

Tracing it Back: Identifying the Impact of a Trans-national Language Teacher Education Programme on Classroom Practice

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Abstract

Language teacher education programmes can be viewed as ‘change’ programmes, particularly in their endeavours to re-shape cognition. However, often such programmes are found to be relatively ineffective in this regard. As a means of facilitating the desired change, trans-national language teacher education programmes, in which students study abroad for a portion of time, may be more effective than programmes conducted in the home environment because of the potential for encountering the new and different. This article considers the impact of two years spent in New Zealand on the language teaching practices of a cohort of Malaysian pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum. It also considers the methodological challenges in identifying sources of influence on language teaching practices.

Keywords

Language teaching, language teacher education, language teacher cognition, pre-service teachers, trans-national education, running dictation, interviews

Introduction

Recent decades have seen an increasing interest in the mental lives of teachers. No longer are teachers likely to be viewed as working from ‘teacher-proof materials’ (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988), passively ladling target knowledge into learners posing as waiting empty vessels. Today, rather than being viewed as transmitters of other people’s ideas,

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teachers tend to be seen as actively engaged in the learning and teaching process (Freeman, 2002).

Changes in perceptions of teachers generally have also found their way into one area of applied linguistics research, language learning and teaching, and specifically the area of language teacher cognition which Borg (2003: 81) has famously described as that 'unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe, and think'. Attempts to describe the development and operation of language teacher cognition have been made in various models (e.g. Borg, 2006; Macalister, 2010) with common elements being the role of prior experience and the impact of professional development, as well as contextual factors. The importance of language teacher cognition is in its influence on classroom practice; the two exist in a dynamic relationship which would be overly simplistic to view as a cause-effect relationship. Understanding language teacher cognition does, however, allow insights into teachers' decision-making.

One focus of research interest in this area is the effectiveness of attempts to re-shape cognition within the framework of language teacher education. In pre-service teacher education this may be viewed as potentially challenging the beliefs and assumptions about language learning and teaching that have been formed through the 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975), the time spent in classrooms as a learner. Research into changes in beliefs has shown mixed results, however, leading Richardson (1996) to conclude that such courses represent a 'weak intervention'. Recently the suggestion has been that in-service rather than pre-service teacher education may be more promising as a site for re-shaping cognition (Borg, 2011; Macalister, 2012). The reason for this is that practising teachers have a lens of experience through which to evaluate the merits of any new ideas they may be introduced to during in-service teacher education.

Logically, however, pre-service must precede in-service, and thus finding effective ways of re-shaping cognition before beginning teachers enter the classroom is an important undertaking if we wish to ensure optimal learning outcomes for the students those teachers will be teaching. While the essential homogeneity of much pre-service teacher education may explain the mixed results in respect to changing beliefs reported in research – teacher educators and teacher trainees may both have experienced the same education system, be members of the same or similar social groups, speak a shared first language, and so on – one sub-set of pre-service teacher education offers greater scope to challenge pre-service teachers. This is teacher education programmes that include a trans-national element. In other words, the students experience a part of their education in another country. This element of a programme reflects possibilities created in an increasingly globalized world. Some researchers have claimed personal, professional and cross-cultural benefits from such experience (Sahin, 2008), although others have warned of possible dangers. Greenholtz (2003: 129), for example, describes Japanese learners who have taken on Canadian values after a year abroad but who 'mope around their home campus bewildered and bitter that their newly found ability to criticise and question is not considered praiseworthy in Japan'.

Essentially, then, what such trans-national programmes offer is the potential to create 'dissonance' between the known and the new, between the cognition about language learning and teaching formed through the 'apprenticeship of observation' and the content of the teacher education experience (cf. Richardson, 2003: 14). An example of such an

attempt to create ‘dissonance’ in a pre-service language teacher programme was recently presented in Macalister and Musgrave (2015).

