about learning are dependent on personality factors, identity, perceptions of ability to learn, expectancies and self-efficacy beliefs (Brown, 2000; Epstein, 1990; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993). Given the limited size of this project, the investigation was restricted to the teacher trainees’ learner beliefs shaped by their motivation to learn a new language, their needs, strategies and learning efficacy beliefs.

Methodology

In this project a case study approach was used. Semi structured interviews were conducted, that were taped, transcribed and analysed. The data gained were coded according to themes. Eight foreign language teacher education students participated in the project. More precisely, six were Australian pre-service students who planned to teach Japanese, Indonesian or Italian in Australia. Two were non English speaking background (NESB) postgraduate students, who planned to teach English and Korean as a foreign language in their home country. The data gained from these students were separately treated given their specific situation: one of them studied and lived in the target language environment and it was expected that he would have somewhat different perceptions about his language needs than the Australasian Languages Other Than English (LOTE) teacher education students, and the other studied in her second language in order to teach a third. The multicultural make-up of this group reflects the diversity that Australian universities have in LOTE teacher education groups.

There were two sets of questions asked during the interview that were concentrated around the two research questions: 1. What the students’ felt they need to know about the language they teach and 2. what from their own language learning experiences can or need they utilize in their teaching in order to improve their students’ learning. To the first set belonged the following questions: what do you think a teacher needs to know about the language that you teach; which of the courses have helped you or would have been beneficial for you in improving your knowledge about the language you teach; has your explicit knowledge about the language changed now because you have to think about how to teach certain structures; and what makes a good language teacher. The second set of questions comprised items such as: why have you started to learn a foreign language; what are your current needs in the four macroskills; which facilities and support aided your learning; what kind of assistance and support improved your language skills; what learning strategies worked well for you; and which of your language learning experiences and strategies would you recommend to your learners.

Discussion

Tsui (2003) pointed out that the knowledge that teachers develop is of personal, practical and situated nature. Elbaz (1983) distinguished five categories of knowledge that are relevant to teachers: 1. knowledge of subject matter including theories related to learning; 2. knowledge of the curriculum and how to structure the learning experience; 3. knowledge of classroom routines, classroom management, student need; 4. knowledge of self (personality, age, attitudes, values, beliefs, goals); and 5. knowledge of the school context and community.

The responses to the first question that explored the students’ opinion in relation to teacher expertise can be characterised as subject-matter-related responses with Elbaz’s categorisation.

(Please note, the names of the students have been changed for protection of their anonymity.)

What do you think you need to know about the language you teach?

Kuni. Grammar.

Ati. All the things related to grammar are important.

Nubi. I think grammar, linguistics and the ability to explain things through a contrastive analysis are very relevant.

Rhuni. For me it is more important that the teachers learn how to explain pronunciation related nuances of the vocabulary.

Susi. Cultural points are important and grammar and semantics. Some phonetics and morphology, but they are less relevant.

Kimi. Everything is important.

Zizi. Language teaching and learning strategies, grammar and all the other aspects of grammar like morphology, syntax

Andi. Grammar, phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, culture. All of these. And to speak with a small or no accent and select what is important to teach, and teach written formal language as well.

The call for more grammar is strong in the responses shown. However the interview also revealed that the students did not refer to a decontextualized grammar like the one Michael Clyne illustrated so interestingly at the conference on: Who’s Afraid of Teaching Grammar (Clyne, 1996). He
referred to an anecdote that emerged in the 1950s according to which when a new migrant was asked to conjugate “I have a gold mine” he continued with “You have a gold yours”, “He has a gold his”. The students referred to a solid knowledge of grammar that enables speakers to function and communicate accurately and appropriately in real life situations. They thought that this would enhance their ability to explain and teach structures. The responses showed a high level of similarity. The most obvious difference between the responses of the NESB group (Zizi and Andi) and the rest of the group was evident in Andi’s attention to accent that might have resulted from his immersion experiences and possible discrimination in his context of living because of his foreign sounding English.

As grammar was mentioned by all the students, a further elaboration on why grammar has such a prominent role in their opinion revealed a range of diverse reasons. For example, frustration about the respondents’ superficial grammar knowledge, lack of understanding how language works and need to gain more confidence in production of accurate language output. The link to personal experiences in student responses provides supporting evidence to Clandinin and Conelly’s (1987) claim that teacher knowledge is experiential knowledge that is part of the teacher’s life narrative.

