

Theoretical Overview

SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION: AWAKENED ENGLISH TEACHERS

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Abstract

In Asia, with regard to English language teaching, many teacher education programs emphasize ‘teacher education’ whereas many mainstream schools focus on ‘teacher training’. As a result, a substantial number of new English teachers are ‘shocked’ when they are required to teach English in a conventional way which is contrary to their teaching beliefs. This paper attempts to propose some possible solutions to this teaching dilemma. In order to fit into the system, to a certain extent, English teachers need to follow school norms. On the other hand, through teacher development and self-reflection, English teachers could become awakened in light of present circumstances. As awakened teachers, they could negotiate school culture in a positive way; they could reconcile their teaching strategies and the school practices. This paper exemplifies the issues discussed with particular reference to Hong Kong.

Key Words: Awakened English teachers, Social activity, Teacher development, Teacher education, Teacher training, Hong Kong.

Introduction

Nowadays, in education, the terms ‘teacher training’ and ‘teacher education’ are used interchangeably in terms of providing preparation for a career in teaching. However, teacher training implies emphasis on techniques and skills that can be applied in the classroom (Richards & Nunan, 1990: xi), whereas teacher education emphasizes teacher development, such as involving teachers in decision making and requiring teachers to ‘reflect critically on teaching’ (Richards & Nunan: xii).

In this paper, the term *second language* refers to English as a foreign or second language. *Second language teacher education* (SLTE) is promoted in higher education institutions, but *teacher training* concepts have been deeply ingrained in many mainstream schools in Asia. As a result, novice language teachers encounter many problems when they face the reality of school life.

Freeman (2009: 13) states that SLTE can be conducted through activities. It emphasizes the social process of learning. Language teachers can learn through social participation, such as cooperative planning and discussions. Inside the classroom, students can learn through social interactions and language activities. Conversely, in Asia, many English teachers use the conventional teaching methods and impart knowledge to students directly.

Teacher Training and Teacher Education

Teacher training is based on a set syllabus and a system of assessment (Ur, 2006). It emphasizes direct transmission of knowledge from experts to novices. Teacher training helps institutions and countries to achieve convergence (Tomlinson, 2003) and implies an authoritarian regime: the trainee is told what to do by the trainer or institutional authorities (Ur, 2006). Teacher training also dis-empowers the individual teachers and places authority in the hands of the experts’ (Ur, 2006).

Teacher education is ‘characterized by approaches that involve teachers in developing theories of learning, understanding the nature of teacher decision making, and strategies for critical self-awareness and self-evaluation’ (Richards & Nunan, 1990: xi). In teacher education courses, teachers are given new knowledge and the means to discover new knowledge for themselves (Tomlinson, 2003). Teachers feel empowered by their new knowledge. Teacher education is better than teacher training in terms of developing generic skills, because ‘effective teaching involves higher-level cognitive processes, which cannot be taught directly’ (Richards & Nunan,

1990: xii).

Nowadays, SLTE has expanded from a 'training' perspective to an 'education' perspective. In the past, teaching was regarded as 'a kind of technology' (Richards, 1990: 8); language 'educators' trained student teachers for the delivery of knowledge and skills in the classroom. Today, SLTE focuses on teacher development in which teachers can get together to do research, share experience and evaluate the teaching (Ur, 2006). Teacher development emphasizes 'personal processing of knowledge' (and making reflections (Gebhard, 2009, p.251). Teachers also develop their awareness of the processes of learning and teaching (Tomlinson, 2003).