The focus of this paper is on the impact of time spent studying abroad as part of a pre-service language teacher education programme on the cognition and practices of the student teachers. The study is part of a longitudinal project focussing on the development of language teacher cognition in a cohort of Malaysian pre-service teachers, whose teacher education began with 18 months in Malaysia, continued for two years in New Zealand, and was completed with a final year in Malaysia, which included a teaching practicum. One of the reasons for undertaking this project was to gain an understanding of how these emergent teachers navigated the at-times-contradictory input from teacher educators in New Zealand and Malaysia (an illustration of these differences can be found in Macalister, 2011). It was also clear that the goals of the different stakeholder groups – the two groups of teacher educators and the students themselves – differed (Macalister, 2013). Ironically, however, the majority of the students did not appear to take up opportunities to become more native-like in their use of English, despite this being a declared intention at the beginning of the two years in New Zealand (Macalister, 2015).

A similar group of Malaysian students, who had spent three and a half (rather than two) years at a New Zealand university, were the focus of a study by Erlam (2014). In this she reported on five teachers who had completed two years working in Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA) secondary schools, and found they ‘were able to incorporate more learner-centred approaches into their lessons alongside traditional instruction’ (Erlam, 2014: 16). While this suggests some impact from their time abroad on their teaching, it is perhaps worth bearing in mind that this was self-reported rather than observed classroom practice. When compared with Wong’s (2010) investigation of changes in beliefs about language learning over a 14 month period among a group of 25 Malaysian pre-service teachers studying in Malaysia, it does, however, lend some credibility to the suggestion that time spent in a different learning-teaching environment may be more effective at creating ‘dissonance’, for Wong found that her participants’ beliefs were largely unchanged.

This study took place during the fourth year of the project. During a visit to Malaysia when the students were on their teaching practicum, seven of the participants were able to be observed in the classroom and interviewed immediately afterwards. The two questions investigated in this article are:

1. What evidence of impact from two years spent in New Zealand was observable in the language teaching practices of these emergent teachers?
2. How did the teachers explain their use of any observed practices that could be traced back to a New Zealand influence?

Methodology

One of the challenges of studying language teacher cognition is that it is ‘unobservable’ and thus research in this area must employ methodological tools to tease out ‘what teachers know, believe, and think’. One cluster of strategies are what Borg (2006) calls verbal commentaries, among which are interviews, the use of which in

language teacher cognition research has been discussed further in Barnard and Burns (2012). Indeed, the use of interviews in applied linguistics research generally has been effectively critiqued by, among others Mann (2011) who discusses four dilemmas regarding their use. These include recognizing that interviews are co-constructed by the participants, placing a greater focus on the role of the interviewer, recognizing the importance of the interactional context, and shifting attention from the 'what' of the interview to the 'how'. A more fundamental problem perhaps is one posed by Canh (2012: 98) who noted, 'All interviewers are confronted with how to judge the honesty or truth value of what the interviewee says'. This problem will be returned to in the Discussion section.

Interviews were one of three data-gathering tools used in this study. Interviews were conducted with 11 of the pre-service teachers (four were not observed teaching) as well as with supervising and cooperating teachers. The former were lecturers from the teachers' college who visited and observed, and wrote reports on, the students during their practicum; the latter were classroom teachers in the schools. Both offered support and guidance to the pre-service teachers. One purpose of the interviews with the students was to ask them about their transition back into Malaysia after their two years abroad. The other main purpose, for those who were observed teaching, was to ask them about the lessons they had just taught.

The other two data-gathering tools were field notes made during the observations, and document analysis for lesson plans and teaching materials.

Findings

The seven observed lessons all shared certain characteristics. Classes tended to be large, around 40 students, and for most of the teachers classroom management appeared to be an issue. There was frequent use of methods to bring the class to order. All the teachers had, however, invested considerable time in creating usually engaging and occasionally innovative teaching resources. For most, the focus of the lesson seemed to be planned as more on the learner than on the teacher, and resources generally appeared designed to engage and motivate, and to promote collaboration among the learners. With only one exception, however, that being a teacher who incorporated PowerPoint slides into the introductory stage of the lesson, resources tended to be paper-based. Bearing in mind the theme of this issue, in their professional lives the students were keeping on, not keeping up.