The second question explored the students’ opinion about the necessary contents that they feel would enhance their knowledge of the subject matter and improve their pedagogical content knowledge. Pedagogical content knowledge is pivotal in teaching. Hillocks (1999) defines it as the effective presentation of subject matter to learners. It is not a separate knowledge entity, but a manifestation of integrated knowledge that builds a coherent whole (Tsui, 2003).

The students had diverse levels of exposure to diverse contents. Three out of the eight students were enrolled in a double degree (Bachelor of Languages and Linguistics and Bachelor of Education), three were graduate entry students who completed a Bachelor of Art degree prior to their Bachelor of Education program and the two NESB students completed their Bachelor of Education degree in their home country and were enrolled in the Master of Teaching program. In the on-campus sessions, those students who had already some exposure to linguistics and psycholinguistics (the double degree students), demonstrated a good understanding of not only the formal aspects of the target language but also of language acquisition issues. The courses that were offered to the double degree students are marked as No.1 and No.3 below. All the students had exposure to No. 4.

Which of the courses have helped you or would have been beneficial for you in improving your knowledge about the language you teach: 1. Languages and Linguistics; 2. Language and Cultural Diversity; 3. Language acquisition and Development; 4. Second language teaching methodology; 5. Solinguistics for educators; 6. The language of academic discourse; 7. Text analysis and language understanding in educational settings

Based on the data, it is safe to say that all the students wanted to have a better knowledge in linguistics and language teaching issues, and a significant number (six out of eight) wished to gain a deeper insight into intercultural and language acquisition issues. The NESB students were interested in text analysis and language understanding in educational settings that could be attributed to the difficulties they faced with learning the different genres requested in their assignments and coping with classroom talk and interpersonal communication during their teaching practicum. Although student preferences are a changing and dynamic category and cannot be generalized, these responses are quite informative in terms of the perceived needs of this group in relation to curriculum design.

Shulman (1986) and Richardson (2002) go a step further than Hillocks (1999) in their definition of pedagogical content knowledge as they refer not only to the subject matter knowledge and its optimal presentation to students but also to the knowledge of the subject matter in a way that enables teachers to understand how students learn best in a classroom context. Consequently it could be expected that the teachers’ explicit knowledge enhancement would result in the improvement of their pedagogic performance. The next question asks about the impact of the teaching experience on the students’ self-perceived changes in their explicit knowledge:

Do you think that your explicit knowledge about the language has changed now because you have to think about how to teach certain structures?
Ati: I have not taught grammar yet, I was just asked to follow the text book tasks, so I don’t think anything has changed with me.
Kuni: I taught in lower grades, had not much grammar to teach, I don’t see any difference in my explicit or implicit knowledge.
Nubi: I haven’t focused on grammar, I taught only topics related to real life.
Rhuni: Yes, I clarified many things for myself, in particular the use of particles in Japanese. Yes, no doubt, my explicit knowledge has grown immensely. I also learned about the Task Based Approach and this changed my whole view on language and teaching.

Susi: I became aware of how hard it is to teach structures and grammar in an easy- to- digest way.

Kimi: My grammar has really improved since I have been teaching it.

Zizi: I have a better explicit knowledge and I became very conscious of my pronunciation. I keep monitoring my language and grammar.

Andi: I figured out that how I teach is more important than what. But yes, both have improved. Particularly the explicit bit, as I keep contrasting and explaining things to myself.

Not only my L2 knowledge about the structures has improved but my L1 too.

Five students admitted that thinking about formal structures and using a contrastive approach enhanced their formal knowledge of the target language. One student claimed that it has also provided him with a better understanding of how his native language functions. Surprisingly, one student understood grammar as a separate entity that needs to be taught in the traditional way, detached from real life topics. This suggests that students need to be made aware of the fact that knowledge acquisition happens in an integrated way and grammar should not be taught without its natural context.

The last question in the first block of questions deals with understanding expert teachers’ classroom practice and the knowledge that is embodied in it. This represents another relevant component that contributes to the shaping of pedagogic knowledge and skills of teacher education students.

What makes a good language teacher?