Even though SLTE broadens the scope in teacher preparation courses, many novice language teachers have encountered serious problems (Farrell, 2009: 182) when they start teaching. The beginning teachers often complain that the teacher education programs are unable to reproduce environments similar to actual school contexts. The novices are left in the lurch. This is particularly true for the first year teachers. Farrell (2009:183) indicates that novice teachers' ideas and practices are often challenged when they commence teaching in schools. They are inexperienced teachers who may create discipline problems or high noise levels in classrooms when implementing their new practices. As a consequence, their conservative colleagues have good reason to oppose these new practices and pressure the novice teachers to follow the traditional way of teaching. On the other hand, there is not much support for the novices. They have already completed the teacher education programs. It is not convenient for them to seek advice from their former professors and lecturers. Therefore, they are left to 'sink or swim' (Farrell 2009:182). In order to survive, many new teachers give up their educational principles that they have learnt in teacher preparation courses (Richards & Pennington, 1998:186). Instead, they follow the norms of the school. 'Every school has a culture of norms, values and ideals' (Hayes, 2008: 57) which may be very different from those of the teacher education programs. To uphold the traditions and ensure the smooth running of the school, new teachers may be socialized to conform to conventional practices under the influence of the school culture that is similar to teacher training. For example, in Hong Kong, many new teachers are required to cover the school prescribed syllabus and adopt examination-based practices (Urmston & Pennington, 2008: 91). In Singapore, new teachers often face a dilemma that the traditional teacher-centered approach is firmly rooted in school culture (Farrell, 2008: 47) and novice teachers are discouraged from adopting child-centered approach. Moreover, Singapore teachers are expected to follow the

school syllabus and prepare pupils for examinations. In Thailand, although the government has legislated a law to promote learner-centered methods, a pedagogy of direct transmission of knowledge is the norm in schools (Hayes, 2008: 60). Indeed, in many Asian countries, a substantial number of school English teachers adopt traditional teaching styles, which are predominantly transmissive, and expect new teachers to follow suit. In fact, organizational socialization is so overwhelming that many novice language teachers abandon their previous beliefs and follow school norms. Unfortunately, this kind of teacher socialization is similar to training an apprentice into a profession or on-the-job training. In order to fit into a school system, the novices need to learn the social norms and follow the behavior code of the schools; and they need to perform their duties consistent with the school culture.

Today, in Asia, it is very difficult for language teacher educators to provide a course which can serve two functions together: First, the course is designed to 'produce' professional teachers who feel empowered by their new knowledge that can apply to their own teaching contexts; second, the course can train student teachers to assimilate into the mainstream school culture which places too much emphasis on examination-based practices. Farrell (2009: 182) points out that the novice teachers are more vulnerable to 'reality shock'. He suggests that a specific course should be designed for first year teaching (Farrell 2009: 186). The Course should help student teachers handle 'shocks' and challenges associated with novice teaching. The Course should equip pre-service teachers with skills in 'anticipatory reflection' before joining the profession. It can also explore something beyond classroom teaching such as interaction with colleagues. The student teachers must be mentally prepared when they are socialized into 'ways of working that may be contrary to their own beliefs' (Hayes, 2008: 69). This Course may be useful with regard to preparing pre-service teachers for the actual school environments. However, technically, the qualification of this Course, Teaching in the First Year, may not be recognized by the local or overseas governments, because the Course cannot guarantee the quality of practitioners who are supposed to view teaching as a life-long career.

Farrell (2009: 186) also suggests setting up school-teacher educator partnerships in which both parties can help novice teachers navigate through their teaching experiences. The partnership programs can also 'nurture' new teachers and guide them to discover that learning to teach is not so 'shocking'. As such, these programs can be regarded as a part of teacher development during the transition from student teachers to first-year teaching. Indeed, language educators urgently need these partnerships because

the teaching experiences of their graduates may become case studies that can inform SLTE programs. They are also important for teacher educators to understand the reality of school life. There is always a complaint that professors and lecturers are in the ivory tower and they do not know the actual school environments (Hayes, 2008: 60). Setting up partnerships with schools can enhance teacher educators' understanding of the social and political contexts of schools that may facilitate them to design effective teacher preparation programs. Unfortunately, from the perspective of schools, partnerships may not be commonplace between teacher education institutions and local schools with respect to organizing teacher-induction programs, because school teachers are too busy teaching and doing administrative work; they may not like to squeeze out time for other programs. In fact, teacher education institutions and local schools may have different philosophies in terms of school education. Language teacher preparation courses emphasize the 'theoretical' side, such as learner-centered approaches or learning by doing whereas many local schools emphasize public examinations or academic results (even though some schools do not admit it openly). Therefore, conflicts may arise when a school-appointed mentor instructs a novice to teach to the test while a language educator expects the new teacher to promote communicative activities in the classroom. This kind of conflict prompts Richards and Pennington (1998: 190) to propose that teacher education should 'align itself with local practices or ...work to change those practices'. Otherwise, there must be discrepancies in these two settings in terms of teaching practices.