The primary focus of this and the subsequent section is on two participants who used a running dictation during their lesson. A running dictation is an activity in which a text is pinned on a wall, or made available in a similar way, and learners work, usually in small teams, to recreate it. The first learner runs up to the text, reads the beginning and runs back to retell it to a team member charged with writing it down. When done, a second learner then runs up to the text, and so on until the text is complete. Learners respond well to the game features of the activity, but from a language learning perspective the focus is firmly on fluency development. In particular, this means that the language and the content of the text should already be familiar to the learners.

The two instances of running dictation that were observed on this visit took very different forms. The first was a class of 11 year-old boys, where the content was about the Olympics. The lesson began conventionally enough in the classroom, but the latter part, which included the running dictation, took place outdoors. The second instance, with a co-educational class of 8-9 year olds, occurred in the classroom. A sense of both is given in the extracts from field notes below.

Lesson 1

As groups finished, around 10.28, they hung their coloured sheets on the wire of a nearby fence. By 10.37 [SJ] had set up an activity that looked like a cross between PE and running dictation – but was the latter. Again the boys seem fully engaged, and some at least appeared quite competitive. The first group to be finished, around the time the lesson was supposed to end, received gold medals! Just like the Olympics! Except that these were old CDs.

Lesson 2

She gives the Ss a worksheet – fill in the blanks (for the song). I note that the picture cards remain on the board, which is a big help (at least for me, in remembering the order of the fruits!). Earlier, too, I had noticed that every desk had either a pink or a yellow Post-it on it. The purpose is now revealed, as [SB] calls up the different colours. There's a yellow huddle at the front, then a pink, then two more yellows, then a pink. What's happening is that [SB] is showing the lyrics for a specific verse, then they Ss run back to their partner. She also does a countdown 10-9-8-...

The use of the running dictation was, to be honest, exactly the sort of activity I had been hoping to observe, and looked forward to talking about with the student teachers when the lesson finished. I was interested in finding out more about the decision to use a running dictation, and where the idea came from. I needed to be careful, however, for I thought I knew the answer. These students had studied in New Zealand, and I was certain had heard about and experienced running dictations in one course in which I was involved.

I needed to be careful on at least two levels. First, there was my relationship to the students, my identity; while I had first met them in Malaysia before they came to New Zealand, and while this would be the third in-depth interview we had shared, there was no escaping the fact that they had known me in various roles during that two-year period, and that I had represented (and perhaps to them still did) a figure of authority. Second, while recognizing that interviews are co-constructed, I knew that it would be my questions that largely shaped the interview. Thus I wanted, as far as possible, my questions to be determined by information the students provided (although recognizing that we probably would not be talking about the lesson at all if I had not directed us there). As an example of this, in the extracts reproduced below, I never initiated use of 'running dictation'. My use of the term follows its introduction by the teacher.

This occurred in the interview with SJ, who introduced the term for the activity and suggested that it is not widely used in Malaysian schools. In these extracts my contributions are signalled 'JM'.

- JM Mmm. OK. OK, OK. And the running dictation is something that's widely used in schools here?
- SJ Among practicum teachers, yes. It's a very common practice among practicum teachers, but for teachers, no... usually it's the good old 'Chalk and talk'. (*John laughs*)

After further discussion about the time involved in materials preparation and the importance of a work/life balance, more was said about reasons for using the running dictation.

- JM OK, OK. So why do you think practicum teachers use a lot more running dictation?
- SJ I think to add more variations to the routine of the classroom.
- JM OK, OK. So you and your friends on the same cohort?
- SJ Actually I got the idea from a junior, so he's a friend. But for them it's reading observations.

He went on to explain that on practicums students 'pull out all the stunts', and that he listened to his junior because he had done two teaching practicums, thus was seen as more experienced.

The second teacher, however, in her interview following the observed lesson had a different explanation for her use of the running dictation. She gave all credit for ideas in the lesson to her supervising teacher (represented as MyR).

