



Exploring teacher competence in language teaching*

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Our understanding of the nature of teacher competence shapes the way we conceptualize the nature of teacher learning, and in turn, how we design teacher training and teacher development programs for language teachers. In this paper I will briefly consider 10 qualities or characteristics of exemplary language teachers in an attempt to conceptualise the nature of competence, expertise, and professionalism in language teaching.

教師の能力の本質に対する我々の理解が、教師の学びの特質を概念化する方法に影響を与えているが、同様に、語学教師のための教師養成と教師研修プログラムを計画する際にも影響を与えている。本論では、典型的な語学教師の10の資質・特徴を簡潔に述べ、語学教育における教師の能力、専門知識、専門性などの特質の概念化を試みる。

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The language proficiency factor

Most of the world's English teachers are not native speakers of English and it is not necessary to have a native-like command of a language in order to teach it well (Canagarajah, 1999). The issue is, how much of a language does one need to know to be able to teach it effectively and how does proficiency in a language interact with other aspects of teaching (Bailey, 2006; Kamhi-Stein, 2009)? To answer these questions it is necessary to consider the language-specific competencies a language teacher needs in order to teach effectively. These include the ability to provide good language models, to maintain use of the target language in the classroom, to give correct feedback on learner language, and to provide input at an appropriate level of difficulty. Learning how to carry out these aspects of a lesson fluently in English is an important dimension of teacher-learning for those whose mother tongue is not English. There appears to be a threshold language proficiency level

a teacher needs to have reached in the target language in order to be able to teach effectively. A teacher who has not reached this threshold level of proficiency will be more dependent on teaching resources (e.g., textbooks) and less likely to be able to engage in improvisational teaching (Medgyes, 2001).

The role of content knowledge

Content knowledge refers to what teachers need to know about what they teach (rather than what they know about teaching itself), and constitutes knowledge that would not be shared with teachers of other subject areas and in language teaching has traditionally been drawn from the discipline of applied linguistics. Two kinds of content knowledge need to be distinguished: *disciplinary knowledge* and *pedagogical content knowledge*. Disciplinary knowledge refers to a circumscribed body of knowledge that is considered to be essential to gaining membership of the language teaching profession. When language teaching emerged as an academic discipline in the 1960s, this disciplinary knowledge was largely drawn from the field of linguistics, but today it encompasses a much broader range of content. For example, it could include: the history of language teaching methods, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, phonology and syntax, discourse analysis, theories of language, critical applied linguistics, and so on.

Pedagogical content knowledge on the other hand refers to knowledge that provides a basis for language teaching. It is knowledge which is drawn from the study of language teaching and language learning itself and which can be applied in different ways to the resolution of practical issues in language teaching. It could include course work in areas such as curriculum planning, assessment, reflective teaching, classroom management, teaching children, teaching the four skills, and so on. Teachers with relevant

content knowledge should consequentially be able to make better and more appropriate decisions about teaching and learning and to arrive at more appropriate solutions to problems than a teacher without such knowledge.

The *Teacher Knowledge Test* developed by Cambridge ESOL is an example of a recent attempt to provide a basis in relevant pedagogical content knowledge for entry-level teachers.

Teaching skills

The initial challenge for novice teachers is to acquire the basic classroom skills needed to present and navigate their lessons. Teaching from this perspective is an act of performance, and teachers need a repertoire of techniques and routines, including routines and procedures for such things as opening the lesson, introducing and explaining tasks, setting up learning arrangements, checking students' understanding, guiding student practice, making transitions from one task to another, and ending the lesson. *Teacher training* involves the development of a repertoire of teaching skills, acquired through observing experienced teachers and often through practice-teaching in a controlled setting using activities such as micro-teaching or peer-teaching.

This view of the process of teaching has been extended through research on teacher cognition (Borg, 2006, 2009). Concepts such as teacher decision-making introduce a cognitive dimension to the notion of skills, since each *skill* involves the teacher engaging in sophisticated processes of observation, reflection, and assessment and making on-line decisions about which course of action to take from a range of alternatives that are available. As teachers accumulate experience and knowledge, there is thus a move towards a degree of flexibility in teaching and the development of what is sometimes called *improvisational teaching*.