Second Language Teacher Education as social activity

SLTE does not end even after student teachers have completed teacher education programs. Teacher education is regarded as a continuous professional development. Freeman (2009: 13) mentions that the scope of SLTE comprises two main areas: the study of disciplinary knowledge (such as applied linguistics, second language acquisition and classroom teaching) and the study of 'the teacher' that encompasses teacher identity, teacher cognition as well as teacher research. Freeman also points out that SLTE can be viewed as 'a form of activity based on a professional learning process'. It means learning can be a social process. Teachers can participate in 'social activity' (Freeman: 2009 11) in order to learn. This concept is important because it shows that SLTE embraces not only what teachers need to learn, but also how they learn. Indeed, through social participation, teachers play an

active role in learning. In a school setting, teacher learning takes place through classroom experiences and teaching practice (Richards, 2009). Learning can also take place through 'dialogic teaching' that means a group of teachers discuss learning/teaching issues during which teachers examine their own beliefs and engage in collaborative planning, problem solving and decision-making. This kind of collaboration is crucial in terms of expanding language teachers' repertoire of teaching skills. This collective pool of knowledge and experience among the teachers provides the resources through which all teachers benefit .

For classroom teaching, Freeman (2009: 15) suggests that language teachers can also use 'activity' as a process of student learning. Instead of direct transmission of knowledge, language teachers can use more activities to enhance children's learning. Freeman (2009: 11) indicates that the substance of SLTE has 'moved from knowledge and skills to social activity'. Nowadays, many language activities, such as group work, demonstrations, discussions, debates and dramas, are suggested by SLTE educators and scholars in order to promote classroom interaction and enhance students' communication abilities. It seems language learning is not all about 'sit quietly and listen to the teacher' (Brooker, 2005: 123); it can be a dynamic and social process. In the field of SLTE, there are many innovative approaches which emphasize 'activity', e.g., the communicative approach, project-based learning, task-based learning and language arts activities. However, these new teaching approaches are often overshadowed by traditional practices which emphasize direct instruction and accumulation of academic knowledge. In Malaysia, English teachers teach to the test; students need to do a lot of practice tests and grammar exercises (Ho, 2004: 278); scarce attention is paid to speaking skills. In China, the grammar-translation method is still prevalent (Wighting, Nisbet & Tindall, 2005) and English teachers emphasize rote learning rather than communicative skills. In Japan, teaching English is based on textbooks; English teachers need to drill students orally after introducing the target sentence. Habit formation is more essential than the communicative approach in second language learning (Iwamura, 2008: 160). In South Korea, because of the Confucian culture, English teachers are in an authoritarian position and play a dominant role in the classroom; students are rather passive and quiet with respect to learning English (Kim, 2004).

We can see 'social activity' seems to work in the area of teacher collaboration. This collaboration can increase teacher effectiveness and develop new knowledge among teachers, but school culture may be a stumbling block to new ideas. The conventional school values and routine traditional practices do not favor the innovative approaches of English

language teaching in the classroom. These new approaches are designed to equip students with the skills to use English as a living language. However, the traditional teaching approaches treat English as an academic subject in which there is a syllabus and students should learn English from a transmissive pedagogy from teachers; there are examinations to assess students how much factual knowledge they have learnt according to the syllabus. In response to 'the rules of the game', many English teachers need to cover the syllabus and teach to the test. We can see that there are many Asian students studying hard for English examinations; schools can maintain high status if they can help children make the grade. This utilitarian school culture seems to disallow the spread of the communicative approach which is not compatible with pen-and-paper examination system.

