

Shaping teacher profiles through overseas teaching

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Published

2011

Journal Title

Babylonia

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Shaping teacher profiles through overseas teaching

Maria Dobrenov-Major | Brisbane AUS

Im Programm der Ausbildung für künftige Fremdsprachenlehrer bietet die Griffith University in Brisbane/Australien Praktika an, die im Ausland absolviert werden können. Der Beitrag von Maria Dobrenov-Major berichtet von den Erfahrungen von sieben Lehramtsstudierenden, die mehrere Wochen an verschiedenen vietnamesischen Universitäten Englisch als Fremdsprache unterrichteten. Grundlage dieses Berichtes sind die selbstreflektiven Tagebücher der Studierenden und Interviews, die mit ihnen nach dem Aufenthalt in Vietnam geführt wurden. Dabei wurde deutlich, wie sehr diese Erfahrungen die didaktischen Konzeptionen wie die pädagogische Praxis der Teilnehmer beeinflusst haben. Nicht zuletzt haben die Studentinnen und Studenten durch die Konfrontation mit einem kulturell höchst verschiedenen Lernkontext ihren Blick für interkulturelle Fragen geschärft und dadurch auch ein tieferes Verständnis für ihre eigene Kultur gewonnen. Da die australischen Studierenden in Vietnam viel mit Ausspracheproblemen zu tun hatten, publizieren wir diesen Beitrag in direktem Bezug zum Thema dieses Heftes.

Students' experiences with immersion as a teaching and learning context

Griffith University has an Overseas Experience Incentive Scheme that aims to complement the knowledge acquisition of students by supporting them financially if they opt to gain work integrated learning (WIL) experiences overseas and diversify and enhance, in this way, their learning process. A recently revised document, the Griffith Graduate Statement, clearly specifies the University's educational goals and lists those attributes that the University aims to develop in its graduates. These are:

1. Knowledgeable and Skilled in their Disciplines
2. Effective Communicators and Team Members
3. Innovative and Creative with Critical Judgment
4. Socially responsible and Engaged in their Communities and
5. Competent in Culturally Diverse and International Environments (<http://www.griffith.edu.au/gihe/teaching-learning-curriculum/graduate-attributes>)

One of the sub-components of point 5 above is that students develop respect, awareness,

knowledge and skills to interact effectively in culturally or linguistically diverse contexts and gain global and international perspectives on their disciplines. The overseas practicum is seen as a learning component that contributes to the development of all the attributes above, but in particular to the attributes described under number 5. It is embedded as an additional voluntary option into the teacher training programs and it is accredited by the institution. The learning outcomes are evaluated based on reflective diaries of students and on video-taped and critically analysed representative classroom situations. The benefits of WIL are broadly discussed and documented by numerous authors (e.g. Harvey, Geall and Moon, 1998; Smith, 2001; Billet, 2001). All these authors agree that the experience needs to be meaningful, and organised. What the students learn and gain from the learning depends on their knowledge background schemas, motives and intentions. Learning causes conceptual change (Biggs, 1999). WIL represents experientially gained new knowledge. In addition, it deepens students' understanding of their professional role and provides opportunities to see the world from a different perspective.

The participants in this project – four female and three male students – were all mature and experienced teachers, enrolled in the Master of Arts in TESOL program. Some of them had already gained overseas experiences, but these were mainly restricted to English speaking countries such as New Zealand and England.

The immersion into a new culture caused a linguistic and culture shock in most of the students. For the first time they found themselves in a situation in which they were surrounded by people who did not speak English. They struggled to communicate and resorted to diverse non-linguistic means in order to convey their messages, using drawings, body language or objects (realia),

or, in the best case scenario, being helped by an interpreter who spoke English. They considered this as an important and authentic experience that made them aware of what new migrants, refugees or the parents of their non-English-speaking background students might experience when they arrive in Australia with low or no language skills. Learning a few Vietnamese words and utilizing them in communication gave them a firsthand language learning experience.

In terms of teaching, the following problems were faced by most of the student teachers:

- Teaching in large oversized classes with multi age level students
- Understanding differences in teaching and learning
- Difficulties in implementing the Communicative Language Teaching approach in large classes.

Teaching in large oversized classes

Coping with large, oversized classes of 40–60 students (except in a private university that had on average 24 students in class), and incoherent groups with diverse level of language proficiency and age range was hard for the student teachers. The learner types and size of classes in which they taught are specified in the table below.