- SB They fill in the blanks – it's [MyR]'s idea...
- JM OK, OK, oh good.
- SB Yeah. So initially there was individual work but she said 'Why don't we make pair work just to make things meaningful for them', so they come to the front and they change...
- JM Yeah, yeah. So what were you doing when you had the pink and the yellow panels at the front? What was that?
- SB I show them the lyrics of the song and then they go hide, and then they go back for their partner. And then another partner with a different colour come, paragraph by paragraph.
- JM So where did that idea come from?
- SB [MyR]'s (*laughs*)
- JM Oh that was [MyR] also?
- SB Yeah, that was [MyR].

These responses did surprise me a little, and raised the possibility that they represented, at best, partial answers. While I could, after all, have accepted them at face value, I was surprised there was no mention of New Zealand. The teachers might have thought of influences in their immediate environment and forgotten other input distanced by time and space.

As well as with the students, however, interviews were conducted with their supervising teachers. Neither of the supervising teachers for these two students commented directly on the use of the running dictation, but a third supervising teacher did bring it up.

- MyQ They are very very interested to implement this new knowledge that they actually got from you in New Zealand. Yeah.
- JM Yeah.
- MyQ It's just sometimes they are not sure, so they check with us.
[discussion about classroom management].
- MyQ Yeah, that's good. And then definitely running dictation is very popular among the New Zealand trainees. All right. And then the poster something – you know they walk...

Possible support for the idea that there was a link between familiarity with the running dictation and time spent in New Zealand is also indirectly offered by SJ's supervising teacher's apparent unfamiliarity with the running dictation activity.

- MyF But he had – you know – thought that out, and I think this is also ... how-do-you call his improvement on his what-do-you-call ... you call it a running dictation, or shouting dictation...
- JM Running dictation

This supervising teacher also gave a greater sense of the sharing among the pre-service teachers when they had a week of reflection after the initial teaching observation. She suggested that they used this time for sharing ideas and raised the possibility that this could have been the source of some of the activities used, although 'I never asked them about that, but...'. It emerged later in the interview that this week-long workshop had been facilitated by two lecturers from New Zealand, both of whom had been significantly involved during the students' two years in New Zealand, and this, again, seemed to strengthen the possibility of a New Zealand connection to the use of the running dictation.

But perhaps the most telling comment came from a third student, who talked about (but was not observed using) the activity.

- JM So when you mentioned a running dictation, is that something that they teach you here at [the Malaysian teachers' college]?
- SF Back in New Zealand. In New Zealand with [tutor's name]. With [tutor's name], yes, in [course code].

Her naming of the course and the tutor that I associated with their introduction to the activity made me think that perhaps my doubts had not been groundless after all.

Discussion

The focus of the previous section has been on two students and their use of the running dictation, as this was the most obvious example of apparent influence from the time spent in New Zealand on their language teaching practice. Another apparent influence, stemming from observation in New Zealand primary school classrooms, was on classroom management techniques but these have a less direct link to language learning and

teaching, which is at the heart of this article. The short response, then, to the first research question is that there was limited evidence of observable impact of the two years spent in New Zealand in the language teaching practices of these emergent teachers.

However, the findings presented above suggest there is no simple answer to the question, where did knowledge about the running dictation come from? One supervising teacher seems to trace that knowledge back to the time in New Zealand, and another is given credit by her supervisee for the idea. The other supervisee credits his juniors, all of whose teacher education was delivered in Malaysia, for the idea. In other words, neither pre-service teacher links use of the running dictation back to New Zealand, although one supervising teacher, and a third supervisee explicitly trace the activity's origin back to that as the likely source, which happens to coincide with the my expectations as the interviewer, based on my insider knowledge. On balance, then, that might be argued to be the original 'truth'. It seems safe, therefore, to trace the use of the running dictation back to the teacher education experienced in New Zealand.

In terms of language learning, however, knowledge of where the activity originated from is less important than the use to which it was put. As mentioned earlier, the running dictation is a fluency development activity and fluency development had received considerable emphasis during the two years' abroad as one of the four strands proposed by Nation (2007) as the basis for a balanced and successful language learning course. According to Nation, for the fluency development strand to exist, certain conditions need to be in place for language learning to occur, and one of these is that the language and content being used in the activity are largely familiar to the learners. If they are not, then fluent reception or production is not going to occur.