Contextual knowledge

Language teachers teach in many different contexts and in order to function in those contexts they need to acquire the appropriate contextual knowledge that will enable, for example, an Australian teacher to learn how to be an effective teacher in China or vice versa, or a Singaporean teacher to learn how to be an effective EFL teacher

in Japan. Learning to teach involves understanding the dynamics and relationships within the classroom and the rules and behaviors specific to a particular setting. Schools have their own ways of doing things. In some schools, textbooks are the core of the curriculum and teachers follow a prescribed curriculum. In others, teachers work from course guidelines and implement them as they see fit. In some institutions, there is a strong sense of professional commitment and teachers are encouraged to cooperate with each other. In others, teachers work in relative isolation. This is reflected in many different aspects of the way the school functions (Cooke & Simpson, 2008).

The notion of *context* here is hence a very broad one, since it includes issues such as the school's goals and mission, its management style and *school culture*, its physical resources, including classroom facilities, media, and other technological resources, the curriculum and course offerings, the role of textbooks and tests, as well as the characteristics of teachers and learners in the school. Learning to teach means becoming socialized into a professional culture with its own goals, shared values, and norms of conduct. This *hidden curriculum* is often more powerful than the school's prescribed curriculum and teacher-learning involves learning to teach within the constraints of the hidden curriculum.

The language teacher's identity

One of the things a person has to learn when he or she becomes a language teacher is what it *means* to be a language teacher. Identity refers to the differing social and cultural roles teacher-learners enact through their interactions with their students during the process of learning (Miller, 2009). These roles are not static but emerge through the social processes of the classroom. The concept of identity thus reflects how individuals see themselves and how they enact their roles within different settings.

Native-speaker and non-native-speaker teacher-learners may bring different identities to teacher-learning and to teaching. For many ESL teachers their identity may partly reflect their wish to empower immigrants, refugees and others for whom English is a way out of their current circumstances (Cooke & Simpson, 2008). Untrained native speakers teaching EFL

overseas face a different identity issue: they are sometimes credited with an identity they are not really entitled to, finding that they have a status and credibility which they would not normally achieve in their own country. Teacher-learning thus involves not only discovering more about the skills and knowledge of language teaching but also what it means to be a language teacher.

Learner-focussed teaching

While teaching can be viewed as a type of teacher performance, the goal of teaching is to facilitate student learning. The extent to which the focus of a lesson is teacher rather than learner-focussed is reflected in the extent to which input from learners directs the shape and direction of the lesson, the quantity of student participation and interaction that occurs, the ability of the teacher to present subject matter from a learner's perspective, and how the lesson reflects learners' needs and preferences.

It is natural when teachers first start teaching to be preoccupied with their own performance as a teacher, to try to communicate a sense of confidence, competence, and skill, and to try to create lessons that reflect purpose, order, and planning. Hence, studies of teachers in their first year of teaching have revealed a transition from a survival and mastery stage where the teacher's performance is a central concern, to a later stage where teachers become more focussed on their students' learning and the impact of their teaching on learning (Farrell, 2009). The challenge is to make sure that such a transition occurs and that the teacher's initial teaching experiences do not lead to a style of teaching that sticks, one that provides a comfort zone for the teacher but that fails to provide learners with the opportunity to achieve their full potential as learners (Tudor, 1996; Benson, 2001).

Pedagogical reasoning skills

An important dimension of teaching is the teacher's pedagogical reasoning skills. These are the special skills that enable English teachers to analyze potential lesson content (e.g., a piece of realia, a course book lesson, an advertisement, a poem, a photo, etc.) and identify ways in which it could be used as a teaching resource; to identify specific linguistic goals (e.g., in the area of speaking, vocabulary, reading, writing, etc.)

that could be developed from the chosen content; and to anticipate any problems that might occur and ways of resolving them, to make appropriate decisions about time, sequencing, and grouping arrangements. They can be thought of as the application of pedagogical content knowledge.

Shulman (1987) described this ability as a process of transformation in which the teacher turns the subject matter of instruction into forms that are pedagogically powerful and that are appropriate to the level and ability of the students. Experienced teachers use these skills every day when they plan their lessons, when they decide how to adapt lessons from their course book, and when they search the Internet and other sources for materials and content that they can use in their classes. It is one of the most fundamental dimensions of teaching, one that is acquired through experience, through accessing content knowledge, and through knowing what learners need to know and how to help them acquire it.