Anti: Who understands second language acquisition processes and teaches accordingly

Kuni: Somebody who has a clear articulation and a high level of familiarity with the language and culture

Nubi: Motivates, is fun, likes learning and learners, has good L2 skills

Rhuni: Can make students understand the value of learning and who is enthusiastic, confidence building, who applies variety and paces well

Susi: Shares good learning strategies, encourages learning

Kimi: Appreciates others and the L2 culture and teaches for communication

Zizi: Loves language and loves students

Andi: A good teacher motivates students to learn, gives comprehensive feedback and is consistent in everything he does.

Most of the responses quoted above refer to teachers who understand the affective aspects of language learning. This allows the assumption that the students’ teacher education program effectively encouraged a learner centred, a humanistic approach to learning and teaching.

The second set of questions, inspired by Adger, Snow & Christian’s (2002) belief that teacher practice is shaped by the teachers’ own learning, explores the students’ perceptions on what they know they need and what from their own learning experiences would they utilize in their teaching practice.

All the students identified motivation as a primary need in language learning and teaching. Goldman (1986) called it a pivotal building block of epistemology and Gardner & MacIntyre (1991), Dornyei (1998) and Schommer (1990) claimed that it is the most powerful driving force in second language learning. In other words, there is a general consensus among psychologists and psycholinguists that motivation has a significant influence on academic learning, thinking, reasoning and problem solving. The following question attempted to find out what motivated the investigated students to study another language than their own and to make teaching of this language to their profession.

The students displayed a mix of diverse motivations. The largest number of them (six) wanted to do further studies in the country in which the second language (SL) is spoken. One of them started to learn a foreign language at the request of his parents. The motivation of these students can be labelled as instrumental (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) as they wished to develop good language skills for improving their job prospects. Five students showed genuine interest in the target language and culture (intrinsic motivation), one student also experienced integrative motivation (being married to a target language speaker and wishing to achieve a native proficiency), whereas four students wanted to gain employment in the target language country (instrumental motivation) or widen the circle of their friends by new bi/multilingual members (integrative motivation). There were three students who learned the new language in order to follow role models in their families (intrinsic motivation), whereas the two non English speaking background students attempted to improve their English language skills for study purposes in Australia (instrumental motivation).
A constructivist view on motivation emphasises the personal choices of individuals and the social context in which these choices are made. Each person is motivated differently and acts in a unique way. However, these acts are context dependent and adjusted to the cultural and social environment in which they are carried out (Williams & Burden, 1997). There was evidence in the data that this is not always the case. Against our expectation, the person who was extrinsically motivated and started to study his target language in order to please his/her parents did not belong to a collectivist culture with a Confucian view on education (Hofstede, 1986), but to a western post-modern individualistic type of society. Whereas the Confucian view emphasizes the relationship between the self and the others in which education is seen as an obligation towards the family (Arconia, 1994), western societies see it as a matter of individual choice and responsibility. Another interesting finding was that the Asian background students involved in this study expressed either intrinsic motivation, for example, curiosity and keenness to study their target language, or instrumental motivation to succeed in university studies and gain better jobs rather than an obligation to enhance the standing of and respect towards their families in their home countries through higher education degrees gained overseas. In sum, it appears to be quite safe to say that success in language learning does not depend on the type of motivation that acts as the initial driving force. These students displayed a range of different types and combinations of motivations, but they all succeeded in developing a special relationship towards the target language and decided to make foreign language teaching to their profession.

Another need that the students identified as essential for language teachers was good language skills. In order to evaluate their current language skills the students undertook a proficiency rating and established their proficiency level between 3, 3+ and 4 on the self assessment version of the ISLPR scale (Ingram & Wylie 1997), at which 0 was beginner proficiency and 5 was native speaker proficiency.

The self-rating prompted the next question: What are your self-perceived needs in the four macroskills?

The students gave surprisingly similar responses. This might be explained by the fairly equal proficiency level of these students. The majority wished to improve the understanding of native speakers’ speech and pronunciation (which suggests that the target language was learned via textbooks and in classroom situations rather than in real life situations and contacts with native speakers). Further, they wished to understand jokes, idioms, complex sentences and the News on the TV and radio. The speaking needs overlapped with the listening needs, as the students expressed the need to enhance their ability to orally interact with native speakers, use complex sentences, tell jokes and use idioms and metaphors. In sum, the expressed needs were commensurate to the students’ proficiency level. The responses in relation to their reading needs showed a larger variety. Six students wanted to be able to read more demanding literature (books with higher level of language and complex sentences), four wished to improve their newspaper reading skills (in particular those who read newspapers written in kanji or with Korean characters). The NESB students displayed more down to earth needs as they lived immersed in the a second/target language and wished to improve their comprehension of texts on bills, official letters, bank contracts and forms. This would have enabled them to function appropriately in their new context of living. Interestingly, these students expressed frustration that they have difficulties with understanding TV advertisements. The strongly culturally coloured nature of advertisements and the students’ lack of understanding of the humour, the implications, presuppositions or connotations that they carry points towards the needs of these students to develop a higher level of discourse and socio-cultural competence. Writing showed a very even picture of the students’ needs. All of them wanted to improve their formal letter writing skills. The two NESB students wished to improve their academic writing skills and one reported on difficulties in writing informal letters and filling in forms. These data show the students’ awareness of their language proficiency level and reveal their needs. In other words, the students know what they need and expect support and help.