Of the two participants who used the running dictation, only SB used it appropriately. In the class, the learners had already become familiar with the language, the content, and the form of the song during the observed lesson and in a previous lesson. They were, as a result, able to complete the activity successfully. In SJ's class, by contrast, the learners did not appear to be understanding the text they were supposed to be reproducing through the activity. Earlier in the lesson they had been introduced to the text in the form of a strip story, i.e. sentences and phrases that needed to be sorted into the correct order. It was evident from observation of the groups as they worked on this that most learners did not understand the meaning of the text. Most groups failed to construct a correctly ordered text before being moved on to the running dictation.

It seems, therefore, that SJ chose the running dictation because it entertained the learners. When asked about it, he did try to make a link to the day's theme, the Olympics.

JM Yeah, yeah, yeah. So why did you choose the running dictation?

SJ I think it fits the theme because it's better if they're running (*John laughs*). There's running involved, so the kids feel they are doing sports, but they're learning language as well. Because one had to read and one had to write.

An observer would doubt the later part of that response. This doubt was to some extent reinforced by comments from the supervising teacher, MyQ, when she said of the trainee teachers of their use of the running dictation: 'They love it, they love it. And it also has the competition now in the minute so pupils like to do it'.

It seems likely that SJ's decision to use the running dictation may have been as much related to considerations of classroom management as to learning outcomes. During the interview he had talked of his issues with control and the use of corporal punishment earlier in the practicum. Using an activity that allows students to be physically active, to 'feel they are doing sports', and the attendant focus on competition may have been linked to the wish to avoid any loss of control of a class of 11 year-old boys.

The study, then, tends to add support to other work that has looked at the impact of pre-service teacher education and found limited transformational effect. The immediate context was largely determining the lesson planning decisions made in the seven lessons observed – the students were being guided by supervising and cooperating teachers, as well as influenced by peers and operating with a set curriculum. Overall, their approach was traditional, almost without exception relying on paper-based materials and the blackboard. However, the two teachers who used the running dictation were trying to be learner- rather than teacher-centred (as was the case with most of the observed lessons) and in this respect were similar to the respondents in Erlam's (2014) study which is suggestive of the potential for trans-national experiences to effect change, even if the participants here had less time abroad than her teachers. Their efforts to be learner-centred and to use an activity such as the running dictation are also interesting as they were on their teaching practicum, unlike Erlam's respondents, who had completed two years as teachers and thus may be assumed to have come to terms with some of the classroom management issues that seemed to be a concern for many of the seven observed in this study.

At this point it is worth emphasizing that identifying exactly where knowledge of the activity came from is not, of course, important in itself. A person need not be conscious of the origins of an idea to adopt it, and Richardson (1996) has spoken of the 'sleeper' effect, the notion that ideas from teacher education may lodge in the brain and be activated later. There is no need to track these back to a definite point of origin. From a teaching perspective it is sufficient that teachers understand how and why to use an activity in order to achieve a learning objective. However, from a *research* perspective, and remembering that this project was interested in understanding and exploring how these emergent teachers navigated their way through the different messages they received at times from teacher educators in Malaysia and in New Zealand, and that it was a study of the development of language teacher cognition, being able to trace ideas back to a likely source was important.

But tracing it back, as this study has demonstrated, is not clear-cut and there are implications for researchers seeking to do so. As noted earlier, interviews are one methodological tool available for exploring teacher cognition but teacher cognition, by its very nature, is 'unobservable'. The question of how to reliably trace influences on classroom practice returns us to the question of how to ascertain 'truth'.

To some extent, standard advice to researchers suggests steps that could be taken. One way of dealing with reliability might be to conduct more than one interview with each teacher, as was done by Canh (2012). Mann (2011: 15) also suggests the value of a follow-up interview, as well as offering the interview transcript to the interviewee for validating. For mainly logistical reasons neither was done in this scenario. However, these steps may primarily be designed to deal with an issue that has long been accepted in the

use of interview data, that of indeterminacy of meaning (Miller, 2011, discusses this issue well). But ambiguity was not the problem here.

The first lesson to be learned, then, might be a reminder of cautions to bear in mind when using interviews. They are not a fail-safe way of arriving at some 'truth', even if they do 'tend to be theorized (often tacitly) as a tool for investigating truths' along with 'facts, experience, beliefs, attitudes and/or feelings' (Talmy, 2011: 26). The responses provided by the two teachers who used running dictations could have been accepted without question; it would, surely, have been legitimate to present them as statements of 'truth'.

A second lesson for dealing with interview data, therefore, is to allow insider knowledge to play a role in interrogating the results. It is conceivable that a different interviewer, one without my knowledge of the programme studied in New Zealand, might have taken at face value the responses of the two teachers who used the running dictation. I suspect that my turning to, and repeatedly reading, interviews with various others as I thought about the use of this particular activity was partly driven by my hunch that something was not quite right. Although a complicating factor, it must be acknowledged that I could be accused of persevering until I found the answer I was looking for. But, as noted earlier, Mann (2011) has reminded us of the need to place a greater focus on the role of the interviewer in the use of interview data in applied linguistics research. I have not sought to disguise my possible bias; readers can form their own judgements.

This lesson, and the focus on the interviewer's role, link more broadly to the value of reflexivity in qualitative research (as nicely demonstrated by Watt, 2007). My awareness of my responses to what was said, of my relationship to the interviewees, and of the immediate context all shaped and re-shaped my understanding of the co-constructed interview data.

A further lesson from this experience, and certainly one of the most important, is to draw on multiple sources. In this scenario, if interviews had only been conducted with the teachers who used the running dictation, or only those interviews drawn on, a different picture would have emerged. However, the fact that 11 teachers and the supervising teachers of the seven whose lessons were observed were also interviewed provided a much wider range of views and allowed for a more layered understanding than might otherwise have been possible. The teachers were able to be viewed not just as autonomous individuals, but in a wider context, as members of a teaching community.

Not only were multiple sources important, but so were multiple readings of the transcribed interviews. This seems obvious, but I suspect familiarity with transcripts is often confused with analysis of the data. This, perhaps, is the single most important aspect of sifting interview data for 'truth'. As an example, it was only on a later re-reading of the interview with SJ's supervising teacher that any significance was attached to the information that two New Zealand lecturers had facilitated the workshop. It had simply not leapt out as relevant on earlier readings. While not a compelling detail in itself, it added to an accumulation of data that began to point towards the most likely source.

Finally, this experience also serves as a useful reminder that while models (such as Macalister, 2010; Borg, 2006) appeal as orderly representations of processes, in the real world these processes are altogether messier. Through data such as that discussed here, we glimpse some of that messiness and thus gain a richer understanding of the world.

Conclusion

Teacher education programmes seek to effect change through re-shaping cognition which, in turn, is held to influence classroom practice. Trans-national language teacher education programmes may have the potential to effect greater change than programmes delivered domestically, and for the two teachers who were the focus of this article, there was some impact from their time in New Zealand observable in their language teaching practices. The choice to use a running dictation suggested a learner-centred approach to teaching, even if only one of the two seemed to have fully appreciated and applied the activity in terms of language learning outcomes.

All seven emergent teachers who were observed were influenced by context, both the immediate context that triggered on-the-spot classroom management decisions and the less immediate context formed by friends, colleagues and mentors that helped shape lesson plans. The influence of time spent in New Zealand, a more distant context both temporally and physically, was also present but, as the preceding discussion has highlighted, was not always able to be identified with absolute certainty. This is a methodological issue with which researchers must contend, and take steps to mitigate.

The emergent teachers who participated in this study were still on their teaching practicums, and as they transition to novice teachers in schools around Malaysia will continue to develop. Whether context becomes more and more determinant of their classroom practice, or whether the impact from time spent abroad persists and grows is an important question that a future study will investigate.

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