Theorizing from practice

Teacher development involves developing a deeper understanding of what teaching is, and developing ideas, concepts, theories and principles based on our experience of teaching (Borg, 2006). The development of a personal system of knowledge, beliefs and understandings drawn from the practical experience of teaching is known as the *theorizing of practice*. The belief system and understanding built up in this way helps teachers make sense of experience and also serves as the source of the practical actions they take in the classroom. The *theorizing of practice* involves reflecting on teaching experiences in order to better understand the nature of language teaching and learning. The theorizing that results from these reflections may take several different forms. It may lead to explanations as to why things happen in the way they do, to generalizations about the nature of things, to principles that can form the basis of subsequent actions, and to the development of a personal teaching philosophy (Richards, 1998). Activities in which teachers articulate their theories, beliefs, and principles are an important component of professional development and journal writing, narratives, discussion, and critical reflection can all be used for this purpose.

Membership of a community of practice

Teacher development involves capitalizing on the potential for learning and growth that comes from participating in a community of teachers having shared goals, values, and interests. The school or the teaching context becomes a learning community and its members constitute a community of practice. A community of practice has two characteristics:

1. It involves a group of people who have common interests and who relate and interact to achieve shared goals.
2. It focuses on exploring and resolving issues related to the workplace practices that members of the community take part in.

Membership of a community of practice in a school provides opportunities for teachers to work and learn together through participation in group-oriented activities with shared goals and responsibilities, involving joint problem solving. Collegiality creates new roles for the teacher, such as team leader, teacher trainer, mentor, or critical friend (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

This collaboration can take a number of different forms (Johnston, 2009). For example, collaboration with fellow teachers focussing on teaching issues and concerns, such as use of the textbook, development of tests, and course planning; collaboration with university colleagues through collaborative research or inquiry into issues of shared interest, such as exploring aspects of second language acquisition or learning strategies; and collaboration with others in the school, such as working with administrators or supervisors on issues of concern to the school.

Many forms of professional development can help foster a sense of a community of practice, such as reading groups, action research, team teaching, peer observation, and peer coaching, though this may require a change in mind-set for some teachers who do not see themselves as members of a team. For others, however, collaboration can be seen as a source of strength that can have valuable personal as well as practical benefits.

Professionalism

English language teaching requires a specialized knowledge base obtained through both academic study and practical experience, and it is a field

of work where membership is based on entry requirements and standards. There are two different dimensions to professionalism (Leung, 2009). The first can be called institutionally prescribed professionalism—a managerial approach to professionalism that represents the views of ministries of education, teaching organizations, regulatory bodies, school principals, and so on that specify what teachers are expected to know and what quality teaching practices consist of. There are likely to be procedures for achieving accountability and processes in place to maintain quality teaching. Such specifications are likely to differ from country to country. The second dimension to professionalism is what Leung calls independent professionalism, which refers to teachers' own views of teaching and the processes by which teachers engage in reflection on their own values, beliefs, and practices. A key to long term professional development is the ability to be able to reflect consciously and systematically on one's teaching experiences.

There are many ways in which teachers can engage in critical and reflective review of their own practices throughout their teaching career (see Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Richards & Farrell, 2005), (e.g., through analyzing critical incidents, teacher support groups, journal writing, discussion groups, action research, and portfolios). Reflection involves both looking back at teaching experiences as well as looking forward and setting goals for new or changed directions.

Conclusions

Any attempt to characterize the nature of quality, expertise, professionalism, or effectiveness in language teaching is liable to the charge of different kinds of bias, since it is bound to reflect understandings that are shaped by culture, by context, by individual belief and preference as well as by limitations in our present state of knowledge. These limitations, however, should not prevent us from reflecting on the beliefs and assumptions that shape the way we understand the nature of teacher knowledge and teacher development for language teachers. For when we do so, we are in a better position to assess what the goals of teacher development for language teachers are, as well as the means by which we seek to achieve them.

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Jack Richards is an internationally renowned applied linguist, teacher educator, and textbook author, a specialist in the teaching of English as a second language (TESOL) who has had an active career in the Asia Pacific region (Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Hawaii) for many years. He has written many books and articles on language teaching methodology and teacher training, as well as many widely used classroom texts including the best selling series *Interchange*, which has sold over 30 million copies worldwide. His most recent publications are *Cambridge Guide to Second Language Teacher Education* (edited with Anne Burns, CUP 2009), *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics 4th Edition* (with Richard Schmidt, Pearson, 2010), and *Teaching Practice: A Reflective Approach* (with Tom Farrell, CUP, 2011). Forthcoming publications include *Cambridge Guide to Pedagogy and Practice in Language Teaching* (edited with Anne Burns) and a new 4-skills series *Four Corners* (with David Bohlke, CUP, 2011).