As next, the students identified support and facilities as essential in language learning. Therefore the next question attempted to elicit their opinion in relation to which facilities and support aided their language learning. A range of choices were offered such as: Language learning support in language centre (study at Uni); Language learning support in the library; Language learning support at the workplace; Tapes/CDs/Videos; Books with tapes; Books (without tapes); Others - websites, computers.

Based on the gained data, it appears that books without and with tapes were seen as the most effective means of learning. However, it is questionable whether these were really the most effective or the most accessible means of learning. The responses in relation to the self-perceived needs in listening and speaking discussed above show the deficiency that was caused by learning a ‘bookish’ language

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that does not reflect real life language. As a result, many of the students were worried about their lack of understanding the native speakers’ pronunciation and language use. Surprisingly, although most of the Australian universities offer computer assisted language learning classes and sophisticated learning studios and laboratories, only two students reported that they made use of them. Obviously, modern technology was not sufficiently exploited or considered an efficient learning tool.

With regard to assistance and support (human resources) that improved the students’ language skills six of the investigated students expressed a high level of willingness to learn through interaction. MacIntyre et al. (1998) point out that people, who are willing to communicate possess a high level of self-confidence. Teachers and tutors were seen as most important partners in the interaction. Second most important were colleagues and friends. Two students thought that they could only rely on themselves and learn best when they are left alone. One of the students, an NESB student adopted the strategy of visiting the target language country quite frequently. Thanks to this circumstance, he managed to enhance his overall cultural, linguistic and pragmatic proficiency. The second NESB student preferred to be guided and corrected by tutors and language teachers.

Learning strategy training was another factor that was seen as an essential need in language learning and teaching. There is a large amount of research evidence about the usefulness of learning strategy provision (Cohen & Oxford, 2001; McDonough, 1999). The investigated students’ responses revealed that they were thinking about their learning and were highly aware of which learning and communication strategies were effective for them. The following strategies were mentioned as useful in developing their language skills:

**Listening**
Most of the students admitted that they apply careful listening to people who speak in the target language and watch movies and TV shows. When difficulties arise in understanding the target language sounds, they ask the speaker to repeat the new sound. In order to understand what they hear, they listen for key words and listen for most interesting information. If they do not understand what someone says, they ask the speaker to repeat the word/sentence or to slow down.

**Vocabulary strategies:**
Drilling, repetition and use of the new words in context were the main vocabulary strategies identified by all the respondents.

**Speaking strategies:**
For improving speaking skills all the students applied imitation of the native speakers’ talk and pronunciation practice. Four students claimed that they do not initiate conversation without pre-planning, and pre-practicing in their mind, what they intend to say. Three students prefer to start a conversation without making a plan. Most of the students like to be corrected and ask the other person involved in the interaction to correct their errors.

**Reading strategies:**
In order to improve reading, the students tended to choose interesting readings. One student found that reading newspapers was extremely important not only for improving his reading comprehension but also for learning about culture. In order to understand what has been read, the following strategies were used quite evenly by all students: Looking for main ideas and important facts, reading things more than once, looking at the pictures and headings, underlining important parts. In case of comprehension difficulties, the respondents attempted to guess the meanings using clues from the context or used dictionaries.

**Writing strategies:**
Interestingly, the students reported on an extensive use of writing notes in English prior to putting a text together in the target language. This means that they use the following metacognitive strategies: advanced organizers, directed attention and functional planning. Other strategies identified were: using a dictionary or spell checker, writing letters to people in the target language and rewriting what they had written.