Suggested Solutions

Gebhard (2009: 255) points out that teachers can find a way out when there are differences between school practices and personal teaching beliefs. Gebhard (2009: 251) highlights many teacher development activities for student teachers during practicum in order to equip them the skills how to make their own informed teaching decisions. These activities include 'teaching a class, self-observation, observation of other teachers and keeping a teaching journal' Gebhard (2009: 251) which not only provide a lot of opportunities for the novices to acquire teaching skills, but also make them 'aware of their teaching beliefs'. The period of the practicum is viewed as teacher development rather than teacher training (Gebhard: 250). Through these activities, student teachers are always asked to make reflections, such as 'Am I providing chances for students to learn English? Do I block them from learning English? What are my beliefs about teaching?' By making reflections, the student teachers engage in high-level thinking. This cognitive process can help them construct and reconstruct their identities as teachers (Gebhard 2009: 253). Journal writing is also important because it provides a place for the novice teachers to 'criticize, doubt, express frustration, and raise questions' (Bailey, 1990: 218) about teaching beliefs and practices. Indeed, all these teacher development activities can make the novices learn about themselves as teachers and help them build identity. Once they become teachers, they are in a better position to accommodate themselves in a school setting. In the previous sections of this paper, it mentions many new teachers complain that they get 'shocked' by the reality of the school environment. Some of them abandon their teaching beliefs and follow school norms. In

fact, some new teachers may also quit their jobs early and leave the profession. To remedy these situations, Gebhard (2009: 255) suggests that teachers construct their identities which can guide them through their struggles in schools. Teachers can build their identities and form their own teaching philosophies through professional development; they can also shape their beliefs and forge their own set of values through reflections. Then they become awakened teachers. These awakened teachers are very different from those new teachers who change their teaching beliefs and adapt to the traditional school culture easily. In contrast, the awakened teachers can negotiate school culture in a positive way: they can find good aspects of the school culture that align with their own values; they know how to position themselves and stick to their principles while maintaining an equilibrium between their teaching strategies and the school practices; they can take a step back and view the situation from another perspective; they try to understand the networking of the school and convey their ideas through proper channels. If possible, they hope they can play a part in decision making. Through continuous teacher development, they know how to advance and retreat in response to the social and political contexts of the school. After possessing these qualities, language teachers are likely to survive and thrive in the teaching profession. As Gebhard (2009: 255.) says, 'The more secure teachers are with their professional identity, the better they can interpret and negotiate new teacher settings.'

Hong Kong

In mainstream primary schools in Hong Kong, all students have one or two English lessons every day; each lesson lasts around 40 minutes. English language teaching has been criticized as examination-based and product-oriented (Urmston & Pennington, 2008: 91), emphasizing correct usage of the language. Many students do many written exercises and use rote-learning strategy to prepare for examinations; most English teachers have to teach to the test. Moreover, many students seldom speak English in their daily life (Poon, 2004: 308). Many scholars and teachers agree that the traditional teaching methods be changed, giving more opportunities for students to practice using the language; it is stressed that communicative success is more important than grammar correctness. As a result, teacher education institutions promote the communicative and process-oriented approaches in teaching English. As such, many student teachers have been equipped with the latest teaching skills when they graduate. However, research indicates that new teachers encounter considerable difficulties in the workplace. Their

innovative ideas and practices are challenged in schools, most of which tend to uphold the school legacy and tradition. After repeated setbacks and being influenced by their colleagues, many new English teachers begin to adjust themselves and gradually follow the traditional way of teaching. In a bid to survive, these new teachers give up their educational beliefs and follow the norms of the school. This phenomenon is particularly marked in Hong Kong primary schools. Even though the communicative approach has been advocated for more than three decades, it is still very common to see local English teachers using the transmissive, didactic and rigid teaching approaches in class.

Many new teachers want to use the new approaches, such as the communicative approach or task-based learning, which could facilitate students to use the language for communication. Then students may develop a habit of using English in their daily life; they can acquire English in a natural manner and use English as a living language. These new ideas are what the novice teachers have learnt in their professional teacher education courses. However, these teachers are likely to face many challenges if they adopt the new ideas. First, the new approaches may create discipline problems in the classroom (Urmston & Pennington, 2008: 90), because students are given opportunity to interact with one another. If students move around the classroom and create high noise level during class, the teacher may be in a difficult position and may rethink the new approaches. On the other hand, direct instruction and the traditional way of teaching can ensure that the teacher is in control. Thus, the reality of the classroom situation may discourage novice teachers from using new approaches.

Second, the tight class schedules do not give teachers leeway to introduce new approaches. Teachers are too busy covering the school syllabus and preparing students for examinations. Under these circumstances, it is easier for teachers to follow school norms. When teachers are extremely busy, it is unlikely that they can manage the time for pedagogical innovations.

Third, if an English teacher insists on the new approaches which engage students in communicative activities and allow them to practice authentic English with the teacher and fellow classmates, students will not be well prepared for pen-and-paper examinations. In Hong Kong, most primary school internal assessment emphasizes reading and writing whereas speaking seems to be overlooked (Cheung, 2010: 39). Students' academic standards are largely measured by pen-and-paper examinations; and the content areas of examinations are mostly based on textbooks. It is common to see that

assessment areas of English examination in individual schools encompass all or most chapters of the course books. As a result, textbook-bound teaching (Carless and Wong, 2000: 213) is inevitable. If a teacher adopts the new approaches, the students may have less time to focus on the textbooks. How can the teacher prepare students for examinations if he/she does not follow the school syllabus closely? To make it worse, competition between classes also forces many teachers to abandon the new approaches. A standard Hong Kong primary school consists of 24 classes. At each level (e.g., Primary 1), there are 4 classes. Each class may be taught by different English teacher. After examination, the principal who wants to know the performance of the students may look at the examination data. If a particular class performs badly in the English subject, the principal may think the English teacher of that class is incompetent. Therefore, many teachers do not take the risk of implementing new approaches.

Furthermore, English teachers have to prepare students for external standardized tests, the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA). Because of the 'teaching to the test' culture, a substantial number of students are required to do many practice tests; repetition and drilling are also provided to familiarize students with the TSA format. In mainstream schools, if teachers are under pressure to help students achieve good results in TSA, they are unlikely to carry out the new approaches.

However, coaching for the tests certainly restricts the quality of teaching and learning. Students simply learn 'Dumb English' (Xu, 2006: 53) which is mainly focused on reading and writing while ignoring listening and speaking.

Students learning English through social activity

Rhetorically, modern language teaching methods are advocated, emphasizing social interaction and language activities. In reality, many Hong Kong English teachers follow the rigid textbook-based teaching schedule; they do most of the talking during class and students do a substantial number of practice tests and grammar exercises. Therefore, in order to promote authentic English, innovative English teachers need to find a way out: Becoming awakened teachers! Awakened English teachers could fit into the school culture while they could also reconcile school requirements and their own teaching beliefs. The following are suggestions to show how to negotiate the teaching dilemma:

Teachers have to understand the shortcomings of school assessment

system; pen-and-paper tests may not largely reflect students' communicative language ability. If individual English teachers could not change the school examination format, which is mainly based on textbooks, and could not adopt the new teaching approaches because of the examination-oriented culture, they have to think outside the box. Teachers should use English for classroom management. This principle is very important in terms of creating an English environment in which students and the teacher can use English for purposeful communication. Since many local English teachers are busy, now they use Chinese as the medium of communication and interaction for carrying out daily classroom routines. They think using Chinese is more efficient to get the job done. However, this is not a strategically smart move when they continue to use the mother-tongue for classroom interaction in upper primary levels. In English class, Chinese could be used at the early stage of primary schooling, but it should be phased out as soon as students get used to classroom routines. There are many occasions that teachers could use English for middle and upper primary (Primary 3 to Primary 6) classes:

1. In Hong Kong, school children may have lunch in the classroom. The English teacher could speak English when looking after them during lunch time that provides the most authentic situation for students to practice speaking.
2. The teacher could always use English to maintain order and discipline. The English used for classroom management is contextualized and authentic. Daily classroom interaction provides opportunities for learners to use English in a meaningful way.
3. If the class teacher also teaches the English subject, speaking opportunities abound for both the teacher and the students. Classroom routines, such as collection of school picnic fees, selection of pupils to join the choir and conducting daily conversations, provide plenty of chances for interactions between the teacher and students, and among students.

The above examples are the practical ways to make students learn English through classroom interaction. For some well-behaved or elite classes, talking (using English) could be allowed among students in class on condition that this does not disrupt the lesson. In Hong Kong mainstream primary schools, there are not many students speaking English among themselves. Making the first move, allowing small talk is conducive to encouraging more students to speak up and practice spoken English.

Apart from speaking, the English teacher could also promote learners' writing skills. Students could write for real readers, not only doing written assignments for the teachers. Students should be encouraged to write e-mails to their classmates and teachers. Then they could use English for purposeful communication. Writing e-mail is a practice for learners to enhance their writing skills and this activity is comprehensible to students. The English used in e-mail is authentic and related to student daily experience. It is the living language in which the learners find it meaningful and useful. Students would no longer find English remote and boring. Furthermore, to maximize the chance of writing authentic English, each student could write weekly diary to the English teacher. Journal writing can express a learner's feelings and ideas. This authentic work is very different from those contrived language exercises which are designed to prepare students for examinations. Authentic writing occurs when learners use English for real communication, whereas practice tests require students to memorize and write in an unnatural manner. Since it is necessary to develop writing skills for real life communication, teachers should promote authentic writing. Furthermore, students could also write a simple note to the teacher; they could write complaints, anecdotes and real life problems. Hence students' written work would become authentic literacy which is related to their daily life.

Outside the classroom, it is the perfect place to practice spoken English because we learn English in the classroom and we use English, in real life situations, outside of class. Professionally, English teachers should create a language-rich environment in school. To provide the most authentic situation for learners to use English, awakened English teachers should speak English outside the classroom when they talk to students. They could speak English in the corridor, on the playground or in the library. 'A language belongs to those who speak it' (Mandal, 2001, p.115). Hong Kong students must be given more opportunities to speak the language. Speaking outside the classroom is the best way for learners to practice what they have learnt in class. Indeed, English teachers could start very simple conversations with students in the corridor by asking the following questions (examples):

'Good morning. What did you eat for breakfast this morning?'

'What did you do last night?'

'Where did you go last Sunday?'

'Where do you live?'

The English conversations would have great impact on many Hong Kong primary students because they seldom encounter such situation outside the classroom. In Hong Kong, many students think that learning English is to memorize a lot of grammar rules and prepare for examinations. When speaking outside the classroom, some students might suddenly understand that they could use English for communication. In fact, communication, not examination, is the real purpose that we learn English. Therefore, English teachers should set a role model and encourage more students to speak the language.

Conclusion

Teacher training and teacher education are different in terms of preparing student teachers for a career in teaching. In the field of SLTE, language educators intend to educate course participants as professionals to promote effective teaching strategies, such as the communicative approach and the child-centered approach. However, in Asia, many schools want to continue their legacies and expect new teachers to follow school norms and traditional practices which are largely teacher-centered and didactic in nature. As such, novice teachers receive 'education' in colleges or universities, but they obtain 'on-the-job training' in schools. Both new teachers and language educators are confused by these discrepancies. Freeman (2009: 11) even argues that SLTE can be viewed as social activity. Language teachers can learn through social participation such as collaborative planning and discussions; students can learn English through classroom interactions and language activities. But in Asia, English is viewed as an academic subject and English teachers need to cover the school syllabus and prepare students for examinations. Therefore, the didactic teaching method is more popular than the communicative approach. As such, SLTE faces a dilemma as many novice language teachers abandon their teaching beliefs and adopt the didactic way of teaching when they work in school. To remedy the situation, Gebhard (2009: 250) suggests promoting teacher development activities during which language teachers make reflections and examine their beliefs. Through this high level thinking process, language teachers could build their own identities and become awakened. As awakened teachers, they could negotiate school culture in a productive way instead of being fully socialized into the school community. The awakened teachers could maintain a positive balance between their own beliefs and the school practices.

In this paper, reference to Hong Kong as an example as many Hong Kong primary school English teachers need to cover the school syllabus and prepare students for examinations. However, as awakened English teachers, they could use English for classroom management in order to create an English environment. Moreover, they could speak English with students outside the classroom. Students would certainly learn authentic English, instead of textbook English, through these social activities. To enhance student writing skills, teachers should encourage students to write English email and diary.

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