Student teacher	Students	Number of students in class
M1	First and Second Year Bachelor of Arts students	On average 24 in class (in a Private university)
M2	Group of adults + a heterogeneous group of students from age 7–24	50–60
M3	Co-teaching with M1 same groups First and Second Year Bachelor of Arts students	40–60
F1	High school and university students	More than 50
F2	IELTS preparation classes and a senior teacher class	40–60
F3	Co-taught with F2 the same students	40–60
F4	1, 2 and 3 Year Bachelor of Education students from village background – boarding house accommodated	50–60

Table 1: Types of classes and student numbers

Code: M=male, F=female

Student teacher F1 described the context in which she taught in the following way:

"The size of the classes is usually more than fifty students. The more able students tend to sit towards the front of the room and the less able at the rear. Some of the classes went for more than two hours though the average duration was 90 minutes. Teachers wanted conversation only in my classes, because they intended to teach grammar in the learners' native language. The students were not accustomed to a full lesson in conversation. The classrooms had adequate equipment with a blackboard and chalk of various colours and OHP and cassette recorder were made available on demand. The students tend to be shy, as the teachers explained to me that these students have had few if any chances to talk with foreigners (native speakers) throughout their years of learning English in school and in University. They may have come from a country area, with parents farming rice."

(Diary excerpt F1-2009)

Differences in teaching and learning

The teaching approach used by the Vietnamese teachers and the Australian student teachers showed significant differences. According to F3 who observed a few lessons, the Vietnamese teachers used the Grammar Translation method often combined with the drilling techniques of the Audio Lingual method. They used texts from the British textbook Headway and they taught grammar rules extensively. Their main aim was to prepare their students to pass grammar tests. The instructions and explanations were given in Vietnamese and only a small proportion of the lessons were devoted to interaction in English.

According to F3 students were

"not used to interactive lessons, they were not familiar with group work and it has taken a while to get them to participate in the activities. Some of the older students either sit and stare blankly or put their head down hoping not to be asked to verbalise. Once we get into the lesson, some will begin to participate after considerable effort on our part. Their responses are usually one word. They know a lot of words, but can't do much with them."

(Diary excerpt F3-2)

The Griffith student teachers' general observation was that the Vietnamese teachers were confident with teaching grammar, but they were less confident with their own pronunciation. F4 noted that the majority of the Vietnamese teachers she met had a strong Vietnamese accent in English which had a negative impact on the intelligibility of their language output. According to her, the lack of English conventional suprasegmental intonation, pause and stress were a larger problem than the lack of vocabulary or errors in grammar and accuracy. This is also underpinned by Cunningham's findings (2009), who lived in Vietnam for years and who claimed that the intelligibility of Vietnamese speakers of English is a major problem not only for them, but also for their interlocutors. It shows clear instances of Vietnamese language interference. In addition, Vietnamese English speakers also have other, spontaneous, modifications of the target sounds and these sounds are mostly far from the English sounds. This makes communication with them an extreme effort. Probably as a result of the awareness of these pronunciation problems in all the institutions in which the Griffith students

All the student teachers realized how important pronunciation is for learners and how easy it is to make negative judgements about a speaker if there are noticeable deviations in their articulation of sounds.

undertook their practicum, they were asked to focus on listening and speaking skills development only. Their presence was seen as a good opportunity for Vietnamese students to interact with native English speakers. F4 was asked to teach a group of teachers and she reported that her teacher classes were very enjoyable and the Vietnamese teachers were very appreciative and eager to improve their speaking skills with particular attention to their pronunciation.

Difficulties in implementing the Communicative Language Teaching approach in large classes.

The main aim of Communicative Language Teaching is to enable learners to communicate in the target language. Communicative classrooms are therefore often noisy classrooms in which students perform different tasks, move around, and work in groups or pairs. Three of the seven student teachers experienced difficulties with implementing task-based communicative lessons and they struggled to move learners from their seats and engage them in pair or group work. This was partly caused by the large number of students in class, but also by the Vietnamese students' classroom habits and perception that they have to sit quietly opposite the teacher and listen to him/her attentively and silently. Group or peer work were experienced by these learners as simple chatting and not studying.

Changes in pedagogy that proved to be necessary in order to meet student needs

Teaching large classes was new to all the Griffith student teachers and it required adjustments, flexibility and

changes. The students acted on this issue by developing multileveled tasks, forming groups, choosing group leaders with whom they modelled tasks and who monitored the doing of the tasks etc.

Setting tasks in an interculturally sensitive way was another issue that students needed to learn. According to F3, there was a non-alignment of textbooks with the culture in which they were used. The course book that was chosen by her university assumes a certain level of familiarity with western life style and exposure to western technology and often required modifications for the Vietnamese context. For example in one task students were asked to undertake a survey on what their peers thought of video cameras. F3 was surprised by the simplicity of the material lives of her students who were well aware of many of the amenities of modern life, but which were mostly not available to them. So she decided to exploit this cultural gulf between herself and her students as a naturally occurring and authentic information gap that could be productively used.

F1 tried to address the shyness of her students and used extensive body language – nodding and smiles in order to encourage them to participate in tasks. She noticed that there was reluctance to conduct dialogues with foreigners, whereas they were frequent between the students themselves. She therefore introduced student interaction and communicative games early on, which proved a successful and relaxing icebreaker.

F2 and M2 found that modelling a task

yielded more results than explaining it. Positive reinforcement and praising helped in overcoming reticence to speak. M3 used a different approach to reduce the language anxiety of his students. Realizing that his students enjoyed repeating sentences and words and rehearsing conversation questions, he recorded them on the board and drilled them. According to M2 there were many kinaesthetic learners in his class who liked touching and exploring things. This prompted him to bring to class lots of realia and let the students hold them and experience them.

The impact of this teaching experience on thinking about teaching

All the student teachers realized how important pronunciation is for learners and how easy it is to make negative judgements about a speaker if there are noticeable deviations in their articulation of sounds. They also became aware of the importance of prosody and suprasegmentals in language as most of the Vietnamese speakers they met tended to use equally long syllables which were all stressed in the same way without pauses or accents that would have made their speech English sounding. This was a negative transfer from their monosyllabic and tonal mother tongue. But the aim to achieve an English sounding language prompted the question: which English pronunciation should be taught? (cf. on this question the considerations of J. Marks in this issue). Knowing that Vietnamese favour the British English pronunciation and use British textbooks on a large scale, the student teachers were uncertain whether one

should really aim to correct students' pronunciation in order to achieve British standards or only to improve the speakers' intelligibility to the level of relative effortless understanding of messages. They decided in favour of the latter option which is in line with the intelligibility criterion of English as an International Language. Intelligibility there refers to pronunciation that is intelligible to non-native English speakers (mostly from different cultural backgrounds) who use it to interact with each other or with native speakers (Derwing & Munro (1997).

M1 and M2 increased their flexibility and skills in operating ad hoc successfully. They were repeatedly asked to stand in for their Vietnamese teacher colleagues. This prompted them to collect multilevel and easily adaptable teaching materials and develop a series of lesson plans. They ended up with their "bank of lessons" that they could implement quickly and flexibly and adjust to the level and learners whenever required.

F2 was given a group of learners to teach ranging in age and educational background from seven year olds to university students and working adults. She had between thirty to sixty students in class, most of them at an elementary level, and was expected to focus on speaking. Because of their various ages she had to prepare different tasks and activities that were age-appropriate. For example the younger learners had to name animals and their body parts (using flashcards) whereas the older learners guessed the animals' names and the food they eat, the geographic location and climate where they live etc. In other words, the student teachers learned how to improvise and think on their feet, as in some cases they did not know in advance what kind of group they would teach.

F2 and F3 summarized the change in their thinking about teaching and learning as follows:

"Through this experience, we now have a better appreciation of the challenges faced by teaching professionals, but also by non native speakers learning English as a Foreign Language and the tremendous efforts needed to help them improve."



L'orecchio di Dionisio a Siracusa.

The cultural learning that occurred

The overseas working and living provided the Griffith University students with an authentic Third Space experience that is according to Crozet et al. (1990) the point of intersection 'where interactants from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds meet and communicate successfully' (ibid p.1). They learned how to develop culturally sensitive pedagogies and how to operate in the Third Space, this middle ground between two cultures. This implies that they learned how to avoid miscomprehensions and misinterpretations and acquire skills in communicating across cultures, using the appropriate expressions in the appropriate tone, tenor and register, at the appropriate time and place. In other words they improved their intercultural communication skills. According to Fantini (2002) intercultural communication is a process of learning, where students get the opportunity to engage in activities that put them at risk and move them into a zone where they have to make choices in response to cultural confrontation and potential conflict.

The students were aware of the changes that had occurred in them in terms of broadening their horizons, moving away from their ethnocentric views and dismantling cultural stereotypes and preconceived

ideas. Inevitably they were challenged in many ways and among others in their ego permeability and ambiguity tolerance as well. Among the striking cultural shocks was the dress code: teachers were expected to go to school well dressed and not in shorts and short-sleeved shirts. The student teachers enjoyed their extremely well-behaved and strongly motivated students, but they were quite annoyed when the students failed to come to a class and had forgotten to inform them that they had an exam, or when they came late to a class, sat down without apologies and started to eat, saw or knit. This clearly shows cultural differences in behavioural expectations and views about the role of the teacher and expectations of the teacher.

Conclusion

All seven students felt that the WIL experience in Vietnam enriched them and had a strong impact on their pedagogic self-perception and practice. They were confronted with a traditional teaching context in which the teacher is the undisputed authority in charge. They experimented and trialled how to adapt a task-based and communicatively orientated approach to the Vietnamese context with extremely large multilevel classes. They found ways to implement peer learning, pair work and group work. They focused on procedural knowledge provision and a functional approach to teaching. They developed strategies for lowering communication anxiety and enhancing interaction in classrooms and they learned how to react quickly and flexibly to changes and to

prepare multilevel lessons and tasks. And, last but not least, they learned to live and communicate successfully in a culture that is significantly different from their culture and their way of living. In this way, they not only enriched their knowledge about cultural differences and learned to understand values and attitudes different than their own, but they also enhanced their understanding and appreciation of their own culture.

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