**Translation strategies**
Five students reported that they plan what they want to say or write in their first language prior to translating it into the target language and the other three students said that they think in the target language. However, they also use translations when they wish to enhance their understanding or clarify things. Most of the students were theoretically in favour of thinking in the target language and interacting with target language speakers because this makes speakers aware of the differences between the two languages and cultures and allows for looking at their own language from a different perspective. Two students reported that they regularly use the target language outside of the classroom.
In sum, a range of diverse strategies were identified. O’Malley & Chamot (1990) would classify them as metacognitive (directed and selected attention, self-management, functional planning and self-evaluation); cognitive (e.g. repetition, translation, note taking, keywords and inferencing) and socio-affective (such as asking questions for clarification and learning from peers). The students claimed that as young teachers they will recommend the strategies that worked well for them.

The following responses show student perceptions in relation to the question: Which of your language strategies would you recommend to your learners?

Kuni: Work on understanding of grammar, watch TV, listen listen listen
Andi: Radio and movies, TV programs as they provide exposure to authentic language
Nubi: TV dramas, interaction with native speakers
Rhuni: Practice, speak, TV, Reading, interesting texts
Susi: Exposure as much as possible, contacts with native speakers
Kimi: learn grammar and combine it with watching TV programs
Zizi: Take notes, TV, radio, native speakers, newspaper, sum up what you heard or read
Ati: Listen to natives and practise speaking

As assumed the students recommended those strategies that matched their personality type and learning style. However, they expressed their awareness that strategies that worked for them are not ‘one size fits all’ type of strategies and their learners need to be made aware of the possible choices but should find out on their own, which suit them best.

Additional qualitative responses where yielded in relation to the utilization of the own language learning experiences through the question what can you utilize from your own language learning experiences in your teaching?

Andi: I needed more opportunities to speak. Get the students speak. Show sympathy when they struggle and help, promote peer learning.
Nubi: School is not enough, encourage beyond class activities
Rhuni: Cultural aspects should be more taught, songs, rules, drawings and a lot of kanji
Susi: Have fun while learning the language, needs tailored exciting activities help
Kimi: Encourage students to gain in-country experience.
Zizi: A personalized approach is needed. We are all different and learn differently
Ati: More grammar and more speaking is what I would recommend.
Kuni: Use the second language as much as possible in the classroom and beyond

The responses showed an interesting variety ranging from affective issues to teaching strategies and curriculum design. They also revealed that the students consciously reflected on their experiences and evaluated their usefulness.

**Conclusion**

This paper investigated a group of second/foreign language teacher education students’ opinions on what they need to know and what they know they need. Student feedback yielded an unexpected additional outcome besides the already described ones. The students not only became aware of their needs, analysed their own learning, evaluated the effectiveness of their learning strategies and revealed their emerging pedagogic philosophy and beliefs regarding language learning and quality teaching but they also became more aware of themselves as language teachers than they were before the participation in this project. The findings can be summed up in the following way:

The data showed the students’ call for more pedagogical content knowledge and for a more prominent position of grammar within their language teacher education. The students believed that more theoretical and conceptual knowledge in the domains of language acquisition, linguistics and second language teaching would have equipped them better for their profession. The fact that they had to explain structures to their language learners had a positive impact on their explicit knowledge development. The question about what a good language teacher is yielded responses that were typical for a learner centred approach with a strong concern for the affective aspects of learning. The initial motivation type did not play a relevant role in the students’ decision to become language teachers. Human support was identified as more important for the investigated students in their language learning than facilities, technology and support systems. A large range of various learning strategies was used and encouraged to be used. In addition, the students claimed that during their teaching practicum they reframed their conception of what professional knowledge and what the expected professional profile of an Australian LOTE teacher is. It seems that this reframing happened in two ways: through reflection-on-action (on the subject matter knowledge and on the pedagogic knowledge and skills as demonstrated in their teaching practicum) and reflection-in-action (on the quality and level of their knowledge gained through their teacher education program).
The students involved in this study showed that they are highly aware of what they need and what they can utilize in order to enhance the quality of their pedagogic practice. In addition, this study highlights the need for a reflective and critical analysis of the design of second/foreign language teacher education programs. Further research is needed to answer the following questions: Are teacher education programs flexible enough to adequately cater for the dynamics of knowledge acquisition? Do they offer a sufficient range of courses that would allow students to gain a holistic view on language, language teaching and learning and to choose directions in the acquisition of linguistic and pedagogic competence according to their interest and professional needs?

References:


